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Between

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BETWEEN

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Patricia Valeria Pinedo

August 2014

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

BETWEEN

by

Patricia Valeria Pinedo

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE
LITERATURE

SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2014

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ABSTRACT

BETWEEN

by Patricia Valeria Pinedo

This thesis is a collection of poetry based on the farm worker Grape Boycott of 1965-1970. Through personal narrative and formal poetic techniques, the collection presents a migrant family struggling to understand where it belongs in choosing between joining the boycott or not. The Mexican-American family is depicted in relation to struggles of the time, thus emphasizing the historical situation. The collection asks each reader what side of the Grape Boycott he or she would have joined. The poems shed light on the internal struggle of those who both joined and did not join the boycott.

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It was through the support of numerous individuals that this completed work was possible. I would like to thank my mother for her unwavering support in my pursuit of higher education. Thank you to all my family members, both immediate and extended, for their support and assistance in sharing their personal stories of involvement during this monumental time in history. Thanks to all of you for digging deep into your personal stories to help shape the family that is the main focus of my collection.

Thank you to Professor Maio for his support and critical eye during the revision process of this collection. Another thanks for both Professor Soldofsky and Professor Engell for their support of my poetic voice and vision. Thank you, as well, to colleagues who assisted in helping shape the poetry by reading early drafts of very rough poems. A special thanks to Yaccaira de le Torre and my mother for assisting me in my use of Spanish, without which much of the poetic voice would have been lost.

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INTRODUCTION

The book of poetry I have written touches on an important time in American, Californian, Mexican-American, and Labor history. My focus is on the period of 1965-1970, which was the five year Grape Boycott in California. I have captured the story of a Mexican-American family stuck between staying complacent in its work and taking a risk to join the boycott. The collection is a linear timeline of poems that are interconnected through varying thematic elements. These poetic units focus on central themes as well as on recurring characters that readers will encounter through the collection.

I wrote forty poems dealing with the Grape Boycott to encompass the many narrative voices that illustrate the central struggle between social and moral right and wrong. I made use formal structures, such as sonnets and villanelles, and of free verse in shaping these narratives and challenging myself to ensure that the central message was forcefully presented in each piece. I used images involving field work, home environments, and other settings to shape poems that show the reader the ways in which environment influences the responses to the central questions of the volume: Do we work or strike, and do we join the boycott or not? The family unit and the reader must face these questions and answer them. I have entitled the collection *Between* because it reflects the central idea of choice in my poetry.

Themes in the collection include the uses of soil, types of vegetables, movement between jobs, and the American Dream. The main characters of the collection are a family whose story begins with the coupling of the heads of the household. As the

couple's children are born and grow, the readers experience the type of struggle workers faced during that time and understand the type of American Dream this family struggles to achieve.

Other poems depict society at the time of the boycott. Historical moments are told from a third person perspective and place the reader in a wider setting than that of one family. These moments include reflections of César Chavez and Dolores Huerta, stories of what other workers faced during the boycott, and situations involving workers who did not join in the marches. I have drawn from both personal history and literature in setting the scene.

The heart of the collection emphasizes the difficulty that workers faced when deciding to join the boycott. This collection shows how one family begins by opposing involvement in any struggle but changes by joining the farm worker movement. The struggle of choosing to join the boycott or not is a complicated situation that history tends to ignore. Understanding that not everyone joined with the strikers instantly is key to the collection's exploration of the difficulty farm workers faced. Some workers stayed working on the farms, and others moved north to take the place of those who had left the fields. The Grape Boycott was a complicated time that separated families and neighbors based on whatever choice was made.

Coming from a Mexican-American and Chicana background, I draw from my culture whenever I write a new piece of poetry. A passion of mine is to reclaim the voices lost or silenced through my culture's historical struggles. This collection is also important on a personal level because it depicts a part of my family history. Members of my family

were on different sides during the Grape Boycott. One group joined the strike and fought, while the other stayed in the fields and worked. I conducted interviews with my maternal grandmother as well as several aunts and uncles in order to gain their perceptions of the history of the labor movement and use these ideas to develop the voices of the collection.

Other research I conducted looked more widely into the Chicano movement as an artistic and cultural phenomenon. I learned through books, films, and histories about this time period and gathered as many personal stories as I could. I looked for the type of information that not many people touch upon when discussing the boycott. During my research, I found that stories of farm worker exploitation continue to this day. This knowledge helped drive and sharpen my poetic voice in the collection.

At a Center for Literary Arts event, poet Camille T. Dungy read from her book *Suck on the Marrow* in which multiple characters intertwine with one another and deal with living on a border state between freedom and slavery during the nineteenth century. This exploration of the difficult conflicts African-Americans faced gives Dungy's poetry collection a strong and compelling foundation. Dungy's examination of the African-American history of living between free and slave states sparked the idea of exploring the tension between conflicting loyalties within my own culture. Within the farm worker movement itself, there was unending tension between strikers and those who continued to work. When I told Dungy of her book's inspiration, she encouraged me to take her idea and run with it. Though I did not follow Dungy's narrative, I am influenced by her thematic ideas and her book's narrative arc.

