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## La Bestia and Other Stories

Jessica Viada  
*University of New Orleans*, [jviada@uno.edu](mailto:jviada@uno.edu)

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La Bestia and Other Stories

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Jessica Viada

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## Abstract

The following collection of short stories explores the notion of being caught between two worlds, of straddling physical, emotional, linguistic and metaphorical borders. I have chosen these characters in order to give voice to those who are often voiceless. The collection has been divided in two parts in order to challenge ideas of what is “real.” I argue that the emotional truth of a story is paramount, and this reality can sometimes be best achieved through unconventional means.

Fiction, Latino literature, borders, border lands, symbolism, realism, speculative fiction, short stories, urban.

I. Real

## The Surf Lesson

Goddamn, surfing's no joke. For the second time this morning, Marisol Reyes falls against the slick shore of Blackie's beach rubbing saltwater from her eyes and gasping for breath, her lungs straining to swallow as much of the air around her as possible. She's always making life harder than it has to be. She should be sleeping away the mornings of her summer vacation instead of choking to death; she doesn't have to work until two. But then she thinks of her mother spending her own days off in front of the T.V. watching novelas in her pijamas and clucking her tongue absently at the screen, too exhausted from keeping other people's houses to keep her own. Marisol will risk a hundred wipeouts before she ends up that way.

The plastic leash linking Makai's longboard to the Velcro strap around her ankle tenses as the tide ebbs and threatens to drag Marisol back out and under. No jodás, not again. She claws her fingers deep into the wet sand. The leash goes slack, and Marisol rolls on her back, still coughing, to find Makai standing above her with the longboard tucked under one arm. The water dripping from his shaggy hair gleams like quicksilver in the pink sunlight. "You okay?" he asks.

She sits up and forces a giggle. "I'm fine. Let's go again."

"You sure? You look toe up, girl. You got kind of close to the jetty that time." He hikes the board higher under his arm and gestures to the wall of jagged rock that separates their section of beach from the next. "Let's grab breakfast."

She glances at the line of Makai's left hip rising from his boardshorts and imagines what it would be like to trace that line of muscle with her fingertips. To be cradled in Makai's bed, sea salt and sweat mingling under the fluffy down comforter; that's Marisol's kind of morning.

Makai'd be down for it; she can tell by the look on his face. He squints a lot, like the sun's already completely up, like maybe that way she won't notice him checking her out. She notices. But that's not what she came here for. She stares at the water. The ocean is still slate gray and glassy, and the marine layer hasn't yet lifted, making it impossible to distinguish the sky from the sea. One wave, and then they can leave. *Blackies*, Makai's friends say like a promise whenever they come into the shop. From behind the counter Marisol studies the boys and spreads cream cheese on toasted bagel halves. Their boardshorts sag low around their sun-tanned hips, and their hair is sandy and sun-streaked. *Epic*, they say to each other, eyes shining and far away, like they're still flying across the water. The swells at Blackie's beach are *epic*. When they come straight from surfing, they recreate their favorite ride with loose and relaxed gestures. They seem only half-present in their surroundings, some piece of themselves left boundless in the ocean. Marisol is dying to know what that's like.

“Probably it hasn't even been two hours yet,” she says. “Seriously. I'm fine, come on.” She sets her jaw and pulls herself up.

Makai laughs and drapes his arm across her shoulders. “Whatever you say.”

The water's so cold Marisol's feet tingle, and the sharp rocks and seashells that she tries but fails to sidestep remind her that her toes haven't gone numb after all. When they wade out far enough that the water reaches Marisol's thighs, Makai sets the board down. “Time to paddle out,” he says. Marisol climbs on and lies on her stomach. The wax she rubbed over the board earlier is gray and mottled with sand and feels rough against her skin. She pulls the T-shirt Makai lent her—a rash guard, he called it—down toward her hips and tries to adjust her swimsuit without him noticing. She should've chosen a different one. Her blue gingham bikini, the one Julio says she's only allowed to wear in his presence because she's too young to look

like such a Mayan goddess, threatens to become dental floss in the rough surf. Makai climbs on behind her, and when she's nestled beneath him, he paddles his arms in long strokes toward the break.

Julio had been off again with some crunchy-haired puta. Marisol knew because it was always the same. He stopped calling for weeks and then she would come home from work one day to find him sitting on the faded couch in her tiny living room eating her mother's chuleta off the porcelain plates with the blue windmills. A visit from Julio was the only time Marisol ever saw those plates, and the only time her mother ever cooked. It was also the only time Julio put on a pressed collared shirt over his wife-beater.

"Nice shirt," Marisol said as she shut the door behind her. "Your sancha iron it for you?"

"Mari, por dios," her mother scolded from the kitchen. "Don't be rude."

"Yeah, Mari." Julio grinned from between bites of pork chop. "Listen to your ma."

"You have something in your teeth." She bent down to the coffee table and threw his napkin at him. "Why are you here?"

"Marisol, please," her mother warned as she entered the living room and sat beside Julio. Marisol noticed she'd changed out of her sweats and into the long green skirt she saved for baptisms. Marisol rolled her eyes. "Here, Julio," her mother said and placed another pork chop on his plate. "Don't pay attention to Mari. Probably she just had a bad day at work."

Julio dug a fingernail between his molars to dislodge a piece of pork. "It's all right, Doña Leonora. Mari's upset because I haven't called. I've been so busy at the restaurant."

“That’s what you’re calling her?” Marisol scoffed. “More like a fast food restaurant, I imagine. Is she open twenty-four hours? You don’t have to lie. Sandra told me.”

Julio stood and leaned close to Mari, so close that she could feel his breath on her neck. She shivered with excitement in spite of herself. “Ay, Marrri,” Julio purred. “That metiche? Everyone knows Sandra’s dramatic. Come on,” he said and stroked her arm. “Go change and I’ll take you out.”

“Your cologne is giving me a headache.”

“*Marisol*,” her mother hissed.

“Fine,” Julio said. He stepped back. “I’ll come back when you’re not so tired.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Thanks for dinner, Doña Leonora. If only Mari could cook like that.” He winked at Marisol before walking out of the house. The screen door slapped behind him.

Marisol’s mother glared at her. “Why are you so awful to him? Can’t you see he only wants to take care of you?”

“Julio only wants to take care of Julio.”

“More like Mari only wants to take care of Mari. You’re young now, mijita, but you won’t be forever. Stop pretending to be better than you are.” She stood holding Julio’s empty plate.

Marisol’s eyes widened. “He sleeps around, Mami. You heard him. He didn’t even deny it.”

“Ay, Mari.” She brushed the air with her free hand. “Men are men. Julio loves you.”

Later, after Mari slammed the door to her bedroom, Leonora stood washing dishes with both faucets turned as far as they would go to drown out the bass from her daughter’s stereo.

Steam rose in thick tendrils around her, adding to the leftover haze in the kitchen from frying onions. She remembered herself at Marisol's age, standing over the sink, Marisol already an onion-sized swirl swelling Leonora's belly. The screen door had banged open and closed and her father had passed through the kitchen of their old house, barely glancing at Leonora.

"Careful with your mother's plates," he mumbled as he reached in the oven to take the dinner she had waiting for him. Leonora used her fingernail to scrape a piece of cabbage from the base of a blue windmill. "Yes, Papí."

"I heard you crying in your room last night. You still haven't heard from him?"

"No, sir."

Her father set his plate on the stove top, and out of the corner of her eye Leonora could see where several grains of rice had embedded in the hairs of his goatee. He leaned against the counter and removed the dishtowel from the handle of the oven. She felt his eyes on her, on the swell of her blouse, as he curled the towel around his fist. Her father was a small man, not much taller than Leonora, but she had spent more than one Sunday mending the seams of shirts that failed to contain the muscles in his back and shoulders. He tugged at his goatee, plucked the pieces of rice he found there and smashed them between his thumb and forefinger. Leonora knew what was coming next, and she focused her gaze on the flowered blue border of the plate in her hands. She wondered what it would be like to run through a field of blue flowers in a land of windmills.

"You stupid puta." Her father shook his head. "You wait for the ring before you have the baby, didn't you know that? Who's going to want you now?" His laugh caught Leonora off guard; it filled the room with disjointed emotion. The plate slipped from her grip and broke into three neat pieces in the sink. Before Leonora could think to cry, he snapped the towel against her

throat. Her breath cut short, and she felt a searing pain against her neck. She turned in time to see the unraveled dishtowel lowering to her father's side. He dropped it to the floor.

“Clean up your mess,” he called over his shoulder on his way out of the kitchen. The screen door banged open and closed, and Leonora was alone again, back in her own kitchen, Marisol in her bedroom, Leonora's hand on her throat.

The board sits lower in the ocean with Makai on top of her, and Marisol gets splashed in the face every time water spills over the longboard. She can feel his crotch pressing into her butt, senses he's happy with this arrangement. Even though she wants Makai all the time, right now she feels annoyed. She feels hot even as the cool water seeps around her chest and ankles. She should be on top; let Makai drink the ocean. Makai's ribcage digs into her kidneys as he paddles toward the break. She has a feeling in her chest like it's hard to breathe, and she scoots forward on the board to give her shoulders more room. The nose of the surfboard plummets into the water, and though Marisol knows she's only slid forward a few inches, her head is underwater and it's like her whole body has fallen beneath the board. Her heart flutters in her chest like a bird caught indoors. Marisol can never tell where she is when she's underwater, can't tell up from down, and she lashes out. Then she feels Makai's grip on her rash guard; he pulls her back, and she is beneath him once again.

“Hey,” he laughs and moves them both through the break. “You keep squirming around like that and you'll upset the balance. Just hang out a sec, we're almost there.”

Beyond the break the water is smooth and silent, and Marisol slows her breathing in time with the surf. She's relieved Makai didn't notice her panic. "Isn't this my lesson?" she teases. "I'm the one who needs to paddle."

Makai slips off into the water beside her. "I caught my first wave eight years ago in Costa Rica. On a family vacation. I was hooked; the water was warm and so clear you could see straight to the bottom. You ever been?"

"What, To Costa Rica? And leave behind the natural beauty of Costa Mesa?"

"Oh man, you gotta make it out there. It's awesome."

"Yeah, sure." Marisol smirks. Right after she crosses Rio de Janeiro and Paris off her list. The board is big and clumsy, and even though she moves her arms just like Makai did a second ago, she doesn't go anywhere. Damn. She looks at Makai. His eyelashes turn black when they get wet; they make his green eyes glow like sea glass. She first saw him several weeks earlier through the storefront window of the bagel shop. She knew by the way Makai coasted by on his black beach cruiser, lemon-colored longboard tucked snugly under one arm, that he was the perfect antidote to Julio. He rode without his shirt on, and as she stood behind the counter, Marisol could see the muscles in Makai's slender shoulders swell and roll as he maintained his balance. She would have given her left little toe to be that longboard. His name nearly said it all. Makai, like koi fish gliding between lily pads. MacKenna, like a knotted Celtic tree on a rainy bluff somewhere in Ireland. She knew it was only a matter of time before they ended up like this, floating together in the ocean. She knew even though Sandra said he only liked blonde girls, and even though Marisol lived on the wrong side of Nineteenth Street in Costa Mesa. *Costa Mexico*, the white kids at school joked, even though she's not Mexican. Pobrecita, Sandra's been a downer ever since she got knocked up.

Makai still can't believe his luck. How'd he manage to get such an epic hottie on his board? He was sprung the minute he saw Marisol sitting on her beach towel, all caramel-colored in the sun. And the way she told him "down here" when he looked around to see who was calling his name, like they already knew each other. He recognized her from the shop when she reminded him he liked "everything" bagels. Out on the beach she looked like some kind of mermaid.

Makai's used to attention from girls, but Marisol's different. Smarter. He can tell she doesn't take shit from anyone, and Makai respects that. He gets so bored with the girls at school who follow him around trying to get him to take part in whatever group activity they have planned for the weekend. A party; a weekend trip to TJ, maybe score some E. Someone's dad is out of town and wouldn't Makai like to come to the pool for beers and a barbecue? Makai doesn't give a rat's ass about any of it. He'll go so his friends won't give him a hard time, but he'd rather be on his board. People are always worried about unimportant shit. It makes him tired just listening to it.

Marisol's not like that. He can tell. But he can also see she's got other worries. He notices it sometimes, a look, like right now when he's trying to teach her about A frames. She loses focus and stares over his shoulder. He wants to show her that if she can just lose herself in the surf like he does, none of that other crap will matter. It'll all fall away until the only important things are the wave, the speed, the wind in your face. The moment is all that really matters; everything else is just corporate bullshit.

"Hey," Makai says and snaps his fingers. What the hell? Marisol thinks. She's not some mesera. But she sits up on the board. "There's another set coming in. Here." He turns the board

so Marisol faces the beach. “When I tell you to paddle, you start paddling to the shore like crazy, okay?”

“Okay,” Marisol says. She tries to make her voice hard and indifferent, like she’s done this a hundred times before, but the ‘y’ gets caught in her throat. The one thing Marisol’s been taught about the ocean is never to turn her back on it.

“Paddle!” Makai shouts, but she isn’t ready. The trapped bird feeling rises in her chest again, but she presses it back down, leans forward, and paddles as hard as she can, paddles thinking of the feeling she sees behind Makai’s eyes. A feeling like the ocean’s stillness between sets. Her arms move until her shoulders ache. She’s afraid she’ll never reach it.

The crunch of Julio’s black work boots on the tile floor at the shop’s entrance made the tinging bell above the door seem like a bad joke, like an ice cream truck selling smack. Marisol reached for the knife Sandra was using to slice bagels and wiped the blade with a rag. Julio pushed his sunglasses up over his dark hair. His face was flawless except for a thin scar that ran the length of his left jaw line. The watch Marisol had given him last Christmas glinted around his wrist.

“Ey, Nena,” he said to Marisol as he approached the counter. The button-down shirt was gone, and Marisol could see the tattoos on Julio’s chest and stomach through his wifebeater.

“What are you doing here?” Marisol asked without looking up from the knife she cleaned.

“I decided I was in the mood for some bagels,” he said and smirked. “Do you want to make me un bagel, Mari? With lots of cream cheese?” He licked his lips.

“Go to hell, Julio.”

“Ay, Marri,” he said. Sarcasm rolled off his tongue. “Don’t be rude to your customers.” He turned to Sandra and rested his forearms on the counter in front of her, leaned in close as if they were about to share a secret. Sandra looked away. “Sandra,” he began. “What’s this I hear about Mari being some gabacho’s puta?”

Marisol walked over, knife still in hand. “Leave her alone, Julio. I’m not anyone’s puta.”

“That’s not what I heard,” he purred into her ear. “You know what it’ll do to me if I find out you messing around? What you doing later?” He slid a finger along her belly, where the edge of her shirt grazed the waistband of her jeans. She thought of the way Julio never made her ask for anything. The way he could grab her and throw her down at exactly the right moment.

“Kicking it with your sancha,” Marisol answered and stepped back. “Didn’t you hear? We’re forming a knitting circle.” She nudged his stomach with the blunt knife handle. “You’ve gotten a little panzón, Julio,” she said. “That sancha’s making you lazy. Maybe you don’t need any more cream cheese.”

Julio looked down. Stretched his grin wide to hide the sting. She still didn’t get it. He didn’t give a shit about any of las otras. They were just there. Take the edge off after a long day. Distractions. They were easy. Mari wasn’t. Sometimes he felt like he was running. Gotta catch up with Mari. She was complicada. But she belonged to him. Held his hand tight when they went to see his old man in Chino. Even when he lost his shit. Threw the phone at the glass. Mari didn’t budge. Her hand kept him from punching the prison guard when he grabbed Julio’s shoulder. Told him visiting hours were finished. Mari was the only thing holding him down in the world. If the vatos were right, what they were saying. If she was with someone new, some

white boy. If she was serious, he didn't know what to do. He wouldn't let it happen. In the end they would always end up together. They shared the same barrio. They belonged to each other.

Julio swore under his breath and jerked upright. Marisol could see his temple pulsing and wondered if she'd taken things too far. But if he was mad, he didn't say anything. "All right, Nena," he said. "Let you get back to work. Later."

Makai yells for her to get up, but his voice is almost completely drowned out by the wave. Marisol knows he means it's time for her to stand up, surf. But it's happening too fast; Marisol can't think what to do with her body, can't even remember where her pinche legs are, let alone stand. She stops paddling. The board jerks beneath her and she careens to the right. The jetty's rocks loom in front of her. How did she get so far over? She looks toward the beach and sees she's close to shore, but she can't tell which direction the wave is pushing her, whether she'll crash into the jetty or the beach first. She takes a deep breath and jumps off Makai's board, rolls beneath the wave as it pushes her forward. Her leg hits something sharp, and she thinks she's hit the jetty. She covers her head with her arms, but then somehow she's on the shore again, crying with relief. The water recedes, and she resigns herself to being sucked back out, positive her limbs are no longer capable of movement. But she doesn't feel the tug on her ankle, and she looks down to see the Velcro strap free of the leash that links it to the surfboard. Marisol sits up in a panic. This is worse than being sucked under; there's no way she can afford to replace a longboard. A sharp whistle strikes her eardrums, and she looks up to see Makai jogging back from the surf. Her entire body goes limp when she sees he's carrying the surfboard.

“You all right?” he asks when he gets close. He crouches next to her, and his face looks like Marisol felt when she thought she’d lost the board. “Dude, that looked scary.” He scans her face and body for injuries.

“I’m okay,” Marisol breathes, though she barely believes it. She’s glad to be soaking wet so her tears are invisible.

“You’re not okay. You’re bleeding.” Makai pulls off his rash guard and wraps it around a gash in her shin that Marisol hadn’t noticed until now. He holds the shirt in place, and Marisol enjoys the way his hands cradle her leg. His palms have no calluses, and his smooth fingernails look like the pale insides of seashells.

“It’s about finding your balance,” Makai says to her leg after awhile. “You can’t think it through every time. It’s more like a rhythm. You have to sense it. You’ve gotta put everything else out of your head and only focus on what’s immediately around you, where your body is, what the water’s doing. And then you have to let go. You can’t fight the ocean because you’ll never win.”

Cute, Marisol thinks. She doesn’t need Zen surfer wisdom. She needs to catch a wave. She studies Makai’s bowed head. She likes him, but sometimes he aggravates her and she isn’t sure why. Last week, Makai brought her to his house. He lived just like she imagined, in one of the white mansions on the peninsula that look like they’re scrubbed with sea salt and bleached daily by the sun: Makai’s parents never have to worry about car exhaust blackening the paint. His dad was home even though it was the middle of the afternoon, and when she saw him, Marisol knew Makai would still be gorgeous in thirty years. His dad was tall and lean, and his face held the same tranquil expression and shining eyes that Makai wore after a morning surf session.

“Hey, Makai,” he said when they walked into the kitchen. He put down the fish taco he’d been eating and pulled two glasses from the rack above his head and set them on the polished granite countertop. “You guys want some pomegranate juice?”

Marisol excused herself to use the bathroom, but she wandered up a staircase to the third floor. She’d never been in a house with three stories before. The top floor had been designed as an office and home gym, and the walls were made entirely of sea green glass, creating an unobstructed view of million-dollar homes and the ocean beyond. She looked around. Her entire house would fit into the office with room to spare. Marisol wondered if maybe the weightless quality that drew her to Makai wasn’t from surfing after all. What did Makai worry about, anyway? Even without a surfboard Makai, was free in a way that neither Marisol nor anyone she knew would ever be. But that wasn’t his fault, was it? Marisol felt empty and out of place. She turned back down the stairs.

She had almost made it to the kitchen when she heard Makai’s father tease him. “She’s pretty, but be careful, Mak. Latin women have hotter blood than the rest. Make sure you can handle it.”

“Don’t be gross, Dad.”

It’s not his fault. Makai can’t help where he was born any more than she can. Marisol reaches out to push the hair back from Makai’s forehead. He smiles and removes the shirt from around her leg. The bleeding’s stopped; the gash wasn’t so deep after all. “I know this diner where we can get banana splits for breakfast,” Makai says. “How about it?”

“One more,” Marisol says. Her entire body feels like a jellyfish, but this time she’ll catch a wave. She’s sure of it.

Makai frowns. “Are you serious? That was a gnarly wipeout. The current’s getting kind of rough. Let’s go. We can come back tomorrow if you want. You’ve gotta be exhausted.” He holds out a hand to help her up, but she pulls him back down to her and leans in for a kiss.

“So, you’re into white dudes, now?” Sandra asked after Julio left. They wiped down tabletops in the empty shop. Summer afternoons were always slow. Sandra refused to buy maternity pants, and Marisol could see the curve of her best friend’s belly push against the unbuttoned waistband of her jeans. Sandra insisted that she and Ronnie were getting married as soon as he saved enough money for a ring, but Marisol wasn’t so sure. Riding home from work the other day, Marisol had looked out the bus window and had seen Ronnie in front of High Times Liquor. A girl who wasn’t Sandra leaned against Ronnie’s blue Dodge Neon so that her tetas looked like they were about to jump out of her tube top. It was only a second, but Ronnie leaned over and whispered something into the girl’s ear, and Marisol could see that Sandra wasn’t getting married anytime soon. It was better, anyway. Marisol knew Sandra would be miserable living with Ronnie’s mother and his three sisters in the tiny stucco house they all shared. Still, she didn’t have the heart to tell Sandra.

“¿Y qué?” Marisol responded. “What if I am?”

“And Julio?”

“Fuck Julio. He should have thought twice before hooking up with that sancha.”

“For reals. But he’s still so protective of you.”

“You mean possessive.”

Sandra threw her rag down and walked over to retrieve her purse from behind the counter. She reached in and fingered the adoption pamphlets the nurse at the clinic had given her. She thought of the nurse's eyes when she told Sandra she was months too late to terminate the pregnancy. Like the look her principal gave her when she got called to his office for not changing in gym class, and she had to explain how she couldn't buy the uniform until next paycheck. She was always late, first her period, now this. Sandra wished she had enough money to get out of the mess she was in. She pulled out her compact and lip liner and began applying a thick layer to the outside of her upper lip.

"You can't trust gabachos, Mari," she said before she smacked her lips together.

"And I'm supposed to trust Julio? Out with a new ruca every week?"

"It's different. Gabachos think all we do is sell our cherries by the freeway."

Marisol remembered her first afternoon with Makai after the beach. She'd felt like a tiny bird perched on the handlebars of his bike. The summer breeze had passed over her skin and she squealed as Makai darted shakily in and out of traffic, navigating his cruiser with one hand, promising not to lose control. When they came to the pier, Marisol directed Makai to the back of Ronnie's dive. Late afternoon light poured through plastic crates stacked next to the bar's back entrance.

"Can you get us in here?" Makai asked as Marisol hopped down from his handlebars.

Marisol nodded and knocked on the back door. "Ronnie!"

Makai chuckled. "You're kind of a badfish, aren't you?" he asked as the door opened and Ronnie towered over them. He wore a baggy white T-shirt, a pair of khaki Dickies, and steel-toe construction boots. His wide smile revealed several silver teeth. Makai looked small and golden next to him.

“¡Ey, Mari! ¿Qué onda?” Ronnie asked.

“Oye, we’re thirsty. Let us in.”

Ronnie glanced at Makai, and then looked at Marisol. He raised an eyebrow at her. “I can’t let you kids in here. You’re illegal.” He laughed.

“No esponjes, ese. This is my friend, Makai. He’s cool.” She watched Ronnie and Makai study one another and could barely contain her amusement. They jerked their chins toward each other. “Vaya, Ronnie,” Marisol urged. “Let us in.”

“One chela.” Ronnie relented. “Then you have to go.” He pointed at Makai. “And tell gabacho here to put on a shirt. This isn’t Hawaii.”

The bar was dark and empty except for a couple of surfers playing pool. As Marisol’s eyes adjusted to the dimness, she felt Makai’s hand on her shoulder guiding her to a bar stool. She reached up and took his hand in her own. Ronnie popped the tops off of two Coronas and set them on the bar. He left to get the surfers another round.

“You’re a good person to know,” Makai said. “What else can you do?” He winked at her as he took a sip of his beer.

Marisol shook her head. “No, now it’s your turn. What can you do?”

Sandra’s compact snapped closed. “It’s not like that.” Marisol said.

“I’ll tell you what it’s like.” Sandra sighed. “It’s all fun and everything now. But what happens later? When he wants to see where you live? He can’t ride his bike past Nineteenth. The vatos will laugh his ass all the way back to the beach. And that’s if they’re feeling generous. You going to bring him home to your ma? What will she say? ‘Stop thinking you’re better than the barrio, niña,’ that’s what. Look. Don’t be with Julio if you don’t want to, but leave the sand on the beach okay, Mari?”

Marisol stopped herself from pointing out that if leaving the sand on the beach meant ending up like Sandra, she'd date as many gabachos as she wanted. Instead, she dragged out a chair for her friend and sat across from her. She reached past the pamphlets in Sandra's bag and pulled out the lotion for stretch marks. She folded Sandra's shirt back from her belly and got to work. Sandra's bottom lip quivered. "Gracias, Mari," she whispered.

Marisol closes her eyes. Beneath her the board rises and falls on the water. The surf sounds far away and for a moment, she wonders if maybe this is enough. Floating in the middle of the ocean on a longboard—her own tiny island. She feels a breeze against her forehead and wishes she could keep floating farther away from the shore. Away from Makai, away from Julio, Sandra, her mother. Away from Nineteenth Street, from the peninsula and its shiny houses that say to her, "Nena, get back where you belong." Her mother's wrong; she doesn't think she's better than the barrio. She just wants both things. She wants to help Sandra with her baby and find time to surf in the mornings. She wants someone who'll take care of the cuts on her leg and who understands why she can't fly to Costa Rica. Even now, Marisol can't only focus on one thing. She's tired and her muscles ache. She wants to lay everything down, just for a minute, but she can't do that when everything's so quiet. She needs the speed to help her forget. So when Makai shouts at her to open her eyes and get ready to paddle, she does. She looks at the shore, and even though moving toward her life is the last thing she wants to do, she takes a deep breath and paddles once more.

Her timing is dead on. The swell lifts her, and she's in control, the wave and her movements carry her together, and she gains speed. The ocean sprays her face and Makai yells, "Get up, girl!" Marisol pushes herself up and slides her right foot forward so she kneels on the board. The panicked bird feeling rises in her chest, and Marisol lets it go. She moves so fast she can barely breathe and her ankle's no longer bound by the board's tether. She's never gone so fast. She moves her left foot to meet her right but leans too far over and the board shoots out from under her. Before she knows what's happening she's underwater, still feeling the same speed, still not breathing, and when she realizes it's time to swim, she can't tell where the surface is. Pins and needles burst through her body, and she pushes her hands out in front of her, trying to find a part of herself that's not her head to hit the bottom first. She rolls beneath the wave and her arms flail in front of her. She moves so fast, but time slows down. She can't tell if she's rolling head-first or sideways, and her thoughts slow. She lets herself roll because it's the only thing she can think to do. She wonders if she will come up.

## Malt Shop Love

Serena, my life, my sky! You will never know all the ways that I adore you. What use is the romance of my language if you cannot understand me? I am forever your servant, darling tenderness, command me. It is I, Tulio, who makes sure your orders are impeccable. The medium-rare hamburger cooked well-done—sent back! French fries black at the edges instead of the deep honey gold of your glorious mane—send them all back! Nothing less than perfection for my queen.

My sweet mermaid, you are my American dream. Your blue eyes are an impossibility; twin lagoons where I drown in infinite ecstasy. Water child, how I long to climb the golden cascade that plummets from your crown. To tangle myself in your silken strands and explore the secrets nestled between twin crescents of your seashell ears. To be a student of each curve and crevice of your delicate knees, a cartographer of the whorls in your navel—heaven! For you, my soul, are my true uncharted country.

José and the other cooks mock my agony. Serenita, ay, Serenita! Tulio, look, here she comes. My heart jumps to my mouth. The anticipation of your arrival cuts the air to my lungs, and I cannot draw breath. But my world is crushed when it is not you but another waitress darting into the kitchen for a new bottle of ketchup or a clean steak knife. Pobre chaparrito, the cooks laugh. I cannot deny my Mayan blood keeps me small, but I come from a warrior people, noble and true. Give me a chance, my treasure, and I will show you.

Alas, I am restricted to the language of the diner. I can only summon you by dinging the bell on the counter where I stretch both arms to line up plates for your customers. Even then you

cannot see me. I stand on tiptoe to catch a flash of your magnificent mouth, and it is enough to keep me going. My heart, I will submerge one thousand fingers of chicken in boiling oil if it means seeing your painted lips once more. The tools I possess are futile, but perhaps one day my message will reach you. I knot the stems of maraschino cherries and drop them heart-shaped against a whipped cream cloud that tops a chocolate malt. For banana splits, I slice the fruit into earnest grins, fudge dripping into circles like the liquid desire of my own eyes. I cut tulips from carrot slices, carve roses from cherry tomatoes; the salads you deliver to your tables are gardens in full bloom.

You, my queen, should serve no one. Come with me, my cherished one, and I will take care of you. I will prepare meals fit for your tongue only. Plátanos drizzled with sour cream, crumbled white cheese sprinkled like snow. Tortillas that dissolve into butter in your mouth, patted into full moons with the love from my hands. Sliced green mango with chile and lime that you suck from my trembling fingers. For dessert tres leches: evaporated, condensed and cream. Three milks mingle in a cake in homage to the flawless ivory of your skin.

I am thinking of the hot bath of milk and honey I will draw for you, my star, of pink roses blooming on each of your cheeks as you soak in the steam when the knife I slice peppers with slips. A schism opens along my index finger, and I see bone, white as the corner of your eye when you look above the counter to check tickets, before the blood rushes in.

Ay, Tulio! the others shout around me. Blood spurts over the table, soaks my arm to my elbow. How can something vital escape so quickly? The cooks push me to the sink, press my arm down into its steel basin and turn on the faucet. The water doesn't do anything; my blood splatters the edges as if we had slaughtered a chicken. My ears ring and my head feels light, and suddenly—summoned by water!—you, Serena, stand before me.

“Pri mer,” you say and take my hand from the sink with gloved hands. What mystery is this? Primer qué? First what? Cruel fate, am I to die with the knowledge that we speak the same language after all? I search for a witness.

“It’s okay,” José says. “She studies medicine.”

My blood sprays constellations on the front of your apron. Horror of horrors! But you, my angel, are calm. You wrap gauze around my open wound and hold it tight with your tiny fist. Your grip is strong, my sun; you are not delicate at all. You lead me to a chair and bend my arm at the elbow so that I point to the heavens, while your clasp grounds me to the earth. Together we sit, and I am terrified to look on the brilliance of your face. You tap me on the shoulder, and when I turn, you are already dropping a cherry in your mouth. I watch the beautiful line of your jaw work back and forth, separating fruit from stem, and after a moment, a knot! Heart-shaped and perfect on your tongue. You smile at me, and the earth cracks open. After a lifetime, José says, Come Tulio, you need stitches. He leads me from the chair by my elbow, and you vanish in a swirl of candy-striped uniform. My light, the world is full of miracles.

## Citronella

Marisol knows Julio like she knows the scar that runs along his left jaw line, knows him as well as he knows her, and she knows she can convince him. She has to. Otherwise, if he's lucky, Julio will be buried next to his old man in the plot Julio's mother has reserved for herself. If he's not so lucky, they might never find his body, or else they'll find it in pieces, an arm, a leg, maybe his head. It'll be a closed casket then, for sure. And then what'll become of her? Could she be called a widow if she was never even married? An unmarried widow and not even twenty, a single mother to a baby not even hers? No jodás, hell no.

Marisol feels a pulsing beneath her and turns to see Lala slapping the bench of the picnic table where Marisol sits. "Lala, ven," she calls and pulls the little girl into her lap. The night is hot and sticky; August in the Southland is no joke. Marisol wishes for October and the Santa Anas that wick moisture from the air and turn the barrio back into the desert it is. She lifts Lala's curls off her neck and blows gently. Lala coos and reaches out, knocking over Marisol's half empty whiskey and coke. The liquid runs in skinny channels around a flickering citronella candle in the center of the table. If Marisol's mother were here, she'd already be wiping this mess with an ammonia-soaked rag. When Marisol thinks of her these days, she can almost smell the ammonia and Vick's Vaporub that hung in the air of their house for weeks after her mother left for the hospital.

The glass door slides open, and Julio steps into the yard holding a bottle of Jack and a plate of cold asado that Marisol's friend Sandra brought over earlier. Julio's dog Dulce trails behind him. Lala screeches with delight and wriggles out of Marisol's lap. Lala and the dog

rush toward each other. Her fearlessness amazes Marisol; Dulce's easily twice Lala's size. When they meet, Dulce covers Lala with wet kisses and they run circles around each other.

“Carajo, Mari,” Julio says when he sees the mess. He takes his bandana from his back pocket and wipes everything up before refilling her glass with an inch of whiskey. “More Coke?”

“No.”

Hijos de puta, all of them. Her mother poisoned herself cleaning their shit all those years so they wouldn't have to get their manicured hands dirty, and at the end not one of them could help with the hospital bills. No one even came to visit. Just Marisol and Julio in that hospital room, listening to her mother's ragged wheezing. The sound of cancer eating lungs, a sound Marisol hopes she'll never hear again. She dropped out of nursing classes after that. Julio paid all the hospital bills. Marisol knew better than to ask where the money came from. After that she finally believed him when he said they belonged to each other. After all the years of on-and-off, of Marisol planning to get out of the barrio, of Julio running around with his sanchas—though he stopped all that after Lala was born. Marisol's mother had been right: he did love her.

Julio paid the hospital bills, but there was nothing either of them could do about the house. Marisol ignored the phone calls from the bank, the notices shoved crudely in the mailbox. The house that'd seemed so cramped when it was just her mother and her was drafty and hollow even though it was still cluttered with a lifetime's worth of belongings. Julio couldn't pay the mortgage, but he could move in, which is what he did, bringing Dulce and Lala with him and covering the smell of ammonia and Vaporub with aftershave and dog food and baby shampoo. She was grateful even though both she and Julio knew it couldn't last much longer. It'd been three months since they'd sold her mother's beat up Terrel to write the last

mortgage check. It's just as well. Julio can't hide here anyway. All his homeys know where he's at.

“What you thinking about, Nena?” Julio asks. He wraps a piece of steak in a corn tortilla and shoves it in the corner of his mouth. Then wraps another and hands it to Marisol. “Still the wire?”

“You have a better idea?”

Julio chews his asado. Glances at Lala and Dulce. Lala's clapping her hands over Dulce's nose. Dog nips back, playful. “Lala, ojo,” he warns. They say pit bulls ain't violent dogs by nature. The owners make them that way. Julio knows Dulce won't do nothing to hurt his baby girl, but he don't take chances either. Tosses a piece of meat to Dulce who snaps it up between her jaws. Lala runs to the porch light to chase june bugs. That's it, don't bug Dulce while she eats, good girl.

He turns back to Mari. She looks worried. Determined, too. Shit. Like he don't want out of the barrio just as bad as her? Pero it's true, Mari's wanted out for a long time, longer than him. Jumping out ain't an option, they both know. Puta, he barely got past the jump in. He was little then, fourteen. Skinny too. Julio smiles to remember it. Him and his carnal, Tavo, a couple punk-ass taggers tired of getting beat down by 18th every week. Turn gangster to stop getting beat. Only thing, had to get beat to get in. Fifteen homeys standing in a circle on the sidewalk outside Sombra's crib. Julio went first. Never knew a real beat down before that. Thirty fists. Thirty boots. Steel toe. Everything at once. Thirteen seconds passing like a fucking year. Every time he thought he died, another chingazo brought him back. Reminded him, “Nah, motherfucker, you still here.” Felt like roadkill in the middle of that circle, homeys whistling over him. Calling him maricón. Kicking his hands away when he tried to cover his

head. Gravel mixing with blood on his face. Later, him and Tavo comparing battle scars in the bathroom mirror at Tavo's. Tracing the number thirteen in different places on each other's backs. Aquí? Lower, Ése. Aquí? Bigger. Planning their first ink. Wore their broken teeth and cracked ribs proud. They belonged. They were free. Nobody gonna mess with them no more. Pendejos. That's what they were. Didn't know shit. Now Tavo's dead. And Julio ain't about jumping anywhere. Seen too much to get out that way. Besides, got Lala and Mari to think about. Lala's mother too cracked out by her cholo boyfriend-supplier to know where Lala's at most times. Mari's mother fresh in the ground. He's all the family they have. Gotta provide. Can't risk no jump out chingazo to the head. Seen it before. Homeys get jumped out, spend the rest of their lives in bed drinking through a straw. Fuck that. Pero he ain't sure about a wire either. Homeys watching him after what happened with Tavo. Only reason they ain't sent someone over to watch him now is they're having a meeting about him. But he don't tell Mari that. She's already scared.

“You could cut a deal,” Marisol says. “Maybe they'll let you off. We could go some place with Lala. Witness protection y todo.” It's something she's daydreamed about. She and Julio and Lala and Dulce on a farm somewhere in Montana. She can't imagine any gang bangers in Big Sky Country. It's in the name: Big Sky. So much freedom. They'd learn to ride horses. Julio could find work on a ranch. They'd be like a Latino Robert Redford and Kristin Scott Thomas in that movie about whispering horses, except Lala would get to keep her leg. It's only a dream though. Marisol's not so naïve. Julio knows a lot more about his business than he lets on. But she doesn't know if it's enough to get him off the hook for whatever he's been into. Running some shit, definitely. Drugs, at least. Guns too? All through high school she never bothered to follow Julio's involvement. She thought he was just another wannabe cholo. Even

when they were dating she didn't take him seriously. She was too busy planning her escape. She thought he was one of those pretty boy homeys, just in it for the cred. Then seven months ago when they got back together, Julio put his fist through the passenger side window of her mother's car when she wanted to know more about where his money was coming from. She knew then she had to get him out. Julio could lie, Julio could fuck around, but she'd never known him to be violent. He wasn't a violent person.

"And if they don't?" Julio argues. The edge in his voice makes Dulce pause her chomping. She picks up the meat and crawls beneath Marisol's side of the picnic table. "What you gonna do? They coming to take the house any day now. Where you gonna go if I'm locked up? They find out about a wire, homeys ain't got your back. And they always find out, Nena."

"Mi vida," Marisol protests but feels her voice about to crack. She tries to imagine life without Julio and thinks of her prima working as a maid in a motel somewhere around Tucson. She thinks of the dust and the cracked earth and knows she'll shrivel up and die without Julio. It's not an option. She crosses to the other side of the picnic table, puts her arms around him and presses her face to his neck, inhaling his sweet smell of leather and tobacco. Lala toddles across the lawn to join in their hug, and Marisol scoops her up, too.

"You can't ask me to trust la jura, Mari."

She stiffens. "Well, trusting the homeys really got you far, huh?" She watches the color drain from the scar on Julio's jaw and knows she's pushed too far. Julio stands up, moves around the table so they're across from each other again, the bottle of Jack to his lips. He's been on the edge of drunk for two days, since Tavo, and Marisol can tell he plans to keep it that way. Lala holds pieces of tortilla under the table for Dulce who nibbles them from her fingers. Marisol reaches for her glass.

Fucking Tavo, Julio thinks. Pendejo was too fucking loyal. Should've known better. But how could he? Pulled a decade with the homeys in la Mara. Same as Julio. Then two days ago Tavo walks into Sombra's house ready to unload his trunk full of armas. Finds an 18<sup>th</sup> Street vato banging Sombra's girl from behind. Right in the middle of the living room. TV playing KTLA evening news and everything. Homegirl's even smiling. Shit. Tavo don't think twice. Pulls his gun. Empties two rounds into vato's skull, homegirl screaming. Tavo bounces quick. Gotta get his trunk load of armas out of there. Sombra's crib's been armas central for the past four months. Neighbors already calling la jura because of gunshots and homegirl's screaming. Next thing, there's a raid on Sombra's house. It's finished for Sombra. He's got armas in the house, cash, kilos of coke, computer full of email and shit, cell phones. Cops take everything.

Not even two hours later, couple homeys show up at Tavo's. Tavo opens the door for saludos and *bang!* Shoot him in the fucking chest. Not the head, simple, instant. They catch a fucking lung. Tavo's on the floor gasping. Bleeding in front of Tanya and the twins. Can't even catch enough breath to say goodbye. Homeys walk out. Job done. Julio didn't know it could happen. Never heard of gangsters turning on their own. Some fucking loyalty. And where was he while his carnal was being slaughtered? In bed with Mari. Letting her trace old ink across his stomach with her fingers while he covered her body with kisses. Lala watching cartoons in the next room.

Julio takes another swallow of Jack. Feels it burn down his throat. His stomach. Feels good. Burn up some of his anger. Without the Jack, he might explode. All he can feel is heat. He wants to agree with Mari. Truth is, he's dying to wear that wire. Fuck la jura. Nothing sounds better than taking down the entire clica, locking the homeys up one by fucking one. But he can't risk it. Not with Mari and Lala counting on him.

Marisol watches Julio stare at the candle's wavering flame, and she can barely stand it. That's her stare, the one that she's used since her mother died to carry her away from this picnic table, this house, the barrio. She wants to take Julio's grief and wrap it in her own so he won't have to feel it. Because she also understands the recklessness that comes with grief, and she's scared Julio's feeling it, that nothing matters, that there's nothing to lose. She still feels it sometimes too, but Julio's shown her that it's not true. Everything matters.

"Might be something else," Julio says, finally. Lala climbs off the table and Marisol sees Dulce perk up and scamper after Lala on the lawn. She picks up Dulce's rawhide bone and holds it as high as her little arms can reach. They freeze for a second before Dulce lunges and Lala jerks the bone away giggling.

"Tell me."

No way Mari's gonna be into what he's got. Gotta keep it short. "Couple weeks ago a guy offered me a job. Money's good. Enough to get out." Marisol looks at him hard. She's no pendeja. Gotta come up with something better.

"One of the homeys?"

"Guy me and Tavo moved shit for. Offered us a side job. I could still do it. Homeys ain't gotta know." Homeys ain't gotta know. Neither does Mari. La Mara been moving armas for Sinaloa for months. Julio's been on the ground. Couple weeks ago at Sombra's, Julio's handing the keys to the Suburban over. Always like this. Same Sinaloa jefe with the cowboy hat and gold chain meets him. Sombra's never there. Sinaloa jefe takes the keys. This time, asks Julio if he can fire armas as well as he moves them. Julio thinking of the guns he spent hours packing into the floor of the truck. Each one heavy. Fit them into the floor like puzzle pieces. Cover them with carpet. Everyone in la clica gotta know how to handle a gun, it's la ley. But it's

not Julio's business. He moves shit. None of the trucks Julio's packed ever been stopped. He's good. Sinaloa jefe knows it. Julio tells him, yeah, he can shoot. The jefe says he's looking to take care of someone been giving el cartel problemas. Julio don't think he hears the figure right. Jefe has to tell him twice. Fifty grand. More than enough to get them all out the country. Ten years with la Mara and Julio never killed no one. But now he thinks, what's one life for three? Julio don't do it, Sinaloa jefe'll find someone who will. Problema gets taken care of either way.

