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## Learning to Speak: Poems

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LEARNING TO SPEAK: POEMS

A Thesis

by

CELINA A. GOMEZ

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2015

Major Subject: Creative Writing



LEARNING TO SPEAK: POEMS

A Thesis  
by  
CELINA A. GOMEZ

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May 2015



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## ABSTRACT

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This project is a collection of poetry that weaves together past, present, and the hopes of a future that causes change. It is set in South Texas and discusses borders spanning from social class, language, and identity. The collection primarily focuses on the Chican@ voice and the shame that comes from the borderlands. I have drawn from the Rio Grande Valley as a source of inspiration while also using family experiences, my own reaction to shame, and the possibilities of an empowered voice.





## DEDICATION

This project would not have been possible without the support and love from my mother and father, San Juanita “Jaynie” and Jose Luis “Joe” Gomez—they are my foundation and have given me deep roots. Everything I have done has been for them and to make my sister, Teresa, proud. This is for my brother, Joey, who carries many of the same memories, and for James who, since high school, has always supported my voice. I also dedicate this project to my students who need to know their voices matter.

Mom, you were right—everything becomes a poem.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Poetry is alive in the Rio Grande Valley, and I am grateful to all the powerful voices who have shown me what a voice can do.



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## Critical Introduction

*“When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads  
unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.”*

Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*

My maternal great-grandmother could tell you the future. She would sit in her chair and pace the rosary knowing I was there before I entered the room by calling out to me before I passed the threshold. She died in 1992, but she still visits my mother in dreams. We were both born in February, and before she died, she left me a small ceramic heart-shaped jewelry box with a glass thimble whose porcelain flower only has three petals and a pink plastic rosary given to me months before she died. I keep these objects of her past closed, sitting in the back of my mind. As I look to the future and focus on my need to write, I open that box and remember.

*Learning to Speak*, a collection of original poems, is divided into three sections—severed into parts and time. It is a reflection on voice, the vehicle that commands and craves to be heard—as it refuses to be ignored. Voice is more than the traditional “characteristic sound, style, manner, or tone of a particular poet or poem” (Drury 342). Voice is “as unique and identifiable as a fingerprint” (Drury 343), and the collection is my journey to discover a voice that can only be mine. The first section of in this thesis is a look at the past and the “resonant sources” that are the foundation for everything I write. The first section develops the image of the other, a collective that stands outside of history books and is continuously dismissed as inferior or invisible and sets the collection on a bumpy caliche road where I play with terremotes, scare off tlacuaches, cut grass with a machete, and ultimately, root my voice. It is set

in the Rio Grande Valley and focuses on the Mexican American community as othered; however, the otherness applies to all who are set apart or treated differently because they are not considered to be part of the societal norm and are “the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity” (Freire 47). The second section shows the progression of my poetic voice through Gloria Anzaldúa’s borderlands and the discovery of my own borders. The section explains how the inner self reflects on the outer world. In the second section, I have discovered what I want to say and most importantly—why. The third section focuses on movement and what I feel my voice should strive to accomplish. Each section culminates in the need to inspire change while still looking to unearth the unknown. The strongest realization made about my voice is the simple and powerful statement: I don’t know. Wislawa Szymborska in her Nobel Prize speech of 1996, “The Poet and the World,” argues that it is this thirst for curiosity and this understanding that there is more to know that drives her writing. She uses the phrase “I don’t know” as a means to create and continuously be astounded by the world around her:

...in the language of poetry, where every word is weighed, nothing is usual or normal. Not a single stone and not a single cloud above it. Not a single day and not a single night after it. And above all, not a single existence, not anyone’s existence in this world (102).

This allows me to continuously discover and question.

### **Family, Voice, Language, and Loss**

The caliche road extends the length of what is left of my grandfather’s property in North Edinburg. My mother’s parents traveled from Mexico in search of the American Dream and found most of what they were looking for. Before finding a place in the Rio Grande Valley, my

grandparents grew up in General Terán, a small municipality in Nuevo León, down a quiet street littered with adobe houses. They were happy but wanted more. In the United States, they struggled with a family of ten, but found that hard work and dedication pay off. My mother's family was well known in Edinburg—perhaps before I was born, and carried with it an odd clout I never understood. Perhaps it was because my grandfather was able to earn enough money to purchase land and build a small apartment complex on Closner Boulevard, and with land comes power. My uncles used the connections built by my grandfather to grow businesses in construction, and they become wealthy. My aunt, the oldest, was able to finish her college education and become a teacher. My mother was left at home to care for the younger children and was not expected to accomplish anything outside of a family. She was not encouraged to attend college, and she was not told that she could care for herself without a traditionally defined family. She married my father, and they in turn raised us.

I am a product of my mother's discouragement. It wasn't until I discovered Gloria Anzaldúa that I realized that my mother's story is shared by many women in the borderlands because "the culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men...If a woman rebels she is a *mujer mala*" (39). As a woman that could not escape this culturally and societally-created role, my mother understood her place was at home caring for me and my two siblings. She understood that this role was hard to break, and she understood her action of rebellion when she raised independent daughters—*mujeres malas* without remorse—*hijas de la Chingada*—her daughters who would not know what it is to remain silent. This is my voice: the inability to remain silent because my mother and so many others were forced into the white space that I leave on the page. This white space is part of their silence and mine when I take the time to think about everything my mother has given up for me. The

poem, “Walking Out Back to Talk to Mom,” is an ode to this sacrifice and a reminder of everything I cannot be, a mother who has lost herself in her children and husband. I use white space to create pacing and transition between the now of this mother walking her massive, 70 pound dog, Gracie, who passed away earlier this year, and a realization of everything the speaker has taken from her mother:

In fourth grade, I had a seizure  
head locked down, polka dots  
and dressed like church. I fell  
during lunch. She caught me  
for years after. Hospital visits  
and a broken ambulance.  
They couldn't find my veins.  
She found me and lost herself.

She lifts her glasses  
as they slip to the end of her nose,  
sweat seeps from her pores to  
the chain to the overly excited dog  
rushing towards  
the usual  
spot.

Everything is just so usual.

So expected. Like end-stopped lines.  
Every weekend, she picks up my sister  
from school and takes her out again,  
and waits for her to come home.  
4am nightmares. She has lost herself  
again.

Sainthood, when pushed too far,  
is wrathful. The day I broke my mother  
she was cleaning the kitchen. Organizing  
jars and pots and every size of bowl—  
everything in its place but out, on counters  
and floors. I yelled and she responded  
in force, swiping glass across  
the floor. Pieces stabbed into my mother's knees  
and my heart. The day she refused.

My mother, at times, realizes the scale of her sacrifice. She threatens us with a tell-all book: the mother who has nothing because she gave it all away to her children. She then looks at us angrily singing *Chicago's* "Mr. Cellophane" in which a husband is dressed as a clown and completely invisible to his family. My mother appropriately changes the title to "Mrs. Cellophane" and continues to hum the tune as she walks away. It is through this sacrifice that my mother has found a voice for her children, but this is not the kind of voice my mother wanted for me, nor the kind of voice I wanted for her. It was in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, that the protagonist,

Edna Pontellier says, ““I would give up the unessential; I would give my money, I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself”” (52). My mother gives herself completely and without compromise. Today, my brother and I have earned college degrees; my younger sister is now in her senior year. Soon, my mother, who was given nothing by her family but extra field work and babysitter obligations, will have raised three college graduates, and most importantly, three free spirits and free thinkers. This is what drives me to write. I write to give life to my mother’s voice—my voice may not be enough. My mother sacrificed and forced herself into a place in life that is so beneath her. One where her voice is not as defined and demanding as it should be. My mother would never deny the importance of raising three successful and free thinking children, but she knows she has more to say than only what has been said through her children. Nonetheless, she ensured that her children would not suffer a fate of inequality and degradation. She raised *mujeres malas* who would not accept the limitations of a stifling ideology.

My mother would yell at us in Spanish. This is when my full name came before a string of maldiciones, and if she was really mad, she would add a junior after my name like my brother: Celina Annette Gomez, Jr.—my father’s daughter who did not do as her mother asked—forever a paradox to the way we were raised. This was typically the only Spanish heard in my house when I was younger and before I started to ask for translations. My mother grew up in Anzaldúa’s Valley where children were taught to hate their accents and were hit for speaking Spanish. My mother describes her hands: red lined and bent in resignation. Her story, again, is mirrored in Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*, as the speaker

remember[s] being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. [She] remember[s] being sent to the

corner of the classroom for “talking back” to the Anglo teacher when all [she] was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce [her] name. “If you want to be American, speak ‘American.’ If you don’t like it, go back to Mexico where you belong” (75).

Like Anzaldúa, my mother could not go back. She was born in Edinburg on June 14, 1956—the first in her family to be born with help from a doctor for under \$10. There was no back for her. Her home has always been the borderlands.

As a second generation Mexican American, I do not know what it means to work with my hands until they bleed. Throughout my childhood, my parents continued to work to ensure I would not have to; however, they also worked to ensure I would not be stereotyped and held back the way they were because of my background. My mother did not receive a proper education because she was only seen as the short, poor Mexican girl who could only be a mother. My father made friends with the white kids to get into advanced classes. Education and language are woven together through learning and knowing. My voice is both limited and sharpened by the languages I know well. Anzaldúa would argue that I know many languages:

1. English
2. broken English
3. broken Spanish
4. beautiful Tex-Mex

but all I have found is shame. I cannot speak Spanish well. I cannot read Spanish fluently or fast enough. I cannot write Spanish correctly and misspell my every attempt. I cannot even understand Spanish if someone speaks too quickly. This is my shame.



When I was younger, my mother would go to work every morning and leave me with my grandmother who only spoke Spanish and a few words in English. I grew up knowing the languages of all my borders, but by the time I was in middle school, I had forgotten. I could barely speak to my grandparents and repeated high frequency words like “muy bien” and “como estas.” Many of the poems in the collection focus on this loss and detachment from these roots because of the loss of language. Paul Martínez Pompa in his collection, *My Kill Adore Him*, shares a similar connection or lack of connection in his language. His poem, “Retablos: 10 Deleted Tongues,” reflects on the consequences of losing multiple languages:

Ouch-woe—

My pocho      tongue loss      a second language      me

with a Spanish      last name who      can't talk

Spanish (30-33).

