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Mexican Bingo

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MEXICAN BINGO

by

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ABSTRACT

MEXICAN BINGO

Amanda Michelle Galvan Huynh
Old Dominion University, 2017
Director: Tim Seibles

This collection of poetry is an elegy for what I have lost and what I have left behind in order to reach this point in my education. These poems attempt to be a witness to the Latinx community who migrated across Texas for field work, for a better future, and for their children. The collection is meant to communicate the loss of culture, generational differences, familial struggles, assimilation, health, womanhood, and trauma. While these poems are not all encompassing, they are a beginning and a way for me to better understand my role as a poet.

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Día de la Dama Rubia

The day I saw Catrina was the day
my mother and I were in a car accident.

She stood on the sidewalk with a crown
of red blossoms on her skull. Her dress

gold, her clavicles exposed and reflecting
the firetruck's lights. Beside her a woman

with blonde hair, penciled eyebrows, gray
bags under her eyes, and a thin mouth.

The taste of quarters was in my mouth,
a busted lip — *you're lucky your little*

body didn't go through the window –
someone grabbed me, held me on their hip

while my mother talked to the police.
Catrina and the blonde woman left

between the cracks in the sidewalk.
I never saw Catrina again

but I found the blonde woman
in my mother's jewelry box:

her thin mouth smiling, a crease
through her eye, a tear climbing her arm.

My mother doesn't talk
about the blonde woman. She doesn't

tell me why she keeps her picture
in her jewelry box. She doesn't talk

about the day of the accident
or if she saw her too. She doesn't talk

about her Mamá. So, her Mamá visits me,
tells me stories of their days working in the sun.

EL SOL

El Sol

La cobija de los pobres.

He always watched our backs
as we pulled our way

from one end of the field
to the other. In the middle

of the day, we felt like onions
frying in the pan, sizzling

with each absent cloud. Our sol,
however brutal, put money

in our empty pockets,
covered us with his rays,

and let us survive.

Hunger

The whole trip we had them—
 small white pills
 in our pockets. We knew
 we were female,
 we knew

how long the trip would take,
 and we knew
 the stories of La Bestia: a metal freight,
 who claims
 the limbs of men

at her feet. We, unsure
 of the hands pulling us
 onto the boxcar, prayed
 for her blessing, to keep

our own hands
 as other limbs lay
 fallen
 by the tracks, flies suckling
 on rotting flesh. We wished

to be like La Bestia,
 but we had them
 in our bags while los coyotes broke
 into the dust, etching us
 through the space between Saltillo

and Tejas— one hundred and ninety-five miles.
 Their boots familiar with every rock,
 every burr
 gathering on our cuffs.
 Each day,
 we checked

to make sure we had them
 while our guides hovered
 over us—half shepherd,
 but full coyote

in the evening's sun. Eight days of travel
 and they began to pant,
 sniffing heat. Exhaustion

would turn into steam fading
from their last warm meal. Searching
for the next,
their pants become hunger

as they'd pick us with their eyes:
an arm attached to a shoulder,
shoulder becoming a breast. One night
a thigh, a hard-on, another night

of waiting—for a mother to ask them to slow down
waiting—for the moment to offer help
in exchange
for her daughter. Other nights,

there'd be no offerings
as they'd take
a fourteen-year-old girl. Her body

ten feet away flailing
in the night's
dirt, her sister
pinned
by other paws. Each night,
we checked to make sure
we had them:
small white pills.

For the morning after.

Elegy for The Migrant Worker's Hands

*These workers, they have chosen this way of life
and if they were not happy they would not be here.
– Jack Pandol, Delano Grower*

they are born
soft as cotton
small but able
to wrap around a vine

they learn to grow
with each season
and drift like pollen
they learn to callous

along the edges
learn to live with dirt
under the nails
they learn to birth

onions from the earth
cradle peppers away
from the vine
break cucumbers free

hands moving
from Robstown to Mathis
to el Valle to Floydada
never finding a place

to rest
they long to rest
beside a local girl
to make a home

they dream of words
they can't read
for a pencil to shape
their name

they dream of afternoons
empty of fields
of onions
of soil

Before I Was Born

my dad died in an
accident except it
wasn't an accident at
least that's what my
brother says he was
twelve at the time but
he said my dad was
shot in the fields
while working maybe
over drugs or
something but they
shot him then they
turned his tractor on
let it run over his
body brother said
there were a lot of
gashes on my dad's
face too you could see
them at the funeral
service that's what he
says I wasn't there I
wasn't born yet but
there are nights I
dream those gashes
feel like the fields
I work in every day

Fray

Some fray in a field
of onions, a horizon
of green stalks flanked

by brown bags & some
start to fray after one
season in the Texas

summer when the clouds
turn away & some start
to fray after six days.

