

borderland

My abuela has begun laughing at Death / brushing him off every morning from her crooked /
shrunken shoulders / pinching him away from her body as resilient / as fearless as our people /
like my father dragging his mattress to the road / and jumping down from the roof to touch the
softness of sky / and the hardness of fall / still young / still a child then / like my tía roller skating
with her sister / each with only one shoe / and the crooks of their arms so braided / that they
weren't sure whose was whose / like someone my abuela used to be / running before she learned
to walk as though escaping her own shadow / dancing around gazebos in circles with boys / and
their hair as thick as a gringo's accent / their strands slicked back with gel and a comb / her shoes
and her world not yet grown too small.

She cannot do this alone like she used to / her steps so clumsy now that she once fell / and
cracked her rib / shattered the vase holding her heartleaf / and made my tía replace the pieces
with a pot / For weeks / her eyes couldn't find a way to close / her body made more of ache than
bone / her slippers heel-hollowed / unfilled on the floor / her spine so bent like a lung collapsed /
and troubled with finding the strength to breathe / her cries to God so loud that my tía took the
room down the hall / and still heard all of her voices at night / as though she housed different
people inside / no puedo / no puedo / Mamá / Mamá / ¿dónde está? / Ay Dios Mío / estoy listo
para morir / all this over and over and over again.

But still my abuela jokes every time I leave home / si todavía estoy aquí when my nieta returns /
if Death doesn't steal my breath in my sleep / her life her pearled pair of aretes hidden away in
the drawer like a secret or a candle aflame / a please-come-true wish / Ay, Amá, don't say such
things / Mamá scolds her / my tías too / but my abuela can't hear the world right / has to have
everything repeated twice / as though Death stole her ears after stealing her feet / one thing at a
time / yet she was the one who saw the humor in the end / who spoke of her death as inevitable /
approaching soon / like a train chugging through chain-link borderland / that rainless / faceless in
between / where nopales bear their fruit as though offering a sting / and fear is carried in the
belly / like a child unborn with no brakes to stop its coming / my abuela who speaks with the
mouth of an immigrant / her teeth that believe heaven and home are said the same way / and
stumble through inglés / as though made of a thickness she cannot understand how to chew / so
different from Spanish with words spoken the way they are spelled / so out of reach that she must
gesture for what she's looking for / so much that the valleys of her hands ache just as well as her
tongue.

My abuela who has made a fool out of Death and is only waiting to let go / I only wish I still
believed in prayer / or the cross above her bed to ask God for her escape / can't hurry her out of
this house / even with its locks that never stay shut / even with its many doors / their width too
small / too narrow / too soon to let her pass through.