

María Meléndez

Interview with María Meléndez

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Location: McKenna Hall, Institute for Latino Studies Library, University of Notre Dame

MM: María Meléndez

SC: Steven Cordova

SIDE A OF TAPE

SC: This is an Oral History Program interview for the Institute for Latino Studies at the University of Notre Dame. April 5th, 2007. I'm here with poet María Meléndez, and we're in McKenna Hall in the ILS library. I'm Steven Cordova. Both María and I are here at the behest of Letras Latinas, a program at the Institute for Latino Studies, run by our friend and fellow poet Francisco Aragón. Thank you María for participating. Would you just please begin with the basics; state your full name, date, and place of birth.

MM: María Teresa Meléndez Gallagher. Place of birth is Tucson, Arizona. Did you say date? I don't know—I'll make you say your birthday! My birthday is on April 15th, 1974.

SC: Well, just for the records, I was born on November 15, 1963; I'm 43 years old. Can you talk a little bit about your family and where you grew up—in what city or what cities?

MM: Sure. I mostly grew up in Livermore, California, which is in the East Bay Area. I have lived in California since I was five weeks old, so I'm really a Californian rather than an Arizonan—although we do have a number of extended family in Arizona that we visit pretty regularly; but I grew up in California.

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SC: Brothers and sisters?

MM: Oh, yes. I have a little sister; she's nine years younger than me. I was just remembering Poetry Flash in the Bay Area, poetry publications, and how I would admire it even as a child; it sort of highlighted how poetry was a cool happening thing in California. I remember getting a sense of California being a place for poetry even as a little kid.

SC: And you went to public schools or Catholic school?

MM: I went to public school. I was lucky enough to go to public schools that were well funded and had great teachers. I know that not everyone's public school experience mirrors that.

SC: No, mine didn't.

MM: It's interesting because—and I hope this is changing now—in the set that I traveled in I was lucky enough to get in this sort of...

SC: Artistic crowd?

MM: Well, not necessarily so much artistic crowd but the overachiever crowd. I was lucky enough to be in the honor classes. In those settings there was maybe one of each from the ethnicities of our town. I was the one Mexican American in those classes, in those situations; I guess that has influenced my sense of identity in a way.

SC: Did you feel a sense of responsibility?

MM: I didn't feel a sense of responsibility, but I did have a sense of indignation now and then. My friends would make remarks that in other settings one white person might make

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to another expecting a chuckle or whatever. Like if there was a car going by and *ranchera* music would be blasting or something, they'd make some disdainful remark or even go so far as to say, "the dirty Mexicans," or something like that and then they would say: "Oh, but we don't mean you María because you're not a real Mexican, we don't mean you." It wasn't until college that I was able to kind of connect the dots behind those remarks and say that was really hurtful. It annoyed me, but it didn't strike me as hurtful until I was able to kind of put together all that went into their saying that. Although I grew up in California it wasn't, I don't think, the California that it is today, where there is now a Hispanic majority in California. My mom actually said there is a Meléndez in our hometown as the dentist; it wasn't like that when I grew up. There weren't as many Hispanics in sort of visible positions or positions of power.

SC: So your mom saw it as a point of pride that there was a dentist who was a Meléndez?

MM: Yeah, right, which is new; that's new for that area.

SC: On the one hand you did experience some discrimination, and on the other hand the schools were well funded. You got exposed to poetry very early on. I didn't know that.

MM: I did. Actually one summer my mom set up a deal for me; she was a very imaginative person for one thing, and for the other thing she probably was tired of me pestering: *I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm bored, I've nothing to do.* I do remember one summer she set up a poetry-writing incentive program, where if I wrote five poems she would take me out for ice cream, and this would keep up throughout the summer. [laughs] I do remember learning from an early age that poetry could pay.

SC: This, ladies and gentlemen, is an unusual situation; most people's parents don't push them to write poetry. You had a stage mother. [both laugh]

MM: Well, without all the pressure...and cocaine. [laughter continues]

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SC: Did you grow up in a family with a mother and a father?

