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A Guayaba's Heart

Melisa Garcia

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A GUAYABA'S HEART

by

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DISSERTATION

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Requirements for the Degree of

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Que viva la poesía!

XXIX

Traveler, there is no path.
The path is made by walking.

Traveller, the path is your tracks
And nothing more.
Traveller, there is no path
The path is made by walking.
By walking you make a path
And turning, you look back
At a way you will never tread again
Traveller, there is no road
Only wakes in the sea.

—Antonio Machado, *Border of a Dream: Selected Poems*

Storytelling, *Los Cuentistas*, and Landscape

Every night before bed when I was a child, my father would write a few words in a column so I could translate the left column of English words into the Spanish or the Spanish into the English. This was a nightly regimen; my father wrote a short list of words he'd heard on the radio that day while taking container shipments from the Port of Long Beach to the Inland Empire or Las Vegas, Nevada, while I teased out the Spanish translations. The lists of words were something like this: travel, thinking, library, pencil, politics, health, ear, desk, trampoline, friend. I'd sit with him, pen in hand, thinking out loud, and pondering about the way his handwriting looked on the white notepad, while my cursive was bubbly and messy. The notion of translation was always important to me. Through college I always wanted discover how other translators I read would influence me.

One, in particular, was Octavio Paz. A passage still allows me to understand the way that my father's "balancing of languages", translation, and identification with words. Octavio Paz is most commonly known as a poet, but he also wrote several essays. His first volume of poetry, *Luna Silvestre* published in 1933, Paz's best-known works was *El laberinto de soledad*, in 1950, and later translated as *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought* in Mexico. Paz's critics are most known for commenting on the interspersing elements of prose—commonly known as philosophical thought that Paz incorporated into his poetry, and poetic elements in his prose. This section out of this translation essay reflects my experience with translation as a child and today:

When we learn to speak, we are learning to translate; the child who asks his mother the meaning of a word is really asking her to translate the unfamiliar term into the simple words he already knows. In this sense translation within the same language is not essentially different from translation between two

tongues, and the histories of all peoples parallel the child's experience. Even the most isolated tribe, sooner or later, comes into contact with other people who speak a foreign language. The sounds of a tongue we do not know may cause us to react with astonishment, annoyance, indignation, or amused perplexity, but their sensations are soon replaced by uncertainties about our language. We become aware that language is not universal; rather, there is a plurality of languages, each one alien and unintelligible to the others. In the past, translation dispelled the uncertainties. Although language is not universal, languages nevertheless form part of a universal society in which, once some difficulties have been overcome, all people can communicate with and understand each other. And they can do so because in any language men always say the same things (Paz, Corral, 1).

Paz speaks to my own experience with words. The translation exercise would have a profound effect on my life as a poet; the whole process was pivotal to my understanding of words, their flexibility, and the way they took on a life of their own. The words my father had chosen were actually coming to life as I thought about their meaning. Until now, those same images live in my memory though I always wondered how I would remember these words. I knew these words in English and some in Spanish; this is when they took on different definitions, emotions, embodiments, and actions in translation. The words were no longer what they meant in English, like the word "travel," meant getting on an airplane and traveling to another state, while in Spanish it meant traveling on foot. Or the word friend could have different meanings and not the equivalent in Spanish. The definition of a "friend" changed through the language and sound of *amigo*, or '*compa*' (from *compadre*). Spanish changed all those words' meanings, their texture, and overall sensation when spoken

and imagined. These words were not simply “just words,” but because I’ve examined their meaning through each language, the images I have of them when they are mentioned are now in action and constantly evolve in meaning through language.

As a poet, I see this as a blessing. Communication is important, but observing conversation and extracting ideas are important to my work: conversations in which a friend uses common phrases from his hometown, or listening to my grandmother’s stories complete with idioms from El Salvador. Also how she told of the secrets of her hometown while keeping the vision of that language alive through her diction. Or the fondness of my parents arguing about the particular names of foods in Guatemala versus in El Salvador, like *enchiladas* or *chuco*. These both mean entirely different things in Mexico, and the word *chuco* actually means “dirty” in some instances. Because of these situations, language brings forth a layering of meanings and so allows me to see the in-between and where the meaning of these words and others no longer exists. This in-between in my process of understanding words is what pushes forward images from the common phrases. As words are expressed, meaning appears and then slowly a poem is formed. The image or visualization that arrives allows me to understand the importance of accumulating stories, paying attention to the different points of view expressed, and the way words are still familiar to my family and how they become part of my vocabulary.

Poet Ofelia Zepeda has been influential in my approach to language and translation. Her poetics and her poetry helped me in developing an understanding of how culture and languages can be mixed in my process of writing. She showed me as well, how I am able to incorporate my parents’ cultures and languages in my work. Zepeda created the first Tohono O’odham dictionary; the Tohono O’odham people originates from south-central Arizona and the northern Sonora in Mexico. Denis Holt describes Zepeda’s poems as “cultural

mélange” as they often display “varying patterns of bilingualism, including code-switching and immediate interlinear translation.” The idea of a “cultural mélange” when thinking about bilingualism, code switching and interlinear translation is that Zepeda is focusing on using all of these strategies to present as much as possible the cultural aspects of the Tohono O’odham language. When one thinks about bilingualism in the Tohono O’odham language one thinks about her native language in comparison to English. This can happen when it is read out loud or written. There is an obvious change in the inflection of voice, tone, and rhythm. Holt is saying that much of Zepeda’s poetry takes the opportunity to demonstrate this change by showing a visual parallel to English. Her work is important to my writing because the translations of both English and Spanish are parallel to each other mentally and sometimes cross through “code switching” as well. What is most important to understand is that in other instances they are right against each other moving forward, but this is not always seen.

In Zepeda’s poem, “Landscape” we are able to see both languages side by side:

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| ...She pushed bits of her past | |
| and bits of her future | |
| in uncertain amounts and | |
| in uncertain directions | |
| Oig ’am si, ’oig’am si | Come now, come now |
| Si g o ’e-keihi | Step lively |
| Si g o ’e-keihi | Step lively |
| Att o ’i-hudiñ g cewagi | We will pull down the clouds |
| Att o ’i-wai g ju:kî | We will call the rain |
| Oig ’am si, ’oig’am si | Come now, come now...” (Zepeda, 18-27). |

In this excerpt of her poem we can see the physical manifestation of her bilingualism and also the involvement of code switching through the parallel display. Having both languages parallel to each other in the manner found above provides value to seeing both sides of the same phrasing or image.

After reading Zepeda's work there I discovered how intriguing two languages can look side by side and so I began to understand the mental work I put into place when thinking about phrases or stories exchanged between my family members. They can either be seen as a parallel conversation to each other, or a juxtaposition. Like I mentioned before there can be a conversation constructed within two languages. To have the poem formatted this way also brings into question how translation is a dualism that in poetry works to portray the identities found within one poet and how both languages are sacred through storytelling. So that even when there is only one language existing "on the page" it is important to keep in mind the absence of the other and vice versa.

The purpose of a storyteller, *el que cuenta historias*, or *el hablador* has always captivated me. My childhood was filled with storytellers: my father, mother, grandmothers and Salvadoran neighbors; they tell stories of the past, or combine the past and present to prophesize a story of the future. During family meals, my parents would tell stories about the time they climbed trees in their native countries, or walked through tall fields of grass. Or they would tell stories of the secrets in their hometowns like the time my great grandfather Nicholas lost all the land he owned in Guatemala. Or of the mysterious deaths of people and how their bodies were never found. I replay these conversations constantly thus reliving those moments and recording the remembered incidents on paper. My poetry brings more meaning to these conversations thus exemplifying their importance and how they add to the on-going memories of a now unknown land, time, and space. As I grew older, my notebook

filled with the stories told at the dinner table by these *cuentistas*. I would listen attentively to my parents, anticipating the next round of stories, but did not imagine that I would later compile those stories as poems.

My favorite stories were those that were told in the future tense. My father would say: “*vamos a salir adelante*—we will get through this.” I always think about these moments in which my father did not make enough money to buy what we wanted that week, and how it was hard for him to lie to us because he wanted to give us the best. This is where the emotional challenges came into play as well.

For a long time, I would replay this phrase “*vamos a salir adelante*” as a marker of his faith that everything would get better. This phrase brings to mind the purpose of some of my poems. I see their creation as a highlight to the mundane moments in which my father couldn’t simply give us what we needed or what we wanted because there was not enough money. I always had poems to sustain me. To embrace the moments of when there was a lack of something is important to me because of how far I have come now. In this case, my parents—the storytellers of the future were and are important as markers of hope that clearly emanates from their stories, memories, phrases and sayings (*dichos*). The importance of these storytellers, of being able to provide an assurance of the future when material things were limited, allowed me to believe in the power of *using language that was not limited*. And so, language and words were never limiting to me. Words have always had weight to them and are always profound and important.

Cornel West states that “poets are prophets” and so they not just anticipate the future but clearly see past the circumstance to move towards a clearer vision. I have seen this exemplified by the storytellers in my life—my parents, grandparents—are poet-prophets who in sharing their stories give light to the unknown, the unsaid, and the future. We see

these connections from day to day and I may miss them sometimes but I've slowly begun to understand how storytelling has enriched my writing, my poetics, and my life in general so now I understand its importance and layers. Another way storytelling has enriched my writing is that I have become conscious of stories told as memories, of the present memories that are under construction, and future memories that arrive as dreams and that I keep a close eye on. These stories are those that my parents have shared and I hope to "re-tell" to future generations.

Poet Carolyn Forché makes this notion apparent and responsibility of the "poetry of witness". She argues that the importance of being a *poet of witness* is that we are archiving testimonies and the history of a place or group of people. Forché coined the term "poetry of witness" in her anthology, *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, where she explains the difficulties of politically-engaged poetry:

Poetry of witness presents the reader with an interesting interpretive problem. We are accustomed to rather easy categories: we distinguish between 'personal' and 'political' poems—the former calling to mind lyrics of love and emotional loss, the latter indicating a public partisanship that is considered divisive, even when necessary. The distinction between the personal and the political realm gives the political realm too much of too little scope; at the same time, it renders the person too important not important enough. If we give up the dimension of the personal, we risk relinquishing one of the most powerful sites of resistance. The celebration of the personal, however, can indicate a myopia, an inability to see how larger structures of economy and state circumscribe, if not determine, the fragile realm of individuality. (Forché, 31)

I am separated from my parents' experiences in their native countries because I have not ever experienced their homelands. These stories are no longer the same, but have shifted over time because they have lived in the United States for about 35 years now. I have now reinterpreted the actions of the characters in those stories, the emblematic images, and overall shapes of these memories because by archiving them, I bring them to a state of permanency. For example, I ask myself, are they based on fiction or myth? Are they altogether 'real' and is memory playing its part to re-live these moments through my renditions? These and other questions are what I consider in the weight of the stories my parents tell and I will take through exploring its origin and significance. This is daunting, exciting, and in many ways, a sacred process as it is my responsibility to reconstruct, recollect, connect, cut-out, shape, and essentially archive these stories. This is like putting a photo album together, positioning family member's pictures of them riding a horse through a large field, lounging under a tall tree in a hammock, or playing soccer in an open field and never really knowing where exactly the field was, or how tall the tree was, or what soccer ball was used. I've chosen to have their voices next to each other; some to interweave the stories all of them have carried throughout this time as a way to have them continue living.

My responsibility is to listen to these stories and in the future the memories will begin to appear. By acknowledging that the future of these memories is important to the storyteller and myself, as the poet, it is vital for the process of "transcribing." This is the way that triggers are created while learning the story through the first, then the second, and possibly the third time. It is much like the process of translation in which I am arriving at different definitions or images (in the instance of poetry) and so I am continuously considering the point of views, layers, and the conclusions of a story. Of course, language plays a role in this because it creates varied interpretations and layers. I see these stories and

others as two stories, in two languages that arrive at different point of views and defining moments. Paz describes this process of thinking and writing in two languages in this passage from *Convergences*:

Maybe it is just a label that doesn't so much name as conceal a reality in a state of evolution—something that doesn't yet have a name of its own, because it doesn't yet have an existence of his own. I enumerate these difficulties not as a rhetorical device but to justify my method in the article: negotiation and comparison. Since it is impossible to define or even describe our poetry for what it is, I shall try to say what it is not. My aim is to clear that terrain; once the underbrush has been hacked away, those who are curious can come closer to see, and above all to hear—not poetry, which is mute from birth, but poems, those verbal realities. (Paz, 202)

The message of my family stories, becomes alive and exists in multifaceted ways when I write them in English and Spanish. The task is challenging and sometimes daunting. When I look at a tree on my way to campus, I see a “tree,” but I also see “*el arbol*,” “*los arboles*” or those “trees.” I listen to the word “tree” or the word “*arbol*” and realize the texture of the word and its physical state. When I remember my mother’s stories about trees and imagine her climbing and describing “*los arboles*” for me, the nature of the word is no longer a noun but a verb—action expressed through the noun. This is often how the recognition of names come to mind. Again, I have not only translated the word, but in doing so, evoke its meaning and the memories connected with it. This is due to the fact that my mother has always talked about the trees in El Salvador as if they exist in California. When she looks at the tall, strong magnolia trees that grow in my neighborhood, she closes her eyes recalling the trees in her homeland. My mother was born in San Miguel, El Salvador and

lived in San Salvador for most of her childhood. She left El Salvador at the age of ten and never returned because the 1980 civil war in El Salvador would bring violence, and death.

My mother's recollection of her childhood is different from my father's because they come from different countries, but faced their everyday lives in particular ways due to the evolving natural and political landscape. Although my mother's childhood was about survival, she had an approach to the way that she dealt with the difficult social and political climate due to the brewing war in El Salvador. The theme that is evident in many of mother's stories is about hiding in trees, observing the space from above, and accepting the enjoyment of those afternoons at the top of trees while still understanding the ongoing violence that grew down below.

