


7-20-2015

# Gardens, a collection of stories

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## Recommended Citation

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Gardens,  
a Collection of Stories

by Jacob Wilbers

Canterbury Fellowship  
Santa Clara University

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The inspiration for this collection comes from my mother's family. My mother grew up with three siblings – two sisters and a brother – in urban Chicago after her parents migrated from Mexico in the 1960s. The interrelated stories here are loosely based on real-life events that occurred to this family as my mother and her siblings grew up.

I would like to thank the Santa Clara University English Department for providing me the opportunity to write these stories through their generous Canterbury Fellowship program. I owe much to my faculty advisors, Dr. Simone Billings and Dr. Cruz Medina, for the successful completion of this project, and I will always be grateful for their feedback on matters of creative writing.

Of course, my highest thanks goes to my parents and my family – for their constant encouragement, support, and love. This collection is dedicated to them.

## The Cross

During the sixteenth of his fifty-two journeys north across the river, Lázaro Blanco copied symbols, alphabetic letters, in his journal with remarkable fervor and concentration. He did not notice the rower who had stopped paddling, or the lizard with cocked head on his left, or the Indian who was doing the sign of the cross, *ad infinitum*. He was not even aware of the mosquitoes following his hand. His only distraction, and just an unconscious one, was the tide that swept against the boat and caused Lázaro to lift his pen, almost imperceptibly, away from the page at the constant count of a beating heart. Every passenger sat in astonishment of the incomprehensible attention Lázaro gave to his writing, the transcendence of which the young composer sitting on Lázaro's left would one day immortalize in his ballads, songs that would contemplate how every man and boy in the wooden boat had sweat on his face, but only the perspiration on Lázaro's was caused by something other than the heat. The passengers were certain that Lázaro was authoring a message so profound as to garner the consent of god, and Ignacio, Lázaro's ten year-old cousin on his father's side, lifted and dropped his head as he tried to decide whether to tell everyone the truly remarkable reality: Lázaro could not even read. He stayed silent though, in fear that his voice would be soundless anyway. The journey across the river took the time of twelve because the rower had allowed the boat to be carried like a dreamless flower, and it was only when the boat was finally stopped by a

shore of trees that Lázaro looked up. He closed his journal and asked, “Have we gone farther downstream or upstream?”

The travelers remained awestruck (the Indian had been moved enough to crawl on his knees in pilgrimage), and they stayed well behind Lázaro for the first quarter of the day’s journey through the desert. This time was spent in whispers. One man told Ignacio that he had not seen anything so remarkable since his own father had eaten chocolate for the first time in three decades, another inquired . Each passenger shared his own prophecy for Lázaro, though none of these would come true of the boy, who was as thin as a palm leaf and not as tall. Yet many of the men would, in later life, remember crossing the river this day and wonder what happened to the boy who stabbed at his journal with such unnatural conviction. Ignacio himself would tell his wife Belinda, thirty-eight years later: “I have never seen a man as concentrated as Lázaro was on this day, thirty-eight years ago, when he copied letters he could not read as we crossed the river.”

The heat caused steam to rise from the earth, and Lázaro took that to mean the land was spiritual. Eventually, Ignacio and Osvaldo – Lázaro’s cousin on his mother’s side – joined him, and they both passed the time with crude insults.

“I can drink more than your father.”

“My testicles are bigger than your mother’s tits.”

Lázaro, the eldest at thirteen, smiled, though he never spoke himself. His mind was unsteady and nauseous like the landscape, and he was reminded of the time he tasted his father’s favorite cognac. I am vulnerable as only a woman could make me, he thought with pride. Though it was really only a girl, Eliana, who unsettled his stomach. They

walked slowly through the desert, the cousins silent after Osvaldo, provoked by a jape about his father's countless affairs, had countered with the ancient proverb, "In between scorpions and vultures, there is only poison." Lázaro thought now, in this barren solemnity, of her face, light and symmetrical, her hair that hung like a folded flag on her right side, and her lips that she kept moistened by an active tongue. He thought also of the curious voice she used with him, and of her movement, the movement of a woman, that he could only recognize after seeing her. Mostly though, he thought of her long, curling eyelashes, which opened and closed like patient gates, revealing or veiling her near black eyes, framing those eyes that stared at him from the horizon now, replenishing him with their murky and seductive pools, like water in the moonlight, safe to walk in unclothed and bare.

When only red remained in the day, the men stopped, and the boys laid their bags between three cacti. Ignacio and Osvaldo were already asleep when Lázaro took out his journal and finished copying the last symbols of the alphabet, the sounds of which he did not know. Then he considered his burgeoning love one last time and followed his cousins to sleep.

In the early afternoon of the next day, they arrived at the ranch, and they stayed there for five months, tending the cattle of an elderly rancher whose face was discolored by a remarkable amount of sunspots. It was, of course, unavoidable that the summer heat would arouse dizzy reveries of Eliana within Lázaro, which kept his focus away from the pain in his calloused hands, destined to be rough, and from the layers of skin sacrificed to the dust and sun. The cattle, perhaps adrift in their own reveries of love, were tame and simple. They made the days float by in their diffidence, so that all of the days became

one, or possibly just a single moment. It made Lázaro think of the ranch his father used to own and of his goat on that ranch, Fenómeno.

Numerous times on that sixteenth journey, when he was not pretending to brush Eliana's hair behind her ear, Lázaro remembered the last day his family spent on the old ranch. His mother had made burnt eggs and flour tortillas for breakfast, and his father had sat, with the posture of a priest, in the wooden rocking chair. His father's eyes always looked faraway in the morning, and Lázaro had not been able to tell if there was a particularly profound resignation in the gaze.

Lázaro and his father were the descendants of a patriline that had farmed for over three centuries south of the river. Years that saw many passions and defeats, but never once saw a day when the Blancos were not tied to the land. Then, on this morning that had been planned for several months, the communion was broken to nothing at all, Lázaro cursing the heavens for there not being a procession of crows to bear witness, or even a reverent shift in the winds. After breakfast, Lázaro had gone to the stream, pulling Fenómeno by a tether. He cried as he bathed the goat. "Fenómeno, remember when you used to thrash in the water? Now you are still, and we have become good friends."

By that afternoon, all of the Blancos' belongings were packed in an unpainted truck. The last of the tomato crop made the truck smell like burnt leather, something that would eventually make Lázaro's mother sick. Before the smell was trapped inside though, Lázaro's father looked at the ranch a final time, what Lázaro had been waiting for, and spat on the ground. The truck moved away, and the last memory Lázaro would have of the ranch was Fenómeno, his tether attached to an upright pole outside the barn,



eating grass indifferently as he watched Lázaro stare back at him from a small, dusty window that eventually disappeared.

“That is quite sad,” Eliana would laugh when he later told her the story. Sometimes Lázaro would laugh when he thought of it too, though sometimes he would instead fall prostrate on the ground.

She, Eliana, made the sixteenth journey endurable for Lázaro, just as she would dull the pains of the subsequent thirty-six, even as the passage became more dangerous and the work more despairing. Lázaro only needed the understanding that she existed and the possibility that he would see her again, even if she was just a mirage in the landscape as he milked the cows, even if he had only spoken to her once. Hers was the face that replayed in his mind and mingled with the desert and mountains around him, so that he came to love the land north of the river. Hers was the face of opportunity, and it buried in him the desire to stay there, above the river, where the face of the land was the same.

He had first seen her only three weeks before he crossed the river for the sixteenth time. She was a jeweler’s daughter. Her family had moved from the capital, and her father had opened a new shop on the outskirts of the town’s central plaza. If Lázaro’s mother had been ingratiated in town gossip circles, she would have heard the many rumors about why this family had come from a place of small aspirations to a place of none. She would have heard talk that the jeweler had caught his wife in an affair with a high-ranking lieutenant, or that it was the jeweler himself who had an affair with a colonel, or even that the jeweler had offended the president by giving him a pendant of a crow rather than an eagle. If Lázaro’s mother had heard such things, then perhaps she would not have sent her son to the new jewelry shop to ask the jeweler if her broken

earring could be fixed, the ruby having come detached from its gold encasing. But his mother was also new to the town and was similarly regarded with skepticism by her neighbors, and she had no reason to hesitate sending her son, him carrying the ruby and its encasing carefully in his cupped right hand like a beggar.

The shop was dark when he arrived. There were only two lights: a large, dim ceiling light at the entrance and a much smaller, but far more brilliant, lantern in the back workshop, visible through an open door. The jewelry was encased in glass which covered the entirety of the shop's four walls. Finding the place empty, Lázaro wandered around the dark anterior room. He admired the different jewels and their colors, emeralds, amethysts, and lapis lazulies. Some of the pieces glimmered for him as he passed in the dimness, piercing his eyes with lateral light and making the room feel as if it existed on the edge of a storm.

“They are alive, no?”

