Before the Body

by

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ABSTRACT

Set in South Texas, the poems of “Before the Body” address the border, not of place, but in between people. Following a narrative arc from a grandfather who spoke another language—silence—to a young boy who drowns in silence, these poems are expressions of the speaker’s search for intimacy in language: what words intend themselves to be, what language means to be.

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to honoring the memory of Rosa Espinoza, Refugio Espinoza, Clementina Smith Garza, Ruby Delgado, and Jose Flores, Jr; and for the Espinozas and Garzas that are not memory, but present—gracias for your voices and your support. Thank you to my professors and friends who have spken to me (at length) about the form and content behind these poems: Casie Moreland, Sara Sams, Michele Poulos, Bryan Asdel, Lauren Albin, Lakshami Mahajan, Chandra Narcia, Monica Teresa Ortiz, and Laurie Ann Guerrero. Para mis profesores, nunca pudria hacer esto sin ustedes: Alberto Ríos, Sally Ball, Cynthia Hogue, Carmen Gimenez Smith, and Deborah Paredez. To Yazmin, si tuviera cuatro vidas, cuatro vidas serian para ti—estas poemas son una vida. And finally, muchísimas gracias to my parents, thank you for believing in me throughout the years—it is your strength that has given me everything.

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Notre Dame Review: "Rosa Espinoza—Abram, Texas."

Pilgrimage Magazine: "He Would Never Have Told Me"

*Raspa Magazine. "*A Cutting*"*

Sinister Wisdom: "Chemical Reactions on the Border"

Souvenir: "[luminous]"

The Acentos Review: "Ruinas," "The Llorona Isn't Postmodern."

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Page

Second Obituary for Refugio and Rosa Espinoza

Rosa and Refugio Espinoza's names did not appear in the Valley & Life section of the newspaper. No mention is made of San Juanita Espinoza, daughter that preceded them in death in 1963, or the number of daughters, sons, and grandchildren that survive them. Their hometown, Bledos, where the church still has a dirt floor is not cited. Their occupations—housewife, farmworker—are not listed. The date of the rosary is unpublished. The memorial service, burial at Abram Cemetery, appears without an address.

He Would Never Have Told Me

My abuelito was a Bracero. He picked cabbages.
I didn't know this when he died of prostate cancer.

It wasn't until after his burial
that my father told me.

Not that it made any difference,
knowing now versus knowing then—

I never had a conversation with the man.
The South Texas sun yearly leathered his skin

while crop dusters flew low overhead.
He would never have told me

what it was like for him, where he worked,
how little he made. Only the white-button shirts

left in his closet keep moths
from inhabiting his empty room.

Instinct

I

While hunting, my dad brought down
two doves with one shot. Wings open,
they fell as if they were still living.
I watched both birds' trajectories
waiting until the field was clear of bullets
to collect their remains.

II

Walking through the brown grass,
a dove's smallness is hard to find,
even on a sight line. Disturbing the stillness,
one chest rose up and down.
This whitewing did not die
full of birdshot; it never hung
limp from my father's hand like its sibling.
Instead it lay there: shocked and unmoving.
I carried the living and the dead
across the field in my neon-green
vest pockets, petting them both softly.
I named the living one.

III

As we sit across each other's sandwiches at Jason's Deli,
my mother tells me that she was pregnant after me.
That the doctor said she would have to be bed ridden
throughout the entire pregnancy
in order to carry it to full term.
She reminds me that my father said no,
that he could not care for both
my mother and I.

IV

Growing up only, I never admitted to wanting
a brother or a sister. Strangers asked constantly
if I was lonely, as if there was another way to feel.
I never imagined singing a sister to sleep
to the tune of Little Mermaid's "Part of Your World,"
teaching a little brother constellations
I made up the names to on South Texas skyline.

V

Rupert, I decided, was the name
of the living dove. He spent the day
in my vest pocket, only superficially wounded
by some miracle of shell shot.
I showed him off to my cousins,
but he never left my pocket,
only peek-ins were allowed.
My dad did not find out until later
that I had saved Rupert,
marked him as mine.
Taking me aside, he said,
“you never half kill something.”

On the Day the Boy Drowned

the sky purpled like his lips,
the handprints on his chest—

the same color as the small four-petaled flower
in my great-grandmother's yard
that I don't know the name of anymore
even after so many times she told me
to water them. Every day I lugged the

manguera to the flower bed, stood and watched
the water trickle to the ground, like the foam
that spilled from his mouth
after compressions. As the ambulance arrived,

I stood staring at the flowers
outside Mamá Clemen's house.
While she passed away, I held her hand,
her mouth opening, opening

like the oversaturated mud
underneath her windowsill.
When you die at home, someone still
has to declare you dead.

I called the mortuary first, then the judge,
then the non-emergency line. I told EMS
no gurney was needed,
she was already past purple.

From the pool I watched them
load him into the ambulance,
his body an early summer sunset.

In the Adult Day Care

Barbie's decorated with Elmer's glue and glitter
sit next to paints and paper plates at the craft table.

Cell pones ring without being heard;
when return calls are made, everyone else overhears.

