



# Unaccompanied

*Javier Zamora*

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## **Unaccompanied** Javier Zamora

This gorgeous debut speaks with heart-wrenching intimacy and first-hand experience to the hot-button political issues of immigration and border crossings.

## **Unaccompanied Details**

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Author : Javier Zamora

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# From Reader Review Unaccompanied for online ebook

## Patti K says

A Salvadoran-American poet published (2017) his memories of the long trek from Salvador to the US at age nine. Zamora tries here to recreate the baffling hard experience of many years past. The poems are raw, emotional, and highlight the hardships of all immigrants who risk their lives to escape poverty-ridden violence and suffering in their own country. They are forever caught in a limbo between their birth country and their new country of hope mixed with despair. Recommend highly.

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## Sidik Fofana says

SIX WORD REVIEW: Will kick down any wall built.

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## Grady says

‘Real life turned into myth and myth made real life’

Poet Javier Zamora was born in the small El Salvadoran coastal fishing town of La Herradura and immigrated to the United States at the age of nine, joining his parents in California. He earned a BA at the University of California-Berkeley and an MFA at New York University and is a 2016-2018 Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University.

Javier’s debut UNACCOMPANIED assesses borderland politics, race, and immigration on a profoundly personal level, and simultaneously remembers and imagines a birth-country that’s been left behind. His poems cross rugged terrain where families are lost and reunited, coyotes lead migrants astray, and "the thin white man let us drink from a hose/while pointing his shotgun."

In this tenuous time of attention to immigration when so many of us yearn for the new residents of this country to find promise and a happy life instead of the constant over-the-shoulder shudder of being ‘watched’, this collection of poems by a very gifted young artist helps to shed light on both sides of the wall. Perhaps his thoughts will help tear it down permanently – or at least offer hope to those ‘in transition’. Some examples follow.

### How I Learned to Walk

Calláte. Don’t say it out loud: the color of his hair,  
the sour odor of his skin, the way they say  
his stomach rose when he slept. I have  
done nothing, said nothing. I p\*\*s in the corner  
of the room, the outhouse is far, I think  
orange blossoms call me to eat them. I fling rocks

at bats hanging midway up almond trees.  
I've skinned lizards. I've been bored. It's like  
that time I told my friend Luz to rub her lice  
against my hair. I wanted to wear a plastic bag,  
to smell of gasoline, to shave my hair, to feel  
something like his hands on my head.  
When I clutch pillows, I think of him. If he sleeps  
facedown like I do. If he can tie strings  
to the backs of dragonflies. I've heard  
of how I used to run to him. His hair still  
smelling of fish, gasoline, and seaweed. It's how  
I learned to walk they say. Calláte. If I step  
out this door, I want to know nothing will take me.  
Not the van he ran to. Not the man he paid to take him.  
Mamá Pati was asleep when he left. People say  
somehow I walked across our cornfield  
at dawn, a few steps behind. I must have seen him  
get in that van. I was two. I sat behind a ceiba tree,  
waiting. No one could find me.

#### Instructions for My Funeral

Don't burn me in no steel furnace, burn me  
in Abuelita's garden. Wrap me in bluewhite-  
and-blue [ a la mierda patriotismo ]  
Douse me in the cheapest gin. Whatever you do,  
don't judge my home. Cut my bones  
with a machete till I'm finest dust  
[wrap my pito in panties so I dream of pizar]  
Please, no priests, no crosses, no flowers.  
Steal a flask and stash me inside. Blast music,  
dress to impress. Please be drunk  
[miss work y pisen otra vez]  
Bust out the drums the army strums.  
Bust out the guitars guerrilleros strummed  
and listen to the war inside [please  
no american mierdas] Carouse the procession  
dancing to the pier. Moor me  
in a motorboat [de veras que sea una lancha]  
driven by a nine-year-old  
son of a fisherman. Scud to the center  
of the Estero de Jaltepec. Read  
"Como Tú," and toss pieces of bread.  
As the motorboat circles,  
open the flask, so I'm breathed like a jacaranda,  
like a flor de mayo,  
like an alcatraz—then, forget me  
and let me drift.

