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'Punk Half Panther'

By STEPHEN BURT

Most of Juan Felipe Herrera's many books evoke at once the hardships that Mexican-Americans have undergone and the exhilarating space for self-reinvention that a New World art offers. The child of migrant workers and now a professor at the University of California, Riverside, Herrera began to publish and perform verse in the late 1960s and early '70s, amid the Chicano cultural ferment of Los Angeles and San Diego; he has been, and should be, admired for his portrayals of Chicano life. Yet he is no mere recorder of social conditions. Herrera is, instead, a sometimes hermetic, wildly inventive, always unpredictable poet, whose work commands attention for its style alone.

If there is one earlier writer Herrera resembles, that writer is [Allen Ginsberg](#), whose volatile temperament he shares. In a poem dedicated to Ginsberg (and to "Oloberto & Magritta") Herrera calls himself a "Punk Half Panther": his slangy enthusiasms make him at home among "Toyota gangsta' / monsters, surf of new world colony definitions / & quasars & culture prostars going blam." Like the young Ginsberg, Herrera is at once an idiosyncratic visionary and antiestablishment advocate; like Ginsberg, Herrera manifests glee in extremes, in paeans and in jeremiads. "Blood on the Wheel" — part blues, part doggerel, part litany — denounces a pathologically American nexus of sex, commerce and violence by drawing on the border and on the biblical Ezekiel: "Blood of the painted donkey forced into prostitute zebra, / Blood of the Tijuana tourist finally awake & forced into pimp sleep again."

Like Ginsberg, Herrera presents not stories but simultaneities, in which everything takes place at once. Such crowded worlds find adequate praise, or damnation, only in rapid-fire lists: "the dawn-eyed village alley, / the intrepid nets of hushed camps, you / with your embarcation, gypsy-Indian hair, and me / without a hat, did you love me." He delves insistently

Into the tilted factories, the smeared taxis,
the stunted universities, into the parlor of bank notes,

187 REASONS MEXICANOS CAN'T CROSS THE BORDER

Undocuments 1971-2007.

By Juan Felipe Herrera.

352 pp. City Lights. Paper, \$16.95.

HALF OF THE WORLD IN LIGHT

New and Selected Poems.

By Juan Felipe Herrera.

310 pp. The University of Arizona Press. Paper, \$24.95.

in the cramped cookhouse where the dark-skinned humans still stoop and pitch the daily lettuce bags.

Such an art of accelerated inclusion uses its fast pace and its adjectival surprises to propel into view scenes we may otherwise avoid.

Herrera had energy from the beginning: he needed to find forms that would let him use it. Like Ginsberg — like Pablo Neruda, like [Walt Whitman](#) — Herrera found such forms in long lists, long lines, long poems made out of short parts, and in the literary device called anaphora, where many lines begin with the same words. No poet alive, perhaps, uses anaphora better; none relies on it more. The title poem in “187 Reasons Mexicanos Can’t Cross the Border” is also the first in the book. Each of its 187 lines begins “Because”: “Because multiplication is our favorite sport,” “Because someone made our IDs out of corn,” “Because we’re still running from La Migra / Because we’re still kissing the Pope’s hand.”

Herrera’s anaphora, in that poem, pivots between ironies directed at Mexican-Americans and anger over California’s Proposition 187, designed to keep illegal immigrants out. “Performance & text-in-the-community work,” Herrera claims, “is at the core of all Chican@ poetry.” (Herrera likes the @ suffix for words that could end with -a or -o, as in “Latin@.”) It certainly lies at the core of his own. Arranged with the most recent (and best) poems first, “187 Reasons” gathers, from throughout Herrera’s career, verse and prose especially fit for oral performance. Herrera calls these works “undocuments” because they solicit the voice rather than lying flat (like “documents”) on the page, and because they often concern undocumented immigrants. They are “undocuments,” too, because they are works of imagination rather than pieces of evidence. The title “Autobiography of a Chicano Teen Poet” (1987) may promise the literal record of a life, but delivers, instead, such lines as these: “My brother died in the ring, / stabbed 14 times by the King of Desire. / All the electric guitars moaned in the pawnshops / and my mother grew smaller with memory.”

