Pica

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

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June 2013

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Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank my wife for all her encouragement. And to all those in my workshops.

All of your word will never be forgotten.

A huge shout out to my parents; much love.
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The Call

My father collapsed holding his chest.
I pace the kitchen. Out the window
a man pushes a shopping cart into the alley
full of groceries and a dozen roses streaming yellow
from the child’s seat while his daughter, maybe 4 or 5,
struggles behind him. With no hurry to his steps,
his posture gives way to the weight of light
beaming over the Sierras. His daughter skips
then kicks a loose rock down the alley,
bouncing off a garage door with a clang.
He doesn’t stop to tell her to settle down.
He doesn’t beat her with his belt
like my dad did, the one embroidered with his initials,
the one he used to brand my body when I was loud
and didn’t follow his orders. He hands her the dozen roses
to hold. The glass vase huge in her hands the petals
in her face, against her eyes. They disappear around the corner.
To Sing

I secure a sheet of drywall with a screw gun.
The loud whirl cuts through the ranchera music
blasting from a small boom box.
The constant dance of hammers
& the sawing out of covered sockets,
like a song against song. The only time beatings stop
is when the day ends covered in dust.

The next day I return with my father,
my hand unable to grip. He smiles
& I force my fingers around the base
with one squeezing the trigger
to punch the sheets with black screws.
The arm’s bruising muscles don’t respond
as he glares under his brows. The shake
of my hands severs the gun from my grip.
Soccer Practice

It’s tough to walk
on concrete and asphalt.
Dad knows cleats are made for grass.
Still, he sends us, the bench,
to chase the balls into the street
where the cars swerve and honk
to sideline us. Have you ever tried
to run on ice? He encourages us to cheer
during the games on Saturdays.
The white chalk on the grass
like barbed wire coiled around the pitch.
The color of my jersey the same hue of red
as my teammates; the sweat is absent
on mine. On the sideline
we wear orange vests like children
in the woods during hunting season.
We run extra laps around the field
during the scrimmage at the end
of practice. A ball flies over the fence
and I run after it into the street
where a red car ejects me
with a honk and a middle finger.
Washing Dishes

The plates that stood over night in the dry sink are canvases of neglect… bits of fried flour, burnt butter, and pasta left to dry like stucco. Leftovers stick like bad memories like the biting words, irresponsible, childish, and selfish. My wife and I left the table to scream each other’s faults down the hall.

I turn the faucet on and the hot water, fills the crowded sink, loosens the grime. I remember the hard clinks of forks against dinner plates. The water runs across the faces of dishes that clasp onto the bits of fried flour as if breath was leaving for good. And maybe I should leave too, grab the keys and disappear into the bright lights of L.A. And never come back.

My father once told me, marriage is hard work. I didn’t believe him but I should have taken to heart the hard grasp he had on my hand when he shook it and told me. I’m not going anywhere. I know that. I’ll be here in our apartment later tonight. I’ll make a chicken stir fry for dinner. And we’ll make cold stares at each other while only using the necessary syllables to speak a demand- 

*Put away the dishes. Go outside to smoke.* 

*Take out the trash.* And then we’ll add *Please* and the word will be forced like eating vegetables because we both work hard. These hands know that.
Prayer

Reading *polycystic ovary syndrome*  
from lab results, the ink permanent,  
my wife's eyes lose their blue  
trying to understand the dyslexia  
of her body; the confused twitch  
of her brows shaking  
the language the I speak  
from my tongue. Did You see us burn  
the copy we took home,  
the blackened shreds floating like moths?

I pray—leave us alone.  
Let us walk to the bus stop without the shrill  
of all the kids we can't have  
playing at the daycare on the corner.  
The laughter.
Hollywood Endings

The moths thaw out from the lamppost
to soften the yellow
like the lights before a movie starts;

the dark, held back
by the glow of the screen,
ingers like a hungry bat.

I don’t know how much longer
these nights will last;
the walls have suffered enough
from the naming of faults.

We don’t talk about Hollywood endings.
We stopped watching movies together.

The moths are too faithful to the light.
And when it flickers I envy
how they dance in the dark.

My wife shifts in her sleep
and I hear her teeth grind
like a carcass dragged
slowly over gravel.
Museum of Natural History

It’s concrete cracks
sprout from the ground
like lightning. Inside,
the library of decay,

stuck behind a fluorescent sap
for style, holds its breath.
I learn how we are born
without clothes; for warmth
we kill for skins.
Fungi will out live us all.
They predate the structure of bones.