MM: Yes, it was just the four of us though—my sister and I, my dad and my mom. My dad taught at a community college; he still teaches at a community college in Livermore. My mom was home for part of the time that I grew up, and then she worked at a fast-food place and now works at a legal office. And she was always involved in artistic endeavors. I should say that they were always involved in creative endeavors. My dad plays the piano and the guitar; now he's kind of interested in graphic arts on the computer. My mom is a big quilter, sewing projects; she always had some new project. They're both very creative people, I think, although maybe nobody else outside our family might really know that.

SC: And then after public schools you went to college?

MM: Yes, I went to college at Colorado State in Fort Collins. My mom pointed out that we lived in five states in nine years. So, I went to Colorado State and met John while I was in school there.

SC: And John is...?

MM: John is my patron, my husband [both laugh]. I met him while I was in Colorado. Then we moved to Wyoming where my son was born. I should also say that I have two kids. I'll just do the quick places where we've lived.

SC: I think they'll be upset if you don't mention them.

MM: Right. So Quetzal was born in Wyoming; he's ten now. From Wyoming we moved to South Carolina for just nine months; we didn't fit in there at all. We were sort of suffering there trying to figure out the social situation and realizing we didn't fit in, and John said: "this would be a good time for you to think about graduate school" [big laughter]. Then we moved to UC Davis, which was the chance for me to get my graduate

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degree in creative writing, and much because of John's support were we able to do that while starting a family at the same time. We were in Davis for five or six years; that's where my daughter was born—Caliope. From Davis we moved to Indiana. I should say I was in graduate school with Francisco at Davis—that's where I met him—and he came to South Bend a few years before I did, and so it was almost coincidental that he was here when I moved to Indiana to work at Saint Mary's. That was nice to have a colleague from a few years ago.

SC: Things come in full circle.

MM: Things come in full circle.

SC: Francisco Aragón, of course, again is the person who arranged our interview today because he works at the Institute for Latino Studies. I want to back up to undergrad. What did you study?

MM: All right. I started out in wildlife biology because I had been very outdoorsy-focused and nature-focused in my interest and my hobbies. I didn't know any writers. I didn't know a writer was a job or even a real thing that you could do with your life. Wildlife biology seemed like a good fit, and Colorado State was known for its wildlife biology program. I had some nice experiences in my first couple of years as a wildlife biology major. I had some interesting jobs—like studying golden eagles in North Dakota one summer, I got to rappel down into their nests. But a combination of a couple of things like learning that the work of wildlife biology isn't at all like a Discovery Channel show...[Laughs] Sounds silly to say it now but it took some learning on my part to realize that. A lot of it is sort of drudgery and rather boring.

SC: Data collection.

MM: Data collection. You're waiting for critters to do something exciting, and the hours go by, and you've nobody to talk to, nobody to tell jokes with...

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SC: Watching the grass grow.

MM: Watching the grass grow. Then also I started taking organic chemistry, realizing that I just had no interest in these kinds of abstract scientific concepts; it didn't really hold my attention. At the same time all this was happening, the fellow I was dating at that time died in a rafting accident. I was still working in western North Dakota when that happened, and so the emphasis of solitude during fieldwork really exacerbated my already strong sense that I needed to be among people.

SC: You were grieving.

MM: Right, I was grieving. I would have rather been around people. It was very difficult to complete the field season, although I did. While I was out there in the field, writing was my friend, was a companion for me in a way; the act of writing was helpful. It was a way of reminding myself that writing was something I went toward naturally. All those things came together at the same time I was redirecting myself. In the end I graduated in English with an emphasis in creative writing—after two years starting out in the sciences in wildlife biology.

SC: Tell me again where you went to grad school.

MM: In Colorado State in Fort Collins.

SC: That's where you met Francisco, and you did a writing program.

