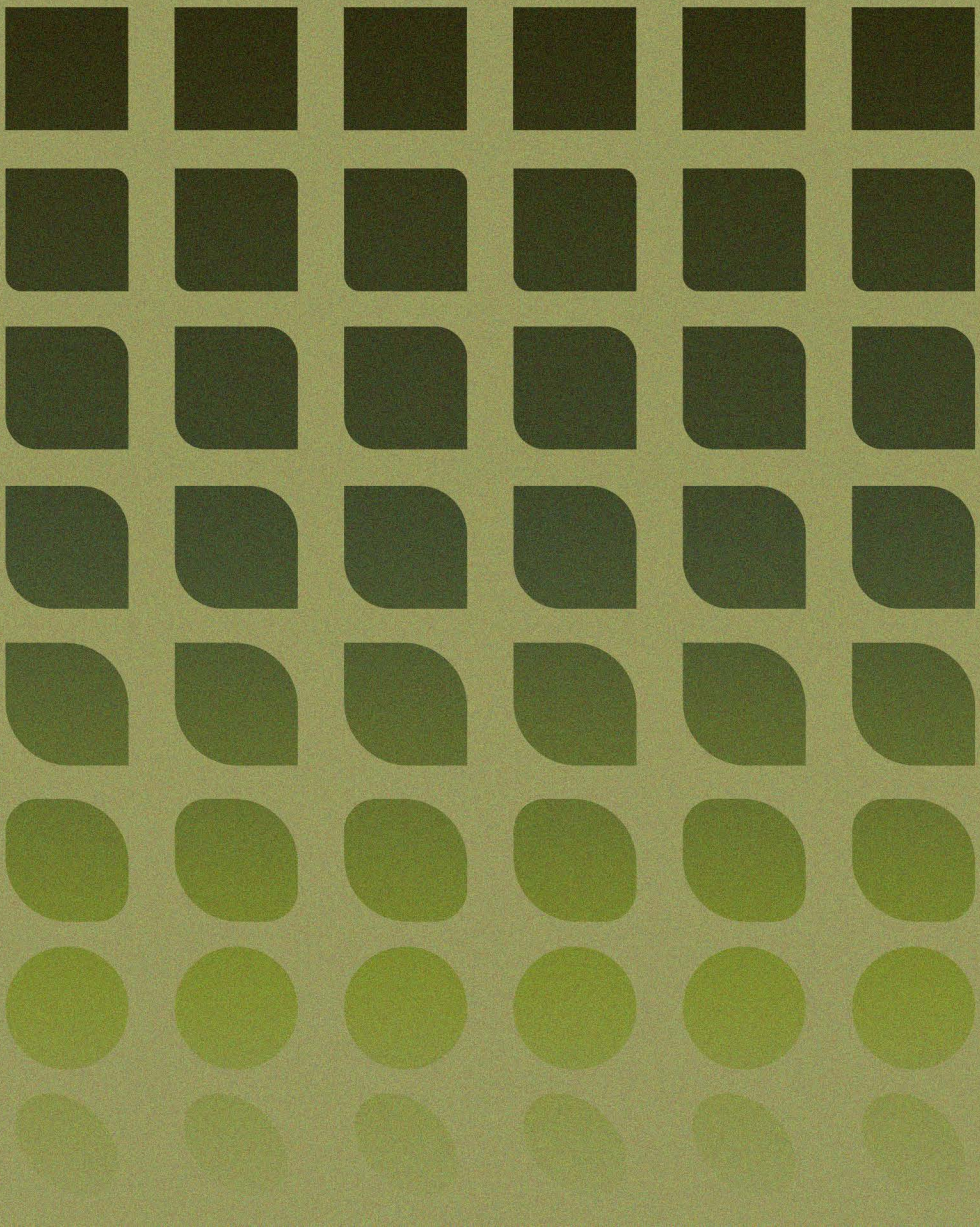
CRAFT CHAPS

An Interview With Fear

Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo



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In September 2017, I spoke to ghosts. Big, old ghosts. White supremacy ghosts. Confederate soldier ghosts. The ghosts of racism that haunt many of us on a daily basis while others say that we're seeing things, or no such thing exists.