While both of my parents lived in poverty in their childhoods and their parents and grandparents made ends meet to survive, my mom's way of envisioning her childhood now is heavily dependent on humor and comedy. The tragicomic hope is present in the history of her childhood as much as it was in my father's. The tragicomic hope is an incident or situation that has both the comic and tragic elements; through these situations a person can be heavily affected by the tragic event(s), but manage to cope with the event through comedy. The key within the tragicomic hope is how one comes to term with accepting those circumstances that are out of one's control. For many reasons, this is my mother's method. By understanding the hardships of her living conditions it is important to understand how she came out of them and what she chooses to remember versus what she rejects in her stories. This brings to light an important component of my mother's storytelling. She chooses to share those stories about trauma that she has already healed from. What happens with the other stories? What does she do with them? Of course, this can be a difficult thing to know or remember. I pay attention to this particular "attitude", "action" or "choice"

because I am curious, but I know I have to let her be until she is ready to tell me. Thus I see my mother's process of telling stories based on the idea that she is a storyteller of healing, whereas my father seeks to constantly find the truth. He is enveloped in the idea that to every story there is a final conclusion. And although my mother seeks to "heal" or find that sole moment of learning, they both in the end search for the moral of the story.

My mother's storytelling also seeks to find a truth, but it is conscious of the process it takes to finally breathe out emotion. I see this as a release. Or what I think of as a moment in which the release makes sense to her and the story then she is content. The in-between process in which she reaches this contentment is always out of control, but from what I can understand is always fine. The raw emotion from not having any control is what fascinates me. It's this idea that there isn't exactly greener grass on the other side, but life will continue if one doesn't confront those things that make one weak or falter. In many ways this particular characterization is part of understanding and comprehending that there is only so much she, my grandmother, or my aunts could have done to prevent the uncomfortable and ugly moments from interfering with the small moments of happiness. This is the fine line and complexity of her storytelling. Of course, I lament that some of her stories are "darker" in nature than others, but when she does share with me that those moments needed to happen, it changes the way I imagine her childhood and guides me to understand that her experiences make her storytelling fuller. So this is how she seeks to explain the truth of her lives in two different emotional spaces when thinking about the past and where she is now—the future. Both of my parents' stories are enactments of their personalities and emotions and so they live to tell all their stories to my siblings, friends, and neighbors.

Because of my mother's stories, I was drawn to Gary Soto's voice and style as much

as I was to Forché's depictions of the civil war in El Salvador in her poem "The Colonel". Much of Soto's poetry, was important in this way and also like Phillip Levine's focus on the mundane, the everyday, and desire to express a story. Soto is a Chicano poet from Fresno, California, and a lot of his work focuses on family histories, the body at work in the fields, and as mentioned before, creates a clear dependence on the motif of fruits and memory.

Here is an excerpt from Soto's "A Plum Heart":

A bird fluttered
from there, a single
leaf cutting loose,
and gnats like smoke
around a bruised plum.
I climbed searching
for those red globes,
and with a sack filled,
I called for father
to catch—father
who would disappear
like fruit at the end
of summer from a neck
wound some say—blood. (Soto, 24)

Soto utilizes the image of the plum to establish a clear understanding of the relationship between the speaker and the father. The short lines and the verbs show how much movement surrounds the situation. The short lines allow readers to not just understand the relationship, but to experience the way the words portray the moment in the poem.

In the following poem, I draw from my mother's perspective of the aerial view of her "neighborhood" and what it is to see forced violent change come to a community of people, in that so much of it is affected because even the landscape itself feels those violent changes and gives into the dark emotion. What follows is an excerpt from "Orquídeas & War, El Salvador 1980".

The sun appeared through an open mouth in the clouds. Five children lounged on the plated rooftops of the neighbor's houses. Others played a game of *canicas*, making a circle onto the wet earth, then flicking the marble with their thumb to hit their opponent's...Papa Chico always talked to the neighbors about the men in green uniforms...From up in the tree my mother focused her attention on the male spotted orchids below her, bent over, like the backs of the village people when the military came in and took their children from them. Their heads bowed down obeying the voices of the soldiers... She imagines the breeze never cooled any of them that died, that the arms, legs and hands of the victims melted like petals...with the memories of dandelions bivouacking among the chipped ribcages. (Garcia)

This is a particular account of my mother's on one occasion that she was at the top of one of the trees in her grandfather's ranch. In many ways, this is my retelling of the event, and also introspective way of reproducing how she imagines and remembers this particular scene.

While writing this poem I always remember the sensation I felt when thinking about how she was viewing this moment and how that incorporated an "aerial" view experience. Most of the stories that she shares with me stem from growing up with her grandfather, Papa Chico and the fields that he'd cultivate and harvest. She was able to identify all the trees, harvest, fruits, and plants within the area which always are abstract to me, but I try really

hard to remain faithful to it. Many of my mother's childhood years were spent in this space and she always remembers them fondly. The moments she remembers the most are those when she ate fruit and how she imagines them drop like bombs in the following poem "Abrazadora":

She grew up where the grass was taller
than her, she'd use a hole packed by large leaves
as a trampoline. I don't know about nature the way
she does, leaves that twirl from up above
towards the wet earth, they have a mission
to be seen on the ground. She explains
that mangoes and papayas drop down like bombs.
Exploding, and then she's scoop
the remains in her hands, licks her cupped hand
assuring the papaya went to waste.

My mother misses her country (Garcia)

In Forché's poem "The Colonel", the peach becomes a central image as it is what she chooses to expose in her this poem as a way to engage with the notion of bearing witness, and presenting what the mind was forced to remember. The image of the fruit here is connected to the "human ears on the table" that tell us more about the motives of the Colonel:

His wife took everything away. There was
some talk then of how difficult it had become to govern. The parrot
said hello on the terrace. The colonel told it to shut up, and pushed
himself from the table. My friend said to me with his eyes: say

nothing. The colonel returned with a sack used to bring groceries home. He spilled human ears on the table. They were like dried peach halves. There is no other way to say this (Forché, 12-18)

The image of the human ears in juxtaposition to the spilled human ears on the table is expressed in “hiding”, as if almost skeptical of what is being seen. The notion of what is hidden or not seen is present in my poems “Orquídeas & War, El Salvador 1980” and “Abrazadora” because there is a close attention being given to the what is seen from up above, or what is being hidden from the eyes, and the sound furthermore connects to land and the demise of the people who live in it.

As I have mentioned before, through navigating the sound and texture of a particular object, person, or place I am able to understand their meanings viscerally via either Spanish or English. This does not mean that it is not just about formulaically placing the equivalent of the word, but giving its meaning life in that other language. Thus for me and my mother, the fruit becomes a placeholder of time representative of my mother’s short time lived in El Salvador. When my mother reminisces about the trees in her village, she focuses on the weight of the fruit, the size of the leaves, and the strength of the branches. What always comes to mind about those conversations is that she hasn’t forgotten San Miguel, El Salvador or other areas she lived in. She looks back fondly on that emotional security of nature as a gift. So much that when she came to New Mexico she compared the grandeur and beauty of this state to El Salvador. This in my perspective, is the way that one person is able to relive their time in a place, which because of so many reasons has changed, but will always be frozen that way in their mind because that image has never been replaced.

As a child, I imagine my mother saw the fruit as a rescuer, as a way to get past the difficulties that came her way. In addition, understanding that there was more at the tops of

trees and not just down below. By being in between the sky and land it was important for her to understand how that “in-between” was her escape and through that visual fascination she looked for refuge. It is fascinating that this is what happens when I think about her as a child. Although she is older, this child who became my mother is that child-storyteller that has passed down so many stories. So much that when I think about it, the past granted me a storyteller: that young eight, nine-year-old girl is my storyteller. The stories of that child have come into the present and although frozen in time those fruits have become important components to my poetry. So much that when I think about the fruit, I think about abundance: *el fruto de mi poesía*. My mother sees the past and present in constant collision. I am able to see past the condition or state of the fruit in my mother’s imagination and rejuvenate its meaning generationally.

Another aspect of my poetry that I continue coming back to is the construct of generations. Generation plays a large part in this manuscript as it informs how these storytellers pass down stories, information, secrets, etc. to me. When I think about the way this works, I look back to understand the way that my grandmother’s stories and her point of view affect the way I portray another version or versions in my poem. My interests lie not in exactly what she said event by event, detail by detail, but actually in what she didn’t say. That even when I ask questions about the particular person in the family or someone who is no longer with us, she may answer with either a quick response, or easily respond with a full story. I have seen this happen constantly with the stories about my grandfather, my mother’s father, *Abuelo Toño*. My grandmother has withheld information about him and other events in her life that have either marked her in some way because of who my grandfather was when he was younger versus who he then changed into before his death. It is as if when she tries to bring meaning to the story and so the memory may change because of how she

pushes away specific details. The idea here is that the storytelling through generations changes, so for a long time it was expressed through conversations and now I begin to express these same stories as poems they also begin to take another form. Parallel to the lineage of the generation itself because there is a change in how we communicate, what we communicate, and what we want to investigate.

In my poem, “*A Guayaba’s Heart*”, I include the emotional intensity of Soto’s *A Plum Heart*. When creating this poem, I intended to create a meaningful parallel between the speaker and the speaker’s grandfather:

Every time I cut
into a *guayabas*
I think about my mother
climbing to the top of trees,
picking up the ends of her dress
to make a pouch for the fruit.
I see her peeling back the yellow skin
with her teeth, as the pink flesh
appears, the veins wrapped around,
holding in the seeds.

She’d say, cup your hand
Below your mouth and pit
out the clump of seeds...
I asked her why she hid at the very tops

of trees late at night.
She said she was hiding
from her father,
who would come home drunk
from the *cantinas*
She knew she could get down
from the tree when she heard
his snoring coming out the back window.

As we pulled *guayabas* from the trees
she picked up a bruised one
from the grass and held it.
My mother hardly mentions
my Abuelo Toño, but as she held
the blackened *guayaba*,
she mumbled to me:

Cuando su corazón ya no dio mas. (Garcia)

This was an important poem for many reasons: the overall message of the poem focuses on showing the value of the speaker's grandfather's heart through the comparison of the *guayaba*. This exploration is not to bring attention to the sentimentality of the heart, but to understand the way the heart can deteriorate easily through experiences, time, and age. This presents the reader with the emotional and physical stability required to understand the hardships that come to one person. Through the speaker's point of view, the mother in the poem expresses a negative emotion towards her father and although it is not fully known

what the larger scope of the relationship is, we get a sense that there is some friction between the mother and the grandfather. What holds *A Guayaba's Heart* in place is the close attention to time and understanding the complications that come with remembering a loved one that did not leave good memories behind, or if they did, it may have been too late to notice entirely. Forgiveness is the ultimate message that the speaker arrives to by presenting the importance of the fruit through the memory of the mother and having the speaker relay it back is how we get the emotional resonance. The *guayaba* is an important marker within the relationship and so the symbol of the fruit becomes a sort of balance for the emotionality of the poem. The lines found in Soto's poem provide brevity and intensity and push forth the emotion of the poem and expand the emotional reception of the fruit as an image. This is what I intended to reach, by creating a brevity in the lines the image of the *guayaba* would do its job. I enjoy this poetic tendency because it allows me to understand the juxtaposition between what a poem can do physically on the page and how it elevates the importance of the image. The image of the fruit is not just an image of a fruit but a way to engage the reader in the action of the poem and then release the emotion by the time the poem is over.

*

My father grew up in Marajuma, Guatemala and later lived in the Distrito Federal in Mexico for about a year before he traveled to the United States. When he tells of coming to this country, it is a long narrative about the way the landscape changed from Guatemala to Mexico to California. My father describes Guatemala a huge jungle with tall trees, tropical birds that fly in and out, and Marajuma as a region with arid weather where people walk among tall fields of hay, sell goods along the side of the roads, and the luck of finding a *quetzal* makes them feel as if their God is looking out for them. Although I have my father's

memory to retrieve the physicality of this place and its people, I am certain it has changed drastically. Through the change in landscape in Guatemala, my father also survived the massive earthquake in Mexico, on September 19, 1985 (a few years before I was born). He remembers Mexico City being busy and not rural like his hometown of Marajuma. On the anniversary of the earthquake every September, my father remembers every detail: he recalls the exact moment of the earthquake, remembers the many who died, and those he was able to help rescue. Recently, he found a photograph of himself amidst the debris; he helped people trapped under the cement and wreckage. This was a crucial moment in my father's time there because he had become part of that place, that particular neighborhood. He had slowly begun to identify Mexico as his home when the earthquake hit and took him out of that safe space. I see this memory, his status there as representative of his journey in and out of places. Natural disasters such as this underscore the fact that there is no permanency. One sees living in such a place as time served, energy exerted, and dedication to that land because you took in the unknown. As well, they shape his sense of survival from that time forward.

After the earthquake my father lived in Mexico for a few more months, but then he left to find another home. When he arrived in California, he was faced with "new" ways. He would have to blend into an English-speaking world, of communicating, and finally becoming nostalgic for Guatemala. A place is not just home because one wants it so or because we are forced to do that. My father's home and the places he momentarily lived in father pushed him out of his country, out of its customs, and built an entirely new identity for him. My father recalls that the first thing he drank in California was an orange Sunkist; this particular detail became emblematic for that time in his life. Along with the narrative, there is nostalgia for the place he grew up in and also for his new life as an immigrant in the

United States of America. A large part of my father's stories show that he left Guatemala to work to make a better life.

