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## Migrant Child

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MIGRANT CHILD

by

NICHOLAS SHEPERD

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in English  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
and in the Burnett Honors College  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Thesis Chair: Terry Thaxton, MFA

## **ABSTRACT**

Migrant Child is a poetry collection about injustice in the United States of America and the international community. The purpose of the collection is to humanize social injustice in the present, so as to show the reader that discrimination still happens in the United States in 2016. To that end, the collection draws on comparisons from civil rights movements of the 1960s and from present day. It is also meant to reflect injustices the author experiences in his own life. The poetry collection was created after the author spent six months volunteering throughout the State of Florida. The poems in the collection center around Hispanic communities in the United States, refugees seeking asylum, individuals living HIV and AIDS, male rape, and familial abuse. Several poems are written in the epigraph format, so as to place the reader in the author's desired mindset for that particular poem. In addition, multiple poems in this collection have been inspired by the poets Yusef Komunyakaa, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Allen Ginsburg. In present day, discrimination and prejudice are still experienced by minority communities in the United States, and Migrant Child is not by any extent an exhaustive list of all communities that are, in the present, experiencing social injustice.

## DEDICATION

For Dylan,  
who has seen many of these poems in earlier forms,  
and who always sneaks his way into my poetry.

For Grandpa Severo  
who, along with Dylan,  
encouraged me to improve my community.  
I know you would have been proud of this collection.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who helped to contribute to this collection. First, I want to thank Professor Terry Thaxton, whose advice, thoughts, patience, and encouragement helped to make this collection a reality. To Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, whose guidance helped me to write the poems that draw on my Hispanic heritage, and helped me to establish Migrant Child's overarching theme. To Dr. Harry Coverston, who reminded me to narrow in the subject matter of the poetry collection, and that I should let the collection be what it wants to be.

I would also like to give a special thanks to my husband, Dylan, who sat through several unedited versions of Migrant Child. You always say that I am beautiful and that my writing is an extension of that beauty. Migrant Child is as much for you as it is for me.

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## INTRODUCTION

I spent my childhood in an abusive home. When he was home, my father was mentally and physically abusive towards my mother, my siblings, and me. When he wasn't home, I was raised by my grandfather who taught me to respect everyone, and always to improve my community when I could. The poem "Broken Crate" is about the last face-to-face interaction I had with my father, and "Hermana" is about me rescuing my sister from the same abuse—both poems are confessionals. The poem "Gestapo" is about my mother and her view of homosexuality; the poem is a conceit to the last serious conversation we had where she said that "gays belong in camps."

The poems about my grandfather in this collection contain references to my favorite memories he and I shared; for example, "1994 at the Kane County Fair" is a confessional poem about a time he and I spent walking through the fairgrounds when I was five-years-old. My grandfather worked for Roger Wilco, an insulation factory, before the government enforced higher occupation safety standards. My grandfather was diagnosed with Waldstrom's Disease—a very rare bone cancer he contracted from working in the factory. The poem "Grandpa, Tell Me about Good Ol' Days" is about my grandfather working in factory, and his constant use of the term "Spic." He died on September 5<sup>th</sup> 2016, three hours before my birthday. "Old Milwaukee," is about his death and his favorite beer. I never told him that I was married. In fact, he never knew I was gay, so the poem "Wednesday Morning with My Grandfather and a Conversation We Will Have One Day" is about my regret of never revealing my homosexuality to him.

My husband, Dylan, rescued me from my abusive household and we have been together for six years as of November 14<sup>th</sup> 2015. In the collection, I tried to show a range of Dylan's personality. The poem "The Jesus Spider" is a confessional poem meant to show Dylan's playful side. In my sophomore year, I was drugged & raped, and from the attack I became HIV Positive.



The poems “Nobody Has to Know,” “Blood Test for Dylan,” “Sleep Talk,” and “Morning Alarm” are about being married and living with HIV.

