



InterText: A Conversation with Guillermo Castro

[Gerry Gomez Pearlberg](#)

Three years ago, at somebody else's poetry reading, Guillermo Castro sold me a copy of his new chapbook, *Toy Storm*, a handsome handmade publication put out by the Brooklyn-based Big Fat Press. The title alone was enough to make my day, and when I sat down with the book itself, the pay-off was complete. "Balloons from Hell," "Driving Parents," and "You and I are Guests of Garcia Lorca" — in these and other poems in *Toy Storm*, Guillermo Castro's vivid, image-rich language fearlessly guides the reader down a verbal gang-plank into the realm of the unconscious and unrealized. Take this, from Castro's poem "For Koka": "Amor,/you're tattooed purple/on the thick folds of memory/the way they used to stamp beef/in Argentine slaughterhouses." Or this: "We need the dead quieter/and the living even more so" ["Fascist Manifesto"]. As much a post-modern magical realist as a magical post-realist modern, Castro's poetry is disarming in every sense of the word, and deeply introspective without a trace of narcissism. Funny, frightening and intensely pleasurable: that's how I think of Guillermo Castro's work.

In this interview — conducted via e-mail during the spring and summer of 2000 — we talk about two of Castro's relatively new poems, "[When You Go Away](#)" and "[The Year of Minimum Wage](#)," as well as some of the larger issues, influences, and tensions that have brought these poems into being. — GGP



Guillermo Castro

Photographed by Gerry Gomez Pearlberg

Gerry Gomez Pearlberg: Guillermo, let's begin with "[When You Go Away](#)." This poem begins with a seemingly innocuous and mundane observation: "There is, of course, silence./Even with the phone's ringer on." But right away, in the very next stanza, there's a leap into magical realism and an increasingly nocturnal or dreamlike atmosphere. Can you talk about the process of writing this poem in terms of how and why that transformation takes place?

Guillermo Castro: This poem originated in a workshop, but only the title (taken from a W.S. Merwin poem) and the last couplet survived subsequent drafts. Like many poets, I utilize dreams to draw images from or even "plot" poems. In this case, what really kicked

the poem into gear was a dream I had of mice leaping into my bed, not to attack me, but more like seeking shelter. Also, the other conscious decision was to move into a surreal realm. During the time of revision I was reading Jeffrey McDaniel's *Alibi School*; I liked his use of playful, at times almost grotesque, hyperbole. That gave me permission to take the poem further, to stretch its skin.

Pearlberg: Stretching the poem's skin. That's a great way to put it. And that's how it feels — the skin or casing of the reader's mind is stretched in a very pleasurable way. I think the stanzas in your poem mirror the effect of passing from room to room in a dream, with a new and entirely unexpected strangeness to be found in each room. The inexplicable seems perfectly normal. The presence of intuition is so pronounced in your work.

Castro: In regard to the inexplicable seeming normal, I'm partial to some of Julio Cortázar's early tales, where the fantastic, the surreal and "reality" co-habitate harmoniously. In a story in *Relatos* ("Tales"), there's a scene where mourners at a wake, while gathered around the body, switch places with the corpse every time anyone sneezes!

Pearlberg: Cortázar has another great story called "Axolotl" where a man gazing at a salamander in a glass aquarium suddenly finds himself inside the tank, having become the salamander, trapped and gazing out at the world. It's all very deadpan and normal-seeming, as well as terrifying.

Castro: Same thing goes for — God, so many others — perhaps more notoriously, Gabriel García Márquez. *A Hundred Years Of Solitude* is the epitome of what we've just discussed. After the patriarch of the Buendía family — whose saga the book is about — dies, his ghost tethers itself to a tree in the backyard, remaining visible to everyone. But with the passing of time, the ghost turns paler

and paler, until he finally vanishes. It's quite poignant.

Pearlberg: As are the ghostly lines in your poem "checking the underside of shadows/with a mirror attached to a pole." It makes me think of the forlorn quality of dental equipment — lonely and elegant in a rather sinister way. How did you arrive at that image?

Castro: The credit goes to the American Embassy in Buenos Aires, the city where I was born. The Marines stationed at the security checkpoint would search under any vehicle going into the premises with such instruments. Since the "I" in the poem is the paranoid kind, I thought the image was fitting. And to the mice and embassy of the previous couplet, as well. Maybe I should write a fable called "The Mice At The Embassy" — you know, the mice would be yelling outside the building: "We want our visa! We want our visa!" Then the cat-marines would come out and eat them.... As an immigrant you do feel you could get eaten any minute.

Pearlberg: I think that sense of de-stabilization comes across in both of the poems we're looking at here. Would it be fair to say that this intense awareness of precariousness runs through much of your work?

Castro: Absolutely. It is one of my major themes.

