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TO LOVE THE BIRDS AND THE PLACES THEY'VE MADE THEIR HOME:
POEMS FROM THE MAGIC VALLEY

A Thesis

by

ALYSSA B. GARZA

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

December 2019

Major Subject: Creative Writing

TO LOVE THE BIRDS AND THE PLACES THEY'VE MADE THEIR HOME:

POEMS FROM THE MAGIC VALLEY

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December 2019

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ABSTRACT

Garza, Alyssa B., To Love the Birds and the Places They've Made Their Home: Poems from the Magic Valley. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), December, 2019, 91 pp., 34 references.

The theme of the collection could be summed up in these lines written by Caryl Chessman in *The Reed of God*, “body and soul together give glory to God: the sharper the capacity for sorrow and joy, the greater the hallowing...Christ laid hold of the world with His human hands...He wed Himself to it. Our life is the response of the bride” (66-67). Our loving connection to every human person is our loving connection to Christ—charity is our bride-ness. The poems follow one bride through her journey, with the author’s environment (the Rio Grande Valley) coloring the verses, as one is not saved in isolation but rather in communion with all of creation which “waiteth for the revelation of the sons of God” (Douay-Rheims Bible. Rom. 8.19). God created the world and said “it is good.” The author looks out and says, “yes. I think so too.

DEDICATION

To my Beloved.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank God, the Holy and Blessed Trinity, the Father of all Mercy, the Lamb slain for love, and Divine Love, the Spirit, the gentle breeze, the flame. To Mary—la Virgen de Guadalupe, the Mother of Sorrows, Our Lady of the Underground, the Softener of Evil Hearts, Mother of the Firstborn of the Dead, the Mystical Rose, the Star of the Sea, the Mirror of Justice, the Ark of the Covenant, the Refuge of Sinners, the Queen of Angels—all the Saints, and my guardian angel, thank you for your love and guidance.

To my mother, Miriam—thank you for—what could I say? the word “everything” would not begin to suffice. You are always there, brushing the hair from my face. To my father, Vidal—I love you so very, very much. Thank you for all you have done for me. To all my family and friends—thank you for the forgiveness, encouragement, joy, inspiration, shoulders for crying, shoulders for rest. To my all my teachers, from kindergarten to university, especially my chair Dr. Rodríguez, and other committee members Emmy Pérez and Dr. Christopher Carmona—thank you for making the suffering that is learning interesting and lovely. More than anything, for your kindness towards me. My gratitude and love goes to my godmother Bertha Campos for help with my Spanish poetry. To all my Valley people—for all the lessons, beauty, mercy, light, hope, passion, strength, and love, I thank you.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

The theme of the collection could be summed up in these lines written by Caryll Houselander in *The Reed of God*, “body and soul together give glory to God: the sharper the capacity for sorrow and joy, the greater the hallowing...Christ laid hold of the world with His human hands...He wed Himself to it. Our life is the response of the bride” (66-67). Our loving connection to every human person is our loving connection to Christ—charity is our bride-ness. The poems follow one bride through her journey, with the author’s environment (the Rio Grande Valley) coloring the verses, as one is not saved in isolation but rather in communion with all of creation which “waiteth for the revelation of the sons of God” (Douay-Rheims Bible. Rom. 8.19). God created the world and said “it is good.” The author looks out and says, “yes. I think so too.

i. Folk Catholicism in el Valle

The Valley is a unique place—culturally between two vastly different cultures—American and Mexican. Neither completely one nor the other, but carrying fragments of both, embracing all the juxtapositions, contradictions, and idiosyncrasies that arise. And so local Catholics’s expression of the Faith also blends in all the layers and aspects of border life between the U.S. and México. Priests here, even at an “English Mass” constantly code-switch. At various parishes, people leave ofrendas—candy and toys for the Divino Niño, different colored strands of ribbons for Saint Charbel Maklouf for different petitions, locks of hair for St Jude Thaddeus.

Pilgrims crawl on their knees to la Virgen de San Juan del Valle. When a loved one dies in a car crash, a permanent shrine is made at the scene—typically a cross, artificial flowers, candles, rosaries, and solar lights. Mexican-American culture is not the only ethnic group to have seemingly superstitious practices incorporated into their expression of Catholicism, and neither is it only Latino cultures that have these types of practices; neither are these and other such strange practices newly manufactured in order to ease the conversion of indigenous peoples in the Americas (e.g. Saint Vincent of Saragossa, who lay dying in 304 AD after being tortured by Dacian the Roman governor, was surrounded by the faithful who kissed and licked him as he took his final breaths, as linens were being dipped into his blood for relics which would provide protection from evil and harm) (Classen 13). Still, the particular histories, environment, pre-Christian beliefs of México, Texas's wild and rugged Western culture, and America's puritanical roots all combine to form an expression of the Catholic Faith that is unique to Mexican-American Catholics in the Valley. It is true that non-Catholic Americans and even American Catholics often see the folk Catholicism of Mexican-Americans and cry "idolatry!" or "paganism!" And while these do remain very real issues in our community (e.g. the cult of the Santa Muerte which is not a real Saint as it was never a human person but is actually a demon) often these accusations stem from a misunderstanding of Jesus's call to "go and baptize all the nations." For culture is the "soul" of a nation—a nation is unified and has its identity in its culture. Culture being the visible, physical, and/or audible expressions of the invisible, metaphysical, and inaudible realities of God's children, can thus be baptized. God, as Saint Thomas Aquinas says, draws all beings to himself, since he is Being itself (452)—and so even in the pagan religions can glimmers of God be found to varying degrees, as from conception the human person—all human persons—begin to feel a distance and longing for their Creator. Jesus

does not call for the annihilation of nations but for their baptism—vermin and viruses are annihilated, human souls are baptized, cherished, protected.

In all this conflict and misunderstanding the Faith lives on in God's children. God's people living in the Valley endure. For Valley Catholics, God is not relegated to one aspect of our lives. Catholicism is very much a part of the culture, such that even non-Catholics living in the area know of and even sometimes own images of the Virgen de Guadalupe—on a t-shirt, wallet, in a tattoo. Non-practicing Catholics still go to Mass on major holidays, have the Last Supper somewhere in their house, and/or wear the Miraculous Medal their grandma gave them one Christmas. Roscas de Reyes are torn apart and eaten every January 6th for el Día de los Reyes, with all participants searching for Jesus. Quinceañeras are major celebrations for many young girls coming of age, Mass usually considered a necessary component. Visitors of all faiths flock to the basilica with empty milk jugs and Simply Lemonade bottles to fill these up with holy water. Baptisms of babies are celebrated with comidas and rented moon bounces and mariachis. Here, the Faith is celebrated and found in unexpected places (how many times I have gone to a tire shop or a taquería only to find myself face to face with the Sagrado Corazón or San Martín). “He hath not done in like manner to every nation” (Ps. 147.20)—this scripture often quoted when talking about México and its people, explicitly in connection to the Virgen de Guadalupe's unique love of us. So too, is our response to this love unique.

ii. Atonement of Poetry

In the early Church there was a heretical group called the Gnostics, who by their doctrine of corporeal-disownment expressed a belief that the soul was trapped inside the crude, ugly carcass that is the human body and that once dead the soul would be free to forever be a pure spirit as was originally intended by God. Saint Thomas Aquinas, addressing the heresy of

gnosticism wrote, “the soul united to the body is more like God because it possesses its own nature more perfectly” (qtd, in Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, 92). The poems in this collection join Thomas and other voices in the Catholic Faith in protest against gnosticism, as well as its inverse, materialism (the belief that there is only the material, or what is seen, and so the soul does not exist) by showing gratitude for the senses and the sensual world as well as celebrating human beings to be neither souls trapped in bodies, nor bodies lacking souls, but rather every person a soul and a body together forming one nature, though wounded by sin. To do so is no less than to follow in Christ’s footsteps, to be his disciple.

“Christ looked at everyone he met, at the prostitute, at the thief, and saw the beauty hidden there. Perhaps it was distorted, perhaps damaged, but it was beauty none the less, and what he did was to call out this beauty” (Anthony Bloom qtd. in Manney, *An Ignatian Book of Days*, 94). “Go,” Christ says to the paralytic, the blind, the leper, the accused and scorned sinful woman surrounded by men with stones. “Your faith has saved you.” As the Catechism of the Catholic Church defines it, “Faith is first of all a personal adherence of man to God” (CCC 150). First and foremost, it is the human person’s connection to God, her relatedness to him that saves her. It is by her humanness, by the simple fact of being born a child of God that opens to the human person the world of Creator-creation intimacy, of loving dependence upon the bridegroom, of responding to God with faith which “is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not” (Heb. 11.1). It is the human person who is able to meditate and wonder about the metaphysical world and the world to come. The realm of love, hope, wonder, and faith belongs solely to humanity. This unique beauty belongs only to us, but to each of us, no matter how we have wounded ourselves by our sins, or how much others have wounded us by their sins. Regardless of all, we are beautiful because we are human.

Inspired and driven by her Catholic Faith, the writer set out to discover the beauty in everyone and everything in her beloved homeland. Referring back to Thomas Aquinas, he states in his “Commentary on First Corinthians,” “...divine wisdom, when making the world, left indications of itself in the things of the world...” (qtd. in Venard, *A Poetic Christ*, 376). There is not a human being too low for the eye of the collection to stop and gaze upon. Indeed, all human beings, being created in the image and likeness of God, have equal dignity bestowed on them not by the government, 1,000 followers on Instagram, or winning the lottery; neither by being a celebrity, an elected official, a tax-payer, sober, intelligent, or a church-goer; but by God from the moment of conception and which no sin nor creature could take away. From dead migrants (who were mocked on social media by border patrol agents) to San Jose Sanchez del Río, a small 14-year-old Mexican Martyr killed by his own government, all are cherished in these poems.

