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## From a long line of thieves

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FROM A LONG LINE OF THIEVES

A Thesis

by

LUCINDA ZAMORA-WILEY

Submitted to the Graduate College of  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2016

Major Subject: Creative Writing



FROM A LONG LINE OF THIEVES

A Thesis  
by  
LUCINDA ZAMORA-WILEY

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December 2016



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## ABSTRACT

Zamora-Wiley, Lucinda, From a Long Line of Thieves. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), December, 2016, 96 pp., references, 78 titles.

This work is an original manuscript composed of flash non-fiction or personal essays, prose poems, and poetry. Its main focal points include effects of Vietnam War, strained communication between family, survival of life's various traumas, political opinions as formed through the experience of being a Hispanic woman, including poems of place and home, and love—the celebration of light and joy.





## DEDICATION

To my husband for never judging me when I go on breakfast dates in my pajamas, for his abiding love and acceptance of me for all that I am—dark and light, I honor him with my humble words and love. To my daughter, Ava Sofia Zamora-Wiley, whose gift of words already surpasses mine, despite being only fourteen years-old, I look forward to your own book of poetry. And finally to my parents—my strong, forgiving, loving parents—not only for creative fodder, but for loving me through pain, through healing, through silence. I love you for loving me as only you could. And for my Nina...*you know!*



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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A special note to Jean and Emmy: thank you for challenging me to look at my work from the outside-in, for helping me to stop beating the horse to a bloody pulp, for treating me more like your peer than your student. It's been an honor to know you and work under your brilliant leadership. You are loved. And I can't forget Dr. Britt Haraway...thank you for saving my butt and being willing to be my third committee member! I'm kind of glad you had no time to think about saying no in the frenzy of busyness this past semester!



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## CHAPTER I

### CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Dad never talks about Vietnam...he doesn't talk much at all, at least not to his daughters, least of all, to his wife. My parents cohabit as far as I can tell. They're roommates who tolerate each other's existence. Dad wakes up, Mom presses "brew" on the coffee pot, scrambles some chorizo con huevo, and all but tosses it on the table at my father. Dad knows to serve his own coffee. Little is spoken. Mom plays Solitaire on her tablet while she nibbles at her oatmeal; Dad reads the *San Antonio Express News*' Section A. I think they prefer silence to having to acknowledge each other's existence. I've noticed that if there is something to be said to each other, each has a difficult time speaking calmly or objectively—voices rise, and so does the tension. Nowadays, as they are both in their 70s, neither one of them seems to have the same fight in them as they did when I was younger. I can recall verbal assaults between the two of them that would make me cry...like the time that Dad called my mother a pinche elefante. I remember my mother slamming dishes and cupboards in the kitchen after realizing that Dad had fallen asleep on the couch—again, before he'd eaten the supper she'd cooked. In Spanish she'd say, "You don't eat a goddamn thing, but there's always room for that goddamn beer!" Once, I remember counting the number of beer cans that Dad left behind on a typical evening worth of drinking after work. He'd walk in after his paperwork, and the first thing he'd do after greeting his girls with a peck on the top of their heads, was to wash his hands, head to the fridge, and crack open a cold one. In one night, I realized, Dad could throw back up to eighteen beers. And

yet, despite this seven-day-a-week occurrence, Dad would wake up every morning at the crack of dawn—he'd never think of using a sick day. He'd squeeze Visine in each of his eyes to dilute the alcoholic-redness. He was the most responsible alcoholic in the universe, I think. When he retired from the San Antonio City Water System, he had set a record for the thousands of hours of sick leave that had gone unused. Because of my father, there is a new clause that the City of San Antonio had to author in its Human Resources policies...one can only amass so many sick leave hours before the City must buy them out. Dad may have been a hard-core drinker, but his work ethic and commitment to providing for his family could never be called into question.

What Mom endured in her marriage to my father, what she continues to endure to this day, is my father's alcoholism. I remember once when I was young, asking my dad why he started to drink. He said it was a *maña*, a bad habit he'd acquired by watching a lot of bad examples when he grew up in Palito Blanco, Texas; among these bad examples was his own father. Dad confessed that he'd been drinking and smoking from the time he was twelve years old. He didn't have to tell the rest...I knew that Vietnam didn't help. While Dad was able to kick his smoking habit, the drinking was his way of self-medicating, of trying to stay numb to the pain of living with the war in his head that would never die. I only know this now because in 2014, my father finally applied for and was awarded 100% Disabled Veteran Status—due to Agent Orange exposure, tinnitus, and PTSD. It was my Tio Pete—Dad's brother—who said to my mother, "I've only been telling Memito to apply for Disability for two or three decades!" he laughed, "Look at him now...rolling in the dough." Apparently, Dad was given back pay, a lump sum amount for his pain and suffering that he'd learned to endure for over forty years. Mom later bragged to me that she and Dad were getting some "Disabled Vet" license plates, which made

her very happy: “We’ll be getting the best parking spaces ever at the mall, at HEB...shit, wherever we go!”

I now realize that being married to a depressed alcoholic, a damaged war veteran, is probably not what Mom thought she was signing up for when she married Dad. This is probably why Mom took out so much of her frustration and anger on her daughters. When you’re working like a dog, living no real kind of life with joy, your middle finger goes up and stays up. All I know is that coming home from school when I was in middle school was no fun. There was constant bitching the minute you walked in the door. “Who fed the goddamn dog?!” “Who put all this shit in the sink and didn’t wash their dishes?!” “Get your ass out there, and check the mail!” “Well, if you spilled it, get the goddamn vacuum cleaner out, and suck that shit up!” If you sat down, she’d tear into you, “*Ay, mira la princesa* who gets to sit down on her fat ass...*no hay nada pa’ hacer*. Shit, if *I* don’t get to sit down, *you* don’t get to sit down...what a bunch of bullshit!” This went on Monday through Friday, and it was exhausting. All this anger affected my three sisters and me in deep ways—two sisters fought back, but my youngest sister and I remained as silent as possible. Herlinda and I quickly learned that there was a price to be paid for fighting back. Sometimes Mom started hitting, and she couldn’t stop swinging. I do recall a few times when I was scared and horrified enough to intervene on a particular sister’s behalf because I worried that if Mom didn’t stop, she’d maybe break bones. It wasn’t audacity that led me to yell at my mother, “Please, please stop, Mom!” It was fear, and what I feared most of all was that someday things would go too far, whatever that meant in my gut. So much of what I write in my chapter entitled “Canciones De Mi Padre” is rooted in this time, in trying to understand why my father was so silent and distant from me, in trying to tiptoe around my mother’s short fuse and angry booby traps. I write about a feeling of paralysis, in not being able

to connect with my father through his PTSD, through the Vietnam that he brought home with him. In so many ways, living at home was like a war zone, which is why I became a master at avoidance—I was always looking for a way out of being at home.

When I was in middle school, I befriended two very sweet white girls—Tammy and Kristinn. Before this at my local elementary school, all my peers were from very humble homes, all of us were on free lunch, and there was nothing to be self-conscious about. We were a very homogenous group of poor Hispanics at Royalgate Elementary School. I remember going from kindergarten through sixth grade with the same group of friends, and what I clearly understood in sharing intimate stories with my friends Celia and Angelica, was the fact that marriages were bad for all of our parents. Marriage was to be endured, and when you were out of the house, you did not air your dirty laundry about your miserable marriage. It was not scary to hear Mom and Dad argue about something in the car on the way to visit my grandma, only to exit the car stoically and without any hint of pain and anger that had just been lived from the twenty-minute car ride. A bottomless silence was more the norm, though, between them. There was always more silence than anger. My sisters and I must've learned that this is the way the ship sails because we never panicked; we never worried that our parents might divorce. The idea was as foreign as a real summer vacation—away from home.

In middle school, Tammy and Kristinn were drawn to me because I had some real “hood” or street credibility. Having grown up on the darker side of town, my vocabulary was

exponentially more sailor than Tammy and Kristinn had ever heard. I wielded *fucks* and *shits* that were entirely unnecessary in their world. But all three of us were in this advanced GT program for 6<sup>th</sup> grade nerds, and they must have been bright enough to intuit some reason for my sewer-mouth sensibilities. They must have known I was an *other* of some sort, but I thank my lucky stars for the leniency and open-mindedness of youth. While profanity flew off my tongue in rapid-fire succession on a daily basis, Kristinn and Tammy did not stoop to my Rated-R vocabulary; there was a mutual respect, and we became fast friends. I was soon invited to their houses on a regular basis, and what I found most fascinating about these two new friends was their parents. The Huelsbergs and Kardons seemed genuinely happy to be married to each other. I was astute enough to know that my foul mouth needed to dress itself in camouflage whenever adults were around, so while Kristinn and Tammy were growing accustomed to it, their parents would have been shocked to know that I was capable of anything less than proper, respectable English. I was so taken with each set of their parents that I was determined to behave myself like a respectful young lady and be invited back. Being invited back on most weekends during my middle school years is what kept me sane through my parents' insane marriage and subsequent family drama.

All I knew is that at Tammy's house, her two blond parents would sit at the kitchen table over breakfast on Saturday mornings after I'd spent the night. Sometimes I'd notice Mrs. Huelsberg's bare feet scrunched up on top of Mr. Huelsberg's big bare feet. Sometimes, they'd pass the newspaper to each other in a way that felt so intimate, like they just knew which stories they'd go for. If one got up for more coffee, the other would hold his or her mug up for a refill, too, and there'd be some sweet joke like, "Well, I guess if I'm up anyway!" The love was just

delightful to me, and when I said so to Tammy, I think she was puzzled. “Yeah, I guess,” she once said, “though I think it’s a little gross.” There were a couple of times that I recall when Mr. and Mrs. Huelsberg would have us sleep outside in their Winnebago “‘cause the breeze was nice,” as Mrs. Huelsberg would say, but really, I thought that Tammy’s parents just wanted some alone-time. I found this idea fascinating. Intimacy—deliberate, wanted intimacy. What a novel idea in a marriage. I thought Tammy’s parents were nutjobs, but in the most beautiful way...like *Little House on the Prairie*. At thirteen, I just assumed that happy marriages were a white thing.

Kristinn’s parents were no different. Mr. Kardon would pretend to be shocked when I’d show up on Friday afternoon after school with Mrs. Kardon and Kristinn to spend the night. I was lucky that Kristinn’s mom was my middle school English teacher, so often after a long school week, I’d get invited to spend the weekend at the Kardons’ house. She even did me the favor of calling my mom on my behalf. Mrs. Kardon always knew what to say and how to say it, and that’s how it started. My tradition of spending countless Fridays at Kristinn’s house. Often, Tammy would join us since she lived only a couple of streets down from Kristinn, and despite the fact that the two of them had been friends longer—all through elementary school—I felt like we’d been friends for years. I think they saw me as funny, frank, and unusual. The feeling was mutual to a certain degree. I felt like Kristinn and Tammy’s home lives were extremely unusual. All my Hispanic friends from my old school would have flipped to see what I was seeing—these white chicks’ families that were romantic as all hell. It was as unreal as the *Twilight Zone*—but no, because there was no horror, and the scenes were all in full sunlit color. It was more like *Fantasy Island*.

At Kristinn’s house on Saturday mornings, we could get out of bed at whatever hour suited us—something I loved. At my house, if you weren’t up and at ‘em by 9:00 a.m., Mom

would have to go into your room and wake you, and if that happened, you'd be paying the price with inside house chores *and* outside yard chores...your day would end only when Mom decided you were done. A day like this full of walking on eggshells left a bad enough taste in your mouth that you learned to set an internal alarm clock...I trained myself to be awake on weekends by 8:00 in the morning. After waking up at whatever hour we desired, Kristinn and I could go into her kitchen, open up her pantry, and dive into Cheetos for breakfast without anyone complaining. Kristinn's folks would keep a plentiful pantry stocked, and I was told on more than one occasion that I should feel free to help myself whenever I was hungry. I was made to feel at home. Shoot, one weekend, Mr. Kardon called me on my secret: "Hey, Luci! What the hell is going on here? Are you moving in?! Kathy, did we adopt this kid?!" He smiled and pretended to be incredulous. Mr. Kardon was the coolest dad I'd ever met. He worked as the lead herpetologist at the San Antonio Zoo, he had sleeves of arm tattoos—way before this was cool—and he drove a Harley everywhere...without a helmet. He was pretty much a badass. But after his joke at the dinner table, I worried that I'd overstayed my welcome. My eyes must have betrayed my fear because he quickly disheveled my hair and told me to relax, that he was just kidding. "But," he said, "if you're gonna be here every weekend, I'm at least gonna put you the chores list. Today, you're in charge of dishes and folding laundry with Kris." "Absolutely," I agreed, "I should earn my keep," I said with a smile. Mr. and Mrs. Kardon made me feel loved and welcomed in their home, and I became a regular weekend fixture at their house.

To this day, I'm unsure of why my folks let me get away with never being home on weekends. Often, after spending Friday night at Kristinn's, Tammy would invite us to spend Saturday night at her house. Mrs. Huelsberg would do me the favor of calling my mom on my



behalf, and Mom never declined an invitation. I never even got called out at home when I'd come back home on Sunday afternoons. Instead, a certain number of chores had been reserved for me: scrubbing toilets or bathtubs, doing dishes (that I hadn't even used), doing laundry, anything to pull my weight. I threw myself into my chores with fervor; I never wanted Mom to feel like I'd given her a reason to start saying no to Mrs. Kardon and Mrs. Huelsberg when they invited me to sleep over. Dad never had an opinion on much with me or any of his daughters, for that matter. He was a hands-off kind of dad, often involving himself in the parenting of me and my sisters when we had crossed some line in the sand that my mother had drawn. It was at her demand that he'd discipline us. I used to think that he did this because he stood firm in solidarity with her and her parenting goals for us, but now I think it was just a matter of shutting Mom up as soon as possible; doing her bidding was a quick way of getting back to silence.

I began to see my time with the Kardons and Huelsbergs as my salvation from the crazed week at home in my household among a chronically drunk father who sat quietly like the Tin Man on the sofa every night, staring out a closed window...and a mother who never knew how to turn down the volume of her voice and her anger.

