

## Loss in Benjamin Alire Sáenz's "Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy" and Alberto Ríos's "Taking Away the Name of a Nephew"

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### Abstract:

Alberto Ríos's "Taking Away the Name of a Nephew" documents the traumatic loss felt by a woman who reads a newspaper article about "one of the disappeared" and assumes that the account of the dead body found refers to her nephew. At that moment, she becomes an unwitting witness to the pain of others. Through her reading of a newspaper account of someone's death, the aunt makes the reader aware of her nephew's pain and her own pain when she imagines the horror of his death. Benjamin Alire Sáenz, likewise, focuses on loss and trauma in "Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy" as he examines different events to determine what constitutes tragedy. He concludes that the death of a child left unattended in a parked car constitutes tragedy as does sacrificing one's life to one's values, as Lot's Wife does when she refuses to obey God's command to leave her land and family. These two poems document the violence or simple random events that affect people.

**Keywords:** trauma, witnessing, tragedy, desaparecidos, mourning.

In "Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy" and "Taking Away the Name of a Nephew," Benjamin Alire Sáenz and Alberto Ríos provide a historical record of the violence perpetrated against people whose only crime is being alive at the wrong time. The speakers in these poems face violence, directly or indirectly, rage against it, and make the reader feel what it means to suffer the loss of a nephew or to sacrifice one's life for one's values. Alberto Ríos focuses his poem on the grief felt by one person, a woman whose nephew may have been the victim of random violence, perhaps even political violence or the violence perpetrated by policemen against brown young men, while Benjamin Alire Sáenz writes about the pain of others to get at the heart of tragedy faced by most people who live in troubled times. These poets also rage against the cold hard facts of history, the indifference with which a newspaper article describes the body of a young man, one of the disappeared, possibly murdered by government thugs, and the equally disheartening narrative of historical events that alter the course of people's lives, for better or worse, but is now stated as a simple fact from which no one can escape. In "Crossing Boundaries," Myra Sklarew, traveling

through Lithuania, the land where her ancestors were murdered, writes that "only in the compressed silence of poetry could such experience find its language" (102). Her point contradicts Theodor Adorno's claim that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms* 34), because for Sklarew, as it is for Ríos and Sáenz, poetry bears witness to the evil that people do. In "Taking Away the Name of a Nephew" and "Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy," Ríos and Sáenz tell the story of horrendous violence and provide a record as they attempt to make sense of the chaos of random violence and everyday disasters that people face.

Criticism of Alberto Ríos's work has focused on his use of the border in fiction and poetry. In *Border Matters*, José David Saldívar claims that many of Alberto Ríos's poems "focus on the liminal geographic spaces of Chicano border towns such as Nogales, often bordering on two worlds, two languages, two cultures and two literary traditions" (66). This notion of bordering two worlds recurs because, as Richard Vela explains, Ríos "grew up on the Arizona border," so his poems and stories explore "the basic concept and condition of dividedness" (115). Because he was born in Nogales, a border town, and often writes about the people who live in the border, Alberto Ríos is identified with the border. Irena Praitis points out that Alberto Ríos even "describes himself as someone who inherited and grew up with the idea of borders" (82). Being identified with the Spanish speaking side of the border has caused Ríos some negative reviews, especially one written by an established poet. In a review of *Teodoro Luna's Two Kisses*, Ted Genoways surreptitiously attempts to answer or perhaps discredit a statement made in 1986 by Carol Muske in a review of *Five Indiscretions* about "Mr. Rios's imposing of syntactical idiosyncrasies of Spanish on his English" (28). While Muske finds the use of Spanish-sounding words awkward and distracting, Genoways claims that Alberto Ríos manages to "capture the lilt and melody of the Spanish language" in his work, an obvious attempt to respond to Muske's criticism on Ríos's use of language. Genoways then adds that Ríos "still works with the themes of alienation felt by those on the fringe" (166), a nod to the poet's interest in lives lived on the border but also an additional mention of alienation as a possible topic covered in Ríos's poetry.

