

# SUNSTONE

BY OCTAVIO PAZ

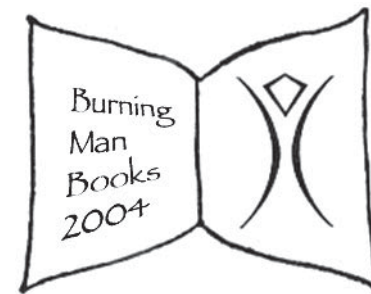
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EDITED BY RAYMOND SOULARD, JR. &  
KASSANDRA KRAMER

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by Octavio Paz

edited by Raymond Soulard, Jr.  
& Kassandra Kramer



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**Sunstone**  
(1957)  
by Octavio Paz

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This volume is in remembrance  
of a sweet evening  
in a Seattle bookshop . . .



a crystal willow, a poplar of water,  
a tall fountain the wind arches over,  
a tree deep-rooted yet dancing still,  
a course of a river that turns, moves on,  
doubles back, and comes full circle,  
forever arriving:  
the calm course  
of the stars or an unhurried spring,  
water with eyes closed welling over  
with oracles all night long,  
a single presence in a surge of waves,  
wave after wave till it covers all,  
a reign of green that knows no decline,  
like the flash of wings unfolding in the sky,

a path through the wilderness of days to come,  
and the gloomy splendor of misery like a bird  
whose song can turn a forest to stone,  
and the imminent joys on branches that vanish,  
the hours of light pecked away by the birds,  
and the omens that slip past the hand,

a sudden presence like a burst of song,  
like the wind singing in a burning building,  
a glance that holds the world and all  
its seas and mountains dangling in the air,  
body of light filtered through an agate,  
thighs of light, belly of light, the bays,  
the solar rock, cloud-colored body,  
color of a brisk and leaping day,  
the hour sparkles and has a body,  
the world is visible through your body,  
transparent through your transparency,

I travel my way through galleries of sound,  
I flow among echoing presences,  
I cross transparencies as though I were blind,  
a reflection erases me, I'm born in another,  
oh forest of pillars that are enchanted,  
through arches of light I travel into  
the corridors of a diaphanous fall,

I travel your body, like the world,  
your belly is a plaza full of sun,  
your breasts two churches where blood  
performs its own, parallel rites,  
my glances cover you like ivy,  
you are a city the sea assaults,  
a stretch of ramparts split by the light  
in two halves the color of peaches,  
a domain of salt, rocks and birds,  
under the rule of oblivious noon,

dressed in the color of my desires,  
you go your way naked as my thoughts,  
I travel your eyes, like the sea,  
tigers drink their dreams in those eyes,  
the hummingbird burns in those flames,  
I travel your forehead, like the moon,  
like the cloud that passes through your thoughts,  
I travel your belly, like your dreams,

your skirt of corn ripples and sings,  
your skirt of crystal, your skirt of water,  
your lips, your hair, your glances rain  
all through the night, and all day long  
you open my chest with your fingers of water,  
you close my eyes with your mouth of water,  
you rain on my bones, a tree of liquid  
sending roots of water into my chest,

I travel your length, like a river,  
I travel your body, like a forest,  
like a mountain path that ends at a cliff  
I travel along the edge of your thoughts,  
and my shadow falls from your white forehead,  
my shadow shatters, and I gather the pieces  
and go with no body, groping my way,

the endless corridors of memory, the doors  
that open into an empty room  
where all the summers have come to rot,  
jewels of thirst burn at its depths,  
the face that vanishes upon recall,  
the hand that crumbles at my touch,  
the hair spun by a mob of spiders  
over the smiles of years ago,

setting out from my forehead, I search,  
I search without finding, search through a moment,  
a face of storm and lightning-flashes  
racing through the trees of night,  
a face of rain in a darkened garden,  
relentless water that flows by my side,

I search without finding, I write alone,  
there's no one here, and the day falls,  
the year falls, I fall with the moment,  
I fall to the depths, invisible path  
over mirrors repeating my shattered image,  
I walk through the days, the trampled moments,  
I walk through all the thoughts of my shadow,  
I walk through my shadow in search of a moment,

