

WE DON'T OWE  
NOTHING

by

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NOTHING

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## ABSTRACT

Poetry has been good to me. When I was a younger, I was an avid reader. Often I chose to stay in the library en vez de recess. But then, I fell off the reading path when I was about 12, as most boys do. During my senior year of high school, I was introduced to T.S. Eliot by my senior English teacher. That was the first time I entertained the thought that a poem could be a magnificent and complex thing. But again, I fell off the reading path. It wasn't until my sophomore year of college that I became a voracious reader, and with the help of my professors, began to produce poetry of my own. Since then, poetry has guided me to the hidden worlds of lightness and dark, of joyous occasions and jolting sadness. It has allowed me to express myself in new ways, to give and find new meanings in words, and construct new words themselves.

My thesis was written over the course of nearly two years, and a lot has happened during that time: presidential elections, relationships building and breaking, travelling and standing still. Throughout these poems, and especially between sections, there may be significant changes in voice and tone, this is a creative consequence of the temporal nature of things and the work itself. My creative thesis is composed in three sections. The first primarily deals with poems generated by autobiographical content; the second wrestles with historical and present issues of social and racial inequity; the third plays with poetic convention and voice.

Opening the work is the poem "Mestizaje," which hints at the cultural intermixing of American Indian, Spanish, and Mexican people. It is a word that also describes the process of racial and cultural intermixing. Its noun form in English, mestizo, is used to describe a person of mixed decent. Over the course of history, this word has been used as

an insult, but for some, like myself, it has been a lamp in a dark night. Hence, the use of plurilingual poems acknowledges the diverse nature of language, identity, and images present in the work.

In search of generative material, I often looked to James Baldwin. His book of poems, *Jimmy's Blues*, was my go-to whenever I was stuck with myself or my poems. Likewise, I also pulled strongly from my time spent with Jim Harrison, Billy Collins, Julia Santibáñez, Eduardo Corral, and Russell Edson among a myriad of other poets. By exploring poetry across topic and time, I was fortunate enough to learn from the poems of others and strengthen my voice and structures. Their influence can be found in many an idea and stylistic element.

For instance, the epigraph that opens the work is from Julia Santibáñez's work, *Ser Azar*. It serves to invite the reader into the work. In English, the epigraph reads, "Come. We will be." By using the first-person plural, I am asking the reader to join the work as we journey across voice and scene. Likewise, I find Julia's lyric even more important since it is in Spanish, the language of my culture and people. Looking at "Mestizaje" specifically, I open with an epigraph from James Baldwin's poem, "Jimmy's Blues." In doing so, I hope to set the tone of the poem. Since James Baldwin had an extremely politicized voice, I believe it sets a political stage for the reader and begins to shape the poem before the reader enters its world.

The poems in each section have a different tone, and at times those tones can be angry or confused. However, I end the work with "Gratitude Power Ballad" because I truly am grateful for the opportunities I have been blessed with and the home poetry has built for me. I have tried to steal like an artist and make my poems distinct while

acknowledging that I borrow from those before me. I will never stop writing poetry, and with the completion of this manuscript, I mark a milestone in my nascent career as a writer and lifelong learner.

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*“Ven. Seremos.”*

- Julia Santibáñez



## Mestizaje

“I’ve *seen* some stars. I *got* some stripes.” – James Baldwin

We shake trees, make love  
under the covers, throw our bodies onto train tracks,  
listening to the vibrations  
with our neck bones—

copper pennies split in halves.  
We wear wife beaters at the water park,  
flex our biceps with a long stretch,  
bike in jeans, baggy hoodies. We come from

No Man’s Land. Sugar cane and stone  
bound to our ribs with rope. Blood spilling  
out of our skulls. One foot in a muck pond,  
the other in molasses. *They say:*

güero-white-boy-amigo-brown-nigga-  
black-nigger-fairy-faggot-kike-chink-  
slanteyedfucker-spic-wetback-zipperhead-  
gook-bastard-monkey-puto-maricon-beaner—

With our hands tied behind our backs. Witness  
just how fast we—white sidewalk outlines,  
spray-painted freeway walls, fire in our beds,  
bombs at our churches, bullet cases our coffins.

We are frightened of the worlds that crawl underneath our skin,  
of the lady in the schoolyard in delicate yellow dress,  
whose father hates liminal men. When I asked her mother  
permission to take her daughter on a date, she told her husband,

who smashed open my front door with his fists,  
casting splinters across the ground.  
I have carved this into stone for the bleeding,  
gleaming liminal men, who shaved themselves spotless  
so that one day they might shave their sons.

