

Out of the Valley

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But if these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in.

— Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

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La Llorona was a beautiful woman by the name of Maria, who fell in love with a beautiful, dashing nobleman. Every woman wanted to marry him. Every woman claimed to be in love with him, without ever even knowing him. Blind love, but it felt real. He paid attention to many women, and it seemed as if he would never settle down. Eventually, he came to love Maria in return. At last, he chose her for his wife.

For a short while, everything was marvelous. But then, with time, Maria felt her husband grow distant from her. She felt the love he had for her fade, replaced by his affection for other women, prettier and richer. They have two children together, but by then she feels him slipping through her fingers like water she cannot hold, getting word that he is spending all his money gambling, or on other women. She feels, little by little, as he shrinks away from her. She starts to see him as a stranger. When he lies next to her at night, she becomes consumed with looking for his imperfections, as if she might find some evidence of his infidelity written on his flesh. He begins to spend all his time away, traveling on business. The old women who live next door start to mutter between each other, noting the pair's remoteness with an old saying: "Amor de lejos, amor de pendejos." To love from a distance is to love like an idiot.

The end came on the day that Maria spied her handsome husband riding with a beautiful young woman in a big, fancy wagon. This beautiful woman lived on the other side of town—where only the very rich were ever seen. Maria suspected that he regretted his marriage. Watching him from the shade, she saw her children run to meet her husband. They gave him a big smile. He kissed, hugged, and gave them sweets, but never once looked in her direction.

Jealous rage boiled up inside Maria. When her husband and his new companion rode out of sight, she took her children down to the river. In a fit of insane anger, she threw them from the cliff, drowning both of them. Only for a moment did Maria come back to her senses, long enough for her to realize the grave sin she'd committed. She went out of her mind. She threw herself into the river at the very spot where she had murdered her children.

It was only a few days afterwards that La Llorona appeared. She came first only as a voice carried thinly on the wind, crying, "Mis niños, mis niños!" In her madness, and with the passage of time, Maria forgot what her children looked like, and so, she called for all children. And whenever La Llorona found a child alone in the dark, she took it. The child never returned.

what it's like

The San Joaquin Valley extends from the River Delta in the north to the Tehachapi Mountains in the south. 65 million years ago it was the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, but now all that's left is the salt. The summers here are dry and hot. This is the kind of heat you need to feel to understand, that sinks you and anchors in deep. The longer you're there the more you get used to it, that falling feeling, the being stuck.

In the winter, rain clouds cleave the sky, and the downpour can fill up the cracks in the clay like God's thumb smoothing out a wrinkle. In the deepest parts of the season, the fog comes on so thick it's like being stuck inside a cloud. One year it hardly rains, and those first drops hit in long strings of sound—relief/release, a combination. The asphalt shines. Nowhere else is the smell of wetness meeting dry soil as strong, so that it ascends, unfurls itself, soaring over acres and acres of things growing.

hiding

The kids decide to hide from their Papá. The oldest girl takes the lead on this. The rest of them wring their hands together, and look at her like they're asking for permission. It's an old game, and they haven't played it in a long time. When she gives the signal, five bodies scatter into different parts of the house. They settle into their preferred hiding spots—under the sink in the kitchen, the gap where the shelves meet in the living room, in the closet, behind the television. Suddenly, they hear a loud smack and someone saying, "He ran into the wall again!"

They reappear. The youngest boy hobbles into the room. He's missing an eye, but rubs at the spot where it should be. He looks like he might cry. They decide to hide all together instead. They begin to argue over the location:

"How about the garage?"

"That's dumb, he goes there *first*."

"The linen closet?"

"We can't all fit in there."

"How about the shed?"

They used to hide from their Ma all the time, and it seemed a lot easier then. When their mother looked for them, though they could not see her they could smell her by the scent of lemons that followed after her when she picked up an armful from the trees in their yard. Lemon trees still lined the back fence, six of them, in varying shapes and sizes. The kids liked to name them after people they knew: old Teresa, for the tree bent over the wrong way, or Leopold, for the short, squat one that looked like the butcher.

When their Ma looked for them, they were always found. Their Ma had been a finder, the kind of woman that could locate anything lost. They didn't know this, but she was born with the

ability to find like a gift from God—a finder since birth. At eight, she found her father’s lost dog stuck in a wall of their home, an event which was talked about in her neighborhood for some time. The dog, which had crawled into the wall through the foundation, ended up in the hallway between the bedrooms. And so when the family laid down to rest at night they would hear a howling, wailing sound that reverberated down deep in them. They couldn’t rest. They slept very little. For a time, they believed the sound to be the spirit of the lost animal, which must’ve died somewhere, and was upset at the family for having been lost. She saved that dog.

Like the dog, her mother found lost socks and hairpins and the backs of earrings and forgotten books, tutting oh, oh, oh, miss pollitos, rhythmic like the lullabies she would sing them to bed, oh, my little baby chicks. What made a person a good finder? They knew how to hide.

The kids choose the shed in the yard to squeeze into, accommodating each other in the dark. They are used to squeezing against each other. The five of them share a room, two of them a bed. They often hear each other from across the old refrigerator boxes they put up to separate the two boys from the three girls. In the room, the sounds of them ping-pong from one end to the other: snoring from the eldest boy, cooing and muttering from the youngest, one of the girls moaning and taking up all the sheets between her legs, the other two breathing heavily and trying to sleep through the noise.

Outside the shed, night begins to fall. The sun dips and the sky tints purple at the rim. Farmland stretches out beyond these few rows of homes and as the light wanes, the land becomes just a dark spot, like a hiccup between more important places. Soon, the only light emanating is that from the cars driving on the road. Then the night bugs start jittering, at first soft and then louder, and the sound open ups the land somehow, expanding like an exhale.

Locked up in the tight space, they begin to bicker:

“Can’t see!”

“Well, you only got one eye.”

“Don’t be rude.”

“Ouch, that’s my foot.”

“Your elbow’s in my eye!”

“That’s not my elbow.”

“Did you take a bath today?”

“Oye, it was hot out.”

“Is he here yet?”

“What if he doesn’t come?”

“Your legs are getting long.”

“Maybe you’re just getting rounder.”

The whole world might’ve spun once while they waited in the dark. Someone starts tapping a tune on their thigh. Then, other sounds: a cough, some feet shuffling in the dirt, the tink of metal hitting metal as objects budge around them, then, finally, a hushing sound over all the noise. They get quiet.

Sometimes their Ma would wait for their Papá, too. At night, they could hear their mother outside on the couch with the television on low, passing the time. She wouldn’t make any noise, but they could imagine the way she was sitting, with her legs bent underneath her and her knitting in her lap, looping her needle in and out. That looping—in and out and around—lulled them to sleep.

They didn’t know this, but their Papá knew she was waiting most of the time. It didn’t rush him any, though later he would think maybe it should have. When he got home he would go to the refrigerator before anything and crack-pop open a cold one. This was an old routine. He did that before washing his grainy hands from picking and digging, or his muddy shoes from slogging around in the dirt. He never took off his boots when he got home. Inevitably, he made some stain on the

carpet that probably wouldn't come off. He always thought he would get around to cleaning it later, but a man does the same thing every day for long enough and he can start to lose track of the mud on his shoes. He was not a good finder, and a poor hider, too.

One night the television is on loud and the laugh track keeps the kids awake. They hear a kind of conversation:

expect too much
you?
me?
that's not the point.
cursed
drinking now
enough?
and we see
not until you
like your father.
I don't
what sacrifice?
I'm not saying
What?
happy?
these are
choices
it's not simple

What their Ma and Papá talked about wasn't really a special kind of conversation. It was the kind of words that had passed between a hundred pairs like them before. That is to say: I'm finished. All done.

The kids listen as hard as they can, but after awhile there's no more talking. Then they hear footsteps that don't sound like Papá's heavy boots, and the front door slams shut, the laugh track the only sound in the house. The group of them is different after that.

Their Abuela would say, *que sea lo que Dios quiera*. She puts a lot of faith in faith. She feeds them on Sundays, and then, after their Ma leaves, she starts coming around all the time, bringing

pastelitos and new pairs of socks, and sandy, Tamarind lollipops. When they swore, if they swore, their grandmother would respond with her eyeballs so wide they were certain they couldn't naturally be a part of her face, saying, "Ya vez! You see how dirty mouths bring evil into the house!"

Papá would tell them not to mind her. He would say, "Don't worry about it, Ma. I'll take them down to the river to wash them off—no more evil. You'll see." And Abuela would answer, "Bien, see if I care if they drown." (But they knew she did care.)

At the river they would stick their feet in the water, watching the current dip and roll over small mounds of rock protruding from the surface of the water. They were in charge of each other. The youngest boy had to be kept from falling in headfirst trying to catch bugs. While skipping them, the eldest boy had to be kept from throwing rocks at the youngest boy's head accidentally ("accidentally"). The middle girl, who liked to find the flattest rock she could on which to sun herself, had to be kept from getting burnt. The oldest girl kept them, and the youngest girl, wanting to be like the oldest, helped.

Their Papá walked up and down the bank. This they always saw from a distance but never interfered. His head was always bent down, eyes trained on the ground. His shoe laces would drag, get grubby. On the bank, his boots made a wide, heavy pattern that told the story of how he had traversed—in a straight line, with some purpose, as if he was going somewhere in particular. At certain spots, the footsteps were deeper than others, which was how the kids could tell he had stopped to think for awhile. He never touched the water, or picked up a rock to throw. He never asked them if they liked going down to the river, though they did. He just walked, as if he could keep walking until the end of the earth, one footstep after the other. A man who can't find and can't hide can only really do one thing: keep going.

From inside the shed, they suddenly hear the screen door creak open. They hear one creak and then another as a pair of heavy rubber boots makes their way across the back porch. They suck

in mouthfuls of air. For a moment everything is so dark that they can't see any of themselves, as if they can't really exist. But then a shoulder pokes into someone else's and a toe gets stepped on and they know, or think they know, that he's going to find them at any second.

The crack-pop and hiss of a can opening takes up the quiet. Their breaths hiss into the shed alongside the sound, and dust swirls around them. They hear a creak and another creak, and then the sound of the screen door slamming shut.

They sit in the shed. The air inside is heavier than it was before, and it feels like years and years have passed to the ticking of their Papá's rubber boots making their way back into the house. They follow each other out of the shed: one, two, three, four, five. They sit on the porch together, hearing the shuffling of boots behind them again, a bit surprised, as if they had just been remembered. They do not feel found.

In the morning they find the hole their Papá put in the wall. Only the oldest girl sees it happen. She tells them how just before he puts in his fist he was holding the phone and then hangs it up so hard the part where you talk gets a big crack in it. She says it was like he hated the phone, but couldn't hate it hard enough, so he went to the wall instead. Whenever they use the phone after that, they have to yell so the person on the other end can hear them. "HELLO!" they say, sometimes so loud the whole house hears, "HELLO? IS ANYONE THERE?" Someone trying to sell them carpet once asks one of them to calm down. They say, "I AM CALM."

The hole was there for a long time. It became part of the house, and nobody ever asked him about it. But, eventually, they each take their turn measuring his fist against theirs. Eventually they each stick their hand into it to see just how much bigger it is than their own.

at church

On the corner of Peach and Tully there's the church where the Morales kids get baptized. First Ana, then Eloisa, Carlos, Rosa, and Hector. There they learn the smell of Frankincense with mass, which later becomes the scent they learn as part of their Abuela when she's warding off evil spirits where the ceiling meets the wall, muttering prayers under her breath and wafting up clouds of smoke. They kneel at the altar, crossing and taking their daily bread.

At church, Ana starts to look more like their mother. Eloisa, who sits besides Ana, just wants to be stared at. Rosa doesn't notice anyone's looking, folding the newsletter stuffed inside of the pew into shapes. Then Carlos starts dating some girl who he says is not his girlfriend because girls are gross it's just that she sat on his handlebars one day and he couldn't get her off and the rest of them find out because of the way that she waves to him from the third pew over.

Eloisa says, "She has more hair on her arms than you do."

"Don't make fun of him," Ana says, "It's love."

Carlos is just thirteen then but this is more than his manhood can handle and he kicks one of them in the shin (it turns out to be Eloisa).

"Carlito, you're not making trouble with your sisters?" Abuela is leaning over them, eyeballs protruding as she bounces Hector (who is still fussy) on her lap.

He shakes his head, muttering, "Not anymore than them."

That was the thing with Carlos, that trapeze liar, perfectly balancing truth and half-truths. The day before, Carlos hit a boy so hard he cried, but all he said was, *Hector's eye, what do you want me to do?* He gestured to the place where Hector's left eye should have been, *He was making fun.* They want to get Hector a patch, so maybe they can pass him off as a pirate, or just so people wouldn't stare. Hector's always been missing that eye.

When anyone gets too unruly, Abuela pinches them hard in a place no one else can see. That's how their people do things: inflicting the most damage in the smallest amount of space. At church, Rosa learns what a word that should not be uttered in church means, which she learns after she utters it to Carlos, who whoops loudly, interrupting the priest. Hector loses his first tooth stumbling down the aisle and tripping onto the corner of a pew. Eloisa rips her skirt one morning sitting down and refuses to stand up to take communion, something Abuela takes as a personal offense. After all the families in the building leave (and she makes sure), Eloisa finally agrees to wrap Carlos' sweater around her waist and walk to the car. Ana has her first kiss in an alcove where a poster of the Virgin Mary is staring down at the two of them (much later, she can barely remember the taste of his name—Ernesto? David?). Afterwards, she has trouble facing a poster of Mary anywhere.

Many years later, when one or more of them try to relate these stories to someone else, they remember very little other than the brick wall which separates the church from the street, where one day there are freshly-painted letter that read: *Please stop painting our church, God is watching.*

haircuts

When Mamá cuts Papá's hair in the kitchen, she puts a sheet down on the linoleum. Her hands are slender, bony at the knuckles. She struggles to hold the scissors at the right angle, which are really just kitchen shears. She takes a little off here and there, careful around his ears. Even after a bad fight, if Papá needs a hair cut she'll cut it without much grumbling. He won't need to ask her, he'll just show up in the kitchen pulling his hair and she'll answer by setting up a folding chair on top of an old sheet. If they're fighting, she'll work quietly, but the way she folds his ear over to cut around it, so gentle it's like she's whispering with her hands, betrays that she's loved him for a long time, and that she loves him even then, too. When they're not fighting, she hums some tune she's just heard on the radio, tousling his hair every now and then to see how it looks. She'll put her finger under his chin and lift it to get a better look at him, as if she is composing his hair in the model of someone particular. One time she nips him on the ear by accident, and they hear Papá swear some dirty word into the kitchen. She apologizes and tapes up his ear with a band-aid. Later, when the sheet is balled up and the folding chair put away, she is washing the blood off the shears when someone catches her face wet, like she'd been crying.

Sometimes the story comes differently. Sometimes Maria leaves the dashing nobleman instead. She sits in her house and gets bored of his good looks and all of his money. She doesn't like hosting dinner parties for his stuffy friends, or eating strange, decadent food, most of which make her stomach, which is unaccustomed to fine cuisine, upset anyway. When he isn't home, she goes on long walks at the plaza and thinks of all the things she hasn't done in her life, like bull fighting, or glass blowing, or even cake decorating. From the window in her room she can see nearly the entire city, and when it lights up at night she counts the little yellow windows one by one as if she is counting stars. She imagines all the other lives the people inside of them are leading.

In the end, she still drowns her children in the river, though she does it because they don't choose her, because they are stupid, and love both their parents equally.

in july

July in town is a stray tomato on the side of the highway tossed from the bed of a truck speeding northwards. In the schoolyard, Jamie Fischer is asking Rosa on a date, and she's saying no with her nose wrinkled up in confusion while Carlos is listening in from around the corner, biting his cheek, bleeding to keep from laughing. And Eddie two houses down from the Morales kids is limping pitifully in his wet clothes, hosed down by his mother for complaining about the heat.

In the deep lots out back are wire clotheslines with flapping underwear and sheets, property lines hedged with dried-out bushes of some kind of berry that didn't stand a chance. In the orchards the trees are planted so close together their limbs entangle when it gets windy, when they lean into the sun. At their feet, fruit that fell off before their time sweetly decompose until they're just brown mounds, small protrusions in the dirt. The canals cut into the land like cracks in a sunburn. Underneath the smooth current of the water debris tumbles, plastic bottles and old fishing lines, maybe from Victor Torres who sits in his beach chair by the water, fishing for fish he don't eat, passing hours making sure his kids don't come near the water, fall in, get pulled under, not like his first.

On the corner of two dead roads, the Jimenez brothers sell oranges at their fruit stand, which they name BA-DA BING from a movie they saw once at the drive-in, when the drive-in was still running. Ana is flirting with one of them while Eloisa watches, amazed at how her sister's shoulders rise and fall as she laughs, slender and sun-freckled, wondering how many years she'll have to practice to get that laugh, careless and sweet like a wind chime. And the smell of pork roasting on a charcoal grill awakens Hector from his nap, cooing for his Abuela to feed him. There is no

downtown, only roads leading to somewhere else. The land rises and falls like a sound wave, round at the tops of the corn fields and flat where the strawberries grow.

Here in July a man says please stay to a woman, and a woman says no. The man keeps his shame close, and the house where it lives becomes his reminder. It stays there with him, in the fork drawer, or under the shoe box where he keeps 2-dollar bills with the small hope that they will be worth something someday. He forgets about the bills after awhile, but the feeling is still in the faucet, in the water he uses to shampoo his hair, in the trousers he puts on for work, hemmed at the feet by the woman who wouldn't stay. Hurt becomes anger. Time passes. And in hating a thing for so long he sometimes forgets why he hates it, and has to remember to keep the hate going, which starts up the hate again, which was born from some kind of hurt, and so he has to feel the hurt again to hate again. He gets stuck.

And yet, not paying much attention, a passerby would only see what isn't: no opera house, no national monuments, not one building more than twenty floors tall. And someone else might see what should not: Rosa should not turn away from—Carlos should not turn into—Eddie should not want more than—Victor should not fear what he can't—Eloisa should not learn to become—Hector should not hunger for—

but a man *should*—a man should say when he's hurt.

lalo & carlos

Lalo and Carlos would grow up to be best friends. They were born on the same day in the same year, five hours and twenty miles apart. Lalo's mother preferred a room facing the west side, where she could doze off in the afternoon with the sun warming her bed. Carlos' mother chose the east, preferring instead to wake up by the light. The symmetry of their birth day ended there. Lalo's waiting room was full of far-traveling tias and tios and primos and primas, potential godparents, grandparents, future babysitters, and half-cousins of a kind (like Leti, whom later Lalo would lust after, though he couldn't be blamed, she would grow into a woman with a chest that could draw no comparison). Even his neighbors came armed with a plate full of pastelitos and warm tortillas that filled their corner of the hospital with the scent of spiced meat and soft dough. Later they would all eat more, drink more, celebrate, be loud, have their party broken up, invite the police that came to break it up for a quick bite, share a quick bite with them, and then get off with a warning.