The jeweler's voice did not surprise Lázaro, though he had not heard him appear. He was a large, rectangular man who had the look of someone once well-built, but who had experienced time so that his stomach outpaced his chest. His face, also rectangular, had a deep crease just above his bushy eyebrows, evidence of the longevity of his vocation.

Lázaro lifted his right hand to him, “My mother has a broken earring.”

The jeweler reached under the counter and pulled out a pair of glasses, “Eliana, bring out the lantern.”

Lázaro noticed the girl then, moving into view as she grabbed the lantern from the back. She held it high, next to her face, as she walked nearer. Lázaro was sure he had

never seen anything as bright as the lantern's bulb, like a condensed sun that momentarily made the girl's body the earth itself, half in light, half in dark. But then she stepped into passed the back door, and the awing bulb reflected off the walls of jewelry, sending the entire room spinning in the radiance of refracted light, geometric blocks of color flooding into each other and dancing on every surface. Lázaro met her eyes then, amidst this paradise of color and luster, agape at her pale face, her dark brown hair, her scarlet lips, all her features mystically in concert with the weightless glow. Instinctively, Lázaro closed tight his outstretched hand, the sight of her making it necessary to protect something within himself. He did not feel the gold earring bite his skin. He only noticed the wound when he handed the jeweler the two pieces, seeing them smeared in his blood. The jeweler said the repair would take five days, and Lázaro rushed outside, embarrassed, blood falling between his fingers. Yet he could only think of that beautiful face shrouded in wondrous light. That's how he would always remember her face, even after their fights amidst the song of tortilla pans, even when she told him to never come back— a face illuminated by the dancing of a thousand jewels.

When summer moved into fall, Lázaro and his cousins agreed to return home. The colder nights were pushing many men south, and the cousins joined a group whose individuals were united only in how they never turned their faces away from the direction of their respective homes.

“I see now why the geese do not need maps,” Osvaldo said.

To Lázaro, the path south felt very familiar to that going north, resembling it so closely that he wondered, late that night, if he and his cousins were falling asleep between the same three cacti that had surrounded them just over one hundred fifty days

before. Lázaro had time to wonder about such things because he never fell asleep that night, knowing that he would meet Eliana for the third time the next day. His dreams were the same as they had been when the journey began, but now they were aggravated by an anticipation that made him restless and caused his hands to shiver, creating mirror dust storms on opposite sides of his waist, while he struggled not to convince himself that Eliana, a girl from the capital, had fallen for a schoolboy in his absence, one who could write her letters even though she, like Lázaro himself, could not read. He saw this brown-haired, faceless schoolboy reading to her at the park, beneath the same stone columns where Lázaro's own aspirations of love were fulfilled, Eliana sitting there, oblivious to the relative impurity of the faceless boy's oaths compared to his own.

To calm himself, Lázaro affectionately remembered his fifth journey across the river, and the man who gave him his journal, a fated encounter that first enlightened Lázaro to the promises of letter-writing. After noticing that Lázaro had watched him write in the journal for many minutes, the man leaned over and said, in an almost inaudible whisper, "My past lovers lived in the pages that once laid here, but now I must leave them to rest forever only in my heart. Take these last sheets and make your own future love affairs unending." The man left to go farther north the next day, and Lázaro never got to ask him what he meant by these words. He would not think of them again until the day he saw Eliana, on the afternoon when he retrieved the journal from beneath his bed and swept the dust off with a bandaged hand.

Now, shivering in the night, he decided he would devote a year to finding the perfect words to say, and his letter would be the promise of their eternity. And she would learn to read from that profound letter alone, him showing her how the individual

symbols worked together so that, in the even more distant future, they could exchange them in case they ever had to be apart.

The three boys crossed the river in the midafternoon of the next day. They anxiously moved through the town that awaited them on the other side, one that's dreams had faded alongside the storefront signs and the shirts of hungover men who slept against them. They took the day's last rusting silver bus, the only one that went between the river town and their own smaller home. During the trip, Lázaro said all the prayers he could remember and even wished he had brought a rosary, even though his prayers were not directed at any specific god. The most desperate ones never are, and they lifted instead like hollow cannonballs toward the sky and at any wakeful deity compelled by the winds to avail himself to human pleas. The prayers brought Lázaro, exhausted, to a sweaty sleep.

When his cousin shook his arm to wake him, he felt a slight shock recognizing that his town looked the same as it had five months earlier when he left, caught as it always would be between different periods in history. The cars and trucks moved through the dirt roads of the plaza, and the cobblestone and brick shops were bordered on all sides by unhurried rainwater standing in the street gutters. Lázaro felt that everything, except for the fruits sitting outside the market, had been dipped in the palest shade of brown. The only magnificent parts of the plaza, though just as pale, were the colossal church, gravely disproportionate to its surroundings with a looming bell-tower on its east-side and a gold-plated dome in its center, and the tortilla shop, enlivened by the perpetual and mechanical movement of women passing in and out of its small door. No one knew when the church

or the tortilla shop had first been built, but everyone agreed they had been built at the same time, long before people ever inhabited the area.

Lázaro told his cousins to go home without him, mystifying them with the maturity of his voice as he said, “The time since seeing my mother is not as long as other equivalent times.” He then walked, unsure of his legs, to the jewelry store at the end of the plaza, the only store with exterior walls painted in black. He did not hesitate when he got to the door. Inside, on seeing the raised head and furrowed brows of the jeweler, the boldness of his heart resisted any more patience but could not prevent the quaver of his voice when he asked: “Is Eliana here?” At that moment, before the jeweler could respond, Eliana showed her head behind the back door, incredulity spreading over her face when she saw the boy she had not seen in five months, and only talked to once, standing in the doorway, appearing as frightened as a rabbit and as ambitious as a man. The jeweler motioned to his daughter to be with the boy if she would like, and she did without reservation, taking him through the back workshop and outside, where there was a wooden bench with a green canopy. She told him she could not go any further. Therefore, from that day until the day he left for his thirty-ninth trip north across the river, when Lázaro asked Eliana for her hand in marriage, their relationship continued there, under the shifting shade of the canopy.

Lázaro soon discovered that his earlier worries had been unwarranted. Eliana had only been in school one year of her life, before she had moved into the town, and she was never near the schoolboys except for Sundays at mass. She did not join the other girls her age who walked in a circle around the park each evening and flirted with the boys, who also walked in a circle but from the opposite direction. Regardless, Eliana had not

forgotten Lázaro, because, as she explained on the bench, he had known the Indian sun god when they first talked, the second time they saw each other, a week after he was mesmerized by her face in the brilliance of jewels, when he had returned to pick up his mother's earring. She had asked him then if he knew anything about the Indians, and he told her he knew the name of the ancient sun god because, on his first journey across the river, his uncle had mentioned this god when they got off the boat. Lázaro had not known the word at the time and had asked his father, who laughed and told Lázaro that his uncle was only joking that they pray to such a god, a god of the sun, that they not be seen by bandits or the authorities.

“As if gods did not come and go like men,” his father had said, still laughing.

Eliana proclaimed, however, that this is what is worth knowing. Her own vast knowledge of the ancient Indian gods came from the stories her grandparents had told her for many years. They recited the myths from memory and captivated a young Eliana with their greedy and erotic life.

When Lázaro had returned to pick up his mother's earring before his sixteenth journey north, the only thing he found appropriate to ask her, after a week of contemplating all sorts of questions, poems, incantations, and, in a feverish climax, an immediate proposal, was: “Are you in school?”

She replied, “No,” and paused before concluding, “But I know history, so there is nothing else to learn.”

Her father grinned proudly under his bright, burning lamp. Eliana did not attend school in town because her parents did not think it was necessary for a girl, and because they were quite sure the town school was less edifying than the ones in the capital, where

Eliana had lived her first eleven years, before she and her family moved because the noise of the city made it impossible for her mother to sleep.

As Lázaro held his mother's repaired ruby earring, Eliana explained this and then asked Lázaro if he knew anything about Indian myths. He told her the one god he could name because of his uncle, and she told him much more about that god than he ever could have imagined there being, details he would forget but that would return to him later in life. Eventually, he felt the urgent need to leave her so as not to seem desperate for companionship or insincere in his attention, but he left telling her in earnest, "I'll come back to learn all there is to know."

And on the day that promise was at least half-fulfilled, after learning she had remembered him, under the canopy, he felt obligated to explain his absence. He told her, his chest pushing forward, he had gone north of the river to tend the cattle of a rancher for more than two dollars a day. In his tenseness though, the narration quickly devolved into an explanation of his entire being, including the detail that his father was a failed rancher who had become a terrible drunk. He supposed this would make him seem heroic to her, but, when his tongue finally stopped moving, he had the feeling that it instead made him seem pitiable. She comforted him with a lift of her lips though.

"I thought you were in school because last time you asked me if I was."

"I am not allowed in school anymore."

"Why?"

"My father tells me it is because I am not from the town, and the other boys are the imbecile purveyors of their mother's rumors."