Most difficult was that my father didn't know if he would see his mother again. The journey of traveling from one country through another was long and treacherous. As he travelled through Northern Guatemala to get to Mexico he met several people along the way and he remembers their stories about their trips, their homelands, and where they hoped to travel. I am fascinated by this journey of moving to a new home, to new circumstances even though some turned out to be deadlier than others. I am also interested in seeing how the role that nature's forces play as people seek better opportunities. I have tried to imagine both my father's country, Guatemala, and my mother's El Salvador, but haven't done so because of the impact of their negative memories. This is when I think again about the word "travel" and it's meaning in the context of how "traveling" changed my father's identity and what I now perceive as real traveling. The traveling that changes your way of living, that displaces you and then allows you reimagine who you thought you were. Traveling in this sense also then changes your communication, the language you once inserted yourself in and then slowly move away from.

I have thought about going to those countries and experiencing the landscape and trying to understand how it can change a person. Ada Limón, a poet from Sonoma, California, has several books about the notion of the unsaid, and the cycles of nature. In *Sharks in the Rivers*, the speaker portrays the struggles one encounters with the change in landscape, the appearance and disappearance of water, and overall realization of where the self fits. This collection reflects on the emotional process of displacement and how it is similar to my parents' experiences in their native countries. The emotions focus how the

land is unique in a particular place and time, and the unavoidable nostalgia when the place changes drastically.

This same thing happened when I moved from the west coast to the Southwest. Water was absent, seemingly invisible, and my sense of direction shifted. Limón portrays the praise and sacredness of water in her poem “Body of Rivers”:

The river comes to the body bold,
dreaming of black hues and a gestured
cluster of colored fish. This is the way
the world runs through us, its instruments of moon-
water and hangnails of hope. River, river,
listen, I understand the urgency. I am
floodwater running; I am dirt ditch rising.
A constant glutton for the outpouring pond,
I am trying desperately to return to gone. (Limón, Body of Rivers, 20)

This poem is not only about how I remember the Pacific, but that it reminds one to remember one’s birthplace, childhood and then where you have gone. I realize water is part of my life much like how my father valued his life in Guatemala, family and his daily life there. Most important in Limón’s poem are the lines, “River, river, /listen, /I understand urgency. I am” (5-6). Accepting where we want to be versus where we should be is difficult in itself, and like my father’s shifting identity, he became used to the life of the “nomad.” He slowly began to understand the urgency to move through life’s currents and continuously tries “desperately to return to gone.”

As a poet, I see my father’s stories as a way to pass down his memories. I visit the memory bank of breakfasts, lunches, and dinners and always revisit the Saturday mornings

when he would buy his favorite can of refried beans: *frijoles Ducal*. He would buy two big cans, and baguettes from the French bakery in downtown Long Beach. The memory of eating these beans together as a family only exists there: home. In New Mexico, I couldn't find these *frijoles Ducal* because I've had to figure out how to get to the grocery stores nearby or on the other side of town: the South Valley. I asked my father to send me a box of cans in memory of his *costumbre*, his habit, during my first year in Albuquerque. Why does this matter in light of my father and mother as storytellers? These beans are ingrained in my identity. Finally, I found a can of the beans at a Ranch Market with a new friend then I understood the importance of customs, of "being used" to a particular way of life. There is a deeper understanding of this memory because in the act of keeping the last can that my father had sent me I was reminded of how my father would always buy *Ducal*, then eating it for breakfast and literally how this was what we could afford to eat on some days.

The ritual of waking up and buying *Ducal* was not just a reminder of his lifestyle and country, but because it became a ritual of survival; the cans of beans are also now a symbol of poverty. When I invite my parents to dinner in California, they sometimes refuse, and afraid to waste money. Of course, I don't listen and we find ourselves eating out and enjoying the change of scenery and food. I replay these images in my mind, and I am led to think about the way food grounds my parents and my siblings. In particular, *Ducal* is linked to the memory of being poor, but it is now an indulgence. I continue to keep one can in my pantry because it has become so fastened to the stories of my father's life in Guatemala, but now we are both displaced from the places that these cans lived in we arrive at an in-between. We are both in the same place now in the road. Through the buying of a can of refried beans, my father, mother, brother, sister and I create a new memory, maintain it, and keep a Guatemalan root in our stomachs.

My father's identity as a storyteller is a narrative of the traveler. As a traveler, an immigrant, and a truck driver in the United States, he's experienced different facets of what it means to be displaced from his homeland, to relocate, and what it means to build a new life in his new country. These themes are evocative of Philip Levine's work and his portrayal of the working class. Thus Levine has become important to the work about my father. Levine was raised in industrial Detroit where he started working in auto factories at 14 years old. He was fascinated by those who worked jobs to make ends meet and get through every day; he was interested in stories as a way to understand poverty within his community. Levine's work depicting the working class parallel the poems I write about my father, the working class of his generation, and poverty, in general.

Levine's speaker in *What Work Is* is similar to the voice in my father's stories. An ongoing motif in my father's stories is the phrase "what work is." These poems that speak to this involve a continuous conversation with the idea of labor, as a father, as a husband and as a truck driver. They have become a reflection of his work life, how it is part of his identity and becomes symbolic of our family life. In Levine's poem I appreciate the attention of the act of working, to the mundane, and understand the importance of the smallest nuances of physical work:

We stand in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you're
old enough to read this you know that
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you. This is about waiting,
shifting from one foot to another,

feeling the light rain falling like mist
into your hair (Levine, 18).

These simple lines from Levine's poem set one to think about work, one's own reflections about 'work' and then to consider the poem as an address or lamentation to his brother. The poem also provides a balance between the speaker's identification with work he also introduces his brother to work and an "ode to work" appears. The first time I read this poem I thought about my father coming home late from work to greet us, kiss us goodnight, and watch TV late into the night. In this excerpt of "A Truckdriver's Paycheck," I illuminate those instances:

Every Sunday morning
my dad is always first to wake up.
I walk down the hall way
he looks at me
rubbing his worn out wallet,
slides it into his back pocket.
He's not wearing his work clothes
but his body carries the stench of diesel
and junk yards he visits to collect truck parts
by the sea. I imagine he's tired of waking up
at four a.m. each morning, sliding on
the same brown boots and safety
visibility vest for his late night shift...
The years are playing with his face,
the brown rings around his eyes,

the long nights of working
to come home to a microwaved meal,
and a tall glass of water, a cup of coffee,
and *pan dulce* from the *Concha* bakery,
just waiting for someone to thank him
for today's meal. (Garcia)

Most of my conversations with my father concerned work: the shipment that he took to Ontario, California, the men at the container yard who talked about how slow work was and that they were not going to make ends meet. Or the humor used to alleviate themselves from the responsibilities of having to pay bills, mortgage, rent, and feed their kids. This seemed like an ongoing conversation and concern that never ended. So my father's conversations at home were about these men, about how many containers he drove and how many he had prepared for the next day. On the days, when there was no work, my father would come back home silent, without a greeting for us. He'd open the refrigerator door and remain quiet—I knew he was worried. Some of the conversations he and my mother had concerned work but also how to “make it” that month. The idea of work also brings to mind my father's exhausted body and the stench of diesel as he turned the pages of my favorite book. This is in the poem “The Art of Flipping Pages:”

I know something about books. I know that each page is handled with care,
like a small feather picked from the ground. Also, one should know that each
page holds part of the story. Consider this, my father sat beside me, opened a
book and read to me. Its title I don't remember. The texture of its cover,
coarse like his hands, the smell of the diesel in his clothes. That I do
remember. I would stare at the words moving like a wave crashing against

the rocks. At the end of the page, he would lightly dab his middle finger against his tongue, sweep its corner, and say *each page should be turned slowly and thought about.* (Garcia)

In this case, work drives his storytelling and it is the active verb that reappears as an image throughout most of the poems. Without the movement of driving, physically pulling his body into the truck and then climbing down the truck stairs to proceed with his day involves action. It involves and understanding in the way that our bodies work and that they are in constant motion, dissolving themselves of worries, or taking more in. The conducting of work adds to the construction of histories. These are mini-stories of our days, of his days, as we go day-by-day learning how to overcome obstacles and digest the mysteries of our days.

Since most of my father's life is filled by work, Levine is important to the telling of these spaces and gives voice to the stories involving my father working to get to this country, working as a cook at a sandwich shop in L.A., and finally working as a truck driver to support the family. Overall, Levine's work has deeply influenced the way that I understand my father's storytelling. My father has the habit of making every day useful: a regimen to make sure he does one thing that involves work in the house, in the neighborhood, or fixing his car. The action of his work is what make his storytelling vital as if without physical work, he wouldn't have stories. His stories rely on observing the world and determining where "work needs to be done". Another important aspect of these lines are the movement of the feet and the rain—my father leaving for work every morning and on rainy mornings, he would still face the rain. As a truck driver, rainy days are not the safest for driving. All of this is to say that, Levine's work has deeply influenced the way that I understand my father's storytelling, as part of a working-class ethic and a lived experience.

Another aspect of my father that incorporates this idea of the storyteller is how he takes, constructs, and portrays their value. I imagine that the many people who have told him stories about their lives and their journeys—when they were robbed at gunpoint, to making through day and night without food, or the pranks pulled on people traveling through the different cities he’s lived in. He held onto these stories because there are clear connections which makes them part of his life, his experiences, and in these narratives, his own struggles are unveiled. This is how memory becomes vital to father’s journey out of Guatemala. He learned the ways in which he can recollect the most important memories, and then retell the stories. The selection of such memories shows how a storyteller is in constant flux with the external and internal stories which are later mixed, remembered, or forgotten.

When my father tells stories about his childhood, or about his adolescent years in Guatemala he is no longer in that physical space where the events occurred but as he retells the story, the long-ago living room or dining room are re-created and he is taken back to the exact moment when the event happened. Details are intact, there is no moment in which he questions the series of events, but instead remembers them clearly. This is fascinating. He also has the habit of enacting the stories as if it were a play, dressing up like one person and then quickly changing into the next outfit or particular detail that creates a distinction. Through these actions, my father wants to show how he is able to become the people he is telling a story about. His storytelling involves performing and acting. The acting out of scenes is the way my father shares the emotions and movements of stories. This style of telling stories is a ritual of sorts because my father believes in making the stories as real as possible. Also, he will look into the corner of the room and smile, then swallow and clear his throat if necessary. His listeners are drawn more deeply into the scene and analyze the

reasons why the person at conflict should have not gone forth with their decision. Slowly you understand the emotion and the unveiling of the final scene to the event. The energy in the room is fascinating and all are completely part of the story. When my father tells a story I am instantly hooked; the story not only takes on its own life, but makes the listeners conscious of their imaginations and move them to share the narrator's experience.

There are a variety of stories, but I love the story of my father traveling to California, is always magical, scary and breathtaking. Much of his trip to the U.S. was impacted by a series of events such as living in Mexico for a couple of years before finally making it to California, then walking very far distances—hitchhiking, and not having enough food. He was clearly in danger throughout his journey. There are images in his story that I don't quite grasp because in my imagination they are not entirely visible or are simply unimaginable. While the story of the immigrant is one that varies, the constant walking and sleeping in the desert is one that repeats. In my father's case, the image of him squatting through large water pipes to hide from *la migra* who were above him is one that I always think in connection to how much of his life was fraught with constant danger, hunger, and pain.

My father's journey is about hiding, breathing below the earth and so the thought of him traveling through these underground water pipes while rats moved alongside him is unimaginable. How does this relate to the ways in which my father is a storyteller? I think my father tells stories to free himself of those particular memories that he probably doesn't believe are true, but yet understands that they did happen to him. As a storyteller, my father doesn't necessarily free himself from memories, he actually digs through them. He ties them down and questions them, asks really how they happen and replays them over and over. He seeks for truth and so he is constantly in a flux between myth—what was said—and “the truth.” The truth doesn't just present itself easily but he is there searching for it. So much

that when he does find an answer, he will repeat the story to himself and discover something new. For him this newfound detail brings new weight to what he once thought was the truth of the story. Seeking the truth behind a story is how he feels at ease with what he can believe, push away, or have faith in. He is compelled to release his stories to the world because he wants the listeners to extrapolate the truth as well.

Physical journeys tend to shape us, and the surrounding landscape becomes a part of the experience. Understanding one's journey is important because sharing the details of the experiences can dramatically affect the way we remember it. Then we begin to examine where we fit - how we see ourselves in the changing landscape. I'd like to think that in any journey there is a constant looking back, a retrospect of what the self once was, and what the self is now. We reflect because we want to understand why or how we adapted. In many ways this is what continues to happen to me, and what happened to my parents. Slowly those stories begin to appear and soon arrives a new self. The same happens in those moments of storytelling when slowly the stories begin to take on different interpretations and they as well have new entities.

Meaningful stories remain with us metaphorically, follow us around like shadows. Eventually the storyteller is compelled to share the stories and they come in the form of morals, entangled in humor, or used for serious moments. Through storytelling occur moments of self-exploration, reflection as memories reappear over and over. As I write, I'm mindful of the idea I have for the poem but understand that it can go in an entirely different direction. Although I pay close attention to diction which forms the voice and identity of the poem, I also realize that I essentially have no control because it will eventually take on a life of its own. What I always keep in mind is where the poem came from and that I am responsible of its interpretation and how I retell it.

Every time that I start writing a new poem, I remember my father as I last saw him in May. I ask myself where I fit within the stories he's already told me, the ones I wasn't there for, or the those that I may be part of. He's overflowing with stories and he shares with me another part of his past every so often. I am still catching up on stories told five years ago. Meanwhile my mother in the same process, does the same. Here is the question: through this process, how do I, as an intermediary, express my own view of my family's American life juxtaposed with the lives they had in their native countries?

As a poet, I lived my childhood as a part of the United States, a child of Central American parents thus enriched by a Central American perspective, and living an American lifestyle. As well, when I present their stories in English I give voice to the present generation of Central American immigrant life. To be the "in-between" connects their world to a world few would otherwise know about. What does it mean to be in-between which is influential to my poetry, yet continues to shape my identity, and compels me to offer another glimpse of my parents' immigrant life? At the same time, in portraying these moments, I keep in mind that they have shared these stories with me to remind me of where I come from.

