

# **Borderlandia and Other Stories**

a collection by Emily Suazo

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## Abstract

To be mestiza and Latina is to occupy the liminal space between two languages, cultures, and races. This experience of liminality has been exacerbated for me as a result of my parentage: being indigenous New Mexican on my father's side and white American on my mother's, I have struggled throughout my life not only to reconcile the history of Spanish colonization in Mexico, but also the intersection of, and tension between, my white American and brown indigenous selves. Therefore, this work is an effort to acknowledge and reconcile the split self that defines the mestizo and Latino identities: it is mired in cultural ruin, superstition, religion, bilingualism, and resilience.

In conversation with works such as Gloria Anzaldúa's mestiza bible, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*, this work approaches a number of themes concurrent with the mestizo experience, including the significance of language to the culture, the effects of the Trump administration on the Latinx community, and the importance of our indigenous past in the shaping of our current identity. The work also aims to form a conversation within itself, which includes a questioning of the idea of "good" Latinxs and "bad" Latinxs, and of the complex position white American women occupy in indigenous and Latinx spaces.

Ultimately, this work is a collection-as-catharsis and a collection-as-reclaiming: catharsis for the complexity of my relationship with being Latina, and a reclaiming of the identity that, as a result of slurs and hatred, I fought for a decade to disown.

Though these stories find loose roots in assorted family fact and fiction of the Martínez-Suazos, a group of mestizos from the New Mexico/Mexico borderlands, it is the intention of the piece that the experiences and characters resonate with anyone who has fought to reclaim their own histories. Therefore, the work is less concerned with what delineates fiction from nonfiction, and more concerned with truth. Like all good stories, it is my hope that the content of this work is true somewhere, whether it be in the future, in the past, or even inside just one reader.

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With thanks to Marcia for her mentorship; my mother for listening; and Malinna, without whom I would not be myself: “Amicus verus est alter idem.”

*For Goat Hill kids everywhere*

*A mi papá*



## La Mancha

*“Do you see over yonder, amigo Sancho, thirty or forty hulking giants? I intend to do battle with them and slay them.”*

Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Ingenious Nobleman Sir Quijote of La Mancha*

There is a time in the life of every Latina during which she insists that she is Spanish. She might have heard her parents encouraging older siblings and cousins to marry someone with lighter skin so that the bloodline will begin to run white instead of brown. It may be because she has been called a wetback or a beaner by a peer, or because she heard someone call her parent a name at a store. Maybe her father has been asked to show his papers after being pulled over by la policía for a broken taillight.

There are two reasons why the Latina chooses to say that she is a Spaniard. First, it is because it is a half-truth, and half-truths are more believable than an outright lie: A Latina, by definition, has some Spanish in her blood, and is raised speaking and hearing the language that the Spanish forced upon her ancestors. More, the Latina is taught from an early age that it is the Spanish who have something to give the world. Mexican and Spanish cathedrals look the same, but in Spain they are surrounded by teeming crowds of tourists, not pawn shops and taquerias; color is also central to the problem, because while Spaniards might be swarthy and pink, the mestiza's family is yellow and brown. Spain's history is taught to the Latina in school, along with the histories of other influential European nations. The Latina finds it better to claim ancestry from the nation that birthed the Borgias and the literature of Cervantes and the art of Pablo Picasso than Mexico herself. The Latina rationalizes: at least the Spaniards were the

colonizers and not the colonized. To rewrite her role in the narrative is the goal of the Latina who decides that she is a Spaniard.

This Spaniard-fantasy will be called the mirage of La Mancha. The Latina wishes so ardently to be a knight fighting giants that she eventually believes it to be true. Before her, however, is only a windmill: she does not see it for what it is, and charges ahead.

When the folk history of the Mexicana is considered, perhaps the Latina will become more sympathetic in her plight. Mexico is a paradox: It is simultaneously rich in history and history-less. This is because of the efforts of the Spanish and Americans both. Stripped from the right to her past, the Mexicana chooses to attach herself to a people who are adjacent to hers, and one for whom a history is recorded. If the Aztecs and northern indigenous peoples saw a family like the Borgias, it will never be known. If they engaged in wars with the nearby independent cities, it will not be known. The Latina's Renaissances are lost. So too are the Latina's Salvador Dalís and Miguel Cervanteses. It is Europe who hoards these things for his own; it is the conquered who suffer for it. Humans are, by nature, inquisitive, and the most elusive question to the Latina is one that all Europeans can answer in full: Where did we come from? Who came before?

The Latina struggles to tell herself her own story. What remains are ghost stories, half-remembered tradition, and figures of myth and legend. In exempla, there are three types of Mexican woman that are known to exist: La Malinche, the stolen native girl who became Cortés's wife, and therefore a Spaniard, is the first. La Malinche is the archetype of the seductress and the traitor. The next type of woman is La Llorona, the bereft mother gone mad with grief for children who were snatched — whether by the Spaniards or by ICE is immaterial.



The third is the Guadalupe, la virgencita, who in Mexico takes the form of a mestiza and watches over all Mexican people the same as she watched over her son, who is called Jesús. Despite her undeniable status as a symbol of monotheistic Spanish rule, La Guadalupe holds within her the quiet strength and complexity of the Mexicana, and therefore connects Mexico in some way to her beginnings.

Ping-ponging between these three archetypes, the Mexicana is forced to pluck them up like masks depending on the company she is in — La Malinche when she dates too many gringos, La Llorona when she mourns her tenuous hold on her history, la virgencita when she is with her family. The Latina must be all or none. It is tiring to be the Latina. Instead, many find it simpler to inhabit a liminal space. They become no one to anyone. This is out of necessity. When she is no one to anyone, the Latina is free to grope in the dark in search of her fragments, which with time may be adhered together. The Latina, more than any European, is the truest archaeologist and anthropologist: There is no more pressing subject to recover than one's own past.

Still, the question remains if the mirage of La Mancha can ever be overcome, when the world becomes bisected by walls upon walls and borders upon borders, both internal and external. God Himself is at work in the mirage of La Mancha; on seeing the mestiza attempting to map herself and navigate a world of Americans and Spaniards alike, He booms the same words He said upon beholding the audacity of the Babylonians: “Come, let us go down and confuse their language, so they will not understand each other.”

## Angél Martínez Hears A Parable

It was Angél, age twelve and spitting flames, who told the kids at Washington Middle and High that Manny wasn't in trouble. "He's the smartest person any of you are ever going to know!" And that was why Manny was leaving for California, Angél spat: so that he could pay in-state tuition when it came time for him to go to college. Slowly people found out that this was true, via word of mouth at the bailes and the cookouts. They reacted the way one would expect: What, he's too good for Goat Hill now? The Martínezes are going to lift off and fly into space next, are they? The gossip doubled, though it transmogrified, when their father went into seizing on a Monday night in July and died where he fell — on the green linoleum kitchen floor — of a heart attack.

The day of the funeral was wet. Manny offered, quietly and apologetically, to come back to Goat Hill; but Angél and their sister Viola said no. That conversation was the silent birth of a back-and-forth that continued ad nauseam for the ensuing years, mediated only when Mama Petralena came to yell down the phone to Manny that his suggestion disrespected her, his dead father, himself, and God — in that order.

The skin under Viola's eyes was still pulled taut five years later because of the disagreement when she came to hover behind Angél on a Sunday night as he washed the dishes in the sink. Outside the rain came hard. Angél felt the weight of his sister's stare like two hands pressing on his shoulders. Viola was twenty-five then, scandalously and joyously divorced; but she was still one of those women with a distracted, busied look about them. The tautness under her eyes said, I deserved a better life. Her stubbornness in this avenue was unique to Goat Hill,

though little else about her was. Por ejemplo: her newest baby Pilar was balanced on her hip. Doesn't that say everything? Pilar was a baby who was identical to her mother, uncannily so, and one who was born loved, and with a full head of hair.

In the voice of a person who was very tired of having the same argument, and while absently bouncing Pilar, Viola asked Angél a question that was simple enough. Would he start handwriting letters and sending them to Manny? Pilar pulled on her mother's hair. Before Angél could answer, and with the intention of forestalling any objections, Viola started to explain:

Manny isn't bad at English, but he needs to practice it more

It probably isn't because he can't master it, but because he doesn't feel like putting in the time and effort

Do you want him to have to rely on the gringos to proof-read his college papers?

And the last — Viola's trump card, pressed facedown between them: I'm too busy with Pilar, and he's your brother too.

"Ayúdame, Angél," she said. "I know you won't like it either, but please." She already had so much on her plate. Didn't he know that? Angél said he would — he couldn't say no to her — and she nodded, and sighed, and pulled a precisely folded sticky note from her pocket on which she'd written their youngest brother's summer address in her skinny letters, the kind expected from a scientist.

There are a few things to know about Angél, including that he wasn't accomplished with words; that he had few ambitions for himself because he thought that harboring any was a waste of time that could be better spent earning money; and that he was a good enough boy not to talk back to Mama Petralena when she called him one. That was why he gamely sat down on his

bedroom floor with a notebook after the dishes were done, and tried to think.

He wrote on the page: *Dear Manny.*

He scratched that out.

“Manuel” wasn’t going to work either. Angél hadn’t seen or heard from Manny in many years, not since he was young enough that Manny still gelled his hair for him in the morning before school, splitting a part down the right side of his little head, smoothing the flyaways down. He didn’t know what his brother looked like anymore up close. He wondered: What do we have in common? Maybe, thought Angél, a memory would do.

*Do you remember the pool at the rec center in the middle of town? Well they’ve changed it completely and put a brand new slide in but you can still get in for free if you have a kid with you who’s nine years old or younger. I go down there and think about the ocean and some other stuff. What it’s like in California and if it’s nice at the beach. The beach is just something I’ve seen on TV. Do you remember the time we went to the pool and it was one hundred degrees and you went down the waterslide and fell off halfway down because it had that bend in the middle and you just went flying off? And the lifeguard screams bloody murder and you don’t come up for a minute and I’m standing there thinking oh my God, this is it I killed him. I killed my brother. Viola still says that I yelled I KILLED MY ONLY BROTHER throwing a tantrum and all of that.*

*Then you come back up and break the surface and I’m so pissed I shove you back under. You remember that right? Yeah well don’t do any stupid shit like that again while I’m not around.*

*If it’s nice there will you tell me about it or show me a picture or whatever? Not to be lame but I’m really curious. I’d like to come out there and visit but I don’t know when I’d have the time.*

*Do you like speaking English and hows it going at school? Tell me a story or something.  
I'm bored. Take care of your little brother better.*

Angél hated smalltalk the way that Mama Petralena hated a dirty kitchen sink, the way his father had hated the thought of Angél growing up to be a pato. He realized belatedly that he had failed to bypass it, but the letter was already written, and he wanted to go to sleep. He hadn't written anything that long since spring semester, and trying it had made him feel basically illiterate. He thought, guiltily, and with some relief: At least that's over. Angél didn't sign the letter, but he did fold the notebook paper on itself in thirds, the way that he had seen characters in regency dramas on the BBC do it. He had to use a Christmas card envelope to mail it, and a Christmas-themed stamp — it was all he could find in the drawer. Frosty the Snowman was on it, thrusting out a Coca-Cola and looking proud. Angél had learned English watching Regency dramas.

Overhead the moon rose and fell in the sky. Angél went to work at the garage, where his primo Sonny accosted him. Sonny was generally a nice guy, even though he'd once told Angél in ninth grade, memorably, that they couldn't associate while they were in public. "You have ears like Dumbo," Sonny had said. This claim followed an explanation: he was trying to get Marisol — a girl in the year above them, who boasted board-straight ironed hair that fell to her waist — to sleep with him; he didn't think that it was going to happen if he was seen associating with somebody like Angél. He had one parting gift to add: "And Papá José smells like gasoline."

"Eres un pendejo!" Angél had yelled. Then he stomped off to his own locker.

But that was a long time ago now. And, by the typical machinations of fate and perhaps even just desserts, Sonny now smelled like gasoline too. He never apologized for that attitude

which he'd borne when he was younger, the one that clung onto his back and ran him around like a dung beetle from the Smithsonian channel. And he hadn't apologized when Papá José had his heart attack and died either. He must have forgotten, Angél reasoned; to Sonny's credit, he had learned in the discrepant years how to take responsibility for himself and for what he thoughtlessly said on any given day. Off-color speculation about whether or not Angél was a pato notwithstanding — and that was usually in jest — Sonny had tempered his machismo as much as any boy in the barrio was going to manage. Perhaps even more. He had acquired sensitivity somewhere along the way, though maybe it was because he was a puto with a revolving door. That was what Viola said, anyway.