In September 2017, Colin Kaepernick was still playing for the 49ers and taking a knee each Sunday. Trump had so much to say about this. Trump always has plenty to say. He's also like a ghost that rattles the pipes in the night and never gives it a rest. He'd make the walls bleed if it meant we'd pack our things and run out the violent house, exclaiming, "We're never coming back!"

In September 2017, I was tasked with facing my fears. Big, old fears. White supremacy fears that looked like red caps and the words "Make America Great Again."

I tell students about these fears when I visit classes. Middle schools, high schools, community college, undergraduate, and graduate classes all receive versions of this same talk about a writing residency I was awarded at Gettysburg National Military Park, where I lived for three weeks in a haunted 1860s farmhouse. I tell them two Confederate soldiers are known to have died in the house's basement. Almost everyone wants to know if I ever heard anything *go bump in the night.* I tell them I never shut off the lights, and my computer sat on a pillow next to my head streaming episodes of *Workin' Moms* all night, so I was sure to not to hear or see a thing. Before I walked down the stairs, I would often raise a hand to the air and say, "Please don't push me, Rogelio."[1] At dawn, I would run out into the battlefield to thank the sun for rising again.

Once—only once—I tell them, did I experience anything supernatural. It was the dead of night, and I was dead asleep. Suddenly, I was woken by a cold gust of wind. I quickly pulled blankets over my shivering shoulders when I realized no windows and no doors were ajar. The class shivers too.

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[1] Rogelio is the name of our family ghost. It isn't an ancestor or relative. It represents stories of poltergeists that have been told among family members, both as a joke and seriously.

In my 75-minute visit, I play games with students to help them think about their own fears. We play "This or That." What's scarier, a spider or a snake? Students yell out their answers. I pick one student to expound on their reply. "Snakes can be big, bigger than you. You can't just step on them." I call on another student to talk about the opposite choice. "Spiders have all those legs and eyes! And they can wait for you in dark corners." We continue the game. What's scarier, space or the ocean? Students are again allowed to share the reasons behind their choices. As we go, I warn them that the questions will grow in intensity. That we will move from external fears to internal ones. "What's scarier," I ask, "failing at something you tried or never finding something worth trying?"

Once the class has had time to step into the idea of fear in a playful and communal way, I ask them to list 5-10 of their fears. While listing, I tell them there's no need to push into places that are too scary or feel too dangerous. If they want to stay with spiders and snakes, they can. The stakes are up to them.

Next, I ask students to choose one fear from their list of 5-10. It's a strategy I often use to minimize stress around trying to come up with the best idea or the correct answer. I ask participants to list as many ideas as they can think of, and from that list, they are to choose the one that is most interesting to them in the moment. Now that they each have one subject, they are to quickdraw an anthropomorphized manifestation of this fear, or a "fear monster." What does this fear monster look like? What are the details of its face? How many limbs does it have? The ability to draw well is not important. I tell them no one will judge their drawings. I remind them that this is a poetry lesson, not an art lesson. The point is only to get their idea down on paper. Once everyone has drawn something, I have participants look at their fear monster and ask it this very important question: "What do you want?" They are to listen for an answer and write the reply as a speech bubble above the monster, much like a comic.

After everyone has a chance to share their monster, if they wish (there is never any pressure to share), I read a poem from my book.

"Interview with a Ghost Soldier in the Peach Orchard" (featured at the end of this chapbook), is a poem I wrote after my first week in the haunted house. I

was tired of leaving lights and TVs on, and I thought, maybe if I talked to the ghosts, something could change. For three days, I walked out to the Peach Orchard, the site of one of the Gettysburg battles, and sat among the trees at dusk. I held a smokey quartz in my hand and asked the ghosts my questions aloud. I also wrote the questions in my notebook. Like I instructed them to do, I listened for answers. This sort-of-seance became the poem. By the third day, I wasn't so scared. I started putting out the lights. I stopped asking ghosts not to push me. I felt like I had permission to be there, and I was able to write and create.