Later as I entered my high school years, though I went to a different high school from Kristinn and Tammy, we kept in touch, and their homes remained my salvation, my light in the dark. I continued to earn my keep on the chores list at the Kardons, and the Huelsbergs continued to let me bunk in their Winnebago as often as I wished rent-free and chore-free. It was only about two years ago that my baby sister said to me one day, "You wanna know why you're so much more put together than the rest of us are in this family? Because you weren't around for HALF of the fucked up, messed up drama growing up! You were sheltered from all the bullshit,

all the hatred, all the anger, all the damage. I realize that that's why you practically lived at your friends' houses. Shit, I would've done the same thing if I'd had good friends to shelter me!" I couldn't disagree with her. She had gotten pregnant in high school and married the father of her baby fresh after graduation...perhaps this was her way of escaping.

Another sister of mine made it her personal goal to sleep with as many boys in high school as she possibly could—she kept a running tally of all the boys she'd fucked by penciling in slashes on the wooden slats underneath her upper bunk bed. I last looked at the slashes when she'd hit twenty-three...this was when she was a sophomore in high school. My older sister ran away from home at eighteen. She moved in with a long-haired, heavy metal guitarist who played in a local San Antonio band. Mom and Dad were horrified. I watched all the drama unfold with a sense of detachment. Fucking up my life was something I was eternally afraid of doing. So what I did, instead, was I spent every single free moment of my time reading books. Romance books—especially Harlequin Romances—were my favorite. Though the recipe was the same for every Harlequin, I never tired of reading about all the Priscillas, the Katelyns, the Tiffanys, the Madelyns...all the white chicks who found their happy endings in the Harlequins. I never noticed any Estefanias, Magdalenas, or Elvas in them, but I wasn't deterred in my belief, my absolute faith, that I'd find love that was real.

One of my favorite things to do at Tammy's house was to scope out her mom's bookshelves and read. On our weekends together, Tammy, Kristinn, and I would often read—it was an unspoken rule at the girls' houses. Because we all loved to read with a passion, it was understood that a few hours of our together-time should be, would be spent in silent reading. At the Huelsbergs' house, they even went so far as to do this thing where the TV went off and the house went silent. All the drapes were opened up to the sunshine, and windows opened to let in

the chattering of birds and cicadas. The entire family would just claim a reading nook or comfortable chair...and we'd all read. These are some of my fondest moments from my teenaged years. When I reflect on these beautiful memories now at the age of forty, I tremble when I think of how differently life could have gone for me. I will never stop being grateful to the Kardons and Huelsbergs for letting me claim their homes as my sanctuary, my refuge, my island of sanity and peace. Nor will I ever forget the beautiful, healthy marriages I learned to appreciate—once I got over my shock and awe—between the Huelsbergs and Kardons. I saw such moments of warmth, tenderness, and laughter in these homes, between the two married couples, that by the time I was in high school, I just knew...what happened at my parents' house could be its own kind of dark and eerie exception to marriage and family and love. I began to understand that the differences in marriages between my friends' parents and my own was less to do with whiteness and brownness and more to do with circumstances, life circumstances that I never saw played out in my Harlequins. In my romances, there was never any mention of Vietnam. Vietnam was a war that played favorites; Hispanics and Blacks were disproportionately drafted in the war, and so many with affluence and influence (not brown and black folks) were able to weasel their ways out of service. Vietnam is a thief that has taken so much from my father, from my family, from me, and it has never stopped taking.

What I learned from my family's sufferings, their disappointments and regrets, their silence...all these themes are present in the questions I ask myself as an adult poet. In most Hispanic families, there is a culture of silence, of not airing one's dirty laundry...of shoving things best never spoken of under the rug. I now realize that I have become obsessed with lifting the rug, with looking at all the cobwebby truths here under a magnifying glass, of trying to make sense of all the silence. I'm the only one in my family who wants to look, who needs to look, it

seems, and in some profound ways, I feel like I'm betraying my family's right to privacy. But the teacher in me, the poet in me, the lover of life in me, knows that there are lessons to be learned from lifting the cloud of silence and mystery. So I tell the truth to those who are willing to question, willing to turn the page. I never forget that it's only by dredging up the darkness that will I ever find the path to light. I start with my own story, the story I know best. I give this meager gift to my own daughter, wanting her to be blessed with the opportunity of spending so much of her youth in the light.

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On a subconscious level, I learned to bathe and sleep at my parents' home...to reside there. But I did my living away from home. My experiences with Kristinn and Tammy trained me well, and I continued my adventurous life with zeal as an undergrad at the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA). While I still lived at home with my parents to save money, I wasn't expected home at any particular hour, so I'd stay in the stacks late into the evening. I let the romance of my learning take me on long journeys into the library stacks. The library became my new sanctuary, and I quickly discovered the 811 section—poetry. It seemed to be my own private apartment--I had this place to myself so often. It might've been all the Harlequin romances, the optimism of belief in love that was swimming in my blood, I'm not sure, but I decided to marry my first husband—the wrong husband-- at the age of nineteen when I was a sophomore in college. He was a mild-mannered Hispanic three years my senior. He had given up drinking because I told him that I'd never marry a drinker. Things were going well until he became a U.S. Border Patrol Agent and got stationed in Brownsville, Texas. Within two months of our marriage, I could note changes in his mannerisms, the way he spoke to me. He was

transforming into a regular macho man right before my eyes, and I when I called him on this in the privacy of our home, he'd apologize, but when we were out with other agents and their wives, I was astounded by how little respect was afforded us as women.

At a Border Patrol party once, my friend Claudia, who was pregnant, was hosting the party with her agent-husband, Robert. She happened to be cooking, and several women and I were helping in the kitchen—of course. Robert and some other agents—along with my husband-- came in to grab more beer from the fridge. It was then that Robert busted out, “That’s how I keep my women! Barefoot and knocked up!” Claudia flushed but half-smiled. I could tell she was embarrassed. I spoke up on her behalf and said, “Robert, don’t be a dick. Respect your wife. She’s carrying your child for God’s sake!” Robert guffawed, looked at my husband, and said, “Dude, you better put your ruck in her place.” I looked at David and dared him in front of everyone, “You gonna put me in my place, huh? I’d like to see you try.” Awkward silence. David simply said to me, “Alright, Luci, that’s enough. Don’t ruin the party.” I remember wanting to leave this party immediately. When things had settled down, I told Claudia that I wasn’t feeling well, and I excused myself. I whispered into David’s ear that he’d have to find a ride home, that I was heading home early. When David came home later that evening, he picked a fight and told me that I had embarrassed him. I told him his behavior was repulsive, that his friends were assholes, and that he need not worry about further embarrassment because I’d never want a piece of Border Patrol action in my life again. I was true to my word. I was so disgusted by the culture I saw absorbing my husband that I checked out on him, with his permission. I began to go to the movies by myself, I began to go on dinner “dates” by myself. I threw myself back into reading Harlequin Romances, but I was more enlightened now. I read them to dissect their falsehoods, not because I was waiting for my happy ending. That train had come and gone.

During this time, I had stopped writing poetry, stopped reading it, too. Poetry had always been about light, and now that I was steeped in darkness, there was no place for it.

After eight years of this relationship, I found that I'd somehow allowed myself to be controlled financially; I was put on a leash in terms of how much I could spend on myself. Once my husband almost got physical with me when I came home from a department store with three new bras I'd bought that night. He pushed me up against the wall, grabbed the plastic bag in my hand, and demanded to know what I'd purchased without his permission. He said I didn't have the right to spend so much money since I was only earning a meager paycheck at a Catholic high school where I was teaching English. At the age of twenty-seven, I realized that I had ended up in a marriage like the one I was trying to leave behind me in San Antonio. I realized I was trapped in a history that looked too familiar.

So I did the only thing possible to save my life. I let myself fall in love with the right man—coincidentally, a white man--and I told him that he was going to marry me. There was no asking. And through this long journey back into light, I found poetry again. All the poems I write about love and light stem from my heart's connection to my husband, Chris. While I don't dwell much on the history of my ex-husband, there are a few poems in my collection in which I celebrate my freedom from him.

I also celebrate the strength and resilience of my body and mind, for when I was a child, I was sexually molested by a relative. While I haven't always appreciated my family's way of sweeping pain and sadness under the rug, this act has served me remarkably well in dealing with the hideousness of the violation of my innocence. It is only in the strength of adulthood that I can shine the light on this history and work through it with open eyes and heart.

Writing has been my roadmap to healing through everything I've ever lived, now that I think of it: my father's PTSD, my sexual trauma, my divorce, my journey to adulthood, my remarriage, my motherhood, my trying to reconnect with those whom I love most. For me, writing is healing, but it must open up old wounds, let the truth ooze out, fester a little...or a lot. Then I sew...I sow. Words.

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While at UTSA, I enrolled in an Intro to Poetry class with Dr. Heather Sellers, an accomplished creative writer and professor. It was she who first saw potential in my poetry. When I wrote my first poem in her class, "Things to Do When You're Ten Years Old and Your Mom is the Babysitter," she commented on the authenticity of the speaker's voice, and she taught me lesson which I haven't forgotten to this day: every line in my poem should aspire to be its own poem. This is how a poet makes use of the line. Ever since this class in 1994, I've tried to remind myself of my responsibility to the lines that live in each of my poems.

At eighteen, Pablo Neruda was my first love, the first poetic master to me. In his multitudinous odes to everything overlooked on the planet—the onion, a pair of socks, a squirrel and his nut—Neruda married images and objects that weren't even in the same realm of possibility. He wrote poems about Poetry and how it came to him as a lover who'd never release him. He wrote poems about the love he felt for his wife, Matilde, and these love poems took me back to the Harlequin days of my youth, back to Huelsbergs and Kardons, and happy endings. I read everything there was to read of Neruda, and I was saddened to learn that he had died in 1973—two year before I was born. I had hoped to have been able to walk the earth at the same time as he, to know that some of the molecules I breathed could have been his as well. This is

where my poem for Neruda comes from...from feeling profoundly connected to him, from feeling the outrage of his death, which was most likely not cancer, but murder.

In Dr. Sellers's poetry class, I was called upon to present a paper on William Carlos Williams, the red-wheelbarrow-guy, and I was pissed that I had drawn his name out of the glass bowl of poets' names. I had so little respect for WC Williams back then. I felt like he'd cheated the poetic world, poked the eyes of his readers, and I wasn't interested in playing his game. I told this to Dr. Sellers who looked at me with disappointment. I remember her saying that she expected me to commit myself to excellent scholarly research, to come to a new understanding of the value of Williams' voice in poetry. I did. Absolutely. I began to understand that the image-poems he created were more genius than I ever imagined. The simplicity of language with which Williams wrote was inspiring to so many poets, including me. His poem, "This is Just to Say" is one of my all-time favorites in the poetic world. There's equal imagistic beauty in "Pastoral," "Spring and All," and even in his ekphrastic piece, "Landscape With the Fall of Icarus." Williams delivers these understated little bombs in each of his poems. I want to blow just one reader's mind like this just once! To some degree, I compare Williams to Rafael Campo, a Hispanic medical doctor and poet. Like, Williams, Campo uses his medical training and doctor's experiences in his writing. Campo shines the light on AIDS, the suffering of homosexuals...Campo allows himself to be disturbed by the images he writes. More mind-blowing imagery...this time in the hands of this fifty-something Hispanic doctor who practices medicine and poetry in the United States. I honor WC Williams in my poem "Before the Red Wheelbarrow." Of course, in this poem, I poke fun at a bad marriage and allude to Williams' most famous poem and how it could've come to fruition. I also aim to write ekphrastic poems like Williams, the way he paints his observations like brushstrokes, the way he paints himself



into the painting by interpreting the artist's intentions, by writing lyrics to the song that's painted on the canvas, by creating a new duet.

Sometimes good poetry is a religious experience—like when I read Rumi, Hafiz, or the prayerful demands of Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, who challenges one to be the most luminous Catholic one can be. I like the dizziness that comes with Rumi and Hafiz...I feel like a whirling dervish when I read Hafiz's "The Happy Virus" on love and kissing. Hafiz also teaches me that "Everyone is God speaking." Working to remember this every day, to make it part of my DNA, is a lofty goal that Hafiz inspires within me, and when Rumi further instructs, "Passion lops off the bough of weariness./ Passion is the elixir that renews:/...seek passion, seek passion, seek passion!" I am indeed renewed. I love receiving direction on how to live a life, aspiring to find the sacred and holy in each day I live. This is where my poem, "Baptism With Fire" comes from. There are a series of poems that I still have in me about all the saints' remains I encountered in Rome the summer before last...it was in this city that prayer followed me around like an aura, and I was constantly amazed at the stories of faith and martyrdom. If I were not graduating this fall of 2016, these poems would find their home in this thesis.

