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Damas Y Caballeros

Guadalupe Mendez

University of Texas at El Paso, gmendez6@miners.utep.edu

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DAMAS Y CABALLEROS

GUADALUPE MENDEZ
Department of Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Sasha Pimentel, MFA, Chair

Tim Z. Hernandez, MFA

Tony Diaz, MFA

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memory of my Tio Margarito De La Fuente, from whom all I have ever known is love and caring.

DAMAS Y CABALLEROS

by

GUADALUPE MENDEZ, BA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

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The following poems in this collection have appeared in the listed journals, anthologies or literary magazines in one form or another:

- 1) "So How Are You Feeling Today?", Luna Luna Lit Journal - <http://lunalunamag.com/2014/10/29/poetry-mendez/>
- 2) "A Poem About My Name – I. Lupillo ", New Sound Journal , Vol. IV , Issue 2, 2015, Fall Ed.
- 3) "Flight" originally published in Luna Luna Lit Journal - <http://lunalunamag.com/2014/08/01/30-latin-poets-30-days-featuring-lupe-mendez/>

- 4) “What Should Run In The Mind of a Caballero”, Norton’s Anthology of Latino Sudden Fiction: Short Short Stories from the U.S. and Latin America, 2012
- 5) “Photograph of “Woman on Street - Flower Leis” “ – forthcoming – Gulf Coast Lit Journal
- 6) “A Human Rights Worker Tells Me About the Cuarenta y tres”, The Thing Itself, Our Lady of the Lake University, San Antonio, TX , Spring 2015
- 7) “A Dancer Tells Me About the Cuarenta y Tres”, HEArt Lit Journal, Sept. 2015
- 8) “Revolución”, Revista Sincopé, D.F. Mex, Spring, 2014 -
<http://www.revistasincope.com/site/2014/02/17/poesia-chicana-yo-miro-tu-watchas-%E2%80%A2-seleccion-y-traduccion-de-alina-hernandez/>

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Preface

FOUNDATION OF PROJECT

My best understanding of poetry, the conformation that indeed, I live as a writer, my use of language, socio-political message and the level of professionalism in craft have come into clearer view in the creation of this manuscript. This project is made to share out with readers at all ranges (novice to the pro-poetic) everything I know about my poetics and voice in poetic form. This project serves as a tool for the reader to use and build broader connections between them and my work, between a reader and their own community and between the reader and their access to other forms of art, language and cultural identity.

As of the date of this writing, I believe I am still formulating a definition to who and what I represent as poet and writer. I come from a performance poetry background, having sharpened (to a degree) my poetic ideas and images from the perspective of stage and sound, of moment and reaction, of voice and energy, all the elements that are central to poetry as spoken in a live recitation. It is thoughtful struggle creating for the stage and for the page.

In John Hall's *Essays on Performance Writing, Poetics and Poetry*, I found a bit of an answer to the internal struggle :

“Composition and performance: in your own work, in your own subject area, what is the relation between the two? Which is thicker in the mix that is your work?

Does this come with the medium or the traditions of the form or is it a decision that you yourself have made about how you want to work?” (23)

I have found that in answering these questions, it has helped to focus my efforts in production. I am much more metacognitive in my craft. I am willing to compartmentalize (a task I previously did not tolerate within myself) and review a completed piece, not edit a piece at first, just a mere “looksee” to explore what I have created. Once I have begun the editing process, I discern then if this pieces “feels” right and could go from performance to literary publication.

In the very classes I have taken within the MFA program we are asked to pay attention to what is said and unsaid in a poem. I also have found myself relating this idea to what is said and unsaid and tying it in a performance of a poem. This element is very telling:

“the writing then hovers on the edge of a space which is the place of performance. It is about to become topical—which means of its place. The performance writer writes the space between the writing and the performing, where the writing is always about to leave to become something else.” (Hall, 27)

The writer who writes with performance in mind must keep this “edge of space” at the forefront of language expressed, of image contained and push all of it forward in clarity. And, just like in the performance writing where the writing is about to become something else, so too, is the writing that is marked “for the page”, the images, the line breaks, the form all must work together to transform that piece of writing into something else. A poem must collide, transcend and its arrangement.

As I have taken on the task creating this manuscript and the production of the poems leading up to this manuscript these last three years, I have explored a different level of writing, a different form of expression and believe it is yielding positive results. While I do not shy away from writing poems that “fit” my old style of writing – the tone and use of imagery in a poem presented for the stage, I have become more and more comfortable writing in what could be considered rather traditional forms. Though I still struggle in figuring out which images or my expression of images needs to be relayed in the page or on the stage, I am much more aware that there can be a difference. I am much more aware that what a poem looks like on a page can be just as important as what is spoken aloud. I have learned and developed a keen sense of how whitespace on a page can equate to the pause as spoken aloud. I acknowledge the struggle and have become better equipped to welcome that struggle with language so that it is no longer a battle, but a crafted exchange between what is said and unsaid in poetic form.

In the crafting of the entirety of this work, I discovered the distinct school of thought, or the rules, or the guidelines in craft. I was able to definitively put a sort of label to what I was already doing. As Horace writes in *Ars Poetica* “But painters and poets/ have always shared the right to dare anything./ I claim that license and grant it in turn:” (2) It is this very simple understanding that has always been with me, but I wasn’t even aware of its lineage – for me, it was this undeniable calling to write and give voice to things, and by giving it that voice, I can

then express that image, that idea, that feeling and let people glean their own understanding from it later. It was not until the beginning of this MFA program that I had “discovered” this as a named idea. I found an even more concise notion upon further study:

You who write, choose a subject that's matched by
Your powers, consider deeply what your shoulders
Can and cannot bear. Whoever chooses rightly
Eloquence, and clear construction, won't fail him.
Charm and excellence in construction, if I'm right,
Is to say here and now, what's to be said here and now,
Retaining, and omitting, much, for the present.
Moreover as the author of the promised work,
Liking this, rejecting that, cautious and precise,
Weaving words together, you'll speak most happily, (Horace, 3; 40 – 49)

Here, Horace puts a kind of rule of thumb to the process – write what you know, write clearly and in that writing, if clear, then the reader or the audience will understand what you mean. This is what has always stayed with me. Horace wrote this in 19 BC and I am only now in the last three years reading about it. It is a lasting, influencing poem/essay, written by a man in whose time period, “spoken word” poetry was the norm. This idea as well, has stuck with me. It is the job of a poet to speak in language that is clearly constructed, something deep and precise.

In terms of the language of the poetry I have tried to create in this manuscript, I began to read more and more into the interviews and the essays presented in my classes and discovered an outside reading, one on the philosophy of language developed by Ludwig Wittgenstein. In one of his lectures dating back to 1936, he speaks to a simple yet profound idea, “imagining consists of two things, 1) in having a certain image in mind and 2) in using that image in a certain way”. (qtd. in Rhees, 295). So developing the language to describe an event, a feeling, to try to give a name to the ideas of the poems within the manuscript, I worked towards the capturing of an image in my mind and then deciding, or rather letting that image decide how it wants to be used, how it wants to be shared.

On of the ekphrastic pieces “Photograph of ‘Woman on Street – Flower Leis’ “ I capture the very surface of the image:

“your feet crossed, goddess,
barefoot, tender feet, no ankles here,
hiding under a woven, wool, waist-wide falda,

trim in red and you wear a white blusa,
green vines array flowers that fleck and burst in
purple down your neck, a thick neck,
a worker's neck, a young lover's neck,
and around this, una cadena de caléndulas," (3 – 10)

This poem becomes more than just the image on the page, it is not just the surface of the image I am reaching toward, but the tension of the being in the image, the vestige of this woman, who is really just a artisan selling her goods on the side street of a market, but now, the image provokes more. She is a potential being of power, no longer the artisan. She is goddess with a past, a haunting image, rich in color, rich in kinetic potential, unmoved and thoughtful.

In one of the poems covered during my time in the MFA program at UTEP, *We Real Cool* by Gwendolyn Brooks, there is the environment the poem speaks to. The image is that of a group of adults who enact certain habits, certain actions connected to nights at a bar, connected to the image of a speak easy, connected to a pool hall or juke joint. All these simple actions, these simple images are layered together to give the reader a new fuller image, a new sound. It is the full painting pushed up against the brevity of the poem and the “we” at the end of each line which also serves as the start to the actual sentences. Syntactically, this shouldn't work, but because the full image is layered we are able to advance with the poem as it is pushed to become something else. It becomes something not static, but sonic.

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon. (Brooks, lines 3 -8)

It is this very idea that helps to push the poetry forward. Brooks' poem ends with the image of “Die soon”, an image that happens to all of us –we all die soon. The poem speaks to the what will happen to the seven pool players, but it is also very telling of what happens in human nature over all. This level of universality through a commonality is something I have been

working towards in my craft. It is something I learned to identify and explore while in the MFA program.

I have become much more at ease, creating new images and allowing them to grow in ways I wasn't quite sure they had room to stand on. I grew more and more confident the more I read other poets. I can say that upon reading shorter poems and longer poems, I began to appreciate the wide range of work and shared images that exist across many poems. I began to understand that in order to create a great image, I had to be willing to explore with much intensity all the ways that an image can be named, like Wittgenstein suggests. I also had to be willing to name it differently, to be ok with naming the data I engaged with separately than what the masses call for.

Furthermore, Wittgenstein goes on to say that we are “tempted to use the grammar which we use for a word designating a physical object – we are tempted to use this grammar for words that designate impressions... This produces a puzzle...”. (Rhee, 356) We are then not restrained to branch out and reimagine an image. We are empowered to call up all those things an object, an emotion, a moment can be and name it a way that is closer to the way it really is. We become the masters of a new language, a poetic language. I have written with this in mind.

EXPLORATION IN THE MANUSCRIPT

As this manuscript was being developed and has been the case in my writing, I wanted to ensure that it covered those subjects that are important to my poetics. If at all possible, it is partnership and community I look for. I always enter writing spaces and writing conversations and am drawn into the question of writing and its place in the socio-political realm. Even now, I think Gloria Anzaldua's words:

“Why am I compelled to write?... Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me. By writing I put order in the world, give it a handle so I can grasp it. I write because life does not appease my appetites and anger...

To become more intimate with myself and you.” (Keatings, 78)

I enter the manuscript with conscious effort to build a world that can reflect how I see the reader, how I see myself and how I can build a better conversation with them. I take the necessary steps to be a bridge across all the vantage points in arts and language. *Damas y Caballeros* is a collection of poems that works across several key elements, calling attention to

social injustice needs, gender politics and the importance of history and memory. In the publishing world, and in the geo-political world I live in, I am well aware of the lack of support provided to readers and writers of color and therefore want to ensure in my own way that there is another collection of poems that provide an access point as well as serve as a representative voice for those who do not have a chance to speak.

I think of Martin Espada and an interview done with Bill Moyers in 2007:

“We have to deal with this paradox that there are 40 million Latinos in this country and, yet, we’re invisible.”

Whether as an award-winning poet or as a tenant lawyer for Boston’s Latino community, Martín Espada’s aim has remained the same: ‘to speak on behalf of those without an opportunity to be heard.’ ” - (qtd. in BillMoyers)

It is my goal with this collection of poems, to serve as a voice for my southwestern United States. I want my poems to reflect the very language that is familiar to a community at large that may need access to art and poetry. It is necessary still to have language that is vital to the success of self-identification, not of my own self identify, but the Latino community I must represent.

I want to provoke conversation and expression. It is the reason I included poems such as “Cada Mañana”. There is a need still to provide poetry that is accessible poetically in image and in language. In the poem, I take a moment to engulf the reader in a familiar surroundings, especially for individuals who are familiar with life along the U.S./Mexico border.

