she holds my face
& wipes each tear
THE LONG DEFEAT

We lose because we shortchange ourselves because we’ve been taught to hate so much, to discard analysis for activism because in the intensity of the work you lose sight of yourself because the trauma you’ve witnessed has taken too deep a tool because it is too too hard too hard too hard
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BALDWIN (detail)
I met Marco in 2007, when he was a first year student at Kenyon College. He wore a prep school blazer and a tie wherever he went, even when he was sitting in a pile of leaves on Middle Path, painting a watercolor of the chapel. When I ran into him outside of the bookstore, he told me that he’d spent the entire day in his room, reading Howard Zinn. “For class?” I asked him. “No, for fun.” When he lead the prayer before our campus ministry dinners, he would often start by quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins or W.E.B. Du Bois from memory, and I would look at him and wonder why he didn’t seem pretentious. If I had that skill, I’d show it off so that people would think I was cool. But Marco wasn’t showing off, he was just telling you about something that a friend of his had said, and maybe his friends really were Du Bois and Hopkins. He seemed to be in almost constant conversation with them in his head.

I didn’t know, at first, that Marco was an undocumented immigrant. I wondered why he always took the Greyhound and never flew, and why he didn’t study abroad his junior year, but I was too ignorant to really put two and two together. He could be very reserved at times, very quiet, but it never occurred to me that this quietness was self-protection.

Then, in the Spring of his junior year, he came and visited me in my office and told me about his undocumented status. On Good Friday, he did one of the meditations during the Stations of the Cross. He talked about being on the Greyhound after Spring Break, coming back to campus. The bus was stopped and immigration officers came aboard and detained two migrant workers. Marco talked about sitting back and watching it happen, about being afraid that the officers would question him, and then knowing, as they led the two migrant workers off the bus, that he should have done something.
Marco’s spent the last three years doing something, finding ways to do something that weren’t available to him then. He’s done wildly brave things, like infiltrating the Broward Detention Center and self-deporting so that he could march with other activists to the border and demand re-admittance. He’s looked into the face of hatred, and the cold, bureaucratic faces of riot police, and he’s shouted slogans and staged sit-ins and met with members of congress. He’s become less quiet, and certainly less self-protective. But the core of him is still there, the questing mind, the internal conversations with Du Bois and Hopkins and others. And in a way, it’s this capacity for reflection and gentle conversation that’s the most impressive thing about him. The way he’s never ruled by anger, always curious, always listening. He’s taught me about bravery and risk through his actions, and just as importantly, he’s taught me about grace and gentleness through his person. And because his voice has spent so long gestating in quiet and reflection, it is an astounding voice. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Marco Saavedra.

— Karl Stevens, Columbus, OH
the most useful, dangerous, meaningful thing i did with my life was sit in a jail cell & think & panic & wonder & remember — then the walls fell around me & i could see my father, mother, son, sister once again, and knew myself better & was happy.

& that alone was a challenge to those around me & above me & i was full.

& this is not AT ALL a romancing of my condition, it is my reality.

—K.
liberal arts

i once mentioned weber to my mom
and the dubois-booker t debate to my dad
he said it was complicated
she said we’re all alienated

i think my dad knows that due to our being from
different generations – tho both migrants -
we are predisposed to different opinions

and that my mom alludes to the unsettling
connection between mexican men’s machismo &
her homophobia

it is too bad that they didn’t go to a little
liberal arts school like i did, where we learned
that truths are hidden in literary reviews of
peer-edited scholarly articles — instead,
they opted to live life so that i have
the pleasure of writing it in poems.
Those youth had to pay a terrible price in moral discipline, in interior effort and courage, which the country cannot imagine...
If you the Americans people invented the Illegal, then you must answer why...