*The Triggering Town* by Richard Hugo has found its way into my heart at the urging of three different professors of mine: Dr. Heather Sellers, Professor Emmy Perez, and Professor Billy Collins. Hugo's idea of the poetic "leap" or "turn" is what I aspire to most of all in all of my poetry and flash non-fiction pieces, and it's the turn that is the primary reason for Billy Collins's poetic genius. In "Aimless Love," his speaker puts his heart on the tripod of life and falls in love with all these objects: a dead mouse, a seamstress sewing at window, a steamy broth. All poets who are most amazing to me marry seemingly polar objects and/ or images. It's what makes writing poetry worth all the failure and frustration—that moment when you make a

marriage that is beautiful, too. Donald Hall does this in “The Painted Bed,” the poem in which he talks about love and death, watching his beloved wife, Jane Kenyon, die of leukaemia. Jane Hirshfield does it in “My Skeleton,” marrying gratitude to her bones and all the roles they serve. She does it, too, in “Global Warming,” when she writes about the explorer, Cook, as he lands on the coasts of Australia. She writes that the Natives are unable to look up, “. . .unable, it seems, to fear what was too large to be comprehended.” Nick Flynn, in “Becoming a Coat,” talks about how we are all transformed, after death, into old clothes that outlast us all. In the end, we are all going to become some coat passed on to thrift store of some sort. As if this were not amazing enough, in “Emptying Town,” Flynn marries the feeling of missing someone to the sacred heart of Jesus—“... You know the way Jesus/ rips open his heart, all flaming and thorny,/... I’m afraid/ the way I’ll miss you will be this obvious.” In “Early in the Morning,” Li Young Lee paints the beautiful picture of his father watching his mother comb her hair as it falls “like curtains” from the pins that have held it up all day. Jane Kenyon writes about how when her husband is away from home traveling, “The bed on your side seemed/ as wide and flat as Kansas,” in “Alone For a Week.” Maxine Kumin, in her “The Blue Bowl,” writes of a beloved cat that she and her husband are mourning: “. . .a robin burbles...like the neighbor who means well/ but always says the wrong thing.” Denise Levertov marries poetry all the time to Oscar Romero and El Salvador, to Vietnam, to the Gulf War...to politics in such astonishingly touching ways. I honor her for acknowledging the ugliness of war and paying attention to the suffering of others through her chronicles of poetry. Sylvia Plath, in “Cut,” marries her nearly-severed finger to a British Redcoat. W.D. Snodgrass in “Magda Goebbels (30 April 1945),” marries our hearts to this historical figure who is poisoning her children after Germany’s defeat in WWII...somehow, despite the horrors of Magda’s dedication to Hitler, Snodgrass gets us to feel compassion for

Magda as a mother; he pulls us to the universal human experience of loss. Gerald Stern takes the opposite perspective—that of the Jew who suffered in WWII. In “Behaving Like a Jew,” Stern says he is not going to be part of this fast-paced American optimism and ignore “...the bloodstained bumpers, the stiff hairs sticking out of the grilles,/the slimy highways...” all these images of death and roadkill disturb this Jewish speaker. No, he is not going to be okay with this beautiful dead opossum which lies in the road like “an enormous baby.” Instead he’s going to, “...behave like a Jew/ and touch his face, and stare into his eyes,/and pull him off the road.” The fact that this speaker is honoring the death of this small creature gives pause to the reader and shows that every death deserves its dignity, the dignity that millions of Jews were never given in their anonymous, unacknowledged deaths. What a marriage here—what devastation! I cannot name in my own poetry where and how I write or make or fashion successful turns or marriages. I’m not sure that I’m ever successful, but always, always, I am trying. Reaching for that communion of the bipolar twain, the impossible. As my favorite professors—Jean Braithwaite, Emmy Perez, and Billy Collins—have said, no surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader. I’m always trying to astonish myself first, my reader next.

There are some poets whom I love because of WHAT they say in addition to how they say it. Subject matter, exposing truths that would otherwise stay covered—this is admirable beyond all compare. Jimmy Santiago Baca is not afraid to tell you that he served five years in prison on drug charges. He wants the reader to understand how he ended up on this journey. So many poets I love because they show you the dark underbelly of life--only in looking and knowing the dark, can one see the light. In “The Girl,” Sharon Olds writes about two girls who were gang-raped in the woods. One girl survives, and her best friend dies. Olds concerns herself with the extraordinary pain in healing, in finding a way to move on. Olds writes, “She knows/

what all of us want never to know/ and she does a cartwheel, the splits, she shakes the/ shredded pom-poms in her fists.” What Sharon Olds does with subject is one thing, but what she does with her diction choice is another...she gets the reader to understand the “shredded” life, the clinging to life with “fists,” of this survivor of rape and attempted murder, the survivor that exists in all of us in this mad, mad world. Sharon Olds writes the truth no matter how painful it is to see and read and live. Anne Sexton does the same in “Sylvia’s Death,” a poem about her friend’s suicide; the friend happened to be Sylvia Plath. Sexton and Plath were each other’s sanity and strength through their recurring battles with clinical depression. In “Sylvia’s Death,” Sexton wonders jealously at the fact that Sylvia followed through this time, ignoring all the previous “little suicides” each had lived through. Sexton, sadly, followed suit and committed suicide as well. Both Plath and Sexton own their true emotions, write around them, through them, on their way to life’s journey of learning and hardships. And as a reader, one must appreciate the brutal honesty of their words and art. I embrace this kind of painful honesty when I deal with my sexual abuse as a child—in “Blue Pubes,” “Stretching,” and “Autobiography.” Moreover, I continue to force myself into facing what I’d rather not—my own father’s suicidal thoughts—in “As I Walk These Silver Solemn Nights.” For so many years, I have secretly watched my father’s every move, warily guarding him from himself, celebrating when the mesquite tree in the backyard died and had to be razed. I seem to write obsessively about my father probably because I’m always worried about him and the burdens he carries. There are some poets who’ve lived through war and understand that often, the war doesn’t end for the soldier just because a victor or ceasefire is declared. Chareles Simic is one of those poets. His prose poems on war in *The World Doesn’t End* are moving and original. There are some enigmatic, dark images in these works, mostly just surreal images, but the underlying tone is heavy and gray. The reader never forgets that these

works are prose poems whose job it is to show you the tension, anxiety, and fear that goes along with war...the constant feeling that the world is going to end.

I also admire one of the best poems written about the Vietnam War, Yusef Komunyakaa's, "Facing It." It's such a powerful title because for so many veterans of war, facing it—the history and the trauma lived through in war—is almost too much to bear. In "Facing It," Komunyakaa writes, "I go down the 58,022 names,/ half-expecting to find/ my own in letters like smoke." I have been to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. I, too, half expected to see my own father's name on the sleek, black, granite wall, but like smoke, my father is only there in wisps. The Vietnam War has been a member of my family in so many ways, a thief, too. It has robbed me of the father I should have had, but mostly, I lament what the war has done to my father—and others like him. My father graduated as the salutatorian of his high school class, and when he went to Texas A & I University in Kingsville in the late 1960s, he ran into a professor similar to the ones Gloria Anzaldua wrote about in *Borderlands*. When asked what my father wanted to do as a career—especially considering his "thick Mexican accent"—the professor was shocked to hear that my father was thinking about majoring in English literature. The professor mocked him and wondered how students would understand their teacher if my father's very own professor had difficulties working through his thick Hispanic tongue. Within days of this humiliation, my father voluntarily enlisted in the U.S. Army, and months later, he was deployed to Vietnam. The rest is history. And not. The rest is the present that my family and I have lived every day for over forty years since then. And my father...the war...he will never be done with facing it. Vietnam is certainly one of the weightiest subjects in my own writing.

As I write and reflect on the work I do, I now realize that I am a warrior, a fighter. Like a war veteran—maybe by genetics—I rage on against all darkness. A favorite poem of mine words this more brilliantly...in the words of Dylan Thomas, “Do not go gentle into that good night/...Rage, rage against the dying of the light.” I see my job as a poet of always, always, always raging against the dying of the light, and I when I graduate with this MFA degree in December 2016, I will not go out and buy a class ring. Rather, I’m going to paint myself a new tattoo...it’s going to be a green light bulb (ala Gatsby) with a red-heart-filament, and it will read “Lover of the Light.”

As much as I obsess about the dark, I am equally obsessed with clawing my way to laughter and light. Light can often be seen best through the rose-colored glasses of humor, and I do my best to write with a light-hearted voice sometimes, too. Billy Collins is a primary inspiration along this route, along with Mark Strand, Daniel Garcia Ordaz, Sandra Cisneros, Mark Doty, Denise Duhamel, and so many more. I hope that on the journey of reading my poetry collection, there is laughter and light along with the trauma of war and darkness; such is life.

Every time I pick up Billy Collins’ *Picnic, Lighting, Aimless Love, The Trouble With Poetry*...I am reminded of what I want to be at my core: a poet. This past summer I got to realize a dream—I got to be one of seven students in a workshop class with Billy Collins at the Southampton Writers Conference. I also had the privilege of being his Teaching Assistant. I am *still* in a haze of joy over this opportunity and blessing. Under his expertise, I wrote some of my most powerful poetry, and I revised old work in a way that makes me proud, too. Prof. Collins told me what was praiseworthy in my work, but he was also incredibly honest with me and cautioned me against drowning my poetry or overdoing my metaphors. There is beauty and strength in simplicity. This advice has similarly been echoed by Dr. Jean Braithwaite, another

beloved teacher of mine. I will always value this constructive criticism, and I'll hold it in one of the ventricles of my heart every time it's time to hone in on revising my work.

As a Hispanic female, I often negotiate between the guilt and pride I feel in being what sometimes feels like a “double agent.” As Toi Derricotte writes in *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey*, she often explores the privilege—one she didn't ask for, but owns nonetheless—of being a lighter skinned black person. I can relate to Derricotte's struggle with racial and cultural identity. The truth is I am not fluent in Spanish. My skin is whiter than it is brown. My last name is hyphenated with my white husband's. This skin I wear is a privilege of sorts. When I'm asked if I identify as a Chican@ writer, I say sometimes say yes, sometimes no—the same answer as my skin. Sherman Alexie wrestled with these same issues of identity, of not speaking his Native American language, the language of his ancestors, of leaving the reservation to save himself from suffering. He writes tragedy and comedy, and he is a master of both. When I grow up, I want to be Sherman Alexie. I try to explore a bit of my Hispanic roots in “My Suegros Forget That I am Mexican,” and I also face head-on the ugliness and resentment that my people face in “Visibly Invisible,” and “Seeing Through It: Reflection on the Border Wall.” Sometimes I fear I do not have the right to speak for “my” people, my fellow Hispanics. Like Sherman Alexie, I lament that I do not speak the native language of my ancestors with fluency or mastery. And if I'm not careful, I can let this feeling of shame overwhelm me into a silence I do not want to own.

There are some Hispanic writers that make me want to own my father's accent and migrant-worker past, that make me want to be more authentically Chican@. One of my favorites is Martin Espada, whom I had the pleasure of meeting and learning from this past summer as a

student in a workshop of his at the Southampton Writers Conference in New York. Espada wrote one of the most beautiful 9/11 poems that exists in the English language; it's called "Alabanza," and it's a tribute to all the Hispanic employees who ran the restaurant at the top of the Twin Towers—the restaurant was called Windows on the World, and all the workers died this day, and they all deserve *alabanza* for the dignity of the work they did, the lives they lived, and the deaths they suffered.

Sandra Cisneros makes me own my Mexican-Americanness with a pride I never could've fathomed before reading her *Loose Woman* and *My Wicked, Wicked Ways*. The badass poetic essence of Cisneros can best be illustrated in her title poem, "Loose Woman," in which she writes: "By all accounts I am a danger to society./ I'm Pancha Villa./I break laws,/upset the natural order,/anguish the Pope and make fathers cry./I am beyond the jaw of law./ I'm la desperada, most-wanted public enemy./ My happy picture grinning from the wall." Yes, I want to BE Sandra Cisneros...muy Mexicana! I want my long trenzas and Frida Kahlo eyebrows and feathery moustache. I want to speak in gritos. I want to sing *Canciones de Mi Padre* with Linda Ronstadt! Like Sandra Cisneros, like Lydia Davis, I want to wreak havoc with my *Varieties of Disturbance*. Sometimes I remember who I am and who I want to be. Reading authors like Emmy Perez makes me take pride and ownership over this place I call home, this Rio Grande Valley. In "After Thirty-Five Days In Italy, I Learn..." I write about an epiphany I have, about how much this river in my backyard has come to mean to me. For two decades, I ignored it, but after being away from it for so long, my homecoming included an acknowledgment of it, a realization of what it means to live alongside it, to be blessed by its presence, not weighed down by it. Likewise, I'm still exploring who I am, who I want to be, not only as a Hispanic woman, but as a poet.



But I still have such a long way to go, and in so many ways, as a poet at the age of forty-one, I find this daunting. How much there is left to learn...how much to emulate...how much to grow. There are books I own—like bibles, to me—that force me out of the comfort of my turtle shell. Some of the most significant along my writing path include Julia Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way* and *Walking in This World*. I come back to the directions for life and inspiration of this books time and time again. They are scribbled in and battered; they are a metaphor for my life. Annie Dillard, too, has taught me the beauty of natural images—whether a dog who watches her drink a cup of coffee, praying mantis egg sacs, or an orb weaver spider who becomes her new roommate—Dillard’s words have inspired me to want, to hunger for from my own words. When Joan Didion lost the love of her life and chronicled her loss of balance in this world in *The Year of Magical Thinking*, I was blown away by her words, by the agonizing truth of her loss. I now know what it will feel like if my husband dies before me, and I am often haunted by Didion’s experience—solely because she wrote so authentically. Susan Wooldridge’s *Poemcrazy* inspires me to want to live Poemcrazy for the rest of my days. I am enjoying the craze and high of words even as I write this now. The next thing on my to-do list is to write Donald Hall, to Mary Oliver, to Claudia Rankine, to Jane Hirshfield (I’ve already written to Charles Simic, Annie Dillard, and Billy Collins!), to Nick Flynn, to sooooo many poets just to say *thank you*. Thank you for sharing your life, for saving mine. Poetry has saved my ass so many times. Poetry has been my compass, my lighthouse, my gasoline tank, my roadmap to myself...all roads lead back to my heart. If I hadn’t discovered poetry, I truly believe I’d be medicated, hospitalized, or worse. But I leave that hypothesis in the dark, to be buried along with all the old sloughing off of past and pain.

As Galway Kinnell writes: “It’s the poet’s job to figure out what’s happening within oneself, to figure out the connection between the self and the world, and to get it down in words

that have a certain shape, that have a chance of lasting.” This, I now realize, is my primary aim. And while I sometimes carry guilt about my confessional poetry, my autobiographical flash non-fiction prose (so much of what I write is true), I remind myself of what Anne Lamott believes, “You own everything that happened to you. Tell your stories. If people wanted you to write warmly about them, they should have behaved better.”

Furthermore, from *Bird by Bird*, Lamott adds:

If something inside of you is real, we will probably find it interesting, and it will probably be universal. So you must risk placing real emotion at the center of your work. Write straight into the emotional center of things. Write toward vulnerability. Risk being unliked. Tell the truth as you understand it. If you’re a writer you have a moral obligation to do this. And it is a revolutionary act—truth is always subversive.

