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# At Night My Body Waits

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AT NIGHT MY BODY  
WAITS

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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2018

AT NIGHT MY BODY  
WAITS

by

Saul Hernandez

Thesis

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The University of Texas at El Paso  
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## INTRODUCTION

Growing up and being labeled as an at-risk student of color in a predominately low-income neighborhood in San Antonio, Texas by my teachers, with undocumented parents, while being a closeted gay man, who was also a Jehovah's Witness for 18 years, I can say it has been a winding road to adulthood. Having had many traumatic moments throughout my childhood, I found my body internalizing emotions, experiences, and identities. I've learned that the body can only endure and take in so much before it releases the unsayable. In poetry, I found this similar connection of how words create lines and stanzas; how a poem's body is also holding on to a thread of words and not quite saying what a poem has to say. In this introduction to my manuscript titled: *At Night My Body Waits*, I will discuss the place of experience in poetry, the aesthetics of my poetry, influential writers, and the development of this manuscript to show how these four components have merged to help me understand both my construction of and process for, writing.

## PLACE OF POETRY IN EXPERIENCE

The place out of which poetry comes is from life itself. In *The Demon and the Angel* by Edward Hirsch, he writes, "Art is born from struggle and touches an anonymous center" (Hirsch i). Through out my life, I kept my struggles hidden inside me until I felt it was time to bring them from an anonymous center and give them life again. The anonymous center for me is the place of secrecy and the place of which one dares not to touch again; therefor, those struggles remain dormant. In the times in which we are living (Trump Era Presidency), I feel it is especially

important for people like me to speak out and bring awareness, share stories, and to tell others going through hardships at this time that there is light at the end of the tunnel, even if it is just a speck. Poetry that comes from experience is vulnerable, dark, it reveals that which is untouchable, and urges for change.

In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey writes that a true work of art is refined and intensified form of an experience (Dewey 8). Through my work, I explore my own lived experiences hoping to mimic other writers who have created literary work out of their life, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Joe Jiménez, Rigoberto González, and Benjamin Alire Sáenz. Through my poems, I am able to capture moments when the speaker realizes the body has many ways of communicating to them during times of shock, silence and times of questioning origins of their name and identity.

In my poem, “That’s Not My Name,” I reveal how the speaker is taunted by his teacher and peers for having a name that they can’t pronounce. The speaker’s body tenses through this experience, since the speaker knows the students will look at them funny when the teacher mispronounces their name. However, in this moment and time, the speaker is young, so the speaker doesn’t have the confidence or the courage to stand up to an authoritative figure and correct them. This experience to speak up is internalized within the speaker and they can’t do anything but stay in silence and be called another name. The speaker’s name is also linked to identity, which they feel is fading. Since the speaker is called other names at the end of this experience, the speaker feels that they are losing themselves within their name.

Reading Anzaldúa’s book, *Borderland La Frontera The New Mestiza*, helped me understand others who have gone through similar experiences as mine. However, Anzaldúa

didn't stay quiet like me. In Chapter Five of her book, "How to Tame a Wild Tongue," the chapter begins with the dentist telling Anzaldúa as he fights to take off her braces, "We're going to have to control your tongue" (Anzaldúa 75). In this case, Anzaldúa's tongue is being seen as a threat because it gets in the way; she is also suggesting the danger a tongue can have of speaking. Anzaldúa says, "flies don't enter a closed mouth" (Anzaldúa 76). Through my experience of having predominately white teachers and them not knowing how to pronounce my name, I now know that I shouldn't have stayed silent as child but seeing these teachers as an authoritative figure gives them agency. This power that is given to an authoritative figure made me doubt myself as far as how my name is pronounced and whether my parents truly knew how to say my name. When I asked my mother why my teacher didn't say my name the way they do my mother informed me that it is because they did not put an accent on my name in fear that I would get bullied or made fun of by others for being different; however, what my parents didn't know is that they were making me doubt my own identity even more. I had to decide the whether I belonged to a certain language or group of students by the way in which my name is pronounced.

If we look at Sandra Cisneros's book *House on Mango Street*, silence is broken when she refers to her character's name (Esperanza). In section three, "My Name," the reader(s) learn about Esperanza's name and that she was named after (her grandmother). Esperanza explains that her name is too long and always mispronounced; she would like her name changed to something else: " But I am always Esperanza. I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do" (Cisneros PG 13).

The way in which these two readings relate to me is, as Dewey would describe, the real form of the art is the making of the experience or encountering an object (Dewey 45). What Dewey refers to as an object would be the main center of the experience in which one is undergoing. In this case the object or main part of the experience is the speaker hearing their name mispronounced. So, through the experience of staying silent and hearing their name mispronounced (the object), the mispronunciation of the name is colliding with the experience creating this piece of poetry.

Joe Jiménez in his essay “Cotton,” writes, “Riding in a car along cotton fields, of which there are a shitload in South Texas, your eyes might think, for a moment, that the field rows are running swiftly beside you, and that is one of the magical images from when I was a boy, which I hold onto now as a man in the middle of my life” (Jimenez 1). For me, a place is a moment of time in which an event or trauma is experienced. Through this place such as the opening of Jiménez’s essay he puts the reader in that place in which he grew up to help establish how growing up being surrounded by fields of cotton shaped his life. The place of the experience is vital as it can help the audience or individual relive something they went through. Throughout my manuscript, most of the experiences I write about are from my younger years, restating how the body takes in moments and keeps them in for years and how these moments have shaped me into the writer and person I am today. The places that I write about not only fill me with nostalgia but challenge me as to whether I remember accurately what happened in them. For example, in my poem “Calamine,” the speaker and his partner are in a place between life and death. The speaker and his partner in this case are the two objects of this experience. The place becomes the

internal struggle and literal time frame where they know there is no cure for AIDS as his partner is slowly dies:

At night I bathe him like my mother bathed me  
in a tub full of oats, I let lukewarm water ease his body  
to find salvation. Sitting in the tub I pour water on him,  
his rock head breaks the water and I watch  
oats slither down his body. Water makes him glow;  
if only baths could cure diseases. I can hear the doctor's voice:  
*time kills.* (Hernandez 41)

In his essay, Jiménez moves through literal and metaphorical time and place. He moves us through the process in which cotton is harvested at different points and what can be made of cotton. Alongside the making of the physical cotton, Jiménez tells the reader of the different abusive partners he has had and how he was able to eventually escape each one. In this essay, Jiménez is able to weave the process of time and place by giving us his experience of growing up among nothing but cotton fields as the relationships he was in merge together and show us that life blooms just as cotton does. The poem "Calamine" also switches between the past, present, and future. After the speaker's partner passes away, the poem jumps into the future and shows the speaker applying calamine lotion for mosquito bites, remembering his dead partner:

That's when I remember him  
sitting on our bed with a smile,  
my fingertips blooming with small

dots of pink relief touching his skin.

There he sits in my head

slathered in ointment. (Hernandez 39)

The continuation of having experiences throughout my life to create poetry is everlasting. I may not be able to capture the every precise detail of the experience that I underwent; however, I can replicate the events that I remember and the way in which I remember them to be.

## **AESTHETICS AND POETICS**

My aesthetics and poetics are something that continue to change radically for me. These changes happen as I read, study, and write poetry. Currently, my main intention for my poetry is to have in them a moment where the reader and writer can bridge the gap of what the body cannot say and make connections. I want to be able to show through my work how the body takes in these different moments that one has experienced and how seeing or hearing a trigger of that moment can tense up the body bringing back the trauma that one experienced. By bridging this gap of body and trauma I hope readers are able to be more aware of how the body remembers even if we choose not to recall the events that we have gone through in our lives.

Coming into the program, I was told to define my own aesthetics. At the time, my answer was unclear as I didn't know what exactly that meant. When I was asked, "what is the poem telling you? How is the poem pushing itself?" I was even more bewildered. I tried to image the poem's body asking me what it wanted to become or what the words were trying to tell me aside from the literal. The choosing of words and sounds and how these words want to be shaped into as the body of the poem is now something that I better understand. My poetics are constructed

through seeking answers in nature, time, discourse, experiences, identity, masculinity, solitude, culture, religion, language, and the body. Literary works, in my opinion, should be created from what one knows and what one is surrounded with at a certain time. By writing what I know, I am able to address a certain type of audience that share experiences similar to mine.

The form of a poem for me is established through the content first. The context for me is what will define the content. Once these two are clearer for me, then the form of a poem can begin to take form. Through the form the tension of a poem can now rise. The tension of a poem for me comes first from the desire of the language and what the experience is trying to manifest. Denise Levertov writes, “Every poem appeals to the eyes, ears, emotion, and intellect” and one can experience this once the poem’s tension begins to take flight through the content and context (Levertov 69). Levertov, echoing Robert Creeley, also writes, “Form is never more than a revelation of content” (Levertov 67) For me this includes what can’t be said or in the use of white space and tension, and ultimately in the risk the poem is taking route towards. She also writes, “A poem is more than just a form it takes into consideration” (Levertov 72). A poem and a reader can both go through the journey that the writer is trying to take their audience on once the writer begins understanding that the use or meanings of the words used, the breath in a poem, the lines breaks the writer has chosen, and the punctuation marks to speed up a poem or slow down a poem. Each of these interactions form part of a contract or form that a poem must possess in order to achieve its tension and desire. Moreover, defining what a poem wants to say and what it cannot say can become blurred at times. When the body of a poem does not fully say what it wants to say, the reader can feel the tension through the construction of word choice, line, stanza, and the images that a poem is constructing. An example of this can be seen in my poem,

“Airball,” in which a boy watches a group of boys play basketball from across the border in Juárez. Through this poem the boy in Juárez analyzes the outcome of the game but in reality the boy is wishing for an opportunity to be part of that game in the U.S. The boy does not have the same opportunities as the group of boys playing basketball and that tension rises as he keeps clenching his hands against the gate.