Why would poetry be a method of speaking out against heresies? While there of course exists other forms of communication each with their own advantages, it has been argued by some Catholic theologians, most notably Josef Pieper, that poetry is in itself necessarily theological, being a creative act of wonder beyond the bounds of economic utility and the everyday workaday world and therefore into the realm of the cosmos, the heavens, God. Pieper, writing about the nature of true philosophy in *Leisure: The Basis of Culture* says, “we [philosophers] can only be theoretical in the full sense of the word...so long as the world is something other (and something more) than a field for human activity...We can only be ‘theoretical’ in the full sense of the word if we are able to look upon the world as the creation of an absolute spirit, as something that deserves reverence” (80-81). If the world was anything less than a gift created for humanity by a spiritual uncreated God, any wonder would not be pure. This type of philosophy, influenced by the ideological assumption of creation being purely material (or if the spiritual

does exist, it is of little to no consequence), produced through a series of random events, and scientifically knowable, would necessarily have a means to an end. Philosophers would not attempt to reach out to the beyond, to the heavens, to ponder the essence of things for the sheer enjoyment of wondering, as it would already be supposed that there was nothing behind the veil, nothing spiritual, nothing that could not be understood by scientific formulae and mathematical equations. But how does this apply to poetry? Pieper states, “The reason, however, why the philosopher may be likened to the poet is this: both are concerned with the marvelous” (69). This is precisely the aim of the poetry here—to marvel at God’s creation—at his children, the trees, the birds, everything seen and experienced in the Valley, including marveling at God’s hand upon the speaker herself.

Naturally, as the collection progresses, the person of the speaker draws closer and closer to God, moving to “Heaven/Beneath the Palms” then finally to “Death/Down the Sunshine Strip” where she explores her personal, intimate relationship with God. To wonder, to marvel, to be a poet is no less than to be living with one’s arms grasping out for the cosmos, for God. Poetry is prayer. Saint John Paul II (who, besides being a canonized Saint, the Pope, an expert skier, a survivor of two assassination attempts, was also a poet) writes in his poem “The Stream” about wonder—describing Adam as wonder embodied, alive, “he was alone in his wonder / among creatures incapable of wonder— / for them it is enough to exist and go their way.” The Saint continues, “but being amazed, he always emerged / from the tide that carried him, / as if saying to everything around him: / ...“stop, this passing has meaning... / has meaning... has meaning”” (*The Roman Triptych: Meditations*). Poets have the unique capacity, “occupation” of being human—body and soul together, fully alive. “The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens” says G.K. Chesterton in *Orthodoxy* (29). Heads reaching for the heavens, those who

occupy their brief time on earth with writing poetry are those who connect us to the Divine; they are our bridges, our Adams, our Christs. Atonement—“at-one-ment” to be united with God—face to face, heart to heart. Poetry, poets, do this for us, for humanity. In marveling at the connection between the mortal and the Divine, as well as the bodily and the spiritual, we are brought out of ourselves towards our whole-connected-ness.

But what if the poet’s hand should not be open and grasping for God, but rather a fist shaking in the air? For this we again turn to Saint John Paul II. Writing in his “Letter to Artists” he says, “even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption.” The Bible is filled with the shaking fists of God’s children. And it was the Son of God himself, who, from the cross, cried out to the Father in anguish, “my God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt. 27.46). In his last moments Christ uses poetry, a line from Psalm 21 (Ps. 21.2), to express himself to his Father before all of humanity. This is not something to be dismissed.

iii. The Word Became Flesh and Dwelt Among Us in Homelessness

What Catholicism teaches is that human life is about seeking God out of love and gratitude, to go where he has gone—a belief poetically condensed in the *Song of Songs*. In this Old Testament book, the betrothed laments that she sought her beloved from her bed, but found him not. It is only after searching and searching for him that they are united. To leave your bed—to break out of the shell of the comfortable life being lived half-heartedly; to cease anesthetizing the pain within yourself and treat it by administering to the pain of others. For in doing so, one will not only be obedient to Christ, neither merely imitating him, but meeting and loving Christ in every person. This is the spiritual life lived well. As Father Herbert McCabe writes in *God Still Matters*, “[Jesus] is God become a part of our human history, become human, become the

first really thoroughly human part of our history—and therefore, of course, the one hated, despised and destroyed by the rest of us, who wouldn't mind being divine but are very frightened of being human" (104). That "the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us" would scandalize humanity and disrupt our complacency if it would be meditated upon more. Jesus took on human flesh and all the toil, pain, and suffering that comes with it. He didn't waver, coming instead as God in awesome, terrible glory; neither did he come half-heartedly, being born of a rich, established woman to a life of ease and abundance. He was born to a Jewish teenage girl in the Middle East and spent the first several weeks after this birth on the run from the law, at once the King of the Universe and a political refugee.

There is in us an eagerness for perfection, without an appreciation for what Perfection became for the entire human race—mortal, weak. There is this pervading sense that the Divine can only be reached in a state of bliss, cleanliness, isolation, and numbness to the surrounding world. It is a lowly human thing to run around, worrying and spending yourself for others. It is an exalted and praiseworthy thing to stay above the masses, to be able to obtain whatever you desire, to have others under your power, to reach "your full potential" "seize your moment" "maximize profits" and not get weighed down by the worries and struggles that come with poverty or spending yourself in the caring of others. As Joel Osteen, a famous televangelist stated in a sermon entitled "Have an Abundant Mentality," "when you're poor, broke, and defeated, all that proves is that you're poor, broke, and defeated. It doesn't bring any honor to God." For those souls living in poverty—those who are poor, broke, and defeated with no real means of lifting themselves out into Silicon Valley or Wall Street; those who, due to our own culture of consumption will likely never know material wealth—do they truly not give any honor to God? At what economic status does God's glory enter into the human soul? Must a person be

upper-middle class? Have a gym membership? Their own washer and dryer, or better yet, a maid? A robust 401K? Does the maid who spends so much of her time on her hands and knees going about the home of the God-glorifying rich man—does some of that glory rub off on her? Is that glory given in the paycheck she gets working, “15-hour shifts, six days a week, for wages amounting to \$2 an hour”? (Carvajal). When proof of love between God and man is explained to be in the pudding of material abundance, what else can be concluded but that the poor are hated by God?

Isaiah, prophesying about the Messiah said, “surely he hath borne our infirmities and carried our sorrows: and we have thought him as it were a leper, and as one struck by God and afflicted...he was bruised for our sins: the chastisement of our peace was upon him...” (Is. 54:4,5). Who are we, self-professed believers of the God Who became Flesh and willed to be born to a life of poverty, ridicule, and homelessness, to say that the glory of God and God himself is not super-abundantly found in those whose very looks, thoughts, fears, joys, and sufferings he chose for himself while he walked the earth? The poor, bruised for our sins of selfishness and apathy, suffering the chastisement of our false peace borne of complacency and capitalism are our images of the Christ—are the Word Made Flesh dwelling among us. We put up spikes to deter them from resting in public places; we put up barriers on our international bridges to prevent them from asking for asylum; we stare straight ahead at the red stoplight as they stand outside in the cold and heat with shopping carts, cardboard signs, and empty cups.

“For I know the thoughts that I think towards you,” said God to the prophet Jeremiah, “thoughts of peace, and not of affliction, to give you an end and patience... You shall seek me, and shall find me: when you shall seek me with all your heart” (Jer. 29.11, 13). If one does not lose oneself in and for love, the Christian life is still yet waiting, still yet pushed aside, still in

limbo. Christ remains, carrying his cross towards Golgotha, waiting for his Veronica to come and wipe the sweat and blood from his face. The soldiers stand impatiently before the stupefied Simon, twiddling their thumbs while he makes a cost-benefit analysis about helping Jesus, who has continuously fallen, and will continue to fall, lest Simon help.

Poverty is not something that can be easily done away with like a cold. And, the catch is, in order to combat poverty in any meaningful, effective way, those who have must give what they own, must deny themselves pleasure, comfort, ease. Must love the poor as their equal, as people worthy of dignity and compassion, and therefore the rich must suffer (at least material loss, as well loss of time, individualistic desires, comfy ideologies). Along the border, especially, there exists a unique and dire need for Valley residents (who are majority Mexican-American) to see Jesus in the faces of the immigrant strangers who look nothing like strangers. As the bishop of the diocese of Brownsville, Most Rev. Daniel Flores explains, “[E]l inmigrante, representante de una realidad humana de sufrimiento y rechazo que muchos en el mundo no quieren reconocer...nos ofrece una gracia, una oportunidad, quizás la última, de responder con gracia y superar la indiferencia que nos está matando” (Meditaciones sobre la evangelización). Each immigrant is the Christ in the most profound way, for their lives most closely mirror Christ’s very own, in ways many first-world Christians will never experience or even understand. Our salvation lies in embracing our own humanity by caring for those who are the most vulnerable and therefore the most human. It also lies in caring for ourselves enough to take on this work which, stripped of all naïveté, is tiring, difficult, and even painful yet necessary and good—God-like.