When he told Eliana this, she nodded, as if she had been there all the afternoons his mother had tended his cuts and bruises.

Then, after another brief silence, Eliana asked him if it was different across the river, and he told her how, for a long time, he did not understand the river's significance because the towns on both sides had the same name.

“But one is old, and one is new, and the names lie anyway.”

She laughed at the frustration in his face, and he turned to her, confused at first but then elated.

After time did not pass but simply disappeared, Eliana said that she had to leave. Lázaro stood up and asked when he could return. “Tomorrow, I suppose,” she replied with a blush. And so he returned the next day, and all the days after that until he had to take his seventeenth journey north across the river, the most difficult of all fifty-two. They talked about whatever they could: town gossip that had trickled into their homes, the musicians they liked to listen to on the weekends, and the difficulty, for each of them, of being their parents' only child. She would talk about distant history, and he would talk about the history of his family. They talked about the revolutionaries their families had sided with. She told him the meaning behind her favorite pieces of jewelry in the shop, the ones with smiling skulls enshrouded in flowers, while he told her about his favorite goat at his former home, Fenómeno. She told him how much she missed her grandparents and their endless stories, because they had stayed in the capital, and he told her about his paternal grandfather, a wealthy rancher who had disinherited Lázaro's father because he had disobeyed and married a poor, dark-skinned woman, Lázaro's mother.

She admired his tenacity, his dreams. He admired her fearlessness, the way she flirted with death when she talked, as if it was not even there. They soon began to rely on each other. Before his seventeenth journey, three months after his sixteenth, he told her, glassy eyes defying his deepened voice, "I am sorry. I hoped to learn the alphabet so I could write to you. But I have not." Without hesitating, she gave him a kiss on the cheek and answered with the most heartfelt words she could think of, "I will wait then."

The following years were a haphazard affair between the two lovers, their lives fragmented by Lázaro's journeys north. His departures were always marked with romantic pledges and assurances, and his arrivals by maddened conversation and exaggerated story-telling. Though it could be forgiven of them if they forgot, they were both growing older in all manners of life. The effect, however, was greater in him. He watched her grow into a womanly beauty that he felt surpassed even her girlish one, but, being still a boy and thus less attune to the mingling of flesh and spirit, he did not see the feminine anxiety that grew in her as she fell deeper in love. Meanwhile, she watched his face become more withdrawn and mature, and she was perfectly aware that Lázaro's attitude was more resigned to certain truths. She could see the surrender in his eyes when he told her of the north, of which his dreams remained constant. "I can be a true man there," he said. She had no idea what he meant, what it was to be a true man, but she did know that he was changing into a man, for better or worse, right in front of her.

"It is two worlds," he said. "And where my life has promise will never be where I can call home." She wanted to tell him that the Indians believed there was only one world, but she knew this would only arouse his mocking.

There was nothing she could have done to prevent his particular hardening. If she had pleaded with him not to cross the river, it would not have worked. And his coarseness grew, like weeds in his soul, from the river itself. It divided him, he told her, capable and inferior, renewed in his dreams and affirmed in his desperation, fully alive and yet an oft unwelcomed stranger.

Lázaro's sullen hardness was heightened by the twenty-sixth journey across the river. He and five of his cousins, including Ignacio and Osvaldo, crossed the river without a boat, arms connected as they waded through the current. They had all done this before, but this time Osvaldo misplaced his foot while walking on the riverbed's unpredictable surface, and his arm became separated from his younger brother Eduarte's. Lázaro heard the wind talking in Latin, like the priests, as he watched his cousin flow away, his hands dancing wildly until they melted into the horizon forever. Lázaro would never remember how the remaining six managed to cross the river, how their wailing did not undo their strength, but he would remember the expressions of each man on the northern shore, Eduarte pounding on the hard desert until dust covered his entire body and another cousin running alongside the river, in the direction Osvaldo had been taken, only to return bleeding everywhere from the cactus piercings. The others sat in silence, not moving until the next dawn, when they continued the journey north and stayed on that side of the river for half a year. Eduarte almost went mad thinking about his mother, and how she did not know her own son was dead. "The river just took him!" he screamed in his sleep, as he would also scream when he was finally reunited with her.

On one of their first conversations under the canopy, Eliana told Lázaro about the Indian conception of eternity. She told him the Indians thought death was strewn with

obstacles, the first of which, necessary to overcome to find infinite life, was a river of blood. When he returned from this twenty-sixth journey, he told her, “One day, I will take you with me, and, like dying, we will cross the river, and we will never come back.” They were romantic words, and they were true words, but most of all they were words that proved, and would prove again, to Lázaro that time is only cyclical.

Throughout these difficult years, when the love between Lázaro and Eliana was constant but interrupted, like two pairs of arms reaching toward each other through the vertical spaces of a fence, Lázaro managed to fulfill the vow invoked during his sixteenth journey – he took lessons to read and write. On many days he was in the town, he visited a school teacher in the evening. The teacher, the only one who sympathized with his rare curiosity and deferred education, would write his favorite poetry passages on a slate, and Lázaro would try to read them, memorize them, and then rewrite them. It was not the most efficient way to learn, but Lázaro was satisfied knowing that he would forever write with cadence and intensity. When the teacher asked why he was so keen on learning to write, Lázaro responded that he thought it would make him a better lover. The teacher considered this briefly and then assured him that it would.

Lázaro kept his lessons secret from Eliana so that he could surprise her when he was ready. This was not difficult because Eliana’s father was losing his eyesight and needed Eliana to help more around the shop, which itself was failing because no one in the town had enough money to buy jewels. The family had enough saved from the capital to survive though, and Eliana’s mother enjoyed the quiet nights, so the three of them stayed. Often though, Eliana’s eyes glazed over whenever she mentioned her father and his sacrifices, his frustration, and sometimes she could not stop herself from crying. In

these times, Lázaro would put her face against his cheek so that he could share in her tears.

When Lázaro was preparing to leave for his thirty-ninth journey north, it was not out of empathy but necessity that he asked Eliana to marry him. Under the canopy, he gave her a letter, the first he ever wrote without his teacher's help. Eliana still could not read though, so he dictated it aloud to her as she held the worn paper.

“Eliana, you've waited long enough. Marry me.”

The first thing Lázaro learned about growing up is that age does not always give one time to write long letters, but that love needs few words. She kissed him for several seconds and folded up the paper. He would never see it again, but she would never lose it. When Lázaro returned from that thirty-ninth trip, they planned the wedding. She would have to wait, at her father's demand, until her eighteenth birthday to marry. In the intervening two-year engagement period this required, Lázaro continued taking journeys across the river, and he grew more anxious in his desire to live in the north, the only place he felt he could capably form a family. He did not know how to achieve this, however, until Ignacio provided the critical guidance when he told him, “Do what is necessary and lie.”

Lázaro's parents did not attend his wedding, which took place when he returned from his forty-fifth journey. Lázaro told them that Eliana was from the city, and they looked down on her the way the townspeople looked down on them. Lázaro was not in the least dissuaded by his parent's absence though, and the wedding went on without them in the gold-domed church. Eliana wore a white, satin dress with a train that fit perfectly between the church entryway and the altar. When Lázaro took back her veil, he

found her face covered in crystalline powder, an Indian custom, and, for the second time, her face danced in the lights. The few people in the church clapped when the marriage was made official, which seemed now a mere formality to a future life together. If anything, they were disappointed when they walked out of the church, feeling that nothing much had changed in their lives. But Lázaro told her, pointing to the right of the setting sun, that everything would soon be better.

When he woke up at her side the next morning, he kissed the back of her neck before taking the train to the nearest city. There, Lázaro had his first meeting with the consulate official, a man who had a talent for smiling at people he did not care for even slightly. Their initial discussion was brief, Lázaro telling the tall, mustached official what he desired, the official responding that it would be impossible in Lázaro's lifetime, Lázaro saying he knew there was a price, and the official leaning forward over his polished desk to inquire, "Do you have the means to pay this tricky cost?"

With that single conversation, Lázaro was able to make what should have taken a lifetime occur in a matter of years. Lázaro was penniless when he returned from his fifty-first journey, three years later, each cent he achieved spent on accomplishing the necessary lies. The lovers were surviving solely on Eliana's dowry, but it was drying up like much of the town, including the jewelry shop.

Thus, there was much relief for Lázaro when he returned from the consulate a few days later, holding two slips of paper that he would grip tightly until the fifty-second journey was completed. He showed Eliana the papers when he returned home, and it is likely their respective blank faces masked disparate reactions. They each found solidarity in the other's, however, and embraced madly.

Until the day they left for that fifty-second journey, his last and her first, his eyes would stay fixed on a general point in the distance, causing much clumsiness in his steps. Eliana, as was her nature, remained wary, not least because of his faith. She asked him where they would go and what they would do. He would respond with assuring vagueness, convincing her each time with a final phrase, “Now we will never have to be apart.” But she remained concerned about when they would return home, a question that perturbed Lázaro.

