

THESIS

CROSSROAD OF CHANGE

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

CROSSROAD OF CHANGE

Crossroads of Change is a collection of eight short stories. The collection is comprised of characters who are of Latinx/e ancestry and who are, for the most part bilingual in English and Spanish. My goal for this collection was to create something that spoke to me as a reader who grew up in America wishing to see more stories that had characters that lived in similar spaces as I did as a child. Each story represents its own unique setting that represents different aspects of the character's lives, some characters are traveling through the United States and Mexico, others live in the US and others live in Mexico by the US border. This collection represents a culmination of my creative writing effort across the three years I've spent in this program—most of that effort spent in this last year was fine-tuning the language used by these characters, and the different ways I could present these Latinx/e characters while staying true to the medium in which I am writing in. I wanted to see what the limits of translanguaging was when it came to creative writing and the different ways, I could incorporate the language barrier that some of my characters exist in and portraying that to my audience without taking my character's identities as Spanish speakers away. My influence for this was from reading excerpts from author Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She was a huge inspiration in deciding to write about my culture while also adding in my native Spanish language. Amongst the language aspect of my writing, I also played around with the narrating POVs. This collection hosts stories that range from first person narrator to second and third person narrators, in my attempts of telling a variety of stories with different perspectives, as I wanted these Latinx/e characters to be viewed in varies angles and perspectives that counters the one-sided narratives often portrayed in contemporary writing.

DEDICATION

To my parents and siblings who always believed in me and supported my decision to dedicate these last few years to my art and writing.

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Introduction

In this collection my goal was simple, I wanted my stories to represent the world from which I came from, and I wanted them to do so in their own unique, and at times, surreal ways. This collection is for the younger version of me, a small immigrant Mexican kid, who grew up reading stories and watching TV shows with characters that never looked or talked like her, with families and friends who always seemed to live lives so foreign from the one she got to witness growing up.

For me short stories weren't the writing format that attracted me to writing when I first considered becoming an author. I had always envisioned myself writing a novel for a project like this, but in my time in this program, I quickly realized that the short story format was one of the best ways to explore and play around with language and it taught me how to start and end a story, something that feels like it shouldn't be that hard to do since all stories have a start and an ending, but short stories have this beautiful quality of holding a fictional world within the limitations of 10 to 20 pages, a limited amount of space to tell a story, creating the urgency that every word written down, every dialogue put onto the page, it all counts, and nothing should be wasted. I fell in love with this urgency of storytelling, which is why I decided on this collection to be the focus of my thesis. When crafting and compiling these stories for this collection I knew that I wanted each story to have the strength and uniqueness to stand out on its own, or else the story couldn't really be considered a true piece of short fiction, so I focused less on story continuity and more on solidify the story collection through language and themes of family and culture.

To emphasize their uniqueness, I played around with POV and narrative voice creating a plural "we" short story titled *Our Sweet Bread* and a second person POV in *Tacna*. I also wanted

to diversify the settings of these stories, all existing in worlds that traverse borders, but with each family having their own obstacles to face. My inspiration for these stories stemmed from reading excerpts from Gloria E. Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the short story *Chango* from Oscar Cásares' Mexican American short story collection *Brownsville*, and Rudolfo Anaya's novel *Bless Me, Ultima*.

Gloria E. Anzaldúa's writing inspired the blend of Spanish and English in this collection. Early on in my adult writing I realized that I couldn't write or narrate these characters without inputting Spanish words and phrases, and these small inputs slowly became whole sentences and dialogue pieces in this collection. There are stories like *Tacna*, where Spanish text exists to a limited capacity, and then there are stories like *Family Trip* which fully embraces Spanish dialogue without translation. This decision in language did pose numerous challenges for me as a writer, given that despite my characters existing in a bilingual or Spanish status, my audience for these stories, my readers, is an American audience. Which meant that my biggest concern with these stories was how to portray the meaning and messages of my stories without having to comprise my native language and its importance in the narrative and character's cultural expression. My answer to this concern of mine was to focus and emphasis on context clues. I realized that for me to write at a translanguaging capacity I needed to provide the proper support for my monolingual audience, without sugar coating or watering down my character's cultural heritage and expressions. In order to do that, I needed to be able to trust my audience's ability to read in between the lines of my story, and understand through story context and character body language what was happening in a dialogue scene without me having to translate or reiterate what was already put onto the page, because my stories are also for the people like me who grew up coexisting in both languages.

Oscar Cásares and Rudolfo Anaya inspired this collection's settings and presentation of cultural heritage. I remember reading *Chango* for the first time in my undergraduate Chicano's Literature class and being amazed at the idea of this character, this complex tragic character and his story of mourning and depression being told in the backdrop of Brownsville, TX, a border town in the US. Similarly, with Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*'s setting of rural New Mexico that looked and felt a lot like the places I used to live in here in the US, of small immigrant, mostly Mexican American communities existing in the United States, but keeping cultural traditions alive from Mexico. These stories inspired both the ground in which these stories breathe and come alive in, but also the mysticism and surrealism that is birthed from my cultural heritage. In *Bless Me, Ultima* the story revolves around an elder character named Ultima, the curandera of the town who has a special relationship with the novel's protagonist, Antonio. This invocation of cultural beliefs such as a curandera, in the US often feel like silly superstitions or fairytale like, but they exist in my stories as storytelling devices like in the House Duende and Tacna, where the supernatural exists as part of reality, guiding both the protagonist and the reader towards discovery. In these stories a mischievous duende and witches aren't just superstitious creatures, but they real characters to the protagonists in these stories that drive the plot forward and are treated as such by the narrative.

Although many of the stories of this collection have child protagonists, there are stories like *Alien Farms* and *Our Sweet Bread* that break that mold and highlight the familial threads that connects this collection and the type of violence that these families face. *Alien Farms* talks about the overbearing weight of being a Latino father in the US having to keep a family financially afloat and all the sacrifices that come with it, while *Our Sweet Bread* focus on the collective pain of a family's loss and the mistake that resulted in their pain. These familial

threads and their focus on the different forms that violence can take when targeting a family is meant to highlight the growth and change that these characters must endure, for the better or the worse, to undergo a crossroad of change.

Our Sweet Bread

We have entered the funeral home. It's homey and warm inside with the entrance leading up to a large couch and a snack table at the far end of the small entry hall. There are many faces we recognize, a few we don't and some we vaguely remember from old family photographs. Our Tia Carmen spots us from the entrance door. Her smile is a reassuring one, the corners of her lips barely rising as she looks at us, but it's her eyes that do most of the smiling so it's okay. She greets us by going in for a hug, she holds us tight, and we want to do the same to her but in our hands is a grocery bag filled with sweet bread, our own small contribution to today's event. She kisses our cheek, and we ask her where Tia Lydia is. She squeezes our shoulder one last time as she motions towards her. We see her sitting alone in the front pew of the viewing room. Rows and rows of pews behind her with familiar heads decorating them, watching Tia Lydia from behind. She's covered in a black shawl, her hands gripping it tight. Her posture begging to be left alone. She looks afraid of loosening her grip on the shawl she is wearing like a shroud, as if it falls off her shoulders, it will leave her naked and exposed, with all her grief on display. Glancing at her, we too suddenly feel exposed, standing at the entrance still, sweet bread in hand, staring at the mother who's waiting by her son's casket, our cousin's casket, Oscar's casket.

"-, come with me." We follow Tia Carmen to the snack table. She reaches for the coffee pot with its freshly brewed liquid while we open our bag and pull out the sweet bread one by one and place it on one of the many food trays there. We spot Cousin Lorena's brownies and there's a bottle of Tequila by the coffee pot, probably from Tio Luis. We reach for a brownie and bite into it. We're not hungry, in fact, we already felt full to the point of being sick the moment we entered the funeral home, but the food here was a silent 'thank you' to those who've come, and it

be rude to not partake in the ritual of eating something sweet to help hide the salty tears and bitter words of goodbye. We take another bite. Tia Carmen touches our shoulder, “Here, give it to your Tia.”

We take Tia Carmen’s offering of coffee, and we carry it with care towards Tia Lydia. She’s still gripping her shawl, hands steady. We tap her shoulder. She turns around. Her eyes are dim, but the corner of her lips turn upwards, and she gives us a smile followed by a thank you as we hand her the coffee. She keeps one hand on the shawl and the other wrapped around the Styrofoam cup. We watch her take a big sip from it and in that small moment of her tipping the cup up, her lips parting, the black coffee going down her throat we remember that the coffee is too hot to drink, that steam had been trailing behind it on our short walk to the pew, but it’s too late. She swallowed her first drink of it with no sign of pain or discomfort, with no signs of feeling anything but the black shawl around her shoulders as she put the cup down to readjust it. We now worry.

We reach to put our hand on her shoulder, to offer her comfort and make ourselves useful, but she places her hand over ours and brushes it away. She stands and looks at the casket merely two feet away from her, covered in flowers from top to bottom, a beautiful mosaic of family names painted onto sashes that decorate each bouquet. Each flower ornament represents a family in attendance. There are twenty on display. Ours is at the casket’s feet. Oscar’s feet. Cousin Lorena brought it this morning in our place. We chose marigolds and lilies. Oscar liked the color white; we like yellow.

Tia Lydia steps up towards the casket and knocks down our bouquet in the process. We follow. We ignore our fallen flowers. We rush to stand by her side. We are afraid of leaving her alone, or rather, we are afraid of being left behind.

She stares at her son, his body laid facing upwards in a wooden casket, a barely visible, sheet of glass laid over the opened casket door, like a window looking into the afterlife, keeping the living separated. We watch her fingers reach into the casket to touch him. Her movements are slow. Her eyes are small and then wide when the plexiglass stops her from being able to reach him, and, in an instant, we are behind her, holding her up, arms underneath her armpits, her legs have given out, our arms want to give out too, but we hold on because she's breaking in front of us, falling into pieces as her black shawl falls from her shoulders and she is exposed. Her tears are screams and Tia Carmen rushes behind us, taking hold of her from one side. Tio Luis runs to the other side, he grabs her by the waist. Cousin Lorena grabs the smelling salt as Tia Lydia's eyes flutter as she cries out for her baby boy- her son- asking God why he took him away. A line has now formed behind us. The viewing of the body has started. We had all been waiting for the shawl to drop.

“Mijo, put on a jacket.” Lydia looked up from her coffee cup as Oscar walked out of his room wearing a white cotton T-shirt and blue jeans. There was a cold breeze outside, and Lydia worried he'd get sick. He rolled his eyes at her. She slapped her hand on the dining table. “¡No, me faltas el respeto!” He sighed and apologized for being rude and went back into his room to grab a jacket as told. Lydia nodded her acceptance of his apology, although she knew her son wasn't really all that sorry, teenagers were like that, never measuring how actions can carry so much weight behind them.

As a single mother Lydia always worried that her only son would resemble his father- ignorant, abusive, and disrespectful to women. When he left her, fourteen and pregnant, him

twenty and on his way to cross the border into the US and start his life all over again, she swore to herself that if she had a boy, he'd be a better man than him.

Oscar walked out of his room again, this time with a gray jacket on, and gestured dramatically with his hands on his jacket asking his mother if she was happy now. Lydia smiled. She was happy. Her son had dark brown, almost black eyes like her, and his nose resembled more his Tio Luis's than his father's. The only thing Lydia could see in her son that resembled his father was the way his lips were slightly of kilter with the symmetry in his face, giving him a crooked smile like him. But even that, she learned to love it because it was her son's smile, a smile she worked so hard for him to have.

“¿Ahora sí, where are you heading to?” Lydia finished her coffee and stood up to wash the dishes.

“El cinema with Sonya.” Lydia grabbed the sponge and turned on the hot water.

“And do you have money with you?” She rinsed her coffee cup, “Did you get permission from her parents?”

“Sí, mama.” Oscar stuffed his hands inside his jacket pockets looking annoyed at all his mother's questions. Lydia smiled at her son. She turned off the water and turned to him.

“Take some money from my purse and tell Sonya to come visit me again. We haven't shared a cup of coffee in a while.” Oscar's face immediately brightened up. He ran to kiss his mother on the cheek, thanking her before running to her room to take money from her purse. She watched him leave and let a small sigh leave deep from inside her. Oscar was growing too fast in her eyes. Already seventeen and in a two-year-long relationship with Sonya. Things were different from when she was a girl, but Lydia had made a point to lecture Oscar on how to treat his girlfriend when he first introduced Sonya to her. Still, though, Lydia had nightmares of the

young girl knocking on her door, asking where Oscar was because she was pregnant and scared, only for Lydia to find her son's room empty, his things gone, and the window open facing North, into the city lights across the border wall that shadowed over their town.

Taking in a deep breath to replace the air she just let out with her sigh Lydia turned back to the sink to clear up the dirty dishes, but as she placed her ceramic cup in the drying rack her fingers slipped from its handle, and it fell onto the floor. Lydia stared at the broken cup. The cup wasn't one of her pretty ones, and if Lydia had seen it at the store, even if it had been offered to her for free, she would have never thought of taking it, but it was her favorite cup. It had been a Mother's Day gift. Oscar was ten and he had come home with this cup, its handle oddly shaped, and so small only her index finger could fit inside of the handle, clearly having been measured by the hand of a ten-year-old. It had 'Mama' spelled on it, but its spelling had mostly faded throughout the years and now. It was old and really, Lydia had thought many times of putting it up next to her virgencita statue and using it more as a small vase than a cup, but every morning she'd pull it out, pour sugar and cream along with hot water and coffee grounds into it, and she'd sit in the kitchen table admiring how small her son's hands used to be. Now it lay broken on her kitchen floor and Lydia felt like a shadow seemed to have formed above her. A feeling of unease seeped into her chest making her feel cold inside.

"I'm leaving, mama!" Oscar yelled out as he headed out the door.

Lydia turned to watch Oscar run out of the door, suddenly he looked ten again and the image placed Lydia in a panic. Without thinking she yelled out, "Wait!" Oscar paused at the door. Lydia's voice had come out in a desperate cry.

"Is everything okay, mama?" The scream had scared Oscar, but it had scared Lydia more.

“Si, everything-” Lydia stared at her son. His face round and his cheeks still had some leftover baby fat despite early signs of a beard growing on them. Lydia didn’t want him to go anymore, but- “everything is fine. I...I just forgot to tell you something.” She hesitated as her son waited for her by the entrance door. Side-stepping the broken cup Lydia went to her refrigerator and took out a grocery bag filled with tamales. She had prepared to give these to her neighbor and friend Celia sometime tomorrow but today was as good as a time to do so. “Give this to Comadre Celia.” Oscar grabbed the bag and kissed his mother goodbye. Lydia watched him as he walked out of their front yard and went straight to Celia’s house across the street from theirs. She tried to bury the nagging feeling in her chest. She couldn’t hold onto her son forever. He was becoming a young man, a year closer to graduating high school, first in the family to do so, and she needed to start letting go.

Lydia spent the rest of her evening watching TV, the image of her son running out the door. Her broken cup was neatly placed on the kitchen table wrapped in a cloth. She was thinking of gluing it back together the way she saw someone on Facebook do so with a broken vase with gold glue to make the cracks look pretty. She couldn’t quite remember what they had called the art form. And as Lydia sat in her living room watching the nine o’clock reruns of telenovelas play, she glanced at her phone. Oscar had yet to answer any of her messages and his 10 o’clock curfew was approaching fast. She stood up from her door and walked over to his bedroom. She peered inside and checked the window making sure it was secured shut.

Last time Oscar came home late he and Marcos had come in through his bedroom window drunk as can be. Oscar vomited on his sheets and Marcos slept like the dead. She had grounded Oscar for a whole month and Celia tried to do the same to Marcos and failed.

She clicked her tongue upset. She'd give him until 10pm before she called her sister Carmen to come to help her look for him.

Fifteen past ten rolled in and as Lydia was on the phone with her sister Carmen, there was a knock on her door. It was Celia. At first, Lydia thought she came to thank her for the tamales despite it being so late already, but she thought nothing strange of such a late visit. Celia had been good friends with her for almost ten years now, their sons having grown up together, and in those ten years Lydia was used to Celia's bouts of insomnia, often coming over to have a cup of tea at night if Lydia's living room windows still shone light so late at night, but when Lydia opened the door she knew something was wrong, Celia's hands were reaching towards her, wrapping her in a sudden hug.

Lydia tried to invite her in, asking her what was wrong, but Celia wouldn't let go of her, her embrace suffocating Lydia. In a terrified voice, Celia informed her neighbor and best friend of ten years that Oscar had been shot. Marcos had asked his mother to tell her.

The smelling salt did its trick and Tia Lydia's eyes stopped rolling to the back of her head. Tio Luis told us to let go of her from behind and we did, and he took over for us, he lifted her up in his arms, despite her protests of not wanting to leave her son. His eyes were red from tears he seemed to be keeping inside and as he passed us carrying his little sister in his arms, we could smell alcohol in his breath as he spoke to Tia Lydia.

"Hermanita, you need some rest. You haven't eaten all day." It was already evening. He took her back to her seat, and we stayed.

Behind us was now the line for the viewing, so we turned back to the casket and viewed it. Cousin Oscar lay inside, and he looked the same as he did when we last saw him. We extended our fingers, just like Tia Lydia did, but we knew that the plexiglass was there, and we stopped just before touching it. Our hand hovering over his face. He looked strange wearing a white suit lying in the red cushioning of the coffin. The cousin we knew lived permanently in the same washed-out blue jeans.

“Hello.” We turned to the soft greeting followed by the light touch of a hand on our forearm. Sonya stood beside us. We moved to give her space.

She didn’t say anything else but her greeting. She just stood staring at Oscar. Her hand braved the plexiglass as she rested her palm over it, her hand hovering over his chest. She and Oscar had had big plans this year. We had heard all about it. Sonya was going to enter University next year and Oscar was going to support her education while he worked as a mechanic with Tio Luis. Marriage was a real conversation between the two, as real as any conversation about the future can be between two teenagers whose entire lives revolved around the two. We watched Sonya watch Oscar and lamented how she’ll never be family now.

“Oscar, stop it!” Sonya pulled the popcorn box away from him. “You’re going to eat them all before the movie even starts!”

“It’s fine, I’ll buy another one if we finish them.” Oscar pulled the popcorn box out of his girlfriend’s hands as they made a line for the movie showing to open.

“That’s not the point.” Sonya sighed as Oscar stuffed a handful of popcorn in his mouth, wrapping her arms around herself as the wind blew. Sometimes, Sonya wondered what it would

take to make her boyfriend take life more seriously. She always found it irritating when he acted like all his problems could be fixed if he just willed it to be.

“Here.” Oscar handed her his jacket as he saw that Sonya was cold. She smiled and took the jacket; the sleeves were too long for her arms, but she didn’t mind. She liked the way his clothes fit big on her. She liked the way he offered her things without her having to ask him to, just as he offered to pay for her college tuition without her asking him too. She never told him that her parents didn’t support her decision to study archaeology. A moneyless degree they had called it. But she didn’t have to tell him that because despite Oscar’s habit of never thinking things through seriously, he always had an eye for knowing the unsaid. It was thanks to him and his mother, Lydia, that Sonya was on track looking up archaeology programs to apply to in their senior year.

“Oscar...” She reached for his hand to hold it tight, but he interrupted her as he raised his arms in the air and made a loud whistling sound with his lips. Sonya covered her ears. Oscar was gesturing at Marcos who approached them with a box of popcorn in his hands.

“¡Ehhh, que onda! You made it!” Oscar stretched out his arm and fist-bumped his best friend.

“Obviously, I know you’re shit with scary movies.” Marcos was Sonya’s least favorite person. Whenever he and Oscar got together the duo was reduced to only one brain cell, and Marcos seemed to be the only one who had control over it.

“Hola Marcos.” She didn’t smile in her greeting.

“Eh, Sonyita how you been?”

“Bien, I just didn’t know you had a date with my boyfriend today.” She looked at Oscar who looked nervous under her stare.

“I promised Marcos we were going to go to the Tinta Bar today and he wanted to see this movie too soooo-” he finally looked down at Sonya’s eyes. “But he won’t be sitting with us. He’ll be far away from us in the theater, so don’t worry it’s still our date.” He grinned at Sonya like everything was fine again.

“Your mom is not going to like that.”

“¡Ah, come on Sonyita! It’s fine, she doesn’t need to know.” Marcos gestured with his hands in a prayer as he asked her to not tell on them. She ignored him.

