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# A Son of Mercy, Un Hijo de Misericordia

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A SON OF MERCY, UN HIJO DE MISERICORDIA

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## **Dedication**

To Jaqueline Sanchez-Espinoza &  
Ella Itzel Espinoza

A SON OF MERCY, UN HIJO DE MISERICORDIA

by

CARLOS FIDEL ESPINOZA, BMS

THESIS

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
Preface.....	1
A Son of Mercy, Un Hijo de Misericordia.....	22
Vita.....	126

## Writing From the Hands of a Plaster Jesus

### The Poetics and Theory: An Understanding of *A Son of Mercy, Un Hijo de Misericordia*

#### I.

##### The Historical Scope of *A Son of Mercy*

*The Son of Mercy, El Hijo de Misericordia*, originated as an image: a plaster bust of Jesus Christ's head and torso, trimmed in gold, holding a pair of yellowing dentures in his hands, held open to receive the Holy Spirit. I imagined the plaster bust sitting on a night-stand next to a queen-sized bed. A woman, wrinkled and tired, struggles to sit-up. She asks who I am and I tell her I'm here to write her story. She asks me if I've seen her dentures. I lie to her and tell her I haven't.

This image became the ending of the *The Son of Mercy*, and from the end I constructed different sketches of what ultimately became the characters in the novella. I knew that Josefina, the woman who had lost her teeth, was a Mexicana and an American Citizen living in El Paso, Texas. I wondered if she or any of the other characters would struggle with language, racism, sexism or any other -ism in various American cultures. I wrote the characters into short-stories, and watched Charlie's motivations and yearnings develop. I took the stories into various workshops and saw how people responded to them. The protagonist, Charlie, began as a cocaine addict, an overweight Chicano cook whose motivations are driven by a dying grandmother and

a stripper named Delilah. Drug-addiction becomes an excuse for Charlie's mistakes and all he wants to do is snort cocaine and spend his paycheck at the Dusty Rose, the strip-joint where Delilah works. But in this thesis, I didn't write about Delilah and the cocaine. Instead I focused on the relationship between Charlie and Josefina.

Pepper, Charlie's grandfather, passes away, forcing Charlie to question his role and place in the Cantero family. Josefina, Charlie's adoptive mother, makes it clear to Charlie that she adopted him out of circumstance rather than love or the desire to have another child. Juanito, Josefina's son, also harbors resentment towards Charlie because Pepper never hit Charlie or called him a *gordo* or embarrassed him by showing up to a school event drunk. Unsure if he even has a family after Pepper's death, Charlie tries to be a good son to Josefina by helping her cope with her husband death and the financial stress that ensues. Josefina rejects Charlie, calls him a *worthless maricón* and runs him out of the house, yet Charlie always returns.

Charlie yearns for Josefina's maternal love, which manifest into quiet moments when she tells Charlie stories. Together they create worlds from these stories. Sometimes the stories are about life in Mexico; other times they are about unlucky vampires and Pepper's life before Charlie was born. These moments, when Josefina tells Charlie stories, do not define their relationship; rather they give Charlie the hope that Josefina loves him like a son and isn't just tolerating him out of circumstance.

Charlie's struggle with a role and a place in the Cantero family parallels the Chicano/a struggle with our role and place in the United States and Mexico. As Chicanos/as we search for a home, a country, a motherland that accepts us as sons and daughters, which loves us with the same unconditional love that she extends to all her patrons. Chicanos/as want to belong, to be loved regardless of our languages or skin color or ideas. We want to be humans, not Latinos or Hi-Spanics or Spics. We want a place where we can feel safe, a place from which we can love instead of a place where we are tolerated out of circumstance. Chicanos/as want a home, a mother and *A Son of Mercy* allows for the exploration of that yearning. It creates a space in which we can witness to what extent someone will go to in order to feel like a member of the family, for Charlie, too, wants to belong.

## II.

### **Poetics: The Mexicana Muse**

*There is history in Texas that, either vaguely or precisely, we who live here understand without a second thought. That is to say, we all are aware that once upon a time there was Mexico in Texas, and it was here, right where we are now.*

--Dagoberto Gilb, *Made In Texas: American Literature and Culture*, preface

I write because I am the cultural descendent of Maya, Mexica and Toltec ancestors and I find myself in an era in which social stigmas and misconceptions are desperate to drowning out our voices. In "Texas Ethnic Studies Bill Protested By Latino Activists," an article in the *Huffington Post*, Roque Planas writes: "Texas has become the next battleground over ethnic studies. Latino activists are protesting a bill filed by Conservative state Sen. Dan Patrick that would disqualify ethnic studies courses from counting toward core history requirements." According to the article Arizona passed a similar bill, HB 2281. Proponents of this bill aim to ensure that classrooms will limit the scope in which history is taught. Gilb writes about the attitudes towards Mexican American literature in *Hecho En Tejas: An Anthology of Texas Mexican Literature*:

Mexican American work can be charming but not serious, not important, certainly not important. Until very recently at best, there was no book, no writer, of Mexican descent who was worthy of being taught in a university course on American or Texas literature. (xix)

This type of bias motivates me to write. It stems from my never reading a Mexican-American writer in grade school, middle school and high school. I didn't even know Mexican-American writers existed until I got to the university. Of course, I knew of Shakespeare, Maupassant, Melville and Dickens—all required reading—but not a single one of them was Mexican American.

Perhaps my need to write developed while I was tucked into my grandmother's arms. She told me stories of our family history, stories of her brothers fighting with other rancheros, stories of her youth in Mexico and stories about raising my father and uncles. From then on I wanted to write and in my early twenties I realized that I was part of a history that went back thousands of years, to the first Mayan poets. I wanted to write stories about my people and for my people, so we can have our own history. This sentiment is echoed in *A Son of Mercy* in that Charlie gathers Josefina's stories and uses them to solidify his role in the Cantero family; her stories become his history. Charlie participates in the creation of his history by changing, adopting and imagining some of the stories. For example, Charlie does not know his mother but feels the need to understand why she gave him away. As a result Charlie imagines the circumstances which led to his mother abandoning him.

One may make another connection between Charlie's need to understand and participate in his history and the history of the Meso-Americans. Meso-Americans were subject to colonization which erased part of the Meso-American history. Historian and author Inga Clendinnen writes that the Aztecs suffered a "completeness of the obliteration of a way of life and a way of thought" (Aztec, 272). She goes on to explain that what remains of Meso-American history was written by the Spanish, with the exception of a few surviving codices.

According to Lex Williford's presentation "The History of The Short Story," "The history of the short story is the history of losers" (Williford, "The History of The Short Story Clip I"). The Native Tribes of the Americas have suffered some of the biggest losses in the history of mankind, but we do not need to ascribe to a history that pretends we are extinct. Rather, we should use these ancestors' losses to tell stories of who we are and how we live.

My goal is simply to tell our stories. I want to write about how we live in El Paso and Juárez, the smell of roasting chickens in the streets of the Mercado or the demolition of the Asarco smoke stacks that snowed toxic debris over Juárez when they came down. I want to write about sitting on the boulders at Hueco Tanks looking at the cave paintings our ancestors left so that we can never forget that we were always here.

In *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafiction Paradox*, Linda Hutcheon writes: "The reader is explicitly or implicitly forced to face his responsibility towards the text" (27). The reader, in facing the responsibility towards the text, must also face the responsibility of loss in the text when the text is fiction. The responsibility towards loss gives the reader an understanding, through empathy or sympathy, of the loss experienced in a text. Writers must understand that they create an alternative to history by writing about history's losses. Luis Valdez's poem, "Pensamiento Serpentino," expresses the role of history and gives an understanding of how it can be rectified. Valdez writes:

/not Thomas Jefferson nor Karl Marx/ will LIBERATE the  
Chicano/ not Mahatama Ghandi nor Mao Tze Tung/ IF HE IS NOT  
LIBERATED FIRST BY/ HIS PROPIO PUEBLO/ HIS POPOL VUH/ HIS  
CHILAM BALAM/ HIS CHICHEN ITZA/ KUKULCAN, GUCUMATZ,  
QUETZALCOATL. (172)

What we write becomes the culture of our successors, our children, and it has the potential to influence American culture as a whole. This observation is not a call to arms or a wish to terrorize the proponents of colonialism but to acknowledge that the Chicano/a is the product of an act of terrorism through colonialism. As a result Chicano/a writers offend, what Benjamin Alire Sáenz calls, the "defenders of the pure," who believe that "Chicano [writing] corrupts the integrity of the Spanish language. Chicano [writing] corrupts the integrity of the English language," because the "Chicana's integrity is this: she has no respect for borders. She knows why borders are there" ("I Want to Write an American Poem: On Being a Chicano Poet in Post-Columbian America," 524). The "defenders of the pure" are a reaction to the act of colonialism because colonialism is about taking from others: ultimately colonialism is about raping and robbing and pillaging. I suspect colonialism creates an inherent fear that those whose ancestors have colonized will suffer the same atrocities as the colonized. In other words the colonized will rise and take back what has been taken, through the same methods of rape, robbery and expulsion of history. This fear is at the heart of every prejudice, slur and stigma. Those who have colonized live in fear

that the conquered we will oust them. However, this ideology is false. As a Chicano/a writer, I want live in a collective of poetry and fiction that rectifies the piss-poor ideologies created by colonization through writing.

According to Vrigilio Elizondo's *La Morenita*, Náhua philosophers believed that "the medium of words was dangerous and no one could ever be assured of its truthfulness—for it was easy for man to twist words around. Hence the key question 'Is truth possible?'" (3). For the Náhua peoples, of which Chicanos/as are the cultural descendants, the only truth came in the form of poetry. In *Aztec Thought and Culture*, Miguel León-Portilla writes:

"Poetry is, then, a creative and profound expression which, through symbol and metaphor, allows man to discover himself and then to talk about what he has intuitively and mysteriously perceived.... [His] words may at times embody authentic revelation" (76).

My writing is for the people, but not as their voice or champion, rather as one of them, a small part of a whole history of experiences, revelations and thoughts. I've often believed, while sitting at my computer late at night, that all I have is this small part of the whole from which I write and it's riddled with doubt and fear, because every line may not be perfect, because English and Spanish grammar has been a problem for me all my life, because I exist between the lines of language.

Portillo writes: "Since [the poet] feels that he will never be able to express what he longs to express, the poet suffers" (76). Perhaps, there are worse things to suffer, the bombings in Boston, the immigration camps in Arizona and Texas, the failing economy, foreclosure, war and La Migra. And through all this, my writing exists like a pinhole in a felt blanket, only visible when held up to the light.

### III.

#### **The Mechanics of Second-Hand Stories**

##### **Metafiction: Telling a Story From Within a Story**

While writing the novella *Son of Mercy*, I noticed a relationship between the storyteller, Josefina, and the protagonist/narrator, Charlie, and the oral traditions of storytelling. In other words, Charlie narrates Josefina's stories second-hand through memory. These stories could be lies about Charlie's family members and who they really are. Perhaps, the lies allow for Josefina to manipulate Charlie, because she loves him like family but despises that he is a bastard grandchild born from the daughter of her husband's mistress.

On one level Josefina tries to consolidate her genealogy for Charlie, an elusive task when considering the flaws of one's own genealogy. In the essay, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," Michel Foucault writes, "Genealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most unpromising places, in what

we tend to feel is without history" (76). For Josefina, her stories define her genealogy; they are proof to Charlie that she was not always a bitter woman, that she was capable of emotions, that she was once young and men died over the chance to be with her.

After Charlie's grandfather dies he too feels the need to consolidate his genealogy by narrating *A Son of Mercy*. As a result, the text becomes, what Hutcheon calls, a "metafictional paradox... fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and or linguistic identity" (1). Charlie retells Josefina's stories but doubts the integrity of the stories. However, towards the end of the novella Charlie, too, decides to create his own stories about his genealogy by imagining his mother, Mercy, and the life and the events that led up to Mercy's decision to abandon Charlie. This act of imagination allows the novella "to shift the focus from the 'fiction' to the 'narration' by either making the 'narration' into the very substance of the novel's content, or by undermining the traditional coherence of the 'fiction' itself" (Hutcheon, 28).

In *A Son of Mercy*, Charlie retells Josefina's stories to reconcile his role in the family after his grandfather's death. To some extent Charlie's grandfather, Pepper, has validated Charlie's role in the family. Charlie is not related to Josefina and therefore after Pepper dies Josefina doesn't have to pretend that Charlie is family. Charlie questions his role in the Cantero family and recounts the stories Josefina told: as a result the stories become the "very substance of the novel's content" (28). *A Son of Mercy* undermines

"the coherence of the 'fiction' itself" because Charlie, as the narrator, tells the story of the stories told to him.

The mechanics of attempting to undermine the coherence of fiction requires choices and compromises. For example, the form of this novella needed a kind of symmetrical balance. I could group the chapters into three sections: the present action narrated by Charlie, the past action narrated by Josefina through Charlie and the past action of Mercy narrated by Charlie. I could also group the chapters by themes like Josefina's family and Pepper's job or I could arrange the chapters in a Chronological order. My thesis director, Lex Williford, suggested that I write the present action of the novella in present tense and write the past action in the past tense. In the end, I decided to follow that suggestion, and I layered the present action in chronological order and past action in a thematic order. For instance, in the present action Charlie must deal with his place among the Canteros after Pepper's death. But in the past action, Charlie recounts and reinvents the stories Josefina told him. In the first chapter, written in present tense, Pepper's appearance reminds Charlie of Nosferatu when Charlie sees Pepper sniffing the air, heavy with smell of chiles rellenos. In the next chapter, written in past action, Charlie recounts a story Josefina told him about Chupas, a vampire forced to attack a donkey to survive.

An interesting thing happened when I wrote the past action of Mercy's story, told by Charlie. Charlie adapts the role of Josefina in that he too creates a history that may not have existed. When

considering "Narcissistic Narrative: The Meta Fictional Paradox," I realized that Charlie enters a "diegetic mode" of Narcissism. According to Hutcheon, "In the diegetic mode, the reader is made aware of the fact that he, too, in reading, is actively creating a fictional universe" (28). By listening to and retelling Josefina's stories, Charlie as the reader/listener is "actively creating a fictional universe" (Hutcheon, 28). The height of the "diegetic mode" for Charlie, occurs when he decides to create the stories of Mercy to coincide with the stories Josefina has told him of his mother. Charlie finds himself in Josefina's stories and creates stories that collaborate with hers. Motivated by his need to be a son, he does what he thinks will make Josefina accept him as a son.

### **The Chronotope: How Time and Space Are Layered**

My favorite theory, the chronotope, developed by Albert Einstein and later adapted by M.M. Bakhtin into a literary theory, considers the concept of time and space as one unit. Bakhtin writes:

[S]patial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, become artistically visible, likewise space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (84)

In *A Son of Mercy*, time fluctuates between the present action of Charlie, the past action of Josefina's stories narrated by Charlie,

and the past action of Mercy imagined by Charlie. In the first-person present action, time follows a chronological order. Charlie visits his grandfather, his grandfather passes away, and then Charlie discovers that his uncle has stolen the money the union has collected for the funeral. In some instances, Charlie, has flashbacks during the present action. For example, at Pepper's funeral Charlie remembers being a boy and riding with Pepper on the way to Mount Cristo Rey. In essence we have chronotope created from within a larger chronotope assuming that each chronotope counts as a specific time and space.

The past action begins in the second chapter in which Josefina tells Charlie the story of the vampire Chupas. In this chronotope Charlie, in his youth, lies next to Josefina and listens to her tell a story. The story begins, "Have I ever told you about Chupas the Vampire from Transylvania? Josefina asked me when I was five." Then it ends by returning to Josefina and Charlie lying in bed and talking in the present action. This shift in time and point of view indicates to the reader that Charlie narrates Josefina's stories second-hand.

Josefina's stories create the second chronotope in the past-action chapters. Sometimes time/space exists in a memory. For example, Josephina tells the story of how her husband killed her cousin Marqito during a wedding. In some cases the stories are made up, like the story of Chupas the lonely vampire, forced to face a brave donkey. In other chronotopes, Josefina recounts Pepper's abusive hands, quick temper and love of alcohol.