Pearlberg: "Let me polish your furniture/With woodlice and malice/Until I see my mother's face on every surface" is a truly fun and disconcerting image. "Woodlice and Malice" sounds like the name of a very scary home cleaning product available only in a Hardware Store of Dreams. Do you recall how the two words ended up next to each other?

Castro: I arrived at "woodlice" after watching a documentary on how these tiny terrorists raze houses in matter of days. I don't remember how I got "malice." I think I liked the off-rhyme, and also because it looks like it could fully rhyme with woodlice. Or at least to the eyes of a foreigner like myself. To me, those words also bring to mind a law firm, surely wearing its intentions on the sleeve!

Pearlberg: Your work makes me think about what I love most about poets like Charles Simic and Pablo Neruda. The sense of the dream state and the waking state as being interchangeable, simultaneously soothing and disturbing, the way a troubling dream can somehow feel utterly familiar and comfortable. I think many of your poems walk that edge of mystery and periphery, alluding to things that don't quite translate into the "directly said."

Castro: I love Charles Simic's work. He's so good at juggling mysterious imagery with childhood memories. I'm reminded of an Argentine poet, Alejandra Pizarnik, whose work I couldn't possibly explain with "words of this world," as she put it. I'm thinking of Lorca, too, his "Romance Sonámbulo." *Green, I want you green.* What is that supposed to mean in a literal way? And who cares? Borges believes in letting the reader feel that he or she is in a very strange world, that they themselves are very strange, that the fact of being alive is the oddest thing. I really agree with that.

Pearlberg: Your line "I poke at the very thought of you" seems to be exactly what the poem itself is doing — prodding at thoughts, unsettling the dust, discovering its own meanings as it goes along, the way a dream lands you somewhere that's a complete surprise, filled with pictures and images you didn't know you had in you. Does that bear any resemblance to your creative process in general?

Castro: Yes, absolutely! You open a door — I have so many poems set "indoors" — and you don't know what you'll find. It is a surprise for me as much as for the reader.

Pearlberg: Do you ever dream lines of poetry?

Castro: Often. To my detriment, the poem is scrolled in front of my eyes so quickly that I can't memorize it! And I'm never given a second chance. I'm left with two or three words and the sensation that it was a really good poem. Very frustrating.

Pearlberg: Jorge Luis Borges has a quote I've kept pinned to my bulletin board for many years: "I live in memory and I suppose an artist should live in memory, because, after all, what is imagination? Imagination... is made of memory and oblivion. It is a kind of blending of the two things." I respect his evocation of oblivion as a fertile state, a primary condition under which creativity blossoms. Your work strikes me as very much in keeping with the *memory + oblivion* equation.

Castro: Yes, and even more so since I moved to the US. It is the sort of tension I base many poems on. As an immigrant, I at times am overcome with memories of people and places in Argentina. The job of the poem is to nail those instances to the page. And I have to do it fast. Alejandra Pizarnik says "my only country is my memory," and concludes: "there are no flags in it," just to tell you how universal that feeling is.

Pearlberg: I'm curious to know more about your writing process. How often do you write? Do you have a routine set aside or just when inspiration strikes?

Castro: [I write] when inspiration strikes (and my supply of Prozac is almost depleted). A visit to the park near my job on a wondrously sunny day can be very helpful. Daytime seems essential for ideas. But I only take notes. The poem won't become "real" until I see it on the computer screen. Schedule-wise, the actual writing takes place at night, late, after a swim in my neighborhood pool and dinner. Swimming, by the way, has proven to be inspiring. Then again, I wish it were as casual as it sounds. There's a lot of agony involved, too.

Pearlberg: Speaking of agony, let's move on to your poem "[The Year of Minimum Wage](#)." This is a very tough-minded poem. Horrible as it is, I have the feeling it's all too real.

Castro: It's based on first-hand experience. I'm not going to lie about it: the "you" in the poem is "me." And I'm happy to report that the place went out of business, probably to reopen in hell.

Pearlberg: There's such a sense of claustrophobia and trapped-ness here — beginning with (and resulting from) the want of a green card. There's the neutered cat longing to scale the airshaft, the paranoid boss with his gun in the basement office, the slapping of the sleeping man while in the background "the cook keeps chopping fleshy things." Like many of your poems, this one is quite cinematic. Are films an influence for you?

Castro: Yes, they are. I enjoy science-fiction movies. Perhaps my all-time favorite in that genre is Ridley Scott's "Blade Runner" (the director's cut): a melancholy, nocturnal world where happiness is all-too-brief. Some of my early work would feel very at home in that futuristic Los Angeles! And the "Alien" series, particularly the first one, directed by Ridley Scott as well. In other genres, I love the way Martin Scorsese tells a story. And hundreds more!

