San Francisco

My great-grandmother taught my mother to read using chalk and a black slate in León, where adobe brick buildings are white-washed Spaniards and history. We brought with us red and blue macaws, panthers, and crocodiles. Tooling up and down Dolores Street hills, my Papi rode a bicycle delivering Lela’s nacatamales. Back and forth from a clock tower at the end of Market Street, a renovated 1919 streetcar, transplanted from Milan, works tourist dollars. Advertisements from the late sixties posted behind True View Plexiglas. I can’t read a word of the European Italian glitz, deep blue of the Mediterranean and a Coca-Cola, but there is a warm blanket on a wooden bench and a leather hand hook. Above a Cuban restaurant, where waiters serve black bean hummus and chocolate croissants, hangs the gay pride flag alongside a Direct TV satellite dish. Gabby walks to school, Pokémon cards in his pocket, Sanchez Street. I work in the kitchen with my Lela. Mariposa Avenue, Valencia Street, Camino Real are added to masa. Homemade tortillas puff into sweetness. I’m not one-third Irish, one-half German, and two parts English with a little Cherokee thrown in, but last night I couldn’t translate the word “hinge” on every door that opens and closes to clouds beyond four walls. An old lady, perhaps Cambodian, Vietnamese, Korean, something of her own, hurries off the 31 Stockton while
my tia Teresa double-parks in front of the mercados on 24th street
para los quesos y los chiles in the back room. One
whiff and the world is not so small.

My Mother, Sex, and Dating

Though she was sexy with her stockings
and silk slips, she didn’t
think it was good. Seven years after leaving
my father she wore a satin bra
under a gold and black knit sweater
which I could see right through.

I pouted and exclaimed,
“You can’t go out in that!”

My good mother now tells me
I should hold off on sex, though

I’m divorced and in my thirties.
After Elizabeth’s wedding reception
at the Richland Pub, we all
went back to her house in the woods
and I slept with a man who wanted
only to hold me. My mother tells of dancing
all night with a soldier or man in a tie.
She must know how the heart
gets lost once a palm is placed, open-faced
upon another palm, how the fingers
curl under and how the neck pleads
for a kiss, and I think John
knew this, too. That’s why he confessed
that he didn’t love me and why we didn’t
do anything else. I thought it was understandable
for my husband not to want me
to wear make-up and to have all my clothes
three sizes too big. My pants were held up

by one of his old belts. I tucked
the extra leather through a loop, almost around
to the back. We both wanted for me
to be a good mother. She swears

she went home after breakfast at the diner,
offering a thank you and a fake phone
number, and I have to believe my mother.

Throughout New York City

Emotional instability demands a new pair of shoes
and a leopard-print coat. All the men are beautiful glass
houses. Desire struts down Fifth Avenue, past Gucci and Chanel,
throwing blocks while shaking the rattle. I have been behaving
badly chasing after a man in a blue wool coat who lisps
in Spanish and smiles with a crooked eye. A late night
phone rings and rings, while in the morning
dreams morph a black crow’s claws onto my left
ankle, a scavenger picking pieces from the not dead yet.
I should leave this city and practice patience. If only
to sit outside and wait for the temperature to cool as light
elongates through the shadows of a maple tree. Those damn-near-
perfect leaves in cadence with the wind, as the wind
goes round and round the earth’s circumference. Vibrant.
Volatile. Never ending. An unnamable interior ooze settles for a minute with my modern-day gaucho on a New York subway, the F train, or maybe the E, and then I am terrified, not of what might be or what should be, or the socially constructed this and that of how a woman should act concerning desire, but of electrified confusion that cracks open a thunderstorm’s loud boom while children kick and scream through nature’s chaotic dance.

We find shelter under an aluminum awning over a five-story parking garage and by running down subway mid-summer sauna steps to another connection, another train. All holds still with permission to touch a knee, hip, shoulder, a slight seductive brushing back and forth as we sit on pre-fabricated easy-to-clean subway seats. I could fall into forgetting, but I cannot shut down the box cutter blade steady in that woman’s hand, or ignore that we all clutch bags slung crisscrossed over the shoulder, the possible intrusion from the outside, an actuality. Our bodies, moist and pliable, wait for the one who seeks to calm or release or turn-the-table on that same interior ooze and find refuge, a palm in the dark. In the lift of so many bodies swaying with the continual rocking, there is only more of ourselves. We rush to leave tiles falling from turn-of-the-century walls, the steel gurneys and iron pillars erect under the city above.

Between Two Languages

Misericordia translates to mercy, as in God have mercy on our souls. Ten piedad, pity us the poor and suffering, the lost and broken. Have mercy. Ten piedad. Misericordia, a compassionate forgiveness, carries within miseria, misery, the stifled cry on a midnight bus to nowhere, and yes, the hunger, a starless night’s piercing howl, the shadows within shadows under a freeway overpass, the rage that God might be laughing, or even worse, silent, gone, a passing hallucination. Our nerve-wracked bodies tremble. Our eyes have trouble peering into night. Let us hope for more than can possibly be. Señor, ten misericordia de nosotros. And if we are made in the image of God, then we can begin heading toward the ultimate zero, the void that is not empty, forgive ourselves, and remember the three seconds when we caught a glimpse of someone else’s stifling cry. Compassion, then miseria, our own misery intensified by the discordant ringing of some other life. Our ultimate separation. Our bodies intolerably unable to halt the cacophonous clamor of unanswered prayers. But nevertheless we must try for no reason at all. Once more, Señor, ten misericordia de nosotros, forgive us for what we cannot do.
Playing around César Vallejo

The day I was born
God conchéd his mighty roar
into Khrushchev’s ear.

Dandelions bloomed yellow
and continued to fall
away, countless airborne,
and a very young boy
sat down to a bowl of chickens
scratching the yard.

Few know the leopard-print
pajamas I found on sale and that
I’ve withstood stars withered
into a faint echo, the pulpy mass
of a tomato
cut open, sliced, and slivered.

The day I was born
God found his sense of humor
and whispered a dirty joke
into my grandmother’s ear.

Oil heated in a pan,
kernels of rice crackling before
water, and she forgot the brush
taken to my mother’s legs, the welts
of anger when a bullfrog
let loose his mighty tongue.

Let’s go to the Dragon River
and order moo shu pork rolled
with plum sauce. Did you wake
in love this morning? Never forget
a warm December and the cold
water deep in a lake,
August, September.

The day I was born
God was feeling much better.

What is the proper location
for a box of rusty nails
or those squirrels,
those damn squirrels again
sitting on a fence. Who knows
what you know and what is true.

I think the earth is in league
with red-tail sparrows, maple trees,
and even the stench of tar, wet and fluid;
all laughing as we sit
confused and mourning January’s
overcast sky, the death of an oriole
frozen in ice.

And yes, César, light is inexhaustible
as well as shadow,
and it is the Mystery, the vast space
of what is unable to be said
that is kicking,
kicking us upside the head.

My Mother’s High Heel Shoes

A fat man in white. A polished stone floor. Marble or granite
A patio deck.
Inside the cabana, at the counter, I ordered a hamburger.

In Nicaragua? Maybe it was a soda
in a highball glass with a cherry. I do not have to ask
for money. I am part of the black sand, fine silt, and seaside sparrow.

The sun drapes freckles across my mother’s shoulders.
Ponoloya, a beach in Nicaragua. She is seventeen and pretty.
I lost the 8x10 glossy.

I think I took it to school for a class
project on family history and autobiography. In the second drawer
of her dresser, a satin slip the size of a Mead college-ruled notebook.

How close can I get to the first bikini on Ponoloya?
Saturday at three o’clock old movies re-run on KTTV, Channel 11.
Clark Gable. Claudette Colbert.
A shapely leg in a silk stocking extends for a ride
to champagne and elegant parties.

Cummerbunds. Gold taffeta. Who does my mother kiss on a blanket
as Abuelita scolds her with a look that keeps hands in view?

My mother spots a picture in a Paris magazine or one
de Los Estados Unidos and asks the seamstress to make her one just
like it.
Probably blue.
It would have covered her belly button but exposed two inches of ribs
below the bosom. Esther Williams

pulls back her hair and raises one arm before submersion.
On an overcast day we head toward Huntington Beach.

The piping tube of a seaweed frond stuck in a castle turret.
Half moon slivers. Crushed shells.
Pebbles in sand.
My father, my brother, and I are added to a shoebox.