Another writer who influenced the creation of my collection of poetry is Cherrie Moraga. I found her poetry valuable in describing the difficulty of understanding what it is to be a Chicana. In her book *Loving in the War Years*, there is a section entitled “lo que nunca pasó por sus labios” in which Moraga explores the ways in which she experiences her gender role in her family. I used Moraga’s analysis of the Chicana experience to shape the voices of the female characters in my collection. Moraga’s depiction of the Chicana struggle to conform to the family unit is a revelation of Chicana oppression. I have drawn from moments of gender strife in Moraga’s work to depict female roles in Mexican-American families and to show how Chicana women attempt to subvert these traditions. Through the female voices of my collection, I bring more recognition to the familial and social struggles women faced and how they overcame them.

Moraga has also influenced the creation of the male characters in my work. There is a moment in the poem “My brother’s sex was white. Mine, brown” in which Moraga introduces a character named Roberto who seems to understand how women’s roles are limited in a Mexican-American family and is ashamed of being waited on by women. Roberto is an example of the way a man feels divided between following tradition and following his sense of right and wrong. I have used this character from Moraga’s piece as a baseline for the male voices in my poetry. I have created men who both attempt to understand their oppressive ways while fighting to change them yet are complacent in the role that they are given as providers for the family. The male voices in my collection deal with gender-role issues in which their choices are not always clear. These male characters explore how they should act toward women in their families.

Another poet who has influenced my book is John Olivares Espinoza, through his collection *The Date Fruit Elegies*. One poem in particular entitled “Spanglish as Experienced by a Native Speaker” has influenced the way I approach weaving Spanish words and phrases into English. In this poem Espinoza describes Spanglish words that have been created by the Mexican-American community. One example is the lines, “At work we ate lonche. At school we ate lunch.” (Espinoza, 54). This shows how Espinoza not only uses the language to his advantage by displaying the Spanglish word first, but also provides a type of translation for anyone who may not know the word “lonche.” Espinoza’s playful Spanglish is an influence on my attempts to play with two languages in my poetry. Through reading Espinoza’s collection and studying his technique, I have woven Spanish and English throughout my collection. I also used Spanish-language poems to create more disparity between the language barriers that people experience as immigrants in this country. Through the use of Spanish in several of my poems, readers gain a sense of being unable to communicate in the world around them.

Another influence on my poetry collection is Juan Felipe Herrera through the unique musicality he brings to all his work. When he spoke at a Center for Literary Arts event, he transformed the poems through the music that accompanied his performance. Being unable to play music for my readers individually, I try to capture the same type of musicality in printed form. Herrera’s performance poem entitled “187 Reasons Mexicanos Can’t Cross The Border” appears on first reading to be a long list, but, during his performance, he chose a few moments from his list and repeated them to bring more musicality to the printed lines. I convey musicality in my poetry through my use of

repetition of sounds and images. I use repetition to ensure the importance of these sounds and images in the collection. I also used formal poetry to create some of the music-like verses.

Edgar Allan Poe is another writer who has been an influence in the creation of my musical ear. His poem “Annabel Lee” shows his musicality through the constant “e” sound that is prominent throughout the poem. Also, his narrative technique of telling a tale through musical repetition has been my strongest narrative musical influence. I used Poe’s musical techniques to create several formal elements in my collection, thereby formulating my own rhythms and sounds in my narrative poems.

I have also learned from Robert Frost’s depiction of nature and of farming in his poems. I have drawn on Frost’s poetry in writing about the importance of the landscape as part of farm workers’ experiences. An emphasis on landscape places the readers directly into the world of workers in the fields. Therefore readers gain a sensory idea of the situation through the landscapes presented.

Helped by all of these influences, I have created a memorable series of poetic narratives. My techniques and skills have been challenged so that I can write my best poetry. My overarching goal with this collection has been to ensure that an important time in my personal and cultural history is explored and conveyed with compassion. The creation of this collection has not only provided an entrée for my creative voice into the writing community, but it also gives a voice to people and events often forgotten. These are the voices that have been lost somewhere between the harvest field and the protest march.

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Between

By: Patricia Valeria Pinedo

“Todos nos tenemos el alma en el cuerpo, todos nos duele.”- Maria Mercedes Perez

“It’s gotta be done and I’m determined that, I’m convinced rather, that the only way to do it is to make it your lifetime work.”- César Chavez

Manzanita

Climb up the steep hill and see the bark
dripping with blood red sap down
the spine; images of the past enter the mind.
Begin to think of grandparents moving to California;
heard it makes dreams come true.
Think about chemicals that burned throats;
the aches from twelve hours hunched in the sun;
the fear that one mistake meant a lost job.
Imagine broken backs bent over the lines of tomatoes;
Imagine brown skinned hands mixing with el cortito;
Imagine the hard sun on skin that is not covered, parched mouths gasping;
Imagine traveling and meeting en la iglesia as rumors spread.
Hay trabajo en San José; no en Santa Rosa; no en Patterson;
no en Delano; no en Hughson; no en Lodi; no es en Fresno.
A constant flow up and down California's Central Valley and the West.
Up and down like the blood red sap.

Sit in the forest of Manzanitas;
listen to the whispers of the trees.

Vienen

The clouds thunder and the rain pours
filling canals with fresh water for farms
as new crops poke up ready for harvest.

Coming from the depths of México
to the sunshine States to rebuild.
Rebuild a new life after an escape;
rebuild a family on the brink;
rebuild the pride in what they do.

Cajón de Carton

My small brown box with rips and dents still holds
two pairs of pants, four white shirts, underwear, socks,
a tooth brush, soap, a towel, a photo of la familia,
and anything else that can fit.

Este cajón es mi vida contained and ready
if I should need to leave at anytime.

Anytime the wind brushes my ear with talks
of where new work can be found.

