Volcanoes & Other Yards

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Volcanoes & Other Yards

Rebeca Flores

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Let us gather in a flourishing way
en la luz y en la carne of our heart to toil
tranquilo in fields of blossoms
juntos to stretch los brazos
tranquilos with the rain en la mañana
temprana estrella on our forehead
cielo de calor and wisdom to meet us
where we toil siempre
in the garden of our struggle and joy

Juan
Felipe
Herrera
My Pops said, “I needed a job.”
I thought I believed him.

Kendrick
Lamar
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yo! There’s a Volcano in The Backyard</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My Country Gassed Children</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warehouse Party</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roadside Memorial</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Drive Thru and The Taco Truck</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Uninvited Guest</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pungency</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zapatos/Shoes</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uprooted</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyday Going into a Pharmacy</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare Line</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Flyer</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When You Come to Your Resting Place</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abstract

*Volcanoes & Other Yards* is a collection of short stories set in the yards of California, Mexico, and El Salvador. Characters see the manifestations of their labor through imagination and purposeful acts of play. Working class characters are pushed to eruptions that make them question what it means to witness racism, capitalism, and noble acts of good. They undergo solitude, loss of home, and welfare lines, and they witness their country gas children, government intrusions, and grief. To reconcile with their generational trauma, they must encounter land and labor. The collection explores the idea of an imaginary volcano to bring forth the concept that land is inherited through memory.
Preface: On writing a collection of short stories

June 7, 1494, Spain and Portugal divide the New World (Native people and sacred homelands) between themselves. This will be known as the Treaty of Tordesillas and the result is an infinite reverberation of Indigenous and Mesoamerican slaughter. I set out to write stories that offered me a reconciliation to this fact. My characters are descendants of the slaughtered ancestors, they’re Mexican American and Central American, they’re also janitors, field workers, construction workers, children playing in yards, youth racing cars, office workers, graffiti artists, detained people, people without homes, people mourning the deaths of their family members, daughters and their fathers, daughters and mothers, and curanderas/healers. I chose working class people as characters who grapple with the worth of their own labor to think about the ways in which Indigenous and Mesoamerican descendants are born directly into labor. This has created people whose work and lives are exploited because of labor. I wrote this collection to question the ways that that feeling of commitment to labor is reinforced into our imaginations.

In a New Yorker article about novelist Haruki Murakami entitled Becoming Japanese, Murakami is quoted, “I don’t want to know the facts. I’m only interested in the effect my blocked memory has on my imagination.” I took this to mean that Murakami’s memory always remains blocked, as in he creates his stories as a separate limb from fact. This idea of fiction as an imaginary limb was helpful for me as a way to think about my characters. In my stories I tried to incorporate what Murakami said he did not care for. I define the “fact” as the present reality, our “blocked memory” as the
things we are not keen to see, our “imagination” as the manifestation of what we should invest in, and the “effect” as the play which comes out of our manifestations.

In *The Uninvited Guest*, a young girl from the Central Valley is traveling with her mother to attend a wedding in Mexico—this is the present reality, the facts. The blocked memory is what the young girl isn’t thinking about, the fact that her family is on the verge of losing their home in California, and at the same time her mother isn’t thinking about the fact that her own father abandoned a child and murdered the child’s mother. The effect is what not thinking about these things does to the imagination—how the characters reconcile the calamity that they’d rather not think about that leads them to manifest a future change in reality. In this story, it is the mother’s imagination of a reconciled family that transforms her own family, and it is the narrator’s imagination of home—that she learns about necessary good vs. the handling of damage. The young girl watering is a metaphor for the mother pouring into a transformation. For this story, first-person point of view allowed me to create the unfolding in the story and within the mind of the character.

In *Everyday Going into The Pharmacy*, a young girl goes into a store with her father, and she translates for her father, all the while enduring casual racism. My use of third-person in this story allowed me to examine the effects of one interaction on different characters, but primarily the young girl. The blocked memory in this story is the racism unfolding within the young girl’s eyes, the effect is the erasure of her father’s needs, and her imagination lands on assimilation in the form of a Barbie. I chose young girls as characters because I needed witnesses for the world that is unfolding before them. A kind and noble world, but also a racist and unjust world, but no matter their
homeland, either American or Mexican-Salvadoran, both of these characters understand a sense of duty, or what I would call a necessary good.

Murakami has been a great influence in my work because I admire his ability to cast a net in a story and remove all the noise—or what he would call facts—of the world and remain wide until the very end. He designs this wideness in his stories not for the effect of resolution but for the feeling the reader has while reading, wherever that feeling may lead. In his short story, *Kino* Murakami tells us very few facts: Kino has left his wife, buys a bar, and then he leaves the bar. Murakami lets the language guide the reader through the mystery of Kino’s solace in flight. Murakami’s large play of emotion gave me the permission I needed to tell stories that don’t end in resolution but on the emotion the character is experiencing. The first story in the collection, *Yo! There’s a Volcano in The Backyard*, is a story of an early adult homeless boy in search of an imaginary volcano. I designed *Yo!* to be about the emotion Chicle experiences while on his quest instead of him physically encountering a “real” volcano. The first-person point of view helped me lean into the sense of wonder that exists within the narrator’s own imagination and solitude. Chicle’s imagination is what prompts his life to change, his imagination is his action and his understanding of the world. First-person allowed me to get as close as possible to this inner process so that what is examined is not *his* actions but the outside force that is trying to push him out of his own truth. I designed the collection to begin with a character who is without a home to bring forth the underlining reality that exists for descendants of Mesoamerica who live with and without a sense of home or hogar. The volcano in the story is also the unstable relationship he has with his brother that is about to erupt. I chose the volcano as my
main symbol because of its ability to create land. When Chicle’s brother Diego erupts, he sets in motion land being formed. My intent for Yo! is to question what solitude does to an imagined state of existing in a world that discourages engagement in play unless it can be used for profit.

This is the beginning: (Slaughter = labor), the present and imagination raised to the power of infinity \( \omega = \omega \). Gabriel García Márquez wrote a novel about how solitude is not the madness from self but the consequence of people. How much of the natural world requires some level of solitude? When Spain and Portugal divided Indigenous people and sacred homelands between themselves, they created the exploitation of land for profit and made slaves of people who once cared for the land. Fleeing war, sickness, rape, and genocide, the Mesoamerican people fled from their sacred lands. Now descendants of Mesoamerican people are without equity on the land they still care for. A grape field is a long row of solace, and it is also an alleyway into the mind of the person who cares for the fruit on the land. Yet from labor, yards are made, space is made, play is created in spite of labor and because of labor. I want to show working people finding joy and purpose through play. It is my belief that play is so essential to who we are as human beings, and we don’t always see the different manifestations of play because of the labor that is forced upon brown communities since 1494.

To examine these moments of play, I used the point of view of the young, who engage in play out of necessity, to think about the ways in which imagination takes root. This collection spends a lot of time in yards, parks, front lawns, and backyards as a link to the natural world and acknowledgement of how characters feel a yearning for homeland and through yards the characters are able to create reclamation. If our human
connection to home never leaves us and always remains a part of who we are and even frames how we choose to raise our children, then our children inherit homeland through memory. In order to balance labor with play, I used the idea of assemblage to gather characters whose labor is exploited to create a collective consciousness and then assembled their imaginations to create collective memory. In visual art Assemblage is defined as an artistic medium that consists of three-dimensional elements, textures, found objects, in collage. This idea of gathering was introduced to me by poet Juan Felipe Herrera in his poetry collection Notes on The Assemblage, where he explores the beginnings of imagination, pain, endings—life. It’s all included. Everything remains and goes.

By using an omniscient point of view in Welfare Line and My Country Gassed Children, I move the reader through the perspectives of different characters to enter the collective consciousness of people in a world designed to trap them into labor. I created a structure that resembled the machine of capitalism to actively give the machine the bodies it needs to oppress while using the point of view of the bodies as witnesses to the machine’s process. In Welfare Line, the reader is witnessing the codependency the machine relies on. It shows the people the machine is exploiting while perpetuating the same labor that is insufficient for the demands of the machine. In My Country Gassed Children, the reader witnesses a tactic used by capitalists (the machine) to enact genocide on the same people it exploits. By using a shifting close third-person, I was also able to create little alleyways into the minds of the witnesses to show the active effect of how collective memory is formed. I designed the point of view in these stories to show flashes of substance of who the characters are, to make the reader aware of the
catastrophe that is unfolding, occurring, because once the machine is in motion it survives off the pain of people, it’s a parasite. I want the reader to think about how they might be witnessing either the exploitation of their own labor or the exploitation of other people’s labor.

I designed the final story, When You Come to Your Resting Place, to mirror Workers, to create balance and launch the reader into the idea of finding rest. In Workers a daughter collects artifacts from the dead. In When You Come to Your Resting Place, a daughter who is dead is taken on a journey to home, to place, just like the artifacts. I start the collection with a grand feeling of possibility and then I move from the imaginary volcano of Yo! There’s a Volcano in The Backyard to the real volcano of the final story. In my endings, to the best of my ability, I tried to create the semblance of rest: Chicle burning his connection to his brother, Miguel looking to the sun through a gingko, a field worker picking a cherry to eat, a mother receiving citizenship, a father laying his daughter to rest. The characters in this collection have been removed from land and because of this they’re disenfranchised people in search of rest. I assembled yards as a connection to homeland, young characters as an alleyway to imagination, mothers and daughters as stand-ins for the active battle between the homeland and American land, the machine (capitalism) to remind the reader of the feeding line to labor, I used fathers and daughters to give offerings to the dead and to honor the dead, and finally, volcanos, which create land.

I’m a child of indigenous immigrants who belong to two different countries from the same colonizer. I wanted to create my own land to which I could belong. I created lives that are pushed to eruptions to give the descendants of Mesoamerica a land not
from slaughter but born out of imagination. I contrasted the imaginary land with the assemblage of yards to create rhythm and variation between what can be created and what can be imagined. If the idea is that land is inherited through memory, through the ongoing combination of work and play, I want to give ideas and people a chance to land, a place to call home, and a place to reconcile. I’d like to believe that one day our lives will not be measured by the expectation of labor but by what can be imagined and what I imagine is land and rest for everyone.
Yo! There’s a Volcano in The Backyard

I want to drain a volcano. It’s my thought before my stomach starts its hourly rumble for food. I maulder around my tent and follow my idea, but I feel the thick heat from the outside world seeping in through the plastic. The tiny battery-operated fan I traded for at a garage sale circulates hot air and I throw myself unto a weighted sheet. When I was at the sale the owner swore to me the fan was alright. More than alright. So alright that it could make my space feel like the old Antarctica. When I asked her what the old Antarctica was, she said, “pre-melting times.” I still don’t really know what that means. She lied and hustled me out of a nice vase I stole from another garage sale.

I sprawl. My hair sticking to my neck. The blanket I haven’t washed since last December starts to share its sour stench with my shirt. My brother Diego, familia’s favorite, reminds me that stepping out outside is necessary.

I call him. He stopped answering fast about two years ago. He grunts as his hello.

I tell him, “I’m going to drain a volcano.”
“Are you high again?” he asks, his voice clear and stern.
“A little.” I push sticky hair out of my face. The oil leaves residue on my fingers.
“Listen. A volcano.”
“It’s too hot. I don’t care. We’ve been over this.” I hear his voice loud in my ear.
“You can’t drain landmarks.”
I wonder, is his voice eager to squeeze out of the phone?
“Repeat the sentence back to me,” he says.
I’m silent. I rub my oily fingers together. It feels fun and like a slippery game only I can feel.
His voice comes through the receiver again, “Say it or I’m hanging up.”
“Real life has human limits,” I say, mumbling back to him.
“Like you mean it.”
I remove the phone from my ear and yell the response back to him. “Real life has human limits!” I bring the phone back to my ear. “But listen, all I have to do is borrow a water pump. It will be easy.”
The phone call disappears. I try and get it back. “Why did you hang up?” I ask.
He clears his throat. “I love you Chicle. Get better.”
I sit up fast. The phone call disappears and I speak into the receiver anyway, but I am too late. “C’mon all I need is a pump. I can do it. It’s just a pump.” I like talking on the phone after he hangs up as if there’s a way my words will bring him back, but he’s gone. I know the thread to my brother is unwinding. I lay in the fetal position. I close my eyes and bounce my leg back and forth to rock myself. From where my tent is, I can hear the screeching sound of the train grinding against metal. I release the phone from my ear and before I know it, I’m deep in sleep.
In 90-degree heat I walk barefoot on concrete. Rare for San Francisco. Everything I own fits into two backpacks. I walk with my face down avoiding the trash and grime of the city. First stop is 24 Hour Fitness to charge my phone and stash my first backpack carrying my tent. I can feel the tiny ridges of the ground against my toes, the dark circles of gum stuck to the ground. They look like little ponds. The only thing missing is the fish. If I had some chalk, I could draw them in.

A rush of cold air greets me when I walk into 24 Hour Fitness. I dart my way into the elevator and for the first time in weeks, I see my reflection in the metal doors of the elevator. It’s a distorted view of myself and I almost don’t know if it’s real. My face goes sideways and my mouth big like a cartoon. I look like a blurry Chewbacca and I’m comforted, because I’m on my way to see Han Solo. I push the elevator button to take me to the third floor. When the doors open, people are hard at work running on treadmills as their eyes obsess on the screens above them. I quickly sneak into the locker rooms, help myself to the tip jar, stash my backpack, and see the back-exit stairwell. On my way out, a mirror stops me, I can see the oil that has been mounting up on my scalp and I’m thinner than I expect. I avoid mirrors they are so solitary. It’s a lot easier to move through the world like this.

The scorching sun reminds me of why I miss dwelling indoors. My foot meets a gooey substance sending a shiver straight up my back. My feet red, blistering, and in need of green grass to rest. Then I see a small fruit cart on the corner of First and Folsom. I see Chulo. Relief. I can stash my second backpack with him. He’s working the stand with his father. The yellow painted cart parked under the shade of a grand tree sits still, a red brick holds the small wheels in place keeping it from rolling down. The
juicy watermelon, ripe mangos, and bright red strawberries sit proudly in a block of ice. Big jugs of agua fresca sweat water down into the street. The cars roaring past shake the cart.

When Chulo’s dad has a little more money to spend this month because he won on a scratcher or he set up the stand outside a wedding on the good side of town, the cart sells elote. Chulo’s dad selling elote is rarer than the record heat San Francisco is having. Yellow corn on a stick, glazed with mayonnaise, topped with cotija, with a sprinkle of tajin. Corn and agua fresca. Food of the summer.

From where I’m standing at the bottom of the hill, I see Chulo crouched in front of the cart with a small tin can beside him. I watch him for a moment, thinking he’s fixing a wheel, maybe he’s greasing it up so it can roll better? No. I see his shadow lift an elbow up, hold steady, his hand moves purposefully like he’s teaching someone how to glide during a slow dance. I sneak in closer and see black paint in a recycled chili can. His small paint brush moves steady as he paints in the words, *Martinez Fruit*, in old English type on the cart.

I’m the first to speak, “Yo. Chulo. ¿Como te va?”

He turns his head, sets the paint brush on top of the cart, and walks towards me with his arms outstretched. We hug.

“Better. What are you doing?”

I graze my foot over the thin prickly leaves trying to get the remaining goo off my big toe. I see his father, “Hola, Mr. Martinez.” The old man looks up from cutting watermelon and gives me a slight head nod before returning to his to work.

“I’m going to Pumps,” I say to Chulo, letting the cool grass comfort my burning feet. “Can I leave my backpack with you?”
“The strip club?” he asks, he reaches for a fruit cup. “Have you eaten? Here.” He hands me a cup and don’t even think about politely declining. Who turns down food? I gorge the fruit and it tastes metallic. I’m dehydrated and I need water. The chamoy and chili powder makes my nose run. “No.” I slurp the fruit juice. “Pumps Warehouse. You know? The place that sells water pumps and shit?”

“Why do you need a water pump?” he asks.

I throw the fruit cup to the grass and make my arms like superman. “I’m going to drain a volcano. Can I leave my backpack with you?”

He turns around and picks up the discarded cup I threw on the ground. “Yo. The environment,” he says. He squishes the cup into the already overflowing blue plastic bag tied to the yellow cart. “You might need your pack for a big task like that.”

I reach for another fruit cup. He slaps my hand away. “Do you wanna come?”

“To the strip club?”

“No. To the pump store.”

“I’d rather go to the strip club,” he says, scratching the back of his head. “But chale, I wish you luck.”

I see his hands are dyed red, his nails dirty, like mine.

“I should stay and help my dad out.” He picks up his brush and returns to his lettering, “Or at least finish this sign for him.”

I grab his arm, “Finish. Then we can go after.”

“No,” he says, pointing the paint brush at me.

“Yes,” I say, hopeful.

“Maybe.”

“Please. This is important.”
“Let me finish this first,” he says, crouching down and spreading black paint into the stenciled letters on the cart. I get stuck watching him turn the sign to color. I watch him slowly paint inside the lines. The loud cars on the street sound far away and the world is silent. If I watch this long enough the thoughts in my head will quiet down soon enough. I sit cross-legged on the grass under the shade of the fruit stand umbrella. Still and patient. I use my backpack as a pillow, my mouth hanging open, drool dripping down into the grass. I watch him make straight and sideways lines over and over, I’m amazed on how steady his hand remains. There is no delay in the way he removes paint from his brush. Just when I think he’s finished, he begins again, going over the lines making them neat, straight, and long. I forget again about the water pump. About my idea. About draining a volcano. I think back to childhood with Diego. To those late-night Bob Ross DVDs a nice man on the battery powered DVD player teaching us how to paint a shrub with one shade of forest green. That was back when I learned that green could be many greens. We’d lay on top of our old purple carpet and eat one-day-old popcorn. We made a living room. Diego responding to Bob Ross, “I can do that. That too. And that. That looks easy. I’m a try that. I got that shit in the bag no problem.” As the night started to invite sleep, Bob Ross’s calm voice lulled me into a dream, our pants still buckled, the morning light not too far away. With Diego I used to feel present. Time was different. It didn’t hang over me with the need to be carried like it does now. I envy that about Diego. The way he carries time like it his job to move with it. There is a comforting wave of peace I feel over my tired and out-of-reach brain and as I’ve gotten older, the urge to exit has become more persistent. I know it means exiting out of the world that is important to Diego. I don’t know why I leave. I just know I have to.
An hour later, Chulo finishes painting. He stands up and dusts off his pants. He looks unbothered by the heat. “I’ma be right back pops,” Chulo says, and hides the tin can inside the cart. Mr. Martinez looks up from counting crumpled up dollar bills. “Don’t be too long mio,” he says. I shake his hand goodbye.

While strolling to 4th and Harrison I spot a convenience store I want to hit. I swat the entrance flies away from my face and walk through the aisles. My feet tired, black, and aching with blisters from walking on concrete all morning. The corner store is small with dirty floors that look like they haven’t been mopped in years. Chulo wanders off into the back of the store and opens the beer cooler. He holds his big shirt up to let the cool air into his shirt. The rows of chips and chocolate make my mouth water, but I move past them and spot cheap plastic sandals. The tag reads seven-ninety-nine. I do the math in my head. I call my brother.

He doesn’t answer on my first try. The phone rings for a long while. “Hello? “Diego? What’s happening?”

“What do you want Chicle?”

I miss his voice. I tell him about the volcano, how Chulo is coming with me, and how now it’s real and really happening. He’s quiet. His breathing sounds heavy through the phone. I feel alone and scared for what he’ll say next. “Why are you calling me?” he asks.

My arm reaches for the back of my head. “So that’s the thing. I want to know if you can loan me some money for the pump. See, I have the money, and you can come too and help us but what I really need is—” He hangs up before I can finish.

I call him back and he picks up on the first ring.
“Don’t talk to me about your stupid fantasies, okay?” His voice is low like he’s trying not to be overheard.

I walk the aisles of the store with the phone pressed to my ear. I speak low enough to be heard through the phone. “I need sandals for my feet, and I want you to join me too.”

“Join you where?”

“To Pumps. To drain a volcano.”

“Grow up, Chicle.”

“No,” I tell him. The silence between us is long.

“Why do you do this?”

Every call is a chance to change his mind, but I don’t know of what. I wander around the aisles, aware I have to respond soon. I stare down and try to count the black and white tiles. I want to admit to him that I miss him and the old tent we grew up in. I want to tell him that I still remember washing our clothes together outside with rocks and I want to tell him I’m sorry I tried to light those same rocks on fire. I want to tell him that he was my home, but if don’t respond right now, he’ll hang up, leave, and I really don’t know when he’ll answer again.

