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# Rolodex of Saints: A Collection of Short Stories

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ROLODEX OF SAINTS: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

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ROLODEX OF SAINTS: A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

by

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THESIS

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## Preface

In the fall of 2006, I happened upon an advertisement for a brand new online, bilingual MFA program in creative writing at the University of Texas at El Paso. Having spent the previous 16 years of my life teaching English courses in composition and literature at a small Catholic university in San Antonio, I felt myself, ironically, at a loss in terms of attempting to enter this world. I'd spent years in the classroom focused solely on instruction and assessment and had given little to the kind of writing I fell in love with first before ever deciding to become a teacher. Part of my trepidation came from the fact that I was inordinately busy raising a child, teaching a four/four course load, serving on committees, co-hosting a radio show, and writing book reviews for the local newspaper. The program's features of "online" and "bilingual," however, seemed tailor-made for me. I couldn't ignore the tug of at least attempting it, and so I applied. I was accepted and became part of the first cohort of students who, as I quickly discovered, were as committed as I was, but also as itinerant due mainly to the many demands on our time in our homes and work lives.

Soon I was learning and stretching as I never had in terms of my own writing. There is nothing like a deadline to motivate students sometimes. For me, the motivation came from the work. I wanted to write, to read and to write and to work with my peers on improving as writers. From the very beginning, with the very first courses offered in screenwriting and playwriting, of all things, I felt free to write about what I know. I could hold my own in discussions and in peer review. A poetry course followed. Because in those early years, there were not many course offerings to choose from, my first three courses in the program didn't really focus on the genres I was most interested in (creative nonfiction and, later, short fiction). Even so, the depth in reading and excellent instruction set the imprint for all that would follow.

But then I dropped out. A four-alarm fire ravaged the building which housed the office and lecture halls and writing labs I had inhabited like a second home for over a decade. I was emotionally devastated. Deaths in the family followed, other hardships, illness and life's incessant grind. However, I found I missed the sanctuary of the virtual classroom I had already been enjoying in the program, so I returned to take classes in creative nonfiction and short fiction. Here I found a renewed sense of purpose as a writer, mostly due to the unflinching support of my professors who respected our personal stories and our desire to follow that old advice about writing about what we know.

Distance and time from my subjects have not afforded me the fortitude to press on in creative nonfiction. One professor called my work some of the "most honest," but also "the rawest." And while I accept the words as compliments, I take them, too, as perhaps a warning to tread lightly. As I didn't want to censor myself while still addressing the subjects I am passionate about and want to do right by, I moved with some trepidation to short fiction.

Short stories are what I enjoy reading most. And this movement toward embracing this genre more seriously as the focus of my thesis study, coincided with other events in my life.

I am a Mexican American woman from the border town of Laredo, Texas. As someone who has always loved to read and write, I was anomalous in those classrooms in middle and high school in Laredo. Even in university at the University of Texas in Austin, peers seemed perplexed that I was an English major. Many of these otherwise enlightened students had such a limited view of this part of our world.

I had graduated from high school and started college in the same year that Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* was published. And while she was beginning to blaze a trail with various publications in major anthologies, she is not someone who was part of my

reading experience in school, not even in University. In fact, we didn't study any writers of color, save for a few in a unit on the Harlem Renaissance.

By this time, I'd been having a long love affair with Jewish writers, Saul Bellow, among them. He was born of Russian Jewish parents and was raised in the slums of Montreal. If it isn't patently obvious how it is that a Mexican American girl living on the U.S. Mexico border could develop such an affinity for Bellow and other writers of their respective diasporas, I'll explain here.

From the time I was six months old, until I was an undergraduate, my parents carted my siblings and me to Port Aransas for summer vacation. Port Aransas was a truly wonderful getaway in the 1960s and early 1970s. It was quiet, and life moved gently there. That isn't so any more unfortunately. It's crawling with bikini-ed and shirtless tourists (in stores and restaurants in town, not just on the beach), and even boasts fast-food restaurants. Life moves fast and noisily. I still love the place and still travel there with family every single summer, but I'm glad I have memories of that long-gone idyllic place that I carry with me and long for today.

One of the things I remember best about it is Souvenir City. In those days this was a modest un-air-conditioned shop of cedar wood treasures, straw hats, beach towels and seashell wind chimes. There were floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that lined one back wall in a corner of the store. There they were: used paperback books. They looked and smelled and felt like used paperback books in an un-air-conditioned little seaside souvenir shop. There were also hardback *Reader's Digest* collections and lots of comics. I was always drawn to the paperback books. They promised to me afternoons of escape and adventure. In the late afternoons my sister and I walked along the beach; we shared plot summaries and analyses of the characters of the novels

we were reading that week. She always said that my retellings were so detailed and vivid that strolling aimlessly at sunset, she could envision it all as if it were a movie.

I'd better pause here and interject that, yes, we were allowed to walk along the beach by ourselves. This was a different era. These were the days when Mom could send us to the corner store for a half-gallon of milk knowing that the worst thing that could happen to us was that a dog would bark at us. It was a time when Myspace meant you called dibs on the window seat in the car before you left the house. It was a time when you held up a behemoth Panasonic tape-recorder in front of your transistor radio to tape your favorite song.

One summer on a visit to Souvenir City, I found Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man*. The thin paperback is about a man in a dreadful limbo between war and peace as he awaits being called to active Army service. On the surface that sounds more like a book my brothers would have given up their quarter for. But this was intense drama.

There must have been a Saul Bellow fan living on that island. Though why that person would give up those books to Souvenir City is a mystery to me. Or perhaps it was my destiny to find those books. *Herzog*, *Henderson the Rain King*, and *The Adventures of Augie March* became my own summer romance books. I still have all of the paperbacks. I carried them home like small precious trophies and read and reread them and shared them with my sister.

Fast forward to 1984. I was an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin. Though that is not far from San Antonio or my hometown of Laredo, it may as well have been in Timbuktu. Laredo is an insular world. We are closer to a Mexican city than we are to an American one. The distance up I35 to Austin was a world away.

So this was the '80s—a decade much defamed. But it was an innocent time for me. A good decade. I was an English major. My English teachers in high school were named Cox,

Winters, and Hardy. I had no exposure to Mexican American literature, and though this was the decade of Cisneros (at least from about the mid '80s), I was never assigned a thing to read by a Latino/a author, never mind a Mexican American one.

Those were the days of “What are you?” That was the question I was asked for the first time in my life when I went to university. In Laredo, no one asked. Now everyone was asking. I was desperate to get the answer right. I will spare you the details of my identity crisis. But I will say that I was drawn inexorably again to the writing of, not Sandra Cisneros (I hadn't heard of her yet), but Bellow, the creator of “The Dangling Man” and “The Victim” and all the poor guys who were “other.” I was back there again on the beach re-enacting the scenes of the Jewish man's story, trying to decipher my place in the world, on the brink of the rest of my adult life. The only owner's manual I had were those musty little paperback novels that offered cryptic formulas on ways to survive in a world where the individual is repeatedly besieged by economic, religious, political, or social turmoil and those arbitrary borders and a power hell-bent on forcing us to answer the troubling question “What are you?” So I found my place in the world of a Jewish American man of Russian descent by way of Montreal.

Maybe this is an oversimplification of the real way in which Saul Bellow saved my life. Maybe it's just a tautology formulated in youth: he saved me because he saved me. But it's worth adding that at the core of his novels is the idea that the individual must fight against dehumanization and against the possession of her soul. That's life-saving stuff. In the intervening years, I've read far more widely and more deeply the works of Mexican American authors, but I have found once again a perplexing silence in the literature of the U.S./Mexico border, particularly as I have experienced it.

In 2007 on a trip to various border cities to do research for the radio program I co-host on Texas Public Radio, the seed of this thought took root again. I was investigating true stories about real people affected by the government's decision to erect a border wall. The people in this part of our country were desperate that their stories be told.

In Granjeno, Texas, for instance, major media outlets covered the border wall story, focusing on the fact that just about everyone in the town had fought in a war to defend the United States and that most of these same people were from families who had been in Granjeno for 300 years. Suddenly their backyards were being usurped, their health affected by the dust and debris, noise and chaos of cranes and earthmovers.

The stories haunted me. Here was born my idea for *Pobrecito, Texas*, a fictional town that is an amalgam of border towns where I have lived or visited and that makes up the setting of most of the stories in my thesis collection, *Rolodex of Saints*. The stories also include characters who are from there and who leave to fill the soul-draining voids they experience. Invariably they also return to this place.

“Pobrecito” is a loaded word. I was born and raised on the U.S./Mexico border in Laredo, Texas to a migrant worker mother whose story I have tried to capture in my work about Pobrecito, Texas, a fictional border town with characters who carry the idiosyncrasies, grotesquery and beauty of all that the word connotes. To say “pobrecito” or “pobrecita” about someone, can be a loaded declaration. It is said about someone either pitiful or pitiable. It is said with sympathy that is sincere or self-conscious. It is said to comfort or to condescend. My pobrecitos—as reflections of those I grew up with and live with still today and whose stories are not shared often enough—struggle, but they do survive. The unflinching grotesquery brings the conflict and hard-won resolve of these characters to live, to survive, to matter. Through my

writing, the voices of the pobrecitos can be heard, their stories shared, their dark emotions and diseases eased by the knowledge that in sharing their stories, comprehension and compassion come. Literature did that for me in Laredo when I was a young and lonely pobrecita. I would like nothing better than knowing that my words could diminish the isolation of the border to dissolve away the head-shaking and tongue-clucking pity and condescension, to show that the grotesque characters are like Texas ebony trees growing wild by the river, standing there proudly as if they've always been there and ever will be.

My work for the last several years has focused primarily on the stories of the U.S./Mexico border, a place and a people not adequately represented in literature. My fictional town of Pobrecito, Texas brings to life the woefully underrepresented characters of this place. We hear the echoes of the voices of the pobres, in English and Spanish, in music and in the flora and fauna, the ébanos, the garzas, el rio, the crooked houses and the crooked lives of the place—wild and beautiful in its way.

### **Poetics and Assessment**

The story of the U.S./Mexico border is a difficult one. The Mexican American from the border is not an immigrant, nor is she/he accepted easily as anything but an immigrant—those who also, incredibly, continue to struggle to be accepted or understood.

The denizens of the U.S./Mexico border make up the largest minority group in the United States, a group that is medically underserved, with unrelenting, deplorable health and social conditions, high rates of uninsured citizens, poverty, and inequitable health conditions.

Hollywood's depictions of this place are invariably painted with a broad brush of truncated strokes. It's not unusual to see the Mexican American on television in, by now, stereotyped roles of maids and drug dealers. The nods to breaking the stereotypes are ephemeral and rarely flattering or true to the diversity and mold-breaking and trail-blazing we experience in "real life."

The story really begins in the legendary ancestral home of Aztlán. This term and the broad concept behind it draw together geography, culture, history, biology, authenticity. It represents home before invasion and dispossession.

According to Rafael Pérez Torres, scholar Daniel Cooper Alarcón asks us to consider the place as "both an image of land and a form of discourse, as both text and context" (Pérez Torres 677). It exists as a sort of cultural icon because it is a "more than twice-told story" (Pérez Torres 677). In Cooper Alarcón's words it is also

[A] site where a text has been erased (often incompletely) in order to accommodate a new one, and it is this unique structure of competing yet interwoven narratives that changes the way we think of cultural identity and its representation, as well as enabling an examination of history, cultural identity, ethnicity, literature, and politics in relationship to each other, providing a new vantage point on the relationship of the United States and Mexico at a time when these two nations are intimately linked than ever. (qtd. in Pérez Torres 677)

It is, in fact, what he terms a "palimpsest." In terms of literature, Cooper Alarcón says of Sandra Cisneros' collection of short stories *Woman Hollering Creek*, that this condition is a breaking away from what we might call "the difference within" (qtd. in Pérez Torres 679). He notes that her fiction stresses a shifting sense of the "Mexican" as "intracultural differences are

factored in, and that different forms of privilege... frequently depend on asserting the differences of another person or group as static and inferior” (Cooper Alarcón147). In this way, Cisneros breaks away from the long-held notions of Chicano cultural identity.

In my own work, as it has grown organically from the very first course back in 2007, I have been moved to this same kind of breaking away. Having noted the sometimes discomfiting nature of not quite adhering to expectations and foregone conclusions about being a Mexican American, a Chicana writing nonfiction and fiction, I have found this to be a difficult endeavor. In fact, the very first work I penned in the program was a screenplay about a Quinceañera for the unlikeliest of characters, a boy. In the next course, one on playwriting, the main character of my final project was an educated professional woman who hides from her mother the secret of a dark past and a terminated pregnancy when she is jilted by her lover and knows she must return home to help care for her severely mentally disabled brother. The mother is hiding her own dark secret. Because of what the reader might infer as postpartum depression, the mother abandoned the daughter to the care of a midwife when she was just a toddler.

These are uncomfortable subjects that don’t take up the some-time mantle of my forebears writing about militancy or defiance against the dominant white majority. The conflicts in my own stories in Pobrecito, Texas, in *Rolodex of Saints* are civil wars fought within families. Of course, the deplorable conditions that still exist on the border undergird the stories as well. But at the fore are the other pitched battles with resolutions that are just as elusive.

I have often run into the obstacle of self-censorship over fears of what family, friends and colleagues might think about the subject matter of my work. This is also one reason I abandoned creative nonfiction for a genre that allowed me to create these worlds with some impunity and license. The story of the Mexican American is not just one story. Literature does a better and

better job of offering authentic, diverse depictions. But it seems to me that for a woman writer, the stakes are high. There is much to risk.

Kwame Antony Appiah in *The Ethics of Identity* offers that history and culture might give us “a gendered community where men played at being *sinvergüenza*, women were confined to housework and child rearing, and children did what they were told” (Appiah). He continues:

To create a life...is to interpret the materials that history has given you. Your character, your circumstances, your psychological constitution, including the beliefs and preferences generated by the interaction of your innate endowments and your experience: all these need to be taken into account in shaping a life. They are not constraints on that shaping; they are its materials. As we come to maturity, the identities we make, our individualities, are interpretive responses to our talents and disabilities, and the changing social semantic and material contexts we enter at birth; and we develop our identities dialectically with our capacities and circumstances, because the latter are in part the product of what our identities lead us to do. A person’s shaping of her life flows from her beliefs and from a set of values, tastes and dispositions of sensibility, all of these influenced by various forms of social identity: let us call these together a person’s ethical self. (Appiah 163).

Alfred Arteaga’s theoretical considerations likewise cultivate a sense of Chicano subjectivity. His work points to a theoretical framework by which to understand Chicano “cultural production,” what Homi Bhabha associates with a third space in relation to postcolonial situations. This is similar to Gloria Anzaldúa’s Coatlicue state, named for the Aztec goddess who represents conflicting identities. She gives life and brings death. Anzaldúa uses the Coatlicue

state to articulate this same identity conflict experienced by Latinas more generally and Mexican Americans or Chicanas more specifically for purposes of this preface. She writes that the Coatlicue State “simultaneously represents duality in life—and a third perspective—something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality” (Anzaldúa 68). She surmises that to be in the Coatlicue State is to be on the verge of experiencing something life-altering. Individuals who reside in lands where their family's culture is not that of the dominant culture, often experience an identity crisis between the various cultures of their life (Anzaldúa 68). Arteaga likewise explains this “racial and cultural hybridity imbricated in Chicano cultural and critical production” (11).

Focusing even more acutely on the border itself, José David Saldívar argues more forcefully than all this that border discourses are the emerging dominant in American studies. His work is inexorably driven by his view that we are embroiled in the inescapable reality of U.S. militarism and what he sees as the government's plans against Mexican and Central American border-crossers. The army, the National Guard, local police departments, and the INS are called on to defend the borders of the U.S. He notes the border as the focus of many academic discussions and points to the distance created then between discourse and the “sociopolitical reality of borders and border-crossers” (qtd.in Pérez Torres 683). He forces a central question for this preface, too: “Has cultural studies...become institutionalized in U.S. academies at the cost of its political edge?” (Saldívar 11). For him, however, the literary and cultural history of the Chicana/o is as yet unwritten and he looks to the writing of contemporary poets, writers and artists to fill the space of the borderlands.

This is just a thumb-nail of Saldívar's far more complicated theories, but I am drawn to his focus on government's control of the border as a trope in my own work for myriad conflicts

and complications. In two stories from the collection, “Attachments” and “Make Over” we see this trope most obviously. These two stories are connected and have recurring characters and setting. In the first story, “Attachments,” Santos, a young boy, is the first-person narrator. The story opens with his description of the men from Homeland Security arriving in their black SUVs and questioning his grandfather about his failure to respond to a letter sent to him by the government and informing him of the imminent and necessary infringement of his property where part of the border wall will be erected. We learn that the boy is living with his grandparents because his mother, a single mother, has been deployed to Iraq where she works as a nurse in a Green Zone. The border now usurped by cranes and earth movers butting up against the property forces us to look at not just other borders throughout the world, but also the borders that we might put up between each other. The grandfather and the boy are generations apart. The story also features a digital camera and Skype and email as modes of communication between the nurse and her family, but it is one that the grandfather is not able to utilize and the communication remains broken between him and everyone else in the family. The boy observes him as a dinosaur of the past who might not be able to fight off the modern world’s nightmarish invasions in spite of the fact that his property has been in his family for 300 years and he himself served in the military and fought wars to defend his country.

In the second story, “Make Over,” Flor, the grandmother in both stories, reads an obituary announcing the death of her first boyfriend in high school. The earthmovers and other machines arrive each morning and her husband angrily counters their movement and noise with his own, using lawnmowers, edgers and aerators as his weapons to fight back. The noise drives Flor out of the house. Professor Daniel Chacón has often referred to Clarissa Pinkola Estés’ “el río bajo el río” in referring to the idea that there is one story that we read on the surface of a work

and another bubbling, surging one just beneath that surface. Here again in this story, the perceived invasion of property is made more unbearable for the Gonzalez family by the noise and pollution of the machines on their property. The machines are faceless, soulless. Underneath that river, however, is another where the husband's need for a kind of revenge with his own cacophonous machines takes as unwitting victim, his own wife who recalls the dead ex-boyfriend with a nostalgia that, it turns out, the husband simply cannot bear.

I am excited to be a loud and persistent voice for the border. I don't imagine I'll ever write stories that are not set in this complicated and wondrous place. Although we can measure it in miles, the border between the United States and Mexico is limitless. The postcolonial criticism of it as Babha notes, "bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order" (qtd. in Pérez-Torres 685). The theorists who study modern and contemporary literature of the border help us realize that ours is an exceedingly complex present and that it just isn't that simple a negotiation to define these studies, and yet it seems undeniable that what they are is inclusive. That's an exciting prospect for those of us just beginning to share our stories about this distinctive place and its people.

## **Framework**

A fictional town in literature is nothing new. The trope has deep roots in such works as Spencer's *The Fairie Queen*, for instance. Garrison Keillor's *Lake Wobegon* is known to radio listeners and movie fans alike. H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, J.K. Rowling and J.R.R. Tolkien continue to thrill new generations of fans with work set in fantastical fictional places.

Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* is arguably the most famous of fictional places for those of us who study modern American literature. This work has been much critiqued for not easily fitting into any one genre—novel or collection of short stories. Many have speculated on the thematic thread that connects stories that except for their common setting, are otherwise mostly disconnected.

*Winesburg, Ohio* is a mixed work, a hybrid of sorts, with alternating narrative modes and can “only be approached with finer instruments than the crude tool kit of genre categories” (Miller). Initially this was the same concern and criticism I had for my collection. That is, as a composite novel or novel in short stories it didn't have enough easily discernible transitions and links. The intersections between the stories were there but perhaps there were far too many competing foci. Murder in a small town was the first focus I undertook for a collection with the working title *Pobrecito, Texas*. This idea also came from those 2007 travels to the border wall. I'd heard a story about the murder of a young girl. I found chilling that everyone in the town must have felt unsafe, knowing the killer was still among them—at church, the supermarket, at PTA meetings, up and down the main road of the town. I wrote thirteen stories for this first collection, but feel the weight of the voids that still exist in telling the whole story. However, what emerged was an unquiet world of characters and their own stories. These are the neighbors and friends and teachers of the murdered girl. Time was not on my side, and I had to shelve the collection for a second manuscript. I did pull a few stories from that earlier manuscript and am revising them to stand alone as short stories outside the context of the collection. These stories, include “Fallout,” “Receding,” “Burning Boy,” “Ardilla and Araña,” “Marina Swallows the Stars,” and “Swept Up.” The connections between the first two stories mentioned here might be

obvious, but the murder is not even introduced until the third story and mentioned only twice more in the subsequent tales.

The characters in these stories seem to want their own stories, and I am listening closely. The composite novel idea returned to me again in a series of thirteen more stories, again set in Pobrecito and focused on an election with an unlikely candidate running for city council. Infused in the loss and yearning of this character are a series of stories about the inhumane conditions of the animal shelter in the town. There are many dog stories in this grouping, but in most cases, the dog figure is metaphorical or merely a vehicle to help us to understand the sins and dark worlds of the characters—the candidates and their families who are suddenly thrust into a smallish, though glaring, spotlight.

Therefore, the process of compiling *Rolodex of Saints*, has rendered three manuscripts, now, and the seedbed of a fourth, and, possibly, a novel about the recurring character of the teacher that seems to be more alter ego than anything else. But she also exists as someone not born in Pobrecito who chooses to live there and is inextricably joined to the other denizens of the place. Moreover, she is someone who guided the girl who is murdered to feeling confident about her abilities and to knowing that she might even escape this place to attend college, a life not many in the town can imagine for themselves. So although the project of the thesis has endured many fits and starts, I'm pleasantly surprised to have the number of stories that I do. This is a testament to the rigors of the program.

Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, is one we referred to a few times in the many courses I took in the program. While it may seem unusual to include this work in a discussion of the story cycle rather than a collection of independent stories and the obvious signposts of a unified composite novel might not be so readily evident, considering this

question might bring us closer to an understanding about how *Rolodex of Saints* can be more readily experienced as a story cycle and not a series of disjointed, disconnected stories that just happen to share a common setting.

Lahiri's work features such a variety of narrative styles, wholly unrelated characters and even locales. In fact the stories feature a transcendence of national boundaries, as some stories are set in the United States and some in India. What does connect the stories, however, are very common motifs related to the subject of communication, isolation, love and familial relationships and more.

Forrest L. Ingram underscores the vexing question of how to build a meaningful story cycle:

Like the moving parts of a mobile, the interconnected parts of some short story cycles seem to shift their positions with relation to the other parts, as the cycle moves forward in its typical pattern of recurrent development. Shifting internal relationships, of course, continually alter the originally perceived pattern of the whole cycle. A cycle's form is elusive. (13)

Susan Garland Mann points to a "simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence" of the stories which make up the whole (17). Of Ingram's notion of tension created by short story cycles between the stand-alone stories and their intrinsic components and the unity of the whole work, Garland writes that "tension is revealed in the way people read cycles" (18).

This same tension is something that might be inherent in ethnic literature, according to Noelle Brada-Williams. She asserts that the author of ethnic literature has a "unique vision" as an individual artist and their work is a "unique representation he or she provides of a community are

often challenged by readers from both within and outside the community being represented as various readers lobby for the value of one representation over another” (Brada-Williams).

This logic puts undue demands on writers for a version of the story of a place or a received culture that is expected or predictable or canned and prohibits their individual experience or telling. Readers expect more “sanitized, more stereotype-affirming, or simply more diverse, representations” (Brada-Williams). She adds that “more readers are aware of the diversity and individuality of any given ethnic group” but also that the “logic of representation implies” that the work must represent “the whole” (Brada-Williams).

Lahiri’s depictions, particularly of second-generation Indian Americans who are frivolous and careless (Shoba and Shukumar in “A Temporary Matter” and Sanjeev and Twinkle in “This Blessed House”), have aroused the most controversy, as have the stories that take place in India with characters as flawed as any that exist in literature (“The Treatment of Bibi Haldar,” “A Real Durwan,” and the title story, “Interpreter of Maladies”).

*Rolodex of Saints* is the collection I am presenting to replace the draft, *Pobrecito, Texas*, but I would argue that it can also be perceived as a story cycle, one with the aforementioned “tension” implicit in ethnic literature. It is also one that doesn’t necessarily give in to the demands of readers who expect the canned, stereotypical stories of Mexican Americans. The elements are there, to be sure, but they are presented in a way I have not encountered in my own reading life.

The notion of “Saints” in the title of my work likely connotes the ubiquitous prayer altar handed down from abuelita. Any mention of the cuisine of this part of the world would have to include the expected tortillas and chiles and guisados. The characters would have to code-switch or speak a kind of Spanglish. Those special legacies are a reality for many of us. But they are

not the main focus of the stories presented here. They are part of an intrinsic backdrop of a border town. This is also true of Pobrecito, Texas.

The loss and yearning of the characters that we see in any short story are here. Mostly they are represented by addiction, disease, obsession, alienation. There is a careful balancing of the range of representations and the stories somehow talk to each other about these same issues, even while they embrace the expected trappings of the border world.

Other Mexican American authors who manage this balancing act include Rolando Hinojosa Smith who created stories out of his Klail City in the 1970s. This work has endured for some four decades. His Belken County world depicted in six novels with diverse narratives, newspaper accounts, testimonials, and interviews has influenced generations of Chicano or Mexican American authors. His work succeeds even as it is composed of such varying elements. Jay Ann Cox writes that he “de-stabilizes the typically American omniscient epic voice, and retains a uniquely Mexican American tone to tell their stories (Cox).

Hinojosa Smith’s protégé, David Rice, sets his stories exclusively in Edcouch, Elsa and Weslaco towns of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. *Crazy Loco* is a collection of nine stories that each deal with family. And although the book has been described as having a “sameness to the voices and writing styles, the stories have a wide emotional range” (McCaffrey) and indeed a universal appeal. Oscar Casares uses the backdrop of Brownsville, Texas to draw the deeply psychological stories of the denizens of that border town in the eponymous *Brownsville* published in 2003.

Chad Hammett offers that the notion of “sense of place” might incite a falling back on this cliché only when a setting of a story “isn’t one of the epicenters of modern civilization” (Hammett) and that authors like Casares don’t take on “big” topics (like an unreturned hammer

in “RG” or losing a favorite bowling ball in “Mrs. Perez”) but that they are “epic” issues in the lives of the characters.

This idea seems true enough. The wars on the border are fought quietly every single day. Part of the reason for those inaudible whispers sometimes comes from the fact that there are not enough stories about the border. Twister Marquiss claims that the Texas literary scene is alive and well, but the border—a place that is the focus of too many news stories underscoring crime and death—has many more dimensions than the borderline sensationalism of evening news sound bites.

More recently, Ito Romo published *The Border is Burning* stories set in San Antonio, but also in my hometown of Laredo, Texas. Although he does employ drugs and guns heavily in these stories, some reviewers have described these violent props as “the perfect antidote to the saccharine-sweet convention of minority fiction” (Saldaña Portillo qtd. in Romo).

This off-handed, blanket criticism might smart, but it tells a hard truth, one I believe Mexican Americans writing today must observe with some measure of acceptance and some level of commitment to tell true stories honestly, to craft them with the utmost care without giving in to euphemism and sanitized renderings of what has always been a painful history for the twice-conquered people who battle a litany of slings daily still.

Moreover, Mexican American authors, specifically those writing about the border, can create an internal and regional history of the Mexican American culture vis-à-vis the border, rather than a history that is imposed from outside this very specific place or from the dominant culture.

In my fictional town of Pobrecito, Texas as in most Texas border towns, everyone speaks Spanish. For some, even for those born on the United States side, Spanish might be their first

language or one they mix with English through code-switching that is as organic and natural as breathing. For me, being bilingual is a very particular kind of blessing. My ear for replicating code-switching, so I've been told, is exact. It stands to reason; such dialogue in my narrative is made up of echoes of my childhood.

The “bilingual” part of this program I first read about in an online advertisement back in the fall of 2006 has certainly been another boon for me. In each of my courses, even with professors who are not themselves fluent in Spanish, I felt free to express myself in both languages, to have my characters do the same.

Writing offers some refuge from reality even while we are well immersed in it while we write. However, those same realities of ethnic prejudice, persecution, isolation, loneliness, addiction, heartache, are deprived of meaning in a society that does not appreciate or allow the mother tongue. I've never set about to pepper my stories with Spanish words arbitrarily. I understand my characters and know exactly what they want to say.

To examine this notion clinically and from a linguistic standpoint, I turn to the studies of William Labov, the sociolinguist I studied as an undergraduate when I minored in linguistics. He found that code-switching occurs among bilingual speakers to “achieve more dramatic effects through personalizing as opposed to objectivizing certain parts of the narrative” (Koike). Linguistics is about describing and not prescribing, and Labov's meticulous data-gathering led him to results that most of us don't give much thought to. In writing it is just this way—natural and organic and never a calculated move. The characters dictate and I am merely the recorder of their words, like La Malinche, a translator.

*Rolodex of Saints* is a collection of stories set in Pobrequito, Texas, a border town. The border can be the bane of life, but also a life-giving source. To be from this side or that one

brings a world of complications not easily resolved. Writing, here, these stories, in this program, has become a symbolic border, one I can cross at will. In writing, I can conquer the linguistic oppression prevalent throughout the history of the Mexican America and speak for the migrant worker, the hoarder, the addict, the autistic, the caregiver, the fathers and mothers and sisters and brothers, the abuelitas, both saintly and dastardly.

I've long admired the work of Flannery O'Connor. "Good Country People" is a particular favorite story. Joy/Hulga, the protagonist of the story, is highly educated and has a doctorate in philosophy, but she is loath to express her emotions. Having lost her leg in a gruesome hunting accident as a young girl, she closes up and closes off any connection with any other human being. Although Manley Pointer, the shyster bible salesman who absconds with her wooden leg and her glasses, taking her very soul that way, is allowed to ply her with hard kisses that do nothing to move her, it is his being able to remove her leg, to see her wound, that makes him somehow special to her, even for that briefest glimmer of a moment.

That is what entices me most to cross that border into writing. I want to be able to keep the wounds close, to protect them and understand them, to feel them and in the darkest moment of all, to reveal them and offer up a bit of my soul.

Everyone wants redemption, and flipping through the *Rolodex of Saints* might redeem readers some time who might feel less alone for hearing their story echoing back to them like a lonely voice from the other side of the bridge, the green waters receding and returning just below.

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## Attachments

I watched from the screen door with my grandmother as the men from the Department of Homeland Security talked to my grandfather in low voices.

“They came because your abuelito didn’t respond to the letter they sent before,” she said. “They came because he threw the letter away. I think they’re going to take our house and put a wall right here.” She put a hand over her mouth. I turned my face and pushed it against the screen to hear the men in their dark blue uniforms. Abuelita scurried into her bedroom and closed the door.

I walked out to where the men stood on the walkway leading up to the house and held my new digital camera up a few inches in front of me. My grandfather came into view, and I zoomed in on his serious face and then down to the men’s legs, the dark blue pants tucked into their black combat boots. The taller man with the brown hair turned when the flash went off. He said something to my grandfather who turned to me and said, “Santos! Stop that!” The blond man said something to his partner and then to me he said, “Son, please delete that.” My grandfather sighed as the man held his hand out toward me for the camera waving his fingers.

“Yes sir, I deleted it already,” I said pulling the camera back behind me. I wasn’t going to give it to them. It was a gift from my mother.

The men talked for another minute more, then turned to leave with a nod and climbed into their big, black Suburban.

I plucked two golden pork rind shells of chicharras stuck on the grayish white bark of the giant sycamore tree that shades the house. I put them where the men had stood and took their picture before the wind blew them off the sidewalk.