“Oscar.” She looked at him pointily again. Marcos was not someone she could trust. He had a history of instigating fights and dragging Oscar along with him in his desmadre. Plus, Sonya had witnessed on more than one occasion Lydia consoling her friend Celia over her son’s reckless behavior, reassuring her that he’ll turn over a new leaf any day now, that he’d never become like his father, locked up in prison.

Oscar ignored her stare and pushed her forward as the line started to move upwards. The showing had started. “It’s fine Sonya. We’re just going for a bit. The movie ends at 8pm and we’re just going for a bit. I’ll be back home before ten and mom will never know.” Sonya sighed. If she had known that dating Oscar came with the package deal of his best friend Sonya would have probably not said yes, but she swallowed that thought as Oscar took her hand in his and squeezed it.

After the movies, Oscar and Marcos walked her home. She kissed her boyfriend goodnight and watched the two leave her front yard. She had forgotten to return his jacket, so when she heard knocking and opened the door at around 10:30pm, she half expected a drunk Oscar at her door looking for his jacket. Instead, she found Marcos sitting on the ground. His T-shirt was stained red. He was crying, and this scared Sonya. Marcos was the type to make others

cry not the other way around. With Oscar's jacket in her hands, Sonya asked him why he was here and why Oscar wasn't with him.

He looked up at her and reached for Oscar's jacket sleeve instead of answering her. She pulled it away from him and for the next few seconds, they fought over his jacket. It wasn't until he won the tug-a-war over the jacket, cradling it in his arms, that he whispered to her the reason why he was there. He was the last person to hold Oscar in his arms as he bled out in them.

"Sonya." We called out to her as her face turned purple. She wasn't breathing. "Sonya!" We shook her shoulders and she gasped for air, hyperventilating out her cries. Unlike with Tia Lydia, we knew now that holding her from behind wasn't the best method of keeping someone upright, so we held her at her waist and allowed her to drop her weight onto us as she leaned forward. Her hands were now scratching the plexiglass.

She kept calling Oscar's name in repetition, silently at first but her words gained strength and her crying became screaming. We tried soothing her, but our words fell mute under her grief.

"Mija." We turn to see Tia Lydia followed close behind by Tia Carmen and Tio Luis who was holding our sweet bread in hand. She reaches her arms out to Sonya; her screaming having called her like a beacon. Sonya left our side and ran into Tia Lydia's arms. They both seemed to collapse into each other, their grief harmonizing, and a tragic picture appeared as they held each other, rocking back and forth in unison as they both exclaimed how much they missed Oscar. His body ran cold behind us.

"Tia?" Marcos was not next in line for the viewing, but he cut in front of Cousin Javier and his wife. Celia was next to him. She had a hand on her son's shoulder as he greeted the

woman, he grew up calling his aunt. Marcos was not our cousin, but he had been Oscar's brother, we heard him say so enough times that we couldn't see Marcos as anything but that. Family.

"Tia." Cousin Marcos called out once again, but Tia Lydia ignored him or maybe she was too busy rocking with Sonya in their shared mourning dance to pay him attention. Either way, we understood what this meant. Celia removed herself from her son's side and tried to join the dance, but despite her cries coming out as screams too, her footwork was too slow, her rhythm off-pitch, and Lydia's grip on Sonya too strong, unyielding to any outside force. Rejection.

Tia Carmen stepped in instead. Took Celia into her arms and let her do her solo dance as she cried. Tio Luis guided the dancing pair back to the pew to try and convince Tia Lydia to eat. Cousin Marcos joined us at the casket.

Marcos had convinced the bouncer to let him and Oscar into the bar without IDs by slipping him a few dollars. He, unlike Oscar, wasn't afraid of upsetting his mother with his recklessness, and Oscar often praised that about him, calling him a brave fool.

"See, easy." Marcos spread out his arms like a pair of wings as he showed off being able to get them into a bar despite being underage. Oscar shook his head and found a seat at the bar.

"One Bud Light," Oscar ordered.

"Make it two shots instead!" Marcos shouted after Oscar, changing his order. "I'm paying." He reassured Oscar as he looked at his friend's concerned face. Marcos knew that money had always been an issue in Oscar's house and as brothers do, whatever belonged to Marcos also belonged to Oscar.

“I’ll pay you back.” Oscar offered back. Marcos grinned and shook his head.

“Don’t worry about it hermano. It’s my treat.” Marcos would never admit this out loud, but whenever he called Oscar’s brother a warm sensation spread in his chest. Marcos had two other siblings, one little sister, and an older brother, but he only got along with his sister. His older brother, being seven years older than him, created a huge age gap that Marcos could never seem to be able to breach or want to. Marcos’s older brother treated him more like a son than a brother, given that he’s been helping their mom raise them in place of their absent father. To him, Oscar was the closest thing he ever had to a real brother, although he was a lot more closed off than him. Marcos on the other hand was an open well of stories and conversations, easy to talk to and easy to get carried away with.

The bartender gave them their shots, not looking twice at their faces. He got paid to serve drinks, not paying attention to how much baby fat his customers still had resting on their cheeks. “Cheers everyone! Mi hermano aquí is getting married soon to his high school sweetheart!” Marcos riled up the patrons as he fought off Oscar’s hands as he tried to shut his friend up.

“Don’t say stupid shit!” Oscar chugged his shot. He didn’t flinch at its taste. “Nothing is settled yet. She wants to finish school first.”

Marcos laughed at Oscar’s serious face. He didn’t understand what more there was to wait, but then again Sonya always struck him as the kind of girl to stick with a plan once put into motion. He was afraid of her. When they first started dating Marcos soon realized how much of a threat she was to his relationship with Oscar, too serious. In his opinion, Sonya did not suit Oscar at all as a partner and if asked he’d say that Oscar asked out Sonya because she represented the type of girl Lydia always wanted for her son. If Oscar wasn’t such a momma’s boy Marcos was sure they’d have much more fun, but as he watched Oscar start singing to the bar’s live band, he

decided that things were fine as they were right now. Nothing more needed to change. He joined Oscar in belting out the song acting like an old pair of drunks although one shot was not enough to get either one of them tipsy yet. A fact Marcos was proud of having contributed to their friendship.

The music kept playing, but as Oscar got more and more into the song's chorus even singing the guitar solo, Marcos stopped singing. A very drunk man stalked his way towards the bar, but he had very obviously already had his fair share of drinks elsewhere. He stumbled his way past the duo and in a moment of mischief, a result of being too high of spirits, and the shot having hit Marcos a bit harder than usual as he had skipped dinner that evening and only ate popcorn at the movies, combined with his penchant for starting fights especially when in high spirits, he stretched his leg out and tripped the man.

He laughed as the man fell face first, knees hitting the floor hard. It was a good laugh too, one that came deep from within his diaphragm. Oscar laughed too.

Disoriented the man tried to climb his way back up to his feet but his arm strength was lacking, and he slipped back down, face first again. This time the whole bar lifted into laughter. The man cursed with his broken lip still pressed against the floor tile. Marcos was in tears laughing too hard, calling the man pendejo before jumping down from his stool gesturing at Oscar to follow him.

"Let's go to a different bar." Oscar followed behind him and they both turned their backs to the drunk shuffling his feet against the tile floor trying to gain enough traction to stand up. Oscar closed the gap between him and Marcos, swinging his arm around his shoulder. The night was still young, and Oscar already seemed to be infected with Marcos good cheer.

Walking towards the exit Oscar looked at Marcos, and said, "Hermano-".

The first bullet that struck Oscar severed his spinal cord. The second one perforated his left lung. Everything had happened so fast.

The drunk man had found his footing at last, but he had only found it after he had shot twice in a hurry before his target left. He had been aiming at Marcos and everyone in that bar knew this as the man, in a drunken slur cursed saying he missed.

Unlike Tia Lydia and Sonya, Marcos doesn't scream when he cries. He cries in small, short sobs and we place an arm around his shoulders and call him by his family name. "Cousin-."

"It was supposed to be me." We pat his back, encouraging him to let it all out. "It was aimed for me." He bangs his fist against the plexiglass as he murmurs this repeatedly. The banging is causing the casket to shake, but we remain passive. We let Marcos' banging fist become a punching force of resentment. We only react, removing our hand from his shoulders to seize his forearm after he has shattered the plexiglass and his fist bleeds red onto Oscar's white dress shirt. We only yell for him to stop, to get a hold of himself after the glass has already been broken, its breaking ringing in a chorus with the mourners behind us gasping in horror at the display of a boy unbridled with guilt.

Marcos collapses into us, his bloody hand bleeding onto our shoes: black sleek shoes, never been worn before, bought not explicitly for this occasion, but now we won't be able to wear these shoes again because they are now tainted with loss. He seems to want to merge with us, rocking his body back and forth to share his grief so he doesn't have to shoulder it alone. We don't allow him to. He moves left, we move right.

At this same moment, Tia Lydia rushes to her son, reaching into his chamber of rest to place her hands on his forehead, brush his hair back, and trace his nose with her still-warm fingers. Sonya runs close behind and places her palm over his heart. The people who have been waiting in line this whole time rush forward. They all peer into the casket at the same time, eyes hovering over a manicured corpse.

Marcos cries one more time, his voice muffled in our chest. “It should have been me,” and we just nod because we know he’s right. We, like Tia Lydia, like Sonya, like Marcos himself, we all resent him, and the bitter taste of it burns our throats and makes the air in our lungs run thick.

We reach for Tio Luis, stealing the sweet bread in his hand and we bite into it as we and the crowd stare over Oscar’s body crying, whispering, “It should have been him.”

Peregrinación

The news rang, the Chapo's son had been arrested, a 26-year-old man, detained in Culiacan, Sinaloa, and now the city burned because of it. The Sinaloense Cartel has attacked the city and Aguaruto prison has involuntarily freed fifty-five men from their concrete walls. All this chaos was born from trying to rescue the child of an idol, named Ovidio, but in the eyes of these men who have followed his father to the depths of the earth, he might as well have been named Jesus.

But before the city had turned into chaos and things changed forever Antonio's uncle had also arrived in the city of Culiacan. He landed in the morning at the Culiacan International Airport and took a cab to his sister's home. When he entered the house, the only brightly aqua-colored home in the neighborhood, with its back garden that spread into the neighbor's fruit trees, he hadn't bothered to knock. As he stepped inside, duffel bag in hand, he asked his little sister where his nephew was. He had come bearing gifts, a soccer ball from the U.S., and a new pair of shoes. While setting the dining table for the day's celebration, tortillas on the compal and meundo steaming hot on the table for that morning's breakfast, Antonio's mother informed her brother that he had gone to la tiendita, about two blocks away, for a two-liter soda. She assured him he'd be back home soon.

Alarms blared, the prison had been breached, a riot instigated, and prisoners had been released and armed. The gates were opened and men with AK-47s and hand pistols crawled out, they infested the highway next to their fenced home. On the pedestrian bridge that hung over the

highway stood 12-year-old Antonio, who had just walked a block from the tiendita to the bridge and had one block left to reach home. He watched the prisoners escape while he held onto a two-liter Coke bottle. Today his uncle was arriving home from picking fruit in California. He was his only uncle on his mother's side and on his father's side he only had aunts, and even though Antonio didn't have many memories with his uncle, they did far exceed the memories of his deceased father, making his uncle his longest-standing male figure in his life, and that meant something to Antonio, who saw himself as a man and not boy.

This soda in his hands was for him, but instead of rushing home Antonio stood frozen on the bridge with two others and they watched cars swerve and stop in shock as they got ambushed by men with guns for hands. They watched a civilian with a white dress shirt get pulled out of his car, yanked by his ear. His hands pressed against the back of his head, his forehead against the asphalt. An ex-prisoner snapped his trigger finger, and a bullet went through the back of the man's head in an instant.

Gunfire sounds a lot like fireworks, a lot like a motorcycle backfiring, but it's not supposed to sound like it did in Antonio's ears, like a metal bat piercing bone and memory. Antonio had heard of the cartel before, everyone who's lived in the city has heard of it, it was never a secret; some are cousins, husbands, friends, or neighbors, everyone knows, but not everyone gets to see it, and knowing and experiencing were two very different things. Today Antonio got to experience it and all his mother's fears came true. Gone were his ideas of these men being strong, rich, and commanding of respect, his image of these Cartel men given to him by TV shows gone. These men weren't like El Senor de los Cielos and the suave actor who portrayed him, leather boots, expensive watches, and all. No, these men, these real dangerous men were dressed in orange jumpsuits, their guns their most expensive accessory. The illusion

broke, and in its place stood a cold realization of danger, as it blew up in his ears along with the rapid-fire execution of drivers in the street below him.

The people on the bridge ran. The people underneath the bridge ran. The prisoners ran. Antonio waited. He clutched the soda bottle. He needed both arms to hold it steady, against his chest. It could hear his heartbeat as it slowed, dumbed down by the noise. The man's image, the one with the white shirt phased in and out of his eyes- white shirt, red shirt, white shirt, red shirt. Antonio ran, he finally ran.

The 2-liter bottle was heavy in his arms as he hugged it. He could have dropped it, left it to spill onto the bridge like the man in the dress shirt's blood, but his mom had sent him on a mission to buy it, to bring it home for her brother, his uncle. This soda was meant as a gift for him since he often mentioned in their weekly phone calls how much he had missed the taste of home, of warm humidity, and homemade tortillas.

Antonio had been looking forward to seeing his uncle. The last time he had seen him was when he was eight, being held up in his arms as he had Antonio kiss his father one last time before the casket was closed and his father went to sleep in the dirt. That wasn't the only memory Antonio had of his uncle, but it felt like it was the only one that mattered. It had been the last day Antonio was carried in someone's arms.

He reached the end of the bridge, his home just a few houses away from its base, just a straight walk from here along the sidewalk left to the bridge, but there were men with guns walking in the street in front of him. He had barely made it two houses down his neighborhood street when he spotted them. He hid behind a trashcan by his neighbor's, Doña Alma's, house.

Among these men were some from the highway, having spilled over the road fence in their jumpsuits and trigger happy hands, but among these men were a pair of different ones, different from the prisoners; they were wearing bulletproof vests- like in the movies- pockets full of ammo, and no uniform, but they seemed to be the same breed of men, born with a pistol for each hand, handing over vests and ammo to the prisoners. Behind the trash can, hugging the bottle to his chest, Antonio's rib cage ached with his heartbeat beating against it, bubbling along to the bottle's building internal pressure. He wanted his mom. Twelve years of age felt like eight again.

He wondered if he could run it. He'd heard once that they don't always hurt children, but then again, Antonio hadn't thought of himself as a child for a long time now. He gripped the top of the bottle, setting a steady hand on it, using it as a pillar for strength. If Antonio was a real man, the kind he always proclaimed himself to be in front of his mother and tias, then today was the day to prove it. Men provided for others. Men always held it together. Men were a steady rock, cold as the earth it grew from, hard as the hands that knew how to protect, and unyielding to anyone but God. Antonio's hands gripped his coke bottle harder. The shooting from the bridge stopped and the yelling of people running away lessened. A real man wouldn't hide. A real man- Antonio eyed the bulletproof men- a real man- their backs were to him- a real man, Antonio thought- a real man wouldn't be afraid. He took a step forward, rising from behind the trash can, ready to run, ready to confront the men, ready to say something, do something, anything but hide, but then- the shooting started.

Antonio shrank. He curled up in a fetal position, knees to his chin, head tucked in, and the soda bottle pressed to his stomach and chest, like an umbilical cord, pulsing with a heartbeat.

A patrol car had run up the sidewalk, crashing into Mrs. Lorena's chili bush, they had been attempting a sudden U-turn at the sight of a street blocked off by men in guns, probably had been called to check the perimeter around the city prison. The cop staggered out and his partner with him, running to hide behind their car as the other gunmen shouted at their arrival. The cop car was parked diagonally against the side of the street's sidewalk, across from Antonio's aqua blue house, two houses away from where Antonio hid.

From across the street, the gunman had rushed inside Miss Linda's house, breaking down the door in the process. Antonio wondered if she and her sons were still inside but was too afraid to check and see any more before ducking back down behind the trash can. Her house was across the street from Doña Alma's house.

Miss Linda was still a Miss because she never married but had two children, one Antonio's age whom he often played soccer with, and the other one was still in diapers. No one knew who the father was, but Miss Linda always answered that God was their father. Antonio remembered his mother once telling him that too, after he lost his father. She reassured him he wasn't alone because everyone is born with two sets of parents: Dios y la Virgen Maria. He didn't believe it. He only wanted to believe in the things he saw, and that was what he'd put his faith in, and right now his faith showed him bulletproof vests and ammo-filled pockets.

The cops and the gunmen were at a standstill, none of them moved, gauging who'd make the first step forward, and as the tension built, and the gunfire kept ringing, Antonio covered his ears. He felt like a child as he hid behind Doña Alma's trash can, bullets going off a few meters ahead of him. He desperately looked around him for anything to protect him and his bottle. That's when he noticed an elderly face staring through a glass window. The woman through the window had frown lines up to her forehead. She wore a checkered blanket over herself, doing

nothing but drawing attention to her hunched back. She was cursing at him, and Antonio knew this as he eyed her from where he hid, in front of her house, behind her trashcan. Her eyes always wrinkled at the ends and her nose would scrunch up whenever Doña Alma cursed and cussed be it about the gas prices going up or because the priest's sermon was "a loud of bullshit" in her words.

She was motioning for him to come inside, and that's when his soda bottle fell from his arms. Maybe he had loosened his grip from the relief of seeing someone he knew, or maybe her angry face had scared him into dropping it, whatever the reason, the bottle rolled out from behind the trash can, its bright red colored logo exposed, and one of the men wearing a beige sombrero on top of Miss Linda's house noticed. "Hey! ¡Hay alguien ahí! There's someone there!"

Antonio panicked. Quickly he reached for the soda bottle only for a stray bullet to hit the concrete floor near him and make him change his mind. The bullet had been a few feet off, nowhere near enough to have hurt Antonio, but it was close enough for Antonio to forsake his mother's mission for him. Leaving the soda bottle behind he ran into Doña Alma's house.

Ammo-driven footsteps stomped behind him. He didn't know if they were chasing him or if someone, on either side had finally decided to step forward and rush head-on in the confrontation. Whatever the reason, he kept running and his soda bottle kept rolling, bubbles building up with every step he took away from it, the pressure building up inside, ready for both to have their caps blown off.

"Hijo de tu chingada...! Come in, come in!" Doña Alma's voice spilled from inside the house. Her brown eyes and frown-lined face opened in surprise and fear. Quickly she undid the turning and undoing of a doorknob and door chain to let Antonio in. No one breathed. The door clicked shut behind them and both stood with their backs pressed against it, no time to lock it

back up. The men's shouting rang outside, someone shot a round forward towards the sidewalk, but there was no way of knowing where they were shooting.

Doña Alma was the neighborhood abuelita. She was the oldest of all the women at the age of 92, and a close friend to the women in the neighborhood, her love for playing Loteria and poker gave her the status of beloved abuela in the neighborhood, especially after her husband passed away at just 80 years old. But Antonio knew her best as the lady from church who wasn't afraid to curse in the presence of God.

She led him towards the kitchen. Inside playing with a toy car and eating pan were three kids varying from age 6 to still being breastfed, grandkids from her daughters. The oldest one was next to a water jug on the floor, brand new, sticker and all, trying to make his toy car drive up its side, his little sister next to him inspecting a pinkish orange convertible, closing, and opening its side doors, while the baby sat on his mother's lap eating sweet bread. The uncle sat next to the kitchen back door nursing a beer bottle, glazed-eyed. Underneath the table lay a red hen, pecking at the crumbs falling from the baby's messy gum chewing.

"Sit Antonio." He sat listening to Doña Alma's words and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand. He lost his soda bottle and if they all survived this, he would be coming home empty-handed. He wanted to cry, like the five-year-old version of himself who'd thrown a fit whenever his father refused to hold him and take him everywhere with him, but he didn't cry. Men didn't cry, and Antonio was still trying to be a man right now.

In the years he'd grown up he had never seen his father cry and he had made sure to follow suit in his father's footsteps. So, Antonio from the moment he called himself a man stopped crying, holding back even at his father's deathbed. He had been the one to hold his mother's hands as they buried him, and he had been the one to care for his home while his mom

fought her way out of grief. He was the man of the house now. He, like his father, needed to remain as a stone, dried out by the desert wasteland of manhood.

