

David Huerta

POEMS  
POEMAS

poetry  
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centre

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## Introduction

David Huerta was born in Mexico City in 1949. He grew up during a transitional period of Mexican history. The hopes of the political left, which had been animated by the Cuban Revolution, would appear increasingly beleaguered as the 1960s progressed, and the ensuing decade brought a series of repressive dictatorships across Latin America. Huerta himself witnessed the *Matanza de Tlatelolco* (Tlatelolco Massacre) of 1968 when government forces opened fire on student demonstrators in Mexico City.

Yet this period also introduced young Mexicans to a wave of new philosophical ideas from continental Europe. In particular, it brought a fascination with the ways that language encroaches on the interactions between self and world. That awareness of language is always present in Huerta's poems, whether as explicit reflection or, more commonly, as a taste for extended metaphorical excursions. In 'Prayer', the speaker calls for the preservation of a moment 'here now among us': 'it casts its yellow light and swells / like the sun or like flaming lemons / – and tastes of the sea, of loved hands / and smells like a street in Paris / where we were happy.' What begins as an unremarkable call for mindfulness of the present launches into a figurative journey that engages the senses (sight, taste and smell) and startling shifts of imaginative scale (sun to lemons to sea to street). Yet the very expansiveness of this language suggests that the experience has never quite been captured. Indeed, the present moment gives way to 'a street in Paris', a fleeting memory of the past, and a recognition that the preservation of the here and now is a precarious endeavour.

Huerta's poems can be colloquial, fanciful, and dense in turns, but they are linked by a strong dramatic portrait of a speaker trying to orient himself in shifting landscapes of word and world, memory and desire. There is a consistently intimate note to poems which are often addressed directly to a lover. While the meditative cast of

his work precludes direct confession, a number of the poems here betray an autobiographical inspiration: whether the difficult feelings about masculinity of ‘Thirteen Attempts on the Life of Trivial Love’; or the more casual anecdote of ‘Aural’; or the exchange between present and past selves of ‘The Child is Father of the Man’. Even in works that refer to other poets, such as ‘Poem by Gottfried Benn’, the encounter is framed in terms of a troubling personal narrative: ‘But how they stayed here those images the ghosts / of those lacerating images is something I must / come to terms with it won’t be easy but I have to do it.’ This passage is a pointed reminder that the frequently baroque expansiveness of Huerta’s imagery is not mere ornament. Poetic language is here a visceral experience.

It is now nearly forty years since David Huerta published his first collection of verse, *El jardín de la luz* (The Garden of Light) (1972). We have chosen to concentrate on his later poems, from *Historia* (History) (1990), *Desdoblamientos* (Doubling) (1997), *La música de lo que pasa* (The Music of What Happens) (1997), and *La calle blanca* (The White Street) (2006). His novel-length *Incurable* (Incurable) (1987) is a remarkable document but it did not lend itself to selection in a modest volume such as we offer here. Huerta’s poems, which themselves deal with the translation of an evasive experience into words, confront the translator with particular challenges. Jamie McKendrick has managed to capture both the physical precision and the imaginative flight of Huerta’s world. He presents a poet with an eye for the mundane as well as the erudite; a speaker intent on rescuing meaning from the fluid motions of a passing world.

TOM BOLL

### *Translator’s Note*

I am deeply indebted to Tom Boll for his encouragement and expert vigilance throughout, and also to Xon de Ros and Erica Segre for their help and advice.

## POEMA DE GOTTFRIED BENN

Tenía que irme pero un poema de Gottfried Benn  
me detuvo en el arranque de ese impulso  
no saben ustedes qué poema terrible

Una flor se deshacía en medio de una autopsia  
y el doctor que había abierto el cadáver  
veía cómo los pétalos se atoraban en las vísceras

También los guantes del médico se llenaban  
de pétalos y de sanguaza era todo impresionante  
pero sólo era un poema y yo tenía que irme

No sé si me fui pero las imágenes de ese poema  
de Gottfried Benn –por lo demás una figura  
no muy simpática– no se fueron se quedaron aquí

Cómo se quedaron aquí esas imágenes las huellas  
de esas figuras desgarradas es algo que deberé  
investigar no será fácil lo sé pero debo hacerlo

POEM BY GOTTFRIED BENN

I had to go out but a poem by Gottfried Benn  
stopped me in my tracks – you've no idea  
quite how disturbing that poem was

A flower fell apart in the middle of an autopsy  
and the doctor who'd cut open the corpse  
saw how those petals landed among the inner organs

Even the medic's rubber gloves were covered  
with petals and blood it was utterly breathtaking  
but only a poem and I had to go out