Being born in the border between the United States and Mexico marks Alberto Ríos and others like him as an "other," so critics have struggled with this issue of identity politics. Benjamin Alire Sáenz argues in "In the Borderlands of Chicano Identity" that he engages with the subject "because we live in a shitty, disgusting world that produces and reproduces appalling inequalities, a society that helps to create suspicions of 'others.' The politics of identity cannot be separated from these inequalities" (79). Claiming that the poetry of a Mexican American poet from Nogales suffers from the use of "syntactical idiosyncrasies of Spanish on his English" (28), as Muske does in her review, may not be one of the "appalling inequalities" mentioned by Sáenz, but such a statement from a well-known American poet could influence the way other people read Alberto Ríos's work or fail to read it. Carol Muske, writing for *The New York Times*, states that "Mr. Rios's Mexican-American background gives a special texture to his language and a forceful tone to his voice," but this reviewer also adds that

“Mr. Ríos’s imposing of syntactical idiosyncrasies of Spanish on his English, his use of an upbeat, baroque style, sometimes throws a cloud over his syntax; he can be tough to follow and quite verbose,” a statement culminating on the claim that “through his overlay of Spanish syntax on English and his unusual use of common words he produces odd metaphors” (28). Stating that Ríos’s poems can be “tough to follow and quite verbose” in a review published by a major newspaper reads like the kiss of death for a poet’s work.

Probably because Carol Muske’s review calls attention to Alberto Ríos’s use of Spanish syntax in his poems, later reviewers often feel the need to defend the poet’s use of language. Ted Genoways argues in a review of *Teodoro Luna’s Two Kisses* that “Ríos’s greatest asset has always been the authenticity of voice in his work. There is a calm certainty, an assuredness of a seasoned writer practiced in his craft” (166), and he adds that Ríos “manages to [...] capture the lilt and melody of the Spanish language in an English context” (166). David Barber, in “Habits of Mind,” a review of *Teodoro Luna’s Two Kisses*, mentions Ríos’s “stripped-down phrasing and deadpan delivery” that “call forth the twists and turns of folklore, superstition, and apocrypha” (224). Genoways and Barber make a point of mentioning Ríos’s use of language in order to dispel whatever damage Muske’s review may have caused. David Barber also points out that Alberto Ríos is “a writer who smudges the lines between the actual and the marvelous as a matter of course in both poetry and prose” (224). Leslie Ullman claims that Ríos’s “willingness to test the boundaries of the absurd belies a profound trust in, and affection for, human nature—for the foibles and flights of fancy that keep us alive, unique, and which live beyond us as they are embellished and passed along” (190). Ríos’s use of the fantastic is the subject of “The Real and the Marvelous in Nogales,” a review of *Whispering to Fool the Wind* by José David Saldívar who points out that Ríos’s “gift as a storyteller is the ability to relate the marvelous reality incarnate in Nogales, Arizona, a whole different creation and culture whose chief power is to fascinate. His poems are the blood stories of his ancestors’ lives” (143). Through this statement, the sense of otherness that some critics note in the poet’s work about the border transforms into something else, a “marvelous reality” redefining life on the border and reclaiming as the norm what outsiders see as unusual.

Timothy S. Sedore attempts to place Alberto Ríos’s work within the “mainstream” American canon by suggesting that some of the speakers in Ríos’s poems remind him of “James Fenimore Cooper’s American Adamic personae and the ‘idea of the isolated individual’ in *The Prairie*.” He argues that “Ríos’s work reflects the themes of archetypal American borderer literature” about “characters who are a functioning part of society and thus acculturated, yet who simultaneously live at the margins of society and experience alienation,” but he adds that Ríos’s “best prose and poetry is [sic] surgically precise in revealing the idiosyncratic, interior lives of characters who are disarmingly, affectingly human” (7). The humanity of Ríos’s border characters impresses even Carol Muske in the same review in which the poet’s Spanish-influenced language offends her. Muske finds “Taking Away the Name of a Nephew”

interesting because this is "a poem that allows us to grieve for atrocity, not simply experience its power to shock" (28). The fact that some of Ríos's poems allow the reader to grieve is a testimony to the point made by Joseph Deters, who argues that Ríos's work "almost always deals with real and serious issues" (28). Ríos lays claim to the serious side of his poetry when Leslie A. Wootten asks him about his "role as an artist-citizen." The poet's response is "that's a role I take seriously" because he wants his "poems and stories to serve the community in the same manner the baker's bread does" (5). Bread is sustenance, and therefore absolutely necessary to the survival of a people, so the poet's comment suggests that he wants his poems to be equally as essential to the survival of his people as the bread that a baker makes.

