

Alejandro Murguía

**STRAY
POEMS**

SAN FRANCISCO POET LAUREATE • SERIES no. 6

STRAY POEMS

Alejandro Murguía

Poet Laureate Series Number 6



City Lights Foundation
San Francisco

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INAUGURAL ADDRESS

Thank you all very much for attending this event that honors not just poets, poetry, but also the entire poetic/literary community of San Francisco.

We are so lucky to be able to gather to celebrate with poetry, when so much of the world is covered in violence, prejudice, hatred, intolerance, war and bigotry. We are truly blessed to live in a city like San Francisco, a city of poets.

I am truly honored to be with you here today.

Let me tell you a story: I was born in California but raised in Mexico City and Tijuana since I was about one year old to about six years old. The first time I recited poetry I was five years old in the first grade in Tijuana. I was on a balcony overlooking the entire student body in the school yard. It was a poem about Columbus—"Las Tres Carabelas." Ironic, I know.

Then when we return to the U.S., California, I arrive like any other immigrant. I don't know a single word of English, I don't know a thing about the culture. I am lost. I lose language. I am silent for a long time. I still vividly remember the very first words I ever spoke in English: "Pepsi, please."

Let me say—It has been a long road from that five-year-old on that schoolyard balcony to this stage. In particular I want to thank Magaly y Marisol for their patience.

I'm under no illusion that this laureateship is an individual honor—I know better than anyone that this is a recognition that belongs to my community, that it is about the contributions of the Latino community and the Mission community to the vibrant literary scene that is San Francisco.

I also know that there are other more deserving poets who would have stood here long before I ever would have, had it not been for the quirks of fate. Serafin Syquia, Buriel Clay II, Al Robles, and also those who in the future would have been poet laureate had the calavera catrina not taken them out to dance, Victor Martínez, and Piri Thomas, whose words I recall every day: “Every poet a child and every child a poet.”

But also others such as Víctor Hernández Cruz, Ntozake Shange and Jessica Hagedorn, writers who I grew up with and worked with. But in particular, one poet who should be standing here is Roberto Vargas, had revolution, politics and life not gotten in the way.

These are the poets I grew up with, reading in cafés and bars—like the Coffee Gallery when Carolee Sanchez was running it, and at the Ribeltad Vorden, where I met John Ross, Kell Robertson, Wayne Miller and George Tsongas.

I cut my teeth reading in workingmen’s bars, where if you didn’t hold their attention they might boo you off the stage, tell you to go home. I always say that the first time I was paid for a reading it was two beers. Actually, it was only one beer because the other one was thrown at me.

When Mayor Lee called to ask if I would accept being Poet Laureate, I answered, “Only in the name of my community.” Then my next thought was, *Does this honor come with a parking permit?* You have no idea how many poems I’ve written on the back of parking tickets. Have you ever tried a haiku for a parking ticket?

That’s where that stipend is going for that you’ve heard so much chisme about.

So when I talk about community I mean all of us—what we have in common, in communion—what we hold together. And part of what we have in common is the literary history of San Francisco.

San Francisco has many parallel literary histories. One of these histories, the one I trace for myself, is a history that has often been lost and at the same time preserved—for example, the history of the Ramaytush, the first-nation people who lived along the creeks that flowed through what is now the Mission District: Mission, Precita, Islais, Serpentine; and the first chants, the first songs heard here, and hence, the first poetry: *Ishman colma, carac yonabi acho isha hacheche asmush harwec irshah*—sun, moon, sky, village, friend, alive, we eat, drink, sing and dance.

Or the diaries of discovery written by the first westerners, men like Pedro Font—a priest in Portola’s expedition who was the first to describe the Farallons and also a point near present-day Point Reyes, named Punto Murguía, and whether poetic or not, these writings are still part of this other history. And what about the Chileans who shipped here from the Southern Hemisphere in the 1840s bringing the old mining songs and settling in communities like what is now North Beach? The songs and yearnings of Latin America, transposed and fused to this landscape. Pablo Neruda, for example, writing his play “Fulgor y Muerte de Joaquín Murieta,” “Splendor and Death of Joaquín Murieta” about a legendary figure of California.

So Latin America fused to the history of San Francisco, and vice versa—San Francisco fused to the memory of Latin America.

One of the first poems I wrote in San Francisco was one afternoon in the mini-park there on Capp Street and 19th. I'm going to reach way into the archive for this one. It is written in the language of the barrio, known as Caló, and I'm going to read it how it was written, porque, porque—me da la chingada gana.