Abuelito watched the Suburban kick up dust and gravel and disappear into the distance. He seemed as if he was holding his breath just as long as he could before going in to check on my grandmother. Coming back up the walk, he pulled up some weeds growing around the lavender rosales and the statue of St. Francis holding a small cup that we fill with water so the birds can drink. His face was cracked right around his nose from the time the cat knocked it over, and there was some bird poop on the robe. I took a picture of it.

My grandfather always looks proud; he stands up straight just like a soldier and he is always dressed in work pants and a work shirt that my grandmother irons for him like if he was going out to a dance or something. This time he looked at the agents with that same pride, but as soon as they left, he looked less proud, his back not as straight.

He pulled on the weeds and looked up at the sky as if to decide if rain was coming. Sitting on the porch swing, I tried not to move at all, so as not to bother my abuelo. Only my feet dangled below me.

“Santitos,” Abuelo called to me from the rosebushes. “Where’s Grandma, mi’jo?”

“I think she’s praying,” I said, although I knew that’s exactly where she was.

My grandfather nodded once and put his hands in his pockets. He walked up the five steps to the house and onto the porch pulling on the screen door and letting it slam gently behind him. I knew he was going to make sure Abuelita was okay. After a few minutes, I followed him inside, but the door of their room was still closed. Abuelo sat at the kitchen table and waited.

When Grandma came out of her room after a while she said, “I’m sorry, Gus, I couldn’t stand the sight of those men. They looked like the Marines who came to tell us that Erasmo was dead. I couldn’t look at them for one more second.” She noisily pulled pots and pans from a

cabinet, a knife from the drawer, opened the refrigerator, and took out a white paper-wrapped package.

“No te apures, Flor,” said grandfather. “Don’t worry. Look, the agents said that the men will come tomorrow to survey the land.”

Grandma swung her head around fast to look at him. “Where?” she asked.

“Behind the property. Just beyond the fence line.”

“I don’t trust them.” She unwrapped the package, pulled out a big red steak, and started to cut it into little cubes.

“Let’s see what happens,” said Abuelo. “Maybe they won’t build right away.”

Abuelita didn’t respond, but her busy hands seemed to reassure him that she was getting on with making dinner and that meant she was fine for now. He smoothed her shoulder with his big, brown hand before going out the backdoor to work in the garden.

I looked up at my grandma, and in that light streaming into the kitchen in the late afternoon, I could see the lines on her face and her swollen eyes. I knew she had been crying there alone in her room.

That’s where she kneels on the cold, hard floor every day after breakfast after she washes the dishes. It’s really just a table, but it’s piled high with things. She put some candles there, many candles with the images of the saints, and she lights them every morning and blows them out at night, leaving only one that is really a small lamp that looks like a candle with a teardrop-shaped bulb. The saint candles are tall and skinny like the cardboard roll from the paper towels. I like to turn them around and around to see the sad-eyed saints and read the prayers in English and Spanish. When my grandmother is praying for something special like a sick friend or

someone's safe trip home, or my mom who is a combat nurse in Iraq, she lights a candle. Lately, there are always candles lit.

On the altar there is also a rosary of clear, honey-colored beads that abuelita's grandmother gave her. There are some milagros, some tiny gold things that look like charms for a necklace or little toys for a miniature dollhouse.

She also put some pictures of dead people from our family. Only pictures of dead people go there. Frames, silver or wooden or plastic, make a train curling around the whole table. There is a wedding picture of abuelita's parents in an old black and white photo. They're both looking at the camera, but not smiling. It is the same with the wedding picture of my abuelo's parents. No smile. I asked my grandma how come they're not smiling if it is a wedding picture. She said that people were not used to cameras back then, that they felt uncomfortable when their picture was taken, even on their wedding day.

There are pictures of my grandmother's sisters, Tía Licha who died of cancer and Tía Carmen whose foot was amputated and later she died because of the diabetes. Abuela cleans their faces with the edge of her apron and then wipes her eyes with the back of her hand or two fingers when she stares at them too long.

To see the faces of the dead makes me feel sad, but alive, too.

All of the people in the pictures are older people, except for one. It's the picture of my mom's brother, my Tío Erasmo in his uniform. Like the parents of my grandparents, he is not smiling, but he has a look like he is surprised and proud. He died in Desert Storm before I was born. A prayer card from his funeral is stuck in one corner of the frame and kind of covers up the American flag.

My grandmother has little statues of saints all over the house, but the ones on her altar are of the Virgin Mary in a blue gown, San Antonio carrying a baby, San Juditas, the patron saint of lost causes, and also one of San Martín de Porres. He's black. Abuelita says he's mulatto.

She keeps a little piece of paper there with some words that Padre Miguel said about San Martín in church one morning. Abuelita asked him to write it all down on a piece of paper for her. It says, "All work is sacred no matter how menial." Then he wrote, "Even with a flood of tears I would never wash from my soul the stain that harshness toward the unfortunate would create." I took a picture of the piece of paper.

Abuelita watches the altar like it is a T.V.

After dinner, Abuelito stood looking over the cyclone fence in the backyard. The breeze blew the branches of the naranjos and his long hair, white like paint. Hands in his pockets he stood very straight. Carpintero, our scruffy dog, stood by him looking out through the fence. Grandpa named him that because every time my grandfather is building something, a new roof for the coop, a birdhouse, or repairing something in his workshop for Abuelita, the dog stands by him like he is waiting for something to do to help. Carpintero is not afraid of anything except the thunder that comes in the late afternoon rainstorms of summer when she hides under Abuelito's old Ford pickup.

I waded the chickens into their coop. It is like a small house with chicken wire and a little ramp for them to go up to their nesting boxes where they lay the eggs. It's really easy to get them in there. As soon as the sun goes down, the chickens go in on their own after spending the entire day grousing around for bugs. They climb up the ramp, looking like they have their hands behind their backs and are thinking about something important.

“Check and make sure there are no holes, mi’jo,” said Abuelo. I went around the chicken coop making sure no animals had tried to burrow through to get to the chickens. Carpintero is the guard for them at night when the rodents come out.

Grandpa knows how to make stepping stones. He made the square molds out of wood. He makes all colors. Some are sandy or reddish; some are the color of a blackboard. Before the cement dried, we carved our initials and the date in one of them and lined them all up against the coop to keep the varmints out.

I sat on the ground next to Carpintero and put my arm around him. He panted in my face and then turned back in the direction where my grandpa stared out into the bluish darkening night.

“Is something wrong?” I asked Abuelo.

“No, mi’jo. I’m just trying to memorize all of this.”

I took the camera from my pocket and held it up until the levee out there came into view through one of the diamond-shaped holes in the cyclone fence.

The government built the dirt levee fifty years ago. And beyond it is the Rio Grande.

“When you see those people walking through here,” my grandfather said nodding toward the levee beyond the fence, “you should know that they have come a long way to cross the river and are just passing through. They don’t want to hurt no one, just pass through to get to some place else.”

“How come they want to leave their own homes?” I asked.

“Life is very hard in Mexico. People come to this side to make money and make a better life. They leave everything and everyone they know behind and come here to do hard work that most people wouldn’t want to do.”

“Like you when you were a migrant worker?”

Abuelito didn't say anything. He stuck his hands in his back pockets and stared straight ahead.

Abuelita doesn't like to see the people who cross the river walking around here. Sometimes it's surprising to see a stranger walking along our fence. Carpintero barks and barks and the hens scatter like the cracked corn I throw out there for them in the mornings before I collect their brown speckled eggs.

Sometimes the neighbor ladies complain about the strangers, too, but everyone admits that they never hurt anybody in our town before. They don't even stay in the town. Grandpa says they go on ahead to big cities or even other states. And now the only intruders here are the agents from Homeland Security.

When we came inside, Abuelita sat in her comfy chair and watched her stories. Sometimes it is a crime show or a romantic movie or a show with singing and dancing. Sometimes she gets hooked on one of those novelas with the pretty ladies that kiss the men with big moustaches. The ladies on the show scream and fight a lot and are always jealous of the youngest, prettiest girl who ends up with the main guy.

Abuelita watched the T.V. looking over her little glasses while she knitted something with thin pink yarn, probably something for someone's baby. She always knits tiny sweaters for new babies.

Grandpa went outside to smoke his pipe in the front porch. He does that every night and sits there until it is time to watch the news or go to bed. I followed him out. I like the smell of the tobacco. It smells like vanilla and tierra mojada after the rain. After a few minutes I asked him why he threw away the letter from Homeland Security.

“Because I couldn’t believe it,” he said. “I just didn’t believe it was real. Maybe I thought that if I ignored the letter, it would go away. But now you see, Santitos, I was wrong. Your old grandfather was wrong this time.” He sucked on the pipe looking out into the distance.

“After the surveyors come, they’ll build the wall, right? But is something going to happen to us? To our house?” I asked him.

“I don’t want you to worry, Santitos.” Then to change the subject he added, “Did you write to your mother, today? You can’t forget about her out there. She’s missing you.”

Without a word, I got up off the floor of the galería and pulled on the screen door. Grandma looked at me over her glasses. “Computer time, Mi’jo?” I nodded, walking across the living room with my arms in front of me like I was a robot or Frankenstein.

“Ándale, mi muchachito,” my grandmother said smiling. “Your mom depends on our letters,” she said.

My mother is in the army just like my abuelo had been in Vietnam. I don’t have a dad. I do, but my parents aren’t married. I don’t see him. He doesn’t want to see me. He has another family. While my mother is away my grandparents are my parents.

I have a computer in my room and I can play games and download music. Because of the time difference and my mom’s schedule we write to her at night and tell her what happened during the day. In the morning her responses are there waiting for us.

Grandma followed me in to the room where I opened up her Yahoo account. She thinks I’m too young to have one of my own. “You have to wait until you’re twelve or thirteen,” she tells me. Her password is “Santos.”

“Mira,” she says, looking at the page through her bifocals. “I’ll move el mouse así y así and now...” her voice trailed off. “Okay. Ready. Now just type what you want to say and we’ll send it.”

I’m not a fast typist. Abuelita lets me take my time searching for each letter mixed up on the keyboard. She can type very fast since she used to be a secretary in an office when she was only eighteen years old. She told me about something called shorthand that no one uses anymore and showed me on a piece of paper where she scribbled things really fast that only she could figure out. I guess it’s like text messages on paper.

In my email message I told my mom that the agents had come because grandpa threw the letter away, that the surveyors were coming the next day, but that we have rights and everything would be fine, just like abuelito said. I told her that Carpintero had trapped a tlacuache in the backyard and rescued the chicken girls from its vampire clutches. And I told her that I was having a fun summer and I wished we could move to Pobrecito, Texas with my grandparents whenever she comes back from the war instead of going back to San Antonio where she’s stationed at Brooks Army Medical Center. I closed the email message with, “Love from your son, Santos Gonzalez,” and clicked on “Send.”

I stood up and Grandma sat in the chair and started to type her own message.

Grandpa poked his head in the doorway. “What did you tell your mom?” he asked.”

“I told her what happened today,” I answered him. “But not in a way that would make her worry.”

Abuelito looked at Abuelita and she nodded her head.

My grandfather quit school in the seventh grade to work in the fields with his family. I never saw him reading too much, and he never likes to write the emails to my mom. Most times

Abuelita will type the message and sign it from both of them: “Your parents who love you, Mom and Dad.”

Abuelito left the room and when we heard him turn on the TV to watch the news Abuelita said, “When your grandfather was in the army, he wrote very short letters. He never felt too good, you know, about his writing,” she said typing very fast.

“Do you think that’s why he threw the letter away, grandma?”

She turned suddenly to look at me. Behind her glasses, her eyebrows came together like tiny bird’s wings. “Of course not, Santos! Your grandfather is a very smart man. He would never do such a thing.”

“I know he’s very smart,” I argued. My eyes burned. I felt embarrassed or angry. I wasn’t sure which.

The next day, when I got out of bed, I went to the computer, moved the mouse, and woke up the screen. I heard Abuelita making breakfast in the kitchen and smelled the bacon. The email messages from my mother were there. I clicked on mine with the subject line “To Santos.”

*Santitos,*

*It sounds like you are having a fun time with your abuelos. Please be good to them and help them all you can. I know you will. They have a lot of worries right now. I miss you very much. We’ll all be together soon. I can’t wait to read your next message. Did you get the camera I sent you? Send me some pictures!*

*All my love,*

*Mom*

There was an attachment. It was a photo of my mom in her green uniform. Her hair is pulled back in a ponytail, her face looks skinny, but she is smiling so big, I can almost hear her laughter that sounds like a little girl's giggle.

"Santos," said my grandfather. "Rise and shine. He tilted his head to look at the computer monitor. "Anything from your mom?" he asked. I nodded. "Let's see what she says," he continued.

I clicked on the email message. The subject line was "To Mom and Dad," and I read it aloud to Abuelo:

*Dear Mom and Dad,*

*I don't want you to worry, but yesterday there was a big adventure here. Mortars landed on the compound. The loud boom woke us up and we all put on our flak vests and went to a shelter. There were a few casualties and many, many patients with shrapnel and other wounds. One of the men I treated with a leg injury lost a lot of blood. He looked very pale and I was afraid for him. I didn't want to leave him alone. I told him to keep talking to me. He was weak but he told me about his family and his hometown. It made me miss you all and my home. We will be together there soon. Don't worry. I just want you to know how much I love you. The young soldier lost his leg. The operation was this morning. Say a special prayer for this young soldier.*

*Love,*

*Sarita.*

“She sent me a picture,” I said closing the message quickly and opening the attachment. My grandfather stared at her picture on the monitor. He didn’t say anything. His mouth curved downward as he nodded his head slowly and left the room.

I printed out the photo and put it on Abuelita’s altar to surprise her. I leaned it against the photo of Tío Erasmo next to the statue of San Juditas.

After I got dressed, I went out to feed the chickens and let them out of the coop.

When I came back inside for breakfast, I put the wire basket full of eggs on the kitchen counter and took a glass from the dish drain. Abuelita had put the printout of my mom’s picture on the refrigerator door with a magnet of a smiley face. A candle with the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus glowed on the kitchen table. She was stirring the pot of beans on the stove. She had a tissue in her hand.

“Santos, please don’t put the pictures of the living on the altar. It makes me feel afraid,” she said.

“I’m sorry, Gran. I forgot,” I said. “I wanted to put it in a special place for you.”

She pressed the crumpled up tissue to her nose and stared at the candle.

I slammed the glass down on the counter and ran back outside.

From the tool shed, Abuelito called out to me as I climbed over the cyclone fence and ran across the levee as fast as I could. I hopped down on a bluff and fell and lay there by the river for a long time staring up at the sky.

That night I sent an email message to my mother. I wanted to write everything, to put it down in shorthand that only I could understand. I wanted to tell her that I was afraid of the wall, that I didn’t know how to keep Abuelita from feeling sad and scared, too, and that I love Abuelo like a father. I wanted to tell her that I couldn’t eat breakfast that morning or talk or breathe

because of the lump in my throat for the soldier who lost his leg. And how could I tell her how sorry I was for putting her picture on the altar, there with those sad ghosts, the frowning brides and grooms, and Tío Erasmo, her big brother who died when she was only eleven like me?

I didn't type anything. I attached a photo.

Thousands of miles away in a hospital in Iraq, she would open the attachment to see a picture of the surveyors' truck pulling up to the small white house just beyond the levee in Pobrecito, Texas. She would see the tall naranjo with its dark green leaves rising up over the cyclone fence, Abuelita's colorful towels and white sheets hanging on the clothesline like flags, and Abuelito standing with his hands in his pockets looking out toward Mexico, memorizing how it all used to be.

###

## Make Over

Flor Gonzalez stared at her reflection in the mirror over her vanity, a piece of faded, scratched antique furniture that had survived three generations of Davila women, including her older sisters. After inheriting it from their mother, Licha left it to Carmen who left it to Flor. The sisters had no female heirs, so Flor planned to give it to her own daughter, Sara.

Flor was the youngest, and, everyone said, the prettiest of the three sisters, although now she couldn't see why anyone would think that. Looking in the mirror, she saw the faces of her sisters staring back.

She walked toward the small altar in the corner of her room by her side of the bed. Her husband, Gustavo, had built the table and hutch himself to display milagros, pictures of deceased family members, prayer cards, saint statues and candles. He accompanied her to the JCPenney Homestore where they picked out frames for the photos of their dead kin. She looked admiringly at the black graphite frame she'd chosen for her son's picture, kissed her finger tips, and touched the handsome face of the young man in the Marine uniform.

Her sisters were both plump and pudgy-cheeked with shy, close-mouthed, thin-lipped smiles, and short hair dyed a copper color that Flor had never liked for herself, opting instead for the natural salt and pepper look and the shoulder length hair she could still tie back.

Flor touched her sister's framed faces with two fingers, first Licha in the clingy fuchsia knit top she wore for every special occasion, and then Carmen in her ample lime green blouse. She noted again the coincidence of the yellow rose corsage each woman wore. It reminded her that perhaps only on Mother's Day did anyone snap their photos. She struck a match on the side of a box and lit a candle. The Virgin Mary in a cornflower blue robe glowed in between the two sisters. Flor

closed her eyes and said a quick “Padre Nuestro” and crossed herself. “I’ll see you after breakfast, girls,” she said to no one.

She walked down the small hallway to the room of her grandson. “Santos,” she whispered loudly. “Ándale muchacho. Your abuelo has already been up for two hours. Get up right now, mi’jo.”

The boy dressed in blue plaid pajama bottoms and white T-shirt rolled over and put the pillow over his head. “Five more minutes,” he groaned.

She patted his back. “Hurry now, mi’jo. Pronto. We need to get as much done as we can before the men come. Get up and get ready. Check the email. There’s a message there from your mom. I read mine already.”

He looked at her expectantly.

“No mortars. Everything is quiet there. Now get up, mister,” she said.

The men were building the border wall for a two-mile stretch along the fence line of the Gonzalez’ back yard. The surveyors had come the month before, and the actual building had been going on for three days.

A small radio on the kitchen counter played a song by Los Bukis. Marco Antonio Solis’ honey voice lamented a lost love. Flor sang along and poured herself a cup of coffee and put it on the counter. She pulled the wire basket of eggs out of the refrigerator.

Gustavo entered through the back door and wiped his feet on the mat.

“Breakfast is almost ready,” she said to him.

He looked at his watch. “Ya no tardan. They’ll be here any minute,” he said pulling on the sheer white curtains and peering out through the window over the sink.

Santos came in yawning. He had put on his Levis and Nikes.

“Santos,” said his grandfather. “I had to feed the chickens and get the eggs myself, mi’jo. Are you going to let an old man beat you at your chores? Your grandmother already read the newspaper from beginning to end and hung up two loads of laundry and made breakfast.”

The boy sat at the table and put his head down. “It’s summer. Why do we have to get up so early now? Just because the men are coming? Why do they come so early anyway?”

“They’re on the government’s dime, I guess,” said Gustavo. “One of them told me they have to do the job on a very tight schedule. They have to finish fast. Hey,” he said, looking from Santos to Flor, “There were only four eggs in the nesting boxes this morning. What do you think happened?”

“Space aliens?” offered Santos brightening and sitting up straight.

“I think the poor hens are traumadas,” responded Flor. They’re scared to death of the trucks and all the noise. They could die of a susto,” said Flor. “If we’re all stressed out from the noise, can you imagine those poor animals?”

Santos opened his eyes up wide and jerked his body as if he were being electrically shocked.

“Ándale grosero,” said his grandmother gently swatting at his shoulder.

She took three plates from the trastero. “Bueno, ya está el desayuno,” said Flor. “Did you wash your face and hands, Santitos?”

“Yes,” he said, drawing out the word and rolling his eyes.

She put the Styrofoam tortilla warmer full of flour tortillas in the center of the round table next to a small molcajete of salsa. She turned to the stove and filled the plates with scrambled eggs and beans and put one at each place before sitting down.

“Vamos a dar gracias,” she said holding out a hand to Gustavo and Santos on either side of her.

Over the soft strains of “Ojalá” on the radio and Flor leading the prayer of thanks for a new day and the bountiful breakfast, the churning, chugging caravan of Caterpillar earthmovers and excavators arrived just beyond the Gonzalez’ cyclone fence, inciting the shrill, relentless barking of their Shepherd-terrier mix, Carpintero.

Gustavo pulled his hands away from the gentle grips of Flor and Santos and slammed them on the table making the forks hop and clang against the plates, “¡Que la chingada!” he spat, pushing his chair back with his legs and throwing the back door open. Carpintero, jumped up and down. “¡Bájate, perro!” yelled Gustavo as he charged toward the cyclone fence that divided him from the men.

“Oh, man,” said Santos, digging into the beans and eggs. “Grandpa’s gonna be grumpy all day.”

Flor watched from the window, craning her neck slightly. “They came even earlier today,” she said.

Santos ate hungrily, rubbing the last triangle of his tortilla on the empty plate and downing a tall glass of milk.

Flor raised the volume on the radio. Rocío Dúrcal and Juan Gabriel sang their duet, “Costumbres.” Santos put his hands over his ears. “It’s too loud, Gran,” he said going out through the back door. She lowered the volume quickly and the machines and Carpintero’s barking filled the air instead.

As she washed the dishes, Flor watched through the window and saw Gustavo pulling the weed-eater out from its place in the tool shed. Its noise would blend in with the sound of the earthmover, she thought.

In her room she knelt before the small altar, eyes closed and hands clasped together in front of her mouth. She opened her eyes at the shrill drilling and belching sounds of the machines outside that echoed through the house. She stared at the picture of her son, her parents, and those of her husband, unsmiling brides and grooms unaccustomed to being photographed.

She sat on the edge of her bed. From the pocket of her housecoat she pulled out her reading glasses and a paper folded in half. In an email message she received that morning from Sara, a combat nurse in Iraq, she read:

*Dear Mom,*

*I'm sorry you all have to endure the noise of the machines outside the house. In some ways the noise you describe is like the intrusions we face here in the compound. Even a hospital in the Green Zone is not immune to the mortar and the constant threat of that dreadful noise. For you the noise lasts all day. Here it is unpredictable. We hear the sounds of explosions far away and then they move closer and closer to us. It reminds me of the thunderstorms in Texas. Mami, maybe you should get out of the house. I don't like to think what the noise is doing to your nerves. Leave the house during the day. I know Dad would never leave the men there alone. Santitos told me that Dad is always in a bad mood since the men came and that he rarely leaves the backyard. Maybe you and Santitos can go some place during the day, the library or shopping or something. I wish I was there to take you away on a vacation.*

*Love, Sarita.*

Flor folded up the letter and returned it to her pocket. She pulled out a small newspaper clipping and read to herself, “Manuel Moreno, 62, went to be with the Lord on July 24, 2008.” She scanned the details of the funeral services and survivors, folded it up again, and opened a cedar wood box out of which she pulled a small silver ring with diamond chips in the shape of a flower, and a silver rosary. She fingered the filigreed beads leading to the crucifix and kissed the feet of Jesus before returning the rosary and ring, and now the newspaper clipping, to the box. She rubbed at the thin gold band she had not removed from her finger since her wedding day. She tried just then, but it would not budge past the fleshy skin or her thick knuckles. Flor removed her glasses and stared at her face in the mirror over the vanity. She turned to the side and looked at her profile. She sucked in her stomach and exhaled. The forgiving housecoat ends up showing the truth, she thought to herself, sighing and shaking her head. She pulled out the stool from under the table, sat down, and opened up her make-up case. She appeared before Gustavo in the backyard as he refilled the weed-eater with gasoline from a large red can. The lawnmower was parked by close by.

“Where are you going?” he yelled over the noise of the trucks. He looked at the keys in her hand and focused on the dark gray dress and heels, the creamy coral lines painted on her thin lips.

“I’m going to the beauty shop,” she yelled back, leaning into him.

“Today? Again? You just went the other day!” he protested.

“I know,” she said. “I don’t know why my hair is growing so fast. Just want to get a little trim,” she said, knowing he would wave off her disclosure of the details he found so trivial.

“Vaya,” he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. She scanned the backyard for Santitos and spotted him sitting on the floor of the coop with the frightened chickens.

“These girls are going to lose all their feathers,” he yelled out to her. The excavator responded with a loud clank and a growling engine. Carpintero barked all the while.

In the driveway at the front of the house, Flor climbed into the driver’s seat of her silver Mercury Monarch. Even there inside the car with the door closed, she heard the noise coming from the backyard. She imagined Gustavo with his weed-eater, edging the entire length of the large yard all along the vegetable gardens and their orange trees. He’d follow it with the chain saw or something else to drown out the sounds of the workers in his own way. She started the engine and joined that chaotic chorus, put the car in drive, and went down the street away from the noise.

In the quiet, she hesitated to turn on the radio. After a moment she turned the knob and hummed along to the last part of Roberto Carlos’ “Yo Te Propongo,” and decided that she’d always liked the nasal quality of his voice. It made him sound needy in his musical love propositions, she thought.

The DJ came on and said, “Radio Recuerdo. Aquí vienen Los Panchos con ‘Caminos Diferentes.’” The soft strumming of three guitars and the mournful staccato voices of the three singers reminded her of the dances she used to go to with Manuel Moreno.

By the end of the song, she found herself five blocks away in the three-car parking lot at Ninfa’s Beauty Palace, a small pink house with scraggly Mexican heather growing in clumps along the sidewalk leading up to the entrance. She dug in her purse for a tissue and checked her reflection in the rearview mirror. She patted around her eyes and blew her nose.

Little brass bells announced her arrival. She took a seat in a white plastic patio chair in the makeshift waiting room by the front door. Two and three year old copies of *Vanidades*, *Buenhogar*, and *People in Español* covered the small plastic coffee table.

“I’ll be right with you,” said an old woman’s voice from somewhere in the house. With her small purse in her lap, Flor picked up a magazine, leafed through it, and put it back down.

“Flor!” said Ninfa, a short, stout woman with short hair a color so red it looked purple. She wore a long, flowing floral print dress and house slippers, and walked to the waiting area with some trouble, as if her feet were made of concrete cinder blocks. “You’re back? Ay, mira que elegante. You look nice, mujer,” she said, focusing on Flor’s black low-heel pumps and then back up to her face. “You’re wearing make-up, too? Wow, lady. Oye ¿Apoco te corté mal?” Ninfa pulled up random strands of Flor’s hair and examined them through her large gold-framed glasses, scrunching her nose, the glasses moving up on her forehead as she did.

“No!” said Flor gently slapping back Ninfa’s hands. “I only came to get away from the house,”

“Are the workers there?”

“Si, mujer. The noise is non-stop. Me están volviendo loca.”

“Pues, just stay here with me for un ratito,” said Ninfa. “It’s slow right now. We’ll find a good way to pass the time here.” She took the remote control from the top of the small television set in the corner and pointed it at the screen until a picture emerged. Two young women slapped at each other while a man with a shaved head, black jeans and shirt tried to break them up.

Another man in a suit and wire-rimmed glasses smiled as he watched the fight. “Ay, mira. El Springer,” she said taking a seat next to Flor.

Flor watched for a moment. “I can’t stand this show. They’re like animals. It’s too loud.” She stood up and walked over to the barber’s chair. She sat down and rummaged through Ninfa’s supplies of combs and hairsprays. “I just have a few hours,” she said. “I have to be some place later on.”

“I know what we can do,” said Ninfa smiling. She pointed the remote to the television to turn it off.

Hours later Flor pulled into the driveway and could see from there that the men were packed up and gone but not before having erected several large metal posts, thirty feet high and three feet apart.

In the kitchen, Santos sat at the kitchen table eating crackers and peanut butter. “Gran, I’m so hungry,” said the boy. With the back of his hand to his forehead, he feigned fainting.

“Why didn’t you make yourself something?”

“Like what?” he said cocking his head and shrugging. He straightened up, wide-eyed. “Abuela? What happened to your hair? It’s like red or something. And it’s so short. You look like a punk rocker!”

“Muchacho grosero,” she said swatting at the air. She squinted at the clock on the wall. “Mira. It’s seven o’clock,” she said, self-conscious now of the drastic change in her appearance. “You mean you guys haven’t eaten since breakfast? And your grandfather didn’t even eat any of his eggs and beans.” Still holding her purse, she pulled out a skillet from under the sink, but quickly put it down to examine her long, red nails.

“Wow, cool finger knives,” said Santos watching from the table. “You look like Lady Death Strike,” he said with his own hands up in a clawing gesture.

“Like who?” said Flor scrutinizing her pinky.

“Wolverine’s enemy!”

“Where’s grandpa?”

“He went to walk on the levee to see what the men did.”

“It’s getting dark out there,” said Flor looking out the window over the sink.

Just then Gustavo entered, wiping his feet on the small mat by the door. He looked at Flor without saying a word. For just a second she could see his surprise.

“Gus. I lost track of time at the beauty shop. Mira, let’s go out tonight. I just got my nails done,” she said holding both hands up in front of her face.

“Since when do you get your nails done?”

“Since today,” she said. “Let’s go get some fried chicken or something.”

“I’m not hungry,” he said.

“Check out Gran’s hair,” said Santitos, standing now behind her and hugging her shoulders. “She looks like Tía Licha.”

“I’m going out front to smoke my pipe,” said Gustavo walking through the kitchen. She could hear him slam the front door,

“He’s cranky because he didn’t eat all day,” said Flor.

“No, he’s cranky because of the noise,” said Santos. “He’s been mad for days. And my ears are ringing or something. I can still hear the noise in my head,” he said pulling on his lobes.

“Maybe tomorrow I’ll take you out during the day.”

“No, no, no,” said the boy pretending to cower with his hands up in front of him. He put his hands on his head. “Don’t dye my hair please!”

“You little clown,” she said swatting lightly at his arms in front of him.

“I don’t want to go anywhere,” he said straightening up. “I don’t want to leave Abuelo alone. We’ll be fine, Gran. You go. Mom said you should get out of the house because of your nerves or something,” he said spreading the peanut butter on another cracker.

Flor pushed the screen door open and saw Gustavo sitting on the porch swing smoking his pipe. He looked out into the still night, and she sat next to him. "I'm sorry I was gone so long today," she said.

Gustavo took the pipe out of his mouth. "You don't look like you. You don't act like you. Are you trying to look younger with those nails and that hair? Because you look older like that."

"You don't act like you either," said Flor standing up abruptly, charging back into the house, the door slam echoing in the quiet night.

In her room she flipped through the pages of a slim, blue yearbook with "Enlace" in large gold print embossed on the cover. She smelled the pages and put the book back on her lap. Her long red nails traced the names of her high school classmates, black and white images of kids in sixties wide collars and plaid patterns, girls with stick-straight hair and boys with long side-swept bangs.

She came to her own small photo. Flor Davila. She had long hair and a toothy grin. She turned the page three more times. Manuel Moreno, with his piel canela and short, neat black hair, smiled shyly back at her. She slammed the book shut and replaced it on a high shelf in her closet.

"Abuelita," said Santos, leaning against the doorframe. "I finished emailing Mom. Your turn." They walked to his room together. She scratched his back with her long, fake nails. "Ahhh! That feels good. Now I'm glad you got them even though you can't cook with them," he said. "More, more! Hey are you going to be able to type with those things?" "I'll find out," she said.

Flor sat in front of her vanity with her hair wrapped in a towel. Her face glimmered with Oil of Olay. In the mirror, she scrutinized her sagging eyelids pulling them up and watching

them descend back into place like crumpled crêpe paper. With large silver clippers, she clipped the plastic nails off to the quick and rubbed off the nail polish with acetone-drenched cotton balls.

Her husband climbed into bed with his back to her.

“Good night,” she said. Removing the towel and combing down the wet spiky red hair. He did not respond. “Gustavo?”

“Yes, goodnight,” he said curtly.

She looked at him lying there, the back of his head, his white hair against the blue pillow like wispy clouds in the sky. “Gus?” she called. “Gus? You awake?” Because he did not respond, she knew that he was. “Gus, after I got my hair and nails done, today. I didn’t stay at Ninfa’s. I went somewhere.”