“my Tia Maria’s shotgun house hides in
between years of cherry blossoms limbs,

in the buck shots of leaves that settle on the roof,
on the stepping stones, on the porch, flakes

along the grass. I am here to collect summer
aguacates, the fresh cheeks of strawberries

and consejos, the size of dollar bills. I come here
every summer, to the hot house, to the white

tiny leaves that blind me to old poverty... “ (1 – 9)

I made the decision here, poetically, to work the poem in couplets, inviting the reader to take a slow read, a walk with the speaker (whom they are welcome to speculate as the speaker being the author) and see the world as it is unfolding. There are elements that speak to the moment – a shotgun house, the summer, the idea of summer crops being picked, etc. These for many along the U.S./Mexico border are naturally familiar elements, but later, in the very same piece, I add to the deeper meaning of lineage to the poem. I am able to complete the sides and elements of what we know as borders:

“I sleep on a bed frame, a family tree now, a witness
to each birth in this family. Everyone sleeps here

when they are young. The radios play tunes
older than me. . . “

The poem shifts a bit, a nod to the idea of births being had a home, as has been the case (and in some colonias along the El Paso/Juarez border, this is still the case) and experience of many Mexican-Americans. Family lineage and the image of the tree are so strong here in this piece, as is the music. It is as if for a moment, time is irrelevant here. All there is, is the time spent in the summer doing what is to be done.

In a poem such as *What Should Run In the Mind of Caballeros*, I play with the idea of thought and breathlessness to provoke the reader into stumbling across the page. There are simple, jovial connections and images, but they are couched without punctuation.

Read this fast at first/run/don't start fights, just end them
quickly/stand up for yourself . . . a little/mind your own
business/never touch the ball with your hands/play fair/if
you have a fist fight, buy the winner or the loser
a trago/no name calling/stop swearing so much, that spit
forms in the corners of your words... (1 – 4)

Though the images individually are simple, the “/” is what gives the poem part of its power. That tool separates all the ideas, all of them and now does something else – it affects the speed at which the poem is read and allows for the reader to be aware about the speed at which they are taking the poem in. They are flooded with language, some of which is repetitive (another one of the tools of this poem) and this makes any listener, any reader become acutely aware of what is happening here. It is a magnet that draws in the ears and the ideas of this poem.

I believe that in writing these poems, I must be able to access the elements of culture and bilingualism. It is the first surface draw to the poems themselves. It is the first recognizable elements that serve as an invitation to the reader of the poem. It is a connection I want the reader to experience when they engage a poem. I happened upon a blog interview of Luis Alberto Urrea who sums up how he wanted to explore his family, his bilingual culture in his work and it is something I am searching to do as well with in *Damas y Caballeros*.

“I first heard about her [Great Aunt Teresa] in family stories in Tijuana when I was a little guy... Within that matrix, I heard this story of an aunt who could fly, talk to spirits, raise the dead – part of me believed because I was a gullible little kid, but some part of me knew better. But she kept resurfacing. “

(An Interview With Luis Alberto Urrea, BookSlut)

Urrea goes on to say that it wasn't until he was able to verify that this aunt was a true person – he ran across a story of her in a text. He then began to interview family, to gather story and image about her. His approach and treatment to family allowed his own context to be the construct for many Latino readers. It was a necessary step, a familiar one. It is one I hope to draw from.

“That's where I started working with writers who really opened up my eyes, including Linda Hogan [Native American novelist/poet/playwright] and Lorna Dee Cervantes [Chicana Native American poet].

Working with them made me realize that this was a story about a woman and her family that I couldn't really footnote... but in reality, you can't footnote a dream. I was in a trance with Teresa's story, so I had to figure out how to put readers, too,

in that kind of trance as best as I could.” (An Interview with Luis Alberto Urrea, BookSlut)

It is what I try to achieve with a poem such as the three-part piece, “A Poem About My Name”. In this piece, divided into three sections, I examine the origins of my name, discussing it from multiple angles. I engage the reader with the telling of how my name truly came to pass, a story of sorts, where I use language to play in time, travelling into my own past, the day of my birth and then a further trip back, to an attack a family member suffered at the hands of a coyote.

“I asked my father why they gave me this name –
The night you were born, /your mother almost died,
her veins ran hot, her muscles locked up, /
her insides frothed with poison . . .

My father
thought of the last time he prayed, the night his Tio Lupe
fell, a throat/ nearly grated apart in between a coyote’s
teeth, the smell of copper mixed/in mud. His uncle’s blood
flowed, a river across a campo, a pool of flesh, . . .” (1-3, 6 – 9)

In the second and third parts, I take more symbolic approaches to the work, first recreating the images of La Vigin de Guadalupe and Tonanzin, and taking out both levels of religious treatment and stick strictly to the fable element to the story – both images of la Virgen and Tonanzin are merely beautiful women travelers. “she painted my hair black/said I would get used to the language/I talked to that boy Juan again/gave him some roses for his troubles/asked if they could build a place/all the neighbors came by/...” (31 – 33).

By the time I am able to reach the third part of the poem, I engage in all the more uniform ideas of the name “Guadalupe”. I invoke the simplicity of the name and mention infamous individuals who hold the name – including Jose Guadalupe Mosada, Guadalupe Victoria, La Lupe, Lupe Fiasco, Lupillo Rivera, etc. .

The access to such images is connected to the language of culture, to the language of identity. There are striking subjects, bold verbs and switch between Spanish and English allows the reader to enter into the poem with a level of familiarity if they are a part of my culture, as well as a way to into the poem with wonderment if they are not a part of this culture. It is my intent to use commonality to jar the reader, to provoke the reader into a much more universal landscape. I am hoping to engage the reader in language that taps into their cultural lives as well as their memory.

It is Tony Morrison who reminds me of how we should write about memory:

“Whatever the style and circumstances of these narratives, they were written to say principally two things. One: ‘This is my historical life’ - my singular, special example that is personal, but that also represents the race. Two: I write this text to persuade other people - you, the reader, who is probably not black - that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery. With these two missions in mind, the narratives

were clearly pointed. “ (86)

Morrison describes the reason why memory can be used to create a work of fiction and why it is necessary. Though her examples and codified rules apply to the reason African – American narratives were first written, the same kind of logic can be applied to Latino poetics. There are still not enough stories being told about people of color, written by people of color. The images that are couched in memory become deliverable as being both believable as well as universal, if only for a short amount of time. It is very relevant and will continue to be relevant, because this exercise “is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic.” (Morrison, 91)

In a poem such as “ The History of A Proposal – VII Soul Mate”, it is all narrative. It is an outside speaker bringing the reader into the world of a family in danger, a story within a story. “and finally, after a year, she lets me in. Tells me about El Salvador./ Tells me about the time when she is little, six, pig tails, chubby cheeks./ Soldiers take her father away, pulled his arms out their sockets,…” (3 – 5) Here the visceral nature of the piece is the language that moves the words forward. The words are hard, they dangle, like the limbs in the tree as described in the poem. They cut into the memory and they linger there for the reader to quietly work on.

In another poem, “Driving By the Old State Theatre on Ama’s 79th Birthday”, the memory here is again vital to the progression of the poem.

“back in Fifty-Eight,
down town Galveston has signs,
big, stark white black letter signs
Colored here, Colored
there, nothing

para invisible Mexicanos

unknown, unless
you make a mistake,
dangle you in a tree branch
late at night. Rent lady tells me
to be careful at night.” (8 – 18)

Again, the same images appear, but in a vastly different arrangement. There is a threat present. There is a need for expediency, a need for urgency when the poem is read, as well as a sense of time shifting as the poem continues into the world of the past. There is a sense of loss in the language, a sense of anguish and turmoil held up with the tension in the word placement and the line breaks, “para invisible Mexicanos” makes the word “unknown” a valuable image, makes it stand out, a defining image in this piece. This connection is present throughout the book, allowing the reader into the untold history of the writer, in all cases into the life of the speaker in each poem, the life of the poem and Latino culture.

In creating the overall tone of the book, a truth came about – a sense of direction came into light. I was subconsciously including a new level of my poetics, a gender conscious level in my writing. Prof. Pimentel identified it at first, almost like an unveiling discovery, something I hadn’t thought I was doing. I understand now that there is an element of feminism in my work. A respect and awe in the female body and the female life that are the counter and the equal of the images of man in my poetry in this manuscript. I am reminded of an interview done with a poet over the topic of gender in poetry.

“When I hear . . . poems, they have a feeling for me, they have a feeling for me, written by a girl, they have a liquidity, these are poets I love and admire and wonder at... does it mean something to me that they are sister poets, rather than brother poets? Yeah, yeah . . . I love to read poems without knowing who wrote them, but is it a woman or man or one of the other sexes and we have a lot of sexes and that is a good thing . . . all of that it interests me.” (Sharon Olds on Sex & Gender)

Just in her agreement to this idea, it speaks volumes to the necessity of consideration of gender and how it is handled in poetry. As a male, who writes poetry, I must be able to consider all levels of entry into the poem. I must be able to provide access for every sex that exists, if I am able to. I am charged with a responsibility, to speak about the marginalization of the culture of women. Sharon Olds does the same. In her collection of poems, *The Father*, she writes about an alcoholic father, his approach to death and the aftermath of it. She enters the poems with a very clear understanding of the subject and enters the feeling of the subject to catch the emotion. She

understands that “feelings do not just exist, but have a trajectory of their own”. (qtd. in Hempel, Bomb)

In the creation of this collection, I have become hyper aware (thanks to the initial call out by Prof. Pimentel) of my writing in regards to gender. The idea behind gender politics is its description of how sexual orientation plays out and the role it has in society. I believe that I try to push the ideas about gender roles by writing with intention. I write about my interactions with the opposite sex (I hope) with reverence, with respect, with realness. I write earnestly about situations, about emotional connections to the women of and in my life. I write about women I miss, women I am in awe of. I am trying to convey a level of thoughtfulness – a level of connection, one that resonates with the reader well.

I write about men and the men in my life a bit more infrequently, but I also try write an inner strength about them. I hope I am able to convey a sense of respect and awe in there as well. There is a gentle capturing I render to both sexes. To this end, and in this collection, I reshaped the poetry so that there are sections wholly dedicated to ideas, moments and memories that revolve around women. I have come to realize that like Sharon Olds, who had her relationship with her father as a muse, I write about women in the same light. Though I have not dedicated an entire book (perhaps later) to a single relationship to a woman, I have created sections that enter the world and present a language of women – a language that respects, upholds and represents women in a new context. In a poem such as *A Mujercita's Profile Drawing at the East End Studio Gallery*, “*Transition*,” I take an ekphrastic adaptation of a pencil drawing in a gallery and reach into the subject and let her actions, her motionlessness, speak.

“You always close your eyes. There are whispers,
talk, about the delicate petals on your clavicle. You always
arch your back, reeling in a glass cylinder, that tinta, toxicity
of an old school chola. You do this drawing a favor. You hate
photos, but this, this isn't so quick. This is on fleek.
‘I got this, this Gucci’, you say.” (14 – 19)

The speaker in the poem blurs the understanding of the subject and the title. He or she is speaking to the drawing or the woman in the drawing. She is mujercita (a young woman), she is a daughter, she is a ruca. She is real in this work. She speaks in language that is current, and the

language of the poem cuts to the bone of the feeling behind what she doesn't say, how she doesn't move, as well as what is on her body.

In the sections "Women" and "Ellas" in *Damas Y Caballeros*, I have dedicated whole sections to relational moments involving women. In "Women" it is strictly a closer idea of what women enact, and the third part, "Ellas" is a series of poems between a male and the girls, young ladies and women he encounters as a boy, a young man, and an older man at different stages of development. At the time of this writing, I am still toggling between keeping the poems in the sequence they are in, but am considering taking it out of order – thereby shifting the focus away from the male and his relationship with women and putting that focus on the individual moments. The writing here in this section is delicate. It is sharp and hard at all times. In a poem such as "Search Party (A Poem For the Mother of Jessica Cain, Missing Since 8.17.97)", there is a narrative that shifts focus. The reader would, on the surface perhaps think the poem is about a missing girl, when in fact, the focus is the mother and her grappling with wanting, with waiting, with loss, with time and no answers.

“ . . . Some one said “mother still runs her
a bath”, puts her clothes out every night
for a year, took up all sorts of things, read
all the books in the house, again, learned
how to flip bay houses, restored the furniture,
poor thing, the only legs and arms and backs
she could manage. She stripped the grime,
wiped the dull off, afraid to move away, lingered
a while, listened for the sound of feet on humid
wood, up the stairs, down the hall, until the tears
ran her out, . . . “ (30 – 40)

It is the subtle language, the images of water, of wood of something concrete that the reader and the subject can hold onto. It is a kinetic tension that needs to linger, a repetition that exists in this woman's life. It is heavy and unending.