The collection was created after I spent about six months volunteering throughout the state of Florida. The poems “An Immigration Reform Protest...,” “June 2015, in Orlando, at a Rights Restoration Event...,” and “Slavery” are about people I encountered during my time volunteering. The inspiration to write *Migrant Child* came from the poems “Steven’s Song” and “Migrant Child.” The title poem is about children coming to the United States of America from South America to escape the violence caused by the drug wars. “Steven’s Song,” was the first poem of mine that was published. Steven Simpson was an eighteen-year-old autistic, gay teen, who was lit on fire at his own birthday party. The assailant, Jordan Sheard, only received a prison term of a few years. The title of the collection, *Migrant Child*, is meant to capture the idea of the “other child;” The issues that society does not want to consider, or even face, which leads to social injustice. The poems “Police State,” “Refugee,” “Migrant Child,” “Standardized Testing,” “The Need for Socialism,” and several others are meant to describe the lives of those affected by social injustice. I would later come to realize that, while writing this collection, I also felt like a Migrant Child within my family. The poem “Midday, August 2009 off the Shore of Condado Beach,” is about another Migrant Child I know—whom I love like a sibling—and their failed suicide attempt. In present day, discrimination and prejudice are still experienced by minority communities in the United States, and *Migrant Child* is not by any extent an exhaustive list of all communities that are, in the present, experiencing social injustice.

## **Political Poems**

## The Need for Socialism

A young man runs down State Street  
on a cold Chicago morning.  
Prada bag in hand,  
unzips the metallic zipper,  
and pulls out two twenties.

He sprints towards the L-Train  
like a labrador after a tennis ball.  
A few hours before  
he promised to pick-up  
Chipotles  
from the *tienda*.

Government assistance  
like EBT only lasts a few weeks.  
His family didn't have the money  
to spare, and their forty-seven cents  
wouldn't buy a can.

Red lights and a siren  
that sound like a high-pitched kazoo,  
he gets to the platform  
but the uniforms grab him first.  
When they put him in the squad car, they say  
just another Cook County spic.

A Republican Candidate's Gaffe about Black Lives Matter  
—For Terry Thaxton

I woke up,  
and pulled the Vote mug  
out from under the Keurig.

I turned on my Galaxy S6,  
and read an article about comments  
made by a presidential candidate.

He said,  
*I don't care about Black Lives Matter.*  
*Let's talk about things that matter.*

I thought, yes.  
Yes, let's talk  
about things that matter.

Let's talk about how immigrants  
can't get Publix to pay an extra penny  
on tomatoes, so they can unionize.

Let's talk about how black children  
are taught to be afraid of police  
because they might get shot like Trayvon.

And let's talk about how a Sheriff Deputy  
was shot, execution style, while pumping gas  
under the Texaco star because of antiquated gun laws.

So by all means,  
let's talk  
about things that matter.

## Standardized Testing

Fill in the bubbles with Number Two Lead  
as grey as a fifty year old nickel.  
Are you boy or are you a girl?  
If you are gender fluid, we can't help you.  
Might we suggest the APA?

Answer questions one through five.  
Place the variables  
on the blank sheet of paper  
in a row.  
Are you smart or are you dumb? If you fail,  
you're dumb, and your school will lose  
its soccer program.

Five minutes remain. Are you white  
or are you black? If you're black,  
enter the school-to-prison  
pipeline, full of budding "gangbangers"  
packed-in like "ciggies" in a carton of Camels.  
Get question twenty-four  
correct. Time's-up. Bubble in *B*—  
that's always the correct answer.

## **Mi Familia**

## Broken Crate

Didn't you know, Daddy,  
it was cruel  
to lift me off the floor  
by my Polo?

My skin couldn't sustain  
the welts  
from your strikes—  
my screams  
like screeching tires alerted Dylan.

Did you think  
to lie to the police,  
and say my husband  
attacked you?

Daddy,  
I was never going to stay  
no matter how much you begged  
me through my phone.

Now, Daddy,  
a broken mahogany crate  
is the only item  
that lives in my old room.

And years later,  
the next time we speak, Daddy,  
will be when you are living  
in a mahogany crate.

## Gestapo

Mother. Why do you say Auschwitz is for fags like me?  
Oh, Mother. Why do you cry? I see the dogs  
in the distance with their Mein Kampf eyes.

Who is the blond man in the photo, Mother?  
Why does he have a Luger in his hand?

Why does our lampshade  
have a pink triangle on it?

Did the man who owned it remind you of me?

Why do they call your doctor  
Mangle 'em? And why does his office smell of almonds?  
Are you a part of the Third Reich?



## Hermana

I.

The crack of the ceramic tile  
bore the image  
of my sister's face,  
while our grizzly father  
brood over her.

II.

Colonial and Semoran  
hummed like the purr  
of an orange tabby cat,  
while driving my battered  
sister to the airport.

III.

"It hurts  
not feeling wanted,  
you know that, Nick."

