

Fleshed
Searching
for a way

back
into my body,

I pray
the drum psalm of joy.

I galaxy across
an unmarked strip of light

where my body becomes a song.
My first love song ascends

alongside father ọ̀ọ́.
Si ánze climbs the sky,

touches
tandá-es kós.

The waning moon cradles me
within the lull of my cry.

Care Work, Policy, and the Conditions of Teaching

Higher Education, what have we surrendered to the stranglehold of policy and mandate, the directives that continue to constrict our programs and cast our syllabi aside from the principles of honesty, care, compassion, and responsibility our students deserve and require? How do I prepare future educators to remain intellectually forthright and genuinely answerable to the students, families, and communities who will depend on them one day, even as mounting pressures urge us to dilute difficult histories and contain critical thought?

Conspire with me so that we may move forward in our truths. Know that I am an educator reaching for the knowledge that sustains us, knowledge built from our pasts, from the language of the land, and from the language rising from the mouths that must be heard. Let us rekindle the fires of elders, storytellers, and culture bearers.

What begins
in the water

becomes sky.

Falling.
Returning,

feeding heron,
feeding anhinga.

Here,
the light and I
lift mountains,

deer
leap
at dusk.

Warning
refires the embers.

Our hunger
ties

to
the offering.

TENDERNESS UNDER CONSTRAINT

In my early years of teaching, I walked hand in hand with one of the most vulnerable children in my classroom, a student I was assigned to shadow. He and I developed a language between us. Every morning, he ran straight to the farthest corner of the schoolyard, climbing partway up the eight-foot fence and waited for me to catch up. I followed only seconds behind him. When I reached him, he would jump down and extend his small hand to meet mine. This was our ritual of understanding. Our slow walk back together gave him time to share, excitedly though tiredly, a happy detail about his life. His tiny face tilted upward toward me, and while he caught his breath, with his winded voice, he would pant, “I love you, Miss Yanez.” I adored the way his lisp slipped softly through his teeth, air pressing gently at the sides of each sound. And yet, even in these small moments of connection, I understood then as I understand now, that care work in our classrooms exists alongside forms of institutional pressure that often go unspoken yet are increasingly felt (Delgado Bernal 1998).

The distance between tenderness and threat is not as wide as you, Higher Education, might imagine. I have come to know this tension first through the body — through the ways movement, language, and vigilance begin to come together under constraint.

Deer Run

I run
I run
through a forest

In recent months, Higher Education, the ways in which many of us move within your spaces, has become increasingly narrow. At the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA), the announcement for consolidation of the Department of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality Studies with Bicultural-Bilingual Studies exists alongside mounting pressures brought on by Senate Bill 17 and new UT System guidelines urging faculty to avoid topics deemed “controversial” or not clearly aligned with course content (Preyor-Johnson 2026). My body responds. Women of color in academia know how to read these signals: the shifts in language, the withdrawal of commitments, the narrowing of what can be said, taught, and sustained. I continue to teach, mentor, and sustain all of my students as I do our most vulnerable students, even as our programs and classrooms collide with uncertainty.

Higher Education, hear our voices clamor and call out! Grandmother! How I long for the vocables of your Lipan song. How I long for your fingers to once again braid my hair, to gather the words you prayed into each strand. Oh, Mothers of Mothers, bring to us those vessels filled with medicine. Press the clay against our lips and pour into us all that has been denied, all that has been taken, all that policy language attempts to restore unspeakable, unteachable, and undoable.

At this moment, what stands on the cusp of jeopardy is not simply administrative alignment, program structure, or funding retention. We risk losing the relational ecosystem that many women of color in the academy have labored to build, including pedagogical spaces where students are not consistently met with care, curricula that allow difficult histories to surface honestly, and intellectual environments where our full linguistic and cultural repertoires can move without constant surveillance (Delgado Bernal 1998; Simpson 2017). When policies constrain our histories and programs dilute their critical strength, the consequences can weaken our classrooms. They land in our bodies, where lived experience and memory are carried and understood. They land most heavily on the students who feel underseen.