MM: Where I went to graduate school? Sorry, it was at UC Davis, in Davis, California; that's where I met Francisco. He founded the press while we were there at Davis; he founded Momotombo.

SC: So he was a go-getter from the beginning?

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MM: Absolutely!

SC: I'm not sure about my chronology here, but we all know that there's been a mushrooming of writing programs across the US. I'm not sure where in that kind of development that was, but certainly you've ridden some of that wave of people going into writing programs and coming out and writing novels and poems and memoirs. What about that stands out in your mind as good? And what stands out as something you'd like to see changed in writing programs? Especially since you're now working in writing programs, and you've got a lot at stake, you might think.

MM: That's an interesting question. You know, there is a lot of talk about: are there too many writing programs? Are there too many "workshopy poems?" That's an expression you hear sometimes. I don't have a sense of anxiety about any of that. Actually it reminds me of...One of my teachers in grad school was Gary Snyder. In class—I don't remember which class it was, it might have been one where we were studying the San Francisco Renaissance in poetry—a student who was also a poet said, "What do you think about all the bad poetry being written today? What can we do about that?" [both laugh] Gary, who not only looks like a wise elder but actually *is* a wise elder—he's in his seventies and has been writing poetry for over fifty years and has many publications to his credit—said, "You know, people writing bad poetry is *way* down on my list of concerns about the world today." [Both laugh] I really took that to heart. I figure that if people are spending their time studying poetry and studying the craft of writing in graduate school, they could sure be doing so many worse things with their time. I think the positive result will be that we'll have more readers for poetry. Who's to say if we'll have better poetry or not? I think that's for history to say. It's not for me to stay up late at night and worry about what history will be able to say.

SC: Not when you have two children.

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MM: Right! Whether or not this proliferation of graduate programs was good or not, I think that'll just come out in time. The idea that more people understand poetry, I think that's a good thing.

SC: You talked about how as an undergrad you studied biology; what's interesting is that in your poetry there are a lot of references to that. I think that you may even have a poem called "Field Notes," is that right?

MM: Maybe, that could be. [Note: MM does not have a poem titled "Field Notes"]

SC: If you don't have a poem called "Field Notes," certainly the first time I read your poems I could tell this was going to distinguish your voice—a connection with knowledge of nature. Since the time we met—which was two years ago—there have been films like Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which was a big success. I think it's fair to say that even just in the past two years since you and I met, there's more concern in our culture about the environment; more talk about global warming; more people taking it up as a platform. Do you find that a challenge as a writer? What advice would you give to young writers who want to talk about that? Because it is a concern for them; the environment is a concern, but at the same time they want to avoid clichés, and they want to avoid sentimentality.

MM: I want to tell the *nature, nature, nature* [repeats for emphasis] story, and then maybe I might ask you to repeat the last part of that question...

SC: As I was going on?

MM: It's an interesting train of thoughts, but it was reminding me of the *nature, nature, nature* observation that you made, which was... I had heard you read a poem about a past relationship, and I had then said to you, "Oh, that poem always makes me feel kind of sad and kind of wistful because you're saying how you miss this person in the poem." If you don't mind, is it all right if I tell the story?

SC: Am I blushing? Yes, of course you can; I printed the poem. [both laugh]

MM: I said, “I just feel sad for you when I hear you read that poem.” And you said: “Oh, please, it’s just a poem. Look at it this way: you write nature poetry, but you don’t go around thinking nature, nature, nature all the time.” [Laughs]

SC: What you’re saying is that when you write a poem you might be really focused on that subject matter, but it’s not something that keeps you up till four o’clock in the morning.

MM: And it’s interesting because since you said that to me, it’s kind of been echoing in my head. From moving around—I think you have a question coming up on this too—so much of late since living in Davis, I haven’t had the chance to have that kind of attentive relationship to the natural world where I live. In Davis I knew a number of the plants; I knew a number of the birds; I knew sort of the environmental history of the place I lived and that was very important to me as I was right in there. In Indiana maybe I didn’t have time, or I didn’t have the interest. It sounds like so overblown and dramatic, but in Indiana I felt like the landscape was shut to me in a way, like it wasn’t revealing itself to me. Probably more a reflection of my laziness or unwillingness to get a stinking borrowed book out of the library.