El Tambor, La Chalupa, La Bandera.
Buena.

Even with the loud speaker announcing the cards,
a *Buena* has to be checked to ensure

there's been no confusing *El Pájaro* for *El Perico*.
In another room, talking to the tv: súbale porque no vello.

El Catrín, La Dama, La Garza.
Buena.

Occasional trips to the pulga or to the baile,
stories to anyone who'll listen about new novias,

STD rumors surrounding the viejitos que bailan muy bien.
Blood pressure checks at the nurse's station,

La Muerte, El Corazón, El Borracho.
Buena.

calls to the pharmacy to refill medications
expansive knowledge on what's covered on Medicaid plans.

Names embroidered on the cushioned seats for the metal folding chairs,
every cold surface covered with a crocheted placemat.

El Cotorro, El Violoncelo, Las Jaras.
Buena.

Their day ends at 2pm, after lunch and one final game of lotería, unlike Kindergarten,
there's no line of cars waiting to pick them up at the end of the day.

Our abuelitos toddlers again,
una peseta para jugar.

At 2AM on the Corner of Burleson and Oltorf

They wait on the broken sidewalk,
their mariachi suit buttons
reflecting the lights of passing cars.

The bigger one carries a vihuela
(fat guy with a little guitar);
the smaller one insistently presses the walk button
with the hand not holding his trumpet;
the one checking his phone hunches
against the guitarrón strapped across his back.
The trio walks when the crosswalk says to—
each in pace with the other
(the Mexican Beatles on Abbey Road).

This is what makes me want to hire them:
their strides keeping time for
a serenata yet to be sung,
the moon humming on their lips as they
walk towards Whataburger.

I see them from my table as they walk in.
Even mariachis have to eat, I think,
until they start playing "No Volveré"—of course
the fat one sings.

Their white suits complement
the orange and white chicken-strips-box,
the cups that say, "When I am empty
please dispose of me properly."

After the bars close, is it too much to ask
to sit alone and eat without thinking about
the quinceañera I never had?

Cultura

On the corner of Zapata Hwy
& Washington St, the Virgen
picked up her uniform. Dry cleaners
gave Border Patrol deities discounts.
At home, she put on her socks—
one American flag, one Mexican,
her work chones—rose red,
& kissed her angelitos goodbye.

Today would be a good day at work—
no zarape smugglers or papel picado dealers,
just tourists bringing across tequila, sugar skulls, aguacate.

Jesús, a US citizen, would not die
on the bus in his son's arms—
returning to the states after visiting México
one final time. His corpse would not be carried
off the bus as passengers pretended he was asleep
while the Virgen checked his passport at the checkpoint.

Wireless Panteón

Let's make the panteón wireless
put internet in the sky
so the dead can iChat
the living with properly
connected computing devices.

Upon interment, the deceased
is guaranteed an IP address
attached directly to the soul
after it ascends (or descends)
it can perpetuate its own connection.

But what happens to souls
that expired before
the internet revolution? Will
they be able to watch their
relatives on YouTube?

Will there always be guaranteed
internet access? What if no
one's around to reset the router?
What if there is a firewall
on your connection?

At a critical moment, when
I am telling you how
the telenovela ended
my MacBook battery dies.
Can there be outlets
at the panteón? And a readily
available IT guy?

You Tell Me To Call You By Your Name

I can't call you by the name
your parents named you—
that word was my grandmother's.

The closest I can get to that name
is arroz: arroz that Buelita measured in handfuls
instead of cups, preferring to feel the weight.

Arroz that she made for *mi muñeca*
each time I was coming over.
That one time it was cold in the valley,
I ate so much I threw up in my mittened hands.

I wanted to keep the arroz inside me,
put it back where it came from,
not expel it, betraying Buelita.

How could arroz make me do
what the chemo made Buelita do?
How can I call you by her name?
Invoking spirit each time:
Rosa, arroz, her.

for Rosie

Sin Olvidarte, Buelita

3/4/1993
At misa today a wrinkled woman wore a brown shawl—a Franciscana like in the picture after the mastectomy where you are not smiling. Without any hair, you are wallet sized: economical enough to give to each family member. I did not have a wallet to put you in, so I kept you in my lunch box.

3/4/1995
At misa today, the monjitas sat in the first two rows, led the responses that only the devout remember without assistance. Too sick to go to the Basilica anymore—you browned-out, dressed always the same so as to live simply: conducted masses in your room, every day, at noon. You became faith dressed in brown.

12/4/2013
At misa today as I said the *Padre nuestro, que estás en el cielo. Santificado sea tu nombre,* common sense told me it's easier to have all your outfits already planned, especially when you don't have breasts to worry about.

11/13/2014
At misa, today was the feast in honor of Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, Virgin, Patron Saint of Immigrants. The townspeople say a flock of white doves arrived the morning the virgin was born; she adopted a nun's habit before she took her vows. (I will be more like you, I will pray like you, I will wear what you wore). Now, she is buried under a high school in New York. You had no such doves, only a lechuza that waited around patiently to take you across the border.