I search for an instant alive as a bird,  
for the sun of five in the afternoon  
tempered by walls of porous stone:  
the hour ripened its cluster of grapes,  
and bursting, girls spilled out from the fruit,  
scattering in the cobblestone patios of the school,  
one was tall as autumn and walked

through the arcades enveloped in light,  
and space encircled, dressed her in a skin  
even more golden and more transparent,

tiger the color of light, brown deer  
on the outskirts of night, girl glimpsed  
leaning over green balconies of rain,  
adolescent incalculable face,  
I've forgotten your name, Melusina,  
Laura, Isabel, Persephone, Mary,  
your face is all the faces and none,  
you are all the hours and none,  
you're a tree and a cloud, all the birds  
and a single star, the edge of the sword  
and the executioner's bowl of blood,  
the ivy that creeps, envelops, uproots  
the soul, and severs it from itself,

writing of fire on a piece of jade,  
crack in the stone, queen of snakes,  
column of mist, spring in the rock,  
lunar circus, aerie of eagles,  
anise-seed, thorn tiny and mortal,  
thorn that brings immortal pain,  
shepherdess of valleys under the sea,  
gatekeeper of the valley of the dead,  
liana that drops from the cliffs of vertigo,  
tangling vine, poisonous plant,  
resurrection flower, grape of life,  
lady of the flute and the lightning-flash,  
terrace of jasmine, salt in the wound,  
branch of roses for the man shot down,  
snow in August, gallows' moon,  
writing of the sea on basalt rock,  
writing of the wind on desert sand,  
the sun's last will, pomegranate, wheat,

face of flames, face devoured,  
adolescent face plagued by phantom years

and circular days that open out  
on the same patio, the same wall,  
the moment is aflame, and all the faces  
that appear in the flames are a single face,  
all of the names are a single name,  
all of the faces a single face,  
all of the centuries a single moment,  
and through all the centuries of the centuries  
a pair of eyes blocks the way to the future,

there's nothing in front of me, only a moment  
salvaged from a dream tonight of coupled  
images dreamed, a moment chiseled  
from the dream, torn from the nothing  
of this night, lifted by hand, letter  
by letter, while time, outside, gallops  
away, and pounding at the doors of my soul  
is the world with its bloodthirsty schedules,

only a moment while the cities, names,  
flavors and everything that is alive  
all crumble inside my blind skull,  
while the sorrows of night press on my thoughts,  
weigh down my spine, and my blood runs  
a little slower, my teeth wobble,  
my eyes cloud over, and the days  
and years heap their empty horrors,

while time folds its fan shut  
and behind its images there's nothing,  
the moment plunges into itself  
and floats surrounded by death,  
threatened by night's lugubrious yawn,  
threatened by death that is masked and alive,  
the moment plunges into itself,  
into itself like a closing fist,  
like a fruit that ripens toward its center

and drinks from itself, spilling over,  
the moment, translucent, seals itself off  
and ripens inward, sends out roots,  
grows within me, taking me over,  
its feverish leafing drives me out,  
my thoughts are nothing more than its birds,  
its mercury runs through my veins, tree  
of the mind, fruit that tastes of time,

oh life to live, life already lived,  
time that comes back in a swell of sea,  
time that recedes without turning its head,  
the past is not past, it is still passing by,  
flowing silently into the next vanishing moment:

in an afternoon of stone and saltpeter,  
armed with invisible razors you write  
in red illegible script on my skin,  
and the wounds dress me like a suit of flames,  
I burn without end, I search for water,  
in your eyes there's no water, they're made of stone,  
and your breasts, your belly, your hips are stone,  
your mouth tastes of dust, your mouth tastes  
like poisoned time, your body tastes  
like a well that's been sealed, passage of mirrors  
where anxious eyes repeat, passage  
that always leads back to where it began,  
you take me, a blind man, led by the hand,  
through relentless galleries toward the center  
of the circle, and you rise like splendor  
hardened into an axe, like light that flays,  
engrossing as a gallows is to the doomed,  
flexible as whips and thin as a weapon  
that's twin to the moon, your sharpened words  
dig out my chest, depopulate me

and leave me empty, one by one  
you extract my memories, I've forgotten my name,  
my friends grunt in a wallow with the pigs  
or rot in ravines eaten by the sun,

there is nothing inside me but a large wound,  
a hollow place where no one goes,  
a windowless present, a thought that returns  
and repeats itself, reflects itself,  
and loses itself in its own transparency,  
a mind transfixed by an eye that watches  
it watching itself till it drowns itself  
in clarity:

I saw your horrid scales,  
Melusina, shining green in the dawn,  
you slept twisting between the sheets,  
you woke shrieking like a bird,  
and you fell and fell, till white and broken,  
nothing remained of you but your scream,  
and I find myself at the end of time  
with bad eyes and a cough, rummaging through  
the old photos:

there's no one, you're no one,  
a heap of ashes and worn-out broom,  
a rusted knife and a feather duster,  
a pelt that hangs from a pack of bones,  
a withered branch, a black hole,  
and there at the bottom the eyes of a girl  
drowned a thousand years ago,

glances buried deep in a well,  
glances that have watched us since the beginning,  
the girl's glance of the aged mother  
who sees her grown son a young father,  
the mother's glance of the lonely girl  
who sees her father a young son,  
glances that watch us from the depths  
of life, and are the traps of death  
—or what if that fall into those eyes  
were the way back to true life?

