

Editor's note: Thank you to the students from Our Lady of the Lake's program in English/Creative Writing/Social Justice with Dr. Kevin Scott Jobe who chose to share their writings with readers of La Voz.



Prayer in the Shape of a Gun

Author's note: *This Poem/Performance Piece/Meditation about gun violence in America is also the final component of the service learning project for my MA/MFA in creative writing and social justice through OLLU this semester.*

insert today's shooting

The thing that feels most holy in this country

Is shaped like a gun.

The thing and the theory and the theology

that most distinguishes Americans for me

revolves around the gun.

The Second Amendment is an immutable sacrament

All other laws and philosophies and sciences

Demanding constant examination, re-drawing, and
the most minute of shifts

Not for me the platitude of "thoughts and prayers".

Worshipful words, attached as they are to organized religion,

are no convincing substitute for action or a soothing salve
for sheer tragedy.

But I have watched America, over the decades, inure itself
to any forward action

No matter the scope and daily horror, seeming to
prefer platitudes to the hard work

of shifting the faulty frame on the church of firearms
that has taken root here.

Each mass shooting now runs one into the other, on a daily basis.

I lose track

On the same day of reports on the casualty rate of one event

another killer is cocking his gun

Beginning his unholy mission to mow down innocent people.

Each cry of "Enough! We must do something!" is drowned out by
exhortations to pray because anything else is tasteless

and unseemly and too soon.

The Sikh temple in 2012

Sutherland Springs in 2017

Emanuel A.M.E. in 2015

Tree of Life Synagogue in 2019

insert today's shooting

Actual places of worship where people should feel safe

where their very prayers did nothing at all.

There is no more sanctified space in queer culture than a dance club.

Between the lights and the shadows,

we hide, we seduce, we celebrate out loud, we fight back
against the silence

We felt our Pulse drain in 2016

Blood on the dance-floor? That's just a clever line from a song.

It wasn't meant to be real.

To dance is worship, to move is prayer, to love out loud is religion.

And for someone to take it all away, from behind the barrel of a gun?

Feels like blasphemy.

A school may not feel like church to many (and perhaps,
it well should not)

Yet. It should be a safe space for those who study and work there.

Columbine 1999. Sandy Hook 2012. Parkland 2018.

insert today's shooting

"Surely Americans will do something now?"
my countrymen ask me

As footage of young, covered bodies flash across the news.

But it's clear that Americans will not

Children march for their lives and are mocked as crisis actors

Politicians respond with suggestions of buckets filled
with stones, removal of doors and arming of teachers

You lost your minds. You have lost. You have been lost.

New Zealand just banned assault weapons days after their tragedy.

But here, guns are the untippable idol.

This country technically not at war prefers to train
its youngest citizens to accept

the increasing possibility

that they might actually die in their classroom

We want them to accept their nightmares

And yet.

We protest, we march, we push back.

I don't pray.

I keep waiting for this country to decide it's time to lose its religion
the one built around cold steel, cocked triggers and deadly ricochet.

And I wonder if it ever will.

—s.t.shimi



The Noise of Highway 90

By Larissa Hernández

Author's Note: This creative nonfiction essay centers around my experience as a homeowner and married woman. It weaves in and out between themes of home ownership and the inherent struggles of maintaining a property and a struggling marriage plagued with its own need for constant maintenance.

We overlooked the mulch-covered front yard and what must have been millions of tiny rocks that covered the backyard. Two years earlier we had looked at multiple houses. Houses with back-splashed kitchen counters, houses with covered carports, houses with grass. We had asked for an appraisal or two the first time around. But the second time we chose the first house that met some of our needs—three bedrooms, fenced, near my grandmother, built before 2001. The house was on a remodeled property that used to hold tiny shacks that hid prostitution and drug abuse. The ghosts of these vices are now buried beneath the tons of rocks, landscaped into the background of our new neighborhood.

We overlooked the glass that was intentionally hidden beneath the tarp that held the mulch. “A crazy ex-girlfriend,” a neighbor told us, who was strung out and angry with a baseball bat in her hand. “And that huge tree in the back got struck by lightning before they finally cut it down.” Our previous landlord warned us before buying a house that it typically took about a year before all the defects came out in a house. I think on the surface we may have seen some, but the convenience was too easy.

We overlooked the cyclone fence that could barely hold itself together and the noise of highway 90 that swept through the open aluminum diamonds of the back fence, a persistent buzz like a nearby bumblebee or a hornet wasp. The yard took several hours over the course of a few days to prepare for the sod we had loaded into the back of the car. Throughout the ordeal of tilling the clay-like soil, the September sun burned into our skin. It cooked us until our hearts

must have sizzled and popped like fat on a hot pan. And the pain in our backs forced us to lie dormant for several days, allowing the new grass to settle beneath the water and the oppressive heat. The complacency of a half-finished yard cooled us.