Si Una Vez

¿Que haces mi'jita?
I love you, Buelita.
No me duele, mi'jita.
I love you, Buelita.

I brushed the hair of your wig once,
felt its coarseness—black synthetic edges.
I invent the wig as something different each time I remember it,
change the color or the cut.
I do the same to your face,
blurring the edges: round out your cheeks,
your lips changing their contour,
me knowing they won't say mi'jita again.

Si una vez dije que te amaba
I wish I could remember it.
I have inserted I love you into
every conversation we ever had.

Te *dije que te amaba,*
words falling from my mouth,
cascade like hair falling loose.

Ámame, Quiéreme

Abrázame, como nunca me has abrazado—
Y bésame, como nunca me has besado—
Porque tu eres la luz, la luz que ilumina mi vida.

Buelita Rosa, in another age, you would've been a mystic—
Sor Rosa de Bledos
who preached Catholic doctrine
to the native peoples—looking
out across the landscape, bluebonnets
and chachalaca birds—
you'd say you'd bilocated
after the ecstatic fits
from your bed.

Committed to the insane asylum,
that was when you got better—
no more outbursts, days of crying
without stopping: tears wetting
the masa as you made tortillas,
food always too salty. No one had complained.
On medication, manic depressive is controllable.

When you went to the hospital again,
no one knew why. You said it was for a check up;
after the biopsy, your breaths hummed
as you waited for us to pick you up
in the gray-cool lobby.

When the results came back
no one was prepared for the humming
to stop. I wanted to dance cumbias
with you in the kitchen, tell you everything
I knew so you wouldn't be afraid
the way you were before when no one
understood your voice.

The voices, the voices
telling you to love,
telling you to want,
telling you to hold,
(to light their life.)

Fotos y Recuerdos

No tengo fotos de ti,
the only picture I have
is you, brown vestments
of a Franciscan, holding
your güerito grandchild—
a prize with blue eyes,
ojos claros like none
of your children.

Tantas lagrimas que estoy
derramando, your one güerito
didn't cry at the funeral, hadn't seen you
in so long, he didn't recognize
your emaciated face as his grandmother's.

Que me queda de
tu amor? Solo fotos y recuerdos.
I don't remember your hands, I don't remember
what your hugs smelled like, I don't
remember which bedroom was yours.

Tengo un recuerdo de ti—
you standing in the lobby after the Sunday matinee
of the Nutcracker. I didn't change out of my makeup
after having spun like a string-pulled-top
as I performed the Russian dance. So proud,
you handed me roses, said *tan bonita, mi'jita*.

Todo lo que me queda de
tu amor, your Sunday best: a plain dress,
small heels, and black hose—
a bouquet of roses in your arms.

Rosa, La Flor

On Saturday, your first grandson
got married; had a Catholic ceremony.
All of your children, and grandchildren
were there, dressed in Mexican finery:
worn-in boots or outdated suits.

You were honored in the program,
but I haven't been to visit
your grave in years. Your plot
isn't in the cemetery
next to the McAllen airport,
so I can't wave goodbye
every time I leave.

Rosa, tu *Flor,*
con tanto amor,
your Rosita danced
with her son: he lifted his chin
to accommodate her ear
on his chest as she did
when he was a baby,
listening to his heartbeat.

Pero, ay, ay, ay, como me duele.
Ay, ay, ay, como me duele.

Keeping your head down
as tears streamed down
your folded arms onto the table,
you never danced the mother-son
dance with my father. Rosa Espinoza was not
announced as mother of the groom.
Instead, you were escorted out, back home
as you wept for your loss.

My father was your nino,
so named, being the second oldest,
by his brother who couldn't say niño.

Si vieras cómo duele perder tu amor
Con tu adiós, te llevas mi corazón.
No sé si pueda volver a amar
Porque te dí todo el amor que pude dar.

Nino carried you out of the hospital,
his arms a wheel chair, as you laid
your head on his chest, listening; lifted you
into his smooth-riding SUV

so you wouldn't be jostled along
the caliche road as he drove you back home
after the mastectomy.

Pero, ay, ay, ay, como me duele,
ay, ay, ay, como me duele.

A day later when we came to visit you,
you had already made tortillas and rice
for your husband and three youngest
children, never spoke once about your pain.
Only asked, "quieres mas?" *con tanto amor*.

Yo Te Sigo Queriendo

El tiempo pasa y tu no estas:
"Lore Renee" when he was happy to see me,
Buelito with khaki pants & no shirt.
I never knew what the tattoo on his arm was—
it wasn't Buelita's name. We never shared

a sentence. I wish I knew how to
cross the river, wrinkles around your eyes,
make photographs share secrets.
Every time my dad says my full name—
Buelito, I only hear your echo.

Yo te sigo queriendo, amando,
añorando tu amor.
Buelita bought her first air conditioner
so that her only grandchild could come
visit her without crying in the heat:
this was 1985.

Yo te sigo soñando, llorando.
Esperando the day I finally understand rice
is never just one grain, alone.