I'm not sure if I left but the images  
of that poem by Benn – frankly not  
a very appealing figure – never left they stayed here

But how they stayed here those images the ghosts  
of those lacerating images is something I must  
come to terms with it won't be easy but I have to do it

## TRECE INTENCIONES CONTRA EL AMOR TRIVIAL

*Si la palabra es el principio de la acción, liberemos la palabra de la esclavitud doméstica rellenándola de cáncer, del virus más venenoso e incurable, y lancémosla al cuerpo del amor trivial.*

LLUÍS FERNÁNDEZ, *El anarquista desnudo*

1. Razones viudas por las que  
“sucede que me canso de ser hombre”,  
líquido deflecado y fértil  
de la mujer que no soy; líquido  
terso, cristalino, que sale  
de los senos que no tengo.
2. Enigmas, siempre, del coito  
conmigo mismo: uróboro,  
Anillo de Moebius. Evidencias  
de una manada, de una multitud  
que se difunde dentro de mí  
—circula, quiere algo: ama, se ama.
3. Hay mujeres, mal sueño mío,  
muertas en mí —arrojadas como cabelleras.
4. En mis fotografías de niño estoy  
indiferenciado, un amasijo  
de palpitante energía carnal, sin  
sonrisa, sin miedo, sin neurosis.
5. Misterios de mis labios bajo el bigote  
imperioso y solipsista, hirsuto paisaje  
de los caracteres secundarios.

## THIRTEEN ATTEMPTS ON THE LIFE OF TRIVIAL LOVE

*If the word is the basis for action, let's deliver the word from its domestic servitude, infecting it with cancer, with the most venomous and incurable virus, and hurl it at the body of trivial love.*

LLUÍS FERNÁNDEZ, *The Naked Anarchist*

1. Widowed reasons why  
'it happens that I'm tired of being a man',  
torn fertile liquid  
of the woman I'm not; clear  
liquid overflowing from  
the breasts I don't possess.
2. Always the enigmas of coitus  
conducted with myself: uroboros,  
Möbius strip. Evidence left  
by a handful, a mob  
that spreads within me  
– circulates, wants something: loves, loves itself.
3. There are women, nightmares of mine,  
dead inside me – discarded like scalps.
4. In the photographs of me as a child  
I pale into the background, a tangle  
of trembling carnal energy, without  
smiles, without fear, without neurosis.
5. Mysteries of my lips under that  
imperious solipsistic moustache,  
the hirsute landscape of minor characters.

6. Tacto y sudor, míos, de hombre,  
a veces, sobre una carne en penumbra  
deleitada, carne desconocida, sedienta;  
carne imborrable, con un corazón  
afilado y leve, y otros latidos milenarios,  
caudalosa carne abrazada a mí, a mis  
ficciones concretas de persona, mi yo turbio.

7. Una sequía nos divide,  
mi vertebral llamarada  
y tus ansiosas vértebras  
lo saben interminablemente.

8. ¡Ah!, instantáneos abismos  
de mi apetito, la mayoría de edad  
y sus frustrados paraísos, los jardines  
parásitos del hambre individualista  
que va sintiendo el cráneo macho,  
secamente, resplandeciendo por lo bajo  
y con los dientes apretados.

9. Falo y esperma, grandes símbolos  
y minuciosos abalorios del amor trivial  
–losa diamantina en mis lomos adultos.

10. Pero quién quiere culpas, por lo demás:  
pedazos muertos del falo-gimnoto,  
pedazos muertos de la vulva-caverna: Culpas.

11. No quiero culpas prendidas,  
como millar de escapularios,  
en el envés de mi falda de hombre.

6. The sense of touch, sweat, my own, a man's,  
at times, over flesh in joyous half-light,  
unknown, thirsting flesh; unforgettable flesh  
with a heart sharpened and made buoyant  
and other ancient heartbeats, generous flesh  
cleaving to me, to my embodied fictions  
of someone else, of my own shady self.

7. A drought divides us,  
both the flame of my spine  
and your fiery vertebrae  
know it forever.

8. Ah! Sudden chasms opening  
in my appetite: coming of age  
and its frustrated heavens, the gardens  
of such predatory hunger  
that the male skull,  
dramatically underlit,  
senses with gritted teeth.

9. Phallus and sperm, towering symbols  
and meticulous trinkets of trivial love –  
adamantine tombstone in my adult loins.

10. And yet who wants this guilt anyway:  
dead fragments of the gimno-phallus,  
of the vulva-cave: Guilt.

11. I don't want these rooted guilts,  
like countless devotional scapulars  
hung inside, the wrong side, of my manly robe.