Alberto Ríos opens "Taking Away the Name of a Nephew" with a newspaper article about "one of the disappeared" ("Taking Away" 3). He writes from the point of view of a woman who thinks that the young man described in the news story could be her nephew. Even though the newspaper's story does not name the victim whose body is found, the woman who reads the story immediately assumes that the mutilated body being described is the body of her nephew. This establishes the notion that people everywhere are not only connected by familial bonds but can also fall victim to the same kind of violence suffered by the young man whose body is described. The poet stresses the point that the newspaper report about this young man who has been made to disappear is just one of many. Other people, also left without names, have suffered the horrible circumstances of his death. Ríos writes that

One of the disappeared looks like this:  
One shirt, reasonable shoes, no laces, no face  
Recognizable even to the mother of this thing. (3)

The young man is described as a "thing," something not human because of what has been done to him, but the poet also describes him as a "Lump. Dropped egg, bag of old potatoes / Too old and without moisture" that has become "Food for the maggot flies and small monsters" (3). The newspaper's description of this young man who disappeared is cold, matter of fact, as if he were nothing more than meat decomposing. The news worthy item is that this young man has now been found as yet another victim of violence, but the poet points out that his body has been so abused that his own mother may not be able to recognize his face. Shameem Black, in "Commemoration from a Distance" suggests that "narration provides an important therapeutic undertaking for individuals, or those close to them, who have been intimately affected by violence" (41). In this poem, the poet's job is to narrate the young man's death in such a way that it makes his death significant. It may not recover his name, which has been taken away, but narrating his pain through the poem allows the reader to feel for the young man whose life and name have been taken. The poem forces the reader, whether the reader is the young man's aunt or the person reading the poem, to witness what happened to this victim of violence and feel his pain. The speaker and the reader become witnesses to the horror.

In the Introduction to *Against Forgetting*, Carolyn Forché argues that “the poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political and in so doing defends the individual against illegitimate forms of coercion” (45). Reclaiming the “social from the political” suggests that this poetry focuses on what the individual feels apart from whatever political statement the poem could be making. “Taking Away the Name of a Nephew” clearly makes a political statement against random acts of violence, but the focus lies on the individual aunt’s pain at her loss, not the politics of what her loss represents. For the aunt in Ríos’s poem, the pain is personal. She is mourning the pain suffered by her beloved nephew, even though in fact the mutilated body described in the newspaper may not be her nephew’s body at all. She simply reads the account and assumes that the dead body is her nephew, who is missing. In doing so, she becomes a witness to random acts of violence. Her imagination and her awareness of the historical moment in which she lives allow her to connect with the pain suffered by the mutilated man, indirectly feel her nephew’s pain, and bear witness to the injustice, even if in fact the mutilated body may not be the body of her beloved nephew.

The aunt’s imagined pain, her ability to connect with the pain suffered by the mutilated man whose body is found, makes her a witness. She may not have seen the crime being committed, but her imagination allows her to identify with the pain of others. Kelly Oliver defines witnessing when she explains that an act of witnessing encompasses two ways of seeing: “the juridical connotations of seeing with one’s own eyes and the religious connotations of testifying to that which cannot be seen” (16). The “juridical” witnessing is a firsthand account from someone who has firsthand knowledge about the event, which is clearly not possible for the aunt who only encounters the event through a newspaper article. The second account refers to bearing witness to “something beyond recognition,” what Oliver calls “an infinite encounter with otherness” (16). In these encounters, the person telling the story encounters someone else’s pain, someone else’s story, which is exactly what the aunt is doing in Alberto Ríos’s poem when she imagines what her nephew, if he is in fact the man whose body has been found, must have suffered. Brenda Carr Vellino suggests that “witness poetry needs to engage with the whole range of primary, secondary, and distanced tertiary witnesses in order to open up the range of witnessing contexts and ethical questions arising from them” (150). In “Beyond the Trauma Aesthetic,” Carr Vellino examines the ethical questions posed by the poetry of witnessing written by poets who have not suffered the pain they describe. This essay, however, concerns itself with how the poem means, what the poets who write about someone else’s pain, someone else’s grief, want the reader to experience, not whether a poet is allowed to write about someone else’s pain. However, Branda Carr Vellino’s article is an excellent resource on the subject.

In “Taking Away the Name of a Nephew,” the cold description provided by the newspaper account about the shape of the young man’s body shocks the reader, and this makes empathy possible. Neil Jamieson claims that “good poetry often succeeds in jiggling our perceptual screens in ways that enable us to see both the past and the present in new and

sometimes more useful ways" (75). This happens because "those who 'make' history, like the 'makers' of poetry, can juxtapose elements in unfamiliar ways, illuminating previously unperceived dimensions of interconnectedness, deeper patterns of meaning, helping their audience to redescribe themselves and the world in more satisfying and more humane ways" (75). The cold description of the young man's body forces the reader to see not only the young man whose life has been taken but also the violence that has been perpetrated against him. The reader may be powerless to effect change or alter the brutality to which the young man has fallen victim, but she is not exempt from knowing or feeling because "poetry stimulates our moral imaginations by developing our capacity for empathy, by sensitizing us to deeper levels of meaning than those available to us through rational analysis or common sense understandings" (76). Through the aunt's grief, Alberto Ríos's poem brings the reader face to face with the tragedy facing los desaparecidos and the families who mourn them.