& the future of the country depends on whether or not we can face that question.
si alguna vez besas a un ángel—
no lo hagas en acuerdo con morrison,
no beses donde tus heridas existen,
sus lesiones no corren paralela a vuestras,
no pienses que un relato constante de
cortázar será de ayuda tampoco,
a veces no hay peces
corriendo como agua entre vuestros respiros
y weigl, igual, se puede equivocar,
a veces forzamos un paraíso,
mientras nuestras manos queman con deseo
y toomer también fallara,
quizás solamente hay
una incandescencia imaginada
y quizás responde y no se niega
y piensas que el cielo se aproxima
y piensas tu decir lo conquisto
(mientras dibujas tus manos por su cara)
y la hora se convierten en tres y cuatro
y no deseas cerrar los ojos
porque solamente son estas horas extrañas
donde la vida ofrece un descanso
y por sus espalada paseas tu mano:
rescatando memorias de su juventud,
acaricias su cabello mientras disfrutas su calor
(atentando de no estorbar)
besas sus manos y tocas su rodilla,
y corres un dedo por sus labios,
y quizás dice nada,
y después de suficiente momentos intensivos,
después de acercarse por un breve beso
- cuando hasta tus respiros has limitado -
dirá algo curioso,
como, esto será extraño,
o, tendremos que hablar
y te alejas y piensas:
que si los maestros literarios te fallaron,
tenentes aplicando pintura
sobre el lienzo no es nada como un beso perfecto
If you ever kiss a girl –
don’t do it in accordance with morrison,
don’t kiss her where your wounds exist,
her injuries don’t parallel yours.
don’t think a literary
reading of cortazar is of help, either:
there sometimes are no fishes
streaming like water between your breathes
& weigl can be wrong, too,
sometimes we force a paradise,
even as our hands burn with lust
& toomer might fail as well,
sometimes there is only an
imagined incandescence
& she might respond & not refuse
& you might think heaven is in sight
& you might think that what you said was win-
ning;
& she might lean in for a very little kiss
& you pull away & wonder
that if the literary masters failed you,
then applying paint to canvas
is nothing like a perfect kiss
ONE by ONE

You will spend your pleasant days saying you love me –
I will tell your ear.
You will lay by me –
I will warm my nights by yours.
You will know me.
I will become lost in you.
You will smile in light.
Mine will be the voice amidst the darkness.
You will be –
& I will be yours.
One body
by a body.
One body freed
by a body.
Letter from Broward Transitional Center (50 years after Birmingham)

I am terrified I tell David, If I, or someone does not provide me with money I would die.

I can confess my fears to David knowing him as a fellow undocumented poet — we’ve only met on a handful of occasions when civil disobediences or celebrations have brought us together — but we know each other deeply having been forced into America from Mexico before the age three & growing up with the terror of deportation & finding ourselves irreconcilable with our reality & having wrestled with loneliness & insecurity & illusioned ourselves with policy as relief & felt liberated & then overwhelmed by organizing within our communities. We are both 23. & maybe the death is not instantaneous, I resume, (which isn’t entirely comforting) — it might be softened with acts of charity or prolonged if I steal to survive or become institutionalized in some prison or detention facility but by that point the choices are so wretched that perhaps death is preferable.

What I am getting at is that living is difficult, by this I mean not solely surviving but rejoicing in the activity you choose to do, not just toil you are forced into. This conundrum is not (at all) disconnected from our hatred of the poor or the arts — and perhaps is the scariest fact of our current market economy — by discarding any other measure for human worth, people are measured by their production, if they cannot produce they are expendable, and when they are expendable they can then be used as soldiers, prisoners, automatic & sexless workers.

That is why when Mohammad proposed the plan to infiltrate Broward Transitional Center & set up a detention camp there through the summer to further the work we had already begun in stopping deportations I did not hesitate in saying, Yes.
when Claudio (one of the first detainees we worked with, moreover, the chief organizer inside) amidst one of our first meals asked how I had begun, I told him about our eight day hunger strike for the Dream Act in the summer of 2010. He looked at me then & said: Entonces, te gusta luchar? — Well then, you like to fight? — & not needing to respond, I am to assume, that he does, too.

The goal was to get stories out; to us the person is the story, so get the person out of detention: Each time Claudio or I or one of our core group of our fellow detainees-turned-organizers approached a new person we would explain the process of how they or preferably a loved one outside should call the hotline number connected to five phone-lines which would then do a basic intake with biographical & legal information (age, family, time & claims to the US, reason for their detention, possible avenues to legalization & strategize next steps). Each campaign has three components, legal, advocacy, & public organizing & each case would then raise awareness of the violations that Immigration & Customs Enforcement (ICE) was making in this so-called model facility. On the legal front we would steer the family through filing for Prosecutorial Discretion* or other forms of relief if they could not afford an attorney, or coordinate with the attorney in correspondence to ICE or the media. In terms of advocacy the family would be connected to local representatives and shown how to plead their politicians for support on the detainee’s behalf. Last, the organizing front usually demands the most creativity as each person’s story & community is different; by exploring all social connections we tried to get churches, labor advocates, health professionals, community leaders & immigrant allies involved by calling for the person’s relief through sign-on letters, spreading alerts & signing online petitions.