The final chronotope develops around Charlie's mother Mercy. Charlie tries to imagine Mercy's life and circumstances that led to the abandonment of her son. He develops these stories because Josefina, in the present action, refuses to tell Charlie about his mother. This chronotope juxtaposes how Charlie learned to tell stories from Josefina and how Charlie develops the stories which Josefina refuses to tell him.

The concept of the chronotope allows a writer to keep space in perspective, because "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (84). I was constantly aware that regardless of the time in the chronotope, the spaces needed to be connected thematically because Charlie as the narrator populates each space. Therefore, each space has an identical component in Charlie. Other images appear thematically, in the various spaces and times throughout the novella. For example, Josefina's teeth or dentures appear in present-action chapters and past-action chapters. The surfacing and resurfacing of these images allow me to link the various chronotopes into a cohesive novella.

### **The Integrity of the Narrator and the Layers of Unreliability**

Is Charlie telling the truth, in that he accurately retells Josefina's stories? As Bakhtin points out, "[t]he speaking person in the novel is always, to one degree or another, and *ideologue*, and his words are always *ideologemes*. A particular language in a novel is

always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for a social significance" (Bakhtin, 333). In *A Son of Mercy*, Charlie, the speaker, narrates for the reader and who sees the world through Charlie as if Charlie were a lens that focuses on Josefina and her stories.

Charlie's language also affects the lens through which we see the world he narrates. That is, his English, Pocho and Spanglish play a role in the novella's narration. The context of the language creates comical and ironic undertones which drive *A Son of Mercy*. For example, Charlie gives his chile to Pepper in the first chapter. On one hand, Charlie physically gives Pepper his food, a poblano chile, stuffed with cheese, battered and pan fried. On the other hand, *giving someone your chile* is slang for giving someone your cock. Since Charlie is the narrator he sees the word through this filter and throughout *A Son of Mercy*, Charlie incorporates the use of context to create comical situations out of tender moments of death, abuse and neglect.

Another example of contextual play occurs in the titles and names used throughout the novella. Pepper belongs to the A.M.P.U. which stands for the Amalgamated Meat Packers Union. *Meat Packer* is also a derogatory term used to describe sexual intercourse between two men. The Amalgamated Meat Packers Union marries the relationship of working class men with the possible suggestion of sexual orientation juxtaposed with Josefina, Pepper and Juanito's concepts of machismo masculinity.

The use of dialogue contributes to the verisimilitude of the narrator by establishing different voices, tones and timbers. The characters have different voices separate from Charlie's and because Charlie narrates all the stories they sound like his dialogue, rather than Josefina's or Juanito's dialogue. Within dialogue, a space between the narrator, the characters and the reader can be established.

The dialogue in *A Son of Mercy* also defines each character's attitudes, prejudices and emotional vulnerabilities. For example, Charlie confronts Juanito, his uncle, about the money Juanito stole from Pepper's funeral. Juanito claims that Wilson, who collected the money for the funeral, has lied about the amount of money collected. Juanito blames Wilson's skin color (Juanito uses a derogatory term) as the reason Wilson lies. Josefina affirms this mentality by also referring to Wilson with derogatory terms based on the misconceptions of race. The characters' dialogue also gives reference to the time/space in which the characters occupy the novella. For example, Juanito's dialogue towards Wilson serves as a reminder that at one point Pepper hated Wilson and used derogatory terms when speaking about him. Charlie, on the other hand, is born several years after Pepper has befriended Wilson and therefore does not hear Pepper talk about Wilson in derogatory terms.

## **Style: A Note on Aesthetics**

The aesthetics of *A Son of Mercy*, combines the concept of minimalism, or the economy of language, with folktales which I use to mirror the oral tradition with origins of the written story.

Raymond Carver's "Popular Mechanics," Lex Williford's *Macaulay's Thumb* and Charles Bukowski's *Post Office* influenced this thesis's economy of language. These writers write in a direct and intelligent manner that gets to heart of a story without convoluting the text. In Stephen King's essay, "Everything You Need to Know About Writing Successfully—in Ten Minutes," he writes, "Remove every extraneous word. You want to get up on a soapbox and preach? Fine. Get one and try your local park." *A Son of Mercy* attempts to maintain a minimalistic aesthetic. The stories are not populated with pages of images of the El Paso/Juarez landscape or with pages of stream of conscious writing. Rather, I kept in mind what Stanley Fish writes in *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One*: "If you can write a sentence in which actors, actions, and objects are related to one another in time, space, mood, desire, fears, causes and effects, and if your specification of those relationships is delineated with precision that communicates itself... you can write anything" (8).

In part a minimalist style also informs the structure of the *A Son of Mercy*, the stories are short and they try to keep the integrity of a short story by being direct. The narrator reveals only what is important to the story. The narrator is not concerned with his day-to-day life or his time at work. He is concerned only with

the events surrounding the death of Pepper and the need to understand his role in the Cantero family.

The style of *A Son of Mercy* also reflects the folktale quality mirroring the history of oral tradition and its evolution into written text. Josefina tells Charlie stories orally and Charlie narrates them into a written text.

Vladimir Propp's thirty-one functions, from his *Dramatis Personae* also informed *A Son of Mercy*. The first function *absention* occurs when "one of the members of the family absents himself from home" (386). In *A Son of Mercy*, this happens when Pepper passes away. It then reoccurs when El Gitano leaves the house and goes missing. The fifth function, *delivery*—when the "villain receives information about his victim"—occurs when the union collects money for Pepper's funeral. The *villain*, Juanito, follows the function of a villain by attempting to deceive Charlie and causing harm to both Charlie and Josefina. The eighth function, *lack*—when a "member of the family lacks something"—occurs when Josefina misplaces her dentures. Charlie decides to act upon all this by offering to pay for or to find Josefina's missing dentures and by questioning Juanito about the stolen money, which she could have used to pay the dentist.

Juanito and Charlie enter into direct struggle over the money stolen from Pepper's funeral. The seventeenth function, *branding*—when "the hero is branded,"—occurs when Josefina slaps Charlie snagging her nail in his beard and cutting him. At the end of the novella the task of finding Josefina's missing teeth is resolved in accordance

with the twenty-sixth function, *solution*—when “the task is resolved.” Josefina at the end of the novella, as in accordance with the twenty-seventh function, *recognition*—when “the hero is recognized”—establishes a new relationship with Charlie when she recognizes him as a son and he too recognizes himself as her son.

## **Conclusion**

*A Son of Mercy, Un Hijo de Misericordia*, evolved from a story of Charlie’s vices to a story of his family relationships and the role he plays within that family. The evolution, informed by the last image of Josefina’s dentures in the hands of a plaster bust of Jesus, drove an exploration of the characters and their yearnings. Charlie needs to get to those dentures to solidify his relationship with his adoptive mother, Josefina. Juanito, Josefina’s son, stands in the way of that relationship because he knows that Charlie is a better son.

As I wrote these characters and saw the dynamics of their family relationship unfold, I realized that their flaws, fears and conflicts prevented the characters from loving each other unconditionally. I questioned if it was possible to love family unconditionally once the members of the family stop becoming ideals and perhaps expose their humanness, their flaws, short-comings, desires, doubts and ambitions. Unconditional love can only occur when family accepts each other’s faults and realize the complexity of their own humanity.

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A Son of Mercy, Un Hijo de Misericordia

by C. F. Espinoza

Dead, the noblest man's meat is inferior to pork.

--Mark Twain

July 23rd, 2009

As the dentist pushes the mold plate into my grandmother's mouth I realize that I haven't been to the dentist since the violence in Juárez picked up. Before that it wasn't hard to cross the bridge and get some dental work done real cheap, too. Now the dentists cross into El Paso and make house visits. I imagine a dentist visits twenty to thirty people a week, performing root canals in kitchens, pulling teeth in bedrooms and capping teeth in living rooms.

After a while I get queasy from seeing Josefina slobber on the dentist's creamy latex hands. I get up from the kitchen and walk to my grandfather's room.

Dónde vas? asks Josefina as the dentist shoves his hands into her mouth.

I forgot to say hi to Pepper, I say.

Everybody calls my grandfather *Pepper*, though his name is Braulio. He picked up the nickname while working at the Payaton Meat Factory. One of his buddies, Wilson, gave him the nickname because Wilson thought my grandfather was a feisty man, a pepper that keeps burning. When I walk into Pepper's room, he's lying on his bed watching a boxing match. The fight announcer screams in Spanish; his voice jabs at my ear. I kiss Pepper on the top of his bald head. He pats me on the back.

Hi, Mijo, he says.

How's it going, Pops? I ask.

Good, good. Is that gordo, Juanito, here?

Nope, just me.

It's a good fight, he says. Chavez le da en la madre a ese negro.  
He nods to the T.V.

Chavez throws a left to the body, then a right hook. He crowds the boxer into a corner, and puts four chingasos into him. The camera pulls back and the audience is on their feet. The bell rings and each fighter staggers to their corner. The station breaks for a commercial.

Is the dentist still here? asks Pepper.

He's almost done, I say.

You all right? he says. I can have the dentist take a look at you, if you need him to.

I'll be all right.

If your grandmother asks, tell her I'm asleep, says Pepper as I leave his room.

The dentist washes his tools at the kitchen sink. He dries them with a paper towel. Josefina sits by the table, rubbing her jaw. She's wearing a barber's smock

He's a carnicero, says Josefina. A real butcher.

Be nice, I say. He's the only dentist who'll come out and see you.

Do you want him take a look at you? asks Josefina.

No, I'm good, I say.

The dentist packs his tools into a gray suitcase.

Your dentures should be here in two weeks, he tells Josefina. I can

charge you then.

What happened to your other dentures? I ask.

Who knows? she says. I might have left them outside. Maybe Pepper took them.

Josefina gets up from the chair and pulls the smock from her neck. She hands it to the dentist and walks him out the door.

I turn the comal on and start heating up some tortillas.

I can make you some food, says Josefina when she walks back in.

I'm okay, I say. I'll just make a quesadilla.

Don't be ridiculous, Sharlie, she says in a heavy Chihuahuan accent.

I take a seat at the kitchen table. She starts pulling pots and pans from the stove.

I'll make some chiles rellenos, she says. And I got some beans. Go ask Pepper if he wants some.

He's asleep, I say.

The kitchen fills with smell of frying eggs and flour.

How was the dentist? I ask. What did he have to say?

Not much, she says, except what he's charging.

Do you need some money? I ask.

You don't have money, Sharlie, she says. Your uncle told me you quit the call center. Says he pulled a lot of strings to get you in and you quit in two weeks.

That's not the job for me, I say. I can't just sit there all day waiting for fat women to call and order tunics and pantyhose.

Look how well it worked out for Juanito, she says. He made manager

like that. She snaps her fingers.

I don't want to talk about that shitty job, I say. Besides I got an interview to work in the kitchen at Azul's.

She laughs and puts the plate of chiles rellenos in front of me.

That's how you cook, she says.

I bite the chile.

Pepper pokes his head out of the hallway and sniffs the air. He looks like a mustached, Mexican Nosferatu creeping around for his next victim.

Did you make me some, Vieja? he says.

Sharlie told me you were asleep, she says.

He can have the rest of mine, I say. I got to catch the bus anyway.

I hug Josefina and kiss her on the cheek. Pepper's already at the kitchen table eating my chile.

Yo te doy un ride, he says. Just let me finish eating.

I'll be okay, I say.

I walk outside. The sun bites at my pecan skin. It's so hot outside that the soles of my cheap shoes melt if I stand in one place for too long. The bus won't be at the stop for another twenty minutes and there's no shade. I go back inside.

I'll take that ride, Pepper, I say.

He finishes eating, then goes to his room and puts on his polyester Wranglers and yellow work boots.

I jump into the passenger's side of his '89 F-150 Lariat. Pepper gets in, starts the truck and puts it in gear.

Look what I found, he says and pulls out a tape.

What is it? I ask.

Ramón Ayala y Sus Bravos del Norte, he says. I used to listen to this tape all the time. I found it in your abuela's dresser.

He put the tape into the deck. The speakers pop and Ramón's accordion kicks in. At first, the accordion is choppy. Then Ramón's voice comes in low and builds up. He sings about the bitter drinks of alcohol and how they don't help him forget his lost love.

Pepper and I drive down I-10. We don't say a word. We just listen to the tape.

I was five when my grandmother told me stories about Chupas, a vampire from Transylvania who traveled by ship to Mexico and never came back. Before she started the story she gnashed her teeth and bit into the back of my arms.

Chupas lived in an old-stone castle, on top of a mountain in Transylvania, she said. He lived with his mute servant, Kuko. After many years of preying on the villagers, no one was left. Chupas, needed to feed and turned on his companion Kuko. Kuko didn't fight back or try to escape; instead, Kuko turned his head and let Chupas, his starving master, bite into him.

With no one left in the village, Chupas traveled south until he came upon the Black Sea. He followed the coastline, found a docked ship and stowed away in the lower deck, which also had a brown donkey and chickens in a coop.

The ship set sail.

At night, Chupas climbed the stairs and opened the hatch to the deck. Three sailors worked the deck. Chupas crept up behind the first sailor and bit him. When Chupas was done he and threw the sailor overboard. The second sailor worked on the sail. Chupas bit and the sailor screamed. The third sailor ran over to see what had happened but Chupas turned into mist and returned to the lower deck.

The next night, Chupas climbed out of his wooden box and returned to

the deck. The captain and sailors kept watch. What a feast, Chupas thought. He bit into the men and tossed them overboard, one by one. By morning they were all gone.

By the twelfth night at sea, Chupas grew skinny and weak. Should have rationed the sailors instead going loco, Chupas thought. Now who will navigate the ship? By the fifteenth day he drank the chickens' blood, but six chickens were hardly a meal.

On the thirteenth day, Chupas decided to test the donkey. A thick vein pulsed on the donkey's inner thigh. Chupas' fangs grew long and sharp. He lunged towards the donkey's thigh. The little donkey braced himself with his front legs and raised his right hind leg and let it fly. The hoof struck Chupas and he bent over holding his stomach; he had never been hit so hard. It took him a second to regain his strength. The donkey chewed the hay as if nothing had happened. Chupas jumped at the donkey again. The donkey bucked and kicked Chupas with both hind legs, and Chupas flew across the room. The donkey chewed on hay. Chupas dusted himself off and turned into gray mist. The cloud floated towards the donkey's neck, and Chupas materialized. The donkey spun around before Chupas could sink his teeth in. The donkey kicked again, hoofing Chupas in the mouth. Chupas fell to the floor like a beaten boxer. He ran his tongue along his teeth and stopped at the gap where his left fang should have been. He scrambled over the floor trying to find his fang.

It took three weeks for the donkey to run out of hay. Then Chupas waited till the donkey fell asleep. He crept up to donkey and sunk

his one good fang into the donkey's vein and sucked.

Chupas' stomach swelled. After he got his fill, he sat back and unbuttoned the top button of his trousers. The donkey lay on its side with its mouth open. Chupas saw the donkey's incisors grow long and sharp. The donkey charged, but Chupas was too full to move.

Do you know the lesson of that story? asked Josefina.

Don't be greedy?

No, pendejo, said Josefina. Even a burro can fight back.

October 2nd, 2009

I receive a phone call from my uncle, Juanito Cantero.

Charlie, where the fuck you been? He shouts over the phone. I been trying to call you all morning. Pepper had an accident and he's in the hospital. Get your ass over here.

Twenty minutes later, I make my way to the hospital elevators. My sneakers flop and slap against the linoleum tile and echo off the walls. I push the button for the fourth floor but the elevator stops on the third. Two male nurses push in a pruned woman attached to an I.V. I flatten against the wall to give them room and I try to avoid looking at her, but a mirror on the ceiling reflects the woman's tiny, gray frame; a momia breathing dust.

Pepper can't be in this bad of shape.

Juanito and my grandmother Josefina stand over Pepper like two vultures about to tear apart a carcass. They both turn to look at me. When I hug Josefina Pepper's eyes open. I nod and his irises roll up to the back of his head. I let go of Josefina and push Pepper's eyelids shut, but they pop open again.

It's no use, Sharlie, says my grandmother in a thick Spanish accent. I've been trying to shut them all morning.