12. Doy mi palabra de hombre y cuánto pesa,  
circula austera, devuelve un aroma  
musculado y gentil, de cedo-el-paso, de ir  
por el lado de afuera en la banqueta, de  
extender una mano –sólo tendones, venas.

13. Mis palabras quisieran  
restañar esa herida: la  
mordedura del amor trivial.

*Amor, amor, detén tu planta impura.*

VICENTE ALEIXANDRE

12. I give my man's word – how much it weighs,  
severely circulates, distilling the gentle,  
muscular scent of giving way, of stepping out  
to the pavement's edge, of stretching forth  
a hand – merely tendons, veins.

13. My words would like to  
heal this wound: bitten  
deep by trivial love.

*Love, love, stay your impure stride.*

VICENTE ALEIXANDRE

## ABRES Y CIERRAS

Abres un filo de navaja  
para que gotee la transparencia.

Cierras el sonámbulo cubo de la noche  
y un río de sombra se derrama.

Abres y cierras el diafragma líquido  
de mi corazón –y amanezco

en el decuplicado y lento  
destello de tus manos.

## OPEN AND SHUT

You open the blade of a flick knife  
so it drips transparency.

You shut the restless cube of night  
and a stream of shadow ramifies.

You open and shut the liquid diaphragm  
of my heart – and at dawn I arrive

in the stately, tenfold  
starlight of your hands.

## PLEGARIA

Señor, salva este momento.  
Nada tiene de prodigio o milagro  
como no sea una sospecha  
de inmortalidad, un aliento  
de salvación. Se parece  
a tantos otros momentos . . .  
Pero está aquí entre nosotros  
y crece como una luz amarilla  
de sol y de encendidos limones  
—y sabe a mar, a manos amadas,  
huele como una calle de París  
donde fuimos felices. Sálvalo  
en la memoria o rescátalo  
para la luz que declina  
sobre esta página,  
aunque apenas la toque.

## PRAYER

Lord, save this moment.  
There's nothing outlandish or  
miraculous about it, unless it holds  
a hint of immortality, a breath  
of salvation. It looks like  
any number of other moments . . .  
But it's here now among us:  
it casts its yellow light and swells  
like the sun or like flaming lemons  
– and tastes of the sea, of loved hands  
and smells like a street in Paris  
where we were happy. Save it  
in your memory or deliver it  
into the light that sets  
on this page,  
barely touching it.

## AURAL

Escarcha sucia del *audio*  
en la penumbra nómada  
del automóvil;  
ciénaga de sonidos  
en donde la aguja del oído  
apenas puede moverse.  
De pronto, una *torch singer*  
desmenuza a Wittgenstein  
con tenedores de Cante . . .  
¿Cómo lo hace? ¿Cómo  
desenlaza, destraba los lenguajes,  
hace fluir el mundo –y por añadidura  
suma la gracia  
y la tragedia?  
El automóvil  
entra en la noche  
ungido por la música.

## AURAL

Gritty frost from  
the radio speaker  
in the car's  
nomadic shadows:  
a swamp of sounds  
in which hearing's  
needle can  
barely move.  
Out of nowhere,  
a torch singer  
slices through Wittgenstein  
with the cutlery  
of *cante jondo* . . .  
How does she do it? –  
unstitch, unseam  
language itself,  
make the world flow and  
if that wasn't enough  
hit the twin peaks  
of grace and tragedy?  
The car  
anointed with music  
slips into the night.

## COCINA DEL PARAÍSO

Había utensilios infernales en la cocina del Paraíso,  
ollas dobladas de color violáceo,  
hinchados tenedores en cuyos pliegues  
se ensartaban saliva de arcángeles y voces deshilachadas  
que provenían de la camisa izquierda de Dios.

Una sopa fue preparándose y apareció el Amor,  
un caldo peregrino adornado con inflamadas escrituras  
y reflejos de playa en vacaciones. El aceite se hizo fuego,  
entró en los cuerpos y luego se encajó, activo, iridiscente,  
en los ojos de los bienaventurados.

El aquelarre barroco se detuvo: longitudinales olores  
invadieron la cocina paradisiaca,  
limpios condimentos para el edificio febril  
de la primavera y sus ondulaciones, abriles  
de dientes florales, mandíbulas llenas de libélulas,  
todo el ropaje de Eros para la Ensalada  
y sus rizos, el esplendor de los acuchillados abrazos  
y el mar de las manos, todo azul y multiplicándose.