Most begin to fray
at the bottom cuff
of their jeans, where

an ankle rubs against denim
in the quiet of a boot. Some
begin to fray in the gap

between wooden crates
& sweaty palms, where blood
blisters soak into the handles

& stain shirts. Some fray
at the collar, where the neck's
grime rings a harness

of the work-
day's clock. Some fray
at the waistline where

a buckle can burn its way
into the stomach. Some
fray the hem of an old slip,

yellowed by vaqueros
dipping in for the harvest.
My mother frays

along the inseam
of her long legs
barely covered. Her legs

scissor through Tejano
singing crowds,
ready to clip

a ripe one: a man
missing the warmth
of his wife. A man

wanting a body
without ties. Each night
I listen to her harvest

in hot sweat
& I know some fray
better than others.

When the Weather Changes

my family moves. From Mathis to Lubbock, the sunrise waits for the car. Clothes bundled into boxes and trash bags. No room for my First Communion dress. From Lubbock to Amarillo, Mamá's voice rattles through the hallway, strips the mattress. Our breaths fog the car windows until it blurs the moon. From Amarillo to Corpus, my notebooks crumple as Mamá stuffs blankets into my backpack. She throws bags into the trunk and replaces my doll with a bag of pans. From Corpus to Mathis, the cops invite themselves in. I hold my baby brother's bruised body as the thin flesh of our apartment tears. Only four pairs of clean underwear. It never matters if it's in the middle of the night or early in the morning, or if we are pulled out of school around noon. We get used to taking what we can —

Abandon

Mamá bleaches the Mexicana out
of her hair: a blonde waitress
with too many men, too many children
to add in her head. Every man's tongue

carves an exit and leaves her
belly swollen, her insides rusty.
Her mix-matched sons become burros,
pulling the cart full of hungry children.

Before each skeleton meal, they sink
their little heads and give thanks
for brothers who work in sweat-filled fields,
who miss school, who put rice and beans

on the table. Those who are little
are little mouths with stomachs.
From each breakup, each odd job,
Mamá herds all six children out

of haunted houses in search of cheap rent,
unleveled driveways, twelve hour shifts,
and new leathered men. At thirty-two,
her body caves in on itself and disappears.

When I Visit Floydada, Texas

I remember how to fall
in the cotton fields. The weight

of the sun burning,
burning my brown skin

until I blend into the earth.
Down in the ground, my hands

throb, I am unsure if the pain
comes from picking or the fall.

My brothers tell me
Levántese or else I will

find trouble. There is no
time to pick the dirt embedded

in my fleshy knees, to nurse
the cuts interrupting the life

line of my palm.
Each fist-sized cloud

blushes in my crusty hands.
If I cry, the salt

will make my hands sting
louder than my brothers' taunts.

But I remember Mamá most:
She doesn't look back,

too busy picking nickels
off the bushes. Nickels to

drop into our chapped mouths.
She can't look back.

There's Only One Picture of My Mamá—

it is creased through her right eye
and water-stained from the left
corner. She's in her mid-twenties.

Hair curly, short, but blonde.
Her smile looks like my daughter's.
There are no pictures of my mother

as a child or if there are, I don't know
about them. All I know is she died
at thirty-two, in a Houston hospital.

Lupus. A broken heart. I was sixteen.
I remember my three older brothers
fingering the coin holes at the arcade

and at the Laundromat. On my walk
to school, I checked the gas station
payphones and pavement. Two thousand

short. No father to help pay for the funeral.
No family willing to help. Each of us searched
the cushions of the couch until we knew

how many seams kept us together.

LA LUNA

La Luna

El farol de enamorados.