Solo quiero tenerte aquí
so that I hear our histories, know
why you cried at night. Know
what my dad's real birthday is. Know,
how. *Nadie podrá reemplazarte*

aquí en mis brazos.
My cousins hit piñatas without
Buelita in the kitchen, they've never
tasted your sweat, your rice.

The youngest never met either of you,
only know you through their middle names:
Cristina Rosa. Isabella Rosa. Angelina Rose.

Yo te sigo queriendo, amando
añorando tu amor: Buelito and Buelita,
I have forgotten your faces.

Que en Paz Descansen

In the U.S. I can go to school, watch how quickly
money fades as children grow; but I don't know this
as Buelito and Buelita knew it.

No matter how many Spanish classes I take,
I won't have a conversation in their language.

Buelito was wordless like the cabbages he picked
left to wilt in the sun. I try to recover him—

go outside in the fields, sit on ground he broke
look at grapefruit trees he planted.
His hands spent more time holding the land
than they did holding me.

Living so close to the groves, pesticides covered
clothes hanging on the line.
Buelita would never have told me
if she knew being Braceros would kill them both.

I only know her in that kitchen.
I don't know what it was like for them:
where he worked before the groves,
what she looked like when she was young.
How they met.

How did you feed nine children
with the little money he made?
How did you afford a headstone for an infant?
How did you buy clothes for eight children?

I take my father with me
to sit in the orange groves
but the blossoms
do not whisper history
to him either.

I don't know if I wish he could share their words with me.
I speak to my father in a language he
understands: silence. We sit quietly listening
to Selena songs as he drives out to the panteón
so I don't lose them. So, I don't lose him—

I watch my father grab the shovel from the pickup bed
loosen the dirt atop your graves,
pull weeds, water the live oak tree
next to your headstones, take care
of the plots that keep us.

Buelito's Koozie

Buelito is on a koozie,
on the tailgate of a pickup,
his outline is even soldered
onto the automatic-open gate
surrounding my uncle's house.

Nestled in between orange groves,
I sit under the corrugated metal roof
of the truck garage. Trucks and tractors
replaced with fold out tables and chairs—
my Tio Mike brags about where Buelito is now.

I did not expect to look into my grandfather's eyes
magnetized onto the fancy metal cooler
each time I reach to open the hielera for a beer.

Buelito stands there with the quarter horse
Palooka, whose hair he brushed every day.

My Tio asks, "Do you know who that is? That's your grandfather."
Too drunk to come up with an appropriate response,
I can only think that the horse and the man are not drawn to scale—
Buelito was tall enough to grab me under my arms,
lift me straight into a saddle without hesitation.
This horse is elephant sized, the man holding the reigns
almost resting under the horse's chin—
the tallest Buelito got was when he was day drunk
at the bar and still managed to make it home
without a police escort.

I grab a bottle, place the Miller Lite into my koozie,
rotate the images to see Buelito leaning on a hoe.
This is when I am most like him—sitting, drinking,
looking at my life surrounded by oranges.

This image, meant to be significant of the land he tended,
the countless railroad cars filled with the oranges he picked—
none of the family members realizes the joke of his hands on a hoe,
the horse he didn't own—only took care of, or these images on a koozie
meant for bottles when he could only ever afford cans.

How to manage a hangover in the Rio Grande Valley (a beginner's guide):

1. Sunglasses: put them on.
2. Mrs. G's – their number is (956) 668-TACO (8226).
   Order breakfast tacos, pick up, eat. Go for the barbacoa tacos;
   if vegetarian, the potato and egg. Ask for salsa.
3. If you live in Edinburg, move to McAllen.
   Fucking someone the night before so you don't have to bear
   the 20-minute drive home means a less classy hangover the next day.
4. Pelo del perro: go outside to pick a grapefruit off the tree
   in your backyard, juice it into a glass. Add whatever tequila
   you mistakenly ended your night with, top it off with Topo Chico, drink.
5. Do not recycle away that glass bottle of Topo Chico quite yet,
   you'll need those agua mineral bubbles after you've finished the Big Gulp
   (refer to Step 7).
6. For lunch, try the menudo, if you don't like pancitas floating around
   in your soup, go for the pozole. The Mexican-grandmother-Jesus-magic
   in the hominy will make you will feel better. Keep your sunglasses on
   while eating.
7. Go to any Stripes, buy a Big Gulp Lemon-Lime Gatorade.
   Big Gulps are bigger & cheaper than the 32 oz Gatorades
   (the plastic cups are even refillable for next time).
8. Go for a swim in a nearby pool (*not a canal*). It will always
   be warm enough for a swim & there will always be a pool nearby.
9. Turn on your computer, find an episode of Teen Mom. Know that
   however bad you feel, at least a toddler & a camera crew
   are not following you around as you sweat off the alcohol
   into the humidity of the Valley air, as you think that breathing
   will get you drunk again.
10. On weekends, Mexicans bar-b-que in the afternoon.
    Find someone whose Tio is having a cookout, show up,
    if you're lucky there will be fajitas, mesquite grilled chicken, homemade rice,
    H-E-B potato salad, & a hielera full of Bud Light.
    You'll be feeling good enough by now to crack a beer with a Tio,
    talk about the Cowboys or the Spurs, & convince a primito
    to hustle you some candy from the piñata. And so begins your pregame.
11. Repeat.