Any moment El Patrón threatens me
with calling immigration when I don't
do what he says. I am always ready
to move on to the next destination,
the next job, the next stop in life,
so long as it is not my last.

Los Fields

When the sun rises on the pesticide
dew filled grapes of Napa, a far away
freight truck is loading the first pick.
Box after box is filled and packaged
to be sent out to the stores.
The workers began at six this morning
to make sure to meet the deadline this week.
Rows and rows of workers mixed with grape vines;
bodies covered from head to toe trying
not to get sunburn on their already
darkened skin.

By noon they wish they had on
a different set of clothes. They're drenched in sweat,
their eyes feel like closing as their hands keep
moving in their work with the sharp clippers.
Halfway through the field, the trip back and forth
to the truck gets longer. Yet they keep on working
hoping to be let off soon when they complete
the quota for the day.

None of them realize El Patrón has
extended their deadline and Mayordomo
is suppose to give them tomorrow off.
He likes it that way. Making them work twice
as hard as he does nothing. He needs to
remind them of his generosity.
After a hard working day like today,
he can pretend they are back on track
and he will grant them half day tomorrow.

The night comes and Mayordomo plays his part.
The workers are proud in this moment; some
give each other handshakes, others puff out
their chests and straighten their crooked backs.

Another successful day en los fields.

La Línea

Everyone works with backs bent, knees slumped,
fingers grasping at the plants they must harvest. No
one is left behind or else everyone
will suffer the wrath of Mayordomo
or worse El Patrón. They work as one,
moving together, looking after one
another, helping the unit move from
end to end.

 Until Mayordomo comes, sees
someone has ruined a part of the vine.
Do they speak up? Who will be fired first?
Nadien dice quién estaba allí.
Everyone takes a cut in pay tonight,
losing fifteen cents of a thirty-cent day.
Look to the thirteen year old that passes
for sixteen, his red ears can't hide his shame.
He will move to another job tomorrow
where his family will not be at risk
of losing more money they can't afford.

El Campo

The barbed wire fence surrounds the long rows
of houses that have been separated
into two room sectionals. Paper
thin walls distinguish family from family
in the camp that once imprisoned
Japanese Americans during World War II.
Haunting walls holding migrant families
needing to rest their tired bodies after a long day.

One bedroom, a sitting room and
kitchen is what they look forward too.
The bathrooms are in the center of all
houses. Men and women separated
by tile with ice cold pipes that never
generate warm water. This is the first
place many call home when they are lucky.

If not, a tree can provide the space
the family car cannot. Cooking meals
out under the stars on a winter night.
Looking up to the heavens and dreaming
of the day children graduate from school
with an education that allows them
to do anything. Imagine a dream home they will
buy one day when they have enough money
to settle down. See the dream of succeeding in
this new country of promises that all
hope to fulfill.

El Trabajador

Mis huesos me duelen después de un día largo. Me subo a un autobús para regresar a mi casa. Nadien se levanta para darme la silla. Después de trabajar todo el día, nadien puede darme una silla para descansar. Estoy apurado, agarrándome del poste con toda mi vida.

Mas gente se sube, me muevo por ellos pero nadien me ayuda. No más me miran y se voltean al otro lado. Quiero sentarme con ellos y platicar de mi vida. Decirles que en mi país todos me conocen y nos ayudamos cuando es necesario. Pero nunca hablo inglés y nadien habla español aquí. Estoy luchando para mantenerme parado. Mi cuerpo quiere callerse y descansar. Pero sigue adelante, sin ayuda y sin vergüenza.

En el Camino

Bodies stand pressed against other bodies
as the truck drives up Interstate 5 towards
the field jobs that await everyone.

Carlos has learned to stand with his legs bent
following the way the truck flows down the road
swaying cautiously so that he doesn't fall onto
the other travelers around him.

He sees Señor Domínguez is back again
at the back of the truck. He will make
sure to keep close to the old man
to help him along in the work
they do. He enjoyed working with the old
man at first, but now it was double the work
helping whenever señor fell
behind. He doesn't want Señor Domínguez
to lose his job because he couldn't keep up.
Mayordomo always checked for flojos
that took breaks. If you were caught standing
straight for five minutes, you were fired.
They almost fired Señor Domínguez once
but Carlos stepped in, saying Señor fell
behind because he was teaching Carlos.

The truck goes over a road bump
causing everyone to jolt forward. Carlos braces
himself to stop the bodies behind him.
Others are not so lucky, rows fall as dominos
getting smashed into the wall.
People on top of people, those that are still standing
try to help them up. Three to four people stacked
on one another, trying to breathe in the chaos
when the truck jerks again.

More people fall, Carlos does his best
to help those around him. Women and men
crying out they cannot breathe. People
start pounding on the truck crying out,
¡Ayúdanos!
Carlos knows it is hopeless and keeps helping
people up. Up to their knees, to their feet,
then they lose balance and fall again.

When they finally stop, the back doors
open to a night sky with an orange
haze of dawn in the East.

People file out, helping the fallen
as best as they could. See people
with blood and purple bruises.

Carlos finds Señor Domínguez smiling
with a bloody mouth and black eye.

Juan Miguel (I)

Juan Miguel is eighteen when he starts working in the fields with his papá. He works to help feed his brothers and sisters; some who are too young to remember time spent in their casa en México when Juan Miguel helped run a ranch for his papá.