When I finish reading the poem, I ask students what they think. They pick out favorite lines. They say that they like how the speaker flirts with the ghosts. They like the images of the fog. Then it's their turn. I tell them, "Now it's time to take your list and monster drawing and write a poem interviewing your fear. What do you want to know? Your poem can be a list of questions like mine. But it can also be a back-and-forth conversation, or a dramatic monologue." A dramatic monologue is when a character talks in a long speech and tells you why they do what they do. Scary movie villains often have a dramatic monologue just before they're vanquished.

The first time I tried out this lesson, it was with middle schoolers in my hometown. The teacher was once my nephew's teacher. She first invited me when he was in her class. My nephew is now out of high school, but she continues to invite me into her classroom for special poetry presentations. I'm very thankful for teachers.

At the end of class, students had time to share poems. When most people were done, one student raised his hand, "Why are we doing this, Miss?" His question stumped me, but in that teacher-like way, I gave the question back to the class. "I don't know. Why do you all think we're doing this?" Students raised their hands. One girl said, "So that we can face our fears. So we don't let our fears get the best of us." I praised her answer, but honestly, I was no longer sure how right it was. Each time I've visited a class since that first one, I share this presentation, and question if what I'm doing is right. What's the value of exploring fear? What does it have to do with poetry? And why do I think this lesson is important to share?

In my slideshow, I present images of Gettysburg National Military Park. In one, I show the Klingel House, the 1860s farmhouse where I stayed during my three weeks. In another I show the row of teal cannons that are visible from Klingel's bedroom window. Each cannon on the battle site is its own monument. They are placed in the exact place they shot cannonballs from in 1863. Another farmhouse, not Klingel, still has a hole in its side the size of a cannonball just below two, second-story windows. The house looks to be saying, "Oh!" I share the image of a monument just 50 yards from Klingel's front door. This monument commemorates the 11th Massachusetts Infantry, and is an obelisk crowned by a dismembered arm thrusting a saber into the air. I share an image of my hand holding a smokey quartz to the setting sun in the Peach Orchard. The Peach Orchard, like most things in Gettysburg, is kept just as it was in 1863. Peach trees are not allowed to die, but instead are removed and replanted again and again. The natural life/death/life[2] cycle is not allowed to occur. With everything frozen in time, it's hard to tell if this place faces its fear of death or runs from it. If it honors death or tests Death.

In August 2017, a group of white supremacists organized a march in Charlottesville, Virginia as an objection to the destruction of a Civil War monument. "Unite the Right" rallied droves of white men holding tiki torches and emboldened them to show their force across a city square. A counter protest was organized, and Heather Heyer was killed on August 12, 2017, when a white supremacist plowed his car through a group of peaceful protesters.

When I look back at the details of the time, and that one month later, I elected to put myself in the middle of a Civil War site that boasted over 1,100 monuments, I'm not surprised at my fear. In retrospect, my fear was very real. Like the young middle schooler who questioned my presentation on fear, I also wonder, why did I do it?

[2] "Life/Death/Life" is a reference to *Women Who Run With the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estés: "The work of learning Life/Death/Life nature has to be done… The Work of embracing [Life/Death/Life] is a *task*. Without a task that challenges, there can be no transformation. Without a task there is no real sense of satisfaction. To love pleasure takes little. To love truly takes a hero who can manage his own fear" (154).

The day I applied for the residency, I was at a friend's apartment for a 'Submission Party'. Back in the early days of Women Who Submit, a literary nonprofit working to empower women and nonbinary writers to submit work for publication, this was the cornerstone of our organization. About eight of us gathered that day, armed with computers, print journals, and lots of snacks in order to apply to opportunities and send our work out for publication. I was sitting at the friend's dining table, when someone said, "Hey, did you know you can receive a residency at a national park?" My mind pictured Yosemite. In fact, it was a dream of mine to write in such a place. I fantasized myself Muir-like, admiring nature's cathedrals. "Really?" I asked. "Can you send me the information? I'd love to write at a national park."

