

ACTS OF TRESPASS

by

Paula Beltrán  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
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of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Creative Writing

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Spring Semester 2015  
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Fairfax, VA

Acts of Trespass

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

by

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Spring Semester 2015  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

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## **DEDICATION**

This is dedicated to my loving husband, José Juárez, who is window and door and home and more; para mis padres que me dieron todo, Juan y Aurora; la Chiquita porque es la Mayor a quien admiro tanto; y mis tesoros, Lemoni y Jacob.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## **ABSTRACT**

ACTS OF TRESPASS

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George Mason University, 2015

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There's arguably no more tangible or dangerous act of trespass than the illegal crossing of a country's borders and in this regard, Houston, Texas, mere hours away from the United States – Mexico border, is the perfect setting for my collection of work. This thesis explores rampant socio-political-economic-religious-sexual-ideological border jumping. The poetry, fiction, and nonfiction pieces in this thesis feature accidental, purposeful, and seemingly unavoidable acts of trespass and transgression. In the process of researching and writing this thesis, the author completed Spanish-English translations of the late Mexican poet Jaime Sabines and implemented a wide range of linguistic code-switching.

## MY LITTLE LOVE

Pequeña del Amor  
By Jaime Sabines

Pequeña del amor, tú no lo sabes,  
tú no puedes saberlo todavía,  
no me conmueve tu voz  
ni el ángel de tu boca fría,  
ni tus reacciones de sándalo  
en que perfumas y expiras,  
ni tu mirada de virgen  
crucificada y ardida.

No me conmueve tu angustia  
tan bien dicha,  
ni tu sollozar callado  
y sin salida.

No me conmueven tus gestos  
de melancolía,  
ni tu anhelar, ni tu espera,  
ni la herida  
de que me hablas afligida.

Me conmueves toda tú  
representando tu vida  
con esa pasión tan torpe  
y tan limpia,  
como el que quiere matarse  
para contar: soy suicida.

Hoja que apenas se mueve  
ya se siente desprendida:  
voy a seguirte queriendo  
todo el día.

My little love  
Translated by Paula Beltrán

My little love, you don't  
know it,  
You can't possibly know it yet:  
It's not your voice, the cold angel  
of your mouth, nor your responses  
to the sandalwood you breathe  
and exude, that move me:  
nor your ardent,  
crucified virgin's stare.

Your carefully expressed  
anguish doesn't move me,  
nor does your silent,  
hopeless weeping.

Your melancholic gestures  
don't move me;  
nor your longing, your hope,  
nor the wound  
you speak, tormented.

It's your entire being—  
your portraying your life  
with such ungainly, cleansing  
passion, that moves me,

like he who wants to kill himself  
to be able to say: I'm a suicide.

Leaf that hardly stirs,  
and already feels stricken:  
I'm going to keep loving you.  
all day long.

## **THE HALL OF THE VIRGINS**

### **Bone-Picking with La Señora**

A few years into our marriage, my husband came home from work and said his mother had made dinner, mole in fact, and invited us over. I had used the sick card, the bad-hair-day card, the work card, the but-it's-raining card, even the cramps card. I was out of cards. I said the only thing that could be said, "Mira, how sweet of her. We should go, honey."

Mole means both sauce and a specific kind of one. From the looks and taste of mole served at most "Mexican" restaurants, you would not think so, but a tasty mole will sing the tunes of well over twenty ingredients.

There are many varieties of mole: mole colorado (red); yellow (looks like a mild curry); black (mmm...); the mancha-manteles (the stain-maker); the specially spicy one, mole pipián; and the extra sweet ones like mole almendrado, which lets you make love with spicy almonds, and my favorite, mole poblano, chocolately and spicy all at once. When done correctly, it will make you cry and you'll tell yourself it's only the heat.

The base for all moles starts with a combination of chili peppers: ancho, chipotle, pasilla, mulato. Sometimes stores do their own mixes and you'll see a bag labeled, "Chiles para Mole." Then come the nuts, peanuts, walnuts, almonds, pine nuts; the seeds,

pumpkin seeds, squash seeds, sesame seeds; onion; garlic; cumin; anise; cinnamon; cloves; achiote; tomatillos verdes; tomatoes. All these ingredients are toasted then ground into a powder before being added into stock. To thicken it, people add slices of stale bread, or browned corn tortillas.

It used to be that women scheduled the toasting and grinding of mole paste days in advance, allowing for the hours the work demanded, and the searing back and shoulder pain from leaning into a molcajete making fine powder of what was once whole. The paste is then turned into a sauce which can be thick or soupy, and goes over the meat of your choice, but traditionally chicken for every day meals, and turkey, for special occasions.

Mole is my favorite Mexican dish. My family, and his family by then, knew this weakness of mine. I do think it was strategic of my mother-in-law, La Señora, as I refer to her even now after almost nine years of marriage, to invite us over for mole.

My husband and his siblings are second-generation Mexican American. His parents are originally from a town called, Pueblo Viejo, “Old Town,” in Guanajuato, Mexico. Guanajuato is an official World Heritage site. Starbucks and McDonald’s are not allowed to desecrate the cityscape. While his family’s code-switching, or Spanglish as it’s commonly if reductively known, continues to perplex and amuse me, my eating habits seem to entertain them. Because I was raised in the capital city of Chihuahua, the largest state of Mexico, and one which borders Texas, all of my peculiarities are deemed the result of my “weird Chihuahuan upbringing.” Accordingly, despite their less than masterful command of Spanish, they feel Guanajuato’s location in central Mexico,

renders them and their family recipes “truly Mexican,” while Chihuahua’s close proximity to the United States is blamed for my “weird Mexican” or “American taste,” i.e. sour cream and sourdough bread, etc. My intolerance of any pepper which rates higher than a bell pepper on the Scoville scale, except for when masked in the sweet-spicy tones of mole, makes me outright suspect in their eyes. So I’ve felt as if under a microscope during every meal to which I am invited.

But as I said, I had run out of excuses. I joined my husband at his mother’s for dinner. The mole colorado, spread over the two drumsticks I was served, did little to hide the pieces of gristle and skin attached to them. The mole was spicy beyond belief yet tasted like... restaurant mole. The red thick paste seeped oil that circled the plate as if to help me point it out to my mother-in-law, which of course I didn’t. Tears squeezed out of the corners of my eyes, and all I could do was reach for a napkin fighting the urge to pick up the salt, the pepper, anything to make my boiled meat taste like...something.

“There is plenty more, Paula,” said Mary, his oldest sister. I told her thank you, and complimented her earrings. I offered to warm up the tortillas for everyone so La Señora could join the family at the table. As expected, she waved me off, and I knew there was no escaping the plate in front of me. I turned to look at my husband and found him busy pulling the skin off of the breast on his own plate. When he finished he put all the undesirables in a napkin he folded and pushed under the edge of his plate. Then with his fork and knife he began to take the meat apart from the breast bone. Everyone at the table pretended not to notice, especially me. My husband had been served mole at my parents’ and knew how unlike my mother’s, his mother’s mole was. Once all the pieces

of meat piled up, he took his fork and folded the mole into the meat. When he finished, he switched plates with me.

My mother-in-law gestured to Mary for the bowl of roasted guajillo salsa and heaping two spoonfuls onto her mole said, “you’re lucky you got him.” I vigorously nodded yes with my mouth full.

### **Like a Virgin**

Three years after my college graduation—after six years of dating, a teaching stint in Japan, one pregnancy scare, and countless illicit encounters in dorm rooms, cars, isolated parking lots, library bathrooms, halls, and study rooms, on day beds, sofa beds, and both our childhood beds—I married my first boyfriend. Just like my sister before me, just as our mother had a year a year before I was born.

The seeming inevitability of my decision to marry weighed on me as heavy as the silk taffeta skirts of the gowns I would be talked into trying on by the battalion which accompanied me to the bridal shops when the time came. My mother, three aunts, and two cousins, all gave their proverbial two cents for what it was worth, both about the task at hand and marrying in general. And so they had for as long as I can remember.

As I grew older I learned to ask for the little things in life. If at times I requested that my salad come without chives or blue cheese, and then was served chives or blue cheese, I never felt the slightest embarrassment in asking that the oversight be rectified. I could just as easily make comparable demands of my cable service, my manicurist, my

mother's cooking, a professor who failed to see, at first, why my work deserved a B+ and not a B-. I never hesitated before telling Girl Scouts or Macy's shoes salesmen that I would think about it and would be in touch. But it never occurred to me to ask my then-boyfriend for some time to consider his marriage proposal. As proposals go, even now it remains the one that should have given me the most pause. And yet, when the moment came, in the glow of *America's Next Top Model*, and the impossible velvet box was gently placed on my faded elastic-less sweatpants, I squealed my yes as surely and high-pitched as every other woman I've seen do the same in real life.

### **How about it?**

Who proposes on a Tuesday? My husband did.

My husband, a Texan at heart, if not in fact, is drawn to revisionism like the rest of the state. He insists he did *not* squeeze next to me in an armchair made for one person— making me feel fat moments before he made the following invitation, “How about it?” He proclaims my proposal story a tall tale. But some things he can't undo no matter his insistence that I “just remember it wrong.”

My husband is almost ten years older than me. We had been fighting in the days leading up to his proposal and though I am certain that at the time it mattered and that I was right, I don't now recall why it was that he found me in sweats watching that horrible show. I do remember, clearly, that right after I heard the wooden bones of the chair we shared groan with our combined weight, he said “I know you're upset

with me but... How about it?" On a Tuesday. The day before my birthday. My immediate reaction I know you can't and shouldn't want to change someone, but can you at least change someone's notions of an acceptable proposal? Even as you say yes... and notice the size and cut of the rock... and put it on? I did. "What is wrong with you?" was immediately followed by "Oh my god, honey, yes!"

He says he only asked "how about it?" when I took long to respond to "I love you. We've been together for six years... Will you marry me?" He says he only added "So... how about it?" when I didn't respond right way. But how can I have blocked all that out? I prefer his version! Unfortunately, there were no witnesses. I lived at home with my parents up until the day before the wedding but they weren't home the day of the proposal. I'd like to think he planned it that way, but the man proposed on a Tuesday, the day *before* my birthday. Why not Wednesday? Or that following weekend? Or even a week later, at Christmas, which his family zealously celebrates? I don't think he planned anything short of the purchase of the ring. I'd like to think he at least did that days, weeks in advance. But he's known to stop for a \$6 haircut at a Vietnamese shop on his way home from work simply because traffic on Highway 59 is bad, showing up at home, grinning, "Brother's ears feel nekked!" oblivious his hair looks as if it was *bitten* off.

At some point it was agreed or decided (by whom?), that his parents would come over during Holy Week so they could formally ask mine to bless our union. They might have worded this differently, of course. I think the actual words in Spanish were closer to, "consent to give her... to our son." During Holy Week, my mother and my

aunts worked as one implacable and efficient unit. The menu was changed in consideration of his Catholic parent's dietary restrictions. The carpet was shampooed, curtains pressed, baseboards shined, silverware polished then reexamined and tossed, newly bought.

My Tía Carmen stayed to help my mother with the dinner service. After the seafood stew bowls were removed from the table, the main course was served. A minute or two into her lightly- fried filet of tilapia smothered with a cream tomato and cilantro sauce, and a side of fluffy white rice sprinkled with super fine lemon peel, my mother-in-law asked for "chile or salsa," adding "so it can at least taste like something," and still, my parents gave their yes as was expected. As mine had been.

### **Extra Virgin**

Until now, I had never thought of it as such but I guess we do have a family tradition.

My mother was nineteen years old when she married my father, her first, and presumably only, boyfriend. My sister was nineteen when *she* married her husband, also her first novio. Years after wedding guests pinned token cash gifts to their veils in exchange for dancing privileges, aunts and old family friends never fail to mention the absolute fact of their virginal status at the time of the nuptials. This is not merely hinted at, or referred to euphemistically, but direct announcements are made to the

physical, anatomical fact of the thin membranes which were broken only a few hours after their other, whispery veils of silk organza had been lifted at the altar.

Against my parents' wishes I went on to complete university studies in English. That framed diploma, tellingly placed next to my sister's wedding portrait, itself a few inches away from my mother's in what I call the hall of the virgins, was a daily source of guilt for a long time. I felt I had wronged my parents with my fancy dreams of being a writer. What's worse, until rather recently, I feared I had wasted, for all intents and purposes, my father's last, finally successful trip across the Sonoran desert in the mid 70's. I mean, law school, medical school, business school, surely anything but English could give him a return on his investment, make up for hypothermia, scorpion bites, train rides with livestock, implacable midnight chases.

Although my father intended to give his marriage the best start in Santa Ana, financially-accessible medical care would drive my parents back to Chihuahua shortly after my sister's and my third and fourth birthdays. His health improved but crossing back with wife and children in tow was now unthinkable. All those horror stories that weren't stories. We stayed in Chih. for a decade.

Having been born in California but raised in México, I returned to the United States with my family when I was fourteen. Upon arrival in Houston, Texas my father banned Spanish (to encourage my sister's and my immersion in English), but threatened deportation if we became "too American." He declared eyeliner, shaving, and friendships with American girls illegal. Everyone could see, he argued, that

American girls grew up wild— like vines. Eager to make friends and learn what my father referred to as the language of air conditioning, I read.

Under my family's vigilant eyes I came to read the entire *Babysitter's Club* and *Sweet Valley High* series provided by my ESL teachers, while learning the latest slang from shows like *Beverly Hills, 90210*. It's still a thrill to catch the episodes without my parents' channel flipping every time Kelly and Brenda kiss boys.

By my second fall in English, I was making up what I couldn't understand. My dad would shake his head while I sat crying at the dinner table having been caught with smudges of eyeliner no matter how hard I scrubbed on the bus ride home. But he never questioned my spending time with fat paperbacks. I was free to indulge in my favorite petulant vampires and to devour the grand affairs of bored housewives, the latter imagined by Danielle Steel, whose latest book jackets can still transport me right back to tenth grade. Soon enough, almost as if by magic, I could understand that it was a truth universally acknowledged that single women all over the world must be in want of a husband. I tested out of ESL classes.

Reading in order to learn English left me with a whole lot to say that couldn't exactly be said in Spanish. Reading turned into writing. Unlike spoken English, which was about the business of school and serving as an interpreter for my parents, writing in English gave me my voice as a new and young American.

My college years were spent waging a private war against my conflicting identities and a public and all-American one against my parents (Mexican daughters don't talk back to their parents, much less wage war against them). On good days my

family and I cheered the miracle of my improving bilingual self. On the more often bad days, no one missed a chance to point out signs of its evil twin, my nascent bicultural self. By the time I read and wrote about Toni Morrison, Lillian Faderman and Cherrie Moraga, there were all-out border wars at home. Reading and writing offered sanctuary, but it also helped that by the second spring of my undergraduate career, I had convinced my parents to let me move into a campus dorm. My father had survived deadly crossings; my mother had developed chemical solutions to tackle any combination of household stains and grimes; yet somehow neither questioned my claim that a *guard* was stationed 24 hours at the entrance of the university dormitory which I'd miraculously, surreptitiously secured.

At home, the presence and domain of the virgins grew.

On the other side of a wall of bookshelves built by my father especially for my use, sat a mahogany Queen Anne coffee table reproduction, its curving legs mimicking the shapes of the young women contained in the frames displayed on its lacquered surface. My parents saw no need for me to be on campus on weekends when there were no classes to attend. Unless I concocted wildly complex school projects for which I needed almost the very walls of my dorm to complete, I was picked up Friday afternoons and driven back to campus on Sunday evenings.

The framed bridal portraits of cousins in Chihuahua, New Mexico, California, and Texas received me every Friday night I returned home.

The frames of my cousins' bridal portraits were made of various metals, glass, and wood finishes. The sizes too varied, from 4 x 6s, to 5 x 7s, to the 8 x 10s given

prime mahogany real estate. It seemed to me that the more virginal the cousin, the more ostentatious the frame in which her portrait was placed, but this was not always the case. Also, I'm sure I'm wrong but I remember thinking the bigger frames tended to feature younger brides.

My mother filled her American house with family photographs without a care for aesthetic principles or anything resembling a particular decorative style. Wood, plastic, Ikea, glass, ceramic, it didn't make a difference. But the bridal frames had beveled edges, etched, heavier glass; the wooden ones were carved in more intricate patterns. I don't remember if it was my mother who chose the settings or if she was given the photographs already framed. I do remember thinking the finish and weight of the frames reflected bridal strategy, so to speak. Not all the brides showed those smiles that are born in the eyes and hardly need the accompaniment of showy teeth. Some of the pictures were of both the bride and the groom, which made me think, had been done rather intentionally to quiet any rumors of prematurely consummated unions, as if to say, They're married now, that's all that matters. The invitations to receptions welcoming first-borns less than nine months after their parents' wedding celebrations did not go unmentioned by anybody. The frames kept the onlookers distracted if ever so briefly.

My mother was in charge of the bridal rotations. For reasons never explained, I would come home and find that Miriam had replaced Sonia in the platinum oval, and that Yadira had been pushed to the back, behind third-cousins we really didn't

know. If this was the result of bored dusting, or purposeful demarcation, my mother didn't say. What was often pointed out was the space for a very special frame in *the hall*.

### **Sister Dearest**

As a sign of respect, my parents promised my maternal grandmother that they would name me, their firstborn, after her. So there was never a question of who I would be.

My sister hates being named after my mother. She thinks it proves they weren't excited about her and consequently, failed to give proper care to selecting her name. She thinks being named after my mother shows, at worse, my parents' indifference, and at best, their laziness. She's wrong, por supuesto.

My parents were thrilled when my mother became pregnant for the second time. They had a girl and they just knew this one would be a boy. At least in their hearts they knew they would have a boy. During my mother's check-ups at a government clinic in Los Angeles, the doctor refused to let her know the sex of the baby. My parents, always fearful because of their undocumented status, were reluctant to ask too many questions, afraid to offend anyone, and risk being denied the "free" maternity care. During the pregnancy they asked the doctor to please let them know once, maybe twice. But he would say he just couldn't see it, he couldn't tell, and a baby was a baby. Because they wanted a boy, they planned for a boy. When my sister came along, my mother was alone and unprepared, my father unable to secure

permission from his roofing boss to take the day off. Even then there were plenty of other desperates waiting to take my father's place. Pressured by the nurse to "hurry up," she named my sister after her, a practice popular in her family.

### **Smallprint**

Every few years my sister threatens to legally change her name. I'm nothing like you, she tells our mother often. Nevertheless, by their twentieth birthdays, almost to the year of their virginal unions, both my mother and sister were properly pregnant with their first of two church and family-sanctified children.