If I have done this work correctly, and if I have done this with care, then the images of women is strong. The women here are like all women, bold in all circumstances, they are full and waiting or working or traveling or questioning or merely existing, as women and men do.

In the sections dedicated to men, of which there is only one, even there, it is my understanding of manhood in relation to the muse of woman. Each of the poems has a woman (in some cases, not all) as part of the backdrop. The women in these poems are the saviors, are the heroines, are the reason for movement in the poem. In a poem such as “Twisted Wrist”, there is an exploration of relationship between a young man and a young lady and then the same young man his relationship to his father (though much more violent).

“... I searched for light, but all I could really see
was how much I missed him in the daylight, missed my girl

that moment, missed a deeper slice – blood that night,
my hand knew the taste of steel, knew the taste of warm

thighs on fingertips, my father’s neck safe from a fall, my lips
wanted to bite into flesh, to feel around in the dark, beat fists,

let loose until we fell again, me, asleep at the foot of my father,
in the bosom of promiscuous night.” (32 – 39)

This poem allows the language to twist around to come into and out of each separate relationship and gather it all together. The relationships are blurred and this causes the tension to rise due to its uncomfortable nature – the young man living with the lingering desire to be with the young lady and lingering desire for acceptance of the father, and so the “promiscuous night” takes on a new tone, a disconcerting nature. The want of belonging is strong here and the young man is left, spent, his energy collapsed in an almost sexualized nature.

In order to give a full understanding of the manuscript as a whole, I must include how it is formatted. I have divided up *Damas y Caballeros* in sections that play up the ideas of gender – the first being “Women” the second “(Me)n”, the third “Ellas” and the last, “Ellos (Damas y Caballeros)”. Each section is then much more defined.

Part 1 is about the image of women in general, those I know, those I have experienced, from my mother, to my great aunt, to my wife, a miscarriage, to a painting of a beautiful ruca and the loss of a missing friend. I am trying to capture in this first part the more intimate images of woman. It is essential because these interactions are important to the life of a poem and lives of women and equally important to this writer, as these lives have configured me, as a man.

Part 2 is about the images of men, as well as a definition of “self” – a notion of how I let the reader know about me as this “idea” of manhood and how I embody that (or attempt to embody that). Poems here relate to my father, to the random situations men find themselves in, almost a crazy “struggle” balancing self with the world, as well as poems of definition.

Part 3 is then a long form poem + three ekphrastic poems in a sequence –here the tone shifts to something much more focused. Here the poems are about relationships with women with one speaker running along a timeline and a history of relationships. The last three are ekphrastic pieces that touch on the image of indigenous women, the role of women as deity, as religious and as fighter.

Part 4 is the combination of the two sexes – poems that are about the world at large, the world they work in, the world we work in, conversations between men and women and even poems where the speaker and the subject are ambiguous and therefore could be read as woman or as man.

TECHNIQUES AND MOTIFS IN THIS MANUSCRIPT

As the work began for this manuscript, I made the conscious decision to take chances and broaden my use of form and technique in some of the poems. In this section of the preface, then I will explain out how that took form. It is my intention to give examples from selected works I have read and give an effective rationale as to why the poem is the way it has come about.

I begin with Nick Lantz’s poetry collection as a source of inspiration in the formatting of this manuscript. *How To Dance As The Roof Caves In* is a three section collection of poems that dig into the relationship mankind has with spaces and with one another and the status that exists when ownership and land come into play. There is one section in the book, “II” where all the poems are related to the idea of homeownership and home as a space. So all the poems are about all the aspects – renting, tenants, home owners associations, fees, mortgages, loaning, spirits that inhabit homes, vacant homes, homelessness, etc. To a focused extent, I think I was successful in borrowing this method as he writes one whole poem in 15 parts and the poem travels in a full range of both emotion and subject. In that fashion, I then created a poem in 10 parts, “The History of A Proposal”. It is the third part of this ambitious manuscript, one that dedicates a speaker across different interactions with the opposite sex, from an early age until a committed

relationship comes up . As Nick has done, I have created this one, 10 part poem as a single section of the book with a narrative focus. As I have stated before, I am working to see if I follow that narrative, in chronological order, which can focus the poems on the speaker or release this sequence and thus shift the focus from the narrative to the individualized poems and make it more about the relationships with the female subjects therein.

From the books *The Truth is We Are Perfect* and *Inside She Swallowed* by Janaka Stucky and Sasha Pimentel, respectively, I have been drawn to the form and the lines throughout both books. Both poets do amazing things with form. Stucky builds poems that are smaller, shorter in line, and in one page. In the poem “Destroy Song”, for example, he focuses the level of language in a way that draws the reader directly into the moment, into the action. “I want to make a cut/ That will sing/ Now you breathe/ Next to me blood...” (Stucky, 35) Here the end words are all concrete images or actions “cut”, “sing”, “breathe” and “blood” are all relatable elements, all interconnected to one another. He choose to end the lines and build the breaks with these connections present. It is short, concise and immediate. I tried to match the same intent and worked on a shorter piece – in the third section of my manuscript, the seventh poem in “The History of a Proposal”.

... we talked,
laughed at broke –ass pink bill slips that cut
into the lights. We started off as old friends,
this old old flame, remembered how we
used to have to sneak around, how to give old kisses

Here I tried to work on the line breaks and the brevity of the piece, just as Stucky has been able to do. I tried to capture the same element. Here the focus is on the action, “we talked”, “bill slips that cut”, and “how to give old kisses” speak to this same level of action, but perhaps not the same level of visceral nature.

But when Stucky ventures out, he works in prose that is highly personal and full of tension. In “Be The Unicorn of Your Neighborhood”, he creates a short prose piece, but it is a pointed piece, a commanding piece.

“The Children will raise their palms to your mouth. The children
will feed you rar bananas with black neat. Bananas they stole
from the garden of the old Child Eater, braving his wild hair. “ (1 -3)

He directs the poem, now a short prose, almost narrative, one that invites the reader to take part in the poem, enlisting the “you” as the principal character within the prose. It is with this sense of connection that I took on a similar ideal and began to write in an inviting tone, making the reader as much a part of the poem as possible. I had a moment of affirmation when I looked and compared the level of line and almost “instructive” element between my poem “So, How Are You Feeling Today?” with the Stucky’s Unicorn poem.

You are laying there/wrapped in blankets/
wrapped in silver needles/so calm/your face is lying/
I watch your ribs rise/bones expand with a
jerk/I hear a click/a thud/
a white bone is aching/in your side (13 – 15)

Though I took a slightly different route, including the “/” versus the standard punctuation, I think I did succeed at creating breaks and involving the reader in the poem. There is a “you”, who is laying in a bed, being worked on, medically, adding a sense of tension. The tension comes from the unknown ailment, the unknown conclusion of what happens to the person in this instance. “You” are then trapped in this moment, in these lines that are racing forward, “you” are then stuck in this thought, until that thought is finished.

Pimentel does the same, as she ratchets up the tension even further by choosing much more visceral words, much more personal elements in her poetry. In the American Poetry Review, Pimentel has one poem I referred to a lot. Her poem, “For Want of Water,” the poet works the lines in the poem in a way that pulls the poem away from a standard “white space” across the page, at the same time it develops new white space and breaks. She jars the reader, forcing them to travel the edge of the lines and the images to build new context.

“an ant will drown himself, his body submerging
into ease, his mandibles, head antennae, baptized. How lovely
to lose our senses to the cup of your want. A boy
drags his mother’s body across the desert, her
fluids rising ... “ (1 – 5)

There is a level of line in which Pimentel captures the image and the moment “an ant will drown... his body submerging” a single action, a single notion and then on the next line, that

same image is expressed again and built up with the image of a baptism and a commentary of sorts “How lovely”. But here, she has begun to trick the senses, evolve the language where there are multiple meanings branching out. The “How lovely” is the beginning of the sentence that ends on the next line – “How lovely to lose our senses” is divided and then reconnected, a didactic meaning is now invoked and the reader has several meanings, several understandings of language from which to choose from. The reader is building context and understanding from this use of line and the line break. It is this formality that I want to get to.

In my poem, “Photograph of Woman – Blue Scarf, Red Dress”, I took this idea and played with the line break and the language.

“...I want to say a prayer with you,
but you are not that María, you tell me
it would be a waste of your time,” (13 – 15)

Here I worked on the line 14 for the effect “but you are not that Maria, you tell me” has one meaning in the line, but when you add it to the line underneath, there is a different understanding “you tell me it would be a waste of your time,” has new meaning as a connected line, as does “it would be a waste” and now, due to the break from the line above there is a new meaning “you tell me of your time”, a constructed meaning when you take line break and location of words to construct meaning. Like Pimentel, this work has several layers of meaning.

I believe from reading the two of them, I began to look at how I would change up the line breaks, the line spaces, the word choice and the “close to the bone” effect of what words do in the poems. Reading Stucky also helped me work with couplets and tercets in shorter and longer modes of line expression, especially after reading “I Hope To Come To You With Nothing But Light”. He allows the balance of line and white space to emerge easily. “In the shadow of hope against hope I speak/ To every bodypart that rebels to be with me”. (6 – 7) It is a simple couplet that delivers a simple directive, an almost abstract element exists, but the minute the reader accesses the “To every bodypart that rebels” part of the line, then the tension is placed right up front. It is now an essential line in the poem.

One poem that comes to mind that shares this quality with Stucky is the first entry into “A Poem About My Name, I. Lupillo”. “her insides frothed with poison, outside the moon was high,/yellow in the breeze, nothing could cool the pressure in her heart. “ (3 - 4) The lines exist as separate instances, but when brought together in a couplet there is a solid gravity of language

remember to call me
 bought you a snow globe in July
 Check the dinner,
 eat the dinner,
 fix the breakfast,
 boil the eggs,
 pay a bill late
 she says she is
 late, . . .” (70 – 85)

From Natalie Diaz, I discovered that I share a poetic skill with her –that of the longer line as evident in her poetry collection entitled *When My Brother Was an Aztec*. She has an impactful skill at taking up all the white space on the page with language that is directed and full. No word is wasted when it is on the page and it carries weight to it. In one of her poems, *Black Magic Brother*, she opens up the poem by painting a darker image of her brother with lighter words, but the heaviness of the topic is always in arms reach.

“My brother’s showdown flutters from his shoulders, a magician’s cape
 My personal charlatan glittering in woofle dust and loaded
 with gimmicks and gaffs.

A train of dirty cabooses, of once-beautiful girls,
 Follows my magus man like a chewed tail... “ (1 – 5)

Similarly in one of my poems, “The Exorcist on TV, the Night Hurricane Alicia Fell”, I employ the use of the long line. I wanted to give as much of a narrative and poetic break. I wanted to elevate the image and the desire for the words to get up from the dirt of such an event.

“a man, covered him in granite and sea foam. He didn’t even make a grip
 when he died. His hand was limp, his wrist was stuck between asphalt,
 the glistening rock, the size of the Datsun he was walking toward.

The smell of fish remained when they pried the piece of jetty off – he died
 with a basket full of croakers. He once shined shoes at the Hotel Galvez,
 he knew everyone and told my father tales about old hurricanes...”(16 – 21)

RATIONALE TO THE MANUSCRIPT

I read several books to gain context, to inform my sense of form and aesthetics. So I read Federico Garcia Lorca’s *Juego y teoria del Duende*, and Edward Hirsch’s *The Demon and the Angel*. In reading Lorca and Hirsch, I began to understand the construct of what potential poetry

has. I learned of the desire a work of art has on its own, outside of what any creator wishes it to contain. Art is then uncontainable, art is then undefinable. I learned that there must be a set of constructs, the tensions in the lines, the emotive need for struggle and grit in any work of art for it to be of any use. I learned that this must be the contents of this collection.

In reading Lorca, there is one partial quote that did stick out, one that at first I did not understand.

“recharza al angel, y dar un puntapie a la musa, y perder el miedo...
La verdadera lucha es con el duende”.
[reject the angel, and give the Muse a kick, and forget our fear...
the true struggle is with the duende”.] (Lorca, 14)

It is known that the idea of the Duende is undefinable but potentially visible, audible, lucid and dreamt. It is a pushing desire, an untouchable thing that when called forth is a well’s worth of energy that pushes forth. It is the survival tactic of the underdog. It is found between the nail and the finger when struggle is present. It can be the single moment in which word meets image, in which sound searches out meaning in language. It is necessary gravity in the creation of a thing. It is not one thing, but many things that make art possible.

So with this attempted understanding that I began the creation of this manuscript. I took into account the many ideas that have built my aesthetics and build from that point forward. I am drawn to poetry and poetics, seeing it as a necessity. Writing is then as important as breathing, as essential as eating. It is a part of living to create words. It is a part of the element of witness – to not only observe what is happening around one, but also to collect and annotate what is experienced. It comes from a communal element. To this I have written to before at the beginning of this preface. This manuscript, which I hope one day will become a book, serves as a tool for the reader to use and build broader connections between them and my work, between a reader to their own community and between the reader and their access to other forms of art, language and cultural identity. It is therefore a thing of necessity. It must stand on its own. It must represent more than my persona as a writer, it must be the finest form of craft so that it can be a representation for someone else of something of value. It is a craft built out of Duende. As Hirsch says, “ Duende, then, becomes a name for a radically accelerated process of creation in which everything is at stake. It is a term for a black feeling that exceeds itself...”. (54) This work, then, is crafted with an urgency that must be put forth. It is work that hopes to sustain community, a community of color that needs words, that needs cultural capital that is as specific,

so specific, that it can entice a reader to see the universal messages. It is a collection of specific Latino poetics and images that uplifts the images of women, the images of a people of color and the language of that culture and allows them to speak for themselves. These images fight for space on the page, for space in a readers mouth when they say the words, and a struggle for space in the mind in terms of the cultural connections that need to be examined while read. It can be no other way. This work, then, “fills [the artistic maker] with such an extreme feeling that a fresh mode of expression becomes absolutely necessary.” (Hirsch, 76) This work then becomes a necessary thing. One that I intend to see be around for a long time.

Finally, I have made sure to list out the specific songs and genres of music that are present in this collection of poetry, because it has just the same effect as reading a book of poems has – it leaves a lasting mark and encourages a connection to memory and makes this writer want to write. Music and poetry are thus sources of inspiration to write more poetry. These songs serve as titles of poems, lyrics used in the poem itself, an epigraph to be included as the start point setting for a poem and in two cases, it is a direct “next chapter” effect to what the song could be about (see “Las Golondrinas” and “A Poem for the Mother of Jessica Cain”). In some cases, these poems are a part of the subject of the poem, a part of the setting, or a moment in time – but in all cases, they saturate the poem entirely.

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Damas y Caballeros

Part I

Women

A Mujercita's Profile Drawing at the East End Studio Gallery, "Transition"

You keep your eyes shut. Blanquita skin
shines bright. A chin turn to the left. You are quiet,
you bury yourself in this rostro. Pose a bit longer.
A right shoulder up, the angle takes the whole space,
a good eight and a half by eleven. Perch out
that ruca neck tattoo. Everybody can see you, toda
chingona. Do you wonder if people talk about you?
You used to people staring at you outside of this drawing?
You bite your bottom lip a bit, trembling in red,
you sink in this moment, a comfort. You remember,
tu madre don't fucking like the use of needles in you,
in your skin. The silver ones scar, bruise you in jeringa sweats,
the ones dripping the word *mom*, a bundle in teal colored roses
you suffered. You always close your eyes. There are whispers,
talk, about the delicate petals on your clavicle. You always
arch your back, reeling in a glass cylinder, that tinta, toxicity
of an old school chola. You do this drawing a favor. You hate
photos, but this, this isn't so quick. This is on fleek.
"I got this, this Gucci", you say. This is so good, it can take
a bit. You take a breath away, draw in eyes close, thinking,
the last time you see the house, mother, or pretty on the wall,
brilliant sparks, a billion specks trace around you, in your head.
You clean up nice, yo. You remember her embrace.
Fingers race to run around the base of your neck, following
las rosas, the lines of your cheek bones, your ears.
The colors of the teal, the center of the drawing, the roses,
makes gente want to touch you for real. Supple, deep,
fleshy roses, her arms bundle around you. They don't exist
in teal. Say her name. Her name in your skin makes you miss her.
Everybody wants to know your name. You do not hesitate
outside of this frame. You own every pose. You won't tell
anyone about mom, about you. You don't talk to her. But here,
no one can tell that. Here, you are sure. Here, don't let tremble in,
against this canvas. You brush away your pain, put up your hair,
you look beautiful, that way. Look that way.

Search Party (A Poem For the Mother of Jessica Cain, Missing Since 8.17.97)

*"They buried their dead with the flowers in the field
with wounds so deep they never be healed"*

- Sanders Bohlke

She was at the water's edge,
a touch of the moon lit up her hair.
She was the center of a hug, a laugh
a story, people loved to tell. When
she disappeared, the breeze shifted,
collected the night in silent scraps.
She was young. There was no struggle.
There was no fight, just her purse
in the car, the keys lost, parked along
an I-45 at the end of road. Rumors ran
red across the bayou – that Jessica
ran away with a black boy, who'd a
thought of that? Little lady took off with
the wrong crowd. All them drugs in the air,
all those theatre kids dreaming shit.
Yet, nothing really ever found - locked car,
between exits, the house just over there,
a blink of mile. She was almost home.
People gathered, sang her songs,
interchanged weepy candles, and dug
into the ground, prayed she was hiding in
the brush, in the marsh, dirty, misled.
So they searched, dragged the rumors into
their dreams, called her soon-to-be-college,
said, she's a bit tied up right now,
wrapped caution tape to broken branches
and Ziploc-ed socks on the side as evidence.
No one saw her smile again. Everyone just
looked at pictures. Pointed out where the car
was, alone. Some one said "mother still runs her
a bath", puts her clothes out every night
for a year, took up all sorts of things, read
all the books in the house, again, learned
how to flip bay houses, restored the furniture.
Poor thing, those the only legs and arms and backs
she could manage. She stripped the grime,
wiped the dull off, afraid to move away, lingered
a while – listened for the sound of feet on humid
wood, up the stairs, down the hall, until the tears
ran her out, and her own age wouldn't stall.
The summer sailed in. No one could whisper

a word, could live in weight. Some just prayed,
their hands shook, and their children, watched
for a missing girl,
a moment every day, along the shore.

Cada Mañana

"And I know a spot right over the hill"

- Hank Williams Sr. , 1951

my Tia Maria's shotgun house hides in
between years of cherry blossoms limbs,

in the buck shots of leaves that settle on the roof,
on the stepping stones, on the porch, flakes

along the grass. I am here to collect summer
aguacates, the fresh cheeks of strawberries

and consejos, the size of dollar bills. I come here
every summer, to the hot house, to the white

tiny leaves that blind me to old poverty,
to the locust winds outside, to the smell

-brewing Sanka and canela.
I come here to finesse my 17 year old words

against the ears of Olivia, or Emelda, Carmen
or Monica. One of them will take a walk with me.

Remind me to walk under the blossoms at night.
The stars are much larger to talk about

and under the blossoms, nothing else matters.
I live in the past, watching my mother fighting

in the streets, a challenge of who can fit the most
fresas in their mouth. A red runs down a laugh.

I sleep on a bed frame, a family tree now, a witness
to each birth in this family. Everyone sleeps here

when they are young. The radios play tunes
older than me. Every morning, a shot rings out,

I can hear my Tia belting a song. Her voice blasts
on the porch swing; an alarm that will echo in me,

a high pitch for the rest of my life,
a nasal cry – a fuzzy radiola memory stirs.

*Hey good looking, wha 'tcha got cookin?
How's about cooking something up with me?*

Requiem for My Mijit@

I am a barrier island,
with tepid shores,
with worries that fester up
in slicks of *chapopote*

at the bottom of feet.
I am an eye sore.
I tremble at the crash of waves,
at the boom of thunder.

Dejame solo.
Give me a year or more
to lick my wounds,
to clean my shores,

to address the damage.
We lost the inkling of a baby,
the minute I looked up at the moon.
I didn't heed the warnings.

I didn't ransack the *mercado*
to prep for this devastation.
I was in awe of the swells on the jetty.
I lost my footing,

the expectation of fatherhood –
Instead, the storm sent
us slowly bleeding,
a hurricane inside the womb.

Nothing looks the same.
We waited for it to take its toll.
I am still waiting.
I am a hungry man,

homeless and in need of shelter.
I remember the day
we told my parents
we were having a baby.

They looked at me
said to wait and see.
They are not over their loss, either.

I should have an older someone

to collect sand dollars with,
but they were lost
before my birth.
I think, when my father goes fishing,

when my mother looks up at the moon,
they are searching for a *carita*.
They go by night,
tripping around downed palm trees

with a lantern, looking for a lost child.
I should join them,
but I cannot. I am in shock.
I bleed salt water onto to the road.

I am broken waterlines and uprooted rip-rap.
Forgive me for not wanting
your festivities on my beaches.
I cannot stand the sight -

children, writing their names in gritty me.
It is too soon to smell the breeze off the pier,
too soon for the seagulls to cackle,
too warped, to invite you in.

Driving by the old State Theater on Ama's 79th Birthday

She damn near snaps her neck,
eyes stick to the fachada,
an old movie house, bare,
guttled white inside. She smiles,
looks, says, I know why

you such a bruto, mi'jo.

Unfolds an old memory,
back in Fifty-Eight,
down town Galveston has signs,
big, stark white black letter signs
Colored here, Colored
there, nothing

para invisible Mexicanos.

Unknown, unless
you make a mistake –
dangle you in a tree branch
late at night. Rent lady tells me
to be careful at night. Used to
babysit Anita and her pigtails,

a nursing school hustle, a barter.
Anita had a friend,

Ama goes on,
beautiful, plump, black, small
Olivia. Loves to teach the girls
how to cook on Saturdays,
pancakes, eggs, eat warm syrup
with a spoon, buy them dolls,
watch them struggle

with time tables and takes them
to the movie house. In front,
it had signs, big, stark white black
letter signs, No Colored
Here. In the building,

mi'jo, I am bruta, then.

I love island winters, a reason to
hide the girls in my pea coat.

Pay the janitor for three tickets.
Sneak them through the back door,
their hands warm – sticky
from sweet maple. Their heads

unaware of hate. Their eyes,
their skins are the same in the dark.

A Saturday Night at the ER (Passin' Me By)

*"Now let me tell you about the feelings I have for you"
- The Pharcyde*

I.

I listen to every track on my phone, to every song,
til the battery run dry. I think I need a prayer, a lyric
I remember. I sit in a pew, my Catholic, old, velvet, red,
soul shakes its handkerchief, pleading for attention.
God among us, not for, me passes me by,
she keeps on, for her, for her deep, breathe deep draws
reaching into the fibers, the filaments, both lungs and blood.
She deserves breath more than I do in the sunlight.
Light and dark, a single dark moment of silence, is all
she needs, some silent, some dark quite space, where
closed eyes exist, recharging,
fulfilling what the heart was meant to do.
breathe in, to do out, without me breathe without me
is fine. Learn to breathe again,

my dear,

My dear,

my dear,

III.

When you aren't looking, I can't help myself,
all I can do is stare, stare at your back,

the curves in your shoulder blades. The hospital gown
hasn't been tied correctly. You say you have the chills,
except for the top tie, you are exposed. You are seated up,

you arch your back a bit, to stretch, you have been in bed
for a full day. Your hair hangs all to the right side.

I can't daydream, can't ignore you, can't want to caress you
like this, can't wait to have you,

But I know

you very well,

not yet. But I will, once we can get you home, cover your breasts
in my hands, block out the echo of the heart monitor. Change
you out of your sweaty sheets, run you a bath. Bathe you

in my warm palms, in my warm breath, in my dreams, waiting
in this chair for the doctor to finish his exam of you. I can't
look away, you are able to raise your hands again, able to take
a deep breathe for the doctor, and I am angry.

