Desaguar

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DESAGUAR

by

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A thesis submitted to the
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Noah Eli Gordon

Sidney Goldfarb

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Gomez, Alicia (M.F.A., Creative Writing, Department of English)

Desaguar

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Noah Eli Gordon

I am proud to present this thesis. I am happy to complete a project that speaks of where I come from and who I am. I was born in El Paso, Texas. I lived part of my childhood in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. This thesis contains poems and short prose blocks/poems that explore and retread the displaced, lost and assimilated. Some of the material, images and ideas come back and forth between pieces. I hope that this repetition creates tension and cohesion. This thesis attempts to answer the following questions (among others): what does Ciudad Juarez mean to me now? What do women and men mean to me now? What do I do with my grandfather, now dead and gone? How does the past define the relationship I have with my husband now? How does the past (my past, his past) affect our relationship? What future is possible for my daughter? What life am I writing for my daughter? Where is belonging?
for my cosita linda, Sophia Valentina
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I. SILENCE
SMALL ROOM

You think it's a small apartment but it is a big room divided into three smaller rooms: one for the dining table and the fridge; another for the stove and the tin tub; and the third space is the living room, the tv room, the play room, the homework room, the room where the rats dance on our bellies while we sleep, the room below the bridge outside, the bridge over the canal, the canal where the rats come from, the rats enter your little bedroom and dance on your parents' bellies, the rats come to dance and your mother says don't tell your teacher rats dance on our bellies but you do anyway, you tell him in Spanish even though a sign on his breast says English, you tell him rats dance on your belly then you tell yourself that you shouldn't have told him, that there are bigger problems like the black widow spitting light in the toilet room outside, the toilet is outside, the landlady says and your parents move in anyway, your parents move in the dark and the black widow plucks and plucks light, you can see the shadows of drunks walking on the bridge, it is dark inside but not outside where the bridge is bright, where you dream yourself running away with a Mickey Mouse coin bank and one doll, the blonde one with the black stripe on the crotch but inside where you sleep in the same bed, your brother’s belly is warm, your belly brown and soft like paws, claws of rats keep you awake
IN THE KITCHEN

I lock the front door. He says, “Baby, I’m hungry.” I turn the kitchen light on while he undresses in the living room. There are yellow rubber gloves and a roll of paper towels on the counter, three drops of hardened tomato sauce on the stove. I am not hungry but I want to eat everything. I want to tear open the bag of bread, toast it; roll sliced turkey between my fingertips and stuff my mouth with it. I want to pour hot sauce, let the juice of watermelons drip down my arms. I want to lick the lids of jars, warm the frozen pizza, chug the lemonade, spoon couscous. The Alfredo sauce I will not touch. I will not eat the ground beef, the chicken strips, the peanut butter cups, ketchup. I will not eat the sausage or cottage cheese. I will merely desire the chocolate milk, the spinach pasta, honey almond granola bars, banana chips.

I want to bake, fry, eat everything raw. But I don’t. I see the onions frying in butter in the pan. I see my face in food.
A PAN HEATS UP

A pan heats up silently. There is something greasy between my fingertips, a batch of lard nearby. A room full of egg crates, bags of pinto beans and rice, sacks of white flour, pickled pig feet and six people: Armando, his wife Lilia, my brother, a homeless man, my mother, and me. My grandfather and father are driving out the Carta Blanca plant to buy freshly bottled beer. I devour the smell of chorizo frying in the pan, the flour tortillas plumping. Armando waves a spatula in Lilia’s face.
THROWING FRUIT

I imagine our creation story. God waits at the top of the mountain. I am something green creeping into the bodies of water filled with crocodiles. You are something silent like fish. We hear the crack of turtle eggs, feel the sour jelly of tadpoles creeping down our throats, hear the tiny crunch of beetles in our mouths. We tremble in the rain of the dark trees, the crackling monkeys, the vast nudity of our bodies. And God does not remember us. Calling him is like throwing fruit at lions.
POPSICLES

My fourth grade teacher asks me to buy popsicles for the class. Not knowing the difference, I bring lollipops. She says popsicles are the ones in freezers while angrily pouring the lollipops into a clear barrel full of candy on her desk. Everyone else brings candy when she asks. Everyone makes paper snowmen for Christmas so that my teacher’s brother can hang them up in his district office and the El Paso Times reporter can write a story about how we, the low-income children of Beall Elementary, love so much, work so hard and still have something to give even during tough times.
DOG

My fifth grade teacher sends me to a writing camp at Dr. Green Elementary. I enter a classroom full of kids where a teacher asks us to embellish (“or make it better”) a sentence on the board, one that starts “The dog is.” I make it better by adding “ferocious” in front of “dog.” I am proud of my ferocious dog until a white kid sitting on a table by the window talks of a dog with green slimy breath and pointy teeth tearing the flesh of neighbors it chases down a long sidewalk. His dog eats my ferocious dog. At the end of the day, Gary Soto sits on a white plastic chair and reads some children’s stories. My father picks me up. I feel happy to be back in my father’s car with the torn seats that leave little crumbles of read foam on my jeans.
STILL OUR FACES LOOKING

Still our faces looking and looking, want. This is our house.

We are married. We have a baby. At some point there was another
man and another woman living here. I see her face. I imagine their baby.
I see his face but I am married.

Morning comes earlier. It smells of explosives, then the sea.

Our words light our bedroom and how we love it. Eat the words,
find something to talk about. We spend our nights thinking of ways to describe
the sound of water flushing through pipes. The baby cries herself to sleep.

We stay together for the television. At some point or another there
Could have been another woman here. The baby takes a step.
We have something to talk about. There once was a man who had to die
so that his family would have something to bury.
II. SCHOOL STORIES
ASSEMBLY

The class picks me to speak before the school on El Dia de la Bandera. There is a microphone in front of me. I am speaking into it and saluting the flag with my arm extended, my palm heart-level. The crowd is quiet with respect or boredom or heat. The flag waves. Once in a while, the principal pushes my arm back into place.
GHOSTS

A friend tells me that there are ghosts in the classrooms at the Colegio—ghosts of Coca Cola workers and ghosts of a cemetery built there after the Coca Cola plant exploded. Ghosts that talk to the janitor, the principal and the school teachers who hate children. We tap the cement stones of the playground where the ghosts’ bodies are buried. We think of knives, coke bottles, footless shadows stalking children.
AT THE PARK

One afternoon James and Vicente run home before sundown and Martin and I linger on the hump of the yellow slide next to the monkey bars. “Someone likes you,” says Martin, “and I won’t tell you who.” I beg him to tell me. “Well, the name starts with M, then A, and ends with N,” he reveals. And I yell, “It’s you! You like me!”