Anita Helle, writing about *The Angel of History*, *The Empty Bed*, and *Dark Fields of the Republic*, three books written by American poets, argues that these texts "present an intimate relation to singular deaths as symptoms of larger-scale, global, historical disaster; and they introduce notions of living out our lives, our mourning, nostalgia, protest, with a vague (or in some cases, more pronounced) sense of responsibility—in other words, they exemplify mourning as witnessing in a public, historical mode" (52). In "Taking Away the Name of a Nephew," the aunt witnesses what she perceives as her nephew's death as a "public, historical" event. Her grief may be private, like the memories "of a thick hugging / His Tía Susí gave him with the strong arms / Her breasts were" ("Taking Away" 3), but she still wonders as

She begins to add up, again, to put numbers  
In the equation of how many cuts and glowing scrapes  
One more thing or another adds up to,  
What it must feel like,  
How many paper cuts might roughly equal  
The breaking neck of a favorite nephew. (5)

The private pain of losing a favorite nephew is universal, wrapped up as it is in the horror of historical excesses and violence against unsuspecting people. The aunt hopes that her nephew's "memory of Susí was better than how the soldier held him" (3) because she knows that the soldier held him violently, without sympathy or mercy of any kind. Susí hugged him against her breasts; the soldier probably brutalized him and tortured him, and this is what the aunt who reads the newspaper report on "one of the disappeared" (3) is mourning. The "crisp bag of seventeen birthdays" (3) could be anybody's son, anybody's nephew, because such is the historical moment in which these people live, but the aunt nevertheless mourns as if the young man whose body is found were actually her nephew, still unaccounted for. She mourns what she knows could have happened even before she knows for a fact that it happened. Brenda

Carr Vellino suggests that “the speakers in such poems stand as avatars for the mediated position of readers as tertiary witnesses, who are also summoned to extend the chain of witnessing in response to the provisional human rights subjects of the poems” (150). The aunt’s words encompass her pain and touch the reader; they make the reader witness her grief, her pain as she mourns the death of her nephew.

Mourning is not new in poetry. In fact, Jahan Ramazani claims in an essay published by *The Poetry Foundation* that, “whether writing about the intimate deaths of family members and friends or the mass death of industrialized genocide and global war, poets have made of poetry a privileged space for mourning the dead” (np). Contemporary poets who write poetry about loss, however, do not use traditional forms used by more conventional poets who favored the elegy, which is a “formal and sustained lament in verse for the death of a particular person, usually ending in a consolation” (Abrams and Harpham 77). Poets like Alberto Ríos and Benjamin Alire Sáenz, as Eleanor DesPrez suggests, do not follow the “conventions of mourning and the elegy, with their drive toward sublimation and closure” because they “may feel an urgent responsibility to register not only personal grief but also large cultural and historical losses” (30). Their work eschews traditional forms while retaining the imperative need to mourn perhaps because these two poets, having witnessed random acts of violence, do not believe that violence leads to sublimation and closure. Violence is destructive, indiscriminate, and ever present. For Ríos and Sáenz, the elegy does not suffice. Their poems are not just laments that will end in consolation because both poets know that people who suffer violent acts or witness acts of violence cannot be consoled. In fact, neither “Taking Away the Name of a Nephew” nor “Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy” provides consolation, which is what a traditional elegy attempts to provide the reader. Alicia Ostriker in “Beyond Confession” states that the work of certain contemporary poets represents “a crisis that is at once global and intimate: the simultaneous impossibility of *objective* witness and of *subjective* wholeness” (329). Sáenz and Ríos use the dichotomy of an “intimate” but simultaneously “global” crisis to examine what it means to live in a violent world where human lives seem worthless to the people who perpetrate either intimate or historical violence.

Adrienne Rich examines the poet’s need to write about the historical moment as she focuses on the connection between the poet’s life and history. In “Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life,” she claims that “we cannot help making history because we are made of it, and history is made of people like us, carriers of the behavior and assumptions of a given time and place. About this, the impact of our individual existences, we have no choice” (144). Rich adds that people “have a choice to become *consciously* historical,” but she also argues that “breaking silences, telling our tales, is not enough” because “historical responsibility has, after all, to do with action—where we place the weight of our existences on the line, cast our lot with others, move from an individual consciousness to a collective one” (145). For Adrienne Rich, the poet has a responsibility to witness and to be engaged in the historical moment. Living outside of history cannot be the poet’s conscious choice.