He gets to touch

the middle of your back, checks your chest for a murmur, murmurs
you sound better. You look better, you look back,
you smile at me, and I miss you, my wife, my patient.
Let me get you home.

IV.

*My dear, my dear, my
dear, you do not know
me, but I know you very well,
now let me tell you
about the feelings that I have for you...*

So, How Are You Feeling Today?

When you say the word/pericardium/I think red/I think viscous/I think fragile/I think full/I don't think puncture/I don't see wound/I don't want to know/you can't breathe right/can't catch a gasp/can't sleep laying down/can't function/You are younger/you take plenty of pills/you have apps on your phone I have to know about/when you fall down/if you fall down/I'm supposed to know/what to do when your fingers turn blue/what to say when they mention renal failure/how to keep a calm demeanor/I tell your parents you are in some ICU/I got the question/are you taking care of her/I just sigh/I just rub your feet/I just wake you/don't yell at me/yell at your puto pericardium/that swells up/a three liter coke bottle full of heavy/fluid/ I don't sleep/you don't sleep/when we do/its two hours/I have bad dreams/about your heart sack/that wraps you up/clings around your lungs/a knot around your heart/that traipses around a pulse.

You are laying there/wrapped in blankets/wrapped in silver needles/so calm/your face is lying/I watch your ribs rise/bones expand with a jerk/I hear a click/a thud/a white bone is aching/in your side/I should leave/I should get you a pitcher of ice water/fill your cup runneth over/lavish you with unbridled rest/you are in pain there/trying not to make a move/make a sound/make a tear fall/stream down a window pane/looking out into the woods/behind your eyes/in the distance/there are trees/blowing in the gust of wet winds/a few of them/dry and bending/they expand/they click/twigs inside them break/they grow rigid/they ache/splinters in your heart/it burns.

It's a waiting game/new tubes of blood/the doctors touch you in places I need candles lit to touch you/soft pillows to caress you/the night moon/showing off your hips/your eyes look at me/in a hunger/hungry for something ripe/you become restless/want to wrap your legs around my heart/you want to bite into my shoulder blades as if they are mangos/you don't want to be here/see it in your eyes/sunken/dark/you love to hate me/when you are here in the observation room/wires sticking out of your shoulders/out of your breasts/out of your ribs/to get a pulse/to get out of here/you hate me/for brining you here/to be tested/you teach the pre-med class as they walk in your room/they ask you your history/you show them your heart/in your file/you smile at them/you cry when they leave/you scurry/you fumble around with the tubes/the cords/the drops of tears/the size of stolen bread/quick/dry them away/they might want to study that too.

Part II

(Me)N

A Poem About My Name

I. Lupillo

I asked my father why they gave me this name – *The night you were born,*
your mother almost died, her veins ran hot, her muscles locked up,

her insides frothed with poison, outside the moon was high,
yellow in the breeze, nothing could cool the pressure in her heart.

He waited, smoked a whole pack of Winstons, learned how to ask
about my mother's labor in broken English. The doctor said *only one*

will make it, asked permission to cut the baby out. My father
thought of the last time he prayed, the night his Tio Lupe fell, a throat

nearly grated apart in between a coyote's teeth, the smell of copper mixed
in mud. His uncle's blood flowed, a river across a campo, a pool of flesh,

dark skin, slick from fear and sweat. A howl across his chest, a fight
against a bestia, a bright moon out that night, and my father on his knees.

He prayed in the capilla at the edge of the village, remembered words
again. In the hospital chapel, years later, he prayed the same, his throat

filled with tears. On his knees, a howl in his chest, his hands folded,
the dark of his skin, a prayer between the teeth, a bargain:

Querido Tio, Querida Virgen, dame fuerza, dejamelos vivos.
My body and my mother's blood pooled in this old name.

He asked for another Lupe in a campo, a bestia that could fight, to howl
at the moon, to mix with the mud, sweat and cool the pressure in her heart.

II. La Negra, La India

the first man I met was a doctor/Lucas/good with his hands/felt my skin/smoothed me out/dressed me up in reds and golds/said I was a doll/said he liked black girls/put me up on a pedestal/asked if I wanted to get out of town/leave Syria/I could go with him/travel red dirt roads/where the sun flowers grew/we ended up in Extremadura along the river/he died on me/kept moving/I liked the back roads of Spain/was homeless/walked around until a caballero came by/Gil/I asked him to build me a house/he did/He died in the last brick/between the mortar and the fingers/finished it/I stayed there for a bit/watched the moors come and go/watched the storks fly overhead/got bored/took care to stay out of the sun/didn't want to get any darker/la gente didn't look at you if you were too dark

heard a rumor/a man with three boats/crazy habladera/wanted to cross the sea to some new place/he came by/asked if I could come along/yes/floated around a while/ watched the skies/ate all the granadas a few nights before we landed/he told me to go up front/showed me off a bit/my gown blew in the breeze/said we could stay here/on the new beaches/yelled at the people he met/he found this in my name/the neighbors didn't understand/they mumbled between themselves/they shrugged shoulders/they brought food/they brought coins/pots/lots of gold/they prayed/we answered/in cut off limbs/in dog chased bites/in ankle shackles/in lost eyes/fever/small pox/mixed up tongues/dead horses/things got tense

I had to walk/into the mountains/get away from all the fighting/I was homeless again/lots of drama/try the same story again/in this new place/met this poor kid/Juan/asked him if he could build me a place to stay/said he would see/said he knew a guy/who knew a guy/ who knew the lady that used to live here/up the block/in Tepeyac/She was tough/ate maize raw/let the kernels stay in her teeth/burned the cobs/had a house of mud/let people come in all the time/her place got burnt down/didn't care about the people I came with/hung around the hills/the trees/in the mouths of the dying/in the ears of corn

had the chance to talk to her/traded some stars/talked about boyfriends/sacrificed some songs/we embraced/I felt her back/the muscles/rounds of clay/said we could be together/said we could kiss all night/we could live forever/she painted my hair black/said I would get used to the language/I talked to that boy Juan again/gave him some roses for his troubles/asked if they could build a place/all the neighbors came by/brought candles/like they did in Extremadura/bowed their heads/raised their arms to the sky/sometimes/she would go out/on the porch/watch them as they talked at once/how they sang/cut the necks of goats/painted the doorways with blood/asked me to bless some crops or watch over them/like I was going to make flowers appear/like in the snow or something like that

III. Guadalupe

My bones wash ashore, bathe in a river covered
in wolves,

wolves that howl

at the blood moons,

the lights,

the candles

in front of an altar not far away.

I am the blood

in Tonanzin,

mother of earth,

her son, her little

adobe sun, who hides all his ideas

in stones, washes them

in paints,

paints in lyrics,

in newsprint, draws

Catrinás, bones washed

in pastles, the color of lasers

in la oscuridad, the color of poverty,

charcoal, rib cages showing,

hueso blanco,

waiting to be put to rest.

Soy virgin,

soy santo,

a mountain chained to the wind.

a paper treaty, betrayed, abandoned

un tévî building tclatl building albañil

Lope de Vega still searching for gold.

Jose Guadalupe Posada, hungry.

Guadalupe Victoria, victoria, victoria, victoria

¡Victoria!

Lupe Fiasco, hungrier,

a unisex bomb, a fighting man –woman,

four legs, four arms, in revolt.

I am La Union del Pueblo Entero. Punto.

an autoimmune disease eating away,

a canine,
a Puerto Rican songstress,

a Mexican Banda barbaro,
a luchador,

black volcanic rock
burning, streaming against the river,

against the hides of wolves en lo hondo
del rio, the bottom of the water,

where you can dream, dream, dream,
dream. Dream of me!

“mi'jito de mi vida, it is what they call smart boys who leave this desgraciado barrio.”
down on the ground, a tear fills, one eye, does not fall, cleans the dirt from my hands, says,
She stops washing. She looks up in the air, a crack in the ceiling, she laughs, takes off her yellow gloves, she kneels,

Anna, ¿que quiere decir wetback?

inside, speak to my mother, her washing the dishes, the sink, singing a tune, drops of Cornelio Reyna. I ask,
I hear something, I do not understand. I go,

you there! – she comes out, laughing, her father, behind, grabs her, a talon around snake skinny arms, pulls her away,
she is not there, I look, the mound, climb and seek, catch the edge, her shoe in a bush, laugh –
he screams at me – the alley I say, and he leaves. I know,

he comes,
teaches me shhhh, her father comes, outside to find her,
excuse me, alley, say alley, between the bar, my yellow house, she teaches me yellow, teaches me house,
the girl and I play hide, seek for a bit that day, until I lose her, I run up and down the callejon,
I cannot say her name, her father's name. Him at the bar, next door, a blonde mustache,

girl. First time I ever feel English in my ears.
It is the first time I have ever seen a white
We do this for weeks.

from the mouth of a girl, blond, green little eyes, teaches me, play, sky, daddy, bar, angry, secret, hide, seek.
grits itself along my back, I trek it, get English lessons daily,
I play around orange dirt, outside the house, a small open lot, a mound, the grain of it, gets under my nails,

Lagrimas de Mi Barrio

Twisted Wrist

I didn't spend too much time with her, along jetty rocks,
along the beach – whisper a bit longer under moonlight

ripples. I should have worked a little bit harder
in the front cab of the truck. Steam things up between

us, heat up the windows with palm prints and lips.
Instead, I got home early, walked in the front door,

a throb of blood still bulging in my pants. I tasted

a morsel, perfume on my tongue, senses reacted to

the sound of my heart in my head, the smell,
“Japanese Cherry Blossom” on my hands. I was slow.

I swallowed a tooth when a fist greeted me. Beer-drenched
knuckles came out the doorframe. My father guarded the insides

from the outsides with a murmur, a stumble. He beloved
two Black Velvet bottles, both empty. They laid out

next to me on the porch. I got up, blood still flashed, my face
pulsed along the lips, along the jaw. I swirled a few words.

I'm home. I took her home. I brought the truck back.

I helped him up, like a thousand times before, like rolling
a life size rock, damp with liquor, up a hill, every night,

I walked him. Him, a jumble of uneven buttons, pissed on
pant legs and blood shot laughter that rose in mangled

arms and stumbled knee caps up the stairs. I bore his weight
until I couldn't. I couldn't hold all that tension, couldn't see

in the dark of his eyes. I tried to catch a glimpse of affection.
But all I managed was a blow to my head, again, one.

Us flying back down the stairs, until I held us. We were
at the foot of the steps, braced my hands against the wall.

I felt it all coming down on me, his weight, a split second,
my hand between her hips, twisted wrist, cupped her breasts

in my hands, and then they burned. I cupped her image,
cupped the end of a machete, a slice in my palm,

a machete in the dark that sat against the corner;
in the corner of a moment, in the dark of the truck,

in the hallway. I searched for light, but all I could see
was how much I missed him in the daylight. I missed my girl

that moment, missed a deeper slice – blood that night.
My hand knew the taste of steel, knew the taste of warm

thighs on fingertips. My father's neck safe from a fall, my lips
wanted to bite into flesh, to feel around in the dark, beat fists.

I wanted to let loose until we fell again. Me, unconscious liquor,
asleep at my father's feet, in the bosom of promiscuous night.