The rich and the middle-class can be Christs to others. For there is Christ at our doorstep, knocking and pleading for love, and there is Christ in our souls, desiring to go out to the unloved,

sick, and suffering. In every human to human relationship there is Christ within each soul, on both sides of the door—asking and pleading, asking and sighing, the wealth to give and the poverty to need. Indifference towards human suffering is indifference towards the Incarnation of God. Christ wrapped in burial bands at the nativity, Christ willingly nailed to the cross, Christ descending into hell after death—these are signs of God’s continuous refrain, “it is good.” “It” being life. “It” being love. “It” being humanity. It is good to go down, to feel, to suffer out of love and give your life for others. This is how God is known—in Christ meeting Christ from person to person, like lightning bolts in the dark. To open oneself to Christ who wishes to work inside of you for your good and the good of the other, this is call of the bride. To be the receptive, apocalyptic cloud, electrified and drowned and roaring with light. A useful meditation—the Second Joyful Mystery of the Rosary, the Visitation.

iv. Communion

Several distinct voices influenced the writing. Much must be attributed to the family and to the well-loved dichos, prayers, and cuentos repeated at the kitchen table, at comidas, or during tropical storms and hurricanes when the power goes out and the only thing to do is reminisce and watch the rain beat the house. Poets that wrote about God or whose writings were influenced by their faith were also integral to the collection. Abba Kovner, the Israeli Jewish poet who wrote in his collection *My Little Sister and Selected Poems* about the horror of the Holocaust, the struggle of the Jewish people, and their grappling with the existence of a benevolent, all-powerful God, influenced much of the poetry in the first section of this collection. A major influence would be Anna Akhmatova, who wrote poetry about her experiences as a Russian woman—as a woman who loved, who hurt others, who suffered, who sinned and repented, sinned and repented, and felt the terrible cruelty of man via lovers and most notably the Soviet Regime, ever (re-)placing

her hope in God. Called the “half nun, half whore, or rather both nun and whore with her petty, narrow private life, her trivial experiences...” by one of Stalin’s men, (Ascherson) Akhmatova’s style of confessional and prophetic poetry was taken up and admired from the first moment I read her work. That a woman could write from her experiences as a sinner and as a woman of faith, as someone who is brutally honest about her struggles with herself, her relationships, with suffering, the government, humanity, and God in a meaningful way without trying to hide the contradictions of her heart is something that’s aimed for in my own writing. Two other influences, especially on the Spanish poems in the collection would be Francisco Matos Paoli and Claribel Alegría. Paoli with his strange imagery and bizarre metaphors and love for the Virgen María, Alegría with her brevity and motif of a woman’s journey of the self through the symbol of the butterfly influenced much of the imagery, structure, and tone of the second and third sections of the collection. If it wasn’t for Alegría’s work, *Umbrales*, the final poem “field notes” would not exist. Other influences I place myself in communion with have been previously mentioned, such as Saint Thomas Aquinas and the *Song of Songs*, or will be touched upon in the following section.

v. The Poems Themselves

A theme expressed in the collection is suffering as inescapable in a world broken by sin—a world often ruled and corrupted by evil men in power and the complacency of good people. This suffering can be monotonous, back-breaking, cruel, meaningless, lethal, or it can be heroically taken up for the greater common good (especially for the poor who are so continuously overwhelmed with suffering to the point of despair, making the hope of the Gospel seem like nothing more than a ruse, cruel joke, or fairy tale) and thereby transforming suffering into a tool, a weapon, a source of life—not only for oneself, but for those surrounding, and

indeed all of the human race, all God's children. This can make life, however painful (even unto being full of pain), beautiful. The speaker, out of love for God and his creation, cries out in the midst of the crowd and with the crowd for unity, justice, and peace. Saint John Paul II, in an address at the Basilica of Saint Francis in 1986 stated, "there is no peace without a passionate love for peace...Peace awaits its prophets...Peace is a universal responsibility: it comes about through a thousand little acts in daily life." Some of these thousand little acts mentioned by the speaker in this collection—cooking a meal for the family, painting, praying for the dead, singing Selena songs, passing on family heirlooms, caring for the immigrant, asking the saints for their intercession, kissing relics, going on a pilgrimage, making a cup of tea, getting out of bed in the morning, treating scoliosis, bird watching.

The poetry presented in *To Love the Birds and the Places They've Made Their Home: Poems from the Magic Valley* is a collection which shows the speaker's journey of gratitude, of discovering beauty in the local—in her family, in the flora and fauna, in herself. This journey of humility, of getting down on hands and knees and admiring the creatures crawling in the blades, for the speaker, naturally arises to looking up and up, to the heavens, to the saints, to God. As Saint Thomas Aquinas puts it in his *Summa Theologica*, "God draws all things to Himself, in so far as He is the source of being, since all things, in as much as they are, tend to be like God, Who is Being itself" (452). As the speaker learns to appreciate the beauty of the local, not only is she "becoming" more herself, but the wonders of the world open, call to her. Not that the everyday beauty of Valley—homemade flour tortillas, charro beans, running through the sprinklers, is negated—but rather that their signs of beauty give the speaker desire for more. The speaker realizes that God can be known at the kitchen table with family, listening to a tree full of parrots in the evening, and, out of fervent appreciation—rushes headfirst towards the Source, who, she

discovers, was desiring her since before the beginning, calling to her in little whispers, in the songs of birds.

But this journey isn't, as lovely as it seems, a walk in the park. Examination of the local not only reveals its beauty but its wounds. Especially in the Valley, living along the U.S.-Mexico border at such a turbulent sociopolitical time, seeing the complications of reality—the poverty and richness of the Valley, the vitriolic speech of those in power towards those who have very little if any at all, the hypocrisy, the nationalism, racism, xenophobia, selfishness, injustice, the spiritual violence of words and the physical violence they incite. The writer doesn't take the usual, perhaps more cathartic avenue of rant in poetic form, but rather calls attention to the wounds we've made, the hunger we've created, allowed, ignored. In the most explicitly political poem, "On the President's Visit, January 10th, 2019," the speaker mentions the purpose of the visit in the first stanza "discussing all the violence—how to keep it / out of this side of the river / by building a wall" (34). Then she goes on to describe how she spent the day (painting), and narrows-in on the ox-hair brush she held in her hand, saying oxen are learning, like people, how to be selfless, how to be open to and encourage life, art—the peacefulness of vast fields of flowers and cattle, a nearby church. This was written, it should be known, at the time when the government was trying to acquire the land on which the historic La Lomita stands for the purpose of building part of the border wall there—effectively severing the little church from the people who care for, love, and visit her. That the government should have no regard for God and his people is nothing new to us, especially the poor Latino community. Poor Latinos have had to learn, pitifully yet remarkably, how to sing our songs in a foreign land—sin arpas, using veins as strings. This poem and the other political poems in this collection read not as anarchist manifestos to dismantle the government and refrains from making any explicit call to action such

as impeachment, protesting, or even voting. Rather, there is an expressed desire for those in power to be merciful, and for all to learn to be more selfless. For the speaker, it is not about the powerful versus the weak but rather both powerful and weak working together for common good of the community.

When first starting the process of writing this collection of poems, a political thread was not intended to be woven in. In fact, there was an explicit desire and effort to avoid all current-day politics. Yet it was discovered and accepted that one could not write about the people and their faith without writing about their pain and suffering, for faith is the light in the dark, what is clung-to and cherished in hard times when it seems there is nothing else to hold onto (and is often neglected in times—or lives—of ease and abundance). And one cannot write of the people's pain and suffering without writing about the government. It has been argued that all poetry is political. There is a hesitancy to concede to this statement as it seems incongruous to the aforementioned definitions of poetry as philosophical, as prayer, as wonder. To say poetry is not at the heart wonder-based but political turns poetry into a means to an end—arranged words concerning the distribution of power (and not the Essence of things) with the conscious or unconscious desire to effect change in the world (of the poet or the reader). To say that it is not the desire of the writer to effect change with the poetry in this collection would be untrue. Yet, this is not the ultimate, final desire, which is to show wonder at and love for the Creator. This love naturally spurns one to give that love to all—and it is love that serves, it is love that cries out against oppression, it is love that moves the peacemaker to tear down the temples of greed, selfishness, and apathy; that moves her to try to shake herself and the world from complacency, that brings her voice into the realm of politics.

The collection as a whole is feminist, though not in the modern, typical sense; it is colored by Catholicism (most explicitly in the two poems written about the Virgen de Guadalupe)—love for tradition and the family. The poems celebrate women as feminine beings, and femininity not as a hindrance or something that should render women less than men, but rather something that allows for women to have a unique intimacy with God. In the poem, “The First Woman/Felix Culpa” Eve becomes the speaker, addressing her husband, Adam, looking back at their time in the garden of Eden, wondering why humanity blames her. “You mouthed God’s mouth / to me...” Eve continues, “was I tone-deaf or hard of hearing? / The children I birthed from our primrose love all blame me” (48). This poem was inspired after attending a Bible study class given by a deacon who explained that Adam, being the husband and the one God directly gave the commandments to, was supposed to teach and protect Eve, and failed to do so. It is as well inspired by the “Praeconium Paschale” the Easter Proclamation chanted during the three- hour long Easter Vigil, which calls everyone to invoke the blessing of God and outlines the mysticism of the Old and New Covenants and the parallels between them—“O certe necessarium Adæ peccatum, / quod Christi morte delétum est! / O felix culpa, / quæ talem ac tantum méruit habére Redemptórem!” (O truly necessary sin of Adam, / destroyed completely by the Death of Christ! / O happy fault / that earned for us so great, so glorious a Redeemer!) (preces-latinae.org). Felix culpa—the concept that “God allows evils to happen in order to bring a greater good therefrom” (Aquinas, III, 1, 3, ad 3). And so our weaknesses are something, as Saint Paul says, to boast about. Not boasting in the fact that we have injured ourselves, but with the faith that God has, is, and will take that brokenness and bring out goodness from it. This is not to be confused with that tiresome, well-intentioned cliché, “everything happens for a reason.” Everything does happen for a reason—more often than not the terrible occurrences in this world

happen because people can be selfish and cruel and simply accident-prone. There is God's active will and God's permissive will. God never intended for his children to become broken, get sick, die. Adam and Eve were always meant to love God and enjoy the love of God in the garden. That God knew of their hubris beforehand only "changed his plan" in that he willed the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of his Only Begotten Son for their sake and the sake of their children. The Second Adam came into humanity by the fault of the First. "But the foolish things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the wise;" exclaims Paul in the *First Letter to the Corinthians*, "and the weak things of the world hath God chosen, that he may confound the strong" (1 Cor. 1.27). Those hearts that seem to us to be damned, forsaken, ruined, are perhaps God's greatest playgrounds. God delights in being within those the world scorns, to bring the world to its knees in awe at the humility, wisdom, and paradoxical nature of Love.