SC: You were focused on other things.

MM: I guess so. Anyways, now that we live in Logan, Utah—which I don’t think we actually said I live in Logan, Utah now—we plan to stay there a long time. I know the Intermountain West a lot more in terms of plant communities, and I know some about the big mammals that live there; I’m hoping that that’s going to come back. I am worried a little bit because so much of the first book is really staking my claim as an environmental writer, I think—me trying to stake my claim as an environmental writer; I’m a little worried, can I keep it up? We’ll see. I didn’t answer any of the questions.

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SC: Are you worried because you feel like you're jumping on a bandwagon? No, you said you really don't have a whole lot of anxiety about that; there's so much more to say.

MM: Right, there's definitely more to say; I just wonder if I'm able to say it anymore. I don't know; I guess we'll see.

SC: Do you have writers that you turn to as models—people who chose nature as subject matter?

MM: I do. Actually Gary Snyder comes to mind immediately. I think those who I enjoy using as models are writers who don't position themselves as environmental writers but who happen to have interesting wild wacky poems that involve the more-than-human world in them somehow or another. I think of Diana García; she has a book from University of Arizona Press actually called *When Living Was a Labor Camp*. She lived in migrant camps as a child; she didn't grow up in them necessarily, but she lived in them as a child. She has some great poems about fig trees and great poems about apricot trees that are really intimate descriptions of these trees. Only someone who's had to climb them and spend a lot of time in physical contact with them for their work could describe them. They're just beautiful. I guess that's a crusade in a way that I haven't lost energy for—which is to show other people who are interested in environmental writing it's not just white dudes on mountain tops producing writings about the natural world. There are all kinds of writers—writers of color, Latino writers—who can contribute to the field from their own experience, but their contributions don't get acknowledged, I don't think, nearly as often as they should. When people think about environmental writers, they think of white dudes on mountains; so I feel personally a little bit of a sense of mission there to sort of open up the field and say, "You know, my fellow Latino writers have made all kinds of contributions to writing about nature that these scholars must not be aware of."

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SC: It also sounds like you're saying that poetry by its very *nature* kind of, sometimes... I can think of... well there's the Elizabeth Bishop poems, coming across an armadillo ["The Armadillo"]. Is there one about a deer crossing the road that she has an encounter with?

MM: William Stafford had a famous dead deer poem ["Traveling Through the Dark"].

SC: "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" [Wallace Stevens].

MM: Yeah, "Thirteen Ways of..." well, Steven, who knew he was a natural writer. [both laugh]

SC: You answered my next question already a little bit, but I wonder if you would talk about it a little more. You said when you were doing fieldwork and living in the West, that was very much forming your poetry. When you moved to Indiana, maybe it wasn't forming your poetry; nature wasn't forming your poetry. Now you're back in the West and you're feeling the urge again. To what extent do you think you're kind of writing about...obviously locations were affecting you where you were living at the time. So to what extent are you writing about a universal backyard?

MM: That's an interesting question.

SC: Beyond the fact that a lot of poetry seems to be about nature.