Our Fathers

Waking up drunk on your couch,
Princess came to whine that I was in her spot.

Your father walked out of his bedroom unaware of my presence.
White men, I found, didn't wear shirts, slept bare chested,

were not ashamed to bear the whiteness of their skin
or their underwear. My father had always worn a matching set of pajamas—

complete with buttons in front; even asleep his body must be covered
underneath sheets as if his own darkness would envelop him.

for Eric

Climate Change
after Raina Leon

When we lose our children, we lose hope of laughter at dandelions.
No longer are we left to predict a famine, thinking that will be how we lose them:
watching tiny bodies waste away in our minds eye, reminded of the commercials

of the children in Africa that we could sponsor for just a dollar a month.
Or predict that they will outlive us, hope that our recycling of corn cans,
plastic bags means an extra day they have this earth.

One day we will find them taken by the winds, the water,
unable to stand up to the gale force of nature, our thoughts betrayed us
into imagining a disastrous future instead of a tragic present.

Three Remembrances of Joel Flores, Jr.
after Rafael Alberti

PROLOGUE

It was all before the body,
before he had a name, birthday,
before rain and words, before
a declared time of death.

FIRST REMEMBRANCE

His mother in the shower
dredging out two lakes in her eyes,
shiny drops pellet into her skin.

SECOND REMEMBRANCE

Long, long before the body
700,000 gallons of water in a swimming pool—
16 times the number of milk-gallons consumed in a lifetime—
most of it found in his lungs at the autopsy.
Before wings and fins, nothing—
only thoughts and a body:
his mother seeing him in that void,
invented the first word.

THIRD REMEMBRANCE

Before, before she could ask
the location of his body.
He had imagined being a man who is only
a body, using arms as stays:
able to hold your looks of sorrow
not throw them back at you.
Before he was two unmoving arms, drowned.

The Mute Woman at the Adult Day Care

When I visit she waves frantically
in my direction, calling me over.
Every interaction the same:
she always wears matching outfits,
her clothes make statements—
the hem on her sleeves a little higher
than usual, giving her space for gestures
cobbled together in place of words.

She motions to me about her children,
cradling arms back and forth, holding up three fingers
caressing imaginary long hair, daughters.
Her few-toothed smile could not be wider
as she points to my belly, asking if I have children.

Each time I struggle to answer. Even though she can hear,
I motion back, no, I do not have children.
Think that there are no words for such absence.

Historia de un Amor

In my right eye to the side of my iris,
lives a dot, a circle of would be dirt
left to sit and rust across the white suburbs
of my cornea—

as if the field work my abuelito did
will forever mar my sight
unable to simply see
without carrying him in my periphery.

And on my lip a scar,
barely visible, from a lover
who bit down too hard,
wanted to know what tomorrow
looked like—thinking that I held
the future in that brown dot.
Wanted to know all the ways
to taste me, so that I would not
lie to her again.

Not having sight beyond sight
hasn't made me any less of a fortune teller—
my hands, open, can touch *all* of my heart
through to the blemish on my eye,
where I hold our history:
together and alone.

Eydie Gorme and How to Put Yourself Back Together

1. Te Digo Adiós

In my dreams I do not speak Spanish. Even when I am visited by Grandma Clemen.

At her funeral, I sat in the chairs at the cemetery. She would have wanted her favorites seated. I thought she would've outlived me—reckless and young, I didn't know that life ended. At 18 I left home for college, 80 years older than me, she kissed me, blessed me, and sent me off. I wasn't the first she had given her despedidas to, and the others had all returned. It was then I learned to feel cold without her embrace.

Growing up I thought that all Spanish speakers were Mexican. Even after learning about other countries, I still hold the same assumption.

2. Te Quiero Así

I am not sure if I remember or have convinced myself to remember Eydie Gorme's soft songs wafting through Grandma Clemen's house as she sat for her merienda with café & pan dulce.

Grandma Clemen said when I was born, "I only want to live to see Lauren's 5th birthday." Then, "I only want to live to see Lauren's 10th birthday." Then, "I want to see Lauren's 16th birthday." Then, "I want to see Lauren graduate from high school." Then, "I want to see Lauren graduate from college."

There was no success without her. It took me seven years to graduate college without her. I left a graduation invitation on her headstone so that her spirit would feel invited.

3. Cuatro Vidas, Cuatro Vidas Serian Para Ti

Grandma Clemen raised my mother. No one told me you couldn't have three grandmothers. I only ever called one Grandma.

Doing my homework, I would sit next to her while novelas blared through the tv—we only spoke during commercials. She sat so still that I would look at her hands, see the rings she wore on her fingers, clean the dirt out from under her nails. She never fussed while I pressed down on her most prominent veins, watched the skin on her hand move.

At night when I woke up to make sure she was breathing, I let the sounds of the tape player forgottenly left on put me back to bed. It was Edyie Gorme whose voice would comfort me at night, as I went over the steps to CPR, counting myself back to sleep.