to fall, to go back, to dream myself,  
to be dreamed by other eyes that will come,  
another life, other clouds,  
to die yet another death!  
—this night is enough, this moment that never  
stops opening out, revealing to me  
where I was, who I was, what your name is,  
what my name is:

was it I making plans  
for the summer—and for all summers—  
on Christopher Street, ten years ago,  
with Phyllis, who had two dimples in her cheeks  
where sparrows came to drink the light?  
on the Reforma did Carmen say to me,  
“the air's so crisp here, it's always October,”  
or was she speaking to another I've forgotten,  
or did I invent it and no one said it?  
in Oaxaca was I walking through a night  
black-green and enormous as a tree,  
talking to myself like the crazy wind,  
and reaching my room—always a room—  
was it true the mirrors didn't know me?  
did we watch the dawn from the Hotel Vernet  
dancing with the chestnut trees—  
did you say “it's late,” combing your hair,  
did I watch the stains on the wall and say nothing?  
did the two of us climb the tower together,  
did we watch evening fall on the reef?  
did we eat grapes in Bidart? in Perote  
did we buy gardenias?



names, places,  
streets and streets, faces, plazas,  
streets, a park, stations, single  
rooms, stains on the wall, someone  
combing her hair, someone dressing,  
someone singing at my side, rooms,  
places, streets, names, rooms,

Madrid, 1937,  
in the Plaza del Ángel the women were sewing  
and singing along with their children,  
then: the sirens' wail, and the screaming,  
houses brought to their knees in the dust,  
towers cracked, facades spat out  
and the hurricane drone of the engines:  
the two took off their clothes and made love  
to protect our share of all that's eternal,  
to defend our ration of paradise and time,  
to touch our roots, to rescue ourselves,  
to rescue the inheritance stolen from us  
by the thieves of life centuries ago,  
the two took off their clothes and kissed  
because two bodies, naked and entwined,  
leap over time, they are invulnerable,  
nothing can touch them, they return to the source,  
there is no you, no I, no tomorrow,  
no yesterday, no names, the truth of two  
in a single body, a single soul,  
oh total being . . .

rooms adrift  
in the foundering cities, rooms and streets,  
names like wounds, the room with windows  
looking out on other rooms  
with the same discolored wallpaper,  
where a man in shirtsleeves reads the news  
or a woman irons; the sunlit room  
whose only guest is the branches of a peach;  
and the other room, where it's always raining  
outside on the patio and the three boys  
who have rusted green; rooms that are ships  
that rock in a gulf of light; rooms  
that are submarines: where silence dissolves  
into green waves, and all that we touch  
phosphoresces; and the tunes of luxury,  
with their portraits nibbled, their rugs unraveling;  
and the traps, the cells, the enchanted grottoes,  
the birdcages and the numbered rooms,  
all are transformed, all take flight,  
every molding is a cloud, every door  
leads to the sea, the country, the open  
air, every table is set for a banquet;  
impenetrable as conches, times lay siege  
to them in vain, there is no more time,  
there are no walls: space, space,  
open your hand, gather these riches,  
pluck the fruit, eat of life,  
stretch out under the tree and drink!

all is transformed, all is sacred,  
every room is the center of the world,  
it's still the first night, and the first day,  
the world is born when two people kiss,  
a drop of light from transparent juices,  
the room cracks half-open like a fruit  
or explodes in silence like a star,  
and the laws chewed away by the rats,  
the iron bars of the banks and jails,  
the paper bars, the barbed wire,  
the rubber stamps, the pricks and goads,  
the droning one-note sermon on war,  
the mellifluous scorpion in a cap and gown,  
the top-hatted tiger, chairman of the board  
of the Red Cross and the Vegetarian Society,  
the schoolmaster donkey, the crocodile cast  
in the role of savior, father of the people,  
the Boss, the shark, the architect of the future,  
the uniformed pig, the favorite son  
of the Church who washes his blackened dentures  
in holy water and takes classes in civics  
and conversational English, the invisible walls,  
the rotten masks that divide one man  
from another, one man from himself,  
they crumble  
for one enormous moment and we glimpse  
the unity that we lost, the desolation  
of being man, and all its glories,  
sharing bread and sun and death,  
the forgotten astonishment of being alive;