MM: I guess some of the more nature-y poems of mine, I hope, speak more to an archetype of nature than just my particular patch that I'm in contact with. Although, I've always kind of bought the workshop maxim that the more specific you are, the more universal you are, anyway; the more you can describe something and bring it alive on the page, the more it'll become part of the reader's experience. I guess I don't worry too much about: does it have universal qualities? Although, perhaps I should. I think if the writing is doing its job, it'll be able to connect beyond the location it's focused on or the individual that is focused on. One thing I do worry about in Logan—and this is kind of a

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strange way to put it—but we live maybe five or six minutes away from Logan Canyon, which is this beautiful public space. It's part of a national forest, managed by the Federal Government, and it's very close to town. In the actual town's area there're all kinds of pressing matters today, such as the immigration raid that we were talking about last night. There was a big immigration raid in the next town over at the Swift meatpacking plant. This might sound grandiose and overblown, but I do feel a sense of obligation in a way to respond as a writer to those raids because I'm a Latino writer. There isn't a Latino arts community in place already in Logan, so in a way I feel like the burden is on me to say something about that either in poetry or in prose. It's kind of a puzzle to me; thinking about writing makes so much less sense than actually writing. Therefore, I should qualify this by saying, "None of these projects have actually started yet [laughs]." I think, "Is there even room or time or value in discussions about our poetry; about going up the canyon and contemplating nature and/or the sacred or whatever?"

SC: When it seems there's lots of other...

MM: Right, when there are so much more sort of pressing issues to be dealt with.

SC: Right. Well I guess that kind of leads into the question I wanted to ask next. We haven't talked about how you consider yourself a Latino poet. Do you feel that...and it sounds like the answer is yes and I just want you to talk about it more...There're so many ways to come at being a Latino poet, because what does that mean? One way you come at it is through nature. Is that a tradition in Latino poetry? Are there Latino poets you have as models, since part of your mission is to acknowledge that tradition?

MM: Right. Pat Mora really comes in mind. I know she's been out here—I don't know if she's been interviewed or not, but she's been out here at Notre Dame. Pat Mora comes to mind because I think she has a kind of a mythic relationship to the natural world of the desert Southwest. She's from El Paso, if I remember correctly. She has a poem about a *curandera*; that's an interesting one that comes in mind. There she talks about the *curandera's* relationship to nature as a symbol and sign; of course the healing properties

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of plants are mentioned in that poem, too. There're other poems of hers, too. She has another one called "The River of Women." It's an eco-feminist poem in a way because it's celebrating the properties of the land, but at the same time in her language she's talking about this river of women and the power inherent in the unity between women. Those are just two examples. Especially *Agua Santa*, which is now probably three books ago by her—I think it has a very strong eco-mythic dimension—where nature is present and is described, but it's also functioning symbolically and mythically in the poems, too.

SC: Another way that maybe you come at being a Latino poet, I don't know... Another kind of subject matter I've noticed in your poems is motherhood. How does motherhood, nature, and being a Latino poet all kind of go together... or does it?

MM: That's a good question. Bringing up the topic of motherhood in general reminds me of a workshop maxim that I'm now trying to reject more—that poetry isn't therapy and you shouldn't necessarily look to poetry to work out your own problematic points in your life. Now, I think that's a very dangerous thing to tell young poets because it's the problematic points in your life that are going to in some ways be the most fruitful or the most inspiring; if it's something you feel you've already figured out, to me that's going to be a less interesting poem than if it's something that is troubling you. That's it; why did I put it in these terms? We're talking about motherhood. [both laugh]

SC: Are the children misbehaving?

MM: No, it's not them; it's me. I became a mother at a very young age. Luckily for me I already had formed an identity of myself as a writer before becoming a mother.

SC: So, they're not absolutely married?

MM: Which?

SC: Being a mother and being a writer.

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MM: All right, yeah!

SC: There's a distance between the two ideas?

MM: I thought of myself as a writer before having kids. But because I was a young mother—especially because I was a young mother alone in a situation where I didn't know any new mothers—it was very isolating for me at first. Looking back, I think I must have had postpartum depression—looking back and thinking about it. Those early months after Quetzal was born was another time when writing was a friend to me, was a helper, and a way to kind of speak into the universe about what I was going through. Definitely a lot of that material didn't ever end up getting used in poetry, but a few poems came out of the raw journaling and what not. I think that's what's wrong with that workshop maxim is that it makes you think—that maybe it's especially dangerous for women who are already supposed to be irrational—don't follow your emotions and whatever. If you tell a young writer “Don't follow these emotions that are stirring you up,” then you feel like, “What am I left with?” Motherhood—because of all the strong emotions it stirs up—was a natural subject for me, especially with the first child. Caliope, I hope you don't feel bad, it just maybe gets easier or something.