“Are you hurt mijo?” The mom with the crying kid at her leg reached forward to touch his forearm, she meant it as a mother’s reassuring touch, but Antonio brushed it off, continuing to rub his eyes harder this time.

“Si, I’m okay.” His voice shook, so he looked down, biting his lip.

“Those fucking cabrones! Why are they bringing their stupid war to us? We got nothing to do with it!” Doña Alma complained in her raspy old lady voice as she pulled out a cup of water for Antonio. Her feet shuffled across the concrete floor as she did.

“It’ll be fine if we just stay home. Mama, they’re not after us.” Esperanza tried to reassure the room as she held her baby on her lap with one hand, keeping him from slipping off as he laughed at the hen below him. Her other hand was preoccupied with her phone in hand, WhatsApp opened, waiting for a message. She hadn’t heard from her husband since the shooting had started.

“They want the Chapo’s kid! What do they care about us, we’re just collateral damage!” The uncle sat up, his drink spilling over the edges, words slurred. No one said anything to follow his angry remark, not even Doña Alma, who just nodded her head in agreement. The Mexican government had made a public, televised announcement of the Chapo’s kid’s arrest, painting a giant target sign on the city of Culiacan which housed him. The Sinaloense cartel had already lost their God to the American court, they weren’t about to give up their savior too.

When the gunfire had started Antonio's mother had run to the kitchen. Her brother had run to the front door. She grabbed a knife; he grabbed the lock.

"What are you doing?" His sister looked at him, a butcher knife in hand.

"Luz, we can't go outside right now." He eyed the knife, his arms slowly raising, trying not to spook his little sister more than what she already was.

"Let me go, Hernando. Antonio is out there. Mi hijo, tu sobrino, is out there." She looked worried, but her eyes were cleared, and her voice was unwavering. Her brother stood his ground.

"You can't join a gunfight with a knife."

She took a step forward. "I don't fucking care! Que se vayan al infierno, I need to go find my son." Her hand was shaking now.

He too took a step forward. "Carnalita, little sis, I need you to put the knife down. Antonio is a smart kid. He knows to hide." He reached for her knife. "Don't make me have to worry about you too."

"But... Antonio..." He took her knife.

"La Virgincita will be with him. He will protect him." He reached in to hug his sister, maybe to comfort her or maybe it was to restrain her, either way, when his hands wrapped around her, they too were shaking, the blood inside of him running cold with the sound of gunfire outside. He too was afraid, scared to go outside, scared to lose both a sister and a nephew.

Luz shut her eyes as she knew she couldn't leave the house without going through her brother first. She took a deep breath and prayed, but not to God or Los Santos, but to the la Virgen, because she too was a mother, and in a city with so much chaos happening, she could only trust her to look after her son, just like a mother would.

And that's when the bombing started.

The Mexican army was now in the city fighting against the cartel, upping the ante on the rounds of bullets fired and grenades thrown, no one really knew which side was doing what, and in the mixed sounds of property being destroyed and citizens running, the knowing made no difference.

At this point Doña Alma's son was so drunk that he was sharing his drink with the hen, making a ceremony of pouring a little bit of beer into a plastic cup and feeding it to the hen. The ritual consisted of him taking a sip and then the hen would stretch her neck and take one for herself. After every sip the hen would take, he would stroke her feathers and compliment her on her red color. They both seemed merry with good drunken spirits.

"Antonio, come let's pray." Doña Alma motioned Antonio towards the refrigerator, there she had a small magnet of the Virgen Maria propped up. She used to have a bigger one in her bedroom with bright colors and clear eyes, but it had been stolen a few weeks ago along with her television and her water jugs. Antonia remembered how unnerving it felt, seeing the life-like detail in the Virgen Maria's eyes and the way her stare seemed to always follow him, but his mother along with the other women of the neighborhood would stare into those eyes, night and day, and pray whenever Doña Alma lent it for funerals or held novenarios. In comparison to the bigger painting the kitchen magnet was so small it blurred out the Virgen's face and far too cheap to have any defining details.

Antonio knelt with Doña Alma in front of the refrigerator, its low humming mixing into their prayers as they spoke the rosary into words. Doña Alma's daughter whispered it, even the uncle joined in, the hen cooing her words of prayer too, but Antonio, in his kneeling position stared up at the Virgen, whose blurred-out eyes bore onto Antonio's figure. He felt small before

her even though he could swallow her whole if he tried. And then the thought accord to him, that maybe if he did that, she'd be able to cleanse him, fill him up, and take away the pressure he felt building up inside his chest. He took a deep breath, imagined it, holding the Virgen's image in both of his palms, raising his arms into the air, saying a brief amen, and then taking her into his mouth, letting the magnetic image of the Virgen melt inside his mouth until he swallowed her whole, inside of his stomach. Maybe if he had her there, always with him, she'd grow inside of him and bless him, like the blessing she once had with her son.

Next to him Dona Alma clutched the rosary she always wore. She often swore it was her lucky charm when playing Loteria, but today it looked less like a lucky charm and more like an anchor. A weight she willfully chose to carry.

“Dios te salve Maria...” Antonio closed his eyes as Doña Alma kept repeating the same prayer as a mantra. May God save you, Mary. May God save you, Mary. The sounds of her voice joined by her family lulled Antonio back and forth as he imagined himself once again plucking the magnet from the refrigerator door and gently pressing it in his mouth, savoring it before consuming her.

He knelt for 20 minutes before he heard the drunken coo of the chicken followed by Doña Alma's soft voice. “Antonio, mijo, you can open your eyes now,” but Antonio hesitated. The bombing had stopped but his eyes felt heavy. Doña Alma put her wrinkled, mostly bony hand on his shoulder. “Come on mijo, stand up.” Antonio did not budge, he was scared. If he opened his eyes now, he'd release a damn he was not ready to acknowledge yet. So, he kept kneeling, the Virgen's eyes baring over him. When he finally did open his eyes the gunfire sounded like fireworks in the distance, like a passing dream you can vaguely remember once awake.

With the rosary done, and the bombing having quieted. Doña Alma's daughter started to receive Facebook alerts on their phones from friends and families. People had been posting videos of the war; streets were blocked off with burning cars, corpses bled next to running cars, people ran into strangers' homes, some were kind enough to offer shelter – others broke in – men in trucks drove up and down on the street with gun barrels sticking out windows and sunroofs. The Mexican military was fighting fire with fire. The only consolation the city had was that when it was all over there would be enough land to bury the dead afterwards.

Esperanza read out loud these posts. Her face turned more and more pale as she looked at videos of people who were safe walking past those who never made it home. According to some Facebook posts the cartel had ceased fire. Others claimed it was a false alarm or trick. Nothing was clear about the situation, and Esperanza still hadn't heard from her husband. Her oldest was still playing with his car toy, crawling after it as it zoomed underneath the table, his sister following pursuit, and the baby was asleep now, lulled by his grandmother's prayer.

"I'm going home." Antonio stood up. His knees burning from kneeling, and he bid everyone goodbye, avoiding Esperanza's hollowed eyes of worry. He had waited long enough. He eyed the holly magnet before turning to Doña Alma and saying his goodbye. His mom always said that the Virgen Maria cared most for the children of this world, more than God or Jesus ever did or could, and that was because she too was a mother who knew the pain of losing a child. Antonio was willing to test that theory right now.

"Estas pendejo?" Doña Alma grabbed him by the shoulders. "You can't go out yet. Can't you hear the shooting? The world is still burning." Although the gunfire was now further away, it still rang loud and clear in everyone's ears.

"Doña Alma, I'm going home."

When he left Doña Alma's house Culiacan looked different. He stood for a second on the sidewalk watching the smoke rise from buildings and burnt cars across the city, the smoke rising so high it left black smoke signals, screaming out a warning message to the Indian blood inside every Mexican: Danger. Run. Not Safe. Help. Each smoke trail in the sky had its own message, its own story. The street to his home was empty.

The soda bottle lay by the road, inside a ditch a few feet away from the trashcan, dented on its sides and with dirt around its plastic body. It had been kicked and thrown around like a football. The sun had finally reached its peak in the sky, and it reflected itself onto the bottle's surface. For a moment Antonio could see it, the Virgen's eyes with all its detail, the bright and knowing being reflected onto the bottle's surface. Her eyes reminded him of his mother, kind and warm.

Antonio walked home, bottle in hand. He lived four houses down from Doña Alma's and on his way, he passed Miss Linda's home. Her door had been completely removed from its hinges, the windows were broken, and glass scattered all over her front lawn. He couldn't hear anything from inside, and for a moment he contemplated walking inside, calling out to Miss Linda and his friend, but he didn't. If they hadn't been home this whole time, if they had been out somewhere else then he'd just walk into an empty house, but if they had been inside when the cartel men rushed in for cover, then... Antonio didn't want to see that. He couldn't see it. Instead, he sucked in air as he passed by her home, holding his breath in, letting his lungs swell with it as he passed by. The soda bottle clutched in his hands as it swelled from its building pressure reading to fizz over at any moment.

His front door had two bullet holes. His trashcan was overturned and burnt. Antonio stepped up to this house and knocked on his home's door. He felt like a stranger. He didn't recognize his house, even though the color of its walls looked different, a darker shade of blue than he remembered this morning. No one answered. He tried the doorknob, but it was locked, and relief washed over him. "Mama! Mama! I'm home! I'm home!" He banged on the door, his voice drowning out the distant shooting. The fighting had moved past their home.

Antonio's mother rushed at him, pulling him inside with a hug, the front door shutting shut. She was crying thanking the Virgen for having brought her boy home. As he stood inside, he took note of his home. The ceiling was lower now and the big armchair he used to lay in was now smaller, and strangely enough a butcher knife laid on its cushions, but even the knife looked small to him, like a kid's toy, plastic and dull. He wondered if chaos made things shrink.

Antonio stood there in his mother's arm, his limbs frozen around his mother's shoulders hugging her back, but his body felt stiff as he heard her sobs calling out for her brother, "Hermano! Antonio is back! My boy is back!"

His uncle ran out of the kitchen at the sound of his sister yelling that Antonio was home, but his hurried steps and opened arms soon slowed and closed in. His uncle stood in front of him, a strange look on his face as he looked him up and down, and as his uncle observed him Antonio did the same.

His uncle looked shorter than Antonio had remembered him to be. In his mind his uncle had never stopped being the adult man he always dreamed of and inspired to be, but now... his uncle looked small, wounded by age, almost human, and less godlike to him. Gone were the strong arms of the man who held him for the last time and the deep brown eyes that once looked ready to swallow him whole were now tired and sunken. His uncle extended his hand and

Antonio stared at it. He'd been waiting all day to greet his uncle, to shake his hand and show him what kind of man he had become but the hand being extended to him now was cracked from long hours of fieldwork and years of being away from home. It wasn't the hand Antonio had imagined greeting today, and he didn't know if he wanted to anymore but still, he shook it, he had to. His uncle had been waiting for him.

“You brought the soda?” Antonio looked down; he still had the bottle in his hands, gripped to his chest. He let go of his uncle's handshake and handed the bottle to his mom. She led them into the kitchen. She pulled out three plastic cups and placed five ice cubes in each one. She twisted the soda's cap and suddenly the pressure that had been building up from this morning spilled out; from the walk up to the bridge from the store, to the shootings on the road, to the hiding and running from armed men, to the pounding of his heart as he ran to Alma's door and the hen's drunken coo's, to the walk home in the aftermath, and Linda's house, it all spilled out with a snapping sound followed by a low hiss and Antonio's insides also made a snapping sound. His tears spilled out, and together with the soda bottle they both emptied themselves onto the wooden kitchen table.

Alien Farms

The earth appears hard and cracked around the melon field. The shovel struggles to go through the first layer of crust against it and Javier is pushing and pushing in, his foot on the shovel, trying to angle his weight differently into it. It doesn't work. So, he takes to a different strategy. He starts beating the ground with the shovel, stabbing it down in a circle, loosening the earth as he injures it, but it refuses to be pulled apart, molded, and prodded. Sweat already forming on his forehead, as the horizon line, a straight, slightly slanted skyline cuts through the many miles of Honey Dew fields, fading out the morning's blue hue for the bright yellow light of the sun, already beating relentlessly down onto Javier's back.

...

There was a sense of desperation in the mornings that Javier hated. Maybe it was the sound of his alarm going off. A grinding, high-pitched sound that made him flinch awake and away from it. Or maybe it was his body shrouding itself in dread, crying out for more than the six hours of sleep he had, trying to force him to close his eyes again and escape it. Whatever was the case, Javier ignored it. The fields were calling him like they did every day and night.

"I'm turning off your alarm papa." His daughter, Emma, was at the foot of his bed, her hair was sticking out upwards, his phone in her hand. She'd fallen asleep wearing a ponytail and now her hair looked odd and mishappened.

Javier's family all slept in one room. They slept in a series of two full mattresses pressed against one another. Emma slept in between her parents and her twin younger brothers, sacrificing good sleep every night as she would slowly start to slip into the crack of the two

mattresses, waking up in the cold hardness of the concrete ground of their bedroom floor every morning to the sound of her father's alarm blasting off.

“Gracias, hija.” He rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “¿Puedes cambiarle el timbre al teléfono?” His daughter stared at him. Her eyes round and tired like his.

“Timbre?” She questioned him. She often struggled to understand him, Spanish being a language of 50/50 for her. Half the time she understood what was being said to her, asked of her. *Despierta a tus hermanos. Wake up your brothers. Ayuda me con las tortillas. Help me with the tortillas. Te Quiero. I love you.* But there were times when the words were too fast for her, the context was too obscure, or subjective, or she just did not know what the words meant.

“Timbre?” She asked again, and Javier could see his daughter's sleep-heavy eyes staring down at him, trying to decipher his words and the confused look in her eyes, the confused head tilt she always did when thinking hard. That small look of confusion and frustration always sparked a tender feeling in the pit of his stomach. Javier often saw his little girl in her confused expression, and it always brought with it memories; like her tilting her head to one side when he tried to teach her to say papa instead of mama as a baby, or the image of her eyes narrowed in frustration when she struggled for the first time following the words to Cielito Lindo, breaking concentration in awe at how similar her father's voice was to Vicente Fernandez. “Papa?” Emma was still holding onto his phone, her eyes and head stuck in her confused expression, pointing to his phone, trying to ask him what he meant, but not finding the words for it.

Javier reached for his phone and shook his head, “Está bien hija. Está bien. It's okay, it's okay.” He reassured her the way he always did when the wall that existed between the two of them fell down, always keeping him at arm's length from her, trying to reassure her with what little English he'd learned since he came to the US, trying to not bury himself in the thoughts of

disappointment he felt at his first child. Thoughts that choked him at times, asking over and over again when did the little girl who loved Mariachi music end up as the daughter who couldn't hold a conversation with her own father? He always told her it was okay when she got stuck on a word, a sentence, or a question, but it wasn't. It wasn't okay, but he couldn't say that to her. He was proud of her English, she got good grades and helped her mom out with the twins, but to find fault in his daughter would be to find fault in himself, el progenitor, in the home he had created, in this life he had given them, although richer in opportunities, was still poor in quality. That the only moments he saw his little girl and boys were right now, in these short, intermediate times before and after sleep. He'd have to face the fact that he's seen his daughter grow up into the girl she is today in 90-minute intervals every day.

...

The sun was burning above, rotating, giving him a hard time as it usually did. He was used to the long days of sun and the dryness of the desert. The feeling of sweat drenching his back and armpits and the layer of dead, cracked skin on his lips was normal, welcomed in fact. It meant that the day was moving forward, the sun rising, and when the sweat would start to cool off and his bandanna would be tied around his neck instead of his forehead, he'd know the sunset was arriving and it was time to pack up and go home to the wife and the kids. But today was different. Even though the sun was shining and antagonizing as every other day, it felt off. Like it was shimmering in the sky instead of blazing. Like it was bearing down on him, but not the water. Like it was conspiring with the earth that day.

The fields were refusing to drink up the water pouring out from the canal. He had opened the floodgates two hours ago, flooding the field and its fledgling stems, but it refused to be

absorbed. The water levels remained the same as they were two hours ago. The water was cold to the touch as well, the sun refusing to burn above it.

...

His wife was making burritos in the kitchen. She had on her cooking T-shirt, an old rag that belonged to him a few years ago, until it was bleach-stained in the washing machine, and she refused to let him wear it to work anymore. He'd argued that it didn't matter if it was stained or not. He wasn't working anywhere fancy for anyone to care, but she put her foot down and stole it from his side of the dresser. He was grateful to her. She never allowed him to leave the house without a clean pair of clothes, ironed and pressed even though he'd come home twelve to thirteen hours later covered in layers of dirt and sweat, smelling of field pesticides.

No husband of mine is allowed to go to work looking like he has no home and no wife, she'd often say to him when he'd tell her to sleep in more, that he could get dressed on his own. It made him feel loved when she said those things, but also small. She had the final say in everything: the bills, the house, the food, what he was wearing for work that day or any day. She was the one who cashed in the checks he earned. She was the one who got to spend it the most. She got to see the children grow.

And he let this happen. He knew he did even if he never allowed himself to sit on that thought. If he ever took a seat in his own mind, he'd find only disappointment in himself and jealousy towards his wife. His unknown jealousy would come out in small bursts of anger at times. When she'd complain that he'd forgotten to call off work to attend an honor roll assembly for the kids. He'd yell and call her ungrateful. That she had it easy. She just had to stay home all day and cook and clean and spend his money at the grocery store and pick up the kids when he'd work all day long outside in the hot sun plowing and plowing the earth until it gave way, forcing

open and closing floodgates and eating breakfast, lunch, and dinner inside a hot car. All his yelling was about the things he was grateful for her doing, but the things he wished he could do. The things he wishes he had the time to do. To go grocery shopping. To pick up the kids from school. To clean and cook even though he never learned how to. He wished he was her sometimes, but he could never bring himself to wish for her to be him.

“Siéntate. Ya casi termino tu lonche.” His wife, Maria, placed a cup of coffee on the dining table, a sturdy four-seat table, as she continued with her cooking. He could smell breakfast burritos of eggs and ham, and lunch burritos of pork and green salsa. She was making his favorites. She always made him his favorites, and as she cooked and walked small steps from the stove to the refrigerator, he sat there silently watching her and listening to her as she went on and on about what she had planned to do for today, and he listened sitting on the table he bought for his wife and three kids, the table which was often complete without him.

...

It was lunchtime by the time the earth finally broke loose underneath Javier’s weight and persistence. His back was soaking wet, and his socks even felt like they had been seeped inside a pool. The sun was still simmering above, wavering in and out of focus. Maybe there was an unspoken battle happening between the earth and the sun. Maybe the earth had bet the sun that it couldn’t penetrate it, that it couldn’t crawl its way into its crust or harm its waters. Maybe the sun took up the earth on that bet and is growing an aneurysm at its evident loss. Like God betting the Devil that Job would never denounce him, but in Job’s place was Javier with his shovel bearing all the miseries the sun was sending his way.

Javier finished his coffee at the same time his wife was done cooking and started packing his lunches into tinfoil, pulling out an old small-sized container of Nesquik and pouring the reheated birria from last night's dinner inside. The tinfoil burritos are stacked above it. A plastic bag is tied with a small portion of chopped cabbage mixed with chopped tomatoes and onions with a lime cut in half inside it. A metal spoon topped off the small mountain of Javier's three meals for the day. "Listo!" His wife smiled, clapping her hands together in satisfaction at her finished task. Javier stood up from the table, leaving his cup behind for his wife to clear out later, and walked behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist.

His wife was no longer slim like she had been in their first years together. Her waist was round and stuck out on all sides, her legs chubby after two pregnancies, the last one having left her bedridden in the hospital for three days and leaving the family in debt. She'd often complain about her figure. Often in conjunction with telling their daughter to not eat too many tortillas with each meal, to drink water only instead of soda. To appreciate her figure while she still had it. Emma, being thirteen, did not appreciate nor understand her mother's strange obsession with her body.

Javier didn't bother to pay any mind to his wife's and daughter's squabbling about weight and food. He just squeezed his wife tighter in his arms, resting his head on her shoulders, breathing in her two-dollar shampoo. This was part of his routine. The stove's clock was marking 5:30 am. It'd been 20 minutes since he'd woken up, about the time he always felt like crying. It was getting closer to him having to go to work, but every morning, the sight of his wife packing lunch, her usual clap of satisfaction at a job well done, always made the floodgates of his eyes want to spill open. He wanted to stay, eat breakfast with her, share a cup of coffee, rush

the kids to the car, grab the keys and her hand as he'd drive them all to school with her at his side.

...

Javier was halfway done with his second burrito, the green salsa dripping from his chin when he noticed the ground at his feet shake. He was inside a beat-up grey van. His work van. The one he always drove to and from work with no a/c and the back passenger seats ripped out so on the days he worked overnights he'd have a hard place to lie on that wasn't the cold ground. He was inside this van, sitting with one leg bent in and the other out-stretched forward, it'd been years since Javier had lost the mobility to sit cross-legged. The side doors were opened for the air flow when he noticed the pebbles around the borders of the fields shake and then levitate.

Javier did not rise from his seat inside. He took another bite of his burrito. He'd been fighting with the ground all day. The ditches that he was supposed to have finished digging up to redirect any excess water off the fields this morning were not even halfway dug up. The sun and the earth were not in their usual state and so, as a man of the earth and the sun, neither was Javier.

...

"Papi," One of his twin boys was calling for him, half asleep on the mattress as Javier buttoned up his flannel. Emma was in the kitchen helping her mother set up the dining table for breakfast with the twins. "Papi." Javier, with his shirt halfway done up, knelt onto the mattress. His hands went down to soothe the cheek of the rowdy twin whose body was curled up facing the back of his twin brother.

They were about six years old. About, because Javier didn't quite remember their ages anymore. For him, time existed in intervals dictated by the job. His calendar consisted of the

planting cycles; of Lettuce season with its long hours of waiting for the midnight frost to thaw in the morning sun, to the short season of Wheat watching the fields grow tall, changing from green to brown stems, until the Honeydew Melon season kicked in, which brought long hours of laboring away under the intense sun, pouring water only for half of it to evaporate, a continuous cycle until Wheat season comes again, with its cooler air, and dim mornings, signaling the start of Lettuce season once again with menudo and birria tucked safely into his thermos.

The twins had been born during Lettuce season, a week after the first batch of seeds had been planted and germination had started. He missed their birth, stuck in fields, his sisters at the hospital, acting as his proxy. They were the ones sending him pictures every day of the twins while they stayed in the NICU, hooked up to machines that monitored everything about their being. They were the smallest babies he had ever seen. He was sure that if he had been able to be there and hold them, they would each have fit in the palms of his hands. He was sure in those days that his wife's emergency c-section had been his fault. That he had not provided enough to her care, that he shouldn't have expected her to continue making him his favorite lunches and ironing and pressing his clothes. If he hadn't kept expecting those things of her then she wouldn't have turned for the worse. And when he had seen the pictures of the twins inside their incubators, he had also been sure that if he had talked more to them in the womb, sung Vicente Fernandez and Luis Miguel like he had when his wife had been pregnant with Emma, when he had had more time, than they wouldn't have been born so small, in so much need of attention and love.

"Papi." The rowdy twin had his arms raised now, his eyes half opened, expectant. Javier took him into his arms, cuddled him against his chest, and brushed the back of his head. He'd wonder when they'd start to speak more, and stop being able to communicate with him like

Emma did. When she was their age, he had been able to understand her much more than he did now.

The second twin remained asleep as Javier soothed the other twin back to sleep and Javier finished buttoning up his shirt. Their names were Jose and Miguel. Javier couldn't remember which one was which. Identical twins are hard to tell apart, which is something his wife kept reminding him of every time he'd accidentally call them by the wrong names. Always so careful to try not to put on any extra burden on him, she'd often call the boys by their names in front of him, so Javier wouldn't have to go through the trouble of figuring it out, not knowing that the burden he often felt on his chest grew with every moment he had to look to his wife to figure out which son of his is which. The only consolation he could find within himself was knowing that he loved them both the same.

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The ground continued shaking even after Javier had been done with his second burrito. Cleaning himself up from the dripped green salsa Javier took his first good look outside. He, however, did not look at the ground, or the fields, instead he looked up at the sky. He was alone for miles among the hundreds of acres of gridded farmland and the interconnected system of canals that he opened and closed in and out of the day. He gazed up at the clouds, there was only one, off in the distance, lazily floating miles away from him, and next to it was the sun, some thousands of light-years away from it. He looked directly at it. Its red sphere burned his eyes as Javier stared at it, there was a giant floating mass floating in front of the day's sun, shaped like a saucer.

...

“Bye, papa.” Emma hugged him from the side as Javier was bending down, lacing up his work boots. He kissed her forehead before she let go of him. Even with the few words that could be exchanged between them, they remained close. Javier wondered how long it’d take for that too to change. The time was 5:45 am.

“Con mucho cuidado Javier. Te quiero mucho.” His wife too hugged him. He was standing at the doorway. His lunch was packed in Walmart plastic grocery bags, layered up into three bags to make sure nothing leaked through or fell out in case of an accident. Javier smiled at his wife and told her he loved her too. His eyes holding back the feeling of wanting to stay.

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The saucer-like object looked stagnant in the air, hovering in place, but its presence grew larger and larger until it blocked off the sun, leaving a giant dark spot above Javier’s field. It looked like an oversized paperweight. Javier stared at it for a while, but it did nothing. His afternoon lunch was gone, devoured with the sense of gratefulness he always felt at his wife’s cooking. He should get off his truck and start working again. He needed to check the water levels, call his boss, and ask him what time he’d have to go get the next water pump and set up a new field. Would he need to enter the workshop today before heading home, grab a gun and go scare off the birds to protect newborn seedlings again? There was still so much to do, and yet there was this unidentified object hovering above him, but he received no call about it. No co-worker working miles away from him called to check in and ask about the giant blip in the sky above him. His boss didn’t call and say that the world was changing and that he, for once with the oddity that is a natural disturbance like rain or sandstorms, could take off the day, go home early, talk about what happened here. But nothing happened. Nothing changed. He didn’t change.

He just sat there, watching it, letting time pass with every forward inch of earth around the sun, until the ground stopped trembling and the fields remained empty of anyone but Javier.

He picked up his shovel and with the newly given shade from the saucer went back to digging the earth. He finished digging up the ditches. Checked the water levels in the field. Called one of his co-workers to close off the water pump and stop sending water to his side of the grid. He did a once-over of the perimeter and cleared up trash that had been picked up by the wind and left inside the other fields and dirt roads leading up to his area. He called his boss, he wanted Javier back at work at the same time as always tomorrow, at a new location, at a new field, and no birds were needed to be scared away. He did all of this with the giant saucer looming over him. The shade appreciated.

Occasionally he'd glance up at it. A thought about the universe and religion would try to form in his mind at the sight of it, but the thought itself would never form. The only thing that came to mind as a fully formed thought was how strange he felt about not feeling strange. Like the earth underneath him had moved in rotation, but he, himself remained unchanged, but alien to his new surroundings.

Javier had felt like this once when Maria had just told him she was pregnant and without a wedding ring on her finger yet, and he was just some 20-something-year-old kid, new to this country in a seasonal position as a melon packer for the summer. Suddenly he'd gone from just starting his new life to becoming an expecting father. The expectations of fatherhood, marriage, and responsibility loomed over him like a great mass of dread, and then Maria said she wasn't going to keep it. That she wasn't ready to be a mother yet, and Javier, under the sudden weight of expectations, took a step forward and hit the ground running to catch up to where it had shifted from underneath him.

He asked Maria to marry him. Promised her he'd take care of her. That if she was alright with it, he'd be a good father. He made so many promises to her that night, taking bigger and faster steps forward to catch up with the rotating earth underneath him. And now, he stood still.

He packed up his shovel and cleaned up his trash. It was leaving time. The field had taken all day to absorb the water, but it did. The earth, after all, could not go long without a drink, it like other living things, needed sustenance to maintain on being, even if it meant allowing itself to be broken into.

The saucer had also remained in place and Javier had not paid it any more attention. It, like many other things in his life, was relegated to the back of his mind, too unimportant to the moment he currently was in, which is and always has been the fields, the hard earth, and the hot sun.

Often Javier wondered why he didn't just live inside his van, parked on the dirt road of whatever field he needed to tend to that day. Why he couldn't keep himself physically tied down to the fields, where nothing ever changed, unless it was meant to be changed? Why couldn't he just remain where the ground never shifted from underneath him?

He turned on his car, the engine stuttering like it always did before keeping a steady hum. Pulling out of the side of the dirt road and onto the path towards home, Javier glanced at the saucer shrinking in his review mirror as he drove away, becoming more and more obstructed as his back tires picked up dust and pebbles from the fields, the ground underneath him shaking with the uneven dirt road, his knee aching against the gas pedal, realizing, that the fields were no longer that steady ground he could stand on, resurfacing that foreign feeling of dread he often had in the mornings with him.

Javier arrived home late at night, like he usually did, tapping his feet on the doormat before entering, groaning as his body had cooled down from the drive home, his aches and pains of age and overuse hurting. His wife hated him tracking dirt on the living room floor. He didn't even get the chance to open the entrance door as he heard the twins excitedly yelling from inside the house that Daddy was home. His wife opened the door for him, welcoming him in. Javier looked more worn down than usual entering his home. His back was arched downwards, and his eyes focused on the living room couch. Rest. He just wanted to rest, sit, and remain still for once.

“Papi!” The twins rushed at him as soon as he stepped inside. His wife left for the kitchen to get him a cup of coffee. Javier ignored their small bodies, allowing himself to sink into the living room couch, the weight of his day wrapped around his forehead, laying lopsided on his temples like a crown made of tumbleweed. “Mija, quita me las botas.” He called out to Emma, putting his feet up on the coffee table, waiting for his daughter to come and take his muddy boots off for him.

“Papi?” His sons looked at him with identical faces, doe-eyed, but he didn't reach out to hold them or speak with them. He couldn't tell which one he had held onto earlier that morning, both their eyes looked up at him with adoration, but he just closed his eyes, waited for his daughter to appear, and started to loosen his boot laces until he replied.

“Ahorita no niños. Estoy cansado, muy cansado.” Not right now kids. I'm tired. I'm very tired.

Grandma's Milk Tree

As a child, I believed that when people died, they would become stars. I believed it the same way I believed the moon followed me on car rides and I believed it the same way I always believed my father's words, and I held onto that belief as I sat in that car as a ten-year-old, three hours into a 14-hour car ride from Tucson to Sinaloa, Mexico. I remember the sky had been a purplish blue, the breaking of dawn with a shrunken moon fading in and out from the surrounding daylight. I waved it goodbye, happy to see her off. As I waved the car radio played a humming static and we reached the mountains. My uncle's ashes rested on my mother's lap.

"Papi, how did my tio die?" I kept asking this on the way to Abuela's house. Maybe I kept forgetting, a child's attention span can be short or maybe I already knew in the way children always knew and I just wanted him to confirm it. I wanted him to be honest.

"He died in the desert trying to cross over." He half-lied, in the way parents often do when they believe their child isn't old enough to know the full truth, and maybe he was right to lie. Maybe I was too young then, and the truth wasn't going to change the current reality. My uncle was still inside a box, a gray towel covering the lid, holding his soul in, resting to the soft static of the radio as the Arizonian mountains turned into rough patches of the cacti-covered hills of Nogales, crossing borders even in death.

The ride was bleak and uncomfortable waiting for the radio stations to switch over from American airwaves to Mexican ones. The landscape through Nogales to the state of Sinaloa wasn't something a ten-year-old would have found exciting. It's paved in sandy rocks, dry ceros covered in tumbleweeds and the occasional white cross planted onto the side of the road. To pass the time, I fought with my little sister over the road trip snacks, even as a toddler she knew

how to fight me, and I annoyed my older brother by waking him up from his naps. I ignored my dad's grief. He was a Mexican man with a dark mustache etched to his upper lip, and he would never mourn in front of us, not now and not ever. He would just hurt in that silent way men hold in their pain.

Halfway through the ride, when the sun settled and stopped shaking in its own heat, dusk came in and my mom couldn't take it anymore. Her lap felt too heavy, she kept telling us she smelled funeral roses in the car, opening and closing her passenger window, hoping for the stench of death to not cling to her clothes. My mom had lost both of her parents in an accident when she was 30, the scent of funeral flowers was already embedded in her soul, and she refused to allow it to also cling to her clothes. I offered to hold my uncle, but although the weight of him on her lap was too much, she refused to let me hold him. Instead, we pulled over at a gas station, and Mom left him to rest in the passenger seat as she walked out to the bathroom. We spent an hour in that gas station. I went to pee once and cried when I came back, and my little sister had eaten all of the snacks. When it was time to leave, Mom couldn't get into the car. She kept staring at my uncle's box.

She stood by the bathroom door, the Sonora heat cascading over her in waves, the bathroom stall smells reaching her from where she stood while I approached her, eyes swollen from my lost candy, reaching to hold her hand, "Mami, dad says we got to go." She gave me a gentle and reached her hand out and rubbed the corners of my eyes clearing away the lagañas from my sleepy eyes.

"Un minute más hija," she stood outside for about 20 minutes, her face red from the heat and I sat next to her on the concrete floor, my head resting on her upright legs, as we both stared at my father giving her some time to rest, wiping the windshields, throwing out trash, checking

the radiator's water levels and the engine bay's oil. Eventually dad came for mom, he ordered me to go back to the car, drink some water, so I did, and from my window seat in the car I could see them just standing there, talking to each other, until mom sighed and they both walked back together, putting his ashes at my feet in the back passenger seat, telling me to be careful with my feet and to keep them up on the seat.

I helped them readjust him on the car mat, and as I straightened up his urn with his name tag facing up towards me, I realized that he wasn't as heavy as I thought he'd be. I held in this thought until we were back onto the road, until the thought of him squished into a wooden box filled me with too many questions and concerns that I had to air them out before I blew up into a balloon.

“Why is he so small?” My uncle had been a big man.

Mom glanced at me from her front seat, she looked tired. “They cremated him.” In the United States, they cremate all those who've died crossing through the desert that remain unclaimed for, but in my uncle's case, they cremated him because of how little had been left of him when found, and for us to be able to take him home they had to finish off what the sun had started.

“What's cremated?” I hadn't heard that word until that day. “Did he turn into a cream?” I wasn't doing well in my English lessons back then either. I was held back a year in 4th grade, and I couldn't tell the difference between the 'ch' sound and the 'sh' sound. Chocolate sounded like shocolate to me.

“That means they burned him, stupid.” My older brother sneered at me.

“Gabriel! We don’t use that kind of language in this family!” My mom was a liar. We couldn’t use that language, but we’ve all heard her call more than one annoying thing stupid before.

I chose not to ask anything anymore after that, instead, I sat there with my uncle sitting at my feet wondering how long it would take him to be burnt to such a small size. My fingertips itched to pull him up into my lap and be able to hold onto its wooden side, but I held back the desire to hug my uncle one last time. I was too afraid that if I held him in my lap and we’d hit a big enough bump in the road that he’d spill all over me. Then, like my mother, I too would never be able to rid myself of funeral flowers.

We pulled over to a nearby town at a motel to sleep the night. My dad had been driving for hours, only stopping when we needed gas for the car and bathroom breaks. He needed both the rest and silence that came with sleep. Mom carried my uncle into our rented room and placed him on the nightstand, there was no other table to put him on. I wished they had kept him in the car. At night I could feel him there.

We arrived at my abuela’s house in the morning, showered and dressed for mourning. They had everything already set up. They had a big canvas roof, crisp and white with a bold TECATE sign on it. They had borrowed it from the local liquor dispensary, there was one in every ejido. It hung, casting a shadow over the big wooden coffin underneath it. I found it silly. Why would my uncle need a coffin when he already had a tiny one; grieving didn’t have to make sense. They’ve always mourned a loved one within a casket, open or closed, why would my uncle resting in an urn, burned back to ash, a reversed creation, be any different? My mom placed my uncle inside the white pillowing of the casket and left him there.

I met up with so many cousins that week. We mourned for seven days, with seven days of prayer and seven days with no color in the world, we all dressed in black that week. We ate so much candy and played so many games of tag I would sometimes forget I was at a funeral. Not even the ever-present casket in the backyard of Grandma's house would remind me of it, nor the scent of roses next to it. What usually brought me back to the reality that someone I loved was dead was the whispering. One would think the crying would be an indicator, but much like the casket that lay in the backyard, they would all blend into the background. No, it was the whispering and the sudden silence that came into a room when I walked in, when any of us kids walked in.

On the third night of mourning, I had fallen asleep on a towel lying on the floor. I had been watching TV and my grandma didn't own a couch, just a plastic chair that held the TV off the ground. I laid there, half asleep, half away listening to my aunts and mom make flour tortillas for tomorrow's breakfast. They were discussing how many kilos to make since we'd be having more family over tomorrow morning. I wondered where they were going to stay. Tio Jorge had already claimed sleeping underneath the porch, and I was already close to falling off the bed my mom, sister, and I shared. Though there was still one spot left on the floor, at the foot of the bed, if they didn't mind sleeping facing my brother's feet.

"It's just too sad." I heard mom say and I stirred from the floor.

"He had it coming. He was helping people cross over!" I opened my eyes, my tia Martha's high-pitched voice echoed down the hall. I stood up. There was no use sleeping with her shrill voice traveling through the hallway.

"Callate! You out of all of us have no right to say that. Before you had papers, he was the one who helped you and Santi cross to the US. If it weren't for him, you'd never have met your

husband and Santi would have stayed fatherless.” My mother’s voice lowered. “It was the drogas that got him. He got greedy. He decided to cross more than just people-”

“Mami?” I was in the kitchen now, my towel wrapped around me. I felt like a little virgin Mary, draped in a green towel, putting it over my body, and over my head like a veil, but the weight of it made me drag my feet into the kitchen. There was silence when I reached the kitchen’s entryway. My aunts stared at me, spooked as if a ghost had walked in on them cooking. The silence remained until mom picked me up, draping the towel off my head and over my shoulders, wrapping me in it like I was still a baby before I was carried off back to sleep, their conversation heavy in my ten-year-old brain, and it would remain a heavy source in my mind for years, forgotten as a child and then remembered one day.

On the fifth day of the funeral the last of our family members arrived. We were all a gaggle of black swans loitering around abuela’s backyard, walking around greeting people and handing plates of food to anyone who seemed hungry, anyone but me, as I evaded plates with red rice and beans like it was a sport. I kept myself to the peripheral of the funeral party, sucking on a lollipop, my tongue blue from all the blue candy I had that morning, watching as my cousin, my uncle’s only child, the one raised by our abuela, cried over the dad she barely knew. She had been on bed rest just a few days ago since giving birth, her doctor finally allowing her to be discharged from the city hospital that was a day’s drive from the ejido.

As I watched her from the doorway, I wondered what my role here was supposed to be. We all had a role to play like my mom who kept rubbing her shoulders, and my dad, who kept her from climbing into the casket as her wailing grew louder. I would go on to ask myself the same question many times, as my family shrunk in size, wondering when it would be my turn to try and climb into the inside of a coffin because the thought of being apart from a parent

outweighed any fear of being buried alive. But back then I just stood there, licking my lollipop entranced by her sobbing, until I got tired of trying to reach the center of my lollipop and I bit into it, the crack of the hard candy matching the crack in my cousin's voice as she fainted.

I spent the rest of that day eating sweets for every meal. Mom was too preoccupied helping to feed others that she forgot to feed me directly, asking my brother to hand me a plate of food instead only for me to hand it over to one of my uncles before asking them for spending money to buy more chips and cookies from the tendita. Dad was also too preoccupied, but unlike mom who kept herself busy with physical and emotional labor, dad spent most of the funeral in a lawn chair, beer in hand and his tears stuck at his throat. He was too busy trying not to mourn like the women in his life that he too didn't notice my lack of proper meals that day.

Aside from my uncle's daughter who arrived that day, there were many people who attended the funeral, many of whom were strangers who had come to see the spectacle of a man inside of a wooden box inside of another wooden box, like a nesting Russian doll holding Pandora's box inside. Many were women who lived in the small ejido. They would come and mourn, despite having never met my uncle or been friends with my abuela, and take up prayer with the family, eat our food, drink our coffee, and then leave, only to come back again the next day.