Outside, the fog of my breath
knows this. My bare arms
sting in the breeze.
It’s cold this morning.
Skin

A place one returns to

when the sky is as dark as asphalt

with the smog that hovers over Blackstone,

and rattles the foundation

of our small apartment, cramped

with the clutter of each other.

Then breath begins

to fog the window of air

between us. I am home.
Going Back

I drive your drunk bodies
home in your Hummer
& you say my daughters don’t curse;

I smoke weed with them.

My wrinkled shirt shrugs
at your neat creases; your wasted time
trying to be more than something human.

You say I own a custom home,
two horses, & three stores.

I say I have an education.
Though our pockets are empty.

I pass a struggling Greyhound bus
& a doe spilling its guts against asphalt;

I take comfort that we’re alive as animals.
At The Entrance of a Back Alley

A teddy bear leans against a telephone pole.
There are bright red balloons that read “Happy Birthday.”
A candle, half melted, still lit, burns black
the top of the glass it sits in. The Virgin Guadalupe
stickered on still wears the “$1.99” price tag.
This is the street altar for a young boy.
This is all that remains of his childhood—
a bear soaked with rain and covered in grime
not much different from the one that I lost years ago.
My old teddy, he was dark blue with white patches.
I made sure to replace his eye with a button when it fell off
after a wash. His color slowly faded over the years.
I look closely but this teddy’s eyes are still new.
These eyes didn’t see the boy face down
in a pool of his own of blood, the wound in his chest
pouring out the red dark love from his heart.
The news was that the boy was searching for something lost.
When will I learn to let it go; the small dark blue and white patches,
my teddy bear, a small token of what once was a childhood
when a swimming pool was an ice chest full of water.
Black men are gathered by the doorway of the apartment I’m headed too. Inside the delivery truck I call the customer and leave a voice mail reminding her that we don’t deliver after dark to Crystal Fall apartments. They look at me on the phone. I look at their shoes. The way the laces are tied and their color matters out here like the color of their shirts and their skins. Inside this gated complex the iron bars aren’t that different from a prison’s. Inside here, shoes matter because if I do decide to step outside this car and head toward that doorway I must not step on theirs. My brother was jumped for his Nikes by men like these, with shoes like theirs. Brand names can be stitched on. Fakes can easily be distinguished. My brother, his face swollen and scratched. His mouth bleeding from all the teeth knocked loose from the gums. He stayed home from school for one week and I heard him say the N word and mean it. I know how to mean it too. Before I leave, I look for my brother’s shoes on their feet.
Molting

The lady in the wheelchair can’t weigh more than 120 pounds.
Her hand shakes with a Camel 99 filling the air with smoke,
an oxygen tank behind her, the burning tip like a fuse.
I wonder how much we both want to meet our ends—
I return to this doorway and don’t mention the cigarette
and the oxygen tank, how dangerous it can all be.
The adrenaline rush of teasing death. I hope
the explosion will get rid of these skins I live in:
the skin of man, the skin of student, the skin of a husband.
Her fuse reflects my unlit fuse. I want to burn these skins I live in.
No more expectations. Again, I return to the doorway.
At The Unemployment Office

I over hear someone say dancing is like making love.
    I think it’s like riding down a long toboggan slide,
water splashing and moments of cool.
    The news says today is the end of winter.

Birds will comes with their nests.
    What a distraction. There is work to be done.

I need dirt beneath these fingernails.
    I need grease stains and bits of flour
powdered onto the bottom of a shirt
    from slapping out pizzas all day.

I wear an old work hat stained with sweat,
    a memory of an oven at 525 degrees.

The weatherman explains the rise in temperature.
    There is a moment of silence before a chorus of groans
grows like a protest on precipice of violence;
    the power likes to take hourly vacations into the Sierras
to climb the giant red woods and bring back the breeze
    of the A/C once it has had its fill. Too many people

I don’t know. We all share that same anxious look
    filled with the murderous intentions of the dark.
Wash

The caked dirt is washed away
by streams falling off the car.
A milky mud drains into the gutter.
Some pools in small dents
in the pavement, pressure and time.

