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RIVERSIDE

Breaking Earth Poems

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Scott Mcnaul Hernandez

June 2012

Thesis Committee

Prof. Juan Felipe Herrera, Chairperson

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Dr. Chris Abani

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The Thesis of Scott Mcnaul Hernandez is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

To my son Joaquin Olin Flores

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all poets at UCR that helped me along this journey: Evangeline, Yuri, Angel, Rachel, Jesus, David, Eric, Kaitlin, Ching-in, Nicelle, Aviva, Noel, V Zamora.

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The sacredness of this obligation shall never be lost sight of by the said (US) Government, when providing for the removal of the Indians (and Chicanos) from any portion of the said territories, or for its being settled by citizens of the United States; but, on the contrary, special care shall then be taken not to place its Indian (and Chicano) occupants under the necessity of seeking new homes, by committing those invasions which the United States have solemnly obliged themselves to restrain.

-Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo-

What We lost In The War

Nahuatl=Calli

Spanish = casa, dormitorio

Portuguese=casa

German = Hause (Haus)

French=Maison

Italian= Casa

Slovak= Dom

Arabic= Mazil (منزل) or Bayt (بيت)

Breton = (a language of France): Ti

Haitian Creole= Kay

Icelandic=Hús

Sardinian (a language of Italy)= Dómmu

Welsh= Tŷ

Nahuatl=Calli

English= house or home

The Canal

The August night
cools the fields
we run and jump
into the long green canal
of brackish pesticide
tinged water.
Like little brown fish
near rows of strawberries
and almond trees
we laugh and bathe
in the orange moonlight
trying to wash away
the days' grease and dust.
Under a sea of shadows and starlight—
I am heartbroken
season will turn
we will leave
soon I will be shivering
in the used water we all share
near the packing shed
as the sun falls
upon us.

Smudging

A cold front comes through the valley, threatening the orchard. The air stings our hands and takes our voices. The trees are silent; they wait for the dark clouds of smoke to overtake their leaves. We fill the pots of used motor oil and kerosene. Enough to warm the ones in the middle as the first darkness enters the grove. I help my grandfather fire the pots as the large fans rush the warm air into the leaves.

My grandfather, an orange picker, has worked the grove all his life, except for some time spent in Iwo Jima. He wouldn't talk about that except to say that the orange grove at dusk reminds him of a sea of grayish green foam floating on pacific kelp beds. I watch the trees and I wonder if we will survive this season. Most of our citrus is on the ground; we will be lucky to save a third of this harvest. End of night before the sunlight comes to us. I go, leave the trees to their fate. Once inside I see my grandmother close her eyes and clutch her rosary; I kiss her and head to my room before exhaustion takes me.

Grapevines

I went out and picked
some red grapes

From vines near
The neighbor's fence.

The sun was high and fiery
The grass was burnishing under

I squeezed a grape between
My fingers and it tasted of you.

A bee buzzed between the veins
I thought of you, and the time

You said you loved the night sky
Did I ever listen? Instead of staying awake

To watch night with you,
I slept and you slipped away.

My Father's Ranch

The grey barn
full of oily
chicken
feathers
dirt so dry
hard
not even
blood
would soak
in.

Las Palomas (Betrayal)

I often think about the days spent in my grandmother's backyard, among her wall of nopal cactus that grew along her fence line. Close by she had a large wooden cage that held her doves. She said the birds reminded her of Mexico, when she was young and alone raising my mother.

My grandfather was a Bracero, working in the U.S. and gone for more than four years. Sometimes she thought maybe he forgot his promise to come back to her. She said her birds kept her busy and their songs made her feel less lonely. At eight I didn't understand what she meant but I knew that she loved those birds, especially now that abuelo was gone into the grey winter sky.

Often sick, with blood clots moving up her legs, I would visit her in the rest home on Thursdays. I had to sit next to her hospital bed and rub her legs and feet. Often she would ask me to turn up the heat on her blanket. I said I would but never did (Nurses orders).

I remember the way she ran a sharp knife up and down both sides of the cactus pads, scraping away the spines and needles. She'd bring them inside and dice them into long thin cuts of green, fry them with some fresh eggs and tomate.

The last day I saw her, she begged me to take her back to Mexico. I told her I would, kissed her on the forehead and pretended to turn up the heat on her blanket. Then I left and went to meet my girlfriend. I wonder if she thought of my grandfather that day she died.

Immense Sky

For AV

The small silver cloud
Passes along
A gray winter sky
The white skin of moon
Shows through the half-light
On a hill above me.

The shine of the silver
Against a gray sky,
Reminds me
Of the girl
In the yellow sweater,
Skin the color of crushed
Cinnamon, eyes the shade of honey
When the first light of day
Strikes them.

She is made of whispers
Wind and the fire
That burns within her.

She dreams in poems
Sometimes she says,
Love is hard never soft
It comes then leaves
Like tides on the shore
Of the moon.

12921 Hunter's Ranch Road

I can still see the rows of chicken cages and corrals,
brown snotty-faced kids, bare feet and running after each other.
I remember the melodies of the ranchera music,
“Amanecí en Tus Brazos” and “Ay Jalisco No Te Rajes”
As it would play across the makeshift dance floor
of the horse corral, we would dance. I can still see the
dust as it would rise like small cumulous clouds around our feet.