In Carlos' waiting room, Abuela spent all her time trying to keep Eloisa from wandering off after doctors, and Ana from tearing pages out of magazines. The nurse at the reception desk shot her a look that said something like *control them*, and Abuela, already out of her element, was as apologetic as she could muster in a language that didn't fit her mouth, giving a hard pinch to each girl's arm. When Eloisa started to cry, Abuela said, do you want me to give you a reason to cry? When Carlos' Papá finally emerged, his hair was gathered on top of his head like a mop, and he was red-faced, like he'd just run ten circles around the building. Even Abuela can't remember exactly the first thing he said, but it was something that sounded like, "My boy." And the phrase was iterated again throughout the day, passing Carlos off to whatever neighbors stopped by, putting him back

into his mother's arms, taking him up into his own, letting Ana hold his hand in hers, even later when Abuela gives him his first bath, again and again, ad infinitum: my boy, my boy, my boy.

things delivered

Carlos and Lalo started working for Johnny the summer they turned thirteen. For awhile they really thought they'd gotten away with it, telling him they were sixteen and had worked on farms before, and then one day while they were loading feeding tanks Johnny stopped them and said, "Not bad. Maybe when your balls drop, I'll start paying you more than quarters." By then they had already gotten used to him, and leaving would've been like leaving your best uncle. Not in a million years. Jonny was an old guy, a bachelor, and as he called himself, an *entrepeenier* with an intimate knowledge of tits that, to the unprepared listener, made them sound like some kind of religion.

The longer Carlos worked there, the more he couldn't get rid of the smell. It made him go apeshit sometimes, that stench of fish, of pond scum. But the job paid. J & M Aquafarms was a hiccup between farmlands, but business was booming. The ponds, full of carp and catfish and koi, were punctuated by dirt roads for the feeding and collection trucks to weave between as they picked up fish and pond flowers for sale in big tanks. Three years later, Lalo and Carlos were sixteen and still packing for Johnny.

Holed up in the shop that summer, they tied up air-filled bags filled with delicate pond flowers. It was the season, and the air was getting so dry and hot that sometimes while they were working inside of that room it was like being cocooned. They packed water lilies and pickerel weeds, lotus and water hyacinths. Lalo, stringy and dark-skinned, worked slow and a little clumsily, which sometimes provoked Johnny into firing him for the day and, when the anger faded, rehiring him the next. As Lalo worked, an unlit cigarette hung from the side of his lip. It seemed to Carlos as if Lalo always had one there, a couple of muddy fingerprints painted on it from adjusting and readjusting,

putting it behind his ear and back again to his mouth. Carlos could see how the filter was already soggy and chewed up, and it wasn't even noon yet.

Carlos found solace in the repetitive nature of his work. He liked the rhythm. He liked the sound of his shoe stepping on the pond banks where the mud was soft. He liked the smell of the flowers sitting in the big tubs of water in the shop.

While they worked, Lalo told Johnny some story about a girl he'd tried to kiss. Johnny liked those stories best and he turned to Carlos and said, "What about you? Do something interesting last night?" His eyebrows, peppered with gray hairs, wiggled at him suggestively.

Carlos fought the urge to blush. He only waved him off, as if to say, what more do you need to know? But there was plenty left to know: He was sixteen and even though he'd made out with Lola and that freckly white girl Pauline from school, both in uncomfortable darkness, so that the bra-clasp was more of a Rubik cube than a hook, and that he'd said *Fuck* accidentally while fumbling to pull it open, and that Lola had misunderstood and shoved him off, and that Pauline was actually a prude and maybe even a little flat chested, he hadn't ever actually *technically* done anything more. And maybe Johnny could read this on him, because he only whistled through his teeth and left him alone. This was how it was. Carlos spent hours inside of that shop. He was a steadfast worker. He minded his own business. Not a bad boy, just a quiet one. The work had filled him out, and his usually thin, tan shoulders were thicker, more solid. A pair of knobby knees had been replaced by steady, albeit sometimes aching ones.

When the last of that afternoon's order had been bagged, they put some of the plants in boxes for mailing out and the rest of them in a big bin. This bin Carlos moved himself, shoving it onto the bed of the delivery truck as he made his way around to the driver's seat. Mechanical work, now. He had been running deliveries since he'd gotten his license, which Abuela hated, but grudgingly allowed.

In driving deliveries, he had learned to settle. Not to sacrifice, but become even, to experience something like equilibrium. As he drove, the land around him, like the work, was repetitive and rhythmic. Farmlands were interspersed with empty fields as he drove on, passing cows grazing or a few horses looking for shade under the last standing tree. Lone houses stood in the middle of vast stretches of yellowed-out grass, looking worn and a little dated. The smell was strongest in the summer when it stewed in the dry heat, a mixture of cow shit and fertilizer that wafted in and out of the rolled-down windows of the truck. Sometimes, he swore he could taste the air. The valley in which he lived and worked was flanked by two ridges, and the fumes of every kind of machine it held settled inside of it like a sinking weight. Even in the emptiest, darkest parts of the city the sky could still be starless and red. Rosa had once told him that the only wishes she ever made were *for* stars, never *on* them. But Rosa always had big ideas. Carlos saw stars and everything that came with them for what they were: just a couple holes in a sheet pulled tight to keep the whole world from going blind.

He closed in on the first address on his list of deliveries. As his truck rounded the last bend in the road, he realized he had a case of bona fide *maximus casaitis* on his hands, more commonly known as Big Ass House. It was one of those Spanish style things with imported palm trees and a leisure boat sitting in the driveway, probably for weekends at the lake.

The man who opened the door belonged to the house in more ways than Carlos could name. He was tall with a bright, white smile and dark hair cropped short and neat to his head. He wore a pair of colored trousers and what looked like a freshly-laundered shirt. From behind him he caught a glimpse of the woman Carlos assumed was his wife, crossing from one end of the hallway to the other, the smell of her perfume like pressed flowers and lemon juice. In her arms, she carried a pile of dirty laundry. A pair of basketball shorts that perhaps belonged to her son slipped through her hold, and she bent down to pick them up, giving him a cursory smile, as if to apologize for having

exposed herself somehow. The man led him to the gate, making small talk, and as he extracted himself to leave Carlos to his work, he muttered *gracias* in a way that was too big for his mouth, as if he'd known the word once, maybe when he was young, but had forgotten how to use it. Carlos only smiled thinly in return, muttering *de nada*.

He went about his work, lugging the bin full of flowers to the pond set up under the shade of a few trees. Thick flowers and shrubs, some probably imported, lined the yard in a zigzag pattern. They were perfectly pruned, though by the look of the hands of the man who had led him here, he assumed the owners had very little to do with it. It was something of a feat to keep a yard alive during the driest months of the season, when the heat could kill almost everything. He began to unfurl the flowers from their packaging.

"They got you working too?" A voice said from behind him.

He turned around, shading his eyes against the sun. "Yeah, you?"

The young man standing across from him might've been in his late teens. Even though his t-shirt was stained with soil, there was something about the setting of his jaw that made him seem older.

"Yep," he replied. "All day." He held out one of his hands, "I'm Black." He shrugged as if to explain, *I didn't pick the name*.

"Carlos," he responded, gripping the boy's hand briefly. Black bent down next to him, plucking up one of the air-filled bags, lending a hand. They worked for a short while in silence, unwrapping flowers and strategically placing them in the large pond.

"You're kinda young for this, aren't you?" Black said.

Carlos shrugged. "I'm old enough."

Black laughed. "Ever get tired of this?" He gestured vaguely around the yard.

Carlos considered the question, one he had not been asked before. Did he get tired? He didn't know about getting tired. He wasn't sure about what it meant to be tired of something; he only did things because he knew they needed to be done. "Sure, I guess," he said, setting loose the last of the flowers. The water lily floated gently to the center of the pond. "Someone's always tired."

Black wiped his hands on his jeans. Carlos was acutely aware of how Black was eyeing him, as if assessing his worth, and the feeling, unfamiliar, unsettled him. He'd known Black for maybe a half hour and his eyes could already bore into him with the force of ten Abuelas. "Not everyone," Black replied. He stuck his chin out towards the Big Ass House behind them.

"Yeah," Carlos agreed. "Not everyone." He lifted the empty bin, muttering his thanks as he turned to leave.

"Hey—Carlos," Black said, pacing alongside him as he walked back to the truck. "Me and my boys are throwing a party tomorrow. It'll be big. You down?"

Out of the sun, Carlos got a good look at Black. He was taller by a few inches, but when he addressed Carlos it was with his head tipped to the side, as if the effort it took to speak to him should be valued in some way. Carlos said, "Yeah, okay."

"Good. We're gonna show you how to get less tired."

Carlos didn't know what that meant, but Black's voice was steady and commanding and he took it to be some kind of truth.

Black glanced at the name of the farm on the truck and said, "I'll pick you up at your shop—I know where it's at," he paused. "And hey—no friends, okay?"

Carlos nodded as he shut the driver's door shut. No friends, just him. Less tired, whatever that meant.

Sometimes, Carlos would get up before anyone else did. Hector could sleep through anything, snoring as loudly and contently as he had when he was a baby. In time, the girls had made their own space in another room in the house, and he no longer worried about tip-toeing around in the middle of the night. Still, when he wanted to make the least noise it seemed as if every step he took made something in the house creak. Sometimes he swore each crack in the walls of the house was a gap that was growing so big that he could feel the suction of the air going inward, as if it would take him whole.

One morning, much earlier than anyone had sense to be awake, he had caught Papá in the kitchen. He was still wearing his work clothes and Carlos wasn't sure whether he was leaving or if he'd just gotten back. His boots had dragged mud into the house, and a trail led from the front door to the kitchen table where he sat drinking—or perhaps he had already finished—a beer. This is an image that Carlos returns to later, which he circles around until he can finally figure out what it means. It takes awhile.

Carlos sat down across from him, wondering if he would offer him a beer. He doesn't. He remembered instead how his father had run his finger around the rim of the can, a thin line of black underneath his nails.

He turned to Carlos and said, "Long day?"

Carlos shrugged. He wanted to keep up. "Yeah," he said. "You know."

You know. Papá looked at him for a long while, and Carlos could feel himself shrinking. Papá nodded. That was all there ever was—that nod, a small acknowledgement. He thought about

that morning a lot. He's not sure, but it felt as if something changed then that could not be changed back, and he had only found it out when the two of them were sitting across from each other.

"You're leaving early." Rosa's voice startled him as he walked into the kitchen.

"What are you doing up?"

She shrugged. "Reading."

"You're always reading. You'll go cross-eyed." He retrieved a jug of milk from the refrigerator, pouring himself the last of it into a tall glass.

"That's the last of the milk."

"Going to tell on me?"

She frowned. "No." After flipping a page, she added, "Going to work?"

"Oye, you sure grew up nosey."

"It's called concern in some families."

"Not ours." The faucet in the kitchen sink dripped as he drank his milk. They sat across from each other, waiting for one or the other to give up their impromptu staring contest first.

"Why are you always angry now?"

"Who said I was angry?"

"You seem *angrier*," she gestured vaguely.

"You're getting too old." And she *was* getting too old. She was wearing her hair long and making smart sentences, smarter than he'd ever made.

"Not really. I just learned how to be concerned. You should try it."

He relented, walking over and ruffling her hair. "Don't worry so much, you're not *that* old yet."

"You're all numbers today."

He dumped the glass into the sink, grabbing his jacket from the back of the kitchen chair.

Sighing, he said, “Just keep reading.”

She went back to her book. “Abuela will be mad about the milk.”

“I’ll buy some before I come home.” He turned to leave.

“Hey—”

“Yeah?”

“So are you angry?”

“Nah,” he paused at the door, hating how she always looked at him straight in the eye. Rosa never flinched. “Only a little bit. Like everyone else.”

She didn’t reply, only shrugging. He admired her restraint. Her eyes said *not everyone*, but she had let him go regardless. Rosa, she was always the easiest.

Leaving early meant he was at the shop before it was even open. But he liked the empty space. He’d stand there between the ponds just listening to things. Sometimes he’d bring out a fishing rod and try to teach himself a basic cast. The line always got caught in something though, snagging on weeds or the bed of his pickup truck, and the soft string of obscenities on his lips through his trial and errors with the rod were like a tune that ran parallel to the soil under his feet.

If he wanted, he could stand there for hours taking in all the smells there were: the wet of the soil and the scum of the water gathered around the reeds, the faint scent of cow shit from the farmland the next acres over. When it was dried-out hot, Lalo and Johnny and the rest of them would dive into one of the side ponds with the cheap fish, letting them make hurdles out of their legs as they cooled down.

“Catch anything?” Lalo asked, appearing beside him and pointing to the rod hanging loosely in his hand.

“Nah,” he replied, dangling the line in front of him. “Still shit with it.”

Lalo took his turn with the rod, looking absurd as he fiddled with it, a cigarette hanging loosely between his lips. “You coming tonight?” he asked, “with us and the boys? Johnny promised he’d let me at some of his best *cerveza* tonight.”

Carlos snorted. “He’s always promising you that.” As he watched Lalo fiddle with the rod he thought about how he’d shared his birthday with Lalo since they were eight years old, the year they met between classes. They had carved their names into a piece of wood on a lunch bench, declaring, *they’ll have to remember us now*. Even then the two of them were not really sure who “they” were, only that there was some unnamable force that they could not see or taste or smell but that was meant to be pushed against. When Lalo’s sister got pregnant they started to feel the effects of their home, how small it could be. They started to put a name to it. Then Lalo knew he had to start working to help his family and the new baby, and the two of them showed up at Johnny’s doorstep with a lie that they helped each other to tell.

When his mother left, Carlos left for awhile too. Lalo let him stay at his place until Carlos could go back to the house. Lalo never asked him to explain, he just let him. And then one day when Carlos told him *I’m going home, now* Lalo just said *you got two of those, man*. Over time, they had picked up each other’s loose ends.

Failing at casting, Lalo threw the rod back into the bed of the truck. He pulled at the collar of his t-shirt, leaving stains at the seams. “So you coming?”

Carlos stuffed his hands into his pockets, leaning against the truck. “Nah, skipping.” It was the first time he had ever withheld anything from Lalo, and he wondered what his friend would say about someone like Black.

Lalo shrugged. “*Bueno*, I’ll see you around.”

As he turned to walk back to the shop, Carlos called suddenly over his shoulder, “*Flaco!*” *Skinny boy*, a term of endearment, and Lalo turned back around to face him, cheeks full of sun.

Carlos faltered, because, after all, what would Lalo know about it anyway? “Don’t drink anything Johnny gives you. Been waiting to mess you up for weeks,” he grinned, and Lalo waved him off with a toothy smile, turning around, laughing his way back to the shop.

Black wasn’t one of your regular homeboys. Carlos could tell as much, because he didn’t seem to need to walk with those wide, swaggering steps. And he was clean, too, like he just rolled out of the laundry. It was an art watching how Black moved around the room, how he could angle his shoulders at that exact position that said *Que quieres? What do you want?* as if no one in the world had the power to ask him the right question.

He also had a really nice car. (A ‘69 black Camaro in pristine condition. Memorable and freshly waxed, Carlos swore the leather seats still smelled new. This was the first sign that if Black was anything, he had to be Heaven sent, because there was no other way he could afford it.) From the passenger seat, Carlos had watched the landscape unfold from the open window. Black drove fast and sure, and they sped by the scenes he had so carefully traveled through before. Now, they flew past him like paint smudges, easily replaced and forgettable. He let himself get sucked up into the wind, enjoying the immediacy, turbulent and thrilling.

They arrived at a house party in the middle of a street crowded with cars. Inside, a heavy beat rattled the worn-down walls. He followed Black around the house, watching him greet everyone he brushed by with some degree of familiarity, the kind that resembled some kind of kinship. Black was a big deal here. They ended up on the porch sharing cigarettes.

In a lull between groups, Carlos muttered, “You some kind of Jesus or something?”

Black laughed. “Ain’t no Jesus here, Carlos.” He took a long drag of his cigarette, flicking the ash on the porch. “I just know a lot of people looking for something.”

“Oh? What are they looking for?”

He shrugged. “What you’re looking for. A win.”

Carlos took a long sip from his beer. He shrugged, something that seemed to please Black, who leaned towards him, like a precursor to something important, “Listen, if there are two things everybody’s always getting wrong in this world, it’s karma and worms. You know what your parents, or your abuelos, or your tias and tios used to tell you? When you were eight, or nine, or thirteen and your lip is bleeding and the drawing you made for your teacher is all fucked up under someone’s shoe because this big, mean kid decided to beat the shit out of you—just for the hell of it?”

“I don’t draw much, Black...”

“That’s not the point, man, that’s when your mami comes along saying, *Mijito, you can’t always blame others for what happens. If you go to school thinking those kids don’t like you, then you won’t give them a chance to get to know you! Listen cielito, tomorrow you’re going to go to school and you walk up to those kids and tell them that you’re not afraid of them and that you’d really like to be friends, and they’ll accept you just as you are! I promise!*

Bullshit. But, if that kid doesn’t know how it works, you know what he’s going to do?”

“What?”

“Go up to that big, mean kid and tell him he wants to be friends. Then he’ll be running all over the schoolyard, trying not to get his face beat in again, and realization will crash down on him so hard it’ll make him cry. See, that’s the moment he’s gonna realize that quid pro quo means *exactly dipshit*. What I’m trying to say—that karma of yours? *Mierda*, all of it. All that ‘when you give you get times three, believe in you and others will too’—all that bullshit made up in church doesn’t work. None of it.” He took a long sip of his beer, wiping his lip with the back of his hand as he turned to

face Carlos, “And when you’re older, it just gets worse. Then you have people with leisure boats in the driveway making you fix their pond. You get it?”

And what do you say to a thing like that? He asked, “And the worms?”

“Oh, you know. They fuck just like everyone else. You can’t cut a worm in half and expect each part to live.”

They sat there for a short while finishing their cigarettes. Black excused himself for another round of back and forth with party-goers. Carlos sat holding onto his beer, feeling it go warm in his hands. It was the first time that Carlos had felt anything like revelation, and he buzzed with the sensation of a world that was as black and white as Black had painted for him. A sudden, mad feeling of possibility struck him.

In weeks, he was Black’s right hand. It wasn’t a hard job to get. The rest of Black’s boys revolved around him like a halo. Like skinny Lou, who wasn’t skinny, but didn’t get the joke. Or Vinny, whom Carlos remembered vaguely from church, the boy picking his nose and sticking his gunk between the thin pages of the Bibles stuffed into the pews. There was Ted who hated his name, so he went by T instead, which in Carlos’ opinion wasn’t a whole lot better. Carlos was let into Black’s world in inches. He was the doorman and the last one out of the party. He began to realize how Black could afford his nice car, his pressed jeans, his clean shirts. Black never asked him to do anything more than watch the door, but he didn’t need much imagination to know what was happening on the other side. He watched Black unfurl in millimeters, the set of his jaw pushed up in a way that Carlos analyzed and reanalyzed—where did it come from? Who taught him that?

At the same time that he became comfortable in one world, his other began to disorganize. The pieces started to jam against each other at the wrong angles. Lalo called after him, but he was never there. Rosa caught him sneaking out of the house on more than one occasion. She didn’t say anything to anyone, but sometimes the way she looked at him at dinner evoked in him a dull ache.

Then one afternoon at the shop Lalo asked him, “Where you been, man?”

Until they started selling the next crop, this would be their last job for a few weeks. After the years they had shared in it, the shop felt somehow like some sacred spot, not one that should be sullied by the outside, and so Carlos only shrugged. “I don’t know, just around.”

“No where I’ve been.” They worked silently. Carlos could tell Lalo was hurt, though he’d never say it. Lalo went about his work without looking at him, and he felt compelled to answer.

“Don’t worry, man. I’m still here.”

Lalo stopped twisting plastic bags. He leaned against the work table and said, “Are you?”

Carlos could’ve been honest. But he didn’t feel very honest at the time. If he was being honest, he would’ve said something other than, “Yeah, and what gives? Come off it, already.”