She'd be the brightest on Saturday nights
 for a quince, a wedding, or some other reason
 to celebrate—to fill a dance hall:
 tías refilling plates with barbeque

and gossip. Beer bottles humming
 around mouths. Children playing tag
 under tables until drunk abuelos trap them
 into norteña-ing their boots along to the breath

of el acordeón. When cumbia whisked her way
 through the speakers, the women would line
 the floor to sway in rhythm to *Baila*
Esta Cumbia. An invitation to mueve

to the music in their blood. These were the songs
 of brujería and this was where the women
 in my family practiced. These were the nights
 my mother would take me onto the dance floor

with her long black hair cumbia-ing to its own beat.
 She would teach me how to listen to the magic
 found in those nights—
 more important than breathing.

Who La Llorona Cries For

I imagine my mother saw the two blue lines

as handcuffs made from rivers.

Twenty-one and pregnant.

The two blue lines clapping, announcing to her
in-laws that she had made their son
a father.

Finally.

Did she think of her mother?

Throughout the next nine months, did she wonder
if her mother sat outside on the porch
eating sardines and craving the salt of the ocean?

Did she want to ask her how she carried ponds in her belly?
What death felt like at thirty-two?

In the delivery room, I can hear my mother
¡Ay, mi Mamá —
calling over
and over
— mi Mamá!

Every contraction,
a protest, a reason

not to deliver:
not to become her mother,
a single mother,
a mother who would leave
her sixteen-year-old daughter.

In those first seconds I came up for breath

my mother was already calling to the dead.

Where My Umbilical is Buried

Abilene, circa 1989 - 1995

my mother waited two weeks
for my umbilical to dry

like a rose stem
she preened it, wrapped

the curled flesh in cloth,
tucked it beside her dead

Mamá's necklace, and waited
for our own home with roots

Our first house was on a corner
and if I stood under the corner's tree
I could see the gas station, H.E.B.,
and my uncle's pickup truck walking
towards us – my cousins waving
from the truck bed, ready to come in
through the sliding door.

*I can't remember the street name.
If my parents die
the street dies.*

the backyard fence
made of cinderblocks

my secret garden
with patchy grass

a metal swing set
a clothesline
one tree

A Sunday afternoon,
my father bags cut grass
and my mother kneels
under the corner's tree,
her hand moves
down the tree's flare,
rests between two roots.

She unearths the earth
to tuck my flesh in—
hoping
I learn to dig
into the soil
and hold on.

I found a baby
bird, its wings covered
in dirt.
I helped my mother—

cradled its unopened
eyes in the nest
of my hands—
returned the tiny wings.

my father promised
he'd build a tree-
house
with a hook
for piñatas

I bit my little cousin on the stomach
for her piñata candy.

My time out corner was in the dining room.

Under the table's belly I drew my name in pink crayon, a heart in purple.

I'd add to my Sistine table whenever adult legs lined the chairs, when they jumped and fiddled. I learned "cut the deck" could not be done with a karate chop. Ugly beans were for Lotería. Tornadoes of laughter could not break down our walls.

Where is that table?

Is my name

still waxed

in pink?

I'd twist mother's lipstick until the pink was the tallest, press my lips into it the way I thought she did, cover my mouth and chin, then squish the beauty back into the tube.

My ruins:

Pink Parfait
Rubellite
Bois de Rose
Maple Sugar
Rosa Rosa

*Time out corner was in the dining room—
on impatient days I'd be belted.*

On the kitchen counter I learned:
numbers in English
 in Spanish
flour didn't taste like sugar
tortillas couldn't be cooked without being flattened
onions could make you cry if you were jealous

During the day my mother took care of white children. I pretended the little boy was my brother.
I would ask her why

 I didn't have blonde hair like him or
 Cinderella
 Smurfette
 Sleeping Beauty
 Alice
 the girl across the street
 whose mother didn't like her
 playing with me

I never noticed that we

were just getting by.

I wasn't allowed to get my clothes dirty. / I'd lay my clean clothes on the driveway / run through
 the backyard / in my underwear. / I learned / to compromise. / After a few scrapes, / dirt behind
 my ear, / sweat around my belly button / I'd be caught – / *Why are you naked?* /

No one else to get in trouble with
 I played by myself

Pretending I had

a brother
 a sister
 a baby

on the way
 faded away

on the way
 faded away
 faded away

The last trip to the hospital—

we carried nothing

home.

He was supposed to be

born in April.