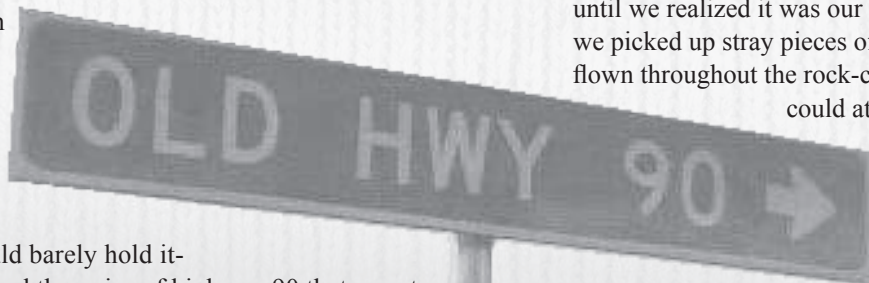
We overlooked and underheard the sounds that came from the attic and beneath the house. A pier and beam home surrounded top to bottom by vermin and roaches. The mice cried from their sticky mousetraps, throwing their bodies to freedom that only came from their skulls being smashed in, at last. They say it takes two years to truly know someone. I was horrified to learn that my husband wound the mice up in plastic bags and bashed them against the concrete until the squealing of pain stopped. For me, it was easier to sit on the couch and ignore them until it was necessary to peek at the screaming bodies from around the corner. Well,

what was worse? Allowing them to starve or to strain themselves to death? Or was it kinder to end it quickly?

We overlooked the drivers who took the curve too fast near our house. On the night a grocery store worker crashed his car into our fence, we glanced out from our laundry room window until we realized it was our backyard he had sped into. For days we picked up stray pieces of iron from the good fence that had flown throughout the rock-covered backyard. This mess we

could at least see. Beneath us, as we walked around picking up the mess of car parts and metal, were the remains of past homes broken in their own ways, demolished by time and by wrecking crews. And, when our home was broken into, we over-

looked again the disease of poor lighting and bad timing in a neighborhood plagued with crime. Here was an American dream mowed down to the greenest blade of grass, boarded up until the dogs could no longer escape, overlooked until happiness could be found again beneath the tarps and the glass fragments.





Rice

by Emily Yglesias

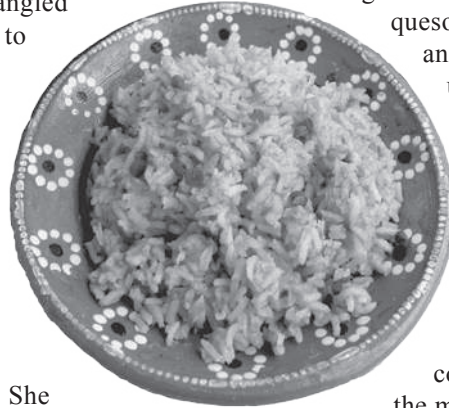
My mom has always struggled with making Spanish rice. She could never quite get the rice to be this flavorful, crisp, yet soft dish. She took her time with the process. She boiled the rice as she grabbed a couple of huge towering cans of whole tomatoes and tomato paste. She wrangled her hands around the can, twisting it open to pour it over her second pan. The chopped garlic pieces are tossed like yesterday's leftovers into the same pan popping as they hit the oil. The rice finally becomes the way she likes it and then she mixes everything together.

The covered pot irritates my mom. Her constant lifting of the cover to see her baby begins to annoy me. —*Mom just leave it alone. Let it cook, it will be ready soon.*— She does anything, but that. She lifts the top gingerly and begins to add water. She didn't stop adding water, so the dish became mush.

In a couple of weeks, she will try again. This time she pays more attention to the rice and instead uses chicken broth. She does the same routine, grabbing the cans off the pantry shelf, chopping the garlic real fine, and mixes it all together. She steps out of the kitchen for a few seconds and comes back to find that her rice has burnt on the bottom.

This time she's given up.

She will have to come back to making rice, it is the essential side dish. Anytime my family and I are out whether that's at a restaurant, or a barbecue we always ask if there is rice, and if the rice is good. Rice is the best part of Mexican dishes. It ties it all together. You can make a rice and bean



taco from your enchilada plate. If the enchilada isn't good enough, then you can just eat the rice and beans.

I think of the rice as French fries. The French fries don't just compliment the burger or sandwich, they are their own dish. They need to be able to stand on their own. Sometimes rice can fail you.

In December, my work place had a luncheon for the teachers. The PTA had gotten food from a local Mexican restaurant to serve us. They had an array of chicken flautas, stuck-together tortillas, crunchy chips that were waiting for queso to be drenched on them, clumps of beans, and brightly colored orange rice. They scooped up the rice and plopped it on my plate. What was this stuff?

I sat at the table and moved my fork around the rice. It danced around the plate mingling with the queso and guacamole, but I couldn't bring myself to eat it. All of my co-workers around me flung it around their plate as well.

"Why is this so brightly orange?" My co-worker whispered to me afraid that one of the moms of the PTA would hear her comment.

I was unsure. It didn't even carry the texture of Spanish rice. It looked like someone spilled Orange Fanta on white sticky rice.

I looked at my co-workers pushing the rice around on their plates. They weren't going to touch it, but I had to know if this was edible. I picked my fork up and poked at the rice, but I couldn't do it. I wanted to see what the others had thought of it. My co-worker, Chelsea, dug her fork into the mysterious rice and began to eat it. I tilted my head like a dog wondering what its master had just said. She thought it the rice tasted good. Since she dared to taste it, I had to taste it, too! So, I picked up my fork and slid a small amount onto my fork and forced it into my mouth. This was not rice.

This was not even close!



Nuestro Westside



"La Gloria" by Mary Agnes Rodríguez

Nuestro Westside
Home of our ancestors
Who remember those days when
La Gloria stood proud.

Nuestro Westside
With people who remember
Their childhood homes—
Even if the home isn't there anymore.
La tierra guarda memorias.

Nuestro Westside
Es nuestro. We built it
With the flesh of our hands.
Blessed our homes with our names
for generations.

Nuestro Westside
We walk down your streets
Hearing your heartbeat.
Listening to your stories—
Told from the mouths of those
Who honor your legacy

—Samantha Ceballos



The Dungeons

By Josefina Beatriz Longoria

You are being expelled from the productive world and relegated to the sub world of motherhood, where moms convince each other that what they do matters. Your nest gets prettier, twigs and leaves turn into shiny golden bars, which in turn become a golden cage. The bait that lured you in were the four hundred thread Egyptian cotton sheets, rugs, and pillows but ultimately the promise of a happy marriage. The professional terrain does not coexist with diapers, strollers, and high chairs. Family-friendly places are in the periphery of society. Children are set aside like cute domestic animals. You lose your passport to adulthood and get deported into the land of the small people, where the conversation revolves around green tables and red chairs. Your brain goes into hibernation mode and is frozen into a long winter that will last a decade. When you want to address this issue, it is treated as irrelevant. You feel resentment towards the women at your bridal showers for not fully explaining what was about to happen. You have joked about fairy tales and the happy ending as an ellipsis. *Why doesn't anybody explain how mothers are thrown into the dungeons of society by taking care of the little people?* Your voice fades into the choir of pedagogical techniques and decoration advice. In all those years of being single, you did not even smell dissatisfaction. Women, like other powerless factions of civilization, are Oscar-deserving actresses, pretending to each other that this is all they ever wanted. You did want to have children, but at the entrance of this jail, you left your civilian clothes. Men pretend mothers are behind the scenes, but mothers are the hidden iron rod inside the pillars of society. When you hear other mothers, you witness how they all support their families. They manage the emotional patrimony of the world. They create Christmas from scratch. From stuff found on sale in stores, they make homes. They do not build equity, there is no return on investment or profit. Their allowances are hugs and kisses, smiles and cuddles, lullabies, and bedtime stories. The male conspiracy claims all of this is priceless, but there is no dollar value set on a woman's work and dedication. Mothers become like children themselves, taken care of by male adults who run the world.



“Don't Tell Me”

Don't tell me to be Rita Hayworth
 For I would rather be Margarita Cansino
 Keep your bleach, skin cream, hair dye
 And your cruel vision of beauty
 You want us to be vain,
 Concerned only with
 appearances
 Like soldiers in red
 uniforms
 The blood is still there,
 indelible



Don't tell me what language to speak
 For I would rather choose for myself
 Keep your disgusting hate speech
 And your narrow definition of American
 You want us to be ignorant
 Something to be displayed, not
 understood
 Like pristine leather bound books
 Our knowledge is still there,
 beckoning

—Monica Arredondo, OLLU



Asylum

Desperation suffers
 No retreat
 While whispers
 Above dawn
 Present themselves
 As pleas for humanity
 Gathered in line
 To wait their turn
 At freedom.
 Hardened hearts
 Harbor indifference
 When muted mouths
 Speak no truth,
 And are silent
 To oppression.
 Turned up palms
 Desire walls between
 Themselves and fear
 Finding none
 Are separated from children
 Without number
 Who neglected
 In systems of hate
 Seek recourse.
 Finding none
 They retire promise
 But not hope
 For emptiness is measured
 In pain's single refrain of loss
 A running narrative
 Told in brown bodies.

—Arrie B. Porter