I was just a boy—I couldn't do anything about the changes and loss.
I can't remember when things began to disappear. First the cows and pigs,
then the rabbits left their cages. Slowly the egg graders, the truck loaders,
left in twos and threes, then their houses near the barn rattled empty with wind.

Only an old shoe and an abandoned cat lived among the bungalows,
near the barn that collapsed. One by one the windows were broken and doors
fell off their hinges. Then cages were sold for scrap and large metal water
feeders were taken; the dust settled and covered all of us left behind.
The farm of my childhood is now just a street through a small town, but once
it was mi ranchito.

Demolished, erased forever— fields have become golf courses and gated sub-divisions.
Hunter's Ranch lives only in the dust of my dreams.

Lost

I turned sixteen
Dreamt of leaving
Home.
Finding hope somewhere
Learning to love
Or just, feel
Something.

I wanted nothing more
Than to pull myself from the gutter.
Leave the self
-destruction and violence
That was my family life,
I had to kill myself, become
Someone new,
I lived in a ditch
Of sewers
Rats and roaches
Of my city, I stole from the police station.

As long as I had that dream
Of more
Nothing else mattered
Not eating, not writing
Not praying, not fucking.

In the bleak light
Of a day's sadness
I felt like nothing
And nothingness
Surrounded me.

But the dream
I had, lived on
Deep in my spirit
Between my heart
And lungs
Left of the spine. It was always there
When things got hard, like
The day they shot Miguel
That nightmare, they made
Filling my head

Haunting me for years.
You'll grow up and forget
The pain, leave behind the
Labyrinth of loss
But you will grow
Leave and find hope
And love again.

Tonight

I can't sleep tonight
Remembering you
I thought back
To the day when
I kissed you and I felt
Your silence
I waited to be
Embraced by it.

We held hands,
As we lie in the grass
On that little
Hill to watch fire
fill two skies
between two moons
and Sun
I didn't want to
See rise.

Tio Jesus

With Desert Storm over, my tio Jesus came home. Walking home in his sandy colored camouflaged jacket with nothing but sore feet and a thirsty mouth, he returned to take his seat at Rosie's bar and Mexican food. He would tell stories and sing his favorite corridos. I loved him for that. He would often scream a loud grito when his favorite song came on, "El Rey" would play as tio Jesus would take on all comers, drinking and singing them into a drunken stupor.

It seemed un-American to throw him out the way they often did. He would walk home and dance as the dogs barked in the alley. I could hear him coming and I'd run to start the coffee. He would be falling and laughing on the concrete, his compadres would scrape up his remains and carry him into the house.

My family is here in this cemetery in Loma Linda where we gather around my fallen uncle we kneel among candles and virgins. We softly chant as my grandmother rubs his head with sacred water, we pray for him to rise in three days.

Orange Blossom Festival - Riverside, Ca 1990

Each summer my family would walk the streets of downtown Riverside, mostly because it was free and we could walk from our small apartment. I remember the smell of orange blossoms wafting through our apartment windows, and the oranges—trying to eat a whole bag by myself. I remember the sugary juice of the oranges sticking to my fingertips. My grandfather taught me to peel an orange in one long slice from the bottom up. He let me use his pocketknife to do it, the one he carried all the way from Los Altos de Jalisco, Mexico. I told him it said “Made in Japan” on the back, but he insisted it was from Jalisco, like him. I laughed, continued eating another orange from the bag.

They celebrated everything orange—candied slices, marmalades, sugar cookies, ice cream, orange covered bacon, orange beer, orange blossom tea. But we celebrated the workers, orange pickers like us, the ones who worked the small ranches and the big groves, the people up from Mexico and across the ocean from Japan and China who came to work oranges. I wondered if they smelled the orange blossoms in their countries— did they call to them, if the scent of the small white flowers and blossoming trees invaded their dreams and brought them here like us, with oranges and little else in their hands.

Earth Against My Back

I lay in the apple orchard,
only the touch of earth against my back.
Looking up and watching the apples ripen,
nearby sits a day's labor;
crates of Red Delicious,
Ozark Gold, and Granny Smiths.

I've worked the ladder all day
moved quickly between the rows
pulling and plucking
and cutting the fruit.
I've cut and pricked my fingers
given and shared my blood
with trees.

Sometimes and Once in a While

--After Luis Omar Salinas--

Sometimes I feel I am getting old and heavy with years. Then once in a while I see a beautiful woman— maybe she smiles at me, reminding me of the Milky Way— and I feel young and light again. Then sometimes I stare into my little boy's eyes or I see him laugh and I remember being young like that, when nothing mattered but running as fast as I could— with arms straight out like airplane wings through the green sea of the alfalfa fields—imagining I was flying over them. Reminded of him, I wonder about his future, and my grandparents' farm and the changing water allotments and new restrictions that will end our way of life. Will my son know the same farmland the way I did? What will his life be in Los Angeles away from the farm of his father's youth? Sometimes I remember being nine, sitting for hours in the open hayloft with my father, sprawled out under the constellations and waiting for a meteor shower to fall. Even at that age somehow I knew this world would end and all of us would once again return, mysteriously to stars and dust.

