

A Partial Sarcology: Short Stories on Identity

A Senior Honors Thesis presented

to

the Faculty of the Department of English and the Honors College

University of Houston

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts in English

Alfonso Reyes

May 2023

Thesis Approved by:

Margot Gayle Backus, Ph.D., Thesis Director

Roberto Tejada, Ph.D., Second Reader

Robert Cremins, Honors Reader

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An Introduction in Three Parts

I. Queer Euphoria

in the warm New York 4 o'clock light we are drifting back and forth between
each other like a tree breathing through its spectacles

and the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint
you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them

I look

at you and I would rather look at you than all the portraits in the world
(O'Hara)

I am tired of queer stories about heartache and trauma. I have come to a point in my life, nearing the end of my undergraduate career, where there is nothing more terrifying and exhilarating than the breadth of experience I have not had. When everything feels so big and my mind is packed with more fresh knowledge than I may ever receive again, and especially now, in 2023 and in Texas, I find myself turning to the idea of queer euphoria.

I recently found an archive of correspondences from a man who worked as an attorney in Houston in the 1980s and 90s. He worked for gay rights organizations as a legal and executive director, and the most fascinating of his correspondences were not the legal documents about AIDS grants or advocacy agendas. They were the postcards he received in the mail with messages on the back that said "I think you're cute. — Charles" and the extremely detailed log of all sixty-six men he'd had sexual encounters with over twenty years. This included J.O.E., a witty nickname for the jack-off encounter he'd had outside the bathroom at a club in Houston with a leatherman; John, the only man he slept with from 1987-1989 and who'd been labeled as a "co-dependency" in the summary; and Charles, who'd been labeled a "mistress" (the names have been changed for anonymity). On no more than fourteen legal pad sheets exists two whole

decades of queer joy, in painstaking detail. With Jack: fifty-five times in 1987, fifty-one in 1988, thirty-seven in 1989. Two in 1990, by the time he'd met Bill—number sixty-six (Botts).

Sometimes, I will go to Numbers or South Beach on the weekends and think of nothing in particular. Reading these correspondences—the letters he wrote in response to personal ads, the notes from friends in the midst of his pending divorce (he called it a divorce) from Jordan, whose domesticity with him I thought about too much to write about—I think of this man in the hallway to the bathroom in Club Heaven, now South Beach. I imagine what it must have felt like to be queer, then. Of course, the heartache—it was unavoidable. But there, too, must have been ecstasy. To be in an unapologetic queer body then must have felt just as it does now, like an innate political act. To be queer and, in the face of epidemics and heinous political agendas, to flourish like a dandelion rising from concrete, to exist and be happy, remains extremely powerful.

These are the stories that I think are more important than ever. There are real stories of queer pain and discrimination, yes, but there are just as many stories of queer domesticity and joy. It is writing this joy, I find, that further dismantles the hetero-patriarchy that all literature must exist within—rather than writing queer stories that fit into the heteronorm or writing narratives that help the majority understand our experiences, we can invite White, cisgender, heterosexual readers to occupy a space that queers know all too well.

Just as Sara Ahmed argues in her essay titled “Queer Feelings” that queerness can be at its most transformative when it is in proximity to heteronormativity, introducing those whose lives and identities align with heteronormativity to works that discount that system can be both liberating for the queer writer and impactful for the non-queer reader. Ahmed writes that “to be comfortable is to be... at ease with one’s environment...” to the degree that one finds it “hard to

distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins" (Ahmed 425). This is the inherent state of the White, cisgender, heterosexual, in no small part due to the media and literature about queer people that highlights our contrasting discomfort within the heteronormative system. I argue not to ignore this discomfort—in fact, I argue that this discomfort becomes more apparent when we write queer-euphoric pieces because of the nature of queer euphoria. This euphoria occurs in spaces that allow queer people to feel the comfort that Ahmed describes, which necessitates that non-queer readers feel the disorienting discomfort that is natural for queers—wherein “one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled” (Ahmed 425) in its surroundings.

Just as the entry in “Gay Sex: Lovers and Tricks” that recounts the attorney's anonymous foursome on a pool table in New Orleans during Mardi Gras in 1982 may force a non-queer reader into a position of discomfort if only due to the discrepancies in their own experience, stories of queer euphoria display the disparity in the queer and non-queer experiences by the simple fact of their existence (Botts). However, this is not the intended effect of the pieces in this collection. These pieces are not written for the heteronormative audience. Stories of queer euphoria and queer beauty are powerful because they are some of the few pieces of art created within and for the queer worldview.

II. On Writing the Other (And Not)

Over the summer of 2022, I completed an extensive research project that aimed to understand how and why to write characters unlike oneself into one's fiction. I based my research question on a practical problem that I'd seen firsthand in my limited experiences in publishing, primarily with small literary magazines—stories about queer or non-White people were not prevalent in 21st-century literary fiction, and when they were written, they were

presented in a cisgender, heterosexual, White framework. In other words, most books written about queer POC were young adult fiction and a majority of those followed characters undergoing narratives that fit within the heteronormative patriarchy. My research found that this was a systemic issue within publishing; it wasn't that no one was submitting queer, POC stories to publishing houses or that no one was purchasing the books that were published, but it was that those in control of what was looked at or published didn't find queer, POC stories relatable or marketable.

Therefore, I sought, through my research, to develop or discover ways for the writers considered acceptable within the publishing industry to push diverse narratives in a way that felt more authentic than the majority of the pieces currently on the market. Rather than attempt to promote the work that queer, POC writers were already producing, I'd surmised, it would be more effective to find strategies for writers in privileged positions to use their power to prove to publishing houses that queer, POC stories are marketable and relatable to a wider audience. I thought that a top-down approach to this pervasive issue was the most likely to be effective—until I read Alexander Chee's essay on "How to Unlearn Everything" about writing the other.

Chee elucidated that this question was not unique and that the lack of an answer was rooted in the question's shortcomings. He pointed, instead, to the exact opposite phenomenon—that of writing the self. Beginners' stories, Chee writes, "are ways of performing [the writer's] relationship to power... stories that let them feel connected to the dominant culture" (Chee). This, he suggests, is why for many years every story presented in a beginners' workshop was about a White or racially unspecified character, regardless of the race breakdown of the class or the authors of the stories assigned. When he began receiving workshop stories from queer,

Korean-American students about queer, Korean-American characters, he writes, “it felt like the dawn of a new era” (Chee).

While Chee does not explain the cultural or social factors behind this shift, he does encourage writers to seek out a new line of questioning—questioning “how... we write our own literature” (Chee). It was this line of questioning in particular, which calls upon young writers to “think of stories only they can write... [that] they know but have never read... [that] they always tell but never write down,” that changed the trajectory of my research project and this collection (Chee). I did not have a particular race or positionality in mind when I began my project—only the knowledge that were I to find an idea, it would need to be meaningful and well-researched. It wasn’t until I read Chee’s words—and felt shame creeping over me when he wrote that “ many writers [asking questions about writing the other]... don’t want an answer; they want permission”—that I realized the issue central to my writing and pivoted to writing about my experiences and those of the people I love, rather than remaining constantly in search of some unreachable, “authentic” representation of someone else.

As a Latinx, bisexual, transgender man who passes in many circumstances as White and cisgender, I spent a majority of the summer under the assumption that my externally facing privilege precluded me from writing about any authentic experience of my own. This is rooted in imposter syndrome, I’m sure, because when I read that Alexander Chee gained the confidence and self-assumed authority to write about queer Asians from White writers writing about different European ethnicities, I felt validated. If this man, whose identity felt to me profoundly tangible, needed permission from himself and writers unknown to him to write his experiences, then I did too—and he gave it to me.

Though the stories in this collection are not all about Latinx, bisexual, transgender men who navigate the liminal spaces between White and Latinx or poverty and suburbia, there is some integral piece of me in each of them—something I can't say for every piece written before this collection. These pieces are researched, yes, but they're also rooted in feelings that are innate to my background and positionality. They also, in this way, call upon the idea of queer euphoria. This isn't to say that there is no conflict in these stories—there must be—but that conflict does not come from queer trauma or the daunting prospect of coming out; it comes from being a person interacting with others. It is inexplicably different from both the White, cisgender, heterosexual narrative and the queer narratives we have come to expect because it is mine.

III. Unpacking the *Partial Sarcology*

In writing these stories, I was highly aware of the space my characters took up on the page and within their narratives. Taking inspiration from writer Victor LaValle, who put Ahmed's theory of queer discomfort into practice by thinking “about the space [his character] would take up when he enters a room—how much that body communicates before he even gets a chance to say anything,” I approached my pieces from the perspective of sarcology—the study of the soft parts of the body (Shapiro). I say sarcology, which focuses on the soft parts, rather than anatomy, which is the study of the body as a whole, because I want to stress the fact that this was no mechanical endeavor. Perhaps the most important thing about this collection was that I approached it from a place of empathy—to treat my characters with the softness, the tenderness that I believe is conducive to queer euphoria. LaValle put it best when he said that he could not

“imagine how anyone’s interior life is not formed by the body they got born into” (Shapiro). This interior life—not the trauma, but the daily lives, desires, and connections—was central to my collection.

This sarcology is partial by necessity. Partial because these stories examine positionalities that, for reasons outlined above, are unique to me, and because these positionalities are only explored in limited situations, under a time constraint. My hope is that, by highlighting the innate limitations of this collection, I may inspire or encourage other writers of positionalities unlike my own to conduct their own interior studies.

Kai Palo

The mortar and pestle set is cheaply made and probably overpriced, Chai thinks. Inez picked up the set at World Market a few weeks after Gumbo knocked Chai's pestle off the counter and they found it in the litter box, split down the middle. The new pestle is made of some kind of resin, dressed up to look like marble. It has a wooden handle, and as Chai grinds the garlic and peppercorn together, he can feel the glue holding it together loosening.

“The trick is to make it into a paste without completely pulverizing the peppercorns.” He tips the mortar over to Inez, who watches, chin in her hands, from the other side of the island. She extends her hand, waiting for him to hand her the pestle rather than plucking it from him. “But what if I do pulverize them?”

He hands it to her, backpedaling. “I mean, I don't think you will. Just focus on the garlic.” He turns, reaching into the cupboard for cinnamon sticks and star anise. “But if you do, it's not a big deal. Honestly, I don't know that it matters.” He sets the glass jars down on the island and inspects her work. “It's just how my mom taught me. You're doing good.”

She grinds along the sides of the mortar, trying to crush the garlic without pounding into the pepper. “Good enough for you, or good enough for her?”

“Well, let me see.” He grinds the whole thing into a paste like it isn't a big deal—like he's done it his whole life.

“I thought so.” Inez rubs her thumb against her opposite palm, a nervous tell that typically precedes cuticle biting.

His mother is coming over at eight, and it's already three in the afternoon. She warned him the night before that they should start at least a few hours before he thought it was necessary,

but he assured her that Kai Palo tastes fine regardless of whether it's made the night before or a few hours ahead. She knows that his mother will be able to tell.

"I promise you, she'll approve." He's watching her now, waiting to have to tell her to wash her hands again as soon as they reach her mouth. "But only if it actually gets made." Chai starts making the rest of the spice bag, which Inez thinks is kind of cheating, but she knows he means well and lets him do it.

"Sometimes I feel like I know her more than you do," she says, her thumbnail flat against her lower lip. "Like, how is she not going to look for something to disapprove of?"

"Sweetie, hands."

She walks around him. Their kitchen is small enough that, at the sink, her back grazes his. The steadiness with which his shoulder shifts as he grinds the cinnamon sticks calms her a little. "This would be her first grandkid. I think it's going to be an ordeal."

"With a white girl, no less."

"Stop that." She turns before she washes her hands and wraps herself around him, her cheek against that shoulder and her palms against his chest. She's still trying to pretend she doesn't remember the dichotomy between Jutharat's cordiality to her face and the scolding she'd sent her son through Siri from her Uber after they'd first met. He'd shown her the texts as further proof that the accent he adopts when quoting her isn't offensive, that even Siri thinks she means "knife" when she says "nice."

"I told you, we don't even have to tell her yet." He looks up to the ceiling, so the back of his head touches the top of hers. "We don't even know how we're going to do it."

Inez lets go of him and turns on the faucet. "You don't know how we're doing it."

"I'm not making you go through that."

She focuses on the smell of citrus and the sting of soap in the cracks along her cuticles. It wouldn't be that bad to try again. She'd heard that the second and third trimesters are easier—that the nausea is supposed to ease up and the glow is supposed to set in. She'd miscarried just a few months before she met Chai at one of her very first galleries, but it feels like much longer ago, now. She remembers the feeling she'd had, leading up to the gallery premiere, that everything was going to change—and it did. Much, much more painfully than she'd expected, but here in their kitchen, with Chai's wallet ghosting over the small of her back through his jeans, she thinks it was for the better. Even something about their bickering—the way his voice hitches with a kind of frustration that she only hears when he's feeling protective—draws her focus away from the water that's getting too hot and toward a moment somewhere in their future. She wants to feel his hands on her taut skin and see the flesh of her stomach move to meet his touch.

“Regardless,” he squeezes past her and opens the fridge. “I don't want to bring a third person into the process. You know that.”

“And how is adopting not bringing someone else into it?” She turns off the faucet and turns to face him, but he's dug himself into the fridge, probing through the meat drawer as if she didn't set the pork shoulder at the very front, level with his chin.

She'd been doing her research, and she knows that he hasn't been doing his. Otherwise, he would know about separation trauma, about the kids who spend their whole lives looking for their biological parents. He'd know that to be an adoptive parent is to be forever inadequate. He lets himself find the pork shoulder and sets it on the cutting board, then reaches around her for the cleaver. “At least adoption is a sure thing,” he says.

“Wow.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.” He doesn’t hesitate to hack into the shoulder. “IVF takes like, five or six tries.”

“Even for normal women, you mean.”

Chai turns to her. “You’re talking to me about normal.”

In vitro isn’t something that Chai hasn’t thought about before. His state-mandated therapist, years ago, had encouraged him to freeze his eggs—just in case. He did because they go for around five thousand a cycle, whatever that means. If anything, he’d thought, someone could make use of them where he hadn’t. Rather than research adoption—he knew Inez had that covered—he’d been ruminating on what it would mean for them if he went through with something like that: a few months of stares, maybe; a prolonged leave of absence from work; weird sex, for a while.

Inez looks like a wounded animal. “You know that’s not fair.”

“I know,” he says. He turns back to the meat. “I’m sorry.” He pushes it into a bowl with the back of the cleaver.

He starts melting the palm sugar, and Inez sits at the island. She rolls the pestle between her hands and watches a small chunk of garlic stuck to the blunt end move clockwise, then counterclockwise, then back.

“It doesn’t solve the donor issue,” Chai says, still turned from her, “but it’s just nine months. I could stop taking the shot as early as this week.”

“Don’t say that.”

“It’s true, though. Probably cheaper than adoption, anyways.”

Inez sets down the pestle. “I wouldn’t make you do that. That would be cruel. You wouldn’t even be able to work.”

“I’m offering.”

It would be painful for both of them, regardless of who does it. She knows that. She looked it up, once, when Chai let it slip during sex that he wanted her kids—regardless of how impossible the fantasy really was. She knows the risk of miscarriage increases a bit each time a woman tries again.

“Adoption wouldn’t be so bad. We could keep in touch with the biological parents.”

“You don’t mean that. It would be bad, for you.”

“I do, I think. I don’t know.”

Chai places the spice bag in the pot and pours in the broth. He reaches for the bowl of cubed meat and Inez can see the muscles in his back tensing.

“I did this wrong.”

“You what?”

He bends down, reaching into a spot that she can’t see. The abrasive sound of the charred bottoms of pots and pans scraping against the unfinished wood inside of the island cabinet makes her teeth hurt. He comes back up with a deep-bottomed pan, which he dashes with oil and sets on a burner.

“It’ll be okay,” he says, in the voice he uses to calm her down. “The sugar isn’t going to have that fatty taste, but it all goes in the broth anyway, so I really don’t think it’s a big deal.”

She reaches over for Gumbo, despite having just cleaned her hands, and rubs the spot above his

tail that Chai claims will overstimulate him, which leads to bad behavior like the pestle incident.

“Is it really not a big deal, or are you going to hear about it when I’m out of earshot?”

The oil is hot, and he tosses the pork into the pan. He takes a deep breath as it sizzles.

“When I asked my mom for this recipe a few years ago, do you know what she gave me?”

“That doesn’t mean that there isn’t a right way to do it.”

“I didn’t even say it yet.” He shakes the pan and resists the urge to try flipping everything over with one elegant toss. “She sent me a picture of the pre-made stuff from H-Mart first,” he says. “Then when I pressed, she sent me a list of ingredients without amounts.” He takes a wooden spoon from the holder and pushes a few pieces loose. “She didn’t even tell me the steps.”

She looks at the raw skin around her nails, light blue and peeling, over the backdrop of gray-brown fur for a moment before she closes her eyes and focuses on his breathing and the crackle of the pork.

“You mean it?”

“That would be a really lame thing to lie about just to make you feel better.” She wants him to say more about how horrible his mother is, but she keeps quiet and imagines how sad her child would be if she didn’t have any recipes to pass along. She imagines teaching them how to thread a needle and how to roll it in a way that makes a flower on the embroidery tapestry.

After sliding the seared pork into the pot, Chai stirs the mixture, bringing up the broth’s aroma—premature, without the warmth or the sweet licorice spice that it’ll develop in the next few hours—and places the lid over it.

“Look,” he turns to her, and she does look, watching the pot as if she can see through the metal, unsure of how she so quickly lost control over the cooking process. “Now, we just wait. And if she notices, we’ll blame me.”

#

This time, the first thing Inez notices about Jutharat is her brooch. The last and only other time they’d met, she wore a t-shirt and jeans and complained that Chai and Inez probably wouldn’t take her anywhere nice enough to dress up for. Tonight, however, the jeweled elephant on her breast winks against the jade-colored silk of her dress. If it weren’t for the deep aroma of star anise and pork spilling through the doorway, Inez would have bailed as soon as she opened the door, sneaking into the bedroom and pulling some bills from her nightstand to make last-minute dining reservations.

“*Sawadee ka*, Khun Jutharat.” Inez lowers her head as Chai steps around them to grab the luggage in the hall.

Jutharat waves a dismissive hand between them as Inez’s head bobs up. In her thick accent, she rhetorically asks, “Why do you think I came here? To hear Thai all the time?” She walks past Inez and into the apartment, taking off her coat as she goes. “Chicago is so cold and gray. Why do I come here and not the other way around?” Without looking, she tosses the coat onto one of the bar stools.

Inez makes big eyes at Chai, who sucks in his lips as he pushes the door open for her with his elbow, each hand holding a matching, monogrammed suitcase in garish pink.

“Kwanchai,” Jutharat takes a seat on the couch in the living room. “This place is so small.”

She looks out of place here. Sitting stiffly with her big Louis Vuitton purse in her trim lap, she takes up too little of the couch. She's dwarfed by the pinned bugs in glass cases and Inez's embroidered birds, flanking the walls on either side of her, and the arch of the floor lamp seems to loom over her with ill intent. Inez can't imagine how this room feels small to such a woman.

"Give me a second *Mae*," he says. "I need to put your things in the office."
Inez makes herself busy with the pot of soup while Chai is out of the room, stirring slowly and watching the eggs bob in and out of view. She hopes that her stiff posture gives off an air of purpose or ownership. "How has the trip up been treating you so far?"

Jutharat leans over and watches to see what Inez does to the soup. "Very good, yeah. I went to the John Hancock and saw the lake. Not as good as the beaches in California, but it was okay."

"I'm glad." Inez tastes the soup. Out of the corner of her eye, she can see Jutharat watching her, and she considers adding something but decides against it. Instead, she uses the spoon to fish out the spice bag, pulling it from the broth and letting it drain against the side of the pot before she plucks it out by the strings. "There are no sharks or anything in Lake Michigan, though, so I think that's a bonus," she tries.

Jutharat shakes her head. "You know what to do when you see a shark?" She stands, leaving her purse on the couch. "You punch it in the nose and put your hand in its gills. We know this in California. We're not scared." Her hands flatten her dress where it bunched up as she sat. Even from the kitchen, through the manicure and the years of affluence Jutharat has become accustomed to in the States, it's clear to Inez that her hands are calloused from years of work. Years, she's sure, of breaking down fish—pulling out their organs and separating *akami* from

toro or slicing as close to the skin as possible to get the biggest filet for nigiri. It's not hard for her to imagine those hands three knuckles deep inside a shark's quivering gills.

Inez nods and pretends she's breathing normally. She can't tell if Jutharat is joking. "Good to know."

When Chai walks out of the office, Jutharat embraces him for a brief moment before holding him by the shoulders at arm's length. They're the same height, but although Chai is stocky and his mother is petite, her formidable posture dwarfs him.

"You've gotten fat," she observes.

He huffs and avoids Inez's stare. "I told you it's the T, *mae*. They said I would gain thirty pounds."

"Thirty pounds, huh?" She pokes his stomach. "Looks like forty-five to me."

He holds her forearms and moves her toward the kitchen. "Let's eat, okay? I bet you've had a long day already."

"Okay, but I want to see more of this place later. I can't believe you moved all the way to Chicago to live in a little room like this. And in such a dingy neighborhood."

Inez remembers the first time each of her parents visited this apartment. She could tell that her mother wasn't too sure about the area, but she at least remained tight-lipped and polite about it, and her dad loved the place. He'd brought a case of Corona as a house-warming gift and barely needed to share, and by the end of the night, he was trying to figure out how to use Amazon to buy an inflatable mattress, to be kept in the linen closet for whenever he dropped by. They were proud of her for the partner, the apartment, and the strange and colorful quilts, or embroideries, or collages, depending on the month, that had begun attracting audiences in

galleries—things that had been uncertain for a long time—and when her dad saw Chai a few months after getting on testosterone, he'd only joked that if the relationship was getting chunkyserious, it had better get ring-serious quick.

Chai sets the island for the three of them. Jutharat sits between them. Inez stays quiet and waits for Jutharat to make the first move. When she looks at the island, it seems sparse, as if she's forgotten some crucial element that any well-researched in-law would know. All that sits before them, other than a few grains of rice that Inez wishes she could discreetly scoop into her palm, are the glass pumpkins they'd bought for Halloween. On display before Chai's mother, they seem even more kitschy than they had at the Christmas get-together they'd held a month ago.

"How is it?" Chai asks. He's already begun eating, filling his spoon with rice and fishing out the hard-boiled eggs.

"You know," she says between bites, "it would be much better if you'd stayed at the restaurant."

"I wonder why that is." He keeps swishing his spoon around in the bowl, looking for another egg.

"Maybe it's because you decided to move to Chicago and eat hot dogs instead of practicing your mother's cooking." She says it playfully, but the malice is palpable.

"You don't have to lie," Inez says. She hasn't touched the soup yet but takes a bite of pork before she keeps talking. The fat melts against her tongue and she wonders if it's supposed to taste like pork or like the spices on the inside; if even this will betray their lack of preparation. "He's trying to take the blame for me. I made the soup."

"Oh, really?"

“I wanted to show you my appreciation.” Inez nods and takes another, bigger bite. Some part of her feels guilty for doubting Chai.

“So Kwanchai gave you my recipe.”

“*Mae*. She’s my partner.”

“He didn’t give me the recipe,” she says. “Just the ingredients—I even had to figure out the amounts myself.”

“I can tell.”

Chai stands up. His stool screeches against the floor. “I went and bought your favorite soju to celebrate your visit. Let me get it.”

The first two shots are quiet, in between slurps of the soup. Chai refills the glasses after each shot and waits for Jutharat’s cue before taking his. Inez waits for Chai’s. By the third shot, Chai’s cheeks are red and Jutharat is pouring her own.

“You get that from your *phaw*,” she says. “I never glow.”

“It’s not like I party, anyway, so it’s fine.”

“The servers at the restaurant are always partying. Always have to get your *phi chaai* to help on Sunday because half my staff calls out.”

“My job here isn’t really like that,” he says. Had he not been drinking, he might have paused a moment before continuing. “We have real responsibilities.”

“How you can come from me and work for free I will never understand.”

Chai shakes his head. “I know you won’t. It’s a non-profit. I don’t work for free.”

“Your *phi chaai* is outside my restaurant scaring away customers with his guitar and your *phi saao* is in New York, I don’t know what she’s doing.”

“Jaran plays the banjo and Pranee is an editor, *mae*. You know this.”

“And now my Kwanchai is playing golf with the big men in Chicago.”

Chai pours her another shot. He looks past her, to Inez, but she covers her glass with her hand. She can feel her temper flaring. Jaran, she can understand Jutharat’s concern for—each time they met, he seemed more easy-going and less bathed. On the other hand, Pranee was living the life that Inez had dreamed of as a little girl, after she’d watched *13 Going On 30* for the first time. If she could be disappointed in Pranee, Inez couldn’t imagine what Jutharat must think of her.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he says.

“You know,” she takes the shot. “When I lived in Chiang Mai,”

“Here we go.”

“You haven’t heard this one before. When I lived in Chiang Mai, I was very beautiful.”

She looks at Inez. “It’s true. Very beautiful. I dated Miss Thailand.”

Chai gives Inez a look that says he has heard this before. Despite her bewilderment, Inez smiles. She’s never tried to imagine Jutharat as anything but angry, tight-lipped, and disdainful. Rather than simmer on the logistics, on how her relationship with Chai’s dad works, or what her upbringing must have looked like, she imagines the woman that Jutharat wants her to—young and beautiful and in love. It’s a nice image that she wants to hang onto.

“What happened with her?” Momentarily, Inez wonders why Chai has never brought this up. She can’t help but feel like it’s her fault for practically blacklisting any mention of Jutharat in the house unless it was urgent (a surprise visit, for example).

“She was a bigshot in Thailand, and I wasn’t. I wanted to come to America. Why would she leave?” She nods for Chai to refill her glass. “And I was having Jaran. I wanted him to be American.”

Inez nods. The big bottle of soju is empty, and although she’d only had two shots, Jutharat’s energy is making her feel it. There’s something about the tone of her voice, not a waver but a pinch at the back of her throat that frames everything a little differently—like maybe she isn’t disappointed in her children but in herself for what happened to them. She wonders if that pinch is why Chai kept the backstory to himself.

“And now I am here. My children are all citizens, and they’re not even grateful.”

“We aren’t ungrateful, *mae*, we’re American.”

“I get it though.” Inez clears her throat. “You gave up everything for them.”

Jutharat tilts her head from shoulder to shoulder. “A lot, but not everything.”

“If I had a child,” Inez says, shifting in her seat. “I think I would understand.”

“You wouldn’t, though.” Her lips turn upward at the corners like she’s telling them a soft and sad secret.

“We might, though.” Chai stands up and grabs the glasses, preparing for an explosive reaction. When they were younger, before the few, cheap therapists they’d gleaned a crash course’s worth of conflict resolution skills from, she had to have her panic attacks in the living room, so that Chai had his space to lie in bed and avoid the emotions that he tried to convince her transferred to him, too, through some kind of spiritual osmosis.

“Might what? Understand?”

“Have a child.” Inez looks at her lap. “We might adopt. Or do in vitro. I don’t know.”

Jutharat looks at Chai with wide eyes. “Who would have it?”

“Probably me,” he says. He presses his back into the counter, and although he’s no further from his mother, he’s pressing so hard that he’ll have a welt later.

“No.” Inez follows Jutharat’s gaze and gives Chai a hard look.

“Maybe.” He doesn’t return the look.

Jutharat turns to Inez. “How come you won’t?”

“I didn’t say that.” She stands and moves to the couch, partially out of deflection and partially from discomfort. “I want to.” Though she’d picked out the couch, the nicest one at IKEA, she notices how unsuitable it is for a relaxed posture. Her back upright, she tries to pass off her stomach-rubbing as an absentminded response to a slight disagreement between the soup and soju.

Behind her, Chai begins to wash the dishes. He pays close attention to the bits of food that cling to each bowl.

“It’s just a hard process.” Absently, she rubs her thumb against her opposite palm. “And it might not work. We don’t know.”

“Why do you want kids so bad?” Jutharat follows her to the couch.

Inez chews at her cuticle. Sometimes it’s fine but other times, it stings. “Why did you?”

“No, it was different for me. I didn’t mean to have Jaran.”

Inez wrenches her thumb from her mouth.

“I just think it’s a bad idea,” Jutharat says.

“Why?” Inez makes herself look up at Jutharat, who’s sitting underneath a Cassowary and an Eastern Hercules Beetle. “Why would it be a bad idea?”

“Think about it. Who will be the donor?” She shakes her head. “Will you have a White baby who does not know why her dad can’t take her out on his own, or a Brown baby who does not know why his mom is treated better than him?”

“I’m not just White.” She wrings her hands hard, as if she’s trying to wipe away the skin itself. “My last name is Ramos. My *abuela* is from Guadalajara.” She racks her brain for proof. “I was going to have a *quinceañera*, but my dad lost his job at the Sam’s Club that year.”

Jutharat looks back at Chai. He’s letting the faucet run, watching the two of them. She straightens up and reaches for one of Inez’s hands, but she stops short of touching her. “I mean,” she gestures around the apartment. “You are obviously not using your skin to be more successful.”

Inez presses under her eyes with the side of her curled fingers. “I’m trying to.”

“I know. So you have to think about it. You kids don’t think.”

Chai turns off the faucet and comes to the couch. He sits on the arm, behind Inez, as if the warmth of his body will make her feel better. And it does, a little, but she doesn’t feel comfortable leaning into him with his mother right there.

“We are thinking about it. That’s why we wanted to bring it up,” she says.

Jutharat laughs. “I found out about you six months after you two moved in together. You think almost as little as I did when I came here.” She straightens out her dress in her lap. “Just think about it.”

She stands up and, slowly, walks to the office. Even though Inez has just watched her drink more than half a bottle of 50-proof soju and had gotten a tantalizing glimpse of how fun she must be at parties, her gait is measured, as if she’s a woman whose shit is so together that she can drink to excess without showing it.

#

“When I was falling asleep, these birds kept watching me.” Jutharat looks at one of the larger embroideries, directly across from the futon, depicting an orange bird presenting a yellow-green bird with a thin blade of grass.

“I’m sorry about that.” Inez smooths out the folded linen on the edge of the futon.

“They’re a big project of mine right now.”

“I see that.” Jutharat places her toiletry bag in her suitcase. “Why birds?” Inez is quiet for a moment. There are many reasons: her *abuela*, who taught her embroidery and, when she could no longer hold a needle and thread, became a birder; Chai’s stories about the Senegal parrot he’d grown up with; the pigeon family that nested on their fire escape each spring.

“There are a lot of them,” she says. “I guess I figured it would be a while before I ran out of source material.”

“What kind are these?”

“They’re a pair of Orchard Orioles. The chestnut one is the male. They’ll use the grass for a nest.”

Jutharat nods. “They’re pretty.” She zips up her luggage. “I’m going to see some girlfriends in Wisconsin. Just for a day or two.”

Inez turns from the orioles to look at her.

“I have a ride, don’t worry. But I’m going to leave my big bag here, so I can stop by and get it before I go back to LA.” She hoists her smaller bag off the futon. “It might be late when I come back. You should keep the bed out, just in case.”

“Okay.” Inez nods, mostly to herself. “That sounds good. By the way—”

“Yeah?”

“Chai made the Kai Palo last night.”

Jutharat smiles and walks past her with her bag. “I know. He never lets it sit overnight—he thinks I can’t tell, but I always know.”

###

Rifts and Expanses

The one thing climate change is good for, Javier’s partner Hugo always says, is paleontology. As crude as Javier finds the joke, Hugo isn’t wrong. The first time he’d seen the vast, lonely expanse of James Ross Island, Javier had only the salt flats he’d visited each year in his childhood, thousands of miles away in Utah, to compare it to. On his most recent visits, its ice no longer resembled the uniform sheet of the salt flats that lay far up north. Though the air is still frigid enough to crystallize his eyelashes, the landscape is mostly a rich brown, and the patches of ice that scatter the ground are minuscule compared to what he’d heard stories about in school. Now that it’s warming up, they anticipate that the first few layers of dirt will be softer than they had been during the last expedition. This could save hours of work in the long run, and that’s what Javier is hoping for.

The last night before a trip out from the station is always frenzied. It’s the middle of December, and there are only a sparse few minutes of civil twilight to make the days distinguishable. Though the others are perpetually focused on gathering everything for the trip, Javier prefers to spend those moments outside. Other than the dull thrum of the generators, a quilt of silence falls over the station’s surroundings when the sun dips below the horizon, and he likes to stand in the alcove of the doorway, out of the bombarding wind, and watch the

penguins—black blemishes against the white plains of Seymour Island—diving into the water one by one.

The camp is primitive, even compared to the station. The paleontology lab is at Marambio, so the only supplies they bring to the expedition sites are those needed for digging and survival.

“Just think of it as living like the fossils did,” Hugo said the first time they built a quinzee in the snow, packed together so tightly that their chests moved like a see-saw—Javier breathing in as Hugo breathed out, taking turns in synchrony until it became an unconscious rhythm. Hugo’s stubble had tickled his smooth chin, and they had been warm.

That was when they’d been foolish enough to undertake expeditions in the dead of winter. They’d both grown as scientists since then; they’d learned the value of comfort and efficiency. Their tent is still small. They each have a sleeping bag, separated by a neat line of all of their belongings, from pee bottles to the radio. The separation feels unnatural to Javier, though it’s standard and more comfortable than it would be in another configuration. He refuses to complain about the barrier between them out of some fear of a research assistant popping in to ask a question or a distraction from what really matters.

Hugo has always been focused on the things that really matter—dissatisfied with anything less than absolute innovation. It’s brought him this far. Javier thinks of his satisfaction with falling right behind Hugo in all things, and how this has led to Hugo’s tenure-track position in Connecticut and Javier’s adjunct situation in Texas, in the same way it’s led to their separation. This is the first time they’ve been together in longer than Javier can remember, leading an expedition together.

Before they set out into private spots to dig, Hugo briefs the scientists one more time. Though they've read the papers from his last expedition and seen the geologic maps and fossil diagrams, he reminds them: the purpose of the expedition is to find proof of a specimen never before discovered, other than the jawbone Hugo found on his last expedition on James Ross, whose dental patterns were dissimilar enough to known species to warrant this expedition in the eyes of the grant committee.

In the midst of scientists and students looking over the map and attempting to triangulate the most fruitful dig sites, a graduate student approaches Javier.

"Mr. Becerra." Javier hands him a copy of the marked-up map, which serves as a reminder to students of what's been found and what barriers shouldn't be crossed to avoid crabeater seal or orca encounters. "What do you think so far?"

"Cold," Angel says, and he takes the map with a gloved hand. "Gorgeous, though." "Isn't it?" He gazes over the people and the landscape, where he imagines seals will bask by the hundreds in a few months. "I'll admit, even though the fossil record here is one of the most extensive in the world, it's the views that keep me coming here every time I imagine what the weather must be like in parts of Africa."

Angel follows his gaze. "It's so alien in the present day," he says, and he takes a deep breath. "I wish we could see what it looked like way back when. And know for sure."

Angel is one of the students he had highly encouraged to join the expedition. He and Javier had been working together for years, ever since Angel turned up in one of the undergraduate classes he taught every other semester with a proposal for an independent project. When they'd met, Angel had just thought of paleontology as something taught to others,

knowledge passed down from professor to future professor. He didn't think that there was anything left to find. Then Javier encouraged him to come to office hours, to talk more about the real possibilities—and about graduate school.

Though he would never tell him, Javier knows that only part of his interest comes from Angel's academic abilities or enthusiasm. He speaks with an accent, which he tries to hide but which slips out when he gets carried away talking about something, and he's dark-skinned—his background unconcealable—and he's *good*.

“Would I be able to shadow you and Dr. Fuentes?”

Angel's passivity stings Javier. In the field, he's lost so much of the confidence and luster that propelled him through his coursework. Despite being taller than Javier by half a foot, Angel hasn't yet learned how to present less meekly; how to act like he belongs until he does.

“Honestly,” he says, “I think you've got this.” He looks over at Hugo, who had been talking to a small group of students and is now gathering his things. “We're working on a dig from one of our previous expeditions, so you won't get the full experience, anyways.” He holds up the map and gestures to a group of students who have set up many yards away. “They've picked what seems like a fruitful spot.”

“Yeah,” Angel says. “Yeah, I can go work with them.”

“Go impart some knowledge on them.” Javier pats him on the back. “Also, and I say this from personal experience—that earring's going to increase your risk of frostbite, so you might want to put it in your pocket.”

As he had on the expedition before, and the one before that, Hugo sets himself up at the previous dig site, where he found the first jawbone years ago. Javier sits next to him and grabs the hammer and chisel from his belt, immediately getting to work on the exposed stone before

him. Over the years, they've become comfortable with one another, working like two professional chefs. Rather than avoiding knives and hot pans, they maneuver their bodies to work as closely together as is efficient, deftly avoiding one another's elbows and expending as little energy as possible to keep warm. Hugo has always been a quiet worker, as if reverence will draw the bones out from the mineral, but Javier likes to chat. He'd chosen paleoichthyology because he'd imagined it would be solitary work, with long lonesome hours, and he often wishes for that when they're at the station, but he can't resist cashing in on the few chances he gets to talk to Hugo face to face—to watch the muscles in his jaw as he speaks and the flutter of his brow when he thinks of a response.

“You know,” Javier says, talking over the chiseling without yelling, “I haven't seen many whales so far this season.”

“No?”

“No, and just yesterday I saw tons of penguins diving into the water. Like they had nothing to be afraid of. I wanted to grab my camera, but I would have missed everything if I tried.”

Hugo hums. “Seems like a mystery for the zoologists.”

Javier looks back out at the penguins, less distinct against the darker rocks. He often wonders if he'd be in the same place had he chosen zoology or nature photography instead of this, watching the harems of seals and colonies of penguins and studying—even simply appreciating—the living. He'd taken photos on trips before, but he tries not to let it distract from the real purpose of these too-rare expeditions. Especially, he'd thought before they set out in the morning, not when so much rides on this one for Hugo.

