



*Charela Durham*

## ¡Escuche Y Viva!

I wake with song of the sun—bleeding the horizon—a voice as sweet and solaced as the nuns of my parish—My face, a wrinkled brown onion—I comb my black hair generously streaked with silver—I look at my mouth—my tongue, my teeth gold pebbles in a gray, pink bowl—My back like my teeth refuses to straighten—My kitchen plumbing reeks gray water on the floor I cover with newspaper—walls gray in a cloak of shadows and light of one waning light bulb—dark, damp—the belly of a whale, perhaps the one who swallowed Jonah

and I remember the day I came here/ fleeing a  
banana farmer/ my betrothed/ a hunchback thing  
whom Papa owed money/ came coyote/ paid a keg  
of cerveza and a stroke of my youthful breasts

“Quiero buscar amor.”

waitressed downtown near Olvera Street/ met  
Charlie/ a tall, thin man with coal black skin  
showing only the whites of his eyes/ but I loved  
him/ married the day Roosevelt died in a 4th floor  
tenement off Normandie/ Charlie played Bessie  
Smith on the old victrola/ he was drunk/ he took  
me in his arms/ he went to war/ I conceived a lump

in my belly like a possum hanging from a tree/ I  
 read *Mein Kampf*/ hated Hitler and you wrote of  
 Mussolini's music/ blood bathed trenches/ bodies  
 strewn about like peaches rotting in a southern  
 sun/ VROOOM! overhead/ dragons in the sky that  
 vomit their fire breath on the petrified people  
 below/ you told of drunken bouts/ poker in the  
 barracks—the stench of war in your sweat/  
 nightmares.....you are headless/ torpedo through  
 your neck/ you congregate with coloreds—just  
 like home you know your

place

awake on a whining bed thinking of you, an ocean  
 away in the arms of an Italian prostitute/ and when  
 you peaked that mountain....I hoped you cry my  
 name/ funny eh? V-Day came, but you did not

“Ando Sangrando”

I bore Coco your only legacy

“Quiero buscar amor”

Daughters like mothers more than they know/ She  
 loved a tall, dark man and one evening evapo-  
 rated—her sick daughter behind that I must muster  
 into woman

I now return to the God of my mother—mass on Sundays—  
 always—pious in the pews a praying mantis to Our Lord—One can  
 not blame God nor others for the fate one chooses—when tossed  
 rags, sew quilts

“Nana,” a small voice chokes and severs my thoughts, “I can't

breathe. I can't breathe."

(and neither could I, My heart whispers)

"Silly girl, forgot your medicine," I say.

her nostrils snuff the magic stuff—her tight chest loosens and raspy breaths subside—she falls in my arms, eyes closed—I wipe the sweat glued hair from her temples—I strain to hear above the snatches of Mexican market women through my window. I listen to the rise and fall of life in her chest—back and forth like the leaves of the palmetto trees and the shores of Belize I watched as a girl.