“To what?” he would ask her.

“To family,” she would say.

“You, most of all, should know that even gods are smart enough not to return here.”

Even these conversations could not aggravate Lázaro for long though, and he abided Eliana’s desires to spend their last days south of the river traveling their own country. They visited the capital, and Eliana was able to see her aging grandparents a final time, shaking as she left them because her grandmother passed down her most prized possession: a pair of gold earrings depicting the circular Indian calendar. A couple days later, Lázaro and Eliana visited Lázaro’s old family ranch, for little reason more than Eliana’s belief that Lázaro should do for himself what she had just done for herself. He was happy to find the barn and house standing. They walked around the land for a while, Lázaro not telling his wife that he hoped to see Fenómeno one last time. They never found the goat though, and Lázaro surrendered to the likelihood that Fenómeno was dead.

Two days later, the husband and wife boarded the bus that took them across the bridge and over the river. They each took a single suitcase filled with their most necessary belongings, and, though neither knew it, Eliana also carried her first daughter. The bus crossed the bridge without giving Lázaro the time to have solitude with the memories, or the opportunity to look down the river as it pointed at the horizon and acknowledge the naturalness that had been stolen from it. As the bus sped forward though, he did consider, as did his wife, everything left behind, how again the earth was uncaring in its farewell, as if Lázaro had been the betrayer. He thought about his family, his drunkard father and bitter mother who still refused to allow Eliana in her home. He thought about his first journey north across the river, now eight years past, when his father was still noble enough to instruct Lázaro on the least strenuous way to pick fruit off the branches. He thought about the several journeys when authorities had arrested him and sent him southbound over this same bridge, only for him to cross north again the next day. He thought about all the journeys, most of them becoming one single event, like the days within them.

Yet a few, a precious few that held the entire continuum of bliss and anguish, would always stand out among the fifty-two. He would remember this last journey, the least arduous and most deceitful of them all, with the known eagerness of a man emerging into an untraveled world. He would remember the twenty-sixth journey, the fateful midsection, and reconcile himself to the decisions of modern gods.

But it was the sixteenth journey Lázaro would remember more often than any other. Because it was then, amidst the tortures of a lifelong affliction that was acutest in



youth, that Lázaro first began to dream, and he felt dreams could not be purer than those blossoming from love. So he believed in them too.

## Gardens

Juanita was born, her father told her, underneath a bounty of oranges.

“Imagine,” he said to her, “rows of the roundest oranges you’d ever seen, perfect spheres dangling from bent limbs, sweating out juice beneath the midday sun. And imagine your mother, her belly swollen, picking them off the branches, inspecting each one like she still does at the market.”

Then, standing there in the gray kitchen and telling this story, Juanita’s father smiled at his wife, who was resting her hips against the rusted silver sink. Juanita sat between them, eager-eyed, at the off-balance table where she had to be careful so as not to disturb the glass vase and the pink and yellow tulips inside, resting in water, briefly alive in the windowless kitchen with its single light bulb, hanging over the table and the tulips, offering light like it were dying breaths. “I’d told your mother to stop working weeks earlier,” Juanita’s father continued, “but she never listened. Then it happened, there in the fields, with orange trees streaking into the distance either way. Still clutching the last orange she had picked, your mother bent slowly to the ground, lying herself on a blanket of wet leaves. I’ll never forget her eyes as they passed over me, the terror in them. Soon, you came into the world.

“And by this time, a group of people – other workers – had crowded around us, murmuring about your light skin and dark black hair. They’d never seen a baby with so much hair already, clumps of it sticking to your soft skull like seaweed. And when your mother finally had you in her arms, well, by then, the only reminder of her terror was the

streams of pulp that covered her arm, from the orange she had crushed while giving birth to you.”

When her father told this story, Juanita was eight years old, and she knew little of her early life as a sojourner through grape orchards and orange groves. The abundance of hair she began life with now reached her waist, wavy, brown hair only outstripped in length by her dresses, purple, blue, or white depending on the day, the only outfits Juanita was willing to wear. Her skin, too, maintained its paleness, despite how she nursed and first crawled with the sun on top of her, the paleness a blessing her mother believed. Her face was unremarkable, the flesh soft and unformed, her eyes the same brown as her hair, the lips almost uncolored. Juanita, her parents, and her younger sister Adelina, who was five and spoke only in whispers, lived in one, white-walled and bare room of a cracked-concrete apartment complex in Chicago. They shared a kitchen and a bathroom with two other families, so that the three-bedroom apartment housed eleven people – one family from Jalisco, another from Puebla, and Juanita’s family, the Blancos, from Sabinas Hidalgo, the small town where it only rained when it flooded. The Blancos’ room was furnished with a bed and, to its left, an oak nightstand and a tall, golden-stemmed lamp. The floor had thin, blue carpeting with holes where dogs had bitten through, and there was also an unsteady fan, hanging from the ceiling, which wobbled and made it difficult for anyone to sleep on summer nights. Juanita’s parents slept in the bed, while Juanita and Adelina slept as best they could with blankets and pillows, threads unraveling, on the floor, Juanita beneath the large lampshade and Adelina on the opposite side, below a single window pane that looked out onto their street and did nothing to block nocturnal noises or autumn winds. Juanita and her parents, accustomed by now to open fields and

unbounded sunsets, felt restricted. Yet, for whatever such brief moments are worth, they were also pleased with the apartment and their single room. Juanita's father carried a renewed vigor, having found a packaging job with a downtown toy manufacturer, and Juanita's homesick mother was contented that the family had settled, if not in the country she knew, then at least among people who spoke the same language and attended Mass on Sunday mornings.

Juanita spent those early apartment days helping her mother, attending to daily chores, the laundry, the dishwashing, and the bed making, and amusing her mild-mannered sister. She took from her mother the ability to remain busy in the unvaried days, washing clean dishes to pop the soap bubbles that formed on her hands, or putting different outfits on Adelina, mismatching her socks and shoes, just so she could laugh, "How ridiculous you look, sister!" Occasionally, during the cold days, Juanita and Adelina would bundle themselves up in their blankets, like caterpillars in cocoons, and listen to their mother, a woman who would always despise winters, tell them stories, stories once told to her in much the same way, about ancient lovers who became mountains or forgone gods who once appeared as serpents

Even more rarely, Juanita's mother would take Juanita on small trips outside the apartment, to the laundromat or, if she was lucky, to the bakery on their street, while Adelina, too prone to crying at the sight of strangers, would stay at the apartment under the care of another Mexican woman. Juanita prized these trips, feeling that they opened her up to the limits of the world, to a multiplicity of personalities, the beggars and the middle-aged men who drove fancy automobiles, slowly so everyone could see, and to an

existence of curiosity that felt playful and light even as her arms were weighed down by unclean garments, colorful fruits, and boxes of bread.

It was on one of these trips, a summertime walk to wash bed sheets, that Juanita met Rosa, a lithe, dark-skinned girl who always wore a purple headband in her hair. Rosa had restless hands and movements that showed clearly how much of her early life had been spent laughing. This much was obvious when Juanita saw her in the laundromat, lying on a bench and resting her head in her mother's lap, staring at a washing machine in front of her, a finger outstretched, following the clothes that rotated and giggling to herself. It was also in this moment that Juanita was drawn to Rosa's most spectacular feature, the one that made her loveliness singular, a group of eight beauty marks beneath her left eye. They made the girl striking, in the unusual way that comes from having two distinctive sides to one face, a demonstration of the exquisiteness in asymmetry.

The beauty marks compelled Juanita to walk over to the girl. "How did you get those brown dots?"

Rosa, still resting her head on her mother's red polka-dot skirt, pointed to her own face, "These? I've always had these. I don't know where they came from."

"I like them," Juanita said.

Rosa's mother laughed until tears streamed down her face. To Juanita's mother, she said, "Your daughter knows beauty well. That will take her far."

The girls became friends. Rosa lived across the street, in an identical, concrete apartment building with black metal doors and a three-step staircase leading in, and her mother walked her across the street every Saturday and Sunday to spend afternoons with Juanita. Together, the girls developed a routine of activities – acting as waitresses for a

Mexican diner, raising Adelina as if she was their own daughter, playing Juanita's mother's card games which involved devils and drunks and mermaids and frogs (they made up the rules) – or, on sunny afternoons when Juanita's mother went to the small, dirt yard behind the apartment to tan, they would forage the sidewalks for grasshoppers and snails, trapping them in their hands. Rosa was only four months older than Juanita, but Juanita spent their time together looking to Rosa as if she held ripe knowledge, as if each of her words was the unlocking of a secret.

“Who is better, the soldier or the cowboy?” Juanita asked one day as they played at her mother's cards.

Rosa thought for a moment. “The cowboy. But the musician is better than both.”

“Why?”

“Because he is dressed the best, and he can make people dance.”

