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# The Earth, The Moon, The Stars: Stories

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THE EARTH, THE MOON, THE STARS: STORIES

A Thesis  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Department of English  
Western Kentucky University  
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

By  
Cameron Moreno

August 2018

THE EARTH, THE MOON, THE STARS: STORIES

Date Recommended

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“Why I Never Look at Planes Flying Overhead” was a Finalist for *SLAB Literary Magazine*'s Elizabeth R. Curry Poetry Contest

This collection is about reaching a point of discomfort and choosing to reside there. It is about being unafraid to push the boundaries of the status quo. It is about learning to love one's self at any distance – from the Earth, to the Moon, to the stars, and beyond.

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## THE EARTH, THE MOON, THE STARS: STORIES

Cameron Moreno

August 2018

144 pages

Directed by: Rebecca Brown, David Bell, Sonia Lenk

Department of English

Western Kentucky University

This is a book-length, hybrid collection of short stories and poetry with a critical introduction. The narrative of these stories and poems are told through the perspective of Xavi Muñoz and various characters related to him. In theme, this collection explores machismo and Xavi's attempt at overcoming it by discovering the intersectionality between masculinity, sexuality, gender, and gender roles. In addition, the introduction theorizes about masculinity by relating it to water.

## CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I was told everyone has a purpose for living. There was – and for the sake of candor, still is – a part of me that wonders what purpose *I* am to serve. A part of me believes that it lies in the world of story-telling as it has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. My father would tell me stories, myths from our culture, and I would be in awe of the way I could lose myself in the fantasy worlds he conjured simply with his words.

Though I was no stranger to stories, I discovered there was a career field focused entirely on the art of creative telling – whether that be fiction, fact, or something in between. I gravitated toward fiction because I believed it was an escape from a reality I did not want to face. But was that really the case? A few years after beginning my creative writing journey, I came across a quote from Flannery O’Connor: “I’m always highly irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and very shocking to the system” (78). This quote forced me to investigate my own writing – the stories and poems that ultimately created this collection. And the investigation helped me realize something: this book is not my attempt at avoiding the reality I grew up in, it is me trying to face it.

### **The Author**

I was born and raised in the city of Corpus Christi, Texas. It is home to (roughly) 350,000 people and sits on the edge of the Gulf of Mexico (which is where it gets its name: “The Sparkling City by the Bay.”) As a child, my parents would take my siblings and I walking along the shore of J.P. Luby Surf Park, a section of the Gulf of Mexico a



mere 20 minutes away from downtown Corpus Christi. I grew to love this beach, so much so, this became the place I would come with friends as I grew up (much like Xavi does in “Emeralds”).) However, somewhere between the drinking and the smoking and doing young, dumb things, I made an assumption: most people who are born in Corpus Christi tend to live and die here.

I asked myself why this was, even looking at those around me for the answers. Members of my own family, both distant and close relatives, had no plans of ever leaving the city. They experienced heart break. They experienced death. They experienced loss of home and jobs, and yet, they had no desire to retreat somewhere else. I thought I had experienced those same things, and therefore, Corpus Christi became a place I grew to resent.

That was when I was eighteen years old.

Since then, I have traveled to different cities and states, ending up in Bowling Green, Kentucky. For the last two years, I have lived in a world almost entirely different from where I grew up. This distance allowed me the opportunity to step away from what was familiar to me and explore what it was about Corpus Christi that was so unappealing to me. Now at twenty-four, I can see that it wasn't a person nor was it anything specific and exclusive to Corpus Christi that helped to breed my disdain. It was the idea of masculinity.

### **Machismo**

Many people have told me that I am masculine-presenting, even assuming I am a cis-heterosexual male – I have a beard, I wear manly clothing, I have a deep(ish) voice.

However, I, as well as the few people who have come to know me on a very personal level, know this is not the truth. Not entirely. And because of this, I called to question if my “manliness” was an act, which, ultimately, led to my questioning of if I could still be considered a man.

I was taught that masculinity is like money: you want more than the person standing next to you. I’m not sure where this idea started nor if its inception can be pinpointed to a single moment in time. But I do know that masculinity goes by another name: machismo. Defined by Victor De La Cencela, machismo is the “socially constructed, learned, and reinforced set of behaviors comprising the content of male gender roles in Latino society” (291). Essentially, it is the way men in Latino communities are “supposed” act and what they are “supposed” to say that defines them.

It wasn’t until recently did I realize this fixed perspective of what made a man in the eyes of Latinos (more specifically Mexican-Americans) was toxic. Especially for me. At least, I didn’t know the words to call it such a thing.

Since I can remember, every movement I made, every word I let out of my mouth, was under constant evaluation. Was I manly enough? Did what I say make people assume I was overly feminine? Was I overly feminine and hiding it? This constant self-evaluation wasn’t limited to what I did physically; it bled into my career choice. At an early age, I told myself I was *going to be* a doctor. This predetermined path forced me to pursue everything science and math-related I could attach myself to. I felt that if I could focus on these things, I wouldn’t be worried about upholding a masculine performance, especially because saving lives was considered a manly thing to do.

In his article “The New Psychology of Men,” Ronald Levant states: “the pressures on men to behave in ways that conflict with various aspects of traditional masculinity ideology have never been greater. These new pressures—pressures to commit to relationships, to communicate one’s innermost feelings, to nurture children, to share in housework, to integrate sexuality with love, and to curb aggression and violence—have shaken traditional masculinity ideology to such an extent...” Society is progressing past older constructs, gender and gender roles being some of them. This has caused men to cling to machismo in such a way, it takes on their identity.

I didn’t want machismo to define me. And this retrospective study of my own life not only allowed me to see what machismo truly was, it helped me to see that maybe I wasn’t the only person struggling with keeping up a certain “level” of manliness.

### **The Inspiration**

I have never been good at writing about myself. I have never felt my life held enough merit to write about and hope people would care about what I had to say. That is part of the reason why I like fiction: it talks about issues without placing yourself at the center. That’s what I believed.

This book began with a friend of mine challenging me to write a story about myself, most specifically, a time where my empathy (her words, not mine) shines through. She said that was the most beautiful part of me, something that was unique, and she wanted to read a story about such a person. This is how “When the Waves Come” was born. This was how Xavi was born.

“When the Waves Come” is taken from a personal experience of mine. During my time training as an EMT, a patient, much like Jesenia (an ex-drug addict who was attempting a better life) slipped and fell during work. And much like her character, she too had no one in her life. What happens after this moment in “When the Waves Come” – Xavi coming to Jesenia’s side and learning about what it is emotions are – are events I *wish* had happened. I figured no one would want to read a story about what actually happens – a story about a boy who cries at night thinking about a patient because he was sad for her.

I received encouraging feedback about Xavi, the story, the themes. I was told to keep writing about this: write until I get to the “me” of the story. But this put me in a difficult situation: it sounded like a novel, and I was fond of short stories. I was writing about something I wasn’t sure could be talked about. That was until I met (not physically) Junot Diaz.

In early 2017, I was introduced to Diaz’s writing, most specifically his first collection of short stories, *Drown*. In the book, his main protagonist, Yunior, navigates the reader through parts of his (and Diaz’s, as the book is semibiographical) life as he and his family move from the Dominican Republic to America. The story, although is heavily centered around the themes of what the American Dream is and immigration, taps at the glass tank of masculinity and its involvement in the Latin-American community.

I could relate to his writing on some level. But I felt an even greater distance between myself and Yunior. Maybe it was the location (him from New Jersey, me from Texas.) Maybe it was our differing cultural backgrounds. Maybe it was because I could not relate to the struggles that come with immigrating and, therefore, was forced out of

that space. Whatever *it* was, it wasn't the first time I had felt such a strong connection to a book while also feeling like the possibilities weren't tangible. But this was the first time I felt inspired to write about me.

In an interview, Diaz once said: "The formula for being a man is so impossible, it's like trying to get yourself into a suit that no human being can possibly wear." He was correct: manliness was a formula. It was also unsolvable. There was no perfect version of a man, only what we believed to be "manly." The idea of people attempting to fit themselves into a certain set of boundaries was idiotic. I admired Diaz's format, using Yunion in multiple stories – it was something I wanted to mimic. But I was going to write about something that mattered to me.

### **The Argument**

Where I'm from, water is in abundance. It was a luxury I soon began to miss while living in Kentucky. I felt a sense of comfort and belonging around it. And because I knew what it was that felt so suffocating about Corpus Christi, I wanted to go back and be able to subvert, as best I could, the idea of toxic and hegemonic masculinity. But more than that, I wanted my writing to speak to people from there who knew how I felt. While writing this book, I wanted to relate it to something familiar to a Corpus Christi resident while also relatable to someone not from there as masculinity is not limited to within the Corpus Christi city limits.

Nina Munteanu, author of *Water Is...*, began the chapter "Water is Life" with an epigraph, a quote from Theodore Schwenk:

Why, then, does water-form the very basis of life in all life's various manifestations? Because water embraces everything is in and all through everything; because it rises above the distinctions between plants and animals and human beings; because it is a universal element shared by all; itself undetermined, yet determining; because, like the primal mother it is, it supplies the stuff of life to everything living.

Much like Schwenk, I believe water is the most important element there is. I am fascinated with the idea that water is in every living creature. And it is my belief that, like water, masculinity is in everyone too. In this book, water is a constant motif, revealing itself subtly in stories to argue something: machismo is the abundance of masculinity. Although the two terms go hand-in-hand, I believe that machismo is the overuse of masculinity, to the point it is suffocating to not only the person exhibiting masculine characteristics, but to the people around them.

For example, in "Waterworld," the reader is taken on a journey with the narrator, Ria, through her relationship with Carlos. Though this is a modular story, it is clear to see which vignette marks the beginning and which is the end. In every section, the volume of water present grows – from the water of an ice cube, to the rains of a hurricane. In addition to the name being a nod to the Kevin Costner film (which is mentioned in the story) it is a metaphor for Carlos' machismo. It is abundant and controlling, so much so, it almost kills the two of them.

In addition to this, I also argue that because masculinity, much like water, is flexible and "embraces everything," I use water as a metaphor to show masculinity's fluidity, basically arguing that masculinity is relative. In "The Origin of Olivia Waters,"

Olivia is a drag queen coming out to his father. Olivia identifies as a man, but dresses in feminine attire. When he finally does come out to his father, Stavio, Stavio begins questioning everything about Olivia – his identity as a man, if he is homosexual. At the end of the story, we see Olivia’s first performance. He claims he looks like his mother but feels as his father does (“tired, hungry, and fulfilled.”) I wrote this story to show that if masculinity is feeling as a man does, then Olivia is still a man even though he doesn’t work in the refinery as his father does, or as an EMT like Xavi. Some stories, like “Waterworld” and “The Origin of Olivia Waters,” is told from people connected to Xavi because I wanted him to learn from others. No man is perfect, knowing all of life’s lessons at birth, so why should Xavi be?

### **The Poetry**

In “Emeralds,” we are introduced to Xavi’s love of poetry. He states that it is something frowned upon for a man to participate in, which is a lesson I came to understand at a young age. I was taught poetry is feminine, often belittling it to romanticized stereotypes with its only purpose being to pour one’s heart out to another person in written form. This isn’t true. In my eyes, poetry is powerful because it is a dose of reality – quick, short, and to the point.

At the end of every story, there is a poem that corresponds with it. These poems, written from Xavi’s point of view, serve as an echo for the theme of the story it follows. I feel that it is necessary to show the world the internal thoughts of Xavi in both the prose form and the poetic form. The reason I write poetry is to allow myself a bit more exposure than fiction would allow. I test my ability to play with language while also

opening myself up – raw and real – for others to read. Because this book is (very loosely) semibiographical, I felt it was best to give this trait to Xavi. He too uses poetry as a place to bring his thoughts together.

### **The Conclusion**

There are many words I can put here to sum up what this book means to me. It is an amalgam of questions and answers that were born from the many moments of doubt in my life. But the main purpose of this book is this: it is a challenge in written form. I am challenging the idea of machismo, the invisible beast that haunts men of all cultures and generations. I am challenging the idea that men are meant to act a certain way because there is a supposed boundary that if crossed cannot be uncrossed. I am challenging masculinity in this book because I have crossed that boundary before, playing jump rope with it almost daily, and I want other men to not be afraid to cross it too.



# The Earth, The Moon, The Stars: Stories

Cameron Moreno

## Emeralds

Xavi liked this spot. Mile Marker 39 at JP Luby Surf Park. Since he could remember, once-a-month visits were tradition. This far from the entrance to the beach, he could lose himself in the dunes of sand behind him – stranded on his own made-up island. He would use sticks and palm branches as the tinder for imaginary fires while the broken shells – tied together with frayed strings found in the sand – were the ends of makeshift spears. But if he ever fell too deep into this world, enough to scare himself by the thought of loneliness, he could look to his right, squint his eyes, and see a pier escaping out of the line of condominiums and hotels.

But today wasn't an island day. His young, chubby fingers scribbled unorganized lines in the sand. He didn't think about where they were leading; all he wanted was to feel the warmth of the shore at the tip of his finger. Under the partial shade of a palm tree, his mother sat next to him wearing a red and white polka dotted bathing suit with a wide-brimmed straw hat – the red bow tied around the crown of it matching her outfit. From his peripheral, he noticed her shifting her gaze from the sea to the sky, letting the rays of sun bathe her copper skin.

Xavi's father stood in the water before them, planted directly in the middle of his line of sight. In the distance, Ignacio's body was stiff and alone as a buoy. With his hands on his hips – the ocean calm around him – it appeared to Xavi that he was staring directly at the sun, silent. For years, he wondered what his father thought about while he was all alone. But any time Xavi would speak to him, hoping to share something other than the air in the cabin of their family car, Ignacio would entertain Xavi's imagination by asking

questions and suggesting things to pretend the next time they came. Not once did Ignacio tell Xavi about what he imagined, what the Sun brought him that day.

“It’s nice today,” said his mother, Griselda, with her eyes still closed. The way she was positioned, her arms held her upright, making sure her chest felt the sun while her legs were crossed on top of the towel. Her torso was exposed enough that Xavi could see a scar a few inches below her belly button – a smile folded into her stomach. He could recall seeing it only briefly, exposed to him in department store dressing rooms. But this was the first time he could remember seeing it at the beach, outside florescent lighting. Then again, he had been too busy pretending to battle for survival to notice.

“¿Ques esto?” Xavi asked, pointing at it.

“That’s where both of my babies came from.”

His eyes widened. “I have a brother?”

“Sister,” she corrected him.

“Where is she?” He looked around thinking this was the day she would surprise him. Maybe she was in the sand, in a treasure box, and that was why they came to this spot so often. The excitement from something he never knew he wanted heated his skin.

“Just because she’s not here doesn’t mean she’s not my baby.”

Xavi examined his mother’s scar with intent. He used the cut he earned from running in the ditch behind his house as a reference. When he ran his fingers along his ankle, he couldn’t feel the difference between the wound and the skin around as it was fading and barely visible now. But his mother’s scar seemed deeper. She covered her stomach with her dress before Xavi had a chance to feel the gradient change of her skin.

“Did she die?”

Without looking at him, she replied with a faint “yes.”

“Is she buried with Momo and Popo?” Xavi recently learned the term ‘buried,’ what it meant instead of the simple idea that his great grandparents were large patches of grass he and his parents visited every so often, and how everyone was headed there one day.

“No, Xavier. She’s here.”

His mother pushed herself up and rubbed her hands together. Xavi could hear the grains of sand leave her fingers returning to the bed of shore. Wiping her knees clean, she motioned for Xavi to sit on her lap. She put her chin on his shoulder and spoke into his ear. To him, her words were smooth and coated with love, the way he imagined silk would sound.

“You might be too young to understand this,” she began, “pero creo que es hora de que lo sepas.”

As the seagulls sounded above them – hovering over the shore in their own circled formation – Xavi’s mother whispered that his sister was cremated, her ashes spread into the ocean at this very spot. He imagined his parents sprinkling her remains the same way Momo would feed her chickens: a swift flick of the wrist and a curtain following behind. She reminded him that because one couldn’t see something or feel a heart beating or share warmth with it didn’t mean they couldn’t love it.

“That’s why we come here.” She finished her elegy with a kiss on his cheek.

“Why don’t I remember it?”

“You were too young, mijo,” she replied. “Just a year old.”

Xavi studied the ocean. The water in Corpus Christi had a dark green tinge to it. He remembered he had seen pictures of the ocean in Fiji and Hawaii, water so clear you could see your toes grip the rocks. But he knew that as soon as you walked out into the ocean here – past the bit of shore where the water and the sand met – you would lose sight of your legs, making you believe you were nothing but your chest and the water was the only thing keeping you afloat.

“Momma?” Xavi asked, now staring at the area where his father stood. “Why is the water green?”

A few moments of silence passed. She moved Xavi off her legs and looked back at the ocean.

“When God made the Earth,” she began, “He dropped emeralds in the ocean.”

She picked up a handful of sand and let it fall out of the tunnel she made when her fingertips touched her palm. Some carried away in the wind while most of it piled directly below.

“Why’d He do that?”

“Because emeralds are said to heal people.” Again, she wiped her hands clean.

“When you’re in the water, your pain seems to just float away.

“That’s why we brought Erica here,” she said. “We didn’t want her to hurt anymore.”

Hearing his sister’s name seemed distant, sharp, uneasy in his ear.

The sun had just set when The Oldies: 93.9 radio station started their commercial-free hour. From where he sat, Xavi saw his best friend, Carlos, dancing as best as he

could around the girl they met at a club a few nights earlier. His top half remained stiff with his arms flexed and guarding his chest. But something seemed different. Xavi carefully eyed the two and noticed that Carlos' hips were swaying, which was something entirely foreign from his hyper-masculine nature that followed Carlos like a shadow. Xavi was familiar – and in awe – of the way Carlos swaggered about the hallways of their high school.

On the other side of the fire was Ria, Xavi's most recent friend he met while in college. She danced the way he imagined a truly free spirit would: alone, with her arms above her head and her hands rolling around each other while she mouthed the words to Bee Gee's "Stayin' Alive" as if she was born somehow knowing the lyrics. The random beach walker she made eye contact with sat on the log next to the fire, his hands motioning for her to sit down in his lap. But she seemed to want to do anything but that. Instead, she extended her arm out to her friend, Sofia, trying to pull her in to dance.

With a beer in her hand, Sofia sat in Carlos' truck, her feet hanging out of the opened passenger door of. Xavi was constantly fighting the urge to look at her, occasionally studying debris in front of him or pretending to laugh at his friends' dancing around the bonfire so he wouldn't frighten her. But the moments he caught himself watching her wave off Ria's drunkenness, he was in awe of the way the flames flickered on her skin, drenching her face and clothing in a deep red.

Xavi drank the last swig of warm Dos Equis. He was keeping it in there until he summoned enough courage to grab another beer, giving him a chance to talk to Sofia. He suppressed the fear filling his stomach and made his way to the trunk where the beers sat in the ice chest. He searched for a manly beer, one his father would drink.

“They’re all out of Dos,” Sofia said. Xavi wasn’t ready to look her in the eyes yet.

“Fuck,” he replied, calm and cool. “What’s left?”

“Peach Smirnoff.” Her sentence ended with a laugh. She picked up a bottle and, holding the neck, extended it to Xavi. He looked up and noticed her smile broke the tension in his stomach. Her hair was pulled back tight, the fire bringing out the light brown in her bun.

He grabbed the drink. He fiddled with the beer opener deciding if this was his moment to say something more to her. If it was, he wasn’t sure what to say. His eyes wandered toward Carlos who now had his arms wrapped around his date, slowly grinding his body into hers. Xavi figured it wasn’t the right time. He decided he would go back to his seat, drink, stare, and wonder the what-ifs.

“Can I join you over there?”

“Sure.” Xavi acted as if it wasn’t a big deal, but his stomach panged with excitement.

She chugged the bit of drink left in her glass and grabbed another from the chest, slicking off the sweat from the melting ice it was nestled in.

“Actually –” Xavi planted his bottle in the sand, shifting it in place until the sand grew around the glass. He pulled his shoes off, then his socks, and threw them toward the blanket he was sitting on. “Come on.” Swaggering with a Carlos-like macho-ness, Xavi made his way into the ocean until the water reached his collarbones – his shirt clinging to his skin. Sofia slipped out of her sandals and pulled her shirt over her head revealing a red bikini top. She walked toward Xavi, her body shivering from the cold shock of the ocean.

The two stood in the water, the sound of the small waves colliding with their chests. Even the music seemed to add to the tension Xavi could feel between them. To him, every moment neither of them spoke, the empty space between them lengthened.

“Have you ever been here?” Xavi asked, his voice stammering a bit.

“No, actually. My family and I go to Port A for a beach day.”

“I’ve been coming here since I was a kid. This exact spot, actually.”

“That’s sweet.”

Xavi thought Sofia’s voice to be soft, weightless, distracting him from the pungent sulfur they were paddling in.

“What’s sweet?”

“That you wanted to bring your friends here.” Her hands hovered above the glittering water. And when she would barely touch it, ripples ran between their bodies, connecting them for as much as the miniature wave would allow.

“I guess so,” Xavi replied. “How do you know Ria?”

“We met in high school. And you two met in college, right?”

“Yeah. I was glad I wasn’t the only person from Corpus.”

“Why’d you want to go there?”

Xavi had been trained for a moment like this. He was alone in the water with a woman half-naked and soaking. Instantly, he heard Carlos in the back of his mind saying *You need to man-up, vato. Tell her this* and then he’d whisper some quixotically-coated sentence that would swoon anyone desperate enough to listen. But Xavi didn’t know himself to be a smooth talker. And he didn’t think Sofia was hopeless or vulnerable, nor did he want her to be.