I remember
AGARITA pouring into the my palms.
CRIMSON a way
CLAY it
roots, medicine cup warmed
I how how gave shared HER silence.
FIRE flickered in the grief
EARTH me HERB and
MOTHER
I what TRUTH asked of me remember
I to BLOODLINES try reconcile
to make sense
of rape
of murder
I look for the GOD
who did not
turn away.

Higher Education, none of this falls as unfamiliar to my Lipan history. Texas has long relied on the story of our supposed disappearance, a story easier to spread and sustain through forced removals, murders, and land dispossessions that disappeared many of our relatives off the official Texas map. Erasure does not seek to declare. It moves through textbooks, through census categories, through the management of institutions that speak of us in the past tense while many of us continue to live in our Texas homelands.

At UTSA, the consolidation of Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality Studies with Bicultural-Bilingual Studies exists within a policy climate shaped by Senate Bill 17 and growing pressure across Texas institutions to limit classroom curricula and how fully our students' histories and cultural connections can surface. We in the academy know this calamity well. We take up the relational labor while the structures around us grow more cautious, more measured, and more inclined toward erasure.

I steady myself now in what my elders remind me. I reflect on my roles in higher education as an organizer, a PhD candidate, and a teacher of future educators: survival was never the final horizon. It was about instruction. It was about preparation. It was the foundation from which we were always meant to rebuild.

I believe
in the unraveling
of
fire.

I believe
in the constellation
of Father Deer.

I return
to the seasons of my land
to the limestone slope,
the formation of hills,
to Changing Woman,
and the birth of her sons.

Higher Education, I ready myself to return to San Antonio, Texas, from Del Rio once again, where my mother lives. I have the documents in hand. I will advocate for supplemental funding from the Department of Veterans Affairs to support my mother's care. We need help. I have finally completed the questionnaires for her legal care. She is preparing to place these decisions in my hands, assigning me executor of the life she built with such care.

How I detested speaking with her about her death. How I detested the conversations with contractors about widening doorways and preparing her home for elder accessibility, reminding me of her aging. But my mother is still strong. She remains my role model, the teacher I watched and trusted as a girl. I remember sitting beside her and her students in the early to mid-seventies, after school and during the summer sessions when we lived in Stockton, California. My mother was an educator, a translator, and a cultural broker for children and families navigating disrupted schooling due to seasonal farmwork. She began working the fieldwork circuit at the age of eight. She understood this lifeway intimately. So, of course, I hold dearly what she taught me.

My mother
wears a jewel on her tongue
canta una canción, I exist
in the poem she writes, soy la marca.
I punctuate her poetics. Vivo en su
garganta. I am her utterance.

(Yáñez-Alaniz 2025)

This is the labor that travels with me back into the academy. This is the knowing I wrote into my thesis when I chose wellness over formal accommodation, when I chose to trust the healing traditions practiced by my ancestors. My mother's endurance, my students' needs, my own body's negotiations, none of these exist outside the work I do. This is the work.

I taste the first
míla'htsoe'
inaádá'
of harvest,
as grandmother
once did.

Constellations turn,
a wheel
overhead.

I feel it churn
in my chest
like legend.

I listen
to my history
while naaki' isžání
flesh the hide of reverence
from the body of god.

*With enduring hope and steady resolve,
Jennifer Yáñez-Alaniz*

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About the author

Jen is a Chicana Cúelcahén Ndé (Lipan Apache) scholar, poet, and educator. She is a PhD Candidate in Culture, Literacy, and Language at the University of Texas at San Antonio. In her role as a Graduate Teacher Assistant, she teaches courses in language and cultural equity, language policy, and second language teaching and learning. Her work is grounded in community engagement and cultural advocacy. Jennifer facilitates poetry workshops, open mics, and mentorship projects that center BIPOC voices, language justice, and creative expression. Her praxis extends into land-based and community-rooted collaborations that support literacy, cultural continuity, and collective care.

As a poet, Jen is the author of *Surrogate Eater* (Alabrava Press, 2023), with work recognized through multiple Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominations. Her poetry and scholarly writing engage themes of translingualism, embodiment, and relational knowledge-making. Her poetry is published in various journals and anthologies, and her developing poetry-theory, articulated through Lipan language, is forthcoming in academic journals and has been shared widely through national conferences and invited presentations.