And so here is mine....

### **Epilogue:**

“When it’s over, I want to say: all my life / I was a bride married to amazement. / I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.” –Mary Oliver

## CHAPTER II

### CANCIONES DE MI PADRE

#### **What I Say When I'm in Brownsville and They Are in San Antonio**

##### **(or A Poet in the Family)**

I am all ambush, a spider trapping truth,  
encasing it stealthily in cocoon,  
my next meal.  
I tell my family's secrets  
dressed in camouflage,  
the same kind my father wore  
in the jungles of Vietnam where Agent Orange  
could not tell a man from a tree.

I am a sneaky toxin to my family  
if they only knew how I lie in wait.  
I am a booby trap. I am javelin and noose.  
I am invisible because for too long,  
they have trusted me to follow the rules.  
They thought I would never cultivate  
a crop made of my own voice.

But they hadn't considered my pen,  
this new kind of ink that spills  
the soggy bones of truth,  
the metallic corrosion that is mirror.  
I weave stories with all these legs  
I own. I grab. I steal. I collect all the seeds  
that drop from their mouths...small as millet.

My words rain down on family,  
a slow mist. Before they know it,  
I have soaked through layers of protection  
like cotton and skin and bone. My words  
are towering shadows, a devious orange fog.  
They are acid rain...they will leave a mark.

## **I Plan Your Funeral While You're Still Alive**

Instead of talking to you, I plan  
your funeral in my head a hundred times.  
I read you my eulogy as if only  
your body and I are in the room, as if  
it really matters. In my dreams,  
I read loud enough for you to hear. I touch  
your face, and it's still warm. I touch  
the brown mole on your lower lip, imagine  
your pulse is still present.

Instead of talking to you, I write  
what I can't say: I understand  
how you tried to drink down bullets,  
dream away helicopters and jungles,  
that I accept when you once said  
you wanted to hang yourself  
from the mesquite tree in our backyard.  
I imagine the stained glass shadows  
splashing life on your embalmed skin,  
the scent of Catholic incense—  
enough to erase the Agent Orange  
that followed you home from Vietnam.

I want to give you a funeral that makes you  
forget the shooting stars that misfired  
in your face, no more booby traps  
or VFW, no more remembering,  
no more secrets, no more elephant on your chest.  
Just casket.  
The only truth we need to finally say—  
you've been waiting too long for death.  
And I've been waiting too long to deliver  
the words you deserve while your ears are still  
warm and pink and listening.

## **From a Long Line of Thieves**

Someone once said that all sin  
has its origins in theft.  
My 'buelito stole a man's life,  
and my tio stole his wife's.

The stories are graphic and surreal—  
I picture it like a scene in a Dali painting:  
Tia's teeth hanging loosely from her gums,  
swaying in the wind like mesquite tree branches...  
Tio's hands trembling from the force  
of his fists clenched around his shotgun barrel  
as he smashed, ground the butt into Tia's mouth,  
her punishment for dreams of freedom and divorce.

Grandpa died when I was a baby.  
I will never get to ask him  
why he killed a man over words.  
There is a picture of my abuelo holding me  
in white arms with rivers of veins  
running through them, alive.  
I don't remember his heart beating,  
but the hearing is somewhere inside of me...  
pumping the chambers of my own heart.

There is a connection  
to both men; we are family.  
I come from a long line of criminals.

So much of me worries—  
does murder get handed down  
from one generation to the next?  
Like a genetic mutation,  
a predisposition swimming in my DNA?

Grandpa's hands, the ones that held me,  
once held a pistol. His fingers, which wove  
in and out of my hair, also wove around a trigger,  
bore a hole in a man's gut,  
and then another in the heart of his wife.

I come from a long line of thieves,  
but I keep telling myself that I am different.

And I am.  
I choose a weapon made of soft, pink flesh,  
no guns, no bullets...just mouth.  
The same one I use to kiss.

I wield weapons that are words...  
Cruelty flies off my forked tongue,  
in rapid fire. Every flick delivers  
a venomous wound. I lick my fangs  
and invent a new language, a noxious fury.

I lie in snakey, snarly coil,  
trying to control  
the cold in my blood.

But I worry:  
has my blood been diluted enough  
over the past forty years?  
Is there a way to water down murder?

I carry their blood in me.  
I carry their blood in my blood.  
We are the same species.  
We are all thieves.

## From a Long Line of Thieves

There had been hints before that Grandma Fina wasn't well for a few years in the 1960s. I had heard my father tell of "being raised for a couple of years by Tia Sofia," but being so young, I didn't put the puzzle pieces all together. I didn't know until one Sunday after church in Palito Blanco, my father passed an old abandoned bar. He said to my mother, "That's where Daddy shot and killed that man." My ten year-old ears perked up. My Grandpa killed a man? Grandpa Teto? In the only picture I have of the two of us together, my grandfather looks like he glows in the dark-- his skin is so white, you can't tell the wifebeater from the man. He's holding me in his arms, looking into the camera with sodapop-bottle lenses so thick that they magnify his blue-grey eyes. He looks warm, even if he isn't smiling...it could be the eyes that make me think of sadness...they almost look watery in the old photo. He died when I was nine months old, so I have no memories of the man himself, just this photo...and the knowledge that in this old, rundown little building off the main caliche road in Palito Blanco, my grandfather shot a man and killed him.

When I ask my father for more information, my older sister silently and sneakily punches me, then stares me down with her shut-your-damn-mouth-eyes, but I feel brave. "Daddy, did you say that Grandpa Teto killed a man?" Yes, he says with ease, and then matter-of-factly reminds me, "Don't you remember that's why Tia Sofia raised me for a few years." He goes on. After Papa Teto went to prison, Grandma Fina shut down. "They had to put her in a mental institution in Alice, Texas. Her children didn't see her for close to two years," Dad says solemnly. This is news to me. I wonder for a moment why my father thought I'd know these stories...he'd never shared. From whom was I going to get these family histories, if not from him? I kept picking at the scab, "But why did Grandpa kill a man?" "Stupidity...drunkenness. Grandpa let something the other man said offend him. I believe the other man called Papa Teto a drunk...so he was truthful. Papa Teto wouldn't let the man get away with it. Apparently, it ended badly...Papa Teto sometimes carried a pistol on him for hunting. But this night, he used it on the man." It takes several minutes of silence on the car ride home for me to process this violence, this murder. At ten years old, I don't know what to do with this knowledge, the fact that my grandfather was a murderer. I thought of Grandma Fina, now a widow who always wore a black mantilla over her head to church, and wondered *how did Grandma do it? Live with a murderer?*

A judge granted my grandfather a compassionate early release from jail because my Grandma Fina was having such a difficult time in the mental hospital. The first thing Papa Teto did when he got out of jail was go to Alice to collect her. Then he proceeded to collect all ten of his children who were living with various relatives. He put his family back together. But by this time, one eldest son, Porfirio, was already married. He married at a very young age, and he had learned to hit the bottle hard, too...just like his father. But unlike my Grandpa Teto, my Tio Firo also hit his wife.

I didn't learn this story till a few years later when I was staring into a black and white photo of a woman I didn't recognize. My father noticed my stare, so I pressed him, "Who was she?" And that's when he told me that she was my Tia Vicky, my Tio Firo's first wife before Tia Elva. Tio Firo killed his first wife—out in broad daylight. He had been stalking her and surprised her in the parking lot of a grocery store. He beat her to death with the butt of his shotgun, breaking many bones. Her family couldn't give her an open-casket funeral. Dad says he sneaked

into her funeral days later, wearing sunglasses and standing in the back of the funeral home. He was recognized and run off the premises by Tia Vicky's brothers, who told my father all the Zamoras were "*pinches putos*."

Two murderers. A father and a son. And I stared looking at the profile of my own father, watching the throb of his heartbeat as it appeared on his left jawline. I wondered if murder plants itself in DNA, if Dad is a "carrier."

Sometimes I wonder about me. Sometimes my husband will wonder, "Luci, do you ever think you have a short fuse?" This is when I'm seething about something, saying things I *should* later regret. And I think of the blood boiling, and I think of the blood that's been spilled by my family. And I wonder at the ways of murder, how one can kill without weapons, how one can kill with the same tongue, the same lips we use for loving.



## Vietnam and Other Thieves

In my first memories of childhood, I remember my father with a beer can in his hand. I find it hard to believe—now that I am forty--that his right hand is not permanently locked into can-holding position, an artistic arthritis, it would be. But maybe all the years of migrant work kept his phalanges flexible, his tendons gummy and yielding. As a young man in his teens, he would have trapped coyote, snipped the ears off the dead carcasses with shears, shipped them to the U.S. government for payment. This was after picking cotton. And driving the milk truck came somewhere in between. But all this was before Vietnam.

I came about eight years after his war, but the war he carried with him like an invisible stigmata, a private crown of thorns. Vietnam rendered my father silent, and he only opened his mouth to receive the communion of Schlitz, Black Label, and on occasional paydays, Miller High Life. At five, I watched with intrigue, and I longed for acknowledgement that never came. When I was ten, I joined CYO softball, and Dad would go to my games. Win or lose, at the end, he'd buy me a Big Red from the concessions, and he'd pull a can of beer from an ice chest in the backseat. I pretended we were connected on the silent drive home from my games, each of us guzzling a different reality.

At eighteen, it was too late. Words that never came began to fit me like the most comfortable sweater. I wore the silence like Mr. Rogers's own cardigan and sneakers. My dad and I would pass each other like glaciers in the Arctic, never touching, floating islands. No wonder I married the first man who loved me. He, too, was quiet. He was my polar opposite...the polar was familiar.

At twenty, I wanted an annulment. David didn't match any hero in the Harlequin romances I'd obsessed over as a middle schooler. Marriage left me parched, scorched, more alone than I was before the small diamond chip on my left hand. As a student in college, I'd sit among the library stacks in the 811 section, never alone. I let the medicine of William Carlos Williams work me like a curandero. I discovered life inside the bell jar with Sylvia. I dreamed that I was the Matilde of Neruda's heart. I knew it was time for me to be silent, to stop pretending that I knew how to fill every void. I couldn't stop talking to save my life. I was a chachalaca, always chattering to kill the numb of invisibility.

At forty, my father and I still do not talk. In his retirement, he sits with a can in his hand, I with a mug of coffee in mine. Both of us sit near each other, eyes wide open. Ears, too. Waiting for one to tell the other something important—before we die. In the silence, I imagine “Vi.....et.....nam” pulsing its syllables through his skin like a steady heartbeat. I listen in, hoping that our hearts will one day imbibe the same spirit.

## Daddy

In my head, I am always  
conversing with you, sharing  
the true story of how Elvis meditated  
on his knees, praying the *Our Father* for hours  
before he recorded *How Great Thou Art*.

I share with you  
a haiku by Richard Wright  
about a mangy dog who sneezes,  
a potent image of Goya's *Christ Crucified*,  
a picture of me standing in Mamertine Prison,  
the exact spot where Saints Peter and Paul were  
held captive right before their martyrdoms.

I share with you these morsels of interest  
and keep all the words to myself,  
sometimes in a file folder made of the ventricles of my heart.  
Sometimes all these thoughts ricochet off my cranium,  
bullets that miss their mark  
that's always you.

My words embed themselves in the nooks and crannies  
of my skin--the "eleven" between my eyes, the parentheses  
around my lips, the life lines on my palms...  
so many places where I hide my words from you  
are *really* in plain sight...

if you would only look through your Vietnamese jungle,  
look past the bars that you've built,  
stop looking through me  
and know that I've been talking to you for  
forty-one years.

## Canciones de Mi Padre

To hear Linda Ronstadt weep  
*Tu Solo Tu*, longing at the foot of *Las Laureles*,  
I go from forty years-old back to ten,  
back to Palito Blanco and every party  
filled with your six brothers and three sisters,  
beer cans that never stopped flowing  
out of old trucks and into sad mouths.

Oh, the power of song, of voice—yours.  
Everything stopped when you sang  
of *Dos Arbolitos*, of companionship  
and love between two little trees  
on your ranch, and you begged for that, too.  
Your gritos were a double-edged sword,  
loud as joy, sharp with thirst.

*Hay Unos Ojos*, I remember yours,  
wet and overwhelmed with wanting  
more than this moment of all eyes on you,  
more than this marriage after Vietnam,  
more than four daughters who look  
in your eyes, too young to know  
that when you sing, you are baying at the moon.

*Por Un Amor*, this song is your last  
before you go back to your seat.  
It's about how a man's heart cannot  
recover from its brokenness, how it would be  
better if he gave up. Now that I am forty, I know  
what you hunted at the bottom of every can,  
a numbness, at the bottom of every bottle,  
a universe, the songs you've always sung,  
a eulogy all your own, all you own.

## Hungry

Sometimes it looks like a plate of spaghetti with chunky marinara and hearts of artichoke, but what I'm really digging my fork into is you, as you pour your fat jokes into a vat of *manteca* that you will roll and stroke and beat into submission until your tortillas are what they're supposed to be—and me, let's just say I've never cut the mustard, this same condiment which I use to lather up my Polish sausage. Sometimes I dream that I am Polish, too, anything but yours, your Mexican-American daughter born into a marriage that should never have been, just like the Vietnam War that stole your husband from you. You know that you eat your own denial, like a fine veal cutlet, probing the meat for secrets that you already know: your husband has come back spewing a new kind of venom—different from the alcohol that courses through his veins, thicker than blood. Thick like my thighs or like my insulated walls, that I've designed to keep you out. My drug of choice has always been *pan dulce*. When there's no light in your dark, I create my own. *Empanadas con calabaza*, chocolate cupcakes, *maranitos*—we are kindred spirits, the pigs and I, you used to say. Like kneading bread, you needed me to know my place, how low-down a fat girl like me was. At fourteen, you had me nailed, and I've never forgotten how well you pegged me. I resigned myself to being too large, when all I wanted was to be small.