One of the most important lessons I’ve learned when creating poetry is to treat setting as a character, meaning a setting must also have desire as a character would. This is important for me since I tend to write poetry from a place of experience. I treat the different settings in my poetry as characters mostly through the border, whether it be a physical or metaphorical border. For me, every poem also has a border of what the poem’s body desire is. This border is tied to the unsaid and the desire of a poem. Again, my intention is bridge this gap of the border between the body and trauma. Through this border, either the body of a poem says or doesn’t say what it wants to say at the time in which the poem is taking place. For example, in my poem “13 Reasons Why My Mexican Father Fears Water,” the father struggles with accepting any form of water in his life because of the trauma that he experienced at the Rio Grande. Through this poem, the border of wanting to say he’s traumatized is internalized and instead he refuses to accept water as an element that is vital.

Jericho Brown said in a lecture, “Poems are the mirror of the life of the believer.” I believe poetry is the outlet which lets one take their experience and begin to construct what was never said during those moments of time (place). Setting and experience interact together to form the tension of what cannot be said in the body of a poem. This again can be seen through my poem “13 Reasons Why My Mexican Father Fears Water,” as each of the 13 parts take place in

different settings and have different experiences; however, it is what the father does not say that intensifies each part of the poem with setting and experience.

A poem for me has to have an unsaid or wailing desire. The unsaid and the desire, for me, are two completely different components in constructing a poem. The desire of the poem has to be present from start to end. This desire has to carry that thing that the speaker is trying to reach for. The unsaid, however, can be echoing or not be as present through the whole poem until one reaches the end. The unsaid plays off from the desire of a poem; however, with the unsaid the speaker of a poem does not give out that desire instead he leaves it at almost at the audiences grasp without giving too much away. An example of this is found in my poem, “That’s Not My Name.” In this poem, the child sits in the back and traces his name onto the window:

In the school bus I sat alone in the back,  
put my mouth against the window  
and breathe against it, in the mist I wrote  
my name,  
  
watched it  
vanish,  
again and  
again. (Hernandez 36).

Here we can see the desire of the child wanting his name to be known but it keeps vanishing as the mist fades. This desire is something we see continuously throughout the poem

as the speaker wants their name to be pronounced correctly. The unsaid here grows side by side the desire. The unsaid in this poem would be the speaker keeping everything internalized which is what is ultimately allowing the desire to grow.

## **INFLUENTIAL WRITERS**

Throughout the development of my thesis I have been inspired by many writers, such as, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, Ocean Vuong, Laurie Ann Guerrero, Reyna Grande, and Joe Jiménez. These writers continue to show me resilience through their words, as well as the importance of empathy.

Sáenz's collections of poetry *The Book of What Remains* and *The Last Cigarette on Earth* continues to show vulnerability and how much it can connect with its reader. For example, in “Arriving at the Heart of Tragedy,” from his book *The Book of What Remains*, Sáenz is able to produce the vulnerability of what it means to arrive at heart of tragedy. The poem moves us through biblical, individual, and societal experiences, and each brings a different level of what it means to be in pain. In my own book, I reflect on various types of pain, such as, remembering my mother’s choice not to go to Mexico to bury her father because she would not have been able to cross back into the states to raise my siblings and I, my father’s constant fear of water because it reminded him of his experience crossing the Rio Grande River and witnessing his brother drown, or my usual Sunday running down Scenic Drive and looking at the border that divides the U.S. from Mexico; ultimately what divides me from others.

Ocean Vuong’s book, *Night Sky With Exit Wounds*, influenced me to dwell on the question of identity and what it means to recognize yourself as a foreigner or as a First Generation American. How does one move between cultures and language? Vuong’s poem

“Notebook Fragments” is an example of how identity, masculinity, family lineage, and the consequences of certain actions can take a toll on an individual. In this poem, the speaker questions their own existence by first questioning war. The speaker goes on to say if an American soldier had not raped his grandmother in Vietnam then he would not exist. The poem pushes further as the speaker’s identity and masculinity merge to produce awareness of how he feels he is attracted to men. Vuong’s poem allows the reader to be vulnerable and at the same time courageous, “Woke up screaming with no sound. The room filling with a bluish water / called dawn. Went to kiss grandma on the forehead / just in case. An American Soldier fucked a Vietnamese farm girl. Thus my mother exists. / Thus I exist. Thus no bombs = no family = no me” (69-70). This long poem is able to connect readers with the personal “I,” as the poem is written in fragment sentences that all lead up to the ending where the speaker is just looking for their path or ultimately for their reason of being: “Dear god, if you *are* a season, let it be the one I passed through to get here” (Vuong 70). This poem resonated with me because the first reading that I gave it I could not figure out what the poem was pushing or asking for. I realized that for me the title of the poem “Notebook Fragments” correlates with the thought process of how someone can perceive their own experience and connect them together as a thread to construct a larger message through language.

“Notebook Fragments” by Vuong inspired me to write “Defying the Dangers of Being” by allowing me to bring the form of an essay into poetry. Throughout “Defying the Dangers of Being,” I connect experiences from my own life and how they have affected me as an individual and how the speaker is reflecting on their life and what it means to be Mexican-American and ultimately why being yourself is dangerous, as they are running and looking at the border of El

Paso and Ciudad Juárez. Through this poem I tried connecting all experiences through sound, images, and emotions so that the reader could see or feel a connection between each experience. For instance, in beginning I connect the fist the speaker made underneath the desk to the image and sound the trays slamming on the lunch table to the father slamming his fist on the trays at work. Through these three initial experiences the readers can see the hands and hear the slamming of trays or fists:

the wall will always be there and I look ahead close my eyes  
and see my sixth grade middle school counselor who says,  
*do you want to work with your hands indoors or outdoors?*  
I made a fist underneath the table, how easy it was for him  
to say those words. He is fired a year later  
for shouting at a student who wants to be more.  
*I hope you're happy, how you've  
hurt your cause forever, I hope you think you're clever.*

In Michigan children are chanting *Build The Wall, Build The Wall,*  
*Build The Wall* during lunch as they clench their hands  
and bang on the tables. Threats too can echo  
at the speed of sound: At 20 years old, my father quit his job at a  
Mexican restaurant, his boss yelling at him  
*Don't walk away from the cooking line  
or I'll tell La Migra where you live.*

Afraid of losing our chances of growing up in an American school system  
my father stayed slamming trays on the cooking line for two years.  
My parents have lived more than half of their lives afraid.  
In 2009 they contributed to the 1.68 million undocumented  
immigrants living in Texas; such a crime to be *living*. (Hernandez 26).

In her book, *A Tongue in the Mouth of the Dying*, Laurie Ann Guerrero is able to be personal and genuine when describing her upbringing of growing up Mexican-American and the lessons she's learned. Moreover, the poems show what it means to speak in a Mexican household and how the mouth is a vital source and resource. The overall collection of poetry has an

emphasis on Mexican American culture to execute some of the deep messages in the poems. In, "Preparing The Tongue," the reader learns not only the process of cooking lengua, but also experiences the tongue through the five senses, bringing us to an underlying message. In her poem "Preparing The Tongue" the reader can see how the use of language is crucial to one's identity just as food(s) can make one's identity.

In her poem "Yellow Bird" by Guerrero employs the image of a bird in a cage to explore the never-realized dreams of a woman imprisoned by her own marriage. The bird thus represents all the aspirations and dreams the woman had not wed. In Mexican culture women play the role of nurture which in terms means many women give up their dreams and tend to the needs of their families. In "Yellow Bird" Guerrero demonstrates this culture by using the bird as a metaphor for what this married woman longs for in her life. In my poem "I Can't Pass Down My Heritage," the speaker has an experience with his mother who tells them they can't have children for being gay. The words of their mother lingers in the speakers head enough to turn into a reoccurring nightmare. Being gay and Mexican means not being able to pass down their heritage to their children. The expectations here again become more of gender roles, sexual preference, and expectations. When the speaker informs their mother that they can adopt the mother says it is not their blood and it will not be the same. The speaker is left questioning if this social expectation of having children leaves them trap for being gay.

I believe language and words have power that pushes against the borders of what standards of society have imposed on us. Both Voung and Guerrero do this by challenging gender roles and identity. They do not put limits in their poems but rather their poems breaks against social norms and expectations by the construction of words and language.