“It’s not that I *wanted* to,” Xavi said. “I didn’t want to stay here.”

“Why not?”

The truth that Xavi felt alone in this world didn’t seem like the right answer; he didn’t want to scare her away. Even more, he wasn’t inclined to possibly offend her by saying he believed Corpus people were too stuck in their ways to leave the town and that everyone was as dead as his sister. He figured the silence would force the waves to bring him the correct answer the same way it carried algae and trash: in manageable, tangible chunks that he could pick up and hand to Sofia.

“I never felt like I fit in here,” he said. “I thought going somewhere else would help me figure out who I am.”

“Did it work? Going somewhere else.”

“No. I think that’s why I come here.”

“Because it’s a reminder of your childhood.”

“Because the water is supposed to heal you,” Xavi corrected her, “and every time I’m in it, I feel okay. I think submerging myself gives me the strength to be here. Maybe it’s making me content, like my father wants me to be.” He paused. “Like him.”

The entire time, he could feel Sofia’s gaze centered on his cheek. He knew there was a heavy tightness to the air that made the moment seem fragile. He knew something had to change if we wanted her to remain by his side. “My mom used to tell me that God dropped all the emeralds here and that’s what makes the water green. But I don’t believe that.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think he’d waste them. Not on this place.” Xavi noticed the perplexed look on Sofia’s face and couldn’t help but wander into her eyes, the darkened irises inviting him in.

“Then where’d He put them?” She seemed fascinated by Xavi.

“In your eyes.” His answer was quick coming out of his mouth, scratching his throat on the way out. A line that corny and obvious was something he learned from Carlos. But Xavi wasn’t sure if it would work for himself.

Sofia smiled, her teeth now visible. She brought her fingers to her lips – water running down her arm – to wipe the edge of her mouth. “Tell me something you’ve never told anyone,” she said.

Xavi was thankful she changed subjects; he didn’t want to fester in the moment any longer. “I write poetry.” Again, the answer slipped out. His confessions tasted bitter like the smell of rubbing alcohol.

Growing up, Xavi was fascinated by the way language could operate on a page. And when he took a course in poetry, he came to the realization that Hispanic men didn’t share the same appreciation for it. He hid behind bookshelves in libraries and made sure only to read in the solace of his bed room hoping no one would see what he was doing. And now, his greatest secret in the open, he believed any chance he had with Sofia had drowned in the water.

“That’s honest,” she said. “It’s not something most men can admit to. Especially to someone they just met.” She blinked a few times, then added: “Especially to a woman.”

“There’s been a lot of admitting tonight.” Xavi felt vulnerable, open and raw and he didn’t want to be the only one. “Now you tell me something.”

“I like honesty.”

“Something else.”

It took a few breaths, a few moments for Sofia to answer him. She turned toward the shore where Ria and Carlos were still drunkenly dancing. “Poetic or not, that emerald bit was the worst pick-up line I’ve ever heard.” She moved closer to Xavi until her leg touched his. He looked down as she pulled his hand out of the water and flipped it around so his knuckles hovered above their reflection. She seemed to be studying the lines of his hands, the curves and webs of his palm as if he was meant to tell her something through his skin. “Is it bad it kind of worked?”

The faint whistle of the wind escaping the driver-side window was the only sound playing in the car. Ria’s left hand remained close to the gap between the glass and the frame of the door, sparks and smoke from her cigarette cherry floating away while she steadied the steering wheel with her other hand. Xavi was busy detailing the sky, following the formation of a few clouds in the sea of light blue.

A few dips and bumps on the sand later – after the thin, winding road leading to the shore – they arrived at Mile Marker 39. Ria opened the trunk of her jeep and laid a towel, flattening the bumps under it as best she could. She settled herself and opened a copy of Junot Diaz’s *Drown*. Xavi sat next to her, his legs crossed as he stared in the direction of the ocean.

“I haven’t been here in forever,” he said, smelling the familiar hint of sulfur.

“Me neither,” she replied. “When was the last time? The bonfire, right?”

“I stopped coming about a year after I moved back. That was three years ago.”

“Four.” Ria corrected him as she lit her cigarette. “Carlos and I met and started dating two years after that. Almost to the day, actually.”

“Met.” Xavi laughed as he mocked Ria. “I can’t believe you forgot I introduced you two at the bonfire.”

“I was too drunk to remember anything,” she replied. “And I’m sure he said something stupid that night, so my lack of memory served him well.”

“He changed a lot in those four years.”

“Have you talked to him?” Ria asked.

“Not really. He pushed me away after you two broke up.”

She put her finger in the middle of the book, resting the spine on her knee.

“I’m sorry.”

“I tried.” Xavi pulled his shirt off, throwing it to the front seat. “But he didn’t want to open up about anything.”

“Sofia did the same thing to me after you two ended.”

Xavi concentrated on the frayed ends of the towel. He had told Ria, who now seemed invested in her book and cigarette, that he wanted to come here and see the ocean, listen to nature as it moved before him. But that wasn’t enough. Sitting this far away from the water reminded him of his mother, how the many times he and his parents visited the beach, he never saw her soak in anything but the sun. But he didn’t want to walk all the way into the middle of the ocean; he was afraid he’d keep going into the cold and forget the feeling of warmth, something he imagined his father would feel.

His legs dangled off the end of the car, close but not yet touching the ground. He scooted off and proceeded down toward the end of the sand and the beginning of the ocean.

“Be careful,” Ria shouted from the car. “It’s going to be cold.”

Xavi waved at her that he was fine. Slowly, he rested his body into a seated position. The way he was situated, his legs felt the cool, wet sand – mud, almost – under his calves. He relaxed his back on the dry part of the sand, the grains massaging his body with the bit of warmth they had left.

“What’re you doing?” Ria yelled out.

“Come sit with me.” He wanted her to feel what he felt, in between two worlds.

With his eyes closed, Xavi heard Ria’s feet hit the sand and the flick of her cigarette. Even though he knew she was with him as the sand shuffled below her body, he opened his left eye. He saw her sitting with her arms propping her body up while her legs braided into one another.

“Just wait,” he said. “Wait for the water.”

Xavi could hear the rushing sea approach the two of them. The first few waves only came to his feet. It seemed the tide was pushing itself, hungry for his body.

“When I came here with my parents,” he said, breaking the silence between them, “my mom would sit in the sand back there while my dad would stand in the middle of the water.

Wasn’t until years later I found out it was because he was crying.”

“About your sister?”

Xavi gave Ria a look of surprise. Though they were best friends for some time now, he didn't remember telling her about Erica.

"Sofia told me," she continued.

"Yeah," Xavi said. "He would stare at the sun because he thought it'd evaporate his tears. He didn't want me to see."

He focused on the water again, feeling it only come to the bottom of his calf muscles.

"That's some machismo shit if I ever heard it."

"He didn't cry every time he was here," Xavi acknowledged. "He just got used to standing out in the ocean. The same way my mom was stuck in the sand. Their ways of coping, I guess." He knew he didn't want to sit in the sand and not join in on the cleansing the water brought with it. And didn't want to walk too far into the water to drown himself with his problems like an anchor dragging his body into the dark abyss.

"Why are we here?" Ria asked. The sun was surrounded by gray in the December sky with a melancholic breeze blowing on the two of them. Even the numbingly cold water was gloomy, the dark green glow made visible in the bit of light at high noon.

"Healing isn't fixing something that's broken," he said. "It's putting back what you lost."

Ria seemed to like that. "So, do you feel complete yet?" she asked. "Do you feel anything?"

"Yeah. I just can't put my finger on it."

There was a word for it, the feeling in him at this very moment: acceptance, at home, belonging, attachment. Different words kept presenting themselves, but nothing

seemed right. Instead, Xavi let the sound of the waves, the seagulls overhead, and the shifting sand below him fill the lack of knowledge as the water finally tried to swallow his legs, reaching his hips, soaking the sand under him.

Reflections

*Mile Marker 39, JP Luby Surf Park, Corpus Christi, Texas*

In the illuminated night,  
there will be a child  
that wonders how it is  
we can open our eyes and see  
something of worth in this sea.  
What is so appealing about beer  
bottle shards that share space  
with spit and cigarette  
butts sponging the round  
corners clean?  
How much time can someone spend  
at a place where the water is  
as green as Christmas  
trees year-round?

He told a girl he loved  
that this beach wasn't worth  
anything, even the shells  
didn't want to live  
in the water, with streams  
like they were shooting  
stars in the sand. He grabbed  
an Auger and told her he would  
save it from this place.  
It's been two years  
and it is still  
with him – not the girl  
or the hate, but the love  
of that beach in the shell  
like a memory.  
But anything can be  
a memory if you hold on to it  
long enough.

In the illuminated night,  
there will be a man  
who sees a galaxy on the glass  
water, each ripple a goose  
bump in the stratosphere.  
And he will know why shells  
in the shore will have trails  
behind: to remind them  
which way is home.



## When the Waves Come

The ambulance echoed Xavi's breathing. No patients inside, no heart-pounding in his ears, just the sound of his controlled breath in and out of his nostrils. Trapped by the latex gloves, grains of sand decorated his fingers and palms. It always happened when he worked on – even *near* – the beach. He rested his head on the wall of the ambulance, letting the sand sit in its places. By this time, the poorly air-conditioned vehicle had dried the drips of sweat on his forehead and neck leaving only his shirt soaked.

Less than an hour ago, the ambulance responded to the call of an older woman on Mustang Island who had fallen during an excursion of her property. Half a mile away from where they parked the vehicle, he and the rest of the crew found the woman lying at the bottom of the dune, her left tibia peeking out through her shin. To Xavi, it looked like she sat on a throne, the sand conforming to her body. And such as any summer day in Corpus Christi, the sun sat above them all like a stage light while the group performed their ceremony of strapping the woman onto the bed and making their way back to the ambulance. The sand kept catching Xavi's steel-toe boots, as if it wanted him to stay longer to see the ocean.

“You have any plans this weekend?” asked Pablo, the other paramedic riding with Xavi that day. He wiped the gurney clean ridding the two of them of the throne-woman's sweat.

“No. Not really.”

“This the end of your twenty-four?”

“Yes sir.”

“A friend told me the bartender with the huge tits is wearing a low-cut dress tonight,” Pablo said, almost shouting. “I don’t want to miss it.”

Pablo’s outright-ness always forced Xavi to make light-hearted attempts at dismissing it with a non-sequitur. But he knew if Pablo could detect his shyness, it would make him the object of his mocking, something that hadn’t occurred since Xavi was in high school. It was men like Pablo – swagger-full with a nebulous nature about them – that were common like the palm trees that lined the highways. So common, in fact, Pablo reminded Xavi of his father, Ignacio – at least, the stories he heard of his father. His uncles would joke how Ignacio had women fawning over him like they were cows and he was field of vibrant grass. *And most of them looked like cows, so I don’t know why we’re bragging about him*, they would say to Xavi. His father remained silent as they showed their teeth. He assumed if what they said about his father was true, then old age must have been what dampened his attitude.

From the locker, Xavi heard the siren of the station scream a sharp cry. It was something he could never prepare his body for. Pablo ran toward the refurbished ottoman that housed the radio in the living room of the station. “Dispatch says there’s a girl who slipped at a restaurant.” His fingers turned the knob as he read off the description of the call. “Five-Six-Three-Three, Lexington Drive.”

“Where’s the next crew?” Xavi asked.

“Not here yet.” Pablo gathered his supplies from the floor. He jumped back into the ambulance and looked out to Xavi. “Can you do one more ride out?”

The prospect of another hour and a half of paper work after they dropped this patient off – plus the added cleaning required after *that* – gave Xavi pause. He didn’t

want to be around Paulo any longer. And he knew that his absence from his bed would make Sofia, his girlfriend, worry that he wasn't home. "Fuck it," he said making his way into the truck. He grabbed the ambulance's radio speaker and sung his usual song: "F-S Four to dispatch: we are on our way to Five-Six-Three-Three, Lexington Drive. E-T-A: ten minutes."

Through the small window in the backseat Xavi could see the streams of red and blue twisting, illuminating the rears of the cars ahead. The flood of vehicles split in half as the ambulance soared through the highway. It reminded Xavi of a coagulated blood stream, blocked from plaque or foreign objects. That made him the thinner that freed the pressure building along the walls.

The entire ride, Xavi assumed there would be brazen faces and murmured speaking while they helped whoever it was that needed help. But as he and Paulo, with medic bags in-hand, ran into Freddy's Grill and Serve, the two were surrounded by patrons sitting in their booths, forks still rising to their mouths. The only sign of something out of place came from the customers standing in line to have their orders taken. Each one was shooting glances over the line divider, trying to take a glimpse of the scene on the floor.

The blood pooling around the girl's head drowned the strands of hair not captured in her hairnet. It traveled through the cracks in the tiles and against the wood handle of the mop next to her. Only her eyes were shifting while her chest was rising. Kneeling beside her was an older gentleman with a bristled mustache and a large belly – her boss, maybe. Every few seconds, he would rub her hands and repeat "You'll be fine, mija."

“I’ll get the spine board.” And Pablo sprinted out the door.

Xavi knelt next to her, close enough to receive a whiff of copper. “Hi,” he said making sure he and the girl were eye-to-eye. “My name is Xavi.”

When speaking with a patient, Xavi made sure his voice carried stillness. It was a product of practice, something he learned to perfect as a boy. His father – by digging the joint of his index finger into Xavi’s head – had seared a lesson into him: to be a Hispanic man was to be made of stone. *To show emotion* his father would say *is to be weak*. He carried this notion with him every time he encountered a patient as he believed it benefited people to see a calm face while they panicked. Whether they suffered a broken bone or the patient was unknowingly dancing on the thin line between life and death, Xavi wanted them to not see a flutter of worry in his eyes. But though he presented a smile and a warming voice, it didn’t mean he didn’t feel anything for them. He was trained to be impersonal, just a vessel that carried people from one place to another; it was his least favorite part of the job.

“I need you to look straight up for me while I shine this in your eye.” He could feel her fingers studying the ground below them. They didn’t stop moving until they reached his pant leg. “Pupils are equal, round, and responsive,” he said as he let go of her warm cheeks and turned the pen light off. “Let’s get you out of here.”

With eyes like that of a puppy’s when they’re sitting in the corner of room after a scolding, the girl gave Xavi a nod of approval.

“What’s your name?” he asked. Each rotation of the gauze was carefully placed as he held the flaps of skin on the back of her head together. To him, they were the only thing keeping her memories from pouring out.

“Jesenia.”

“That’s a nice name,” he said kindly. She never seemed to notice she was being strapped down to the gurney.

Xavi liked the closeness of the ambulance. The back corner where the wall and the door met felt like a hug from a close relative, distracting him from whatever was on the opposite side. But many of his patients were sure to let him know they felt restraint, especially when the turbulence of pot holes and the sound of clinking glass vials in the overhead bins became the background noise for their ride. He was reminded of this when he dressed Jesenia’s arm with the sphygmomanometer and felt her body trembling under the orange straps. Her feet were like fish in the hands of a fisherman: eager to free themselves. Through the stethoscope, he could hear her quiet sobs. It brought him a sense of guilt when a patient would cry even though he knew he hadn’t done anything wrong. Since the start of his ride outs, with every patient that crossed his path, Xavi would pretend to take their pain away by placing his hand on their wounds, imagining it would course through his fingers and into his veins. He figured he could handle their pain if it meant they were free from it.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“I was cleaning,” she said between gathered breathes. “And I slipped and hit my head.”

“You lost a bit of blood back there,” he said as readied the needle of the I.V. He took a band from the dispensary on the wall and was about to prepare her arm when she interrupted him:

“You’re not going to find one.”

Xavi was confused by what she meant until Pablo whispered to him: “Her veins are collapsed on this arm.”

Xavi studied the arm resting below him and found no blue or purple breaking through the skin. He lifted her pant leg up on both sides but could only see lightly-colored brown skin and dark gray dots constellating up her shin.

“They’re all collapsed.”

He grabbed the central line needle from the drawer. It was a tough but flimsy thing that took two hands to operate. And before he had a chance to deliver medicine to his patients, their eyes would widen and become active. Just as he was wiping the iodine stain onto Jesenia, he heard Pablo mutter under his breath: *junkie bitch*. Xavi thought maybe he heard it incorrectly. But it was Pablo; he knew it left his mouth as easy as air.

“I’m going to put a central line in your collar bone,” Xavi said to Jesenia. “It’s going to hurt, but it’s the only way we can get fluids into you.”

With her hand over her mouth she gave him another nod. Xavi tracked the vein under her bone and placed the needle underneath it until he felt the resistance of the vein. A simple push and Jesenia sucked in a sharp inhale of air. His eyes wavered at the sound. “Call it in, Pablo,” he said. “Now.”

“We have a twenty-five-year-old female: 17-B-1 on the back of her skull... Headed to Shoreline... B-P: one-ten over seventy... heart rate is stable... patient suffered blood loss... prepare O negative drip.” – Pablo quickly studied Jesenia and looked away – “Gave patient fluids via central line; reasons detailed in the report... E-T-A: twelve minutes.”

“Is there anyone we can call for you?” Xavi asked.

“No,” she said. “I don’t have anyone.” Jesenia’s cries settled down as the muffled sound drowned under the sirens. Xavi’s arm rested on the window of the ambulance. Working night shifts it was a rare opportunity for him to see the darkness of dusk beginning to descend over the town. Behind the large petioles of palm trees along Padre Island Drive Highway, Xavi could make out the silhouette of miniature buildings; the town appeared to be in-flames

Xavi hadn’t spoken to Pablo since the two dropped Jesenia off at Shoreline Hospital; he made sure to shower and change without even breathing in his direction. And he could tell Pablo had detected his annoyance when he asked him about going out that night and he answered him with a sharp: “I can’t.”

“You’re missing out.” Pablo’s hands mimicked breasts on his chest.

“You didn’t have to be an asshole to her,” Xavi blurted. “In the ambulance.”

Pablo scratched his head: “You heard that?”

Xavi raised his eyebrows.

“It’s just... I hate people who use drugs and cry about wanting help.”

“How do you know that’s what happened?”

“She had fucking track marks on her.”

“They were healed.”

“Why does it matter?” Pablo slammed the door of his locker. He was now eye-level with Xavi. “We’re not qualified to do anything but transport patients to the fucking hospital.” The vein in his neck was apparent as he raised his voice.

When Jesenia told Xavi that no one would be there for her at the hospital, he found himself wondering what it was like to be alone in the unfamiliar. He remembered the first time he smelled the hospital – a cocktail of plastic gloves and lemony scented hand-lotion made the ER seem overly clean. He remembered the sounds of uncomfortable plastic shifting under one’s body, blasts in the eerily quiet. Xavi was now numb to this, but he knew the smell and the noise were overpowering enough to cause nausea to those who weren’t as accustomed. And though he didn’t know much about Jesenia, he knew he didn’t want her to feel this way.

“I have to go.” He grabbed his bag from the bench and made his way to the parking lot.

Xavi sat in his truck and noticed the sun had completely set. The sound of Al Green’s “Let’s Stay Together,” was filling the empty space. This song reminded him of his father and his poorly-sung version performed to his mother. Deeply in love was the only time he saw him this vulnerable. Any other time was met with a stoic face and crossed arms. But when he’d finish the ballad – a few twists and turns under the kitchen light with the smell of enchilada meat flooding the room – he’d turn to Xavi and say: *If you ever find someone you can’t stop thinking about, never let them go.*

Xavi put the truck in drive, unsure of where it would take him.

“What’re you doing here so late?” asked the night nurse, Claudia. She smiled at Xavi seemingly happy to spot a familiar face.

He looked around the desk for the nurse’s chart, his cheeks enflamed. “A patient I brought in earlier— I wanted to see if she went into surgery already.”



“Which one?”

“Head trauma.” He whispered so as to not let the silence of the hospital wing catch his voice. “Female. Twenty-five. Her name is Jesenia.”

Claudia ran her fingers along the switchboard. “Not yet, but the doctors went in there about an hour ago. She’s scheduled for later tonight.”

“Do you know if it’s serious?”

“No. I’m sorry, baby.” Claudia crossed her arms, her eyebrows furrowing at the question. “Why do you ask?”

“I didn’t want her to be alone.”

This was unorthodox: an EMT wanting to visit a patient beyond visiting hours, outside of their working shift-times. Both Xavi and Claudia were no strangers to regulation, but he knew Claudia was a kind soul. He was hoping she saw that in him too.

“Room Twelve.”

Brightened by the dim lights of the room, Jesenia was propped up and asleep. The central line he had placed in her chest was now used to administer other fluids. The room was a tranquil white, the only relief in the pink pitcher on the side-table and the striped décor of the cup reminding him of something out of the 80s; it made the room feel timeless. Beyond the beige curtains sat the Gulf of Mexico. It sat so still and black it blended in the night sky above it. Xavi, enamored by its beauty, could make out a fixed reflection of the moon illuminating off the water. He gently set his bag on the floor and picked up the chart, making sure not to make any noise:

*Jesenia Milagros Chavez: Twenty-five, Abortus, O – Blood Type*

Xavi was lost in the words, letting each letter tell him Jesenia's story. He had many different versions of her running through his mind, but what brought him the most comfort was not seeing or hearing that she was dead.

"Hello?" said Jesenia.

"Hi." His calm work-voice returned. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"It's okay. I wasn't dreaming about anything."

As she tried shifting her body up the bed, Xavi noticed her eyes tightening.

"Relax." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "I can get the nurse for you."

"No." Jesenia's hand reached the back of her head. Xavi could clearly make out the outline of her throat. "You told me your name is Xavi," she said with a forceful swallow and sigh followed. "Is it short for Xavier?"

"Yes." He took her questioning as an invitation to stay.

"What does my chart say, Xavi?"

Something had come over Xavi tonight. It was like he was drunk or inhibited by something – someone. Instead of telling her that only a doctor should read it, he looked over his shoulder through the glass wall separating Jesenia's room from the nurse's floor. When no one was in sight, he pretended to fiddle with his fingers in his lap while reading the page. Jesenia keeping a look out made him feel rebellious.

"You suffered a minor skull fracture." He pinched the vinyl on the arm rest of the seat, trying to pick away the fear. "So far, it doesn't look too bad. But they can't tell for sure until the doctors perform surgery."

"Could've been worse."

Knowing the odds may be in her favor, he felt liberated. He knew it wasn't his obligation to be there, but for some reason he couldn't move from the seat. It was like he was captive, unable to free himself from the same uncomfortableness experienced by every occupant of that recliner before him.

"Were you here with another patient?"

"No."

"You just came to see me?"

Xavi focused at the bridge of her nose, trying not to make direct eye contact with her, and nodded.

"Why?"

Although Xavi waited for this question, he hadn't computed an answer for it. He didn't know what he could say that would justify his reasoning for coming to her side. Instead, he simply muttered: "I don't know."

"Sure, you do."

Xavi wasn't sure what to say. How could he tell her that the way the customers in the restaurant didn't care enough to ask how she was doing made his stomach turn? That her eyes, fearful of death, were seared into the folds of his brain? How he couldn't fathom leaving someone, anyone, alone in their time of need?

"When you said had no one to come see you here, it bothered me."

"Why?"

"I've been lonely for most of my life," he said. "Not alone, but lonely."

Jesenia's head tilted away from Xavi, like she was staring at a painting trying to gather every detail she could without turning her head. He prayed she wouldn't find the

streaks, the cracks, in him. “You’re not trying to get anything out of me? Because I may be in a hospital bed, but I can still fuck somebody up.”

“No. Not at all.”

Xavi hadn’t gathered that his voice had lowered until he noticed her leaning closer, like his words carried something important with them.

“Sometimes, my emotions get the best of me,” he said. “It’s not anger or rage, like what men are *supposed* to feel.” The smell of the hospital was invading his nostrils; it was something he didn’t realize he hated. He figured it was his mind trying to wander away from a moment like this, one where he was becoming vulnerable. This led him to believe that maybe the reason he could now smell the room and all its sterility was his mind’s way of focusing on something else. “My father would tell me that showing emotion is a sign of weakness. And tonight, it hurt me to know that someone was going to be alone.”

“So, you’re saying your father is like every other Hispanic man?”

Xavi let out a smile. It did him well to push back the tears he felt forming.

“Let me guess,” she continued. “He was only kind to his ladies. Your mom.”

“He was vulnerable.”

“That’s a good word. And he taught you to never be *vulnerable* with people?”

Xavi nodded: “Pretty much. Not people. Not myself. Not planes, even.”

“Planes?”

“Nothing,” he said. “So, what? Do you have some insight for me?”

Jesenia slid up the bed, again, her face muscles tensing as she did so. He stood up to help her, but her raised hand stopped him in his place. “Do you want to know how I got to be a ‘junkie bitch’?”

Xavi’s face painted itself with equal parts shame and guilt.

“I heard what his name.” She waved her hand in the air, alluding to Pablo. “I mean, he’s not wrong. But do *you* want to know?”

Jesenia told him about her Uncle Willy. She said he lost his welding job at the refinery and didn’t want to ask people for money, so he turned to selling weed. She would accompany him as he sold to people around the city. In a matter of months, she was able to see every bit of Corpus – from the neighborhoods where people in mansions would give her uncle hundred-dollar tips, to the houses with wood on the outside walls that had been feasted upon by termites.

One night, while sitting in Willy’s car, she saw a man press the barrel of a gun to his chest and fire. “It looked like a tomato had exploded on his back,” she said. “Or he was in a fucking Tarantino film.” Pedestrians were screaming as they ran away from the bloodied scene, and no one stopped to call the police; no one stopped to see if he was alive. When she spoke of her hands and how red they were after holding him, she paused for a moment. “I hadn’t seen that much blood until today,” she whispered.

Jesenia continued her litany by telling Xavi about a man she met, Jaime. The way she described him: “he was so attractive, he made my stomach turn into a fist.” She fell for Jaime’s slick words and his greased hair with streaks left from comb teeth. That was when she talked about the child she lost, reminding Xavi of what he’d read on her medical chart. “Jaime never cried,” she said. “Nope. He’d just beat me until I couldn’t

open my eyes.” Some nights, if he hit her hard enough, she thought she could see Willy. On those nights, she wanted to reach out and hug him because she knew that if she could feel him wrap his arm around her, that would mean she was dead.

“I left Jaime and that’s when I started using. I wanted to sleep it off and I figured if I slept long enough, maybe this life would turn into a dream.” Jesenia was now four years sober, sitting in the hospital bed with no family, no significant other by her side. “Just a kind, wandering soul.”

Hearing the ocean waves while rays of sunlight were creeping up above the horizon soothed Xavi. One of the seagulls chirping close by had made its way to him, standing on one foot as it picked at the small pebbles on the ground. He was going over what had happened between him and Jesenia. Something she said before he left her, something undeniable as the sun, resonated with him: *You and I are human*, she said. *I’m sitting here, weak. And if that’s okay for me, then it should be for you too.* What followed was the part that stuck out to him the most: *Emotion is a wave. Sometimes, we have to play in the water.*

Behind him, the automatic doors opened and the seagull flew.

“Xavi.”

It was Agustín, a doctor from the ER. Xavi always thought him to be a handsome man, a type of attractive he hoped he could be when he got to his age. His gray hairs amassed at the bottom of his chin and at his temples. He was wearing baby blue scrubs with white tennis shoes, something Xavi had never seen him not wearing. “How’re you doing?”

“I’m doing all right, Doctor Fedro. What brings you out here?”

“Please, Xavi. We’re friends. Call me Agustín.” Agustín folded his hands under his armpits. The way he rested on the wall made Xavi think highly of Agustín, the same way he felt when the girl he had a crush on would talk to him. But Xavi was sure this was different: there would be no begging from Agustín about doing his homework. “You look like you have something on your mind.”

“I think I’m bad at my job.”

“You didn’t kill anyone, did you?”

“Nothing like that.”

The two were in an awkward silence until Xavi opened his mouth: “Do you ever think about patients even after they’ve left the hospital?”

“Sometimes.” Agustín emphasized the last word with a raise of his eyebrows.

“Something I do – a procedure or a name – will remind me. Why?”

Xavi couldn’t figure out what it was, but there was something comforting about Agustín’s presence. He told him he dreamed of some of his own patients. There would be water in some of the dreams, some of them drowning and Xavi thinking it was because of him. And when he finished, he wasn’t sure what he’d expect from Agustín learning of this. He remembered this was the same person who’d greet Xavi by saying something innocuous and not at all helpful almost daily (“Don’t work too hard,” Agustín would say in-passing while Xavi’s face was clearly rosy with sweat like he’d just walked through the rain.) Maybe he’d surprise Xavi with a degrading comment that would alter his entire view of Agustín – something Pablo-esque.

Instead, all Agustín said was: “Claudia told me you’re a writer. I take it you read a lot?”

“A poet. And yes, I do.”

“Poet. Makes sense,” he said. “Trapped minds tend to speak at night.”

Xavi wasn’t sure what he was trying to gain from this. Was Agustín silently judging him?

“Being a poet, what do you think water is symbolic of in these dreams?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Think about it. Water is dangerous. If someone drinks too much of it, they die. Too much around them, they die. Enough pressure applied, it can cut through stone.” Agustín smiled, cunningly almost, and continued. “And yet, everyone – man and woman, alike – is made of water. If it’s so dangerous, how come we need it to survive?”

The sound of the door sliding open was followed by the voice of a nurse requesting Agustín. “I should get back in.” And before he walked inside the hospital, he turned to Xavi: “Don’t be too hard on yourself. From what you’ve said, your patients aren’t the only ones in the water.”

Xavi wasn’t sure why, but the gust of wind that came with Agustín’s departure gave him stomach pangs. Maybe the realization of what Agustín had said about water was settling. He hadn’t thought about it until now, but water was both life and death in one. Whatever the reason for his discomfort was, it would have to wait. Xavi could clearly see the sun above the dark green ocean, which meant it was time to sleep.



## Why I Never Look at Planes Flying Overhead

Blue-eyed mankind caught me  
staring at the Blue Jay fleet  
flying above the golf course  
trees. He spit on my skin,  
called me a *spic*,  
pushed me out of his way  
so I could meet  
my kind, *faced-down in that fuckin'*  
*river.*

When he told me *never walk*  
*that wet-back ass back*  
*into this place*, I could hear  
a hint of fear  
in his weathered voice. Was he afraid  
of my tongue when it makes the  
perfect sound of rolling r's?  
Was he afraid that I could cast  
a brujeria curse  
on his family  
name?

After that, my father told me  
I had to grow a pair  
of eyes in the back of my head,  
let a mouth form on the folds  
of my neck. *Never let*  
*another white man tell you*  
*what your name is not,*  
*mijo.*

I was taught to never look up  
in the sky when I hear jet screams,  
see planes leave streams behind  
because the next cry would  
be from my second  
face making sure  
it hasn't gone blind,  
making sure  
we are both  
alive.

## Waterworld

I wiggled my toes under the mouth of the faucet as a rush of water plunged onto my shins and filled the tub. The fingers of my right hand ran along the faux marble tracing the streaks of gray fading into the white. With my left, I gripped a cigarette in the folds of my fore and middle finger. My eyes were fixated on the bubbles going through a constant cycle of growing and bursting; entire lives surrounding my knee that peeked out of the water like the tip of an iceberg. As I mouthed along to Carole King's "It's Too Late," smoke climbed out of my mouth. It coiled inside itself headed toward the ceiling, uninhibited by gravity.

"Do you smell smoke?" Carlos opened the door to the restroom and, the moment he answered his own question, put his index finger under his nostrils. "What the fuck, Ria?"

He stretched over the tub and opened the window on my right. As he steadied himself against the wall, he reached down and shut off the water from the faucet. I sat undisturbed, the cigarette steady, my wrist folded over the edge of the tub.

"You know I don't like you smoking in the house," he said as he squeezed the can of air freshener and swept the room with it. "I thought you quit."

I stared into his eyes, pulled the cigarette to my lips, inhaled, exhaled, and crushed the head of the cigarette against the lining of the tub, ash rolling onto the painted-on marble, some into the water.

"I didn't."

He grabbed a tissue, dipped it into my bath water, and cleaned the pile of ash, scooping the mess and folding the tissue in his hand.

“The fuck is wrong with you?” Before I could answer, he walked out of the restroom and closed the door behind him. I sunk myself lower down into the tub until my nose and mouth were submerged. I stared at my reflection in the small gap of bubble-less water below my chin, strands of hair flattened against my wet forehead in the image looking back at me. I moved my eyes toward the faucet, concentrating on each drip that came out of the rusted metal spout. In the background, Carole, with the smooth sound of her piano, sang to me the thoughts I had had for some time now.

A bird chirped on the drooping branch uninterrupted by its striped friend fidgeting with the lone twig between them. I lifted my wrist, flexed as I held the cigarette away from the rusted, paint-chipped railing, and took a sip. I blew the smoke out at the birds like they were asking for a hit. Stripey stopped messing with the twig and looked up at me, cocking its head left and right trying to figure me out. I tilted my head.

Through the open door behind me, I heard Carlos rustling in the sheets, and noticed his body turning in my direction. As the ray of light breaking through the trees hit his face, he opened his eyes. With his arm, he propped himself up and smiled at me, one eye closed with the other cracked, slightly open. I showed him my teeth in return.

“You look cute in my shirt,” he said. I pulled the lower edges of my top showing off the black and white picture of Batman standing majestically, an American flag waving behind him.

“It was the only one that didn’t smell like ganas,” I replied. He pushed his body up and patted the empty side of the bed. I stepped back, took one last hit of my cigarette,

blew the smoke out toward the tree, and flicked the butt into the branches. The birds took off, diving out of sight.

I skipped inside, closed the sliding door behind me, jumped over my dress on the floor from last night, and rolled on to the bed. I pulled the blanket down, revealing Carlos' hairy chest and kissed his left nipple.

“¡Cuidado!” he said as he pulled my shirt off and threw it to the foot of the bed. I rolled around him and grabbed the neck of the glass bong sitting on the floor. I looked over at him and raised my eyebrows. He nodded and turned his back toward me as he fumbled with the contents inside his bedside drawer. He pulled out his herb grinder and opened the bottom compartment.

I pinched some Indica into the bowl of the pipe, gently patted it down, and lit the weed. Bubbles and smoke formed in the brown water as I lifted the bowl out of the stem and inhaled from the mouthpiece of the chamber. After I handed him the bong, still holding my breath, he pushed his mouth onto mine. I shot-gunned the smoke into his mouth feeling his wet lips consume my own. He kissed around my mouth and went down to my neck kissing a trail to my sternum. I felt the prickle of his two-week-old beard against my skin. I wrapped my hands over the back of his head, my fingernails gently scraping his scalp. His cool body made mine tingle.

“When are the cable guys coming?” Carlos asked with his head resting in my lap. Our stomachs were full of Hunan Express and beer.

“Tomorrow.” I flipped through the channels trying to find something to watch other than static and infomercials. “The pamphlet said the townhouse came with a free HBO subscription.”

After a few minutes of surfing, a young, wet-haired Kevin Costner appeared on the screen. He was standing next to a harpoon gun on a swaying ship conversing with a group of disheveled pirates wearing torn clothing and sporting streaks of dirt on their face.

“¿Ques esto?” Carlos asked.

“*Waterworld*,” I said. “You’ve never seen it?”

“No.”

“Most of the world’s covered in water.” Carlos began rubbing the bulb of my clavicle. I squirmed in response. “The movie’s about this guy, Mariner, who’s trying to survive pirates and thieves.”

“Are those gills?” Carlos lifted his head trying to get a better look at the screen above the miniature skyline of take-out containers on the coffee table.

“Yeah,” I said. “He adapted to survive.”

“What would you do?” he asked turning his head toward me.

“What would I do about what?”

“What would you do if we lived in a world covered in water?”

“I don’t know.”

“Of course you do,” he said. “If you and I lived there and we had to fend off pirates and shit, what would you want to do?”

With the middle joint of his index finger, he started stroking my tank top, like the idea of just us in the world was supposed to bring me pleasure.

“It’s just you and me?”

“Well,” he stopped. “There’re other people, but you and I are still together. Just imagine our lives now, but in that world.” He pointed to the television as he said this.

I wanted to give him a romantic answer, something to think about before he went to sleep, to keep what we had going a little longer. But it made no sense for me lie to him.

“Honestly?” I pushed the nailbed of my left thumb back with my right. “I’d probably drown myself.”

He propped himself up with both of his elbows and turned to face me. Cautiously, I moved my eyes from my nails to him and saw he was smiling.

“Why?” He grabbed a strand of my hair and put it behind my ear.

“Because.” My eyes quickly sprinted back and forth. I focused on nothing trying to find something. “I’d... want to die this happy.”

Carlos smiled. “That’s sweet.”

He reached over and forced his lips onto my cheek. The smell of General Tso and Dos Equis made me queasy. I fought the affection by turning my face away from him. As my eyes wandered around the room, I noticed the hydrangeas I’d bought earlier that day on the dining room table, the vase they were in filled up to the brim with water. I looked for the other two bouquets of flowers and saw them in two vases on either side of the front door, the water touching the top of the glass containers like an infinity pool. These were our only decorations until the movers brought the rest of our belongings.

“Why’d you put so much water in the vases?” I asked. Carlos pulled himself away and saw what I was looking at.

“They need it. It’s fine,” he reassured me as he snuggled his nose into my neck.

The next morning, I walked into the living room and began cleaning the mess he left behind from last night. I looked over at the table and saw brown in the petals of the hydrangeas –a couple of petals had already fallen while others were wilting in their place. I looked at the vases next to the door and saw the same thing: the necks of the flowers were tilted downward no longer able to hold the bushel upright able to see the sun. They were overwatered and drowned.

My thighs gripped his pelvis while my hands – fingers – were intertwined with one another behind his neck. Occasionally, I felt his head hair brush against my thumbs as he thrust back and forth, rocking us along to the sound of the metal springs rubbing against themselves.

“You like that?” he asked for the third time. His voice was shaking during his multi-task between fighting the desire to come and making sure he kept our rhythm going. The only muffled sound I made was a simple “hmm, hmm.”

My eyes were closed, me concentrating on making sure I came. I tried stroking his back, imagining his muscles flex as I lightly pressed my skin against his. I forgot he shaved earlier that day and immediately met with the overwhelming feeling that a pre-pubescent boy was inside me.

With one strong thrust Carlos stopped, sweat dripping from his forehead onto my neck. He reached down, pressed my cheeks together with a firm grip, and kissed me.

Grabbing his gallon of water from the side of the bed, I stayed in my position. As he chugged, I lay confused at both the idea that this was the first time I hadn't come fucking Carlos, and that he didn't bother to ask me if I had.

“What about me?” I asked.

He moved his mouth from the gallon and took a quick breath of air, in and out.

“What?”

“What about me?” I repeated. “I didn't finish.”

“I'm sorry,” he said. “I just figured you always do with me.”

I let out a snicker and moved my eyes from him to the edge of the bed where the white comforter, crumpled and bundled together, sat.

“You can finish yourself, right?” Still looking at me, he picked up the jug and took another swig.

“I *could*,” I said. “Pero quiero que lo hagas.”

I stood on my knees and shifted over to where he was. I rubbed his shoulders, my thumb running against his collar bone. His arm was flexed from gripping the handle of the water gallon. My hand went from his chest to his arm to his hands. I grabbed the jug and dropped it onto the floor – water sprinkled our skin. I moved my hands to his neck, and as he leaned in for a kiss, I pressed his head down between my thighs. He pushed me on my back and in a swift move, cradled my legs in the crux of his arms throwing his head down between my legs.

As I pressed his head deeper into my pelvis, I found fear hovering in the dimly lit room. It was fear that this – me focused intently on the shadow of the ceiling fan above me while he fucked me with his tongue – would be a common occurrence. That my mind



was too clouded to even find a silver lining in our connection. That this would be the only way I would be able come again.

I clutched the cigarette with my lips, both hands steadying the flame of the lighter. I took a few puffs and let go of the fork. After a few seconds of staring at the narrow strip of lawn drenched in darkness, I pulled the cigarette out of my mouth and studied the burning end. The ember, sitting in a pile of ash, was slowly metastasizing the paper surrounding it.

“Ria?” Carlos called from beyond the corner of the brick house.

“Here.” I smashed the cigarette into the wall and flicked the remains over the fence into the neighbor’s yard.

“Claudia was asking for you.” He extended his hand out to me. As I grabbed it, he pulled with more force than usual and brought me closer to him.

“Chew this.” A stick of winter fresh gum rested between the fingers of his other hand. “She hates the smell of cigarettes.”

I let go of his hand and stared into his eyes. With them, he motioned to the piece of gum again. Reluctantly, I grabbed it and started chewing. We walked, hand in hand, back to the party where his sister, Claudia, sat at the edge of the pool. Her husband, Pedro, was wrapped around her waist as they stared into the glimmering water.

“I found her,” said Carlos.

“Ria, how’ve you been?” Claudia tried concentrating on me while ignoring Pedro as he played with the sides of her breasts. Her toes were dancing in the water. “How’s the art coming along?”

“Good.” I grabbed my glass from the table next to the pool and lightly swirled the contents of it. My margarita was now watered down, the perspiration from the glass wetting the slab of brick below it. “I’m working on a few pieces for my show next month.”

“That’s amazing,” she said. “God, you’re so busy, chica. How much have you sold so far?”

“Twelve paintings this past year.” I went to grab a cigarette but I stopped myself. “I bought a new car.”

“I saw that! You should’ve saved up for a bigger one, though. For when you have kids.”

Bothered, I cocked my head back and let out a small laugh.

“Kids?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Pedro answered. “Y’all should be starting soon. Gabriel needs someone to play with.”

“I don-”

“She’s still thinking about it,” Carlos answered for me. He looked down at me and back at his sister. He covered my ears – poorly – like I was child, and whispered: “Está asustada.”

“Aww,” Claudia said. “You don’t need to be scared. You can paint even after you have kids, maybe not as much – You know what?” Claudia moved Pedro’s hands from her waist and leaned closer to me. “They’re looking for an art teacher at my school. And my sister said they’re going to be hiring someone next semester for a senior seminar in sculpture or something. You can do that, right? Yes! We’ll put in a word for you?”

“No offense,” I began. “But kids ruin your life. And teaching them seems like shit. I’m sorry.” I put my hands up, guilty of spilling the truth.

Claudia and Pedro laughed. Carlos pinched my hip.

“Don’t apologize,” Pedro said. “People say that all the time. But you’ll realize that you haven’t started living until you *have* kids.”

Pedro kissed Claudia as she leaned in to him. Carlos wrapped his arms around me, his thumb moving the sleeve of my dress back up to my shoulder. As I stared into my thinning drink and then into the pool, Pedro’s words resonated in my ears beating out the music in the background. I swallowed the collection of minty spit in my mouth and couldn’t help but think of a little girl with Carlos’ slightly crooked nose destroying one of my paintings. How I was supposed to forgive her no matter what. How I would hear her cry and be expected to soothe her so she wouldn’t feel like she ruined something I cared about.

I didn’t give a shit if I wasn’t living. I liked whatever *this* was; childless and free.

Carlos came in from the front door. He put his hard hat on the dining table and gave me a kiss on my cheek. He pulled out the seat next to me and sat down to remove his steel-toe boots stained with crude oil. I sat quietly sipping on my cup of tea reading Flannery O’Connor’s *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked.

“I thought we’d order in today.”

“Cool.” When he unlaced and kicked off his last shoe, he leaned back into the chair, hands slowly moving through his sweaty hair. “What do you want?”

“Pizza sounds good,” I said.

“Mi gordita.” He tugged at my love handle and got up from his seat. As he walked to get the phonebook from the cabinet above the sink, I heard no more movement coming from his direction.

“What’s this?”

“What’s what?” I moved my eyes from my book and saw Carlos staring into the sink.

“This,” he said. “I thought you were going to put these up.”

“I put them up last time,” I replied. “It’s your turn.”

I crossed my legs and continued reading. Halfway through a sentence, I heard Carlos’ fist slam down next to the sink, glass and ceramic lightly touching each other.

“All I wanted,” Carlos began. “Was to come home and relax. And now, I have to clean this shit.” He had this quirk where he’d start speaking to himself, loud enough for me to hear when he was upset about something. This time, it was about and directed toward me.

But I didn’t say anything. Halfway through another sentence, I was interrupted by the smashing of a glass. I turned toward Carlos and saw his face, pink with disruption, as he cleaned the dishes. Bits of glass were scattered across the floor.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I closed my book and stood.

“What?” He snapped at me.

“Are you a child?”

“All you do is sit in the house all day and fucking paint and read your stupid shit,” he said. “The least you could do is clean the dishes and make us some fucking dinner.

“You know what?” he threw the dish towel over his shoulder. “Vete ala chingada de aqui.”

He pushed me to the wall and proceeded to fold the sleeves of his shirt up. It was instinct – me g grabbed the plate he was reaching for, bits of solidified, melted cheese grown into the ceramic. I turned around and threw the plate against the wall, shards spraying onto the counter and the floor. He covered his face with his arms and slowly lowered them looking at me.

“I don’t know who the fuck you think you are,” I said as I walked to the opposite side of the room. “If you ever put your hands on me again, the next plate I’m throwing is going at your god-damned head.” I couldn’t stand the smell of him.

I walked to the table and picked up my book.

“I can throw shit too,” I said, and walked out of the kitchen toward our bedroom. An hour and half later, I walked back inside the kitchen, the shrapnel of our battle piled at the top of the trashcan. Inside the sink, the dirty dishes were soaking in a bath of soap and water, filling both tubs. Carlos walked inside from the backyard.

“I’m letting them soak.” He wiped his hands on the dish towel never making eye contact with me. “I’ll put them up.”

I looked down at the dishes. After clenching my jaw, I reached behind the faucet neck where the dish scrubber rested. I dug both my hands inside the mess and started scrubbing. As I was busy trying to rub the soggy bits of chicken off of one of the plates,

Carlos wrapped his arms around me. He buried his lips in the nape of my neck and kissed it.

“I’ve never cleaned a man’s dishes before I met you,” I said. “Not even my father’s. He told me to use my hands for something more important.”

“It’s because you love me,” he replied. His thick finger ran along the back of my neck.

It was true: before I met him, I’d never cleaned a man’s dishes.

Water spraying from the shower wouldn’t let my fingers grasp his back as he drove his hips into me. My wet back clung to the dry tile behind me.

After he spat the water that collected in his mouth onto my shoulder, I heard a silent “fuck” leave his mouth. With my right leg raised and his arm holding my thigh up, I concentrated on the corner of the shower. I took note of the web that formed in the space between the wall of the room and the wall of the shower. I looked down to make sure my hair didn’t get wet since I’d washed it just yesterday.

“I’m going to come,” he said. I folded my lips into my mouth and lifted my leg a bit higher. He let go of my leg and tried to give me a kiss. I dodged his mouth.

“I haven’t brushed my teeth yet,” I said. He smiled and rubbed his wet cheek against mine.

As I stepped out of the shower, he picked up his bar of soap and turned toward the rushing water. I grabbed a towel from the cabinet and patted my body.

“Is there a towel out there for me?” he asked. I threw the one I’d just used over the rod of the shower and walked toward the bed. A soft “thanks” barely escaped the sound of the water.

Slowly, I fell onto the bed and covered myself with the sheets. I heard the shower shut off behind me. The sound of metal beads on the clips holding the shower curtain to the rod ran against one another.

I turned myself over so I wouldn’t face him when he finally laid down. The lights in the restroom shut off. The sheets lifted and Carlos crawled into the bed. His back was touching mine, sprinkles of water he missed when drying off spread along my spine. Staring blankly at the window next to us, my peripheral caught the shaking fan above the bed. The subtle sound of the two pull-chains barely touching one another filled the room. I closed my eyes. A tear rolled out of my eye, over the bridge of my nose, and onto the pillow case. My body no longer felt comforted by his presence. Instead, I was colder than I’d ever felt before.

With an empty carrying basket around my arm, I stood before a mosaic of vegetables in the produce isle, amazed by the beauty. The light-colored cabbages and lettuce heads faded quietly into the darker green stalks of kale. It was like a painter’s brush ran low on color. I needed celery for tonight’s meal, but I also didn’t want to disturb the art.

Then the sprinkler system above the vegetables turned on. A gentle mist of water brought with it the glare of the fluorescent lights overhead. While each leaf and stem collected water in their folds, I walked to the end of the section and stood in the corner of

the wall. Now, I was looking in the gap between the vegetables and the water. I noticed droplets falling from the jets while most of the water turned into heavy haze, making sure to infect every vegetable below it.

Through the corner of my eye, I noticed my mother fiddling with the fruits. With her wrinkled hands, she picked up a watermelon from the bin. After lifting it to see the yellow stain of sugar collecting at the bottom she smiled and placed it in her cart.

“Ria!” I jumped up. “Ven para ca, carbona.” Her pointed voice tugged me over to her cart. “What’re you doing over there?”

“Nada,” I said. “What were you saying before?”

“I said he’s a sweet boy.” She gripped the top of the watermelon, protecting it like a small child. “Muy guapo tambien.”

“I know,” I said. “But I don’t think I feel anything anymore.”

“¿Nada?” She and the cart stopped moving. “Why not?”

“I don’t think you’ll understand.”

“Is it because you’re smoking?” she asked. “¿No puedes hacer eso!”

“No, it’s not that.” I picked a grape and ate it. “I don’t think we’re compatible.”

“Aye mijita.” She grabbed my hand and cupped it with both of hers. “He’s giving you everything you want though, no?”

“I don’t know.” As she slowly rubbed my hand, I glanced over at the vegetables again. The sprinkler was still drenching the produce like it was trying to drown them.

“Sometimes,” she let go of my hand, her turquoise bracelets clinking with one another, “we don’t get everything we want. But we make the best of it.”



She walked toward the vegetable aisle and picked up a celery stock hiding in the green sea. She rushed behind me and picked up a sack of potatoes, brown and cratered, and put them in my basket.

“I say just make him some caldo, mama,” she said “Mexican men like caldo; reminds them of their mothers. It’ll make him happy, and you’ll need that... para un dia lluvioso.

“Speaking of which,” she continued, “Momo says we’re going to have the worst hurricane season this year.”

“How the hell does she know that?” I looked at the tag on the potatoes, noticing they were a day past their expiration date. “Hurricane season’s in the summer.”

When I walked into the kitchen, I set the groceries on the table and yelled out to Carlos:

“I didn’t know what you wanted for dinner. It’s kind of cold outside, so I’m making caldo.”

After putting the last bag on the counter, I noticed an envelope with my name on it. I peeked inside and found two plane tickets to Telluride. Behind them was a brochure, a cabin covered in snow plastered on the front of the pages. The sound of Carlos’ footsteps meeting the wooden floor made me turn around.

“What’s this?” I asked as I lifted the envelope.

“Next week’s two years since you sold your first painting, right?” He shuffled the mail in his hands. Lifting up each envelope by the edges and placing them at the end of his stack, he looked over at me sparingly. “I figured you could use a vacation. Four days

and three nights in Colorado. It's an I'm-very-proud-of-you-and-your-naked-lady-painting gift."

I shook my head in disbelief. "Why Colorado?"

"I remember you telling me you'd never seen snow." Looking up, he smiled at me.

I bit my lower lip trying to fight back tears.

"Congratulations, mi amor." He walked over to me and gave me a hug. Reaching down, he kissed the part in my hairline. "I'm proud of you."

I buried my head in his chest. After a few moments, I wrapped my arms around his stomach.

"I love you." Carlos looked down at me. It was the first time he'd ever said that to me. I'm not sure if it was the moment or because I really, truly felt it. What I do know, is that I wanted to say it too.

"I love you, more." The sound tingled in my ears.

A loud smash of thunder sounded overhead. Carlos and I sat in the middle of the kitchen, two candles flickering, illuminating our faces.

As we lined the bottom of every door, the weather station on the radio warned us that Hurricane Harvey was now registering as a category four and headed directly toward Corpus Christi. It was suggested that the citizens who didn't evacuate in the days before landfall were to write out their social security numbers on their arms. This would be used to identify our bodies if we were to die in the flood.

I wanted to leave and be with my friends in San Antonio, but Carlos didn't. He told me that this was his house and if it were going to collapse, the hurricane was going to take him with it.

Carlos was writing my social security number on my forearm, the felt-tip of the permanent marker tickling my skin. I read the numbers as they were being written, wondering why I was given this specific set of digits. Coincidental, maybe. Whatever higher power assigned me this number expected me to live an entire life.

I knew it wasn't true, but I imagined that these numbers were someone's before me. They may have lived an amazing or a mundane life. These numbers were mine to carry on the spirit of adventure or to fulfill the journeys untraveled by my predecessor.

Then I thought, what if they'll be someone's after I die? It was possible that in the next few days, a rescue crew would fish my body out of the salted, murky waters, take these numbers, and pass them on. The people who would attend my funeral would think of me as a woman who died in the arms of her lover, tragic and beautiful and in love.

By the time I'd convinced myself that social security numbers could be recycled, my chin, resting on my palm, began to quiver. After hearing my muffled cry, Carlos lifted the pen from my skin, put it on the table, and rubbed my hand.

"Mi amor," he said. "Don't be afraid. We'll get through this."

"I don't want to." I moved my hand from my mouth to my forehead and rested it on the table, eyes closed and tear-filled.

"What?" He moved his hand from mine and capped the pen.

"I can't do this anymore," I said. My index fingers were now pressed to the bridge of my nose, tenting my mouth, echoing my cry. Carlos stood up and walked toward the

sliding back door. He sat in front of it, his back to the glass. After a few moments of silence, I heard him whisper: "I know."

After composing myself, I followed suit. I rested my side against the door and felt the dampened towel lining the door sweep soaking through my shirt. The echo of raindrops falling on the glass massaged my body; Harvey was trying to get in.

He extended his hand out to me and grabbed my shirt. My body fell into his. As I continued to cry, I could feel his chest quickly rise and sink. He proceeded to rub my head, kissed the top of it once.

Through the sound of the rain, I could make out Carlos' shaking voice. "I'm sorry, gordita."

Through the small opening of my eyelids, I saw a strike of lightning. It brightened the room for a single second.

"Where does your name come from?" Carlos asked. He finished his venti water and was now sucking out the air between the ice cubes.

"My grandfather was a bull fighter," I said. "I never met him, but he seemed like a crazy fuck."

He chuckled and wiped his finger across his lips.

The waiter interrupted. "Earl Grey?"

Carlos looked at the coffee mug she sat in front of me, and then at me.

"It's fucking hot outside, why are you drinking tea?"

"I don't like cold things." I gripped the handle of the mug and blew into the tea before drinking it.

“So,” he used his fingers to count down. “You’re bisexual, you smoke a lot, you cuss like a sailor, and you’re burning yourself from the inside, out.

“Xavi was right.” He put his hand down into his lap and cocked his neck back. “You are different.”

“That’s me,” I said. And in a mocking tone, I continued: “Does being different scare you?”

He licked his lips and shifted his eyes up from my forehead, down to my chin, and back into my eyes.

“I like different.”

When he turned his head toward the window, I noticed the navy-blue t-shirt that complimented his skin, similar to the one I saw in pictures.

In the first photo Xavi sent me, Carlos was standing in what seemed to be a restroom, a graffitied urinal behind him. The stained mirror reflected his hand in his pocket. He was wearing a navy-blue and white platted, button-down shirt that looked black in the dim lighting.

In another photo, Carlos was carrying a child. Wispy strands of hair covered the baby’s head opposed to his own chestnut-colored hair that appeared to be gelled. The two were under a tree, small bits of sun printed on them. The baby was smiling and looking up while Carlos’ eyes were aimed at the camera. When I first saw the photo, I looked past the baby. I even looked past the glare in Carlos’ eyes drenched in a single ray of sun. I focused on his lips noticing that even at this angle, his smile was intoxicating.

Without looking at my mug, I fully grasped it and felt the sharp pain of the heated ceramic against my skin.

“¡Aye, chingada!” I shoved the tip of my fingers into my mouth trying to soothe the burn.

“Oh shit,” he said. “You alright?”

“Yeah, just stupid.”

With both of his thumbs, Carlos popped open the lid of his cup and picked an ice cube.

“Let me see.” He laid his hand out on the table. I revealed my palm and sat it on his. Through my knuckles, I felt the callouses lining the top of his palm. He ran the ice cube along the reddened area, moving it in circles, soothing the burn. When he looked up, his slightly crooked nose broke the mental image of a line running down the exact center of his face.

And then he smiled, the ice cube numbing my skin below it.

On Heartbreaks  
*for Ria*

I hate music  
that talks about having a broken heart. Sappy  
shit about loving  
someone & they leave  
you scattered. The moment it happens you think  
you hear boots  
cracking something like fresh snow  
or fragile bird bones hidden  
under leaves that will now move  
into dusted spirals with the wind.  
In your empty town  
home we are listening to “How Can You Mend a Broken Heart”  
while you sip on your cigarettes  
letting the ash  
timber on the couch and  
you’re probably asking yourself how  
can *you* mend your broken heart. But I think  
maybe Al had it  
right when he sang to us  
questions of how he could  
live again: I don’t think you  
can  
mend a broken heart because they’re not  
made of bone. Maybe once it cracks, you learn  
to live with it, suspended in your chest  
ready to fall from a few more  
breaks. And if any  
one can live with that shatter,  
I know it would be  
you.

## How to Know if Xavi Muñoz Loves You

He will tell you about his mother and that she used to say Corpus Christi water was made of emeralds. And that's what makes the water green. And it was God who dropped them in the Gulf of Mexico. And He must have saved a few and dropped them in your eyes too.

You will let him meet your friends. And when your girl, Sylvia, tells him shit like *Sofia's never brought a guy like you around*, through her lipstick stained teeth, he won't look at you like you're made of metal magnet with the only purpose in life being your ability to attract the rusted bolts of men from under furniture. All he will say is *I think of Sofia when I hear "Ain't No Sunshine."* It will make you forget about the people sitting with you, the Beth-s and the Courtney-s and the Sylvia-s with their snaggleteeth, painted red. He'll make you want to say *choke on your sopapia, bitch* and leave so you can ride his face while Bill Withers plays from the speakers of his car so the two of them can speak praises into your ears and your pussy.

Speaking of fucking: you can tell he's trying his hardest. You can see he's trying to please you, and the idea of that alone makes you come every time; at least, you will tell him you do. But there is a moment – delicate like a language you're curious to learn – when he lays his head on your stomach. You will ask him *What are you doing?* because you're afraid your tripas will sound off like the chopped & screwed remix of your favorite song. I promise you, the comfort that comes from the silence *is* your answer.



You should expect to undress in front of him. You won't want to (especially not with the lights on) because of flaws and fat – both he'll assure aren't there. But he'll tell you that he likes to see you like this. He'll say he wishes he would look this beautiful this exposed. And it will be sincere, soft in your ear. It will become a ritual: you will take the pins out of your hair (above the left ear, above the right ear, back of the head), then shimmy your way out of your clothes. You will grow to like letting him mellow in the drama of you.

He will cook breakfast-for-dinner every few days. It will be a lot of migas and chorizo con huevos. And you will come to find it doesn't bother you. Instead, it will bring you comfort. And it's not because breakfast is your favorite time of the day, but because those are his favorite meals and he wanted to share them with you.

You will hear him cry after his night shifts in the ambulance – it's always beautifully tragic. When you ask him why he feels like this, you will think it's because he's fucking another girl; it's not your fault, you've been cheated on before. But the doubt that festers in your stomach is how you know you love him.

He will tell you he met someone who said he was the sea: deep and dark and parts of him still undiscovered. And he will tell you that he knows this wasn't meant to be anything but words, but still, he thinks of this often. You will ask him why he is telling you such things to which he says something unforgettable: *Trapped minds tend to speak at night.*

And you will think he's saying you are the gates that make his prison. But you must remember that it is night time, and he is speaking to no one else but you.

You won't help him pack his clothes. You won't tell him goodbye. You won't even touch him; you can't remember the last time you did. All you will do is cry while he walks out of (now *your*) front door. And they will be tears of the unafraid.

When you lock him out, you will hear a hushed sound coming from outside. It will remind you of something you heard as a child. It brings back memories of salt water in the air and sunlit skin turned pink like hibiscus. The sound is something natural. The first time you heard it, you thought this same thing as it echoed in its pool while it cried for something. Home, maybe.

It is something like the sound of whales.

## The Devil Is Inside

& he wants to be  
freed, but my father  
told me *only share*  
*your demons with*  
*a single lover.*

& so, I listened  
to your stomach and heard  
El Diablo sing  
to me:

*& I think*  
*I like this place, where*  
*even your hands can't*  
*reach me. So answer me,*  
*mijo: how can you kill*  
*what you cannot*  
*see?*

& I remembered Momo  
telling me  
*matamos a los*  
*demonias con nuestros*  
*bocas*

& that's why I yawned  
over your body, left lip-  
shaped craters, my calling  
card.

## The Origin of Olivia Waters

I like staring out the dance studio window. I can see everything from the second story of this building: birds flying then diving in formation like traffic, and pedestrians walking to work or to somewhere important, each with their own specific rhythm in-stride. Even the ocean is visible at this height. But my favorite thing to do is stand before the window, my arms hanging by my sides.

This window is actually a wall of the studio. It has rustic squares in a grid-like formation with bolts holding the ends together. I spend breaks standing here so I can stare out at the birds, the people walking, the ocean. I like it because when I turn around, I can see a reflection of the window in the large mirror covering most of the opposing wall. Of myself. I can drown in the visual and forget that the studio is on the second story of a building where the bottom floor is a spaghetti house – the smell of oregano and burning marinara sauce almost always in the air.

Right now, Dior is standing in that spot. My spot. And she wasn't looking at the window, she was looking at me.

My legs were spread on the hardwood floor, cinderblock of high heels weighing them down. With arms crossed and her hand covering her lips – sporting no-less than a bandana to cover her wigless head while her face exercised her infamous daytime drag – Dior watched me spin and kick until I collapsed. It was like this four days a week because I was preparing for my first performance as Olivia Waters, like any dutiful drag daughter does.

“Why the fuck you resting?” she asked though nude-painted lips. Her red-bottom heels made her seven feet tall, a Goddess with chest bones that stretched with every

breath she took. “You need to kick your leg up first,” she said, “*then* go into a split. Get up, let’s do it again.”

“Why? I know the song.”

“Because I’m not raising a Pointer Queen.” She punctuated the sentence by pointing to random corners of the room with her index fingers. “Get up, Liv.”

I was raised to be a devout catholic: mass every Sunday, prayers every night. And baseball – as if it was its own religion – was considered a rite for a teenage boy in Corpus Christi. This meant two-a-day workouts and protein shakes sipped like the secret serum to everlasting youth. *Curls for the girls*, my father would say as I walked out for 4AM workouts. He’d stop me and tell me how much he used to lift back in the 80s while squeezing my neck muscles. I always imagined that was his way of seeing if I was putting in work. Maybe it was telling him things I didn’t want him to know.

He was a fit man, burly hair on his arm flattened like wheat grass in the wind. Though his arms were basically covered, the hair on the top of his head was beginning to thin leaving an atomic-blast-like formation of black and grey that budded from a cowlick. He reminded me of the upside-down tree: leaves at the bottom of the body while the branches were left bald.

The studio had mold spores that were blossoming on the ceiling tile nearest to the restroom. I locked eyes with the biggest one – there was a second spore growing on the bulbous end of it, so it looked like an eye – and made it my focal point for turns.

“Stop.” Dior demanded. In the reflection of the mirror, I could tell she was a bit frustrated with me. And when she bent down to turn off the music from the boom box, I was left staring at my own boyish reflection. I had a jet-black pompadour that rose at the front and crashed somewhere in the middle of my head, kind of like a wave. It looked better when I took the time to massage gel into it. Now, it was lightly damp with sweat, the ends curling like dog’s hair. I was planning on giving the sides of my head a close shave before the performance; duct-tape worked best when it had skin to cling to.

“What’s up?” Dior now sitting on the floor crisscross.

“I think I want to tell my father.”

“Today?”

“It has to happen sometime.”

“You really want to do this before your first show?” she asked. “What if he tells you not to do it?”

“I need to.”

Dior patted the empty space before her, resting her hand on the hardwood. She was like this for a while, even tapping it again to make sure I knew what she was saying. When I finally sat down – legs tucked under me with my heels still chafing the tendons of my ankles – she whispered: “Let’s do this.”