Honestly, I never said I'd be all you wanted me to be...skinny, a doctor, all your dreams of success. So instead, I'm *carne guisada*, *enchiladas con salsa verde*, *menudo* full of tripe and hominy...no harmony between us. Instead, I'm a high school English teacher who teaches kids to love the poetry of their lives, to paint verse out of every pain that love gives us an offering. It's what I do, too...here on this page, painting truth out of memories of *abrazos* that never came, pride that never filled a plate, kindness that left every glass I ever put to my lips--empty. Here I stand at the buffet table of life, hungry...always left empty when I go to your table, knowing that if I want sustenance, I will have to prepare my own meal.

## **As I Walk These Silver Solemn Nights**

I walk to get away from what I don't want  
to be still and think about.

I walk with empty hands, closed fists.

I pump my arms for acceleration...all minor distractions  
from thoughts of suicide.

Once on a car ride from San Antonio to Brownsville,  
my father decided to talk to me—though in twenty years of life,  
he'd never thought to talk to me before.

And maybe that's why instead of diving into shallow waters,  
we dive into the deep...Dad says he used to dream  
about hanging himself from the tall mesquite tree in our backyard—  
the same one we used for our piñatas when I was a child...  
piñatas that hung on a rope with painted smiles and plastered joints,  
swaying in the silent wind.

I'm back to pumping, pulse at optimal fat-burning capacity.  
Dogs bark, a tarantula scurries around my feet and to the curb,  
I focus on Mumford & Sons' banjo and fiddle.  
But then I see hands pumping at strings and they turn into fists  
that knot nooses around my father's neck.  
I'm back to that car ride ten years ago.

Neither Dad nor I have ever re-visited the conversation of that day.  
But it echoes in his introvert-voice, it is spelled out  
In the lines of his forehead, I hear death whisper in the swoosh  
of my feet as I traverse over asphalt fissures. I walk three miles of the same circle.  
I'm always going in circles—wishing I could slow  
down and talk to my father, ask him to let me back into  
his world, to see me  
not as just one of four daughters, but as a lifeline.  
I want to offer him a transfusion...of fresh marrow  
to sprout green sprigs of hope or  
to grow small, short shrubs.

The next time I'm visiting at Dad's house,  
he sits in silence and reads the Old Testament;  
I read the newspaper. I get dizzy wading through the want ads.  
It's the wanting that does me in...  
I want to ask Dad if we can please cut down the old mesquite tree  
in the backyard, but instead, I ask,  
"What kind of tacos do you want for breakfast, Dad?"

But it's a question I already know the answer to.

And that's how it is always between us.

Dad forgets to eat, I remind him.

He sits in silence, I let him.

I twiddle my thumbs, the same as my father's  
that have pondered pulling back a hammer  
and a trigger.

Suicide swims around us in silence...

Silver, slithery minnows that meander  
in between toes, between our hands that lay flat  
on the kitchen table only inches away from each other,

but in separate hemispheres.

## **You Buy a Guitar in Vietnam for 600 Piasters—April 1965**

And I can just imagine the quiet howling you would have done, hunched down in your bunker, no maybe in open light because you mentioned that once, even after that first siren screamed out to take cover, you stood standing and finished your cigarette while everyone else ran. Your theory of courage: you were too stupid to know that this was no place for machismo. You'll never forget the whizzing, whirring, whistling, hissing of the mortar rounds as they rocketed past you. Past the cigarette in your lips, past the guitar in your arms that was more friend to you than most. It was you, your dog, your guitar. All three of you standing staunch in the face of mortar rounds.

You tell me that you can't believe they didn't find you...the mortar rounds missed you in broad daylight. You sat down, put your hand on the coat of your German shepherd, put your other arm around your guitar. The mortar rounds kept coming. Kept missing. Your white comrades would later sit in wonder at you, at how you didn't run. For some, it would mean they changed your name from *Spic* to *Zamora*, but for others, it was just one more reason to hate the song that was your skin. The truth is, we both know, you've never feared a death that you've been stalking for too long.

## **After Forty Years of Waiting, You Speak to Me of Vietnam**

Your eyes traverse over latitude and longitude, I feel you leaving me to stay, to answer a question I've carried tucked under my feathers. It started out as a speck of dust, and after many years of the hard labor of tuck-age, it is now a pearl, a pearl I offer to you. It is black, it wants to shine.

You go there, and your eyes chopper back to mine. It was a man named Cunningham who was your first Viet Cong, an unexpected land mine among assumed allies. He heard the Accent of your *yessirs* and bayoneted you—you *are a fucking wetback*. You had just met him in Georgia. You were both training canines as military police. You'd be sharing the same bunkers, your German shepherd, Fritz, the only other witness to the hacking of your spirit. You said nothing. You tucked that wound away in a private oyster, clammed it shut. And today, for the first time in our lives, you offer me a pearl, too, this one made of the bottom half of an exclamation point.

I dream that we'll start a collection, prying open all the mussels that we've hammered shut. I dream that we'll carry our very own bayonet, stab every silence, kiss all the necessary lips that have pearls to yield. No matter the stench or barb, I dream that one day we'll empty our pockets of every secret we've longed to tell, string them all into one strand..... a string of perfect punctuation around my neck.



## CHAPTER III

### FORCE

#### **Baptism With Fire**

I wear like every saint, an aura,  
a Heavenly helmet upon my brown hair.  
I am plugged in, my brain percolates light.  
With these electric eyes, I radiate this world.  
I am thermal energy.  
Under this skin, I am cooking,  
a beautiful singe, roasting my pink lungs  
to perfection. My heart is always  
simmering, so warm that my ears are smoking.

With this pen in my hand, I am a hearth  
to warm your hands by. With these words,  
I become a geyser. I swish hot springs around my tongue  
like holy water. I become a prophet.  
I gargle with ink, and my lips swell with poems.

## House Made of Bread

Marrying a *bolillo*—it's like tasting a warm hot roll fresh from the oven, and your tongue is the butter. But if you want, you can grab a spoonful of *cajeta* and marry the thick sweet brown to the white steamy flesh that you spread open in your palm. When you place this communion on your tongue, it melts into syrup as sweet as agave... you leave it there and let it nestle, plant roots in your palate. Roots so deep they remind you of the saguaro's. Long after the saguaro is dead, I read, you can use its dried limbs as wood. You can build a house out of the body—the same goes for the *bolillo*.

## **We Are Not Yet Married When This Pelican Takes Flight**

You and I were dreaming when the pelican  
flew across the causeway strip.  
We both silenced our tongues  
and let the bird ease the tense  
wall between us and a future, your hands  
cast in bronze against the sunset of August.

We had been speaking of adultery when this august  
moment made us pause to breathe in pelican;  
you didn't know what to do with your hands—  
drive or reach for me. Our hearts were a strip  
made out of cartoon, the world was all past tense,  
and we wanted to taste the future on our tongues.

Other people could not stop flapping their tongues  
at us. It was too soon, it was only August,  
and divorce wasn't far enough away, too present tense.  
The only mouth we heeded was that of the pelican—  
in full view of him, we would strip  
down to bare bones, truth in our hands.

To this bird which hovered over us, we reached out our hands.  
For the moment, we forgot the wagging of tongues,  
no one was there to point fingers and strip  
us down to shame, to dull this August  
evening to a nub of brown pelican.  
This moment was our own present tense.

Under his wings, our bodies no longer tense,  
we cupped our pairs of hands  
to remember that we could forge a nest for this pelican  
to shelter him, too, from all the sharp tongues  
to live within this steady breath of august  
epiphany...carved across our hearts like lightning strip.

We paint ourselves in mauve and copper, a strip  
of the sun's remains to buffer us against this world so tense  
with envy that they suck the wind out of our august  
sails. We find each other's hearts in each other's hands  
after having lost them in other people's tongues,  
but we remember us again when we speak to this pelican.

In the presence of this pelican, we can strip  
through the gangrene tongues that speak in a tense  
we do not heed, our hands chiseling an eternity of Augusts.

## Trash Collector

What you have heard is true. Like an incendiary enzyme, I have poured myself into a beaker filled with your husband. He is now a distilled spirit I swish around my mouth, like a cultured pearl that rolls and clicks against my teeth. He has forged a dwelling place here, his own Georgia O'Keefe canvas, a cavern of palate and botanical curves.

You set him on the curb for Tuesday's trash collection. You could have changed your mind, rummaged through the Hefty sacks as if searching for an important receipt. But you didn't.

One woman's trash is...well, you know how this ends. With your husband's heart in my palms. Granted it was withered, scorched, and scabbed, but we dipped it in a salve of aloe. It was as fragile as origami lace; it needed repiecing of parts, the sewing of ventricles. You were once a seamstress, but your thread can't hold him anymore.

You can't make a claim of theft when you leave your fortune in broad daylight. with a sign that reads *free to good home*. Because that's what I did. What you have heard is true. I was his catalyst, moving him like osmosis-- from less to more. We became a chemical equation, and we made you evaporate... bubbles of what used to be.

Floating onward...upward...into the burning sun...and bursting... into nothing.

## Today I Think the Thoughts of a Man

If the research is true and men think of sex every seven seconds,  
then today, I must be made of beard and brawn and smaller breasts.

Now, you are drinking your honey green tea, and I am not touching my Earl Grey.  
You start to speak of your cinnamon scone, possibly, but I'm not listening.

I am looking at your polished white teeth, wanting to taste their smoothness.  
You are saying something with your lips and talking with your hands,

the same ones that were—fifteen minutes before—holding my breasts, kneading them,  
needing them. I remember the rasp in your whispered voice against my skin.

In the background, I hear the grinding of coffee beans and frozen frappes,  
now that we are here in this public place... but loudest of all, I recall the sound of your heartbeat,

like the zip of exclamation points against my ear as I lie on your chest after we're both spent.  
*Let's go back to the past*, I think, but then I recall this present is perfect, too...this naked  
thinking.

Watching you cradle your white cup of steam, I think: I'd like you to cradle me—again,  
or I could wrap you in the parentheses of my two hands, warm them against your hard fire.

You're rambling on, something about needing to paint the shutters, I shut off your words,  
I'm studying your hands, retracing where your fingers pirouetted across my skin.

I look at the barrista and the other customers, at you still talking at me, transcending my present  
lust. I wonder how you can place your tired red lips on your cup and not remember drinking me.

## Cartographers

I see me reflected in the amaretto  
of your eyes...in the fissures  
that line your hands in hearts,  
the music staff on your forehead.  
I walk the line.  
I am there.

In the hematite of your hair,  
I see me...in the rose quartz of your lips  
I glisten like you.

In the bowl of soup on your placemat,  
I simmer. I am swimming  
in your spoon.

In the smile you beam,  
in your smooth moonstone teeth,  
I am there,  
looking at me, looking into you.

Wherever I look, I see you—  
in my wrinkled sheets,  
in a Ronnie Milsap song,  
in the bottom of my pumpkin coffee mug.

In every entry, out every exit,  
out the windshield and in the rearview mirror,  
I see you. I see me.

Wherever my expedition begins,  
you are the meditation and mantra.  
However my pilgrimage ends,  
you are the fuel and the fireworks' grand finale.  
I see you in every footprint,  
I see me in every tread...

We are a sojourn, a campaign,  
a promenade, a wandering,  
wayfaring caravan. And together,  
we redesign the map of the world.

## **Autobiography—after Frank O’Hara**

When I was a child  
I was sent to my uncle’s house  
where he played “This Little Piggy”  
on my seven-year-old toes.

I hated his motorcycle, but still  
I was made to straddle it, holding him tightly  
from behind, my budding breasts  
smashed into his back.

Nobody ever came looking for me  
except for Tio Robert, in the darkness  
of night, the moon and stars the only  
witnesses, and I did not cry out.

And here I am, the  
poet, fingers on the trigger of my pen!  
my ink spilling your secrets!  
Bellowing!



## Blue Pubes

There are certain things that baffle me to this day. Why I drew pictures of a penis and pubic hair in blue ink all over notebook paper at six years old. Mrs. Walla, my first grade teacher, called my mother in for a conference. At the end of their meeting, my mother picked me up in the front office, grabbing my hand forcefully and pulling me out Royalgate Elementary's front doors. We got in the car, where she yanked out the paper with all the penises—some small one-inch things, with larger ones that took up a quarter page. Curly blue pubes abounded. “What the hell is this?” she screamed. I didn't have any words. I didn't know how that paper made it into my schoolbag. It didn't make sense. It was my handwriting. I'd written, “pipi” all over in pretend-cursive.

I don't remember what came after this pipi-incident. I imagine the same thing happened to my pipi-art as happens to most scandals in my family. They are filed away in some mystery manila folder labeled, “Never Talk About This Again. Not. Fucking. Ever.” When my twenty-year-old sister confided in me that she'd been sexually abused by our other sister, I took my rage to my mother who said, “Alright, Goddamnit, that's enough!” That was fourteen years ago. My sisters still have to be in the same room for Christmas and Thanksgiving. And when one sister asks the other if she wants her children to spend the night so that she and her husband can have a date night, it's my brother-in-law who answers too abruptly, “No. The kids are staying with us.” He looks at me. Later he'll whisper in my ear, “This family is fucked up...the way no one shits their pants when Chana has the fucking audacity to ask if I want my kids to spend the night with her.” What bothers him—and me--the most is the fact that my mother is offended on behalf of the sister who did the sexual abusing. Mom later tells me, as we are doing the dishes, after the rest of the company has gone, “I don't know why Richard is such an asshole to Chana. It happens every damn time, and I will not have it in this house.” I stop wiping down counters to look at her, but she doesn't return my gaze. There are no words to say. I fall into perfect silent formation. File me under “Silence of the Lambs. Voiceless.”

Every once in a while, as I doodle in an after-school faculty meeting, I start mapping out blue swirls, and sometimes I'm taken back to the pubes. A few years ago my oldest sister, Alicia, confessed to me that our Tio Robert molested her when she was eight; I would've been five. We were sent to spend occasional weekends with him and my Tia Esther. Alicia asks, “Do *you* remember anything, Luci? Did he ever...you know...to you?” Immediately, I ponder blue pubes. I am outraged, “We **MUST** do something. Confront that motherfucker.” We look at each other in silence, knowing that nothing will ever come of anything. To test the waters, I tell my mother, “Mom, Alicia and I are pretty sure that we were molested by Tio Robert when we were little.” My mother looks at me, makes fists with her hands, continues folding the hot towels fresh from the laundry. She finally looks up at me after several seconds of quiet. “So you two just remembered this shit? After thirty years?” I walk away. Another right answer... another file folder.