“You can’t just,” and here Lalo whistled through his teeth, making a vague gesture of dissolution, like pair of legs leaving a place, disappearing, “You can’t do that to them.”

And Carlos, who had always thought Lalo understood his family better than he did, felt for the first time that Lalo didn’t get it at all. Carlos had chosen Lalo, and between them there was the kind of loyalty that comes from knowing a thing again and again. There was no sense of obligation, one which Carlos often struggled with when it came to his sisters, or little Hector, or his Abuela asking him to do this and that, one that came from being divulged too much information too soon, from looking at his Papá one day and feeling a feeling so old he couldn’t explain it until many years later, that this was not to be a man to lean on, that it was him that would have to prop them up and that he didn’t know how to take the weight of it except to push back.

“Stay out of it, Lalo,” he said. “You don’t know anything about us.”

It was the first real fighting words they’d exchanged, and they went back to work at their separate stations, not talking for the remainder of their shifts.

One of those nights with Black, the group of them drove through the looping roads of the valley's outer towns back to the city. One last party, one last house left to find. There were two cars, and they weaved the roads together, tracing out the topography of that dead place between populations. Suddenly, the one in front of Carlos pulled over on the side of the freeway. The passengers inside it exited and shot in different directions into the neighboring rows of grapevines, most likely to find somewhere to piss. He leaned against the car next to Black, who almost never showed any sign of bodily discomfort. Even if he had wanted to piss, he probably wouldn't have.

"Carlos," he said. "What's your next move?"

"What do you mean, man?"

Black lit up a cigarette and tipped his head in a gesture recalled from their first meeting. "You know what I mean, you want to be part of something here or you just along for the ride?" The question surprised him, and without an answer prepared he stuck his hands into the pockets of his jeans. He glanced briefly above Black's head, where the sky stretched out behind him, starless, and red. Black continued, "Those *pendejos*," he gestured vaguely into the grapevines. "They don't know something good when they got it. You do. *Si?*"

Carlos nodded, "Yeah, I guess."

The boys, skinny Lou and Vinny and T and some others whose names he hadn't yet learned emerged from the grapevines, swearing, and laughing, and zipping up their jeans. Black flicked his cigarette onto the dry clay cracking open next to the asphalt. They all piled back into the cars and started on their way again. In the car, Carlos felt the landscape blur past him, pistachio groves and dead grass, twisted up weeds. Black took a curve hard, and Carlos felt the car tip just so, the headlights'

beams for just a moment lighting up the tail of coyote retreating into a field. The land had become nondescript, and that he had started to lose track of the details suddenly frightened Carlos very much.

At the party the dizzying night continued, and Carlos found himself leaning in a hallway alone while music pulsed around him. The room was smoky and dark, condensation from a packed room of bodies forming on the wall. Never too far from Black, Carlos watched him from around the corner as he talked to someone at the back door. The man he spoke to was big, thick at the wrists, starting to lose his hair. He looked old. He didn't think anyone here would've invited him. He couldn't make out what they were saying to each other, but the old guy's thick wrist came up under Black's chin until Black pushed him off, spitting on the ground.

When Black reappeared in the room, he brushed past him, nearly missing him as he shuffled by. Carlos reached out to him. "You okay?" he asked.

Black took back his arm, not meanly, but shaken and perhaps even a little annoyed. It was the first time Carlos had seen him like this, and suddenly Black looked much more his age, wearing a t-shirt his mother might have given him, basketball shorts dragging at his hips, bought a size too big, though it did not look as purposeful or careless as it had before, now hanging on Black as if he might've thought he would grow into them one day and never did.

Black said, "Let's get out of here. This party got lame."

Out on the lawn, Lou was standing over a small guy, thin and tan and muddy. His worlds had become so separate that it took Carlos a few moments to realize that the boy was Lalo, and that he was yelling something at Lou.

He froze. Had Lalo followed him here? Black walked up ahead to the pair of them. "What's going on here?" he asked.

Lou turned to Black with a blank look and shrugged, pulling up his jeans. "He's been askin' all these weird questions—"

Black interrupted him, and addressed Lalo directly. “What? They send you to check up on me, too? I’m selling, aren’t I?” He gave him a hard shove, palms open. Carlos watched as Black regained some of the set of his jaw, his lip stiffening as his shoulders began to once again fill out the gaps of his shirt.

Lalo looked to him, his face opening up with familiarity, and perhaps even some degree of triumph. He said, “Hey, I’ve been looking for you—we gotta talk, man. I’m serious.”

Carlos shifted uneasily. Everyone was looking at the pair of them, including Black. Carlos did not want to talk. He did not need Lalo to remind him of his responsibilities. He did not need to be reminded. He did not need to talk, to be talked to, to be made to talk. He felt himself pulling away from Lalo until there might’ve been miles between them.

Black turned to Carlos. “You know him?”

The words came out before he had even really considered them, “No, I don’t know him.” He could see how Lalo’s face changed, and he felt something inside of him change along with it. Lalo didn’t correct him. Instead he took a step backwards, as if Black had pushed him again, looking woozy and a little confused.

One of Black’s boys said, “Get lost *pendejo*.” Lalo didn’t move, and Carlos remembered that of the lessons they had taught each other his was how to be proud. That was his fault.

“*Put a madre*,” he heard someone else say, “I think he’s retarded or something.”

Black stepped forward and shoved Lalo again, this time so hard that he faltered and was tossed against the car parked behind him. Lalo’s head hit the metal with a thump that Carlos felt somewhere in his stomach. Black held Lalo against the car with his hand clenched under his chin, and Carlos could’ve sworn he turned back to him as if to say that this was for his own good before he sent a fist hard into Lalo’s stomach, once, twice, and then again. Lalo crumpled against the car and Black bent

down, whispering something Carlos couldn't hear before getting back up, hoisting his shorts up with him.

"*Puto*," someone said, and they all left together, Carlos too.

Days later, Carlos couldn't sit still through his guilt. He headed to the shop, which was still closed, and grabbed the keys to the delivery truck. He drove aimlessly. He ended up following the route he had driven deliveries through before. He started to remember the worse things at the wrong times, like how Lalo hadn't told anyone he'd gotten sick all over himself the first time he'd been drunk. Or how Lalo hadn't told anyone about Pauline telling him he was the worst at kissing. Or even that Rosa, even without being asked, had kept all of his secrets for him. He drove on. He ended up driving down the road of Big Ass Houses in which he had met Black, until he had pulled in front of the one that had been theirs. (Theirs. What a strange thing to think about—a possessive adjective, as if there had really been a *their*.)

He thought about this place like an origin. He hoped that it might explain some things. The street was so quiet he started to imagine what it might've been like to live there, and he felt guilty for peering into the homes of these people, not his people, as they ate their dinner at tables lusciously designed, lit by bulbs so bright it almost hurt to look inside. The man with the mouthful of *gracias* and the woman that smelled of lemons shuffled around their dinner table, setting plates and silverware. This he saw through the window. The symmetry of their motions pleased Carlos, an opposite to how dinners were set at home: Abuela yelling, some sauce dripping off the spoon she uses to point commands, Hector putting his shirt on backwards after getting out of the bath, Rosa trying to right it,

Ana and Eloisa bickering about the use of each other's combs, and Papá's spot at the head of the table, which they all shuffled around, as if the empty space had some physical quality to it that could not be crossed.

What happened next could only be described as some strange, sudden act of nature piecing together components. Suddenly, his eyes moved back to the road where he heard the distant roaring of a car coming in fast. Black's car, unmistakable, pulled into the driveway hard; taking the dip so fast that the trunk popped up and down long after the car had stopped running. Black emerged from the vehicle and ran to the front door, pulling up his shorts. The door opened before he had stopped fishing in his pocket, perhaps for a key, and the lemon scented woman put a hand on her hip, as if to chastise him. There was familiarity in the motion, as if he had done this kind of thing before. He seemed to apologize by giving her a quick kiss on the cheek, disappearing into the house. The two of them reappeared at the dinner table, where he took his place across from the man with the cropped hair. They bent their heads. Carlos felt his throat close. They were praying.

He felt his pulse like he was holding it in his hand. It was stupid the things he started to think about then, like how Rosa was telling him he seemed angrier, angrier than everyone else. Angrier than Hector, Eloisa, and Ana. Angrier than Abuela. Just him, until it was consuming everything and he was being flung out into the atmosphere, one second in his room and the next two hundred miles from the surface of the earth, getting stretched thin. Carlos had learned the kind of anger that was smoothed out like a tossed stone. It became so compact that he could fit it in his pocket, and after awhile he forgot that it was there, making one side of him heavier than the other. It was the kind of anger that sat inside and festered.

He started the car up again and drove off. His eyes stung. On the unlit road, he waited for some sort of sign, like tornadoes touching down, or volcanoes erupting somewhere, but no sign ever came, just more cows grazing and cars driving by with their headlights shining lights in his eyes.

Soon, he felt as if Black and his world were receding behind him too, farther and farther, until they were just specs of dust in the past. He would say *Lalo, please*. He would bend his head if he had to. He would try not to be so proud. But, after everything, he was just a boy; they were all just somebody's boys.

seeing red

The first thing Hector learns on his own are the red ant hills. That first summer he starts to walk around without help, these red ants crawl in through cracks in the house and paint a line along the bottom of their freshly-painted white walls, down to the bathroom where it's coolest. They crawl on the stucco outside, marching on a crack in the driveway. A ceaseless line of red hot ants, much plumper than all the black, harmless ones he's met before. They are more soldier than spectator. He learns that when red ants bite, they sting. He doesn't realize this until he's standing in the backyard on one of those little red ant hills and his toes are prickling, tiny dots scattering across his feet like freckles. He begins to tiptoe around the house, cautious over the never-ending lines and tiny stinging. His toes swell once.

When he's brave, he approaches the small mounds of sand and clay, marveling at the ability of something so tiny breaking into something so hard. But even if you wait for hours at the top of a red ant hill, they never come out if they're undisturbed. Instead, they're only sleeping inside of it, maybe waiting. (*Does a red ant sleep?* he begins to ask these questions, *Does it sting when it stings? Is it kill or be killed? Can it remember the times I've stepped on them?*) When the lines of red ant paint become too much, the family smokes them out with poison. This smell becomes familiar; bitter, but a kind of comfort. Still, the ant hills always return. And when it rains and they're drowned out, he's still thinking, in this small way, that it must be hard to be this kind of soldier.

what happens on handlebars

Hector was at the top of that hill every day. Everyone was always telling him to get down from there; that he was going to hurt himself. He was only seven years old. All the *viejitas* from the neighborhood would round up and tell him he was going to get himself knocked right on top of the head. Quietly, they whispered, *que pendejito*, what a silly boy—not very smart, is he? Quietly, they would agree amongst themselves that little Hector Morales would probably grow up to be a good-for-nothing like his Papi, who was letting his eighteen year old daughter take care of all his children. But Hector had that one eye missing, so they were always kind to him. Every *viejita* on that street was always sneaking him candies and sodas, telling him *que lindo*, how handsome he was.

The year he turned seven he adopted a bicycle from a neighbor who outgrew it. It was blue, rusty, and missing paint chunks where the bars were worn. The handlebars were grimy from overuse and under-cleaning and the tires were a little flat, but no one could find a pump, so when he rode it wobbled a little on the asphalt. When it rained, Hector would pull the bicycle into the shed, protecting it from the elements with that particular kind of a love that is relegated to boys and their bikes. He would steal a towel from the kitchen and wipe every curve and every groove in every pipe free of dirt, dust, and debris. It was the first thing he'd ever had that was his, not Carlos' and Eloisa's and Ana's and Rosita's but just his.

When he first started riding, he'd veer a little to the left side. That was because of his missing eye. When he moved fast, the street's angles started to blur so that the road often appeared uneven. Sometimes, he would be pedaling down the middle of the street and in the next second would suddenly hit a curb. He rode into things all the time. Bushes, mailboxes, even sometimes the *viejitas*. It was harmless. Most days, Ana would be on the porch folding laundry and watching over him,

yelling every so often when he got too close to barreling into something like she was some kind of compass.

But then he started going to the top of that hill sitting at the end of the street, just before the road petered out into empty fields. It was the biggest hill around. Hector used other words, too: enormous, super super, *gigantisimo*. He had tunnel vision, just him and that hill, and sometimes he felt like that thing was the only peak the earth had ever made. Even he was bent over eating cereal at his place in the kitchen in the morning, or taking a bath at night, or sitting near Abuela's legs when she was sewing something fixed, he could still feel the presence of the hill. He mapped himself around it. Every girl and boy on his block would take turns pushing their bikes to the top and riding down full speed, eyes watering from the dust clouds that billowed up around them. It was ritualized and, above all, *cool*. (He learns that word from Carlos, *Be cool, man*, he tells him on the porch one day, months ago, and Hector walks around all morning wondering how he's supposed to be cool when it's so hot.)

One day, feeling brave, Hector pushed his bicycle all the way to the top. Ana hadn't been on the porch so one of the *viejitas* from the neighborhood let her know where he was. She'd raced to scoop him up just as he was getting comfortable on the seat, scolding him, saying, "Don't do that, you'll hurt yourself."

Later, at dinner, Carlos said, "We should've never let him have that thing."

Hector was quiet that night, pushing his food back and forth on his plate, his lip jutting out—a petite version of Carlos' own scowl. Still, it didn't stop him from sneaking up the hill whenever Ana wasn't around. He would climb up without his bicycle so no one could get him in trouble and sit on the topmost bend, watching the road unfold in front of him. All that Hector wanted in the world was to ride down, but no one would ever let him. He could hurt himself. He wasn't even sure how.

Their fear for him went back a long while. When Hector was born the doctor walked into the waiting room, crisp white coat pressed at the seams. “There’s something wrong with his eye,” he announced, and the whole family was together, hoping against hope and praying. Hector doesn’t remember Mami like the rest of his siblings do; he remembers only bits and pieces: her soft hair, a pair of eyes, whose color he commits to memory, not knowing the name of it.

But the rest of them remember she had said from her hospital bed, “Get rid of what’s hurting him.”

Everyone had been watching over Hector since then. Everybody was always making sure he was holding onto someone’s hand. He couldn’t pour water into cups without spilling, so someone did that for him. He couldn’t play hide and seek without running into walls. He could still *do* everything, just tilted and angled. His other eye could make up for the missing one, just not very quickly. He could hurt himself if he wasn’t careful, if they weren’t careful for him.

He was sitting on top of that hill when the little girl who lived nearest it approached him. Her name was Soledad, which all the *viejitas* thought was appropriate, because she must always be so lonely with her Papi off buying women all the time and her Mami sitting in a room crying. All the neighbors and the gossips, they said she must have something special in her, little Soledad, a girl who lived happily despite her namesake. When she approached him that afternoon the sun was high in the sky, around noontime. Hector barely noticed her climbing up; he was so concentrated on the road in front of him, arms wrapped around his skinny knees.

Then Soledad was suddenly next to him, her long black hair tied into braids that hung over her shoulders. She was darkest in the summer, a deep caramel. Soledad was only seven years old too. She didn't know much more than he did. "You riding down?"

Hector shook his head. "No. Ana'll get mad."

"So?"

"So I don't want her mad."

"It's okay if you're scared." As she said this, her nose lifted higher into the sky. It was a sign of the woman she might one day become.

His hands made tight fists. "I am *not* scared."

"*Miedoso*," she giggled, scaredy cat.

Carlos had told him to never hit girls. So Hector stood up, hands at his side, muttering, "You don't know anything," before making his way back down the hill, his back to Soledad's giggles.

At home, he was still frowning. Ana floated around the kitchen mixing the contents of pots and pans. The room was filled with the scent of chicken sizzling and sauce boiling. Eloisa was sitting at the table chopping onions, her eyes rimmed red, sniffing every so often.

She collected the contents of her work into a pile, assessing Hector. "What're *you* crying about?"

"*I'm* not crying." He crossed his arms.

"Maybe not, but you look like you might."

He threw himself into the seat across from Eloisa. "Ana, I want to ride down the hill. Why can't I?"

Ana faced him, hands on her hips. She looked so much like their mother when she was angry, a fact which frightened everyone. Hector, who couldn't remember Mami, only knew that she looked like Ana when she was angry. That was scary enough. "Hector, I told you. You could hurt yourself. You're not like the other kids. Don't ask again, okay?"

He was little but he knew what she meant, and he sagged deeper into his seat, cursing the spot where his eye was missing. Before he could beg Ana for a second chance, Abuela rushed into the room out of breath, her hair sticking out in frazzled wisps around her head. She was crossing herself as she sat at the kitchen table. She shook her head back and forth and back and forth, but said nothing. Then she took Ana's hand in hers as she said, "He's leaving Anita, he says—he's leaving," she shook her head again, clasping her hands in prayer, "*Dios mio...*" Eloisa led Hector out of the kitchen. Behind him, he heard Ana and Abuela's muted whispers, rushed and urgent.

The remainder of the afternoon they forbade him from leaving the bedroom. Rosa sat with him on his bed, her hand loosely gripping his as she read to him from an old book. Her voice was rhythmic and comforting, and the lullaby soothed him. Slowly, after some persuasion, he found himself drifting off to sleep. In his dreams, he was at the top of the hill, sitting on his bicycle. He was three feet taller and his arms were thick and solid. He always had both eyes in his dreams, so that he could see the world twice as fast and twice as big, though much of this vision was in what he imagined his other eye might see, as if with two eyes the world would reveal the fantastic things that it'd been hiding from him—a dragon, maybe, or a super hero. On the cusp of riding fast down the hill, he suddenly felt as if he could fly. And then he was soaring through the sky, wingless, feet pedaling, the bicycle's flat tires scraping the clouds. But even as the wind rushed through his hair, a whistling sound in his ear, he could still hear Abuela and Ana's whispers, rushed and urgent, and he felt the good feeling inside of him dissipate somehow.

The next day he awoke to an empty bedroom. It was early morning and Ana was running errands. Abuela was in the living room curled up sleeping on the cushioned sofa as he tiptoed past her. Her nostrils grew and shrunk in size as she breathed, snoring softly. He stopped at the shed, thinking about pulling out the bicycle again, but Ana's reprimand was like a weight on his hand, and he retreated without opening the shed's door. For a while he sat on the back porch kicking rocks and picking lemons, but when he grew bored he gravitated back towards what had been on his mind all morning: that big hill.

Soledad was waiting for him when he arrived, playing with an old doll while sitting on her lopsided porch. When he came into her line of vision, she regarded him with new enthusiasm. Running over to him, she sat next to him on the sidewalk. Hector didn't really want to talk to Soledad.

"I heard about your Papi."

He shrugged in reply.

She continued, "I heard he's leaving. I heard the neighbors talking about it. Did you know he was leaving?"

"No." He wished she would shut up.

"Your Papi's leaving. And your Mami left too, didn't she?" Hector nodded his head. That's what they told him, anyway. She continued, "Then you're like me!"

"I am *not*."

"Are too—your Papi is leaving. Mine leaves too." Soledad bit her lip, adding, "It's because he doesn't love me. I heard the *viejitas* saying that."

"Well my Papi loves *me*."

She stuck out her chin. “*Pendejito*, your Papi is leaving you.”

“*Mentirosa*,” he said, *liar*. Again, he repeated, “You don’t know anything,” and turned away from her, wondering if Carlos would let him hit a girl just this once.

