

Open Door Behind You

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Abstract

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*Open Door Behind You* aims to represent familial themes specific to one part of the spectrum of Latin-American heritage. All poems are creations of a hidden genealogy. The multi-media, and experimental form allow the exploration of themes including religion, patriarchy, generational trauma, and dysfunction. It confronts suffering, through memory and touches on the constructs of race by piecing together parts of a hidden history.



OpenDoorBehindYou

StephanieSegura

To mamá, dad, Michelle, Helen and tío Juan

to all the spirits of our origin,

to my future, that I might figure out a way to break the cycle.

## Guide

1. Walking through the open door.
2. What does family mean to you?
3. How do perform a history?
4. What would happen if support to others was offered?
5. When did you witness a transformation?
6. What does home mean to you?
7. Who or what are you looking for?
8. How to make a home.
9. How many times have you left?
10. Who did you leave behind?
11. Were you ever a victim of violence in your former country?

# Walking Through the Open Door

*Open Door Behind You* is a multimedia manuscript that pursues a hidden genealogy. The manuscript consists of experimental poetry and utilizes photographs and public documents. It also includes the use of personal artifacts to investigate and attempt to piece together the dysfunction of one family. This dysfunction is subject to the displacement of this particular familial structure but is also subject to the ways in which dysfunction affects memory. *Open Door Behind You* uses lost memories and generational suffering to piece together parts of a life that have been purposely hidden. This manuscript uses documents and other historical artifacts as material to closely examine each history.

The project originated in the form of a quilt. Each poem seemed disconnected from each other, at the start. I found it hard to understand how any of the poems were in connection to each other. Until I realized each poem told the same story only from various perspectives. The process was frustrating and tedious. Not knowing how each poem related to another felt like constantly running into a dead end. I found myself at a loss for words most of the time and felt like I was forcibly pulling words out of my brain, unsure of where they would lead. When I did feel inspired, it was when I allowed myself to experiment with sound and visual media. I decided to manipulate recorded audio by overlapping the voices of my parents in interviews I had recorded. I did the same with images of them taken from passports and official documents when they were younger. Each manipulation drew me closer to an alternative narrative of them. A narrative I never knew from just knowing them as my parents. Each experiment felt like an attempt to understand the effects of inherited trauma and how said trauma played out in their own lives.

I thought most of how displacement contributed to this, from their migration of their country of origin but also to how they have been spiritually removed from each other in family. I thought about war and how my mother migrated to three different countries before calling America

her home. I channeled my thoughts to the men removed from our family, through death and separation. I focused most on how this affects the body, how diseases are passed on not only physically but mentally. Depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder are contributing factors of this spiritual displacement. I knew I wanted to talk about this and how my living ancestors continued to live with this in mind and their experiences of war, migration and death. But mostly, to longing.

The longing part was easy. As a child I longed to know more about my family history. I often caught myself wishing for a larger family. I wanted to have cousins to talk to, who were my age, and that didn't live on the other opposite end of the country. I wanted to know what my family traditions were before they were Americanized. Growing up with two parents from two separate Latin American countries felt confusing. Weren't they the same thing? They weren't. My parents made note of that, usually around the dinner table. When I'd ask how to pronounce a particular word in Spanish, the dialects were different in both of them. When I was curious and asked about their lives, it was hard to focus on one of them. They each felt their country was the better one, the one I should be learning from. It wasn't until I got older that I longed to understand each side. But, more than that. I longed to understand each side of my parents' memories and life. I wanted to see them as people before I saw them as parents. I wanted to understand *their* longings.

In the process of understanding longing and displacement, I chose to chart the histories of each side of my family as they have been presented to me, unclearly or not at all. My process involved placing myself in the memories of my parents, experiencing their loss, reliving their frustrations through my own eyes and re-telling accounts of my own trauma. I thought most about how I never knew my mother had brothers, growing up. Or at least I didn't think of my mother as ever being a sister. As I looked into my own memory, I had no recollection of my mother grieving the passing of her three brothers. I had only ever seen my mother cry once in her life. My uncles were always a mystery.

I thought most about my connection to the women in my family, and how most of the men in the family line have either met death or have never shown face. I imagined the matriarch of women connected through pain, and how the mental and physical states of each woman have somehow manifested and transformed itself.