## **BEHIND *At Night My Body Waits***

When I began this manuscript, I had no idea where it would go or take me. Then again, if the writer is not surprised neither will the reader be. As I began thinking what I wanted to write for my thesis year, I knew I wanted my poetry to come from a place of my own experiences of my own body and what is going on in the world. Growing up in San Antonio, TX, I saw many injustices be done towards my parents for not knowing English or for being from a completely different culture. When I moved to El Paso, TX, I saw how one is celebrated here for knowing two languages and being able to move between them. Language here in El Paso does not separate but unify. It was in this space that I was finally able to see how being in my own body and living through the experiences that I lived through affected me internally and physically. Being in my late twenties now and remembering certain experiences makes me physically sick. I wanted to create a manuscript which shows the division of cultures and how those divisions are a threat to individuals and how the physical body of one functions as its own character and has desires and fears, too. When I started writing the poems for this work I did not expect them to be political or even touch upon politics. However, as I continued writing I realized that most of my manuscript is political and that I am using my own art and experiences to create a voice and language which speaks out about immigration, homophobia, but most importantly of having a body and seeing that as a danger to oneself. What I mean about having a body and seeing that as a danger to oneself is that we all have bodies and most of us feel that we are capable of controlling every single bodily function which our bodies do; however, there is a fear of the body controlling us. For example, having anxiety overpowers one's body and now the body controls us

instead of us controlling the body. I wanted to bring this forward in moments of tension that can be seen in “13 Reasons Why My Father Fears Water,” “Defying the Dangers of Being,” “At Night My Body Waits,” and in “When Dreams Come True.” Through these poems and others, I explore fear of bodies with power, the fear of not being in control of one’s body and the overall impact both have on the body.

For example, in the opening of my manuscript, I begin with the poem “The Body Sheds,” in which a biology professor announces that the body sheds every seven years and new cells are created. Through this information, the speaker feels relief and at the same time their body gets chills knowing the trauma their body has experienced through touch will cease to exist as new skin will be created. The poem is able to capture the moment of the speaker realizing that their body ultimately evolves from past trauma and a new body is created for them in which the past fades off them. However, the body may shed but the memories of the trauma linger, which comes into play with fear and how fear can control the body as I mentioned earlier.

I also didn’t expect to write about identity. To begin to peel layers of my own experiences and begin to weave them together to show or attempt to construct how I perceive myself is nonetheless quite shocking. Through Thesis I, my director kept telling me this is what you write about and I kept telling myself is it? As I began writing more and more I realized that I am not only questioning my identity but I’m also questioning politics, borders, how individuals perceive others, how the U.S. system is not as everyone thinks it is, how the American Dream is nonexistent, but most of all, channeling these internalized experiences and shaping them into language that is able to push and pierce through what I have grown up thinking is “correct” or expected way of living.

In my manuscript, I attempted to create a narrative in most of my poems that braces through experiences from my childhood or from my adult life into where I am now. Jericho Brown in a lecture said, “A narrative poem is much more complicated to create.” His reasoning for this is that the subconscious and consciousness go through three steps (emotion, thought, and action) in order to create a narrative poem. When writing my poem “When Dreams Come True,” I had to go through all the emotions of the day when my mother’s father passed away. To relive this moment, I had to go into my consciousness and ask myself what exactly happened on December 19, 2002? How did my mother react? What was she doing? Why didn’t she get into the SUV? How does the shape of grief take place in a human being? Through these initial questions I began the poem, which at the time I was certain was only going to be one piece. The end piece now consists of four parts making “When Dreams Come True” a poem sequence with a narrative arc. We know from a four act play that at the beginning (section one) it introduces the audience with a situation creating the first leap into tension. The second act keeps building the tension along with the main conflict rising. The third act presents the climax and the falling action as the fourth act gives the audience a resolution without further conflict or tension. Throughout this four section sequence poem I set out to reveal what it is like for immigrant families to obtain the “American Dream” and what implications and/or things they have to give up in order to achieve it or continue pursuing it. The four acts also need to act as a mirror with each one reflecting from each other, meaning poem one and poem four have to mirror each other and poem two and three mirror each other as well. In this case, my intention was for this silence to carry on from poem to poem so at the end that silence is semi revealed and understood by the speaker of the poem. The poem “When Dreams Come True” features my mother and how she

could not venture into Mexico when her father passed away because she was an illegal alien. The poem finishes when my mother returns to Mexico and visits her father's grave to have closure.

Although I've attempted to create a narrative arc in each of the poems, my manuscript's layout is not formed in a narrative arc. Instead I've organized it by moments of tension and impact on the body. I organized the first section to create tension and by the middle of the book that tension rises. The ending my manuscript also ends with tension in the poem, "If I Get Lost in Juárez." I decided to close with this poem because it is a short poem which is able to capture the sensation from the poem which opened up my manuscript ("The Body Sheds"). These two poems mirror each other by producing the same rising tension and end with a surprising twist. The first poem ending with the speaker getting chills and the ending poem concluding with a more philosophical questioning that maybe their body exists because it has a name.

I decided to name my manuscript *At Night My Body Waits* because the title encompasses all my themes that I have written about: masculinity, immigration, identity, culture, and borders. The title *At Night My Body Waits* is tied to a poem in my manuscript which mentions all these themes. The dangers of ultimately accepting oneself in the end and how being oneself comes with consequences from experiences one will encounter. Creating this poem "At Night My Body Waits" has been one of the most difficult poems because I am telling the truths that my body went through. When I was ordering this manuscript, I realized this poem had to be at the center of the book, serving as the heart of it and the title of the book had to be called *At Night My Body Waits*.

## **Conclusion**

I chose to create this work to explore metaphorical and literal borders, such as the geopolitical border between the U.S. and Mexico, the border between languages, etc. I feel that at this time in our country, it is vital that diverse experiences and voices be heard. The news these days is filled with shootings, death, deportations, and rights being taken away, describing an endless loop of harsh realities certain individuals face. I didn't expect for my writing to turn political but it did. Writing this manuscript has taken me to relive certain experiences in my life but most importantly it has shown me the power of language and words. As I continue to revise and edit poems from this collection, I could only hope that one day my work will resonate with others and show them that the fear of being themselves is a universal one.

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# **AT NIGHT MY BODY WAITS**

## The Body Sheds

In biology class I watch my professor put  
samples of skin cells in petri dishes.

The body sheds, he says as he passes  
the petri dishes of skin cell samples.

I analyze the skin samples, and I tell him  
mine are all dead. Good. He walks towards the front

of the class room, Every single cell in our bodies  
will be destroyed and replaced every seven years.

My body gets chills knowing one day  
I'll have a body you've never touched.

## When Dreams Come True

I.

The telephone rings at three  
in the morning the voice shouts

from the phone receiver into  
my mother's ears: *Papá esta muerto*

Her eyes widen, her fingers  
rattle with the news, she drops the phone;

her *llanto* a waking lullaby—  
some dreams come true. At 15 she came to the States,

overstayed her visit with my father,  
they became illegal.

We watch her pace the house  
running her fingers through her hair.

Then, *¡Hagan sus maletas!*  
In the morning we'll drive sixteen hours to Mexico.

The SUV is loaded with us now and  
in the driveway the hands of her

siblings on my mother's back consoles her  
choice. *Lo tengo que ver*, my mother told them. They reminded her,

*no puedes regresar a tu familia y a tu casa.*  
My uncle turns the key, my mother wails.

She opens the back door, falls out, runs to my father, *no puedo ir.*  
We watch from inside the SUV as she

removes her suitcase.  
Through the window she asks

*El me perdonara, verdad?*  
They squeeze her hand, bow their heads.

My mother stares at my brother and me,  
tells us to go in her place.

We pull out of the driveway,  
in the direction of the country

she left behind, now  
impossible to reach.

We watch from the back window  
as my mother runs behind the SUV,

falls to her knees,  
hands covering her face.

## Airball

In Juárez a boy clenches his hands  
against the gate. He watches a show:  
a group of boys playing basketball on the other side,  
at Bowie High School. His eyes watch the ball  
as it's dribbled and passed around. His eyes continue  
to watch for an opening. The boy's hands grip  
the fence tighter as another boy falls on the opposite side,  
misses the shot. The boys laugh at him  
as he gets up from the floor they all shake hands  
and leave the court. The boy across the fence  
in Juárez keeps watching the probabilities  
of how the game could have ended:  
a 3 pointer, a 2 pointer or  
an access shot to  
outweigh the odds.

## My Body Brown

In the shower I scrub the brownness off my body.  
I watch the white soap bubbles form around my arms and  
water pours down washes the soap away. But my body  
stays brown. I close my eyes and I can hear them  
coming after me: the ones who wear red hats and  
who want to make America great again. So I scrub harder,  
watch the same bubbles begin to form, and I rinse.  
The brownness remains.

## Chain Migration

The October sky rides with my brother and I as we drive on I-35 South towards Mexico where our deceased grandmother waits for us. I look out the window and the sky becomes clouded by a storm of

fluttering confetti; clusters of them surround us and I believe in magic at this moment. Their wings working as fast as the speed of the truck and their antennas fighting to reach Mexican soil. Winter is coming and they seek refuge in

Mexico from the cold states. As they migrate female butterflies leave eggs behind; they will never meet their children, Mexico is their final destination. Drive slower, don't kill any of them; they have to make it back—

My brother keeps driving and I keep flinching when I hear them splatter across the windshield. The magic is fading and I can't do anything to save them so I turn to him and grab his shoulder, Please, slow down! They have to make it. They have to go to where

their parents died; they have to.

My brother extends his arm and pats my back looks me in the eyes as his eyes drip. I close my eyes but I can hear their bodies splitting into pieces.

## Hollowed Ground

Every Sunday my mother's voice  
d

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p

s

into the soil  
as she digs holes with  
her nails and places seeds  
she takes out from her pocket,  
kisses them, lays them in the dirt, and  
prays. No amount of holes  
are able to reach roots beneath the dirt that hug other roots

across lands. After the death of her father  
she hated flowers. They reminded her of  
where she could not be. Dirt should not be measured by

borders but it is. And in a county where she is  
considered illegal she had to choose—  
Bury her father or raise a family,  
so she keeps digging, planting, and  
praying for her father.