“I guess so, yeah,” he says. “The most fascinating thing, I think,” he says as he brushes away the dust that has accumulated over his work area, “is playing zoologist for our specimens.” “Oh yeah,” he says. He does this thing when he’s not paying close attention to Javier where he adopts a slouch. In front of others, he’s always made a concentrated effort to seem tall and stiff. “Diet, breeding habits. All that.”

“Not that.” Javier runs his gloved hand over the rock, studiously thumbing the demarcated layers. “Like, imagine this place when it was an ocean. When it was connected to Australia and India. I wonder if they were social animals, you know?”

Hugo nods, but Javier knows that he’s not listening anymore. He’s got that look on his face, working the deep-set wrinkles in his forehead, and there’s a rhythm to his movements. He’d been a better conversationalist—and maybe a worse paleontologist—when they were research assistants, working on other people’s passion projects. Now he found his in this singular, sacrosanct fossil. For Hugo’s sake, he hopes they find something.

He wants to talk to Hugo more, but it’s clear that he’s lost between the layers of rock and ash. Javier isn’t like him; he can’t chisel away for hours at a time without extra stimulation. The lab is fine for him, as there’s cell reception at the station and he can take breaks when he needs to, but the camp is constant. He does it, but he lets his mind wander—to the mindlessness of the birds a few feet away from them, the plants he has on his windowsill at home, which he hopes will survive, as he’s put their pots into jars of water after reading that they’ll soak up what they need; the unopened messages in his Tinder inbox, which he always neglects while he’s in the field with Hugo, even when there is service; the wrinkle in Hugo’s forehead and the hunch of his shoulders as he works.

The first day, which ends not at the next twilight but when the students' hands become less steady and the cold begins to get to them, had been relatively fruitful, all things considered. The assistants collected two vertebrae, which Hugo will analyze when they get back to Marambio. The morale is low, as it always is on the first day when the expectations are set: nine, sometimes ten hours of labor and then rice with a polar pâté—everything is always polar—of suet, mystery jerky, and vegetable oil for dinner.

“I always forget,” Hugo says between bites, “that it’s like the Oregon fucking trail out here.” He sips some of the tea from his thermos. “The true last frontier.”

Javier knows that with Hugo’s words comes a deep love for the terrain and the work. He’s complaining again about the ball-and-chain that he’ll happily go home to each night and kiss on the mouth. Hugo’s resolve easily unearths the same feeling in the younger scientists, even through complaints, and Javier wonders what he’s like in class—how his students view him and whether there are any particular young minds that he’s waiting to see burgeon; anyone that he thinks, even now, he might pass the torch to. To see someone so passionate is sometimes inspiring to him, like now, as he watches Hugo, invigorated by his tea, attempt to regale the others with stories of expeditions from the Spiti Valley. Sometimes it frightens him.

#

Throughout the night, though there is no desk and Hugo had promised that he’d wait until they return to the station, he pores over his notes and diagrams, carefully turns over the vertebrae in his hands, and flips through the journals that added unnecessary weight to their supplies. Javier is used to this, but he prefers the winter expeditions, when the unending night and cold lull him to sleep and only occasionally do the flipping pages wake him, and he can turn over to see

Hugo's shadowy profile in the dim lantern light, wasting their battery. During the summer, the ceaseless light is already working against him, and the mousy sounds that Hugo makes disturb what little sleep he can find.

"Would you mind," he says at some hour, "getting just a wink of sleep?"

"No can do, buddy." Hugo doesn't look up from his makeshift desk, which is just a food box on top of his sleeping bag. He looks like a child hiding under the covers, flashlight tracking the panels of comic-book contraband. "I think I'm on the brink of something."

"Breakthroughs don't happen like that in real life." Javier reaches for the cloth that covers his mouth and nose during the day, looking to use it as an eye mask. He could almost handle the relentless daylight, but it's hell coupled with the sound of a pencil scraping against paper. "This is always how it goes."

"I don't get why you don't want this," Hugo runs his fingers over a new page of vertebrae sketches.

"You know I do." Javier has placed the cloth over his eyes, but it's lightweight enough that it doesn't do much to block out his view of the tent. "I just think it'd be easier if you wait for the lab."

"Don't you realize how much it would mean to co-author something like this?"

"Co-author a laboratory-researched paper, yes."

"To the whole field—to aspiring paleontologists, ichthyologists."

"When it isn't disproven because of hasty fieldwork." He's cranky and tired. Too tired to be tender with Hugo's dreams.

"For people like us."

Javier leaves it at that. He doesn't have the energy to come up with a retort and focuses instead on regulating his breathing and pressing his eyes shut.

He hasn't told Hugo about Tinder. They had never been personal with one another like that. Something about the extremity around them now makes Javier feel like sharing anecdotes about who shows up in his feed would be a waste of breath. Their relationship has always had a certain intensity to it that makes trivial small talk hard to swallow, and a don't-ask-don't-tell, pick-up-where-we-left-off nature that makes everything in between their time together feel irrelevant.

After the first night in the quinzee—the closest Javier has ever come to dying of his own volition—he'd felt a kind of connection with Hugo that was hard to replicate in normal circumstances. Following that trip, they'd stopped seeing one another on any other continent.

That's part of why Javier hasn't told him much about his growing desire for photography, either. He knows, logically, that if he wanted to, he could be a wildlife photographer with an Antarctic specialty. He could have a shelter made for his instruments, could sneak into Hugo's tent in the middle of the eternal day, when he knows that he'll be focused, and distract him without feeling like a saboteur to their mutual endeavors. He doesn't let himself imagine what it would be like to lose the brink-treading and breathless aspect of their partnership. He knows that there is no world where he's an artist with his academic partner. He chooses to ignore the erosion of passion that even now he knows they're both aware of, as he shifts in his bag and turns his back to the rustling of papers.

#

They wake to a voice on the radio. A windstorm is coming in, unusual for this time of year, with winds of over 100 miles per hour—nearly twice what the tents can handle. The scientists at Marambio suggest that the team make its way back, as they'll have enough time to get there before the storm reaches either the camp or the station.

Javier begins packing their things and gets ready to dig the tent up from the layer of snow they'd put over it and de-stake it. They'd made the quinzee during a windstorm and he doesn't want to relive that, despite his fond memories, or make the students or assistants do the same. Throughout Javier's frantic packing, even when the tents are down and the students are loading them onto the truck, Hugo makes no motion to assist. He looks instead at the contents of his side of the tent, at the papers held down by countless paperweights, their corners flapping fanatically.

"Come on." Javier is breaking a sweat. "You heard them. We can come right back."

Hugo shakes his head. "I was really close yesterday. I can feel it." He reaches for his tools. "They said we have time before it comes in."

"Time to get to the station. That's it." Javier stands between Hugo and the site they'd been working on.

"I know how to survive out here," he says. "I'll be fine."

"Tell me," Javier says, "how it could possibly be beneficial for you to stay here, freezing half to death and not getting any work done?"

"You're missing the point."

Javier can't deal with this obstinacy, not at the moment. Instead, he tells the juniors what to pack and what to leave, and he packages the vertebrae with care. He gazes at the penguins, no longer frolicking but huddled together in masses, myriad creatures enacting a unity that only instinct can enable. They can feel the storm coming too.

Before he finishes filling up the truck, Javier tosses a few duffel bags of clothing and packed up tents onto the ground and packs them in walls of snow, reinforced until the structure is thick and solid. He digs a hole in the side of the structure and pulls the bags and tents out. Unlike in the one they'd made together years ago, Javier makes this quinzee methodically. He makes sure it'll be snug around Hugo, to keep the air warmed by his body.

That Hugo had returned to digging while Javier prepared everything had not been lost on the researchers. Javier briefly feels a twinge of embarrassment, knowing that Angel is watching—knowing that the students Hugo encouraged are watching him unravel. For just a moment, he sits at the edge of the hole.

“I can't let the others go back to Marambio by themselves,” he says. “But I made you somewhere to sleep and packed a food box in the snow.”

“Okay,” Hugo says. He's slouching.

“And I hope that you stay safe.” He wants anything in response—reciprocity, maybe, or an acknowledgment of the shirking of responsibility, or an ounce of concern or affection.

“Yeah.” Hugo continues to examine the rock beneath them.

Javier imagines Hugo's mind wandering to thoughts of how, in mere hours, the cavern will be filled with snow and debris. He stands up.

“By the way,” he says. He thinks about telling him and wonders if this really might be his last chance. He looks at Hugo and up at the truck full of potential. He remembers the way that Hugo's hands felt, pressed flat against his shoulder blades. He thought then, even though he couldn't feel them through the layers of polyester and cotton, of the difference between Hugo's hands and those of their classmates. He compared the roughness of Hugo's, from the part-time

work at the farm he did to put himself through school, to the delicate way their classmates adjusted the microscope lenses.

He thinks of Angel, sitting in the truck, packed in with the other students like the masses of penguins a hundred yards away. Of what it might do to him, too, if Javier told Hugo about his feelings for him or photography, even out of the students' earshot. He rubs his mouth and his cheeks, and though he can't feel the calluses underneath his gloves he knows that they're there, waiting for more rock to crumble and gravel to move aside.

He can't tell if Hugo can still feel his presence, or if he's noticed the shadow he casts over the work. He clears his throat.

"Um," he says. "I'll see you in a few days, okay?"

He puts a hand on Hugo's shoulder, which, either by instinct or a glimmer of recognition, relaxes with his touch. He squeezes, and he wants to sit and press his chest to Hugo's back and work the knots out of the curve between his neck and his shoulders, but he lets go. He walks to the truck, opens the door with a shaky hand, and starts towards Marambio.

Hugo watches as the truck speeds away, leaving tendrils of snow in its wake. He watches until it's a blemish on the muddled brown horizon; until it dives right over the edge of the continent.

###

Rekindling

Raúl Albarran-Cortés's mother was dead. This had been true for a few weeks, according to the medical examiner's report, and it was the only thing that he and the cleaning crew representative could agree on. They stood on the front porch of Raúl's childhood home, and the wooden steps softened underneath him. The crew's representative—Ed, according to his name tag—clicked his pen against his clipboard in a staccato rhythm as he reiterated his point, slower this time.

"You need to be the inheritor in the will." He turned the clipboard around and clicked the name at the bottom of the page once, twice, three sharp times. He tapped the unsigned line next to it.

"Unless you can get your sister to come and vouch for you, you can't come in."

Raúl's shirt was damp along the curve of his spine, a result of the Sedona sun. He felt fat drips of sweat sliding under the hem of his jeans. "I told you," he said, grazing the leather lip of his wallet in his back pocket, "I don't have a sister."

"Listen, man." Ed pressed the clipboard to his cheek as if they were in on a secret together. "If this Yesenia lady doesn't come by, you're out of luck. We gotta hold onto everything. But if she does, I bet she'll have everything in here on the street in no time."

Raúl tried to peer around Ed, between the waist of his denim coveralls and the frame of the open front door. Ed stepped to the right with him, like a trainer blocking a reactive dog. He wasn't a wide man, but he was tall, and from the top of the stairs, his figure blocked anything of value.

"I am authorized to call the police, sir." His voice held no animosity. The words came out in one monotonous tone. He focused past Raúl, on the cleaners' van and the men in matching coveralls waiting to unload it.

Raúl debated pulling out his ID. The men were bored, mostly, scrolling on their phones and smoking something that wafted the faint scent of raspberry over to the porch. One or two of them were watching the interaction. They gathered around the back of the van, half-shrouded by the open doors covered in stickers that said “How’s My Driving?” and advertised their services and had thin blue lines. He stopped fingering the wallet in his back pocket.

One man, who’d been sitting on the lip of the van, hopped down to meander alongside Raúl. He was tall, too, but he stayed at the bottom of the porch steps, as if they were equals. Raúl recognized him in an instant, the weight of years apart aside. He felt the instinct to run toward his car, but the pile of old exercise equipment and the stacks of mildewy newspapers on the doorstep held him back.

“What’s the hold-up, boss? Half the day’s over already.” After fifteen years and two thousand-some miles, the twang in Julian’s voice was still distinct.

Raúl didn’t know how many times he’d thought of Julian in the years since graduation. He was one of the few people Raúl felt guilty leaving behind when he left town a week after commencement. They’d wasted a lot of time together, between classes or after school, avoiding their peers or their parents. They always pretended it was a matter of convenience, as if the passing of the cigarette or joint was more important than what one of them said while the other was lighting up. He’d told Julian some of the most intimate things he’d ever told anyone, in between talking about the football team’s fate since Julian’s brother’s suspension and copying one another’s pre-cal and world history homework.

He was still big, probably from the labor Raúl could only imagine he did each day—hauling broken dressers down flights of stairs, scraping years of God knows what off of walls.

He had a tan that made him seem more Latino than Raúl even though he remembered that his last name was Pritchard. As close as he was on those steps, his bergamot aftershave overpowered the otherwise sweet-rotten air.