The speaker in the poem speaks a broken language that is not accepted as there is both pain and sadness in “ouch-woe;” however, the playfulness and the pocho of the phonetic translation of “ocho” adds humor to a serious subject and the realization that his pocho isn’t good enough for a person with a “Spanish last name.” The idea of pocho (or coconut as I was called when I was younger, brown on the outside but white in the middle) is unacceptable and my mother understood. In the Rio Grande Valley, there is such a disconnect between American and Mexican cultures that many will simply deny the duality. In my poem, “Maiz,” the mother figure is attempting to protect her daughter from a language that has only caused her pain:

Maiz

My mother separates the tortillas de maiz as if she doesn't trust me

To preserve my history, she teaches me in English

the way to mix caldo de res with white rice, so maybe I won't have it  
as hard as she did when rulers were a measurement for assimilation  
  
across knuckles. *Ch* becomes an *sh* and chair become share—she shared  
how I lost her language. Slaps across hands that carried  
  
crates of strawberries across fields of greens and browns  
and reds oozing juice on sticky fingers. In the sixties,  
  
no matter how south Texas, you weren't allowed to speak  
Spanish in schools so now she only uses it when she yells  
  
Desgraciados—only when no one can listen—she knows  
how to hold her tongue. Down in the bottom of the pot, boiling  
  
barbacoa. Tender, falling apart. Mom shows me how to use a fork  
to tear it to shreds, salted, and piled thick on tortillas de maiz.

These are my borders and my deficiency in language has limited my voice—I have lost a mother tongue and with this, an entire world of words that could have armed me to spark change and communicate with worlds now lost. Poet Laureate of San Antonio, Laurie Ann Guerrero, speaks of loss of voice in her collection, *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*; she gives a voice to those who may not have one. In her poem, “Preparing the Tongue,” which begins the collection, she uses the tongue as a dual image to express the violence and sacrifices needed to speak:

I should want to enchant it:  
let it taste the oil in my skin, lick  
the lash of my eye. What I do instead  
is lacerate the frozen muscle, tear  
the brick-thick cud conductor in half to fit  
a ceramic red pot. Its cry reaches me  
from some heap of butchered heads as I hack  
away like an axe murderer. I choke down  
the stink of its heated moo, make carnage  
of my own mouth, add garlic (6-15)

As a poet, I find it essential to know the limitations of my voice if only to destroy it and start over stronger. Guerrero, in her collection, strives to not only voice the difficulties and heartache the speaker has faced, but she also speaks for those who cannot. While I strive to understand the foundations of my voice, I also work to develop its purpose.

I am still discovering how important my childhood has been to developing my voice. By giving me a foundation as hard as caliche and just as painful when I fall, I have discovered how much of myself is still waiting at the edge of my monte. These are my resonant sources as Linda Greg, in her essay, “The Art of Finding,” describes as “essences” and “energy, equivalents, touchstones, amulets, buried seed, repositories, and catalysts [which] function at the generating level of the poems to impregnate and pollinate the present—provoking, instigating, germinating, irradiating—” While she states these resonant sources are not the only subject matter of all her poems, these sources are always present and keep the poet grounded and needing to speak. My

childhood *provokes* my voice into saying something important—something to change the world, no matter how small that world may be; something that feeds.

### **Personal Voice, Conocimiento, and Recovery**

*When I write, I bring all of my truths, even the Judas-truths that make me feel like the betrayer whose dirty hands are resting on the table for everyone to see, including God. For me, writing is less a declaration of those truths than it is my interrogation of them...*

*Natalie Diaz*

My first memories of creating begin with my mother drawing a letter of the alphabet on the center of the page. She would sound out the letter, a-a-apple, and turn the oversized crayon over to me. She would then tell me to transform this letter into anything I could imagine. The letter A became a jagged mouth with tongues and the letter Z became lightning stirring from a messy sky. It was the year before kindergarten, and this was my poetry. This curiosity and need to know developed, and as I grew, my love of writing deepened. In elementary, I watched my father write a love note to my mother, and I saw what words could do—it could move people to do beautiful and terrible and life-changing things. The words my father used were simple and in English and all I can remember is that it started with “My Jane.” For my mother, my father helped remind her how beautiful she is. For me, my father helped me seek power in my own voice, but with this drive comes the responsibility to truly know myself without the limitations of societal expectations and the restrictions I gave myself. By limiting what we can think of, we limit everything else. Gloria Anzaldúa, in her essay, “Now Let Us Shift...The Path of Conocimiento...Inner Work, Public Acts,” writes:

Tu camino de conocimiento requires that you encounter your shadow side and confront what you’ve programmed yourself (and have been programmed by your

cultures) to avoid (desconocer), to confront the traits and habits distorting how you see reality and inhibiting the full use of your facultades (540-541).

As a writer, I have worked to realize my limitations and see past them or use them. Esto es el conocimiento—knowing what cannot be done, transcending past what I am told I am capable of, and moving into an awareness that allows me to strive for something bigger with poetry as my vehicle.

I am proud—told usually that I am too proud—of everything I have done and will continue to do to provide for my family. I get this from my father, the man who held my brother and me up in the palms of his hands toward a ceiling that always capped our potential. I inherited not his physical strength, but his strength of character and his unwavering work ethic. I love my mother and have only recently realized how much who I am is dependent on her, but I work not only for her, but also to prove my father raised strong daughters in spite of the belief that many men do not know the strength of a woman's voice. My father knows the power in his daughters. This is my conocimiento; this realization of why I continue to face my *shadow side*. Programming tells me that I am not good enough, tells me what I should want, and tells me to hide the potential of my voice because I should not want it to be heard.

I was in one of my undergraduate classes at UTPA when I was told my father was in the hospital. He was working as an assistant manager in the meat department of Wal-Mart off of University Drive. The back room was covered in ice and the ladder he was climbing could not open because of a random pole. As he climbed the ladder to reach a box of frozen meat, the foot of the ladder skid on the ice, and he fell. His back was broken by the pole. I was told later that if the pole had been any thinner, it would have driven itself straight through my father's stomach. I still cringe knowing he could have died. I cheated death that afternoon. Soon after his accident,

despite the recommendations of his doctor, my father returned to work. He understood he needed to provide for his family. This is what drives me to write. My father has worked tirelessly since 1967. He gave up his opportunity to earn a college education during his senior year at the University of Texas at Austin because of me and my brother and my sister. This is a sacrifice that I carry with me through my lines.

It is this selflessness and near loss that calls forth my muse, La Malinche, the image of both mother and language and father and strength. La Malinche is a common Chican@ image of the *mujer mala* who is considered a traitor to her gente; however, Malinche is the mother of a new mestiza and through language and strength of voice, she is able to mother and father a world of independent and free thinking gente, more specifically women. Poet and current Texas Poet Laureate Carmen Tafolla writes about la Malinche as a visionary who saw the “Mother world / a world yet to be born. And our child was born.../ and I was immortalized *Chingada!*” (44-47). Malinche mothered worlds and cradled languages as Alicia Gaspar de Alba writes “the high priest of the pyramids feared La Malinche’s / power of language—how she could form strange syllables / in her mouth and Speak to the gods without offering / the red fruit of her heart” (1-4). Malinche is my muse, and in many poems, she is mocking my inability to create and speak as she has. Through her language, she moved worlds, and I am still striving. I find many of my lines broken or severed through violent line breaks or columns. This is much like my journey to discover the potentials of my voice. In the poem, “Severed,” I attempt to make an honest recognition of my shame about language and my connection to my background. I ask my muse for direction as I work to discover everything I cannot yet do and merge that with my need to become better:

I

the reds in which I view my palms	at the bottom steps as heads
crease half empty promises	roll down like the fall of the Aztecs
read like premonitions	because I have betrayed
forked on the head	beating your breath

malinche—	against lips split open
I am a traitor of crooked lines	slicing the memories
syllables cut, carcassed, capped	coiled and recoiled manguera
capping pyramids lost	rope bruises on my tongue

that searches.

With each column, I hope to encourage a different journey while still acknowledging pain, weakness, and inabilities in order to provoke movement and ultimately, growth. Poetry collections and individual poems that push audiences to take a journey have always inspired my writing. Valerie Martínez, in her collection, *Each and Her*, uses her poetry not only to bring awareness of the massacres in Juárez and Chihuahua, Mexico, but also to provoke her reader into growing and ultimately into wanting to act. In her collection, Martínez uses one or two words to direct her audience as she simply states: “this way” on page 13 while on page 27 she breaks the words “this / way” to again beg the question: where am I going? She continues to pull her audience into the collection and far into an uncomfortable reality on page 50 with “sígame” only to leave you on page 55 with “no sígame.” This journey leads the audience to a three page list of

*Marías* who have been murdered in the city of Juárez (61-63). Finally, only pages from the end of the collection, Martínez overwhelms the audience with silence in order to give them time to reflect on the weight of this tragedy (65). This is what I hope to accomplish with my writing—to push the boundaries of traditional poetry and find both voice and silence that can spur change. Martínez ends her collection with a simple yet heavy hope “—to remake the world” (74). This collection only further cemented my understanding of what poetry is capable of and the responsibility of the poet.