I laugh so hard Martin gets angry and responds, “No, it’s not me, it’s your brother!” and runs away. I never see him again. When Vicente tells me he has moved to China, I imagine Martin smiling and laughing upside down.
AFTERSCHOOL

I am in the third grade bilingual class with a boy who throws a fistful of rocks at my face during recess. The teacher sends me to an afterschool program at Loretto Academy where a girl in a uniform resembling the one I wore at the Colegio del Valle loads a computer game. I make the brown gorilla climb yellow ladders until the school bus picks me up.
SCIENCE FAIR

In the third grade my teacher points to a sign on his chest that says “English” when I ask him if I may step out to use the restroom. By the sixth grade I am in the science fair presenting a project about diabetes based on my grandmother’s blood sugar levels. I use my brother’s computer to create a banner for a three-sided backboard and find clips of pornographic images that disappear the next day. At the science fair, I win first place and move to the district competition where a classmate and I wait for a judge to come by. A judge asks about my conclusion and all I remember is my classmate’s face as I struggle to say the word three. Three, Tree, Three, Tree. I win third place.
III. CREATION STORIES
The buildings crumbled at the sight of God. The wind uprooted every streetlight and flower. God went under every bridge and played Man. He came upon us and said, “Be fruitful and multiply!” I sat on a woman sitting on a chair, giving birth. I caught the baby trembling out of her and called her my own.
A LESSON

My grandfather refuses to serve in the Vietnam War. He is sent to prison in Arizona where he and a jail mate escape, survive the desert with urine and crackers. Before reaching Ciudad Juarez, the men part ways and my grandfather enters a church to ask a priest for food. The priest turned him away, called him a thief. For this, my grandfather vows to raise churchless children.
We are learning each other’s bodies when God finds us under a terrible tree. He lets out a loud grunt and laughs when he sees he has scared us awake. He scares me into giving birth and our baby girl hides deeps inside the earth.
THE GIRL IN OVERALLS

The newspaper clipping announces my parents’ engagement under a picture of my mother in overalls. She shows it to me when I turn 15. She wonders if readers thought the girl in overalls was too young to get married, if she was one of those girls who needed to get married because she was pregnant. We work out some math: Mother married at the age of 15. My brother born when she’s 17. I was born when she turned 21 and all this time my father is still ten years older than she. Unable to answer why she married him she says, My parents just gave me away.
IV. LOVE

Now I can make myself a vase,

rim worn slowly,

worn with kissing

*

Kissing like that,

myself slowly kissing

*

Now I can make myself,

kept at his bedside, worn away

*

Now, bedside worn, he slowly

kisses me, his vase
There is no end in sadness
only wholeness unravel
the blue string
of love, there is no end
Words come, eyes closed so they can
keep their sadness
Erase one word
There is no end only in sadness
Day Two

Outside he, nude
Outside the open window
Outside the rain drop drop drop
Outside moon
   opened box of tools
   his hand pulls the blue string
   of
   quick, quick hail

Say a rose

Sorry, so sorry my body
   is trying to disappear
Day Three

Avoid water. Never dip your hands into sentences.

Nouns are black circles.

Several times a thought or your hand
stopped on my breast.

Avoid unearthing. The talent of your house
is room, is window, oven, pipes.

You love me yes

You love hush and tree top,

yellow, prickly sun

Draw your love where you're not supposed to
Day Four

Write down the man
Writing off his clothes

The woman rearranges paper furniture,
kills the man in bed but slowly
so he'll think his death is his.

Pray over a block of wet green foam pierced

with marigolds; a white cross, weak-kneed.
Day Five

It's been four days:

there is no end of sadness.

There is nothing but love circling the ground, blanketed-

blue, spider webbed.

Four days of prayers to build a mountain road

(children play below in dust)

By now you should be old enough to love,

to love the too cold the earth now,

open your heart, feel the cold wind

of open windows

Calla Lily burns in the mouth
Day Six

Say no frequently, no
white blouse no

white dress no

white veil no

white scream in the water no

white sails, children in the distance no

white moon moaning no

white ghost woman crying no

Say no, decolonize your desire
Day Seven

Guess what God's been up to.

When you guess you must open your heart. It is important to abandon your country. Learn the language of subtitle. Rethink your children.

You may ask no yes or no questions.

Guess quickly and correctly.

The tomatoes on the kitchen counter blacken.

Men and women birthed by a big explosion.

I have never seen an explosion make anything but a big mess.

Guess.
Day Eight

Generally it becomes necessary to undress at this point. Since sadness is not decorative, we must remove the horizon. Feel closer to the prickly sadness of light. Pulling the blue string unravels love.

There is no end, only wholeness. Heaven houses erased words and outside the rain rushes down the street in a hush hush.
Day Nine

Let the dove
Dovetail prayer and yet
Pray for chains
Open your heart whole
Sadness is the end
There the forgotten address
Blue ink blushing through
Words ending in roar
Raw unraveling of the soul
And you threadbare
And you, sadness
Begin in the failed rhythm of your parents’ bodies.

Your father rises from the Rio Bravo in a bell-bottomed suit,
takes your mother, quiet and warm like tar melting in a barrel.

In your Bible book, grasshoppers veil the terrified face of a woman.

A man in a golden robe destroys houses with doors clear of blood.

Grandmother dies. Your doll’s name: Dialysis.

Blind ants find the soft spot around the crab’s mouth,
eat it from the inside out. The book says Abraham bought a field
with large breasts. Your mother does not want any more children.

Hear hail hitting the roof. You pray over and over
until the words needle your eyes. Grandfather looks out the window.

Outside, in silence, children follow their mother home.

A swarm of clouds moves forward. Little strings on the sidewalk
worm to death.
DON’T LET THEM KNOW

When we search Ciudad Juarez for a gynecologist and avoid all the males ones, my mother tells me, “Don’t let them know we’re from El Paso or they will ask for more money.” One woman we visit works out of a room as small as a closet. She eyes me behind her desk and says I’m too young to have those kinds of problems. “Four months without her period?” she asks my mother and recommends that she pay 300 pesos so I can take a pregnancy test and have my ovaries checked. I turn to the examining table behind me; on it are stacked papers and a button-down sweater. The light bulb flickers. I search the walls for credentials, her desk for pictures of loved ones, her hands for rings, her eyes for that humanly connection. I find nothing. She says no gynecologist will see me unless I take a pregnancy test, “because, you know the kids of today,” and avoids looking at me for a moment, then looks at me as if confirming something. My mother gives her a twenty dollar bill so she can forget about us. We walk across the street into an antique jewelry store where we touch all the gold necklaces with the dangling first names of women in cursive gold. We rub the faces of men’s pocket watches on our sleeves.
TRAVELING BETWEEN TWO CITIES

We’re driving to Juarez to visit my grandfather. Juarez is the perfect escape, a place to be wicked. Why else would anyone endure the hell of waiting in line on a bridge in a car without air conditioning just to tell the border patrol agent that No, I’ve got nothing, when you do have something, a gun throbbing in the glove compartment, three boxes of penicillin in the bottom of your purse. I hear my father’s full bottles of beer clicking under the backseat. Traveling between two cities only makes us better liars.
When I am as tall as the corner of my grandfather’s car propped up on a jack, I dream of a cold wind and a room where, instead of a door, I find the entrance to a cave and a monster with white fangs and long nails that tears me apart.
V. CIRCLES
THE FLOOD

The morning after they discover bed sheets
blood-spotted crushed mosquitoes
under blue baby sky

When the baby’s born blind, he wonders if she touched
frogs behind the house is a cathedral behind
an ocean floating on water, his wife a square
of solitude behind the ocean

a pair of hands wave: a man pushing garbage past their house

She empties a bucket full of frogs
belly puffing tortillas on the stove

Behind a thinning striped shower curtain, he reads
a comic book: a woman with stars on her nipples has sex with a Brazilian
before pushing the flaming asteroid into the sun with her thumb

Rain gouged a maze of mud through the city
the sun settles
In the beginning, God burned the earth. Skyscrapers, trains, football fields, taverns sunk. The fire bloated the bellies of houses and little girls floated down neighborhoods on skeletons of cars. The smoke of God crawled over the faces of dying men. And God said, “Let man perish!” and men died. Screams deadened in the north and east and west and even in the south where men had been loud and agonizing. There was no morning or evening, one day.

And God said, “Let the whales emerge from the oceans, turtle shells become jewels, eels turn into wine.” The jewels hung from God’s ear lobes, the whales fashioned mountains. Eel wine poured into the chalice of God called “Heaven.” And there was darkness, a second day.

And God said, “Let there be a roof where I can sit and drink my wine, let there be limestone and dark caves!” And it was so. God’s hands smell like lime. And God said it was good, a third day.

And God said, “Let there be temperament, sun and the loneliness of the desert!” And it was so. And God finished his wine, placed his eyeball in the middle of the sky. And God saw that and said it was good. There was evening and there was morning, a fourth day.

And God said, “Let there be cock fights, bears, dumb birds, and poisonous frogs!” Every living creature multiplied and filled the earth. God said it was all good and there was evening and morning, a fifth day.

And God said, “Let there be Frida and a bus named Diego!” and Frida was born a vessel to be filled. The skeleton of God collapsed and Frida climbed into God’s green mouth, down his ribcage of roots, cartilage of sorghum. Frida found God’s fruit hanging as still and cloying as a heart.
WATER

Sunlit white letters someone painted on the mountain.

My grandmother’s house. What place should I give her.

To be the other city, roller pin or warm mattress in the outskirts.

She roasts onions and whispers the work of witches
crowding her backyard, scratching her name into the ground.

Grandmother’s lover dead. Her hands reddened with dust study
the crumbling ear of the other woman. My hands splatter in a barrel
edged with rust, sunshine-bottomed barrel behind her house, under
my feet a milk crate or shoe shine box. My brother stands next
to me so my body won’t fall in, so I won’t hear the devil.

My hands in the barrel: terror in my father’s eyes: I remain blue,
found thing, found quite like a circle, barreled cold and perhaps sweet.
CROP CIRCLES

For a dollar, he bought a picture of crop circles to replace his father

(In a picture frame, floured hands hold a baby crying the dark sound of chains)

lost in the desert, a box of crackers from a prison in Arizona in one hand, a man in the other,

(Burnt brown, the milk spills over. A baby dies then another is born)

no-tongued. Ants circle the dead cat in the backyard. He loves the picture,

(another cross in the backyard. The father’s baby is lost to sand)

the square of a vague ghost trapped in blue sky, white clouds: ufo

(or women in bed. She holds the baby in her arms, the only one left,)

circling, flattening crops. Out of the frame, he takes a picture of

(A boy. For her husband imprisoned for refusing to go to war,)

his father who brings a doll back from the desert,

(she poses. Inside her eyes, crops circle)

not knowing all the little girls are dead
WHERE WE LIVE

We paint the face of our old house in on Calle Boro every month. The neighborhood boys continue to humiliate each other in black graffiti. Across the street the clinic erects a limestone head of Miguel Hidalgo as big as an Olmec head.
THE CAT

The radio moans softly. Sitting on milk crates in the backyard and reading the newspaper, my parents crack peanuts out of their shells. My grandfather Rayo sits nearby. The only movie on tv is a Charles Bronson one and it’s too hot to sleep so I watch my grandfather from the kitchen window. His eyes are fixed on his shoes. A cat walks by, circles my grandfather’s chair, rubs its tail on his legs. He kicks it. The cat runs away for a moment then comes back, jumps onto my grandfather’s lap. He slaps it away. The cat jumps, turns around and climbs onto my grandfather’s lap again. His hand strikes. This goes on and on until my father asks him if he knows today’s date and Grandfather replies, “1996.” My father laughs and says, “Did you hear what the old man said? 1996!” He asks her, “What’s today’s date?” My mother folds the newspaper in reply. Grandfather caresses the cat on his lap without looking.
GRANDMOTHER VICENTA MOVES IN

Grandmother Vicenta moves in, occupies a corner of our bedroom where she spreads like a giant breast implant on my brother’s bed. The house is full of pink sugar packets and dots of blood on little white sticks. She eyes us when we enter the room, weeps as my mother props her on her side to clean her. My brother and I wonder if she is in pain but we never ask.

Uncle Antonio with the Big Gulp visits only to grumble about his brother Rosario with the cirrhosis and bags of candy. He never talks about the clothes he purchased with his mother’s social security check or the days he spent in his locked room eating boxes of crackers while his brothers and sisters starved. Life is like this for a while; my brother and I eat dinner in the kitchen but never in front of the tv because Grandmother Vicenta is watching her novelas. We hide our smiles from Grandmother who is toothless and sleeping when we want to play. Mother forces us to sit on the bed by Grandmother’s feet while she talks about Easter and ground beef frying in a pan and birds in the backroom of her house sleeping under sheets.
VI. FOR LOVE
THING OF LOVE

After Guillaume Apollinaire

I. Wedding

Love is the glut of the split sun.
Disgorged of youth, I follow you along a road
pickstitched with roosters. A road leads to absence,
a sky tainted a burning blue by noon where
my love comes undone on the flat sun of your face.
II. Ocean

To pyramid a house in the middle of the ocean, 
I fashion windows of yolk-colored flowers, 
paint murals of you with purpled lips, cricket eyelids.

My house, the third sun of the cognac ocean 
Full like glass
    my humble house
    my house, in flames
    the rapid heart beating
A plane flies over your forehead
Thick with thought

A thought pressed like a hand on the small of your back, 
a golden boon plucked from the sky, you are the loopy wind, 
ooze eyes of my house, the ocean restless for my mouth.
III. Kiss

If your neck is the toll of the entombed,
the spoked wheel of death, you have done well
to deny me of your earth swollen with dearth
that is your kiss
IV. Room

You are the burning field in the sweat of my windows,
eggshell light lit between my lips, the thing of love
hushed like smoke
V. Song

My name loosens the thick step
Loosening the nail, the chicken egg

My name a blanket of the sun

And the cry of wind from your green mouth
follows like song
HE IS IN BED

I see the sock he came into, twice today, while watching those girls in the free porn channels online.

I blame myself. The night of our second date I took him to the video store owned by a little Indian man. A red door separated the adult section from the rest. He didn’t want to open the door but I pulled him in, begged him to pick a movie. He didn’t want anything with big black socks or Swedish women. We scrutinized the image on the box of a movie called “This Pussy is a Mess,” a close-up of a dripping vagina pried open by two fingers. He chose “Babes in Space.”
My mother had three defining dreams: in the first, her inability to speak resulted in my father’s death. He reached for a soda bottle foaming at the lip and she was unable to tell him not to take a drink. Every time she tried to say something, a wad of gum appeared in her mouth. Every time she removed it, stuck it in her hair, on the wall or under a table, the gum reappeared in the back of her mouth, bigger and stickier than before. My father died, his fingertips digging into his stomach, as my mother chewed.

In the second dream, a woman forces my mother to sign a document. At first, the pen slips out of her hand then her hand begins to shake uncontrollably. My mother begins to sign the “A” or her first name but a curl or a straight line or just another “A” as vacant and fat follows. The name she finally signs is another woman’s name.
He snores, stirs a bit when I get into bed. In her third dream, my mother struggles to pull up her underwear. It is fixed to her ankles. Pulling it is like carrying the earth.

My mother manages to pull up her underwear, walks outside and crosses the street before realizing it is fixed to her ankles again. I slip under the covers and the rustle of my body wakes him. He says, “You know I love you,” before he drifts back to sleep.
OF A MOON

After Rene Char

I. The Chain

Our boat shivered
    the moon, a veiled wound
sandwiches fly-licked
    sun, the spiral sky of blood
II. My Love in the Robe Blue like Fire

My love in the robe blue like fire,
cool my seething face heavy
with the husk of a moon
worshipping you in secret

I love you, blood red alive
inside of me, your city. You are an iron horse
merciless against the trees of my eyes

Mouthfuls of you  (forgive me, my love)
make me sick
III. In Company of a Vain Woman

I loved you. I loved the orange hanging in the branch of your breast.

Some believe in an image of love so round.  
For me it was sufficient.

But now you dispossess me so,  
thieving smoke from another poor man’s mouth,  
that I want to pull your hair out.
I NO LONGER WANT TO DIE

I no longer want to die. I fork a piece of steak and my mother sits next to me. She tells me that while I was gone she painted a saint on a round piece of cardboard and traced faces of models on red construction paper. She shows me the saint and the faces; I feel like an egg yolk pouring out of its membrane.

She gives me a newspaper photo of a woman whose body is hidden under the wings of a butterfly. On the wall, the bodies of butterflies dried and pinned to velvet tremble in their frames. A train trembles by.
LOVE, QUICKLY SEEK TO QUIET

Forget the curtains, I don’t like windows. Dark creatures in the ocean’s bottom,

Forget the half-eaten. Forget x-ray vision. Mountains outside fold.

Forget the baby in plaid. Forget the neighbor’s cacti on fire. Forget a letter

Rarely means love. Turn on the light, love gets in my eyes. Let the chain

Hang down your back. Forget the baby knows she is loved. Paint your lips

The color of a mature peach. I’m hurting. Open a window. Forget my hair is real.

Forget pieces of glass line the wall separating our house from our neighbor.

Forget the baby doll. Wear edible jewelry. Drink a glass of water.

In the other room, the baby screams a little then falls asleep. Forget dreams.