And Sonny still came over after his and Angél's shifts at the garage to make everyone fish; despite being a cousin, he took after Papá José more than anyone else in the family. Like Viola and baby Pilar had identical elsewhere-eyes, Sonny and Papá José had identical restless hands. They wanted to fish, or hunt, or work with cars to make money, or open a beer, or put their palms on a woman. One of those was held by Angél as a good memory of his father, in fact — that he had excelled at fishing. He was capable of feeding everyone for a week at a time with the cornucopia of his catches; Sonny was no different. After dinner, with Papá José dead, it was up to Angél to make conversation with Sonny in the living room over Coronas.

Sonny was anomalous in one way, though. He was the only person who spoke English in the house. When he did it, Angél couldn't help but think about Manny, and what he would have said if he heard how Sonny had become: when they were younger, before he left, Manny refused point-blank to speak English anywhere, in the house or outside of it, and especially at school. That got him in a lot of trouble. One time in Ms. Lewis's homeroom he wouldn't say anything in

English, not even ask if he could go to the bathroom in English, and — Angél was never in a homeroom with Manny, but heard this from Sonny and other chismosos — when Ms. Lewis told him to speak in English in the classroom like he was being taught to, because it was obvious to her that he was smart enough to know plenty of English vocabulary and grammar and was only being stubborn for the sake of being stubborn, Manuel said, “No-speaka-Inglés,” in a slow, deliberate mockery of his fast-fading accent, and was sent to detention.

That moment defined how Angél and Papá José set the new standard. If someone wasn't going to talk back to a teacher for demanding that they speak in English, and pretend bullheaded that they didn't remember a word when they were top of the fourth period ESL class, then they weren't worth anyone's time. Manny was a paragon, a sigil of perseverance. He did the family name proud, and made everyone on Goat Hill proud, because he refused to capitulate. If Angél was a meaner boy, he would have thought every time that Sonny spoke English that he was a coconut, as Papa Jose had liked to say about anyone who didn't reach the Manny-standard of ethnic pride. (You know, coconut: brown on the outside, white on the inside.)

Angél told him about the letter he had sent. Sonny hummed. They descended into thick silence.

“Do you ever think that we should be doing other things?” Sonny asked, after a while. Angél was taken aback, but after a moment he knew what was going on. It wasn't necessarily something he was immune to himself. Sonny was thinking of a better life in the same way that everyone sometimes dreams of one: rendered indefinitely and shaped informally by the stories he heard about people who moved away.

Angél asked him what he had in mind. Sonny didn't seem to know the answer to that at

all. He sat there and blinked slowly, and then brought his beer can up to his mouth and tilted his head all the way back to empty it.

“Man, I don’t know. We could go to college,” Sonny said. Angél laughed, but Sonny was serious. “What? Like community college. Trade school.”

Angél asked if he really wanted to waste money getting a certificate in mechanics when he was already a mechanic. He still thought about it, though, while he finished his Corona, which he didn't like the taste of but drank anyway, because it was expected that he should drink it. Then he looked outside to where the dusk light flushed red like it was embarrassed above the houses, which, with the sun behind them, were only shadows. Evening slunk away into night. Eventually Sonny stood up and squeezed his hand on Angél’s shoulder, a bracing squeeze, like he was saying goodbye at an airport. Viola and Mama Petralena were smoking on the steps and playing norteño music. From the couch, Angél saw Sonny stop at the screen door when it clacked shut behind him. Then he raised his arms and sang along to the tinny transistor in a trembling, low vibrato, and swept Mama Petralena up from her plastic chair to dance with him. She was a head shorter and bobbed beneath him like a buoy. She was laughing. She was taking those little Mexican-dancer steps that matched the music. For the first time in his life Angél imagined Mama Petralena as a young woman. He thought about her hair and how it must have fallen down her back in two long braids. She was small and round now like a chicken egg, but Angél realized that used to translate to a petite, dainty frame. She must have laughed with her mouth open then. She must have thrown her head back so that her braids swung with it.

Viola took her cigarette when Sonny spun her around, once, and then twice. Pilar smacked her hands together, confused but delighted. On the freeway a flatbed blared, and



matched for a second the pitch of the music exactly.

There was a story people in the barrio told their kids. It went like this: Many years ago there was a monster that came from the west. It had strong jaws and big teeth all over its face. The Indians made it fall asleep — how they accomplished this task varied depending on who was telling the story — but there was one uniting commonality in all iterations. It was that the monster fell heavily asleep right where it was cursed, and that was what formed the titular hill of the neighborhood.

But beware, the story went. If you don't come home before nightfall or stomp around on the ground too loudly, it'll eat you up!

Once Angél was old enough to rationalize it as a cautionary tale he started telling it to Manny, the same way Viola had told it to him, and Mama Petralena had told it to her. It was, of course, an incentive for children to come home at dark, and little more. When Angél received Manny's reply, he read it in front of the window before the kitchen sink, which looked out onto the backyard with its ancient tree; old things reminded him of the story, and he wondered if Manny remembered the story or ever thought of it. Then he concluded, morosely: Why would he?

School was going fine, Manny said first, and then he said that yes, he did remember the pool.

Angél breathed a sigh of relief like he had been expecting a firing squad.

*I remember the swimming pool. That was pretty funny. I didn't know up from down when I fell underwater. That was why it took me so long to come up; I was swimming in the wrong direction. I was swimming down.*

*A story. I think you meant a story about California, but unfortunately, nothing is coming to me. I'm going to tell you a story about over there, instead. Do you remember Yolotli? Do you remember how she used to complain about English? Yolotli always told people strange stories without being asked to, remember that? She told me a story one time about a woman who started a revolution against the Spaniards during the conquista. It went like this: The woman was young, 19 or 20, and she seduced the Spanish governor. After the deed was done she killed him in the night while he slept. Then she brought the governor's head back to her husband in a breadbasket, and he gathered the men and they burned the village to the ground.*

*And then, Yolotli said, she died a while after, because the Spanish had reinforcements close by. I don't know what the point of the story was. After she was done telling it, Yolotli stared at me like I was supposed to be having some kind of profound reaction. I think I was fourteen or fifteen then, and I was really expecting an exciting ending, but instead the girl just died.*

*School is fine. How's Viola?*

On the back was a shockingly well-rendered sketch of a beach that Manny had labelled "Newport."

Angél did remember Yolotli, an old woman with a back like a wind-bent tree, who lived a block away and could sometimes be spotted at the 7-11 on Main Street, where she would frown and squint at the sausage prices. (Angél did not know this, and neither did Manny, but Yolotli was quite old — in fact, she was four hundred and seventy-five.)

Angél wrote: *She's still here and she still tells batshit stories like that. I don't know what that one was about but doesn't it kind of remind you of Papa? Like he'd had this great life where he didn't die at the factory and when he got shot on the hunting trip with Sonny and Tío Melecio*

*(remember that it was wild) and then out of nowhere he had a heart attack on the kitchen floor and it was over. Like that was it, man. Not to get heavy or anything but when he died I kept thinking about all the coincidences that made it happen. First he happened to get a gene making him more likely to get high blood pressure or however that works, I think that's it though. Then the doctor had to be distracted enough that one time he went in for a check-up he didn't notice how high his blood pressure had gotten. Then he had to eat enough salt and stuff.*

*But I don't know man. She probably is just a crazy lady. Every neighborhood has one. Mama always said that she's been around since she was a little girl, which is also crazy.*

*Viola's fine. I worry about her after the split and everything. And he's not even interested in seeing Pilar but I think she's happy about that. Obviously the gossip is bad but I think Viola likes it, you know how she is. Baby's cute.*

Angél scratched that out, and clarified: *Pilar's great. You should see her because she's in that phase where she likes to chew on stuff here there and everywhere you know?* Angél chewed on the end of his pen until his rabbit teeth bore a hole in the plastic, and then he spat that plastic on the ground. *She's getting bigger really fast. I bet I got that big that fast.*

Angél didn't have the money to travel to go see his brother, but he did have enough saved to pay for the application fee to and for a semester of community college. He applied and after a few weeks found himself admitted for the following fall. Mamá Petralena cried for the first time in years. (That Latina women cry often is a broad misconception; that's the men.) "Meine Junge," she sobbed. Angél, clutching the letter and wrinkling it in one fist, patted her back, bewildered.

A story: Mamá Petralena had been adopted by a pair of German academics when she was

a toddler, after being orphaned under circumstances unknown to her, which were therefore unrecalled by the rest of the family. History, often considered detritus, was usually jettisoned accordingly by each ascending generation. For two years she was left alone on the dusty reservation until the Germans came along and, in what was perhaps some sort of psycho-social experiment, chose to take her in. They too orphaned her in due time, several years later (excessive Jaegermeister, a car wreck); but by then she had been old enough to marry Papá José, which eclipsed the tragedy of their deaths in the mind of the community. She only spoke German when she was emotional enough to revert to what was her mother tongue; Angél took this reversion now to be a good sign.

*I remember about Papa, said Manny's next letter. That was a difficult thing. I see how it reminded you of that. I never thought about how much worse it was for you than for me. I was sad, but I remember Mamá crying. Not you. Forgive me if there was more that I could have done or said and didn't. That is something that I think about while I finish school. If leaving was a bad idea. You know that already.*

*Tell me a story. It's your turn.*

Angél wrote back the first thing the letter had made him think of, among other things, about how it was fine about their father, and Manny having to leave: He didn't want to talk about it anymore. As he wrote he remembered what had happened after Papá died. *Do you know, I didn't notice until just now that I can only pray in Spanish? After Papa died the house was really quiet, I mean really really quiet. Viola was the saddest because you know how close they were. We had to clean out his clothes and everything and Sonny took it really hard too. I wondered why I didn't and if I just didn't love the old man enough or whatever. Mama was sad too but not that*

*sad. Don't tell her I'm saying that but do you know how I mean? Can you see it? I mean she cried and everything at the funeral but that was about it. And then after that she wanted to start doing other stuff like going to church out of nowhere and things like that. Like, English mass.*

Once, in the autumn, when the leaves were just beginning to crunch underfoot, Mamá Petralena had insisted that the family attend some English masses: She was reveling, very cautiously, in the newfound freedom that succeeds the removal of a man who yells. She was curious, she told them. She wanted to see if it could help her understand any of the language, so that she could navigate town more efficiently when Angél moved away down two blocks and over three, which was how far children usually debarked when starting their own families. Angél realized, and told Manny this, that he had handled the English mass with minimal confusion — Stand, sit, kneel, sit, kneel, stand. You couldn't confuse or forget those components. When Angél was supposed to pray as he waited to receive communion, though, he had found a stumbling block. He couldn't find a way to ask God for anything in English. It wasn't a language built for asking for help. It was the language the boys at school used to say "Miss" when they wanted the teacher's attention; it was the language they were given detention in for disrespect. The teachers never took a moment to think — señorita is a perfectly formal address in Spanish. English: a gas station attendant who eyed him up like he wasn't going to pay; a woman on the phone with her husband at the garage, asking him to hurry up, right now, come along, there's a boy staring. How was he supposed to pray to God with a language like that?

But in any case, the curious phenomenon Angél noticed was now undeniable: Manny's English had superseded his, whether Manny wanted it to or not. He showed Viola the latest of the letters over TV dinner that week, while Pilar grasped at the shag carpet under the couch with her

fat babyhands. Viola put her palm over her mouth at the sight of them. She thought that English looked beautiful — that in-between generation, capable of speaking it but less proficient with reading, and who, without fully knowing the clumsy placement of the immobile verbs, the stringy beef-taste of the flat r's and n's, idolized it. Angél had been one of those too, for a while.

Maybe it was because he had been so close to Viola while Manny had been away. All Angél could think, as he watched his sister's dark head bent over the paper, slow and rapt: Manny was right. English lacked in ways so fundamental that native speakers of the language could not even map its blankness, their blindness.

Angél read this letter laying on the floor of his room, legs kicked behind him, one house-sandal falling off his toe. His mother and Viola were out with Pilar, taking her to a park to play and then along to buy some fish. Sonny was laying in Angél's bed, scrolling bored through his phone. It was ancient, and only a handful of flash games worked on it. He kept telling Angél to come on, he wanted to go out to the bar. It was still early enough and there were supposed to be flamenco dancers after the rodeo was over.

But Angél was reading. Manny, he was going to write back to him; You got good at English, like, really good.

Angél scribbled back a response while Sonny groaned halfhearted complaints into the pillows. (*You're kind of a funny guy, telling me about how much you hate English in English...*)

Sonny was already planning to apply to a community school in California, and told Angél this, reluctantly, as they stumbled back home, bruised at the shoulders. (These bruises were acquired from the caballeros, who were nice but handsy, and had the tendency to slap people around.) Angél didn't know how to react for a moment, and then he congratulated his cousin,

politely and deliberately. His rationalizations as they continued down the dark street to Goat Hill were as follows: It wasn't Sonny's fault that Angél wasn't going to California. It was no one's fault but his own, even as he tried to foist culpability off on his mother or Viola or circumstance, the plain sad fact that Papá José's death bound him to the neighborhood. Angél was a good boy; not a perfect one. Don't expect too much of him. Wouldn't you be angry too? These are some more thoughts he had: Who else was going to take care of Mama Petralena as she grew older and older? Viola had a child of her own. A life to live.

So on one sunbaked morning, before the monsoon rains rolled in overhead, it came to pass that Sonny left for California, and Angél sent the second letter to Manuel in a row without waiting for a reply to the first. *Sonny's moving out to California and I*. He tried to put into words how he felt; he was grasping for something that he couldn't locate within the traffic in his mind. English wasn't his after all. *I bet you could think of how I'm trying to say it. You always think of these things. That feeling of watching a bus leave. You're not too late to catch it and it isn't your bus. But it's still a bus pulling out and leaving all the same, do you know what I mean by that?*

Sonny met a girl in California. He Met Himself a Girl. Angél was to hear about this through the grapevine, which consisted of some second cousins, Manny, and finally Sonny himself, who tried to be offhanded when he mentioned it on the phone but failed, wholly. Normally this kind of information would have been advertised in neon cursive on a billboard in town. Not this time. Here's why: she was a gringa.

Yes.

The girl's name was Ruth. She often wore pristine white low-top Converse and loved to eat sea food dunked in melted butter. The only physical attraction Sonny experienced toward the

girl was a result of her liveness, and the fact that she had no dirty- looking darkened skin under her arms, like Mexicanas.

A breath before July turned, while Angél was buying, for the first time in two years, school supplies, Manny wrote that he was coming back to Goat Hill for the last two weeks of his summer break.

He was going to drive, and so Angél called him instead of writing back: Tell me when you think you'll be in, and I'll take the afternoon off work so I can show you around. Not much had changed since Manny left as a child, but it was worth saying, Angél thought. Maybe he had forgotten some things about it. They spoke in Spanish on the phone.

Later, in California, it was time for the red and pink dusk. Manuel loaded up his truck with everything that he would need, and brought his girlfriend with him. He left in the evening, after the sun had begun to set, because his air conditioner was broken when his father bought him the car, a result of the past owner's negligence. Manny didn't want to put Juana — that was his girlfriend's name — through the still air of the truck when one of the windows was jammed, too.

The news of what had happened next reached Angél through Sonny, who called on the second day of Manny's pilgrimage home. He had heard it through Juana; of all Manny's relatives from California to New York, only Sonny's number was in her phone. They had made it as far as Arizona when a cargo semi, its driver distracted by an emergency call from home, saw the glare of his headlights of the car before him a moment too late. The nose of the truck cleaved into the driver's side seat of the car in front of it, and ricocheted back into Manny's 1990 hand-me-down; what pinned Manny where he sat was not the truck itself, but rather a badly-secured pole that had been in the truck bed, and which, at impact, hurled like a javelin through the window and into



Manny's thigh.

His girlfriend hit her head. Then she saw Manny bleeding, and then began to scream. She stumbled, ears ringing, outside the car; next, she swung her arms and screamed for help. She was thinking about another detail she would later relay to Angél by Sonny on the phone: Manny had insisted they left a day earlier because he wanted to beat the weekend traffic. Manny had insisted on that, and the truck driver had insisted upon being on his phone; the man who secured the cargo was distracted by his girlfriend calling earlier to break up with him.

In a moment Angél was to heft Pilar onto his hip and go into the kitchen, where Viola stood humming over the dishes, and then he was going to swallow around the golf-ball sized lump of hail that his Adam's apple had become, and tell her. He would tell her in Spanish, and then adopt English in the household like Sonny, an accidental prophet, had done before him: but for now it would be Spanish, a final prayer for what might have been.

But after Sonny hung up, Angél couldn't do anything for a moment except stand there, looking down at Pilar as she gnawed on her plastic cup. So he's died, Angél thought, who, despite being a good boy, was not an impractical one. No one in Goat Hill could be. So he died. Doesn't everyone have to? It happened just like that, mouth open, eyes open, on his back like most men do. But Angél imagined, because he had to, that inside Manny's mind he was writing one last epistle for the living to find: it was alright, all of this, not too bad, not even with the pole sticking out straight through his thigh. Manny couldn't even feel that anymore. He was thinking about the first time that he learned how to open his eyes underwater, Mamá too poor to afford goggles but the community pool was free in the summer if you brought a kid with you who was nine years old or younger, and he had primos y primas to spare, bursting out of Mama Petralena's

house and out the wazoo. Catholics, you know? His eyes were open underwater and the silence was from the pressure of it around him, burgeoning silence, bursting silence, a silence that was going to eat the world whole. It hadn't been as bad as he had been expecting. He had the simultaneous thought that this wasn't how it was supposed to happen, and that it was exactly how it was meant to be. Hosannah! he had thought, when he opened his eyes underwater, a word he heard in both Spanish and English Mass, and so he thought it was English for beautiful. My eyes sting like hell, but the water is blue. Hosannah!

## 100 Ways To Skin a Cat

I had never taken Ruth back to see Goat Hill after we got married. Why would I? It wasn't even fit to be called a neighborhood — just an intersection of a couple shitty roads, all filled with casitas a politician's daughter shouldn't see. What would a politician's daughter be doing down in New Mexico along la frontera, anyway? Last time I saw Goat Hill nobody even owned a washer and dryer. What was she going to do, hang her linens out to dry on the barbed-wire fence next to the Border Patrol station? I wondered if the boys still had cockfights. They used to have cockfights there like you wouldn't believe, right in the middle of the street. The girls rolled their eyes at it and early on I thought it was because they were scared. That was what women were, right? Afraid?

I said that one time at Tía Petralena's house when I was thirteen to be mouthy while one of the cockfights went on outside. That was a long time before I went to California and met Ruth. Tía Petralena was a different kind of lady altogether. She was always pissing me off with how much Fabuloso she sprayed all over, choking my lungs like her husband's cigarette smoke. I said that about girls and she hit me with the palm of her calloused hand and pointed her finger at me with her bulldog face screwed up.

You see too many gringas at that school you go to, she said. We were standing in the kitchen. She stopped sweeping to squint. I was already taller than her, though honestly that isn't saying a lot. She asked if I knew about women's work. She said, you don't know about women's work, do you, Sonny? No, you don't. Because all you and José Tito do is sit inside while me and Viola and your mother deal with all of this. When she said "this" she gestured around her at the mess of the kitchen mid-dinner prep like I was supposed to know what the hell to do with it.

Tía Petralena and Tío José kept their chickens in the backyard in a tin coop right there in the middle of suburbia, which I didn't know was strange until I transferred from community college to school in Boston. Sonny's big break. I found out really soon in Boston that to get through college you had to leave certain things behind. But back then I didn't know that, and so I stood there and acted like a big man with my shoulders out and my legs spread wide and kicking the grass while she stuck two hands inside the coop and pulled out one of the hens, which squawked.

That wasn't even half of what I was in for. Right after that she took it in one hand tucked under her arm like a football and grasped her fingers overhanded around it until her knuckles turned brown to yellow. It really squawked then, but right away she lifted it by the neck and swung it around over her head. There was a crack and a flurry of white feathers. I screamed like a bitch. Then it was over and its neck was stretched-out and floppy when she held it upside down by the legs. She told me to get a knife and bucket from the kitchen twice and then smacked me on the third time before I did. I trotted back out and held the bucket underneath the body with my hands shaking all over the place. She gave the jugular one clean nick without even searching for the vein and we waited for it to bleed out the way you wait for an elevator to go up, silent, staring. I remember seeing the blood change color from red to a sluggish black drip, hypnotized. I thought that it must hurt, but then I remembered it was dead and couldn't feel anything at all. "Now take it inside and pluck it," she told me.

After I got over wanting to piss myself and did like she said, she cooked it and showed me how to take out the gizzards and everything. When we sat to eat, I scarfed down my portion in about five seconds and then asked for more.

So that was what I was thinking about on my walk home from work. Tía Petralena, and the chicken, and how hungry I was. I investment-banked, so the sounds of English and coins were clanging between my ears and I was trying to push it out or at least make it distant. Remembering about that chicken was making me hungrier. There was a *carnicería* on the way home, only a half a block away. That was lucky. I hadn't been in a couple years, not since we first moved to Boston and I did the obligatory snoop for places to buy tortillas y pollo and whatever else. I couldn't stop thinking about it so I ducked inside.

It was little with the windows fogging up and the whole place smelling delicious, like fresh blood. The *carnicero* wanted to give me half off the choicest bits but I wanted to pluck something myself, if he had any for tomorrow or some leftovers. He did. It was a big fat thing with the head and the feet already chopped off, which was good, because I wanted the skin still on so that I could make *chicharron de pollo*. I explained that to the guy. After I paid I trudged the rest of the way home in the chill fall, which at least wasn't far by then. The *carnicero* looked like a man I'd turned down for a loan today at work. He had been stuffed in my office, still in his work clothes because it was his lunch hour — construction — and his name was Martínez too. My name plaque at the front of my desk felt like it was the size of an elephant. I felt both of us killing ourselves trying not to stare at it as it shouted at us in white lettering: SEBASTIAN MARTINEZ. When I started, I used to justify the work to myself pretty easily: I'm just the messenger, don't shoot the messenger. That was when I started.

I got to our door I unlocked it to step into a quiet house. Ruth was out and the lights were off except for a single lamp in the living room. Ruth always kept one light on so that robbers wouldn't break in. What the hell is there here to rob, I used to ask. But I guess we had a lot of

stuff to steal now — my two laptops, the flatscreen, and even the furniture, which was honest to God real leather. And our kid, but she was at a sleepover. To veer my mind off Mikayla and what she'd said to me that morning I got to work at the kitchen table.

I spread the bird out over a plastic bag that I took out of the plastic-bag drawer and ripped down the middle. Doing work with my hands made me taste chewing tobacco in my mouth because I always worked at the garage after school, and there would be burns all over my hands and sometimes up my arms and on my face and always bruises on my toes because Tío José couldn't stop dropping shit. I get this fuzzy feeling in my head when I wasn't working with my hands, you know what I'm saying?

The door unlocked around when I'd started telling time by how raw my fingers were getting from the spines of the feathers. When they were pricked red was when I heard Ruth toe off her heels and pad into the kitchen on stocking feet. It took me a minute to say hello to her in English. My mind had gone far away to a place it didn't reach often anymore because of all the Spanish I had been speaking at the *carnicería*. Hey, she said, her tongue sounding thick in her mouth. She was tired. I'm fucking tired too, I wanted to say. I didn't know what it was about that day in particular that led me to want to snap; it was how I felt at the end of most days by then. Maybe I was just tired of being two different people buttoned up into one black suit. Does that make any sense to you? Maybe that's why I was tired.

Ruth was oblivious, but it wasn't anything I was about to blame her for. She was holding one of those white plastic bags in her hand, the kind that say THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU in red font down the front. I asked her what was in it.

“Lobster.” It stabbed me all of a sudden, the sound of her voice. My accent had been scrubbed clean, but I still wouldn’t ever be able to copy her Kennedy vowels.

She pulled out a lobster with her little hands. Its claws were taped together and it looked slick in the light even though it must have been dry. Its antennae moved. Then Ruth’s eyes fell onto the kitchen table where I was sitting, and I watched her brow pucker up and she said, “What on earth are you doing?” So then I looked like an idiot with the whole chicken plucked naked and spread out in front of me. What on earth? What on Earth? But at least she’d come up with something to face me with. I, on the other hand, just couldn’t think of what to say. It was obvious by the look on her face that I should have some sort of excuse for it. But I wasn’t crazy, right? She was still giving me that face. And I was embarrassed like a kid, the way I used to be when some gringo kid at school sneered at me for packing a Spam quesadilla for lunch.

I thought I’d try to explain because it seemed like the path of least resistance. “I just miss it, you know? Doing shit with my hands. I don’t move all day behind that desk. I miss bagging groceries. Stuff like that.”

Ruth gave me a look. “You miss bagging groceries?” *Groceries?* That’s how she said it. *Groceries?*

I wanted to tell her about Tía Petralena but my neck felt rubbery and loose and the back of my tongue had started to burn. When I didn’t offer up anything else, Ruth said the chicken would keep and started rummaging around for a pot to boil water in, because the lobster wouldn’t keep, and so we had to make it tonight. She asked me, while she worked, “What happened today?”

Nothing, I said. I said I don't know. I couldn't explain it to her because I could hardly explain it to myself. She was looking in the cabinets for pots. At Goat Hill we had to keep our pots in the oven because there was never enough cabinet space. What was I supposed to say? I'm mad because you people don't keep your pots in the oven? What does that even mean? It didn't make any sense. I was losing my mind.

Ruth was standing in front of me all of a sudden. She looked down at me, her face haloed in the bistro lights of the kitchen like la Virgen. She took my stung hands in hers and turned them over and over. I loved her even when I didn't. The veins in her hands stuck out moon-blue and I looked at them.

I said, "Mikayla doesn't want a quince."

Ruth's brow drew.

"Quinceañera," I explained. Ruth got it then. She asked if that was what was bothering me. I was still looking at her hands. Thick palms, omen of money. A Chinese guy, Bill, told me that at work once, while we were bored over lunch and swapping superstitions. I pressed my thumb into her skin down along the heartline. "She doesn't want one," I said again, but I couldn't explain it. Don't you get it? I wanted to say. She doesn't want one, Ruth. Don't you get it?

Ruth said, "Maybe she thinks it's embarrassing. You know, the big dress and everything."

My first girlfriend Maritza had the biggest quince Goat Hill had ever fucking seen, I tried to say. That's the point, is to show everyone how your family provides for you and to celebrate how they raised you up into a good woman and the dress is about that, it's about how I take good care of her.

"Don't let it get to you," Ruth said. "It doesn't have to mean anything, honey. She's



fourteen. They're like that." Teenage girls? Gringas? Who's like what? She pushed her hand through my hair and that got a smile out of me, and it was a good smile even though it was a tired smile, so she figured it was fine and went back to the counter. She lifted up the lobster, its little legs spinning in the air.

I said, "Wait."

The water was coming to a boil. Ruth's hair curled at her temples in little baby tufts like it did when they went to the beach in the summer, where she'd turn pink all over the top of her forehead and I could rub suntan lotion over her shoulders. I met her that way. I was in Los to visit some cousins and the spawn who I was babysitting elbowed me in the side and said that I should go over and try to bag that gringa. He was fifteen, so that meant I figured he was old enough for me to point my finger and say, I am not going to chase white pussy. Who the fuck do you think I am. Gringas have flat asses, Benicio, it isn't happening. But she was so pretty. That was all I could think when I looked at her, like I was a ten year old kid with a crush on Miss Teacher. She was just so damn pretty. She was wearing a halter bikini top and high-waisted denim shorts that she had bought tattered, with the bottom of each leg frayed. She was so young then that she bought shit pre-torn to rebel against whatever. I'd never seen pre-torn shorts in my life. Her hair fell, blonde and brown, to her shoulders.

Ruth looked at me again, confused for real now. "What is going on with you?"

I said, "Come on, don't —"

"Don't what?"

"Just cut its head off."

Ruth was confused. "That'll get blood in the water."

“Then—” I rubbed my sore palms on my trousers. “If you find the right angle it’ll be dead in a second. Stab it through the heart. I’ll do it for you.”

“I can just drop it in the pot.”

“Jesus!”

“What?”

“Don’t—you can’t do that.”

Ruth bristled. “It was how my mother did it. She taught me how to do it and it always worked fine for us.”

“I don’t like it.”

“I came home to see you sitting there plucking a chicken that’s only been dead for a day,” Ruth said, and raised an eyebrow. “How is that any different?”

“It is.” My tongue was thick. All that money on a real college degree and I couldn’t articulate it.

“I don’t see how.”

“It is different. I don’t know, it’s different.”

Ruth said, reasonably, “If I cut the head off, it’s going to get blood in the water.” I told her to bleed it then. Ruth was confused. “Why would I bleed it when I can just boil it?”

There was a rush in my ears. I tried to tell her that doing anything else was just drawing it out. It’s just disrespectful, I tried to explain.

“Drawing things out? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If you’re going to butcher something you have to at least look it in the eyes when you do it,” I said. Then it hit me. “You just don’t want to look at it. That’s it, isn’t it? You just don’t want to look, that’s what this is about.”

Ruth said, “Of course I don’t want to look, what the hell? Who wants to look at that?” An angry flush spotted up her neck to her forehead. “You didn’t kill that chicken, did you?” She said it calmly and that was how I knew it was her knock-out punch; she was smug. She reached for the kitchen scissors in the drawer and snipped the ties off the lobster’s claws, left and right.

When I’d gone up to her at the beach with Benecio nipping at my heels I remember that she startled back for a second and lifted one narrow hand to shield her eyes from the sun, and had pale eyelashes that looked white. And all of a sudden my heart started hammering at the back of my tongue because I didn’t know what I was going to say to her but I knew that I wanted it to matter. How many ugly chulos had swaggered up to her so far that day with some dumbass line? God, I was telling myself, don’t act like another ugly chulo.

“No,” I said. “No, I didn’t. But I know where it came from. And I plucked it, and I’m not just doing it this way because I don’t want to look. You know?”

But she didn’t and she didn’t want to. “No, I don’t know,” Ruth told me. She was flushed up to her ears now like all the blood in her body had nowhere else to go. At least when Latinos get angry we bleed it out. “What the hell is wrong with that? Seriously?” I couldn’t stop watching the lobster’s little legs waving in the air, peddling at nothing, and its slick black body catching the light. From where I was it looked like a giant cockroach.

“It’s how my aunt taught me,” I tried. “You have to watch while you do it or else the animal doesn’t know — ”

“What?” Ruth’s brow was drawn and she was half-gesturing with the flailing lobster, which would have been funny if I wasn’t clutched harder and harder in panic. Ruth told me to pay attention. “My mother taught me how to do this and it’s always worked fine for us. Maybe the way we do things is fine, too.”

What I thought: You güeras are all like this. No me mires así. This is what I get for fucking one. God — you, and an identical gringa daughter. I should have married a moreno but now I’m stuck with you, a city bitch who won’t even get her hands dirty. I said, “Your mother never worked a day in her life.”

Tía Petralena would have slapped me across the face for talking back to her like that. Ruth stood there with her pink mouth hanging open.

You want to know why I’m so bent out of shape? I almost said, as I sat there and watched her shock morph to anger. Fine. Fine. The guy I turned down today for a loan needed it more than any blanquito bastard who swaggers up with his Ivy League brats in tow. Mikayla won’t have a quince because she wants to impress her gringa friends and they don’t know what a quince is. It’s the dream I keep having, over and over and over, no matter what I take before I go to bed to sleep better or if I meditate like you keep suggesting or whatever the fuck. It’s the one where I’m walking into the bedroom and I’m looking at myself laying on the bed, only it isn’t me, it’s you — it’s you, Ruth. But something in me says it’s me, one hundred percent, without question. It’s me, staring at myself, and that’s wrong because nobody should see the back of their own head and nobody should see the back of their own head when the hair and the skin is the wrong color either. That’s what’s fucking wrong with me, Ruth. That’s what’s wrong, is I feel

myself becoming, because becoming is the only way I'll survive. And Latinos will survive if it kills them.

Instead of saying any of that I laughed. It came out of nowhere, foaming up my throat and spilling out my mouth. Ruth stared at me with her eyebrows screwed up in disbelief and hurt. I knew that I should stop, but I couldn't help myself from saying it because it was the only thing I could think of. "You remember the first time we met," I said, "When I came up to you on the beach, with my stupid chulo shirt buttoned at the throat, trying to be cool, and I went, ay mami, que linda. And you said, who's Linda?" I watched all the color bleed out of her lips. Her jaw jutted out and her straight little teeth glinted.

"I don't know what your problem is," she said. She pushed a flyaway hair out of her eyes. "You're being an ass, Sebastian." Suh-bas-chun. The water was boiling. Ruth's shoulders were taut under the silk blouse and her hands shook when she fumbled under the stove for the lid. She said, "We're having seafood and that's the end of it, get the wine," and then I watched deaf and dumb as she reached for the lobster with its mouth gaping, and the water bubbling beneath it like hungry reaching hands, and a fist closed in my throat and I jumped up with one hand stretched out — the panic was unbelievable — and I said, "Don't — " But she already had.

"See?" Ruth said. She put on the lid and it clanged. She dusted off her hands and planted them on her hips, pleased with her decision. "It's done. There's a hundred ways to skin a cat."

But don't you hear that? I wanted to ask as I sat there, mute. Don't you hear that? It was the smacking of the claws. Rattle, smack, rattle, smack. Inside the pot the lobster was still alive.

## Mikayla, Sonny's Daughter

I move to Edinburgh. It's cold. I move in the winter when there's rain pummeling down and nausea for the entire walk home. I walk home sometimes so after a month the rain ruins my boots. They're Steve Madden. I'm sad about it. Happy too but I don't know why. On my walk home there's a KFC and a mosque. Then a Starbucks and a Domino's and Blackwells Bookstore. In Blackwells I sit for two hours every day when I leave my lecture on art history. Initially it was a refuge from the slush that falls from the sky like the neighboring planet is a truck that's hit a puddle and Scotland is one big curb getting splashed. Then it became a place where I go because I like to look at the books, stacked in neat and close rows on every shelf like teeth in a smile. The first floor has a wall of Shakespeare, a wall of mystery, and, up two jaunty half-steps and inside of an alcove with a replica of a Corinthian helmet, three stout shelves bracketing a window; the shelves cradle Homer, Thucydides, Herodotus, Euripides, and the rest. It's not like an American bookstore. There's no Starbucks inside, so I don't even have that excuse for sitting around. The employees don't like students to wander around tracking in the wet gray gravel that sticks to our shoes from the cobblestone on campus and the sidewalk lining the shops. So I try to sneak in like a dormouse, like the mice in *The Nutcracker* ballet who dance around to the scurrying violin. Toe-heel toe-heel beeline to Borges. I buy a copy of *The Aleph* one month into my stay so that the shopkeeper can't accost me.

I like *The Aleph*. I read it where I live and I live in a one-room basement-level flat with a TV that I keep tuned to the Food Network. There are palm trees outside my window and bamboo. Can you believe those grow in Scotland? Dad always says that if you're in a bad mood

when you cook the food it'll come out tasting bad; I think, childishly, that maybe all the people in Scotland are perennially in bad moods, and that's why the food tastes like shit. I start looking for Mexican food somewhere but nobody here could find Juárez on a map so I'm not sure what I'm expecting. There's guacamole at Tesco's which they mix with hummus. I see it on the plastic shelf in its refrigerated container and laugh out loud when I pick it up. They have some vague idea of the breakfast burrito but stuff it full of potatoes. Scots.

I study Hans Holbein for class. I have to do a presentation on him and the propaganda he made for Henry VIII. The professor puts up a slide of Beyoncé and Jay-Z standing in front of the Mona Lisa and talks about the difference between real art and modern trash. I sit in silence but students around me nod. Have you heard about the story of the Venus of Knidos? I do a presentation on her too.

In textbooks it's told like this: Praxiteles discovered the female nude. (That's my favorite part. Like it didn't exist beforehand, like women are discoverable only by a sculptor's discerning eye, and with ten scrolls of scholarly theory attached.) Praxiteles carved her from the stone and set her up at a temple to Venus in somewhere that I forgot. She was so beautiful that one man couldn't help himself and whipped it out right there. So after that they had to move her onto a pedestal.

Makes sense, I said, and looked up at my peers.

My professor, an old gay man from Liverpool, laughed. The rest of the students, who carried Birkins, couldn't stop staring. Like I was from Mars — which was about as far away from them as the Southwest. Look at that vulgar girl, I imagined they whispered after class. Look at that vulgar Mexican. Wet-back. Beaner. Spic. But they don't know I'm Latina because I'm

only half so I don't look it and I dyed my hair blonde last year. So they were actually just saying, Look at that vulgar American.

