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# Mexican Bingo

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MEXICAN BINGO

by

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## ABSTRACT

### MEXICAN BINGO

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Old Dominion University, 2017  
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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 —

## When I Ask My Brother About Our Dad

Like I told you

I don't remember

                                  much. Our dad  
                  was just a mean man.  
                                  If he wasn't working,  
he was drinking. The cerveza  
                                  became his left hand.

                  One time I tripped over his boots  
                                  and as I stood up he hit me  
against the wall,

                                  brushed his boots  
off.

                  I lost my first tooth then.

When mom found out

                                  he had another family—

  she kicked him out  
                  and when he asked if I wanted to go  
with him

                                  or stay,

                                  I stayed.

## 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—

## Ethnicity Information

Provide your ethnicity information.

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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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 &amp; 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 39<sup>th</sup> 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