The story goes that after hearing the Chicana lesbian-feminist thinker Gloria Anzaldúa read her poetry at an antiracism conference at the University of Iowa back in the 1980s, Joan Pinkvoss, the publisher of Aunt Lute Books, asked for a manuscript. Anzaldúa responded by writing a lengthy prose introduction that eventually became the book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Poetry along the US-Mexico border has never been the same since. Anzaldúa brought forth feminist issues and themes of border life that had never before been the subjects of poetry from that region: hers was a poetry that included stories of Tejana/o history, stories of her community, her family, and herself, a poetry based on a theory in the flesh, as first articulated by Cherrié Moraga in the anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), which she and Anzaldúa co-edited.

To be sure, there were feminist poets writing before Anzaldúa: Sara Estela Ramírez from Laredo, Texas, comes to mind. Ramírez published her poem “¡Surge! A la mujer” (Arise! to Women), a scathing critique of how women were treated that urged women to break free of what was expected of them, in 1911. Today’s poets continue to write of life on this contested and much-maligned strip of land, in poetry that continues along the Anzaldúan path. Their work reverberates with violence, and death is a recurrent theme. Four recently published books of poetry by the Tejanas Laurie Ann Guerrero, Rossy Evelin Lima, ire’ne lara silva, and Raquel Valle-Sentíes attest to the harsh reality of the border.

The poet laureate of both her city of San Antonio and the state of Texas, Guerrero’s second collection, *A Crown for Gumecindo*, is, as the title indicates, a crown of sonnets: a sequence of fifteen, each of which begins with the final line of the preceding one. In addition, the collection loosely adheres to the form of the heroic crown, as the final sonnet comprises the first lines of the fourteen preceding ones. Guerrero deviates slightly and significantly from the form, however, by introducing a running meditation set in a lighter color print.

The sonnets treat the death of her grandfather, Gumecindo. The first, “Where the Dead Come to Speak: El Paso, Texas/Cuidad Juárez,” signals the poet’s choice of the border as her setting; in Notes from the Author, she reminds readers of the femicides that have taken place in Cuidad Juárez. Acknowledging that her grief can never compare to the grief of those who have suffered “a loss I could not fathom,” she nevertheless clarifies, “I knew … that, as a woman, a living woman, I had been brought to that border place to contemplate both sides, to feel the grief in the air, to feel at home, to understand that like Ocotillo (cactus), there were many things I would not be familiar with and that they would exist regardless—with or without...
me—tragic death, natural death. I could only have understood this in El Paso. And it was there that I started to understand what it meant to mourn.

Firmly grounded in the cultural life of the borderlands, Guerrero highlights the intensity of loss and recurring grief. Sonnet “8, Día de los Muertos, El Carmen Cemetery, Bexar County, Texas” ends:

Grass is starting to grow over you. Shards of rock gone smooth. I sing to bees. I lay my ear to stone; it doesn’t hurt; I hear your song—water rising from dirt.

And sonnet “9, Sunday Dinner” begins:

I hear your song—water rising from the dirt of Sunday. I peel potatoes for your The coming out is abrupt; I am singing to the red bird (you are dead) mouth. I wear your teeth like an apron. . .

The interweaving of the lighter print within the sonnet adds to the depth, as the poet engages in a dialogue with the subject of the poem and with herself.

The poems constitute a verbal equivalent to the colorful floral wreaths that grace the tombs in South Texas cemeteries, not just on religious holidays like Day of the Dead but year round. Guerrero remembers and mourns even as she reflects on the strength that came from the granddaughter relationship:

In your house, I was all bedrock and teeth. Cutthroat. Stopped clock—just as much man as woman. Or rain. You were blind and I loved you for it. In your house, my shoulders grew to fit the work. Patience blossomed upon my head: a crown.

Just as her “shoulders grew/to fit the work,” the form, in Guerrero’s hands, fits the task, rendering a chronic of grief but also of hope, set against the backdrop of South Texas, where goats graze in a cemetery in which “tomatoes—trying to follow a sun/they can’t see, shrinking, puckered on the vine.” Each poem is complemented beautifully with art work by Maceo Montoya.