Adrienne Rich's insistence on the poet's conscious choice of being in the moment, involved in the historical events of her time, echoes Emmanuel Lévinas's argument that art must serve a purpose. In "Reality and Its Shadow," Lévinas argues that "art for art's sake [. . .] is false inasmuch as it situates art above reality and recognizes no master for it; and it is immoral inasmuch as it liberates the artist from his duties as a man and assures him of a pretentious and false nobility" (2). Contemporary poets like Alberto Ríos and Benjamin Alire Sáenz may not ask themselves whether it is noble to be a poet whose work focuses on the violent excesses of contemporary life, a poet who attempts to define the meaning of tragedy, but their poems nevertheless address these issues in what is almost a calling, an attempt to discern a moral compass apparently lacking in the real world outside of poetry. Their wrestling with moral issues like the value of a human life or the meaning of tragedy reminds the reader of John Gardner's statement in 1978 that, "if there *are* real values, and if those real values help sustain human life, then literature ought sometimes to mention them" (24). Benjamin Alire Sáenz and Alberto Ríos mention these values because, as Travis Poling reminds his readers, "poetry enables vision, a particular way of seeing the world as it truly is." He claims that poetry "removes the mask that humanity dons to hide from the gravity of life amidst doldrums, brokenness, anxiety, violence, and death and reveals the bitter—and the joyous—truth: we are alienated yet united, unfeeling yet tearful, frightened yet courageous, violent yet loving, dead yet alive" (126).

Benjamin Alire Sáenz's "Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy" attempts to pinpoint the moment when something that happens actually becomes "tragedy" and not something awful that someone must bear. His poem catalogs multiple disasters, from the moment when Quetzalcoatl loses his realm to the Spanish conquerors to the idiotic instance when a man walks home thinking about what he can say to his wife to deliver the knowledge that he has lost everything they own in a game of cards. The poem opens with the poet's mention of an early act of defiance, the statement that "Lot's wife glanced back at Sodom as she was / Fleeing," but a quick reminder that "just like *that* she became a pillar of salt" ("Arriving" 87). Lot's Wife's transgression is immediately punished, but Sáenz's poem does not focus on the punishment, her transformation into something not human. Instead, the poet focuses on her humanity and wonders if "maybe she adored her beloved city / More than life itself and wanted to say *adiós*" or "if she could escape / With one little transgression in her pocket-- / Like cheating on your diet" and thinks to herself, "*I can't believe that God is doing this.*" But God does punish her, and the poet wonders "how one last moment of terror / Would feel. Lightning and thunder in the heart" (87).

The moment of lightning in the heart concerns this poet who moves from Lot's Wife's lot to the irreparable damage done by someone who "lost / Everything—his cows, his horses, his barn, his house, / His property. Everything lost in a lousy game of poker." Although the poet asks, "What in the hell was he thinking?" he also wonders if "he kept his wife's glare in the darkest / Corner of his heart till the day he died" because "He would never / Be sure if she had truly forgiven him" (87). The problem, of course, is that "You can't take back / A poker hand"

any more than people can take back “the mean things they said to one another,” which is why “At a certain point *I’m sorry* becomes a hollow phrase” (88), but the poem’s title points to something other than hollow phrases or the hole a foolish man has dug for himself in his marriage. Benjamin Alire Sáenz includes the story of the foolish man who loses everything he owns “in a lousy game of poker” (87), which is very sad and could cost him his marriage, but the poet simply uses this story as something he can compare to the other stories that he mentions in the poem. Lot’s Wife loses everything, including her life, which is tragic, but losing one’s possessions in a game of poker does not come anywhere near being tragic.

In the poem’s second stanza, Sáenz wonders what life would have been like if Eve had not tasted of the forbidden apple. If Eve had not tasted of that apple, the poet jokes that life as we have known it from the beginning would have been different because “everyone would adore snakes and none of us would / Have to work” (88), but the joke leads to the more serious awareness that, if life had been different because Eve had avoided taking the bite of that apple, then maybe our not having to work “would mean we wouldn’t have to worry / About illegal immigration (and we would have to invent / Another reason to hate poor Mexicans)” (88). One “what if” would change the course of history so radically that we would not even have to hate Mexicans, although the poet humorously adds that “we would have to invent” other reasons to hate Mexicans. The whimsical possibility of people adoring snakes and not hating Mexicans is presented almost as a joke, as something that could not possibly be true because people do tend to hate snakes and Mexicans, not always in that order, and the possibility of people not hating Mexicans is presented as something not to be taken seriously when the speaker in the poem points out that “The whole world is littered / With what-ifs.” The fact of the matter is that Eve did take a bite of that apple; thus, history remains unchanged, and for some strange reason people do hate Mexicans, which may or may not be tragic.