*Todo a su tiempo,*

her own words cup her tears.  
They fall into the soil, roots beneath her drink,  
water ceases to exist on the surface;  
marigolds will grow later this spring.

## I Can't Pass Down My Heritage

You cradle in my arms; perfect fit.  
Your belly rises and flattens with  
each deep breaths and I feel electricity  
running through my body. I lie with you  
as I hold your hand with my finger. Baby's  
breath and lilies bloom on the kitchen table and  
now you're running through the house as I try  
to catch you; I let you outrun me because

that's what a good father does. But I'll never reach you.  
Leaves fall from the tree and now you're in high school;  
you think I'm boring now and  
something knots inside me knowing

you too have to make your own  
decisions soon without me. A whole life flashing  
through my dreams keeps waking me up  
at night with my mother's words in  
the background of each scene echoing over and  
over again: *You're gay, you'll never have children.*

And I tell her I can adopt. *It's not the same;*  
*it's not your blood—*  
*It's not your blood. It's not your blood. It's not your*

*blood.* I may not be able to pass down my  
blood because I love a man. But I know how to  
love so when I say I can adopt I mean I can

love. And my blood will love them equally as if  
they are my blood.

## Autumn

In November you were supposed to be here. Instead blood keeps dripping from between your mother's legs.

She holds her belly with both hands as she walks, caressing what she could have had,

what we all could have had.

The doctors said these things happen but how do we explain these things

to people? At this moment another baby stillborn. At this moment someone is shocked by the news. Who do we get answers from when we seek them, someone answer me, please.

Your mother now keeps what's left of you: a blanket, an unworn yellow onesie, a hollow photo album.

At the cemetery under the United States Flag where people take flowers for the unborn your mother joins them now.

## New Eden

They walk the desert, dozens of them, each holding  
on to their treasures: a birth certificate, a *rosario*, photographs,  
a child's drawing. They walk to *el otro lado* where dreams

come true. And they continue walking in the heat as  
water from their bodies evaporates  
in the desert as their new Eden too

now seems so far away. Each step they wonder if  
going to *el otro lado* is really worth putting  
their bodies through the impossible.

At night stars shine they seem continents away  
but they keep walking knowing a new  
world awaits them. But not all of them

get to see the new Eden.

## Mexicans in The Bed of an 18 Wheeler

On the Southside of San Antonio  
if you listen closely you can hear  
the sound of air being sucked  
from a bed of an 18 wheeler

parked at a Wal-Mart. A hole gives  
hope to undocumented bodies  
brought by a man promising  
them dreams of a better life in

*el otro lado*. He left them some  
have gone days without water. Bodies  
as young as 10 strive for air, others  
have stopped breathing. The summer heat

in Texas is unforgivable as it takes  
air from mouths lying on the floor.  
10 out of 39 die chasing their dreams.

And while they fight for air I run another  
mile in the El Paso heat thinking of  
them wanting air.

How can a body keep pushing  
and begging for more pain?

SOS

--- / -... ---... / -... ---... / -... ---... /  
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## When Dreams Come True

II.

I play a video at night: families meet  
in the middle of the Rio Grande  
with their ankles in water

they reunite. In 180 seconds  
they grab on to one another,  
dig their faces in between

necks, fingers that do not want to let go  
of one another. A couple drives  
11 hours from a small town in Mexico

to meet their grandchildren for the first time.  
A woman says it's been a decade since  
she has seen her family. A girl

of 15 says her mother was deported years  
ago; today they will all meet once again.  
A man covered in tattoos looks at the camera,

he's wearing my mother's eyes,  
he too must know the weight  
of having to carry a hollow space

between his hands; he tells the reporter  
*Isn't this the land*  
*where dreams come true?*

I want to hold him  
in my arms tell him this is the land where  
dreams will destroy

you; there are no promises  
here. Another man reminds us  
this is a Human Rights Campaign:

Hugs Not Walls. For three minutes  
two countries merge:  
Undocumented and Mexico.

For a scrap of seconds  
dreams do come true  
in one language.

I press replay  
again and  
again, a crack begins to

forms in my throat  
for 300 seconds;  
my mother's been carrying

this hole in her throat  
for 27 years,  
    324 months,  
        1407.86 weeks,  
            9,855 days,  
                236,520 hours,  
                    14,191,200 minutes,  
                        851,472,000 seconds—

## My Mother Sees Fireflies

She stands outside watches flares  
coming down soft as rain from

our ignited house. *Isn't it beautiful*  
she says and I squeeze her hand  
she doesn't cry. We stand looking at

our house coming down and she begins  
making *ohh* and *ahhh* sounds with  
her mouth. She let's go of my hand and

she cries now but of laughter. I hear  
sirens in the distance and she laughs  
harder, opens her hands embraces the

speckles of ash falling and  
in that rain she twirls. People are  
watching us now. I keep standing still

but my mother is a firework show and  
she keeps on repeating *I'm free from this house,*  
*I'm free from this house, I'm free*

*from this house.* She grabs my hand  
tells me to dance with her so  
we spin in circles and look at the

house disintegrate in the flames. Then she  
picks me up and says make a wish on  
one of the fireflies and I

close my eyes and wish for my  
mother to see the flames

instead of fireflies.

El Tanteó

My *abuela* does not use measuring cups  
in her kitchen. *Todo es al tanteó*. Her  
hands pinch condiments, releases them

into the pot filled with grains of rice; she cups  
oil in the palm of her hand, as it drips into  
the pot it sizzles. She stirs with a *cucharón*

and brings it to her mouth; in her mouth it sits—  
*el tanteó*. *Todo no se pierde en esta vida mi'jo,*  
*Tu boca can be a weapon, don't forget that.*

My *abuela* smiles at me, *Le falta mas sal y*  
*un poco de consommé*; I ask her how can you know  
what you have is needed? She turns around

in her hands a mixture of red and salt grains,  
*cuando tengas mi edad tu tambien sabras medir asi.*

Abuela doesn't know  
I'm from a generation in our family that can't measure.

She hands me the *cucharón* with some rice, *taste*  
I put the pasty red rice grains in my mouth. As I suck on  
the grains of rice flavors fill gaps of lost skills. My

*abuela* grins at me as my eyes widen.

## Dinner Time

How can you sit there, having chicken, rice and beans for dinner as the T.V. plays in the background saying people like *you* are being found and taken. The anchor man says go get a lawyer they can help you incase ICE comes to your front door. And my father takes another bite of his chicken and I don't know how to tell him that he's in danger of being taken. He rolls his eyes at the news anchor, he says: We've been in danger our whole lives, what's new? But I want to say this time it's different, this time being brown is different. Everyday another one of us is on T.V. being sent back to Mexico. My mother says, enough, your food is getting cold. So we continue eating dinner while my parents are being hunted.

Barbacoa: 7:45 AM

Through the bottom cracks of my door  
an uninvited odor comes in. It lingers on my nose  
awakening my mind and belly. It provokes  
them to wrestle.

My head pleads me to remember  
*abuelo* and the *cabrito*.

My famished stomach tells me to taste the meat  
of a dead animal I once saw slaughtered  
before my child eyes.

The mirror stands before me.  
It can read my worries  
on my face.

Barbacoa: 8:15 AM

The smell enchants me. I close my eyes.  
I see what I've stored in the back  
of my head, files. I wish I had not seen,

the creature's eyes roll back  
light in them gone.  
*Abuelo* telling me  
*no lo veas morir, si te sientes triste*  
*el animal no muere en paz.*

His head rest on the red tainted grass  
the wind brushes his coat. Picking up  
milk dew weed flurries, taking flight  
towards the mourning sky.

In my room. I stand. In front of the mirror  
I look at my repulsive reflection. I see  
his tongue cradled, on the side of his mouth

it sleeps.

Barbacoa 8:25 AM

The smell of barbacoa turns my head. Away  
from the mirror a dust cloud of odor demands to be inhaled,  
it begins to take shape. In my room  
the *cabrito* now stands. Parallel to me  
he opens his mouth. No words come out.  
He is missing his tongue. He begins to prance  
around my room.

El ritmo de sus pezuñas me invitan a bailar  
One, two, three. Uno, dos, tres. One, two, three.  
We are the wind in my room. Spinning  
*levantamos polvo de libros cerrados,*  
*de tierra debajo de mi cama,*  
from the corners of my room.

I open my baby eyes. Coming to a halt  
*nos miramos como viejos amores.*  
I open my mouth and he jumps at me

*caemos. Con la paciencia*  
*que tienen las hojas de otoño hacia el piso.*  
I inhale the smell and I close my eyes.

*Empiezo a correr, con mis cuatro patas,*  
stomping the ground picking up dirt and debris  
on a hot summer day. I am free  
to roam my land.

Barbacoa: El Origen del Cabrito

No tengo fronteras. Puedo tocar el crepúsculo  
de esquina a esquina. No tengo temor por mi vida.  
No estoy fuera de mi lugar.  
Esta es mi tierra. No hay limitaciones  
5que me impiden ser restringido.