In the Spanish language poem, "La Santa Teresa de Bernini habla" the figure from Gian Lorenzo Bernini's sculpture "Ecstasy of of Saint Teresa" speaks, claiming that God is within her, reliving His Passion through her body. "Me retiro, regreso, siento el infinito / abrazo del cielo y de la tierra, y hombres / miran y pasan juicio con los ojos elevados" (60). The woman in ecstasy—vulnerable, misunderstood, put on display, reveals that much of woman's experience can be seen in Jesus's harrowing selfless journey to Golgotha. St. Thérèse of Lisieux (another Catholic woman who, like St. Teresa de Ávila, is a discalced Carmelite nun, mystic, and Doctor of the Church) writing in her autobiography *The Story of a Soul* explains this viewpoint in her own words:

Ah! Poor women, how they are misunderstood! And yet they love God in much larger numbers than men do and during the Passion of Our Lord, women had more courage than the apostles since they braved the insults of the soldiers and

dared to dry the adorable Face of Jesus. It is undoubtedly because of this that He allows misunderstanding to be their lot on earth, since He chose it for Himself. In heaven, He will show that His thoughts are not men's thoughts, for then the last will be first. (140)

This is not, as Marx would say, an "opium of the masses" to get those of the female sex to accept abuse, injustice, and mistreatment as inherently a part of womanhood and therefore natural and good. It is rather a testimonio about the suffering and injustice women everywhere experience, though at different levels, yet experience nevertheless simply by the fact of being women. This suffering makes women ipso facto more like the Christ, and if viewed and properly taken up by women, could instead of being useless suffering that only brings one down, be meritorious, a tool, a weapon.

As this collection is a bit of an homage to the Valley (where Spanish and English often intertwine, or where Spanish is often the dominant language), it would feel incomplete if Spanish didn't make its way into the poetry, and in fact, there are seven poems in entirely Spanish, with code-switching occurring in little fragments throughout the collection. Spanish interjects itself for whole poems, and peeks into the English poems from time to time. The speaker hops around the Valley, from memories to dreams of the future and down to the present, from the land of the living to the land of the dead to heaven and back to her bedroom. The environment, her mind, and God's heart is her playground, with her own heart becomes God's.

The speaker is elevated, and brought back to the reality of her own sinful past, concupiscence, and her anxious mistrust of God's mercy. Yet so much of the journey has already changed her, allowing her to have hope, to begin to open herself even unto tasting heaven. From this springs forth the desire to give back the love, to return to heaven, and therefore to suffer and

die to the self for the greater common good. This includes the living and the dead, blood relatives and strangers, as well as herself. Indeed, all are connected by Blood.

Form is experimented in several poems, though most of the collection is in free verse. Two of the pieces are *carmina figurata* (shape poems)—one being “Como la Flor (for Selena)” and in the shape of a rose, the other “Spider Meditation” being in the shape of a spider. For “Como la Flor” the shape form worked because of the short line lengths that begin after the first stanza. With such line lengths, it would seem awkward to have the poem flush to the left margin as most pieces in the collection are. Shape poems also having a bit of a “juvenile” or “amateurish” reputation in modern times, the form adds a bit of sweetness and youth to the poem in which the speaker is addressing the deceased cumbia singer Selena Quintanilla, saying how much she admires her and wants to be like her. “I want my little sisters / to sing along / into their tan fists / and clogged hairbrushes” (35). This is also the effect on the “Spider Meditation” poem, which isn’t as dark as the title might make it seem. Love is given to everyone, even the most unlikely of creatures—the spider—in this collection. The spider is actually a character found in the *Book of Psalms*, “for all our days are spent; and in thy wrath we have fainted away. Our years shall be considered as a spider...” (Ps. 89.9). The psalmist laments of his sins, expressing his regret and fear of death, yet expresses hope in God’s mercy. The speaker addresses the spider not so much as an outsider or strange creature, but as a sister, as an animal representation of herself. The speaker doesn’t want to get stuck in despair, to give up hope in reflecting back on her sins. “Birding Center, South Padre Island” is a pantoum that plays around with words which make repetition less apparent and yet don’t take away from the musicality of the form. It is a meditation on the relationship of light and dark, God and sinner, life and death. “Love-Sick/The Divinity of Feeling” is based on the sevenling poetic form created by Roddy Lumsden (inspired

by Anna Akhmatova), with the final single line being broken up into a small quintain (Eberheart). “Doble haiku a la Pequeña Flor” is a poem composed of two haikus, one in English and one in Spanish, with the Spanish poem connected to the first haiku in subject rather than being a direct translation. A haiku seemed to be the most fitting form for a poem dedicated to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux—declared a Doctor of the Church for her teaching of “the little way”—accepting small, everyday sufferings for love of God and neighbor.

“All Hallowtide Pt. I: Cempazuchitl” is a poem influenced by the great Alcolhua poet Nezahualcoyotl, both in form, subject, and tone. As Cempazuchitl (marigold) is the central image of the poem (the Nahuatl word being purposefully chosen simply for the pleasure, sound, and mood the language evokes), it seemed appropriate that the other elements of the poem should lean-in to the ancient Mexican culture rather than risk the single Nahuatl word sounding ineffective, out-of-place, superficial. The poem, though being the only Nahuatl-inspired piece in the collection, does not seem out of place, perhaps since man’s yearning for God is timeless and boundary-less, crossing all cultures and continents. The inclusion of such a poem helps to give the collection a sense of completeness. It is the first in the trilogy of the “Allhallowtide” poems, a group celebrating the Catholic holidays of Allhallowtide, the period of October 31st to November the 2nd in which the Saints and the souls in purgatory are remembered. The second poem “Requiem” gives readers a firsthand account of someone at a requiem Mass at a parish in a small town in the Valley, showing how it is both a solemn and mystical rite and yet celebrated by imperfect human beings in an imperfect workaday world of cars and laundry and tone-deafness. The third poem comes in the final section of the thesis collection rather than following after the other two “Allhallowtide” pieces in the first section. This poem, “Rosary” is more focused on the speaker herself and her relationship to God through her (struggle of) praying of the Rosary.

From the local in the first section entitled, “Valley/By the River” we are shown family, friends, neighbors. Then to the second section, “Heaven/Beneath the Palms” a slow transition from the world to the otherworldly (there is no hard, severe distinction between the two sections, often subject matter overlap and spill and leak into each other). Finally, the third section, “Death/Down the Sunshine Strip” zooms-in on the speaker, starting with the intimate moments of making tea, of rousing oneself from bed in the morning into the world. It is the speaker, alone with God, whom she has been journeying towards. Yet, the tone is not one of someone who is speaking up high from a lofty place in the clouds, but rather someone who admits weaknesses, who struggles, who pokes fun at herself, who compares herself to a spider. The final section of the poems is like an oscillation between Mary Oliver inspired poems and poems written with the poetry of 16th-century Spanish mystics (like Saint Teresa de Ávila) in mind. The poetry in this section reveal something the speaker discovers—that she has to die in order to authentically seek God and show gratitude for everything she has been given. This is a Catholic concept, explained poetically in Annie Dillard’s *Holy the Firm*, “but the world without light is wasteland and chaos, and life without sacrifice is abomination” (72). To be grateful to the Creator, and for that gratitude to never ask anything of you, to never move you to be in turn generous with the Creator (who needs nothing but loves all the good that his children do), is not to be grateful at all but rather to entertain the illusion that pleasure is love and that the gifts given to you are owed to you for gluttonous, wasteful consumption. *Holy the Firm* is a strong influence on the collection, in its religious theme and in its love to look intimately out at the surrounding world in awe, frustration, horror, love. This final section of poems also repeatedly looks to the writer’s scoliosis as a symbol of suffering, of the brokenness of a sinner. This was only explicitly taken up after reading a book entitled *The Burden of Søren Kierkegaard* in which the author states, “but it can

be safely said that Kierkegaard's suffering from a curvature of the spine helped him to despair of temporal fulfillment and to live for eternity" (Carnell 20). Reading this line brought the Catholic theory of *felix culpa* to mind. The speaker accepts her brokenness and accepts God's love in the form of "...consultations, surgeries, / the ongoing processes..." ("field notes" 84). At the end, the speaker is neither healed, perfect, nor complete; neither in heaven, purgatory, nor completely on earth. She stands, head in the heavens, baffled at God as he sticks another pin in her spine.

CHAPTER II

TO LOVE THE BIRDS AND THE PLACES THEY'VE MADE THEIR HOME:

POEMS FROM THE MAGIC VALLEY

“There are no events but thoughts and the heart’s hard turning, the heart’s slow learning where to love and whom. The rest is merely gossip, and tales for other times.”

—Annie Dillard,
Holy the Firm

“Al principio Dios imita la retama. (Pero es dulzor).”

—Francisco Matos Paoli,
“Canto de la locura”

If the Dead Dove I Found in My Garden Could Speak

Oh, carry me in a bright red
wheelbarrow,
bury me in the little wood
by the river—
my bones will become
stepping stones
for the children.

Valley/By the River

“And for us, descending into the vale,
The altars burn,
And our voices soar
To God’s very throne.”

—Anna Akhmatova,
“You Will Live Without Misfortune”

Charro Beans

My grandmother refills our cups
with small, sweltering bodies, and slings
tortilla after tortilla into the pale
red tortillero, the flour from her fingers
falling like the first snowflakes
in Christmas movies.

As she sits she smooths the canary
yellow tablecloth, sweeping
crumbs into her hand—
she throws them like dying stars
into a constellation
on her paper plate,
folds the white disc in half.

And with many faces bowed
down over bowls, cups, plates,
she rises to stand at the stove,
limp-legged, and nods to no one in particular,
counting unknown
data on her singed fingers,
doing the occasional flip, stir.

Valley Lemons

Let's share them, here, beneath
the trees in my tía's yard
where she'll live until
her house burns down.

Holding the hem of my blouse,
I pluck off some bitter bright yellow globes—
I press them to my stomach
an asteroid belt,
like a little greedy god.
We tear them apart at their ligaments
eating slices of their dripping flesh
making faces at each other,
our enamel crumbling in acid.
Our teeth look like termite kingdoms,
like Lot's wife looking back.
I won't remember the flames

only the flying
cockroaches, scrambling
to wash the cars in the rain,
the scent of the citrus trees,
the frozen lemonades we made
scraping frost
from the metal racks
of the freezer,
how for days after,
our throats
were so sore.

