

Poetry Series

Oscar Mireles
- poems -

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Oscar Mireles()

Oscar Mireles (b.1955) has been writing poetry for the past 25 years. He is the editor of two anthologies titled 'I didn't know there were Latinos in Wisconsin: 20 Hispanic Poets' (Focus Communications,1989) and 'I didn't know there were Latinos in Wisconsin: 30 Hispanic Writers' (Focus Communications,1999) . He produced a chapbook titled 'Second Generation' (Focus Communications,1985) . He has had over 50 poems published in anthologies and magazines including Gathering Place of the Waters: 30 Milwaukee Poets (1983) Revista Chicano-Riquena 'Hispanic Literature in Wisconsin' (1985) , Visions and Voices against Apartheid (1987) Viatzlan, A journal of Arts and Letters (1992) , Dreams and Secrets, Woodland Pattern (1998) , Alt. Literature 2003.

He has received grants for his writing activities from the Wisconsin Arts Board, Dane County Cultural Affairs Commission, Wisconsin Humanities Committee, Wisconsin 150th Sesquicentennial Commission, Madison Civic Center Foundation and Wisconsin Center for the Book. He received a fellowship to spend a month at the Vermont Studio Center, an artist colony.

Oscar Mireles has done numerous readings at the following institutions: Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI., Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago, Il., The Loft, Minneapolis, MN., Chicago Cultural Center, La Raza Bookstore, Sacramento, CA., Wisconsin Book Festival, Madison, WI., National Association for Chicano Studies, Ypsilanti, MI., University of California, Riverside, Riverside CA., Canterbury Bookstore, Madison, WI and Woodland Pattern, Milwaukee, WI.

Oscar Mireles has received numerous awards for his community service and activism. He was selected as one of the '10 Who Make a Difference' by the Wisconsin State Journal in 2002. He was featured on 'Know your Madisonian' in 1998 by the Wisconsin State Journal. He was nominated as '89 People to Know in 1989 ' according to Milwaukee Magazine. He was selected as the Future Milwaukee Alumni of the Year in 1988, and 'Wisconsin Hispanic Man of the Year' by the United Migrant Opportunity Service (UMOS) in 1988.

He is currently an artist member of the Minds Eye Radio collective, which produces a monthly radio show of spoken word poetry on WORT radio.

Oscar Mireles is currently Principal/Executive Director of Omega School, an alternative school in Madison, Wisconsin and has assisted over 1500 young adults prepare for and complete their GED Diploma in the past decade. He is the father of four children, Diego Jesus, Sergio Andres, Lorena Pilar and Javier Oscar.

A "z" Is More Than The Last Letter Of The Alphabet...

My father proudly showed me
his new birth certificate
that had our last name Mireles
spelled with a "z"
instead of "s"
Mirelez

He said that my grandfather couldn't write
at the time
and the young doctor thought
he said "s"
Miiiiii....reIIII....sssssss
when he sounded it out
and that's how it was changed

is it really that much of a difference
I wondered?
would my ancestors
have approved of it?
...would they have even noticed?

A "z: is very defiant, sharp and bold....
while an "s" is smooth, curvy and soft...

I guess the best answer
to my dilemma
could be found on an old television show
where a masked man
with noble Spanish blood
used a slashing sword
to leave his mark
on the world

Oscar Mireles

Assassination Day

In the seventh grade in 1968,
playing football on the school playground
I heard that
Martin Luther King Jr.
had been assassinated,

Some kids cried,
other students didn't know what to feel
I felt a little sad.

I headed up to the third floor classroom
for my fourth period class
at Washington Junior High School,
I realized I had to step it up a bit
cause I was running late...

As I turned the corner and
shot up the final set of stairs
I saw an unfamiliar black face

standing...
at the top of the stairwell
with his eyes swinging
as wildly as both his arms
screaming
and hitting people
as they walked up the steps

I was about to turn around
when I realized
that I did not have enough time to go
around the second floor detour
without being late...
again

I continued to march up those thirteen steps
I could see some students
begin to shift their whole bodies
slightly to the left

leading with their right shoulder
as if trying
to provide a target
for the attacker
to aim for
besides their face

Other students decided
to take the hit
head on...
directly in the middle of their chest,
their pummeled bodies flying
as if hit by the thick force
of water from a fire hydrant

I could hear him screaming
"they killed him,
you killed him,
they killed him"

As I took another
cautious step forward
I took a quick peek at his face,

I knew everyone in the school
and I confirmed to myself,
that he was not a student
but before my eyes left his face
I made a startling discovery
I saw a tear appear on his cheek...

he was crying...

he was crying
but kept punching
and swinging
not one of the students said anything
when they got hit,
they just released a "umph"
almost being careful
not to let out a sound
to warn other students

And the students held in
their tears too
clutched in between their
clenched prayer fists
hands into fingers

At this point
I realized
this person
who had terrorized our school
armed only with his lightning fast fists
was crying,
screaming
and hitting
the world around him
in a whirlwind of emotion
that was raining upon all the students
in that stairwell

and I was next up
for the unending
onslaught
of
violence

and as he cocked his arm
for the more than one hundredth time
I wrestled the urge
to capture my balance
as soon as I could,

an angelic voice
from the other side of the stairwell
said..."hey man...
hey man...
that's Oscar...
he's cool
he's ok'...

and the man-child
quickly stepped aside

and let me pass

and as I headed
down the hallway
with a sigh of relief
draped across my face,

I realized
it shouldn't be that simple

And have wished every day since
that I had
found the courage
to speak up for what dreams
Martin Luther King Jr. stood for

even if it meant
falling down
over my words
in that stairwell...

Oscar Mireles

Baby In The Bathwater

When my son Sergio takes a bath,
The water is never still.
He thinks that he is in
a fishbowl, and dives
underneath the rim of the
bathtub.

After the warm bath
water reaches flood level stages,
we turn off the faucet.
He lies on his back,
two ears tucked down
below the surface of the water.

He asks that I wash his feet.
He throws them both
towards the direction of my face.
They are so small, like a bar of hotel soap.
His toes are attached to his feet,
five little beads of pearls.

He sticks out his hand
and I pour several drops of shampoo.
He throws it in
the air and then laughs.

And come to think of it,
I almost forgot
what it was like
to take a bath.

Oscar Mireles

B-I-N-G-O Is Not A Four Letter Word

B-I-N-G-O

used to be the name
of someones's dog
in a grade school song

now it is a legalized form
of big time gambling
for an old woman
straddling a crutch
with a withered arm
as she enter the Bingo parlor

she is sitting in the front row now
to make sure she doesn't miss
any of the numbers called

next to her
a sweating bearded man
who rings a tiny Christmas bell
every time I-22 is called

I guess he won \$1,000
once
on that lucky number I-22
and he needs the good luck
especially today
because it is crowded
the first week of the month
always is
'cause of the holy trinity of government checks
pensions
welfare
social security

it seems like everyone
is smoking cigarettes
or coughing

coarse fingers crossed

around strands of hair
being twisted
dark eyes looking at the
glow of the bingo screen
and back on their cards
without blinking

like a Four Star General
going over his strategy
on a war map

you can hear the tension
stomachs growl
fingernails scratch the bingo cards
in anticipation

finally the bingo lady
yells
"B-4.....B-4'
and someone in the back
who was not really paying attention
and who has never been here before
screams B-I-N-G-O

and the rest of the crowd murmurs
and start to scrape
the blue chips
back into
their little casket shape box

hoping they will fall
in the right place

...next time
...next time
...next time

Oscar Mireles

College Wrestling My Freshmen Year

During my freshmen year in college
I had the urge to continue
my wrestling career
which did not need
to be resurrected
but at that time in my life
I was still an idealist

So my brother Jesse and I decided
to enter the wrestling room
partly on a dare
from a couple of guys
from Minnesota who lived in our dorm
and partly to prove
we still knew
where to try to find
our manhood

I decided that I would not cut my long hair
before the first practice
which in hindsight was not the best idea
because it helped to piss off the coach
and he doubled the intensity of the wrestling practice
for our enjoyment