Juanito puts his heavy hand on my shoulder and squeezes hard. I turn to hug him but his cell-phone rings and he leaves the room.

He's had a stroke, says the doctor. His brain has gone without oxygen for too long.

Josefina's legs wobble and I catch her arm and help her to a chair. She sags into the chair and the white of her eyes go hazy and bloodshot with tears.

Get her some juice or something, I tell the nurse. She has diabetes. The nurse returns with two white-pills, a plastic cup of orange juice and a blood-pressure cuff. He velcros the cuff around my grandmother's arm and pumps the black rubber ball. He checks the gauge and releases the valve, which hisses like a tiny viper bearing fangs.

Miss Cantero? asks the nurse, would you like to lie down?

The nurse runs his slender fingers through his red, curly hair the same carrot color as his scrubs. My grandmother shrugs, lets out a snort and a laugh. The nurse looks up at me.

I'm sorry, he says. I don't speak Spanish.

It's okay, I say. She understands.

The nurse tucks the blood-pressure cuff under his armpit and he and the doctor leave the room.

Maricón, snarls Josefina.

I squeeze her shoulder to shut her up. She puts her a hand over on mine.

No me siento bien, she whispers to me. Maybe I should be in the hospital, too.

We both look at Pepper, a thin dried husk like a chile too long in the sun. His mouth hangs open; his lips dry and crust against the cold air from the cooling unit in the room.

My grandmother tugs on my arm, I help her stand and we walk over to Pepper. She cups his jaw in her palm and closes his mouth. She pulls an onyx rosary from her sweater pocket and dangles it over him. The rosary nestles onto his lips and his nose. She prays in low tones that gather in her chest and softly rumble up her throat.

I expect a miracle, but she just cries over him and mumbles. Nurses enter the room and disconnect him, pulling the breathing tube out of his mouth and the I.V. from his veins.

Would you like to say your goodbyes? asks a nurse.

I think we already have, I say.

I pull my grandmother into the hallway and then hug her. We form a cocoon, into which we both weep.

Your grandfather got his brother killed in '56, Josefina once told me.

Pepper was at a bar, drunk and going on and on about a girl he'd slept with.

She's a cochóna, said Pepper. She likes to bone.

He pumped his palm and smiled at the other drunkards surrounding him. But he didn't realize that the thick-necked man sitting in the corner was the girl's older brother, Cuero. At the time Pepper was twenty and on a full stomach he weighed a hundred and twenty seven pounds. So when Cuero snatched him up, everyone in the bar, including Pepper, thought that this was the end of Braulio "Pepper" Cantero.

Pepper crashed against the bar's sticky, wet floor and curled up like a dried little shrimp. Bottles of beer and glasses of liquor popped against his shoulders and hands. He felt Cuero's heel kick his ribs and the points of Cuero's boots kick his thighs. The drunkards hollered and howled, dancing around the two men.

A gunshot went off behind Pepper.

Pepper ran his hands along his body, feeling for the wound. Cuero clenched his gut and fell next to him. Pepper jumped to his feet, dusted the shards of glass off his shoulders and arms. He kicked Cuero in the nalgas and spat on him. Pepper's brother, Palacio, stood at the entrance.

Thank you for saving me, Carnal, said Pepper.

Move your ass, Pepper, said Palacio. I'm going to kill this hijo de puta.

Pepper ran to his brother.

Let's go, please, said Pepper. No need to get into it with the law, not over this culo.

No one cares if this pedaso de mierda dies tonight, said Palacio.

Then another gunshot.

Pepper spun around. Cuero turned his head to the left and used his good eye to aim a .22 caliber pistol at Pepper. Palacio pushed Pepper aside, walked up to Cuero and emptied his revolver. Two bullets went into Cuero's gut, one into his forearm, one into the shoulder and one into the floor of the bar, next to Cuero's head.

Pepper grabbed Palacio and pulled him towards the the bar entrance.

We got to go, Brother.

The two ran to Palacio's 1940 Hudson six. Palacio threw Pepper the keys.

That culo shot me in the leg, said Palacio.

Pepper tried to lift his brother into the car, but Palacio's meaty shoulders and thick waist made him as heavy as a side of beef.

Stop, pendejo, said Palacio. Let's go to the doctors so he can get this pinché bala out of me.

The engine turned over and the car pulled onto the dirt road.

Why didn't you just let me kill him? said Palacio from the backseat of his car.

It's my fault, confessed Pepper. I called his sister a puta.

The car pulled up to the doctor's house. Pepper honked the horn several times and jumped out of the car to help his brother from the backseat. Palacio's lips turned gray and his wrists went limp. The doctor helped Pepper pull Palacio from the sticky back seat.

Pull him into the light, said the doctor.

Pepper grabbed his brother's legs and the stumpy little doctor grabbed Palacio's wrists. They pulled Palacio to the adobe porch. The doctor's wife came out with a lantern. The doctor pulled the belt from his waist and wrapped it around Palacio's thigh. The .22 caliber bullet had hit the femur artery in Palacio's right leg and Palacio had bled out on the doctor's porch.

That's why you don't talk about sleeping with women, said Josefina. You never know which pendejo will shoot your ass.

October 5th, 2009

My grandmother Josefina, Juanito and I sit in the first row of the Sunset Funeral Home's second parlor. Behind us sit distant cousins, neighbors, friends of the family and members of the Amalgamated Meat Packers Union, which Pepper had been a member of for forty years.

As a kid, I went with Pepper on his pilgrimage up Cristo Rey, a mountain trail ending with a forty-five-foot limestone statue of Jesus Christ looking over the El Paso/Juárez border. Pepper and the other members of the A.M.P.U. met every year, in honor of the A.M.P.U.'s '61 strike. They always met on the Sunday of the first week of May and Pepper was the first Meat Packer to arrive. That morning we woke up at three thirty in the morning, to reach the summit by dawn. My grandmother dressed me in Juanito's hand-me-down jean jacket. She packed potato burritos and a thermos of coffee into a brown paper bag.

Pepper put on a cassette of Ramón Ayala and we headed west on I-10. I stared at the stars cascading behind the Franklin Mountains and drifted into sleep. Pepper nudged me in the side of my ribs and laughed because he'd startled me. The silver lining of his false front tooth shined from the truck's dashboard lights. I laughed, too.

I carried the bag of burritos in one hand, the thermos in the other, and Pepper carried me and a flashlight up the mountain, for half a

mile. I walk next to him the rest of the way. At the peak, we ate the burritos and drank from the thermos. At dawn, Pepper knelt in front of the statue's feet and prayed in silence until the Meat Packers of the '61 strike arrived.

We wait for the priest to begin his sermon, but he keeps fumbling with the microphone attached to his robe. My grandmother pulls a lace shawl across her shoulders and drapes it over her head, a black-veil. She cries into her hands and I want to hug her and promise her that we'll be all right without my grandfather. Instead I sit and sob. The priest gives up his crusade to get the microphone working and unclasps it from his robe. He gives his sermon in Spanish and no one can hear him, but we all follow his gestures for the cues, when to stand, when to kneel and when to pray. The priest finishes his sermon and waves his hand over Pepper's coffin and presents him to the crowd, as if the whole thing were part of a magic act.

The blue fibers in Pepper's gray suit shine under the florescent bulbs hanging over his coffin. The rouge makeup on Pepper's pecan brown face is two shades too light with his mustache and hair dyed velvet black. A bolo tie with a silver arrowhead encrusted in turquoise stones wraps around his neck and rests on his chest.

I stand in a line behind Juanito and my grandmother, and all in attendance line up to see Pepper. Josefina bends over, cups his face and cries into his chest. She throws herself to floor.

Por qué, Dios? She screams at the ceiling. Take me, too.

Juanito scoops her up, but she screams and kicks and curses in broken English. Juanito waves me back into the line and says he'll take care of Mom. I turn to Pepper and kiss him on corner of his cold lip. He smells like cedar and anise.

I love you, cabrón, I whisper into his ear.

When I was a girl, living in Chihuahua City, said Josefina, a boy named Chacho called me La Avispa.

She pulled the blankets up to my chest and I tucked into the folds of her stomach and breasts. When she told me this story I was six.

Chacho, a coffee-brown man with no creamer, lived on the outskirts of Chihuahua city. He met La Avispa at a puesto that sold Mennonite cheese, eggs, beans and rice. He had never seen a girl with such a small waist and thick thighs. The nickname, *La Avispa*, means *the wasp*, and he gave it to her on account of her figure. He returned to the puesto every Sunday with jamoncillo or a pink comb or some paper flowers. She showed her gratitude by hugging him and running her fingers along the small of his back.

He returned one Sunday, but a young man with hair like wool stood behind the counter.

Where's the girl who was working here? asked Chacho.

I don't know what you're talking about, said the young man.

The young girl with the thick, black hair.

She left with her husband, about two weeks ago.

Defeated, Chacho bought his provisions and left. He returned a few weeks later, to purchase hay, and saw La Avispa bent over a barrel of beans. She scooped three cups of beans into a brown bag and handed it to a little old woman standing at the counter. He ran to her.

Mija, said Chacho I thought you left with your husband.

La Avispa laughed and shook her head. Who told you that, mi hermano?  
she said.

Oye que tries? said the old woman. Can't you see she's just a niña?

La Avispa's fair-skinned cheeks blushed red. The old woman's hand stretched out for the bag, her arthritic fingers drooping down. She wrapped her hand around the neck of the bag and La Avispa's hand. La Avispa pulled back.

Cuidate, mija. The words fluttered like gray moths from the old woman's mouth.

Get going, you old goat, said Chacho. He waited for the woman to leave, then asked La Avispa if she would accompany him that evening.

I can't, she refused. My brothers and father would not allow it. I'm too young.

They don't have to know, said Chacho. We can meet somewhere.

Then meet me under the nogal tree, said Josefina. After sun down.

La Avispa ran home after work. She bathed, brushed her hair and marinated her wrists with lavender oil. When her sisters came home, they asked her why she was so perfumed. La Avispa pulled them into her room and told them about Chacho. Her sisters pretended to be excited for her, but as soon as she left they ran and told their father.

Chacho parked his '51 Ford F6 pickup half a mile from the tree. He

had brought two of his workers with him.

Whistle if you see anyone, said Chacho. I'm going to hump this girl tonight.

Chacho unhooked his white-leather buckle and hung his belt on his shoulder. La Avispa sat under the tree eating a jamoncillos he had given her. A group of brown and gray horses grazed near them.

Mí amor, he called to her.

One of the horse's lips flapped, making moist noises. Chacho stopped and scanned the area. He fingered the black pistol cradled in a leather holster tucked in the small of his back. He crouched down like a luchador ready to pounce on his opponent. La Avispa stood up, her white dress cascading down her legs. Chacho could see her voluptuousness pushing against the pleats. He removed his hat, exposing the white tan line that crowned his head and bordered his receding hair line. He bowed towards her and she waved him forward. He professed his love for her and told her that he intended to ask her father for her hand in marriage.

He asked for a kiss and pulled her thighs to his. La Avispa pushed away. He pulled her again and thumbed his pants' zipper. The zipper's teeth pulled apart.

No! she shouted.

He grabbed her wrist and yanked her hand to his crotch. Her warm wrist brushed against his erection. He heard the click of a rifle's hammer. A bullet buzzed and flew near his ear. He pushed La Avispa to the ground and drew his pistol. He aimed the gun to the right but

saw no one, just the horses grazing. His two men ran towards the tree, their pistols pulled. The horses bucked and scattered. La Avispa ran towards a hill to the left. Chacho and his two men stood back to back, scanning the area. The two men were the first to die. Unable to tell where the shots came from, Chacho dropped his gun and threw his hands into the air. Chacho called to La Avispa, but she didn't answer back. He spun around trying to figure out who had shot at him. He saw three men walk out from behind the horses. Each had a rifle in hand. Chacho recognized the man who had told him earlier that La Avispa had left with her husband.

Please, said Chacho.

The three men stood in front of Chacho. The older man looked like the father of the other two. The three men held their rifles from their waists.

You want to fuck my daughter? asked the older man.

I have money, said Chacho. We can arrange something, a marriage, anything.

The older man shot first; then both his sons shot.

Don't mess with La Avispa, said Josefina, smiling, or you'll get stung.

She poked the side of my belly with her finger till I laughed.

Josefina heard the guitar strings ring over the clay-tile roofs, she told me, and the toroloché thumped against the town's white-washed plaster walls.

The Mariachi music filled the air and the town danced, ate and drank in a small park with no trees and next to the Spanish colonial church. Everyone was there for Lalo's wedding, except for Pepper and Josefina, who was eight-months pregnant. She felt guilty for asking Pepper to stay with her because she knew he loved to dance. To make up for it she cooked rajas with queso and bought Pepper a bottle of Mezcal. After they ate, they danced barefoot on the cool dirt floor, until the sun cracked the black sky open and dawned over the mountains.

El Gitano, Josefina's brother, didn't come home that night. Josefina assumed that he'd met a girl at the wedding.

In the afternoon a small, almost unnoticeable pain tickled her stomach. The pain grew and she feared her baby wanted out. She saw little red-specks flower her cotton underwear and called to Pepper to get the midwife. Josefina lay on the bed and cried from her contractions. She clasped her hands together and prayed. El Gitano walked into her room, limping, his hands and face covered with red-clay.

Hermano, where've you been? she asked.

I fell asleep in a dirt field, said El Gitano.

She winced when he placed his cold hands on her belly. His hands felt like marble.

You'll be okay, little sister, he said. I'm here to help you.

The pain in her belly cleared, but she felt something else, a pushing from deep within her thick and swollen belly button.

Where's Pepper? She asked.

I heard you crying, said El Gitano. The voice of our abuela, Nati, swirled around me like a warm breeze and told me to come to you.

What did you say? asked Josefina.

Nati told me to find you, he said.

Josefina's stomach tightened and the pain folded her over. El Gitano put his hands on her back and she cried.

I must go sister, he said.

Please, Gitano, you can't leave me, she cried.

She felt a breeze kiss her on the cheek through the open window.

Nati? whispered Josefina.

She looked up and saw Pepper and the midwife standing over her.

I'll get water, said Pepper.

Josefina screamed and pushed and screamed and pushed. Then the room went silent. In the midwife's arms slept a baby covered in the juices of birth.

Es niño o niña? asked Pepper.

She was a niña, said the midwife.

Was? Josefina said.

The midwife washed Josefina's legs, wrapped the still-born baby in a sheet and left her on the dresser near the door.

Please, bring my brother in, said Josefina.

He still hasn't come home, said Pepper.

Weeks later a boy riding a donkey found El Gitano lying face down, bloated and decaying in a cotton field.

Who killed him? I asked.

A story for another night, said Josefina.

She kissed me on my cheek and turned off the lamp next the bed.

Good night, she whispered.

October 5th, 2009

Some of the neighbors leave the funeral early and go to Josefina's house to set up trays of sandwiches and sweet bread and to brew coffee. When we arrive, they help my grandmother to the dining-room table and then feed her a pumpkin empanada. I don't want to sit there and talk about my dead grandfather, Pepper. I haven't seen him or Josefina since a few months before to his death. I know Josefina will remind me that I wasn't around to see him in his final days. Instead I go to Pepper's room and sit on his bed. The door-bell rings and I hear more people come into the house. A mahogany Jesus, nailed to the wall, looks over Pepper's bed. The dark wood exaggerates Jesus features and he looks mummified. I remember as a boy I'd sleep with my head under the covers for fear of that statue. Pepper would feel me moving around and pat me on the shoulder and pull the covers down.

It's okay to be scared, he told me.

A neighbor walks into the room, a guy with a square jaw in his late fifties.

Sorry, man, I'm looking for the bathroom.

It's over there, I say, pointing to the door at the corner of Pepper's room.

Any toilet paper? he asks from the bathroom's doorway. I think those sandwiches got me.

I walk out without answering him.