## Stretching

Sometimes in decades of poetic lines, there is only one octopus that clings to life with outstretched tentacles...there is a seahorse that clings to the seagrass, there is an orb weaver spider guarding an oracle that I keep coming home to. There will be a story that I really wanted to tell, but I will find it's not worth the plot pyramid I've constructed. There's all this knotted fur suffocating skin, burrs swarming the bluebonnets.

But I keep writing, my fingers warming up, stretching so we don't pull a muscle. The phalanges do what they must, lifting weights, pushing the pen and grunting. The pen sweats bullets, wondering if it can stretch far enough into the dream that woke me this morning, the dream of me watching my uncle put a pistol into his mouth, like a steel straw, sucking. I stood there watching, waiting for him to do the right thing. Swallow. The way he once made me. And then I wake, not knowing what to do with all this wanting, this wanting to stretch this dream into something more.

## Biopsy

The days of waiting come paired with spring break,  
time allotted for renewal, for sunshine to refill  
what the clouds have greyed, the same grey of your cells  
that have been spread like lifeless butter onto a scientific slide.

While we walk and breathe in mountain laurel,  
I hold your hand in mine and wonder if you're thinking about cancer  
as I am. This break is only half-restful while the word *biopsy*  
looms in the shadows of the oak leaves, dancing on our skin.  
An orb weaver spider makes his home in our hotel room, spinning  
malignance, maybe. Or perhaps, his web is spun of good news.

Why should cancer have found its way to others and not to you,  
to us? Cancer needs no compass rose, no North Star.  
It's all cartography of its own design.

We should be able to turn over a random stone, and find  
roly-polies. We should be able to find some random splash of copper,  
a penny tossed anywhere along this asphalt we traverse.  
There *are* some givens in life. Cancer is one, lurking behind  
any old organ, on any given day.

Are you wondering: *why not me?* I'm wondering *why not you.*  
But I only allow myself this pondering in between naps that we take together,  
Lately, I've been clinging to the folds of your body, planting my fingers  
in the waistband of your Levi's, unbuttoning your button-downs to rest my hand  
on your heart. I need to feel it beat. I know I'm as clingy as cancer.

We wait, and everything around us becomes analogy for death.  
What if this spring we're in is not for sprigs of green,  
sprouting hope? What if there is no photosynthesis in our future?  
No light, no chlorophyll, no rain forests, no emeralds.

I keep dreaming of green lights. Like Gatsby, I hold out my hand and grasp  
at all the stars in the East Egg sky. I am a butterfly net, with gravitational pull  
towards the benign. I will you towards wellness. We sail on the plumes of  
Manhasset Bay, leaving the dock of wondering behind us.

And in the hazy gray of twilight, as we sail onward, I can see the faint outline  
of Gatsby behind us, as he reaches towards us, but we are too fast for him,  
too rich. We are like Daisy and Tom, beyond his reach,  
assuming that Jay is another analogy for cancer.

## **After the Biopsy Results**

We are still reeling with the good news.  
Though a bit of us leaves the words unspoken:  
Why not us? Why not you?  
And then we're back to the wine in our glasses,  
A stem in your hand, a stem in mine,  
containing a fine Italian red.  
I drink to your blood, all the luminous cells  
manufacturing, chiseling, welding a pipeline  
of health from your prefrontal cortex to the  
phalanges of your feet.

My only weakness, my only loss is weighed in faith.  
My faith is less dense than it once was.  
It used to be I had to carry it around in heavy boulders,  
pink Texas granite, gilded in slivers of gold. My faith would cast shadows  
on every slithering snake of question. But after a time of drought,  
it now knows the aches and crags of famine.

I can now carry my faith around in pebbles,  
light and easier for travel.  
I fill them in the toes of my shoes,  
in my ears, in the pockets of my blouse and blue jeans.  
Some of them are the colors of bright agate,  
Some have the shimmer of quartz, but even the grey and black stones  
are worth their weight and purpose. I can lay them down before me  
and they will create for me a path towards any light I want.

These rocks are all beautiful and benign...  
as are you.

### **Iambic Pentameter-You**

So, what I'm needing is a rhythm—you  
have planted your beat between hemispheres  
of mind. There it hammers and hunkers down  
into a blanket of soft, pink...could be  
cervix or brain. Who knows? You reside where  
you choose because your tango waltzes my  
heart into submission. You could wear me  
like a velvet dinner coat that purples  
your vision, violets your breath—I would  
give lightning, roots, and pulse to keep you in  
my skin, just chiseling your signature  
across this verse that pa-rum-pa-pums your name.

## **Me and You = Math**

We are complements..  
We are mirror images.  
We are congruent,  
and when we feel like it,  
we let the theorem of supplementary  
angles equalize us to 180 degrees.

We are music,  
whole notes and 32nds,  
an arpeggio played backwards and forwards,  
we render eighty-eight keys  
into equations no one can solve.

We are geometry,  
parallel lines and perpendicular, too.  
We are rays on the same plane,  
headed towards the same infinity.  
We declare our own postulates.

Our sum is beyond definition,  
exponents try to reach us,  
but our power is out of reach,  
just like string theory. We are Pi,  
we are Pythagorean-wielding wonders.  
We are a lesson worth teaching.

**A Bird-Watching Moment**  
**(To Sofia on Monday, March 12, 2007)**

Today we do very important things:  
we sit by the window, watch the rainstorm pass and flood  
the grass. We listen with new ears  
to the squawking and singing of the birds...  
all kinds- sparrows, crows, and kiskadees.  
The kiskadees sit like champions  
on the shrubs right outside our windows,  
making the branches dance with the rhythm of their hearts and wings.  
The kiskadee is our Greek hero,  
wearing a ready-made white stripe of laurel leaves.  
We watch poetry in the movement of the birds' breasts,  
in the prancing tree branches,  
in the droplets of water released from the oak leaves  
as they shiver, shudder and dry themselves after the rain,  
in the movement of Sofia as she surreptitiously plots  
to be near the kiskadees- the only thing separating us from the birds  
is the mesh of the screen. Our hero eyes us, and we eye him.  
There is an understanding between us.

We are this moment  
living poetry,  
and I will live this moment a thousand times over  
as you grow up. I will remember bird-watching today  
and remind myself that YOU have become  
the poetry.

## **For Too Long, I Have Relied On Pancakes to Fix My Life**

For the sixth time this April, she asks me if there really IS an Easter Bunny. I stop sidestepping, meet her amber eyes head on. "Are you ready for this?" I ask. Her eyes go wide, but she nods. We drive in silence to IHOP. With a short stack in front of her, I spill it. I disembowel the bunny...stuffing is laying all around us. Her 10 year-old eyes spill their guts, too. She is a limp balloon. I watch. I cry. But we both know it was time.

On the way home, we see a smashed turtle on the road. It looks like a murky, green pancake. Its red tongue, a ribbon of red carpet. I pretend it's not there, that she doesn't see it, too. When we park in our driveway, we are both silent, and as Sofia plods ahead of me to the front door, her spirit is flat as a pancake...she is as light as a mashed green tortoise.



## Spoons

You can't see yourself  
in a spoon. Your eyes, your lips—  
they're upside down, no reflection  
no semblance of the real you.

Even though it's a new spoon,  
given to you in sets of eight place settings,  
even though it once felt right in your hand,  
and you chose it above all other cutlery.  
Now...no fork will probe, no spoon can dig  
deep enough into the smooth broth  
for which you thought you were thirsty.

Eventually, you forget what drew you  
to this utensil, the spoon's shine is gone.  
Now, the spoon pours a history into your mouth  
that you no longer recognize.

You decide it's time to look elsewhere.  
for a reflection of who you are.  
It's a time when life is calling  
for a new stew, something rich and thick  
and satiating.

And the only spoon that will do  
is one that won't force itself  
down your throat. Instead,  
it will serve you faithfully,  
digging into whatever's on your plate,  
looking you in the eye,  
and knowing its place is simply this:  
feed, give, quench.

## **Autumnal Equinox**

It's not just about the leaves  
that should be letting go soon.  
It's about this marriage that we're molting.  
Everything gets colder by the day.

All the golds and oranges, the fires  
of autumn translate into rust,  
that irony film that weighs us down,  
heavy as chainmail, or marriage.

I no longer look out windows  
to appreciate the trees, the sun no longer  
warms. You no longer  
look at me, I have become the windows.

The truth starts to fall on us  
like leaves of lead, words unsaid  
build up in piles of brown, landmines  
we avoid. For too long, my prayers to St. Jude  
have evaporated—the same as us.

The autumnal equinox means the end  
of something and the beginning, too.  
We become the trees that shiver,  
dropping beautiful parts of ourselves,

veils, , vows, gold bands...  
everything about us that we once loved  
now left behind like the summer  
that once kissed us the colors of fall.

## CHAPTER IV

### GOOD MEXICAN

#### **I Wear America Around My Neck**

I wear America around my neck. A scarf of red, white, and blue. The wind kicks the stars in my face. Occasionally, I'll lift a fork to my lips and accidentally nibble on the stripes--sometimes red, sometimes white. I haven't, as of yet, choked on my country. I should probably take it off sometimes, this necklace made of homeland. Forgive me if I wear it like a bad re-run of *The Loveboat* or worse, *Fantasy Island*.

It's just that recently, I was so far away from home, and now that my feet are reunited with these States, I can't let them go. I'm too busy weaving my veins into star spangled banner, mapping out the geography of my heart's country, knitting my own arteries into interstate highways. I traverse the latitudes and longitudes of America, stake my claim to Walden Pond of Massachusetts, the lobsters of Maine, the cherries of Washington, the antiquity of New Mexico, the Alamo of my San Antonio, the Rio Grande River that lives in my backyard whose color matches my skin.

I wear America around my neck like I own all fifty states. When the wind blows them in billows around my lips, they rise up to kiss me back.

## **My Suegros Forget That I am Mexican**

My white suegros invite us to dinner at Rosa's Cantina.  
We eat enchiladas and soft tacos; we pass the sopapillas  
around along with the honey...this Mexican is good.

Back at their house, we watch Fox TV, and Bill O'Reilly  
spews his own truth. I am supposed to watch alongside  
this white family, which is mine now, too.

I'm supposed to believe Trump's pussy-grabbing  
is secondary to abortion. *Build the wall*,  
his supporters say, and the words echo in my ears.

Tortillas are good, enchiladas are, too.  
And tamales are the most perfect Mexican  
present to unwrap at any meal. I am convenient  
to have around when inquiring about the menu,  
when translations and mediation are required.

I am supposed to listen with both ears open  
about how *Trump says what everybody's thinking*,  
how *we can't let crooked Hillary into the Oval Office*,  
how *I must be open to voting for Trump*.  
And because my parents raised me right, I never argue.  
I just pull down this invisible sombrero  
over my dark brown eyes, past both brown ears.

I build my own wall between family,  
a border between us  
because it is a long time till election day,  
and I don't know if I can forget all that I've seen,  
all that I've heard. *We must build the wall*, they say,  
and I agree...to protect ourselves from those who try to rape us,  
from those who rob us of our proud identity,

all the while eating at our tables,  
eating all the good Mexican on their plates.

**Seeing Through It:  
Reflection on the Border Wall**

Let's make the wall a clear one,  
like Scotch tape or a Ziploc bag.  
It's not going anywhere but up...  
but it's only  
as strong as the pods on a dandelion--  
one breath, and it's gone  
like powdered sugar after a sneeze.

Some people say it will lull you  
to sleep to the tune of a sonorous sonata,  
but don't let it sing to you;  
turn your ears away.  
That wall is a son-of-a-bitch,  
and it's got nothing nice to say.  
Its hot breath will vacuum your lungs  
and leave behind balloons as saggy  
as an old woman's knees.

Some people say it will make you feel  
like mashed potatoes and gravy biscuits--  
all warm and delicious. Comfort food  
that makes your soul feel at ease--  
those Mexicans won't be climbing  
that wall--zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Some people say that wall is only  
as strong as we allow it to be.  
I, for one, plan to slurp it down  
like a slithery string of spaghetti.  
I plan to flick it into oblivion  
like a hairball or a bad memory.

That molehill will be made  
out of a mountain of dollars,  
but it's as pointless as a condom  
on a bad blind date. What good will it do you?  
People always find ways through walls...

but that wall isn't going anywhere but up,  
high as Trump's middle finger.

So let's make the wall a clear one--  
see-through like glass.

When we lean into it  
and put our hands on the panes,  
we'll touch palm against palm  
on either side of the wall and feel  
the warmth of a parallel body.

Let's make the wall so transparent  
that when we look through it,

we see ourselves on the other side.

**Feeling Like a Writer**—October 2016

I am typing at a laptop, lazing  
in the sunlight that's radiating  
through the faux-wood blinds  
at Denny's on South Padre Island.

I'm still in my pajamas at 6:00 p.m.  
People walk by me and stare  
at these pink flamingoes on my pants,  
at these pink fingers pirouetting  
on the dance floor of keyboard.

All these drafts of poetry, my thesis  
are fanned out before me, a placemat  
for my coffee and pumpkin pie.  
This company I keep is wordy and silent.

I look out upon the massive causeway brimming  
with cars and brown pelicans. I see two suns  
shining in the distance, one in the sky,  
one dancing on the bay...  
all the things real writers notice.

I feel like I have an anthology  
of poetry inside me. I'm listening  
to Peter Gabriel's *In Your Eyes*  
over the loud speaker, and  
*the doorway to a thousand churches*  
is somewhere around here.