What fragile things we are.

I.

| *“By the time a man realizes that his father was right,  
he has a son who thinks he’s wrong.”*

- Charles Wadsworth

## Prayer for my Parents

O god of gods, is it truly right and just  
that the suffering of two people must be made  
inadequate by the suffering of their children?

## Jinxed

My neighborhood was a cul-de-sac.  
An asphalt carousel. Adrian and I  
played tag endlessly.

There was a small brick wall  
between the stucco houses. As kids,  
we felt super-human when we sailed over it.

One day while playing tag, I kept jumping  
over the brick wall, proving that I wasn't a kid  
but a high-flying macho man. Then, my father came out—

brown eyes and flat top—saw us running  
in circles. *Be careful!* He yelled, *You might  
fall!* and I turned my head  
to look back at him, knowing

if I jumped the wall with his eyes on me,  
I could prove how I had just done it  
before. I circled back, leaped, and

crashed. Bloodied my shins  
against the red brick; fissured my palms.  
Skin broken and dangling.

*Why did you have to say that?!*

## You Did

Off I-395 is an old brown barrel  
American joint serving pancakes  
the size of dinner plates, sausage patties like fists,

with a large glass of milk for under \$10.  
One of those places where every family  
stops on the way up to the mountains.

My small elbows were on the laminated  
tabletop, when my family got up  
to go the bathroom. Somehow

the bill was paid and my family  
was gone. I wandered between  
the gumball machine and empty booths;

stared at the Big Mouth Billy Bass before  
I approached the waitress behind the counter—  
a blue pen in her bun.

*I lost my family.*

She had me sit down on the torn leather seat,  
my feet dangling like thin willow branches. Five  
minutes turned into fifteen...into thirty. The

doors clattered open, a bell dinged:  
my father's sweat dripping from his stubbled  
chin. He swopped me into his

arms, clutched me against his chest,  
I'll never forget you again, he said.

Somewhere in Southern California,  
probably Temecula or some other drought-ridden city  
in the Southern California basin, Dad told me

I was going in Mom's car. Mom told me  
I was going in Dad's car. The gravel turned  
and sprayed across the parking lot, and I was

left alone. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Forty-five.  
I hold it together this time. I'm a few years  
older, but still scared. The tears collecting

in my throat as I approach a girl chatting  
on a pink Razor phone pressed against her ear—  
*Can I please use your phone?* in a defeated tone—

*My family left me!* A buzz-cut boy with knots  
in his stomach, trying to make a phone call.  
I punch the numbers in with my forefinger and

before I can say anything, I feel Dad's  
*oh shit*, springing him from the table  
where I'm sure he was enjoying a warm

breadstick and pasta. I wait for him  
with my knees in the gravel.

## Show All Work

If your father throws  
you 25 and a half feet, at 14  
and a quarter mile  
per hour, how much

Unrelenting Pain™  
is experienced, given  
that the body contains  
only 100 nerves?

Who Taught

My father

to teach

me: never

give up—while

wiping

the blood

streaming out

of my nose—

his white shirt...

His father: treated

wounds with rye

whiskey

until the stomach

scars

became black

-eyed

Our Father:

is crying

laughing

on the couch;



a wave  
of ocean light.

Who taught us: to dance, to  
swivel our hips  
to the salsa beat.

His eyes  
in the rearview mirror  
piercing black.

My Father Labored so I could L—.

My dad and I spoke,

mostly e-mail or by phone.

I remember yes, no, or confirmed.

*I need you*

*to stay home.*

*Make sure the guy*

*fixes the fridge.*

*Pull all the weeds*

*by hand. Confirm.*

Confirmed.

He wore a sweaty reindeer costume at every office

Christmas party. Pomona to Huntington Park,  
Montebello, El Monte, Southeast L.A... his domain.

Singing a version of the Oscar Meyer wiener song to sell title insurance,  
he drove and drove and drove and drove and drove and drove and drove;  
the Dodgers game radio crackle. Traffic and smog. Dusk till dawn.

I remember green

monster slippers;

car seat cologne.

Glass waterfall.

The white things

growing on my nails.

Sunny D— read: Mexican

orange juice. Red

tamales steaming. Tortilla

chips cracking, salsa

spilling on the floor.

## Stubborn Child

My RC car  
with jumbo plastic  
wheels and flames,  
is battery dead.

Mom, wearing a wrinkled  
tie-dye shirt, says she won't  
charge it; says to finish  
my breakfast first—

Yellow waffles  
trapped underneath  
brown syrup. Sunny D.  
I refuse to eat.

I cross my arms, purse  
my lips angrily into  
a hunger strike—

Mom's bare feet  
against the kitchen  
floor, carrying  
my RC car

fully charged. My  
plate still full, I snatch  
the fork, shove waffle  
down my throat, but

she sees I haven't  
eaten at all. She  
turns around & drops  
the toy in the drawer—

*I'm eating! I'm eating!*

& I shovel deeper  
into my throat.

## That Time I Needed my Mom and it Turned Out OK

I ran. Living room, kitchen

*Where are you?*

I yelled I

opened the front door

and found her

dumping ashes

into my juice

cup, the orange tip of her

cigarette

a dying ember.

*What's wrong*

*baby?* my eyes—

hiss & smoke water.



## And the Time I Found Her Crumpled

on the brown

corduroy couch,

wearing nothing

but a bra—

the blue-glass

pipe

dangling

from her cracked-lips.

## Christmas, 2010

“Maybe Christmas, he thought...doesn't come from a store. Maybe Christmas, perhaps...means a little bit more!” – Dr. Seuss

I spent Christmas morning in rehab We drove there My sisters  
 and I woke up that day with nothing much to do  
 Slate grey quiet a murmur of façades The air thick  
 curtains There  
 my mother bearing gifts a plastic dart board Some makeup  
 for the girls Pine needles gathered on carpet floor  
 Huddled in the corner a Christmas tree

## II

*“My progress report concerning my journey to the palace of wisdom is discouraging.”*  
- James Baldwin

## Please, God

“Then, perhaps they imagine that their crimes are not crimes?” – James Baldwin

I'm waiting for the E train, reading

**I can't breathe** in the newspaper.

On the calcified steps there is  
a black homeless woman,  
swathed in a rat-holed tweed coat.

She's chopping it up with one of New York's

finest. His uniform shimmering

as the trains whistle through. With a Glock 19  
strapped to his hip, he flicks the safety off.

She throws her head back in a laugh, as his hand

moves toward the gun. I shut my eyes

and squeeze my fists, bracing for something—

*a chokehold; a black and white carousel electrified;  
the crack of skull on concrete; teeth shattering;  
piss and blood and please, God don't let—*

The E screeches to the platform.

My eyes open and she's against the railing,

her hands clasped cymbals, head bowed to her chin,  
rocking back and forth—he marches up the stairs—  
and she guffaws into the resounding tunnel.

## Miscomunicados

White girl sitting next to me  
in class, with your purple hair  
and nose ring, don't say *coño*  
to me *riéndote*. *Por favor*, your horrible  
mouth turns my ears into stone wax.

White girl sitting next to me in class,  
with your glasses and turtle lips,  
When you say *pura*, I imagine  
your tongue rolling, *como las olas*,  
beautiful & blue.

[my tongue]

Mira,  
la lengua  
está atrapada.

Un salmón  
wriggling  
in a net.

Una cárcel.

Por fa. Por fi.  
Save me.

## We Don't Owe Nothing

Yo soy mezcla, ¿Y tú?

Reading this in my voice...

Whose voz?

Tío, gringo, güey, nunca vas a conocerme.

Pero I know you—don't I? ¿Y por qué?

I.D.? once a murderer, always a murderer;

un millón de muertos y un millón de perdidos.

Crimson stains across the desert sand, cheek

bones remnant the ground. Frayed huaraches.

A vulture circles the saguaros, rattle sn

-ake gravels through a chain-link fence.

Can you hear its traq-traq-traqueteo?

¿Understand?

## El Rey Poeta, Nezahualcóyotl

“Si es de jade se hace astillas, si es de oro se destruye, si es plumaje de katzalli se rasga...” –Nezahualcóyotl

Antes de la conquista  
we spoke  
whatever the fuck  
we felt like.

Zapoteco—Maya Yucateco—  
Náhuatl—Tzotzil—  
Mixteco—Huichol—  
Tzeltal—Chatino—

Después de la sangre  
dried to scabs  
una lengua deformada  
pero útil; a mouth  
-ful stinking  
of shimmering fish.



## La Heroína & How She Fucked Me Over

In the evening,

yo rezo,

howling

my naked prayers,

convulsing spine;

sol: gold

blanco. My arm

purples blue.

I chomp gnaw;

swing it bandera-like,

digo. Lizards crawl

my chest and neck,

un coyote dentro

de mis dientes—

snapping mouth.

## Beneath the Scalpel

“I could see the hospital in the distance and imagined the surgeons in the basement sharpening their knives.”  
– Jim Harrison

They’re performing  
surgery on me  
when the lights go out.