April
 moving required no movement.
I sat with boxes
 in the hallway – staying out
of the way – I played
 with fireplace matches.
I was scared
 when I lit one. Blew it out.
Tucked it back in
 with the others.

My father never built a treehouse.

I stood at the gate
 the swings waved

 with a creak
brown grass

 naked tree
 yard empty

 of me

the street has changed

the front yard is empty of dirt bushes hold no prickly leaves the door does not sit unlocked carpet
lays unworn from couch legs the bathroom is not tight enough perfumes are not crowded on the
dresser the window does not frame jeans on a line the back door does not know how to slide
open trees do not play tag the neighbor across the street is not a girl bikes cannot trip on the
sidewalk the park owns no fading blue swings the grocery store bakes no pan dulce church offers
no Nuestro Padre the mother quiets Spanish in the house the kitchen does not smell like sweating
onions the mother stops flattening tortillas the father does not come home for lunch the dining
table forgets to play Lotería the hallways resist laughter the daughter does not celebrate her
cumpleaños with cousins the garage does not hang piñatas the city is not full of tíos the mother
loses her smile the daughter cannot remember

Returning to the Moment I Learned To Count

my imperfections: in our small house
 in Houston, my two hands swollen
 and puffy from rips of skin,
 my six-year-old fingernails bitten.

Each time my fingers seek the comfort
 of my mouth, you slap them,
 rub jalapeño pepper juice into the cuts
 then cover them with gloves. Seven

brings new glasses: you hand me
 the pretty bronze frame and I jump
 from the clearer vision of the parking lot.
 I smile until you introduce me

to the word four-eyes. At ten I struggle
 to fix my short hair, smooth the dark mess
 into a half ponytail before school. But it's ugly:
 you pull the chongo out. You call attention

to the smell of my puberty, twelve grams
 of red spots on a pad needing a change
 because I *smell like vagina*. Fifteen: I run
 around the pool with cousins until you say

my stomach pouch makes me look
 pregnant. I wrap myself in a pale yellow
 beach towel. At seventeen, I need
 to wax my eyebrows. At twenty-two, I still

don't wear makeup. At twenty-four, I need
 more exercise. At twenty-six, I understand
 how life has maimed you.

The Nurse

My mother lied to me at twelve
when I asked about her mother:
What did your mom do?

She was a nurse.

And I saw her blonde hair
tucked into scrubs, working
double shifts to place rice
and beans on the table. She
was strong, intelligent, and a myth.

Ten years gives way to specific
questions: What kind of nurse was she?

She was never a nurse.

She had a profession we're not proud of.

My mother doesn't make eye-contact with me
as she cannot bring her mouth to say:

prostitute.

The scrubs are replaced with hand-me-down
clothes. My grandmother, a single mother,
working

as an attendant at a carnival,
saving old candy apples from the trash
to bring home to her children

as a field worker,
bringing her children into the sun
to pick onions for nickels

as a clerk at a panadería,
shoveling stale pan into a bag as penance.

When there were no jobs, she gave the rest
she had; her body for a portion of the rent.

Notes on Absence

If I went by the memory of photographs, my mother's life
 began only at sixteen—there is one of her posing
 with co-workers in fur coats at Sear's; and one

 of her in high waist jeans, up against a car; a glamour shot
 with black leather held up against her left cheek. I can see
 myself one Saturday afternoon in the hallway,

 too hot outside, the closet open, the plastic tub full of albums
 unlidded. Worn albums spill and scatter on the floor
 like stepping stones smoothed over by glossy currents

 older than me. I see the studio print of my father as a baby—
 a blue onesie— the same one framed on the wall
 at my grandmother's, along with others. I sit

 on the floor, looking into these windows of stillness.
 But was I only curious about my father's baby pictures?
 Did I even ask once about her? Or worse,

 did she walk away and cry the day I asked *Where are you?*
 Why don't you have baby pictures? Did she answer me
 and I just forgot? Only when my mother was forty-eight

 and my cousin uploaded a photograph did I see: my mother
 on the far left in her baby dress, her sister beside her,
 her three older brothers with matching checkered shirts,

 their soles exposed. There is no time stamp, no cursive to examine
 on the back. I know her family moved too much—a single
 mother with five children would have to move

 too much, and pictures were a luxury left behind for blankets
 and pans. But now there's this one— a 4x6, black and white,
 and I can see myself in her outstretched fingers.