4. Desesperadamente

Songs in Spanish are not for sharing, they are for keeping to yourself: for holding sacred things inside. When you speak two languages, you speak two secrets.

5. Nosotros

The day that Eydie Gorme died, Grandma Clemen glided through my memories—her sitting at the kitchen table crying over a daughter who died before her, to see and not hear her pantuflas across the kitchen floor as she refills her cup of café.

6. Sin Ti

Edye Gorme, I didn't know you were still living—I'd always assumed you dead. When I heard the announcement of your death, I remembered that my grandmother had died. I lost my breath, unable to hear your songs; I didn't know I had forgotten Edyie Gorme.

At Grandma Clemen's funeral, the mariachi's sang "No Te Vayas Sin Mi." No te vayas

Me Vas a Recordar

Everyone has their own classroom:
a field—a garden—an echo:

when a goat's throat is slit,
its kid cries its cry.

Survival is not taught; no matter
how many How-To Manuals echo

the same words: Always Be Prepared.
Buelita does not have this echo.

Instead she said, *paciencia, mi'ja;*
fuerza, mi'jita; no me duele, mi'jita; mi'jita.

Si, Buelita, si. I always echo.
¿Laurenina, me vas a recordar?

for Laurie Ann Guerrero

A Cutting

Knife in my hand,
thump, square to hilt
in the blood wet stump
where animals are slaughtered.

I

My parents found stray knives
in my room. Suspected
suicidal tendencies. In the therapist's office,
as I played with Legos outside her door,
my parents learned
knives meant grandfathers.

II

I stopped throwing knives in high school
after depleting the stock
in cutlery drawers, sharpening
one beyond the use of cutting steak:
too sharp to use on plates,
left scars on cutting boards.
Knife throwing was for girls
afraid of forgetting.

III

Knives never could cut the cancer out of him,
no matter how many surgeries.
I refuse to YouTube how to throw,

trust that when I find the perfect knife—
remember its weighted evenness—
I will bury it.

Rio Grande Valley Diptych

I

Even with the air conditioner on,
believers stream out
from the strip mall church:
women with flowers in their hands, praising,
as they walk toward the palatero.
He having timed his arrival
after many Sundays missing the sales
to the girls in frilly white socks and dresses,
the boys in their ostrich boots and ties.
His shirt one too many buttons opened,
he darker than the men who give him money
for their daughter's paletas.
Of course, the palatero quenches their other thirst,
knowing it's hotter inside the church than out.

II

In the oncology waiting room,
a woman walks around selling
Ziploc bags of sliced fruit
covered in Trechas—
sandia, mango, & jícama
packed like a cigarettes
in a newly opened box.

For $3 you can eat while
she waits for her appointment.

Stems

I'd decided to let cancer
be in charge of the break up,
Stage 3 Hodgkin's Lymphoma.
In the ICU waiting room
I sat with flowers,
a small dog with anime eyes.

Her mom came infrequently
her dad older, wheelchair bound.
When they were out of town
we slept on his hospital bed
enjoying the mechanized positions

as slowly her hair thinned.
She asked me to end it for her
make it so that she wouldn't hurt

I went down on her every day
after that, hoping I could swallow
every cancerous cell.
Once she stopped breathing

in the night. I performed CPR. Called 911
after two minutes of care was given.

Standing with a vase of calla lilies
the tube in her mouth like the stamens
as I placed the stuffed husky on her bed.

I spent the night on the pullout
unwilling to fall asleep
and dream her to death.

Second Letter to My Father

Dear Father,

I remember all the presents you've given me. Age 5—a castle whose occupants all folded into cubes for easy storage. Age 13—a desk that lay flat in its box, assembly required. Age 21—when you told me that I wasn't your daughter, that from then on you refused to accept presents from me because I could never give you the one you wanted in return. I didn't understand what this meant; or how I would be looking at a lilac t-shirt you brought me from your trip to Louisiana. Too ill fitting for regular wear, only appropriate for sleep, alone—when no one was here to hug me. In the mirror I study the magnolia screen printed on the front, Louisiana written in a cursive magenta across it, and wonder what would've drawn you to this shirt of all of them in the gift shop. In cheap options there are many, but this is what came home. An awkwardly blocky medium size, and realize that this is what I will remember you by—the piece of material I will hold on to when you are gone. When I have nothing left in my lunch box, nothing in my wallet, and no remnants of you in the pockets of car doors. A shirt from Louisiana where you took the senior citizens from the Adult Day Care to gamble, Louisiana where you thought of me, Louisiana where I could be your daughter, again.

Lauren

Ruinas

Chacha, make sure the 25-yr-old's toys
are properly put away
by the time the Padrecito
gets here. A niña shouldn't use
her mother's perfume. Don't
put on deodorant next to the tamales.
Padrecito, play cards over
the fate of her soul—

deal out the devil
so only her mocoso suitor,
father, and I remain battling
in a game of King's Corner.

Chacha, put lipstick on her face,
make sure she is smiling. We want
her to fetch the highest price.
Dowry should be paid in full
so he can drive away
in a brand new car. Mocoso,

I see the ace you are hiding
under your skin. Neurosis
claims the feeble minded,
those obsessed w/ _____.

