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The Wind Still Blows: Poems

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THE WIND STILL BLOWS

POEMS

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

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The Wind Still Blows: Poems is a collection of autobiographical poems and lyric essays that explore my journey with faith. This collection reveals the life of a young woman learning to meld Chicana feminist ideas and Christian belief. With regards to this introduction, the first-person "I" will be used to denote specific craft choices and critical frameworks that I, the writer, used within the collection, and third-person references to "the speaker" refer to the constructed narrator described in the poems. In this collection, the speaker offers up a history with anxiety disorders, fraught relationship with male figures, developing into an educator with socially just ideals, and the tensions between her Catholic past and Protestant present. The speaker shows an effort and desire to reach a consolidated identity as a Christian woman exploring an emerging Chicana feminist consciousness. While the story of God's hand in my life will be apparent in the poems, this introduction will testify, in part, to my journey with words: my Chicana literary and Christian educations and how the philosophies of each have influenced this collection. This introduction also addresses the ongoing questions I hold regarding how to reconcile still-developing ideas about the gender of God, Chicana feminism, and the decolonialization of the Church and offers potential features of long-term revision.

DEDICATION

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without my parents, Noemi A. Solís and Rosalio A. Solís. Thank you for paving for the way of education for our family, for your endless support, and for providing a majority of the funding for this degree. This collection is a work of love for you both and honors your intentions to raise me to be a strong Christian woman.

Thank you to my coworkers who cheerleaded me through long days and nights working with our students and doing the work of writing. Thank you to my students who constantly challenge me to be a better human being and who shared in my excitement for this collection.

Thank you to my friends and mentors at church, in student ministries, my home group, and Bible studies who have read this work, prayed for me, and encouraged me to be brave. To God be the glory.

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

"By redeeming your most painful experiences you transform them into something valuable, algo para compartir or share with others so they too may be empowered."
Gloria E. Anzaldúa

The Wind Still Blows: Poems is a collection of autobiographical poems and lyric essays that explore my journey with faith. This collection reveals the life of a young woman learning to meld Chicana feminist ideas and Christian belief. With regards to this introduction, the first-person "I" will be used to denote specific craft choices and critical frameworks that I, the writer, used within the collection, and third-person references to "the speaker" refer to the constructed narrator described in the poems. In this collection, the speaker offers up a history with anxiety disorders, fraught relationships with male figures, developing into an educator with socially just ideals, and the tensions between her Catholic past and Protestant present. The speaker shows an effort and desire to reach a consolidated identity as a Christian woman exploring an emerging Chicana feminist consciousness. While the story of God's hand in my life will be apparent in the poems, this introduction will testify, in part, to my journey with words: my Chicana literary and Christian educations and how the philosophies of each have influenced this collection. This introduction also addresses the ongoing questions I hold regarding how to reconcile still-developing ideas about the gender of God, Chicana feminism, and the decolonialization of the Church and offers potential features of long-term revision.

The Influence of Scripture, Prayer, and Worship Music

I have known the language of the Bible since I was four years old when my parents enrolled me in Agape Christian School in Mission, TX. We had Bible lessons every day and were expected to memorize passages of Scripture selected by our teacher. On Fridays, we would take a memory verse quiz where we had to write the verse and our interpretation of the verse's application to our lives; when we handed in our paper quizzes, we would recite the verse to our teacher. Every Wednesday morning, our school congregated in the cafeteria for chapel, and we sang Scripture set to music. When it was almost time to return to our classrooms, each grade took turns reciting their memory verses. The constant, repeated exposure to the Bible resulted in a deep ingraining of the language. Almost twenty years removed from the school, I can still recite many of the verses I learned, such as John 3:16, the Beatitudes of Matthew 5, and "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal," from the "love" passage in 1 Corinthians 13, among others. The verses come to me as I speak to people and in personal reflection.

Throughout my time at Agape, my mother, younger brother Danny, and I frequently accompanied my grandmother Alicia to Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in downtown Mission. We went to the twelve o'clock bilingual mass when the First Reading (Old Testament passage) and Gospel were read in English, and the Second Reading (New Testament passage) and Responsorial Psalm were read in Spanish. Father Roy Snipes prayed over us, interweaving the liturgy in English and Spanish, and the mariachis sang the sacred music in Spanish. In the third section of *The Wind Still Blows: Poems*, the reader will see how the bilingual influence of this church setting has led to a speaker that desires to use Spanish and English to reflect a spiritual experience.

When I arrived at Palm Valley Church in Mission, TX, in July 2013, I was taught to read the Bible with an understanding of its historical and cultural setting and advised against taking a portion of Scripture outside of the context of the larger biblical narrative. My pastors introduced me to the BibleProject, a non-profit Bible study resource founded by Tim Mackie, Ph. D. and John Collins. Through their *How to Read the Bible* video series and podcasts, I began to see how the literary genres of the Bible supported the message of the Bible as a "unified story that leads to Jesus" ("About"). One who wants to read the Bible wisely must take into consideration the writers' audiences and compare specific instructions to the nature of God revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus. For example, the reader will see how the speaker upholds "Love your neighbor as yourself" in "Little Words Bleating" as she urges conservative Christians to rethink their treatment of immigrants.

My pastors also changed my perspective of prayer. In the Catholic Church, I prayed along with the same Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, and Apostle's Creed every mass, but at Palm Valley, I was encouraged to pray to God as I would talk to a person, a friend, that God's greatest desire was to reestablish communion with me. The intimate and honest language of the poems is founded on this truth. The speaker in the prayer poems, like "Secret Place" and "How to Pray," directly addresses God with her fear, frustrations, and hopes.

This collection has also been influenced by contemporary Christian worship groups like Hillsong UNITED and Worship, Bethel Worship, Housefires, and Elevation Worship, along with solo recording artists like Cory Asbury and Steffany Grezinger. Worship, as opposed to praise music, is characterized by slower tempos and a more ballade-like musical setting. The lyrics tend to be more introspective; they are prayers and simultaneously acknowledge the human tendency to wander and the eternal, inescapable faithfulness of God. The use of anaphora and refrain in

my poems, such as “Night Psalms” and “Pursuit,” is inspired by the chorus and bridges of this style. In the music, repetition is meant to guide the worshiper into deeper conviction of the words they sing. A clear of example of this technique is found in Leeland’s performance of “Way Maker,” where the group repeats the bridge, “Even when I don’t see it you’re working, even when I don’t feel it you’re working. You never stop, you never stop working.” As the vocalists repeat the bridge, jumping into higher octaves, the musicians build into a crescendo that leads to a resolution in a high-intensity reprisal of the chorus. The effect is powerful. It’s not uncommon to see tearful worshipers during service. Among my friends and fellow members, we share these songs as encouragement, and my poems are meant to offer encouragement to the Christian part of this collections potential readership.

My Chicana Feminist Education: The Contradictions and Questions

I came to Gloria E. Anzaldúa stumbling when I took my first undergraduate Mexican American literature course in Spring 2012 at the University of North Texas in Denton. I learned more about different identifiers for people of Latin American descent, Texas History, and for the first time, literature by Chicana/o/x and Tejana/o/x writers. We read *Caballero: A Historical Novel* by Jovita González, George *Washington Gómez: A Mexicotexan Novel* by Américo Paredes, selections from *Woman Hollering Creek* by Sandra Cisneros, and …*And the Earth Did Not Devour Them* by Tómas Rivera. The last work was an excerpt from *Borderlands/La Frontera by* Anzaldúa. More than any of the previous texts we discussed, the “El retorno” section changed how I perceived myself as a border woman and writer.

When Anzaldúa envisioned “‘the calvary of Christ’ enter[ing] this valley riding on their *burros*,” I saw the white outline of horseback priests on the t-shirts Father Roy made every year for the Easter Sunday pilgrimage to La Lomita (111). I saw my grandparents’ neighborhood, my

old neighborhood in McAllen, TX, in her description of "hot pink and lavender-trimmed houses" and knew what she meant by "Chicano architecture, we call it—self-consciously" (111). Anzaldúa's short description of returning home to reclaim and reinstate a latent history denied to her became my homecoming. The readings at once enlivened and angered me. I wondered why my high school curriculum excluded these books and why I had to travel nine hours away from the Rio Grande Valley to learn about home. This first reading of the "El retorno" section was my introduction to the violence of colonization and the Catholic church's role in dehumanizing the indigenous populations of Mexico and South Texas. It was also the first time I questioned my unflinching childhood view of the Catholic church as entirely benevolent.

I continued to take Mexican American literature classes every semester until my final spring semester in 2013. In a nonfiction course, I read the remainder of *Borderlands,* Jovita González's folk tales, and parts of Paredes's *With a Pistol in His Hand*. In studying the entirety of *Borderlands,* I learned more about the history of the America's original peoples and the colonization that began with Hernán Cortés' invasion of Mexico in the 16th century in the chapter "The Homeland Atzlán/*El otro México*" (27). Here, Anzaldúa describes the figureheads of the Catholic church's colonization of the Mexico/Texas region as "soul-hungry missionaries" (27). Father Roy's stories of humble country priests on el río were suddenly complicated by the new images of robed men devouring indigenous populations to satiate their avarice. She also casts the idea of manifest destiny as the product of white supremacy when she quotes William H. Wharton, a Texas legislator during the U.S.-Mexican War, who asserts that "the justice and benevolence of God will forbid that… Texas should again become a howling wilderness trod by only savages, or benighted by the ignorance and superstition of Mexican rule" following the war's end.

The readings also included Cherríe Moraga's *Loving in the War Years*¸ and I found myself even more vividly in her essay/testimonio "La Guera." I, too, am the well-educated daughter of Mexican American former migrant workers. My parents also made the decision to raise my brothers and me as American and nothing more, like Moraga's mother. In reading her words, "I have had to confront the fact that much of what I value about being Chicana, about my family, has been subverted by anglo culture and my own cooperation with it" (30), I began to recognize how I operated under the false sense of superiority my white passing privilege afforded me. At the time, I did believe that I was better than my classmates who did not leave the Valley. I did use my education as a weapon against my older brother who did not go to college. I did choose the University of North Texas because it was the furthest away from the Valley my parents would allow, and I wanted to separate myself from the "uncultured" cultured I perceived the Valley to have.

Humbled by these revelations, in my last undergraduate creative nonfiction workshop, I began to work on essay called, "What It Means to Speak English in the Borderlands." I was motivated to find out more about why my parents chose to raise my siblings and me without Spanish when the family included many older Spanish-only members. I interviewed my mother several times that semester, and I came to learn of the social climate my parents grew up in. I had heard their stories of migrant farm work all of my life. While my parents made clear it was tremendously hard work, they didn't share freely about what it was like to be Mexican American adolescents in the late 1950s and '60s.

From the interviews, I learned of the discrimination my parents faced in schools and communities within and outside of the Rio Grande Valley. My father, in particular, experienced cruelty in the Midwest education system. I learned he was, at one point, put in a school for the

mentally disabled because he didn't speak English quite well enough and because of undiagnosed dyslexia. I learned of other immense hardships my father faced through second- and third-hand accounts, and I was stunned to think of the worse traumas he won't share with anyone.

When my parents met, my mother was in her last semester of an accounting degree, and my father had just completed a degree to be a dental laboratory technician. Both were the first in their families to obtain a college education. As parents, they did not want their children to face any barriers to success. In the interviews, I learned that both my older and younger brothers experienced some developmental delays. My parents were encouraged by doctors and speech therapists to choose one language in contradiction to current research on childhood language acquisition. The exploration of family, language, and community in the third section of the collection began with this understanding: my parents' decision did not exist in a vacuum. Their whole experience as then-migrant-workers, now-educated-professionals in a racist, classist America led them to choose Americanization over potential challenges.

I give the reader this context to say that before the spiritual inner-change depicted in the poems, I underwent the beginnings of a cultural transformation. In my collection, the speaker puts Anzaldúan theory next to Christian doctrine not to co-opt the ideas of women of color or to force them into the framework of Christian beliefs, but to posit that, perhaps, both knowledges can come together to inform the speaker's ideas on what it means to be a woman of faith on the border of Texas and Mexico. I admit that in the current collection, Christian beliefs largely outweigh Anzaldúa's ideas, but I hope to engage with her philosophy more directly in future revisions. In my current understanding of both Anzaldúa's work and the Bible, I see some parallels between Anzaldúa's use of nepantla and the liminality of Christians as both spiritual

and earthly beings, people who live in a world full of pain and tragedy and in the anticipation of a renewed world. However, I have not done enough reading or learning to unpack these similarities.

I still question if I can call myself a Chicana feminist and be a Christian given how the patriarchal systems of both the Catholic church and Protestant denominations have devalued and oppressed women for centuries. I recognize that readers may find my invocation of Azaldúa alongside Christianity to be contradictory. In *Borderlands,* Anzaldúa holds the Church and its influence on society responsible for the expectation that women should be subservient to men and should fit into the prescribed identities as nuns, prostitutes, or mothers (39). She further argues that Christianity has made women "carnal, animal, closer to the undivine," (39) and while I agree that gendering God as male perpetuates the idea of women as less godly than men, my readings of the Bible push back against the idea that the dehumanizing and devaluing of women reflect the heart of God.

Many feminists take issue with traditional teachings of Eve as the arbitrator of original sin depicted in Genesis 3. However, God does not place the blame on Eve but on Adam; in fact, in verse 15, God provides the victory over sin through Eve. Paul, in Romans 5, argues that Jesus is the "second Adam," able to redeem Adam's wrong in the Garden of Eden. Beyond motherhood, women in the Bible are depicted as examples of righteous leadership. In the Old Testament book of Esther, readers see Esther, an ethnic minority as a Jewish woman in Persia, subvert the authority of her husband the King of Persia and his advisor in order to save her Jewish community from genocide. The book of Judges offers Deborah, one of the few righteous judges in Israel. The judges came during the period of Israel's history before they called for a

king. Deborah is known as a prophet, so she leads Israel by speaking to them the word of God. She also leads Israel in a victorious uprising against an oppressive Canaanite king.

To be clear, I do not mean to underplay the trauma women have experienced in the Church as an institution and from the men who use biblical passages to oppress women. My mother left Catholicism in 2012 because she grew up under the Catholic doctrine that divorcees cannot partake in communion and the onus for maintaining or suffering through the marriage that traditional applications of this doctrine placed on women. She felt home at non-denominational Palm Valley Church because she felt like she wouldn't be judged by her past. I give the reader these biblical stories to show that women play a vital role in the biblical narrative. I realize that my readings of Bible are, at times, non-standard, and I still have much to learn about the historical and cultural contexts of women's role in the Church as depicted in the Bible.

I stay at Palm Valley because our pastors parallel Jesus' attitude towards women in His ministry—it is a woman, after all, who becomes the first preacher of Jesus' resurrection while the disciples—men—mourn Jesus' death in their homes. Women also held positions as leaders of home churches during the early days of Christianity depicted in the book of Acts. In Acts 12, after the apostle Paul escapes from prison, he goes to the home of a woman named Mary, where other believers had gathered to pray. In Romans 16, Paul names several women as essential to the work of the gospel—workers for the Lord Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Persis, and Priscilla, the leader of a home church in Rome. Priscilla is named first in Paul's closing of Romans and listed before her husband. Women are an essential part of the way my church functions. They are pastors, members of the board, service producers, design, worship, and communication staff, and respected elders and mentors. They lead worship, pray, and teach from stage. They are leaders across several ministries—not limited to teaching children or among other women. The fact that

I can be a Bible study leader to a group of young adult women and men stands in opposition to the beliefs of other Christian denominations.

The feminism the speaker displays in this collection is only the beginning point. I am still trying to reckon with the Church's history of ill-treatment of women and questioning how the local and global Church can address the inequalities that still exist and move forward. I am still untangling my early Catholic education that shames women for sexuality and acting out of self-agency. My pastor says often that he believes in guilt-free Christianity; I wonder if he emphasizes this because so many of us, his congregation, are working to free ourselves from the shadows of "Catholic guilt."

My hope is that with more research on Chicana/x Christian writers, I can better articulate my feminism in later drafts and practice it in my life. In a future version of this collection, I would like to include more narrative poems about the women of my church, including a poem about how the women ministry staff and key leaders gathered around and supported a former volunteer who became pregnant before marriage. I would also like to add a poem about what it personally means to be a feminist who follows Jesus.

On Genre

In Christianity, a testimony gives account of God's transforming work in the life of a believer. At Palm Valley, I was taught that when people place faith in Jesus as Lord, they receive the indwelling Holy Spirit who acts as their guide and teacher (John 14:15-17, *New International Version).* Sanctification is the process of a Christian's gradual transformation into Christ-likeness by cooperating with the convictions of the Holy Spirit. The testimony relates this work in a narrative that describes the before-Christian life, the events that brought the believer to faith, and

the life they lead now in faith. It implies that God has done something the person could not do on their own or through their own volition.

In the Bible, testimonies served several purposes. In the book of Acts, sharing testimonies was a common practice in the early Christian church, meant to encourage believers at a time when Christians were persecuted by Roman officials and Jewish zealot groups. In the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Samuel, faith leaders like Moses, Joshua, and the prophet Samuel testified to how God had been faithful to Israel. In the prophetic books, like Isaiah, testimonies served as a course-correction when the people of Israel strayed from God and living His ways. Christians now share testimonies because the remembrance of God's past faithfulness brings strength for the present and hope for the future. The telling is praise. It strengths other believers to continue their pursuit of God.