Shunted from his beloved hill, he was left to stare at the shed again, which he did with such intent that the space around it began to blur, and soon no other color was as bright as the cool metal of the door’s handle. Inside, Carlos had been punching the old bag set up on one of the rafters for what seemed like hours. Hector knew because he could hear Carlos’ fist hitting the bag through the thin metal door separating them, like a clock ticking time away. It was the only sound that cut into the afternoon’s noise, one littered with the hum of cars passing through, a laugh from a *viejita* taking her afternoon walk, and the bugs, nameless to him, which seemed as if they were always jittering.

Finally, not able to bear the noise any longer he opened the shed’s door. Carlos stared back at him, sweaty and red-faced. After a moment’s pause, he ignored Hector and continued to punch the bag. Hector walked over to his bicycle, retrieving a kitchen towel from the shelf. Quietly, he started to wipe away at spots that were already clean.

“That’s all you can think about? Your stupid bike?” Hector shrugged at his brother. Carlos was leaning with one hand against the bag, searching his face. “You have no idea, do you?”

“Carlos, *ya basta*,” *enough*, Rosa said, appearing at the doorway. “He’s seven.”

For a moment they gazed across at each other, but grudgingly, Carlos relented, and turned back to the bag, cracking every bone in his hand before pummeling the cushion with all the force he had.

That night, Hector twisted around in his bed sheets, feeling as if they were wrapping around his legs tighter and tighter. The house was asleep. He stared up at the ceiling, awake, counting the cracks in the wall. It seemed as if he'd been staring for hours when he heard noises in the kitchen that sounded like his Papi coming in late.

He sat up in the dark, awake and tentative. He began to remember different things that had happened in the darkness. It filled his vision like a fog, and he remembered the sound of static on the television and his Abuela praying and watching the refrigerator door open and close. He didn't really know what these things in particular meant, only that they'd happened at some time. It was difficult to sort them out, a bit like puzzle pieces. But Hector only knew how to match colors and shapes, not patterns. He smashed the pieces together because it was the best he could do, forcing the most ill-fitted things to rest snugly against each other. He was, after all, only seven years old.

Papi was leaning over the kitchen table when Hector crept out from the hallway. Later, Rosa would tell him he must've been the last person to see him before he left for good. He tiptoed over, tapping Papi on the shoulder. His father's eyes were obscured by his hair, hanging around his face loosely. He observed at Hector with slow recognition, smiling weakly.

"Are you leaving, Papi?" The question was abrupt and hung between them. Hector hadn't meant to ask it, it just happened.

"*Por un tiempo, mijito.*" *For a while*, he replied, ruffling his coarse fingers through little Hector's hair. His eyes stopped at the place where Hector's other eye was missing.

"Why?"

"To take care of you, to make money. But it's far away. You understand, *si mijito?*"

"*Si*," he said, but he didn't.

It was strange how Hector saw the world sometimes, with one eye making up for its absent brother. He clumsily took it all in, but it was okay that the pieces were ill-fitted, that they fell into each other at odd angles, that they met at all the wrong parts. It was okay still. It was some combination of these things that led Hector back to that hill, this time with his bicycle in hand. Soledad was sitting at her porch, this time without a smile. When she approached him she was quiet, and Hector was glad for this, because he didn't know if he could talk to Soledad again.

"You going to ride down?" she asked, almost shyly.

"It'll make Ana mad," he replied. "She says I'm not like other kids."

"Cause of your eye?"

"Yeah." They stood side by side in silence, staring at their feet.

"What if I ride on your bars?"

"What?"

Soledad brightened, "I mean, what if *I'm* your eyes?"

Hector considered this. He thought about whether Ana would be mad, whether he could hurt himself, but he decided that Soledad's logic was sound. *She* could be his eyes. He wouldn't be breaking any rules. He agreed, letting her climb up on top of his handlebars, and shifted the bicycle to face down the hill. She was giggling as he counted down before taking off, heart pounding in his chest.

They were off. "Faster Hector! Go faster!" Soledad said between laughs, neck stretched. "Faster!" she said, and he pedaled as fast as his legs could take him, so that every neighbor and *viejita* watched them speed past in a ball of color and laughs and dust. He was flying blind, but he was flying, wheeling through the clouds, the wind-sound in his ear muting the rest of the world to a dull

roar, so that it filled in the quiet spaces at home, so that it held inside of it Abuela's whispers, rushed and urgent, caged, harmless.

At the end of the road, long past the big hill, Soledad turned back to face him, exclaiming in whoops, "We did it!" She hopped off of his handlebars and he smiled wide, throwing down the bike and lifting up his tiny arms in victory too. When she kissed him—and she did, lips puckered up as if she had just taken a sip of sour lemonade—it was brief and impulsive. An apology, a triumphant gesture. They were only seven years old. And all the *viejitas* and the neighbors and the gossips, they all saw, they all knew that they were kissing away the hard parts.

a photograph

Abuela's one of those thick-skinned women, curvy at the waist. There's this picture of her standing on the *malecón* when she was a young woman that they keep in the house. She's in the back row surrounded by her friends, but it's her hair that makes her stand out, curly and rising in the humidity. She's smiling, and they can see how her front tooth is already a little crooked then, turning inwards. Though the picture isn't in color they can imagine how she's turning brown in the sun and her elbow is darkening so that it'll turn into the elbow they know, blackened and coarser than the rest of her skin, wrinkled at the bone. They can imagine that the way she laughs in that picture is how she laughs now, rolling her eyes back into her head, something that she also does when she's worried, or praying, or both. They wonder about that girl a lot.

the beginning

Something is wrong with Hector's eye. She doesn't understand the doctor, with his broken Spanish and flat English and starch, white coat. In the waiting room she tugs at her one of her granddaughter's sleeve, asking for translation. The disease, whatever it is, is affecting the baby's eye. They should remove it completely. That's what they tell them. Abuela crosses herself, muttering prayers, knowing that his lost eye must be an effect of all the anger of the family he's been born into, a family curse.

The doctor leaves the room, and the family sits alone. At moments of tragedy you think *la familia* will come together, because of the smallness of the room or how much your hands look the same. But no, the closeness lets us lie less. Abuela already knows this, but the rest of the children learn it too. They mourn, not together, but individually for the loss of the eye.

Alone, she sees more clearly the missing pieces, the weak points. It's appropriate that they're in a hospital, she thinks. Her father had been a doctor. It was years ago that he'd told her about the human body, how bones can crumble when they're ignored, how even the most important parts are the most vulnerable. She remembers this all now, trying to sort through the past, seeing if she might be able to strengthen what had been lost.

As a girl, Isabel Morales is in love with the world. Her father is smart and her mother is kind, and the house is large and comfortable. The city of Morelia felt smaller then, vendors she knew by name at all the city centers. This is the only city she's ever known in Mexico, but she feels as if it's

the only city she will ever need to know. Her father is a doctor who works at the clinic down the road, tending to neighbors for a reduced fee. Her mother keeps their home, taking on extra chores, refusing Isabel's help so that her daughter can have smooth, clean hands when she grows up, not those of a girl who is poor.

Isabel's a good student, but not the best. She passes notes during lessons, misses confession, and sometimes talks back to her teachers. She's always restless in her seat, fidgeting, pulling at her hair, waiting for the end of the day. Her mother sometimes finds her in the middle of the night on their balcony, sleeping on a blanket after having spent a night reading—or trying to—under the stars. Isabel is, if anything, a romantic.

When she walks home from school, it's surrounded by friends dressed in the same crisp white uniform. Their hair is braided, ribboned. She's a popular girl, solidly built, curvy and strong for her age. She's also an excellent dancer, growing up with the radio always dialed into some fast-paced cumbia or some slow-paced Spanish croon, moving her feet around the house, swaying her hips as she follows her mother cleaning, and, sometimes, stopping her so that they can dance together. She spends afternoons with her father on the porch, asking him about different illnesses and learning about the people that stop by his clinic as if they themselves are characters in a book that is just hers. Together, they sip lemonade while he smokes cigars, as a doctor knowing well enough they are bad for him but doing it all the same, filling the air with its sweet-sour scent. Her father sometimes tells her, "You'll be a teacher," because even if she can't sit still in class, she likes to learn, and anyways he's a proud man.

When she's old enough, her parents sometimes let her stay at her friends' homes. "Si, Señora Morales," her friends beg, "*Por supuesto*, we'll take care of her." With adolescence, they get bolder. They sneak out in the middle of the night, reveling in the city's glowing lights and cobbled streets as if everything is happening for the first time. Once, they go to one of those dance clubs their parents

would never let them even walk near at night. Here, the girls dance with their braids loose. They dance under the yellow-red lights, skin sticky with sweat and smoke from the bar. They are young and happy, Isabel at their center, swaying her hips as she had with her mother, oblivious to the consequences or the stares she attracts from older men. She becomes a woman when she dances. So when one of those men approaches her to dance she does so, not because she wants him particularly, but because she wants to be wanted.

She observes his components: the stubble on his chin, the thick hair on his arms, the solidness of his fingers against her waist. He's a good dancer, not the best, and she leads him sometimes, smiling when he lets her guide him by the gentle pressure of her fingertips on his shoulder. When she's soaked with her own skin, he leads her outside for air, and then, drunk on the newness of everything, when he offers to walk her home, she loops her arm in his with smile and lets him.

It must happen very quickly, the change in things. One moment she's walking with him down the main road where the streetlights blur pleasantly against the night sky and the next he's pulling her into a dark room where she can't see any light at all. The change is so rapid that she's suddenly small and afraid, standing in a corner of the room as if she did not own her own body.

"Come here." He tells her this with his thick, husky voice.

Her voice trembles, "No, *por favor*. No."

But he only repeats the words *Come here* until they're a command, and then her back is against the mattress and he's pushing up her dress, slipping her underwear over her knees, pressing into her as she bites her lip to keep from yelling. When it's over, he thanks her, and she thinks many years later that's the thing she'll always hate him for, not the act itself or the consequences, but the way his voice sounds when he says, *gracias mijita*.

When her belly begins to show, her mother thinks she's eating too much. Reluctantly, she tells Isabel to start doing more work around the house, that laziness begets weight. So Isabel starts washing the sheets, rubbing them with soap in the wash basin and then, when they dry, stringing them up on the laundry lines, squeezing out every excess drop of water. It's hard work, and unaccustomed to the extra chores, she adopts a rose blush on her cheek from standing under the sun for so many hours. Her father says the color is good for her. But her belly keeps growing, and she'd stopped her monthly bleeding months ago, so that eventually the fact is inevitable, and within weeks, everyone in her neighborhood knows too.

Later, they mock her father, the doctor who couldn't tell his own daughter was pregnant. They whisper amongst each other as he walks home from the clinic, the bravest amongst them pointing to their bellies and calling out, "Am I getting fat, Señor Morales?"

Her father is furious. He locks her in her room, sending her mother to bring Isabel her meals. She takes these moments with her daughter to hold her and cry for her and plead for her to tell her who it was and why she did it and then, before leaving, *God save you*. And, still, Isabel never tells, and, after awhile, they stop asking, in part because they would like to believe the child is fatherless and holy. Isabel stops praying. She can no longer fit into her clothes. Her mother sews her new ones she can wear around the house. She stops going to school, opening her books, making up stories.

Instead, Isabel begins to sit by the window in her room, staring down at the road under her, watching the people pass back and forth with their legs moving underneath them like scissors. She begins to imagine she is any one of them, on the way to the market to buy meat or flowers or wearing a pretty dress for a picnic. Sometimes, she sees old friends pass by laughing or talking with

one another, but the more time goes on the less she remembers what it is to be one of the girls down the road, passing notes, whispering secrets, putting ribbons in her hair. They, too, begin to forget Isabel. They are too young to get swept up in her personal tragedy, still dreaming about their husbands-to-be and the wonderful possibility that lines the road ahead of them—to disrupt it with anything so unjust or ugly as Isabel’s baby was to destroy a vision they felt was their right. Eventually, they stop visiting, and Isabel is surprised to find that she doesn’t miss them.

After some time, her father lets her out of her room and around the house. He will still not talk to her, and she misses their time together on the porch, her rattling off medical terms and him explaining each of them to her with a cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth. As the weeks pass, her belly grows to mountain size and she begins to spend more time with her hand caressing the swell, imagining the tiny person that is evolving inside of her. They would be very smart, like her father. They would be kind, like her mother. Whoever it was inside of her, they would be unlike her. Better and stronger.

She has her baby in the guest room, with her legs spread on her mother’s best sheets. Her father runs the delivery, and the baby comes into the world screaming and kicking. When her father presses the baby against her chest, he only says, “It’s a boy.”

She smiles wearily and, with sweat-stained lips, replies, “His name is Manuel.”

Later, with Manuel against her chest she goes to her father in his study. “I’m keeping him,” she tells him.

Without turning around, her father replies, “Then we can’t keep you.” It hurts her, but as she turns around to leave she swears he might be crying. Only her mother cries freely when she leaves to live with her aunt by the coast, still pleading and praying and muttering *God save you*. Isabel thinks that in the future she’ll be a different mother, one who says *Stay*. to her children no matter what they’ve done.

Manuel and she grow up together. As they do, her aunt begins to ask her why she doesn't go out more. She might find a husband if she tried, there are good men who like her curves and her strong arms and legs. They would love her if she let them, they might love Manuel too. But Isabel is terrified. She does not want another child, not even the possibility. In part she is afraid that if she does she'll love Manuel less, not because he's worse, but because his father was.

She guards Manuel like a lioness. Manuel, who's eight or nine years old when he starts wandering around the neighborhood with his thin, tanned shoulders and knobby knees. The other boys on his road tease him. Manuel never learns how to swim, a rarity for the coastal town. She often catches him watching from the sand while the other boys splash around in the waves. They hoot and holler and occasionally kick sand on him as they run back to their own homes, full of an easiness which seems to elude her son. Isabel is strict and makes him come home at a certain hour. She makes scenes if he arrives even minutes after his designated time, and constantly fusses over whether he's getting enough to eat, whether he has a sweater when he leaves, and whether all his homework is done, and sometimes even if he's looking happy enough. He's always within eyesight.

She's sweeping the porch when she catches the boys kicking sand on him again, and, broom in hand, she rushes out of the house with her curly hair thick around her face, chasing after them, hollering, "You evil boys! I'll tell all your mothers!" From then on, she's known as *la loca*, the crazy woman with the broom.

With age, Manuel begins to ask about his Papá. At first, Isabel tells him that he doesn't need a Papá, that he has her. For awhile, this is enough. Later, the question becomes hard and terrible. Manuel gets just old enough to hate him for not being there and her for lying. He starts ripping up

everything, his jean shorts, his *pendejo* shoes. He starts poking holes in the wall like tearing it up would bring his Papá home. One day Isabel can't stand it anymore, how he refuses to move to clean his room or do anything but mess up his things or sit on his hands.

"Do as I say!" She yells this at him, dragging him by the arm. He goes limp in her hands, making himself heavy, pulling himself down onto the floor. Full of anger, she lets go of him, yelling "Enough!" before she hits him hard with the handle of her broom. There is a pop in the room when the wood hits his bone. She wanted to punish him for being a bad boy, but after she's done it and he's splayed out on the floor crying with his hands against the spot on his stomach where she hit him, she feels as if she's made some terrible violation. She crumples to her knees and begins to cry too, pressing him hard against her chest, muttering apologies and prayers and *God save me*. It's the first and the last time that she ever raises her hand against Manuel.

When her aunt tells her that she has a cousin in the United States inviting Isabel to stay with them, to work and to help the family there, Isabel takes this as the sign for which she was unconsciously waiting. Suddenly, she sees a world full of tall buildings and pristine shops and well-dressed women with long, blonde hair. With little Manuel, she piles into her aunt's truck and makes the long trip over the border. Yet as they drive deeper into the country, and the desert stretches on as far as she can see, it's not the oasis that everyone talked about, that she imagined from books and magazine clippings. Surrounded by dried up land and shifting sand and miles of cacti, she begins to believe that it is nothing more than a version of a place she already knows.

**

"I love her." Manuel says this with such force that she can hardly believe it's her son. Her son, who at fourteen was stealing apples from a neighboring farm, at fifteen swindling *los gringos*

downtown with window-washing and fake watches, and at eighteen declaring his love for a girl like he is a man. Manuel had perfected the art of learning how to push his limits and retreating into safety afterwards, making it impossible for her to ever punish or be angry with him for very long at all. This was her son, who fell in love with Elena Barrera, the Peruvian girl from school, with her rich parents and her perfectly plaited hair. Isabel can only shake her head as she runs the dishes under the hot water, already seeing how things will end. She sees their two burdens: Elena's growing boredom, and Manuel's wish to please her. She sees how they'll end each other, most especially because they're in love.

Dismissively, she responds, "Mijito, you're eighteen. You don't know love."

"What do *you* know about it?"

"I've loved *you* haven't I?" she says this in that deep, reprimanding way that mothers do. "Haven't I loved you well enough?" She knows he feels guilty because he hangs his head, looking at his hands so that he doesn't have to look into her eyes, so that he can still stand against her. She almost pushes his chin up.

"I love her, Mamá. You can't stop me." He departs before she can stop him, leaving her standing alone in their kitchen. But as he's proud, she's proud, and for months they spend the days apart, her watching him only through the neighbors' word of mouth. Through all of this, Isabel stays silent. To speak to him would be to agree with his decision. She hears that he starts working for a different farm than her cousin's, buying a small house with Elena's savings. She hears that Elena's family stops speaking to her too, that the money is all they give them. When they marry, Isabel is still silent, not there, sitting in her kitchen cooking dinner as if it's any other day. Even when Javier, the little boy next door, rushes in to say, "Señora Morales, your son's getting married!" she only nods her head as if to say *I know*.

She stays silent through all of this, but when she discovers that when Elena and Manuel marry they already have a baby on the way, she crumples into a seat at her kitchen table and cries for him from a spot very deep inside of her. She can only think *God save them*. Isabel wonders how the change she had planned for him while she'd been rubbing her belly those years ago had failed, how she had thought, naively, that every piece can't be replicated, that inevitably, something must evolve, and some small, imperceptible part in the genetic code flourishing into something different—something better. She thought that she had passed this onto Manuel, that he had come equipped with this tiny aberrance in the pattern, but now she can only sit in her kitchen thinking of the baby he's about to have and wishing he had told her sooner.

The very next day, she approaches his new home with her head bent. When Manuel opens the door she's struck by how much he's aged, transformed from her baby to a father. She only says, "So you're a man, then. Will you let me meet my grandchild?" It's as much of an apology as she's ever given anyone, and, just like that, she takes on her new role, not only Isabel or Mamá, but grandmother. *Abuela*.

**

For awhile, things are blissful. There's a new baby every couple of years. First Ana, then Eloisa—the eldest girls. They have birthdays and Christmases and platefuls of warm empanadas. When Elena wants to plant a lemon tree in their backyard, Isabel is bent over too, helping to pick lemons when they're ripe, and advising Elena's less experienced hands on how to keep the tree alive. Then Carlos arrives. He's a fussy baby and can only be calmed by Ana's attentions, Eloisa frowning when her sister's affection is placed on anyone but herself. Around this time, the farm Manuel works at begins to fail, and he comes home later each day, as if trying to somehow revive it with his own

two hands. Isabel is encouraging, a believer in God's plan. Time passes. The money from Elena's family begins to dwindle, the birthdays and Christmases more modest. When Rosa's born, it's just after Manuel loses his job at the farm, and he's out drinking the night Elena goes into labor so that Isabel drives her to the hospital herself with all her grandchildren piled into the backseat.

