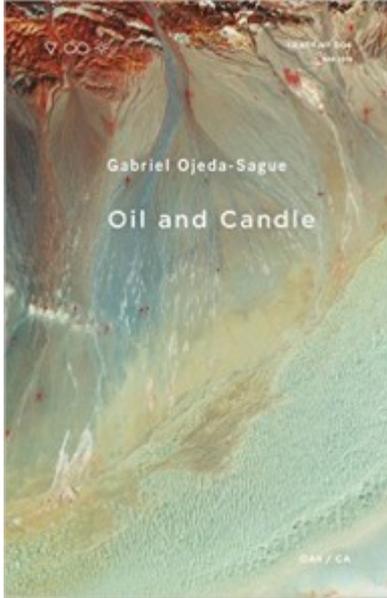


# Oil and Candle by Gabriel Ojeda-Sague

written by Guest Contributor | April 6, 2016



*Oil and Candle* by Gabriel Ojeda-Sague  
Timeless Infinite Light, 2016  
74 pages – [TIL](#) / [Amazon](#)

Gabriel Ojeda-Sague's debut collection, *Oil and Candle*, opens with the lines: "there is a coded syndrome / of poets who want blood." A "syndrome / of poets" is like a murder of crows. It spreads out like cancer, which the speaker imagines having, "in multiple places especially my skin." It is a phrase that pathologizes desire, desire for the blood that's your own and for the blood that isn't.

In another moment, the speaker watches while poets have a contest "where they hold up / Kleenex soaked with how much blood they can get / out of themselves," and a white man passes out first. The speaker wishes that hadn't happened because "every body gets very dramatic about the emotions of / white men." Habituated responses here are another kind of ritual. Inexplicable habituation, the poems argue, is what race and ritual have to do with each other.

Ritual and race are both typologies that people use to imagine a futurity they can live with, and both are troubled and leaned on in the poems, as is futurity itself. The speaker wonders whether they can produce and reproduce a viable future in which their body is valuable. In these poems, ancestry is futurity's opposite. There is "no citizen; / no future;" but the speaker watches people desire both citizenship and futurity. The speaker positions both as being homologous with the conveyance of information.

"[H]ow does the latino convey? / what has him survive?" Ojeda-Sague writes. Survival and conveyance are parts of a whole, especially for bodies that have

been subordinated or otherwise queered. But even the future has no futurity. One kind of searching the book offers is “looking with the future / and its pistol.”

The oil and candle of *Oil and Candle* are the media of Santería, and at the center of the book’s community of objects. The procedures of Santería’s rituals are both sacred and incomplete for the speaker, who, when performing rituals alone, googles what they don’t know. “[W]hat does / this candle do,” the speaker asks. The speaker calls a number to ask what to do with an abrecaminos candle that’s finished burning and is told to put it in the trash. They drop it into a chute and “hear it go all the way/ down.” A Santería ritual is elsewhere “a useless 7 day ritual.” The poems turn to ritual and let it go and turn to it again.

But rituals are necessary, inescapable. The “now” of being a poet is historicized in a biblical past through the performance of rituals: “limpias of poets who trust the police / limpias of poets who poison the apple.” Poetry is and has been forever. Ojeda-Sague’s poems are concerned with how to think about forever and how to balance forevers: the one that’s happened already and the one we have, even if it’s short.

The speaker learns from their mother to practice rituals out of a respect that’s also fear: All of the men in the speaker’s mother’s office wear white suits one day a year and the speaker’s mother wears white too and says “‘no / creo pero respeto’ / as in we don’t want / to get hexed.”

The speaker posits other rituals, drawing them out into a public sphere that carries its own anxieties, its own compromised futurity: “I wonder if there is a ritual to stop killing and I think / there is not.” Philadelphia and Miami, both cities with histories of high murder rates, also offer kinds of futures. Philadelphia, in the poems, is divided from itself. “Philadelphia becoming / a question of split / lights.” Philadelphia is a figure like the body that is fragmented into objects: “the head is / the site of war’s / misgivings.”

There’s no room between what’s imagined and what’s real in these poems. They demand a union of conjecture and practice, of ritual and body and race and city and world in all of their dissonance. Imagined and real in these poems contain facts with which we have to engage, and out of which we might make a taxonomy of what’s hurting us, and of how and why we each hurt differently.

The poems occasion questions: what does it mean to perform rituals for a short future? If every community you’re a part of is hurting, where do you direct your prayers? If you’re offered no futurity, how does that change your relationship with the past? Riffing on the “no future” offered queers whose partnerships don’t reproduce within a frame of heterosexual practice, Ojeda-Sague writes, “I don’t / trust babies.” The poems want to know what to keep on doing out of respect, and where to draw boundaries and what kind of hope to draw within them. The poems make us complicit in what they imagine. They ask to define the limits of what we’ll witness, of what we’ll live with. They’re brave poems. They ask us: “do you have parameters / too”?



**Davy Knittle**'s poems and reviews have appeared or are forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly*, *Fence*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and *Jacket2*, and his collaborations with Sophia Dahlin have appeared recently in *Eleven Eleven*. His second chapbook, "empathy for cars/force of july," is forthcoming from Horse Less Press in April 2016. He lives in Philadelphia.