With their phones,  
they put the flash  
lights on to finish the job;

to get the bullet  
out of my chest.  
Black fire destroyed

my flesh  
in the streets  
of Caracas.

*Agua, ayuda*

I didn’t even hear the—  
I felt it rip through me first.

*Por favor*

Like a sledgehammer  
to the ribs. They grab the

*¡Ayúdame!*

*bola* with tweezers  
and yank it gently;

*clink*—striking metal  
I go under.

### III.

*“But all they want to do  
is tie the poem to a chair with rope  
and torture a confession out of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose  
to find out what it really means.”*

- Billy Collins

## Simple

Today I'll write a poem.  
A plastic bag. A foxface

fishface poem. That reflects  
like the plexiglass

at the aquarium.  
No flash. Sign says.

Says that. Common shrimp.  
Sea horse. Lavender.

Turtle in the shark tank.  
Wonder. How come its tender

flesh never gets eaten?  
No FLASH. Gift shop like

a dirty room. Not much but,  
some things there. Exit. Sun.

Walk. River and boats.  
Cobblestones and smoke.

Bend down. Tie shoe. Laugh.  
Choke, meaning, cough.

Laugh. Cough. Laugh choke.  
Choke cough. Belly over. Tears.

Smile. Foxface fishface smile.  
Sun. Heat. Blue and green. Walk.

## Murciélagos

El viejito  
with the accordion  
is singing tonight.

A child runs  
across the cobblestones;  
circles back to his mother.

Los murciélagos de Sevilla  
vuelan en el viento. The lights  
from the bridge

reflect along the river—  
it silvers and sways como  
las ojas en sus aguas. In front

of my eyes, a bat flutters,  
swoops, and returns underneath  
el Puente. The dark sky warms my skin.

## Metastasize

- 1) No rush.
- 2) It wouldn't be a palm tree unless it were a telephone pole.
- 3) Write what he says how he said it.
- 4) There is no rush.
- 5) Life is a liquid. Swish it into a cyclone. Upside down.
- 6) Find the nearest neutron star and dance around it.
- 7) Watch lamplight cast shadows over clapping feet.
- 8) Eat beef ravioli and drink red wine.
- 9) Spill once in a while.
- 10) The sky grows into blue-orange.
- 11) Read aloud to the walls.
- 12) Don't have kids.
- 13) Learn to run so fast the balls of your feet bleed.
- 14) Make time to do nothing.
- 15) Call your mother if she's still alive.
- 16) Hope she isn't.
- 17) Teach your dad how to type. If he'll listen.
- 18) Write the number twenty
- 19) twenty more times.
- 20) Why not?

## I Scream

I come home after a run  
in the Texas heat, muscles thirsting.

I open the front door, my boyfriend  
sipping Topo Chico—

I sit on his lap. Kiss him.  
Opening the fridge for ice

cream, instead: blue popsicles.  
*Gerald, the fuck happened*

*to my ice cream?* I turn  
and he's got strawberry ice cream

on his cock, dripping  
to his sack. Strawberry chunks sliding

like pink wax. I pick one  
and pop it into my mouth.

## Exploring

“I start with good intentions. On a date, I struggle not to sound so insincere; I think, hyperbole will be my fate.” – Randall Mann

The first thing we did was stare  
at each other. I knew he would want  
to kiss my wet mouth. I had prepared  
for this, the sun spread out over the L.A. skyline  
like a floodlight.

On the freeway we talked about  
MFA programs: Houston, Florida,  
and how we were finally meeting  
in person. At the museum, we watched  
blue ovals swing from strings; a ballerina

fell to the ground like a pear. The next room  
was Mapplethorpe photographs.  
That is to say, bulging cocks and assholes.  
He had already seen them. Nice.  
We left, but, before we crossed the street

to the café, he told me I was cute and  
he shoved his tongue down my throat.  
Two. Then three times. Old man tongue—  
a withered leather rope in my mouth. I wasn't  
as interested as I thought I was. That's the issue

and what I told myself. Driving back to his place,  
he said his book was going to be reviewed  
on NPR's *All Things Considered*. He stroked my  
hair, with his hairy, muscular hands, as if I were a  
dog; at his apartment, he kissed

me again. I told him, I don't like tongue. He said  
I didn't understand, how when a man wants a boy—



## The Moon

Standing in the driveway  
with the last  
Miller High Life  
in my hand. I gaze

at the stars  
and moon.  
I *awooo*  
at the Gods

bright-black sky.  
Finishing the bottle,  
I chuck it  
at the moon—

both shatter. The light  
disappears  
and glass shards  
crackle onto the ground.  
I pick one up,

place it on my tongue—  
swallow it whole.