Juanita had never danced before, and she blushed. “I've only seen my parents dancing, when my father comes home late at night. They never have music though.”

“It's better with music,” Rosa said.

In the three months she had with Rosa, Juanita learned many things like this, what became obvious truths later in life but started with Rosa's simple understanding about how much more immense the world was than Juanita had imagined, far bigger than her crowded, single street in the city. After Rosa told her about music and dancing, Juanita asked her mother to take her to hear the man who played old rancheras every Friday afternoon. Her mother indulged the request and took Juanita to the neighborhood park, past the grocery store and the bakery and every other place Juanita had been, just beyond a half torn-down brick building that would later become a famous tortilla shop. The park

was actually just a rectangular plot of grass, with a swing-set and plastic slide in the middle, but a small group of people gathered to watch the performance of the gray-mustached man with worn dress clothes and a sagging bow tie. The singer, older and fatter, looked nothing like the musician in the card game, but it gave his singing an added layer of despair, one that Juanita thought fit the love songs he sang with his eyes closed. Slowly, the people began to dance. Most of the audience was just as old as the band members themselves, and their movements were gentle and measured, leisurely pirouetting to the singer's deep, longing voice and the broken guitar's sorrowful chords.

"This reminds me of home," Juanita's mother said, making Juanita notice how young her mother looked, her face aglow then as she smiled. "Except we had a much better park and a much more open sky."

"I want to dance like them," Juanita said, pointing to an elderly couple, a man with wrinkles like parallel rivulets and a thin woman whose black dress hung loosely around her shoulders. The man balanced on the back of his feet, appearing as if he were trying to sit down, and their dancing seemed as if it were a mutual agreement that one party would lead so long as the other held him up, and, besides, they seemed to be saying with their patient steps, silently laughing at the fleeter-footed dancers, dancing is foremost in the eyes.

"Yes, they dance very sweetly," Juanita's mother said.

The next weekend, Juanita and Rosa spent hours dancing when they saw each other, though to Rosa's disappointment they had no music. Juanita practiced the steps she had learned from watching the concert in the park, and she imagined the old singer and his voice in her head, causing Rosa, at one point, to become exasperated with how slow

Juanita moved. Dancing became the girls' favorite activity, one that occupied and exhausted them every day Rosa visited. And each time, they would eventually have to stop and rest in the Blancos' single room before Rosa's mother came to pick up her daughter. In these moments, Juanita was amazed by the vigor with which Rosa could whisper, the liveliness in her even when she was lying on her back with her eyes closed.

With Rosa like this, her chest still heaving, at the end of the last day that Rosa and Juanita were together, Rosa asked without opening her eyes, "Why do you always sit under this lamp?"

"This is where I sleep," Juanita said.

Rosa lifted herself onto her left elbow, and looked at her right thumb as it twirled her brown hair. "I sleep on the floor too. Sometimes my mother lets me take naps with her on the bed though, when her stomach hurts her."

"Why does her stomach hurt?" Juanita asked.

"She says she has an illness all women have. It follows the moon."

"Do I have it?"

"Not yet, but you will one day. I will too."

When Rosa's mother came to take her daughter home that afternoon, Rosa and Juanita embraced, leaving their feet planted but leaning their torsos toward each other and stretching their arms around the other's waist. On none of her visits did Rosa say goodbye. She always parted as if her thoughts were ahead of her, past Juanita and toward the next curiosity, and Juanita would always remember how Rosa never seemed to think saying goodbye was necessary, leaving Juanita to suffer wondering whether this was the right or wrong way to live.



The final time Juanita saw Rosa was after Juanita and her mother visited the bakery to buy desserts and breads. The bakery was just over a block away, and Juanita loved taking deep breaths there, inhaling the scent of yeast and sugar. That day, they bought eight boxes of bolillos, and Juanita carried three of them, using her nose to balance the top box, and Juanita's mother had to direct her because she could not see the people who walked in the opposite direction on the sidewalk. This prevented Juanita from seeing, at first, what her mother saw as they neared their own apartment, which was a police car, its siren lights gleaming and throwing a silent, rotating spotlight, red and blue, on the street and the apartment building across from Juanita's.

Juanita only learned of the chaos just beyond her when her mother said Rosa's name, with urgency, and dropped her five boxes of bolillos on the sidewalk. Juanita did the same with her boxes, with caution so the top box remained steady. And by the time she looked up, she found her mother already halfway across the street, her floral skirt and brown hair sailed by the wind, the police car on the opposite side, and, just beyond it, Rosa holding the policeman's hand, looking tiny next to him, an imposing figure in his uniform but uncommonly gentle in the way his hand held hers. Juanita's first thought was that Rosa looked peaceful, standing there and not moving.

The policeman took a step forward, and then Juanita noticed Rosa's mother was there too, standing at the top of the three-step staircase at the entryway, her right hand laced around its guardrail, her left gripping a string of beads. From across the street, Juanita could not hear the policeman as he spoke, but the words were there in his gestures and in Rosa's mother's face as she took in the policeman's news, her face falling with the force of all the birds, the clouds, and the sky. Her body fell also, collapsing into a heap of

skirts at the top of the staircase, where it then began shuddering and wailing against the afternoon. The policeman went to the convulsing woman and tried to calm her with his hands, leaving Rosa behind him, alone as she watched her mother spasm violently against the concrete, making a terrible sound and causing Juanita's mother to yell out a single syllable that got lost in the wind. The policeman's hands were useless, and when the body finally stopped its shaking and clamoring, it did so full in its own convictions.

There was a moment then of complete stillness, not just Rosa but also the policeman, stunned, his hat fallen to the ground in the sudden madness, holding Rosa's mother's limp head. Juanita had the odd compulsion then to go to her, to Rosa, to walk unhurried across the street, past her own mother and the police car, and, once there, to take Rosa's hand and to lead her in a dance, also unhurried, so that Rosa might ignore everything that was happening around her, of which Juanita would not understand for many years, but which Juanita realized now was more tragic than song.

This did not occur though. Because out of the stillness and silence came Juanita's mother, running back and lifting Juanita into her arms, taking her to their own apartment building and leaving the eight boxes of bolillos on the sidewalk. Juanita's mother, shivering, opened the black metal door and stepped inside, while Juanita still looked over her shoulder at Rosa, who finally turned her head, so that Juanita could be astonished one final time by Rosa's eight beauty marks, a constellation.

Inside the apartment, Juanita's mother ran up the stairs, not breathing until she had both Juanita and Adelina in her arms, and then her breaths came with a stream of tears, which made Adelina cry too, a screaming cry that lasted until wet streaks were on all three of their faces. They stayed there, crying against each other so that it was

impossible to tell the origin of each tear, for many minutes before Juanita was able to whisper, “Mamá, what happened?” There was no answer Juanita’s mother could give however, nothing to explain what had happened to Rosa, something so wicked that it caused her own mother to forsake life in a single instant, standing as she had been on the staircase with her rosary, the news depraved enough to stop a heart, so that the only thing left to curse the three boys who did this was her body itself, which left the world howling, and nothing to ease Juanita’s fears that Rosa’s mother, or maybe it was Rosa, had been stricken terribly by the sickness that all women got, and there was also nothing to explain to Juanita what would happen next, why Juanita’s mother would not replace the tulips when they died on the kitchen table. So Juanita’s mother only pulled Juanita closer to her and continued to cry, thinking how inhospitable a world it was to bring a daughter.

Rosa disappeared from everything except memory, and eventually Juanita, her sister, and her parents left that apartment too. They did not move far, into a third-story loft only a few blocks away. Juanita and Adelina were surprised to find that they both had their own room and, more so, that there was a bed in each. For those initial months though, before the third daughter arrived and brought, by no fault of her own, the havoc of inebriation and longing with her, Juanita was unable to sleep in hers. Each night, she could only find peace by descending and laying her back on the hard floor.

## Holidays

All the children were anxiously waiting in the front lobby of the church. The Christmas gifts were piled on the floor there, right in front of a Virgen de Guadalupe mural painted on the plaster walls. The slight tilt of the Virgen's youthful face was highlighted by the soft blue of her gown and the light yellows and oranges that filled the horizon behind her, making it seem as if the Virgen herself was providing the presents with her outstretched, palms up, hands. The church was small, buried in the urban landscape of Chicago with only a concrete-tiled, pyramidal roof boasting a cross to help it stand out against the taquerias, markets, and Mexican clothing shops. Everything about the neighborhood seemed faded at dusk, as if the lights, the walls, and the sky itself were endlessly struggling to breathe through a layer of dust.

Inside, Adelina was becoming impatient, and she had to bite her left forefinger to control the nervous excitement. While the other children moved and jumped around with each other, or gawked at the wrapping paper of the gifts they would pick, she just stood in the middle of things quietly, her legs shaking slightly as she waited for someone to make an announcement.

In a couple weeks, all the children would receive their First Communion rites, but, for now, a Christmas present was the true reward of the interminable practice, the ceaseless lessons on straight-line walking and safe candle-holding.