Poetry has allowed me to capture change, from the smallest, miniscule moments to more universal moments. Understanding how this change takes place allows me to think about landscape not just through the everyday, but through those small details. Being able to move throughout my day with this understanding, always impacted by place and the self, helps me to acknowledge that the system of "give and take" exists. This is true of the natural world. We live in a constant flux of giving to others, to things, to anything really (often when we don't expect it) and so we reciprocate, we take. I'd like to say there is a balance that allows for influences from the outside and from one's self. Thus one's physical surroundings

and what is already engrained in you allows access to information, emotions, actions, images, and so ideas (poems) are formulated.

The nature of storytelling is ultimately about giving and taking, and of retelling as a way to ensure that the stories endure. There is an abundance of gifts that have been passed to me and I've taken responsibility to pass them on. In writing these stories, creating images, conveying emotions, and translating from one language to another instills a growing awareness of the past. I write for those who have passed on, those who shared their stories, and those who are present.

I. Curse

If my grandmother Santos
had not fallen in love with a black man,
married him, and had six kids
I'd wouldn't know what it is to fall in love
with a black boy. I wouldn't know
what it is to run away from home,
live inside a silver car, and lose my family.
I remember when I was ten,
my Abuela Santos would slip
her rings onto my fingers. The rings left a green
stain on her fingers. This is how I knew
they were fake. It was then that I'd ask her,
who gave them to you? She'd say "Your step grandfather."
Another time, when I was seventeen,
I asked her about Abuelo Roberto,
how it felt to be with a black man, she did not respond.
That day she told me that
my first boyfriend would be black.

II. e-go-is-mo

Maybe if Jose had never met my grandmother Vicky
I'd know who my grandmother truly is.
I wouldn't find her giving and giving to this man.
I wouldn't find her labeling presents: *Para Melisa*, *De Jose*.
From this, I will not marry for material goods:
a new microwave, a new fridge, a can opener, a remodeled
kitchen, a new car. Her favorite verse in the Bible
says *it is better to give than receive*. The truth
is she's been waiting to receive. She continues
to give, give to Jose, what he doesn't want to give to her.
If she would have never met him, I'd know who she truly is.
I've also learned that I can't fall in love with objects,
but only with a heart.

III. A Foreign Heart

If my mother had never met my father,
if she had never listened
to his heart
I wouldn't know how
to listen with my eyes.
I wouldn't know how to listen
to a heart that is not yours.
To understand that the heart can see each movement,
moving up or even side to side.

As they've listened
to each other's hearts, to the hollow thumps,
how it expands after each beat,
but then synchronizes
to match the slow rhythm of the other.
All my mother could do is hold
onto that sound, onto the vibration
of my father's heart
and hold the hand of the man she loves.

A *Guayaba's* Heart

Every time I cut
into a guayaba,
I think about my mother
climbing to the top of trees,
picking up at the ends of her dress
to make a pouch for the fruit.
I see her peeling back the yellow skin
with her teeth, as the pink flesh
appears, the veins wrapped around,
holding in the seeds.

She'd say, cup your hand
below your mouth and spit
out the clump of seeds.
I'd look at them while sitting
in the backyard both of us glaring up
at the sky to focus at Orion's belt
connected by a stringy cloud.
I asked why she hid at the very tops
of trees late at night.
She said she was hiding
from her father
who would come home drunk
from the *cantinas*.
She would climb down
from the tree
when she heard him snoring
through the back window.

As we pulled guayabas from the trees
she picked up the bruised one
from the grass and held it.
My mother hardly mentions
my Abuelo Toño,
she held the blackened guayabas,
she muttered to me: *cuando su corazón
ya no dio mas, lo perdoné*. When his heart
gave out, I forgave him.
Every time I slice a guayaba,
I look at the pink halves, I think about
the heart, its bruises, and how it stops.

My Mother's Birth in El Salvador

Opening to see an eye
quickly to the birth of land
like hips that shake
a third floor studio apartment
throng between the sway
warmth of my grandmother
night tangled in a red blanket
to think
this is what is not felt
whispers move
the land shakes

Bare feet splintered
cracked skin
eat words for us
replant them like weeds
with a fist, hands cupped
bound with closure
protect: mothers do this

If breath is held
death arrives
if it is strong
the inhale of tremors
no exhale exists
only bubbles do
from above the door
pushed against force
my grandmother pressed her hands
against white sheets
above her swayed
the chandelier, the light

Like a womb
the blanket swoops
an orange-red
a body inside
mother cradle swoon
an up-down rattle
off to side to side to side
by the force and slurp
the door is eaten

Abrazadora

My mother hugs trees
to find their width.
She measures them with her arms
like measuring tape.

She told me the story
of wanting a green papaya
from a tree that her Papa Chico
told her to not to climb. She did
climb that papaya tree
and reached the highest branch
to see if she could touch the sky.

I've never climbed trees, touched
their bark, or stared up to see
their gray-brown branches.

In 5th grade, I argued
with my mother to let me walk
to school by myself.
I wanted to cross
between the two yellow lines.
I know now my mother pretended
she was safe when climbing those large trees,
as if an imaginary net below protected her.

She grew up where the grass was taller,
she'd create a hole in the wet earth
and packed it with large leaves
to create a trampoline. She knows about nature
the way leaves twirl from up above
towards the wet earth, they want to be
on the ground. She says
that mangoes and papayas dropped down like bombs
exploding. She scoops the remains in her hands,
licks her cupped hands
to ensure they don't go to waste.

My mother misses her country.
The short steps she'd have to take
to get to the open playground. To feel
the wet earth beneath her feet,
and to no longer feel the pain of not having
a mother or father. She thinks of her country
and remembers the leaves, the vines, the moss,
the small insects that would curl under the burrows.

The guayabas she picked but never ate.
She jumped vines to reach the sun, to fly.

On Hands
for Andrew

Even long before we're in love
our hands are tempted
to touch fire, to graze the small flame.
Our hands have felt the steam
billowing out of my grandmother's
pot of *caldo* every Sunday afternoon,
after she's pressed her hands
against the handmade tortillas
to quickly heat them.

Our hands have felt the drops of rain
that first slide off eucalyptus leaves
before landing on the top of our fingers
and rolling down the grooves of our knuckles
when a fist is formed.
The clouds expand like my hands,
they leave gaps and they extend
towards the sun, cradling it,
and eventually covering its rays.

My hands cover my eyes from the sun
when the clouds hang low,
and do not provide shade.

For those who can't speak,
their hands are like tongues
that roll and sway in sentences
the first time I used sign language
and told you the sky is blue.

Even before we're in love
we learn to touch the petals
of a sunflower
those petals fall apart,
from the power in our hands.

Orquídeas and War, El Salvador 1980

The sun appeared through an open mouth in the clouds. Little children lounged on the metal sheet plated rooftops of the neighbor's houses. Other played *canicas*, drawing a circle on the wet earth, then flicking the marble with their thumbs to hit their opponent's. Then my mother climbed the same mango tree so she could see everything. Sap dripped and made her curly hair sticky and tangled. She climbed up to the top, the smaller branches pulled at the ends of her dress like hands, exposing her polka dotted underwear to the people down below. The leaves scratched her hairy legs. My mother would go up to the top of that tree in fear that the men in the green uniforms would come into her home, and take her away.

Even before the war began, she knew something was wrong. Papa Chico always talked to the neighbors about the men in green uniforms, how they came into the town questioning them. From up in the tree my mother focused her attention on the male lilac spotted orchids below her, bent over like the backs of the villagers when the military came in and took their children. Their heads bowed obeying the voices of the soldiers ordering them not to resist, not to move, to give up. My mother left before the war started.

She says the breeze never cooled any who died, that villagers' arms, legs and hands melted like petals. They were left to disintegrate with the dandelions bivouacking among chipped ribcages.

La Costurera

My grandmother's dress is sticky
around her armpits/ *la humedad*.
La costurera/she pumps the sewing
machine pedal/ *la pompa/ la pompa*

My grandmother would sit/ *su espalda jorobada*.
Wiping sweat from her temple.
Her daughters, little babies splashing
in the washbasin/ *tiemblan de frio*.

Her daughters let out loud cries,
the rays of the moonlight slip/ *deslizan*
en el agua/my grandmother stops the machine.
She leaves Don Juan's shirt, the patch
she'd been working on half-done/ *no lo termino*.

She powders/ *talcos*/on her babies'
bottoms. She curls their hair
with her fingers. Wraps them
in/ *costuras de ropa*/old worn
shirts patched with black thread.

My grandmother pumps
the sewing machine pedal/ *la pompa/*
la pompa/connects two blankets,
covers her children/ *la pompa/*
la sabana/ la humedad/ el sudor.

Toño

My Abuelo always wore *guayaberas*,
letting his gold necklace
hang over the coiled hair on his chest
as he hugged me.

At his home in Los Angeles
he'd take up his accordion
and play *Vicente Fernández* songs
and yell "*Sigo Siendo El Rey*"
as if howling to the moon.
His deep voice emphasized
every curse word in Spanish—
chingao'
as if it were a prayer.

He loved fried fish on lettuce leaves,
and small red tomatillos with lemon,
and cup of *borchata*.
He seemed healthy—
eating out with him
meant having
pupusas, platanos fritos, pastelitos,
and *tamales*.

He never mentioned the tiny holes
on his forearm which turned to scabs.
Every week I saw him
press the top of a syringe
against his forearm. The liquid
inside looked like the shots I got at the doctor,
where I'd cry from the pinch.
My grandfather didn't cry.
He'd cover the syringe,
still sitting in his rocking chair
and gaze out the bedroom window.

The day my Abuelo died,
his friend played a bolero.
I was four years old
and thought he'd wake up
from a nap. I didn't look
at his body in the mahogany coffin.
I imagined the small scars
on his forearm blending
into his pale skin, like the holes
on the green walls of his living room
where he hung framed photographs

of us—his family.

Now, I picture Abuelo with
his accordion, stretching it out
squeezing in, dancing
to his favorite ballad called *De Noche*
looking down at me,
placing his finger under my chin,
the miniature craters
on his forearm disappeared.

Pomegranate & Silence

I dislike finding a carcass, hollow
with secrets swept under a rug
and on the side lies wrapped in purple *rebozos*.
Trapped underneath my grandmother's
lengua are these words:

Mija, eres bella. Mija eres bonita.

My grandmother slices pomegranates
into quarters, the juice streams out.
Seeds hold onto juice. Lies hidden
under cupped hands. In her hand
she holds the juice, some of it seeps,
what does she hold onto?

Silence.

How do these pomegranates grow?
She watered them each day.
She watered them overnight.
They were large bulbs weighing down
over a dirt garden. Did my mother
see grenades, landing and exploding
in the corn fields?

Blood *rojo*

Why doesn't my grandmother
remember my mother
beautifully wedged between a tree and earth?

Lost Love

My grandmother knows
the tongue
of my grandfather's ghost
like bricks it presents itself to her.
Dark and grey.
His ghost is also like this.

We are taught to believe
we can wave
our hands through a ghost,
but they were wrong.
What would my grandfather's
tongue
say if it were a ghost?
A secret, or a lie?
Would it demand answers
about his sudden death,
the lost love from my grandmother,
or would it ask who Jose is?

Maybe he'll present facts,
add more to the fiction.
Would he build a tree with the letter "e".
Or would he order
my grandmother
to be mute because her tongue
is now a ghost?

Sitting Next to a Woman Named Marina at a New Year's Party, 2013

I could not tell if the moon
was circular that night—the clouds
bit off its edges, sunflower shaped.
I listened to the same words
me vale me vale me vale me vale me vale.
Marina, a woman my mother
knows from school speaks about love—
habla sobre el amor—as if she could predict the future.

My mother says: *como que esta amargada.*
She's bitter about life.
I think about that word: *amargada.*
A pot of black beans left unrefrigerated
for three days. This woman seeks happiness,
but shows the world she doesn't care
by proclaiming she can do it on her own.

The moon, cut by clouds, now
set on fire at the edges. Marina says
that her Korean-Guatemalan husband
climbs through the window at 5 a.m., drunk.
Every weekend night he attempts this.
She sits in her velvet love chair waiting for him,
while she sips on her black coffee and looks
at the carrot cake she made earlier that day.
A knife is tucked right under it.
She says in that moment as he crawled in
she grabbed the knife and in front of me
yells to the air, cursing his absent body:
con esto te voy a cortar.

She says to me: *Sea fuerte hija, no te dejes.*
The knife in her hand, her lips pursed up,
assuring me that a knife
could scare her husband away,
could scare any man away,
and more importantly heal her heart. Her lips careless
about kissing someone, they are scared shut now.
She lives with that knife
tucked under her pillow, the moon won't shine
through her window. A sunflower dangling
among shadow, alone, and to itself.

Habanero Chiles & Marriage

When I was ten, I would play in my grandmother's backyard, digging holes with the sticks that would twirl down from the tree above—an attempt to imitate her, to imitate the constant thrusting of the cape-cod weeder in the dirt.

A small red placard hung from the fence that read—*para Jose*. The man she met in the 1980s and married two days after my grandfather died from a heart attack. I think I know now why my grandmother had a special area in the garden for the red, green, and orange habanero chiles.

She wanted to grow something for *Jose*, to remind him of how much she cared. Moving each stalk of habaneros from pot to pot, inevitably the habaneros would dry and break off. I would find them in the pockets of her apron. The habaneros, brown and dried like prunes.

She did this to hide the truth; Jose didn't love her; this is what she had planted all along.

Noctua

The other day I learned that owls have three eyelids:
one for cleaning, one for blinking, and one for sleeping.
My grandmother cleans the kitchen tiles over and over
with 409. She has bottles of Pine Sol, Fabuloso, and Ajax
and piles of rags cut from old white and gray t-shirts.
She uses these to clean the front windows.
She sprays them with Windex, the liquid runs down
the windows and she wipes the glass until it disappears.