I pass my grandmother, who stretches her hand out and nods for me to come to her. Tears smeared in eye shadow and mascara stain the wrinkles of her face and gathers on the thin mustache that highlights her upper lip. I hug her and she slobbers into my shirt, pulls me tight and slobbers on me some more. I rest my head on top of her head and cry just a little bit. After a moment she lets me go and tells me to eat something. Enormous plastic trays of carrots, celery and halved sandwiches sit on the counter top, on the dining-room table and on the shelves in the fridge. I know I have to grab something, anything, a celery stalk, a ham sandwich or piece of pound cake, because somehow my eating comforts her. Always has. So I put a few shabby sandwiches on a paper plate and head for the front door. Juanito's wife, Margaret, sits in the opened hatch of her Honda CR-V. An ice-chest of beers lies at her feet. I dig my hand into the cooler. The straps of her black-leather sandals pull tight over her coffee-tan feet. She wears a silver toe ring on her middle toe and I follow her muscular calf up to her knees and then to her thighs.

We missed you at the funeral, I say.

She smiles and lights a cigarette.

Your uncle told me to come to the house instead and setup for the wake, says Margaret. He said your grandma would be too tired to host, but as soon as she got home she gave me that look and I figured it would be best to stay out of her way.

I put two fingers up to my mouth and motion to her cigarette.

They're menthols, says Margaret.

Just want a drag, I say. Don't think I can smoke a whole one, yet.

She hands me her lipstick-stained cigarette and I take a couple of puffs. I haven't smoked a cigarette in almost six months, not since a periodontist pulled a rotten tooth from my mouth and told me I had to quit smoking or I'd lose all my teeth in a couple of years. The menthol smoke goes down my throat and feels cold when it hits my lungs. I feel dizzy and need to take a crap. I cough and hand it back to her.

It's not weed, man, laughs Margaret.

I chug my beer, crush the can and reach for another. The cold beer helps with the pain in my stomach.

Hey, take it easy, man, says Margaret. I don't want your grandmother getting pissed at me for getting you drunk.

I can take the heat. Don't worry.

It's not you I'm worried about, she says. I don't get why she hates me so much.

We both know that is a lie.

I love my uncle and it hurt me to see him crying over Josefina's meaty shoulder the day he explained to us that he had found e-mails and naked pictures of Margaret, that she had sent to a co-worker, or ex-boyfriend or someone she had met on the web. My grandmother grabbed the back of Juanito's head, pulled him in tight and cried with him, two fat boulders crushing against each other, slobbering

and whimpering. But all I could think about were the naked pictures of Margaret. I imagined her tan, forty-year-old tits pushed up and out of a black-lace bra. I wondered what her labia looked like.

We sit in the back of Margaret's Honda talking for a while. Then Juanito comes out and asks for a beer.

It's getting heavy in there, says Juanito. Mom won't stop crying.

You're getting heavy in there, I laugh.

Watch it, chora-face, says Juanito. I'll fuck you up in front of Margaret.

We drink the remaining Natural lights in the cooler. Then Margaret offers to drive to the store and get some more. I give her a ten. I'm broke, but I always have money for beer.

Let's go to the Good Times Store, says Margaret.

I go back inside and see Wilson, Pepper's buddy from the Meat Packers Union, standing alone in the corner of the living room. He sticks out because he is the only black man in the room and no one is talking to him.

Hello, Wilson, thanks for coming, I say, and shake his hand.

Charlie? Wilson's face lights up with a smile. Pepper was a good man, he says. A tough working man.

Thanks, I say.

I haven't seen you since you were about ten, he says and rubs the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

Yes, sir, I say.

What you been up to? he says in a thick Alabama accent. Where you working?

A little bit here, a little bit there, mostly cooking at a restaurant downtown, I say. The hours are good but the pay isn't.

Damn, union guys work all their lives and all they're concerned with, is work, even after they retire.

Juanito and his wife went to get some more beers, I say. You want one?

We walk outside and wait for Margaret. He opens a box of cigarettes and offers me a Marlboro red. I can smell the nicotine on his mahogany fingers as he hands me a cigarette.

I hope the money we gathered helped you and your family, says Wilson. Money? I look up from my lit Marlboro. What you talking about, Wilson?

The money the Meat Packers gathered, he says. You know the money we put together when one of us goes. We scraped up six thousand for Pepper.

The first I hear about it, I say.

Gave your grandmother the money yesterday, he says.

Margaret pulls into the driveway. Marvin Gaye's "Let's Stay Together" pumps through the car's speakers.

God damn I love this song, shouts Margaret from the driver's seat. I am so in love with you, in any kind of weather, whether times are good or bad or happy or sad, sings Margaret off key.

I open the box of beers and hand them out.

To my dad, says Juanito. Damn that son of a bitch liked to drink. I'm going to miss that old bastard. I chug half a beer. How I loved to fuck with him, I say. I used to sneak into his room while he was showering and take the batteries out of the remote control and unplug his television. I can still hear him banging his drawers and cursing, as he looked for the batteries.

We all laugh.

How about the time that he showed up to my baseball game drunk? says Juanito. He parked on the curb behind the bleachers and honked and hollered, I'm here, I'm here. He passed out and I had to drive him home.

We take turns telling stories, like when he helped Margaret change her tire on the freeway or when Juanito put his dick on Pepper's forehead while Pepper slept.

Payback, said Jaunito. For all the times he hit me and Mom. Dad would come home drunk and bust Mom to shit. In the morning she'd wake-up, make him breakfast and pack his lunch. But it all stopped after the accident with Marquito, said Juanito.

We continue to tell stories until it gets cold outside. Margaret asks me to get her jacket from inside the house. I go inside and Josefina calls to me. She hugs me and soaks my cheek with her tears and the mucus from her nose. Someone gifted her a plaster bust of the upper half of Jesus Christ, his hands are stretched out as if he is receiving communion. It sits on the center of the table looking up at me.

Es Sharlie, says Josefina. The baby of the family.

Oh, the ladies say around the table. Sharlie, how are you?

Hola, I say.

Is that drunken perra, Margaret, still outside? asks Josefina. Why did she even come? She doesn't give a damn about your grandfather. She just goes where there's pisto and verga.

At least she helped set up the house for today, I say.

Mijo, says Josefina grow some huevos and remind her that this isn't a party, por favor. Are you drinking?

No, not one beer, I promise.

Cabrón, she slaps me on the arm. You and that puta are going to pay. Just watch.

I grab Margaret's jacket from the couch, smell it and rush outside. Wilson sits on the red and white cooler, his black fingers wrapped around the long neck of a Bud. His eyes hide behind a pair of yellow bifocals.

I hate to ask you this, Wilson, but do you mind standing up so I can get a couple of brews? I say. Better yet, let me go get you a chair.

Sure thing, says Wilson.

I watch Wilson stand up, his bones creaking and popping. It takes ages for him to stand.

This is what thirty years of carrying big meat will do to a guy, laughs Wilson.

Wilson was telling me that he put some money together for Pop's

funeral, I tell Juanito. The Meat Packers gave it to Josefina, but she never mentioned it to me. She tell you anything?

Yeah, she did, says Juanito. Helped out a lot.

I guess she must have forgot or something, I say. She asked if I could pitch in for the funeral costs.

Wouldn't worry too much about it, says Juanito. She's stressed and I'm sure she isn't thinking straight.

I get Wilson a chair.

We sit and finish the thirty pack, telling stories, laughing and listening to music from Margaret's hatchback. I stare at the silver ring wrapped around her creamy coffee toe, until the sun peaks over the mountains and we decide it's time to go.

The Payaton Meat Company called Pepper Cantero for interview in the summer of '59, Josefina told me when I was seven.

Pepper woke up at 5:46, took a shower, dried himself, parted his hair to the right and waxed his mustache. His wrangler jeans fit snug around his boots but loose around his backside and waist. He clasped the pearl-inlaid buttons of his light blue shirt and cinched his waist with a brown leather belt adorned with a white horse head stitched into the buckle.

Josefina placed two cups of coffee on the dining room table. They lived in a one-bedroom apartment on the corner of Saint Vrain and 5th in El Paso's Segundo Barrio. Their son Juanito sat at the table waiting for his father to sit down. The room filled with the scent of Snow Cap lard popping and smoking on the iron skillet. Josefina dropped two scoops of beans into the melting lard and pushed a masher into the beans. The hot lard and bean juice splashed against her forearm which sizzled like beacon. Josefina divided the beans into two plates, scooped more lard into the pan and dropped in four eggs. A tortilla puffed with steam; the edges browned. Pepper and Juanito ate; Josefina washed the pan and prepared a thermos of coffee for Pepper. She scooped up Pepper and Juanito's plates and ate whatever beans and eggs were left on them. Pepper hadn't worked for two

months, not since the Brazeros' cotton-picking season had ended. Pepper had worked as a Brazeros four years.

Pepper sat on a metal chair in a small trailer outfitted to be an office outside of the Payaton factory. Three other men sat next to him, and he recognized them from the Brazeros program.

Across from the four men sat Larry Fieldmen, a pink, balding man with sausage fingers and a blue clip-on tie. Larry struggled to breathe under the dry desert air, and a puff of breath preceded each word. Sweat beaded across his gray scalp.

You'll work shift one, said Larry. Starts at five and goes till three. Pays \$2.25 an hour.

Larry leaned into his chair and rested his hands on his stomach.

If you have trouble filling out your paperwork, said Larry, take it down to Mary in filing. She can get you situated. Gentlemen, welcome to the Payaton Meat Company.

Larry stood up, pushed his bulbous stomach into his desk and extended his hand toward the four men. They each shook his hand and gave a small bow as they left the trailer. The four men stood outside looking at the paperwork. Pepper understood the basics of English and could say with confidence, *hello, bye, thank you, yes, please* and *no thanks*, but to read a contract and understand it was beyond Pepper's broken English. He looked at the other men and realized that they also struggled with the paperwork.

He nodded at the three men and they nodded back.

Braulio Cantero, said Pepper, los e visto en el campo.

Mucho gusto, said the man closest to Pepper. The three men introduced themselves.

Do you understand this? asked Pepper.

No, not really, answered Saul.

I mean, we can speak a little English, but I'm not sure what we need to write.

Let's find Mary, said Pepper, his silver tooth glistening under the rays of the desert sun.

Mary sat behind a glass window at the entrance of the Payaton Meat Factory, plump as a brined chicken breast, her curly dyed hair bouncing past her shoulders.

Can I help you? she asked the four men.

Yes, said Pepper, do you speaky Spanish?

You the new hires?

She waved the men to the window and took Pepper's papers through the opening.

Write your name here, she said. This line is your address, and this one is your social security number.

The four men pressed their foreheads against the window. Pepper stared at the skin tucked between her breasts.

If you don't have a social security number, she said, leave it blank.

The double-wide doors to the left of the front desk opened. A man wearing a white-smock stained in blood and yellow animal fat walked through the door. A white surgeon's hat covered his hair and parts

of his afro stuck out from the sides of his head.

Hey, Mary, he bellowed.

Wilson, she said.

These the new hires? asked Wilson. He nodded towards Pepper.

Well, boys, welcome to the show.

Pepper arrived to the Payaton Meat Factory at 4:32 in the morning. The three and a half mile walk to Payaton invigorated him and woke his senses. He could smell the cold dew that pooled on the leaves of the desert flowers growing between the cracks of the concrete sidewalks in downtown El Paso. He carried a brown bag with an avocate torta, an orange and a bean burrito. In his other hand, the thermos and coffee kept him warm during his walk. Before he reached Payaton, he had eaten his burrito and drank most of the dark-brown bitter coffee in his thermos. He entered the front door and passed the empty front desk, through the double-wide doors.

Groups of men dressed in white smocks stood around table saws and pushed halved cow carcasses across spinning blades. Four men worked at each station, one loading the carcass, another pushing it through, the third man receiving the carcass and the fourth placing the meat into two separate bins. When the bins were full, the fourth man raised his hand and two men, pushing empty metal carts, came in from the perimeter of the factory, replaced the full carts with the empty carts and pushed the full carts behind plastic curtains.

Pepper walked along the perimeter of the factory floor watching the

men work, until he stumbled upon a man with a silver clipboard.

Can I help you? asked the short man with a thick Armenian accent.

Yes, you espeak Spanish?

Little bit, you the new hire? asked the man. You're temprano. I like that. The man looked at the watch that stretched over his thick hairy forearm.

Pepper Cantero, mucho gusto.

Fernan Abdul, said the man. Let me show you the locker room and the plant. This is the cutting room. We separate the meat here. The good stuff goes to butchers and the rest goes to our links department where it's made into hot dogs, sausages and patties. The cutting room is divided by pork and beef. The pork goes to the left and the beef to the right comprende, my friend?

Yes, said Pepper.

Okay then, let me show you the locker room.

Pepper received a white smock, hair cap and two wooden dowels with meat hooks.

You're on thirty-day probation, my friend, said Fernan. After that you're part of the Meat Packers. Dues are deducted from your check. You'll start in the unloading dock, he said. Remember my friend, beef to the right, pork to the left. The truck comes in about five-thirty. Wilson will get you situated.

Pepper put his lunch in the locker and headed out to the floor and stood by the loading docks. The workers slammed slabs of meat onto the metal tables and pushed them through. The high-pitched buzz

ripped through his ears, and the men around the tables had either cotton or foam ear buds pressed into their ears. A horn blasted and the men cleaned the machines and headed towards the locker room. He saw the Gilberto brothers walk through the door. Pepper nodded to the locker room and the three men followed his gaze. More men walked through the double-wide doors and into the locker room. Pepper recognized Wilson from the day before.

The three brothers exited the locker room wearing the same white smocks and carrying hooks. They stood next to Pepper and greeted him. Wilson came out of the locker room and whistled at the men.

Hey, newbies, over here, said Wilson. All right, new meat, you'll work the pork and the three of you do beef. Pepper and Saul, you're with me. Now pace yourself, boys. We got us about twenty trucks to unload today. I don't need you passing out before lunch. Wilson paused. Comprende?

The four men nodded.

Que dijo? asked Saul.

You two are gonna work the trucks with the pork, said Pepper. We're gonna work the beef.

A second horn rang through the air and the gates to the loading docks opened. The truck-drivers waddled out and opened the back of the trucks. Pepper, Diego and Wilson entered the trailer. The cold stung Pepper's face. Wilson dug his hooks into the carcass of a halved cow and flung it onto his shoulders. Wilson's thick arms and broad shoulders supported the weight of the halved heifer. Saul

followed him, stumbling under the mass of the halved cow, first to the left, then to right, and finally centering himself. Pepper dug both his hooks into the carcass and lifted with his legs, straining his thighs. The carcass towered over Pepper, who struggled to get the meat off the hook. Pepper pulled the hooks out from the ribs of the cow, squatted down, hooked it again and pushed up. The carcass came off the hook and onto Pepper's shoulders. The weight almost knocked him over. If he didn't move fast he'd fall.

Better slow down, new meat, said Wilson with a laugh. Still got nineteen trucks to go.

Pepper nodded and smiled, but Wilson's thick southern accent made it difficult for Pepper to understand what Wilson said. Pepper heard: butter slow the new meat and stick it for nineteen bucks. So Pepper kept his pace throughout the morning. His legs turned into balled-up knots of muscle. During his launch break, he lay on his back and stretched his legs up towards the ceiling while he ate. His lower back released and the knots in his thighs dissolved, one at a time. He later used this same technique in his old age to make his legs have good circulation despite the diabetes. The Gilberto brothers stood around him and watched as they ate the burritos they had purchased from the roach coach outside.

Told you to take it easy, laughed Wilson. You ain't the first hotshot to work himself to death.

But Pepper kept his pace. If he stopped moving, even for a second,

the muscle, fat and bone weighed too much for his thin build and he would topple over.

He was a hardworking man, Sharlie, said Josefina. Work was the only thing he did right.

Pepper loved his work, said Josefina. It was hard for us during the Meat Packer's strike of '61. We didn't expect it to last so long.

The union ran out of funds two months and seven days into the strike. Some went to work in the cotton and chile fields in Socorro, and others worked construction. Pepper tried to reenter the Brazeros Program, but the pay rate of seventeen cents a bushel had long expired. The job paid less, and Pepper, now an American citizen, no longer qualified to work as a Brazero anyway. He sold his '61 Ford Falcon and bought a used Ford 100 pickup with a light-blue stripe along the trucks sides. He fashioned wood from broken-down pallets into a tool rack for the back of his truck.