Her husband raised his head and punched his pillow and said again, “Goodnight.”

“I went to a rosario,” she continued. I went to a rosario to pray for someone.”

“Okay,” he said without turning to face her.

“Y si no te importa, Gus, I’m leaving in the morning. I’m going to a funeral.”

“Who died?” he asked turning to look at her.

“Manuel Moreno.”

For a moment, just for a second, she saw that the news stunned him. His eyes widened, and she was sure she heard a tiny gasp. Gustavo turned his back to her pulling the comforter over his shoulders.

Flor turned off the light and climbed into bed with him. She ran her hand through her hair and winced, closing her eyes tight, and pursing her lips to realize again how short it was.

Outside Carpintero barked once. Tomorrow it would begin again. Gustavo would be cross, slamming doors and starting up the aerator and the lawnmower, to duel with his own noise against the churning machines, gurgling and clanging all day long, driving the hens to the dark nesting boxes. But for now, there were no sounds.

“Flor,” said Gustavo softly in the darkness. “I don’t want you to go to Manuel Moreno’s funeral.”

She pretended to be asleep for a long time before she closed her eyes and wished she could quiet the ringing hum of the silence.

###

## Loves

Mary could not remember where she had left the turtle. Her house was small, but she could not remember. Was it in the kitchen? In the bathroom? In the sink? The tub? Was it an amphibian? Had she put it in with the tropical fish? Was it in a shoe box with some celery tops she'd pulled from her overstuffed refrigerator? She had known so much about turtles. She couldn't remember much anymore. Where was it?

"Mom, where is the turtle?" Her son, John, was angry. She could hear it in his voice. She turned to face the wall of books, rotted with age and disuse, covered in dust.

"Maybe it's in the altar room. I don't know," said Mary. She rubbed her left index finger with her right thumb and stared at the wall of books she had never read. She liked the titles. The pictures on the covers. The names of the authors. She liked to read, too, but just never found the time. There was so much to see to in the house and on television.

"Mom?" said John. "The altar room? I thought we agreed there would be no altar room anymore."

"No, no, there isn't. It's just the way it was when you said 'no more altar room.' When was that again? I forget"

John's blue t-shirt was covered in lint and dirt, streaks of shit or some other unidentified stains, liquids, bodily fluids of animals that roamed the house or once did. He put his forearm over his nose.

"Mom, I can't help you with this anymore. You're going to lose the house." A cat jumped on her lap and hissed at the two cats at her feet. A dog barked. Other dogs barked in response from other rooms in the house.

"Uh. Oh. You woke 'em all up. I'd better let them out of their cages to do their business."

“Mom, you never let them out,” said John. Their cages are full up shit. This house is full of shit. It’s a shit-filled house of horrors. Some of your animals are dead. Right there in their cages. Dead. Decomposing. Did you know that? The law is going to come down on you so fast, Mom. You know that?”

Mary closed her eyes as if that could drown out the sound of his voice. Where was the turtle? She had to remember. A cacophony of parakeet and parrot chirps rose up in the air. A crow flew in from another room and landed on Mary’s shoulder. Mary labored to stand. John shuffled toward her awkwardly, not wanting to touch her. He held on to her elbow. She put the weight of her body on one foot, the other, then both. She looked down at his hand. Her eyes moved to his shoes and then up to his face. “Johnny boy,” she said smiling as if seeing him for the first time in a long time.

John released his tentative grip. “Careful,” he said, vigilant of his own immediate surroundings, looking down at his feet, raising his knees up high to walk across the room to the door, the hallway, ahead of his mother toward the altar room. She shuffled along slowly, too, careful of the crow. Cats yowled at her feet. The crow squawked a tense, harsh squawk.

“Mom,” said John, “The whole place smells of dog shit. Cat shit. God knows what else. They’ve got to go first, okay? The dogs and the cats. They’ll help us find other homes for them. You’ve got to let the Humane Society come in, okay?”

“Yes, yes,” said Mary. She patted the air in front of her and just behind John. “I said I would, didn’t I? I have bigger fish to fry.” John turned his head back slightly to look at her and then shook his head at no one to show his disdain.

As they passed each room in the short hallway, they heard the yelps, howls, and barks of animals in cages. John covered his nose and mouth with his hand. Mary patted the tiny head of the black bird with her index finger.

They entered a dark room. John pulled the curtains and Mary shielded her face with her hands as if she were a vampire. Hundreds of dolls and stuffed animals sat on the king-sized bed, on the highboy dresser, along the floor, in large boxes, bags and baskets. Mary took one. It looked very old. An antique. “This is the only one I’ll keep,” she said. She ran her thumb along a crack on the porcelain face and the closed eyes of the doll. “This is the only one I’ll keep because it’s the only one my mother let me keep. Remember? I told you the story?” She moved the doll toward him. John looked around as if someone were watching and took the doll by a leg and held it limply. John sniffed at the air. He rubbed his forehead. “Mom, this is all crap. Throw this shit away. I won’t want that fucking doll when you’re gone. Your grandkids ain’t gonna want any of this shit.” He scanned the ceiling. He looked at the floor shaking his head.

Mary started to cry. Her body convulsed. She cried from deep inside her chest like a wounded animal.

“Mom. Mom? Don’t start,” said John. “I’ve heard it all a million times before. Your dad left when you were a toddler. Your mom didn’t let you have toys. You’re a grown woman! Your tears bore me. I’m out of here.” He turned to face the wall.

On the nightstand next to the bed were plaster statues of St. Francis and one of San Martin de Porres. The dog at St. Francis’ feet was missing an ear. San Martin’s broom was missing its long handle. “No, she stays, the doll stays,” said Mary hugging the doll. “And these two. They stay.” She nodded toward the two statues that stared back at her. “Don’t get any ideas about them. They stay with me. They help me.”

“Okay. No, Mom,” said John. “These fucking toys are going. Your mangy dogs and cats. He wiped his cheek and looked at the back of his hand.

“They are not toys! Don’t you swear in front of me,” said Mary.

“I’m sorry. Mom, come on. Enough is enough.”

A small, black, scrappy mutt scurried into the room barking a tense, defensive bark at John’s feet. John kicked at it. “Ugly little shit! He looks like a ball of hair plugs. Where do you get these little monsters?”

The dog scurried under the bed and barked. The force of each bark sent him out further from under the bed. Mary picked up the small dog. With ease she reached under the bed and pulled out a turtle, its shell decorated in nail polish designs of hearts and flowers and smiley faces. The dog’s front paws went up and down. He wagged his tiny tail and panted as if smiling. He licked her face. The crow bent forward and moved its head slightly to stare at the dog out of one eye. Mary tossed the dog lightly on the bed. He nestled between the ancient doll and a dingy lace-covered pillow in the shape of a heart.

“You can go now, John,” said Mary. “I got what I need.”

###

## Texas Ebony

*Preso de un ondo quebranto/Sumió sus ojos en llanto/Y con infante emoción/Quitó de la jaula el preso/Posó con su boca un beso/Sobre el rosado plumaje/Y en su mano temblorosa/Quedó dormida una rosa que tenía corazón.*

*Overtaken by a profound sorrow/He lowered his tearful eyes/ and with a child's emotion/Removed the captive in the cage/With his lips he kissed its pink plumage/In his trembling hand/Remained the heart of a sleeping rose.  
--Leonardo Favio "El Niño y el Canario"*

The hand-pulled ferry moved along slowly but assuredly carrying its usual freight of three cars. Six expressionless men with skin bronzed brown by the sun pulled the rope in unison. Three were American citizens, and three were Mexican, but they were indistinguishable in their faded jeans, t-shirts and tennis shoes. Several pedestrians lined the edge of the barge as it approached the river bank on the other side. Marta watched as the men lowered two small metal gangplanks with two swift kicks and waved the cars forward into the United States. The Mexican men were not allowed to set one foot on United States soil, but the rope they pulled to move the ferry was attached to the massive ancient ebony tree there on the river banks of Los Ébanos, Texas.

The ride was quiet compared to the motorized ferries Marta had heard of on the Gulf Coast. Audible, however, was the creaking of the floor of the barge underfoot and the deafening mating call of the cicadas clinging to the forest of trees in view from the opposite bank. The sooty bluffs that formed around the exposed roots of the oldest trees dwarfed the ferry entrance where the captain greeted passengers or said goodbye or a "que te vaya bien" in English or Spanish.

Even this comparatively small ferry had a federally licensed captain who navigated the pontoon, the only international ferry of its kind, with a block and tackle rope. Marta had recently

heard the men remarking that the American owners of the ferry received funds for a new rope as part of the Obama administration's stimulus package.

As if on cue, the drivers started their cars all at once. The cars rolled off one by one, and pedestrians carrying plastic bags and looking wearied by the ten-minute ferry ride, braced themselves for the long walk back to their homes in and around Los Ébanos. A fixture on the barge, Don Fermín who looked to be as old as the tree that gave the town its name, swept behind them vigorously, as if the very force of his broom could sweep the cars and the people off the chalán.

At the U.S. Customs office, Marta answered the usual questions. Yes, she was an American citizen. No, she was not bringing anything over, just returning from visiting a relative in Ciudad Gustavo Díaz Ordáz. Technically, all true. She didn't live anywhere anymore.

Overhead on a branch of a mesquite tree, a garza, a heron with gray body, black pate and pointy orange bill, shook its feathers and looked searchingly across the water.

Marta recalled her first job in San Antonio at the zoo. Although she knew nothing about birds, except the chickens on the ranchito back home and the urracas and palomas she kept away from her tomato plants, she was assigned a place in the aviary. Over time she grew accustomed to the acrid smells and the cacophony of screeching, fluttering innumerable species of birds—flamingoes, macaws, cranes, finches, lorikeets, doves, cockatoos, conures, jays, parrots and pigeons and dozens more. One feature of the aviary was the small cups of sugar water provided to visitors. Birds drawn to the sweet treat descended on anyone in the large cage holding the tiny cup.

Apoplectic children caused much stress and anguish to the birds whom they batted and swatted with their small arms, sometimes spilling the sugar on themselves or dropping it on a floor of dirt and wood shavings where it was quickly absorbed.

The day Marta met Niko Nikolić in the outsized cage had been a particularly trying one. The hot July afternoon brought droves of vacationing families, as if through a revolving door, in and out of the aviary, some searching for shade, others drawn in by the exotic creatures. Among the sun-burned throng, identical twin girls burst into tears as small conures, small rainbow-colored parrots with orange, yellow and green plumage, perched on the head of one who jumped up and down, and the chest of the other while getting a better dig at the cup she held to herself while she screamed. Niko reached over and gently removed the bird from the first girl's head. The other one batted another green bird away and it flew off with a shrill chirp. The girls continued screaming as they escaped the aviary still holding their empty cups.

“Maybe I can work here,” he said to Marta who took the bird from him and released it by just raising up her cupped hands. She immediately noticed his accent. Where was he from? Russia? Poland?

Smiling, she turned to busy herself with cleaning up.

The following week he returned and asked her for a cup of sugar water to feed the birds. He did this nearly every Thursday afternoon that summer, greeting her politely and going on his way. Knowing he would be by, she wore make-up on Thursdays to counter her drab khaki uniform. She was ever on safari, enclosed in the cage.

Their hellos became cheerful and familiar, and she learned more about him in their short conversations. His parents were estranged. His mother was a Bosnian Muslim. As a consequence of extreme pressure from his domineering Serb father, he had at one time fought for

the Serbians in a civil war against the Muslims, but now he was a Bosnian refugee. The history of divisions and conflicts and civil wars in his part of the world confounded Marta whose image of the young man changed instantly. Suddenly his boyishness, the lightness with which he had approached her, his eager smile and friendly manner, were weighed down by the burden of this new information.

When the first cool days of autumn finally broke through in south central Texas it was already the first week of November. That Thursday afternoon, Niko appeared as usual. He helped himself to a cup, filled it with the nectar from the dispenser on the wall, and stood before a perch with the cup held up to his shoulder. A rose-ringed parakeet Marta had secretly named Paco, after a green budgie she'd had as a child in Los Ébanos, perched on his shoulder. Niko held up the cup. The bird feasted, its flat black eyes moving around in its sockets as it growled softly but shrilly, mimicking some other bird species that fluttered its wings nearby. Niko petted the bird's head with his thumb, and returned him to his perch.

He exited the aviary, closing the door behind him, walked around the aviary and put his fingers through the chicken wire. Marta's back was to him as she opened up a box of the disposable cups to refill the dispenser. He grazed her shoulder gently through the wire.

"Marta," he said, conscious of rolling the r in her name. "Let's go get a beer after work? Bombay Bicycle Club?"

She knew the place. Just a few blocks away, it was walking distance from the zoo. It was the first place her friend Sonia had taken her to eat when she first moved to San Antonio. She'd applied for the zoo job because she hadn't graduated from high school and was inexpert at most things except grueling manual labor in the fields and tending to animals on her parents'

sprawling farm on the border. Goats and cows she knew, even respected in many ways in their symbiotic roles. Birds she came to understand by necessity.

“I don’t like beer,” she said giggling nervously and half-relenting, betraying her past resolve to avoid the guy whose persistence both irritated and excited her. She didn’t know much about him, only the few facts about his painful past in his country and that now he worked as a mechanic at the Toyota plant.

“You are being difficult,” he said.

“Okay. Okay. I will meet you there at five o’clock after my shift.”

With his hands in front of him, he patted the cage three times with his palms and took a few steps backwards before turning on his heel to leave.

Bombay Bicycle Club was a college hangout. The din of too-loud, over-modulated, unmelodious music filled the crowded restaurant. She hated the stale smells from the old musty sofas among the tables and booths that were supposed to contribute to a vintage motif. A mixed menagerie of license plates, sports team pennants, movie posters, and framed black and white photos of John Wayne, James Dean, Burt Reynolds, and other American actors from decades past covered the walls. The improvised decor reminded her of the way the Conejo bus drivers in Mexico decorated their dashboards with an eclectic assortment of Pitufo or Smurf figurines, magazine images of soccer heroes, stickers of Bruce Lee, Beatles, Cantinflas, and luchador memorabilia.

She was always self-conscious at places on this side of town. She was the same age as most of the other patrons, but here she felt out of place. She lived with her friend Sonia in an apartment on the west side of the city which seemed more like her hometown with taquerías, botánicas and panaderías on every corner and everyone speaking Spanish. Here she wasn’t a zoo

employee doling out cups of sugar water to children who grabbed at the cups, tormented the birds, and never had a greeting or a thank you to say to her. Here she was a paying customer among the groups of American boys and girls in shorts and flip-flops and caps turned to the side like rap singers. She never saw any black customers and wondered where the international students hung out if not at this place so close to Trinity University. She was Mexican American, but her Spanish accent was thick, her skin, brown as a shelled pecan heart—the corazón, as her mother called the whole, intact meat of the nuez from the nogales that she and her father cultivated along with orchards of citrus fruit, vegetable gardens, and berry bushes. Her shoulder length hair was black and curly and she pulled it back now into a ponytail and wound a rubber band she kept on her wrist around the mass of curls.

“What can I get ya’?” the bartender asked while he wiped her table with a dishcloth. He looked to be barely old enough to drink and was dressed just like the other college boys knocking back amber bottles.

“I’m waiting for somebody,” she said, pronouncing “body” as “bawdy.”

“You’re what?” said the bartender, squinting and cocking his head.

“Beer, please,” she said waving her hand at his confusion. “In a glass.”

“I’ll bring you a Shiner,” he said stepping back and then returning and putting the rag on the table again, damp against her elbow. “No, I’ll bring you a Corona. Bueno?” he said, pronouncing the tag question as “bway-noh.”

“Sure, sure,” she said nodding, self-conscious now.

“Dos,” said Niko, who stood now next to the barkeep. He held up two fingers to him and nodded a hello. “Sam Adams,” he added as he slid into the booth next to Marta.

“Got it, bro’,” responded the kid, lighter in his step now, the burden of the incomprehension of the exchange with the brown-skinned girl lifting as he strutted back toward the bar gesturing an air guitar solo emphatically, his face contorted under the off-center bill of his Dodgers cap.

“Sorry!” Niko screamed leaning into Marta’s ear to be heard. He pointed to his watch and shrugged.

“I just got here, too!” she said smiling and waving her hand to show she hadn’t minded waiting. The barkeep returned to the table. He dealt out their coasters and put down the glasses of beer.

“I’m going to pay now!” yelled Niko, pointing at the table.

“Cool!” said the kid, nodding, comprehending. Niko gave him a ten and held up his hand in that universal sign of “Keep it.”

“Hey, thanks. You all have a good night,” he said smilingly and seeming to make an effort to make eye contact again with Marta.

“American beer sucks, but this one is okay!” Niko said carefully bringing the overflowing tumbler to his lips.

She nodded and then shook her head to show it was hopeless to try to talk. The place was best for boisterous laughter with head thrown back and flirtatious loud exchanges. They drank their beers quickly and in silence, surrendering to the music and the noisy chatter of the co-eds playing pool and munching on fries.

Marta stared at the beer-swilling college students. They were like the birds in the aviary with their tiny beaks in the pink sugar water. But wearing those oblivious expressions, they reminded her more of the ungrateful children eager at first to feed the birds and then

disillusioned at seeing them up close, the novelty of it gone in seconds. The poor birds, their hearts beating hard in their tiny chests, their miniscule straw feet curving around small, nervous fingers, flew back up to the fake jungle branches in the furthest corners of the aviary, teased by only a taste of the sugar.

Marta put down her beer and declared with her hand up “I’m done.”

Niko reached over to take her glass and downed it. She laughed embarrassedly covering her mouth. “What? I paid for it!” he said wiping the corners of his mouth with thumb and index finger.

They exited the place, and were suddenly washed in the first cool evening breeze of the season. “At last,” said Niko, his pinky wriggling in his ear. “I can hear. I can breathe.” He smiled at Marta. She noticed that his whole face smiled. His short hair, hazel eyes and the small mole on his cheek made her think of Steve McQueen.

“I have to get going,” she said, studying her watch in the darkness.

“Where’s your car?”

“No. I’m going back to the zoo. I go home with one of the ladies who works with me. She lives near me. Thank you for the beer.”

He nodded once saying nothing.

Halfway to the zoo, she noticed he was following close behind her. The cool night had brought out flocks of joggers in paper-thin shorts and mothers in sweat suits pushing baby strollers. Stopping to stand behind a small tree across the street from the zoo entrance, she turned to wave to him.

In Los Ébanos, she passed the many buildings made up to look like old western towns with saloon and dry goods storefronts and hitching posts. They were really duty-free shops, but they looked mostly abandoned, like forgotten remnants of a ghost town. Marta imagined the inside of the places was another story, with floor to ceiling shells of enticing bottles of liquid to counter the arid exterior, innumerable jewel-toned bottles, the many shades of Bacardi rum, the blue and gold agaves, the requisite Crown Royal and Chivas, and on another wall, the equally enticing perfume bottles of Giorgio, Chanel, and Calvin Klein, heady, intoxicating scents that permeated the walls of the small, sun-washed structures.

In an adjoining parking lot, Marta climbed into her Mazda sedan and drove for forty minutes to McAllen to her job at Chuck E. Cheese where she stood behind the glass counter of showcases of cheap plastic toys that mesmerized children with fistfuls of tickets to redeem. Their parents' investment of ten or twenty dollars yielded fifteen-cent toys—a plastic ring, a balloon, a rubber spider. The drone of the arcade games rang in her ears well after she left her shift. Every evening she drove back to Los Ébanos, back to the parking lot. Some days she parked the car and paid the pedestrian ferry fee of seventy five cents. Otherwise she drove the car over the gangplanks. She paid her two dollars, rolled down her window and sailed for ten minutes, a quarter of a mile across the Rio Grande back to Mexico.

The captain navigated the ferry perfectly, always a straight shot across the river. The banks on both sides of the river gave the ferry free access. There had been talk for months that the border wall would soon be erected on the banks on the American side with open access only at the narrow entrance. Marta shook her head at the thought. It would be another confounding boundary in her life.

In Los Ébanos, Texas, Marta was born to a Mexican mother and a Mexican American father and delivered by a partera, a midwife, from Mexico. Now Marta worked in McAllen and stayed in Díaz Ordáz where her mother had recently moved.

Arriving at the small house on a dirt road, Marta could smell her mother's cooking. She'd grown to hate pizza and never accepted the free ones the manager offered her after her shift.

“¿Eres tú, Marta?” her mother wiped her hands on a paper towel and walked to the small living room. “¿Como te fué, mi'ja? Everything okay with Chunkin' Cheese?”

Marta smiled at her mother's mispronunciation as they walked back into the small kitchen. “Yes, mom, ese pinche mouse,” she said hugging her mother. “I'm tired. Hungry,” she said lifting the lid of one of the pots on the stove.

“I have to tell you, Marta, your father came today,” said her mother. She looked thinner to Marta now, the circles under her eyes more pronounced than usual.

“Here. Mi papá. He came here. “What did he want?” asked Marta pulling out a kitchen chair to sit down.

“He wants us to go home to Los Ébanos. Está loco. I told him no.”

Dead-eyed, Marta stared past her mother and shook her head. “Was he drunk?”

“No, no sé. I think he was not,” said her mother returning to the food bubbling on the stove.

“You didn't let him in the house, right?”

“Of course not. He stayed out there. He came on the chalán and I sent him right back.”

“I don't want him here, mamá. I've told you. If you want to go back with him, you can. He's your husband, but I'm always going to worry about you if you do.”

“No, mi’ja. I want to stay here. I want you to live here with me. I’m the one who is worried about you.”

Marta’s relationship with her father had once been a good one forged on a bond based on arduous labor on the small farm in Los Ébanos. Marta did everything from working in the fields to tending to the cows and goats and chickens. She worked alongside her father, mother, and a few hired hands, eschewing her studies and dropping out her junior year of high school. Alberto Ramirez worked hard, but he also drank hard. Some nights he drank beer with the other men around an open fire. Short and slight, he drank beer after beer rebuffing the food the other men cooked and ate over the fire. They feasted on grilled meat and corn on the cob from his own fields and drank cases of the iced down beer. By midnight they broke out the bottles of tequila, played their music loud, the strains of José Alfredo Jimenez’s sorrowful drinking songs rising up into the blue night sky with the last smoky embers of the campfire.

The mornings after those drunken nights, Marta worked alone, seeing to the animals and the fields while her father slept. Passed out, still wearing his cowboy hat, he snored loudly in his v-neck t-shirt and boxer shorts in the small living room of their house. His open mouth blew on his brushy moustache, making it move.

When she was twenty years old, Marta fell in love with a man who’d been hired to remove trees from a swath of land on the extensive ranch property. His name was John McDougall. He was over six feet tall, burly and blue-eyed.

John flirted boldly with Marta who had never had attention from anyone before. Everyone had always told her she was pretty, but she knew her features made her merely pleasant. Her round cheeks, squat nose and wide-set coal black eyes against her copper skin

made her rather ordinary. But John said she was beautiful on the inside, that he'd never met anyone so easy to be with.

John worked for his father's business and his tree-trimming and landscaping jobs took him all over the Rio Grande Valley. He made special trips in his Ford truck just to take her to dinner at his favorite barbecue places or dancing at country stores and dance halls in the area. John usually had a beer or two, and even then only on Saturdays. It was hard for Marta to imagine a man, any man, who worked around her father could be that abstemious.

They made an odd couple. Looking lean in his Wranglers and Lucchese boots, John towered over Marta. She was short and stout, almost muscular. When he proposed to her he told her that their life would be difficult. That she would grow tired of a gringo. That she should go to a big city. "You're better than working with your hands," he said. "I don't like you working so hard. You have a great mind. You should get your GED and go to college or something."

"Me? I'm just a Mexican girl from the rancho," she said giggling.

"I love that about you. I'm just a dumb hick drives a big truck. What about that?"

"I guess that means we'll be very happy," she said leaning into him, her hand on the back of his neck. They stared out at the river that fronted her father's ranch.

They planned a small wedding at Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Los Ébanos. At a boutique in McAllen, she bought her dress, delicately embroidered, with a sweetheart neckline and tulle overlay. She saw him blush for the first time when she told him that he would surely resemble Dwight Yoakum in the dark gray western suit he had tailor-made for the wedding.

Ten days later John was dead. Removing a large tree, a palo blanco withering where it had stood on the property for over a half century, John was attacked by a swarm of bees. Marta's

father heard his screams and ran to John writhing on the ground slapping at his own face, swollen and unrecognizable.

Marta burned her wedding dress in the trash fire her father set that Saturday night. The tulle, like burning sugar, like singed black hair, went up first. The duchesse satin burned like paper. The gown turned gray then black then to ash, white again.

Marta's mother pulled her into the house, both of them crying, while Marta's father drank deeply from a bottle of gold tequila, the reflection of the flames glinting off the bottle.

Marta's friend Sonia talked Marta into moving to San Antonio. Sonia hated their small town as much as Marta loved it. But Marta couldn't stay there any more. She couldn't walk the expansive fields again without recalling John lying in the coffin in that Dwight Yoakum suit.

Marta usually spent all day away from the apartment in San Antonio. The small place and the blaring televisions she could hear from the adjoining apartments enervated her and made her long for the open spaces of the farm.

She also grew to hate the aviary for the way it trapped the birds as spectacles. She felt trapped, too. During her break she cheered herself by going to the open area where the two bald eagles were. They had been rescued years before after being shot by hunters. They were captives, too, she thought, but not behind the bars of a cage.

After about a year, she grew weary of the zoo and the small, confining apartment. She began to plan her return to Los Ébanos even though it would mean that she wouldn't see Niko any more. By now they were inseparable spending free time together several nights a week. They went to the movies and drove often to Austin, to a couple of clubs frequented by Niko's compatriots.

“Why do you want to go back to Mexico?” Niko asked her while they shared an ice cream and walked toward the caged lair of a lion with real and fake boulders and jungle foliage.

“It’s not Mexico, Niko. Well, and I guess it’s not America either,” insisted Marta. “It’s the only place I’ve ever known. It’s my home. It’s where I belong.”

“I don’t want you to go,” said Niko. “Stay here with me.”

She smiled, embarrassed at his emotion. “You’re joking.” They sat on a bench.

“I’m not,” he said, looking away from her. “I thought everything was going so good between us. Are you better? About John, I mean?”

“I don’t know if I am. I just miss my own home now. This city breaks my heart everyday. I don’t belong here.”

“My country destroyed my life,” he said, his mouth dry. An edge in his voice told her he was upset. “My father destroyed me and he’s still there. I’m staying here. This country let me in. I’m staying. I wish you would stay with me.”

Marta gave her two weeks notice at the zoo the next day. But by the end of the first week, she had some clear indication that she might be pregnant. Her period was late. In her apartment, in sweaty confusion she took the pregnancy test box into the bathroom. Her nervous fingers fumbled with the box, as she dug her nails through the tight shrink-wrap. A few minutes later, she had her answer. She called Niko and told him she had called in sick and needed him to come over after work.

“You called in sick? You? What the hell? I can’t believe it. You must be really sick. What’s wrong, Marta? What can I bring you?”

“Nothing,” she said, impatient now. “Please just come over, okay?”

When he arrived she had prepared sandwiches for him. He turned on the television and the sounds of a sitcom filled the room. The mean put-downs and one-liners of the big-breasted actresses made her cross. "Shut off that shit," she said to Niko as he happily munched on his tuna salad sandwich.

"What's wrong?" he said swallowing and taking another bite. "It's funny," he said with his mouth full.

She pointed the remote to the set and they were left in silence. Niko wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. He eyed her curiously. "You don't look sick," he said. "What's wrong? What are your symptoms?"

"I'm pregnant."

Looking like he'd been punched in the stomach, Niko swallowed and pursed his lips. He dropped the sandwich and brushed his hands together over the plate and sat back in his chair. A moment passed.

"Say something," she said covering her eyes with her hand.

"You are going to be the best mother," he exclaimed, slamming his hand on the kitchen table. He smiled broadly, his eyes wet with the tears of the surprise. That baby is going to be so lucky to have you."

Marta covered her face with her hands. She convulsed a little but emitted no sound. Then she sobbed loudly.

"What are you crying for?" he asked rushing to her. On his knees he tried to pry her hands from her face. "Don't you see? This is the best news of all." He put his head in her lap.

She wiped her face with her hand. "No," she said, her voice shaking. "This is not a good thing. I'm not ready to be a mother. And my parents are going to be so disappointed."

“Disappointed in what? You’re a grown woman.”

“I don’t know. Look at me. I’m single. I’m so messed up. I’m not ready. I won’t even have a job after next week.”

“Oh, please,” he said. “The zoo will take you back in a snap. You are ready, Marta. You’re ready. You’re not single. We’re together. You’re ready. And I am, too.”

She put her arms around his neck, and buried her face in his shoulder.

Marta married Niko in a civil ceremony witnessed by Sonia and her boyfriend. She moved her clothes and the few possessions she’d accumulated into Niko’s apartment.

The months they spent as expectant parents were happy ones. They rented a small white cottage close to the zoo that she had often walked by on her way to catch the bus. She had imagined that university professors lived there in the tree-lined neighborhood with the manicured lawns and flowering violet bougainvillea. They learned that it was students who typically rented the house and they would be able to afford the rent. It would make a nice place to bring the baby home. Marta read books on pregnancy and the two amassed the usual accoutrements for the nursery, a changing table, a crib, a small dresser. At the store, Marta picked out an “Old MacDonald”- themed mobile with a cow, a pig, a chicken and a horse.

Niko worked longer hours at the plant once Marta went on maternity leave. On her last day, she left the zoo knowing she would not return again, except perhaps as a visitor, pushing her baby in the stroller to the aquarium, or the wildlife exhibit. She closed the aviary for the last time at the end of her shift with a sadness she had not expected. The birds eyed her from the sides of their faces. With her head against the cage and her hand on her belly, she sighed deeply. “Adios, Paquito,” she said to the green rose-winged parakeet.

They named the baby Nina. It sounded like Niko's name. A popular girl's name in Niko's homeland, it was also the name of Niko's mother.

Marta's mother traveled on the Greyhound bus from McAllen to San Antonio a week after the baby came. She stayed with Marta for a month, cooking three meals a day for her and seeing to her sustenance and healing while her daughter tried to nurse the baby. Niko met Mrs. Ramirez for the first time, finding her to be timid, fragile like a tiny bird. Only with the baby did she seem to come alive and be herself. She stayed up all night with the crying, colicky infant to let the young, exhausted couple sleep, and then she prepared huge, hearty breakfasts for everyone with the baby on her hip all the while.

Motherhood was a revelation to Marta. She did housework while the baby napped but found herself always back in the nursery, sitting on the edge of the rocking chair before the crib and watching the baby's breaths, her tummy a silent, slow and even metronome. The baby moved her red lips as if suckling at her mother's breast. With her arms up over her head she sometimes jerked with a start as if moving in a dream. When the baby stirred awake and Marta would realize she had been sitting there for two hours. Every coo and giggle and sneeze was wondrous to Marta.

While Marta nursed Nina, she compared the color of their skin—the baby's red lips on her dark brown nipple, her dewy pinkness against Marta's coppery brown. And yet for Marta the colors were a mosaic, a calico. One fabric. One thing. One being. She felt like they shared the same skin.

Once while nursing, in the early dawn while a newscast glared on the television and Niko slept deeply, the baby grew listless. Marta sleepily rocked the baby for a minute. She looked down at the baby and smiled. Nina's eyes turned upward and a smile formed. She nursed for an

instant as milk spilled out of her smile as she looked up at her mother's face and said "mama" for the first time. Warm milk ran down the front of Marta's robe. She felt a pain grip her chest, a literal ache. It made her feel as if the love for her child could burst forth from her heart, bubble up through her skin, drip from her fingertips and pour out like a light through her eyes.

