

OUR BOYHOODS IN BALTIMORE

William Camponovo

i.

To wait out erasure in her backwards
and backward-facing life.

This, where brain
clicks into Spanish,

and that, the obliteration
of English.

And so,
how she wakes up this morning,
Adriana, or Adrienne?

taking the past-tense inventory of the neighborhood,
what she cannot any longer do herself.

Item: steam,
rising from glass skyscrapers downtown,
from snouts
of silent foxes milling in the road,
morning,
electing fresh popes
in the chimneys of each small home across the city.

Item: burnt and bleached mattresses lining the wide-bodied alleys,
punished by the morning sun.

Item: two sitting patiently in a shared room
repeating the word *water*
to shuffle off our accents.

ii.

All families have code
for shame. Any child
knows not to say *shit*.
in public. We said *traer*.

Simply: to bring. As in, when,
at a mall, at movies,
a leg nudge and *Mom, traer!*

meant: *time to go*.
For decorum's sake.
To bring, to carry,
to take along, to have, to be

the cause, traer. As in,
That stench?
We carry it with us.
Scent the primal sense.
A hijacking. If I say

*we blessed
the emapanadas
cumin, cumin
the smell of god*

I move in one direction,
and if I say

*she also blessed
her biosolids
to her a sacred cycle
amen in the water closet
we move in different directions.*

Item: shit. I am saying *shit*.
First, the vague terror,
oh, no ... not again ...
and mind crowds out the primal sense,
takes over, calibrates, moves
the failing body hurriedly amongst the throngs.

If I say *shit*, my mind takes me
to shame. If my mother says *traer*,
her mind takes to *carry*, to *bring*,
what it means to be carried,
words like *cradled*, *swaddled*,

and so, in the food court,
your mother—my mother, our mother—

takes her mother
soiled,

to the restroom, in dignified secret.
You will not know how long
you will have to wait for the sick woman
to be sick

and the other woman
to clean them both up.

I would have been then
and so will be
humiliated now, but differently,

and thus when I say *traer*,
when I say *shit*,
I mean it as a code of shame.

iii.

Item: a very fine first home.
This, after all,
item: the first time one had control
of one's own heat, the proof
some visible vibration through the radiator vents,

and item: ownership and potential of a lawn.
Item: porch renounces the former stoop.
Item: and them dull,

dumb foxes—
tree, and simply what weather does to it.

And then, item: you'll receive the gift of a Viewfinder,
and the subsequent invention of the Savanna.

You'll see: warthogs, bushpigs, hartebeest, wildebeest,
the black rhinoceros, the white rhinoceros.
The monstrous animals bowing before the standing water.

You look through it. And cower
at the strange and frightening thing
you did to this world.

La Boca. Then,
Baltimore. All
of a sudden. Of all
the places.

Wonder if your mother still rolled her 'r'
or gave it up after you.

iv.

Write about women better.

WEST BALTIMORE CVS,
2509-2523 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE

William Camponovo

Already a food desert, when the city shut down
the now-crime-scene CVS,
the neighborhood became the Gobi.
The Antarctic. Flames had licked it,

tongue gumming the canker,

and its language—*uprising* versus *riot*,
Black Lives Matters versus *Blue*—
did not erase the fact pharmacies sell, too:

food.

The body will tolerate many kinds of self-harm, but starvation
is rarely one.

It is true it burned for days, but what was a few more?

When they opened it back up—a ‘soft opening,’ away
from cameras, not ready, yet, for narratives, as this poem also

is not—people lined at the door.

I toured it like the museum it partially was.

Up the rows of toilet paper, office supplies, Scotch Tape a
minor miracle of a kind, medications, prescriptions, lines, as
they say out the sliding door . . .

remedies, supplements, ginkgo to preserve memory,
ginger for morning sickness (ginger for indigestion, arthritis,
dizziness),

how many times Vitamin D in winter,

held on the tongue like communion?

I pass the tuna, the cans of beans . . . if food is divorced from
supermarkets, bodegas, farmer's markets, it ceases to be junk
food. At this source, pharmacy,
it becomes remedy, becomes prescription, supplement.

Rice and beans in Shamanic transformation.

Food as talisman. I feel it inside and out.

(You know, growing up, we only ever saw American food in
the shed.

We did not eat American food; we did not buy American
brands, their absurd names:

Yoo-hoo. Twinkie. Moon Pie. Ho-ho.

But the bizarre, foreign brands—*Easy Mac, Campbell's Chunky,*
Chicken of the Sea—stocked the metallic pantry, expiration
date *infinity*

in little black lettering stamped across the plastic,
nurturing us should we need to be nurtured at the end of
the world.

In the event of: *hurricane*,
siren, municipal mobilization, both urgent and routine,
we would wait out in our fortified walls
and see what kind of landscape we might emerge, emigrate to.

The cans pulsed like marrow, there, insuring us against
disaster—)

And suddenly, I am back there, out of the parenthetical,
in the shed, and though I can't place the *newness*,
the fluorescent lighting, the stocking, the lettering of the *Sale!*
items, pharmacy

and emergency have merged into the *now-prepared* Baltimore
of my mind.

The city is the storm and the neighborhood's the shed.

Or I am the storm and my anger is the shed.

I will buy the Twinkies, the Devil Cakes, the Devil Dogs, at
this, risen CVS,
phoenix-pharmacy, living grave. I will gorge on the unhealthy.

I will become unhale. I feel it.

I feel it. My body vibrates.

Did the uprising work? *Well . . .*

I will mail this food to a future version of myself,

in a future version of Baltimore,
one in which
it is written (there, on the package)

it will outlive us both.