My father held my hand through the entirety of my mother’s funeral: while we sat in the pew of the funeral home where we recited the Rosary, and in the graveyard where my Sunday shoes were misted with dew. As my young body shivered – the rain not acknowledging the sun’s presence – my father wrapped my hand (clearly too big to fit

entirely in his palm) until I could feel the heat of the blood rushing toward it, unable to reach my fingertips. I remember looking up at him, waiting for him to tell me something. I had already done my bit of crying, almost every day between finding out what a car accident was until yesterday when we got to see her before everyone else came. But the days leading to her funeral, Dad had grown silent. Even now he was giving simple nods as everyone reached for his free hand. It wasn't until we were the last of a few in the graveyard – only the priest and the dirt pile next to her headstone accompanying us – did he finally speak to me:

*Son. His whispering made me think he didn't want my mother to hear him. It's going to be hard without your mom around. But that just means we've got to stick together.*

I could see the copper of his eyes, beautiful almonds that searched the floor before me. I couldn't make out if the water running down his face was his tears or the rain. Either way, it took a few seconds for him to breathe through his quivering lips. Instead of saying anything more like I thought he would, he rested his forehead on mine, our noses nearly touching. I couldn't see his eyes anymore, only shadows of my own brow. This became his way of speaking any time the moment didn't call for words: before Championship games, when I graduated from high school, before I left for college.

It was his way of making sure I knew we were men.

There were a few rings until my father answered the phone. He greeted with his first name, Stavio, like it was a job title. But when he discovered it was me, he used a higher-pitched voice, something he thought was playful. "How're you doing, mijo?"

“Nothing much, just wanted to check in.”

We did this dance every week: he would tell me about the weather (sunny and wind-less), and then describe (in detail) his workday adventures. As a welder for refineries, his hands are sturdy like a surgeon’s. He is sought after by most of the refineries in the city. It made him feel good when competing refineries offered him more money than the one he was at. There were so many rigs and plants in the city he never encountered the same people twice. *They’re always looking for workers*, he used to tell me. *They need strong men like us.*

For a while, I zoned out of his talking. I played scenarios in my head of what all could happen when it was my turn to speak.

“Mateo?” he finally said. It had been a few weeks since I heard my boy-name.

“Yeah?”

“Everything all right?”

Dior must have heard my father’s voice carry from the phone. I think this because she grabbed my knee when I went silent.

“You’re okay,” she mouthed. “You’ll be okay, baby.”

I should’ve know I was different while standing in my mother’s night gown and heels – they were only a finger-width too big for my feet. Dad opted not to sell her things. He kept telling my grandmother – his mother – that he would donate everything, even if there were four years’ worth of moth holes in the clothing. It was around this time he started working more. *It’s never a bad time for overtime*, he’d say before walking out the door. At first, the silent nights would bother me. The discomfort that came wrapped in



my own loneliness was jarring. But when I discovered my mother's clothes in a hamper, I realized I wasn't alone.

Grandma told me that someone's soul resides in the stitching. I know she meant the seamstresses that birthed these clothes, but I had my own logic: if someone wears something for long enough, a part of them gets left in the fabric. It becomes their own.

When I gave myself the name Olivia Waters – a combination of my mother's first name, and an homage to our home town – I would twirl like the ride at the Buc Day's Parade, with swings hanging from the mechanical umbrella top like moss on a tree. And when I spun, the ends of the dress lifted into the air.

I could feel my mother inside of it.

I told my father it was because of theatre that I started doing it. But he made it clear that it didn't matter *how* it started.

“What the hell is Drag?”

“It's when a man dresses as women. Do you remember when Cousin Xavi went as Doctor Frank-N-Furter for Halloween a few years ago?”

He sighed. “What the fuck, Mateo?”

“What?”

“You want to be a woman? Is *that* what you're telling me?”

He waited a few seconds until he spoke again: “Eres un maricon?”

“I don't know.” It took me a second to remember that he was *asking* me if I was, not *telling* me I was. But it bothered me it came out of his mouth so easily.

“Quieres ser una mujer? Answer me right now, Mateo.”

“No!” I didn’t mean it to sound like I was crying. “That’s not what this means.”

Dior had her hand covering her mouth. It was like she knew what was happening, or what was going to happen when it came to me and my father.

I was unrecognizable to myself. The sharpened corner of black eye shadow under the hood of my eyes. My 301s: doubled and glued to my already-curved lashes. Even my cheekbones looked like they were pinched and held up by string. The padding on my thighs made them appear larger and fuller but shockingly realistic. My chest was bonded together with duct-tape and my penis –strategically and uncomfortably pushing against the crevice between my testicles and my asshole – was forced in place by even more tape. I had seen her – Olivia – before; at first, she was just a silhouette. Then she became a few dots on my glued-down eyebrows. Now, she was in her fullest form.

Though my father never said not to go through with this – our call ended with him telling me not to come home followed by the sound of static balancing between our phones – it took me a few days to come around to the idea of performing. I did wonder if I was doing this because I wanted to be a woman. I knew some men who had. Drag was their gateway – an escape from a trapped life into their reality. But was it meant to be my reality too? Dior suggested it wasn’t: *If you start fucking doggy style, does it mean you want to bark?* Though this was the funniest tidbit from our conversation, the part that resonated with me the most was nestled between hugs: *You are my baby. And I’m not going anywhere.*

“Sis.” Dior opened the curtain to my changing room. “They’re calling you.” Her wig reminded me of water spilling from a cup, a blond waterfall flowing from her lace-front. “How’re you feeling?”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll be all right.”

I made my way down the corridor toward the stage – my fingers hovering above my dress and the teeth of my corset. Sweat collected under my wig and in the palm of my hands because the lyrics to Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” were slipping from my memory. But I knew once I heard the recording of the piano keys dancing, it would come to me.

I stood in between the partition of the curtain – only a sliver of light breaking the darkness that shrouded me. I had my hands planted firmly on my hips and could feel the nerves collecting in my gut.

“Shut the fuck up!” The emcee shouted into the microphone. His charm came with his I-don’t-give-a-fuck attitude. “Get your money out and throw that shit in the air. Make it rain for Olivia Waters!” With the ceasing of last few letters of my name carried away from the microphone like an echo, the curtain opened and the lights came down centering themselves on me.

It wasn’t until the velvet drapes parted could I see everyone in the venue. Other queens, tall and extravagant creatures, roaming around handing out drinks and food. In the reserved seating section at the front of the club, I could make out the faces of my cousin Xavi and his friend Ria. They were beaming, already waving dollar bills. Next to Xavi was an empty seat.

My entire life, I had been compared to Xavi by my father. He worked as an EMT, the only other career field I could have ventured into and been met with approval because *saving lives was manly*. But despite our being pitted against each other, Xavi and I became friends. He was the first person I told Olivia existed; he told me I was the first person of our family to know he was bisexual. And because my father thought so highly of Xavi – *now that's a man*, he would say grabbing Xavi's shoulder making him choke on Thanksgiving stuffing from the abrupt gripping – I figured if he happened to attend, he could sit next to a familiar face in the sea of foreign.

I performed three times. The crowd hollered. I walked back into the dressing room with forty-seven dollars. And when Xavi broke through the clothes hanging in front of the opening to the back of the dressing rooms giving me a hug, I laughed. I didn't ask about my father or if Xavi heard from him. Honestly, the thought of doing so was as present as the possibility of Dior calling me by my boy-name. Instead, we drank.

"I'm proud of you, Mateo," said Xavi as he studied my semi-spectral skin in the mirror. "You're a working man now."

In this light, I can see the sunken-in cheeks of my mother, especially as they framed the now-slightly thinner nose. Her face came to point, too. If someone were to ask me why I chose to do this, I wouldn't know what to say. I wonder if the real Olivia, my mother, convinced me to do this. Maybe in my dreams or in some other way a spirit can speak to the living. *If* they can. But despite my looking like my mother, I felt differently inside. Olivia Waters was an illusion – the makeup, the hair, the dresses, were all temporary – and for those three songs, I felt free. But sitting in the dressing room staring

at a myself, wigless and frighteningly beautiful, I couldn't help but be reminded of something my father would tell me.

He would work long hours in the hot sun, his clothes always smelling of dried sweat and trees. But after coming home from work, he would tell me the same thing: he felt tired, hungry, and accomplished. That was how I always assumed someone should measure their worth.

“You're god damn right I am.” I threw crumpled dollar bills in Xavi's face. “And it's Olivia Waters to you.”

Boy in a Borrowed Face  
*after Saeed Jones*

From splash-stained glass, I can transform  
into her: face painted with stained-glass and thick lips of blood  
-red sacrament open like a catacomb. Remember I am  
here, just hidden.

Madame who I model, madame lover, I need you  
to give me a name, tell me that you never knew the moon  
could have colored corners like this – I was beat,

left to bake like I am decadent  
cake, and this is my kitchen. If you want me, ask me  
to let her go. She will fall down  
my face, the makeup

crawling into faucets like rain. I could be the boy  
wearing only 301s, eyes like dead Venus flytraps.

## The People of Fruit

Ignacio gripped the pineapple, somewhat pinning it to the cutting board like he was afraid it would sprout juicy legs. His wrist flicked as he sliced between the budded sections, shrinking the fruit until all that was left was the leafy bract. Next to him stood Griselda gently skinning an apple. The long, connected shaving spiraled between her manicured nails. They were making a fruit cake.

Xavi was never fond of fruit cake. He liked the separate pieces that made it: brilliantly colored apples and oranges and lemons that made his jaw clench just from looking at them. But it was something about all the different flavors being mixed together with the manufactured sugar and the dried, used-to-be grapes that didn't sit well with him. Gazing upon the garden-spread of fruit on the counter, he tried remembering why his parents loved it so much.

"Griselda, baby, pass me the tub-o-ware." Ignacio pointed with the knife to the bowl holding the fruit innards sitting at the edge of the counter. Griselda put the almost-peeled apple down and grabbed the bowl, Xavi's hand inside it salvaging his favorite pieces to eat.

"Stop eating all the fruit!"

Xavi dropped the piece of orange back inside the collection after his mother patted his hand. "I don't like it when it's in a cake, though."

"¿De qué estás hablando?" his father replied, never looking up from the board. "You love it! Why do you think they called you Fruit Cake when you were a kid?"

"No, Ignacio," Griselda hissed, almost whispering like it was a secret. "They just called him that. He's never liked it." Ignacio continued cutting chunks of the pineapple,

gathering small portions with his free hand, embarrassed. He stared past the cutting board as if the knife divots would correct his misremembrance.

During Xavi's childhood, his Tío Juan, Ignacio's older brother, called him Fruit Cake. At every family function, every hand shake and side hug – because Juan didn't believe men should embrace with two arms – was followed by “Hey, Fruit Cake!” Soon, it caught on; members of his family, even the relatives on Griselda's side who came to know Juan by marriage, called Xavi ‘Fruit Cake.’ The only utterance of his birth name was left to holiday cards, misspelled with a ‘J’ where the ‘X’ belonged.

While in high school, his best friend Carlos overheard Juan greet Xavi by his nickname at his cousin's quinceañera. And as the two of them pretended the Sprite hanging between their opened legs were cans of beers, Carlos revealed to him that his nickname was a term used to describe a gay man. When Xavi discovered this, it wasn't the derogatory nature of the term that sent a chill down his spine but the self-induced fear from the idea that Juan had caught a glimpse of his life before he had a chance to live it.

For the next few years, his mannerisms were conscious. Though he knew them to be stereotypes of feminine ways, he made sure there was no sway in his hips as he walked and his wrist never flicked. But no amount of deliberate hiding – to the point that he forgot what was natural to him – ever changed the way he felt about women or men.

“Why did Tío Juan call me that?” Xavi asked. A part of him thought that maybe his parents would surprise him and prove it really was a term of endearment meant to highlight the bright parts of his personality. Maybe his uncle was out of the loop when it came to homophobic slang. But Xavi knew better.



“Because you are the sweetest boy to ever live,” Griselda said, not taking a second to think about it. She cradled Xavi’s chin with the palm of her right hand, the acrylic ends of her fingers combing his beard hairs. Her hands smelled sugary. Sweet.

“Speaking of, Juan’s having another baby.”

“What number is that? Four? I thought I’d at least be married before he had *another* kid.”

“You could’ve been,” Ignacio interrupted. “What happened with Sofía? She was such a pretty girl. You’re *twenty-seven*, mijo, *and* not getting any younger. You need to give your mother some grandbabies.”

“Didn’t work out.”

“Are you dating anyone?” Griselda’s head was turned toward Xavi awaiting his answer as she walked toward the cabinet to grab the bag of Splenda. “I can set you up with my friend’s daughter. You remember Allena?”

“I’m going on a date in a few days.”

He didn’t want to tell his parents that his date was with a man, Agustín, an ER doctor whom he met through work. Their encounters were brief and, if looked at realistically, birthed from the root of people’s agony: Xavi would pick up patients in the ambulance and deliver them to the ER where Agustín worked. But he didn’t mind the circumstances. Xavi’s reward for saving a patient’s life – or so he convinced himself that’s what they were – was with the few moments he spent transferring them from the back of his ambulance to the inside of Shoreline Hospital. This was his favorite part of any shift: being able to see Agustín’s handsome face and graying sideburns. They were the ends of two brushes with white paint still hiding in the bristles.

“Really? Who is she?”

“Someone I work with.” Xavi’s answers were calculated

“At the fire station?” Griselda’s asked, her hand at her hips. “She’s a female EMT?”

“They work at the hospital in the ER,” Xavi corrected her. “Speaking of, I have to go to work.”

“Okay, papa.” Griselda wiped her hands on the kitchen rag and wrapped her arms around Xavi. “Thank you for stopping by.” She kissed him on his cheek leaving a red stain where her lips had been. Ignacio stood and wrapped a single arm around him with the other arm stretched out, stiff. The sound of cupping came from his signature three pats on Xavi’s back.

This jittering feeling burrowed inside Xavi’s chest. He hated lying to his parents – by omission or other means; guilt would always bubble in his gut when he did. And the acid from the fruit didn’t help his stomach’s churning. This wasn’t the right time to tell them that he was bisexual, he thought. He didn’t want to allude to being sexual at all. But his relationship with Sofia had set a standard of straightness he felt obligated to uphold. He imagined it was a pane of glass he was carrying, cutting into his sides and hands the longer he held on to it. If he ever told them about his true desires, he knew it would shatter. And the thought of that alone made him think that the pain of silence wasn’t so bad.

Most times he could justify his bisexuality as being only a part of him that desired men. He knew he liked sleeping with women and the sense of comfort and naturalness that came with seeing them in his bed, especially with Sofia. But since their break-up, his

craving for men came back. And when his memories of sex with Sofia were over shadowed with Agustín and the possibly gray hairs – covered in child-drawn clouds, he imagined – covering his chest, Xavi was convinced that maybe this “craving” never left.

Instead of worrying about if or when he would come out to his parents, he focused on other things. Sitting in his truck, Xavi thought of Tío Juan and his beer-stained teeth colored like banana peels. The thought of someone’s tongue finding joy in the hollow of that mouth made him queasy. He thought of Sofia and her kiwi-colored eyes – more so the memory of them leaking after he shut the door to their apartment and never returned. When he couldn’t stop relating things to fruit, he tried thinking of vegetables. The thought of cauliflowers and their blandness helped ease his discomfort while he drove to work. But that night, when his mind was most vulnerable to the whispering of his subconscious, Xavi dreamed. He dreamed of people. He dreamed of fruit. He dreamed of people made of fruit.

There was a dark hallway. The air was sticky with silent sugar blessing Xavi’s cheeks. At the end of the corridor was a bright yellow light, a room with chandeliers elegant and outstretched like vines. When he entered the room, a woman sitting on the arm of the couch next to the door moved her lethargic eyes up and down his body, the rest of her face covered by the drooping lace of her eye mask. Her arms were covered with black latex gloves, the tingling sound of the rubbing subtle as she moved the slender tube sitting between her fingers to her lips. Her other hand was tethered to the man sitting beside her, stroking the back of his suit as he spoke to the couple next to them. She studied Xavi, then blew smoke into his face – sharp and musky menthol filling his

nostrils. With her chin, she directed him to the congregated group before them, well-dressed men and women huddled together.

Xavi carefully peeked over the shoulders of the huddle to see what they were looking at: two naked men with arms and legs intertwined with one another on a decorated rug. The blonde-haired man's tongue was tracing the indentions of the other's body, flattened hairs on his chest showing Xavi the trail Blonde followed. From behind their bodies a naked woman appeared, her curious finger tips reaching in the scene for a taste.

She rose from the floor and rolled Blonde onto his back, mounting him. She thrust her hips while he dug his fingers to grab a fistful of her skin. With a flip of her hair to the opposite side, Xavi could visibly see her half-eaten mouth – saliva dripping from her lips making out the teeth of her mandible protruding from her cherry-red gums. The other man – black-haired and his mouth agape – was straddling her from behind while gripping her shoulders. He took a chunk of her skin with his teeth stunning Xavi. An exposed yellow pulp took the place of her collar bone bulb. For a moment, Black's face muscles tensed seeming that his taste buds were fighting the sour of her lemony pith, but he proceeded to lick the wound. The woman traced her upper lips with her tongue finding pleasure in nurturing Black's mouth on her skin, his cheeks sunken in while he lapped her juice.

Xavi knew it was a dream. He was able pick out the parts from the day, the faces of some of his patients or passersby that lingered during his deliveries. But he couldn't control what was happening; he was a victim to the film of fantasy. And he kept questioning why he was dreaming such a thing. There had to be a reason for it, something

he could pull and follow to the source like the root of a tree that hadn't hid itself very well in the ground.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sensation of a hand brushing his arm. He turned to see Agustín dressed equally as dapper as the rest of the people in the room. His matted black eye mask molded perfectly to his cheekbones and nose blocking Xavi from seeing anything more than his forehead and salted beard. Even with a face covered the way it was, Agustín was handsome.

“What is all of this?” Xavi asked. His fingers found the cuff of Agustín's suit jacket and caressed the back of his hand.

“Just a mask.” He reached for Xavi's mask letting the string on the back of his head roll through his hair. The bridge of Xavi's nose opened and he could smell the sweetness in the air. It wasn't until the mask was completely off did he finally open his eyes and see Agustín, his featured carved from the bright insides of an apple. Xavi was sure it was him as he focused on the vibrant green leaves replacing the black and gray of Agustín's – each leaf rich and healthy like they were watered every day before plucking.

Spread about the room were the human forms of various fruits: juicy endocarps of an orange holding a glass of champagne; vein-rich brown pulps of a grape sitting on the couch alongside the bright, yellow mesocarp of a mango. Everything in the room remained the same – each painting still in its place, the furniture nailed to the floor boards. But Xavi couldn't determine the gender of the moving fruit figures. All he knew was he was standing among the flesh of fruits in a garden of bodies.

He stared into the camouflaged eyes of Agustín, seeing them shift as he searched Xavi's face. Every second that passed, his apple-skin turned more bourbon. Agustín

smiled, bringing his hand to Xavi's cheek. He ran his finger from the side of Xavi's nose until he reached his beard, the same way someone does when wiping away a tear. Xavi smelled sweet spring on Agustín's fingers and wanted to taste Agustín's before he completely oxygenated; before he rotted away. He took the tip of Agustín's thumb into his mouth letting the tart apple juice slide down his throat. From the passing wave of passion Xavi grabbed his face and kissed him, drops of fructose dancing on his tongue.

“I hope you like Old Fashions,” Agustín said as he unlocked the door to his house. The storm was rising, the whistling wind breaching the crack in the front door. From where Xavi was sitting in the restaurant earlier in the night, he could hear the sprinkles collide with the glass window behind Agustín; the sound reminded him of a loose coin lost in the wash. The only time he noticed it was when the waiter came to take their order or when Agustín left the table to use the restroom. Other than that, he was focused on the graying hairs of Agustín's beard or the sliver of skin between the unbuttoned collar of his dress shirt. Xavi focused on the way he held his wine glass: supported in the palm of his hand. He wondered if Agustín would be tender like that in the bedroom, that careful not to break the thing he was holding.

With the back of his jacket covering his head, Agustín led the two into the home. Xavi was mesmerized by the white walls making the house seem infinite. Lining the home theatre setup against the wall was a large flat screen TV where he could see the darkened reflection of Agustín walk around him to hang his leather coat next to the door. Below that sat a vintage record player surrounded by rows of records.

“Make yourself at home.” The squeaking of his wing-tipped shoes on the concrete floor bounced along the house as Agustín walked into the kitchen.

Xavi made his way to the record station and ran his thumb along the spines of the albums, the weathered sleeves yellowed from age. He passed artists like Eric Clapton, Bob Dylan, Billie Holiday and Nina Simone, noting all the albums were first editions. It wasn't until Xavi reached Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* did he decide to pull it from the shelf.

*I love this album*, Xavi thought as he placed the record on the turntable. A loud screech of the needle escaped the box when it hit the wax of the vinyl. Lowering the dust covering, he noticed the edge of a wooden frame sticking out from behind the records. Careful not to make much noise, he pulled it out and was greeted with the gaze of a blonde-haired woman. She was wearing a black shirt, her head resting on her closed fist while she looked lovingly into the camera. Xavi noticed her large earrings with the sun brightly reflecting off the diamond. But the longer he looked, he realized it was her kiwi-colored eyes staring back at him – subtle and striking – that made him think she knew someday, someone would find her portrait and wonder how a person could be this beautiful.

Agustín came to Xavi's side with a drink in his hand: “Here you go.” He clinked the glasses after handing it to him and sat down on the dark-green leather couch in the center of the room. His foot was tapping along to the sound of the music.

“Who's this?” Xavi motioned toward the portrait.

“That's my roommate. She hates that picture. That's why it's back there.”

“Roommate? I thought ER doctors made good money?”

“We do.” Agustín took a sip of his drink and sat it on the glass coffee table. “But she’s a good friend of mine. We’ve known each other since we were your age. Maybe a little before.”