“Mom will be very upset with you when she finds out you left me,” I say.

“She’s a runner like you.”

The phone call disappears, while I’m standing alone in the toilet paper aisle. I keep the phone to my ear waiting to hear his voice again. I yearn for us to be a team again. For the home we made together. I yearn for the place he neglects.

“Shit,” I say, banging my head on a peanut rack.
Chulo steals in the chip aisle. One bag of hot Cheetos up the inside of his shirt for him and a pair of flipflops in his shorts for me. He gives me a head nod.

I nudge him. “Let’s take a ride.”

The flip flops keep the ground from roughing up my feet. We continue walking and stop at 15th and Portero. “I know it’s close I just want to get there already.”

Chulo moves his shoulders up to me and eats his chips.

We hop on the number 9 bus through the back doors. Buses help me shut out. The 9 is nothing like being on the number 48 bus. Falling asleep in the back and no matter what knowing you can end up on the Great Highway. Doing it again because that’s Monday and maybe it’s Tuesday too. Being on the bus like that is like being a part of the outside without having to invest in it. It’s an agreement to see the same world over and over and then yes, you can push off.

Chulo licks the Cheeto dust off his fingers. “Have you thought about what you’ll do once you have the pump?”

“I’m not interested in disrupting my process.”

“Well, how’d it go with your brother?”

“He’s an asshole.” I look behind us. “We’re not going to be on this bus long.”

Chulo folds the hot Cheeto bag into itself. “What was that about?”

I pull on my fingers. “It ain’t like it used to.”

“You know if we were in Mexico, we could just yell baja and the foo would just stop right in the middle of the road and let us off.” Chulo has one older sister who lives in Mexico. Whom he takes the Greyhound to see at least once a year. Chulo goes to work with her and in the afternoon, they go catch fish in Alcapulco. Like their dad
taught them. Chulo pulls the string and stop requested shines in red neon. “No matter where we are, we can just hop off like nothing. I think that shit is so badass.”

I feel the rumbles of the bus. “I haven’t been,” I say.

“Let’s get off now. Follow me.”

We stride to a purple house with one small lemon tree planted in the yard. This is not Pumps the water pump store. “Why are we stopping?” I ask him.

Chulo points a finger at the house. “The lady with the sage lives there.”

“The what?”

“The lady with the sage,” he says. “She stops by the cart once in a while and my neighbor says she’s very good.”

“Who’s your neighbor? Can we just go to Pumps?”

“Some lady,” Chulo shakes his head. “Anyway, Maya can clean off the bad energy your brother is giving you. This might help you while you go on your quest.”

I bite my top lip, nervous. “I don’t know about this Chulo. Before my mom left, she told me two things, avoid witchcraft and always pull it back when showering.”

Chulo frowns and throws his hand up in the air. “How can a cleaning be witchcraft?”

I stick my fingers through the chain-link fence and hook them to the metal. “I don’t know about this. My mom warned me.”

Chulo’s voice is low and reassuring. “Maya’s good people.”

“Okay,” I say. “But I’m not getting naked.”

He knocks on the front door and we wait. The door swings open and a woman in her early thirties stands in the middle of the doorway. Her braided hair hangs loose on her shoulder. “Why are you here?” she says, sounding aggravated.
Chulo takes off his hat and sticks it into his back pocket. “We came for a limpia.” I copy his gesture of respect. It’s silent again and I breathe quietly through my nose.

“The both of you?” she asks.

“No just him,” Chulo says, pointing at me.

She hums. Her arms crossed behind her head. “I’ll do it, but it won’t be cheap.”

“I’ll have to owe you,” Chulo says. “Come by the cart whenever you want and I gotchu.”

“You better.” She turns to me, scanning me. “What’s your friend’s name?”

“Chicle,” I say. “Everybody calls me Chicle.”

“Okay gum, come inside the house.”

I step into a jungle. Her living room is filled with plants hanging from the ceiling, there is a big purple couch and a small box TV pointed towards the window facing the outside.

“Not a lot of people own TV’s in this neighborhood,” she says. “I like to do my part.”

I nod my head yes, like I understand. I trail behind her. There is an abundance of leaves scattered all around the floor. Each step is like the announcement of fall. Crunch. Crunch. Crunch. Her plants look healthy, but I really don’t know. I recognize the salvia plant and remember that the goo inside the leaf is used to heal wounds. On a shelf there is one grand display roses. Yellow and pink on long green stems.

“I like your flowers.”

“You came on a good day,” she says. “Roses are the highest energy.” We stop walking when we reach the back of the house. I see a shelf packed with cleaning
supplies and a group of mops stand dirty next to a metal shelf. One pot with a giant leafy plant near the back door. “I’m still deciding where it all should go,” she says.

I nod my head yes like I understand.

She grabs a wand of sage coiled in red yarn.

“Are you ready?” she asks me.

I don’t answer.

She asks me a different question. “Are you open?”

I nod my head yes.

She holds a wand of sage steady as she lights the tip. She does a quick ritual on me and explains everything to me as she does it. I’m nervous and worried I don’t know enough about what is happening. She holds the white sage in her hand as she moves it around me like a wand.

“Right now, I’m cleaning your head space,” she says.

She moves the wand in a circular motion around my head. She moves down and covers my chest, my knees, she cleanses my feet and tells me what to do next. “Pick up your feet one by one so I can move the wand below your foot. This is to clean your footsteps.”

I do as I’m told. I close my eyes. I think about Diego and about the fires I used to start in our backyard. The neighboring tent yelling at me for causing destruction. I remember how impatient he grew with me when I couldn’t hang on to my first job. How judgmental he got about what trying looks like. Maybe it was easier that way to exit. To wish there was no commitment to care about.
Maya is behind me now. She’s shorter than me but the sage reaches the top of my head, nonetheless. Smoke starts to appear from behind my back and then it starts to come through my pants.

Maya’s voice is smooth. “Pick up your feet one by one. This is to clean your footsteps.”

I do as I’m told. I lift my right foot and then my left. The smoke immediately rises before I can step down. I wonder if that matters. I am I more protected the more the sage burns? I feel safe. I’m standing here not wanting the ritual to end.

Maya faces me and cleans the air between the two of us. When she finishes she sets the wand next to a green pot.

I clear my throat. “Thank you.”

She wipes off her hands. “Don’t mention it.”

“Sorry we bargained like this.”

“It’s alright.”

She escorts me out of the house, and I turn back, wave, but the front door is already closed. Alone in her yard, I wonder if Mamá lied to me.

“How did it go?” Chulo asks. He is digging his hand into the hot Cheeto bag.

“It went okay. I think.”

“Well, how do you feel?”

“The same, I think.”

“The same?”

“Well, I feel.” I search for the words. “I feel taken care of now and I know that sounds weird.”
Chulo turns his head towards the street, “You’re not weird.” He squishes up the Cheeto bag and sticks it into his front pocket.

We walk together towards Pumps. The sun is not as brutal as before. I can hear my thoughts and the flip flops clacking on the cement. When we arrive to 24th and Mission and see the store, Pumps, there is a man pulling a giant plastic bin filled with old toys. He’s wearing a red clay mask and has no shirt on. We walk inside and see large aisles of pumps of different colors and shapes. There are pumps for carpets, windows, and clogged toilets. The hoses are all circular and my heart starts beating with excitement.

Chulo stands behind me looking out the store window. I check the pumps for heat pressure and see if the pump will work or even last long. We pick one. A big one with a large dent in the middle, the hose blue and thirty feet long. Long enough to accomplish anything. Right? Long enough to drain any volcano.

We pick it up and carry it to the help counter. A lady sits with her legs crossed, her big hoop earnings swing back and forth as she chews gum while on her phone. I reach the counter and tell her our situation. We’re two sane guys trying to drain a volcano and we need a water pump, now and fast, and if she has a triangle hose instead of all these circular ones, we’ll take that too.

The lady at the counter looks at us in disbelief. “Are you crazy?”

My hands make fists. “No. I’m not crazy. I’m just a regular dude who wants to drain a volcano. I have good money. Decent money. Now the only question I have is, how much to rent a water pump?”
I know I’m irritating her because her face gets red. “Anyway, read the sign.” Her finger points to a white paper behind her. “You need one form of I.D. and proof of credit,” she says, returning to scrolling on her phone.

“What do you mean by proof of credit?”

“A credit card.”

My face falls with sadness. I can feel it and I can’t hide it. I ask her to wait a moment. I pace around the store and try to think about a way to find a credit card I can use. This is important to me.

I ask Chulo, who nods no, and says, “I have some cash.”

I can’t ask Dad that is out of the question. I boggle my mind for friends who owe me anything. Anyone else I can run to who’s not Diego. I walk the long lines of pumps. Searching my brain for absolutely anybody else. I bite my top lip and start dialing.

It’s beeping. No answer the first call. One more time. “Hello? Diego? I need your help. Don’t hang up.”

I hear him sigh heavily on the other end. He’s silent for too long.

“Hello are you there?”

He releases a deep sigh. “I’m here.”

I explain to him that I made it to Pumps and I need a credit card in order to rent the water pump. I plead with him. I tell him that after this I’ll be good, I’ll be so good I won’t bother him again, I weep, I swear I won’t be like this anymore. I hope he’ll extend this favor me. Extend to me this because I’m his brother, because I was there for as long as I could, because I’m his family. “What do you say hermano?” I ask.
A wave of sound pulls apart my eardrum. Diego screams, his screech is unbearable, long, throaty, and then it breaks, and his eruption cracks my home in two. The phone call disappears. I don’t call him back.

Chulo and I sit on the tallest hill at the park. The sun is going down and I watch a group of kids roll themselves down a hill. One by one they roll after the other. Their loud laughter makes me feel warm.

Chulo squeezes my arm, “Diego doesn’t know what he’s missing.”

The cold breeze makes my arm hair prick up. I think about Diego and imagine us rolling down the hill. His long hair would get so misshaped he’d be happy-angry for the rest of the day. Or is his hair short now? He’d bump into me and we’d laugh together. I am angry with him because he never lets me complete a thought.

Before Chulo leaves to help his dad lock up he releases my arm and says, “Yo! There’s a volcano in the backyard.”

I smile at him, say my goodbye, and lay down on the wet grass under a purple sky. The park is emptying out and I see just across from me a small hill. The fog starts to reach above the round tip. Un monte, my mother would call it. Small enough to drain, small enough to create something, small enough to imagine my own volcano, and I know I don’t make sense.

I sit up to dig a hole. I scratch into the mud with my fingers. The dirt reaches deep into my nails and it’s going to be a pain in the ass to harvest this up later. I stick the phone in the hole and head down the path.
My country gassed children. It was on the news but first it was on the screens everyone carries. I was at school and saw the news report light up my notifications. I thought it was a bill coming through, I owe money. I always owe money.

Her country gassed children. Sitting near the TV her cell mates laughed when they first saw the pictures of the border. “Oye,” Roberta said. “What the hell are they doing?” She had just crossed the border and was being detained by ICE while she waited for her court date. Then the first lady of the United States came on screen and she said, “What about the children that were separated? Give me a fucking break.” No one said anything. The horn for lunch rang. Her cell mates turned away. Roberta’s eyes stayed glued on the screen.

His country gassed children. The sun rose up and stretched to help the field workers. They didn’t know yet. The cherries were nice and red, big like the inside of a mouth
with no teeth. Armando held one in secret. He dusted off his hands, rubbed it clean with the inside of his shirt, and he ate it. The juice squirted into his mouth. Armando returned to his work of picking cherries. He had crossed the border years ago and he didn’t know his brother was being gassed.

Their country gassed children. Scrolling, a picture of a crying baby, tear gas hanging above now a part of the sky, a brown baby, being held by their mom, probably, maybe it an aunt tired of cleaning houses for the rich, or a grandma who knows better, because she lived longer than forty-five, not like her mom, no, it was a sister, who’s doing one little favor for her mom to go for freedom, wrong, it was a cousin going to meet another cousin on the other side, if we could only survive the way there.

Our country gassed children. In an office somewhere as a pop-up link on the lower corner of a wide screen too big for human hands, reality glitches far from wave lengths into a 4k display with new sound speakers for all your streaming needs. You see it. Not as a hologram but like a sale you don’t care about.

Your country gassed children. “Listen, I’ll be very clear. A government has the right to defend itself from any national threat. This is a direct and ongoing attack on our nation’s sovereignty and constitution’s fundamental right in securing our nation’s future. Let’s not forget we must protect our internal defenses above all.” Tomorrow claims will be denied that your country gassed children.
My country gassed children. She was eight, no more than ten, dinner plate on her lap in front of the TV screen. Aware. She was staying in our house while her mother Roberta waited for a court date. I didn’t know her name. Her father was standing still in a photograph on the screen being gassed by his country. His eyes covered with a red bandana. She ran from the addicting TV screen to the front yard and I watched her through the window doing cartwheels.
Bringing Modelos to the downtown library is a summertime A/C happening. The routine began after Maya and Marisol abandoned riding bikes for skateboards. In the summer, the two friends hide from the oven of California in the library with their boyfriends. It’s a once-a-week escape from the baking heat. It always begins with the girls entering the library and meeting up the guys who are already there drawing in old books of maps. The view from the inside of the library made the outside world look like a calm, safe, sunny day—If only there was a way to see the world is scorching before entering.

Marisol likes the cold air that hits her body upon entrance—a sweaty pant to the world map stacks. She sees a sign posted declaring new summer library hours. The girls move in. They move carelessly. They know the people they want to find.

Marisol first sees Julio sitting near the back shelves about 19th century torture methods. Chuy is sitting with his legs crossed, talking and drawing. Julio is tagging inside an old Aztec Empire map, using the grid that covers the maps as a guide to help them draw a straight line, to a legible funky name. A line says a lot about the
personality of a tag. It tells you what it’s about, how to read it, and how to get lost inside the shape.

Julio kisses Marisol. “How was the ride over?” he asks her.

Maya joins Chuy on the floor.

Marisol puts her hair up and starts fanning herself. “Damn. It’s so hot out there right now. We should lay low for a while.” Marisol’s hair is long, thick, and naturally straight. When she was younger, she would cut her mom’s leggings and braid her hair with that cut piece of cloth to make her hair wavy. Now Marisol has given up her dream of wavy hair and keeps it short, cutting it regularly and thinning it out during the summer, so her head doesn’t feel like an oven.

“We’re good,” Chuy says, stretching out his hand. “A little tired from staying up too late last night. My moms and dads have been watching the news hella loud and really late at night. I guess about the detention centers. That shit is mad scary.” He returns back to the map and continues to draw. His glasses sitting right above his pink and purple eye bags. One line at a time he draws. Over and over till it starts to look like his tag name – HAM.

Marisol watches Maya flip through A History of Torture Throughout the Ages, the pages brown and fragile.

“I saw that photo of the baby crying while his hands gripped a wire chain. It scared me to death,” she says.

Unlike Marisol’s hair, Maya’s is curly and bouncy. Marisol and Maya have been friends since they both let it slip that they were not born in the United States. It also helps that their mothers are the only women in the neighborhood who speak Spanish.
They are family. Maya flips through the book shaking her head. Her curly hair intertwining into hoop earrings.

Maya continues. “It is so scary,” she says.

The eyes of the four friends are on the pages Maya is turning. *A History of Torture Throughout the Ages* creating a portal.

Marisol drinks her beer in two big gulps. “I stopped caring about it,” she says. “I’m from here what are they going to do to me?”

The group nervously laughs.

“Anything,” Julio says. “They can do anything to you. Whatever they want. Times are different now. The game is different now.”

“What game?” Marisol says. She passes the hot Cheeto bag to Chuy. He looks up from his page and takes a sip. “The game of life man,” he says. He pushes his glasses to his face and starts chugging the rest of his beer. Chuy and Maya start kissing while Josue and Marisol try not to stare.

The following week, the group of four repeats the same routine. They sit in a half circle on the floor of the library. The stacks of books close the circle, dust swirling above them as if it can hear the low jazz music coming from the speaker. Warm sunshine coming through the skyline. They drink Modelo tall cans hiding in Maya’s big purple purse. She hands the bag to Marisol. The wait, the passing of time, trying to outrun the heat is tremendous. The library’s large window reveals a park, kids swinging on the swings and sliding down a yellow slide. Two large trees outside offer shade but it’s no match to the AC the library has.
Marisol loves the playground and in the winter the group drinks on the playground, but it’s summer, and when the sun goes down it cools the land to bearable. A light breeze may join but the wait for the weather to cool is long.

Marisol and Julio have been seeing each other long enough for their romance to settle into a routine. One filled with laugher, games, and fights about communication. It is the realest romantic relationship either of them has been in and because of that they stay together. Marisol doesn’t know if Julio is it for her.

The sun starts to peek through the library’s single skylight. The light shines on the dust of the shelves. The light moves around the space looking for bodies to engulf in a blanket of heat. Julio gets up and tries to walk it off, slapping his pants, he grabs the first hard cover book he can find and starts to fan himself. He unintentionally pushes the dust back into his face making him start a coughing fit.

Maya hushes him in a low voice. “They’re gonna make us leave.”

“Yeah Jul be quiet,” Marisol says, opening up another can of beer.

Julio slaps his chest to stop coughing. “Why? It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong,” he says.

“We know that, but they don’t know that,” Chuy says, finishing coloring in his lettering. “Do they know that they don’t know?”

“I don’t know,” Julio laughs.

The girls laugh and get up to dry off their sweaty thighs.

Marisol puts her hair in a ponytail. “What time is the party?”

“Nine,” Julio responds.

“It’s about to be six. Library is going to close. What are we supposed to do until then?”
He smiles at her, “Drink more?”

Chuy looks up from his coloring, “We could race. I borrowed my dad’s car.”

Marisol feels excitement. Intrigued by the idea of being in a car while someone else takes the wheel and races, excitement to be along for the ride.

The group make their way deeper into downtown to the warehouses. The warehouses in downtown sit collecting dust near empty tall buildings that have been taken over by squatters. Under the dirt and grime, big roaches that have the ability to fly and surround the warehouse on Peach Street. During the summers the heat makes the roaches come out and crawl on the walls.

Five years ago, people started renting out the little rooms in one warehouse and started letting people check out their art. People started going by art spaces and it used to be kept on the down-low, the owner used to check up on his second rented warehouse in the next town over on Thursdays. When the owner was gone the people who rented those tiny art spaces would open up, bring weed and beer, and invite people to come check out the art taped to the walls. When the owner caught on, he started letting food trucks park right outside as long as they gave him some percentage of their profit. As the years went on, it got bigger and bigger. More money for the owner and an excuse for people to do something on a Thursday night.

Julio drives Chuy’s car and parks the car at a red light in downtown. It’s quiet and all the downtown workers have left their posts, leaving it empty. The warehouse gallery not too far away. Marisol sits with one leg hanging outside of the 1997 Toyota, four windows rolled all the way down allowing the warm breeze to flow in. The sun is beginning to fall down from its place in the sky, its glow the only thing visible through the skyline. There’s no sun, no clouds but the sky remains orange and lit. They wait. For
someone careless. For someone looking to have some thrill. What better way to pass the
time than to car race?

Finally, a car pulls beside the Toyota. Three young men wearing baseball caps
give Julio a nod. The driver a bald man with a rose tattoo to the left of his eye.

Excited, Marisol reaches for Maya’s hand.
Julio clears his throat. “I’ll race you,” he yells.

The bald driver lowers his window. “What do you want?” His voice deep.
“To race,” Julio says, grinning. He turns to look at Marisol, she nods in approval.

The bald driver turns to his friends in the car. They laugh and nod their heads.

“We’re down. What are we playing for?”

“For fun.”

“Fun in the form of pleasure?” Driver laughs. “If we win we want a blowjob from your girlfriends.”

“This guy is disgusting,” Marisol says. “Jul don’t do it.”

“Deal,” Julio yells. Marisol locks her door and pulls the window up.

“If you lose, I’m breaking up with you,” Marisol says. Angry. Excited for thrill.

Marisol loved to hate Julio. She never knew what he was going to do or what he might say. Being with him was like experiencing a curated life of adventure.