Drive on asphalt long enough
& it will groove to the tires.

These cloudy oasis remind me of my neighbors
that wouldn’t share their pool
that sounded lonely over the brick fence
most summer days in Fresno.

The neighbor’s kids did not like us
and their parents didn’t like the loud corridos
my dad played he gardened.

With a pressure washer the dust comes off easy
but I still need the brush to scrape what’s left.
The tiny pools become clear as the sediment settles;
almost as clear as that neighbor’s pool.

When the swamp coolers stopped humming,
my brother and I covered in sweat.
We gathered sling shots and dirt clods.
& took aim from our tree house
built out of scrap lumber
and started belting the kids in the pool.

Each splash was followed by a mushroom
of dirt & blood underneath the surface.

Their shrieks jumped the fence
& and eye began to swell.

We laughed in our tree house
until my father, powdered by drywall dust,
came home from work & dragged us down
from that tree house by our ears
to the front of the neighbor’s door
where we confessed through tears and snot.
We mowed their lawn over the summer
and watched them drain the pool
the water streaming down the pavement
like it does now under my car

with streaks of mud left over
to remind me of what I’ve done.

The heat will evaporate the water,
and leave what remains of the dirt
for these tires to kick up into the air.
Baptism isn’t enough.
Fences

You already know where the ghetto is.
There are fences around their front yards;
chain link and around five feet high.
Some are iron bars with spikes.
And the dogs behind them growl
even when I deliver medication two houses down.
I leave the front gates open just in case
a herd of Chihuahuas flies out from the back yard,
mouths open and hungry. There is a fence
around this neighborhood but you already know that.
You already know that this used to be my home.
You already know not to drive South of Olive.
Don’t think for a second we forgot who built this gate.
Lizard Blood

My grandfather asks me to drink lizard blood. 

*It’s good*, he says, *gives you ganas.*

I gag but I swallow 
the warm and slimy liquid down 

and don’t protest. This bitter taste 
that lingers in my mouth reminds me of the words

of my poli-sci teacher at Clovis community 
who said I should drop his class, 

that I wasn’t going to pass, and that I would need 
near perfect scores on all my tests.

In that office, I didn’t put up a fight. 
I studied while I slapped out pizzas.

*I don’t feel anything*, I tell him. 
This face contorts in disgust while 

drinking water to rinse out the taste. 
My spit stained purple red.

The headless reptile lies across a rock. 
I passed that class without this blood.

No other tongue than mine will determine 
which myths I accept.

*Now you have ganas*, he says. A smile across his face 
as he throws the bloodless body into the bushes.
Stones

My grandfather told me to be careful with scorpions as we walked through the cemetery. He told me that the dead remember everything. He told me to find his name as we looked at gravestones. I did and then he told me about his first son, and about the stone water tank that collapsed and crushed his abdomen. He told me about this uncle I never knew. He told me about the doctor who told them not to give him water, that he’ll fade into heaven faster that way. He told me how he begged the doctor to save him. How he begged God. How my grandmother held the small body in her arms. He told me how his son repeated, *Mamma, I’m thirsty. Water, please?* And how my grandmother couldn’t refuse her little boy’s last wish. He told me how he brought him water in a small cup. He told me how he buried his first son. I remember the sun against the gravestone, the heat of the small lettering of our last name, the corrosion of the first rendered it almost illegible. He told me to grab his hammer and pick. He told me how he stopped believing in God as he taught me how to carve out a name.
Diet

I step onto the scale, look at the bathroom mirror fogged with steam, and wait for my weight to flash on the digital display in those rigid lines.

My brother likes to remind me that this is not my first fight. Stretch marks curve down my torso from my arm pits to my waistline. These off color stripes of skin tearing.

At the doctor’s office I stood on the scale and was asked to step off because I weighed too much for it to weigh. “350 +” is what the nurse writes on my chart.

The doctor writes morbidly obese. The hustle of worms wait for me. I have lost before. I tried the Medifast diet and nearly collapsed under its 1000 calorie diet. In the kitchen I would measure eight ounces of chicken breast and scoop a cup of steamed brown rice for dinner. This I had for 3 weeks straight. I ordered pizza on the 22nd day.

Before I married I lost 20 pounds walking on a treadmill at the college’s rec. center. Then gained it back and more. This body climbs and falls on the rails I build but the scale is not the one that will buckle underneath the stress. I can’t run because of a bad knee. I show up early on the first day of class to pick a desk I won’t get stuck in. I check the width between the chair and the writing surface.