I also did not think I needed to
do any advanced training
before hitting the wrestling mat
and after the first five minutes
it became evident that
this was not the best strategy

but I did it
I made it through the practice
and I only threw up once
I think but maybe
I went back for seconds
and shared my lunch with the team

I was exhausted
winter drenched in sweat
but I was wrestling again
and I still had it
even if it lasted
only one afternoon

Oscar Mireles

Courage

Courage is setting yourself free

As she maneuvered
her entourage
of a motorized wheelchair
trained assistance dog
and personal assistant
into the Olympic size swimming pool
at the health club

I thought that it was
a nice idea
to come and sit
at the edge of the pool
and that it would probably
be therapeutic
or at least a refreshing
change of place
for someone in a wheelchair

but she scooted her vehicle
into the front of the first swim lane
and as she was chatting to her assistant
the dog just sat there by the door
resting

her assistant reached behind her and
lifted her torso up and placed
her at the edge of the pool

as I was sitting in the
nearby whirlpool
at 4: 30 in the afternoon
I became curious
about what they were going to do next?
was she going to just go by the water and sit
or was there something more
in store

when she was tossed in the water
I realized she must have been a swimmer before
you could tell by her upper body
that she had once had a sleek physique
that swimmers have
powerful shoulder muscles

she started with a back stroke
her thick arms making a V stroke
her clenched fists
providing an engine to paddle her body
down the lane
since she had no control over her legs
the graceful placement of her head
during her swimming stroke
face up in the pool
forced her knees to come up
to the surface
this improvised technique
had half her body moving furiously
and the other half
being dragged behind

she had an unusual turn
in which instead of using the wall
of the turn to propel off
she turned first sideways
and then circled back
and went on her way
back down the lane

but as she finished the turn
I saw a peaceful look
on her face

she had found
freedom of movement
once again
in a swimming pool
in the water
nothing to hold her back

in one of the most dangerous places to be
when you have lost control
of most of your body

Oscar Mireles

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Oscar Mireles

Diego's Mom Takes Bonding Lessons In A Home Study Course

The first day home
she touched him
the way you approach
a not so familiar porcupine
nice and slow

the second day
after leaving the maternity ward
she held him
as if he was
a 20 lb. sack of potatoes
close but awkward

the third day
she caressed him
like a crossword puzzle
touching each different little piece
starting to become familiar
as she laid him on the bed
of the growing image of our new son
tossing
smiles and love

Oscar Mireles

Diego's Ninety Day Follow-Up Check In

Diego is growing
even though he mainly rests
on his back
this is something I need to change
before we start wrestling

later, he opened his hand
to me
to expose his thumb
and then threw it all
into his mouth
and still had enough room
to yell out a laugh

his first teardropp fell
when he was crying
one cold winter morning
he did not blink
when he swallowed it
but I swear
he winked at me

yesterday
he said one of those
“....gah... gah....” words
letting me know
he is hungry...
hungry for my heart

Oscar Mireles

Divorce Is One Of The Easier Reasons To Change Your Address At The Post Office

after I was asked to leave my home
I lived with my nephew
who was in law school
in my hometown
and he let me live there
because he owed me a favor
cause I had let him live with me
during his gap year
after high school
and cause he knew
I had no other place to go

and the first night went well
we had dinner,
I helped straighten out his apartment
cleaned the refrigerator,
bathroom and kitchen
drank some rum
and he smoked some weed
at 10: 30 pm
before he went out clubbing
and I fell asleep

and that was the first sign
that it was not going to work out
because our timing was off
he was ready to go
start the evening
when I was ready to sleep
and we made it work for a little while

I would stay away
till late at night
then I would call
to inform him that i was heading
his way and probably
right to bed

as to not disturb his plans

each day I would
think about ways in which
I could make it back home
and instead of reading the signs
my ex-wife made that said
I wasn't ever going back
I made pretend it was a possibility
and that would get me through the day

If those thoughts didn't work
I would think about running away
to Mexico,
Minnesota,
California
or New York
places I had old friends
or girlfriends
that would put up with me
until I got my feet on the ground
or got tired of running

one day,
I realized I could not go home
anymore
because I did not live there...
or as my son put it
so eloquently
'I don't remember now
what it was like when you lived here'
and followed it up with
'is that a bad thing? '

or run away
to another city
because
I loved my children
too much
to let my anger
get in the way
of seeing them grow up

and I learned that
I could not parent them
on the morning drive to school
nor could I yell at them
for their mistakes
or do anything foolish
during the short times we were together
and I learned how to be quiet
and listen
and not focus on what to say next
but just focus on being there with them

I thought
things would never change
but they did

and my children forgave me for my mistakes
did not forget who I was
and I did not
have to regret
missing
anything

including
giving my wife
hundreds of reasons
fashioned into small postcards
that were mailed without stamps
to divorce me

Oscar Mireles

Eightyfive Pound Racine Junior High School City Wrestling Champion

It doesn't sound like it,
but winning the Racine Junior High School
wrestling Championship
might have been the highlight of my brief wrestling career

another highlight is
I also made the Racine Horlick High School varsity wrestling team
at 98 lbs. my sophomore year in high school
which used to be the first year of high school
back in the day

It was also the smallest weight class
it would have been worse if I had been the only guy at that weight on the team
but I had beaten out Shawn Briggs and Larry McMillan
and convinced two other guys not to try out for the team
who I wrestled in gym class

I also placed second
In the Racine Invitational my Senior year at 126 lbs.
making the finals
against a wrestler
my older brother beat every time
and he liked to shoot a takedown right away
so my strategy was to shoot first
which I did and gained a 2- 0 lead
and didn't have a plan
for what to do next
and I lost the match
but still have the medal
with the Racine Lighthouse Invitational Tournament
32 years later

my final highlight
was my senior year in high school
when we wrestled Kenosha Tremper High
who had been ranked as one of the top wrestling schools in the state
they had the Mayor of Kenosha there at the meet

and a band, and it was parents night
they had a 340 lb heavyweight
and all we had was 190 lb. "Black" Jack Hanson
Jack and I had a routine, where I would help warm him up
before every match
and he had lost to this guy before
because he was so huge
but Jack wore him down
after getting caught underneath him once
he ended up on top with a pin
I remember being in the locker room
hearing the coach say
and we banged the lockers and cheered
this will be one night you will remember
the rest of your life

I didn't believe him

and if I had not written this poem
I might have forgotten...
why...

Oscar Mireles

Electronic Touching

You
called
me
last
night

but
were
afraid
to
speak
into
my
answering
machine

Didn't
you
know...

I
was
listening
to
your
voice

and
heard
a
sad
sigh
being
chased...

by
a
dial
tone

Oscar Mireles

Eyewitness To Shooting That Could Have Been Me

My brother Junior didn't remember
what happened last weekend
when he first opened the front door

Omero and Charley entered in
with drunken laughter
talking about Janie's
hot cousin from Kenosha

Not aware that an ambush
was awaiting them
above loud voices
playing poker
in a grimy crowded kitchen

Suddenly,
spindly card table overturns
green money and yellow screams
fly about as
dark fists race angry faces
for the best angle

Crazily
a gun
not aimed at anyone
went off
Charly is stuck in the way

His brown eye
shattered red
on his shirt
on the floor

His dreams
lay still
underneath the sunglasses
left on the carpet

Fathers Day Poem (...A Day Late...)

