



volume one, number one

winter 2009/spring 2010



Published by Open Books Press, USA  
www.openbookspress.com

*The Hummingbird Review* promotes fine writing by publishing both new writers and fully established literary figures. The review is committed to portraying the beauty and challenges of life—the full human experience—through literature and art, and promotes cross-cultural writing in all forms.

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book and cover design Grace E. Pedalino

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ISBN: 978-0-9842258-5-9

This book is printed on acid free paper.

Printed in the USA

## MAMMOTH

BY ROBERT WRIGLEY

Returning the refilled feeder to its hanger on the tree,  
I am followed, and from my first step out the door  
to the careful slipping of the loop of twine over the hook's tang  
made to understand—as he darts within inches of my eyes—  
that this hummingbird, while he may not despise me,  
finds my human dawdling not simply unacceptable but offensive,  
a lumbering no less appalling than the moonscape of my face  
and its billion plumbable pores. Even the vast tidal wash  
of my infernal, slow-witted breathing disgusts him. Therefore he loops  
so swiftly around me I can hardly blink, and when I tell him he is  
beautiful, he hears only the two ton roar of a woolly mammoth  
as it thrashes in the bog, at the edges of which, this time of year,  
the red, sweet flowers he loves most of all still thrive.



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## PUBLISHER'S STATEMENT

### ¡Gloriaficar las Palabras—Sing Praise for the Words!

I saw him as soon as he stepped off the elevator heading in my direction, a man who possessed a remarkable likeness to Sir Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, even without the cigar and specs. And, I suspect, that few people knew more about the illustrious statesman and even fewer could deliver a superior, more professional imitation of the great man himself. The visitor stopped by my office door, struck a Churchillian pose and offered: "They also say—that the Prime Minister is hard of hearing," knowing full-well with just that phrase—the punch line from a famous Churchill yarn—that I'd crumble at his feet with laughter. This, of course, I did, as was the visitor's desire, a prelude and prepayment to requesting the use of my office for a few days. I never refused no matter how many times he asked.

The welcomed intruder was James C. Humes, author of 30 books, ghostwriter for five presidents, and the only writer in history to have his words cast in bronze and affixed to a lunar-lander leg, where they have remained on the moon since 1969, silently awaiting the next reader.

HERE MEN FROM PLANET EARTH  
FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE MOON  
JULY 1969 A. D.  
WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND.

I think of Jamie and Sir Winston as we launch this review because of their love and skill with which both men made such effective use of words. Words to inspire, inform, inflame, coddle, cajole, chastise, convince, and yes, entertain. All aforementioned goals, we believe, reasonable ambitions for a publication such as this.

I've also been informed by the naysayers that the economy is weak, particularly in the publishing industry. Don't launch a new publication now. I'm not listening to them. But loudly I hear Jamie as Sir Winston, shouting, "...never give in, never give in, never, never, never, (ten more "nevers") give in!" Okay, somewhat exaggerated and perhaps overdramatic for this occasion, but you get the idea. We're pretty excited about the words we've collected here for you.

I also reflect on the adage that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. If so, then *The Hummingbird Review* advisory/editorial

committee has designed the best-looking dromedary west of North Africa and east of the San Diego Zoo. Thanks to The Committee we bring to you a wide-range of material offered by a group of very generous, gifted writers.

We invite you to read Robert Yehling's insightful interview with poet Taylor Mali who entertains and shocks in the same demonstrative breath. Listen to the inner thoughts of Achy Obejas as she recalls the heartache of her Cuban family's exile. Hear Martín Espada sing of Zapata and Marcos. Be sure to look into the window of Cabin Twenty's "Home Fires" section—an eclectic group of published and unpublished writers who offer a wide range of work.

Our name was lifted straight from the title of the 2005 book, *The Hummingbird's Daughter* written by Luis Alberto Urrea—a valued contributor and the inspiration for this review's emergence.