Reading the description and guidelines, I learned it was for Gettysburg. The application asked how my work might coincide with the location. I thought about Lincoln and his Gettysburg Address. It was June 2017, and the country felt very similarly split. In my application I wrote about imagining a better future for our country and using my words to speak out against violence. Lincoln would be my inspiration for healing. I wrote the narratives and sent it off. I announced to the room, "I just applied to a residency at a national park!" and the room cheered. I congratulated myself with a mimosa.

That's how submission parties were back then. They were quick and celebratory. The more claps and cheers that filled the room, the less space there was for second-guessing or worry. When I left my friend's house, I let the application leave my mind as well. I didn't think about it again until early August when I received my acceptance. I was at a writing workshop in San Francisco, and in attendance at the welcome gathering when my cellphone rang. I ran outside onto Mission Street. It was late afternoon and in San Francisco fashion, the sky was gray and the air crisp. "Congratulations, Xochitl! You're going to be our first official 'Poet in the Parks!'" I squealed with excitement. When my friends exited the welcome, I told them my good news, and we all squealed together.

But when I arrived at Gettysburg, I was hit cold with culture shock. I knew very little about the Gettysburg *battle* or what such battle sites meant for people who are not me. As a Californian, Chicana feminist, I had no context for Gettysburg or the lively fascination with the three-day battle that happened

there in July 1863. I was a fish out of water. No, I was a tamal drowning in a tuna casserole.

To conflate matters, my first day there, the park ranger who welcomed me also informed me that I was in luck! "You got here just in time for the first day of World War II Days!" Down the road from the Klingel House was Eisenhower's Homestead—a national park of its own right—and every year in September, it hosts the country's largest World War II reenactment camp. On day one, I arrived at a giant, living war memorial set inside a giant, stone war memorial. I kept asking myself, "Why do we remember war like this?"

It's usually at this part of the tale that I share an anecdote about an argument I had with the friend who drove me to Gettysburg from their home in Virginia, but Melissa Febos calls this "unfair." In her essay, "A Big Shitty Party" from *Body Work*, she writes, "When I think of narrative truth—the truth that lies beyond the verifiable facts of an event—I picture a prism, with as many facets as there are people affected. When a writer chooses to publish their version, the facet becomes the one visible beyond the scope of people involved… It is hideously unfair." (95) So then, I choose instead to share a different story about a different friend. It's one I've asked for permission to tell. "I trust you," said my friend, which is its own truth, and holds its own fear.

In November 2021, I visited Assistens Cemetery in Copenhagen, Denmark. This current and operating resting place also acts as a public park and social gathering space. As far as I can tell, since the 17th century, locals have enjoyed visiting Assistens to take strolls, picnic, sunbathe, and play. The cemetery is also home to the burial sites of Søren Kierkegaard, Hans Christian Andersen, and my dear friend's baby boy, Espen.[3]

From the gates of Assistens, black poplars lead visitors into the cemetery. In fall, these tall trees line the walk in gold leaves. The trees feel regal, and, at the same time, enchanted. Greek mythology says that Phaethon tried to drive Helios's chariot across the sky, but his young body was not grown enough to

[3] "To make love, if we are to love *bailamos con La Muerte,* we dance with death. There will be flowing, there will be draining, there will be live birth and still birth and yet born again birth of something new" (Estés, 173).

control the sun. Zeus struck him down with a thunderbolt, and Phaethon died on the edge of the Eridanos River. His seven sisters, the Heliades, traveled to his scorched body to do the work of mourning their fallen brother. In their mourning, or perhaps because of their mourning, the Heliades were transformed into poplar trees and their tears into amber.