## Montage With Mangos, Volcano, And Flooded Streets

I helped Abuelita pluck the white flor de izote from stems  
to put in a bowl to then drop in the pan  
to mix with eggs,

there's no way Mom, younger than I am now  
and in California like I am now,  
there's no way she knew my technique:

grab stalk and pull toward belly,  
bowl between legs, petals like rice  
from opened burlap.

I don't want to go on.  
I'm older than Dad then,  
for the longest time I wanted to go back,

but going back won't wake Mom's hand  
slapping my butt  
when I'd run out the kitchen

to climb the mango tree,  
branch by branch,  
up six meters to watch the volcano's peak fit in my hand—

lie to me. Say I can go back.  
Say I've created smoke and no rain.  
¿What was it I saw up there?

It's almost 20 years and still,  
I can't keep mangos from falling  
six meters down,

to where dogs lick what my aunts,  
Mom, Dad, and I, still  
cannot.

Heart wrenchingly beautiful poetry that must be read - especially now. Javier has a brilliant future.

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## Craig Werner says

Poems of witness to the realities faced by children making their way to the U.S., in Zamora's case to escape the chaos of El Salvador. Most of the poems are written in a direct, near prose voice, but there are flashes of lyrical depth that suggest Zamora's going to be worth reading as he evolves. For example, from "Pump Water from the Well":

...From my forehead,  
the jaw of a burro, hit on the side and scraped by a lighter to wake the song  
that speaks two worlds.

I'd start with that poem, "For Israel and Maria de los Angeles," and "Abuelita Says Goodbye," along with the testament sequence, "June 10, 1999," the most direct excavation of Zamora's journey. From there, "Cassette Tape," "Instructions for My Funeral," "Aftermath," "How I Learned to Walk," and "Exilados."

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### **Igrowastreesgrow says**

Wonderful collection of poems. I enjoyed the walk through a different life.

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### **Chaze Copeland says**

Amazing collection of poetry by Javier Zamora, who I had the pleasure of meeting during the 2018 AWP Conference. There are some phenomenal pieces in this book; some brutally aware and full-bodied lines that hit you in the gut with a closed fist.

The themes faced involve the current political climates of the US and El Salvador, the history and scars of war, the plight of immigration, separation of family, the stripping of evolution of identity, the role home plays in self, and many more.

Here are a few of my favorite lines:

Amor, tell me to shut up, tell me none of that matters,  
come watch the ride drain south  
to where the house I left is lined with glass and barbwire.

- from "Vows" (pg 69)

Don't burn me in no steel furnace, burn me  
in Abuelita's garden. Wrap me in blue-  
white-and-blue [ a la mierda patriotismo ].

- from "Instructions for My Funeral" (pg 17)

Her breath, hay sweet mango scent, her body, whitened from bedsheets  
Tightened around her neck, her hair, coiled nets dragged ashore—

- from "For Israel and María de los Ángeles (pg 35)

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## David says

Powerful, enlightening, and disturbing

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## Jim says

An astonishingly powerful book of poetry, largely speaking of the memories of growing up amid the violence of civil war in El Salvador, and the experiences of illegal immigration into the United States.

Among my favorites:

"Instructions for my Funeral"

Douse my in the cheapest gin. Whatever you do,  
don't judge my home. Cut my bones  
with a machete till I'm finest dust.  
[Wrap my pito in panties so I dream of pizar].  
Please, no priests, no crosses, no flowers.

"Disappeared" begins Hold these names responsible...

"Let Me Try Again" which includes  
He must have remembered his family  
over the border,  
or the border coming over them,  
because he drove us to the border  
and told us  
next time, rest at least five days

Each section begins with a quotation from Salvadoran revolutionary poet Roque Dalton. Look him up.

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## Sam says

Zamora's first full-length poetry collection arrives at a very crucial moment for our country. The wall depicted on the cover reflects both our president's words and what separates a young boy from his parents. The material appears to be heavily autobiographical, or biographical about his other family members. This gives US readers, who may be unfamiliar with El Salvador's brutal war, an introduction to how that country has been torn apart and affected across time.