Maybe my grandmother just can't sleep
because cobwebs grow in her husband's bedroom
and he forgets to clean them. They hover over him
as the spider builds its web in the corner of the room.

He leaves at dusk to go for a long walk, and doesn't return
until midnight. My grandmother's eyes never close, so like an owl,
she never sleeps. Recently she's lost track of things,
like the shoes she gave my mother last week. Slipping
on the black sandals, she tells my mother, "You can't take
what is not yours." She also forgot about the twenty dollars
she mailed me last week to buy groceries. When I remind
her, I can tell there are gaps—things are missing.

So like blinking, these gaps are continuous—after each blink
the image is blurred, the tiles in her kitchen are not clean,
the cobwebs forgotten, and maybe one day
my name will be wiped clean too.

Image of my Grandfather

My grandmother will never forget
the smell of my Abuelo's body
heavy, liquor sweat, and grizzly.
I have stopped returning
her calls in an effort to have
her sit back, recall, erase, whatever
it is that she wants to do.
Does she not miss my grandfather?

My grandmother will never forget
the touch of a man,
the man she always loved,
but because of his late night shifts,
money for extra booze, he never came home.
She will reminisce about my grandfather
the drunk, not my Abuelo, the plumber.
Yes, memory deceives the heart
plenty of times,
but like a vein of water, it moves.

She recalls his face, the wide opening
of his mouth as he shouted at her.
She still senses the tough grasp
of his coarse hand, slicing the side
of her face leaving a red hand print.
She touches her face to remember the blow.
On days when the wind gusts loudly
and sand hits the side of her lonely room,
she hears him call her name:
Maria Victoria.

The deep tone vibrates the walls,
her ear drums catch the chant of her name
and his voice is caught in her throat.
So when she speaks, instantly
she covers her mouth, and then what?
I've asked my grandmother plenty of times
if she ever loved Abuelo Toño, she nods
to the side. She rubs her hands together and looks
back at me. She begins to clean her album collections,
in one stack she has old photos that are turning
brown at the edges. In another, photos
to begin a new album. In another stack
photographs of my grandfather. I ask her what she plans
to do with his pictures. She looks at me, walks away
and brings a plastic bag. *Throw them away* she says.

I take the photo of my grandfather at a church pulpit,
reading a Bible to a large crowd.
This is the image I carry of my Abuelo,
the new memory
of him.

The Flowers
After Ernestina

On Cedar Ave lives a woman:
there are vases all around her house.

Some the size of my palm,
others as tall as her eldest son.

Her husband, cleans lawns the size of pools.
Pools filled with leaves he rakes them

clean. He climbs the tallest trees, he cuts
the branches down. He looks up at them,

sees their leaves unfurl. He thinks
about their weight. As he heads up the tree he hangs

from one branch, to another branch
as if he told the branch to push him higher.

As he reaches the tallest branch,
the sky is his roof, blue and like stucco. This man,

this man loves the smell of wet dirt. He keeps lines
of cabbage, broccoli, mint leaves ready to be used

by his wife. She appreciates this because
in the vases in her house, she doesn't place

real flowers—she is too afraid to see a rose, a tulip,
a carnation die. She places flowers in each vase

never moving them—leaving them to gather dust and memories.

Let it not stand alone, without life.
Give the garden its justice.

Watching *Telemundo*

Apparitions of the Virgin Mary
on the bark of a tree,
or the condensation
on the glass door forming her face,
her hands together in prayer.

I don't remember the Virgin Mary
because of Catholicism,
but because she always appeared
on the 6:00 pm breaking news,
as my grandmother
came in through the door
after a day of cleaning houses.

We'd turn to channel 52
the rest of the night,
hearing about the U.S.-Mexican border
and the million-dollar fence Bush built,
always getting higher, and
immigrants crossing. Flood survivors
in Guatemala riding in boats, shirtless men
in faded blue jeans, ripped at the knee.
The villagers search for survivors in homes and trees.

A serial killer in California has been caught
although more are waiting in the underground
parking lots and back booths at McDonald's.
My Abuela sits down, serves me a plate of pinto
beans rolled up in corn tortillas,
turns up the volume on a segment
about deportation. She stirs her hot chocolate
and the steam billows. I imagine reporters
saying the steam is the Virgin Mary.
I think of our chances of having a happy life,
maybe ordering steak in a restaurant
and wave my hand through it,
as if to erase it.

Every Prayer from Grandmother is like this

My grandmother prays in three languages:

To the Spirit en *Español*: *lo mejor esta en el cielo*
To God she whispers *que onda* maybe only then he can hear her
To the Son she glances over
but forgets how to speak and mouths [run, arrive, mourn]

To the Spirit en *Español*
Recuerda I am the shadow,
but forgets how to speak and mouths [run, arrive, mourn]
Because she forget to kneel and search for the ghost / God / Son

Recuerda, I am the shadow.

The words are absent / fly / verb
She forgets to kneel and search for the ghost / God / Son
and then is left with wedged prayers and sun and gloom

The words are absent / fly / verb
She wants to forget the Son but live with the ghost
and then is left wedged prayers and sun and gloom
the shadow tells her *a si es como trabajo* while she reads a verse

The House Cleaner's Gifts
for Abuela Vicky

Hundreds of paper towels
and toilet rolls are
stuffed inside her closet.
She stacks them on the top shelf
where there is nothing
but small moth balls
in each corner.

She saves them for us.
Some can be found inside
the J.C. Penney plastic clothes covers,
there are probably ten rolls there.

The metal hangers bend
from all the weight. I always ask
my grandmother: Why do you keep
so many paper towels and toilet rolls?

The good thing is she brings me
one or two rolls when she visits
me in Riverside. I don't have a closet
full of them, but every time
I take a roll out of the closet,
I remember her.

She presses rolls and rolls
into her purse, or into a black
trash bag, hoping her bosses won't see her.
She says that they never notice,
they are too preoccupied signing her checks.

What a business!

So the weekly regimen
is clean a house with their paper towels,
take paper towels.
Take toilet rolls.

Give them away.
Give paper away.

Elegy for Abuelo Toño

*Al primer muerto nunca lo olvidamos, aunque muera
de rayo, tan aprisa que no alcance la cama ni los óleos.*
– Octavio Paz

At dawn, I remember the dead in my house.
Grandfather, you come back
to me here and in my memory. The sound
of the accordion—a deep tone welcoming
you today. Your accordion
breathes
extending side to side.

You left when I was young and I didn't
asked my mother what time you died.
It is possible that you died
around the time night and morning meet.
This is when you took your last breath
towards the sky. You appear to me when night
battles light, turning on and off.

If you were to return you'd glide in a cloud,
grey-opaque, full of silver lighting.
At times, a red streak comes through,
touching the earth, like a string of murmurs.
Messages of living, of dreaming, of music—
so strong like the pulses of the heart.
Through the music of the accordion, your voice
is a soft ballad. Each note like a spider's web
with a pulse that grows long, and connected
slower and steadier until they are bound by silence.

Linguistics of a Christian

My grandmother must wish
to create a new life. She opens
her Bible, points to a verse
and memorizes the words
but not its meaning.

When we speak
we remember the sounds.
The (duh) Lord (Lrd)
El (ehl) Señor (seh-ñor)
My grandmother remembers God
through sounds.

My grandfather tried to kill
her when
he found out she had fallen
in love with another man.

There are days when voices
are all she can hear. Her
body shivers at the thought
of my grandfather's voice.
"So-lo-te-a-mo-Vee-qui".

She keeps the past enclosed
within every syllable
each death
entangled like a puzzle.
She can't
finish this puzzle, but she
reads the Bible through the syllables.

Habito

My grandmother Vicky often gives the world money.
She gives the church she attends each dollar
from cleaning kitchen counters at Joan's house,
and with every pair of earrings she creates and sells
for a dollar each. She keeps one dollar
and gives a dollar. *Es una ofrenda.* She says
this is an offering; with this your blessings
are counted and multiplied. Ten percent-*diez por ciento*
should always be taken from
your pay and given to the church:
this way your earnings will multiply.
My grandmother misses the meaning
in this, but continues this religious habit.
Todo se multiplica cuando lo ofrecemos a Dios.
I have to tell her that everything from the earth multiplies.
Like the colors of the sky, the rain clouds collect
water and when heavy, drop closer to the earth.
She keeps money in a small purse in a tiny box
hidden from her husband. This small
box is in her underwear drawer, underneath
her favorite bra—the black flowered sequined one.

This is the way a secret starts: a rain cloud not
sharing the weight of water. If this is her way of showing,
then show and don't tell us. Don't think about missing
the dollar, the unmade house payment.
She doesn't tell her husband how much money
is in her bank account or the hidden money.

We pick things like leaves and crunch them with our feet.
They remain only in our memory.

Escandalo Doce

Dale-dale-dale
Ya le diste una,
ya le diste dos;
ya le diste tres,
y tu tiempo se acabó.
My time is never up,

I hear them screaming:
Melisa, ya se acabo tu turno.
Melisa, your turn is up.
Y le pego duro otra vez,
miren todos los dulces.
And I hit it hard again,
look at all the candy.

I swing the bat forward,
drop it to the ground
and look down.
While some run to get the bat,
a few run to gather the piñata candy.
On the grass are melted Lafty-Taffy's,
and trampled Tootsie Rolls.
Nails scratch at the dirt,
like they are digging for treasure.
In between my legs
crouched on all four,
I scooped each candy closer, each sucker,
a handful of wrapped or unwrapped chocolates closer.
My dome-body protects
my candy. *Mis dulces,*
que yo arranque de las manos
de todos los otros.
These are my candy,
that I have taken from the hands of others.
Mis dulces.

Dear Long Beach

a mirror to the front of me and an ocean behind

– Carmen Giménez Smith

I wonder Long Beach, how you feel about me?
Did you notice I never took into account your ocean?

You know, your blue-green waters
are what I see when I dream.

Now that I am no longer with you,
I long for the shade of magnolia trees.

When I see the leaves from the trees change
to orange-brown here in Albuquerque,

I imagine magnolia petals falling slowly
and the aroma calming wet earth.

It is then I remember the breeze that slid
through my window—the heavy crisp salt water.

During the winter, the rain and wind deflowers
the trees overnight, white sidewalks of stepped-on magnolias.

Albuquerque, a brown muscle, shadowed by the sun and clouds.
The land flat with small hills.

Long Beach, you must be waiting with two hands
cupping water for me. Wait for my return.

Learning to Trust at the Port of Long Beach

That night the fog hung low, the headlights
of my father's burgundy Toyota van pushed
against the mist. He bought this van
a few months ago because my brother
could not ride in small compact cars.

I sat in the passenger's seat, my brother
in the back seat with his head out the window.
The moon sprawled its light
across the slow waves, the cliff rocks
glistened as the clouds drifted past the moonlight.

My father was taking us to the edge of the cliff
where a big ship floated close to the harbor,
headed to the large cranes which pulled
metal shipment containers
onto a large dock. Our seatbelts strapped tight
though we pulled on the belt buckle over and over.

He told us to hold onto the edge of the cushioned seats
as he lightly let go of the brake. The tires pressed
against the gravel as the car moved forward.

My father watched my brother through the rear view mirror.
I pressed my hand against the condensation of the window
as if leaving a sign. I looked over at my father again,
the brake was released. A cloud cradled the moon
in the night sky, the car moved forward closer to the edge
of the cliff, my brother's head out the window.
I looked up at the water while my father pointed at the moon.

Standing Wave

*La manera en que se forma la ola,
como de la nada, y como se rompe.
Tenue aguamarina*

– Cristina Rivera Garza

When I was younger, my feet were bigger
than the rest of my body. Every Sunday,
my parents took my brother and I
to stand by the shore, to see the waves
split in different directions and chase after us.
Like a mouth, the Pacific would pull
us in.

There was no escape.

My brother knee deep in water,
moves to my side, torsion waves
push us away
and we are not allowed as part
of its space.

The waves collapse like fists
forced in the same direction.
We'd point at the next wave coming our way,
then think it's short, and steady as a feather.
But we were always wrong.

I could see my feet,
hands by my side
as the water bubbled around my calves.
My brother's hands hidden
under white spumes.
The salt water is a sibling
becomes part of our skin.
Ripple, ripple, ripple.
The water swallows
my brother whole.

Another wave approaches him.
The distance of the waves is not known,
and don't react against each other but flow.
I think about my brother,
how waves converge
when earthquakes arise,
and push themselves against each other
and never worry
about touching, or becoming one.

Escandalo Ocho

The carousel turned and turned
as my friend Malcom from Lafayette,
sat atop one of the
carousel horses, looking down at me.

*Melisa, si tienes que ir al baño
vamos.*

In my white collar shirt
and blue shorts, I stood
in rebellion. My arms crossed,
and one sock pulled up higher
than the other.

Ma ma, vamos al baño
my father pleaded.
Melisa, toma mi mano
with his hand extended,
signaling that taking his hand
would get us to safety.

And of course, he was trying
to avoid another *escandalo*.

Malcom's turn on the carousel
continued and I stood
not taking my father's hand
and the small stream of pee
trickled down the walkway
to customers with groceries
and into the parking lot.

Escandalo Cinco

My father squeezed
my hand when I made an *escandalo*
at Lucky the Supermarket

Callate!

That is what happens
when I scream twice,
he squeezes my hand a second time—
the *escandalo* escalates.

Puchica!

Only aisles
separate us from the exit—
I wanted was a new Crayola box
with 46 crayons.

What I didn't know
was my father used
the last twenty-dollars
on groceries.