We hope that you enjoy our premier issue and we ask for your aid. Help us decide the direction this review should take. Your thoughts will be most beneficial. Tell us if we have brought forth a product worthy of your time. We are sincerely interested in your observations. Send a comment: [info@thehummingbirdreview.com](mailto:info@thehummingbirdreview.com)

"We shall not flag or fail." Sir Winston Churchill, June 4, 1940.

Charles Redner, publisher  
December, 2009

essays/prose





ACHY OBEJAS

## Exile

He will get down on his knees.

He will bend his legs and approach us face to face on the deck of the ship. For a moment, it might look like he's going to squat but he doesn't, he just kneels like a penitent, leans back a little, then catches himself and straightens up again. Like davening, but not quite.

This is the myth we tell: About our father as a younger man, kneeling on the deck of a ship, whispering to us about civic society, about Lincoln and the First Amendment.

Actually, that's not true. He would never have talked about the First Amendment. He would have more likely mentioned democracy—or freedom. That's the word he liked the most.



We keep this secret: The iron hissing on the dining room table, the towels moist, our mother's hair splayed on the cloth, her chin just off the edge. A black thread of smoke.

And this one: The champagne bottle a brutal club in her hand, the champagne an arch like a morning star.

But not these: The bar on U.S. 12 with sawdust on the floor. The bar at the mall that stayed open past the shopping center's closing hours. The bar downtown where the high school teachers held their book club discussions and gossiped and flirted and gave each other strategic rides home that were acted out as spontaneous.



We wanted to be Jews.

We wanted to be Polish or German. We would have settled for Danish.

A boy with relatives in Copenhagen explained to us that all blue eyed people on earth are related to an ancestor whose genes mutated between six and ten thousand years ago.

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We explained that where we come from the greatest achievement is to leave.



Most of us held clerical, semi-skilled and service jobs, our median income well below the national norm. We preferred to think we were lawyers, doctors, teachers, paramedics, industry giants, the president of Pepsi Cola, unbelievably popular and successful pop stars and media titans. We cared for our grandparents, our cousins, our aunts and uncles, for the offspring of the friends who didn't make it over, for our own kids when they refused to leave home. We had nuclear households plus one, sometimes two.



We curled into a ball, all of us, in the back seat of that Pontiac. We did not want to look, to hear the altercation outside, by the gas pump. We prayed no one would notice us, our pink flesh, our red lips; we prayed no one would ask for the words we could not form with our stiff fingers, force like a cough from our bruised lips.



When a cousin refused breakfast—a fried egg, a slab of grilled ham and greasy toast—we witnessed an uncle push her chair closer to the table. She was wearing flannel and had a rash. He piled lunch next to the fried egg, ham and toast: a hill of rice, a smear of spicy ground beef. She swung her legs, meaty little limbs tolling away the hours. Later, a glass of milk, a banana. For dinner came a cut of liver, onions browned in its juice, a bowl of Neapolitan ice cream with three bulging scoops.

He was making a point.



We listened, enraptured, to the moon landing on a radio in Loomis Park in Miami Beach. We are aware that there are 227 kinds of birds in the Grand Canyon, only 26 fish. We admire public art. We are citizens and we vote, not for a particular party, but for, and against, ideas. We know

the Gettysburg Address and its admonitions to us, the living.



A man named Walter Poenisch once made the same trip we did, only he swam it. He rotated his body along its long axis with every arm stroke, so that the shoulder of the recovering arm was always higher than the shoulder of the other arm, the one that pushed and pulled.

This way, there will always be less need to turn to breathe. When one shoulder is out of the water, it reduces drag; when it falls, it aids the arm catching the water; when the other shoulder rises, it will help the arm at the other end of the push to leave the water.

When we heard about the trip, at first we thought Walter Poenisch had done it in reverse, from here to there. Then we read that it took him 34 hours in a shark cage, that he took necessary breaks for medical purposes, and that it wasn't 90 miles but 129.

DANIEL A. OLIVAS

## Diplopia

The classroom's florescent lights and afternoon sun seemed to converge directly at Alisa's eyes. She knew that her headache would quickly morph into a full-blown migraine and she needed to do something soon otherwise her twenty-seven fourth graders would be grossly entertained by their teacher's violent vomiting into the nearest receptacle. Alisa wanted nothing more than to close her eyes and rest in a quiet room. Just for a minute or two.