Six o'clock in Patterson, CA

After work they walk,
To the waiting trucks
To take them home.
Back to their cars
Some smoke, others
Just sit and listen
To the sounds of tires
Against the earth.

As they pass the long rows of green
That led off to a horizon and setting
Sun, where the port-a-potties
Stand guard and look out
Over the coming harvest
Near the water carts
That sit, wait for
Another day.

The workers arrive
To meet their rides home
With nothing but dust
And dirt cake knees.

They pick the sticky spines
And thorns from sore arms
In the dying light
Of a days work.

Back Bird Night

last night, even as I held you
I was letting go

when I woke this morning
and you weren't there

I gathered up the sheets and blankets
burned them in the fireplace

I put the mattress out on the curb
waiting for the trash to take it away

I would rather sleep on the floor than beside
the memory of you

the smell of your body still haunts me
and it finds me at the most peculiar times

letting you go feels so good
taking you back is what kills me

it felt good to feel close to you in the night
invisible in your sleep

while your body breathes
I struggle to find my breath

asleep we are again
resurrected by the night

together we are of the night
alone we are nothing but
bleakest desert light

but I can not give you up,
black bird night.

Migration Dream

the air is cool
tonight near the river
i risk my life
shadows of men
gather near the water's edge
dark faces
looking for hope
looking for work
only helicopters and
razor wire greet us
we are lost
the sirens find us
we run into the dark
as dogs bark
gun shots ring out
and we hide under bushes
only to be discovered,
pulled out by gun point
and sent across the line
in the dirt
only to come back tomorrow
like water working
its way through sand.

Thirty-Seven Rows Left

I'm slowly working along the rows
Of loud squawking chickens,
Feathers and shit flying
All over me as I near their cages,
Pulling one egg after another,
Filling my flat, stacking
Eggs on my cart like a
House of cards, one rickety
Piece on top of the other,
Then pulling another, *crack*,
Throwing it to the ground.
Thirty-seven rows left.
I want to sit and drink with
Jose Santana and Juan Vera,
The best egg men we've got,
Both up from a small pueblo
In Sinaloa.

They sit and drink *Bud Light*.
They could clear fifty rows
In an hour and they could fill a big rig in two.
They had a bet going
That I would break more than I brought in.
I try to move quickly and stack fast
Just like they taught me.
Then suddenly a mist of water hits
Me, its' automatic switch on
To cool the birds and workers—
The birds refuse to lay if it's over
100 degrees.
Jose and Juan refuse to work too
When it's over 100.
So they sit, watch my eggs—
The flats stacked and shaky,
Ready to fall off my cart.
They laugh and tell me,
Slow down.

I go slower
Letting the eggs become
What they were going to be,
An omelet, part of a recipe

For pan dulce, a yellow bread.
I left that day, never
To return to the farm again,
Jose and Juan kept returning
Year after year to work
Before the land was cleared
The eggs and birds gone
Shit and flies removed
The awful smell of burning feathers erased
And the memories and story of Jose and Juan
The best egg men in all of Jalisco
Riding carefully, delicately,
Only in my head.

For E

Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?

-Agha Shahid Ali-

Where is the rain that came to our fields? Has time and loss changed you so much that you forgot me? Where are you? I long for the days of rain and planting seeds.

Where have the days of the harvest gone? When we ran into a deep green alfalfa sea. I was running after you, never catching up. Even now you are too far from me.

When the rains left and September came, you disappeared like the wheat sold at market. All of me is lost and the farm awaits your return. Only bones and dry cornhusks remain.

Will the rain return? When the drought is over, where will I be? Will I remain and you come back to me? Will we come together like row and seed?

I will leave and follow you to the city; this way of life is at end. It doesn't rain here, the days our drought ridden. Our fields are dry and barren and nothing grows in the razed soil you left.

First Street

I live on First Street, a place where a sea of shattered glass sparkles and shines like the stars under the avenue lights. My placa is written on my neighbor's wall, he dares not paint over it. Often we walk the alleys and write our names on the walls with old spray cans. We thought we were invincible, but once my friends started to use they lost who they were. Now Toker is doing twenty, for beating to death one of the Tecatos that refused to pay. Oso disappeared and Shadow is lost and living on the street sin vergüenza, nothing more than a dark stain on the concrete his family wishes to forget. Everything is owed to our neighborhood but none of us can pay.

Seasons Change

Winter

Our house wasn't much, but it was all a third shift truck driver with four kids could afford. Cold, all I remember is cold; no matter how many blankets I wrapped myself in, it was never enough. My sisters and brother all shared the living room floor near the yellow heater; it would tick, pop and moan as if it were about to burst. It never did work right, like a lot of things around my house. There was a sink that never drained and the stove with one working burner and no oven. Before our neighbor died he gave us his old gas range with four working burners and a big oven. I was thrilled; finally a way to keep warm.