I see the blur of this body in the mirror, a glimpse of my phantom as “303” appears on the display.

This is not my first fight. The stretched skin wrinkles without the fat and my pants don’t fit. I grab a knife and ruler to measure the next hole on my belt. I drive the knife through the leather.
330 Pound Man Exercises

I walk up a steep hill and smell the barbeque
from Smokey Canyon. I miss food:
a Western Bacon Cheeseburger from Carl’s Jr;
a thick crust Extravaganza pizza from Domino’s;
a pack of KFC’s popcorn chicken.

The charcoal smell pulls at my stomach.
I climb slowly like the rides at Six Flags
where my wife and brother enjoy their day.
When I weighed 250 I barely fit on the Batman ride.
The man next to me, his harness wouldn’t lock.

I saw the looks of disgust, the faint whispers and laughs
from the people waiting. I knew that embarrassment
from elementary school where the kids shouted marshmallow man;
Mister blimp. The smell of tri-tip seduces my nose.

Drivers honk and yell out their windows, faggot and fat ass.
My brother and my wife enjoy the roller coasters
and I follow the smell to the restaurant.
I eat at the bar, beyond the view of windows,
afraid that I may catch a glimpse of my reflection.
Pica

I drink beer from a tall glass with water spots.
An argument brews between the couple
at the end of the counter. I remember this tone
coming from my mother yelling at my father for spending
nights after work at his friend’s auto shop, drinking.
Mother flung a glass full of beer at his head
and missed, hit the back of the house,
shattering across the red painted cement
of the back porch. I walk across the glass
sparkling under the porch light like stars
to the tool shed. I grab the push broom and sweep
the shards and beer off the porch.
I sit in the chair until the screaming stops.
The bouncer escorts this couple out
of the bar and the light from outside
blinds me for a second like my father
when he told me married people fight.
And how, I shouldn’t tell others about
what happens in our home. Darkness returns.
I don’t remember if the trash bin or
my mouth swallowed those shards.
The Measuring Tape of a Dressmaker

In her small shop that faces the cobbled stone
she sells dresses to quincenieras and brides.

Her dresses add color to the landscape;
A pale white dress on a dark skin bride, hair black,

her curves unwielding in the grasp of the measuring tape.
The stitches hold together the twirling fabric,

that unfolds like a fist opens into a palm.
She says that in her shop no woman was ever denied beauty.

While she sleeps, I grab the tape from her shop
and measure my body.
Last Words

I want to be cremated when I die. This is why I’m losing weight because if you’re too fat they won’t do it,

the body fat will act like oil and everything will burn. Even the smoke will dissipate into nothingness.

I don’t want to lie in a box as if I’m sleeping, lying to the people coming to see me, giving them a glimpse of hope that I may still rise, and breathe, and laugh, and reminisce about all the shit I did and all the shit I’ll still say I didn’t do but I did or maybe I didn’t. Only God knows.

* * *

I left that Catholic god a long time ago, although I still believe in a god, but not this Catholic one or that Mormon one, or whatever one you think is right and whose rules I have to follow, regardless of which name you may call Her.

* * *

But my story hasn’t been told. It hasn’t even begun and I’m already talking about cremation and death and meth. And my extended family who does not know about the real me.

I have tons of family in Chicago. I’ve never met them but they know of me because of my grandmother and her attempts to visit everyone before she dies.

* * *

What if my breath is taken away and my wish to be cremated no longer exists and fades like a memory?

* * *

Yesterday I was asked to imagine my death in the abstract. I thought this: The firing of electrons. Brain waves collapsing, beaches of memories, grains like breaths.

Bumps on a crowded sidewalk, and on busses and in playgrounds –fouls like in soccer, basketball, real soccer, football. No. Futbol.

And story time in first grade- a green sweater with plastic spider webbing that has cracks and girl behind me who traces the webbing with her fingers.

Falling.

I’m bleeding like pens in pockets. I’m stains in a Laundromat, next a five dollar bill, forgotten, dancing with clothes, as it slaps against the glass conga window of the dryer.

No moon. No stars. I’m in a cave in Mexico, stalactites like fingers, outstretched, caressing, full of want.