The baby had Marta's wild curly black hair and Niko's fair complexion. In their home, together, Marta felt like they fit perfectly, that they belonged, and it didn't matter what city or country they were in. They settled easily into the life of a young family. Niko received a promotion and a raise at work. Desirous of giving her daughter a better future, Marta studied for the GED and made plans to enroll in night and weekend classes at San Antonio community college.

They planned a trip to Los Ébanos when the baby was fifteen months old. Marta's father had never seen her before and her mother missed them very much.

As soon as they arrived, Marta directed Niko to the ferry. They would go through and come back. They paid the two dollars and drove up on the pontoon. Marta carried the baby who looked strangely incongruous in the yellow party dress, lacy white socks and black patent leather shoes there against the edge of the rough barge. Marta turned in surprise to see Niko lined up holding the rope. She felt a kind of love for him in that moment as he pulled the rope in unison with the six other men. The baby squealed pointing to a pair of urracas, blue in their blackness, and a green jay bobbing on a sparse spindly branch of an ebony. A heron flew by and then another to places in the tree tops where they nested near the water. One flew just over them, alighting on the branch of a mesquite, making it sag under its weight.

The men kicked the metal gangplanks. Niko drove the truck off the ferry while Marta carried the baby across to Díaz Ordáz. They walked a long distance, perhaps a mile, with Niko following slowly close behind in the truck. The town was quiet and seemed nearly deserted in

the early evening hour. Perhaps everyone is having dinner, thought Marta. She let Nina walk on her own a few steps before the baby reached her arms up to be carried. Together, they saw the pink and green and purple houses, small and modest and well-kept, like their little cottage in San Antonio.

Niko turned the truck around and Marta and the baby climbed in for another ten-minute trip across the river back to Los Ébanos. The baby slept, lulled by the floating. In her sleep she raised her little arms up stiffly. Marta imagined she dreamt that she was flying over the water with the birds.

At the checkpoint, Niko was detained. The agents eyed him as if indifferent, but their questions were prying, their inflections betraying suspicions or at least curiosity. Skinny drug dogs panted and paced; they circled the Tacoma sniffing at its tires and exhaust pipe. “Marta, just go on ahead,” sighed Niko. “I don’t think they’ve ever seen a case like me. And since 9/11, you know. It’s okay. Just go on. Drive the baby to the ranch. I’ll walk. I want to. I’ve always wanted to trace your steps from the ferry to the farm.”

The agents studied her silently. “Are you sure?” she asked as the baby squirmed in her arms. She felt strange as the dark-skinned one with the thick accent with the easy pass to the United States.

“Yes,” he said waving her off. “Just go. This is no place for the baby. Your mother must be wondering where we are.”

She kissed him, right there in public, something she’d never done before. He rubbed her back gently and kissed the baby who grabbed for his face with her small hands.

Marta put baby Nina in the car seat and drove on to the farm, looking at the baby through the rearview mirror and then raising her face slightly to the reflection of what they drove away from.

When she arrived at the rancho, her father had a campfire going by the river. She could see the fire aglow like a nighttime rainbow from the backdoor of the house.

Carrying Nina, she walked over to where he was. He fussed over the baby, and she was pleased about it, relieved to perceive that perhaps he had not started drinking yet. Nina stared curiously at his cowboy hat. He put the hat on her and she laughed, wrinkling her nose and showing her tiny teeth.

“Leave her with me,” he said. “We’ll get to know each other. Where is Niko? I want to meet him,” he said loudly.

“He’ll be here soon. Just some stuff at the checkpoint. You know. He won’t be long.” She looked at the baby pulling the large hat over her face and laughing. “Okay. I’ll go let mamá know we’re here.”

“Don’t worry about us,” he said. “Your tías and your primas are here, too. They want to see you. Spend some time with them. We’ll be fine here.”

Marta walked back along the path lined with stepping stones she’d not traversed since John’s death. She expected the hint of longing for him, and the sorrow with no direction now in that wide expanse with the gaping twilight overhead.

Her mother met her at the backdoor pulling her into the kitchen where the other relatives embraced her. The homecoming meal would be chiles rellenos, a meal of involved, time-consuming processes, but Niko’s new favorite.

“Where is Niko?” her mother asked.

“He’ll be here. I don’t think they’ve ever had a Bosnian Muslim at the Los Ébanos checkpoint.” The other women nodded slightly, unsmilingly, as if not entirely sure what to make of the statement.

Marta helped her mother burn and peel the blackened skin off the roasted poblano peppers. She stirred the picadillo cooking in another skillet. Pinto beans bubbled in a large earthenware cauldron. One woman made the pico de gallo, the chunky salsa that was the only condiment they ever put on the table. Another made tortillas.

For over an hour, the women chattered their gossip about neighbors and relatives. The music played loud, a mix of hip thrusting reggaeton that the younger cousins danced to in the small living room and romantic ballads that made the women sing along and pass around cans of beer.

Marta threw open the back door and peered out. The glow of the fire by the river had shrunk, and night was falling like a gray fog on the ranchito.

She heard the cries of her father. Hearing nothing else, not the sound of the other women, or her mother, or the radio blasting its sorrowful strains, or Niko ringing the front doorbell, she ran across the wide field hearing only her own breath, her own gasping. She followed the sounds of her father's screams growing louder, baser and more animalistic, like the shrieking of a stressed bird. She arrived to see the cowboy hat floating on the quiet brown river and the almost neon glow of the baby's yellow party dress floating just beyond it.

The death was ruled an accident by the sleepy justice system of the town. Alberto Ramirez drank through a self-imposed sentence where a million times in nightmares he fended off again and again the choking hands of Niko, a son-in-law he'd never met before this, who stopped and threw him against the banks and jumped into the water where his wife waded through the deepest part of the river in the dark night to grab at the yellow dress being carried along by the gentle currents. A million more times he envisioned Marta, his only daughter,

whom he'd seen wailing in just that way once before when they'd found John breathing his last. She sank into the water herself, holding the small child before being dragged out by Niko. The young parents threw themselves on the small lifeless figure lying on the banks, their sobs echoing in the still night, while Alberto lay in the mud, hair askew, with the bottle in his hand. After the funeral, still wearing her black dress, Marta pulled the nursery furniture through the halls of the house, through the living room and out to the front yard of the cottage. Scratching the hardwood floors as she passed with each piece, she dragged out the changing table, the dresser and the rocking chair. Inside the nursery, she gathered up all of Nina's clothes in a box, her blocks and dolls and stuffed animals. On her knees she picked up the pull toys and big bouncy balls and tossed them into the box. She stuck her face into the box and breathed in so deeply she felt like she would pass out. Then she dragged the box out to the yard with the rest of the things. The next day, after Niko had finally fallen asleep, she packed a small suitcase and left San Antonio.

Niko moved away, too. He left San Antonio and kept moving. He finally stopped in Maine and tried to forget Texas and Mexico, the civil wars fought there daily. He had always considered that fighting in a war and leaving his country forever was a kind of death.

Coming through the river that night, the way so many were forced to cross the river to America, would not offer him an escape to freedom. His small family had been his salvation, but nothing was left. What haunted him most was the sight of Marta on top of the baby. Clutching at the body and the muddy earth where Nina lay, Marta wore a frozen expression with eyes and mouth agape. Her hair and clothes dripping wet, she held the baby to her chest, and rocked her back and forth in the shadows of the ebony trees.

Marta's mother moved across the border to her hometown in Díaz Ordáz, no longer able to subsist with her husband on the neglected farm. Marta stayed with her, finding refuge in a small pink house with a well-kept yard and a bougainvillea growing along its side wall; the purple flowers seemed painted on.

Marta moved from job to job earning minimum wage. She floated through life, not from here or from there. She rode the ferry every day to remember again the time she sailed across with Nina and Niko. Her husband had smiled to be pulling the rope with the bronze-skinned men. The baby hugged her neck and pressed her face to hers, their black curls making one figure against the blue green water. They all floated along together.

Alone now, Marta leaned against the ferry railing. A heron followed. It sprang, as if diving, from the ebony tree, with the thick ferry rope coiled around the trunk, its bark gray and smooth, and its branches fanning out in tiny yellow blossoms on that August day. The heron flew over the river, searching overhead, alighting on the banks on the Mexican side where the ferry met the ford. The water covered its delicate feet, and ebbed away in the tiniest waves back to the other side.

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## Blackbird

Maria Bernal had never laid eyes on a black person until she saw the boy who would become her son. Swaddled in a fleece blanket the color of the bright yellow Esperanza blooms that grew in front of her house in Laredo, the baby yawned, making a pink O with his mouth, closing his eyes tightly into two tiny lines, and making fists the size of the fingertip she held out and allowed him to squeeze.

“How long has he been here?” Maria asked Sr. Ruth, the nun at the orphanage, the very orphanage where she herself had spent seven years of her life. A hairdresser with her own beauty shop, Maria returned once a month to cut the children’s hair.

“Came just today,” said Sr. Ruth indifferently.

Maria eyed the baby boy curiously, touching his tiny cheek with a curled index finger. “What do they call him?”

“Baby. Baby Boy. I don’t know,” said Sr. Ruth thumbing through a stack of files. “I think the mother was afraid to name him. If she doesn’t name him, she doesn’t have to claim him. She’s Mexican and she said the father is Black. She could barely speak English. She had no idea where the father is. She only knows that she doesn’t want a black baby. Now here he is.” Maria had figured out the system during her own tenure at Sacred Heart Children’s Home. This one, she feared, would live out his first eighteen years of life in the orphanage or else, at best, have to go through the labyrinthine tunnels of foster care as solitary progeny of no one.

“People who want to adopt, always want babies, right? At least that’s how it used to be. Is that how it goes today?” asked Maria.

“Babies, yes,” said Sr. Ruth. “But this is Laredo. I know it’s 1964, but really, let’s be honest, who do you think is going to want him? In Laredo?” she said, her head cocked to one side.

“Me,” said Maria, the word like a reflex, like a hiccup coming forth as if she had no control over the response. Then rife with conviction, “I want him.”

“What will your husband say?” asked the nun, wide-eyed and mouth agape. “Why now? Why all of a sudden? You’ve been coming here for years to spend time with the children, but you never said anything before about wanting one of your own.

“Do you think I’m too old?”

“No, no,” she said falteringly, “You’re not too old.” Sr. Ruth studied Maria’s face under her furrowed brow, “Are you forty now?”

“Forty two,” Maria responded assertively.

“Well, no, you’re not too old. But, Maria, your husband? He’s quite a bit older, isn’t he? Sixty three? Sixty four?”

“Sixty four,” she said almost defiantly.

“Sixty four,” said the nun, shaking her head. “What are you thinking, mujer?”

“You know what I’m thinking, Hermana?”

As the baby in the Esperanza yellow blanket slept, his eyelids fluttered like luminous pink shells. His bee-stung lips moved as if suckling at his mother’s life-giving breast. But no one was there.

“I’m going to finish up with the children,” said Maria, “but maybe we can talk some more when I’m done?” Sr. Ruth shook her head sympathetically in response.

Maria walked down the long corridor leading from Sr. Ruth's office to a small room where the children waited for her. A line of several girls and boys had formed behind the tall stool where Maria had each of them sit for a haircut.

She put a long, white cloth cape around a skinny, adolescent girl who, painfully shy and awkward, looked down to let the long strands of hair shield her acne-covered face.

"You're looking so beautiful, Manuelita. You're turning into a beautiful young lady," Maria said, combing her hair. The young girl smiled and remained perfectly still while Maria sectioned and trimmed her locks.

Maria remembered well suffering through puberty and all of its painful results, the frightening changes in the body, right there in the orphanage with no one to comfort her, to reassure her, to brush away her loneliness, to share her own stories of adolescence—someone close to provide the human proof that she would survive it.

When she was a toddler, Maria's father, a laborer, died in an accident for which details had always remained vague. Her mother died of tuberculosis after years of working in appallingly bad conditions, both in the fields and in a clothing factory. At age eleven, Maria was sent to the orphanage, an unadorned three-story building on the fringes of downtown Laredo. When she first arrived at the orphanage, she had three meals a day for the first time in her life. She went to school and learned to cook and do domestic chores like laundry and housecleaning. But it wasn't like in the movies. No mommies and daddies came to the building for her. No one ever came.

When Maria was eighteen years old, she graduated from high school and followed the road that all eighteen year-old orphans must travel: she forever gave up the idea that she would

ever be adopted, that she would ever have a family. She left the orphanage as an emancipated adult.

Following a tip from one of the cooks in the orphanage, Maria went to work for an elderly lady, Doña Inez, who needed a full-time caregiver—one who could cook and clean and take care of the house where she lived with her son, a man approaching forty who had never married.

The son, Frank, was short and stocky. He had golden blond hair, like *pelos de elote*, thought Maria when she met him for the first time, soft and straight like that. His eyes were like blue glass. She soon learned that his appetites for food and drink were big. His elderly mother was gray-haired, with small black eyes and skin the color of pecans. She doted on her son constantly, but now only from the confines of a chair where she gently directed Maria to iron his shirts or make his favorite meals.

Maria spent every waking moment with Doña Inez. Most mornings, she worked in the gardens, following Doña Inez's sage instructions on how far back to trim the rose bushes in a front yard that was full of flowering shrubs and small trees. Majestic cypress trees like sentries stood on either end of the walkway. A magnolia tree taller than the small house spread out its simple leaves and its flowers like giant pearl ornaments. Tiny hummingbirds darted and dived, stopping suspended in mid-air before the allure of the wild jacaranda and its bright violet flowers or the Esperanza's yellow blooms as bright as the South Texas sun.

Maria helped Doña Inez to dress and groom. Each morning, she combed and braided her hair. The long plaits like ropes went past the old woman's waistline. Maria coiled them carefully into a bun at the nape of her neck giving Doña Inez a neat and regal appearance.

Maria cooked all of the meals, usually following Doña Inez's menus and recipes for caldos and guisados. They made tortillas from scratch at every single meal and baked bread each morning.

Doña Inez grew increasingly frail, lost her appetite and eschewed the delicious foods Maria enticed her with each day, preferring instead simple porridges, pudding and broths. She rested in her bed most of the day, the gas heater ablaze every second of that time to fend off the cold she complained of softly as she pulled the extra blankets that Maria brought to her up and around her shoulders. The doctor said there was nothing left to do but see to her comfort. One evening, Frank sat by his mother's bedside. The smell of the menthol rub that Maria rubbed on his mother's feet before putting wool socks on her was thick in the air. A humidifier by his mother's headboard bubbled forth its steamy clouds.

"Güero," said his mother. But that was never Frank's nickname; that was his father. "Güero" she said again.

"Mamá," said Frank. "Do you need something? What can I bring you?"

"Mi'jito," she said from beneath the pile of blankets. "Aquí está tu padre. Míralo, Por fin regresó. Ay viene El Güero por allí. Despues de tantos años. Míralo con sus ojos de azul ultramarino."

Frank slumped back in his chair recalling that the day El Güero himself had died, he kept mumbling between wakefulness and sleep and saying he saw his mother standing before him in a shower of light. Frank scooted the chair closer to his mother's bed and held her tiny, arthritic hand.

"Güero," she whispered.

"Go to sleep now, Mamá," he said soothingly. "Rest, dear mother."

On the way home from the funeral, Maria cried openly sitting next to Frank in the front seat. He drove without saying a word. When he parked the car in the driveway, she told him she would gather her things and leave in the morning.

“I guess I’m an orphan now, too,” he said suddenly, gripping the steering wheel. “Even at my age, huh?” he said nervously trying to smile. “I think this must be the loneliest a man can ever feel. I don’t know how you survived it,” he said.

Maria had never been too familiar with Frank. She had spent her days with Doña Inez while Frank was at his job at the smelter. In his evening hours he played cards with his friends, while she and the old woman talked or knitted or collaborated on ornate quilts they donated to the church poor.

With Maria, Doña Inez shared stories about her own childhood, her courtship with Frank’s father, the man everyone called “El Güero,” whose mother was German. She recounted how she and El Güero had prayed and prayed for a child and he was finally born when the couple was in their forties.

Doña Inez shared, too, that the disparity in their skin color and physical features was the source of tremendous bullying for the young Frank. The other boys accused him of being adopted whenever they saw him walking around town with his mother. They bullied him mercilessly because he was so short and because he looked different from everyone else.

Frank and Maria sat in silence for another moment before he spoke again. “Look,” he said. “I know you don’t have any place to go. Why don’t you stay with me? You’ve been taking care of my house for months now. Why don’t we just get married? I promise; you’ll always have a home. A girl like you deserves to have a home.”

The next day Frank walked into the kitchen and its early morning aromas. Maria crouched down before the oven and pulled out a loaf of bread.

“Buenos dias,” she said pouring a cup of coffee for him.

“It smells like my mother’s onion bread.” It was his favorite, according to Doña Inez’s stories to Maria about his penchant for savories and beer.

“Yes,” she said, “Your mother wrote down your German grandmother’s recipe for me just last week.”

Frank pulled back the chair from the table and sat down to drink his coffee. She served him a plate of eggs, sausage and the bread.

With her back to him, Maria washed the dishes at the sink, “Señor,” she said quietly, “I will stay in the house with you.”

Frank stood up and walked to the cabinets over the counter. He opened one, then another, until he found the one where the plates were kept. He walked back to the table, sat down and spooned half of his eggs and sausage and a slice of the onion bread on the other plate and placed it opposite from his place at the table. He stood up and pulled out the chair there. Maria dried her hands on her apron and sat down at the table with him.

Chewing on the onion bread, Frank cried. Maria sipped her coffee silently.

Frank napped on the living room sofa when Maria arrived home from the orphanage. She shook him lightly. “Frank. Please wake up. We have to talk.” He sat up rubbing his face with his small, thick hands. “What’s happened? His eyes, like water, pale as ever, were just visible over the sagging hoods of his eyelids. He was balding, and the remnants of his boyish blond hair existed only as stray wisps on top of his head.

“I want to adopt a boy. You know, from the orphanage. I want to adopt this boy I saw,” said Maria breathlessly.

“I don’t understand,” he said, rubbing his eyes again, “You said you didn’t want to have children. You said you didn’t want any children. You’ve told me that for twenty-five years. What’s happened? Hey, what’s going on with you?” He studied her face, wide-eyed and glowing in the dimness of the living room lit only by a small lamp on the side table.

“I want to be his mother,” said Maria withdrawing from him, putting her hands on her lap.

“Whose mother?”

“The boy. The baby. A newborn I saw at the orphanage.”

“Maria,” he said, taking her face in his hands and then moving them away, fingers flared, “I’m almost sixty-five years old. I’m an old man. What am I going to do with a baby?”

“What about me?” asked Maria exasperatedly. “I know I’m not young any more, but I’m not too old to be a mother. Your own mother...que en paz descansa....she had you when she was even older than me.”

“Yes, but she and my father prayed to God for a baby...for years. They lit candles. They saw the curandera...and the cura. For years they did that. They tried everything. They wanted a baby of their own. They wanted that for a long time. They both did,” he offered in protest.

Frank stood up sighing deeply, his stiff knees creaking. “Ay Dios, mujer, what am I going to do with a baby? You’re just excited you saw a cute kid. You’ll feel different in the morning when you have to go back to open up the beauty shop and stand on your feet all day.” Maria crossed her arms, over his bringing up the beauty shop. It was true. She did have to work. She was a housewife and a business woman. On a sudden whim when she turned forty, she

declared she wanted to open her own business. She wanted something of her own. She wanted to learn something new.

Frank supported every part of the endeavor. She attended beauty school, practicing on the señoras and the viejitos from the vecindad and the church. Frank built an addition to the small house and bought all of the accoutrements for Maria's Casa de Belleza. It wasn't a wholly lucrative enterprise, and Maria worked long hours, but it provided her with her own money now that Frank was retired. The salon was one large room which led directly to a hallway and her kitchen. She cooked pots of soups and stews or baked meatloaves or bread while she worked in the adjoining beauty shop.

The next day and for days after that Maria did not mention the baby to her husband. They grew distant from each other, saying nothing about the orphanage and very little on every other topic. Maria worked long hours in the shop. Frank busied himself around the house.

The following week, a young mother and her three daughters entered the beauty shop. The mother apologized for having to bring her small brood; she had no one to watch them, but she needed to have her hair done, as she was attending her niece's quince años later that evening. The two older girls who looked to be about twelve or thirteen sat politely. One held the youngest, a toddler of about two, on her lap. The other stared at the cover of a Photoplay magazine with Elizabeth Taylor on the cover on one of the chairs.

"Are you excited about going to your cousin's party?" Maria asked them, while she shampooed their mother's hair.

The two girls nodded shyly.

"I have to get ideas for their quinces, too" said the mother smilingly, staring up at the ceiling as Maria rinsed her hair.

Maria stared at the youngest girl while she wrapped the mother's hair in a towel. She wrapped her long brown hair in large pink rollers and sat her under one of the dryers. "Mind if I give the girls a snack while we wait for your hair to dry? I made some coffeecake this morning," said Maria.

"O, que amable, Señora Bernal. So nice of you," responded the young mother. "I know they won't say no."

Maria clapped her hands with a great flourish. "Okay, girls, ahora lo verán. Let's have some milk and cake." She swept up the youngest girl, cradling her in her arms as if she were a much younger infant. "¿Y tú, mi gordita? ¿Quieres un pastelito? The cherubic girl opened her eyes up wide, pursed her lips and nodded vigorously.

Maria turned to the mother, "¿Un cafesito?"

"O, sí, que rico," said the young mother.

Maria sat the girls at the table in the kitchen and prepared the pot of coffee. The girls downed large glasses of icy milk. Maria held a small plastic cup of milk to the mouth of the baby who drank happily sucking the edge of the cup.

"Huele a café," said Frank lumbering down the hallway. "Are you making...?" He stopped cold when he saw Maria doting on the three girls.

"Coffee's on, yes. And there's coffeecake si quieres. Frank, mira, this is Lucia, Carmen, and this chiquita is Juanita."

Frank sighed deeply turning his back to the girls to find his coffee mug in the dish drain. He poured the coffee and left the room quickly.

That night Maria lay in bed with her eyes open staring at the blue darkness coming through the window. Frank's heavy form fidgeted. He tossed and turned. He faced her back. He gave her his back. Finally he sat on the edge of the bed.

"Maria. I'm an old man. I don't know how long I'm going to live. The decades of working at that merciless smelter, the years of smoking and drinking, my bad circulation, and this pansa of mine," he said patting his protruding belly. "Me estoy acabando," he said. "I won't live forever."

"No one does," she said to the window. "Everyone dies."

After a moment, he spoke again. "God help us, but I will do what I can. I will help you. I will go with you and arrange to see if we can get your baby for you. And I will be as good to him as my dear old man was to me. I already know you will be as good a mother as my own. When I die, whenever that is, you will still have your little boy. He won't be alone. And you won't either. Te quedas con tu niño."

Silence filled the space between them. Finally Maria spoke again, "Viejo, the baby... The baby... He is... Es un negrito. The boy is black." She paused a moment. There was a perfect quiet and stillness, yet she could almost hear his stunned surprise.

"Frank," she continued, "I want him more than any other child I have ever seen. I spent seven years in that orphanage. No one ever came for me. He will be there for eighteen years. No one will ever come for him. No one. He will go out into the cold lonely world and there won't be a Doña Inez there. There won't be a Francisco Bernal to give him a home because he has no place to go. No one will do that for him. No one will come for him if we don't. Please understand."

Frank stared at his hands through the darkness.

"I think I can understand if you don't want to be this boy's father," said Maria. "But I want to be his mother. If we can't be his parents together, viejo, I will do it alone."

She could feel Frank moving in the darkness. He crawled underneath the blankets and turned his back to her.

“Bueno, vieja,” began Frank. “I will be a father to the boy. He will carry the name of Doña Inez y El Güero Bernal and my abuela Amsel herself and the Alemanes and the Mexicanos and these two Laredenses locos lying in this bed.

Maria bit her lip and closed her eyes tight, tight enough to see a blanket of stars in the blackness of the night sky.

Frank laughed heartily and said, “That was a good one, Maria. If you don’t kill me, you will keep me young forever.”

She turned to lie on her back and rested her hand in between them on the bed. He put his hand on hers. Neither one of them slept much that night, each imagining the days and months and years to come with the baby boy.

Maria decided on the name Felipe and Frank concurred. It seemed to them both a fine name, simple and dignified.

Adopting a baby, even then, was not without its scrutiny and formalities. They filled out forms and several questionnaires. They met with a committee of social workers who, at first, blanched at the sight of Frank, the portly older man with blond hair and blue eyes ambling toward them with his chubby hand outstretched to greet them, or Frank with his puffed out cheeks and ample jowls making funny faces at the baby in an attempt to make him laugh. Maria and Frank were subjected to many home-visits. A yard full of blossoming shrubs and trees and manicured green grass was the first thing the social workers saw. The house was

always neat and clean, smelling of lemon oil, or the warm, welcoming aromas of Maria's cooking, or the perfume of her salon products permeating the small house.

The social workers were most interested in seeing where the boy's room would be. Frank himself led the way to the closed door painted the green of the cypress trees in the front yard. He opened it and led them in to a room of freshly painted yellow walls. A mobile of stars and moons hung over a small cherry wood crib. Shelves on the walls held a menagerie of stuffed toys and Golden Reader books. A quilt made by Doña Inez and Maria together hung on one wall, and on the opposite one, a chest of drawers stood tall. Frank proudly pulled the chain on a small cowboy motif lamp there, illuminating a galloping bronco and a tenacious rider. In the center of the room a massive, sturdy rocking chair of cherry wood to match the crib portended the boy safe at last in loving arms in his very own room in his very own home.

There was no denying Frank's advanced age. His face was a map with lines etched hard by the sun. He was overweight and balding, and his short stature seemed diminished further by his stooped posture and slow gait, the results of a history of back problems suffered on the job. Even so, when he was younger, no one could predict he'd choose the life of a confirmed bachelor when women had always been drawn to him and his fair features. He had been engaged once to a girl from a wealthy family who called off the wedding. Everyone surmised he never recovered from that episode.

Instead he lived life hard. He played cards with his friends and drank every night, arriving home falling-down drunk once in a while and the next day accepting his mother's tearful reprimands and a bowl of her spicy menudo with gratitude and a promise never to do it again.

The first time Frank saw Maria, she was standing before the stove expertly flipping over fresh tortillas on the comal, and then shaping the cooked corn crepes into taco shells in a pan of sputtering oil, while also seeing to a pot of beans and a skillet of picadillo.

“Buenos días,” he said as she ground cumin and garlic in the molcajete, pushing down the volcanic stone pestle with all of her upper body strength. She smiled meekly at him, figuring he was the son she had heard so much about that first day from Doña Inez who painted a picture of saintly austerity in the blond, blue-eyed man.

His mother walked in to the kitchen just then bracing herself on the swinging door. Frank kissed her cheek as she said, “Francisco, this is Maria. She is the one I told you about that Hilda from the orphanage spoke of so highly.”

“Yes,” he said brusquely, avoiding eye contact with her. “Mucho gusto.”

“Igualmente, Señor,” said Maria noting his aloofness.

“Dinner will be ready soon, mi’jo. Don’t go too far,” said Doña Inez.

“I’m playing cards tonight with Hernandez and the boys,” he said pushing the door of the kitchen that led into the small dining room. His mother shuffled out after him and after a few minutes poked her head back in and said triumphantly to Maria, “Three places for dinner.” Doña Inez filled the awkward silence of the threesome with her talk about the astronomical prices at the grocery store, particularly for produce and meat. She recalled for them her ranchito in Sabinas, Mexico where her pets were goats and chickens, she milked cows every morning, and helped her father tend the corn fields.

Frank ate silently and hungrily, munching on taco after taco, and spooning up the last of the picadillo that spilled onto his plate.

Maria watched as Doña Inez ate a bit of lettuce and tomato, a spoonful or two of the beans. Clearly all of the cooking in the house would be for the son.

Frank thanked her for the meal, kissed his mother on the cheek and left for the card game.

Driving over to his friend's house, Frank thought of the girl, how thin and tall and pretty she was. Her skin like canela, her hair castaño, a clear copper color that shimmered. "Pajarita," he said smiling to himself before becoming serious, his look grave. How could he think that about her? They'd only just met. And he was old enough to be her father.

That was the first time he saw her. He realized that the second time he saw her, or really allowed himself to see her that way again, was that morning after the funeral. The woman of the house. Of his house. Like a loyal daughter she had cared for his mother and forever won his heart for that alone.

The thought of sending her out in his mother's absence made him feel all the lonelier. Selfishly, he thought, and impulsively he had asked her to stay. But with the invitation came the impromptu wedding proposal. He hadn't planned on that. He decided that night to rescind the offer. He figured he wouldn't have to. That in the stark light of day when their emotions over his mother's death were blunted, Maria would take her leave on her own. He never expected her to accept the proposal. And when she did, modestly, with her back to him, and the smell of yeast and onion and rosemary wafting through the air, like a ghostly summons of his happy childhood, he had to stick to his word to make a life with her.

Their life together was happy and busy. It was not a whirlwind romance. A priest married them in a small service early one Saturday morning. With neighbors and parishioners from their church, they shared a luncheon wedding feast of chicken mole that Maria prepared herself and served to everyone still wearing her white dress.

The couple traveled to Corpus Christi for a weekend honeymoon. They walked on the long, rough jetty where the greenish gray ocean waves crashed at their feet. Maria had never seen the ocean before. She had never eaten fried shrimp. It quickly became her favorite thing to eat. They were intimate in the ways that newlywed husbands and wives are. People on the beach stared at the odd couple: the much older blond blue-eyed man, short and squat, his unapologetic beer belly hanging over his Bermuda shorts, the hair on his chest already white, walking hand in hand with the much younger, skinny girl, her café-con-leche complexion, her wavy brown hair in a teenager's style, her body, likewise without the curves of someone more mature and old enough to be holding hands like that.

For a long time Frank had forgotten the youthfulness of his wife. She never stopped working, never stopped scouring clothes or washing baseboards, seeing to even the minutest of details in the little house.

Her work ethic was as demanding in the salon. She let her clients make appointments at all hours. If someone knocked on the front door after hours, she saw to their manicure or their haircut, no matter the time of day.

Even the mortuary a few blocks from the church sought out her services. If a grieving survivor requested it, the hair and make-up of the deceased would be done by Maria. She took special care applying the make up on the cold, hard faces comprehending that it would be the last image seen on earth by the loved ones of the poor muertitos.

“Maria, when my time comes,” joked Frank, “do me a favor and make me look like Alan Ladd?”

He smiled wryly. Unsmilingly, she waved a scoffing hand at him.

The work never ended. Maria was consumed by it. To Frank, seemingly over night, the young girl had become a hardened woman whose rough, sad appearance belied her true age. She'd never wanted children. She realized early on that Frank hadn't bargained for children. She couldn't make room in her heart for the idea. From the time she came to work in the Bernal house, she was consumed with work, with making her own money, gaining her own independence. Even in her marriage she was reserved, always guarding the secret close that she was intent on survival, that she could never again be put in a situation of being turned out on the street. The conviction with which she believed that turned her inward and inward and away from Frank.

It was only the effusiveness with which she brought to him the idea of adopting the baby that seemed miraculously to return her to that sparkling guilelessness of youth. She opened her soul to him again for the first time since the early days of their marriage over two decades before.

Frank saw to the boy's care while Maria worked. He changed his diaper and rocked him to sleep during the day. Maria took her turn in the early evening, bathing Felipe in the kitchen sink, dressing him in one piece pajamas covered in brown bears or yellow ducks and rocking him to sleep in her arms with only the glow of the cowboy lamp shining on them.

It was one of the few things she recalled from her time with her mother, her insistence that a small light remain in a dark room while a child slept. It was a creencia she'd long held to, believing that the light warded off the bad spirits that circled around them when they were most vulnerable, sleeping in their beds.

Over time, the small community got used to seeing the calico colors of the Bernal family. Frank's fair features paled next to Maria's brown skin and Felipe's slightly browner nutmeg tones. Maria's long chestnut hair and Felipe's short kinky orb of black, almost imperceptibly mound of fine curls contrasted with Frank's fine white and golden comb-over. Before Felipe was old enough to go to school for the first time, he had learned his letters and numbers at home. He spoke English and Spanish. He knew that he must not bother his mother when she was in the beauty shop. While she was at work, he was with Frank, whom he called "Papi."

They spent hours fishing in the river. Felipe became expert at marbles and catch. He and Frank built birdhouses that they put out in various places throughout the yard. They bought bags of wild birdseed at the feed store where the men called him "Little Frank" and gave him pieces of candy from a giant jar on the counter.

Frank and Felipe sat patiently on a bench in the backyard each afternoon to watch the birds. If they sat outside long enough, the birds descended to perch on the birdhouses and eat the seeds there.

"Mi'jo" said Frank one cool autumn afternoon. "Let me test you. How many kinds of birds do you know? Name them for me."

Felipe looked up and scanned the various birdhouses hanging from tree limbs in the yard. He smiled broadly and began, "That is too easy, Papi." He pointed here and there. "There are cardinals, red boy cardinals and gray girl cardinals," he said stretching out his words and looking up and all around the yard. "There's a pichón, some blue jays...oh, and a green jay, some palomitas, some sparrows..." The boy paused and looked around to see if there was another type of bird he had not yet named.

“I know there are other birds. I don’t have to look out there to know they are there,” said Frank fixing his gaze on the boy.

Felipe looked all around the yard again. “You mean the blackbirds?” asked Felipe looking at one just inches from the bench where they sat.

“Did I ever tell you about my Abuela Amsel?” asked Frank crossing his arms in front of him.

“Yes, your father’s mother. The one from Germany.”

“Do you know what the name Amsel means? It means blackbird. I love the blackbirds. They are the most common bird in North America, and maybe the smartest. You see them so much and so often, they fade away into the sky and the trees and the ground. It is as if they are invisible, but they are really there all the time and everywhere, tall and big and black.”

Felipe’s eyes followed the movement of the lone blackbird shaking its feathers and walking on its black spindly stick legs toward a place in the grass where the seeds always fell from the birdhouse.

When Maria was not working in the salon or cooking or cleaning, Felipe helped her in the yard. She weeded her flower garden in the front yard and the vegetable garden in the backyard.

On Sundays the three of them went to mass together, always sitting in the fifth row. In his room, there was a picture of Felipe as a little baby being baptized by Padre Juan, the water on his hair glistening like a constellation of tiny diamonds.

Every night Maria read to Felipe, and both she and Frank tucked him in. Maria gave her son a kiss on the cheek, then Frank gave him one, then Maria gave him one more before turning on the nightlight, patting his head and reminding him to say his prayers.

When Felipe was a little older, and went to a new place with his father, no one called him “Little Frank” anymore. They eyed him suspiciously as he followed close behind Frank who was now in his seventies and had trouble walking.

Adults eyed him furtively. Children were less discreet, staring and then whispering and giggling to each other behind cupped hands.

Felipe was very tall and he ran fast. His friends at school wanted him to play basketball, a game he didn’t care for. He joined the team and played well, but he didn’t like it when the boys on the other teams called him names.

He knew that his biological mother had been Mexican, just like everyone else in town. But his appearance would not convince them of that fact. Felipe also knew that his parents loved him. They fought the battles waged in all families where children want to stay up late or shirk chores, but it was indisputable that they loved him and were better allies than enemies.

Felipe went into his mother’s beauty shop late one night while she swept and mopped as she did every night after closing.

“Que sorpresa,” she said, since he never entered the shop. “What brings you here tonight, mi’jo?” she asked him sweeping under the chairs in the small waiting area.

“Will you help me with my hair?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” she asked, her voice betraying her confusion.

“I saw what you did for Mrs. Cantu’s daughter the other day. That curly-haired girl? You made her hair straight? Can you do that to mine?”

Maria leaned the broom against the wall and sat down in one of the chairs. “Did someone say something to you, mi’jo? Someone at school?”

“No, mom,” he said curtly. “It’s just me. Can you do it for me?”

“Do you think you will look more like the boys at school if I do that? Those boys with their brown skin and straight black hair. Are you trying to be like them?”

“I don’t want to be like them,” he said, pretending to examine his nails. “I just don’t want to look so different. They...You...You all are brown. I’m black. I just don’t want to look so different.”

“Felipe, mi’jo, if I try to straighten your hair, you will not look like yourself, but you will not look like those boys either. You will never look like them. We are all the same, but they will not ever believe that you look like them. And when you look at yourself in the mirror, you will know that you do not look like them. It is best to be who you are. It is best to look how you look.”

Although mostly bed-ridden and weakened by his poor circulation and emphysema, Frank fretted that even in the insulated world of Laredo, even there on the border, on the very margins of the United States of America, there was a brand of intolerance that he’d never considered in all of his seventy seven years.

“When Felipe was a boy, so small and smiley,” said Francisco to Maria one night in bed, “the people were affectionate to him. They were amused by the black boy in the cowboy boots, the black boy that speaks Spanish, the black boy that idolizes Mexican wrestlers instead of baseball or boxing heroes.”

He looked up at the ceiling, “Now that he’s older, they go back to their suspicions and fear and ignorance. He’s not a cute, harmless boy now. They want to discard him like a dog in

the street. That's not why we took him in. We took him in to make sure no one would ever discard him like that. He is our son. I can't stand for it. I can't stand for the cruel ignorance of the world." He turned to look at his wife, his face weary and worn.

"I love you, Frank," said Maria.

It was the first time she'd said the words to him. They held hands over the blanket and tried to sleep.

The next day, Frank was hospitalized after losing his balance and falling while walking around to stretch his legs. The doctor who examined him said that the dizziness was due to a lack of oxygen. Frank's emphysema would never be remedied. It was a certainty it would take his life.

The doctor advised Maria to take Frank home and make him as comfortable as possible for the rest of his days.

An ambulance pulled up to the house with the towering magnolia tree and returned Frank to his home and his family.

The next day Frank slept long, deep sleeps. Maria checked on him often, trying to rouse him with chamomile tea and chicken soup. He coughed and wheezed and gasped for breath and asked to rest.

When Felipe returned from school, he watched his father sleep, his eyelids fluttering like luminous pink shells. A humidifier bubbled forth its menthol fumes.

"Mamá," said Frank, his voice hoarse and weak. "Mamá."

Felipe held his breath for a moment, puzzled. Was his father dreaming?

"Mami," said Felipe when his mother came in to check on them. "Papi was talking in his sleep. He kept saying 'mamá.'"

Maria hid her panic. “Don’t worry. He is just dreaming. Go and do your homework now, okay? I’ll stay with him, mi’jo.”

Frank stirred and opened his eyes for a second. “Maria,” he said closing his eyes again, “My father and mother were here. I saw them both.”

When Frank died the next day, Felipe was at school, sitting in the principal’s office for fighting with another boy in his sixth grade class who called him names and made inappropriate remarks about his mother and father. Felipe was sent home in the middle of the day. With his books on his hip, he walked home, eager to see his father who would know what to do. The first thing he noticed was the black wreath hanging on the door of the Casa de Belleza. He walked into the kitchen to find the priest there talking to his mother who was crying into her hands. Surprised to see the boy there, she pulled him to her and hugged him and told him that Papi had flown home with the angels.

Felipe pulled himself away from his mother and gave her the note the principal had sent with the news of the fight with the other boy and the two-day suspension from school. Maria read the note and focused her eyes on him, gasping with her hand over her mouth to see the scratches on Felipe’s face, the welts and bruises the other boy’s hands had left. Felipe lowered his head and walked to his room and closed the cypress-green door.

He lay on his bed listening to the quiet for a long hour before opening the window, climbing out, and landing on the soft green grass below.

His loud lamentations shooed the mob of birds, scattered them, and kept them at bay on the telephone wires high overhead or hidden in the trees.

Only did the blackbird alight on the grass, oblivious to the boy's mournful cries. It flew down and hopped to the places where the seeds fell from the birdhouses. A blackbird against the backdrop of the blindingly yellow Esperanza blooms. A bird so black, it looked blue.

###

## Last Words

When Buddy was seven years old, his little brother Eddie was born. His father was a tall, burly man who worked at the smelter in Pobrecito. His mother was a slight pale woman named Esperanza. She looked to Buddy like one of those 1930s actresses he had seen twice already at the Rialto when the family vacationed on daytrips to Corpus Christi. She could have been understudy to Merle Oberon or Olivia De Havilland.

The midwife, Doña Hilaria, packed up her mochila. Buddy was glad that she was leaving. She had interrupted his home life as he had known it for so long. She was very old, toothless and slow-moving. He didn't like the way she looked or smelled. She smelled flowery and sweaty at once. Buddy had heard his mother tell his father that he smelled like chivo correteado when he'd been working outside in the sun all day, pulling the weeds in the garden and trimming their nogales and naranjos and laureles. Buddy could never get close enough to his daddy to see what that smell could be like. Maybe Doña Hiliaria smelled like that, like chivo correteado. He did not like the smell on the old woman.

She pulled her fist from a pocket in her apron and opened it to reveal a tiny white seashell. Buddy looked at it in the palm of her hand. Then he looked up at her before taking the shell and putting it in his pocket.

After night after the midwife had left the house, there was a flurry of movement and hushed voices that woke Buddy in the middle of the night. The baby was crying and so was his mother.

Buddy watched from the bay window in the front room of the house as his father carried his mother to the troquita in the driveway. They appeared to Buddy's mind like the movie stars who fall in love on that big screen in the Rialto. It made something in his heart move. His father

walked back to the house and told Buddy to get in the truck. Buddy climbed in and his father put the squirming, crying baby in his mother's lap. When his father climbed into the driver's seat, Esperanza rested her head on his shoulder. Buddy rested his head on Esperanza's arm. The baby cried.

At the hospital, as they wheeled Esperanza away, the nurse beckoned to the boy to come over and kiss his mother. "Digale 'adios'" she said with a hollow note in her voice that the boy recognized as something ominous and he shrank from the sound of it. His father held on to the pink, crying baby boy. With his leg, he nudged Buddy toward his mother lying there on what looked like a plank with wheels. Buddy looked back at his father, who looked pale now, too. He turned to his mother and kissed her outstretched hand and tried to focus on her eyes which were both blank and piercing at once. They seemed to look inside his heart.

"Take care of your little brother," whispered his mother as she turned her head up to search the ceiling. She closed her eyes and didn't see that Buddy was nodding. He looked toward his father holding the pink, crying baby and nodded some more. His father handed the baby to a nurse all in white and walked over to his wife lying with her eyes closed.

Buddy reached up to hold the nurse by the arm. He stood on his tiptoes and craned his neck to make sure that little Eddie was fine. Buddy had promised his mother. Wouldn't she be so happy when she came home to find that Buddy had taken care of everything?

They wheeled Esperanza away and Buddy's father followed shuffling quickly on the stark white linoleum for a few steps saying some words in Spanish that Buddy couldn't make out. They sounded like love words that Buddy had heard from his mother but not from this father who was usually either very quiet or very stern, or both.

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The day they buried her, Buddy was not allowed to go to the funeral. He stayed in the little house and stared out the bay window in the front room while Doña Hilaria, the ancient midwife who looked like she could be blown away in the beach breeze of Corpus Christi, fretted over him with bowls of warm capirotada or arroz con leche and glasses of warm milk. He walked into the room he shared with Eddie, but he could not reach into the crib. He pressed his face between the pine bars and cooed in syrupy tones he had only ever heard from his mother. He tried to reach in his little arm, but the baby was too far away. Doña Hilaria called from the kitchen. “¿Dónde estas, mi muchachito?” The sound of her voice sounded so far away, as if she were in a deep well calling out for help.

Buddy went into his parents’ room. He stood before his mother’s vanity and smelled her orange blossom talcum powder and looked into her mirror. He opened up a locket and saw a picture of himself on one side and knew that the other side must be for Baby Eddie. He didn’t know if his father would ever take a picture of the little baby. His mother fretted over such details. Buddy studied the chain for a moment and put it on. The heart-shaped locket rested all the way down against his belly button.

Buddy pushed the stool before the vanity across the short hallway and into the room where Eddie’s crib was. He could hear the little animal sounds he made, the grunts and groans and yelps. He saw his little pearly pink fingers reaching up to heaven.

Buddy pushed the stool up close to the crib and climbed on it. The seat was soft and swiveled to and fro. Buddy bent his legs at the knee and slowly, slowly stood up right. He looked at the baby in the crib before falling, hitting his chin against the railing of the crib and landing on the floor. His sharp cries summoned Doña Hilaria, who extended a liver-spotted hand to him. She cradled him in her arms. He could smell the stench of sweat but also his mother’s orange

blossom talcum powder combined. At last he sobbed and howled as he hadn't done so far. He knew his mother was gone forever. "¿Por que? ¿Por que, Doña? Yo quiero a mi mamá. ¿Dónde está mi mamá?"

"Ay. Ya, creatura," said Doña Hilaria. "Pues ¿No me ves, muchachito de me alma? Aquí estoy."

Buddy studied her leather-like face, the lines running so deep across her forehead, cheeks and around her mouth and chin. She looked like a map to him, the map of Texas he had studied so that he could figure out how far they had to drive from Pobrecito to the coast, to the beach where he loved to play with his mother, where they walked for miles collecting sea shells and putting them in the ample pockets of her dress, the beach where she carried him, dipping his toes into the waves and lifting him up to the sun before he went in too deep.

Buddy buried his face in the folds of Doña Hilaria's skirt. Now he smelled the peppery beach grass, the salt water. It conjured an image of his mother, dewy-skinned and bronzed by the sun, her disheveled hair, curly, but so pretty, like the guardian angel from his catechism book, the angel hovering sweetly over the little boy and the girl on the rickety bridge swinging precariously over untold horrors from some other world they did not yet know.

With a start, he looked up at Doña Hilaria's face. For a second, he saw his mother, and then he saw the angel. He blinked and in an instant, he was staring into the blued cataracts of Doña Hilaria's hooded eyes.

She took the locket in her gnarled hands. With her thick thumb nail she opened the locket. In it, was the picture of Buddy and one of the Baby Eddie, smiling back at him.

###

## Lobo

“What’ll you do when he makes dirty?” Ana’s father, Don Felipe had never used a euphemism before for “cagar” or any other vulgar term that named a bodily function. It was as if in front of the tiny beige puppy, he was self-aware and for once in front of his own daughter, also willing to be polite.

“They sell wee wee pads now, Dad. Even at the Mega-Mart,” said Ana. “And I’m not the one who’s cleaning up after anyone in this house any more. This little guy is all yours. Your responsibility.” She scooted the pup toward the pad in the corner of the small room where her father’s television blared. Judge Judy with eyes bugged out, spat while she pounded her gavel and offered her verdict to a plaintiff and defendant who squared off, appeared to wear their Sunday best, clean and neat while they aired their dirty laundry.

“Wee wee pads,” said Don Felipe putting on a high-pitched child’s voice, mockingly and drawing out the vowels of each word. “En mis tiempos, dogs lived afuera, not inside the house con la gente. Que barbaridad. My mother, hell, your mother would never allow a dog in her kitchen or in her sala.” He crossed his arms in front of him and glared at the puppy with its tail between its legs at the loud, tense tone of Don Felipe.

Ana patted the dog’s head and soothed him with sweet syrupy coos: “Hey, boy, shhh, shh, shh. You’re okay. You’re okay.”

Don Felipe shook his head vigorously, the exaggeration meant to show his disdain. He sighed deeply and loudly. “Que cosas,” he said, looking at the dog.

“Dad, you need a dog. You’re all alone now. This little guy will bring comfort and companionship,” said Ana crouching down to pat the dog wagging its tail now and panting, as if smiling.

“Ay Dios. You are describing a lady,” said Don Felipe waving his hands and looking away from Ana and the puppy.

Ana made a face as if she smelled something unpleasant. “Dad, I just thought that since you lost Lobo, you would want another dog around the house,” she said.

“Lobo era un perro,” said Don Felipe. He made a circle with his thumb and index finger and drew his hand down before his chest. This was a gesture Ana hadn’t seen in a long time. The older men in Pobrecito gestured this way to make a point, usually one steeped in masculinity or machismo. “I didn’t need no wee wee pads ni nada.”

“You also didn’t use any kind of flea and tick prevention. Nothing for the heartworm.” Ana knew that the inherent accusation in her words might hurt her father’s feelings. Her face softened and so did her tone. “I’ll help you with all of this, apa, okay?”

“I don’t got the money for all those pills and shots and things,” said Don Felipe. “I hate hospitals.” He rubbed at the stubble on his chin and looked at his thumb nail.

“You have to be humane, apa. You can’t just chain up dogs in the shade of the naranjo in the backyard anymore.”

“I never did that to Lobo,” said Don Felipe angrily. Ana could see his eyes narrow.

“Well, you need a dog house for when it rains. And please bring him in when it gets to be too hot outside,” said Ana.

“Que tonteras,” said Don Felipe staring blankly at the television set. “Lobo no andaba con esas mañas.”

“Dad, taking care of a puppy isn’t like getting a bunch of chicks and letting them roam around and fend for themselves in the backyard,” said Ana. She sat on the floor. The puppy sniffed at the pad.

Don Felipe brought his fist up over his mouth. Ana knew she had made him angry this time. She stood up quickly. “¿Sabes que, hija? ¿Sabes que? Mejor vete. Get the hell outta’ here. Nobody gonna come in here and tell me nothing about nothing.”

“Apa...”

“You gonna blame me for your mama, too? And for what else?”

“Dad, don’t be silly. I didn’t say that, Dad...”

Don Felipe went into his bedroom and slammed the door.

Ana looked at the puppy now wagging his tail and gently gnawing on the leg of a chair. Loudly now she said, “Dad, I think you need an older dog. Let’s get an older dog.” She craned her neck to listen, but no sounds came from other end of the house. Don Felipe did not respond. “Dad? Dad? Dad, I’ll see you later, okay?”

Again, not a sound came from down the short hallway. “Come on, little guy,” said Ana. She rolled up the wee wee pad and pushed open the screen door. The puppy skipped through the doorway and down the sidewalk with her.

“When Don Felipe heard two car doors slam and heard the motor start and then fade away in the distance, he walked toward his highboy dresser. He touched a framed photo of his wife smiling back at him. His hand went to a small wooden box next to the photo. “Lobo,” he said softly through lips that trembled.

###

## Rolodex of Saints

“What’d this guy bring to the baby Jesus?” Amy asked, plucking the figure of the wise man from the small glass nativity scene I kept on display in the office year-round. I ignored her and turned my face back to the computer monitor. “The Wise Men. They’re like magicians, right?” she asked, giggling, holding the figure of Gaspar between her thumb and index finger, waving it back and forth.

“Not magicians,” I said, shaking my head. “Magi. Nothing to do with magic.”

“Right,” she smirked. “Then what? Voodoo? Good luck charms?”

“Don’t you have a phone to answer or something?”

Amy, an office assistant, persisted in her daily lunch time visits to my office. Chubby and amiable, she dropped off my mail, then munched on her peanut butter sandwiches and Fritos or slurped down the cup of ramen she’d cooked up in the faculty lounge microwave next door to my office. Then she’d return to her cubicle in the English department workroom.

“Remember when that kid broke your Mary? Who was he? Cooper’s grandson?”

My colleague, Bob Cooper, had brought his grandson visiting San Antonio from some place in California to meet his hall-mates. “He’s like autistic, right?”

I nodded. “Hyperlexia.” I knew a lot about autism. My sister was never diagnosed and labeled instead “mentally retarded” when we were kids. She didn’t have echolalia. I wish she did. I wish she could talk at all.

The tall, thin boy, blue-eyed and sweet-faced, even handsome in a Jimmy Stewart kind of way, kept repeating, “Are you holy? Are you holy?” as he eyed the altar—the small table with the nativity, a bible, the biography of St. Therese Lisieux, a boxed rosary, and figurines of saints.

“May I hold it? May I hold it?” he asked me, drawn to Our Lady of Sorrows, the figure of Mary in dark purple robes, her exposed heart pierced by seven daggers.

“Josh,” said his grandfather. “Don’t touch.” The boy had already picked it up so gently that he dropped it on the floor.

The handle of one of the daggers broke off her heart with a “plink” and slid under my desk.

“Oh, no, no, no, no. Did I do a bad thing? Did I do a bad thing?” Asked the boy, shaking his fingers like five thermometers.

“No, no, no! I insisted, conscious suddenly of my own echolalia. “I can glue it back on,” I said. “It’s nothing. It’s nothing.”

“Oh,” said the boy looking up at one corner of the ceiling. Then he laughed a laugh that sounded both genuine and forced at once. “Why are you going to glue it back on? Why are you going to glue it back on? Why don’t you take it out? Huh? Maybe you can take the knife out?”

“Come on, Josh,” said Bob pulling the boy by his skinny pale arm speckled with a constellation of brown and red moles.

“Thanks for coming by, Josh.” I said, over-enunciating each syllable. I nodded at Bob who mouthed out “Sorry.”

“Okay,” replied Josh looking up at the ceiling. “I’m sorry I broke your heart. I’m sorry I broke your heart. I’m sorry I broke your heart.”

“That’s all right,” I said and closed the door behind them.

Amy held the small figure of Mary. “What’s with the daggers? Do they represent like the seven deadly sins or something?”

“Sorrows,” I said, pretending to concentrate on a student essay.

“Oh,” she said, sizing up the figure. “Why do you keep this stuff here in your office anyway?”

I didn’t respond. I turned the page of the student essay and kept reading.

Amy threw her head back and took a swig of her Monster Energy drink. “Want to get a margarita after work?” she asked. “Let’s hang out, man.”

“I need to hit the gym,” I said, knowing Amy would rebuff the suggestion of joining me for that.

“Screw that,” she said. “If you change your mind, call me. We’re gonna be at The Flying Saucer,” she said, tossing her can in my waste basket. She flipped the light switch off and on repeatedly.

“Get out of here, you weirdo!”

“See you,” she said, leaving me in the dark, her laughter echoing down the hall.

I turned to the computer monitor and scanned the in-box messages. I searched through the pile of mail Amy had left. I slumped back in my chair and stared at the altar. Amy’s suggestion of meeting at the bar made me feel anxious. I opened the small refrigerator under my desk and pulled out a can of diet Coke. I swallowed big gulps of it and belched. Even though the thought of it made me feel nauseated, I could almost taste the white Bacardi rum I used to mix with the soda, eschewing the lime altogether and eventually switching to the vodka or gin that I preferred before the night was over. “That fucking Amy,” I said out loud and then felt bad about it. She didn’t know any better. She didn’t know my secrets. She didn’t know a thing about me. She had no idea what the seven daggers were about. She had no idea.

“Who’s it tonight?” I said to St. Therese, St. Jude and St. Anthony. They stared back at me, and the silence rang in my ears disguising the thought I could not quiet of the dark, smoky setting of The Flying Saucer, a shot of tequila and a Black and Tan I could nurse with the girls and their inane conversations and confessions before going home to my own well-stocked stash of booze under the kitchen sink. “Looks like it’s you,” I said to St. Anthony. He cradled a book and a baby in one arm and a bouquet of long-stemmed lilies in the other. The baby Jesus, like a tiny boy scout, held up a three-finger salute. St. Anthony, face turned upward, stared at the corner of the ceiling. “I’m lost,” I said to preface the prayers I whispered next.

I arrived at my house late that evening and decided I had to call the neighbor’s kid to cut my grass on the weekend. He came over with his lawn mower and his iPod, and I paid him twenty bucks for fifteen minutes of work. He ran the gas mower evenly across the little yard, texting as he went. He didn’t edge the sidewalk or cut back tree branches. Easy twenty. My yard was spare and manicured. No plants. No trees, save for an Esperanza bush that grew wild and climbed over the side cyclone fence, spilling its flowers into the street.

Inside the front door, I clicked on the television. A show about hoarders. The subjects of the show were lost, lonely souls. This one from a broken home. That one abused by an uncle. This one grew up in poverty. That one was abandoned by her mother and later by her husband.

We all have triggers.

I had mine, too, and understood them. I’d gotten into a kind of retail therapy years before when I first started teaching at a community college in San Antonio when I was twenty four.

I’d met a teacher that first year. Steve. He was thirty five and mourning the recent death of his mother, from whom he’d been estranged for years. He visited my office and shared stories with me about hitchhiking, living in Whitehorse in the Yukon or traveling through South

America. He'd never married and seemed a bit of a flirt, but not with me. We talked every day. He talked. I listened. He regretted his broken relationship with his mother. Other times he criticized her for being a dilettante, a bad cook, an inattentive mother. Over time I became used to our meetings after classes. I considered him a pitiful guy—odd and worthy of my sympathy and not much more. For both of us it was our first teaching job, but I came by the work honestly, a good student my whole life, an obedient daughter to my migrant worker parents, a lonely sister. He'd dropped out of school, seen the world, ridden trains, did everything but work a real job. He ended up in Texas and got his master's degree at Texas Tech.

The secretary and some of the other girls were curious about him and told me they envied the time I'd spent with him on a daily basis. My feelings for him were blunted by the focus I had on my work. As a first-year instructor I had a lot to read and research and write. I'd always done well in school, mostly motivated by the pressures my parents put on me to succeed. They had come to the United States from Monterrey. When we weren't up north, my father worked for a construction company, my mom in a Mexican food restaurant where she dressed in a China Poblana outfit and made tortillas all day. They were simple people, but demanding, and my father was particularly strict. Tall and lean, he had only to raise his voice, his big moustache moving with his big dark lips, and I bent to his will. I could never go out with friends or date boys. I had to make straight As. Even in college, I was so intent on doing well, on keeping my scholarships that I eschewed all the diversions that befall college kids. I called them every Sunday night and reported my grades to them. My mother would say she wished she could understand what I was talking about, but she was proud of me just the same. My father responded with silence. "Hello?" I would say. "Papá, are you there?" He would end the conversation with admonitions about boys being the undoing of the family's investments in my

future. He told me to stay away from “esos pinches gringos” because they’d only take advantage of a humble Mexican girl.

Even so, I developed a rabid interest in boys in college. I loved to look at them during my classes. But I was too shy to talk to them. Cystic acne covered my face. Big, red pustules throbbed and threatened to explode if I so much as sneezed. That quieted the feelings of longing I kept to myself while my imagination played out unlikely love scenes with romantic boys who returned my affection with passionate kisses that magically made my pimples disappear.

My mother was quite beautiful, with her cinnamon skin and her lustrous hair. She had always been full-figured and jovial. Suddenly, she’d lost thirty or forty pounds. I thought she was on one of her many crash diets she attempted in order to keep my father at home—he and his philandering ways and the viejas he saw on the sly. But my mother was keeping secret the terrible fatigue and nausea she felt for months, the blood in her stool and the roiling, searing pain in her abdomen. She was dead of stomach cancer in a matter of months. I inherited her altar table, the little gold Milagros and a cavalcade of saints—chipped and ancient figurines that had belonged to her own mother. She had prayed to them so often. When she died she was clutching the figure of Our Lady of Sorrows the daggers left marks on her palm when the hospice nurse pried it out of her hand.

My father moved to Houston with one of his girlfriends and calls me once in a while to borrow money. I revert to my old ways, reporting to him the good work I am doing, the compliments from my chairperson and dean. I still hear silence on the other end.

As usual, Steve arrived at my office after his lunch hour. He slumped in the chair next to my desk and told me that he’d just come from the dentist, that his gums were receding because

he'd not taken care of his teeth for all those years he was on the road. "Are your gums like mine?" he asked me. I felt self-conscious and covered my mouth with my hands. I'd worn braces in high school, and my teeth were even and clean, my gums not the least bit inflamed. But no one but my dentist had ever seen my mouth up close or my face, pimply and red and scarred from the ravages of that old skin condition that still lingered.

"Let me see," he said, grabbing my wrists and pulling my hands away from my mouth. He relented and offered, "I'll let you see mine. Give me your finger." I gave him one hand. Holding it with both of his, he shaped it like a gun and took the point of the index finger and brought it up to his mouth. He ran my finger along his gum line as if he were writing with it. I could feel the bumps and ridges, even his teeth. It felt like I was holding his whole life on the tip of my finger. After a few seconds he said, "Feel that?"

I pulled my hand back and rested it on my lap. I didn't wipe it, but it seemed to tingle as the saliva dried off.

Something happened that day that I would not return from for a very long time. I started to notice when female students came by his office. I timed their visits and found pretense to interrupt them if I felt the girls were in there too long or laughed too loudly. The cavalcade of tank-topped, blue-jeaned coeds never ended.

Steve was handsome. Movie star handsome. Six feet tall, lean, tanned and blue-eyed. His brow ridge and jaw line, broad and boxy, gave him an almost cartoonish Disney prince or Ken doll look, but for the crooked nose he'd broken playing football when he was teenager. His teeth, big and yellow, fit somehow behind his full lips. During our conversations I couldn't take my eyes off his mouth or the tiny mole just under his right eye.

I started losing weight and buying sexy clothing and waited for him to notice me. I filled the bedroom of my house with dresses and blouses and pencil skirts. But the acne on my face, red and unsightly, kept me from being too bold.

I'd never partaken of alcohol like the kids did in high school and college. I'd never even considered it something I wanted to do, never had an urge to try it. But in those endless nights in my apartment, I turned to it. Maybe it would quiet my anxiety; maybe it would dull my constant thoughts of him. Maybe it would bring sleep. It took hold. Bleary-eyed and buzzed, I dialed his phone number, heard him answer on the other end and hung up. Other times, sober and nervous, my hands shaking and sweating, I called him and asked him ridiculous questions like could I borrow his textbook because I'd lost mine, had he seen my favorite pen in the English department workroom, did he know when our chairperson's birthday was.

I showered him with presents. When I shopped for clothing for myself, I bought him books and CDs, watches, a leather satchel. He stopped visiting the office. I was too shy to make a move and went on about my business.

I went to work and taught my classes. I researched first-year experience offices in colleges and universities and developed a program at my own school. I presented papers on the topic at other colleges. After a couple of years I won a handful of teaching awards. I researched and wrote and graded. I drank all night every night, straining to concentrate, staring at the phone. By three or four in the morning I was in the shower, leaning there and vomiting. I was always in the office and at my desk by seven o'clock. I never missed a day of work.

Afternoons I shopped at the mall, buying sheer blouses and silky skirts. Walking down the hallway to class one day, I heard a student say to a friend, "I love the way she dresses. She could be pretty except for those zits."

I stopped at liquor stores on the way home a couple of times a week. I made sure not to visit the same one more than once a month. The thought of running out of beer or wine or gin kept me well-stocked. I hoarded booze and clothing for years.

Semester after semester, I watched Steve's every move—when he went to lunch or class. He lived near the campus, so I drove by his apartment three or four times a day. If his red Civic was there I felt at ease and drove home with the index finger that had grazed his teeth inside my own mouth. If his car wasn't there, I parked up the street and stared at my rearview—sometimes for hours—until his car came into view.

I never saw him with the librarian or with the dean's secretary or with the graduate student he was rumored to have dated over the next few years. Like Cinderella's step-sisters with big fat feet, I clomped around campus and pined for him. I had no glass slippers in my sizable collection of dozens and dozens of shoes—strappy sandals, stilettos, open-toed, flat. I piled shoe boxes on top of each other. The rickety pyramids spilled out onto the bedroom floor. I had no more room in my ample closet. I had dozens of pairs of slacks, hundreds of blouses and skirts. My armoire was bursting with lingerie that no one saw. At night I would get drunk, put on a cute cami or bra and panty set from Victoria's Secret and cry along to Ana Gabriel singing her hoarse love anthems and despecho songs.