Forget the motorcycle speeding by. Only women in movies wear bikinis,

Gold hoops, fur coats. Forget I am too old to flirt. Rubber plant, make it holy.

Our blanket looks like stretched skin. Open a window. Forget fire.
VII. WOMAN
THE RELUCTANT MOTHER

I.

Part of the problem is that we don’t struggle with *two roads diverged in a yellow wood*. We say it the way we zip up our pants. Our tongues dial the number of the same words answered over and over: *What has gotten into her?*

II.

Look how quickly I have become my mother.

\[
I \text{ said my mother-}
\]
\[
\text{it seems as if}
\]
\[
I \text{ love her, don’t it?}
\]

The man sleeps on the floor next to my bed.

I am sorry that I have not listened to me. A tongue says *three and tree and three* I say

*I hold your body in my hands* I say  
*Hush keeps flies out of the mouth* I say  
*Memory is a stranger’s dog* I say  
*Make your cunt into a kite and let it fly* I say  
*Its own mouth kills the fish* I say  
*Never sell the bear skin without killing the bear* I say  
*Don’t listen to your mother* when he returns to bed.

III.

In Indiana, your mother from Parral says Villa died, in the eyes of school children, a dirty face and boiling blood. Women pestled prayers and would not touch him. Skirts flickered, and Villa, powdered, cooled into the night. Your father speaks of discarnate broncos, turkeys with faces of witches and a bloated red eye beaming into the back of your head, *turn around turn around*.

When they speak of love the car speeds through Missouri. Your father drives drinking grape soda. Mother makes cheese and bologna sandwiches on her purse. You reach Oklahoma and you can’t understand how these things are about you. Your mother says even the raven born in the egg of your home will pluck your eyes out. Rare trees blot the highway. There’s the moment your voice starches and thistles. A sheep on a hill says *bah*.

IV.

I turn twenty-something again.
I turn twenty-something over and over. It makes me fold like the crusty photograph of a train flattening a penny. I’ve had this photograph for a while.

I enter the room ballooned in which our voices but not our answers are trains derailed by cows. And I can see that they wear cone hats that read ONE STEP CLOSER TO THE GRAVE. We face each other while the cake freezes in the green refrigerator in the raven’s room.

They say I turn twenty-something again and the baby gives me coo and bah bah bah.

Under my cake slice I see he has been writing. My napkin reads **amazing how your armpit is so soft and vaginal.**

I think this is what happens when your car breaks down. Oil drips down my thighs, my red-laced body is trapped in rubber hose, a fireman pulls the end as I twirl. Jealousy is waking the dead man behind the steering wheel.

V.

I tell him a man punishes a woman by turning her into living dead. The man does not believe this. He prefers the boiling of feet in a boot. He asks me if all I think about is living dead women or eating cake.
YOU ARE THE ANNOYING GIRLFRIEND

You are the annoying girlfriend we want to break up with You are our only daughter
You are my sister, don’t let me down You are better than us with the college degree on the wall but you don’t know about life You are intelligent like your dad’s sisters You are heartless like your dad’s sisters You are the little girl sitting on top of the refrigerator singing a watermelon song You went to college so far away, like a cloud You destroyed the loteria board game the day you lost all your money

You smiled as you sat on the little boy’s trembling knee at the end of the folklorico dance You never wanted to undress in front of me in the dressing room You taught me to say I love you You ate my m&m’s when you were doing the Atkins diet You asked your grandfather if he’s afraid of the devil and relish that neither of you are You make fun of me because I like Buffy the Vampire Slayer You believe in that faceless figure with a skirt on a cross made out of straw You are Alice the Best in my computer game

You believe in the motion of your fingers crossing over your forehead, shoulders and lips You are Lichita at the dinner table, at the sink with your hands in the water with the wet corn husk leaves You are dark-skinned like those indias on the street begging for money, selling cheese and chicles You are a woman with a proud face You are the only person I believe in You are deceit You are pain You live in our silence
My grandmother’s spirit floats above me in sweet disappointment. Women never undid buttons or cracked zippers like smiles. Women like this never made their vaginas into kites and let them float.

The body is a natural thing. I hear male models find it difficult to pose in their underwear so women tell them their bodies are art; men’s bodies are sculpture, plaster and paint. But the body is that thing that makes me go to bed even when his index finger and thumb dig into my gums through my cheeks. I open my eyes as my palm closes tightly into a fist. He turns over and I run my fist down his spine. When he doesn’t turn, I am buttons scattered on the floor. I open my palm and rub it against my thigh as if it’s dirty. I want to punch him.
ALL OF HIS

The room is too cold / Let me make you come / I never told you / You’ll be old and ugly, I’ll be wrinkled and grumpy / Get me some lemonade / You are the love of my life / You’ve lived a crappy life / I want to have a baby with you / Hold me / There is ice on the ground / Call them about the alarm / Love me only / You’re an ass / Be smart / I wore that shirt last Friday / Don’t be a bitch / We are family now / I love you / I’m hungry / I like a crease down the legs of my pants / Let’s go live in the forest / I want to grow old with you / I gave up so much for you / Just do as I say / You never want to open the window / Be good to me / Be positive / You want the baby to love you? / I’m telling you the truth / You are everything to me

I whisper them into the night like prayers

I bake and eat them for dessert

I finger them like the beads of a rosary

I pour them over my body like honey
Women in the kitchen where they belong
twist sugar into children. See birds hiding under
the cool of a car. Some children have
raisins in their bellies. Don’t know where God is,
the women say, come inside. All women wear aprons
although some of butterflies, some of children saying mama,
mama. A house burning across the street
lets go in a half-hearted crackle. Women say, come here.
Their hands pull and pull dresses over the children’s heads.
Neighbors pull a couch and a woman out from under.
Below her skin, rubies blister. Women say,
come closer. The sun begins to set on the breast of a sooty bird.
Later it will yellow wedding dresses downtown.
THE OVARY

The sprinklers lightly moisten our shoes. There are other people at the park so my mother uses her secret voice to tell me her ovary swelled to the size of a plum because my father did not allow her to visit the gynecologist. She says that as soon as her menstruation became heavy and painful, my father decided that gynecologists had the best jobs men could have and that women visited them when they wanted to cheat on their husbands. She says he said, “Imagine if all I had to do at work was touch women’s parts?”
THE WEDDING DRESS