Cookies. Milk. Oreos, and Santa Claus. The Easter Bunny,

They’re all illusions.

I love you. I think. I once loved.
The Stones From The Water

I.

I was spit out of from Popocatépetl. Discarded like waste. Broken over and over from mountain to boulder to rock to this stone you threw into the water in a tantrum. The blue sky accepted me like a monarch in migration.

This water accepted me regardless of my violent intrusion.

The lava will take me back. Like I came into your palm. Like I exited your grasp.

II.

You complain as if you were the first granite boulder to be split open by a glacier. This crack of a cry of yours, these fragmentations from pebbles to sand, is nothing new.

What do you know about being a father? I was once a mountain.

III.

I disappear in the water’s grasp.

Ripples string across the skin before the placidness returns.

You think by forgetting me you’ll be able to move on? You think to forget is to forgive?
Go ahead and pick up another stone
and throw it.

I’m still here.

IV.

You picked me up
and threw me

as if this would help you erase
those whom you think did you wrong.

I was once like you—molten rock
burning everything I touched.

You are a fool.

You don’t even know what forgiveness is.

V.

I accepted this beach.
I accepted your hand.
I accept this water.
I accept my erosion.
I accept the sand I will become.
I will welcome the fire.
Ars Poetica

To hush the salt in my breath,
Neruda’s palms rise from the dirt—

the final blueprints of memory;
    pine chewed into paper.

I’m so tired of being angry—
    & the wedges of fingernails
    buried into my palms.

It’s frustrating not knowing
how to build a wooden chair;

    I can write its name.

I’ve mutilated my body enough
trying to mimic his ascent.

    Even so, I will continue
though my hands will never be as splintered as his.
Open Letter

You, Chief Dyer, defend the badge
in front of cameras. Their lights expose
the creases on your face

when you speak. The polygraph of skin
spells out everything I want to know—

the victim was on the phone when he jumped
over the back yard’s brick fence

into the alley where small patches of grass grow,
where this supposed weapon (a cell phone) was held,

ready to fire. The news cuts away
to a man in his mid-twenties, no facial hair,
almost boyish if it weren’t for the tattoos

crawling up his neck, the ink black as tar
on the streets, a dog paw under one of his eyes,

and “Bulldogs” sprawled out across his scalp.
He looks like my brother. They share those eyes

that have been broken by the pop-pop-pop of bullets.
Who knows if he would still be alive
if my brother didn’t jump to push down a girl

in the front lawn as a car drove by
and spit up accusatory led with disregard.

What if the angle were different and an artery burst
like a rose blossom? What if my brother was my cousin?
What if my cousin was just a friend? What if this friend

was another man? Or the boy who lives down the block from you?
What if this person was your brother

who jumped that brick fence to hear the voice of his lover
only to hear the silence inside the barrel of your guns?
Behind a podium, you defend the badge.

Your words drop from your lips like stones
into water, a small splash followed by ripples

before the calm returns and the TV is turned off and all of our brothers, cousins, and friends are forgotten in the darkness of the screen.

We’ve become too comfortable with murder.
The Language of Masa

Her fingers have danced this many times before, like a prayer on her rosary bead.

She hums and I can’t help but listen, the calmness of the song of masa…

me, a pebble of sand washed away by a flood. Her wrinkled fingers like the lines inside a tree,

each for a year she has lived, each for a child she raised, each for a day she worked around the stove,

mastering the language of masa, taming the fire inside and turning the tortilla over at just the right time.
I Left You a Note

You’ve stayed in the kitchen from house to house. Does he not see how hungry you are for your friends? I’ve wondered how long you’ve accepted this or whether the cold tiles of the floors and counters have hypnotized you over the years into believing what he does about what your role is in this house. I see how you look out that window. I see how happy you are when you leave for work, that part time job he’s allowed you to take because we needed the money. This isn’t natural for you. Do you know that you belong out there beyond this view of drywall and egg shell paint. Do you dream about using those legs and leaving? I don’t know your maiden name. Mom, maybe you’re just a dream. I can stay but I won’t. I don’t want to see you die this way.
Addressing A Letter to My Father

First the paper will yellow
and I’ll think of the dead grass
in our front lawn, the summer’s
drought in its cloak of heat,
and the tart juice of mandarins.
I’ll see a typewriter at an estate sale
among the porcelain statues of boys
kissing girls under umbrellas glazed with dust
and remember an old photograph of you,
the writing on the back:
“Shaver Lake camping trip 1992”
and the trout you gutted and ate
boxed in by the pines.