Flight (On June Jordan's "Free Flight")

"I must arise" - June Jordan

There is never enough travel to keep you
home,
a back pack, ready,
rolled up maps, socks, undies,
a vile of holy water, sage in a bag
for the spirits that travel,
that haunt
you too, back up, on shoulders,
filled, crammed with passport forms,
thumb print scans, a room with your shit
laid out on a table, rummage this again,
Mr. TSA Agent, yes, sir,
no, sir, why gloves?
That's not a liquid,
it's a sensitive skin,
teal colored Gillette eight ounce gel,
that's not a weapon,
it's a butter knife
for the bread and the decadent, yes,
sticky Nutella. Ask him for that.
You have not eaten.
The line is longer
when you get out,
finally,
you are not a terrorist, just checking,
upload all the photos, the blog post,
photo-bomb the shit out of Westminster,
pay three times to get in the Tate Modern,
explode your eyes at the Tate Modern,
over and over and over,
over a pint of Carling
with a pretty Irish girl,
walk her to her place
near Charing Cross, cross the street, in the puddles,
in the sprinkle, in the gray, change the gray
to night, dejadaté un momentito en Russell Square-
change clothes, a black Mossimo V-neck
for a heavy polo, fifty percent cotton,
fifty percent, hot, sweaty,
walk, you, you fat ass, walk,
walk, then pack again, pay the fare, the transfer,
the taxi, to
get you to Stansted,
the Costa coffee with soy one percent milk,

with a baguette and gouda cheese and a half a Roma tomato,
 for a bit, pop in the plane, a fifty dollar flight
 for a twenty pound note, fiberglass bus seat
 on a plane- no safety instructions,
 no upright tray table,
 just buckle your ass in
 or you will slide down the tarmac
 in Madrid
 Chicago
 Miami
 as soon as you land. Throw out all the clothes
 you put in the bag, dip them in Lysol,
 dip them in honey, dip them in boiling water,
 get the scent of exploration off of them,
 get off,
 come on, you only have another twenty
 minutes,
 before she has to leave for her flight,
 remember she needs you around
 before you
 have to leave for Austin
 Anaheim,
 por el amor de Dios,
 hurry up and see you both, alone, a sliver of a minute,
 don't talk too much, take the sad look
 you didn't have to leave out of your pupil,
 between the rush of conversation- for so long,
 did you feed the dog
 yes
 walk the dog
 aw fuck
 remember to call me
 bought you a snow globe in July
 Check the dinner,
 eat the dinner,
 fix the breakfast,
 boil the eggs,
 pay a bill late
 she says she is
 late,
 try to talk about it when you drop her off
 for her next flight hug right,
 plan for this new thing, get all tired at home,
 rock me to sleep,

sleep,
sleep,
dream,
get up, take a leak,
take a shower, call to say, say goodbye,
forget to say goodbye.
Then, forget the names of the days of the week
or that time changes
or that you forgot to, remember to check
back with her doctor, waiting on the line,
another moment stuck in a line,
a trip,
what a trip,
another minute to see that
no one in this place is going exactly where you are.
Stand still, would you?

Betrayed at the PopulArt Jazz Café, Madrid, Summer, 2014

The sound of jazz that night, soothed the bags under my eyes – thought
I would never find such a succulent sound. I waited, bounced, rambled to the tune,

in my dark skin. The music – a damn Pink Panther in E Minor, it was serious,
charged at me, gnarled its way into my heart, into my feet. Slick bastard surprised me.

It blared, with a silver scratch from an old man band. But I had to leave. A white man rostro
painted in black face, stared at us from a poster right by the front door that night.

Every night. Let him turn this way, the night had just gone dark. I could have ordered another
shot of Jameson, could have barked something, but I had to leave. His face,

glared at me, smiled at the door, came alive, laughed when you walked in, did so for the last
thirty years. Time is frozen here, hangs right over the mood, along with the music

that lives above a statue of a dirty, minstrel, dancing man. Leave me at the door, leave me across
the shorelines, leaves me with an image in blackface, which I won't drink to.

Las golondrinas en la Plaza Alcalá

*“que me toquen las golondrinas,
que en sus notas lleven a mi alma”*

- Tomás Méndez

I linger a bit,
golondrinas dart around me,
a breeze picks up, they catch a white moon,
as they reach out,
they spin around a black molino.
I do not want to leave. I walk around
the barrio judío, a gas lamp lit the street,
no shadows,
merely footfalls,
the ones I make,
the ones
Cervantes makes
the ones Quijote
the ones Panza
track in the distance.

Las golondrinas sing to me.
I did not have to cry.
I can stay.
They will build me
a nest, en el quiosco
dentro la Plaza de Alcalá,
where the voices come from,
at the corners of windowsills,
where Cervantes looks out,
never stops looking out.
He sends the golondrinas,
he swallows,
takes a deep breath,
sings, lets them sing.
They always sing,
at the tinge of wind,
at the sound, his words,
read aloud,
a cacophony fills dusk,
settles over the cobblestone,
the sound of a pen,
one that dips in a tintero, every night,
written once, is
read a million times a day.
So I chose to stay,
a new golondrina, resting,

on a roof tile,
above a childhood
home.

What Should Run in the Mind of Caballeros

Read this fast at first/run/don't start fights, just end them quickly/stand up for yourself
. . . a little/mind your own business/never touch the ball with your hands/play fair/if you have a fist fight, buy the winner or the loser a trago/no name calling/stop swearing so much, that spit forms in the corners of your words/remember you pray with that *bocota* of yours/Let ladies go first/open doors for everyone/pray to a god/pray to the four winds/plant something/remember how to act in public/smile/don't stare at her . . .with your mouth open/don't stare at her chest/workout maybe another half hour/don't control the conversation/learn how to dance a waltz/keep up with the mileage on your car/stop staring at her chest when you talk to her/don't be cocky/remember peoples names/eat vegetables/once in your life, work a dirty job/don't mix light and dark liquors like your *pendejo* of a *tio*/choose between the thing you love and the one you love for the rest of your life/battle/try new foods/dirty thoughts aren't dirty/don't expect a kiss on the first date/don't brag with the boys on poker night/learn how to salsa/only play poker once a month/watch your spending/be humble/drive defensively/don't be so defensive/someone else siempre tendrá la razon/manual labor clears your head - do it often/study hard/get good sleep/take risks with a clear mind/show some quiet pride/call her back/remember you come from a *cumbia*/learn to cook *mojarras para tu Tia Juana*/write the thank you cards the day after graduation/make new friends/ don't sweat around girls/shave down not up, burns less/read/write/look smart/be dumb only at night/don't get a fake i.d. from your cousin Enrique or Sunjay or Ephthimos or Terrance/change your socks/read/call her back/call home/don't let checks bounce/write/run/stop using checks/don't buy every young lady a drink/argue so that you learn from someone/read, *jodido*/don't stare at her legs . . . all night/don't whistle to get her attention/offer assistance/bar-b-que with *carbon* instead of a gas grill, tastes better/remember every chick is a *dama* in training/pay bills, even late/dinner and dancing is just that/don't suggest one night stands, let them happen/if it does happen, make sure its not a one night stand, every night/know how to cook/if you get her pregnant, tell your father first, if you have a father/listen/be able to fix things/run faster/struggle/take a moment and listen to a story from your grandfather/let your mother know you are alright, if you have a mother/know your license number/wear deodorant/don't hit on her friends/learn a new language/if you have neither parent/rely on me/rely on your boy/rely on your girl/if you get the chance to spend the night with a pretty someone, exist in the words first, then the lips, then a kiss on the hips/only use your credit cards . . . never/take it slow/learn to take shots of *tequila*/make sure the only tequila you drink is Don Julio/ be there on time/admire the moonlight/pay attention to time by the sound of the crash of the waves on the jetty/sleep on the beach at least once in your life/get your heart broken/pick up the tab when someone has a great day/pick up the tab when someone has an awful day /learn to samba/remember your friends when it gets busy/be intimate, especially when you want to run away/ pray as much as your *madre* did and work as hard as your *padre*. You got that? NO? Read it again, slow. . . I'll wait.

Why I am Like Tequila

I have pencas¹,
growing out of my body,
beautiful blue maguey veins
stretching,, brown hands. Breathe in
the sun.

Let me bleed slowly.
Every seven years I am
birthed, dissected, canabalized.
When I am useless, bury my husk
in black wreaths². Que toquen
³conjunto next to white candles,
lit on nights when the moon won't
shine. Drink for me.

Cry for me.
Mi corazón es un mezontle⁴,
layers in white flesh,
in the center, white
blood cells, nectar seeping

¹ Penca – (n) The arm of a maguey, a leaf, a blade, an arm –
that stretches out, that reaches out, that flexes out,
that fleshes forward, the first limb that touches the dew, that extends
into a the palm of a mejicano.

² Black Wreathes – (una chingadera) mi apa won't let us put a wreath on the door,
says it's the blanquitos who want to remember death. That is why you have
a wreath, a simple announcement – someone just died. The first time
my ama and him drove around in 1974, he couldn't breathe –
asked why so many people died in the month of December.

Shook his head, mas triste.

Shook his head, said "me acuerdo del Señor Davila"

died from a fever, ran around
one summer,

durante el tiempo de las lluvias, recogiendo sus caballos

³ Conjunto – n. The name of a genre of Mexican, Chicanx, Tex-Mex, Cuban music, featuring instruments
including fingers, bajo sextos, hearts, vocal chords, harps, adobe, violines, agonía, liquor, dirt floors, botines,
acordiones, espíritu, gente huasteco, gente jarocho, pobreza, riqueza, a dance hall, two back up singers
making a dollar each in 1968, and a look out to make sure la jura or the Texas rangers don't show up to string
someone on the branch of a roble [an oak tree, baboso, an oak tree].

⁴ Mezontle – (a heart) the gritty center in the center of the plant where
tequila comes from. Your soul emanates from this grainy thing, fluid a bit, not blood,
but molten rock, your soul comes from water, comes from mercury, runs
recio, runs hot, why you love until you are cold, wear a sweater
when you touch, lock eyes, embrace for warmth, feel in
the chest for this ember, this ember, this ember.

through to my heart sack,
 greso, ready to fight.
 Cut this out, fracaso y espinas –
 boil it in fire, bursting
 out of its chambers, warm,
 viscous and clear, across my chest.
 It beats in the heat of the day.
 Soy jimador⁵ con su talache⁶,
 who is alone in uneven cerros,
 who clears rocks that clutter growth,
 who won't leave until the job is done,
 who digs in the night,
 who's back is good enough to plow,
 who goes home and fucks,
 who is determined to plant a good seed,
 who eats with his hands,
 who sleeps in the callejones of magueys,
 who dreams before his heart is plucked,
 who cuts at ladrones in the fields
 who cleans cazangas⁷ after a dirty battle.

⁵ Jimador – (n) every mejicanx who has ever lived, who has ever bled, who has ever sweat, who sings corridos, a trio, a bolero, a cumbia, the image of a huichol, a rasquachero, a G.I. Joe, a mariachi, a viejo, una reina, una diosa, una tamalera, the man who makes the liquor you love to down in a single shot glass [you wasteful shit] by pulling up the root for your drink, by pulling up your job, by working when you spend time reading this poem and resting. Right now, he is at work. Call back later.

⁶ Talache – (really, yo?) a tool, a pick axe, older than you, shares the age with dirt, with work, with iron, with rust, with wood, with houses, with bridges, with dig, with dug, with ditch, with edge, with groove.

⁷ Cazanga – (nombre) **one.** A sickle, a tool, sharp, cuts into a half moon, leaves in a half moon, **two.** The tool of revolution in September. **three.** The primo-hermano to the machete and the talache. **four.** The shit ninjas would use if they were originally from Mejico/ Centro America. **five.** The thing under my bed to ward off evil spirits. **six.** a weapon born at the same time as Huitzilopochtli, a slick of his copete – the moment he was born, he took it, spat on it, made it metal, made it hot, what he used it to cut at his sister, making her head the moon and his brothers, making them the stars [that boy on fleek].

Part III -

Ellas

The History of a Proposal

*“Be your husband, if you’ll be my wife,
Love and honor you, the rest of your life.”
- Jeff Buckley*

I. La Niña

She was little, tender to hold by hand,
easy to push on a swing, tender, the tissue paper
I handed that girl a drawing of a flower. I said “te quiero”
with a kiss on her cheek, I received a pink handed slap.
Landed on the ground, felt a sting, felt anger. Began then
to hate little girls at five years old, with their sweet smell,
their long hair, braids, bright toothy smiles, a tooth gone
in giggles. I placed bugs in their ears, threw mud
on their shoes, pulled at trencitas to hide that I liked to look
in all their eyes. Wished I knew why their eyes were so white.

V. Savage

I returned the rented tuxedo, tailor
asked about the blood on the cuff,
said *must have been some kind of party*.

Told him I would pay for the blood,
felt my lip still bruised, still imprinted

with a kiss, the moment mi novia
pushed me aside, the night before.
She got in the way, wrangled in mi apa

after he offered my face a hit,
didn't take the table I offered him,

a bit away, le ofecio una silla
at her family's table, close to the dance,
a quinceñera. She didn't say a word,

didn't look scared, she just moved,
sat next to him, calmed his temper,

allowed me all the dances our legs could
handle, remembered to introduce my folks
to her folks, a diplomat who bit my lip later,

a snuck in kiss, between songs, between
drinks, when our fathers were too busy
laughing, our mothers, who stomached

the night.