That night, Manuel arrives at the hospital long after Rosa's born. Isabel watches from the hallway as Manuel holds Elena's hand, muttering apologies, asking forgiveness. That night jolts Manuel from his stupor, and things are good again. Later, when he's sitting with Isabel in the kitchen looking for jobs in the Sunday newspaper he confesses, "I only want to do what's best, Mamá. It's just so hard."

"*Si, mijito,*" she says, "*Yo se,* I know." She fixes his hair as she had when he was a child, pressing down the parts that stick up stubbornly. But this new period of bliss ends quickly, and Elena and Manuel are always fighting, and the newspaper is not listing enough jobs, and no one needs any help because none of the farms are doing well enough. There's a drought that year too, and all around them the land is breaking into pieces, deep cracks forming on the surface of the earth. Isabel sometimes feels as if her family could slip inside any one of them.

She becomes vehemently superstitious, turning to old and new herbal and spiritual cures. She buys oils and incenses, rubbing her grandchildren with basils and ruda plants, hoping to ward off evil spirits. When she senses one of her grandchildren is sick or ailed with some discomfort, she rubs whole eggs up and down their arms, whispering prayers, sucking out the evil influences, cracking the eggs into glasses of water and keeping the yolk in a dark place in the house, where it can't hurt anyone else. The children begin to learn to eat everything on their plates and to not blink too often or not enough or to ever cough in Abuela's presence without the threat of her procuring some new concoction to cure them.

Yet despite all of her incense burning, her plant baths, her oils and her eggs, Isabel can't take care of her Manuel. She watches her son slowly disappearing. Some days he's so small to her that she can hardly remember him as a boy, sitting on the sand, staring longingly into the waves.

In that waiting room on the day of Hector's birth, she thinks about all of this, of the beginning. She searches for the weak points, some singular moment that might've signaled all that would come to pass. But how could she have known, back then, what would happen? How could she know now, that one day soon Elena would leave, that eventually Manuel will leave too, and that she'll have to tell him how he'll regret it, that it's only parents who can really forgive their children, not the other way around. She searches for all of this, but she couldn't have known, and even bones break suddenly too.

After the surgery, and with only one eye left, the baby is still nameless. "Hector," Isabel offers, giving her father's name, hoping that it might lift the curse. Perhaps it's her fault, she thinks. Perhaps it's her father's punishment for what she did, for keeping Manuel, for leaving. She hopes that the name will be an apology, a new hope. But even then, holding Hector's little hands, she thinks that the name isn't enough to protect him.

Sometimes the children don't drown. They grow up to hate both Maria and the dashing nobleman. The boy becomes a priest, because he wants to know about real love. The girl becomes a telephone operator. From work she calls her brother at the new phone at the church, and when he answers he must yell because the reception is so terrible. He says, ARE YOU THERE? And she answers, I'M HERE, I'M HERE. When they leave, they do not go back home.

one bad day

At night, even walking turns into something more than it's worth. A woman often carries the weight of these kinds of choices, though the spot in which they carry it varies. Like Ana, who's always walking to or from somewhere alone in the dark, mostly her job. She's brave about it, stepping on cracks and sticking her chin up. There's an art in sorting out footsteps, a fine distinction between a searching tread and one just plain looking. Ana's a kind of footstep artist. Sole on pavement is like a song to her. When she hears a misstep one night it's like someone interrupting Lucho's rendition of *Bésame Mucho*. In other words, a great offense—one equal only to the sound of nails dragging on chalkboard or bees nesting in your wall, but even these are more forgivable. She makes it to her building's door and plugs in the code that lets her into her building. This night, and on this footstep, she doesn't wait for the door to latch behind her. Instead, she pulls it closed shut, with a kind of purpose. She faces the glass then, where the man with the footsteps on the other side has caught up to her and is pounding his fist against the pane, going, "You're a smart bitch, aren't you?" He's still pounding his fists as she ascends the staircase to the second floor. She is somehow less brave by the time she makes it up the first flight. Her chin is somehow less up. You're a smart bitch, aren't you? he says.

washing

The neighborhood laundromat was best known for the Duralux 500, the biggest dryer in the county. The metal box was fixed in the back corner of the room near the plastic sinks stuck on the wall. Sometimes the line to use it would get so big that it wrapped around the backdoor and into the alley where the smell of detergent and fabric softener washed out the stench of the rain water which sat around the clogged storm drain.

There, Ana would wait to wash everyone's sheets; the rugs, the towels, the big, thick blankets they dug out of the shed when the seasons changed. Sometimes this would become an event, in the summers the ice-cream carts rolled in by vendors ringing their bells selling *heladitos* to the kids; in the winter, Styrofoam cups full of hot soups.

Here Ana had process, she had order. She had a certain amount of quarters. She had time to schedule herself by and a duty to the clothes she washed. She knew how to guard what was hers. Though the house was a space they all shared, the laundromat was Ana's.

La vieja Teresa, a woman who'd lived three doors down from her all her life, often came in on Sunday afternoons to wash, too. Sometimes Ana helped her load and unload her belongings—big blankets with cigarette burns in them, panties whose *nalgas* she could only imagine the size of fitting in them, mismatched holiday socks—in return, Teresa talked stories at her. When they started this ritual Teresa was strong and Ana couldn't even reach the change maker, now Teresa leans on the machines to keep from tipping over and Ana knows better to just bring change with her.

"Anita," Teresa coos at her.

"Hmm?" Ana mutters, working on folding her sheets.

"Why you don't have boyfriend? *Eres tan bonita.*"

“I don’t know Teresa, you tell me,” she replies, this not the first time Teresa had asked her.

“I’ll tell you,” she says, “you work too hard.”

“Doesn’t a man like that?” she teases.

Teresa waves her off, some rude word forming on the tip of her tongue, like—“*Joder*, you tell man what he wants, he don’t tell you.” She leans in, “I have many grandsons.”

Ana laughs. “*Si, bueno* Teresa, I’ll meet all of them.”

The old woman scowls, crossing her arms against her chest. “Fine, all *chistes* now but remember: no *bonita* forever.” For short while Teresa quietly stews while Ana does her laundry, then she stuffs her hand into her pocket and hobbles close to her. She extracts a crumpled piece of paper which she puts in Ana’s hand like a secret. “*Toma*,” Teresa says, *here*, “Take this.”

“What is it?”

“Your Papá’s address.”

Ana feels her hands go cold. “Where’d you get this Teresa?”

“*Una amiga*,” she says, evasively.

“Why are you giving this to me?”

“Because: no *bonita* forever,” Teresa says. She puts her hand on Ana’s. “Have some kids, *mija*. Think of yourself. Talk to him, and then forget him.”

At home, she stuffs the blankets back onto the shelves. She’s distracted, putting the towels where the sheets should go and the sheets where the towels were. Eloisa keeps talking to her about getting some new haircut she read about in a magazine.

“It’s a bob,” she says. “You think I’d look good in a bob?” Without waiting for an answer she says, “I don’t know. My head’s too fat, isn’t it?” Eloisa looks at Ana, who is still just putting blankets back where she needs to put them, not even looking at her hands. “Ana?”

“What?”

“You’re not even listening.”

Ana snaps, “Do whatever you want. Just be quiet for a second, will you?”

Eloisa says some rude word and Ana hears the door to their bedroom slamming shut a few seconds later. Hector peeks out from around the corner, “*Que pasa* with Eloisa?”

“Nothing Hector, don’t worry about it,” she softens as he looks at her with his one eye concerned, his cheeks getting rounder as he gets taller. Can you get Rosa to help with dinner?”

She retreats to the bathroom, where she sits on the edge of the tub, rubbing her eyes. In her pocket the address is still crumpled up. She hasn’t looked at it. For Ana, life happens in images: a lemon cut in half to suck on in the summer, the way a fig tree curls up when it dies. But there is no image in life that persists like a father’s retreating back. Even now she imagines how it fades away in her sleep, how it becomes in some way the compass by which she plans her life. It is a line she draws that is both in pursuit and avoidance of that dark spot on the horizon.

She remembers how one Christmas she catches him wrapping her presents: a set of paints and brushes. He wraps each brush and color separately so that it fills out the spot with the gifts tagged ‘Anita’ beneath the tree. She does not know if this memory is real or imagined, but it is in the brief period when it is still just the three of them. She can barely imagine the house empty now that it’s stretched to fit them all in, bending at weak points in the wall. She had learned its terrain before all of her siblings, how it settled at night after she was tucked into bed, how she could hide in the shadow of an open door.

When Eloisa came Ana started to teach her the house, too. When Carlos came, he wanted to know it better than her, but still asked questions, though grudgingly. When Rosa came, she began to learn new cracks in the wall, ones that Ana had not even noticed at first. By the time Hector came, they had all each their map of the house, which they lent to him whenever he wanted it, but which often wasn't necessary. Of all of them, Hector intuited the most.

Sometimes, she thinks it's only an accident that she was the first.

The next week she uses the laundry as an excuse to get out of the house for awhile. One long bus ride and ten blocks on foot later she's in front of the apartment building where her father now supposedly resides. It is two hours away. It is *only* two hours away. The truth of it hurts her. The building is small, two stories, wrapped around a central lot. Staring up at the numbers on the doors, she searches for 39.

She finds it on the second floor. She folds and refolds the little piece of paper. She starts to walk and stops a couple of times. When she does finally reach it, it feels as if she's gotten older in the traversing. She thinks about fixing her hair. When she knocks on the door it takes a long while before she hears a body fumbling on the other side.

The door opens. Her father is suddenly standing there in front of her. She thinks of the years that have passed. She didn't know what she expected. He says something that sounds like *dios mio*, muttered under his breath. She sees how his hair has grown out long and stringy, and his face sinks in places she didn't know could indent. It is awful to see anyone that makes up half of you any less than magnificent, in part because perhaps this means one day you might be less than magnificent too. Even love of this kind can be selfish, because it is so afraid.

He invites her in, apologizing for the mess. He asks, “*Algo te tomar?*” and she thinks she might have answered, “*Si*.” In the kitchen he rustles around for a glass, opening and closing cabinets and shoving old paper and plates aside. The counter is covered with newspapers, unopened mail, and various debris that from some locations in the room emanate a smell too complex too name. She had become so engrossed in tallying up the contents of the room that she doesn’t notice when he’s holding an old coffee mug full of water in front of her.

“No glasses,” he says, somewhat sheepishly. “*Perdon*.”

She takes the mug from him. He leads her to the living room where it is obvious he’s sleeping on the couch, an old sheet covering up the velvet green of whatever is underneath it. They sit down together.

“*Como has estado?*” she asks, *how have you been?* The words feel stiff and formal in her mouth.

“*Mas o menos*,” he says, not really covering it. She tries not to be insulted.

As she takes in more of the surroundings she feels how his eyes hungrily take her in—his first child. She sees how he looks for the parts that have changed and those that stayed the same. She wonders if he is looking, too, for the parts that had become like him. For the first long minutes, the two of them sit in silence across from each other, wondering how to talk loud enough to step over the years apart.

They had never been a talking pair. They communicated most often through the pressure of a glance. She remembers when he is still looking for work, before it gets really bad, and she hands him a glass of lemonade pressed from the lemons in the trees out back. He’s hunched over the newspaper that afternoon circling and re-circling wanted ads, and he says these words that break her heart when she remembers them, he says, *gracias, mija*. Their speaking is in gestures. She cuts his hair one afternoon, standing on a stool in the shed, the scissors snapping shut and open, making that odd noise. He buys her a pair of earrings from the flea market the day she turns twelve, making her

feel like a grown-up. He doesn't make a big deal out of it. She hems a pair of his favorite jeans. He plays her favorite song one morning. The night her mother leaves, she's the one that sits with him, stoppering up their hurt with a cup of coffee and some slices of bread. He says, *gracias, mija*.

She thinks about saying words she's practiced saying to herself in the mirror for some time now, but for now they only sit and watch each other. Abuela would always say she has her mother's face, and her father must see this in her too because his eyes can't sit still—they look and then move back to his hands. He shifts his weight in his seat, pulling his jeans at the knees. They come back to her again.

She sets her mug down and gets up and walks to the kitchen. Wordlessly, she finds a trash-bag under the sink and starts crumpling up the old newspapers before stuffing them inside.

"What are you doing?" he asks her. She doesn't answer him. Instead, she folds up a large pizza box and tosses it in the bag. He reaches out his hand to stop her from picking up another pile of old food. "*Mija*—"

"*Papá*," she replies. This she says with force, and the letters return to her tongue as if reborn. "You need help," she says. "Let me help."

Later in the night, when he feels less ashamed, he mutters, "*Gracias, mija*." They collect the kitchen in pieces. There is something in these motions that feels as if it could perhaps become a kind of routine.

She considers what her home would look like without her in it. She tries to imagine the lives that her siblings will lead if she left. Rosa will go to school soon. Hector will have Abuela. He'll miss her but he won't be hurt by her absence, because of all of them Hector hurts the least when

someone leaves. She doesn't understand this in particular, but thinks that Hector must believe they will always come back. His faith gives her faith. Carlos will be upset, though it will manifest in anger. But even then after a time his anger will fade too, though she sees how he'll resent her for it later, at some time when she most needs him. The hurt of it will fade, maybe, but it will not go away. He'll keep it. He'll use it someday. And Eloisa—her first sister, her first baby, her first little hand—she doesn't know what Eloisa will do in life, but the thought of Eloisa alone in the house without her makes her the most afraid.

Eventually, she tells them while they're all sitting down to dinner. She figures that too many people have already left in the middle of the night, so she wants to do it in the day while the sun is still out tinting the sky orange, under the yellow light of the kitchen where the table is shoved up against the wall. Carlos is piling rice into his mouth when she says, "I'm leaving."

The voices come all at once: "Leaving to where?"

"Like—for a couple days?"

"Do you mean tonight?"

"Where are you going?"

"Wait, does this mean I get your side of the room?"

Meanwhile, Abuela sits and stares at her, which unsettles her more than anything else going on. Finally, Abuela shoos everyone out of the kitchen, and it's just Ana and her and seven plates of food getting cold on the table.

"*Mija*," she says, "Where will you go?"

Ana considers telling Abuela everything; it is, after all, her right to know. But still, the pact of putting away dirty dishes, of starting to forgive, it feels much stronger to her. She evades. For the first time in her life, she lies. "South—there's this job. You remember Lizeth? She has some family down there. Says it's good money."

“What kind of job is it?”

“Working in an office. They need some kind of secretary,” she says. “I’m tired of the warehouse.”

Abuela murmurs her agreement. “*Si*, of course.” She asks, “Where will you stay?”

“With her family, they’re renting a room out to me.”

They sit for some time discussing the particulars. Once, she thinks she hears the sound of Hector’s footsteps trying to sneak up the hallway, and then Carlos’ heavier ones pulling him back into the room.

Finally, Abuela asks her, “Are you sure?”

Sureness. She doesn’t really know about sureness. She knows about a crisply folded sheet stuffed into the linen closet. She knows about how a plate of cold rice tastes.

“*Si*, Abuela.”

Eloisa hates her most for leaving. On the evening that she picks up the last of her things Ana approaches her in the girls’ room, which now feels twice as large without her things inside of it. Eloisa hardly looks in her direction. She keeps flipping through her magazines and pulling at her hair, a gesture that Ana has seen her make hundreds of times before. The room that afternoon is the purple-blue of the day turning, and it reminds her of the color of Eloisa’s knee when she gets her first big bruise and Ana has to kiss the tops of her hands to calm her down after she falls. Or much later, in the color of the first drinks they have together at some party—tripping over themselves and giggling, trying to hide their sickness from Abuela the next day.

“Eloisa,” she says, “Look at me.”

“I can see you.” Eloisa’s response is stubborn and proud, and even though the magazine is open in front of her Ana can see how she’s not reading any of the words.

“Don’t be mad.”

“I’m not mad.”

Ana sits down next to her. “You need to take care of them, now.”

“They can take care of themselves,” she shifts away from her. It hurts her a little bit.

“No,” Ana says, “They need you. Okay?” Eloisa shrugs. It looks like she’s trying hard not to cry, and before Ana leaves she kisses the top of her hands and mutters, “You’ll understand.”

Outside on the street she sees a figure up ahead lugging a lumpy bag in a folding cart. The wheels wobble as the cart dips on cracks in the sidewalk. She can hear the familiar, faint swearing emanating from Teresa’s mouth a few feet before she gets to her. On her hip, Ana balances a small box holding some of her old jewelry, wash cloths, hair pins, and knick knacks from the back of her closet. Teresa will be the first person Abuela tells about Ana’s leaving, or so Ana imagines, how they spend a few hours gossiping on patio chairs set up on Teresa’s porch as if it were any day during the summer. Teresa doesn’t seem surprised to see her holding a box. She stops and leans against the folding cart, her breaths short.

“Anita,” she says, “Going to help a *vieja* take her laundry in?”

“Not today, Teresa. Somewhere to be.”

“Somewhere?” she says, “No office job, is it?”

Ana feels the lie somewhere in her heart, some vein or ventricle or ventilation system; she doesn’t know much about the body. “You’re not going to tell Abuela, are you?”

“Me? Tell *Isabel* you take care of her son?” Teresa laughs, shaking her head. “*Ni loca*, all yours.” Teresa is still laughing as she turns around and starts wheeling her cart.

Ana keeps pace beside her quietly. When they reach the bus stop and Teresa is settled into the bench, Ana says, “Teresa?”

“Hmmm?”

“Who gave you his address?”

The woman wipes some of the sweat off her brow in a gesture that feels as if she is very tired. “*No se, mija*. The envelope just show up one day.”

“So you don’t know?”

Teresa pulls the folding cart towards her, fumbling around her belongings. She pulls out her purse, oversized, and after more rummaging reveals a small, crumpled envelope. She hands it to Ana, who thumbs the lip before pulling out the note inside. On the square of paper there is just her father’s name and address. Teresa points, “The original. I kept just in case—*por si las moscas*.”

The note is written in blue ink, and Ana traces the line of the words with her fingertip. They evoke something in her that starts in her hands, and she recognizes the curve of the M of her father’s name, the thin line of the Ls that make them look as if they were just cracks on the sheet of paper. It is her mother’s hand. She sinks onto the bench beside Teresa, breathing hard.

She comes back to this moment her mother is brushing her hair. It is a memory she’s kept for some time now, though she rarely allows herself to remember it. It is one of the few times she is getting her hair pulled into some kind of bun, though now she can’t remember for what—church or the grocery or because it was a hot day. The brush of that fingertip in that moment, something singular and intimate, is one that she remembers thinking she could never love more.

Teresa asks, “*Estas bien, mija?* What’s wrong?”

She says, “*Si*, Teresa. Nothing—it’s fine.”

**

She has new laundry: the work socks of a grown man, his flannel shirts. She washes the sheets he covers the couch where he sleeps. His jeans, spattered in paint. That is the kind of work that she does, tending to small bits and pieces, wiping away stains. The laundromat nearest her

father's apartment does not have the biggest dryer in the county, but it is small and familiar, and it grounds her. There, the fans spun the dull, hot air around the room. Her back is pressed against the folding table. She feels the low vibration of the machine behind her as it hits the spin cycle.

The room is quiet for some time, her eyelids half-closed under the heat and the lull of the fan and the low rumble at her back. Suddenly, she hears someone say: "No one will want to keep you, with you hollerin' and shoutin' like that." A mother sits on a bench near the entrance with her daughter standing between her legs, braiding her hair tight against her head. The little girl protests every so often, crying out as her hair is pulled and fixed. "Okay? You gotta stop when you're with strangers."