My sister works in accounting. APRs and small-print disclaimers *excite* her. She dreams of quitting a career she loves to homeschool her two children to shelter them from all the ungodliness found in our public school system. I man phones for Planned Parenthood. Mathematics became unbearable as soon as my third-grade teacher introduced the class to fractions with uncommon denominators. In high school, enduring the shame of learning English was a piece of cake next to algebra's binomials, which almost shattered my grasp on reality.

A couple of years after my sister was married, she came to visit my parents' home, where I still lived on the weekends, not because I was in college and unemployed, but because this was what was *right* since I remained unmarried, if not single. In front of our mother, as well as another cousin and her mother, my sister emptied her purse on my bed. My mother and aunt sat and fussed over my niece who

reveled unknowingly in being at that time the first and only baby in the house. My sister ran her hands over pacifiers, baby wipes, and coupons for pie crusts. My cousin and I painted her nails a bright yellow.

“Here they are,” my sister said. “I knew I had them.”

In her right hand she held up a few condoms. I say held up because at the time I refused to believe she was extending them to me. Like the stamped labels on cartons of eggs, I remember they read, Extra Large.

“Excuse me,” I let escape from my lips, enraged like the woman I was, afraid like the daughter I also was. I turned to see if my mother and aunt were paying attention. They weren’t. Blessings fall upon babies.

Without missing a beat, my sister said, “Here, take these, you probably need them more than me, no?” She laughed, put everything else back in her purse. The wrapped squares sat on my bed, radiating, until I picked them up by the corners with two fingers and pushed them under my violet-dotted bed skirt.

“So! Mom! I found the most incredible recipe!” she moved on.

### **Mexican Kasbah**

At the time of my engagement, my sister and her family lived in North Carolina. She came to Houston the weekend of my last fitting before the wedding. To help me. I was happy to have my little and only sister there, even if she is as ruthless as only a sister can be. After all, the joys and tribulations of having multiple sisters, is that sisterly ruthlessness is then over-abundant, not less or more punishing.

I have always been enamored of traditional rituals, Mexican and other cultures'. I wanted my wedding to reflect that. During the ceremony those closest to my husband and I would pull around us a braided rope signifying our permanent union, and we would exchange miniature chests of tiny gold coins for good luck in our joint financial future the way I had seen it done at Mexican Catholic weddings of friends; my bridesmaids would wear Indian sarees because the more colorful the happier the occasion; the night before the wedding, all the women in my family would get mehndi, or henna tattoos, while they shared female wisdom from the ages, but I alone would have my husband's name written among the intricate designs for him to discover on our wedding night; my cake would look like a tower at the Moroccan Kasbah where I dreamed of spending my honeymoon; I would wear a traditional red tunic belted in gold the way of the barber women, or a festive peasant dress with a full twirl-ready skirt like Frida donned when she married Diego.

Almost none of this came to pass.

"Get out of your books, mija," said my mother. "What's wrong with a *Christian* wedding? I will not participate in a pagan Catholic wedding."

"You know you're Mexican, right?" said friends, neighbors, my cousin Jaime, playing and not.

"Red Moroccan gown, huh? asked my sister. "Well, sis, at least you're honest, which is more than I can say for most of our cousins..."

"Baby," enticed my now-husband, "we'll do whatever you want, but you know we're Mexican, right? Think open bar and good music. Good food. It's all about the

food. Why can't we just have a barbeque? Imagine brisket cooked all night long? The boys would hook it UP.”

After the initial shock of my particular wedding fantasies wore off, the women in my family caught their breath and dragged me dress-shopping. This first trip was painfully unsuccessful. I did not want to wear a white or long gown, its history too much for my women- studies heart. I was not being rescued by my husband. He was my best friend and my equal. Alone, I found a knee length 60's-inspired dress and took it home. They deemed it the perfect post-wedding luncheon dress. And it was back to the shops.

In the end, my bridesmaid wore sarees and I had my Kasbah cake—it looked so phallic I was embarrassed to be photographed with it. But my rituals were declared pagan, ridiculous, or Catholic. It was decided that my uncle, the pastor of his own church in Santa Ana, CA would officiate the ceremony. I sent him a list of things I did not want him to say when the time came. I did not want mention of Adam and Eve anything, as I had gay and lesbian friends coming to the wedding. I did not want mention of the children to come as we did not plan on having any. Along with taking my 20 minute ceremony and turning it into a 45 minute Come to Jesus session, my uncle did the exact opposite of what I asked him. In the wedding video, you see me crying—and this was because of my hurt shock, not my flowers, or my husband's strong hand behind my back while he whispered, I got you, steady...

In the end, I was stuffed into a princess ball gown of my own choosing. At the last fitting my sister commented on its shade of antique gold saying, “I like it. It's

you. You are not a white gown type of girl, after all.” During the reception aunts put their hands on my waist and gushed, “so modern, no?” My mother laughs but I think they were feeling for the flush of the first trimester. We were forced to invite people we neither knew nor liked and the wedding costs ballooned so that a honeymoon anywhere proved impossible.

When I look at my wedding photos, I still like my dress. I think I remember choosing it. I tried it on a couple of summers ago and the zipper wouldn't even grant me an inch. If it wasn't for the photos, I wouldn't believe it was once mine or that it ever fit.

#### **Mr. Juárez and Ms. Beltrán 4-Ever**

Being married was fun.

I began my career as a court advocate. He moved up the ranks as an analyst at an environmental laboratory where he eventually worked alongside Ph.Ds without having graduated college himself. We had no kids and no intention of having them. It wasn't hard to decorate the 500 square feet of our first home together. I visited Ethan Allan and World Market and Pier 1, and then dragged my husband to Marshall's and TJ Maxx for less-expensive versions of their home furnishings.

My husband came home early no matter the deadlines, the last-minute projects, the disapproving looks of his boss. Football became less of a weekly national emergency no matter how much his friends called, texted, or emailed. I shaved every other day. Refused to wear anything that smacked of “housewife.” I made sure to have

shoes on when he came home. I served lovingly prepared, if simultaneously raw and burned meals, at least three times a week. We made love in our shower, against our front door, on our IKEA futon, on our laminate marble floor. On our very own queen-sized bed. On lazy Saturdays mornings, I put on my wedding gown and we played wedding night.

But soon enough I noticed people treated me differently once I was married.

My husband knew of my dream of learning to write and even publish one day, and respected my wish to keep my maiden name. It was duly noted by all and considered selfish then as it is now since I have yet to change it. I have never understood how I was expected to change my name, to literally stop being who I was, simply because I agreed to love him unconditionally and live with him permanently.

My book shelves and their contents were commented upon. Surely the money spent to buy them and the time spent to read them could be better used? My housekeeping practices were openly questioned and mocked. Why does he cook so much? Why don't you? Did you just say he sewed a button on your shirt?! The question of children, our lack of any, never fails to come up. All of this from the lips of educated, feminist-identified, even and mostly, my closest lesbian friends.

Perhaps it should have been obvious to me that things would change after marriage, but it wasn't and I resented it whether it was for better or worse. In the beginning it was the little things. Interstate and international gossip reached my wedded ears for the first time. Some were serious developments like how I finally had

something in common with my sister. But I also lost friends. A support system I had enjoyed since my undergraduate years. My first few years of marriage I was giddy with love for him, but depressed over the loss of my life before him. Everyone has opinions about what married women should do, say, and look like.

Twice, while surrounded with college friends who are now almost strangers, I've been told I'm vain for not wanting to have children. "You're married now, remember? You can get fat now and it's okay." Because he's older than me, I'm called cruel for depriving him of the opportunity to be a young father. Worse still, I've been told by more than a few former friends that if he had better self-esteem he would "demand" all the things a husband "deserves from his wife." All these friends were openly contemptuous of my decision to apply to and attend graduate school out of state. Countless explanations of the crazy odds of admission into the MFA world went unheard. "It doesn't matter. You're *married*. You don't just leave him to go see what you're going to be when you grow up." If he cheats, everyone warned, no one to hold accountable by myself.

My biggest surprise was how my mother and aunts reacted to my new status as a married woman. The women in my family have endured the loss of children, spouses, jobs, and country. And they have nonetheless thrived. They have bought homes in cash earned cleaning people's homes; the intimate act that is washing other people's linens, whites. With extremely limited schooling or no schooling at all of their own, they've sent their children to college. However, at my bridal shower, I clearly remember being told about the inherent goodness of exemplary housekeeping; the

implication that unless I was amicable and receptive at all times, and prompt with my meals every day, I would be to blame for any and all indiscretions, or marital discord.

Imagine my shock at how the women in my family handled the news of my MFA plans.

My mother celebrated the news of my various acceptances and offers of funding. She asked all the pertinent questions and summed it up for me: “You’ll have a lot work to do if you want to have both a master’s and a marriage three years from now, but you can do it.” My aunts took a little longer to warm up to the idea, but soon after I settled into my MFA in Virginia, they started calling me reassuring me that men did or didn’t do as they liked whether we were in the next room or not. “Don’t worry about him. Focus on your work.” That he visits or calls my family regularly, even sometimes more than I do, surprised no one, least of all me.

I’ve joined my mother and my sister in the hall of the virgins. My mother says that when I’m done here we can mount my MFA and BA degrees in a single large frame, place it alongside my portrait.

I still sometimes catch them, the women in my family, studying my portrait, my crucified virgin stare.

## NANNYING UP

You're not the first and you won't be the last.

Every common maid in Houston attempts at least once to pass as experienced nanny. But you want to get outta scrubbing them toilets and into that reading hour at the library on Kirby, you listen to me.

First of all, put them belongings of yours down.

When you's a nanny nothing but the children belongs to you. You have no past and no present and definitely no future. And no bag. Leave all bags at home and save yourself the hassle.

Even if they don't say anything, they'll wonder. Next time a spoon, or a brush, or one of them fancy creams appears to have grown legs, they'll reckon it's "worth asking about, just in case."

And they'll wonder enough about you. (But not about who is looking after your own babies in Roatán. Remember you don't have any.) Don't give em something else to ponder.

Don't try to look fancy for them. They see you wearing anything they might have seen in a store, they'll think you're making too much.

And you're not.

And you won't.

But it beats the shit outa scrubbing them toilets.

## THE TWO FRIDAS

Not remotely romantic, the storm. We don't even have enough candles to light up when the power goes out in our place. Scary how tiny and ugly it is, scary how expensive it is, scary how much I love it because Camila calls it home. And me too.

Right now Camila is pretending to pull her long hair back from her face and from in between my legs to swallow greedy gulps of air.

"I'm sorry," she says, "my hand is cramping up." "We don't have to—"

"Shh... Just enjoy it..."

I can't get into it. We have so much to do. And we need to find another bed. New, old, borrowed, it doesn't matter. No one will be sleeping in it. I look out of our tiny window. Cleaning the apartment is only the beginning of all there is to do by tomorrow—before the shit hits the fan. That's an expression that Camila taught me.

"Luna, you like this?"

Her numb fingers keep working; her guilt contributing to that nice steady pace I usually like. Instead, a rhythmic pounding settles behind my eyes. I don't, but I arch my back just a little bit anyway.

Camila's eyes travel up past my breasts and onto the Frida Kahlo poster above our 'headboard,' a broken conference table my boss asked me to take out to the trash bin.

She is fixated on the two ugly Fridas and their fearless stares. I think she imagines they scold her for her half-hearted attempts at making love guilt-free.

I moan as expected. Camila withdraws her fingers. Not too fast as to hurt me, but fast enough so that my hips—glorious she calls them—couldn't fight back even if they wanted. She chuckles softly, comes up to nestle her back into the fullness of my breasts, really all they're good for. I put my long fingers to work, smoothing out the cramps in her hand.

"Admit it," I say. "You were mentally rearranging the pantry shelves the way your mother likes them."

"English!"

"Hmm. I remember when even saying 'pásame la sal' got you wet, Camila."

"You need to practice," she says. She sulks that at twenty-eight I seem to be unable to add to my vocabulary.

She asks if I—you know.

"Houston is not a very romantic city," I start to say by way of reply. Camila faces me with pursed lips.

"Yes, I 'arrived' or 'got here' or whatever, and no, I'm not just saying that," I tell her.

She rests her head on my chest, licks the tip of her index finger and writes something that feels like *why* around the top half-moon of my left breast. I make the effort to stop thinking about her mother's visit and our empty fridge. My eyes close.

“Cami, I wish I could take you to Veracruz, I say. Every few blocks you see a plaza you’d think was made just for kissing, I swear.”

Camila’s body lowers against mine so that my right thigh feels the heat. I play with her hair and massage the back of her neck. She purrs even as she almost pulls away from the roughness of my paws. Then she puts her mother’s visit under our pillows, and grabs my hands. She holds them to her lips attempting to kiss away the bruises, the scars, and this week’s burn.

“Exactly what kind of mechanic are you?” she asks. She has asked many times. “The good kind, baby!” I say. I ask her if she needs a checking.

“Check-up, “she corrects me, giggling and dropping kisses around my navel. You’re attempting so much more than vocabulary lessons, Camila, I think.

“Hey, Frito Lay speaks Spanish.” I try to say this evenly remembering how she once said she could hear it when my jaw sets.

She’s applying to law school. She doesn’t know how hard it is to learn words you have no time to use. I just want a cold Victoria at the end of the day. And her.

“Luna—your hands...?”

“Your fancy lotion doesn’t work, and I can’t help it. Sometimes my hands take the burning glue and the staples. It can’t be helped, Cami.”

Sometimes my hands also take the weight of metal presses intended for unfeeling cardboard. I’m in charge of the machines responsible for gluing the boxes that carry the twelve or twenty-four assortments of chips.

She knows what I do from the surprise visits she's made to the factory since we met almost two years ago.

“So you're a good mechanic, huh?”

I'm not the most patient of women, but the scars on my right thumb remind me that everything takes its time—glue, immigration visas, love.

“La mejor,” I say, running my hands over the bandolon of her hips. I've always liked the blue uniforms of mechanics, so I bought one, and the thick grease under my fingernails is real enough to encourage her attempts to manicure them.

Camila reaches for her purse beside the bed and finds a compact mirror, looks at the smeared remnants of last night's eyeliner. I catch the Fridas in it. Sitting side by side, one dark, one light, together they reign over the darkest of skies even if one alone holds the surgical clamps keeping them both from bleeding out.

“Your Frida liked looking at herself, didn't she,” I point to the poster. She sighs my name. “You say I'm not a real Mexican and pick on my Spanish, Luna, but you don't know about Frida Kahlo? Frida painted “Las Dos Fridas” when she was mourning her husband's infidelity. With her own sister! She felt alone. So she split herself in two, made another Frida to keep her company.”

I wonder if Camila's mom will ever understand. Without Camila, I too would freeze in place and time like the Fridas. Minus that unibrow. That's the one lipstick thing about me. Wax is your friend, I always want to tell the Fridas.

“Luna?” She clicks the compact shut, shifts her body towards mine, looks up at me. “Yes. Your mom. Here. Tomorrow. Don’t worry about it. We’ll have everything ready,” I promise.

“It’s already three in the afternoon... Hand me that Reese’s please.” I do. Nothing better than putting something she wants in her hands.

“You took off from work so we would have plenty of time,” she says. “We haven’t even made it out of bed.”

I do get easily distracted.

“Well, you fell asleep after breakfast!” I try. Camila says nothing.

I sit up, and gently pull loose the braid of her alien hair. A natural blonde, she’s tried to go dark and back again. It still looks green to me. I kiss the pretty mole on the soft of her lobe, smile at her from below the clean arches above my eyes.

“You know you’re the only butch I’ve ever known to,” she stops. Then cries, “Your hair...”

She knits her brows and they look like the wingtips of gaviotas. I can tell she thinks about not finishing her sentence, but she does.

“It’s almost shorter than my Dad’s, Luna.” Her wings fly back down, hopeless.

“Man. You’re gonna start with the hair!” I don’t say anything else. I thought the almost- curls made it, well, hair de niña.

She says, The bed, Luna, the bed. All I can think of is the bed we already have. How it’s the first time I haven’t minded sharing one. How my sisters never felt as warm and right against me all those years before they moved out to share their husbands’.

Camila sits on the bed's right side, at the edge, adjusting the sheets to cover the slopes of her hips.

“Cami, mi niña, why don't you just *tell* her?” I start. “You're twenty-three years old and have taken home nothing but 'roommates' since college. Your mom probably already knows.”

“Not all of us looked like G.I. Jane when we were ten,” she snaps at me not for the first time.

The first time she said that I had her show me what she meant. It's not true. At home, my mother and sisters only thought it was sweet that I wasn't as *vanidosa* as them, that I didn't compete with them for the dresses and cosmetics they found on clearance in the open-air stalls of Sunday's *tianguis*. Dresses a decade too old to be anything but someone's trash and a reminder of how the girls couldn't be too choosy with their men. Compacts with cracked boxes of color dust that evaporated not too long after it was applied. A blessing since it made them look like the powdered cookies we ate at the weddings they got all dressed up for. Camila wants to say more but stops after telling me she doubts my parents were truly surprised when I told them. She's wrong about that too. My parents believe that to say it is to will it. They would never let me say it.

She assumes I don't know how badly she wants to get out of this room, away from this bed, and away from me.

You think I think it all so simple and you're wrong, Camila.

But she's right. Her mom gets here tomorrow and even I think my hair looked longer last night. I've known about her mother's visit since last month... All true. I reach for my Astros cap and see my hand shaking. *Hijole*.

She doesn't notice, doesn't have time. She stares at the two Fridas. Perhaps finding disapproval in their eyes she shuffles into the bathroom to dress.

"How hard can it be for Frida to hold hands with another woman when she's married to a man," Camila mumbles from behind the bathroom door.

Not to mention she's dead, I think but don't say. I look at the Fridas and they seem encouraging if indifferent, not judgmental. The unwavering rain now seems to be the only thing that could stop her mother from coming.

It's only dinner, I tell the closed door, picking at its flaps of loose paint.

Depending on her mood, Camila might like or dislike my opening doors. To be safe, I let a man ahead of us hold it this time. The cold air of the furniture store immediately puts the pressure on to buy the first ugly thing we see, just to be able to leave the building. I really could have let my hair grow some, just for her mom. Chinnn,

"Wow, these are so expensive, Luna..."

I have to be very careful when mentioning money. It's the funniest thing. For the longest time she insisted on paying for half of everything. Since graduating from university and somehow convincing her mother she needed to live with me, 'a friend,' to be closer to the LSAT-prep courses, the mention of play money, who has it (me) and who

doesn't (her), is more and more a sure-fire way to not, how do you say... get any action for days. It doesn't help that I didn't even graduate secondary school.