I decide to go and visit the Natural History Museum. It's right outside of campus. I walk past the historic cemetery across my building and briskly through the city, dodging buses and girls with their makeup done up walking to go to work at the single cosmetics store in the city. There are sleepy lights in my favorite cafe and inside the bed and breakfast that I stayed at my first nights here. There's graffiti outside of that cafe. There's a man on the corner rolling a cigarette. Everyone in Edinburgh rolls their own cigarettes. The city feels like a cigarette that's been rolled by hand. Snug and isolated. Sometimes burning. Sometimes, ash.

At the Natural History Museum I look at a mummy and some sarcophagi. There's a room with taxidermy. There's a room with the world's largest arachnid, which sends me darting up the nearest set of stairs. From the top of the stairs I can see the T. Rex skeleton and the skeleton of the now-extinct giant stag. While in Edinburgh I have a lot of dreams about the big wolves that people say used to live on Arthur's Seat. I worry that I'm going to dream about the stag now. I worry about that so much that I don't notice when I'm right in front of some pottery.

My feet stumble over each other. I say, "What are you doing here, mija?"

I say it reflexively, without knowing I did. Joy bubbles up; it's dampened by confusion. I would recognize what's in front of me if I had both my hands tied behind my back and had to identify it by taste. Mud and salt. Earth and sweat. I know the woman who made them. Her name was María; she lived down the block in my dad's neighborhood. She was the last person who knew how to make pueblo pottery with her own hands. She made it prolifically, because few people were willing to learn. I thought that was probably how we lost our language, after the



Spanish — nobody willing to learn, and a few people who only spoke it prolifically, to themselves, and into their mirrors.

Three of her pieces were behind a glass case alongside a picture of her and some woven rugs in the background. Bobbed hair; broad nose; that mischievous smile. The clay that makes the pots is slippery when it rains, and cracks when drying. There's a peculiar taste in the air at dusk from the red clay of the earth, which is what I taste. I think of cacti flowering. María made her pottery for decoration just so that it would last and people would be able to remember what it looked like, but that's not what it's supposed to be used for. You eat out of it. Drink out of it. Pass it between you and friends. Of all the places in the world for it to end up. Here's you and me, little bowl, little plate, little molcajete; face to face through a sheet of glass. They save the bullet proof stuff for the mummies. I could reach out and grab you back to me. Hold you to my chest like a baby. What are we doing, so far away from home? You and me. Thrown out into the world, packaged and shipped into other dimensions, bleached by the sun. I want to touch the glass but somebody's going to yell at me. This is what we are now. A humming throbs between my ears — an ode to what we have been.

## Borderlandia

Sansón's hair falls down past his shoulders which means that everyone says he's not groomed right, that he doesn't take care of himself. When he sits on my couch it's with his legs pulled up criss-cross and his big monkey toes peeking out from under his knees. His hands prop his chin up like he's The Thinker. Sansón leaves letters on my kitchen counter when he goes out before morning to say how sorry he is that he had to go. Sometimes he also leaves me bacon. I prefer the bacon. I told him one time that I preferred the bacon one night when he was around, when we were sitting next to each other on the couch, and he smiled at me in the blue light of TV. He said he'd make it more often then and I said good and I thought, he's not going to do anything, but then he grabbed me by the ankles and pulled me over to him and I shrieked, kicking. He propped himself on his elbows and looked at me, that broad nose like a Navajo. I always wonder if he's Navajo because a lot of us around here are a little Navajo. A lot of our noses look like the rocks that we used to cut our houses out of, before we knew how to write.

Sansón left often and for long bouts of time; I had a private joke with myself that he had a second family south of the border or something, and that was who he was going to. I'd have told it to him but he'd get so ruffled, because he was proud of his loyalty the way some men are proud of their names. Instead when he was around we'd spend a lot of nights sitting around on the couch or in bed and I wouldn't ask him where he had been. We had plenty of other things to talk about.

I was going to school then, just at the community college, to get my Associate's. It was more than I'd ever expected for myself and I told him that one time after we talked about my day in class and the shifts that I had been picking up at the supermarket, which were as agonizing as

eating floppy, cold eggs. It made him laugh when I said that. I wasn't going to be a nurse like most of the other girls from high school. I was studying art history. Sansón liked that about me. I liked it about me too.

“It means you have dreams,” he said. “It means that you have ambition, even if you don't know what it's for.” It was unfair to the girls who were doing nursing to talk like that, but that was how Latino boys were like. There's no getting it out of them so I feel bad even calling it misogyny. I could get so mad in my classes when we started having discussions about misogyny in art and sexism in academia and whatever else but then I got home and Sansón was over, putting dinner on for us, and I was just glad that he liked me.

He was leaving again soon, which was what he always told me. When he told me that about a month ago, I shrugged and said fine, and then conversation moved on. I told him with my feet in his lap about a school trip I was going to go on. There was a traveling exhibition at the museum in Santa Fe. I spread my hands when I said it like I was miming a billboard: “Greats of the Renaissance.” He said that I'd have fun there. His eyes were little slits sometimes when he considered me closely, fond and discerning. It excited me when I made him indecisive or when I confused him because he always knew exactly what he thought and where and why and how. That was the root of his strength, I often thought. And I've never been that kind of person, not once in my life.

I went the next day. My classmates were chattering the whole time that we walked through the exhibition and I split off from them so that they'd go ahead of me. They wanted to go and see what the cafe had for lunch and maybe find a vending machine for some Cheetos.

I was looking at the paintings. All the girls in the paintings looked the same to me. Distant eyes and stiff dresses. I wanted to see something different, and I wanted to see it with different people. I didn't know what Sansón thought of art — I'd never asked him — but for a second I wished that he was with me. At least he'd have had something interesting to say, and I could lean on him while we looked at paintings. My shoes hurt. We never really went out in public together anywhere. I was still thinking about Sansón when I finally saw something interesting, and it made him fly out of my head. The painting was rich — it looked like how the expensive 86% cacao chocolate bars tasted, the ones in the souvenir shop. The first thing I saw was a dog sleeping by naked feet. They belonged to a girl who only wore earrings: thick thighs, blue eyes, a belly shaped like a pillow. And two maids in the background. In the window the sun was flaring on the horizon like it was dying; the stars were out behind it. I could count them. One, two, three, four, five. Her feet looked powdery and soft: Italian wedding cookies. And most importantly, unlike any of the other paintings or people in that gallery, she was looking right at me. She wasn't bored or engaged, just looking: "And who are you?"

The placard said she was Venus of Urbino, and that her maids in the background were looking for some clothes. That was why I liked art history. It proved that even in the Renaissance nothing was that different from now, and matrons were still trying to get sexy young girls to cover up.

Her hair shone in the light, gold and brown. I thought she'd reach out and tap me on the shoulder like we were in the bathroom of a club to ask if she could borrow my lipstick.

Something about her eyes looked like she'd fit in somewhere with neon lights and a sticky linoleum floor. They were knowing and sloe. That was why I liked art history, too. Women who

are painted to look sexy always end up staring out at other women, and then it's just the two of us, me and Venus, in on a joke together. I knew suddenly what Sansón would say. Sansón would look at her and go, no tits.

That was why I couldn't take him to an art museum, I thought, even though at first I'd wished he was there. Because that was the kind of thing he'd say and then I'd laugh and have to look at the curator, who would be staring watchfully at us like we were going to lift one of the paintings off the walls and make a run for it, and then I'd be tugging him away and I wouldn't get to stay and look at all. It'd be like the time we had gone to the mall to get mall pretzels, the kind with the big square flakes of salt. There was a cop behind us in line, and while we waited for our food he stood there drinking Coke through a straw and looking, looking. Sansón put an arm around me and turned his face away. The cop mumbled something into his walkie talkie and left when we got our food.

It was weeks later when Sansón came in through the patio door and scared me half to death. I was dyeing my hair in the kitchen sink and shut off the faucet and asked where he had been. He said running errands. "Running errands for three weeks?" He asked if I was his wife. I asked who made him dinner — my head was still halfway in the sink — and he took the towel I'd set out and told me to lean closer, and then he wrapped my hair up in a turban.

After I straightened up he reached around the back of my head to tuck the tail in against my scalp. He told me my hair was going to look brassy. His mouth twisted at one side like it was attached to a wire.

"Just say what you're thinking, cabrón," I told him.

He didn't mince words. He tilted his head. "Why are you always trying to be a gringa?" I realized he'd come home in a bad mood, even though he was being gentle. I knew that because he wasn't looking in my eyes but at my new hair showing beneath the towel instead. It was honey brown and I was going to lift it lighter to blonde.

"Why don't you like how we look?" I slapped his hand off my forehead when he reached for it. It had nothing to do with that. He looked down at me with a hard face and said, "Everything always has something to do with that."

I said I didn't get why it was so personal to him. "Because you can never make up your mind about anything," he said. "You don't know who you are. Or maybe you do know, and you just shy away from it. You know what? That's worse."

Where was he for half a year when he wasn't with me if it wasn't with a bunch of gringas? That's what I asked him. He looked at me like I'd slapped him. I was immediately guilty.

"You don't think before you say anything," Sansón said. His face was close to mine. "You don't think before you do anything, either. And you're not stupid so I don't know what your excuse is. At least I can always trust you to be selfish. I'm working." I could see my reflection in his eyes. "I'm making money."

On the tip of my tongue was to ask him why I never saw it, then, but I realized I really would sound like I was trying to be his wife. He didn't owe me any explanation at all. Who were we except for two people who had happened to meet one time at the 7/11 down the street? I had wanted a coffee and I'd left my wallet at home. Everything unraveled so quickly with the pull of just one thread: It had been half a year and I didn't know where Sansón lived, where he worked,

what he did when he wasn't with me, who his friends were or if he even had them. We were nothing to each other, not really. My family had never met him. For all the rest of the world was concerned he didn't exist at all, or at least he existed somewhere unreachable — only in the stories that I told.

I didn't say any of that, but I did say, "What are we doing?"

He said to me tightly that he loved me and that he'd be back in an hour with dinner.

Before the door slammed he said my hair looked stupid. I stood there feeling stupid.

We made up later, because he told me he loved me before he had gone. That was how it went. That's the first defense of a Latino man, actually: I love you. So you fold. I guess because it was so rare, or like it's being squeezed out of him. And I'm standing there like Meryl Streep clutching the Oscar, insisting it was a privilege just to be nominated.

After he came back and we made up by rote, I told him that I had to ask him something. "Where are you going?" I asked because I'd realized what I said before: that he only existed in the stories I told other people. There were a hundred other questions wrapped up in there. Why haven't you told me before? Why were those cops looking at you? Why haven't I seen your place? If I shy away from me and you're so much better then why haven't you told me what you do?

He looked at me for a long minute in the blue light of the television. I wondered what he wanted to ask me. Later I'd think it was strange that he didn't tell me not to tell anyone, and I would know it was because he just trusted me that much. But then, I was waiting.

He said that he was going over the wall and the fences. He said that he was crossing over in the middle of the night, the blue land, the stretch of desert where the Earth holds her breath for

you. He said that he gave them good deals, especially families with kids. And he never abandoned them, not anyone not ever. All or none. I thought about the Three Musketeers chanting hysterically happy late night on TV: All for one! One for all! He had never hurt anyone and never left anyone, he thought that was important for me to know, because out in that land, where nobody is looking except la luna, it would be so easy to do it: block her out with eyes closed and lock them in the trunk after taking their money. But he didn't. "I'm a good businessman." He kept juice-boxes for the kids. They liked Capri Suns. They had to fold up like juice-boxes in the false bottom above the right front wheel if there was no room in the back. And la policía like to check the trunk first, you know? So until they wise up the front seat is the best.

Sometimes he told them to toss a Capri Sun packet out the window if he had to talk to Border Patrol and he thought they were going to look through his car. There was a stretch of land where things like that were found, right next to the fences, he said to me. Like No Man's Land in the World Wars. In the sand there'd be girls' hair accessories and a man's razor. Toothpaste. A shoe. He told me that sometimes the shoes were for men, but sometime the shoes were for babies. Artifacts left behind out of necessity, and now they're just for archaeologists to find in one thousand years when they dig up the wall and wonder what was there. I closed my eyes while he confessed to me. I had to because there was a tugging in my heart. Now I had a million other questions, clamoring on top of the other to be heard: What's it like there? Is the air different? I imagine it's different because it's a place where everyone speaks Spanish, and those beautiful words curl up away from people's mouths like smoke, settling over the houses in a dreamy haze. How is México, Sansón? Will you tell me about the shape of my phantom limb?