Pepper drove to El Paso's East-Ridge, a neighborhood of Georgian and Palladian homes surrounded by palm trees and green lawns. He started at the end of Mason Avenue and worked his way west, knocking on every door, asking for work. Sometimes they hired him to cut the yard or trim some trees but nothing consistent or well paying.

Josefina made watered-down tortillas from the flour in the pantry. She even borrowed a cup of flour from the neighbor at one point. She got so desperate that she went to the grocery store and stole a package of hot dogs by tucking them into her armpit. The cold franks rubbed against the stubble and she pulled a shawl over her shoulders

to hide them. She wrapped a package of corn tortillas in napkins, shoved it in her purse and went to the produce section. She smelled the apples and grapes and complained, out loud, that the produce had gone bad. On the bus ride home she sat in the rear corner of the bus and pulled the package of Payaton hot dogs from her armpit. That was the only time I ever borrowed from the neighbors, said Josefina. The only time I ever had to steal.

October 22nd, 2009

Juanito and I separate my dead grandfather's clothes into three piles: clothes to donate, clothes to sell and clothes to keep. My grandmother requests that we keep Pepper's gray suit, bolo tie and orange ostrich-skin cowboy boots. We divide Pepper's furniture, I get the nightstand because it does not fit in Juanito's truck. He gets the television, the bed frame and the oak dresser.

We bag Pepper's clothes and call the Goodwill to pick up the bags. Pepper took pride in his wardrobe and I wonder who will buy his polyester slacks and cowboy shirts, with pearl-inlay buttons.

I lift the mattress from the box springs, and several flesh-toned rubber bands fall to the floor. I grab the thickest one, stretch it around the back of my head and make a pony tail. Juanito laughs.

What the fuck, man? says Juanito, pointing at my ponytail. Those are the rubber bands Dad used to keep his dick hard when he jerked it.

I laugh, pull the rubber band from my head and several of my hairs wrap around it. I hold it up to the light.

Then I think he's gonna need this, I say.

I take the rubber band into the living room. Josefina sees me holding it and her eyes double in size.

Sharlie, what are you doing with that? she asks.

Thought the viejo could use this, I say.

I stand in front of the glass door of the entertainment center. My

reflection casts down between two photos, one of my grandfather, the other of Henry Vaquero, the son of Josefina's friend Elvia. Pepper poses at three-quarters of a profile and the photographer's light creates a soft halo around his head. Vaquero wears a Marines uniform. A white hat with a gold eagle, holding an anchor over the world, sits on his head. I open the glass door and lay the rubber band on top of a brown leather box that holds Pepper's ashes. Juanito and I carry the mattress, box springs and trash-bags full of Pepper's clothes to the curb. We go back inside, and Josefina serves us some beans and salted pork.

What are you going to do with Pepper's room? I ask.

I don't know, says Josefina. But I want to seal up the bathroom so I never have to see where Pepper died.

Don't be ridiculous, says Juanito.

Will you spend the night? Josefina asks me.

I have to catch the bus, I say. Besides, I have to work early tomorrow.

I lie. I want to get home, back to my apartment. I want a beer and I want to be left alone.

On the way out I stop at the pile on the curb and rummage through the clothes. It doesn't feel right to toss Pepper's clothes out like that. He took pride in his wardrobe and now it sits on the curb waiting to get picked up like a working girl on Alameda. So I pull out a couple of pants and three cowboy-shirts and walk to the bus

stop. When I get home I try on Pepper's red and green shirt. It fits tight around my gut but I wear it regardless.

A couple weeks go by and I call Josefina to see how she's doing. Estoy tan solita, she says. I don't know if I can take this loneliness.

I don't want to hear it, so I make up some excuse about being late for work.

Please, Sharlie, she says. I just want to talk to you. We can talk about anything you want, even your mother. I'll tell you a story.

I promise to visit her when I get some time off from work.

Your mother, Mercy, is a puta, said Josefina one morning. Just like her mom Mary.

When she first told me the story, I was just seven.

Pepper felt Mary put her hand on the back of his head and pull him inside her. In the morning he slipped his white-boxer shorts over his thin waist and flat ass. He pulled a white t-shirt over his pecan skin. He held his boots in his left hand and slid his polyester Wranglers over his bony legs. The early morning cast a blue shadow into Mary's apartment.

Wait, whispered Mary.

He pulled the first lock of the door, and its metal joints popped.

No puedo, said Pepper.

Please, Pepper, she said. I need you here this morning.

You know I can't stay, he said.

She stretched her arms and her left breast fell out of the sheets. The skin of her nipple pulled together and Pepper froze for a moment. He pulled the second lock. She threw the sheets off her body and lay to the side. He dropped his boots on the carpet next to the door. Can't you see? she said and rubbed her hand on the bottom of her pot-belly.

Her body had changed, her breasts full, and her belly hung over her waistline, accentuating the curve of her right hip. Pepper pulled

the third lock and opened the door.

The sun peeped over the mountain, blinding him. He shielded his face with his forearm and ran down the stairs to his yellow '64 Maverick. The gears grinded and pulled but the engine would not turn. He pumped the gas pedal three times and cranked it again. The engine whined like a piglet, then died. He put the car in neutral opened the door and pushed the car backwards. His boot heel crashed through the windshield. The glass spidered into thousands of cracks.

He turned back and saw a Mary with a sheet wrapped around her chest. She shook his other boot at him and launched it, striking Pepper in the right shoulder. He jumped into the car, tiny shards of windshield cutting into his ass. He popped the clutch. His big toe had split during the escape and bled over the gas pedal, gluing his toe to the metal.

Pepper had fooled himself into believing that Mary had gained some weight from all the beer they drank or that she had plumped up because of all the restaurant food she ate, but he had seen a woman's body swell into pregnancy twice before.

He pulled up to his house and limped to the front door. Eggs, chorizo and a sack of flour sat on the kitchen counter. A kettle of water boiled on the stove, and a strainer filled with ground coffee and cinnamon, hung over a clay pot. He heard the toilet flush and wobbled into the hallway, ducking into his son's room. Pepper left the door cracked open and watched Josefina walk by. He watched as she poured the boiling water over the strainer and into the clay jug.

She turned on the comal and poured flour, water and salt into a bowl and mixed the ingredients until they became dough. She tossed flour onto the counter, pinched a chunk of dough, rolled it into a ball and rolled it out flat with a wooden rolling pin. She put the first tortilla on the comal, flipped it when it puffed then pulled it off. She wore a dress made from some flower-patterned fabric Pepper had bought her a few weeks before. She loved the fabric so much that she made a dress, curtains and a table cloth from it. She rolled out another tortilla. Pepper shut the door and thought about hiding in Juanito's closet. He jumped into the bed, put his arm around Juanito and closed his eyes pretending to sleep. Josefina walked in with a rolling pin in her hand. She walked over to him and struck him the side of the arm.

Vieja, yelled Pepper, it's me.

She slapped him across the face. The flour on her hand clouded around Pepper's face; a white hand printed his cheek.

Juanito screamed.

Josefina was going to say something but Pepper grabbed her by the neck and slammed her head into the wall, caving the sheetrock in. He punched her in the stomach and she knelt over. Juanito jumped out of the bed, ran at his father and swung at him, hitting him in the hip. Pepper turned around and slapped Juanito in the neck.

Leave him alone! yelled Josefina.

Pepper pulled his leather belt from his waist and cracked it like a whip onto Juanito's back. Josefina scrambled on the floor and picked

up the rolling pin. She lifted it into the air but Pepper stepped back and kicked her in the thigh. She slammed the rolling pin down on Pepper's toe. It squirted like a stepped-on tomato. He swallowed hard and his eyes teared, but he did not cry. He hopped out of the room.

Pepper washed his toe in the sink, poured hydrogen peroxide over it and wrapped a t-shirt around it. He slept for six hours and awoke to the smell of gorditas de maiz frying in a pan. He got out of bed, then hopped out of the room and into the kitchen. The welts on Josefina's face had swelled. Pepper sat at the table. She rolled out another gordita with the rolling pin. Then she put a plate of food in front of him and went to her room.

After eating, he sat quiet and listened for Josefina. He walked to her room, tapped on the door and opened it. She wiped the tears from her eyes. He tried to hug her. She pulled away.

Is this what you brought me to El Paso for? she asked.

Mary's pregnant, said Pepper.

Leave, she sobbed.

He left her room, limped into the kitchen, opened a Bud and sat the table, drinking.

You see, Sharlie, you're the bastard of a bastard, said my grandmother. But you're Pepper's blood, y familia siempre se cuida.

November 19th, 2009

Josefina refuses to cook on Thanksgiving.

I'm not going to cook anymore, she says, not without my viejo here to enjoy the food. No me importa el Thanksgiving de los pinche gringos. Ma, it's not about that, I say. We just want to get together, you know, the family. Don't you want us here?

No.

I'll help, I say. I'll make the masa for the tamales.

I don't care, she says.

I wrap my arms around her shoulders and rest my cheek on her curly silver hair. She shrugs me off and asks if I want corn or flour tortillas.

Sit down, I say. I'll make the food for once.

You, ha, she laughs. What do you know how to make, Sharlie? You'd just burn yourself, estúpido.

What are you talking about, Vieja? I say. I'm a cook.

A cook? she says, more like a marijuano, and besides being a dishwasher at a restaurant doesn't make you shit.

Go sit down before I leave, I say.

She turns around and balls up her fists.

Don't you threaten me, cabrón, she says.

She jabs at my side, hitting me between ribs. The hit rings through my body like she hit a funny bone in my ribcage. I grab her wrists and pull her arms up.

Let me go, she says.

Then stop hitting me.

She cries and I let her wrists go.

Why, Sharlie? she says into my chest. I miss him too much. All night I pray to him, call to him and beg him to take me, too.

I help her to the kitchen table. She balances herself with my arm and takes a seat. She rests her head on her hands and sobs. I get her a glass of water and return to the stove. I put chorizo in a sauce pan and add some cooked beans. I make a burrito for her and two for myself.

You burned the tortilla, she says.

Please, Ma, eat your food.

She bites into her burrito, opens her mouth to say something, but I shush her with my hand. We continue to eat in silence. The burritos are salty and the chorizo is overcooked and crunchy.

Sharlie, you remember when you were thirteen and I carried you to the shower? she asks. You didn't want to take a shower so I scooped you up and pa dentro. Think I can still carry you?

Nope, I was nine, not thirteen.

That's right, she says. Thirteen is when I found you jalando té la to some dirty magazines.

Stop lying, I say.

I'm not lying, she says. When I close my eyes it all goes backwards, el disco va al revés. That is when you know you're dying. My memories, my youth, my life with Pepper, it's all going in reverse.

Please, Ma, you don't have to cry, I say.

Sharlie, I feel it in my wrists and legs and spine, she says. A pain, arthritic and cold. My bones are breathing menthol and cracking from the inside. I don't have much longer here. Every time I close my eyes, I see my brother, tall and handsome, and I see you, my gordito, running around the house with his little huevos hanging out. I see Pepper when he was young.

She closes her eyes and tilts her head up to the ceiling as if she's receiving a transmission.

I can see Pepper, she says. In a black suit dancing. Silver charms dangle along his pant legs, down to his boots. He twirls a lasso into a hoop big enough for him to step through and he spins the hoop around him and over him, whipping it into a frenzy. I can feel Juanito kicking in my belly.

Pepper used to drink too much, Josefina told me when I was ten. His brother's ghost haunted him for so many years. Your grandfather tried to shoot Cuero, the man who killed his brother, during a court hearing. But he missed and was arrested. We moved north after that. Many men tried to kill Cuero. Your uncle, Palacio, put five bullets into him but he didn't die. Even the thieves and murderers in prison despised Cuero and they hired two men to kill him.

Wake up, *pendéjo*, whispered Pelón into Cuero's ear. Death is here to take you.

Cuero jumped to his feet, saw a mustache in the chalky moon light and yelled for the guard.

A knife dragged across Cuero's throat and he fell to the floor.

For my cousin, you *pedaso de mierda*, said Rafita from behind Cuero.

Cuero lay on floor, face down, panting.

Hey, said Pelón. This *cabrón* doesn't seem to want to die. I think you should put a few more *picasos* into him just make sure. Stab him.

Cuero felt the blade enter his lower back.

*Culo*, gurgled Cuero.

He pushed into Rafita, knocking him against the wall and ran out of the tight cell and down the hallway. The knife handle flapped up and down with his stride.

Run, Cuero they won't help you, shouted Pelón.

Cuero reached the guards' booth and collapsed. He groaned and bled on the floor till dawn. No one helped him, but to their surprise, Cuero did not die that night.

A few years later a judge released Cuero. He walked along the dirt road leading out of the La Pinta Penitentiary. He had no place to go, but any place was better than where he'd spent the past seven years. The road, lined with mesquite trees and cactus, stretched twenty-seven miles before it connected with a hiking path that led to the small town of Morrís, Chihuahua. He walked under the sun till the sky purpled and turned black. His eyelids weighed down, but his body kept moving at a slow, steady pace. In the quiet moments between sleep and consciousness his legs marched on but his mind slid between the constellations he had learned as a boy and the black that cradled them.

A thin rattle glimmered in the air shaking Cuero out of his trance. The familiar sound took him back thirty-eight years, when he'd seen a tan and gray rattlesnake hook itself into the thigh of his caramel-colored dog. The dog yelped and bit at the snake; the snake spun and twirled and faded into the desert. The dog hopped on its front legs, pushing its culo into the air. Cuero scooped her up and ran home. His legs pumped and pushed faster and faster. When he got home the dog's head had swollen and its tongue hung dry and crisp like a chicharrón.

The rattle stopped and Cuero figured he had created enough distance between himself and the snake. He looked around and wondered where he was. He could no longer see the path to Morrís. The desert air bit at the tip of his nose, and he could smell something rancid in the air, perhaps a goat carcass. He was tired and decided to rest under a Mesquite tree that grew on the slope of a small hill. He scanned the area under the tree for scorpions and niños de la tierra, fat, pincher-less insects the size of small tarantulas. He curled up on the ground and pulled his canvas jacket over his head. Droplets of rain snapped against his jacket in a light and soothing rhythm that set the tempo for his breathing while he slept.

He felt a tickle on his cheek and the sun poked through the seams of the jacket. He wiped his cheek; a small worm fell on the ground. The worm wiggled and arched like a grain of white rice dancing. He patted the ground, surprised at how dry it felt; it had rained all night. His fingers ran along the scar that itched on his neck and he pushed his head from under his jacket to find mounds of maggots crawling over each other. He got to his feet and stomped the jacket on the floor. The larva popped and juiced under his worn shoes. From the tree hung a man with a bloated face, gray mustached-lips and a pudgy body. Cuero ran, leaving his jacket underneath the man hanging from the tree.

He came across the path to Morrís and followed it till he came upon a dry goods stand on the main road. He jangled the five pesos in his pocket and bought a small hunk of Mennonite cheese and some corn

tortillas.

I'm traveling through, said Cuero. Trying to get home, you know of any work around here?

There's a rancho a few miles to the north, she said.

Cuero thanked her and traveled north until he came upon a group of men pitchforking hay into a barn.

I'm looking for work, said Cuero.

The workers nodded towards a man riding a tan horse with a rifle strapped across its rump. He walked to the man on the horse, waving his hands.

Boss, I'm traveling through looking for work, said Cuero. I can work hard and I'm used to the sun.

Interesting scar, said the man on the horse, someone cut you?

It was accident at a rancho, got bucked off a horse and landed on some fence wire.

Cuero fingered the scar on his neck as if it were a fresh wound. He paused trying to place the man's familiar angular face, thin lips and fuzzy eyebrows.

You a thief? We don't take kind to thieves around here. We had to lynch us a worker that tried to run off with some horses and one of the other men's wife.

No, sir, I'm not a thief, said Cuero. Just trying to get back home, back to Aldáma.

You from Aldáma? asked the man on the horse. Had family there, once.

Me, too.

You can start by loading the hay. I pay twenty pesos a week, minus food and lodging.