I didn't hit bottom. I skidded along face first for a long time. One Friday night in late April, drunk on vodka, I drove to Steve's apartment. A small, two-room efficiency, it was mostly empty, dusty and dark. I caught him by surprise. He seemed aloof at first, but became talkative after a short while. A kitchen table in the middle of the front room seemed to hold his entire life—mail and bills, books and newspapers, a small electric typewriter, three baseballs, a glove, a tea kettle, one plate and two forks, a small sauce pan, a pen, cans of

Skoal, cough medicine, a can of bug spray, nail clippers and floss. The backroom was a bedroom with no furniture but a small twin bed. There was no light fixture, not even a bare bulb in the bathroom. I noticed a tube of Revlon Blush Me Pink lipstick on the sink. I imagined it belonged to the librarian or the secretary or the grad student.

We listened to Neil Young's Harvest and drank Tecate. He typed while we sat there in the quiet darkness. He claimed to hate computers. He said he hated all technology and still typed everything, his notes and lectures and assignments. Letters to friends or to his father, he typed or else handwrote them in beautiful cursive that reminded me of the handwriting of Mrs. Henkel, my second grade teacher.

He pulled a bottle of pisco out of his freezer. We drank some more and chain-smoked. He typed quietly, a big smile on his face, a cigarette hanging from his lip. He pulled the paper from the roller with a great big movement, waved it around and then presented it to me like Vanna White.

I read the letter which said, "M—You have power. You must harness it in some way and use it. You must take control. Take charge. You have the power. I'm yours."

I read it quietly, my eyes moving fast across the page to reread the lines. Steve laughed hard, a fake kind of forced, loud laugh. He put his hands on his stomach like it was hurting him, all the laughing. He pounded the table causing the baseballs to roll off and bounce across the floor.

I thought about the message. Even drunk, he must have meant something by it. The opposite? What power?

I pecked at the typewriter and read aloud: 'The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.'

Steve whistled. "You type faster than I do," he said.

“Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country.”

“Whew! You’re fast. There’s smoke coming out of that thing.”

“Now is the time for me to harness the power.”

He took a long, slow drag of the Marlboro light and exhaled. He said nothing. He was flat, like all the air and blood had gone out of him.

I took another drink and continued. Giggling and reading aloud, I typed, “Dear Steve, I am going to harness the power and make love to you on your tiny twin bed. I think you are a silly baby because you sleep on a baby bed and don’t have a light in your bathroom and that is the only room out of two in your whole apartment with a mirror. Don’t you want to see your creamy lovely face and your sweet lips? Don’t you want to see how pretty you are? I love you, Stevie Baby Doll. Your friend, M.”

I pulled out the paper and giggled covering my mouth with my hand.

Without looking at me, he dropped the cigarette in an empty beer can while he said almost in a whisper, “Get out. Get out. Get out right now.”

I was drunk and thought he was joking. At first I started to laugh until he added, “Get out now, you ugly thing.” He said it with no feeling. But I could see his dead eyes.

I whipped around the room looking for my purse. “Get out,” he said and then without raising his voice, added, “You stupid, pizza face!”

I started to cry. I couldn’t find my purse. I looked around. “Wait!” I said and reached out to touch his arm, his face.

“Don’t you ever touch me. You’re so gross. You know what I do when I talk to my friends? I tell them about you and we laugh. We laugh so hard because you want me and you can

never have me. You are so worthless. Get out!” I saw him reach down and grab my purse. He threw it out the open window to the parking area below.

I reached out for him once more and saw his face, twisted and crazy. I only remember struggling to unlock the door, then stumbling down the creaking stairs. I picked up my purse and ran to my car.

Driving home, I was hysterical. The drunkenness and tears blinded me. I feared being stopped by campus police that patrolled the area in the evening. I parked my car, put my head on the steering wheel and cried.

I heard a tap on my window and a muffled “You okay?” I looked up to see a fat lady in an oversized T-shirt and sweat pants. “You okay? Can I help you?” She was toothless and wrinkled, her mouth contorted in unsightly ways to say the words.

“I’m fine” I said, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

“Okay,” she said nodding. She disappeared behind her front door. I had driven past the house countless times. Amy called it “The House of the Perpetual Yard Sale,” as every bit of the front lawn was covered—old toilets, washing machines, lawn mowers, broken bird baths. The rest was faded and chipped yard statuary—gnomes and fairies, a small army of St. Francis and his menageries, several wise men bowing down before the many stray dogs that settled there waiting for the woman to feed them cheap dry dog food which they devoured.

I waited a few more moments and tried to calm myself down before starting the car again. I saw several Mary’s in various poses of devotion all in a circle. They looked to me for a moment like women praying for each other.

I arrived home that April night and prayed to my mother's saints. I'd been so out of control for so long—shopping for clothes and shoes, for acne creams and remedies, for presents for Steve and booze for me to quiet the longing.

I stumbled into the living room, tripped on my small altar, and hit my cheek on the corner of the coffee table. I vomited there and said these words aloud in a feverish, weeping whisper and don't remember anything else: "St. Anthony, patron saint of lost things, help me find my way back to myself. St. Jude, patron saint of lost causes, here I am. Find me. Help me. St. Therese, of the child Jesus, the little flower, guide me to your confidence in Christ. Our Lady of Sorrows, O, afflicted, forsaken, desolate Mother of God, fount of tears, sea of bitterness, solace of the wretched, help me, I pray to you. Or I will take the seven daggers of your heart and stab my own. I want to die. I want to die. I want to die."

I gave up drinking that day. The figures on the altar were like AA sponsors I talked to in the deepest part of the night when all I wanted was a drink. I busied my mind with my books and my papers and tried to ignore the feelings—the cravings, gigantic and loud. Alcohol was oxygen. The nights were endless. I'd talk to those saints who had heard all of my poor mother's problems about my cheating father and the cancer. Now they heard all about my own disease, my secrets, my confessions and obsessions. I sat before them every night, watching the table as if it were a television, watching them until I fell asleep.

I managed to avoid Steve for the next couple of weeks before the end of the spring semester. I was teaching summer school, and he was traveling to visit friends in Maine. I felt calm again. Almost whole. Maybe the distance helped. Maybe my prayers were answered. Maybe my mother was watching me from heaven and helping me recover my life. I don't know.

One day in early August, my phone rang. It was Steve calling from Houston. He said he was on his way back to San Antonio. He wanted to see me, he said. It had been a long time since we'd talked.

Hours later, he rang my door bell and I felt nothing. No regret. No pangs of longing. No nervousness.

"What's all that?" he asked nodding toward the altar as he entered my living room. "You really believe in that stuff?"

"What stuff?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah, you Mexican Catholics. You love your candles and your saints."

"Can I get you a Coke or water or something?"

"Is it holy water?" he laughed and pounded the arm of the chair.

I made a big show of rolling my eyes and shaking my head.

He stayed for a few minutes and we exchanged niceties. It was a conversation like the first ones we'd had. Just two friends talking. I felt sad and sorry that our early friendship had been replaced by my obsessive behavior. He knew how I'd felt about him before. I wanted him to be just as certain that I was back in control, accepting of the fact that he never really had romantic feelings for me. It was such a sense of satisfaction, but something tugged at me. I felt like a baker carrying a ten-tiered cake on a high wire. As he left, I felt that it all might unravel and tumble down to the ground. It was the same kind of feeling I struggled with a few times a day when I wanted nothing more than to have a drink.

The next day, he called again. It was late and I'd been asleep for a couple hours. He wanted to come over. To give me something. A present he said.

In shorts and a t-shirt, I opened the door for him. He entered wearing the same clothes from the day before. He talked loudly and I thought he might be drunk. “Tah! Dah!” he said, holding up a large bundle wrapped in a trash bag. He put it down on the floor at my feet with a thud. “Got a knife or something so we can open it up?”

“Sure,” I said walking toward my kitchen.

“Got anything to drink?” he called out. “Beer or something?”

“No,” I said, “but how’s this?” I gave him a steak knife and a bottle of Topo Chico.

“That’s horse piss!” he said. He wrapped his arms around his stomach and made a big show of laughing. “You drink this shit?” He took a big gulp of it. “So what’d you do today?” he asked me.

“Summer school,” I said. “Got an eight o’clock tomorrow.”

He shrank back, his smile evaporating. “Oh, yeah, okay. I’d better go. But open your present, okay?”

“You didn’t have to get me anything,” I said, remembering the gifts I’d lavished him with and which he had accepted embarrassedly, never gratefully or graciously. I suddenly remembered the St. Christopher medal in fourteen karat gold I’d given him one Christmas. He laughed at and said he’d hang on his rearview mirror “with some fuzzy dice.”

“It’s nothing,” he said examining the bundle. “Just saw it on the drive home yesterday and thought you might like it. Hell, after all the things you’ve given me over the years? You’d better not make a fuss.”

“I won’t,” I said, eager to see what he’d gotten.

With the knife he cut the masking tape wrapped three times around the package. With both hands he pulled and ripped the black plastic to reveal a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary.

About three feet high, it tottered as he put it on my coffee table. “Yard sale,” he said. “You know that white house by the college on Dewey?” Lady’s always selling something out front? Fucking hoarder. Looks like she has five houses worth of stuff out on her lawn any given day.”

“Yes,” I said. “I know it.” I knew it. I’d seen the statue there on that lady’s lawn often over the years—a member of that circle of the praying Mary’s. I’d noticed it did not bear a fetching resemblance at all to the doe-eyed, beautiful Mary imprinted in my mind since childhood. Her face was thick, masculine. “Thanks, Steve,” I said, imagining that Mary would spend her days in the backyard hidden from view of the neighbors.

Steve moved to hug me and awkwardly planted a hard kiss on my cheek. In an instant he squatted down at my feet and laughingly mimed kissing them.

“What the hell are you doing?” I said, stepping back away from him.

He laughed loudly again and sat down on the couch. “I’ve been feeling bad all this time. Feeling bad at how I’ve treated you.”

“Don’t worry,” I said crossing my arms. “I’m okay. We’re friends. I’m fine.”

“Nah,” he said. “I just didn’t think you should get involved with a guy like me.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“Look,” he said. “Maybe it would work between us if we tried. Would you want that?”

I studied his face, almost wanting to feel the desperation of the recent past, but in that moment as he pleaded, I couldn’t. It was still handsome Steve. But I couldn’t muster the feelings and I imagined that’s what impotence felt like for a man. Had he felt that way, too, like I was such a willing girl and he couldn’t even push out a feeling of affection? He could have taken terrible advantage of me, toyed with my feelings, used me for sex, but he never had.

“I’m a little surprised,” I said finally.

“What’s in there?” he said nodding toward the closed door at the end of the short hall.

I didn’t want him in my room where the mountains of clothes were, where every inch of the floor was covered with shoes.

“My bedroom, but I don’t think we should do this now. I think you’re drunk. Let’s talk tomorrow, okay? Let’s watch TV and you can sober up and we can talk tomorrow.”

“Let me in there,” he said.

“Steve. Stop. There’s no way.”

“It’s not like that,” he said. “I just want to see your room. Can I?”

I looked at the clock on the wall. It was past midnight and I dreaded my early morning class. “Why don’t you sleep for a bit, okay? I’ll take the couch.”

He stumbled to my bedroom. He left the door ajar. I sat on the couch and stared at the statue. I noticed a crack along the top of Mary’s head, just underneath the halo. I ran my index finger across it and felt it move. A small copper hair seemed to peek out through the crack. I moved back and then closer to see what it was. I pushed at the top of the statue slightly and another copper hair popped out, and then the head of the cockroach and then an army of them big and brown poured out of the top of the head. I knocked the statue over. I screamed. The statue rolled slightly on the floor moved by the mass of roaches making their escape onto my living room floor.

I stepped on them. I dug in with my feet, but they jerked back to life and kept crawling all around me. They moved this way and that as if searching for something. Crawling and moving to where? Why? What were they doing there in the darkness of the statue? There in the yard of the old hoarder on Dewey Street? Over the years, I’d felt so sorry for her for exhibiting the sin I shared but that I’d labored to hide. I’d said a prayer for her countless times, made the sign of the

cross at that statue at those numberless roaches. What did they live for? Why didn't they stop? Why didn't they die? I took the steak knife from the table, fell to my knees, stabbed at the rug and sliced my own finger.

Steve ran in screaming, "What happened?"

"Look!" I said, jumping up and down and pointing to the trail of cockroaches, the blood dripping from my finger. I looked up at him to see that he was wearing one of my nightgowns.

The hoarder show is the same old story. Poor people with no resources spending their last pennies on crap they don't need, mountains of clothing and fast-food containers, plastic bags and empty bottles, cans, dolls and stuffed toys and animals to love because they can't abide by or are bereft of human love, cats and dogs so numerous they can't take care of them. The world spins out of control and falls off its axis. Everybody's looking for something.

In the space where my altar had been stands the Virgin Mary with the mannish face, the top of her head and halo super-glued in place. She stares back at me. I moved the altar to my office because I spend so much time there and I pray to my saints for Steve's return. That night in August was the last time I saw him. He didn't come back that fall semester. He must have moved to Alaska or Nova Scotia or South America or someplace where he misses his mother.

I am here at home in a pretty pink robe contemplating The Flying Saucer, clambering from the wagon to the spaceship and taking flight to Margaritaville. Instead I close my eyes and pray to Our Lady of the cucarachos, pouring out the endless petitions of us poor bewildered wretches that never die. I'm sorry I broke your heart. I'm sorry I broke your heart. I'm sorry I broke your heart.

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## Fallout

I remember the way her wig hung on the bedpost like a small impaled dog. For my entire life in Pobrecito, we dissembled the glaring facts of Irma's alopecia—the lash-less eyes like two lonely buttons, the semicircles of brows she'd drawn in with a Sharpie with a hand made unsteady as a result of years of thunderous hard drinking.

She hadn't expected me to walk into the room we'd shared as sisters. She hadn't expected to see me at all ever again after seven years.

I'm nine years older than she is. But the distance between us was due to other things—a mutual incomprehension. Having been born in Pobrecito, I'm fated to this immutable bond to this town on the border, the lavender house on Whisper Lane leaning drunkenly into the mesquite tree. A giant useless antenna pokes up at the sky. Aluminum foil like giant sunglasses covers the front windows and peers out blankly into the stark, empty field of weeds and wild flowers beyond the unpaved road.

Irma covered her head with one hand and grabbed a faded blue cap hanging on a hook on the closet door. She pulled it down so tightly on her head, the tops of her ears folded down like two tiny tacos. My mind flashed back to her ninth grade year when she'd taken to wearing that same cap backwards because she thought it looked cool. That was the year she dropped out of school. She gave birth to a son whose father she never named but who could have been the responsibility of any of a number of dim-eyed, gloomy, indolent teen-aged boys who would have wanted to take advantage of her simmering desperation for their attention.

“You fucking scared me, bitch,” she said in that way she spoke that sounded like she had an ice cube in her mouth. She was mostly toothless and seemed to create an inordinate amount of saliva that she sucked in every few seconds. She pointed the remote at the small television in the

corner and perched on the edge of her bed to watch the telenovela. A curvy woman with cascading curls leered at the camera, talking to herself, exposing two orbs of cleavage and revealing a menacing plot to defile the reputation of the show's demure heroine.

“We’re leaving tomorrow. For California. I don’t know when we’ll be back,” I said. She stared at the TV and sucked in her saliva. “I brought Adancito,” I said. “Can he come in?” She leapt from the bed grabbed the wig on the bedpost and put it on hurriedly, crouching down to look at herself in the mirror over the vanity. I realized she’d eschewed the pony-tailed wig she’d bought at the dollar store one Halloween. This one was very short and sandy blond, but she looked like an old man.

“No, bitch. Don’t be fucking coming in my house when I didn’t even invite you or nothing like that. I thought you were supposed to be like a college girl or something like that. Looks like you didn’t learn nothing, stupid idiot.” She held her stomach and her shoulders shuddered as she pretended to crack herself up. She slurped her Budweiser.

I looked out into the short hallway that led to my mother’s room. My mother stood there in her housecoat with a giant pink curler on the top of her head. She put her hands on Adancito’s shoulders and steered him back into her room. I could see the light spilling out into the hallway and then die out as she closed the door and silenced the sound of the same telenovela she watched in there. I blinked into the darkness and imagined her explaining the characters—the beautiful ones and the stock ones—and the stalling plots of lies and betrayals.

When the door closed, I felt a pang of missing him. He’d been in my life for so long, the only family I had with me in Austin. The only one who would start over again with me in another state.

To return to Pobrecito to see my mother was an obligation. She spent her days working in the middle school cafeteria. She spent her nights at the Bingo hall or in front of the television with Lucero or Thalía or Dón Francisco and Sábado Gigante and the lurid late night talk shows where the humblest of people aired the dirtiest of laundry. “I can’t believe these ugly peoples can have affairs,” my mother would say. Not only do they have the sex with their own wife, but then with some other puta fea también.

Irma is one of those ugly peoples, I guess. One of those feas. Completely hairless, she was odd to begin with, but she was slow, too, and for reasons that were never diagnosed in the neglected school districts of PISD—what the people in town laughingly referred to as “pissed”—or behind the lavender walls of our crooked house.

I doubt any one in my family even knows the word alopecia. They merely treated Irma as though her hairless body were the hand God dealt them. My mother called her “La Pelona,” as though it were a term of endearment.

Irma started drinking when she was just ten or eleven. She drank with my father who died of that addiction. Or of diabetes. Or something. With both legs and several fingers amputated he bellowed from his wheelchair for Irma to fetch him more beer. She became his drinking buddy for the next several years. By midnight they did tequila shots. She turned on the Spanish language radio and danced to bouncy conjunto music. Braless and in over-sized sweats, she sucked in her saliva and huffed and puffed to the beat. She self-consciously adjusted her wig every few seconds. My father sang along loudly, or cried or proclaimed superlatives for the singers.

She drank straight through the pregnancy she hid for months behind her sweatshirt.

After my father died, she took her place in his wheelchair in the kitchen. She set up a cooler of beers at her feet and drank until she passed out, her wig in her lap. A month later she gave birth to Adancito.

She labored for two days. The partera told her that the baby was big and that she needed to go to the hospital. My mother looked at her wide-eyed, shrugged her shoulders, then commanded Irma to push. “¡Ándale, pelona!” she screamed, gripping Irma’s ankle.

For weeks, Irma took to her bed, claiming she could not recover from the traumatic experience of the delivery. I tended to the baby, making his bottles and changing his diaper. At night I cradled him in my arms and rocked him. Irma never touched him. One night she called to me to bring her a beer. “You can’t drink, Irma. You need to take care of the baby now.

“And you’re a fucking bitch!” she spat. “You think you’re better than me, don’t you? But you’re not. You don’t know nothing. Daddy loved me the most! More than you! More than anybody!”

She pulled the sheet off her body and hurled herself at me. She swung her arms wildly. She wasn’t wearing any pants or underwear. Brown blood streamed down her leg. She went to the small crib next to her bed and upended it. It landed upside down, trapping the baby underneath like a wooden cage.

She bit me hard. I could feel a single tooth like a dull knife in my forearm. She seemed ready to pass out, but she kicked and spat and punched me. I managed to push her out of the bedroom and lock the door. She banged on it. I could hear her sucking in her saliva. “You stupid bitch! I’m gonna kick your fucking ass! I’m gonna kill you!”

I turned the crib over and saw Irma's wig. Then the baby wriggled in the folds of the flimsy mattress. I sat on the floor next to the pile of tiny pillows and stuffed animals I'd given him. Irma's cries dissolved, replaced by the faint din of the Spanish language radio in the kitchen. I imagined her sitting in the wheelchair, her bloodied legs open, her toothless smile singing along, her head completely exposed.

I made silent promises to myself that night. To my sister. To the baby. I kissed his smooth bald head.

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## Receding

After their mother's funeral, Tita considered taking her sister with her back to California. For months before her mother died, she'd known that her sister lived like a homeless person. She spent her days walking up and down Hidalgo, the main boulevard in Pobrecito where the kids cruised in their tricked out cars and monster trucks, a cavalcade of color, and metal and exhaust and the cacophonous sounds of competing speakers turned up to deafening gradations that invaded the body, penetrated the head. Taco stands and tire and transmission shops lined the street. Irma leaned against holes in the wall, muttering to herself, flipping off the boys who spewed venomous insults, as their barely street-legal vehicles bobbed up and down like giant colorful dolphins in the middle of the street.

Sometimes Irma slept on the bus stop bench. She hugged herself and pulled her knees up to her chest. Tita imagined her looking almost angelic, like an infant with her bald head and hairless face.

When Tita's mother called to report that Don Epifanio had seen Irma there, asleep on a bench, her wig on the dirty sidewalk, had coaxed her into the back of his pick-up because with his wife and two grandchildren there was no room in the cab, had taken her home and propped her up on the rickety rocking chair in the front stoop of the lavender house on Whisper Lane, had rung the bell and tiptoed down the creaking steps and back to his truck where his wife shook her head and made the sign of the cross and the children craned their necks to get one last look at the bald-headed girl in the sweat pants and a dirty white T-shirt that failed to disguise her large braless breasts, well she just couldn't take it anymore. Her mother had said it all in one breath just that way, referred to Irma as La Pelona, punctuated every other word with "y luego," and then, and

then, and then—the litany of humiliations she was too old and too tired and too sick to endure any longer.

In desperation, her mother had decided to keep Irma home by pickling her in her choice of beer or cheap red wine. Irma would pass out on her bed with the television blaring, and their mother was free to resume her life. Retired now from her job as a middle school lunch lady, she could freely spend hours at the Bingo hall. When she first took ill, her aim was to keep Irma subdued so she could stretch out on her recliner and watch television. When she felt up to it, she travelled the short distance to Nuevo Pobrectio on the other side of the river, there where she said she felt like herself with her gente. She'd locked Irma in her room for those outings. When she returned at nightfall, walking up the creaky steps to the front stoop of the crooked lavender house, she could hear Irma's wails and cuss words moving the earth and piercing the still, hot air like passing thunder.

At the end, the two were trapped in the house together. A heart attack had left their mother enervated. The beer ran out. Irma hit the streets.

The minute she got the phone call about her mother's death, Tita began to assess her future. Would she become her sister's legal guardian? What would that mean for her, for her little boy Adán and their life together in Moorpark? How would she get Irma to California in the first place? She'd never flown before, couldn't sit still for long car rides.

Her mother had called 9-1-1 herself when she vomited and felt the crushing pain down her shoulder. The EMTs had noticed Irma's strange behavior, the drooling, the perplexing bald head and hairless face. They said she seemed drunk and disoriented. Eventually the cops came and called Adult Protective Services.

Tita took the next flight out to San Antonio, rented a car and drove to Pobrecito, passing the expanse of an endless horizon, the dingy bluish sky dissolving into the brown and yellow earth. “The clouds are following us, mommy!” she imagined Adán saying from the backseat. Tita looked in the rearview mirror and wished she could see the top of his head flanked by the south Texas landscape. But he was better off where he was—in California with her neighbor, Mrs. Campos, whose maternal sympathies and general compassion gave Tita the peace of mind to leave him behind in California while she saw to things in Pobrecito. Mrs. Campos babysat often if Tita had to work late to attend a meeting or grade papers. She couldn’t take the chance of bringing Adán back to Pobrecito, back to Irma. She’d tried it once before and lost her nerve, the experiment a miserable failure. She’d only wanted to give Irma the chance to say good bye to Adán. They were going to California. Who knew when they’d return to the house on Whisper Lane or for what reason?

The wake after the funeral was small. Señoras from the neighborhood arrived with their heads covered with black or brown veils. The priest at St. James’ Church had seen them arrive and fill the pews at the funeral mass, a sea of black polyester and hair dyed an unnatural orange. “Ya llegaron las María Magdalenas,” he’d said to Tita, chuckling under his breath, shaking his head.

Now in the tiny front room of her mother’s house, they stood elbow to elbow eating macaroni salad and brisket from paper plates. Irma sat at the kitchen table nursing a Budweiser. She ran a stubby finger up and down the red and white can to melt away the cold beads of condensation. She sat smiling into space, her mouth a black slit. The sight of her made Tita recall the social worker whose breath reeked of coffee and a smell like menudo. She’d wanted to open the window of the woman’s small office on the third floor, climb out, jump, and end her always-

acute olfactory sense with a dull thud on the pavement. Instead she answered her questions and listened intently when the social worker said things like “alcoholic,” and “schizophrenic,” and “dangerous,” and “medication,” and “state hospital.” She also said, “alopecia.” It sounded like she was saying it for the first time after having heard it on Oprah. She said it almost proudly, stressing the “o” and breaking the diphthong as if to give the “i” an accent.

“I’m her only relative,” Tita had said to her. But she had to consider her own future, the one she had worked so hard to create. Through sheer will she’d left home at 18, moved to Laredo and enrolled in community college. She quit and returned to Pobrecito when Irma got pregnant. She wanted to help her. Her father was dead; her mother was at work all day. She recalled the pitched battles she’d had with her sister who drank around the clock and became belligerent after just one beer. She turned up the television and yelled back at the infomercials. She jumped on the bed, screaming, or rocked violently to music no one else heard.

And that night. The night she tried to hurt the baby. The way she’d bitten into Tita’s arm rabid and relentless. Could Irma have killed them both that night? Why wonder. She was gone the next day. Gone from Pobrecito.

When the guests left, Tita cleaned up and boxed up leftovers. Irma had plopped her wig on the table next to her and scratched at her pate. She scratched hard with her nails and rubbed with the palms of her hands. Her crookedly drawn eyebrows moved up and down. “I want to go to Nuevo Pobrecito,” she said sucking in her drool and rubbing her nose. We shoulda’ taken amá’s body there. We shoulda’ gone there today. She’s gonna be so mad when she know that we put her in the cemetery over here next to dad. ‘Cause he didn’t like her. Only me.” She sniffed deeply. “Only me, only me, only me.” She put her head down on her arms and seemed to have

passed out instantly. Then she said softly and almost in a whisper, “I’m going to kill you today. You took my little boy, so I’m gonna get you back.” Then she seemed to fall asleep.

Tita stood motionless for several minutes. She could hear soft snores coming out of her sister. Tita pulled out the chair next to her and sat down. She closed her eyes for a moment and recalled the baby sister she’d loved. As a baby, Irma was adorable. Bald and big-eyed, she looked just like a doll. She was docile and sweet. She never crawled, but would drag her body across the dirty floor of the house and fall asleep under the kitchen table, the bed or the couch. Tita would pull her out by her tiny hand as if she were in fact a limp, raggedy toy. Lint and dust bunnies made a tiny toupee on her silky head. Tita cleaned her off, changed her soiled diaper, kissed her eyelids, her nose, her chin. “I love you, my baby,” she whispered in her ear. “You’re the only one I love.”

As Irma got older, she grew more ornery. Hard. Demented. What did anyone know there in Pobrecito about schizophrenia or anything else? What could Tita have done herself to change the course of this destiny? She suffered in that house, too, under that dilapidated, tilting roof, under the thumb of her drunken father and her fearful enabling mother who purchased the beer herself for her husband and young daughter.

Tita pressed her lips together as if she were exerting force, moving something heavy, casting a spell. She put her hand on her sleeping sister’s head and patted it gently.

Irma scrambled out of the rental car once they reached the mercado in Nuevo Pobrecito. She adjusted her wig—a black bob. “Alright!” said Irma scratching her protruding middle under a green sweatshirt. “I told you, Tita! I told you this is where we should have brought amá. She always says this is where we belong. Don’t you remember that, pendeja!” She forced a guffaw

and clapped her hands, bent over as if overcome by the laughter.

The view made Tita reconsider her plan. Had Nuevo Pobrecito always been so squalid? So desolate? There was a liquor store, a drug store, a bar. At a bus stop on the corner, sat a blind man with eyes shut tightly licking the curved top of his cane. His skin was as red as blood. A transvestite with a pink wig and small breasts squeezed into a yellow halter sauntered past them chattering on a cell phone. She stared at Irma who stared back with wide eyes and a wry smile. Mothers baked blue by the sun sat with hands outstretched while nursing their babies on flat, sagging breasts. “Señorita,” said one, “mi niño, mi niño. Tita stared at the little boy. Without moving from his place at his mother’s breast, he shifted his eye to look at her. A fly alighted on his nose.

Tita touched her forearm, soothing the phantom pain of her sister’s attack all those years ago when Adán was first born. She hugged herself in the 100 degree heat and felt a chill. Irma took a seat next to the blind man. Tita could see her thin lips moving. The blind man turned in her general direction. Tita couldn’t feel her own legs under her as she climbed into the car. She told the uniformed man at the checkpoint that she was an American citizen. “I was just here for the day,” she said. “Just here to see family.” He looked past her at the next car and waved her in to Pobrecito, Texas, USA with two wagging fingers.

Tita breathed deeply and drove. There was nothing to connect her to Pobrecito anymore. The lavender house on Whisper Lane could welcome its ghosts now. She was bound for San Antonio where she would board a plane and return to California, to her books, her classes. Adán. She pulled onto the interstate and looked in her rearview mirror at all she was leaving behind. The city open, desperate, like a wound.

###

## Burning Boy

Beto kneels down in the dim blue light of dusk and brushes away the stray leaves, a pink petal from an artificial flower that blew over from another grave. He places a small bouquet of daisies from the grocery store in the little foil-wrapped coffee can that he brought here himself the day after I was buried.

He's only twelve but he makes money by cutting the grass for Doña Delia who probably takes pity on him because of what happened to his sister.

He saves his money all week. The automatic doors open, and he walks through the white-lighted aisles of the Mega-Mart where mothers shop for groceries with their children, like little ducklings circling, moving dangerously away from their center and returning to the folded cuff of her denim shorts, or the drawstrings hanging off of her knock-off PINK sweat pants that all the ladies buy at the pulga stall with the with fake Coach purses. Mothers push shopping carts as if they were small cars and fill their baskets with red baloney, ramen, frozen dinners, white bread and giant boxes of sugary cereal. Maybe some bananas. Their little children put more things in—neon green juices, big bags of chips, powdered donuts, and Chinese candy. With blank looks and open mouths, they are like baby birds waiting to be fed. The mothers are too weary to notice. They are in some other world, maybe thinking of when they were younger, maybe my age, the age I'll always be. They throw in one more box of macaroni. Their baskets overflow, but they are all hungry.

Beto marches purposefully to the little floral department. He nods like the boys do at any other boy. Some carry candy bars and packs of baseball cars, others, big bundles of off-brand diapers or formula in one hand, a case of beer in the other. Ready for a quiet night at home with the family. He notices a tall, thin man with short brown hair and a tattoo on his neck. It says

“Diablo.” Beto watches from the corner of his eye as the man checks out a girl with long hair and skin the color of pecans—just like mine. Beto pretends to be looking at something—a magazine about cars or a small bottle of energy drink someone has left on the little bleachers of candy and gum at a closed, cordoned off register. But he is really watching the man who is watching the girl. He is watching the way the man’s eyes narrow and his breathing turns shallow. Beto can see things like that now, even though no one else can. It is his super power.

He always said he had this ability. Even from the time he was just a little boy when he was only four or five years old. He would decorate his little room for Christmas starting around Halloween, but he had this other dark side, too. He read all the old comic books that our neighbors down the block, Ardilla and Araña, handed down to him. They are primo-hermanos, sons of sisters and they have problems. Araña’s legs never worked right. On his knees he goes, dragging them around, and I guess he does look like a spider walking on his hands. They say his toes are gnarled and fused together and resemble the pointy end of a spider’s legs. Sometimes the kids call him Spiderman, and he seems to like that. Ardilla is a strange guy. Maybe a little slow, and he sounds just like a little girl when he talks. Their abuelita, Doña Pepa, feels sorry for them, I guess, because they are both like orphans. She buys them whatever they want, and even goes into Arispe’s Newsstand, where they sell dirty magazines, just to get them the latest issue of Wolverine or Daredevil.