As I continue to strive for a deeper understanding of self and this need to do more with the voice I am carving, I have realized how much of my writing is dependent on my education and where I went to school. I started my schooling at an advanced elementary that accepted students who scored high enough on an exam given at the kindergarten level. Many of the students accepted were part of the upper middle class because of the advantages afforded to them. Looking back, I realize that I was caught in the middle: not rich, but not poor enough to rid myself of shame. I was out of place. I searched for other students like me and found her. I have had the same best friend since third grade. She grew up around stereotypes. Her brothers were in gangs—two out of the three are currently in jail. Her father created tattoos prison-style with a razor blade and ink, and he drives a yellow low-rider truck. I remember growing up with the only mailbox not bashed-in the night before by baseball bats because she and I were friends. I am not sure if this is the image mainstream America has of poverty in the Mexican American community, but that is how she defined stereotypes and explained why no one was ever surprised by her family—*pues, ella tiene el nopal en la frente*—she looks Mexican so it’s not surprising. Every time we talk about when we met, she makes it a point to stress how she was the poor kid at the gifted and talented school. She was the only one who didn’t have to pay for lunch. She was



the only one who had to ride three buses to school because her parents could not drop her off. She was the only one who knew what it meant to struggle. Everyone else was rich. It surprises me how we are all so protective over our own poverty. I grew up always having food on the table (even if it was rice and beans for a month) and I grew up with my mom dropping me at school in a burnt red van with the window taped up with duct tape and cardboard because it was too expensive to replace and I grew up down the caliche road. Even now, I feel the need to defend myself. As a culture, it seems that we keep trying to outdo or prove ourselves—prove our struggle. This is both our power (the power in shame), and it is our divide. Another borderlands.

My voice lives on this border, and the realness of this duality became apparent in a story commonly told in Mexico and shared by a poet in one of my workshop classes about a crab merchant. There are two barrels: one covered to keep the rebellious crabs in—the ones who understand the power they have—and one uncovered because as any crab attempted to escape, the others would pull her down. As a people, it seems we work to keep each other down so no one can rise above another. Everyone suffers because of an inability accept the success of the other. Tejana poet Inés Hernández-Avila's poem, "Para Teresa," hungers to change the system that stifles the potential of the other and the *infinite divisions* that exist between all people. This poem recognizes a divide amongst powerful people, our gente, in an effort to bridge the differences and unite a people. It recognizes the complexity of our culture, la mestizaje—beyond my own duality. The speaker of the poem states:

Porque reconocí en aquel entonces  
una verdad tremenda  
que me hizo a mí un rebelde  
aunque tú no te habías dado cuenta

We were not inferior (46-50).

This is a Chicana anthem. The speaker is so sure of her power and the potential she holds for herself and her culture. But there is more than one way to demand change, and the speaker of the poem both recognizes this and embraces it. Teresa, the chicanita fighting for her right to be heard through violence and gangs, found hers through anger while the speaker develops voice through education and family. One path is not greater than the other but instead wants the same outcome. I write not only because I recognize the importance of education, but because I recognize my voice's power and validity. However, shame carries into my writing and forces me to question my abilities and their limitations—the constant balancing of power and pity. In the poem, “Ars Poetica,” I am the speaker that lingers too long on an attempt to validate my poetic voice:

because I may run out  
into parked cars. this  
is going nowhere, and i am too humiliated  
to die servicing muted whiteness blinking  
  
out allergy induced tears realizing  
i am incapable of real emotions. robotic  
to the taste, rusted. rasping, voiceless  
  
wasting away rotting rat caught in the drainage  
hole bottom of residential dumpster crumbling  
  
teeth exposed. fighting to remain relevant.

Rainer Maria Rilke in his *Letters to a Young Poet* tells of the freedom to write without worrying about the expectations of others or the need for acceptance and to write something true if truly compelled to write:

You look outside yourself, and that above all else is something you should not do just now. Nobody can advise you and help you, nobody. There's only one way to proceed. Go inside yourself. Explore the reason that compels you to write; test whether it stretches its roots into the deepest part of your heart, admit to yourself whether you would have to die if the opportunity to write were withheld from you (30).

I currently know that I am compelled to write about my past and its power because the Mexican American culture is full of shame. While there are others fighting for the multiple voices of the culture like Valerie Martínez, Laurie Ann Guerrero, Joe Jimenez, Rigoberto González, Paul Martínez Pompa, and so many of my Rio Grande Valley poets, I feel the need to contribute.

The borderlands are a paradox, and I find myself searching for not only the power of my shame but the freedom to write about it. In the poem, "Down Davis Road, Tejas," the shame translates into an ownership and acknowledgement of both the beauty of poverty as it is an ode to a caliche road, but most importantly a realization of everything the speaker can accomplish because of her background:

I am the poet of this caliche road that extends half a mile into monte—green lush unrestrained, untrimmed, uninviting crossing civilization and abyss where my father would go to drink and run away for hours to think about everything he could not give us—monte that my grandfather owned but sold to build this home that is now my mother's.

That was his American dream—land that extends

the length of my caliche road.

the length of my outstretched, callous-free palm.

the length of fingertips that do not know:

work my grandfather did, my father did, my mother did

picking strawberries vined around Sabal palms, palms on hands,

hands, fingers, knuckles scraped raw and thick with everything

I do not know

but will write

this less than half a mile—

I did not build:

I am the poet of this caliche road.

The poem begins the first section as it is a reflection on the strength of roots; however, this direct “I am” statement is only fully realized in the second section regarding personal voice as I begin to develop and accept the power of my past. The poem was inspired by Walt Whitman’s declaration of “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul” (21.1) and poems like *I Am Joaquin* and la Chrisx declaring “Soy la Mujer Chicana, una maravilla” (5). I want to build a collection of poetry that is not afraid to declare: *I am*.

## Movement

In a workshop with poet Joe Jimenez, author of *The Possibilities of Mud*, he spoke about the importance of voice for the other. Poetry is often seen as an abstraction or only as a beautiful piece of art to look at and appreciate; however, the other does not have that luxury. While poetry is an art and is beautiful in its lines and breaks and silence, it is also a call to action. Poetry wills movement. It demands. Loudly.

Poetry has always moved. Through its lines, it carries you across a page or leaves you in silence mazing through the white space. Through its schools, it has combined minds and hearts in a way that study and writing today mirrors its teachings. Poetry has always moved and has always caused people to move—to evolve, to question, to change, to fight—para luchar. It is important that this fight is continued and no one is allowed to ignore the voices of peoples. Elie Wiesel, a novelist and Holocaust survivor, in his speech, “The Perils of Indifference” claims that the indifferent is more guilty than the aggressors as “to be abandoned by God was worse than to be punished by Him. Better an unjust God than an indifferent one.” The analogy discusses faith in efforts to develop the severity of abandonment. Wiesel continues to discuss the consequences and pains of indifference and ultimately argues that indifference cannot yield a positive outcome:

Indifference elicits no response. Indifference is not a response. Indifference is not a beginning; it is an end. And, therefore, indifference is always the friend of the enemy, for it benefits the aggressor -- never his victim, whose pain is magnified when he or she feels forgotten.

There is dehumanization in indifference for the victim the oppressor, and the indifferent. The consequences of indifference reach much farther than those who are victimized. The indifferent

have lost their humanity, and it is only with understanding the plight of the other that change is accomplished.

This is the importance of using poetry as a way to communicate the pains of the world. In the poem, "Lilith's Children," I use the mythological story of Lilith, Adam's first wife, and the rejection and pain she faced for refusing to first lie under Adam and refusing to return to the garden despite the request from God. Lilith asserts, "We are equal because we are both created from the earth," and in the poem, the speaker questions the unequal and degrading treatment of child refugees arriving by the thousands in the Rio Grande Valley and California and ultimately bussed across the United States during the summer of 2014:

These are my children  
stemming from a broken  
wound. A womb reduced  
to grated tissue. They severed  
the umbilical cord before  
I could teach you  
about borders and freedoms  
and walls and hunger.

Like Lilith  
and the thousand deaths of her children.

What are my children accused of when I am their mother?

According to myth, Lilith is punished and must watch one hundred of her children die every night. Lilith is then considered a demon and forever lives in the desert (Gaines). Poetry is powerful and can call forth demons and duendes in order to provoke a change, and this is what I want poetry to do both on the page and in the classroom. This is how I respond.

I am a high school English teacher. Two years ago, in an advanced sophomore level English literature course, I shared a short poem, “So Not to be Mottled,” by Bernice Zamora:

You insult me  
When you say I’m  
Schizophrenic  
My divisions are  
Infinite. (1-5)

We were beginning our study on poetry, and I was hoping to discuss the power and limitless possibilities of words. When I told the students that this poem inspired the title for an entire anthology, *Infinite Divisions*, we discussed how the collection focused primarily on a specific gender; the students were quick to respond with “women.” However, when I continued to prod for inferences and said that the collection focuses on a specific cultural group, the students listed every possibility: white, black, Italian, Greek, Chinese, and so many more. The poet’s name was written right under the title, but the students did not once mention Mexican or Mexican American. This happened in all five of my classes. I stopped the discussion after five minutes of guessing and arguing across the room, and when I finally asked why no one mentioned their own background, a young woman from the back of the room of our eighth period class shouted, “because Mexicans don’t write. They don’t get published.” Not only was she denying the power of voice for an entire people, she was also denying herself the possibilities for her own voice.

Her voice does not matter. My voice, in the eyes of this student, does not matter. Thankfully, this was already the end of the day—my heart was broken. The class fell silent, not in outrage, but in contemplation. They couldn't understand their own oversight. This is why I write. To help students see that their voice matters most of all.

I had never read anything that included my voice or my experiences until I reached the graduate level of my education. In high school, I was taught to appreciate the canon and admired the writers of the past who wrote the way I expected them to: passionately in their voice, but a voice that could not be my own. Today's education system has not changed—the same canon exists and students, just as I did as a child and teenager, continue to invalidate their own voices because that is what they are taught. As a means for change the collective must realize and as asserted by Julia Alvarez that “the word belongs to no one, the house built of words belong to no one. We have to take them back from those who think they own them” (204). There are so many who have laid claim to the world of words, and so many who have been given the deed, especially in the school system. It is time that the silenced and the over spoken realize that there are no boundaries to poetry and no restrictions to voice. While the standard canon serves its purpose to show the possibilities of the written work, it does not show all possibilities. This is what I hope to accomplish with my voice: realization of voice and validity of story.