Cuero joined the other men and worked till sundown. Then the men went to wash their hands, faces and necks and gathered in a barn. They each got a bowl of beans and three tortillas.

The food was better in prison, said Cuero.

You just get out or something?

No, no, I just heard the food was terrible there.

In the morning the roosters crowed and the men got up from their hay beds, washed up and went to work. At noon they took a break and went to the barn to get their bowls of beans and tortillas.

Hold up, the man on the horse told Cuero.

Yes, boss?

Some of the workers said you spent some time in La Pinta. This true?

No, boss, I was just commenting on the food.

What's your name?

Steve, said Cuero.

Don't you lie to me. Come to think of it, maybe you are that son of a bitch.

No, not me, boss, said Cuero. I'm just a worker trying to get home.

You're just a worker, but twenty-eight years ago you were a murderer, said the man on the horse. You remember a man named Palacio Cantero?

Cuero spun around and started running. He heard the hammer of a rifle click back, then two blasts and Cuero crumbled to the dirt.

The workers ran out of the barn and saw the soggy pile. The man on the horse jumped off, reloaded his rifle and unloaded it into Cuero's back. When he ran out of bullets, he swung and slammed the butt of the rifle against the back of Cuero's skull. He pulled out his revolver and shot at the pile of meat on the ground.

Why, boss? Why? One of the workers hugged him from behind.

This man killed my father.

I thought the man we lynched two weeks ago was your father's murderer.

The worker let his boss go.

Guess not.

The boss reloaded his revolver and emptied it into what was left of Cuero. He turned to the worker.

My father put four bullets into this piece of shit and he didn't die, said the boss. My uncle tried to shoot him in court. He didn't die. Two men in prison slit his throat and stabbed him and the fucker still didn't die. I need to make sure this pedaso de mierda is dead.

The boss reloaded once more and emptied his gun once more.

The workers stood in a circle looking down at the red spatter that was once Cuero.

Palacio's son killed Cuero, said Josefina. Pepper bought him those guns because Pepper knew his nephew had huevos de fiero. Do you?

Josefina poked at my thighs.

Pepper grinned, flashing his silver tooth, said Josefina, and she begged him to go back to their home town of Aldáma for her cousin Paola's wedding.

Your grandfather wouldn't budge, she told me, but I kept at it until he gave in.

Pepper squared away some paid time off from work at the Payaton Meat Factory. He drove the family into Juárez, then four hours south through Chihuahua. The city of Chihuahua grew busy with cars confettied the streets. Concrete buildings squeezed between adobe churches and cathedrals with copper domes. Juanito's chubby cheeks swelled with a smile, as Pepper pointed out where he and Josefina used to live.

They drove two hours southeast until they came upon Aldáma, a desert town with yellowing grass spread over its hills and nogales etching the purple horizon.

Pepper pulled his cream-colored cowboy hat out of a red box and laid it on the bed next to his gray suit. He opened a pine box that contained round tins of shoe polish, a horse hair brush, a cotton polishing cloth and a 1960 Ruger Single-Six .22 revolver. Pepper pulled the red tin out of the box, opened it and inhaled the red wax's aroma. He struck a match and lit the polish. Juanito stood at

the doorway; his eyes bulged with joy as the flames reached higher and higher. Pepper placed the lid on the tin and the flames died out. He waited a few seconds, then opened the lid. Pepper motioned to Juanito to come into the room and sit next to him, on the bed.

Papa, whose gun is that? asked Juanito.

Not yours, said Pepper. If you touch it me la vas a pagar.

Pepper swept a brush over his rattlesnake skin boot until it shined. He sat there watching Juanito, who put his hand on the pistol then took it off.

Pepper waited for Juanito to turn around and then Pepper slapped him across the face. The chingaso echoed off the adobe walls. Juanito fell to the floor crying and Pepper pulled his embroidered leather belt from his pants and continued to hit Juanito's plump thighs.

Josefina ran into the room, and Pepper re-looped the belt around his waist.

How am I gonna go the wedding like this? cried Juanito, holding his chubby hands up to his face and covering the red hand-print.

We have to ice it, said Josefina.

Pepper adjusted his bolo tie and put his feather in the band of his cream-colored cowboy hat.

Pepper dedicated a zapatiada to the bride and groom. He danced around his hat, his hands clasped behind his back, and he kicked his legs to the mariachis' guapenga. People clapped, whistled and cheered. Then Pepper twirled a lasso into a large hoop and jumped

through it like he was a lion in the circus. He danced with the lasso, spinning it around the dirt floor and throwing it into the air. The bride and groom clapped and whistled. Pepper bowed and the entire party came out to dance.

At midnight Paola's husband proclaimed his love to her and pulled out his .32. He aimed it at the moon.

Orale, cabróns, he howled, everybody pull out your guns.

Pepper stumbled around and threw his hands into the air.

Await, await, await, less me get my gun, said Pepper.

The party booed and laughed.

Mijo, Juanito, said Pepper, come here.

Pepper waved Juanito over. Juanito tried to hide behind his mother's rump, but she nudged him to go Pepper.

Mijo, cans you bring me mines gun? said Pepper. Mijo, please Mijo, brings me the gun and the black tin.

Juanito ran into the house. He returned with the gun and the tin. Pepper shook the tin, opened it and loaded the gun. He dropped a couple of bullets on ground.

Uno, dos, tres, Juanito shouted.

Pepper wobbled back and forth shooting his gun until it ran out of bullets. The party clapped and the men shook each other's hands and raised their beers and whiskey.

A scream buzz-sawed through the air. Pepper turned around and saw Marquito, Josefina's cousin, on the ground.

Levántate, güey, said Pepper.

He tapped Marquito with his boot. Josefina dove past him and onto her cousin.

Get away from him, you fucking perro, she screamed through tears and mucus that gathering between her nostrils and upper lip. You killed my cousin, mi Marquito. You fucking animal.

She held her cousin's wounded head in her lap, and he bled out onto her black dress. Pepper dropped his pistol and ran, his legs burning.

He's running away, yelled someone.

Let him go, that fucking coward, that fucking animal, cried Josefina.

Pepper ran to his car and rifled through his pockets to find his keys. He threw up on the door, opened it and then turned the engine. He ripped the transmission into first gear and pulled out. The dark road swallowed his canary-yellow Maverick.

He never drank again, said Josefina.

November 25th, 2009

My grandmother cooks her guisado and I sit at the kitchen table grating Munster cheese. She stands over a greased pan stirring chile de arbol, potatoes and meat. The chile stings my nose and I sneeze over the pan de huevo at the center of the kitchen table.

Salud, says my grandmother.

Her once-full cheeks sag on her cheek bones, like she is deflated. The dark rims around her eyes gray with wrinkles, and her hair fades into thin silver slivers. She no longer wears her bottom dentures.

What time is Juanito coming? I ask.

He's on his way.

I hand her the plate of grated cheese and she sprinkles it over the bubbling stew.

How many burritos do you want?

At least two, I say.

She serves me a plate and she serves herself one, too. She bites into the burrito with her molars like a dog chewing on an old bone. Then she unrolls her burrito and scoops up the red meat and potatoes with her flour tortilla.

It's easier this way, she says in Spanish.

Your dientes? I ask.

Can't find them, she answers with a mouth full of food. I've looked everywhere, under the bed, behind the couch, I even looked in mi viejo's room. Her eyes gloss over and I put my arm around her

shoulders.

Don't worry, I say. If we don't find them, we'll get new ones.

Your grandfather knocked-out the first tooth, she says and gives me half a smile.

I knew he abused her, but I never witnessed it myself. He had stopped long before I was born.

I miss him so much, she says. He was a bastard, but I loved him. Her shoulders bounce up and down and she leans her head on me.

We all miss him, I say, but you have to stop.

Don't think I can, she says. I need to be with him.

I know you love him but come on. He knocked out your tooth. You need to get out, even if it's to church. Can't spend all day in this house waiting to die.

When Juanito arrives he kisses Josefina on the cheek and then leans over to hug and kiss me.

Damn, Charlie, you smell like a hangover, says Juanito. You go out last night?

Nope, stayed in my apartment.

He turns his head to the stove and nods towards it. Josefina struggles to get up and wobbles over to the stove.

You want another one, Mijo? she asks me.

Estoy bien, gracias.

Juanito plops onto the couch in the living room and turns the television on to the Raider's game. Josefina takes him a plate of burritos and some napkins. She stands over him and waits till the

play ends. Then she hands him the plate.

Juanito and my grandmother share the same dumpling body, thick ankles, light skin and curly hair. I look more like my grandfather, Pepper, in that we both share the same walnut-colored skin, barrel chest and bird legs. I got along with Pepper when he was alive. Juanito hated him and probably still does.

Aye, my leg hurts, says Josefina. She limps back to the kitchen.

Sit down, Mom, says Juanito. You have to rest. Hey, Charlie, can you bring me some soda?

I help Josefina sit down then get a can of grape soda from the fridge. I stand in front of Juanito and wait till the play ends.

Goddamn Raiders, shouts Juanito, taking the soda.

I go to Josefina, who has a pile of letters in front of her. I translate them for her. One of the letters, from Unlimited Health and Services, demands payment for the services rendered during my grandfather's funeral. They want \$3067.42.

I thought all of Pepper's funeral expenses were paid?

I gave everything to Juanito, she says. He paid the bills.

Yo, Juanito, this bill says we still owe for Pepper's funeral.

He stuffs half the burrito into his mouth. Red chile spills out of the back end.

Quit bothering me, he says. I'm trying to watch the fucking game and you're here bull shitting.

Mom got a bill for the funeral, güey. Says she owes money.

Even with all the money gathered and the insurance we were still

short, he says. I put in some cash from my own pocket.

What about the money from the Meat Packers? I ask.

The union only put up a couple hundred bucks, says Juanito. It wasn't even enough to pay for all the food we had at the house. Besides, with Pepper's pension and social security, she'll be okay. The house is already paid for.

Wilson said the Union gathered six thousand, I say.

Hey, Dick-face Tracy, he says. Quit asking stupid questions and watch the fucking game. Besides you know how mayates are. Wilson probably stole it.

Juanito shoves the other half of the burrito into his mouth and lays the plate on the floor.

Don't fight, please, says Josefina. She makes another burrito for Juanito.

Sharlie, can you bring me your tío's plate?

Juanito slides the red chile-splattered plate across the tile, with his silver and neon-green running shoe.

And bring me another coke, Charlie.

I bend over to pick up the plate. Juanito jumps to his feet.

Touchdown, touchdown, shouts Juanito. Raider-nation, bitch.

I return with his food.

Wilson wouldn't lie, I say.

He's a fucking nigger. That's why he lied, says Juanito. You know what? I'm fucking out of here. I don't need to be questioned about what some fucking jungle-monkey told you.

Josefina begs him to stay, but he says he has to leave because he can't enjoy the game with me questioning him. Josefina complains about the pain in her leg. But Juanito leaves.

He's your uncle, she says. You need to have more respect for him.

I'm just looking out for you, Mom.

He's my blood, Sharlie, she says. Remember that.

I've become a stranger, an unwanted visitor, and the house I grew up in no longer feels like home. Josefina isn't my grandmother, though she raised me like a son. The truth is I'm the bastard son of Pepper's bastard daughter, and my mother abandoned me. I owe a debt to Josefina. She took me in and raised me, but for the first time I feel what it means to be a bastard.

I don't return to Josefina's house or call her for almost two months, not even during Christmas. When I finally return, she asks me for forgiveness. I tell her that the truth doesn't bother me and the love between us will never change, but it has.

Pepper pulled up to the house at four in the morning, said Josefina. He cut the engine and lights, swayed back and forth in his car seat and finally escaped from his Maverick. He took off his boots and entered the house, stumbled to his bedroom, unclipped his leather belt buckle and fell onto a red-felt blanket covering his bed.

He woke to find Josefina standing over him. She shook his shoulders and his head bobbed back and forth. He rolled over and pushed her away with his palm.

Stop, Vieja, Pepper mumbled.

It's six and estas late.

He got to his feet, his head heavy, his breath smelling like tripe pickled in tequila. He ran to the living room, grabbed the thermos of coffee, a brown bag with two egg burritos and jumped into his car. His work clothes and construction boots bounced around in the back seat as he drove down I-10.

He didn't bother to change when he got to work. Instead he slipped his work boots over his dress socks and slacks and left his white undershirt on.

The time card read 6:35 in bright red.

You're late, Pepper, said the plant manager.

Sorry, boss, a hundred times sorry, said Pepper. It won't happen again.

Best not happen again, said the plant manager. I'll move your ass to

third shift.

Nobody wanted third shift. It ran all night and consisted of hauling pork which stank like rancid bologna. People on the third shift never stayed at Payaton for too long.

Pepper unloaded the first truck in forty-two minutes. After the first truck he took a ten-minute break to shit and wash his mouth out. By the time he got back another truck had pulled up.

Get a move on, man, yelled the greasy trucker.

Pepper opened the back of the truck and the smell of cow carcasses pulled at his intestines. He folded over and threw up.

I think this meat's thawed, said Pepper.

Standing around puking ain't gonna help none, said the trucker. Get your ass in gear.

Pepper's stomach coiled and tensed.

What the shit? said the trucker. You're gonna have to hold your lunch or I'm gonna talk to the boss.

Pepper wiped the bile from his face. The inside of his head pounded.

Don't mess with my job, said Pepper. Or you and I are gonna have a problem.

The trucker's face turned split-beet red. He stepped to Pepper.

You want go, spic? said the trucker. He thrust his belly into Pepper's chest.

Pepper put up his dukes, cocked a fist back and swung. The fist landed between the trucker's second and third chin. The trucker laughed, grabbed Pepper by the white smock and head-butted him in

left eye socket. Pepper's eye swelled and his legs noodled. He threw-up eggs, tortillas and coffee onto the trucker. The trucker took a whiff, grabbed his knees and puked, too.

No mas, please no mas, said the trucker.

Pepper punched him in the ear and the trucker put his beefy hand up to defend himself.

All right, we're even, gringo, said Pepper. Clean yourself up and I'll get you another smock to change into.

At home that night Pepper pulled up to his house and honked his horn for his son, Juanito, to move out of the way.

Hey, Pops, said Juanito.

Pepper sat in the driver's seat until his became distracted.

What happened to your eye? said Josefina as he walked into the house.

The air sat heavy with smell and sizzle of onions and searing liver. Pepper salivated. He walked into the kitchen and put his hands around Josefina's waist and rubbed his hips into the back of her thighs.

Leave me alone, said Josefina. She shoed him away with the spatula.

I got into it with a gordo from work, said Pepper, pero me lo chinge.

Josefina placed a plate of fried liver smothered in onions and sprinkled with cilantro in front of Pepper.

How many tortillas do you want? she asked.

Pepper spooned chile de arbol salsa over the liver and asked for four

tortillas. She sat next to him while he shoveled meat into his mouth. He finished his plate. She served him more. After the second plate Pepper unbuttoned his pants and let his belly loose. Josefina pulled a glazed donut from a greasy-brown paper bag.

I saved it for you, she said.

Serve me some milk, Vieja.

Pepper sat with his hands on his belly and stared into the donut's glaze. Josefina put the milk in front of him and opened a jar of pumada de la campana, a skin cream used for rashes, bruises, burns, pimples, eczema and the evil eye. She dabbed some on Pepper's face. The warmth of her fingers soothed his swollen eye. He dozed in and out sleep. She continued to work the eye like a cut man hunched over a boxer.

Juanito ran into the house.

Mama, is the food ready? asked Juanito.

He washed his hands, sat at the table and asked Pepper about his eye. Josefina served Juanito a plate of liver and a glass of milk. Juanito's hand glided across the table towards the donut. He pushed his finger past into the donut hole. Then he pulled it out and licked it.

You have to eat it now, said Pepper.

Juanito laughed and kicked his legs back and forth. He stared at Pepper, who knew he was looking him in the eye. Juanito asked for more food. Josefina took his plate and warmed some tortillas on the comal. She put dishes into the sink and waited for Juanito's

tortillas to brown.

Juanito sat on Pepper's lap.

I kicked this big, fat white guy's ass at work today, said Pepper. He got one lucky shot but after that it was all me.

Why'd you get in a fight? asked Juanito.