Father's Day Poem

My children are old enough
to know it is Father Day
but the younger two
are not old enough
to work or buy gifts

so my girlfriend got the gift
an electronic Sudoku game
and my daughter and son
gave it to me
(no it was not wrapped,
except with their delight on their faces
giving me something
they knew I would like)

My nineteen year old
who just got his first summer
college area sub-leased apartment
but not enough money for food
or toilet paper
decided to text me this message
"Happy Fathers Day Pops! "
at 9: 33 a.m. the day before
just in case he forgot
to wake up
before noon the next day

My other son
The eighteen old
Who headed off to college a little early
Sent me an ecard

"Happy Fathers Day"

It's too bad,
I can't be home this weekend,
but Happy Fathers Day! "

and it reminded me
that just being remembered
is the greatest gift
one can ask for
from teenagers
on Fathers Day

Oscar Mireles

Finding A New Word In The 'street Dictionary' Is A Little Harder

In sixth grade
we'd walk down Hamilton Street
beneath trees that were older
than the houses
Frank Ruiz, Richard Green, Elvis Norman
the conversation was always
about girls and swear words
I being the smallest
never offered anything
besides an occasional "yeah...."

one spring morning
school was let out early
for parent-teacher conferences
and Frank started talking about Lucy
a girl he convinced to lift her dress
behind the Pocaró house
like a patio umbrella
opened wide for all to see
and without thinking said
"only whores give you what you want! "
and as a guy, you should always want it
and it was as simple as that

it probably would have made perfect sense
to me, in my eleven year old wisdom
except the night before
I was told my older sister
who was fifteen
was also pregnant
and when the word whore
is used outside the safety
of a dictionary
it not only hurts
it can make you cry

Finding Your Final Resting Place Wasn'T Easy

It took me a year
to find your gravesite
actually I only
went to look for it
once with my wife Clara and the kids on
my way back from Milwaukee
when I was feeling sad

I remembered during
the funeral arrangements
that they mentioned
your plot was located near the access road
near the foot of your mother's grave

my son, Diego and I
went the second time
on an icy Sunday afternoon
there were flowers
spread out in front and the snow had
almost blanketed
the tombstone like a pillow

I didn't feel you
or anything that closely resembled you,
during that moment of discovery
I could only hear the wind
crashing across empty gravestones
searching for a place to rest.

Oscar Mireles

Five Finger Mexican Style Revolver Roulette

He was described on the morning drive time radio
19 year old man
who lived on the 900 block
of South 10th Street ...
shot in the head
with his own revolver
a victim of Russian Roulette

but there was no mention
of the fact
that he had finished
his high school education
in May of last year
only one semester
after he was supposed to...

...when most
of his teachers thought
his life would be finished
before
his seventeenth birthday

nothing mentioned
that he had worked at the community center
two years ago
on a mural project
in front of our building
and was starting to see
the connection between
the tattoos on his arm
and the art hanging in our
small gallery walls

Joaquin is dead...

and I know who
was standing next to him
in this time of miscalculated fear
because tragedy loves a witness

it was a former student, Cruz
not yet sixteen
but not willing
to stay away from the violence
that surrounds him everyday

I know Cruz is scared, mad and angry
and wished he could have done something
but it is too late

too late to take the gun away
even though he tried to take out the bullets

too late to tell Joaquin
that manhood is determined
by what is inside your heart and brain
and you can't reach that
with a gun or bullet

too late
to change that second shot
which went too fast, it was unreal

too late for Cruz
who when he saw the dead body
he couldn't open up the bedroom door
and had to suffocate
for almost three minutes
with the live stench of recent death

too late to fire the third shot...

Joaquin deserved another chance
But maybe that is
The only thing
He can pass on...

Oscar Mireles

Hey Soos

In a black and white
1960's television episode of
the western 'Rawhide'
was hidden
a small scene

in which a
young Mexican cowboy
from Austin, Texas
named Jesus

and a saddleboy
from Chihuahua, Mexico
named Juan
who was rescued
from the Camancheros Indians
when he was seven years old

and both Juan and Jesus
are standing together
posted as lookouts
in an abandoned fort
comparing notes
on their lives

and the three surprising things are

they both get along

and both get to stay alive
by the end of the episode
(even with Clint Eastwood in the script..,)

and the only problem
I have
with this historical portrait
is that they spell the cowboys names
as
Hey Soos

Oscar Mireles

History Lessons Are Programmed To Repeat Themselves, Until We Learn To Change

My mother Elisa
was picketing outside
the cattle car trains
that were quietly lined up
to deport Mexican nationals
from Minneapolis Minnesota
in the 1920's

Yes, it was her
and three other women,
my Aunt Juanita and two friends
Carmen and Josie Flores
they were afraid to hold up the picket signs
that protested the mass deportations
yet were more afraid
worse things would happen
if they didn't do anything

A local policeman warned them
it would be best if they left
otherwise he would be forced
to take action
but they stood there
waving their picket sign
like a flag
as the last train
fell into the sunset

Oscar Mireles

I Hate Atolle

Every single morning
during my childhood
it seemed to be, we would have
atolle, an mexican style oatmeal
swimming inside
a large silvery pot with twin ear handles
squatted directly on top of the stove

red and yellow gas flames licking
the lower sides of the base
as if the kettle were
trying to tickle itself
into a heated frenzy

we never ate
ice cold milk
poured into a wooden bowl
waiting for a load of
dry mouth cereal
laced with sugar
to sweeten up
the start of another day

and the only time
we were supposed to eat
krusty kreme donuts
to nourish our bodies for the day
we got stuck instead with
day old pan dulce, mexican sweet bread
which was neither sweet
nor resembled a krusty kreme

and even when we had those
very special meat filled days
of mexican sausage or chorizo
mixing its red blood stained juices
with farm fresh yellow strips of eggs
and creating delicious chunks of meat-filled scrambled
to wrap your hot tortilla around

the next day was always...□

.....oatmeal □

.....atolle□

.....oatmeal□

.....atolle

"...I hate atolle, '

that oatmeal cereal watery paste

that seemed to be perpetual burning

always on the back burner on our stove top

warning us that the morning was near

and atolle was on top of us□

....one more time

and I had all but forgotten

winter school day mornings in Wisconsin.

when atolle cooking

arose those warm chest feelings

that simmered around my body

hugging my insides.

Oscar Mireles

I Was Able To Get A Fake Press Pass To The State Wrestling Tournament

I was able to get a fake press pass
for the WIAA State Wrestling Tournament
my son Sergio's freshmen year
by getting a friend who ran a community newsletter
to let me serve as Sports editor
for the weekend

I had never been on the floor
of the Kohl Center
two hours before the meet
I had a chance to walk on the floor
as I was entering the stadium
through the hallway
I could feel the immenseness of the building
and started to get nervous
even though I had not wrestled in twenty years

and it became clear
how the pressure of just being there
could put you in a place
where the tournament
would go by so fast you
didn't know what hit you

once the meet started
I could not sit
in the coaches corner
I grabbed a vacant seat
as close to the mat
as I could
and waited for the first match

Sergio started out great
he had a firemens take down
and I thought with the back points
he was up by the score of 5 - 0
and at the end of the first period

I saw the other wrestler
stop and looked up at the scoreboard
and when he saw the score was only 2-0,
he smiled
and I got worried

and rightly so
even though Sergio was still being the aggressor
he ended up getting caught
in a headlock
his opponents favorite move

and as we waited in the lockerroom
afterwards with his coaches
Sergio asked us to leave
give him some space
and it at all happened so fast

I can barely remembered it now...