I have forgotten my teacher bag, brimming  
with ungraded essays, with middle school  
vocabulary, as I look at the seagulls outside.  
And now Journey is playing *Wheel in the Sky*,  
and I'm whirling with words in this corner booth,

writing, hacking, vaulting, creating a world  
where the election is over, where a woman  
is president, where brown families will not be  
severed in two. And there are no walls  
to build. Only words. Words as tall as

Trump skyscrapers, words that sail on brown  
pelican wings, words that sing out of seagull  
mouths, words that look in my brown eyes  
and do all that they can to please me  
because today I am a writer.



## **Out of the Blue**

The Bluebonnets call a town meeting;  
they consort, conspire to spread  
a billowy blanket of blueness over Texas.  
Never has dominion been so sweeping—  
swept up in a new kind of ocean.  
A field of azure breath,  
a quilt sown of flowers.

Along the highways, there are blue ballerinas  
grooving in a liturgical dance—  
spangles swaying in a violet twilight.  
They are singing  
a song that is Texas.  
A mesquite-tree-whistling-wind  
is the only harmonica  
the bluebonnets need to keep tempo.

Their sapphire light is my lantern;  
I believe in God;  
He exists in this indigo canvas,  
this mad, mad Van Gogh splash of blueness.

A starry night is painted all over Texas.

## **Pelican Church**

Eighteen pelicans set sail upon a silver resaca, synchronized to the same song that is sunset. Every move is choreographed in perfect time, eighteen heads bobbing beneath the water's surface all as one breath, one beak, a single gondola gliding on a gilded pond. As I meander over, intent on gaining their trust, they stop in concert, one sheet of white paper, a stillness upon us all. Our eyes meet, and it takes four seconds before they move again, inching along in millimeters before they are back to breaking their fast and the water, they plunge headfirst...every immersion a new baptism. And as I watch, I am drawn to the fire in their eyes. They are a new John the Baptist. For forty days I would wander in search of them, just to see me as they do, the mirror in their eyes a flame that tastes of locusts and honey, the finest last supper.

### After Thirty-Five Days in Italy, I Learn...

That I am not made for sweltering churches, nor watered down Café Americano diluted from thick pitch to black bitterness. I am not Pantheon perfection, cradling the bones of Raphael. I am no John Keats, though I have touched the walls of his bedroom and breath and the broken lyre on his tombstone. I am not one whose name is writ on water.

I am not mechanical ingenuity like Da Vinci's prehistoric flying machine. When you look up at my ceiling, there is no Creation of Man, I am not the Sistine Chapel. Being here is like wearing a lumpy sweater in stifling summer. The sleeves won't stay up. This turtleneck is a wooly choke-collar. I have become my own hairshirt. No limoncello gelato can ease the burn of this Roman holiday. A scorching that runs so deep it probes past epidermis to spongy vascular tissue... liver, lungs, and heart.

As I bore my eyes into the heart of St. Charles, the marble body of St. Cecilia, the heads of St. Peter and St. Paul, all mounted like trophies, I realize that Italy is finished with me. After thirty-five days of living in this boot, I am ready for Hill Country, Gulf Coast, and a South Texas I never before wanted to wear. I used to wear the Rio Grande like a bra with A-cups, when what I need is Double-D.

As my transcontinental flight deposits me in Texas again, I'm coming home for the first time. For the first time, I am Texas. I am San Antonio's *Mi Tierra's* hot chocolate con *Abuelita*. I am Kingsville's Texas A & I University—the same one that tried to tame my father's Mexican tongue, the same as La Gloria. I am Richard King's land, once my own inheritance before he usurped the crown.

I am Brownsville, a coat I've worn for twenty years and never seen, the opposite of The Emperor's New Clothes. I was once immune to Brownsville, vaccinated. But now, as I drive home, for the first time, I am so thirsty that I ache for the Rio Grande, the same river that has always had her brown arms open, hoping I'd accept her wet *abrazo*. I try her on, slip inside her boots, these boots with a *nopal*, a mesquite, an *aguila*, a lone star carved into their flesh. I am home in these boots called Texas, these boots that lie under the bed of another lover called Mexico. I can straddle these waters with one boot on one side and the other *en el otro lado*. Two halves of the same body.

## Visibly Invisible

El Valle-  
poorest geographic region in the United States...  
cycle of poverty goes unbroken.  
Like the water cycle, we evaporate,  
but then come raining down again.

The Valley goes down to the tip of Texas,  
as far as Mexico , and up to the Sarita Border Patrol--  
No Mexicans beyond this point.

There is no real valley to speak of-  
no hills or mountains, just a plane  
of land that used to be  
Mexico and is now Mexico...  
pero en este lado.  
The people who live here know the truth:  
half of us are not legally here,  
we are undocumented...  
but you can read our identities in the  
canals of calluses in the maps of our hands.  
Our fingerprints do not betray  
our humanity; we exist.

But you only think of us when you reach inside  
your coin purse...

We polish your spoons;  
and cultivate highways.  
We harvest your children.  
and fertilize our tears.

But we are confused about how  
sometimes we count, and sometimes we don't.  
You are embarrassed of having wooed us;  
you hand us a paycheck and pretend  
that we are not having an affair.

Perhaps it is called the Valley  
because it needs to be a cavern--  
large enough to envelop lost dreams.  
Only a valley will do to hold the gulf  
of despair that wells up in this people,  
this people that live en este lado...  
but borders don't matter

because El Valle has carved its initials all over the US--  
con safos.

El Valle is a flat plane--  
there is no topographical depression to speak of...  
just a pit of despair  
for those who are visibly invisible.

## CHAPTER V

### SOULMATES



#### **Levitation**

(ekphrastic poem based on Marc Chagall's *Promenade*)

Why should you not hold a bird in your hand?

And I, a bird of lavender  
feathers... when you  
smile at me,  
I'm in the sky for you, a  
violet pinwheel-- a kite  
tethered by flesh, and I  
sail over the world that  
you have painted us into.

Our world is on fire with emeralds and  
peridots, our sky a prism, the trees  
infused with neon blue, and our picnic  
blanket is a red pool of beating hearts.  
Our home--the heart in which we

dwell, pink like your lips and the  
 labyrinths of your ears.

After thousands of days  
 together, your acrylics and  
 paintbrushes still electrify  
 this skin we call canvas.

I become a fish in any ocean you devise,

I float upward into your incandescent sky--luminous like me.

You become my anchor in a sea of green.



**The Poet--Half Past Three in the Morning** (based on Marc Chagall's painting)

It happens that one must remove his head  
to be open to the magic of a heart folded  
in the accidental ruffles of a blue suit.

In mid-espresso-sip, the face goes green  
like the blinking light that drew Gatsby  
in to Daisy. The tongue of the cat  
that catches on the silk of a fine shirt

also reels in a quilted vodka bottle  
patched together with holy water and Elmer's glue.  
It offers no answers, but only plagues the poet  
with questions...will you always resist?  
When will you hear the secrets  
in the vapor of my breath?

The palette is not only for splashing canvas—  
it is a typewriter, it is a pair of dice,  
it is Morse Code, an SOS.  
He dips his nib in the paint  
and spouts a deluge of dandelions that  
blow back, rainbows that blind  
with furious bliss, love that percolates in the sky



to the tune of a blue goat's violin.

He spins for himself a perfect cocoon,  
an aura that he weaves with his spinneret-mind;  
he lets it soak in the aurora borealis--  
he plugs it in like a neon sign.

He knows that the poet is the artist,  
and the artist is the poet.  
When he looks upside down,  
with his green cheeks and kaleidoscope eyes,  
the words somersault within him, a whirlwind of indigo  
that quivers with pulse on the sheet in his hand.

## **Everyone Wants to Know Why I am Studying Poetry**

Because there are soulmates like garnet lemon-lips  
and smoky topaz skies. Even superfluous soufflés.  
Because being a matchmaker  
feels like bursts of Einstein in my skull.

Because there are others who've made marriages  
that inspire my lungs to erupt like a life raft,  
my heart to splurge on an amber halo  
that hangs on my husband's eyes.

Because there is such sorrow  
in this world that it takes the Stonehenge  
of metaphor to dig us out of trench warfare,  
it takes the salvation of similes  
to stop the soul's scorching; it takes the hyperbole  
of St. Lucy's plucking out her own eyes to get us to see.

Because there is such joy in the world that it requires  
the dabbling in sequined fern fronds,  
the crunching of paradox as I love you  
and dream of a life without you, too.

Because the smile on a baby's face reminds you  
that haikus are written in toothless gums,  
alpaca sweaters and the llamas with pacemakers  
and blood banks spewing life,  
alive as these lines I offer to you now,  
your own lifeline and lighthouse  
as you map out the geography of your soul.

## **Tattoo Love Story**

I wear Gatsby's blinking emerald light  
on my finger next to a Rumi  
tattoo that recommends an open mind...  
and that you love me. A *milagro*  
around my neck hangs  
between my breasts—speaking of symbols,  
yes!

A butterfly cliché is painted  
on my back, my own wings  
to kite me fathoms of blue  
away from you—but we can't forget  
the cord...maybe umbilical...maybe noose;  
the reel is in your hands, and oh,  
I am all pinwheel.

*Awake my soul* is etched  
on my forearm, a recipe for lemon meringue  
smiles, a prayer of gratitude,  
a to-do list with countless *amens*...  
a scripted dictum to open my Judas Iscariot-eyes  
and breathe in a world that's all peony.

## A Song of Despair—for Neruda

I can't explain why I'm weeping tonight when we talk about the exhumation of your body—I was a freshman in college when I discovered your love songs. I hid in the library stacks crouching in the corners with you and your words splayed in my hand, you made me feel exposed, naked breasts and all—in front of a mirror of words I was just beginning to piece together. You made me feel like I could look at me and praise the windy curves and precipices of my body.

We were so close...your hand was on my hand turning the pages of your breath, our eyes were blinking with the same lashes, and my tongue was praying your song with lips bruised by the kiss of your shadow. Finding you was an accident. I went on the longest journey without enough water in my canteen and not enough skin to buffer me from the loss of you.

They said that cancer ate your heart out, planting its roots in your prostate. But forty years after your death, your words come to the surface, a magnificent dead fish released by the current. You open your deadfishlips and expire this breath: *And I pray that my eyes never shut, even for death. I, who will need all of my vision to learn, see at firsthand and interpret my dying.*

You must have felt this way after Allende's death. No wonder you said bones can't learn to disappear—you could smell the foreshadowing in the military coup, on the regime's bayonets as they sniffed you out like the muzzles on foxes. We know it was Pinochet who thought he could make you *a shout muffled by huge autumns*. Though his syringe may have poisoned your veins, they still sprout metaphors all over Chile, they transfuse verse across the latitudes and longitudes of poets planted all over the earth, the same earth that we move today to find the truth in your death, a death whose pain we live a second time

because you were a poet too great to die only once.

*(words in italics are Neruda's)*

## Why I'll Never Write My Novel

Today I had great hopes  
of writing a few pages of the novel  
that lingers like sticky cobweb in the cracks and crevices of my brain.

But when I sat down in my overstuffed chair  
that smells of cinnamon and library books,  
I found your book of poetry and remembered that I knew nothing  
of writing a book. Who was I to think myself an author?  
And it was good to read the words of someone who really knows  
what he is doing in the garden of life—you know what hyperbole to prune,  
which metaphors to cultivate, how to make imagery bloom.  
I've never been able to keep a plant alive—  
not even the gifts I've been given over the years,  
which include fine succulents, beautiful rosemary bushes,  
neon daisies...they all end up the same, wilted heads hanging low  
void of the pride that once let their eyes stare directly into the sun.

So now, instead of my novel, I'm writing about the things I've killed—  
not just plants, but a land tortoise once, one tarantula  
that snuck its way into my kitchen (I squashed him with the tentacles  
of a dry mop), one roach at which I swung a heavy broom mightily  
and severed his body straight down the middle.  
I also bear the responsibility for a betta fish who committed suicide—  
he jumped out of his bowl onto a dry carpet of death,  
probably because he was lonely.

I say to myself, *Surely Billy Collins has a green thumb.*  
*I bet his pets don't kill themselves.*  
He'd also know how to read a map,  
how to bake an apple pie, how to paint oils on canvas,  
what city in the United States would make the best  
choice for the setting of my novel. He knows so much,  
and I am an empty vase.

I decide to sit in front of the T.V., watch some rodeo  
contest where high school students wrestle a steer down to the dirt.  
I start to wonder if the animal suffers...what a surprise it is  
to be blindsided by a cowboy who picks a fight.  
I change the subject by changing the channel,  
and now, it's home-shopping. I no longer worry  
about my novel. Instead, I wonder if I should  
buy a turquoise ring, the color of periwinkles  
I once killed in a magnificent fuchsia pot.

## Taking Off Billy Collins' Clothes

First the pullover sweater with the zipper running down the center up to your clavicle, creating pools of moonstone flesh on either side of your neck. I could name them after Greek gods— Hyacinthus or Zephyr, maybe-- and fill them with whirlpools of kisses and haiku. Zippers are technological advancements that make my nimble fingers even more buttery as they work to coax your L.L. Bean-coated arms into the open air.

Next, your camel-colored corduroy pants. Buttons have come a long way since mother of pearl, and this one at your waist is no match for my rhetorical skill. Its cold, hard shield of plastic only serves to juxtapose against my warm caramel hands...the button melts in my palm like a drop of honey. You will want to know that your amber pants, puddled around your ankles are analogous to the aforementioned drop of honey.

The simplicity of men's boxer shorts cannot be undervalued or overstated. They are like a bank which never closes for the holidays, like a warm pumpkin pancake that exits warm and moist from the toaster. They yield their fruits—ripe for the taking—to the world, or myself, ever obliging in their offerings of ambrosia.

Later I wrote in a notebook how it was like floating in the Mediterranean on my back, my arms butterflying in the sheets, though I'm not sure if they were made of white linen or those torn from your *Taking Off Emily Dickinson's Clothes* anthology. If they were, these sheets, indeed made of your poems, then that would probably explain why I felt so inspired to toll the bell, to extol to the world the virtues I've seen spelled out in the palette of pores and lines of your skin.

When we were at our grand finale, I was only too aware that you were the bread and the knife, why the neighbor's dog would not stop barking, why Van Gogh stared out at a halo of swirling darkness, why you'd ever think to wonder what scene I'd want to be enveloped in more than this one, this conjoining of sighs and breaths and yes, even a convergence of the twain.

## **Before the Red Wheelbarrow**

What William doesn't tell you  
is that what sent him to the back porch  
after the rainstorm, was his wife.

She had been nagging him,  
*Put down that damn clipboard  
riddled with images, and take out the trash!  
Or, at least wash the potatoes  
and carrots for the stew!*

When, at last, he grabbed for the refuse  
and exited the house, Ms. Williams  
grabbed for his poems, tore them  
to pieces as she peeled potatoes,  
letting the wet skins fall dead onto his notes.

Upon re-entering the kitchen, he noted  
the destruction of his art, but he knew better  
than to inquire as to why. She was so jealous  
of what was truly beautiful,  
the birch trees, the raindrops, his black medicine bag.

Or maybe she was still upset about the plums  
he'd eaten for breakfast. She'd hid them  
in the back of the icebox, an obvious treasure  
to her, his apology falling on deaf ears.

He briefly pondered lamenting  
the loss of his paper and pencil.  
And that's when he spotted it.  
This time, the poem was so short,  
a flash of lightning  
that only begged for sixteen perfect words.

## **I Dream I am Skydiving With Him**

*“First you jump off the cliff and you build your wings on the way down.”*

*--Ray Bradbury*

I'm up in a cargo plane and someone tells me my lipstick looks nice.  
Then he takes my hand. Together, we jump out of the plane, and we chat  
as simply as if we're having tea at Babington's, forgetting that we are falling  
closer to our earthy death.

We are talking about Thoreau, how we will go to Walden Pond,  
look into his little hand-built cottage. Maybe we'll also stop off at Maxine Kumin's  
New Hampshire farm where she lived on the day Anne Sexton died.  
And while we're in the Northeast, we might as well pop in on William Carlos Williams'  
red wheelbarrow scene in Rutherford, New Jersey.

While we're hovering above the vast expanse of yellow and green below us,  
I also talk him into taking me to Emily Dickinson's Amherst home. *Yes*, he says,  
*to touch the walls of their breath and inhale what remains of their dusty spirits.*  
And I smile because he gets that I want to breathe the same air they did,  
glean what's left of the words they planted, beat my heart where their hearts once beat.

Then I come back to the present: we must surely be within an inch of our lives.  
Who can float on forever? *Everyone reaches the end of their line*,  
I say with furrowed brow. But he smiles and pulls out a parachute made of words,  
and now that his beard has stopped billowing into his eyes, I recognize him...  
Walt Whitman has saved my life, and we land softly on the billowy soft leaves of grass.



## **Billy Collins Was Here**

I don't mean that Billy Collins was just in this building  
or last weekend, or in his undergrad days.  
But instead, that he's written a poem about everything,  
showing up at the buffet, leaving no penne pasta or wine  
for the rest of the poets who wanted a say.

In the midst of Picnic and Lightning,  
I am inspired by electric clouds,  
but in script they have written a message:  
*Billy Collins was already here.*

I want to write about how we live life,  
how we'll all meet at the same end  
of highway, velocity speed lines abound,  
when I notice graffiti on the train speeding  
past me: *Billy Collins was faster than you.*

I want to write about the wren's song  
at twilight, about a bowl of soup  
that steams its way into lungs,  
about the Bee Gees, about a symphony-playing dog,  
about the lovely outline of soap wading in its dish.

But as I reach for a new sheet of paper,  
my pen is trapped in a strait jacket,  
and spells out a strangled memo: *Billy Collins was here.*  
And sadly, all there is to tell of original thought  
is found in these final few lines:

I wish Billy Collins would retire  
to a lovely hut in the Pacific  
where there is no Wifi or ink,  
no paper either, for that matter,  
and certainly no carrier pigeons who might,  
out of loyalty to the maestro,  
carry his whispery words on their wings.

## Spilling Poetry

I was busy planting silent poems  
in my head.  
Every slash of white on the black  
highway suggested punctuation marks  
to suit metaphors and similes.

There were question marks  
in constellations,  
semicolons in barbed wire fences,  
and periods pelted  
my windows. But this was no ordinary  
syncopation...

A swarm of lightning bugs painted  
themselves on the canvas of my windshield,  
splashes of electric-green luminescence  
to light up a nighttime Jackson Pollack.

But theirs was temporary genius...their masterpiece was  
erased as quickly as it was shone.  
I was the only audience—  
no crowd to appreciate their life's sacrifice  
of fading, glowing glory.

I see that this is my poem  
making its mark...and missing it, too.  
Lighting the world for a fleeting, flying moment,  
of family and beating wings.

We are all poets slamming into windshields  
paying for words in blood,  
punctuating experience in amber and bronze,  
all that throbs and oozes out of  
our hearts, the fleshy parts of us, an offering.

Long after we are gone,  
our blood will speak for us.

## **To Annie Dillard**

I read your personal website.

You write that you no longer read, nor respond to, personal letters.

I suppose it would be a full-time job

to read about how wonderful are your words, your images, your Thoreau-heart.

You are like the Appalachian Trail, there for the taking, not needing affirmation that you are the right direction.

I know that I could send a letter to your agent; I trust it would never arrive at your door. So, instead, I'll write this open letter to you, knowing full well that these words will never set sail on Tinker Creek, they'll never be a newt to dance on your fingertips, they're my own pilgrims on a voyage—not to your eyes, but elsewhere.

My message is simple: your words have saved my life,  
taught me how to see...  
seasons that trespass upon each other,  
trees that are electric as the sky,  
how to hunt down a praying mantis egg sack,  
how to connect my own veins back to those in the granite  
heart of this earth. I spread my lungs  
and fill these alveoli with rhododendron, sycamore,  
and even a Polyphemous moth.  
You have taught me how to breathe in a world  
in which I never knew I'd been blind.

## CHAPTER VI

### POEMS HEAVY AS BREASTS



*The Green Violinist* by Marc Chagall

**Exodus**—(ekphrastic poem) after William Carlos Williams’ “The Dance”

In Chagall’s great picture, *The Green Violinist*,  
the musician’s skin is malachite-green, and he sits  
on top of the world, his feet resting on two stools  
made of houses. He plays on his fiddle, his eyes lamenting  
what they’ve seen, and the town that he plays for  
has vanished to powdery white; you can’t tell the clouds  
from the mountains, as the fiddler wears them both  
as a halo atop his purple hat. In the sky the color of tombstones,  
there is a floating man in pajamas, hovering as do so many  
of Chagall’s subjects who might need to fly away.  
A small gray dog in the corner stands on his hind legs, praying  
to the music-maker wearing the violet trench coat,  
who seemed to foretell of the Holocaust that was to come.  
And all the color in the world has fled from where it’s unwanted  
in Chagall’s great picture, *The Green Violinist*.

**True Dat** (Oulipian Poem)

This maverick follows me into the juniper of money.

It haunts me like a telemarketer trying to sell me knockwurst,

but my credo and I are no longer on speaking terms.

I have learned to deny myself the pleasure of birth control

because gawking at too many ravioli makes me giddy.

My headdress starts to spin, and my heatwave can barely breathe.

The synapses between my bankruptcy and my walrus never meet.

My World Wide Web is made of butterflies and impetigo.

Every bird-of-paradise eventually flies away. Every pat of butter melts.

## **A Border Collie Mistakes Highway 83 for Elysian Fields**

You halted traffic with your bones—  
your pink innards now on display,  
what remains of you, flesh outgrown.

A three-ring circus is what shone,  
your broken pelvis as a stage.  
You halted traffic with your bones.

We gawk at you—a stilled cyclone.  
On this asphalt pyre, you were slain,  
what remains of you, flesh outgrown.

Your life spills out...spells out my own.  
From behind the wheel, I meditate,  
You halted traffic with your bones.

What drew you to this road alone?  
No dog is an island or cliché.  
what remains of you, flesh outgrown.

Driving onward, I will bemoan  
How nothing innocent can stay...  
You halted traffic with your bones,  
What remains of you, flesh outgrown.

## Spasms of Stillness

I.

I think of that beer commercial  
where two anonymous people  
sit in beach chairs.  
They reach for a Corona;  
all is silent except for the sound of seagulls  
babbling in the distance.  
The beer bottles sweat,  
As do I...just itching for a moment like this one.  
I don't even like beer,  
But my mouth waters—  
my two right fingers tap at the veins on my left arm.  
It hits me that I need a hit...  
of something.  
But I don't want a beer;  
I just want the time that goes with it.  
The time to sit—who gives a shit about the Corona?  
Time.  
To listen to the birds.  
I've seen them flying—in pictures.  
I've heard them sing in my past.

I am an English teacher who works seventy hours a week.  
I'm a mother, a wife, a grandmother, a beast of burden, a *burra*  
who works...too much.

I've got me a lot of jobs and no time  
to sit and drink a beer—  
even if I could palate one.

II.

I think of Monet  
painting water lilies in his studio,  
of Chagall discovering his dancing goats as they play violins,  
Of Van Gogh's quiet haystacks—all golden and still.  
This is the life I crave—a quiet life.  
I want to paint myself into these pictures.

Instead, Diego Rivera haunts me,  
his Indian girls in the market selling flowers.

I hear the clamor of *mercado*-madness.  
I feel the hunch of backs saddled with baskets,  
Loaded with dreams waiting to be fulfilled...  
or sold.

III.

There ain't no floating goats  
or fluffy haystacks or quiet on *my* canvas.  
Just an image of a sweaty beer bottle  
selling me something that I can't buy:  
time to think of me,  
time to think of friends,  
time to think of strangers,  
of needs.

Time comes in spasms of silent lucidity...

and then I'm back to the present,  
teaching a lesson  
on what motivates Antigone  
to kill herself.



## What the English Teacher Knows

When I see the turquoise veins of my typing hands, I want to connect us—  
I want to tie your veins to mine in a tangled knot of pulse.  
When I see your eyes poring into me, I want to pour something into you:  
Desire, Inquiry, a compass rose, a sheet of paper laced with words  
from your own heart, your own voice. I want to sing the ballad that you bake  
in your own hearth. I want to plant the first seeds of lyric, I want to reap  
what I sow— mellifluous frankincense, topaz canyons--words both heavy and light.  
I want you to cultivate a crop of calypso, weave it into the longest thread that connects  
every aorta, every lung, every palm. I want you to want—like me. Make your own map,  
plant your own tenderloin, tenderize your own verse.

Sometimes I want to tuck you away, under the feathers of my own wings. Forgive me.  
I have held you in my hands for so long that I've grown accustomed to your warmth, to the  
weight of your dreams, But I know that you are ready to stand, turn your sunflower-self to the  
warmth, forge your own shadow.

This is the work of the teacher. I will try to etch these thoughts into memory because there is a  
test with stakes so high that a noose will dangle in the air above my head—  
the same one that has taught me to write poetry, to tell stories to you, to plant a pen in your hand.  
There are people who point fingers like daggers, who demand proof that you have  
metamorphosed under my instruction. The proof, they say, can only come in the form of multiple  
choice responses. But they don't speak the language of dreams, of yours or mine. Their red ink is  
spilled on your answer documents like blood, like war, like the teacher is the enemy. The  
teachers who know that you are more than a test will be the first ones sent to the gallows.

And maybe you will write a metaphor in memory of me as I become a new endangered species.  
When I am turning blue and my tongue is swelling a magnificent fuchsia, my last words will be  
for you. The same as my first.

## The Bureaucracy of Breasts

### I.

I walk into the imaging center  
and only worry for a second  
if I shaved my armpits this morning,  
if some radiology-dude will have his hand all over my boobs.

My boobs haven't been in many dudes' hands—  
that's a personal choice.  
Don't get me wrong...  
several dudes have asked  
to hold them. But they haven't seen much action.

My breasts are beautiful,  
not too droopy, though they are hefty.  
They're nice and supple. Take my word for it.

They're pretty useless, though.  
They failed to perform their duty  
in breastfeeding, always coming up dry.  
Plus, my industrial-strength bras cost me  
some serious coinage. These boobs  
haven't met their contractual obligations.

I asked my gyno if we could remove them...  
*The lumps?* he asked.  
*No, the boobs,* I said.  
*We can't do that! But we can discuss the lumps.*

### II.

I wear a lot of jewelry.  
I have amassed a precious collection  
of silver and gold, stones from canary to amethyst...  
(like the stones that grow in my breasts?).

I'm wondering why I even need these breasts,  
this dead weight, the heavy lifting and tuckage  
that comes with every new morning...  
they just serve to decorate this body,  
but these two adornments are superfluous.  
I can be a glittering Christmas tree—even without breasts.

Maybe these boobs are balls of bitterness

because I've pondered life without them.  
Whatever the case, we've turned  
against each other.  
Now they lie lumpy  
on my chest. The elephant—not in a room—but sitting on my chest.

### III.

Before I came into the imaging center,  
I sat in my car, waiting for the rain to stop  
pouring in sheets. It never stops.  
I decide to dash inside, knowing this downpour  
will weigh me down.

Along the way, I skim over paving stones  
like lily pads...I feel them sinking down  
with my heaviness. I've got to move faster  
before we go under. Cancer is chasing me  
as I race inside for sanctuary  
inside the imaging center.

I arrive at the receptionist's desk.  
I sign in. I wait 45 minutes.  
Some man in scrub comes out, calls my name.  
I picture his hands on my breasts.  
He pronounces every syllable of my name,  
Lucinda Zamora-Wiley, as if I'm being summoned  
to my own funeral.

His attention is jolted my way.  
I surprise him; I'm seated only two feet away from him.  
He tells me my doctor's orders cannot be fulfilled  
by my insurance. No mammogram for me?  
*No*, he says, *not unless you can pay cash*.  
It will cost me \$400 to get this dud to  
wrap his fingers around my breasts.  
I've never had to pay a man to touch my titties.  
I refuse to start today.  
Me and my lumpy breasts go home.

We're still trying to move past  
our irreconcilable differences.

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Photo: courtesy of Gilberto Godoy