I wanted to see myself in my mother’s yellow bathing suit but it is another thing in her barrel full of clothes that at age twelve I cannot fit into. Clothes from my mother’s youth: terry cloth hot pants, Action West jeans, army colored tiger and Eiffel tower print shirts, a fur coat. While hiding the bathing suit, I find a yellowed wedding dress with fake diamonds I bite off as my mother busies herself in the kitchen. Ruining the pleats, I enter the body of her wedding dress slowly. She yells my name. My body curves as I tear myself into my mother’s body.
CIUDAD JUAREZ

I.
After she learned her whole name, I lost her outside
Mal de ojo I found her in the middle of laundromat gossip,
ironed shirts wrapped in plastic. Women gave her buttons
to teach her words are also things

II.
The dead go like fire down the neighborhood of cardboard houses.
   The dead go home.

III.
My daughter: fat Mongolian spot on the side of her hip
   Blue map of pre-Columbian moon
round Africa prelapsarian

IV.
The dead live on dry grass and song. And the dead: woman of heart attack,
woman of parched face, woman burning in the evidence room, go home.

V.
The dead, raise your chin and give the living one last kiss.

To think of this desert where Jesus once spread in a watermark
on the ceiling of my bedroom

And this desert: city of dead women,

Have here all you can’t have there.

This desert: city of the dead, city of road,
thigh and machine.

I see the edge of the road is mountain,
I see
   so far
God still here.
VIII. HUNGER
VIDEOTAPE

My brother and his friend Rudy collect poker cards and pictures of naked women washing cars and brushing the hair of horses; hide them in a place that, due to the desert and the predictably hot weather of Texas, seems like the perfect hiding place: our winter coats. Dropping quarters into the pockets of her black wool coat, my mother finds the pictures and a video tape.

The tape my mother made me watch and translate was not pornography. It was a terrible movie about a lonely woman’s life. The woman wearing a tuxedo sat on a half moon and smoked into the nothingness of her failed marriage. In the next scene, she stepped out of an indoor pool topless before returning to the half moon. Overly dramatic, poorly filmed and scripted, the movie became my mother’s obsession. She worried that the missing sexual intercourse in the movie was a clear sign that my father had failed to teach my brother how to be a man.

My father came home late that night. My brother grounded my brother for weeks. The next day I missed school and my mother and I watched “Never Talk to Strangers” starring Antonio Banderas.
GORILLA

My father sips beer by the railroad tracks in El Paso with his friend Margarito so Armando takes us to the Feria de Juarez. He wins a stuffed black gorilla with a banana in its mouth. Even though I think it is hideous, the gorilla sits on my lap and I love the way the light flickers on its beady eyes as we ride the train around the Feria. Armando asks me if he can give the gorilla to his girlfriend and promises to give me something prettier when I start to cry. I see Lilia admiring the gorilla; he turns away and embraces her. I spend the night avoiding her eyes.
TRUE LIES

At night we visit the video store with the movie posters behind a tall wooden counter and an adult room my uncles disappear into while I beg my mother to buy cracker jacks. When we get home, my uncles invite me upstairs to watch what they’ve rented.

My parents sleep and the street lights are bright against their faces. I climb upstairs on my hands and knees and sit on the floor in front of the television. The movie is “True Lies” and Jamie Lee Curtis has just torn her dress to look more like a prostitute. A figure in the dark tells her to undress slowly.

I don’t look at her face but I turn to look at theirs—the image on the television is bright against their faces. They have that hungry look, that unblinking desire to see that naked thing more naked than Curtis on the screen.
He caresses her neck, tries to slide his hand under her shirt to show her that the rib in Spanish is called “Costilla.”
In my dream, the street is empty and moonlight shines on our faces. My father and I sit in a car; I sit in the back and he pretends to drive. He tells me to get off once we reach the panaderia but we had been parked outside of it all along. The sidewalk is empty and the panaderia is closed. I say to my father, “Maybe there is another entrance in the back.” I go behind the panaderia and find three men on their right knees waiting for me. I turn back but my father’s car is gone. The moonlight shines on my face and I’m a little girl.

Across the street, the auto repair shop is open and the greasy men with wrenches and posters of naked women tell me to come in.
Wolves sleep under skinny trees. Your daughter hands you a basket. The sun, she says, smells like an onion. You must fry 2 pounds of onions to make your soup. In the frying pan, they cook to half a pound. Your daughter is afraid of wolves. The sun withers the flowers in your basket. This is how you wrap a belt around the skinniest part of your trunk. This is how you hide. See how the sun brings the world to light.
II.

Grandmother follows with her skeletal walk. Her bones make baskets.

In your transparent dress, you float above like a thought, your daughter at your breast. Grandmother says, I’ve been around wolves ever since onions made Jesus cry. Your daughter’s fear triggers the let-down. Let her see your face as your breast turns soft. She will move if she can’t breathe.

A pause is a swallow, her mouth guides.
III.

Whistle a soft song for your daughter in the dark, wake from a long dream of dying among skinny trees. First you picked little flowers then bees bloated your body with stings. The belt around your waist is the tiny ribbon on your daughter’s head. You could say the donut of your mouth powdered with disappointment. Listen for the answer: bloated with stings, who could love you now?
This is a recipe to love your pots and pans: First, cut your mother into strips, Place in a bowl. Add salt and pepper, grind. Bone the father, cut along the back. Spread out, skin side down. Spread the mother over the father, press together. Fold them into a cylinder, sew the ends. Place the bundle in a large stock pot. Add liquid, boil. Remove from pot and set aside on a plate. When cool, Decorate with vegetables. Turn on the radio. Wrap a scarf around your neck. Reassemble the vegetables so that they resemble faces. Ignore the redness of eyes.
V.

I love my mother the way the fish loves jumping out of the frying pan.

Grandmother says the sound of wolves chewing ankles is like an egg cracked in her beer.

