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Stretched

The Hatchery by Virgil Suárez

The Hatchery by Virgil Suárez (Suárez 27-28, see appendix) details the childhood experience of a field trip to a chicken hatchery and *tries* to be simply a story. But the poem becomes imperiled when the speaker's adult perspective violently breaks through. Throughout the poem, there is a sense of two speakers: the child telling the story and the adult both correcting him and forcing him to see details previously overlooked. With images of the working class, the slaughter of useless birds, and uniformed children marching in lines, the poem serves to connect the childhood experience to the current reality of Latino people in the United States.

Looking through a telescope of both time and distance, Suárez's speaker tells how, as a child in Cuba, his class visited a chicken hatchery. "We walked there single file, already a string of blemished / pearls strung by our sweaty hands, divided every / tenth by a teacher" (3-5). This single-file line of linked and sweaty children evokes images of the working class and of manual labor. These images go so far as to resemble a chain gang. Listen to how Suárez continues. "We wore our Young Pioneer uniforms / and the sweat made our shirts stick to our backs" (5-6). Sweat is mentioned two times in three lines along with uniforms and strings of linked people with authority figures stationed in between. But the most telling moment comes in Suárez's choice of the simple word "already" (3). This word is our first glance at the adult speaker who is also narrating this story: "*already* a string of blemished / pearls strung by our sweaty hands," he says (3-4, emphasis added). This word, a simple motion of mind, makes a statement about the current status of the group of children of which the speaker was part: Cubans and, in some

cases, now Cuban-Americans. In this simple word—*already*—Suárez’s speaker links past and present. He links the sweaty blemished child with the man he has become.

The blemish, as far as can be discerned, comes from a label. The parallel in the poem seems to come in the moment when the chickens are sexed, when the light passes through the fertilized egg to determine the gender of the chick inside. Though the sexing table, as an object, appears in line twelve, the gravity of what is determined there doesn’t appear until line twenty one: “The males, it was explained to us, the few born, / are gathered and separated and fed for only a few days, // then they are sent next door to the grinders” (21-22) The word alone seems to be enough for the schoolchildren because Suárez writes, “The world went white and still when the guide said ‘moledoras.’” (23-24). But the speaker, like the guide, insists upon continuing the story: “What happens there? / The male chicks are ground up and mixed with by-products // to make pellets for farm animals. We shivered at the news” (27-29). The speaker, the young speaker, only shivered for a split second, though, because the tone immediately changes in the next line when he says “Later, we each received a chick to take home, a science project of our own” (30). Such fun! The child can afford to deny the presence of a label—be it “male” or “Cuban-American”—because he has the blissful ignorance of childhood. The adult speaker, though, cannot. The label, to him, is a blemish. He is like the “male chicks in the world of poultry”—a Cuban-American in the world of white privilege (27).

The speaker’s double identity as both Cuban and American and as both child and adult is emphasized by craft in a couple of ways. The consistent use of unrhymed couplets as a form underscores the pairing of the two voices. Both voices are always present and fairly equal as indicated by line lengths. The voices are also never in complete agreement which is reinforced by the lack of any rhyme scheme in the couplets. This dichotomy is also superbly represented in a single line/stanza break where Suárez leaves readers hanging on the word “half” (6). Half what? The content prior to the word gives no clue. “The sweat made our shirts stick to our backs, the half-” (6). Half-Cuban? Half-American? Half-man? In the next stanza, Suárez answers our curiosities with another image of sweat: “half- // moons wet under our armpits” (6-7). But the choice of line and stanza break forces a pause on

the word “half” (6). And the word, as it resonates, speaks to the perhaps indescribable notion of displacement which permeates this poem.

Suárez’s adult speaker emphasizes this displacement and alienation within the walls of the hatchery *and* the confines of the memory by not only forcing readers—and his childhood speaker—to acknowledge the fate of the male chicks but by dwelling momentarily on the deformed chicks kept on display. Following the young speaker’s description of the hatching room floor as “furry with the downy / white-yellow of baby chicks,” the adult speaker stops in another room where he finds “a collection of jars with all of nature’s anomalies, / ‘left turns,’ as the man called these little accidents. / The specimens floated in formaldehyde, aliens from other worlds” (15-16, 18-21). Accidents. Aliens. These chicks represent an alternative fate of Latino-Americans in working-class America which, though not labor-force, is just as bad. Those who escape the life of egg-laying for the man are used as food for more productive creatures or exploited as objects of amusement. The fate of these lives are decided by economics. So why feed the males before sending them to the grinders? Weight gain? That hardly seems significant. Is it by some mistaken notion of humanity? Whatever the case, these strange details represent another parallel to the Latino-American experience of half-ness where humanity is acknowledged right before it is taken away.

The “throwaway” quality of the chicks as products is proven later in the narrative when each child is given a chick to take home as a “science project // of our own. Responsibility tests” (30-31). These living creatures are given to children as practice items. And the child speaker in the poem is delighted. “We thought of the possibilities,” he says, though he doesn’t name any. (31). Perhaps he’s afraid to name his hopes. Perhaps he’s more aware of the adult speaker than I give him credit for. Or perhaps he runs out of time. Because as soon as he says “We thought of the possibilities, / if the chicks we carried close would grow // to be roosters, or grow at all” the adult speaker jumps in with his most direct statement yet: “No matter, for if they did grow, they undoubtedly would end up in the soup” (31-34). Is the adult speaker really objecting to chicken noodle? Or does the chick-equals-man metaphor continue? And if so, what does it mean? If the working-class imagery and the couplets and the presence

of the counterpoint voices really links the chicks and men, then it seems to mean that the working class, no matter what, end up cooked and eaten.