O California

Se fueron por el Camino Real
Ese largo y triste camino de eucaliptos
Cargados con frijol y maíz
Y llegaron en lowered-down Chevy ranflas
Con gafas fileros y tomando botellas de tequila
Que decían Made in Mexico
Hablando tres palabras de inglés
Apple pie y coffee
Y cantando—Vámonos a California
Vámonos a California

Se iban por el alambre
Indios de calzón blanco y huarache
Y aterrizaban
Pochos, pachucos, perdidos
Vatos locos con tatuajes mágicos de vida y muerte
Esperando en las esquinas el Big Hit
The 5-10 of Caliente race track
That never came

Cabuleando—esta sí es la vida gacha cucaracha
Y cantando
Vámonos a California, vámonos a California

They came from New York, New York
The Big Apple to the Big Orange
Yorubas, jíbaros, borinqueños
Piel color café oscuro
Ojos de verde cocodrilo
Y un ka-ta-tún-tún-tún
De viejas selvas ancestrales
But now with a pocket full of cancelled tickets
To the promised land
They were singing
Vámonos
Vámonos
Vámonos a California!

JOSÉ CORONEL URTECHO—THE PRECURSOR

Although San Francisco, and in particular, the Mission District, has served as a greenhouse for many Central American writers during their periods of exile, most notably during the decades from the 1970s to the present, Central American writers have lived in and written about San Francisco since the 1920s when José Coronel Urtecho penned his essay “Mis ‘Gay Twenties,’” published in his book *Rápido Tránsito al Ritmo de Norteamérica*.

In this autobiographical essay, José Coronel Urtecho describes the life of a young Nicaraguan living with his family

on Van Ness Avenue, near Vallejo Street, and attending Commerce High School to learn English. In many ways, Urtecho's essay is the precursor of Central American writing in the Bay Area: he touches on themes that will occupy future generations—the rapid pace of the big city; the glamour of its nightlife; alienation, racism, solitude. He also grafts English words and phrases to his Spanish to more fully capture his experience as a Central American in the United States, always indicating with italics that the English words are foreign. I will quote part of one sentence to illustrate my point: “A la hora del *lunch*, la quieta calle frente a la escuela cerrábase para el tráfico de vehículos y se llenaba, sobre todo, de muchachas que *lonchaban* en las cafeterías. . . .” (page 30).

On his return to Nicaragua, his suitcase stuffed with the poems of Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound, Carl Sandburg, Edna St. Vincent Millay and other Modernist poets, this influence would revolutionize the poetry of his native land. From this cultural poetic interchange, emanating in part from San Francisco, the most important literary movement of Central America in the 20th century emerged, the Vanguard Movement of Nicaragua, which influenced world-renowned poets as diverse as Pablo Antonio Cuadra and Ernesto Cardenal, the greatest living poet of Latin America at this time.

We also cannot deny or underestimate the influence of Central American poetry here in San Francisco, in particular, the poetry of Claribel Alegría, Daisy Zamora, Gioconda Belli, Otto René Castillo and Ernesto Cardenal and the great influence of Roque Dalton, whose life and work inspired in the early 1980s the formation and translations undertaken by

the Roque Dalton Cultural Brigade, such as *Volcán*, *Poemas Clandestinos*, and *Tomorrow Triumphant: Selected Poems of Otto René Castillo*. The work of this cultural brigade was instrumental in forming a new consciousness among poets as well as encouraging more translations from Latin America. Even today Roque Dalton's work has touched most every poet I know here in San Francisco and most recently had a direct or indirect influence on the Revolutionary Poets Brigade.

I believe the collective work of the Roque Dalton Cultural Brigade set a standard that will last a long time. It is also the duty of the poet to recover the lost texts of our continent, the forgotten writers, and reread them and preserve their work for future generations. It is important, too, to read widely from many different streams of poetry, even bad poetry, so that you learn what good poetry sounds like.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s and up to the present, the contributions of Latino poetic voices to the history and poetic-literary movements of San Francisco play a prominent role. One of those was Dr. Fernando Alegría, a professor at Stanford and cultural ambassador for the Salvador Allende government, who did so much to link Latin America to San Francisco. In particular, he organized one of the most momentous readings ever—the reading for Pablo Neruda and Salvador Allende on October 4, 1973, at Glide Memorial Church, attended by some of the great poets of our time, including Diane di Prima, Víctor Hernández Cruz, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Janice Mirikitani, Jean Franco, Kathleen Frazer, David Henderson, Ishmael Reed, Nanos Valaoritis, Nina Serrano and Roberto Vargas, to name a few.

Latino poets have enriched and enhanced the poetry of San Francisco with their bilingual writings and readings, their publications, their political perspectives and their approach to poetry—to quote the Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton, the belief that “poetry, like bread, is for everyone.”

At the same time the people of San Francisco, and in particular its poetic community and literary community, have been and continue to be a source of solidarity, without which this most recent flowering of Latino poetic voices could not have bloomed so brilliantly.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE 1970S

In 1970 the first Latino poet to be published was Amilcar Lobos, of Guatemalan background. His collection of poems *Quetzal* was published by Casa Hispana de Bellas Artes, located at that time at 362 Capp Street.