"Manual labor doesn't pay much, but it'll always be needed," I tell her.

"Don't preach to me," she says, "I know all about that." Then she preaches to me about her mom cleaning toilets in Memorial and River Oaks to put her through school. My reassurances to her that I'm okay supporting us for now go ignored.

"So, what, you're the man, now?" Camila says. *Es super terca.*

"You won't be the only one paying for it, Luna," she says now, hugging herself against the chill of the store. But I'm the one with a job. I know I will be paying for this useless bed, and more, long before Camila can tell the truth.

"Are you girls finding everything okay today?" A saleslady greets us with a smile, shifting her weight from one swollen foot to another. I know what that bone-deep exhaustion feels like and I'm twenty years younger. I'm sure she hates her high-heeled shoes. Standing on your feet for hours on end is a bitch, even if Camila doesn't want me to use the word. Kind lady or not, I know "girls" is all Camila heard. The rant on girls who are not women and vice versa one of the first I ever got.

Camila lifts her right brow at me, and I nudge her towards the living room sets. Her fingers comb through her hair. As if she could untangle her fears, find the knots of her resolve.

I turn my attention back to the saleslady, seeing that flash of recognition in her eyes. She recovers in a long second. Though not as long as when I waited for my mother

to take in my short haircut the night before I left Veracruz. The saleslady doesn't have my mother's look. I fight the urge to thank her for this.

“We are interested in whatever you have on sale, Ms. Yolanda. We need something simple, the frame, the mattress, nothing special. Just a cheap bed..” I refrain from adding that we're shopping for a bed we don't need, because we can't shop for new parents for Camila. Or for their acceptance.

The saleslady's mahogany skin is slack along her jawline when she smiles: a tired smile that makes me think she's on our side.

I turn to see Camila walk past three-piece sets until she falls into an overstuffed sofa obviously trying to be nice-looking with its contrasting trim and all. Maybe Camila is more afraid of telling her mother about *me*, than about telling them it's a girl she holds at night before falling asleep. Maybe she's scared to say she's with a school drop-out with an accent. Maybe it's my blue uniform, worn by those of us who are ignored as long as we meet the quota of the day. I meet mine and don't mind it, but I understand it still bothers her. And I wonder what would happen if my status as extraterrestre couldn't be blamed for my employment options. Here, or there, I think I would still be wearing a uniform of some kind.

I beg Ms. Yolanda to find us any bed less than two hundred dollars that can be delivered tonight.

“I'll be sitting right over there with that güerita.” “Who?”

“The pretty blonde I came in with,” I say, pointing to Camila.

I sit next to her. Turn my body to her but can't bear to look into her face. "You're sure it's only the whole girl-girl thing, Cami?"

I can barely hear my own voice with the pounding in my brain but I'm sure she's heard me.

Her furrowed eyebrows make her look like that Frida. A blonde-green Frida. The first thing she ever told me about Frida was that she was an incredible artist who loved women, but married a man. Apparently back then love was also complicated.

She reaches for my hand—in a store, with a family of chinitos just a few steps away, in the all-revealing light of day—and I grin like the luchadores.

While Yolanda does the paperwork, I tell Camila that everything is going to be fine.

"I'll wear one of your long skirts. I'll pretend I'm terribly upset about the stylist chopping off my hair, just because I had terribly damaged ends. ¿Usted sabe, Señora, no? Éste frizz?" I go on and on.

Camila rubs the tops of her thighs.

I told her to make up a story for her mom, tell her not to come yet. She's not ready for this. We're not ready. And, man, I'm not ready. Her mother's not blind, and she's definitely not going to fall for my girly girl disfraz. Camila's lovely green hair is all going to end up in her hands if she doesn't stop tugging on it.

She just sits there, one leg tucked so pretty under the other, and holds my hand. The hemp heels of brown leather sandals mute her floor-tapping. Think of oranges, she had said when teaching me they were called wedges. English is so strange.

Yolanda announces that all is ready. The bed will be delivered tonight at eight. She puts the yellow receipt in an envelope. Only then does Camila ask if the bed is cheap enough for us. I tell Yolanda to have a good night. I'm pressing the sides of my cap against my sweaty head, when Camila pulls me close, says, You're so good to me, Luna. No one ever has, or will, treat me like you have.

I'm still smiling when fear drips into my heart just like the burning glue that melts holes in my uniform and skin. I fear disappearing into those holes. I open up the umbrella Yolanda gives us and we brace ourselves for wet lunges back to the car. Uno. Dos. Tres.

Raising the volume on the radio just makes the silence between us more solid, like the short bursts of thunder of the metal presses at work. It's been a long day, and still so much to be done. But, it all ceases to matter when we find Camila's mother, my would-be-suegra, standing by the leasing office trying not to get wet. Who knows why she's not in her car. She's here!

She's here.

Somehow we walk towards her mom and not away.

Camila's mother is short with wispy brows; nothing like her daughter. Her face is lined, but not too much. Anyone could tell she's been on this side longer than she ever was on that side. When she opens her arms to take in her daughter, she holds on to a plastic container. I've heard Camila say she doesn't like chiles rellenos a few times. In spite of myself, I miss my own mother then. Say her name silently. A prayer.

With red splotches conquering her face, Camila chokes out introductions. Tells me to go on home, they will catch up in a minute. I shake hands with her mom and feel how, even with her nice dress and the shiny arracadas piercing her ears, our hands recognize each other, though she would deny being like me at all.

Camila touches my arm, barely, with only the tips of her fingers—as though never having licked the paths traced on the inside of my thighs with those same fingers. Camila says again, softly, go home. Never before have I felt like I looked so much like a boy. I think, home, whose home.

I walk slowly. The black canvas of my second-hand All-Stars soaks up the rain and they look new. I want her to say something else. I want her to lie to me. I want Camila to tell me that sooner or later we'll have a \$10,000 bed carved by hand; to assure me there *will* be moments when all guilt leaves her soul, and her thoughts of what good daughters should do and be and love die mid-flight; to say I'll be free forever to give in to the perfect task of my hands on the small of her back, the wet wedge of my tongue on the crook of her elbow; I want her to tell me to stay. I want her to shout these things in front of her mother.

Then Camila calls me back and I step ankle-deep into a puddle, the liquid shocks but the cold is not new.

“Take my purse, please.”

I run up to our unit. From the balcony I see them standing in the rain. I lean on the railing before moving away after a few minutes, afraid of being seen. Then I think ¿por

qué chingados no? and stand in the middle of the balcony. But, quickly, I wonder if I *should* care that they can see me. I slick my hair back, the way I wore it when I asked Camila to dance the night we met.

I sit on the cement floor, keeping my long legs folded away from where I think they could see them. Then I stretch them out. I want to be invisible but I don't want to be forgotten. I remember her voice full of wine she couldn't handle saying she didn't know how to dance. How I told her it wasn't her fault. American girls just weren't good at dancing cumbias, even if their parents were. That was the first time she said, all fake-sober serious, I'm like you, I was just born on this side. It's all a matter of luck she says.

I think she won't last another minute in the rain, maybe I have time to change into one of her skirts? But I can't move. I sit there picking at the dirt in my fingernails, there no matter how much Camila scrapes. How long have they been out there? My wet jeans prick my thighs.

Finally, I see Camila gesture towards the balcony.

Readying herself, Camila's mom holds the container with the chiles rellenos so close to her chest the juices may slip through. Her feet spread apart slightly. She adjusts the long straps of a black leather purse I know Camila would never buy. Camila's mom looks up in my direction.

She knows. She must know. I think no, don't tell your mom, Cami, she'll never forgive you nor you me.

Camila's mom points her chin up at me and she might as well be pointing her finger saying *You*. I stand up, the jeans sticking to my butt and the back of my legs. I step

out of my soggy shoes, peel the socks off, and place both just outside the double doors. Camila's mom walks circles around Camila no longer trying to keep her shoes out of puddles. She walks over to a trash can and the plastic container lands on top of shattered glass. Camila pulls her hair into a low side ponytail. For a moment, she turns her back to her mother, seeks me out. I can't bear to look at her black wings and busy myself arranging her coffee tins of marigolds. They stay out there in the rain so long, before I shut the balcony doors, I see two men drive up in a delivery van. I unlock the front door and go wringing the water out of my socks at the bathroom sink. Here we are. A second bed. It's done. Some things just can't be said.

## **AMERICAN LANDSCAPE(R)**

You name your lawn mowing business “Smith and Sons” even if your name is Gomez, because “Smith” gets more calls than “Gomez.”

You drive down South Shepherd in Houston to maneuver your double cab red Chevy and the trailer full of equipment worth more than you’ll ever be worth on your way to wide oak-lined streets.

You place both your hands on the steering wheel so that the people in the next lane see that you are responsible. You sometimes steer your truck with only three fingers, leaning your left elbow on the window frame to let some men –and some women- know the truck and the business are yours.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are how often you drive with the windows down so that you don’t forget just how recent it was that you were able to afford the new truck. Mondays are when you let the crew ride with you in the cab so they can forget for a moment that the equipment in the trailer is worth more than they ever will be.

Wednesdays are when you buy everybody lunch because it’s the day for the “green” homes and you charge more for using organic grass seeds and propane over gas because it’s good business and your son---whom you’ve never let ride in the truck inside or outside--told you you should care about the size of your shoe on the planet.

You turn left slowly onto Inwood Drive where the lady with the shapely chamorros sits outside picture-reading to the three year old she cares for while imagining her own kids back home playing in the surf of Playa de Roatán.

This is how you park in front of Dr. \_\_'s house and –are you paying attention- this is me reminding you and the rest of the crew not to speak Spanish. This is how you say good morning Mrs. \_\_\_ in English, and this is how you stop to smile and how you say it's a beautiful day, Mrs. \_\_\_ (practice!) before going back to your work if she walks up to you again.

This is how you smile when the heat makes you forget and she hears you cursing the fire ants and the brown patches of dog piss messing last month's re-seeding and she waves her hand with that ring you assume is a fake and asks why are you speaking in Spanish when you're in America?

This is how you wait to see her retreat into the cool of her home swinging her hips in white cotton so thin you imagine she wears them only for you.

This is how you don't speak Spanish even though she's inside and the two o'clock sun seeps through the brown leather of your skin, even if the sharp blades of St. Augustine flying in the air cut again and again through your old bag of English words leaving you with grotesque, mispronounced stumps and at a loss to talk about anything including the tilling, plowing, seeding, mowing, hauling, trimming, mulching, fertilizing you've been doing.

Thinking of your son someday learning how to *say* those and all words in Spanish and English is how you get through it. And when you see the competition display stickers

of an American flag and the caption “These colors don’t run,” you buy your own and this is how you place it right above the license plate.

Once you’ve been here fifteen years like me you’ll do anything to get out of riding in the trailer with equipment worth more than you’ll ever be.

## **EL TESTIMONIO DE MARIA LOURDES PEREZ DE ALEJANDRE**

The waiting room was packed with the same Saturday morning crowd Luna had come to expect in the months since she had started meeting with the abogada. The receptionists' greetings in Spanish, English, and Spanglish mixed with the many Mexican, Central and South American accents of those in the seats around Luna and her mother. Lourdes wrinkled her nose and crossed and uncrossed her feet at her ankles every time the conversations of the paisanos breached the scarce privacy provided by the individual upholstered chairs in which they all sat. Luna didn't mind the buzz. That noise was better than the one in her head. They had been waiting for close to two hours.

Luna had no idea whether her mother would actually sign today. She had lived with Luna since her arrival on a tourist visa the year before. She hated Houston on sight, calling it a land of crude maleducados after a teenage Latina at La Michoacana used the informal "tu" instead of "usted" to ask if she wanted paper or plastic, and declared Lula's American life the worst lie of all of her seventy-five years. Where was all the renewing golden light? The overabundance of His blessings and favor? For Luna's part, that first summer in Houston His American light had left her perpetually parched. Lula too had never been this dark back in Veracruz—even when she had worked during her secondary school years alongside her brothers at the shipping docks.

Though Lula had not looked particularly feminine since her first communion, Lourdes was surprised to find that in the ten years since she had last seen her, Luna's face had hardened into a kind of mask, one that simultaneously dulled and played up her narrow masculine expressions. It was harder than ever to tell what was in her daughter's mind. When Lourdes rubbed her calabaza ointment on Lula's hands she could not find her lifeline among the cracks and dents there either. How, she had demanded of her daughter those first few weeks of their living together, how could it be that her own lavandera hands with decades of industrial washing were softer than Lula's 30 year old American ones? I'm not American yet, Madre, Lula had talked back, further adding to Lourdes's disillusionment.

“Lula, déjalo pasar.”

At her mother's directive, Luna folded her legs to the side so the young Salvadoreño could squeeze back into the seat next to her. Room consensus had forced him to go outside to clean the fertilizer off his shoes but his bare feet did not win him any sympathies now.

Lourdes sat erect in her chair. She crossed her stockinged ankles.

“Madre, estás bien?”

“Si, sí, claro, sí.”

“Madre—

“These people...” Lourdes shook her head and returned to studying the blonde and blue eyed stars of her favorite Telemundo telenovela in the *People En Español* someone had left behind.

Luna didn't mind the people and their chatter. She wished herself multilingual and suddenly able to string together some right and magical combination of words that she could lay at her mother's feet to make her understand.

The smells in the too-small room dizzied Luna; the pungent body odor decanting from the still translucent whites of the painters who must have come straight from a job; the toddler sitting in the corner in her heavy diaper grabbing handfuls of dirt from the potted Bird of Paradise to shove into her mouth, her young mother too distracted by the replies to the frantic whys she whispered quite clearly into her mobile oblivious to the glares the younger paisas and Lourdes sent her way; the coconut-scented hand lotion of the large African woman in the brilliant green head wrap who sat holding on to her stomach as if it alone could help keep her wide feet on solid ground. The room was shrinking all around her.

“Madre, it's been two hours, vámonos—

“Luna Alejandre?

Luna fingered the hard ridges of her ears and stared at the receptionist from between her knees.

“Excuse me, did you mean to say Lula?” Lourdes asked the receptionist.

“The appointment is under the name of Luna Alejandre, ma'am.”

“Andalé, Lula,” Lourdes patted her daughter's bent back and started towards the offered, opened door.

From where she and her mother sat across the lawyer's large, plain desk, they could see her tall figure as she stood in the hall in front of shelves loaded with heavy red-lined volumes. It was hard to tell whether she looked for one or at none as she stirred the contents of a packet into her cup. The lawyer turned to smile and call out, Be right there, and Luna wondered if she had been caught. As always la abogada wore her dark hair parted at the center and braided into a single tight rope that fell to the middle of her back. She wore the same fitted black slacks, but not the usual obviously de-marca-jacket that covered the ample curves Luna had initially appreciated in their shared elevator ride that first day months ago. That afternoon Luna thought the lawyer had returned her friendly stare longer than most straight girls, a good sign, but upon walking into the waiting room, she had turned to her and said politely but with absolute authority, Here you go, have a seat and someone will call you when I'm ready to see you. Luna knew then she didn't stand a chance with the woman, gay or not. Love worked between equals. She knew that since Camila. Love on its own was not enough if you weren't equals; if you at the very least didn't approve of each other's uniforms.

“Lula, why are your appointments under someone else's name? And what kind of name is “Moon”?”

Luna looked away from the abogada who remained standing by the shelves and was now checking her mobile and pulled out paperwork from the large flat envelope she had brought.

“I go by Luna now, Mother.”

“Cómo que you “go”? It couldn’t have been your idea,” Lourdes said leaning forward in her seat to scan the contents of the abogada’s desk.

It had not been her idea. Luna had met Camila at a night club where men danced to the suggestions of hip hop, the polka in rancheras, or the accordion of norteñas, and the quick footwork and spins of cumbias and huapangos. Lean young men who accessorized their muscle or oversized shirts and sagging, baggy jeans with large fake jewelry and unlaced high-top sneakers like Luna’s younger brothers; and men who looked like some of both her and Camila’s uncles and cousins down to the vaquero outfits, complete with Stetsons, belt buckles, and iguana or snake-skin boots. The outrageousness of all those men holding and leading each other. When Lula asked Camila to dance, she thought she’d heard her introduce herself as Luna over the brass cumbia of la Sonora Dinamita. Luna was already staying most nights at Camila’s dorm before she corrected her. It became one of their favorite stories. *I met the moon that night... I was the moon that night...*

“Okay, Luna, Sra. Alejandre, I’m sorry about the long wait. We’re a little behind. ¿Cómo están?” The abogada’s sweet perfume mixed with the freshly brewed coffee she set on the desk and Lourdes’s Vaseline. Luna’s stomach roiled.

She pulled at the sleeves of her pale gray button down shirt and ran a quick pass of her hands through the sides of her head. Her mother uncrossed her ankles.

“Two hours. Good thing it’s not a work day for us—

“Señora—

“We actually haven’t met, Licenciada. Maria Lourdes Perez de Alejandre, para servirle.”

“Perdone usted.” The abogada walked around the desk to shake her hand. “Un placer, Señora. Luna has told me so much about you, it feels like I’ve known you for a while, now.”

“Sí... well, I’m here now.”

The abogada lifted the rope of her hair off her chest where it had swung when she sat down and met Luna’s eyes.

“I’d like to start with what you understand about Luna’s case.”

“Lula’s working on her papers with you. As her mother, I need to sign something.”

“Yes. We need a signed statement from you detailing some of the hardships Luna experienced when she lived in your hometown.”

Lourdes looked away from the lawyer to turn to Luna who kept running her long knobby fingers, from pinky to index, along the curved distance of her right ear.

“You still stuck on those stories?”

“Madre, I’ve tried to tell you for weeks now that—

“And—with all due respect, Licenciada—for years I’ve tried telling her that the world is not going to change to fit her—one person. You—she brought some of those on herself, Licenciada.”

“Would you like some water or tea? No? Some of what, ma’am?”

Lourdes pursed her lips.

The lawyer stood up to partially close the blinds redirecting the hot rays of light towards the tops of the walls. “Luna’s applying for asylum as a member of a persecuted social group.” She turned back to face the mother and daughter, both with their eyes fixed forward towards her, both with a different version of fear on their faces. “We need to be able to establish that Luna experienced harassment and discrimination in your hometown and that she would face the same if she were to be forcibly removed from the States and returned to Mexico.”

“Isn’t there another way? How can—what does such an...unfortunate situation have to do with her papers? We know so many *good* people who’ve been waiting for years... How can—”

“U.S. asylum laws allow for relief for good people who have experienced persecution on the grounds of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. Luna’s application falls under this last. Can you tell me what you remember about the day Luna was assaulted at work?”