When Ardilla gave Beto his old red bike, Beto said we should all call him Johnny Blaze after the Ghost Rider character. He told us that Ghost Rider could look deep into people’s souls and plainly see their terrible deeds. He said that Ghost Rider’s aim was to get revenge on Satan himself. My daddy didn’t call him Johnny Blaze. He had trouble with his J’s which sounded like

Y's and his Z's which came out like S's. He called him Capitán Fuego, and this made Beto smile slightly.

Our parents can't understand the dark and complicated comic book stories. My father tried to get Beto to watch Lucha Libre on Saturday afternoons. He told Beto that El Santo, Mil Mascaras and El Blue Demon were real and could beat up any made-up comic book character. Sometimes Beto would watch with him, and he would play around and pretend to do different moves in front of our smiling father. He bounced off the lumpy, beige sofa in the living room like a wrestler ricocheting off the ropes of the ring. He kind of liked the idea of their masks. They derived their power from them, and he had even worn a mask he'd bought in Nuevo Pobrecito for trick or treating on more than one Halloween. . But for Beto, these luchadores just didn't have abilities beyond brute force that appeal to him. He always grew bored halfway through the wrestling match on television, pushed open the screen door, climbed on his bike and searched for evil-doers—among them now, the devil himself.

Beto pulls the plastic-wrapped bouquet from the bucket of water on the floor next to the florist—really just a girl from produce who doesn't know a carnation from a calla lily. He puts a five on the conveyor at the express lane, takes his change, and walks back to his bike chained to a pillar outside the store.

He rides to get to the cemetery on Hidalgo and Cleotilde Road. He wends his way along the narrow paths, turning here and turning there almost as if without even thinking about it. He parks his bike and pulls the flowers from the plastic bag and wrapping, pulls off the rubber band, pulls out the old flowers and puts in the new ones. He adds the rubber band to dozens of them on his wrist.

“I’m going to find him, Elena,” he tells me. He says it to the sky, the brown earth, the ghosts all around us. “When I find him, I’m going to kill him.” He touches my name on the cold stone. He takes the old flowers with him. He will take them home to the big compost heap in our backyard where Papá grows okra and tomatoes and green beans and onions. The pile of daisies grows bigger; they will dry up and become part of the dirt.

Beto searches every day for the person who raped and killed me and left my body in the lean-to of an abandoned house on Whisper Lane. A sad house with a legacy of sorrows that everyone talks about as if they all happened yesterday. I heard the hushed whispers and gossip my whole life. That is the last place in the world I wanted to be taken. Who could ever save me there in the shadows of those sorrows and demons?

I was walking home from school with my best friend, Zulema. We hugged like always, and she turned down her own street of Viola and I continued on Lantana, my mind going back to retrace the exchange I had with Juan in history class. I wanted him to ask me out. I was sure he would the next day. But now I don’t know. It doesn’t matter.

Pobrecito is a very small town. The person who killed me is somewhere right there, right in Pobrecito. He can go with ease to my school or Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church, Zulema’s house, Delia’s beauty shop, Doña Pepa’s house where she raised Ardilla and Araña. Why didn’t they hear my screams that day? Did I scream? I’m screaming now as the ants and worms would like to devour me, here in the beautiful melon-colored dress I had picked out for the homecoming dance, only there wasn’t one. No football. No sports at all at my school because the state would like to shut us all down. It was a way for PISD to save some money. I guess it doesn’t matter. There is no football. No homecoming. And there is no me.

When the sheriff went to my parents' house, he had a big lady officer with him. She wore a tan uniform. Her stomach stuck out like a big drum and her hair was pulled back in a tight bun. She wore giant gold hoop earrings. She was there to help hold up my mother in case anything happened, to put her in the cop car and speed to the emergency clinic. When they told mamá and papá that I had been found and that, no, I wasn't alive, the big lady officer tried to put her hands on my mom, to rub her back or to get ready to keep her from falling down on the floor and having some kind of attack. My father watched my mother, too. Beto stared into the face of the sheriff. He saw something he didn't like. He pushed through the small group of them in the little kitchen and told them he would take care of his mother now and he guided her to a chair at the kitchen table. Mamá lost her balance and lunged toward the table, knocking down the large St. Jude candle glowing there. The big officer lady gasped. Beto picked up the candle dripping hot wax, and returned it right back to its place.

Every time a car goes by slowly in front of our house, or he sees a man leering at a young girl at the store, in the park, at our church, Beto follows him. He wonders if that could be the man who killed me. He will get on his bike and ride like a ball of fire and follow that person. He will look into the man's soul. He will know that the man killed me. And he will kill that man. I'm not sure how. Maybe he will use the force of my mother's wailing, her howling in the middle of the night like a dying animal. Maybe he will use my father's hollow soul to carry his ammunition in that big emptiness. He will fill it with bullets and blades and rope or an endlessly long and thick bike chain to tie him to a broken chair, to muffle his own screams, to smother his dreams of ever falling in love or getting married or the dream I buried deeper than the rest of them—to go to college because I made very good grades, and my teacher told me that I should

leave Pobrecito and go to college. I felt so shy when she told me that. Ms. Vasquez is so pretty and so smart. I couldn't believe she was saying that about me. She fainted at my funeral. I guess she was really counting on me to be one of the few who leave Pobrecito to go to school to escape the life of cruising on Hidalgo, and drinking and wasting our lives on nothing. So many kids end up doing that. They join gangs and take drugs. I don't want Beto to end up like that because now that I am gone, our mamá and papá are becoming like ghosts themselves. Dead. My mother sleeps and sleeps like she is waiting for me to come back home from school to wake her up. Maybe she dreams that I will do that; she wakes up not remembering just for that moment right before she opens her eyes that I am gone forever.

In November in Pobrecito we celebrate El Día de los Muertos. The town's people come to the cemetery and wash the headstones of their loved ones or water the little crepe myrtles or mountain laurels or rose bushes they have planted to remember the dead. They place marigolds all around. Some people put favorite foods of the dead, even bottles of tequila or beer—if that's what their loved one enjoyed in life.

My mother has brought me a small doll. She is pink and bald and wide-eyed. She reminds me a little bit of Irma, a neighbor girl with no hair who suffered a lot in her life. Maybe the doll is also a prayer for Irma. I like that. My papá takes off his cowboy hat and places a white rose right underneath my name. It seems to me an elegant and fancy way for him to remember me. That took a lot for my poor daddy. Beto brings me leche quemada—which means burnt milk, but it is just a name for caramelized goat's milk. We always ate this treat on Sunday afternoons after a big, delicious meal my mom prepared. She would put a big spoonful of it inside a warm corn tortilla for each of us. She would roll it up with her long, thin, brown fingers. We would

turn up the little tube so we wouldn't lose a drop of it. Beto has brought me a Gloria. It is a leche quemada candy formed into a small ball and wrapped in red cellophane. It has tiny pecan bits deep inside the caramelized goat's milk. He has placed the candy inside a box of matches.

My mother puts her head down and her shoulders start to move up and down. She falls to her knees there before the doll and the rose and the burnt milk candy. My father puts his hat back on and walks toward his old green pick-up truck. He walks slowly, as if he has nowhere to go. Beto puts his small hand on my mom's head, smoothing her graying hair. My mother throws her body on my headstone and wails loudly, the sound like maybe a ship makes in dark waters. It startles the crow that perches in my mountain laurel. The shiny black bird flies over to a magnolia tree holding out white flowers like giant pearls to the muertito that can almost feel its roots poking up against his coffin underground.

I don't know why but I want them to leave. I don't want to see them like this. It is as if their own blood has been drained out of their bodies, too. I can't bear it.

My mother leans into Beto. He guides her to the truck. She is wearing the black veil and the black dress of luto still, even though it has been seven months since I left this world of Pobrecito. This is the same dress she wore when her mother died. We were not allowed to turn on the television or the radio for weeks on end. I was only fourteen. I couldn't live without those things. I wanted to die. It seems silly to say that now.

My daddy starts up the truck. My mother squeezes her tissue into one eye and then the other. She makes the sign of the cross several times as they drive away.

Beto returns and arranges the doll that has fallen over. She sits up now, looking straight ahead at him as he puts the rose in the water in the foil-wrapped coffee can with the daisies he'd placed there the day before. "I'm not leaving this for the tlacuaches," he says, running his fingers

over my name. He unwraps the red cellophane and pops la Gloria into his mouth. He looks around and thinks he sees a tall slim figure at the far end of the cemetery where a row of laureles lines the cyclone fence next to the narrow exit. It stills as Beto stares, never moving his gaze. He doesn't dare blink, but the shadow evaporates. Beto closes his eyes to focus again. He sits cross-legged in front of my grave and looks around at the other families—old men and ladies shuffle around like aimless zombies or lean into walkers to reach a grave that is always just too far away. Young kids—little brothers and sisters—run and laugh and play hide-and-go-seek, slipping behind trees or statues of Jesus.

Beto returns the box of matches to its place on my headstone. “You can hide, carbón,” he says into the cool November evening air, “but I will find you.” He swallows the candy and breathes in the stinging sweet smell of mesquite wood burning some place close by, climbs on his red bike, and rides off as the orange sky melts into the darkening night.

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## Ardilla and Araña

La Ardilla got his nickname from his buckteeth and the long bushy ponytail he'd grown over many years, treating his hair—just the tail—with VO5 hot oil treatment on Sunday nights. At the MegaCuts every Tuesday afternoon, he instructed Delia to buzz-cut the sides of his head with a number one gauge, leaving just the prickly nub of follicle. She was an old woman, plump and white-haired like his grandmother. She listened to his animated stories about swimming in the canales after a rare South Texas rain or fishing in the arroyo, catching perch and smallish trout and making sure his abuela didn't ever have to buy fish at the Megamart. She looked at him in the reflection of the large mirror through thick drugstore readers, with a bobby pin she kept in her mouth like some men suck on toothpicks. She smiled at his tales, not even noticing anymore his high-pitched voice. It was the helium voice of a baby coming from a young man. All of the señoras there for their tints and short perms sat under the dryers and peered at him over their copies of Vanidades and People en Español and Sudoku magazines or looked up at the television bolted up high on the wall and shifted their gaze subtly back to him, his slim figure in his low-slung jeans and wife-beater t-shirt. A big silver chain with a large eagle pendant glimmered as he talked with his hands.

The only thing La Ardilla liked better than chatting with Delia every week was coming back home to his cousin Araña. He'd been a blue baby. His mother died in childbirth and his father left soon after. His legs were withered and useless, but in Pobrecito, Texas, in those days, no one asked why. He walked with tattered weightlifters' gloves on his calloused hands, and on his knees, pads from the bike department at the Megamart, and dragged his legs behind him. He moved to and fro like a human metronome. La Ardilla was his number one, indisputable primo-hermano, blood brother, home boy.

Neither La Ardilla or Araña had ever known his father. Ardilla's mother had travelled to el norte to do the fine-fingered work that feeds the world and, in this country, renders her worthy of suspicion and persecution. But she met a nice man, en la uva in Bakersfield and had more children and never came back to Pobrecito. She left La Ardilla in the care of Doña Pepa who had had already lost another daughter, Araña's mother, who died in childbirth.

Doña Pepa bent over to collect the pecans scattered in the front yard. In Pobrecito, nogales and naranjos and mesquites grew with little cultivation. Pecans and oranges were plentiful in equal measure in the fall and winter months. La Ardilla sucked on the mesquite pods that he gathered from the ground. "No, guey," Doña Pepa would yell admonishingly before she surrendered her harvesting and returned to her stories on television. La Ardilla sucked his front teeth to clean away the remnants of the bittersweet pulp. Araña watched from the front porch. Ardilla cracked open a pecan with his teeth. He plucked an orange from a low-hanging branch, peeled it and fed his cousin one little section at a time.

The boys shared a room in the little white house. They liked to keep it dark with only the light of a small bed lamp to light their faces while they talked to each other at night about their dreams. La Ardilla would carry Araña up to the bed and help him take off his knee pads. They prayed El Padre Nuestro in unison before turning in. They had done this since they were little boys, before they pierced their ears and inked tattoos on their arms. La Ardilla sported a purplish, pensive urraca and Araña a dignified, coiled rattler.

One day as the boys got their gear ready for fishing, the neighbor girl from the lavender house next door appeared on their back porch, the sound of her drowned out by the deafening drone of chicharras in the naranjos. She had the pork rind exoskeletons of two of them like Velcro-ed barrettes on the sides of her blue baseball cap.

“You going to the arroyo?” she asked standing up straight, pushing out her chest her overdeveloped teen aged body made her girth look as wide as Doña Pepa’s

Araña approached, hands splayed on the hard grass-less ground. He bobbed up and down, dragging the long legs of his frayed Lee jeans behind him. His silver chain and eagle pendant—one to match La Ardilla’s—swung from side to side, a pendulum to mark the endless afternoons of waiting on his hands and knees for La Ardilla to pull in the fish, to brandish the knife he carried in a little leather holster, and skillfully remove the hook and throw the catch into the Styrofoam cooler of ice while he merely watched. “You want to come with us?” he said to Irma.

La Ardilla turned swiftly to Araña. He knew his cousin’s penchant for shapely girls. And even though Irma didn’t look too good to him—not even with the long blond wig that contrasted with her morena skin but covered the bald head everyone in the vecindad had snickered about—he knew that Araña’s eyes went right to where they shouldn’t. Not with a girl like her. He’d heard she was a drug addict and that her own father had raped her and a baby had come, born and swaddled in such shameful circumstances that the older sister had to take the unfortunate little being and leave the town of Pobrecito—something that no one ever really managed to do. But it was all just chisme. Who knew the truth?

“Hey! Little Spiderman!” she said, crouching down next to him and parting her lips to reveal a big dark sky with only a silver star or two, “Do you want to kiss me?” Araña smelled the booze on her breath and wished he could suck down a Busch beer for courage. He looked at her deeply and saw the white salt of the dried saliva on the corners of her thin lips.

Ardilla dropped his pole and ran over to the nogal. He climbed on to the lowest limb and pulled leaves and twigs and dropped them aimlessly down to the ground.

Araña looked at La Ardilla in the tree. His bushy ponytail and buckteeth had always inspired a certain sadness for his cousin, who was without self-awareness or guile, always on the threshold of being acceptable as a man, but never being quite adequate enough with his high-pitched voice like a little girl's. "I have to go now, Pelona," he said to Irma. "Gotta get to fishing with my homey, a'ight?"

"Pinche, joto" said Irma crossing her arms over her ample bosom. "You'll be back, ese. I'm gonna make you come crying to me, maricón."

Araña walked on his gloved calloused hands toward the nogal where La Ardilla was perched on the lowest branch dropping down stick soldiers wearing invisible parachutes.

"Primo," he said. "What you want with her? It's not just your legs that don't work, guey. ¿Que te pasa, ese?"

"Nothing, okay! Look at me. You think I like to be here on my knees watching you do everything? I'm never going to climb a tree or pull in the fish. I can't go into town and climb in the chair for Delia to cut my hair. She would have to carry me. No way, man. You have more chances than I am to be someone. To meet a girl and make a baby and get a job and have a long life. I'm gonna die some time, ese," said Araña. "My heart is like a big red balloon floating in the sky. It's gonna land in the trees and pop and I'll be dead. I wish I could be a dad some time. That's all. I came out of my mom and she died and my old man left. When will the little spider eggs break and all that like in that cartoon of Charlotte's Web. At least those little babies got to live when their momma died; they were spiders like her.

"Yeah," said La Ardilla. "But all the animals took care of each other when the momma died."

La Ardilla jumped down from the tree and fell to his knees so he was face to face with his cousin. He pressed his lips together and pulled the buck knife from the little holster on his belt. He held out his ponytail and his buck knife taut against it. He sawed at it with the serrated blade and held up the ponytail, smiling, brandishing it like a string of wide mouth bass instead of the anemic perch that swam in the arroyo. He dropped the tuft of hair on the ground. It landed between them like a fuzzy black spider. La Ardilla got to his feet and picked up his pole and gear. Araña led the way, a boy in perpetual prayer, toward the gaping green waters beyond Whisper Lane.

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## Special Needs

Oceana County, Michigan in the autumn months of 1976 was nothing like the fall in South Texas. It was predictably cool with occasional showers that kept us inside our barracks and out of the apple orchards. That cool weather also made for bountiful harvests that made my daddy decide to keep us up north a little longer. We waited through the winter months even, to complete the grape harvests.

We had been back and forth and back and forth and back and forth on roundtrips to El Norte and back to Roma, Texas for most of my life. But that was the first year I had to miss school back home. A lot of the kids went through that in Roma and throughout the Rio Grande Valley. But a lot of the kids didn't even like school or aim to complete it anyway. I did.

My parents were uneducated. They both quit school by the time they were eight years old. And my sister, Marina, never saw the inside of an institution. That is, unless you count the town's lore about the Northern Michigan Asylum. That's what the whole county knew it as. Even after the name was changed to Traverse City's State Hospital, people had a hard time using that euphemism.

The name is etched on my heart. The kids in the fields used to say that Marina belonged there. She's autistic. But nobody used that word back then. Kinder migrant worker folks said, "retrasada mental" or "malita." The older teen-aged kids with nothing to hope for said, "retard." My parents just called her "Querida" and "Linda" and "Hermosa," and used all of their sugary attention on her to convince her that she was loved, that she was dear and beautiful. I was none of those things.

What I was was hungry. We all were. Sure we harvested food all day, but we didn't eat it. Not any of it. Some days, the foreman showed up with a rifle in plain view right on these gun

racks inside the cab of his pickup. Biting into an apple would have meant certain death—at least to my young mind.

I thought of my father as heroic, even then. To pick up and travel along a highway with no GPS and no Google map strikes me now as something completely beyond the abilities of most people today. His keen survival instincts and boundless work ethic goaded him. By most measures, he is a successful person. He eked out a living as best he could and moved his family back to Texas from Roma to Corpus Christi. He said he liked the idea of the big ocean when he crossed the border and ended up in Brownsville, right at the mouth of the ocean, aptly known as Boca Chica. That beach is still undeveloped today in spite of the tides of partiers to South Padre just miles from there.

My mother is his most worthy “media naranja,” as we say in Spanish. His other half. Not better, not worse. Twin souls. Their marriage had been arranged even though that’s not a custom we follow, of course. And I suppose that’s the very reason they’ve survived as long as they have, even in the face of uncertainty and deaths and births and poverty and my sister’s disability.

She was never diagnosed, of course, not back then, not in a family like ours. But I can bet my own teacher’s retirement fund that she is autistic, and I don’t mean for some recognizable Rainman quirks. Autism is a messier business than a Hollywood movie could ever gussy up. And it’s even worse—maybe it’s worse—for the poor during those times when no one knew words like “spectrum” or “Asperger’s” or “occupational therapy,” or “social skills” or maybe worse still for the poor from another country, another town or state. Worse for a girl. A girl. A girl. Somehow worse for a girl crawling out of the shade of an apple tree—Honeycrisp—with a streak of brown blood across her jumper.

The other kids around us said she belonged at the Northern Michigan Asylum. They said she was possessed by some mal de ojo that shriveled up her tongue, that made her expressionless, that took away her soul. They would hold their index fingers up to their foreheads and turn them around and around to indicate she was “crazy.” But she wasn’t crazy. She was exactly in her right mind. The rightest mind she will ever have. What have I done with mine but make it less right?

The day I was hungriest was when the wind shifted out of nowhere. We all say “cold front” in Texas to indicate a ten-degree dip. But a Blue Norther is a mother fucking cold front sent from the devil himself to force us to join his dark side. People do terrible things when they are starving and freezing at once.

My mother and father stooped in the fields that day in November to pick as much as they could. It would be twenty degrees by nightfall. They directed us to the pick up truck, said we should wait there while they continued picking. We’d gone through orchards of apples, and cherries and fields of grapes, then asparagus, which I didn’t care for in the least, not then.

As the sun set and appeared to me a fizzled match, ash, a pink and gold as cold as metal, I noticed a station wagon just a few yards from us. I pulled on Marina’s hand until she gave way and I could drag her along, her feet taking each step, but stomping reluctantly, slapping along the cold, grassless, earth on a path worn by trucks and tractors and the feet of migrant farm workers.

The hatchback was pulled down. There was a pot of beans and a bag full of white bread in plain sight. I dropped Marina’s hand and ran to it. I took a slice of bread and dipped it in the beans and devoured it. Marina approached like a mummy, a zombie, a bear, with her arms akimbo. She grabbed at the bag of bread. As I fended her off, she let out a piercing wail, alerting the owner of the station wagon to our misdeed. My misdeed. The family of seven—a mother,

father, four boys and one daughter ran in from the fields. The littlest boy shivered. He was too young to be working, but no one cared as long as the crop came in on time.

I could only blame my sister, Marina. She stood there lapping up the beans like a dog, from the slice of bread, the crook of her arm.

I'm an alcoholic. I've yet to go to rehab or AA or any other twelve-step anything. But I experienced a miracle at the funeral service of a murdered girl in Pobrecito who had a lot of living to do—enough living for me and my sister both—dead in different ways.

Maybe I'm supposed to do this now. Maybe this is a baby step for me.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry I blamed Marina for eating the bread and beans, when I enjoyed that small feast first and made her think it was okay.

I'm sorry I told that angry family that she was a patient at the Northern Michigan Asylum and caused them all to bow their heads in hungry shame and let the matter go.

In the blue light of fallen night, I could see my parents hunched over like two scared rabbits, looking at us, imploring us to go back to the truck.

I'm sorry I ate the beans and bread. Hugo's modern day pinche miserable, okay? I'm sorry, okay? I don't like the idea of taking food away from a family that big. The littlest boy, a baby, big-eyed, shivering, smiling broadly, sincerely at Marina.

I'm sorry I ate the apples and the cherries and even the asparagus. I'm sorry I did that. Each bite was like a bullet in my stomach. I just waited for the foreman to shoot me in the head, and that was my nightmare for many years. I still have it on occasion. I deserve it.

###

## Marina Swallows the Stars

*"Sometimes sisters play on brown and red leaves with paper dolls."*

*--Tina May Hall "For Dear Pearl, Who Drowned."*

Sometimes sisters play on brown and red leaves with paper dolls. Sara said this to herself all the time in those years. She witnessed this very thing when she drove with her parents and sister, Marina, to the small supermarket in the center of that little town in Oceana County. They drove by houses, large and white with towering trees giving their crisped auburn offerings to the ground below where the little girls with the light complexions, cute haircuts and stylish jeans played games unknown and out of reach to her from the vantage point of her father's pickup truck.

Sometimes sisters play on brown and red leaves with paper dolls. She wished for this harder than anything else when she was a child. She had wanted it so much for so long, that the imagining remained in her memory as vivid and pointed as anything that really occurred. She could change the clothes of a paper doll with ease and keep it with the other important papers Mami kept between the pages of her bible. She wasn't allowed to bring a real doll with her. It would take up too much space in the truck. But she had no idea how to get her hands on the paper dolls she'd spied in the chubby, pink hands of those Michigan girls in the big white houses.

From the front door of her parents' house in Corpus Christi, Sara could see her sister, Marina standing in her mother's tidy kitchen. She was a grown up woman now with an adolescent's doughy figure and almost defiant expression. But the fact was Marina was now pushing fifty. Dressed in a heather gray sweatsuit, she rocked back and forth, back and forth, jamming an arthritic index finger like a twisted twig into the palm of her hand.

“Hey, Mari,” called Sara. Marina turned slightly in Sara’s direction. Drying her hands on a wet paper towel, their mother hurried out of the kitchen to meet Sara. “Mi ’ja,” said her mother. “Gracias a dios.” She made the sign of the cross with her thumb over Sara’s forehead. Sara opened her arms slightly as if to welcome the blessing from her mother. “How is everything in Pobrecito? ¿Como andan los alumnos?”

“Oh, you know. The usual.” Sara shut her eyes tightly to recall her dream the night before, the recurring one where she’s lost in a maze and can’t find her classroom. She looked at her sister who was now sitting at the table rocking back and forth.

“Ya nos vamos,” said her mother carrying a small red Adidas duffle bag. Sara’s father came out into the hallway from their little bedroom. She could smell his Tres Flores hair gel, as he walked slowly and tentatively. Sara couldn’t get over how much he’d aged. He steadied himself slightly with both hands splayed against the wall like a man pulling himself along a rope.

“Sarita!” he called out, smiling. “Que gusto, Mi’ja.” She hugged him tightly and he patted her back with an open hand.

“Ya, ya, ya,” said Sara’s mother. I want to get out before the traffic. Everyone going to the playa at this time of the day. Ay dios mío.” She made the sign of the cross and with her thumb still over her mouth said, “Vamos ya. Regresamos el domingo, hi’ja.”

Sara watched as her mother and father approached Marina in the kitchen without a shred of hesitation. Sara’s father patted Marina’s shoulder lightly then dug both hands in his pockets and jingled his keys and change. He puckered his lips as if to whistle but nothing came out. Sara’s mother talked to Marina as if she were a baby. “Andale, Chiquita. Te portas bien. Be good.” She pulled up her sweats from the elastic waistband and told her she would bring her a souvenir from

San Antonio. She pulled a loose strand of Marina's hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear.

"Give my love to Tío Ernesto and Tía Zulema," said, Sara.

"Pues, sí," said her mother. "Zulema is very sick. Ya sabes. Your daddy has to go one more time to sit a while with his sister. Nunca sabe uno."

"Well, don't worry about anything here." She turned to look at Marina in the kitchen. "And you don't have to bring me anything." She chuckled and clapped her hands once.

"Ay tú. Loca," said her mother. Sara hated that word. She felt cross, like she wanted to get back in her car and hide away in Pobrecito again.

"Bueno bye, mis babies" said their mother. Their father waved to them as if he were on a ship far from the dock before the front door slammed shut.

Sara almost regretted not being part of the road trip. Her parents were fun. They listened to classic country music or sang along to Spanish language epoca de oro tunes on the AM dial. Sara always felt safe with her daddy driving and her mami riding shotgun. They had made so many long car trips across the country together. For Sara it remained a defining imprint of her childhood. She loved the idea of going away.

The family had travelled often from their small town in Roma, Texas to Michigan for the pizza with other migrant worker families. They went to the citrus groves of Florida, then back to the spinach fields of Crystal City, cherries in Washington State, and back again to Michigan. They picked apples in Oceana County and moved to Leenlanau in northern Michigan, to pick the grapes that would be turned into wine. Sara recalled the way the foreman told her father that a famous monk once said that to imbibe is to "drink the stars." When she was older, in her

twenties, Sara learned from some place—maybe a PBS cooking show with Jacques Pepin—that the quote is attributed to Dom Perignon.

She remembered the way the man said it. He was tan and handsome. She smiled at the incongruity of the iconic sparkling wine and the uva fields where her father and mother stooped and worked quickly to beat the sudden storms common in that time of year. Sara and her sister Marina sat on the autumn leaves that crunched beneath their knees or their bottoms. But Marina rocked back and forth, and Sara played alone.

Sometimes sisters play on brown and red leaves with paper dolls. Sara had witnessed it with her own eyes from the bed of the pick-up truck while her parents drove in the cab, Marina in between the two of them rocking back and forth.

Sometimes her father worked as a gardener for the monied patronas in those places up north. He would bring over-ripe fruit back to the family and over-sized dresses for his two daughters. They didn't turn anything away, but her daddy never seemed to bring the treasures she'd really wanted, the cute jeans and neon colored tops, some Nike shoes or Famolare flats, like she had seen in a Seventeen magazine once. And he never did find his way to second-hand paper dolls.

Marina didn't care about any of that. She was five years older than Sara but didn't speak or know her times tables or anything else. Her parents doted on her for every little thing, soothing her knuckles with savila when Marina gnawed on them in agitation, and giving her the sugary treats she loved—ojarascas and pan de huevo her mother baked herself.

Sara walked into the kitchen tentatively. "Hey, sis," she said, waving her hands like windshield wipers in front of her sister's face. Marina didn't blink. Sara walked to the

refrigerator and opened the door to find the case of beer that her father had probably put in there months before. He saved it for company they never really expected. She looked in the cabinet over the kitchen sink. It had a plastic child-proof lock on it to keep Marina away. She wouldn't think to open the big white box of the refrigerator, but she could stick anything that wasn't nailed down right into her mouth. She ripped pages off the church calendar her mother thumbtacked to the wall, or ripped pages from the newspaper if her father left it on the coffee table in the living room. She had bitten into whole onions or unpeeled bananas and swallowed cough drops with the wrappers still on them. Sara removed the lock easily and opened the little doors to find a bottle of Reposado, the tequila she hadn't seen her father drink in her life.

Sara closed the door quickly. She took a cold can of Tecate from the refrigerator and drank half of it down. She turned the little skeleton key to open the pantry door and brought out the cookie jar in the shape of a blue bear. She smirked at its large eyes and the daisy it clutched in its hand. She pulled two oatmeal cookies out and gave them to Marina. "Eat these," she said, and took a swig of her beer. "Or, maybe I should fix you some dinner." Marina put both cookies in her mouth at once and chewed.

Sara bowed into the light of the refrigerator and opened up and closed the crisper. She gathered up a plastic bottle of mustard, a package of cracked black pepper turkey, Swiss cheese slices and another beer. She made Marina a sandwich and poured some potato chips on a paper plate. Marina ate hungrily, making smacking noises with her mouth open. The loose strand of hair her mother had pulled back was now in her mouth as she chewed. She started to gag.

Sara downed her beer with her head back but moved her eyes down to check on her sister. Gulping, she patted Marina's back hard. Marina spat out the masticated ball of sandwich, but it clung to her hair. "God dammit!" said Sara. She pulled on the paper towel roll and ripped it

angrily, then wrapped it around the strand of hair and pulled. Marina's head moved forward and down with her sister's brusque movements. She dropped the towel in the trashcan and wagged her finger in Marina's face, "Don't do that again." Marina put a handful of potato chips in her mouth and chewed and crunched happily.

"Let's go to your room, Mari, said Sara, looking at the clock on the wall. "I'm tired. Sleepy time." Marina raced awkwardly down the hall to her room. It was spare with only a small twin bed on a bare frame, no headboard. An old rusty file cabinet served as her bureau because she'd always empty the contents of any drawer when she was alone in her room. Her parents could lock the file cabinet. They kept the small key hanging in the pantry in the kitchen. "Fuck it," said Marina. "You look clean. We'll brush your teeth in the morning. Your sweats are your PJs tonight. Acuestate ya, Mari." Marina obeyed, kicked off her pink house slippers, and climbed into bed. She lay flat on her back like a plank, not moving to cover herself or curl up. Sara stared at her sister. What goes on in that mind of hers? Does she know that her mother is her mother? Does she miss her Mami and Daddy right now? Does she remember Michigan? Does she know I am her sister? Does she know what that means? Does she ever miss me?

Sara carried her messenger bag into the kitchen and pulled out a file of student papers to grade. She fished around the bottom of her bag and pulled out a green pen. She graded a couple of papers before drinking one more beer. Then she unlocked the plastic child safety lock on the cabinet over the kitchen sink. She held the bottle up to eye the contents. I'll just take a little, she thought. She poured it in a small jelly jar glass in the dish drain and did the shot. She took a swig of beer and returned to the table to grade papers. She talked to each paper as if she were addressing a student: "Look, Yesenia, if you don't know the difference between 'there' and 'their,' we got us a big problem." She scribbled a comment at the bottom of the page, sucked on

the end of the pen then wrote a C at the top. “Chingao, Mario, again with the fucking run-ons, homie!” She scribbled some more and pulled another paper from the stack. “Dammit, Perla, don’t you know your elbow from your fundío, muchachita?” She threw her head back and laughed. She downed the beer. “I’m gonna quit, or these mother fuckers are all gonna make an F. Pobrecitos pendejitos.”