"Who are those ladies" I had asked with a mouthful of sweet bread. "Are they family?"

"No mija." My mom held my hand. "Some people just show up to these things to empathize for the other's loss." She was holding me tight. "Some of them know what it's like to lose a son."

That week I saw my mom cry a few times, sometimes openly, joining the strange women or in the arms of one of my aunts, and I saw her cry privately, at night in our shared bed, but I

wondered if she was crying for my uncle or if she was sometimes crying because she was afraid that someday it be my brother who was the one inside a wooden box too.

On the fifth day I found a tree at the corner of my grandmother's front yard that bled milk. I would cut its branches and watch it bleed white. I was obsessed with this tree back then, the memory of it was always at the forefront of my mind when I thought of grandma's house. I remember climbing it and just sitting there, watching el ejido from on top, pretending I could see the whole world from up there.

It was here where I round up my cousins, old and small, gathered all of us to tell ghost stories at night, and it was here where I heard my little sister confess that she saw our dead uncle in the hallway during the night. She had gotten up to go pee, something she rarely did given that peeing the bed had been her signature move at night until she had turned 9. When she pulled open the curtains covering the bedroom doorway, my grandma couldn't afford real doors to the bedroom, she saw him in the hallway, pale, next to a chair. He called her name, asked her to come with him. She ran back inside and lay on the bed, scared, until she peed the bed.

When she told us this, I took her to my mom right away, giving up my throne on the milk tree so my sister could confess her vision.

"If he appears again mija, come to me first, okay? Don't follow him." My mom cupped my sister's cheeks in her hands, worn-out eyes peering back and forth at us, letting me know that I was being told to do the same.

"But isn't just my uncle? Why can't we go with him?" I would always ask questions I shouldn't.

She took a second to answer me, looking me in the eyes. "He might be confused," was all she said. I took that with a nod, feeling scared and went back to the milk tree ready to fight my

way back to the top. I now know she meant that he might not have been the uncle I thought I knew.

During the last night of prayer, we stayed up all night. All the kids and all the adults were up and about, no one was going to rest until we poured in the last grain of dirt into his grave tomorrow morning. The men were awake with beer in their bellies, their drunkenness at hand and their feelings finally showing. They laughed and cried and sometimes they did both at the same time.

The women were up on caffeine and sweet bread, bloated to the core by their anxieties, kept upright as the caffeine worked like helium in their veins. They talked shop, what they were going to make for breakfast tomorrow, they had a village to feed and children to fuzz around.

The children were up on sugar, pieces of sweetbread, caffeine, and beer, some offered by drunken dads and uncles, others stolen and taken to the dark. We ate and drank anything that we could reach. We were the lost ones in all of this. Joyful to see cousins we didn't even remember having, but hesitant to ask our parents anything aside from spending money. We saw them all cry or go silent, but no one explained. No one explained why it was disrespectful for us to listen to music while we had a burned corpse in the backyard. Why we couldn't go around wearing other colors that weren't muted, and aged like every adult's face? Instead, we played tag around the casket, one of us bumped his head on it and started crying. He got a beating for that by his mother.

On this night I stayed with my dad. He was drinking his beer, and I was drinking mom-made coffee. My cousins were running around, my brother was with the older kids acting cool and big. I sat with my dad while he talked with my uncles. I was tired of running around eating sweets and only sweets for days. Instead, I looked up at the night sky. There were so many stars,

there was no electricity in most of the houses here, so when the night came it was the moon and stars that lit the way.

I watched those stars light up the sky, my head resting on my dad's shoulder when I suddenly felt a rain drop. I remember being scared by the saltiness of them. I remember stretching my hand outwards, waiting for more rain to come, but the water drops only fell on my face. I looked up to my dad and he had his beer down, his eyes were red, and he was crying. His grip on me tightened and I knew he wanted to pull me into a hug, but I pushed him away. I was scared of him. He had a face on that I'd never seen before. He suddenly looked very old and foreign to me, so I jumped off his lap and ran away from him and my uncles. They now all looked old and foreign too.

I dashed around the house, running past my uncle's casket, covering my ears as the woman prayed another rosario to the dead, my ears buzzing from their broken record of a prayer. I felt bloated and my intestines felt ready to burst. My stomach rumbled and I could feel bile making its way into my throat. I made it to grandma's milk tree, hugged its tall bark as I stumbled forward and spewed out days' worth of candy and sweets. I dry heaved in the darkness of the tree's shade, until finally having the strength to climb it. I think I was trying to run away from the mess I had just made, hide from it and all the sadness and morning happening in the backyard. I pulled myself as far up the tree as I could and curled myself up into a branch, my stomach laying on it as I hugged it like a koala bear, my throat burning from my stomach acid and my eyes blurry as I tried to count the stars in the sky.

I tried to count them all, but I could only number eight of them before I lost count and sight of the ones I'd numbered among their splattering lights. I tried over and over again, losing count every time, until the sight of a moving ball of light in the sky got my attention. It looked

like a star, floating around in the dark cracks of the sky, moving its way along the negative space, avoiding other stars. I followed its movements with my eyes as it danced in circles, left and right, forward, and backward mimicking. I watched it in awe until it stopped, and it hung there in one spot, blending into the starry night sky and at that moment, in my child's mind, I knew this was my uncle's star.

House Duende

Abril climbed over her brother's sleeping form, dragging their shared cobija off the bed, as the bedframe squeaked in her careful balancing act of getting off. Their house had floors made from concrete, a cheap, but sturdy material that was always cold to the touch during late-night walks through the house. Barefoot, Abril made her way into the hallway connecting her bedroom into the kitchen and living room. She could hear the rustling of dishes and the whisper of laughter ahead. "Papi?" She was searching for her father. She turned down the hall and peered into the open space that made up their small kitchen area, a dinner table cutting the space between the kitchen and the living room into two.

The sink's tap was on, and in the darkness, Abril could make out a pair of plates hanging in mid-air, a set of eyes glowed next to them. The softness of laughter softly echoed through the kitchen's shadows, traveling down and into the hall, gathering in all and creating cold spots along the way. Abril stood inside one of those cold spots, her toes numb from the freezing bit of concrete, her hands pressed against the hallway's wall, "Papi?" She stepped out of the hall, still searching for her father in the eerie softness of the Duende's mischievous laughter.

The moon shifted into the kitchen's barred window, casting a gridded shadow onto the sink, beaconing Abril forward for a better look, and as she spilled closer into the kitchen, her 7-year-old body coming into view underneath the moon's light; her round eyes met glowing, yellow ones attached to a large pointy head and a small thin body decorated by gray, pruned skin. The creature stared back at her; its mouth opened with rows of human teeth. It tilted its head in her direction. Still half-asleep, Abril rubbed her eyes and asked again, "Papi?" but the creature staring back at her did not respond, instead it pointed at her and laughed. Its yellow,

glowing eyes look down on her. It giggled and laughed until Abril's eyes cleared up and she could see the creature, in its pruned, old man skin, pointing at her, the kitchen plates still hanging in the air. Abril stared, wide-eyed, too frightened to scream, the duende's laughter traveling up her spine like the chill from the floor, making her legs and hands go numb. The creature's eyes narrowed, its laugh stopped, its mouth gaped, like it was going to say something, and then the front door opened, the chain lock rattling as Abril's father banged the door, trying to force the chain lock to unhook from the door frame. The sudden rattling of her father's violent attempts against the door, his slurred cussing about the damn door not opening, his yelling for his wife to come and fix the problem for him, all startled Abril into a scream.

The Duende dropped the plates, Abril's mother rushed out of her bedroom door, the kitchen froze and unfroze, cabinets opened and closed, laughter stopped, the lights popped on and the creature was gone, broken ceramic plates littered on the floor now, and Abril cried barefoot holding onto her brother's oversized T-shirt she wore.

"What's going on?" Abril's mother was running into the kitchen, panicked and worried. Her older brother, Javier, followed behind from the hall, both were barefoot and shivering in the giant cold spot the house had become. Javier rushed to Abril's side, and her mother opened the front door.

"Duende! Duende!" Abril cried; her eyes red while her father zig-zagged his way into the house. Abril pushed away from her brother who was holding his arm around her shoulders, soothing her bed hair, and ran towards her father. "Papi! Papi!" She walked over the broken plates, jumping into her father's arms, his breath having that weird rancid, tomato smell he often got from a Bloody Mary. He half caught her, his coordination off, and off-kilter, as his wife

caught Abril's upper half, her arms wrapped protectively around her daughter's head, as his sweaty hands held her waist, but failed to properly hold her up.

He didn't stay for long. The house was too awake and rowdy for him, so he grabbed some cash and headed out into the night once more, leaving Abril's full body weight to fall onto the shoulders of his wife, and the soothing to his son.

Morning came and as children do, Abril somehow managed to move on from last night's scare. She had a superpower at ignoring unpleasant things. Her brother soothed her cries, and her mother carried her off in her arms to go back to sleep. They both assured her that duendes did not exist.

She had slept in her parents' bedroom that night, taking up her father's space, and as Abril pondered over her father's missing silhouette on her mother's mattress he came to visit once again.

It was afternoon and he walked in without knocking, it was his home after all, and the lock had fallen off after the night's fright. He sat down at the head of their small dinner table, his eyes bloodshot from a sleepless night, and an angry hunger visible in the way his mustache hung over his lips in the shape of a frown. Abril's mother served him lunch, birria for the hangover, and a pack of tortillas bought fresh off the Tortillero who drives his hatchback around the neighborhood like clockwork, morning, noon, and evening, selling freshly made, still hot tortillas by the kilo.

"Where were you?" Abril was in the kitchen, peering into every crevice of the kitchen, duende hunting.

“I was working.” Abril’s father took a tortilla and rolled it up on his palm, before dipping it into the birria and taking a bite off it. His wife stood next to him, her arms were crossed, and her eyebrows looked uneven. Abril stayed inside the kitchen area; she knew to stay clear when her father’s mustache looked like that.

“You expect me to believe you were out working this morning when you were out all-night drinking? Daniel, no naci ayer.” Abril was suddenly craving sugar. Grabbing a spoon off the sink, she made her way into one of the lower cabinets. Inside she found her holy grail of sweetness, a three-pound bag of sugar hidden behind a bundle of grocery bags.

“Are you calling me a liar, Dulce? I was working because I said I was working.” Half of Abril’s body was now stuffed inside the kitchen cabinet, her mouth stuffed full of sugar grains, her bottom hanging outside the cabinet doors, and moving along the rhythm of her mother’s nervous foot tapping, a habit born out of marriage. “I come home tired and all you do is chinge y chinge con tus acusaciones!” His voice was thick, gripping onto the kitchen walls, coating them with failed dreams and resentment.

“Pura madre que fuiste a trabajaste!” It was rare for Abril’s mother to raise her voice. Before marriage, she’d been born a Finch, soft-spoken and small, but after two births that swelled ankles, and destroyed her body until it became the perfect tool of creation, she grew in size and vigor, her voice no longer the soft chirp of herbivore, but the screeching of a Laughing Gull, ugly and angry. “You lost your job again didn’t you!”

“¡Chingado!” Abril’s father was now up, his chair scraped back, face red and mustache straight on both ends, angry, stiff. The yelling match commenced with Abril’s mother on the left hand in hip, voice ready to go, the father on the right, body pulled back, ready to snap back like a

lasso, and Abril's face deep into the sugar bag, spoon gone somewhere inside the cabinet, stomach cramping, too sweet, too heavy for a seven-year-old kid.

The first punch was thrown, a plate, one filled with birria and tortilla bits hit flew into the kitchen grounds. The sound shook the house, Abril's mother stepped back, her hands going up to her chest in fright. Being barefoot, Abril absorbed the plate's vibrations. They ran up her toes, past her ankles, through her calves and into her sugar-grained core. It forced her head up from the sugar bag and into the void that was the inside of the cabinet. Yellow eyes stared back. Eye to eye, the duende reached forward, he grabbed hold of the sugar bag.

The plate's pieces stopped ringing against the floor and as they fell silent with its free hand, the duende's stubby little fingers pressed against Abril's chest and pushed her back. She fell backward, as if the vibrations of the plate had caused her to recoil back and as she fell, she watched the duende drag the bag of sugar deeper into the depths of the kitchen counter with a human smile, grinning.

Spooked, Abril stared up at the kitchen ceiling, her mind in pause. Her mother was beside her, yelling. "Javier! Javier!" Her brother came running in from the front yard, soccer ball in hand. He'd make a good mid-fielder, he had the stamina, the strong calves, and the hamstrings to run insistently for 90 minutes. He already did so much running, 90-minutes would be easy for him.

"Take her outside!" Abril's mother pulled out some money, and Javier took it pulling her outside.

The sand was hot, but to a veteran shoe hater Abril's feet felt warm as the sand went in-between her toes: through the cracks of her bandages, and her sole was pricked by stones. The streets weren't paved, it was dirt roads for miles, and the swirls of dust as a car passed by closed Abril's mouth, she hated the taste of dirt. Her stomach ached.

"Ey! Where you guys going?" Javier's friend joined them. He lived in the same neighborhood as them.

Quickly, Abril closed her eyes, hands over them, as her brother raised his hand, and together with his friend they did their secret friendship handshake. "The store," Javier waved the money in mid-air at Luis's face, "Let's share a big bag of Takis! Ah, Abi, you can open your eyes now." Abril wasn't allowed to know their handshake, according to Javier, she wasn't old enough yet. With the promise of free food, Luis walked with them, he too was barefoot, but he wasn't by choice.

Three houses down into the block Abril looked over to Doña Luz's crack house. In the front yard, underneath a shabby made tejaban de paja was Doña Luz's son blaring heavy music with some of his friends, all of them wearing dangerously low pants. Abril watched her neighbor put a lighter underneath a broken lightbulb. The round glass part faced the flame and the cracked, opened end facing up.

"What are they doing?" Abril pointed at them, her forefinger aiming like the barrel of a gun at the one with the broken lightbulb; her brother smacked her finger down and disarmed her.

"They're doing drugs. Don't stare." He looked forward. They were walking in the middle of the road now, putting their distance between them and the house.

"What kind of drugs?" Abril's eyes were glued to the light-bulb man as he turned off his lighter and pulled out a needle.

“I don’t know.” She looked up at her brother. His grip on her hand tightened and she knew he was scared. She looked back at the house. There was beer and women and all of them wore wife-beaters and tank tops, the little kids were bare-chested.

“I’m going to ask,” Abril’s stomachache propelled her forward, she had a sudden need to know what they were eating. So, she ran from her brother’s side, away from the street, and into her neighbor’s crack house. Javier stood in the road caught off guard, his arm extended where he had just been holding his little sister’s hand, his friend laughed nervously, but neither of them moved.

“Señor, what’s in there?” She pointed at the light bulb.

Light-bulb man laughed, putting his injection down from the inside of his arm, his eyes blinking sideways for a long moment. “Why, do you want some?” He pointed at a small mound of white crystals resting on tin foil. It looked like sugar.

Resting her hand on her stomach Abril said no. She already had her fill of sugar, of her parents’ screams, of her father’s open space in her mother’s bed.

Light-bulb man laughed at her sincerity and patted her on the head. He asked for her name and where she lived. She answered and pointed at her house. “That’s a nice house.” Light-bulb man sat down on his lawn chair, now eye-level with her.

Abril shook her head. “No, it’s not. We got duendes.”

“Shit. Those are some pesky little things.” He gave her a smile adorned with a rotting tooth. “They really like sweet things,” he said, blinking sideways. “But do you know what they like to eat the most?”

Abril shook her head.

Leaning forward, he said, “They like to eat little kids,” and made a biting motion towards her. She jumped back, a giggle the sound of gravel getting sandpapered escaping the Light-bulb man’s throat.

Abril walked back to her brother. She had a lollipop in hand, a gift from one of Light-bulb man’s girlfriends. “It’s meth.” She told her brother and Luis, the fullness of her stomach subsiding, if only by a little bit.

Abril walked into her home with a can of Jumex in her hand, and her lollipop still in her mouth. She was humming to herself as she hopped about the house. There was a red mark on her hand, the one holding her Mango Jumex drink. The mark came from her older brother. He had scolded her from leaving his side and talking to the Light-bulb man, slapping her hand as a show of discipline. There was a fear in his eyes that Abril did not understand, and it made his eyes small in comparison to her wide eyes. Mixed in there was affection too, and that she recognized as the light brown that liked to swirl.

“Eh, mija, come here.” Abril’s father waved towards her from the couch. He was sitting with his legs spread open, a brown paper bag with a TECATE bottle inside sat in between his legs. He was watching TV, a telenovela Abril liked to watch with her mother.

Abril approached her father. “Where’s mami?”

He picked her up and placed her on his lap. With one hand he patted her head and with the other, he took a swing of his drink. “Tu mama? She’s resting in the bedroom right now.”

Abril observed her father. The way he grabbed his drink with a strong grip, how he took in large gulps one at a time, the smacking of his lips as he tasted it, and the loud ‘ah’ sound of

satisfaction he made. As she watched him, she took her lollipop out of her mouth and handed it to her father. He took it with a smile, his eyes a light brown, and put it in his mouth. Abril used both of her hands to grip her mango juice and took a swing at it. She made a small gulping noise as she attempted to consume as much of its contents as she could, almost choking on it. After coughing a bit, she smacked her lips together and made a satisfied ‘ah’ sound. Her father laughed at his little girl.

“Aver, let me taste it.” He grabbed her juice out of her small hands and took a sip out of it. “Hmm, tastes good. Here, have some of mine.” He handed her his brown paper bag bottle.

Abril wrapped her two small hands around it, but she was unable to cover its circumference with them, so her father helped her with it. He placed his hand underneath the bottle as she pulled it up towards her lips and helped her sustain it in the air. The smell of it made her nose scrunch up, but her father smiled at her encouragingly, and suddenly, Abril felt so empty. The fullness she had felt all day, the sugar rush that had clung to her intestines throughout that afternoon was gone. Her face scrunched up at the smell of the drink, and her father’s eyes darkened in the sunlight coming in from the living room window, the grid pattern falling in between his eyes. The telenovela forgotten in the background. Abril took a big gulp of her father’s alcohol.

She wrenched and gagged at the taste of it. It tasted bitter and sour at the same time, like the expired milk she’d once drunk by accident at her cousin’s house, and for a moment Abril was suddenly afraid she’d drunk something that had just expired, but her father’s bolstering laughter calmed her worries. He looked so pleased with himself. He took the drink out of Abril’s hands and kissed her forehead. “That’s my girl!” He cheered. Abril’s core felt warm.

“Here.” He handed her back the lollipop and Jumex juice. She leaned against him, curling herself into his warm embrace. The lollipop now tasted like the paper brown drink.

The telenovela was ending by the time Javier came home. His bright blue shorts were dusty, and pale compared to their original color and his worn-out shoes were untied. His shirt was drenched in sweat and Abril knew her brother had just finished playing soccer with his friend. His feet were probably black at the soles too. He never played with his shoes on.

“Mijo, ven! Ven mijo!” Their father extended his free arm towards his son. He motioned for him to come near, to sit on his lap. Javier hesitated.

“¿Que pa’?” He approached his father and stood in front of him. Abril stared at him. His eyes looked so small at that moment, that Abril thought maybe he had closed them shut.

“Sit.” Their father motioned at his lap once again. His hands full with the weight of his brown paper bottle pressed against Abril’s cheek, as he had it draped around her small body.

Javier remained silent. His eyebrows were furrowed into his forehead. He didn’t look like he wanted to sit.

“Javier!” The eleven-year-old boy jumped a step back. His father reached for him, and Abril spilled her drink all over her, his paper bag drink having knocked it off her hands.

The outburst summoned their mother. She ran out of her bedroom into the living room, but she froze. Abril, drenched in mango juice stared at her mother who just stood there as her husband played tug of war with his son’s arm, and it was in that moment, when Abril made eye contact with her mother, her eyes so small they turned into slits, that the emptiness inside Abril’s stomach made her intestines twist and squirm inside of her. It kicked the inside of her, the emptiness wanting to escape, spilling out of her in the same way it had entered her, through desperation. Her mother just stood there, staring and staring and staring, her chest rising,

inflating, gathering air to screech. Her husband gripped her son's wrist tighter and pulled at him, the TECATE bottle spilling all over the couch, stains she'd probably never get a chance to clean out, and yet she remained still, winding up into a shrill, a high pitch scream capable of breaking glass.