Letter To My Aunt with Down Syndrome

I hated the way your mouth stayed open:
your tongue turning crumbs soft. I hated
when you'd come to visit us, how mom

always let you run out first into the backyard
to hunt for Easter eggs. I hated the way
your shirts were too big and your bra always showed,

how annoying you could be asking for help
with the ceiling fan, a container, the shower
faucet, medicine, the damned dog

who wouldn't stop following you. I hated
the way people looked at us in public—
a little boy's frown, a woman's stare,

a man's pity smile. I hated the way
my friends looked at me. How I
had to explain who you were.

I could be cruel. I was. I learned
how to avoid you by closing
my bedroom door, by hiding

in my closet or by telling you to look
for my sister, telling you to go ask mom
when all you wanted was a Diet Coke.

I think I was the cruelest when you'd call
the house. Six hours away in an assisted living
home, you'd call because you were lonely,

and I'd find something to do to avoid mom
passing the phone to me because you always asked
Where's Manda? The one thing I would hate the most

was my name coming from your mouth
as if you'd say it so much that I would be
infected—I would wake up like you.

I Was Supposed to be a Down Syndrome Baby

My mother found out
too late for an abortion.

An error in data.
I don't have to ask
why, or if she didn't want me—
I pull threads from the stories,

these shadows of her in my hands:
my mother was in detention three times a week.
Fist fights, some kids making fun of her
sister. Some kids stealing money.

Her sister was hit by a car at ten,
and I see the body on the street, change
in her hand because she was running
to the gas station for a Dr. Pepper.

My mother's brothers would laugh
at the way her sister ate with her tongue
out, even now in their mid-fifties they still
do. When their Mamá died, my mother signed

papers to become her guardian, took her
to assisted-living housing, dealt
with clinics overcharging procedures,
lists of medications—her day

timed by AM and PM doses.
Her sister got visitors when it was convenient
for them. Everyone left her in Abilene.
There were clothes stolen, underwear smeared

with feces, half-cooked meals. The molestation
reports started coming when she turned twenty-two.
My mother was always reminded
that people like her sister never lived

past eighteen. Now, she's fifty-two years-old.

EL CORAZÓN

El Corazón

No me extrañes corazón, que regreso en el camión.

My mother only let me play Lotería
with the imperfect beans. The ones

broken in half, oddly shaped,
or discolored. I would fill

the corazón card with them.
Squeeze their broken bodies

together until all the red
disappeared. The arrow tip

would be the only thing left.
These were the days when I had

no one to play with, but myself.

A Tongue Untethered

My Spanish spoons the crescent
of my dreams, seeps in
wearing a navy dress and bare feet.

She untethers my tongue,
leads me into the dark reflection
of the sky and we run

among the words sprouting:
camino, luna, estrella, casa, calle –
until cities overgrow my mouth.

People and places I cried to hear
are clear as ice melting.
My Spanish braids long summers

of field work – moving back and forth
her old fingers through my Mexican hair.
My Spanish tells me how beautiful

my name sounds when I say it
in Spanish: Amanda! Those “A”s
shaken free, open their arms

to envelop the Bidi Bidi Bom Bom
my familia sways to. My Spanish
turns over shriveled memories.

She helps me collect abuelo’s words
into a jar – they flicker like cans
in a junkyard. My Spanish cups

a handful to press my ear against,
to hear the worn leather
in *¿Que pa-ho mija?*

My Spanish stays until dawn,
asks for me to say my name—
she loves hearing her name.

Querida Mother Nature & Co.

Querida Mother Nature, I'm like the hot vapors
rising from the black summer roads
as if those Texas streets would never cool.

Querida Puberty, I don't care if you're preparing me
for childbirth. Distorting my body, sprouting pubic hairs
to cover what will be coveted, plumping my breasts for men
to measure and for babies to feed. As long as I can hold a pencil
in my hand. Deafen my ears to *gorda, comilona*, and *Hey, Mami*.
I confess, I should have paid more attention
in that Health 101 class or cared for the way the female
reproductive system worked. But I cared about who wrote
the textbook and if it were a man or a woman.
I cared if the illustrator had seen a real ovary
or Googled it and drew an imitation.