In an antique store there is a Corona typewriter
in a brown briefcase and I think of your truck
with its two shades of brown, one dark, one light;
wet dirt, dry dirt. And I think of you walking
through the front door stinking of sweat,
your shoulders drooped, the creases
on your forehead like fault lines

on a map I studied in geology,
your body covered in drywall dust.
I remember the typewriter you bought me
for school. I’ll think of your hammer
and how you showed me to wield it.
I’ll remember all the homes I helped build,
the drywall I nailed to lumber,
the first words I typed, “this is not a toy,”
as you dictated them to me. And I wonder
where that typewriter has gone. I keep searching
from thrift store to antique store in downtown
Fresno with its one way streets
I wish I could disobey.

I’ll think I’ve spotted it through a window
with Christmas lettering sprayed on in white
and I’ll double back only to find
that it has disappeared. I remember
holding your hand as we exit a grocery store into a bright day, an ice cream cone in my hand, your thick mustache hiding a smile, and the quarter you made appear behind my ear. And I’ll know that no matter how much I write out your name, that it will fade like our voices, that these letters are just symbols that mean nothing to someone else but mean the whole world to me so much so that even by writing your name, father, I will have brought you back, to Shaver lake where you taught me to filet a fish, to the homes where you showed me where to place my thumb on a hammer, to the front of La Estrella Meat Market where, with a simple quarter, I will have brought you back to life.
Para Todos Los Poetas

The page
yells across
the salsa verde
universe,
pockets full
of mangos
to the river stones
drowning-
remember
to breathe like poems!
The river stones
pray from magma
the secrets of avocados
and remembers
the ink’s song
in poems
like breaths.
My Story Begins When

I captured death with graffiti,
gave him the halo-
a handcuff for spirits.
And his car painted by water
led the parade of devils
demons of asphalt
bleeding red to orange
like the sun
like a blush
against the wall
of the museum of natural history
into the cement wall.
This is his crucifixion.
And Then I Go To The University Where

It’s about the shadows of bodies
skirting across concrete and asphalt.

It’s about all their prayers
sent through the postmen of earthworms.

It’s about the footprints behind sprinkler heads
under the yellow glow of lamp posts.

It’s about the shuffle of tired feet
and their heavy legs under heavy eyes.

It’s about their repetition like incantations-
the careful utterance of an answer

in disguise behind a question mark.
It’s about the presence of police in riot gear.

It’s about tuition hikes and closed meetings.
It’s about pepper spray and batons.

It’s about students being plucked
from the soil of bodies like gossip.
On The Road, I Meet River Stone The Fruit Vendor

Wearing a bandana of sand
the fruit vendor sings
in the language of oranges
to the rush of cars driving by.

His voice like the skin of peaches-
notes falling like grapes from the vines.
His fruit stand like a box full of crayons.
What color will sweet be?

He sings that the blushing strawberries
know the secrets of flirtation: whistles,
hums, hymns, corridos, and rancheras.

But river stone knows nothing
of the ocean or its sand, only himself,
a man, barely a man, waist deep
in the earth with sadness.

His demeanor - a shooting star.
His palms - fireworks.
He himself - tasked with the void.
Crazy Town Boss Calls Me Boy

And the man calls me boy.
This is Fresno with its skipping stone past
where the street lamps decay the night with yellow
because my boss is really old school like that.

Yup, Fresno with its skipping stone past
because if the street sign turns brown, turn around
because my boss is really old school like that.
The shelves have been the same color for 50 years

because if the street sign turns brown, turn around
and head away from Clovis and their new school district.
You see, the shelves have been the same color for 50 years.
And this pharmacy wont last like this for long.

So head away from Clovis and their new school district.
My boss’ kids went there. And now the son co-owns this place.
I was hired because I knew someone who knew someone
and so the boss blames me for shit I didn’t do.

My boss’ kids went there. And the son now co-owns this place.
They treat me like I don’t have an education.
The bosses blame me for shit I don’t do
when the old boss bursts through the door enraged.