This manuscript reflects languages of familiarity to myself. English was my second language, and now feels like my first. English and Spanish have always been thrown around in conversations with my family. Spanish to begin with, English in response or an integration of the two. Examining language brought me to words I cannot translate but are so familiar to me. It also made me think of bias, race and racism/colorism and how each are contributing factors to how I am attuned to the world around me. Writing my thesis in Seattle left me no choice but to hyper focus on race, even if it wasn't my intention. It was a thought to constantly bear and interrogate. I thought of the ways race has intervened its way into moments of my life. Names I've been called by strangers and those I love, unintentionally using their learned biases in forms of endearment. By this I mean, as the darkest skinned person in my family I was always called out for my appearance. This bias is internalized, which is not only subject to my family but to the entire Latinx community and how they might view black people and those who are darker skinned, as a joke or usually as lesser than. Throwing around words like prieto or morena, often used to be affectionate. Even in affection the language has shaped my perceptions, and the perceptions of those in my family, bilingually.

Most of my process was spent on the phone with my older sister, she was the one who gave me so much insight on our family history from her perspective. We often spoke about her connection to the spiritual world, and visitations she has received from people in her life who have passed. She had a visit once from one of our uncles in a dream of hers. This visitation made me think of how history continues to be in connection, even in spirit. My sister knew stories I did not,

and as the eldest sibling, it seemed like she held a vital role in the way that dysfunction shows up in our family. She was my main line of communication between my parents and I as a child, and with the history I learned from her, it still seems that way, even now.

The questions included as titles in the manuscript were something, I had not thought of including until I read Mary Kim Arnold's *Litany for the Long Moment*. It reminded me so much of Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*. In the revision process, I realized that the titles I had for the poems in my thesis were lacking context. The questions I curated are in relation to thinking about the homes of my parents and how their experiences shaped their perceptions on what having a family actually means. My parents grew up very differently, and their definition of family, from my interpretation, is one that has never accurately been represented in Latinx culture. Both of my parent's lived outside of the traditional family dynamic. They both grew up without fathers. My mother had many siblings to share her time with; my father on the other hand only grew up with an older sister and was alone most of his childhood. There are other questions that probe for information, and most ask for a history to show itself, even if it is unclear.

One of the ways that *Open Door Behind You* presented itself was through a visit home in Southern California. I was alone with my mother in the house on one of the hot days I visited, we had the day to ourselves. My mother often talks about her childhood in Nicaragua. It's always a point of conversation for her. I asked if she had any photos of herself, I hadn't seen yet. To my surprise, she had shoe boxes full of personal items. I saw photos of myself, ones I hadn't seen before. I saw photos of my parents during their dating stage as young adults. What stuck with me from that day was a letter that came from one of her shoe boxes. A letter I had never seen before. It was a letter from one of my uncles to my mother, dated a year before I was born. The letter was written in Spanish (of course) and mentioned my mother and how her brother worried for her. It

was a letter of reassurance and love. It was a letter that traveled between countries, a letter of hope for a future where my mother and uncle would be reunited again. I can only imagine that bond has broken tangible barriers, to be continued on in spirit. *Open Door Behind You* has taught me that the poetry shows itself to you when you need it. It itself reveals its true intentions, even when you feel like it's hard to trust the process. It has left me with many more holes to fill, and many more questions to listen to. I know that this project is only the beginning of what I continue to ask myself, and my living ancestors. I know that there is more to be told.



## HOW DO YOU PERFORM A HISTORY?

There's a home video of me in the back of my parents' closet. Collecting dust. Set in one place, moving through time. Mamá is giving me a bath while I laugh at the camera.

We sing "*de colores...de colores se visten los campos en la primavera...*"

I let my laughter hold the room and soak up water into my curls. My eyes shine a signal to my father behind the camera. It's hard to imagine myself as that baby girl. Free to speak, to smile, to meet my father's eyes and not look away.

## WHAT DOES FAMILY MEAN TO YOU?

A fan spins its wings above my head,  
I sit on top of a toilet seat crying.  
The hairs on my body, chilled.

Today my father said that the velvet on my skin is a lesson.  
Today my father said that the red bruises lined at the edges of my legs are a privilege.

Grandma rubs alcohol and kisses a prayer into each bruise.  
After, I sit on the gravel in front of my house, eat a mango and watch grass move with the  
afternoon.

The head of the mango rolls its sun rays onto my taste buds, dripping out the sides of my mouth.  
Like my mother's tears, hidden in sugar.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF SUPPORT TO OTHERS WAS OFFERED?

## WHEN DID YOU FIRST WITNESS A TRANSFORMATION?

**Father:** You are not a woman yet.

**Daughter:** There's a girl at school with honey curls. I see her in my dreams, I see her eyes in the reflection of my smile, we are kissing. One morning I woke to find her living at the touch of my thighs, she stayed for seven days.

**Daughter:** At church I am reminded by a white man from Texas, that plants and animals were named by a man. I am reminded that my body is not mine, not even my own destiny. God kept knowledge from his creations and let Adam become manipulated by Eve and her eternal punishment was to be ruled by her husband for the rest of her life.

**God:** Curiosity leads to control.

**Daughter:** At night I imagined Eve. Imagined us naked, skin caressing with the spirit of the forest growing in our toes. Bathing in a river of milk and burning incense. Lips brightened in red, apple chunks overflowing in our bellies. Laughing in sweet gluttony.

## WHAT DOES HOME MEAN TO YOU?

Imagine this: The Virgin Mary littered over train tracks three blocks down where the breath of  
CARLOS MORALES GUZMAN lives on broken pavement,

a blanket under the moon an open field, naivety digging into the lawn of midnight below the erratic  
flicker of football field lights  
mimicking the raw oranges whirling in the heart of your tongue.

Imagine this: solace in sage-like visions that come in the dust of the wind, shadows of bougainvillea  
bushes at three a.m., sunsets over the smell of rusted iron in melted shades of pink  
beat down in sweat  
murmurs of blisters under a bridge FONTANA CLASS OF 89 coyotehowl behind bloodied knees  
and summers of sticky road bike bruises.

WHO OR WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Stay out late laugh at music  
    drizzle to an open sky  
        from the back part of a yard

strip

meet friends in summer water  
    taste salt at the ridge of your mouth hold  
    hands with your temptation

    listen to soil crumble against naked feet  
lay your spine  
    against the brick foundations of a home,

close your eyes  
under flickers of front porch lighting

allow the whistles of freight trains to fall through the calm of your ears.

WHAT DOES FAMILY MEAN TO YOU?

*(Daughter and Father)*

So hot you could smell the heat rise off clothes a wet tongue sizzle under red melted popsicles valley winds trapped in a trance dance, bursts of sand. My body a movement of its own made to shame me. Because I leapt. No, because I dove the whole of myself onto chilli-peppered lips while fingertips interlaced against iron rusted fences, the air tickling touches up & down the trail of my spine while shoulders blades beat the heat on red brick walls. I willfully gave each breath, each exchange.

I heard you say you  
cursed yourself with the creation  
of a matriarch.

## HOW TO MAKE A HOME

niña morena niña gringa gringa morena gringa greñuda gringa morena niña niña gringa morena  
mo ren ita niña mo ren a a a a a a a niña gring a a a a a a a a  
gringa mo ren a grin ga greñuda grin ga morena niña niña g g g g g g g g  
g g g g g g rin ga moren a mo ren ita niña morena niña gring a ser gring a  
es ma lo gringa morena gringa greñuda a a a a a a a a gringa morena pelo de  
mo ren a niña niñ a a a a a a a gringa mo rena moren ita niña morena niña  
gringa gringa morena gringa greñuda gringa morena niña niña gringa morena morenita niña  
morena niña a a a a a a a a gringa gringa morena gringa greñuda gringa morena  
niña niña gringa morena morenita niña morena niña hacer gringa es mal o gringa mo r ena  
grin ga greñuda grin ga moren a ni ñ a niñ a gringa m o rena morenita  
niña morena niña gringa gringa morena gringa greñuda gringa morena niña niña gringa morena  
morenita niña m m m m m m m m m m mor ena niña gringa gr  
inga morena gringa greñuda gringa morena niña niña gringa morena morenita niña morena niña  
gringa gringa ser morena es malo gringa greñuda gringa morena niña niña gringa morena morenita  
niña morena niña gringa gringa ser morena es malo gringa greñuda gringa morena niña niña gringa  
morena morenita niña morena niña gringa gringa morena ser gringa es malo greñuda gringa  
morena niña niña gringa morena ser morenita es malo niña morena niña gringa gringa morena  
gringa ser greñuda es malo gringa morena niña niña gringa morena es malo morenita es malo

## WHAT DOES FAMILY MEAN TO YOU?

Mamá and Dad –

A limit exists on how I am able to reach you

in a way that provokes understanding  
in a way that is possible for us to both exchange  
our lives I don't think you know what I went through  
not able to speak to you because of our generational  
barrier, but because you would not listen.  
I want to tell you I have a secret life.

I am not the scared, quiet

obedient daughter you

know.

## WHAT DOES HOME MEAN TO YOU?

God must have told you to carry worn leather on your wrists.  
I find it confusing that god is your savior.  
Unless you have a vagina, which means you are only  
a vessel.

Betrayal is thinking you are a blessed child of god.  
Betrayal is watching mamá, your wife, hold her  
voice in crystalized glass at the vacancy of her chest.

But a father is supposed to be the one to prevent that  
Do you know it's already hard being a person?

## HOW TO MAKE A HOME

Summer afternoons on the block, watch people line up at the corner to eat meat rolled into food blankets. Hide behind house silhouettes, sneak inhales of marijuana between passing cars. When it's hot, run to the paletero, plead for ice to grace your tongue, and turn your lips blue. Drive up to city night lights and gaze at existence below. Listen to baby coyotes whisper behind caves in burned hills.

Sometimes, stray from the block. Go to an abandoned house with a boy you think you love. The ghost of the family that used to live there will watch as you sip Arizona Tea kisses between your tongues. Friday nights will howl beneath bus stops, walk under streetlamps and meet friends on the patio of a house full of dirt. Listen to beer bottles chime against gravel let your eyes wander to a saguaro cactus at the end of the yard.

## WHEN DID YOU FIRST WITNESS A TRANSFORMATION?

I remember my face plastered to yours, by the bus stop on the corner of Citrus and Randall. Next to the apartment complex I walked through when Mami was looking for her sisters in Christ. I hated every woman in those weekly meetings--when they joined hands, weeks passed. Each prayer growing longer than the next, words colliding into each other, an unwrapping of cellophane around my body. When they prayed in Spanish one sentence felt like one word spoken. Each breath desperate to swallow the next.

We kissed there, under the cajeput trees. That day the heat lifted off our pores. You still wore your gray generic sweater anyway. Zipped to the top. I didn't want to stop. I'd walk home later, past broken glass and torn chain-link fences. Smell burnt beef at the edge of my block and hide our exchange from my lips. I'd hear my father walk into the whispers of the house. We'd exchange a sentence. Transactional. I'd fall back to the floor of my bed and disappear into sleep. The wind banging branches against the panes of my window while my yellow curtains shivered. I'd dream of being stoned to death. Boulders. Bible bullets. Melted iron on my lips. Black blood falling out from under my eyelids staining my fingertips



## HOW DO YOU PERFORM A HISTORY?

Fog opens up portals on the windows in the early morning. Curls wet, dangle in the kitchen. A morning sun pulls out a view from its pocket. Hills and hills out in the distance. I look at a photo of you and feel our distance. Your arm outstretched reaching touch to a faceless being. I like to think I'm the missing part of the photo, mamá Your other half, a part of yourself that might not exist anymore. Your legs still hold you up, arms in lively motion, face in glow. The day you are in is orange. Palm trees kiss incantations down cobblestone streets, a blessing to your nectarine colored dress. I don't know the missing person, I don't know who cut out the missing person, I don't know if you wish they were still there, I don't know why you kept it fragmented.

Te encuentre allí  
Sobre olas del jardín  
Tu mirada en  
Mi poder en el viento  
En mis manos aquí naciste.

## HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU LEFT?

### *Mama's list*

1. Portrait of a silhouette on a curb
2. Crossed fire borders, call it home.
3. Frozen heartbeat in cupped hands.
4. Big loss (sold everything).
5. Loose dollar bills, home invasion, brother catches my fall.
6. New rain is a tiny rejection: never call it home.
7. Maybe a new beginning, maybe vows and crescent lakes
8. Volcanic rocks begin to glow in at the base of my abdomen.
9. Moist air can be felt by the texture of my skin, I feel nothing.
10. Dry heat is better.
11. Letters stop coming, I swore I saw the legs of the clock turn backward.
12. Stored tears in a recycled shoe box, mailed them out of the country.

## WHO DID YOU LEAVE BEHIND?

### I.

Wait under the light a backyard moon bury up  
origins sealed in tight glass jars only to be opened on  
rare occasions like when a father drinks tequila and  
  
finally tells his daughter how proud of  
her he is.

Say waste. Say damage.  
flourish in a house of the unsaid  
  
keep looking through paper walls  
trace what you find on contact paper hold  
a conch shell to your ear be  
  
still

listen to the faint sounds of your mother howl  
regret never asking.

### II.

Heaven sent you, abuelita,  
a siren wailing the entirety of her husband's death into the ears of my mother.  
The house breathes out day heat past sunset, I place my toes  
on the light opening up from the door of your room. An outstretched triangle.  
I'm seven-years-old and your voice sounds like a surrender to pain. Mamá cradles herself,  
  
bears the impact of siren wails, imagines her knees scraped at the bottom  
of a stairwell, holds onto the whirl of her adolescence,  
to being fathered by death.  
By eternal mania.

### III.

If you want to feel something, sneak your bones into the sliver of a young man's backpack.  
He will carry them in a jumble, brush them against bus stop poles, soccer fields, bicycle bars,  
and brick walls.

At night he will take them out on an empty field and put you back together.

He will hold you close, and you will feel each strand of grass tickle its way against your hips.  
Ask for desire, listen to both of you reach for air in desperation.  
You will then feel like the sun after it has set, ingrained in soil and pavement.

Your mind will fall to abuelita, you will wonder when she fell apart, or if she ever was together.

IV.

I disappear into gloom take a walk in the middle  
of the night plunge myself into a street I have only lived on for two months I feel  
the weight of new outlive the old,

I long for satin stained fingertips, beets & citric acid a midday summer I wrap myself  
in aggressions become bound to the ground  
I let it swallow me whole.

V.

A whistle in the inhale of your breath  
while you danced around destruction. A war  
around your neck. Your six children  
held their palms out for prayers of your return to a breeze  
of palm tree aromas to everyday kitchen window shadows  
they inherited your mania and left sun to wait.

WERE YOU EVER A VICTIM OF VIOLENCE IN YOUR FORMER COUNTRY?

Mamá tells me you lit the red light on your night life  
and you were gone for weeks

when you were able to come back, you brought the neighborhood behind you  
the door to the dim light of your brain, open

Mamá watched you move in rush  
Mamá watched you wake, a widow.

What does a lost pair of shoes equal? Mamá asked  
You responded, a lifetime of selling market watermelons.

Mamá watched, as you moved in a rush, a widow  
quick to replenish the house on days you felt it was empty

silent in purple rice water

gripping tears into a banana leaf.

## WHO DID YOU LEAVE BEHIND?

Today I thought of long-distance journeys, between life and  
death.

I rested my mind on the thought of uncertainty, could there be a series  
of things you might need?

Here are the materials you might need for a  
death to take place on the shore of a tropical ocean: a white truck, a

body open to supernatural encounters, a knife, an unnamed, unfound

person to help with the passing, a morning of ambiguity  
for all you

will leave behind.

I kept thinking about what the afterlife might look like

I imagine the afterlife as rain creating language in puddles upon impact.

Your new occupation: reaching your descendants in dreams so that they might  
not repeat your suffering.

You replay the travel diary from where you

were to where you are now:

a love like no other, an open chest wound,

a mixed affair, the voices of your mother's burden burning away the

bone at your skull, an act of violence, an act of violence against

yourself, one last dying wish.

## HOW DO YOU PERFORM A HISTORY?

Autumn makes me dream of smoked cedar; wet wishes are  
crushed leaves stepped into puddles.

I dream of wrapping my skin into one.

Where do my prayers go once, they are spoken into existence?  
My prayers are sick, the cold air has frosted them down.  
Don't even know who god is.

Mamá dreams better prayers.

Dreams of flying above mountain air, all limbs  
released in a river

flow

hair blown above clouds,  
the weight of pain in waking life

nonexistent.

Maybe earth is inadequate for her body, maybe dreams are  
revelations of the future.  
Prayers that actually work.

I want her to dream away a lifetime of pain. A life where her father lived,  
where her mother existed.

Is pain her first language?

Maybe I want to dream a dream where her brothers  
are still writing letters to her from one country to another, where they are  
still eating mangoes by oceanside, celebrating the birth of my older sister.

Maybe I want that to be my life.

Mama dreams better prayers. Prayers for the sake of her life.

The emotional climate of the session is predominantly negative (e.g. disrespectful, tense, executive, even angry or hostile); negative behaviors, such as rudeness, bragging insults, “trash talking”, negative gestures or other such actions.

## HOW DO YOU PERFORM A HISTORY?

Three generations in rainbow flesh eat a banana in the kitchen

Mamá works to clear the outer parts of my lips from banana shavings

yellow satin on my lips

Did you know, Mamá, that our limbs would shapeshift in seasons?

The emotional climate of the session is predominantly positive, negative behaviors are mediated.

## WERE YOU A VICTIM OF VIOLENCE IN YOUR FORMER COUNTRY?

I'm not certain on how I pushed you away, but I know you grew into me. It started with waking up one morning to finding my father feeding you into the side of my ear, patching me up with soil and water. You possessed me. Now I can't be certain you're still there. I don't feel you sprouting until I'm watering the garden in my apartment, walking over stacks of books and packs of incense. I don't feel you until you've gripped yourself onto my chest, vines interlaced in strength squeezing the bridge of my ribcage together, until breaths feel like far-away kisses. Until I've pushed my lover too far, and he rips his way out around the vines and I'm alone, in my garden. Anticipating my father to walk in and tend to his too.

## WHEN DID YOU FIRST WITNESS A TRANSFORMATION?

There's a scar at the bridge of your nose. You got it playing soccer. The ball kicked too high and crushed your glasses. Right there where I run my fingertips, your gaze on the pattern on my skin. When we're too lazy to open the blinds to your room. On Saturday evenings, your mother calls us from the kitchen as she prepares a knife to cut the Chile guajillo open, like gutting a fish. We watch her hand grind it in a bowl. Just like your family does in Oaxaca. You say you've felt the floor of your feet touch the soul of your mother's pueblo once. Nails collected dirt. Your heart felt still at the waters of the city, you think of when you can go back. I project my love to you in a gaze and watch how much you look like your mother. Mystical. Powerful. Eyebrows black as crows.

## WHO DID YOU LEAVE BEHIND?

I ask of us, why distract ourselves  
when the world is so bad, we learn to ache  
    for warmth wrap our bodies around chimney fire  
burn smoked sage into our cupped hands  
    joined at the touch

we catch fallen embers  
    laced in Holy water.

Last night we screamed at *La Rosa de Guadalupe* my sleepy eyes  
at the fabric of your chest the teenagers in this episode remind me of helicopter wings  
the teenagers in this episode remind me of crust swept into edges  
    eyelids waking up to flashing lights in a cactus filled backyard

Amidst the cold dark winter  
we lift our chins to the sun every chance we get  
we say a prayer whisper name it a memento  
    watch the flames eat at our skin  
    I pray we won't deteriorate.

## I want to tell them the silence they offer each other

They were brought together upon meeting at the same job location, her mother was always weary of him. After all he took her mother's position at the office; they chose him because he was a man.

When they married, she knew he had a child with another woman. She treated him as if he were her own, but the other woman felt like fruit flies when they are born out of the sweetness in your kitchen. She might have been too young to marry; he might have been too young to care. They migrated, with their first born and had three children.

They often fought. He could not let go of his past and his actions taught his children what kind of man he was when he was younger. Did he know not to treat woman that way?

How could he, his father used his mother while he was away from his wife. He wanted to be best for his children, but there comes a point when love turns into control and control turns into irrational fear.

hides what lies in front of them.

WHO DID YOU LEAVE BEHIND?

<https://moooonbreaths.blogspot.com/2020/06/who-did-you-leave-behind.html>