II. The School Girl

When it was time, right before the summer
climbed into the classroom, found a note
in my third grade lunchbox, read it to the boys,
written by one girl, they laughed, I smiled,
and she, she yelled at me loudly, she ran
up to me, stabbed me with one No.2 pencil
in my bicep. Left a 3 cm. piece, gray graphite
in my arm, traveled to the pit of my stomach.
I still feel it in the summers. It wiggles around
with the guilt, the humidity, an itch.

VIII. Soul Mate

We can never go to movies, can never take photos of her face.
I can never see her naked, can never tell her horror stories,

and finally, after a year, she lets me in. Tells me about El Salvador.

Tells me about the time when she is little, six, pig tails, chubby cheeks.
Soldiers take her father away, pulled his arms out their sockets,

how she hates the sound, me popping my knuckles, imagines her father,
younger, screaming, in a dark room, can't eye the sight of blood,

says,
the day after he is back home, mom packs up everything,

sells her soul,

they travel, they pass by a tree, her father, both arms in bandages, he
isn't able to carry a bag, he leans on the tree, rests a moment, gasps in

another, looks up, the soldiers, they take a stranger, days before, dangle
parts of him, blood drops dry now, the color of red brick, the color

she hates, says
she never looks up at the sky, never looks for a fight, doesn't
wish, never tells her ex-boyfriends to stop hitting her,

she just walks away.

That night, lets me see a photo collection, all the dates, polaroids, bruises,
one old police report that got her the worst beating.

That night, when she sleeps, I paint all her walls sky blue, draw clouds
on them with yellow kites, flying forever in a breeze.

IX. Mr. Independent (Wish I were Live at Sin-é)

Thought about Jeff Buckley when he used to sing this song, wished I could have seen him in the Sin-é, that shit is closed now – wished I could have had a cup of coffee, sit left to that cajón he played, the mic, the reverb, the mic check, the crowd finally getting the notion that this was really happening, put down the spoon, fucker, I am trying to listen – wondered if he meant this song for a girl, wondered if she was sitting there in the room, off to the right, a table full of friends, or strangers, if she was ready to talk to him about this tune after he covered it, changed the words around from what Nina Simone had intended, wondered if he thought about her being bipolar, if he was as indecisive, a cup of black, a cup of tea, two sugars, no, two creams, no, let's play here, no, not a big room, trust me, this will do, I'll play for you, play for you to see me play to the crowd, let me tell you what I can't tell you alone, I want to spend some time with you – and just like that, maybe she fell in a spell, cast in his falsetto, in his brow, in the intensity of a small mic, in a smoke filled room, on a Thursday, or a Monday, or maybe she thought he was full of shit and she had to go thirty minutes into his set.

VI. Flirt

Once, I came home at night,
drunk, burst into her place,
(a different her), found clothes
along the floor,

found her,

asleep, happy with somebody else.

At twenty-three, I walked away.
Figured out how to hide loss,
behind the valves, in between shots,
bought at a bar, with women,

with trumpets that curved out sound,

who spoke about nights that had
nothing to do with me.

III. Lonely

I was lonely at thirteen,
chunky, when the dances came,
love notes passed me by,
no girl wanted to kiss behind
the music room with me.

I watched the local high school
football games from my window,
four blocks away, could make out
the lights that glowed, the stadium
always roared with people, and I,

quietly sat, in a dark room,
my window open, the old shutters
open, the ceiling fan on its highest
setting, wobbled a breeze about

the room, stagnant with one mistake –
a single kiss, something I lived with,
a girl and I pushed into a broom closet,
an awful moment, our teeth met

before our lips, in the dark, and I
wanted to say something to earn
the moment, but the closet and this
girls hips felt to big, we didn't

date for it, for the absence of warm
palms, the lack of care, the rumors.
We came out, changed, some kind
of monsters, frantic, from a cave –
I had fish lips, cold hands and she,
a hair lip, better than mine.

VII. Old Flame

In candle light and ice cube back rubs, we talked,
laughed at broke –ass pink bill slips that cut
into the lights. We started off as old friends,
this old old flame, remembered how we
used to have to sneak around, how to give old kisses,
in dark dance halls. Remembered the looks we used
to give, the only tool we had to talk to one another,
when dating, when loving was forbidden.

IV. Nights on The Beach

I was amazed at how tender she was,
scared, at the sight of us naked. I
might have been too young, but
her hips and stupidity took us
for a trip/tripped through the female
body on the inside and the out.
We rummaged around on beaches,
struggled for room, the discovery
ice cream with late night clumsy
sex in the cab of my truck,
in the rise and fall,
waves at Jamaica Beach,
in the midst of an argument
was messy. Learned to sneak
around bon fires and cop lights,
balconies and cold nights
filled with tears,
filled with gritted teeth,
this meant love.

X. The Proposal

I had no lover
over and speak up,
to dream of.
dulce delights,
perfumes as
a hot red alma,
unhinged,
tender smiles.
She wrecked my flow;
crinkled my forehead,
She haunted me.
embarrassed my manhood.
when I bought her flowers
wrapped in tissue paper.
the goddamn things
them damp flowers. She fed
Dominican kisses
that envelop my body
I rocked her, my poems,
as we read
linger in all the pauses.
up like that, chilled
tear across my page,
warm together as we race
laughing to unbutton
clothes, to cook like we
with hot boiling spices
I decide today that
a home is with her,
past my addictions
my mistakes in
tender hands

to keep on, to come
to tend to me,
I was in my shell, eyed
candy in colors, supple
I made the rounds. I was
I was cavalier, aloof,
unattached, incognito, filled –
Until I met her.
disturbed my pace,
alarmed my age.
She drew me in,
I caught a cold
at twenty-eight,
Bought
in the rain. She hated
me with her breasts,
sang to me in poems
from the toes up.
made love
to each other's hearts bare,
It's been that way; to wake
still, a dream that might
means she has become mine,
in the sheets,
our thoughts,
fight about writing
that eat up insides.
I am in a place, in
having, I'll walk
to get her, embrace
her, remember to be honest,
for the rest of our lives.

Photograph of “Woman on Street - Flower Leis”

The title of the photo is wrong.
You are not on the street, you are hovering,
your feet crossed, goddess,
barefoot, tender feet, no ankles here,
hiding under a woven, wool, waist-wide falda,

trim in red and you wear a white blusa,
green vines array flowers that fleck and burst in
purple down your neck, a thick neck,
a worker’s neck, a young lover’s neck,
and around this, una cadena de caléndulas,

rojo, amarillo, rojo, amarillo, rojo, rojo, amarillo, nuca, y el patron sigue.

Una corona, mi reyna, te alumbra el rostro,
estas caléndulas sirven, angel con tu aureola,
angel con tus brazos medios extendidos a los lados,
lista para dicha palabra, holding a lei in each hand,

red, yellow, red, yellow, red, red, yellow, finger tips, the pattern continues.

You sit in a makeshift thrown, in front of a fountain,
the two stone men behind you carved into the wall,
one to each side, always genuflect, pay respects, still,
their large hands, the size of yours, cover their faces
with water. You perch, bird of the day. You reign,
diosa. Matlalcueye, you don’t smile, you don’t

move, detienes tu pecho, above the water
in the fountain pool behind you. Turn your body
around, dip your feet in the cool of the water, in
the wet of the stone, in the middle of your day,
y luego bendiga todo con una mirada de tus ojos.

Photograph of “Woman in Red Dress, Sunflowers, Sitting With Blanket”

Oigame, Doña, ¿y esos mirasoles? ¿a cuanto los vende? Andele, vendeme las ¿no? Y la cobija tambien, que las lineas en negro y blanco remind me of a tent entrance to a circus at the edge of a field, a field in Tlajamulco, so straight, so propped up, parece capa, eres majestad con esa capa, at the edge of you y los mirasoles, they grow out of you right now, you grow out of the wall, you grow into the sky, your trenzas are long, stem stocks tied in bright yellow orange, you grow into the clouds, the white ones that sit next to you, your hair Doña, enrollado en rayos de sol, amarillo profundo, vendeme su pelo, los rayos, andele, Doña, no sea mala, vendeme las ¿no? No, no sus ojos, ni su respiro, pero las flores, I am sorry, I should have complemented you on your purple, tu rosada, tu morada, your pink vestido, lleno de lunares, la cobija lleno de rayas en los rayos del sol, el sol, el sol que la cubre en un fulgor, que la cubre, que el sol extiende su boca y bese su piel, un beso en su frente, que brille, que brille, que brille. Perdon, Doña, vendeme su tiempo, su silencio, su espacio en la pared, sus pies que no puedo ver, su manos que son mirasoles, hecho de nuves, hecho de rostro, hecho de paz, de paz, de paz, mejor, la dejo Doña, la dejo, la dejo, solita, mirasol, en paz.

Photograph of “Woman on Street – Blue Scarf, Red Dress”

*“Dona Maria como vai você?”
-Traditional Capoeira Song*

You are the third woman I find
no shoes, with no home,
in bright colors, in closed eyes.

you are waiting for a fight, the hate,
the waiting for someone to come
back.

If I didn't know any better,
I'd say you've been waiting a bit

“said he'd be back in three days,
he left me here on these sharp rocks,
took my shoes so I can't leave,
don't want to slice each sole down to the muscle”

I want to say a prayer with you,
but you are not that María, you tell me
it would be a waste of your time,
a waste of your day, a waste of a virgen,

maybe you should stand up
in that red skirt, in that blue reboso,
and march around,
maybe go collect that last conversation,

the set of words you have pursed
in your lips, in an image in your head,
I know you are a bit punchy.

I am sorry
to take your picture, but I want to take you
with me,

you don't want to be left here,
you hate that someone,
want to grind him with your teeth.
I won't tell anyone if you don't believe
in a god.

Cut him in his side, make him
wish he never crossed you.

PART IV -

(Ellos) Damas y Caballeros

I. A Human Rights Worker Tells Me About the Cuarenta y tres

*“Vivos se los llevaron, vivos los queremos”
-rally cry for the 43 missing Normalistas*

a voice on the other end of a phone ring,
a whisper, checks the door, a look through the blinds,
an ok, no hay nadie aqui –
a breath, a flood of words that reverses blood flow,
the voice on the other end, he, could not let
his tongue slow down, could not let the air
come out of his lungs without llanto
filling the line, the whole room, the whole one
thousand, one hundred and thirty four miles between
there and here – the voice trembles –
there are over one hundred students
there, in the town square, the ones
who come from the mountains – he says, the ones
who want to go back to their homes,
teach Mixtecos how to come out from mountains.
One of them, he’s been found, in the moon
light, in the middle of the street, his hands,
dirty from the blood in the puddles, and his face –
not a face fit for the classroom he wants to teach in.
It is something Posada would have drawn.
A round, pink set of bones; not the skin or the lips,
but the white cheek, the jaw. The brow exposed
to the evening breeze. This body has been drug
by a car – he says, the police didn’t help this
soon to be teacher, no, they let him fall in the mud.
Let the face melt away along the brick road. This body,
this boy isn’t the only fracaso. He’s not the only one
who’s missing. The voice on the phone – help me,
gasps for air –help me find the foot prints, the rumors,
los ojos, the bus tickets, los scapularios, the wallets,
las fotos, the cell phones, las huellas, the watches,
la voz juvenil, the shoes, las venas, the breast plates,
el aliento of forty-two more just like him. Help me,
he whispers,
see if we can find their faces in the selva,
help me see if we can find them
in the mouth of mayor’s wife, tan goloza,
can’t lick her fingers fast enough, she can’t
even eat all the names at once, without taking
a moment to look around. She doesn’t want to be
seen, esa dama, eating the fruit, la cosecha – Ayotzinapa.
But she will eat nonetheless, binge on silent bodies,

until her teeth hide all the limbs, leave only bones,
charred speeches, decay and a rot from such young meat.

