

JAMES COLLUM

Skyglider, 2011
platinum print, 12 x 12 in.



courtesy: Susan Spiritus Gallery

ALFREDO VÉA

A Mexican Flyboy

Adapted from an upcoming novel

Ten years ago, when prisons in California were still pretending at rehabilitation, Kevin Hughes, Simón's good friend from the San Francisco Public Defender's Office, had begun teaching a poetry class at San Quentin. Kevin had dreamed up the ambitious class. He had written the proposal, formulated the entire curriculum and had sold it all to the Department of Corrections.

Once the plan had been accepted he had somehow managed to convince the previous warden to allow him to use Prisoner Notification Frequency Yoyo, also known as radio channel PNFY. Channels X-ray, Yoyo and Zulu were the last three working channels of twenty-six antiquated emergency radio bands designed to communicate with the prisoners in the event of a riot, an earthquake or fire, or a hostage situation in one of the cell blocks. The rest of the Prisoner Notification system had been replaced some years ago by a computerized intercom system. Any prisoners who wanted to hear Kevin read poems or play music on PNFY could do so on secure, see-through pocket radios

that could be purchased at the commissary. The cases of the little radios were made of transparent plastic so that no sharpened shards of steel or joints of marijuana could be hidden inside.

Kevin had used the radio channel to supplement his poetry class and to broadcast classical, ethnic music and jazz to the prisoners. But after only eleven months of a struggling existence, the station was shut down by the warden who had cited a deafening lack of interest on the part of the prison population. Kevin had been the first and only announcer and disc jockey at station PNFY, and he had been the only teacher in the prison poetry class for ten agonizing years before finally throwing up his hands in full surrender and giving up on that idea, too. The warden had advertised for a replacement in five bay area newspapers, but not a single person had applied for either job.

Simón had strolled into Kevin's office at the prison just in time to see him packing away his precious first edition of Robinson Jeffers's collected poems. There had been papers and envelopes stacked and scattered everywhere in the office. Some of the papers were wet and steaming and a small, brown puddle was growing on the floor. A cup of coffee had been thrown with savage force against the blackboard and the brown liquid was still dripping down the wall onto the cement.

"There's no such thing as subtlety or silence in this place," Kevin had muttered angrily, as much to himself as to Simón as he stuffed as many books as possible into a battered cardboard box. Kevin's Irish eyes were flashing and his cheeks were as red as sugar beets. "These brutes would have robbed Keats at gunpoint. They would have burglarized Jeffers's home at Tor House and bugged Ezra Pound. These fools would have dragged Emily Dickinson from her room and forced her into a life of prostitution!"

Books by those four writers had been carefully set to one side. It was obvious to Simón that Kevin detested each angry word, even as it gushed from his own mouth. After ten years of superhuman effort, he considered himself a failure. His cherished poetry