Advance Praise for 

"A story that will slam the power of poetry
and love back into your heart."
—LAURIE HALSE ANDERSON,
author of National Book Award finalists *Speak* and *Chains*

"Elizabeth Acevedo crackles with energy and snaps with authenticity and voice. Every poem in this stunningly addictive and deliciously rhythmic verse novel begs to be read aloud. Xiomara is a protagonist who readers will cheer for at every turn. As X might say, Acevedo's got bars. Don't pass this one by."
—JUSTINA IRELAND, **author of *Dread Nation***

"I devoured this magnificent work of art. Elizabeth Acevedo gets everything right, bringing the magic of the verse novel to stunning new heights. A glorious achievement. This is a story about what it means to be a writer and how to survive when it feels like the whole world's turned against you. Required reading for everybody alive today."
—DANIEL JOSÉ OLDER,
author of the Shadowshaper Cypher series

"Though vivid with detail about family, love, and culture, *The Poet X* is more of an exploration of when the poet becomes the poem. Xiomara teeters between verbosity and restraint, shape and form, rewriting and sharing. Most important, the poet (and poem) searches for the freedom to stand on her own. Acevedo delivers an incredibly potent debut."

—JASON REYNOLDS,
author of National Book Award finalist *Ghost*

"In *The Poet X*, Acevedo skillfully sculpts powerful, self-contained poems into a masterpiece of a story, and has amplified the voices of girls en el barrio who are equal parts goddess, saint, warrior, and hero."

—IBI ZOBOI, author of *American Street*

THE POET X

A NOVEL BY

ELIZABETH ACEVEDO





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To Katherine Bolaños and my former students
at Buck Lodge Middle School 2010–2012,
and all the little sisters yearning to see themselves:
this is for you

PART I

In the Beginning Was the Word

Friday, August 24

Stoop-Sitting

The summer is made for stoop-sitting
and since it's the last week before school starts,
Harlem is opening its eyes to September.

I scope out this block I've always called home.

Watch the old church ladies, chancletas flapping
against the pavement, their mouths letting loose a train
of island Spanish as they spread he said, she said.

Peep Papote from down the block
as he opens the fire hydrant
so the little kids have a sprinkler to run through.

Listen to honking cabs with bachata blaring
from their open windows
compete with basketballs echoing from the Little Park.

Laugh at the viejos—my father not included—
finishing their dominoes tournament with hard slaps
and yells of *"Capicu!"*

Shake my head as even the drug dealers posted up
near the building smile more in the summer, their hard scowls
softening into glue-eyed stares in the direction

of the girls in summer dresses and short shorts:

"Ayo, Xiomara, you need to start wearing dresses like that!"
"Shit, you'd be wifed up before going back to school."
"Especially knowing you church girls are all freaks."

But I ignore their taunts, enjoy this last bit of freedom,
and wait for the long shadows to tell me
when Mami is almost home from work,

when it's time to sneak upstairs.

Unhide-able

I am unhide-able.

Taller than even my father, with what Mami has always said
was "a little too much body for such a young girl."
I am the baby fat that settled into D-cups and swinging hips
so that the boys who called me a whale in middle school
now ask me to send them pictures of myself in a thong.

The other girls call me conceited. Ho. Thot. Fast.
When your body takes up more room than your voice
you are always the target of well-aimed rumors,
which is why I let my knuckles talk for me.
Which is why I learned to shrug when my name was replaced
by insults.

I've forced my skin just as thick as I am.

Mira, Muchacha

Is Mami's favorite way to start a sentence
and I know I've already done something wrong
when she hits me with: "Look, girl . . ."

This time it's "Mira, muchacha, Marina from across the street
told me you were on the stoop again talking to los vendedores."

Like usual, I bite my tongue and don't correct her,
because I hadn't been talking to the drug dealers;
they'd been talking to me. But she says she doesn't
want any conversation between me and *those* boys,
or any boys at all, and she better not hear about me hanging out
like a wet shirt on a clothesline just waiting to be worn
or she would go ahead and be the one to wring my neck.

"Oíste?" she asks, but walks away before I can answer.

Sometimes I want to tell her, the only person in this house
who isn't heard is me.

Names

I'm the only one in the family
without a biblical name.
Shit, Xiomara isn't even Dominican.

I know, because I Googled it.
It means: One who is ready for war.

And truth be told, that description is about right
because I even tried to come into the world
in a fighting stance: feet first.

Had to be cut out of Mami
after she'd given birth
to my twin brother, Xavier, just fine.
And my name labors out of some people's mouths
in that same awkward and painful way.

Until I have to slowly say:
See-oh-MAH-ruh.
I've learned not to flinch the first day of school
as teachers get stuck stupid trying to figure it out.

Mami says she thought it was a saint's name.
Gave me this gift of battle and now curses
how well I live up to it.

My parents probably wanted a girl who would sit in the pews
wearing pretty florals and a soft smile.
They got combat boots and a mouth silent
until it's sharp as an island machete.

Pero, tú no eres fácil

is a phrase I've heard my whole life.
When I come home with my knuckles scraped up:

Pero, tú no eres fácil.

When I don't wash the dishes quickly enough,
or when I forget to scrub the tub:

Pero, tú no eres fácil.

Sometimes it's a good thing,
when I do well on an exam or the rare time I get an award:

Pero, tú no eres fácil.

When my mother's pregnancy was difficult,
and it was all because of me,

because I was turned around
and they thought that I would die

or worse,
that I would kill her,

so they held a prayer circle at church
and even Father Sean showed up at the emergency room,

Father Sean, who held my mother's hand
as she labored me into the world,

and Papi paced behind the doctor,
who said this was the most difficult birth she'd been a part of

but instead of dying I came out wailing,
waving my tiny fists,

and the first thing Papi said,
the first words I ever heard,

"Pero, tú no eres fácil."
You sure ain't an easy one.

Mami Works

Cleaning an office building in Queens.
Rides two trains in the early morning
so she can arrive at the office by eight.
She works at sweeping, and mopping,
emptying trash bins, and being invisible.
Her hands never stop moving, she says.
Her fingers rubbing the material of plastic gloves
like the pages of her well-worn Bible.

Mami rides the train in the afternoon,
another hour and some change to get to Harlem.
She says she spends her time reading verses,
getting ready for the evening Mass,
and I know she ain't lying, but if it were me
I'd prop my head against the metal train wall,
hold my purse tight in my lap, close my eyes
against the rocking, and try my best to dream.

Tuesday, August 28

Confirmation Class

Mami has wanted me to take the sacrament
of confirmation for three years now.

The first year, in eighth grade, the class got full
before we could sign up, and even with all her heavenly pull

Mami couldn't get a spot for Twin and me.
Father Sean told her it'd be fine if we waited.

Last year, Caridad, my best friend, extended her trip in D.R.
right when we were supposed to begin the classes,

so I asked if I could wait another year.
Mami didn't like it, but since she's friends with Caridad's mother

Twin went ahead and did the class without me.

This year, Mami has filled out the forms,
signed me up, and marched me to church

before I can tell her that Jesus feels like a friend
I've had my whole childhood

who has suddenly become brand-new;
who invites himself over too often, who texts me too much.

A friend I just don't think I need anymore.
(I know, I know . . . even writing that is blasphemous.)

But I don't know how to tell Mami that this year,
it's not about feeling unready,
it's about knowing that this doubt has already been confirmed.