The race. Ten blocks north. Red lights will not be honored. No accidents. No responsibility, if caught by authority you don’t know the other racer. Go when the light turns green. Marisol can feel her heartbeat in her face. She can feel her gums clutching tighter to her teeth. She wonders if Julio is turned on. If he’s scared. If he needs thrill like she does.
All eyes wait for the light change. It’s coming.

Both racers grip the wheel in anticipation. This is living. When the light changes green both racers take off.

Julio keeps straight. He’s lucky the first three lights are green. The fourth is yellow, here comes the red, the city bus blocks the road for the bald driver.

Julio turns left, he cheats and drives up the freeway ramp.

Marisol lets go of Maya’s hand. Screaming in amazement, “You’re cheating!”

“I’m a winner baby,” he yells as the wind roars into the car.

Chuy reaches behind his seat and holds Maya’s hand.

Maya laughs along for the ride.

Julio takes the first exit off the freeway. The car comes to a halt.

“Do you think they’re mad?” he asks.

“Probably,” Chuy says. Giving him a pat on the back.

Julio’s face is red. “Now what?”

The light turns green.

Before the Toyota pulls up to the warehouse gallery, you can hear the loud music from around the block. The song, 1-800 Suicide by Gravediggaz, plays loudly on two big stand up speakers. A line of pink flyers taped to the outside rusted wall reads, CAR DOOR plays at eleven o’clock. Marisol tries to read what other bands are playing but the loud fun crowd swarms in and out of the warehouse.

Maya disappears into the crowd with Chuy.

Julio pouts his lips. “Are you mad at me?”

“Yes,” Marisol says.
“It was a joke. Get over it.” He takes a joint out of his pocket. “Give me lighter, please?”

“You’re incredible. You said yes to blow jobs. That’s disgusting. You’re disgusting.”

“You were laughing the entire time, admit it you had fun. Can I borrow your lighter?”

“That’s not the point. You told him I’d blow him. What is the matter with you? What if you lost?”

“So, you’re saying that if I lost you would have dumped me and given a stranger a blow job? You’re fucked up. Can I please borrow your lighter?”

Marisol is frustrated. How did this conversation become about her? “I’m going to find Maya, this isn’t going anywhere.”

“I’ll see you later,” Julio tells Marisol.

In the back of the warehouse there are five white rooms called galleries. All of them small but different sizes of small. The kind of small that has different rectangle shapes but overall still small. The walls painted with cheap white paint that stains easily and you can see the dirt marks coming up from the floor. People come in groups, dressed in black mesh tops, lone people in brown cowboy boots, and boys and girls in fancy dresses. Julio and Chuy head towards the back of the warehouse to the little white galleries.

Marisol finds Maya. They link arms.

Marisol enjoys the experience of art. A different kind of excitement. A calmer one. A game-changing feeling of knowing something has been forming since before her
arrival. String lights line the walls giving the warehouse ambiance. The crowd a swarm of different colors and facial expressions.

The girls move past people looking at the art, they watch others huddled in circles passing a joint and getting high, and they move past the people who are just now meeting up with their friends. Different kinds of people there to experience the night in different ways.

The band starts to set up. Marisol sees Julio and Chuy across stands in the crowd. She watches the band members plug wires in and out of speakers and their instruments.

Inside a gallery room, the wall is lined with black and white film photographs of trees. Marisol passes a Hot Cheeto bag to Maya and then licks the red dust off her fingers.

Maya grabs the bag. “This is cute.”

Marisol gives her a side eye. “Yeah, I guess it’s cute,” she says, while examining the photographs closer. “I don’t get it. We see trees everyday, why do we gotta see them in black and white? I don’t get it.”

Maya snatches the Hot Cheeto bag from Marisol. “Yeah. I think that might be the point.”

“I don’t know.” Marisol steps back and accidentally bumps into another person. She apologizes and exits the room.

In the crowd Marisol spots Julio and she joins him grabbing Julio’s arm. “Aye, I’ma go pee. I’ll be right back. Are you good?” She’s irritated with him.

Julio turns to her. “Yeah. Just little a high, I’m good man. I’ll be right here.”

Marisol catches a glimpse of Chuy at the back of the warehouse. “I think Chuy is near the back exit,” she says to Maya. Maya nods and leaves Marisol.
Marisol searches for the bathroom or any marked or unmarked door that suggests it might be a bathroom but doesn’t find it. The band starts to play. *Rowy noise*, Marisol thinks. She starts to hop. Desperately needing to use the bathroom. Marisol uses the exit door and goes into the alley. Two big white vans race towards the front of the warehouse. The vans park on the side while their tires screech to a stop. She watches four men and two women jump out of the van quick all of them wearing the same uniform and blue bulletproof vests that read, POLICE ICE in big white letters.

Marisol paralyzes in fear. Pee running down her leg. The door opens. Maya’s face gives Marisol relief.

“I can’t find Chuy,” Maya says.

Marisol covers her legs.

“What’s wrong?” Maya asks.

Behind her a booming voice, “Immigration and Customs Enforcement! Everyone show me some I.D! Now!” They move in. They move carelessly. They must know the people they want to trap. They bulldoze in with no remorse.

Marisol mouths the words, “What the fuck?” to Maya. Marisol’s face drops with fear. Now she is aware. Julio is inside still in the crowd. The two girls remain still in the alley trying their best not to move or be seen. The only thing moving is eyes. Frantic eyes look for still calm eyes and calm eyes look down at their feet.

Maya opens the door a little and describes the scene to Marisol: Agents are moving from group to group examining IDs. No sign of Chuy or Julio. People are coming. Maya shuts the door quickly. “What should we do?”
Marisol looks down at her wet pants. Her heartbeat in her ears. “Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Marisol says. She starts to climb the fence. The chain wobbling as she climbs.

“No, I don’t think I should leave Chuy,” Maya shouts at her.

“Shut up!” Marisol yells back. “Or they will come.”

“They are already here! And I’m not leaving without Chuy.” Maya disappears behind the door.

A link on the fence breaks dropping Marisol on the concrete landing on her back. Through the closed door she hears commotion, maybe it’s people scrambling. People must be running back and forth. Big thumping boots on the ground and people yelling for help. She hears a loud bang on the door and then a low voice. Maybe Maya’s back, she thinks. I can’t risk it.

She spots a wooden plank and pushes it through the door handle to hold it in place from someone trying to get out. Marisol locks herself in the alley. The door starts to push against the plank. One thump. Another thump. ICE agents move into the alley. They move carelessly. They must know the people they would find here. They bulldoze in with no remorse. They move in because it was convenient to forget they were in a territory field of knowledge. It was their right.

Years later, Marisol will sit in a cold room with other women like a prisoner. Dreaming about Julio. The women will pass around jokes and laugh with one another: What do you call a cow with no legs? Ground Beef! She’ll look thinner, hair long and straight, she will dream about parties. Excitement. Car racing and library books. She will have conversations with herself often. I used to really like summer. Drink beer in the
summer. I had a boyfriend in the summer. During the summers I’d go to the library and meet up with Maya. We’d sit in one of the corners in the back and draw. We used to just draw. I used to really like the summer. I used to really like summer. Her eyes start to water. I used to really like summer. Is it Thursday? There’s no visitation here, she remembers.

Maya will call her and tell her Julio is also detained. Marisol will lift her head from the table. Her head a heavy weight on her shoulders. She will watch an ICE agent push a book cart with one book of maps peeking out.
When Rosa and Maria first arrived, the candles were already lit and in rows of one red, one white, one red, one white, all with the sticker of La Virgin de Guadalupe facing the street. There was a small altar set up on the chain-link fence near the railroad tracks. In her lap Rosa carried two candles and an old photograph of Juan she kept from the seventh grade for the altar. She had seen in movies that people brought something. She held onto the candles on her lap and waited patiently for Maria to stop and park the car.

At the age of eight when Rosa had stood at the altar for her grandpa, she watched as someone put a photo up and then set down two orange flowers. When Rosa asked her mother why people did that, her mother, took a deep breath and said, “I don’t know. But it’s something to do.”

Rosa stepped out of Maria’s car. Rosa remembered this conversation with her mom. The two friends joined arms and followed the little lights on the other side of the tracks.
“Marigolds. That’s the flower of the dead,” Rosa said. When Rosa noticed Ramon she gave him a nod and he walked over meeting them halfway.

“Aye thanks for coming,” he said, going in to hug the friends.

“Yeah, no problem, I want you to know I’m sorry. Really sorry. I brought some pan for you it’s in the car if you want it,” Maria said, pointing past the groups of people to her black Honda parked on the side of the street.

Rosa wondered if from here Ramon could see the dent in Maria’s car, she didn’t know if he could, but she felt secondhand embarrassment for Maria. Maria was not a good driver and her car had a dent in it from when she hit a concrete pillar because she wasn’t paying attention.

“Nah, I think we good right now but thank you,” he said, turning look at Rosa.

“¿Y usted? How are you taking it?”

Rosa folded her arms. She knew her eyes were puffy from crying. “I’m okay, I mean, I don’t know like, how do you not hear a train coming, you know? Like fuck,” Rosa said, her face turning red like the color of the curb.

Rosa was a quiet person and not usually vocal about her feelings but this was a stressful time. Juan’s death had become a mental process for her, one where one day she’d be walking and suddenly begin sobbing and other days she’d be calmer. Rosa wanted to settle in on the correct words for her feelings. Her words had become so jumbled and out of place.

Rosa saw Maria and Ramon give each other a look. Maria walked away from the group towards the altar with Rosa’s candles in hand. She placed them on the corner where the candles were already low, and she fixed the Marigolds and they looked fuller after she touched them.
A part of Rosa was glad Maria had kept her distance from Juan because Rosa knew she would’ve been jealous if they connected. But Juan was never alone, he always had a homie by his side no matter what. Maria’s mom had gone out with Juan’s dad for a hot minute back in the day. Their parents dating was brief and short lived but with really loud sex. That was all the chisme Maria had mustered for Rosa.

Maria returned from the altar. “I thought there would be more time. More time to get to know him,” she said.

The groups of people started to drink.

Maria continued. “I assumed I’d get to know Juan the more that time went on. You know? Is that stupid?”

Rosa began sobbing and Maria held her. Rosa had never even considered that time could plop down into nonexistence so fast. Juan was her age, and he was gone. The last time Rosa had seen Juan, she was with Maria at the the liquor store buying 40’s and hot Cheetos. Maria pushed Rosa to talk to him whenever they saw him because of the crush she could not let go of. But that day when they saw him come out of the bodega he was alone.

His skinny arms dangled from his dirty white tank top, Maria stopped him.

Juan’s head was low.

“Hey, you, how goes it?” Rosa asked him.

He looked startled but he met her gaze. “I’m fine.”

“Good,” Maria said. “My mom started dating again. She’s been going out trying to find her match.”

Juan grabbed his right shoulder like he was in pain. “That’s cool.”

“How’s your dad?” Maria asked.
“Right. They were going out.” Juan half turned and started walking away backwards. “Yeah. That didn’t work out. Listen I gotta go.”

Rosa saw the gap between them widening. “Maria’s mom can’t stop talking about your dad, you know?”

Juan walked straight towards the park and Rosa stopped herself from calling out his name and saying, wait up. Instead, the two girls walked in the same direction behind him, they saw him get smaller and smaller, the 40 heavy in the plastic bag hurting Rosa’s fingers.

That was five days ago. Rosa winced in pain trying to light a candle at the altar. “Damn these are cheap as shit,” she said.

There was no more sun. The sky was a beautiful mix of purple and pink pollution, the way it gets during the middle of summer in California. The trees rustled in a warm breeze and the clouds moved above the group towards the mountains and away from the railroad tracks.

Ramon walked over and took the candle from Rosa’s hand. “You’re supposed to tilt the candle when you’re lighting it like this,” he showed her, making an entry for the lighter to enter without touching his skin.

She took the candle back from him. “I know alright.”

“Well if you know why’m I showing you?” He laughed and gave her a light push on the shoulder.

“Really, you’re going to give me attitude when it’s your cousin?”

He squished his eyebrows together. “I was playing with you.”

She took a couple steps away from him, the lit candle in hand. The altar was made out of the fence, a wooden box holding 99-cent-store picture frames of smiling
Juan and baby pictures of him held onto the fence by ribbons. Rosa set down the candle making sure to continue the pattern. One red, one white, one red, one white.

She turned back to see Maria hugging herself in the middle of the street, waiting. Rosa and Maria weren’t cousins or even distant cousins of Juan’s but they were familia. They grew up together in the same neighborhood. Hop the fence together, let you have the last tall can, leave the window open so you can climb in to sleep when your mom forgets to wait up for your no good ass, kind of family. The crowd cleared and Rosa started walking towards Maria.

Ramon was still standing next to her. “She’s gonna be alright.” Rosa heard him say. She didn’t know who he was talking about but he left Maria’s side and went to meet more guests.

“He was a very good guy,” Rosa said to Maria. Rosa was crying again. “The realest one out here no doubt.”

“No doubt,” Maria said holding a beer to the sky.

Rosa watched more family members gather, a cousin spray-painting Juan’s full name on a curb, a tía passing out fruit, his friends holding red cups, little nieces and nephews throwing marigolds at each other. Rosa smiled at them.

She went to grab a beer and when Rosa returned she thought he heard Ramon tell Maria, “I mean we all know. I mean no earphones in the world are that strong.” When she joined them again there was no mention of the statement. It confused Rosa and this time she had no urge to cry but to scream.

“This beer sucks,” Rosa said. “I’m going back to the altar.”

Maria nodded in her direction, “Okay.”
Rosa left Maria and Ramon. The box pushed against the chained fence as it wobbled against the coming wind. The tracks sat right in the middle between the small cul-de-sac and an abandoned dirt lot. Rosa held the picture of Juan in between her linked arms while looking at the concrete. She remembered the day she overheard him say he liked to read and to sing. Rosa was hooked and did not need any more convincing than a cute boy saying he liked reading. From then on, she wanted to know more and she took any opportunity to talk to him. It helped that he was from the neighborhood and had never felt like everyone else they had known growing up on the block. When he dropped out of high school, she would see him come home from work holding his tool bag in one hand and he would wave at her with the other. She tried saying hello sparingly maybe on Monday, not Tuesday or Wednesday, maybe on a Saturday on her day off. She wanted to give herself the confidence to approach him with attraction and maybe a little sexiness. She left it at hello’s, believing that one day she’d be granted the courage. Now more than anything, she wanted to tell Juan that she was sorry.

After Juan’s visual, Rosa had a dream that she was a camera watching the universe fall in love with a void. Void spoke slowly, holding on to Atmosphere in the tight confines of the air craft.

“If I go to the hologram and try to see you right through it you don’t look like anything.” Void moved from the bed turning front eyes towards the lookout window.

“Maybe a fuzzy image from a lost memory I’ve been trying to erase or grow into. I don’t know where it comes from. I want to have sex in the hologram. I get lost sometimes and I try to hold on in your stars and I know that doesn’t make any sense.”
Void paused and turned back to face Atmosphere. “Still there is you. You and the pointing of stars and I can’t reach because I am not full enough.”

Atmosphere took a hand to Void’s face. Speaking low and putting Atmosphere’s face to Void’s. “Keep me being fuzzy with you.”

When Rosa awoke, she went straight to her phone to look up the meanings of dreams but after not finding anything useful she threw herself into shitty reality TV love stories or watched the news. It was no better. Trump was taking office and the fear of what this could mean for family pushed thoughts of Juan away to the back of her mind where she wanted them to stay.

Rosa called Maria.

“Have you been seeing the news?” Rosa asked, starting to cry again. “We are no longer going to hide. I need to get my mom citizenship.”

“Okay,” Maria said.

Rosa wiped away the boogers from her nose that were already forming.

“Like now. How do you apply? We need to apply.”

“Okay.”

“My mom knows English now, it’s way better, she’ll pass,” Rosa said, pacing. “I mean she taught herself how to read and write, she can learn a couple of answers.”

“You should do that,” Maria said and hung up.

Rosa threw herself into helping her mom acquire U.S. citizenship. Mrs. Ramirez almost gave no objection. The Trump Administration was something they were all worried about. “It will be just like we’re stealing the citizenship right from under them,” Rosa reassured her mother.
Rosa wanted to feel in control. She prepared the paperwork for her mom and bought her audiotapes for her to study. Rosa applied for citizenship for her mother. She thought of it as a collective effort and accomplishment. She thought about who might approve of the long list of applications. Thousands of patient families waiting for a response from citizenship acceptors. In a matter of months, they approved her mother’s request for the oral exam, and Rosa felt like a sellout.

Rosa hid from her own mind. There were so many rules. Her mother was exempt from the English Language Requirement because of the 50/20 rule. The rule states that if you are age 50 or older at the time of filing for naturalization and have lived as a permanent resident in the United States for 20 years, you can choose to take the exam orally. Still, the exam must be taken in English.

They waited. Mrs. Ramirez was so nervous she constantly worked her memory in the back seat of the car and in the dark of her bedroom. Cassette tapes and CD’s that would play over and over, who was the 34th president? Dwight D. Eisenhower. Her thick accent sounding nothing like the robotic female voice asking the questions.

“You have to sound just like the robot if you want to pass,” Rosa told her.

When the time came Rosa asked Maria to drive Rosa and Mrs. Ramirez to the immigration office for the test. Mrs. Ramirez wore a red jacket, a scratchy thing she purchased from a corner thrift store. Rosa was proud, and her mother looked her best for the exam.

“Thank you Mija for driving us. It’s all been happening so fast,” Mrs. Ramirez said to Maria.

“Of course, no problem. Suerte,” Maria said, smiling from the wheel.
Mrs. Ramirez continued. “It’s been twenty-five years since I came on my two little feet on a work visa. You know, I never told Rosa this, but I walked from Guerrero to the border with my visa in one hand and dreams in the other,” she said, laughing. “I did everything the right way. The acceptable way.”

Rosa held back her disdain for her mother for saying acceptable.

Maria parked and told Rosa she would wait here in the car.

Rosa guided her mother into the downtown department building. More waiting. They sat in hard old wooden chairs that could barely hold their weight. They waited to be interrogated.

“Do you know how Dad received citizenship?” Rosa asked her mother.

“I didn’t want to say anything in front of your friend because you never know if they have it,” Mrs. Ramirez said. “Dad had passed his test during Reagan amnesty in the 80’s.”

“Really? He’s never said a word.”

“He doesn’t like talking about it. He snuck in through the border in a blue truck hiding with five other men.”

Rosa imagined the musty car rumbling in fear as it approached the border.

“Dad didn’t cross like I did,” Mrs. Ramirez said. “The guy next to your dad started shaking in panic and your dad held that man next to him down. Suffocating him till he passed out, can you believe it?”

Rosa looked around at everyone in the waiting room to see if anyone else had heard her mother’s revelation.

Her mother’s leg was shaking. “Don’t tell your dad I told you and don’t even think about sharing our business with your friend. You hear me?”
“Yes mom,” Rosa agreed.

“The things we will do to get here,” Mrs. Ramirez said. She straightened her shirt. “How do I look?”

“You’re going to do great, Mom.”

The front secretary called her name. There were no more papers to fill out. Her mother disappeared into a hall. Rosa was relieved and she went to join Maria outside.

Maria was leaned against her black Honda. “How’s your mom doing?”

“She’s so nervous she just dropped the biggest bomb on me.”

“No way. What happened?”

Rosa shared the story. Maria’s eyes widened and she laughed.

“Wow. Your dad might be a spy.”

Rosa laughed too. “Is it weird if I’m proud of him?”

“I have no idea.”

“Thanks again for driving us. This means a lot.”

“Of course,” Maria repeated. “I’ve been seeing Ramon.”

Rosa was shocked. “For how long?”

“Since the visual. It’s been going pretty great. I think something is finally going to stick with him.”

Rosa was disappointed. “I thought you wanted to be done with him?”

“Life is precious,” Maria said. “Juan is gone. Look at your mom. I don’t feel like denying my feelings.”

Rosa didn’t know what to say. For months, she’d been trying to forget about Juan’s visual. “Well, if you’re happy,” she said.

Maria nodded.
An hour later, Mrs. Ramirez ran out cheering. She passed the test. She was a U.S. Citizen. Rosa felt relief. She thought about this joy and the security it would bring her family and then she thought of Juan and the guilt she felt after she saw him in that bathroom after failing him and how sorry she felt. There was no security for him.

“I want to eat a hamburguesa con queso,” Mrs. Ramirez said.