Oscar Mireles

If You Take Care Of Them, New Shoes Can Last A Long Time

My father brought me a pair of brown wingtip shoes
for my first day of junior high school
and since it was one of the first times I had
shoes that cost more than \$1.99
I was so excited that I walked
on the school playground
with them on
just to show everyone

but the only one
who noticed them
was Pete V.
who commented
"where did you get those shoes from? "
and before I had a chance to answer
the bell rang and I headed to class
with books in my hand and an
embarrassed look hanging from my face

so for the next two months
I would walk out of the small house
on Hartman Court,
where our family of twelve children lived
and stop on the bottom step of our front porch
reach along the bottom of the creaking stairs
and grab a pair of ragged tennis shoes
from the year before
put them on
and gently place
the brown wingtips
in their resting place

when I got home
from the cold and the snow
my tennis shoes were drenched
I would put on the brown wingtips
after creeping on the stairs

and walk inside
as if nothing was wrong...

one day
arriving home after
junior high school wrestling practice
my father said
"see, a good pair of shoes lasts a long time"

Oscar Mireles

I'M Gonna Take The South Out Of South Africa

I'm gonna take the South out of South Africa
the home of the slaves
and the land of no freedom

I'm gonna take the south out of South Africa
where George Wallace stood
on the University steps
and said no blacks
no blacks shall enter here
except over my dead
and crippled body

I'm gonna take the South out of South Africa
where separate but equal means
that blacks lived in the homelands
and not in their homes

I'm gonna take the South out of South Africa
where Jim Crow laws
have tried to change their colors
but it's still the same old shackles
call Apartheid

I'm gonna take the South out of South Africa
where young people are detained
...without trials
...without lawyers
...without rights
but never
... without hope

I'm gonna take the South out of South Africa

Oscar Mireles

It Could Be Worse

I guess it started to get worse
when I decided to build my own house
in a sweat equity program
and by the time we got to the fourth month of working
and I barely had a roof on my house
I started dating women
who thought I was marriage material
because I had building materials
in my front yard

but the worse thing was
after they moved on
I would read in the paper shortly after
and find out that they had gotten married
to someone else
and the fourth time this happened to me
I started to wonder
was it me?

or was I reaching the age
where one makes those kind of half-baked decisions
called marriage
or was it the house
that symbolized that I had organized my life
enough to deceive a lender into a home loan

then I met this Colombian woman
who would give birth to my four children
and before that would happen,
her mother and brother came to our wedding
and four years later,
I asked when they were gonna leave?

instead we moved to Madison
I had a new job, smaller house, larger mortgage
but my bosses didn't tell me the employees had chased out the old director
and joined together to make my work life hell
and no matter what decision I made
even a good one that they agreed on

it was wrong
I was wrong
and it was getting worse

so, I stayed working longer than I could bear
and the employees all walked away,
except one
who I had to fire and he gave me more than enough reasons
to change his employment history

I published a poetry anthology
my mom died
my children no longer listen to me
but it could be worse
and I know it

Oscar Mireles

Katrina Means Cleansing

Katrina
was the first "black named" hurricane
and rightly so
because she was a "big ass" storm
that pushed her way through the Gulf of Mexico
after stopping off the tip of Florida
to get her beak wet
and give them a taste of her fury

Katrina Katrina
bo beana
banana fana for feena
fee fi fo meana
Katrina

there was no way
you couldn't have noticed
that she was coming
and heading towards the "Big Easy"
bringing her southern blend of water, wind and destruction
before the Mardi Gas season began

she was in a partying mood
tossing waves around as if
swishing her skirt around
shaking her body
with the force of a category five
wind storm

those people in New Orleans
did not need the internet to tell them
that it was going to be a direct hit
something some of those wacky scientists
had been predicting for a long time
chicken little like

the brownie people in charge ignored their words
as if they got caught in the wind
and floated away

and swore
they didn't know

If they would have known

would they have done anything different?

Oscar Mireles

Labor Of Love, Intermixed With Plastic Tubes, Straps And Bedpans

Your swollen thighs
sprinkled with blood
like dandelions strewn
across the front lawn

an I.V. tube is in your left arm
delivering antibiotics
for your unexpected fever

another I.V. tube is in your right forearm
full of pertocin
to induce labor
and nudge it a little faster

two probes inside
your uterus
one listens
to the baby's heartbeat
and the other
either measures your contractions
or I wasn't listening again...

doctor prescribed tubes
race across your belly
a highway interchange
of health care

contractions
nature's own shock therapy
rips through your body like
lightning bolts

cold metal bed pans slipped
underneath your tired body
like a letter
shoved underneath a closed door

you were so exhausted
that you didn't even see
that one tear
leave my eye

Oscar Mireles

Listening To Conversations At The Gym While I Worry About My Athletes Foot

My athletes foot fungus
grows between my last two toes
and I didn't notice it
until I worked out yesterday

hitting the sauna first
for 15 minutes, then
30 minutes on the hand driven bicycle
watching the end of Oprah
and the beginning of the news

which celebrated 50 years on the air this week
back to the sauna
where I take off my shirt,
shoes and spend some time getting a full sweat

and listen to two guys
talk about life
where one of them happens to be
picking up trash on a later afternoon walk

and since it was early spring
notice some trash 50 ft. from the road
and stumbles upon a Meth lab

and he knew the ingredients
Sudafed, ether, some other chemical
So he gathered everything up
and was about to walk home
When he realized he could get in trouble
So he called his friends
to let them know what he was doing

He called the Sheriff
and when the Sheriff asked him
if his name was spelled correctly
he asked about the boating ticket

and if he knew his daughter had a speed ticket
and how did he know so much about Meth

and he said he was a doctor
and it made things a little clearer

and the two guys in the whirlpool
were talking about investments
well one of the guys was not actually talking
but either trying to get a tip on a stock
or trying to sell some stocks
and he explained that someone he knew
who knew what he was talking about
said to invest in Canadian companies
because of the weak dollar
and the other guy finally said
"it seems like a good idea
but was it before the rally on the stock market last week?"

And the two women at the counter
Were talking about the
Braces that were plastered on their co-workers mouth
But I did not listen for long

And I am amazed what people
Tell other people
Without regard
knowing other people
are listening
to their conversations

Even though I think it is a sin...
other people
can listen
without
telling
anyone

Oscar Mireles

Lost And Found Language

It started in 1949, when my oldest brother
came home from school
in Racine, Wisconsin
after flunking kindergarten
because he 'spoke no English'
and declared to my parents
that 'the rest of the kids have to learn to speak English
if we planned on staying here in the United States.'

so my parents lined up
the rest of the seven younger children
had us straighten up
tilt our heads back
reached in our mouth with their hands
and took turns
slicing our tongues in half

making a simple, but unspoken contract
that from then on
the parents would speak Spanish
and the children would respond
back only in English

how do you lose a native language?
does it get misplaced
in the recesses of your brain?
or does it never quite stick to the sides
of your mind?

for me it would always start
with the question
from a brown faced stranger
'hables espanol? '
which means
'do you speak Spanish? '

which meant
if they had to ask me
if I spoke Spanish

this was not going to be a good start for
at having a conversation...

my face would start to get flushed
with redness and before
I had a chance to stammer
the words
'I don't'

I could see it in their eyes
looking at my embarrassed face
searching for an answer
that they already knew

as I walked away
I know they were thinking
'Who is this guy? '
'How can he not speak his mother's tongue? '
'Where did he grow up anyways? '
'Doesn't he have any pride
in knowing who he is? '
or 'Where he came from? '

I tried to reply,
but as the words in Spanish
floated down from my brain
they caught in my teeth,
the rocks of shame.
I spoke in half-tongue.

my future wife
taught me how
to speak Spanish
mainly
by being Colombian
and not speaking English

and I had already known
the language of hands and love
which got me confident enough
to reach deep inside
myself

to find the beautiful sounds and latin rhythms
that laid deep within me

and although
I still feel my heart jump a beat
when someone asks 'hables espanol? '
now the Spanish resonates within me
and echos back 'si, y usted tambien? '

and today as I talk with the Spanish speaking students
in our school
they can not only feel my words
they can feel my warm heart
splash ancient Spanish sounds off
my native tongue
that has finally grown whole again.

Oscar Mireles

Lost And Found Marriage

lost and found
could apply to my marriage

I was afraid of losing my former live-in girlfriend
when she talked about going to Miami for Christmas
the winter of 1985.