SC: Caliope is your daughter?

MM: Right, she's six now. You asked about are motherhood and writing about nature and being a Latino poet related.

SC: I think you answered that.

MM: Good.

SC: You said that in nature, when you were doing isolating fieldwork, poetry writing was a way to pass the time and overcome the challenge of it; and when motherhood was

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isolating and a challenge, writing was another helpful way. The other big aspect of your life is that you're a teacher. So you don't only have the two kids at home but you have lots of other kids that you're mentoring. Maybe when we tell young writers to try to distance themselves from their subject matter or to write not about something that's emotionally immediate to them right now, because they're beginning writers. Do you feel that you've got more depth writing about the personal?

MM: No, I don't. I wouldn't say one way or the other whether or not I'm better at it now; I don't know that I can answer that. I try not to say to folks, "Don't write about such and such." As an example, in one school that I taught, there was a colleague who told a student whose mother had died the summer before, "Stop writing about your mother dying." I thought that was really an invasion. If she's led to write about her mother dying, let her write about her mother dying. Were a caution necessary, the caution might be: "a couple of years from now, don't look to these poems or these journal entries to be the end all or be all, the best writing you'll ever do, because some of them might be and some of them wouldn't be." We wouldn't have *Ariel* if young writers weren't allowed to write in the heat of the emotional moment of distress; we wouldn't have Plath's best work. If Plath was told, "Get a distance from Ted Hughes' affair, sweetie, before you dive in." I think the better part of the caution is that...

SIDE B OF TAPE

MM: ...the intensity of the emotion may or may not match the success of the poem, but I don't think intensity of emotion is a reason not to write something.

SC: I think that's good advice, and it just may be that sometimes going through a tough time and writing about it at the same time you're going through it—going through some kind of challenge—is going to work out successfully; at other times it's not. It is a kind of poem-by-poem issue basis. You brought out the subject—thank you—of being a Latino poet, because we were kind of focused on nature for a while. I mentioned that it seems

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that there's more concern about the environment all the time. There's also more recognition that Latinos aren't a minority any more—that we're a majority.

MM: In some areas.

SC: In some areas... Do you still feel like you're writing in opposition to another culture or to a larger culture? Or do you have some sense that you're becoming part of the mainstream?

MM: Yes, it's an interesting question. In California Latinos are becoming the majority. I think in the U.S. the figures are at about twelve to fifteen percent in the U.S. population. They're now the majority minority; they surpassed African Americans. Utah, where I live—and I'm actually loving where I live now—is interesting because the Hispanic population is really growing very rapidly, but you can still have a situation like where I heard a colleague at Utah State saying, “Gosh, I know there're more and more Hispanics moving in here to the area, I just don't see them anywhere.” [Laughs] It's sort of a tragic-comic remark, “I just don't see them.” Which is funny because on the other side of the spectrum there is starting to be a kind of paranoia or backlash—a xenophobic backlash—in the area where I live about this growing number of Hispanics. There was an editorial in the paper a couple of months ago where a gal said...which reminds me a lot of what was said in Bruce Willis' movie *The Sixth Sense*: “I see dead people.” It reminds me of that “I see dead people” business. She wrote a letter to the editor saying, “it is interesting because I moved away from California because of the illegals, and now I come to Cache Valley, and everywhere I go *I see illegals*.” [laughs] Also it's sort of tragic-comic because obviously it's not something that you can: a) tell from looking at somebody; b) nor does the person's documented or undocumented status say anything about what kind of person they are or aren't.

SC: There's plenty to write in opposition...