Because the power of a believer's testimony rests in telling the truth, *The Wind Still Blows: Poems* is decidedly autobiographical poetry. I have, to my best abilities, recorded my physical and spiritual experiences as I have experienced them. I have only made changes to the names of family members and the men of past relationships. I selected key moments in my life since 2009 that describe my fall from faith, the wandering during my time at UNT, the sequence of events that led to my return to faith, and significant incidents when my faith was stretched and deepened.

In *You Can't Make This Stuff Up* (2012), Lee Gutkind defines creative nonfiction as "true stories well told," where "creative" denotes the use of literary techniques found in fiction, drama, and poetry, and "nonfiction" demands accuracy of facts about "real people and events" (6). Many poets resist labelling their work as nonfiction. However, Gutkind holds that "poetry is (often) creative nonfiction" because of its commitment to "spiritual and literal truth—presented

in free form or verse." The poet and journalist are similarly motivated to seek "larger truths" beyond what is "possible through the mere compilation of verifiable facts, the use of direct quotations, and adherence to the rigid organizational system of the older form [of journalism]" (12). A melding of two might be seen in Claudia Rankine's books *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* and *Citizen,* which seem to lean into the ambiguity between poetry and lyric essay.

My decision to tell my true story through a poetry collection was influenced by reading Rita Dove's collection *Thomas and Beulah* (1986) in a contemporary narrative poetry course I took in summer 2018. In this collection, Dove recounts the marriage of her grandparents. Like most poets, she does not give her work the label of creative nonfiction, but on the dedication page, she instructs the reader that "these poems tell two sides of a story and are meant to be read in sequence." The first section relays the love story from Thomas' perspective, and when the reader arrives at the second section, we are brought back to the beginning to relive the marriage through the eyes of Beulah. By the end of Beulah's section, readers discover a "Chronology" of events, and again, we are sent back to see how the personal lives of Thomas and Beulah align within the family and historical timeline. I was, to an extent, enthralled by how the poet's structure beckoned me to flip back and forth between the Thomas and Beulah sections, but to a greater extent, I was interested in how Dove relayed an expansive family history through poetry.

Dove describes her collection's relationship to the factual lives of her grandparents in an interview with Steven Schneider. In the interview, Dove discloses that the Thomas poems were the first to be written, and the interest was inspired by hearing her grandmother relay the story of how her grandfather, on a steamboat headed north, dared his friend to swim in the river. The friend died drowning in the river as Dove's grandfather watched helplessly. She states that the collection began with a desire to "understand [her] grandfather more" and how her "very gentle

and quiet" grandfather bore that guilt throughout his life (112; 115). She realized that should not rely solely on personal memory nor on the impressions of other family members, so to gain a better understanding of what the grandfather's life may have been like, Dove did extensive research on 1920s and 30s Akron, Ohio. Of telling the truth, Dove asserts that she "was after the essence of [her] grandparents' existence and survival, not necessarily the facts of their survival" (116). The character Thomas factually deviates from Dove's grandfather, but the fictionalized character is meant to capture the truth of the grandfather's oppressed reality as a black man living in pre-Civil Rights Movement America (116). Several poems in the collection do coincide with historical events, like the poem "Wingfoot Lake," which Dove subtitles with "Independence Day, 1964" (72). This poem describes Beulah watching with fascination and fear the televised Freedom March occurring on this day in Indianapolis. The intersection of the personal and political is represented in my poems "Little Words Bleating" as well as across the third section of the collection.

During my undergraduate degree, I focused primarily on writing creative nonfiction, but in terms of craft, I struggled with how to transition a narrative between scenes when long periods of time had passed. How does a writer re-contextualize or offer enough-but-not-too-much background information to the new scene? Dove solves this problem by allowing the space between each poem to connote the passage of time. In April Linder's article, "Eloquent Silences: Lyric Solutions to the Problem of Biographical Narrative," Dove is quoted about her collection, "…one of the things I was trying to do was string moments as beads on a necklace" (114, 2012). In the interview with Schneider, Dove reveals that while she didn't see her first Thomas poems as a book, she "did want them narrative" (117). She wanted to find a "way to get back into poetry the grandness that narrative can give, plus the sweep of time" (117). I realized that

following Dove's technique would not only be the most economical to way to tell a story that spans 2009-2020 but would relate how disparate events can create a cohesive narrative.

The assignment after reading *Thomas and Beulah* was to write a lyric poem that captured an intensely emotional and personal moment. The first draft of "How the Wind Blows" was the result. While my poem may not reach the lyric heights of Dove, it describes the transformational moment I gave my life to Christ. I was happy to have written the poem, but I was also tinged with nerves about how a Christian story would be received.

This nervousness carried into my second year of graduate school in Fall 2018 even though I was fully committed to telling my testimony in my thesis. More than writing a Christian narrative in a state school, I knew that telling my story would force me to re-experience and reveal painful memories from childhood, college, my first year teaching, and my struggles even after coming to Christ. It would mean talking about my emotionally abusive and repressive father, my alcoholic older brother, admitting to past sexual relationships, the questions I still held for God, and criticism from conservative members of my new church home. I had always been a quiet girl, but compelled by the Holy Spirit, I knew I had to tell my story no matter the cost. The urgency and nature of the speaker's cultural and religious backgrounds push this work into testimonio. Because the speaker is Chicana, a border woman who grew up under a tradition of silence, the reckoning of how God reconciled a smashed-clay life inevitably brings her to break the power structures of quietness within her family and the Church.

In "*Testimonio:* Origins, Terms, and Resources," Kathryn Blackner Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez describe testimonio as "a first-person oral or written account, drawing on experiential, self-conscious narrative practice to articulate an urgent voicing of something which one bears witness" (525). This voice is "not meant to be… kept secret" and is "bring[s] light to a

wrong, a point of view, or an urgent call for action" (525). The voice and call to action is intended to be political; additionally, Chicanx writers in the United States use testimonio as "a tool to express marginalization resulting from race, gender, and sexuality… and as a means to expressing agency" (528). The testimonio is an act of self-empowerment brought by empowering the inner-self, as shown through the works of Anzaldúa and Moraga. Testimony of faith departs from this because the source of bravery to tell the truth comes from the Holy Spirit alive in the believer. The teller of testimony does not do so alone; they are emboldened by the presence of God.

The lyric essays in my collection have a testimonio motivation. Lee Gutkind describes the fine line between lyric essay and poetry, arguing that "what some people refer to as the 'lyric' essay can be poetry" (12). Perhaps a distinguishing character between the lyric essay over a personal essay is the emphasis on "artfulness over information" (12). The lyric essays in this collection—"Losing," "Neil, "Grief," "Dreaming Walking," and "Goodbye/Hello"—do use poetic devices such as the heavy use of imagery and the radical use of space, but the narrative content is still quite accessible. I chose prose over poetry to house these stories because the narrative described in them are more expansive than those found in the narrative poems. I find the lyric essays appropriate inclusions in my poetry collection because they serve the same aim. Both forms bear witness to the speaker's evolution of faith. The lyric essays in the third section—"Grief," "Dream Walking," and "Goodbye/Hello"—also capture the speaker's progression on "the path to conocimiento" following the death of a close friend and shows how she begins to integrate the different facets of her identity.

My participation in writing testimonio is informed by my readings in the course Writing for Social Change, where I read Gloria E. Anzaldúa's testimonio "La Prieta" (1981). Anzaldúa

speaks against the colorism she experienced within her family, the discrimination she experienced because of poverty, and the pressure she felt to conform to feminine gender roles. I related to the fear she held for writing this essay; though, I recognize Anzaldúa, as a queer brown working-class woman, had at stake than I do in sharing my testimony. I was inspired by Anzaldúa's bravery and was encouraged by these readings to be brave also. I was impacted by Anzaldúa's fear of "making [her] mother the villain in [her] life rather than showing how she was the victim" as she wrote "La Prieta" (221). I felt the same about writing my father into the testimony. In past writing projects, I had failed to adequately capture the experience of living with my domineering father without making him monstrous. Several works throughout the collection ("Goodbye/Hello," "Night Psalms," and "Words for My Father") show the speaker trying to balance holding her father accountable for emotional abuse and infidelity while seeking to know him and forgive him. In "Words for My Father," the speaker states:

> I don't excuse you,
> but I know what it is to feel
> so far from your body
> you need to touch someone
> to know where your fingers begin.

This testimonio in poetry attempts to illuminate how the emotional traumas, indeed brought by my father, have shaped my life as a Chicana feminist writer and as a recipient of grace as a Christian. As I have learned more about Chicana feminism and the Bible, I have realized that God doesn't hold me to the virgin/whore dichotomy the patriarchy places on me and others. Because God has grace and love for all, I can undo the traumas of gender expectations once defined by the Catholic church. Additionally, in revealing my father's affairs, his drunkenness,

his withholding of love, and illustrating attempts to show him empathy, the speaker bears witness to a healing that may be possible.

I tell my family's story because healing requires that I reckon with the traumas I experienced as a member of my family. In doing the emotional labor to write these works, I have learned that the beauty of grace lies not in forgetting offenses happened, but in acknowledging their severity and choosing empathy and love. This is the way the Father treats me, and I am compelled to love my family in the same way.

The Prayerful, Truth-Telling, and Reflective "You"

In this collection, I use second-person perspective in multiple ways: as a signal for prayer directed to God, apostrophe, and as a tool to reflect on a first-person experience. Often, it is easier for me to write poems that directly address people—ex-boyfriends, pastors, my father—because for years, I have rehearsed what I would say to these men. In my writing, the speaker has a boldness that I don't yet have in real life.

My prayer poems take after the way biblical writers address God directly in their prayers. As seen in the Psalms, I capitalize "you" in my poems to help the reader differentiate when the speaker addresses a person or God in prayer. This practice is reflective of my education at Agape where all pronouns and names that refer to God are capitalized. This comes from the tradition in the New King James Version of the Bible though my elementary teachers used the New International Version as I still do in my current study. The capitalization of "you" and masculine pronouns when referring to God, Jesus, and/or the Holy Spirit seeks to delineate when the speaker is talking about human men father versus members of the Trinity.

I realize that using the masculine pronouns for God stands in contradiction to earlier claims to feminism. Theoretically, my theology knows that, as spirit unbound by the limitations

of the human body, God is without gender. The use of masculine nouns for God and references to God as a Father serve as a metaphor for God's relationship to humanity. But I admit that this awareness does not reach the current collection where God is gendered and gendered male. My early ideas of God were largely shaped by patriarchal views held by the Catholic church, and even now, I have had to seek out Bible teachers that affirm that God exists outside of gender. That I refer to God as "Father" more than "Lord" or any other name for God may be due to fact that now, as an adult, I look to God as a replacement for my earthly father. I want to further study biblical scholarship and translations, such as *An Inclusive Language Lectionary*, and feminist theory on the gender of God to guide my approach to using pronouns for God. The lectionary is particularly interesting to me because its editing committee sought to eliminate the masculine dominance in Scripture; for example, they replace masculine pronouns for Jesus with "Child" in their version of John 3:16. They also refer to God as both Father and Mother. I also would like to add a poem addressing the gendering of God and how the practice relates to patriarchy in future drafts.

In *Poetry: A Writer's Guide and Anthology* (2018), editors Amorak Huey and W. Todd Kaneko define apostrophe as "a poem addressed to a particular entity, often a dead or absent person" (167). The poem is written a like a personal letter from the speaker to the person or object being addressed, and the "you" serves to help the reader feel like the audience to the speaker's communication with their subject. In my coursework, I read several examples of apostrophe, including Javier Zamora's "To Abuelita Neli" in *Unaccompanied* (2017). In this poem the speaker addresses his grandmother he hasn't been able to see in fourteen years since he immigrated. He tells his abuelita his complicated feelings of nostalgia for El Salvador and resignation that he can't return if he wants to continue living in the United States. Huey and

Kaneko state that the intimacy developed in this mode is performative; the words exist in a poem, not a letter (Huey & Kaneko, 2018, 167). Perhaps in Zamora's poem, the speaker confides in the construction of abuelita because he feels he can't share them with the person abuelita. Additionally, readers can sense that this poem is performative because it is written in English when we can assume that the speaker's grandmother likely speaks Spanish.

This performativity is reflected in my apostrophe/epistolary poems, "To J," "Counterfeit," "Pastor Rick," "Dear Girl," "To J: A Goodbye," and "Words for My Father." In all but "Dear Girl," I chose apostrophe to let the speaker tell the male subjects of these poems the truth that was never said to the actual men. The "To J" poems and "Counterfeit" offer the speaker a sense of closure in the relationships she had with men who are no longer in her life. "Dear Girl—" is unique among my apostrophe poems because the speaker addresses herself. Writing this poem is an act of self-testimony. The speaker recounts all the ways God provided for and guided her through graduate school to re-energize her motivation following the loss of a close friend.

In several poems—such as "I'm Sorry,"—and lyric essays, I also use second-person as a way to reflect, a device found widely in creative nonfiction. In "Neil," the speaker describes her first sexual experience with a college friend and the immense shame she felt afterwards because of her Catholic upbringing. The distance allows the older narrator to re-enter the experience of the eighteen-year-old. Sue William Silverman would call this the "voice of experience" and "the voice of innocence" in her essay "Innocence and Experience: Voice in Creative Nonfiction. Silverman states that nonfiction characters can achieve "depths of view" in contrast to point of view through the mixing the voice of innocence, which relays facts, and the voice of experience, which offers insight on the facts (paragraph 4; 7). My use of second-person to relay a first-person

experience is an attempt to reach her deepest level of reflection and show compassion towards the subject "you:"

> Here is the spectrum of lies you will tell and truths you won't about this night:
>
> He was older.
>
> You were drunk.
>
> You were persuaded.
>
> You thought he really cared.

Imagine the older, more emotionally healthy writer speaking to the college freshman, "This, too, you will survive."

Part I: Leaving Behind and Returning to Christ

In the following sections, I will take the reader on an exploration of the influences, themes, and devices used in the collection. When deciding which poems to discuss, I had incredible difficultly excluding poems. *The Wind Still Blows: Poems* is a highly curated collection of moments of physical and spiritual reality, and each piece works in service of the testimony of faith. With the exception of the prologue poem "Secret Place," the pieces in this collection are organized in chronological order.

As the first poem of the collection, "Secret Place" serves as an invocation and invitation to allow God to take the speaker on a journey of healing. The line "Let my wounds be an opening," references Anzaldúa's work in "now let us shift… the path of conocimiento… inner work, public acts" (2002). The essay offers a path to inner understanding that compels the nepantlera to change herself and change her community. Anzaldúa examines the necessity of "using wounds as openings to become vulnerable and available (present) to others," which means "staying in your body" (572). The speaker in "Secret Place" expresses fear to re-enter

memory of painful experiences, but she knows that in order to tell her story, she must confront the physical reality of the past. Anzaldúa quotes Jean Houston, writer of *The Search for the Beloved: Journeys in Mythology and Sacred Psychology,* "wounding is the entrance to the sacred" (572). This idea can be found in my poem:

> God, I'm scared of this place
> where there are no secrets,
> what it means to stare at the deep,
> the deep in me rise.

The speaker brings to God her fears over the risks she must take to tell this story, aware that the telling will bring her closer to God and hopeful that documenting the process will help fellow Christians or anyone who is curious about different pathways towards healing past traumas.

The first section of poems represents the speaker's fall from faith and the life the speaker led from 2009, when she graduated high school, to 2014, after her first year of teaching. It documents the speaker discovering her father's infidelity, her complex relationships with men, her first experiences at Palm Valley Church, and a return to faith.

"Losing" describes the event that precipitated the speaker's departure from faith. Prose was chosen here because the narrative extends over several days in three different settings: a graduation party, the speaker's family home, and a hospital. This moment is the primary arrebato in the speaker's life. In "now let us shift…," Anzaldúa uses the metaphor of an earthquake to show that an arrebato is an event that violently shakes and disrupts the person experiencing it (544). She goes on to say, "Cada arrebatada (snatching) turns your world upside down and cracks the walls of your realty, resulting in a great sense of loss, grief and emptiness, leaving behind dreams, hopes, and goals. You are no longer who you used to be" (546). The speaker in

"Losing" is unable to reconcile her early ideas about God as completely good, completely loving and the betrayal she now faces. What had been a fundamental part of identity becomes the thing she most rejects.

The lyric essay "Neil" is the first of a series of pieces that capture how the speaker attempts to regain balance in the world through relationships with men. The form is influenced by Brenda Miller's "Table of Figures" (2009). In her essay, Miller borrows the impersonal form of a table of figures to create distance between the writer and description of sexual experiences. The narrator observes the female subject and clinically describes the girl's experimentation with masturbation, puberty, and sexual relationships with men. The distancing technique allows the reader the space to feel the poignancy of a young woman coming to terms with her sexuality in a society that calls women sluts for exceeding an arbitrary number of sexual partners. The reader isn't overwhelmed by highly charged emotional language and can register the sad irony of the narrator's detachment towards a subject who is deserving of gentleness. I use second person to create some distance between writer and subject, but, as mentioned previously, the use of second person here is to allow the voice of experience (the speaker addressing "you") to show the voice of innocence ("you") the compassion she did not afford herself at the time. The voice of experience reconstructs the old narrative of shame into a narrative of grace.