Querida Mother Nature, I never want to have kids
or to carry and push a little human being from my insides.
I'll leave that to my cousins. Two to three sway on their hips
while they settle into the matriarch role—I do not care
to have one with my eyes. Is that why my family says I'm bad?
Leaving in the middle of a blind date when a Latino man
tries to put his machismo down as law.

Querida Puberty, you have marked
and categorized me. You have given me
a list of expectations. You've even built
a clock in the lining of my uterus as if all I should ever want
in this world would be to answer the ticking.

You Have To Be Ready

when they are—
 my mother hands me
 dishes to wash—
even when you're not.
 I watch her turn

the faucet on,
 my hands heat
 under the water
 and I wonder
 who told her

she had to be open
 twenty-four/seven.
 How many times
 did she lie, split
 open, reviewing

a mental list of things
 to be done tomorrow?
 Did she learn
 over the years:
 where to kiss,

when to touch,
 how to suck to help
 her husband finish
 quick—to end
 the chore. To make

more time to be
 the good wife, the one
 who makes floorboards
 reflect the moon
 when it comes

through the window,
 to make sure
 he doesn't drift into
 another woman's body—
to say yes.

Ortographobia: First Generation

I fear the words
my mother has trouble spelling

using *t-h-e-i-r*
when she really means *t-h-e-r-e*

or *you're* when she means *your*.
I see her outline in the study

sounding out a word, typing
then retyping but never able

to make the red underline disappear.
I'm ten and she calls me

to read her words, to check
her spelling. She yells—

How do you spell...?
She pronounces appreciate

ah-pre-key-ate and I correct her,
but my mouth carries the hesitation

of her tongue. Before bed,
I repeated letter and leather

to teach my tongue the difference,
I practiced writing verses of the bible

to teach myself the difference
between myself versus her—

no matter how many words I gather,
I'll never be smart enough.

I'm not allowed. My uncle cannot read
a menu. My cousins couldn't get in to college.

They learn how to pronounce their labor,
how to turn junk into nickels

but are never able to collect enough
to send their kids to school.

When Applying for College

This form—



an excuse

to keep us separated from the rest,

1) Are you Hispanic or Latino?

- Yes, I am Hispanic or Latino
- No, I am not Hispanic or Latino

to keep us on our side of the border –

2) What is your race? Select one or more.

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White

because *What is your race?* does not include Hispanic or Latino.

Alien to the planet of the United States, even the computer system can't compute the selected *Yes*.

It prompts:

Error: Please select a race.

Error: Why are you applying to school?

Error: You think you're smart enough?

Error: You wetback.

You can't speak English, you Spic. Error.

Go back to your shit country.

The First Language
after Kimiko Hanh

is not scientific
so the med student does not pronounce
but sings “for-mal-de-hi-de”
in staccato quarter notes.
In her mouth, her tongue
realigns to change her image.
To brush away the recollections
of her grandpa, a Spanish-English
dictionary by his bed.
You could cry for his mango tree
and his junkyard.
The other dry
cracked working hands
brought his wife soda cans
and metal scraps off the road.
The nickels
glistened in their palms.
He couldn’t speak to you
though he said *mi nieta*
and patted you on the cheek
as if you were five generations pulled away
saying *grandpa* instead of *abuelo*.
It occurs to you
that only in America
you will lose
abuelo.

What Are You?

They wait for the crosswalk signal
to give them permission.

A Nigerian man, nervous,
repeats his question.

He does not know how
many times she has heard this question.

She does not know how
to be his dark. The skin paired

with an accent that
can tell what he is.

Nigerian is a sufficient answer—
American is not.

She's a blend

of something he can't pin

down. He waits

as if her answer would help him

understand,

help him

be like the people who print

black

over his face.

He fills the air with his question:

Enough

after Gloria Anzaldúa

My Latina friend confesses:

I was afraid of you—

that you were one of those Latinas—

you know the ones.