The poet’s search for the heart of tragedy will not allow easy answers, and the poet is not in search of history but in search of the heart of tragedy, which may or may not include history. If one believes that the characters in the Bible are real, then Lot’s Wife is a historical figure whose transformation into a pillar of salt serves as a warning to people who disobey God’s mandate. Her transformation is tragic to people who value her defiance, especially contemporary feminist poets like Kristine Batey, who claims in “Lot’s Wife” that “It is easy for the eyes that have always turned to heaven / not to look back,” but she points out that “those that have been—by necessity—drawn to earth / cannot forget that life is lived from day to day.” Batey admires that “On the breast of the hill,” Lot’s Wife “chooses to be human, / and turns, in farewell—/ and never regrets / the sacrifice” (129). A feminist poet in search of women heroines finds Lot’s Wife’s defiance thrilling, whether she was a real historical person or a fictional character. Lot’s Wife’s choice “to be human” is commendable, even if it is tragic, but the foolish relative who loses everything in a game of poker is simply foolish, not tragic; his story does not reach the pathos that the story of Lot’s Wife reaches. They could both be real people, or as real as

fictional stories can be, which suggests that they may have existed in history, but the poet juxtaposes their stories to make the point that only one of these stories is tragic. Poets like Kristine Batey value and respect the choice made by Lot's Wife because she values and respects that this Biblical character chooses to be human and in doing so teaches women to make moral decisions that square with their own moral values. They can follow God's command blindly, as Lot does, or choose what makes sense for their lives in spite of the consequences.

In "Arms and the Muse: Four Poets," Emily Grosholz claims that "poets have an important part to play in the drama of our moral self-education" (634). After stating that "poets should moralize," Grosholz explains that poets "are masters of concrete reflection, the representation of universal patterns in the rich complexity of individual experience, and so combine the gifts of storyteller, historian and philosopher" (634). For Grosholz, "morality, like legal justice, requires the harmonizing of abstract principles with the idiosyncrasy [sic], unpredictability and finitude of particular human lives" (634), which is exactly what Sáenz accomplishes when he connects Eve's taking the bite of an apple with people hating Mexicans or what Ríos accomplishes when he presents the reader with a woman's grief in the presence of a body that could be her nephew, murdered by unknown forces and abandoned to rot in the fields. Sáenz and Ríos force the reader to face the "drama of our moral self-education." The reader may never have wondered "what if" Eve had not done this or if the aunt in Ríos's poem had never faced the violent death of a nephew, but the poem brings her face to face with the tragedy and with the choices that people make in their lives, two reasons for the reader to examine her own moral values.

In the third stanza, Sáenz jumps from heavy philosophy to a foolish everyday occurrence, the poet's propensity to lose his glasses and his keys. He states that he hides "keys in the garage" and has "spare glasses everywhere," but he is aware that, when he compares his losing things to the problems faced by other people, "None of this qualifies as tragedy" ("Arriving" 89), which once again reminds the reader that the purpose of the poem is to "arrive at" the heart of tragedy. This is when the poet remembers "the man / Who forgot his infant child in the car as he rushed off / To work" and sees a mental picture of that man "as he flings / Open the back door of the car" to find his son dead. The man, of course, "is inconsolable / As he holds his limp son in his arms," and he immediately blames himself by stating, "*How could I have / Done this? What have I done?*" (89). Losing one's keys or glasses cannot compare with the horror of forgetting a baby strapped to the car seat. The poet notes that the man, when "His wife called in the middle of the afternoon, wanting / To know why their son was not at day care" (89) realizes immediately what he has done and asks himself "*how / could I have forgotten*" (89), but he has no answer to his own question.

How does a busy man forget that his child is strapped to a carrier in the back seat? Obviously, the distraction of everyday life, of getting to work on time, of anticipating what work must be done that day could have caused him to forget that his child was still inside the hot car when he walked to work. The question then becomes not "how could I have forgotten" but

how will he live with such knowledge. His neglect causes his child to die a horrible death, a death that in fact happens far too often in the United States. *The Motor Vehicle Safety Issues Injury Facts* page reports that “on average, 38 children under the age of 15 die each year from heatstroke after being left in a vehicle” (np). Scientists from the American Meteorological Society, Andrew Grundstein, John Dowd, and Vernon Meentemeyer, point out that “most cases (54%) involve caregivers simply forgetting their children” (1183). The fact that a caregiver can forget about the child sitting in the back seat of the car strikes a chord with most people who have seen the reports on the news, just as the poet does. The poet, however, connects the silly act of losing his keys or his glasses to the horrendous act of forgetfulness that costs a child his/her life and dooms a man to grieve not only the tragedy of his child’s death but also his own involvement in what happens. This is the heart of tragedy.