There was something about her, something familiar that kept Xavi stuck to her eyes like they would tell him a secret. Her beauty was undeniable. And familiar. “She’s gorgeous,” he finally said. “She looks a lot like my ex.” The two continued to stare at the photo. From where Xavi was sitting, Agustín seemed lost in his own focus like he was looking through the photo and into his memories.

The sound of “Dreams” spilling from the speakers drowned the silence the two were festering in. Agustín smiled. “This is my favorite band.”

“This is my mom’s favorite band, too.”

“Well, thanks,” Agustín said pityingly. “I’m probably old enough to be your dad.”

It was true: Agustín was around the same age as Xavi’s father, the only difference being his father had jet-black hair that was constantly mistaken for being box born. But Xavi knew that if he confirmed the apparent gap existing— more than gap in the couch between them – the air would be suffocating. To ease Agustín’s mind, Xavi rested his hand on his leg. “You look nothing like my father. I promise.” Agustín’s hairs finding the gaps between Xavi’s fingers excited him. He had never felt another man’s arm.

He faced the record player to hear Stevie sing: *Now here I go again, I see the crystal visions. I keep my visions to myself.*

“I had a dream about you,” Xavi said. “It was trippy.”

“Really?” Agustín took a slow sip from his glass. “What was I doing?”



“You weren’t *doing* anything. But – this is going to sound strange – everyone was made of fruit.”

Agustín was stunned: “Why fruit?”

“I’m not sure,” Xavi lied. “Before, there were people dressed fancy and when you took off my mask –”

“We were wearing masks?”

“Yes. Anyway, you took off my mask and then *you* were made out of an apple. The other people were grapes and oranges and other things.”

“Were the other men made of apples, too?” he asked.

“No.” Xavi took a second to think about this: “I couldn’t tell who was male or female. Everyone was just fruit.”

Agustín scooted in closer to him, his elbow now resting on the back of the couch while he gently rubbed Xavi’s knee with the other. He squeezed the sides of his knee, sending a shock through his body. “Maybe it means you don’t care about the gender of the person. Just the *actual* person.”

“Or it could have been an anxiety dream.”

“What do you have to be anxious about?”

Xavi wanted this. But looking down at his hand on his knee, his mind flooded with memories of Sofia. He remembered dragging his fingertips along her smooth forearms, never colliding with so much as a baby hair; they would joke about how he had enough for the two of them. He remembered her long brown hair covering her shoulder like a scarf and how she liked to fiddle with it in her fingers when she wanted something, especially sex. This remembrance mixed with Agustín’s hand weighing his own leg down

filled Xavi's chest with excitement. "I've never been on a date with a man before," he said. "But I'm glad I did."

Agustín sat back, folding his lips into his mouth. He freed Xavi's leg, "I'll be right back," and stood. He gave a few pats to his stomach. "Too much to drink at the restaurant."

Xavi was embarrassed. "I need to go too. Do you have another restroom?"

"Down the hallway, last door on the right."

"Can I go through there?" He pointed at the closed door at the entrance of the hallway.

"No," Agustín replied. "That's my roommate's room. If you want to wait —"

"No, it's okay." Xavi excused himself by placing his glass down on the table. "Last door on the right."

Xavi stared at his own reflection in the mirror, trying to find something new about himself. He pulled the skin of his cheeks down, reading the vein lines in the red of his eye lids. With deep inhales and exhales, he tried slowing his heart beat. Every run of his fingers against his palms made apparent the clamminess and forced him to reach for the seashell towel hanging on the ring next to him. The thought of waiting crossed his mind. He figured maybe he wasn't ready to sleep with a man. Maybe this was meant to stay a fantasy and should never come to fruition. Maybe it was meant to only be imagination, because tonight felt too surreal.

What seemed like an hour in the restroom was only six minutes. And the unmeasurable anticipation of what could come made everything Xavi touch more obvious than meant to be. He closed the door behind him and felt the cool metal of the

doorknob. His fingers were spread on the door to slow it while it closed and they could read the wood lines – mountainous and imperfect – after every throbbing heartbeat. He stood at the door for a moment, trying to compose himself before he made his way back into the living room. Unclear of what would happen, he made sure he was ready to hear – to feel – anything.

The closed door at the end of the hallway was now slightly ajar. He figured the pressure from him closing the restroom door caused a slight crack in the roommate's quarters. Curiosity lead his steps silently. He made sure Álvaro wasn't in the living room before fitting his fingers in the gap of the door to peek inside.

There was something suffocating about the pink paint covering the walls and the ceiling. Along the middle of the wall was the faces of a many cherubic suns, one after another, with dots for eyes and curves for cheeks. Even *they* were a light shade of pink. The only relief could be found in the white wooden crib and dresser set held up in the corner of the room. Seeing this made Xavi feel like he was at the entrance of an alternate dimension, a different life than the one Agustín had led him to believe was real. The heat of excitement was now that of betrayal – frustration, really. He closed the door, making sure to turn the knob so it wouldn't click. "Agustín?" Xavi called from the hallway, his voice heavy with defeat. "I think I'm going to go."

From the other room, the faint sound of Álvaro's voice emerged: "I can't hear you," he said. "Come in here."

Xavi walked in to find Agustín shirtless, undoing his belt buckle. The hairs from his chest were just like he imagined: dark and somewhat graying, infected with age. There was a definite crease between his pectoral muscles and ribs pushing themselves

against his skin that made it seem like the bones of wings would break free at any moment. “Come lie down with me,” Agustín said. Though his pants were still on, he crawled onto the bed and stretched his legs out, propping his upper body with his elbow. “We don’t have to do anything,” he told him. “But if you want to, I do too.”

Xavi’s body felt cold, shivering even, while the warmth of the lamp bulb radiated on his arm. There was no denying that he was upset about what he had found, but there was something so inviting about seeing Agustín laid out in front of him. He had always considered him to be a masculine man, someone dominant and physically strong; these were what attracted Xavi to him. He had imagined this moment would feel foreign, unnatural even, as one man stared sensually into the eyes of another. But now, as Agustín was sprawled on the bed, he craved him the same way he would crave Sofia when she played with her hair.

As Xavi lifted his legs onto the mattress, he didn’t tell Agustín that he found the baby’s room. He didn’t ask to see inside the closed closet where he was sure the clothing of a woman clothing would be hanging, bodiless and absent of life. He wasn’t going to tell him that when he put his watch on the night stand he noticed the shimmer of a loose diamond earring on the floor in the space between the night stand and the bed – the same one from the roommate’s photo. Instead, Xavi stayed silent as he rolled to Agustín, the satin sheets like a sea below his skin. He stroked Agustín’s chest, comparing the pattern of his hair with his own. The gray reminded Xavi of mold developing on a fruit that had been forgotten about. Walking his eyes from his chest to his chin, he saw some loose-hairs now budding above Agustín’s beard.

There was a want to expose Agustín's wrong doings— something Xavi had convinced himself he wasn't *really* sure to be true. But with the now-beating sound of rain masking the song coming from the living room, Xavi pushed himself into him, making sure to note what his mouth tasted like. He didn't know or care to know if this was the first-time Agustín had done something like this. All Xavi wanted was for the memory of him – of this night – to last him for a while.

La Femme Damnée (La Seduction de Venus)  
*Nicolas Francois Octave Tassaert, 1859*

I don't know if angels can be / men or if their tongues are  
/ meant to want / or to want to taste / the body of their own  
(because / the Lord has said we are all / one in the same  
in his eyes). / But if that' s true then / why do they never  
touch / each other, only Venus and her / body? It's like  
she is / life and they are / seeds that need to / sprout. Or  
they are flies / attracted to the light / and her flesh will /  
free them from the darkness / that is forbiddance  
of other men. / This never made sense / to me  
because I see them – / Venus and men alike / – as beautiful  
beings, whole / fruits meant to be / harvested. Was my  
tongue not / meant to eat the produce / of all? Would it  
taste like danger- / ous consummate long past / its prime?  
If craving them as nature has / intended is frowned upon,  
then call *me* / the damned because / rotting fruit is still /  
sweet and worship is not / just meant for women.

## Cayotes

Carlos held the neck of the beer with his index finger, letting the bottle dangle between his legs as he sat perched on the stool. It was 6:57 AM, and he and Xavi were already drunk. The smell of wood and leather from the bar filled the room as they laughed and talked about high school, their jobs, their recent adventure. Carlos grabbed the pack of cigarettes and a lighter from his back pocket and threw them both on the table. Xavi reached for the lighter and studied the fluid inside, holding it up. He tilted it until the combination of the light behind it and the flat line from the liquid inside made a horizon, a small sea, through the plastic.

“You think she did it?” Xavi asked. “I don’t know who else it could’ve been.”

“I’m not sure,” Carlos replied. He was busy studying the pack of cigarettes. “I can’t figure out how she knew.”

“He probably called her through the radio.”

“But why?” Carlos asked. “We could’ve made it without her.”

“In chemistry, fire can speed up the process,” Xavi said. “But only if you remember to light the burner.”

Anytime Xavi got philosophical, or “smart” as Carlos called it, Carlos would roll his eyes and change subjects. Though Xavi had looked away, Carlos still scoffed and rolled his eyes back. He picked up the pack of cigarettes, opening it and peeking inside.

“What’s so good about these?” He set his finger in the small gap between the bundle of cigarettes and pulled one out.

“I don’t know. I’m guessing it’s a hand-to-mouth habit or something.”

“Let’s see.” Carlos lit the end and inhaled a few times. He licked his lips, a bit of smoke escaping him with every open-and-close. “Christ, that’s fucking gross,” he said, ending his statement with a few hesitant coughs.

Xavi laughed, taking the cigarette away from Carlos. He sipped on it with ease, cradled it between his two fingers.

“It feels like there’s a fucking carpet on my tongue.” Carlos licked the back of his like an injured dog. “I don’t know how Ria could smoke those.”

“You haven’t talked to her?” Xavi asked.

“No,” Carlos replied before taking a sip of his beer. “She doesn’t want to hear from me.”

“You don’t think she would after tonight? I’m sure she’d like to know you have a softer side to you.”

“What softer side?” Carlos cocked his head back a bit. “There’s no ‘softer side’ to me.”

“Oh, yeah, you’re right.” Xavi made sure he said this with as much sarcasm as he could.

Carlos took another sip from his beer. “No one can ever know about tonight.”

It was ten minutes after 11:00 PM and Xavi couldn’t see Carlos nor his vehicle anywhere in the church parking lot. He thought about not showing up tonight; the two hadn’t spoken since Carlos and Ria ended their relationship. He knew by not coming, it would throw Carlos’ system of manipulation – ending questionable favors with phrases like “please, man” and “I really need your help” – out of whack. But Xavi knew the



feeling of vindication that came with freeing himself of Carlos' rhetoric would fill him for the same amount of time as a breath. It would be a few inhales and exhales until Carlos' voice would replay, singing a tune as it bounces off the walls of his mind. It wouldn't be long until a small fire built of worry and guilt would ignite inside Xavi.

For now, he tapped his fingers against the top of the door frame in a rhythmic pattern as he concentrated on the bugs dancing under the curtain of light below the lamppost. When time was passing but not the anxiety, he tried easing the tension in his stomach by chewing on his thumb nail. When he nibbled on the tightened surface of skin covering the metacarpal joint of his right thumb, a black Escalade made its way into the parking lot. It came to an abrupt stop and Carlos, sticking his head out from the right backseat window, greeted Xavi.

“You ready?” Carlos asked.

Xavi rolled up the window of his truck and cut the engine. The moment his foot touched the pavement, Carlos asked: “Did you bring your EMT bag?”

Xavi, with a look of concern, answered: “Yeah, it's right here. Why do you need it?”

“Just get in,” he said. “I'll explain.”

The two met their freshman year of high school. And any time Carlos said that phrase, it led to Xavi being forced to pick Carlos up to buy weed from his dealer across the Harbor Bridge in Portland. Or it meant that Xavi would call Carlos' mother and say the usual *Yes ma'am, Carlos and I are studying for our algebra exam* when really, Carlos flirted with girls like Griselda Lozano and Miriam Alvarado, girls with so much eye makeup blinding them they couldn't see through Carlos' bullshit.

The window retracted back and again, Carlos' head came out. "Lock your car. We'll be back tomorrow."

Xavi did so and opened the van door.

The driver was an older man with graying sideburns, his arm relaxed against the window while a younger man stared at Xavi from the front-passenger seat. Through the younger man's dark skin mixed with the even darker night, Xavi could make out the tattoo of a dagger in the middle of his eyes, the blade pointed toward his nose. A few seconds of silence and tensioned gaze passed when the tattooed man gave Xavi a head nod.

"Buckle up, guey."

"That's Valente." Carlos patted Valente's shoulders until he faced forward. "Let's go, Abuelo."

The older man put the Escalade in Drive, the car turning out of the parking lot and into the dimly lit street through the gap under the freeway. They were south bound.

"Where are we going?" Xavi asked.

"A little past Falfurrias." Carlos turned himself toward Xavi, his left leg resting on the middle seat between the two of them. "We're going to help Valente's cousin cross the border."

"You're fucking kidding me." Xavi gazed out the window. "Really, Carlos. What're we doing?"

"He's not lying ese." Valente, still facing forward, answered Xavi. "Milagros and a group she met are crossing the border tonight. We need to be there to make sure she can get by without any problems. Thing is," he reached his hands back and gripped the

bottom of the cushion his head rested on, still looking forward, “they’ve been traveling for about a week now. There’re a few that aren’t feeling well. Some are injured; a couple are dehydrated.”

“That’s where you come in,” Carlos interrupted. He held an air of happiness about him as he said this. “We needed a medic to come with us. While Valente is our lookout, they need to help the group.”

“Why would you ask me to do this?” Xavi’s face heated as he said this. “We could get arrested or killed. I could lose my job. We haven’t even seen each other in months and you want me to risk my fucking life for you. Fuck that! Hey,” Xavi tapped on Abuelo’s seat in front of him. “Let me out of the car.”

Carlos said, “Don’t stop.”

He planted his gaze deep into Xavi’s eyes: “You’re the only medical professional anyone here knows. I wouldn’t have asked you to do this if I didn’t know for a fact everything was going to be okay.” Carlos reached into his pocket. “Plus, there’s this,” and he threw a roll of cash into Xavi’s lap.

Xavi, shifting between looking at Carlos and back at the money in his lap, took the rubber band off and counted the money.

“A thousand dollars?”

“That’s half,” Carlos said. “You get the rest of it when it’s done.”

“What about border patrol?” Xavi asked. “You’re not the first people to try this.”

Then came Abuelo’s tempered voice from the front seat: “The city is doing construction on the checkpoint. They’re adding more stops, more guards. Soon enough, we won’t be able to do this at all. And that’s what makes this the perfect time to do these

small jobs. They're saving money using minimal guards at night, leaving back roads open, y todo."

Xavi made eye contact with Thomas Jefferson, face darkened by the shade of night.

"I don't like this." He set the bills down on the middle seat not wanting to touch it.

"You don't like what? Paying for medical school?" Carlos said.

"Calm down. This is barely enough for books."

"But it's more than you had," Carlos said, and with that he turned his head.

"When we get there," Abuelo said, "we'll tell you the plan."

Xavi set his elbow on the window sill. With his thumb nail in his mouth, he nibbled on it.

"Is there anything I need to do now?" Xavi asked.

"Sleep." Abuelo said. He turned on the radio, and out came Tears for Fears' "Everybody Wants to Rule the World."

For most of the next two hours, Xavi stared out of his window. He watched the silhouette of trees change with every second that passed while the formation of stars in the background stayed still; tiny pin holes reminding him of a beyond. Every so often, he would glance over at Carlos and through the lights in the cabin, Xavi could make out a dimly-lit half of Carlos' reflection staring emptily at the space on the ground between the back of Valente's seat and himself. Xavi wondered what went through Carlos' mind. Was he in trouble? Did he do this so he had a story to tell? Was it because of Ria?

Before Xavi's train of thought drifted too far, Carlos noticed Xavi noticing him. He'd smile at Xavi, making him turn back toward the window, again staring at the silhouette of trees, the tiny stars, the beyond.

Somewhere in the sixty miles between Falfurrias and Edinburg – what Xavi assumed to be fifteen minutes past the border patrol station he knew they would encounter – Abuelo turned into a dirt road blocked by a weathered, almost-destroyed gate. Another few minutes on the bumpy path led the men to a wooden house. The walls were poorly constructed as Xavi could see the light from inside breaking through the cracks and holes of the termite-chewed wood.

Abuelo grabbed the walkie-talkie from the cup holder and spoke into it:

“We're here,” he said to someone on the other side. Xavi exited the now parked car – medical bag wrapped around his body– and noticed Carlos' truck parked before the steps leading up to the entrance of the house.

“Isn't that yours?” Xavi asked Carlos.

“Yeah,” Carlos said. “She's been here for a few days. I missed her.”

Xavi assumed there would be thirty immigrants, dirt-brown not just in their clothing but in their skin. He imagined bodies lining the walls one after another, cheeks sunken in. His heart raced, the beating ringing in his ears, the feeling of nausea noticeable.

He crossed the threshold of the nearly empty house, warmth radiating from the exposed bulbs hanging from the ceiling reminding him of the ends of lightning bugs. The only person inside was a white-haired woman wearing a traditional Mexican peasant blouse.

“Abuelita!” Carlos stretched out his arms and gave her a tight, full-bodied hug.  
“This is Xavi. Un médico.”

She moved from behind the lone table in the living room and walked toward Xavi. “Aye, mijito,” she said, and her weathered hands cradled Xavi’s chin. With the thumb of her right hand, she drew a cross on his forehead. He could feel the wrinkles on her thumb flatten as her skin met his. While she quietly whispered a quick prayer of protection, Xavi’s hand gently brushed the fabric of her flowered blouse; it reminded him of his mother.

She finished the prayer, opened her eyes – enough for Xavi to see into the slightly cataract eclipsed pupils – and walked away, leaving him with a kiss on his forehead. Xavi could now see the map pinned to the table, the corners fatigued. He moved closer and studied the narrow, vein-like rivers surrounded by darkened patches of land; it was the Rio Grande Valley. Their location, Xavi presumed, was marked by the coyote figurine howling in the center of trees a few inches off Highway 281. They seemed to be closer to Edinburg than they were to Falfurrias.

“Escuchanme, mijitos” Abuelita called out. “El Cayote is almost here. He radioed-in about five minutes ago saying that they’ve crossed the border. In the next forty-five minutes, they’ll be at the safe house here.” Abuelita placed the sheep figurine she fiddled with in her other hand onto the map, right over McCook. She crossed her arms and put her left hand under her chin.

“How much time do we have?” Carlos asked.

Abuelo shouted from the kitchen: “We’ll leave here in about fifteen minutes.”

“Great.” Carlos rifled through his pant pocket. “Xavi, I’ve got your smokes.”

Xavi pulled himself away from the map, confused: “What?”

Carlos motioned toward the door and proceeded to walk outside. Still not sure of what this meant, Xavi followed. Outside in the cool Texas night, Carlos stood a few yards away from the house unwrapping the pack.

“Here.” Carlos pointed the bundled cigarettes at Xavi.

“You know I don’t smoke,” Xavi said, his hands in his jacket pocket.

“Ria told me you do.” Carlos fished a lighter from his back pocket. “At least, when you’re stressed.”

Xavi stared at Carlos and then at the cigarette in the top, right corner of the pack. He used his forefinger and thumb to grab the filter of the cigarette and set it in between his lips. The faint smell of the tobacco invaded Xavi’s nose. Carlos lit the cigarette.

“Why did you start smuggling illegals?” Xavi ran his thumb against his lip.

“I know Valente from the refineries.” Carlos dug both of his hands into his front pockets. “He asked me if I could help him. Then he asked me if I knew a medic, and now we’re here.”

Xavi inhaled and held in the smoke longer. He was remembering how it felt in his mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Carlos said. “For not telling you about this. Really, I am.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“Because you would’ve said no.” Carlos wasn’t looking at Xavi anymore.

Instead, he shifted his eyes from the ground and back to the house.

“Yeah,” Xavi said holding in smoke. He exhaled: “It’s illegal. Not to mention, this is the cartel’s thing. If they find out about this, we can get killed. That’s if we don’t get arrested first.”

“Abuelo is old news,” Carlos said. “He’s been here since before the cartel bosses were even born. That’s why they call him ‘Abuelo’: he’s grandfather-ed into the territory. Plus, Abuelo’s a greedy fuck. He wants to keep the money he makes.”

While he chuckled, Xavi nodded and looked away.

“I know it’s illegal.” Carlos ceased laughing. “But I needed you. I wanted to do the human thing.”

“The human thing?” Xavi asked. “What’re you talking about?”

Carlos walked to the bed of his truck, lowered the door to sit. His legs dangled.

“Do you know why people call us coyotes?”

Xavi snapped, the word ‘us’ uneasy his ears: “I’m not a fucking coyote.”

Carlos stopped moving his feet. “After this, you are,” he said. “Do you know why *we* are called that?”

“No.”

“I don’t either.” Carlos looked up. “But I think it’s because we *are* coyotes.”

Xavi gave Carlos a perplexed look.

“Think about it,” he continued. “Coyotes kill because it’s survival. If you ask some people, they’ll say it’s not the right thing to do,” he flexed his fingers as he said ‘right,’ “Because what is one life over another? But coyotes do it because it’s in their nature. And they don’t kill just for themselves, they do it for their pack.”

“I thought coyotes run in pairs or alone.” Xavi took a seat next to Carlos.



“That’s when they hunt,” he responded, offering Xavi another cigarette. “They still belong to a pack. My point is that those are *our* people crossing the border. Our grandparents, great-grandparents, did that same thing. And that allowed us to be standing here today. So why should these people tonight not get the same chance?”