Lourdes took a tissue from the desk and dabbed at the perspiration on her forehead and neck. She turned to peer into her daughter’s face but Luna stared firmly at her fingernails, as if attempting to extricate the fine lines of grease there by the sheer power of her thoughts.

“It was so long ago—”

“Well, not that long ago, right? It’s been less than—”

Luna sat up and wrapped her hands around the curved arms of the chair. The wood felt nice and cool to the touch. Soft.

“—And like I said, the whole thing was rather unpleasant so I have not tried to remember it to be honest.”

“Of course. I’d like to see if you can fill in some of the blanks that are understandably a little less clear to your daughter.”

“What exactly did you tell her, Lula?”

“Luna, are you okay? Do you need to, want to wait outside?”

“No.”

“Luna has shared with me about the Friday she stayed to work late on the docks so she could save a bit more for her motorcycle.”

“I mean, a young woman saving for a motorcycle!”

“For work, mother. For work. I didn’t want to work at the docks like my brothers, my whole life.”

“Do you remember what she told you when she came home that day?”

“She didn’t say anything, really. And I didn’t think to ask questions even once I saw her face and clothes.”

“Why not? What was wrong with her face and clothes?”

“She’d come home other days with bloody lips and ripped up clothes. She’s never been one to...”

“You’re saying it was common for her to be the object of violence?”

“I’m saying she was always up to no good. And if you go looking for trouble, you’re likely to find—”

“Actually, yes, I need to visit the restroom,” Luna tried to hold her mother’s indignant stare.

“Of course, Luna. Go ahead. The receptionist will let you back in.” The lawyer turned to run her thumb and middle finger over the leaves of the peace lilies sitting on top of a low wide filing cabinet; she bent to grab the water spray bottle she kept next to it. As Luna stood to leave, her eyes travelled to the small v of skin above the top button of the lawyer’s blouse, a button down like hers, but probably silk. With a look that was more resigned than pleading for her mother, she left them alone.

“Sra. Alejandre, your daughter was assaulted by 5 men. I don’t—”

“Assaulted? She wasn’t robbed. My poor daughter was beaten up for running her mouth like a man to actual men.

“I’m sorry. I mistranslated the term. I realize that, she was not, no fué asaltada. She was—”

“You young people, you should do better by your parents. I don’t understand this nonsense about folks who claim to not speak Spanish.”

“Sra. Alejandre. My family has been in Texas for five generations. Neither of my parents knows Spanish. What I know I learned in school. In any case, I do know that she was not robbed, she was physically attacked by five men. I believe your sons, Luna’s brothers, witnessed it?”

“Carlos and Manuel were there. But they couldn’t do anything about it. Don’t go blaming this on them. They’re good boys. It’s really warm in here, Licenciada.”

The abogada dropped her pen on her writing pad and turned on the fan sitting on top of her filing cabinets.

“Maintenance is aware. My sincere apologies about the heat. No one’s blaming your sons. But the fact is that they were ... present and...”

“What were they were supposed to do? That job was their livelihood. And they both already had families by then.”

“Please pardon my bluntness, Sra. Alejandre, but as you know we’re running a little behind—”

“Two hours, Licenciada.”

“Yes. I’d like you to tell me what you know about your daughter’s violación, and if you’re willing to submit a written statement that we can include as part of your daughter’s asylum application. I’d like to know these things before she comes back in here. Sra. Alejandre?”

There it was. That word. Lourdes sagged into the full depth of the chair, her crossed ankles dangling above the carpeted floor, and for the first time that day, fell silent. Not because she could not speak. But her schooling had not given her enough words from which to pick one that could adequately tell this woman lawyer how her heart ached for what been taken from her daughter.

When Carlos and Manuel had stopped by for their weekly family dinner that Friday night ten years ago, Lula had not been with them. When she asked them about their sister, they only grunted, You know how she is. When they did not eat, but only sipped and sipped the small glasses of brandy their father pushed on them, Lourdes had

felt the strangest cold seeping in through the soles of her feet. Throughout dinner and long after, Carlos and Manuel continued passing the small glasses between them until they were a drunken, belligerent heap making lewd remarks about the scantily clad TV presenter in front of their women, who complained loudly that men did not know the meaning of macho anymore as they played *lotería*, calling out instead of *El Borracho!*, *Carlos el Chupetes!*

Around midnight, Lula came home with her nose folded to the right of her face and a story of *buenos-para-nada* taking off with her paycheck despite her efforts.

“Sra. Alejandro?”

Lourdes remembered the tears in Lula’s uniform showed the sole prints of a man’s work boot on her daughter’s beautiful, feminine back. She remembered how she had gone into her husband’s closet to grab her husband’s nice belt, the one with the bucking mare on the buckle, and landed blows on all her drunken children. Then she had gone into their small bathroom where Lula already had a sewing kit out to try and mend her uniform, taken the kit and the scraps of shirt left from Lula’s hands, and with her husband’s nice belt placed perfect wide bands across the outline of that man’s work boot. As she helped Lula wash under the hot trickle of the shower, she told her, This is what happens when you go around looking like a boy. When have your sisters gotten hurt like this?

The lawyer walked around her desk to sit next to Lourdes and hold her hand until she stopped crying and shaking.

“Why didn’t she obey her brothers? What does a woman need with a motorcycle?”

“Sra. Alejandre—”

“Licenciada, you’re an educated woman. Please tell me the truth, do you think it was the... what those men did to her all those years ago, do you think that’s the reason she doesn’t like them, men?”

“Madre.”

“Lula, yo—”

“No, Madre, no me interesan los hombres porque—”

“Luna, I think—”

“...soy gay.”

The lawyer dropped Lourdes’s hand and stood up.

“Madre?”

Lourdes moved to the edge of her seat, noticed the small circles in the pattern of the carpet as she placed her small feet on the ground.

“I’m sorry your brothers didn’t protect you,” she said. Then she stood in front of the lawyer’s row of small potted plants plucking dead leaves and untangling the ivy strands.

“Madre”

“They were cowards.”

“Luna, I’m sorry but we need to address the information your mother has just shared with me. Please sit?”

“Okay. Madre, estás bien?”

“Licenciada, I would be glad to tell you as much as I remember about the state Luna came in that night.”

“Good. But we have a problem. Luna, in our first meeting you told me that you had been here a little under three years. As I explained to you, applications for asylum can only be filed within one year of an applicant’s arrival in the country. There is case law that allows for some exceptions but —”

“You’re punishing her because I didn’t want to know about . . . what happened to her?”

“Señora, Luna’s eligibility for asylum is based on her membership of a persecuted social group, in other words, her identity as a lesbian woman, not the fact that she was a victim of sexual assault; the violence perpetrated against her as well as the lack of appropriate response by the law enforcement agency that was made aware of the crime, is what we would use to demonstrate that she was targeted and discriminated against because of her sexual orientation.”

“But Lula—”

“Madre, quiero tener lo que tuviste con mi padre, con una mujer.”

“Luna, you lied to me. I’m sorry but I’m afraid I can no longer handle your application for asylum. Your mother said you’ve been here longer than three years. Given the length of your residency here, the odds are not in your favor. Plus, I asked you to tell the truth when we met. I can’t work with clients who would knowingly commit and

involve me in fraud. You understand, I'm sure." The lawyer delivery was perfunctory, her face a document of unease and probably unrelated but real emotions, Luna thought.

"Licenciada, surely you can understand that my daughter couldn't afford your services when she first got here. She can barely do it now."

"Sra. Alejandre, I completely understand that she's only recently become aware of the paths to legalization, but the truth remains that—"

"The truth remains, Licenciada. She fled Veracruz because she was persecuted and discriminated against by—many. There must be a way you could help her."

Luna had been following the pops of microwavable popcorn from down the hall and now the smell was fusing with the lawyer's perfume and sweat and nausea rose in her so that she had to concentrate in taking as deep breaths as possible while remaining as her mother would say, a lady.

"There's always same-sex marriage for Luna, down the line, of course."

"Absolutamente que no, Licenciada!"

Luna looked around for a trash can.

"Luna, estás bien?" said the lawyer.

"Lula, estás bien?" said Lourdes.

Luna didn't feel fine. It was all those reasons they all had, all that desperate, pathetic need. The waiting room reeked of hope and insufficient and belated truths. Luna could not wait any more. She ran to the ladies' holding her hands to her mouth.

## THE CROSSING

Many years after her daughter had been taken from her, Lupita still sometimes closed her eyes to relive the cries of hunger that would float out at midnight, and the mornings after, waking with nipples throbbing from the baby's impatience, thinking of the milky scent of her and the lightness of her weight, and feeling as if she were surrounded by light. Mariana remained clear—her small fists beating the bottle forced on her, her gummy smiles when Lupita changed her diapers and practiced writing her name on her belly, her purrs when she danced with her following the circles in the pattern of the rug that marked the beginning and the end of their world when they were together.

From the moment she had first seen Tom, in a production meeting at the first maquiladora where she worked in Juárez after running away from Casas Grandes, both of them staring and staring, she had believed with a quiet hope that this love was the reason she had left home. Yes, the ten-hour shifts were longer and more tedious than her friends had described during their visits. Her fingers were always cut open because the tiny pliers didn't work. But she didn't hear anyone else complain and she wasn't about to be the first. She was making more than her father and brothers did laying bricks and selling gas tanks door to door out of the family's Chevy. When Lupita waited for her name to be called out on pay day, her toes curled with sensual anticipation in her boots. And at least in Juárez she didn't have the whole town ready to report to her family if she wanted to let

a boy whisper sweet things in her ear. Inevitably, the bruises from the beatings administered by her father or brothers always lasted longer than the interest of the boy who soon—too soon, she thought—grew bored of her saying *No, no puedo, lo siento, no puedo...*

So when Tom came to her almost a year, out at their meeting place in the back of the factory floor, offering her a cup of cut up coco, juiced with lime and sprinkled with the right amount of salty chili powder, she told her mother on one of her rare calls home that this was the man she would marry. For a couple of expensive minutes the other end of the line had stayed silent. Did Lupita not know that the bolillo would not want to be seen with her past the gate of the factory? That she would not be asked to stand in the light with him but only to crawl with him in the shadows ? Lupita ignored her mother. She was newly sixteen, he double that. They knew what they were doing. She went into the breakroom and found Rocio and Maribel and told them she would give herself to Tom.

Her friends, veterans on the floor, found her exhausting, this simple, headstrong niña-mujer with the veil of straight dark hair and impetuous cheekbones who in her first month at the Ford had beaten the boys' top numbers. (They had had to warn her not to be so earnest.) They were concerned about the jefe's intentions. But as options went, he was not a bad man: Tom was the nicest of the bosses, a friendly buenos días, buenas noches always on his lips; he interceded on behalf of them all when Travis, the fat one, raised their nightly quotas and unlike Travis—who never finished a shift without reminding them of their ready replacements waiting just outside—knew all of their names. Lupita

would not be “asked” to work doubles, or made to show her sanitary napkins to prove she wouldn’t be slowing down the line in the foreseeable future. Besides, it was better that the men knew she was taken; she seemed to have never learned that she needed to mark her boundaries from the start, or next thing she knew she’d be giving blow jobs during her own unpaid breaks like the other chiquillas. They had tried to protect her but there was only so much they and she could do. Girls who resisted at the beginning were good girls; unos tesoritos, little gems. But the novelty of an innocent in their midst wore off soon enough. So Maribel and Rocio, weighting all this with a shared gentle sigh, gave her their blessings, and she smiled and called them her madrinas.

At first Tom wooed her just as the other boys and men at the maquiladora had. He cleaned her tools. He opened doors for her and told the other guys to cool their teasing. He offered to share lunches packed by his wife or girlfriend, or else bought her cans of orange Fanta, watermelon gum, tamarind candy. From the safety of his favor, Lupita saw how even the meekest girls from the interior began to twist their lips into painful smiles, taking longer each time before swatting a man’s hand away from their hips. How soon they stopped introducing themselves, as if giving their names meant offering all of it. Filled with guilt for being spared, she tracked the short weeks before most of the girls began to let the mexicanos take a little something every now and then; after all, they made sure the jefes didn’t take it all without bothering with even a soda/candy/tamales courtship. The day of the coco offering, Tom also procured two extra bowls for Rocio (taken by Travis within a month of her arrival), and Maribel (refused the week off to go bury her infant son, drowned in her mother’s laundry tub in Michoacán), whom he knew

watched over Lupita. Tom liked the women enough, they would be called shift leaders if they had gotten paid accordingly, and they knew how to rally the floor when the rushed orders came in.

It was they who pushed him a year after he held out the lime-sprinkled coco to help her lose the problemita all that earnestness had gotten her before it was too late. Tom told them that he too thought it best, but when they were alone in his office in the dark of the closed blinds he assured her that they could have the baby, and that he would marry her. She didn't ask him about the other woman of his—the wife or girlfriend whose long caramelo hairs she found every so often on his shirts, the woman who packed him the delicious chili bowls and knew to lay thin napkins between the tortillas before rolling them to keep them fresh until his lunch break. He was as honorable as she knew him to be the first day their eyes met. He would do what had to be done and he would do it honorably.

She only suffered the rapid deterioration of her good name once news leaked onto the floor.

Vendida. Puta. The hissing that followed her everywhere lined up behind her every other Friday when she waited for her paycheck. Though she didn't miss them exactly, lately Lupita wished that she could have her father there to take care of her like he had when she was little and chased dogs and beat her brothers and their friends playing canicas. No one cared then if her dress flew up, or if she revealed her underwear when, indifferent to the gravel indenting her knees, she bent low to the ground for her winning shots. When her mother cried during their calls— *Lupita, Mija! ¿Dónde estás?*

*Cómo estás? Lupita vuelve a casa, por favor*—Lupita bit her lip and yearned to speak of the baby.

Tom's usual cool hand was moist and trembled holding hers while they went on their daily walk after Lupita said her goodbyes to her friends and he briefed the night shift's supervisor. They walked down the long, darkened corridors of the farthest warehouse at the maquiladora. He dropped her hand, now as sweaty as his, when they reached a stack of pallets as high as her chest. Tom had arranged a handful of cream handkerchiefs over the raw blond wood. Laid out chunks of coco and papaya, a bowl of peeled whole walnuts, a two liter jug of pink lemonade. Red and white claveles stood tall in a glass Coke bottle. Tom helped her up onto the pallet then sat next to her, his legs dangling over the edge; hers folded sideways against her belly. He watched with delight as she feasted on the sweet and sour and soft and hard of her cravings. Tom renewed his promise to marry her and be a father to their baby. But there was something else. He looked away from her, down the stack of pallets. She would have to make her way into the United States. He would double her savings and would negotiate with a coyote he'd heard about. All she had to was trust that he would be on the other side waiting for her. Lupita looked into his eyes and said Yes. They stayed on the pallet until they were satiated.

Her happiness and dreams embarrassed her so much she couldn't call home. Not to share that the very same week of their pallet date Tom had announced to her paisanos that she was his novia. Or to say that she no longer had to sleep on an armchair in the tin shack she rented with 5 other girls in the makeshift town at the edge of the city because

Tom had found and paid for a studio apartment close enough to the maquiladora so they could have privacy and a real home for when the baby came. The weeks went on and she grew shamelessly big with hope but still didn't call. Six months later, days short of her eighteenth birthday, Lupita woke up in a bed surrounded by stiff and dirty curtains to find herself a mother. But she didn't call when Tom deposited the baby gently into her arms. Or when Tom avoided her in the days that followed.

He didn't want to do anything wrong, he told her one night as they lay in bed. He didn't want to be involved with breaking the law. So it was she who returned to work a week after Mariana's birth to save for a coyote. It was she who ate everyone's offered leftovers and nursed the baby during her unpaid breaks while Rocio and Maribel and a few of the others raced to make up for her falling numbers. It was she who told Tom that it was best for his health if he didn't worry about them so much and let her handle things from now on. It was she who saved and saved and did what she had to do to come up with the \$4000 that the coyote recommended by Maribel demanded.

She crossed the border five months later under the indulgent light of a new moon. There were eleven men, some her age, some her father's age, and only one other woman: a Salvadoreña who shrieked she would not disrobe in front of anyone but her husband, not even to get to the promised land. What honey and milk could be worth it, she cried into the coyote's confused, ravaged face. Except for one or two of the young boys who seemed too dazed to move, most of the men fixed their eyes on the river and set about removing and packing their clothes into grey Walmart plastic bags offered by the coyote, keeping their backs to the women. Following closely behind a man who just moments

before had been inexplicably wearing a suit and a tie, Lupita counted her steps until she felt that only her toes made contact with the riverbed. As the Bravo opened its mouth to swallow her naked body bit by bit, terror that her tired arms held high above her might drop the bundle of clothes which nestled her daughter, drowned out the woman's pleas to the coyote that there had to be another way. Lupita would never forget looking up from setting her daughter down on the American dirt to receive the image of the woman's pregnancy shining bright on top of the coyote's shoulders as both he and the woman grimaced, incredulous of what life had promised was an answer.

Clothed again and with Mariana all eyes and quiet in her arms, Lupita listened to the new coyote that was suddenly before them. He was impossibly young, in his clean striped polo and kakis like the fresca university kids she remembered from her stop in Chihuahua City on her way to Juárez. He was talking numbers: these many hours of night coverage, these many migra officers, these many Patriot-ranchers; the many and long eyes of the infrared cameras, the amazing new drones; their odds. As he dropped to his haunches to draw the path to their dreams with a huizache branch on the wet banks of the river, Lupita chewed crackers and fed the paste to Mariana. When she had tied the pieces of carpet the young coyote gave them to her flats, and was arranging the blanket around the baby, the Bravo spit out the first coyote and the Salvadoreña. Panting violently, they dropped their bodies together on the hard earth. Lupita was mesmerized by the woman's heaving breasts and stomach, brilliant in the moonlight. She could not help but stare until she noticed the old coyote doing the same. Holding onto Mariana, Lupita knelt by the shaken woman and asked her for her name and if she could help her

with her clothes, but the coyote, pulling a flask from the bag the woman still held, said she had only what he wanted her to have. And he wasn't sure yet what that would be. The woman refused to meet her eyes so Lupita stared into Mariana's waiting to be told what to do with her arms and her feet and her mouth and her eyes and ears. A few meters away, the strongest or perhaps the most impatient of the men began tailing the young coyote. Lupita touched the woman's hands which the woman held fast to her belly. The youngest and oldest of their group kept drinking and refilling their bottles of water. Lupita looked into Mariana's honeyed eyes and when she heard the first coyote declare the new terms of payment to the Salvadoreña, Lupita thought she also heard, clearly, Mariana's voice saying *look, they're leaving without us*, so she turned from the woman and her voluptuous need to follow the young coyote into the desert.