I horse-laugh but I am afraid of wolves. My house of red bricks so far, the bees burst like flowers in our baskets. We bust a gut running. Grandmother’s feet follow with their yuk yuk sound. Silly is my mother’s hand, her basket full of flowers. And dying under skinny trees my mother’s body bloated with stings. And her fat mouth speaks,

There once was a hole in the middle of the ground and in this hole is the prettiest mother

That you ever did see
VI.

I enter my daughter’s room but my daughter is not there. I find her notebook under a tiny window.

She writes  I would like to eat myself. I will start with my toes. Then I will eat myself up until I reach the belly button. I will not eat my belly button. I will eat my belly and then my arms. I will not eat my head for that is where the mouth is and I will need my mouth so that I can eat my arms. First my left so I can hold my right. Notice then, the knuckle bone in my mouth. Notice the fingertips littering the floor
CIUDAD JUAREZ II

City of hanging
strips of leather and button-down dresses

metal-clipped hangers,
spooling men and women
clinch fabric under the soft light of
18 hour shifts

Bus driver, slow down
in the shadows so I can sleep
a little

hands cut legs to petite,
fix broken zippers
men and women stitch their flowers
down legs of jeans, count pesos per collars

Bus driver, drive slowly over shoes,
let the women sleep

under needles

men and women rivet
despite the droning song of so many
half-bodies bleeding in barrels

the road home is riddled
with women's shoes, teeth

Bus driver go slow, I like it slow

City: inseam of blood,
turned-on machine
Hear the touch of love turn denim
TRAVELING BETWEEN TWO CITIES II

When I think of the desert I think of sidewalks and cracked streets named Alameda and Trowbridge, an I-10 exit to the bridge of the Americas or my best friend’s house. My uncle Antonio digs graves while sipping on Big Gulps at the Evergreen Cemetery.

The virgin sister of a whore. Here the Rio Bravo is the Rio Grande and Pancho Villa roams. One constant star on the Franklin mountain, a scenic drive for teenage lovers, the eagle of Aztlan on the wall of one abandoned community center. When I think of desert I think of midnight and the downtown lights bright against the closed stores’ metal gates pulled down, chained to the ground. My father wears his beer bottle colored Ray Bans and we are quiet in the back of the car, relieved that the border patrol agent did not ask any more questions. My father drives in the white lights of the checkpoint, drives slowly over the yellow speed bumps and through a maze of cement walls. In my mother’s purse is a box of penicillin and high blood pressure medication. I pull a mango out of my pocket.
FINAL VISIT

We give up and drive to Dr. Castillo’s office with the cracked lamps and exposed light bulbs, the cemented and grooved benches covered with bright red and blue cushions in the waiting area, the birdless cage and young receptionist, the radio tuned to Yuri oldies. We walk past the smiling papier-mâché frogs sunbathing and into his office with the Betty Boop nurse figurines, the painting of a landscape with a waterfall and a bridge scrolling in its frame, the unused cotton balls and a tiny examination table folded like a woman holding her stomach in pain. Dr. Castillo sits behind a table. He is portly, pale and old like Santa Claus. He asks me, “What’s wrong, mi’ja?”

My mother answers. I haven’t had a period in four months.

“Well you need to lose weight, I can see it, you look a little heavy,” he replies. My mother flashes me the I told you look.

“But you need to take a pregnancy test before I can prescribe anything,” he concludes. I promise Dr. Castillo that I’m not pregnant but he needs proof, just to make sure, because, he says, “you know, today’s girls sometimes walk in here and don’t even know they’re pregnant. Or if they know, then they really don’t want to know.”
TALKING TO HERSELF

My mother is talking to me but she might as well be talking to herself. The little woman who looks like a gnome with wooden teeth takes my blood from the top of my hand because she cannot find a vein in my arm. We take the results to Dr. Castillo who says birth control will lure my period back. This upsets my parents; they shift in their tiny green chairs and say I cannot possibly take birth control. They ask me what I think about taking birth control and I don’t know what to say. I know I have no choice. My parents take me to a restaurant across the street where we eat chile colorado burritos in silence.
IX. DISFIGUREMENT
without glass    nude men dot

    the air windowed    glass cuts the white face of feet

palms over genitalia    nude slab cool under    the nobody here

nobody wants to fuck    no blind curtain of the sun

    removed windows from a wall

hollow blocks where I slip    my hand steals inside

    nude blocks where I slip a hand

over a white floored body    hand inside mouth

    inside my mouth a whistling    dotted air

the dot of a man’s finger: there is a woman out there
In the beginning, God descended upon the earth from the heavens. Half of the earth hid from God, forgot why and fell asleep. The other half walked to the bottom of the ocean and created countries. God floated on canals, carved his name on trees, danced a one-God, slow cheek-to-cheek dance in taverns, snored in movie theaters, waited for the train to flatten his penny. And he said, “Let there be light!” And God removed his robe.
Lilia is the love of Armando’s life. He brings home a picture of a white fat face and a body hidden in black academic regalia. Lilia stands in front of a shelf full of books with titles in gold print I cannot read.

One day Armando and Lilia make love for the first time in my grandfather’s bed. One night he begins working at the liquor store where a transsexual co-worker pursues him relentlessly. One day Armando visits the hospital because a piece of steak has glued itself to his intestines. We find out the hospital visit was due to a venereal disease Armando had contracted. One night Lilia shows up at his new job at the Papillon night club and pours a bowl of menudo on his lap. One day he comes home with a scratched, torn face.

One night Armando disappears into marriage. He begins to listen to Banda Machos, thinks about raising chickens. He and Lilia bring home a baby girl who grows so big she topples over if no one supports her back. Armando shoots himself. That night he sleeps deep in the earth, broken-faced, wrapped like a worm.
I. The first thing I see when I look in the mirror

I see you. His eyes see you, disapprove. The newspaper tongue inside my mouth waits for a spell. I want to calf-love, put my power to bed. My Rio Grande mind waits waits Eyes want to eat you. I see what men cannot see. I see my breasts are disappointed children. The bend up there in the sky, the tree branches spread like rumors. I am sagging with rain
II. My eyes wrinkle in corners

Espanto: white horse. The plump of carps circling our ankles as we cross the river. The first slap to the face under the cranial moon.
My face where all houses are exactly alike.
   Slit eye. Fish eye of a house.
   Conserve your house in a cake of wax.
   House of bones: 15 fragments, 26 whole in red dust.

