

IF I GO MISSING

by Octavio Quintanilla

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Review by Taylor Collier (originally appeared in the Spring 2015 issue of *Concho River Review*)

When I read Octavio Quintanilla's debut collection of poems, *If I Go Missing*, I'm reminded of the famous lines from William Carlos Williams's, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower": "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there."¹ Quintanilla's poems do far more than delve into the personal; they speak to the violence of the landscape, the ever-present threat of vanishing. The poems are fiercely inquisitive, determined. From the title poem:

What if we're taken in the middle
of our daughter's ball game, or from our beds,
just minutes after making love,
never to be seen again?
But who takes us?
Where do we go when someone in the news
says, *He's been missing for days.* (82)

However strong this undercurrent of fear appears throughout the book, it doesn't always serve as the emotional compass. The book, divided into three parts (If...I Go...Missing), offers an exploration of the multi-dimensional aspects of the human condition, and so refuses a reductive reading that limits tragedy and fear as the main engines of the book. Because Quintanilla's unflinching eye zeroes in on the world, his poems are political whether or not they intend to be—yet still remain works of art more than overt political statements. In a time where too many political poems come across as blinded by anger, or stilted in the ability to recognize nuance and emotional complexity, Quintanilla offers surreal visions in poems like "Influx," which begins:

Too much killing
south of the border, the heavy rains
make it easier for bodies to disappear.
And so,
the dead come from Argentina, El Salvador, and Mexico,
as if looking for a new start. (38)

¹ Williams, William Carlos. "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower." *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry*. Ed. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellman, and Robert O'Clair. Norton: New York, 2003. 317. Print.

The speaker refuses to shy away from the unsettling, unforgiving violence, the dusty landscape, the way “the night emboldens us to wake the heart / that’s gone deaf” (44). The speaker’s imperative seems to be truth over beauty. Perhaps, because of the subject matter, it’s easy to focus on the content of Octavio’s poems, but I would be remiss not to mention the craft and skill here. There’s very clearly a master sculptor at work with his chisel. The suspense of the sentences as they weave and dangle over and across the linebreaks—in the sample above, look how each line adds a layer of complexity to the situation, allowing us to feel the desperation of those dead who were “looking for a new start.” The speaker in many of these poems wonders about his role as brother, son, father, husband, son, exile. His speaker claims to be, “*the son without sons*” (27), he tells us, “even those wanting / to remain anonymous / are giving up / their names” (53).

In the poem, “Fugitive,” Quintanilla’s lyric mode takes over:

At that hour
 you wanted to be water
 drinking itself, not water
afraid of freezing.
In that quiet,
 a greater mind couldn’t finish
the abandoned project
 you became.
You’re driving now
 through another
Texas town,
 dust holding things in place
like a rib cage.
The light,
 hard as granite. (75)

Because he begins the third section with an excerpt from Larry Levis’s “In the City of Light,”: “Out of respect for someone missing, I have to say / This isn’t the whole story” (55), Quintanilla’s poem here reminds me of the winding, loose—yet precise—lyrics of Levis. Replace California with Southwest Texas, and it’s difficult not to see the same attention to detail, the same insistent eye that refuses to look away, the surprising turn of phrase—water drinking itself, not water afraid of freezing. The weaving of narrative and lyric is Quintanilla’s strong suit. His poems often show preference for the world we share, rather than relying too heavily on abstraction.

Quintanilla’s debut collection reveals a mature artist at work, performing the difficult task of the poet—the all-seeing eye—in a harsh landscape with a history of grief and violence, giving us the news that only poetry can. We learn about life as a son, “My father fell from a tall ladder / at the

cotton gin. I imagine, before he hit / concrete, he asked, *Where am I going?*” (57), and of the aftermath of that accident. In an early poem, “[My parents can’t recognize the country of their birth],” we see people grown accustomed to the chaos: “Grandmothers no longer close their eyes at the sound / of gunfire breaking a neighbor’s window” (32). We learn of a brother’s transition back to civilian life after fighting in Afghanistan, we learn of love. We learn to, “Call it a field where you get lost / and no one goes out to find you” (67).

He is a poet to pay attention to, and I’m not the only one saying so. John Keene at the Volta blog lists *If I Go Missing* as one of the ten best books of 2014, alongside poets such as Claudia Rankine, Jimmy Santiago, Saeed Jones, Fred Moten, and Danez Smith. The poems in *If I Go Missing* pay attention to a world they cannot ignore, and Octavio Quintanilla is a new 21st-century American voice we can’t afford to ignore.