Fantasía, chicharra.
Fantasia chachalacas
outside our hacienda.
Niña, your father has left us,
and you shouldn't talk
to your mother like that.
I will hear you in the restroom
after throwing up spoons.

Niña mala brillante
marcada por la herencia
mira me—
soy tu.

The Llorona Isn't Postmodern

claiming the lives of underage heroin addicts
in New Mexico while she cries *mis hijos*.

Not when high schoolers skipping school
still drown in the canal. Not when
valedictorian middle schooners fail
the TAKS because they were in AEP
all year after jumping someone
into their gang. Not when DREAMers
commit suicide as they fill out college
applications without a social security number.

Still after all these centuries,
she requires sacrifice that her indigenous counterpart
basked in. Syncretism hasn't taken that
out of her. Cihuacoatl wants you.
She wants
your body.
She wants your touch.
She wants
to feel your hands reach out for her
as you realize you are suffocating.
Mexicanos, she wants your children.

She wants to keep their bodies
for when you forget

who you are.

She will always claim our youth.
Reshape them, remold them
into a new problem
better fit for today.

So that when we curse someone, we don't place blame on anyone but ourselves.
The Llorona isn't postmodern,
todas las diosas están inquietas.

for Orquidea

It Wasn't Raining, It Wasn't Sunny

On the day the little boy drowned
it wasn't raining, it wasn't sunny,
it wasn't candy wrappers.
Eyes can be deceived when it's overcast.
Left alone for less than a minute—
floating at the top of the water.

At the Adult Day Care
they have a name for this,
non-knowledgeable morbidity.
99% of the time this is the code
they use when an ambulance is called.

On a television in the background,
CNN is promoting a storybook
using a little boy's death. *The Polar Bear*
Who Couldn't Swim educates on accidents.

At the pool we don't have a code for drowning
because it's not supposed to happen. Especially
not to a five year old, survived by a brother, a family.
At the Adult Day Care the morning ritual is to read
the obituaries aloud before bingo begins.
Aloud, his obituary delivers words he never learned:
beloved, *tragic*, *survived*.

[luminous]

Underneath their desks children lie face up on the floor singing *caballito blanco, llévame de aquí*. Outside their classroom window, machine gun cartridges empty in Reynosa, México. Faces of children, this is all I know of luminous.

After "Border Wars"

I

Alton, Texas—brothers & sisters ride
bikes, play soccer on the closed-off
road as streams of white SUVs
green Border Patrol lettering flow in & out
emptying the safe house.

The two suspected smugglers are charged
with unlawful transport.

II

Finding an abandoned raft while walking
your dog along the Rio Grande:
the team prepares the body to be returned
back to Mexico.

It's awesome, this is what we do for a living.

They're not gonna quit.

III

Not all bugs are bugs
only beetles are true bugs
if let loose in U.S. farmlands,
they could destroy thousands
of acres of crops.

Locusts the color of sand
are not bugs. Roaches asleep in
cereal boxes are not
bugs. Ants attacking cats are
not bugs: *our job is to protect*
American agriculture.

IV

There is a high traffic
area near an old
abandoned monastery.

Forward-looking infrared
can't find the immigrants

from the helicopter,
leading the agents in
the wrong direction

it's so many groups, it's confusing us—

in the infrared it's difficult to distinguish the agents
from the immigrants.

Calopteryx Splendens

On the day the boy drowned
dragonflies coupled
as they flew over
the pool's chlorinated blue.

The CPR on deck
mirrored their flight:
silvering up and down—
pressing against chest,

counting out thirty seconds,
two breaths, crushing the thorax.
The male having chosen his mate
while she floated atop the water,

shimmer-fresh from her youth.
The dragonflies flickered
as they moved, locked together;

the male with his spiked
barb, rupturing the sky
as the little boy's body
was loaded into the ambulance.

To Be a Bracero Means
after Gloria Anzaldúa

For every trailer of food sent to Mexico under NAFTA,
two undocumented workers come across the border.

Think of it as: a transnational issue—
an issue of immigration—
policies instituted by the US
critical to a century of Mexican migration.

Buelito was a Bracero—
a worker provided at doorsteps.
Esclavos casi mareándose.

My first lesson in Tejano history I learned at home:
these names are dying—
you get angrier when it's your grandfather.

If your family is paid $1000 for your death in US fields
isn't that better than living?

El maltrato es el mas trauma que hay en esta vida.

Nos olvidaron, ya estamos olvidados.

Amancio Jesús

Young men at fraternity parties
don't just fall off tables
shattering both eye sockets,
fracturing the skull,
bone shards like country
outlines on a globe.

Falling onto a concrete slab
while dancing on a table
is a farce, a caricature of
men: jovial, sweaty, shirtless
with glitter. A beer in hand kept
him imperfectly balanced until he pushed
or someone pushed for a man to take
a 9 foot drag queen death drop.

A Sheriff declared the investigation
regarding this incident closed,
seeing with his two eyes
what the young man cannot. His face
too swollen with blood to lift eyelids,
while brothers campaign outside
classrooms preaching the gospel of falling.