The man whose child dies as a consequence of his own forgetfulness may never recover or find consolation. Jacqueline Kolosov points out in “The Art of Losing” that, “since 1900, or 1910 (the year Virginia Woolf said everything changed), grief has no longer served as a temporary stage that the poetic mourner surpasses, but as a continuous state of immersion” (31). The man whose forgetful act causes his son’s death will be forever immersed in grief. He is, however, not a character in a myth or a play. He’s a regular person who gets up in the morning, straps the child to the car seat, and drives to work, but the story of his negligence, his forgetting the child in the hot car, causes a horrendous thing to happen. This is not a random act of violence or yet another case in which a police officer kills a brown child. This is an intensely personal foolish act of forgetfulness, neglect, done without thinking, resulting in the loss of a child’s life. In this case, the father’s grief is eternal, steeped in guilt, but the child’s death is the significant part of this man’s story, the tragedy that he will never escape.

The story of the father whose negligence or distraction causes the child’s death is one of the many sad stories that Sáenz uses in his poem to get to the heart of tragedy. He compares the real story of a man’s loss reported in a newspaper and documented by scientific studies to the mythological story of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent deity from whom Mesoamerican people descend. He sees in a sculpture of Quetzalcoatl given to him by his ex-wife that

Quetzalcoatl is lying down  
In a small and lonely boat. He is in mourning.  
He, too, is inconsolable. Tenochtitlán has been razed  
To the ground. Cortés has won the day. Quetzalcoatl alone  
Has escaped to tell the others: Mexico has fallen. He is  
Floating out to sea, holding in his hands an image of a world  
With a cross firmly planted into its core.  
The Christianized world has arrived  
With an army that cannot be turned back. The Aztec  
World has been destroyed by fire. For Tenochtitlán

There will be no resurrections—and for Quetzalcoatl  
There is only this eternal and solitary travel in a sea  
Of endless sorrow. ("Arriving" 90)

The poet's conclusion is that "The world is in ruins. / We are left cursing and clutching at our bitter hearts, / Wondering, wondering why we are not dead" (90). Quetzalcoatl drifts off into legend; the Aztec world is destroyed, but Mexico survives, as do the Mexican people, although the conquering army forces them to change. Octavio Paz explains in *El Laberinto de la Soledad* that "Quetzalcóatl-Nanauatzin es el dios-sol de los sacerdotes, que ven en el autosacrificio voluntario la más alta expresión de su doctrina del mundo y de la vida: Quetzalcóatl es un rey-sacerdote respetuoso de los ritos y de los decretos del destino, que no combate y que se da la muerte para renacer"<sup>1</sup> (88). Quetzalcoatl accepts as his destiny his own displacement through the arrival of Cortés. He accepts self sacrifice, according to Paz. For him, "eternal and solitary travel" feels like "a sea / Of endless sorrow" ("Arriving" 90).

In spite of the poet's awareness that we are not all dead, that Mexico makes the transition, and Quetzalcoatl's story is now told in the conqueror's language, he finds it important to tell this story and wonder whether the banishing of Quetzalcoatl and the arrival of Cortés can be considered tragedies. Magdalena Zolkos claims that, "when faced with genocidal occurrences and when unable to resist them, we are not altogether powerless—we can tell a story about them" (214). In the telling of Quetzalcoatl's story, Sáenz forces the reader to consider what is lost and what is gained from the historical moment, and the poem is published in a collection called *The Book of What Remains*, which suggests that the poet expects the reader to move beyond the stories that he examines in his quest to arrive at the heart of tragedy and consider what remains. Sáenz does not consider Quetzalcoatl's loss of his realm in Mexico a tragedy, and this becomes evident in his argument with Gloria Anzaldúa's suggestion in *Borderlands/La Frontera* "that a return to indigenous ways of thinking will 'change our fate.'"