She took three more beers from the refrigerator, making a mental note that she would replace the beer the next day and her parents would be none the wiser. She went into their little bedroom at the end of the hall and watched television and drank her Tecate until she fell asleep.

The next morning she awoke to find her students’ papers ripped to shreds. The bottle of tequila rested on its sides, almost empty. The pantry door was ajar and the bag of potato chips and canisters of rice and beans were opened, emptied on the floor. Marina stood there, her eyes closed, rocking and making a little humming sound. Then she sat on the floor and the chips crunched under her bottom and her thighs. She rocked and held up a piece of Perla’s essay. To Sara’s disbelieving, bleary eyes, it looked just like the outline of a little girl.

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## Swept Up

When high school English teacher Sara Vasquez fainted at the funeral service of one of her students, everyone believed she was overcome with the grief that consumed the whole town of Pobrecito. In reality, the room spun around like it did after any other ferocious weekend bender. That's when she saw what she saw and heard what she heard and lost the feeling of her legs under her, her body, her senses, and lunged face first at the feet of San Martín de Porres.

She did not reveal her experience to anyone else. She feared it would provoke the entire town to a collective hallucination, as happens often in desperate times in small towns when Mary's in makeshift front-yard altars cry droplets of water or blood or the image of Jesus with his Veronica Lake silhouette appears on a stucco wall or the bark of a sycamore tree.

It was true that Sara was given to drink, especially on the weekends. It was a bad habit that had developed into an irremediable addiction in her twenties when she first arrived in Pobrecito from her hometown in Corpus Christi.

The singles scene did not exist in Pobrecito. It seemed like love connections in this town happened in high school. The prom date led to marriage or a child pretty quickly. There weren't any single male teachers at the small high school, save for Pete Gallegos, the science teacher who was a widower and older than Sara's 44 years. Sara looked a little younger than that. Well, she used to anyway. No one really commented on it much anymore, come to think of it. If the students knew her real age, they'd say she was over the hill. She was older than their parents even. She dissembled the truth with cute outfits and make-up she bought on QVC. Online retail therapy seemed her drug of choice when she wasn't drunk. But she'd been returning more and more of the merchandise and ordering bigger sizes.

It was also true that she was hung-over when she entered the church that day for the funeral mass of Elena Ruiz, a girl from her junior English class who had been abducted, raped and murdered. Elena was a quiet girl, shy, innocent, and an excellent student. Only a few days before her disappearance had Sara told her that she was college material, that she could write her own ticket. All she had to do was get out of Pobrecito.

Sara had to get out of Pobrecito, too. She was an outlier and increasingly unhappy. She was gaining weight and spending more and more time watching TV instead of grading papers or researching or writing. She never socialized and hadn't been to mass in years. In recent days, Mark, a man with whom she'd had a twenty-year emotional affair had stopped emailing her. She knew that—as was his wont—he had forged yet another relationship with a twenty-something girl back in Corpus Christi. That's how she had met him and had been one of his many conquests. But she was “different” he said. And sometimes, though he didn't write her all week because he was involved with someone new, he would call her late on Friday nights. She prepared for his call by dressing in a sexy nightgown she bought online on Overstock.com even though he would never see it. Sometimes she soaked in a bubble bath and shaved her legs to wait for his call. Most times she didn't. By the time he phoned, she was also suitably inebriated just to quell her jangled nerves. He always sounded drunk on the other end, too. They did a verbal Apache dance, joking around, abusing each other verbally, and gently transitioning to honeyed voices and dirty talk. He always wanted to hang up when they were finished. She always cried. She didn't really know why, and he didn't want to stay on the line to figure it out with her. She believed some place in her soul that onanism is a sin. Did everybody think that? She sat at her computer and tried to focus on the word “onanism” in the Google search bar. But she quickly lost interest and called up Youtube instead. Her playlist was all beautiful women from the last

several decades with well-documented wretched taste in men—Timi Yuro, Fiona Apple, Alanis Morissette, Maria Luisa Landin, Tanya Tucker, Paquita la del Barrio, Tammy Wynette, and her new favorite Lila Downs who sang a song about sleeping on a bed made of stone. “Yeah!” said Sara with one eye squinted shut to focus on the video. Her head swayed from side to side as she tried to keep her balance. She steadied herself against her desk but her head continued to move like one of those dashboard dogs. She held her wine glass with index finger extended to point at the singer on the monitor who seemed to read her mind. “Tengo penas en el alma-a-a-a-,” she whimpered feeling the lyrics of the echo the deep shame growing in her soul.

She poured herself another glass of the red wine she had bought to cook with. She had polished off the last half of the cheap vanilla Vodka she’d had under the sink since last Christmas. She remembered a bottle of cinnamon Schnapps in the freezer behind the ice trays and the Lean Cuisine boxes. She knew she shouldn’t drink any more of the wine. She would be at the church the next day—in just a few hours. The whole town would see her. “Oh, well!” she said, holding her glass up to the stove. “I’ll look good and sorry at Elena’s mass.” She slammed her glass down on the stove top, fell to her knees, and started to cry.

That night she dreamed that a black man was trying to wake her up. The leg cramps that awoke her around 3 a.m. to signal the profound dehydration from the evening’s marathon of alcohol made her forget the dream. But she recalled it the next day as she prepared for the funeral. She didn’t try to overanalyze it. She always had unusual dreams when she drank or was feeling stressed out at work. In the dream, a black man was trying to wake her. He looked a little bit like Sydney Poitier, circa *To Sir with Love*. She’d always had a mild crush on him. He didn’t say anything, just shook her arms a little bit. He tapped her shoulder with a broom handle. “Just a wine dream” she said as she downed a bottle of orange Gatorade.

When she arrived at Our Lady of Sorrows, she had a difficult time finding a parking space among all the dented, scratched up pick-ups. The high school boys drove the best cars, however. Their shiny, flawless, tricked-out SUV's were parked next door at Delia's beauty shop which wouldn't open for another couple of hours.

Sara sat in the cool air conditioning of her Jetta. The church had no central air. She would surely swoon in that unventilated sauna-like place. She would smell earthy incense and candles, cloying viejita perfume, old man after shave, and bad breath. With her headache and dehydration (the euphemisms she used for hangover), she wouldn't be able to stand up straight for very long.

She walked down the aisle and had a strange feeling of being part of a particularly somber wedding procession, except with no groom and no flowers and a teenager in a casket at the altar flanked by two disconsolate parents.

Sometimes she felt special among the buena gente of Pobrecito. She felt they perceived her like some aging third-rate celebrity. But just then, in the cold, screaming light of this particular day, she knew that was wrong. They felt sorry for her. She was an old maid. Not an actress or a rock star. Just an aging lady who never left her house and would end up like Mr. Gallegos—an old teacher, alone with no children and no prospects for another soul mate. She was a pobrecita.

But here she was walking down the aisle of the church. An ocular migraine stabbed her left eye. She felt like she wanted to run back out the way she came, get back in her car, climb into bed and forget the whole thing. She took one more step and another. She looked at Jesus on the cross hanging over the altar. She winced. A statue of Our Lady of Sorrows with her requisite seven daggers stood to the left of him next to tiny bleacher shelves of candles big and small and

glowing red. Why was Mary smiling? To the right was San Martín de Porres, the mulatto saint. The patron saint of pobrecitos—of rodents and medical workers and everyone in between. He loved all God’s creatures. She remembered that from catechism class in the seventies with Sr. Marian back in Corpus Christi, back when the nuns still wore habits. Where was his broom? The iconic image of San Martín has him holding a broom. She tried to focus. That’s when she heard his voice. The room spun, and she pitched forward. Everyone gasped and she landed at his feet with a thud. That’s when she saw a little tiny lint ball and the tiniest trail of sand right next to his sandaled toes. I thought so, she thought to herself. There’s the proof. He’s supposed to have a broom. A small plaster dog stared back at her. Did San Martin have a dog, too? She wondered how that would sit with St. Francis.

Her mind flashed back to the sodden dream at dawn with San Martín prodding her awake with the handle of the broom.

She opened her eyes to see a small group of Pobrecitos gathered around her. Their caramel colored skin and black hair made her think of them as San Martín’s Salvation Army. All of them hunched over her with their arms outstretched as if to help her up.

At eye-level she saw Araña, a pobrecito, a paraplegic who used his hands for feet, as he dragged his withered legs around. “Quehuvole, maestra,” he said in the slang of the border, but she noted his grave concern for her. “I wish I could help you get on your feet,” he said.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’m so sorry.”

“We are all sad, too,” said Araña’s cousin, Ardilla, shrilly in her right in her ear. She wanted to stick her index finger in and wriggle it back to normal. He sounded just like a grown man sounds when he tries to affect a little girl’s voice, like Tiny Tim tiptoeing through the tulips.

“Oh, oh, yes,” she said. “I’m sorry. I can’t believe any of this. But I’m just sick. Something I ate. I’ll be fine. Please. I didn’t mean to disrupt this service where we should only be thinking about Elena today.” And Sara meant every word she said. Ardilla guided her to a pew and Araña followed close behind at his heels.

She tried to look composed and smiled weakly at some of the people who stared at her with curiosity and concern. She looked down and saw that the ball of lint that had been at the feet of San Martín was now hanging precariously from the hem of her skirt. She took it between her thumb and index finger and slipped it into her purse.

During the service, everyone cried. Mrs. Ruiz wailed and yowled. Mr. Ruiz stood perfectly straight and looked like he would break in half. Little brother Beto sat with his head down.

All of the women shook their heads and cried tightly into their Kleenex. While Fr. Thaddeus, the Polish priest, spoke, everyone nodded in recognition or cried all the more. Sara liked accents. She’d minored in linguistics and found fascinating the compensations of the second-language learners. Fr. Thaddeus was a dear old guy with a penchant for chocolate and Dr. Pepper. His ruddy cheeks and white hair made him such a stark contrast to the...to the...to the black man now standing next to him and drowning out the sound of Fr. Thaddeus’ voice.

Sara closed her eyes and fanned herself with the missalette. She opened her eyes again and San Martín de Porres continued speaking to her. He said that all work is honorable. That her work in educating the people of Pobrecito was a selfless act and could heal her soul. He said that she was a good woman. That she needed to let go of her shame and addictions and make a better life for herself in this humble place.

“Pobrecito’ is not a place that should inspire you with pity,” he said. “Think on that.”

And just like that he was gone. She looked back at the statue and it looked undisturbed. Was she hallucinating? Was her mind playing tricks on her? Was it the booze? Had years of it finally addled her permanently and irrevocably? No. No. She was just tired. Just tired and sad for poor Elena. For the Ruiz family.

When she got back to her little house on Huisache Road, she moved her hand through the bottom of her purse. She pulled the lint out between her middle and ring finger. She looked at it closely. "I'm losing it," she said. "It's just lint." She went into the kitchen to pour herself some of the cinnamon Schnapps. She noticed a broom leaning against the wall next to the stove. A small brown dog ran between her feet, exited the kitchen, and was gone.

She didn't sleep all night.

The next day she waited in her car outside the church. She contemplated going to see Doña Mague, the curandera. Or maybe she would see Doña Rosa, the palm reader or Doña Chole, the card reader. Or maybe she would go to the botánica for some protective powders and herbal teas.

From the back seat of her car, she pulled out the broom. "Here goes nothing," she said, taking a deep breath.

She pulled open the large wooden door of the church, and a small sparrow fluttered in first. "Shit!" she said, and covered her mouth with her hand.

The bird sat on the head of San Martin. "Real subtle," she said under her breath. She gently leaned the broom against the black plaster hand, and he grabbed it in one quick movement. The little brown dog barked at his feet.

Sara blinked and looked again at the plaster statue standing before her. The sparrow remained motionless. It looked at her with its little black bead of an eye.

On the way to her car outside the church, Araña whizzed by her on a skateboard. Ardilla whooped and cheered, and for a moment, he sounded like a grown man. Betito, followed behind on his red bike. She thought she heard him laugh.

Sara sat in her car for a moment. Before she put the key in the ignition, she imagined that Rita Ruiz had gotten up out of bed that morning and got ready for work even though her daughter was dead.

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## Pobrecitos

In the obituaries that morning, I read that Jesus had called Paula Gonzalez home. In the face of my recent widowhood and pending retirement from my job as a legal secretary, I reconsidered my long-time resentment for her, the mother of Gela, my childhood best friend.

At Lopez Funeral Home on that warm June day, the mourners fanned themselves with copies of the pamphlet that outlined the short program for the rosary and the next day's internment services at Our Lady of Good Counsel.

Here I was again. "El mundo se está acabando," my mother used to say at the news of yet another acquaintance from the Azteca barrio passing away. Sure seemed that way. I'd been to this funeral home too often lately, more times by my count than I'd been to visit my son Miguel's home in Virginia.

Floral arrangements of carnations filled the small room. Planning her wedding, my daughter, Juanita, complained that she thought they were "cheap," but for me they were perfect—papery and peppery-sweet. Smelling their light scent in the air mingled with the cloying viejita perfumes gave me a nervous feeling in my stomach, but also comforted me somehow. Surprising sounds of laughter pierced the cloud of murmurs that droned on steadily.

It had been fifty years since I last saw Gela, and since I last considered her my best friend. Growing up in the 1950s, both of us from families steeped in that form of poverty we knew we'd survive somehow, we latched on to each other and formed what seemed an unbreakable bond.

We were born in Laredo, Texas, but our parents were from el otro lado. My own mother had come all the way from Monterrey and Paulita from some place in the state of Tamaulipas, not too far from this American city where our little houses stood catty-corner from each other.

We were poor, but in some ways, my family was worse off than Gela's. My mother, a teen-aged bride, had only a sixth-grade education. My father was in his twenties when they married. I was only five when he left us, and my mother was pregnant with her fifth child. My papá was a Mexicano, as macho and unfaithful as one might expect from the unflattering stereotypes of the hot Latin lovers on television today. He had another family of children that shared my unusual last name of Decker a couple of streets over, there en la Azteca. In fact, I heard there were a few litters of Deckers throughout Laredo. I've never investigated the family genealogy. I picture the tree twisted and wild with branches weighed down by fruta madura and seeds spilling all around, and here and there surrounding the tree, scraggly, leafless saplings. Besides all that, it was such an odd name to have in my city where most people were named Garcia and Casares and Rodriguez. Decker was a part of me I'd learned to feel ashamed of on those rare outings to the movies about World War II. I slumped down in my seat in the darkened theater as Hollywood leading men dressed as soldiers helped feed America's hatred for the rest of the world.

My father came around once in a while and my mother would send us out on some errand to the tendajo or out to play, and she and my father locked themselves in the single bedroom of the house.

My mother was a proud woman who never married or even dated again after my father left, but she confided in Paulita that she would beg my father to return to help support the family. In those days, deadbeat dads were the norm. There weren't laws like there are now. My father never gave us much. He came over only rarely. He'd scan the bare cupboards and swear, complaining about the meager rations.

On one occasion he pulled the large can of sliced yellow cling peaches my mother was saving for a Sunday treat from the cabinet under the sink. Unfamiliar with our little house, he opened all the drawers in the kitchen and emptied the utensil drawer, spoons and forks clattering on the counter. With his large open hand, he noisily moved the forks and spoons around in search of the opener. With animal grunts he opened the can and then ate the squishy sweet peach slices one at a time, slurping and wiping the juice from his beard. My sister Chayo and I sat and watched. Hunched over the can and clutching it with one hand, he held up the other as if he would strike me. I fearfully dodged it, bumping my own head against Chayo's. "Ow!" she squealed, slapping me hard across the face.

My father only laughed. "Que la chinganda," he said. "Son puros pinches changos aquí ustedes." He chuckled and continued to eat. I felt something inside me like the saddest most unquenchable hunger in the world—for the fruit, but also for the attention of the man who swallowed it down like a fat cartoon cat with his head thrown back, dropping in whole, savory fish with X's for eyes. With both fists, he held the can up to his thick lips and downed the heavy syrup. A few minutes later he was out the door and on his way back to the other Decker household where he would eat the yellow fruit of some other monkeys.

One day, my father showed up drunk for one of the closed-door meetings with my mother while the rest of us were at school and Johnny was well restrained in a highchair. Perhaps, as usual, my mother begged my father to come back and support the family. I don't know what else went on, but at some point during an argument that ensued, she held her finger up to heaven and told my father that God would surely punish him for abandoning us and never seeing to our care. My father pulled my mother's finger back on itself and broke it.

Paulita came to my mother's rescue. She sat with Johnny and helped my mom as much as she could. There was no clinic to run to, no doctor to see. For the rest of her life, my mother's finger stuck straight up that way, a constant reminder of her final pleas to my father.

Even though once again Paulita seemed to be my mother's best friend, she wasn't that. Soon enough she regaled the neighbors in the barrio with some version of that story. I overheard her myself telling her backyard neighbor hanging clothes on the sogá that my mother, "Esa tonta," had enticed my father with her body and that he'd rejected her again and again. What was it about women sometimes that made them such busybodies? *Malas y habladoras*. To my young mind the indecipherable puzzle had no easy answer.

Paulita also seemed to me to be a woman who put on airs. "Presumida" my mother called her at times. She carried herself like an arrogant rich woman, even though she was almost as poor as we were. At the church she seemed extra attentive to the ladies in the parish who were well off, who wore nice clothes and whose chubby children sat in the front pews. During the *desayunos* in the church hall after morning mass, she waited on them like a servant, laughed too hard at the things they said and did not speak much at all to my mother or any of the other ladies from our street. I noticed that she wore fancy, expensive dresses on Sundays. She looked like the rich ladies, especially when she stood next to my mom in her simple everyday dress.

Epifanio was Paulita's husband. And while my own father was a terrible excuse for a man, Epifanio was gentle and kind. Illiterate, he worked with the city's sewer system. He loved to fish in the Rio Grande and listen to baseball games on the radio with his buddies on weekend afternoons. He always announced to Gela and her brother Lalo when the next payday would be, and every two weeks the two children hungrily anticipated the *quincena*, the happy fortnight Friday, when he would come home wearing his overalls like always and carrying a quart of ice

cream. Putting on like he was a little kid skipping and jumping, he never failed to come up the street singing a song made up for the occasion: “Here is the ice cream for Lalo and Gela, Lalo and Gela, Lalo and Gela.” When he saw me standing there with my arms crossed in the shadows while his son and daughter jumped up and down and squealed with their own arms stretched out toward their generous daddy, he would add “ Y pa’ Luisita, la pobrecita.”

I was used to that name. The whole neighborhood knew about my father and our terrible situation. Everybody was always calling us “pobrecitos.” It was just a word that people said sometimes to be polite, but it was usually without meaning, without sympathy or pity or condescension. But when they said it about us, used it to name us, it made me feel something in my heart sharp and dull at the same time. My throat tightened up, but I didn’t feel like I could cry for myself. I’d want the person to pat my shoulder, but I also felt like I would slap their hands away if they did.

Epifanio and Paulita kept a tidy home even though it had dirt floors. Twice a day, Paulita would drizzle water on them to tamp down the dust. It was a trick: too much water and the floor would be muddy. Gela and I learned just the right amount to drizzle down. Sometimes we’d bring a rake into the house and sweep it across the damp floor, making decorative squiggly grooves.

We traveled up north together with Gela’s family and worked in the pisca. I felt safe with Epifanio around. We traveled all over the country picking crops of cherries, lettuce, cucumbers and other delicious things I so wanted to eat right there in those endless field. On one trip to Bakersfield we worked en la uva, rows and rows of those perfectly beautiful fairy tale vines sagging with bunches and bunches of those sweet white grapes. How I wanted to fill my mouth with them and bite them all at once. No one cared that underage kids labored in the sun with the

grown-ups. Gela and I and even little Johnny tagged along. One day Gela and I were so hot and hungry, we stopped working and sat under a tree and tried to sleep off the nauseating prickly pangs in our stomachs. I spied the station wagon of another migrant family next to our campsite. Carrying Johnny who was not quite two years old, I made my way to the back of the car and saw a large pot of beans covered with aluminum foil and next to it, a bag of white bread. I sat Johnny down on the grass next to my feet and took two slices of bread from the bag and dipped them in the beans. Johnny and I shared one and I held his hand as we made our way back to the tree to share our find with Gela.

Soon I was roused from a nap that had finally taken hold when I heard the shouting. The man who owned the station wagon pushed Epifanio and yelled at him that his daughter was a thief.

Epifanio held both hands up and said, “We’re all hungry, ‘mano. They’re just children.” He reached into his pocket and gave the man a dollar bill. The man grabbed the dollar and ignored Epifanio, who held out his hand to shake on peace restored.

Epifanio never corrected the man who believed that I was another daughter. It made Paulita mad that Epifanio had paid the man. “That was the most expensive bread in the world,” she said, adjusting the pañuelo she tied tightly around her head. Epifanio shrugged and winked at me, and I felt like I could work all day long.

Soon after we returned to the little house in la Azteca, this old argument resurfaced. Paulita, a wonderful cook, sent me back home when it was time for dinner, though she’d always let me stay before, saying mine was just one more mouth to feed. “Anda, guerquita, robona,” she hissed. “Your mother couldn’t take care of her man. Can’t she take care of her children?” As I ran out of the house, I heard Epifanio coming up the street, whistling happily in the cool

night where the smells of the bubbling guisado con papas no doubt made him glad to be coming home to his little family. “Where are you going, Luisita?” he called out to me.

“A mi casa,” I said, glad that the blue darkness of the evening kept him from seeing my tears.

One day driving a car he’d borrowed from a friend to take Lalo, Gela and me on a day-trip to the beach in Corpus Christi, he suffered a heart attack and crashed the car into a light pole. He died right there. We had waited for hours on the front stoop, looking up and down the street every time we heard a car coming, thinking it was Epifanio. I imagined he came down the road, smiling and planning the day’s fun events for us. Maybe he was whistling like always. Maybe he was singing one of his songs: “Vamos a la playa, Lalo y Gela y Luisita la Pobrecita.”

As was common in those days, the body of the deceased was laid out in the front room of the house, and mourners arrived with food—something to help the family. I arrived with my mother. We brought over a quart of milk and bags of bread from the panadería. My mother was so shy that I was always the one to speak when there were strangers around. Suddenly self-conscious in front of a room full of people I had never seen before in this same house, I could only mumble “Aquí le manda mi mamá, Lolita.” My mother looked down at her feet and everyone stared. They surrounded the body of Epifanio, there on a floral print sheet on the dirt floor, most of them standing, for the lack of furniture in the little house.

Paulita’s sister took the bags from us and ushered us into a back room where Paulita and Gela were. Lalo lay on the bed crying into the pillow, blowing his nose into the pillowcase, his whole body shuddering.

I approached Gela and felt nervous and afraid of the display of emotion that we'd never had occasion to share before. I was stunned to see her plainly smiling. I grasped her hand and she giggled and then remained silent, staring at her wailing brother.

Paulita seemed composed and sniffled into a handkerchief. My mother hugged her and the two comadres held each other for a long time before walking arm in arm into the front room and Epifanio lying there on the floor.

This was the room where Gela and I had slept often. The house was so hot for most of the year that we slept there with the windows and doors wide open. Now Epifanio was there shoeless and in a suit borrowed from a cuñado. It looked to be two sizes too small, and the sight of him made me wince at the discomfort he would feel in life wearing something other than his ample overalls and worn work boots.

My borrowed, some-time daddy looked like he was sleeping a painful sleep. His giant, beautiful heart exploded because it was so full of kindness and love. I would never feel safe en la Azteca again.

Now our mothers were both alone. But Paulita began to ingratiate herself even more with the ladies from the parish, bringing them morsels of gossip, made juicy in her exaggerated version of events, especially at the expense of my mother.

When she was fourteen, my sister Yola dropped out of school. She would look for a full-time job to help the family. It was Christmas time, and a brand new department store called Neisner's was opening up en el centro. Yola was skinny and flat-chested, but my mother helped her stuff the formless training bra she still wore and dolled her up with powder and red lipstick. Yola passed for a sixteen year old and got the job. When she returned from the store and entered the front room of the house to make the announcement, we all cheered, imagining that life would

finally be better. My mother slumped in a chair in the kitchen crying into her hands. Paulita stood over her and rubbed her back.

At every Christmas from the time Gela and I were about six years old, Paulita would take us to the posadas at the Sacred Heart Orphanage on the banks of the Rio Grande. It was an institution within a compound surrounded by high-brick walls with high arches and iron rails. I realized that it was built that way, not to keep people out, but to keep the orphans in. The Catholic nuns ran the orphanage and Paulita helped them coordinate the posadas which were mostly about praying the rosary in the chapel. Then we processed down the hallways after each mystery of the rosary. We knocked on doors which represented the inns where Joseph and Mary looked for shelter. We sang “Silent Night” and “The First Noel” and walked back to the chapel while we prayed in unison.

Even though this was such a special time of the year, and the cool air still carried with it the excitement of days off from school and the expectation and cheer of the holiday, I could not ignore the anxious thought that Gela and I were one parent away from joining these children behind those high walls. I shook off the feeling and sang all the louder, holding hands with Gela.

The main reason we loved to go to the posadas year after year was because we were sure to get a bag of candies. We loved to be among the other children. Rich or poor or in-between, we were united in our young, persistent faith. Paulita gave each kid a wooden whistle in the shape of a small red bird with the instructions that we had to return it. Even for just an afternoon, it was a magical toy to hold and possess for that short time.

It was during the posada when I was ten years old, that year that Yola got the job at Neisner’s, that ended my friendship with Gela. As the nuns gathered the children around in the cramped hallway to distribute the small bags of peppermint and butterscotch candies, I heard

Paulita telling Sr. Marian to pray for my mother because she had prostituted my sister Yola.

“Yes, Lolita has done such a terrible thing,” she told Sr. Marian. “But what does she know with her limited education and her tendencies to woo her wayward husband with her body?” Sr. Marian whispered something to Paulita. “Oh no.” This was all she could say, she insisted, because she was a true and loyal friend to my mother and could not share any more details, in fact had said too much already, but only in the interest of seeking God’s intercession. Hands together on her protruding middle, she sighed heavily, closed her eyes, and shook her head.

“¡Vieja méndiga!” I screamed above the laughter and chatter of the children. With small, closed fists I reached up to strike her square on her upper arm like a tight sack of flour. Sr. Marion grabbed me by the arm and whipped me away from Paulita. I wrenched my arm away and faced Gela who showed her shame and sorrow as she had done at her daddy’s wake, with a large grin spreading across her face.

No one tried to stop me. I left the confines of that impenetrable compound easily. I had only to walk out the way I had come in. The hallways, once bustling with children, were empty now, though the echoes of their singing “Los Tres Reyes” filled my ears as I fled.

I left without my candy, but I still clutched the little wooden whistle in the shape of a bird.

Walking home, I tried to blow it, my tears and mucous falling into the tiny hole on top of the whistle, disrupting its once pleasant tone, dissolving all of its magic away.

I would not return to the tidy house with the dirt floors. I would never again return to the posadas at the Sacred Heart orphanage. My mother and Paulita, joined by their common sorrows, never spoke again after I arrived home and breathlessly and tearfully told my mother what had happened at the orphanage. She stood in the middle of the small kitchen holding

Johnny in her arms. “No te preocupes, hi’jita,” my mother said pressing my face against her chest. Johnny patted my head with his tiny hand.

I saw Gela at school, surrounded by other girls from the neighborhood. Sometimes she would wave to me or say hi, but I could say nothing back. By the seventh grade, she dropped out. Soon after that I heard that she’d married and moved to California.

I received a card from her when complications of diabetes took the life of my mother. But no one from the old neighborhood came to pay their respects. My mother’s five children and dozens of grandchildren and great grandchildren filled that funeral home and the mass at Our Lady of Sorrows. I imagined our own family tree, branches reaching up to the sky, full and even and fairly bursting with golden fruit.

Part of that glorious tree was my own husband, Felipe. We met and married when I was twenty two. He worked construction and later opened up his own hardware store. We had the problems all couples do, I suppose, but he was a loving man, one who never raised a hand to hit me or his voice to wound my soul. He built for us a solid, simple home—all I ever wanted. He loved his children and knew the way to win their pure, happy hearts with tenderness and attention. He saved up all year and treated us to a week-long beach vacation every summer. While my children played with him in the water, I walked for miles up and down the shore and studied the gulls that soared around me, lonely and always searching. I returned to my husband resting on the tailgate of the camper, watching the children play, looking out at the elaborate sandcastle he had built for them. From the ice chest he pulled out ice-cream sandwiches—one for each of us. My Juanita and Miguel sat on the tailgate, swinging their feet. They sang and laughed and licked at the ice cream that dripped on their arms. When they were finished, Felipe let them share his.

He is buried in the cemetery plot we selected together. I know well that I will join him some day. El mundo se está acabando. I pray I can see him again in heaven. Perhaps there is a special place there for the pobrecitos. The ones who struggle in life to survive, the ones who pull their families out of poverty, the ones with big, open hearts, the ones who do the best they can.

Paula Gonzalez went to be with the Lord. I considered the wording in the obituary while I stood at the doorway of the funeral home.

Once in the door, I saw Gela. It had been fifty years and I felt like I was looking at some strange señora. But I knew her instantly there among the mourners, the smile she wore frozen on her face.

Sitting in the front row with what looked to be her husband, adult children, and grandchildren, she looked up as I approached. Without hesitating, I hugged her and it was like breathing in the air of those old casitas where we'd spent so much time together—the milky smells of both of our mothers, the comino and ajo that filled the entire vecindad no matter whose mother was cooking, the smoke rising from an old oil drum in Gela's backyard as mesquite wood burned and Epifanio sang along to Jorge Negrete on XEW or re-enacted the final, dramatic inning of the afternoon's baseball game, the smell of orange on our hands in those orchards in el Valle, my mother's Ivory-soaped skin when I slept with her in the front room and we said our prayers together and lay on our stomachs to watch through the front door entrance as the trees danced in the warm breeze.

Gela and I said nothing to each other. I began to cry and wiped my eyes with a tissue, unable to speak. Gela cried too—this time, at last, her tears trailing down into the big open smile on her face.

As I moved to make my way to Paulita's casket, Gela pulled me back gently. "I have to warn you," she said. "Mi mamá....This is how she wanted it. Just so you know."

I walked toward the casket and braced myself as one does. Paulita lay there wearing, not her nicest Sunday dress, but a faded housecoat. Her hair was dyed black and her face lined and cakey with a bronze tinged make-up. She hadn't changed much at all.

From the bundle of Kleenex in my hand I pulled out the small wooden bird and gently dropped it in the casket.

Paula Gonzalez went to be with the Lord. That's good, I thought. I turned to my old childhood friend, an orphan like me, and we both smiled.

## Vita

Yvette D. Benavides was born in Laredo, Texas. She is one of five children born to Cristobal Rene Benavides and Luisa Decker Benavides. She graduated from J.W. Nixon High School and earned a bachelor's and master's degree from The University of Texas at Austin. She was an instructor of English at Laredo Community College from 1990-1995. She is an associate professor of English at Our Lady of the Lake University in San Antonio where she lives with her husband, David Martin Davies and their daughter, Christianna Louisa. She is a book critic for the San Antonio *Express News*. She has been host of the public radio shows "Texas Matters" and "Fronteras" and still contributes interviews and commentaries to both. She has published widely in such publications as *Latina* and *Mothering* magazines, *The Texas Observer*, *The Langdon Review of the Arts in Texas*, the *Austin Chronicle*, among others. Her work is also included in two anthologies, *Is This Forever or What?* and *The Pedagogy of Pop*.