

Thomas Dukes

ETUDES FOR EL PASO AND SPANISH GUITAR

1973 - 1978

1.

Marie borrowed a red convertible
her brother swiped from the Houston boom,
and we parked south on Scenic Drive
as dusk changed clothes for evening.

Already, her hands gave the finger
to arthritis, each joint crossed
by a surgeon, while I sat with
juvenile diabetes, too sweet for words.

We weren't even close to twenty-five,
but God was either a bitch
or absent without leave. Marie had
the smokes, I had matches,

and we set the world on fire
with wonder and pain as Juarez lights
crossed the border with all the seen
and unseen immigrants.

2.

After the Fall, angels guard the gates
of Eden while I count forever
the lost on my desert rosary:
Glen, Joe, Mack, Miss Lolita Highball,

and others known to God
or the Centers for Disease Control.
One family hid its only son
without funeral or obituary,

without standing by the grave
 in consecrated grief.
 I'm told the father wrote
 his child's name in the sand

each night away from the city
 until he saw a ghost walker
 who promised to take him, too,
 from the guilty earth.

3.

Someone stuck a note on the cactus
 by my apartment door
 where city life met the city desert,
 and my Siamese gifted me with lizards:

*Bougainvillea are red,
 Jacaranda are blue,
 Plumeria are rotting,
 So, cheating Tom, will you.*

I put this with the line
I love you, Thomas
 another soul had written
 inside my overnight bag

and thought of my fidelities
 before the phone rang with news
 of a cousin who'd shot herself over
 a wayward husband: she lived one night.

4.

My priestly lover and I promised
 New Mexico fresh Lawrencian
 sins, but we were closer
 to Forster's Italian sun

at the Santa Fe Opera
 where we held
 untranslatable passions
 under an Indian blanket,

and stars kept time with the
 open music. Of each myth,
 he said, *It's like a fairy tale*
 as the heroine died,

but we were the ones
 finding so much
 and so little to sing about
 between Liza Minelli and Anita Bryant.

5.

When my friend Phil,
 addicted to Milton and swearing
I am NOT a Catholic!
 stopped his bike by a Texas road

without warning, a car knocked
 him halfway to heaven:
 he came down to die,
 reported Marie, and crashed

on broken knees, his behind
 pointing to the God
 who had it coming.
 After the funeral mass

he gave his wife and children,
 some of us celebrated communion
 with chardonnay and Seventies wafers:
 tortilla chips, divined by a salsa indulgence.

6.

At the last beautification party
 of the west Texas sexual revolution,
 our hostess-by-the-pool explained
 her new Lady Bird Johnson décor:

I brought the desert colors inside.
 We approved her semi-erect bathroom taps,
 the silver folds of a tissue-box vulva,
 before walking into the adobe tile fantasy

of a guest-room shower
 where our five bodies broke
 state laws and most commandments
 before stretching on the rapturous

sunburst-orange spread,
 proudly post-coital as we discussed
 how water conservation is best
 practiced by showering during sex.

7.

I still hold the view from Scenic Drive.
 Marie drives her poetry from a wheelchair,
 I'm told: one friend shares a house
 with a drag queen gone Carol Channing,

another discovered the world he could lift
 with weights. I cannot be faithless
 although the sand blows equally on
 my living and my dread: Jesus

breaks my heart every day
 in a new Eden that my love
 grows for us and our salvation,
 the cats and dog found on the road

to Jerusalem, Ohio. Still, some nights,
 I close my eyes in God's wild mercy
 to see the world all before us,
 and I cross the desert again.