Rosa’s mother rolled down the window and as soon as Maria merged on the freeway she heard her mother shout into the wind, “Estoy aqui. Aqui, ven ha garame migra.”

Maria laughed. Rosa watched as the cars zoomed past her blurry vision, her eyes swelling with tears.

Rosa’s family shared nothing of Mrs. Ramirez’ accomplishment. No family was told, no friend on the block, there was no gloating. Her father said it would it be in bad taste as many of the people in the community had no papers.

Rosa didn’t understand why they should hide something so monumental. Trump had been in office for years now and Rosa thought it was time to do something. Rosa boasted about her mother in pride. Maria told her mother, who then told her pastor at a different church, who told the pastor at the church her parents attended. People began to talk and one day in the white building where her family went to church, while Rosa was sitting in the back hiding her phone in the bible, her mother made a speech from the pulpit. She was vague, jumping around without saying anything concrete, she just thanked god for all that he had done for her.

When Mrs. Ramirez took her seat a round woman sitting across from her started to shout, “You don’t know. No sabes lo que es luchar.” Her scrunched face stared at Mrs. Ramirez waiting for an answer.
Mrs. Ramirez’ hands went in the air in protest, her wrinkles falling to the sound of the church member.

“No trabajas en el campo. Tú no luchas,” the woman said, shaking her feet and crossing her arms.

Rosa was sitting in back, she looked up from her phone. She was angry for her family but Rosa felt her chest opening as she sat in the back of the church like an opened wound. For the entirety of the service Rosa let the woman’s words pour into her chest like salt on a wound.

Rosa fled from the church. She ran into the street and ran so far and long that when she was staring at the grape fields, she had no choice but to collapse and cry. Rosa had only learned shame from the bible and criticism from its servants and then she thought about the past. It warped and shaped under memory to one party when she had failed Juan.

That night the carne asada lingered from eight o’clock at night to one a.m. Saturday. The air cool but just the right amount to wear loose tank tops and small shorts. Rosa showed up to the party with Maria and Lupe hoping to see Juan and some of the other guys. She hoped he’d get drunk, follow her around like a puppy, and steal a kiss. Instead, he stayed next to his homies laughing and dancing on a low coffee table babysitting one cup of beer.

“Talk to him more,” Lupe said to Rosa, nudging her to his direction.

Maria snorted and drank more of her beer. “Ya right. She’s never gonna do it.”

“I will. I just need more of this,” Rosa pointed at her butt, laughing.

“No, you don’t. You need to get over it,” Maria said, placing her beer on the burgundy carpet next to her foot.
“I don’t know how.” Rosa looked down and then once more at dancing Juan. His white shirt clinging to his thin frame with sweat. She left the group, wandered around the house and sat outside drunk. She could hear the loud music booming from inside the house and she wanted to go home and lay in her bed, under a thick blanket, and daydream herself to sleep. She thought about how warm she would feel and how badly she needed to use the restroom. She wandered back inside, her beer swirling in her cup and the music loud in her ears. She pushed past drunk leaning guys on the wall and tried opening the bathroom door, but it was locked. She knocked hard and started jiggling the cheap lock. “Aye,” she said. “Who’s in here? I have to pee. Open. Open!”

Rosa jiggled it open and pushed herself in. “Sorry,” she said. “I’ve been drinking. I need to pee.” She looked up and saw Juan. He startled her, she took a step back, his hand raised holding a red lipstick, lips cracked, his hand shaking in midair.

Juan set the lipstick down and instantly apologized. “Sorry,” he said. “Sorry.” He moved frantically towards the door.

Rosa confused and then realizing, she smiled at him. “It helps if you use chapstick,” she said. “And go like this,” she stretched her lower lip flat.

He rubbed the sweat off his hands on his pants. “I’m leaving now.”

Rosa put her hand up. “Wait, don’t you wanna try it?”

“Nah it’s cool,” he rubbed his hands on his pants again.

Rosa smiled at him. “C’mon try it.”

He opened the lip case and flattened his lower lip. The red color shining beautifully with his brown face.

“Wow,” Rosa said, shaking her leg. “It looks nice.”
Juan set it down and looked at himself in the mirror. “Can I tell you something?”

_No. I gotta pee_, Rosa wanted to say. “Sure,” she said, jumping up and down a little.

“I want to go out like this,” he said. “Do you think I should?”


Juan put the lipstick down on the sink gently. He wet a piece of toilet paper and rubbed his face clean. He pushed past her.

Rosa sat on the toilet and peed. Not thinking.

Later, Rosa found Maria and Ramon at the kitchen table playing kings cup. She walked over eyeing Maria and Lupe laughing with excitement. People pushed in and out of the patio. The air hot making the girls stop dancing and go search for water.

Ramon called out. “Aye what’s up? You enjoying the party?”

“Yeah it’s fun,” Rosa responded, avoiding eyes as she spoke. “How much beer is left?”

“I don’t know,” Ramon said, throwing his hands up when cumbia started playing over the loud speaker. “Aye too much for us to finish,” he said, laughing.

Rosa linked her arm with Lupe’s and looked over her shoulder looking for Juan. “Y tu cousin?”

“Oh, he’s gone. Something about not wanting to be more tired than he is for work.”

“He’s still doing construction?” Rosa asked.

“Yeah still, he says he doesn’t like it,” Lupe said, looking at Ramon.
“Can’t imagine what it’s like. Do you think he’ll find a new job?”

“Why would he?” said Ramon.

Rosa looked around once more for Juan. “I don’t know? If he hates it, shouldn’t he find work he likes?”

“Does anyone like the work they have?” Ramon said and looked over to Maria.

“What about you? You still working at the dentist office?”

Maria moved closer to Ramon gripping her red cup and laughing. “Yeah still, that shit sucks.”

Ramon laughed. A white light beamed from outside. The music stopped. Three words boomed into the space. Oh, shit cops! Rosa panted and ran towards the fence, then she left for home.

When she got to the front gate it was locked. She walked to the alley to climb the back fence. She was surprised to see Juan there in the dark of the alley. His skinny arms gave him away.

“Hey!” he shouted.

“Oh, fuck you scared me. What is the matter with you, why are you in the alley?” It was late and he was carrying a big backpack.

“My dad is in there with some woman and I don’t want him to see.”

“See what?”

“Nothing.”

Rosa was still drunk. “What’s up with you?”

“What do you mean?” Juan gripped his backpack.

“I mean we never see you anymore and I like seeing you.”
Juan dropped his backpack. “Can you do something for me? You’ve lived on this block longer than anyone. Can you hide this backpack for me?”

“Well what’s in it?”

“Can you keep it?”

“Well what’s in it? Why can’t Ramon keep it? Or Lupe?”

“Because they’re nosy.”

Rosa thought for a second. “Who were you going to give it to before I showed up?”

Juan looked irritated. “Look just bury it in your yard and I’ll come swoop it when I can.”

“When will that be? And why can’t I just put in my room or something?”

“So, you’ll do it?” Juan’s voiced sounded rushed.

“What are you keeping from your dad?”

“It’s not my dad I’m scared of.”

Rosa was still drunk. She agreed to the burial of the backpack. Juan helped her hop the fence to her backyard and she gave him a shovel. In the morning, Rosa went to see where Juan had buried his backpack, but the shovel was missing, no dirt patch, no sign of a backpack burial.

In the grape field, Rosa thought about Juan’s death, his suicide. That night she saw him, she felt powerful, like now he would owe her, and she hated the thought. She had been so obsessed with him and she felt so much shame from machismo, from the church, from herself. Here, looking through the straight line of the field she had no
choice but to face it. She reached for a grape, they were so little. Not ready. Her hands would not be the ones to pick this fruit.

It was not a big town but not a small one either. There was enough smog for all the residents to breathe and feel suffocated. She remembered the last time she really talked to Juan. The last time he was Juan. The last time anyone heard his big laugh. The last time she really saw Juan.

At Juan’s visual, Rosa had faced away from the cul-de-sac and towards the houses.

She had placed the photograph she had of Juan on the altar and payed her respects. Rosa rubbed the dirt off the picture to reveal a toddler jumping into a pool with a Spiderman suit on. She took out her red pen and painted in his lips very thinly. She cried, let out a small hiccup, her mind on two words. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry.

Ramon talked and looked beyond everyone’s heads in the group, looking to the sky. “I remember when he used to dance at the parties. I think I’m going to miss that the most. He was so cool. I think I wanted to be like him more than anything.”

Rosa admired his honesty. Lupe walked over and placed marigolds on each side of the altar next to the fence almost like a landing strip. For you my cousin, her note said.

The candles stayed on the lot for two months before the dirt made the altar unrecognizable. The candles were in rows one red, one white, one red, one white, all extinguished.
The Drive Thru and The Taco Truck

A line of cars moved gradually towards the golden arches. The lunch-hour drive-thru line was wrapped around the block. I was a twenty-two-year-old pothead in need of a Big Mac. The ordering went smooth: One Big Mac please, with only one pickle, small fries (because economy), one small iced coffee, that’d be all. Thanks!

I pressed the brake pedal and lit up the last bit of my joint. I had just really begun to make a habit of smoking a joint in the middle of day out of boredom. The ash fell into my lap and sprinkled black spots on my yellow shirt. I wiped the ash from my shirt, smearing the ash. What looked like little spots of black now appeared to be black handprints on my shirt. What a mess. A McDonald’s worker came out of the EXIT door and hauled hamburger bun racks to the trash can. One by one, giant plastic bags of buns flew into the garbage.

Two windows opened. Mine and then the cashiers. Her red striped hat stained with sweat. Her arm reached out of the window holding a card reader. She told me the total. She bent her arm resting it on the window ledge. Was the card reader heavy? I inserted my card. “That can’t be good for your arm,” I told her.
She sighed. Her hat moving up and down as she nodded her head. “I’m getting used to it,” she said. “It’s a new policy.”

My card declined. We tried again. The bank declined again. She took back the reader handing me my card. I was embarrassed. My thought process was slower than I wanted it to be. I fetched my wallet for some cash. We all need one moment to strike us into the present.

She waved me forward. “No need. I just bought it for you,” she said and closed the window.

I drove forward and collected my warm bag food at the second window. It seemed bizarre to me that someone who didn’t know my name would do such a kind thing for me. I wondered if she was an angel undercover at the downtown McDonalds. As I drove away, I saw under the golden arches a man sleeping on a backpack. Who in this world is in charge of mercy?

In November the weather drops just below thirty degrees and I was wearing sandals. For dinner, it was the same situation only this time my mom insisted she’d come with me. I was a pothead in need of asada tacos from my favorite taco truck. While back in my hometown I had spent most of my time waiting to get stoned or trying to hide that I was stoned. I had come back home after losing my job, and I really wanted to figure out how I could sleep for more than five hours a night.

I trembled my way to the front of the line. My feet looked like pink frozen chicken inside of my sandals.

My mother continued talking, “Do you have a plan? You need a plan. In this world if you’re a girl you need to have a plan. I learned that the hard way. I did. You don’t know a lot about my life, but let me tell you, I had a plan. What is your plan?”
“To get these tacos, Mom,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Girls with plans own taco trucks,” Mamá said.

“Fine that’s my plan. I’ll own a taco truck.”

“That’s a horrible plan,” she said.

We reached the front window. I ordered for the two of us. Hola, can we please have two tacos de asada one with cilantro and the other with extra onions and four tacos de lengua to go please, thank you. The cashier handed me a piece of paper with the number 54 written on it. Me and Mamá scootched over and let the remaining line make their food orders.

I wanted so badly to be an observer in the smog sky and have the ability to push the blackness out of the way to create a chunk of true blue in the sky. When I look down and see the land, what catches my eyes is the soda cans strewn across the valley, these are the stars on earth. But there are no such people and what is real is the smog collecting over the valley reminding us the sky is painted gray.

I sat on a ledge and immediately regretted it after I felt the cold concrete on my body. It wouldn’t be long now for the food and we would be in the car once again with the warmth.

Mamá sat down next to me. She was wearing a big puffy jacket. “You have no plans to even bring clothes to keep you warm,” she said. She untied her shoes, took off her socks, leaned towards me and pushed her socks onto my cold feet. Her socks were wet and warm like she had been wearing them all day.

When I heard our number, I collected the warm bag of tacos and we ate them on the curb.
A wedding is uprooting me to the motherland. Mamá and I are leaving from Belmont Street, to Guerrero, Mexico. It’s early June, summer is just beginning to show its heat and to me that’s good weather compared to the 110 degrees it reaches in July. Our home is proof of this. Stuffy and cluttered with boxes ready to be shipped to a land unfamiliar.

Before we go, Mamá sits me down and tells me, “When we go to el mar you have to read people’s minds.” My first thought is that people don’t live in the sea. But I soon realize that she’s speaking in code. “We are not going to stay with tío Gabriel like we usually do,” she tells me.

“At all? Will we visit him at his home?”

She shakes her head no. This is the end of the conversation. “Come,” she says, “I’m going to teach you how to be useful.”

I follow her to the backyard where the water hose is twisted around a Home Depot bucket like a snake.
“When we go to el mar there will be a well,” she says. “No water hoses. Fill the jugs with water and water the plants like this.” She points her hand in the direction of the trees. She moves her hand like she’s imitating a fish swimming.

“Do the plants look different where we are going? Do they look like our plants?”

“Oh course, they look like plants,” she says.

I hold the water hose in my hand as it pours into the bucket, I imagine what a trip to a well will sound like. I have never seen a well. When the bucket fills, I carry it to the foot of my papá’s large avocado tree. I pour it straight towards the bark of the tree.

“If you’re going to do it wrong, I’ll do it myself,” Mamá shouts.

“You said to pour it. I’m pouring it.”

“Like this mensa, you have to pour like you’re making a pool of water. The tree gets more nutrients this way.” Mamá waters the mango tree. The water she pours creates a ring around the tree. The base already muddy from yesterday’s water.

When she finishes, I place the ladder Pá uses to pick fruit against the wooden fence. This fence separates our backyard from the alley. Between home and something else. From the top of the ladder I see a pink plastic pool leaned against a wired fence, foreclosure signs strewn throughout the alley, two upside down grocery carts, Hanes underwear hanging from a light pole, and broken-down cardboard boxes. Backyards to one alley.

A dusty pink empty pool leaning against a wired fence on a hot day like this is a shame. That is not being useful. Our fence is just wires bare with no plastic in-between. The whole world can see our backyard. Can someone fill up that pool and let me sit in the pool under a tree? But I don’t want the task of filling it up. Pour after pour. I just want to watch it be filled.
Mami has been nesting for a year for the wedding. Beaming with joy. When she cleans, watches TV, and even in her sleep she’s always saying, “I’m going back to mi tierra.” I think it has become her mantra.

The wedding is all planned out. All we have to do is arrive. But my mother loves drama. El chisme too. The truth is her sobrino is a playboy. I know this because he always calls Mamá begging for money to take out his girlfriends. Visiting Mexico is like blowing bubbles. It’s a mixture of place and family. A beautiful small sphere of joy and excitement but there is always a pop.

The recession is in full swing and everyone is losing their jobs and their homes left and right. Papá is staying behind to meet with lawyers and save our home. Really, my playboy primo’s wedding could not have come at a better time.

Mamá shouts for me. I pay attention to the last of her reprimand. “This is what I’m talking about! Laziness. When we go to el mar remember to be useful.”

I’m traveling with Mamá to see her nephew—my primo, get married. I’m practicing my Spanish so that my mother’s family doesn’t make fun of me. I saw them a couple years ago. Hola mucho gusto verlos. “It’s important that we visit Mexico,” Mamá reminds me. Hola mucho gusto verlos. Puedo ayudarte? I’m not supposed to mention my uncle. The previous visit was cut short and we didn’t even have time to pack our mosquito nets. Hola mucho gusto verlos. Puedo ayudarte? Yo se como regar. We returned early because Mamá pissed someone off. It always happens this way. Returning home is a planned commitment.

☆ ☆ ☆ ☆
Now we’re in Mexico only exchanging one kind of heat for another. I spend most of my time in Guerrero eyeing the world from a mosquito net. Tia’s house in Mexico is beautiful and vast. A concrete house sitting on top of a hill. I help clean and water the plants all summer. Trying to keep it together and hold it down. A day before the wedding, Mamá wakes me up before the sun rises and tells me she’s going to do something important. She asks me not to mention her and to just be useful around tía’s house while she’s gone.

“Where are you going?” I ask her.

“Do what I tell you and be useful.”

I am outside pouring water on the cacti when my cousin calls me from the hill. El monte. “What are you doing prima?” he yells. He is a thin man with a deep voice.


“What?” he yells back. He can’t hear me. “I’m going to the bridal store,” he announces. Manolo runs down the hill and stops in front the water jugs. “You should come with,” he says. Manolo is a man working in Acapulco making money to help pay for the wedding. I know two things about this wedding. The first is that the bride’s family has her on lock down. We’re talking, can-only-leave-the-house-in-the-afternoon-if-an-older-sibling-goes-with-her kind of lock down. I place my hands on my hips.

“I’m watering,” I answer, handing him a water jug.

“No,” he says. “I need to pick up the dress and then pick my tía up from the pueblo.”

I hold in my breath. “What’s my mom doing over there?”

He shakes his head, “She didn’t say. Only that I need to be there by six and to bring the truck.”
My heart drops. That’s the second thing I know about this wedding. That my mother was going to make the day an extremely uncomfortable reunion. Here’s the story, Mamá has six siblings all together. Three sisters and two brothers all with the same mama and one brother no one will mention. Mamá visits him in Acapulco every time she comes down to Mexico. To visit all of her family. She loves her brother. Even sends him clothes from America. The thing is not all of the siblings know mama visits tío Gabriel. Yes, Gabriel is her brother, but he is not a brother to the rest of her sibling clan. Not a brother who was invited to the wedding. At least not by the bride or groom.

Manolo places the water can on the ground. The thump raises the dirt into the air. “So, are you coming?” he asks.

“I don’t think so,” I say, continuing to water the plants. It is one thing to be raised by a woman who doesn’t care about social boundaries and it is another thing to be accomplice to the chaos. “I’m going to wait for mama here,” I say. I want to disappear into the plants, into the soil, deep into the roots to be decomposed of properly and be as far away from the surface and be mantle. Away from this mess.

Manolo takes off his hat and holds it with both his hands in front of him. “After I pick up the dress I’m picking up your mom in el pueblo. Come. It’s your second to last day. Come see the land,” he says.

Another adult speaking in code telling me I’m not old enough to stay alone in this house. I think about what I would be doing in Fresno right now. In this moment I could be roaming the park looking for plastic bottles, cleaning the garage, riding a scooter to the corner store, smashing cans, swimming in chlorine water, or tending to the garden in the backyard. I embrace being close to earth. The last time we came to el mar, to my tio’s house, I spent my time swimming. I think about the yard at my tio’s
house that is closed off by a chicle stand. If I go with my primo will I see my uncle’s yard?

While we wait downtown at the spot where Mamá will meet us I watch a fountain pour out water from two mouths of what looks like angel babies. It’s a nearly empty plaza. Manolo sits outside a taqueria drinking a beer with a waitress. They talk, laugh, Manolo’s hand on her leg. I’m the first to see Mamá. She walks up to the taqueria with tío Gabriel. I knew it. Mamá doesn’t drive so I don’t know how she got here. From my seat in the truck I can see she’s smiling. She’s beaming all her teeth are showing and everything. I sink into my sweaty sticky seat. I rub my eyes. One baby seems to have run out of water. El centro is silent. I guess Friday does that no matter where you are.

The white puffy dress in the back twitches against the wind. I watch Mamá greet her nephew and he shakes the hand of my uncle. When they reach the car, they climb in, Manolo hangs his arm out the window and slaps the door of his truck before he starts the car. “We’re going back home,” he yells.

Tío Gabriel and Mamá are dusty and sweaty. Tío Gabriel joins me in the backseat. He looks older I can see more gray hairs in his beard.

I sink into my seat and I don’t greet anyone. I look at Mamá. Terrified. I know she keeps in close contact with her brother. Always has. She knows him well. Before we left Belmont Street, she told me the story, “El me busca,” she said. It was him who sought out a relationship with my mother and they met and became family before I was born.