Juan Miguel takes pride working by papá, day after day as they rise together. Papá warns Juan Miguel of the white smoke, how it falls often and they must cover their mouths and nose from the sweet smell it brings.

Juan Miguel keeps working away, watching his brothers and sisters grow and study. Carlos and José join Juan and papá in the fields para ayudar la familia. La familia that has grown with the twins, Elisa y Sofia (bonitas), who are now citizens of this country.

Juan Miguel works in the field with Claudia, a girl working for her familia too. Juan y Claudia go to un baile where they dance all night in each other's arms. They get married, they have children and Juan still works in the fields with Claudia.

Juan Miguel has six children now, all citizens of this country. He can't remember the old house in México anymore, and has trouble breathing while he works. His back permanently hunched from all the years he stayed in the fields. He sees the plane that brings the sweet smoke, he drops his body to the earth and closes his eyes as he waits for the smell to pass.

Another day in Juan Miguel's life and he continues breathing steadily doing the job he has grown into.

Los Niños

Parking the car on the side of the old dirt road
the family of seven climb out of the car.
Roberto is in charge of two younger brothers,
makes sure they do not get into mischief
as the rest of the family goes to work.

First play hide and seek, then chase,
then draw in the dirt.
Maria comes and checks on them,
Roberto wants her to play, but she goes back.
In five minutes Ricardo starts crying;
he wants to go home.
Roberto calms him by singing a song
he once heard on the radio
until his brothers fall asleep in the back seat.

Roberto is reading a book for his school, finishes,
goes back to drawing in the dirt when
Mamá appears on the edge of the field.
She smiles at her son, before disappearing back
into the vines of grapes. He sighs as he hears
his brothers laugh in the car.

The family comes to the car for lunch time.
The younger boys jump on their Mamá
asking if it is time to go home.
Roberto tries to ask older siblings
to trade him spots since he is tired
of babysitting. They shake their heads while
eating their burritos. As quickly as they come,
the family returns to work leaving the three boys
alone again.

Roberto makes new games for them
to play as the time ticks slowly by. No one comes
to make sure the boys are not getting into mischief.
No one checks to make sure they are not overheating
in the hot summer sun. No one comes until the family
has finished the work day, and they make their way
back to the small shack they live in.

Noche

The stars twinkle in the distant night sky
as the tractors drive on the cold, hard ground.
Metal teeth dig deep into Mother Earth
as she is prepared for planting new foods.
Foods like grapes, tomatoes and broccoli
are set to grow and mature for eating
by the American families.

One

lone tractor is moving in the darkness
with lights off. The driver uses moonlight
to carve through the soil perfectly straight lines.
The driver swells with impenetrable
pride as the sunrise comes up from the East.
El Patrón is happy with the driver's work
and promises another raise again.

At the end of the month comes pay day,
the driver's raise forgotten.

Fresas

Dark clouds fall around the lonely skies
as the air fills with the scent of damp earth.
The Western wind from the sea cuts through my
jacket as it swirls around my work.
There is still a tint of light in the day,
though my brittle bones cannot take the cold;
to go home now means a loss in pay,
others have left too sick or too old.
My back bent over the strawberry vines
that I pluck daily for El Patrón to
sell in the market full of hungry lines.
I can't even buy myself some shoes.
My frozen hands continue their labor;
numb fingers working the silver saber.

Los Campesinos

They are the ones not seen
working hours and hours hunched
over tomato vines with el cortito
in hand as they weed out los surcos;
squatting hours and hours cramped
under grape vines with cuchilló
in hand as they harvest las uvas;
slouching hours and hours over
tiny crops with tools in hand
as they weed, harvest and package
plants grown in American valleys
to feed the American people.

They are the ones that travel
up and down from San José
to Delano because seasons change;
all night and day from Yakama
to Bakersfield for better take home pay;
West and East from California
to Texas for a chance to be near México;
they move and adapt to new places
never staying long enough for the dust
to settle and roots to take place.

These are los campesinos
who work all day in the sun,
bodies aching at every swing
they make as they harvest;
who travel to new places
with families uprooting their lives
to find the best place
with the best job;
who stay silent with dry mouths
and stinging bladders until half
hour lunches; who work side by side
proudly with others who share stories
and long for a better life in America.

Mamá

Me levanté a las cinco de la mañana making fresh tortillas for the familia as I cook frijoles y bologna to go inside. I make 1, 2, 3,...10 lunches for mis hijos and 2 for mi marido y para mí; making sure I get the burnt ones, my favorite. I make extra for mis hijos snack I know Lucy will give the little ones when they return from school.

Ya son la seis de la mañana and I wake up mis hijos. I help them dress for school; Juan wants to stay home. He has something called a “pop quiz,” I tell him he must do his best and try hard. He needs an education to help him get ahead in this country. He mumbles something en Inglés I do not hear as he leaves with his brothers and sisters to the bus.

Ya son la seis y media de la mañana y voy a trabajar con mi marido. We make our way to the field that hired us to weed out tomatoes. My bent back aches quickly from bending over at my work. I am looking forward to Sunday, the one day I have off.

Thirty minutes for lonche!

Estoy apurada todavía, no rest as I eat my burritos and wait for my children to come from school to help. Our Lucy works some days, but she mostly stays with her brothers Alejandro and Eduardo during the week. I hope Alejandro doesn't try to play “boxer” again. I hope that everything goes smoothly with Juan today.