“Some people are good,” he said to me in the dark, “And some people survive. Sometimes it’s the same people. Sometimes it isn’t.” Like Moses he had shepherded mothers and children back to New Mexico, their promised land, which was rightfully ours anyway. But sometimes he ferried cartel men for extra money, because he could turn an extra profit if they paid him in dope. “I wonder which one I am,” Sansón confessed. “I wonder if I’m good or surviving. Or neither.”

“Both,” I told him, and meant it.

“You’re good to me, Delila,” he said.

He slept well that night, on top of me, like the dead. I thought it was because he’d gotten the lie out. I combed my hand through his long hair. I wondered what a good woman would have thought, laying there. A woman who put love above herself. And the lives of others, too, families who wanted new chances. I closed my eyes and pretended, desperately, that I was that woman; I tried to embody her, to breathe out forgiveness like her; I tried to be kind. I spun out a mad fantasy of what might be if I were that and not this: in that world I’d want to marry Sansón, and I would cook dinner. I would pray for a daughter. Maybe I’d be that woman if I were a sympathetic liberal gringa. Maybe I’d be that woman if I had been born and raised in Juárez. But I’m a mestiza, from New Mexico: Mexican and not, American and not, faithful and disloyal, fickle and true. I am like holding smoke. I have more ambition in my body than love or longing, even for Sansón, even for the home a hundred miles south that I had never seen.

At school, I had learned I could be a curator and that I could move to Europe. There were paid internships if I transferred to a real college. What about those things? What about those lives that I could live — weren’t they as important as Sansón’s, or the lives of those children? That

was what I knew about myself now that Sansón had always seen. Maybe it was why he liked me, or maybe he just thought he could love it out of me.

My hand stilled on his hair after a while. For the first time in my life, I thought a man was stupid. I wanted to poke his shoulder and wake him up and say, “Really, Sansón? Love’s going to save us? They built a wall on the border and soon they’re going to be shooting us on sight. I’m going to, what, hide you in my basement?”

But I didn’t, because survivors are also sometimes cowards. How? Easy: We’re afraid to die. That’s why we survive. I let him sleep and felt his breath blow warm and steady across my collarbone. He was untouchable, like those portraits of the buttoned-up, honorable people that surrounded the Venus at the gallery.

The cops did kick down my door months later, in June. I had my earbuds in and I was doing homework which was why I didn’t hear them knocking and yelling. The neighbors, of course, had all shut up inside their apartments, because most people are like me, and not like Sansón. The cops said they had seen us out together at the mall and el mercado. Did I know where Sansón was? Did I know what he did? Could I tell them anything? One of the men told me kindly that it wasn’t in my interests to lie. But I didn’t need any coaxing. I’d made up my mind to tell them the night I stroked his hair while he slept on me, breathing in and out, in and out.

When Sansón came back he was oblivious to what I’d done. But abruptly there were all of these excuses I wanted to tell him when I saw him. It threatened to spill out of my mouth: I’d go to prison, Sansón. They said for years. I almost have my degree. What do you have, Sansón? Sansón had a legacy in the children who made it across. I had no legacy. But what about my dreams? I didn’t say a word. He cooked hamburgers in a pan on the stove wearing my house

sandals, which his heels and toes both stuck out of. They were pink. I loved him as much as I could love someone who wasn't myself.

I try not to think about it much anymore. If I do think about it, then it's a thought that I have when I'm doing things like washing the dishes, when my mind gets away from me and I can't help it. Sansón still goes and comes back, goes and comes back. He goes for longer every time now. He asked me to cut his hair because he was almost caught in January. I did it over the bathroom sink. "It's too distinctive," he said to me. I brushed it and ran my hands through it, a river of black, and then snipped it off evenly at his shoulders. When I had cut it up above his ears, I ruffled it. Our eyes met in the mirror. "Isn't that better?" I asked him. But he had nothing to say.

They still haven't caught him yet. Sometimes I imagine his head split open like a backpack with his brains all over the dirt. Then I do something else so that I don't have time to regret. In any case, it's done. I trim his hair in the bathroom when he's with me. Then he goes to cook dinner or order it. Tonight he's making bean burritos because I haven't been to the store. I'm still in the bathroom.

"Sansón," I call to him, "Open the window?"

The smell of tortillas warming over the gas stove is reaching the bathroom. "One second," he calls back, and then I hear him leave the kitchen to do as I asked. My chanclas flop on his feet while he goes. Then I hear him come back, and I start to feel the spring wind rustle through the house. I asked him because I'm bleaching my roots in the sink, and the smell of the dye is going to make me sick.

## Gringolandia

A story from my mom's family, about my great-great-great-great grandmother:

This woman hated her children. Think Scarlett O'Hara, but a Yankee: "What am I going to do with a passel of brats?" She was much better suited to the upkeep of the horses and their single cow. She liked the log cabin that her husband built for them and their three children to live in. The kids, I imagine, were sallow-faced, useless rag dolls: more mouths to feed, and often too sick to do any useful work around the house. I don't remember my three-times great grandmother's name, so I'll call her Roberta. Roberta was just a couple generations removed from the witch trials, which her great-grandmother had testified at, and she had thought life out east was too soft and boring. What was she supposed to do all day, other than take care of the children and sew? What good was there in sewing? Roberta stewed over it, and hated it, and she was deliriously excited when her husband set his shoulders and told her, uncertainly despite his original determination, that they were going to try their luck out west.

He was expecting her to smack him or have some kind of outburst. She always had been a fiery woman, which was nice at first but kept ending up in her doing things like exiling him from their bedroom when she decided she didn't want to deal with any more children. She was too self-possessed for his gentle New Englander's mind. The simple fact was that Roberta was a savage.

She didn't hit him or yell or anything like that. She just jutted out her jaw like she did when she was pleased and said, "Fine."

So Roberta and her emasculated husband set out west. I'm not sure how they got out there other than train, and that part was boring anyway and never made it into family lore, so I

can't really elaborate there. In any case, they made it all the way to Kansas, stopped for a while, and then went right down onto the border of Mexico, which was teetering on the precipice of the Mexican-American War. Roberta didn't know that and she didn't care.

Roberta found heaven on the southern border. It might be noted that her vision of heaven was probably what we'd call Valhalla. Her hands turned blistered and rough from working her own fields. She got calluses all up the inside of her thighs from riding her horse bareback. She'd have cut her hair if it was allowed by the pastor at the church in the nearest town, which was miles away. As it was, she wore it in two braids on either side of her head, the same as she had done when she was a little girl.

In winter, Roberta's husband would go off to try and find work at the butcher shop in the nearest town, because their crops weren't going to be making any money, and they still needed money because they still needed to eat. The children were allowed to board up at the school in town if there was too much snow, which there often was. Both of these factors meant that Roberta had the log cabin to herself for a lot of the winter. It was a blessing at first because it meant that she could do all those things we love doing when we have the house to ourselves, like walking around naked or singing as loud as we want to, or leaving dishes in the sink for the night instead of cleaning them immediately. Sometimes Roberta even broke into her husband's brandy, which he saved for special occasions, like if they were hosting the pastor or had produced a particularly good crop, or another child. Other than the cold and the howling wind that sometimes whipped through the canyon like a pack of wolves, Roberta liked it: all in all she got to do what she wanted, and she got to chop all the firewood herself, into neat little rectangles.

Here's how the rest of it goes:

One night she was sitting there darning a sock with her blistered hands and drinking her husband's brandy, pleased with how her evening was turning out, when she heard a hollering outside the door. At first she thought it was just the wind. Roberta started thinking about how she'd have to batten down the hatches if there was a cold dust storm coming, and which candles she was going to light and how many she'd have to save to make it through to the next big storm, and if she should let the horses out like she would in a tornado, and she was thinking so hard and darning the sock so judiciously that she didn't hear for a second that the cry was human, and when she did she sat up straight in her chair and made a shushing noise at nobody. The cry tapered off, but Roberta had already figured out who it was. She'd heard that they were being starved out because of the settlers like her and her husband coming in to pick the land clean and make crops of their own.

Well, thought Roberta, I'm starving, too.

She ran to her hope chest, which her husband had insisted they lug along with them out west despite the fact that she didn't care if her daughter wore her wedding dress or ever saw any of her valuables from when she was young. It had come in handy, though: Inside was her father's hunting rifle, which she'd smuggled out against her husband's wishes and without her mother knowing.

Roberta loaded it up with just a little struggle: it was half the height of her. She lugged it out from the bedroom and into the main room, which was also where the kitchen was and where the children slept when they were home. She rubbed condensation off the window with her sleeve, and when she saw who it was out there — a band of three coming up at their silent run onto the cabin — she acted before she had time to think, and punched out the window with the

butt of the gun. Then she propped the barrel on the empty ledge and squinted one eye through the black night and the shards of glass. She held her breath and squeezed the trigger. The first Indian crumpled onto the ground with an explosion of red across the dirt behind him. Second. Third.

## Sic Semper Tyrannis

Sometimes in the summer I could hear the men inside the workshop talking. We all got louder in the summer, happier. It pissed the Spaniards off. I heard it happen sometimes. The whippings, I mean. Standing in the shade of the building, I'd stop and listen: and when the singing quieted, and the jeers, I knew by that uncanny stillness what was going on. Sometimes I could make out the crack of the belt, but usually not. That was to the credit of the boys. They would laugh and holler with one another while they were working, but for the Spaniards there wasn't a single sound. Not a grunt. It reminded me of how Catholics pray. One thing we agreed on, I guess: pain has its own holiness. Then the wind would pick up and blow across the dirt and rustle some leaves. I'd keep on walking.

They came the year I was born, and then they paraded a little further north before they met their sanctioned quota of raping and pillaging down there and decided to call it a day. We didn't have a name for them at first, but their big helmets and shoes made them look like polished beetles, so that was what we called them until they told us who they were. By the time the conquistadors looped back to our village I had seen five summers. My first memory: Mama lifting me onto her hip outside the house as their boots, stomping past us, kicked red dust into our eyes. She raised an arm above us because we were being blinded by the silver glint of their helmets. She was looking for someone. Eventually I put two and two together and got a sum of bastardy. She found nothing that day; it turned out he'd died down south. I never met my father except for in the mirror: but when I saw my own reflection and mapped the differences from Mama, I knew he'd had a short nose, a thin mouth, and was as pale as ash. Kids used to make



fun of me and tell me I looked dead. I even got sun-sick like the Spaniards, turning red all over, my skin peeling off in little flakes. How do you scrub that off?

We were a small village, so after their return we were garrisoned in short order. I grew up. Mostly I remember that first colonel, strutting around like an eagle, who proctored my childhood. He was ginger underneath his helmet, and had skin like a boiled, peeled egg. Gross. I learned later when I was married off to Miguel, a tall, intelligent man with fifteen years on me, that the first colonel had been hoping for deification — he had heard a rumor that a city in the south had worshipped Cortés as a god. General Ibáñez replaced him. He was a swarthy Valencian, and he liked to address the village with announcements of policy changes, I guess because he fancied himself a politician. With him came missionaries; with the missionaries came a priest.

The first mass Padre Tovar led in the dusty wooden chapel was for both us and the Spanish. When I filed in, I saw Miguel across the aisle. It was just a glimpse of his eyes, black in the sunlight. They seemed dubious, like he was laughing at some inside joke he was having with himself. I got it after a moment. He was thinking how funny it was that they were going to sit down and break bread with us, the savages. I missed Miguel. They'd annulled our marriage in a broad set of laws from the Catholic Church; now I lived in a "virgin's" house with Encarnación. We were the only two who hadn't been allocated new or Spanish husbands.

The mass was fine. There was a lot of standing up and sitting down. It wasn't like we could chant along with the Latin or anything, and at the end of it, Padre Tovar told us that he was going to walk us out, but he'd be standing outside. "I'll lead us back inside and you can all break bread with me," he said.