Spring

I remember I found an old typewriter in the garbage on my way home from school. I was so proud; I ran home with it and showed my family, told them I was going to be a writer someday. My dad swore he could fix the bent keys and the missing return mechanism; he never did. Soon it was just another useless thing, lying about looking for work. It took me three and half years to finally buy a new one.

Summer

My dad found me a car. For my sixteenth birthday, that jalopy sat in the front yard on cinder blocks, heads cracked and the seats removed awaiting rain and rust. I went to work demo-ing concrete that summer; swore to myself I would fix that car. Then my dad fell off a truck, broke his back and tore his rotator cuff; now he's just another broken thing lying around looking for work one arm man can do.

Fall

Sitting on the porch after work, I watch the sun fall into a bruise of clouds at dusk; there is nothing else to do but wait for the breeze to find me. I watch my father in the shadows drink another *Bud Light* and tell myself I'll never have a life like that, I'll never be a useless thing in a junk yard. I dream of a breeze that will come and cool the house, take the valley's hot air away. The house broken and the yard so desolate the plum and citrus trees outside stopped producing. I look to the long sky and the empty road, wondering when the breeze will whisper in my ear, and I will follow it far from this life beyond salvage.

Rancho de los Sueños

I would return to my grandparents' home, near the volcanic coast of the Mexican Pacific in Jalisco. I'd sit near my grandfather, listening to his stories about traveling to California as a young man, hitching a ride on a wagon for most of the way then walking to meet his cousin in San Jose, California. The year was 1927 and he was able to find work in the vineyards, picking grapes and working the pecan orchards. He helped build the first Catholic Church on the Southside. A lot of the neighbors pitched in and began to fix up the streets so they could be paved. His dream was to own an orchard himself, start a family there in this place he loved and helped build. He would call it "Rancho de los Sueños." Then the Great Depression and the Oakies ended all that hope; soon people were leaving back to Mexico, driven by their hunger to return to their small fields.

My grandfather was arrested for drinking in the wrong bar without permission, for fighting with the Oakies or loitering in the park or for wandering into a segregated Mass. Often the police would free him for one month's salary. Sometimes he would sit in the church and pray for a sign of hope, for a job and for some other sort of redemption. He wouldn't say anything more about it. The more I asked the less he said; too painful, my mother would say. After four years he returned to the peasant fields of his childhood, married my grandmother, worked in a grocery store and slowly earned enough money to buy his own milpa, some maguey fields— enough to keep him busy and away from California, the fields, and jails and lonely churches where he'd left his share of dreams.

Eastside Walls – Riverside, Ca 1999

Turning the corner,
through the Eastside,
I run into deafening sirens
Circling a small crowd
A crumpled man with thick black
Glasses reflecting red.

Bleeding from a hole in his belly
The size of a quarter.

He was called “El Leon”
Nightly at the Café Libre.
He read from a
Small red book
He had written, screaming
For change and blood.
Crying for his missing brothers,
Their names scrawled across the wall
Of poverty none could break through.

I grab the pen he dropped
And began to write on the walls
Of the alley around him and the
Crowd screamed at me, to stop, but
All I could hear was his voice

Revolución, Liberación, Educación,
La Lucha Continua

The words spilled across the walls,
Around the corner into the open street,
Chased the people home, whispering in their
Sleeping ears until
They woke in the morning’s cold.

Sister

My little sister— thirteen and pregnant— moved out to live with her boyfriend's family. The persistent memory of my missing mother could never fill our home. I wanted to kill

myself early that year. Early mornings I'd leave the vacant house. I walked, through the alley to school in my donated clothes, wearing someone else's hand-me-down shoes re-gifted

again to me somehow. Went to school get a free lunch, I learned to cut lawns, learned to trim brush. This is our Regional Occupational Program for low-income students – you are

perfect for this class. My dad and I lived, across from a heroin den; people would get high and die there. No more farming jobs in this town. There are nice golf courses here now.

Water that bush, it looks a little parched, the teacher said. My dad a shell of himself so full of rage, resented his life and his loss. I shut my eyes hard as I could when he hit me. I felt nothing.

Not Giving Up

-Dedicated to Luis Omar Salinas-

i'm not giving up, God
i'm still writing my placaso
on the Santa Fe train
cars left on the tracks
behind my house.
i still carry a filero to the
smoky pool hall where junkies
and prostitutes do business;
The alley next to my house
is dotted with used needles,
i worry my sister will fall on them
when she walks to church.
Sometimes the winos sleep on the grass
near my house, I walk up and kick them
in the ass and yell "largate aqui".
Then i see it's my uncle
and i apologize to him.
When the morning is really
dead and the smog refuses to lift,
i drag two large trash cans full of
cheap Vodka and Bacardi bottles
to the curb for my neighbors,
they hand me 16oz Miller High Life
and i leave feeling
i'll make it
to heaven in a lowrider yet—
gold wire rims spinning
hydraulics pumping
three wheeling,
pancaking,
side to side motion as
i drive through
Saint Peter's gate.

Veterans' Parque

It's Friday night;
we are going cruising
under the avenue lights .
I walk down Calle Cesar Chavez toward
Veterans' Parque where my friends
are sipping Mickey's Malt Liquor from 40oz bottles
and listening to oldies, dreaming
about natural highs
and crystal blue persuasions from the 70s
As I get closer I hear
oogum oogum boogum boogum,
now baby –
castin' your spell on me....
wafting through the air
greeting me as I enter
el parque then
I see the ranflas
y bombas...
fire shoots from the tail pipe
as Shorty hammers the gas pedal.
the blvd awaits
and we will ride
to a chicano
utopia, where your neighborhood
and your clika respect the blvd.
The only thing that matters here
is the shine of your rims,
crease in kakis
polish on your Estéicis.

My Son Joaquin

Mata me, papa
Mata me
Como la policia
His chubby fingers
Fold into his hand
Index finger out
His hand like
A gun stares me down
Squints one eye closed
Pow, Pow!

Lets' play something
Else I tell him.
No, mata me.

No! I don't want to
He runs away
Hides in the backyard
Away from me
And the street
Where the LAPD
Shot a kid.
Bullets, screams, and blood
He saw it all
From the front porch.

After,
He cried for hours
Hid under his bed,
I wasn't there.
I came home
Found him,
Me muero, papa
Me muero,
Was all he
Would say.

Agricultural Accident Number #00137 – 1993 (OSHA Redacted copy)

Name: [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Age: [REDACTED]

Site: [REDACTED]

Description:

Tractor tilled him under the soil [REDACTED] men said nothing of his burial in the fields; they plowed him under [REDACTED] as if his body was compost [REDACTED] bones fertilizer.

Saturdays

It's seven in the morning and the smell of spicy chorizo frying—invades my dream. Near the kitchen I hear my little sister reciting the catechism to my grandmother, blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. My mother cracks the eggs into the pan of cibola and green serrano chilies. The smoky burning smells of tortillas cooking on the comal finally awaken me; soon we will eat before heading to a long day of work in the apple orchard again. I lie on the couch and dream a little longer, dressed and ready for work, but not really. I want to stay home today; I want to sit on my porch and read Lorca, Machado, César Vallejo to the cars as they pass. Mijo ven a comer, I hear in the far off distance, ven a comer, the words call to me, I dream of walking the streets of Paris and my melancholy death in the year ahead, as I lay dying on the Champs-Elysées, suddenly a pantufla bounces off my forehead and abruptly I am standing in my living room, rubbing my head as I see my mother walk back to kitchen grumbling to herself flojo.

My Aztlan

-After Andres Montoya

I came looking for Aztlan
But couldn't find it on any map.

It had been hidden by names
Like Blithe, Calexico, Modesto.

I came asking questions of my family
But my family could only remember

How the last paycheck
Was swallowed mysteriously
by the valley's hot air.

Some say there is no Aztlan
That we are people without history.

They think we are nothing more
Than mongrels staring at them
From below their table.

Our memories, our culture
Insults them.

There is no Aztlan
Is like saying
There is no God,
It is to say
There is no heaven
And that our memories and
Our culture are
Nothing more than
Blasphemy.

Then I look inside myself,
I realized that Aztlan is not
a physical location.

Wherever there
Is Raza picking in fields,
That's Aztlan.

Wherever there
Are cops beating a brown kid
For walking these mean streets
That's Aztlan.

Wherever there
Are people murdered for
Marching through the streets in
Solidarity and protest
That's Aztlan.

The grove

I remember when my family was evicted from our ranch. My sister and I went to live with my grandparents in an old orange grove. I remember feeling like the stray cats they sometimes picked up along the street or near the St. Catharine's Catholic church. At night we would walk the grove and mi abuelo would tell me the story of his life, how as a little boy he had lived in a cave at the foot of volcano, where his family ate roots and leaves. He said when they arrived here; a man let them live in the grove in exchange for their pulling weeds and pruning the trees. They lived among the orange trees; learned the songs of the leaves. They cleansed the ailing and sickly trees with the smoke of white sage and when the freeze would come they burned copal and let its incense become a prayer to protect the grove from the frost that could kill. When I fell ill with fever, mis abuelos would pray and burn sage and chant as if I was one of trees. At night the smell of the blossoms still enters my dream, no matter where I lay my head.

Saving Souls

We filed onto that old hand-me down
School bus, yellow with black crosses
With no A/C
Sitting up board-straight as if
We were in mass.

For eighteen hot and sweaty hours
We rode across Death Valley, and
The Mojave Desert as sister Marguerite
Reminded us the world would end soon. So we
Must continue to pray for the sinners and
Do corporal works of mercy
To save the under privileged like us.

When we arrive at the Shoshone Indian Reservation
There was nothing to see—
Instead of people we find
Old small beige and white shacks
With dirt front yards and one with an old dog tied
By the throat near the back steps.

A single white t-shirt waved on a line back.

I thought of my home.

Where are the children
We are supposed to save?
I don't feel like saving
Anyone today, I want to sit down
By the Indian graveyard and tell
Scary stories with my brother Jose.

That's what we do back home,
But here we can't go near the graveyard.
So that's where the Indian kids hide,
And laugh at us. They don't seem so
Different from us.

Hours creep by slowly,
And I feel like that old dog
Tied by the throat.
4 days—Later

We are headed back home
Without any new catholic souls. Instead
Some of our Mexicans have returned to our Indians ways,

We started sneaking into the graveyard to tell
Stories and play among the small wooden markers
That sat above the graves.
I was one of them.

Final Score:

Indians - 4
Sister Marguerite - 0

As we arrive home,
A single white t-shirt
Waves on a line
In my backyard.

And I wonder
Who's going to come
And save us?

We Played War

I lay in the alfalfa field for several hours, gun at the ready— safety off. The sun was setting and I sat alone. In darkness, I walked home alone. My mom had nothing to give this country but a son she said, sometimes too much as if trying to convince herself. I remember my brother hated to take me with him, my mom would insist until he relented; he took me to play war in the alfalfa fields near our ranch. At dusk silence comes and covers the alfalfa field. At night I hear my mother crying for her lost son in the bathroom.

To my Brother Jose

He swings a ten pound sledge,
I look away as splinters of concrete shoot
Passed my head. The sweat falls and carries
Some dirt away, but not the heat.

Hands blistered with small salty wrinkles of skin, my feet
Burn against the concrete, but I continue to work. I bend down
Again and pick up the huge jagged slates of rock,
Like carrying headstones to their final resting place.

My feet ache but it's faster to carry concrete than to push
A wheelbarrow with a flat tire and a busted rim.

My Brother swings a ten pound sledge and I look away,
He gives me the mad dog stare.

He used to hum and sing to himself. Never really speaking to me
Except sometimes to say don't be like me and don't dropout, this what happens
When you leave school in seventh grade.

But at 13 that's all I wanted in this world was to be him. To be able to swing a ten-pound
sledge
All day in the 100 degree weather and never complain once. His shoulder length hair
camouflaged pants that were cut into shorts and no shirt— ever.

The guy who knew everybody, he could listen to loud corridos and play guitar while
smoking lucky brand cigarettes all night, and still be up at five to feed the dog and all the
chickens before work.

When he left home that next summer he left for good At 14, I continued to work concrete
in the summer, but without him, I lost my will, had no one to prove anything too. Soon
the heat would come and take me away too.

Visiting mother at the ranch

She is the color
of warm
cinnamon tea
brewed in blackened pot.

Momma says her back hurts,
as she leans back then stretches
her hands up toward the ceiling
of our ash gray barn.

Her dress smells of sun
and the field winds
that come to cool
the rows of wheat
in early August.

I begin to
separate the small pile of
pinto beans, I pull out the small pebbles
and sticks my sisters missed when they
scraped the beans up from
blistering hot concrete after
they had dried several days.

Momma reaches around
pounds the bones in her lower back
with a clenched fist she tries to
knock the loose vertebrates
back into place
like cinder blocks.

I can hear them crack and crumble,
five kids and the years of
being the only mid-wife in a
small town of immigrants
and live stock.

She will be thirty eight years old
next month, her spine so painful
not even a Curandera's egg
or a Shaman's spell could
make her whole again.

Fog

I see the tall eucalyptus trees become whiteness when fog arrives. Effervescence blurs all around me. I want to chase my father's memory like the black cat chases an orange one, near the dumpster in our yard. I want to know how this happened. How does a person's home become another's crack den? The frame of the house and roof are all that's left. Heroin needles, ratty blankets and condom wrappers sit where my mother's linoleum once was. I find an old tintype photograph of a family, iridescent eyes staring at me. Their frightening stillness stuck somewhere in time. The form of my father comes to me. He stands with his arms folded across his chest staring into dark water pooled in the yard. We stand for hours, me looking at him, he looking at the water.

My Father Comes Home

His fist goes through the drywall again. I want stop him, I'm afraid to leave my room. I cover my head with a pillow. Her bare feet slap against the wood floor. Mom barricades the bathroom door with her body. Father yells and pounds on the door. Pounding in my head grows. I squeeze the pillow tighter press it into my mouth, bite it. He kicks, breaks the door from the frame. I scream for them to stop, my pillow muffles it.

Sobs after— You made me do this. Flashing red lights shine through my blinds. Knocking on the front door gets louder. I cover myself in blankets try to disappear. They'll take dad again. My sister Angelica stands in my doorway. I see her cry, like when my brother John shot six humming birds. He placed their tiny bodies on the windowsill for her to find.

After— He laughed the way my father does.

Javier Cruz

I'm not scared
To use a butterfly knife
On someone, I'll stick them
If they're in my way.
Javi wore the same jacket everyday

REBELS

Spray painted across the back
In silver paint stolen
From Ace Hardware.
With a switch
Blade, ready to stick
People that
Hold on to their wallets
And gold chains too long.
I wanted quick money too
Scared to get caught,
I feared to stick someone
In the gut for a gold chain.
I waited for long hours
In the park.

I waited to prove myself
I leave with nothing
Sweaty palms
And fingers
Rub an unused
Knife in my pocket.
I was the look out
Saw the cop car
Thought to yell
I ran instead.
The cops took him away
Face bloody, shirtless
Bury me in the streets
Tattooed across his
Collar bones.
He confessed,
Ratted me out
To the cops.
They came for me,
I did six months in Juvi
I got out, Javi
Disappeared,
Like heat
When winter
Comes.