Como de mi tierra,  
mi panza esta hecha de paja.  
Tomo de la lluvia cuando el cielo llora.  
Cuando las luciérnagas salen a jugar

me acuesto en mi cama. Descanso  
mi lengua para poder hablar con mi tierra otro día.  
A veces sueño. Aspiraciones lentas con el aliento

del aire me levantan hasta las montañas, desde arriba  
vuelo por las tierras en busca de mis hermanos y hermanas,  
que fueron levantados, por las manos del hombre.  
Miedo se apodera de mí, me dice que corra  
a otras tierras antes de que vengan por mí.  
Baa, baa, no quiero ese destino.

Barbacoa: Tomado por El Hombre

Pero el hombre de otras tierras sabe tomar  
su oportunidad cuando uno duerme.  
Es muy tarde. Amarrada  
mi boca y lengua ya no son unas arma.  
Son desventaja a donde me llevan.  
Prenden una máquina, empieza a caminar despacio  
luego corre como cuando yo era

libre. De las realidades del mundo.  
Ojos con sueños olvidados, ven a  
la luz saliendo del arroyo donde tomaba agua.  
Por última vez veo la paz  
de mi hogar—  
la tierra sin fronteras.

Barbacoa: Encadenado

Ahora soy prisionero. En otras tierras desconocidas  
de mi pescuezo detenido con raíces  
de árboles. Muerdo y muerdo y no se rompen  
estas raíces. Pesan, es una carga para poder comer  
Para poder dormir,  
para poder soñar.

Mi reflejo en agua contaminada distinto  
a mi ser. No soy ese.  
Antier otro. Hoy soy invierno  
en este campo podrido.

## Barbacoa: Carga el Aire

El amanecer no es igual, por el viento  
se oyen voces cargadas  
con dolor.

Voces con sueños.  
Voces que le pegan a mi alma desamparada.  
Voces que ya no entiendo.  
Voces que me pierden por el florecer de plantas dando vida,  
por el verano que seca mi boca,  
y por el otoño caprichoso que quita vida.

Sobre los cerros mis pupilas siguen el aire. Al campo libre  
me recuerda que mi vida es un ciclo  
guiado por el sol y la luna,  
que me dicen a que hora como,  
a que hora camino,  
a que hora puedo beber,  
a que hora puedo hablar.  
Y a que hora debo dormir.

Campo libre, pies engatusados.

## Barbacoa: Revelaciones

El hombre, todo poderoso se presenta. En frente de mi  
y me da su mano. Como un acto de paz  
le quita la raíz a la cerca  
que me detiene de cruzar otras fronteras.  
Toma la raíz de mi pescuezo y me guía.  
Caminamos juntos los dos,  
lado a lado sobre el campo libre. El aire me abraza,  
me invita a recordar momentos de gloria.  
Los rayos del sol están escapándose lentamente. Sobre las nubes  
salen y me dan besos como agua del estanque.

El hombre me lleva al campo. Desconocido  
veo a una criatura. Parecido a la imagen del hombre.  
Nuestras miradas se conectan. Siento miedo,  
por los dos.

Cierro mis ojos. Recuerdo que soy un cabrito—  
tengo cuatro pezuñas,  
tienen ansias por volver a vivir.  
Tengo derecho a correr,  
a gritar sobre el cerro más grande,  
pero sobre todo  
el derecho a que mi cabeza cansada, caiga—  
picada y en bañada,  
para volver a soñar.

Barbacoa: 8:25 AM

Abro mis ojos reencarnados. Adolorido me levanto  
con mis dos piernas. Me pongo de pie y me miro en el espejo,  
my reflection suggest nothing has changed  
my mind disagrees.

Mi reflo me recuerda que  
sus ojos me los comí con mi mirada.  
Yo estuve enfrente del cabrito. No usé palabras.

My hands reach for my neck,  
I examine the creases in search  
for signs of encadenamiento. No trace is left.  
Abro mi boca.  
My tongue is in place.

Barbacoa: 8:30 AM

*Salgo de mis cuatro paredes  
doy pasos ligeros. Down the hallway  
leading to the staircase I follow the smell.  
But, how will I tell my family?  
Esque, no me van a comprender.*

*Bajo sobre las espaldas de huesos ancianos  
pensando en mis ancestros. If,  
they ever had the courage to lash their tongue  
at their own blood. Over the table across the food*

of foreign lands.

Barbacoa: Sueña Again

I sit down at the table. Overlooking my mother  
I land my hands on my mouth, *con los ojos*  
*de cabro veo las tiras de carne,*  
I begin to quake. The table set,

my stomach empty. My mouth  
an *estanque* of water. It is full,  
ready for the *cabrito* to drink.  
The *cabrito* rests on my tortilla.  
I shower him with salsa and salt,  
I take him in my mouth.

I look at my reflection in the plate.  
*Mi lengua iba a mirar a todos en los ojos*  
*les iba a contar la historia del cabrito*  
*que soñaba. Libre de conformar*  
*con lo que ellos pedían,*  
*libre de tomar su propio destino,*  
*en un lugar indocumentado.*

*Pero*, in a house of silence,  
we have not learned  
to open our mouths,  
*dejar la lengua caer hasta el piso*  
*desarrollando palabras*  
moving mountains,  
moving rivers,  
moving skies,  
moving me. Out of fear.  
Yet—

I can dream.

Hide-N-Seek

My father drives his Oldsmobile South towards  
the border. In the backseat my brother and I  
play hide-n-seek. We toss blankets at each other,  
hide underneath them, we shout to each other

*aquí estás ya te encontré* and my father flinches  
in the front seat. We laugh. Papá tells us to sit down  
and stop playing games because *La Migra* is out  
here. His eyes stare at us from the rearview mirror.  
His fingers tap the steering wheel. We stay still for  
a minute. *Quién es la migra, papá?*

He shouts from the front:

*Do you want them to take me?*

*No* we say.

Then sit down and stop playing hide-n-seek.

*Why would they take you if we're just playing?*

He keeps looking forward and sighs, I'll tell you  
when you're older. Just sit, look out the window,  
be on the lookout for a white SUV with  
green letters. *Are we running away?*

*No.*

*Then?—*

*Then I'm going to have to play hide-n-seek.*

My brother and I do as we are told  
and look for the SUV. Sometimes I still catch  
myself holding my breath when I see *La Migra*  
in fear they will hear me breathing,  
tear down the car door  
put me on the floor as they did when I was child  
and ask me: where is your father hiding?

## Defying The Dangers of Being

Alone on a Sunday at eight in the morning I run  
through Scenic Drive in El Paso listening to Defying Gravity, looking down  
at two countries meshing in the daybreak  
light beams and shadows wrestle between the border

the wall will always be there and I look ahead close my eyes  
and see my sixth grade middle school counselor who says,  
*do you want to work with your hands indoors or outdoors?*  
I made a fist underneath the table, how easy it was for him  
to say those words. He is fired a year later  
for shouting at a student who wants to be more.  
*I hope you're happy, how you've  
hurt your cause forever, I hope you think you're clever.*

In Michigan children are chanting *Build The Wall, Build The Wall,*  
*Build The Wall* during lunch as they clench their hands  
and bang on the tables. Threats too can echo  
at the speed of sound: At 20 years old, my father quit his job at a  
Mexican restaurant, his boss yelling at him  
*Don't walk away from the cooking line  
or I'll tell La Migra where you live.*

Afraid of losing our chances of growing up in an American school system  
my father stayed slamming trays on the cooking line for two years.  
My parents have lived more than half of their lives afraid.  
In 2009 they contributed to the 1.68 million undocumented  
immigrants living in Texas; such a crime to be *living*.

I think about the people who run Scenic every Sunday and wonder if  
they look down and think how fucked up it is to have division.  
A biracial boy in New Hampshire was almost lynched  
his mother posted pictures: the skin of his neck splitting  
open as if his own flesh fighting against what it should be.  
The children who did this were children being children.  
I too know two cultures: American and Mexican.  
To fear both cultures is to fear your identity.

My best friend's mom told me when she was young  
the teacher washed her mouth with soap  
because she spoke Spanish in the classroom.  
I imagine the micro bubbles forming on her tongue

cleansing it of such dangers.

*I hope you're happy, I hope you're happy too, I hope you're proud,  
how you would grovel in submission to feed your own ambition.*

I keep running looking down at the two countries  
and the border, separating us from them.

I woke this morning to a text message from a friend,  
*Did you make it home safe?*

When Trump became president, I walked  
through campus the next day, the American flag turned  
upside down lining the path to the library

*You can still be with The Wizard,*

*what you've worked and waited for you can have all you ever wanted—*

Stars and stripes in distress proclaiming this is our American  
now: our world shifting towards a different path. Later I

went to dinner at L&J Cafe, watched two army men tell my waiter to go back  
to Mexico if he couldn't speak English right. I realized  
this isn't *our* America, but *their* America.

*Something has changed within me,  
Something is not the same.*

My waiter's hand shakes as he gives me my change,  
looks me in the eyes, tells me to  
*be safe*. My mother tells me every time I go to Ciudad Juárez  
not to trust anyone. She's afraid one day I'll disappear in her country  
like the way she has disappeared in my country for 27 years. In 2005 the  
number of murdered women in Ciudad Juárez is estimated to be 370;  
the numbers increase each year. In Juárez, I walk Avenida 16 de septiembre  
with headphones on hoping no one sees my hips move to the beat  
and take me for weak; when I came out at 21 to my parents  
my mother said I don't dress like *them*,  
did that mean I was an alien hiding  
out inside my parent's home?

In 2016, 49 people died at a gay club, Pulse, in Orlando, FL.