He passed it out to us as we sat awkwardly in the pews at the front, where the Spaniards had been. Tovar was a ruddy, pale thing, with very kind blue eyes. That was why it was so hard to hate him. He thought he was so nice, and sometimes he actually was. But still, no matter how nice he could come off, there was a moment where we all realized it was a hundred of us and one of Tovar. It seemed to happen at the same time, too. But Miguel shot everyone quelling, warning looks: Not now. Sometimes I got so mad at Miguel — he always wanted to wait to do everything, but I always thought, if not now, when?

The night before we had been divorced, laying in bed and clutching each other in fear, Miguel had turned until our noses touched. He told me it wouldn't always be like this.

“You're in a burning house. What do you do to stay alive?” He said. I answered: you run. “What about when you're hungry?” You hunt. “And if you're living on your knees?”

The answer, it seemed, was to eat Tovar's bread and then agree to Tovar's Latin lesson, which was next on his agenda. As we ate, he pulled out his Bible and started teaching us the words we'd need to read it. He taught us some grammar too. I was catching on the fastest, the way I'd caught on the fastest to Español. I could see how similar they were, and it wasn't hard for me. I twisted my hands together and called my quick brain a traitor.

“I'm going to give one person in the village the Bible each week, so that you can study it with each other.” His smile was sweet and small. “I think the Word will help all of you in this time, when you come to accept it.”

“And then he gave the Bible to me,” I moaned to Yolotli, after I had related everything. The two of us were sitting in her cave that night, sharing avocados and salted meat. Her face screwed up and she spat on the ground. I jumped.

“How many fuck-ugly languages are they going to make you learn?” she demanded. Yolotli flipped the pages with hands that had jagged, dirty nails, and stabbed at the Book with her index finger. She said it was ugly too. “You learn language from your parents, not from a book. What kind of people know so little about themselves that they have to write down how they speak so that they don’t forget?”

I shrugged at her, chewing. The jerky tasted like salt and not much else. How was I supposed to know? Yolotli scoffed and shut it. She looked like she wanted to toss it into the fire. A frog croaked at me from somewhere nearby, telling me to stop worrying. I frowned in its direction. You know who’s usually wrong? The frogs. They have good intentions, but most of what they say are platitudes. Here’s my favorite one: the Spanish won’t invade.

Yolotli had been Mama’s friend. She was quick to dismiss anything she deemed a waste of time. On that list: Spaniards, shoes, tears. She had been named María by the Spaniards, but ran away into the night while the going was still good, around when I married Miguel, which made her Yolotli now, again, and always. No one else got away. My mother they killed. When that first colonel brought up Our Lord Cortés for the thousandth time, pacing in front of the bell workshop, Mama lost it and spat in his face. So one of the guards stabbed her through with a bayonet and she bled out there on the dirt. It was Yolotli who carried her body away.

Yolotli’s disgust couldn’t do anything about the reality of it, though, and after a couple of weeks we settled into a routine after mass. Tovar made all of us stay back and had us keep on with the lessons, and I answered questions and helped others with readings because Tovar always asked me to. Miguel looked at me as I paced around the little chapel while the rest stumbled through Genesis, his eyes sharp like nails. I couldn’t tell what he thought of me. I tried to make it

clear to him with the silent looks I gave him: Don't you see I'm just doing what you taught me? Yolotli was right; the alphabet was ugly, but what I was reading was interesting, and strange. I liked all the stories about their messiah, who had been alive a long time ago, oppressed by the Romans. I liked it even more when I heard through the grapevine that it was pissing Ibáñez off that Tovar was teaching women how to read, even if it was only the Bible.

Tovar made me linger after by making conversation about everyone else's progress with me, de facto tutor. After a minute he told me to enjoy my day of rest, and he touched my braid where it lay on my shoulder.

Only Miguel and Mama and Yolotli had ever touched my hair. I learned as I left that the birth of hatred was like touching a pot with boiling water inside: pain so white that the mind fails to know anything but numbness. Once that fades, the hand throbs — raw. That's how it began. A burn so acute that for a moment I felt nothing at all.

I ran to Yolotli in the grip of that fear that night. I told her, miserably, that the priest was in love with me. At first she wouldn't believe it. "Your nose is too ugly for that to happen," she said. I felt like I'd swallowed a ball the size of my fist.

"Thanks," I told her, but I knew it wasn't true and I'd never wanted to be ugly more in my life.

Yolotli cooed and scooted around the fire and wrapped her arms around me. She shushed me and rocked me as I stared into the fire, my hands grasping uselessly at her shoulders.

We fell asleep after a while. I woke up in the middle of the night laying face-to-face with Yolotli, who was breathing evenly and slowly, her lashes fanned black over her cheeks. I couldn't remember what Mama looked like, but I could recognize Yolotli's face blind. It was broad, with a hook nose and a thick proud mouth, and she was just starting to get crow's feet around her eyes. When the Spanish gave us two options, Yolotli made a third. I wondered a lot if she regretted it. She was so far away from a stream that even getting clean water was a task, and it wasn't like she could build a well on her own.

I pushed her hair back from her face. Then the frogs started croaking at me. I rolled away from Yolotli so I wouldn't wake her and searched for their little wrinkled faces at the mouth of the cave. "Well?" I asked them. "What? Don't wake her up."

"Don't start crying again," one croaked at me.

I squinted into the dark. "Did Yolotli put you up to this?"

They told me she hadn't. "Don't wake her," they echoed, and I rolled my eyes. Fine. But I still made them tell me what they meant.

"You knew this might happen," they said. "You were always going to use it, don't try and say you weren't." Their urging croaks echoed on the walls of the cave. Use it, use it. "Go on. You know what you have to do." Then I watched as one by one they hopped into the night.

I wiped my hand across my nose once they were gone. I knew that they were right — if I had been sucking up to Tovar just for the sake of sucking up to Tovar, that made me as bad as the bitch who had married Cortés and borne him a child who looked like me. I looked back over at Yolotli. I'm only nineteen, I was thinking. This isn't fair. It isn't fair. But no matter how many times I thought that it wasn't fair or told Tovar's Jesus to get on this situation down here or even

prayed to our own gods, the ones whose names we weren't allowed to mention anymore, nothing happened. So then I started praying for a chance. Give me the chance, I prayed. I can't make it myself. Give me the chance and I'll do it fearlessly, in one hard stroke, like Jean d'Arc. I'll do anything if you just make the chance for me.

When light started to lift at the mouth of the cave, I wandered back to the village in the pink light, rubbing at my eyes. When I reached the hill that looked out across our home I saw that the men were just waking up, stretching bare-chested outside their cabins and chewing on breakfasts that were mostly corn or jerky. Just past, honeyed in the early sunlight, General Ibáñez's residence loomed above the church. It was a strange looking place, no adobe to speak of, but slats upon slats of wood, the same kind which made the workshop and the church and the barracks. The door opened, and I shielded my eyes from the creeping sun with a hand. General Ibáñez stepped out and I saw him adjust his sword at his belt while his groomsman got his horse ready for his patrol around the village. Then he looked up at the hill. I know he saw me there — it was flat other than me, a lone figure silhouetted at the top. I planted my feet where I stood. It's not like we weren't allowed to go where we wanted. We still lived here, didn't we? It was still our village. That was what General Ibáñez was supposed to pretend, anyway. He couldn't deny it now, not so early in his career. So I didn't move. So what if he wanted to arrest me for a morning walk? Padre Tovar would vouch for me. I stared at Ibáñez, shielding the sun with my hand. After a moment he shifted on his feet, and then looked away; I saw him gesture for his horse.

At lunch, Padre Tovar, blushing, knocked on my door. He said that the General had seen me, and been taken by me, while I stood on the hill across his mansion.

I said, and not to him: “Thank you. Thank you, thank you. Gracias, por todo.”

I had hours to myself until nightfall, both enough time and not enough at all. I went back and did the laundry with Encarnación and helped to start lunch, and then I told them that my aunt was going to be coming over later, probably around dinner. “I didn’t know you had an aunt,” Encarnación said, but I hummed and said I did. And I waited, and waited, and waited until it was at least the afternoon, and then I took off on foot over the hill again, not letting myself run until I was out of sight of the village. I clutched the clothes I had brought for her to change into.

“Yolotli,” I yelled, as I got closer. My feet pounded the ground in time with my heartbeat. “Yolotli! Yolotli!”

We got ready in my bedroom. Yolotli made herself up quickly and efficiently even though she hadn’t done it since she was my age, and then she rubbed red pigment into my cheeks and tucked a cactus flower into my hair. Within the hour Padre Tovar knocked on our door with his hood pulled up. He led us out, and down the street, and then past the church and up the second hill. The Spaniards had taken a while to understand that nighttime in the desert was cold, Padre Tovar particularly; he shivered because he wasn’t wearing much more than a tunic and those stupid puffy pants underneath the cloak he’d put on for disguise.

He only asked me one question. “Who’s this?”

I said, “My aunt from the village to the south. Didn’t I tell you she was visiting today?” Tovar didn’t seem convinced. “I need her with me,” I said. It was easy to put fear in my voice. “I’m not sure what to do if she doesn’t tell me.” Lie. But he went redder, and bought it.

The door of the governor's palace was made of huge, thick oak. He knocked once and a maid opened it, another halfie named Juana. She wouldn't look at me as I went past.

Inside it was a hall of mirrors. When I walked in I couldn't understand for a minute what I was seeing, and I stumbled and felt Yolotli next to me do the same. We were surrounded by images of ourselves put up in little glass cases, all throughout the hall. To our left a pestle and mortar; to our right a headdress; on a mantle, the stuffed carcass of a coyote. My vision sparked white. Yolotli grabbed my wrist where Padre Tovar couldn't see.

We wound through three hallways and up one flight of stairs when Padre Tovar finally stopped off at a door and knocked. He looked back at me with his face wide and pale like the moon. I tried hard to smile. The door swung open.

Ibáñez was stout and swarthy, and he had a ruddy sunburn at his thick neck. He wasn't an ugly man, I guess. He looked me up and down, and then glanced to Padre Tovar. "This is the one?"

"She can tell a good story," Padre Tovar said. Blood was rushing in my ears, and I heard the rest of it in short clips of sound: She speaks Latin beautifully. She knows the Bible backwards and forwards. Her devotion to the Son is divine. It's miraculous how quickly she came to believe.

"Huh," said Ibáñez. "Alright. Let's test drive her, then."

Padre Tovar caught my arm and gave me a tremulous look. I tried to give one back, but then everything was happening in a rush, and he was gone, and the door was closed, and Yolotli and I were inside. She was fixing my hair. Her eyes weren't on me, but Ibáñez, who was behind us, pouring a drink from a decanter on the great oak desk. The room was incredibly ugly. Big



wood furniture, an intricate headboard, blood-red coverlets and sheets. His stationary was embossed with stolen gold. Yolotli caught my eye by dipping her head. Calm, the frogs croaked, outside the window. Calm, calm. It'll be over in ten minutes.

Should I do it?

If not now, the frogs croaked outside the window, When?

When? Yolotli asked me, with her eyes. Come on. Come on. Josefina. Come on.

I hate that name, I thought.

He fucked me. I don't know what else to tell you or how else to say it. I had been lying to Tovar earlier about Miguel, but even though I was fourteen then Miguel was gentle. Ibáñez wasn't rough, but he disgusted me. He said he liked the color of my skin and wanted me on my back. I tried to be as accommodating as possible. Yolotli, in the corner, looked like she was going to cry. I gave her eyes over his shoulder. Keep it together.

After he rolled off me. "What kind of stories?" he asked. For a second I didn't know what the fuck he was talking about. Then, careful, I reached out a hand across the bed, and put it in his hair, which was the exact color as mine, but extremely thin and fine. What a funny mirror we made across the bed from each other, only wearing our skin.

"The hill you saw me on," I said, in my finest Spanish. "A monster lives inside it."

Ibáñez was amused. Indulgent. Belly-up. "Really?"

"Yes," I told him. "A beast with spikes all down its spine and a hooked tooth on its head. No face. It comes for our women and our children. It's a giant, but completely silent."

"Where did it come from?" he was comfortable, falling asleep. Sometimes men reminded me of babies. You fed them and they were done wailing.

“East of here,” I said. “It didn’t always live here. It lumbered down from another place and started living here, and we just have to watch out for it. It’s hungry, and when it wakes up it wants to eat.”

Ibáñez told me that I wasn’t very good at stories at all.