Ya son las seis de la noche and I just finished in the fields. I leave with mi marido y mis hijos to home. Alejandro punched Lucy on accident, this time in the stomach. I will try to talk to Lucy while she helps me set the table. Her other siblings need to do their homework and study. I begin making dinner, more tortillas, we will finish the frijoles tonight con el queso fresco; tostadas.

A las seis cuarenta y cinco de la noche, I am feeding mi marido y mis hijos making tostada after tostada eating the burnt ones as I go. I clean my mess and continue to clean the entire house.

A las ocho y media de la noche, I begin the cycle of showers and baths. Everyone must work quickly, babies first with oldest last. Make sure they wash correctly and are ready

for school tomorrow.

A las nueve y media de la noche they should all be sleeping or at least laying in bed to sleep. I do a bit more cleaning as mi marido goes to sleep soon after nuestros hijos.

A las once de la noche I begin to set a new pot of frijoles to cook for the next day. Watching the pot as it boils, I sew some pants for Miguel; Diana ripped her skirt again. No tiene vergüenza esa niña. Then I begin to iron all of their clothes even mi maridos. I make sure ever wrinkle is gone so that they are presentable.

A grumble comes down the hallway, Eduardito had a nightmare. I hold him and sing his favorite lullaby Pinpón, rancheras and anything else I can think of until I feel his body go limp into sleep. I carry his six year old body back to the bed with Alejandro. With the nightmare, I take longer ironing.

A la una y media de la mañana, I take my own shower and I lay down to sleep before I need to wake up again a las cinco to start the cycle all over again.

Lucy (I)

Finished with her work, Lucy is so tired that the walk back to the family car seems like an eternity.

Her father allows her to wait before making the long walk.

She is only 12 but passed for 15 to Mayordomo, who was ready to take any bodies he could to be back on schedule.

She lets her hair down to shake out the dust and chemical dews that the wind blew towards the field they worked in. It was past her waistline and she was happy that her white friends at school were jealous, for once, at something that she had.

A hand covers her mouth from behind while an arm pins her body into another behind her. Lucy freezes with a fear she has never known.

No grites o te voy a matar.

A nod as she feels him push her into the rows of grapes, feels hands grab her early developed breasts, feel them open her pants and reach into her calzones. Feels the tears begin to fall down her cheeks as she looks to the sky. Fixes her gaze on a plane flying towards her set to spray pesticides in the field she spent her day in.

She imagines what it would be like to one day fly a machine to any place in the world whenever she wished. Imagines seeing the far off worlds of countries she hears about in school, England and France.

When he let Lucy go, she dresses and begins her way to the family car. Running in fear of making her papa wait too long.

Mayordomo

He holds his head high above all others
that work beside him in the rows of orange
trees. Standing straight back barking his orders,
“Vámanos perros, trabajen fuerte.”

He no longer gets his own hands dirty
since El Patrón named him Mayordomo.
Hard work is for the men that work below
him; the men that he must now control.

He stays standing and yelling to workers
about how to do their jobs, forgetting
he once worked as hard as those around him.
He once helped others to stay with the line;
he once worked a double shift to pay bills;
he once dealt with painful words, like wetback,
in the triple digit heat, without breaks.
He does not care about the workers now
as his job is to please El Patrón.

He has become another man to all.
The men call him coconut behind closed
doors. Doors he was once welcomed in
Doors that now shut him out of the circle.
Mayordomo does not mind this at first,
a new job means new friends with El Patrón.

Until the day, El Patrón changes him
back to the line and gives the job away
to his wife that works hard *with* the workers.

Mayordomo becomes wetback again.

Para Las Mujeres Del Campo

Working hard day and night, she strains to maintain
a family home in their one room shack of living.

Working around only men,
she strives to show her strength to keep up
the line that she begins on her own.

Her back is bent with el cortito, working
hard at el surco de tomate as the sun beats
on her tired body. Her stomach shows
her three month-old child growing inside,
yet she still bends to the best of her ability
still protecting the small child
with each motion she makes.

Her husband, el Mayordomo, eyes his wife
taking a moment to stretch her back.

He goes to her, demanding she continue;
no breaks for anyone. She eyes her husband
shaking her head, “déjame en paz.”

For a moment she forgot where they were;
she forgot whom she was speaking too.

Mayordomo's hand comes across her face
and she falls hard to the ground.

She leaves at lunch, refusing to face the men
that saw her disrespected by her husband,
who had never hit her before that day.

She goes home, places ice on her cheek
and thinks of what her next move will be.

La Tierra

Claudia sits in the cold bath water
scrubber and soap in her hands.
She rubs and rubs and rubs them on her knees
caked in dirt from the fields.
This long bath is a weekly errand to remove
the brown dirt that she gathers there
all week as she sits on her knees
to pack the boxes of grapes.

She feels the rawness as her skin sheds
more and more and more layers.
Naturally brown skin turns shades of red
from the areas she has already gone over.
Drops of blood begin to appear as Claudia
realizes that she can no longer scrub
the dark brown stains on her knees.

She lets the soap and scrubber fall in the tub
as she draws her legs to her chest.
Her mind races with thoughts of what her husband
would think of his now deformed wife.
Her legs, the one feature he always admired,
now stained forever from the Earth.

Claudia lets the water spiral down the drain
as she gathers up her strength
and puts on her long pajama pants for bed.

Los Que Nunca Hablan

Our God taught us to turn the other cheek
as people taunt us with strange foreign words
Virgen de Guadalupe help us speak.

When someone tries to knock us off our feet,
we raise our fists up to stand with the birds
for God taught us to turn the other cheek.