"To J" is an apostrophe poem that addresses the speaker's most significant relationship during her time at the University of North Texas. The radical enjambment visually represents two narratives running concurrently. The form is inspired by Robinson Jeffers' sonnet "Love the Wild Swan" (1935). Readers of sonnets can expect a volta, or turn of ideas, towards the end of the poem. In "Love the Wild Swan," the first speaker bewails his inability to capture the wholeness of nature in poetry, but the volta reveals a second speaker who urges the first to love

the pursuit of nature in writing rather than mastery. I took the idea of the two speakers and applied it to two narratives, one narrative holding a mirror to the other. On one side is J's variable efforts in the relationship. The other, the speaker's desire and sometimes failure to stand up for herself. The contrast can be seen in lines like,

> you yelled at me…
> when I needed to go to the hospital
> to wait for the birth of my best friend's son.
> I said,
> *You are taking me.*

The enjambment also reflects a relationship marked by a separation of values and a departure from what the speaker holds as an "ideal" relationship shown in the lines, "After six months together,/ I taught you not to say,/ *I wear the pants."* These lines reveal how the speaker rejects J's attempt to assert authority over her. The separation of these lines from the J side of the poem suggests that the speaker imagines that an ideal relationship consists of an equal partnership.

"Pursuit" is a ghazal that comes after the relationship poems to summarize the testimony narrative to that point: the relationships and first experiences at Palm Valley Church. Agha Shahid Ali, in "Ghazal: The Charms of Considered Disunity," defines the characteristics of a ghazal as "made up of couplets, each autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself" (205). I looked to the example of Richard Kenny's ghazal "Your Name" found in Ali's anthology *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000, p. 90). Instead of exact rhyme, Kenney uses a mix of assonance and near rhyme to maintain the spirit of the rhyme. I do the same. I chose a ghazal because by definition, the couplets could stand on their own, merely linked by syllable count and refrain. Each of the couplets in "Pursuit" could be taken as disparate

events in the speaker's life, but the common thread remains: God's pursuit of the speaker. In music, the term "ostinato" describes a sound—usually a note in a low register—that is sustained while a melody moves freely above it. It's a ubiquitous foundation of sound. The refrain or linguistic ostinato "You pursue me" reflects the speaker's realization that God was there, working in the unseen. The last line, *"I'll pursue You,"* bridges the divide between the speaker's between-faith life and pushes the reader towards a critical point in the poem "How the Wind Blows."

"How the Wind Blows" similarity to the collection title and title poem signals a key moment in the progression of faith. The title is a biblical allusion to the story documented in John 3. Jesus describes the felt presence and evidence of salvation as the sensation of blowing wind (John 3:8). *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (1989) defines the word "wind" in the original Greek language as "a movement of air," but symbolically, the usage of wind in the New Testament stands for the Holy Spirit. I use wind is a guiding motif throughout the collection as an acknowledgement of the presence of the Holy Spirit throughout the speaker's life recorded here. For the Christian reader, the motif serves as a comfort and reminder. For the non-Christian reader, my original intention was to echo the evolution of the speaker's awareness of God; though, in future revisions, I would like to relay these experiences in a subtler, more nuanced way and address the persuasiveness the non-Christian reader may feel from the collection.

I wrote "How the Wind Blows" as a response to write a poem that captures a "lyric moment" in the same way Rita Dove's poems do in *Thomas and Beulah.* Stephen Dobyns, quoted by April Lindner, describes the lyric moment as occurring "when the emotional world of the writer joins the emotional world of the reader. The primary function of narrative in poetry is

to set up these moments" (105). In the interview with Schneider, Dove states that the direction to read the poems in sequence was to allow the poems to reach their "maximum in meaning" in context with each other. She did make an effort to write each poem so that it would be "wholly self-sufficient," but since the poems are housed within a collection together, Dove seems to suggest that the individual lyric poems act like brush strokes to create a larger portrait of her grandparent. Like Dove, I chose specific, intensely spiritual moments to uphold the narrative, but another level, many of the poems, in particular "How the Wind Blows," seeks to join the spiritual and physical. The entire collection illuminates the emotional and spiritual reconnection between the speaker and God, and the act of writing this moment is the meeting of past and present.

Part II: Returning to Christianity as a Path Towards Healing

Just as the speaker underwent a revelation about her mental health in the previous poem "Unearthing," in "Sunday Night Apocalypse," the speaker undergoes a profound spiritual experience as a result of studying the gospel of John. Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon defines the original meaning of the word, *apokalypsis*, as "a disclosure of truth…concerning things before unknown; a manifestation or appearance." Across the Bible, the disclosure "relat[es] to the Christian salvation—given to the soul by God Himself…especially through the operation of the Holy Spirit" (1989). "Apocalypse" in the title does not denote the end of the world as modern usage suggests. Within biblical poetry falls "apocalyptic literature," which captures the dreams of visions where God or the kingdom of God has been revealed. In Acts 9:1-9, Paul, a Jewish zealot who persecuted Christians, experiences an apocalypse (had a vision) of Jesus. The experience sets him on the course of becoming the foremost missionary to non-Jewish people. "A Sunday Night Apocalypse" follows this understanding of the word "apocalypse." Through

intentional study of the gospel of John, the speaker comes to believe Jesus as man and God more deeply, and the moment catapults the rest of the narrative in *The Wind Still Blows: Poems,* including a desire to participate in mission trips.

"Thailand" is a list poem and both a word-based and visual collage of photographs taken on a short-term mission trip July 2017. In his article, "The List Poem," David Lehman states that in a list poem, "diversity replaces hierarchy as a structural principle while simultaneity substitutes for narrative cause-and-effect" (359). The word-based collage, though connected by listed details of the speaker's experience in a children's home in rural Thailand, reflects the speaker's conflicted attitude towards the ethics and efficacy of short-term mission trips. She wonders if she did any good or if she only perpetuated a cycle of colonialism and exploitation of the most vulnerable. The visual collage reveals the speaker's desire and inability to see the events and their consequences clearly even after years have passed. The collage depicts in the background the journal in which she recorded her experience—a visual metaphor for the voice of innocence—overlaid by the poem—the voice of experience. At the end of the poem, the speaker questions if the Christian church can be decolonial and make amends for the violence indigenous populations and people of color experienced because of conversion efforts in colonialism. I still question this possibility.

In "How to Pray," the spiritual meets the physical world again as the speaker relates the events surrounding her older brother's expressed desire to commit suicide. The "how-to" form is a framework to show that the spiritual reality of the speaker propels the speaker, her mother, and friends to act. Pray and do. It's a personal spiritual activism that is reflected in many narratives throughout the Bible. The gospels record Jesus went to lonely places to pray before he continued his ministry; the night before he is crucified, he retreats to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. In

"Let us be the healing of our wounds: The Coyolxuahqui imperative—la somber y el sueño," Anzaldúa also held that change, whether internal or in the community, relies on an "amalgam of the two": spiritual practice and praxis (303). The pastors of my church regularly teach on the existence of coinciding spiritual and physical realities. They cite Ephesians 6 to say that, at times, conflict originates at the spiritual level, and the resolution of this conflict relies on confronting the issue both spiritually (through prayer) and physically (through action).

As a companion to "How to Pray," "Morning Coffee" serves to illustrate God's continual presence in the life of the speaker's mother through the use of the pantoum form. As described in *A Handbook to Literature,* a pantoum can have "any number for four-line stanzas, but the second and fourth line of one stanza must reappear as the first and third lines of the following stanza" (349). The pattern repeats itself until the ultimate stanza where the final line repeats the first line of the poem. The looseness of my pantoum is inspired by Natalie Diaz's "My Brother at 3 A.M." (2012). The repeated lines here are slightly transformed each time to describe the mother witnessing her son hallucinating as he battles a drug addiction. The recursive lines signal the relentless nature of the son's (the speaker's brother) hallucinations as he envisions the devil hiding behind a neighbor's house. Most striking is that through the transfer of lines, readers see the despair the son feels as he sees the tail of the devil, crying, "O God… O God, look" shift to despair in the mother as she realizes the tragic state of her son (43-44). The mother in "Morning Coffee" deals with a son in recovery. The repeated lines represent a handing off of worry to God but also the mother's continual prayer.

Part II ends with "Little Words Bleating," a poem that preaches to so-called conservative Christians about their unloving treatment towards undocumented immigrants. The speaker documents an unsettling conversation she witnesses during a worship rehearsal at Palm Valley

when two musicians made dehumanizing comments about an immigrant woman. The organization of the poem moves like the teaching at Palm Valley. The poem begins with examples from Scripture that show how anti-immigrant sentiments stand in opposition to the speaker's interpretation of Jesus' command to love one's neighbors as oneself. It further provides examples of leaders who brought ruin to Israel because of their deeply rooted pride, which, in the case of Tamar's rape, can manifest as violence towards women. It moves to the speaker's inner wrestling with how to apply biblical truth to the injustices immigrants face. Here, the speaker writes from nepantla.

Anzaldúa describes nepantla "liminal space" is brought on by "transitions… a form of crisis, an emotionally significant event or a radical change of status" (310, 2009). The speaker in "Little Words Bleating" must decide if she is going to follow the mindset of the musicians or find a different way. In her exploration of Scripture and desire to know how God works in the physical world, she enters "the path of conocimiento." Anzaldúa holds that

> "conocimiento urges us to respond not just with the traditional practice of spirituality… or with the technologies of political action… but with the amalgam of the two—spiritual activism… to engag[e] with the spirit confronting our social sickness with new tolls and practices whose goal is to effect a shift" (311, 2009).

On one level, the speaker wishes to remind Christians who hold anti-immigrant sentiment to live out the gospels that describe Jesus as a friend to the socially oppressed. She realizes that this specific group may not listen to social justice activists, but if she offers Scripture, they may be more likely to listen and change their perspectives. On another level, the speakers wants other readers to know that not all Christians share in these political ideas.

Part III: Intersections on the Path to Conocimiento

In Part III of the collection, readers will see a speaker who again must walk the path of conocimiento as she copes with death of a close friend, unresolved grief she held for her grandmother, and the threat of border walls in her community. The arrebato is documented in the lyric essay "Grief," where, after experiencing a panic attack, the speaker comes to understand that she does not face this crisis alone. It demonstrates the work of the Holy Spirit as a benevolent teacher of faith in the process of sanctification. Additionally, in "Dear Girl—" captures a re-calling Anzaldúa describes in her section, "the call… el compromiso… the conversion" (554-558). Anzaldúa's work credits this remembrance to the work of the inner voice; the speaker of "Dear Girl—" credits the reminder to the Holy Spirit. The speaker is not only refreshed and encouraged to continue her graduate school journey, but it also signifies a speaker who opens herself up to multiple transformations as seen in the following pieces of Part III.

In "Dream Walking," the speaker has a dream that helps her process the unresolved grief for her grandmother. This grief brings back memories of the Catholic Church, and in the dream, her two church histories come together. The vision of Father Roy washing the mother's feet shows the speaker attempting to heal the wounding her mother experienced because previous Catholic doctrine denied participation in communion to divorcees. This lyric essay signals the speaker's desire to engage in community activism. This period of time coincided with many community activists' and Father Roy Snipes' fight to protect the chapel of La Lomita from the proposed border wall, his most recent expression of categorical rejection of a border wall between Mexico and the United States. The speaker feels called to be a witness and ally with those against the walls.

The form for this lyric essay takes after Sandra Cisneros' short story "Little Miracles, Kept Promises," that also evokes the Catholic Church. The narrator visits a shrine where she sees the milagritos (pinned charms depicting hands, children, or men and women) and the letters pilgrims left behind. Cisneros uses a space and a variety of devices to show the variety of prayers. The narrator leaves behind a braid of her hair as she recognizes the strength of Guadalupe and her mother, so it is a show of reconciliation. Here, too, the speaker seeks the reconciliation of women, the Catholic Church, and her new home church. As I was re-exploring my Catholic background, I was compelled to probe other aspects of my culture, such as my relationship to the Spanish language.

At the end of "Dream Walking," the speaker expresses a curiosity and concern about the Valley's native peoples. This came about from the research I conducted during to write an essay about La Lomita for my graduate nonfiction workshop in Spring 2019. In my research, I came upon Facebook videos of Juan Macias, a community organizer and representative for the Carrizo/Comecrudo tribe of Texas. I learned that while state representatives were fighting diligently for the protection of La Lomita, their urgency was not unilaterally applied to different historical and cultural landmarks across the South Texas border, namely the Eli Jackson Cemetery in San Juan, TX, where members of the Texas tribe lay buried. During this time, I interviewed Father Roy, and when I asked about the history of La Lomita, he handed me an orange booklet written by the Catholic church. It made mention of the Spanish land grant owners, but there was no mention of the indigenous population preceding the colonizers. At the time, I wondered about the exclusion, and in the future, I would like to do more historical research about the Escandón colonization efforts in the Rio Grande Valley and the impact of the Catholic church on South Texas' indigenous peoples like the Coahuiltecans. I would like to write

a poem, or series of poems, that explores this historical narrative and the Church's role in colonizing the Mexican-South Texas borderlands.

"Goodbye/Hello" serves as a language testimonio. The speaker reckons with the ways her father denied her language. This sets off a domino effect of reflecting on her practices as a teacher and how she related to her dying grandmother. As Anzaldúa describes, "affirming [that the mind and body] are not separate, you begin to own the bits of yourself you disowned, take back the projections you've cast onto others, and relinquish your victim identity" (554). The speaker chooses to shift away from the resentment she felt when her parents did not teach her Spanish as a child; she instead welcomes a new journey towards a more actualized self. She re-members her language and commits to a new legacy.

"Cruzando" is an extension of the language testimonio. I did not want to say I would try to bridge my English and Spanish but actually do so. When I wrote this poem, I used the Spanish I knew, and the original draft was full of grammatical errors. I involved my mother, telling her what I wanted to say, and she helped me fix some phrase to create a completely Spanish draft. However, I felt conflicted with the desire to have the poem be my language—even if it was a heavy mix of English and Spanish. I decided against a completely Spanish draft, but I did use a Spanish to English dictionary to find translations of words I wanted to use. The whole process was an effort: finding the right balance of my language while pushing myself to learn more, ask for help, and allow myself to be vulnerable enough to share a draft with the original language. Working with my mother as she co-edited this poem was part of the healing from the language trauma described in the previous testimonio. She has always encouraged me to learn Spanish now as an adult. The first time I performed "Cruzando," she was in the audience to both show her my commitment to this language and to actualize the poem's ethos.

In the poem, the speaker mentions “la herida abierta” as an allusion to Anzaldúa’s work in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987). She describes, “the U.S.-Mexican border *es una herida abierta* where the ThirdWorld grates against the first and bleeds” (25). Here, Anzaldúa’s image is meant to the collision of the first world with the third world results in a loss of culture; in an attempt to heal, the borderlands create a third culture. The grating of “Cruzando”’s speaker involves the Americanized, colorblind, patriarchal education she received from secondary school and church settings and the beginnings of her re-education from Chicana/o/x writers. One way she displays an evolving consciousness is by invoking the matriarchs of her family—abuelas, Tia Tóme, and her mother—as a way to reconnect to a familial legacy in Spanish.

Christianity teaches the speaker not to pray to anyone other than God, but the speaker prays to her mothers as a cloud of witnesses to guide her along the path of synthesis and blended waters. Chicana/o/x Catholics may see praying to mothers as regular practice as la virgen de Guadalupe is powerful (albeit complicated) figure in the Latin American church, but to Protestants, the practice is almost anti-gospel. Hebrews 12 relates that the heroes of the faith like Moses watch over living believers and spur them on. My grandmother Alicia and Tia Tóme are the heroes and matriarchs of my faith. I believe I am now living in the favor they prayed for on behalf of their family during their lives, and I want to believe that they continue to intercede for me just as Jesus does. Like the speaker asks God for wisdom in other poems, the speaker in “Cruzando” invokes the wisdom and blessing of her matriarchs as she navigates developing her cultural identity.

As the final poem in Part III, “La Lomita Morning” is a convergence of the personal, political, spiritual, and physical, evoking ideas about interconnectedness similar to Anzaldúa’s poem, “ritual… prayer… blessing… for transformation” (575-576). By entering into her

Catholic past, the speaker reconnects with the memory of her grandmother. In Anzaldúa's poem, the speaker calls the reader to "step through the doorways between worlds/ leaving huellas for other to follow/ build bridges, cross them with grace, and claim these puentes our 'home,'" (576). In the previous pieces in Part III, the speaker begins to build theoretical, emotional, and artistic bridges, but in "La Lomita Morning," she carries her body across the threshold of physical bridges to as a way to begin the work integrating the intersections of her identity.