And then, Abril vomited, a yellowy, grainy spill that sprayed, rather than spill.

And finally, Abril's mother's throat expanded, the captured air running rampant, her eyes snapping open, becoming wide as a deer, as wide as they could get, running straight forward, towards headlights, headfirst. "Juan! Leave the kids alone!" She moved. She took her husband's hand off her son's wrist, screamed at him words Abril never knew her mother could say. Bad words, Abril had thought were reserved for fathers only to say. But Abril did not stay long enough to hear her father's response. By the time her dad had stood up and stared down the five-foot woman he married, his eyes dark, blinking sideways, hers wide and unyielding Abril was already being carried off, in the arms of her brother.

"Let's get you a bath," he said. Abril turned to look at her brother's eyes, but there was nothing to see. His eyes were gone and hers had shrunk, and as he carried her to the backyard, underneath the lemon tree, she sat naked in a water basin made of concrete standing on two piles of bricks, four feet up in the air, her brother placing the water hose over her head as a makeshift shower head, dish soap rinsing itself off her hair and body, Abril could see two glowing eyes peering up at her from the lemon tree. A yellow lemon gripped in between its human teeth.

That night, Abril's father stayed. He slept on the living room couch. A thick blanket over him and a new brown paper bag drink standing next to him on the floor. His hand lingered over it as he snored, ready to reach for his security blanket if he were to wake.

Abril tippy-toed her way down the hall and into the living room, her feet clothed this time to avoid the aching cold that had settled on the house since the previous night. She stared at her father, poked him on his mustache and giggled. He was here. He was home.

He shifted and turned his back to her, grumbling in his sleep. Satisfied, Abril made her way back to her room, but paused, she stared at the kitchen. The moon was in the kitchen sink, her roundedness was squared out and divided into four by the window panels. Abril stepped into one of its four squares, eyes squinting as she peered into the kitchen cabinets. In her hands she held the sugar jar her mom liked to leave on the dining table. There were no signs of where the bag of sugar had disappeared. She made a trail of sugar leading from the cabinet next to the fridge to the square of light in front of her. She waited as the cabinet's emptiness gave way to pruned skin and a pointy head. She watched with small eyes as the duende reached for the sugar and ate its way up to her, stepping into the light. Its eyes glowed yellow. They were similar in height.

Abril reached forward, slowly, trying to pry her shrunk eyes as wide as possible as she stared down at it. She reached for its hand. The Duende paused its eating and looked at her, its mouth chewing on a handful of sugar. She decided she wasn't going to be afraid of it anymore.

"What are you doing?" Her dad's voice came from behind in a heavy slur, bottle in hand. Abril jumped and the glass jar fell from her free hand. It shattered into a million sugar pieces and glazed over Abril's bare feet, and as she turned around to stare at her dad, what met her were two sets of glowing eyes staring back.

“Pinche niña!” Her dad cursed at her and jumped back, his feet uneven, his brown bag too heavy in his hand, and like marbles, he slipped on the sugar. His fall shook the house. His earthquake shaking the dining table, making the moon’s light tremble, and rang all the doors in the house.

Abril’s mom came running out first, followed by the sounds of her brother’s impatient rustling in their room and his shouting of her name sprinting into the hallway. The lights came on, the creature at her hand had disappeared, and Abril’s father was on the floor crying, his back arched, in pain, and as Abril’s mother rushed into the kitchen reaching for her and her brother sidestepped their father to grab her hand, Abril laughed at her father. It was a deep, bellowing laugh that showed off her opened mouth showing off her baby teeth, not one was missing. Light-bulb man was right, all you need to get rid of a duende is to put out a sugar trail and call out to it at night.

Tacna

In area code 85356 Arizona, exit 42 off the side of Interstate 8, and over a pair of train tracks you'll find yourself in the small town of Tacna, population 610. The town is in the shape of a square, half a mile long and half a mile wide. The main road of this town is the only paved road, one that goes through the town, flows from the entrance on the crossroads of the train tracks all the way through its middle until its half-mile end where it meets downhill into fields and fields of agricultural nothingness. In this street, there's a Chevron, both a store and gas station, and the only sign of life during the night. This Chevron is a checkpoint, visitors come in and out of it, it's the beacon of civilization, the town's connection to the outside world. You came from here. If out past 10 o'clock, this Chevron is your safe zone, don't forget, witches, roam the night.

Across the street from it is the Post Office, it's the size of a small house, but half of it is closed off and boarded up. Do not look through the blinds of this closed half, something will stare back. Next to the Post Office is the town bulletin board. It holds various announcements on it such as community info like what days the Post Office will be closed or if the school, one small town over, will be holding any events. Sometimes you'll see missing people posters. Among these paper posters are the occasional hiring ads looking for a babysitter or a farmhand to work for cheap, the phone number tabs are at the bottom ready to be pulled by anyone. Do not take any. This is a small town. If anyone is hiring anyone, word of mouth is how it goes, these ads aren't looking for a hired hand. Those ads are looking for you. If you keep walking this line, from the Chevron, across the street into the Post Office, past the bulletin board, parallel to the train tracks, you'll see the skeleton of a train station bared to its finest bolts. Its office is littered

with graffiti and there's a strong smell of piss coming from the backroom. In the back room, there's a plain wall, dirty, but graffiti-free. If you ask this wall a question it'll answer you in red letters, but be careful, you might not like its answer. Now, these are the trouble areas. These are the sections of town that one must avoid, especially at night when the witches like to roam.

Among those living in this town, there are families with children, many of whom are stuck here. Now, this is not the town's fault, but a fault of the living. Some lack conviction and drive, but most of all they lack the freedom to do so. Only the children, like little desert ants, travel the town with an ounce of motivation. They are the only ones who know how to thrive in Tacna, unencumbered by disillusionment, and reality. Among the 31 children, there is one who stands out among them. She possesses a sort of sixth sense for this town; she can see the shadows that like to stalk at the corner of her eyes, but most importantly she crossed the desert and remembers it. She's the leader, if you will, of the desert ants. Sometimes, if you pass by her trailer home, a small little thing with a mesquite tree, at the edge of town, you'll find her lying on the ground, a bed of rocks outlining her body as she stares at the sky reading the clouds.

Mira is eleven. She's the go-to person when the little desert ants are in trouble. She knows most about the town and its dangers than the adults do, but despite her leadership qualities, Mira has a pension for being alone. She won't go out unless invited, a habit she received from her ever-present mother. In fact, if you walk further along the dirt path by her home, past the edge of town into the vastness of the desert where the nothingness of agriculture has yet to be bred into the sand, you'll be able to see her mother staring from the kitchen window. Her gaze shifting from dirty plate to strange daughter. Always within reach. Now as

you stay here, standing in the middle of nowhere, your feet buried in the loose desert sand, staring at her trailer home you'll see her father pull up into their driveway on a 1995 pick-up truck. A short brown man with muddied boots and a bright face. He gets out of his truck and greets his daughter. She turns her head to see him approach her. He smiles at her; Mira is a daddy's girl. He picks her up from her rock outline, something he shouldn't do because of his hernia, but Mira has yet to know about his health issues, and he takes her inside leaving the impression of her body in the front yard. Mira believes that leaving behind an impression of herself is proof that she existed in the case she's ever taken away. From the window, you can see the mother put down the dirty plate in her hands and turn on the stove. She puts tortillas on a hot plate and starts making food, but instead of watching the family of three sit down in the kitchen, a table set for dinner, you see the father and daughter combo come out of the house, a milk gallon refilled with cold water, the 2% milk tag barely legible in the father's hands and the daughter is carrying a Del Sol plastic bag filled with tin foiled burritos and nonperishables inside. They head into the desert as the sun hangs close to dusk.

If you follow them sitting in the back of the truck's bed, you'll watch as the truck's exhaust mixes with the puffs of sand the tires make as they drive further and further into the desert, closer to the Mohave mountains. Through the little back window of the Toyota, you'll see dusty blurs of the daughter laughing, her dad having told her something over the roaring of the wind in your ears. She's eating her share of the burritos and he's not. The radio station is turned on, the windows are opened, and you can barely hear the radio host introducing the next song. You can't understand him.

You'll make it to the mountains with them, the state troopers had already passed by hours earlier, and you'll see the duo hop out of the car and leave their milk gallon and their bag of food

inside a little dent of the mountain where the rock feels cool to the touch even during the day. As you see this, you'll also hear Mira praying. Her little hands joined together as she asks for safe passage for the desert walkers, a red string with a single bead in the shape of an eye is tied around her left wrist. This eye stares at you. Desert walkers are what she calls them, that's what she calls herself. She still remembers her journey and the witches' lights she saw as she hid beside a bush, her mother's shawl around her. Those lights tend to reach out to the children and keep them while the parents must remain behind, searching. Her dad also prays, but he prays for news as he holds last week's bag of supplies in his hands. News about his brother, if he's safe if he made it across, or at the very least if he's still alive. Mira just prays for good things and for all desert walkers like her uncle who have yet to finish making their trip up north to be safe.

After their prayer Mira and her father head back to Tacna, you follow in the same way you came. Dusk is now peeking over the mountain, and you see Mira draw a cross over her body, from her forehead to her breastbone and then slightly up to both sides of her chest. A cross for protection because it's the witching hour, where witches hover on their brooms, flying in the dark, their broomstick headlights blinking next to the stars.

On the ride back to Tacna you inspect Mira as she's looking out the passenger window, looking for the signs. It took Mira many hours looking out her bedroom window to learn to distinguish which lights were stars and which were witches, but now she knew what lights to be afraid of. The blinking kind.

It takes about an hour to go from Mohave Mountain to Tacna, the road runs parallel to the train tracks. The train passes by a few times a day, always inconsistent, once, twice a day or once

twice an hour. It holds no consideration for the inhabitants of Tacna. You watch it as it runs by. You stick a hand outside from the truck's bed, you mimic Mira as she did it first. She moves her hand in a wave, she follows the currents, you follow her. The truck pulls out of Interstate 8 and past the crossroad, into the dirt road parallel to the train tracks, and the edge of town. Dusk has fallen. You watch them get out of the car and you follow. You hop off the truck's bed, you land on your feet wrong, you fall forward. Mira is standing by the car's passenger door. She's staring at her father as he groans his way out of the car. His hand rests on his stomach, where his intestines like to bundle up and digest. His hernia is inflicting pain on him. He shouldn't have held Mira. He knows this but also denies this. Mira sees her father's discomfort, she sees his eyes close in momentary pain, she sees his hand on his stomach as if he's trying to hold something in, inside, but Mira still doesn't know. She can see, but she can't comprehend.

Mira puts her hand on the car door to close it. You finally finish falling. You fell in slow motion. You have the luxury of existing under different sets of restrictions. She closes the car door, and you land on your feet wrong. You're hand brushes against her shoulder. You go through her. She turns around. There's nothing there, you are not there. You are on the ground. The weight of your idleness has carried you onto her feet. You look up, her hand is inches away from your face and once again the red string's eye stares at you. It's meant to ward off evil. It doesn't know yet if you are evil. Are you evil?

Mira walks away from you; she goes up to her dad and holds his hands. He goes in to pick her up, but from your position on the ground, covered in the desert sand you see her reject him. You see her own confusion at the rejection. She walks into her home, and you remain outside. That evil eye bracelet scares you.

That night as you stand in the empty lot next to Mira's mobile home, the clothing line's shadow hanging over you and in-between both property lots forming an invisible fencing line, you can see the night sky, its full moon a white rounded dot in a sea of black ink. In the muted vibrancy of that night, you see a pair of desert ants, no older than ten years of age walking over in the cover of night, a bed sheet over each of their hunched shoulders for protection, and a flashlight guiding the way. They walk up to Mira's window, the glow of her nightlight softening the shadows of her movements in bed through the window's curtain cover as they start to tap at the glass. Stone after stone they aim at waking her up. She stirs. Star-eyed with the aftertaste of a dream of cracked desert sand and mountain lights that glow like stars in a starless night sky, Mira wakes up. She looks out the window and stares at you. She doesn't see you, but she freezes, for a second, your image flashes at the corner of her eyes. The clothing line swinging in the breeze was all she really saw before she noticed and looked down at her friends. Mira always sees, even when she can't.

Nico and Jayde are crying, their white and brown cheeks glowing in the night. Lucero was taken by the witches they say, and you notice Mira's eyes widening in shock, she knows that no one ever comes back after being taken. Last year Jose was taken. His disappearance had caused his family to move away, back to the desert. The adults don't believe in the witches. They don't have to, they are far too big to be caught by their headlights and swept up in their brooms, unlike the children, whose existence is bite sized. Instead, they like to call them something else, something Mira denies. She had almost been taken by one when she first crossed so, she knows what they are, and they are not what the adults think they are. They think of them as human, man-made, but Mira saw the blinking lights up close, she saw the supernatural in those lights.

Mira grabs a pen from her dresser, her evil eye bracelet resting there, and climbs down the window, her own sheet around her shoulders. She surveys the night sky. You follow her gaze but all you see are stars and a full moon, while Mira sees too many blinking lights. They head to Lucero's home.

You follow, like always, one step behind, your feet barely missing their moonlight shadows as they move forward. You have no shadow.

Lucero's home is a house with a fence, her dog is silent for once. The lights are on, and her older brother is outside with the other teenagers, safe within their fence. The inside is for the adults, so Mira stays outside. Adults like to mourn alone. As the oldest of the kids Mira approaches the brother. His eyes are bright red and bulging.

Where's Lucero?

Gone.

We could find her if we ask the backroom.

Go home, Mira.

But the backroom will know.

I said go home. I'm not playing with you tonight. Does your mom even know you're out here this late?

Yes.

Go home before the witches take you too.

Lucero's brother goes back inside his home, his last words linger in the air bitterly. You taste them. Sometimes teenagers don't believe either. He opens his front door, the light flushing outwards, the desert ants' shadows are stretched out, they cross the dirt road into the train tracks parallel to their houses. The midnight train passes then, their shadows are crushed underneath it,

the door is closed now. The leaked sounds of Lucero's mom wailing stopping with it. Mira stands there in the night with her two friends for a second, the sheets as armor around them as Lucero's mom's cries ring in her ear as an afterthought. She hadn't known Lucero's mom was part Llorona.

Mira starts to make her way to the abandoned station. Her eyes are narrowed, and her lips are pressed into determination. She's angry. She's sad. Lucero was one of her people, one of the desert walkers. If she had been meant to disappear then it should have been in the desert, not taken into the air, evaporated into the night sky, strapped to a witch's broom. Taken.

Lucero was eleven too. She hadn't always lived here. She belonged to Texas, she always insisted on it, even if she hadn't been born there it didn't matter because she had chosen it. To Lucero Texas was home, Tacna was not, but she had moved in either way. Desert walkers don't get to choose where they stay. Lucero had never believed in the witches. That's how she got caught, sheetless. She had stared right into their headlights, her brown eyes had become doe-like, her body begun to wind up like a spring, and when the witch landed, her two feet impacting the ground, her crackle, high shrill laugh cutting the air, it was too late. Lucero's coiled body had uncoiled, her spring sprung, one second too late. She was caught and caged.

You want to follow Mira, but you can't. Nico and Jayde remain frozen at the fence. The train had shaken their feet into the ground where they had now planted themselves into the soil with the seed of fear. If you move on ahead, you risk stepping on the little desert ants, and you can't do that. Ants are good for the ecosystem.

Mira.

What?

You said we should never ask the backroom about anything.

So? This is Lucero we're talking about!

Maybe the adults can fix it?

They don't even believe in the witches! You know that!

Nico knew. Jayde interjected.

Let's go look at the bulletin board! Maybe there's already news about it!

Mira knew there would be nothing there, but if it got them closer to the back room, she'd take it. *Fine. Let's go take a look. Sheet up!*

They walked in a line of three, shoulder to shoulder. Their eyes avoiding the station as they passed it. This time you made your way across the dirt road, onto the railway, your feet going one in front of the other, walking a tight rope along the tracks. This way you won't be stepping on any desert ants.

The Post Office was lit with a streetlamp, one of three in town, and it needed it. The Chevron across the street was illuminating enough that it cast a shadow onto everything outside its halo radius. The price of \$3.07 Premium could be seen throughout the entire town.

As you sit on the railway it's warm, the friction from its previous train crossing had yet to fade with the night freeze. The children look like little dots under the yellow glow of the streetlight. Jayde is on her tippy toes. It seems like she's trying to face plant into the bulletin board, but really, she's just squinty at it real close. Jayde needs glasses but her mom and teacher have yet to figure that out. There was nothing posted about Lucero. You watch Mira, she's not even trying to read the bulletin board. She had guessed as much. Her sheet hung loosely over her body, the grey color of it looking pale and sick like the morning skies in Tacna. Nico. You see

him peeking through the Post Office's boarded-up blinds. Mira was speaking to Jayde about the bulletin board, her hand gestures gave her away, but you couldn't hear her from your position across the road, but you did hear Nico's scream.

His body ricocheted away from the boarded window, his sheet slipping off and his body shrinking as if wounded. He looked through the blinds of the abandoned half Post Office, a curiosity he had always had, a feeling to do what one is not supposed to. Today he lost that battle.

You see Mira run towards him. Her sheet is also off. Everyone's sheets are off. You stand up. You walk closer to them. Get prepared to run. There's a pair of eyes still staring through the blinds, they are bulging through the gap, strained and dried as if they've never closed once in their life. They don't affect you. Nothing does. Your existence is non-consequential. You wield your freedom more as an excuse than as a weapon. You keep coming closer. Mira has her back to them, shielding Nico, but Mira doesn't need her eyes to see, with the back of her head she sees it seeing her. Chills run down her spine, you can't see her goosebumps, but you can feel them. Its pupils shift, they're now looking at Jayde, but Jayde's squinty eyes save her from that sight.

You've reached the Post Office. You stand by the bulletin board. In front of you, past the Post Office and the children, you can see the safe zone of Chevron's glow, like a beacon, behind you the train station and its urinated backroom looms. You suddenly have a bloom of light coming behind you, if you had a shadow, it would have splattered itself all over the little desert ants, but luckily you don't.

Mira's head snaps towards you, no not you, towards the light behind you. Jayde is still squinting, Nico is cowering, but Mira is seeing. The blinking lights are here. She screams and pulls Jayde down with her. The witch flies over them. Her headlights flushing over them as her

lights sweep in low. Mira is trying to blink away the light. The desert ants scramble on the ground, their protection gone. Nico starts running. Jayde follows Nico, you follow Mira.

You see Nico and Jayde make a run to Chevron in one piece, but you ignore them. Mira is your vehicle for this town. You step into her shadow. There's no way of her getting away from you now. Mira runs towards the train station. She feels like a small rodent in a town of owls. The headlights are blinding behind her. For the first time after arriving in this town, you feel afraid of what's going to happen next, but don't worry, she's afraid too.

Mira is running towards the desert, trying to cross the train tracks and make it into the darkness of the sand dunes. She survived hiding in the desert's darkness, she thinks she can do it again. Unfortunately, you can see that her sheet that's bunched up in her fists is spilling over her feet. She steps on it; her body falls forward and the witch swoops in. You stand there at Mira's feet and watch her roll onto her side, her knees are bloody, small pebbles are stuck to her skin and you see her eyebrows arch in pain and surprise as she attempts to cross the train tracks. The witch dips in low again and grabs her foot. Mira is lifted into the air and for a moment you hover, before dropping back onto your feet. Mira had stabbed the witch. Her pen from her back pocket is now embedded in between the witch's webbed hands. Mira's eleven-year-old body dropped onto the ground. Quickly she reaches for her sheet and crawls underneath it. You're standing over her curled figure, her sheet looking more like the Mohave Mountain than the tinfoil gray she had been. You watch her lay there like a rock, her body becoming part of the desert the beginnings of a small mountain, sprouting out from an anthill, while the witch flies around in disarray.

Witches are fragile creatures, not very adept at facing hardships and pain. This witch in particular with her blue-eyed veins hates pain. She backs her broom up, over the dirt road and the train tracks, her headlights flash, casting shadows onto Mount Mira. Their blinker is accidentally turned on, something only used when flying in the sky. The blinking is used for traffic purposes. Can't have witches head-butting broomstick to broomstick while flying late at night. The witch can see you. Its blinking light catches you; engulfs you and forces you outside of Mira's shadow, onto the dirt road, into yourself, but before your shadow can grow and spring out from your backbone like wings, the train comes. Splat goes the witch.