Pearlberg: Who or what are your other major influences?

Castro: Having said all that about films, these days I find music more emotionally gratifying than any given movie. I'm not sure why. I suppose, if you're listening to instrumental music, be it classical, jazz or tango, because of its abstractness you may run with it in any direction you want to. Obviously, with tango I have a stronger connection. I have a piece called *Argentine Music II*, written while listening to Astor Piazzolla. With movies, so much is delivered to you already pre-digested, formed — you either accept it or not. Music lingers longer in my tastebuds.

I always wanted to write songs, and that's what I considered my first writings to be: songs. I wanted to be a singer in a band. So my first initial influence were the pop musicians — Argentine and from elsewhere — I was listening to at the time. Then, for my twentieth birthday, a friend gave me Lorca's *Poet in New York*, which turned my world upside down. Then followed Kafka, the architect of labyrinths. The aforementioned Alejandra Pizarnik, blind little princess of nightmarish landscapes.

Pearlberg: Why is Alejandra Pizarnik so important to you?

Castro: Pizarnik is one of Argentina's major poets. Her poems, particularly the early ones, are somewhat surreal, short, and spare, colored by her obsessions: childhood, love, and death. The presence of death increased dramatically in her later work. And no wonder; she died by her own hand in 1972. I don't read her as much nowadays, but her importance to me goes beyond her work or influence; she's also part of a common history of reading and thinking about poetry that I have with a specific group of friends from college days.

Pearlberg: Can you say a little bit about how Lorca's *Poet in New York* "turned your world upside down"?

Castro: Lorca was my primary introduction to surrealism, though he'd probably object to my characterization, as he never considered his New York cycle to be surrealist poetry. Not only the sheer beauty and breath of his imagery blew me away, but also the intense emotion that propelled many of these poems. I discovered a language I could use in my work to express (and codify) my own feelings of alienation in an urban landscape — Buenos Aires, in this case.

Pearlberg: That makes me wonder about the link between alienation (or displacement) and poems which deliberately use mistakes, mis-readings, or misunderstandings as either a point of departure or a central theme. Your poem, "The Year of Minimum Wage," ends with the lines, "You hide behind the



Self-Portrait of Guillermo Castro
Assemblage of machine photos

loaner register/with 'taxable items' handwritten on one of the keys/you always misread as 'taxable dreams.'" And in your poem "Williamsburg," you have the line, "A misread Xmas announcement: Take A Picture With Satan!" What part do the elements of randomness, chance, and "mis-reading" play in your work?

Castro: I'm always misreading stuff. In some cases, it's got something to do with my first language trying to assert itself. When I see the word "pies," what first comes to mind is not a picture of, say, an apple pie, but more like "feet," which is what "pies" reads like in Spanish. So, to me, signs (and things) *are not what they seem to be*. And I like what the confusion/misreading may bring into a poem, be it a paradox or something humorous.

Pearlberg: How have the cities of New York and Buenos Aires influenced your writing?

Castro: Buenos Aires, naturally, has influenced me in the sense that I grew up there. It has been the foreground and background of some major (and minor) drama, not only in my life, but it's certainly affected other people's. It's hard to escape that. In tango lyrics, rock songs, the city is sung about/cursed to death. So there's this kind of dialogue going on. Some of those circumstances could be applied to New York: writing about my urban environment makes me feel more anchored, more at "home."

Pearlberg: Since your first language is Spanish, I am curious about the part that plays in your poetry. Do you write in both Spanish and English?

Castro: For quite some time, I've been writing poems in English only. In fact, I do want to start writing in Spanish, besides translation papers, or letters and e-mails to friends and family.

Pearlberg: Do you think the cadences, construction, and musicality of the Spanish language infuse the way you write when you're writing in English?

Castro: I do see that, stylistically, I tend to write the same way in both languages — how I break sentences, my placement of commas, the use of quotation marks and parentheticals, my love for adverbs. Maybe somewhere there's the Spanish influence coloring my English, but I'm not aware.

Pearlberg: Why is that you've been writing poems in English only? And what's prompted you to want to begin writing in Spanish again?

Castro: I developed as a writer in the US. Had I found a poetry workshop in Spanish, I think I would've continued writing in that language. Even in Miami, where I lived for a few years, I learned that if you wanted to be part of the larger world in poetry, you needed to crossover to English. I did become involved in one local poetry group that flaunted a bilingual constituency, though at readings most of the people in the audience was Anglo; I just hated the blank look on their faces whenever I'd read my poems in Spanish. Recently I met two Argentine poets who've been in New York for many years and still write in Spanish; I'm hoping they'll serve as muses that will "nurse" me back to my mother tongue. That doesn't mean I'll move away from English. I'm here to stay.

BY GUILLERMO CASTRO

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