A Truck Driver's Paycheck

Every Sunday morning
my dad is always first to wake up.
I walk down the hall way
he looks at me
rubbing his worn-out wallet,
slides it into his back pocket.
He's not wearing his work clothes
but his body carries the stench of diesel
and junk yards he visits to collect truck parts
by the sea. He's tired of waking up
at four a.m. each morning, sliding on
the same brown boots and safety
neon visibility vest for his late night shift.
He still places his key chain,
wallet, and cellphone on his dresser—
still wears dark blue jeans,
held tight by a black leather belt.
The years play with his face,
brown rings around his eyes—
the long nights of working
to come home to a microwaved meal,
a tall glass of water, a cup of coffee,
and pan dulce from the Concha bakery.

He wishes for someone to thank him
for the day's meal.

El Chicle Real

*Woodcutter. Cut my shadow from me.
Free me from the torment of seeing myself without fruit.
– Federico Garcia Lorca*

Maybe everything is slow for a reason;
The cracks in the asphalt
continue to grow, and my sneakers
become a part of the earth
underneath the cement. Big blocks,
like Guatemalan *chuchitos*.

I've seen so many pieces of *chicle*
I forget that gum also exists in Long Beach.

In Guatemala the tall, poised
Manilkara trees
are scrapped for gum.
Now they are scarce,
Wrigley refuses
to use the trees to make gum.
My father says the gum isn't real now.

In the 1990s
Sesame Street taught me
that gum was scraped
from underneath the bark—
scraped and scraped.

My father did not scrape any trees,
but he came from the country
where Manilkara trees grow.
I also come from there
but I have never seen Guatemalan
land or its trees.

In my daydreams,
they are featherless,
flapping their green wings.
All the *quetzales* with their feathers
in the tar, tantra and tea leaves.
I never seen them.
My father has seen this.
The feathers now fall
into my eyes in dreams,
then trapped in a large tar pit.

When I retrieve them,
they stick to me and the *quetzal*
on its back doesn't move.
I pluck the *quetzales* feathers,
one by one, until it has no longer has wings.
It sticks now to the Manilkara trunk.

Sorting Frijoles out of Superstition

The first time my grandmother
visited us from Guatemala,
she sat at the dinner table,
arms resting on top of each other.
She smiled watching my brother
and I as we ate. I sprinkled salt
but missed the plate spilling
some onto the table and my lap.
She stared, and then surprised
me as she grabbed
the shaker from my hand
and threw salt across her shoulders,
and mumbled *por favor perdonanos*—
asking God for forgiveness.

That summer my *Abuela Santos*
sat alone in the dining room,
her back hunched forward.
She wanted to make *frijoles negros*:
she took a jar of beans from the cupboard,
and began to sort the small beans
from the larger ones.
She counted the small beans
from the bigger beans.
She parted five small beans,
and broke them in half.
She asked me to join her,
pointed at the rotten beans
and said *mira estan pudridos*.
She took the fifth bean
and snapped it in half,
and from the end of the broken bean,
a small worm popped out and uncurled.

Now as I sort beans,
I think about the trapped worms
behind the bean shells
and how my grandmother could snap
them open knowingly.

The Mother Tables

“At birth we know everything, can see into the shimmer of complexity.”

– Joy Harjo

Uno.

My mother’s dinner table is long.

My sister sits on a stool
next to the tree stump
my father brought one day.

My father sits facing south.
My brother sits facing north.
My mother sits facing east.
I sit facing west.

My mother places a dark green vase
without flowers. They adorn
the table as it wastes away.

This table
is where stories are exchanged.
Stories about El Salvador,
mango trees, the corn fields,
and *Papa Chico*—her grandfather.

She drinks coffee with toast.
She picks at the breadcrumbs
with wet fingertips.
This is where the sun
slips through the blinds.

Dos.

My Grandmother Vicky’s table
is always covered by a table cloth.
Her table is round. In the center sits
a vase with pink tulips.

She sits alone facing east.
Her husband eats in his bedroom.
She admires the slant
of the sun by the kitchen window.
A bowl of oatmeal with the steam
billowing up. My Grandfather Toño
and El Salvador

come to mind as she gazes
at the key holder by the door,
written on it: *Que viva El Salvador!*
She recalls her mother making fresh dough,
mangoes cut fresh in fourths,
and fresh picked corn on the cob
popping over a fire.

Tres.

My Grandmother Santos
has four tables in her house.
There are no tablecloths, and vases.
No tulips or carnations.

On one table clothes
are in piles, some hanging from the edge.
Old shoes, dirty shirts.
She can't sit at that table.

On the small table,
she has pictures of her grandchildren
in America. To the side, her *quetzales*
adorn the table. Her rings sit
on the table by money.

There are days that the table
is illuminated by sunlight.
On other days the blinds
are closed. The tables
are always covered
with numerous objects.
She never moves them.

Eat Dirt for Doubt

My mother often tells the story
about eating dirt
moving daisies from the garden
to feed her craving.
The dirt my mother ate
must have shifted the land.
Was I created from dirt?
I was in my mother's belly,
I rolled to the side of her *panza*
to be exact, with my legs crossed.
There is a constant movement,
like the rumble of an earthquake,
I was there.
Where earth must have shaken,
the *panza* walls jiggled.
Then I was born.

Tierra que sabe a dulce.

My mother loves the taste of dirt.
Chocolate candy earth. Rough
like rocks. Heavy on the throat.
Then comes the release,
clarity, air and how she
can't let go. Eating dirt to her
and my grandmother was a pact.
Grounds pressed against each other,
small and forced, but strong.
She must have eaten dirt
to recall the wet earth of El Salvador,
to recognize the trails of the planet's
core, to never forget her life.

Five Fantasy Five, Please

A walk to the liquor store for my father
consists of rubbing his thumbs against
his pointer finger, as if snapping. Looking

up to the sky and thinking about *luck*.
The meek search for it but what he thinks about
is *faith*—seeing what is not there.

A gallon of milk half-empty. A week passes,
my mother's friend gives us two gallons
of whole milk.

My father sells the recycling my grandmother
collected from the houses she cleans. He gathers
them in plastic bags, crushes them, counts them one

by one. He thinks of the five gallons of water.
I've thought about money, about milk, and about
water, as well. He's searched the cabinets in the house

for pennies, dimes, nickels. Hoping that after some
time at least one drawer will be miraculously filled with them.
He doesn't like to play to get lucky. When he hands the Middle Eastern

man five dollars he says "*Five Fantasy Five, Please.*"
The man hands him the yellow-orange ticket,
smiles and tucks the five-dollar bill into the cash register.

My father walks home, thinking under the white stars about
the water, about the milk given to us, about the recycled bottles.
He rubs his fingers once again, ponders about the chances of winning,
of finding God. "Faith", he says "comes to you."

Egg Yolk Knees

My mother climbed trees as a child, so she wasn't happy that her daughter's legs looked like the colors of a globe—patches of land in pink, blue, purple, and green. When I was five, there was a *nopal* tree my mother watered daily that perched forward like a pitchfork ready to stab me. On days when the neighborhood children were exploring, I'd forget it was there, and scrape my legs against its spines. I'd build tall castles from cardboard boxes and crouch on all fours through the flap of the door. Again I would cut my knees.

These openings were like tiny cracks in the pavement oozing with blood. These openings were the wounds of my childhood, the scars healing and opening again. Every night before bed, my mother would crack eggs into a bowl, and beat them until they were thick and foamy. My mother never expected a reckless tomboy collecting cuts and bruises the way someone collects stamps. She'd place me on the kitchen counter and spread the bubbly residue over my legs—spinning them into a cocoon.

My Father's Thoughts

My father presses his ear against the side of his truck;
listening to the engine, waiting for a deep voice,

his stepfather pressing the brake, then releasing the pedal

again and again...he remembers semi-trucks
on the cobble stone highways of his homeland,

his stepfather's instructions:
to drive a semi-truck, you must keep your eyes open!

My father listens to himself, the little boy in Guatemala,
el niño sin papa, his feet hidden under mud that later flakes off.

Walking all day he recalls the jetting halt
of the engine belt and his real father returns,

his stepfather disappears. In the morning newspaper my father
reads about another death in Mexico, sits behind the steering wheel,

pulls a yellow button, releases brake. He looks back at his daughter
in the truck bed—mushroom cut jet black hair. He says to her,

“un con-tay-ner mas, el chasis del troque, el chofer.” My father's heart beats
like the air of a shell, breathes out waves of sand.

Tap Dance Shoe Shine

The story goes something like this:
My father asks the shoe shining man
if he can take his job for the day.
My father tells him that he doesn't have money
for beans, rice, and milk.

He explains that he is the oldest of six
and they have been asleep all day.
They don't speak much because
they are hungry. He convinces the shoe
shining man. The man gives him
the shoe shining kit.

The next thing that happens is unlikely.
His stepfather buys tap dancing shoes
from neighbor down the block.

He is tap dancing
at this moment.

My father is shining shoes, and scrubbing
while earning one quetzal per [pair of shoes].

This is what happens when his stepfather dances:
my father's siblings look at him, slightly pick up
their heads, their stomachs churn.

Meanwhile he is covered in black polish.
that is now under his nails. Under his eyes,
on his knees while his back is hunched
Meanwhile his stepfather dances in the living room.
The hunger continues.

Then it happens like this:
my father gets home. Tap dancing shoes slap
the wooden floor like spoons that are
dropped in the kitchen. One spoon, a second one,
and another one,
and another one.

He opens the door and steps in. His feet hurt
from sandals that are worn out.
My father's looks at his stepfather's shoes.
The spoon hits the kitchen floor again.

Calcite Tooth

One Sunday
you gave me
that shark tooth
hanging from
a silver chain.

Abuelo Roberto,
you told me that
you picked the tooth
from the open
mouth of a purple
shark. You said:
desde atras
se lo arranque
I pulled it
from the back.

You made me believe
that the throats
of sharks are endless,
tunnels with slime,
calcite teeth
and darkness.

I don't know
I don't know
where that tooth went.

Escandalo Tres

*Quieres un ice cream?
Melisa, tienes que portarte bien,
y te compro un ice cream.*

The tall aisles of Pic 'N' Save
collapse inward
like a tent.
My mother told me:

te quedas en mi vista
“Stay in my sight.”

All I could see
was the endless shelves
of crayons, pencils,
coloring books and paper.

Melisa...
My mother's faint voice
calls me
from the cookware
aisle. Her hands reaching
for my hands as I swing
forward to grab the box
of 100 crayons.

*No hay dinero. No hay dinero
para eso, Melisa.*

The aisle caved in,
became dark.
She was the end
of a tunnel.
Honestly all
I saw were the 100 crayons
sprawled on my bedroom floor.

No hay dinero.

Sí hay, I pleaded my mother.
Sí hay, yes there is.
Sí hay, sí hay, yes there is.
Is there a problem, mam?
Is this your daughter?

No just, eh, my *daughter*,

wants these *kra-yolas*
and I don't *halve*
for them to give to her.

Why is your daughter
running away from you?

Surr, she is just mad at me.
Surr, she is my daughter.

My mother reached for my hand,
as the security guard's forearm
pressed against my small chest.

She is my daughter.
Melisa, dile que soy mamá.

My hair swung side to side
as I nodded my head up and down.
The security guard released me
to my mother. Her hand squeezes
my hand hard. *Ijole, Melisa.*
En lo que me metes.
Y el ice cream, ni lo pienses.

Late Night Questions

My brother asks questions every night.

What are those cracks in the back yard?

Did you know the earth was going to shake?

Why do the birds sing so loud?

Why don't animals speak?

Why can't we fly?

We know that every day the earth trembles,
this is why the cracks grow wider.
Cracks shaken out by movement.
The ground is always moving below us,
change is always happening. The birds we thought
were crazy for flying out of the trees are signals for
us—
the land will molt. They hold the power to fly into the
sky.
Although this doesn't mean they are safe in flight.

Dad worked late most nights.

He'd come through the back door.

I'd always hear him.

My brother fell asleep, he'd ask:

Why does papi work so late?

Why are his hands so rough and greasy?

Where did dad learn to drive those big trucks?

I tell him that we won't understand our dad.
We won't know if the sun will rise the next morning.
Maybe out of nowhere we will burn,
like the lighter fluid
use to light charcoals
with to melt marshmallows for s'mores.

Now that my brother and I are older,
the questions now have answers.
We know that cracks
can grow, that we can fall into the earth.
Those shifts the birds signal
the tides of the earth and we pay attention
to the secrets unveiled by them.

When we were younger we came up with answers.
He never knew that I, the big sister,
kept the answers in our beds.
I kept them there, in fear, never releasing them.
As the tree outside grew taller, the tips

of the branches swept the windows
whispering answers to him.

Doing the Math

Priscila, I look at you
and remember when
you asked how old
I would be when you turned *twenty*.
I respond *thirty-four*.
Outside on a red wooden bench,
near the yellow rose bush
mother has grown over the years,
I sew the shirt you tore
when you ran past the rose canes.
The needle pushing through the fabric,
At the age of seven I climbed
up apartment stairs in the back of the house
until I reached the top. I'd yell
"Wonder Woman" and point to the sky.

When you ask how old
I'll be when you turn *thirty-four*,
I answer *forty-eight*.

You lean in close,
press your palm against my chest,
my heart beating steady.

I'd do the math in my head
and before you ask again,
I answer: *sixty-two*.

Above us, a jet flies
through the air trailing
a white thread
of smoke.

Then you run your hand down
my arm and hold my hand.
We continue
to add up the years until
we reach *eighty-eight*
where our words are lost
only our mouths move,
the propellers overhead drown
our voices and my heart beat.