Poetry is a vehicle. It is not stagnant. It is not simply pretty words on a clean page. Poetry is powerful and can move the world to revolution. This is what I want to do with my poetry whether through the images of my childhood that remind others like me that they are not alone or through poetry that speaks of problems facing my community. Lorna Dee Cervantes, in her poem, “Poem to a Young White Man Who Asked Me How I, An Intelligent, Well-Read Person, Could Believe In the War Between Races,” satirizes the idea that discrimination does not exist as



the speaker states, “I am not a revolutionary. / I don’t even like political poems. / Do you think that I can believe in a war between races?” The speaker later declares, “I believe in revolution.” The polemical poem is essential for the growth of the community and the empowerment of those whose voices have suffered a history of silence. In the poem, “Poem to a Person Who Told Me to Censor a Poetry Reading,” I channel Cervantes and create a speaker who attempts to maintain this utopic vision of what society approves for a poetry reading; however, it is quickly realized that every story experienced by the speaker requires censorship in order for it to be deemed appropriate:

This is my attempt at political correctness.

This is my attempt at political correctness.

Remove the controversy. Remove the pain.

Remove the lines that push you to want to  
cause change. Poetry does not equal change.

“I am not a revolutionary.” I am not—

write about:

family—but not about:

father: who was not given lead manager positions at a chain pizza restaurant because in training he could not prove he could yell or lead or command an all-white crew up state because he was trained to know where his position was and his inner hierarchy prevailed.

mother: who was hit across the fingers when she spoke in Spanish in the classroom. Or who was told by her father que era pendeja, she was only meant to marry and have children.

As a high school teacher, it is expected that my poetry is appropriate for high school audiences, and when I was hosting a poetry reading on my campus, my principal asked me to read and approve all poems by visiting performers. Censorship of voice is promoting censorship of voice, and students are feeling the effects.

I have found my voice not only on the page, but through performance. By using my voice as a vehicle to highlight the struggles faced in my community, I am able to make a difference. I performed my first piece of poetry in middle school when I started with Edgar Allen Poe's "The Raven" and ultimately, I began competing in performance poetry in high school with poems by Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. I analyzed and read poems like "The Addict" and "Daddy" so many times that I can still recite them today. However, I understand that my performances can do more than appreciating the craft of other poets—I can use my voice to demand attention to issues that should not be ignored.

Poetry deserves voices that are unafraid and ready to provoke thought and revolution. Audre Lorde speaks specifically to women of color in her essay, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," and it is important that all voice, especially those who are oppressed speak out in efforts to cause change. I spent most of my education reading canonical writers, and it is important that every person feel their voice and their lives are represented. There must be a call for action as "poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language,

then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (Lorde 370). It is by naming injustices that we can give them voice and evoke the power of our voices.

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I am forever the child sitting in a wood paneled bedroom, patched linoleum floor, and a closet door covered with a sheet because the window that should have been in place shattered years ago. These images of my family home haunt the lines that tell me I am not good enough. I continuously hide the past to protect those I care about. As a child of parents who struggled each day for the little they could provide, I continue to feel as if I am not doing enough to honor their hard work. However, it is with this realization and acknowledgment of shame that I empower it.

I have learned to speak.

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## POEMS

## Severed

### I

the reds in which I view my palms  
crease half empty promises  
read like premonitions  
forked on the head

malinche—  
I am a traitor of crooked lines  
syllables carved, cut, capped  
capping pyramids lost

at the bottom steps as heads  
roll down like the fall of the Aztecs  
because I have betrayed  
beating your breath

against lips split open  
slicing the memories  
coiled and recoiled manguera  
rope bruises on my tongue

that searches.

### II

Grope.  
splintering, wedging into finger  
tips flowering half understood  
phrases. Malintzin—

### III

betray

### IV

tongue strapped where red  
turns blue tethered to head

stuck like orange blossom  
honey foraged in el Valle

ached. Who will show me how to use  
a forked tongue forged in the borderlands?

I will follow.  
Show me the way.

FAMILY, VOICE, LANGUAGE, AND LOSS



Down Davis Road, Tejas

I am the poet of the caliche road and the dips and forks that branch off into the unwritten palm right handed life line. Off white, damp, new holed, hardened like calloused hands outlined by:

playing tennis with a racket found at the Palm View flea market, bouncing off balls off rocks into my father's racket, used and flaking pale blue and white—like the old Ford with bottlecaps for knobs on the radio, windows down—No net. killing Texas Indigo snakes with my father's machete. My brother cut off the heads with the tails still shaking. Blistering toes on rocks and my mother pouring peroxide until I blacked out. The bleeding stopped and mopped up by generic paper towels:

bright white, tiles, perfection squared contrasting the uneven, off balance of my caliche that smoothed where the tires hit it and ran with terremotes where the land still resisted.

I am the poet of this caliche road that extends half a mile into monte—green lush unrestrained, untrimmed, uninviting crossing civilization and abyss where my father would go to drink and run away for hours to think about everything he could not give us—monte that my grandfather owned but sold to build this home that is now my mother's. That was his American dream—land that extends

the length of my caliche road.  
the length of my outstretched, callous-free palm.  
the length of fingertips that do not know:

work my grandfather did, my father did, my mother did  
picking strawberries vined around Sabal palms, palms on hands,  
hands, fingers, knuckles scraped raw and thick with everything

I do not know

but will write  
this less than half a mile—  
I did not build:

I am the poet of this caliche road.

## Maiz

My mother separates the tortillas de maiz as if she doesn't trust me  
To preserve my history, she teaches me in English

the way to mix caldo de res with white rice, so maybe I won't have it  
as hard as she did when rulers were a measurement for assimilation

across knuckles. *Ch* becomes an *sh* and chair become share—she shared  
how I lost her language. Slaps across hands that carried

crates of strawberries across fields of greens and browns  
and reds oozing juice on sticky fingers. In the sixties,

no matter how south Texas, you weren't allowed to speak  
Spanish in schools so now she only uses it when she yells

Desgraciados—only when no one can listen—she knows  
how to hold her tongue. Down in the bottom of the pot, boiling

barbacoa. Tender, falling apart. Mom shows me how to use a fork  
to tear it to shreds, salted, and piled thick on tortillas de maiz.

## Walking Out Back to Talk to Mom

With her thick soles, walking her Gracie,  
her 70 pound dog, out back by the snake tree,  
mesquite and over run by weeds.

Her hair fuzzy against the clouded backdrop—  
clinging to the large link chain.

She used to be a runner  
escaping the links that chained  
her as housewife and mother. Running  
down Closner with her high school  
team from teachers who told her  
    You aren't smart enough.  
    but you'll find yourself a man  
    to care for you.

High school version of my mom  
sitting on the aluminum stands of  
Bobcat stadium, throwing ice at  
the all-white cheerleaders  
laughing with La Maria.

broken down dreams torn  
between ligaments and expectation

starching five button-down  
work shirts every Sunday night  
after cooking carne picada con papas  
y arroz y frijoles a la charra.

She used to work for Head Start  
before she smashed her hand  
between the copier and a filing cabinet.  
She used to place needy children in school.  
Well-fed and given more than she had when she was four.

Before then, she worked at South Middle teaching parents  
how to be parents.  
Like her.

In fourth grade, I had a seizure  
head locked down, polka dots  
and dressed like church. I fell  
during lunch. She caught me  
for years after. Hospital visits

and a broken ambulance.  
they couldn't find my veins.  
She found me and lost herself.

She lifts her glasses  
as they slip to the end of her nose,  
sweat seeps from her pores to  
the chain to the overly excited dog  
rushing towards

the usual  
spot.

Everything is just so usual.  
So expected. Like end-stopped lines.  
Every weekend, she picks up my sister  
from school and takes her out again,  
and waits for her to come home.  
4am nightmares. She has lost herself  
again.

Sainthood, when pushed too far,  
is wrathful. The day I broke my mother  
she was cleaning the kitchen. Organizing  
jars and pots and every size of bowl—  
everything in its place but out, on counters  
and floors. I yelled and she responded  
in force, swiping glass across  
the floor. Pieces stabbed into my mother's knees  
and my heart. The day she refused.

She waits—relaxing her grip.  
Hoping to sit on the bench in the back yard.

Spurs spike—the responsibility of the eternal

Mother. Grandmother.  
She cares for my brothers  
three children for date nights  
and sanity nights when she could be sleeping  
  
the sounds of herself.

## Wicker & Laundry Soap

unwashed laundry piled in wicker  
baskets sitting alone on porcelain tile  
by the dining room table cluttered  
empty bottles of laundry soap stuck

sitting alone on porcelain tile  
slumped towels limp and torn—overused  
laundry soap bottles empty, stuck  
remembering.

torn and limp towels slumped—overused  
overdue found in crevices of tile and countertops  
remembering  
lumps encompassing tile floors

overdue found in crevices of tile and countertops  
top loading washer stench wasting into damp masses  
lumps encompassing tile floors  
coagulated laundry soap stains

top loading washer stench wasting into damp masses  
unwashed laundry piled in wicker  
coagulated laundry soap stains  
by the dining room table clutter

An Incomplete Novena to Saint Jude in an Attempt to Understand My Faith

I

I wasn't going to whisper  
prayers into the ears  
of ventilation grids, but *Our Father*  
spoke first in musk and hymnals  
often misunderstood. That is how  
I felt when I was five sitting  
in the pews next to dad  
and a full bag of Cheerios

repeating lines like church  
singing *who art in heaven*

*who art in heaven?*

II

The wild nights of St. Jude  
collapsed on the heads  
of sacrifice. How do you

pray a rosary when the beads  
do not align like these stairs  
falling on whispers?

I used to wish upon you  
until I found the novena  
to St. Jude, most loyal—

his knees listen to desperate  
voices. *Who art in heaven?* Litany  
after litany

of praise  
of worship  
of sacrifice  
of guilt, there is always guilt  
of promises rephrased to make

sure they could be kept  
in sharing names and crosses  
across flesh in lines, these lines—  
is this what heaven is for? Selfish

because, perhaps, I could cure

myself.

### III

Only recently have I prayed  
to you, but often, in response, it is my  
own voice. *Who art in heaven*

if I am alone? The vanity of saints—

this voice that yells only in exaggerated  
storytelling, in poems. When does poetry cross  
purpose into prayer? The novena whispered

among empty bottles of holy water, a ritual  
like Catholic mornings in pews of hard  
wood across knees, low like prayers

in the hymnal bolded directions. You asked  
me to stand but I got the order wrong. Who can  
defile this—that came out wrong like  
over-cooked barbacoa and sulfur.

