

CONVERSATION

THE HEART, THE BREATH, AND THE BODY

ABRAHAM SMITH, SEAN BISHOP, SARAH JEAN CARTER,
QUINCY BRAVO, JORDAN WISE, AND HEIDI FERGUSON



A Conversation with **EDUARDO C. CORRAL**

Eduardo C. Corral is the son of Mexican immigrants. He is the author of *Guillotine* (Graywolf Press) and *Slow Lightning*, which won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Competition in 2011. He is the recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and a Hodder Fellowship from Princeton University. He teaches in the MFA program at North Carolina State University.

In *Guillotine*, Corral maps the perils of the body moving through myriad floods of desire: the migrant's corrosive saga crossing the desert; the lover's epic struggles with feeling at home in the body; the searing desert, and those that roam the edges of the borders, threatening to consume the individual in search of selfhood; and unrequited love jeopardizing similar forms of erasure. All the while, Corral's poetry brings bold beauty to loud and quiet despair.

Corral is the rare artist whose beacon-like brilliance pairs with far-reaching, unassuming generosity. He doles out wisdoms with a nonchalance that belies the depths of their impacts. His WSU Visiting Writer reading moved the attendees out past the edges of their seats. The answers he provided to the questions that followed stirred the undercurrents of consciousness and provided walking sticks for the sometimes uncertain terrain of a life in the arts. Listeners became poets for life that night.

(Heidi) I understand that parents shouldn't pick favorites among their children, but perhaps a poet is allowed to do just that. Do you have a favorite poem or section within *Guillotine*? If so, would you mind sharing which one and why?

It takes me a long time to complete a book. Over nine years for the first, and seven years for the second. So I spend a lot of time with my poems as I draft and revise them. I really get to know them. This might sound strange but some of my poems, in my mind, have personalities. This poem is a charmer. This poem is reclusive. This poem is a gossip. That said, my favorite poem in *Guillotine* is probably "Autobiography of My Hungers." Why? It reveals so much about the hurt that animates the book. The poem is a scab over a wound. I'm still amazed that I was able to distill into language such emotional turmoil. This poem signifies not an artistic triumph, but a personal triumph.

(Sean) What is your process for playing with form? Do you splice words out of physical paper and paste them into different configurations, or is it a digital method? Do you

start with the form and fill it with words, or the opposite? Does it change from piece to piece?

For me, language arrives first. Language gives way to subject matter. Subject matter suggests a form. When I start drafting, I don't think about subject matter or form. It's my job to follow the language until it reveals subject matter. By following the language, I mean: dwelling with imagery, playing with phrasing, isolating the music, breaking open the words I know to discover the unexpected words inside them. I try to explore various possibilities for the language. It takes more than a few drafts for the subject matter to appear. I trust this process. I trust the language.

But before I start drafting, I practice radical attentiveness. I jot down any language or image that stills me. I carry language in my mind, let it resonate. I write down menu typos. I look up words that are new to me. I write down interesting verbs on tiny pieces of paper, place the pieces into a jar. Why? I know my verbs are weak, so I'm always gathering good verbs. I move through the world with my five senses alert.

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(Jordan) Is there a cultural significance to the scorpion, hummingbird, and wolves in Guillotine?

All poets are haunted by the things of the world. For me, the scorpion, the hummingbird, and the wolf are rooted in the desert of southern Arizona, where I was born and raised. These animals were, for the most part, invisible parts of the landscape. We rarely saw them in the wild. But each of these animals is tied to a vivid memory. I once watched as my mother cupped a hummingbird with her hands. I watched my sister drag a black light through her child's nursery and jump back when a scorpion glowed in the light. I remember believing as a child that a coyote (a term for human smuggler) snuck my aunt across the desert. These animals live in the zoo of my mind. There's no way I could ignore them.

(Sarah) Your poetry uses both Spanish and English, as well as commercial and religious words and phrases. How does the language of your writing draw from the language you hear and read?

I grew up as the son of Mexican immigrants. Spanish is my first tongue, the first grammar I learned, the first music I heard. My par-

ents raised us as Catholics, so I spent many Sundays listening to the language of faith.

All languages should be at play for a poet: high or low, secular or religious, commercial or domestic. I've trained myself to jot down any word that catches my ear, that confuses me, that surprises me, that stuns me with beauty. All kinds of languages have a home in me. So when I draft and revise, I'm able to call upon these various grammars and musics to enrich and complicate my work.

(Quincy) Throughout Guillotine, you have several repeating objects or parts such as thumbs, mirrors, and beards. Do you make a conscious effort to work these repeating things into your poems, or do you find that they seem to work themselves into the poems? Thumbs, in particular, seem to repeatedly show up in the second half of the book. What is the significance of thumbs in your book?

Motifs! Images or language that echoes throughout a book. The second book does indeed have its motifs: wolves, ovals, beards, and thumbs. I'm usually not aware of my motifs until I'm half way through writing a book. Then I work hard to make sure the motifs are being used in interesting ways. Being too aware too early isn't helpful for me. I need to discover my motifs. I don't want to force them.

What do thumbs signify in my second book? Honestly, I'm not sure. My best guess: the last man I loved had beautiful thumbs. So I was probably thinking of them, of him, when I wrote down the word "thumb."

(Abraham) As a poet who teaches, what's a sterling piece of advice that you were taught and seek to pass on in pretty much every class you helm? And what's a wisdom or rule that you tend to teach but break in your own writing process?

One of my teachers told me, "Good writing equals good thinking." I went to him because I was worried I was not smart enough to be a writer. His words instantly made

sense to me. Writing isn't just about the intellect. Writing is about language—intelligence dwells inside language. But so does the heart, the breath, and the body. Which means any living person can be a poet.

I always tell my graduate students to write in other genres—essays, reviews, or fiction. Writing outside poetry will strengthen your poetry. But I myself have no interest in prose. Why? The sentence terrifies me.



Sean Bishop graduated from Weber State University with a BA in theatre in 2012 and is back completing a Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in creative writing. He lives in a 130-year-old Victorian house in Ogden with his husband, Taylor, dog Ted, and cat Tina.



Sarah Jean Carter is a graduate student in Weber State University's creative writing program. A former midwife and technical editor, Pleasant View is her home, where she enjoys dark chocolate, her Labrador retriever, three near-adult children, and her husband, John.



Heidi Ferguson graduated from Weber State University with a degree in English teaching and a minor in ESL. She is currently a student in the Master of Arts in English program at Weber State University.



Jordan Wise is a student in WSU's Master of Arts in English program focusing on creative writing. She is currently working on a children's book.



Quincy Bravo lives in Ogden, Utah, and is a prospective poet. He is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in English with an emphasis in creative writing at Weber State University.



Abraham Smith is associate professor of English and co-director of creative writing at Weber State University. Away from his desk, he improvises poems inside songs with the band The Snarlin' Yarns.