The Art of Turning pages

I know something about books. Each page is handled with care, like a small feather picked from the ground. Also, one should know that each page holds part of the story. Consider this: my father sat beside me, opened a book and read to me. I don't remember the title. The texture of its cover, coarse like his hands, the smell of the diesel in his clothes. I do remember. I would stare at the words moving like a wave crashing against the rocks. At the end of the page, he would lightly dab his middle finger against his tongue, sweep its corner, and say *each page should be turned slowly and thought about.*

Father's Still Life

My father does not need much.
He carries a book with him.
He says that words rest on the page
fragile like autumn leaves.
He reads it by his nightstand.
He takes out the same silver pen,
jotting down a few phrases to remind
him of a verse. His chair rocks easily
after he sits in it. The night stand
by his bedside overflows with Bibles
and notebooks. He's had the faithful
look of his wife for twenty-five years.
He says handshakes tell him everything about others.
My father paints over an old canvas,
over what he said was once a masterpiece.
Now he has a new idea.
Although the paintbrushes are drying, the good thing
is, he has pens. He has a suitcase full of pens—
he finds some when he's walking,
he picks them up from the ground,
others he takes from the desks of bank clerks.
Plastic, metal, gel, and fountain pens.
But only the silver pen makes it to his shirt pocket.

I ask myself now why he only writes phrases,
why he draws over canvases?
Why does he have so many pens?
Is he ever going to find the right ink to tell his story?

Then on days
like these
when the skies are gray
he's lost the story, the pen, the notebook.
The memory on the back
of a rocking chair.
Someone's missing.
A seagull
pushing
against
wind.

Torrent

The winds must whirl ocean sand to Albuquerque,
I've kept salt water from the Pacific in bottles.
I cup sand in my hands letting the water seep,

The water spins inside, a salt-surged tornado,
my sister says at times the water mottles.
The winds must whirl ocean sand to Albuquerque.

I tell her the ocean is now a wedged river though
here the water is kept this way—it throttles.
I cup sand in my hands letting the water seep.

Water teaches me this winter—it comes in snow
while water reaches my bed side as it topples.
The winds must whirl ocean sand to Albuquerque.

Under mounds of steamy salt my body toddles,
the layers' heavy hot—I am now the ocean's sago.
I cup sand in my hands letting water seep.

I've done this over and over, become a shadow
in the sand, although the river's voice wobbles.
The winds must whirl ocean sand to Albuquerque,
I cup sand in my hands letting the water seep.

Letter from My Mother

I see the wrinkles
on my hands
and around my knuckles.

In the garden I've planted
the last sunflower seeds.
They'll grow tall and poised
only to slouch over with age,
the way no one wants to.
The sun's rays coat
my skin, as I pat
down the wet earth
and look up at the sky—
the clouds expand and separate
as if silently pulled apart—
small holes in the middle of the sky.

I look through the bedroom window
and still see you, daughter
at age five, four feet tall,
asking for a jelly and peanut butter
sandwich as if food
appeared from the sky.
Face pressed against the window screen,
you call my name.

I may die tomorrow
or two weeks from now.
I'll become the ground
you will dig through to find the seeds
I once planted, but they'll be mixed
with my ashes.
In time, the sun
will also wear your skin away
as you work in your garden.
You'll stare up to the clouds
and see a line of birds,
flying in unison
bonded by invisible string.

Why my Brother Pablo Collects Dimes

I've realized that every night
you empty your jean pockets.

In your room dimes are spilled on your bed sheets,
and stacked on your bed rest. Our stomachs

churn, and the constant opening of the refrigerator
reminds us that there is only—a cheese turning light blue,

and a leathery tomato next to a jar of peanut butter.
You imagine having a lot of money,

so you won't have to eat Maruchan soups
everyday for lunch. You won't have to use the last slices

of Sara Lee bread, and find a piece of turkey
in the container labeled leftover.

You search for the last half opened Kool-Aid packet,
and say that mom always says saving *diez en diez*

can make us rich. Every day you walk home from
school, looking down onto the pavement, you daydream

as you walk, wishing the ground would shine with them.

Pupusas

My mother did not know how to make Salvadoran *quesadillas*. She had seen her grandmother squeeze pieces of dough firmly against the wooden table as gunshots flew through the humid air and shattered the windows like messenger bids of death—table legs wobbled and pounded against the kitchen cement floor my mother sat on.

Thirty years later I learned how to make pupusas and taught my mother. It is something like this: I pressed the dough against my palm, circling the edge with my finger, as if molding pottery, and then carved out the inside. On my hands the mush left over hardened like sea salt after swimming. I took the fillings of *loroco con queso*, *chicharron con frijoles*, and then pressed them, closing the ball tightly making sure nothing would seep out. The pores of the pupusa absorbed the oil from the metal plate.

My mother tells me that in El Salvador, if she'd learned to make them she would have died. I roll another circle of dough. I look at her and tell her "I'll teach you."

My Father's Locked Door

Many doors in the house
have been locked, opened and closed.

The other day my brother locked the door.
The knob has to be old, at least fifty

or sixty years old. The deep voice of the Boeing
engine could be heard overhead, the continuous

inserting of the screwdriver my father used to open
the now knob-less door. You see the problem here

is not the locked door, or fixing the door.
When my father assumes there is no way out,

he gets angry, he likes that locked door. He closes
himself in, sees no direction. Like the sound of the knob

falling on the other side of the door, possibly
landing by the toilet, where my brother left his underwear

sprawled. I want to say that maybe the screwdriver,
or even the pliers he was using were not working. But then

I'd be saying tools are useless, when they are made
to make things like unscrewing a piece of metal from

a hole. I instantly imagine how his mother was with him,
how she must have rushed outside as the first drops

of rain fell on the freshly washed *cobijas*. Or maybe
there was a puddle and she sent him straight to bed

with muddy feet, and splotches of it on his only white
t-shirt. I have to imagine this, I have to think that

there is a reason why the day is gloomy, why
he has to feel secure, to have the two rusty screws he took

out of the holes to unlock the door. His life is like this door,
it closes on him unexpectedly, and he blocks us

from coming in. He becomes the air on the other side
of the door that we can't get to the shower, the toilet,

the sink—the necessities. Again, this is not about the locked

door, this is about my father, about a tool, about a character,
someone insecure.

Escandalo Diez

At the baby shower, I sat making sure to keep
my legs uncrossed. The pregnant woman
could not cross her legs
and so the other women
couldn't cross theirs either.
My mother explained
that baby showers, were not actual
showers in a bathtub, but parties.

*Eres una niña, una niña, jugando con mujeres?
Una bebé, jugando con mujeres?*

Parties? I'd ask.
Yes, parties—she'd respond.
Y hay juegos, ma'?
A veces, Melisa.

As the women in high heels
uncrossed their legs
I'd take the baby pin at that moment
from their shirt.
They'd look at me and say:

*Una niña, una niña, jugando con mujeres?
Una bebé, jugando con mujeres?*

Soon, I'd have all the baby pins in my hand.
I'd stare at the women's feet,
waiting for the last pair to cross their legs
like roots tangling together.

*Una niña, una niña, jugando con mujeres?
Una bebé, jugando con mujeres?*

I wanted to be like the women
at this baby shower. I wanted to win
the prize: a set of lotions. That was the prize
for taking pins away from legs being crossed,
for spotting all the legs crossing.

Cemento

My silence explores
a funnel of wind escaping.

A whistle extracted
to create silence.

This is how I control action.

Verbs exists in my mind:
run, dig, paddle, jump.

I trace them back
to where I lost the shark tooth

necklace my Abuelo Roberto
gave me when I was ten.

Why have I not forgotten
this necklace?

I keep silent about it, but I know
I have lied to myself.

I want to run outside, dig both
my feet in puddles of mud,

and try to locate it under the rose
bushes I know I played beside

when I was small. Small footprints
lead me there and then they multiply

all ten toes printed on the cement.
This little girl goes to dig for the shark

tooth and my grandfather's voice
moves in and out of each new layer

of dirt that falls off of the shovel.
Recuerda que los dientes de los tiburones

*estan abajo del mar con las conchas. Los
dientes y las conchas estan apretadas debajo*

de mar como el cemento. Remember that
shark's teeth are at the bottom of the ocean

with the seashells. The teeth and the seashells
are packed into the cement sea earth.

My Father's Instructions

Listen, words can be taken away.

Repartidas serán las palabras.
Given, away, will be, the words.

Listen and believe they are there like stars.

They are heavy wire bound and tangled
to your tongue.
Son invisibles, ¿crees que no están?
Do you not believe they are there?

Listen, words slide through like water.

Words also make others turn their backs
and then miss out on them. They end
up washed up on a riverbank.
Y allí son secas.

Listen, the words I share *las que yo comparto*

with my voice *son* jabbbers
chillidos,
with my pens exhalations
exhalaciones de vapor,
with my eyes *susuros,*
my knuckles that in a conversation I crack
(this is more like a refusal)
is the way I hesitate to share each syllable.
So many give phrases away as if they were nothing,
like *buenos dias, que dios vaya contigo, nos vemos pronto;*
(so now save yours).

Listen when words are out on the open. Naked and ready to be stolen

by those that don't understand their weight.
Their eyes, ears, or tongues will take them.

Listen:

You'll know after you've secured
them, held them in your palms,
that you can give them away.
Tu lo sabras.
The instruction is only for when
you are ready—release.

Before my Father met my Mother

I can imagine him strolling down
the streets of *El Progreso, Guatemala*
with his high belted jeans and slick
parted hair, looking into the eyes
of his girlfriend *Tita* twirling
her brown hair with his thick finger,
and whispering
how he loved her,
and she was the one.

He takes her to eat with his Tia Concha,
the aunt he visited every Sunday morning,
to buy *frijoles negros, chuchitos*—
the Guatemalan tamale—
and *champurado*.

It was then, when my dad placed
a gold pendant on Tita's neck,
with her name inscribed.
He's told me this story several times,
and jokingly tell me that *Tita*
would have been the one,
if he had not met my mother in America.

When he told me this
I didn't even look at him,
I walked to my mother's
dresser, opened her jewelry box,
and tried on her golden bracelet,
and rings. As I picked up her wedding ring,
he glanced over at my direction,
and looked back down to his hands.
My father bought this wedding ring
by repairing cars in an East L.A. car shop.
As he continued his story about *Tita*,
he always prayed for a wife
with woman of integrity. I forget that he was young
once, staying up late, thinking about his future wife,
thinking about what his kids would look like,
how he'd raise them. Truth is he didn't end
up Tita, although as he rekindles that old love,
to me it seems he would have. But he left Guatemala
to come to the United States to make a life,
leaving behind family and friends.

I place the wedding ring back
into the box, close it, and sit next to him.

He shows me an old photo of my mother
he's carried in his wallet for a long time.
As he holds it up, the light shines through it.

Cycles

I stared at the moldy *guayabas* that fell
from the nearby tree, scattered on the grass.
They are like small comets

when they pass through the night sky,
how they are packed with light. They
pass through the dark with so much force.

My mother always drinks dark coffee
from her favorite mug and she doesn't add sugar.
I've looked at the side of her face her moles align.

After months, the yellow fruit keep falling
off the tree. They dangle and move with the wind.
It is winter now, I think about the inside

of the fruit, how the small seeds,
are the pebbles my mom walked on
when she didn't have shoes.

I look at my mother's childhood photograph.
She wore dresses that looked like curtains,
the fabric sticking to her skin. I think about this little girl

when I observe those pebbles, I sit beneath trees,
when I become lost and then find myself.
I walked down 2nd street today, all the tall trees

down Magnolia Ave. balanced and provide shade.
How many trees did my mother climb in her childhood?
Did she look from down below and trace trails

from out of her village? Perhaps, she did not find a trail?
As I step onto the bus, I notice on how the
bus driver straps in an old lady in her wheelchair.

The people in the bus were pushed back
into their seats by the force of the speed. The mother
to my right, holds her daughter in the bus seat.

The cold breeze hits my face,
and I will be older in one month. The beach sand finds
its way onto my green coat, and the sand stings my face.

In the corners of my eyes and mouth sand has found a pocket.

A huge tree appears in my mind, a tree that breathes in air,
and releases it for continuously. I noticed a woman selling

guayabas on the side of the Transit Mall.

How this woman finds delight in this but I always think
about the girl that ran away from home,

the one that gets on the bus without any money.

Pretends like she doesn't have change, or her bus pass,
and gets on for free. I hear the rain tapping the bus window.

My mother always enjoys the smell of wet earth.

She enjoys the water. I met my mother once,
next to the same *guayaba* tree in the back of the house.

Only I was looking at myself, a reflection of a little girl
in a puddle of water.

Silabas

If a poem circulates,
do the words hang off
like leaves on tree?
Are they curled at the end?

*Un poema se siente
como el abrazar
de mi mama. Ajustado,
ondo, y guindón.*

A poem feels like
the embrace
of my mother's
arms. Tight, hollow,
and thief-like.

*La voz de mi padre,
es como un poema
que se da vuelta
de un lado al otro.*

My father's voice
is like a poem, that flows
from one side to the other.

They both are poems
stern walls of sand dunes
building over time one grain
of sand sprawled over another.
They're *palomas* that utter slick
Spanish syllables de:
"a", "e", "i", "o", "u".

On Hands Part II

Only a few hours outside of my mother's womb,
My father said my hands
were slender,
long hands,
curling in and out,
and scratching my face.

My father explains to me
letting a boy touch your hands is the end of innocence.
The first boy that touched my hands
slid his fingers through the spaces
and learned that a girl's hands are simple
that hands can be tongues
the interlocking of a zipper
the way lips lock,
as they drive
the brain into darkness.

At Sea
For Lisa

I have been in the same silver Pontiac Grand Prix
for eight months now. I park under the same palm
tree behind the library. A water bottle rests
on top of a box of salty crackers.
I had to use the restroom all night,
but Kentucky Fried Chicken
closes at 9 p.m. so I couldn't brush my teeth last night.
I sleep in the backseat, legs hugging my body
and a fleece blanket covering my back,
the engine running to heat the car.
The doctor's voice lingers in my head saying:
it is too late; the baby can't be saved, but I still follow Larry.
That story stays there, but I could never tell anyone—
me
him
living in that car.
I could never tell anyone: a life was lost in the back of that car.
Some don't know how to swim like me, or know how to direct
a path for this boat. The sharp waves threaten my path, shifts
the position of this car. I try to point a compass
to the North, but swerve to the East. I am still above water,
boat sways. A breeze seeps in and I am seasick.
The clouds overhead push forth wind
and the flaps of the sail
merge together; pieces of a puzzle matched.