In the shadows of early evening, three days and three nights after walking miles around a line most never saw, Lupita knocked on the door of Tom's house in El Paso. He embraced her and the child. He drew a bath for her in a tub made of the whitest porcelain she had ever seen. He surprised her with a babysitter and announced they would go out to celebrate their new life that very night. So despite the fact that she was so tired that she could barely see straight and all she really wanted to do was sink to the first horizontal surface she could find and sleep and sleep she instead went into the bathroom and powdered the skin that had been peeled by the midday sun and hardened by the midnight cold of the Chihuahuan desert, and put on the heels he'd bought her and smiled as she walked her sexy walk towards him and their new life despite the shredding blisters of her feet. At the bar, Tom paid for many rounds for them, and then eventually for the

strangers around them, cheering, To my new family! Lupita handed her drinks back to the bartender to pour down his sink and only drank from the lemonades she asked him to fix when Tom went to the men's room. The lemon and the sugar burned the cuts on her lips and gums but in the desert when she thought Mariana would die in her arms, she had kept herself walking thinking of squeezing lemons with her mother for her father's afternoon limonadas. She gulped them down. And when they were ready to leave, a drunk Tom grabbed a napkin and wrote quickly on it before handing it to her. Here, sign your name, and we'll be married under God's eyes tonight, he proclaimed with a flourish. Lupita hesitated when he put the pen in her hand, because she didn't want to spoil the moment. But he lifted her face to his and his towering presence, the gold specks in his eyes, his stubble and her bleeding feet made her feel drunk. She wrote her name as best as she could on the napkin, then pressed it to her lips so their pink imprint transferred, and jumped into his arms.

In Tom's bed that night and many after, the implacable sun chased Lupita.

And she was still dreaming of the desert when El Paso began to feel like some kind of unimaginable begging and end.

Tom changed his mind about everything. Or not everything, just Lupita. Within a month of her crossing he had taken Mariana from her and she was forced to sleep-walk around the Plaza de los Lagartos until Rocio and Maribel could put her in touch with friends in the city. Lupita had no answers for her new friends. For herself. She didn't know why Tom had decided he could be father to Mariana but she couldn't be her mother. She didn't know how long he had known he would do this. Only that she

returned to his house after her shift at the laundromat one Friday and found paisanos loading the last of his furniture into a moving truck, and a woman in a suit locking up the house behind her. She didn't know who the woman was or why she couldn't tell where Tom had taken her daughter despite Lupita pulling out handfuls of her hair at her feet.

In the decade that followed, Lupita and her new dancer friends didn't know why men always changed their minds about loving them; or why these fathers always changed their minds about being fathers. All of their fathers back home had been at least steadfast if not always more than that. Lupita and her friends knew even less about how to call home, where loved ones wouldn't believe the opportunities this side of life denied them, or accept the ones it offered. The young mothers knew the dream lived on back home. Pure. Untouched.

When her sons Ricardo and Obed turned seven and ten years old, Lupita decided the three of them would pack up the little that made up their lives in El Paso and move to Houston, where she would have the support of maternal aunts and cousins and they could start fresh. It was time. Driving past Tom's old house now, peeking through a window at the back bedroom where she last held Mariana in her arms, no longer brought her any relief. And the latest owners had already warned her, Go home, or we'll call the police.

Lupita and her children were welcomed with open arms by her aunts. Work? There was plenty! She would not need to clean offices at night like in El Paso. Houston women could neither clean their own homes, nor care for their own children, her aunts gushed happily as they supervised their children helping Obed and Ricardo to unload the

whole of their lives until then, in less than half an hour. And though as the saying goes, guests, like fish, stink after a few days, she managed to rotate stays with her aunts long enough to save rent for a one bedroom apartment for her and her children.

Lupita also found the love that had run from her all these years. Manuel, an electrician originally from Guatemala, did not change his mind. He not only loved Lupita and married her as he'd vowed he would, he also filed for her legal permanent residency. Though the legitimacy the new status afforded her did little to soothe the body-numbing fear that paralyzed her when police (the young ones were the worst, the brown and black ones worst of all) were around. By their fifth year together, Manuel had also offered to give his name to Ricardo and Obed, now fourteen and seventeen years old, and they had both said they would think about it.

So it was here in southwest Houston, lying next to Manuel as he rolled heavily onto his side in his sleep, listening to the sputtering of their neighbor's busted air conditioning unit and waiting for the boys' keys to turn in the lock of the front door, that Lupita dreamt of Mariana, all eyes and quiet. And Manuel, who knew all, would wake to find her rocking nothing in her arms.

The years might had padded her hips and coarsened the skin on her hands the high planes of her face, but Lupita remained as earnest as ever. She and her Tía Blanca were soon a popular team in the River Oaks and Memorial subdivisions. Though since marrying Manuel she and her Tía only worked Monday through Friday, cleaning four to six-bedroom houses in four to six hours for about 180 to 220 dollars. Usually one house

per day, sometimes two if it was a last-minute referral, or if they were looking to let go of a client insisting on “my money’s worth.” After all these years she and her clients were used to cash. Sometimes clients didn’t have small bills and would promise to cover the difference next time and then forget. She imagined they thought her life to be unfortunately Mexican when she reminded them about the five or ten extra dollars. Soon enough they were opening up their closets and bestowing upon her sections of their best, decades-old wardrobes.

Ricardo’s sophomore year was busy for her. That spring she had to leave beds half-made to go pick up her fourteen year old from the principal’s office after he’d gotten caught skipping classes and smoking pot. One Tuesday in April instead of driving him back to the morenita doctor’s place to wait in the car while she finished the job, she drove him home in silence. She waited to enter the house then slapped him hard across the face. They sat facing each other at the kitchen table. Holding an unopened cold Fanta, she told Ricardo her story. It was not that she had two children by two different men, she told him, or that she picked off the pubic hair of strangers from the walls of their tubs or the expanse of their stripped beds, or that her teeth were crooked or missing, or that no matter how hard she tried she always said shair and shicken and shance. Not even that, unlike them, she would always be a mojada regardless of what the new papers Manuel had secured for her claimed. She took a napkin from the roll wedged between the bottles of Valentina and Louisiana playing centerpiece to the table, and asked her son for a pencil, told him to make sure it had an eraser.

While she wrote *Lupita Morales, Obed Sánchez, Ricardo Ruíz*, their birthdays and home address, Lupita told her son about her work at the maquiladora in Juárez and how she waited three months to admit to herself and her boss Tom that she was pregnant with his baby. She told him of her first born, a beauty with brown curls she named Mariana and everything Tom had promised. Ricardo started to say, Listen, Mom, but she shushed him. Pushed the destroyed napkin at him. She had memorized the shape of the individual letters that made up their names and a few other words, Lupita told her son, but that was all. Ricardo took the napkin from her thick fingers. He absorbed his mother's small, small and coiled tight, child's script. The tissue ripped through the upper cases. The extravagant accents on his Ruíz and his brother's Sánchez which disfigured the daisies. Lupita held her hand up and said, Ricardo, my first child, your sister, she's lost to us because I didn't know my letters. You're here, one of them. You don't have to hide from anyone. You can know as much as they do. You are free to go as far as you want. I hope you do. And with that she left to go finish the doctor's house and left Ricardo at the table staring at the napkin and the accent on his last name, the dark hole of which threatened to swallow him.

Years later, when Ricardo and his fellow med school student-fiancée laid in bed after making love, he would tell her that he thought of his life as Before and After the Napkin. And how it was After the Napkin that he straightened his ways. No more fucking around for him. No more carelessness. He didn't grow bitter with the news, he assured her. He simply looked at his friends and suddenly knew they would never understand the true cost of their American lives while he would never forget the price

paid for his. His soon-to-be-wife held him tight. Years later, she named their eldest daughter Lupita and never once bought napkins with prints of blue daisies.

Ricardo told his big brother about the conversation the second he came home from debate class. As it turned out, Obed had pieced the basics of the story about his sister a couple of years before, when he'd overheard their mother discussing an unsuccessful visit to a lawyer with Tía Blanca and prima Alejandra. Though their mother's illiteracy was new news. It took a few seconds for his brain to register the heat mushrooming from his chest and settling into his ears as shame for his mother's ignorance. Years later, when Obed sensed why his partner was late coming to their bed, he would continue his practice of unknowing the painful. In fact, that day looking into his little brother's blanched face, Obed was already thinking of German homework, his chemistry exam the next day, learning to assess the difficulty of unknowing the terrible.

What do we do, dude, Ricardo kept asking Obed. What could they do? I don't know, was all Obed could say, stumped for words in English and Spanish for the first time. Dude, said Ricardo over and over.

Lupita reserved every other Tuesday for the Olympia house. The woman was Latina, a lawyer. She entertained friends at home on Wednesdays and liked her to pay extra attention to the sitting and powder rooms on the first floor. Lupita had been at Olympia since early that May morning but at 3:30 p.m. she was finally done. She mopped up the sweat sliding down her back and pooling between her breasts with her t-shirt, and walked on her toes to a mirror (how she envied them all their ease with mirrors)

to make herself presentable without taking too much stock of all the crossings documented there. She collected her purse, phone, and the envelope containing her payment and a *Usted es la mejor, Lupita! / Gracias!* note she still couldn't read, and stepped out into the humid heat outside. She leaned against the heavy carved doors for a minute or two before letting herself back in, taking care not to smudge the Brazilians or leave the seagrass runners out of place. She liked to bask in the citrus clean of the homes for a few seconds before locking up. When at last she walked down the long driveway to her car, Lupita waived at the landscaping crew and the Hondureña nanny playing with her charge across the street. Lupita felt the world owed her nothing.

Ricardo disagreed. It was Ricardo who found Mariana.

Ricardo swung their front door open before Lupita could get her keys ready when she came home after the Olympia. He took the long straps of her purse from her shoulder and led her by the arm to Manuel's ugly green felt sofa. She hadn't had the heart to say no to it when they moved in together because Manuel had told her of making every minimum payment for three years until he'd settled the account. When she shook Ricardo off and said whatever it was could wait until she used the bathroom, he went to fix her a cup of té de almendra. He ran the largest spoon she owned around the walls of the cup until she sat back down on the sofa and took and swallowed a sip. Then he said, Mamá, I found her. My—your daughter, the baby that you, that he—*está bien, Madre.* You hear me, Mom? Mariana. She's ok, Madre. Mom? The teacup shook and spilled over on its endless journey to the coffee table.

Lupita tried to hurry at the house on San Felipe but got stuck in Galleria traffic on 610 and their car blocked hers in the driveway so she had to park on the street. She walked around the house and let herself into her back yard, where she hoped her sons had forgotten to close the door to the kitchen as usual. Her hands shook as she slid the glass doors opened and quietly stepped into the hall then to her bathroom. She washed her face. One, two, five times. The hand towel wet by the end. She sat on the seat of the toilet and tried to slow her breathing down like cousin Alejandra had taught her that day at Memorial Mall when a young girl had come running into her arms outside of Macy's and Lupita was certain it was Mariana until the child's mother claimed her a few seconds later. Lupita washed her hands for a final time and slathered on some of the perfumed lotion Obed had given her last Mother's Day.

Lupita entered her living room. Everyone, Manuel, Obed, Ricardo, Tía Blanca, Prima Alejandra, Lupita and Mariana, everyone can see Lupita and Mariana are mother and daughter.

Mariana stood up when Lupita walked into the room but did not move toward her. Manuel grabbed Lupita's hand and walked with her the few steps to the girl and the strange friend who sat next to her. Lupita wrapped her arms around Mariana's small bare shoulders, and they fell back onto the sofa not saying anything, only shaking and crying. Drying Mariana's wet face with her own hair until Obed walked up with wads of toilet paper, Lupita catches Mariana's friend's eye. Her daughter's friend sat at the other edge of the sofa looking on behind her phone camera, her face obstructed by the visor of a

purple and yellow cap that seems to match the colors and design of her oversized shirt. Ricardo looked to Manuel then Lupita then Mariana and reached to embrace her quickly before stepping back to take a picture of the three of them on the sofa: Lupita, Mariana, her friend. Obed walked up to them again. But, Here, is all he said to Mariana that night, extending a hand with more tissues in her general direction without raising his eyes.

It takes Lupita days to pick off every tiny wet shred off her hands after the girls leave. She doesn't work, or eat, or wash her hands, for days after their reunion. She can't, she won't lose any bit of Mariana ever again.

Alejandra, Ale, es Lupita, tu prima, she introduces herself the first time she calls her cousin. I know we're related, Lupita, Alejandra laughs. Alejandra, Tía Blanca's daughter, had been the one to save her number and ringtone on Lupita's phone, at Tía Blanca's suggestion. That way, they said, she could call her directly with her questions. She had many since Mariana and her friend had come from California to stay with her and Manuel. Lupita apologized for the imposition, but asked if her prima could let her know what "Apircombre" was, suffering through the impossible sounds in her mouth until Alejandra understood—Abercrombie!—and told her it was a store at the Galleria. Since when did she shop there? Lupita did not answer that, or any of her family's questions in the weeks that followed.

How could she let Mariana and that marimacha kick her and Manuel out of their bedroom? Did Mariana work? Did her "friend"? Why do they wake up at two in the afternoon everyday? What's Mariana doing in Austin? San Antonio? New Orleans?

Who's paying for her weekly manicures? Her highlights and lowlights? Her piercings and distressed skinnies? Lupita learned more new English words those three short months than she had in almost twenty years combined. But she didn't give her family any answers. While Manuel endured the girls by suddenly staying out as much as possible, her sons went to stay with their cousins. Just until things chilled a bit, Ricardo said. Until there was room once again for them, Obed said. Lupita didn't care. She increased her work hours, adding as many new homes to her roster as she could physically fit into the day, when Tía Blanca refused to let her keep their joints jobs to herself. She worked as hard as she could to love Mariana as much as she could. Paying for Mariana's friend's \$80 ugly shirts, listening to the sounds she brought forth from her daughter as Lupita struggled to rest her body and heart on the green sofa, was all an insignificant price to pay to have her daughter.

Lupita knew that her daughter had crossed borders alien to her. She told Lupita that as soon as her girlfriend—*novia*, *novia!* she had said—placed her demo tape in the right hands and she got her cosmetics license, they would be a power couple, and would move to San Francisco and get married where there weren't all these brothas and Jesus-scared wetbacks to chase after them like it was the freaking 1500s.

Lupita said nothing when Mariana announced that she would start a mobile nail art business as soon as she bought her a car. She was finishing roasting pasilla and ancho chiles, about to start grinding nuts and seeds in the traditional basalt molcajete her mother had sent her along with her bendiciones and forgiveness since Lupita's arrival in Houston, and she continued to do so, flipping the achote next to the pasilla chiles, while

Mariana talked about the \$300 she would need as seed money. The bowl of nopalitos she had offered her stayed untouched—she hadn't yet eaten anything at all of hers—and she looked at her, this girl-woman with a hole in her nose, and wondered whether she could have kept her longer if she hadn't lost her from the beginning.

The night that she asked if she could sit next to her to watch the novela, Lupita was not as surprised as a few days earlier when for the first time in the three months since Ricardo had found her, she had called her mamá. Where's your novia, Lupita asked her, prepping a pillow for her on her lap. Mariana thought with friends. She added, now that we're around you, she misses her mother. Lupita waited for more but nothing more came. She wondered briefly if her daughter was as worried about those friends as she was about Manuel's then pushed them all out of her head. Here was Mariana, all eyes and quiet in her arms again. When the novella ended, she kissed her before going into the master and closing the door behind her. In the early morning, Mariana would tell her stumbling girlfriend that perhaps they could try Houston a little longer. And the girlfriend would mumble they would see, they would see. But they didn't get to see.

When Lupita came home from work the next day, she had the jeans that the girls had asked for weeks ago. She placed the shopping bag on the sofa and walked into the kitchen. She had had her own talk with Manuel last night when he came home and she had told him not to go to the boys' room and asked him to join her on the sofa for the first time since the girls had come to live with them. Instead of continuing to prepare the paste for the mole she had planned for the girls, she would make güicoyitos rellenos,

Manuel's favorite from home. She moved the heavy molcajete with powders still inside out of her prep zone and onto the countertop of the breakfast bar.

She had the television and the vegetables for the stuffing going by the time the girls came home from doing who knows what. Not work. She called out her hello to the girls and resumed humming the novela's theme song.

The girlfriend waited until Mariana went into the bedroom to approach Lupita at the breakfast bar. Had she finally gotten the jeans she had promised them? Lupita smiled at her. Yes, she told the girl, who was slight and not intimidating despite all the hard work she put into it: the boy clothes sizes too big for her, the cropped hair, that faint mustache she grew. Lupita wondered who had hurt the handsome girl to make her want to look so tough. Looking at the girl dipping a finger into the red achiote powder, Lupita told herself she would plant a good night kiss on her that night, whether she thought she wanted it or not.

When Mariana came back to the living room they started fighting about what channel to watch. The girl wanted to change it and Mariana told her to wait until Lupita's novela finished. The girl threw the remote at Mariana's head and it shattered the mirror behind her, breaking Lupita into a million pieces. Stop it, they told each other. Lupita looked at her watch and deliberated how long before Manuel would walk through the door. She tried to stay calm. While the girls shouted about a third who had come between them, she drew side cuts into the whole pasilla chiles she had roasted the night before and prepped them for the stuffing. Then she heard the girl say to her daughter, Bitch, leave it alone, you're not my mother, this one here playing Mary fucking Poppins

is not your mother. Mariana started crying, told her to leave. The girl pushed her against the broken mirror and held her there. Lupita put her knife down and went to stand ten feet away from them, her hands brushing lightly the felt of the sofa.

Déjala, she told the girl. Then softened her voice when she saw in her eyes that she wasn't there. Mira, she tried again. ahí están los jeans. The girl took her hands of Mariana's chest and went to look through the shopping bag.

That was the last thing she would remember.

Manuel found Lupita after Mariana and the poor girl left her hurt in the living room, blood staining and seeping through the lace doilies she kept on the arms and backs of the sofa. Manuel walked into the house and took in the molcajete, blood and bits of bones and skin from Lupita's knees smeared along it as if she had been rolling pomegranate empanadas; the mortar so close to the sofa if Lupita had been able to move her left leg she could have touched it; the shredded pieces of the offending jeans here and there on the coffee table and the floor. Lupita could only stare at him, afraid to close her eyes and see Mariana and the girl standing above her again. Manuel knelt at her feet and said I'm here, Lupita. I'm here. I'm calling the cops, okay? It was them, right? Her body must have betrayed her somehow because Manuel clicked his tongue and said, Ya, Lupita. It's okay. Déjala ir.