They treat me like I don’t have an education.
Here, the street lamps decay the night with yellow
when the old boss bursts through the door enraged.
And the man calls me boy.
Here, Justice Is A Woman In A Green Leaf Dress

After Luis Omar Salinas

While I daydream of her
underneath the oak
a small worm hangs

on the eyelids of dirt
and the bees swarm
the brilliant fingers of flowers

stretching the daylight into joy.

Here, justice is a woman
in a green leaf dress.
The palms of her hands
unfurl truth like kisses
down my neck.

But she skips the knife wounds
left to scar and fester

beneath the skin with a hunger
for the warmth of her lips.

And then she stabs me where it counts.
The sharp switchblades of her blue eyes
cut me open. Eyes undone,

I ask my brother for sleep
and he hands me a shovel,

tells me to dig myself out from her embrace
that follows me like a phantom
through hard or soft earth.

I ask my brother for patience
and he sighs and tells me to listen
to the hustle of worms.

I ask my brother for fight
and he demands me to wash my hands
in the pond of sweat left behind
in the shadow of this oak, to let breathe
the nicks and cuts of rocks with the sting of salt.
I tell my brother that all I want is love.

And he tells me joy only exists in the life of bees.

*Oh, to receive the honor of a bee, he says
They die after they sting you.*
We Collected Cans For Our Allowance

Sometimes even to live is an act of courage.
- Lucius Annaeus Seneca

And I got the yellow Power Ranger.

Our father watched us as we ate
before we headed back to our home
where our mother had prepared a breakfast
of beans, cheese, & eggs with tortillas for them to eat
while we smiled away our allowance.

My parents would host a get together on most weekends:

a birthday party, first communion or some small achievement

like living to see the end of the week,
as grandpa used to say
paraphrasing from Lucius Seneca,
was enough reason to dance

the night away. And all the guests
would not come empty handed.
To do so would be rude
and a welcome sign
to not invite that person anymore

like Greg, our neighbor down the street,
who probably did not know
of this custom in our house.

Greg - with his large frame & his balding head
& that stubborn beer belly
that stuck out like a hitchhiker’s thumb.

But he is not important. Nor was his Hawaiian shirt
that stood out against the dark jeans,
creased pants,
& dress shirts
with that cowboy flare
you could buy at a discount store at Fulton Mall.

Everyone else throughout my life
in that house but him
brought in at least a six pack,
    even if it was just Milwaukee Best
    or Natural Ice.

    It was all welcome,
all custom like firm handshakes.

The day Greg toured our house & backyard
there was a piñata.
    I remember climbing the fence
    to jump onto the roof
    to tie a rope around one of the air vents.

There was cake too.
    But like Greg, the cake didn’t matter either.

What did were the ice chest full of beers & sodas.

    And not bottled water.

No one that ever came to our house brought water.
    We had a kitchen faucet for that.

And if the kitchen was full of masa
    being flattened into tortillas -
    if there was a cacophony of dishes being washed
    by hands - knifes chopping onions, tomb-eight-toes,
or cabbage for the posole,
    - grandma dominating the conversation
    about those old movies starring Rita Haywoth-

    there was always the hose out front.

It wasn’t until morning,
    after the neighbors had asked to turn the music down,
    after my father had to break up a fight between cousins,
    after the unimportant Greg had his fill and left,
    after the trash bins were heavy with empty plates

    And after my brothers & I had eaten most of the candy
    that fell from the piñata,

that we woke to collect the cans.
We would empty them out in the garden
sprouting with ripe Tom-ate-those or vibrant

We would giggle as we did this
because we thought the plants could get drunk.

Then we would smash the cans into small compact disks
and place them into large bins in the tool shed that had two locks
and our dog *Candado* as guards.

Once a month we would clear the back of my father’s truck,
full of his work tools,
log those bins full of cans onto it
and drive to the recycler.

This is when we received our allowance
that was just enough for the gas
to drive to the nearest McDonalds.
Asking for a Raise In a Recession

I ask for a raise on Tuesday. 
The day before I drink vodka and gin; 
creativity and courage for my tongue 
that fucks with the words 
I’m trying to rehearse in the mirror. 