I ask: will I know about the crustaceans that live underneath?
Will they feed on the larvae growing on the sea beds?

Have they also stolen their meal for the day?

The Shuttle

When I step on the shuttle, I think about the college class
in college where I learned about women working
in *las maquiladoras*, about Albuquerque,
the border, the class I teach, and my student
who mentions these women
since he lived in El Paso
and often travels to Mexico.

The women in Mexico that get on buses
like these one get off work late,
and hope to make it to their children.
The L.A. Times reported
that a Mexican woman in a black cloak
gets on the shuttles with the *maquiladoras*
to travel home. This woman Diana
then shoots the men two or three times
and walks away. Some call her the masked *Zorra*;
I envision her as the bat woman, out at night
as a protector in Gotham-Mexico.

On Tuesday nights, I wait for the shuttle, sit down
on the seat closest to the bus entrance.
The image of the women sitting in a shuttle bus
reappears, holding their purses tightly as the bus doors close.
As he drops off the last woman, he closes the bus doors,
and grabs her by the arm. He pushes her face down
onto the seat, and she never makes it back home.

A peso rolls out
 of her purse.
 The man's pen falls
 out of his shirt pocket,
 as he forces her down.

As I exit saying good night to the bus driver,
my pen falls near the opening of bus's glass doors.

I looked up at the sky, a twisted strand
of pink cloud unravels slowly. I remember my class
in college, the students, the peso, the pen, the border,
the *maquiladora*, Diana. I remember revenge.

Figuring it out

The rumble of the engine begins, the engine falters.
I'm inside the silver 1998 Grand Prix

and clutch the empty space as Larry releases the brake.

On Sunday, the car battery died, the ignition mute
and we pushed the car to a AM-PM gas station.
The rumble of the engine begins, the engine falters.

From below my body a slice appears, the twist and twist
of the snap, of the slice, always caught in my eardrum
and it's the rumble of the engine, the engine falters.

A small body exits from a doorway; my dreams ran away.
The pushing. The crumbling. This is what I've feared—
The rumble of the engine begins, the engine falters.

I know I have lost the shadow while moving my shadow.
The apple seed that is closest to the core. Farther from the tree
and clutch the empty space as Larry releases the brake.

I'm in that silver car, stalled and irreplaceable,
only farther from my shadow, no one else saw me.
The rumble of the engine began, the engine falters
and clutches the empty space as Larry releases the brake.

Escandalo Cuatro

*After Arturo Marquez Danzon
No. 2*

The two *nopales*
They did not
They were
My father yells
to me
Te dije que no te metieras allí.
I told you not to go in there.

held me together.
speak to me.
like two pitchforks.

The two *nopales*
I found myself
Prying the sky
A cloud showering
And my mother
fixing her
Nothing remains

held me there though.
nestled between two standing forks.
open for me baby blue.
more sunlight onto me.
looking at me,
dark irises into the corner of my eyes.
other than the look of my mother.

The two *nopales*
what I knew
and seeing blood
my arms and having
of my grandmother's
to the memory of
my father's
Te dije que no te metieras allí.

wedged me between
about being pricked
ooze from the side of
the needle prick
aguja sends me back

Why did I want to live
Te dije que no te metieras allí.
A man with a long wooden
and had my father move aside.
Déjenme, I will
The two *nopales*
With the broomstick
off and then they
they said:
Te dije que no te metieras allí.

in between all the *espinas*?

broomstick
yo la saco. Take her out.
held me together.
he slashed the spines
spoke to me
me dijieron.

Prodigal Daughter

"Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and forsake not your mother's teaching, for they are a graceful garland for your head and pendants for your neck."

-Proverbs 1:8-9

My father hands me the largest Bible he has in the house.
All my attempts to read it have failed. He's told me numerous

times that I should read it, that it'll help me write poetry.
I know now, that he may be right, because it helped me write

this poem. I've failed again. There was a time he made
me read the same verse to him every morning, it's there,

but I've forgotten the words. The image of jewels the size of light bulbs,
around my neck—if I obey my parents, years will be added.

The next time my father handed me the largest Bible, I read the
parable of the prodigal son. I read it, after each verse, the red words,

which Jesus wrote—dissipate. They emerge, and then float
away. This has been one of my continuous failed attempts.

I understood then, my longing to be me. That although
my father could hand me the largest Bible in the house, the weight of

the red words, was not there, or if did I read it I'd finally
learn the size of the jewels and the light in them. I understood that

when I came back home to fill the months I had missed.
That now I was not sleeping in the back of a car to prove a point.

My parent's sofa was comforting, and I could settle for that, the reason
my mother began to take medicine was to prevent those small heart

attacks from coming back, that although the blame was placed as mine,
she forgave me. That my father's hair turned gray, he lost

patches of hair when he thought he'd seen me on the corner
of Magnolia & Willow, but was saddened that the girl

with the curly locks only looked like me. I understood why after
five years my sister did not recognize me the summer I came back.

She said, she had forgotten what I looked like, because I left, came back
then left again. I see my father do the same now, sit my sister

in front of the mother's vanity. I remember that while I tried to detangle
my curls he'd ask me to read it. I was forced to look at myself

in the mirror, I saw my mouth move to the rhythm of the words. I saw
my mother combing my hair over and over. How my curls never straightened.

I see that with my sister, he just attempts to do it once he doesn't push
her to memorize the words. My sister, gets off the bed, and tries to remember

each word. The strands of her hair are fine, the words
she repeats are not his. He has given up.

Always Worried

Yesterday I worried about the cup
that never fell off the desk.

I imagined the water spilling into
a small cup draining into a shell's tiny hole.

I also worried about the letter I wrote
in green ink but never mailed.

Let me remind you of the cup again,
I'm worried that a magnitude 6.8 earthquake

will drop the cup, and then the mailman
will never make it to the post office.

I think about the two-hundred dollars
I earned last week from tutoring

a 3rd grader who still can't
spell her name or say her ABC's

and how I haven't deposited that money into
my bank account. How I hate going to

Bank of America and waiting in line
to deposit one-third of the money because

I remind myself that someone can steal my identity
and take all of my money.

I continue eating but still think about the six
pounds I will gain the next three months

because my mother would never let him into her house.
She says that a good man is hard to find,

and expects perfection. I also worried
about the plane I'll be on when I travel to

see you in Kansas. Yesterday I didn't bother
to think about how your hair falls softly on the side

of your face, how you lean in closely
to the scent of my hair, and kiss me on both cheeks.

I looked over my shoulder

to see if you were not staring at me
and only found that you were. I expected
you to be ignoring me, to look over at
the girl on the other lane, to push
your hand through your hair
as a gesture to look better, but instead
you looked at me and pushed my hair
behind my ears. It happens this way
a lot, that I am worried about the gallon
of water when it is still full. I am filled with
worry about something that hasn't
even happened yet, and then it happens
and I only think about the next thing
to worry about.

Finding *Duca* with a Texan
for Rafael

I rode in his blue car,
his eyes shiny from the lights
the car in front of us. He confessed
that his father picked pecans from the tree
in his mother's backyard. This is how he knew
he had come to visit. Even then, I think he wrestles
with the sound of wood hitting wood, the deep voice
of his father. The wind hitting the leaves as they rocked
against that tree.

While I sat next to him, the car moved
by the road bumps and the fast pace of Albuquerque
traffic scene. He looked at the road,
drove me to the Pro's Ranch
Supermarket in the South Valley and danced
cumbia and merengue down the aisles of that
resembles the old supermarket I always miss
from Long Beach.

He didn't know that
he had brought me to a memory
that I had to forget;
My father, my mother, my sister, and brother
and what I always leave behind in California.
Bolillos the size of palms. The fluff of fresh
pan dulce, and the music of swinging hips.

As we walked down the aisles
he'd share a new thought, a new thing that bothered him,
and I cradled the *chocobanano* pack in my hand
and searched for the canned refried beans my father
always bought every Saturday morning at Northgate.

When I found them, I knew that through this man's actions,
the small things in life are worth sharing.
I carried the canned beans there in awe of his gesture,
of his heart, and of his shared happiness.

All enclosed in a small blue car, a drive to a store
and his voice carried the truth about friendship.

Terreno

*“...and the landscape will do
us some strange favor when
we look back at each other
anxiously...”*

– Frank O’Hara

My friend told me that the peaks I pointed out to her
from my apartment window are actually volcanoes.
From far away, they just look like mountains.
They are pointy at the peak, and dark brown.
I asked her about the big gap between them two.
The land has begun to eat itself over the years.
I have him on my mind on Fridays,
then I see the void in the distance.
I’ve forgotten the way he looks.
His hair black olive, his face tanned
from the winter. I have to stop seeing him in flesh.
I have created the gap.

So listen, you know the void I am talking about.
It’s not just a small eraser mark,
its empty air wedged between borders,
with no answer on how to fill.
It could be easy to look out my window
and think about him, but I’ve handled the void, I squint
and place my thumb to close the hole from far away.

I thought it could be mended, stitched, but this Friday,
I learned the truth it just can’t happen. Then I uncovered
the secret of the land, a secret shown, not talked about.
The land has holes like mouths—voids like eyes that are covered
with a blindfold and scared. Spaces to breathe, and move along.
All we can do now is forget the shape of the land.
We have to keep walking to fill them. The landscape is constructed
as we fill it, the land tricks us to guide us from destruction.

Understanding Death at All Souls Cemetery
For Alex

The dead are buried and laid
at different levels, each one facing up,
resting hands on stomachs. Death is like this,
it's the way your hands interlock
with each other when you bring them close,
it fits. The dead also have neighbors,
I remembered this because two days before Christmas
you asked if I'd go with you to see your grandmother.

When we arrived at her grave
the faint music of a Christmas card,
came from the grave
next to her. The card flashed red,
every time the breeze hit it and
caught my attention, as you knelt
down to say *bendición*—you said
it was a custom. It made me wonder
if your grandmother heard it,
if the dead really lived in spirit.
Walked over grass, moist from the sprinklers
that were turned on every night.
I had never been to a cemetery.

You've talked about your grandmother
many times, about how she served you coffee
every morning, before you caught
the school bus with me. She'd put it in the same mug
with the chipped rim, you noticed
but never pointed out—
you knew she was losing her memory.

You imitate her heavy Puerto Rican
accent, and remember when she'd call
you brother go-hi-to because she
couldn't pronounce the "r" in *gordito*,
while she cooked *arroz con gandules*,
and coquito for New Year's.

I'd like to think that you're at peace,
that when you come to see her grave
you learn to not miss her so much.
If this were my grandmother
I'd find that my hands wouldn't
rest easily, they'd get tangled,
they won't lie on my stomach,

resting on top of each other,
they'd find a way to bring her back
because I can't accept death.

The *Ocote*

Did your voice drown, grandfather?
That night you were buried
in an indigo blue suit?
The earth was eager
to seal tight pores, from the morning's rain
and your body's last exhalation.
The ocote trees bud green fruit
suspending below your grave.

Those present say that the weight
of the fruit brought down
the branch each day.
The fruit muscled off
each branch as it landed
on on your grave. Each palpitation
pressed against the earth.
The pine needles shook
as each fruit dropped one by one.

My grandmother claims your body
was taken back to San Salvador.
This was years before I learned to pull
guayabas
from the tree in the backyard.

Before my grandmother could admit
she never really loved you.
Or how she turns in disappointment
at the mention of your name: *Toño*.
Every day since your death,
she spoons dirt, leaving open holes,
never covering them again.
She denies you travel to her bedroom
windowsill because your soul is heavy,
weighted down. The rustling garbage
startles the dogs. They bark.
They know you never left.

Escandalo Dos

Trae tu plato para acá, my Mamá said as she filled up our boxed apartment with the savor of her arroz con pollo. I stared at my plate, waiting for the tortillas calientes, when out of nowhere, smoke swirled around the small corners of the kitchen. Mamá corrió para abrir la ventana and the smoke slithered out the window, but the warm tortillas were now like charcoal. Papá continued eating as the window remained open and the East L.A. breeze flowed smoothly in the night.

That night, I nestled into bed, covered myself con mi cobija de Little Mermaid, and shivered in mi camita. The window remained open. Yo dormía, the brazos desconocidos, grandes y hambrientos. No one heard him tip toe through our small living space. The door slammed and in that instance, Papá jolted out of bed in his calzoncillos and ran to my room—las cobijas destentidas y solitarias. He noticed the open doors and corrió, wanting to catch el hombre.

Dos cuabras away, near Day St. Papá saw him corriendo con prisa. Papá launched onto el hombre snatched me out of his brazos y con un puñetazo he knocked him out. Me meció en sus manos as Mamá ran towards us, en angustia. We all shuffled back home, Mamá walked near the window y murmuró, *Tortillas estúpidas, ¿porqué las tuve que quemar?*

Still Alive

My grandfather,
mi *Abuelo* is still alive.
I remember him as
the sound of a pebble drops
the instance it is cradled
in the tips of fingers
and finally how it falls
onto the dirt.

My grandfather,
always measured the width
between photo frames.
Two fingers in-between
each frame to keep them aligned
and not too even from each other.
Each one had a photo of us:
the grandchildren with happy smiles,
his daughters, Sandra, Karina,
Jancy; and his ex-wife
my grandmother Vicky. The
alignment he created was
the only control he had of the
family, of his family.

I always remember
my grandfather, mi *Abuelo*
I recall the sound of the pebble,
I have kept under control
that pebbles always have to make
noise when they are dropped
into the river. My grandfather
may have been the silent pebble,
the one that sounds fills other sounds
we can never hear because it is drowned.