As if a fall from grace
is the expected outcome
of a gay man dancing atop a table.
There is a joke there, a joke about
brothers afraid of being in a restroom
accused of "sneaking a peak."
Or a quip about a gay man's free
chance at a face lift, and a Sheriff
like Pontius Pilate—too quick
to wash his hands as a young man
sips water through a straw, a reed—
sponge of vinegar. Camels passing
in the backdrop.

I Thought I Had Post-Chicana Blues Because Chicana Just Wasn't Enough

1.

Like the checkered chanclas I tripped over, too big for me.
Chicano nationalism didn't have a place identity. I did,
Borderlands, Tx:
    where my home has a U.S. area code, but you wouldn't be able to tell it by looking
        at the last names in the phone book.
    where people speak pocho Spanglish.
    where every kitchen may not have a loaf of bread, but for sure has tortillas.
    where you can buy every virgen accouterment possible at the grocery store.
    where you go to the pulga to see the movies in theaters.
    where the minority is the majority; does that still make them a minority?
    where you don't have to go to the doctor to get antibiotics.
    where at Macy's, people ask if they can pay in pesos.

2.

If the border is just what divides us as people,
then there is no border.
If there are no borders, there is no reader.

3.

Who will be the Post-Chicanas to speak
for those who are middle-class Mexican-Americans
who never knew the poverty of growing up in the streets
who never spoke Spanish in their home
who went to classrooms labeled Gifted & Talented
who never had to worry where their next meal was coming from
who never questioned if they were going to be able to go to college,
    because for them it was never a choice—the only choice was what school.

4.

Tejanas:
wear Selena on their t-shirts
have spray paint stencils of the virgen on their dressers
get Gloria Anzaldúa quotes as tattoos
dress up as La Llorona for Halloween
have cats named Sor Juana and Tonantzin

5.

If there is no reader
how are the borders

what defines us?

On a Hilltop with No Trees

There would be no laying out a blanket to take a nap in the shade, no jugs of water waiting, no people hoping for the tow-truck to come, no mockingbird's nests, no abandoned single sneakers, no fires with the spare branches, no tire swings, no ice chests full of Bud Light, no soft grass to run your feet through, and no lynchings.

Before Improbability
after Pedro Paramo

This town is filled with echoes,
dreams let to fade
plastic petals in stone vases next to headstones.

Trapped behind walls, suffocated
corpses forgotten in foundations
left to become sinkholes

under the stones. When you walk
beneath, whispers escape
no matter how light your step.

Behind you,
no one breathes
in your footsteps.

You hear a rustling, turn
to find only spirits hurrying you along
not to join them, but to live them:

laughter sounds used up
because memory is
poor substitute.

Voices worn away by the years. Sounds
like that night we were inescapable, held together
by tendon and bone.

The day will come when sounds fade away.
But if they do not, ghosts behind us compose
bright shadows along the streets.

Rosa Espinoza—Abram, Texas

I

I learned how to pick cuetes
after 12 years of twice annual
pilgrimages outside city limits:
4th of July & New Years.

At Buelito & Buelita's house
we could pop the Tanks, Chickens,
Blooming Flowers, Jumping Jacks;
throw sawdust full of Pop-Pops
into the caliche street
where it was darker with stars
lit by orange blossoms.

After the New Year's incident
where I looked too closely
at the fire end
of a bottle rocket,
Buelita knew to watch closer.

II

The first time I saw a man cry
we weren't allowed video games
or loud noises, my cousins & I.
We could only play checkers
or Monopoly without laughter,

we sat outside on the wooden picnic table
a Tio had built as a final project in Ag class.
No one remembered

which Tio, their projects
interchangeable in memory.
No names carved
in the wood, her casket.

III

I never learned the rosary, but knew the feel
of a mechón when it caught the fuse
of a Fountain. Knew to keep my head down,
run away quickly, and not look too closely.
Santa María, Madre de Dios, ruega por nosotros,
pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén.

Sabor a Mi
after Eydie Gormé

I

Your taste lingers on my mouth—
the stickiest part of the chamoy
you have to *smack* to get off your lips
it's not *that* sweet stickiness
keeps me here,
even after you've left.

I still find your hairs in vacuum rollers,
a months old receipt for dinner and drinks for two,
a note hidden behind a picture, its frame: *always* and *forever*.

II

We spent so much time—*you and I*.
I still taste you,
you keep my taste as well.

That afternoon you put an orange slice
up to the light to check for seeds,
so am I inside you.

III

I don't pretend to be your owner;
I can't walk out in the street, yell your name
until you come home.

I don't know if we have anything here on this earth:
your mouth will know where to find the seed.

IV

You will always carry me.
Whenever your lips touch another's
all that will be left
is my imprint on their mouth.

My love will fill you
to a point too swollen
to desiccate back into place.
You only know to be full
in an uncomfortable way.

V

In an embrace you forget yourself,
know only me—only us—
what it means to be media naranjas:
searching for ourselves in another.

for Yazmin, always