I know the ones standing under my high school's
stairwells cutting fifth period, who know
how to graffiti their notebooks in Chicano,
who yell at me in Spanish

because they know that I don't know
what they are saying, who call me white
washed, who know my tongue
is not Chicana enough

for their ears. Four years of high school
Spanish is not slang enough to understand
that *'stá bien miya* means *Está bien mi hija*.
It is not enough to have Spanish-speaking parents

who have left their tongues on the front porch
of their family's small migrant houses
because those lives were not enough
for their own dreams—dreams that could not live

in a one bedroom house with too many bodies
turning the living room into a dining room
for dinner, and into the children's room
in time for dreams—my parents' dreams shed

the dirt, the callouses, the boots, the tongue
for the suburban life. The chalk outline of squared
lawns, unbroken sidewalks, well-dressed kids,
and schools with white teachers. With white walls,

white students, whiteboards, white paper—white stairs
for me to hide underneath.

EL DIABLITO

El Diablito

Pórtate bien cuatito, si no te lleva el coloradito.

I saw him once. I sat
on my abuelo's lap, a telenovela
on the television. He kicked
back to laugh, and a red shimmer
made me look down. At the bottom
of his empty beer can
El Diablito sat against
the curve. He didn't look
at me, but at my abuelo,
and I knew he looked at him
at the end of every day.

Somewhere

there's a small town
 forgotten—
 on purpose
 or by accident?

No one remembers. Maybe
 there's an empty
 highway,
 shoulders speckled with cotton.

Maybe there's a tattered house
 with a rusty metal gate,
 a sinking floor
 with dusty pictures.

 Maybe the room is too dark
 or the lamp by his bed too weak.
 Was it on the nightstand? Or
 was it the sun from outside?

 Maybe she isn't
 allowed in
 there. A curtain to keep
 her out—or was it a door?

 Maybe
 she thinks
 he's sleeping, still
 breathing as he lies there.

 A small hand inside his
 migrant palm, rough—no,
 my hand resting inside
 his soft palm.

Maybe
 this hand
 was all.

The Summer My Cousin Grew Taller than Me

The coats begin to fear the dark
heat of his breath. He wants to know
what a burning body tastes like

and my flame is the only one
within reach—a telenovela flickers
on the television. Dr. Pepper cans

are wet. Outside the dog's chain runs along
the dirt. The house empty of adults.
I become a whisper of a match

as my cousin leaves me to my charred edges.
The closet door opens to breathe. Abuela's shoes
are crooked, and a coat's shoulder hangs off the hanger.

When Diabetes Comes to Your Abuela's House

it sends a yellow notice

in the shape of a diet sheet
taped to the refrigerator door.
No one says *diabetes*

until two orange medicine bottles make their home

on the dresser. No one cares to stop buying Dr. Pepper,
2 for 1 Doritos, pan dulce, and tamales.
Two orange bottles multiply into five over summers,

a blood pressure cuff becomes the centerpiece

on the dining room table flowered by a glucometer.
Each June you notice the new:
there's a red sharps container on the window

sill looking out into the backyard. There's insulin

next to the butter, doctors' numbers by the phone,
packages of needles by the teacup collection,
and dialysis appointments fill Wednesdays,

take over Fridays. You spend every summer morning beside her

watching the blood pressure machine flash numbers
while papas fry in the kitchen. At first you asked
if you could try but you didn't like the way it made your arm

turn purple. You didn't like picking her up from dialysis

because she'd turn the car sour with vomit. You stopped counting
the orange hills of bottles as the empty ones
reminded you of tombs.

Cicada Shells

I try to regrow the cut tree next to the tornado
shelter. The length, the bark, the weather worn

spots. I try to grow its branches back,
the ones that extended into the shape of a wish-

bone, unbroken. For three summers,
my only wish was to pull myself up

into its mouth, to sit in the groove
that my cousins would wave from—

their rocket popsicles in one hand
and a blue-stained laugh on their faces.

I'd be left on the ground looking
up until my hands blistered. My arms

realized one summer where I wanted to go,
I climbed up, found cicada shells ghosting

the branches. I brought one to my abuela
sitting in her wheelchair. The one sitting

empty by the back door – looking out.