"Skylar," she said to a red-headed boy in the front row.

"Yes, Ms. Varela," said Skylar in a voice that was almost too eager for Alisa to take but she needed him desperately at that moment.

Alisa pulled a paperback book from her desk drawer. "I have to make a phone call. Would you mind reading from the *Trumpet of the Swan* for a few minutes?"

Skylar wriggled in his seat. "To the class?" he asked. The other students giggled.

"Yes," she said. "To the class." Alisa opened the book and handed it to the boy. "We're at chapter fifteen. You can sit at my desk."

Skylar couldn't believe his luck. He leapt to his feet and was at Alisa's chair before she could get to the door.

"Behave, children," Alisa said as she left feeling unable to control her now convulsing stomach. She barely made it to the faculty bathroom.



Today was going to be the day Alisa reentered her life. Dr. Ramos had been very clear about it: in a day or two after the surgery, Alisa could jump right into the things she always enjoyed doing with only a few precautions. The doctor told his anxious patient to rest her eyes when they got tired, use the antibiotic drops three times a day and not to lift heavy objects for about a week or so. But it had already been ten days since the surgery and she barely could drag herself to work. The whites of Alisa's eyes were awash in blood, much to the entertainment of her students, and the stitches pulled and irritated every second she was awake. The constant low grade fever didn't help matters much. Yes,

the surgery had apparently restored Alisa's "ocular alignment" but they wouldn't know for sure until more time had passed.

"This is usually done on infants," Dr. Ramos had said. Alisa remembered how the doctor's head was simply too big for his almost petite body. But his face was of a TV doctor: empathy almost bled from his pores, his temples sported just the right amount of gray, and he had perfected looking over his black-rimmed reading glasses in such a way that Alisa could only feel safe, protected.

"And?" she had responded.

"And so we have to be careful with adults. But I see no reason for you to restrict your activities other than not lifting heavy objects for one or two weeks." At this point, Dr. Ramos had lowered his head, lifted his eyebrows, and peered kindly over his reading glasses. "All will be fine."

But there was still no explanation as to why Alisa's left eye decided to turn in toward her nose after the retinal surgery two years ago. "The strabismus is not related to the retinal repair, as far as I can tell," Dr. Ramos had said. "You just had a propensity for it, let us say."

The only comfort was that Alisa knew she had to have the surgery to reverse the diplopia. There was no other option. The double vision had intruded more and more into her life, and driving became a fretful activity. Twice already she had to pull over to rest her eyes before getting back into city traffic. And little activities sometimes became difficult. More than once a cashier held out change and Alisa had trouble putting her hand in the right place to receive the money. She remembered how one cashier looked at her as though alcohol or illicit drugs were the culprit.

Friday, after class, Alisa had planned a wonderful day with Emilio and Greg, her favorite couple. First, they were going to browse at the Alexander Book Co. and then wander over to Dolby Chadwick on Post to look at some new Kanevsky paintings. And the Meyerovich Gallery was within walking distance from there. Then maybe a nice dinner on the Embarcadero. A perfect afternoon and evening with two good friends. But as she pressed the cool, wet washcloth on her eyes and enjoyed the near silence of the faculty lounge, Alisa couldn't imagine looking at anything let alone books and paintings. Keeping her eyes covered, she reached into her purse, found her cell phone, and speed dialed Emilio.

"Talk to me," came his voice, too loud but very welcome to her ears.

"I feel really crappy," Alisa barely got out.

“Mija,” said Emilio in a softer voice. “Do you need me to get you to the doctor’s?”

Always available for me, Alisa thought. Always there.

“No,” she almost whispered. “No. But I think I need to cancel. Sorry.”

Alisa could hear workers banging away at something in the background. Emilio was supervising a remodel that was proving to be as painful as it was lucrative. But in this economy, he said he couldn’t complain. A remodel in San Francisco meant money. Good money.