### IV

St. Jude—  
Show me. In textbooks and fables,  
outside the bible, where to place

my hands  
my knees  
my feet  
my head  
my heart  
my heart  
my heart

like litanies and *heaven*.

### V

When I was in fifth grade, I prayed every night because my best friend, Amanda, said she wanted  
to kill herself. I probably should have told her mom, but I told you instead. She broke my bed  
once, jumping on it, maybe that's prayer—

Jumping.

Leaps into the everything hoping not to fall  
flat on your back, staring at *heaven*.

VI

I can feel you  
in the closet—especially  
when the door is closed  
but I forget to turn off

the light.

VII

*Where are you?*



## Saints and Suicide

I

St. Thérèse of Lisieux would have taken  
her life without her faith—  
little flowers often die  
after blooming like Christmas  
morning after you wake  
faithless. How do atheists keep  
from suicide, Therese prayed  
for their strength in darkness.

II

Do saints know darkness?

III

My mother read  
tarot cards and at 16.  
She hid the cards  
only to find them, white  
background, blue faced, scattered  
around a different house.

IV

It has always taken me  
hours to fall asleep.

There was no light  
to grow flowers.

V

St. Thérèse died in her letters to Céline  
when she was 24 of tuberculosis  
as her father died of dementia  
as her two brothers and one sister died  
as her mother died of breast cancer

VI

My shadow knocked three times.

## Roses

My grandmother dropped  
stems of roses and bloom  
life into motion, speaking

in tongues  
we ate on Sunday mornings  
before family was too cliché.

My mother  
offered me roses.  
Bushes that died

years ago leaning against rented  
houses. I was the keeper  
of roses until they withered.

They were pink,  
innocent like baptism, sunned  
victims of this Valley

heat. My sister lived  
among the roses  
before she was born. She told us

she chose our family.  
She shares  
a name with saints—

one who protects  
gardeners  
and AIDS sufferers.

Saint Thérèse's older sister,  
Céline—that's what they  
call me—took photographs

in the convent  
of sisters and roses  
and sainthood.

According to genealogies,  
neither was married.  
In letters, Thérèse wrote  
To Céline:

“What have I done  
for God that He should shower  
so many graces

upon me?” A question  
for prayer yet asked  
of a sister. Ungraceful and naïve.

I’ve neglected the roses  
for years and their branches  
break off into the heat  
while sisters wither  
brown and splintering

like roses decaying  
with no one to tend  
to their beauty.

## Abuelitas

The distance between us bends  
into this bridge on the backs  
of tildes, punctuated accentos  
and running, rolling r-sounds  
trilled. This is a love poem

to a language I do not know  
well enough to own my own history,  
remembering my grandfather's  
step-mother, I don't even know her name—

abuelo's real mother died when he was little  
this mother was his aunt before she married  
his father—she still lived in an adobe home

when I was ten and able to visit  
Terán. I did not know how to ask  
for stories, poeta sin palabras.  
Walking down the caliche  
to buy soda from glass bottles, popping  
rims to check for broken glass. Scattering  
memories of you—my mouth full

of syllables splintering on the tongue.  
Language is hard to swallow  
from a sieve.

My mother's mother, Abuelita Pepa,  
taught me Spanish so we could talk,  
fideo-filled-fragments saved  
only in photographs of my brother  
pouring the bowl of letra sopa  
over my head and me, seeking

the dribble, every letter. Craving  
the words lost now among stacks  
of academia and time. This Valley  
taught only in English. A canon  
that left me craving  
the world and the word  
and its division, its borders  
of language of literacy  
of power of infinites ladled

into soup bowls by my grandmother's  
mother, Bisabuelita Segovia's  
blue spotted spoon rusted  
over with magic of this language  
forgotten in mud-hardened memories.

Bisabuela Rumula Segovia  
(1903-1992)

I can't even remember your voice. It must have been strong  
enough to carry two daughters across el Rio Grande  
without a man—he died when you were still young, married off  
before you knew your worth. Your mother died before then, *Perfecta*,  
she left you alone when you were 15. You stand arms folded,  
rebozo como la virgen, eyes narrowed but full, *rebelde*—  
this is the image I carry of you

in daydreams and nightmares. You appeared to my mother,  
Bisabuelita Segovia—mother of all mothers—and in tongues,  
you rushed all of the world's secrets risking your afterlife,

salvation sacrificed to warn of the world's end, but she couldn't  
understand, not ready for your world, and you angered and faded  
airy into whispers into silence into everything I cannot know of you  
and my voice. How can anyone learn the language of gods?

My mother cried for years sobbing into rebozos and nightgowns and ridged  
lace patterned circles you hung on the backs of your chairs. Abuela, why  
were your rebozos always black, mourning the day? You appeared again,  
ten years after your death to *su Joito*, my brother and promised hope  
in a language of onion picking and pain, a language felt but not known

before you died, my language. Language is muddied by rivers. You promised  
him hope as they miscarried again and again and again. The loss of saints to cancer.  
You told him to not be afraid, and bisabuelita, *sabias que esperamos*  
*la tercera*—Lily, rooted deep into the soul of El Valle. Were you afraid

to use your voice to weave your world into ours to restitch the wound  
and repair your family? Bisabuela, are you safe

in languages and rebellion? I hold the pink rosario you gave me  
before you died and I pretend to know how to pray  
its waxy beads, and your voice echoes.

I Remember My Grandma Gomez  
*For Abuelita Aurora Gomez( 1927-2014)*

whose hands mapped rivers and muddied together  
ten children and even after grandpa died, she stood  
taller than his frame that filled a door way. I can't stop  
looking at her hands. I never knew them  
calloused or sore, but they must have swelled  
in dish soap and scraped against talladors.  
Before she died two days ago, I visited her in the hospital—

She could no longer talk  
but she spoke with her hands. She reached  
for mine and cried. She couldn't remember  
my name or my brother's or sister's, but her hands knew  
we were hers.

She smiled when we told her of my father—  
her Jose Luis. She could remember him  
and we are his.

Her hands carried more  
than thirty grandchildren  
and twenty-five great grandchildren  
and onion bags and fruits picked  
for someone else from trees standing  
miles taller than her four foot ten inch frame.  
I have never felt my size—I think  
I got this from my father's mother. She controlled:

worlds of children and that two story house  
on 17<sup>th</sup> Street and Schunior between Yoli's  
and the tracks that run through town  
dirt and thorns and rusted blue spotted spoons  
she stirred forgetting the bills and Tío Ricky  
who we all think about everyday now—he didn't know  
she was gone until the rosary. He couldn't understand  
until she wasn't moving and the songs and prayer  
moved him to tears—  
and banisters that creaked  
when you were trying to sneak up them.

I broke a hole in the wall once, playing  
with my cousins. Inflatable gloves grew  
our fists five times and my ten year old hands  
were not strong enough to resist. I flew into the wall

and cracked it. Sheetrock breaks easy  
when there isn't enough money to fix it.

I ran into my mother's arms  
while my father glared—I broke  
his home. A life size hole in the room  
he still saw as his bedroom.

Even now when I step past the screen  
door walk past the porch and through the crooked  
wooden door handled by hundreds  
of little hands latched closed with a hook  
and hole, and I cannot forgive myself.  
I rarely go back.

All my uncles and father painted  
that house every couple of years--always hunter green  
and brown, they tried cream once—too soft, my grandma  
knew the hurt in brown. Her hands speak  
of work and hurt and survival after loss  
as they crease an ending life line.  
I didn't get to see love, but her head line bled  
la familia louder than pain.

My father told my sister she didn't deserve to cry  
at his mother's funeral—we didn't really know  
her. So today, I will sit with him, quietly  
stare at her hands, folded and still,  
and I will search for lines  
down his face while he is convincing  
himself that he does not deserve to cry.



## Knock on Wood

Palms calloused along edges talking  
deep lines left handed to show the past rooted  
in work on fields in Michigan and Carl's Grocery  
and Coors trucks for this dream you wanted for me beyond  
forks of life and love and everything that keep you  
from what you wanted. Into the right palm  
that predicts a future that is broken like your old Ford pickup  
you gave up when it was too much to fix rusted blue and white  
with cactus growing out of the hood. Your hands are stronger than mine  
and you always take mine in, squeeze to prove a father  
is strong—and you'd laugh. This is where the image I have of you  
should be suspended because I don't want to remember  
the hospital, a stroke, but too proud you walked across  
fresh cut into the heart and around the shoulder knit together by lines,  
unpredicted and this palm reader is too scared to check  
the restroom where your fingertips brushed against shoulders.  
The nurses rushed to patch you together again,

and again

you showed me where to place my hands when attempting  
my first cartwheel. One down then the other—fingers outstretched  
on faded yards you cut with one hand holding hues  
of greens and yellows and browns. Remember when Joey said  
you needed better soap? We didn't know better looking down  
at hands faded lighter like the sun you protect me from. I do not  
know the real work you do to love me holding my arm down  
that isle at grandma's house and you let me go hesitantly reaching:  
there's still time to run

and again

remembering when I left my Discman on the kitchen table,  
the one we should not have afforded, and you pretended  
to bang your head to Metallica in acceptance of me. I was fourteen  
and little girls do not last. You sat with my headphones grasping  
for that hand you once caught to bend the fingers into each other  
but it no longer reaches out to you. I am afraid of losing,  
you know. Please—please trace your future far into mine  
along dips and crosses and the parallelisms that promise.  
I should not be writing this  
for fear.

Dream about the Death of My Father, Age Eleven

Sphered, twenty feet above (wake  
up) cracked desert saltpan fine-  
grain. Sediments. Iridescent  
floating out reality (wake  
up) in other realms, Fathers

die. Lying flat like Heaven  
(wake up), floating black and white  
wood frame, latticed. chipped  
paint two-story—grandma's.  
Fathers die in that house.

