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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
Orlando, 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 5th 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 14th 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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