Immigration, both its causes and effects, is the big theme here. The narrator, a Salvadorian immigrant to the US at 9 years old, is neither fully here nor there: "I'll never be a citizen. I'll never / scrub clothes with pumice stones over the big cement tub / under the almond trees" ("To Abuelita Neli" 3). There are numerous poems dedicated to the act of border crossing, and each is powerful in different ways. "Let Me Try Again" is

sampled on the back cover, and speaks to how many people, including those in law enforcement, have family members who have (or will) attempt a border crossing into the US: “He must’ve remembered his family / over the border, / or the border coming over them, / because he drove us to the border / and told us / next time, rest at least five days, / don’t trust anyone calling themselves coyotes, / bring more tortillas, sardines, Alhambra. / He knew we would try again / and again / like everyone does” (62).

We get a variety of perspectives from different members of a family (a young boy, his parents at different ages, as well as his extended family). El Salvador’s war looms large, as the shadow it has cast stretches across generations and borders. Military violence, and how to live with family members who inflicted that violence, is an on-going question: “He’s chased us / to this country that trained him to stay quiet / when ‘his boss’ put prisoners in black bags, / then pushed them from the truck, ‘for everyone to see / what happens to bad people here’” (“Nocturne” 70); “My mother, then nine years old, found María in the public latrines” (“For Isreal and María de los Ángeles” 34).

The big gem is “June 10, 1999,” which closes the book. It’s a 12-page poem that kind of sums up all the poems that have come before. Like any life-changing event, especially those coming at a young age, the narrator cannot entirely get over, move past, his border-crossing experience.

In terms of theme, Zamora really hits the nail on the head. We get a ton of different angles on immigration. I also love the incorporation of Roque Dalton’s verses as intertitles—hopefully this will draw further attention to that very deserving poet from the last century.

However, there is a ton of overlap, in terms of content, between poems. Many of the same events appear several times throughout the book. I can understand gives us a new understanding of these events, but I also would have enjoyed learning about some new material. What I am trying to say is that, politically, this book is 5-star. Poetically, I’d say it’s more of a 4-star.

This is only Zamora’s first book though, and he is quite young. I really look forward to seeing what he releases in the upcoming years.

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## **Ruth says**

There's a compelling disorientation to the poems in this collection that mirrors the visceral experience of the speaker, displaced from his home, crossing the border into the U.S. illegally to reunite with parents who have become like strangers. There's also a longing for home that pervades. For the most part, the poems eschew dense poetic imagery, almost as if Zamora wants to sketch out the experience bare bones, not allowing the reader into any symbolic escape.

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## **Ryan Miller says**

I’m neither a poet nor a great lover of poetry. But in this age of immigration and asylum controversy, when too many people isolate others as faceless issues rather than as people, Zamora’s imagery and descriptions are heart-breaking. As a privileged, sheltered North American, I have little to no personal understanding of the war, the fear, the gangs and the violence Zamora describes from his childhood in El Salvador. I have no personal understanding of what it took to seek safety by crossing the desert as a 9-year-



old fleeing from horrors. Zamora's words are harrowing—difficult to read and process—but they are important in framing and humanizing our immigration discourse.

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### **Antonio Paola says**

More than ever, this book is a calling to our country's newly set directives toward immigration and our country's new, but certainly not unified, mantra, all-borders-closed policy. This not the United States I was raised in or raised to believe in!

As Javier Zamora says "I think in the United States we forget that writing and carrying the banner of 'being a poet' is tied into a long history of people who have literally risked [their lives] and died to write these words."

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### **Cindy Leighton says**

"I'll be back soon mijo-  
but in our windows still no glass,  
when raindrops hit the sill  
they touch my skin like her eyes did  
that morning she said  
I'll be back soon mijo."

To what extent is immigration really a choice, when your homeland is filled with war and gang violence, and your children hungry? Powerful collection of poems by Zamora who immigrated to the US from El Salvador, beautifully capturing the pain of families torn apart by immigration - who can not go back and still return, who don't recognize family when reunited, who will never again feel quite a home in either land. This is an achingly beautiful collection following the life of a nine year old boy who comes to the US alone. Zamora passionately captures the danger of life in war torn El Salvador, of being a child watching your parents leave so that they can take care of you, and of later following on your own.

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### **Ingrid Contreras says**

A book that speaks to the Zamora's experience of crossing multiple borders from El Salvador to the United States at nine years old to be reunited with his parents, *Unaccompanied* is a collection populated by deserts, border violence, a family's desperate claim to survive, and the conjuring up and remembrance of a country left behind.

Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* asks: Is fleeing from danger a crime? Is being driven by spotlights and vans into desert trees and into hiding a crime? The government says yes. *Unaccompanied* begs to differ.

"It was dusk for kilometers and bats in the lavender sky,  
like spiders when a fly is caught, began to appear.  
And there, not the promised land but barbwire and barbwire

with nothing growing under it. I tried to fly that dusk  
after a bat said la sangre del saguaro nos seduce. Sometimes  
I wake and my throat is dry, so I drive to botanical gardens  
to search for red fruits at the top of saguaros, the ones  
at dusk I threw rocks at for the sake of hunger..."

Zamora's stunning collection, sprinkled with some Spanish, is deceptively prosaic. In *Unaccompanied*, the politics of border-crossing take a backseat to the brutal realities that such a journey would entail. There is hunger, there is thirst, there is the saguaro, and bats. There are fruits. There is desert-found kindness among strangers. There are tight spaces: white vans and boats to travel in, and cells when found and captured.

Some poems take place across the border, where the American Dream remains elusive and there are a different set of challenges. The silences and metaphysical speculations around being undocumented haunts the speaker of these poems. In "The Book I Made With a Counselor My First Week of School" Zamora writes:

"His grandma made the best pupusas, the counselor wrote next to  
Stick-figure Abuelita"

And next to a drawing of yucca plants:

"Javier saw a dead coyote animal, which stank and had flies over it.  
I keep this book in an old shoebox underneath the bed. She asked in Spanish,  
I just smiled, didn't tell her, no animal, I knew that man."

As in border crossings, these poems are peregrinations by night and through darkness. They echo in a need of survival and a fear of ambush most of us will likely never experience. The longest poem in *Unaccompanied* is probably my favorite. Titled "June 10, 1999," it tells of a harrowing border passage, of finding one's way, and of being lost, regardless, after arrival:

"we were lost and didn't know which star  
was north what was east west we all  
dropped out of the van too soon to remember  
someone said the sun rose east we circled  
so much we had no maps and the guide we paid  
twisted his ankle as slowing us down

[...]

I didn't recognize Dad  
different from pictures

he remembers the smell  
shit piss dust in your hair  
he says now  
crying

Mom had a bag with Nikes  
Levi's Star Wars  
Episode One shirt

I left my ripped clothes  
inside a Ross fitting room

I'm tired of writing the fence the desert  
the van picked us up  
took me to parents  
I'm tired it's always that."

I imagine at times there must be a literary alignment of stars between the State and the Poet, so that a Poet's work may respond in real time to a State's injurious policy, or so goes our desire. The truth is that books outlast the present moment, and they survive by their own truths. There are things about crossing the border many of us cannot know and cannot imagine. In this collection, the search for home is both a physical and an emotional one, and finding one's bearings grows toward the past — in the case of this book, coming to terms with an abandoned, forlorn Salvador, and a grandmother left behind. *Unaccompanied* is a courageous offering.

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### **Jonathan Tennis says**

A friend suggested this collection after hearing an NPR interview. I had just read about Zamora in *Poets & Writers* so dropped what else I was reading to pick this up. While I loved the subject matter and his delivery, I think there are significant things I missed by not speaking Spanish (there are portions of poems in Spanish with no translation that I simply didn't want to Google to understand what he was saying). Even with that, great collection and enjoyable read. My faves were: *To Abuelita Neli*; *Second Attempt Crossing*; *Rooftop*; *Mom Responds to Her Shaming*; *Abuelita Says Goodbye*; *Let Me Try Again*; *Vows*; and *Deportation Letter*.

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