## HEAVEN'S KITCHEN

Heaven's kitchen is supplied with infernal utensils,  
sagging, lilac-coloured cauldrons, fat forks  
between whose prongs are tangled strings  
of archangels' spit and frayed voices  
that rose from the left-hand shirt of God.

A soup was being cooked when Love appeared,  
a rare broth sprinkled with flaming scriptures  
and glints of seaside holidays. The oil became fire,  
seeped into the skin and stayed, vigorous,  
iridescent, in the eyes of the blessed.

The elaborate coven stopped work: elongated odours  
invaded the heavenly kitchen; pure spices  
for the feverish construction of Spring  
and its rippling; Aprils whose flowers are teeth,  
whose jaws are crammed with dragonflies;  
Eros's entire wardrobe for the Salad  
with its curled coiffure; the brilliance of stabbed embraces  
and the sea of hands, blue as can be, multiplying.

## ENTROPÍA EN WIESBADEN

Por el romano muro te asomaste  
a ver la calle alemana  
bajo la lluvia tenaz y declinanate.  
Lo que viste fue el bullicio, la fractal  
escritura del desgaste europeo.  
Mucho dinero, finas ropas,  
edificios cuidadosos, gestos agrios,  
mala comida— Goethe, en fin,  
en su áulico, nemoroso  
y patriarcal papel de santo doctus, poeta  
enciclopédico.

Nada que contar de regreso,  
nada sino la lluvia ahora pertinaz  
y final. Un soplo del Espíritu Santo  
entraba por la boca de los minutos—  
pero tú, presente, más cuidadosa  
que las Edades Medias  
de la Selva Negra,  
atestiguabas el sermón puritano  
y el sedimento postindustrial,  
las palabras eclipsantes  
de cualquier académico, los consejos  
de algún editor  
despistado in Francfort. La entropía  
se apoderaba de Wiesbaden  
y tú renacías incesante  
contra el fulgor del tiempo.

## ENTROPY IN WIESBADEN

You peeped out over the Roman wall  
into the German street  
battered by the slant, stubborn rain.  
What you saw was Europe worn away,  
its crowded, fractal script.  
Lots of money, well-cut clothes,  
prim dwellings, curt gestures,  
ghastly food – and, finally Goethe  
in his memorious, courtier mode,  
patriarch, *santo doctus*, mode  
of the all-enlightened poet.  
Nothing to tell on your return  
except for the now constant,  
final rain. A breath of the Holy Spirit  
entered the mouth of the passing moment –  
but you, present, more diligent  
with detail than the Middle Ages  
of the Black Forest,  
bore witness to the puritan sermon  
and the post-industrial dust,  
the overbearing views of  
some academic, the counsel  
of an editor astray  
in Frankfurt. Entropy  
engulfed Wiesbaden  
while over and over you were reborn  
against the blaze of time.

## CONJURO DESDE SEPTIEMBRE

*Fuego verde, niebla en el aire . . .*

[. . .]

*En una hora, en media hora, para que se vaya como una niebla,  
que se vaya como una mariposa . . .*

Rezo tzotzil para curar la epilepsia

Que la mano se abra hacia el espejo del sueño  
Que el ojo se cierre hacia el manajo de los nervios  
Que la espalda se suavice en el reposo cristalino  
Que la boca se distienda bajo la electricidad de la noche  
Que el cuello se afloje en la flor del reposo  
Que la nariz se eleve en el perfume blanco del día  
Que la pierna se alargue detrás del magnetismo del viaje  
Que el pubis se encienda en el terciopelo del abrazo  
Que la cadera se curve en el esplendor de la brisa  
Que la oreja se despierte bajo el tintineo del contacto  
Que el pelo se derrame desde el muro del cráneo  
Que el pecho se ilumine entre las astillas del grito  
Que el hombro se duerma ante la huella del neblí  
Que el pie se extravíe entre las magias del tiempo  
Que la garganta se oscurezca con la sílaba del espacio

## SPELL FOR SEPTEMBER

*Green fire, fog in the air*

[. . .]

*In an hour, a half-hour, let it disperse like the fog,  
let it fly off like a butterfly.*

Tzotzil prayer to cure epilepsy

Let the hand open to the mirror world of dreams  
Let the eye shut on the clenched bunch of nerves  
Let the back unwind in lucid repose  
Let the mouth widen under night's electric charge  
Let the neck relax in the flower of sleep  
Let the nostrils flare to the white scent of day  
Let the leg stretch from the journey's magnetic force  
Let the pubis ignite in the velvet embrace  
Let the hip curve in the breeze's grace  
Let the ear awaken at the ringing call  
Let the hair spread from the skull's wall  
Let the chest be lit within the splintered cry  
Let the shoulder sleep before the falcon's flight  
Let the foot lose its way in the sorcery of time  
Let the throat darken with the syllable of space

## THE CHILD IS FATHER OF THE MAN

No sé cómo buscarte dentro de mí,  
niño que fui: si debo escarbar  
encarnizadamente  
en la memoria  
o invocarte por medio de magias repentinas  
en las que no creo.