Valley Girl Hair Dye (Tropical Punch)

My friends joke that I'm losing
my virginity. I laugh, let it burn,
bleach my hair—break into the shaft,
chemically change the composition
of the molecules of pigment—
eviscerating all traces of color.

I wrap the tips in aluminum foil,
trying to contain the violence, keep the poison
off of my skin and clothes.

I unwrap, slowly
(I have been, occasionally,
peeking into the sealed ends,
anxious for change, for light)
and see my dark hair is light enough

to dip the ends into Kool-Aid (Tropical Punch)
to turn my hair red, wrap up again, wait.

When I finally remove the foils,
gently wash and dry my hair,
the ends will be ugly, coarse,
green-orange, and sweet-smelling.

Our Casita in Progreso

sweats, heaves a great sigh with every arid gust of wind.
Gone off-white sheets flail in the air between
the green bones of two Jerusalem thorn trees.
Our living room—ominous.

Sugar ants file in through the kitchen sink
and mock us with their bureaucratic coup d'état.
The cable cut-off since September;
we talk about the weather, playing
oblivious to the rising heat.

The bubbling foam in your beer swells up
to greet your lips, Darío, which come
together, separate, like two bodies
dancing Jarabe Tapatío.

And me—chewing on the charred, succulent
ribs of a pig—I cannot help but notice
your phone's sharp, glistening face
is suddenly so shy around me.

I clear the dishes—leave them
soaking in the sink. I go
to take a hot shower, and laugh
when I see you've left
the toilet seat up again.

Trip to the Dentista en Las Flores

One of your teeth got broken. We went
across, por el otro lado to get it fixed.
You were embarrassed, Darío, but I loved being there
with you, in the shade of the rainbow buildings.
The teals, yellows, and hot pinks kept me
thinking about paintings—how Kahlo or Gauguin or Matisse
would have painted us—man and woman,
sitting together, holding hands on your lap and serious,
perhaps a splash of red on your lips for all
the brokenness. And afterwards I was careful
when I kissed you, not wanting to ruin
the doctor's good work. Your face
held your teeth like a fish—you were so proud,
and my kisses had never been so soft
and so sweet. It's a wonder you never took
a hammer to your teeth.

Allhallowtide Part I: Cempazuchitl

after Nezahualcoyotl

Petals the color of chichiltote
swarmed all the etched stones
for two suns,

an eternal blaze in the internal
blood altars of the grieving—
What sort of God?
What sort of God?

All the eagles and jaguars yawn,
sleep in the place of the fleshless—
what weapons could we wield?
against what face?

Precious realities you have poured down—
We will all have to go.
All things here will fade, end.
We are not our own.

The place of the fleshless calls—
perhaps our cempazuchitl can be played
like instruments in the wind.

Carry our flowers, our songs
with your breath.

Allhallowtide Part II: Requiem

The priest's voice cracked as he read the list
of names of the beloved dead that belonged to us,
to God—a Requiem Mass
to pray for the souls sighing
in purgatory.

There were too many

names, so they divided them up,
and lit a candle
when each had been read

through.
At the end

of Mass,
twelve candles burned
their blackened, twisted wicks

a time for silence; the church
bell rang

in
the
dark

incense embedded itself
into the fibers of my black
cotton dress (that I've since

thrown on the floor of my bedroom
and forgotten).

Our small community of bowed heads
inside Sacred Heart
mourning for everybody, mostly ourselves,
sang off-key in procession
to our cars.

I Follow the Woman Along the River, Passing You By

“El amor de Dios sabe a ternura maternal.”
—P. Ángel Aparicio Rodríguez

My great-grandmother goes with knees blooming blood
to la Virgen de Guadalupe,
with my one-year-old grandmother
strapped to her back. It was always just like that,
wasn't it? Desire. Nurture. I forget exactly
how far that 91-year-old church is from my home
(how close things seem! thin lines on a map).

I see their clothes-crumpled bodies
every day I drive down the military highway,
there—on the rocky scarred shoulder
of the winding road, trying to reach the water
that carries exorcised salt.

Maybe I forget sometimes, but you will never know,
will you, wall? with your rust-red bars, orange hazard signs.
We mock the arbitrary places where you start and stop—
fields full of wildflowers, yucca, cacti
and junkyards, bingo halls, backyards infested by droves
of pink plastic flamingoes.

It is hard, I know, to be anything other
than a barrier between beloved
and beloved. I will bear you
bar by bar—my loving Father with dark
brown heavenward eyes will baptize you
will turn into another river.

Guadalupe's bells will ring out—
matrimony! alleluia!

On the President's Visit, January 10th, 2019

The president came down to the Valley today
discussing all the violence—how to keep it
out of this side of the river
by building a wall.

I spent the day painting native birds
and flowering vines
on the archways
in my home. This is what I love—

beautiful expansive space

somewhere I can paint, can throw
my colors, can see the birds I've slipped in several shades
onto a wall, with a brush made of ox hair.

Somewhere, I know, there is a field
full of bald oxen, smiling
learning like me, like all of us
to be empty
and produce—give
of the self—a painting completed—
a field, a church—undisturbed

people, birds, cattle, all—

Como la Flor (for Selena)

I visited your grave
stood on that archway at the riverwalk
did the washing machine by the gulf in Corpus
where your mother taught you the dance
(according to the movie about you).

I sing the same songs you do,
thinking myself your harmonious
cuata, in the shower or in the car;
death the only thing
between us.

I want my body bedazzled brilliant
in the light.

I want to be withered by the one
I loved.

I want to sing
long after
I'm gone.

I want my little sisters
to sing along
into their tan fists
and clogged hairbrushes.

I want to be on beach towels
grocery bags
and bedroom walls.

I want to die in the winter,
spring up in the spring
and at every quinceañera.

For All My Valley Party Girls

I got bit by a dog walking to the meat market
in my best friend's barrio to get a Topo Chico.

He broke the skin, I bled, bought my drink, walked back carefully,
got some rubbing alcohol and slapped on a cotton ball with a bandaid

(cussing the whole time and sipping my drink)
and got ready to go clubbing with my girl friends.

In mini skirts and pleather and glitter and sequins we piled
into a truck, elbows dug in each other's necks, half-sitting on laps,

heads bent to clavicles, and still taking selfies and dancing to reggaetón.
When we crossed la Basílica de Nuestra Señora de San Juan del Valle

we crossed ourselves, and kissed our hands, recommenced our dancing and singing,
and then hopped the bars, and danced with boys and danced with men,

and swallowed shots, and chased shots, and got burned by cigarettes
held loosely in inconsiderate hands,

and got grabbed by boys and grabbed by men
and we ran and fell and bled

and cried and laughed and yelled and pushed
and we wanted to love,

us girls wanted to love.

We want love

We want love

We want love bad

Please be gentle with us.

Testimonio of a Kid Sister (for AJ)

the mint chocolate chip
ice cream you hid from me
in the back of the freezer
behind bags of bloody carne

the backs of your school friends
I'd climb on, begging
to play too, to be included

my barbie dolls with
their heads popped off

uncertain and awkward goodbyes
at airports—you in your desert
camouflage uniform, your hair
shaved off, your green eyes standing out

me abstaining from meat
for the final legs of your deployments
in Iraq and Afghanistan
(cheating by eating chicken-flavored ramen)

being at the mercy of God,
the Taliban, the U.S. Army,
and a volcano in Iceland
named Eyjafjallajökull
which delayed your arrival
for nearly a month

on opposite sides of the earth
our minds and air filled
with ash and smoke
perhaps the holiest of vigils

brother, I missed you

My Gift of Light Teal Hospital Scrubs (from My Mother)

“Do you want these?
They gave them to me
because of all the blood. I was
soaked. I had to tear a hole in the waist
to make the drawstring tighter to keep
the bottoms from falling.”

She presented them like a painting—
arms in the air, face hidden.
A stamp on the thigh read:
PROPERTY OF _____
HOSPITAL.
IF FOUND OUTSIDE OF FACILITY,
THEY HAVE BEEN
STOLEN.

I took them—
I, the daughter born after
the second miscarriage,
and after my mother’s vision
of a little girl running through
the kitchen barefooted.

Some nights I sleep in them, dreaming
of the many possible faces
of my siblings, a double-knotted bow
around my waist.

My Father, Swinging Me Around in Circles

(after George Szirtes)

by my ankles—he came in and asked me for my feet
and held me upside down and spun me around
slowly, careful to not let my head hit anything,

gradually increasing the speed—then suddenly
stopping. I tried to get him to continue, but his back
was hurting. When I asked him several weeks later

to do it again, he started to bend
down, shook his head, and said, “no mija,
you’re too heavy and my back is bad.”

My father and I are both getting older
and now both of our backs
are bad, and the time
for flying has passed;
I am no longer
a child, though I am
his daughter, forever, looking up
and asking him.

My Burden is—Light

“The essential form of our lives is migratory: a leaving behind and a moving forward in hope...Talking to actual migrants might help save our souls.”
—Bishop Daniel Flores

I.

My father, growing up
a migrant worker,
hated it. At the house he built us,
he put in the white picket fence
upside-down.
Frustrated, amid laughter,
he fixed it.

II.

I sometimes saw him in uniform
in his office at his desk, looking around
without picking up his head.

III.

In every sighing throng of strangers
I see us—60,000 heads—
Las Mañanitas echoing
throughout many shades
of glowing brown throats
greeting my buela as she stands
at her lime green screen door,
spine forever hunched.

IV.

On her back she carries the story,
what happened before me,
and—eyes squinting—
I love him.

Bodies to Behold, Tenderly

*“Quién te vio y no te recuerda?
Que te busquen en mi frente.”
—Federico García Lorca*

As if trying to save a face it never had,
the armless gushing river runs still,
embarrassed.