She watches the little girl standing between her mother's legs and thinks—doesn't her mother know what she's doing? Doesn't she have any idea that it starts then, that seed of doubt? That in those words the doubt gets born and then that it grows until it gets so big it can't fit inside one little girl anymore, that it starts to spill out onto all the things that surround her, too: jobs and men, the dresses she'd worn and those she hadn't, the nape of her neck, the way she pulls up her hair, an infinitesimally small but significant spot on her back tooth. Soon, the doubt is everywhere; it swallows her whole, that belief beyond all others that one day, and she will not know when this day comes, no one will want to keep her. Doesn't she know?

bird watching

They first hear the hum of the boat when the sun is angled on the crown of their heads. Hector is standing near the edge of the lake, feeding stale pieces of bread to ducks and Carlos is napping on the grass with his cap slung over his eyes. At first, Hector squints hard in the direction of the noise, but the boat is distant and the man inside of it is almost indiscernible to him. From their vantage point on the edge of the water they can hear only the back-end of the motor's rev, watching the light on the surface break as the boat moves in a zig-zag pattern. Carlos wakes. They start to watch the boat, tracing the line it leaves in its tow, which from their distance start to look like a crack in a piece of glass.

They see a second dark speck on the surface, what must be a duck. They realize the boat's chasing it, twisting in the water to meet it head on. A beak bobs up and then back down to miss the hull. It bobs up and back down under the water. There is some kind of violence in this.

Hector starts to cry, pulling on Carlos' sleeve. "But he's killing it, Carlos, he's killing it!"

Carlos says, "Some people are just like that."

mi gorda

She meets him while selling empanadas during packing season that summer. He says something like *gracias mi linda*, and she smiles and throws her hair over her shoulder, pretending that many boys call her beautiful, and that they also wink at her while they eat her empanadas. She likes how he peels oranges. A few times while selling food around the packing house she watches him pick an orange out of the crates, tearing into its skin with his strong, white teeth. Sometimes, her ears heat up when he runs his thumb across the pulp. Other times, she's embarrassed how much the act of his picking out quarters and tossing them into his mouth whole lights something in her. His name is Umberto, but everybody calls him Berto, except his mother, who calls him Umbertito.

He's peeling an orange the first time he talks to her. It's a weekday afternoon and the trees in Orange Cove are sweating citrus, so that when the southern gusts break northwards the whole town smells like fruit. The packing house is windowless, stacks of empty crates towering like skyscrapers in the open lot outside. Leaned against the white panels of the building, a man sits hunched over sucking on a cigarette with his hood pulled up over his head. She waves to him from the other side of the chain link fence and he walks over to open up the gate.

Berto's working on the orange when he catches her walking into the lot. "*Linda*, empanada girl—what's your name?"

"Eloisa." She adjusts the tin foil over the warm plate of food resting against her hip.

"I like it," he says, and she notices how his hair curls around his ears. "You want to know my name?"

"I know your name."

“Oh?” He smiles. She blushes. She doesn’t think he’s surprised. He’s not the most beautiful boy packing oranges, but he’s the boy that most believes he’s beautiful.

“Another empanada?” she asks, moving the plate of food in front of her like a shield.

“Yeah, okay,” he says. “You make them?”

“I do.”

“Keep your family full, huh?”

“I guess so.”

He takes an empanada from her plate, handing her a couple dollar bills. As he walks away—almost as if in afterthought—he tosses her an orange from his pocket and winks. She misses it and it drops down at her feet, rolling down the slope. He only smiles, saying, “See you around, Eloisa.”

She sees him four more times that week, though they never speak directly. She spends most of her time with the women, selling food and trading *chismes*. She meets Marianna, a girl her age. They trade hair tips, lamenting together over the last episode of their favorite *telenovela*. They talk about boys. They mention their families, at first speaking in generalities, and then with time, in that precarious shared understanding that when it’s hard, it’s hard. They cross themselves together, muttering *que sea lo que Dios quiera* in shared prayer. Eloisa learns how Marianna packs faster than anyone else, and how she does it with long, acrylic nails, curling at her fingertips. They look perfectly kept.

“I do them myself,” she says. “The *niejas* think I’m crazy packing with these things, you know?” Perfectly timed, Marianna lifts her hand to sweep back her hair as a pack of someone’s *abuelas* walk by. She whispers, “*Que se jodan*. You need to feel pretty here somehow.” Her breasts swell against her shirt, and Eloisa can’t help but feel ugly in her shadow.

Sometimes, she watches Berto as he works, carrying in crates and sorting, the thrum of the machinery around them muting out the sound of his voice. She scrutinizes him like one might

scrutinize a painting, learning the lines of his face when he shares a joke with his friends, or when he says some rude word, spitting on the ground beside him.

“You like him?” Marianna asks her one day, leaning against the fold-up lunch table in the back room. “When you look at him it’s like you want to eat him.”

“*Loca*,” she says, turning pink. “I don’t look at him.”

“Liar. If you like him, take him.”

Eloisa laughs. Taking is such a joke to her, a kind of dream.

She wants him. She does not learn to recognize this craving all at once, but little by little. In time she joins in on the history of girls that fell in want with boys that did not want them back. She wants him until the desire grows so large that she can no longer trace the origin of her longing.

She reads her magazines twice over, seeing her face where she’d never even dared to look before. The woman on page four with the drooping eyes is the way hers droop in the morning when she rolls out of bed—this is how she wakes up from a dream in which Berto tells her, “*Linda*, I was just waiting until it was the right time for us.” The girl on page twenty-six with the red, purposefully jutted lips—this is how she pretends to look before they kiss. When she’s not flipping through magazines, she cleans. She cooks. She folds laundry, keeping her hands in constant motion. Abuela wonders where the streak of domesticity comes from, meanwhile, Eloisa wants.

She’s ironing Carlos’ favorite shirt one day when she smells the scent of burning. Her sister Rosa is sitting on the couch next to her reading. Somewhere in the house she hears little Hector in his room, listening to loud music nobody else understands. She’s standing near the fire alarm, which

goes off, beeping loudly as his shirt sizzles under the iron. Carlos sprints into the room, clambering to find a chair to stand on to shut it off.

“*Fuck*. What gives, Eloisa?” Carlos says, holding up his nicest shirt, which now has a triangle-shaped hole in the sleeve.

“Oh,” she responds, as if only just noticing. “I’m sorry Carlos, I didn’t even notice.”

“Jesus. Look at this thing. I was going to go out with it, you know.”

Then she gets annoyed, like do your own ironing then, *pendejo*. “Please, when do you go anywhere?”

“I go places,” he says. He rolls the shirt up into a little ball and throws it into the nearest bin. “Going someplace this weekend.”

“Hot date?” she says, not seriously.

Carlos evades. “Party. Big one, out in Orange Cove.”

The name evokes something like sense memory, and the tang of those orange peels hitting wood crates comes back to her. This time she almost burns herself shutting off the iron. “Can I come?” she asks. Her voice is small, as if she’s asking herself and not him.

He says, “No.”

They start to fight. She says things like, *Take me to the party!* and *why not?* Carlos says things like, *You don’t take your sister to a party.* and *It’s just weird.* She makes an offer: *I know a girl I could bring along*, while he says, *I don’t want to hang out with any of your fat friends.* They fight some more.

After a string of sentences punctuated every so often with *pendejo!* and *shut up*, Carlos finally says, “Jesus *cristo*, *fine*—you can come.”

The house is jammed in between two orchards. As they pull in, bumping over dips and curves in the dirt, the music coming from inside the house leaks out the open front door. She feels it somewhere in her chest. The house is full. Young men and women are standing out on the porch dancing, while others sit on plastic patio chairs in the yard, looking alarmingly like their *abuelos*, gossiping and smoking sweet-smelling cigars. Inside, they are draped on the stairs, leaning in hallways. Some are sitting on counters in the kitchen. She recognizes Marianna sticking something in the oven. She waves Eloisa over.

“Your hair looks amazing,” she says, and Eloisa feels a mixture of embarrassment and pleasure. Beside her Carlos is shifting from one foot to the other, staring at Marianna’s chest.

“I didn’t know you’d be here,” Eloisa says.

“*Claro*, we’re all here.” Marianna winks at her, and Carlos starts leaning on the counter and flexing or something, Eloisa’s too embarrassed to look long enough to know for sure. She’s still angry with him so she doesn’t introduce him, and after a long minute of silence he gives up, giving them a curt nod and retreating into the crowd.

“Your brother?” Marianna asks.

“Sometimes,” she responds, feeling like a bit of a liar. “Rude most of the time.”

“He’s cute.”

“Stop.”

“You’re no fun. Go dance with my cousin for awhile, he’s nice.” Marianna waves him over before she can protest; a tall, lanky boy with long hair. The music swells and Eloisa relents, letting him lead her toward the speakers where the crowd is gathered dancing.

There is nothing like dancing for Eloisa. When things were good, she remembers her family going to neighborhood parties. Hector was just a baby then, clapping his hands to the beat. It was always messy: Carlos’ face refusing scrubbing, Ana ordering Rosa to leave her room even when she

please, please didn't want to go, Eloisa standing on her tip-toes in the bathroom putting on Ana's lipstick when she wasn't looking. But when they got there and started dancing, when they were even in the presence of it, it was as if their feet and everyone else's were stomping on all the cracks in the Earth. For Eloisa, the world tilted on its axis, for just a moment hanging in orbit by a thread. She doesn't know a feeling so wonderful, and so she dances a few songs with Marianna's cousin—they share a salsa, bachata, and sway together to some old-time bolero. At the end of the set, they part. She's flushed and hot, hair sticking to her forehead. After dancing, she feels all parts of her body as if they are in alignment, her fingers perfectly angled to her hands, the curve of her ankle seamless and magnificent. She makes her way outside, craving the cool air, part of her wondering if the stars will still be in the same pattern.

And then there is Berto again, standing in the yard under a tree. He looks almost pale in the night's light and she likes it, how it smoothes him out somehow. For a moment she thinks about approaching him but starts to withdraw instead, and the sound of her coming and going catches his attention. He looks up.

"No empanadas tonight?"

"No," she says. And then, without really thinking, "Don't be so mean."

He laughs. This is the first time she's heard him laugh, and she likes the sound, how it sits somewhere deep in her palm.

"*Bueno*," he says. "I'll stop."

He has some ugliness about him, small things: his head too round, a bit large for his neck, his eyes set far apart just so, his mouth just a little wide. Ugliness in a man doesn't matter all that much. Abuela had taught her that. Like a bedtime story, it was a truth she had always known. No, ugliness in a man doesn't really matter, but in a woman, it is her whole life.

She had been made to learn what she feared as her ugliness, discovering the curves of her belly, softly folding over the waistband of a tight pair of jeans. She had examined her breasts like a scientist, noting how her left was larger than her right. She had run her fingertips along herself, felt out the angle of her pelvic bone, how it suffered somehow under the weight of her. She doesn't feel like a woman, but she has a woman's body.

There's this moment that she keeps coming back to from many years ago. She's sitting with Rosa on the sidewalk of a beach boardwalk, she can't remember which, it's one of the few times her family is on vacation and she feels disoriented, woozy and a little stupid. Abuela is off somewhere, buying them all *helados*. She doesn't know where the rest of her siblings are, maybe bent over some arcade game or buying cotton candy at the pier going on and on forever just as they are. Here, a man approaches them. She doesn't know now what his face looks like, but she remembers his hand, the coarseness of it on her knee as he says, *Can I keep you?* Rosa starts to cry, she attracts attention, and the two of them extract themselves, hands held. Eloisa feels a great loss that day, though she can't name that hole in her that she did not recognize before. She spends the rest of their day on the beach burying her knees in the sand.

Berto kisses her that night under the tree. She expects him to taste like oranges, but he doesn't.

She wants to be one of those girls that do not need a boy like Berto. It is awful to want anyone like this. She sits with her forehead pressed up against the window in the backseat of the car while Abuela carts her to and from places, picking up food at the grocery store, *bendiciones* at church, and gossip at the center. Abuela drives too fast and brakes hard. Her glasses slip down to the crook at the end of her nose at red lights. Meanwhile, Eloisa imagines standing on top of the hills that roll

by in the distance, setting up camp on some quiet ledge, the wide space muting out her need for him. Her dreams are bite-sized, small, like whimpers.

But sometimes it feels as if he's really listening to them. They go on dates. They share their hopes and desires. They walk up and down the canals together, their feet marking a tear in the ground. On Saturday nights they dance together at the plaza where they play music outdoors. When she sells her empanadas at the packing house she likes how his eyes feel on her as she works. She likes catching them at a distance.

He tells about her how he only sleeps naked. When she asks him why, he says, "Well, it's *natural*." And he says it in that way, with emphasis, as if it makes him more of a man—*natural*—natural. "It's how we're supposed to be," he says, "It's how we're born." Okay, she thinks, rolling her eyes, loving his kind of stupidity which sometimes is not too stupid.

Later, while sharing empanadas at the lot, they're leaning against a stack of empty crates teetering from side to side when he tells her, "I want more for you than this kind of thing, you know?" She doesn't know what to say, so instead she squeezes his two longest fingers, enjoying for the first time someone else's hope for her.

She crawls out of the window of her room to meet him the night they first make love. She hops into his truck, where the seats effuse the smell of cigarettes and orange peels. A rosary twines the rearview mirror like a beaded snake, swinging back and forth as they pull out of her driveway. When the tires hit the gravel, it sounds as if they're sneaking out alongside her, and a bit shamefully too. At first they drive for some time, the fields passing by them dark and empty. Berto has one hand on the steering wheel, the other he puts on her knee. It's warm. She thinks he can feel her tremble.

Her legs are still shaking when they pull off to a small side road in a grove of pistachio trees a few miles from her house. They move into the bed of the truck, where he wraps her in a wool

blanket. She itches. She's embarrassed when he pulls her shirt up over her shoulders, when he unhooks her bra. She feels exposed, as if her ugliness will become his ugliness too. He spreads his hand against her belly, and she resists the gesture, feeling as if he's mocking her. He persists. She relents. He kisses her breasts, muttering something that sounds like *mi gorda, mi linda*. The words raise something long dead. *Mi gorda*, she hears, and she remembers her father muttering the words to her mother somewhere, perhaps in the kitchen near the stove or another time, when she catches them dancing slow together in the middle of the night, the tune on the radio so low she can't make out the song. Later she imagines it to be Carrilo's *Dos Gardenias*, a song that makes her cry no matter who sings it. *Mi gorda*, he mutters to her, and the words are a memory that feels like a half-remembered dream. *Te quiero, te adoro, mi vida*.

Hector is in the kitchen when she gets out of bed that morning. He's staring at his hands when she walks in, which means that he knows she snuck out the night before but he's going to pretend he doesn't.

"*Basta*," she says, *enough*. "You're looking at your hands like there's something dirty in them."

"Where'd you go?"

"Out."

"You shouldn't have."

"Oh? *Y que*, you playing Abuela now? Or Ana?"

"If Papi was here—"

"Papi's not here. No one's here, just us."

Hector opens and closes his mouth like a fish and Eloisa wants to say something like cut that shit out Hector, but he only says, "Okay."

Okay. She shuffles with some pots and pans to keep her hands busy. "Do you want me to make you something?"

“Okay,” he says. “Anything fried.”

The rain drums against the window. They watch this from the inside of the car.

“Are you keeping it?”

“Maybe.” She stares at her fingers, lone, lost pillars. “Do you want me to?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

They sit like that for awhile, him curling his fingers around the steering wheel, her staring out the window. In front of them, blossoms from the pistachio trees fall to pieces under the rain, and the asphalt gleams wet. It’s not the right time to remember, but Eloisa keeps thinking about how he’d told her once how he thought it was cute when she tried lighting cigarettes against the wind. And she thinks about the way that he says it; how it sounds like he says *you are mine*. Now she sees how his eyes never leave his hands, how he is gripping the steering wheel as if he is already driving away from her.

It’s much later that she comes back to him, wanting to face him. This is the only time she’s ever been to his home, and she’s afraid of what’s on the other side of the door. It’s late on a weeknight when she knocks. When he cracks open the door she’s startled by how a face she had memorized now seems so alien to her. It is so strange how the most familiar things become bizarre, how they become somehow lost and unimportant. She doesn’t know if it will always feel like this, but she knows that the doorway will somehow always be there. But still, Eloisa wants.

“Berto,” she says, “we need to talk. I’m serious.”

He says, “I don’t know.”

Her anger rises, and she's about to use the only rude word she's ever thought of saying to him when from behind him she hears a voice calling softly, "*Umbertito*." In four syllables the man she's made evaporates, and she sees how the shirt on his shoulders hangs loosely, his pants dragging on the ground. He's no hero then, no great intellectual, no promise-maker. He becomes then just another boy who didn't know what he wanted or what he had when he had it.

In time, he'll bring around some tall, skinny girl that he started going with after her and she'll think about what an insult it is to her. She'll remember how when lying together one night he says, "This is what people need to live, you know, touching like this. Holding like this." (*What a line*, she thinks.) But still, she will smile when she has to smile, and she will not say one word about his nakedness, not one word, and then, later, after she stops having to be so strong, she'll cry ugly in the shower, with her shampoo bubbling in her hair, there in her own nakedness, in that place where people hide their shame. This is how you say goodbye to someone: the words come first, and then the feeling.

But that first night he leaves her it's in Abuela's lap that she cries, and Abuela holds her like a baby, wiping her nose with the back of her hand. She sweeps her hair back behind her ears, cooing, "*Ya, mijita. Todo va estar bien.*" Later, when Eloisa is tired from crying, sniffing every now and then into Abuela's shoulder, Abuela imparts a second truth, "People are sometimes like this," she says, and Eloisa accepts the words as law. "Sometimes it feels like the worst ones look for you." Abuela makes crosses on her back with her thumb. "But it's not true, *mi linda*. You'll see."

The words form a promise, and she keeps it somewhere inside of her growing belly. You'll see.

sunday fútbol

Sunday is the day of fútbol and Eloisa's empanadas. After church, the boys from the street gather around the television set, slapping the side every so often, trying to catch a signal. They make Hector do the television dance, the only dance he knows, wiggling the foil-wrapped antenna there and here until the static clears. Then the game starts and the world could be on fire and the boys would still be watching fútbol.

The game happens like this, but louder. A kind of melodrama, played out by sneakered feet pointing into the ground. What do they remember of the match on Monday? Not much, just the illicit pleasures of raising a fist to the air and the almost painful desire to kiss the goal line. The ball skims the goal post and they roar. They can go on like this.

Then there's the crowd singing, *This is what men do*. And they think how is there a more perfect moment than 1958, when Pele takes the field, and teaches them how to be men.

When the goal's made and someone's knees are sliding on that particular shade of grass, they feel more love than they can articulate, and more pride than they've been taught. They have learned all of this for some time now. In the 1994 World Cup Colombia loses by its own goal. After the match Andrés Escobar said, "Life doesn't end here," but then what did he know of endings. He is buried some months later for making the losing goal.

The boys would say, of course life ends here, it starts here.

cures of a kind

Their brother Hector is an anomaly. It's not just because he has one eye. He can't dance, either. It wasn't always like this. When he was real little he could move his hips in that vibrant, fast, loud salsa—sway around with his pudgy arms and tiny feet, dancing with the old *tías* who thought he was cute as hell. It didn't matter about his eye. He'd run into the walls a lot when he was little and moved too fast, but damn if he didn't look good dancing. They don't know when it stopped, when he suddenly couldn't anymore—but Hector doesn't dance, at least not anymore. They don't know if it's that he refuses to or if he honest-to-God forgot how. But what they do know is that Hector liked a girl when he was twelve and that he told her, and that she laughed at him louder than they'd heard anyone laugh before. Even though he only had one eye to see it now he's one-hundred pounds too much for his size and doesn't like dancing so much as he likes comic books.