Xavi smoked the cigarette faster and held the smoke in his mouth. He digested Carlos’ words, his lips slightly opened for the smoke to pour out of him like a tea kettle.

“I wanted these people tonight to be taken care of. At least for them to make it to Corpus. And that’s why you’re here.” Carlos nudged Xavi. “I trust you.”

He jumped from the door and stood before Xavi.

“I understand if you don’t want to do this,” Carlos said. “I’ll drive you into town and I’ll come get you when we’re done. I’ll just take what you brought so I can help them as best as I can.”

He came in closer to Xavi, “But if you do this, you can be a part of something bigger than what’s legal. You’ll be doing the human thing,” he paused, “the cayote thing.”

Xavi scooted off the door. He dropped the half-finished butt of his cigarette and studied the ground he buried it in. He noticed the imprint of his boot and how it slowly faded as the wind carried sand over it.

“Carlitos,” Abuelo called from the front door. “¡Vamanos!”

“What’s it going to be?” Carlos asked Xavi.

He stopped at the door of the car to think about his hands and how calloused they were, born with course skin. He thought about his father plucking cotton and how his fingers would crack and bleed. He thought about the stars, the ones from the beyond and

how his mother told him that's where everyone ends up when they die. He wondered about the family members glowing, flickering down at him and what they would've done for their kind.

He reached inside the car and pulled on the door handle. Carlos smiled and hit the top of his truck a few times shouting that they were ready.

Carlos, following the van, briefing Xavi on the night's plan:

"The best time to do this is around four o'clock," he began. "That gives us about two hours to bandage and clean up. After that, we're putting them in the Escalade so Valente and Abuelo can drive them through the trees, out of sight. While they do that, we're going to serve as a distraction and go through border patrol. There're only two guards at the station around that time of night. One will meet us outside while the other will run my license plate. Since both will be focused on us, it'll be the perfect time for them to cross. Back in town, you'll get the rest of your money and go on with your life. You won't hear from me again." Carlos' confidence seemed reassuring.

"Where did the money come from?" Xavi asked.

"They paid Abuelo a few weeks ago. A thousand bucks a person."

"Jesus," Xavi said. "How did *they* get the money?"

"I don't know." Carlos took a moment. "But it's not hard to imagine."

Xavi's mind wandered like a shadow: close enough to be considered a part of him, but stretched far, trying to touch anything out of reach. He retraced his steps, tried to remember the series of events that led him to this very moment. He tried finding plot

holes in tonight's story, things he may have missed while they were happening. Xavi swallowed a large wad of spit out of nervousness, a hint of nicotine in it:

“Why do you have cigarettes with you?”

Carlos took a few seconds before answering. “Ria. She used to have me carry them around for her.” He let out a small laugh. “I guess I got used to it.”

“I thought you hated that she smoked.”

“I did,” Carlos said, “but I loved her more.”

The two sat with his answer floating in the air until Carlos broke the silence: “I guess you could say it was the human thing to do.”

The Escalade pulled into the driveway of another poorly built and slightly smaller shack, Xavi could see Valente jump out and run inside. Xavi and Carlos followed Valente, walking past Abuelo and El Cayote, another older gentleman wearing a large sun hat with holes in the brim.

In the house, Xavi saw Valente and who he assumed to be Milagros in full embrace. She kept grabbing handfuls of the back of his shirt as if he was destined to float away. In the corner of the shack, some of the refugees anchored themselves to the wooden floor. Two women were holding children – boys – under their arms. When he knelt in front of them, their eyes would move, scattering their sight all over Xavi and the room, trying find any sort of trouble he could possibly bring. The men that traveled with Milagros were sprawled out on the floor, both of whom were severely dehydrated. Everyone carried some sort of blood stain or abrasion on their body, even the children.

But the only ones who needed to be treated for dehydration were the men. “They give their water to the children and the women,” Abuelo said.

Xavi set up two I.V. stations in the kitchen, fluid bags hanging from bent nails in the wall. He could see the chapped, cracked lips of the men revealing the dried, cherry red blood below it. While the men were rehydrating, Xavi and Carlos tended to the wounds of the others. He showed Carlos how to properly disinfect his hands, wrap gauze around an open wound, and how to do a running stitch. Behind them, Xavi could hear Abuelo performing Sana on the children, rubbing their stomachs or bruises: “Sana sana colita de rana, si no sanas hoy sanarás mañana.” In the back of his mind, Xavi knew the words held no real meaning, they were nothing but air. And yet, it brought a smile to the boys; it gave them a sense of peace.

For the last hour, the occasional muffled sounds and sharp inhales as Xavi and Carlos cleaned the wounds with rubbing alcohol were the only noise. Xavi was inspecting the large gash on one of the boy’s heads when yelling erupted from outside. His gaze went from the closed door to Carlos who seemed to wonder why Valente was shouting. A neighboring sound of thunder came and everyone in the shack jumped. The children buried themselves in their mother’s sides while the men backed against the wall, searching the floor with their hands for anything to arm themselves with. Carlos motioned for Xavi not to move and walked out of the house. A few moments of silence passed before Xavi could hear Valente’s voice followed by Carlos’ shouting at one another. He stuck the bandage he held onto the boy missing his two front teeth and followed Carlos.

Valente stood on top of the Escalade pointing a pistol at a man lying in the ground a few yards from the house, his body surrounded by brush and dirt. At the top of the house sat a flood light, shining down on them.

“Holy shit,” Xavi whispered.

“Put the gun down, Valente!” Carlos reached his left hand out toward Valente while the other hovered in the direction of the collapsed man, trying to extend some sort of protection. “He needs help!”

From where he stood, Xavi could make out the bile pouring from the mouth of the man, aloe-colored liquid seeping into the sand.

“I’ve never seen this fucker before,” Valente shouted, never taking his eyes or the gun off the man. “He could be a snitch. D.E.A or Border Patrol or F.B.I. I know it, man!”

“He’s sick!” Xavi said, taking a few steps toward the man “I have an extra I.V. bag, just let me get him into the house.”

“Don’t touch him!” Valente shouted.

“If I don’t give him fluids, he can go into shock.” Xavi said. “He could die!”

“More of a reason to shoot the guy!” Valente replied, still fixed on the man. He shouted: “Cierra tus ojos, homes. I’ll take care of you right fucking now.”

Without thinking, Xavi ran in the direction of the man and turned him over. As he assumed, vomit leaked from his lips. Bits of cactus chunks trailed the man’s cheeks as he whispered: “Por favor,” with a fading voice, “ayúdame.”

“What the fuck did I just say?” And with that, Valente cocked the gun. Xavi chose not to look up, but he knew Valente pointed the pistol in his direction, threatening

him with the tug of the hammer. Instead, he studied the dried, crusted almost-shut eyes thinking this was the last thing he would see before he died.

From behind, Xavi heard Carlos' voice: "I said put the gun down," followed by a click, too. Xavi slowly pulled his eyes up to see Carlos aiming a gun at Valente, pointed at him steadily, unwavering and undisturbed.

"I'll take him across," Carlos said

It seemed endless: Valente staring at Carlos. "Alright," Valente said, putting the uncocked gun in his belt hook. "But we stick to the plan. You get caught, that's on you."

Carlos nodded: "Let's get them out of here."

Abuelo motioned everyone to the front yard, steering the refugees into the Escalade. As Xavi carried and placed the gapped-tooth child in the pile of bodies – legs pressed against chests – Abuelo told him to drive and act as if nothing was wrong.

"Lo siento, miyo," he said. "We'll figure out something. I promise."

When he closed the door of the trunk, Carlos called from behind: "We've got to go." Xavi saw him smiling as he whispered "gracias" through golden-stained teeth, barely visible in the moonlight. The two folded his legs and set him down in the backseat of the truck. Xavi reached over him and put the I.V. bag on the clothes hanger that held Carlos' blue refinery jumpsuit. He stretched out the arms of the boiler suit so they would block the view to inside the backseat.

"Necesitas estar en silencio," Carlos said from the other side of the truck, "Como el viento." The man nodded and both Xavi and Carlos closed their doors. Carlos closed the open divider between the front seat and the backseat. Xavi buckled his seat belt.

“I hope you have a plan,” he said to Carlos.

“Yeah.” Carlos opened the middle console and tucked his gun under the stack of mail and receipt papers. “Only if we need it.”

Somewhere along the ride back to the patrol station, Xavi could see, through the right-side mirror, Valente and Abuelo break formation and drive the Escalade into the woods. It only took a few seconds before Xavi lost sight of headlights in the trunks of the trees. As Carlos and Xavi approached the border patrol station, Xavi’s chest began shivering. His hands clammed from reading the words “No Smuggling Illegal Immigrants” on the sign. He turned around and peeked through the divider of the cabin where, in the backseat, the man lay silent, still – the shape of his face barely visible.

Carlos put the truck in park and lowered his window. A white border patrol agent and his large German Sheppard walking around in circles beside him approached his window. He had sunglasses on his head despite the early hours of the morning. With his hands on his hips, he tucked his thumbs behind the leather of his belt.

“How’re you two doing tonight?” he said. *He doesn’t see him yet.* Xavi thought.

“Not too bad sir,” Carlos replied. “Just going home.” Xavi could hear the calmness in Carlos’ voice, collected as if lying was second-nature to him.

“Where’re you headed?” The agent asked, inspecting along the bottom of the truck.

“Corpus Christi,” Carlos said.

With his flashlight, the agent – the name Thornton on his nametag – traced the outline of the truck. In the corner of his eye, Xavi could see the small bits of light breaking through the stitching of the jumpsuit.

*Don't look in the back, Xavi thought. Please.*

“You transporting anything?”

“No sir,” Carlos replied, grinning ferociously.

Agent Thornton swaggered toward the back of the truck and took notice of the tarp covering the bed. With the swing of his arm, he uncovered it; nothing. With the dog still by his side sniffing the bottom of the truck for contraband, he made his way back to Carlos. He flashed the light past him into Xavi's face causing Xavi to squint. He smiled back at the officer.

Just when Xavi thought it was over, Thornton dragged the light into the window of the backseat.

“What's hanging on the door?” he asked before taking a few steps back.

*Fuck.*

“What was that sir?” Carlos put his hand on the console, searching for the lever to pull it back. When Xavi noticed what he was doing, he placed his hand on Carlos'. Even though his heart raced, his palms clammy and shaking, Xavi gave Carlos a silent, subtle nod.

“The backseat,” Thornton repeated. “Why's it covered?”

“Those are my work clothes. I keep an extra pair with me. You know, refinery work.”



Xavi could tell that they were in this spot for far too long. He couldn't bear the idea of breathing, thinking any movement would give their secret away.

Thornton made eye contact with Xavi when he opened his mouth to speak – Xavi thinking Thornton would tell them he knew what they were doing. Instead, he stared past Xavi. “What the fuck is that?”

He put his flashlight down and Xavi could see bright red drenching the border patrol station. Through the window, he saw the flicker of something large, bright. He turned around to see a fire burning a few hundred yards from the station. It twirled, uncontrolled, and went from a large pyramid to a strip of flame shooting up toward the darkened sky. Sparks of fire consumed stray bushes near it.

Thornton pushed his flashlight into its strap and reached for the radio on his right shoulder: “Reynolds! Get out here!”

As he ran toward the flames, Thornton turned around: “Y'all gotta go!” The dog ran toward the fire, jumping and barking at the monstrous flames. As soon as Reynolds ran past them and into the scene, Carlos put the truck in Drive and took off. Xavi focused on the bright light illuminating past the silhouette of trees never noticing half of his body hanging outside of the window. In the background, he could hear Carlos slamming the top of his car and shouting, howling nearby. He wasn't sure who it was, but what gave Xavi comfort was the image of Abuelita building a large pile of brush and debris. She would drench her work in gasoline from the canister sitting on the porch outside her safe house. The last drop would fall from the nozzle and she would light it all on fire.

“That was fucking awesome!” Carlos shouted over the wind tunnel made from both the open windows. Xavi couldn’t remember seeing Carlos this happy, this excited about life.

“Where’re we headed?” Xavi asked.

americano

when i was a child  
my father read to me

a story about a boy  
from mexico. he was

caught by dirty ICE  
officials outside

of reynosa. they bagged him  
with fleece corn

sacks and hung him  
over chain-linked fences

like he was a fox – his body  
gutted and dried. *he was just*

*crossing the border* papa said *looking*  
*for a better life*

*here.* he had our last  
name, and hair and skin

like mine too.  
if i could speak

to him, i would tell him  
where i'm from, when someone dies

my people say *rest*  
*in paradise.* i think it's because

they know this land  
isn't worthy enough to be

considered freedom,  
it can't be the last

place we can walk  
freely without fear

of life lasting long  
enough to see a boy

killed because he wanted to  
live.

## Dino & Eden

Every Sunday was mass. Most of the time I went by myself. On occasion, I brought Pearl with me to give Eden time to practice playing her guitar. While she sung ballads in her writing room (our living room), I would let Pearl nibble at my finger as I listened to Father Bob perform his weekly joke, the same one I would hear him practice in his office earlier in the week. Every time he paused for the laughs – his voice carrying in the empty archways for only a second – I would let out a snicker. Even though he couldn't hear me, I knew God would.

This Sunday was a special service; we were reading a letter from the Corinthians about temptation. Father asked me to speak to the congregation, and I couldn't think of a better way to celebrate the third anniversary of my sobriety.

“Bonita,” I called out from our bedroom. “Which shirt should I wear?” Eden walked in, Pearl hanging on her hip. Her hair was down and curled strands covered her sideburns like helixes while she fiddled with the hangers. She looked at-ease in her natural face, and her oversized shirt made her appear as if she was a young girl that had wandered into an older man's neatly organized closet. She was looking in the section with the shirts, organized first by type then color. And as she pulled a few out of the closet and threw them on the bed, I couldn't help but notice her chaotic nature.

I found work as a handy man for the church; it didn't pay much, but I figured it was my way of giving back to God. Father Bob told me we all had a gift and mine was creating something out of nothing. He would say *Divinity is a state we hope to reach, and you come damn close, son* while his fingers ran along the matching altar and lectern I crafted from the reclaimed wood of the fallen oak tree outside on the chapel lawn.

I think this was what led me to find solace in K2; the sense of peace – togetherness, really – that I felt after I smoked it. It was at the bottom of every bowl, and I didn't want to let it go.

“What's this for again?” Eden asked.

“Father Bob wants me to speak at mass about addiction—”

“That's right.” Her voice carried disappointment with it the same way it did when bringing up the past. I think she wouldn't like it if I said this, but I was proud of what K2 brought me; clarity and God and Eden and Pearl, in that order. And when given the opportunity to speak about my – our – recovery, I wanted to celebrate that. “It's been three years since we've stopped,” I reminded her. “I thought this would be a nice way to show my gratitude.”

“I know, baby.” While she concentrated on the shirts, I saw her eyes look beyond clothes. “I just don't want you to have to feel validated by anyone.”

I pretended not to hear her, not to feed into her ideas. Instead, I focused on tying a perfect Windsor knot to match the long-sleeved gray button-up her fingers were lingering on. “I would love it if you came to support me,” I said. She remained silent. “After all, I'm not the only one who's been sober for three years.”

“It doesn't feel like three years,” Eden said. “It feels longer.” Before she gathered Pearl from the floor, she pulled a blue shirt from the closet. “This one,” she said. It was Neptune-blue, quietly turning white the longer I stared at it.

Guitar plucking followed the sound of Eden's singing. Her voice was mellow, quiet like she was speaking to herself; the type of music one would hear in a coffee shop. It was a song I hadn't heard before, something she must be working on for her upcoming

show at the city's monthly art walk. Most of her songs were about freedom or trying to escape some place. And when I asked her why she wrote songs about these, she would tell me she wrote from a place she already knew.

Instead of asking if I should take Pearl with me, I walked out of the front door.

The first time I ever met Eden, her body was sprawled on the leather seats of my buddy Slick's couch. Her arms were stretching toward some horizontal sky like she awakened from a nap. He had told me about her, how she was too pretty to be doing cocaine, as if it was exclusively for ugly people. He said she had daddy issues: didn't want to do what he said so she ran away. *She's troubled, guey*, he'd said, *real fucked up in the head*. And as Slick used the edge of a razor blade to separate the cocaine on the table before us— Eden now sitting up beside me with Slick's comment the only descriptor playing in my head — I couldn't find someone in the room who wasn't troubled.

Before us now sat a small mountain of solid white. Eden pressed her pinky on the glass, coating her finger only enough that it seemed she was picking up spilt salt.

“You know what's so great about coke,” she asked me. I quickly averted my eyes away from her cleavage and looked her in her face. “You can tell it's the good shit by rubbing it against your teeth. The same way someone does when buying pearls.” She opened her mauve-stained lips and rubbed along her ivory teeth and around her gums. She closed her eyes and took a breath. “I figured if I can't test *real* pearls, I might as well pretend.”

I was exposed to cocaine during my senior year of high school. Back then, discovering drugs was like finding a new body of water: more quenching and inviting

then the last. And after I had tested everything accessible below Molina Avenue, I gravitated toward K2; it was easy to hide, completely legal, and better than smoking meth. But when I heard Eden speak of cocaine like it was heaven-sent, I began to wonder if perfection had always been sitting in Slick's kitchen cupboard, nestled between the sugar and flour.

"Tastes good," Eden said.

"My shit's always right." Slick, now standing before his record player, was ready to play us a track. He had a habit of playing songs related to drugs during his deals. He was letting people know what they were getting without actually saying anything to them. I think the ritual had to do with his fear of the government; he was a conspiracy theorist after all. I assumed the sound of music drowned out the drug-talk while also being the words for Slick. It seemed like the best decision for a small-time drug dealer with four clients, five if you count me.

He dusted his hands and shuffled between the vinyl discs. "You want your usual amount?" He asked. And before he had a chance to pull Eric Clapton's "Cocaine" single from the sleeve, Eden stopped him.

"Sure thing, papa," she said, eyeing the piano across the room. "But I want to play another song."

"Por que?" Slick asked. His face made it seem like she was going rogue.

"Because I *want* to," she replied. "You going to tell me different?" There was a stinger behind her words. Eden made her way to the keyboard that was clearly devoid of human contact; it seemed important to her that she show some talent other than detecting bad cocaine.



“You can play?” Slick asked.

Ignoring him, she looked down at her hands which were now resting on the dusty teeth. Her nails were painted black, chipped from the lack of attention. She caressed the left side of her face with her right hand and wrapped her wavy locks around the other side of her neck giving me a perfect profile.

Under her breath, Eden let out a few words: “This one goes out to you.” And after testing the piano by pressing the first note, the sound of Carly Simon’s “Nobody Does It Better” came spilling from the wood. I figured she’d let the piano serenade us, a few plucked strings the only break in the trance-like music. But she belted the words with a passion comparable to Carly. It wasn’t clear if she was singing to the pile of snow on the table or to Slick. I wanted her to sing it again – to sing it to me – until her breath could no longer hold a note.

Silence seemed to be the song that played all too often in our apartment. It was almost two months after Pearl was born – about a year and a half sober for the two of us – and Eden had yet to hold her for longer than six minutes. I was the one getting up every two hours to feed her formula and I had a system: caudle her while I boiled the bottles, shake the milk, and tell her a story while she fed herself to sleep. They were always dark and twisted stories, Grimm’s Brother’s shit; I was a fan of tradition.

The night after repairing the roof of the church, I dreamt too long. At first, I heard crying in the dream, unwarranted child-screams in the background, and then it stopped. I woke up sweating, fearful that something had happened. And it didn’t help that Eden’s

spot on our bed was empty. I ran to Pearl's room and saw the two of them: Eden's hand hanging over the crib, soothing Pearl while she cried.

"What are you doing?" I asked. I didn't mean to sound upset, it just came out that way.

"I heard her and thought I should come in and soothe her." Her voice was tired, like the life had been sucked from her throat.

"Are you up for it?"

"Of course," she said looking down in the crib. "Every girl needs her momma."

I reached for Pearl's blanket, the one I would use to put on my shoulder so she could rest her head. "Use this."

"I don't need it." She said without looking at me. Pearl rested her cheeks on Eden's shoulders, the fabric strap of her night-gown the only thing between the two of them.

"Yes, you do. Here."

"Why?" she asked.

To be honest, I wasn't sure how to answer her question. I had seen it done like this in the movies and felt like this was the most comfortable way to be as a baby: resting on something like a cloud, or what I'd tell her a cloud would feel like.

"Because this is the way I've been doing it," I whispered, afraid to wake the now-silent Pearl. "And it's worked every time."

"There's more than one way to do something, Dino."

I heard her say this before. It was around the time we chose to be sober. She said it somewhere between weeps and the catching of escaping breaths after I told her mixing

OxyContin and coke wasn't safe for her to do, especially since she had doubled the amount of money she was spending on cocaine in the last year.

I told her God had come to me and He told me we needed to sober ourselves. And since then smoking became a chore for me, something I did only to keep up with Eden. When she and I spoke about marriage, I knew it couldn't happen like this: drugged out with her not remembering we had spoken about the future. It had been three years since we met, and I wanted to start a family. Eden said she wanted to wean herself clean. *There's more than one way to do it*, she said while crying in her hands.

The sound of bubbling water from the stove distracted me from the repeating thoughts of how habit was broken. I was sure Pearl would be wailing in the next few minutes. After I cut the gas to extinguish the flame and proceeded to shake the bottle, I heard a muffled sound coming from the baby's room. *There she goes*, I thought to myself. But when I stood in the doorway, it was Eden's voice singing to her, low like a secret. Pearl's tiny hand was lost in Eden's hair, limp from slumber: *The way that you hold me, whenever you hold me. There's some kind of magic inside you that keeps me from runnin', but just keep it comin'. How'd you learn to do the things you do?*

It had been months since I heard Eden sing, acapella at that. She was missing gigs and we were running low on money. More than frustration of expenses piling, something I would tend to in the morning, and feeling like I was carrying the burden (I hated using that word) of our suffering, I didn't want to disturb them, to intrude on such an intimate moment. Instead, I set the bottle down on the dresser and made my way back to bed.