Part IV: Re-Learning Love

The first poem in Part IV, "Uncrushing" describes the speaker's reaction when she is told a long-held crush was soon-to-be-engaged to a mutual friend. The poem employs second-person to relate a first-person experience as a way for the voice of experience to provide comfort and perspective towards the innocent, real-time "you." The form of the poem takes after Rachel McKibbens' "the ghost daughter speaks: white elephant" in her 2017 collection *blud.* McKibbens' poem utilizes the entire page from left to right, and the poet creates caesura with space between phrases rather than through punctuation or line breaks. The technique mirrors the increasingly fragmented and disorienting relationship between the speaker and her mother. At the start of the poem when the speaker is a younger child, the phrases are closer together, signaling the entanglement the speaker still experiences with her mother, but by the end of the poem, the space between phrases increases. It parallels the speaker's agency to separate herself from a menacing mother (38-39). Like McKibben's poem, the space between the phrases in my poem "Uncrushing" is tight at the beginning to parallel the speaker's anxious effort to mitigate her reaction to the news. The space between phrases loosens as the subject releases the false allure of a relationship with this man from church. The radical use of space of the lines "*maybe/ I never knew/ men/ could be nice/ without wanting*" highlights a key learning: despite the evidence

of all her previous relationships with men—both romantic and paternal—there exist men who are simply kind. Where McKibbens' loosened form illustrates a rupture with the speaker's mother, the subject in "Uncrushing" finds hopeful resolution in the release. The reformation of the speaker's perceptions on the qualities of healthy love brought by deepening faith is further developed in the return to J in the poem "To J: A Goodbye" and in "Words for My Father." Following the poems about the speaker's relationships with men, the next poems describe the evolving relationship she has with God.

The poems "Spirit Speaking" and "Songs for My Doubt" explore how I have discovered that doubt is not the opposite of faith. I have had to continually learn that just as a parent does not resent a child for their questions or fears, God is not resentful when I question Him. Both "Songs for My Doubt" and the earlier "Spirit Speaking" normalize conflicted feelings towards God. The speaker feels doubt, worry, fear, but the feeling pulls her closer to God rather than away. Prayer and contemplation help her arrive at a place of security. The word "song" in the title "Songs for My Doubt" highlights the psalmic nature of this poem. It follows the thematic model of Psalm 13, ascribed to David, the poet-king of Israel. In the opening verses, the psalmist cries out, "How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?/ How long will you hide your face from me?/ How long must I wrestle with my thoughts/ and day after day have sorrow in my heart?" (Psalm 13:1-2). Tim Mackie and Jon Collins of the BibleProject describe the book of Psalms as "the prayer book of God's people." Psalm 13 shows readers that questioning God is not a sign of weak faith; rather, because the psalmist brought these questions to light, He draws nearer to God and God to him. The relationship is strengthened as shown in verse 5, "But I will trust in your unfailing love;/ my heart rejoices in your salvation/ I will sing the Lord's praise/ for he has been good to me."

Another prayer poem, “Prayer for a Pandemic” depicts the speaker processing the more immediate crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and the more publicized support for the Black Lives Matter movement. In “Prayer for a Pandemic,” the speaker meditates on 2 Chronicles 7:14 in response to her church’s call to prayer. During her prayer time, she confronts how her privileged life has allowed her to ignore the suffering of others across the world, but specifically Black people in the United States. The murder of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Elijah McClain knocks her off her #blessed pedestal. The speaker enters what Anzaldúa describes in “Let us be the healing of the wound” (2009) as the “Coyolxauhqui imperative… to heal and achieve integration” (312). The speaker dismembers herself by recognizing how she has distanced herself from societal wounds. She begins checking her privilege, acknowledging the bloody history of the Church, and the violent rhetoric of conservative Christians. She preaches to herself and to those Christians who refuse to engage in social justice. Anzaldúa urges her readers, “May we do work that matters. Vale la pena, it’s worth the pain” (314).

A part of me fears the reaction of Christians, those believers who hold their views of God and the Church’s benevolence as unquestionable, if I were to broadly publish this work, and perhaps because this fear is valid, it may be a necessity to publish these words. I am working towards it. The question about a decolonial church first raised in the earlier poem “Thailand” is again raised here and remains unresolved. Can the Church ever truly be decolonial? Can feminist, decolonial consciousness co-exist with a Christian world view? With the increased and necessary awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement, I also wonder how the Christian church in the United States and abroad can evolve to work alongside social justice movements for BIPOC histories. I don’t have the answers yet, but I’m committed to walking out this journey of learning.

"The Wind Still Blows, A Psalm" most closely resembles the form of biblical poetry. In the BibleProject video "How to Read the Bible: Poetry," Mackie and Collins explain that while biblical poetry had no set metrical requirements, a defining genre characteristic is the use of couplets. In the first line, the speaker states an idea, and the second line develops that idea in some way, whether through imagery or contrast. The repetition of similar ideas calls the reader to linger over the layers of meaning as one would "a diamond of many facets" (Mackie & Collins, 2018). The lines "I will follow Your marigold paths/ arms full of my questions/ and quaking" show how the speaker develops the image of following God.

In "The Wind Still Blows, A Psalm," the wind motif returns a final time as a sign that the speaker can still trust the invisible work of God even in the chaos of a global pandemic and a burgeoning civil rights movement. That "A Psalm" is the subtitle of the title poem casts the entire collection as a psalm—Part I revealing a speaker who suffers with separation from God and the slow progressive growth towards God and deepening devotion in Parts II-IV. The repeated image of "colored yarn" recalls the speaker's desire to diagram God's work with colored string in "Little Words Bleating." The image has evolved to reflect the speaker's understanding that in the face of the unknowable, she is called to trust. The collection ends with forward movement—a rededication of the speaker's life as vessel to communicate and act out the love of God, which I see aligning to being a nepantlera committed to inner work, public acts.

The Spiritual Event of Writing: Conclusion

In "Now let us shift," Anzaldúa argues, "Those carrying conocimiento refuse to accept spirituality as a devalued form of knowledge, and instead elevate it to the same level occupied by science and rationality" (542, 2012). My intention in *The Wind Still Blows: Poems* is not to convert the reader; though, I recognize that more work needs to be done to engage a reader who

may be curious about a Christian narrative but has no desire to apply or take on the speaker's beliefs. The speaker relays her spiritual experiences in vivid detail only to convince the reader that she believes in the power of her faith experiences. These poems document how I, personally, have found healing when I began to learn about the heart of God rather than rely on religious traditions and institutionalized interpretations of Scripture, God, and worship.

Writing *The Wind Still Blows: Poems* has been a healing work. I view writing as a deeply spiritual practice, time when I can put aside teacher-sister-daughter-church leader duties and create alongside my Creator. These poems not only capture spiritual events, they are spiritual events themselves. Every poem is the result of the prayer, "God, help me write something beautiful and true." They are invitations for God to show up on paper and the intentional taking-off of the visage of put-togetherness I so carefully crafted for years. I have been diligent to the truth and gentle with my subjects and myself, recognizing that we have always been recipients of loving-kindness and transfiguring grace.

CHAPTER II

THE WIND STILL BLOWS
POEMS

Secret Place

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" 2 Corinthians 5:17

"The healing of our wounds results in transformation, and transformation results in the healing of our wounds." Gloria E. Anzaldúa

I am meeting in the secret
place with God,
and sometimes, to get there
I have to jump over rocks,
and sometimes the distance
is long, the leaping impossible,
my legs not meant to stretch

so far. He says, *See*
I am doing a new thing,
slow river in the pebbled desert,
and I say, *Where, God?*
He says, *Don't you see?*
I say, *The way is long*
the canyon is deep.
He says, *I will let the waters rise*
to meet your feet.

And I say, *I'll try.*
For moment, I am
walking on cloud-spotted waves,
saying, *Yes*, seeing God's outline
in the doorway of each moment,
but hasty, I rush and my feet sink,
hands fly up to catch myself,

sink through vapor chest,
grasping.

His hands find me.

*

God, I’m scared of this place
where there are no secrets,
what it means to stare at the deep,
the deep in me rise.

But I will trust You.

Let this struggle bring You glory.
Let this reckoning bear Your grace.
Let my healing be a light.
Let my wounds be an opening.

Let it all be praise.

CHAPTER III

PART I

Losing

You are seventeen, the summer before leaving for college, sitting in your mother's Jeep Commander. She's picked you up from your crush Ramón's graduation party, and for a long moment, nothing moves, her profile outlined by the green-white blinking of your crush's porchlight. The idling engine thrums as she picks at the gold buttons of her navy blazer. It's 10 PM. You wonder why she hasn't changed, why your brother Danny is in the backseat.

Your dad is having an affair.

No.

But you know.

You look at Danny. The way he holds his fists in the blue-black tells you it's not just suspicion this time.

He's still at home. The woman called me at work. She told me everything.

You hold the diagonal slant of your seat belt. Maybe you can unbuckle yourself, walk back into the house, rejoin the game of Risk, let the tickle of Ramón whispering the rules of the game erase what you've heard. Stay while your mother frays button threading.

You realize how long you've been sitting in the driveway and look at the yellow kitchen lights through the curtains.

Can we just go now?

Your father's TV paints the walls in blue rectangles through the lattice of closed French doors. You let your bedroom door softly click, turn the lock. There is only the metal click of the fan's pull string, its gentle wind against hot cheeks, when you climb under your blanket with your jeans, your shoes, pull the sheets over and under your head, so it stretches tight against your face. Eyes squeeze so tightly your head begins to hurt, bite the inside of your cheek.

You open your eyes, and dark oil rises inflating under the meniscus of your skin, so you feel like you must tell someone. You tell the three boys you care about, hand them jars of putrid oil, but their carrying doesn't lighten you.

At 3 AM, you look up to the ceiling, where the fan chain clinks.

You say to God, *I hate you.*

*

The next night, you are painting your toe nails blue, thinking about your trip to South Padre Island with Ramón and his friends in the morning. You think about making him a cup of coffee. Then, your father calls, *Sara.* He calls you this when he's angry. You go right away.

Stomach clenching, you walk into the TV room, and your mother sits on the brown leather loveseat, eyes rimmed red, prayer hands shaking in her lap.

We're going to the ER, he says. *You're coming.*

You put on your shoes and feel the wet paint slide against the top of your gray flats. You hold your mother's hand, palm her warm crumbled tissue, stuff a few more into her lime green pajama pockets as you walk past the kitchen.

You hold her hand in the waiting room of Mission Hospital, hand over hand. She feels like all the gravity holding you to the peeling green vinyl chairs. You will yourself to be hers.

You hold her hand as she lays down on her side, crinkling the waxy paper lining the padded bench. Your father is waiting, arms crossed and standing deeper into the room, so your mother cannot see him. She looks at you, telling you, *It's okay. I'm okay.* You smooth down her hair.

When the doctor comes in, you let her hand go and sit in a chair against the wall. He asks her questions, and she answers, eyes still anchored to yours. You feel like you are a little a girl and your mother is a little girl in a room with two big men talking.

You think, *How can anything ever be good again?*

The doctor says, *Panic attack. Is there anything that might have trigged this?*

She looks at your father. Nods. Looks at you, *Can you leave for a moment?*

You sit in the hallway watching hours stick then dissolve. You do not let yourself think of the *WHAT COMES NEXT.* You message Ramón about everything but hospitals and crying and crumpled tissues until he falls asleep, and you are left with the clock, the gray light of the hallway no one walks through, actively unwriting a poem about clammy hands and hospital gowns. Instead, you are on the beach, salt-tipped hair, sunburn creeping on your forehead and slope of your nose, holding hands in the sand with Ramón.

Later, your mother tells you,
I told him to leave.
I thought he might kill me.

Your breaking leaves no room for hating God.
No room for Him at all.

Neil

On the Saturday night before your first Easter away from home, Neil and you sit on your bunked bed in your Bruce Hall dorm room playing Pokémon SoulSilver and HeartGold, respectively, until five in the morning. He slides you off your mattress and leans in to kiss you. His breath smells like Cheetos.

Wanna get it on?

You take a moment, running your hands over his recent buzz cut. Some of the acne on his forehead has cleared since he no longer has the bangs he wore in high school. You nod.

He says he'll have to get condoms, so you assume he keeps the ones for his girlfriend Lauren in her dorm room. He wants you to come with him to the on-campus 7-11. You don't talk on the walk there, but you think about all the ways this is not what you envisioned. Your lungs pulse with electricity as you enter the 7-11. Neil talks to the cashier because they keep the contraception behind the counter. You stay in the automotive care section, fingers raking through the vanilla- and leather-scented maple leaves.

When you get back to your dorm room, it's almost six, and *Tom and Jerry* is playing on the TV in the background. You and Neil climb into your bed, and he only takes off your pants. You try not think about your unshaved legs or wonder if he didn't take off your shirt because he didn't want to see your stomach rolls.

Ready?

You nod. After a few minutes, you think, *How do women like this?* You hold your hands out to push back against his thighs until he moves them away. He moves deeper until you hold onto the end of his t-shirt and try to leave your body as you watch Jerry catch Tom's tail in a mouse trap.

You think, *Is this long enough?* and agree with yourself.

Okay, okay stop.

He does.

You want him to stay, so you can sleep with your head on his rising chest, but he gets up to leave, saying something about the whisky his roommate keeps in their room. You don't object.

Here is a list of people you will lie to about this night:
Your mother when she asks if you and Neil are still friends.
Ramón when you tell him the man was just a guy you met in Denton.
Ramón's best friend when he asks about you and Neil.
J, the boy you will date for a year and a half. He hates Neil and isn't quite sure why.

Here is the spectrum of lies you will tell and truths you won't about this night:
He was older.
You were drunk.
You were persuaded.
You thought he really cared.
It hurt.
He didn't stay.
It won't be the last.

You believe what Father Roy said about carnal sins, the kind that can send you to Hell if you don't confess, and you pray *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry*, pressing your fingers into the hollows of your orbital bone, elbows leaning hard on your kneeling thighs.

In bed, you watch the sun rise through closed mini-blinds, pressing the flesh of your stomach to feel your ribs, the shelf of your hipbone, imagining the hands touching you are not your own.

To J

When I think of you,
I think about your camel leather jacket
cool under my hands
even in July, my cheek
against the rasp of your stubble,
the menthol of Groom and Clean,
us standing in the inhale
of quiet sofas, packed curtains,
half-opened eyes of mini-blinds—
You had driven from Mesquite to Denton
to watch me unfold packing boxes
and wipe down my stove,
to say goodbye. I said,
I will always be thankful for you.
You left.
We never said I love you.
You said it was cliché.

I never said, *So what?*

When I think about
how you loved me, I say
like a nearly-lit bulb,
a match half-struck,
the best you knew how—

You took me to see
a Russian cellist perform Mendelssohn,
drove from Dallas to Denton three times
to pick me up, drop me off. Later,
we drank coffee at Big Mike's
and I knew I had you when you smiled,
laughing, at my hand-waving rambling
over Frederic Chopin Ballades.

After you dropped out of school,
you let me write my research finals
on your wobbly kitchen table
because my apartment was too loud to focus.
You said you could film a documentary
of my notecard and post-it collage.

You cooked us fried egg sandwiches
and bought me Jarritos de piña,
learned how to make hash browns
for all-nighters spent over a keyboard—
        you'd check on me,
        When are you coming to bed?
                Not yet not yet.

You played Demetrius to my Helena
for Advanced Shakespeare,
taught me Dallas driving,
yelling Adele, en route to a midnight showing of *Clue*.

You drove to my Teach for America interview
because I was afraid to go
alone. You knew that every step
I lunged towards teaching,
a step away from you.
You still drove.
You didn't complain.

You spent $400 dollars on a ticket to McAllen
a week after I moved away,
slicked on a suit and wore your Chucks
to my friend's wedding,
ate menudo across the table from my ex.
When I didn't introduce you,
        saying, *I'm not good at these things,*
You said, *We know*.
You let me drink a whole bottle
of cheap sparkling wine,
f i n a l l y
crushed *I love you* into my lips
when you thought I was too sloppy
to remember. At the airport, you said,
Let's not drag this out.

I think of all the ways
we were almost—

Bringing you De Alba's conchas

from home—

Sweating in your apartment,
lying back to back under
thin pilling sheets—

Rolling out tortillas
with floury hands for practice
during sleepless summer nights.
I could never roll
perfect circles, only angry ovals
like faces mid-scream.
You said they tasted just fine,
thinking it was a compliment.

We woke to the lazy sun rising
and walked in the humid haze
to Old West for coffee and lemon pancakes.

We sat in a Waffle House down 35W
during finals week.
You said if I left home for my birthday
we would break up then.

I stared at parked cars
to keep from crying—
I told myself you
must really love me.

We took pictures with sloths
hanging from trees
for my 22nd birthday.

I didn't invite my friends.

You picked me up from DFW
every time I flew home,
you, always swearing
at the airport construction—

me, folded silent—
let you spit and rage,
thinking,
This is how you get a man to stop.

After six months together,
I taught you not to say,
I wear the pants.

You swore while speaking to your mother
over the phone, in person
when I first met her,
never stayed at my apartment,
never read my writing,
said my friends were losers,
said laughing, *Not surprised*
when my best friend told me
he was having a baby.