We feel the sun filling our body heat
as we gather together in a herd,
Virgen de Guadalupe help us speak.

We feel the whip of language patrón beats
our ears with a call to push us toward
a God that taught us turn the other cheek.

Our souls are strong, our bodies are not meek.
Every Sunday we pray, arms raised upward;
Virgen de Guadalupe now can speak?

We work hard in fields of those who treat
us as the ones that are not to be heard,
but our God taught us turn the other cheek,
Virgen de Guadalupe help us speak.

César Chavez

We first heard of him in small whispers
about something called rights.
He was fighting por los baños, agua y papel;
basic needs we had never dared to ask for.
The whispers were growing more and more
as the speculation took hold of us,
who was this César?

We began to wonder
what a man with such a following could look
like? Possibly six feet in height, strong
shoulders with great big arms. Imagine
the leader we need.

When he finally reaches our fields
on his way up to Sacramento, we are stretching
up on toes; hands and fingers reaching out
to touch the man we had only heard of.
He stood about five feet with many people
surrounding him, chanting his name,
hoping his brown eyes would meet theirs.

“Sí Se Puede,” we all shouted along
to a man who has not forgotten us.
A man that knows what our struggles
have been, a man who is reminding
us of our strengths today.
A man who understands our needs
and tries to gain it through peace.
A man that stops to help a woman
who is struggling to walk with a child
in her arms. A man that helps another
man continue though his feet ache.
A man that welcomes new marchers with
open arms, though they crossed picket
lines just hours before his arrival.

This man was not the man we had pictured,
but he was the light we all hoped for.

El Patrón

I.

El Patrón surveys his acres of grapes.
Rows and rows of vines that glisten with dew
this early on a Monday morning.
He is proud of the history he holds
with every vine rooted deep in the Earth.
Years of his families' lives shine through his fields,
three generations, ready to pass
down to his son when the time is right.

El Patrón drives up in his white Ford truck,
at the point his team of wetbacks stopped last
Saturday. He waits for the vans to bring
his workers to him so that he can start
the week with a good amount of harvest
done. He can't wait for his grapes to sell out
in the markets for families to eat.

El Patrón does not expect anything
to stop his workers from doing their jobs.
He does not know they have left the fields
for signs that ask for human treatment and
better wages. He does not realize
that his grapes will sit on the vines until
the workers feel they are being heard.

II.

El Patrón waits patiently for the trucks
passing by from Mexico with more workers,
so that his harvest continues on.

¡La Huelga!

The crowd gathers on public land outside
the fields, with pickets and bullhorns ready.
Everyone's heart is pounding hard inside
as the sun rises once again today.
The vans arrive and chants begin slowly
asking, no, demanding they stop the work.
People learning how to speak out freely,
their voices become one with a strong smirk.
Want to start the strike they have longed to do;
a strike to win a bathroom and a break.
Knowing the goal is the dream of a fool,
but their children's future is at stake.
Today they are beginning their fight.
Today is the beginning of their strong fight.

La Bandera

High in the air above the head of all
who march and chant together; voices
melting into one as la bandera
moves in their hands. A sea of red, white
and black, each color to remind gente
of the struggle they face in the fields.
An eagle mixing Aztec and Mexican
images set in the middle to remind
la gente of our roots. This is la bandera
that waves as the people shout ¡huelga!

Lucy (II)

Lucy's stomach ached today; the day she learned where babies come from. La maestra says there are eggs inside her body that needs something que se llama sperm in order to be fertilized.

Lucy thinks about her papa having them use a bucket when the baño is broken. "Para abono en mi jardin," he said.

Lucy knows maestra is always wrong. Her mama told her babies come from Dios en el cielo. Only Dios knows when women are ready for their babies to come down.

Lucy raises her hand to go bathroom, her second time today. La maestra looks angry and waves Lucy away. She runs to the bathroom before throwing up her lunch of tortillas y frijoles. Lucy sits with tears streaming down her face.

Dolores Huerta

There is a woman who stands next to César Chavez
and speaks of huelga y viva la mujer.
She reminds the women of the house
of their strength in their voices,
in their actions, in their support.

She sits surrounded by César and his men
in a small living room, planning
her boycott of grapes. She listens
to the men make comment after comment
about the women; listens to the innuendos,
the disregard for her work,
the vulgar praise of women's anatomy.

She decides to take out
a pen and paper to write down every time
a word is used to separate her gender
from theirs. Writes down comments that walk
the fine line of harassment she feels deep
down. Writes down the phrases that diminish
her presence among her male peers.

When business is over, and the floor is open
to anyone wishing to speak, Dolores stands;
“During the course of this meeting
you have made 58 sexist comments.”
The men shift in their seats as she sits
back down with her eyes scanning the room.

This woman with brown hair and skin,
stands next to César, pen in hand,
a second pillar of hope
for women to find strength.

Pan Dulce

She stands on the corner of the road
selling her homemade pan dulce to buy
needle and thread to make la bandera
for her husband to take to la huelga.

El Patrón sees her small stand and stops,
stepping out of his truck, a smirk across
his face as he walks toward the woman.
She, unknowingly, offers pan dulce
to the stranger who spits out tobacco.
El Patrón chuckles and tosses the bread
to the ground, “No thanks stupid wetback.”
She freezes and watches as El Patrón
continues to drop pan en el piso.
He tips his cowboy hat to her before
one last spit of tobacco juice
on her floral dress she sewed by hand.