Simon & Tony

In a loose corner of the house, they keep small family portraits, picture frames of children not of their own. All side by side, iced with dust. The ceiling's belly dips down to match the sunken living room floor, the kitchen tiles are chipped, and there's an oven older than both of them. Two old brothers living in a decaying house. *The mice have started running around.* Tony pushes his taped glasses up his nose. Simon talks about his garden outside because he can't hear the conversation, he can't afford to buy a hearing aid with his security checks. Tony smiles at me and there are teeth missing. *I miss working. But this Parkinson's.* Simon scratches his head and walks back into the bedroom. In the living room, I stand with Tony as static flickers from their 1960's television—a novella. Their window into a world beyond Floydada. *I'm still trying to sell my coin collection. To help with bills.* Tony looks at Simon watching the show. They've always lived together, worked together, Tony as Simon's carpenter's assistant. I notice Simon's beanie on the fraying recliner and remember Abuela inviting them over for Thanksgiving. Simon with his beanie, two gifts for me in his hands: Christmas and birthday. He would never forget my birthday. The gifts would be dollar store dolls or a plastic beauty set. The same place he would buy all the picture frames. There's a silver frame on the far right—a photo of me from twenty years ago, sitting in a rocking chair, dressed in pink.

DFW to LAX

I reach the gate
ten minutes before the plane departs.

A cramp in my side, the aisle
feels a little narrower
with all the seats filled.

I scan the overhead compartments
for space

to fill with my luggage.

There's the awkward shuffle
of bodies. The mandatory motions
of safety procedures, the slow movement
towards the runway. As the wheels

let go of the pavement, the lady behind me
speaks to her daughter – her voice
sounds like the grind of a molcajete—
like my abuela's voice.

Texas stretches beneath us
the way I molded dough into Texas-shaped tortillas
as a child. In the air
the smell of papas y huevos
with a pile of toasted tortillas. Only one,

sometimes two spoons of food
would fit in my state-shaped tortillas
but abuela always let me make them,
pack them up to take to abuelo
working at the junkyard. Migrant to his bones,
he would travel across Texas.

The man beside me coughs
and the ground has become smaller
stitches of color, farmland and roads harder
to outline. It blurs together.

and I wonder
if I can see Floydada from up here
or if we even fly near abuelo's small town—
where abuelo sits at the dining room table
alone.

Mis Razones

My granduncles live in a concaving house
 where the roof bends down
 to reach the floor. Rooms are closed off
 to keep the mice and memories
 away.

My abuela's face can only be seen through orange
 medicine bottles. The smell of vomit
 overpowered the tortillas we made
 every summer morning.

No one wants to touch the lines
 in the palms of the men in my family –
 too migrant, too rough.

There are graves in Floydada with eighteen wheelers decorating
 the headstones. My abuelo
 has a tow truck engraved on his, a junkyard
 entrepreneur no one will remember.

My uncle pretends he can read
 a menu but he waits for someone to order first
 so he can say *I'll have the same*.

My parents did too well.

My cousins got pregnant in high school.
 It could've been me.
 It could've been.
 It could've.

VITA

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EDUCATION

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Preparing Future Faculty Certificate, Old Dominion University, 2017

PUBLICATIONS

2016: "the street has changed," Front Porch Journal

2016: "Before I was Born," The Boiler Journal

2016: "When I Ask My Brother About Our Dad," The Boiler Journal

2016: "The Day After July 7, 2016," Entropy Magazine

2016: "What Are You?" Tahoma Literary Review

2016: "Hunger," Muzzle Magazine

2015: "To Her Husband," As/Us Journal: A Space for Women of the World

2015: "Stainless," Tinderbox Poetry Journal

2015: "Tet," Newfound Journal

2015: "Returning to the Moment I Learned to Count," The Acentos Review

2015: "Dull Circles," The Acentos Review

2015: "The First Language," Huizache: The Magazine of Latino Literature

2015: "Follow Up," 94 Creations

2015: "My Nervous System," 94 Creations

2015: "No Time," The Healing Muse

READINGS & PERFORMANCES

11/2016: Food From Thought: Foodbank Benefit Poetry Reading, Norfolk, VA

11/2016: Huizache's Sixth Issue Release Reading, Austin, TX

9/2016: Old Dominion University's 39th Annual Literary Festival, Norfolk, VA

6/2016: Wordspace/Pegasus Reading Series, Dallas, TX

AWARDS

2016: David Scott Sutelan Memorial Scholarship

2016: Joan Rorke-McClure Futures Scholarship

2016: AWP Intro Journal Award Winner, Poetry

2015: Gloria Anzaldúa Poetry Prize Finalist

2014: Perry Morgan Fellowship

2014: Skidmore College Scholarship for Summer Writer's Institute