That night, I didn't go to sleep until Eden was back in our bed. I wasn't sure what all Eden did to soothe Pearl, if she fed her or followed any of my instructions. But every night since then, Eden never hesitated waking up to tend to Pearl.

"Eden," I said as I closed the door behind me. I sat the brown bag with our food and the keys in my pocket on the table, already adorned with spare change. "Mass went great. Gloria tried telling me about her alcoholic son-in-law."

The air was still. Something off-putting sitting in the atmosphere. I stopped moving to listen for the plucking of Eden's guitar, but all I could hear was Pearl letting out small bursts of whimpers. Maybe Eden was plugged in, listening to songs and chords.

"I brought us some food," I said as I crept closer to Pearl's room. "Figured you could use a break from practicing."

In her play pen was Pearl. She was standing upright, a mixture of saliva and tears running down her face and onto her onesie. Her cheeks were red with anguish believing that someone had abandoned her. She was pointing at the bed where her favorite toy lion sat. I picked it up and placed it beside her.

"Why are you all alone in here?" I asked. "Huh?" Knowing I wouldn't get an answer, I called out to Eden and got nothing in return.

I walked over to the restroom and noticed the drawers opened. Brushes, lotions, towels, soaps, strewn across the floor. It seemed as though Eden had rummaged through the same drawers we kept our stash of cash in.

“Bonita? Are you in here?” I reached for the doorknob: locked. “Eden, open the door.” There was no answer. Now, my stomach was beginning to climb up my throat.

The hairs on my arms began to rise and instantly, I felt a few degrees colder.

“Eden, open the door or I’m going to break it down.”

Still, there was no answer.

I took a few steps back and braced myself. With positioned shoulders and every bit of force in my step, I ran toward the door. My boots trampled the mess on the floor never noticing there was mess there. In one swift movement, the door swung open hitting Eden’s leg.

Eden was seated on the closed toilet, her head resting on the small, glass table we used to keep books and magazines. Budding from below her head were webs of shattered glass crowning her like the portrait of the Virgin Mary. Next to her was a pile of OxyContin now sullied by dried blood from her nose, green dust remnants decorating her nostril. Her lips were separated by small chunks of vomit, residue of a trail that oozed from her mouth to a pile now sitting on the floor.

In the background, I could hear Pearl cry, her lungs capable of mustering ear-shattering sounds.

“It’s going to be okay, baby,” I shouted at Pearl, my voice still shaking.

It had been years since I had performed this ritual. But like walking or breathing, it came second-nature to me. I positioned Eden against the wall, gently, I placing her head on the corner where the two walls of ceramic met. The water fell on my back while dug out the vomit. I continued to dig, reaching back to her uvula. When there was nothing left, I pulled her sagging body over and pat her back.

“Damn it, Eden,” I whispered. “What the fuck happened?”

I pulled her body toward mine and sat behind her, straddling her. I was waiting for her to wake up, still searching for a pulse.

“Come on, baby.” I grabbed her arms and wrapped both mine and hers around her torso. As the two of us sat, her hair grew heavier. I waited for the heat from her body to juxtapose the streams cascading over us, but only my heat was recognizable. I used my bile-tainted fingers to grab a clump of her now dampened hair and placed it behind her ear. I put my lips on her now-exposed neck letting her know I was here.

“I need you, baby,” I whispered. “Don’t do this to me.” No matter how many times I said she was going to be okay – whether I was speaking to Pearl, Eden, or myself – something, a louder voice inside my head, told me the truth I never wanted to live long enough to see.

My tears were lost in the larger stream of water pouring down on us. And through them, I could see, next to the sink, a pile of cocaine resting on the ceramic top.

“Sir,” the police officer repeated. She stood before me, her pad and pencil out and ready. “Mr. Olivarez, I know this is difficult, but I need you to tell me what you were doing before you came home.”

The words had trouble leaving my body: “I was at mass.”

“She didn’t come with you?”

“No,” I said. “She wanted to stay home.”

“I see,” she said. A tone of judgment dressed the words. “And what is your relationship to her?”

“My wife.” I put my fingers on my lips telling them to stop shaking. “We were married.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, placed her hand on my shoulder. It made me want to cry, so I focused on Eden’s shoes collecting dust at the bottom of the bed. She never liked putting them on the shoe rack I built in our closet.

“Do you know what this is?” the officer asked.

I looked up and made out a small black flip phone.

“Were you aware that she had this in her purse?”

“No.”

“We’ve looked through it and found one number.” She opened it and read the name: Slick.

“Jimmy,” I replied. “His name is Jimmy.”

“Did you know her and Jimmy have been in contact for a while?”

“What’s a while?”

“The messages go back about two years,” she said. “All of them talking about an Eric Clapton song.”

I could feel her looking down at me with judgmental eyes. The sound of Pearl’s crying came from outside in the hallway. In the arms of one of the EMTs, she had one hand stretched out toward me while the other was resting on his nametag: Muñoz.

That was Eden’s last name. And now, it was Pearl’s.

*Why would you want to do that?* I remember asking her.

*Because no man will ever own me,* she said. *Or her.*

## On Control

My friend Tony found a baby  
wolf in the forest near his house. He took it  
home with him, sang it lullabies of meat  
and named it Halcón because when he ran  
*that fucker would*  
*fly.*

Three years on the leash, fed  
dead birds and dog food,  
Halcón gnawed through  
the rope, flying into Tony's  
soccer net,  
broke its neck  
by wrapping the end  
of the rope around the goal  
post and pulling  
too hard.

Momma told me it was bound  
to happen, a beast cannot be  
domesticated. *Some things are*  
*not meant to be controlled*



## The Earth, The Moon, The Stars

*Ignacio*

I hate hospitals. The smell. The white gown. Even the pudding they give you almost always tastes like shit. And the flickering fluorescent lights aren't helping smooth the taste of banana cream pie.

I fell after I couldn't catch my breath and my wife panicked. But there's nothing wrong with me. I'm sure there isn't. And now my wife is outside talking to the doctor probably telling him *He eats tortillas and chips in a taco. Together, or Should he not be drinking every day? But he doesn't hit me or anything like that.* Griselda is causing panic because that's all Griselda knows to do. We were walking into the grocery store and she was telling – yelling, really – for me to not grab my Miller Lites because we had some at home. Then, yo no mas. I fell, and here I am.

I tried relieving the tape from the back of my hand; it was pulling on my hairs too much and I didn't want it to rip them off. But I couldn't do much before the doctor walked in.

“Good evening, Mr. Muñoz.”

“Evening, sir.”

“I heard you took a tumble yesterday.” The way he spoke, with his words calculated and well-thought out, reminded me of a soap opera star. And if that were true, I was only a fan to him, no one he would willingly talk to. Even as he shined the pen light in my eye, he looked down at me. While I spoke, his light-skinned finger motioned for me to look left and right.

“Si,” I said. “But I feel fine now. It was nothing.”

“I’m sure you do. But we’re going to wait for those results just to be sure.”

He spoke to me like a child with a soft voice, or like every word was meant to be a friendly punch. “I see you’re fifty-five. That’s a prime age for a heart attack. You didn’t feel any tightness in your chest?”

“No, sir.”

The humming to himself told me he had already figured everything I was telling him was a lie. “No record of health problems,” he whispered under his breath, “Borderline diabetic.”

“Is my wife outside?”

“She’s speaking to your son.”

As if the utterance of his name summoned his presence, Xavi entered the room and made his way to my side. “I came as soon as I could,” he said. There was a tranquility about his voice, something soothing. It was like he was confident I would be fine. “How’re you doing?”

“You didn’t have to come here, mijo.” I patted the side of his face. “Everything’ll be okay. I’m not afraid.”

When I fell, there was a puddle outside of the store. The rain had come and gone and we were jogging inside before it made its way back. I dropped to all fours and remember staring into the puddle forming in the pothole. Inside it was the reflection of an old man, the wrinkles on his face doubling with every raindrop. With every breath I took – loud exhales never met with as deep and equal inhales – I was afraid. I was afraid I was going to die and there would be no life flashing before my eyes like they say there is, no

memories to carry with me on my passage to the next life. I was afraid the last thing I would see was the frightened face of this old man. Of myself.

The doctor shimmied the light into his lab coat pocket. From behind the foot rest, he lifted the clipboard and shuffled through the pages. Every so often, I would catch him eyeing the tray before me.

“You didn’t like the pudding?”

I let out a laugh. “Oh, it’s not that, sir. Just taking my time with it.”

He smiled. “I’ll see if there’s apple sauce somewhere on the floor. We’ll have your results out soon.”

Xavi thanked him, shaking his hand before reaching into the chart slot to reread my information. I told him I trusted the doctor would tell me everything was fine.

“Go outside and sit with your mother.”

I needed a moment. Just a moment to look out into the freshly-wiped window. In the distance, the graying sky threatened rain over the dark-green water. I had a habit of standing in the ocean – I was soothed by the sound water makes when crashing. And I could never figure out if the sound came from it colliding with my shins or with the water below me, with itself. But as I looked out into the Gulf of Mexico, it wasn’t calming me. Nothing was. I was still

*Griselda*

*Why should I go in and see him? I thought to myself. I don’t need to remember plastic tubes coming out of him like he’s in one of those cloning movies he and Xavi would watch. I know what he looks like without them.*

“Are you okay out here?” Xavi’s voice came from the doorway.

“Yes, baby.” I tried not to fiddle with my purse strap, holding it close to me like warm hands in the cold. “What did the doctor say? What is your father doing in there by himself?”

“He’s just flipping through channels. He wants to go home.”

I closed my eyes as the thought of my Ignacio going into the hands of the Lord. “I don’t know what’s going to happen to him.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine, momma.” Xavi grabbed my hand, his palms warm. “I know he’ll be.”

Xavi had a habit of staring at me, trying to find answers in my wrinkles or my hair, something on my face to read and tell him what was really going on in my mind.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked.

I love Xavi. As a child, he was the kind to dig rocks and insects from the ground, following them as if they would lead him to a world he could escape to. It pleased me to see him accept – show an interest in – the fact that our world was comprised of more than just humans. But right now, I felt like I was the insect of his inspection, the object of his discovery, and I hated it. I was too tired to lead him to anything but the truth: “Your father and I were going to separate.”

“What?”

“Just a temporary thing, mijo. Please, don’t give me that look,” I demanded.

He buried his head between his legs. When he rose from his seat, he looked away crossing his arms, like he didn’t want reality to grab his hands. He turned his head toward the nurse’s station and let silence take hold of the moment.

“I have a place on Water Street,” I said. “Something small. You should visit some time.”

“When the fuck did you two decide to do this?”

“Watch your goddamn mouth.”

My sharp words made his eyebrows rise and his bottom lip find safety in his mouth. His lowered head told me he was upset. And rightfully so.

“Why are you acting like it’s not a big deal?”

He wandered around the hallway walking in a small circle trying to lead him to some truth. The sound of his footsteps – his foot gently hitting the wall – married with the phones ringing and the occasional speaking from the intercom gave me ansias,

I whispered, making sure not to let Ignacio hear. “What do you want me to tell you, Xavier?”

“The truth would be nice.”

“I never felt at home.”

“That’s it?” he asked as if that answer wasn’t enough. “I don’t believe that. The house is decorated with your shit everywhere. How can you not feel at home?”

“Because it’s all fake.” Hearing my voice bounce off the white walls made me close my eyes.

The day we moved into our house, nine months before Xavi was born, I remember standing in the painting aisle of the home department store on Weber. Beyond the paint name and colors, I stared into the metal cans reflecting distorted images of myself, an unrecognizable Griselda. The old Griselda before her would never have been in a home improvement store with a man. I never fancied the smell of reclaimed wood

and the sound of screws turning – it reminded me too much of my father. But in those paint cans, I saw Ignacio look to me, eyes flooded with love, and say *I'll let you paint the walls whatever color you want*. He found solace in allowing me that.

Through the years, he would ask me to change things about the house. Blinds. Tables. Fixtures. It wasn't until a few months ago that I realized he was *telling* me to alter the home because it was never *mine* to begin with. It was never ours. Ignacio paid the mortgage. It was in his name. "There is no trace of me in that house. Just what I let your father see."

Xavi came back to his seat, his body now facing me. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Because my father would tell me this is a man's world. And women were lucky to be in it. I believed him."

There was a hesitance about Xavi as I said this, a sort of tug I could tell was present in him even as a child. And I knew it was the bone in his body, the one that desired to help people, that ached like the weather had suddenly changed. Since he was young, any time his father would ask him to do something – take a certain street to get to a location while driving or complete a chore outside – it would be met with a question. And most of the time, Ignacio would answer with, "Because I said so," and assume it would be the end of Xavi's nosiness as Xavi performed whatever task was asked of him. But I knew it wasn't. I could see the cogs in his mind turning, trying to find the reasoning behind such demands.

I liked to believe that the moon was closer to earth that day Xavi was born.

“I’m sorry, mamma.” Again, he looked away. But I didn’t want him to. If he was going to cry, he was going to do it unafraid, unbashful of his tears. Not like his father.

“Don’t cry for me, mijito,” I whispered into his ear. I tried to coat it in something soothing, like aloe to a burn. “It’s not all bad.”

“How can you stand it?”

“Because I have come to accept that this may very well be a man’s world, but women are greater than that. We are the gravity that holds everything in place. We are the sun that keeps their world in light. We are the very thing that make men forget they can fall into nothingness.” I closed my fist as I said. He appeared to be digesting everything I was saying like it was tough, dry meat scratching his throat, and I didn’t want to disrupt the process.

I could have lied to him. I could have lived in my furnished apartment and been strategic about creating an illusion for him when he’d come over, making sure to arrive at least two hours ahead of time to make things appear as if I had never left. But I knew no amount of pillow shuffling or flower arraignment would ever supersede the guilt of lying to him.

“I remember you liked superheroes when you were a little boy,” I said. “And you always wanted to be like them.”

“I remember.”

“You can do something no one else can,” I said. “You can make people feel loved. And these handsome eyes tell them that everything will be okay.”

*Xavi*

I didn't want to cry any more in front of my mother. But what she told me made my chin tremble.

"The doctor is coming," she said.

Both of us stood as the man came back into the room. We followed behind like ducks following their mother. His coat brought a small gust of hospital wind.

My father was still flipping through channels, and when he saw his doctor, he dropped the remote and let his legs out from under the blankets. His body rested on the edge of the bed, ready to jump off and make an escape the moment the doctor told him he was fine.

"All right, Mr. Muñoz," he said. "You're going to be here for a while."

The doctor spoke of quadruple bypasses and what surgery entailed. When he said terms like "cutting open" and "removing blockage," the look on my mother's face was one drawn of horror and fear. My father did a better job of hiding his. He puckered his lips and nodded slightly at having to be opened up.

"We're going to have to operate soon," the doctor said. "And these surgeries go by quickly – maybe five hours at the most."

"Will he be okay?" My mother's hand was now rubbing the small of my father's back.

"Oh yes," he said jubilantly. "He'll be just fine. We have a very high success rate for these surgeries."

My mother let out a sigh. She thanked the doctor as did my father and me. "I'm going to get some food. Do you want anything, mijo?" I nodded and she walked out of the room.



I was relieved at the thought of my father walking out of here. As at ease as I was, it was impossible to assume my father felt the same way. He was staring out through the window, trying to piece together what it was he would have to endure.

“This is good news,” I said trying to ease his mind. “Right?”

He nodded slowly. The way his hands hung lifeless over the rails of the hospital bed made it seem as if he was trying to play dead, to see what lack of motion would feel like.

“Are you okay?”

My father had a habit of looking into the ocean to find salvation. And a year ago, when my grandfather passed away, he and my mother made a visit to the beach. She told me she could hear him whimpering as he stood in the middle of the shore, his feet planted firmly in the muddied sand. The last time I had seen or heard of my father doing that was when I was younger and we would make monthly trips to the beach to remember my sister. Mom would sit on the beach and let the sun radiate off her skin while my dad would stand in the water, his gaze fixed on something in the distance. And though there was no ocean to hold him upright, it didn't keep him from looking through the window.

I turned toward the water, the waves crashing onto one another in the warm afternoon. The water folded in itself seamlessly.

“Dad?” From where I was positioned, I could only see the sides of his eyes, but I noticed them searching across the landscape. It was like he was looking for an anchor so he didn't have to come back to land. “Dad.”

The moment our eyes met, his turned to little cuts already leaking tears.

“I don’t want to die” was the only thing I could make out from my father’s cracking voice. His arms were shaking as he covered his face. Seeing my father cry was like meeting a person you had heard about from other people: you know that person exists, you hear about things they have done. But the longer you go without ever greeting them, putting a face to the words spoken about them, they become a figment of fantasy. They become as real and as tangible as the air around you.

Because this was the first time I had *seen* my father cry, the sight of him trying to find peace in his hospital bed made me want to cry with him. I wrapped my arms around him, feeling both of his hands grab on to me. His nails dug into my back a bit, nothing I had felt from his strong, swollen fingers before. I could tell he didn’t want to move from this moment – one where he knew for certain he was still alive.

Before he had a chance to compose himself completely, my mother walked back into the room. She stopped at the sight of us embracing and took two steps back.

“I’ll be outside.”

“No,” I said quickly. My father looked at me with worry. “You should be here.”

He was a wounded animal, looking up at my mother like he was afraid she would put a bullet in his head to keep him from suffering. He made room for my mother to sit next to him, his body now hugging the edge of the arm rail of the bed.

“What’s wrong, mi amor?” Her voice was tempered, inviting to the soul.

“Yo no quiero morir.” He whimpered. “Y no quiero que me veas así.”

She reached her arms under him, holding him up like he was a child who had fallen and she was now gathering up. “If you don’t cry,” she began, “how else am I supposed to know you are a man?”

My mother was asleep in the recliner, her chest slowly rising and falling. The slow beeping of my father's oxygen monitor told me he too was asleep. I didn't mind the noise coming from them as I stared into the ocean. To me, the sounds of calibrations were proxy for the waves pushing and pulling into the sea. It was soothing.

"What're you doing up?" My father asked. It was three o'clock in the morning and I couldn't sleep knowing he was going into surgery soon. Minds have a funny way of racing when you want to settle.

"Why didn't you tell me about you and mom breaking up?"

"I think because if I said it out loud, it would make it true." He assured me he still loved her. With all of his heart. And I believed him. Every so often, he would look at my sleeping mother and smile a grand smile, teeth and all. He said he would do anything for her, even if that meant letting her go. "But to be honest, mijo, I'm afraid she won't ever come back."

I was afraid of a lot of things myself. The unknown was one of them. But for most of my worrying, my father was there. And as I looked into the tired man's face before me, I can't help but imagine this – thinking of something to comfort him – must have been how he felt as he looked at me.

"Do you remember what we would do when I was a kid and I was afraid of something?"

"Yeah." He pushed himself up on the bed, making room for me to sit.

When his chest was puffed out and ready, I said: "Show me the Earth." And as best he could, he made out a round shape surrounding his chest. It looked like he was

Mother Mary cradling a small Jesus in a nativity scene. “Show me the moon.” He flipped his arms up into a large halo, flexing his muscles. I remember his biceps being larger when I was a child. And when he did this, veins would form along his arm. I imagined they were traces of the craters of the actual moon, molded into my father like it was giving him power. “Show me the stars.” And with his arms tethered to wires on the switchboard of beeping machines, he formed a bolt with his arms – one hand next to his heart while the other arm was extended out to the sky.

“Why did you come up with that?” I asked.

“I wanted you to remember to never be afraid of the small things in life. Especially because this world is yours for the taking.”

“Who said I wanted it?”

For the next few weeks, my father would walk with a tremor. He would cry for his carne guisada tacos and wanted a beer or two when he watched the Cowboy’s on Sunday night. But I wouldn’t give in. Instead, I looked into his weathered skin, thinking about what he had told me, about the world being mine for the taking. Really, I was thinking about what I should have told him: “Who said this world was yours for the giving?”

One day, I would tell him that. I would tell him that we are taught incredible and impossible things when we are younger and we believe them until we are old and closer to dying. He would hear me when I told him how there is more than just men in this world.

But it would have to come later. Not when the Cowboys are losing.

Origin of Water  
*after Marcelo Hernandez Castillo*

Someone said there was a bang,

blast like a pebble ripping the peace  
of a pond.

Then came the sun.

Then came us.

There is a name for everything  
so what  
does that make me?

I am the product of the Sun  
and Earth's first  
meet.

But Earth is third  
in a line of floating  
rocks, pebbles ripping the peace  
of space.

\*\*\*

Chest flat like a horizon

Chest meant to be solid,  
strong,  
said to protect women.

But what if I want to  
hold a man too?

*That's what we are  
meant to do*

\*\*\*

*Trapped minds tend to speak  
at night*

And I've seen what Silence can do

Silence

is the crude crescendo

that comes when I ask  
myself if I am still  
a man

because I let a man know me  
and I knew he  
tasted of fruit.

I protected a man,  
and a woman protected me.  
so what  
does that make me?

\*\*\*

A river fell from the sky  
and I opened my mouth, but I am  
afraid I will drown.

Water is in all  
of us, and I happened  
to be told I should be  
made of more.

For a long time, I wasn't  
sure if I could still be considered  
a man if I am a world  
that is made of a star too.

A river  
fell  
from the sky  
to be  
consumed.  
But I refuse

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