“No, mija, you can’t cancel completely. We can do something else. Something easy on the eyes.”

“Like what?”

“You can watch me and Greg make out.”

Alisa laughed. “Oh, then I’d just get hot and bothered and then what would I do?”

“Hey, I’m just your friend,” said Emilio over the ever-growing construction din. “I don’t mind getting your motor running, but you need to find your own action, mija.”

“I feel like I’m living an R-rated version of *Will and Grace*.”

“You are, mija. But without the residuals.”



Whenever Alisa entered the world of Emilio and Greg, she felt intensely inadequate and quite impoverished. True, she owned her own home while her friends merely leased. But Alisa’s house was nothing more than an unoriginal cracker box in Daley City, inherited from her mother and father, while the boys lived in the City itself. Emilio and Greg existed in style, the kind Alisa only saw in home furnishing magazines and made her drool and feel as envious as she could ever feel about anything. Alisa still furnished her home like a dorm room relying heavily on IKEA or, if she splurged, Pottery Barn. The boys’ apartment, on the other hand, not only had a view of the Bay, but looked as though it was lifted from the pages of *Metropolitan Home*. Their Paola Lenti chaise cost more than her entire bedroom set, mattress included. But she couldn’t complain. They were the happiest people she knew and Alisa felt free and at home in the boys’ apartment.

“Sweet Jesus!” said Greg as he opened the door. “You look like something from an old Vincent Price movie.”

"I need a drink," said Alisa as she hugged Greg. "And thank you for making a girl feel so special."

"I'm sorry. Emilio said you looked pretty bad but I had no idea."

Alisa pulled back. "You just keep on charming me, don't you?" Greg closed the door. "I'm an idiot."

"Yes."

"Drink?"

"Just like I asked."

Greg took Alisa's jacket and ushered her in. "We'll begin with martinis and then move to wine with dinner."

"Heaven. Where's Emilio?"

"In the kitchen, of course. Where I like my men."

"Pregnant and barefoot."

Greg laughed as he walked to the bar. "At least barefoot. Go say hi to him."

"Need drink now?"

"Need drink now?"

"Must have drink."

"You sound like Superman under the influence of kryptonite."

"Si."

Greg mixed the martini and poured a generous amount in a chilled glass. "Olive?"

"Two."

"That's my girl."

He handed Alisa the drink and then narrowed his eyes.

"What now?" said Alisa.

"You don't really look that bad."

"Thanks."

"What is it? Something about you?"

Alisa took a sip of her martini and let out a little *ah*. "Well, for starters, I'm not wearing eye makeup."

"Yes! That's it!"

"And, to top it off, I'm not wearing my contacts."

"Right."

"So I'm four-eyed tonight just for you."

"Cute glasses, though." Greg poured himself a drink and tasted it carefully. "Perfect."

"Yes, wonderful bartender. I need to give you a big tip."

As the words left her lips, two arms slid around her waist. Greg smiled as Emilio pulled Alisa in tight from behind.

“Mija,” he whispered into her ear. “How are you?”

Alisa closed her eyes and enjoyed the hug. “I feel like crap, sweetie,” she said. “Really lousy.”

Emilio kissed Alisa’s hair. “Dinner is ready,” he said.

“And I look like a goon.”

Emilio turned Alisa around. “Not so bad.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Let’s eat,” said Emilio. “Some good food, some nice wine, and you’ll be good as new.”

Alisa put her head on Emilio’s chest. “Oh, sweetie, I love you so much.”

“And I love you.”

Greg took another sip of his martini. “Maybe I should leave you two alone,” he laughed.

“Come on,” said Emilio. “Vamos a comer.”