Driving away, he leaves her in the dust
her face still high as tears drop down her cheeks.

En La Mañana

I wake up at 4 with an ice cold shower
in the community bathroom. The water
reaches hot when I am finished.

Pulling on thick socks, long pants, two shirts,
one with long sleeves, and work boots, I'm ready
to take the van to the neighbor camp.

I eat my breakfast my wife made me;
coffee, dos huevos, beans,
queso fresco, un jalapeño
and tortillas on the side. Then I leave
in the van made for 18 people
in the dark night to the camp ten miles away.

Night stars son bonitas while driving;
my van moving slowly along the road.
I am excited to begin la huelga,
it is time for a change. I need
to make sure my money comes to me.
I didn't realize El Patron is wrong.

I arrive at the gates and step outside.
I feel something crash against my thighs
and I fall down to the ice-cold ground.
Pain shocks me at first mixing with confusion.
Pain kept coming all over my body,
I cry in fear for the shadows to stop.

Suddenly, I am above them all
and I see my crippled body below.
Hear them mutter "wetback", "illegal"
and every other word imaginable.
I don't know who they are, but they know me.

I see them drive away in pickups,
my body left a bloody mess alone.
I feel the light of heaven fall on me.

El Otro Lado

I stand in the middle of a row
of grapes, listening to screams
from the outskirts of the field.
Mayordomo tells me to keep working,
hot sun on my back, every inch of skin
covered from the harmful rays.

Shots ring through the air, the sound
makes my blood freeze and my body
drops down as my heart races.
Mayordomo laughs, ¡Matan a esos babosos!

I look to my right and left to find
the others still working quickly. A fire
lit in their eyes as they silently work
and pray.

Tío Luis

A bus bench on a street. A bus bench with blood stains on a busy street. Clothes in a pile left behind. Tio Luis's clothes left in a pile on a bench with blood stains. Yellow tape secures the area as black uniforms and badges inspect the scene. An area where Tio Luis took his last breath.

These badges scribble notes and talk about last Sunday's big game. These white badges scribble notes that Tio Luis was shot. These white badges scribble that Tio Luis, a Mexican immigrant, was shot. They do not note he was a striker. They do not note he was on his way to picket. They do not note the man who found him was El Patrón. They do not note the previous attacks to the picket lines.

The badges just mark that Tio Luis was another Mexican shot and killed on a bus bench.

Fernando

Fernando works beside his father
in fields he has come to hate.
Working after school in back braking ways,
he wants to do something different in life.

He hears whispers of a union
that is trying to make life better
for the farm workers in California.
He hears a man is coming to the fields
to talk to workers about new plans.
He hears about meetings in the churches
and how they need more people to join.

Fernando talks to his Papá, Juan Miguel,
to join with the others in the march.
Juan Miguel tells Fernando, “No, porque
ese hombre no mas quiere nuestro
dinero. El Patrón dice que es malo.”
Fernando is confused by his Papá’s
words, doesn’t he understand the struggle?
Doesn’t he want a better life for them?
Shouldn’t Papá want to stand up for himself?

Fernando goes to the fields the next day,
he sees the crowd of people waiting there
with picket signs and fists up in the air.
¡No trabajen ahora! ¡Ven aquí!
¡Júntense con nosotros en la huelga!
Juan Miguel drives past the line of people.
Fernando feels the sting in his eyes.

De Mexico

They file in from cardboard towns
set on the border of México and California,
green cards in hand to catch the next truck
into the Central Valley farms. No entienden that
their cramped shuttle is a tax break for El Patrón.
No entienden that they are crossing more
than one line on their way to work.
No entienden that they are being
paid half the wages for the work they do.

Nada mas escuchan que hay trabajo
en el Norte. Nada mas escuchan que
los hijos tienen hambre. Nada mas
escuchan que pueden ir a California
para trabajar donde los flojos
están gritando mentiras. Nada mas
escuchan que pueden pagar para trabajar.

No entienden el sacrificio de la
familia que no puede visitar. No
entienden que los “flojos” tienen
familia también. No entienden que lo que
hace El Patrón es malo.

No entienden, solo escuchen.

Juan Miguel (II)

Standing tall in the grape fields, head above
the vines he has known for many years,
Juan Miguel peers over at the red, white
and black banderas that wave in the air.
He shakes his head in disgust of the way
sus amigos se estan portando con todo
las mentiras de esa huelga.

El Patrón comes to check on their progress,
Juan Miguel squats down again to the vine.
He feels El Patrón watching his hands work,
feels his spine tingle as El Patrón moves
towards him and the other workers there.
“My best workers,” he says as his hand falls
on Juan Miguel’s shoulder with a strong force.
Juan Miguel smiles at El Patrón and nods.
His spine tingling fear gone now that El
Patrón has made it clear that he is not
upset by his small break to stretch his back.

Juan Miguel continues his work in line
while new men struggle to keep up the pace.
He smiles in pride when El Patrón praises
his hard work every day he is there, not
joining the pickets that threaten the crop.

Juan Miguel continues to drive past all
his former amigos, compadres, y
hermanos as they chant at him, huelga,
on his way to work for El Patrón.

Eduardito

Eduardito was nueve años when the blood
began to come with his cough.
His Papá didn't know why it happened,
his Mamá tried to cure it with ancient remedies,
but the blood kept coming.
He was stuck in bed all day, too weak to run.