I thought it was a good idea
until we talked about it
again
a couple of weeks later
she said she had purchased her tickets already
'and did you get me a ticket?' I inquired with a broad smile
'I didn't know you were going...' she replied
and it was not the answer
I expected to hear

and I remembered thinking long
and hard about it
afterwards
she was from Colombia
and had not been home for over two years
and our relationship
which had been going pretty good at one time
was now at that stage
where either
you go all the way
or just go away

and I thought
if she made it back
to Miami
where she started her visit to the United States
it was only a three hour plane ride to Colombia

and the only thing holding her back
was a security deposit on an efficiency apartment
and a just above minimum wage job
at the local Head Start Program
and me

and while a job and security deposits
are hard to come by these days
I didn't feel I had enough glue
in my heart
to keep her from leaving
once she had a head start

so I ordered tickets the next day
and we spent the holidays
with a young Colombian couple,
Maru and Guillermo
who were recently married and had a 13 month old son
who was the most adoreable child
at the most precious age
at a critical time
in our relationship

and after
one of the warm winter Miami afternoons
that we babysat him
I got up the courage to
ask her
to marry me
and she said 'yes'

and now 18 years later
after spending
way too much time
trying to do things
to not rock the boat
it happened anyways
and
I lost her

and I found
that being afraid to lose someone
was not the best reason
to marry
even in Miami.

'Love Mexican Style' Is Not A Reality Television Show

Mexico City is far more romantic
then I imagined

Not that I ever think
of any city as being romantic
but there are more people
walking hand-in-hand

or embracing
in front of the bus stop
in the mid-afternoon sun

four cross hugging arms
propped next to skinny tress
to provide
a little privacy

In the open air
they were stealing kisses before
the next bus arrives

maybe all the romance
is here in Mexico City
because it gets a little chilly
at night

or that everyone seems
to be built about the same size
fromt he earth

or maybe reason is
the older men, who are smiling
all seem to have "pollitas",
women twenty years younger
strapped to their side

or maybe the Latino lover
in them finally starts to takes over

I have even caught myself
holding my wife's hand
a little tighter than usual

and wanting to kiss her
harder than a peck
smack on the lips

or maybe
the natural rhythms
of old Mexico
have been awakened

Oscar Mireles

Music Doesn'T Taste The Same Anymore

I have struggled to develop
a distinct musical taste
and what I ended up with
is a turntable spinning pizza with everything on it

a dab of vintage jazz
sprinkled like anchovies
across the circular disk
sending notes and images
out into the air

slices of country western tunes
resembling slabs of bacon
and adding a deep greasy feel
to the palette

my children listen to heavy hip hop
and the thump thump thump
pops like the bubbles of mozzarella cheese
right before it turns slightly brown

I still listen to Motown
and the sounds are still as fresh
as when I was a teenager
and didn't always know when
to let the music lead
or when to follow

Salsa music has been
spread across my plate
a thick sauce with enough spices
to keep your heart rate up
and your booty moving

each different style
representing a different time in my life
never quite matched
with my hairstyle or clothing
but always matched with

the beat of my heart.

Oscar Mireles

My Birthday Was Different This Year

As I was rummaging through
the file boxes my wife had left for me
in the garage
I found a yellow legal pad
scribbled with hand written poems
I had written one night
in a almost crowded coffeehouse
waiting for a poet friend from Chicago
to come up north to read

The poems talked about
how I waited and waited
before too long
several anxious poets
ran up to the microphone
not afraid to trip over themselves
share their delicate poems
about romance and almost romance
detailing having a job they don't like
and it seemed to me
they were also not liking much else about their lives
besides their job they didn't like

My Chicago artist friend as usual
was more than an hour late
which isn't bad considering Chicago
is almost three hours away
so most other places
damn, she would have been early

When I read the poem
I wrote about being at a reading
I didn't want to be at

I realized I was spending my birthday
by myself in a coffeehouse
writing poems
not making much eye contact
with people I didn't even like

although one of the poets
I think Francine is her name
came up to me during a break and said 'hi'
but she didn't remember my name
or knew it was my birthday
and a couple of days after my anniversary
or that I was getting a divorce

that poem I read
was a good sign of things to come

because this year
on my birthday
I woke up with a new friend in my bed
multiple orgasms for her to share
before having a nice breakfast together
of eggs, sausage, hash browns and italian toast
cooked on the George Foreman grill
and things didn't look or feel
the same again

Oscar Mireles

My First Taste Of The Importance Of A College Education

I remember going
to my first Chicano Higher Education Conference
in January of 1969
in a barren place of
University of Whitewater, Wisconsin

my brother Juan drove a white university station wagon
to his hometown Racine
that Friday night
to pick me and my other brother up

I had never been to a college campus before
but from stories I had heard
college was a cross between
Disneyland and
a crowded New York subway on Times Square on New Years Eve

all I can recall from the two hour ride
was a flashing red light
at the intersection of Highways 20 & 83
there were no cars in sight
just a warning...

we arrived on campus at 11 pm
and went to the student union
where we listened to an acid rock band
playing to a crowd of Chicanos and Blacks
no dancing occurred
just meditating

A college friend offered up his room
and slept at his girlfriend's
at 3: 30 am
seven of us shared
the beds, floor and mushroom chair
but I didn't get much sleep

we snuck into the cafeteria
in the morning
when a football playing black friend named "Big C"
stood in the way of the cashier

the first workshop
was on bilingual education
and the speaker was so excited
he used a lot of big words
I had never heard before
so I figured bilingual education
must be important
or he wouldn't have been so serious

the only bilingual education
I had ever heard of
was mentioned once in
our Mexican-American history class
taught by the only Mexican-American teacher
in our high school

the last workshop
was on getting more students enrolled in higher education
the speaker Corky Gonzales
was also a poet
and he told us
"we were the future of our people"

I stared at the blackboard
in that college classroom
and felt strange
about all the times
I had raised my hand in grade school
and my teacher
did not call on me
or want to hear my answer

Oscar Mireles

My Mother Is A Social Worker Who Works In A Hospital

My mother is a social worker who works in a hospital

she makes daily visits
checks her charts
and shares small talk with the patients
as she brightens up their rooms

My mother is a social worker who works in a hospital

she is always the first one at the scene
just like the television doctors
whether in the birthing room
at my niece Amanda's arrival
or at the operating table
medicines trap door

My mother is a social worker who works in a hospital

my mother translates for the Spanish patients
especially after surgery
she touches their fear
with words that can heal

My mother is a social worker who works in a hospital

Surprisingly there is little blood
on her pink uniform
just a day's sweat and dirt
you wouldn't know
she was a cleaning lady
if you looked in her eyes

My mother is a social worker who works in a hospital

Oscar Mireles

Poetry Can Be Hard On Your Hands

I arrived late
to the mind's eye
poetry group meeting
and I interrupted a critique of a prose poem
about a father tragically
losing his finger
in an lumber yard accident

and before I could shake
the impression of a crushed finger
bleeding and screaming
out of my mind

another writer mentioned
that her father had accidentally
cut off his finger one day
and saved it in a clear mason jar
alongside other body parts he had lost
and I did not have the nerve
to ask which ones.

Another poet said
his uncle lost a finger too!
losing sounds so nice
until you walk in another room
and accidentally find it
again

I thought about the time
my oldest son Diego
almost snipped the tip of his index finger off
with the neighbor's hedge trimmer

his mom Clara put his hand
inside the coffee beans
of a Folgers can
to stop the bleeding
because that is what her grandfather did
on his coffee plantation

when a worker cut themselves with a machete

after rushing to the hospital
to get seven stitches
at the end of the day
the mangled tip was still hanging on
to the end of his finger

I didn't realize
that poetry
could be so hard
on your hands

Oscar Mireles

Prenatal Massage On My Wife's Protruding Body

It is your
three month
anniversary
today

you
are no
bigger
than an anthill

Clara
my wife
makes me
rub her stomach
to remind me
that you
patiently wait
inside her pocket
and not only
in my mind

Oscar Mireles

Romance And Reality

On November 17th 1984,
I met my first wife at a Thanksgiving food drive,
where we were both stuck in a freezing warehouse
in between cartons of donated food
and empty grocery bags
to stuff with a holiday meal.

she spoke no English,
but she was able to show me,
she was interested

that lasted 18 years
creating four beautiful children
surviving extra-marital affairs
crashing head strong into unwanted debt
before we could endure more grief or slithers of joy
we said goodbye
in words that never came out

on November 17th,2002
I left my rusty key to our ranch style home
on the kitchen table,
never to return

after sleeping on my nephew's couch for three months
I got the nerve to ask
would she consider taking me back
her response was "go rent a one bedroom apartment"
which my children later said
was too small for them to visit

four months later,
one of my sons decided to live with me
not because I was a great father
and he choose me over his mother,
but he liked the attention of being
the only child for me to dote on.
I played the part perfectly

last summer,
my ex-wife realized that her two older sons
needed some changes...
including their father more involved in their lives
I bought a house in a bedroom community
and they moved in with me
started life in a new high school

with three men in the house,
I cook, clean and discipline,
not necessarily in that order

the freedom I was looking forward too
since my divorce
looks a lot more like responsibility
and the romance in my life
has become a reality
I have yet to get my arms around.