“Do I know you?” Julian’s voice wasn’t as cold as Ed’s. “Feels like I should recognize just about everybody around here.”

Raúl cleared his throat. He consciously fixed his posture and tried to ignore the feeling of wet fabric on his skin. “I just moved back. For this.” He gestured to the house, through Ed, who didn’t want to hear the spiel again.

“Oh, you knew Ms. Cortés?” He said it with a ‘z.’ “Sad thing, what happened to her.”

“I’m her son, so I guess you could say that.” Raúl didn’t want to see Julian’s reaction. The neighboring houses and the saguaros swayed in the dry heat.

“I didn’t know she had a son.” He said it like a passing thought, without weight.

“The son’s not on the will.” Ed continued clicking. “I’ve been trying to tell this guy.” Raúl was unsure of the power dynamics at play between Julian and Ed—one tall and muscular and the other with an authoritative demeanor and a special shade of coveralls to back it up.

“I just want to clear out the house,” he said. “Same as you.”

He thought of the bulky men behind them, parked in front of the dainty little car he’d just driven across the country in. He remembered how, in high school, Julian was in the ROTC program—a Cadet Major. Then he thought of the box of ornaments in the attic and his childhood bedroom and chose not to turn away.

“Can I talk to you for a moment?” He nearly reached out for Julian’s forearm but stopped short.

Julian didn't seem confused. He nodded and backed down the steps, sure of his footing. When they reached the shade of a western hackberry along the house's edge, he leaned back and stuffed his hands in the front pockets of his uniform.

"Sorry if this is weird," Raúl said. He felt himself returning to the role he'd adopted as a teenager.

"Nah." Julian pulled a chapstick out of his pocket and spoke while applying it. "Ed's been doing this so long, I think he forgets that people are grieving."

"We went to high school together." Raúl fought the urge to pick at his fingernails. "Me and you, I mean. Not me and him."

Julian tilted his neck to each side until it cracked, and Raúl thought that, had things turned out differently on the evolutionary front, he'd be some kind of retriever dog. "At different times?"

"No," Raúl said. "I bought cigarettes off you behind the gym after third period every once in a while." He drew small circles in the dirt in front of him with the tip of his shoe. He'd grown up in this dirt, made potions out of leaves and empty June bug exoskeletons. He'd climbed the tree Julian leaned against every afternoon for years.

"No shit. Cortés," Julian said. The lines in his face, which Raúl thought were a product of age, smoothed out like he'd solved a particularly rewarding puzzle. "I wondered where you went after graduation."

"New York." Raúl smudged the circles out. "As far as I could get."

"When did this happen?" Julian raised his chin toward Raúl.

Raúl didn't have to see Julian's face to know what he was talking about—the facial hair, the fat redistribution. He was glad that he'd figured it out without the need for verbal confirmation.

“God, I don't know.” Raúl stuffed his hands in his back pockets, then crossed and uncrossed his arms. He cleared his throat. “In the last two years or so, mostly.”

A breeze blew Raúl's shirt against his chest, flat now and still more numb than not. He focused on the cuticle that had been bothering him earlier. For the thirty-two years that Raúl had been Yesenia, he'd bitten his nails. Once he came out, he decided to quit, but his nails were still thin and brittle. He'd started picking at the skin on his fingers instead. Being in Sedona felt the same way—like swimming in an infinity pool or running in laps along a track, changing marginally and never getting anywhere. He was still the Cortés kid in a different skin.

“Sorry you had to come back for this.”

“Had to happen at some point, right?”

Julian tried to come across as warm, Raúl could tell. “One thing I've learned is that it tends to, yeah.” He pushed himself from the tree trunk and wiped his hands on the front of his coveralls. “I get it, now. I can try to talk Ed into being cool.”

“That would be great,” Raúl said. “I'd love that.”

Julian walked back to the porch as if the weight of Raúl's new rent and legal responsibility didn't lie on his shoulders. Raúl was next to the kitchen bay window. The house was either dark or his mother had taped something up to the glass, seeking more obscurity than the tree could provide. He could hear bickering from the porch, and if he strained, he could hear a pen clicking, but mostly he heard the sounds of the desert echoing off the canyon walls. The

arguing was nothing he hadn't gotten used to in his final years of marriage, but the wind whistling through the brush was a welcome change. The cliff faces on the horizon felt nearly the same as the skyscrapers he'd grown accustomed to, but there was something primal about them he'd forgotten.

After Raúl sat and soaked in the aridity for a while, the crew opened the back of the van and pulled out their supplies. Julian came part-way around the house and nodded from him to the porch. Raúl didn't ask what he'd said or how the conversation had gone. After years of trying to leave, he was returning to this house like it was a coveted object—something precious. He'd imagined the house in its skeletal state this whole time, but even from the top of the stairs, the weight of its fullness became clear through the open door.

#

“Sorry again.” Julian tossed his keys on the kitchen counter, between a mug half-filled with dark coffee and a pizza box left ajar. “You can probably take it once we're done with the place.”

“It's fine,” Raúl said. “Just feeling sentimental.”

“We have to inventory everything that might be included in the will, is all.”

Julian leaned against the counter. Raúl didn't know where to stand, so he stayed just inside the doorway.

“Don't know if anyone but me would want it,” he said. He wasn't sure if Julian's was a shoes-on or shoes-off type of place, so he left them on. “I used to play when we were younger, but not anymore.”

“I think I remember a talent show or two. What did you play, something by Linkin Park?”

Raúl had forgotten what it was like for people to know who he was before he became himself. “Sounds like something I would have done.”

“Here it is, by the way. All mine.” Julian was digging through the fridge, white and a whole foot-and-a-half shorter than him. “Want a drink?”

The place in question was Julian’s apartment, which seemed as if it had recently been burglarized. The walls were bare, and there were spots in the hall where Julian must have filled in screw holes with newer, whiter spackle. There was no carpet or rug in the living room—just the laminate flooring, which had water damage. The whole place reminded him of how his condo would have turned out if he’d kept it rather than his ex-husband. It was what he thought his new apartment might become once he took the time to break it in—just as small and unfit for the baby grand he’d tried to convince Ed to let him take. There was a TV atop a dresser playing what must have been Adult Swim reruns, with two La-Z-Boys positioned in front of it. A man sat in one, turned away from them. Julian hadn’t mentioned a roommate.

“That’s Chris. Don’t mind him.” Julian handed Raúl a drink even though he hadn’t specified anything in particular.

He took Raúl past Chris and into his bedroom. There were no chairs, so they sat at the foot of the bed with their Diet Cokes in their laps.

“Sorry about that,” Julian said. “Around here you kind of stop expecting guests.”

“It’s better than sitting among the boxes in my apartment.”

That made Julian a bit lighter. His room was more decorated than the rest of the apartment. Raúl expected football memorabilia on the walls or the same situation as the living

room, but there were some framed paintings instead. Above the bed was a winter forest scene, and Raúl wondered if Julian had ever seen its real-life counterpart.

“Can I ask you a question?”

Raúl nodded. “Feel like I’d make it awkward, saying no.”

“Why *Raúl*?” Julian over-pronounced it.

Raúl was surprised it took so long for something like that to come up. He’d expected it as they uncovered the Lisa Frank trapper keeper, bright pink and still covered in glitter that hadn’t faltered under years’ worth of his mom’s fast food wrappers in his childhood bedroom, or the wall recording his height at different ages, always labeled with his old initials—“YLAC.” At the very least, he’d expected more interrogation while they stood with Ed in the front room getting geared up.

“It was my uncle’s name.” He plucked the soda tab with the side of his thumb. “He and I went through losing my mom together. Before she passed.”

There were lines on Julian’s face that hadn’t been there the last time they spoke behind the gym. He’d done a lot of smiling and standing around in the sun since then.

“He died before my transition. Got hit in a crosswalk.” Raúl felt the tension in his lower spine and straightened up. “Sorry, what a bummer.”

“Hey, I asked,” Julian said.

Julian’s cologne was stronger in the enclosed space, away from all of the cleaning products and mold. A painting across from the bed depicted a fox, its mouth around a hare’s matted fur. It wasn’t a print—thick layers of paint formed the fox’s crinkled snout. Raúl wondered when the Sedona art scene sprouted up and when Julian had entered it. Their knees were touching, and if he wanted to, he could smell Julian’s breath.

“Why here?” Raul asked.

“Why Sedona?”

“No,” Raul said. “Your roommate’s here.”

“Oh, Chris is fine.” Julian had just shaved, and his hair sat underneath his skin, waiting to become stubble. “He’s just not all the way there, you know?”

“I was being sarcastic,” he said. “Sorry.” He wished he could ask for Julian’s chapstick, or that he’d asked for water instead of taking the soda.

Julian leaned back on his hands and the air around Raúl cooled by ten degrees.

“I didn’t mean to stay in Arizona,” Julian said. “It just kind of happened.” He tipped his head back, toward the hall. “I met Chris right after we graduated.”

“It’s been a while, then,” Raúl said. He hadn’t thought about Julian having the same years he’d had. “You two are just roommates?”

“Now we are, yeah.”

The heat had all but dissipated. Raúl didn’t feel entitled to Julian’s story, but he didn’t try to change the subject either.

“I wanted to leave, actually,” Julian said. “To see the coast or something.”

Raúl tried to imagine the Julian that made it out of Arizona, but he was too tangible, right in front of him.

“Then it just got really messy.”

Raúl’s coke can clanged dully each time he pressed it with his thumb. Minutes passed without comment. “I thought about you a lot when I transitioned.”

“Yeah?”

“Like, I didn’t know if you remembered me. But I liked to think you did.”

“It took a minute to connect the dots,” he said. “But I did. I don’t invite just anyone over.”

Raúl remembered how the conversation went, fifteen or so years ago. They had it behind the gym as they always did, between history and fourth-period lunch. Julian hadn’t acted surprised. Raúl always wondered if Julian could sniff out his masculinity or queerness like he suspected the girls at Girl Scouts camp had in elementary school summers, or if he’d just been playing cool. If Julian had been, he’d been a good actor.

Julian didn’t question Raúl, even though he went by Yesenia until his last day in Sedona. It was reciprocal respect, Raúl thought, after the years he’d spent entertaining Julian’s one-sided girlfriends. They’d used each other as receptacles for the scary things they couldn’t confront, as if saying something out loud was as good as letting it go. Nothing came of that particular confession then, but when Raúl and his husband sat together at their dining room table and he told him he wanted to change everything, not just his identity, he was thinking of Julian.

There was a knock at the door. It was Chris, holding what must have been Julian’s phone.

“Julie,” he said, “someone’s calling you.” He held out the phone. “I think it’s important.” It was Ed. He said that one of the lights had been left on after the crew left, one of the exposed bulbs. The sawdust and the stray particles that had been kicked up ignited. It didn’t burn for long, and he said that wet ash was easier to work through than what they’d been digging through that afternoon anyway, and he laughed. He wasn’t on speaker, but the volume was loud enough.

Ed wanted Julian to come by the house and answer some questions for the police. He didn’t think they needed that kid, he said, for insurance purposes. Not yet. They could wait to tell him until the next day.

Raúl wondered if something like this had happened before in his line of work, and what

Julian had done then.

“You should come with me,” he said. “Ed doesn’t have to know I told you.”

Raúl thought that he should feel a kind of loss, as if some part of his mother had burnt away while his back was turned. He didn’t.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I can come.” He felt the instinct, maybe prompted by pity, to reach out to Julian and reassure him—to tell him that Raúl would be alright—but he didn’t.

#

The thing about nighttime in Arizona was that there were few trees to block the moonlight, which, on a night like this, illuminated the soot and peeling siding along the house’s exterior. The lights from the emergency vehicles surrounding the front didn’t hurt, either.

The last time Raúl saw this many cops outside his mother’s house, he’d been a fifteen-year-old girl, painting her toenails on the front porch. Another neighbor had called in a welfare check, and he suspected it was the woman who passed by every other day on her mountain bike, trying to find rotting wood in the fence or missing shingles on the roof. His mother didn’t talk about finances, but he rummaged through the bills at the beginning of each month in the hours between school’s end and closing time at the Safeway. He’d graduated past any sense of pride from the size of their house or the gate at the entrance to their neighborhood when he learned that theirs was one of the three original houses everything else had been built around—never renovated, just left at the edge of the community and, until then, forgotten. He was smart enough to know that the clutter had started seeping past their front door, but he liked to think that the neighbors’ scrutiny came from the months of fees to the homeowner’s association his mother hadn’t paid. The officers didn’t wait for his mother to get home. They

trusted him to relay to her the forty-eight hours they had to make the house presentable. They trusted him to tell her the consequences.