II. A Dancer Tells Me About the Cuarenta y Tres (Para Christian Alfonso Rodriguez Telumbre)

*Y en los suspiros decia el que la seca la llena
-Las Amarillas, Arturo Villela Hernández*

It is a hot night when I take the stage, I know these steps,
una lucha para mi, a flutter in the lights, a flock of birds in
my head, a rhythm I can not step away from. My home,
my Guerrero, suffers a loss, an absence, cuarenta y tres are

missed. When I look up at the sky – could not see los pajaros
cadernales, I race to put on my dance shoes, to hug
my children, to count the heads in my own classroom,
race to say the names of forty three sons, gone somewhere,

engrave them on my dance shoe tacones. I want a sanamiento,
dress up in a huipil, a yellow skirt, a field of yellow flowers
in my hair. I heard el gavilan say “A mi hijo, le gusta bailar
ballet folkorico”, it echoes desde la costa de mi Acapulco,

across the mountains in Ayotzinapa, up this border. I let
the pañuelo flicker around the air, the bird that flows,
buscando respuesta, un nido, un respiro.
He came to find his son, to ask for help, to dance a cumbia

with me, to watch us, came to watch me dance Las Amarillas,
and every step was a pounding fight with shadows, the longest
I have ever danced. I can't watch the rostros in the crowd,
feel the tears well up on my face, I keep the beat, close

my eyes every few breaths, look around, think I see el pico
pico, a young normalista, bring his own paliacate and share
a dance with me. It is an ofrenda, una llamada, an echo,
a marcha, a fogata, a fight, a linterna, a flare, a beckoning,
a rezo, a pause, un movimiento led with a simple handkerchief.

I make this gavilan, Clemente, cry tonight, hypnotize him

with a bandada that glows, make his heart swell, remind
him of a brilliant picture, a tarima and his son, caught up
in a dance, watch his lips as he mentions his son,
all our sons will dance once more.

A Response to Gil Scott-Heron's "A Poem for Jose Campos Torres"

*"I had said I wasn't going to write no more poems like this.
I made a mistake."*

-Gil Scott-Heron, poet

From Lucy:

I am glad you called again, Lupito, wanted to correct a comment I made before, about Joe Campos Torres. I make a mistake, I remembered it, but I remembered it wrong, like it was all the same time, along the same night, he died, what? Under twenty five? In 77'? Could have sworn he died before we built the huelga schools. He probably was at war still in '70. But I remember now, was beaten so bad, the jailer didn't want his blood slicking the floors, told the boys in blue to take him to the hospital, they misunderstood, like my memory, switched things up, abandoned him in a building, abandoned thought, blurred around him with kicks, night sticks, left the image of him, ranting drunk at a bar, linger too long in the brain, remembered him fighting with the dogs in the street, back from a war that didn't treat any man, any Mexican man well. They flung him off a ledge, allowed all his cuts to fill with the bayou water and forgot about him. I forgot he wasn't around the huelga schools, forgot about the day when he died, it comes back, el cinco de mayo.

He still floats around here, in my head, along the white greña, along the curb, by the old bar, waiting for the cops, yelling at the dogs that were in the street. I want to see him, want to see his body drug up from under Buffalo Bayou in '77, want to travel around with him on our shoulders, give him a hero's parade. Scream "we are ready!" Scream his loss, is all we could do. Scream with huelga kids who knew where to walk, who learned his name later, who knew what to say, when another mejicano has his soul drowned away.

Una carta de disculpa departe de Tlaxcala

Para los amantes, Popocatepetl y Iztaccihuatl

Mi princesa,

I was there, behind the templo wall, adobe entre mis dedos, I build the cali you lived in. It was the only way to spent the days y verte, vestida de blanco, how your black hair split the sun at the ends, the colibris perched on your shoulders. They would whisper sweet message from him. He was always in your dreams, on the tip of your sweet tongue, the way I wanted my name to be, but you never remembered me in your prayers. I remember the day your father told him he could have you, you told your guerrero – keep head low, to use the knife at his side only if he needed to bleed the moon for white light, to guide him home.

Forgive me for being so sick, my teeth were sharp black obsidian things, that chomped thick. When you asked me for word on the guerrero, I ate the air around you, suffocated you with lies. “He has died”. You fell ill at my news. You finally called to me, to build you a fire, to lead your guerrero home, you gasped at words. When I finished, your arms would no longer hold up prayer, they fell, slumped on the warm earth. I had to leave. But I watched, as he came back, the colibris lead him, whispered of your death, and I watched as he wrapped up your body, the white linen so soft against the curve of your cadera, of your pecho, and your hair turned white. I cried, when he roamed the city. One by one, the birds lost their wings, the sun did not grow, the air did not carry a song.

I waited ‘til dusk, walked him back to your tomb, told him of the gashes I gave you, how you bled tears and he did not fall. He picked up your sleeping body, weighted, broken, climbed a hundred mountains for you. I watched from afar, gathered my solitude, the ground grumbled as he finally slept at your feet, where he still sleeps, a breath, a hot molt of ash, his love, a magma, that never truly rests, que te guarde, que sueña siempre por tí.

Lucciano's Advice On My First Night in the Kitchen of the Garden Restaurant

I see you, in between the blurs of sue chefs,
in bits of ladles that stick out of soups,

careful,

don't let your sleeves get caught in chicken
stock flows around stove tops or the prep cooks,

skimming around that metal table,

brilliant.

You should hustle here a few days more, nights
stay with you, with the hot rags in water,

waves of dishes steaming, your fingers stinging
from cold and hot and flushed and chilled red
steaks, raw

under the blade, white tendons
nerving out on tan boards. We all get past

the fumbling flops of food on floor. You can pinch
black headed strawberries,

sink chocolate warheads,
settle them on mirrors, eat each shard, you can

take one. See?

We always take two.

Go ahead,

learn to make extra, shhh

eat a brown pepper steak,
in butter rolls. It's the best meal in eight hours
standing, planning your escape,

pulling

green lettuce into sheets, count the clock ticks,

multiply that

by the four dollars, twenty-five cents, we make.
Go crazy broke.

The Exorcist on TV the Night the Dirty Side of Hurricane Alicia Fell

Due to the severe damage, the name "Alicia" was retired in the spring of 1984 by the World Meteorological Organization, and will never be used again for an Atlantic hurricane – it was replaced with "Allison" for the 1989 season. Coincidentally, in 2001 the name "Allison" was retired after striking the same area as Alicia.

- National Hurricane Center, 2010

My family split up that day, my mother, white scrubs, dressed for her sick-people-in-the-head job, my father, quiet, - watched black clouds, white flash cracks. The sun hadn't offered a thing.

I couldn't understand the swirls on the screen, the buzz, the ripples, the arrows that pointed across the TV. , but I felt the swoon, the house swayed with the wind. I smelled sea salt. It made me jerk,

mess up my horse picture, brown, and black with yellow hair. I heard the seagulls, they laughed as they flew away. I drew them, too, saw them as they joined the rest of the people in cars and their lights,

those that ran from the water. I told my father I worried about mother, said she would be home that night. He kept in between swigs of Miller High Life and duct tape. I helped him

in the afternoon, x all the windows, between trips to the bar next door. I prayed for food. I did not eat that day. In the distance, the breaks in the waves grew tall, throwing up jetty rocks on the roadway, crushed

a man, covered him in granite and sea foam. He didn't even make a grip when he died. His hand was limp, his wrist was stuck between asphalt, the glistening rock, the size of the Datsun he was walking toward.

The smell of fish remained when they pried the piece of jetty off – he died with a basket full of croakers. He once shined shoes at the Hotel Galvez, he knew everyone and told my father tales about old hurricanes

being brutal lovers and about bitter women who found him out in a cheat. He sat by the waves a lot, taught me how to make paper boats float in the waves and taught me how to fly kites in storms.

On the TV that night, I watched a white girl who's head spun around, who spoke in a demon voice, who beat on her mother, threw a dresser at her, who made the flower filled walls of her house shake,

who made the red stop sign from the corner of the block fly through our window, made the wind howl with gnarling rain, who made the door splinter right next to me. The TV blinked black, flung against the wall,

not a picture moved, but I still heard her laugh, a bit of maple wood in my arm.
The door was gone and out of its space, the lights of the town emptied.
Only the black, only the lanterns and the twigs, the bushes and the sand,

the colored cars and telephone wires circled overhead, floating in the breeze.

Revolución

I.

Querida madre,

Espero que esta carta te haya llegado en buena salud.
Discúlpeme por no escribir tanto este año, pero entre nos,

me ha costado un poco de mi alma, como las cascarras
delgaditas de una cebolla – me he perdido en este lugar.

Me pierdo el sentido cuando hablo este Ingles.
Nací de un color fuerte, verde fuerte, un pino fuerte,
pero me he vuelto un verde claro – un pedazo de
sandilla, ya hecho a perder.

Me hace falta caminar en la oscuridad, guiado por la luna.

Me hace falta comprender el mundo dentro
de la voz suya.

Me hace falta escuchar el cura del pueblo,
debajo del tejaban, porque se que todavía
no tenemos temple propio.

Quiero ir cercas de la presa, ver el agua de me juventud,
correr al lado del tren, entre los cerros.

No marchó aquí. Soy sonámbulo,
tímido, desenfocado.

Este mundo canta diferente. No hay vecinos
con quien hablar.

Les tengo miedo. Me tienen miedo.

He visto la noche más negra, sin luna, bajo
luces deslumbrantes y canciones cantadas por voces
vibrando en brasas de cometas que vuelen por el aire,
donde todo el mundo vea sus rachas.

He visto lo que amaneca después de una pachanga–
la pobreza, muchachos llenos de pierda,
listos para vender, la viuda desnuda, el borracho
tembloroso. No entiendo este sol,
estas nubes.

Querida madre,
le llego pronto.

II.

Nieto fregado,

Espero que esta carta te haya encontrado. Rompe tan bonitas palabras de tus labios. Sigue ese English. Olvide ese sentimiento tan romántico, tan rojo como las granadas de aquí. Los sueños que tuvimos, tan variados como las agujas de estos pinos, no son tan

verdes como antes. No miro muy bien ahora, pero oigo bastante. Catrín, la presa cayó, la milpa de tu serró creció quemado, comemos ceniza y el tren camina en carril podrido, igual a la vida aquí. Parecemos amazonas, que desaparecen tanto varón por todos lados.

Encuentran más muertos en los magueyes que muchachos trabajando allí. Cada día se oye que el hijo de alguien lo han secuestrado, y jamás aparecen. Hay más pandilla que pan ni vuelan lechuzas por el susto. No salgo de noche.

No quiero ver el mundo ya. Murió la hija de Doña Cuca después de un mes, porque piso sobre una jeringa en la noche. Mala fama, mala calle. No crece la juventud, nomás se los llevan. Espero ver este ranchito en llamas, la misma manera en que vi me casa,

de niña, envuelto en destellos anaranjados, la noche que corrimos de los soldados, en pura bata, en pura bala, cuando vino la revolución. Eso es lo que espero. No vengas aquí. Espera un rato, que lleguen los muertos y heridos, desde la milpa

resecada, listos para una revolución.

Vita

Lupe Mendez is a poet/educator/activist, CantoMundo Fellow and a co-founder of the LibroTraficante Movement. He works with Nuestra Palabra: Latino Writers Having Their Say, The Brazilian Arts Foundation and the Word Around Town Poetry Tour to promote poetry events, advocate for literacy/literature and organize creative writing workshops that are open to the public in and around the Texas Gulf Coast Region. Mr. Mendez earned his Bachelors of Arts in Bilingual Education and English as a Second Language from the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas in December of 2000. Lupe has worked in education since then and currently work as the 10th grade College Counselor and 12th Grade English Instructor at Cristo Rey Jesuit College Preparatory School of Houston and is a joint winner of the 2012 Downs Intellectual Freedom Award for the defense of Ethnic Studies education in the Southwestern United States. Lupe is an internationally published writer who's writing credits include work in Norton's Sudden Fiction Latino, Luna Luna Magazine, Revista Sincopé and forthcoming work for the Los Angeles Review of Books. For more information on him, please go to www.thepoetmendez.org.

Permanent address: 11742 N. Michael Cir.
Houston, TX 77071

This thesis was typed by Guadalupe Mendez.