Alisa was not surprised that the food was perfect, per usual with the boys. And the wine followed the martini with ease. Emilio and Greg chatted, laughed, teased and smiled. Alisa needed this support. The surgery was far from pleasant but it had triggered something in her that she seldom felt: an acknowledgment that she was nothing more than human and that some day, she will notice that her body, bit by bit, needed repair. Then one morning, she will look in the mirror and see a very old woman staring back. And this made Alisa shiver. But she dare not mention it to these two friends who had seen more than their share of young men, and a few women, get sick, wither and then die too early. She needed to buck up. It could be worse. A few decades ago, she would have been blind in one eye with a retina that could not be repaired. Alisa was ahead of the game. She would heal, in due time. Though here she was almost thirty, married once for only a year to a very vicious man, and divorced before she turned twenty-one, she still was relatively young with a chance at happiness. But her time on earth was slipping away, disappearing with each new crop of students, each parent-teacher meeting with people who didn’t realize how lucky they were to have a child.

“Oh!” said Emilio. “Listen!”

They all stopped chatting and simultaneously tilted their heads up to hear the song that just came on the radio.

“Who is that?” said Greg.

“How could you not know?” said Emilio.

“Sorry.”

“No sex for you tonight.”

Alisa laughed. “Yikes! I’d hate to find out how you punish Greg for bigger infractions.”

“Oh,” said Greg. “Emilio has a whole chart he follows.”

“God, this is a great song,” said Emilio.

Alisa took a sip of wine. “Tower of Power,” she said as she started to sway to the melody.

“Yes!” said Emilio.

“You’re Still a Young Man,” she concluded with a triumphant nod.

“Sí, mija,” said Emilio. “You win. You get sex tonight!”

“Oh goody,” said Alisa.

Greg let out a snort. “I should test you on house music and see how you do.”

Alisa touched her forehead and closed her eyes.

“What is it?” said Emilio. “Too much wine?”

“Too much Emilio?” asked Greg.

Alisa took a big breath almost gulping air down. “No. My migraine is coming back. I don’t feel so great.”

“Need to barf?” asked Emilio.

“I hope not.”

“Lie down?” asked Greg.

“Please. I’m so sorry. I’m such a dope.”

Emilio stood up and put his hands on Alisa’s shoulders. “No, mija. Don’t worry. Come with me.”



Alisa slept through the night in her friends’ guest room. She tumbled in and out of dreams that were not as vivid as her dreams usually were. Alisa’s dreams this night were muffled, blurry, black-and-white, with no sound. It was as if her now limited sense of sight dulled even her sleep vision. She could sense her mother, that was certain, and a little of

her father. But one sense was clear: she felt very alone. How she ended up this way seemed to be the theme of her dreams this night. Yes, her parents had both died, first Alisa's father, and then more recently her mother. Alisa's husband was forced to stay away by the justice system. And her female friends married one by one and started spitting out children which, of course, made socializing with them that much more difficult. Even when some of her friends divorced, they had a baby or two to stave off loneliness. At least that's what it looked like to Alisa. Relief from these dreams finally came with the smell of coffee and the glare of morning sun.

"Mija," said Emilio as he kissed Alisa's forehead. "How do you feel?"

She kept her eyes closed and reached for Emilio's unshaven face.

"Sandpaper."

"Sí, mija. Just got up and made breakfast. Have some coffee." He guided Alisa's hand to the warm mug. "Have a sip."

She obeyed and let out a deep sigh that comes with the morning's first taste of coffee.

Alisa slowly opened her eyes and then blinked several times. She tried to focus on the mug which had a photograph of a sleek Weimaraner emblazoned across it in honor of Emilio's late dog, Inca.

"You've expected too much of yourself," said Emilio. "You're only human, you know."

Once Alisa focused on the perfect gray canine face, she turned to Emilio. She blinked hard again because this shift of subject proved to be more difficult than Alisa expected. She closed her eyes for a second, breathed in the coffee's aroma, and then opened her eyes very carefully as if they would roll out of her head if she weren't careful.

"Are you all right?" asked Emilio.

Alisa blinked one more time. The two Emilios slowly came together into one. The one she knew so well. The one who was her best friend. The one she loved more than anyone in her life.

"Si, mi cielo," Alisa said. "I'm all right."

Emilio caressed her cheek and smiled. "Sure?"

Alisa took another sip of coffee and looked away. "Of course," she said. "I've never been better."