(Grandfather seven foot door frame  
filled standing. dimmed. last  
time seen. Not allowed

at the funeral.) Something  
comes. Reoccurring. Running

sidewalks. Legs and arms. Breathe (wake  
up) in the musk of better dreams. Hiding  
upstairs. Everything is broken. Stairs caved  
into hollow space, railing splintered. Nothing

to hold. Keep from falling. There is no color  
in this dream. But the bed is made, centered  
night stand flanked. Crouched

head on knees. Breathe. Door  
left open. Reoccurring. (wake—) It  
comes. Head (—up)  
above knees. Look—  
he lies. Flat. Father, it comes—  
Reoccurring. Wake up.

PERSONAL VOICE, CONOCIMIENTO, AND RECOVERY

The Hanging Tree  
*For Juan Riojas (died 1992)*

I never realized you were his lover.

Mom said you lived with your sister after your mom left. You lived in the apartment behind us off Closner back in 1992 when we were still surrounded by fields. I would get lost in those trees. The ones where Hurricane Beulah left warped luggage and yellowing sinks sunk into the dirt. Everything stayed damp for years. You would find me and take me back to my mom. Juan, do you remember?

There were so many trees, mesquite in their rigidness, their density, their breeze—hush. You didn't have a family, but I thought you were part of mine. That wasn't enough, and I was eight. And knew nothing of sexuality and AIDS. I didn't know you were sick until my mom told me when I was too old and you were too gone to say I'm sorry. Maybe this poem is enough.

He refused you, didn't he? He was your family, but my uncle couldn't bring himself to say he loved you.

Not when he refused himself.

He was so far  
lost in his delusion  
he never realized you

would throw  
a rope around  
that tree out back  
where I would play.

Grandpa dug out  
that tree and its roots

as if there was fear  
it would poison

the soil.

Smears

on the sliding glass door, every cousin  
lined up: oldest centered and flanked  
by middle children. Babies between  
legs. Lost count. I was off center  
at nine—just before the birth  
of my sister.

*Jumping on their bed, untouchable and defiant. How dare they ask me to come down when flying  
is much more fun? So they fragment their phrasing between jumps  
you—are—going—to—have—a—baby—sister.  
This translates and I land  
flat footed and crying*

That door covered in fingerprints  
and innocence locked by a broomstick  
splintering with a sawed-off  
head. Bristles used by my hands  
to sweep up the smallest  
of brokenness

*Great Grandmother Segovia left my mother with a crystal vase, red rimmed  
with a cover handled with a sphere. I broke the top. My mother never blamed me.  
My father took the yelling and turned it into music,  
playing from the speakers of his old truck*

Across the caliche  
at Abuela Pepa  
and Abuelo Kiké's,  
I couldn't see  
straight at that tree  
where I used to play  
—focusing  
on the lines left  
by palms

*In kinder, I waited in line to use the restroom. We were taking a trip to the zoo,  
and Mrs. Guerra wanted us all to go before we left. When it was my turn,  
I couldn't reach the lights, so with my left hand holding on to the door where it  
meets its hinge, I used the right to reach the light. Danny didn't know,  
so he slammed the door shut. I stared at my hand the whole way to the hospital.  
Bleeding and broken, I got stiches but I don't remember how many*

promising.

Distractions

That tree  
swung him,

*Juan and my uncle planned my eighth birthday party—when we still lived on Closner—  
and they stood out in the parking lot with mom talking about candy and games and  
everything they wanted*

Juan,  
lifeless.  
floating feet  
above the ground  
Abuelo Kiké worked  
wheeling weeds  
and scraps

*On the third Wednesday of every month, my grandfather digs a poso by the mesquite tree  
where the snakes hide and he digs it deep enough to burn*

that tree grandpa cut down. Children  
should never see sacrifice.

“Quiero ser de su familia o no quiero ser.” *And he isn't.*

through a glass door, echoes tapped  
from little hands splinters pulled  
from little fingers remembering Juan.

## The Motion of Swinging

Words hang off each branch  
bending with the weight of bodies.  
My body doesn't move anymore  
fractured into splints and swellings  
and waves like oceans undressed

and walked in—never on  
because I could never be  
a god. We don't talk anymore  
but I taught you how  
to swing

from trees like the tire I pushed  
you on when you were six.  
You twisted the rope until it creased  
the lines on my palms when I tried  
to protect you from spinning

controlling gravity and blood  
moons that rust October orange  
and copper, a penny flipped  
over for good luck.

We got locked  
in today. When  
I died, you stopped  
swinging. Limbs sagging  
dewdrops roping  
this moment,  
a steady swing.

Remembering

when I realized what gay meant—

my uncle.

I don't remember being there.

I dreamt  
his death:

my mother explaining that Tío's

friend died.

In my dream, the tree was

in a different place  
growing out of the cement  
centered on the porch,

I don't remember his name.

The first sideways look I gave

my ex-husband.

power of my sex.

when we fought, I fought like a man

my voice: woman.

I don't know my mother  
when every piece of glass flew from the kitchen  
except counter

I remember  
fall

ing

in

—

out

and into

my voice, but I don't want to remember—

you.



## Foundations

I loved love once—he wasn't you—  
but you've known I couldn't be pieced together.  
I originally said goodbye but panicked  
and the message reads goodnight. One word  
twisted into hope but I am unconvinced  
that this road leads back to the walls  
holding up the beatings in this heart. I hold  
them up cemented into the floorboards, laminate  
and torn—these are my foundations.

Which is the house  
you grew up in?

I am a witch and can read  
your past paved in suburbia. Roads  
that do not meet my caliche  
memories laying cardboard down  
at the wedding and dancing in white  
offset by caliche mud and potholes.  
You tell me you'll pave  
the world to reach me, but what  
of my poverty that unravels  
into my now, carried by the quiet  
breezing of mesquite trees  
while your oak seeps into your roots.

## Pantoum

It's 6:57 in the morning, and I am ready  
to tie you around the throat if I can catch you still  
leashed locked—it is too early for your defiance  
deafly stumbling keys, too dark to see without front door light.

I can catch you still around the throat and tie you  
to me. If I were to unchain you, would you return  
stumbling for keys to light your dark. Deftly,  
heart? Too chaste to hunger yet too alone

to unchain you from me and return to a sunken in sofa  
faded into a facade enveloping limbs into false comfort  
hungry to chase dreams of restful nights alone  
on cold sheets waiting heavily. In deep crevices

comforted by the facade enveloped by limbs sore  
from holding the weight we let die long before we quit.  
lost in the crevices collecting pennies and heavy with guilt  
of stacks of dirty dishes loaded into a double sink

of quitting and dying and rings circled around milk glasses held  
by hands smudged with the grease of fast food chains  
dirty and stacked napkins loaded with fat and advertisements sink  
unrecycled into trash cans spilling over with regret and weakness of will

You find me? These hands smudging grease stains into windows of cars  
spelling "wash me" like an eleven year old child who knows  
unrequited love from a brother or sister who will highlight weakness leaving  
regret, but you can't control the rhythm of beats once the band starts going

and going dancing but forget yourself be the child who doesn't know fear  
yet who moves because they are compelled to move vigorously  
regret the night before but now you are free to lose control and band  
together because youth dies at 30 and I can no longer accept

it's 6:57 in the morning, and I am ready.

Tell Me

Does it taste good to die?  
Living in the now. Carpe  
diem and all that

distraction. How does it  
feel to always think

of you

now? I wish I knew this  
sentiment, selfishness,

but now I've made myself  
a victim of mothers.

Who do you carry in  
bed like chocolate, deep

and flowing in Willy  
Wonka's wonderland. Didn't

you know they filled it with  
cream and watched it rot

while that fat kid drank it  
in, take after take. Perhaps

that's dying—there are  
better ways

like:  
Motherhood  
and  
cigarettes  
and  
drinking

so much that nails  
can't stand still enough to  
count if one is lost. I can't

lose control. Like when you  
said I should flash that trucker

when we were in high school.  
God, I am dying

remembering high school.  
Those days of

you  
and  
mothers  
and  
God

like when I tried  
to be a witch and you

said you liked the idea  
of trinities and stars

and circles inside circles  
and  
circles  
and  
circles  
and

spinning tilt-a-wheel  
vomiting  
up small chunks

of myself floating  
away on wonderland

dying midair.

## My Last Poem to You

You're holding me  
back, my words,  
my tongue belonged

to you before I defined  
myself. For years,  
you were the you  
in my writing, my head,  
my voice. Dancing

in kitchenettes, holding  
spoonfuls of sopa  
romance on flea market  
card tables and in faux

wood-lined microwaves,  
sheets for curtains.  
Your mom gave us  
recycled bags

from old comforter  
sets filled with older  
popcorned blankets  
and pillowcases

she found at a yard  
sale. Financial stability  
is not found  
at twenty. Dollar store

wine glasses celebrated  
Christmas Eve after midnight  
alone moscato love

filled two. Completely  
in. Until I wasn't.

You were the you  
in every poem, limbs  
wrapped around  
sheets and other  
limbs--mine.  
Until you weren't

you.  
let go. Fingertips  
slipping into sheets  
of paper without  
you.

Sparrow

i used to love  
you

how sparrows love  
like home

my heart  
my heart  
with sparrow wings  
in flight

like looking  
into the sun so that all

you are left with is spots  
fading,

blurring—  
then nothing

my heart  
my heart

mine.  
out of flight

to find home

in slumber. i dream  
about lusting you and wake  
amongst freedom—

this is what flying must feel like  
taking in air  
breathing

outstretched

expecting the fall

my heart  
my heart

the wind catches

without restraints  
and rise.

i am risen

into you and have consumed  
all that you have left  
that is good.

your laugh

your wide-eyed innocence

your heart

your heart

miles beneath

you are not  
good without me.

i wish you were.

risen—

risen.

risen

i am

despite expectation i am  
risen

rising without you  
into birds



## Shame

You picture me billowing—  
pale in black and white movies  
waiting for a train, skirted  
and long, straightened  
spine that maps corners  
of my monte. I've been lost  
too long to know how to cross  
back. All legs and doubled  
over,

contorted.