But it wasn't okay. Tía Blanca's God had taken eighteen years to answer her heart's prayer and then changed his mind. Sometimes she would insist to her clients that individual loads were needed to keep their delicates in their best condition, but they wouldn't listen and when silk and cashmere no longer felt like silk and cashmere they

sheepishly admitted she'd been right but still docked her pay for doing as they'd asked. But if God was God, why hadn't he known he was right? Why had he done as she had asked?

Lupita heard Obed tell the cops they needed to find the little dykes before they went too far. She tried to make a sound but her mouth burned like when her mother rubbed chiles on her thumbs to teach her to stop sucking them at night. She wanted to tell Ricardo, It didn't work out, but it's not your fault.

When she opened her eyes again she was at the hospital and Manuel held her hand. Her two sons sat together against the far wall, their heads low between their legs. Everyone's outside, Lupita, Manuel said. She let her eyes roam her body and he listed the reasons she was there, a broken rib, shattered knees, cuts on her face and legs. From the toaster cord... She didn't know if he was asking or telling her this last. When she asked her husband about Mariana, had they found her? He said, That ingrate's not your daughter, Lupita. Do you see that now? She was your baby once, but she's not your daughter now. Some messes you just can't clean up, cariño.

At the sound of their hushed voices, her sons stood up, and she thought they would both come to her, but Obed walked out of the room. Only Ricardo approached her side. He sobbed against her face, his acne-scarred face salting her fresh welts. *Lo siento, Madre... Lo siento, lo siento, lo siento, lo siento, lo siento...*

They had to throw out the felt sofa because though her salt and vinegar formulas lifted the small blood stains, she couldn't bear to look at it and think of the night she held Mariana in her arms.

Her old sedan guzzled gas and forced Lupita to fill up the tank twice just to get there, first right before she jumped on 45 and passed downtown, then again when she crossed onto TX6/Marlin Highway. She began counting down the miles to Hilltop after that. She headed for Mariana's unit on Sundays mornings after making breakfast for her husband and her sons, none of whom had volunteered or asked to accompany her yet. In all, it took about four hours to drive the two hundred and fifty miles each way. Being alone, listening to old tapes of Vikki Carr, and all that sitting even if she was driving, was not a thing she should have minded.

At roughly the hundredth mile mark, she closed her windows when dead skunk penetrated her bleached sense of smell. She reached into her purse for the second time to make sure she had brought enough money for the return trip.

This was her fourth trip up to Hilltop. The first time she left behind her phone with the precise directions Obed had recorded for her. She became lost, deemed it a bad sign, and turned around two hours in. The next time she drove up Mariana refused to see her. And the last, the last Mariana had made it as far as the foot of the table before shaking her head at the guard and avoiding her eyes as she shuffled backwards to the door, allowing Lupita ample time to see that she now looked like her friend, trying to hide the softness of her body and her features. Pretending to be boys so the world could

them seriously. Lupita did not know what she would do if Mariana declined to see her today. The lawyer had reassured Obed that she was on the approved visitor's list. That was something, right? It meant... It meant something. She was sure of it.

Changing lanes to get away from an eighteen-wheeler, Lupita thought of how she had not told Tía Blanca about her last three attempts, and probably wouldn't tell her about this one either. Tía Blanca, with whom she attended church on Saturday afternoons, spoke of the Lord's plan for her, of the strength and the blessings He was sure to shower on her. She told Lupita that she would be fine, she was not alone, she had her family and most importantly, God, who would surely love and care for her. I know we are tempted to question His Motives and Plans, Tía Blanca said. They shouldn't, she said. Only He knows, Tía Blanca insisted to Lupita naming with her clean, white, seemingly permanently wrinkled fingers, Noé, Job, Abraham...

Lupita turned the music off so that Vikki's heartaches didn't creep on her own. She estimated she had an hour left before arriving at the city limits of Gatesville, where her daughter was housed, and she didn't want to be distracted this close to it.

Only her closest family knew her old story, but complete strangers now knew her new one. She was grateful none of her clients seemed to know. Or, if they did, that they didn't let on. Her picture had been on television and not just on Telemundo or Univision. They'd used the picture Ricardo took the day she and Mariana reunited.

Since that picture was taken, she had stopped coloring her hair and wore it brown and short, and climbing to the second and third floors of the townhouses down on

Washington left her breathless. She also dropped the Guadalupe-Lupita, and started going by her first name, one more Maria in a city dumping fresh batches of Mexican and Central-American Marias younger and more desperate every day. In *Buena Suerte* and *La Voz*, Manuel read ads to her: *Sixty dollars for only TWO floors? Some women have no shame! Call me and you see how I can give you the best clean for best price!*

Lupita, whose name was common enough, thought she could be even more ordinary than that for a while. Lupitas were Mexican, she thought, Marias could be from anywhere.

## EL MARIACHI

Here's the thing, no one cares to know about the revolutionary themes of "La Cucaracha." Not the clients, not your father, not the other mariachis.

Smile.

Sing.

When the strings step forward, dance along with the rest of the violinists.

Keep your bow down just so and return the stares of one or two of the clients. Let the elder members curl their mustaches in distaste for your young gyrating hips as Elvis's critics once did theirs. The elders know every lift increases the night's take.

Anglo clients love your synchronized macho modesty. They want Latin. Spicy.

(In those moments, they forget to tell you to #gohome.)

They paid for this.

You trained for this.

Embroidered by hand in gold thread, your black pants are expertly tailored for this.

Women.

Men.

Their eyes all approve of your masculine passion even if only the women shriek and squeal. Even if a man forgets himself, don't you.

Raise your manly eyebrow and signal for your comrade to pull an early Chente.  
Chente's tenor kills any accidental jotería:

“La migra a mí me agarró  
trescientos veces díganos  
pero jamás me domó.”

When the time comes help assign pet names to the client's friends: pick a bald one and call him out 'Hey, Pitbull!'

Bow ceremoniously low as you catch the eye of a blond-tinted matriarch.

Buenas, a la Princess Di!

Blow a kiss to the darkest woman in the room: Azúcar, Celia!

Tell the young woman who approaches during your water break that you also perform with the city's orchestra. But don't tell her you do it because you want her approval. Because you know you can't possibly have it playing La Cucaracha with your father and uncles. Take that dual selfie with her. She doesn't know you are #BachKiller, #BartókShredder, and all around #ChilakilesKing. Let her gush #arriba #elcucaracho #muymacho.

At a Mexican home, do what you can to ignore the beads of sweat on your father's brow when the Juanga portion of your repertoire begins. Step softly into the light of your father's shame with his beloved:

“Inocente pobre amigo  
No sabe que va a sufrir  
Sobre aviso no hay engaño.”

Pause long enough to let the men among your clients clear their throats and join you on the chorus.

Accept the proffered brandy or tequila and toast to the men and to your father.

Let the men fight over their favorite Juanga requests.

Let the moment happen as it does every night: your father strumming his guitar and staring into the ceiling as he witnesses men like him—or at least not like you, he believes—come to the conclusion that it should be That Song.

The one everybody picks.

Stand in front of your father.

Face your betters.

Face your fans.

Then let your shoulders fall, right then left, left then right, let the flutter of your hands chase the falsetto of your voice around the client’s crowded living room.

Take your Juanga parody into the lap of one tall and handsome like you, hold your cheek to his while his wife fumbles with her cell phone to capture this moment of her husband’s outraged acquiescence; your macho shame.

Go on.

Dance the Mexican hat dance.

## WHAT THE FUCK CAN I DO?

¿Qué putas puedo hacer?  
By Jaime Sabines

¿Qué putas puedo hacer con mi rodilla,  
con mi pierna tan larga y tan flaca,  
con mis brazos, con mi lengua,  
con mis flacos ojos?  
¿Qué puedo hacer en este remolino  
de imbéciles de buena voluntad?  
¿Qué puedo con inteligentes podridos  
y con dulces niñas que no quieren  
hombre sino poesía?  
¿Qué puedo entre los poetas  
uniformados  
por la academia o por el comunismo?  
¿Qué, entre vendedores o políticos  
o pastores de almas?  
¿Qué putas puedo hacer, Tarumba,  
si no soy santo, ni héroe, ni bandido,  
ni adorador del arte,  
ni boticario,  
ni rebelde?  
¿Qué puedo hacer si puedo hacerlo todo  
y no tengo ganas sino de mirar y mirar?

What the fuck can I do?  
Translated by Paula Beltrán

What the fuck can I do with my knee,  
with my leg so long and so skinny,  
with my arms, my tongue,  
my skinny eyes?  
What can I do in this whirlwind  
of good-willed imbeciles?  
What can I do with rotten intellectuals  
and sweet girls who want not man but  
poetry?  
What to do among poets  
uniformed by the academy or  
communism?  
What, among salesmen and politicians  
and shepherds of souls?  
What the fuck can I do, Tarumba, if I'm  
no saint or hero or bandit,  
not a worshiper of art,  
or a pharmacist,  
or a rebel?  
What can I do if I can do it all  
and all I feel like doing is watching and  
watching?

## YOUR BODY IS BY MY SIDE

Tu Cuerpo Está A Mi Lado  
Jaime Sabines

Tu cuerpo está a mi lado  
fácil, dulce, callado.  
Tu cabeza en mi pecho se arrepiente  
con los ojos cerrados  
y yo te miro y fumo  
y acaricio tu pelo, enamorado.  
Esta mortal ternura con que callo  
te está abrazando a ti mientras yo tengo  
inmóviles mis brazos.  
Miro mi cuerpo, el muslo  
en que descansa tu cansancio,  
tu blando seno oculto y apretado  
y el bajo y suave respirar de tu vientre  
sin mis labios.  
Te digo a media voz  
cosas que invento a cada rato  
y me pongo de veras triste y solo  
y te beso como si fueras tu retrato.  
Tú, sin hablar, me miras  
y te aprietas a mí y haces tu llanto  
sin lágrimas, sin ojos, sin espanto.  
Y yo vuelvo a fumar, mientras las cosas  
se ponen a escuchar lo que no hablamos.

Your body is by my side  
Translated by Paula Beltrán

Your body is by my side  
easy, sweet, quiet.  
Your head on my chest repents  
with eyes closed  
and I look at you and smoke  
and caress your hair, in love.  
This mortal tenderness with which I  
keep silent embraces you while I hold  
immobile my arms.  
I look at my body, the muscle  
on which rests your exhaustion,  
your soft breast, hidden and closed  
and the low, light breathing of your belly  
free of my lips.  
I tell you in a quiet voice things  
that I make up moment to moment  
and I get truly sad and lonely  
and I kiss you as if you were your  
portrait.  
You, without speaking, look at me  
and you press against me and weep  
without tears, without eyes, without  
terror,  
And I smoke again, while the things in  
the room  
listen to all that we do not say.

## THE LION KING

I wake my husband with the cold length of my body. I lost all track of time last night and did not call. I've come home so late the early Houston sunlight tsk-tsked and chased me all the way from across town. Against the back of him, I press my breasts, knees, and thighs, all of me tingling and throbbing with regret and outrageously with dregs of the oblivion I felt just a few hours before.

I throw my arm around him and let my hand drop onto his stomach. Don't, he mumbles into his pillow. He picks up my arm and swings his body out of bed. Some lady's night, he says in a thick voice. On his way to the shower he says, I have to go into work.

Three hours later, Javier returns, and turns off the light in our living room. He takes in my rumpled shirt and grayed bottoms He says nothing about them but then he never said much about the flimsy and soft things I wore before. He's nothing if not consistent, my husband.

I put my book down and rush to the bathroom to brush my teeth.

"You didn't go back to sleep?"

"No."

"What time are we leaving?"

"Can't we stay in for brunch? There're leftovers from Friday's dinner."

“I ate that last night.”

“Oh.” When I rinse my spit is colored pink.

“You forgot. We’re going to your sister’s ...?”

“Oh. Shit.”

“You’re wearing that?”

“Sure. No one cares.”

I reach for the old running shoes I’ve been wearing these past few weeks. From their shelves my stilettos pass their judgments.

It’s Family Day. Mine, anyway. I drive us out to the suburbs where my sister’s kids are waiting for us. At the I-10 West exit off the 610 loop, right after we pass the exit line filled with college students and lovers on a budget on their way to Ikea to fulfill their minimal dreams, Javier reaches over the gear stick and pulls my linen dress up to the fleshiest part of my thighs. I shriek when he places his cold hand on my bare thigh but reach for it right before he takes it away. “I hate you,” I say, feeling the cold metal of his wedding band on my lips when I kiss his knuckles. I hate you more, he tells me. He turns the air conditioning down from full blast. I hum along to Julieta Venegas’ sunny declarations: *yo te quiero con limón y sal, yo te quiero tal y como estás*. Javier leans back in his seat as if settling in for a cross-country adventure. Every few miles he refreshes the score updates on his phone. I pretend I don’t know he planned on listening to the game on

the way, even though it is Holy Football Sunday. He pretends I'm not pretending. Fair, I think, after five years of marriage.

We are taking Lizzy and Jonathan to the movies. She's holding onto Pinto, a stuffed horse I stole for her from the bulk donations we receive at the Women's Center for our children's therapy program. Pinto's mane is permanently rumpled like bed sheets left unchanged too long. I have to look close to find the stars in the brown marbles of his eyes. Lizzy sits tall in her car seat, imperious in her total long-limbed ownership of the backseat and I agree with her she's too big for it, but keep the thought to myself. I don't come around enough and I'm too lazy to be both cool aunt and supportive sister. Javier strapped Lizzy and a wriggling Jonathan into their contraptions while my sister watched from the doorway. Javier's hands reached and clasped all the belts effortlessly, as if he does this every day. When it was Jonathan's turn he yanked Javier's first pair of sunglasses not purchased at a gas station with hands still smeared red from the breakfast chilaquiles, and Javier only warned him to be careful with them. "They're magical," Javier told him with a wink. Jonathan's frantic energy was instantly focused.

Lizzy kicks the back of the passenger seat with purple-embroidered cowboy boots and when Javier orders her to stop, she whines she's not four like Jonathan, why are we making her watch a movie for little kids? She says, "Tía Fernanda, play Lady Gaga like last time, please?"

Last time was so long ago, I immediately reach for it. I keep my right hand on the worn leather of the steering wheel and use my left to dig through the loose CDS in the

door pocket . My rings—but not my wedding rings because I may have lost them last night along with everything else—clink against the plastic cases. Jonathan pushes as far forward as he can with the seat belt, a little worm with long eyelashes. “Tío Javier, I’m not a little kid, I’m nine *como* Lizzy” he begs. “Right, Tía, I’m big now?” We play the rearview mirror game until he sees himself and blows me kisses and high-fives his uncle.

I find the Gaga but Javier says please don’t play that crap. I tell my niece I shouldn’t have played that music last time because it’s not for little girls, even big ones like her. I explain that I sometimes don’t know what little girls should listen to. She says that’s what her mom said. I say is that right and she drops Pinto when both her hands fly to cover her mouth. Then she says, “But I’m not supposed to tell you that.” She recovers quickly and I can’t believe she’s only nine and already knows when to stay quiet. “I really don’t want to see this movie, Tía!”

I’m pausing longer than usual at a stop sign and I hope Javier is noticing. I turn around to check on the kids. Jonathan’s holding onto the shades like he’s holding an egg. Lizzy grasps Pinto’s white felt ears between her thumbs and index fingers and swings him up and down, so that I take in the shaggy white of his high-kicking feet. I knew Lizzy still needed to have Pinto in bed with her to be able to fall asleep, but going to the movies? Lizzy’s ponytail of chestnut curls rides high and glossy, wrapped in strawberry ties that match the Barbie-pink prescription glasses she’s worn the past two years. Nearsightedness in the very young startles me. So unfair, I think. As if she needed any help making bad decisions.

I was sixteen when my family immigrated to Houston. My parents' Old Testament discipline was not enforced by my tías when I went back for visits during my summer and winter vacations. Far from playing catch up during those few weeks without supervision, the freedom only filled me with an anxiety that never quite left me until I was back in the familiar order of things. I was lost in the hyphen of Mexico-America, all around me calls for loyalties I didn't have or understand. In Cuauhtémoc, older cousins would dress me up in clothes that were too tight, too short, just too much. With powders and brushes they would shade and blend and buff, creating angles and curves I'd miss and talk about once home in Houston with the sobriety of a soldier recalling lost limbs.

I went back to Cuauhtémoc last when I was twenty-one. I met a guy at my cousins' favorite spot for *rock en español* who looked as lost as I felt. When he asked me to dance, I heard him in the noise of the club even though he kept his voice low. He was tall and broad-shouldered, and the other men moved aside when he led me to the bathroom and dutifully waited outside so I could inspect the condition of my cousins' handiwork. But unlike Javier, who would confidently rest his hand on the small of my back while he led me around the lounge that would host our first date, once in the protective range of my cousins' eyes, this guy held his bottle of *Pacífico* and my hand as if afraid he could crush both. When he asked if I wanted to go smoke outside I said yes. I had never smoked before and from his fumbling with the lighter he obviously was no expert. He wore jeans that stood out for their plainness, no fancy cut or label or wash, maybe even a little too dirty. But his guayabera was bridal white and soft and smelled of sandalwood. He said he was a poet and I thought he looked like one so I believed him. I

asked him to share one of his poems with me. He recited “Los Amorosos” by Jaime Sabines and I pretended I was hearing about the plight of lovers for the first time:

*Love is a perpetual prolongation,  
always the next, no, the following, step.  
The lovers are incorrigible,  
those who always—good for them!—have to be alone.*

“Do you like it?” He asked me producing another cigarette from behind his left ear.

“What do you know about unendurable love?” I started to tease, but lost my nerve when his rapid blinking told me he had already lost his.

I grabbed one of the deep pockets of his shirt, pulling him close enough as if for a kiss then only taking his cigarette from his thin lying lips.

“I do like it,” I told him.

I had done everything right until now. In Houston I had graduated high school without getting so much as felt up. With the help of Zhang, Tsai, Predeep, and Farhan, my tutors in Astronomy, Algebra, Biology, and Chemistry, or pretty much every class that didn’t involve reading poetry or nineteenth century novels, I had managed college. I went from my father’s home to my husband’s with no stops in between. My husband is kind and handsome and appropriate in every way. I never would have thought myself capable of hurting him. Before, when I would hear anyone say “it just happened” I would think in disgust only to *you* would it “just happen.”