Adelina dreamed of having a doll, hopefully one with brown hair like hers, that she could whisper to when her mother yelled at her, or embrace when her father returned

home in the middle of the night. A doll she could treat right and love and be less lonely with.

She forced herself not to look at the lustrous wrapping paper that reflected spectacularly off the dim lights of the lobby. The sight only made her stomach sink deeper and her head more weary in wait.

Instead, she watched the advisors huddled by the holy water in the church's entryway, feeling slightly faint and sweaty until, at last, two of the elder woman stepped away and walked to the front of the group. The taller woman clapped her hands three times to calm the high-pitched conversations of the desperate children, speaking in an accented English for the few black and Polish children.

“Children, we will begin calling names now to open gifts. When your name is called, come up and take one present. Only one. Understood?” All the children nodded vigorously. The shorter woman stepped forward and, from a large, black marble pouch, began drawing little strips of paper.

“George Vazquez, Rafael Herrera, Eva Morales...”

Adelina's eyes were wide and unblinking, her deep, dark brown pupils imploring the woman to call her name quickly, to end this formidable wait that felt like a widening hole in her chest and trapped her breath. Her pale skin, a sign of her fiery, ancestral Spanish blood, was dotted with tiny prickles, and she shivered repeatedly despite the warmth of the room.

The children whose names had been called rushed to the stack of gifts, boys picking from the right and girls from the left. After a brief process of evaluation, each

grabbed a present, ran to a less crowded spot in the room, and then tore at the wrapping paper with their small, pleading hands.

“...Patti Suarez, Memo Castillo, Daniel Johnson...”

Adelina began turning her hips with each name called, her white dress, the one she had worn to every First Communion meeting, slightly sashaying as hope rose and fell, names came and went.

*They aren't going to call my name. They forgot my name,* she thought as the process wore on. Many of the children had opened their gifts, and the girls were admiring their boxed dolls. Adelina saw the clean packaging of Barbies and American Girl Dolls, each adorned with a beautiful outfit and matching accessories. Her chin began to quiver. The silence was overtaken again as the children exuberantly compared their toys, tightening them to their chests.

The few who hadn't yet been called started looking at each other desperately, each pair of eyes saying, *They will call me, too, right?*

“...Lucas Barrientos, Ana Quintana, Adelina Blanco...”

Adelina gulped. *Me?* She looked up to the name-caller, who was searching the crowd to see if anyone was stepping forward. *Me!* Adelina moved towards the presents silently and deliberately, her pace defying the excitement that flooded her small frame and seemed to lift her somewhere, as if she was taking in new air.

She scanned the presents closely and finally settled on one set to the back, one with bright yellow packaging and a handsome white bow. As she picked it up, she admired the tight wrapping, something, it seemed to her eager eyes, made with care. Alone, she walked to an empty corner of the room and began to slowly pull the ribbon

and unravel the bow. She slid her hands under the wrapping paper on the sides of the gift to undo the tape, keeping the paper in tact as much as she could. At last, taking a small breath, she pulled out the white box that rested within.

When she moved through the tissue paper though, her heart took a brief flutter forward before collapsing intensely to some bottomless internal place, descending like a wounded butterfly. Her body became paralyzed as all her hopes fled away to some distant, lost place.

Tears began to well in her eyes, plastering her long, black eyelashes against the skin of her cheek. She looked back at the rest of the room, at all the children in gleeful play, at the others who were already showing off their pristine toys to their parents, and considered the unfairness of it all. Gingerly, with her own head bent, she placed her gift back in the box, before wiping away the moisture in her eyes so no one would see.

Eventually, she walked to the church's entryway, where she waited for her mother to come pick her up. Her breaths became heavy again, causing her stomach to heave in and out, and her pale face glowed with glassy-eyed emptiness. When she finally saw her mother walking towards the church, Adelina rushed out to meet her, her black dress shoes clicking against the sidewalk and her head shaking wildly.

“What happened, Adelina?”

But it was already too late. She held the white box up to her mother and began sobbing, the anger, fear, and confusion streaming out of her system furiously.

Her mother opened the package and, after a few seconds, leaned down towards her daughter. Quietly, she said, “I will buy you a doll.”

Adelina looked up, the glimmer of her tears like translucent roads on a snowy desert. “You will?”

“Yes, mija.”

A small breeze pushed against Adelina’s skin and tugged playfully at her curly hair. Eventually, her breaths became calm again and she wiped away the tears with her palms. Even then, as they began walking home, she knew that her mother would not buy her a doll, but it did not matter. At the next garbage can, she threw away the box, along with the broken, naked figurine lying within, its tan body stained with black skid marks, with a gaping hole where an eye should have been, missing its right leg.

For the rest of the way home, Adelina tried to keep up with the pace of her mother.



## The Happy Sad Clown

The first letter ever mailed to Soledad Blanco was a notification of her victory in a local art contest. The notification was sealed in a faded blue envelope that Soledad found resting on her black bed sheets when she got home from school. Her name was on the back, beneath an American flag stamp, in handwritten, cursive letters so thin she had to read them several times to feel assured the letter was sent to her. Standing in her dust-colored room, twelve year-old Soledad was filled with astonishment by the idea that someone had written to her, and also by the fact that her mother had not opened the letter first. She tried to unseal the envelope with one quick swipe of her sharp nails across the top, as she saw her mother do, and she was disappointed when she instead had to tear at the envelope, marring its perfect, rectangular shape as she pried out the paper, beige and folded five times, inside.

Soledad was still learning how to read, so she pronounced the words slowly, out loud but keeping her voice down to avoid waking her infant brother Jaime, who was asleep in the crib next to her. Her voice was tempered until she reached the middle of the page, to the words *First Place*, words that made her shriek and filled her with innocent elation and the beginnings of less pure feelings as well, among them pride. At this, her brother replied with a cry of his own. In their tiny, wood-floored room with only her bed, his crib, and a five-drawer dresser, Soledad took a step toward her brother and patted his head.

“Jaime, I won!” she said, and her brother congratulated her with his happy eyes and the cycling of his feet.

Soledad had entered the contest at the behest of her art teacher, an energetic old woman who wore green-rimmed glasses and told Soledad, “Your paintings have an unexpected maturity to them.” In the art room that looked and smelled like a cardboard box, the teacher showed her a flyer for the upcoming, local competition, telling Soledad, “If you win, your painting will be on display at city hall for a month.” Soledad had never heard of city hall but the dreamy way her teacher said it made the place seem important enough for her to enter the contest.

There were two aspects that made Soledad’s paintings stand out amongst her peers. The first was that she only painted with vibrant colors, no light shades or grays, only the most garish and lurid colors in the palette, colors that aroused the attention of janitors when they cleaned the hallways at night and parents when they hurried through the school to meet with teachers. This choice of color complemented the second peculiarity of Soledad’s art, which was that she only ever painted half of the focus of her pieces. Whether it was one of the street dogs that terrified Soledad or the machines in her uncle’s tortilla factory, Soledad’s paintings always left half, exactly half, of the depicted scene or portrait absent. For the people who looked at her work, sometimes it was obvious that only half of a given image was shown, and these pieces caused onlookers to stare at the wall next to the paintings and imagine how the other half of the split picture would look if it was presented there, and, other times, it was not clear at all that something was divided, such as when Soledad would paint a family but only depict the mother and father, leaving out the two sons, brothers, that trailed them closely on the sidewalk, fighting over their desserts from the bakery – so that viewers never knew that the depiction of husband and wife was actually the painting of half a family. Soledad did

not just invent the idea to do this, but it instead arrived in her midst naturally, when she discovered that she once had a twin, a sister that died in the same womb she survived.

In the case of the painting that won this contest, the fractional quality of Soledad's was apparent, because Soledad had simply drawn half a face, the face of a clown, split right down the middle, through the bridge of the nose. Soledad had gotten the inspiration for the painting when a clown had visited her class weeks earlier, arriving unannounced and pandering to the students with balloon tricks, muteness, and dancing where he bounced from one leg to the other, waving his arms, too, so that he always had three limbs in the air. Yet Soledad had been most intrigued by the clown's face, which never changed. She was alarmed and humored by the clown's unnatural smile, bigger and redder than any real smile could be (*no one could ever be that happy*, Soledad thought), and she was drawn to the blue teardrop shapes around the clown's eyes, which made it nearly impossible to locate the real human eyes beneath, human eyes she only saw when the clown handed her an orange, balloon horse, real eyes that shocked her in how they contrasted the face made of paint. This moment inspired Soledad, and one had to look very closely to see that there were two faces in her painting of half a clown's face, the clown face, with mischievous eyes and a gaping grin, and the human face beneath it, with the tightened lips of a grimace and the solemn eyes of resignation.