Estás perdido pero no para ti mismo:  
sólo para mí. Sin embargo soy tú,  
o eso me dicen quienes parecen  
saber más de mí que yo mismo; o que tú.

En el tiempo de la vida  
tuviste un tiempo propio,  
largo, dilatado  
hasta el confín de juegos infinitos.

Sé que jugabas como ahora yo juego:  
pero eso no es encontrarte. Soy tu repetición  
—siquiera en el esplendor mínimo  
del juego— y sus inocencias y sus culpas.

William Wordsworth afirma  
que eres mi padre:  
él juega un juego estrafalario  
con los años, con las edades  
y con la genética. Por las entrañas  
y por la biología,  
mi padre fue otro  
—y ya está muerto. Tú estás vivo.  
Y es cierto que vives  
como una sombra palpitante  
dentro de mí. Pero no conozco ese «dentro».

## THE CHILD IS FATHER OF THE MAN

I don't know how to seek you out inside me –  
child that I was: whether I have to scrape  
with gritted nails  
in memory's plot  
or call you forth with drastic invocations  
I don't believe in.

You're lost – not lost to yourself:  
only to me. But all the same I'm you,  
or so they say, the ones who seem to know  
more about me than I do, or than you do.

In the time that's given to a life  
you had your own time,  
wide and stretching out as far as  
the edge, the margin of endless play.

I know you played once as I'm playing now:  
but this isn't to meet you. I'm your repetition  
– if only in the curtailed splendour  
of the game, its guilt and innocence.

Wordsworth declares that you're my father:  
himself playing a weird and wild game  
with the years, succession  
and genetics. For my assembled parts,  
the biological thing,  
I had another father  
– and now he's dead. But you're alive.  
No doubt about it – you're alive  
like a pulsing shadow  
inside me. Yet I have no knowledge of this 'inside'.

Quando examino el interior de lo que soy  
hallo solamente un amasijo de formas  
indistintas, apenas discernible  
por un esfuerzo del recuerdo.  
Pero estás ahí, impalpable, invisible.

Acércate. Pienso a veces  
que no quieres hacerlo  
para que yo no te mate. O te me escapas  
minuciosamente  
por una voluntad incomprensible  
de ocultamiento. Pues sospecho  
que no me tienes miedo  
– como no le tiene miedo la sombra  
al cuerpo que la proyecta sobre la pared.

Es posible que siempre estés aquí  
y seas la forma sagrada  
de una ignorancia cósmica  
que debería atormentarme.  
Pero quizá, mejor aun,  
tienes la hondura de una sabiduría  
visionaria.

Sin embargo, sé que aborreces  
tales grandes palabras, acaso  
porque las desconocías  
o porque ellas te desconocían.

Entre mil otras cosas, puedo entender  
que eres precisamente eso:  
el desconocimiento de las grandes palabras.

When I examine the interior of what I am  
I find a mass of inchoate forms  
that even by an effort of memory  
are barely distinguishable.  
But you are there – untouchable, invisible.

Come closer. I sometimes think  
you don't want to  
for fear I'll kill you. Or that deftly  
you elude me  
out of an unfathomable  
will to hide. Then I suspect  
you have no fear of me –  
as the shadow has no fear of the body  
that casts it on the wall.  
It could be that you're always here  
and that you're the sacred form  
of a cosmic ignorance  
that should torment me.  
Though perhaps, better still,  
you've sounded the depths of visionary wisdom.

All the same, I know you hate  
such big words, maybe  
because you've no knowledge of them  
nor they of you.

Among countless other things you may be,  
I can understand that you're precisely this:  
the ignorance of big words.

Que por el tiempo presente de tu ausencia  
o de tu estilo de esconderte  
eso me baste. Mientras tanto, en sueños,

murmuro tus cantos sin significado  
y en la vigilia intento ponerlos  
en líneas irregulares de juego serio,  
ese otro confín.

That for the present moment of your absence  
or of your manner of hiding  
this is enough for me. In the meantime, in dreams,

I croon your songs without meaning  
and, awake, I try to place them  
in the irregular lines of serious play,  
this other edge, this margin.