Dark Grey Sky

Under a grey cloudless sky—
His mother walks
Through the streets
To the police sub-station
Crying for her dead son Ernie.
The report says
He
Hanged
Himself
In his cell.

When night comes
Her daughters
Try to feed her
Caldo de pollo.

She tries to eat
It stings her tongue
She doesn't
Want to live anymore.
She sings to herself softly—
No quiero vivir.

Candles with pictures
Of Saints Philomena and Christopher burn
She prays to them
No answer comes.
On the corner, a cross is planted in the yard.
Neighbors gather outside.
Old ladies are paid to come,
Wrapped in black shawls
Around their heads.
They cry and pray
The rosary.

In the dark night
Under a starless sky
She sings herself to
Sleep, in her dreams
She runs to the dark
Field where her
Child is buried.

Yes Officer, Tucson AZ

Yes officer, I am a citizen
Of the continent, I migrate
Back and forth like the wind
Or hummingbirds- this is
the way our people have
always lived.

You see that little blue house
that's mine--
that old Chevy sitting on those blocks,
that's mine too.
Yes, I come to home depot everyday
Looking for work and maybe a steady hale

And yet I have nothing,
nothing but work
and you, stopping me
asking me for papers

so that I can work out here
where even in the shade
your skin burns.

You can't do that, we stand
together against 1070!
We are here as a people
against hate and
the deportations.
Officer I refuse
to show you papers-
so take me down to that
little jail cell.

Wait...
Before you take me in
can I ask you a question?

Who hasn't crossed that desert at midnight
to come here and work here in the US?
I've crossed with them

I feel their thirst
in the great desert,

I've seen many deaths
this year, over 300
and it's only April.
What will happen
to those that walk
the desert?

It's been 40 years
yet we still wander.

Madre, Mujer, Tierra

Dreamt of my Grandmother
twisting and braiding her long
black and grey hair in the early
morning sunshine then
she shuffled over to feed the fire

near the beautiful flame she stroked my hair
as I drank *atole* from the clay cup
her warmth and spirit made me feel
like I was full, her comfort
healed me illness
I began to cry
for her

for just an instance I was back in
Moiyatzinlan with her

nudged awake
a shiver started at my feet and slowly
wound its way around me
cold covered my body
joints ached, couldn't feel my fingers

riding in back of that flat bed truck
headed for the clinic before the light
began to creep on to the fields

my mother spoke in a soft worried voice
I never wanted this for you

cured of sickness with prayers
and incense burned at the altar
of my Grandmother
and her Saints.

Menudo Sundays

On Sundays I stand and dry dishes placing them softly in the sink. The menudo bowls empty but for some pieces of white onion and cilantro sit on the table. My Father sits and watches the super classico, *Chivas vs. America*. Through the window hangs a plump pomegranate—I want to taste it's sweet juice but the neighbor's dog is mean, so there it hangs—June days linger into August and still—it waits. Ripening too long, darkens into the scarlet color—before hardening into thick dark leather like the skin on my mother's hands in this her 17th year, working in the fields cutting honeydews from their spiny vines that pierce your hands and face.

At dusk

I sit outside mi Tia's house
waiting for dusk to come.
Mi A'ma has left us here
She's gone to look for work
in Los Angeles.

Her absence fills
every corner of
our insides.

Here in the valley the work
has gone too. The fields we
once worked have disappeared,
replaced by golf courses,
housing tracks,
strip malls.

My father is missing,
we haven't seen or heard
from him in weeks.
I bet he's at Rosie's bar again,
drinking beer or maybe
taking a shot
of tequila with his compas.

A'pa will charge it
to a tab that he can't pay.
Soon there will be a fight
and they'll throw him out.
He'll sleep outside somewhere
or maybe in his truck.

I watch as the
chickens roost in the tree
above the screened patio
we call home.

As I lay my head down
I can hear the
chickens softly coo
and call the others
to the roost.

The Gleaners

The gleaners came through,
the carcass left bare
like chicken left in the fridge
In a house of boys.

Bone and cartilage
shine in the sterile light
of a single blub.

Feed tanks left empty
we leave with nothing
but our harvest sacks
filled with bones
and dust.

Sore hands

As fast as we can
we carry buckets of water
to cattle and sheep pens
the heavy water and cold
slowing us down
my hands burn as the
broken metal handle
cuts a long red welt
across my fingers
the bucket brakes again
frigid water splashes all over
my jeans and sneakers
leaving me cold and muddy
my best friend Ruben laughs
his dark almond shape eyes stare
in Mexico he never saw such
a sorry excuse for a farm hand
but in this town
we live only to serve the rich
dad drives their tractors
through the walnut groves
12 hours a day
mom cleans their houses
we work seven days a week
yet we have nothing
but dirt and a few old cows
my grandmother says
her hands are ruined
she can no longer
candle eggs after breakfast
holding each egg in front
a small light,
looking for the
stain of blood.