Unaware that her artistic cleverness stretched far beyond most of the other contest entrants, Soledad walked over to her bed, lied down where her mother had laid the envelope, and thought about how impossible a thing it seemed to have won. Alone there, closing her eyes, hearing the voices of Juanita and Adelina in the room next door, Soledad began whispering to her imaginary twin sister, Luna, about how she, the one

who had died in the womb, inspired Soledad's paintings. Three years before this moment, when Soledad was nine, her mother had told her about this sister, accidentally, when she thought Soledad was asleep despite the gunshots outside in the night. Her mother's voice did not shake but stood firm in somber wonder as she spoke to her daughter, "You had a sister Soledad, but she died inside of me. And on nights like this I don't know to who the fortune went." Her mother left the room a moment later, and Soledad opened her eyes and looked out the window. She named her sister Luna because there was a half-moon that night and because her older sister Juanita sometimes called her, Soledad, Sol.

"I know you are completing my paintings," Soledad said now to Luna, who she imagined to look like herself in every way, light skin, pointed jawline, large eyes, and remarkably thin, except that Luna's hair was long because she never had a hairdresser to cut it and Soledad's was short, cropped. "I just wish I could see them."

However Luna replied, it made Soledad get out of bed and walk cautiously to the kitchen, where her mother was washing dishes and standing on her tiptoes as she looked out the window, which was halfway open to let in the spring air. The kitchen was falling apart, with cracks and fissures on every surface, but it was kept remarkably clean so that even the cracks maintained a certain brilliance. Soledad's mother did not need to turn to know her daughter was there, and she said, "Dinner is almost ready, Soledad. Please prepare the table for us."

"Will father be here tonight?" Soledad asked.

"I'm not sure," her mother said. "I'm sure he will if he can get away from work."

Soledad nodded, considering briefly that her father had not been able to get away from work for three days now, and then she went to the bottom cabinet left of the sink

and brought out only five china plates. She carried the plates, which looked like large compasses except for how there were four flowers instead of arrows, to the wooden table at the center of the kitchen, and only when she placed the final plate did she announce:

“Mamá, I got a letter in the mail today.”

Her mother, wringing out a washcloth, turned to look at her. “Yes, I know. Who was it from?”

“It was from the art contest I entered,” Soledad said, hoping to see her mother’s eyes respond. They did not though and, if anything, it was disappointment in her mother’s voice when she asked, “What did it say?”

“It said that I won.”

The accomplishment sat in the air then, vulnerable between mother and daughter, Soledad yearning for mother to say something congratulatory, or even just to smile, anything besides what she actually did, which was turn back to her washcloth and wring it out again, saying, “That’s very nice Soledad. Please tell your sisters dinner will be ready soon.”

Soledad winced at her mother’s words, shaking, *What flower has wilted and died within you, Mamá?*

The question she asked aloud, however, as she picked silverware out of a drawer, was, “Can I go to the awards ceremony?” The letter says I get a prize.”

Her mother, with a face contorted in annoyance and near disbelief, sighed and let her shoulders fall. “No, you cannot go. There is nothing in art, no future, and I have no time for it, and neither should you.”

Soledad's mother went to the oven then, the oven groaning as it opened, and pulled out a pan of tamales, using the washcloth to avoid burning her hand when she reached in, all to mean that she had turned her back on Soledad as Soledad tried to handle what felt like an overwhelming defeat, an acknowledgement, an assurance, that she was nothing to her own mother, or at least that she would never make her mother proud, she who came when her parents wanted a boy and was now just a reminder, for always, of a daughter who had died.

Soledad spent dinner on the verge of tears, not eating or even touching her silverware, just staring blankly. Everything began to aggravate her, like the laughs shared between her two older sisters, who also seemed to share everything else, or her mother's special and singular attention to Jaime, the way she was always putting a napkin to his lips to clean up his dribble, and always with a warm smile Soledad could not remember ever receiving.

After the meal ended, all of this sent Soledad, awash in emotion, scrambling to the restroom, where she did cry, profusely, thinking that she desperately needed her twin sister, but not the one she whispered too, one that Soledad could actually hold and feel. Soledad could not see herself in the mirror of the vanity on the left side of the bathroom, across from the shower, but she was small enough to crawl under its single drawer, drawing in her knees and weeping in sadness and anger, cursing Luna, in her own innocent way, for abandoning her.

"Luna, you left me! You left me!" she shouted, her small fists pounding the dark blue tile floor. She said it over and over again, until the words changed and became a single sob of, "Where are you, Luna?"

“Sol?” A soft knock, like three quickened thumps of the heart against the ribcage, came at the door. Juanita stood there, showing a single brown eye through the gap.

“What happened, Sol?” Juanita asked, slowly walking inside and taking Soledad’s silence as an invitation to crawl beneath the vanity too, bending her back in a semi-circle to fit.

“I had the best painting, and mamá doesn’t care.” Soledad paused to swallow her grief. “I won an art contest, Juanita. They chose me.”

“You won, Sol?” Juanita’s eyes gleamed. “That’s amazing.” Juanita put her hand on her youngest sister’s shoulder, briefly, a small moment of contact which was enough.

“She won’t let me pick up my award.”

Juanita waited a moment and then responded, “You can’t listen to mamá. She’s worried about father, and she wants to be home, but she’s here, in this tiny apartment.” Both girls stared straight ahead until Juanita added, “Will you show me your painting?”

“My teacher has it at school.”

“I want to see it. Will you bring it home?”

Soledad nodded, and Juanita motioned that they should stand, Juanita then leaning over to wipe the tears off Soledad’s cheeks. “If there is ever anything you need, come to me instead of mamá.”

The sisters walked out of the bathroom, and Juanita passed her own bedroom to Soledad’s, Soledad gripping tight onto her older sister’s hand as Juanita said again how happy she was that her little sister had accomplished something so great. “I won a reading contest when I was your age,” she concluded, “and mamá never cared about that either.”

Soledad wanted to ask why it was that way, but Juanita had already moved down the hall. Soledad went into her room and considered her sister's words, grateful for them, but she also could not help but imagine the award ceremony she would miss. She pictured an elegant event, with not an empty seat in the crowd, rows of parents facing a stage with a tall wooden podium and an important looking man who wore glasses reading the list of award recipients from behind it. The last announcement, Soledad knew, would be for first prize, and she imagined herself on stage, next to the important-looking man, him saying her name and grinning, and then leaning down to pin a ribbon on her blouse, with the painting of the clown behind them, in full view of the audience, where everyone could see it but no one could realize its subtleties.

And later in that same evening, Soledad apologized to the faultless Luna in apologetic whispers. She imagined the important-looking man, behind the podium at the ceremony, asking her in front of everyone, "Why do all your paintings, like *The Happy Sad Clown*, only depict half of the image?" Soledad would have an answer ready, one that would then send the audience into vigorous applause, "They are missing half of their potential brilliance, like the world when I was born."

For the next several years, Soledad's mother never let Soledad attend any art ceremonies, and so Soledad did not soon have the chance to tell crowds about her inspiration, though it remained with her enduringly, pushing her to paint ceaselessly, at school and secretly at home, until Soledad's drawers could not fit all the papers, a point when Soledad decided to simply tape them on her walls, where they hung in layers, new pieces masking the old, the wall becoming a reverse chronology of Soledad's artistic career, her life. Even though Soledad could never claim her awards, she still sent pieces



to every art competition she could, smiling every time another letter came for her in the mail.

And it would take many more years, after she moved out of the loft, leaving at the soonest possibility, before Soledad could talk to her mother about this day she received her first letter in the mail, and by then her only curiosity was why her mother had not opened that letter first, before Soledad could have.

“I thought perhaps it was a love letter, and I know better than to possibly meddle in those youthful correspondences,” her mother said.

After this, it took a decade more before Soledad uncovered, within herself, the true reason she painted as she did, in halves, a discovery that she told a crowded auditorium that included her two sisters and her brother, the revelation that, “There can be wholeness even in fractions.”

## Footsteps

Jaime woke to the sound of footsteps and knew immediately that it was his father. The only way into the loft was up the wooden stairs, and the creaks did not disguise the heavy shifts in weight. Jaime could imagine, his eyes still shut, his father swaying, alternating railings, his legs sluggish, his face withdrawn and downturned, as if ascending toward some graceless death. From the entryway to the loft, Jaime heard more familiar sounds: the gentle echo of head resting against the door, the grasping for keys, and the sound of glass shattering against concrete thirty feet below. Jaime opened his eyes wide when the door unlocked, and he turned to his sister Soledad for assurance, hoping that she might be there and that she might hold her hand out to him, across the small space between beds in their cold, gray room. But she had already turned her back to him and the front of the house, where Jaime's mother now walked to confront her husband, with soundless steps that only her children heard, out of fear. Soledad always did this on nights when their father came home late, flattened her body against the furthest wall, as if trying to push through it, perhaps to fall and shatter like glass.