In an essay titled "In the Borderlands of Chicano Identity," Sáenz finds disingenuous Anzaldúa's "project" that "if we but immerse ourselves in a particular mythology (a non-European, nonlinear discourse), then our sick body politic will be healed" (86). Although Sáenz agrees with Anzaldúa "that we live in a society desperately in need of healing," he explains that he finds "it impossible to appreciate this solution even while I understand the gesture. This is no solution. This is an escape, *not a confrontation*." For Sáenz,

the return to the 'traditional' spiritualities that were in place before the arrival of Cortés and company makes very little sense. The material conditions that gave rise to the Aztec's religion no longer exist. Anzaldúa's language, her grammar, her talk are ultimately completely mortgaged to a nostalgia that I find unacceptable. The resurrection of the old gods (be they 'white' or 'indigenous') is a futile and impossible task. To invoke old gods as a tool against oppression and capitalism is to choose the wrong weapon. (86-87)

Although he uses Quetzalcoatl's story in his poem to remind the reader of what was lost, Sáenz knows that "the land will never be returned to the people who lived on it before the conquest" (87-88) because "the conquest was cruel, harsh, and irrevocable" (88). Anzaldúa's work may be permeated with a longing for a healing mythology, a mythology that was presumably available to the people before the arrival of the conquering Spaniards and their god, but Sáenz knows that, "whatever the future looks like, it will not resemble the past" (88).

Sáenz admits that far too many people "want / To elevate our unhappiness into the realm of tragedy / As if we were all auditioning for a leading role / With the Royal Shakespeare Company" ("Arriving" 88), but most things are not tragic, only sad. Quetzalcoatl's loss may have been painful at the time, but Mexico and its people survived, faced the invading army, evolved, and became something different. The indigenous people did not disappear or turn into pillars of salt. Octavio Paz points out that the ancient indigenous cultures still remain, that "cualquier contacto con el pueblo mexicano, así sea fugaz, muestra que bajo las formas occidentales laten todavía las antiguas creencias y costumbres. Esos despojos, vivos aún, son testimonio de la vitalidad de las culturas precortesianas"<sup>2</sup> (81). It is a historical fact that, regardless of what happens to Quetzalcoatl, Mexico and its people remain. However, the one thing the poet cannot forget is "the man, a dead son / In his arms" as he tries "to imagine what it is like to feel / The weight of that kind of grief. Lighting and thunder / In the heart" ("Arriving" 90). Writing in a book about loss, David Eng and David Kazanjian point out that, "We might say that as soon as the question 'What is lost?' is posed, it invariably slips into the question 'What remains?'" because "loss is inseparable from what remains, for what is lost is known only by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read, and sustained" (*Loss: The Politics of Mourning* 2). For the man whose child lies lifeless in his arms, only pain and grief remain of what he lost.

Benjamin Alire Sáenz's "Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy" forces the reader to examine what remains after something awful happens, to determine what qualifies as tragedy and what is simply sad. Sáenz suggests that Quetzalcoatl's loss of his land was horrific at the moment it happened, especially for Quetzalcoatl, but Mexico survived and became something other than what it was because the passage of time allows for transformation. The foolish man who loses all of his possessions in a game of poker also survives and finds himself in trouble with his wife because his foolish behavior makes them poor. For these characters, life goes on, albeit changed. Lot's Wife, however, does not survive her defiance; she is punished immediately and loses not only her belongings, her children, her land, but also her life, which qualifies as tragedy. She simply dared to look back, and in that radical decision loses everything. The father who is too harried to notice what he is doing and leaves his son in the hot car to die is struck, according to the poet, with "Lighting and thunder / In the heart" (90). His moment of forgetfulness causes not only the death of his son but also eternal grief. His act is tragic; for him, only eternal grief remains.

In "Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy," Benjamin Alire Sáenz examines what constitutes tragedy. He concludes that losing a child to a foolish mistake constitutes tragedy, a tragedy that creates eternal grief, as does sacrificing one's life for one's values, as Lot's Wife does when she refuses to follow God's mandate that she abandon her land and her friends. The aunt in Alberto Ríos's "Taking Away the Name of a Nephew" grieves the crime perpetrated against a young man who could have been her nephew. She imagines the pain that he must have suffered as she reads in a cold newspaper article about the young man's wounds. Her grief allows the reader to empathize with her pain and with the nephew's pain, and through such empathy both the aunt who speaks her grief and the reader serve as witnesses to the horror of random violence. "Taking Away the Name of a Nephew" and "Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy" catalog losses and force the reader to arrive at the true meaning of what constitutes tragedy.

### Endnotes:

1. "Quetzalcóatl-Nanauatzin is the sun-god of priests, who see in voluntary self-sacrifice the highest expression of their doctrine of the world and of life: Quetzalcóatl is a king-priest of the rites and the decrees of destiny, who does not fight and who surrenders to death in order to be reborn"
2. "any contact with the Mexican people, even if it is a quick one, demonstrates that under the western influences still live the ancient beliefs and habits. Those remains, still vibrant, are testimony to the vitality of the precortesian cultures"

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