Life Lessons

Before sunrise you wake me
promise me that it's for my own good
I will argue with you
Before I get up

I walk through the fields
headed for the vineyards
dressed in layers of your old clothes
I wear your heavy gloves
and hat that shields me
from the life of the fields

you go without any
you fear for me

I blame it on the sun
that hurts my eyes as it begins to rise
that's why I'm working so slow

the cold begins to lift and steam
begins to rise from my shoulders

I watch you

mi A'ma made from clay
fired under the blazing sun
you are the caramel color of onions
that stick to the pot after
they are cooked too long

my lessons are hard on you

It's better I learn them now
I must know your life
soon summer will be gone
our time is short

we cut the uvas from their vines
not the green ones though
I know, I know,

you say remember, you must remember
how you feel right now
know how much it hurts

this is not the life for you,
you must leave the valley
and find a home far from
the this harvest that
runs our lives

My Freshman History Lesson

Chicanos have no history
they have no language
which means, they
don't really exist.

There is no Aztlan
your homeland
never existed in the place of
reeds and tulle grass,
blue herons
never flew over
your home.

Why do I yearn
to be home? Why
does my chest feel
empty like my heart
is buried there?

To say there is no Aztlan,
is like saying to a Christian
heaven doesn't exist
Christ never died for you.

Honeydew and Cantaloupes

The sun is setting
the fields are empty
thirsting for water
hungry for seed.

Outside near the animal pens
I sit on a greasy bucket
pulling sticky feathers
from a boiled chicken.

I watch my grandmother
pluck globs of blood from
the top of the boiling water
sprinkle some salt and taste.

She offers me some,
I gag, shake my head no.

Chickens wait
not knowing their
necks are to be pulled.

I am heartbroken
not for chickens
but for Ruben.

I wish he was here
to help me pull these feathers,
remove guts.

He is gone,
probably to Selma
to prune vines.

Or maybe to Patterson
to pull weeds from Cantaloupes
and honeydews.

Alfalfa

Where the crimson light
touches the green alfalfa
in the far off horizon, the sun
falls in the dark
blue bruise of sky.

My grandfather would say
his land is occupied and after
seven generations, he deserves
some land back.

But deserves got
nothing to do
with it,
alfalfa needs
to be cut
pigs need to be bled
calves killed.

That's all
that matters
today.

After the Feast

After the feast,
the voices and people are gone
look at the disarray
the festivities of last night are over
only solitude remains.

The desolate tent, with tables and chairs overturned
empty wine bottles and crystal glasses slowly spill and drip on
white table clothes
are stained with pools of wine
the color of roses.

Blood oranges, half eaten and rotting
lay on the table. The flowers have wilted
and begun to drop their petals.

The chairs are empty; the beautiful fabric that once draped the table
is now waded up and lay bunched at the corners.

Look how the oranges bleed
the bread stale and hard,
a small mountain of empty champagne bottles
small white napkins litter the ground

Vultures begin to circle above
all is quiet,
after the feast of
the dead.

An Early Variety of a Religious Experience

At dusk the women gather near the barn.
They dance and sing the songs
of love, work and
hunger

between the fires—
preparing for the matanza.

Another day of work in the fields
and packing house is ending—
our bellies aching
along with our backs,
shoulders and hands.
I run to gather wood
from the grey barn
that has fallen onto itself.

My mother calls to me
to help her lift the deep kettles
of water onto the small fire
and glowing coals.

The women of the ranch
fan and feed the fire
into a steady flame, and

once the water begins to boil
I run to gather the chickens.
I bring them to the side of the house
where my mother is waiting.

I reach into the wire cage
and hand my mother the chicken;
she quickly grabs the throat
flips her wrist breaking the neck.

She cuts the loose skin of the collar
and hands the chicken to me—
blood drips on my white shoes as
I hang the carcass on the clothesline.

Once the blood is drawn,

I take the chicken to the pot
slowly dip the body into the scalding water
pungent odor of fresh blood
burns my nostrils
I close my eyes
look away.

Little feathers
begin to melt off
float to the top
becoming white pulp
almost like sea foam.

We pull the chickens
I sit near my mother
begin to pluck feathers
from the wet soggy carcass.

The men finish
their cigarettes and Bud Lights,
watching the children with dirty faces
chase each other into the pasture.

As las mujeres continue to work
The children run to the pasture
I run after them,
ready to take
flight as we leave the grease
and blood
of a long day's work.

Sacred Things

Four Movements

Four Directions

Four Suns

Four Elements

Movement One

At night my ancestors
visit me in dreams.
Every memory,
every moment of energy
I have passed down to you.
Remember this was my land
I lived here
When the sun
Set it was
Mexico.

Movement Two

Echoes and whispers make their way
through my window.

They bounce off my walls
into my girlfriend's womb,
from dust and bone
my family will
grow, formed from
stardust and dark matter.

Movement Three

I hear their voices,
coming to me from
the constellations,
my grandfathers
will be heard,
my grandmothers
womb will live
on.

Movement Four

My ancestors speak to me
from the grey winter sky,
they say everything is energy.
The poems will grow
will flower,
become our song.