Tío Gabriel lives in Acapulco on a steep hill next to the ocean. When I was younger, I would stand on the porch of his house and look out into the ocean until it was sky. Hang my arms high and let the wind pull my white cotton outfit. In the
afternoon, I’d help his daughter sell chicle in a blue shed store in front of his yard. Every yard is different. Ours on Belmont Street has two sides to the yard. One side is green grass and the other is brown sandy desert. A garage connects to a patch of grass where four different trees, avocado, peach, mango, and orange live. The biggest tree lives near a wooden fence a full-grown avocado tree. I know the avocado tree well. I know what it will do and when it will do it. I think it’s the neighborhood’s favorite too, because of the way the avocado tree looms over into the alley. Makes it easy for the neighbors to come, reach up, and take some avocados. This is the alley I pass through when I want a different route home. I like watering the plants in Mexico because it reminds me of my home.

There is one more thing to understand. In Mexico, my mother is a whole person who blooms because she is in the motherland. She says that here there’s more room to breathe, space to roam, and a language we all speak. Here, she is who she is without any barrier. She can jump right in. Beat into beat, and she’s never been a woman to waste time.

Manolo waves goodbye to the waitress who is cleaning up the table they were just sitting at. He turns to face my uncle—his uncle. “Why do you look familiar to me?” He says.

“This is your tío Gabriel,” Mamá says, smiling. “He’s also a brother in the clan.” She removes her sun hat and throws it to me in the backseat. I play with the rim with my sweaty fingers. Manolo grips the steering wheel. He looks confused.

My mom repeats herself. “This is your tío Gabriel. He’s coming to your wedding. I invited him.”
Tío Gabriel takes off his hat. “We just came from the east. It was a long ride,” he says.

It is about to be, I think to myself. I’m glued by sweat to my seat in the back of this truck, the bride’s dress in-between me and tío Gabriel. Manolo starts the car and the radio starts to blast. He quickly shuts it off. Maybe he is in shock. He has never met his uncle before. I can tell because he’s staring at him through the rear-view mirror. Mamá is sitting in the front seat with her eyes closed pretending to fall asleep.

Manolo starts the car, the angel babies are spitting out water together, and we drive away from the downtown buildings. When we finally stop, it’s to let cows cross the road. Their moos are loud.

“I’m going to pee,” Manolo says, turning the car off.

Sitting in the back of the truck I can see that the dirt hills go on for miles. There are so many hills they slope into each other like big scoops of ice cream. My home has no hills. I want to badly to be in a place I recognize.


The cows are still crossing by when Manolo returns.

“Why are there so many cows here?” I ask.

“There’s a lago here over the montes,” Mamá says.

“I’m very excited to meet everyone and join your wedding it’s an honor,” Tío Gabriel says.
Manolo reaches into his wallet and takes out a picture of a chubby young brown man. He holds up the picture for tío Gabriel to see. “If it means anything, you look a lot like Grandpa,” Manolo says.

I peer out from my seat and for the first time see my grandpa. “You do!” I yelp. The cows finish crossing the road. They moo and eat grass. “Have you met anyone else from the family?” Manalo says, looking at Mamá. “Yes. Clara when I was younger,” Tío Gabriel says. “I’m honored to come to your wedding. Felicidades.”

“That’s my mother,” Manolo says. He looks at me. “Mija. Hold the dress in your lap so that it doesn’t get dirty. Can you do that for me?”

I nod my head yes.

I look at tío Gabriel and smile at him. It is very good to see him. I want to ask him about his yard and my cousin, but the fading blue sky is more interesting. Mamá sleeps the entire ride back to tía’s house.

A green lizard scatters by when we walk into my tía’s concrete house hours later. I follow Mamá into the kitchen where tía and the bride are drinking coffee. I place the wedding dress I’ve been caring on the kitchen table. The bride starts to open the box. A white dress appears.

I walk to the back door, open it, and sit on the top step. The house is on a hill and from here I can see the cacti I watered earlier. I can also see the well where I’ve been collecting water. I start to hear shouting between Mamá and tía.

The back door opens and it’s the bride, Magda. “What are you doing out here by yourself?” she asks me.

“I don’t like Mamá’s voice when she shouts.”
“Me either,” she says, plopping down next to me.

The light from the window makes a light square on the steps.

“Have the mosquitos been eating your legs?”

I shake my head yes. I stick out my leg showing her the bite marks. I try to look her in the eye, “Are you in love?”

Magda’s hair is curly and bouncy, ready for the wedding. She pushes it behind her ears revealing little hoop earrings. She takes them off and clasps them together, the earrings now look like the number eight.

“You know how there’s a net over your bed protecting you? So, the mosquitos don’t eat your legs? Well this is like that.”

She places the earrings in the palm of my hand. “Even with the net the mosquitos still eat my legs,” I say.

She nods her head, stands up, and dusts off her skirt. “Yes,” she says. “Even with a shield they still eat.”

She enters the house. There is no more shouting. This small square of light on the concrete steps leads my eye to the darkness where I know the yard I have been watering all summer lives. If I could pick up the light square and place it right where the darkness meets the plants, then all through the night a small portal of light would hover over a plant world. How comforting that would be to know that a hole filled with nature sits before the darkness. But I can’t see past the concrete steps and if I had a light square then the mosquitos would find me and bite me while I water my plants and who would water in my place? The light square on the steps disappears. The stars the only light for miles. I think about Belmont Street. How different this land is to the one I call home. I know there is a route to get back home, but I can’t imagine it really exists.
We are eating birria behind the church after the wedding. None of Mamá’s siblings sit with us at our table. They haven’t spoken to either me, Mamá, or tío Gabriel since the shouting of last night. He slept on the floor next to us. Gabriel volunteered to pass out food plates while the crowd waits for the bride and groom to arrive. People start dancing on the patio and I want to join them. The string of lights above the dance floor so welcoming.

“Why did you invite Uncle Gabriel?” I ask Mamá.

She hushes me and looks behind her back to the table where all her brothers and sisters are sitting. “El me busca and I have lastima for him,” she says.

“What does it mean to have hurt for someone?” I ask. “Why did you bring him like this?”

She starts to play with her plate of birria with a white plastic fork. She lowers her voice, “I’m going to tell you something,” she says. “Something I don’t know either. My father was an angry man. An unsatisfied man. Demons followed him,” she says, clearing her throat, still playing with the food on the plate. “My papa took Gabriel’s mom up into el monte and left him an orphan,” she says. She looks around her before continuing. “I think Gabriel reminds my siblings too much of what the person who raised us is capable of. I’m glad you never met him. He was short.” She flicks off her sandals and stretches her feet.

“What do you mean Grandpa took Uncle Gabriel’s mom?”

Her fork lands on top of the rice. She scoops up a mouthful. “He killed her,” she says, chewing the rice before speaking again. “I told you. Demons followed my father.” She turns her face to the fading sun. “Now everyone is home,” she says.
My favorite cumbia comes on the loudspeaker. People start to cheer. The bride and groom have arrived. Does Manolo water Magda? I feel my heavy hand drop my plastic fork with food onto the tile floor. I can’t eat.

“Are you finished eating? I feel like dancing.” Mamá stacks my full plate of food on top of her empty plate and leaves me alone at the table. I feel visible and like my head is being operated on by the things I’m seeing across the dance floor. Mamá pulls two chairs to the table where all her siblings are eating. She waves over tío Gabriel they both join the table.

I’m thirsty. If I collect all the water from the well, the jugs, the small lakes we drove past, the filtered water we bought from the store, the lakes I wasn’t allowed to swim in, the downtown fountain, I suppose I could make the sea. Suppose then that the sea was following me. Or that I could collect a sea and use it to feed all the trees in every yard I came across. When we go to el mar, Mamá had said, remember to be useful. I need to finish by telling you how I discovered that the route home is something you invent.

We left the next day. Summer was over. Papá called and told us about the house. I knew what we were losing. The route home is a labyrinth. I stood in front of our house on Belmont Street with Mamá. I hooked my fingers into the fence. A For Sale sign posted in the middle of the front yard. Mamá reached for my arm and I realized that I was taller than her. I stood on my tippy toes trying to see the backyard and my avocado tree.
One tree in the future grew grotesque fruit. The fruit a combination of oranges, lemons, and plums. It was large, uneatable, and rotten before it could plop itself to the earth below.

Garbage Battery Operator #515 was brand new in the work haze. #515 had failed the parasocial test. An assessment used to determine which work region individuals would be placed in. The test was, reach a percentage of social following acceptable in the test-taker’s current living region to become a potential influencer. With an accepted following, influencers were placed in categories based on what they could market, and were rehomed in cities with breathable air and populations greater than one hundred. In regions with no work haze.

During a standard route Garbage Battery Operator #515 was working in an alley #AB800 when he stepped in a large fruit. His foot slid in, the juice squirting out, the peel completely covering the top of his boot like a shield. The goo splattered and sank through the holes on his boot soaking his socks. Having not remembered the smell of
fruit, #515 lowered himself to the ground and smelled his boot. *It smells like orange,* he thought.

He quickly scrunched up his nose. The smell of the rotten orange was not unpleasant but pungent. Like odor sealed in place.

The smell so strong, it warped #515’s vision. In his mind the imprint of the machine collecting garbage tech remained. With his eyes closed and nostrils filled with decaying fruit, #515 fell out of the work haze. It was of no fault of his own.

The work haze had been designed by coders to dilute the senses of workers who were assigned “undesirable working conditions.” The work haze was a new invention to lower the awareness of low breathable air in sections of California that housed the data servers for corporations with a net worth greater than twelve trillion.

Garbage Battery Operator #515 picked his nose trying to get the smell of the grotesque fruit out but instead found black boogers. It was too late the smell had reached his brain. When he looked up, he saw the gray sky that had replaced the daytime sky. He could see the technology sheet patches used to repair the ozone layer. Without the work haze #515 remembers the use of memory, *Night sky. Stars. Bring bright. Where have they gone?*

Then #515 saw a young person across the alley holding a mop—an artifact. He was confused, all cleaning was now done by machines.

He heard his own voice. “Are you testing?”

The garbage machine was busy squashing tech equipment. Workers were tethered to their assigned machines to *feel* when the machine needed attention. Although it was not needed, the physical attachment was a part of the perks provided under the work haze. *Person.* He ejected himself from the garbage machine. He chased
the young person down the server alley, passing three story block servers, on-signal lights blinking as he ran past the servers, he watched the ground, more decaying oranges, the young person crawled through a hole in a server block, he followed them through a crawlspace and then #515 reached a patch of green enclosed by a wall of servers, it was a square made from black walls and a tree growing deformed oranges inside the patch of green. Grass.

He saw what must have been a group of young testers. Did data sectors have influencers? They waved at him. Waving. #515 raised his hand and faced his palm to the young testers like a hand pressed to glass.

His voice a squeak. “Are you testing?”

The person he followed copied his mouth, it came out like a question, “testing?”

“Is this part of your parasocial test?”

The young humans looked at #515 and they hesitantly nodded yes. He breathed out but he didn’t understand why he felt relief. A young person came up to him and tore an orange open. The smell of rotten fruit returned.

He felt the headache that came with raw work. Then he saw the young testers place one orange on top of their heads. Juice dripped down their coveralls. Who would follow influencers that lived in data sectors?

#515 missed his machine. The garbage machines were stored in hangars with their operators. Operators slept in quarters next to the machine and where they plugged into twelve-hour sleep and fluid packs, another perk of the work haze.

Between two server walls was a clothing line. Each person was hanging mop heads onto the line. The mops dripped fluid. Water. #515 saw a row of blue mop heads
being hanged by the young testers, it looked like three parallel lines. The young, the oranges on their heads, the blue mops above them, a border being sealed in place.

“I’m going,” he said.

The work haze was beginning again. The work haze was a choice. An allusion of breathable air or the experience of raw work. Side effects include diluted memory and impulse to work. Choice can be renewed every three years. No operator can opt out of choice.


Beep. Battery empty.

The orange goo was still on his shoe when Garbage Battery Operator #515 returned to his route. The machine was shut down mid-work. He plugged himself to the garbage machine. His job was very simple: Press start on the machine, follow behind while the machine collects tech garbage, reload new battery to load the machine with power. Each day, he walked the long-numbered alleys trailing behind a machine. Like order sealed in place.
Outside I can hear older kids coming home from school, as I am waiting for mamá and papá to come home. There is a wave of laughter and silence that is then followed by the sound of closing doors.

The main house door creaks open and I look out from my hiding spot, mamá is the first to walk in. She’s carrying a basket filled with dirty towels and cleaning supplies. I can see papá dragging himself behind her, his hands stained with dirt. I overhear them talking about the usual things: grocery shopping, bug spray, and tomorrow’s houses. They look so tired.

Mamá walks into the kitchen and reaches for the broom, she starts talking to herself. “No más 30 dolares hoy, no más 30, no más 30.”

“¿Quieres que te haga algo? Eggs? Has comido?” No, I’m not allowed to come out when you are not home, I want to remind her, but I step out and remain silent. She paces around the kitchen, a few bugs scurry away as she passes by.
Papa walks in and I can see him stumble as he reaches the chair next to the table. I watch him sit down, wobble in his chair, and open the bag where the bread is kept.

“Que te hago?” mamá asks papá, while washing her dry hands. She reaches for the comal by the sink, passing it through the water before she uses it.

I look down in shame and see my toe from the clear tape around my shoe.

“Te estoy hablando, quieres comer sí o no? No tengo la paciencia, I also have to clean our house.” There’s annoyance in her voice, she’s right her patience is gone but she doesn’t stop sweeping the tile.

“Un huevo está bien y también café si lo puedes,” papá answers.

I try and hold my tongue, all I have to do is ask for shoes and they’ll give, I know it. I stand between both my parents, between the kitchen and the table.

She looks at me. “Quieres comer? Tell me now, que quieres que te haga? No mas dime.”

I want my toe to stop hurting. I don’t want to eat. I want new shoes. She walks over to my dad and nudges him, gently setting the coffee down in front of him. Quiero zapatos, I want to tell her.

I remember lullabies from when she used to sing me to sleep, her sincere voice whispering to me, “I’ll do anything for you.” I wrap myself in guilt and turn to ask papi but I can’t. He’s nodding off, dunking a stale piece of bread into his coffee.
Before the sun breaks, Dolores wakes up, silently moves to the bathroom to not wake Santiago. She feels the cold tile send shivers up her body, the rust scarping her toes. The house is quiet, but outside cars roar past and loud neighbors start to wake up. She begins making breakfast and is careful to make each meal different for the girls. She creeps back into her bedroom and starts to panic when she sees the clock. It’s five am, she and Santiago will have to leave soon to get to the fields. She calls his name out and he grunts.

“Ya levantate. Ya es tiempo,” she says.

“Que hora es?” he says, opening one eye awake. He looks at the clock, it’s early still and he lays back and dozes off again.

“Ya basta, es tiempo.” Dolores curses under her breath for sounding like her mother. Santiago gets up and looks at the pile of dirty work clothes on his nice chair.
“You didn’t wash them last night.” He looks at her with a face of irritation. She glares back at him because he knows she can barely understand English. Her tiredness and lazy husband hover over the morning, it’s time to go to the fields.

“Cuando les vas a decir?” Santiago asks her, stretching his hairy legs. Dolores looks around the small room, wincing at the thought of leaving her home. She bought her house when she first came to America. It was her investment after leaving her shack in Mexico. One day the faded walls will be yellow, como el sol. It takes too long to live in the city and travel to the fields and be on time for work. It is no longer practical.

Her daughters won’t be happy about the move. Xiomara is twelve now and Juana is eighteen. This was the palace Dolores made after her childhood in Mexico and she wants to give her daughters more than the dirt floors she once had.

The house is hidden between apartment buildings, vibrating every time a car drives past. A fragile reminder of an American success story Dolores knew she is. This rusty home was supposed to be a gift to her daughters. A castle made out of Mexican stones.

“Cuando les vas ha decir?” Santiago asks again.

“Hoy,” she says, taking in a deep breath. Dolores walks out of the room in hopes of it being the end of the conversation. She knows her daughters won’t want to move and leave their friends behind. She hates the repeated thought of her daughters seeing Dolores like an exposed wound of disappointment.

Dolores comes through the hall to the kitchen and eats the tortilla she made with her eggs. She hurries, not wanting to make her and Santiago late and be forced to stay
another hour under the unforgiving sun. She leaves two empty bowls out for the girls on the table with two bananas. She looks for her visor and finds it next to Santiago’s keys. “Ya vamonos,” she says. She catches a whiff of Santiago and smells his stink. She makes a mental note to wash his clothes when they return. They creep away silently into a world coming to light and close the house door behind them.

After a day’s work, Dolores and Santiago drag in the smell of burnt clothes. Grapes are the hardest to pick. They wobble into the house tired from the long day of crouching.

“Juana limpiaste el baño?” Dolores asks, wiping her face with a wash cloth.

“Si ya lo hice y Xo tambien limpio.” Juana looks up from the dishes and gestures a soapy elbow at Xiomara whose sitting in the living room.

“Xiomara limpio? Tu no mas debes de ser la única haciendo la limpieza. Ella necesita hacer su tarea.”

Dolores relies heavily on her eldest daughter. She believes that it is the oldest’s responsibility to lend support to the mother. Dolores favors her youngest, her special doll. I’m lucky to have a light daughter, she thinks. Dolores wants Xo’s attention to be on her homework for her future. Dolores designed Xiomara from a light complexioned father.

“She’s old enough to do chores Ma,” Juana says, while rinsing off a plate.

“No me maltrates,” Dolores says, her firm voice echoing into the house. “Ven a sentarte.” She grabs the remote and changes the channel to Spanish, lowering down the volume. “Tenemos que hablar.”

Xo moves to sit next her older sister barely understanding what her mother is saying.
“Encontramos una casa más cerca al trabajo,” Dolores says, looking for Santiago. Since entering the home, he has disappeared into the fridge for beer and pancakes. She calls out to him and he joins her on the couch beer in hand. Dolores continues, “Es del mismo tamaño que éste, está cerca del aire libre.” She pauses, waiting for a reaction.

“We’re moving?” Juana asks, clenching her fists.

Dolores can sense she’s angry.

“I’m not going. Xo and I are staying here, you can’t make me leave. I’m old enough,” Juana snaps.

Xo looks at her sister, confused, waiting for a translation.

“Ma, we have school here our friends are here. There is nothing in that town.”

Juana shakes her head in anger allowing tears to fall.

Dolores sighs and holds Santiago’s hand. “Nos vamos en un mes y tu si vas a venir.” Her stern voice holds. They’re moving and that’s final. It is like an echo in the soon to be empty house. Santiago and Dolores walk through the small hallway into their bedroom. Santiago lays in their bed, still wearing his dirty clothes, he begins slowing falling asleep while Dolores retells him the conversation as if he wasn’t present. On her side of the bed a pile of work clothes he left for her to wash.

Dolores grabs the pile and puts them in the laundry holding the bin tightly. She allows her mind to wander into the dangerous land of memory. She remembers her first date with Santiago. They met in the summer of record-breaking heat and spent their time cruising to the lake, eating tacos, and drinking beer on top of his truck. They joked together that they had invented the saying, *Modelo time,* even though she knew it wasn’t true.
Juana was seven when Dolores began seeing Santiago. After three months, she was pregnant with her second child, Xiomara. Santiago had always wanted children of his own, this was true, but he too had wishes for the future but no guts to complete them. Dolores had craved escape and for the first time in Dolores’ life she feels like she’s learning the consequence of flight.

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In school, Juana learned that housework was once referred to as domestic art. Juana loves a good joke. She spends her afterschool time washing dishes while Xiomara watches English TV. Juana remains glued to the living room after her mother breaks the news of the move. The surrounding towns are like small collections of dust and old soda cans. The crops and rocky dirt cling to your skin begging you to stay. You can see the endless lines of trees and grape vines as you drive past them on the freeway. The lines of solitude now becoming a destination.

That night, Juana slept on the couch staking her claim for the house. Xo creped out of her room and joined Juana. The snores of Dolores and Santiago louder than car backfires from outside.

Juana wipes her eyes and turns her face towards the wall.

“What happens if we move,” Xo asks. Her voice sounds worried and hushed.

“We’re not;” Juana says, shooing Xo back to her bed.

“Ma wants to be closer to work. I’m going to lose all my friends.”

“Listen you’re not going to lose anybody,” Juana’s voice talking over her sister’s, sympathetic and low. “I’m going to make sure of it OK don’t worry.”

“How?” Xo’s low voice starts to crack.
“I’m going to get help, we have to stay. I’ll make sure we stay. I promise.” Juana scoots on the couch making room for Xo. The plastic wrapped couch crackling between the two sisters. Juana wraps the lion blanket around her. “I don’t know how she works out there. I don’t know why she doesn’t just speak English.” Juana’s face turns to the ceiling looking at the faded plastic mangos on the wall. “I don’t want that for me and you.”