I asked my friends
if you were a good person,
wondering if I was
for not expecting you to be.

You said I was using you
for your no-AC Ford Taurus
when I asked for a ride to work.

I loved you the way
a sunflower wrenches its neck
straining from shade.

You told your tios and their friends
what happened under summer sheets,
let them stare and whisper
when I visited your parents' home.

I flew black to Denton early
to watch the New Year fall
with you, thinking of a year earlier
when I, still warm with Malibu rum,
let you kiss me—I asked,
What do you want from me?
because I had rote-memorized
that all men want something,
You said, *Nothing*.
I believed you.

A year later,

you yelled at me when
I couldn't find the livestream
of the New York ball drop,
again when I spent a weekend reading
George Washington Gomez,
when I called my mom every afternoon,
when I needed to go to the hospital
to wait for the birth of my best friend's son.

I said,
You are taking me.

After six months of teaching in the Valley,
you told me about a girl,
and when I visited Denton, snuck you
into hotel rooms, you told me
she was too clingy.
You let me pour the whole hope
of the future through your unlaced fingers.

If I had stayed and we built
our lives on each other,
would I have to pull our children aside,
tell them, *Daddy didn't mean it that way,*
tell our daughter, *Daddy's just protective,*
tell our son, *Daddy's hard because he wants you to be a man?*

Your love was a bubble caught in my throat,
a hand around a lightning bug.

I was so happy
to fit in the groove of your palms.

Would you have flattened me?

Would I have let you?

I'm Sorry,

Ramón.
Your love was boots slick
with deli meat grease
left outside the front door
while my mother sat in meetings—
I never saw this as consideration,
only as a metaphor: half-commitment.

I asked you,
Come help me grade.
I pulled you through
the doorway with an embrace
and my lips. You looked over
your shoulder to the porch-lit homes
in my mother's neighborhood,
as if they'd spread your secret.

Loving you was sitting
cross-legged on a couch,
almost-touching,
half-watching a movie,
half-watching the way
your hands cupped your knees.
When we laid in my bed,
my cheek on your chest,
you asked if I still loved J,
just warming my bed with your body.
I said, *No,*
thinking of my *I don't know*
when you asked if I could marry
a man without a degree.

Years before,
dizzy with prom-night confessions,
summer of maybe-love,
I wrote you a letter
in a sticker-studded notebook:
Choose me.
Let me be enough.
Say that you love me

just because I am.

I’m sorry I didn’t love you
that way either.

Pastor Rick—

I walked into Palm Valley Church
in July 2013, hard-edged,
splintered-vase heart. I drove
my mother to your parking lot
out of guilt for leaving her
as my family broke.

You have to know:
I didn't want the smiling greeters.
I didn't want to find myself
walking into the high-ceiling auditorium
with its elevated stage,
Texas-slate lined walls. I carried
my fury for fathers into the rows
and watched them fill
more people than I'd ever seen in church.
Is this some Joel Osteen thing?

The band in blue jeans walked onstage,
guitar-riffing, pianist glissando-ing through praise,
lyrics stretched across on a projector screen.
The people around me sang loudly, clapping,
hand-raising, shouting, *Amen!*

This isn't church.

Church was mariachis, untuned violins,
too-loud trumpets, *Lord, hear our prayers.*
It was dogs sleeping at the altar
and holy water showers, an old priest
with a Texas drawl telling stories
about ranch chores and Saint Peter.
It was frankincense and tingling bells,
cowboys crooning during the communion
I wasn't allowed to take.
It was repeating prayers, kneeling, bowing,
crossing as choreography with my mother,
grandmother. It was receive the gospel
gladly, leave it in the pews.

Then you walked onto the spot-lit stage.

I don’t remember
what you said, but I watched you,
tall and smiling. I didn’t believe you.
I thought your warmth was manipulation,
your concern, patronizing.
You couldn’t really be so kind.

On the drive home, I asked my mother,
Did he even go to school?
At least priests go to seminary.

I kept coming.
Church was appeasement,
relearning how to live with my mother.
It was learning a new rhythm to follow,
sit and listen, feel faceless in the crowd.
It was get bored and think of all the ways
I could sneak Ramón into my home.

One weekend, in the blue-black,
I sang along. I prayed with you,
wanting the words to mean—
God’s good plans,
healing, homecoming,
being created out of love to be loved.
Everything I thought I wanted, crumbling,
in those months: teaching, Ramón, home.
I thought I knew Jesus, but I wanted
your Jesus, the meek and powerful,
the one who searches for the single lost sheep,
the one who knows my voice
in the roaring crowd,
who calls my life a masterpiece.
I wanted Him to be true.

I kept a clipping of the worship guide
pinned to my visor, reading, pleading
DON’T LOSE HEART
in my school’s parking lot, hoping
your conviction was enough to cover
my unbelief, my doubt, my splitting,
hoping this Jesus you knew could make
everything easier—calm my students

who ripped their tests in front me,
called me a bitch and a phony.
He didn’t.

I kept coming—singing, praying.

I carried the hope of maybe-Jesus,
a warm seed in my pocket.

This Rock

You will be convinced to stay
at Palm Valley, your San Juan school
by a message about Caesarea Philippi—
place of goat sodomy and sacrifice.
Pastor will say Jesus took his disciples
to the mount called the gates of hell.
He looked at Peter saying,
On this rock, you will build my church,
and the gates of hell will not overcome it.

The ushers will pass you
a small black stone, slim gray fissures
on its face. Pastor will tell you,
Let it remind you of your church-building God.
You will think, *My classroom.*

On Monday, you will walk the aisles of desks,
thumbing the stone in your skirt pocket,
open a desk drawer,
letting it clink against the metal.

You will think your rock
is your classroom.
You will think your students
are the gates of hell
this Jesus will overcome.

Pursuit

Lizard-brained, I longed for a man
You pursued me.
I slow-sludged toward my self-ruin
You pursued me.

When my shaking father bellowed, caught, *it's just sex*,
and I cursed Your Holy lumen,
You pursued me.

Quiet words hid my lying fangs. I devoured—
I knew how to trip a boy-man
You pursued me.

I thought mattering was having a boy in bed—
I fell hard, brittle woman
You pursued me.

You tracked me down as I knelt by smoking altars,
praying to the empty gods in men
You pursued me.

You saw Neil: my new moon, my first unraveling,
my unmeetable sugar sand
You pursued me.

I told Neil, *I'm so sad* when I meant, *Don't choose her*.
I small-smiled as he confessed, *she's pregnant*
You pursued me.

I claw-clung to J's bad ribs searching for a home.
He vapored on my thirsty tongue
You pursued me.

My sticking, orbiting fears astroided Straight-As.
I split-atomed dreams of teaching
You pursued me.

Scribbled words murmured hope into my dusky lungs.
Bonnie Friedman coaxed my risky lines—
You pursued me.

I said I would never return to Valley palms,
family, a fractured skeleton

You pursued me.

To teach, constellation people carved a comet path.
On spring nights, I dreamed of San Juan
You pursued me.

Over coffee, Ramón said, *It's coincidence.*
I sighed, *Divine intervention*
You pursued me.

Breathed-out Word slowly buckled my proud and bruised knees.
Thinking of Christ, I straddled Ramón
You pursued me.

One Sunday, the pastor prophesied, *Don't lose heart.*
My unloosed class became a standing stone
You pursued me.

Through wild green parrots You whispered, *Sarah, come near.*
I turned in rhythm to their song—
I'll pursue You.

How the Wind Blows

In a downtown Dallas Turkish coffee shop,
J and I sipped two syrupy cups
one after the other, talking about my future—
I'm moving back to Denton
for the program—getting a job—
staying—maybe we…
He said we couldn't meet again.
It's not right.

I watched my cold coffee
settle to wet grounds
as he told me she made sandwiches
at a Subway down the street,
dreamed of writing web comics—
he met her at a voice actor audition
the last week we were together. She called
over and over when we met each other
in a Hampton Suites in June July.

Brass bells dully clinked
in the saffron-scented room
as Jared walked out to answer
another call from her.
My acid anger ate at the blue paint
of the wooden booth, foamed
in my throat when he said,
rising, *Gotta go now*.

I drove to the airport—
my anger throbbing, heat waves
skidding off TX-635,
thinking of the curls on the woman
I hated for loving the man
I didn't know I didn't love.
In a black rental sedan,
tires droned
you're prettier smarter more
rage like a swarm
of locusts curses
an incessant humming
knuckles petrifying
bone-white on the steering wheel.

I wrapped scarves of fury

around my neck as the sun dipped
me in the amber before sunset
and pulled the tassels tighter
until an instant of openness:

clarity arrived,

wind blowing windows open
to let the sun stream,

illuminate,

all that wanted to stay
curdling and hidden—
God, I don't know how to live.
Show me how to live.

I remember the curve of yell-prayers
down the Dallas loop, nodding and tears,
heart thrumming:
an inverted roll of thunder,
a rumbling towards the moment
before the crack of lightning,
the snap and twinkle of
something new.

At the airport,
God glistened like newborn skin.
Behind the driver's seat,
I left behind a bag of books
like old conversations.

Flying home to McAllen mesquite,
I traced and retraced the thrill
of electric softness,
fingers pricking
with the tiny ardent lurching
of something in bloom.

CHAPTER IV

PART II

Unearthing

During the intake interview,
my counselor tells me,
Don't worry.
Social anxiety is highly treatable.
People recover.

The name alone unwinds
my seaweed thoughts.

There is nothing wrong with me.

*

The next time, I tell her about
the young adults' ministry at church,
playing keyboard on the worship team,
praying aloud for people,
but I can't stand the sitting, the waiting, the talking.
Every week, I circle the block around the church
pleading with breath to feed lungs.
In the down time, I stand in the back,
finger nails making half-moons on my forearms.
A new friend says, *You look tired.*
I'm a teacher.
It's enough for them to stop pushing.

Dr. P. says, *You think you'll say the wrong thing?*
Nod.
What's the worst to come of that?
I won't have friends.
And what's the worst to come of that?

I'll be alone.
What would happen if you were?
I pick at a hangnail on my thumb.
I would be sad.

Go deeper.

I'd feel like no one cared. Lonely?
I think of UNT, first year,
eating lunch 10 minutes before closing,
when the lines are short,
no audience for my sitting
alone at a linoleum-top table
facing an inner courtyard at Bruce Hall,
eating watery fettucine with the squirrels.

No no no.
She leans forward,
maroon Lazy-Boy creaking.
Go lizard-brained.
If you were left alone,
a baby,
what would happen?

I blink.
I'd die.

You'd die.

*

After the session, headlights spilling
streaks onto a darkened Dove Avenue:
Alone. I'd die.

Tar heavy in my belly. It feels true,
the bass beat vibrating soundlessly
through declined invitations, swallowed words,
sitting at tables in silence like talking is dangerous,
heart pounding, *Am I too quiet? I'm too quiet.*

Driving home, my fingers curl, uncurl
around the blistered steering wheel.

I will never leave you nor forsake you.
Unfurling thought, melts on your tongue,
caramel words,
I will never leave you nor forsake you.

The knowing doesn't feel like cure,
but I learn to make anxiety a buoy,
a signal flare telling me
Dig here. Explore. Unroot this weed.

A Sunday Night Apocalypse

apokalypsis (n.): 1. a laying bare; 2a. a disclosure of truth concerning divine things before unknown given to the soul by God himself, or by the ascended Christ, especially through the operation of the Holy Spirit; b. a manifestation, appearance.

While my roommate finishes
her lesson plans in the other room,
I sit at my desk, lit by candle pop
and flicker, and my fingers trace
for the first time
the small print verses,
But these are written
So that you may believe
that Jesus is the Christ,
the Son of God,
and that by believing
you may have life in His name.

It's just a flash of seeing

Jesus,
touching people: the orange sleeve
of a woman's arm, hand clapping
a man's back, and my fingers curl
around the vision of your dusty palms.

I see You smiling—
wide—lines in crescent moons.
You're laughing,
and the sky behind you
is the same blue as my sky,
and the light that shines,
diamond waves, is my light.
I feel the pebbled ground holding
the weight of Your sandled feet.

My breath catches,
palms up, tourmaline moment
of being held so solid
I feel it in my fingertips,
shoulders, soles of my feet.
You were here.

The knowing is home,
a new song I've always known.


Thailand
Forest mountains, small houses with pink and jade sheet metal roofing, blur of palm trees, oleander, bugambilias lining the medians, roadside markets selling durian, mangoes, pineapples, and long beans, home shrines with glittering sequined and filigreed roofs. Sometimes, in the mountains, shrines peak through tree tops. The road to the children's home in Phetchabun curves inward, into the green of trees and thick tufts of grass. I write in a journal, *This is the middle of God's palm.*
When I am there, it is only honey, ripe watermelon and instant coffee for breakfast, T's sweaty little boy head leaning against my cheek, playing Snakes and Ladders with M after dinner, singing *Father, you are king over the flood* with G, teaching Thai students numbers and nouns for a day, morning staff worship, braided chorus of Thai and English echoing up like signal fires in a bright room with palm-mat floors.
The morning of our last day, my team and I stand in a half-moon on the concrete basketball court, waiting to say goodbye to the children as they leave for school. G hugs me, and her green skirt swishes at my ankles. I pray for her. When she walks down the road towards school, she looks back three times before slipping behind the veil of trees.
This is the first time I wonder about my goodness.
send me.
Is 6:8
When I think of Thailand, I hold a candle in each hand. On the left: the glow of God's goodness, grace in every concrete block, making meals for staff, the wind chimes of laughter I shared with children, even momentarily. On the right: knowing I took more than I gave, humbled in the humid night when children were more pastors, knowing there are better local hands than mine, dreaming of the silver-veined edifice of a decolonial church.
Wondering, *Can both flames hold?*

How to Pray

Ask: Is Sam alive?

You pull into your mother's garage after church and see boot-prints in fine yellow dust, tufts of black curls you think might be the cat's but know will stick straight up if coaxed—you've seen him do it. You feel your chest pricking, static blood-hum thickening.

Ask: God—

Start again: God, is my brother dead?

You watch your mother try to put back together a smashed ivy pot, pick up the broken plastic lawn chairs. You tell her we need to leave.

Ask: What do we do?

You sit in your blue CRV—the one that Sam drove up to Denton for you—and he texts Mom: *I almost blew up the gun safe… There is something wrong with me.* You and your mother try to think of the words. You are the writer; you think you should have the words. He texts: *I need to die.*

Ask again: What do we do?

You drive to Stars on Old 83 and order two Vanilla Cokes.

Again: What do we do?

Your fingers find the number to Suicide Prevention. You sit 5 minutes listening to the ring stop ring stop. You pay for the cokes with the sticky coins in your cup holder. Your friend Esther messages you: *I know something is wrong. How can I pray?* (You still haven't asked her how she knew).

Ask: Who do we call?

You think: a pastor. You dial Michelle—your mission trip leader to Thailand—try not to choke on the snake of your story. Your mother holds her phone like a hurt bird, stroking through your brother's messages.

Say: Father, when my mother called and told me don't come home, Sam is drunk and screaming, and I begged You to explode into this world,

this is not what I meant.

Plead: I believe You, Father, but help me with my unbelief.

You drive back to the house you moved into a year ago to get away from the screaming and smashed coffee pots.

Say: Save him.

The women's pastor calls and says go to the police. You look at your mother sitting inside your living room, small and strong, a river stone worn smooth and unbreakable by the currents. Her voice lays steady and cool. The pastor tells her, *The church is praying with you.*

Ask: Are you sure, God? Don't you remember the last time I called, when the police pinned him to ground shirtless, Sam crying *Momma*, and I was just a little girl, sitting on the top of the stairs, stopping myself from telling the officers: *Stop laughing*, thinking I shouldn't have called at all?

Your mother: *We have to.*

Say until the words crest into truth: I will trust you in this.

You cloak your mother's hands in yours and drench the room, every inch of your quaking doubt with every promise you've ever found in Scripture, pray yourself into the future, the gospel of sober Sam, safe Sam, Sam lightened without the tar of his split and splitting brain.

Say louder then louder: Father, You have Sam's name etched on the palm of Your hand, the same hand that flung the stars into existence, the same hand that coaxed seas from the shut mouths of rocks. You breathed life into his nostrils and knit him vessel by vessel in my mother's womb. So breathe again, God, breathe into my brother a new song to strum on his guitar. Let your breath be the burning coals guiding my brother back to his bones. Let him see You, Good Father. Hurtle him into hope.

You tell your roommate you don't know when you'll be back. As you and your mother leave to meet the police at your childhood home, your roommate calls the other women's Bible study leaders, and the prayer ripples out under the wheels of your car.

Say: I will see Your goodness in the land of the living.

You open the back door of your mother's house for the police and stand in her living room, careful of the fish scales of glass glittering the Saltillo tile. The officers walk halfway up the stairs, hands on their guns, and call your brother to come down.

He says no.

Say: Please.

You and your mother stand in the front yard, under the fingertips of your neighbor's live oak. You stare into the curtained upstairs window.

Say: Don't shoot,

plea like a bright bud

Don't shoot.