He remembers the feeling of the still-wet black polish sticking to the inside of his socks as he walked the half-mile down the road to the gas station. He'd waited just long enough for the patrol car to turn out of the cul de sac, then took what he could from the funds on top of the fridge and scrambled over the back fence. The handle of the plastic bag, weighed down by Hefty bags and Clorox spray, dug into his fingers as he dialed some boy's number at the pay phone, still legible on the back of his hand in faded Sharpie.

He didn't remember the excuse he'd given the boy or whether it was believable. He remembers his excitement at the prospect of a date, of something unique to the teenage experience, like kissing in the back of a movie theater or in the boy's backseat at the Sonic while a cherry limeade melted in the front. He remembers thinking it was only natural for his mother to get in the way of any form of normalcy he might get a grasp of. He didn't know the boy well enough to tell the truth—he hardly told Julian the truth, and Julian knew everything—so he swallowed the mucus in his throat and made up something that he thought would make the hour between his raincheck and their plans seem reasonable. A family emergency, or something else that wasn't technically a lie. It hadn't mattered. He didn't hear from the boy again afterward, and for months he felt like every single one of his problems stemmed from his mother's inability to keep her shit together.

He spent the next two days meticulously sorting everything in the house into trash bags while his mother stocked groceries. He promised her he wasn't throwing anything away—just putting it in the attic, he said—and so she let him. He wondered which she'd have clung to harder if it came down to it: her child or her stuff.

“I’m so sorry,” Julian said when they first got out of the car, as if Raúl thought he’d personally torched the place.

Raúl didn’t respond. The damage was worse than Ed described over the phone. Above the garage, the windows were shattered and gray, and a haze of ash had been deposited on the front of the house in a wide radius from there. Parts of the roof and walls were caved in, limp and soggy from the fire department's intervention. Raúl wondered if, before the cleaning crew showed up, someone went through the house looking for anyone trapped inside.

Ed and Julian spoke on the other side of the car, not quietly enough.

“What’d you bring him for?” Ed asked. He’d been sleeping. His hair was disheveled, and his voice was gruffer than it had been earlier in the day.

Raúl assumed there was some kind of legal reason why Ed was called rather than him. He didn’t think too hard about it, just listened to the sounds of their arguing.

He’d read somewhere, when he was in New York and trying to think about anything other than the Algebra II he taught to tenth graders, that it only takes 600 degrees Fahrenheit in the right spot to shatter glass. Before his mother’s death, when he thought he wasn’t tethered to anything at all, he’d researched the forest fires in California as if he were considering moving there. In minutes, a house fire could reach temperatures of over a thousand degrees Fahrenheit. He thought the fire would suck the moisture from the air, but it was wet and thick with smoke, even across the street.

In the car on the way over, he hadn’t pictured what a moment in crisis really looked like. The tableau he’d imagined was in slow motion, and everyone in it was on the verge of action. He didn’t think about the neighbors on the street in their night clothes, irritated by the interruption

and worried that something else might catch. Firemen tore through siding with their axes, and behind the shattered window, they rummaged through the damage. Raúl thought they'd be done once the fire subsided.

In the months leading up to his high school graduation, Raúl had often thought of catastrophes that might befall the house. Sometimes the thoughts came as anxieties. He'd lie on an uncovered mattress, swatting at mosquitoes, and imagine a car coming through the side of the house and the brevity of his obituary. Other times, they were aspirations. In the shower, he would think of how soldiers got trench foot during World War I and imagine a weak spot in the beams between him and the room below. He didn't think about fires—they were too possible.

It took a long time for the firefighters to be confident that nothing would rekindle. They'd undone what little work the crew had accomplished in the latter half of the day with their hacking and hosing. The police talked to Ed for a while. Julian had a blanket in the back seat of his car, and he draped it over Raúl even though the heat hadn't waned.

"Hey," Julian said, "are you good?" He sat down beside Raúl on the sidewalk, his legs splayed out into the street.

His hand only hovered over Raúl's shoulder, but Raúl could feel it.

"I think I need something to eat," he said. "Is Patty's still around here? Still 24/7?"

"It is, yeah." Julian's hand fell to the sidewalk between them. "You sure you don't want to go in, check it out?" He scratched his index finger against the sidewalk and his nail left a white trail behind it. "The officers said we can go in for a minute, with supervision."

"It's just a house," Raúl said. "It'll be there in the morning."

His legs weren't as shaky as he expected when he stood up. Raúl looked down at Julian and felt like he hadn't changed very much since the last time they'd seen each other.

##

When he finally saw the house after everything, Raúl wasn't as overwhelmed as he'd anticipated. He'd built up the damage in his head over the past few days and had come to expect piles of mushy ash on the ground in place of the small steps the crew made toward some kind of organization. There was ash, certainly—in a wet layer over most everything in the front room, which the firefighters had torn through. Where things had been navigable before, Raúl's canvas shoes dampened from the old receipts, newspapers, and styrofoam takeout boxes around them. He comprehended everything as garbage, but he still winced each time he felt a squelch under his soles rather than the steady feeling of a hardwood floor.

For so long, everything in this house had been sacred, and the state of disarray after the fire reached Raúl somewhere he thought had been long closed off. He'd spent a lot of time in counseling, or in his ex-husband's arms after a small comment escalated into raised voices over the kitchen island, trying to adjust his acceptable level of clutter to something normal. As desperately as he'd tried to get out of this house in high school, he'd been bestowed with a tolerance for chaos and grime that soured most of his early roommate experiences. The house didn't look fine to him by any means, but after the initial experience of working with the cleaning crew, he was already readjusting to old standards.

Like he was an adept, his body wove through pushed-over towers of soggy boxes and around years-old piles of cat shit that, despite the moisture in the air, were still caked to the floor and walls. The ash still lingering in the air bothered him much more than the smell. He'd forgotten what it was like to spend each day adjusting so fluently to new configurations and additions that it hardly felt limiting at all.

He wasn't walking through the place on a whim or because Julian, who was waiting in the car outside, told him to. He'd been putting it off as long as he could, until the city contacted him about concerns that the house was uninhabitable and told him they might begin condemnation proceedings. Somehow after years of skirting procedures like that, Raúl forgot they were even a possibility. He was here to scope it out and see the real extent of the damage, to see whether he should bother to put up a fight or let everything go.

In the front room was the baby grand, in addition to most of the damage from the actual fire. The ceiling was blistered and black, the windows were boarded up with MDF, and the walls surrounding those had been hacked up by some overeager firefighter. Not to mention the floor, covered in a layer of drywall and ash and mixed with plastic bags and books, which were ruined at that point if they hadn't been already, and which Raúl had pushed off the top of the piano when he first saw it. He remembered a time when all of this would have brought him immense shame—when he could not have imagined Julian coming within six hundred feet of his house. In a new body, a body that had never been in this space or felt marred by its contents each time he left it, he felt detached from everything despite its familiarity. It was as if his mind were no longer a part of him. He was tired.

He had the deep urge to sit on the bench, disregard the wet blackness that would become of his pants, and play. He knew from looking, though, that the piano was either too far gone or needed serious repairs. The cover was warped and the glue was coming undone. He was sure that, were he to remove the lid, he would see at least an inch or two of water sitting at the bottom of the housing. He sat anyway.

When he was a little girl, before his father died and his mother spiraled, Raúl would sit beside his mother while she played songs he could never recognize on the piano. He had his

own—a cheap plastic keyboard that, had he wanted it to, could have played fart sounds rather than notes—and he learned as much as he could with grubby fingers that didn't stretch far enough to reach all the keys. By the time he was big enough, the house was too far gone to bring a piano teacher in, so he taught himself.

His fingers brushed along the keys, hesitant to press down and ruin something under the water. As he imagined his mother playing something that, in hindsight, was probably fairly simple, he remembered why it was his favorite thing to do. When playing, her nervous tics subsided and her hair seemed frazzled by passion rather than something intangible and incomprehensible to him. She was never beautiful, by any means, when she played. Her face would contort into strange expressions and, sometimes, the severity of her posture scared him. Still, they were the only times he could remember seeing her as anything other than shameful.

He laid his cheek against the lid, and he could already smell the fungus growing in the wood grain. The smell of mold had filled the entire house by then, but it was particularly strong when he pressed the side of his nostril against the warped surface. He wondered if it was salvageable. If anything could be salvaged at all.

He thought of Julian and Chris, and Julian's longing for the seaside in particular, and the ways that his new body could and could not show him the things he desired. He thought again of the oppressive heat in Sedona, creeping in through the gaps between MDF and rotting window frame at his side, and how the first thing he felt as he was being wheeled to the car after top surgery was the biting New York breeze against his cheeks—harsh enough to bring him all the way out of the haze of the lingering anesthesia.

He pushed himself from the wood, unsure of its strength and careful not to place all of his weight on it. For the first time since he arrived in Arizona, his dismal surroundings set in. He'd grown up here, in this dark and colorless place, where only now the stench of mold covered the smell of the cat piss dried to the bathroom tiles. It was a wonder the city hadn't condemned the place years ago. It was a wonder his mother's body had ever been found amidst all the trash. He thought of his apartment a few miles away, and how he hadn't spent much time there since meeting Julian again. He was on a monthly contract, not a prolonged lease. He didn't have to stay.

He decided to leave the piano. He knew from the cursory searches he'd done on his laptop, at the foot of Julian's bed, that it would take years to dry out and then more to remove the spores and rust. The rest he wasn't so sure about. Leaving everything to be dealt with by the city felt cruel and unusual. There might have been a way to fix up the house and flip it.

He felt like he needed time from Julian and the idea, which always seemed to creep into Raúl's mind when he was around him, of finally grasping the boyhood he'd missed out on. In that car, bathed in the proximity of Julian's aftershave and eagerness, he was all too willing to stay in Sedona and deal with whatever he had to just to stay close. So he didn't go to the car. He crept around piles of to-go containers and damp, wavy newspapers and into the backyard. The grass came up to his knees, and he didn't think he'd ever seen so much vegetation in the desert. He had the passing thought that the last time the yard had been mowed must have been a few weeks before his high school graduation. Without checking for snakes or ticks or piles of shit hiding in the grass, he lay down in the middle of the small yard, with the grass doing little to block his view of the sun. The air wavered in front of him, and he thought the heat felt so nice he might just take a nap right there—just for a little while.

###

Kinship

There was much about Grandma Caldera's house that reminded us of our novelty. We didn't like the smell. We didn't like the way that the staircase curled, or how we felt as though we were teetering when we looked through its rails. We didn't like the orange pill bottles on her nightstand, the powdery rose of her perfume in the sheets, or the depression on one side of the mattress. We didn't go into Uncle Matt's room. More than once, we weighed the consequences of clinging to the stair handrail or facing the possibility of roaches the size of our hands skittering around the downstairs bathroom, where the tile was broken and they could hide in the shadows behind the toilet. Once, one of us dropped popcorn on the kitchen floor, and the other shooed a roach into our hand while we mindlessly stuffed them into our mouths, not looking away from the Saturday morning cartoons until we felt the unmistakable graze of antennae against our wrists.

Grandma Caldera herself was a reminder of some time eons ago, before men landed on the moon and—in our minds—the Titanic sunk beneath frigid water. Had we been born in Jalisco, we might feel differently, but her rosary and her ceramic gas stove, always smelling like lard and masa and guajillo chiles, felt not quite foreign but like something we had moved on from; something our parents had left behind in favor of Kid Cuisine and the miniature hot dogs in our freezer. It was her dementia, too, though we didn't know it at the time—her mind's deterioration making it that much harder to communicate and the language barrier making it impossible to distinguish between lucidity and dysphasia. We were Willie's kids, too young to

rationalize our fear of her wheelchair or the false pearls that hung, linked together, against her clavicle, and perhaps at that point in her life indistinguishable from everything else around her.

Years after her death, our older sister would tell us in passing of the way Grandma Caldera gave names to the mourning doves in the backyard, which we had always thought were owls who'd come out during the day to greet us. We would sit on the sun-bleached plastic swing in the shape of a tropical bird and think of owls stealing tootsie pops, and Grandma would sit behind the screen door in the kitchen and know what we didn't. We wondered what they'd been mourning back then when the air was crisp, and everything smelled like oak and yarrow. Miranda left before Grandma Caldera died—before we stopped visiting as often—and the ten years she had on us meant she knew a grandmother that we never could.

Things were strange after she died. At the house after the memorial service, they played *A la sombra de mi madre* on the upright piano whose keys we would press mindlessly in the parlor. We held her urn in the car on the way back from the service, hours after we dug earthworms from the soil where our great-grandparents were buried. We were afraid of spilling her and getting some of her stuck under our fingernails with the rest of the dirt. Later, when we saw the woman on TLC who compulsively ate her husband's remains, we would think of the only time we'd been close enough to taste someone.