But then, it just happened. A few years into our marriage. I was randomly introduced to my favorite poet, a stranger and not a stranger. What are the odds of meeting one's favorite writer after reading his every published word of the last ten years and having said poet proclaim instant, life-flooding love? I *see* you, he said the first time we ever met alone. You, you, you, no one, *nothing* else will do but you, he wrote, his emails like some book he was writing just for me. Like favorite cashmere that suddenly feels too soft, too warm, that becomes cloying, my safe, *good* life back home, was suddenly more than I could bear. While I held on to his headboard, I told myself that his hands and his mouth were not cheating. Until the afternoon the stranger's mouth became all there was in the world. That evening I went home and told my husband I loved him terribly.

We're all set to watch a movie I picked against the wishes of one and the indifference of the other two. The Lion King. I love that it's a classic, hand-drawn and full of songs I know by heart. The kids have seen it before. My American-born husband indulges my stories of watching it more than a few times when it first came out. I had just arrived to the United States and was learning English. I was amazed by how I could sing along after the first two or three times, my accent lost in the noise of a theater full of the voices of kids and adults. When the musical version of the film came to town, I learned the Swahili chorus to some of the songs.

“Nants ingonyama bagithi Baba  
(Here comes a lion, Father)  
Sithi uhm ingonyama  
(Oh yes, it's a lion)

Siyo Nqoba  
(We're going to conquer)

Minutes after finding seats in the darkened theater, I flick popcorn off Jonathan's lap and repeat my warning: no talking allowed, only singing. This time Javier says, pretend-strict, no it's not, and the kids and I respond in perfect unison, yes it is! and declare popcorn wars until the commercials end and the previews start. Later, during the grand opening number when the lion king proudly presents his heir, I sing the loudest, joining the amplified cries of approval of the king's subjects, all somehow loyal despite their rank in the food chain.

“It's the Circle of Life  
And it moves us all  
Through despair and hope  
Through faith and love  
Till we find our place  
On the path unwinding  
In the Circle  
The Circle of Life”

Then the movie ends. Jonathan has been holding my hand since the wildebeest stampede scene where the lion king dies at the paws of his brother. Right before the lights come back on I take him in my arms and wonder how I'm to explain the circle of life to a four year old when I don't understand it myself. But he throws his arms around my neck and screams right into my ear, That was awesome! Helping my husband to collect popcorn off the floor, Lizzy says only, I guess. Though she joins him and Jonathan and a few others in the emptying theater in a joyous if off-key rendition of “ Hakuna Matata / It means no worries ...”

Javier straps Jonathan back in the car seat. Then Jonathan asks if it hurt the lion king when Scar pushed him and he fell. Before we can answer Lizzy says, “Cousin Absalom and Tía Erika tackled Tía Camen in the front yard of Tía Erika’s house.” She says if we want to know what happened she can tell us. She was there. She saw everything. I put both hands on the wheel and ask her to tell me what she thinks she saw.

“I don’t *think*. I know,” she says. “I saw what they did.”

Javier pockets his phone and says do you want me to drive. I shake my head so hard one of my earrings gets caught in my hair. He lifts the kids’ bag from the backseat and digs until he finds the emergency *Caillou* DVD, pops it into the player, and hands the last of the gummy bears to Jonathan. Javier’s phone rings; it’s work. Lizzy and I both try to follow the one-sided conversation, “*Try the 2.2 milliliter ... solution, run that thru ... Hopefully the sequence finishes by the time I get there in the morning...*” Bored after a minute or two of listening to Javier and trying to boss Jonathan into watching something else, but somehow knowing not to resume her story yet, she says, “Tío Javier likes being a scientist because he’s good at math, right?” I nod.

When Javier ends the call, she asks him if he can help her with fractions. They agree on Tuesday then turn to me.

“Okay, baby, tell me what you saw, please?” I say to Lizzy

“Tía Carmen picked me up from cheerleading practice—Tía Fernanda, you know Tía Carmen’s staying with us until she gets even more old and she can move, right?”

I realize I haven’t told Javier about any of it.

“She’s two months away from qualifying for senior housing,” I catch him up.

“...SO... Tía Carmen told me we needed to go by Tía Erika’s house real quick, and when we got there, she told me to stay in the car. At first I did, but then I saw everybody come out of the house and they pushed her so I got out of the car.”

“Who pushed who?” I say to Lizzy as if clarifying the pusher from the pushed will make everything make sense. I reach behind and make her take my hand and I think she knows it’s more for me than her.

“I told you, Cousin Absalom and Tía Erika hit Tía Carmen on Thursday. I thought it was so weird, you know, because, like, that’s his mom. And Tía Carmen is older than Tía Erika so why would Tía Erika push her? I can hit Jonathan because I’m his big sister—”

“No, you can’t. And if I ever see you hurt him, you will be in a lot of trouble, Lizeth.”

“Well. I kicked Tía Erika because I didn’t think that was fair and she pushed *me* off and I fell on my butt. My mom got mad at me later because I stained my cheerleading skirt but I told her it’s not my fault, no one was helping Tía Carmen.”

“You pushed Tía Erika because you thought she was hurting Tía Carmen?” I am avoiding looking at Javier. I don’t want to pull over until we’re done talking. I don’t want to stop the car so he can drive. I don’t want to take away the hand I gave my niece to hold. The only thing I let him do is take the phone off my lap long enough to call my sister, let her know to pick up the kids from my parents’ house, where I’m now driving.

“My mom knows what happened so I didn’t get grounded for kicking *Tía* Erika. Plus Cousin Absalom was worse for pushing *Tía* Carmen.” Something about “worse” makes it necessary to stop after all, and I pull us over into a side street while I take deep breaths and hold hands with Javier.

At my parents, I say goodbye to the kids and my mother, telling her in Spanish that I really wish they would treat me like an adult and inform me when serious things happen, like my aunts beating up each other while my niece watches. Lizzy looks up from her Nintendo DS and says, he-llo! She’s not Mexican like Grandma and Grandpa but she understands Spanish, how else would she talk to them? I ignore her and I’m in the middle of warning my mother I will not be going to *Tía* Erika’s for barbacoa next weekend when Javier asks me to let him borrow my phone. He says his battery is dead and it would appear he’s about to miss the second game of the day. He reaches into the brown leather satchel he gave me for my birthday last year. He pulls out my phone. I wait for my father to suggest that he watch the game in the living room. But either he doesn’t hear the exchange, or doesn’t care to see if the Texans have a chance to make it to the playoffs. Who could blame him.

My mother says I best sit down and be quiet while she tells me what really happened. She is upset and I want to go join her on the sofa, where my father is flipping through one of the old magazines he picks up on the garage runs they do for the church bazaars. Javier sits on a stool at the kitchen island, one flip-flop sandal precariously hanging from his big toe, my phone in his hands. My mother says come sit over here, but

I stay by Javier, watching his eyes on my phone. I reach for something to do and then I am washing grapes in the sink mounded into the island. I'm breaking stems and puncturing the fragile skins while my eyes follow his gentle fingers as they find their measured way to the icon for the Internet browser. He finds it and stays there. I put the grapes in the refrigerator, dry my hands.

“Carmen is upset Absalom is leaving Lorena for that new woman of his. She saw the woman's car parked at your Tía Erika's house and went inside planning to her up. Absalom begged his mother to understand he no longer loved Lorena, then when Carmen wouldn't stop screaming, to leave. You know what she said? Your aunt? My sister? Carmen told Absalom he was a sad excuse for a man, not half the man his father was. He and Erika barely managed to drag her out of the house before she had run back inside and was banging on the door to Erika's bedroom where the woman was hiding. They called me and asked me to go get her but what could I do when I don't drive. I sent your father.”

My father arranges the magazine face down on his crossed legs.

“It was like nothing you or we had ever seen,” he agrees.

“Tía Carmen is only being supportive of Lorena,” I begin, surprising myself with how much I have to say about it. “Absalom... *lied* for *months* and walked out on her and his three kids. He's a *jerk* and nothing *excuses* his... And *shame* on Tía Erika for allowing her sister, a widow, to be treated this way.”

Liar. Liar. Liar. The word echoes through the walls of my brain.

I sit next to my mother. “*You* told him he was right to fight for his happiness,” my mother says while pulling at the hem of my dress and patting it into place at the exact middle of my knees. “You congratulated him for finding “love.”

“Look at that. It’s not only women who want poetry,” Javier says.

“Excuse me, but I don’t think he’s found “love” with this woman, and I definitely do not recall *congratulating* him for leaving his family after months of...of...*deceiving* his wife...”

Just a minute ago I was kissing the kids—where are the kids?—and my parents good-bye. Now I’m hugging my mother’s two red chenille pillows to hide the scarlet staining my chest, my face. When I first heard Absalom was leaving his wife because he had fallen in love with someone else, I had said I thought he was brave. Unoriginal, but brave.

I put the pillows down. I want to go outside and stick my head in Jonathan’s inflatable pool. Instead, I try to pick up my hair into a bun. My husband says, softly, “Do you want your hair thing?” and before I can answer my clip is in my lap.

“I know Carmen is your favorite aunt,” my mother says. “But she’s lost all reason. She’s his mother. Who’s Lorena to her? If they had not pulled her out of the house, she would be in jail right now.”

I nod. I taste bile and artificial butter in the back of my throat and I don’t trust myself to speak.

My father says he knows I love my aunt, we all do, but I really don't know all that's happened and how crazy it's gotten. He says, "Absalom lost his father, and now his mother has denounced him more times than you need to hear about."

"Just think about this," my father looks at me as if for the first time.

"Fernanda, what if it were you? Can you imagine if you and Javier separated," he says, "and instead of supporting you, we sided with him. How would that make you feel?" he asks.

I nod again. The room has gotten dark.

Javier stands, picks up my bag, and inserts my phone into the outside pocket where I usually keep it.

"*Suegros*," he says to my parents, "don't ask Fernanda to choose right now. It's been a long day." And putting his hands on my shoulders, "Baby, can you come back on your own to finish this, please? Let's go home so I can catch the end of the game?"

And I look into my husband's eyes and they're nothing like old faithful Pinto's.

I say yes, let's go home.

I hand him the car keys.

By the time he pulls the car into our parking space, I can hardly keep my eyes open but I know that I will tell him and that I will lose him, but if I don't tell him I will lose myself.

He changes into gym shorts, grabs a Shiner Bock, and falls into his side of the sofa with a sigh. I pull my hair away from my face. I remove jewelry and make up, but do

not change into pajamas. I pick up my book from that morning and reach over him to place it on the end table, face down with the last page still marked. I lay my head on his chest, close my eyes.

I repent, I think, I repent a thousand times, husband.

Soon the apartment fills with the play by play of the losing team's failure to grasp the one moment that could have changed their fate.

## THINKING IT OVER

Pensandolo bien  
By Jaime Sabines

Me dicen que debo hacer ejercicios para adelgazar,  
que alrededor de los 50 son muy peligrosos la grasa y el cigarro,  
que hay que conservar la figura y dar la batalla al tiempo, a la vejez.

Expertos bien intencionados y médicos amigos  
me recomiendan dietas y sistemas para prolongar la vida unos años más.

Lo agradezco de todo corazón, pero me río  
de tan vanas recetas y tan escaso afán.  
(La muerte también ríe de todas esas cosas.)

La única recomendación que considero seriamente  
Es la de llevar una mujer joven para la cama  
porque a estas alturas  
la juventud sólo puede llegarnos por contagio.

They tell me I should exercise to lose some weight,  
around fifty when the fat and cigarettes do the damage;  
they say you have to stay in good shape, and wage the struggle against time, and old age.

Well-intentioned experts and doctor friends  
push regimens designed to squeeze a few more years out of life.

I'm grateful to them all, but I have to laugh  
at these in-vain recipes and poor attempts.  
(Death, too, gets a kick out of all this stuff.)

The only recommendation I take to heart is to find a young woman for my bed, because at this late stage youth can only hope to reach us second hand.

## YOU UNDRRESS AS IF YOU WERE ALONE

Te desnudas igual que si estuvieras sola  
By Jaime Sabines

Te desnudas igual que si estuvieras sola  
y de pronto descubres que estás  
conmigo.  
¡Cómo te quiero entonces  
entre las sábanas y el frío!

Te pones a flirtarme como a un  
desconocido  
y yo te hago la corte ceremonioso y  
tibio.  
Pienso que soy tu esposo  
y que me engañas conmigo.

¡Y como nos queremos entonces en la  
risa  
de hallarnos solos en el amor prohibido!  
(Después, cuando pasó, te tengo miedo  
y siento un escalofrío.)

You undress as if you were alone  
Translated by Paula Beltrán

You undress as if you were alone  
and suddenly discover you are with me.  
How I love you then  
among the sheets and the cold!

You start to flirt with me as if with a  
stranger  
and I respond, woo you ceremoniously  
and mild .  
I think of being your husband  
and that it is with me you betray me.

And how we love each other, in the  
laughter  
of finding ourselves alone in forbidden  
love!  
(Afterwards, when it's over, I fear you  
and feel a chill.)

## JUST LIKE THAT DRUNKEN NIGHT

Igual que la noche de la embriaguez  
By Jaime Sabines

Igual que la noche de la embriaguez,  
igual fue la vida.  
¿Qué hice?, ¿qué tengo entre las manos?  
Sólo desear, desear, desear,  
ir detrás de los sueños  
igual que un perro ciego ladrándole a los  
ruidos.

Just like that drunken night  
Translated by Paula Beltrán

Just like that drunken night,  
that's how life went.  
What did I do? What do I have in my  
hands?  
Only wishes, wishes, wishes,  
chasing after dreams  
as a blind dog barks at noise.

## **CHASING AFTER DREAMS AS A BLIND DOG BARKS AT NOISE**

### **I**

When I, Fernanda Ruinas, walked past the fence of my marriage, a handsome old stranger appeared, a poet expecting a night of memories and possibly hoping to be loved. Anyway, I loved him. And as the weeks went by, preferred him to my husband. And when I had tears to shed I did it in the safe cave of his chest.

### **II.**

A decade after he signed “With gratitude, your biggest fan,” on the margins of one of my favorite poems in his award-winning collection, Lalo sits across from me at a café in downtown Houston, waiting for me to decide between a Malbec called “Santa Eulalia” and another which, not having been named after my grandmother, I can’t recall.

We bask in the early afternoon light with Benny, a writer and founder of the local nonprofit that has brought Lalo to town, killing time before his reading that evening.

“The Malbecs are en vogue, aren’t they? The latest gucci wine,” Lalo chats with the perky college student who is our server just as he had earlier with the Salvadoreño table runner, the Guatemalteco valet, and with every other service staff person with whom I had seen him interact since meeting him the summer before.

A community of writers and hopefuls meets every summer in Ripton, Vermont. Julia Alvarez and Antonya Nelson held waiterships there before making it and I'm sure all the students viewed their stories as signs that it, success, could find any one of them. A friend had put me in touch with Lalo and he in turn had managed to secure an invitation for me to join the team of volunteers who assist the staff every year. He did this before our lips ever touched which itself happened long after we had gotten naked with each other in ways I had never done with my husband. He claimed he too had not been like this with any of his three wives, but how can I know? This writing conference is one of the most prestigious in the country, and I considered myself extremely lucky to have won the chance to pour hot and cold beverages for the visiting authors and the smug lucky ones chosen to attend their workshops. Lalo had taught there several times, but the year we met he was as grateful to be there as me.

Lalo suffered an accident at the hands of a former lover. It was in all the literary blogs. Right out of *Misery*, the beautiful environmental rights activist held him hostage for months, refusing to give him the only copy he'd printed of his latest manuscript, lost to him after his rental casita in Puebla caught fire and in it his laptop. The photograph most often featured in the blogs showed her standing in profile tall and elegant against Lalo, wearing her beautiful auburn hair in long waves and a backless lace dress with a scalloped neckline which on any other woman—on me--would have looked wrong and “Maria Mercedes” but on her accentuated the curves that ultimately proved too dangerous even for him. For months after the accident, he was confined to a wheelchair and unable to move the right side of his body. The *Houston Chronicle* reported that she

had driven two blocks with Lalo hanging on to the driver's door attempting to wrestle his manuscript from her hands. I don't know how she drove while holding onto the papers (and who doesn't keep copies?), or how it felt when his leg went under the left front tire of her Jeep Wrangler. I don't think I will ask him.

On that, his latest visit to the Ripton hills, he cursed his inability to disguise the pain which shot through his foot and caused him to visibly drag his leg when he walked; the ease with which I ran up the stairs when he forgot his reading glasses in the room where he conducted his workshop. How I loved his pain then for it made me useful.

Lalo's vulnerability was new to everyone who knew him, but especially to himself. A former roofer, Lalo was in his mid-thirties when he heard of a poet known for writing about the working class—guys like Lalo. He read the “voice of the voiceless” and was certain of one undeniable fact: he, Lalo, was better. He switched to tiling work to give his lungs a break from the tar fumes and began writing his poetry at night. His work paid off. His first collection of poetry won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry and the Pen-Voelcker for his latest. Fellowships and tenure followed but this last he renounced in exchange for “Freedom, linda,” as he tells me.

To the uninitiated, Lalo is crude and loud. Everything about him raw and uncensored. At Ripton, we walked into rooms where all the men wore their books and tenure and awards, like the world's best push-up bras. Lalo showed up in wrinkled dirty jeans with a saggy ass, in guayaberas he bought during a visit with Elena Poniatowska to Oaxaca. He smelled a little of sweat. He limped. He dozed off while *New York Times* bestsellers read. When I got up to take a call from my mother, the third that day, he

noticed me as if for the first time. And it was as if his eyes falling on me granted permission to love him. I did by the end of the trip even if neither of us knew it then.

While waiting for the Santa Eulalia, Lalo receives an email from his publisher. His latest collection has just been reviewed in the New York Times. I take his iPhone and read: “Lalo is the *herida abierta* of the American working-class male.” Lalo, his eyes full and dancing in his tired face, says “Notice how short it is.”

But he lifts his glass and we toast anyway.

### III.

Love, happiness, a meaningful life. I never questioned any of it until Lalo. Though he never discussed his age—six decades on this earth had not dulled his vanity—it always hovered around us, at once inoffensive and persistent. Lalo was older than my father and I couldn’t imagine not loving him for the rest of my life.