Your hands hold themselves to feel their frantic pulse beat against the even earth.

Don't shoot.

Your lungs fill with infinity waiting for the bang or

The grass pricks against your ankles, the sun buzzes warm.

> Your brother, hands limp behind him, follows the officers out of the house towards the police car. You watch his face flicker between light and shadow as he passes under the arms of trees.
>
> 24 hours later, he calls your mom from the behavioral center. *I'm going to stop,* he says. He tells her he never believed his muddied thoughts could become real, step out into the world to find a match to strike. *I'm sorry,* he tells her. *This is the end of it.*

Breathe because He understands the language of exhales, the thank you each cell spells.

Morning Coffee

God drinks coffee with my mother
when the morning is a breath.
He flakes the paint on her yellow rocker
as she listens to chickadees chatter for acorns.

Held-breath nights become exhale mornings,
and God shines His comfort on her shoulders—
she remembers, *You feathered the chickadees,*
peacocks, crows—
how much more will you care for my kids?

God suns His comfort, her shoulders sigh:
You who counts the stars, count my children,
Let Your care flood the crushed flat beer cans,
the molasses song of worry, the scrape of fear.

God kneels in the dirt and counts hibiscus petals,
Sam and Sarah and Danny.
He wipes His muddy knees, lifts her green water pail, sings,
You are mine you are mine you are mine

Sam Sarah Danny.
He guides the back and forth of her rusting yellow rocker.
You are mine you are mine you are mine,
God hums as my mother drinks her coffee.

Little Words Bleating

In the 20 minutes between rehearsal and service,
the guitarists on the worship team talked
about chasing down immigrants
in the mesquite brambles dried
into rakes. They showed each other
the thorn pricks, and the one who plays acoustic
talked about the ticks that crept up his clothes.
He scratched his arms
at the goosebumps of not-there legs,
and I could almost see the ticks,
crawling mold on his tan uniform.
I listened to them laugh
about a woman who tore through thick curtains
of monte again and again,
losing his pursuit in a labyrinth of thorns,
and just before worshipping
an all-loving God, he laughed:
Welcome to the United States.

I want to ask the guitarists
and the man who drives
the NoBama bumper-stickered F-350
and my Pro-Life friends who describe
asylum-seekers as invasive species,
the men and women of my church
who clutch God's name like a talisman,
if they have read the book of Ruth.
Remember, Boaz gave her all
the grain her brown arms could carry, wheat
waterfalling, because she was a stranger—
> In Leviticus, Moses, mouth of God, said,
> *the foreigner residing among you must be treated*
> *as your native-born. Love them as yourself,*
> *for you were foreigners in Egypt.*

Boaz fed Ruth, protected her
when the judgments of rule of Law men
cast her as *not our own*,
Remember Rahab, Boaz's mother—
the prostitute brought into the line of Christ—
knew what it was to push

into new land by faith.
Boaz promised Ruth everything
when she crept in the night to meet him—
Remember Pastor said,
Jesus is your Boaz.
Remember the gospel of John,
Jesus saying,
They will know you are my follower
by your love for each other.

When I watch crucifix-wearing men and women
strut their *God bless you*s on Fox News
like a totem, praise our president
and dismiss his grabbing
for boy-talk,
do they remember Proverbs,
Do not let any unwholesome talk
come out of your mouths?
Remember Tamar,
King David's righteous daughter,
raped by her brother Amnon
because his desire was power,
and she was pretty.
Remember, he blamed her.
Remember, Israel fell to ruins
in the hands of powerful and pious men.

You're talking about people,
I wanted to say to the guitarists
but I didn't
because I am a coward.
I didn't want to suffer the refrain,
You're too young
too naïve
too sheltered
too book-brained
to understand how this hard world spins.

I want to say I would hug
the insults to my chest,
tattoo "bleeding heart" on the backs of my hands,
but my words stay staked to paper.

When we walked out on stage,
these men made the sanctuary bloom
with bent and glistening notes,
and the people closed their eyes,
lifted their hands, clutched themselves
singing about a God who leaves the ninety-nine
for one, whose reckless love holds together
a people in constant state of dismembering.
The guitarists, my brothers in Christ,
went home to their wives after service
and loved their children
in ways that still leave me breathless.

I don't speak
because this book I swallow like a lantern
seems to sing in a thousand tongues.
I tangle myself following the murmur of light:
Jesus—breaking the Law—healed a blind man
on the Sabbath—the Pharisees wanted to kill Him.
The Christ-blinded-then-unblinded Paul saying,
Obey authorities.
Jesus called the Pharisees
white-washed tombs, clacking
bones inside walking marble,
for loving position more than God.

I don't know how to unpuzzle
God who gave the world His Son
and hardened hearts to disbelieve.

I know from Pharaoh's hardened fist of heart,
Moses split the Red Sea into a slim hallway
of dry land between churning walls of water
because God said, *Go get my people.*
In the desert, God came to broken-backed
Israelites: column of smoke by day God,
pillar of fire by night God,
daily rain of manna for forty years God,
I'm the still small voice in the chaos God.

I know when Jesus is tested,
Teacher, what is the greatest commandment?
He said, *Love the Lord your God,*

and the second is like it:
Love your neighbor as yourself.

But I don't know how to love
a leader who builds empires
of lapping hate, who breathes out
We are putting up massive cities of tents…
thousands of tents,
lets children sleep in the cold
under space blankets,
and next breath,
invokes the sacred obligation to lead.

I want to riddle out my God,
spell Him out, make Him into a map
of pushpins and colored string.
I want to see how His mighty hand works,
diagram all the places His fingers have touched,
tab the invisible instruments of His sovereign grace.

I don't know what to do in the nepantla
of NOW and KINGDOM COME
except to bear the reality that kingdom
comes in me, the call
to be a living apocalypse,
except to say, when my students asked
in 2016, what do we do now?
We must do our greatest good.

I don't know what to do
except trust that my God is good
even when nothing else is good,
trust that like my life of shattered bones
and skinned elbows brought to wholeness,
He makes His love known,
pinpricks of starlight
in a dark that seems eternal—

goodness in poem hands,
lending hands,
leave water drums in the desert hands,
swing up bags of bread to the mata gente hands,
holding hands,

abrazo hands,
handshake and hand-up hands,
penicillin and Robitussin hands,
rub-some-Vicks hands,
te de manzanilla hands,
praying together: twos, threes, tens hands,
danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día hands,
no shadow You won't light up, mountain You won't climb up hands,
sewing loose buttons hands,
laying bricks and mortar hands,
taking down fences hands,
planting bushes for butterflies hands,
let's read a book hands,
this is how you make fideo hands,
rub the sage así hands,
groping in the dark for a rosary
for a pen
for a Bible hands,
brushing little child hair hands,
placed lightly on the shoulder hands.

We must do our greatest good.
God says,
I will make your hands my feet.

Tell me what I can do except love
the life into my students,
teach them to read for coiled vipers
and write words that strike lightning truth,
pray that leaders, both in office and ministry,
meet my God, even if the revelation comes
at the end of the age—
The One who says, *The first must become the last*,
the Christ who washed the feet of the man
who would betray Him—
smile and know that a grunt and wave is my brother's *I love you*
and grilled chicken every Tuesday is my father's *Let's be a family—*
write the little words of a split-open heart,
bleating, *Come and see.*

CHAPTER V

PART III

Grief

When you are asked to cover Group 1, you say yes—readily. You print out grammar foldables in rainbow cardstock, rebuy colored pencils, tape, glue sticks, scissors, notebooks. You've been told these kids are rough, but you write CLASSROOM JOBS on the board, PowerPoint of expectations, stickers, rewards ready. You don't have the money, but you buy cat pens, stress balls, and scented erasers. Your friend has died. You need to feel occupied. Effective.

For three weeks, they do not see you as their teacher. You notice smudges around the stickers clinging to the inside of their journals, and you laugh, imagining their ingenious smirks as they rub off with Expos your permanent marker checks on the stickers they've used for rewards. Monday, you scrape the stickers off with an Exacto knife. On the day you want to teach complex sentences—your mother's birthday—they argue over lunch time drama and refuse to listen. You have to take scissors away. You just watch them unravel—you grow limp. Far way, fingers tingle. You know this tingle: your unraveling. Two boys start yelling, rising from their seats. You say, *Stop,* but your voice is swallowed the moment it leaves. Tingling spreads up wrists, elbows.

You know it's not their fault, it's not personal. Their teacher left them on a Sunday night, no warning, no goodbye. You know they hear the way they are spoken about. Critical. They've carried it in their backpacks, in their heavy blinks all of their lives. Even so—your vision confettis.

Here—you would normally pray or repeat *Be still and know that I am God.* But you don't. You haven't been praying. Lately, it's been hard to be near God. After work, after class, you watch hours of dog grooming videos on YouTube instead of finishing your Bible study. You feel the weight of God waiting to meet you on paper, in silence, in music, but you treat Him like anyone who has ever disappointed you: you let all the words for Him petrify on your tongue.

Your grade team leader comes to check on you. Shoulders slump. You cry. You can't tell her why. You don't stop until she leaves.

*

You replay the day driving to UTRGV. You're about to workshop a piece about a dream you had—Father Roy, your mother, La Lomita. The tingling returns, fluttering in the back of your throat. Your brother calls, *We're waiting. You coming?*

Mercury in lungs. Vision darkens driving down Nolana Loop past Veterans. *I I told you.* Hold the phone away. Breath that won't stick. *I can't.* You are heaving now—metallic air.

He says, *Oh right, sorry.*

The light turns green. Flaming-arrow thoughts: *What a horrible horrible daughter teacher writer friend How h o r r i b l e.*

Vision speckles. You think to pull over, but you don't. *What a loser.*

Somehow, you find yourself driving down 281 towards University, still wading through thick breaths. You think, *This is how I die.* You don't pull over.

You don't remember parking, but suddenly, you are in the building, looking at yourself in a spotted mirror under dim lights. Your mascara freckles your cheeks, and you rub it off, wiping off the melted wings of eyeliner. You think about how to hide the green tinge your skin takes after crying. You practice making *I'm listening*, *I'm fine* faces.

When your class talks about your piece, you hear nothing. You worry about holding your *don't look crazy* face, counting your inhales and exhales. You hear, *This is about grieving.*

You hear. this is about grieving.

*

At home, you slip into your room, lights turned off, and press your pillow into your face, open mouth heaving. You hold your pillow to your chest, pray

you are my peace
you are my good shepherd
you are my good father
you are my strength
you are the rock, my high tower
you are my friend
and I'm yours
I'm loved by you
I'm made safe by you

I’m whole with you

You fall asleep mumbling.

Dear Girl—

You forget
to look up at the *seek-my-face* God.

I will be your Moses,
your poet-king David,
kissing this story back
into your bones
to keep you steady.

Dear Girl—

remember
the October night you came home,
still buzzing with worship
glowing from your voice,
You opened your *Armor of God*
women's Bible Study in Ephesians,
we do not wrestle
against flesh and blood,
but against the cosmic powers
over this present darkness.
Your hungry eyes read:
heart-sticking pull of fear,
sometimes does not spring
from your mind's spoiled litany
but from the rusty whisper
of the prince of lies,
a tactic to push you off
God's lighted-path purpose for you
laid, cobble by shining cobble.
Self-doubt, another faulty magician
hiding cobbles behind freckled glass,
a twisted shepherd beckoning, *Turn back.*

You fell asleep
and heard a woman's voice
against the muted black
of not-yet-dreaming,
clean neat syllables
as if she was sitting
on your flowered quilt,
You need to go back to school.

You woke up gasping
as if you had broken through
a curtain of freezing water—
hands raised, fingers stretched
past the ceiling, face turned up,
your bedroom humming with nearness.
You called out,
Yes God. Yes. I'll go.
You didn't have the money.
Yes God.
You didn't have a portfolio.
Yes.
You hadn't written for four years.
I'll go.

Dear Girl, your father Abraham smiled,
Abraham—so sure of God
even when his feet weren't sure
of what lay beyond the next dune,
only sure that God said, *Go*.
He went, following that fire-fly voice.
You went.

Remember
your parents' land investment
sold after thirty years of no interest—
they gave you the tuition.

Remember
you sat down to a kernel of a thought,
drank black coffee and wrote
your portfolio until it sprouted
tall ears of corn waving towards the horizon.

Remember
you read God's promise to Joshua,
I will give you every place you set your foot.
You curdled in fear thinking
you would be ridiculed for writing
lines about the day that God called you out
of the shadow of your old self,
called you out to the sun of your new name—
your class said, *Keep going.*

Remember
the nectar pour of God's words

on your tongue, the heady drip
to paper, the steady hand
that smoothed every wrinkle
of your trembling fear.

He is not done with you yet.
Though your anxious mind presses
sour wine, your words like butterflies
pinned to your ribs,
His kindness melts the steel.
Dear Girl, say His name,
let the breath of grace
pull out the stones from your stomach.

Dream Walking

I had a dream my mother and I returned to Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Mission, TX. We watched parishioners file out of the red-bricked chapel, smiling under the speckled shade of the palo blancos in the courtyard, children playing in the eddies of the virgen fountain.

When I was a child and the noonday mass was too crowded, my mother, brother Danny, and I would sit on the rounded lip of the fountain. I liked the way Mother Mary's plaster hands stretched outward, a frozen forever-welcome towards the neighborhood with pastel-painted houses across Dunlap Street. The slight curve of her lips made my heart thrum like it was filled with tiny birds.

My mother and I sat in the back of the chapel on the tippy brown folding chairs the church left for latecomers. Before the arching wooden altar of red tunic Guadalupe on her crescent moon, a woman brought her baby to Father Roy, and he held the bundled baby against his green robe shimmering with red and blue stained-glass light. His East Texas drawl rippled over Spanish blessings, prayers of protection, healing, his syrupy voice echoing from chapel sound system. As my mother sat squeaking into the metal chair, I watched him stroke the baby's fine fuzz of hair.

When I was a child, I listened to Father Roy talk about masses held at the Vatican, the cameras panning over the golden filigree and marble statues, the glittering altar and fresco paintings. He would say, *They ought to show the little mammas and abuelas. That's what's beautiful about a church.* During mass, I would stare at the carved columns surrounding praying hands Guadalupe, the cherubim at her head, bouquets of yellow flowers at her feet. My eyes followed the incense billowing up like petitions in the light of stained-glass Jesus, fell as the plume settled down over my grandmother and faded to nothing over her mended black rosary.

People holding Bibles close to their chests walked in, their feet clicking on the orange and green patterned tile. My dream eyes followed the clones of my Bible, the aqua faux leather peaking from the crooks of their elbows. Father Roy greeted them as he walked down the center aisle and leaned into the pews to shake their hands. I realized then it was a Bible study. I found my

backpack next to one of Father Roy's black labradors and pulled out my Bible as Father Roy told us to turn to Genesis 1, the creation story. He walked behind the altar table and began singing a song I remembered from childhood—

following the strum of an acoustic guitar, fingers gliding under the lyrics in a softly wrinkled red folder. I used to rest my thumb on the shiny gray spots on the corners of the page where others had flipped through the hymnal. I imagined holding hands with them as they sang.

Tears budded at Father Roy's throaty melody as if the song was my noble, patient father, and I, the prodigal daughter slouching home. He sang, *Blest be the Lord, blest be the Lord, the God of mercy, the God who saves.* And I rose with rest of the congregation, singing, *I shall not fear the dark of night, nor the arrow that flies by day.*

The chapel darkened, and Father Roy began the chorus of a song I now perform at Palm Valley, *Oh that rugged cross, my salvation, now my soul cries out, "Hallelujah! Praise and honor unto thee."* And I cried in the dream. The pressure of tears behind my eyes felt so real, I almost lifted out of sleep.

I have been taking naps in the afternoon, my room white with the beaming sun even through curtains. Perhaps because I am quietly wrestling with God over the death of my friend, perhaps because I remember kneeling on the flattened padding during my grandparents' funeral masses, trusting God with the souls of my old people, finding healing in the end to their suffering. I learned to mourn mumbling *santa Maria* during novenas in my grandma's living room, praying the rosary on my knees with tia Emma Becho, praying the rosary by myself in my room. Maybe I was letting the Holy Spirit groan for me in the rhythms I rested on when I didn't know what to say to God. In the kitchen, my mother let candles burn until they went out on their own, saying, *So their souls know when to leave us and go home.*

I have a question on my tongue like a glass leaning over the edge of a table.
Wrestling with *why don't people receive healing from their cancer? Why do people die*
before they turn 28?

In the cloud of dirt my own shoes kick up, I tell myself, *You are forgetting your God of mercy.*

When the dream-song ended, Father Roy came to my mother, took off her shoes, the gray Sketchers slip-ons she always wears, and began to wash her feet. He wiped a cloth across the raised veins on the top of her foot. Not stopping, Father Roy told us to read through the creation story several times, meditating on the imagery--God calling up the seas, dividing the sky, his Spirit hovering over the shudder of water.