Similarly, the poet and linguist Rossy Evelin Lima presents, in her second collection, Aguacamino/Waterpath, a border populated by grief. These poems, originally written in Spanish and translated into English, are free-verse meditations on the border, an alien and harsh place for the immigrant. In the poem “Immigrant City,” she addresses the inhospitable city: “You haven’t offered us water since we arrived”; and later in the same poem: “You are fierce and deaf /…you don’t feel our cries, / you don’t understand them.”

Lima’s references to Aztec deities in the poems “Coyolxauqui” and “Tonantzin” hark back to the cultural roots of the immigrants who must “grieve in our homes/and carry our rattles/to other homelands.” In “Tonantzin,” it is the violence of the Spanish conquest and the familiar figure of La Llorona, the mythic wailing woman, whom Lima collapses with the Aztec Goddess Tonantzin (a reference to the Virgin of Guadalupe) as she reframes the narrative. Mexicans are the abandoned children:

You ran Tonantzin, to hide Tonantzin, to try to forget us Tonantzin, … we hear in you cry, Oh my children!

While for Lima the border is often a metaphor, it is also a very real geopolitical space. In the title poem the poet “can see the smoke of nostalgia/from this new land, from the waterpath,” and she implores, “Between the earth and sky / may my body always be a border.” The allusions to Anzaldúa are clear—although unlike Anzaldúa, Lima experiences the border as an immigrant. She is “a woman holding on to the clothes on [her] body,” who is “surrounded by hungry and lecherous coyotes”—the men who smuggle those seeking entry to the United States without legal documents and who prey on the defenseless, especially women.

In the Tejana poet irene lara silva’s second collection, Blood, Sugar, Canto, the violence is not always external, yet it is no less real and physical than in Guerrero and Lima; the violence here results in the body turning on itself with illness: diabetes. Anzaldúa died of diabetes complications, and silva’s collection, divided into five sections, exposes her own relationship to the body, to the illness, and to living with the illness in that body. An overarching theme that appears and reappears in various poems is the idea of susto or fear. In the poem “sustos,” silva reports that the “old women say it is the accumulated weight / of so many sustos that causes diabetes” and she asks “Which susto claimed victory and drove my very / cells to refuse the gifts of my blood?”

Susto is also translated as “fright,” a common ailment often cured by folk healers. Like Lima’s reference to the disaster that the conquest represents, silva, in “diaeta indígena,” writes, “500 years and our bodies / cannot adjust to this foreign diet.” The culprit is corporations, she writes: “not just we but all humans / cannot thrive on a diet of chemicals / and preservatives.” In various poems but especially in this one, she underscores the environmental causes of her disease. She continues with a charge against genetically modified foods, especially maíz:

the corporations (that) have created maíz which bears no viable seed they would have us eating maíz born infertile born artificial born dead

She concludes the poem, however, in an optimistic tone, urging: “decolonize your diet mi raza / it is time to regain our strength.” This hopeful tone of defiance appears in other poems as well, even as she dwells on the negative effects and symptoms of the illness. Two of my favorite poems are in the last section, “let my last breath be song,” for they are optimistic and vibrant. She ends the poem “the world is medicine” with these words:

touch the world eat the world be the world the world is medicine

let it in

The lack of punctuation and the rhythmic flow of repetition and song make Silva’s poems read like mantras. This is especially true in my other favorite poem from this last section, “song for my organs,” which addresses each—“kidneys…..heart…. pancreas…..nerves / liver…skin….eyes…..all my body”—in couplets asking forgiveness for “any harm / i have caused you.” Still addressing her organs, in the last couplet she succinctly states: “i name you now breathe softly / upon you hold you tenderly within.” The collection is bound to speak to the many diabetes sufferers in the border communities of South Texas, where the disease is rampant and has reached epidemic proportions in the Latina/o community.
La reno, Texas, where the visual artist, playwright, and poet Raquel Valle-Sentíes situates the 51 poems in *The Ones Santa Anna Sold*, is also beset by illnesses both metaphorical and real. Valle-Sentíes has gathered poems from her previously published chap book, *Soy como soy y qué* (I am as I am, so what) (1996), along with more recent work, to render a collage of border life, a *testimonio* of a woman’s life from the 1950s to the present. The poet takes us from the emotional terrain of the pain of miscarriage to the ghost of an ex-husband, and from the literal space of a bull ring to the streets of a downtown Laredo that no longer exists. She weaves several themes—relationships, popular culture, corruption, the past—into a beautiful whole that shows off the multifaceted prism that is the border. In this collection, the poet draws from diverse subjects: from Marilyn Monroe to Selena; to characters like the priest, the border patrol agent, and the tourists who flock to Laredo; to town gossips and her family members—her grandfather in “Pa’ Chano,” and her Tía Pepa in “Grave Revelation,” who “lie(s) a virgin in (her) coffin.” Death and ghosts loom large in the collection as poems both at the individual level, as in “A Wake in Nopaltepec,” and in the larger imaginary of border life.