We found cases of medical negligence, police abuse, rape, spouses who had valid claims filed with their partners, victims of trafficking, assault, refugees waiting for years on their asylum request. & while the actual detainment structure wasn't suffocating the wait, the legal maze, the looming end of deportation & separation from your family are insufferable. Claudio did considered throwing himself down a main flight of stairs in order to get out – potential suicide we said – and it wasn’t the first or second time someone had attempted that summer.
The facility appears to be an enclosed pink motel from the outside — it’s easy to dismiss coming off Interstate 91 & on-to Powerline Road across the landfill & shopping plaza, next to the Humane Society & amidst the gas stations. The hallways inside are sterilized & decorated with art fitting for a children’s hospital & lead only to the courtroom (inaccessible for relatives & reporters), the clinic, or the cafeteria (which serves as visiting room on weekends). The nearly 100 male cell rooms are not locked & hold three bunk-beds but the occupants are constantly in flux — the female unit is constrained to one hallway, two supervised visits to the courtyard (at midday & in the afternoon) & much less freedom to walk about the facility.

Returning to my first point, this sense of confinement & surveillance is not new to someone who grows up undocumented & criminalized. One develops a separate consciousness that is always monitoring what you do & who you’re with & what’s to lose. & the more urgent call to me is that when we let the market dictate our morality & determine our lives then there will be segments of people left out who find this form of living in complete disagreement with theirs. I am not unimaginative enough to believe that millions of people abroad selected to be poor & found migration unavoidable & found their existence unjustifiable in the land of the free. Or that, domestically, millions should be locked-up or in the streets, homeless, hungry, & deemed without worthy talents. I think here is where we must confront the Gospel & say that armaments, narcotics & prisons should not be traded in the market as goods. & if you cannot justify our present reality with your faith, then you will become illegal, too, and also irreconcilable with the present. That’s the lesson from Broward Detention, that the current system of operation is unsustainable and yearns for a new creation.

*Prosecutorial Discretion was a process outlined by the Obama administration in the summer of 2011 stating that undocumented immigrants who were not deemed a high priority for deportation (based on their ties to the US & lack of threat to domestic safety) would have their removal stopped or not be a target of enforcement. The announcement & subsequent relief are rarely applied as the current administration continues to deport at unprecedented numbers & set higher quotas & funding for enforcement.
The real awful thing about being dumb enough to be born both an immigrant and an artist is that one suffers both identities & this two-fold condemnation is enough to destroy most persons. On the one hand, one must be bold enough to create in world that suffocatingly prefers commodities and standardization over free-spirits & life-activity. Moreover, if one happens to be an illegal, then, overcoming that particular mill with grace sufficient left over to become an artist means overcoming both adversity & then, – if you are lucky – false praises.
ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

I describe myself as a sensationalist painter. Originally from Oaxaca, Mexico, I have lived primarily in the United States as an undocumented immigrant since the age of three. Growing up in Washington Heights, I attended middle school in Harlem, High School at Deerfield Academy, & college at Kenyon where I studied Sociology & wrote as my senior work, “Undocumented & Unafraid: A So[ul]cial History of the Student Immigrant Movement.”

I draw from Mexican Muralists, British Romantics, Post-colonial Magical Realism, Liberation Theology, German Expressionism & Social Theorists, Aristotelian Ethics, Ancient Hebrew Prophets, Greek Tragedy, French Impressionism, American Transcendentalists & the catalog of Dutch paint masters & the Black experience.

My writing & artwork is deeply shaped by the essays of Du Bois & Baldwin, Lectures by Cornel West, Literature of Toni Morrison, collages by Romaine Bearden, the verse & poetry of Dunbar, F. Johnson, L. Hughes, C. McKay, A. Baraka, J. W. Johnson & the unknown bards who first intoned the Spirituals. Currently I strive to develop a blues sensibility & jazz aesthetic.

I blog at undocumentedohio.com & anillegal.tumblr.com. Shadows then Light is a photo-essay book in collaboration with Steve Pavey found at shadowsthenlight.com.
And maybe if I pray to Christ
He may bring me to you

But for now the muses
Will have to do
Also by Marco Saavedra

SHADOWS THEN LIGHT