#

Aunt Carmen tried to keep grandma's spirit alive when the only ones left in the house were Uncle Matt and our grandfather, who only ever grunted and felt fragile under our touch. She got into Native American history in Idaho, and we never knew if we were Native Mexicans or if our ancestors came from Idaho or what. She said she learned it for Grandma Caldera, along with her girl power mantra, but we called her crazy behind her back. We were young enough then to think

that we knew better than she did and to hold tight to anything and everything that affirmed that belief. When she would show us photos of our grandma, as a girl with her long braids, and tell us how pretty we would become and how far the line of beautiful Caldera women went back, we thought of two things.

Firstly, we knew that our dad was adopted. He'd told us after grandma passed that her stories about his birth in Guatemala or Guadalajara or on the couch we were sitting on were all symptoms of her delusion. He said that he'd always been told that he was born somewhere unspecified in México, to an old family friend trying to escape abuse. He'd been passed off as grandma's own, he'd said, which is why he was ten years younger than everyone else and he never spoke Spanish, and it's why, we were told, he had to repeat second-grade math two times. Secondly, the pictures were in color, and we were pretty sure that grandma was that young long before that technology was developed.

We came to the conclusion that the pictures were of Aunt Carmen around the time that she brought us up to Idaho for a few weeks in the dead of winter. We'd had to skip our middle school finals and the science fair, but in our hazy recollections, we'd always liked her.

"You two," she'd say while she made one of the many variations of potato soup we'd eat over that break. "Were the only ones who supported me after *abuela* died. That's what you call girl power."

She painted the scene like this: leading up to grandma's death, we were the only ones who talked to her in the hospice. She'd come all the way down from Idaho and no one even offered her a room. When grandma died, we each picked a leg of hers to cling to until she left.

We'd cried, she said, when we had to go back to the suburbs with our parents and out of her loving arms.

She also told us about why we were up there. She'd never liked our mother, she said. The fact that she left two beautiful baby girls, she'd said, was proof that some people just weren't meant to be mothers. That some people, who couldn't have babies (something we'd understand later, she'd say) should have been able to trade places with people like Carrie.

"Your poor father," she'd say as she swiped VapoRub along our collarbones and a little farther down our chests than we'd have liked. "He just had to send you up here. He's too depressed without her."

We didn't know which "her" Aunt Carmen meant, and we didn't ask.

Later, when our mom successfully bargained with her new husband for four and a half weeks with us in Indiana, we would try to listen to her over our hair, whipping around us in the back of her new, red Mercedes.

"Girl power, my ass," she said, unbothered by her curls, which flew effortlessly behind her. "Carmen thought Gloria's death would ruin our trip to Nashville."

We didn't know what that meant. In the chaos of whistling wind and *Little Red Corvette*, what actual memories we had of that time eluded us. We forgot the look on dad's face when the woman at the front desk in the hospice told him grandma's room was empty. We forgot what Aunt Carmen's argument was when mom brought up Uncle Matt and his condition and grandpa's new girlfriend and their duplex in the historical district. Maybe we just didn't listen when she tried to explain why she waited to tell us.

One of us got bronchitis that winter. Aunt Carmen never took us to see anyone professional, so we didn't know if it was because of the elevation or something worse, just that it

didn't get better. For nights on end, we'd sleep with the humidifier sputtering in the corner of a room that wasn't meant for us, until we figured out that we could turn it off shortly after the hallway lights dimmed and turn it back on when the sun rose.

When Christmas came around, one of us had infected the other, and we complained among our Kleenex that the sixteen Hanukkah gifts between the two of us, including disposable razors and six-packs of Mickey Mouse panties, did not amount to one good Christmas present. We complained—never to her face—about her incomprehensible need for attention. She made her husband, a good Catholic boy from the Valley, move to Idaho and convert to Judaism so that she, a good Catholic girl from San Antonio, could convert through him and study the *Kootenai* tribe, who were, notably, not Jewish. We tried to shock one another with tales of her outlandishness. She made him get a circumcision at forty-five, we'd say. She wanted him to go through with the *bris*, too, but he'd put his foot down.

She didn't want to bother our dad by asking for our insurance, we suspected, because she took us up into the mountains instead. There was no signal on the way up, but we didn't want to know how far below us the closest town was, so we looked at useless screens and one another intermittently. The air had been tight in our chests since we landed in Idaho, and it only tightened further up there. It nauseated us. We rallied bouts of coughing back and forth and managed to keep it from escalating because we didn't want to roll the windows down.

The cabin she took us to looked old enough that it shouldn't have had insulation, but the fireplace warmed us while we waited for our turns to be cleansed. A large and wrinkled man in hides and beads held a turkey feather and a metal bowl of what we thought was blood until it was doused over our heads. We were sheltered enough, then, to wonder whether the red wine would

soak through our pores and make us tipsy. It didn't, and neither the wine nor the sage, burnt around us and smudged into our temples, alleviated our symptoms. By the ride home, we felt like rodents with electrodes stuck to our chests. Whether Aunt Carmen was experimenting on how many variations of potato scramble a human could subsist on or how long someone could be toyed with without catching on, we weren't sure.

When our lungs cleared up after an indefinite amount of time in that humid room, we underwent more experiments. These later ones must have been sociological—tests of how efficiently our suburban parents instilled in us any kind of culture. We were taken to Carmen's friends' houses, where we were interrogated on our seventh-grade Spanish skills in rapid-fire dialects we couldn't understand and the masa, which fell apart in our hands under the weight of the filling, had been ground by hand.

When we returned to Aunt Carmen's guest room, the paper *alebrijes* hanging over our heads did little to comfort us. They reminded us of the emaciated Jesus that hung from the trim of Grandma Caldera's bay window, head hung too low to greet us as we approached from the street. We weren't used to the room at night without the raspy puffs of the humidifier. We told one another in hushed tones that the creatures must have been Uncle Fred's idea, and that we should be grateful that no totem poles or dreamcatchers surrounded us. Dreamcatchers, we knew, would have been comfortably removed from what we should have known.

#

Our names were Emiliana and Abigail. Each named after a great-aunt we never knew, we would trade every once in a while to trick substitute teachers or to feel like we had shed our skins. For a long time, we were Emmy and Abby, and we were fine.

Aunt Carmen didn't like the nicknames. We were too hard to tell apart as it was, she claimed, with the matching wardrobes that, over the course of our stay, she would replace bit by bit. She said our names slowly and often, dragging out the vowels in *Emiliana* and stressing the consonants in *Abigail* enough that, sometimes, she'd spit a little on the *b*. She picked and chose when to be Latina, and whenever we referred to Grandma Caldera, she would criticize our hesitation to say *abuela*. We would practice in the mirror together, joking at first, repeating *Emiliana* and *abuela* and *mis sobrinas* with increasing theatrics. We stretched our mouths and clasped at our necks and collars, and briefly, despite the difference in our blood, we felt that we resembled those photos of Caldera women.

It was when we came back to the suburbs that we realized the difference between *Emiliana Luisa Caldera* and *Abby C.* There were four Abbys in our seventh-grade class, and over the summer another moved into town. There was something about *Emiliana* that made *Abigail* feel like it had been plucked from a textbook about the founding fathers or the puritans. It felt whiter than our skin, which browned rather than gilded in the sun. It was whiter than our arms, whose profuse hair made us wear long sleeves in the hottest months and got us sent to the counselor's office, individually, after one of the cuter boys told the school we were hiding scars. It was whiter than *Caldera*.

We blamed the very source of our whiteness. Looking back on it, it's unclear what we were condemning our mother for. Coercing our poor, puppy-dog father into letting her name one of her own daughters, maybe. For stripping one of her daughters of the opportunity to claim exoticism. On our cul de sac, in our smothering homogeneity, we failed to consider the real privilege of blending in with everyone around us—the power of *Abigail*.

Whiteness represented everything we couldn't have and everything we couldn't remove ourselves from: the girls with long, milky legs who played volleyball and invited us to their Mormon wards; the boys who were nice to us because we let them look over our shoulders on quizzes, and who gave us cafeteria steak fingers in exchange for our Kid Cuisines but wouldn't give us discounts on the disposable vapes they peddled for their older brothers; our mother, in upstate New York by then and only getting further; some part of ourselves. For these reasons, we kept quiet about our theatrics in Aunt Carmen's bathroom. We pretended that she was a small and silly woman whose cultural complexities hadn't gotten under our skin.

It was harder to pretend when, in high school, we spent afternoons at Grandma Caldera's house, now Uncle Matt's, and tried together to decipher his speech through the impediment. Each time he asked our names again, we'd wonder how long he'd lain in the grass on the side of the road before someone found him. The motorcycle stayed in the detached garage under a tarp, and some days he would take us to look at her, but he drove an old truck then and on days when our father was stuck at work, he picked us up.

Early in our adolescence, our dad showed us photos of his three elder siblings when they were teenagers and he'd been entering elementary school. Their denim and leather, patched with Harley-Davidson iconography, were incongruent with the shrunken, weathered people we knew. He told us stories of Uncle Matt, who went by Mateo then and had a daughter he didn't know by the time he should have been taking his SATs. Mateo, who had been a middle child until he was ten and continued to act like one until a pick-up truck made him incapable of doing much of anything when he was thirty-four. He was fifty-seven when he came to encompass everything we knew about the Hispanic side of our family.

As fragmented as it was, his portrayal remained more complete than our dad's whitewashed and hazy memories or Aunt Carmen's *Kootenais*. He'd suffered memory loss after the accident, well before we were born. He could remember, vaguely, that Willie had two daughters, and he could remember where he was going when he picked us up if we called him beforehand, but we never made it all the way to his long-term memory. On days when the sun swam past the tarped bikes in the garage to sting our eyes like chlorine, when we sat in chairs twice as old as us and soaked with tar from the generations of smokers who'd sat before us, he told us what remained.

"Three hours," he'd say, "is as far as Valerie got." He spoke of his daughter, grown now. She'd moved to the Valley years ago, much further than three hours away by car.

In the heat, it was harder to understand him. Our brains toggled between regulating the temperature of our bodies and melding his stutter or unpacking the way his voice came out muffled without anything tangible to dampen it.

Most of the time he would talk about family. He'd bring up how our dad, by the end of the fifth grade, was already taller than him by a head, and how despite Willie's inferior facial hair, most of the women he brought home were charmed by his little brother. He'd talk about Aunt Carmen in ways we could not fathom—the men she brought home, unaware of each other, who she humored until they bought her a ring. It was his job, he said, to keep them out of the house afterward. The life he painted was warm and colorful. We couldn't help but feel that our own had been marred by something. The availability of cartoons every day of the week, maybe. The lack of warm pozole on the stove.

It was always disenchanting, returning from Uncle Matt's house to ours. The drives home, too, in our dad's truck—an old enough model that we had to listen to the stuck Eagles CD on repeat but not enough to make us feel like we were a part of something—brought us down from a high we could hardly explain. The difference between the passenger-seat view of the streets leading up to Matt's house and ours was palpable. On E Dukes Pkwy, corn popper push toys faded by the sun lay abandoned in the street gutters. On Jolly Pine Dr, cars drove slowly so the kids, riding their bikes in circles or making chalk art at the end of the cul de sac, could run to the safety of the driveway, where their parents waited with Capri Suns. On E Dukes, off one of the busiest streets in the city, shingles threatened to let go and disappear into knee-high weeds. Past forks upon forks of suburban streets, deep in the neighborhood, Jolly Pine was lousy with sweat-slicked fathers mowing their front lawns or replacing the grass with mulch and gravel.

We wondered what the difference was, for us to be here and Uncle Matt to be there. Our dad's migration was incompatible with the meek attitude we used to our advantage in those days. We wondered what he'd done to land our mother and her social stratum. We didn't ask. We weren't grateful, either. Like Aunt Carmen, though we hadn't heard from her in the years since our excursion into the mountains, we became mildly obsessed with the shoes we could not fill. We asked for a dual *quinceañera* four months before our fifteenth birthday, as if our father could pull off something so grand, even without the fourteen-year-and-eight-month setback. On the weekends, we sweated in the stalls at the flea market, bobbing the heads of wooden turtle figurines and rummaging through *huipil* blouses with embroidered flowers across the chests. Sometimes, we'd wander the market separately, and once, we both came back with *lotería* earrings in the same design—number forty-one, *la rosa*. We pretended we thought it was a sign of a sisterly connection. We rarely wore them.

During this time, we saw little of our grandpa, though he was in the house each afternoon we spent with Uncle Matt, watching the news and whatever came on after it. We were never sure how lucid he really was, mostly because he was hard of hearing, and yelling at a feeble old man made us uncomfortable. When he was in the house, we all talked less.

Once, before being at the house became a logistical necessity, we asked our dad why we always met Uncle Matt at Luby's or the Imperial Garden Chinese Restaurant. He'd said something about Matt needing a reason to get out of the house. What about grandpa, we'd asked, and he'd said that grandpa could take care of himself fine. It was later, in the garage, that we understood why grandpa hadn't been living in the house while Grandma Caldera was alive.