But the most influential, both artistically and politically, of this wave of Central American poets, is the Nicaraguan Roberto Vargas (born 1941), who migrated to San Francisco in 1946. He grew up among the new generation of Nicaraguans coming to the Bay Area during and after World War II. As a young man, he traveled to the Far East as a merchant seaman, worked in a mattress factory, then became one of the few Latinos to participate in both the Beat-era North Beach scene and the Haight-Ashbury scene. With the rise of the Vietnam anti-war movement and the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Vargas becomes active in the Chicano movement and the Third World liberation movement. This activity—the Brown Berets and Los Siete de la Raza—inspires some of the

best poetry of that era: “Canto al Tercer Marcha de Delano,” “They Blamed It on Reds,” and “Elegy Pa’ Gringolandia.” His influence is such that his work appears in all the major Chicano anthologies of that period, including *Aztlán: An Anthology on Mexican-American Literature*, edited by Luis Valdez and Stan Steiner (1971), and *Festival de Flor y Canto*, edited by Alurista et al., (University of Southern California Chicano Studies, 1974).

His first book of poems, *Primeros Cantos*, defines his style—rhythmic and imagistic. The poems are meant to be performed, which the poet often did accompanied by congeros. The images are clear, precise, and flowing, often without connecting phrases, just the pure image carrying the poem.

Vargas captures the breath of his experience in a prose-poem titled “Then There Was. . .,” a jazz-like riff recounting the poet’s early years in this country, from his arrival through his high school years in the Mission District, his stint in the Marine Corps, and finally the death of his first wife. The influence of United States music, rhythm and blues, and oldies, mixed with boleros, mixed with nostalgia for his homeland and his emerging political consciousness, mark this prose-poem as one of the most innovative of his works. It was first published in *City Magazine* in 1975, and later in *Nicaragua, Yo Tè Canto Besos Balas y Sueños de Libertad*, in 1980.

A defining moment in the poet’s life occurs when an earthquake destroys Managua, Nicaragua, in December 1972. After this catastrophe, the Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza tightens his grip on the country. Vargas, besides being a key organizer of the *Gaceta Sandinista*, the official publication of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional, the armed

opposition to the dictatorship, organized poetry readings throughout the United States in support of the Sandinista cause. Many celebrated poets, such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Allen Ginsberg, read at benefits for Nicaragua and later, after the Sandinista triumph in 1979, visited the homeland of Rubén Darío. Vargas is also the prime organizer of Ernesto Cardenal's historic first visit to the San Francisco Bay Area and the United States in 1976. It is during this visit to San Francisco that Ernesto Cardenal inaugurates the Mission Cultural Center with a campesino mass, followed by a mass baptism of some two hundred Mission District children, then a poetry reading of his own work.

During this period, Vargas's efforts are not just political, he also publishes in *Tin-Tan Magazine* his first work of fiction, "Sandino, 1925," his re-creation of the Nicaraguan hero's desire for a free homeland. At the height of the Sandinista insurrection, Vargas joins the Sandinista Front in Costa Rica and participates in the attack at Peñas Blancas in September 1978. After that he returns to San Francisco and rejoins the solidarity committee. Out of this experience comes—*Nicaragua, Yo Te Canto Besos Balas y Sueños de Libertad*.

The other important Nicaraguan poet of that decade is Pancho Aguila, who became a *cause célèbre* for many writers in the Bay Area. Pancho Aguila is the poet's *nom de guerre*, adopted when he was first jailed in the early 1970s. Pancho Aguila spent most of the decade of the '70s and part of the '80s incarcerated at Folsom Prison, where he was a key organizer of the Folsom Prison Writers' Workshop. In his life and his work, Aguila always considered himself a political prisoner, and

the act for which he was jailed—bank robbery—a political crime. As could be expected, his work exhibits a strong political stance in favor of the oppressed and all political prisoners. The poems published by Second Coming Press in 1977 under the title *Dark Smoke* are typically angry, but within the anger, there are unmistakable gleams of hope and sincere humanity.

One other Nicaraguan poet published a book during this decade. Although Denis Corrales Martínez's book (a chap-book titled *Pinceladas Nicaragüenses*) did not have the impact or power of those of the two previously mentioned poets, it is important to note that his book was all in Spanish, whereas the other poets were writing in English. Corrales Martínez's work is characterized by the use of traditional verso of Hispanic literature, and also by his poetic concerns. Since he was a recent newcomer to San Francisco when he published this book (recent in comparison to Vargas and Aguila, who'd spent decades here), the poems are more traditionally Nicaraguan than Vargas's or Aguila's. The themes are the Nicaraguan workers, especially campesinos, and their oppression; the poems also emphasize the poet's concern for the environment and ecology.

Among other highlights of Central American writing in the Bay Area during this decade, I will cite two.

Born in Belize of Honduran parents and raised in Hollywood, California, Walter Alfredo Martínez's poetry and prose is written in classical formal English. His book, *Ascensions*, published in 1974 by Heirs Press in San Francisco, has the most surreal writing of this entire group of poets mentioned in this essay. The words skip and fly over the page, confronting