In September 2017, I took daily walks around the Gettysburg battle sites. I didn't have a car, so walking and cycling were my main forms of transportation. There was one Uber driver in town, who I befriended during my time and would take me on grocery runs, but most times, I walked. I noticed I was alone in my walking. Even though the battlefield is a vast open green space, no one walks, or bikes, or runs, or picnics, or plays ball. It's not that kind of green space. Mostly, visitors drive from monument to monument in their F150 trucks and Harleys. This also held its own fear: the vulnerability of my body.

Monuments are men's work. Memorializing, women's.

When I walk into Assistens, I notice the amber leaves beneath my feet. I'm with a gathering of women: friends, sisters, cousins, aunties, nieces, mothers, daughters. We are traveling to do the work of mourning.

"At what point are you *mine* and then not *mine?*" asks Jenny Boully in *Betwixed-And-Between.* "If I follow you into your dreams, then _____. This is a conditional: If, then…although some grammarians do not believe in it, suggesting instead that these conditionals are merely the past or perfect forms of *can, may, shall,* and *will.* But I know the difference: I know they aren't the same. Because the former is about dreaming and the latter is about having, or another form of having. Pregnancy *could occur, might occur, should occur, would occur, could have occurred, might have occurred, should have occurred,* or *would have occurred* vs. *Will* you…? I *will.* You *may*, but choose not to. At what point do our dreams depart? At what point do we stay together regardless?" (5-6).

When I am with my friend and her friends, sisters, cousins, aunties, nieces, mothers, daughters, I think about what is *mine* and not *mine*. How I belong to these women and how I do not.

Back in Gettysburg, I attended a tour of the cemetery. It was my last day, and I'd hoped to hear a talk on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. It was, after all, what got me there in the first place. "I want to capture the deep sense of melancholia that has taken over our collective American psyche since the last presidential election and the fight many are feeling to regain a passion for what we know is right and good," I wrote in my residency application, and after drowning in canons, battle reenactments, and Confederate flags for three weeks, I was desperate for goodness. But instead of Lincoln, the park ranger lectured on the cemetery's Victorian aesthetics. "See how the line of trees creates a corridor." He seemed to marvel at colonial pretense. When he finished, I asked if he could tell me where Lincoln stood during the address.

"We don't really know. Somewhere over that way." The ranger waved in the direction of a wrought iron fence. Beyond the fence, a cement dove perched atop a tombstone. As I walked back to my bike, I passed at least ten markers detailing the exact movements of a variety of infantries. It interested me how men keep records and what they deem important.

If bravery for the sake of intimidation is bravado, then bravery for the sake of transformation is love.

In Assistens, we arrive at Espen's Tree. Our friend, sister, cousin, auntie, niece, mother, daughter shows us the marker where Espen's tiny footprints are memorialized just next to the tree's trunk. The tree is a crab apple and still young. The footprints indicate the tiny feet that once grew inside our friend, sister, cousin, auntie, niece, mother, daughter. The footprints indicate the tiny feet that also once died inside our friend, sister, cousin, auntie, niece, mother, daughter. She is herself like a poplar tree, both grieving and transforming.

We get to work. We dangle tiny brass bells on the branches of Espen's tree. On this fall day, the branches are bare, but come spring, they will fill with pink blossoms and then tiny apples that locals will pick and make into apple schnapps. I've been told the Danes love their schnapps. We string gold foil bunting and hang a singular lantern, so Espen, our little bear, won't fear the dark. When we're done, we move in a circle to admire our decorating and say our blessings. Before we leave, we string ourselves around our friend, sister,

cousin, auntie, niece, mother, daughter, decorating her body with ours. She is at the center of our cinnamon roll. She is in the eye of our embrace, in a place Espen can easily find her.

Come spring, couples will sit under Espen's Tree to sunbathe, kiss, and drink their apple schnapps. Our friend, sister, cousin, auntie, niece, mother, daughter laughs at the thought of it. She says it feels right. Together, like the seven sisters, we mourn our dead. Transform our fear.