Oscar Mireles

Slanted Eyes Are Beautiful...Slanted Eyes Are Beautiful! ! !

a Korean woman
had been sitting
in my cultural awareness class,
for an hour,
and couldn't understand
how African-Americans
had so much trouble
getting along with whites.

She never had trouble until,
we started talking about stereotypes
that included Asians.

They are always sneaky looking,
shrewd businessmen,
have exotic women
can't drive well,
but know karate
and they all have slanted eyes.

She almost cried,
before she stammered,
'Slanted eyes are beautiful! '
'Slanted eyes are beautiful! '

and for the first time
everyone in the room
understood
why

Oscar Mireles

Smells Just Like Yesterday

My older brother Jesus said
the smell of ripe onions
always reminded him of summer

we'd start working early
in the six a.m. dark
on the Horner farm in Southern Wisconsin
while the dirt was still wet
from the sprinkled dew

rows of the bald white onions rested
beneath the soft soil

we were told to pick them up
by the neck
the way a cat
carries her litter

shake the dirt off their round backs
being careful not to tear
their long green ribbons

at fifteen cents a bushel
we thought we were smart
until we were caught trying to hide
large clumps of soil
near the bottom of the bushel basket
to make it fill easier.

around eleven o'clock
we became tired,
my father would say
"this row here, will be the last one today"
so we would try to hurry and finish
only to find

his story would change as we neared the row's end
it doesn't pay to work half a day

when I was twelve, my father told me
"this summer will be the last"
with a quarter squeezed in my hand
and a dirt-crusted smile on my face
I knew he was right

years later
we drove on Highway 31, past the Horner farm
my father took a long glance out the car window
and said
back there back there near the corn bin is where I stayed
when I didn't know better

Oscar Mireles

Strung Up By A String

the only time a man
held my private package
I was resting back
on the examination table
at the Family Health Plan southside clinic

they had already given me a sedative
and asked if I would bring someone to drive me home
and although I felt as if I was drunk
I was getting ready for my first vasectomy

and the main thing I remember
is that the doctor pulled out a 12 inch piece of string
and tied up my two testicles
as if they were a steer roped
and tied up with its' legs in the air

and for the life of me
I don't know why he used the string
or isn't there a vasectomy clamp
or was the string a symbol
of me hanging up
my parenting
ability?

Oscar Mireles

Thanks To The People Who Showed Up At A Poetry Reading At Fifteen Below Zero

In Bob Dylan's backyard
there were twelve chapped faces
huddled in an old church basement

a poetry reading volunteer
and her nervous boyfriend
the host, a poet from California
finishing her second book
an insurance salesman
who never met a poet before
a scruffy bearded old man
who said he was going to move to Mexico
tomorrow
two Chicanas, a secretary from Michigan
an actress from Texas
a Peruvian woman who was an Art Director
and her son, who thought poetry was for sissies
an older Indian woman only
wearing a shawl
and three people who left
before I noticed them
all staring at me
as if I was a log
in the fireplace
crackling poems
into the night

Oscar Mireles

The Almost 9 Minutes Car Ride

The almost daily car ride takes about nine minutes
from the Wheeler Road address
where my almost fifteen year old son
usually wipes his eyes when he gets in the front seat of the car.

About a half hour earlier, I gave him his wake up call
he answered his cell phone after only about 8 rings
said he would be ready and would wake up his sister too

Sometimes he will say good morning...well actually
He never says good morning, he just gets in the car
and grunts "hey"

and the other time when he forgets to grunt
he just sits down and avoids looking at me
and we both sit and listen to the car idle.

Every once in a while he gives me a warning notice
"Mom and Lorena got into to it last night
or this morning
or yesterday.
As if I am going to solve another problem today
Or maybe he is trying to protect me from getting into more trouble
Or maybe he wants me to just shut up
Before I make things worse.

Lorena always comes out about three to five minutes later
If she is in a hurry it is always five minutes
If she still needs to do her make up
We have to all switch seats, so she can use the front mirror
On a good day that is only a little hassle
which involves only one punch between siblings

Silence is different with my daughter
The radio is always something to put in between us
you can tell her mood if she sings along
With the songs, singing with emphasis and her sweet voice
But sometimes the louder she sings
Sometimes it can mean she is mad too...

So one has to listen carefully.

Once both children are safely in the car,
I did back up once without one of the kids fully inside
the back seat of the car and it was almost a painful accident,
but I am not supposed to bring that up

As we race by and wave at the crossing guard
I am reminded my children are no longer at middle school and
Jackie the crossing guard who could read my children's moods
better than I could, was let go from her job
because she took too many vacations to visit her kids
actually only two vacations but I guess two too many

we turn on Sherman Avenue where we race up two hills
and try to avoid the intersections of Highway CV and Northport
where we had an accident.

But it does place the McDonalds restaurant
On our path and if I have enough money left over
I offer breakfast (usually a Bacon Egg and Cheese Bagel for her, and Two
sausage breakfast burritos for him and both want medium hot chocolates with a
straw) .

One time driving out of the restaurant Lorena saw a classmate
Waiting at the bus stop and said "Lets pick him up for school"
And as we tried to clear space in the back and I pulled up besides him
It was not her friend only someone that looked exactly like him
And she was pretty embarrassed and the look-alike didn't seem too upset

Driving down Packers Avenue becomes a race
of avoiding the slow lanes
staying away from the stopping Metro buses
and not looking at people in cars talking on their cell phone
drinking coffee, reading the paper or putting on make-up
while pretending to be driving to work

As we get closer to the high school
I see some of their friends and classmates getting out of cars
They drove to school in.
Thinking that my kids love riding with their dad
or more dislike riding the bus to school

which I have counted each of my kids did less than five or six times

As we turned past the high school tennis courts
The metro bus lets out a mass of teens
Some with backpacks ready for school to start
Some without backpacks, ready to get into more trouble
Then they could possibly need.
I think sometimes they think people don't notice they don't have backpacks
I do...and I know not having one means something
But I haven't quite figured out what.

I usually park on the right hand side of the road
With a yellow curb marking indicated not a parking spot
and it gives them a chance to get out of the car
and onto the cross walk and onto the school grounds

sometimes my kids do not walk together
on the way into the school grounds
they each get into their own minds
and keep walking

sometimes they do walk together
when they do
they are talking to each other
if I did not know better

and if I were too busy
to waste nine minutes of my morning
I would have missed this moment
I realize they will be more than family for life
they will be friends too..