You enter the station's back-room first, Mira follows. She won't let you stand behind her anymore, when you try, she whirls around, her sheet billowing in the wind. She can feel someone behind her. The blinking lights have now marked you. You've become a witness, but your existence is still inconsequential, you force it that way. You've taken the role of visitor, observer, you've stalked Mira this whole time. You excuse yourself through your privilege. You are just you. What can you do but watch; and you do just that. You stand by the corner of the room and watch her walk in. Her mind is still boggled by the sound of the train and the sound of a broomstick snapping. She focuses on the smell of piss instead, it's familiar to her as it reminds her of the time her father got so drunk at home, he missed aiming at the toilet bowl. She goes in and aims for the patch of the wall the moon reaches with her light and flashes her friend's flashlight on the wall. She used one of many cigarette buds that lined the unkempt station's grounds, her pen having died with the witch. With its ashes and leftover tobacco, she scribbled on it. Her head dizzy. Mira has visited the wall once. She had asked why the adults couldn't see

the witches, why they didn't believe. It responded that they believed in something worse. Something that didn't just hide in the night. She hadn't liked that answer. She couldn't understand it. The wall did not have the reputation of being specific, just unpleasant.

Behind her, you watch her sketch onto the wall in black ash. *Where is Lucero?* The words form and stare back at her the same way they stare back at you, and then, they disappear. You look at these words, but you don't understand the meaning. You, who stands off in the distance, the visitor, the spectator, the one who can't tell the difference between starlight or a witch's headlights, you will never really know what the words mean, but as Mira's observer you know one thing. That the words printed on the wall were not the answer she wanted. Did they mean Tacna, did it mean Texas, or worse did it mean home where all desert walkers originate from? Did they mean death? Isolation? Cages? You don't know.

In the moonlight shrouded with her gray sheet, all dusted out, Mira steps out from the backroom, her knees bleeding red dots onto her sheet, and as you watch her walking home, her shadow stretching out, her as the starting point and you as the end; she looks wrapped in tinfoil, invisible in moonlight by its protection. The ground underneath you is reflecting off red siren lights, and you watch them stretch out from underneath you, but they don't reach Mira, they can't, not with her blanket hiding her. You tear your gaze away from Mira and look behind you. There's a storm of red and blue lights heading towards the train tracks.

El Golfo

The gulf was rowdy today. It'd been windy all day, and although the wind had settled by the time night rolled in with the tide, the air remained sticky and salty. Dad led me into the front yard, his junk yard of cars and parts, all haphazardly stacked on top cement blocks, old tires stacked around the premises of the house in a makeshift rubber fence. "Look in son." I did, his grip firm on the back of my neck. His nails were digging in.

"What am I looking at?" The trunk of his yellow Camaro was up, a flashlight in his free hand, shining at what was the underneath compartment of the trunk, where the spare tire usually laid dormant in until anything between a minor inconvenience to a great tragedy happened to the car. But no spare tire laid there, only a large shoe box, pressed flat to fit into the spare tire compartment.

"Open it." I did.

"See that." His voice was proud, "It's seal skin." His hand on my neck twitched, and a new set of nail marks began to bloom. I touched it. It was smooth, the small layer of fur on it soft and sleek, an oily color of grey. "It was your mom's," I looked up at his face shrouded by the flashlight, the shadows on his face elongating his smile into a thick line running ear to ear.

"What do mean hers'?"

"I told you que la pesque." The smile on his face grew thicker, "lured her out with some treats, her kind love those small little things... um krill, yeah." He scratched the back of his head, the light source titling up into the sky and shaking from side to side, like an SOS sign, like his memory had grown foggier over the years of being married.

"Must have been difficult." I kept my palm pressed firmly on mom's seal coat, thinking of all those mornings when I was little where she'd bring me outside to the front yard, put the hose out into the kiddie pool and lay in it with me, my spiderman toy in hand, and we'd sit there, simmering in my mom's small imitation of the ocean, among dad's junk yard of hidden horrors.

"Nah, I got lucky really. Tu madre no era el pes más inteligente del mar." He chuckled a little at his own joke. "It was around December, and it seemed like it was her first time coming up so close to a human inhabited shore. She'd been injured by a fishing boat and ended up fleeing to land. I saw the whole thing. Her skin molting like a lizard, her eyes big and wide, using her new hands to pull out the hook that had got itself on her tail. I thought she'd pull her skin back on right after she took off the hook, but instead she stood up, tried on her land legs. It was obvious that she wasn't used to the land, heck I'm pretty sure that had been her first time molting her skin." He elbowed my sides winking, laughing, "I guess I was her first."

I avoided his eyes as he looked at me and looked behind him, staring at the tire fence.

"Threw some krill at her, luring her away from her coat long enough for me to swift in and take it." He sighed, a sudden serious tone in his voice. "Let me tell you, it wasn't easy getting her used to being on land. Tried to run away on me a few times too, but apparently, she can't swim without her coat, and that hook had injured her foot, making her slower in learning how to use her land legs." He pulled my hand away from mom's skin and closed the shoe box, putting the trunk over it again. "She wouldn't stop nagging me about making you a water crib." He looked at me, his eyes sunken in by the shadows left behind by the flashlight that was still pointing downwards. "Of course, not with her words. Your mom was never a woman of many

words, but...well you know how she is." He pointed at the fence. "She even stole one of these, put a tarp over it, covered you in a blanket and took you out into sea." He closed the trunk and looked out into the skyline scattered with stars. "She gave your grandma a fright. People thought she was trying to Moses you out into sea." He laughed again, his tone filled with fondness, something I rarely remember him sounding like.

"Why are you telling me this?" I stared at the skyline as well.

"Because you're a man now, un real hombre." I'm fifteen. "And your old man isn't going to get any younger and it's time you started learning the family trade and secrets. I'll probably be the first to leave this earth and your mom needs lots of taking care of. She's a stubborn lady. So, make sure you keep this a secret between you and me. If you give her so much as an inch, well, she'll take the yard stick and hit you over the head with it." He scratched the back of his head, his messy hair covering a bald spot formed from an old scar. The distant memory of him covering a bloody wound on the back of his head with his hand, while I hid underneath the dining table flashed into mind. I could still hear the distant echo of mom screaming around the house as dad held onto his wound as she frantically searched the house, looking for something, and dad laughing saying that it's not here, that he threw it away a long time ago. "So," he put his arm over my shoulders shaking the memory of the past away, his flashlight shining towards the house, "Hijo mio, cuida de tu mama. It's your turn to watch over her and your sister. Got it?"

I hesitated for a moment, keeping my gaze fixed downwards. I hated his talks about dying, this wasn't the first time he mentioned his death, but it was the first time I felt the weight that came with it. I finally looked up, stared into dad's eyes, meeting his gaze eye to eye,

something I'd gotten into the habit of avoiding since I grew as tall as him, looking straight at him was like staring into a mirror. I smiled at him meeting his right dimpled smile with my left dimpled one, "Yeah pa, don't worry about it. I'll take care of them."

I crawled into bed after his confession, rolling Marisol to the side, her small chubby hands clinging to a conch shell I'd gifted her when she was born, the same one I used to carry around the house until I grew more interested in superheroes than the sea. She curled herself into me, reminding me of the times I used to do the same with mom, before I started chasing after dad, before I learned how to fix cars before I started favoring him over her. I cried myself to sleep that night mourning the image of my parents that had just shattered before me.

I woke up to mom humming. She was crawling around my room like she was looking for something underneath the bed and behind my currents. "Ma." I called out to her, and she looked up at me, her eyes bright as her smile and the sudden urge to rush to her and hug her waist like I used to when I was smaller washed over me, but that urge was quickly squashed as she motioned towards Marisol making the "give me here" hand gesture. So, I rolled off the bed, and wrapped Marisol in the blanket she'd hogged all night and gave her over to mom. She held Marisol in her arms, rocking her back and forth. She stood there for a few seconds gently waking up Marisol from her slumber before looking up at me. She pointed at the laundry basket in my room, and I nodded.

She then quickly wisped Marisol into the kitchen, sitting her on her baby seat on the table, some porridge ready for her to eat. Mom was different when it came to caring for her children than other parents. She often leaves Marisol on her own, going off to clean or run

errands for hours, and coming back only when food was ready. She'd done the same to me as a child, but I had been a clingy one. The moment I could walk I remember chasing after her, crying, and begging to go wherever she went. She had been very distressed by this. Back then I didn't have anyone else to cling to. According to dad, Grandma had taken care of me for the most part when I was a baby, but she'd passed before I could form any real meaningful memories of her. Now, Marisol had me. She clung to me more than she did mom.

"Ma, I'm going outside to do laundry." I slung the laundry basket over my shoulders. "Come get me when Marisol is done eating okay? Ma?" She waved me off, engrossed in feeding her baby, but her gesture told me she was at least listening to what I said. She had the habit of leaving Marisol on the kitchen floor once she was done feeding her, letting her crawl her way through the house. We had lost her twice already. Once by her crawling her way underneath the living room couch and falling asleep there, and the other time she had crawl her way out of the house and got lost in dad's scrap metal yard for two hours. It wouldn't have taken so long to find her if Marisol was like other children who cried when hungry or distressed, but she took after mom. She was quiet. I wonder if I was the same as a baby. If it was something you could grow out of.

When I went back to the house leaving the washing machine running, I found Marisol on the floor, crawling around mom's legs as she sat at the kitchen table eating a bowl of raw fish. I sighed and picked her up. Her onesie was stained with white smudges, her bottle of formula milk was mostly empty this time. I leaned in and kissed mom on her forehead. "Gracias ma. You fed her well."

"Vieja, where's my brown belt? I can't find it." Dad walked into the kitchen from the hallway. He was well shaven today. "Ahh, hola mi niña." He leaned in and squeezed Marisol's cheeks, affectionately calling her his little princess in a baby voice. "Lola, where's my belt?" Dad approached mom, and I took a step back with Marisol. Mom didn't respond, too engrossed in her breakfast like usual. "Ey, I'm calling your name." Dad reached in and yanked her bowl away from her, raising it up above her head. "Where's my belt?" Mom jumped up, a deep upset sound coming deep from her throat, as she looked up at her bowl. "Nah, uh. Go get my brown belt and you can have it." Dad balanced the bowl above both their heads, pulling further way from mom as she reached up, but mom was shorter than him by five inches. After a few seconds of struggle, she gave up and made her way to their bedroom to find his belt. Her gait had a slight limp to it.

"Take it." I exchanged Marisol with mom's breakfast bowl. Dad rocked her in his arms, mimicking the rhythm of waves as he made a smooth swoosh sound. "When I'm gone, make sure your mom doesn't slack off okay. I know you like helping her around the house, and I'm proud of you for helping your mom out, but she's a big girl, she can do these things if you just incentivize her to, okay?" I stared at mom's bowl. The fish's belly was open and still bleeding. It had been a fresh catch. Its eyes were cloudy and dim. I tried to see my reflection in them, wondering if I stared long enough if I'd be able to find myself in the storm cloud of its eyes. "Hey, you are listening." I kept my gaze down.

Dad lifted my head up by the chin, his nails still long and sharp scrapping my skin as he stared at me at eye level. "Yeah. I got it pa."

Marisol squealed as she paddled her way around the kiddy pool. Mom paddled along with her in place, laughing, and playing in the water. I wonder how much more fun she'd have if I took her to the ocean. It wasn't far. We lived a few minutes away from the Malecon, and the beach was right next to that. It wasn't tourist season yet either, the cold was still clinging to the ocean air. There would be plenty of space for her to run around and throw herself against the crashing waves. While she and Marisol played, I could watch from afar, buy un coctel de elote, and enjoy the scenery.

"Miguel, pon atención." I turned back to the work bench. "Hand me the torque wrench over there." I did. "Now pay close attention. You'll need to know how to do this in the future." I watched dad with his oily, calloused hands trying to tighten the bolt with his wrench, his hands shaking in the process. In between his grunts of strength in trying to tighten the bolt with shaky hands, I could hear Marisol's little giggles and mom's laughter. I looked away from dad's mechanic lessons and watched Marisol making water bubbles with mom.

Marisol looked like a mini version of her. Her hair was a dusty brown, and they both had deep dark eyes like giant pools of calm water and a small face with big features. The only thing that differed between the two was that mom's skin was sun skinned brown, and Marisol's was more like mine, the shade of beach sand after a rainstorm.

"Miguel." Dad hit me upside the head, the slap stung more from the surprise of it than the actual force. "I need you to pay attention." His voice was gradually getting louder and sterner. "You're the heir of everything in this yard." He gestured around, at the cars stacked up on cinder blocks, at the tire fence, of the motor oil-stained ground at my feet, at the house, at the kiddy

pool, at everything, all of it. "I need you to care about this. I need you to listen to me." He wasn't yelling, but he didn't have to, the tone of his voice was tense, I could hear the grinding of his teeth. He was using his command voice, his voice of authority, the voice he often used on mom, and it was enough to make me feel small. "I won't always be here. You know that. You know my time is short, you know-" His gaze flashed up above my head. "Ey! ¡Quítense de ahí! ¡VAYASEN!" He raised his hand, the wrench gripped in it, swinging his forearm as he stood up from his work bench, his gaze heated aimed over my head.

"Hey, Don Felipe! ¡Está bien buena su esposa!" It was the neighbor's kids, two older kids, a few years ahead of me in school. They were whistling, staring at mom in her bathing suit, laughing. Dad's face was red. He hated others ogling his wife. She looked younger than him, and it often caught the attention of people. I was used to it by now, and by now everyone in town knew her as Don Felipe's beautiful wife, the princess and the ogre. But they usually just stared and kept their distance, mom was strange enough, different enough that no one got too close to her. She was skittish around most people anyways, avoiding being touched, no handshakes or hugs ever returned.

"Leave right now!" Dad stumbled trying to get around me, trying to make his way to the fence and scare off the two boys, his slippery hands dropping the wrench, his forward momentum giving it enough strength that when the handle hit my brow bone the skin broke, and the left side of my vision went red with bursts of pain.

The wrench fell onto the ground and my scream of pain was distracting enough to stall dad in his crusade forward as the two boys dropped down from our fence and ran. I held my hand

up to my brow bone, the pain making me bend over onto the work bench. I could feel dad's shaking arms wrapping around me apologizing for hurting me.

El Malecon was festive and busy as it always is during Spring Break. The influx of visitors from the nearby towns that were just slightly off the coast always came rushing in, with soars of beach towels, homemade ceviche, and ill-equipped cars for the sandy dunes of el gulfo, but that is what made father's mechanic business boom after the slow lull of the winter months.

"Mijo, look at all those fools." I looked up at the hill of playa Santa Monica, and watched as the lighthouse at its very center was surrounded by 4-wheel motorcycles, trucks big and small, and the occasional brave little Toyota. They all took turns nose diving at full speed down from the top of the hill, trying to drive off the giant hill without flipping to their potential death. It was dangerous and we often had several tourists ending up in ambulance vans, but the assured adrenaline rush kept them coming back to the giant hill. I sat at the base of the lighthouse, watching like always waiting for the right customer to fall into our hands.

Spring Break and summer were the busiest months for Dad and his mechanic shop. I'd help every year prepping dad's truck with towing equipment, oil cans, and water gallons, so we could pull up to the beach in his pick-up truck and make most of our year's income in the next few months helping the tourists pull their cars out of mud traps from our small costal beach or haul them out of the sea after leaving their cars unattended now knowing how fast the tide moved in during the day. Usually, these cars end up with additional issues and that's when we'd make real the big bucks. Sometimes their tires needed to be rotated after being forced out of a mud trap, the vehicle being left unbalanced, other times sand got into the motor or water made it all the way up into the cockpit of the driver's seat ruining their stereo and navigational system.

Or it could be one of the simpler issues, like the tourist not having checked his oil engine before making the two-hour trek from the city to here, or their car overheating from the summer heat, and they needed a refill to their radiator. This year, I oversaw the talking to the customers, convincing them that they wouldn't get a better price anywhere else in town if not with us. Dad said that half of the job was being a businessman.

I hated doing the talking. I'd prefer it if he had me spend the whole Spring Break and summer with my head stuck inside the hood of a car than having to talk one on one with another person, not to mention that the heat made my facial wound itch like crazy. Dad was the one with charisma in the house. I was more like mom in this regard, awkward, wishing people wouldn't touch me and just leave me alone, but that was about all I had in common with her. Everything else from the hair on my head to my toes screamed my father's influence.

Mom and dad had another fight. This time I was outside when it happened. I was elbows deep into dad's yellow Camaro. He let me work on it as practice before he'd let me work unsupervised on a customer's car. I was checking the transmission when I heard something crash and break from inside the house. I glanced down at Marisol. She had her seashell inside her mouth, she'd started teething a few weeks ago, something I didn't know babies did. I had always thought that our teeth just simply grew in like mine did when I lost my milk teeth and new, stronger ones just popped up in their place. I didn't know that for babies it'd hurt to grow their first baby teeth.

"Ahhh!" I could see mom's outline through the living room window. She was screaming holding what looked like a broom from the outline of its shadow. I picked up Marisol from her

kiddy pool and wrapped her around a towel before putting her up into her baby walker. I had tied bricks to the side of it to make sure she didn't run off on me and tip over amongst the spare car parts around me. Marisol giggled her arms outstretched for me to hold her and dry her off.

"Stop throwing shit around! Sit!" Marisol sneezed into her seashell. I was going to have to go into the house soon, even with the weather outside being warm now, Marisol was still a baby, and I couldn't leave her out here for too long without drying her off properly. She'll end up with a cold.

The door to the house opened and slammed shut. Mom rushed out; her face red with tears. Her and dad's fights weren't abnormal. They were always like clockwork, every March of every year, around the time when the local herd of seals left the coast to migrate north mom would enter a frenzy. Dad always called it her "fight or flight" tantrum, which always ended in a fight. Once again, the image of dad bleeding from the back of head came to mind.

Mom came towards me and picked up Marisol from her baby walker. She rocked her back and forth like she was trying to soothe herself by soothing her baby. I glanced at the Camaro's trunk and then at mom. Dad was still somewhere inside the house, probably taking a shower like he usually did when he was too mad to do anything else. Mom stepped into the kiddy pool, huddled herself up inside, wrapped her arms around Marisol tight and started to cry. Mom's tears were always scary to listen to. She cried like a wounded animal, like there was something inflexible about her vocal cords that always gave way to this guttural echoing sound from deep within her. It hurt to hear her cry and it hurt to see her so vulnerable and injured.

The scar on her right foot was sticking out. It never healed right. The skin was rough and protruded, with jagged edges to it. I used to find it gross looking at her scar, but not anymore.

Her scar reminded me of my own. The eyebrow on my left eye was forever split in half by a giant wound. The stitches were still in it, and I knew that in a few weeks all that would be left would be a deep scar just like the one on mom's foot.

"Mami, it's okay. It's okay." I tried consoling her, suddenly feeling a connection to her that I hadn't felt in a long while, but she kept herself closed off, her cries blocking off my reassurances, and then Marisol started crying. She was crying in that same guttural sound that mom made, but hers was smaller, more high pitched. It shook me to my core listening to both of them crying. I tried to help but nothing was working, and then I started panicking. Marisol's cries turned into coughs, and I wondered if mom was holding her too tight, too lost in her pain to notice her own strength. I tried to pull Marisol away, I tried to call mom's name, but she wasn't listening, instead she pushed me away with her shoulder, shoving me away from her, out of the kiddie pool and into the dirty ground.

For a moment I saw red, just like when the wrench had hit my face, just how dad's hand had risen into the sky, up high ready to go down with all of his powers, I was about to strike her. I was about to do what father always did when she wasn't listening, when she wouldn't stop hurting. I caught myself halfway, with my face red and the palm of my hand closed in a fist above my head. I took a deep breath. I opened the Camaro's trunk, pulled out a worn shoe box and pulled out the seal skin inside of it.

By the time dad had come outside, his hair wet from a cold shower, his clothes fresh and no longer greasy from his day of working in the shop all day, he found me alone with Marisol in my arms, her crying slowly dissipating as I held her seashell in front of her trying to soothe her.