A man opened fire.

Policemen had to tune out ringtones coming from dead bodies  
on the dance floor as they searched for survivors,  
in an audio clip the lullaby of ringtones is painful to hear.

My mother calls me in the morning, tells me she loves me.

*Too long I've been afraid of losing love*

Love is a state of being too:

a man cried for an hour in my car  
after I picked him up from a car wreck,  
I held him in my arms,

he said I deserve someone who will love me the way  
I love him. I wanted to kiss him tell him love isn't measured,  
I squeezed his hand instead afraid of the thought of anyone looking at us  
from the outside of my car.

Once at the Tacoma Airport waiting in the security line  
I saw a family of four, perhaps a husband, wife, and two daughters,  
the wife and one of the daughters were being escorted by officials.  
The husband and the other daughter couldn't touch them,  
tears followed both groups. As the woman turned back  
to look at the man, she said words in  
another language, I didn't understand the syllables, only  
the wailing echoing in my ear reminding me of him—

*Well if that's love*

*It comes at much too high a cost.*

I crossed the security line and vomited in the nearest restroom;  
wondered if the man and I in my car looked like the family clenching on to  
their loved ones in the form of sounds, no words.

These days I'm scared of driving, fearing I'll faint,  
cause a car wreck and die alone.

Alone is more home to me these days.

Last December I celebrated New Years in Puerto Rico.  
My aunt called me and told me if I kept this up I would  
end up alone. I laughed,  
told her *who am I waiting for?*

*I'm defying gravity and you can't pull me down!*

She confused alone for lonely. Words  
can be a state of being too. The weight the of the words  
*can you take me home*

being whispered to me

on my 25 birthday by the man I love,

knowing the night would come to this as his partner

and two dogs await him at home. He held my hand,

told me he's sorry over and over.

All I heard was the wind hitting  
my window as I sped, *I hope you're happy*

*I hope your happy now that your choosing this.*

I sing at the top of my lungs  
coming down Scenic

Drive, *I'm defying gravity!*

*And you won't bring me down,*

*bring me down, bring me—*

*down!*

I smile knowing I burned my tongue

this morning drinking tea, thanked God

for living another day,

oversaw my two countries coming down

in front of my eyes

from Scenic Drive.

## In the Silence of the Kitchen

I inherited my mouth from  
my mother. Only in the kitchen  
does her mouth move, Mira,  
Saúl, *ací guisas el pollo en salsa,*

*en fuego bajo. My mother taught me  
to cook with low heat. Maybe that's why  
silence surrounds me. I try to cook faster*

*sometimes, but it doesn't always work that way,  
Vaz a recocer el pollo y te va a quedar  
seco— Dry like my wordless mouth.*

My mother's voice has been boiling for  
too long. The first time she spoke up  
was when she sent me to Mexico  
for the summer to learn how to be a man.

In her dreams she speaks to her  
deceased father and asks for forgiveness.  
Awake, she asks for water and falls back to

silence. Then there is me, cooking at different levels  
of fire, until my mouth bursts for being silent too long.  
It filled my mother's kitchen with fireworks.

In the kitchen now my mother and I don't speak.  
Words linger now on the outside of  
our mouths. We only open our lips to taste.

## How My Lover Loves Me

He yells at me: *WHY*  
*DON'T YOU LOVE ME?*

His heavy hand yields  
as it come towards my face.

In slow motion my lover's finger fold into his palm  
and caves into my face.

He grabs a beer bottle  
from the table, I don't recognize him

when he gets like this: a savage.  
He keeps drinking, sets the bottle down.

I rise from the floor  
put my empty hand against his face,

cradle it. He submits to my touch  
for a brief moment, then he peels

my hand off his face, his wild eyes  
look into mine in need of an answer

today. He grabs his pills to take, looks  
at me regrettably,

and I kiss him. I let his Bud Light  
breath intoxicate me.

## At Night My Body Waits

It's winter outside, a tree  
branch scratches against  
my window, I can hear  
the sound of a train  
passing. My uncle slips  
into my bed wraps his hands  
around my boy body. His palms  
cup my moon face, he says  
*I'm not going to hurt you.*

I lie in bed and I think  
of my brother and cousins:  
did he slip into your bed too  
while you slept?  
Do you keep his  
little secret with you, too?

My voice  
underneath the blankets  
grew smaller  
as his hands fed  
off my body.  
At night I wake up  
to a train in the distance.

At dinner I see my uncle  
in the man sitting next to me  
his body asking for more space  
as his arm sits on my left leg  
adding more weight  
than what I already carry.  
Underneath the table  
his legs spread,  
half of my body now his.  
I become small again  
laugh awkwardly.

The man at dinner  
tells me to *smile more*  
And in those words  
I remember my uncle

and I want to yell  
rot in hell motherfucker  
But the man is not him  
So I hold it inside  
internalize another  
you.

After dinner I play  
back the encounter  
I ask myself if what  
was underneath my clothes  
tempted him like it tempted my uncle  
to touch me underneath the blankets.  
I know I didn't lead my uncle to  
touch me underneath blankets  
and maybe that's why I sleep  
naked at night waiting  
for my uncle to show up again  
in my bed telling me to quiet down as  
he puts the hand  
with which he'd high five me  
over my mouth.

Last winter  
when I broke a bottle, shards of sea glass  
flew against the Christmas lights,  
as I put a shard against my uncle's throat  
he laughed. My blood dripping  
from my palm  
he said *shh... put it down,*  
*your going to hurt yourself.*

When I first came out  
mamá asked if my  
uncle touched me  
I looked her  
in the eyes  
shook my head,  
swallowed my uncle  
whole again.

Tonight winter comes gently and  
in the distance the sound of trains.

I lie naked in bed. My own hands  
afraid to touch my body  
all the way.

When Dreams Come True

III.

My mother looks out the car window,  
traces the border bridge with her fingers  
*It's been twenty-seven years*  
*since I've been this close to the border,* points

to an older man with a sombrero, *Mira,*  
*he looks like my father.* She follows the older man  
with her glance until he disappears in the mix of people  
walking towards the Santa Fe Bridge. My mother's eyes shift

from side to side, looking for the older man,  
she presses her left hand on her chest,  
lets out a sigh. In the car my mother takes the shape of empty,  
she's been this way for twenty-seven years. In September

a letter from Immigration Services  
says her Green Card has been approved.  
Zigzagging up the road  
towards Scenic Drive she stares out

the window, she lifts up her hand,  
traces the border that separates  
El Paso from Juárez, the mountains almost hug each other,  
the border separates. At the top of Scenic Drive we stand  
in front of both countries, she looks at me and I at her.

The sun wraps her face, reveals her void, I can see the toll that  
twenty-seven years has taken on my mother.  
I put my arms around her,  
she squeezes

my body.  
*Pronto ire para allá,*

she says extending her arm out  
beyond the *cerros* of Juárez,  
pointing at México—  
*Pronto.*

For My Queer Ancestors

Somewhere across the border,  
beyond the desert,  
beyond *cerros*,

my family history  
is erased each day.  
But I only know them by name:

Federico?

Elvira?

Antonio?

Magdalena?

Maybe you, too, held  
hands with a boy like you  
or a girl like you?

Matheo?

Griselda?

Luis?

Zoraida?

To take a leap,  
means losing your family:

Gustavo?

Micaela?

Angel?

Esmeralda?

If I lose them I ask  
you to help me find myself,

Arnulfo?

Esperanza?

Luis Mario?

Marisol?

If you can read this  
I'm losing myself.

In Mexico, I ask my  
grandfather if anyone in  
our family is gay

he says, in *nuestra sangre*  
*there aren't any of them,*

And I say:

Tomas?

Francis?

Juan José?

Emelda?

But he walks away.

## That's Not My Name

In the fifth grade I wanted to tuck away my name  
underneath my teacher's tongue. I thaw  
on mornings, prepare myself, as she goes down  
roster, ashamed to tell her not to yawn my name

around. The classroom eyes aah, I hunch a little,  
they know she's sawing two syllables into  
one. Of those things she prided herself was  
making sure we, her students, weren't meant to feel

small. My ears feel her jaw snap as she opens her  
mouth all day calling my name, with each jab  
at it my back hauls the weight of two languages.  
Once I wore a name tag for a field trip, a

woman pressed the permanent marker against the  
sticker, her blue eyes tracing every letter, she gave  
me a nickname; people saw me through a different  
name that day: *sal*. I wanted to stand tall, translucent

I became. Many names that afternoon  
I heard from my teacher, from strangers, from  
my friends. Towards the end they didn't know what to  
call me, *the Spanish kid* made it's way mouth-to-

ear-to-mouth; a child can only take so much taunting.  
how to tell them my name has soul, I should have  
told them how my name in Spanish stays in your  
tongue, a little longer; how I am the unyielding color

*azul*. I know now not all tongues move, fold,  
press against teeth to reach for more. The tongues  
I know now I can bend; I can say to people now  
*that's not how you say*

*my name*. That day when I got home from the field trip  
my mother saw *Sal* written on the white sticker name  
tag, my mother ripped it off my shirt, asked me who  
reduced me to a child made of salt. I told her a woman

gave me a nickname in English. My mother frowned

asked me how long I've been walking around  
with a name in Spanish meaning salt. I didn't  
understand that day why my mother

got mad at me and not at the teacher.  
Didn't she know that a child can only do  
so much and that a child's voice isn't  
always heard? My mother

said I should be proud of my name  
and how soft and strong it is. That day  
on the field trip I remember walking  
around the museum feeling different

with a new name on my chest.  
My classmates and strangers who  
looked liked me in the museum stared  
at me and whispered as I walked

around. A kid at lunch time threw  
a pack of salt at me from his  
lunch bag. All the grains of salt  
falling into the grass disappearing.