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MM: There's plenty to write in opposition to in Utah for sure. I think in the larger literary world, there is plenty of active opposition too. I think Francisco is doing a lot of good work in that area, in terms of looking at the *crème de la crème*, among the poetry world like: *Poetry Magazine*, *APR*—and on a more popular scale—Garrison Keillor's *Writers Almanac*; it's broadcast nationally. They, to my view, manifest...

SC : Whenever you manage to tune in or read it ?

MM : Right. They manifest an embedded white supremacism continually, by the writers they select or don't select. Even when a poet in the position of power will make an effort at opening the doors, it'll be for *male* writers of color. I happen to observe that that's typically where a dominant writer—in part looking to add some color—will go is to the male writers of color. In this case, I'm thinking of Ted Kooser's *American Life in Poetry*, the name of his column, which he very generously generates for free so that newspapers can run them and people can discuss poetry. He has a hundred and four... Francisco and I are both getting into running the numbers in terms of what's been published.

SC : You're data collecting.

MM : We're data collecting right now. Kooser has a hundred and four columns, I think, to date, of those columns. Each column features a contemporary American poet, and of those, three are Latino, and of those three, all are male; there're no Latinas. His numbers are not so hot in terms of the rest of America's demographics. I think there's a great deal of oppositional or reaffirming the value of Latino poetry that needs to be done on the level of the literary establishment. Whether or not I see myself writing oppositionally on a poem-by-poem basis, that's not necessarily the case.

SC: That's a good distinction.

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MM: Yeah. I don't necessarily know that I will consciously adopt that stance while I'm writing unless it's writing about a news item in particular where an oppositional stance seems overtly warranted; other than that I don't think I necessarily...

SC: So there're larger publishing trends you're looking at, but they are not necessarily obsessing you when you sit down to write a poem.

MM: Right. Exactly.

SC: That's a very good distinction. How are we doing on time?

MM: Well, I think probably we have three or four minutes.

SC: I think you have to read some poems.

MM: Okay, what shall I read?

SC: I think you should start with "Recuerdo" and then just read straight through considering how we are doing on the time.

MM: Okay. Or "Remedio?" [Holds up a copy of the anthology from which she is about to read] This is *The Wind Shifts** edited by Francisco Aragón, a selection of poetry by twenty-four new Latino poets; "new" meaning having published one full-length book or less at the time he was putting this anthology together.

SC: Part of the reason you and I are in South Bend doing this interview is that the publication date is today.

MM: The official publication date is today, and we're celebrating.

* *The Wind Shifts: New Latino Poetry*. Ed. Francisco Aragón. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007.

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SC: And we're having a party tonight!

MM: The first poem that is in the selection—and the first one that you're asking me to read—is “Remedio.” I'll just hold the book open in case I flub up, but I think for the most part I have this one memorized. I was commissioned—although without fee—to write some poems about wolves by some friends in Colorado, who are putting together a collection of poetry about wolves in recognition to the fact that wolves are coming back to Colorado. They had been there historically and had been all killed off by the efforts of the Federal Government to eradicate predators and make the place safe for cows; now they're coming back as they've been introduced to Yellowstone; they're moving back into Colorado. Some environmental writers in Colorado said we need a book to raise the value of wolves in the public's eyes; so they asked me to contribute in that way; that was the occasion for writing this.

SC: It never struck me that way. It seems as a poem that came very much from you, your experience, and your concern.

MM: It was in a way the kind of poem I've been waiting to write. This is “Remedio.”

Let go your keys, let go your gun,
let go your good pen and your rings,
let your wolf mask go
and kiss good-bye
your goddess figurine.

There is a time to grip
your talismans,

a time to strip yourself of them.

Spirit and flesh
will have sometimes had enough

of go-betweens—

A refastening
of our noses and our ears

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onto our soul

can only be accomplished
in the company of master exemplars.

Take wolves, each with a soul full of scents:

asperine willow leaves
and damp earth, willow-rooted.