He looked around the yard for a second before asking, "Where's your mother?", followed by a soft breeze coming in from the direction of the ocean.

Family Trip

Rural Sinaloa, Mexico is a 14-hour drive away from the U.S. border with no sleep, and few rest stops in between where you must pay five pesos to go pee in a bathroom with no toilet seat or toilet paper. Mom usually carries her own paper roll during these trips, so I asked her to hand me a handful of paper as I lifted my hand from the stall's metal door, letting it swing back towards me, its broken latch screwed on as decoration. My mom reaches in and hands me the paper and in the background from outside the bathroom stall, I hear my little sister complain. Her little feet tapping impatiently as she waits her turn for the bathroom.

“Hurry up!” Her yell is high-pitched and shrill as she's been holding it in for the past hour like I have. I flush and upon opening the stall door scold her.

“No English.” I hold the door open as she runs in, sticking her tongue out at me, ignoring me. Mom yells at her to pause. She hands her a handful of toilet paper and tells her to listen to her older sister.

“You know the rules. No English once we get to grandmas so start practicing now.” Mom hands me the toilet paper roll and says she'll be waiting outside with our dad and brother. I took the paper and held the bathroom stall door closed. I didn't need to. I could have had my sister hold it close herself, but I rather be the one doing it, keeping an eye out is always necessary.

As I wait as a doorman in this run-down bathroom stall, I think of today's family trip to Grandma's as annoying. I'd rather be back in the U.S in my shared room, on my bunkbed watching TV than sweating through my t-shirt inside a bathroom that has not been cleaned in years, melting in the heat of the desert that's at the precipice of becoming a lush green landscape

in three more hours of driving. On one hand, I'm happy to see grandma again after five years, to taste her pozole and eat Uncle Ramiro's handmade sweetbread and fluffy pizzas, but I hate the heat and stress that comes from the long drive and stays. Mexico is one of my homes, but sometimes it isn't.

"You can let go of the door now." I drop my hand on the door and Maite comes out with a glistening forehead and a necklace made of beads of sweat.

"Mom is going to scold you again if you keep speaking English." We rush out, into the burning sun, where even the hot air feels nice against wet skin.

"Shut up. You're not the boss of me. You can't even pronounce 'Ingles' right." She's sulking now. Her eyebrows are narrowed, and her lips are in a pout. Her words hurt me, but they're not new. I know she's right; my Spanish is the worst out of all of us three siblings, but still. It doesn't make it easy to accept. I pinched her on her forearm. I am still bigger than her, for now, as she seems like she'll soon outgrow me too. She yelps in pain of my pinch and swats at me. Her slaps feel like tiny mosquito bites, and I laugh.

This is going to be her first-time visiting grandma without having to run around in training diapers. I remember our cousins making fun of her for it. She was a late bloomer, still wetting the bed at six years old. She's grown a lot since then, grown enough to start asking questions and not liking the answers to those questions.

In between chuckles, I tell her, "Just don't cry to me when Tonio catches you." She stops slapping me and I can see her tense up at the mention of our older brother, but instead of retorting she runs off, back into our white pick-up truck, complaining to our dad about how much longer it'll take until we arrive at grandma's.

“Six more hours mija.” He smiles at his little girl as he struggles to secure the black tarp over the kitchen sink that’s resting on the truck’s bed. A gift for grandma. His words rang in a heavy accented English, unbothered by it as his Spanish was smooth and unhindered by an American accent like mine was. I often wished I could speak Spanish like him, with a soft-spoken roll of words. Instead, my tongue gets all tangled in my mouth and the sounds don’t roll but tumble off my lips in lopsided shapes.

I go to help with the tarp, taking hold of one side as he takes hold of the other side, trying to pin it down so the wind won’t blow it off while we wait for Tonio to arrive with some sort of solution, and just as I spoke his name in my mind, he appeared next to me, duct tape in hand.

“Here, use this. It’s all they had in the store.” I take it and bite a piece off to secure the tarp before passing it over to Dad.

“Come on let’s go!” Maite stuck her head out from inside the car, the passenger door hanging open, only for her to stick her head back inside at the sight of Tonio. I laugh again. She really was going to get it now, and I knew Tonio was at his wit’s ends too, he even took a deep breath before heading towards the passenger door. From behind the truck, as I helped Dad pull up and close the truck’s tailgate, I could see her shrinking at the rapid-fire scolding from Tonio as to why speaking English so far away from the border was not a good idea.

“Your grandma is going to love this.” I turned around, dad had his hands on his hips, an expression of bliss on his face as he held the most typical dad pose, I had ever seen him in.

“It’s nice,” I said, not knowing what to say. I wasn’t at an age where kitchen furniture excited me like maybe a new video game did.

“This is the start she needs. She won’t have to be outside by the lavadero, hunched over for hours watching dishes only for them to get dirty if a sudden gust of wind kicks up dirt. This is

going to change everything mija. Me and your uncles are going to get that plumbing system finally up and you'll be able to shower with running water by the end of our stay."

Now that sounded exciting to me. The idea of water sprouting from a showerhead instead of using a plastic make-shift Tupperware bowl with the words butter logoed on it to grab water from a bucket to bathe sounded like a great deal to me.

"We're ready to go?" Mom approached us from the store's direction with a bag of chips in hand and a soda bottle.

Dad tapped his hand on the tailgate of the truck. "We sure are."

"Great! It looks like we'll make it before sunset then. Good, I hate going through those dirt roads at night. You can't see anything." Dad reached up to grab the soda from her hands.

"Don't worry. I'm an excellent driver." Mom sighed at Dad's relaxed mood. She had always been a nervous driver, passenger, person around cars, and long road trips in general. It was something about long stretches of road and the endlessness of a road that just keeps going straight with no end that just didn't sit right with her, or maybe it was the claustrophobia of being inside a car, cramped up with four others, or maybe being in motion at high speeds was what made her so nervous. I didn't quite understand her fear of driving or being on the road, but back then I hadn't bothered to understand her fear either.

On mom's command, we all huddled into our white truck and headed out, back onto the road. Mom counting 1, 2, 3, as each of us entered the car, taking count of all of us before heading out, like a chaperon on a school field trip.

For the first hour of the drive Maite played games on her phone in silence, sulking yet again from Tonio's scolding and I fell asleep on Tonio's shoulder. He put a pillow in between me and his shoulder so my neck wouldn't hurt while sleeping, or maybe it was because he didn't

like it when I drooled all over him. I think it was because of the drool. Either way, I was glad for it. Tonio always knew how to play his big brother's role. He and I were closest in age, one year and 4 months apart, while Maite had about a 4 to 5 age gap between us. From my earliest memories, I remember Tonio being by my side.

I remember when Mom went into labor with Maite. Dad had been scrambling about the place, rushing to take her to the hospital. We were left in the house with our Uncle Luis, who promptly passed out, beer in hand as Rubi played on the TV as I sat on the floor, my blankie in hand, as Tonio fed me microwaved hot dogs he had cut into little pieces with a butter knife. Since that day that is the only meal, he knows how to make, that and cereal. However, we did get into a serious fight once about what went first, the cereal or the milk. He was a strong cereal-first, milk-second kind of guy, and I, as his little sister, it was my job to show him a challenge and I stood my ground that milk first and cereal second was the right and only way, even though, secretly, I used to put in my cereal first and my milk second when he wasn't home. I don't do that anymore.

"Jasmine, pass me the chips." I removed myself from Tonio's shoulder and reached for the chip bag that had already been opened and left at my feet, probably from Tonio. I took them into my hands and raised them towards Maite, and as she reached for them, I pulled them out of reach. "Now ask again, but this time in Spanish."

She did not like that. She started to scream at me to give her the bag and that it wasn't fair that I was holding them from her. I yelled back. Despite being older, I never seemed to fail to stoop down to her level whenever we fought. "It's not fair!" She yelled at me.

I yelled back, "You mean, no es justo!" And we went back and forth in this screaming matching, Tonio trying to intervene at first, as the civil eldest sibling only to also be reduced to

Maite's age of maturity, trying to reach for the chip bag as well. Yelling that none of us could have it now and that he'll eat all of it because none of us deserved it now. And Maite bit his hand as he took the bag from me, while I stepped on his toes, the two sisters ganging up on the brother. By the end of it, we were laughing more than fighting, until Dad yelled from the front seat. Mom holding her head in her hands. The stress from the ride plus a noisy car probably wasn't doing well for her nerves.

“Stop fighting! You're siblings, you're supposed to take care of each other not fight each other, especially you Tonio! You're the oldest and I expect you to protect your sisters and be a good example.” We all quieted. Dad was the soft-spoken kind, not the yelling kind, but in the rare instances he scolded us we knew he meant business. “Now look at your mother. She's not feeling well and you're not making it better. Just sit still and look out the window. Look at how beautiful it is outside. These are the mountains and hills I used to walk through as a boy. Be more respectful.”

I looked out the window. We weren't even in the green areas yet; the strips of land where mango trees grew taller than two-story buildings and the branches dripped from the weight of their fruit. No, we were still in the brassy, desert area that held a burning sun that seemed to blur like a mirage over the landscape. I could see spots of green here and there, but it was nothing like the green and humid weather at Grandmas. We still had five more hours to go before we arrived and I could already imagine myself stealing mangos from my grandma's neighbor's tree with my cousins, making make-shift slingshots with a cut in half 2-liter coke bottle, a balloon, and a rubber band, using rocks as ammo, until we'd break a window.

We rode in this silence for another hour, the desert still painting my passenger window, showing more and more signs of life as we approached further south. The sound of crunchy

chips being eaten filled the car's inner compartment as we, silently and anonymously, decided to share the chips amongst ourselves as if our previous fight hadn't happened at all. My hand was practically at the bottom of the bag when our truck suddenly slowed down onto the side of the road. I saw Dad put the car in park mode, and before I could ask what was happening, he spoke up first. "Everyone, stay quiet."

I could see red and blue lights reflecting off the review mirror behind us.

"¿Cómo le puedo ayudar oficial?" The car was devoid of sound except for my dad's soothing Sinaloense accent booming through asking the officer how he could help him. The hairs on my arms stood up. I stared at the police officer at the driver's window, his badge bright in the sun's rays and his sunglasses reflecting out into the car, blinding me momentarily as he glanced into the car, making eye contact with me, briefly, as he scanned each of us and then glanced at the truck's bed. I turned, following the man's easy-going smile looking through the back window. I noticed the black tarp had been blown over on one side, the duct tape still sticking to the tarp but not the truck's bed, folded onto itself and exposing the kitchen sink for all to see.

"Yo y mi compañeros," the officer motioned to his partners standing next to him, AK-47s in each hand, their faces covered in ski masks, their police officer badges also gleaming in the hot sun. They stood behind him in a form akin to that of a soldier, ready for action. "Nos dimos cuenta de que diste una vuelta ilegal hace un kilómetro atrás." He glanced at our kitchen sink again with a smile. He said we had made an illegal turn, we hadn't made a turn at all, and in that moment, when that realization hit me, I felt my heartbeat drop to my stomach, effectively growing a pulse inside my intestines. A steady beat of stress.

“Ahí, lo siento oficial, es que estoy apurado a llegar a la casa de mi mama.” The cop nodded, smiling, at my dad’s non-refusal of his clear lie. Here lay a man who understood what was happening right now.

“Lo entiendo señor, pero esto es mi trabajo. No lo puedo dejar ir, así como si nada paso. Lamentablemente voy a tener que llevar me su caro a la comisaría.” I could hear the smile in his words, and I could feel my mom’s sharp intake of air from the seat in front of me and I could almost feel my brother’s jaw set at the implications of that last sentence. Were we really about to lose the car and everything with it to them?

“Sí, entiendo oficial, no quisiera ser un estorbo, pero porque no resolvemos esto entre los dos. Es que no quiero llegar tarde a la casa de mi mama.” Dad motioned to Mom’s purse that laid on her lap. I had never seen dad look so nervous. His hand, the one pointing, shook, I could see it as it floated in mid-air in front of the stereo before he dropped it, on what I assumed was mom’s lap to hold steady. The officer slowly removed his sunglasses, as if he was mauling over what had just been suggested. But he seemed convinced that anyone who could afford a kitchen sink like the one in the back of our truck would have money on hand, lots of it. Mom started pulling out Mexican dollar bills. I could see a couple of pink ones being held out; each was worth 50 pesos. She pulled out 6 of them.

“Dad.” My sister half-whispered, scared, in English.

The smile on the officer’s face faded away into a tight line, his eyes narrowing. He stared at us in the back seat, his eyes the color of watered mountain soil.

“Dad,” this time Maite spoke louder, “what’s going on?” Again, in English.

The officer gestured towards Dad, an eye on Maite. “Den me la registraci3n del carro, por favor.” He added ‘please’ at the end of his sentence as a decorative piece. His voice now held a different kind of edge to it.

My mom opened the glove department, her fingers tight and ridged as I saw her pass the car registration to the officer. The officer simply glanced at it, “americanos.”

“No, somos mexicanos, cada uno de mis ni1os es nacido aqu3.” My dad clarified, but the officer hadn’t said it as a question.

“S3lganse del carro.”

“Pero oficial...” My dad’s voice cracked for the first time since the confrontation.

“Dije que se salgan del carro.” His partners were now pointing their guns at us.

We got out and they lined us up at the side of the truck, facing the road. I held my sister’s hand and my brother held mine. The unmasked officer walked up and down in front of us. He paused in front of Maite first.

“¿A ver dime ni1a, me entiendes?” Maite nodded at his words, her small hand shaking in my fist. “Muy bien. Ahora dime en espa1ol lo que le cavas de decir a tu papa.” He was asking her to repeat herself in Spanish. The ‘I told you so’ stuck in my throat like a hot piece of coal I wish I could throw away and never look at again.

Maite glanced at me, and I squeezed her hand three times, hoping it gave her the strength I lacked right now. “Dije, papa, que esta pasando.”

The police officer smiled and looked at Dad with a look of approval. He knelt in front of her and pinched her left cheek. “Tengo una ni1a de tu misma edad en la casa. Es la luz de mis ojos. ¿Cu3al es tu nombre chiquita?” He asked for her name.

“Maite.” Her voice was cracking, I could see the floodgates in her eyes pushing for release as she kept glancing back and forth between me and the officer.

He caught onto her glances, and approached me, “¿Cuál es tu nombre?”

“Jasmin.” I didn’t look at his face, instead, I stared at the ground, where the brown dirt met the concert road, but I could feel him looking down upon me and I felt self-conscious, as if he could see down my T-shirt. Afraid that if I looked him in the eyes I'd be met with the barrel of a gun.

“¿También hablas inglés?” I nodded my yes. “Di algo en inglés,”

I didn’t say anything. The steady heartbeat inside my stomach was too loud, reverberating into my ears. The desert heat cooking the top of my head. I couldn’t hear or feel myself think not even in the English he wanted me to speak.

He moved closer to me, his size intimidating, asking me if I was deaf, but I couldn’t speak out. His feet shuffled against the grainy sand. He touched my shoulder and I felt myself break.

“Please don’t hurt us.” I gasped out, as if my words had been the oxygen I'd been holding in.

He closed his eyes, as if ridding himself of one sense would give him a sixth sense of language. He complimented me on my accent. Very American he said. His hand moved into my hair, brushing it behind my ears. “Sabes que yo tome clases de inglés en la prepa.” He smiled at me. “Pero nunca se me pego el inglés. Soy muy bruto para la escuela, y pues el sueño americano nunca se me hizo.” He looked at dad and gave him a thumbs up, saying he did a good job with my education. He looked back at me. “¿Ahora, di me lo en español?”

Per his request, I repeated what I said to him in English in Spanish as clearly as I could. rolling my R’s the best I could, but my words dragged themselves out of me on their knees and,

barely making it over my uneven teeth, getting stuck on my lips, and until finally they jumped off into suicide, with me butchering my Spanish.

He sighed, disappointed at my poor pronunciation. His face turning into a frown, looking into my eyes, leaning in, and I leaned backward on impulse, my back hitting the side of the truck. He looked into my eyes, and I noticed how dry his were compared to how mine felt, like I was drowning on the precipice of tears. “Prométeme que vas a aprender el español bien.” He leaned in more, wanted to, but Tonio stopped him, placed a hand on the man’s chest, and glared at him, a look I had never seen my brother wear. The police officer laughed, stepping back. He patted my shoulder and smiled.

He then walked up again and looked at my dad. They shared a look, one that I’ll never be able to understand, that I don’t think I’d want to understand. “Los niños no.” He told him.

The officer nodded, seeming to respect that. He took Dad and Tonio, because Tonio was already a man, a 16-year-old man. As he led them away, I locked eyes with my brother as he removed himself from beside me, letting go of my hand, only for me to reach out again, failing to reach him. His brown eyes the color of dry beach sand, quietly burning in the heat as he gave me one last look. They were led into the bush of the mountains, away from us and the road. Into the Sierra, where a heat wave blurred my perception of distance and space. The policeman led with one of his armed, masked officers following behind them. We stood there, the three girls of the house, staring at the last masked man, his finger close to the trigger, watching us.

Cars passed us by, but none slowed down, not even as my sister pleaded with her eyes, and I screamed with a closed throat and beating intestines for help. But I couldn’t be mad, or cast blame because if I was them, in the safety of a car, with my family, passing by at 65 miles per hour, I’d too pass by myself.

As we waited, my hands grew sweaty, and I could feel beads of sweat rolling down my back. The armpits of my t-shirt were probably soaked in sweat, and I glanced up at the sky for a moment, my brother's silent burning eyes and my dad's last words hung in the air around me, sticking to my clothes that now stuck to my skin, reminding me of how I've always hated the humidity in Sinaloa.

After what was almost an hour, we heard gunshots from behind. The wind stood still, and the ground underneath me shook. My mother's back fell onto the truck's metal side, barely keeping her up. My sister jumped and cried, and I bit the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste blood. I let it pool in my mouth, mixing into my saliva, because my stomach was too full of my swelling heart, and I knew drinking blood would have done me no good.

We waited a second eternity underneath the sun after the silence that followed the gunshots, thinking that the man in the black mask must be used to wearing it because I could not see sweat seeping through its material.

"Ya se pueden ir." I turned towards the sound of those words. The two policemen were back, and behind them was Dad, alone. He looked aged, his years of fieldwork catching up to him in that small trek toward the vastness of the mountains. He grew crow's feet at the corner of his red-brimmed eyes and his black hair looked ashen with dust, a bruise forming around a cut on his left temple from what I assumed was from a punch. We all got into the car.

The policeman approached the driver's window, his smile unwavering as my dad took my mom's purse and handed him 4,000 pesos, an equivalent of \$200 U.S. dollars, a month's worth of pay for the average Mexican. As he finished counting the money, he looked at my dad, his smile turning into a stern line. "Que tengan un buen viaje," Dad's cut bleed down his cheek

as he nodded in acknowledgement at his words. The officer almost looked remorseful. He then gestured at me and Maite and waved goodbye.

“Gracias official.” Dad clenched the steering wheel. The officer smiled at that.

When they left, climbing into their small cop car, their patrol lights turning off and leaving burn marks on the concert road, I noticed that their badges no longer shone in the setting sun.

When their cop car finally shrank away from existence the stillness inside the car broke.

Dad cried into his hands and cursed. Mom surprisingly didn't cry; instead, she counted our heads 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2... My little sister wept like the kid she was muttering 'sorry' over and over again in Spanish; and I swallowed the blood that had been pooling inside my mouth, drinking in my own tears, my heart finally having been digested.

After he was done crying, Dad slammed the truck door open and shut, he was headed back into the vastness. I watched him disappear. Mom calling his name out. Scared that he might not come back, or maybe I was the one scared of that as I watched his silhouette undoing, merging into the shadows of the land.

The mountain range was beautiful. The sun painted the sky orange with a tint of red and the mountains poked at it, staining their tips a dark brown. Within that quietness, Dad was back, my brother in his arms. He held him like you would a baby, gently. I got out of the car, my mom bursting into tears seeing Dad return and finally being able to count to three. I pulled open the truck's tailgate, grabbed hold of the tarp that had been falling in the wind this whole time and my dad placed my brother's body underneath it, next to grandma's gift. We tucked him in, and I brushed red soil off his brow crease, and kissed his now muted eyes. I pulled the tarp down, securing both sides this time with double the amount of duct tape.

We arrived at grandma's after dark.