Two bodies, father and daughter
(so small, with the bluest tattered Disney Princess
Cinderella pajama dress) lie face down,
bloated.

On the news it was noted in passing
five children had perished this year under the care
of a country that doesn't want them here—
how freely we let them, those invisible
lines limit the extent of our love.

When one dies of drowning,
not only the lungs,
but the veins, the heart fill
with water.

I crawl on my knees to the altar, a mess
of black lace, swallowing
my own spit over
and over.

I thought God said water would save us.

Cuata

The earth broke apart in your state.

We've the same Kahlo caterpillars
and both of our names were picked
with brains so sure of themselves
and future family bonds. Whenever
I want to see you I must stand still
before a orphaned mirror. There's
a burning church choir and
an organ on my brow, calling
out to you in California—

Única! Única!

For My Daughter, a Future Border Resident Too

I.

I thought about names for you—
Teresa, Jerusalén, Fathima, Miryam.
I dreamt about braiding your dark brown hair,
swatting your great-grandmother's hands away
from pulling your little copper-brown toes.
I dreamt of our home, of your father and me
eating paletas de coco or melón, giving you
small licks as we walked the mall with your stroller,
taking you to the island to watch the kites,
tucking you in at night with that steadfast
ancestral lullaby, arrurrú.

II.

I sing it to you now, every
once in a while—
in front of a mirror
puffing my belly out
or after my nightly Rosary—
can you hear me from inside
the clouds of God?

III.

When the Dove descends to us and you Become
in the waters and blood of my womb, you will grow
there, strong and delicate and secure,
and eventually, have to go,
and get dried off.

IV.

How can I protect you?

V.

If we're separated
from the river
by the time of your birth,
daughter,
know that this
was never our home,
nor that place, or the other.
Our heritage, here,
is the desert.

Her dry grasses are our pillows,
her thorns our hair ribbons,
her snakes, Persian rugs.

VI.

If anyone other than God should speak to you
about a garden somewhere,
run.

From the Bottomlands of Blue Town, the Outskirts of Mercedes

A lone jabalí sniffs the swollen earth
of the damp bottomlands of Blue Town
for fallen, mute carrion. A symphony
of chivas in the twilight, nursing their crying kids,
the mothers' beards soft as leavened bread
and trembling, over at my tío's rachito
out on Baseline Road, near the Rose
Cotton Gin where the owner's
teenage daughter disappeared in October
of 1974 and hasn't been seen since.

Bats hidden inside of roach-gnawed palms
hanging upside down, blinking
like spinning wind turbines in a field below
the spilled-milk-glow of the moon.
They ask the air with small maroon
mouths agape for signs of life,
its humble movement, fruits.

All creatures churning
in the black belly of the night,
bending backs for sustenance,
slumped as the shoulders of Moses,
arms longing to be lifted high.

Miraculous Occurrences

*“Will you be able to be nonconformists by being the sort of people who try to love?
Suffering is often what cannot be fought.”*

—Adrienne von Speyr

The image of the Virgen that blinked in Ecuador,
the dead acrobat daughter brought back
to life in México, and some say
when the wretched poor
would arrive here (in twos,
in fours, in droves,
by foot or by boat)
we’d feed them.

My faith, like the widowed ocean,
foams, rushes
to my motherland’s door.

Heaven/Beneath the Palms

“Pues ya no eres esquivia,
acaba ya, si quieres;
rompe la tela de este dulce encuentro.”

—San Juan de la Cruz,
“Llama de amor viva”

The First Woman/Felix Culpa

Every morning you sang with the birds;
I never learned their songs. I only saw
color, and the movement of it.

I was formed from your rib,
not your ankle or hip—equal,
heart to heart and naked.

You mouthed God's mouth
to me. I knew the motions, but not
the sounds, melodies, how to keep going
in the measures,
when to rest.

Was I tone-deaf or hard of hearing?
The children I birthed from our primrose love
all blame me.

They run around now, extravagantly
dressed, hearts to feet.

Oh what a blessed fall, husband,
to see them similarly stumbling
and know we will embrace them,
their wounds cauterized and honeyed
by the flaming sword, our Son.

Holy Mother of the Valley

“La casa no se reclina sobre la tierra, sino sobre una mujer.”
—proverbio mexicano

And when was the last time
cow intestines were tied
onto our kitchen faucets—
a ritual of inner-purification
for tacos de tripa?

How do we know when to stop kneading
masa for tortillas de harina?
What recipe for hojarascas
should we use, Buela’s or Memo’s?
Have you seen them up there,
beneath the canopies of heaven,
all golden chanclas, aureolas of maize?

What color are the eyes of God,
and exactly what shade of brown?
Tell us again about how
you first found proof of God
one day, at the lavandería,
a Saint Jude scapular left
by some unfortunate patron in the dryer,
that you wore and swore healed
your headaches and bunions.

Your perfume—a blend
of White Diamonds,
masa, and fabuloso
still lingers throughout
our small, humid rooms.
Your rosaries of chiles
still hang in our homes.

Who will pray
using their blood-red
bodies of sun-dried flesh
to keep track of the decades
at the kitchen sink, arms deep
in hot water and foam?

We have
a dishwasher now.

Upon My Return to San Lorenzo (after the promesa)

Clutching my shoulders,
you told me his story
how he was burned alive
and how he loved me
and whispered his intercessory prayer
into God's burning ear.

I hear you talking to our Saint
sometimes, every once in a while,
when, like a child,
I am
quiet and up-eyed, wanting
to see everything.

Already, I am feeling
like a little girl again, the bones
in my toes on end,
with eyes
one would find on the wings
of a butterfly.

I came back, half-expecting your hands
to hold me again.

fingers/warm rosaries

fingers fumbling along
the length of a warm rosary
hoping chanting crying
rocking back and forth,
soothing herself, becoming
filled with the Ghost,
Holy, emptying herself.

once five-year-old fingers
clinging onto an inner tube
then fingers mending dresses,
fingers running along psalms
in Spanish and in English,
fingers of an orphan by the age of 13,
fingers canning string beans,
serving these at every meal to her children,
fingers rolling tortillas and cigarettes,
fingers applying to become
a U.S. citizen, fingers casting votes,
fingers twirling hair, clipping
flowers in, ring finger dancing
with three different rings,
two divorces and widowed. fingers
feeding her parrot, Lorito, loud
and singing, fingers reaching
into the cage and giving me
green red blue feathers

fingers holding each of her
children—three
grandchildren—twelve
great-grandchildren—twenty-three
great-great-grandchildren—twenty-three
(two of these soon to be born)

fingers like roots twisted and bent
knuckles like knots in wood
weakly blessing us,
small signs of the Cross
over heads stooping
smiling kissing then
departing.

our fingers running through her
hair thin white barely there
but shiny and with pink bouganvillas
tucked behind an ear.
my mother slept so i sang
to her, my great-grandmother,
old boleros clumsily whispered
out from quivering lips glistening
and singed with salt. unfamiliar
prayers i've inherited
spoken to my great-grandmother
and cooing vaya con Dios vaya
con Dios as she lay between us
a rattling in her chest, with fingers
that were restless, they would not keep
still.

fingers stiff
fingers cold
fashioned into a clasp
laced with her rosary
grasping some baby's breath
a dozen roses

fingers blessing myself at her funeral
Mass, fingers straight and skin smooth
fingers trembling, hurried,
in motion.

for nine days straight
the fingers of a room
full of women
and a few quiet husbands
fumbling along the length
of warm rosaries
hoping
chanting
crying
soothing ourselves,
becoming

Song for Cocol

He could laugh with one side of his face
and cry with the other, this man,
my Father baptized us—
his children donned in ivory lace
underground, and in the dark
oblivion pressed God's Body
to bloated tongues—I remember
the thirst, I remember

the firing squad, the pale powder flashes
of cameras capturing silver
bullets
being captured by his flesh
we flocked
like the sick, sad, starved
we are
roses, lilies, hibiscus
flowering from our tender, wounded

chests in procession we sang,
his blood still steaming on our lips
and on his numbered bones every shade
of lipstick a petition, a host of holy hellos,
salt and water falling from every dark angelic face
of the black-laced throbbing cloud

el tiro de gracia
on his brow, bubbling
like water from a font
or the rainbow songs
of ambulatory birds
bathing in it

kneeling before his body
we are drowned.

After Driving Behind a Truck Pulling a Dead Horse on San Blas's Feast Day

Did God count the umber hairs
of his tarp-covered mane
as he formed? When he fell
glistening balloon from
his mother's heaving body
were you there, a folded
intercessor?

And while he lived did he love
his work—the ever-stretching of the neck
onward, onward, shoes hammered
onto hooves, metal bit thrust
into parched mouth, tugged
and tugged and tugged? Did he love
to have his coat brushed?

Tell me, what happens to the beasts of the field,
the ones who die standing,
the ones with bodies too heavy for coffins?

Entering Adoration at the Capuchin Poor Clare Convent in Alamo, Texas

Between the hedgerows of Mexican heather,
their purple blossoms dreaming
towards my braided hair, I stand beneath
your body—the Terror of Demons.
You hover over me as ancient Taxco silver,
my black mantilla transformed
into your holy mountain.

Devils arcade, rupture from the pitch
black ground like mangrove roots,
but you are calm and bearded
and barefoot and beautiful—
beauty keeping post.

I am unafraid, at your invitation,
touching the spotted glowing petals
of your heart-lilies
to my forehead.
You lead me—
soft fingertips tenderly
dipped in holy water
french doors blown open
marble altar
Monstrance
celestial Body
of the Son—burning,
wounding me,
I arise—ruptured

from my foaming breast
a bud.

La Virgen de Guadalupe

Some saints are better praised in Spanish.
La Virgen de Guadalupe—the saint of my soul, mi gente,
a story untold, unspoken, unloved—almost
separated from my self. A psalm torn asunder—
out from our Bibles, out from our throats,
by those who think that love for La Virgen
means golden calf pagan idol worshipping,
or those who think Mary, The Mother of God,
could never look like María, The Cleaning Lady.