IV.

My sister,  
nestled in the passenger  
seat, slept through  
the storm, while I drove.

V.

Frequent flyers  
and TSA agents  
surrounded my  
red eyed sister.  
Saying good-bye  
feels like choking  
on Jameson whiskey,  
while my lungs are smothered  
under stones.

VI.

Layover.

VII.

The Airbus  
landed at O'Hare.  
She called again.  
"I landed. I'm looking for baggage claim.  
I'm descending  
on the escalator."

VII.

I'm on my couch  
when she says,  
"I'll call tomorrow."

## **The Grandpa Poems**

## Grandpa, Tell Me about Good Ol' Days

We sit in the kitchen  
eating chorizo and eggs,  
and I ask you for a sip  
of the Old Milwaukee  
you enjoy on hot days.

What was it like working  
in the insulation factory?  
Did Roger Wilco offer  
a fair wage? Or did you take the job because  
that's what us spics from the corn fields  
can find in the States?

Old Milwaukee  
—For Grandpa

Under the oak  
in front of my grandfather's house  
are two aluminum chairs  
and a cold can of Old Milwaukee.

At six,  
I would run outside  
to see my grandfather sitting  
under the oak,  
wind tickling  
the few wisps of hair  
he had left.

He would look at me  
as if we were on  
a clandestine mission,  
and let me steal a few sips.

The oak has aged twenty years  
and the aluminum chairs  
are now covered in rust,  
while two cans of Old Milwaukee  
stand resolute at the cemetery  
atop my grandfather's grave.

1994 at the Kane County Fair

Candy-apples litter  
and stain the Ferris wheel seats.  
My arm raised  
to grasp his hand,  
and it starts

to spin  
and I get sick  
as the lights  
from the bumper cars flash  
neon colors in the distance.

My grandfather rubs my hair  
as the autumn wind  
chills me. He tells me stories  
of the days when he still played  
his Gibson as the ride continues to whirl.

The scent of Old Milwaukee  
on his breath comforts me  
as the Ferris wheel and the lights like gold flakes  
stop revolving.

Wednesday Morning with My Grandfather and a Conversation We Will Have One Day

Let's go out  
to your old Ford  
pick-up, and eat pears  
on the wooden flatbed.  
There's something I want  
to tell you—  
the pears are ripe today.

Let's go out  
to the garage  
and look at parts manuals.  
There's something I want  
to tell you—  
I want to tell you about parts on Ebay.

I go out  
to the marble stone  
enscribed *Severo, beloved Grandfather,*  
with a beer.  
There's something I want  
to tell you—  
I wish I'd told you I was gay.

## **The Dylan Poems**



## Nobody Has to Know

“‘Nobody has to know,’ the student said. He came up behind [the victim], grabbed his crotch, and moved him into the bathroom stall.”-Emily Kassie, “Male Victims of Campus Sexual Assault Speak Out,” *Huffington Post*, 01/27/2015.

The ketamine  
will start working soon.  
Don't cry.  
Nobody has to know.

Wake up  
the next morning  
behind the restaurant  
with your Andrew Christians  
around your ankles.

Look  
down at your Lucky Brands  
answer the Samsung  
in the right pocket.  
Don't cry.

When your spouse looks  
at you with grey eyes  
that say, “I'm sorry  
you have AIDS,”  
cry.

No one has to know  
that the Stribild reminds you  
of the scent  
of cedar in shot glasses,  
and scorpion tattoos.

Sleep Talk  
—After Komunyakaa

Special K, Web MD, Prep and PEP. Oak scent,  
“gift giving.” Fried ravioli. Samsung, Sanibel, plaid shirt,  
three. G6, causeway, speeding at seventy. Waiting room.  
Triage, test results read. Please let it be Syphilis. Oh god, it’s HIV.  
Stribild, Atripla, cheap hotel twill. Integrase Inhibitor, anxiety.

Dylan stirs beneath the cotton sheets, and I glimpse  
at his hairy torso illuminated by the moonlight  
creeping through the window. Sometimes I reach out  
and touch his chest. It feels like fleece  
that has been caught in a dryer. I go back to sleep.

The Jesus Spider  
—For Dylan

The traffic on Colonial provided  
a hollow melody  
like the sound emitted from a Kleenex  
box ukulele.

Dylan and I walked into a Christian ministry store—  
conservative values and post cards  
drunken in excess. A Dionysus party.