“But a horror story is the best kind of story to be told before bed,” I said to him. I moved closer. “It makes you want to stay near someone on a cold night.” He mumbled something to me. “I know,” I said. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

He was out. I looked over to Yolotli and waved my hand. Hurry. She came over to the other side of the bed and stood behind him, staring, fumbling in her dress until she pulled out the knife from the kitchen. El Gobierno snuffled. Yolotli stared. I mimed holding it by the top of the hilt and bringing it down on his temple. Yolotli swallowed, and nodded. Like a cow, I had told her. You smack it to stun it before you slit the throat. Right?

Right, she had said to me.

I looked at her, saying with my eyes: So come on. I’m ass naked here. Come on.

Yolotli gripped it until her knuckles marbled yellow, and did.

Ibáñez grunted, tried to pull himself up, and collapsed. His eyes didn’t opened once. I stared at him, clutching the sheet to my chest, not out of modesty but out of terror. He didn’t move. Now. I scrambled out of bed and shoved Yolotli aside. She put the knife in my hand. I looked down at him. General Ibáñez. El Gobierno. The hall of mirrors. Pobrecito, I thought. That was a new word I’d learned. Oh, you stupid, stupid man.

I took his head of hair in my right fist and the knife in my left, and as the bell chimed midnight outside throughout the village, waking everyone up from their peaceful sleeps, I

balanced the thickest edge of the blade to the vein that pulses bluest and biggest in the neck, and shoved.

So he died like that, mouth open, on his back like most men do, the gash in his throat gaping up at me. I told Yolotli to stop fucking around and hurry up and help me. Her hands, typically steady, fluttered around. She had never been squeamish about blood before; the issue must have been the way the head lolled. “I can’t sever his God damn spine,” I said. My teeth were locked. I was afraid that if I let up he’d reattach his head and come back to life like a cockroach. My hands were slipping all over the knife. Wet. Then Yolotli’s fingers closed on top of mine, and like we were one body instead of two we heaved, once, twice, and there was a burst of black blood and a thunk on the floor. Dust puffed around us. Yolotli coughed and waved a hand in front of her face. She nudged at it with her foot and told me not to take the Lord’s name in vain. I reached for the basket. Yolotli said, can you believe he’s even uglier dead than alive? “Fuck their Lord,” I said, belated.

We went to Miguel. We’d only planned as far as getting the General’s head off, so we were a little flummoxed. But when we knocked on Miguel’s door he answered, sleep-addled, and said my name, and then looked down, confused, to the basket in Yolotli’s hands. “What are you doing making bread this late?” he asked, rubbing at his eyes. We showed him. He stumbled. Then he went to wake the men of the house. And as we stood in the cool adobe commons, shivering, those men went to tell the other men, and those men more, and more after that, and more, until I began to hear it, like an oncoming storm: the crash of voices and yells, not in Spanish. He’s dead. He’s dead. To the church. To the church. He’s dead.

“Thank you,” Miguel said. He took my face in his hands, calloused and burned from the metal work. Something had caught in my throat. I thought I could cry. “Thank you.” Then he yelled to the men of the house that were still getting their things — their torches and their stones and their daggers, hoarded away for so long on an impossible hope, and now finally seeing the air. He left. Yolotli put down the basket, and after a moment we followed.

There was an orange slice of light ripping through the sky, licking with five hundred tongues to the gods in the stars; it was the church, burning. We heard a dissonant clang from the west, and jumped. A yell. And more. The bells, cracking beneath the hands of five hundred furious men.

Still, I think you know how my story ends. We held out for a while, but in six months they starved us out from a slapdash barricade we built on the hill. And I died. Everyone does. I died: not of starvation, but rather in the siege, after telling Yolotli to flee again, and farther this time. A Spaniard who looked fifteen held my head from behind and drove his knife through my throat, and between one blink and the next —

Now I live here, in the red dust of the hill, which has been covered in footsteps, fire, and horseshoes since; then train tracks, and tires, and finally dots of suburbia. A century past I was Mexico; and before that I was north of the Aztec, east of the Navajo; Columbus’s second Indian. They call me America now. To others I’m La Frontera. But none of those things are really true. I am myself, the daughter of a woman called Cualli, wife of Miguel, friend of Yolotli. This is me: a halfie named Josefina, with two feet planted in the ground.

## Mikayla, Sonny and Ruth's Daughter

In the class where we talk about Hans Holbein, there are a couple of guest speakers. I'm late on one of those days, which is more embarrassing than being late on a regular day. Just because it's raining out doesn't mean I want to be disrespectful. I come in, and the guy's already talking; the only free seat is in the front so I shuffle there and put my shit down and pull out a notebook, trying to stay quiet. I pray that the sound on my phone isn't on, but I can't check because now I'm in the front row. I'm thinking about whatever. No time for coffee, it's ten in the morning, I want some coffee. I'll shell out the two pounds for coffee later, and maybe I'll get some banana bread. I'm laughing at myself that that's my idea of a treat and I'm writing down what today's lecturer is saying on autopilot. It takes me a second to understand, like the moment when you stop translating and start reading; when the words begin to overlap, and then lap, at the shore of your mind. Words like waves or a cat's rough tongue. I worked in the States in the southwest, he's saying. Neolithic society; the first dig I led. I hear the story come at me like it's barreling closer through a tunnel —

A girl, eleven

Malnourished

The hot desert preserved some of her braids, two braids down the back.

I'm judiciously ignoring words like mummification and tooth carries — it's gross — but I listen again like a whip's been cracked when he says that hydrocephaly kept her bed bound since she was born. Then he starts talking about the women who gave him a place to stay in the pueblo. Rough hands like you wouldn't believe, he says. And then he starts to describe how they grind up grain by hand to have for dinner, which I'd seen abuela do a million times if it was

once; and he talks about how the old women in the pueblo would get madder than the men. He says that they could be furiously mean. He was terrified of them, he says, because of the lines on their faces. They believe that each line shows a new wisdom, and if that's true, he's got none of it himself — the pueblo women took it all.

I write this down. It won't be what's plucked from this lecture for the exam, but I write it down.

After the dig, he says he had a colleague who wrote up a long response to another colleague which was in response to another colleague — smattered laughter — that it's impossible to infer anything about a society's mores from bones alone. You need secondary sources and firsthand accounts; you need conferences and claims and counterclaims.

He reminds us the little girl had been vegetative since birth. There was nothing to be done for her, and her family, despite living without writing, understood that. She wouldn't have been kept alive unless there had been people feeding her by hand and massaging her throat to make her swallow at the end. She wouldn't have been able to stand, which meant that she was bathed by whoever it was who took care of her. And her braids, he says, were impeccable, like they were braided every day and washed a couple times a week, which meant that somebody did that too. She contributed nothing meaningful to their society, he says. She couldn't speak and couldn't walk. She couldn't work and she couldn't get married.

“There's only one explanation,” he says. “They loved her. And what does that tell us about the mores of the ancient indigenous people of the American southwest?”

They sang to her and talked to her. They loved her and prayed for her. They put her in the ground and they cried when she was gone. My skin grows thick with pride. What could anyone

say to me to dispel this feeling — any gringa, any president? He's saying other things: earliest example of palliative care, proof positive of love fantastic. I have a crazy wish while I'm sitting there, my pen about to fall out of my loose fist. I wish that the kids I went to school with, the ones who called Papa and men like Papa horrible names, could see. Look how well we love our own.

## Macondo

*Within a few years Macondo was a village that was more orderly and hard working than any known until then by its three hundred inhabitants. It was a truly happy village where no one was over thirty years of age and where no one had died...*

Gabriel García Márquez, *100 Years of Solitude*

When the election came, it was los Cubanos who were blamed. Los Cubanos, who had been fed in the Mexican's lap and given the Mexican's jobs, who were helped by the mestizaje when they did not even possess the money to venture a la tienda a comprar leche, were perceived to have pulled the vote in Florida for Donald Trump.

There was no uproar, but rather a quiet rumbling: it rushed throughout the southwest and into the places where Chicanos had dispersed. Those places included California, Chicago, and New York. While gringos in Gringolandia blamed other gringos, and marveled at the hidden cruelty in their fellow man, and southerners dusted off words like "carpetbagger," the mestizo refused to forget what los Cubanos had done. The discontent grew. It was thought that while Trump campaigned on the backs of the wetback, los Cubanos glutted themselves with resort profit gained from the Obama deal, like Herod the Great selling favors to the Romans while his fellow Jews suffered.

Such oppression by their fellow minority led Jews to search for, and cycle through, a parade of messiahs. Jews were lucky to find Yeshua ben Yosef, the man later called Jesus the God. The mestizo has had no messiah since César Chávez y Dolores Huerta, who lobbied for unionization and labor laws. In the absence of a man to deify, the mestizo took to crucifixion. It



was just the simpler alternative: procuring messiahs took more work and more time than the mestizo had to spare.

Complaints transmogrified. Where the mestizo first complained only about los Cubanos and their riches, their anger grew too big to be directed to one group alone. It ballooned, and it had to be distributed more evenly, lest it explode. “Los Cubanos never cared about us” became “the islanders never cared about us.” This was repeated in bars and at work. The words became germane and fruitful — like those of Homer’s protagonists, and in the ancient notion that thoughts took wing when they left the mouth as words, they flew. As they multiplied, they mutated still: “The islanders only love themselves.” “The islanders are too far away from us to care.” “The islanders have always had money. Even Nuyoricans selling piragua for an hour in Brooklyn to gringos make more money than we do scrubbing toilets for a day.”

This is adjacent to the mestizo’s rejection as a Latino. “Latino is what we call ourselves to each other,” said Sandra Cisneros, “Hispanic is what we call ourselves to gringos.” The problem of terminology tangles, barbed-wire, around the mestizo’s feet. The mestizo, experiencing disconnect from Mexico since its 19th century annexation to the States, might feel appropriative if he uses the term “Chicano”; informed by a gringo or an archaic South American that “Latino” only pertains south of Brasil, a mestizo might be prohibited from calling himself that which all others call themselves. Hispanic, despite its popularity among contemporary news pundits, described Spaniards, and was therefore incorrect — unless the mestiza wished to align herself to Europe and forget her indigeneity altogether, which did, in some cases, help to stymie her wounds.

The Mexican-American mestizo is not the only Latino who experiences this. There are doubtlessly other tangles and twists and betrayals of language that los Cubanos and other islanders — indeed, South Americans too — face. It is here that all Latinos are united: Not in our language or by our common colonizers in Spain and America, but rather by what has been lost. To be mestizo is to be liminal; from the Latin *limina*, which indicates an area of passage, or a doorway.

Perhaps, then, our liminality is what should unite us. Perhaps the mestizo, y los Cubanos, y las islanders, can pass through this *limina* and step into a shared past. Before there were los Cubanos who the mestizo perceived lost the election to greed, and before the mestizo existed, and before South Americans were turned paler by Portugal and Spain, there were settlements, villages, and cities. The Mexican-American mestizo, and the islander mestizo, and the South American mestizo, should all be encouraged or perhaps even required to imagine, in our cruelest moments and bitterest insults, this place. It is what I will call the allegory of Macondo.

I urge us to abandon the notion that we are unified only through the shared culture of Spain, and embrace instead our union under disparate yet similar indigenous peoples. That is, I encourage we reject, fundamentally, the untruths pressed upon us by Europe and her numerous colonists, who have come for some of us not once, not twice, but three and four times, and even now continually. To live in Macondo is to inhabit our indigeneity with the same surety that we inhabit our Latino identities — Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Colombian, etc. It is to reach back inside our liminality and feel for the doorknob, in the dark, that leads us to our shared roots. The Spaniards and Americans are unrelated to our shared roots. Our shared roots are that which

unite Taíno, Mayan, and Aztec: the fact that we were, and are, and continue now, as the descendants of proud peoples with histories of their own.

Imagínate the kind of trees you saw nearest the front step of your earliest home. These are the trees that follow the river-lines in Macondo.

Imagínate the birds that perch on a pirate's shoulder in your childhood imagination. These are the birds that fly through the air in Macondo.

Imagínate the language we spoke before the Americans and before Spain. It is the language that existed between Navajo and Nahuatl. This is the language you hear in Macondo.

When we dream it's of a place called Macondo. Heaven and purgatory are both Macondo. The womb is Macondo. Macondo is first and last home. In Macondo they only drink chicha and there's always maize to go around. There's no Spanish bullfighting in Macondo. There's no American big-truck-racing. Macondo has no Cubanos, nor Mexicanos; it has no Puerto Ricans, nor Colombianos. In Macondo, there is simply we.