They were all sitting in the boys' room when Carlos looks over from his bed. His knees are propped up, nonchalant and a little hostile, like some Mexican James Dean. "Why are you always reading that shit?" he says to Hector. The word he's thinking sits there too, that Hector's one of those—you know, un *maricón*. He isn't. Hector likes girls, he does, and he doesn't like it when Carlos calls him that. Carlos is the boy Hector is supposed to be. He can dance. He has muscles. He's got two girlfriends. "Grow some, Hector, stand up to someone big for once—maybe you'll get a girl to—" And then he says something that Abuela would not be very impressed with.

"*Cochino!*" Eloisa says, nose twisting upwards in disgust. She's got this chubby face, big dimples, and it makes her look younger than she is, but she says the boys sometimes like that. Now that Ana is gone she's the oldest, but Carlos doesn't listen to her like he did to Ana. Sometimes he listens to Rosa, who tries to stay out of it as much as she can. Hector doesn't like being in the

middle of things either, so he turns back to his book that is probably about Superman or Batman or some kind of man that was a result of some freak experiment or a wide pocketbook. Carlos doesn't really care about the heroes of the world, so he thinks most of what Hector reads is a waste of time that puts him socially on par with Jorge down the road, most famous for once eating dog shit for twenty bucks. He thinks Hector isn't doing much to help his case, so he thinks he should stop reading comic books.

Eloisa tries to soothe Hector like Ana did before she left, telling him, "It's okay, don't listen to him." But she's just not as good at it as Ana was, and Carlos tells her to shut up.

One morning, they wake up to Hector's grumpy yells and Carlos' angry ones. It's five in the morning on a Saturday when Carlos kicks Hector's bed, demanding he get up to run with him.

Hector, wrapped in his sheet, turns over on his side and groans.

"No," he says.

This only makes Carlos more pissed. "*No?* Get up! Do you want to grow up to be a fat piece of—"

"Carlos, *ya basta!*" Eloisa is in the doorway, and she chastises him in a voice that sounds a lot like Ana and even a little bit like Abuela. They wonder if this happens inevitably, if soon they'll all just be version of each other. Rosa stands in the hallway behind Eloisa, so she can only see half of his face, which looks at Eloisa incredulous and stubborn. They were all so much of the same thing. It was an accident waiting to happen, this momentum, they were hurtling towards each other and eventually they were going to collide and explode into a trillion little atoms. There'd be nothing left.

He ignores her, and starts to kick Hector's bed. He kicks it until Hector can't fall back to sleep, until he rolls over and throws the sheet off of him and looks at Carlos with his one good eye.

"*Fine.*"

Hector and Carlos, they run, and from that day on they run every morning, between meals, before sleeping, at dawn, when it's raining, when it's hot, when the ground's so dry there's cracks in it—they run so much that Hector's heaving and puffing become the ticking by which they plan their days.

The night Eloisa sneaks out it's humid and sticky and no one can sleep. She picks a bad night because Hector is awake too, walking back from the kitchen when he hears us whispering.

"Eloisa, *no lo bagas...*" Rosa pleads with her. She knows Eloisa's seen Abuela when she's angry. She doesn't understand anyone who'd test that.

Even as Eloisa pushes out the screen in the window she only looks at them with angry, accusing eyes: "Don't you dare tell Abuela." So they don't. Hector only shrugs because he doesn't understand girls that are his sisters anymore than he understands girls that aren't. They both sit together, watching the window where she left from until the sound of a car pulling up to the front of the house breaks the quiet. They keep sitting together as they hear the passenger door slam shut and the car drive away. For a long while, they stare at the empty space on Eloisa's bed and wonder where she was going with her hair in braids like that, wearing a skirt they know Abuela didn't buy her. They wonder whether the night will feel less heavy or heavier now that there's one less person in the house.

Hector takes a deep, shaky breath. "Pa wouldn't have let her go." Hector always states the obvious.

“Pa wouldn’t have noticed, Hector.” She takes his hand and soothes him a little like she did when he was real little and running into walls. Pa wouldn’t have let her go, no, Pa wouldn’t have noticed. It didn’t matter.

Eloisa comes back around sunrise; she puts the screen back on the window and crawls into bed. She turns away and throws the covers over herself, her shoulders imperceptibly shaking as she cries. Even though Hector hears this too when he’s walking to the kitchen in the morning, this time he can’t bring himself to come in. Rosa can’t bring herself to say anything either.

For awhile Abuela thinks the whole house has gone crazy. Eloisa won’t eat, Hector won’t either, and Carlos actually smiles. She resorts to throwing glasses of water at Eloisa’s back when she isn’t looking (“Mija, you’re *asustada*!” she says, as though this is the reason she stays in her room all the time when she’s home) and making Hector stand still while she runs raw egg down his arms, whispering prayers under her breath (“Hijo, you have the evil eye on you,” she says, as though this is the reason he runs at all hours of the day and won’t eat as much rice as before). She tries to figure out Carlos. Rosa tries to stay out of it as much as she can.

They wonder if Carlos is smiling because Hector is three sizes less or because Eloisa won’t come out of her room, or maybe if he got a new girlfriend. Hector’s posters of Superman and The Flash and Green Hornet sit on his walls like relics, and he doesn’t read so many comic books anymore. When those things are gone, they wonder what’s left.

When none of her usual methods work, Abuela comes into the boy’s room one day while Hector is alone. Abuela knows, alone Hector is the easiest. She says, “Mijo, *vamos a la botánica*. Get your things.”

The letters are painted on the window in sticky white paint, *San Juan's Botánica*. Inside, the atmosphere feels humid, one sole floor fan dispersing air around the room. There's music filtering in from old speakers, sounding static and distant as trumpets and Spanish crooning wail on around us. Hector sits in one of the chairs on the side of the room, where the last *viejitas* sit to take a break from walking. Abuela is lost in conversation with the girl behind the counter, brows knit and lip jutted in concentration.

Oils, incenses, and spices all line the shelves. There's a wall full of glass candles, dedicated to everyone from The Jesus to the most obscure of saints. They're all different colors, some black, some red, some a combination of shades—greens, and blues, and oranges. On the walls nearest him blends of herbs and spices each with a photograph indicating their purpose: *Rompe Brujería* (job breaker), *Abrecamino* (open road), *Santa Muerte* (holy death).

Everywhere, women whisper to each other. “*Esto me pasó a mi...*” And here, surrounded by cures, they add: *This is how I fixed it*. A woman sits next to Hector. Her pink shirt is tight around her belly and her feet seem permanently swollen into her sandals. He's not young enough to ignore anymore, but only just old enough to be made conversation to. The woman glances at him as she fans herself, making conversation: “My son was a hard-worker,” she says. “He was a good boy.”

Hector nods slowly, muttering her agreement. (They learn this: You don't disagree when a mother is talking about her son.) Abuela is still at the counter, making gestures with her hands. “But one day, it all changed,” she continues, making a tutting noise with her tongue like Abuela does when Carlos comes home late. “He stopped going to school, stopped working *para su familia*.” The woman's eyes flicker to his as she puts a light finger on his shoulder. “There's so much anger in him now—*mala fe*.” A pause. Somewhere he hears a little girl start to cry. “I'll find something here, to help.”

Abuela calls him from the counter, so he excuses himself and clumsily wishes her good luck. When he's at her side, he mutters quietly, "Why did you bring me here?" But she only turns an eye on him, turns on eye on his eye.

"You'll fix them, Hector," she responds, exchanging money with the girl behind the counter. "You will fix *all* of them." It seems like a tall order, and he swallows thickly, taking that bag full of candles and spices and powders and promises.

On Friday afternoon, Carlos convinces Hector to stand up to his bully. When they come home Hector's one eye is purple and bleeding and he can barely move around without Abuela, who brings him to the kitchen, muttering obscenities at Carlos, along with: "You did this, *you* did this."

"*Abuela*, he didn't do anything," Hector insists. "He didn't do anything." We think maybe that's the problem—that he didn't *do* anything when the fight took a bad turn and Hector didn't get his first punch in, that he didn't *do* anything when Hector, drunk on bravery, had stood like he was some sort of superhero too, raising a fist aimed poorly because of his eye, defending his honor, which only made the kid laugh harder than he already was. Carlos didn't *do* anything.

Instead Carlos sits with his arms crossed and says, "He should have just backed down." They're surprised this comes from Carlos, who's been looking for reasons to punch someone ever since he learned how to form a fist. We think Abuela might look impressed, but instead she looks angry. He continues, "What, Hector, you think he gave a shit about you?" He pauses for a second, licks his lips and adds, "You're *nothing* to him. Now you know."

It's quiet for a little bit, and so for a little bit they can hear the leaky faucet in the kitchen sink dripping. It seems to fall in tune with the beating of their hearts, and they're not sure what kind of a

lesson they're supposed to learn. "I don't think he thinks that," Hector answers, the tremor in his voice giving him away.

Carlos turns to him with his eyes dark, as though the heart of the Amazon had nestled inside each of his irises. "It doesn't matter what *you* think. Don't you get that?"

Eloisa comes out of her room. She walks into the kitchen where they all are and stands there for a second, not looking at any of them directly. Instead, she looks only at Abuela, putting a hand on her stomach as she starts to cry. Abuela whispers, "*Dios mio*," putting a hand on her heart where it's breaking. They think about Eloisa slipping out through that window.

Carlos is bent over the table, looking at his hands, furious. Hector sits against the chair, and he can't look at his hands but his lip is stiff, furious. They all sit at the kitchen table, with their hands on the oily flower tablecloth. The night is dark, and the pots are cold. The multi-colored candles of saints Abuela had bought flicker on the counter, and they seem to reflect Hector's swollen eye and Carlos' strong jaw, Eloisa's hand on her round stomach, and Rosa's fingers twisting around the tablecloth. They are together thinking: fix us, fix us.

Sometimes Maria and the dashing nobleman don't get married at all. He never notices her and she meets someone else, a neighbor boy visiting his grandparents on time off from the university. Instead of Maria, the dashing nobleman marries a beautiful, elegant woman to whom he is faithful until death. All that exists of Maria and the nobleman as a pair is him sitting at his favorite café in town, having some kind of important conversation, and her, gazing longingly at him from across the way. They have no children; between them, only a dull ache that is never consummated. The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right.

a thought

Sometimes Rosa likes to think that there are veils between people. She thinks about how they're constructed out of all sorts of things, their hang-ups and preoccupations, the secrets that keep them from revealment, even what feel like stupid things, like stutters or the awkward way that they walk, their personal sloppiness—these things that prevent contact, connection. Sometimes people can help them and sometimes they can't. Rosa, maybe, had the thinnest of veils, could be shockingly honest and determinedly, brazenly herself no matter what the circumstance. But she could be absolutely nothing, too. All that determination wasn't terribly helpful when she didn't know what that meant, and the veil of Rosa, that stuff that kept her from everyone else, was thin, translucent—but shifting. Tenacious.

the loudest voice

On the bus ride home from school, Rosa was wedged between a large, round woman and the window. With her body pressed against the side of the bus, she tried to get comfortable by adjusting her position inch by inch. She didn't make much headway, finding her body angled in a more uncomfortable position than before. The woman smelled heavily of perfume, something peppery and offensive, as if she'd doused herself in it. Her thighs, bulbous, stretched the fabric of her flowered dress, and Rosa couldn't tell if she was awake or not. The woman breathed evenly, though every now and then Rosa caught the back end of a wheeze.

Rosa thought about home. She wondered what it looked like now. She wondered if the lemons in the backyard had bloomed yet, or if they'd already fallen off the branches of their trees, rotting somewhere in dirt of their yard. She had not returned for months. When she had first left for school, she would come back with frequency, on any long weekend or half-important holiday, until one visit Abuela told her to shove off, that she might've been old but knew how to handle a house just as well without her. Rosa relented. She stayed away for as long as she could. She knew she was being saved.

The woman beside her stirred suddenly. Rosa looked out the window on instinct, as far in the opposite direction as she could. She felt shuffling beside her, hearing grunts as the woman struggled to bend forward, her belly like a blockade between her and her bag.

"Dear," the woman said, gesturing to the bag at her feet, "would you mind?"

Rosa bent down and retrieved it, putting it in the small space between them, which wasn't much space at all. She smiled thinly.

“Thank you,” said the woman, pulling out the blanket rolled up inside and adjusting it over herself. “The air conditioning,” she explained, “is awful in these machines. It’s downright despicable how cold they keep these.”

Rosa shifted in her seat. “Yes, it’s pretty cold,” she responded.

“Cold? M’dear, it’s a freezer on wheels, and here us paying all this money to get chilled like some kind of packed meat. Despicable.” This last word she said a little louder, as if she were directing it towards the driver.

Rosa made a noncommittal sound, turning back to her book.

The woman shifted around some more, making herself comfortable. After a short while, she turned to Rosa again and asked, “Where are you headed?”

“Visiting home,” Rosa said. “My niece’s birthday.”

“How sweet,” she responded. “I don’t have one of those. Not until my idiot brother finds himself a wife in any case,” she snorted. “Fat chance. I can’t stand him and he’s my own blood.” She paused, “Are you in school, then?”

“Yes,” she responded. “A few hours away.”

“And do you like it?”

“Yes,” she said, “It’s very interesting.” She did not say that in those first months, and even still, she had felt the weight of being ill-prepared. She had watched with envy as her peers—bright, young people—navigated through school and all that came with it with ease, as if they had been practicing for this time their whole life. She had felt, suddenly, as if there was one half of the world she had never learned.

She did something terrible then: she got ashamed. She started to lie. This happened little by little. They asked, *Where do you live?* and she would answer, *Down south*, which she knew would evoke a very different image than the one that was the truth. She lied by withholding, by creating white

space in her stories of home, which did not often mention home at all. It was easy to pretend to be someone else when there was no one there to disagree with her. She lied to everyone, including Abuela, who asks over the phone, yelling loud so Rosa can hear her, the broken phone never replaced: *Do you like it there?* And Rosa answers, *Yes, it's nice.*

(She rationalized: People know nothing. They construct these elaborate theories and craft these tales as if they have some certainty, but they don't. It's all a lie, everything they've got, threads and twists and layers of lies. To remove them is dangerous, even fatal. Is adding another so terrible? Laying it gently on top of the rest to make this difficult world just the slightest bit softer to fall on, or using it as a rope to tie the parts together more securely? To begin with anything in this life, to pretend it is anything other than a gamble based on zero odds with nil outcome is yet another lie. And yet the world goes on anyway.)

"Well, then," the woman said, "Let's have it. What are you studying?"

"I haven't chosen the one thing yet," Rosa responded.

"But you have interests, don't you? A girl needs to have interests."

Rosa considered the question. "I do. I like—"

"Oh, enough of that, then," the woman interrupted. "You have no idea, I can tell. My idiot brother gets that look all the time. Just you wait, too long without interests and it'll be all over."

She felt herself growing angry. It had started to rain outside and the drops streaked against the window as the bus went down the highway. Beyond the pane, the world was damp and gray, like someone had taken a dishrag and squeezed it.

The woman continued, "My father was a marine. My mother led our church choir. Upstanding people," she leaned in, "People with interests." She shifted the blanket over her body, parts of which could not be covered, and again hissed loudly enough for the passengers sitting around them to hear, "*Despicable.*" When she had settled herself, she said, "You know, the first

lesson my father taught me was discipline—the second, *semper fidelis*. Do you know what that means?”

Rosa shook her head. She decided to guess. She tried for a joke. “Leave the seat down?”

The woman liked that one. She laughed deeply, which turned into a fit of coughing, and she balled the blanket up, covering her mouth. When she stopped her face was rosy at the cheeks, and the rolls of fat around her neck glistened. “Always faithful. His motto.” She pulled at the hem of her dress, readjusting herself. “My mother knew about that, too. A religious woman. Upstanding.” She tilted her neck as far as it could turn so she could peer down at Rosa. “What do you know about loyalty m’dear? Your parents teach you any of that?”

Now that was a question. She thought about the words: *semper fidelis*. She thought about how they didn’t fit well in her mouth. Rosa didn’t know words very well. Although she read books and wrote papers, although Carlos had always said she would go cross-eyed, Rosa only knew the spaces between words. She knew questions, but hardly any answers. Her days were not stacked with neat, ordered syllable—no perfect synchronization. In the place of order, she had a slew of disordered curiosities. There were words she did not know too, like: obstreperous, lassitude, mellifluous. She only knew to file away questions to ask the appropriate people later, like Abuela or Ana or even Carlos, but everything seemed to be conflating into itself and she just didn’t know who she was supposed to ask these questions of anymore. Loyalty, now that was a word.

She didn’t feel like lying. She said, “I don’t really have any of those.”

The woman shifted in her seat, and a sad, pitying expression took a hold of her round flub of a face. “Oh m’dear...” she muttered, spreading her hand in the space between them, as if to steady herself from a recent blow.

Rosa remembered then why she lied, because she hated that look. It was one she had learned to recognize, not only in people that didn’t know them, but those who did, too—Eddie and his

mother from down the road, or Gregor, the only Russian on the block, who carved wood figures on his porch, or Teresa, who had died only a few months ago, the last day of her life spent gossiping with Abuela on her porch, or even Lalo, someone who had always been there. If lying was a crime, pity should have a penalty too.

“It explains your lack of interests, of course,” the woman finally decided. “It can’t be helped.”

Rosa closed her book. She tried to concentrate on the road outside. Beyond the asphalt of the highway the dirt was muddy and wet. But the sky looked clear now, less smoky, as if the rain had pushed down all the dust in the air.

From somewhere near her ear: “And you don’t *visit* home, m’dear. You go back to living there.”

your mother and I

Manuel thinks of a day when he's a boy and his mother is busy sweeping. He's at home at his tia's when they hear the sounds of a car screech to a stop. There's been an accident. Angry cries filter in through the open window, and then the sound of the car wheeling away again. They expect to meet a crowd by the side of the street where it happened, but there is no crowd. There are two or three people on the side of the road, and the rest at their markets shaking their heads to each other as though lamenting the state of their home. There is a body on the street, face down, the pool of blood around his head like a halo.

Even after he's left home, he thinks of the man that dies there, and the people walking by who are, too, lamenting the state of their home and he thinks: how can he be one of them?

He writes this in a letter to Elena. She responds, *Stop it*. She misses the point. He searches for her. Sometimes he finds her, working or living with friends. If she's patient that day, she'll invite him to stand with her near the doorway of whatever place she's been hiding, sharing a drink of some kind—lemonade, or ice-cold water, or a fizzy pop. Sometimes he says, *I'll be better*. She does not respond in any way that he can tell. She doesn't even blink. She only says, in a voice that sounds like she's not even there, *Go home*. Sometimes when she says this he gets angry. He throws the glass of whatever-drink against the wall. The glass shatters. She doesn't cry. He wants her to cry. He wants her to be afraid of what she's done. He leaves.

When he's alone in these years, he thinks about home. He sends some money from whatever work he finds on the first of every month, but he does not go home. He will not go back without her.

The last time he sees Elena she is living in a small house a number of hours away from home. It takes him awhile to find her this time. The house is neat and the yard kept. The boards of

the home are still white, as if freshly-painted. He knocks on the door. When she opens it, she still does not look afraid. He pleads again, this time with the exhaustion of a man who's gotten old waiting. She leans against the doorway. In the sun, her hair looks flecked with gold. He wonders why he'd never noticed it before. From behind her, he hears the sound of laughing. It's a child's laugh—a small one, like a baby whose just grown into his legs. The baby shows up beside her, wrapping his arms around her knees. He leaves. He does not ask her why.