“How much?” Marisol asks.

Julio runs his thumb along his jaw. “Ten grand.”

Marisol stares at him. Julio only touches that scar when he's lying. It's one of the reasons that line is her favorite place on his body. He's had it forever, since before she knew him. Tavo told her how it happened. He said they were thirteen, right after Tavo's sister died in that hit and run everyone in the barrio heard about. She'd been walking home from work one night when some drunk pendejo jumped the curb and took out the stop sign and Tavo's sister. She was only sixteen. After her funeral, Tavo and Julio decided to tag the side of the pawnshop where it happened. They attached homemade needle tips to their spray cans and hid them under their T-shirts. When they got to the corner Julio shook up his can, but Tavo stopped him. He wanted to do it. He was crying the whole time, Tavo said, could barely see, but Julio didn't say anything. Just stood there with him while Tavo put the final touches on his sister's name. He was finishing up when the guy who owned the pawnshop came out. He was a big old white dude, 6' 6" at least, Tavo said, a Vietnam vet they recognized from the street. Marisol remembers him. When he wasn't in the pawnshop he lumbered along the sidewalks drinking out of a paper bag.

“You fucking little shits!” he screamed and slammed Tavo against the wall. Somehow, Julio convinced the guy it was all his idea, and the vet let Tavo go. He grabbed Julio and lifted him up against the wall until they were eye level with each other. Held him there by the neck, Julio’s feet dangling. The vet’s fingers dug into his jaw. “None a you wetbacks has any respect for this country,” Tavo heard him say. “Come over here just to turn things to shit.”

Julio set his jaw and looked straight into the vet’s eyes. Tavo said he wanted to shit himself he was so scared for his carnal. The vet snatched the spray can from Julio’s fist with his free hand and asked, “How’d you like it if someone marked something that belonged to you?”

Julio didn’t answer, and next thing the guy was holding the needle tip to Julio’s face. Drew that line into Julio’s jaw. Marisol imagined Julio’s blood dripping like the wet paint on the wall behind him. Tavo said Julio still didn’t move or fight back, even though he could’ve reached for the switchblade he was carrying in his pocket that day. When he was finished, the vet let both Julio and the spray can drop to the ground like two pieces of trash. “Go back to Mexico.”

Marisol never asked Tavo why Julio didn’t pull his knife. Even though Tavo said that afterwards Julio’s hands were shaking the whole walk home, Marisol knew better. Julio wasn’t scared. He just wouldn’t hurt anyone. That vet was a walking dead man for years before he actually died. Everyone in the barrio knew that. Julio could see it too, and Marisol thinks that’s why he didn’t fight back. So even though Julio’s lying, she knows whatever the side job is, it can’t be anything too bad. But she wonders about the ten grand. How much is Julio inflating the number? She doesn’t care about money as long as it’s enough to get them out of the barrio for good. She watches Julio take another swallow of Jack and reaches for his hand.

Out of the corner of her eye, Marisol sees a small gecko crawl over the edge of the table and dart across its surface. Julio smacks the table, but the gecko scurries past. Marisol lets go of his hand, scoops the animal in her palm, and dumps it into the pail of citronella. She takes Julio's hand again and sips her whisky while staring into the flame in the center of the table. The gecko twists and jerks in the yellow wax. The shadow of its heart beats through its pale skin. Julio lets out a low whistle. The lemony scent of citronella becomes tainted with the smell of something burning, but her eyes remain fixed to the candle. Translucent blisters form on the surface of the gecko's thin skin. Its writhing slows the more it becomes mired in the hot wax. Suddenly she hears Dulce snarl. Over Julio's shoulder, Marisol sees the dog snatch its bone from Lala's hands and trot across the lawn away from her. Lala looks terrified and heartbroken at the same time. She runs to Julio and hides her face in his back. He puts down the Jack and picks her up, cooing *ya, ya, ya* to soothe her sobs. Julio rocks Lala until her cries quiet and her head falls against her daddy's chest as he cradles her to sleep. As Marisol watches them, something inside of her flickers like the candle flame.

## Housekeeping

Shit is the easiest stain to clean. The other women, they don't like it. They don't complain, but their mouths get stiff when they lift the toilet seat. Really, it's no problem. Squeeze blue liquid in a ring around the top, watch it run down the sides, then swish-swish with the brush and flush. No problem—you don't even get your hands dirty.

“That's what I like about you, Gladys,” Mario told me. “You're not like these other Mexicans looking for a handout. You're not afraid of work. You're a good girl.” And he looked so handsome with his long eyelashes and the front of his starched cowboy hat tilting down toward the crease between his eyebrows. He made me feel proud to be working for him.

Yesterday, I knotted the plastic too tightly around the edge, and now the bag tears coming out of the trashcan. Tissue and Q-tips and crumpled bits of paper flutter over the beige tile floor on the way to the bin attached to my cart. Pleasant Crossings Inn sits next to the long stretch of highway leading away from Tucson; the guests never stay long enough fill a trashcan. The garbage huddles in the dustpan, and when I stand up, Sonia leans in the doorway. Like Mario, Sonia was born on this side. She puts so much gel that her black hair is crunchy, and she draws on the outside of her pale pink lips with a blood-colored pencil. Sonia thinks she's better than the rest of us and likes to talk about her social security card. *Security*, she'll say, dangling the word in front of us like a carrot we pretend not to reach for. She reminds us that here at the motel, social security translates to job security, which means she can spend more of her time leaning in doorways and less cleaning toilets, comprende?

“Why do you do it?” she asks.

I push past her. The towels on my cart are rough from years of bleach, and I take a long time sorting through them so she'll get bored and leave. She's jealous, is all.

"He'll turn you in," Sonia continues and sucks her teeth. It's a chirping sound, like crickets in daytime. The truth flutters and flips in my belly. "If he finds out, la migra is coming for you, Señorita." When I look at her, her eyes are cold and dry as the desert night. "If you do my rooms for me, I won't say anything. For now." She has a lizard's heart.

The rolls of toilet paper blur in front of me. Yesterday, Sonia leaned into the doorway of the supply closet and found me vomiting into a bucket. "I clean it," I mumbled, wiping the corner of my mouth with the back of my hand and cursing myself for not being able to make it to one of the motel's thirty toilets. "I'm sick." You have to speak English to Sonia and Mario. Otherwise, they shake their heads and pretend they can't understand what you're saying. And it could be that they can't. When they speak Spanish, their tongues are loose like the rattles on the snakes that flatten themselves against the gravel of Pleasant Crossing's parking lot to take the sun. Sonia just stood in the doorway sucking her teeth, not believing me. For a long time, we stared at each other in the half-light and the dust until she shook her head and turned away. Sonia knows everything that goes on here.

"It's no problem," I say to her now because Mario's right: I'm not afraid of work.

"He'll find out anyway, you know," she says before she pushes off the doorframe. I listen to the wheels of her cart roll across the cement outside and away from the room. The toilet paper comes into focus again, but my mouth feels as if I have eaten sand.

Soon the faucets sparkle beneath the florescent light, the tiny shampoo and conditioner bottles stand like soldiers atop a small box of soap, and the towels hang from their rack as if measured with a ruler. The mirror is spotless, and I redo the pins in my hair, smooth the front of

my uniform. Mario won't care. I'm the best he has. I remove a strand of hair from the sink before continuing to the bedroom.

The sheets on the first bed are hardly wrinkled. They fall back into place in clean lines along the edges. The guests are mostly truck drivers. Their bodies are so tired from the road that they barely move until waking. Because water is scarce here, they tell us not to wash the sheets unless absolutely necessary. I smooth the bedspread and turn to the second bed.

This is usually my favorite part of the day, the memories so recent they leap back into my mind so it happens a second time. Mario's soft hand up my dress, pillow lips against my mouth, the tickle of a moustache against my neck. The first time, he offered to send in someone else to clean the room, but I told him no. I didn't want another woman's hands interfering. At first, we were greedy. I ravaged Mario's body, searching for warmth I could not find in the desert while he pushed and squeezed my breasts and sucked the salt from my skin. I craved the time afterward and searched for ways to keep us naked in our newly claimed bed, but he never stayed long. Once, I told him stories of my country, his parents' country, about rainy seasons and ferns and fresh papaya.

"I haven't been since I was a kid," Mario said. He sat up and pulled on his Wranglers. I wanted to reach out and coil the gold chain hanging from his neck around my index finger, whisper, *please stay* to his throat, but instead I reached for my uniform. "It's a beautiful country, I remember," he continued. "It's a shame the people over there don't know how to take care of it." He pulled me to my feet and reached a hand into the collar of my dress for one last squeeze. "Back to work," he said and adjusted his hat in the mirror. Now, we are not so greedy. Mario removes only his wedding band before unbuckling his belt and reaching for my hips. We keep

our clothes on, but I unbutton Mario's shirt and rub his chest, a small piece of warmth still mine. But it's not enough, it's over too fast, and these days I feel relief and then solitude after.

Today, I just feel tired. The covers on the second bed are badly wrinkled and tiny hairs from Mario's chest curl against the bottom sheet. They turn my stomach. I wish he had never come in here. I wish we would stop, but I don't know how to put things like they were. I peel the condom from the floor. How many months since the broken one? Three? Four? Mario's tone then was flat and thorny as the nopal cactuses lining the pathway to the rooms, and I knew that the warmth I was searching for was not here either. "If anything happens, I trust you to take care of it. I've got my children to think about."

"Don't worry."

He nodded and patted my cheek. "You're a good girl. You do good work."

These sheets need washing. I don't care what anyone says; I don't care if there's no water. One of the corners tears before letting go of the mattress, and the others fall at my feet like deflated ghosts. I pluck the pillows from their cases, ball the sheets on top of my cart, and jerk the vacuum back and forth across the worn carpet until every last grain of sand is sucked from the floor. The cart lurches into the sunlight, and the door slams behind me.

On the way to the laundry room, Mario and Sonia talk near the ice machine. "Well, now," Mario says. "There's a difference between legal Illegals and illegal Illegals."

"Come on," Sonia yawns and inspects her fingernails for dirt. "They're all trying to take advantage in one way or another."

“Hell, Sonia, I can’t begrudge anyone who wants to make an honest living.”

When they hear my cart, they stop talking and look over. And maybe it’s just a trick of the desert, but they both wink at me at the same time, and my belly swishes. I feel acid burning my throat. Beyond the highway, a drifting cloud covers the sun. When it passes, the desert glares stark and sterile. I concentrate on the pile of sheets and continue to the laundry room. There are still more toilets to clean.

## Fire Season

Luz sticks to surface streets when driving home from work. L.A. rush hour is bad enough without having to worry about Sig Alerts across the city. Together, the freeways make up a clogged artery system that Luz has to negotiate every other weekend on her drives north to see her boyfriend, Ben. Through her windshield she can see the Santa Anas have lifted so much dust into the air that the setting sun casts a reddish haze over the city. Fire weather. Her cell phone rings, and the word “Private” flashes on the screen. She picks it up. “Hi, Mom.”

“Hija?” Her mother’s voice echoes on the other end of the line. A bad connection.

“Yeah, I’m here.” Luz has to shout to be heard above the echoing. Traffic is thick on Cesar Chavez, and she looks out the window at the Spanish advertisements and a line of restaurants with names like Mi Pueblito and La Paloma. There’s a homemade mural on the outside of one of the restaurants that depicts a campesino walking along a beach with an iguana slung over his shoulder and a machete in one hand. Jungle covered mountains rise behind him. Luz remembers walking along a beach like that with her mother a long time ago.

“You still coming tonight?” her mother asks.

“Yeah.” She remembers her plastic yellow pail and shovel. She’d wait for the ocean to recede so that she could run into the wet sand to gather seashells. Sometimes she was so focused on the shells poking out of the sand like buried treasure that she forgot the ocean, and an incoming wave would knock her down. Her mother was always beside her before she knew what happened. She thinks about the pat of her mother’s hand on her back as she coughed up saltwater. Together, they would gather the scattered shells back into Luz’s pail and continue along the beach, her mother’s hand wrapped around Luz’s fist, guiding her.

“If you’re too busy, you don’t have to worry.”

“I said I’ll be there. I’m just going home to change.”

“Because I mostly packed everything already.”

Luz presses her forehead against the steering wheel. She’s sick of this dance. “Mom, please.” She picks her head up and slams on the brakes, nearly hitting the glowing taillights in front of her.

“All right. I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

The traffic eases, and Luz speeds up until Cesar Chavez becomes Sunset. Giant billboards and velvet ropes replace the murals and food stands. As she continues westward, crowds of industry insiders gather at the entrances to trendy restaurants. Standing in the red dusk, they look like hungry insects in their oversized sunglasses. Luz forces her voice to repeat the same message she’s delivered for six months since her mother announced she was moving back to Honduras. “Don’t worry,” Luz says. “I’m an adult. You don’t need to take care of me anymore.”

Her parents devised a master plan after coming to the U.S. for college: get naturalized, take advantage of job opportunities, provide Luz with a better future, and retire back to their own country. Luz assumed that after her father passed away the last part of the plan was moot; a stupid assumption. All of her mother’s best friends and sisters are still in Honduras.

“I know, but still,” her mother protests.

“Mom, the connection is getting really bad. I can barely hear you. Be there soon.”

“Okay.”

She hates hearing the disappointment in her mother’s voice. It’s Luz’s fault their conversations have been this way lately. It’s not fair to be angry with her mother. But she also

can't imagine not talking for hours over her mother's arroz con pollo. Her mother's knowing smirk embellishes each of Luz's stories and makes them more entertaining than they are by themselves. Tears sting Luz's eyes, and she digs around her purse until she finds a bottle of Xanax. The orange plastic glows in the setting sunlight as she twists off the top and pops a couple on her tongue.

The pages of newsprint crackle in Luz's hands as she folds them around her mother's *Corazon Sagrado*. When Luz walked into the house, the walls were bare except for this one framed print. She should've known it would be the last to go; the portrait hung in Luz's bedroom until she made her mother move it to the hallway. The flames around Jesus's heart light up his eyes in a way that makes it seem like he's about to weep. Luz feels guilty whenever she looks at it, like Christ is just waiting for her to let him down, but her mother insists the portrait protects them. "How do you think the house sold so fast?" her mother asked just before Luz plucked it from the wall.

As Luz folds the newspaper, she catches pieces of the week-old story about the Los Padres fire on the central coast. The article claims officials are still debating over whether the fire was arson or accidental, maybe a spark from a smoldering cigarette. She hears footsteps shuffling behind her.

"Isn't it a shame?" her mother asks. She leans over Luz's shoulder to look at a map of the affected area. "A week already, and it's still getting worse. Is Ben worried?"

Luz looks at the map and imagines Ben's house as a tiny dot on the edge of the valley, still far enough away from the wildfire that he's not in any danger. She sighs and chews skin off the inside of her cheek. She's been avoiding Ben's calls. "They're keeping an eye on it at the winery. He's sorry he couldn't come down to help pack." It's pointless to talk to him. Ben can guess the meaning of the smallest waver or hesitation in her voice. There's no way she can hide her guilt from him. Luz wonders what it would be like if they ever moved in together, how she'd manage living with someone capable of uncovering even her smallest secrets.

"Pobrecito." Her mother shakes her head. "Always thinking of other people."

Luz remembers the first time Ben took her to Los Padres National Forest. The trees stood close around them like a shield, and when they came to a clearing Luz could see golden hillsides stretching out for miles without a single road or building. L.A. seemed much farther than two hours away. Luz felt safe enough to let all her anxieties fall around her feet like a pile of pine needles. She didn't pull away when Ben folded his arms around her and kissed her longer than she'd ever let anyone kiss her before.

She shakes her head to scatter the memory. "What's that?" she asks and points to a medium-sized moving box at the end of the hallway.

"Ay," her mother says. "I almost forgot. Things from your room. We can go through it if you want."

Luz looks at the ceiling and focuses on her breath to stave off the migraine she feels smoldering the edges of her brain. "I'm hungry," she says. "Let's go eat."

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Not even the tinsel-covered plastic plants hanging in all of their tacky glory in Rincón Hondureño can cheer Luz up tonight. Luz and her mother peruse their menus even though they've been coming to the restaurant for years and know the contents by heart.

“You sure you don't need me to take you to the airport tomorrow?” Luz asks.

“No, it's fine. You're busy with work. Luis will take me.”

Luz thinks of the balding neighbor dabbing grease from his head with a handkerchief, and she almost insists on taking her mother. But she knows that neither one of them will be able to handle a goodbye in front of the Tom Bradley Terminal. They'd be exactly like all the other Central American women clinging to each other and making a scene with their crumpled faces and wet noses. Her mother's way too pragmatic to let that happen, and Luz doesn't want to see her like that anyway.

The restaurant's owner approaches their table. “Buenas noches, muchachas,” he says.

“Buenas noches,” her mother answers. She and the owner speak Spanish to each other, and even though Luz can't understand all the words, she gets the gist of the conversation, especially when the owner's voice gets louder after her mother tells him she's leaving for Honduras in the morning. He turns to Luz. “Que bueno!”

“Mmmm,” Luz responds and twists her mouth into a smile without looking up from the menu. “How come,” she asks after her mother's given him their order, “you and dad never taught me Spanish?”

Her mother shrugs. “You were born here. We figured you'd pick it up later if you wanted.”

“It won't feel right, coming here without you,” Luz says. She shreds a corner of the napkin next to her plate. “You always order for both of us.”

“Just order pastelitos like you always do. Ay, mira,” her mother says and points to the T.V. mounted in the corner of the restaurant. “Another fire in San Bernadino. I knew I smelled smoke this afternoon.”

Later, when they pull into her mother’s driveway, they sit in Luz’s car with the engine running. “You know you can call me for anything, right?” her mother says. Her voice sounds like it might shatter.

“I know.” Luz stares straight ahead. She will not watch her mother cry. Don’t leave me, she thinks. She leans across the seat and holds her.

“Okay,” her mother says after a few minutes. She sits up and pulls the door handle. “Talk to you soon.”

Luz keeps all the windows rolled down on the drive back to her apartment. The Santa Anas whip through the car and suck all the moisture from Luz’s face. She runs her fingers through her hair and feels the spark of static electricity prick her skin. She feels brittle, as if she might crumble to gunpowder and scatter with the wind.

The hum of florescent lights in Luz’s office grates on her nerves, and her head pounds with the two bottles of red wine she used as a sleeping aid when she discovered she was out of cold medicine. She pulls up a blank document and types, “The Los Angeles Council for Civic Engagement respectfully requests a grant in the amount of one million dollars.” The pounding gets worse with each keystroke. Three years ago, all Luz wanted was to lead the council’s fundraising efforts. She believed in the organization’s mission of mobilizing communities to

give voice to underrepresented populations. She brought her mother to one of the voter registration drives and explained how important it was for her to participate and fulfill her civic duty. But over the last six months, each proposal has been harder to complete than the last.

“Do you think it has to do with your mom?” Ben asked her the last time she was at his place. She sat at his kitchen table picking off the split ends of her hair.

“What would that have to do with it?”

Ben flipped the pancakes he was making. They smelled sweet in the pan, and her stomach rumbled. “I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe because she never really considered this her country even after she became a citizen? Maybe you’re feeling like it’s useless to engage underrepresented voices if those voices are just going to leave.”

“Or maybe if people keep leaving the voices will always be underrepresented regardless of whether they’re voting,” she agreed.

Ben scooped several pancakes onto a plate and sprinkled them with blueberries and powdered sugar before setting them down in front of Luz. She tore into them. “But not everyone’s like your mom. You’re still here,” he continued. “You count. Or, maybe you’re burnt out. Maybe it’s time for a change.”

Luz shook her head. “I just have to get back into it. It’s important work.”

Her anxiety grows as she thinks of the ripple effects of not finishing the proposal. She’ll let her team down, her boss Sara, the organization, the community. She should’ve delegated the proposal to one of the other grant writers on her team, but it’s too late now, and the amount is too big anyway. Luz is the only person trusted with million-dollar requests.

It’s easier not to think about it; she’ll see if she can piece together language from some old proposals later. She opens a browser to check news headlines. The fire on the central coast

has already consumed thousands of acres, and another fire has started in the hills near Malibu. She reads the articles and clicks on the slideshow of AP photos. Nearly an hour has passed without Luz realizing it when Carlos buzzes her for lunch.

The acoustics in the El Colmao food court remind Luz of the noise outside of El Ceibeño where her mother used to take her to lunch during their annual summer visit to her grandmother in Honduras. She must've been five or six then, all of the voices at the lunch counter bouncing off of each other, a raucous jabber Luz couldn't understand. All that noise and Luz left out of it; she felt lonely, and she'd start to cry until her mother pulled her in close, covering one of Luz's ears while the other pressed deep into her mother's side. Then she'd hand Luz a bottle of banana soda with a straw poking out, and Luz would forget the heat and humidity and the racket.

She pokes at her pollo pibil and waits for Carlos to join her. She wishes their lunch break ran longer, thinks how delicious it would be to spend the afternoon in Carlos's bed instead. She thinks of the last time, Carlos's tongue trailing the slow glide of ice across her bare belly.