Melissa Febos in the *Body Work* essay, "The Return: The Art of Confession," writes, "[memorializing] can carry spiritual power. It is the proof not only that we have survived, that it is possible to survive such experiences. But that we can integrate them into our lives in ways that empower us, that make us more resilient and wide and connected– to ourselves to others like us, and to all kinds of higher powers." (149)

In the classroom, I've added a new prompt to the end of my lesson. Now, after students write their interview about what scares them, I show them another round of photos in my slide deck. They are from Gettysburg again, but now I tell them something that I've almost kept as a secret. I wasn't alone.

One friend was kind enough to drive me to Gettysburg and stay with me until they were sure I was settled in. And on two other separate weekends, two more friends made the trip from their homes to face fears with me at Klingel House. One of those friends was the same friend, sister, cousin, auntie, niece, mother, daughter I visited in Copenhagen, but this was years before Espen's Tree.

When she arrived, she asked to go on a ghost tour. After one night on the battlefield, she no longer wanted a ghost tour. She commented on all the white people. "We're the only people of color," she told me when we sat at a bar. "I know," I told her back. It was nice to have her with me. To not be alone. On her second morning, she wore a traditional Filipino dress. "I want people to know I'm brown and not afraid," she said. I dressed in a huipil, and together we toured the battlegrounds on foot. At the behemoth Pennsylvania monument, we had someone take our photo. Our brown bodies and regalia contrasted the monument's cold concrete steps. We were tiny, but together, and transformed defiant.

"We took up space in a place that was never meant for us, and we did it wearing our clothes and celebrating who we were," I tell classes. I show the photo of us standing before the monument and another with no monuments at all. This photo is of our crystals and oracle spreads. I say, "We found rituals of joy."

During that weekend, we went out to the Klingel House lawn many times to draw cards and speak hopes. We asked the cards, what "*could occur, might occur, should occur, would occur, could have occurred, might have occurred, should have occurred,* or *would have occurred*." Both of us single at this moment, we wondered how one moves from dating to a relationship. What kind of magic was that? It all seemed like a mystery, much like ghosts. We asked the cards for families of our own. We made an unsaid pact to find our families together.

It is not enough to face fear.

That young man in the middle school class was right to question me and my intentions. It was not enough for me to take him to that place and have him face what is difficult without giving him tools to do the facing. It was hideously unfair.

Now, I tell students the truth. I did not face my fears alone. My friends were with me and helped me. I tell classes that my friends and I honored each other and our identities. We decorated our bodies and celebrated. We wore clothing that made us feel good and held objects that made us feel strong. Before my 75 minutes are up, I have students write one last poem. This one is a kind of ode. What makes you feel strong when you're scared? What makes you feel comforted? Is it a friend, song, piece of clothing? What's your comfort food? Write a poem of thanks for all those things that help you move through fear.

There is a version of the Heliades that says they were made into poplars as a punishment because they helped their brother steal Helios' chariot. This feels untrue, and a version of the story, perhaps revised by a man, made to inspire fear. This is bravado. In what "*could occur, might occur, should occur, would occur, could have occurred, might have occurred, should have occurred,* or

would have occurred," if his sisters had helped him, he would have been successful. Because our community makes us stronger, not weaker. This is love.

It's not Helios that is memorialized, but the tears of the seven sisters. It's their tears that are turned to amber, and they become poplars and thresholds between the living and the dead. It is their love that has power.

The middle schooler asked, "Why are we doing this, Miss?" We do this to transform.

An Interview with Fear Workbook

Activity I: This or That

A. For each pair, circle the subject you find scarier of the two.

1.	Spider	or	Snake
2.	Deep ocean	or	Deep space
3.	Ghost	or	Zombie
4.	Failing at something you tried	or	Never finding something worth trying
5.	Being judged	or	Being alone
6.	Losing your house	or	Losing your health

B. **Choose one** subject from the above activity and write why it scares you. Consider your memories and connotations. When or where have you seen images of this fear? What has happened? What could happen?

Activity II: Fear Monster

A. In the space below, list five to six of your personal fears. They can be low stakes like snakes, or high stakes like illness. The stakes are up to you. Try not to overthink and write the first things that come to your mind.

B. **Choose one** fear listed above, and in the space below, draw the fear as an anthropomorphized monster. Be sure to give your "fear monster" qualities such as ears, eyes, mouth, and nose.
C. Once you've drawn your "fear monster," look at your drawing and ask it, "What do you want?" Write your monster's answer as a speech bubble above your drawing.

Activity III: Interview with Fear

A. It's said that we fear what we don't know. Write a poem where you interview something that scares you, such as snakes, ghosts, or illness. What do you want to know?

B. Form options:
   1. Write it as a series of questions. Ask your fear all you want to know.
   2. Write it as a back-and-forth conversation. You ask a question and the fear replies.
   3. Write it as a dramatic monologue. Let your monster say all it wants to say without interruption. An example is the "big bad" in a classic horror film that explains why they did what they did before they're vanquished.

Activity IV: Ode to Comfort

A. Write an ode, or love poem, for the people, food, clothes, music, and objects that bring you comfort when you're scared or going through a hard time. What are the things you carry with you or on you to help feel beautiful, lovable, strong, or safe?

Activity V: Transformation

A. Choose between Activity III or Activity IV, and in the space below, rewrite your favorite lines into a form. Consider line breaks and stanza breaks, but also order and shape. Try using a geometric or freeform design. How do you want the words to take up the space? How do you want the page to look or feel?

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Ghost Interview with a Soldier in the Peach Orchard[4]

After Ghostlines Collective

Dried peach pits litter the ground reminding me of bones.
Are your bones below the soil? Is this why you care
for fields dressed in morning fog snagging on fences?

How do you want to be remembered? If you could
write anything on one of these monuments
flanking the orchard, what would you write?

Have you ever pledged allegiance to a flag, any flag?
Have you ever loved a flag like your mother's arms?
Speaking of your mother's arms, how did they smell

when tucked tight below your nose?
Like fresh baked loaves or maybe stone?
I want a better simile, but I need you to tell me.

If you could go back, what would you say
to your father? What would you teach your daughter?
I still hope to have a child, so consider this advice.

In your final moments, whom did you think of?
Did you write this someone love letters home
with sign offs like *I wait to hold you* and *Forever yours*?

I sit below a tree alone at twilight because I'm always alone
and afraid. Are you here with me? Is that you
rustling the branches? I tell you, I'm done being afraid.

Do you hate war? Did you ever love war?

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[4] An earlier version of this poem was first published in *Exposition Review*. It can also be found in *Incantation: Love Poems for Battle Sites* (*Mouthfeel Press*, 2023)

Am I totally off and is War like God,
unknown, all around, a mystery too big to understand?

I want to believe in love like some believe in god.
Will you help me? Do you think I'm crazy?
Do you think I'm beautiful? Would you date me?

Don't answer that. What can I say?
I talk too much when I'm anxious. Please tell me
a question exists that will help us both let go.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xochitl-Julisa Bermejo is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and the author of *Incantation: Love Poems for Battle Sites* (Mouthfeel Press) and *Posada: Offerings of Witness and Refuge* (Sundress Publications). A former Steinbeck Fellow and Poets & Writers California Writers Exchange winner, she's received residencies from Hedgebrook, Ragdale, Yefe Nof, Jentel, and National Parks Arts Foundation in partnership with Gettysburg National Military Park and Poetry Foundation. Her poem "Battlegrounds" was featured at Academy of American Poets' *Poem-a-Day,* On Being's *Poetry Unbound*, and the anthology, *Poetry Unbound: 50 Poems to Open Your World* (W.W. Norton). Her poetry and essays can be found at *Acentos Review*, *Huizache*, *LA Review of Books, The Offing*, *[Pank], Santa Fe Writers Project*, and other journals. She is the director of Women Who Submit and teaches poetry and creative writing with Antioch University, MFA and UCLA Extension. Inspired by her Chicana identity, she works to cultivate love and comfort in chaotic times.