I am speaking from a point of ignorance. Doesn't light make the beautiful make it beautiful
How is it that when I drive to the edge of the sun, my shadow there is ugly?
III. In the mirror, my breasts are small

I enter a world of sleep where
a woman’s body is home.

The civilized world of my mother's body lies in ruins.
   I sleep in the belly of a monkey never
dreaming of heaven.

I see you.

Welt of a shoe, woman grown thick with wealth. My voice
was dynamite in the cave with a lonely yellow bird. Hear
the creaky, swinging bridge over the canyon mouth of the
earth.
Should I mention the mirror of gold?
IV. My voice doesn’t matter. My voice doesn’t reflect

I wanted to say I am lone
round tumbling toils of the land but said
instead my body divides into hundreds
where he walks

Who is a deserted settlement?
I followed where others had been by using the work of a circle.

Zumbido: ghost.

Copa: man on his knees.

Vuelo: orange.

Desaguar: demon. After Jesus flew to heaven, each woman threw a word into the ocean.
V. To be seen only after I’ve used the mirror

Hombre: contained thing like divorce. In the center of the room is a woman. (This is a true story)
Need of a woman is a spiritual need.
To need a woman is to need a spiritual need.
There are circles pillars trees living as women here.

And what does man do? Redefine human flight?
But why is the word like a daughter?
Where is the metaphor of the son?

I wanted to say please keep the body under one hundred and forty pounds please keep the nipples pointing at the sun please keep a paved road a word in my mouth. And you know the rest of my body.

Listen.

Mamacita: taco de tripa, divinity, today an empty question, slave, my own old days, peppered trope, enough violence, mountain, never touch, give her a mango, no other thing
Because I have not forgiven myself I have become an iceburg of numbers an experimental fruit hanging in the word sky.
VI. A closet full of dresses

My body is the real thing. I see you. The bees buzz pink flowers onto trees. Pink sunlight seeps through windows framing my eyes. The sun's eye devours itself when I speak to it. My pagan god of a voice, I see you. In front of the mirror, I repeat your every move. Acá: tape over mouth. The place where I come from is symmetry of border,

the border is experience of the unknown word. The place where I come from is a creature named qualia.

The border happened and nothing could be done about it. Woman in the mirror, I see you. I want to calf-love, put my blessing to bed. My Rio Grande mind waits and waits and waits oystered is this natured memory of love unique to no one, his mustache mounted, his breath rivered, his forehead sunflowered in the mirror, you know.

A man’s body becomes things. A man’s body can do things. A man’s body is not the thing to move mountains but the mountain itself.
My woman is not a word whispered in the middle of the night.

Because I have not forgiven myself

When time shows up

alive on my footsteps, he'll apple wrinkle

my face but by then

My woman is not the moon strangled in a wave.

woman after the apple

This is a dream: a green rubber band around the moon and the statue, piece by piece, recognized Michelangelo's hand. When Michelangelo died, the statue stole his hand and healed no one except a blind man who didn't want to see. The town burned a painting of a playground where all children were happy except one
VIII. My body in a dress. Dress the body I have

I see you.
He asks me to paint his face brushing against other women’s breasts.
He writes words on the mirror,
words about my face like stove frying pan wing
Pain is the street behind our house
Pain Street lined with dead trees.
The neighbor walks his dog.

Cucurrucucu: hunger. Love sings outside of my window. The road curves around the field empty of scarecrow and black swan. My word-of-mouth fattens the night. My pupils dilate at the sound of your grovel but I cannot eat scorpions.
I say woman effortlessly. It is easy to sperm and egg. I am not afraid of women born with eyes.
When love sings outside of my window, I lick the air.
Noise blots a bat into the cave of my lampshade.
I guide the river of schema into my mouth. No one remembers to cover up the mirrors during thunderstorms.
No one remembers
IX. Woman in the mirror

I see you.
Woman unlike woman since woman
Woman near Woman inside woman
Woman as buckshot

Nobody swims in the bottom of the narrative.
Woman against woman

Circulo: home. I walked home in the middle of the night. The moon limestoned my footsteps. My hands were god. Night sunk behind my ear. I unlocked the door, turned on every light. Nothing in my god was where it was supposed to be. God, it was lonely. My bed was not god, the open windows allowed god to embrace me. I wanted to sleep but I looked at myself in the mirror instead. I looked like god. Nothing else since then has ever been more like god.
X. Speak or Cinch the Belt

I wish for the ocean idleness of beauty to erupt. I wish for every blue thing. I see you.

Mueca: woman. Bird nest of a big mouthed mandrilled world in the spine of the night, forehead of heart attack, illicit lightning stricken tongue in the mouth of a time, crocodile and citron.

A woman’s body is home.

Thorax of forgetting,

ankle nude deep
in covet and square,
a flattened dime for a face.

Beauty is
the ground inside
where a woman is stain-glassed, cadence, salt.

I see you. Mirror: back bone of ruin.

Woman, unfolding with silt,
body of a hunter,
with its blood eye of a bull sky

See what men cannot see
WHEN WE ARE AFRAID

Everyone shakes while the bus driver takes our purses.
   I become cavity, flowers buzzed onto limbs of trees
Tapes over our mouths, our voices stripped, our purses emptied,
   I hear the scratch of tines against rocks.
Men command us to get on our knees. Unmasked, they take us one by one,
   The headline reads: Lightning struck only once
Down a line, one by one as someone takes a picture, a nipple to hang around his neck.
   52 cows are dead. Cold water turns white:
The Greeks knew knowing was becoming: our bodies knowing become echo
   anything anything says is wisp
When we are afraid. Our bodies shake as the men pull out our hair. Weeping
   in the rotten mouth of a cow.
Weeping upsets tape. Tape undone, weeping doesn’t soften men
   Who knew a thing with life in its eyes
   Could have that instinct to press
   against a wire fence during a storm.
Bibliography