The gears of my delivery truck slip; 
bad shifting. When I ask my boss, 
the question lingers in the air, 
followed by a silence that fertilizes 
the words. They begin to grow bones; 

the shaky skeleton collapses in its shadow. 
Then the muscles, tired in the day’s skin, 
in the sunburn of work, where its brownness 
is now hidden, hangs loosely, under clothes 
covered in dirt the wheels kick up 

on the roads I travel every day. 
The roads neglected by street sweepers; 
their spinning brushes absent. 
My mass shakes in anticipation; 
the execution or last minute pardon. 

I know he will provide me a good blindfold, 
a solid darkness so his answer doesn’t unravel me 
in to Wednesday something less than a man.
Tangerine Tree

I was made to water you everyday
no matter the temperature of the dirt.
Your small stature did not bend
under the weight of winter.
The bones of your skeleton somehow knew
how to negotiate its gravity.
Still, you welcomed the ants and the bees
and a pair of doves with their nest.
I watched you dance to life with leafs
and small blossoms under the smog.
And then you wept with fruit.
And then all over again. And again.
I always wondered how you managed to breathe.
Beetles

Long legs like stiff spaghetti noodles stretch out beneath its body for foundation. The black beetle scrambles across the sidewalk slowly, to reach the brush of dried and fallen leaves of the small wilderness between the street and the high end homes on the hill. I see one or two on my walk dodging the crush of traffic to forage for food or mate or do whatever beetles do. I step over them. I do not smash them under my shoes like I would any other bug in my apartment where my wife rules the home with Raid in her hand at the slightest sight of any insect. I step over them and continue my walk up the hill, my karma clean, my shirt drenched with sweat, and share the hill with the beetles, their black bodies bursting with armor.
Ripped Off

This poem will melt
off the page
Salvador Dali style,
walk down the streets

as the sun,
melt the colors
from our skins;
Tamarindo tanned
song makers
will drain
down
the gutters.

Flesh exposed,
we will walk
the streets
with all of our secrets
revealed.
The circulatory system
will spell out the names
of our sins, first in Arabic,
then in Spanish,
then in English
and it will all look like hieroglyphs

only capable of being read by the ghosts
of our ancestors.

Some will hold us on trial
and our convictions,
sentences
will be handed out
by our executioner,
the moon,

who will come down
with her cratered mouth open
to scream the flesh from our bones.
It will carve out stereotypes;

Lawnmowers and leaf blowers
will be ripped off my wet back.

Tacos and beans and tortillas
will be ripped off my wetback.

Lazy, smelly and picking grapes
will be ripped off my wetback

until nothing but bone remains.

Our fragmented architectures clack
& fall into piles of
a sweat stained existence.

Then the massive roots of undertakers
from orange,
peach
avocado
orchards will devour us,

claim us
back into bark,
branch,
leaf,
fruit,
earth.
My Grandfather Takes Me To Watch The Bulls

The rider tightens his grip around the rope creasing into the hide of the bull and

breathes loudly, exhaling through his open mouth

before the two tied together dance in the stadium carved into the side of the mountain.

A vendor yells “mangos con chile!”

They look like blossoming pineapples on the branch of his arm, the trunk of his body

negotiating the breeze created by applause.

I watch the bull being held at bay on the dark toned beach carved

into the bottom of the mountain.

The sound of the band echoes off the landscape, the Tamarind trees are instruments,

the violins of their branches wave back and forth

and cry a song that embraces the warm air with glee. The bass drum of the granite boulders boom

while the trumpets rage in the seats;

the crowd’s whistles, claps, and cheers for the man on top of the bull to stay on

while the beast fights the tight rope around his body,

the pest on his back he tries to remove with jumps and kicks to the sky sticking out its purple tongue of sunset.

Then the rider hits the wrinkled skin of the old mountain with his head, lies still like the silence that swallows the crowd.

And the bull is herded back into the pen
before my eyes are covered by the hard and calloused hands of my grandfather.

But I still manage to peek through a crevice of fingers to see the riders limp, dead body carried off.
Ghetto Clichés

Hanging out of a car window
the smog perfumes my shirt—
the paint of this city—
a dull brown and peppers it with rust
and the smell of grapes
fermenting poverty.

Under the concrete sun
and the moon of asphalt,
ghosts jump from tree to tree
in the center street dividers.
Not even the plants are safe.

Bulletproof vests are useless,
911 a joke. Here, ambulances become
permanent fixtures in ghetto clichés.

I lost this game of hopscotch once
when I fell and busted my lip open;
the sidewalk and I tasted blood.
We both liked it.