His Papá finally decided to take the cut in pay.
He sent Eduardito to El Patrón's doctor.
He wished to go with his son but Mayordomo
said he had to work to cover the medicine.

All day Eduardito was on his Papá's mind.
He hoped his son would return soon
smiling and laughing the way he once did.
He waited all day, all night, into the next morning.

Eduardito was nueve años when the blood came
and he took his last breath, alone
in a waiting room.

Lucy (III)

She lays on the doctors table, legs propped
open in stirrups, her Mamá holding
her hand as the doctor removes the child
that was growing inside her stomach.
Tears fall down into her hair, in pain
and frustrating anger. She imagines
her Papá's face when her Mamá told him
the truth of why she was so sick this week.
She remembers the sadness in his eyes,
the guilt he carried since it was his job
to protect her from evil men like that.

Once the doctor finishes the sad work,
he leaves Lucy with Mamá to get dressed.
As she puts on the special underwear
designed to catch blood that will fall
from the operation she has gone through.
She looks into her Mamá's red eyes
full of sorrow and confusion.

As they drive home from the clinic, Lucy
holds her Mamá's hand in the backseat
as Papá drives them home.

Miles de Personas

You always saw them before you heard them,
seeing small dark dots in the distance
across the hot fields of the valley
as a unit of ants marching through streets
holding signs and banners
as they chant ¡Huelga, Huelga!
to the wind to be carried.
Their words traveling across miles
¡Huelga, Huelga!

As they come closer, the small dark dots
get bigger and bigger with more coming;
the line has no end. The sea of ants grow
to human size. See the red and black banners
growing and waving in the air. Listen
to the united chant change
¡Sí se puede, Sí se puede!
Your heart swells as they seem to call
¡Sí se puede, Sí se puede!

Mayor Domo is watching you now
making sure you finish the work
for today. Looking down at
el cortito the question
continues to ring in your ears
as you wonder what to do.

¿Sí o no?

Los Otros

We are not all from México;
some of us are from an Eastern nation,
with a long history of dynasty
as far back as time permits.
Some of us are from a different spirituality
in which multiple gods teach
us life's biggest lessons.
Some of us are from right here, born
into this life with no other understanding
then the changes of seasons and crops.

But we are all united; Mexican,
Filipino, Arab, Chinese, and American,
in the struggle for a better work
environment, so that, together, we can
become a new voice that will never
be silent again.

No Teníamos Miedo

Claudia turns to Juan Miguel and takes his hand into hers. He stares into her eyes for a glimmer of true fear but finds strength.

The silence that surrounds them grows thick with uncertainty and anticipation as they sense their final decision.

He stands up from the table and takes his cup to the sink. “Tenemos que ir.”

“Todos?”

He turns to his wife, “Sí, Todos necesitan firmar los papeles de la unión.”

She smiles as she stands to waken her children for church, where they will join la huelga.

Lucy (IV)

They stand together Lucy, her Mamá,
her Papá, her hermanos, her hermanas
with la bandera in their hands as they
chant together around the field con gusto.
Lucy stands tall and proud with the marchers
around them; no longer afraid to speak,
she screams the loudest of the family.
Those around her gaining strength
to continue from the passion she releases.
Releasing the anger towards the man
who stole her innocence; releasing the pain
of her lost child; releasing the hurt of her family
struggling to make ends meet on the meager
wages they made in the fields. This is what drives
Lucy to stand con los miles de personas gritando,
¡Sí se puede!

En Medio

Somewhere between Delano and Sacramento.
Somewhere between “*Sí Se Puede*,” calling
to our brothers and sisters
in the fields to join us or “*Children of the Sun*,”
seeing new brothers and sisters
drop the boxes of grapes and tomatoes
to join the march we started;
Somewhere between walking with Rosa,
whose husband has the cancers
from the cloudy smoke that falls
or Javier, the man that can’t send
money to his family in Mexico.

Somewhere between the field and the road
the sound stopped through some lips
but could still be heard ringing in everyone’s ears.

Adios Alejandro

I.

They sat around the table listening
to the air come in and out of Papá's
lungs as he thinks about Alejandro's
request to leave home for colegio.

Juan Miguel remembered when his son first
called him "Papá," when he started walking,
when he first went to the fields to work,
when he started saving his allowance,
when he said he wanted to study math,
when he said he was ready for life now.

Juan Miguel looked from the table, back up
to Alejandro, back down to the table.
Pues hijo, es mi último niño
y nada mas quiero lo mejor por tí.
Alejandro holds his breath as his Papá
stands from the table and faces him.
Tienes que escribir a tu mamá
cada día. Alejandro smiles,
his Papá's words lighting his young face.

II.

Juan Miguel stands next to Claudia
as Alejandro gets on the bus.
They wave to him as the bus pulls away
leaving a cloud of black smoke around them.
As the exhaust clears, Juan takes Claudia's
hand and squeezes his fingers into hers.
¿Nada mas tu y yo mujer, qué crees?

Claudia smiles as she thinks about her
family that has now gone off into
the world. Fernando a school teacher,
Maria a hair dresser, Roberto
a journalist, Miguel is an actor,
Ricardo stopped writing last week, Juan
still fights with Chavez in the fields,
Diana paints in the back of the casa,

and Lucy is learning about the law.
She sighs before walking to the car
with Juan Miguel leading her, his hand
against her back as he opens her door.
She gets in and smiles at her husband
through her hazy eyes she sees his red ones.

They drive back to their home they finally
own, go inside their almost empty nest
and sit together on their couch, waiting.