"Sorry," Carlos says and sets his tray of enchiladas across from her. "The line was like this." He squeezes the tips of his fingers together, palm facing up, and Luz grins. She likes having someone around who uses these gestures, who digs them up out of her past and makes them real again. A couple months ago, before they started sleeping together, she'd tried to explain this to him. He laughed at her. "Luz, you're so white." Carlos was always commenting on how things in the office were too white: the fair-trade coffee in the break room, the receptionist's obsession with Radiohead, the ugly-sweater-themed Christmas party last year.

“I haven’t been waiting long,” Luz replies. She picks up a fork and dives into her rice and chicken, but the food is lukewarm when she places it in her mouth. She looks around. Carlos had a point. She’s the lightest-skinned person in El Colmao. The last time they came here the cashier at Pollo Azteca immediately switched from Spanish to English when she looked up from the register at Luz.

Carlos thumbs through his Blackberry. Even when he’s not at work, he’s working. “How’s the proposal coming?” he asks. A knot in her stomach twists, and her mouth goes dry. She thinks of her notes sitting on her desk and all the emails she has to return.

“Oh, you know, fine. Almost done, actually.” She smiles, slips her foot out of her sandal and nestles it along the inside of Carlos’s thigh.

His mouth tightens, and he reaches beneath the table to push her foot away. “Quit it.”

“Don’t worry, there’s no paparazzi. I checked.”

“I’m serious.” Carlos pushes his chair out of her reach.

Her foot falls hard on the concrete floor. Luz folds her arms across her chest. “Jesus, Carlos. Relax. This proposal is for your department. We could be meeting to discuss program objectives.”

He looks at her sharply. “We should be long past program objectives by now,” Carlos says and wipes red sauce from his upper lip. “Why don’t I have a draft to look at yet?”

“Sara had to review it first,” Luz lies.

“But you usually copy the department heads on those emails.”

“Carlos, it’s under control.”

Carlos shakes his head. “I need a copy.” He stands. “I’ve gotta get back. I have a meeting at two.”

Luz watches him leave. Amateur, she thinks. But it's her first affair, too. She's a little disappointed. When she approached Carlos, she envisioned hot sex on the desk after hours, doors locked, laughter muffled at the sound of the janitor's cart rolling past. Steamy emails. Instead, she gets an occasional *What are you doing?* text message in the middle of the night. She should've gone with someone older, but most of the men in her office are either gay or married, and Carlos is sexy with his broad shoulders and rolling R's. He's the only person in her office who can order her lunch in Spanish. Luz throws down her fork and takes her tray to the trash. On her way out of the food court, she stops at Cuba Libre for a quick mojito before heading back to the office. A small consolation for her shitty lunch.

The rows of jacaranda, pine, and palm trees lining Luz's street stir in the wind. Luz picks her way to her apartment building around fallen palm fronds the Santa Anas tore from the treetops and pitched in the middle of the street. Luz wishes she had a piece of chalk to trace their outlines. Maybe some yellow caution tape. She'd tell the neighbors it was a site specific art installation if they complained. One of the things Luz loves about living in West Hollywood is that you can bullshit almost anything here.

Her cell phone rings again as she's unlocking the door to her apartment, and she lets it ring all the way to the kitchen as she goes for a glass of wine. She pulls the cork from one of Ben's bottles with a familiar urgent pop and fills her glass until it's heavy. The small glug-glug of wine spilling from the bottle has become her favorite sound. She leans against the counter and looks at her phone. One missed call from Ben. She checks the voicemail and listens to his

message about the wildfires spreading north. He has to be at the winery this weekend to make sure everything's okay, but he'll keep an eye on things to make sure it's still safe for her to come up.

Wine floods her mouth, and the scents of fig and blackberry and sage and tobacco waft in her nose as she drinks. It seems impossible to her that they've been able to keep up their relationship like this for the past three years, all back and forth between north and south, trading off weekends in the city and in wine country. Neither one of them has suggested the other move, and she loves Ben for not making her choose. Eventually though, she knows it'll have to be her. Ben loves his job too much for her to ask him to give it up, and she can write grants anywhere. Their conversations only ever hedge around this shared knowledge.

"You know it doesn't matter so much, right?" They were in Ben's front yard planting a vegetable garden in half of an old wine barrel that he'd brought back from the winery.

"What doesn't matter?" she asked.

"That your mom's moving back."

"What's that mean?"

"I know you'll miss her."

"People keep saying that," Luz protested. She pushed her finger in the dirt and dropped in some jalapeño seeds. "It must be hard, I must miss her already. Yeah, I know it doesn't matter. I can go visit. It's only a five-hour flight."

Ben sprinkled dirt over the holes she'd made and patted them lightly. "That's not what I mean. I know it won't be the same as having her here."

"Then what do you mean?"

He turned on the hose and aimed it toward the barrel. “Just that, if you’re feeling abandoned or anything, it’s not true.”

“Abandoned?” She laughed. “Kind of dramatic, don’t you think?”

“I mean,” Ben said. He kept his eyes on the dirt. It was amazing that he knew not to look her in the eye when talking about her feelings. “Like, if you feel you’re going to lose part of your world, you don’t have to feel that way.”

Luz refills her glass of wine. Picks up her phone, scrolls down. Ben. His name’s stacked right on top of Carlos’s. She puts the phone down again. She needs to cut it off with Carlos. She can’t imagine a worse feeling than Ben finding out. She tears at a scab on her knee until she bleeds. Outside, the wind rustles bamboo leaves against slatted window panes. The restless sound beckons Luz into the night.

Inside the Cabo Cantina, Luz remembers why she never goes to the bars on Sunset. Everything about this place repulses her. She moved to West Hollywood because she couldn’t imagine a safer place than boys’ town for a single woman in L.A. And while she’s never been mugged or harassed, she questions whether putting up with the industry scene is worth it. The bar is packed with twenty-something actors carefully groomed to appear as though they’re having a casual night out at a bar. They lean against the walls and perch on bar stools with perfect hair and close shaves. She wouldn’t be surprised if some of the women were carrying their headshots in their designer bags just in case a producer or casting agent should walk in. In one corner, a black light illuminates a smiling cactus wearing a sombrero painted on the wall.

“Hey,” the bartender approaches and takes her hand in both of his. “Welcome to Cabo Cantina. Can I get you a mangorita?” Actors. Luz takes her hand back and resists the urge to tell him she’s not in the industry. She likes keeping these people on their toes. “Herradura and ice,” she says.

She should’ve known better than to come here, but after her second glass of wine, Luz’s apartment was too quiet. She started thinking about the proposal again. She opened her laptop and stared for a while at the blank screen. Anything’s better than thinking about how she’s about to lose her job, even the Cabo Cantina. On the television behind the bar, Luz watches the news flash a story about the wildfires tearing from the central coast all the way down to San Diego now. The camera cuts to a line of fire along the horizon, and then cuts to residents hosing down their roofs as a precautionary measure. She needs to call Ben and make sure he’s okay.

“I love fire season,” a man at the end of the bar is saying. He’s not an actor. He looks like he’s never shaved, ever. He wears a faded pink sweatshirt and cradles a bottle of Corona between his dirty fingers. As far as Luz can tell, he’s talking to the television. She blinks through her wine haze. “Excuse me?”

“Fire season.” He looks at Luz intensely. “Destruction.” He seems eager to have found someone to talk to and moves down the bar until he’s sitting so close to Luz that she can smell his sour breath. There’s a flake of dead skin on his bottom lip that she wants to pick off. “All this red light, looks like sunset all day long. Ash on the cars. Fire eating up miles and miles of earth. It’s like end of days.” He swings his bottle. Drops of beer spill on Luz’s jeans.

“Hey, watch it,” she says.

“But it’s not the end of days. Nope. Look at those fires. Happens every year. Every year. A cycle. Destruction! It’s beautiful.” He digs around in his pocket with the same

conviction his words hold. “Beautiful, beautiful,” he mutters. Luz tries to get the bartender’s attention, but he pretends to concentrate on salting a margarita glass. Great. She’s tainted for talking to an ugly person.

Suddenly, the bartender looks in her direction. “Hey,” he shouts at the man. “You can’t smoke in here.”

The man ignores the bartender, turns his gaze back on Luz. “Can you believe it? Everyone in this city breathing smoke and smog all day and people think one cigarette’s going to destroy them.” He points the lit end of his cigarette at the bartender. “Anarchy!” he screams before he slides off his stool and out the bar’s back entrance.

Luz’s wine haze thickens with tequila. She pulls out her cell phone, sends a *What are you doing?* text. The response is immediate. *Nada. Come over.*

“Why’d she move back?” Carlos traces the edge of her arm. She likes the way their skin looks together. Café con leche.

“Her family’s over there. She’ll have a better retirement.”

He runs his fingers through her hair over and over again, and Luz feels like she could sleep for years. “You miss her?”

Luz’s face is hot. She wills herself not to cry. “Yes. Can you still be bicultural if one of your cultures leaves you?”

Carlos’s hand cups her shoulder. His voice is sleepy, too. “Of course.”

“You think so?” She thinks about shopping with her mother as a teenager, the saleswomen directing their questions at Luz, not even looking at her mother until she pulled out her credit card. Luz fits so seamlessly into white culture that sometimes she forgets she’s not really white. Like the time she pretended she couldn’t understand the day laborer and handed him a twenty instead of a fifty after he moved all of her crap up three flights of stairs to her apartment. She can’t forgive herself for things like that. With her mother here, Luz could be both white and not white, but now that she’s gone, Luz is a fraud.

She waits for Carlos’s breathing to slow to make sure he’s asleep. “Carlos?” she whispers. “I didn’t write the proposal.”

“What?” Carlos sits up, wide awake.

Shit. “I, uh.” Her mind races. Where are her clothes?

“No, I heard you,” Carlos says, his voice rising. “What the fuck? The deadline’s tomorrow.” He pulls on a pair of jeans and stands over her. “We need that money for the naturalization workshops. You knew that.” He paces the room.

“Don’t panic,” she says. She brushes the ground beside the bed for her T-shirt and jeans. This is not the time to be naked. “We might be able to get an extension.”

“An extension?” Carlos rakes his hands through his hair. “They don’t give out extensions. Everyone knows that. Jesus Christ, Luz. How could you be so irresponsible?”

Because I’m a traitor, Luz thinks.

“You need to go,” Carlos says, still pacing. “I think you should go.”

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Luz picks up the letter opener on her desk and saws off the ragged edges of her cuticles. Tendrils of skin fall into tiny crescent shapes on the surface of her yellow legal pad amid her notes about foundation goals and program objectives. Her mouth is sticky and her stomach churns with the aftermath of wine and tequila. Marco, the communications associate, raises an eyebrow at her as he walks past her office. Yeah, I know it's gross, she wants to say. Mind your own fucking business. She gets up and shuts her office door. She sits back down and glances at the clock. Twenty more minutes. A window pops up on her computer screen, an electronic reminder she'd written for herself the week before: *Conference Call with Sara and Civic Ed team. Final meeting.*

Her phone lights up, and her heart plummets to her stomach. It's too early. "Luz," Carlos's voice comes through the phone in a page. Her breath falls out of her lungs, and her hands shake. "I'm coming down in a few minutes to get everything squared away before the call."

"Sure," Luz answers. She wipes the cuticles from her notepad. The sweat from her palm leaves a smudge on her notes. "No problem. You know where to find me."

For the first time in weeks, Luz feels awake. But it's as if she's awakened into a bad dream instead of the other way around. She stands, picks up her purse and a mug of colored paper clips, and escapes out the side door of the office.

In the parking lot, the Santa Anas are so strong they nearly knock Luz over as she makes her way to the fruit vendor's stand parked on the corner. The red and yellow umbrella attached to the cart snaps back and forth in the wind. She watches him place watermelon and cucumber into a plastic bag that he hands to her. "It's my last day," she tells him, and he smiles.

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The freeways are clear at this time of day, and Luz makes record time through Hollywood all the way north through Ventura where the buildings to her right drop away and the huge expanse of the Pacific stretches westward, shimmering under the afternoon light. “Look,” her mother said the time Luz drove her up to Ben’s. “The ocean looks so deep. That’s what Honduras was named for, did I ever tell you? Because the waters are very deep. You remember? So think of me when you drive past here, okay?” Luz fishes in her bag for her cell phone, but when she calls her mother in Honduras, the line goes dead.

By the time Luz gets to Santa Barbara, the sky is dark with the smoke and ash from the fires. The flames crackling along the parched earth burn so close to the freeway that the roads along her normal route are closed, and she has to take several winding detours as she carves her way into the Santa Ynez Valley. When she finally arrives at Ben’s, the moon is orange through the brown smoke, and the mountains rise against the line of fire tearing through the chaparral along the horizon. As she pulls up to his house, she sees Ben standing in the driveway.

“Hey,” he says when she steps out of her car. “Wasn’t expecting you so early.”

Luz pulls him close and buries her face in his shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

The muscles in Ben’s back tighten, and he pulls away. “Come on, I thought we could go see the fires before it gets too late.” He guides her to his beat up 4-Runner, and she sees a bottle of sangiovese and a blanket on the passenger seat. Sometimes Ben can read her mind. The 4-Runner roars in the dust and together they drive on the washed out road leading into the mountains. The smell of smoke gets stronger and stronger until Luz imagines that it’s the air around them burning and not the land. Ben swerves the 4-Runner around the first barricade they come to but stops at the second. Luz steps out of the truck, and the ash falls onto her shoulders light and delicate as snow. The fire continues its wild dance in the distance, but she’s close

enough now to see the flames consuming dried bush. The man in the bar was right; she's never seen anything so beautiful. Ben spreads the blanket on the roof of the truck and helps her up. He climbs up next to her and opens the bottle of wine. He drinks out of the bottle for a long time.

"You're quiet tonight," she says.

He looks at her, and his blue eyes water with smoke. Then he stares back out at the fire. Luz feels restless. It's hot, and all she can hear is the crackling brush around them; the air is so dry she feels as if her lungs might combust.

"I drove down to see you," he answers finally, and Luz goes cold.

"When?" she asks, but she knows exactly when, and she understands why Ben brought her here. Her body trembles.

"Last week, when I was supposed to work the night shift for the harvest." She watches him, but his eyes are fixed on the horizon. "They didn't need me after all, so I drove down to surprise you."

"Ben."

"I sat in your apartment all night. In the morning, when you still weren't back, I left."

"Ben," she says again. Fear spreads through her chest and down her belly, ravaging her heart, her lungs, anything it encounters. She takes his hand in her lap and squeezes it as tightly as she can as if to anchor him there. He doesn't look at her.

"You have to know," she says, making her voice louder than the snapping sounds around them, and even then she doesn't feel loud enough. "I love you." He won't look at her.

"I love you too," he says after awhile, but his voice is so low that she has to read his lips to understand him. He passes her the bottle, and they sit close and wordless. She watches flames lick the edges of a small, round shrub and thinks of her mother's *Corazon Sagrado*, but

nothing can protect her now. Luz lifts the bottle to her mouth, and as she drinks the scent of blueberry mingles with smoke.

## The Fruit Vendor

Five years I've wheeled this aluminum stand to the corner of Washington and Hoover. It's a well-made cart with four wheels, two drawers, and a glass display window on top. In that time I've had to replace two wheels and the front pane of glass that cracked one day during a heat wave when I hosed down the cart with cool water. Later, I fixed a yellow and red umbrella to the front corner of the cart for shade.

I rise at dawn to peel and slice pineapple, mango, papaya, watermelon, coconut, oranges, cucumber. I make sure the blade of my knife is sharp. In the early hours, before the coffee finishes brewing, a dull blade can slip from the surface of a pale mango and jam into a slow knuckle. I stack the fruit over a blanket of white ice in pink, yellow, orange, and pale green columns against the glass. In the left drawer, I keep single bills and coins. In the right, limes, chili powder, a cutting board, plastic bags. It's heavy work, and I am tired before the day even begins.

Weighed down with fruit and ice, the stand moves slowly over the broken sidewalks spotted black with ancient chewing gum. I walk two miles from my home to the frenzied intersection where I spend my days. I pass lengths of chain link and watch a pair of pit bulls on the other

side trot beside the cart. They yawn and wag their tails. I pass under a row of jacaranda trees in bloom. Lavender blossoms flutter over my baseball cap and shoulders, are crushed beneath the cart's wheels.

Near the freeway, I pause next to an elementary schoolyard for children to buy breakfast. I am too late; the bell rings, signaling the beginning of the school day. Children in baggy, white button-down shirts, loose pants or plaid skirts scurry around me. "Frutero, Frutero!" they call over their shoulders as they hurry to class. My slow start has already cost me twenty dollars.

Under the overpass, layers of red, green, and yellow spray paint cover the concrete walls. I can't decipher the jagged letters, but the writing on the walls makes this section of the walk a little less gloomy. A cement bench with an advertisement for the Piolín morning radio show has also been tagged in black and blue. A gray blanket covering the bench shifts, a movement that might seem the result of rush-hour wind to someone who did not make this walk daily. I place several rings of pineapple in a plastic bag, then set the bag down at the foot of the blanket before continuing on.

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With the money I spend on fruit and upkeep of the cart, I barely make a profit. I am not such a young man anymore, and after long days the concrete echoes through the soles of my feet, up my shins and into my spine. During the winter, it becomes necessary to take on a second and sometimes a third job to feed myself. I wash dishes. I cut lawns. And they say soon the city will make food stands relocate every hour. Will my clients follow me from corner to corner?

The sun is high. It's going to be hot today; good. I park my stand on the outer corner of the parking lot next to an auto-body shop. There have been more and more men gathering here as day laborers in recent months. Some of them have formed a makeshift auto-body shop behind the main building. They offer oil changes and tire rotations for half of what the regular auto-body shop charges. The makeshift auto-body shop is made up of an old yellow van with broken windows and a maroon El Camino with rusted paint on cinderblocks. Most of the time, because of their location behind the building and next to a gas station, people assume that these men sell drugs. But they've told their friends and friends of friends about their business and hold a small clientele of Mexican gardeners, Guatemalan dishwashers, Nicaraguan bricklayers.

The rest of the men stand in front of the building. "You need help," they say with rough tongues to the cars that pull into the lot. "We help you." They speak quickly, as if saying the words fast makes it natural, like they already have the job. They are short young men with dirty sweatshirts

and jeans who are earnest in their approach and do not smile. But because of this and their eagerness, they scare the drivers of Expeditions and Escalades who shake their heads and avoid eye-contact.

These men have to wait for someone in a worn-down truck or someone who speaks their language, someone familiar with what they offer: arms, legs, backs. They carry mattresses three times their size up flights of stairs, silently. They load trucks in eighty-degree heat without asking for water.

Three dollars for a bag of fruit. Any combination is possible, but it's still three dollars even for a bag full of cucumber. I squeeze lime juice and sprinkle chili powder into the bag, twirling the plastic several times before handing it over. The men who search the traffic for work somehow always have three dollars. They shake it from their pockets and lend each other change when someone falls short. At lunchtime Marcelo, the sausage vendor, wheels his cart into the parking lot beside mine. He fries his sausage in seasoned pork fat, and I can almost hear the low rumble of stomachs around me. Marcelo and I greet each other by exchanging fruit and sausage.

The men are homesick. They tell stories of their towns, mothers and wives and children left behind. They squint at the sky and describe the houses they will build back home, tracing the air with their fingertips. They laugh with each other and talk about the gifts they plan to send at

Christmas. If I look down and tune out car horns and screeching brakes, breathe in fruit instead of exhaust fumes, the rush of traffic sounds like the roaring ocean I left twenty years ago. The streets of this city are my home now, but I admire these men for their continued dreams.

An office building stands at the other end of the parking lot, and in the afternoon men and women in pressed shirts make their way over to buy fruit. The women wear heels and silver and smell like flowers. “No chili, please,” some of them ask in polite Spanish. I smile and nod. The men usually head for Marcelo’s cart. Even though they do not carry mattresses or lift boxes or stand for long days on concrete, exhaustion droops their eyes and shoulders. They stand together and eat their sausages in silence, and some of them light cigarettes and send messages on their phones. I wonder what makes them so weary. The janitor of the building stops by my cart on his way to work. He tells me that inside the men grow stiff from sitting all day staring at computer screens. They are preoccupied with phone calls and meetings; their work follows them home. I tell him I push my work home every day, and I think it is a small price to pay for security. He laughs and takes his fruit.

I watch the sun sink orange over the jacarandas. The ice has melted, most of the fruit gone, and the cart moves faster over the pavement. I can feel weariness in my legs and back, but the heaviness also makes me aware of my body. I think of the days when I used to stand on the

corner of Washington and Hoover without the fruit cart. I remember trying not to think of the next day, the next meal, or how I would pay my share of rent in the one-bedroom apartment I shared with five others. Sometimes, after sitting on the curb, I would lie on my back and watch the clouds pass between leaves of a laurel tree. The limitless sky filled me with dread, and I felt scared and rootless in the world.

The men from the office inch past me in their cars through the evening rush-hour. When they stop at a red light, I see them stare ahead or talk intensely into headsets. Lavender flowers fall over their windshields only to scatter when the light turns green and the cars lurch forward.

I wave to the men of the makeshift auto-body shop who are preparing to close for the evening.

## The View from Monteverde

The anorexic girl keeps me going. If Blaine Mason Winchester, the blonde waif whose initials were anything but an oversight on the part of her deranged entrepreneurial father, can tramp through eight hours' worth of dense jungle on Diet Coke and a slice of honeydew melon, then so the hell can I. We're only halfway into our six-week exploration of biodiversity and sustainable development in Monteverde, the heart of the Costa Rican jungle, but, for the most part, I've lost track of time. I'm never going to make it out of this hell of my own construction.

I can't remember what possessed me to apply to this ridiculous summer program my university offered. I even had to write a letter to the Gates Foundation asking for additional funding for my academic scholarship "to study tangible models of ecological health in the country of my origin in order to better inform my course of study." Bullshit language for a bullshit request; my parents are Nicaraguan. They moved to the U.S. when I was only two. Also, I'm a history major. But the Gates Foundation was willing to overlook these details, and now I'm trapped with a bunch of trust-fund babies in the middle of the rainforest.

"If we could all gather around this acacia tree," our guide, an alabaster-colored Englishman with thinning hair says, "I think you'll be very excited by what we've stumbled upon." He sounds exactly like an uptight voice-over from a Discovery Channel documentary.

This is my least favorite part of our hikes. Whenever the group pauses to study a tree frog or an ant pile, I'm a feast for thirsty mosquitoes. But the frogs are the worst. They give me the creeps the way they start out as fish and then grow legs and lungs to live on land but always in watery places like they can't make up their minds, like they're content to live in some kind of in-between netherworld. Gross.

Fifteen students and two professors gather around Mr. Discovery as he announces, “A cat has been here very recently.” He puffs his chest like one of the nighttime bullfrogs I mistake for stones until they leap into my path and scare the hell out of me. An astonished murmur churns through the crowd, and I glance overhead at the gathering cloud of mosquitoes. I pull the long sleeves of my T-shirt over my knuckles and wrap my covered hands around my neck. I think of my mother at the clothesline in our back yard, her thick fingers pinning worn bed sheets to dry in the sunshine. “Lourdes, we did not come to this country so that you could be eaten by a jaguar,” she’d say if she could see me now. Then she’d fold a wet corner over the line and secure it with a decisive grunt.

A mosquito whines close to my ear. I jerk my head away from the sound and pull my baseball cap lower.

“How are you allergic to mosquitoes?” Blaine asked me on our third night in Monteverde as she pulled the mouth of her North Face Pathfinder Backpack open. I peered over the edge of the top bunk as a pile of high-tech, moisture wicking garments tumbled out of Blaine’s bag and onto the floor of the cabin, the price tags still affixed to each item. The aluminum frame clunked on the ground as she tossed the backpack aside. “Aren’t you, like, from here?”

I scratched like a madwoman at the borders of the fuchsia bumps that had swollen to the size of golf balls along my arms and legs. Each bite was a mini epicenter, the itch radiating outward so that my fingers and toes tingled. I’m sensitive about my mosquito allergy. I feel like blood memory should’ve kicked in by now, some sort of internal insect repellent. “I’m from L.A.,” I muttered.

“Huh?” Blaine frowned and fiddled with a gold chain knotted around a tube of hydrocortisone cream she’d dug out of the pile of clothing. The chain looked identical to the one

already hanging around her neck. What was she doing bringing jewelry to the rainforest, anyway?

“I said I’m from L.A. My parents are from here. Near here. Nicaragua.”

“Oh. Cool. Have you been to Nicaragua a lot?”

“Never. My whole family’s in California now.”

“Think you’ll go there after we’re done here?”

I winced. I’d tried to find a way to add Nicaragua into my funding request, but Costa Rica was already a stretch, and I hadn’t wanted to push my luck. “Um. Probably not. I mean, since I don’t actually know anyone there, or whatever.”

“Oh, right. Well, here you go.” I reached for the tube of hydrocortisone cream and bug spray in Blaine’s hand. “Careful with that.” She nodded toward the bottle. “It’s one hundred percent DEET.”

I looked at her. “I thought you said you were a vegan.”

“I am.” Blaine blinked.

“Right.”

By now the mosquitoes have mostly left me alone although my lips have gone numb from the mosquito repellent. I smooch my lips—open, closed, open, closed—more interested by the complete lack of sensation than in the cat whisperer’s speech. “Do you smell that?” he asks now. “Ammonia. That is the scent of the jungle cat’s urine.” He drops to his hands and knees and digs in the topsoil, pausing to sniff the earth. “Yes.” He nods sagely. “A cat was definitely here. If we’re lucky, we’ll find a fresh movement.” He digs faster as the crowd gathers closer, whispering in excitement, as if the Englishman were about to cull a puma from the very earth.

These people are crazy. Am I the only person who can see what's happening? I scan the crowd for Blaine, who's standing off to the side staring into space. At least there's one other rational being on this trip. But when I look closer, I see Blaine waver on her feet and realize it's only a hunger trance. I think of my mother serving mondongo soup to my dad in one of the yellow bowls I bought her last Christmas. "You're supposed to be studying, Lourdes," she says as the steam curls into my dad's face and fogs his glasses. "Not digging for caca."

I'm out of place wherever I go. My parents and professors tell me I'm lucky to be bicultural, to have the best of both worlds, but I disagree. I feel stretched in two directions, only half of me relevant at any given time. At home, my parents cover their ears when I turn the stereo up for my favorite guitar riff. They complain about my friends honking their car horns instead of coming to the door "like decent people" to say good afternoon or good evening. Then at college, I have to change the way I talk. Sometimes it takes me a second to translate a Spanish word that slips in mid-sentence. But as soon as I stepped off the plane in San Jose, I could see I was nothing like the Costa Ricans around me. We were all brown with dark eyes, but the similarities ended there. I stuck out like a billboard in my Gap jeans and Raconteurs T-shirt. At home, my parents tell childhood stories of their friends back in Nicaragua, stories that I've heard so many times they've become nearly my own, but they are, at best, only second-hand memories. I guess that's the real reason I came to Costa Rica: for something first-hand.

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After we've finished our lesson on cat feces, the group travels southward over the bumpy dirt roads to a small fishing village for a lesson on microeconomics. The old school bus we're traveling in lurches to a stop in the middle of the road, and I stumble across the aisle and land against Blaine's bony shoulder. "Watch it." Blaine scowls. One of my professors struggles to communicate with their driver. I scrunch lower next to Blaine. "I don't know what he's saying." I hear him sigh. "Lou? Where's our translator?"

"She's right here, Professor Long," Blaine calls loudly from the back of the bus. I throw Blaine a death stare, but she just rolls her eyes. My face is hot. I adjust my baseball cap and make my way to the front of the bus. Another reason I signed up for this trip was to practice my Spanish. It's embarrassing to be *pocha*, to look like I do and not speak like I look. Especially because *pocha* is a term for Mexican-Americans; there's not even a word for what I am. And even though Professor Long and the others can't detect my accent when I speak Spanish, I know the driver can, and this knowledge makes my tongue swell every time, as if I've been stung by some kind of bilingual-zapping wasp. The driver's encouraging smile only makes me feel worse. I turn back to Professor Long. "He says this is his town, and any second his brother's cattle are going to cross the road so we have to, like, wait for them to cross." Professor Long nods, and we all settle back into our seats as a stream of zebu cattle kicks up dust around the bus. I gaze out of my window wishing I too could swirl higher and higher until I'm the last particle of dust to hang in the air. Then I'd study the ground beneath me and drift to the place mirroring my exact composition.

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The fish come sizzling out of the fryer whole, heads and everything. My stomach growls. One of the fishermen's wives hands me a plate. The fishermen netted the golden fish not twenty minutes before their wives slipped them into hot coconut oil; I've never eaten anything so fresh. I tear into the crisp golden flesh and savor the flaky meat.

"Um," one of the students, a lanky Texan named Drew, murmurs, "this kind of really looks like—an animal." He taps his fork around his plate like a blind man, and then digs into a small pile of rice. Blaine, putting on her one-woman vegan show, laughs. "Yeah," she nods. "I've always thought more people would reconsider eating meat if they could actually see the animal it came from."

Earlier, when we passed through a town lined with mud huts and toddlers running around in torn T-shirts, chubby butt cheeks and baby penises hanging out for the students to gawk at, Blaine lost her shit after seeing a starving dog on the side of the road. "*Please*," she'd sobbed, pulling on Professor Long's shirtsleeve. "We have to find a *vet*." It'd almost been enough to make me vomit until I remembered that's Blaine's area of expertise. Can't anybody else see through her?

"My uncles used to own a pig farm," I lie through tender bites of fish. "We used to hear them slaughtering the pigs before breakfast. They'd squeal their heads off, poor things, but oh man, that bacon was amazing."

Blaine gasps in faux horror—I might as well be a cannibal!—and stomps off in a swish of long skirt. Mission accomplished. I smile and finish my dinner, but then my stupid Catholic guilt kicks in. Blaine's got enough problems without me making her life harder. I see Blaine off in a corner pushing around cabbage salad on her plate and move to sit next to her.

"How's it going?" I ask.

Blaine shrugs. “Fantastic.” Her voice is dismal.

“Yeah, I know,” I commiserate. Even though I feel out of place here, Blaine is *really* out of place. How did this girl get so far from Atlanta’s air-conditioned fitness centers and chlorinated swimming pools? The refinement incompatibility between Blaine and the rainforest is off the charts. Blaine sets aside her plate and wraps the black cardigan she’s always wearing around her shoulders; her collarbones jut from its neck. Blaine’s the only girl on this trip who’s remained committed to eyeliner and mascara, but now her smudged makeup only emphasizes the hollow moons under her eyes. Blaine’s not so bad, really. Even though she’s miserable, she rarely complains. She’s at the front of all the hikes and says *por favor* and *gracias* to every Costa Rican we come in contact with. Also, I can tell that Blaine, the girl with the man’s name, thinks she’s not enough. I can relate to that. We sit together in silence until I get up to use the bathroom. When I get back, a crowd of people have gathered where I’d been sitting. “She passed out,” one of the students says when I get closer. Blaine lies in the middle of the crowd with a wet towel over her forehead. Professor Long tries to get Blaine to drink Coke through a straw. Blaine sits up and pushes his hand away.

“It’s not diet,” I tell him.

Professor Long looks at me. “So?”

I shrug.

“Jesus Christ,” Drew says beside me. “Why doesn’t she just eat?”

“She hates herself,” I answer.

“Just because you hate yourself,” he counters, “doesn’t mean you can’t eat.”

It sounds like something my mother would say.

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Unlike the other students on this trip, I missed the memo on appropriate jungle wear. Being from the desert, my brain failed to contemplate the term “rain” in “rainforest,” focusing instead on images of rainbow-colored (again with the rain) macaws soaring through lush canopies. I packed my jungle inappropriate suitcase (its wheels, designed for the smooth run of airport terminals, useless on the soft mud path leading to the cabin) full of jeans and cotton T-shirts and my favorite pair of sneakers. But each day of this trip, I’m caught between fine morning mist and evening storms, like the one falling now, that drench my entire body in ten seconds flat.

I flop on the bottom bunk and wriggle out of my soggy jeans to change for tonight’s lecture on reforestation. It rains so often here that none of my clothes has time to dry completely. I’ve started to smell like mildew, and I know it’s only a matter of time before athlete’s foot sets in, but I change my drenched socks for a pair that’s only damp anyway. I grab the small umbrella my mother snuck into my suitcase, my notebook, and flashlight and step outside, headed for the rec room that doubles as a classroom thirty feet away.

Though the rain drowns out the usual nighttime sounds of the forest, I immediately sense my mistake. I should’ve waited for someone to walk with me. The darkness presses in from all sides, but I step forward, sweeping the flashlight to carve a lighted path in front of me. Halfway to the classroom, I’m proud of my progress. I’m finding my way through the jungle! I look back to measure the distance I’ve covered, and when I turns to continue my intrepid journey, the flashlight sweeps over something large and crouching a few steps ahead of me. I freeze, focusing the beam of light on my feet. Must be a rock. Animals seek shelter from the rain. I stand in the darkness with the rain pummeling my umbrella and lift the flashlight. The beam illuminates a frog the size of a cocker spaniel squatting in my path. It sits in profile, and its walnut-sized eyes rest squarely on me. Holy crap. We remain motionless, like weaponless

gunslingers about to face off. Behind the frog, I can hear voices coming from the lit classroom. If I move and the frog decides to jump, it'll take me out for sure. I visualize its slimy webbed feet against my chest and gag. "Lourdes, what are you doing?" I imagine my mother looking up in the middle of tutoring one of her math students. "Contemplating a crab's immortality? *Run.*" I drop the umbrella and the flashlight and sprint past the frog, which sits still and silent as a stone Buddha.

I burst into the classroom breathless and drenched. The other students gather to ask me what happened, and the boys laugh. "You're just being a girl," one of them teases. "It was probably just a tree frog." But the Englishman steps in to verify my story. "Yes," he says, "we have trouble with those frogs. They get that big from eating our chickens." He looks at me with a glint in his eye, and I think of the Trix commercials from my childhood. "Silly American," his look says.

After the lecture, I wait to walk back to the cabin with Blaine who stays dry under her North Face Hurricane Rain Parka. I'm sure that the frog's made off with my umbrella by now.

For some reason, the professors haven't stopped to think that the red plastic whistles they're handing out might be a warning that we aren't qualified for the task we're about to undertake. I consider raising the issue myself, but I don't feel like attracting anymore attention after last night's frog incident. I take one of the whistles and hang the nylon lanyard around my neck and listen to the professors' instructions. We're supposed to spend time on our own exploring the sights and sounds of the forest and noting our observations in our notebooks. We're to fan out in

all directions and find our way back to where we've gathered at the base of the forest in half an hour, only blowing our whistles in case of an emergency. My skin prickles. My mosquito bites itch. Surely this assignment must be some kind of liability. I bring the whistle to my lips, tempted to alert everyone to the asininity of this plan, but Blaine nudges me. "Come on, Lou." She rolls her eyes. "It beats another lecture."

Blaine's right, and for once it's not raining. As the students disperse and I make my way into the forest, the weight of the group falls from my shoulders like a hundred textbooks. I haven't been alone for more than ten minutes the entire trip. Being in a group of American students in Costa Rica has only aggravated the sense of being pulled in two directions. I watch the sunlight filter through the leaves of the teak and fig trees as I move over the leaf-strewn ground. In a hollowed-out ceiba tree, I study a line of carpenter ants carrying pieces of acacia leaves back to their tunnel. I wish I had such a concrete sense of purpose, too, but for now I'm alone and it's enough.

After awhile, I've lost all sense of direction, just like I knew I would. But far from feeling lost, I'm content to wander the forest. This is the best time I've had the entire trip. The sun shifts through the leaves, but as I come to a clearing, my breath catches and my legs turn wooden.

The pungent scent of ammonia is so strong I can't breathe. I remember my father putting our sick tabby to sleep by placing a gasoline-soaked rag over its nose. I look around, straining to see through the intense green for the jungle cat that's way too close, almost on top of me it seems by the smell. But the cat's invisible. In my panic, the calmness I felt moments before heightens into an intense languor, and I have an urge to lie down on the soft, damp ground and nap. If the cat's stalking me, its skill at camouflage far outweighs my own. I hear moaning from behind a

giant fern. The noise is enough to jerk me out of my torpor, and I'm about to turn and run when I hear Blaine's voice.

"Oh God, oh God," I can hear Blaine repeating. Her voice sounds low and cracked in a way that I've never heard anyone sound before. I'm pulled toward the fern, but a small part of me says to run the other way. Blaine can't see me yet. I take a deep breath.

"Blaine?" I call out.

"Lou?" Blaine answers.

I step around the fern. Blaine looks like a torn ragdoll on the forest floor. Her clothes have ripped in several places, and there's so much blood that it's impossible to make out any specific wound. When Blaine sees me, she starts to cry. One of her knees bends at an awkward angle. Her sobs get louder until I'm sure that Blaine's wails stretch all the way to the forest canopy, but their strength lets me know that she'll be okay. I sit beside Blaine and pull her into my lap. Suddenly I hear a high-pitched scream. I'm about to tell Blaine to calm down when I realize that the sound is coming from the whistle around my neck, which I'm blowing into as hard as I can. Other whistles sound around us, and soon I can hear voices shouting through the trees. I see a shadow and want to cry with relief when I recognize one of the Costa Rican groundskeepers from the school. I scream at him in Spanish for help, and he rushes over beside us, asking me if I saw the cougar. I shake my head and look at Blaine.

"Blaine, what happened?" I ask. "Tell us where it hurts."

Blaine's words rush forward and bounce off of each other like stones in an avalanche, but I catch every one. I roll them from one side of my mind to the other almost without thinking and turn to the groundskeeper. I translate Blaine's story into my flawed Spanish that flows out in a smooth river. The groundskeeper nods and asks me more questions. I answer each one, and

when he tells me the others will be here shortly, I reassure Blair. We sit quietly and wait. I look up at the canopy and imagine that from way up there we must look like three pebbles on the forest floor.

## II. Real

## The Mason Jar

Ultimately, it became an issue of practicality. Ana could no longer relegate her thoughts about Evan to the moments just before she slipped into sleep at night or to the spaces between her eyelashes when she blinked away her dreams in the morning. For weeks now, the thoughts followed her out of bed, dripped down the back of her neck in the shower, hummed in her ears with the whirring of the hairdryer. They disturbed her during meetings at work, invisible gnats that she swatted at while taking notes on her yellow legal pad. At the gym, they manifested themselves on the treadmill despite her efforts to stomp them out each time her foot met the belt. Thoughts of Evan's fingers, Evan's mouth, Evan's breath chattered incessantly, until Ana thought she would scream.

“Are you okay?” her sister, Iris, asked over dinner at Ana's house. The pasta that Ana had cooked for them was soggy, and Ana watched Iris push around limp pieces of penne with her fork. “You seem a little distracted.”

“I'm fine,” Ana responded and pushed her plate aside. “I'm just overworked.” She lifted the bottle of merlot from the center of the table and refilled both glasses.

“Have you talked to Evan lately?” Iris asked as wine spilled into her glass.

“We haven't spoken in awhile.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Ana sighed. Iris had listened dutifully in the days after Evan left. She made tea, brought Kleenex, followed Ana's circling thoughts with patience that was uncharacteristic but not limitless. "I'm tired of talking about it. I'm sure he'll come around."

Later, after Iris had gone home, the thoughts returned as Ana cleaned her kitchen. Evan's disarming smile, Evan's cheek against her neck. She wiped them away from the burners of the stove and the countertop but noticed that they had also gathered in the cold tomato sauce. Ana rinsed them down the sink and turned on the garbage disposal. That's it, Ana thought, *enough*. She downed the rest of her wine, threw open one of the kitchen cupboards, and pulled out a clean Mason jar. Then she grabbed a long-handled wooden spoon, marched into her bedroom, and shut the door.

When Ana emerged, the Mason jar she carried was heavy with thick liquid that looked like molasses and gleamed under the kitchen lights. The wooden spoon that Ana held in her other hand was slick with saliva. Her hand trembled as she placed the spoon in the sink. Tiny beads of perspiration had formed along her hairline, and Ana wiped them away. She set the jar squarely on one of the countertop's red clay tiles and cut a circle of white cheese cloth. She secured the cloth over the jar's opening with a rubber band, washed the spoon, and went to bed.

In the morning, Ana awoke with a terrible ache in her chest. She felt bruised and tender. Yet in spite of the pain, Ana felt strangely calm. She watched the summer sunlight play upon the corner of her bedspread. The house was still, and Ana wondered whether it had ever been so quiet. In the shower that morning, Ana examined her chest. The hollow between her breasts seemed deeper than usual, though the skin was pink and smooth. She pressed two fingers to the space and cried out in pain. When she emerged from the shower, Ana wrapped herself in a soft

blue robe and shook two aspirin from the bottle in the medicine cabinet. Her bare feet made small patting sounds on her way to the kitchen to pour herself a glass of water.

The Mason jar twinkled on the counter in the early morning light. Its rich, dark content was the same color as Ana's wet hair, black with amber edges. The jar was hot, as if it had just emerged from the dishwasher. Ana set her glass down next to the jar and put her nose to the cheese cloth. The smell was dense and sweet. It reminded her of something she used to eat as a child. She was tempted to lift the cheese cloth and run her finger along the inside edge; just a taste. Instead, she opened a drawer and pulled out a white index card and a black marker. She wrote Evan's name carefully, adding elegant flourishes to the curves of the E, the open arms of the V. Ana propped the card against the jar and poured herself a bowl of cereal, lingering over the counter as she ate. She picked up the phone and dialed Evan's number. His voice on the recording sounded impatient and rough, nothing like the soft voice in her ear that she craved.

*"You've reached Evan, I'm not available right now. Please leave a message."*

"Hi Evan," Ana began, unsure how to phrase what she had to say. "I—I have something for you. If you want to stop by and pick it up, that would be great. Thanks, bye."

She placed the phone back into its receiver and continued getting ready for work.

At the office that day, Ana was able to concentrate for the first time in weeks. The tension that she carried in her shoulder blades melted away, and she conducted her meetings with clarity and focus. During lunch, one of her colleagues commented that she seemed well-rested. Later, at the gym, Ana felt somehow lighter. It was as if she were almost floating over the treadmill instead

of pounding on its track. She ran seven miles, a new record, and even towards the end when her lungs started to burn, Ana's mind remained still, detached. She decided it was the perfect time to try yoga again. The low lights and soft music in the yoga studio heightened the quietness Ana felt, and as she followed the instructor's movements, she was pleased to discover that the thoughts that had been consuming her were not hiding in their usual places. In a forward fold, she saw that they were not nestled between her toes. Nor did they fall from the crease behind her knee during warrior pose. They did not even trickle down her arms when she lifted her body into a backbend.

When she returned home that evening, Ana found Iris in the kitchen examining the jar.

"So you're not even calling before you come over now?" Ana asked.

"I left a message. Check your phone," her sister answered. She bent over the jar. "What is this?"