“I don’t like how they smell,” Xiomara says, quiet barely audible.

Juana knew she could stay in the city if she wants but she’s worried for Xiomara. Xiomara wouldn’t be able to understand the world around her if Juana wasn’t there. Leaving her is not an option.

“Exactly.” Juana returns to look up at the ceiling laying her head on her pillow.

Juana rubs Xo’s back and silently waits for her to fall asleep. Juana starts to feel anger towards her mother, feeling petty. As she watches Xo sleep, she envies her light features. Her light brown hair more alive than Juana’s thick black hair. This is the life their mother has chosen for them. It’s better than dirt floors, her mother says before asking Juana to clean the house. Xo is never asked to clean, and Juana can feel the indifference her mother feels towards her. She resents her mother for many things, mainly for her ugly sounding name that resembles a man’s. At school the name is butchered, and it makes her feel ugly. Xo’s name is beautiful sounding sweet. Juana knows her mother gave Xo that name with more thought given to it than to her own because it could be changed. Xiomara is not an easy name to say in English, but it can be fixed—adaptable. Juana’s name is stuck in place, like it is being given a task she is forced to live out. Juana covers her sister in another blanket like a burrito. Xo’s
breathing is slow and warm next to her. She listens to the sound of her mother’s snoring in the next room and drops tears into her ear at the sound of each snore.

The mid-morning air is cool and flows into the quiet house with the same ease of as the roaring cars zooming past the house. It’s Saturday and before Juana has to do her chores her first thought is, paint. She changes, picking out old clothes to wear and rushes to be the first in the bathroom to wash her face. She picks the crust out of her eyes and dials the phone.

Lupe answers her voice groggy, “What?”

“Hey,” Juana says, holding the phone with her shoulder. “I’m packing my bag right now let’s try to paint something new.”

“No,” Lupe yawns. “I’m tired. It’s Saturday. No.”

Juana drops her bag on the floor and then looks to see if she woke up Xo. “Yes. Meet me at the Walmart.”

“No. It’s Saturday I’m tired.” Lupe voice is louder and less hoarse.

Juana packs white sheets, masks, and hair ties. “C’mon,” she says. “I’ll buy you a spray can.”

“Cheap or the good stuff?”

“Cheap.”

“You suck,” Lupe smacks her lips. “Alright I’ll be there.”

The screen returns and Juana texts Xo. Hey. Be back in 2 hours. Doors locked. Food in Fridge. Don’t tell mom. Juana leaves sleeping Xo in the room and goes outside to catch the bus.
Juana holds on to the pole and sways with the bus as it rumbles. The bus has a way of moving what feels like hyper speed and then it moves slow like a documentary camera stopping to investigate people’s lives.

She walks to the Walmart and see’s Lupe sitting in the shade, waiting. She gets up and dusted off her pants and hugs Juana.

“Where’s your sis?” Lupe looks behind Juana.

“Home. I left her sleeping.”

Lupe snorts and laughs, “Oh. So, she gets to sleep.”

“Yeah, she does. Let’s do this before the sun get’s too hot.”

They enter the store. The cool air-conditioning meeting their faces before it glides into their shirts and socks. The back of the store is always quiet. The people come in and out of rows of items all stacked messy with shirts hiding behind pastas and misplaced toys in plant holders. It is fitting that the art supplies are next to the garden section. Lupe picks up a cactus flower and holds onto it while they wander to the spray cans.

The spray cans sit in rows trapped in a black cage. The colors huddled together in lines waiting to escape. The bright blue and bright yellow stand out to Juana. The floor worker takes them out of the case and tells them they’ll be at the register.

“Good,” Lupe says. “Let’s go buy them.” She stops walking and grabs Juana’s arm. “Dude,” she says, almost whispering. “Isn’t that your dad?”

Juana turns and sees him. Santiago in muddy clothes holding a tall can of beer. “No. He’s my step dad.”

Lupe hides in the aisle. “Oh, shit what do we do?”

“Nothing,” Juana says and walks out the aisle with her back straight.

Santiago sees her and looks behind her. “Aye. Where the hell is your sister?”
Juana’s hand makes a fist. “At home.”

“Why? Why’d you leave her?”

“I needed paint.”

“So? You needed paint so you left your sister alone?” His voice carries out and people start to store. “Go home and watch her,” he says now at the front of the register. “I have to go back to work and don’t think your mom isn’t going to hear about this.”

Lupe doesn’t speak. Juana watches him walk out of the store. She buys the paint and hands a bag to Lupe, the two walk straight home.

“Did I tell you my mom wants to move us?”

“Is she finally going to go through with it?”

“Looks like it. What a mess,” Juana says, kicking a rock.

“Well what do you want to do?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re eighteen.”

Juana doesn’t answer and for the rest of the walk they talk about boys.

**

Dolores and Santiago return home after a long day of crouching for grapes. It is a full season and the vines are packed. This means a gift into ways, work and an extra crate to bring home—a bounty of grapes for her family. She notices three people standing in Dolores’ living room. Her daughters’ organized faces look reluctantly between Dolores and a tall white woman from their school. Dolores remembers the woman from a parent teacher conference she once attended at the beginning of the
school year. Dolores had to leave work early and she missed out on her pay for the full day.

When they first meet Mrs. Miller she scrunches up her nose when Dolores shakes her hand as if Mrs. Miller can smell the fields on Dolores.

Santiago reaches out and shakes Mrs. Millers peachy hand in politeness. Dolores waits and looks at the teacher standing in her sala. Dolores wants the woman to feel uncomfortable, but she is worried the house smells. The dirt and old grapes cling to them permanently.

Mrs. Millers’ mindful expression makes Dolores sick. The way the teacher looks down on Dolores’ family like it is something that needs to be saved. She feels betrayal from her daughters.

**

“Ma sit down,” Juana says, pleading.

Dolores shakes the teacher’s hand. “Que es esto?”

“Hi Mr. and Mrs. Fernandez, do you remember me from Jackson High School? I’m Ms. Miller, Juana’s avid tutor, she told me about the move your family is making.”

Juana immediately starts translating to Dolores and Santagio. She looks back at Mrs. Miller embarrassed.

“¿Cómo es esto de tu interés?” Dolores asks. Her mother’s voice comes through the house.

“My concern is what moving would mean not only for your family but for your girls’ future. The city has far better opportunities than the outskirts. I don’t want to see any of your daughters’ talents go to waste.”
Juana’s translation is far more sincere than the speech Mrs. Miller uses. Juana translates and tries to reassure her mom that Mrs. Miller is only trying to help.

**

Dolores can hear Ms. Miller’s haughty attitude despite the translation, she turns to Santiago for comfort, but he leaves her for their room with a beer in his hand. Ayuda, help. The words sound like a continuous attempt to provoke change in Dolores. Ayuda, help, is what her daughters and Mrs. Miller want to do. Will you help with rent next month? Dolores wants to ask but she has too much pride to be obviously distasteful and she doesn’t want her daughters to hear her broken English in front of the white woman.

“Querio que te salgas de mi casa,” she says to Juana waiting for a translation.

The room remains silent. Dolores notices Juana’s reluctant voice waiting for her to change her mind.

Tears begin to fall down Juana’s face, “I’m sorry, you should go, now Mrs. Miller.”

Mrs. Miller turns to look at Dolores, her hands clutching her white purse. “Do you want your daughters to not have opportunity? Isn’t that why you came here?”

**

Juana waits to translate unsure of what to say next. The room is stuffy, Mrs. Miller’s face turning bright red. Dolores moves from the couch and grabs the broom in the kitchen.

“Dile que es hora de que limpié la casa,” Dolores says, grabbing tighter to the broom stick in her hand.

“I’m sorry Mrs. Miller, please go.”
Mrs. Miller dusts off her skirt and waits to be led out. Juana’s is now angry at her mother. The air feels thick and heavy like its been floating above the old house waiting for centuries to come down. Ms. Miller walks out leaving the door ajar the air refusing to move.

“You are so selfish,” Juana spits. She doesn’t know if what she’s about to say will be understood by her mother. “Everything is always about what you need. What about what Xo needs what I need? Why doesn’t that matter. What about our future?” Juana swallows her angry tears letting them fall down and land on the brown carpet below her feet.

“Tu no mandas,” Dolores says.

Juana feels ignored. She’s in pain.

“There is nothing in that city and if we move, we’ll lose everything,” Juana’s yell cracks between sobs. This is her only chance. “We don’t want to go and you can’t make us.”

Xo creeps out of her bedroom entering the living room. Juana turns to Xo and tells her to go back to her room.

Dolores watches Xiomara obey English commands from her oldest daughter. “Juana.” Dolores voice is stern and unmoving. “Vete a tu cuarto, largate de mi vista.”

“You’re never here and you can’t come home and be a mom just when you have time,” Juana breaks her words in to hurt her mother. She leaves the room, angry and satisfied.
The slammed door shakes the house and then there is only silence. The TV echoes from the sala into Dolores’ heart. It sounds far away and unclear, and she can only make out a few words.

She remembers being in Mexico as a teen listening to her mother forcing her into marrying a man who had good prospects.

“Él es aburrido, pero él es dueño de una tienda, eso es dinero,” her mother would tell her while picking out wedding dresses.

In Mexico, you don’t turn down good money, not when you sleep on dirt floors. His stable job offered him no time to do anything Dolores was interested in. He had a job and money, and that was enough for her mother. Dolores’ mother would be well taken care of if anything were to happen.

When she moved in with him after the ceremony, he laid on top of her, pushing her into his bed. The broken springs pushed on her back, nailing her to the bed. She was his property now, his wife. Every night he laid on top of her, the springs stabbed her, and she stained them with blood. Dolores would set aside money for her mother to collect. When she would visit Dolores would make her café and tell her how satisfying married life was.

“Me da un propósito.” Dolores lies to her mother hoping to satisfy her. Her old wrinkles smiling back at her daughter. How foolish to think there would be a straight sling shot to security.

When she turned twenty, her period was late, and Dolores decided she would not be pregnant. It had taken her some time to save money for a clinic that would help her. Every day she could feel Mexico pulling her in deeper. She fled, leaving only a
plate of food on the table for her husband. He was not a good man and Dolores craved more.

She walked to the next town over and waited patiently in the lobby. She overheard the lady next to her talking about a coyote. Someone who could take you over the border. Dolores paid attention. She decided that she too would go to los Estados Unidos.

Dolores ran and kept Juana. Maybe it was retribution for choosing a different life. On days when the American dust would stick to Juana’s skin, Dolores could see her past husband in Juana. Her obedient nature reminding her of the man and country she had left behind. It was rarely when Juana lashed out and when she did it was the only time Dolores could see herself in her daughter. An angry teen lusting for something more.

Dolores walks into the bedroom and sees Santiago asleep with a beer in his hand. His drunk snores pushing her into the shower. The rusty tile scarps her foot and Dolores pushes her toes into it, thankful it’s not bedsprings to her back. She thinks of what she might say to her daughters in the morning. The move is necessary, and she hopes Juana will come around. In a week they will load up the family truck and make the move. Dolores stands in the shower allowing the water to wash off the dirt from the fields. She reminds herself that their safety relies on a good picking season. The move means safety and it means Dolores never has to go back to the land of dolor.
A father walks into a pharmacy with his daughter. He stumbles in whispering to himself in Spanish.

His daughter is annoyed she was taken out of the car where her iPad is. She has the urge to wander around the store and guilt her father into buying her a Barbie.

Her father reaches the back counter alone and hopes someone who looks like him will appear. He hopes he won’t have to force his daughter into helping him. A light woman with big round eyes appears at the pharmacy counter and the old man sighs, disappointed. He reaches into his pocket and takes out a piece of paper with English words for the prescription he needs.

“Only Spanish,” he tells her, putting the piece of paper on the counter between him and the pharmacist.

The woman with round eyes looks at the paper, annoyed. She looks down past the counter and sees his paint-stained pants.

The father notices the glare. She is not subtle.
She attempts to read the paper, but the letters look wobbly, big, and messy. She closes off. “I can’t read that. Do you have a PERS-CRIP-TION?”

The father understands two things from her sentence, Can’t and You. He looks in a panic for his daughter and starts to worry when he doesn’t see her. He shouts her name. “Cruz!”

Cruz appears from behind the toy aisle holding a plastic box with a Barbie inside. She reaches the light blue counter and notices her father is struggling.

“Que paso?” She asks her father.

“Dile que necesito la medicina Vicodin,” he says, placing his hand on her shoulder holding his daughter like a shield between him and the pharmacist.

The routine will begin. Cruz faces the pharmacist and repeats the words that are on the piece of paper. She wrote the note in English hours ago for this exact reason.

“Can you please help my dad this is a prescription for Vicodin Medicine.”

“Listen, sweetie, you need a prescription for that.”

Cruz face starts to redden. “I know. That’s what he’s about to hand you.”

She turns to her father and tells him that now is the time to take out the paper the doctor gave him.

He reaches into his pocket. In broken English, her father replies, “Yes, is this okay?”

He hands the prescription to the pharmacist. She narrows her eyes on the paper and waits a second before her hand slowly reaches up and agrees to take it.

“Your order will be ready in about an hour,” she remarks.

Cruz nods at her and the family walks away and in instinct the daughter hands the Barbie box to her father.
He takes it knowing it will make Cruz happy. He buys it feeling better about the pharmacist hearing his broken English.

The pharmacist watches the family walk out into the parking lot. She enters the dosage into the system and decides against taking her break. She wants to wait an hour to avoid the annoyance of having to understand Mexican again.

The automatic doors open green converse step onto uneven pavement. Cruz hands grip the barbie box. Here is where you stay, she thinks. Don’t speak. Here you stay in your box. I won’t let you out to play in my world.
Workers

In one year, two mothers were dead. That afternoon, the great unhoarding of the garage began. Not only had Amelia’s mother and grandmother passed but her father, Emiliano, had lost his wife and mother. It was springtime and the sky was soon to gift the earth with showers. Under the clouds of grief, father and daughter became declutterers. While Amelia cleaned in the garage, Emiliano planted, tended to the garden, pruned trees, and picked fruit.

Amelia opened the garage door. She waited for the hum of the motor to stop. Through the large gap she saw her father mowing the lawn. Unhoarding her mother’s belongings was a task Amelia took on her own as her other siblings had fled to different parts of the world to teach. Amelia’s mother had left behind a puzzle of a garage. The puzzle was a series of belongings that contained not only doubles, or triples, but quadruples of items. Who was my mother? Amelia thought. How could one distinguish which of the seven lunch boxes to keep and which to throw away?

Amelia began to keep a catalog of her mother Xochitl’s possessions. To begin, Xochitl had collected seven big and small lunch boxes. Amelia recognized that they
were the same lunchboxes she saw her father carry to work in the fields. Xochitl must have started this collection of loncheras when Emiliano began his work in the fields.

Amelia wanted to ask her father if he would still need this many lunch boxes now that he would be preparing his own food. She decided against it when she saw him struggling with the lawnmower string to turn it back on. These small carriers of home had been useful for when the family had taken day trips to the river or when they went to clean houses on the North Side. The lunch boxes reminded Amelia of the role her mother had in her life. Never again would Amelia eat her mother’s pupusas on top of the work truck with her feet dangling from the side.

*What should I save now?* she thought. When Amelia flipped a red lonchera over she noticed a small circled M written on the bottom of the box. This letter continued to reappear as Amelia sorted. The more she sorted out through her mother’s belongings the more she found. An M taped to a barbeque fork, on five bath towels a sharpie M on the wash tag, on a toy wheelbarrow a scotch tape M appeared, another M on a broom and mop. *What is happening?* The more Amelia sorted the more she found. This was the problem with unhoarding a smart woman’s belongings—there was a reason for each item being there.

Three hours later, Emiliano was still busy in the backyard pulling the lawnmower start up string. The machine roared into Saturday morning and through the garage door opening, Amelia saw him cut the grass one row at a time avoiding a lemon tree and rusted purple swing set.

The lawnmower stopped. Emiliano waved to his daughter.

Amelia poked her head from the garage and answered him with, “*YA?”*

“We need things,” he shouted. “Home Depot things.”
“Things?”

He rolled the broken lawnmower to the garage and pressed the button on the wall to close the metal door. The door unrolled and hummed until it reached the concrete floor.


Amelia looked at the pile of lunch boxes, hungry. She nodded towards her father in agreement.

He walked past the pile of lunch boxes towards the house door.

Amelia picked up a tiny red lunch box. “Do you remember when we used to clean houses and mom used to bring soggy pupusas for lunch? Did you like them, Pá? You can tell me.” Amelia threw him the lunch box.

Her father caught it. He didn’t answer her question, but Amelia thought she saw a smile.

“Pá, do you think it will rain today?”

“The sky doesn’t look it,” he said, looking up at the garage ceiling.

“I’d like to drive back home before the rain comes.”

She saw her father’s face fall. He looked sad. “It’s almost time for you to go again?”

“Pá it’s time, I’ve been here for two months.”

Emiliano held the house door open with his body.

“Finish the garage first,” he said.

He entered the house and left Amelia alone looming over what felt like an assemblage of her mother’s life.
Years earlier, the skill of tortilla making was taught by Amelia’s grandmother. It began at the remate on the outskirts of town. Where people sell discounted nuts and fruits from the fields, where they sold stolen Polo, where you could buy a dining table set, and 10k gold chains. One stand was selling tortilla presses in red and black cast iron. Straight from El Salvador. That was the thing about her grandmother, she never could let any item from the motherland remain unbought. Like if she passed it, it’d be like she was passing an artifact in a museum, like she was leaving the land all over again. That night Amelia learned how much water to pour in the masa, to get your fingers in there good, small balls, that clank of the press each time a ball is flattened into a tortilla, and the sound of the sizzling as it warms.

Throughout her life Amelia had seen her father eat one batch of tortillas from his mother, the next day eat the batch from his wife, and now Amelia wondered if he knew the skill of making tortillas. Would she teach him? Would they fill themselves up with the food or the memory of knowing where the skill had come from?

In the house, after long days of the labor of tending to the yard and sorting the garage, Amelia and Emiliano ate rice bowls on the kitchen island with their backs to the TV and their faces glued to the clock on the wall. Amelia watched her father eat. He looked tired and thinner. The sadness of labor.

Amelia missed her mother’s meals. She thought maybe her father did too, he picked around his bowl while he stared at the clock.

“Pá, do you believe in good?”

“Good? Where is the good?”

She turned to face him. “Are you lonely?”
“Why would I be lonely, you’re right next to me.”

Amelia’s eyes began to water.

“No more of that,” her father said. His head turned back to face the clock. “Bring me more salt.”

Amelia shook her head no. “You have high colesterol.”

“My whole life I’ve lived without you or anyone telling me how to eat.”

“Except what to eat,” Amelia joked but her father looked offended.

Emiliano grunted, “Agh. You American girl go back to your life.”

Amelia picked up her plate and placed it in the sink. Her father followed her and began washing both of their plates. Amelia liked the sound of the faucet water hitting the walls of the sink. It was clean sound of reassurance. This water will come down, it will drain, and it will stop. This was a state of existence Amelia envied. How when allowed, the faucet cried as much water as it wanted and how promptly it could be told to shut off. Here on the slippery walls of the sink you could fall and hide in the dips from the black square TV on the wall in the living room. Amelia wanted to turn on the TV and escape her grief but the thought of walking to the living room and filling the house with the sound that was not the yell of her mother or the laugh of her grandmother was too selfish. Not because of boredom would she take away the silence.

The house phone rang, it was her boyfriend Carlos.

Amelia answered.

“I’ve been trying your phone but I think you turned it off.”

She agreed with him. “I don’t want any distractions.”

“I get that, truly I do but you could have told me you’d be unreachable for a couple of days. What if something would have happened?”
Amelia left her father washing the dishes as she snuck into the garage.

“Listen, I’m in the middle of working right now. Can I call you back?”

“Sure,” Carlos said.

Amelia hung up on him before he could say anything else. Years later, he will bang on her door after she cheats on him and finally, after the back and forth of arguing, he will leave her. She will turn on the faucet and sob against the running water, and finally, only after she’s calmed herself, will her mouth break the straight stream of water and drink.