Oscar Mireles

The Annual Hometown Fiesta Weekends Always Had More In Store Than I Bargained For

It was only
a three second glance
from a former Mexican girlfriend
who when her husband noticed
she was focused on something else
besides him
she nonchalantly
grabbed his hand to remind him
that she was all his

this would happen
at least a couple of times
over the Mexican Fiesta weekends
I would organize in my hometown
beer, Mexican food, Mariachi and Tex-Mex music
softball, an outdoor Catholic mass
and seeing former lovers
who have moved on

when I was sixteen
I had fumbled most of the relationships I was in
and didn't know what to do
whether to just stand there
lick my wounds
or to pick them up
and start to run again

it was just a short smile
another ex-girlfriend gave me
later that weekend
warning that our teenage memories
that were once hotly shared
for now
will stay
cornered like an old photograph
and placed neatly
in a box

next to my other
misplaced memories

Oscar Mireles

The Family Of Doctors Crosses Cultural And National Borders

Juanita was from a small town in southern California
traveled a long distance to find an education
in the Midwest on her way to become a family practitioner
the only one in her medical school class
who didn't have their sights on bigger things

Hiding out in Minnesota, she's playing doctor
to the migrant farm workers, who bring a truckload full
of children and relatives to her office which is located in a tent
these migrants pick cherries, potatoes and onions
stand in the middle of pesticide infested crops
with no shelter from the august sun

It is set in her mind that a doctor can do special things...miracles
with people's lives, touch them, give them dignity
she remembers when she was young
how they treated the migrants in rural California
at the Hospitals, forcing them to be ashamed to be sick
refusing to provide health care because they were only 'migrants'

At age thirteen she made a promise
not to her parents, who were always at her side
nor to a childhood friend, who's now just a mom to three children
but to an old man named Gonzalo
who used to sit on a green porch with two steps missing
across the street from her parents' house
and who would tell her stories of his life
as a curandero, a folk healer
and how the neighbors were so proud
that he was a part of the community

Oscar Mireles

The Fireman's Least Favorite Hiding Place

One night
watching tv,
Roberto fell
cigarette asleep
on burning couch.

He awake in pain,
clothes in flames
and stumbled out
the front porch.

Above the orange blaze
he heard the screams
of his younger brothers
stuck in upstairs bedroom.

He charged in the wooden back door
yelling wildly,
while his brothers crawled
thru a side bathroom window,
to escape unharmed.
smoke burning his eyes,
Roberto dropped to his knees
as the red flames licked
his fingers, the way the
neighbor's dog always did.

He remembered playing hide and seek,
and hid in the corner closet
waiting for it all
to go away.

Oscar Mireles

The Last Dance Ended Before The Song Was Over

Maria Elena,
fell asleep as I drove her home.
she had drank a bit too much,
it was one of the first times
since the kidney transplant.
she did not rustle or snore
like many drunks I know.

we had talked earlier that night
she was enrolled in technical school
had a new boyfriend.
It bothered her that she was scarred
by the kidney machine and the
operations.
I reminded her I always felt her beauty was within
no scars could hide that.

I had plans, and always thought
Maria would be the one to marry.
she was very careful to watch herself
always one step ahead of men who wanted
her to be like the rest.

we danced hands tight and eyes fixed,
as we always did.
she slipped a bit and apologized
"I lost it I guess"

she asked me if I would drive her car home
"Please don't try anything.....ok? "
I smiled and said,
"Don't worry, I know better."

when I reached her driveway
I touched her gently
she awoke, smiled and said
"Thanks! "
and ran inside.

One month later,
I sent a dozen roses
with a nice card that said,
"To the only woman I have loved"
at her funeral

Oscar Mireles

The Last Hurrah...On The Wrestling Mat

During my freshmen year in college
I had the urge to continue
my wrestling career
which did not need
to be resurrected
but at that time in my life
I was still an idealist

So my brother Jesse and I decided
to enter the wrestling room
partly on a dare
from a couple of guys
from Minnesota who lived in our dorm
and partly to prove
our manhood

I decided that I would not cut my long hair
before the first practice
which in hindsight was not the best idea
because it helped to piss off the coach
and he doubled the intensity of the wrestling practice
for our enjoyment

I also did not think I needed to
do any advanced training
before hitting the wrestling mat
and after the first five minutes
it became evident that
this was not the best strategy

but I did it
I made it through the practice
and I only threw up once
I think but maybe
I went back for seconds
and shared my lunch with the team

I was exhausted
winter drenched in sweat

but I was wrestling again
and I still had it
even if it lasted
only one afternoon

Oscar Mireles

The Other Woman In My Life

One spring day,
it always seems to happen in spring
one spring day,
out of the blue
the other woman
popped into my life

I wasn't looking for a relationship
no one really is,
but the first time I held her
I thought I was going to squeeze
the life out of her
but I didn't

she is a good listener
keeps looking into my eyes
and laughs when
I am happy
one can't ask for more in a friendship

It is hard to explain
but it is getting out of hand
she is calling me at all hours of the night
just what I need
a fatal distraction

I used to believe honesty is the best policy
but I am afraid to lose both of them
for the love of one

I think my wife knows
something is going on
but I don't know what to do
or worse to undo
what has been done

but it is the nineties
and I am sure this thing happens all the time
to somebody else

but not me
not now

but what should I expect
from a three week old baby girl
my daughter
Lorena Pilar Barbosa-Mireles
the other woman
in my life

Oscar Mireles

The Researcher Tried To Explain The Reasons Black Girls Get Pregnant

The researcher tried to explain
to the radio audience
that a black 16 year old girl
living in the projects
being poor
uneducated
was actually in the best position of her life biologically
to have a child

statistically
she would be in
the best health of her life
(her health deteriorates after that
only because she will be poorer)

and her baby
would have the best chance of surviving
with a near normal birth weight
and a healthier teenage mom to deliver her

and biologically speaking
there are more young black males
for her to meet
who are out of jail at that age
(because of the black male prison incarceration rate)
and in a position
to put her in a
parenting situation

and she would also
at this age, be able
have her mother around
to help her take care of the baby
before her mother died
or was sick

there are biological reason

why young back teens have children.
and even though we don't know all the reasons
like this researcher did

I do know for some young girls
that becoming a teenage mom
helped them finally grow up
and take responsibility
for their actions

Oscar Mireles

The String That Ties Us Together

' Honey, I will go get the string you want....just wait here...I' ll be right back'

as she walked down the hallway at St. Mary's Hospital
the african-american cleaning lady wondered first
'where am I going to find some string...'
and secondly, 'what did Mickey want with some string at work? '
but it didn't matter, she was going to do what
her co-worker requested
everyone like Mickey
and a request,
which rarely came out of her mouth
was always granted

everyone who worked with Micaela at the hospital
was amazed on how well she cleaned the hospital rooms
she was the best cleaning partner to have
because no matter what you did
she would come back over it and make sure it was clean
so was so hardworking that
each day she was looking for new spots to clean
behind the radiator, on the side away from the door,
always searching for some dirt trying to hide
underneath the odd side of the bed

and the cleaning women became more astonished
when they talked with Mickey
and found out she only had a third grade education
but seemed to know alot about alot of things
she especially knew how to read people
and she was so easy to talk to
even though she never said much

when they found out
she had twelve children
and lost one child at birth
they would ask
'how did you raise twelve children?
and you are still such a little thing'
and 'why would you work

after having so many kids
why don't they take care of you? '

but it didn't matter
what they said... she would
continue to work hard
entering each hospital room
with a quiet smile,
trying not to disturb each patient
she would start on the left side
farthest away from the patient
and working her way close
to the bed where the patient
who was trying to sleep
but was just laying there
wondering about why she was laying in a hospital bed
Mickey would say 'hi'
and would it trouble them if she cleaned their bed
and clear the food from the tray table
the patients were always struck
by her gentleness
and would suddenly get up
and try to straighten up the things around
their bed as if their own mother entered the room
and they did not want to bother her
with anything

she would ask them how 'they were doing? '
the patients would open up about their fears
share which members of the family had yet to show up
and detail the pains that they were feeling
an unveil some fears if surgery was imminent

as Mickey left their room
they would smile
thank her for being so nice
and comforting their stay
if only for a few minutes

As she entered the hallway
her co-worker came up
and said' I found the string! '

and followed-up with a question
'what did you want the string for? '

Mickey grabbed the string
asked her co-worker to hold on to it
and start walking away
and as she was walking away
the co-worker asked
'what do I do next? '

and Mickey said
'this string is for you
when we work together next time
and when you decide to leave
and take a break
I can pull on the string
and get you to come back to work
without having to look for you'

Oscar Mireles

The Wrestlers Funeral

I still cannot remember the first name
of the funeral home but the second name
was Hooverman I think
and as I tried to follow the mapquest directions
I must have pressed scenic route
because it had enough twists
curves and large hills
and dips
to resemble living a hectic life

I remember the conversation
in Iowa last summer at the Regional Tournament
where he told me about his college wrestling career
being cut short
by his temper
and I shared
with him my one day, long hair
out of shape wrestling experience
at the college level
that brought back memories
of how hard wrestling really is

at his son's funeral he said
how awful nice it was
that I came and
that his son was such an awesome wrestler
but the only gauranteed
was that you didn't know
what he was going to do
or what the final result was going to be
but he went out there
and you prayed for the best

and his two medals
one from the Waunakee Youth tournament
and another one that looked like
a state qualifier medal laid
quietly on the coffin

but my other son
the younger one
worked so hard
at wrestling
and he has gotten so good
but even with all that work
he couldn't touch
how good his brother was

and as I reflected
on my two older sons
one with the natural talent
and the younger one who worked so hard I now know why.