"It's for Evan. Leave it alone."

"Is he coming by?"

"Yes."

"Did you talk to him?" Iris looked at her sister and raised one eyebrow.

"I left a message."

"Oh Ana," Iris sighed. "Let it go."

As she turned to face her sister, Iris's elbow struck the jar, knocking it sideways. The rubber band popped off the top, and the thick black liquid pushed past the cheese cloth and oozed over the counter. A fine steam rose from its surface and a syrupy smell filled the kitchen.

“Iris!” Ana shrieked. She rushed over and set the jar upright. She shoved her sister away and snatched a spoon from the drawer. The spoon made scraping noises against the countertop as Ana scooped up the syrup.

“I’m sorry!” Iris cried. “Here, let me help.” She reached for the sponge in Ana’s sink.

Ana tapped the neck of the spoon against the glass as she shook syrup back into the jar. “That’s fine, Iris. You’ve done enough.”

Iris ignored her sister and wiped the black liquid from the counter. Some of it stuck to her fingers, and Iris brought her hand to her face and sniffed.

“It smells good,” Iris said. “Are you trying to lure him back with dessert?”

Before Ana could answer, Iris stuck her fingers in her mouth. Her eyes widened. “Oh my God,” she said softly. “Ana, what is this? It’s amazing.”

“Is it?” Ana asked. She brought the spoon under the light to examine the syrup. The liquid had a reddish tinge and tiny crystals gleamed through the syrup like stars. She placed the spoon on her tongue and closed her mouth around the liquid. It tasted silky, dissolving on her tongue like butter. It was sweet, but not overwhelming or rich as Ana would have expected from the consistency of the syrup. She swallowed, and her entire body filled with warmth. Ana closed her eyes and imagined the long tongues of hummingbirds lapping nectar from orange trumpet-shaped blossoms. This is what they must taste, she thought.

“Seriously, Ana,” Iris interrupted. “If Evan could taste this, he wouldn’t be able to get enough.”

“I know,” Ana replied.

“Should we put a lid over it, so it can’t spill anymore?”

“No, it needs to breathe.”

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Over the next couple of days, the calm detachment inside of Ana did not diminish. She left two more messages for Evan to come and get what she had waiting for him. She kept her tone casual but composed, and she was pleased that there was not much emotion connected to her request. In her newfound stillness, Ana decided to attend to things she had been neglecting. She tied back her hair and cleaned the house as she had never done before. She wiped the dust from the top of the refrigerator and shook crumbs from the toaster over the sink. She scrubbed the floors with a stiff brush and cleaned the windows from the outside. When she finished, the house smelled fresh and new. She ran a damp paper towel over the sides of the jar, which was still warm under her fingertips. Ana thought about taking another taste, but Iris called and invited her to the beach.

It was the first time Ana had been to the beach in weeks. She let the wind curl the ends of her hair and waded out into the cold sea with Iris. She splashed water upwards into the blue cloudless sky and watched light catch on the drops above her head. On the shore, Ana sifted warm sand through her fingers and listened to the breeze. She watched grains of salt drying on the tiny hairs along her hair, and she licked them off her sun-soaked skin. When she returned home in the evening, she checked her messages but heard nothing from Evan. She still felt confident that he would come around, so she showered and drifted to sleep with the memory of the ocean current.

In the middle of the night, Ana awoke coughing violently. A dense haze filled the bedroom. Ana wondered if her house was on fire but realized that she did not smell smoke. A sticky sweetness permeated the air. Confused and half-asleep, she stumbled out of bed and down the hall. When Ana flipped on the kitchen light, she saw an almost impenetrable haze. It obscured the clock on the microwave and wrapped around the jar in muddy layers. The entire

house reeked of syrup, and Ana gagged on the overpowering scent. She opened all of the windows and hurried back to bed, breathing through her covers to muffle the odor.

In the morning, Ana wondered whether she had been dreaming. The haze had vanished and the smell had dissipated, but the windows were still open, and Ana noticed tiny reddish bubbles forming on the surface of the dark liquid. She called Evan, not bothering to cover the urgency in her voice when she again received his voicemail. Ana decided to keep the windows open while she was at work to avoid another incident.

After work, Ana met Iris at the gym and invited her over for dinner. The night was hot and dry, and the full moon shone. As Ana fumbled for her keys on the doorstep, Iris spoke.

“Do you hear that?”

“What?” Ana asked. She pulled her key out of her purse.

“That noise,” Iris said, gesturing to the door. “Did you leave something running?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Ana said. She put her ear to the door and heard a low humming on the other side. She frowned and opened the door. In the foyer, everything looked normal except for a small moth clinging to the wall. Ana shooed it away, and it fluttered through the open door to the porch light, beating its wings against the bare bulb.

“It’s coming from the kitchen,” Iris said behind her.

The sound grew louder as they approached the kitchen, and when Ana turned on the light she stepped backwards, stunned. Brown, gray, and ivory-colored moths covered every surface. They fluttered upwards towards the light and pulsed their wings frantically. They clung to the microwave and to the hands of the open-faced clock above the doorway. They stuck to the surface of the refrigerator like magnets. They beat their wings against the stainless steel sink. Wide wings of furry sunset moths spread over the counter tiles like pot holders. Moonlight

seeped through the window panes between moth wings, and the moths flew in an erratic cloud over the Mason jar.

Iris screeched and sprinted to Ana's bathroom, slamming the door behind her. Ana took the dish towel hanging from the oven rack batted the moths out of her way as she moved towards the jar. The smell was sharp and pungent, and as Ana approached she saw that hundreds of fruit flies had gathered around the edges of the cheese cloth. Ana gripped the jar with the towel and held it at arm's length as she placed it in the sink.

"Iris, get out here and help me," Ana called out. She herded the moths to the kitchen windows. A minute later, Iris emerged from the bathroom armed with a can of insecticide. She covered her eyes and ran through the kitchen spraying. Ana coughed, choking on the metallic smell of chemicals invading the air. Several moths fell to the floor in midflight and jerked their small bodies before dying. The others moved towards the window, following the sweeping motions of Ana's towel. Iris crossed to the sink, and Ana heard the shh-shh of the spray can as Iris attacked the fruit flies.

"Try not to get any in the jar," Ana called over her shoulder.

Twenty minutes later, when the last of the moths had been swept from the floor and the fruit flies rinsed down the drain, Ana and Iris sat at the kitchen table. The Mason jar stood between them.

"Clearly," Iris said, "it is time to get rid of this."

"I think it'll be okay now," Ana argued. "Maybe I'll put it in the refrigerator."

"Ana, you can't be serious," her sister said, rubbing her forehead. "Evan is not going to come get this. He doesn't want it. And even if he did, he couldn't eat it; it's rotting."

"It isn't," Ana insisted. "It's fermenting."

“Oh, Jesus.”

“I’ll just give it one more day.”

“Do what you want,” Iris said and rose from the table. “Just don’t call me the next time you have a home invasion. I’m exhausted; I’m going home.”

Ana sat for a long time staring at the jar. The sweet scent rising from the syrup was sour around the edges, and the liquid was no longer warm to the touch. Her sister was right. Evan was not going to call back or come by her house. He wasn’t interested in what she had for him. Maybe he didn’t even want to know that she had anything for him. Ana felt a hard knot rise in her throat before she realized that tears were already spilling onto her cheeks. They fell furiously, making small puddles on the table. Why not? Why wouldn’t he just taste it? She knew that if he would just allow himself one tiny mouthful, he would never want anything else. She put her head down and let her sobs spread through the kitchen. They echoed off the walls, and her body shuddered.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Ana’s cries subsided. Her face was swollen, and lonely trails of salt lined each cheek. Exhausted and delirious, Ana seized the jar in front of her, ripped away the cheese cloth, and drank. The dense liquid coated Ana’s raw throat and soothed her aching stomach. When she had emptied the jar, Ana stood. She felt shaky and hot, as if she might be sick. The room spun, and Ana walked unsteadily to her bedroom. She collapsed on her bed into a dreamless black slumber.

When Ana woke the next morning, her heart felt swollen in her chest. She rose and padded to the kitchen where the Mason jar lay sideways on the table. Morning sunlight poured through the windows and warmed the room. Ana smiled when she saw the honey-colored

residue coating the inside of the jar. She picked up the jar and turned it in the sun so that it glowed with light. Then she took the jar and washed it in the sink, eager to get on with the day.

## Seven Lemons

Andres Santos Perez  
January 24, 2011  
Home Depot, New Orleans, LA

“I arrived in a city called Monclova. It was a big enough city that I thought it was Nuevo Laredo. I got off the train. It was still dawn, so I went into the mountains and slept for awhile. I thought I was at the border.

In the morning, I asked a man picking up trash if I was at the border. He told me no, the border was still eight hours away. I'd let the train go. I started walking. I was hungry. I had no money, nothing. I encountered a woman, and I asked for a glass for water. She asked me if I was hungry and made me some taquitos to take with me and filled a bottle with water. She told me where to find the train station in Monclova. She said she was going to tell me a secret because they don't let anyone pass to catch the train there. She gave me seven lemons. She splashed a bit of water on my body. She told me to take the lemons and rub them all over my body. I took the food and left.

‘A secret,’ she told me.

I started walking with the lemons, and when I got close to the train station, I rubbed them all over my body. And when I passed through train security, no one said anything to me. I caught the train again.”

## Totti

Rosita sits on the front steps leading up to her new run-down apartment and grinds a piece of hot pink chalk into the concrete next to her. She wishes she was playing on the tire swing at the park in her old hood instead of waiting here for her neighbor, Cielo. It's not going to be so bad, you watch, her mother told her when the moving truck pulled up in front of the building last week. The landlady says there's lots of kids here. They weren't even inside yet, and Rosita could hear babies crying, reggaeton blasting from blown out speakers, and some vato screaming at his old lady. Nothing but bulla pouring out all the windows of this place; at least in their old house it was quiet.

Rosita's parents think she's too young to see they've moved from one shithole to a deeper one, but she sees. The buildings here are stained with graffiti, and she can't sleep through the night because of all the car alarms. She looks across the street between Chichi's Electronicas and Don Fito's Cash Advance and Payday Loans at the tree with the pink and purple flowers, the only tree on the street. The branches are thin and pale gray like the ears of Don Omar, her pet rabbit. Rosita's never seen a tree like that before, bien pretty. A lady I used to work for had one in her yard, her mother said while carrying Rosita's bedroom lamp and her little brother's highchair inside, muy fancy.

Ey, you. Quit tagging up the steps, Cielo calls out. She pushes on Rosita's head with her palm. Chucho and Enano, two boys Rosita's seen running up and down the stairs all week follow behind Cielo.

Rosita throws her chalk down. Why I gotta know about a stupid tree anyway?

Cielo shrugs. Everybody in the building knows. You live here, you gotta know.

Start with the purple toes, Enano says. He squats on the step below Rosita like a tiny frog and sips Pepsi through a curly straw.

Nah, start with the sores, Chucho says. He's got that puppy he found in the trash with him. He digs through its wiry hair and looks for fleas.

Shut up, Cielo says. I'm telling this story. She nods at the tree across the street. We didn't know Totti was still living in the place where that tree is now. Ever since we could remember, the building was falling apart. Paint that was maybe red once peeled in front, and the whole place sagged to one side like it was maybe trying to lay down but couldn't get comfortable. There wasn't no sign, and the sides were all tagged up. At night you could see a cloud of bats swirling from the roof. No one on the block except my abuela remembered what it was.

What was it? Rosita asks. She watches Chucho squish a tick from his puppy on the step next to him.

A beauty salon. Estética Totti. My abuela remembers. She says the hood didn't used to look like this. Cielo waves her hand at the street. Rosita sees overflowing dumpsters, a chain link park and some older kids playing soccer on an asphalt field with no goal posts. In the gutter, a used condom gapes like a dried-out fish.

What happened? she asks.

Cielo shrugs. My abuela says a few depressions.

What's a depression? Enano asks. He blows bubbles into his Pepsi.

Like how you'd feel if I knocked that Pepsi out your hand. Places get like that too, sometimes.

This is the most depressing place I've lived, for sure. Rosita kicks a pebble down the steps.

Shut up, Mocosá, quit thinking you're all that, Cielo says. We all know your papí lost his job.

Rosita gets hot in the face, squeezes a fist, but it's too soon to be starting fights.

Anyway, Cielo continues, not like the hood was ever bien fancy, but it was clean. A nice place for gente decente, my abuela says. Back in the day before spray paint, ladies used to wear hats and gloves to walk down the street. That's when Estética Totti was popular. Totti put an extension on her apartment to build a salon with money her ex-husband sent her in an envelope with no return address. For Lilia, his note said. Lilia, Totti's daughter, ended up working in the salon, too. She used to give free permanents on the first Tuesday of every month. My abuela said everyone in town went to Totti. You could even pay sliding scale if you needed an appointment before the quincena. Totti said if things looked nice, people would take care of them.

My abuela says Totti could set curls tight enough to make men propose to their novias, and husbands stayed home at night with their wives after one of her shampoos. Everyone's ma brought her daughter to Lilia for quinceañeras. My abuela remembers how Lilia pinned her hair on top of her head with flowers to make her sophisticated but not escandalosa. Sometimes people would see Totti leaning in the doorway of her salon, one hand on her hip twirling her scissors from her thumb as she watched her clients walk past. She liked transforming people with haircuts. Her clients walked straighter, held their heads higher, and smiled at strangers on the street. "They should elect me to city council," she'd joke with Lilia over a glass of wine. "I'm doing a public service," she'd say and spin in one of the salon's chairs.

Totti knew people worked hard to save for her services, and she used some of the salon's profits to plant two rows of trees in the park down the street.

My dad says it used to be a real park, with grass and everything, Chucho adds.

In the springtime, the trees bloomed and families went to the park to celebrate birthdays and baptisms. Totti hired a photographer to take pictures of Lilia modeling the latest hairstyles under a tunnel of blossoms and hung them in the salon. Lilia convinced Totti it would be good for business if all the stores on the street looked the same, so Totti hired painters to make all the storefronts red and blue.

Even Chichi's? Chucho asks.

Nah, fool. Chichi's was a bakery back then, I think. Anyway, Totti was right; people took care of things that looked nice. They kept their cars washed and their stoops swept.

Then what happened? A depression? Rosita asks. She leans her elbows behind her and stretches out her legs to get more comfortable.

Yeah. A lot of people had to move away to find work. Some of the schools closed. People didn't have money to spend to get their hair done. Clairol came up with those boxes to dye your hair at home. Totti went to a hair expo in Vegas to come up with new ideas to help business. While she was gone, Lilia got mugged. Some thug forced her back into the shop one night to empty the register. They say the gun went off by accident, but no one knows for sure. It was the first murder that my abuela can remember. Totti closed the salon for a month. No one saw her, even though they all kept coming by with flowers and pan dulce. Then one day she flipped the sign on the door to "open."

I thought you said no one saw her for a year, Chucho whines.

Shut up, fool. Cielo flicks his ear. It wasn't the same after that. Totti kept firing her staff for things like not sweeping up hair or refilling shampoo containers fast enough. Her hairstyles were outdated, and she couldn't make anyone propose anymore. Then Supercuts opened across town and that was the end. But this is all hearsay from my abuela, and she doesn't always take her pills like she's supposed to.

It's true, Enano says. Sometimes she gets the cat mixed up with the Virgin Mary.

Cielo glares at him and smacks her fist into her palm. She turns back to Rosita. The Totti we knew was a skinny old lady with two braids and a black dress who walked to the corner store every afternoon. She had cataracts in her eyes that made us all run when she yelled, get out of the way, ciega coming through. The cataracts didn't bother her. She was so old nothing was interesting to look at anymore. Sometimes, when she saw one of us throwing candy wrappers in the street, she would scoop trash out of the gutter and shake her fist. This is your street too, mal criadas, she'd say. It only looks like mierda if you want it to look that way.

Whatever, Enano interrupts. My brother and some of the other kids from the building broke into the salon once to get high. He said it was gross in there. There were rats and spider webs and so much dust they could barely breathe. He said the floor underneath the salon chairs rotted away and the chairs sagged in mud. Before they even did anything, Totti ran out of her apartment. What are you doing, disturbing an old lady in her sleep? she yelled. Don't you know how to act? This isn't how citizens behave. My brother thought it was a witch, and they bounced. Why'd she talk trash if her house was such shit?

Cielo sighs. Because she was too old to keep it up by herself, stupid. After that, everyone thought the abandoned salon was haunted. No one would go near it. In the winter the city condemned the building. Totti had a relative, the son of some cousin, who used to send her

money. He never came to visit because his wife said the neighborhood wasn't safe. We all thought she went to live with him. Later, he said he didn't even know the salon was condemned.

Totti didn't have enough money to run the gas heater more than at night. I hate the cold and I'm gordita, so it must have been horrible for her; she was flaca, barely skin and bones. My abuela says that when you get old the cold seeps into your bones in a way that's crueller than before. Totti's fingers and toes turned purple, and the small round bone in her wrist swelled so much that she had trouble moving her hand. She felt fierce pain in all the parts of her body designed to move. She thought she would cry from so much pain, except Totti wasn't that kind of vieja, so she screamed instead. It was an ugly sound, like rusted hinges. When people walked past the salon, they thought the building was infested with cats. Totti didn't think anyone could hear her because the room where she lived was connected to the salon on one side and Chichi's Electrónicas on the other. Chichi never turns off all those T.V.s and radios.

Get to the hair, Chucho cries.

Her hair started falling out. She thought God was messing with her, making her go bald in her own salon. So what if it'd been closed for decades? The weird part was that she never took her hair out of those braids because she barely went anywhere. But her hair fell out even though it was tied up. She swept up nests of it that gathered in the corners of her apartment and balled up fistfuls of silver hair from her pillowcase in the mornings.

Near the end of February, her toes changed from purple to red, and it was difficult to walk. Her fingers got stiff. When she lifted a mug of hot tea from the countertop, its weight startled her, and the pressure was so much that her hand was useless. Next thing she knew the mug shattered on the ground in a dozen pieces. To hell with my arthritis, Totti shouted at the mess.

In the morning, Totti tried to sit up, but her body felt rooted to the bed. See what you get for not moving enough? she scolded herself. Si no muevas, mueras. She rolled on her side and inched her thighs along the mattress until her knees were at the edge of the bed. She planted both palms and pressed down, but it was like trying to move concrete. Her spine was like a solid plank. She pressed her hands into the mattress. First one elbow, then the other snapped into place, and her knees creaked as they swung around the side of the bed. Her feet hit the floor, toes like jagged pebbles. She pushed herself upright until she heard a crack in both ankles, and she could stand. Even with her arthritis, Totti never felt so much stiffness. She took slow steps to the dresser to roll a cigarette. Her knees refused to bend, and it took all of her strength to place one foot in front of the other even though they only rose a centimeter from the ground. She noticed that even without the blankets the cold no longer bit into her bones, which meant that winter had broken. Bueno pues, she shrugged. Her shoulders rolled like stones into her back. Time to go shopping. There wasn't any food in the kitchen.

Totti only ate spiders, Chucho says.

Cielo smacks him upside the head. Quit interrupting. Totti took her black dress from the hanger in the closet and unbuttoned her nightgown. When she looked down she pinched her lips together to keep from screaming. Lesions the length of her index finger covered her stomach. They were deep purple, almost black, the color of bat wings. She gagged while she examined them, and a current of fear slithered down her back. This is what I get for letting myself go, she thought. Each sore was curved like a crescent moon and fat on one end. Totti inched her way through the door that led to the salon, stood in front of one of the dust-covered mirrors, and took off her nightgown. She stood there blinking, wondering how she could still be alive. What kind of cancer was this? The sores covered her back, shoulders, arms and legs. Her hands trembled

as she brought her fingers to a sore on her chest. The lesions weren't crusty or wet or swollen. The skin surrounding the sores was thin and dry like the paper she used to roll tobacco, but the lesions felt soft, supple, waxy. When she pressed on the sores, she didn't feel any pain.

Totti belted her dress tight around her and pulled her long sleeves down around her wrists. She wormed her way outside. She had to fight to take each step, her skin stretched tight around her bones. The street seemed foreign to her. Uglier than she remembered. My cataracts have thickened, she thought. She moved past two shadows selling drugs and wanted to tell them off, but her tongue felt dull and heavy in her mouth. She worked her way past the storefronts with blinking signs and curses scrawled on their sides and thought how sad Lilia would be to see their street this way. She felt the way she did when she looked in a mirror, unable to match the image she saw to what her memory reflected. So much time has passed, she thought. Everyone's stopped paying attention. No one notices the small changes until it's too late. They've forgotten what it's like to live with beauty.

By the time Totti got to the corner, it seemed like years had passed. Rotundo, the shop owner, stood outside smoking. Hola, Totti. He waved when he saw her. Something had happened to her hearing. Rotundo's voice sounded soft and distant, as if caught a strong wind, though the air around her was still. Totti pushed past him into the store. She crept through the aisles, and when she went to lift a can of beans, she noticed her hands were no longer gnarled from arthritis. Her fingers stretched twice as long as their normal length; they were skinnier and tapered, the knuckles no longer inflamed. She didn't recognize them as her own. She had trouble grasping the can, and it clattered to the ground. Let me help you, Rotundo said behind her and stooped over. When he straightened, the can thudded to the floor once again. What happened to your face? he asked. He raised a finger to trace a sore on Totti's cheek, but she

pulled away. She covered her cheek with her new fingers, and Rotundo's face went white with horror. "Are you okay?" he asked.