"It only took one time for Willie," Uncle Matt said. He'd stopped drinking years before we were born, and every time we saw him, he was holding a glass bottle of orange soda. "before he stopped acting up." He peeled the label off of the bottle with the back of his thumb. "Didn't matter I was ten years older, I didn't learn."

We rarely interrupted Uncle Matt's stories, and we didn't then, either. All of the focus in the room was tethered to the pills of damp paper falling into his lap.

"He's weak now," Uncle Matt said. "Gotta take care of him."

It wasn't the time to question why, out of all the siblings, Matt had been considered the most capable of that. We assumed he was the only one willing. We'd never considered the idea of our sixties, much less of spending them helping our parents in and out of bed, or of thinking all the while, we supposed, that we were in our thirties and had plenty of time to do everything else later. After that, we felt the frailty of grandpa's shoulder blades each time we hugged him goodbye. We imagined what they must have felt like under a layer of U.S. Army-honed muscle.

What they must have looked like in use.

#

We spent the day Aunt Carmen came into town at the market, showing our friends corn husk dolls and sifting through disorganized shelves of VHS tapes. We had friends all throughout our lives, but they never stuck around the way we did. They'd have rather been at the mall, breathing in fumes at Hollister or making eyes at the guy who ran the Wetzels Pretzels stand. We felt like we were broadening their horizons. They were humoring us. When our dad called us, early, from the parking lot, no one was particularly distraught.

Dad's shifts at work were more standard at that time, which meant we weren't standing at the transit center in the dark or the cold or, God forbid, the heat and calling Uncle Matt as much. A few weeks into the new schedule, we wondered if he missed us or felt abandoned in some way. We thought of him as we thought of our dad most of the time—like a scraggly little dog, maybe with a bite taken out of its ear or mange. We had to remind ourselves that he wouldn't remember the tradition we'd established. In the time we'd typically spend listening or relistening to his stories, we texted boys and girls and tried to watch telenovelas, though they were rarely subtitled in English.

That day was the first time we remember seeing our dad in the house since Grandma Caldera died. Surely there were other times, but nothing was as remarkable as his calloused hand on the lion's-head knocker or the way he sat perched on the edge of a chair meant for lounging, the beat of his knee against his palm arrhythmic. We might have remembered more had it not been for Aunt Carmen, fluttering around the house in a way she never had in Idaho and embracing our father as if they'd spoken more than once since we'd arrived in the airport more

than four years earlier. It became immediately clear how much more comfortable we were in the house they'd grown up in.

Carmen was almost all smiles. We'd grown taller than her by more than a head, and we'd learned to wash our hair regularly in the time since we'd seen her. She hugged us both at the same time and, from the stiff way she held herself, we got the impression that she thought it was our fault we hadn't kept in touch. We wanted to bring up a documentary she'd been talking about while we were up in Idaho, one that she promised we could star in, but we didn't think she'd see the humor in our asking. We'd shown up while she was making lunch for grandpa and Uncle Matt, and she made us sit in the front room with our dad and wait for her to be done, though she pointedly let us know she hadn't made enough for everyone. The sounds of her in the kitchen drowned out the TV, and the three of us sat together for a good forty-five minutes listening to what could have been the most frantic meal made on that stove. In all that time, we didn't see Uncle Matt or grandpa, and we didn't think to wander the house looking for them.

Carmen served them lunch in the room upstairs. It had been Grandma Caldera's room when she was alive and grandpa was living with a woman named Rosa, who we'd met once and then never heard about again. Had we not seen the deep bruising along his arm and chest, we might have felt indignation on Grandma Caldera's behalf to see him on her side of the bed, lying where her body had once made depressions in the mattress, which, we were sure, had not been replaced. The room hadn't changed very much at all, though grandpa's wife beaters hung on the radiator under the window. Uncle Matt sat beside a tray next to the bed, and when Aunt Carmen set two bowls of soup on the tray, we got the distinct image of an orderly in a hospital, intruding on some final moments.

Despite his bruising and although the reverent tone in the room indicated otherwise, it didn't seem like grandpa's time to go. He still had the same glassy look on his face, as if he saw something we didn't. They'd moved the TV onto the vanity—one of the few changes to the room—and grandpa watched the news there, too. Had we ever heard him speak unprompted, we might have been offended or concerned when he didn't greet us or our dad. Instead, everything felt the same. We wouldn't have said it, but we didn't understand what made this situation dire enough to warrant Aunt Carmen's travel.

Although it had been years by that point, Aunt Carmen's behavior surprised us. Our twelve-year-old minds, when prompted to imagine her as a caretaker, would have conjured images of the toughest love imaginable. We would have felt the reverberations of her inflexible requests of us—to fetch more water, to prep the bandages, to put a pot on the stove for the potatoes to boil—in our still-growing bones. At the very least, we hadn't received the same cooing or wavering touches when we had bronchitis, and it seemed that even if we hadn't grown taller than her, Carmen had shrunk since we last saw her. She'd always been a hefty woman and continued to be, and yet she flitted around us to adjust grandpa's sheets or find the best angle from which to feed him. To our further surprise, she didn't banish us from the room for more space. We stood at the doorway like voyeurs.

At dinner, which we ate on a dining table whose contents had to be moved to the parlor, we tried not to let our questions arise from us like overeager fish. As fascinating as her docility was, we didn't want to be around for it. We felt wet feathers brushing the backs of our necks and itches in our throats when we looked at her, and when she kept her head down, we felt something akin to tenderness. Although our grandpa stayed upstairs in the blue glow of the television,

eating his food on a bed tray like he was in the hospital, his presence was felt at the table that night amidst the clattering of forks on plates and the lack of any conversation at all.

It was only once Aunt Carmen started doing the dishes on her own that we got up the nerve to ask her. At one point while we stayed with her, she made us sort through an entire year's worth of receipts for her taxes, and after every meal she made us, we'd washed the dishes by hand. We knew, logistically, why she'd had to come down. It was obvious that Uncle Matt couldn't take care of grandpa, and our dad was working seven days a week at the time. Our assumption was that there were resentments still lingering from Grandma Caldera's death that were keeping her quiet. Though we hadn't felt any kind of hostility from our dad and had in fact felt that he, too, was more reserved and quieter than usual, we didn't think that our grandpa held any sort of power in his state, and we couldn't fathom that a selectively mute and weathered elderly man could be threatening to anyone. Despite her behavior, we waited for the tiger to strike at us once our dad was out of earshot. We asked her, like we were real adults, if this was once again about our grubby child hands against her calves or our father's distress.

No tiger slunk out from any crouch, nor did she retreat further into her shell. Some of her bite remained, but she'd either aged more than we had, or she'd lost her energy somewhere up in Idaho. She didn't like that we asked, and we suspect that she thought she was more subtle than she was. We wanted to ask her about girl power, about whether she still believed in it or if she reserved that for interactions with her husband and other non-Caldera men she didn't respect, but we knew without consulting one another that there would be no fun in the ensuing argument. We still had our limits. In truth, we didn't care about Aunt Carmen enough to press her. Her presence shifted the dynamic in the house, but we spent less time there out of necessity, anyways, and we

could afford to ignore it. We let her be after that night and until grandpa healed enough for her to leave.

We'd assumed that the adoration we'd developed in that house would come back once she left. It didn't. It wasn't that Uncle Matt's stories changed, but they'd taken on a different hue in the context of Aunt Carmen's time here. We knew that his perspective was limited, but we couldn't help but analyze the tapestry made by the stories once they were pieced together. Aunt Carmen had no ambitions, according to whatever Uncle Matt had seen. She was beautiful, certainly, but beyond passing off Grandma Caldera's food for her own to the men who loitered around the house and needing their eldest brother, our Uncle Armando, to pass himself off as her guardian after she shoplifted bright red lipstick from the mall, she had no great impact on anything that happened in Uncle Matt's youth. Grandma Caldera had perhaps the most impact on his youth other than grandpa. However, all we knew about her was that she had the best cooking out of anyone he knew, and her hugs were enough to warm him up on the rare occasions that it got cold this far south. We learned more about what she was like before her dementia from our sister before she left.

We hadn't been unaware of the complexity of Uncle Matt's condition at any point, but it became abundantly clear to us not because of the redaction of our lives from his mind, but of his mother's illness. He never learned, we realized, how she came to resemble him. We weren't entirely sure how his memory worked, because some things made it through. He knew that she was gone. Maybe he knew because grandpa had set up camp in her old room, just down the hall from his. Maybe it took constant reminding.

We suspected this was the case when we finally gathered the courage to see his room. Something about the idea of it alone scared us, as if we were expecting to walk into the

unchanged room of a dead child. It was unchanged, for the most part. A San Marcos *cobija* covered the far side of the wall so that, upon entering the room, visitors were met with the fierce gaze of a leopard with headlights and handlebars flanking its right side. The windows were covered. Like everything else in Uncle Matt's life, the room felt like an altar to Harley-Davidson and, to a lesser extent, AC/DC. Everything was black or burnt orange or engulfed in flame. We imagined waking up each morning in his bed, surrounded by tokens of a zeitgeist we could never embody again. We wondered, too, if our dad had ever shared the room with him. There were only two bedrooms in the house, and although they weren't close in age, we'd gotten the impression that Uncle Matt never left. We didn't consider the timeline or think about whether Grandma Caldera had taken him in after his accident. We couldn't imagine her capable of something so normal.

Despite the sense of euphoria we tried to cling to and our reluctance to find anything redeeming about Aunt Carmen, we felt our admiration for the life on E Dukes Pkwy slipping from us. The difference between her demeanor in the home she'd been raised in and in the home she'd somehow managed to make for herself was enough to make clear to us that even if we hadn't inherited Whiteness from our mother, we could never assimilate into the mirage we'd created.

#

We discovered the power of *Abigail* the summer before college. We'd gotten into different schools, and we were trying to come to terms with what that would mean for us in the fall. We tried to think of who we would be once we'd reinvented ourselves, unattached from twinship. For much of the year preceding that summer, we'd been wandering aimlessly around one

another, as if we'd already lost each other or been lost. It was *Abigail* that gave us direction. In preparation for one of us leaving the state, we spent the summer going on road trips out to the school and the areas surrounding it. We'd jointly received a car for our 17th birthday, and it was unspoken but known that only one of us would need it come August, so the other drove it around the country for three straight months. In New Mexico, where the school was, we grew ten degrees lighter by comparison alone. Our voices, devoid of accents until we tried speaking Spanish, outed us as mixed or something even uglier. It was a different kind of otherness. It was comfortable.

It may have been the Texas plates on our Kia Rio or the way our legs looked creamy coming out from cowgirl boots we'd bought at the market, but men treated us markedly differently than they had at home. They slathered on their accents before reading our orders back to us and embodied *machismo* in a way unlike any of the men in San Antonio had ever tried. We tried to chalk it up to being young and looking lost, but that didn't make us feel powerful. We felt exotic in a good way, in the mail-order bride way as opposed to the way boys back home didn't even consider us an option. We'd joked, early in high school, that they misunderstood basic biology. That they thought, on a molecular level, they were only compatible with blondes. Here maybe they didn't know if we were biocompatible, but they wanted to find out. We never stayed too long in one place, not because we wanted to explore or because the attention made us feel unsafe, but because we couldn't afford hotel rates and preferred sleeping at rest stops rather than in town. We browsed the spinning racks of cut-off shorts at the front of K-Mart's and plucked at the tabloids near the registers at Fiesta and we felt a certain kind of power in the knowledge that months from now, we'd be sitting in lecture halls and reading British literature and solving Punnett squares. Maybe it wasn't power, but it was certainly freedom. We played

Miley Cyrus and Tijuana No! off of the same playlist and when we looked at the roads in front of us, we thought of our aunt, making herself potato soup and trying to fit into holes that weren't made for her.

We didn't often talk, during those months. Our trips felt more primal—like we'd been released after eighteen years of watching and waiting for something we couldn't identify. Sometimes, though, curled up in the front seats of the Rio, our identical hands meeting at the fingertips over the center console, we caught our breath. We talked about the things we would and would not miss. We talked about the mourning doves in Uncle Matt's backyard, who acted as a soundscape for his long and repetitive stories, and who stayed even after Grandma Caldera didn't. We talked about Aunt Carmen, of course we did, but never about what was at the forefront of both of our minds. We talked about what she was going to do for Rosh Hashanah, and whether she even celebrated it anymore. We talked about what she might have been doing for the tribes up there now or if, after we saw her last, we would ever hear her preach about girl power again.

On our last trip, in late August, we were far enough south that it didn't matter that the days were getting shorter. It felt like mid-June, and if we turned our heads back and exposed our necks to the sun, we could pretend we feared burning. The weather and the shallow horizon felt static, but we knew things were shifting. We could feel it in the way the odometer took its time turning over and over. The dust that billowed around us on those wide, flat roads, getting into the car because we liked the windows down, carried something new with it, too. It settled into our lungs, and we felt it when we breathed too deeply, and we were too swept up in the driving, the endless driving, to wonder what else we carried within us.

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