The feeling of venerating someone who looks like us—
brown skin, Brown, like benches in a courtroom,
like rows of earth blooming cotton, oranges, sugar cane.
Brown like brooms in a supply closet, like the beans we eat,
lovingly, with tattered pieces of tortillas instead of spoons.
Brown like a stray dog, or like the great-grandmother
I never met, because she left this world
when I had only just entered it. The woman
I cried for on the day she died, my mother says,
because she visited me before she went up to God.

Usted, la Virgen, Nuestra
Señora, dressed in pink
and green, roses and stars,
tender hands perpetually
clasped together in prayer,
golden aureola embracing
a brown girl, una mestiza,
with almond eyes always looking down,
with the moon under her bare feet.

La Virgen de Guadalupe—
cuando te llamo
 en nuestra lengua
 materna,
sé que me entiendes.

Conversation with the Crescent Moon Under la Morenita

Oh moon conquered by Woman,
how does it feel—she, the Feminine
of Feminine—veil of hostage constellations,
lap of quivering volcanic roses,
callused soles of cinnamon feet
pressing down your powdered face,
your spine suffocated by teenage toes
and the chocolate concha head
of a cherub?

—In time, I have turned
from silver sword
to ebon.

Mi hermanito José, con los pies sangrantes corre

al amparo de la noche.
En la madrugada, yo veo las huellas
manchadas de sangre.
Las estudio, y aprendo lo que significa
ser un don nadie
en un mundo que piensa
que Dios nunca vino
como un niño,
pequeño y pobre.

Sus huesitos yacían debajo
el altar de mármol
donde nuestro hermano mayor
ofrece el Sacrificio
en la catedral de Brownsville
con manos temblorosas
y bigote implorante
a una multitud hambrienta
de rodillas.

Los beso, los huesos
de Joseíto con mis lágrimas;
sé que deben estar
tan débiles y cansados
de estar corriendo
todo este tiempo, aunque
ellos no se mueven
un milímetro
de su cama.

¿No puedes ver? El altar exhala.

A Decade for Santo Domingo

You—the vision of a black dog
with jaws and paws full of fire.
Mother dreamt of you
the Hound of God
while you were still in womb—
hidden, unsure, in the dark.
Mingo, your little sister
hasn't learned yet,
how to bark. You must
howl at the moon with my mouth.

La Santa Teresa de Bernini habla

Dios debes de estar dentro de mi forma.
Los rayos asaltando
el frente, corazón, alma, todo.

Frente, corazón, alma, todo—
recortada en pedazos. ¿De qué
otra manera uno entra la mansión interior final?

Uno entra en la interior mansión finalmente—pecho herido
y terminado por la daga de un ángel,
un coro caótico del fuego a través del cuerpo.

Un bendito coro de caos y silencio—
lenguas de las llamas me queman, áman,
prometen un regreso, retiran, regresan.

Me retiro, regreso, siento el infinito
abrazo del cielo y de la tierra, y hombres
miran y pasan juicio con los ojos elevados.

Con los elevados ojos, los hombres miran
abajo, juzgan, pasan al rato—uno trató
de capturarme con su manos.

Dios debes de estar dentro de mi forma
en su Pasión, por siempre—suspirando, débil, sangrando,
transcendente, incomprendido.

The Disciple's Song/Upon Seeing My Love Resurrected

"Noli me tangere," you tell me,
thinking me equal in strength and affection
to our Syrophoenician sister
who begged you like a dog.
I know my salvation will come with the fall of the stars
like the figs we ate back in our beloved country.
I know you to be the cry of the prophets,
and the firstborn of the dead,
and returning.

Promise you'll still love me when catastrophe hits, promise
to be by me even in your distance, promise
what I once touched with my hands,
I'll always be able to taste
with my kiss.

Oh Jesus Christ, forbid
that I should ever stop falling
asleep with your blood on my lips.

A Bride's Assurances Before Her Wedding in La Paloma, Texas

For loving you
I have said this—he is cut
from good cloth, right nobility;
you can see it in his nose—the arch,
the crooked bone, nostrils like new olives.
His father owns many green horses,
many fields of goats and many cows,
kids, calves, black milk
crates stacked full and flowing over with bottles
filled to the brim. His mother
is a haunted pewter moon.
Foster-father a gold harpoon gun.

I have argued thus, done my part,
hated my own, ran away with Ruth and Naomi,
kept vigil with your cousin Juan in his jail cell,
feeding him chapulines and honey.

Oh betrothed desperado! I am
in love with you as much as I am
in love with your freakish family.

Doble haiku a la Pequeña Flor

I.

A little flower—
so beautiful in God's eyes
as she strews herself.

II.

Alache, gaura—
amada por Dios, la flor
ya se marchita.

Death/Down the Sunshine Strip

“But we can sometimes know [God] with the knowledge akin to the knowledge of the dead, for sometimes we become so aware of the fierce beauty of God’s light that it seems to be known because it is burning within us. This is very like Purgatory, and it is a pain which we would not willingly forgo once it has touched us, because it is our necessity and our joy. For Purgatory, after all, is the fire of the love of God, cauterizing the wound of sin.”

—Caryll Houselander,
The Reed of God

“Ah nican tochan
ah nican tinemizque,
tonyaz ye yuhcan.”

—Nezahualcoyotl,
“Ma Zan Moquetzacan”

*(Not here is our house,
we do not live here,
you also will have to go away.)*

Té

Whenever I make
té de anís
estrellado—I throw the whorled

pericarps in clear water
watching it
get darker, darker,

dark—purposefully
losing
count of the stars. It helps me

remember
a promise—
mercy.

Preliminary Examination

When bansheeing at night in bed
I feel for the vertebrae
forming my sallow back.
I find each one as angled as before.
The pain of knowing yourself
to be contorted, and the pain of contortion,
and the vulnerability of injury.
I trace to his fingers pressing
the pregnable gaps between and gasp.

He whispers like dahlias
blossoming on my skin—
little moons,
little crescent moons,
the sun is here,

straighten.

Morning Routine/Sub Rosa

This morning I am, like most mornings, left wide-awake
and wondering what the day shall hold for me, and if
I'll go head or toe first to greet it.

I saunter out of bed to pray laudes,
chant it if I'm all alone.

My voice breaks and I'm embarrassed.
I try to hurry along with the psalms.

I sing the Canticle of Zechariah while oscillating between
trying to remember or forget the rest of the dream I had last night.

I sigh, ask the Theotokos to intercede for me,
cross myself, and rise.

I make my breakfast.
I'm careful with the portions.

I eat in silence if I am happy.
Watch television if I'm not.

I think of splendid, witty one-liners to say
to the politicians and experts on the screen, and smile to myself.

It takes me thirty minutes to get ready—
ten minutes are spent trying to negotiate my way out of things.

Before I leave, I take one last look
in the full-length mirror in my mother's room.

What are you trying to prove, exactly?
and to whom? Or who do you think
is watching you? and why
do you assume they aren't
on your side?

One of these days, you're going to have to love
the morning sun in return. Practice by drawing
the curtain back.

Allhallowtide Part III: Rosary

I have worn out the silver faces
and roses. I have been distracted,
lost my place, lost count.
I try to embrace each decade,
earn this worn-outedness.

I try to call your Mother frequently,
get over myself and my insecurities
and ask the Mediatrix
for God's graces—
for the turning of death
into hibernation,
divine eternal ecstasy—
little beads between fingers
clink with the urgency of the hopeful
and heartbroken.

Yours is the flesh I've eaten
amidst clouds of smoke
kneeling besides old women and children.

Yours is the heart I'm groping for
with such thin hands as these.

My Blue, Blue God

All the windows in my house pulsate,
the shadows call me out—teasing,
pulling my chain, my hair out—I'm out
of my mind, losing it—I cannot hold
the center of myself—I send myself unraveling
like a threadbare rug swaying in the breeze
from a clothesline, deadened,
beaten by a mattenklopper.
My mouth tastes like armageddon.
I put on some jazz
pray to my blue, blue God—
a love supreme and self-effacing.
We've run out of food,
got no place to rest our ugly heads.
He gingerly offers me his flesh—won't let me go
hungry on an empty stomach.
Our intestines growl, sing
serenades to each other
through thin walls of scarred skin.
We take turns crying in the other's arms—
I fall asleep with his hot tears kissing my neck.
How I pity my love, the insomniac—restless,
he tosses all through my body of night.

Twenty-Third Sunday, Ordinary Time

The sun rises in the sky today
red as the rushed cheeks of the cherubim
who shake their fingers at me, chivvying.
The Muscovy duck, freshly roused
from her bed in the cavity of an ancient riparian
tree, dips her head into the cloudy pond,
washing off last night's nightmare.
Her debonaire drake on the other side

of the water hisses, raises his crest,
and lifts his white-patched wings at another—
takes a laissez-faire approach at love.
I traverse the mud rivers rife
with prepossessing footsteps
leading to the double doors of Sacred

Heart in Mercedes. I fall on my knees,
splitting open my black nylons,
spraying some red on the white
tiles of the temple. In the hurly
burly of the spilled blood
I forget myself (and him).

When I rise up to receive the Eucharist
in Holy Communion, I can barely utter
“amen” (the only affirmation necessary for love).

Today your body tastes of earth, blood, and cinnamon.

Por los campos de caña

la luz de la luna que cae
y mancha mis labios peludos,
el cuerpo que sangra
en el altar en la capilla vieja
por los campos de caña, rodeada
de las tinieblas
y nadie ve, sino yo

yazco en el suelo, mi espalda expuesta
sólo una columna chueca
y rasguños frescos que salpican la arcada,
las plumas pálidas en mi pelo abundante
que revela a nadie mi cirujano
dueño de sí mismo,
que tantea mi
terreno con sus instrumentos
que les gusta
trasnochar

mis lágrimas sirenas
haciendo eco,
y, que son, al fin, invisible—me siento
en una brisa tu primera
y última regla—
*vuelva, déjame tocar
su cuerpo bien tejido*

me asusta tanto
fue mas fácil
cuando no creía
que Dios sería así
mi sanador secreto

él levanta su cuchillo a mi
mutad-eza,¹ y me exalta

¹mutad-eza: mutatedness

Birding Center, South Padre Island

The crumbling dunes of South Padre Island
friction the shadow of the scarlet tanager.
Could light be more than a dead star's last testimony?
The songbird flies on, through the famished dark.