An imaginary spider  
crawls up my spinal column.  
I wait until we are outside to tell this to Dylan.

He cups his hand into the form of a bug  
and says, *The Jesus spider gon' get you.*  
I laugh at him.

Then as slowly as he climbed my back,  
the itsy bitsy  
spider made his descent,  
and grabbed the car keys.

## Blood Test for Dylan

The sleeve of his American Eagle  
rolled up,  
a stress ball crushed  
under the weight of his hand.  
I think how sorry I am  
that I'm the reason he's here.

I say to the woman unwrapping  
the needle,  
*I hear he wants it in the neck.*

She says I'm next,  
not to make fun  
of him.  
Dylan smiles.

I watch the needle slip  
under the skin of his arm.

I start to cry,  
so I leave the office  
to ensure Dylan doesn't see.  
I whimper, *I'm Sorry.*

## Morning Alarm

I wake up and stare  
at a bottle of Stribild on the nightstand.

*Did we forget to take it?*

I feel Dylan's furry arms  
tighten around my smooth chest.  
I pull the micro-fiber blanket up  
over my shoulder and my breathing  
accelerates. Anxiety feels like  
having a leather belt tighten  
around my neck while smelling rubbing alcohol.  
The alarm blares. The red numbers  
flash. Dylan says, *hit snooze*.

## **Migrant Child**

## An Immigration Reform Protest in Downtown Orlando

“Freedom is just another word for nothin’ left to lose.”—Janice Joplin

They marched like ballet dancers  
down Church Street, and sat on the yellow lines.  
OPD ordered them to move. They stayed.  
They were Dreamers, and only knew the U.S. as home.  
Drivers of Mercedes, Toyotas, Subarus, and Fords punched their horns.  
On lookers called them spics and illegals, while drinking  
from their Starbucks cups and holding their Publix bags.

They were arrested and deported. The people who cared  
were the farmers and the families of the Immokalee Workers,  
who were waiting to be deported.

June 2015, in Orlando, at a Rights Restoration Event Hosted by the Legal Aid Society

I had a conversation  
with a black man, twenty-six,  
no older than me.  
His skin was shiny and brown  
like a Grecian statue reflecting the sun.  
I asked, What brought you here?

He said to me,  
*Man, I was premed, tenth in my class,*  
*and I have a daughter; she's nine.*  
He rolled his skateboard  
under his feet as he described how he punched  
the thief who stole from his car  
like a Rock-em', Sock-em' Robot  
until he saw the police.

They bent him over the police cruiser—  
the stucco of dilapidated houses flashed  
candy-apple red. He was arrested and charged  
with assault and battery.

He stared at my fraternity letters and said *I know*  
*it was my fault.*



Midday, August 2009 off the Shore of Condado Beach  
—For Carlos

The sleeve of his Adidas pull-over  
rolled up as he cocks  
that half-boyish smile,  
he dives

into the ocean. Clothes soaked.  
                    sinking  
to the grainy seafloor, he is caught  
by the currents.

Loosed.

He looks up,  
and sees the sun reflect  
off the water's surface like the flashlight  
of *uniformada* on a rain-glazed window.

And as he loses his breath,  
he looks down  
and sees a crack  
in the sand. It's dark  
like the catacombs  
under the Cathedral of San Juan Bautista.

## Migrant Child

Do not make a sound.  
They will not find us here.  
It's too dark,  
    I promise,  
but you must not make sound.

Run, my child,  
run through that open window.  
I can hear the Narcos  
in the hallway  
                                shooting,  
killing,  
shouting.

My child sprint  
across the sun-drenched sand.  
I know the blisters hurt.  
Do not look back.

Don't cry,  
I know your throat is arid,  
but soon you will reach a land  
where the eagle carries water.

You're almost there,  
race towards the signs.  
I pray the people accept you.  
Please don't turn back.

## Police State

“[I]t feels like open season on Black folks in America once more.”  
—“Why Is Baltimore Burning,” Kevin Powell, *The Huffington Post*.

The fire  
awoke  
like a sleeping salamander  
in aisle  
nine of CVS.

A young black boy  
growing-up  
in the dilapidated  
inner-city “utopia”  
of Baltimore  
will be labeled  
hoodlum,  
thug,  
gangbanger.

What happened  
to the city  
in *Hairspray*?  
the poverty level  
shuts the door  
on blacks, Chicano’s  
and white “ghetto-dwellers.”