The poet expresses her outrage at the crimes and violations along the border: in “The Martyrs of Juarez,” in which the femicide victims’ decomposed “remains / whirl and swirl until it covers / everything.” In “Tour into Dark Waters,” older men prey on a young girl: “the red-haired man lifts / the girl over his shoulder, / and your own curtains gently sway.” The pain of life from a transnational perspective is visible in “Requiem for Elvis and Tino,” in which two figures, one from each side of the border, mirror and share a fate; and in “Dos Mujeres en Nuevo Laredo,” in which the narrator, obviously from Laredo and privileged, witnesses a disheveled woman bathing in the streets of Nuevo Laredo. The ending of the poem “Fall from Grace” leaves the reader wondering about the unidentified sin of the priest/friend; it is one of a handful of poems written in the third person and disidentifies the poet with the narrator.

These narrative poems are more than sad, nostalgic tales, although there is plenty of that; there is also joy and a sense of humor, as in “Ode to a Pineapple” and the various poems about Laredo that highlight the linguistic, social, political, and emotional seesaw that living along the border entails. The poet underscores the border sensitivity inherent in the Anzaldúa concept of “*nepantla*”—the state of in betweenness—and “la facultad”—the ability to perceive beyond the physical. Several of the poems in *The Ones Santa Anna Sold* are in English with a smattering of Spanish and include useful translations of words used in Spanish. True to a practice that honors the Spanish and, as Anzaldúa promoted, forces the monolingual English reader to do some work, Valle-Sentíes does not translate some of the poems, including two feminist ones, “Pregunta sin respuesta (Question without Answer)” and “Egoísmo (Egoism).” These are reminiscent of the famous poems “Hombres Necios” (“Silly Men”), by one of the first feminist poet of the Americas, the sixteenth-century nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, and “Tú me quieres blanca (You Want me White)” by the early twentieth-century Argentinian modernist, Alfonsina Storni.

These four Texan poets write poetry firmly rooted in the land and ethos of the border; they and writers like Anzaldúa theorize our border realities, and their lived experiences form the basis of their poetry as they reflect on “the wound that will not heal,” as Anzaldúa referred to that strip of land that continues to confront both Mexico and the United States with its magic and its violence; it is never wholly one country nor the other but the interface of both.

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**Norma Elia Cantú**

Sometimes, desire is like a ghost coming through a broken silence, entering behind you.

The cadence of her footsteps warns the tentative inside you.

You can hear her singing softly a story of a woman waiting at a window, and your own curtains gently sway.

You can see her looking for that lake high in the mountains and you go with her climbing and climbing until the path you’re on disappears into her song.

**Mary Ann Donnelly**

POETRY

Sometimes, Desire

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**Rupture**

Once when I was ten on a train to Kansas, I was dressed to the nines for Grandma—patent leathers crushing my toes, hat strap like a noose.

We stopped at a station—a girl ran out of a nearby house, laughing, hair loose and flying with long red ribbons, barefoot and free. She ran fast alongside us as our train started out. I watched her from the window through the pinched, clouded reflection of my face.

We waved to each other—“Wait!” I whispered. Then the engine picked up speed, yanked us apart.

—Mary Ann Donnelly

Mary Ann Donnelly is a retired substance abuse counselor and sheep farmer living in Vermont. She has an MFA in poetry from Goddard College. These were her first poems accepted for publication. She also has a poem in *All We Can Hold: Poems of Motherhood* (2016).