Reaching to unwed legs and finger  
tips grazed across arching backs  
and firmly held hips as anchoring

carring deep resentment of pasts  
and ghosts. I saw my ghost, red—  
I died and she took my place,  
*Mujer Mala*, my shame

personified and hungry  
yearning to feed on my former self,  
a form of cannibalism, death to the poet.

Don't you want me—

while I simmer in the godliness  
of my woman's voice. In the wake,  
I have come, beware, beware,  
sin pena, sin vergüenza.

After the Yellow Wallpaper

you couldn't even find the words  
couldn't even find the words  
find the words  
find a word

to tell me:

you  
found  
some  
one  
else:

milk  
eggs  
butter  
sugar  
coffee filters  
paper plates  
bread  
cold syrup  
non drowsy

awake  
waiting  
waiting  
wait  
ing

You should have called first to tell me:

you were stopping by. please, the house is a mess. please, sit. one moment  
please. wait. where are we going?

you promised you  
were

going  
to stop

smoking before  
but you promised

Time. and time again—there's never enough time for naps like when we were little.  
Do you remember when everything was warmer like te de limon seeped  
into chipped tea cups? because I dropped it on the counter when I was washing

waiting for you  
and

cold mornings. Naked trees rather than red and sap covered yellow

and fall  
ing  
into this  
rhythm of  
fail  
i  
n  
g  
letters  
like house of leaves  
into echoes

your voice still vibrates  
yesterday—we were  
together. Don't you  
remember? Please  
open the door. Let your  
voice in—it is cold  
and you are f

o

l

l

i

n

g

out of love

Minotaur  
and closets  
and hallways

echoing into:

bedroom ceilings  
unopened books  
garages with stacked  
cardboard boxes  
locked doors

because there's no way out.

Portrait

Cross

eyed, staring straight  
forward into frames  
of windows curtained,  
teal. Hearts failed outside

of myself, hollow yellow  
aorta pulsating into fingers  
swimming in blue, fraying  
mascara dripping into purples  
and reds and pinks filling depths

of bags extending into roses  
leafed on cheekbones.  
I am not myself.

Stitched about the lips, swollen  
reaching out into glass.  
Fingers cupping breasts  
veined, outlined, vined

blooming violet on chin  
curving into an endless  
parabola centered  
on its axis.

I have never cried  
tears into serpents.

## Ars Poetica

the lines break into me  
gut me open like a fish  
lying skinned and deboned. scaled  
flats and sharps hemorrhaging untuned  
missed notes with trilling spit  
valve waiting to be emptied  
on the patchwork tiled

floor. fill me, muses. tip the drippings  
leftover verses. scraps, i am hungry  
willing. beg. prying scum from corners of toe  
nails to feel clean. sanitize scented  
mediocrity climbing into my left  
eye socket. laughing blind

enjambing knives onto ceramic  
plates squealing failure  
wobbling, half staff helium  
balloon on uncurled ribbon. stabbed  
with jealousy. counting words

because I may run out  
into parked cars. this  
is going nowhere, and i am too humiliated  
to die servicing muted whiteness blinking

out allergy induced tears realizing  
i am incapable of real emotions. robotic  
to the taste, rusted. rasping, voiceless

wasting away rotting rat caught in the drainage  
hole bottom of residential dumpster crumbling

teeth exposed. fighting to remain relevant.

## Streaming

Among the burrows of leaves in trees cut down  
by sheers too long touching the sun. You punctured it  
and it bled across my page. The sun is colored

turquoise. I've lost you, muse—in energies  
and language and colors milked like nail clipped  
moons and cloroxed linoleum floors. Domesticate

me. I shouldn't know better. Did you try  
my heart—I bet it fit like new slacks and felt better  
with insoles. Souls—I hadn't thought about souls

in three years. You took it, didn't you? Maybe there's a lost  
and found bin like where all the rich kids' sweaters go  
in summer. You'll remember when it's cold like souls—

it feels without it. That's how I interpreted the bible  
because I lie and everything is justified for saints  
in history books and Catholics online like Christian  
Mingle me empty, soulless and saintly.



## Comfort in Zombies

Everyone is dying, but I'm still alive,  
and the Jehovah's Witness man in a thick coat  
warned me that the dead will rise.

¿Será posible que los muertos vuelvan a vivir?  
I told a friend the Bible was a book about zombies  
and everyone is dying? I'm still alive.

Algunas acababan de morir; pero en un caso, el hombre llevaba cuatro días muerto.  
Her uncle just died of cancer. Should I tell her—while she questions her faith—  
that the dead will rise?

How else should I console a broken heart when my words are cheap?  
I stopped speaking to her because I had nothing else to say.  
I'm sorry. Everyone you love is dying. I'm still alive.

Dios anhela devolverles la vida a los muertos,  
and should this be a type of comfort,  
knowing the dead will rise?

In *cataclysm* classes, they said God will not  
use water for destruction again. But what of love?  
While everyone is dying, I am still alive  
and warned. The dead will rise.



Tlacuache Nightmares – After the Rain on Monday

I wish I knew how to walk down wooden fences pretending to slip like that tightrope walker collecting gasps from the peanut gallery—but you couldn't keep your balance, could you?

Foot wedged into the fence line. I could smell you in spite of the rain. Does wood get slippery? How did it feel when your stepping betrayed you? When life sweeps you up and leaves you to fend for yourself and it's only later that I realize there really was no hope to begin with. It could have been weeks, your head the way it was, tail missing. God,

could I smell you, but I guess that's how we all end up maggoted and limp, innards out and feasted on by scavengers. We're all meant for this. Life on survivalism like those commercials, 1997 version, with egg frying in pan and the entire room is destroyed—*the more you know*. I'm sorry about the leg. I tried to get you out in the one piece you had left but you really were stuck. We all are and maybe this is my cynicism and I've had a bad day but we're all stuck and you may have made your way out a little better than the rest of us. God,

I'm fighting with a carcass. At least I bagged the gloves. Don't take it personally but I couldn't have that smell in the house and the flies kept trying to get through the crack on the glass door. More maggots so please it was you but it was mainly the maggots. Sometimes it seems surreal, fiction, this part of my imagination that swells into really dark thoughts on loss and the insignificance and insecurity of life and maybe it's all in abstraction,

but then there's you.

like when my best friend's uncle died and I couldn't find those feelings you're supposed to get when someone dies. I'm awkward around death so I talk to dead tlacuaches because they don't expect understanding or condolences. Most people would rather they die. Carcassed and hanging toes curled, soft pelt that remains bagged and later picked up by animal control.

## MOVEMENT

## Struggle in the Borderlands

Today, I pulled up from the earth, in handfuls, thigh-high weeds, plentiful from weeks of rain. Some came up from the roots bringing rings of soil, soft and littered with shell and worms that stiffened into curls of black dotted yellow. Snails crack under feet packed dirt. No breeze from outstretched wings of the kiskadee.

I carry this land as each fingernail is filled with dirt, still damp from midday rain—dense and bitter with the raising of the sun. Today, I became part of the earth, part of Tejas—covered in rain and shreds of green splintering into small cuts on the inside of my fingers, forearms, and wrists. Bloodless and scarless but proof of the land's fight to remain. Ouroboros in its primordial persistence to exists as itself. But I am not of this land's history—a history hidden from its people, untaught and ignored. This fight is fruitless and my hands are sore from the pulling in the borderlands—into me.

The soil has hardened and the sun has dried remains piled in mounds across the barren patch of earth. Everything grows back lush around the Rio Grande. For now, stubborn roots remain with tendrils roping themselves to a rusted post once used as a lasso. Roots forged on the divide between lands, languages, and selves. Foraged but forked in their resolve—stinging when pulled. Today, I pulled from the earth hunched over with hands gripping my heart that yearns to remain in the borderlands.

Lilith's Children  
For Refugee Children – Summer 2014

*The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.*

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera*

I  
Little hands opening  
borders. Cutting through  
the womb, arms outstretched  
for cleaner hands to pull  
them through—corralled  
into a greyhound bus hitting  
every pothole leading  
into questions and more hands  
pointing and shoving into missing  
shoes and HEB bagged rags  
and food scribbled out in a language  
anyone can read: Help. More  
hands holding signs. Every child  
knows when  
they are unwanted.

How much should these hands give to save themselves from callouses, from hardening?

II  
These are my children  
stemming from a broken  
wound. A womb reduced  
to grated tissue. They severed  
the umbilical cord before  
I could teach you  
about borders and freedoms  
and walls and hunger.

Like Lilith  
and the thousand deaths of her children.

What are my children accused of when I am their mother?

III  
O God,  
who hast  
said:

“Unless you  
be converted,  
and become  
as little  
children,  
you shall not  
enter into  
the kingdom  
of heaven”

Why sever our limbs and cut out our hearts when their silence leads us away from heaven?

Appealing Citizenship – Dallas, Texas  
June 2008

Waiting single file, folders stacked  
stamped welcome to America,  
blue collar red economy filled  
with white majority. Forget

your country and wave  
this miniature flag dressed  
church clothes found cheap  
at the nearest ropa—flowers  
printed pretty while mamá y papá  
grip each other

praying. Playing with the ribbon  
in your hair, white—trying to look  
american in a line full of people  
who look just like you—lost

in a room of checking—rechecking  
documents—reciting the national  
anthem—in american

only. Finding your language  
when you have done everything to lose it.  
watching as the young Asian woman leaves

flagless, confused—sits crying off  
to the side of the room, defeated—  
sifting through red

rejection from a country that does not want

On the Borderlands

When the guns aim

a straight line.

is on the other side.

pack extra towels

in your black bags.

I do not know your tongue

serpentine around my eyes

scaling skewed realities.

Tell me:

lands, your voices echo

dulled like the beatings

on under ripened sandia.

for you, do not run

When jumping walls,

be careful of what

Rivers are cold

On the borderlands:  
We are of neither nation.

We are of all nations.

We are of neither  
language.

We are of all languages.