The spring in California makes the air breathable, dissipating the hazy smog covering the beautiful mountains, those little peaks watching over the valley. The trip to Home Depot took place weeks after Amelia had created mountains of her mother’s possessions. Amelia knew the wrath of summer was on its way because the roaches were beginning to come out of their caves, the key indicator in the valley that heat was a promise. Amelia had now been frightened by a family of mice living inside a box of thirty coffee mugs. She missed her apartment in the city and she knew that it was either clean now or hang out for the heat release in October.

The day they went to the store both father and daughter pushed an orange cart through the aisles of Home Depot. They spent time at the garden center and admired the little trees in big colorful pots. The orange and black sharpie signs a temptation for purchasing. Here is where Amelia heard her father speak.

Emiliano’s hand rubbed a leaf. “Your Má planted all the cacti in the backyard, she told me they were good for healing. I planted the trees. My Má loved the cherry trees.”
“Yes, I remember. I love when the cherry tree blooms. So pretty, those pink flowers against a gray sky.”

He continued. “On her last days she spent time walking little steps through the trees to see them up close.”

Amelia didn’t know if he was talking about her mother or grandmother. He paused in front of a rack of Aloe Vera plants and examined the leaves. He pressed his finger into the lip of the long leaf until clear goop burst out.

“The ones we have at home keep dying,” he said. “They must be getting too much water from me. Your Má had the secret to keeping these things alive. Your abuela used Xochitl’s plants to heal her cuts. Xochitl would water and I would cut them.”

“During whose last days?” Amelia asked, hoping a hidden fact about her mother’s life would be revealed. During her mother’s last days, Amelia had kept working in the city. I’ll go next week, she thought. She had missed her mother’s death.

They kept roaming the garden center. Above them a giant sky light reflected the rain clouds. Emiliano pushed the cart.

Amelia picked up an information pamphlet. “Pá, how do you know if your plant is a victim of over watering?” When she asked, he was poking a cactus with his finger and smelling the plant residue on his fingers. He didn’t answer her.

A worker with pink hair wore a mask covering her mouth and she asked them if they needed help. “No, thank you,” said Amelia. “We’re just looking for shears.”

She put a hand on her fathers’ shoulder. He was entranced by the collection of baby cacti in their small pots. “They have already outgrown their soil,” he said.

*But look at the possibility,* Amelia thought.
They continued to wander the Home Depot aisles at a slow pace. Amelia stepped into the orange cart and held on to the handlebar. They turned the mock tile samples, they played with the paint samples in the paint simulator, they turned the knobs on the walls as they cruised past, and then finally examined the sink samples.

“Which one of these faucets did you put in abuela’s house?”

“I will redo the roof,” her father answered.

“Pá will you listen?”

Emiliano stood back and looked at the long line of hanging faucets. He smiled, “I don’t see it. It’s out of style then.”

Amelia liked that her father could wander. His thoughts never seemed to add up. She missed the city. There she was learning how to be content on her own. She enjoyed the loneliness. She felt that if she mastered loneliness she’d learned something useful to continue moving in this grand world. She loved the attention from her father. His fatherly care. Amelia believed that if she left first, before what she cared about could leave her, then she’d have a lonely fresh start.

They paid through the self-checkout and pushed the orange cart through the parking lot. One pair of shears, boxes, and a plastic shelving system wet with rain.

As the weeks continued, both father and daughter worked. One in the garage making sense of belongings and the other in the yard tending to land. Amelia had developed the routine of entering the puzzle in the mornings. This week’s garage task was to make sense of her mother’s cleaning supplies and discover the proper way of disposing of them. New piles had emerged, stay piles and go piles, the biggest addition being a pile with a small M taped on them. It pained Amelia to remove her mother’s excess of belongings but she was racing against spring.
The garage was in more of a mess than when Amelia started. She stood over the M pile now consisting of four lunch boxes, two bags of old clothes, a calculator, two irons, a pot, three canvases, twenty spoons wrapped in two rubber bands, a barbecue fork, five bath towels, a toy wheelbarrow and a broom and mop.

With a broom in one hand, she stared at the pile as if it would speak to her.

Emiliano rushed into the garage in a hurry. “The rain is going to beat me,” he said. He was looking for the red can of gasoline to pour into the lawnmower. He eyed the M pile. “Don’t throw these out,” he said, shaking his head. “Important ok, Mija?”

Amelia looked up from her crouched position. “Why was Má labeling things with an M?”

“For Mexico,” her father answered. He pulled the string of the lawn mower—the engine stalled. “That’s the pile she sends to her family in Mexico.”

Amelia understood. “This is the go pile.”

Her father left her to mow the lawn.

“Who would use them?” she was yelling over the engine.

She watched Emiliano as he guided the machine to the grass, he cut the grass in rows, avoiding the swing set, and the lemon tree. When he was finished, he turned on the sprinklers and sat in a white plastic chair nodding off, the water creating pools of mud on the grass.

How long had her mothered survived on minding two beings? Was she lonely while Emiliano split his own attention between his mother and wife? We survive split existences, she thought. Amelia was halving belongings into stay and send. Into work and play. Into I live in America but I haven’t forgotten about you. If Amelia was going to
complete her mother’s last need, Amelia would need to send things to Mexico, and a bigger box.

It wasn’t easy, Amelia had heard every story Xochitl told her about the family she left behind in Mexico. Xochitl kept everything she was ever given. Xochitl had grown up to a Mexican mother and to a Mixtec father in Guerrero, Mexico. “I’m no stranger to the idea of work,” Xochitl had told her daughter. After being an indigenous maid in the 70s, she crossed the border fifteen years later, and lived in California for the remainder of her life.

Amelia looked at the pile now understanding that her mother had always been a person named Xochtl who’d lived a life. *How could I not have thought of this before?* Amelia was living the ending of possessions. She was on the other side of earth and death and felt she had to continue to make room for whatever could come next.

This is where the great unhoarding of the garage ended with piles in boxes and possessions no longer as artifacts but as things with the purpose of being sent to her mother’s home so her family could feel for one last time the reassurance of Xochitl’s love. It goes like this – Amelia watches her father from the garage opening while a blanket of rain clouds begins to cover the sun. “It wants to rain Pá,” Amelia yells.

Emiliano pulls the lawnmower into the garage and grabs a white bucket. He raises his eyebrows to the sky. “Yes,” he says. “It wants to rain. Ayudame primero. Here carry this ladder.”

Amelia trails behind her father like a child carrying the wooden ladder much too big for her arms. Emiliano takes it from her and places it against the small peach tree. Its fruit is small and lime green.

He begins to pick at the tree franticly. “How’s it going for you in the garage?”
“Good,” Amelia answers, holding the ladder in place. “I feel guilty. I know Má doesn’t like her stuff being thrown away.”

“Eso sí,” Emiliano says. He starts to drop the fruit he’s picking on the ground. They look like little green blobs against the brown soil. The peach tree is still growing but it’s old enough to hold fruit. They have both never stopped being someone’s child. He has been son and husband and Amelia has never stopped being two kinds of a daughter.

Emiliano climbs into the peach tree moving branch by branch examining them for small, green, unripe fruit. He is careful to leave no more than four on each branch. He wipes sweat from his forehead. “It’s for their own good,” he says. “Para que crezcan. You have to sacrifice some of the fruit so the others have the room to become peaches.”

Emiliano continues to inspect the tree as Amelia begins to feel little drizzle on the back of her neck.

“It’s here,” she says.

Emiliano goes limb by limb plucking the duraznos and dropping them to the ground. “I don’t want to go until the tree is done,” he says. He drops them two at a time. They clunk against each other like marbles playing on the ground.

The sun in April is the promise of heat. The moisture is a pressure in the clouds that must fall. Amelia feels a rain drop on the top of her head and she lets go of the ladder. She crouches down picking the unripe peaches. She collects them in clawed hands, in her arm pressed against her chest, she creates a bowl in her shirt, and hops from one fallen peach to the other, and discards them in a bucket.

“Did you leave?” Emiliano asks. He pokes his head from the tree.
Amelia stands up and she claps the dirt off her. She looks into the tree searching for the man balancing himself on a thin branch. The bucket of extracted peaches overflowing between them.

“Will you teach me how to live in a world that is without you?” she asks.

Emiliano climbs higher into the tree and stops dropping the unripe peaches. When he comes down he places the peaches directly into her small clasped hands. The soil absorbs the rain dripping from the leaves, above the garage and the trimmed lawn, onto both father and daughter working in unison.
The buildings downtown are modern, crumbling, and the Department of Social Services is no different. It’s morning, birds sing and fly from gingko tree, the yellow building, to cedar tree. The line lingers impatiently as people start to release themselves from their morning sweaters. Above them a clear blue open sky. Nothing to hide the sun. The heat is coming. The front door swings open as people push in to take a number and then go back outside to join the line and wait for a seat. The line leans against the bulletproof glass, leaving hot breath and cigarette stench on each other. The sun continues to vibrate in the sky and the human line twitches in wait.

Inside the waiting room, the air is prohibited from freshening up. The front door’s glass is dirty and held ajar by a small wooden door stop. An act of community to let air in but no fresh air enters. Every row is filled, and no seat is vacant. It’s summer and in the Valley, the only thing the heat does is rise, just like the gas prices. The line listens for the thunderous voice. They are dependent on one booming voice calling out numbers. One voice, a consistent ripple of sound, has the power to scurry the humans and release them from their positions.
NUMBER 27, NEXT.

On the back wall, above a row of people waiting is a nailed brown sign. A young mother sits with her knees screwed together holding onto her baby. In her hand a crumpled-up piece of paper with the number 57. She is sitting between two men whose legs are so spread out that if it wasn’t for the armrest, they’d each have one leg on her lap. The baby’s dirty foot kicks against her skin as the young mother watches her oldest son play with the shoelaces of an old man. He looks to be asleep in the corner snoring quietly. The young mother calls her son over, he obediently scurries to her and sits in front of her. With crayons he draws a happy sun on the warm tile. Above the young mother’s family there is a brown sign that reads: “Improving the health, safety, and well-being of America.”

NUMBER 28, NEXT.

Each number is called one by one and the number of people waiting increases by two. The building’s air conditioning is being fixed, and the waiting room feels warmer than the outside. A man wearing paint-splattered jeans hangs his head low and putts his nose in his shirt to discreetly smell himself. He’s holding a scrunched-up piece of paper with the number #29 in his hand. His phone vibrates against his leg.

“Manny, are you coming into work today? I need your help with this house, man, it needs to be done by today.” The voice on the call sounds hurried.

Manny turns to glance at the clock behind him. “I’m busy right now.”

“Now? It’s a big house man, come help me out. I beg you.”
“I’ve been swearing to my vieja that I’d come downtown and sort some shit out.”

He scratches the back of his head in an impatient manner. Manny continues, “I’m so close. She made the appointment for me and even ironed my shirt. I’m so close.”

The voice on the call sounds frantic. “Please, man, please. I heard them talking. The supervisor might be popping up today.”

The painter takes his nose out of his shirt. “Hang on for as long as you can,” he tells the caller. Manny glances at the clock behind him one last time and he sees a boy drawing on the floor. The thunderous voice calls a number, but Manny doesn’t care, he already has his back to the check in window. Again, he hears his number, but he keeps walking, his face warm, his nose red, his forehead sweating.

NUMBER 29, NEXT.

NUMBER 29, NEXT.

NUMBER 29.

NUMBER 30, NEXT.

Outside, ears are waiting for their number to be called. The young boy closest to the front door calls out calls out the number 30 just seconds after he hears the booming voice. He holds a cold bottle of Mountain Dew to his face to keep cool.

A group of homeless men walk together pulling a dirt-covered grocery cart behind them. One man pulls the cart slow by a single shoelace. His palm blistering with each step he takes. His partner walks beside the cart, holding a white sign with only two words written, HUNGRY. PLEASE.

The men pass the line and begin the routine.

“Spare some change?” they ask.
A young woman wearing a braid scrunches up her nose and walks past them avoiding eye contact. She pushes the front door open and enters the waiting room. When she reaches the check-in window, she exhales a deep breath of relief and takes a piece of candy from the jar.

She meets the booming voice. “You called my number at the right time,” she says, smiling.

**NUMBER 31, NEXT.**

An older woman has her eyes glued to the movie playing on an out-of-date TV. Her eyes are briefly distracted by a pair of red shoes at the check in window. The picture on the TV is a little discolored, blurry, and a lot boring. She stares at the neon green line running straight through the screen. A light leak probably from someone hitting the TV or maybe it’s just that old but it doesn’t matter, she takes out a pen, a brown piece of paper and starts to write on top of her purse. She attempts to describe the green light leak but instead makes a list: Eggs, pick up Jose from school, find time to masturbate, clean house, watch baby, find out why I’m so tired.

**NUMBER 32, NEXT.**

Two humans in wait:

“How long have you been waiting?”

“An hour.”

“I just got here. Did you see that the Warriors lost?”

“Yeah.”

“These chairs hurt my back.”
“Oh, yeah.”
“You wanna come outside for a smoke?”
“No, I’m good.”
“Okay but you’re not good, brother. Tell me if they call fifty-two.”
“Sure.”

**NUMBER 33, NEXT.**

A blue Honda honks causing a jolt in the line. A young woman wearing a dress runs outside and starts arguing with the driver. She yells at him, “No. I’m not ready yet.” The line does their best not to pay her attention but they’re there, present, and this is the most interesting thing that’s happened since the office opened and the wait began.

A young man gets out of the car and slams the door shut. “Why the hell not?” He pulls her arm.

She follows in the direction of the pull. “They haven’t called my number yet.”

He scoffs at her. “Did you even get a number? Are you stupid Theresa?” His voice hoarse.

She yells at him again, tears running down her face. “Yes, I got a number.”

“This is your fault. I’m late for work.”

“Leave then,” she says.

The line is fixated they watch him release her arm and start the car. Near the front door is an empty Mountain Dew bottle, the young woman grabs it and throws it at the car, but she misses. “You’re really leaving?” she shouts. The car screeches and the line adverts their gaze for a moment, remembering they must give the appearance of
manners. Their ears track the blue Honda to the end of the block, it backfires, then the young woman swings the front door open. Her round chest heaving. Theresa sits directly across from the brown sign. No equity looming above her, no well-being in sight, only the wait.

NUMBER 34, NEXT.

Near the bathroom, a woman wearing large hoop earrings answers a phone call. She hides herself in the corner trying desperately not to be overhead. It’s her sister. She grew up around loudmouths and she doesn’t want strangers to know that she’s one too. Since Alejandra moved back, she’s had to deal with running errands and tracking their mother’s medication. The truth is, Alejandra can’t wait to return to her life, and if she’s being honest, helping her familyannoys her.

“Yes, it’s a big deal to use Mom’s address for the paperwork,” Alejandra says, while pacing back and forth.

“Why? It’s where you live now,” her sister responds.

Alejandra’s voice is a whisper. “You’re putting me in a box so I can’t leave, so I’ll be trapped, like you. Like everyone else here.”

“You’re being dramatic and ungrateful,” Sister says. “Like you would know what it’s like to stay behind.” The phone call ends.

This is an argument they’ve had before. Sister doesn’t understand, Alejandra thinks. She closes her eyes. Breathes. Doesn’t want to cry. Applying for benefits solidifies that her life is over. With every number that passes Alejandra grows more impatient. She has no idea what she’ll do once she reaches the woman behind the glass
at the check-in counter. No idea how she’ll convince the woman to give her a slide on her unfinished paperwork.

**NUMBER 35, NEXT.**

**NUMBER 35, NEXT.**

**NUMBER 35.**

**NUMBER 36, NEXT.**

A man looks around in panic. “Did they just call number thirty-five? Oh shit. I think that was me,” he says, pushing himself through the people in the office. He reaches the window and puts his hand on a woman’s shoulder pushing her out of the way.

“Aye. Ma’am, sorry.” The woman in front of the window steps aside.

He looks at the woman behind the voice through the glass. “My number is thirty-five. My name is Miguel, I’m thirty-five.”

She speaks into a wired mic attached to the bullet proof glass. “You have to take a new number.” The voice a boom in the waiting room.

“What? Why? I’m number thirty-five.” His face gets hot and red.

“Sir. I called your number, no one showed up, I moved on to the next.” She glances at the woman standing behind him, waiting.

“Yeah. I know. I was outside in the heat and I didn’t hear the number.”

“Sir. You have to take a new number.”

Miguel clears his throat. “No. That’s bullshit. No, I’m not accepting that.”

“You’re not the only one here today, sir. Take a new number and take a seat. Or I’ll call security.”
Miguel looks into her eyes and knows her voice is final.

“Please,” he begs. “Please.”

She shakes her head no and beckons the woman waiting to the window.

He takes a new number walks away from the bulletproof glass. He returns outside, the line is much smaller now. The sun high in the sky. The concrete outside hot burning through the bottom of the soles of his shoes.

An old man stands closer to Miguel and looks at the number in his hand and asks him, “What number are you now?”

Miguel sighs. He closes his eyes and swings his head back, resting it on the yellow wall. “One-oh-one,” he says. Miguel’s eyes stay closed, opening just to meet the old man’s gaze.

“Shit.”

“One-oh-one,” Miguel repeats. He moves closer to the front door and returns to the wait. The gingko tree provides so little shade Miguel looks up and between leaves, sees a blanket blue sky joined by its star. How strange, he thinks, how strange the sun moves minute by minute, hour by hour, to set in the west. How strange that the sun too waits in line.
One bee flew just above the rose bush not close enough to reach pollen. (In and out) Objective and Interested. At the bottom of the bush a red Fanta soda bottle draws the bee close. (In and out) Objective and Interested. Questioning, does bright saturated plastic confuse bees? Close and Brave. Not quite there—not enough. Do I prove I am not the bee’s enemy? The bee returns to rose bush. (In and out) Objective and Interested. It will soon decide on a flower and I, too, decide on a thought.
When You Come to Your Resting Place

“I haven’t slept in five years. I work the nightshift at a community hospital cleaning. I clean the bathrooms, the plain hospital rooms, with only three colors inside them, I clean the information desk and that one patch of the carpet at the entrance lobby, you know the one. I don’t clean the operation rooms. Not enough qualifications. Imagine? I don’t go near those large, sterile rooms, where the cold hits your body like it’s trying to go straight through you to break bones, that’s the cold I’m talking about. I don’t go near those rooms. That’s another team of cleaners. Before this hospital job, I worked at a Foster Farms factory as part of their assembly line. My task was to hook the chickens onto the convertible line for their electric bath. I did that for eight years. It’s hard work, you know? It was the only job I could get after I got married when I was nineteen, but I had left El Salvador four years before that. The job was cold.”

Mateo looked over at the woman sitting next to him on the plane. She stared back at him and blinked.

He kept talking. “That was just a cold time. The job was piercing cold. Every day I was up at three a.m., I shower and let freezing water pour over my head to wake up. I
wash myself and try to erase as much stink off me as I can. I did this routinely, but the smell lingered and never fully left. That job was like that. Did you ever have a job like that? After the shower I’d touch my wife’s head to say goodbye at 3:35 a.m. Left the house and never ate, no coffee, nada, drive thirty minutes to the factory, the F.M. radio barely on to keep me awake. I don’t like morning shows but listening to other voices in the morning helps quiet down my own itchy voice in my head, do you know about that the feeling? After parking, I join the walking herd of workers entering the factory. My locker is blue and dusty, big enough to fit in a pair of boots and small bag for my lunch. I change out of my loafers and put on the standard issue rain boots they give you that reach up to my knees and once again join the herd of workers headed to their workstations. I felt robotic but like a human too. Do you ever feel like that? It was an icy routine.”

The woman sitting next to Mateo looked outside through the small plane window. The plane was still in the air. She returned her stare to Mateo and shook her head no.

“Have you ever had a cold time? I was always hungry. Every day until 1:15 p.m., that was lunch time. I ate two bites of an apple and sat in the break room and listened in on the conversations. Have you ever done that?”

Mateo remembered the conveyor belt. He remembered digging his thumbs into his thermal to keep warm and securing his gloves waiting for the alarm. A loud noise he was afraid of. A long line of twitchy chicken approaching him, he knew they were scared too. He remembered the repetitive piles of mutilated chicken bodies coming out from behind his workstation. A few more hours until I’m off, he thought. A mantra he had developed. He hooked the chickens and remembered the cold.
“The factory job ruined my feet,” he said.

The woman next to him rested her head on her hand.