He told us later he could see something ripple beneath her skin, and that when the ripple passed the skin hardened like bone, Enano whispers.

She opened her mouth to reassure him, but her teeth had rooted together. She couldn't possibly eat like this. Totti felt the movement in her body slow with each breath. She inched her way back to the store's entrance. Rotundo didn't stop her.

Totti kept her head down on the way back to the salon. She hugged her dress around her and hoped no one would notice the change coming over her. She didn't need to try. It'd been years since we'd noticed Totti. No one except Rotundo even remembers seeing her on the street that day. Her back was so stiff that she couldn't bend to pick up garbage, and she could only watch through her shadowy vision while someone broke into a car to steal a radio as she slunk past. Am I the only one left who remembers what it was like? Totti wondered as she pulled herself along the sidewalk. How much longer can the city go on this way?

Her skin began to itch in a way she'd never felt before, as if mites had hatched in the marrow of her bones and were trying to burrow out through the surface of her skin. Her hands were hard and dry when she reached the salon, and they slipped several times on the door before she made it inside. Totti dragged herself to the shower and turned the faucet as hot as she could stand it, which was still not hot enough. She removed her dress and stepped under the water.

The force of the shower rinsed the rest of the hair from Totti's head, and she brought her hands to her scalp. It was a smooth, hard dome; her skin melted from the bone. The itching went away, and she looked down to see the lesions on her body swell. The skin around the sores puckered and flattened, and her wrinkles hardened into thin channels that the water ran through.

The sores bulged pink, but her skin was the color of dust on the salon's mirrors. Her thoughts slowed, too. The fear that should have been coursing through her entire body was only a stirring at the bottom of her heart. She thought of the blood in her vessels diminishing and of each nerve synapse firing less frequently than the one before it. The rage she felt at being taken prisoner in her own body registered as a small prick in her right temple.

She turned off the water and stepped from the shower. Her toenails scraped the bare floorboards and grew longer and sharper with each step. When she stood before the mirror again, she saw that the sores had swelled to the size of her fist. Her slow mind couldn't register the horror she might have felt at her reflection.

Instead, she felt a pulse in her brain like an unfurled secret. The air grew heavy with the scent of citrus, and one by one the lesions on Totti's body opened into fat blossoms. They masked the gnarled bones in her wrist like lush corsages, and Totti touched the magenta centers like small starbursts. She looked in the mirror, and her tears ran down her face and fell among the petals like dewdrops. It had been a long time since she felt beautiful. She shuffled forward to one of the salon's chairs and pressed her solid weight against it until the chair toppled from hole in the ground. She stepped one foot and then the other into the soft mud and pushed her toes deep into the ground. She looked up to see rats scurrying along the salon's rotting beams and stretched her arms above her until she could feel her fingers brushing away old webs.

My papí was on the demolition crew contracted to tear down the building. He said he was lucky there were ten other guys with him that day because the last thing he expected to see was a huge tree blooming in a dark building, and he wouldn't have known what to do if he'd been alone. They looked for holes in the roof where light might have gotten through to make something so strange happen, but they couldn't find any. A couple of the men fell on their knees

and started praying. They thought it was a miracle from the Virgin. The men thought about moving the tree, but its roots spread beneath the entire foundation, like it had always been there. Everyone agreed it was too beautiful to cut down, so they decided to leave it and took the building down around it.

It was Totti? Rosita whispers.

Cielo shrugs. When she wasn't with her relative, some people thought she must have died alone in the apartment. But none of the men found any sign of Totti anywhere, no bones, nada. Some people say that the hood was no place for an old lady like Totti, and she probably got fed up with all the ugliness and left a long time ago.

But that's not what happened, Rosita says.

That's not what happened, Enano and Chucho agree.

Everyone in the building knows, Cielo says. We all take care of that tree. Even if it isn't Totti, isn't it the prettiest thing in the whole hood?

On the other side of the street, a few petals fall from the branches. Look! Chucho shouts and he, Enano and Cielo run across. Rosita watches and scrubs off the pink chalk from the cement with the heel of her hand before she joins them.

## Divine Intervention

Maribel Fillaos  
March 19, 2011  
Metairie, LA

“The most dangerous part of the journey is from McAllen to Houston. It’s fifteen hours walking without stopping, with nothing, only water. They fill a jug with five liters of water. Immigration flies overhead looking for people who are crossing the desert. They don’t catch the coyotes because they know the desert very well.

So much walking hurts. My bones hurt. It wasn’t so much my muscles. Sure, your muscles hurt because at a certain point your legs feel as if they’re carrying a tremendous weight, like a block. I lifted my legs, and it seemed like I couldn’t go any farther. I couldn’t stand it. My muscles hurt, but I could also feel it in my bones.

You go on that journey knowing you might die on the way. You know that going in. I always thank God because we arrived all right and nothing happened to us. Yes, we suffered, but everyone suffers on the journey. There are people who suffer more than we did. You go hungry. You have to walk so much. You have to walk with blisters. The sun beats down and burns you. There are horrible mosquitoes. There was a moment where I swear I couldn’t walk any farther. And I always say it was God who walked for me then. Because I knew I couldn’t anymore.”

## Liminal Butterflies

Not being able to swallow comfortably drives Nadia crazy. In the break room, she stands next to the cooler with a paper cone of water and tries to rinse the congestion from her throat. Nadia's typically the first person at the office. By only switching on a few lights, she maintains a comfortable dimness in her area for the first hour while she settles into work. And she grinds the beans herself, so she never doubts whether her cup of coffee's fresh. The lump in her throat thickens. She takes a few deep breaths to clear it out. Eh-eh-*hem*, eh-eh-*hem*! No luck.

"Just hock it up." She hears Javier's voice behind her. Nadia raises her head and closes her eyes.

"You're here early," she says to the ceiling.

Javier fills an aluminum water bottle from the cooler. "Conference call with Bolivia. Microfinance training." He smiles at Nadia as if she couldn't possibly understand. "Technical stuff."

You teach banks how to process fifty-dollar loans for people in third-world countries, she wants to say. What's technical?

He crosses the room, taps on the empty coffee pot and looks at her. Nadia has an urge to expel the lump in her throat at his face. He knows coffee brewing isn't part of her job. "Sorry," she says. "I'll let you know when it's done."

He nods like he's done her a service and leaves. Nadia brews a pot of regular blend, fills her mug and dumps the rest in the sink. She brews a new pot with decaf and calls Javier.

"Coffee's ready."

At her desk, Nadia cleans her work area to reestablish order to the morning. She runs a disinfecting wipe over her keyboard and around each of her pens. Her job is to make sure the company's field advisors acclimate to their assignments abroad as seamlessly as possible. When she first joined the company eight years ago, she thought she might join her colleagues overseas one day. Nadia longs to see the world outside of her bowl of a city. In college she imagined studying abroad in Tokyo or Marrakech, swapping sashimi for crawfish or couscous for dirty rice. But every time a travel opportunity presents itself, there always seems to be some reason to stay. She still gets butterflies in her stomach when she thinks of all that could go wrong in a foreign place. She keeps lists of troubles the field advisors need to look out for during their placements: things like dengue fever, food riots, military coups.

As Nadia wipes each of her paper clips, a coughing fit grips her, and she has trouble catching her breath. She reaches in the desk drawer for her bag of cough drops. Her throat clogs, and, before Nadia can remove the cough drop from its wrapper, she hacks up a glutinous wad over her keyboard. Horrified, she snatches a tissue from the box on her desk and glances around to make sure no one's seen. The lump on the keyboard is sticky and a color that she doesn't associate with bodily fluids. The silver mass reminds Nadia of a raw oyster. She's both revolted and disturbed; she rips several more disinfecting wipes from the container and scoops the mess into the trash.

Nadia moves with the same current of traffic she's followed for the past decade. She often stops beside the same vehicles during her evening commute. The woman in the white Escalade who

steers with her wrists, a Diet Coke in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The man in the blue Honda Civic who sings along with the radio. Nadia can spin the dial to match her station to his; he prefers oldies, but once or twice she's caught him tuned in to old-school hip hop. Nadia listens to *All Things Considered* on NPR. The familiar voices of the male and female hosts soothe her, and she appreciates the show's consistent format. Top headlines in the first half of the program, personal interest stories in the second, traffic at ten and twenty past the hour. By the time Nadia gets home, the day's worries have been wiped from her mind. But today she's run down. The congestion in her throat's spread, and coughs burst from her chest like mini explosions.

Her boyfriend Rafa's keys hang from the front door of their shotgun apartment, and the pinched nerve in her lower back flares. He knows she has a thing about keeping doors locked. Inside, Nadia can see all the way back to the bedroom where Rafa has his suitcase open on the bed. Her purse knocks a framed picture from the bookshelf as she passes through the living room. It clatters on the floor, and she stoops to pick it up.

"Hey," Rafa calls from the back. "Have you seen my red Moleskine?"

"It's not with all the others?" Rafa's a photo journalist, and Nadia's framed as many of his photographs as she can fit in their apartment. Portraits of Bedouin campfires, Guatemalan tapestries, and the waterfalls at Iguazu hang on the walls. It's a little like traveling the world without ever leaving her living room. She looks at the photo in her hands, this one of the monarch butterfly reserve in Michoacán. The treetops droop orange with the weight of a million butterflies. She sets the frame back on the bookshelf in front of her old international relations textbooks and back issues of *Foreign Affairs*.

In the bedroom Rafa sticks his butt out from under the bed. A pile of socks brims over the edge of his suitcase, and she sits on the bed and digs through the pile to match pairs.

“Aha!” Rafa cries after a moment. He swoops his red Moleskine above his head with a flourish. “My elusive little friend.” He tosses the journal into his suitcase and flops onto his stomach beside her. She lines the edges of the suitcase with balls of folded socks and tucks the journal into a corner.

“Light of my life, where would I be without your impeccable packing skills?”

“Barefoot in Bali, or wherever you’re off to now.”

“Munich.” Rafa flips onto his back and shakes both fists at the ceiling. “Eighteen hours on a plane! Again. Oh, Nadi,” he rests his hand on her lower back. “You have it so easy.”

Something stirs in her chest, and a clot swells in her throat. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Rafa detects the edge in her voice and sits up. “You don’t have to deal with the tempestuous world of transatlantic flights. Sometimes I wish for your commute.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Really.” He rubs the back of her neck. “Have you thought anymore about my mother’s birthday?”

“I can’t get my visa in time.” She pulls away from his touch. It’s not that Nadia doesn’t want go to Brazil. As long as she’s known Rafa, she’s imagined a place for herself in one of his portraits. She envisions a photo on their wall of her standing on a Brazilian beach, a real life girl from Ipanema. But it’s too much, going so far away, praying the plane doesn’t go down over the Amazon, relying on Rafa for all communication.

Rafa waves away her protests. “You can have those things expedited.”

Nadia feels cornered. There's a tickle in her chest, and she bends over with the force of her cough. It sounds thick and rough.

"Woah," Rafa says and rubs her back. "Sounds like a hairball. You getting sick?"

"I think so. I feel like crap."

"I've got to run to the drug store for razors. Want me to grab cough syrup?"

"Please."

"Madame," he says and slides into his yellow and green flip flops. "I shall return."

When the front door closes behind him, Nadia shuffles to the fridge. She rummages through the shelves until she finds a leftover container of Rafa's favorite pho in the back. She heats up the soup and settles on the couch with the steaming bowl and flips through the current issue of *National Geographic*.

"You're eating my pho?" Rafa asks when he returns.

"I'm sure you can get amazing pho next time you're in Ha Noi." She doesn't look up from the magazine. "I can't look forward to that with my commute." The plastic bag with the razors and cough syrup rustles as he walks past.

The cough medicine doesn't work; Nadia can't sleep even though she's exhausted and feverish.

Rafa snores and drapes an arm across her body. She wants to smother him with a pillow.

Another coughing fit seizes her, and she makes her way to the bathroom so she won't wake him.

By the time she flicks on the light, she feels as though she might choke on her own phlegm. She can't bring up or swallow the ball in her throat. The mass grows with each inhalation, and the

rattling in her chest gets louder. Nadia studies her yellowed complexion in the mirror. Beads of perspiration gather at her temples. She forces the biggest cough she can manage and the bulge in her throat splatters across the mirror and masks her reflection.

Fear replaces the tightness in her chest; something's wrong. The substance clinging to the mirror isn't yellow or green or any color that denotes sickness or infection. Under the bathroom lights, it's silvery-white but contains a myriad of color, like the surface of a soap bubble or a puddle of car oil. The thing from her throat doesn't resemble mucous at all. It's not slimy but porous. More like a web than a solid mass. Nadia rips a few sheets of toilet paper from the roll and wipes the mirror. The substance clings to the paper but stretches as Nadia pulls her hand away. How can this be from her lungs, her body? She tears more toilet paper, holds it under the running faucet and scrubs the mirror. The substance slips off, and Nadia flushes it down the toilet. Shaken, she returns to bed and presses her body against Rafa's for comfort. Exhaustion consumes her, and within minutes she drifts into a deep sleep.

The airport sets Nadia on edge. She doesn't understand Rafa's casual attitude about air travel. How can he trust a handful of strangers in an air traffic control tower to get him off the ground safely? All it takes is one mishap—a pulmonary embolism, a spilled cup of coffee—to divert a controller's attention just long enough for planes to collide. Rafa has no way to know whether the men in the tower are competent. It's the same with TSA. Last time he traveled, Rafa told her how his pocketknife made it through the X-ray machine while the lady behind him had her

perfume confiscated for not being in a plastic bag. Airport security's a farce; there's no way anyone can account for all the variables.

The roar of ascending planes echoes the sound in her lungs. She wipes sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. Rafa pulls his suitcase from the trunk. "I don't want to leave you like this," he tells her.

"I'll be okay," she assures him. "It's probably just bronchitis."

"Did you get an appointment?"

She nods. She's already emailed and called in sick to work.

"I'll call you as soon as I get to the hotel." He kisses her forehead. "And when you're feeling better, don't forget to apply for a visa."

Nadia coughs a lump onto her tongue. She holds it in her mouth and smiles until Rafa's well inside the terminal. Then she spits the thing into the gutter. It clings to the curb in a way that reminds Nadia of a spider's egg sack she found in the back shed last week while she swept behind the washing machine.

Nadia hates the paper lining Dr. Garcia uses to cover his examining table. The tissue beneath her rustles no matter how still she sits. She hasn't been here for a couple years; not since the India misunderstanding with Javier. Nadia's chest quickens with the memory. Dr. Garcia administered vaccinations for yellow fever and Hepatitis B. Her company required all field advisors to get vaccinated before they left the country.

"How exciting for you, Nadia," he said as the needle pricked her arm.

“I hope so,” Nadia said. She chewed her fingernail and watched liquid flow out of the syringe.

“When do you leave?”

“Two weeks.”

A week later, she told Javier she couldn’t go through with it.

“What are you talking about?” They were in the hallway between her desk and his office. Javier’s eyebrows knitted together like twin caterpillars on his forehead. “You’ve filed all the paperwork. Your placement’s already been processed.”

“I just don’t think I’m ready.” She spoke to the tassel on Javier’s polished loafer. It had a tangle that she wanted to straighten out.

“The Mumbai folks are expecting you. We booked your flight.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I can’t believe this, Nadia.” He folded his arms and looked down at the file he held with her name on it. He handed it back to her. “Don’t expect me to consider you for any other openings on my team.”

“I understand.”

Dr. Garcia hangs Nadia’s chest x-rays on a lighted panel. “Looks like acute pneumonia,” he says. “It’s why your lungs are making those sounds.”

He circles his finger around several white swirls on the film. The image looks like something Nadia would see in a haunted house. Several silky clouds inhabit each of her lungs. They hang by diaphanous strands of fiber and are so thick in some places that they obscure her ribcage. They look airy and delicate, not like the tough clump she spat into the gutter. Nadia feels a low rumble in her lungs. She opens her mouth to tell Dr. Garcia about the bathroom

mirror, but an enormous white wad erupts from her mouth. It sails across the room and smacks against a jar of cotton balls. Dr. Garcia's eyes widen. He walks over to the counter where the jar of cotton balls sits and bends over to study the mess.

"I've never seen anything like this." His voice is soft like the cotton in the jar. The mass is barely wet, almost dewy, and shimmers under the fluorescent lights as if woven from silk or fine crystal. Nadia thinks of dusty attics and abandoned sheds. The doctor removes a plastic cup from the cabinet over the counter and a tongue depressor from the jar next to the cotton balls. He scrapes the mass from the jar. It sticks easily, and Dr. Garcia tries for several minutes to tap it into the cup before he gives up and screws the cap over the tongue depressor.

"I'm sending this to the lab," he announces.

"What is it?" Nadia's face is hot. She should've at least tried to dig around in her purse for a Kleenex.

"Well," he says. He lowers his head and scribbles something into Nadia's file. His silver hair shines like the mass inside the cup. "I'm not sure. I'm going to write you a prescription for some antibiotics. Take two when you get home, and don't exert yourself."

Nadia pulls her sweater around her shoulders. "I should stay home from work then?"

"Of course." He tries to cover the tremor in his voice, but Nadia catches it. Dr. Garcia tears the prescription from his pad and avoids her eyes. He smiles but doesn't touch her as he leads her out of the examination room.

\*

Nadia's not prone to nightmares. When she sleeps it's restful, an abyss of uninterrupted calm. But tonight haunting scenarios creep into her slumber: a blizzard outside her window when her city does not know winter, an earthquake that cuts chasms through the floor of the apartment, a riot on her drive home from work. At the height of each dream, Nadia jerks awake. Her coughs tear at the insides of her lungs. She throws off the blankets and heads for the kitchen. The tink of the metal spoon against the mug as she stirs honey into tea sounds like a tiny alarm.

When Nadia wakes up, sunlight pours through her windows. She looks at the clock; it's noon. Her muscles ache as if she's aged several years over the past twelve hours. She reaches for her cell phone. Two missed calls from work. She listens to the dim rattle of her breath while she checks her voicemail. Rafa's call interrupts the middle of the receptionist's message asking where she is.

"You should see where they've put me up," Rafa says. Nadia hears paper tear in the background. "I mean, you should see the wrappers on these bathroom soaps. Such decadence! I never realized toiletries were markers of success." His tone turns serious when Nadia doesn't laugh. "How are you feeling?"

"The doctor says acute pneumonia."

The worry in Rafa's voice reveals Nadia's failure to conceal the fear in her own. "How are you feeling?" he insists.

"Not good." Her voice cracks. "Something's really wrong."

"Go to your mom's, Nadi. You shouldn't be alone."

\*

To get to her mom's house, Nadia has to cross twenty-four miles of causeway over a lake that separates the city from her mother's suburb. It's a cloudless fall day, and the sun spangles the water. She's crossed the lake at least once a week since she moved out of her mom's. Monarch butterflies flutter over the causeway like they always do in late October. The still blue of the lake and sky on this sun-filled day intensifies the dread she feels. She wishes she didn't have twenty-four miles to contemplate her bathroom mirror, Dr. Garcia's face, or her suspicion that the thing in her lungs isn't pneumonia at all.

Her chest rattles once again. This time the lump that rises in her throat expels itself without pain. It lands against one of the air vents and billows out, ghost-like. The hairs on the back of her neck prickle, and goose bumps rise on her arms beneath her sweatshirt sleeves. Tiny drops of saliva cling dew-like to the silky fiber. She coughs again and again, and the silver webs stick to her dashboard and steering wheel. She wipes a gossamer strand from the corner of her mouth and watches the monarch butterflies dart against her windshield, but she can feel them whirling in her stomach, too. Their wings flatten against the hood of her car as they flutter through her path. Nadia doesn't understand why the butterflies hover around the causeway like this and risk being hit by oncoming traffic. They're on their annual migration south to winter in Mexico, after all. Nadia wonders at the idea that even a creature as fragile as a butterfly has the fearlessness to fly across countries, the need for change essential to survival.

She coughs again and gags on the webs that erupt from her lungs. She can feel them in her mouth, like cotton candy against her tongue. She digs around for Kleenex but remembers she left the box on her desk at the office. She wipes the webs onto the sleeves of her sweatshirt, repulsed that she has nothing else to cough into. The butterflies cloud the center of the causeway, and Nadia panics when she realizes she has no choice but to drive through the orange

mass. Black and orange wings smack against her windshield, and she switches on her wipers, but this only smears the colors to the glass and further obstructs her vision. Her coughs fling webs against her arms, the dashboard, the windows. Between the butterfly wings and webs from her lungs, it's impossible to see the road ahead.

An acrid feeling simmers in Nadia's stomach. She knows she needs to stop, but there's nowhere to pull over. She'll have to wait until she reaches a crossover. She flashes her hazard lights and slows the car to a crawl. She can't stop coughing. Butterflies flutter against her windshield. She can see their torn wings and slender bodies, and the simmer in her stomach rises to a boil. The cobwebs cover the interior of her car. As soon as she expels one web another rises in her throat. They come as rapidly as her breaths.

Heat rises along the back of her spine and agitates the back of her neck. She screams. The sound of her voice loosens something inside of her. Nadia tears the webs from her shirtsleeves, the vents, claws them from the steering wheel. "Get off!" she shouts at the butterflies on her windshield and switches her wipers to high-speed. Her coughs ease with her shrieks, so she screams louder, longer, until she's a ball of rage. She presses the accelerator as far down as it will go, channels all of her weight into her foot. The car surges forward, and the engine roars. She can't see anything and feels only the speed of her vehicle, the sound of her voice one long pitch. Her mind is a white orb of fury, madness.