Where is real? In the  
border

On the Media

Tell me the truth! Begged  
a country of people who  
want to know how to think  
from screens in boxes and  
hands and desks and laps.  
Tell me: how should I feel  
about these images of  
people and video feed of  
hunger. Flip the channel  
and everything changes  
like turning on a second set  
of lights, and it hurts.  
You'll say the truth does,  
but whose truth? When is  
it justified to say this is  
enough without feeling  
like an asshole and not  
standing in protest against  
the oppressors—the man.  
Freire said this line about  
the oppressed becoming  
the oppressors, and I  
haven't been able to sleep  
since. Analyze, over  
analyze: why do others get  
to decide what is best for  
everyone? Am I not  
moving fast enough  
because in this country and  
others, there is pain. And I  
am sitting here  
mesmerized by everything  
I do not know, and my  
efforts to make an  
informed decision are  
squandered on the next  
news report and the next  
and the next until I have so  
much information but  
nothing to prove that I  
have earned my place in  
society—my voice.  
Nothing to show but  
information and words.

## A Lesson in Breathing

Styrofoam emptiness of Chinese romance dipped in orange chicken. Running away from the hollowness of fall only to fall into the rhythm of certitude or rather servitude. Hands raised in quiet comfort knowing there are no responsibilities for the average citizen that follows the formation stems from a single stray mark that bleeds into curvatures melting into families who sit so picturesque in front of windows always cleaned by hands that crack into shards of broken picture frames facing an empty hallway with only one open door leading to a bedroom undone and scattered clothing and shoes. A closet hiding years of change loosely thrown into random containers collecting found pennies dating back to that first kiss in a crowded movie theater eating popcorn when it happened leading into the realization that words can be meaningless in certain situations leading with one foot in front then tripping on a raised crack on a sidewalk when you didn't even know why you were walking only to escape the dirty dishes waiting in a crowded sink into oblivion and give everything away while listening to the Beatles trying to convince "you were only waiting for this moment to arrive" knowing lies upon the table carrying stacked and unopened books who teach time as a form of mockery. Knowing time could be slowed but that would require breathing to notice the simplicity of the moment "so much depends upon—"



Damnation

he cried

between the sheets  
lined with broken  
end-stopped  
promises

knees and elbows  
and hollowing  
and subjugation  
through bended beats  
and heads on  
backs of pews.  
you don't pray anymore.  
He cried

in the caliche roads  
of colonias. grooved  
from rains shallowing,

swallowing terremotes  
and children puddled  
and crooked stop signs  
from drunk driver binges

and Sunday morning  
shifts of senoras in hairnets  
making torillas at Stripes  
and empty pews because

there isn't any money.

He cried

forfeiting me

Sunday morning sleep  
only to wake  
to write  
to work  
to tutor children in reading  
that is my church,

and he cried

sinner

sinner

sinner

sinner?

As a child, my mother  
would take us to church,  
and we would sit towards  
the back because the  
people with money sat in  
the front.

I would eat Cheerios and  
kick my older brother with  
the shoes my father  
cleaned the night before.

My father would never  
sing in church because his  
voice wasn't nice enough.

I was too old for the crying  
room—where they would  
place the children who  
could not behave. It really  
was an embarrassment for  
the parents.

Each Sunday I would try to  
ignore the man telling me  
everything I did was  
wrong.

Everything would send me  
to hell.

Everything is a sin and I  
was corruptible.

By the time I finished my  
first communion, I told my  
mother I wasn't going  
anymore.

I was never confirmed in  
the church.

Sinner.

## The Sounds of Heads Hitting Walls

like those children who face the wall  
restricting classrooms head held down  
beneath lined hoods cushioning broken  
down systems lined note book paper warped  
because this is what you show them  
this is what you show them  
this is what you show them  
this is what they know because

brick walls break when skulls  
are slammed against them.  
skulls crack when trying to change  
this system that rejects any change.

mine. mindless. childless. ranting  
politics on and in boxes  
because this is how you see me  
this is how you see me  
this is how you see me  
this is how you see me because

I am merely a part of the system  
throwing balled up paper at a concrete  
wall standing miles away, as if this  
could do anything

Truth lies  
in an attempt to wake. children  
creating rebels against me who

knows the system. Merely a spoke  
jammed bottle of rose moscato  
whine because I cannot fit these hands  
to change me, you, this, them or ideas

soon affecting no one. wants to know  
when the dimly painted, pointed. meaning.

As Poet / As Teacher

I want

to write each  
student into a poem where:  
lines are defined by your  
broken promises and their  
potential that over—  
whelms the poet. I want to write

each student as a poem  
that spasms and twists and breaks  
out into their greatness. into Alé  
who as a faded heart-shaped birth  
mark on the right side of her nose  
that extends into the differences  
between her and her twin  
sister who sits directly behind

her during testing. They reach  
for a dictionary in the same way—hopeful  
but heavy. Alé works slowly, slower  
each page turn meticulous, exacting her success  
while her sister sits behind, always

like Arron who writes into  
broken sentences: I cannot  
finish. He turns in his test  
only partially complete because  
he cannot write. Five lines out  
of twenty six spelled out his failure.

They are not my students but that  
is only a way to shift the blame  
like the system—keeps on shuffling

failure onto the faces of potential  
of futures  
of Robert  
of Luis  
of Maggie  
of Maria  
of Angel  
of Manny

of Sandy who went to school each day with fear of her parents' deportation.  
of Alex who was brilliant but dropped out because his brilliance was wrong for the system.  
of Edgar who was sent to AEP four times for possession and was forced to graduate early.  
of Samantha who dates Edgar and is labeled just the same.  
of Juan who was in Loco 13 and dropped out.  
of Albert who was called "El Flaco" but left that only to be denied entrance to college.

Each student is a poem  
innumerable and beautiful  
and painful but

true. Do not force me  
to lie. Teach truth  
and power and possibility.  
I write my students into  
poems into my life into  
a power that cannot be  
enough. It is not  
enough. Grow, poet,  
teacher, so they can  
have hope.

## The Numbers in Quantitative Data

words spew ignorant and broken—I cannot  
communicate my anger. Flushed,  
downed vile collects at the back,  
uvula. under stacks, misunderstood.  
the student is reading, quiet. below

book level but shhhh—do not expect more  
these numbers indicate our success  
and you are failing our quantitative  
data. child, show me the numbers  
and your future is pigeon-held into  
the widget that counts. watch it

move but your numbers do not  
communicate our success. help us  
develop you into our future of  
quantitative data—forget these things:  
these beauties of literature of art  
of nature of knowledge. Plato

no longer matters because Socrates committed  
suicide and it does not factor into quantitative data  
and numbers and widgets—look at this new technology  
that speaks only of our success and your failure.  
numbers. numbers. numbers. do you feel the  
beat in the numbers that muse our system

into rhythm of data that ranks you as failure,  
as future—our future is failing—our numbers  
do not add up to the sum of our success.  
you fail. you fail. you fail. Us. look at these numbers—  
not good enough. here shovel words at a first grade

reading level. shovel. they will help  
our quantitative data.  
quantity. quantity. look at the numbers!  
This widget; its personalized. and pretty. you can be  
better. forget those words. they are too long.  
you are not smart enough for those words.

those words. those words. these words. our words show  
in numbers. you are numbers. eat your  
numbers. you have failed. failed.

but slow. This system that chooses numbers  
over students, over learning, over true  
knowledge has taken from our future  
the beauty of its potentials—free thought  
and beauty. I have lost hope  
in this  
system.

## Poem to A Person Who Told Me to Censor a Poetry Reading

This is my attempt at political correctness.  
This is my attempt at political correctness.  
Remove the controversy. Remove the pain.  
Remove the lines that push you to want to  
cause change. Poetry does not equal change.  
“I am not a revolutionary.” I am not—

write about:

family—but not about:

father: who was not given lead manager positions at a chain pizza restaurant because in training he could not prove he could yell or lead or command an all-white crew up state because he was trained to know where his position was and his inner hierarchy prevailed.

mother: who was hit across the fingers when she spoke in Spanish in the classroom. Or who was told by her father que era pendeja, she was only meant to marry and have children.

self: who had to fight my counselor, Mrs. Allejos, my sophomore year in high school for an advanced English class. She said I was too young and it would be too hard. I would fail.

my sister: who is beautiful and young and full of judgments others make of her. She is too pretty to be smart. It's ok, Teresa, you can make the project look pretty just. like. you.

Write about the pretty potential life can carry for those who fit:

hope: if you work hard, every opportunity is open to you. If you don't question or want more than the system provides for you or think outside your limitations. Protect yourself from yourself and me and them who say hope but provide no help to achieve more.

equality: everyone is the same. Everyone, everyone, everyone loves you and them and me but not when you're different. Not when you question what has been deemed moralistic and virtuous. Not when these religions and politics conflict and say you're not good enough:

to marry  
to make decisions about your body  
to carry tampons into the Capitol  
to walk through a neighborhood without fear  
to study chican@ history and poetry and life without someone telling you  
your history doesn't matter  
to be happy

You are not mainstream enough to be happy.

voice: every voice is powerful. Every voice has a say because there is this freedom that allows you to criticize and publicize your opinions. You have a constitutional right to freedom of speech unless you're in a profession that can influence others or if anyone else can hear you. Like Socrates who died for poisoning the youth with thought. Shhh. Don't question your authority. Don't question my validity--my ethical fiber—my freedom to censor your thoughts so that you fit easily into a society of lines and—

This is politically incorrect. I have failed  
to censor myself. I have failed  
to make my voice quiet  
enough to keep you  
from worrying about me.  
I have failed  
on multiple revolutions

because I am not a revolutionary  
because my voice isn't loud enough  
because you still feel like you can censor me  
because despite these injustices,  
I am still expected to remain  
quiet.

I am not a revolutionary  
but I can feel the revolution  
coming.



## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Celina A. Gomez earned a Bachelor's of Art in English from the University of Texas – Pan American in 2006. She has been teaching high school English for eight years and coaches performance prose and poetry. She is the 2014 winner of the C.O.N.C.A (Coalition of New Chican@ Artists) Ultimate Poetry Boxing Championship. Currently, she lives in her hometown of Edinburg, Texas with her boyfriend, James, and their two dogs, Zero and Niki.

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