Oscar Mireles

This Is One Of The Reasons Chicanos Are Camera Shy

Only in America
could I flip through the slick pages
of LIFE
and find the only Chicanos I have ever seen
grace that magazine
portrayed in living color
sprawled dead in a San Ysidro, California street

At their local McDonalds restaurant
an angry white unemployed gunman
went postal
had target practice
on seventeen young chicanos and mexicanos
who were caught
waiting for a fast food lunch
and were treated
with a long siesta
on a sunny California late afternoon

later that week
the townspeople held a candlelight march
down the street in front of that McDonald's
demanded that the site be torn down
and a neighborhood park be created
in their memory
instead of reopening the
gunshot riddled restaurant
and the festering wounds

and the sad part is

how the lives of these seventeen
anonymous chicanos
were swept out of the news
in the time
it took
to burn a hamburger
in the drive-thru lane

This Marriage Proposal Was Not Written Down On A Napkin

One Saturday night in nineteen thirty-nine
in a little pueblecito
down in South Texas
the ballroom doors of El Charro's place
were left wide open
as the colorful sounds of Tejano music
pounded on the dirt floor.

Micaela spotted him for the first time
standing against the wall next to the bathrooms.
From a distance she turned
to show him her new dress
her mother had sewn the day before
white lace and pink

Felix wore shiny pointed boots
a beige shirt and brown pants loosely.
That night they had no time to dance or talk
only a few minutes to stare
her dark eyes flashed
as her parents led her out the door.

Several weeks later
at a wedding in the same ballroom
they met again
she noticed he was wearing the same
beige shirt and brown pants.
She had heard that his family
was even poorer than the rest of the Mexicans in town,
if that was any consolation.

"This is the one! "

she thought

"Who would want to have twelve children"

"Want to move north to Wisconsin"

"Probably never have the chance to see my friends
or parents until I grow old"

she thought she saw it
in his piercing black eyes,
and when he smiled
she said
"I do! "

Oscar Mireles

Three Lined Verses On The Birth Of My First Child

Legs strapped
to the delivery table
like a wish bone

my heart strapped
to my wife's rib
making a wish

the doctor's holding
the baby's head
like a short prayer

"It's a boy"
echoes in my throat
but I can't shout!

Tossed as if a leaf
Into the arms of four nurses
I cut the umbilical cord

Father, Dad
words that stand
at the head of the table

Oscar Mireles

What I Did During My Summer Vacation, That Made Me Want To Stay In College

My right big toe
has been black and blue
since the time
old Benny Navarro
got me a job
working on the docks
at the Port of Kenosha

Standing in a crooked line
with unshaven faces
at five-thirty in the morning
I was chosen to unload
100 pound boxes
of frozen meat from dead cows

after the first half hour
one of the icy boxes
dove out of my left hand
and speared my right toenail

that summer after college
I felt like a Mexican
everyday
getting up too early
standing in line
as if my brain
was as thick as the
foreman's shoe

Oscar Mireles

When I Was Asked What My Favorite Body Part Was?

When I was asked what my favorite body part is?

It was not the kind of question
I get asked every day

When I mentioned
this question to my friends
they all thought for a second
and laughed...

so I thought I would
ask those close to me what they thought

someone said the soft tissue
on my hand between my thumb
and second finger
it has no known use
but it is a soft place to hide feelings
and provides a hook to hold on too...

someone else said my hands
because they are able to express
what I am feeling inside
and my hands are what I use to write
down my poetry

another person told me
it was my tongue
that is able to pierce the space
between her mouth
with my warmth

for me I think
it is my smile
which is often the first thing
they notice when they see me.

and when I saw another wrestling dad
in Minnesota at a wrestling tournament

a week after his daughter died
he said he was glad he did not stay home
but support the team, because his daughter was
the team manager

and he was happy to see me
because he said
my smile reminded him
of his daughter, who was always happy
and smiling

Oscar Mireles

Why Did You Name Me Javier Dad...part 2

A couple of years ago
I wrote a poem titled
"Why did you name me Javier... Dad? "
which looked at the meanings behind
my four children's names
which was complicated by the fact
that they had latino names
and we lived in Madison Wisconsin

Diego Jesus Marjil Mireles
has become Colombicano
his screen name for instant messaging
it stands for half Colombian
and half Chicano
and it stands out
in a virtual world of names
like monkeylover
peppills and whokilledkenny

Lorena Pilar Barbosa-Mireles
has become ChicanaHottie27
I can figure the Chicana part fairly easy
I am not even going to touch the "hottie" thing
the number 27 gets a little more confusing
since she is only 15 years old
but was born on the 27th of the month

Javier Oscar Barbosa-Mireles
has never been called Junior
or Oscar the second
just Javy or
Chavs by his brother Diego
his screen name is ChicanoPlaya25
which at 12 years old
is a lot to live up to

Sergio Andres Barbosa-Mireles
goes by the name of Pimpasmurff
which I think he first signed on at in 6th grade

he has been too lazy to change it
or I think he only hears the pimping part
plus he forgot the smurffs are blue little creatures
from the Saturday morning cartoon scene

So as I tally up the score
three of my four children
have self-identified an unmistakable latino name
in cyberspace
to let others know
who they are,
and where they came from

In this era
of blending in, and forgetting why
they have stepped back
reached inside
for something as simple
as a name

Oscar Mireles

Will Grandma Mickey's Hair Still Be White, When We Are In Heaven?

My youngest son asked me this as we were
laying around arguing whether I was going to read more than one book or not...

will grandma Mickey's hair still be white, when we are in heaven?
why do six year olds think about life and death?
why do they not seem afraid
and see it as a natural part of living life

we fear death,
we avoid hospitals, when friends are ill
and when we do go there it is quick to help speed the recovery
of the ill and get out as quick as you can

when people are ill we don't see them as much,
they understand no one wants to be around seriously ill people
and don't invite themselves to events they know
will cause others grief

will grandma Mickey's hair still be white, when we are in heaven?
shows an understanding that she will be in a form that we will recognize
and still be our grandmother
and white signifies pureness, in every circumstance
except as related to hair

will grandma Mickey's hair still be white, when we are in heaven?
is a question best answered by saying
what color would you want her hair to be
and hope he answers
whatever color she would want

Oscar Mireles

Ypsilanti Xicanas

These Midwestern rucas
educated chicanas
who were being mistaken for arabs
all the time
talked about coming up to Michigan
for la primer vez
as migrants

They had us
sitting in the schoolhouse gym
covered the floor with plastic
like a large diaper
to catch the lice or something

They used the old country
schoolhouse method on us
lumping 9th graders and kindergarteners together
just to obey the law that said
every child shall have an education,
even migrants

She remembered watch TV one night
and seeing a documentary on migrants
this young mexican boy
was asked what he wanted to be
when he got older
he said he wanted to be a doctor
because his mother was always sick
and he wanted to help her
the announcer paused
and faced the camera
holding back a tear
he said that only one
in a million migrants
would ever have the chance
to become an educated professional
and that this little boy's wish
would probably never come true

and she started to cry, remembering
when she finished law school
and having all that happiness
that she could not share
with that little boy
who picked onions, tomatoes and peppers
but no chances.

Oscar Mireles