In the school bus I sat alone in the back,  
put my mouth against the window  
and breathe against it, in the mist I wrote  
my name,

watched it  
vanish,  
again and  
again.

## His Last Wish

As the pitchfork hits the ground  
my grandfather brakes his back.

The vibrations from it echoing into  
his body forcing him to kneel down.

His voice bounces off the tomato plants and  
into the sky it travels. He stays kneeling for

five hours unable to move any muscle. His arms  
tighten as he grows weak. And as his vision begins to

fade he prays none of his children and children's  
children know the struggle of working in the fields.

## Calamine

He sighs as he presses his finger nails against his skin  
to find relief but even in comfort scars can form.  
Blisters erupt from the pigment of his skin  
turning into scabs. Liquid oozes, drips. I see them  
falling from him face as he presses it against the pillow.

He has a plague he cannot overlook.  
It spreads like the children's contagious virus;  
this one kills. I lay in bed next to him, I watch  
his chest rise again and again. Then I count his scabs  
of blood-orange blemishes to fall asleep.  
As I drift I hear my mother's voice *dale tiempo*.

I remember coming home from school covered in rashes  
my mother knew what it was as she yelled *La Viruela*.  
I told her kids said I looked like if leeches sucked my blood  
leaving marks all over my body or as if my sores were about to burst  
giving birth to a fleet of mosquitos.

At night I bathe him like my mother bathed me  
in a tub full of oats, I let lukewarm water ease his body  
to find salvation. Sitting in the tub I pour water on him,  
his rock head breaks the water and I watch  
oats slither down his body. Water makes him glow;  
if only baths could cure diseases. I can hear the doctor's voice:  
*time kills*.

After the bath he says he's tired  
from having all this air inside his body  
and it not being able to lift him. I tell him to stand,  
I grab a towel, scoop him, and carry him to our room.  
I twirl us and he laughs. I say Houston we have a problem,  
Helicopter Ivan is about to go down, requesting a safe landing,  
over; I keep spinning, his laughter consumes  
his body and mine. He blurts out permission to lay me down—

over. Just like the summer fading against the *cerros* in El Paso  
on a late September evening, I lather my body  
from the last mosquito bites I will feel this year  
until the next. I spread the lotion on my skin  
as it makes it blush, the smell of itching reminds me

of my mother sitting me on her bed telling me  
I am a night sky covered in burning red stars.

That's when I remember him  
sitting on our bed with a smile,  
my fingertips blooming with small  
dots of pink relief touching his skin.  
There he sits in my head  
slathered in ointment.

## Sometimes I Go Back

It happens often: I'm innocent again,  
running at my grandfather's ranch  
chasing chickens, and as I look up  
I can see the blue sky unfolding  
for miles. The smell of dirt surrounds me  
because that's all there is around me and I  
don't care that my white sneakers are  
dark now. I'm laughing at myself for  
chasing chickens; how easily I was amused  
back then. They chase me back and I run into  
my grandfather's house and close the door. Then  
there he is: my uncle. Everything becomes fuzzy and I  
don't know where I am or where I left that boy who  
runs after and laughs at chickens.

## The Desert Doesn't Quench My Thirst

His index finger undress  
my face, he's done this before:  
touched another man. Tonight he  
takes me home, puts on a show  
for me: How to Love a

Stranger in One Night. We are  
seekers of the same thing as we  
take turns pushing and pulling  
each other towards one another.

This act has a violent scene,  
*turn off the lights*, he says  
he wants his hand to read my  
body; to know what it feels like  
to hold you again. My body  
rises with his touch and in the  
dark he says *You love me,*  
*babe?* I want to tell the man  
I'm not him.

In my bed I interlock  
my hands with his instead,  
pull him close to my lips,  
kiss him the same way  
I did to you. The man  
doesn't know I seek you  
in him too.

## 13 Reasons Why My Mexican Father Fears Water

1.

His arms push against the current of the Rio Grande, his legs tread water, and father searches the surface for his brother. He listens to the silence of the waves and waits for the water to tell him what his next move should be. As his face breaks water a current takes him under too. Father holds his breath; his body lets go, he yells ten feet under water.

2.

Father works another night shift; fifth one this week. He reaches back to the floor wax machine, leans his chest on the handles, and flips on the switch. He watches the sponge rotates as water flows.

3.

His body lays flat on weekend mornings. Father's belly rises with each breath, one hand extends next to his face, the other hangs on the side of the bed; how peaceful he is when he sleeps as if water lulls him.

4.

Father chugs beer, throws it back like water. I ask him if he wants another and he nods. I hand him the beer can, he cracks it open, brings it to his lips, and downs the liquid into his body. He crushes the can with one hand and gasps for air.

5.

He takes us to the beach and watches our bodies break waves. My brother and I laugh but father observes us carefully. The waves come again and the ocean's hands drag my brother into its belly. Father watches from the shore, his mouth searches for words, sinks his feet deeper into the sand. He shouts: *Carlos!*

6.

Father has dreams of drowning: his body submerged in dark water, his hands reaching for dryness but all

they do is move water. At night I can hear his body fighting for air.

7.

He scratches his head, looks away from my eyes; I know he doesn't want to see my body fight against water when I ask him to go to my swim meet. I grab his hand, I tell him it's okay you don't have to come. He smiles and says it's not that, I'm tired today but I'll go to your next swim meet.

8.

At a drive-thru car wash water leaks in through the window. Father takes a napkin from the dashboard but water tears it apart; the wetness is too heavy. He looks around the car but nothing can prevent the water from coming in. He sighs and closes his eyes as the sponge roller presses on the windshield.

9.

A geyser of hot water shoots from the car radiator and father burns his hand. He curses into the air: *pinche agua, hija de su puta madre.*

10.

Water falls from the sky as he drives us through a storm and I hold on to the arm rest. Rain beats on the windshield and the whippers whoosh water out of the way faster. Father has smirks and lowers my window. I flinch at the touch of the cold wetness and he says *it's just water.*

11.

Every

March 31st my father takes white roses to the San Antonio River. He drops all fourteen of them; the age of his brother, Carlos, who drowned at the Rio Grande. He watches each flower bob up and down as the calm current takes them South. Their bodies don't drown.

12.

We watch my mother water the plants outside, the summer breeze carries the smell of wet dirt, and we inhale. The moist earth around us reminds him of his childhood: playing with his brother as their mother watered their plants. His day dream are disrupted as mother wets him with the water hose and his eyes widen, his breathing locks, but he laughs it off.

13.

After his heart attack the doctor sends him to do water therapy. Father refuses: *water doesn't heal everything*. I convince him to go by joining him. In the pool his body struggles to move. I tell him to walk towards me; he says he can't. I swim to him, I tell him if he trusts me, he nods his head, and I lean his body slowly onto the water. I tell him I'm not letting go and his feet rise up as he lets go of his body in the water.

## Blood Melts Too

I wake up in the morning to find snow  
outside my window it falls. Crystalized confetti  
descends into the ground and across the  
border snow falls too. In Juárez there's talk  
about the killings happening again but today there's magic  
happening in both countries: snow. But tonight  
the only sign of snow will be tainted water on the floors of Juárez.

## Immune

They keep calling me names at school: faggot,  
she,  
gay,  
maricon,  
butterfly,  
fruit,  
fairy,  
pansy,  
queen,  
fag,  
queer,  
cock sucker,  
nacy boy,  
sperm gurgler.

But how do I tell *them* when you own what you are  
words can't hurt you.

## When Dreams Come True

### IV.

It's December, my brother and I stand behind my mother just outside the cemetery gate. The sun sits on the low east still and the only sound near us is wind. I can feel with every step we take towards the gate the heartbeat of my mother, she's here in her hometown,

in her country. I reach for the door's handle to but she says she can do it, she pushes, we walk in. She reads tombstones,

searching for what she lost, and familiar names remind her she's back, she stops at each one,

leaving traces of her weight. From a distance the *cerros* watch her separate her hair from the wind, she continues looking, she reads from tombstones

their names. All that remains in Mexico for her are memories.

Two graves down she finds him, presses her warm palms

against the blue plaque with the name Genaro Ibarra Parra. She kneels against him, murmurs:  
*aqui estoy, aqui estoy papá.*

My mother can finally grieve, make amends, be at peace

and I want to tell her, I'm sorry, I've been carrying the weight

of your dreams. I'm sorry every time you've looked at me

I reminded you of unreachable spaces. I'm sorry the weight of our dreams has suffocated us.

## Ivan's Pantoum

The bible says: *if a man lies with another man it's an abomination and they shall be put to death* so at night I wait for death lying next to a man's body as he sinks his fingers into my skin; he makes me levitate. My toes curl and my torso tightens as he caresses my body with his lips. My name evaporates like the drops of sweat running down our bodies.

At night he waits for death. Lying next to my man's body I sink my fingers into his skin; he shoves my hand off his body. *Not tonight*. He presses his fingers on his skin, scratches my name off. It evaporates like the drops of sweat running down his body. He's fighting my touch in fear I become infected like him. He prays while I make love to him.