to love is to battle, if two kiss  
the world changes, desires take flesh,  
thoughts take flesh, wings sprout  
on the backs of the slave, the world is real  
and tangible, wine is wine, bread  
regains its savor, water is water,  
to love is to battle, to open doors,  
to cease to be a ghost with a number  
forever in chains, forever condemned  
by a faceless master;

the world changes  
if two look at each other and see,  
to love is to undress our names:  
“let me be your whore” said Héloïse,  
but he chose to submit to the law  
and made her his wife, and they rewarded him  
with castration;

better the crime,  
the suicides of lovers, the incest committed  
by brother and sister like two mirrors  
in love with their likeness, better to eat  
the poisoned bread, adultery on a bed  
of ashes, ferocious love, the poisonous  
vines of delirium, the sodomite who wears  
a gob of spit for a rose in his lapel,  
better to be stoned in the plaza than to turn  
the mill that squeezes out the juice of life,  
the turns eternity into empty hours,  
minutes into prisons, and time into  
copper coins and abstract shit;

better chastity, the invisible flower  
that rocks atop the stalks of silence,  
the difficult diamond of the holy saints  
that filters desires, satiates time,  
the marriage of quietude and motion,  
solitude sings within its corolla,  
every hour is a petal of crystal,  
the world strips off its masks,  
and at its heart, a transparent shimmer

that we call God, nameless being  
who studies himself in the void, faceless  
being emerged from himself, sun  
of suns, plentitude of presences and names;

I follow my raving, rooms, streets,  
I grope my way through corridors of time,  
I climb and descend its stairs, I touch  
its walls and do not move, I go back  
to where I began, I search for your face,  
I walk through the streets of myself  
under an ageless sun, and by my side  
you walk like a tree, you walk like a river,  
and talk to me like the course of a river,  
you grow like wheat between my hands,  
you throb like a squirrel between my hands,  
you fly like a thousand birds, and your laugh  
is like the spray of the sea, your head  
is a star between my hands, the world  
grows green again when you smile,  
eating an orange,

the world changes  
if two, dizzy and entwined, fall  
on the grass: the sky comes down, trees  
rise, space becomes nothing but light  
and silence, open space for the eagle  
of the eye, the white tribe of clouds  
goes by, and the body weighs anchor,  
the soul sets sail, and we lose  
our names and float adrift in the blue  
and green, total time where nothing  
happens but its own, easy crossing,

nothing happens, you're quiet, you blink,  
(silence: just now an angel crossed,  
huge as the life of a hundred suns),  
is nothing happening, only a blink?  
—and the banquet, the exile, the first crime,  
the jawbone of the ass, the opaque thud

and the startled glance of the dead falling  
on an ash-strewn plain, Agamemnon's  
great bellow, the screams of Cassandra,  
over and over, louder than the sea,  
Socrates in chains (the sun rises,  
to die is to wake: "Crito, a cock  
for Aesculapius, I am cured of life"),  
the jackal discoursing in the ruins of Nineveh,  
the shade that appeared to Brutus on the eve  
of the battle, Moctezuma insomniac  
on his bed of thorns, the ride in the carriage  
toward death—the interminable ride,

and the cry on Friday  
afternoon?, and the silence covered in signs,  
the silence that speaks without ever thinking,  
does it say nothing? are cries nothing?  
does nothing happen as time passes by?

—when was life ever truly ours?  
when are we ever what we are?  
we are ill-reputed, nothing more  
than vertigo and emptiness, a frown in the mirror,  
horror and vomit, life is never  
truly ours, it always belongs to the others,  
life is no one's, we all are life—  
bread of the sun for the others,  
the others that we all are—  
when I am another, my acts  
are more mine when they are the acts  
of others, in order to be I must be another,

Mary, Persephone, Héloïse, show me  
your face that I may see at last  
my true face, that of another,  
my face forever the face of us all,  
face of the tree and the baker of bread,  
face of the driver and the cloud and the sailor,  
face of the sun and face of the stream,  
face of Peter and Paul, face  
of this crowd of hermits, wake me up,  
I've already been born:

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I want to go on, to go further, and cannot:  
as each moment was dropping into another  
I dreamt the dreams of dreamless stones,  
and there at the end of the years like stones  
I heard my blood, singing in its prison,  
and the sea sang with a murmur of light,  
one by one the walls gave way,  
all of the doors were broken down,  
and the sun came bursting through my forehead,  
it tore apart my closed lids,  
cut loose my being from its wrappers,  
and pulled me out of myself to wake me  
from this animal sleep and its centuries of stone,  
and the sun's magic of mirrors revived  
a crystal willow, a poplar of water,  
a tall fountain the wind arches over,  
a tree deep-rooted yet dancing still,  
a course of a river that turns, moves on,  
doubles back, and comes full circle,  
forever arriving: