

metroactive | LITERATURE



Christian Rivera Nolan

FOUND HOME A mural discovered while traveling now marks both poet Christian Rivera Nolan's body and his first book.

HOME IS WHERE

Local poet's journey of self discovery
(and publishing) **BY ETHAN GREGORY DODGE**

ON A COOL Thursday evening in late March, a man walks into Nirvana Soul in San Jose's SoFA District, writes his name on a sheet of paper and orders a hot coffee, black.

Drink in hand, he finds a vacant table to the side of the barista counter with a full view of the shop's small stage. He slumps down on the black, wooden bench between the table and the wall and sips his coffee, waiting.

When they see him, the baristas recognize him, as do many of the regular attendees of the weekly poetry open mic. Back when the place was known as Caffè Frascati, he attended then, too.

The emcee approaches the stage and calls the first poet's name: Christian Rivera Nolan. He stands, book in hand and pen tucked behind his ear. Standing at the microphone, he informs the audience that he is the book's author. It's just come out this February and can be ordered online, his own anthology of poems. Though, he says, with the title so ordinary (*Long Way Home*), they would have to search for his name as well.

From there, things immediately get personal. He tells his backstory: Chicano from Santa Clara, the son of alcoholics. He's self-conscious of his Spanish, but that doesn't stop him from reading.

"To live in the Borderlands means you / *Creer como una contradicción...*

Tú eres de aquí, but not really," he reads. You grow as a contradiction.

The room snaps to attention.

Nolan's path to self-identity is traced across the pages of *Long Way Home*. His mother is of Mexican descent, his father Irish and Portuguese. All of his siblings were born of a different father, making him the lightest shade of everyone living in his grandmother's multigenerational home.

Spanish was not commonly spoken in Nolan's household; his grandmother was discouraged from teaching it to her children.

"I felt like I had to learn Spanish to prove my Latinidad, but then as I went on learning it, I realized you don't have to speak Spanish to be valued as a Latino," he says.

Spanning Nolan's life from ages 19-25, *Long Way Home* documents his complicated relationships, self-reflection and longing for home in a way that puts the reader at the poet's side, experiencing events with him through his vivid, sometimes painful imagery.

"Where I come from living rooms feel more like battlefields," he writes in one poem. "This drum beat in my chest a silent protest, Where cigarette smoke and overcast skies don't look so different, Where rock bottom is a place called home."

Nolan didn't always consider himself a poet. Childhood dyslexia characterized his relationship to writing as "strange." But seven years ago, during college, he found himself a long way from his own home while studying for a year abroad in Spain. There, writing became a therapeutic coping mechanism.

Until then, he had never traveled outside of the country. Still learning Spanish and dealing with the loneliness that comes from "being alone 6,000 miles away from home," he began to travel and meet new people in hostels across the Mediterranean region.

"For the first time in my life, I felt like I could breathe," he remembers, an almost word-for-word description taken from one of the book's poems. "Living over there and traveling, it was my first time coming to an awakening of myself."

A mural of a woman with flowing, curly hair spans the cover of the book. He discovered the mural in an abandoned watermill in Toledo, Spain. He had the same image tattooed across the left side of his chest while in Guadalajara, Mexico.

Traveling continues to be an important outlet for Nolan. He also draws intense inspiration from the community of artists at open mics across the country. Specifically, Sandra García Rivera, with whom he connected at the San Francisco open mic Lunada.

"If I had to single someone out as having a fundamental role in supporting my growth as an artist, it'd be her."

As for readers, Nolan recommends a mantra taught to him by his grandmother: take the good and don't dwell on the rest.

"Take what speaks to you," he says, "what you connect with, and leave the rest." 

OUT NOW	LONG WAY HOME
	By Christian Rivera Nolan