Look, son, you never let anyone talk down to you, said Pepper. Not if they're white or Mexican and especially not a negro. If they do, kick them in the huevos.

Jaunito hugged Pepper and as he pulled away Juanito pushed his finger into the plum bruise on Pepper's eye. The pain shot through Pepper's face and into his tail bone. He yelped. Juanito jumped off his father's lap and ran to Josefina. Pepper touched his eye and looked at the donut Juanito's plump finger had punctured.

Pínche gordo! shouted Pepper.

Pepper moved Josefina out of the way and slapped the shit out of Juanito. The boy's cheek turned red and he cried for his mom.

You want to be a crybaby, cabrón?" Pepper pulled his belt from his waist.

Josefina jumped between them and wrapped her arms around Pepper. She lifted him off the floor.

Run, Gordo, she shouted. Lock yourself in the room.

Pepper's legs kicked back and forth. He tried to wiggle free.

Pasiguate! her voice boomed in his ear. Calm down.

He stopped fighting and she let him go. Pepper threw his fist at her mouth and she fell to her knees. He picked up his belt from the

floor and slapped it across her thighs. She cupped her mouth and a yellowing tooth fell into her palm. He wiped the tears from his eyes, left her on the floor and went to his room. Her soft cries penetrated his door and lingered over him. He went back into the kitchen and picked Josefina up.

I'm sorry, Vieja, he said. I just got so mad because that gordo touched my bruise.

He brushed her thick curls out of her face and smiled at her. Blood had dried on her lips and chin. She opened her palm and showed him the tooth, a yellow kernel that he had popped from her mouth.

February 5th, 2010

Why do you drink so much? Josefina asks me as soon as I walk into her house.

I haven't seen her in a while, but Juanito called me and told me that I need to check up on her.

I don't drink that much, I say. Besides why don't you judge your own son instead of me? He's the asshole.

You're nothing like him, says Josefina. Because your mother left you on my front porch like a fucking dog.

Her face lights up and I can see the red veins burn into the creamy white of her eyes. Her left pupil shines metallic.

Don't forget, Sharlie, she says. You're the bastard grandson of Pepper. That's the only reason I took you in.

Sweat pushes through my pores and I can hear my heart pump.

The only re-re-reason that I came, I stuttered, as to let you know that Juanito stole the money from Pepper's funeral. He used it for his fucking cars or vacations or whatever the fuck he buys.

He didn't steal it, estúpido, she says. I gave it to him. Besides it was only a couple hundred dollars

That's bullshit and you know it, I say.

Larga te, you ungrateful bastard, she shouts.

She slaps my face with the back of her hand. The clasp of her gold bracelet snags my cheek and cuts into my lip. I grab my mouth with both hands and run out the door, crying.

Run, pinche chavala, she shouts from her house.

I jump into my '87 Ford Ranger, push the clutch and turn the key. The engine shakes but the Ranger won't start. I pump the gas and try again. Nothing. Josefina comes out of her house and makes the sign of the cross. I pop the parking brake, get out and push the truck with my left shoulder and steer with my right hand. When the truck picks up speed I jump in and kick it into gear the engine turns and skips and bucks.

Pepper was drinking at Gordita's, a bar near Payaton, when the bartender told him he had a phone call. Myra, Mary's sister, was on the other end of the phone.

You have a little girl! said Myra. She's beautiful.

I have a little girl! shouted Pepper. Beer para todos.

The bar cheered.

At midnight, Pepper went outside and fired his Ruger Single-Six .22 caliber revolver at the moon. When he was piss drunk, he decided to drive home.

He shoved his way through Josefina's bedroom door, pulled his pants down over his boots and forced himself into her culo. When he finished he rolled off and went to sleep.

In the morning Pepper drove to Thomason Hospital. He held Mercy up to his face and rubbed his clean-shaved cheek into her newborn skin. Mary's sister took a picture. Mercy had her father's sharp nose and receding hairline. He handed her Mary and kissed them both on the forehead.

When he returned to Josefina his bags were sitting on the front porch. In the house he found Josefina cleaning the restroom.

Aren't you leaving with your puta? yelled Josefina.

Pepper didn't say anything.

I know your daughter was born yesterday, hissed Josefina. You should be with them, cobarde.

Pepper left the house and headed for Gordita's. The stale-air in the bar bit into his nostrils and the smell of last night's sweat, cigarettes and beer burned from the ammonia used to wipe down the counters, the floor and the toilet. During the day Gordita's filled with geriatric patrons, men and women in their late seventies who took hours to drink a beer or shoot a game of pool. But they laughed, danced and toasted all morning and into the afternoon; most left by happy hour. Pepper sat at the bar and ordered a beer and a bean burrito. He watched the old men shoot pool in the reflection of the mirror panels that encased the bar. The waitress walked back and handed him his beer, then walked out from behind the bar and delivered two more beers to the men sitting closest to the billiards table. They thanked her by kissing her hand and giving her a couple of dollars. Pepper eyed the waitress's thick ankles, the curve of her thighs and the small of her back. She put the money for the beers in the cash register and her tips in the tip jar. He lifted the burrito with both hands but before he took the first bite a voice interrupted him.

What you eating, young buck?

Pepper turned to see a man, wrinkled like a prune and dark as mahogany, sitting atop a bar stool. The man pointed his finger up to the sky and Pepper looked up at the ceiling.

They call me Juney, he said.

Juney reminded Pepper of Wilson. It wasn't that they were both black or that they both had puffy fros tucked under hats, but Juney had the

same long hands and thick nails.

Pepper turned back to his burrito and took a bite. He thought about how angry he felt when Mary told him that she and Wilson had dated for a few months, a couple of years back.

Pepper heaved. In the back of his mouth he could taste the spicy bile, seasoned with chorizo and beans.

Are you telling me que ese pinche negro te cocho? he shouted at Mary.

She pulled a pillow across her body, hiding behind it. Pepper paced back and forth, throwing his arms in the air, stomping and cursing. Mary stood up and Pepper slapped her across the face and then pushed her onto the couch.

I never want to see you again, you piece of shit, yelled Mary. Little verga motherfucker.

He unbuckled his belt and wrapped part of it around his hand.

Stop, she shouted.

He charged her, but a pounding at the door stopped him.

Mary, you okay? shouted a lady's voice from the other side of the door. I called the police.

Pepper looped the belt around his waist and hooked the buckle. He swung the front door open. Before him stood a woman hunched over, her silver hair tucked under a teal shawl, a gray, wispy mustache dancing around her upper lip. Candlelight burned in her eyes. Pepper knew he had to go.

A tí que te importa? he asked as he blew past her.

The woman raised her right hand and a black rosary hung from her fist.

The next day at work, Pepper worked twice his usual speed. He unloaded trucks in fifteen minutes. He dug his hooks into cold halved cows.

Slow down, Braulio, said one of the co-workers. We can't keep up.

Pepper sped up. The lunch horn blared, but Pepper kept working.

Aren't you gonna have lunch with Mary? asked a co-worker.

Pepper continued to work.

After launch, Wilson went over to Pepper and asked him to slow down.

You're making us all look bad, said Wilson. Including your buddies from Mexico.

Pepper dug his hooks into a carcass and lifted it. He stood with the carcass on his shoulder, sized up Wilson and ran down the ramp. He dumped the carcass and ran to hook another one. Wilson stood in his way.

You're like a fucking hot pepper that won't stop burning my ass, said Wilson. Calm your shit down before I sit you down.

Abdul, the floor manager, ran over. Pepper held the two hooks at his side, ready to swing. Abdul jumped between the men.

What the hell's going on here? asked Abdul.

This negro heuvon stands in my way, said Pepper, not letting me unload the truck. He says I need to slow down.

He's gonna hurt himself, boss, said Wilson, or someone else.

Clock out, both of you, said Abdul. I don't want to see either of you for two days.

In two days, snarled Pepper.

Make it three, replied Abdul.

When Pepper got home that evening he asked Josefina to draw him a bath. She put his razor, shaving brush, mirror and soap on the lip of the tub and drew the water. Pepper liked to shave any time of the day. She placed a couple of yerba buena leaves in the tub. Pepper sank in and the hot water soothed his sore legs and back. The steam opened his nasal passages.

Josefina sat next to him on the toilet and lathered a wash cloth. She rubbed the cloth on his back and neck. Pepper grabbed a the shaving brush and swirled it over the bar soap. The brush's horse hair felt cold against his hot face. He lathered his cheeks and his small chin and dragged the razor across his stubble. After his bath he sat and ate at the table with Josefina and his Juanito.

Me tries una cervesa Torrito, he told Juanito.

Juanito's chubby ass shook as he ran to the fridge. Pepper thanked his wife for dinner and stuck a toothpick into his mouth.

Pepper returned to work.

Them cows get the best of you? said Wilson during their first break.

Pepper spun around.

Shut up, nigger, he said.

You and me are gonna have some business to settle after work, said

Wilson. I suggest you save your strength.

Pepper drove to Dave's Pawn shop during his lunch hour and explained to Dave that he needed a small pistol, something easy to conceal. Pepper had purchased several heavy caliber handguns and rifles from the Dave in past. Dave started with a .38 then a .32.

I want it to fit in my bota, said Pepper, something I can toss.

Dave pulled a Ruger Single-Six .22 caliber revolver from his safe.

It's my own gun, said Dave, but I'll sell it.

Pepper held out his hand and Dave put the butt of the revolver into Pepper's palm. The gun felt warm and heavy.

After work Pepper changed into his cowboy boots, jeans and a button down. He walked to his car, pulled out the .22 from the glove box and tucked it into the front of his pants. He hid on the passenger side of Wilson's primer-gray Volkswagen van. When he heard the keys go into the driver's side door he, jumped out.

Aqui tengo para acaver te, puto, said Pepper.

Cool it, said Wilson. I was only kidding about fighting after work.

Pepper put the gun to Wilson's forehead.

No more shit about hows I work, said Pepper, in a thick Mexican accent. I can't stand with the cows on my back, so I have to go fast or I fall.

Keep it cool, said Wilson

You want to die over that?

No, said Wilson. To each his own.

Pepper pulled the gun from Wilson's head.

No bullets, laughed Pepper.

He opened the gun to expose the empty chambers.

Juney smiled his gums at the waitress.

You want one too, young buck? asked Juney.

The two sat at the bar all afternoon.

The thought of having to choose between Mary and Josefina did not enter Pepper's mind until he stumbled to his car, turned the ignition and realized that he had no place to go. He swerved around the city streets till he came upon a desert road, which he followed for an hour, then pulled over. He put the car in first gear and eased his foot off the clutch. The car shook side to side as the engine died. The motion rocked Pepper to sleep.

Your mother, Mercy, never knew her father, Pepper, said Josefina. I've always regretted that.

Pepper lived with Mary five days of the week. On Mondays and Tuesdays he returned home. Josefina had stopped talking to him but washed his laundry and cooked for him when he was home. She told Juanito that Pepper had been hired to work at a rancho in Ruidoso. Pepper maintained the lie by returning with stories of breaking horses and defending cattle from coyotes and wolves.

El Jefe brought the largest horse I've ever seen in my life, said Pepper. It took eight men to keep it from jumping over the corral. Pepper tickled Juanito's belly.

The horse's black coat shined like velvet and he had a white patch of hair in the shape of a diamond, between his eyes, said Pepper. The stallion's muscles rippled as it jumped in air.

Josefina dropped a plate of refried beans and an egg torta in front of Pepper and a smaller plate of beans in front of Juanito.

The food there is terrible, mijo, said Pepper. Nothing but beans with no salt and crusty bread.

What happened to the horse? asked Juanito.

Esperate, let me get some food in my stomach, said Pepper.

He shoveled a spoonful into his mouth.

El Jefe asked me to break the horse, said Pepper. I walked up to the

horse and stared into its black eyes. They were so deep that I almost fell in. Then the horse stopped fighting. The men removed the ropes from around the horse's neck and the horse remained calm. I put on leather gloves and circled the horse. I got a running start and launched myself into the air. I could barely get my leg over the horse. Then I realized that the horse was saving its strength for this moment.

Juanito's legs swung as he mimicked his father's movements. They both shoveled beans into their mouths, wiped their lips and drank from their glasses.

I felt the stallion's muscles tense, said Pepper. It jumped into the air and I held on as tight as I could. It jumped into the post smashing my right side but I held on. Then it jumped into the air and rolled over, crashing all its weight on me. I pulled his mane hard and the horse jumped to his feet. We continued like this for hours, no, days. Then the horse stopped bucking, blew air between his lips and bent down to eat a patch of grass, he said, like nothing had happened.

His son lifted his empty plate and asked Josefina for more food. She grabbed the plate and piled on more beans.

On the days Pepper stayed with Mary, they ate restaurant food, greasy-fried chicken, hamburgers and plates of green enchiladas. The food left a film in his mouth so thick he felt he would choke.

February 26th, 2010

I visit Josefina again. She ran me out the last time, but I hope to find her in a better mood today. Josefina called me early today and promised to tell me about my mother. I know some of my mom's history, like she got pregnant at fifteen and Josefina and Braulio promised to take care of me but other than that I never cared to ask. What for? She left me a long time ago.

Josefina smiles when I walk in. She doesn't have her dentures in. Sit, sit, she tells me. I've been cooking all day. I made enchiladas, your favorite.

I don't like enchiladas, at least not red ones, but I pretend to be excited and hungry. We eat and the red chile stains her upper lip and mustache.

I noticed your truck wasn't starting the last time you were here, says Josefina. Where'd you buy it? A junkyard?

It beats the bus, I say.

Sell that basura and take your grandfather's truck instead, says Josefina. I don't want it here.

I can't take his truck, I say.

She pushes the curtain back, revealing the black truck sagging in the driveway. The black paint fades and rust gathers around the tire walls.

Can't take it, I say. Can't afford it.

It's the last thing I have of him, she says. The bank will take it

away, unless you take it.

Let them, I say.

You owe me for taking you in, she says. God only knows how you've turned out if you've stayed with your real mother. You might not even be alive today. Tossed in the dumpster or something.

Are you going to tell me about my mom? I ask.

What do you want to know? she says. That she was a puta like her mom, Mary?

If you're gonna be this way, I'm leaving.

Don't go, Sharlie, she says. I don't have much longer here.

I wait for her to say something else, but she just looks down at the empty plate stained red like her lip.

I'll take the truck, I say.

She doesn't say anything, just stares at that plate and goes blank, catatonic.

Mary didn't return to work, Josefina told me. She gave birth to your mother and never returned to Payaton Meat Factory. Instead, she found a job at the County Clerk's Office, where she met her future husband, Casimiro Gueyez, a tall, slender man in his early thirties with jet-black hair and skin like the backside of a cockroach. Mary first noticed him while he filled out paperwork, at the end of a long line in the County Clerk's office. Mary pulled her hair back and smiled at Casimiro. They dated for a few months and then he proposed to her.

He later bought her a house on Durango Street.

When Mercy first met Casimiro, she cried. Mary pulled Mercy into their bedroom and slapped her across the face.

You're not going to ruin this for me, cabróna, shouted Mary.

Tears washed down Mercy's face and onto her shoes. She wished she could drown in the tears.

Go to sleep, said Mary.

Mercy stood sobbing, then crawled into her bed when Mary left the room. She pulled a pillow over her face to filter out her mother's giggles coming from the living room.

Mary sat on Casimiro's lap, put her arms around his neck and shoved her breasts into his face. They drank Canada Dry whiskey and smoked

Lucky Strikes. Mary pulled him into her room and asked that he carry Mercy to the couch. He pulled the pillow from over her head and lifted up her limp body.

Mary gave birth to my aunt Marisol on June 10th, 1975, during a heat wave. Then she returned to work four weeks later. The responsibility to care for Marisol fell on ten-year old Mercy. She loved her sister and enjoyed pretending to be a mother.

After the summer ended, Casimiro hired La Gabby to care for Marisol while Mercy went to Kooley Elementary School. La Gabby worked for twenty-five dollars a week and lived in a room at the back of the house. The room had no windows, no fans, no heating and no bed. The white tile floor glowed with the reflection of the green paint from the walls. La Gabby, a seventeen year-old girl from la Colonia Chivera, on the outskirts of Juárez, met Mary and Casimiro through Belen. Belen had hired La Gabby's mother to clean her house on Tuesdays and Thursdays. When Belen found out that Mary needed someone to watch her two daughters, she asked La Gabby's mother to let La Gabby cross into El Paso and work for Mary and Casimiro.