Before he ever laid a finger on me, before I ever knew the hulking body of his, his poetry entered my virgin heart. But it was his flesh and blood hands which ultimately patted and parted my body. Lalo’s hands were true to him, weathered yet otherwise perfect; rough but gentle, like him too all-knowing. I adored his gloved hands, how they wandered over the clumsiness of my body the way expert miners sift through still clay for gold dust. I made up my mind I would not give him up.

### IV.

Lalo yawned and then yawned again a minute later, and bent his broad back over the edge of the bed and picked up the sheets. “I said, it’s time.” He got up and went into the bathroom, and I looked at his side of the bed, tracing lazy circles along the deep hueco where his robust frame had just been.

“Aren’t you going tell me anything, Fernanda?”

Lalo pulled the curtains closed and pulled me to him when he returned to bed.

“Hey...You’ve read this “book,” is what I’m trying to tell you.”

“How do you know what I’ve read?”

I sighed. “It’s your typical story,” I said.

“Well, I could tell you if you stand a chance of publishing it,” Lalo said.

“That’s the point, I don’t care to tell it.”

“Andale. You’ve already Googled me. Educate me,” he said, tucking in the sheets all around us, and in the process covering the accusing clock next to his side of the bed.

“Okay,” I said, trying to memorize the scars coiled around his right foot and leg.

“My father—

My father found most new things oppressive, but especially new ideas of good parenting and the concepts of mutual respect and understanding. How they offered children notions of equality that required a great deal of right-making in the sweltering Houston summers.

“My father shipped me back south to Cuauhtémoc during school breaks, where, under the watchful eyes of numerous aunts and cousins, he hoped I would de-Americanize,” I said.

“That’s nice. Wish I could spend all my summers in Mexico,” Lalo said.

“Well, I hated these trips, let me tell you. The trips back “home,” ordered by my father and arranged by the women in my family who were repulsed by the other women in my life, didn’t exactly help my accent anxieties.”

“That’s a hang-up for now-you. I bet then you were relieved to go back to what used to be home,” Lalo said.

“No. That was the problem! It no longer was. But Houston wasn’t either.”

“Is it now?”

“Yes. No. Mostly... Okay, yes, I remember one summer...”

“Yes?”

“Imagine: Sixteen hours of endless cousin border wars in the folded down seats of Tía Norma’s Suburban.” Unplanned exchanges of musty, grimy pillows. *Interview with the Vampire*. Then finally Cuauhtémoc. I hadn’t been in five years. It all looked the same but different, smaller, dirtier, poorer, more beautiful with my Houston eyes. Except for this: that first night, minutes after my second helping of chiles en nogada, Tía Rosa and Tía Carolina announced I could make whatever plans I wanted as long as a cousin went with me. They reassured me they would handle my parents’ calls.

“That summer, the summer of 2004—

“It’s been established that “it” was the summer of 2004. Mi reinita, let me stretch my legs.”

“I’m sorry,” I said and sat across from him, ashamed when he caught me looking at his shrunken leg.

“Continue, reina.”

“Okay. Well in 2—that summer, I met Elenita at a club where I was supposed to learn how to like being felt up by men without, God forbid, actually being felt up by men, right? Mi prima Miriam introduced us because though Elenita was a normal woman, she wasn’t an adelantada—you know, the women in my family equally offended by women who like men too much, or none and not at all.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Elenita was nineteen like me and ignored that every time my family saw us together sopping up the chile Valentina y limón dripping down to our elbows from Don Tito's carved mangos, they imagined unspeakable lesbian horrors.”

“Lesbian horrors?”

“And the funny thing is that Elenita taught me how to wear a bra a size smaller so that I could squeeze my breasts together for the boys.”

“Ah. The feminine arts remain relevant,” Lalo said.

“She also taught me that in Mexico, if you wanted to be a writer, you studied *Lengua y Literatura en La Facultad de Letras*, which I thought sounded infinitely more *writerly* than creative writing.”

Back in Houston, I begged my confused parents all fall to let attend university in Cuauhtémoc. I asked them to picture it with me, ‘Papá, Mamá, me voy a la Facultad!’

“That’s when you changed majors?”

“No, I’d already switched to English. My French only sounded like French when I had a cold.”

“You didn’t want to do the work.”

“Lalo!”

“Did you really ask your parents to move back to Mexico?”

“You are missing the point! Without Elenita, there would be no Sabines and... everything would be different, don’t you think?”

“You’re in my bed now because of some poetry you read years ago? Not because *I’m* a poet?”

Kiss me, Lalo.

“Elenita surprised me with a book of poems written by Jaime Sabines. She said she didn’t know much about him but her culto friends told her I would like him. She’d been talking about me!”

“I talk about you,” Lalo said.

“Please don’t! I don’t know why you think this is funny—

“Excuse me, but I’m an adult and I’m not going to announce that you’re married, but I’m not going to lie if asked about the nature of our relationship. Don’t ask me to, don’t expect me to. Go on. You were gushing about Elenita.”

I picked up my sweater dress and debated putting it on to walk to his kitchen. I put it on but sat still, feeling his eyes following the rope of my braid down my back, simmering in my guilt, afraid to displease him, surprised by his revelation. Elenita must have been surprised when I tried kissing her the last night we partied at Old Town, the bar where all the fresas and MexAms like me went to on vacation. Though maybe not all of them went for the sole purpose of finding out, well, if pressing up to boys while

dancing to a combination of rock en español, the rancheras of Pepe Aguilar, and the norteñas of Intocables, could give one the same funny feelings one felt when kissing twenty-five year old lit major Alicia's soft onyx thighs...

“Are you asleep?” Lalo said.

I hummed: *Y que me traigan más botellas / para quitarme este sabor de su sudor / y que me apunten en la cuenta toda la desgracia que dejo...*

“Well?”

“I was sitting on the lid of a toilet while Elenita finger-curled my Gloria Trevi frizz when I kissed her on the corner of her chapped lips,” I said, still facing the wall lined with photographs of him with fellow tanned and hyphenated *New Yorker* regulars. Sandra Cisneros, Cheríe Moraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, Francisco Goldman, Luis Urrea, Junot Díaz, Dagoberto Gilb, Sherman Alexie, Z.Z. Packer, Frances Hwang, Jhumpa Lahiri. And on his desk, next to a stack of novels sent to him for blurbs, him and the Maestro, Sabines himself, at a panel sponsored by the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

“You kissed Elenita?” he said, while patting the space next to him in bed.

I joined him but started mentally collecting all of my belongings lost in the writerly chaos of his place. Manuscripts, books, a sack of peanuts.

“Así es. She turned her head but didn't pull back, so I told her I didn't think my mom's and tías' idea had worked at all.” I was as much me in Cuauhtémoc as I was in Houston. “I told her how I hoped she still liked me even though I liked girls and

maybe liked her. She nodded once, firmly, as if it was all she could do to keep from saying, not you too Fernanda! Then she reached in for her breasts and pulled them up and together. She said, ya! lista! and led me by my hand back to the boys waiting outside for us.

“Did anything happen?”

We danced together but not with each other. I held that boy so tight.

“How would anything happen? I was terrified of her telling my cousin I was sick or perverted—a marimacha.”

“I mean, did you fall in love,” he asked lifting my face to him with both his hands so that his long fingers wrapped around the length of my jaw.

“No. Just lust.”

“Like now?”

“Like now,” I said and kissed the calloused pads of his fingers.

Saying goodbye to Lalo those first few times was this crazy dance.

“The book Elenita gave me was a commemorative book put out by TELMEX and I must say, Lalo, it was rather strange reading about lovers and a pregnant limp and whores who needed to be made saints in a book imprinted with a telephone company's logo. On the title page, Elenita wrote “this type of reading is special and made especially for people special like you.”

“Real poetry. Did you feel special?”

Alicia—my first—had read me e.e. cummings but this was my first time reading poetry in Spanish.

“It was easy to pretend she had meant to say *something* when she presented it to me,” I said.

The long drive back to Houston that summer was made longer by our having to pull over so I could vomit from motion sickness and other kinds... No sooner did I finish reading the thin compilation than I began reading it again.

I dug the Sabines out from the pile of sheets.

“Listen to this one, Lalo:

The lovers fall silent.  
Love is the finest, the most shuddering,  
the most unendurable, silence.  
The lovers seek,  
they are the ones who relinquish,  
those who change, who forget.  
Their hearts tell them that what they look for,  
what they seek, they will not find.

The lovers go around like lunatics  
because they are alone, alone, alone;  
yielding, giving themselves up at every turn,  
crying because they can't hold on to their love.  
Love obsesses them. The lovers live  
for today; knowing little else, it's all they can do.  
They are always going,  
forever heading elsewhere.  
They wait—  
for nothing, but they wait.  
For what they know they'll never find.  
Love is a perpetual prolongation,  
always the next, no, the following, step.  
The lovers are incorrigible,  
those who always—good for them!—have to be alone.

“How many times have you shared that poem in bed?”

“Not many. Not very many... What are you thinking about?”

“I think of being your husband, and that it is with me you betray me,” he said.

Lalo lifted me onto his still-muscled left thigh. He covered my hands with his and together we cupped my breasts. I glided up and down his thigh, as supple and wet as the mangos I once ate with Elena.

V.

I visited Cuauhtémoc for the last time when I was twenty-three. Everyone had heard about me by then and not one prima volunteered introductions to a girlfriend, but they did take me back to the boys. I kissed a boy or two until I found one who I thought might be a *culto* and asked him about Sabines. Unlike the other boys who assumed I was a *creida* because I lived on this side, he liked my Spanish, didn't mind my almost-American accent and didn't think that made me less Mexican— though if you had asked me then, I was more concerned with being immediately recognizable as American.

The boy explained Sabines was “an institution.” A poet but not a poet-poet, he loved real Mexicans and was one, and so he wasn't always a poet by the standards of poets, except maybe now that he'd passed.

“The last year I went back I met a boy who took me to his favorite librería and I spent 239 pesos on Jaime Sabines, *Recuento de Poemas 1950 / 1998*. You know, Amazon has the Spanish-language volume for \$40.”

“Do you still have it?”

“Yeah. She calls me “prima” in it. That’s how we addressed each other, “Cousin, who, I mean, what do you want to do today” she would say. You can see where I blacked out “putas” from his “Qué putas puedo hacer?” in case my mom opened it.

“I meant that anthology?”

“Oh—yes. But the point is, if not for Elenita... Sabines? He *is* the reason I’m here. Don’t forget it,” I said.

“You won’t let me,” he said.

## VI.

Fernanda was too tired to think beyond the obvious. It had been almost five years already. A gift had to once again be simply, only, a gift. She decided on a slim volume of Sabines for his son, a bottle of malbec for Lalo. If he pressed her, she would have just a sip, because she was driving. She would drive, not metro in. She would be in control, in charge. Behind the wheel.

“It’s wonderfully precious to see y’all try so hard,” Lalo had said to her years before from the doorway as she stood in front of his hall vanity gathering her hair and herself in preparation to return to her husband.

“‘Y’all’? All of us women folk trying to please you?” Fernanda said not slowing down her pace to look at his lumbering reflection in the mirror.

“We love you for it.” He told her. “We struggle to care as much as you.”

Fernanda made it down Massachusetts Avenue without any sort of trouble only to make three loops around Scott Circle Park before successfully joining the evening's traffic down 16<sup>th</sup>. By the time she pulled up to the valet's station, she felt her thighs slick with sweat and at her temples remorseless sections of hair resumed their natural rigors, neither falling straight nor completely coiling themselves. Fernanda swiped a coat of magenta tint on her lips—a finish she loved-hated, because people invariably believed the color to be revelatory. And yet the world recoiled when anyone actually went bare.

Exposing her legs to the breeze of the early evening, she debated between the suede camel slingbacks she had on and the pair of black flats sticking straight up out of the console's cup holders until a valet who revealed himself to be Salvadoreño when he greeted her in Spanish politely questioned her readiness. For an instant, she felt the urge to yell at him. Of course she wasn't ready. And when she remained unseen by Lalo and Hernán who were then walking up to the front doors, she told herself how easy it would be to drive away and put an end to the night before it'd even started. So easy. It wasn't until she met the eyes of the valet holding open her door that she realized she'd said this out loud. Yes, he agreed with her, it was easy, she'd give him the keys and he'd take her car to a safe location while she enjoyed her evening. Easy. Suddenly she was hot with shame for being angry with him for assuming she spoke Spanish and continuing yet to engage her in it while making them both all the more conspicuous. And had it not been for the book that he was now handing her she would have said something to him. Instead, she took Sabines's *Recuento de Poemas* from his hands more brusquely than she'd

intended and rushed three and a half inches off the ground across the wide sidewalk and into the pulse of the bar.

The reunion was prompted by the news of Gabo's death. She and Lalo had first met in the great man's house. The place was suggested by Hernán who kept a studio with an Argentino just a couple of blocks away and because Fernanda wanting to make light of seeing Lalo the first time since the long end to their brief affair, had said that it needed to be worth the drive in. She would walk into the place and if the presence of Hernán, the dark wood paneling, the brilliance of the chandeliers casting an illuminating glow of American respectability over the evening didn't steady her, she would make her excuse and leave. This was for Lalo, she reminded herself touching a hand to her brow.

At the sight of Fernanda approaching their table, Lalo rose from his seat, the embroidered guayabera stretched pleasantly across his broad shoulders and his still full lips imposing memories of impossible moments past upon her already tentative steps.

"Buenas, linda," he said, so tall that the tips of his loose fingers hovered over but failed to make contact with the crease-free tablecloth.

She forbid herself the relief of swallowing. She would not swallow; she would not look away. This would not be easy.

"Buenas, Maestro," she said as she made to shake his hand and he instead pulled her in for a full, if quick and reserved embrace. Maestro, a gesture of respect for his standing but also one that was intimately whispered many years ago when his name on her lips felt normal and natural and not the bitter fruit it now was.

“Pfff, she calls everyone published a so-called maestro, it seems, Hernán, don’t let her trick you. Fernanda, you remember my son.”

She did. The resemblance was so striking that she’d thought more than once that it must be painful for Lalo to look upon Hernán; his rugged handsome features and effortless bearing.

Perhaps all parents felt this way about their offspring. Or perhaps there was no painful nostalgia for Lalo. Maybe that’s what you were meant to do as a parent? Grow old so the price of living right and wrong lay only half-hidden in the creases and folds of your face, there for your child to see and learn from.

“Hernán, ¿cómo estás?” As she took her seat, she tried to look at him directly without resting her gaze on his earlobe or chin. There was no telling how much he knew. But Lalo was boastful about most things in life; his mistakes as well as his pleasures and success were hard-won, he said. Fuck, no, there was no merit to modesty, discretion. Not for our people, he said. It was a crime to keep quiet, he said. How she ever trusted Lalo’s prudence she would never know. They were both supposed to have had something to lose. And he’d giving up losing decades before Fernanda met him. But she wore her wedding band and even before she found a space in which to drop her husband’s name and wellbeing into the conversation, she felt a recognition of something like compassion in Hernán’s quiet greeting and steady eyes.

“So, I was amused when news of Marques’s hospitalization for urinary tract infections made headlines,” Hernán said as they looked over the drink menu. “I mean, lung infection was one thing, but to report on the poor man’s UTI ... just seemed crass.”

Fernanda couldn't reel in her chuckle.

"Yeah...I just heard myself," Hernán said sheeplessly.

"Gabo's people did good by him keeping him out of public record the past few years," Lalo said while he used his glove-hand to make his way down the list of old fashioned, manhattans, tom collins. Seeing Lalo struggle to command his thumb, Fernanda wondered if he had been thinking of the first time they come together at Gabo's.

Lalo and Gabo held court playing chess all night that summer in Mexico City, surrounded by all the Mexican and international literary who'd managed to score an invitation to the great Maestro's home after he'd attended Lalo's reading at the UNAM. Fernanda was on a journalism internship in town and had snuck into the celebrated author's home with the twin daughters of her boss, who taught at the university.

She remembered the zealous devotion of all those young writers crawling around the place. When not watching Gabo's chest rise with every breath as he stared down the board, they would take turns casually or obnoxiously dropping publications at the first opportunity. She did notice that those with publications in the most obscure of journals were as congratulated with as many enthusiastic toasts and back pattings as those who broke through the giants of the East Coast. Bread was bread and all that. And better than anything online. And in the course of the long, charmed night, the young writers found many such opportunities, walking the perimeters of the rooms of Gabo's library, waiting lines for the various bathrooms, and around the generous buffets laid out in the courtyard under the heavy canopies of jacarandas, naranjos, and higueras.

It was a beautiful evening, one she could not bring herself to regret even after all the rest happened.

A month later, Lalo, with whom she never even exchanged a word that night, would go on to sustain the injury that left him with a permanent limp -- involving a house burning and most of the right side of his body falling under the wheels of his lover's moving jeep.

"Carlos," Lalo called for the server, "my gimp self is at it again," pointing to the water freshly spilled. Fernanda imagined the displeasure of whoever was in charge of maintaining the establishment's decor. A water mark on mahogany sat slight but expansive, almost invisible in the right light yet permanent unless delicate and precise steps were taken to refinish it. Perhaps they would simply rotate it to the back of the dining room. Or the tables were never left uncovered. Lalo'd had no small number of accidents, self-made and not, even before he became Fernanda's biggest one.

## PROLOGUE

Prólogo  
By Jaime Sabines

Estamos haciendo un libro,  
Testimonio de lo que no decimos.  
Reunimos nuestro tiempo, nuestros  
dolores,  
Nuestros ojos, las manos que tuvimos,  
Los corazones que ensayamos;  
Nos traemos al libro,  
Y quedamos, no obstante,  
Más grandes y más miserables que el  
libro.  
El lamento no es el dolor.  
El canto no es el pájaro.  
El libro no soy yo, ni es mi hijo,  
Ni es la sombra de mi hijo.  
El libro es sólo el tiempo,  
Un tiempo mío entre todos mis tiempos,  
Un grano en la mazorca,  
Un pedazo de hidra.

We're making a book,  
testimony of what we do not say.  
We collect our time, our pain,  
our eyes, the hands we had,  
the hearts we rehearsed;  
we bring ourselves to the book,  
and are left, nevertheless,  
larger and more miserable than the book.  
The lament is not the sorrow.  
The song is not the bird.  
The book is not me, nor is it my son,  
nor the shadow of my son.  
The book is only the moment,  
a moment among all the others,  
a grain in the cob,  
a piece of hydra.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

An interpreter-court advocate from Chihuahua, Mexico via Houston, Texas, Paula Beltrán is an alumnus of the VONA Voices Workshop whose work has appeared in English and Spanish-language publications. While at George Mason she served as blog editor for the national feminist journal *So to Speak* and was a recipient of an Honors Award in Fiction.