“It gave me a toenail fungus. I won’t show you but they’re hard and yellow. You know, but I did try using all the ointments the informercials swear would work. Apply twice a day for three weeks and see results! Fast! Nails return back to perfect condition! Try now or your money back! They never worked. My youngest daughter, Alma laughed at my nails. She’d go, ‘Pá your nails look gross.’ I’d laugh with her. I miss laughing with her. My new job, this hospital job, is just as cold but in different ways. Maybe it’s because I need a different kind of patience. There is a lot of waiting. You wouldn’t think so but there is. Most of it is waiting. My job is to clean the rooms and make them sterile, most of the time it’s already sterile from the last time I cleaned it but then, out of nowhere, there’s a blood spill, human vomit, or someone going out the door. At least the job at Foster Farms, I knew every day what I was going to see. I don’t like to be ambushed. I got fired from Foster Farms because I threw up on the production line. Ruining a grocery aisle’s meat.”

Mateo stopped talking because the woman was falling asleep next to him on the plane. He watched her for a second. Her head hung off her neck pillow, her breathing was loud through her nose and her black hair was covering most of her face. Mateo stood up from his window seat and peeked over to see behind him. Most of the plane was sleeping too. He had the urge to wake the woman because he needed to use the bathroom, but he really wanted to ask her what she was doing on a plane to Central America. He wondered if she was one of those sporty tourists who enjoyed going to see exotic places to do some rock climbing or surfing.
On the day he was fired from Foster Farms, he felt warm. He woke up warm and took a hot shower to stay warm. His wife in bed, he decided to eat breakfast. He hadn’t eaten breakfast in years. He couldn’t remember what it felt like. He heated up a frozen burrito not knowing it was two years expired. It tasted like a bland wasteland. He ate past it already late for work. He drove with the F.M. radio low and settled into the cold of the car. His stomach churning. He parked his car and joined the herd of workers. No lunch to put away. The bell rang and the assembly line of humans started working. One after the other the repetitive motion of the task, a little blood where the beak is, where the legs are, in the crest of their closed eyes, but Mateo couldn’t hold it in. He tried. He hooked, he hanged, he looked away, but his vomit poured straight unto the line over the blood, over the animal, over his feet. He was told he could come back tomorrow, once he felt better, but Mateo couldn’t. He wouldn’t return back to work.

Now the lady next to Mateo was snoring. He kept thinking to keep his mind busy. He thought about his hospital job and the notice left for a two-week vacation, and he realized he was on his second day of his vacation and he had spent the first day packing. He couldn’t keep his mind silent. Mateo was nervous about seeing his homeland again. He was afraid of returning to a place he had missed as a young boy but as a man he had grown accustomed to living his life with the gap of distance he filled with work and family. Now, he was jumping into the curiosity of missing home and would face the life the land had continued to have without him. The mind must learn not to be busy.

Before he got on the plane, he called his ex-wife from the airport. She answered, half asleep, her voice hoarse like their Alma’s voice when she was over-tired.
“Hello? Please, Flor don’t hang up,” he said, “I’m sorry. I wanted to tell you I’m going out of town for a while.” He straightens his pants as he talked, anxious. The airport was long, big and it felt horizontal, endless hallways to the gates. The seats black and hard.

She cleared her throat. “Okay. Thank you for letting me know.”

She sounded unsure. There was silence. Mateo looked up at the ceiling. Flor never answered his calls for the reason of the silence. He had taken the habit of asking Celia about her mother for the last five years. Celia had mentioned that Flor was remarried and happy but that was before Celia had stopped calling.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“Guess,” he said, trying to make her laugh.

“Just tell me.”

“I’m going back home.”

“Home? We sold the house.”

“No not the house. Home, home.”

She made a deep sound. “Why?”

Mateo thought about beautiful Celia, his oldest daughter, living in Colorado with her mother. “Yeah, which is why I called,” he said, standing up from his hard airport seat. “I’m bringing her too. I mean, I brought her. I have her with me.” He’d been carrying his baby girl’s ashes in a small urn tucked way into his carry-on.

“Oh okay,” she said. “I’m confused.”

He took a deep breath. He knew Flor never wanted to return to El Salvador. If she thought about the tierra they left, of home, he would never know. “I know you’re
glad to be out,” he said, “But do you ever miss it?” he asked. “Do you think about it? I do. All the time. I think about it all the time. Do you remember home?”

She responded, “No. I don’t want to remember home.”

“I’m going,” Mateo said. “I’m going and I have her with me.”

“It’s not my home.” Her voice cracked. “Not anymore.”

It’s not my home, his ex-wife had said. Mateo was still in daydream when the woman next to him got up to use the bathroom. Mateo counted the minutes that she was away hoping to continue his stories when she returned but when she got back, she avoided his gaze and went back to sleep. She slept the rest of the way and only awoke when the plane touched ground.

Before he landed in San Salvador, he could see the surrounding neighboring country. Honduras was bigger than El Salvador and from the small window he could see the thick green jungle below the plane. Both countries shared a border and they shared fruits like mamones and pitayas. El Salvador was green. That was the only word he could describe it as. It was the kind of green in tropical books or books about dinosaurs. Mateo was scared to be back.

His aunt from his mother’s side met him at the airport. Tía Marri held out her arms big and called out to him, “Mijo!”

They embraced. “Tía, it’s so good to see you. I didn’t think you would remember me.”

“Por supuesto. Mira a quien traje,” she said. She moved out of the way and Mateo’s cousin Armando stepped in front of his aunt.

Armando reached out his hand towards Mateo. “Hola cousin, how are you?”

Mateo shook his hand. “It’s been a long time.”
Tía Marri pointed at Armando. “Las bolsas,” she told him. “¿Tienes hambre?”

Mateo nodded. The airport’s lights began to flicker. Now boarding for flights leaving to elsewhere, Mateo finished. It was time to leave, they crowded with people towards the exit sign roller bags clashing into each other.

They drove a two-hour drive to San Miguel. Mateo sat in the back of the truck holding on to his suitcase for support. He ate a quesadilla Salvadoreña and stared out of the truck letting the humid air hit his face like an oven. As they drove through the bumpy countryside his aunt asked him about the plane ride.

“No. I didn’t see any movies. I don’t like movies and being on a plane, in a metal box, traveling in the air, is already enough of a thriller,” he said.

Armando laughed from the driver’s seat.

“I’m happy you’re home. So many people have left without returning. They get swallowed up by el Norte,” Tía Marri said.

“Is that what happened to me?” Mateo asked.

Tía Marri kept her gaze to the road. From the back-seat Mateo wanted to see her reaction but she never turned to face him and when she answered, she said, “I don’t know what happened to you.”

Mateo hadn’t talked to his family that stayed behind in El Salvador in years. He had called them twice since he’d left. Once after he crossed the border to tell them he was safe and the second time to notify them of his current arrival.

When the family entered San Miguel, Mateo could feel his itchy voice returning.

“I’ve thought a lot about you familia, all the time. We taught the nenas how to eat pupusas and ayote y miel. They loved it. Rico, rico, rico. I was always thinking of home.” It was true. Mateo was always thinking about El Salvador. He thought of home
every morning while drinking his coffee with bread, when Flor carried the laundry on
top of her head, after bringing a live chicken home and killing it in the front yard,
draining it upside down and eating it in the evening for dinner. He had fled from El
Salvador long after the country had watched itself shift into civil war. The people left
behind now keepers of memories of peace, it was them who had witnessed the funeral
for the calm and Mateo knew he did not know how to stay, not here or in his head with
his loud memories like ants on small blades of grass.

They drove into a driveway, parked, and the reunited family went up the path to
a bumpy cement courtyard leading into his aunt’s house. The entire gray house tall
with a pattern of square openings near the ceiling for windows. Lizards crawled in and
out of the openings. Mateo hated the little bastards and he wanted to squish them dead
with a cooking pan.

Armando held the door open for Mateo as he followed behind tía Marri. She
guided him to the living room where a small bed made out of cushions was on the
concrete floor and a mesh sheet hung from the ceiling to protect him from the
mosquitos.

Mateo held the mosquito net in his hand. “Thank you.”

Tía Marri folded a rebozo and placed it for him on the top of the cushions. “Para
dormir,” tía Marri said, gesturing he use it as a pillow.

It was dark in the small living room. He opened his suitcase finally, alone, he
checked inside to make sure the urn had remained secure throughout the trip. Relief.
His daughter Alma was in a small red travel urn and the cylinder container had kept
shut throughout the plane ride, the pot holed roads, and the uphill climb to Tía Marri’s
courtyard—to San Miguel. He held it gently in his hands and then hiding it next to the
wall placing a cushion over it. It had been his dream to take Alma and Celia to see the country. Plans his family never made. Small dreams of ojalá. Mateo heard Armando’s truck in the courtyard, the sound of a TV in another room, he lay on the cushions, falling, falling, into sleep.

During the first week he had been in San Miguel, Mateo cleaned the house to help Tía Marri in the mornings and in the afternoon, he’d ride into San Salvador with Armando to sell watermelons and on one of those days he broke off into a convenience store to buy an international calling card to call Celia and he was surprised to discover that she answered his call although it only lasted for two minutes. She talked about the cold in Colorado and hung up the phone right before he could ask about her mother Flor.

Mateo and Armando sold the watermelon from the back of the truck at the remate. It was four o’clock and people were trying to sell the remainder of their vegetables, healing creams, their mountains of oranges, their stacks of spices, and their clay painted pots. Armando leaned against the side of the truck eating a square of watermelon.

Mateo felt the itchy voice returning. “This is a mirror, back in California we do this too, we sell fruit and eat coconut while roaming the aisles, only they don’t call it, what’s the word you were using? I like those Saturdays, no work Saturdays, seeing the gente, Celia lives far now, I don’t know if you know, but she lives far, not in California anymore she lives—”

Armando spit out a watermelon seed. “Who’s ‘they’?” He emphasized the ey.
Mateo ignored him. “Oh, I remember leaving. You know I never told anyone this but when I left, I forgot my soccer ball, so I came back for it only to find tía Marri crying in the kitchen. I told her I would stay but she told me to go and then I went.”

Armando interrupted him. “What’s in your bag?”

“My daughter,” Mateo said, gripping the bag closer to his body.

“¿Chiquita no?” Armando said, cutting himself another cube of watermelon. “Do you wanna leave la venta soon? Let’s beat the dark.”

Mateo nodded. “Let me go look first.” He wandered through the little alleys. Stacks of fruit that looked like hills on tables and on the back of trucks. As he walked through the aisles, he knew people wanted to connect to him to sell to him, but Mateo couldn’t approach them because he lacked the money and the Spanish. In between a table of cherries and mango was a table of bundles of toys in mesh bags. A Lego bundle caught his eye and he remembered young Celia using Legos to trace Alma and then months later, Alma stashing the Legos away. When he asked his daughter why she stopped playing with them she said, “I grew they don’t fit anymore.”

The vendor picked up the bag and offered it to him.

“How much?” Mateo asked, only being polite.

When he reached Armando, he was on his back laying on watermelons.

Mateo hit the side of the truck, “Listo.”

Armando drove slow on the highway, passing white chapels, the volcano in San Vicente, the blurry batches of green, yellow buildings, and rows of houses.

Mateo talked throughout the drive. “Have I told you that I remember leaving? Well, I forgot my soccer ball, you know the one we used to play with? I forgot it and I
needed to travel with it and when I came back, I found Tía Marri sitting on the couch crying.”

“Are you enjoying your trip cousin?”

“Yes, I’m having a great time. I’m remembering so many things I hadn’t thought about in years. Like the smells, and food, and the faces, it feels like a homecoming, I didn’t know what I was expecting, well I don’t really think I thought about it. I mean, I thought about coming but I didn’t know what I would see or experience because I know that after the war, everything changed, the country changed, and I changed.”

“Is that why you came back? For change?”

The truth was Mateo didn’t know what he was doing back. His Tía had been kind to him and had offered her home once again to him. A favor she had done before for Mateo’s mother. Armando parked and the two cousins walked up the hill to the house together.

Tía Marri was busy clanking in the kitchen when they entered. The house smelled like homemade tortillas. Armando kissed his mother on the cheek, and they started speaking to each other in Spanish. Mateo could hardly understand the language they spoke here. He was used to the mix of English and Spanish he spoke back home in California. It silenced him and forced him to listen—to grasp. It was evening and the sun was hanging low and a faint orange glowed through the trees. Dinner was being set on a table messy with food stains. Mateo stared at the large roses painted on the tablecloth and he traced them with his fork.

Armando’s big belly hung over his belt as he stretched out his arms. “Listen, primo I need your help again selling the fruit in San Salvador tomorrow, do you think you can give me a hand?”
“Yes, I can help.”

“We leave at five in the morning. I will give you ten dollars for the day.”

Mateo nodded and said, “Yes, that’s fine.”

Tía Marri looked exhausted. “I’m viejita now, I can’t keep selling like this.”

They continued eating. Tía Marri was older now, long gray hair to her knees. For work she sold clothes in San Vicente and as the years came her work excavations took longer and longer.

Mateo finished his plate and turned to his aunt.

“Tía, do you remember once long ago when we went on a hike juntos?”

She held her coffee cup in midair.

“Remember? Ma, told me you needed help around the house, so I came, and we took tamales to our cousins in a pueblo nearby? Why did we travel on foot?”

“No. We traveled on combi,” she said, drinking her coffee.

“No on the way there we walked, I remember, and when we came back it was on combi why?”

He was forced by his mom to go and keep his aunt company. His mother had been a cook for the guerrilla and during the time of war, their house was seized from them, and she sent her son away. Mateo was remembering the trip that had slipped through his memory. It was a day trip to a small town called Soledad. They hiked in silence. He had been living with his aunt for only a few weeks then and he was terribly home sick. He did not know what to say, how to talk about the gangs, the war, and he knew no one could promise him peace. They stopped once to rest on a big rock the volcano of San Miguel far. She took out a knife, peeled an apple, and handed it to him. She was barely sweating while Mateo was drenched. She told him in Spanish, “drink
agua.” He obeyed. The hike had given him a routine, he got up when she got up, moved when Marri moved, rested when she rested. Weeks after that trip he migrated to the states.

Mateo asked again. “Do you remember Tía? Armando was gone and it was just us, and we went to take tamales, but when we got there, no one was home and we didn’t knock or anything, we just left the warm bag of food on the steps and rode back? I must have been what? Around fourteen?”

Armando chewed quietly.

“Why did we just leave them?” Mateo asked. “Why didn’t we wait?”

Tía Marri sipped her coffee. She tilted her head towards the ceiling. “Envié Armando a mi hermano in Santa Clara,” she said.

“Why did you send him?”

He turned looking at Armando.

“La guerra estaba cerca.” She cleared her throat and spoke in broken English. “Another favor for your mom. Guerilla was passing by we heard. You were child. You get out for a little. You stay child.”

Mateo thought of Alma and his heart began to hurt. He needed to remember her little feet running on the carpet. “What happened to the tamales?”

“Go bring water,” she said.

Mateo obeyed. In the evenings he started taking long walks to the nearest well for water, the urn in his side bag, the big jugs of water heavy on his back as he walked up the hills.
When he returned Mateo heard his aunt talking on the phone. “He’s back,” she said, speaking in Spanish, his brain made the translation. “How would I know for how long? It would be rude to ask but I like the help, it’s nice.”

Mateo opened the door. His aunt was in the kitchen on the phone. Mateo left the water near the fridge. She must be talking with her brother.

When Mateo left the room, he heard her again. “Armando is lazy. Oh sí, he told you too? His nena. No, he hasn’t talked about it to me. How are the wife and kids? That’s good they visit. Sí, soon. Cuidate.”

Mateo lay on the cushions and listened to the clank of the dishes as he cradled the little red urn. The tip of the San Miguel volcano over them like the moon.

“Madrugar!” It was Armando’s voice coming from the inside of his truck. “Let’s move it primo!”

Mateo opened his crusty eyes. He washed his face and rinsed out his teeth. Before joining Armando in the truck, he checked his side bag, the red urn was secure.

“I lied,” Armando said. “We’re not going to sell watermelons.”

“Then what will we do with them?”

“Eat them.”

Mateo wanted to protest for his ten dollars. “Where are we going then?”

The truck headed deeper into San Miguel. Their hairy arms dangled out the window.

“You got married at eighteen huh?” Armando asked. “Not no more huh? She was from here too, qué no?”

“Yeah. From el rancho.”
“So, what happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why are you here? You don’t work?”

“I told you, the hospital.”

A couple of days before Mateo’s flight, before Mateo had even decided he needed to travel back home, he was working the night shift. The boring shift but the most liberating. His task basic, mop every floor and look busy. The hospital was quiet and even the nurses were dozing off. Around one in the morning, Mateo went down to the main lobby and pretended to clean the entrance carpet while he watched the television on the giant screen mounted above the seats. A young girl, no more than ten was sitting across from the TV in a lone seat in the back of the lobby. Mateo ignored her but at three a.m., he noticed her again. At five a.m., Mateo snuck down again and there the young girl was in the same position.

He approached her and shook her awake.

She jolted up. “What time is it? Is my mom okay?”

Mateo was taken aback. He didn’t know anything about the girl’s mother. “Miss, where are your parents? You can’t sleep here.”

Her voice sounded hoarse. *Had she slept well?* Mateo thought.

“They didn’t let me stay. They think I’m too young. My dad told me just to wait down here. What time is it?”

“It’s about to be six,” Mateo said.

She closed her eyes and tilted her head on the chair to sleep.

Armando was swerving. “So, what’s it like working in a hospital?”
“It’s cold. Very cold. Where are we going?”

“I lied again.” Armando took out a small pocketknife and placed it on the dashboard. “We’re selling today. Just not in San Salvador. I hate that drive. We’ll sell here in San Miguel at the churches.”

“Will you be paying me ten dollars?”
Armando didn’t answer.

Mateo thought about the young girl. He couldn’t stop replaying the night shift in his head. He had said nothing to her. What could he say? He knew nothing about her. He didn’t see her again although he searched for her while on his shifts at the hospital. He didn’t know why the conversation stuck with him. Or why two days later he bought a ticket to El Salvador. He didn’t know.

Armando and Mateo sold watermelons at a church plaza. A Catholic chapel across from a Christian church, store fronts sandwiched in between the buildings, Mateo could only guess who worked inside them. They ate the last of the watermelons under a tree at the park plaza. Mateo watched people in the courtyard dance to music. He wanted to dance too. Had Alma liked to dance? In the plaza families ate food from the vendors. Memories of Alma getting sick overwhelmed him. He knew Flor and Celia ached. Once after a long shift, his family had sat outside in the front lawn of their house in California and projected a movie onto white lunch boxes. The loncheras wobbled throughout the movie but the girls didn’t mind. Mateo had built a mountain out of carriers of food for his family. He ached inside of his own mountain of grief.

Mateo excused himself, overwhelmed. “I’ll find my way back,”

He walked for miles towards neighborhoods in San Miguel and then hopped on the first bus that came his way. He paid his fare with American dollars and he was
annoyed that the country no longer used the Colón. He rode the bus for miles away from the plazas, his tía’s home, the ranchos, front and backyards. From the bus window, he could see the big green trees, the shrubs zoomed past his face like slides on a projector.

It was November, Mateo could see little altars on the side of the road. Candles, yellow and orange flowers, and dusty pictures of the dead. He yelled for the driver to stop. He reached San Vicente and he hopped off the bus. Somewhere in the country people were cleaning graves for the dead because it was an action to remember them. Mateo walked towards the looming volcano. Others were cleaning in cold hospitals dodging surgical rooms and hanging dead meat. He walked deeper into the jungle going off the trails, as a child he had known his country well and now his homeland lived completely in his memory and he understood that he’d forgotten so much. Then he imagined someone was dreaming of his reality, of what he was standing at the edges of—a volcano.

The sun was almost setting and he was miles from the trail. Darkness stretched into the sky. He let his legs go numb and collapsed onto a field of grass. He had forgotten how the humid air makes your clothes stick to you, forgotten there was a volcano, he had forgotten he was grieving.

He remembered now. He removed his side bag gently pulling out the red urn and he poured Alma on the spot where he’d collapsed. She extrudes from the urn like lava, and before he knows it, each memory turns into an obsidian rock, how can he turn this into a blade when he is wounded? His half of Alma will be here and also be in an urn in a home with Flor. His fingers rub over the grass—it feels sandy and prickly. He lays next to the biggest patch of her ashes, closes his eyes, and lays himself to rest.