Five years ago, my mother left Our Lady of Guadalupe after her divorce became official. When I asked her why, she said, *Divorced people can't take communion.* She didn't wait to find out if, somehow, the sisters or communion ministers could see the lawyers, the proceedings on her, flashing on her forehead. I'm glad she carried herself out of those thick wooden doors to Palm Valley, a Christian church with no crucifixes on its walls. When I moved back home after college, she told me she felt safe in the dark sanctuary and large crowd, that the worship—all guitar and keyboard, loud and enveloping—stilled her. She sang the words to herself in the car on the way to work, in the produce section of HEB. She told me she sometimes envisioned herself slamming her car into the concrete columns lining Expressway 83, but the music of Palm Valley kept her Honda straight. I followed her to Palm Valley because I didn't want her to be alone anymore.

When Father Roy finished washing my mother's feet, he slipped on a pair of red socks then her Sketchers. He smiled at her as he knelt, unrolling his long white wing-like sleeves. I rose out of the heavy blanket of dreaming as she smiled back.

Some of my friends at Palm Valley were also raised under the gaze of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Amanda said one day, she realized she didn't know what she was saying as she recited the Apostle's Creed, questioned if the voice behind her words spoke in faith or from tradition. She found her lips moving along to the prayers because her mother and grandmother, tios and primos, bowed their heads, crossed themselves. She left to find the God she could know.

I often think of returning to my Catholic church. I never did the sacraments, but when I was still in elementary, my mother said I was more Catholic than most because I loved Jesus and prayed to Him with the bright sum of my child-strength. And I loved this church with its high curved

ceiling so white it glowed in the passing hand of the sun. I loved standing next to my grandmother and listening to her low, trembling voice singing with the mariachis and the trumpets and the out-of-tune violin, *padre nuestro, que estas en el cielo,* played in a minor key. I always wondered why Catholic hymns sounded like mourning cries, why my grandmother and mother wore tiny tortured Christs at their necks, hung him in their rearview mirrors and above their stoves—wondered why Catholics didn't wear empty tomb bracelets or tattoo scenes from Christ's ascension.

I want to see for myself Jesus in the lecturas and follow-along prayers. I want to know if I, rage burning for fathers, left God because I wasn't taught His honey kindness or because I, bitter child, let go of His hand.

Now that I've come back to faith, bloodied from my self-devouring ways, now that I believe the God who saves, the God who engraved my name on His palms of His hands, the God who reached out to me through songs and kind pastors at Palm Valley, I want to sit on the cool creaking pews, kneel and stand and bow, raise my voice to the responsorial psalm.

In a Facebook post, I read about Father Roy's sunrise novenas every Friday at La Lomita, the shrine of cowboy priests. I feel the pull to go pray alongside them, pray that the border wall doesn't come, doesn't touch the refuge of pilgrims praying and pilgrims coming, doesn't bulldoze butterfly gardens or remains of el Valle's first peoples. During junior high and high school, I lied to my mother saying I had started my period, so I wouldn't have to suffer the sun on Palm Sunday pilgrimages across Levee Road.

I want to make my body march the miles, stand in the back of the chapel with wood-rafter ceilings, and recite *Lord, hear our prayers* as Father Roy intercedes. My hands prick to be there and feel the worn wooden pews, sit underneath a mesquite as the coral sun rises, and listen for the river's whisper.

Goodbye/Hello

When I was five or six and my maternal grandparents, Alicia y Ernesto, were still alive, my Uncle Roy, his wife Elia, and their two daughters from Buda, Texas, came to visit. I sat in my grandparents' Mission, Texas, living room on the loveseat below the clock with butterflies for hands, listening to the adults talk. My father sat on a kitchen chair in between Grandma in her orange recliner and Grandpa on the other couch. I listened to the fast river of Spanish from Uncle Roy's family, sometimes losing myself in the rapids of Elia's language, but I liked how she formed words with her whole body, her voice a heavy spirit in the little yellow house.

I couldn't remember a time when my parents spoke Spanish to each other or to my brothers and me in our McAllen living room. As a child, Spanish was the secret language of grown-ups, only used in the presence of my grandparents or tias or within the plastic lawn chair circle of men drinking beer. Years and years later, my mother told me a doctor advised her to choose one language to hurry along my younger brother's delayed speech. She said she thought I would catch the language by breathing in the Valley air. Sitting in the circle of adults, I followed a few words, ripples of water skidding over a high point of rocks. I asked, *What are you saying?* Someone translated. I asked a few times. I was dizzy with new words and the exhilaration of stepping into what seemed like secret knowledge. Then I heard something that sounded like *raccoon*, and I asked again, *What does that mean?*

My father, blue-rimmed irises wide, mouth firm under his thick black mustache, leaned in, *Why don't you ask yourself?*

His glacier gaze froze the words in my mouth. I thought, *because you didn't teach me.*

I burned, throat clenching, under the ticking butterflies. I was suddenly aware of the tiny pricks of sofa fabric under my knees. No one defended me. Not even my mother. The conversation continued, passed me as I sucked in my lips, stayed quiet, and tried to pick apart the mystery of that word.

I remember my dreams so vividly that sometimes I question if I really did sit on that brown striped loveseat. In college, when I was working on an essay about language and living in the Valley, I asked my mother if she remembered that night. She said she didn't. But the moment has too much flesh on its bones for me to believe it was just a dream.

Last spring, I leaned against the black leather in the back seat of my father's Ford F-150, coming home from looking at bronze and brushed nickel faucets for my mother's kitchen remodel. Even after eight years of divorce and separate houses, my mother and father still make these decisions together. The radio spewed Rush Limbaugh as my dad talked about the undocumented woman who cleaned his house and cooked for him. He had given her some of his old dress shirts to sell—the Kohl's ones he wore before he started collecting $60 Cinch button-downs. He said he felt sorry for her because she didn't speak English. He looked at me through the rearview window and said, *Who needs to speak Spanish when you live here?*

I think about my students, my students' parents. I think about Marco from my first year teaching, Marco who didn't speak English, Marco whose mother asked what I could do to help him on Meet the Teacher Night. I stood over his desk in my seventh grade English class day after

day, thinking *Oh God, Oh God.* I wish I could say that I pulled up my blue rolling teacher chair next to him as we learned language together, that I pieced enough of my ripped-quilt Spanish to help him make sense of passages and essays, but I buckled under my limp inability to get kids to sit in chairs, take tests without talking, stop yelling at each other, at me. I let quiet Marco, green-eyed, curly-haired Marco slip through my fingers. At the end of the year, I didn't tell him that he had failed both of his STAAR Reading and Writing tests because I was afraid that he would blame me. I was afraid he would be right.

I think of being 12, September 18, 2003, the rain drumming hard on the roof of my grandparents' house. I stood in front of my grandma's bed, and I looked at her hands—the hands that rolled out perfect-circle tortillas in two passes, brushed the snarls of hair at the nape of my neck, and drew holy water crosses on my forehead every Sunday. They seemed shrunken, her green veins thicker than fingers. I knew she was dying. My mother told me to say goodnight. The heavy rain hadn't stopped, and from the living room windows, my mother said she could see brown water pooling in the street. I watched my younger brother Danny walk up and say, *I love you, Grandma! Goodnight!* And I stood there—not because I didn't have the Spanish words, *te quiero*. She would have understood me in English. I left her in the dark like a womb room without saying anything. As my mother's car carved its way through flooded streets, I chewed my tongue thinking about all the words I had for my grandmother. I didn't know she would be admitted to the hospital for the last time days later.

When I close my eyes, my grandmother and I sit in the yellow rockers on her patio and watch the tremble of wild olive petals, switching English, Spanish—Spanish, English as we rock back and forth. I tell her about how a poem feels like new bones growing, and she tells me how to make pink roses bloom even when the soil is hard and dry. We talk about John the Baptist emerging from the wilderness with mouthfuls of wild honey. It's a conversation that can only happen in the gauzy haze of daydreams, and I know no one language large enough to mend the gap.

So I'll write this new story for the both of us, to say goodbye and hello, a story where I teach my English and Spanish to hold hands and live out the rhythm of trying. I'll tell my English to make room on my tongue when no other teacher wants to make time to walk Abraham through *Things Fall Apart.* I'll make myself soft enough to welcome teaching from my students. I'll remember my father, put in isolation for not knowing English, and feel compassion—remember my mother saying, *It's not too late to learn.*

I won't let my Spanish freeze under my father's words, *You don't sound right* or my roommate's words, *You're not really Mexican American if Spanish wasn't your first language* or my old words, *I wish I spoke like…*

I will write this story in the colors of two languages and let its current push me deeper into its melody.

Cruzando
Co-Editor: Noemi Acevedo Solís

para mi abuela Alicia
whose name I carry
para mi abuela Aurora
quien solo conozco
en fotos y cuentos,
escritos en un cuardernito
para mi tía Tome
quien siempre me llamó
mi Sarita
par mi áma
who held the toddler
hands of this poem—

Mi español
solo vivió cantando
en la Iglesia de Nuestra Señora Guadalupe
con los mariachis, violín y voz
coating stained-glass Cristos,
santo santo santo, santo es el Señor,
quiet mumbled en la misa de mi grandma,
un día a las ves, mi Cristo.
Luego,
de colores,
de colores son los pajaritos de vienen de afuera,
Todavía—en el memorial de mi amigo JJ,
mi corazón entona esta canción,
cuán grande es El, cuán grande es El.

Mi español
retumbó con ojos cerrados
cuando Father Roy decía *oremos.*
Knees-kneeling in the empty-shell
casa en Pueblo Street,
recitando el rosario
en la luz de una santa vela
left to burn por nueve días,
Padre nuestro—
Madre de Díos—
Agarré mis manitas pidiendo,
Lord, hear our prayers

manitas cruzando,
        y *gloria al Padre y al Hijo y al Espíritu Santo.*

mi español—
vestido en el titulo Ms. Solís—
fuera frases in collage,
lengua gruesa
con una vida llena de inglés,
lengua como dos piedras
grinding
cuando traté de explicar
a los padres de mi clase
        Jesús no está pasando,
        el Field Trip es… este lunes…
        en… Main Event—
Escuché a los otros maestros
hablando facíl facíl
con los padres—agua riendo.

Mi español—mariposas
just emerging, wet-winged—
cuando estoy sola,
repito capítulos de "Y no se lo tragó
la tierra," dos tres veces,
pacing the rug of my living room,
entrenando mis alas
a rizar around the tails
de oraciones, sonidos nuevos
y familiares—
el tenor de mi ama y abuela
        cocinando.
mi amá y Tia Tome
        tomando café.

Estoy aprendiendo
de mi amá
el lenguaje del cuidado
de nuestras matriarcas,
el lenguaje de manos callados
que pueden calmar dolor,
and turn my grandmother's
no me aguanta
into bendiciones while bedridden.

Estoy tratando
de escribir y recitar mi paso
adentro memoria, re-escribiendo
la historia de mi silencio,
cuando no quería tratar,
cuando las únicas cosas
que le dijé a mis abuelos
eran *hasta mañana!*
si, por favor
no gracias, Grandma,
cuando no quería llamarme
mexicana latina chicana
cuando no sabía
sobre la herida abierta
cuando no quería ver
mis heridas sepultadas—
Spanish tongue frozen
for the backwards glitter
of the American dream,
standing in the shadows
over my grandmother, not saying
te quiero for the last time,
hoarding second-hand stories
of her beautiful life,
heeding families and friends
and telling myself,
este lenguaje no es tu lenguaje—
no puedes ser chicana
si no hablas español.

Cuando
las palabras vienen
despacio, explorando
el valle de mi voz,
hiking through its mountains
of unuse, yo espero,
trusting que sí vienen,
heads of sunflowers peaking
over the hill. Esperaré

a escuchar the rustling
canciones de mis abuelas,

mi Tía Tome, the spirit-whispers
de ayuda, para un día crecer
my english y español
juntos.

Queridas,
enséñame las cadencias
de tus voces sonriendo.
Esculpé la voz que canta a mi
lo que necesito escribir.
Ayúdame batallar el grito
ahogado que miente,
IT'S ALL OR NOTHING.
Guíame—por favor—
porqué mis pies no saben
how to come back home.
Iluminé como puedo caminar
entre a new legacy of sunflowers.
Deja que tus brazos se crucen
hacia mí.

La Lomita Morning

Father Roy smiles in a video "The Country Priest,"
I close my eyes, seeing my grandmother
walk down 12th street to church
by herself, across bridges.
I want to cross bridges, too,
maybe self-made bridges,
to Friday novenas over the levee,
misas for La Lomita on the river.

*
The morning is damp gray,
cloudy not-yet-sunrise,
the flute of birds just outside my car.
I say to my mother, *Are you ready?*

Open doors rush in the feeling of open breath singing,
the humid hundred voices rising and gathering
in blue-lit curves of a church ceiling
though the only sounds are the wet rustle of brush,
Father Roy praying blessings
in the white adobe walls of La Lomita.

Two men stand listening at the chapel doorway,
and when my mother and I enter
the dark candle-lit womb,
a woman makes space for us
on a dew-damp burgundy pillow.
This moment: waiting for me to catch up
to history, for my body to catch up
to my grandmother's pilgrimage.
It feels as weighty as her,
as home as atole in tea cups.

I listen to a man recite
the second reading—the premature
arrest of Christ, the soldiers release Him—
Father Roy prays, *We are the head*
over all creation. I think,
What do I do with authority?
With remembering? Re-entering?

We sing *Bendito, bendito, bendito sea Dios*
while Father Roy breaks communion
wafers in half, people line up along
the yellow uneven pavers,
receiving the body of Christ, *Amén,*
as cameras flash on wafers meeting lips,
hands holding as we pray,
Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo.

When mass is over, my mother and I
shake hands with Father Roy—
women plan taquito and coffee breakfast
next Friday—Father Roy, *It suits me to come*
every week—Border Patrol crunch
the levee gravel—My mother, *You can feel*
the Holy Spirit here.

I follow the deep green
foot prints of displaced dew
back
to my car, the rest of the day
back
I am my grandmother's daughter
back
home in shared prayer
back

CHAPTER VI

PART IV

Uncrushing

After four years of praying hands clenching it will happen on a Saturday all at once you will be sitting elbow-leaning dining room table covered gold silver confetti a circle of your best friends you will finish toasting your roommate's engagement One will say *guess who else is engaged* Another will raise her eyebrows eyes rolling your roommate will ask *who X and Y* you will grip the walnut-stained corners fingers pressing the rough underneath sinking through wood grain *w h a t* you will tell yourself your face looks the normal amount of surprise your face says

this is just news

sitting on the couch clear plastic cup pink wine warming between your knees you will tell yourself *yes* you are your normal amount of quiet you tell your friends you're tired too much wine squeezing the bridge between your eyes a head ache you will hear them laughing and you will lie feet twisted in sheets listening to the fan whir will think the first time you met him Gennessa will say *you can't have a crush on a it's not wise* four years you will repeat *it's not w i s e* four years you will say yes anything he asks because you had not yet learned serving God is not about impressing people you will learn to pray *God take this*

you will whisper to your fan cataloging all the stories you spun self-siren songs wondering how to trust memory your gallery of misshapen mirrors

X saying, *you are full of surprises* contorting sitting knee-almost-touching-knee
on a sweating bus convexing X smiling at you too-long
glances weighted jagged unused shards of mosaics you will
wonder how you got so good *(bad?)* quilting coccooning yourself
believing the fables scribbled by your milky eyes

the next morning Sunday you will sigh looking into your closet
w h o c a r e s anymore will be tempted to text X saying
you won't be coming in the light from window slats slants
stomach rising small inhale *you* *are* *free* you hold the
words

open palmed

bringing them up to your mouth

saying *I* *am* *free*
clearing webs of maybes
tangles of missed *good morning*s

mist of *why*

not

me

you will tell your brother Danny this pearl caught on your tongue

watching minutes spiral

before service another healing in the telling

in worship sing
You have been *so so good* *to me*

weeks later
skin still stitching itself you will write

perhaps *the lesson of X is*

love doesn't
leave you skinned-kneed guessing *doesn't make you decode* *mumbles*

curves of eyebrows

maybe

I never knew

men

could be

nice

without wanting

you will learn you are good

whole

exist

because

you

are loved

looping threads

amber

amethyst

star dust

converging

a loom under

His fingers

you are made

of

comet glass

Night Psalms

Sometimes, my thoughts
are a ball of string r u b b e d
tighter and tighter between my fingers
until it knots. Old anxieties callous,
rhymes learned in childhood.

But You are above it all, a God in me,
working out my knots with s l o w,
gentle fingers.

Sometimes, the mending feels like
f r a y i n g.

*

I carry feelings like water pitchers swinging from my elbows, waist, strung around my neck. A sadness that my life is not what I thought would be. A gladness. A longing for what it might be, someday. A numbing to let everything be washed away by waves, to be quieted in a great white humming. A nostalgia for dusty dreams, a quickening for new words. A confidence that You, my God, are not done yet.

When I fall into Your lap of grace, I rub soft and raw. Your grace strips me of my most-loved phantoms, the ghost-arms of self-disappointment, self-derision, self-deconstruction. Grace says to me, "You are not supposed to be enough because I A M."

I'm learning that I am just a stumbling child, always skinning my knees, tripping over myself, and I make myself sting when I try to cover up my wounds with my salty hands. You say, "Hush now, come. As you are. Masterpiece of salt and blood and promise. I will help you with those knees."