At the end of summer, a wolf's soul hears

cottonwood catkins'
long trajectory down an ageless azimuth,

feels, in her inner ear,

myriad shifts of air
as the tufty seeds ride twilit rays
and glow as we imagine all
eternal things to glow.

A remedy for when you've lost your sense
of Spirit in the world,

a simple spell for home lycanthropy:

Smell the new season,
acid, tensed to grow
in budding wolf willow,
and feel the heat recede
from a moose's corpse—then
recuerda esta loba.

Recuerda ... from the Spanish *recordar*
which is at root not remember or re-mind,

but pass back through the heart—

let her pass through your heart again,
this wolf.

Maybe I'll read the poem that's for John, and maybe that should be it. Do you think we
covered what you wanted to cover?

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SC: Well, I'm hoping to sneak another poem. Let's see how we're doing on time when we get through with this one.

MM: This is "Nude Sonnet." The form is a *blason*, a French form of cataloguing the form of the beloved. It's for my husband.

"Nude Sonnet"

When studied apart from chickadees and crooked paths, you seem
built of

concave lines

(scoop of shoulder blades, curving pectoral base,
crescent canoe of pubic hair hung from pelvic bones,
soft swoop of glutes, furrowed muscles along the spine);
I'm guilty of examining your form uncomplimented, unembraced—
sink-fixing, baby-washing, goddamn hockey-watching man,
tolerant, tolerant man, why don't you ever say I'm beautiful, but then,
why don't I ever say that you are? I'm checking skin at the boniest
place
of your ankle, and even there it's smooth; consulting the stubborn
worry lines bowed across your forehead, divining the asterisk of hair,
*size of a silver dollar (cupped between your collar bones), querying
the air
along the part (can you believe it) in your armpit to learn if you were
born
on the same stained sheets that I was; but any guilt you bear is sown
in hair sprouting like a trail of needle grass to your navel: beautiful
man,
unscoutable meander, my own.

SC: We have time for another poem? My favorite, you know what it is?

MM: "In Biruté's Camp?" This poem does get remarked upon pretty regularly because the subject matter is...

SC: Is a little sensational?

MM: It's a little sensational; it's a little out of the ordinary. Should I talk about it before I read it or afterwards?

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SC: Just briefly before you read it.

MM: Okay. Then maybe we're done?

SC: Yes. Then you can take a break.

MM: "In Biruté's Camp." I wrote it after learning of an incident in the field camp in Borneo, of an orangutan researcher named Biruté Galdikas. The account is that one of her camp assistants was raped by an orangutan, who had formerly been a captive orangutan but now was wandering loose in the jungle. The account of this attack appeared in *Outside Magazine* initially, and it also appears in her memoir. As far as I know, it hasn't been contested; no one has said she made this up, this is a falsification. Therefore, it remains this sensationalized account—something that is out of the realm of what we think of as ordinary, as normal. This is "In Biruté's Camp."

Suppose God is looking for a good
piece, who could be you with that bare
strip of scalp parting your long hair,
braided loose and looped up in the swamp heat,
sweat curling around your small, bristly eyebrows,
your hands gleaming with juice and pulp
as you hammer fruit on the feeding platform.

That strange orangutan,
the human-raised one called Pan-gan,
who throws men off the dock
like an overzealous baptizer, may
be a god and here he comes
padding side to side onto your platform in the swamp.

If he curves the ridiculous length of his
tendon-riddled arms around your waist
and wrestles you down to the wooden boards,
scream—he's biting you he's trying to kill you—no,
he's pushing up your skirt—

become limp below the waist and make your torso

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a flexible branch for him to squeeze
as he swivels from one world to the next;
(now he is calm and deliberate,

now his eyes roll upward)—

When he finally moves off
the feeding platform and into the trees,
rise into this loss, which is relief:
his seed will shimmer out of you, unrecognized.

SC: And with nature taking revenge on people, I think we're finished. Thank you very much.

MM: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW