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## Poeta power: The poetic journey of La Erika: Poems

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POETA POWER:  
THE POETIC JOURNEY  
OF LA ERIKA: POEMS

A Thesis

by

ERIKA MARIE GARZA-JOHNSON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Texas-Pan American  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2010

Major Subject: Creative Writing



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OF LA ERIKA  
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ERIKA MARIE GARZA-JOHNSON

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December 2010



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## ABSTRACT

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This is a collection of poetry set in the borderlands of deep South Texas. The poems take as their subject Chican@ identity, family, the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, Edcouch-Elsa, Texas, cancer, sexuality, Chicana feminism, childbirth and children, marriage, education, folklore, epithets, among others. As a cycle, they represent the poet's development through key stages in her life, including childbirth, marriage, death of a parent. Many poems in this collection also reflect the linguistic diversity of the U.S.-Mexico border through the poet's use of code-switching and Tex Mex.





## DEDICATION

I dedicate this first to my loving parents. Jesus “Chuyito” Garza, en paz descansa was and always will be my sweet father who taught me how to appreciate the little, wonderful things so many of people take for granted. My mother Delia P. Garza whose faith and love inspire me to keep going, whose prayers I know have helped me get this far. Most importantly, I dedicate it to Robert Earl Johnson Jr. my loving husband and best friend who stood by me through it all and sacrificed so much time and energy to help me and always, always believed in me. To my beautiful daughter Isabel and my tornado of a son Cactus for they are the best poems I could have written. Emmy Pérez, Poeta Power is you! You are my mentor and you have spent countless hours helping me become the poet I am now.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank my committee who helped me arrive at this finished product. Stephanie Martinez-Alvarez who I can't thank enough for not only bringing Tato Laviera down but for her appreciation of Spanglish.. José Skinner for always being bien de aquellas. Emmy Pérez who I can thank on every page of this entire thesis but it wouldn't be enough. Querida Lucha Corpi for reading my work and being my mentor. I thank you from the bottom of my heart that you time out of your schedule to help a chicanita like me. Abrazos.

Mis comadres aka my trinity, Lauren Espinoza, Lady Mariposa and Lina Suarez who make me feel like a real poet. Always and forever, my heart is with you, my words are with you. I love you like sisters. Michael Jones who not only babysat but listened to my crazy spiels about God knows what. I would write this in ancient Hebrew haikus if I could. MFA students and graduates Laura Espinoza, Rodney Gomez, Brian Carr, Airlie Rose and Joe Haske who all inspired me in their own way and pushed me to be a better poeta. I would especially like to thank Isaac Chavarría, pocho poet thesis genius and Hannah Torres for helping me out come crunch time.

I would also like to thank my ancestors. Without them, I wouldn't be here. Thank you God. Yes, you. I might seem ungrateful but I know that without you nothing is possible. Y mi Virgen Morena, Guadalupe you are my sun, stars, moon.



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## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

My first memories of poetry surround my father teaching me how to write. We would sit at the dinner table and my dad and I would scribble on paper that he brought home from work. He worked at International Paper Company where he assembled boxes used to pack fruits and vegetables grown where we lived, the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. He did this for 26 years and probably died because of the toxic glue he used making those boxes. On the leftover paper he brought home from International Paper, he taught me how to write letters and numbers and how to draw faces of women and other random images. I remember the way he wrote, how meticulously, almost painfully, and I recall how it looked like a lost art form. I remember he had a little black notebook that I suspect he had since he was in Army in the late 1950's stationed overseas in Korea and Germany. He had a few poems written in this notebook. One was about a boy coming back from war. I don't remember the other poems. After he died, my mother showed me some other poems he wrote. They were about my mother and her sister who passed away when she was 26. My father was the first poet I knew and he is the reason I write. If it weren't for him teaching me about poetry, I don't think I would care about it. He is why I am here in this time and place writing this introduction to my body of work, this thesis.

I started writing poetry seriously when I was a teenager, 20 years ago this January 2011. I wrote my first poem when I was seven or so, for Mother's Day, but that doesn't count. The first "real" poem I wrote was for my father when he was stationed in California working in a support unit during the first Gulf War. The poem was about looking out the window on a foggy day and

wishing for sunny days: a metaphor for his absence. He had been gone for several months. He always said this poem made him cry. He thanked me and kept it in his Bible.

Because he told me I was talented, I wrote more poems. I wrote poems about being a teenager. As a teenager I was a big nerd, with frizzy hair, acne, tall and lanky and weird. I wrote about this and about boys I liked that would never like me back. I wrote about all those things teenagers wrote about. As you might expect these were dark, morose, rhyming poems that I revised and reworked several times and would handwrite carefully on fancy paper. I even wrote one in blood. Ha. Silly teenage angst poems. But the more I read, the more I wrote.

I eventually went to college and became much more serious about writing poetry, although my major was anthropology, not English. Maybe that is why my poems are about my identity as a woman who is at odds with labels, my experiences throughout my life, my stories, my community, the Rio Grande Valley, folklore, and my culture.

Still, most of my poems are about me. I won't deny it. The "speaker is not poet" stuff is not the way I see it. We learn in workshops never to assume the speaker is the poet. I remember a few instances when there was a line or two in a poem and it was a bit risqué or revealing, and I remember those moments fondly. "The speaker is talking about how she..." Insert wild La Erika farfetched fantasias or loca sea (lo que sea) and voila! You get a room filled with funny sideways glances and questions. However, I can't say that my most recent poems are 100% me. It's like me refried. I have had to add some details to keep it interesting, of course. A little mystery is nice. La Erika was my safe persona I made years ago. To read in front of people is a bit unnerving. What if they think you suck? What if they tell your Tias you read a poem about being a puta and they didn't know you were being ironic or satirical? I had to have a persona in the beginning. You remember La Erika? She is still here somewhere. She comes out occasionally.

She likes to party con poemas and sacar dagger. Sometimes, she is a little more reserved. She just wants to be called Poeta.

Several times, I wanted to give up on poetry. What had it done for me? I had filled so many notebooks, wasted enough paper that I thought, "To hell with this." I had been told by my sister that it "sucked." My father, even though he encouraged me to write, would rather I write about nature or lighthearted subjects. My boyfriend at that time didn't care about my poetry. I was alone in writing poems, except for those few friends and some professors in the Social Sciences. I had been published in a local literary magazine called *Mesquite Review*. From 1998 until 2005, I was published in *Gallery Magazine* here at UTPA. Yet no one in the English Department really encouraged me to write. Most of the people who encouraged me were in the Art, Anthropology or Philosophy department.

Then I took a creative writing class from a Beat scholar named Rob Johnson. It was so much fun to read other's works and to workshop them. I felt at home and was thrilled to gather all my poems at the end of the semester. This was 2001. I was hooked and had to keep writing. Of course, once that class was over, I faced the same old song from everyone. I still wrote and I loved it but I lost my support group, and I was about to give up again when two years later, Rob Johnson asked me to lunch. I convinced myself it was a working lunch and brought along a poem to show him called "Sizzlelean." It was a feminist protest poem about not wanting to get married because I didn't want my life to be a constant frying of bacon for the man who brings home the bacon, and all of that. All bacon, all the time, in a pork rind. Marriage was not for me. Well, I married that man I showed my poem to. He never gave up on me and my poetry. Sharing my work with someone I loved who understood and appreciated my work helped me continue to write the kinds of poems I wanted to write. I know it sounds paradoxical to have to

find validation in this way but it was something had been a void for so long until I found a community of poets later on.

Now, I could attend readings and even host readings, and did at Art Awakenings in McAllen, Texas and other venues. Before, I was with a controlling, possessive man who would not allow me to perform my poetry. He was afraid that I would get too much attention. So, being with someone who supported my artistic endeavors after all those years of being with someone who tried to stifle me, I was rejuvenated. I went out into the community and made a name for myself. Along came La Erika! With La Erika came the persona of the woman who cussed and smoked and drank and read her poems and could care less what you thought of her. Yes, she wore tight pants and had a low-cut tank top and even heels. She lured you there and she kept you there because it was a good time. With La Erika came a good time. With that persona I liberated my writing. During this time I wrote a poem entitled “La Chingada Wanna Be,”

### **La Chingada Wanna-Be**

I am a vixen.  
A woman with a heart of  
Silky stone,  
Smooth semi-precious earthen mineral.  
Whose eyes have seen,  
Body felt,  
A capiroxada of euphoria,  
Lustlovepassionhate

A head turner,  
Eye catcher,  
Attention getter,  
I slither in pleather,  
Bring two brothers to rival

See,  
I cannot only  
Control you  
But

Destroy you  
And love you with the strength of oak.  
Superglue you to my breasts,  
Make your once tidy world a mess.  
Yes  
A vixen,  
A temptress  
Dominatrix

Si hombre.

A nerd with a pen and too much time on her hands.  
Poetic  
Pathetic

It took coming up with a persona to hide behind because I don't think I was courageous enough to say what I felt. As I started to embrace my cultura, mi raza and that I had been called a Puta (or more specifically, a slut, bitch, whore and a few others I don't want to repeat), I learned that's what you call women like me when you don't want to call them what they really are--smart, different, not concerned about fitting in or being a cookie cutter girl who spends too much time looking in the mirror, or too much money on her clothes, a girl who speaks up and who is not afraid of her sexuality or her needs. I was called so many names by people because I was different in high school. The one that stuck with me and made me feel powerless was bitch. I write poetry because it helped me draw power from feeling powerless and helped me get over the pain of being called these names.

But I also learned that my poetry itself could cause pain. After my father died in 2008, my sister told me that my mom and dad did not want me to write poetry, that it hurt them. I am afraid she might have been right about my dad, but I don't want to believe her. He may have said that. I do know that my dad wanted me to be happy. He wanted me to be someone special. He gave me a ride to UTPA ("PUTA" as my friends would jokingly call it) all those years when I

was an undergrad. So, I dedicate all of my work to father, que en paz descansa and even though the subject of my poems may not be to his liking, pues, I would not be a poet without him.

My mother has also been a huge inspiration to me. She told me this story about how she used to say “Voy a ser poyeta.” She would say that when she was little and her family would make fun of how she said the word. She doesn’t write poems but my mother prays and memorizes prayers. I remember being a little girl and kneeling in the living room and praying with her. To me, poems are prayers. Sometimes, I recall a poem and it’s like praying to the trees or the clouds or the wind. I got to be a poet because of my parents who taught me to appreciate the little things. They taught me the names of plants and birds. They taught me to take time to appreciate nature and to love the outdoors. My father used to take me for long walks, especially along the railroad tracks where all the industry used to be in Elsa. At this point everything was abandoned and we would see hawks and other migratory birds roost. We also used to drive to Hargill and go bird-watching, especially summer days after a rainstorm. I still love to walk, so I can talk to his spirit that I feel in the wind on a cool night. The way I was raised and the special attention I got from my mom and dad—that was what made me a poet.

### **Early Poetic Influences**

“i thank You God for most this amazing  
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky;and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes”  
-- ee cummings (66)

When it comes down to it, my very first poet love/boyfriend was cummings. I had brief love affairs with Frost, Browning (EB and R) and I really wanted to understand T. S. Eliot, as if this was going to happen in the ninth grade. I remember reading Pound because I wanted to be smart. However, I persisted with ee cummings because he had invented his own style, had used

words like “if” and “am” as nouns. He messed around with grammar and did unique things with which I still recall from those days in English 2 in High school when Dr. Dowell (Pan Am professor) had us read Cummings and all the other aforementioned poets who were in our Perrine anthology. I remember “In Just --- Spring” with the imagery of the “little lame balloon man” and spring being “puddle wonderful” (5) and the poem “She being Brand/ New” in which he compares a woman to a car that stuck with me. His love poems are unsurpassable: “i like my body when it is with your/ body. It is so quite new a thing” (16).

Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* was my favorite novel growing up. It was dark, depressing, disturbing, all the greatest elements of fiction, at least when you are a teenager. Plath’s poetry sparked an obsession with depression and suicidal tendencies, no doubt because of my own issues with maladjustment. Every poet I have heard under the age of 17 usually writes about how their plight is unique and their suffering is intense, intangible, insert cliché here. I was not immune to this myself: “I miss those dark, cold dismal days, which remind me of all those yesterdays/in which I spend remembering you / and condemning itself for it too” (me, 1993). Listening to Plath perform “Daddy” is my absolute favorite thing to do. It’s creepy and scary and absolutely haunting and it tickles my misery bone: “Daddy, I have had to kill you” (56). Sylvia Plath made me want to write but not be a woman. I had my many issues with her over the years. I include in my thesis works influenced by Plath, but earlier I wrote this poem:

### **Para la Sylvia Plath**

Died a white death in her dead white existence.  
Fumes as loud as poverty,  
Sadness as strong as father.  
I can’t help but feel it too.  
But mine is not rich or white like you.  
I’d be thrown into a state hospital,  
Shrinking back into my mother’s ovaries,  
Beating at her womb until death.



An oven only a reminded of Thanksgiving.  
Of afternoons and homemade frosting.

What happened after I had kids is that the combo of Post-Partum and the death of my father made me afraid of Sylvia Plath. I couldn't read her without feeling weird. Reading Plath only made me kiss my children on their cheeks and hold them closer. It's not, after all, a good thing to feel down. Her work sometimes makes me feel like a woman who fell from an apocalyptic poetic heaven. Her work is truly beautiful and horrendous all at once.

¿Y el Charles Bukowski? Olvidate. More reason for people to think I am a nut-bag. Bukowski, or great American poet was a cussing, drunk mess. When I attended UT Austin for a semester (on academic probation), I was still trying to be a formal poet. I believed that to be a real poet, whatever that means, I had to write in form or at least I had to rhyme. Example:

I was the troubled one  
Wilting away  
staying out of the sun  
Existing only at night  
Scared to stand in the light  
You came along so jolly  
I still morose, melancholy  
Started blooming with the strength of your light  
Finally finding my way out of night (1995)

Then, while doing my job shelving books at the Perry Castañeda Library, I saw this title on a book spine: *Love is a Dog from Hell*. I was of course attracted to the title because we all know that love can be a bitch. Yet, what I read in those pages made me a mad woman, dying to write in quantity with quality. Bukowski's poetry made me want to write. His poems spoke volumes, hell his books are still coming out and he died in 1994. "Laureate of American Low-life" according to *Time*, Bukowski brought the rasquache out in me before I knew what that word even meant. Most importantly, he spoke to the wanna-be UT student who eventually flunked out and had to take jobs cleaning toilets at the local theatre and making sandwiches at Subway,

working at a daycare wiping babies' butts and noses for minimum wage and was starving because rent was too freaking expensive in the big city of Austin. What the hell did I think was going to happen to me in 1996 when I was not a student at a university but a girl who rode the bus to work and received little pay and who wanted to write poetry? Bukowski was a poet who made me a poet. Punto. Fin.

I don't know when I encountered the Beats. I think it was in 1996 when I met someone who introduced me to Jack Kerouac's work. I think that I wasn't ready for them but "Beat" sounded like a hip thing to be. It sounded like something cool and trendy and I didn't consider myself trendy but thought, hey, why not? Why not read Allen Ginsberg's "America," why not read "Howl" to loosen up your mind, shock you, surprise you, inspire you? I don't think that when I was 19 years old I was ready for the Beats. Later on though, when I did a little growing up, I fell in love with Ginsberg and Kerouac and Cassady and was very inspired, especially when I went to San Francisco recently and stayed in North Beach around the corner from City Lights books.

I was also not ready for Carmen Tafolla when I read her book *Sonnets to Human Beings* at 15. I think I was deeply connected to her words and her poems but I don't think I could quite understand what was happening in her poems. I know that Tafolla's poetry subconsciously inspired me, but I might have had a too-assimilated stance about her work. I read her spanglish poems and it didn't click in my head. I was a self-loathing Chicana/Mexican. I think I was also a very conservative Catholic who just couldn't wrap my head around the things I now know liberated me and helped me decolonize my mind to a certain extent. I think I only thought that poetry written by white people was poetry. I had to come to terms with my own stereotypes. Undo all that prejudice I had about Mexicans, Mexican-Americans, all my "coconutisms." All

the voices of people I have heard in the past that made fun of people who speak Tex-Mex, people that criticize others for simultaneously “slaughtering” Spanish and English: those who were looked down upon as uneducated. I have had to get over all the prejudice that was engrained in my head. I thought the only way to be taken seriously was to be an English speaking poet. I know I knew Spanish. I know that I could code-switch but chose not to speak that way. I chose to try to have “correct diction,” to enunciate my words. I remember how much I wanted to be in drama but was told that I needed to lose my accent. I didn’t even know I had an accent. I refused to be some “Chicana brown power, raza unida, Aztlan-seeking indigenous person,” as some people in my community would say, unfortunately. I was taught this was inauthentic for someone like me.

It never occurred to me I would ever be what I have become. I read Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/ La Frontera* about 10 years after reading Tafolla’s book. Her essays changed my mind about many things including language. In fact, though, before Anzaldúa, I had already been inspired to write poems with Spanish in them. I took a lot of classes as an undergraduate in Mexican-American culture that loosened my tongue. I read Sandra Cisneros at this time (and Ana Castillo’s fiction), but I still wondered about how much to use Spanish in my work. Reading Cisneros made it easier for me to come to terms with my Chicanidad. She was one of those poets who made me want to write. Her poem, “I am so in Love I Grow a New Hymen,” made me wish I had written it. I believe it was my first year at UTPA that I read *My Wicked, Wicked Ways* – her poems pushed my buttons, made me think, made me feel uneasy and yet inspired me to the point where I knew I needed more Chican@ poetry. In 2000, at a reading in Austin, she inscribed my copy of *House on Mango Street* “To La Erika.” It was the beginning of La Erika. As La Erika (as in “the notorious Erika”), I started to embrace some things about

myself that I needed to in order to patch up my identity. It had to be this way. I needed her books to bridge my own reality. I wasn't going to be a white man or woman, no matter how hard I tried, no matter how many times I reread "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" or memorized Shakespearean sonnets, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes / I alone bewep my outcast state / And trouble dead heaven with my bootless cries / And look upon myself and curse my fate." This is la realidad. This is my reality.

I know now that I had to find my inner conqueror and extinguish her so that I could liberate myself to say what I really wanted to say. It's impossible to say how you really feel when you are paying attention to meter and rhyme and trying to find the word that rhymes with faster. Disaster? Plaster? Eh. Dead white guys and women. We love to hate them. Something about Cisneros' black bra wearing, swearing, wine drinking, cigar smoking poetry appealed to me. The speaker in the poems, at the time, seemed to me like a refined Bukowski who spoke Spanish.

Around the same time, a Latino professor told me, unfortunately, that the way some Chicana writers wrote was weak, and that I should stick to writing completely in English. I had an epiphany when I was listening to my relatives speak at the same time I was reading *Borderlands*. After my grandfather died, I remember listening to my Tio Vico, who loves Los Cadetes de Linares, and I wanted to write poems he would appreciate. I wanted to use my Tia's Tex-Mex and the way my parents spoke so fluidly to each other in Spanish and English. The way my family speaks to one another has become a major influence on my poetry. Going back and forth from English to Spanish so fluidly sounded like poetry and it inspired me to write more poems using code-switching. Now, when I read Tafolla's work I wish I hadn't lost all those years not appreciating the poems that code-switch.

Code-switching is now a big part of my aesthetics. I am a poet who has a love for her languages, all of them. In “How to Tame a Wild Tongue,” from *Borderlands* Anzaldúa defines all her ways of speaking as languages. She lists that she herself speaks 8 languages. “1. Standard English, 2. Working class and slang English, 3. Standard Spanish 4. Standard Mexican Spanish 5. North Mexican Spanish dialect, 6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California have regional variations) 7. Tex-Mex 8. Pachuco” (77). In my poetry and everyday life I speak a variety of languages. I speak of course standard English but I also speak English slang and Spanish. I also speak what one would call Valluco or Valley Spanish. I speak Tex-Mex or Spanglish. The distinction I think would be up to a linguist. What we speak in the Valley also varies from town to town. For example, in Elsa “camote” means to be caught doing something wrong (like your hand in a cookie jar), and in other towns it means something harsher. It was important for me, after reading Gloria, to reclaim that I did indeed grow up knowing Spanish. When I spoke to my grandparents in Spanish, they asked me to speak English (even though my older brother and sister spoke to them in Spanish without any complaints from my grandparents, probably because my family lived in their house for a while and I didn’t. My brother and sister were more or less fluent). Later I reclaimed my Spanish when working in retail and having to speak with confidence. This is when I started to use it in my poetry. It was something I already had in my reserves that I needed to utilize to feel as if I integrated the many dimensions of identity. I use it because I want to keep my language alive. I document. I have the privilege to keep my families’ languages, my region’s languages, alive. It took some doing though for me to get to this point. It took a lot of undoing as well.

Of all the writers that I have engaged in silent conversations, Anzaldúa has been the most influential. She told me, *me lo dijo y yo lo senti* que I needed to be a new *mujer*. I needed to be

able to write “sin fronteras” (none of these duality constructions, dichotomies, I was always obsessed with no longer mattered) and to embrace ambiguity, to embrace my contradictions, to embrace a third space, and most importantly, to use my “wild tongue” to write what I want the way I want to write. When I first read *Borderlands*, my anthropology background made me question the validity of what she said. I recall sitting at Barnes and Noble--my husband had basically forced me to read her as I recall--and I would shake my head when I encountered her interpretation of certain Mesoamerican deities. I remember searching through books on the pantheon of Aztec Gods and trying to figure out if she had made the mistake of not distinguishing the Lord of duality Ometeotl or Ometecuhtli from Ometecihuatl. As the skeptic, I questioned her validity. As someone who was barely coming into her chicanidad, I was not ready for such a book. The book me sacó de onda for years. I questioned her work. Until, I read it again. And again. And again. And now, I am a “Gloria” poet and I am invited to read my work at conferences and events dedicated to Anzaldua’s work. Growing up just a few miles from where she grew up, my work has somehow been authenticated in scholars’ eyes. I was in fact one of three Valley writers to attend her funeral, I have gone back to her grave at least four times to read my poems with other writers, and I have read my poems in front of her family at events sponsored by the Gloria Anzaldúa Legacy Project and UTPA, and they have been appreciative of my work. I gave her cousin the only copy of a poem I wrote that was a letter to Gloria. It’s has been such a honor. Because of her, I have embraced the many dimensions of myself. She has helped many heal, and she has helped me too.

### **Later Influences**

After I started to come into my chicanidad, I became more in tune with reading more than the poets I had always read. I started to pick up books by other poets and especially Chican@

poets. I took a mini-mester class with Emmy Pérez and it was like a crash course on Chicano poetry and poetics. Most importantly, I learned the history of Chicano poetry. Chicanos, a whole group of people who been oppressed for so long in the U.S., would no longer go under the radar. The Chicano movement was not only a political movement but an artistic movement which gave Mexicans/Mexican-Americans a voice to express themselves and be heard. Even though he wasn't the first Chicano poet by any means, Corky Gonzales' poem "I am Joaquín" written for the youth conference for Chicanos in Denver, Colorado in March 1969, inspired Chicanos to come together and be a part of this Raza Cosmica. His epic poem rooted our people in Pre-Columbian culture and that gave us power.

Even though I was interested in these messages from a historical perspective, I am not that interested in the poetry of the early Chicano writers. It isn't something I necessarily think influences me. I understand that some of the most recognized work was written during a time that needed the politics and message of the poem above all. I had read Chicana poetry before I had read much of this early Chicano work, and I appreciate that there is a distinction. I have an affinity for the Chicana feminist aesthetic, likely because I can identify with what Chicana poets have written about being a woman in this culture that often privileges men. In class, we read the anthologies *Infinite Divisions* and *Hecho en Tejas*, which is when I became familiar with poets such as Bernice Zamora and Tejana poet Angela de Hoyos respectively. I especially identify with Lorna Dee Cervantes' *Emplumada*. The poems in *Emplumada* are rich with imagery and her poetics impress me. Her influences include "Chilean poet Pablo Neruda" and Elizabeth Bishop (González 164) who are also poets that influence me.

Later works of poets and writers such as Juan Felipe Herrera and Luis Alberto Urrea also feed my poetry. Herrera's *187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border* is not only one of my

favorite books, it was published by my favorite publisher, City Lights. I adore this book and carried it with me in San Francisco when I was there. His style of writing, the list poems or litany helped me write a few of my own poems. Herrera is so talented and prolific. Hands down, my favorite poem from *187* is “34 Things I Did After My Mother Died.” After she died he stepped out of the hospital and went to “Original Joe’s on Second Street ate pasta tasted nothing” (127). Later to “let the wind howl through me I could not hear it I / visited F.D. the therapist who asked me to speak to the empty chair & announce/ to my father had died” (127). When a parent dies (the subject of part II of my thesis), it is the emptiest feeling in the world and the emptiness is in these lines--no taste, no feeling, the empty chair. His poems are like an autobiography so I appreciate them in the sense that he places himself in the poems and we can not separate the speaker from the poet. Another poem from this book that I like is “Don’t Worry Baby,” (155) which houses the best comic line I’ve yet to read: “I worry about the high cholesterol of mariachis”(155). Incorporating humor with serious subjects is something I myself attempt in my poetry (not to downplay the subject matter), but sometimes comic relief surprises the audience and calls attention to the severity of a problem without weighing down the poem with rhetoric.

Luis Alberto Urrea is my favorite writer. I love his nonfiction books *Across the Wire* and *By the Lake of Sleeping Children*, but I have to admit I read only halfway through *The Devil’s Highway*. It was too depressing even for me. In *Chican@ Poetry and Poetics* we read his “hymn to vatos who will never be in a poem” which is a litany poem about vatos along with photos. This poem made me cry: “All the vatos say goodnight forever,” and “All the vatos lost their tongues in Spanish / All the vatos can’t say shit in English” (7). My Dad used to say that. I felt very moved by this poem. I wrote the poem “Las Viejitas Del Valle” because I was inspired by this poem about those who are marginalized “who will never be in a poem”(6). I am one of



Urrea's biggest fans and am lucky enough to be a member of his Cabin 20 reading group on-line. He is to me the Greatest American Writer of our time. So happens he is actually a Mexicano, a Chicano from Tijuana.

On to a Chicana across the border from Juarez in El Paso, Alicia Gaspar de Alba. Here I have to say that I have had the pleasure of reading with her and other Chicana poetas Trinity University in San Antonio after the first Mundo Zurdo Conference in 2009. I read one poem because I was instructed to read only one by the M.C., and after I read the one poem Alicia followed and lectured me that I should have read more than one poem anyway! I bought *La Llorona on the Longfellow Bridge* and I was so intimidated by her I couldn't even ask her to sign it. Silly me. She is just such a bad ass that I was embarrassed to ask her. I wish I could write a book like this. Her poem "Kyrie Elieson for La Llorona" is about making the Llorona a saint. "Patron saint of bus stops and turnstiles./ Mother of the deported. / Mother of the disposed" (108). This poem inspired me to write "Oramos" which I included in my thesis. De Alba herself appears in this book, as a symbol of La Llorona who travels trying to find herself and comes to terms with her identity and sexuality.

This semester I taught her essay "Literary Wetback" in my English 1320 reading class. She says "The Chicana Writer, like the curandera (medicine woman) or the bruja (witch), is the keeper of the culture keeper of the memories, the rituals, the stories, the superstitions, the language, the imagery of her Mexican heritage" (43). Gaspar de Alba claims she suffers cultural schizophrenia which I think I may suffer from as well. I think a lot of us women of color, women who have to be different things in different places suffer from this. I am a Chicana who was raised as an American with parents who imposed their patriotism and Republican conservative ideals on me. I was raised to believe that my Spanish ancestors somehow made me less Mexican.

I remember that I would go to Las Flores (Nuevo Progreso) and felt no connection to it and was scared of it. I thought it was a dirty, ugly country and that looking indigenous meant looking like an “ugly mojado.” Unfortunately, I thought that speaking Spanish would make me stupid. Then I grew up, went to the University and majored in Anthropology and had to shed that skin. I shed my own internalized racism. However, I still hear this voice in the back of my head that because I am brown I am not as beautiful as my sister who is light skinned. I still hear this voice that tells me I am not supposed to be proud of my Mexican heritage. It’s hard to put yourself together, to have to incorporate parts of your identity and patch it all up with a big band-aid that is not peach tone but brown, brown like my blood, my soul, my language. Brown. I married a white man and had my beautiful babies with him. Gaspar de Alba is up there with Gloria. This is why of all the Chicanas I read in Emmy Pérez’s class, I adore Gaspar de Alba the most.

### **Body of Work**

I have split up the poems in my thesis in three sections. The first section deals with my identity as a female and the many roles, stereotypes and divisions I have experienced. I have titled it “Put a Power: Overcoming Epithets and Reclaiming the Self.” In this section I include a few poems I wrote before I entered the program. Before I arrived here in the MFA program, I had already constructed a manuscript of poems I had written in the late 90s until 2004 or so. I had taken what I thought was the best of my work and bound in a spiral bound book 120 pages of poems. In this manuscript, titled *Sueños Desnutridos*, I had poetry that was regionally based, folklore rich, and anthropologically inspired. However, I could only include a small sampling of those poems in my thesis because I wanted to make room for more recent work. I do feature the ones I think are the most important at least as far as finding a voice and identity.

I actually got the phrase “puta power” from a scene in Denise Chávez’s book entitled *Loving Pedro Infante*. The main character, La Tere, is at the local cantina “La Tempasted” and on the bathroom mirror, written in red lipstick, is the phrase “Put a Power.” La Tere is a woman who is unmarried and in love with a married man. She is also obsessed with Pedro Infante (another man she can’t have). I adopted “Put a Power” because a woman who is sure of herself and her sexuality does not give a damn what people say about her.

I remember the first boy who bullied me. He had boogers and he would hit me. In older I wrote, “I was a bullied little girl by bigger boys who bruised my back.” Boys will be boys right? Well, that kind of abuse was something that not only boys would do but girls. Girls hated me and insulted me and all that hatred piled up on top of me. I think that the best kind of medicine is writing. I hope to be able to help others sort through their pain and be inspired by it instead of hiding from it. Embracing the power of poetry was something I felt I needed to do. I don’t think we should let others tell us we can’t write and don’t have anything to say. Some people can stifle you into believing you have no voice. However, yo no me voy a callar. You can’t silence me with bullying, being petty or jealous, because it makes me stronger. After my sister, the first bully in my life, told me not to exploit our family by writing about it, I wrote the first poem in the first section, “Rio Grande.” She had said something about my stealing from her when it came to my poetry and that I needed to be more “creative.” Creating in a space when the oxygen had been threatened to be taken away constantly by zopilotes que nomas tienen envidia proved to be difficult but not impossible: you can’t steal your own memories.

“A Misunderstanding or Chicana Blues” is one of the first poems I wrote dealing with my Chicanidad. Chicanidad is chicana plus identidad. I didn’t know what it meant to be a Chicana. I had preconceived misconceptions that all Chicanas were cholas, as it appears in this poem. There

are a few poems that touch upon being a Chicana that may not accurately portray what Chicana actually is. I believe that is a journey of self that I am still on. I always assumed I wasn't a Chicana because I was too young and not politically motivated or even an activist and perhaps my philosophy did not necessarily fit in the model Chicana. The older I get, I know that am a Chicana poet.

Most of my poems in the first section are all in some way about being a woman. I think of myself as a feminist because I believe that a woman should never be oppressed because of her sex, should have all the freedoms of a man and be equal and should always be able to make choices when it comes to her body. I know that I always wanted to have children. I wanted the option to stay home with them when they were babies. I myself wanted children but I know that a woman is not defined by her children and should have her own life. My life is my children but before them came my work. Before them, I was a young, crazy *mujersita sin control y a veces, bien loca*. I still am pero I got a curfew now. My poems "Shadow," "Llorona," and "Put a Power" were all written when I was childless and obsessed with the fact that I had made mistakes in my past. I felt trapped by names, epithets that scarred and shattered me. I was haunted by own shadow. I had hurt people as we all do and lived in my own shadow and every Saturday night when I stayed home, I cried for a while. It was my ritualistic release bordering the "Coatlicue State," a term that Anzaldúa coined in *Borderlands*. I lamented past *pecados* while trying to shed old skin and old wings, old loves. I wrote "Beast" just before I found out I was pregnant. Eerily prophetic, I knew it was time to move on. I would say that during this period, I experimented with personas until I reached "badass La Erika." However, a persona is just that. I may have worn the low-cut shirts and showed off my body and thought of myself as *muy chingona*, but inside I was dying. "Beast" is about a woman who may indeed be a show of

accessories and the fandango of female; however, she does not feel complete: “What a show/ but my flat stomach/ has yet to know/ of child swimming, kicking.”

It’s not sleeping around that makes a girl a puta. No. It’s much more than that. *Slut: Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation*, by Leora Tanenbaum, is all about girls who have been called sluts even if they weren’t promiscuous, but just different because of their looks, their ethnicity, or other eccentricities. I read this book and couldn’t help but feel that my relationship with words is related to my obsession with names and these names brought me great shame and embarrassment when I was younger. Tanenbaum lists the many negative names for a sexually active woman, which include but are not limited to the following: slut, whore, tramp, ho, bitch, hooker, harlot, hussy, bimbo, floozy, vixen, loose woman, vamp, wench, strumpet, skank, sleaze, and sexpot. For men, negative expressions include womanizer, wolf, and “can’t keep it in his pants.” Positive expressions for a sexually active man far outnumber those for women. Men are called, stud, player, stallion, ladies man, the man, Romeo, Don Juan, Cassanova, bounder, gigolo, lover boy. Women are positively referred to as hot or sexy (intro, no page number). This seems fairly unbalanced, no? The truth is, I might have been these things to certain people, even people in my family, but I don’t care anymore. If my own parents could forgive me, why shouldn’t I forgive myself? Embracing my misnomers through the persona of La Erika was empowering. Embracing the things that hurt me, I felt like a new woman. The reality is childbirth cleansed me of my pain as a lost woman. Childbirth and the use of my body to create made me feel complete. I suffered great pain twice to have the most beautiful and craziest children in the world. Now, it’s time to own all my past and move ahead.

Still, motherhood can prove to be the loneliest feeling (“Motherhood is Lonely”). When you have an infant, the house is empty except for you, the baby, and maybe the cat. You can

starve for some kind of exchange. It helped me heal, having a baby did, but it proved to be a new episode in my life which led to a new kind of panic and anxiety. Especially, when I found out my father was dying. When I found out I was pregnant with my second child, my doctor was next door to my father's chemo clinic. While viewing ultrasounds, next door my father was receiving chemicals directly into his heart that would not save his life. Funny. He was a funny man. I would sit with him while he would get his chemo and he would look around and say, "It looks like a beauty parlor here."

The middle section of my thesis includes poems I wrote when my father was dying and after his death and is entitled, "After Life: Losing my Father and Regaining Hope." When I found out he was in the last stages of terminal cancer, I was in denial. He chose not to tell us earlier because he did not want to worry us. When he would go get radiation, he hid it from the rest of us, even my mother. However, once he started the chemo, he couldn't hide it. Because I was pregnant with my daughter when I found out he was going to die, it was a bittersweet voyage filled with feelings of absolute sadness paired with pregnancy hormones which made me paradoxically happy and at the time concerned my doctor. Once, I had the baby and had to mourn the loss of my father along with post-partum, it was a very difficult experience. Poetry helped me survive it. I waded through the sadness and absolute desperation. Motherhood's second round paired with the death of my father proved to take a big chunk away from me. At times, I almost wished he had taken me with him. It's a horrible way to feel because he was such a strong and loving, happy man who loved children and life so much.

Being self-absorbed is a human trait but one thing that is a remedy for that is watching someone die. It was absolutely the most dreadful and wonderful experience and I never want to go through it again. I am not the same person after that. My father was the most humble, hard

working, friendly, self-less, loving man that ever lived. I say this with all sincerity. I wish more people would have met him. He left before his granddaughter met him and before some of my best friends could meet him. "Afterlife," I wrote when he was sick. In the poem I wrote I wanted the "beforelife." I wanted to see him go back to the way he used to be. After chemo he had to wear a jacket in the middle of summer to protect his skin from the sun. He wore gloves and a hat to protect him further. He couldn't go outside like he used to. He lived outside before. It got to the point where he couldn't walk without a walker anymore. He was a fast walker and he walked everyday before he got sick. He worked at a factory for 26 years where he assembled boxes. Studies show that the type of chemical in the adhesives used to make those boxes causes ureteral cancer, which is what he had. This section was my way of dealing with death, his death, this death of part of my life. Life is not the same without him. The only way to explain this feeling is emptiness that can't be filled. Poetry fills the void though. He is the reason I write poetry and don't give up. When he was sick, I asked an uncle of mine to read him Walt Whitman's "O Captain, My Captain," which was one of his favorite poems. It was the one of the most amazing moments of my life. To join his and my love for poetry together proved that my mission in life was clear. In his memory, I find inspiration. In his pain, I saw what strength was. He would want me to move on and enjoy my life. I have to say, one the best ways I know how to enjoy life is to continue to write.

"Agua Bendita" I wrote because in the last week of my father's life a relative brought some kind of herbal tonic that one of them had taken when he was diagnosed with cancer. My relative was a survivor and he claimed this tonic was what saved his life. I remember that my family more or less thought, why not, what's he got to lose? We all knew he was going to die and that there was nothing that would save him. This poem was inspired by that but is more

about folk remedies and maybe placing too much of our lives in the hands of God. I think that the poem speaks for itself. Knowing about cancer and catching it in time is what is most important. Hope and prayer is something that can help us get through the ugliness, the reality of cancer. “Marilyn en el Cielo” I wrote about my father sitting up in a chair, which was kind of rare at that stage and he was looking out the window. He joked that he saw Marilyn Monroe in the clouds. My mom said, “Oh yeah. I see Elvis.”

After his death, I became involved with the annual “Relay for Life,” which raises money for cancer research but also celebrates cancer survivors and helps us remember those who have died. I was bitter. I won’t lie. I hated the disease, did not want to be a part of it. A good friend was an organizer and a survivor and I wanted to help her out. During “Relay for Life,” teams take turns and walk all night. I was walking a lot after my dad passed away. I was searching for signs that he was okay in the sky, saying prayers to all things, birds and the breeze, trying to find peace. All along, my baby girl was in her stroller and I hadn’t even noticed she was his legacy. I had to keep on moving on. I wrote “Exhale” and performed it during the candlelight vigil held at the relay, trying to say something hopeful: “i stroll her. / his soul in her body / she coos. i exhale”.

The third section of my thesis is a mish mash of poems I titled “Poeta Power: Finding Solace in the Third Space.” Some of these poems were written in workshops but most come from my own inspiration. Workshops are good for the poet who needs someone to push them along in finding something to write about. However, I survived many years being a prolific poet without any outside motivation. This semester I have not taken a workshop and find myself writing more than I did when I was in workshop. This might sound bad but I think it’s probably because I don’t do well with assignments or focus too much on the product and get lost in the



process. There are times when I should be doing something else, like grading or research or cleaning, or raising my kids, but I write a poem instead. In being inconsistent I am constant and don't feel right now that I can pin down my digressions as a poet. Perhaps, my voice is growing or it is changing--even though La Erika still feels like home. I think the bridge between the past and the present is what I hoped to arrive to through my thesis work. In the past, I wrote a lot about where I am from, my hometown, the Rio Grande Valley, and my own exploration of my identity as a woman, as a Chicana. However, I like experimenting. I mean, haven't we all at some point experimented with different poetic styles, different personas, different voices, different languages, different genres? I think I do all of these things in section III.

"Una Vez al Mes," "Voids," "Bar Poems," are a bit different. They are poems that I wrote very recently and aren't necessarily about the Valley and don't necessarily rely on code switching linguistically. However, I will always feel the need to write about where I am and who I am even though I might not need to code-switch or preach. Because of this the "Poeta Power" section is a bit of a miscellany. The future of my poetry is hanging in the air. However, one thing I believe in is the muse. I have gone through some kind of spiritual awakening, embracing the unknown, embracing ambiguity, embracing divinity and allowing those harmful, hurtful things that have imprisoned me to liberate me. For example, "Rendezvous with You," uses the term "Zen Koan" which is a Buddhist parable or meditation. I felt the Buddhist in me coexisting with the Catholic me and they converged one day. Accept loss forever, right? Sometimes I feel I can liberate myself from that Chicanita that I created out of own impression that I always had to write about being Mexican-American, a woman, a mother, and someone who writes in two languages. I want to experiment with different aesthetics but that does not mean I will not write about these important parts of my life. I would also just like to be a poet who worships words

and poetry. I feel free to experiment with style and voice. Poets are constantly shifting, changing, evolving and creating. Que viva el poder de poesia!!! Que viva Poeta Power!

I feel that by calling my thesis Poeta Power, it's as if I am a superhero and I save me from myself through poetry. I think that poetry is powerful and can save others. I don't remember who said, "They may not remember what you said, but they will remember how it made them feel." I believe that the ultimate thing I have always wanted was a reaction. There is a lot of power that comes from knowing that you can stir a crowd, make others aware of things they may have thought about but can not articulate. You might even motivate them to write, too.

The poets I admire the most are those I regularly perform with here in the Valley--Lady Mariposa, local poet Goddess who has been around performing longer than I have; my young friend Lauren Espinoza (lauren out loud) who grew up as a poet in front of my eyes; Lina Suarez, founder of the Gloria Anzaldúa Legacy Project who always makes me cry; and of course, Emmy Pérez, whose poems put me in a trance-like state. At UTPA, I have had the pleasure of opening for Chican@ greats such as Lucha Corpi and alurista. After her reading, I met Lucha Corpi and have had the distinct pleasure of having her read my thesis and give me feedback. She has been a great mentor and friend, and at times feel like she is Poetic Tia. I was selected to be in an online workshop founded by my favorite author, Luis Alberto Urrea. The last poem in my thesis "Crossroads" (which I wrote at El Mundo Zurdo 2010) was selected by Franciscó X. Alarcón and featured on La Bloga for online floriculto. Cyberspace has brought me in touch with Chican@ poets from all over the country. Working on my poetry all these years, I feel that I have grown as a poet and as a person. I do owe a lot of this to Gloria Anzaldúa. If I had not read her work I may have never believed that a small town girl like me could go anywhere with poetry.

What I will do in the future with my poetry remains to be seen. I hope to work on a manuscript that is more cohesive and probably that focuses on one theme. I also hope to have a one woman show with song, poetry, and monologue and maybe I can use some of those dance skills I picked up along the way. There is an enormous amount of work I feel I will do. I will do what I can with what I have and with the talents God/dess has given me. I end on this quote from Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*, "So if you really want to hurt me, talk badly about my language... I am my language" (81). This thesis is me. I am my poetry.

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**Put a Power: Overcoming Epithets and Reclaiming the Self**

## Rio Grande

how do you steal your own memory  
mimic your own voice  
write something  
without  
writing  
about it

"Pues de esas cosas no se dicen"  
I've been told.

so I've sealed my own heart away  
and  
sent it to silencio  
ripped my hands off  
erased my face and  
drowned my past in the  
Rio Grande.  
I cross it back  
this cross on my back  
and denied myself the freedom.  
to dance  
I have forgotten rhythm  
so clumsily I fall  
back in to the  
Rio Grande  
and wet, have gone home to  
black out pictures  
so no one knows my ancestors.

## **Theorize Me**

I would have healed.  
Moreover, I would have forgiven.  
Or would I have been  
sent to the fire?

Set in stone is the gospel of doldrums.  
Blessed be the believer whose saint does not respond in kind.

Pedagogues have petrified me.  
Taken all of my preexisting catastrophes  
and theorized me.  
I am a student of Victim Studies.

We have unlearned.



## **A Misunderstanding**

(Chicana Blues)

I guess I have been a little preocupada with mixed messages.  
I was torn between what I am and what I should be.  
It's all unclear, like after 4 beers,  
Words said with a full head of alcohol.  
Either way, I've got Chicana blues.  
Or rather, I've got blues because I am not one.  
No tattoos yet, although that's not a prerequisite.  
No lowrider- porque I can't drive.  
No cholo boyfriend ( y you know why)  
I live in gringolandia verdad,  
Surrounded by unos chifladitos  
Whose parents are probably scared of me.  
Imagine if I walked around with a sacred heart tatoed on my left arm?  
This is not an identity crisis.  
Don't get me wrong.  
And don't think I am going to apologize for not being a chicana.

Even though, I apologize to myself everyday.

## **My Duality**

I,  
The woman with serpent like qualities  
said to be snake like,  
Give birth to myself.  
In turn I give life to you.  
I've slithered before, cold-blooded,  
Unable to feel or care.  
I was double crossing, venomous, coiling-  
The root of evil, all evil,  
Whispering in any man's ear, lies.  
And then,  
I shed skin.  
Became the source of creativity,  
Guided others with my knowledge,  
Had life emanating from me.

I,  
Umbilical cord,  
Rainbow,  
Reason.  
Or at least, in your bed,  
when I slide on my belly in to your arms.  
My two halves are one.

## Shadow

Evil archetypical me  
Controlled by my shadow  
to fear and feel  
condemned  
to the dark castle on the hill  
sugar cookie cottage to lure tasty children  
left to steal voices and teal scales in the deep eel ridden sea  
clinging to the bottom of cars following families on vacation  
sleeping on the floor of a cave, stalactites decorating my ceiling

I,  
Bruja,  
Terrorista,  
Antagonista,  
Maldita,  
Chingada,  
Ofrecida,  
Perdida,  
Resbalosa,  
Condenada,  
Parandera,  
Callejera  
Sinverguenza,  
Malinche,  
Malamujer,  
Pendeja,  
Put.

I, the woman who once fell in love with two brothers.

## **Llorona**

At night,  
the pitterpatter of  
a sleepwalking  
womb.

Ventre inconsolable,  
that weeps.

The wandering of a frustrated uterus,  
in hysterics,

    Who wonders  
        when if,  
it will be,  
it will have it's day.

My uterus in my throat,  
in my spleen,  
I scream...

and the only cure for the affliction.  
marriage,  
or a good fuck.

## Beast

long nails to prove  
me woman  
cigarette stained  
long hair to prove  
me girl  
let the smoke swirl  
in my mouth  
to prove me cool  
unafraid of my end  
like my buelita had  
with her machines  
stories told from a hospice bed

about brothels and mole cleavage as per sexiness  
and goddessness  
truth be told  
this drunken mess  
has every weakness  
take your pick  
A-Z  
your garden variety  
And catch me weaving in stilettos  
what a show  
but my flat stomach  
has yet to know  
of child swimming, kicking  
the cards said  
my womb, matrice no soporta  
y no soporto.  
mujer. nina. bestia.  
envious of normal women with their  
happy babies in a stroller  
and one inside  
handsome husbands walking beside.

oh the show of red lips  
and skirts  
does not make me feel woman  
no fancy purse  
or miracle bra  
or fishnet socks  
or beaded shawl  
or expensive ring  
or anything else that does

not fit in my arms as it suckles my breast  
can make me feel woman.

yet me with my little womb  
and magic wand  
magnolia tree  
chinaberry  
Briefly sated be.

## **Put a Power(less)**

Yo quisiera que ya no me echaras la culpa.  
Because you do y con razón.  
I've spent chingos of tiempo  
en la obscuridad,  
Agarrándome a patadas,  
And missing you bien gacho.  
Y tú, con tus cerveza Indio,  
Tomando hasta la fregada.  
Mas que ni yo.

While I have been domesticada,  
Y en veces liberada,  
And mostly getting love que una mujer  
Como yo  
NO MERECE  
De nadie,  
Never.

The letter P is on my nametag,  
Mi camisa, mi pecho,

**PURO PINCHE PUTA POWER!**

And what I'd give to not have that sort of epithet.  
But it's hard to remove something written in blood.

No telling whose blood it is.

## Underworld

There's no crawling anymore  
It's more of a cruise ship  
Full amenities y todo  
With a view of pestilence  
Through the circular window  
Like Love Boat but better  
Chillin' in Xibalba  
Oh yeah  
I got the full paid one way cruise  
And every night a new show  
All you can drink,  
Buffet, lo que sea  
Gambling after dusk  
Watching a projected sunset  
Sipping micheladas on the deck  
Every night a new dark room or cave  
New tests  
Can I keep the room lit with a cigarette?  
Or will the bats finally kill me?  
Puro Popol Vuh style  
But I'm a heroine without a twin  
Or a hymen  
And the spittle in my hands  
Does not belong to you  
It's mine and alone  
Without a child to remake the world  
I sail through the underworld  
In search of death without success.



## Once Upon a Puta

Noches así, like that,  
Con los pleather pants  
Y taconones vinyl patent puta  
Shoes and lip-e-stick  
Or falda encaramada  
Fishnet, lace gloves,  
Corsets...

Nights of power  
Y  
Y a mí, no me vale  
Before el güerco lloron  
“Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, Mom, Mom, Mom, Mother...”  
Y la baby la que nunca duerme  
and the step kid con sus preguntas necias.

Nights listening to Chavela Vargas  
“Agarraste por tu cuenta la parranda...”  
Loud mouth loca singing along to lo que sea  
Or Buffalo’s for the tall beers, las waitresses,  
Caguamera mera mera party  
Animalona buscando pedo con todos

Restroom conversations with Coors Light girls  
Reapplying makeup.

Those were nights,  
once upon a Puta.

Before the Sex and the City reruns,  
Viejas desnutridas chingandó over nothing  
Before reading the same book otra vez,  
Oh the places you won’t go!  
Before the dishes you wish  
would wash themselves.  
And the cat que no se mueve  
¡Haste gata!”  
Charagandio toda la noche  
Making out with  
Ese vato cómo se llama  
Exchanging glances con el bartender.  
Waking up con sepa la fregada.  
El blue eyeshadow faded and the  
Pleather pants on the floor.

## **Why am I not Brown Enough?**

Chicana is not my favorite label.  
I prefer it over someone calling me Hispanic...  
Think about it  
The tried trite cliché holds true.  
His-Panic.  
As in I am his source of panic.  
Who is he anyway?  
Not the white man I married. He likes me. We all know that.  
Latina is just not right either. I don't speak Latin. I didn't even  
learn Latin in mass or nothing. That word is also so annoying.  
Latin Dancing. Latin Jazz. All so sexy.  
Sexy Mexy is what I am.  
La Tejanita, Erikita.  
The Americana Mexican, y qué si me case con un  
white man.  
I am the Erika, translation. Yo soy La Erika  
I am not a Chicana.  
I only play one in real life.

Moderately Mexican, I am in touch with the divine  
in two countries. I speak to Aztec/Mayan Goddesses when  
I get bored with the same, stern, guilt is the only answer,  
Obey your master, humble yourself to me, and surrender your equality  
Virgensitas who have found their way into my soul to  
make me feel incomplete.  
Always, praying that I will be something I don't know how to be.  
Chicana, are you inside of me, gasping and clawing for breath  
for the air to speak out when you are at fishing lodges and white women  
are talking about immigrants who come over here and "By God! They can't even  
read. Those people need to learn something."  
I want to say, "How the hell you can  
not learn something?"  
My Grandparents came over here to teach us a lesson  
on how to be someone,  
how to escape yourself to become something.  
Just because they didn't sit around reading some stupid book anyway,  
did not make them ignorant.  
So here. My foot. For your ignorant ass.

## **What the Water Gave Me**

(for Frida Kahlo)

An artist who inspires me  
To write about my tragedy  
Bathtubs filled with tears  
I soak  
Away my old memories  
my blood stained legs  
exhausted aspirated womb  
Tiny ghost with paper nails to  
scratch away at my heart  
A woman who loved me  
After all the men left running off  
with my breath pregnant with words  
My ancestors on Agustina's wall  
their eyes follow me judging me.  
A dress I wore to give me flight  
In spite of clipped wings.

The water gives me a pen  
to write about Popocatepl skyscrapers  
Mosquito on a tight rope  
Half man half tlaloc  
And cactus fruit so sweet.

## **Lentil**

I have trapped myself again  
Inside my body  
Ovary pounds on my right side

I wait it out with chocolate  
covered sparrows in a  
nest of magpie eyes

It is not so long  
to rent out my body  
again to another  
soul that will envelope me

However  
I miss the river and the  
night wind  
on the bridge on Alamo St  
right by the abandoned  
warehouse just north of Blue Star  
I miss you and how we loved  
to borrow movies from the enchilada  
colored library

our walks in King William  
watching cormorants swoop in the river  
right by the Pioneer flour mill  
or under the bridge where vines grew on the walls  
and bats would fly at dusk

the nostalgia subsides for now  
as the water in the pot boils  
more food for my little lentil

## **Pinche Princess**

Because so many girls believe  
They are royalty  
And everyone and everything  
encourages this unmerited delusion  
Of white ponies, plastic heels,  
Feather boas, ball gowns, tiaras  
I shop for my baby girl  
And am attacked by pink and lavender.  
Everywhere.  
I would much rather shop for my little boy  
Who could be a rockstar,  
Any variety of athlete, a paleontologist,  
Entomologist, a race car driver, train engineer,  
Robot scientist...  
And my unborn girl is a pinche princess.  
Y a lo mejor si Dios quiere  
a slutty pop star.  
Since birth we must  
convince our girls they must  
stay clean, play clean, wear feathered slippers,  
heels at two, sit properly,  
their little legging clad legs crossed  
at proper princess tea parties  
wearing gowns and our boys  
are little savages and it's O.K.  
Because they are boys.  
Because they are boys.  
Chicana moms everywhere  
Their boys fucking up their lives and  
all they get is a pobresito mijito.  
Pregnant teen princesses -- dressing  
their baby girls in little pink clothes  
Perpetuating pinche princess futures  
without a prince.

## **Classic Girl**

i used to be a classic girl  
in the black light.

i was young  
we hadn't tried to destroy each other  
you and your pants your mom stitched  
stuffed animals all over  
window unit full blast  
and always  
incense  
burning  
your closet filled with ropa usada  
the pencil writing on the door frame  
something about albino midgets or something

classic girl  
that was me

and now i type this  
while i breastfeed

## **Xanax**

After Sylvia Plath

I erased all the sadness  
But it rewrote itself  
On my tearoom yellow  
Walls. Graffiti in the kitchen  
Tattooing in sprayed ink,  
A flayed cat.

The sadness turned into  
Anger not even the alcohol  
Could undo, undo, black shoe  
Living like a broken toe.  
Sadness. The graphite pencil shades  
Itself. A still-life of rotting grapefruits.

Puddle of furry puppies,  
Mangey messes that yelp.

Try to erase something permanent.  
Blood on the pavement-  
Blowing out trick candles

And it's not my birthday,  
Nor the suns or the flowers.  
I don't want prayers or pity

I indulge in it  
Because it's better than  
the doctor's remedy

Which leaves me blank.  
No writing, no reading, no words.  
Blank.

Sadness is better  
than Xanax.

**after meiosis**

time. it is a wash.  
i use softener.

space. i can't complain.  
so much room to pace.

sleep. sheets washed in  
warm water. counting

threads unraveling to each.  
a feast of molecular monotony.

gerbera daisies soften the blow.  
it has rained three days.

february is a memory  
that relives itself

this year there will be no mountains.  
there will be tall barstools.

and tall tales  
that i am happy.



## **Motherhood is Lonely**

Children are companions  
Who learn to speak too late.

By then you've sold the cat  
To science, set antiques ablaze

Your lonely house  
A maze, a trap, a phase

You outgrow, you watch children  
Grow, plants die, your children

Go, you die, your childless  
Friends come back  
From week long vacations (from what you wonder)

You've nothing to report  
Except that you cursed

Them the whole time they're gone

Their fruitless existence is less than appealing  
But you have forgotten the feeling of freedom

## **Oramos (Let Us Pray)**

Should she have been  
canonized a century  
or so ago  
So women could summon her, en el nombre,  
De ayuda,  
Salvame de estos ninos, fregados, ingratos-  
Salvame de este hombre pendejo,  
Mamado, siempre tomado,  
Tracionero, maldito-  
From this life that culturally befits me,  
Condemns me.  
Llorona, Llorona, Llorona,  
They have tried to hold me back,  
Believing I must keep these children  
Who were thrust upon me in my ignorance  
That a man loves me only with my legs spread  
For fun or for fruit  
To bear the pain of a million years  
That a man me puede maltratar  
Sin merecer.  
Were she canonized, every woman would have  
A white candle, with the scent of lavender in the air  
Each time out of reverence  
Or forgiveness to bear.  
I will not be the woman who has children  
Only to drown them in my own sorrow.  
I will not be the woman who will fall in love  
With a man who lies, cheats, leaves and expects  
To come home without punishment.  
I would have lit candles, long ago to save me from her fate.

## **En el Culto de la Serpiente**

1.

I want to sit outside in the frozen night and watch as my breath condensation makes me feel impermanent like the frost on anacuas.

2.

Being in a cult does steal your soul after a while. Identifying with others eats away at your identity. Piece by piece, much like guilt, this type of unity can destroy solitary animals like myself.

3.

I always had a way with my own words.  
Not words that others told me to say and how to say them, but a voice that speaks to me alone,  
and that I want to convey on a page  
and it is so loud even if you force it down  
to the bottom of all your bills and receipts in a desk drawer,  
she is still speaking, still laughing  
and crying in the still cold frozen night.  
Still humming.

## **detachable venus**

every day  
a goddess falls apart  
as barbie loses her head  
cihuacoatl can't find her cry  
and ixtacihuatl  
fell out of the arms of a  
dismembered hero  
unaware of her peril

every day another  
goddess can't find her wings  
and all those things that make  
her who she is  
coyoxahqui just can't  
keep herself together  
coatlicue she's a downer  
venus lost her hair piece  
in the garbage heap of man  
and cihuateotl lost cihuateteotl  
displacing duality once more

### **Prayer sans Patriarchy Pantoum**

I'm a new woman who found herself  
Found herself in the rain alive  
Alive I've found all my ghosts  
My ghosts have grown wings

In the rain I found myself alive  
It's been too long since I've seen myself  
My ghosts have grown wings  
I pray a new prayer without patriarchy

It's been a while since I've been myself  
And my reflection is never the same  
I pray a new prayer, no patriarchy  
Virgins won't confine or suppress my passion

Yet my reflection is never the same  
At times my shadow beats red  
Virgins won't suppress or confine my passion  
Deeper my passion delves further

Red my shadow beats at times  
Alive I've found all my ghosts  
Further my passion delves deeper  
I'm a new woman who found herself.

## Espejo

Sometimes I see that girl who hated mirrors.  
The girl that was insulted by others for not  
wearing the right clothes, or being too tall, too  
skinny, too awkward. Sometime I still see the girl  
with bad skin and bad hair. The girl who no one would love.  
Sometimes I still hear the voice of someone who tells me  
I have cellulite or my arms sag. Sometimes sticks and stones  
roll off me but the words stick to me and my reflection  
echoes insults and names. All my nicknames on a nametag.  
I see puta, slut, nerd, bitch, in the reflection.  
Sometimes I don't see my beautiful children playing and laughing.  
I see what my body became because I had children.

The mirror laughs at me.  
And I smile.  
I broke the mirror and am not superstitious.  
I embrace myself, I own those names.  
I don't need mirrors to know I am beautiful.

## Que Me Crees?

what was I supposed to do?  
act as if I was born here  
privileged  
as if i deserve the constitution to be delivered to my door step  
here i sit with the entire preamble melting on my fingertips  
and i think of the women  
who i know who are Fabulousas  
the women whom take my cast offs and smile  
i too sing Mexico and I remember  
my abuela on her death bed  
recalling her birth  
i want to call her  
i want to ask her  
qué piensas Buelita  
you told me the world would end  
and in your memories of Aguascalientes  
that world did end  
i don't know what to say to bigots  
i wish they could spend a morning remembering  
that they were not always welcome  
their entitlement makes me sob

i would rather write this at midnight  
then try to relate  
i have not forgotten you Buelita and i don't wish to  
but this world keeps moving somewhere that is not forward  
and nothing  
can bring me back to you

## Palabruja

soy una word witch  
accidental witch  
unintentional witch  
magic finger on you watch out you

soy la witch que no quiere ser witch  
bruja maldita bruja sin saber que soy bruja

you need to stay away from me,  
te hago ser curse, te mediomatas,  
algo va pasar y it's not my fault yo no fui

i am afraid of thinking ill of you  
or dreaming something happened to you  
because sometimes those dreams come true  
and i apologize for it in advance

ruining your life like i am so good at doing

ruining everything

pinche dedo desgraciado.



## Chiché is Best

at the pediatrician  
Women with soft bellies,  
their wombs now empty  
Fuzzy warm newborns in their layettes  
the smell of Dreft wafts through the air  
an occasional flash of a brace  
a new cesarian scar  
Frankenmommy  
staples that itch

I wish I could see a woman break out a breast.

NO, I am not a voyeuristic pervert!  
But I wish at least one of these women I see  
quite often in the waiting room would breastfeed  
Just one out of eight women  
And not me,  
but someone else  
I wish those newborns  
could feel their mom let down  
instead of being let down  
consuming a mass produced powder in a tin

It saddens me, these little babies that  
don't get to suckle their mother's breast  
Why has it come to this?  
When did breastfeeding become a shameful act  
An animal act, an old world act?

I've been at Target before  
A Fresa bitch  
Scowls at me  
A classist condemning cloud in the air  
Embarrasses me  
As if I'd done something so wrong  
Like I had been defacating in a corner  
Not nursing my newborn.

Indigenous women dressed in huilpiles y rebozos  
Still feed their baby on one breast  
And with another one on their back  
It's a wonderful balancing act  
An amazing feat  
In poverty and in desperation

They do what is best for their babies

Milk from a breast  
Milk at it's best  
Not something synthetic  
Breasts used for they were meant  
Not just for us to parade around  
trying to land some man who may impregnate us  
confused in the estrus and rut  
to leave us with a runt  
and in a rut

But a breast  
to feed our babies, umbilical cord still fresh  
not left to digest some mysterious white powder  
that contains every man made chemical  
unknown to man  
we are blind to see that our bodies  
are scientific mysteries and miracles  
that create the most perfect food  
for a baby who has only been alive for a few days or weeks  
who swam inside of you consuming what you did too  
and now this  
left to drink from a rubber nipple  
something that scientists invented that is inferior to the real deal.

I am not a fool.  
I know some women have to work,  
It's hard to nurse when your baby is not there  
And I know lots of women who had to pump in their office  
The ehhh irrrr ehhh sound of the machine can really  
get in the way of a conference call  
and in the break room, bottles separated off-white liquid in a shared fridge  
I understand it is so impossible in this society to breastfeed  
but everything worth a damn is virtually impossible  
every woman has an excuse

But is their an excuse?

## **Candy panties**

do it this way: remember me but  
with stones and feathers and a potted plant  
a heart beat rosary glowing in  
the duck lamp aura of a drunken poet

put it in an envelope and mail it to  
yourself don't let your father find your memories  
and send them to satan for he is unkind he will  
not return to sender.

do this for me: if you find that i am  
frozen again that my smile is the only thing  
changing and that my eyes don't follow you  
but pierce the silent noon, apologize to effegies

and if one day you are in love  
with a woman who wears too much lipstick  
and fruit by the foot panties eat her alive.  
and throw her scraps to me.

## Birth in Two Parts

1.

The first time  
I looked like a woman returned from the dead  
Like my mother who bled me out  
Almost all of herself left then  
To see the golden hands of a savior she  
Prays to in the silence of an empty home.

The first time I looked nothing like the celebrities in  
Tabloids that have primped and colored their faces in but  
Like a woman who had the life sucked out of her  
Staring at a blue green infant with an aspirator to relieve  
his mouth of meconium.

I was the woman with the sunken eyes staring at a dr. who was  
Between my thighs sewing up the tears left behind by a long labor  
Three hours of heavy duty coaching, the push push push cheerleaders  
Exhaustion and oxygen masks and epidurals that had long worn out  
I was a nightmare. The epitome of why women fear the reaper of birth.

2. Frankenmom

This time there was only a brief attempt to push out a ten pound newborn  
Even too much for the Dr. to bear. To bear.

To bear anything I was giving a drug that doesn't numb but  
Keeps you bound to the pain, immobile, I saw a savior or two,  
One of more Jesus was there to witness my pain.

The pieta in reverse.

Demurool daymares and eighties hour.

What was the song that played?

"I want to run, I want to hide..."

No one could remember if it was the Joshua tree or the Unforgettable fire,  
Hip nurses and Dr.s danced while they sewed me back together.

I could feel the tug of the thread, the suture.

So when I was captured in digital this time,

You could not see my eyes, I slept with glasses on

I heard some cries but was uninterested

to see what they had ripped out of me.

**After Life: Losing my Father and Regaining Hope**

## Afterlife

i don't want an afterlife  
i want a beforelife

before life took a  
turn for the worse  
and my dad who  
used to walk the track  
and go flirt with librarians  
everyday is stuck at home  
shedding  
hair  
and  
weight  
all bones in a old blue sweatshirt and Depends  
depends on who you ask  
but the afterlife sounds like a  
crock of shit

i want the beforelife  
before life took the wrong turn  
when my family was still a delusion  
i had when it was all still good  
in my mind when we all  
hung around each other out of  
love not obligation

i want the beforelife  
i don't want an afterlife

## **Agua Bendita**

Drinking holy water does not cure cancer.

Do not chug it.

It will not get rid of Diabetes, High Blood Pressure,  
Cirrhosis, Psoriasis, Eczema, Edema.

Holy water on your joints will not ease the Rheumatoid arthritis,  
Although I have heard and believe that cannabis in a jar or baby oil  
a la mejor, pero, maybe just smoke it and rub yourself

Agua bendita

is better for pouring on the baby when she is fussy

or the little boy who will not calm down,

Parace que tiene un demonio

Holy water does not cure cancer

Education and prevention and hope.

Hope and holy water may help.

Sprinkle both and call me in the morning

**Marilyn en el Cielo**  
(after Sherman Alexie's **Morphine and Codeine**)

I knew it was over  
once Marilyn Monroe  
was in the clouds  
but I was in denial  
trying to feed you  
pot roast  
watching travel shows  
i guess i should have known  
those were the last few moments  
we'd spend with you still able to  
talk even if you struggled to  
close your eyes while you slept

it was near the end  
Elvis in the clouds now  
amino acids in an iv bag  
to give you strength for  
a surgery you would never have

nothing would save you

hospice nurses coming in to  
talk about options softly  
if you could sign the do not resuscitate form  
and to tell that you would go die in your  
own home

it was our last few days together

i wanted to say everything  
but was too shy in our  
father daughter silence  
my own daughter kicking in my belly

everytime i would leave  
you'd ask me to take  
the horrible collage off the wall

and i always meant to bring something  
else for you to stare at  
while you lay there  
dying



## Dehydrated Fruit Cocktail

dehydrated fruit cocktail  
peanut butter in a pouch  
american dream saltines  
and army caramels

walk to H.E.B. for a new pen  
to sign a death certificate  
maybe receive  
half his benefits

in the sky with pie and ice cream  
he will make it rain again

a two year old leans on an open casket  
but keep him away from the open grave

taps, salutes and the folds of a flag  
the second fold a tribute to eternal life  
the tenth fold is a tribute to the father

his teeth black from chemo,  
hollow cheeks  
red eyes glazed  
his last minutes he mouthed words  
unable to say anything  
like if he could would he say  
con una fregada  
ya with the constant praying  
the kissing of my forehead  
or let me die in peace please  
turn off your iphone chingadera

in the mourners limousine  
fiber optics in the ceiling  
empty carafes, champagne glass  
parace que vamos al prom

he blinked one last time when  
i said you will live on in your sayings  
i will have one for everything

in the sky with pie and icecream  
able to talk again and walk

able to eat again  
and to make it rain like a cow pissing on a flat rock

divine mercy twice on el dia de San Francisco  
y ese pinche iphone  
for measuring his shallow breath and heart rate

every night we said good night and  
we always will  
look out the window  
at the hawk  
circling  
it's you  
isn't it  
it is

## **Ten things I should have buried with you**

(because you loved Letterman's Top Ten)

1. Your paratrooper wings.
2. Your IP pencil holder
3. Piece of coral from Normandy Beach
4. The picture of you in Korea throwing snowballs
5. Crossword puzzles, pen, paper
6. Seeds, an army spoon, macetas
7. National Geographic with the whales singing record
8. Platters, Roy Orbison and Elvis CDs and a Marilyn Monroe poster
9. A copy of O Captain My Captain
10. You, so I wouldn't ever have to dream of you again. Or miss you. Or wish you were here to enjoy all of the above and everything I didn't include.

## **today i wept**

I wept at the grocery store, while the grocer asked me if we needed help outside.  
I wept, and choked, wept and choked, wept, choked back the aching sounds  
of my breaking heart, that broke, broke again, broke while trying to put away a desk fan under  
the cart, broke, because a woman at the grocery store, could barely push the cart, her hair had  
fallen out and started to grow back, broke, because Patrick Swayze is down to 105 lbs and on the  
the cover of the gossip rag, broke and I fell apart in front of the sacker, outside in the parking lot,  
I gasped for air, grasped for the groceries to put them in the car while I sobbed, sobbed because it  
isn't fair, it isn't fair, it isn't fair to have to see the first man you ever loved die, die, die and on the  
cover, another man you admired, almost dead, the walking dead, it reminds you of holding your  
father, holding your daddy's hand, his hand, skinny and cold and you don't want to remember it.  
not ever. not in front of the sacker. not the day before your first birthday without him. cry, choke,  
weep over the man who named you.

## **Coral**

I place the piece of coral on my third eye  
Try to envision my father in his twenties  
When he was on the beach in Normandy  
But all I see is him on his bed that Saturday

When he told me to get this piece of coral from the shed  
That day I read him a poem about  
How he will always be the healthy man who  
Loved to walk and talk and tell silly jokes  
But I lied.

All I see is when he died,  
That look he had in his eyes and  
It won't let me be.

My sister told me not to exploit him  
My husband tells me to let go  
My father wouldn't want me to be so  
Miserable.  
I feel that my mom will be okay  
I don't cry every time we drive away  
And leave her behind in her home, all alone.

But today, I just want to say, that  
I wish that painful memory would go away.

All I have left is this piece of coral

Perhaps one day perhaps peace of mind.

Until I am taken to the eternity.  
Where we will meet again.

## **I Remember**

I remember my father would carry me to bed

when I fell asleep watching Three's Company

I remember his face unshaven bristles that tickle

I remember his sayings,

his jokes, his off key songs

would make mom giggle

silly

I remember Shower to Shower, the blue one,

summer crickets sing by the screen door

Memories of the 80's cookies and cream icecream

becoming a pre-teen terrified

of my budding breasts and then came

the blood. The hair down there.

The shame, Catholic guilt.

I remember my first kiss

real fireworks in the December sky

a real kiss from a man who would ruin me

I remember you too, our nights spent

at the Mario Leal park smoking cigarettes

you always snapped your fingers and licked your lips

I remember how you left me

waiting on the front step for you to return

you did, five years too late

I remember our first date and Sushi

how we met outside the gallery

where you had said I was

the most beautiful piece of artwork

I remember making love

I remember how I unraveled

undid all my pain

to bloom again for you

I remember I knew we had conceived.I remember.

I remember waiting in pain for someone to relieve me  
I remember asking Jesus for the anesthesiologist  
then I named my first born after that miracle.

I remember you Jesus  
I remember you Jesus  
I remember seeing the Father and the Son  
watching me as the Demurol kept me paralyzed  
as the contractions came  
and I wept my second child out of my body.

I remember yesterday  
The clouds boiled over

Today it rained

I rained.

## **Exhale**

(a poem written for Relay for Life)

what should I have loved in this death  
of all my youth and all my  
forever that no longer exists  
as i sing his favorite Blondie song that  
always made him cry “The tide is high but I’m holding on...”  
and I summon the common black hawk dusk

why shall I ever have a moment  
of hope in cures or care when  
he was there in a hospital bed  
in a room with a view of  
dead movie stars in clouds  
a sonic cup filled with ice  
and the sadness that no one  
could remove from his eyes

can luminarias light up his life, undo his death?  
luminarias spell out hope on silver bleachers  
hope for my mother who lost her true love?  
hope for his brothers who miss their best friend?  
hope for daughters with babies that are learning to laugh and smile?  
whom he will never get to hold in his arms

those cells were his cell  
undisciplined inconsiderate disrespectful  
as he spoke about the gold rush  
spoke about his happiness, taking his children to  
mcdonalds  
his last days spent while he could still talk  
spoke about what mattered the most  
what he needed to say  
giving me a piece of white porous coral.

what should i do?  
i want to walk forever,  
inhale the night air  
and hope for cures and for  
moments that live forever.  
forever.

i stroll her.  
his soul in her body  
she coos. i exhale



## **Far Removed (the obligatory 9/11 poem)**

1.  
I was far removed that day.  
Hatred for a stupid little boy  
who became president  
The pawn of a man, puppet, pendejo.  
Disbelief –  
from the crawl.  
It was “surreal.”  
So real that evening that I walked to  
The Dollar General  
To buy a disposable camera for  
Three dollars  
Taking pictures of last days,  
last day sunsets and  
Perros roñiosos at the panaderia of  
Lines mile long  
at the Uncle Sam’s gas station and  
Pictures of friends  
Eating  
Pizza Hut’s meat lovers  
Drinking Bud Light  
Watching this action film starring al Qaeda  
Osama possible papasito with an enlarged heart  
Despues piñatas de el terrorista for sale at La Pulga  
Shock  
watching people on Primer Impacto  
fall 100 stories down to escape  
becoming chicharrones  
People running in the streets gasping for  
Air in the ash filled city

And to think 9/11 would lead to more idiots  
Breeding-  
hate  
Despising –  
anyone unlike them  
Throwing plates of food at people  
who appear to be  
Of Arab descent.

2.

That day I was eating breakfast with my father  
At the old round dinner table  
I'd give anything for a day like that again  
My heart, my foot, a hand, this poem.  
Watching the world explode  
eating eggs with my now dead father.  
9/11 tore us apart.  
Years wasted arguing over politics  
Me, liberal.  
He, republican and  
God Bless the U.S.A.  
He wore a flag pin.

I was far removed.  
Far removed.  
Far removed.

**Poeta Power: Finding Solace in the Third Space or Que Viva Ambiguity**

## **Menudo in a Can**

Menudo in a Can, Man!!  
Menudo in a can  
and tamales  
and pico de gallo in a jar  
Instant Mexican rice  
fideo to go with carnitas de Puerco at the Stripes  
and frozen enchiladas!  
barbacoa everyday?

We don't need Buelita anymore  
because she's dead anyway  
And she never told us how she made  
The mole.

The masa is premade  
and we can buy tortillas ready for the comal.  
no need to knead!

Loteria shower curtains and plates  
Frida on my bracelet  
Coyoxachui on my tshirt  
Che Guevarra on my socks.  
the word "Chula" printed on my chones.  
Popocateptl tapestries  
Baby Abuelita dolls that sing to your baby  
Cantiflas posters,  
Don Pedrito Jaramillo candles,  
Virgen Beach towels?

Our cultura is mainstream now.  
Just add water and stir.

## What I See, What I've Seen

### I.

Towns that have fallen in to the dust of the summer  
And what long summers we have here.  
Summers that eat away at your skin,  
Making you so dark que azuleas,  
Y hasta te haces neja.  
And that is what I see,  
Even at night,  
The towns are darker than darkness,  
Blurred to rubble and  
To burst your bubble  
The air is thick and humid sharp  
It sticks,  
La tristeza,  
Til early morning when for  
A brief moment dawn cuts through your grease.

### II.

I was born to a dying mother,  
Who received the holy oils y dime  
Como se quita el dolor de la vida  
What is there to take it away  
When death lingered so close to my birth  
And all my life I visited an aunt at her grave,  
My tia who was my mother's best friend.  
Tell me what there is,  
And don't tell me una cheve,  
O una chela,  
Y un frajo.  
Ask me, what do I see,  
What can I see with these eyes that see  
Images being fed through an eye-V TV,  
Of three month old babies dying of diarrhea?  
Decapitated children killed by Cartels  
I don't see, why should I?  
I try to look beyond the past,  
And glimpse into the deserted future of war and  
Republicans.  
Of poverty and root canals.  
Zetas, Sara Palin, and Dancing with the Dolts.

## **Checklist**

1. You pick flowers from a spent bouquet
2. The cave is your allegory and we all wear the same mask.
3. Natives knew restless rivers.
4. Sacred cenotes to sacrifice one self when there was no sin.
5. Zootl: Do not feed the feathered serpent. His plume will possess you.
6. Coyolxahqui has a rough time texting.

## **Just For a Moment**

On our walk this morning  
the students run around on cell phones  
with ipods and books and gossip on their tongues  
and so much to say and no pause to look  
at the cirrostratus clouds in the northeast  
the wind kicking up leaves  
cooling the air several degrees  
and to look at the eucalyptus tree three stories high  
which stands next to the Education building  
where years before stood a grove  
I thought I'd chain my hippy, naïve body to  
  
and then I tell my two year old boy  
to take a moment and look  
and i hope that years from now  
he will know to stop and marvel at these things  
and i will live on in the wind

## Bad Once

if i died tomorrow.  
a peregrine falcon would fly me to  
my home. i do have a home.  
i remember it. it was good.  
and i was good  
once.

i remember that i  
should always be good  
but it would interfere  
with my everyday.  
outtake.

bad. i should be. i should be  
this that i am and become.

i loved you once  
you. were. a cool. monday.  
and a cold night with a  
blaze of the torch that welded  
my memories of you.

you. were. a hot. friday.  
and a car without air conditioning  
you conditioned me and  
i will always think i am bad.

but i was good once.

you saw it in my eyes.

there was a hint of innocence and  
happiness in those eyes  
you said once  
as you stared at  
a portrait of me when i was three  
there was.

i was good once

i didn't sit around thinking i was  
going to die tomorrow  
what will my children think of me  
why did i have them



no one will love me if i didn't  
would they  
they won't either

i will die tomorrow.  
and my gardens will continue to flourish.

## Las Viejitas del Valle

Las viejitas van a la misa tempranito  
praying the rosario por el esposo difunto  
those men who never left them  
their camisas in the closet,  
their felt hat on the dresser.

Las viejitas at the H.E.B  
Coin purse in hand a comprar  
gossip rags de las novelas  
tomates, cebollas, yogurt.

Las viejitas who still smile  
when they see babies  
remembering their own children  
ages ago who now  
ignore them,  
don't call,  
las maltratan, steal their cheque  
por andar de sonsos.

Las viejitas at the centro  
hacen munequitas, cositas  
play bingo  
y se pelean por otros viejitos  
on baile day,  
start rumors.

Las viejitas in the silence  
dawn  
alone, sighing, remembering youth  
and teeth and roosters that used to crow  
and wake them up on those mockingbird filled mornings  
when everyone was still at home  
papas con huevito  
cuando lavavan todo a mano  
sheets on the laso drying in the sun,  
a handsome young husband  
children jugando,  
sonriendo.

Las viejitas  
remembering all the faces of people who died,  
even if they can't remember much else  
can't remember grandchildren's names, can't find their purse.

Las viejitas who don't know  
where everyone went.  
Don Francisco keeps them company on Saturday  
and Wednesday.

Las viejitas don't recognize this world  
Mujeres que aman a otras mujeres,  
Women almost naked baring cleavage of  
fake breasts,  
women who work and leave their  
children with strangers  
women  
who will be viejitas one day  
if they are lucky.

### **Third Street**

My barrio is a pool of tears  
that should be tested for pollutants that  
cause cancer of the

blood I shed contaminated with chemicals  
from old sheds that produced plastics

uplifted railroad tracks sold for scraps so that the  
town could pay it's debt to pick up trash

my barrio is a cesspool of dreams born from  
a cesarean section  
with muscles who have yet to heal

i am numb around my heart  
my soul feels sour and sick

the barrio is not where i belong  
it's a source of sufrimento  
sadness of wilted corpses.

my barrio flew away  
in a bubble i blew when my niece was two

my barrio does not have jazz  
but out the window framed with  
rotted wood  
two huskies fuck in the driveway of an abandoned lot

my barrio smells like sewage  
my barrio is sewage.

i won't glorify the remains of a day when the air smelled  
like prosperity and potentiality

my barrio is dead to me.

## Una Vez al Mes

If I could distill blood,  
reverse osmosis plasma,  
purify memories  
and siphon all these impurities  
the intoxicants i swallow  
on a daily basis  
to digest the pain, to cope  
all this silt from the past,  
expunge secrets  
blow unrequited passion  
into a paper bag  
and watch it float  
set my cells free to fly  
off into infinity

would you  
finally release me?

Or will the crumbs of your habia una vez always bring me back?

## Not A Chola

I am not a chola.  
I didn't like cholas.  
They were the girls that threw dodge balls at my  
back when we came in from the playground,  
stealing my glasses as we showered in gym class.  
hiding my clothes.  
The girls that would pick on me  
when I went to the potty  
and then they would take off their flannel shirt,  
hand it to their sidekick friend and  
say "I am gonna kick your ass!"  
and I would say "Go ahead! I will turn the other cheek  
cuz I'm a Jesus freak,"  
See, I loved the Lord and I was a nerd.

I wasn't a chola.  
I was the girl who Cholas would pick on.  
I spoke English, only, not a Coconut, maybe in denial.  
I liked Biology and Chemistry, Meteorology and I actually like to read.

I read poetry by white guys like that  
ee cummings vato and TS Eliot buey  
quoting the Hollow Men or Robert Frost  
putting up signs in my room about how  
Nature's First Green is Gold  
and by those gringas locas that all killed themselves.  
Then I discovered Bukowski  
because he was a blue collar worker like my dad  
and I wanted to keep it real.

So I sat in the hallways and ate my lunch  
and I stayed away from all the cool kids,  
See, I wasn't a chola,  
I just lost my virginity when I was too young to a pendejo  
I wanted to be loved, you see,  
I wanted him to love me,  
I wasn't a chola like his ex  
either way he was smart and  
He had a scholarship because of affirmative action  
and what was I thinking  
Why would he be with me?  
You see.  
I was not a chola.

I was the girl wearing Doc Martens and listening to Kurt Cobain  
cuz I thought he was poet, but he was just a heroin addict.

I never liked cholas.  
They wore too much eyeliner and did weird shit  
to their eye brows,  
Eye liner makes my eyes puffy and I look funny,yo.  
I got a uni-brow that takes over my face, like Frida Kahlo.

Then I decided to embrace this race,  
ethnicity when I went to the university,  
I discovered all these awesome things about La Raza,  
Aztlan, majored in Anthropology  
and studied Mesoamerican Art and Archaeology  
memorized pantheons of deities  
because I wanted to keep it real you see....

I am not a chola.  
I dressed up like one for Halloween  
the gringo professors all asked "What are you supposed to be?"  
and when I went to the gay bar the real cholas all looked at me  
Like they were gonna kick my ass  
because they could see right through me.

So as you can see  
I am not a chola.  
We throw gang signs at the Bar.  
We are the Mama Panoch Crew  
and the Chonca Control  
and the Northwest side of Gringoville  
and I am barrio cuz I can talk to my maid in Spanish ese.....

But I'm not a chola. I am just me.  
And even though the cholas all bullied me,  
I still like me.

## **In Elsa**

Women in lucite stilettos  
shopping for groceries.

The cashier counts the change back  
slowly.

Men's heads turn a 360  
Just to stare  
while they drive past me.

A few houses down  
a car dealership  
37 bucks a week  
is all you need for a Monte Carlo.

The snowcone lady says  
*"No es tuyo,"*  
As in my son is not mine  
because he is too "güero"

And the packs of dogs  
are making the rounds  
because  
hey  
it's a nice day  
and there's always  
a bitch in heat somewhere.



## Curar

Folk cures in these memories  
Ailments like empacho  
Cuando te estiran el espinazo  
Dislodging unbaked biscuits and  
Undercooked pancakes  
While lying on your belly staring at the gray carpet.  
Or barridas from strange ladies  
Whispering prayers and whipping rough branches  
On all the corners of our feverish bodies.  
Teas from bitter herbs with bitter names  
Dark rooms we do not recall  
Was it susto from seeing the trenchcoat man who  
Slept in the Rotel warehouse  
That went bankrupt sometime in the 80's?

Black moths that bring death to yellow Chevy's?  
Or car wrecks on the Sunshine Strip?  
Endiabablas repeating mamadas  
That we thought satanic

What espíritu on the breeze impaired us  
Leaving us mute?

These barridas only frightened us further  
More so than before we watched the  
Spring break murders,  
Narcosatanico sacrifices on the tele  
Hoof and chicken claw  
Or the Llorona  
That we heard call us while on the gallinero  
Gloaming.

The only one we ever thought did any good  
Was the cold egg our gentle mother would pray over us with  
then break into a glass.  
Or the te de limon dad would make from lime leaves  
To take away our sore throat.

## **Infatuated with Infatuation**

What was it but a mirage  
that I could touch  
what phantom did i feel  
fingertips  
on my breasts  
breeze on a still night  
this memory. my dream.

2.

Apparition you have a name:  
Zen Koan de mi Corazon  
infatuation fears light  
fears right  
fears wisdom.

Lust is served  
warm a la mode.

Desire, you've become my home.

## **In Good Fun**

Cenzotles are lost on you.  
Body braile is the linguist's nightmare.  
Oil slicks and naked chics.  
Grackels deflate the pool with iridescent black beaks.  
You tweek.  
Laugh at excrement and scent.  
Struggle with discontent of summer.  
Winter is comfort in Lucifer's pie hole.

You don't appreciate truth.

Latinas wave hips, flags, glide in their glistening.  
If I were a chola, I wonder what kind would I be?

Would I be just like you?  
Would I write prose poems that aren't  
and poems that are prose?  
Did you choke on a plastic rose?  
Armageddon and all you  
can do is preach, preach, and preach,  
mispelling every other werd.

Turn off the live feed from that fool and hear the poetry that should be inside of you.  
If you are silent long enough, maybe, you can save yourself.

## **blame**

I would not want to say it all died.  
It still exists in a  
memory somewhere.  
What dies? Bodies.  
They can no  
longer function,  
hearts no longer  
pump blood through their  
ventricles and such.  
Kitties. They are dead.  
Dead, forever.  
Fur fades, bones decay,  
and that's all.  
Dogs. Snakes.

But, it feels like it all died anyway.  
When I say all, I mean the illusion of a family.  
The one I used to have  
That would laugh.  
It's not even a memory any longer.  
Not one I can remember out of my own pain.  
Sure. It's all my fault.  
It always is. It must be that way.

I will be the one who will take all the blame.  
Let me. So when I die. Blame will die with me.

## **Obsessed With Time Magazine**

(inspired by Ginsberg and based on Time Pics of the Week December 2009)

Vinyl masks on fire smell like revolution  
always keep an extra one in case of an effigy emergency

As a child, playing with military warfare flashcards  
proved to pass the time on a Saturday

Hope at Westpoint:  
We can ask and tell if we want to and no one will fire us

Boats on dry river beds don't mean anything to  
those who don't believe in global warming

No matter how you put it  
famine surpasses time

Blood pools on a cobblestone street  
Eid al-Adha marks the end of the Hajj

Carrying coal in Kabul  
a man does what he must to keep warm

Queens love nothing more than seeing women of the Commonwealth  
dress like golden bees when she is the flower

Horton heard who and it frightened him so

Collegers challenge Oppidians and no one wins  
Except for Hulkmania. You can't lose with Hulkmania

Bollywood theatres are as lush as their movies where a lone man  
in an empty theatre is addicted to the song and show, the glimmer and glamour

When soldiers cry a dove dies.

Prayers fill the Hirraa cave,  
prayers that can save the world

Laplanders always take cliché walks in snow covered evergreen forests  
at Christmas time with authentic huskies and real reindeer  
Obama walks the Great Wall of China oblivious to the wall being built  
here in our border. Border, shmorder

Remember that when a soldier dies,  
all soldiers cry

Flat screens with queens always look like the infinite mirror

Tear gas canisters look like whippits  
except this is no laughing matter

If a Mapuche Indian wants his land back, he must be reminded  
that lumber is more important than blood

But you can always make a trip to a Beaujolais Noveau spa  
for a break from all the madness

And circus bears on hockey skates take the edge off of Globalization

God damn communists. It's always the Russians, the Russians and will always be the Russians  
Except this time they're Maoists.

But a circus bear is a circus bear  
And Boujelais Noveau is only available during the holidays

## Míramé

Look me in the eye and tell me a lie.  
Look me in the eye and tell me you don't see  
eternity in me.  
Look me in the eye.

His ghost speaks to your son because you never learned how to pray.

You look at me that way and I see your insides are  
Grey. There is white noise in your heart.

The picture was cut in two, you were evicted.  
I excavate. I don't find you, not even your shadow remains  
In this sunny place where you don't recall your own face.

2.

You came to me in a vision  
looked me in the eye  
and saw how I  
could radiate  
Emanate.

Did I ever thank you?

## **Stealing from God in the Land of the Free**

(Poeta in DC)

When time warps  
turn to plagues for advice  
Often there is no answer.

Leprosy was good to him.  
Scarlet scabs and tulips  
sprouted from his hands.

The Potomac spoke that night  
to monuments and  
men arose from themselves

patina in the puddles  
disrobed they unraveled.

American ghosts and Gods  
played in penny copper fountains

While Lincoln laughed.



## **Voids**

Voids are not parades.

Yet they can not help but honk and  
The pomp is hard to leave at home.  
Alone. In darkness. You kidding me?  
All this nothing for no one to share with

Voids often cast a shadow at midnight

They do not like to be tickled  
Stay clear of them  
If they decide to rummage through chests filled  
With Happy Meal toys

They can be finicky when asked about  
What it is they want for dinner

Voids like hopscotch

Voids should stay away from fireworks  
Red prom gowns  
and dyed Satin pumps

Voids should never under any circumstance  
Decorate cakes, gather tokens  
Or see the light of electronic games and carousels

Voids should cut hearts out of old calendars  
with children at home when the weather looks grim and  
Swallow tears back as to avoid spilling glitter and gloom.

## **In Time**

(a romance)

The past made love to the present and the future was born.

They spent the night together in an apartment, bare floors cold and an old mattress however comfortable. The past sighed. The present stirred. It must have been an awkward few moments because they did not understand one another, they just knew there was a connection that could not be ignored.

They kissed, a long kiss that made the present ache. The past was so irresistible, so attractive, the present could not ignore him. There was a great, great air of relief because the past was only using the present to make himself feel real again.

They stayed friends after their romantic encounter but it would never be the same after that child was born out of wedlock.

They drifted apart only to have occasional moments of the je ne se quois that stirred in their bellies for an eternity.

## **Snooze Button Baby**

Didn't I tell you not to eat stars for breakfast?

Night sky in your coffee

Moon in your migas

Menudo is not your choice of breakfast stew

Spit out the fireflies to form Cassiopeia

Over your Cheerios

Ice crystals form a lunar ring around your aura

Morning and midnight are synonymous to you

What's wrong with you?

## Throw it Away

there goes my language.  
i cut out my tongue and eat a taco de lengua.  
chori queso.

there goes my mama. just sweep her under the carpet.  
who cares what she did to keep us alive. all the homes she cleaned.  
all the children she raised. all the work. i don't care. keep here there.

there, my ego, so you can eat.  
america home of the free. here take my identity.  
it's free. i scored two points away from being someone.

i don't care. what does it all matter anyway. we are all going to die, right?

ya, sure you can have my dad. his memory is all I have anyway.  
take them all. take the donuts and gorditas on a Saturday,  
the popcorn for seagulls at the reservoir.  
ya, here are his dog tags.

my brother and sister and their children?  
i don't need them. they all hate  
me anyway. insult me

my heart. no. that's not mine.  
it belongs to my children. i awake and they  
are sleeping next to me in our little nest.

my little birds. i snuggle them at night.  
when the world is quiet and no one can take anything away from me.

take what you want from me and throw it away.

just leave my heart.

you will take nothing.

## Release

I have been living in the shadows of bouffants.  
I don't have a beat, I just like the beats.  
I don't need wings. I don't need those extraneous things.  
I don't bring props. I don't throw props. I don't want props  
My theatre is on the page. It lives in the silence of my thoughts.

There it breathes. My thoughts are kinda shy and it's ok.  
I am after all kinda shy.

Unless  
I am drunk.

Reflection is necessary.  
I don't want to open my mouth anymore  
because I don't want what I really feel to fall out.  
I gather up all my pieces that I dipped in the vinegar of regret.

Here in the sacred, private space of my thoughts, I have diverted your attention to the following

- a.) My princess
- b.) Degas
- c.) A humpback whale
- d.) The hole in your soul
- e.) Something
- f.) Nothing

I wish to declare nothing. I don't want anything.  
Please tip your waiters.

The beer is at the end of my rainbow today and always.

## **Bar Poems**

(reflections on cocktail napkin)

Excuses are not meant to be kept like promises.

Harbor resentment and harvest regret.

Would it have been well spent?

If my memories acculturate-  
language is lost.

If the living beat is up, down,  
what happens to periphery?

2.

Measure heartbeat like moon dew  
and what if the sun rises to oblivion?  
Joan Didion?

If the cancer persists, what to resist?  
Life should end in an exclamation point  
and what of the semi-colon?

Epitaphs poorly written without punctuation.

Tell them I said hello.

## **Soy the Many**

soy bisexual,bilingual  
soy la que le gusta andar en la calle  
soy la que tiene ganas de parandear toda la noche  
soy 2 kids, 1 step-son, two cats, one big ass house I don't feel like cleaning  
soy trying to get away from my past  
soy la depremida  
soy the janitor who whistles while she buffs the floor

soy muy chingona  
soy afraid of my demons  
soy i don't want to remember being raped  
soy i can't forget i was raped  
soy la quien tiene gallinero en el barrio  
soy Gringolandia  
soy denying my heritage  
soy I moved away but had to come back  
soy I wish I could leave  
soy sometimes i wish i could change the world  
soy idealist pero not radical  
soy codependent  
soy pill popper  
soy please don't feed the animals  
soy self loathing  
soy the Outcry in the Barrio crucifix whistle buyer  
soy I shop at Wal-mart even if I feel guilty  
soy are you a US citizen  
soy my father died from Cancer and I blame the US government  
soy acculturated, assimilated, rebeled, revolted, and is now a moderate  
soy fuck the word Hispanic  
soy I hate labels  
soy no quiero taco bell  
soy liberada  
soy hazardous to your health  
soy I don't care if Ricky Martin came out I still want to sleep with him  
soy i can't shake the sadness some days  
soy i wish i were dead  
soy i want to live forever  
soy eternal  
soy non-existence  
soy

## **You Better Watch Out when the Elsa Comes Out!**

Te hecho unas fajazos  
unos chingazos  
unos chanclazos  
unos toronjazos  
unos Croc-azos!  
Don't mess me with on that day when  
all of sudden  
bam!!!!  
unos tomatazos  
porque  
sometimes  
i get cansada con todo el pedo  
todo ese mugrero  
todo el pinche wato  
encabronada se me sale  
Elsa  
el valle rasquache  
runs through me  
raspas color de sangre  
pickle bits up on all your shit i spit my nonsense  
in your face cuz i am pissed  
tired of all the denial that comes  
from  
unnamed losers  
unnamed spoiled brats  
unnamed sofoques  
que se creen la mierdra grande  
que se olvidan de su hometown  
disgusted with their past  
afraid of who they were  
once  
once  
once upon a time when it was okay  
to be a chola but they  
are too good now with their  
fancy enredos  
their special pedo  
que a mi me vale  
me vale me vale  
i am from the valle  
and i am not ashamed  
y que  
yo soy de elsa



y esa whom will remain  
who will remain  
who will remain unnamed can  
kiss my nalgas

**Cross Roads** (in four parts)

1.

Out the window  
I've thrown a lemon  
into the grapefruit grove  
at the Y on highway 107

Here I have left envidia  
que la gente me tiene  
porque asi son  
envidiosos

out the window

all the negative energy  
everyone who has cursed me  
everyone que se ponen celosos  
porque soy muy chingona  
ah! no te crees

Aqui at the crossroads  
Me persino

En el nombre de  
poesia  
antepasados  
y el futuro

when standing at the crossroads  
¡cuidado!  
Porque dicen que aqui se aparece la Llorona  
I've heard stories about spirits who can't find rest  
Don't know which way to go, which direction.

2.

La Frontera is my crossroads.  
Which direction should I face?  
I invoke all directions—

To the east —I invoke Yemayá!

To the West—The peregrine falcon, a cara cara

To the North—an evergreen wind

To the South,  
To the South  
To the South—

I invoke the struggle  
I invoke hunger pains  
I invoke resistance  
I invoke amnesia  
I invoke the ancestors  
I invoke a Saturday listening to Esterio Mar, Rocio Durcal  
I invoke Amalia Mendoza's tear stained voice  
I invoke Coatlique  
I invoke the zopilote  
I invoke confession  
I invoke nightmares rooted in ventricles  
I invoke fault lines, we balance and tether  
I invoke my shed skin, I sew together prosthetic poetics  
I invoke the indigenous woman to lick my wounds  
and patch me up to break again  
I invoke La Virgen  
I invoke cocaine to numb the awareness of violence and severed heads  
I invoke street vendors drunkenly speaking Nahuatl, crying conquest tears  
I invoke el vientre inconsolable  
I invoke squatting and peeing in seatless toilets at bars where locals laugh  
I invoke dulce de calabaza, soda de tamarindo  
I invoke a dusty Saturday and milanesa con aguacate with a side of Los Cadetes de Linares  
I invoke caguamas de Canta Blanca and trannies dancing tropical

I invoke.

3.  
She burns sage,  
my hair soaks the smoke.  
On my hands  
I've smudge an x of ash.

Diosa Gloria,

I spread out my arms  
My legs.

My body is a crossroads.

I've survived  
I've survived

Congratulations to me!

I thrive.

4.

The wall has not split me into.  
I am all directions.

My words, my imagination, my song, my love....  
Has no boundaries.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Erika Marie Garza Johnson is a poet who grew up in the small town of Elsa, Texas population 6,700 and now resides in McAllen with her husband, two kids, step-son, two cats and a puppy who adopted her. She has been writing poems since she was in Jr High but wrote her very first poem when she was 7. Growing up she always knew she wanted to be a poet. Starting in the 90's, Erika published her poems in the high school newspaper and in South Texas Entertainment Magazine. Her work was also featured in the *Mesquite Review* in the years 97 and later in 2003. Her work was selected and won awards in the Gallery Magazine at UTPA from 98-02. Since then she has published in *Bordersenses*, *LUNG* magazine, The Texas Observer and was selected to be in online Floricanto on La Bloga. She has hosted and organized several readings at different venues and has attended a few dozen readings here in the RGV. She boasts reading before featured poets such as Michelle Otero, alurista, Lucha Corpi, and Minerva Margarita-Villareal. She has also read at several venues in San Antonio. Erika will keep writing and will work on her book in 2011.