Herrera’s vaulting confidence and his concessions to the demands of an audience (where subtlety may be no asset) can raise poems above the page or sink them. “Señorita X: Song for the Yellow-Robed Girl From Juárez” sometimes soars: “This is the song of mumbling fathers with harmonicas conjuring the winds / This is the song of tiny lost brothers and sisters hiding under mercado glass.” Yet other parts of the same elegy sound clumsy or naïve: “The mothers push the blood ocean & cradle close the blood crib cry / ... They are the black center where you dwell.” Elsewhere vigor and naïveté prove inseparable, as in these lines about children dying of thirst: “hey moony moon they said / give me a flask of your water white fresh / hey moonmoony moon.” That poem (“One by One”), like others throughout his books, appears in English and in Spanish (where the corresponding lines read “oye lunitalunera dijeron / dame un vaso de tu agua blanca fresca / oye luna lunita lunera”). Herrera does not say which is “original,” which translation.

One of Herrera’s best books is called “Border-Crosser With a Lamborghini Dream.” Each border or barrier in Herrera’s work seems meant to be denied, crossed, overcome: oral and written, Spanish and English, oneiric and public, lyric and oratorical. He also unites two kinds of Mexicanness, which might (without him) seem forever at odds: one urban, youthful, tough, fast-paced and secular (as in “Punk Half Panther”), the other older, bound up with folk religion and agricultural life. This second version comes out in the chants and spells that punctuate many poems, but takes center stage in the sequence “Thunderweavers,” spoken by ethnic Mayans in Chiapas:

This womb is another willow, little moon leaf
branch of green winds and raw combat. It is of drum,
flute cane and day-break corn.

Trying to break down old borders and orders, Herrera risks making his poetry, simply, a mess. A suite about [Frida Kahlo](#) declares, “There are no frames, really / It goes against the nation of love.” “Style, Genre & Craft” seem to him in one mood maleficent “interests of Master-power.” No artist could believe such a claim all the time, and Herrera does not: he may say, in a 1999 prose poem, “I hate sonnets. Sestinas are for pigs,” but the same year saw him publish fine unrhymed sonnets, one of which (“La Victima”) warns, “Don’t believe anything I’ve said.”

Herrera’s best work seems not formless but endlessly fertile, open-ended, full of beginnings: “Stop resisting the rupture. / Stop grasping the form,” he advises, “recognize the rubble. My mother’s rubble sky.”

“Half of the World in Light” draws on all Herrera’s 14 books of verse for adults (though not on his writings for children): it contains all the kinds of poems he writes — verse orations and evocative monologues, but also imitations of imaginary paintings, travel poems about the Middle East and visual-typographic verse in the manner of e. e. cummings. Herrera’s talent invites such amplitude, though “Half of the World” may overdo it; it seems too various, too generous and simply too long to make an ideal introduction.

Along with “187 Reasons,” however, it is the introduction we have. Herrera’s worst poems seem disorganized, excessive, frantic; his best seem disheveled, excited, uncommonly free. “A poem,” he promises, brings “a way to attain a life without boundaries.” All life, all art, involves boundaries, if only those of birth and death. Some poets keep us conscious of those boundaries; others, like Herrera, discover their powers by defying them. Many poets since the 1960s have dreamed of a new hybrid art, part oral, part written, part English, part something else: an art grounded in ethnic identity, fueled by collective pride, yet irreducibly individual too. Many poets have tried to create such an art: Herrera is one of the first to succeed.

Stephen Burt’s new book of literary criticism is “The Forms of Youth”; a collection of essays and reviews, “Close Calls With Nonsense,” will appear in 2009. He teaches at Harvard.