The young speaker doesn't see a determination of value, or lack thereof, in the actions of the hatchery workers. Or at least he doesn't acknowledge it. Right after learning of the male chicks' destiny to be pellets for farm animals, he delights at the gift of a young chick. As noted, the change is abrupt: "We shivered at the news. / Later, we each received a chick to take home" (29-30). This could simply be due to the child's ability to be easily redirected. This quick shift could be, instead, a response to the opportunity and power the child has been given to save a life. Whatever the case, the young speaker's innocence and optimism allow him to value the life of the tiny chicken. He says "many of us walked // home that afternoon with our prizes, some of us giddy with the idea / of feeding and nurturing. Our parents [. . .] would know what to do with such / a precious gift" (34-38). This confidence remains—even after the adult speaker's mention of soup. That chicken is a gift. The child refuses to believe otherwise. Perhaps this poem is a message from the child to the man he has become: *your* life is a gift.

Suárez's poem continues to have potential for conflicting perspectives until its final image: "this memory of our visit to the hatchery in Havana lingers, / the yellow puffs scattered on the floor like dandelions, free // to float in the air at last, free to float away in the faint breeze / of memory" (39-42). The yellow puffs of dandelions resemble the chicks in the hatching room, sure, but so would marigolds or carnations. But Suárez chooses dandelions. Why? To a child, dandelions represent freedom—they grow freely, they can be picked freely, and they're as pretty as any flowers which grow in gardens. To an adult, dandelions are weeds.

Even so, the child's voice seems to win out here in both content and craft. Narratively, the adult speaker gives in. He lets the dandelions stand symbolic of freedom and possibility. Like the chicks liberated in the hands of schoolchildren, the dandelions have at least a chance: "yellow puffs scattered on the floor like dandelions, free // to float in the air at last, free to float away in the faint breeze / of memory" (40-42). This idea that optimism is still legitimate, even in the face of chicken noodle soup, is reflected in the final line of the poem, a monostich. This one-line stanza serves to punctuate the twenty-

one couplets which it follows as if with an exclamation point: “call our childhoods” (43). The dandelion-equals-freedom image hasn’t been challenged or refuted by the adult speaker and the final stanza presents only one line, only one voice. Either the adult speaker finally concedes and embraces the value of life—chick or man—or he disappears entirely. My guess is that the two speakers have finally come together.

Of course, there aren’t really two speakers in this poem by Virgil Suárez. But looking at the poem in this way allows readers to see the inner conflicts which accompany the Latino-American experience. The title of Suárez’s book is *90 Miles*. In the epigraph which precedes this collection of poems, he writes that ninety miles is “the distance between Cuba and the United States according to a mile marker at the southernmost point in Key West, Florida, and where thousands of Cubans have lost their lives and continue to do so in their desperate journey to freedom” (Suárez). The distance between this poem’s young Cuban speaker and its Cuban-American adult speaker is not so expansive as this. Instead, the two dwell as one being, conflicted and blemished and painfully stretched the distance.

Work Cited

Suárez, Virgil. "The Hatchery." *90 Miles*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2005. 27-28.

Appendix

The Hatchery

Virgil Suárez

1 Once in Havana as schoolchildren we took a field trip
2 to a chicken hatchery not too far from the school.

3 We walked there single file, already a string of blemished
4 pearls strung by our sweaty hands, divided every
5 tenth by a teacher. We wore our Young Pioneer uniforms,
6 and the sweat made our shirts stick to our backs, the half-
7 moons wet under our armpits. We walked through chambers
8 in the hatchery in awe of so much stainless steel, tiled
9 walls and granite floors, aluminum doors, walked silent
10 under the flicker of bad fluorescent lights. We got the tour:
11 eggs on the conveyor belts about to be cleaned of shit,
12 the sexing tables on which light passed through the eggs,
13 the incubator room with all the trays from the hatching room.
14 We walked through single file, passed rooms filled with the chirp
15 of thousands of baby chicks, a floor gone furry with the downy
16 white-yellow of baby chicks. The worker/guide explained
17 the process from fertile eggs to birth. In another room,
18 a collection of jars with all of nature's anomalies,
19 "left turns," as the man called these little accidents.
20 The specimens floated in formaldehyde, aliens from other worlds,
21 we said. The males, it was explained to us, the few born,
22 are gathered and separated and fed for only a few days,
23 then they are sent next door to the grinders. The world went
24 white and still when the guide said "moledoras." The teachers
25 looked at the guide, eyes wide open, a sigh on their lips,
26 as if to stop him from going on about this horrible fate
27 of male chicks in the world of poultry. What happens there?
28 The male chicks are ground up and mixed with by-products
29 to make pellets for farm animals. We shivered at the news.
30 Later, we each received a chick to take home, a science project
31 of our own. Responsibility tests. We thought of the possibilities,
32 if the chicks we carried close would grow
33 to be roosters, or grow at all. No matter, for if they did grow,
34 they undoubtedly would end up in the soup. So many of us walked

35 home that afternoon with our prizes, some of us giddy with the idea
36 of feeding and nurturing. Our parents, the dissidents, who

37 wanted no part of the Revolution, would know what to do with such
38 a precious gift. We held our chicks close to our hearts,

39 and this memory of our visit to the hatchery in Havana lingers,
40 the yellow puffs scattered on the floor like dandelions, free

41 to float in the air at last, free to float away in the faint breeze
42 of memory, across the barren and ravaged fields we now

43 call our childhoods.