## Shingles

“Is this a near-death experience?” – Jim Harrison

The fire is your skin burning—  
 worsens when you rub  
 capsaicin in it, wishing  
 it would help. You start yelling.

Shaking skin turns purple. You get in the car  
 except neither you, nor your car knows where  
 a hospital is. Punch in: urgent care.  
 Four minutes later, in a claim jumper

parking lot. Your skin still ablaze.  
 Only partially cooled by blasting the AC.  
 You can call 911 and they’ll tell you  
 what to do. You know that makes

no fucking sense. You call anyway.  
 Here’s a fireman, a brick house Mexican  
 asking, How you’re feeling— feeling like a silhouette  
 your skin needles. Bruise flames.

Now, with your shirt off,  
 the scars and shingles shine  
 like moonlight:  
 a blood parade.

## Habits

I'm bouncing

from leaf to leaf,

hoping, for the crackle and snap

of a big one.

The brown ones can be deceiving,

the small yellow ones

inviting. Some crunch harder than others,

while some don't crunch at all.

But the jig

is never up

until the sidewalk ends.

And leaves scatter in the air.

## Make Room for the Mouth

A mouse puts  
on a human  
face. And says,  
I am a mouse.

A mouse puts on a  
human face. And  
says, I am a mouse.

A mouse puts on a human  
and says  
I am  
a mouse.

A mouse puts on face human and  
says, mouse  
I am.

A mouse face on a human says  
I put a mouse

Face says—A mouse  
a mouse says  
I am a human face  
on a mouse a human face a mouse

## Home Soil

“... I would cup my mouth in warm bowls over the earth, and kiss the wet dirt of home, taste Bogue-mud and one long orange peel for skin.” – Safiya Sinclair

On a good day

I can see the smog of Los Angeles

from my room

Dogs

with black lipped smiles

A garden in my backyard

I pull weeds by hand

Sometimes

my room gets so hot

I ocean into my sheets

In the soil, only weeds

in my mouth—

Once I used a hoe instead of

my hands

and the weeds

piled

into mounds

## Gratitude Power Ballad

The oil painting on my wall—orange  
 backsplash, with Jewels from *Pulp Fiction*  
 staring at me when I wake up.  
*I'm trying real hard to be*  
*the shepherd*, his word bubble reads  
 in black print.  
 His silver gun aimed  
 at my pile of cardboard boxes.  
 Keeping boxes.  
 Always for next time.  
 Joe painted it in high school  
 for me. Oh, Joe. Just above, another  
 oil painting. Another friend  
 original. In a dark forest,  
 a young girl—little red riding hood,  
 her hands cupped in a whisper—  
 What is she sharing?  
 The wolf pup in his thicket basket  
 peers up at her. His right paw  
 outstretched in a dangly sort of way.  
 He looks past little red towards  
 the acrylic near my book shelf, its  
 back panel held by a metal string.  
 The way things seem to float.  
 It's Christopher Walken with metallic  
 purple hair and teal sunken eyes. To the left  
 of his gently wrinkled face: *The party don't start*  
*till I Walken*. Silly jokes. Puns. My art.  
 The art my friends make. The highbrow shit  
 at the museums. Bed sheets. Mattress pad.  
 All the movies I've seen—  
*Cool Hand Luke* and *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*.  
 Working concessions at the theater, with  
 my blue Dickies shirt, quarters in the front  
 pocket jangling. I give out free popcorn to my friends.  
 And strangers. Books and their yellow smell. The AC unit  
 at 68 degrees. The cold inside and the snow  
 outside. Blue corn tortilla chips. Red and green  
 salsa. Habanero when I'm in the mood,  
 which is always. Vegan pasta. Black pens.  
 The fact that I know one word in Icelandic—  
 Von. The window I run past, its dark maple  
 curves set against the white façade  
 of the stone house. Chorizo

con huevos at six in the morning.  
Bacon sizzling. Preventing grease fires  
with Dawn. My girlfriend's hair  
in a bun and the way she sings *La Vie  
en Rose*. A crocodile smile.  
My best friend's first wedding.  
The first time I'll be a groomsman. The first time  
I'll object. How running my bath  
feels like an ear drum massage. Letting  
my toes wriggle under water—the salt spray  
from the ocean. TK Burgers with grilled onions  
and fries between the buns. Fresh Mahi Mahi.  
Marrakesh. Oranges. Sherry and broken-in flannels.