Grace is transfiguring kindness. How sweet a word is kindness. Let it melt on the tongue. Kindness is warm, a song, sunlight, lamplight, home.

*

Even if Sam never fills the tender
spots that make him want to drink,
never uproots the patch of weeds
that still cling to father-hatred,
I will praise You.
Even if Danny never unbloats
the gangrene of silence and stiffens
under the rot of his anxious anger,
I will praise you.
Even if my father never apologizes

for the affairs, for the never-being-enough-for-him,
for making love witholdable, unearnable,
I will praise You.
Even if my mother never learns
how to loosen the plaster fist of worry,
if she shrinks to nothing trying to grow
everyone but herself,
I will praise You.
Even if stopping the cycle of toxic fathers means
I will never marry,
I will praise You.
Even if my words amount to empty hands
and dried-out wells
I will praise You.
I will lift my hands in song.
I will let Your grace be my strength.
I will wear Your name like a flowering wreath.
I will put on Your love as banner and baton
because all You ask is
Sarah, do you trust me?
Yes, Lord, I do.
Sarah, do you love me?
Yes, Father, I do.

To J: A Goodbye

You are the pocket of sand I kept,
my remnant of Egypt. I waited
for you to turn into glass,
hoping the friction of my fingers
would form you
into a pitcher for myself.

You were my spoiled manna
hoarded during years of wandering,
half-fed me the shimmer of mirages,
the ghost love of warm-body-dreams,
phone calls on summer nights,
half-turned-my-stomach-sour.

I knew I was wrong—
Abraham walking in place,
Israel building a temple
in the desert, Ruth meeting
on the threshing floor a man of Moab.

I was afraid I would miss your weight,
that my waking life wouldn't hold
to glimmer of secret dreams.

I was wrong.

Good love in gentle friends
oozed into the all the bone gaps
I saved for you.

I wish the same good love for you.

New Creation

On the last night of Summer Camp 2019, I stand in the middle aisle of the Marmax Theater nestled in the tree-flecked hills of Giddings, TX. The youth band is roaring, "There is another in the fire," and I look over at my 8th grade girls, the girls I've served for three years—shared my heart, shared my Jesus—and in the purple-lit smoke, they're standing on their chairs, eyes closed, hands raised, singing to a God I've watched them come to know. I think, *God, who am I that I get to do this?*

The music stops, and my girls and I walk out into the night shaking with stars and cicadas. We sit on wooden benches lit up by strings of white lights.

I ask them, *What is God telling you?*

They say,

I want to sing for Him.

I want to serve other kids.

I want to pray for my brother who doesn't believe.

I'm starting a Bible study at my school—even if it's just me.

I tell them this love is the hope of the world, the healing of generations.

Later, in our cabins, when the girls are asleep, I lay on my side and watch the dark water of the lake outside my window shudder in flashes of light.

The only prayer I can find is breath.

I hear You whisper,

My girl,

this is new creation.

This Rock, Reprise

In the summer of 2019,
you and forty other people
will walk past mossy streams,
water running under stone paths.
You will watch the sienna face
of a mountain gape from tree tops,
an orange rocky mouth cut from
the mountain. Pastor will point:
the stumped column, carved alcove,
crumbled platforms to side of the mouth.
Caesarea Philippi. Israel. You will be there.
You will walk down creaking wooden steps
to the base of the maw and pick up a dusty stone.

Pastor will read,
Jesus said, "Who do you say I am?
Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of God."
Jesus: "On this rock, you will build
my church, and the gates of hell
will not overcome it."

Pastor will remind you
Peter's name means rock
—both place and person,
the body-bridge where heaven
meets flesh and walks the earth—
Peter preaching to Jews on Pentacost,
the day the Holy Spirit fell
in flaming tongues,
and the twelve became thousands
holding secret churches in their homes.

You will stand under a bay tree
in the pricking heat of an Israel afternoon,
dusty stone in hand.
You were always the rock,
God carving the crumbling bits
to find the ore, your body
your hands, your feet, your class, your words:
the church He made of you.

Walking Israel

I.

Body, what a gift you are—
tall, thick legs, round belly.
We climbed a mountain today,
you and me, up the rusty face
of Masada by the Dead Sea.

Let's learn to love our wheezing,
each burning breath of dusty inhale,
I love the Lord, my strength exhale.

Love our slow climb, pulling and pushing
our knees to bend over every step,
stopping with friends to breathe
and watch shadows glaze the canyon.

Love the feet sore and slipping
on too-slick socks. They brought you
here, *my strength my strength* now
heart beat and lung pull—
Father, give me strength today,
yes. Amén.

We sat in a 2000-year-old synagogue,
cool in the salted shade, black birds'
shadow lace on the carved stone.
Hand over my chest to still
the warm blood raging, I sing
through my sweaty palms,
sacred swollen fingers:
Thank you.

II.

Psalm 23—
Here are the green pastures:
    steep rocky hills freckled by tufts
    of pale green grass birthed by Mediterranean spray.

The sky is a withholding blue. It holds a fist of sun.
The shepherd stops. Sheep lay down
on sun-bleached-white gravel beds.

Here are the paths of righteousness:
The shepherd lines his sheep
up the jagged face of the hill
and walks. They know his call.
He goes ahead and sheep mouths devour,
each their own lane. They leave
ribbons of hoof prints in the desert,
follow with their just-enough bellies.

Here is the valley of the shadow of death:
deep ravines cut into rock
by rivers. They can flood in seconds
from mountain rain.
Boulders can loose themselves, careening.
Here the shepherd leads his sheep.
They follow because he knows
the places where water spews
from the open mouths of rocks
and melts away limestone caves of shade.

III.

I watch waters ripple on the Sea of Galilee,
green glass waves gold-foiled in the setting sun.
The waves curl around each other's white foam fingers.

The water shudders out from the red hull of our boat
to meet the crest of waves, the ring of foggy mountains.

All I can think is: *Jesus was here.*

His feet touched the tumbling jade peaks.
The disciples watched the waves lap boats, the shore,
living water.

I take out my notebook and write:
Jesus, I have no gilded words for you.
You were here, and you are real.

Words for My Father

Someday, maybe now,
I will have the courage
to walk into my father's house,
dusty light swirling in
from the slap of his screen door.
I will sit him down
and take his large dry hands
    the ones that ripped
    Bermuda onions from Texas dirt,
    plucked blueberries free of stems
    for extra pay,
    moved me out of five apartments
    without complaint,
    the ones that never wore
    a wedding band,
and I will swallow my pebble breath
to tell him,
I forgive you.

Before he has a chance
to recoil, I will grab his arthritic hands,
tell him:

I forgive you now, again,
over and over, because my sticking shadow
self clung to the fragrance of disappointment—
I didn't want to Dad,
but now, I'm unclenching my hands that held
this waxing coal to my chest.

I forgive you

for all the nights
the Bud Light echo of your heavy boots
made me shake, forced me to learn
to move from room to room without
the sticky pop of feet on tile
and lock doors without clicking.

You made love a broken equation

with invisible variables kept in your pockets.
I searched for ways to make you like me.

You were too busy for my poems,
too busy for my fumbling fingers
across a keyboard.

I forgive you for your splicing words
when I wanted healing,
your *Ni modo, that's enough crying*
when Grandpa Ernesto died.

I never saw you soft with my mother,
hold her hand, tell her she's beautiful,
cook dinner or wash the dishes
when she came home late from work.
I became a woman thinking a man's love
would be concealable and unsaid,
that a woman should be happy
just to live in proximity to a man.

I forgive you for all the ways
your betrayal left me spinning,
grabbing at the gravity of any man,
sinking my love into uncatching hands.

I forgive you for the years of anger
when the plume of my rage
flooded out all thoughts of God.
I didn't want a Father.
If your good proved poison,
how could I trust what I couldn't see?

I don't excuse you,
but I know what it means to feel
so far from your body
you need to touch someone
to find where your fingers begin.

I know your silence keeps
you bandaged and numb
against your mother dying
of cancer in a California hospital,

against your drunken father tumbling
down the stairs—you call him “Good for nothing.”
I know he beat you.

Dad,
I am here to tell you
we can heal the wounds of generations.

My father,
I choose you.

Songs for My Doubt

I.
Here is my question:
Does God exist?
God, are You in this?

And as soon as I ask,
I know. I feel
the gentle pressure of arms
closing the distance,
the Father's eyes saying,
Yes, dear girl,
I am.

I am,
and it echoes through
all the cobwebs of my doubt,
mud of my fear.
I am,
roaring quiet under waves,
the groan of fault lines and nebulae.
I am,
the sound of cells rubbing.
I am,
the breath of trees,
dreams of dandelion roots.

You are.
God, a gentle Father
who loves first, without question,
before I lift a hand to earn it.
You are realer
than the sun, than my face
reflected on a speckled mirror.
The hope of hopes is that You are
who You say You are—
beginning-and-end God.

Your name answers all my questions,
inhale of two syllables,
Yahweh

Abba
Father
I AM
You are it.
You are.

Every atom knows Your name.

II.

Even in this fever of doubt,
in this dust storm of disbelief,
You have been there,

standing with me in the whipping
grains of new glass,

You are as close as recognition.
I'm turning my eyes inward
to this temple of gilded lungs
You made in me,
and I am seeking Your face in me,
soft gold over bruised veins.
I return to You.

Sing your promises
back into me,
let them echo in my ribcage.

God,
I choose you over all.
Tie my wandering branches
to Your watered vine—
Watch me turn my flower's face
to the only sun of Your name.

Prayer for a Pandemic

If my people,

At the Neighborhood Walmart, I hold hand sanitizer against my palm, Clorox-wipe keypads and Chase card paying for pasta sauce and wonder about the navy paisley bandana that wraps around the face of the person next in line.

who are called by my name

I watch Pastor Rick online Sunday—only the slightest blink of amber on the indigo-gray sky—by myself first—to make space to sing loud, backs of fingers on closed eyelids, before my mother and Danny arrive to watch service in silence. I cry sometimes only at the sound of a pastor's voice, cloud burst of harmonics on guitar, first breath of *Hide me now, under Your wings,* just to be home, a place more home than home.

will humble themselves

Kneeling on the thin mat of rug, I press my knees into the thousand tingles of polyester thread, press the heels of my hands, pads of my toes at the altar of infected quiet, too much news, hurt back from too much sitting. *Is this the humility You seek? Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy.* I don't know what to say except the litany of Mary, thinking of mothers fathers abuelxs dying alone.

and pray

I lean my forehead on the wall where I've hung brown paper gift wrap, scribbled with verses and thanks and pleas and promises, read them over and over when I can't think of new words to pray. It becomes my rosary, praying in circles until the words themselves bleed like ink in water, and all that is left is standing in Spirit groanings. I know God isn't an incantation, but I feel like I'm trying to find the right set of words to make God work.

and seek my face

Somedays, all I do is write and sing and dwell in the treasure of the Word, sit at the kitchen table and talk to God in the chair in front of me, and it is old friends reunited. It is father and daughter, sunlight and trees, and I wonder how to stay in the jewel of His presence.

Some days, I don't journal, tired of tilling bedrock, left with headaches between my eyes, at my temples. Sometimes, praying to God is like starting at the sun. I feel the melt of warmth sharpen to stings—all the colors brought to light erode to black. Sometimes, I have to blink, shake myself before I can raise my head again.

I'm trying, God.

I want to know the beauty of You, to see the unchangeable goodness the psalmists sing—knowing that I am safe but others are not—feeling the weight of teacher pay, insurance, food in my fridge.

Give me Your eyes to see how any of this makes sense.

and turn from their wicked ways,

Here are my wicked ways: thanking God without weighing my privilege, performing a Christianity that busies itself too much for Christ, cradling an inert gospel that doesn't reach social justice, confusing peace-keeping for the peace-making and kingdom-bringing of truth-in-love-telling, embracing and fighting for the ones Evangelicals hate like the Pharisees hated lepers and bleeding women.

then I will hear from heaven

Do You hear my anxious thoughts spinning and writhing, curled into themselves in leaden knots?

Do You hear my nightmares of mourning my mother from Facebook Live?

Or the buzzing drone of watching so much TV I bloat to keep out the fear and anger for broken Black bodies?

Do you hear the feet of marchers, *I can't breathe,* pleas for a mother, Elijah McClain pleading, with officers, *I'm an introvert. I'm just different?*

Do you hear the thud of rubber bullets against skulls, the burning hiss of pepper spray, the wet crack of batons against bodies?

Hear us.

You promised.

and heal their land.

*

Father,

I am asking for an apocalypse of love,
the transfiguration of Your justice on the mountain
of these skeletons the Church has for too long ignored.
Give us, Your Church, a revelation
of new ways
to empower our neighbors,
our immigrant and indigenous,
because Paul didn't write,
Where sin is grace abounds
to lull us while children

sleep in cages and 1500 disappear,
newborns trafficked.

God, don't let our rivers rise
but purge our streets of blood,
of men wielding chainsaws
against peaceful protesters
in downtown McAllen,
of church members with ALL LIVES MATTER
Facebook banners, the ones who forget
the parable of the lost lamb:
Christ, the Good Shepherd, left the ninety-nine
in comfort to lift up the one in danger.

I don't know how to move forward,
how to reconcile the God I know—
the all-loving, all-preserving,
all-promises-are-yes-in-Christ Lord
and the bloody history of a church
that claims to serve You,
the enslaving, language-erasing,
genocide-disguised-as-conversion,
except to say they didn't live
by the same Spirit.

It seems not enough.

You say, *Walk in a manner worthy*
of the calling you have received,
so Church, let's remember,
we are ministers of reconciliation,
the body that brings kingdom now,
the meeting place of an infinite God,
seekers of lonely places
and workers of the harvest.

Teach me,
teach us, Father,
to trust the weaving You do
in veiled places, to rest
in the victory You've already claimed,
Your beyond-time-but-here-now Spirit
waiting in and molding us for You,

to know when to move.

I will be a Nehemiah.

Put me to work, too.

In Jesus' name,
Amén.

The Wind Still Blows,
A Psalm

Even now, I can trust
the wind still blows
arms back home and retama
blooms on the backs of morning doves,
still smooths the jagged edges
of my wandering.

WHAT COMES NEXT sits
in the green-rivered valley just beyond
the next prayer, poem.

I will follow Your marigold paths
arms full of my questions
and quaking
because Your Spirit-wind calls,
Come boldly.

So I come, seek You
in your temple field,
sometimes tripping,
sidetracked by thistle crowns,
free the dandelion fluff
from my eyes
to see You clearly,
let myself root in the verse
You sing over me,
Your delight.

I have been searching for revival
in this upending, uprooting,
quilting my own stories to keep me warm,
fingers trapped in my understanding's
colored yarn that only tangles,
when here—all along—You wait.

Your shepherd voice,
Here is the way.
Walk in it.

Let my life be a poem
of Your travelling love
because You are the God of this moment,

found here

in this pool of breath.

CHAPTER VII

NOTES

"How the Wind Blows" gets its title from a passage in John 3. Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, crept in the night to talk to Jesus. Jesus tells him that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again; when Nicodemus questions how a man can be born again, Jesus replies, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

In "Thailand," the line "Father, you are king over the flood" is from Hillsong Live's song "Still."

"How to Pray"—the line "Spirit lead me where my trust is without borders" comes from Hillsong United's "Oceans." The line "You're the One who never leaves the one behind" is the last line in Hillsong United's "So Will I."

"Morning Song" is inspired by Tracy K. Smith's poem "Hill Country" in her 2018 collection *Wade in the Water*. In Smith's poem, "God comes down along the road with his/ windows unrolled so the twigs and hanging/ vines can slap and scrape against him in his jeep" (8). God is not only near but relatable. He's a country boy enjoying creation.

The "hands" section in "Little Words Bleating" is after a poem by Edward Vidaurre, "For the Immigrant," which bears much similarity to Odilia Galvan Rodríguez's poem "Hands," which was written before "For the Immigrant." The worship song referenced in the stanza describing the musicians on stage and the line "no shadow You won't light up, mountain You won't climb

up" comes from Cory Asbury's "Reckless Love." "Bleating" in the title is a biblical allusion through the use of synecdoche, representing a sheep with its call. It alludes to Jesus' statement in John 10:27, "My sheep (believers) listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me."

The reference "I will be your Moses" in "Dear Girl—" alludes to Moses' retelling of God's provision to Israel at the end Deuteronomy. The book of Deuteronomy describes the period when the Israelites who had wandered the desert for 40 years were on the cusp of heading into the Promised Land. Moses reminds them of how God had called their father Abraham, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, guided them with his physical presence in the desert, and would continue to guide them because their greater purpose awaited them in this new land.

In "Dream Walking," the line "Oh that rugged cross, my salvation, where your blood poured out for me…" is from "Man of Sorrows" by Hillsong Worship.

The first section of "Walking Israel" takes a loving approach to the body like in Ire'ne Lara Silva's poem "en trozos/in pieces," specifically the lines: "Oh body *cuerpecito mio/* how many years i wasted not loving you/ judging you for what they said you lacked/ for what you were too much of…" (41).

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