The shouting began as distant sirens do, from nothing and with the impression that it was always coming closer. It was only his mother who screamed though, in curses stolen from dead religions and the traitors that destroyed them. The tension grew as Jaime felt others in the lower floors awaken, their sleeps unraveled by the reverberating conversation between sound and silence, each response profound in its madness. Jaime closed his eyes again. In his head, he tried to imagine their faces as they were right then, just down the hall from his bed, in the living room with only a black couch and a washing

machine. He could not. He could only see the faces he knew, his mother's small-lipped, deceiving smile and his father's ceaseless grimace, the grimace that did not hide how relieved he was to have a son, even when he was punishing Jaime with his belt. In these faces Jaime knew, there was no place for these cacophonies, the sound and the silence, to exist. So Jaime's mind distorted the faces he knew until they were barely recognizable, separate beings altogether, not his parents' faces but vaguely similar to them, faces more powerful and destructive than the originals they maligned. It became so Jaime began to mistake the vulgar words for these faces. He could not hear his mother now, but the malevolent feminine face beat in his mind at the understood rhythm of speech. The unrecognizable face of his father, or what had been his father but now was something entirely else, sat completely still, releasing its crudeness through the wars being fought, with flesh and stone, in its irises. Jaime would not recognize until years later the timelessness of these vulgar faces, when he dreamed as an adult of them as the holy pair, and, in that, there rested the latent potential of being recognized as one's own progenitors too. For now though, they were so estranged that Jaime could not coalesce the similarities between the vulgar and the real, which rested in the worn furrow of the brows and the sedimented prominence of the jawline.

Sweat was settling on Jaime's forehead when he opened his eyes again. He felt relief as the darkness stole away the obscene images. The sounds did not abate though, and Jaime recognized something strange in the closeness of his mother's voice, which suddenly filtered beneath the door to his room cleanly, uninterrupted. His father had somehow made it to the kitchen. It was alarming for Jaime to hear his father's boots there, right across from his room, stepping loudly on the tile floors, since Jaime's mother

always stopped his father at the entryway, deflecting him from reaching her children or his shared bed with her, letting him grab the crowbar before leaving if he wanted, but never letting him step past the washing machine. Jaime looked again toward his sister, but she was still lying against the wall. The screaming enshrouded him, like a blanket, until it made him uncomfortably hot and feverish, so that he had to throw his sheets off and stand. He realized then that, among its other eccentricities, the argument had gone on much longer than it usually did.

Later, recounting these scenes in his head, Jaime would not remember opening the door of his room. He was sure it had not occurred by his own volition, and it made him believe that the whole incident was only a dream. Jaime would only remember what he saw through the small crease that was suddenly there in front of him, allowing him to see into the kitchen where his mother and father stood, at a distance from each other only customary to people in love or hate. They twirled around the kitchen, her on tiptoes and keeping a finger pointed at his neck, he looking down at her, anguish flooding and reddening his face. They twirled until they simply became angry caricatures cursed to face each other always, twirling, like pitiable music box ballerinas.

Nine-year old Jaime had inherited his father's thick, blackish hair, though it was hard to tell because he had adopted a military general's haircut. His face was not yet pointed, as it would be in later years when the fat became reapportioned into shape around his facial bones, and his cheeks appeared as though large walnuts weighed them down. As he watched his parents now, thinking himself alive in a dream, his face took on a seriousness not typical to his life, which he usually spent afloat in careless joy, smiling

as though it were the face's natural alignment, smiling so largely that his brown eyes almost disappeared when his face lifted.

The parents he spied, Lázaro and Eliana Blanco, had once been happy on the day they had finally received their son, on the fourth try, the day Jaime became the centerpiece of their lives and began to be afforded privileges his three older sisters never received. (Though Juanita, the eldest, made sure resentment never came of this, telling her sisters, "He has no fault for having what we did not. We must raise him not to be like our father.>"). It would have been difficult to resent young Jaime anyway, for Jaime's personality, as a boy and further on, reflected how he did not know anything but attention and care was possible, especially from his family. There was confusion, then, when he heard his sisters lashing out in secret anger toward their parents, refusing to speak with them, or when he saw his sisters crying in the dark corners of home because of them.

The irreconcilability of Jaime's reality explained why he believed everything a dream when the cries of his mother returned, louder. They echoed against the tiles and brought the kitchen to life, and Jaime could not tell if his parents were spinning or if the room around them was. His father grabbed his wife's wrists and forced her back against the refrigerator, where she fought back futilely. Then he finally started to speak, his voice rising from a whisper to a low-lying bellow, making the kitchen shake as it still spun.

Jaime had moved from inside his door to the outer edge of the kitchen, again not knowing, never knowing, how he got there. Now the kitchen was the entire world, Jaime becoming aware that nothing else existed at this moment except the kitchen, which seemed to be the largest room in the world. He was desperate for the dream to stop, but nothing happened when he pressed into his thigh with a fingernail. His eyes, trying to

decipher the meaning in the nightmare, did not blink as his parents, or the strangers he thought they were, raged in front of him.

His father released his mother's wrist and walked to the other side of the kitchen, where he leaned over the stove and punched one of the heaters. The stove vibrated wildly, and Jaime could make out the blood on the outside of his father's hands as he opened his palm, blood his father admired, his own strength, a regrettable moment of vanity when his wife slammed a tortilla pan against his back.

Jaime's father fell to his knees, but, before his wife could flail the tortilla pan again, he grabbed her wrist for the second time and twisted it. The pan dropped, its clatter like an unsettled church bell, and her scream was more amused than pained. Jaime's father rose to his feet, slowly now, venom clear in his clenched jaw, and he pushed his wife against a counter with his left hand as his right hand found a knife in the drawer of utensils. He observed the knife for a moment, taking into account its promise perhaps, or maybe looking at his face in the knife's reflection to see if he recognized it, the face that looked back at him.

Appeased in whatever answer he found, Jaime's father then moved the knife against his mother's throat. She smiled, her eyes entreating him. The blade reflected light on her face, and Jaime's father was reminded of the day he first met her, long ago in her father's jewelry shop south of the river. Just as then, his hand was covered in blood.

“Yes then, go ahead.”

That was what she said, taking her husband's hand and bringing it nearer her skin. This was the most terrifying part of the dream, for Jaime, her willingness to die at her

husband's hand. Jaime's father glared down at her, an arm resting under her back, the knife the single corroboration that he was not simply bowing her at the end of the dance.

At the precipice, he stepped back, throwing the weapon into the sink and letting his wife fall to the ground. With her back on the floor, Jaime could not tell if there was relief or regret in her face. His father grabbed a towel and wrapped his bleeding hand in it before walking out of the loft, and Jaime heard the creaking stairs as he made the descent, alive, escaping the demise he came for. The kitchen became its normal size, and Jaime no longer felt so small, with only him and his mother, and he recognized that he was once again behind his door, and that he could only see through the sliver of space left ajar.

Jaime's mother got up slowly from the ground. She walked over to the sink and put her hands on the counter, her body trembling with heavy breaths. Jaime could tell she wanted to cry and wished she would, but, even alone, she did not. Her children were asleep, and the world was again hers to dream and grieve over, but, instead, she just looked out the window to the city she had been brought to, one with tall, sparkling buildings that hid the revolutions between new worlds and old ones that persisted within, feeling for a moment like she had never left home.

Many times afterward, Jaime would wonder what his mother meant in her response to death. But it was not until seven years later, the night he faced the void of a gun barrel, that he asked, *Was I close to death or far from life?* And it was not until several years after that, upon the ecstasy of another affair, that he knew the answer to what his mother saw that night: death, whatever it was, as the continuation of life, not separated, and existence without ends or beginnings, just in-betweens.

The next morning was far before such understanding though, and Jaime was disoriented when he woke up and had to adjust to a world that was not spinning and shaking. He looked over to his sister's side of the room, but she was not in her bed.

He found her and his other two sisters huddled in the kitchen, by the sink at the far side, whispering to each other

“What is happening?” he asked.

Together, the three sisters turned to him.

“Nothing,” Juanita said, as the sisters dispersed, Soledad's face looking frightened, her eyes wide and unfocused.

“Is something wrong?” Jaime asked.

“Nothing, Jaime,” Juanita said again. “We were just talking. Do you want toast for breakfast?”

She pointed to a plate of wheat toast and a smaller plate with butter on the kitchen table. He smiled, realizing that everything felt normal again, and then he grabbed the silver butter knife that was also on the table, resting across the smaller plate.

As Jaime began spreading the butter, Adelina laughed. “Jaime, you're holding the knife wrong,” she said. She took the knife from his hand and placed it back, so that the knife edge pointed to the ceiling rather than down toward the floor.

Juanita suddenly looked worried again, and she sat down across from him.

“Jaime, are you alright?”

“Yes. I just had a bad dream last night,” Jaime said. He paused for a moment to take a bite out of his toast, letting his shoulders fall.

Then he asked his oldest sister. “Do you see yourself when you dream?”



“What do you mean?”

“When I dream, I don’t see myself. My eyes are looking, but I’m not there.”