La Gabby packed into a van with seven other people and crossed a third of a mile from downtown Juárez into downtown El Paso. The van parked, the back doors opened and stacks of produce full of tangerines and and honeydew melons were pulled out by the coyote. Behind those stacks La Gabby and seven others crowded together. La

Gabby took a deep breath, despite being one block away from her beloved Juárez the air smelled different. The concrete buildings of downtown El Paso baked under the desert sun. The smell of green papayas, red chiles and sweet pilonsillo that La Gabby had smelled before she got into the van, stayed in the mercado a third of a mile away.

La Gabby made arrangements to meet Mary at the Kress Building at five-thirty. El Coyote, who crossed La Gabby, advised them to stand at the bus stops at the Plaza de Largatos and pretend to wait for the bus.

If La Migra sees you standing around in a group and looking lost, said El Coyote, they'll deport you.

Casimiro stumbled into the house drunk. He went to the kitchen, poured some whiskey and slammed down a drink; the fire in his throat sobered him for a moment. He fumbled through the hallway, towards the room in the back of the house. With his right hand he pushed the door open. It had no lock. He tried to move forward but his foot caught on the uneven floor. Casimiro spilled over La Gabby, landing on her legs. La Gabby woke up, kicked Casimiro and screamed. He staggered to his feet and swung down but missed. La Gabby jumped to her feet and pushed Casimiro into the wall and ran to Mary's room. Casimiro crashed into the room.

This hija de puta started attacking me, said Casimiro.

Are you drunk, Casi? asked Mary.

No, baby, don't be silly, slurred Casimiro. I had some beers with the guys after work.

A week later, Casimiro called La Migra on La Gabby. Back to Juárez she went.

An oxidized copper statue of a trooper from General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing's brigade stood at the entrance of Eastwood High School. The trooper pointed into the air and charged forward, forever in search of the elusive Pancho Villa. Despite being late for class, Mercy stared into the statue's flaring nostrils and imagined that he was mad with syphilis and that he smelled like sour eggs and cheap booze, perhaps whiskey.

Young lady, you're always late, said Mrs. Witmore when Mercy walked in.

I'm sorry, Miss, said Mercy. I had to drop my sister off at school.

I'm not concerned with your excuses or lies, Mercy, said Mrs. Witmore. Your responsibility is to be in class on time and ready to learn. Do you understand?

The teacher pulled a red slip from her desk and bent over to write on it, her fat gut popping a button open on her blouse.

Your button, said Mercy.

What? What was that? asked Mrs. Wittmore.

Your shirt, said Mercy, the button's undone.

Get to the damn office now, growled Mrs. Wittmore, her face red as the slip she handed Mercy.

Mercy walked into the restroom and her eyes watered from the ammonia cutting through the air. She sat in the blue stall and chewed on her

nails and waited about twenty minutes, till the class bell rang. Then she walked out and up to her friends, Malo and Lupita. They always skipped third period and went to Album Park. They sat under a tree and smoked grass. Malo played his guitar, struggling through the chords and harmonies of Sunny and the Sunliners. Sometimes Lupita, who went by Sunshine, accompanied him. She could sing.

Dude, said Malo. I heard Mrs. Wittmore really gave it to you in history today.

You know how it is, said Mercy. That perra has hated me ever since I asked her how Columbus could've discovered the Americas if people were already living here?

Yeah, that's one kooky lady, said Sunshine. She needs to be down with the Raza.

She wants to hold us down, agreed Malo.

I know where she lives, said Mercy. We could T.P. her house or something

Malo strummed the chords and Sunshine sang along to "Brown Eyed Girl." He sang to Mercy, but she knew better. Malo and Sunshine went together. But sometimes, when he got really stoned or a little too drunk, he tried to kiss Mercy.

I got to pick up my sister, said Mercy.

She spotted her sister, Marisol, sitting in a swing, dangling and kicking her legs. She called out to her, but her sister ignored her and kept swinging. She called out again, but her sister swung faster

and faster. Mercy knew her sister wanted to jump and ran towards her. Marisol flew through the air. The plastic ligas holding her pony tail together caught the desert sun and cut it into a thousand reds and blues and greens. Mercy caught her sister and tickled her.

Two eggs sizzled over a porcelain frying pan, their yokes still soft. Mercy stabbed at them with a fork and they bled out over their white counterparts. She split the eggs, shook the pan and sprinkled garlic salt and pepper over them. The eggs thickened into yellow clouds. The wrought-iron screen door squeaked open, the wood door banging against wall.

Hey, said Casimiro, her stepfather.

Daddy, said Marisol. She jumped off the brass chair and ran into the hallway.

I'm in the kitchen, said Mercy from behind the stove.

Where's your mom? he asked.

Haven't seen her, said Mercy. I'm making food. You hungry? She pointed the greasy wooden spatula at the eggs.

He didn't answer. He unzipped his navy blue jumpsuit and took off his grease-stained work boots. He pulled out a piece of gum and two lollipops wrapped in green cellophane.

Here, Mija, he told Marisol.

The candy bounced and danced on the glass table top.

We have to eat first, said Mercy.

Let her, said Casimiro. I brought one for you, too.

He reached into his other pocket and pulled out a cellophane tube stuffed with colored gum balls and tossed them at Mercy.

Thanks, said Mercy, but we have to wait until after dinner.

She snatched the candy from the table and put it into the cabinet.

Give it back, barked Casimiro. You hija de puta.

His nostrils flared like the cooper statue at Eastwood High. He hit Mercy so hard that the smack shook the cabinet doors. The eggs sizzled and crackled.

Give it to her, cabróna, said Casimiro.

He raised his hand again and pumped it towards her. She flinched and grabbed the fork, jamming it into fleshy part of his palm, which popped like a juicy grape. Casimiro screamed and shrilled. He bent over to pull the fork out. Mercy ran out of the kitchen, past the wrought-iron door and into the street. Her mother Mary was pulling up to the drive-way.

Stop, shouted Mary, where are you going?

Mercy's pumping legs gave out and she spilled over the asphalt scraping her elbows and left knee. She looked back and saw her Oldsmobile turning the corner. She pulled herself together and limped towards a red-brick house. She knocked on the door. No answer. The Oldsmobile parked and Casimiro and Mary jumped out. He had toilet paper wrapped around his hand.

Get your ass over here, cabróna, shouted Mary.

Mercy flipped them the bird, ran to the side of house and jumped the fence. A Chihuahua barked at Mercy, its thighs flexed and it gnashed

its teeth at her.

Get over hear, pinche hija de puta, said Mary. Casi, jump the fence and get her ass.

The Chihuahua snapped at Mercy. She punted its head like a kickball, sending the dog a couple of feet back. Then she jumped the rock wall at the back of the yard. Her right ankle buckled as she landed. The Oldsmobile's engine turned over, sounding like a train headed straight for her. She scanned the street and spotted a silver trashcan baking in the sun. She limped towards it and climbed in as if she was climbing into a too-hot bath.

Mercy sat in the trashcan, baking for hours. She heard a car pull up on the driveway and peeked from the lip of the trashcan. A teal Dodge van parked in the driveway. Her teacher, Mrs. Wittmore, opened the van doors and pulled out two little girls from the backseat. Mercy crawled out of the trashcan and one of the girls screamed.

Please help me, said Mercy. Can I make a phone call from your house? Mrs. Wittmore nodded and helped Mercy limp to her house. Mercy called Sunshine, no answer. Mrs. Wittmore served Mercy some iced tea.

You can stay here if you need to, said Mrs. Wittmore. But I will have to inform your mother that you are here.

Don't bother, said Mercy. She doesn't give a damn about what happens to me.

I know, said Mrs. Wittmore. But I have to inform her. It's the right thing to do.

No, said Mercy. Let me call one other friend. Please.

Mercy called Malo.

Hey, man, said Mercy. I know this is like out of the blue, but you think you could scoop me up? I got nowhere to go. My stepfather is being a real shit-head.

Mercy hung up the phone and told her teacher that she would wait for her friend at Album Park.

Mrs. Witman pleaded with Mercy to stay.

Mercy sat in the tree and watched a group of kids climb up a slide and going down it, head first. The mother of the kids cautioned them to take turns.

Mercy jumped down from tree when she saw Malo's avocado green '75 Chevette pull up. He honked his horn twice and opened the passenger's door. She jumped in the car. He leaned over and gave her a hug.

You all right, girl? asked Malo in a low tone.

I really don't want to talk about it, said Mercy. Let's find Sunshine and come back to the park to smoke some pot.

Sunshines with her family, said Malo. They're taking some lame ass portraits or something. She'll call me after.

Let's stay here then, hang at the park you know, said Mercy.

I got the pot back at home. Besides no one's there.

He put the Chevette in gear and pulled out.

She was watching trees, stop signs, cactus and rock houses blur by

when she caught Malo's reflection on the passenger's window, dark skinned with a greasy ponytail and a wispy mustache, his lips always chapped. He put his slender hand on her thigh, near her knee. She pulled it away.

Don't worry, baby girl, said Malo. I got you.

They pulled up to Malo's red-brick house.

My mom won't be home till seven, he said. We can smoke in my room.

Mercy had never been in Malo's room before. She hesitated and then walked in. A giant flag of Mexico hung over his bed. El Ché, Hendrix, Santana and Malo (the band that Malo nicknamed himself after) littered his walls.

This one's my favorite said Malo.

He pointed to a black and white poster of John F. Kennedy leaning over and saying something to Cesar Chavez, who looks down at a row of crates filled with grapes. Do you live in Camelot, too? was written in bold white letters at the bottom of the poster.

Just goes to show you, said Malo. Presidents don't know shit.

He motioned towards the bed with his hands.

You sit down, said Malo.

I'm okay, said Mercy.

He pulled a wooden box from his dresser drawer and handed it to Mercy. A swastika was carved onto the lid.

It used to be my brother's, said Malo. He gave it to me before he left for the Army. There's rolling papers and some Nag Champa.

He closed the door.

Wait, said Mercy.

I got to close the door, said Malo. My mom will be pissed if she smells pot in the house.

Don't try nothing, cabrón, said Mercy.

Girl, be cool, laughed Malo.

He closed the door, and she stared at the two posters hanging on it. The top poster is of Farrah Fawcett in a copper bathing suit, smiling at the camera. Beneath her a Tibetan monk meditates, on fire.

May 5th, 2010

When I enter my grandmother's house I call out to her but there's no answer. I'm going to find her sprawled out on the linoleum floor with her head by the toilet, just like she found my grandfather when he died. Instead she sleeps in her bed. Her mouth hangs open and I can see her leathery gums. Her tender snores fade in the breeze of a fan by her bed. I tap her leg and she snorts. Her body tenses and she looks up at me, confused.

Sharlie, what are you doing here? she asks.

I haven't seen or called her in month, maybe more. I didn't want to see her or her loneliness.

Where are your dientes? I ask.

No se, she says. I haven't seen them in weeks.

I help her sit up and bring her a glass of water.

Why are you here? she asks again.

To see you, Ma.

Since when do you care about me? she asks.

I reach into my back pocket and pull out a folded up bank statement.

I take my time unfolding it.

It took me a while to get this, I say. It's a bank statement showing that Junaito cashed the six-thousand dollar check from the Meat Packers.

Josefina reaches for her glasses, puts them on and looks at the statement. She tears it into small pieces and snowflakes it over her bed.

What do I care about this? she says.

I just want to know why you lied for Juanito.

She steps into her slippers and stands.

I'll make some food, she says.

I follow her into the kitchen. She pulls out a pan, lard, eggs, flour and chorizo. She sprinkles flour onto the counter and into a bowl. She mixes a cup of flour with salt and water until it doughs. She tears off a chunk from the dough and rolls it out with a rolling pin.

The chorizo and eggs sizzle in the pan and the flour tortilla swells and puffs with steam. She places two burritos on a plate in front of me and shuffles off to her room. I leave the plate on the table and follow her.

Go eat, she says.

Why did you lie to me?

Can't you just leave me alone and let me die? she says. It's all I

want.

You're always going on about dying, I say. Get over it. Pepper died, not you.

Tienes razon, she says.

Quit trying to martyr yourself. You're no saint.

Santa no soy, she says.

She pulls the sheets from her bed, and then opens her drawers.

Que buscas? I ask.

My teeth, she says. I've been looking for those pinche dientes for weeks.

She gnashes her gums at me and looks through the drawer.

I can't take this shit any more, I say. If you aren't going to talk to me I'm leaving.

I walk out of the kitchen, but she calls me back.

I told you, I say. I'm done with this. My voice grows hoarse and loud. I'm done with you and Juanito.

You're going to leave me like your puta mom left you? says Josefina.

I shiver, my hands tremble and my gut contracts.

Let me tell you a little story, she says. Your mom came to me one day, strung out on pills and asking for money. She held you in her arms. You were skinny and dark and your diapers reeked of shit.

Please, said Mercy. I just need some cash to hold me over.

But I knew that if I gave her money she'd be back. I couldn't have Pepper's bastard daughter stopping by on a regular bases. So I offered to buy you. Gave her \$527 on the condition that she'd leave

you and never return. She sold you like a fucking donkey at a cattle auction. She never came back, not even a phone call, nothing. She's probably dead.

I want to slap the shit out of Josefina.

You liar, I say.

What are you going to do? she says. Hit me like your grandfather did? Look how that worked out.

What are you talking about, loca? I say.

I heard your grandfather dying in the restroom, she says. He called out to me when he got home from his morning walk. I opened the restroom door and saw him spilled out on floor.

Call the 911, he said.

But I closed the door and leaned my weight against it. I heard his last gasp for breath before I called.

I'm done with you, I say.

Don't act like he was an inocente, Sharlie, she said. That pedaso de mierda beat the shit out of me any chance he got. Juanito got it worse, sometimes. But you, oh, no, not his Sharlie. By the time you came along he'd stopped drinking. You were his little buddy, she says. Don't think he stopped because of you, por favor. It took Pepper killing Marqito to get Pepper to stop drinking.

I take a deep breath and try to move, my legs mortared to the floor.

Pepper spread his seed all over El Paso, she says. He fucked anyone and anything. He left four kids back in Aldáma, a few in Juárez for sure, and maybe one or two in Chihuahua. But he never left me or

Juanito.

Stop, I say. I don't want to hear this shit anymore.

I wish he'd left me, she says. He kept me around because I could take a sock to the jaw.

The tears pool and run down my face. I still can't move.

Don't cry, maricón, she says.

She lies back on the bed and pulls a pillow over her face.

Estoy gastada, she says. I just want it to be done.

She waves me over and puts my hands over the cool cotton pillow.

Don't be a maricas, she says.

I put my weight on the pillow and look away. A plaster bust of Jesus Christ's upper half sits on her dresser, his hands cupped as if he is about to receive communion, his eyes looking up to heavens. Nestled between his white plaster palms are Josefina's pink plastic dentures. I let go of the pillow, take the dentures and hand them to her. She pops them in smiling. Her yellow teeth contrast against the perfect white dentures. She reaches out and holds me like a son of mercy, like I'm her only son.

## Curriculum Vita

Carlos Fidel Espinoza lives and writes along the El Paso/Juarez Border. He has taught GED, ESL, and Event Planning courses at La Fe, for which Carlos received the National Council of La Raza's member of the year award. While a graduate student at the University of Texas at El Paso, Carlos helped organize readings and events for the Creative Writing department, Literature department and the Chicano Studies department, including readings by Mike Medrano, Corrine Clegg Hales, Howard McCord and The Philip Levine Centennial Lecture. In addition, Carlos read or performed in the Butter Toast Readings, The Barbed Wire Readings and Graduate School Readings and his poetry has appeared in the Chrysalis Literary Magazine and he helped edit Andrés Montoya's Posthumous book of poems. Carlos currently teaches Intro to Creative Writing and is an undergraduate advisor at the University of Texas at El Paso.

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