Sometime later Ana shows up at his door. He wants to tell her not to be afraid; that she is nothing like her mother, but doesn't know how. There are things you can't unlearn about people. There are things for which you cannot forgive them. Time does not heal all scars.

rosa & lalo

The afternoon she comes home, Rosa looks for Carlos, who has disappeared somewhere. She starts at the shop, needing his anger to push against for once. Instead Lalo is there, twisting up plastic bags filled with flowers. “Oh,” she says. “Lalo.”

He looks up. “Rosa—looking for Carlos?”

“Yeah,” she replies. “I need to talk to him.”

“Think he left early,” he says, shrugging his shoulders. “Maybe a hot date.” She feels as if she’s known Lalo almost all her life, and yet she is still always surprised by the way his shoulders can sag in that way that is singularly Lalo. “What’s up?”

She fidgets, dipping her hand in the tank nearest her to pick out a perfectly shaped lily. “Oh, nothing.”

“*Mentira*,” he says. “You trying to be cool now, Rosa?”

“Only cooler than Carlos.” She puts the flower back in the water.

“That’s not too hard,” he says, and they smile together. “C’mon, what is it?”

Ana’s face as she leaves her in the doorway comes to mind. What *is* wrong? It turns out to be more like a life’s sum of little shames. “It’s my Papá,” the word, uttered in the language of her family, feels too intimate. She doesn’t know how to retract it. “He’s coming to Nina’s birthday.” She pauses. “Ana just told me she invited him.”

Lalo stops packing up flowers. He whistles through his teeth and says, “*Que desmadre*,” what a mess. She regrets telling him a little bit.

She thinks about their first kiss, which happens while they are parked near a grove of trees. The fog is thick beyond the car windows, obscuring the road. She’d asked him for a ride somewhere.

Carlos would've killed him. The moment isn't romantic, but their shared spot inside the car feels safe and warm. It's in the fog that he leans towards her, and she says something stupid like *I don't know how* because at the time she's still afraid of everything and he says *You can* even though he doesn't really know what's going on either. Later, even after she leaves home, when she thinks of him she thinks of him then, saying *You can*.

After they kiss, he takes her to the fish farm where he works, which Carlos would never do. He tries to show her what he loves about it so much. She learns the strange chemistry of wet and dry soil meeting on the edge of a pond. He tries to teach her how to fish, and she fumbles with a basic cast, something he comments as "genetic." Sometimes she catches him looking out at the ponds with adoration, as if they belong to him.

One day he tells her about a man he always passes on a bridge near one of the canals on the way to school. He tells her how he's always there. He tells her how he wonders what it is that man is always waiting for, and why every day at that exact same hour. The ways they interact with home is an important distinction between them, that no matter where he goes (and he does leave, eventually) he returns to the valley with fondness, he circles back with affection. No matter where she goes (and she does leave) she returns with one foot ready to run. She doesn't know if that's the sort of difference that separated them, but she wishes she could've memorized more of those ponds. She wishes she could've found what he loved in it, so that she might love it too.

They sit together on the cot set up in a corner of the shop where she's heard their boss passes out sometimes after drinking too much. She thinks about all her problems with thinking. She has such a grand sense of imagination. It makes abstractions seem as real as people, and turns people into abstractions; it projects futures from the pinprick of light provided by minute interactions. It makes whole ghost towns out of the skeletal structures of buildings and opens up possibilities which

even don't exist. And yet, she could've never come up with this: the two of them sitting together on that old cot, listening to water drip somewhere in the room, probably from a leak in a tank.

"You think about it the most, don't you?" he says. "Him leaving." He corrects himself, "I mean, you think about it different than your family."

She's suddenly very tired. "I think about too much stuff."

It's a long while before he puts his hand on her hand. He talks to her through his fingers. She thinks she might have started crying, because her face suddenly feels wet.

She doesn't know how it happens but then he's lifting her chin and kissing her, and she's letting him. There are a lot of things that follow this, of course: his skin, hers, thoughts of how she was starting to go crazy, doing things without knowing them—except she wasn't. Because though afterwards she would blame it on any number of things, she'd know better: it was choice. You can't cancel it out.

Two people come together by unexplainable means, accidentally, unintentionally, and the gestures between them are clumsy, but they make them anyway. And then, it's not a game of how and why and when and if but of *this is this is this is*. History slips out of theory and into practice. It's living, then. That's what that feeling was: urgency, coupled with utter assuredness, spinning/not-spinning, moving with all deliberate speed. Another choice: to keep the atoms apart from one another, to prevent the awkward, uncomfortable, frantic friction of thought. She preferred not to think too much. She preferred to stay here, with limbs accidentally, artlessly entangled in a way that made this flimsy cot feel like a desert island on which to be perfectly marooned.

candles

Hector watched the preparations for the party with mild interest. He was reading the latest issue of Desert Dynamite, which wasn't a popular hero, but personally one of his favorites. His story: Dynamite was born somewhere in the Southwest, but doesn't know where exactly, and that's one of his Dark Secrets. Before he was picked up and adopted by a kindly old couple driving down to the Grand Canyon on vacation he must've been raised by coyotes or whatever else was out there in the desert, because he always has these nightmares that end with a long, extended howl. Dynamite doesn't understand them. He starts to fight crime when he realizes he can blow up stuff at will. He's a good guy, so the power doesn't corrupt him, but he doesn't know where it came from, either. He wonders if he learned that while he was being raised by the coyotes. Hector loved that kind of thing.

Abuela pinched his shoulder to get his attention. "*Muy bien*, you read and read but not a single hand to help."

He frowned. "I asked if you wanted help, you said not to bother—"

"Don't make up stories!"

"Okay, okay. Do you need help?"

She answered by shooing him out of the kitchen, telling him to clean himself up and make sure his brother was on time to the party. He walked towards his room, passing by Eloisa who was dressing baby Nina, who was not a baby anymore, but would be called that for some time. Nina fussed in her mother's arms, muttering some of the only sentences she had learned to make, "No no no. I hate this dress."

Eloisa put her hands on her hips, shoving the dress over Nina's head anyway. With age, Eloisa had grown thick and round. After Nina, every fold of her skin seemed soft and motherly.

Hector stopped in the doorway. He told Nina, “You look pretty.” Nina smiled, twirling. Eloisa looked thankful, which was not a look he’d gotten used to yet. For some time now, Eloisa had been living in the girl’s room with Nina, and Hector in what was left of the boys.

He did not understand Eloisa very well, and probably the least of his sisters. He did not think she understood him very well either and most days that he tried to bring up something he was reading—like *Desert Dynamite*—Eloisa would look at him like he was some kind of alien. But sometimes, like when Nina was fussing at night and not letting Eloisa sleep, or when Eloisa came home from work tired, or even when, over the years, he had caught her crying on the porch or in the shed they used to hide in, he would be around as best as he knew how, holding her hand or sitting with her or playing with Nina’s feet until she fell asleep, and she would mutter something through her tears like *oh my baby brother*, which wasn’t really an accurate statement anymore, but still felt nice.

When Rosa came home that day she was carrying a large duffle bag slung over her shoulder, and she looked tanner than he remembered, as if she made it a point to take in sun now. He couldn’t get at her for more than a few words before she was shuffled away by Abuela and the other girls. Nina, who was unaccustomed to Rosa, spent the first hour hiding shyly behind his legs until she got brave and sat on her lap, wanting her hair braided.

As Rosa braided her hair in the living room, Hector watched Eloisa watch them.

Eloisa said, “You do your hair different now.”

Rosa touched her hair. He didn’t know much about hair, but it was in a tight bun, pulled back from her face. She responded, “Not really.”

He said, “Well I think it looks nice.”

Eloisa ignored him. “You do,” she affirmed, her voice oddly rigid. “Just admit it.”

“Admit what?” Rosa asked.

“Your *hair*, Rosa, you changed your hair.”

“Christ, Eloisa. Fine, whatever, I changed my hair.”

Hector did not understand his sisters when they were together, either. Separately they made more sense. Eloisa seemed satisfied, and went back to reading her magazine and Nina kicked her legs every so often as Rosa worked on her hair. Eloisa and Rosa had only started fighting when Rosa had left for school, which made Hector thankful that they weren’t in the house together all the time.

Carlos came home smelling like fish. Abuela patted him with her wooden spoon, which had thankfully not yet been dipped in sauces, and ordered him into the shower. He shrugged his way along, making a face behind her head that made Rosa smile.

When Ana came home, she was carrying a big shopping bag full of knick-knacks. Playing cards and hair ties, lipsticks and polishes, pony figurines and baby girl shoes, and then more sophisticated items: a notebook, some books for reading, some pens, a new pair of socks. She had probably stopped by the dollar store, he thought, and he imagined how she must’ve looked as she waded aisle to aisle, picking up something for everyone. He got a new comic book and a set of collectible toy cars. Ana distributed the rest of the items, cooing and fussing over Nina.

He didn’t know how it happened after all that, but one second he was in his room putting the new comic in its place and the next everybody was yelling. That was how they did things in their family. Like twelve year olds, no dignity. The noise centralized in the kitchen, where Ana was standing in the doorway looking like she was trying not to cry.

Carlos pushed over the thing nearest him, a kitchen chair. It made a loud sound as it hit the wall. Abuela said some rude word at him, which is the first time Hector had ever heard her say a rude word to any of them. It didn’t stop Carlos. Hector recognized how Carlos’ face got red behind the freckles that he hated, which meant that it was serious.

“He wants to see us,” Ana pleaded. “He wants to see *her*.” She gestured in Nina’s direction. Nina was starting to look upset. Though she didn’t understand what was going on, Hector could bet the loud noise was enough to make her cry.

“No he doesn’t,” Carlos said. Ana tried to take a hold of his arm but he shrugged her off and slammed the front door behind him. Now Nina really was crying.

Eloisa gathered her up and bounced her up and down on her hip. She shot Ana a dark look. “You could’ve asked me first. She’s not yours.” She left too, retreating to the room where she could calm Nina. Even after they had left the room, they could hear Nina wailing through the thin wall. It felt awful.

Rosa didn’t say anything to Ana, which probably hurt Ana the most. She just left, not slamming the door, but with her own kind of force, which was more compact. That left the three of them—Abuela, Ana, and him—in the kitchen, staring at their hands. Abuela was crossing herself and muttering prayers, while Ana worked on biting her thumbnail. She looked upset.

Ana looked at him and said, “Do you hate me too then, for bringing Papá?” Her eyes were open wide, and he felt as if he could see every part of them.

He didn’t know how to answer that. “I don’t know how to hate you,” he said. This made Ana burst into tears, and he felt sorry, like he had said the wrong thing. When he tried to apologize she shook her head and squeezed his hand, retreating from the room.

Abuela went back to the stove, where something had started to smell like it was burning. She cursed under her breath. “Hector,” she said, and her voice was unnaturally even, like it got right before someone’s ear got pinched hard. “Go find your brother and sisters. Tell them to get ready for the party.”

He began to protest. “But Abuela—they won’t—”

“You want to help?” she said, “*Bien*. Go help.”

When he thought of Papá, he sometimes thought about the way tied his shoes. Maybe it was because he was always low to the ground and noticed that sort of thing more than others. Papá had this way of tying them that wasn't at all like he'd been taught. Three loops, one zig-zag, a lace squeeze—a kind of made up shoe-tying pattern. When he started learning how to tie his own shoes, Hector tried to replicate it. But Ana was the one teaching him, and often she would slap the top of his hand when he started to loop the wrong way, saying he was doing it all wrong. He never did learn how to do it like Papá did.

Other times it was the river that Papá would take them to that would come to mind, which was the place where he first learned what a frog was, or what happens when you step on a rock that's slippery, or how mad Ana could get when he wandered off.

He thought about Desert Dynamite. He hadn't been able to finish the latest issue. He'd last left off with Dynamite about to save some girl stuck inside a mine. Trouble was he couldn't use his powers to blow anything up since everything was already wired. If he did, he might blow her up, too. Now that was a dilemma. Hector sometimes tried to imagine what his power might be if he was a comic book hero, although so far he couldn't think of anything as cool as flying or super strength or blowing stuff up. But half of what made a hero cool, he had realized, wasn't so much his power, but his story.

He decided to start with Carlos. If he could convince Carlos, everyone else would come, too. Carlos might've gone to the shop, but then Lalo would be there, and he figured Lalo would try to convince him to go home, too. Carlos would probably avoid this interaction. Hector remembered how Carlos used to go to the shed to hit the punching bag for awhile, but the shed would be too

close to home now. Hector decided he would probably be at one of his girlfriends', whichever one it was that he had picked most recently.

He found Carlos at the first one he decided to check. Marianna's nails curled around the doorway of her apartment and her chest stretched the fabric of her shirt. Her hair was curly and big. She smiled at him, exposing her teeth, which were a little yellow. She was still very pretty; the kind of girl that Carlos preferred—unsubtle in her beauty. "How'd you get all the way here?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I walked."

"Long way to walk."

"I don't mind it," he said.

She considered him for a moment. She said, "You're cute." He swallowed. "Looking for your brother?" He nodded his head, and she stepped aside, ushering him into the room.

The place was filled with bags and boxes of take-out food, and it smelled like the inside of a Chinese restaurant. On the couch in front of the television was Carlos, flipping channels. He stopped on a fútbol game that was halfway over. When he saw Hector in the room, he said some rude word to Marianna, who shrugged it off and went into her room, to "let them talk." Carlos looked annoyed.

Hector sat down next to him. The couch sunk a little under his weight. He was still round in places that he should not be round, thick wristed and heavy footed. Carlos had tried to teach him how to run for awhile, and that had helped, though Hector had hated running. He thought he might like it after awhile, like when you like something from habit, like brushing your teeth maybe, but the feeling never came. It was always a slog. But there was one night that stuck out to him when they decide to run the county's famous blossom trail together. The trail is the most impressive during a very specific week in March. When it hits that sweet spot, miles and miles of orchards along either side of the designated trail erupt in blossoms of pinks, whites, and reds. He was not disappointed.

Under the light of the moon the blossoms are milky and blue. The trail is as beautiful as everyone says it is. He felt as if he were unraveling the longer they ran it, and the trail, he decided, was the sort of thing that could make you fall in love with a place.

For some time, he kept thinking about how Carlos looked out there running ahead of him, limbs extended, in perfect alignment. He could hit the ground with the balls of his feet without even really touching it. Hector hadn't known how to tell him then what he thought of all that, but he had thought about it a lot, and somehow, it had always helped him go on.

Carlos made a point not to say anything to him, and he kept his eyes fixed on the game, although Hector couldn't tell if he was watching it or not.

"Good game?" he asked.

Carlos grunted. Through the window, the sun began to fix its way into the room. The storm had passed, and the clouds were breaking apart. In the light, the room looked a little tarnished, like worn metal. The walls were browned in different spots, perhaps from rust. Hector didn't know much about walls, but he decided he didn't like the place. In the other room he could hear Marianna's hairdryer going, drowning out some of the noise of the game.

"Are you coming to the party?" he asked.

Carlos didn't respond, shifting slightly in his seat. The way he repositioned his shoulders made them look bigger. Hector didn't mind. He was used to it.

"It's Nina's birthday," Hector insisted.

"She won't even remember," he finally responded.

"She will if we tell her that her tio didn't show up."

Carlos turned the game up louder. "Hector, leave it alone. You don't know anything."

"Don't I?" His voice was suddenly thick. He felt the sound in his throat. Carlos turned to him and Hector fought to keep his one good eye from getting wet. They heard the commentator

declare a goal, his voice wailing for what felt like a full minute. Carlos' eyes flicked back to the screen, but this time his shoulders sagged with him.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll come.”

They watched the game for awhile, Hector rubbing his eye. Carlos didn’t notice when he wiped his nose on the back of his hand, or if he did, he didn’t say anything, for which Hector was thankful. Desert Dynamite didn’t cry. Or at least not in any issue he’d read.

The party was a neighborhood event. They all came. Eddie and his mother, Lucia. And Marco and Emilia who had that hair salon they ran out of their bathroom. Lalo and all his cousins, and tias, and tios. Bernardo who made his own whiskey. Grandpa Torres who wasn’t anyone’s grandpa but was called that anyway, and the Jimenez brothers with their orange stand, and his English teacher, Mrs. Ramirez. All of them came, anyone who was around. They filled the house up with people, passing around plates of warm food and drinks. The house expanded against the weight of them all, blooming. The kids of the group formed a cohort, playing games, and Hector caught them chasing each other around the yard and later, hiding from each other in the house.

Rosa showed up, and Eloisa, too. Ana finally stopped crying. Hector finished his latest Dynamite issue his closet where Abuela couldn’t pinch him for reading during a party. Dynamite was once again successful, saving the young girl stuck in the mine through teamwork with the local community. The issue ends with a dream, a coyote howling. It opened up a lot of questions. He was excited for the next one.

They had a big cake. They sang happy birthday, and when they were finished, Nina shoved her hand into the cake. Abuela looked like she could faint. Everybody else thought it was cute. They all ate around the mark of her fist anyway.

Then, when the night was really waning on, Papá arrived. He came in while they were handing out cake, so almost everybody was in the same place. Hector wished he had come earlier, or even later. But they were all there to see him. He didn't knock on the front door; he just walked into the kitchen, stopping in the doorway. Hector looked at Papá's face first, which he did not really recognize except from that which he had pieced together in dreams. Even though it had been awhile, Hector recognized he had seen him much sooner than this time. Papá had always been there, on everyone else's face. Carlos' eyes and Ana's nose, Eloisa's dimples and Rosa's thick, black hair. He was in other parts too, like the way they walked or how they leaned against the wall. He didn't know what part belonged to him. Sometimes he wasn't sure any of Papá was even his. Then instead of his face, Hector looked to Papá's shoes, which were tied in the way that he had remembered them.

The room went quiet until the only sound in the house was that of the tune playing on the radio, a Spanish croon. He saw Carlos look down at his feet. Eloisa and Rosa were somewhere in the room, but he couldn't find them. Only Ana stood close to Papá, as if protecting him. For a moment Hector felt as if they were all stuck in the gap between panels. In the comic book world, they referred to this as the "gutter." The five of them waded in it. What happened next? He didn't know. He couldn't imagine what image the next panel might evoke; he only knew white space, as if the author of his life had not yet figured it out. What would Desert Dynamite do? Probably blow up the kitchen to avoid all this. Or maybe he would just make a small explosion outside. The shed might burst into flames and then everyone would have to put it out together.

He was the first to move. He walked up to Papá and took the small gift box from his hands, a wrap job that had Ana's mark of exactitude. He said, "Thanks, Papá. She'll love it."

His words unlocked something, and the room started to move again. It swelled, and food began to pass once more between members of the party—criticized and praised, firsts and then seconds. Someone turned the radio up loud so that pairs began to dance on the porch and in the living room. In the yard the lemon trees were picked clean by the kids on the street, and Eloisa and Rosa squeezed them into fresh lemonade. Nina fell asleep early on the armchair in the living room. Carlos and Ana danced a tune together, her letting him lead for once.

Sometime later, Hector caught Abuela crying and crying in the hallway, and when he tried to ask her was wrong, she shooed him away with that hand that had crossed *bendiciones* to him a thousand times before saying, *nothing is wrong mijito, nothing is wrong. Now go eat.*