Oh, to friction the form of the scarlet tanager—
(I dream of your body—wanted and wounded by want)
fly on, through the famished dark skies of my heart;
I like your wings best when stretched and taut.

I dream of my body—waned and waxed by want—
of your fingers finding me incorruptible.
I like your wings—red, outstretched, and taut.
Hidden bones arched like breathless rainbows.

Your fingers will find me incorruptible—
spinal column, skull—your personal monstrosity,
my blatant bones frozen like a breathless rainbow.
Your breaths down my mouth make time turn state's witness.

Spinal column, skull—love's lowly monstrosity.
Could light be more than a dead star's last testimony?
The star breathes from the dark mouth of time's true witness,
crumbling the dunes of South Padre Island.

Sea Turtle Eggshell

Already so vulnerable
to the world—that gaping hole
where the dome of your little hut
used to be, gazed back at me,
an injured eye—

no returning back
to your eggshell ceiling,
sink, lamp, bedroom set.

In the deep,
distant depths
a mother suspended
in blue
calls to you—
heart
to vein.

A la Gloria (la piscina en Mercedes, etcétera)

En el centro de tu pecho nimbado
de astros (mis manos apuntan
a tu corazón) quisiera nadar.

Por favor,
apaga su desagüe
así que puedas sentir mis
pies pateando
y oír los ecos de mi movimiento
a tus costillas.

No es como una metáfora, o una
cosita imaginaria.
Ya me estoy poniendo
mis alas de agua.

Al ver el árbol que crece fuera de Nuestra Señora de la Merced

Eres lavanda como una jacaranda.
Quiero descansar debajo
de tu corteza, en total
oscuridad.
Escóndeme, Señor,
de mis culpas. (Ya sé,
es duro, y hay hormigas,
pero no importa—
mis pecados son peores.)
Más que todo esto,
no puedo ver tus ramas,
cuando lo sé
que sin mí
serían blancas.

Luis Bienteveo

I.

Every morning I look for your feet
how lovely they are, those that fall
on my spine when I sleep in little patters
like raindrops. I caught you—
your patitas have been trying to straighten me out.
I chill out, unravel the bones of my brain
watch you weave yourself a San Marcos blanket
from my memories. You climb inside of me,
shutting the door of my skull softly, singing,
“how warm, how warm it is, in love.”

II.

Luis, little bird, your yellow belly
barely made a sound as it hit my car.

You fluttered, spun on the glass
like a retiring prima ballerina taking encores.
(*What the sam hill happened?*)
I'm sorry.

III.

I saw you again,
as the sun rose, on my back dancing
a huapango on my scoliosis.

IV.

In all of my withered footsteps I go out, I go out, carrying our music.
I think I know now why he did what he did, that Noah man
with the boat and bird emissaries.

V.

Something about the necessity of hope.

It Happened by the Harlingen Lake (That I Knew God to Be Within Me)

There was a small spider crawling on my neck
(I didn't know—*though I felt it*) as I read verses
written by the late Mary Oliver at the edge
of a lake. I saw a lone, dark

grape floating on the green, rippling
water. I wondered—

Whose teeth did you escape from?

A Muscovy duck answered

in its place, by spreading his wings
lifting his brown body
from the surface of the rolling water,
and flying away from me.

The spider crawled its way down
my shoulder—I flicked it far off

then suddenly—the bells
of Immaculate Heart tolled at 12,

calling us to pray
the Angelus.

In the distance,
coming towards me,

the frenzied siren
of an ambulance.

I bowed my head and prayed.
On my knee, writhing

up my leg, toward my hands
clasped

in supplication, a spider.
I didn't smack her away.

Spider Meditation

I spied a small spider
with a moth in its mouth
outside, in the corner formed by our cuartito and the back door.
It froze, looked up at me, and turned away,
waiting for me to leave so it could keep on eating.
I wanted to pet its little fuzzy head
wipe eight tears from eight glossy eyeballs
kiss eight little patitas;
wanted to tell her that I understood
the terrible guilt that sometimes comes
from subsisting on the body of the beauty that you've killed.

Down the Sunshine Strip

I went, catching
all the green lights in the gaps
of my upper central incisors.

I am always peering inside,
seeing mourners' faces in the minute
ecosystems of cars, trucks.

I once saw a red truck full of talking sunburnt arms
and two pale turtles in the bed,
blue bungee cords in their teeth
planning escape.
I thought about my past,
chewed it over
with a tarnished silver spoon.
All things can be good
as long as we've got vinegar.

Life is lovely when you are sober,
better if you fall on your knees before
Love and the Woman, in gratitude
to God. If not for all the good and the perfectly
ugly, then at least for your ability
to move.

Love-Sick/The Divinity of Feeling

“As a woman and a lover, however, I am moved by the sight of my Beloved. Where he is, I want to be... Who he is, I want to be: crucified for love.”
—Santa Teresa de Ávila

I adore the rumbling in my tummy.
For toothaches, stepped-on toes,
I would crawl on my knees to San Juan.

If death should call to me, I will
run, sign the DNR form,
let my Mother take away my body.

I am so happy
when I am
suffering.
I like to play
God.

Ahora y siempre/Limosna

*“¿Por qué viniste?—le pregunté a una niña.
Porque quería llegar.”
—Valeria Luiselli,
sobre ser una intérprete
para la corte inmigración en Nueva York*

Nuestros niños llegarán, llegarán,
finalmente allá. Ya tuve una visión
de paz, de peces en el río,
los rayos del sol como ayoyotes
sobre sus aletas.

Que Dios siempre venga como lo hace,
en olas.

Mi nueva religion—amar
por el bien de amar,
por las boquitas mordiendo
a mi esternón.

Lo que todo tiempo
y compartimentos del tiempo
son reducidos a—
un tiempo de morir
de morir por amar.

Tu toque, Señor, hace mi cuerpo moribundo
profetizar.

Dos Luis Bienteveos en mi techo

cantaron
mientras volaban
lejos de mí.

Me reí.

desenlace

“Now and then a white bird materialized out of the vapor and screamed. It was, in short, what one might, searching for words, call a beautiful land...”

—Annie Dillard,
“An Expedition to the Pole”

To Love the Birds and the Places They've Made Their Home: field notes

i. canopy of nighthawks

I crawled to you a swan-necked-
spine asking to be mistaken for a fat moth—
sublime filamented death
in the smallest of beaks

ii. murmuration of jabirús

upon my aching bones you performed
a preliminary examination
in the bitter waters of La Sal del Rey,
and with foot of grey-blue ash
pressed my forehead
into the sour white mud
and claimed me.

iii. yearning of cave swallows

you pulled me into the hinterland
of the Bahía Grande—
i emerged a series of silver pins
in my spine, savage euphoric
look on my face

iv. exaltation of tecolotes

wide-eyed and alarmed you stood, as I lay
vomiting bones and unbraided hair and blood
we dissected the pellet together—
my aquiline nose laid there—running, bare,
bloodied, embarrassed
absolution, replantation,
canela eskimo kisses
in the constellated dark that
still embellishes me
with white diamond stars

v. somersault of laughing gulls

i am calcified in my veins, ligaments, heart, soul,
and memory—you know, and atone for me
wearing cilices of plastic coke rings
begging for any jilted Wonder
Bread on the beach

vi. tower of chachalacas

those guttural prayers

comfort me,
let me scream too—
i want to be another unconventional
diaphanous shrieking voice
in the cauterized dusk

vii. pandemonium of parrots
pure rainbow mimicking mirrors
i see my great-grandmother
in your color-lavished tree
clutching green-red-blue feathers in her
glowing palm—i surreptitiously extend my arm,
you happily alight, and light
my head on fire

viii. rhapsody of great blue herons
i called to you
& turned blue
as many shades as i could
for you, and you,
and you
received me
a daughter
splendid and
sculpted as any good
fragile papel picado girl
lifted up overhead
and flowering in fresh and ancient hands
you knew so well and loved and love
i want to
too

ix. procession of mourning doves
inside every pandemonium living
room, i'm crying with you
my face already grilled,
my little sister daughter prima
body already consecrated and
confined in four throbbing chambers
shiva embroidered on the underside
of all of our tongues, sweet lamentation song
of unstained memory—i bow,
touching my forehead to your small feet,
repeatedly. i will be indebted to you
for much and for all eternity—
our little boxes forever touching

neatly in a black-laced weeping row.
madrinas could we be some little
glimpse of athletic grieving, purity's
bubbling votive candle burning no matter
how haunted the coiling mortal room?

x. luis bienteveo

my sweetest Jesus angel messenger
when i look back on my life i laugh
and say "thank you, thank you"
to God for you, little bird,
for my crooked spine, my inborn mutation,
the multitude of examinations, consultations, surgeries,
the ongoing processes, the newly-forming
scarlet peck marks along my shifting spine

and for all of the birds
singing whatever lovely songs their bodies
call them towards—lamentation,
exultation,
canción de cuna

and I think
they are beautiful

and I think,
what have I done

to be worthy of such beauty
to be pretty too.

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migratory: a leaving behind and a moving forward in hope. If we do not move it is

because our contentments detain us. Talking to actual migrants might help save our

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Alyssa Belén Garza earned a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing along with a Graduate Certificate in Mexican-American Studies from the University of Texas—Rio Grande Valley in December 2019. Additionally, she earned a Bachelor of Arts in English with a minor in Psychology from the University of Texas—Pan American (former name of previously stated university), and an Associate of Science in Biology from South Texas College (never makes up her mind, this one). She currently lives in the Rio Grande Valley with her mother and two and half cats. You can find her at the ice cream parlor or in line for confession.

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