He shoves my hands into his body. Tonight he presses his fingers into my skin, scratches his name into my back. I make his body rise with each thrust; he feels alive in my arms yet he still fights my touch. He fears I may become infected like him. I whisper to him: *Ivan, babe, not tonight; please, don't fight my touch tonight*.

My name's on his back but it can't make his body rise anymore. He thrust out of my arms at night. He says he's tired of being alive. He says he shouldn't have made love to a man. I whisper to him: *Ivan, babe, tonight please don't fight my touch*. He says: *in the bible I read if a man lies with another man they shall be put to death*. To death.

Via Bus #41

I remember my mom telling me if I  
ever get lost to get on VIA Bus #41 South  
to get home.

Tonight I get on the bus and I  
don't ask *where does it stop?* I  
keep sitting in the back waiting to

get home, but  
where is home?

## My Mother Waits for Me

At the Juárez airport I wait to board my flight back to my mother's land. I remember abuela calling five years ago: *Don't come to the rancho. Mexico is in flames right now.* They call my flight to board and as I make my way into the plane my legs tense up. *Don't come to the rancho. Mexico is in flames right now.* My mother wakes to find her Spanish failing her back home and I sit now in the plane waiting to get lost in the Mexican skies until I reach her. *Don't come to the rancho. Mexico is in flames right now.* The flight attendance tells me to buckle up and offers me water. I look around the craft and people know I'm not from their country, I don't sound or dress like them and I want to tell them we have the same skin color but that doesn't matter here where I am seen as a gringo. *Don't come to the rancho. Mexico is in flames right now.* My mother is back home and out of place and I'm lost in December skies. The woman next to me touches my shoulder, raises her eyebrow, stretches her neck to see what I'm seeing out the window. I tell her isn't it beautiful seeing the border fade away leaving only land for us to see? She nods her head, turns away, and opens her newspaper. The headline reads: México otra vez en llamas.

## The Juan in Me

The white director motions me  
to take food from the table, *this is for all of you.*  
I bow my head and her white self-grins I and I smile  
back at her. She stands on the stage and says again  
*take some more food.* I smile and grab another piece  
of pineapple. She keeps grinning *I'm happy to have people like you*  
*working here.* People like me? *I wish more people were*  
*like you: a hard worker.* She reaches down her hand and I  
reach up, we shake hands. *Glad to have you here,*  
*Juan.* Another Mexican, me, another me. And before I  
can lash out at her that's not my name, I breath and  
think of all the Juans' who have stood in my place  
looking into her sapphire eyes and if they saw  
the white devil in her place; I gather all the Juans'  
in me and tell her gently Ma'am that's not my name.  
She gargles her laughter, *Ohh how silly of me.* I leave  
her laughing as she tells another white woman next to her  
about my name and she points at me they laugh and I smile at her.

## Your Danger Is My Danger

Tonight my body gets goosebumps as  
the news anchor announces  
the killings. They are happening again.  
48 dead in Juárez this month.

I drive with my friend, my car disappearing  
with other cars and we wait  
in line to cross into Juárez. I tap my finger  
on the steering wheel and ask her:  
are you ever afraid  
to come to Juárez, alone?

She shifts her body towards me,  
*danger is everywhere. Juárez*  
*is my home.* Driving down  
Avenida 16 de Septiembre we pass empty  
buildings, forgotten homes, untamed  
yards; her eyes reading the scenes

of the past when she couldn't come home.  
*They killed my friend, stabbed her death left*  
*her body for her children to find.*  
At a red light I tap my fingers  
again. The killings are happening, I saw  
in the news

last night. She laughs,  
*si nos toca nos toca.*  
I laugh with her.

## How I Get High

I watch him dig the needle in my skin,  
*Does it hurt?*  
I grimace and shake my head.

He grabs my arm and I feel the needle  
pricks my skin. My arm tightens and  
he tells me to relax.

*I'm going to start slow* and I take a deep  
breath and let it out as I feel the needle again  
on my skin. I can feel the needle

piercing the surface. In and out the needle  
moves and I can feel a shock going into  
my nerves, echoing up to my throat.

He sees myself clench my fist, *relax*,  
I nod my head. The needle keeps buzzing  
and I undo my fist,

drop my hand. I let the needle  
take me and the jabs minimize,  
I can take the pain,

of course I can, and I feel nothing  
for once.

## Hurricane Hums

Woke this morning to a hummingbird dead  
outside my front door. Its body spread as if  
still in motion. Its kaleidoscope feathers

perfectly intact. I burry him in the backyard  
wondering what it died of: flying too close to  
the sun? Do birds too test their flight?

In the news Hurricane Harvey hits Texas and  
at dawn another hummingbird dead at  
my door step. Its chest perked up as if it  
wasn't going down without a fight.

I lay my body in the grass after I burry it next  
to the other and as I look at the sun I imagine  
I'm flying with them. We are flying back home  
but we can't go back because water has drowned  
our homes. Instead we stay in the dessert and  
let our bodies fall.

## Santa Fe Bridge

I wait in line at the Santa Fe Bridge to cross back from Juárez. A boy taps on my car window, asks for some change. I scoop a couple of *pesos* from my pocket, crack my window open

hand him the coins. He bows his head, keeps on walking car to car. I keep his eyes present in my head; he's longing to move between spaces of borders not just a couple of coins.

A woman pats my window, presses a basket of candies against it, her body leaning on my car asking me to take them. I nod my head, motion with my hand no. Her eyes, too, yearning for

people like me who can cross between borders to save her a little from her life. The line of cars moves and I can see the star on the mountains in El Paso and downtown, just an arm reach away.

A man splashes soapy water on my windshield, wipes it away with a squeegee before I can wave my finger at him and tell him no he's done.

I give him an American dollar; his eyes smile at me. Inside the car I pull my visor down, pretend to look at myself. In the mirror my eyes too  
craving something more:

how can one keep extending their hands for something they will never reach?

For America I Sing “Dancing On My Own”

My 26-year-old body moves freely with the music  
*I'm just going to dance all night*  
*I'm all messed up I'm so outline* but I don't care

because here I'm me,  
I can spin, laugh, and away side to side and others join me  
and clap for me.

And here I believe in magic: it's real.  
*Stilettoes and broken bottles I'm spinning around in circles*  
and I remember their faces all 51 of

them passing by me. I close my eyes feel all  
of our pain; all of our  
“sinful behavior.”

For a second I can hear their sequences popping,  
coming undone and see glitter on the floor, bodies  
crashing into each other in a middle of

the dance floor they fall. I listen  
to the beat of the song and keep my eyes closed  
tighter. Robyn's song is still playing in the background:

*So far away, but still so near*  
*The lights go on, the music dies*  
*But you don't see me standing here*  
*I just came to say goodbye*

And I open my eyes, see the magic  
all around me. I replay their vigil  
in my mind and what if

that was me that night?  
*I'm right over here, why can't you see me, ohh*  
*I'm giving it my all, but why can't America see*  
*me yet? Why can't my family see me yet?*  
*I keep dancing on my own (I keep dancing on my own)*

Do bodies need to keep falling?

## Look It Up

Everyone around me keeps telling me to be safe as if my body can curl up and launch itself at the sight of danger. *Be safe. Be safe. Be safe. Be safe.* But in this world the only place where safe exists is in the dictionary  
page 146:  
*safe.*

## He Know My Body Aches

In bed, as he rests his hand on my chest,  
he says *how can you have endured so  
much pain in here*. I tell him my body likes to  
hold on to things: my undocumented parents, my  
uncle slipping into my bed, the way the world is so  
fucked up these days and I can't do anything about it.  
He pulls my body towards his, *you can't control everything*.  
I shrug my shoulders. The body remembers everything, I  
say as he pulls me in closer, and I give him my back. *A  
person can't live with all this sadness inside them*.  
I hold my breath. Sigh. He says, *you poor boy* and places his  
hands around me, my breathing tightens, *you shouldn't be  
holding all that inside you*; I dig my face into the pillow, *you can  
let go now*. I feel him squeeze my torso. My body bends with  
his words and tonight I let it all go.

## If I Get Lost in Juárez

Tell my mother not to come  
looking for my body. Tell her to  
wait out my return, maybe I took a  
wrong turn down Las Torres. Or

maybe my decapitated body waits  
in the desert to be found like *theirs*  
spread out in plain sight for even  
coyotes to sink their teeth into ribs.

Tell my mother not to come to Juárez  
looking for my body. I've left no  
footprints here to follow, no traces of  
my shedding skin; only my name lingers  
in her tongue; the only proof I was here.

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## **Glossary**

Poem “SOS” More Code Translation: My body collapses / against my queerness. Laying on the floor / I grind my teeth and count the tiles / of the floor like my uncertainty.

## Vita

Saul Hernandez grew up as an at-risk student of color, gay, and with undocumented parents, with this he's always been conscious of the internal and external border that defines one. His work has been featured in *Southwestern American Literature*, *Adelaid Literary Magazine*, *The Rio Grande Review*, [labloga.blogspot.com](http://labloga.blogspot.com), [xicanation.com](http://xicanation.com), and in The Brillantina Project. He's the Director for Barrio Writers at Borderlands in which, alongside other volunteers, teach a one week free writing workshop for the youth, so that at the end they may submit their work and get published in a yearly anthology through Stephen F. Austin State University Press. His M.F.A. is from The University of Texas at El Paso and his English B.A. is from Texas State University.

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