Nadia's body jolts against the seatbelt as the car strikes something in front of her hard enough to trigger the airbag. She slams on the brakes and jerks back as a puff of powder fills the car, and then everything is silent. The sudden stillness disorients her, and she's not sure where she is. The inside of the car is like a white vault. After a moment she hears the rap of knuckles

against glass. She lowers her window partway, and the silk fibers stretch so that she sees the police officer through a web. She swipes her hand over the opening to clear them away.

“Ma’am,” the female officer says. She peers over her sunglasses into the car. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Nadia glances around. The inside of the car is a mess. The upholstery, the dashboard, every surface is covered with the silky content of her lungs. The officer stands.

“I’m going need you to follow me to the crossover, Ma’am.” She looks at the windshield. “You’re going to need to keep your window down to see where you’re going. Can you do that?”

She nods, and the police officer walks back to her car. Nadia struggles to sweep her thoughts back together into a cohesive memory as she follows the officer’s crumpled bumper to the turnout in between the north and southbound lanes, but the past few minutes fragment in her mind. A flutter of panic rises in her chest when she realizes she’s crashed into a patrol car. She’s never even been pulled over.

“License and registration, please.”

She leans over and tears more webbing from the glove box, shuffles through some papers, and hands the officer the documents.

“Do you have any idea how hazardous it is to keep a vehicle as filthy as yours, Ma’am? You’ve completely obstructed your vision. What are you thinking?”

“I’m sick,” Nadia offers.

“Clearly.”

“No, I mean, I have pneumonia.”

“Then you have no business on the road. Do you know the fine for hitting a patrol car?”

“No, officer.”

The policewoman sighs and flips open her ticket book.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Nadia explains. “I couldn’t see through the butterflies.”

“Butterflies?”

“They were swarming.”

The officer snaps her ticket book closed. “Please step out of your vehicle, Ma’am.”

When she steps outside, the sky outside is brilliant and empty. Several pelicans swoop next to the bridge, but she doesn’t see any trace of butterflies.

“I’m going to need you to walk in a straight line from your vehicle to mine.”

Nadia’s not sure whether to be terrified or indignant. “Officer, I haven’t had anything to drink.”

“Heel-toe, please.”

She does as she’s told, but her annoyance grows with each step. She hasn’t done anything wrong. In fact, the officer should be calling the paramedics, although she doesn’t have to cough. She takes a deep breath. No rattle, no congestion, nothing. Her lungs are clear.

“Are you on any medication, Ma’am?”

“No.”

“Maybe you should be. Please follow my pen with your eyes.”

“Officer. I’m not crazy. Look.” She leads the police officer back to her car.

The officer bends over and lifts her sunglasses on top of her head. She scratches a butterfly wing from Nadia’s windshield, holds it up to the light, and frowns. “All right. Ma’am, please step back inside your vehicle.”

Nadia drums her fingers on the steering wheel as she waits for the officer to run her information. She can't remember ever feeling so powerless. It's absurd. She looks at the crust on her windshield, her gossamer covered dashboard, and the stiff fibers all over her sweatshirt. A tickle rises from her stomach, and a giggle erupts from her throat. She covers her mouth, but another follows, and another, louder, and soon Nadia's unrestrained laughter shakes her entire car. She doubles over and gasps for breath. Wait until she tells Rafa.

The officer stoops at her window. "Ma'am? I'm citing you for reckless driving and failure to maintain acceptable standards of cleanliness for a moving vehicle." Nadia blinks at the officer and then bursts out laughing once more. Tears well at the corners of her eyes, and she snorts and wipes them away.

"I can't let you drive your vehicle like this," the officer continues. She speaks very slowly as if Nadia can't understand English. "I'm calling a tow. Do you think you can handle that?"

Nadia stops laughing. She takes a deep breath, but nothing rises in her lungs. She coughs, but can only manage a pea-sized wad that she spits out the window at the officer's hip. Then she cracks up all over again.

The officer glances down and raises an eyebrow at Nadia. "Control yourself, Ma'am," she says and wipes the glob away with her ticket book. Nadia rests against the steering wheel to catch her breath. "Ma'am?" the officer tries again, but Nadia's laughing too hard to respond.

## Conduction Anesthesia

Jose Martinez  
August 31, 2009  
Treme, New Orleans, LA

“We fit in one van, thirty-two people. We lay in the back along the length of the van. Three rows of ten on top of one another. At first it was fine because I was on top. The ones on the bottom it was hard for. After a time, we stopped because there was a problem with the van, so we got off to rest.

The next day the van returned for us, and it was my turn to ride on the bottom. I couldn't move at all. I couldn't get used to it. The ride was about six hours to Houston; I don't really remember. It was very hard to be on the bottom all that time. My head hurt from hitting the fender. It was extremely hot because of the heat from the transmission. It got really hot down there, and you couldn't move anywhere. There was a kid next to me, about eighteen years old, screaming. Man, how he screamed. People were saying, 'Take him out!'

I tried thinking of other things, movies, to make my mind go blank so I wouldn't have to feel badly for him. They wouldn't take him out, and the next day we saw he had a hernia in his stomach. But even he made it over, too.

When we got there, I remember my entire body was asleep, numb, because of the weight of all those on top of me. No one who rode on the bottom could walk at first. Our bodies were completely numb. When we arrived at the apartment complex where we were to be dropped off, I asked not to be left alone because I couldn't walk. They had to lift me out of the van. I couldn't feel anything.”

## La Bestia

The first time Jorge hears the trains, he is lying in bed half-awake, enjoying Laura's rocking warmth on top of him. He feels her hands grip his ankles, and he opens his eyes to see her back arc away from him like a polished bone in the gray morning light. An aching groan escapes him, and he waits for her to call out his name in response. A faint train whistle interrupts her, its sound long and low and mournful. The sound stops Jorge. No trains pass through the city. Laura looks over her shoulder and glances down at him. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he says. "Come here."

She lets out a frustrated sigh and collapses next to him. He strokes the inside of her elbow in apology. "Did you hear that?" he asks.

"Hear what?" She sits up now, rummaging through the sheets for her underwear, and then she is out of his bed getting dressed. Jorge hates the way she does this, leaves the bed unannounced, without a kiss or a good morning. An iron sadness presses on him. More than anything, he hates feeling lonely when there is another person in the room. He wants to confront her, pull her back in bed with him, lay her arm across his chest. But he feels he has to play the man, so he gets up too, pulls on a pair of jeans, walks her to his door.

"It sounded like a train."

"I didn't hear anything." Her hand rests on the door knob, but she doesn't twist, which makes Jorge feel as if he should offer something.

"Do you want to get breakfast?" he asks, hoping she will say no.

“Thanks. I have to get to yoga,” she says, and the door opens. “Maybe we can get dinner sometime?”

“Sure.”

She leans up and kisses him. “Bye, George.”

Jorge is accustomed to letting the news play in his living room on the large flat screen as he readies himself for work in the mornings. While shaving, he overhears a special news report on immigration. He dries his face and walks to the television where he sees a freight train teeming with migrants from Latin America heading north through Mexico. Hundreds of men, women, and even some children crowd the tops of train cars, cling to the sides. They are desperate to escape the pandemic poverty of their home countries. Several migrants have strapped themselves to the sides of the cars with leather cattle belts. Their bodies jerk precariously, but they hold on with a determination Jorge longs to understand. The trains are collectively known as The Beast, the news reporter explains, though he mispronounces *la bestia*.

The report flashes to a dark-skinned woman in a floral shirt and flat black shoes who reminds Jorge of his Tía Eda. She cries and cries in the shade of a fig tree because her son has been killed. “Se lo comio el tren,” a man standing to the side of her says. The train ate him. Jorge flips the channel to one of the morning shows. The beautiful host flashes impossibly white teeth and hair like sunshine. Jorge returns to the bathroom to finish shaving. He focuses on the curve where his jaw meets his neck in order to avoid his eyes in the mirror.

\*

The summer that Jorge turned sixteen and was caught shoplifting cans of blue spray paint, his parents threatened to send him back to el otro lado for good. We did not come to this country for you to become a criminal, their faces told him. He had only seen his grandfather in photographs, a large man with a serious mouth and smiling eyes. When Jorge stepped off the plane into the thick jungle air, his grandfather greeted him in the crowded terminal with an embrace that embarrassed Jorge with its earnestness. He shrugged off his grandfather's heavy arms and jerked his chin upward. "Sup, Gramps?"

"Jorge," his grandfather said. "Me alegro tanto de que finalmente aquí estás." His eyes glinted with amusement through amber-tinted glasses.

"Yeah, well. It wasn't my idea." Jorge lifted his suitcase and followed his grandfather to the car.

The humid air made Jorge feel as if he were swimming upright, and within minutes his baggy T-shirt was soaked through with sweat. The air conditioning in his grandfather's maroon Cressida was on the fritz, and Jorge stuck his head out the window for most of the ride. The traffic signals were also on the fritz, and as they passed through the center of town, they became mired in an impossible traffic jam. The smell of exhaust fumes and garbage filled the air, and Jorge noticed street vendors crowding the sidewalks. He could make out the dense scent of frying meat combined with something overly sharp and sweet. Jorge jerked his head back inside the car. "Ugh, that's foul," he complained, pulling the neck of his shirt to cover his nose.

"Nances," his grandfather said. He gestured to a wooden cart piled high with round yellow fruit the size of paintballs. Jorge watched as the vendor tossed a handful of nances and water into a metal juicer. She held a plastic bag beneath the opening to collect the golden liquid.

She knotted a pink straw into the plastic bag and handed it over to a waiting customer who slurped greedily as he walked away.

“What,” Jorge said. “There’s no cups here?” But his words were lost in the myriad of car horns, shouting street vendors, music blaring from open storefronts. Jorge strained to make out the lyrics, but the Spanish was different here, faster than what he was used to. He rolled the car window up.

“Hi, George.” Carol, his boss, approaches him as soon as he enters his office. “Can I have a word?” Standing in the doorway with the chain from her glasses tangled in her shirt collar, she looks like the grandmother from the ridiculous sitcom about anthropomorphic dinosaurs Jorge remembers from his youth.

“Sure, Carol. What’s up?”

She perches on one corner of his desk and eyes him over the rims of her glasses. This is her look of authority for authority’s sake, and Jorge curls his hand into an impotent fist beneath his desk. Carol is nearing retirement, and Jorge knows he is being groomed as her replacement. “I need that program budget by the end of the day, and I wanted to let you know that the audit will take place three weeks earlier than normal this year, so the department needs to get organized. I’m putting you in charge of Steve and Emily for all the preliminary arrangements.” She pauses, traces her finger around the handle of his coffee mug. “You weren’t at my garden party on Sunday.”

Jorge fights the impulse to roll his eyes. “I know, Carol. Sorry.”

“It’s too bad. You missed some delicious rum swizzles.”

“Sorry.”

Carol shifts her weight toward him. “George, when I promoted you last year, it was because I recognized your contributions to the team. The finance department is nothing without a strong team, and when you don’t show up for these things, it reflects poorly on all of us.”

“I’ll try to do better.”

“I know you will.” She places one hand on Jorge’s shoulder and leaves it there just long enough to make Jorge uncomfortable. He forces a smile, which seems to appease Carol, and she turns to leave. When she is gone, Jorge lets out a breath. A sound like wild harmonicas barreling down the inside of a tunnel fills his head. He looks out his window for the train he feels certain must be about to crash through the office and sees nothing but a full parking lot and the familiar mountains in the distance. He grits his teeth; the sound seems to last for an eternity, though probably not more than a minute has gone by when Emily passes his office to ask if he’s going to get that. The whistle ceases as suddenly as it started, and there is nothing but the hum of fluorescent lights and the ringing of Jorge’s phone.

Jorge stared at the ceiling fan twirling lazily above him. Though he had rolled his eyes at the idea of siesta when he first arrived, two weeks later napping had become his only escape from the oppressive heat. But he didn’t feel refreshed when he woke up. He immediately felt sticky, and the heat inflamed the swollen mosquito bites on his arms and legs. Gringo blood, his grandfather had teased him, sugar water for mosquitoes. It was fucked up. Back home his

friends were playing ball, staying out late, getting with girls. He had been exiled to a place even his parents hardly ever returned to. It wasn't fair. Jorge sighed and dragged himself from the bed. The last thing he needed was his gramps giving him shit again for sleeping all the time.

Jorge found his grandfather at the table on the porch palming a sweating glass of bourbon and ice. His eyes were wet, and he stared into the guava trees and ferns. Usually, his grandfather would listen to the radio, either a soccer game or some Spanish music from back in the day. Jorge dragged a metal chair to the table, but his grandfather wouldn't look at him. They sat in silence until Jorge thought he would fall asleep again.

"Eres inútil," he finally told Jorge, an insult that Jorge had heard his mother use on his father only once, the morning after his father slept away from home. He remembered his father raising his arm to strike his mother, but his eyes flickered and he dropped his fist. He turned away instead. She had been right.

Jorge didn't want to hear the stories that tumbled out of his grandfather, but he sat still. He heard about his grandfather's job with a logging company that nearly killed him, of working in the jungle through thirteen bouts of malaria. He learned about the cancer that devoured his grandmother, of the family not having enough money for morphine. Of groups of women who circled her bed, their fingers deliberately moving through rosary beads, their joined voices a dull buzz that failed to drown out the sounds of his grandmother's screams. Jorge heard about the older sister he had not known existed. How cholera shriveled her infant body to a bruised raisin by the time Jorge's father found someone to lend him money for a doctor.

Jorge's grandfather swallowed the last of his bourbon and tossed the ice from his glass into the ferns. Vivir, sufrir, morir. Live, suffer, die. His parents had left their home to break the legacy with Jorge.

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Like most restaurants in the city, the ambiance here fails to mask the mediocrity of the food. To Jorge's right, a hammered copper bar shines under glass light fixtures shaped like jellyfish. To his left, the other diners lean away from each other with Bluetooth devices tucked snugly in their ears; bleached and pressed tablecloths gleam between them like islands. Jorge wants to crack a joke about the restaurant to Laura, but the words that come to him are in Spanish, and he remains quiet. He imagines this is why she mistakes him for the strong silent type.

A band plays restrained jazz in one corner. There was a time after he returned from visiting his grandfather when Jorge wanted to study music. The melancholy and majestic sound of trumpets still seems a gateway to an inner world that Jorge will not dare to name. But his father scoffed at the idea of Jorge being a musician, told him he was too smart for that. *La vida no es un juego*, he said. Life is not a game.

Jorge pushes candied strawberries off of the top of the chocolate soufflé that sits between him and Laura. The fruit falls in a syrupy pool below the cake, and strawberry sauce splatters on his tie. "Dammit," he mutters, dipping his napkin in a water glass and dabbing the stain.

Laura giggles. She looks flawless in her camel-colored cashmere turtle neck and pearl earrings. "You never eat the strawberries," she observes.

"They're too sweet." A memory surfaces of his mother and father bent over strawberry fields in June, wearing loose sweatshirts and baseball caps tied with bandanas to shield them from the sun. He remembers coming home after soccer practice to crates of strawberries on the kitchen table, his mother kneading a hard knot from his father's back, his father's mouth stretched tight with pain, the menthol scent of Bengay a tangible reminder of sacrifice and obligation.

Jorge pays the bill and reaches in his pocket for a five to tip the valet. He sees his white Mercedes pull up, and the valet opens the passenger door for Laura, who climbs in demurely. She is petite, deer-like, and Jorge wishes they had more to say to each other. On the drive home, Jorge hears the trains once again. This time the sound is staccato, like puffs of breaths from some great and hairy beast. Jorge glances at Laura to see if she can hear it, but she continues her story about her latest art deal, oblivious to the noise that consumes the car. He sees her lips move, but all he can hear is the noise of the train. The sound continues for the rest of the drive home. At one point, Laura pauses her story to ask if he's okay. He assures her it's just a headache, uses the excuse to drop her off at her apartment.

At home, Jorge runs an internet search on auditory hallucinations, but as with most internet searches on illness, all roads lead to death. He could have tumors, lesions on his brain stem, some kind of abscess. Jorge decides to stop before he dissolves into a puddle of fear and anxiety. He determines it is nothing more than exhaustion; he must be overworked. He goes to bed and sleeps heavily, his slumber devoid of trains.

Once, when his grandfather was deep into his afternoon nap, Jorge combed his grandfather's bathroom for clues on how to be a man. His fingers wandered over the stiff shaving brush, the clean scent of his grandfather's aftershave thick in the humid air. He picked up a boar bristled hair brush, ran it through his own coarse hair. Jorge noticed coiled on the countertop the gold chain his grandfather always wore, the one that held the crucifix and his grandmother's wedding

ring. Its weight was solid in his palm, and when Jorge fastened the clasp around his neck for a moment he felt sure of his place in the world.

Something about the dry cleaners depresses Jorge. Something about the suits and dresses and coats racked together on an endless conveyor and separated from each other by thin sheets of plastic, each article of clothing a number. How the scents of cocktail parties, first dates, job interviews, are chemically stripped from each garment, and Jorge and everyone else standing in line with him will end up smelling the same. And he pays for this sameness. Jorge begins to hear a familiar echoing, the distant sound of a train whistle. Recently, the sounds have been gaining force. They muscle into his mind and flood Jorge's ears to the point that Jorge thinks he will go deaf from the noise. He clenches his jaw and stiffens his stance, determined not to reveal anything to the people standing around him. But the man in front of him speaks up. "Do you hear that?" he asks the woman behind the counter.

She stops in the middle of hanging his suit to listen. "Is it a siren?"

"I think it might be a train."

The other people in line begin looking around them to place the noise. They glance outside the glass storefront, at the T.V. mounted in the corner. The whistle grows louder, and Jorge is afraid they will discover it is coming from him. He steps out of line, hurries from the store.

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At work, his colleagues begin noticing the sounds coming from Jorge's office. "Are you watching something on YouTube?" Steve asks when he drops a stack of papers on Jorge's desk.

"George, would you mind turning that down?" Emily says when she arrives in the morning with half-closed eyes and a steaming mug of black coffee.

"Hijo," his mother says when he answers her call. Jorge can hear something fragile in her voice like the clink of glass on glass. He minimizes the Excel spreadsheet on his computer screen.

"Hi, Mom."

"¿Estás ocupado?"

"Not that busy," he lies. "What's up?"

His mother makes a choking noise into the receiver. "Tu abuelo se murió."

Jorge feels his stomach teeter and fall. Understands that the glass on glass feeling was actually inside of him. It shatters. "What?"

"Your grandfather passed away. Last night."

Jorge's heart is suddenly in his ears, and his hands tremble as he fumbles for his credit card. He gives his mother the number so that she can book her plane ticket.

When he hangs up with his mother, Jorge walks into Carol's office. She is on the phone with the auditors and raises a finger at him. Would you mind coming back later, her look says, but Jorge stands his ground for the ten minutes it takes her to get off the phone. She looks at him expectantly.

“There’s been a death in my family. I need to take time off.”

“How long?”

“Two weeks.”

“For a funeral?”

“I’ll be leaving the country to attend the funeral.”

Carol frowns and drums her fingers next to her calculator. “George, do you realize the gravity of this situation? We’re right in the middle of the audit.”

“I realize that.”

“And are you aware how taking this much time off will affect your professional credibility?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, do what you feel is right.”

“Thank you, Carol.” Jorge turns to leave, and as he reaches the doorway he hears Carol mumble behind him, “You people and your families.”

This time, the train that pierces Jorge’s mind is more than a whistle. It is a loud wail, and when Jorge reaches his desk, the groaning engine, the screaming of train wheels on steel tracks is oppressive. He pulls up a Word document on his computer and begins typing. The office shakes with the force of the train, and the shouts of his colleagues in the hallway sound faint beneath the shrieking din.

“Earthquake!” someone screams. Framed pictures that decorate the office walls fall from their places, crashing in splinters of wood and glass on the carpet below. Jorge remains fixed on his computer screen, typing deliberately. The wail morphs into a howling roar, and Jorge catches

glimpses of flapping skirts and polished shoes in his periphery as his co-workers evacuate the building.

“George, we have to get out of here!” Emily yells as she clutches the doorframe to his office. Jorge loads the company’s letterhead into the printer. Emily gives up and runs away.

As he waits for his document to print, Jorge feels hot liquid trickling from both of his ears. He reaches up to wipe his neck, and when he pulls his hand away he sees his fingers are stained with blood. The printer jams, and he loads the paper again. Jorge notices the lights flickering in the hallway, and a long, tubular florescent light bulb crashes onto his desk. “Get down!” someone cries. Jorge crawls beneath his desk as ceiling panels shake loose and fall around him in a chaotic rain.

Finally, the letter finishes printing. He rises with one arm protecting his head and removes the document from the printer to take to Carol’s empty office. Now the roar has surpassed any sound that Jorge has ever heard. It is nameless and wild, a sound seemingly without end. His co-workers’ cubicles topple with the strength of it. Jorge places the letter on Carol’s desk and walks down the hallway, toward the exit. Behind him, the rumble quiets. By the time he reaches the front of the office, the roar has lessened to a persistent harmony and is contained to the reception area, his immediate vicinity.

Jorge glances over his shoulder at his office turned to rubble. File cabinets gape open, and cubicle sidings lie atop one another like fallen dominoes. He turns the door handle without hesitation and steps outside into silence.

## Vita

Jessica Viada was born in Miami, Florida. The daughter of Honduran immigrants, she grew up in Southern California and obtained her Bachelor's degree in Literature from Boston College in 2003. She joined the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans to pursue a Master of Fine Arts degree in fiction in 2008.