Media moguls  
politicians,  
who sit on the dildo of Capitalism,  
give head  
to the anti-establishment principles  
of revolution.

And remember, Freddy Gray,  
a black man in a grey hoodie  
and Levi’s,

no stanza break

deserved to die.  
He deserved it because he  
had the audacity to be poor;  
the audacity to be black;  
the audacity to be alive.

## Refugee

“Yesterday, and days before, sun is cold, and rain is hard. I know; been that way for all my time.”—John Fogerty

Let's go son.  
We need to leave  
this train. I know  
I said it would take us  
to safety. But now  
we must walk down  
the tracks.

I see the rain coming in,  
but where we are going  
the burnt smell of gunmetal  
will not fill the air,  
and the soldiers will not hurt us  
like they did your sister.

Son, I know the rain is striking  
down like acupuncture needles.  
The blanket you have wrapped  
around your arms  
is all I have for you. We must keep moving.  
The border is five miles away.

Son, please don't cry.  
The soldiers at the border  
will not harm us.  
The guns they carry  
will keep us safe.  
Their bullets are not meant for us.

## Rush

“Deng was blindfolded and carrying a backpack containing 20 pounds of sand while brothers tackled him in Pennsylvania's Pocono Mountains. He apparently fell and hit his head, leading to his death.”—Alexandra Svokos, “Baruch College Bans Rushing and Pledging after Student Death and Lawsuit,” *The Huffington Post*.

I walk along  
the yellow lines,  
the crisp air  
biting at my hands.

The oppressive sandbags  
rabble-rousing  
in the Swiss Gear  
I'm forced to carry.

Adidas, Nikes, and Sketchers  
strike the asphalt,  
and I fall.  
The sandbags feel unbearable  
under the weight of nine frat guys.

And while I lie  
on the road as black  
as a flock of crows,  
a deadly bruise begins to develop,  
and I'm ordered to get up.  
Again, I'm ordered to walk the road.

## Steven's Song

“[Gay teen, Steven Simpson,] had reportedly been dared to strip down to his underpants before being doused in tanning oil, after which Sheard set him aflame at the party. Other reports said that anti-gay messages, including ‘gay boy’ and ‘I love [dick,]’ had been found scrawled across Simpson's body”—“Steven Simpson, Gay British Teen, Dies after Being Set on Fire at Birthday Party,” The Huffington Post.

He looms  
above me,  
Sharpie in hand,  
laughing at my oily hair,  
my exposed flesh,  
my lisp.

The words “Retarded Faggot”  
scorch  
every inch of my body.

So what if I'm a gay boy  
who loves dick?  
My only fault:  
I trusted too much.

While the adults  
stand and sing  
Happy Birthday  
in another room,  
the scent of oil  
assaults the air.

I hear a distant crack  
and soon a piercing  
heat engulfs  
my bare body.

*please*

*help*

*it's*

*searing*

In a few minutes,  
I lie a smoldering pyre  
upon the earth.

## Sun Stroke

“The father of a 15-month-old boy who died after being left in a car in July has been charged with criminally negligent homicide, according to police in Connecticut.”—  
Leigh Remizowski, “Connecticut Father Faces Charges in Hot Car Death,” CNN, 12 November 2014

Daddy please come back.  
It’s hot.

I can’t breath.  
Why didn’t you open  
the window  
like Mommy says?

You’re hurting  
me, Daddy.  
Please come back.

Was it for crying  
when I didn’t  
get the Spiderman  
I wanted?  
Or did  
I need to eat all of  
my carrots  
from the jar?  
Mommy looked mad  
when I threw them.

Please come back, Daddy.  
Maybe you just went  
to get me that Cowboy hat  
I asked for.  
Maybe you  
are putting stuff  
into a bag,  
so we can play  
play  
baseball.  
Maybe we’ll fight a dragon,  
whose breath is too hot.



## Slavery

In the muggy  
Florida heat,  
I pick oranges  
to help immigrants  
in the groves  
just north of Lakeland.

As I climb the rungs  
of the ladder,  
I talk to a brown  
man in a straw hat.

He tells me of a story  
where immigrant farm workers  
down in Immokalee  
are locked in a mini van  
every night by the foremen,  
so they can't run away.

By now I'm visibly upset,  
so he cuts open  
an orange, hands it to me,  
and says *come*.

As I bite  
into the fruit,  
the cool sweet juice  
flows down my chin,  
and I think  
this is the American Dream.

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