PRIS*N SEX: WORKING MANUSCRIPT

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to sing myself. And thank those at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras for their guidance. Thanks to the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference for the boost, and Iowa State University’s fleeting faculty member for the initial fire. Special thanks to the mentors found within bent pages. To those departed and to those still here. And the stories I carried, discovered, or stumbled upon on my daily walks to campus. Please, sing.
ABSTRACT

This partial manuscript is a spectral imagining of ancestral immersion: spectral due to the recurring character named Amelia who travels between different instances in time and institutes the edicts found before every story. I am portraying various families in which characters experience similar dysfunction/disjunction and dissatisfaction with their current condition in Puerto Rico. I believe that through these characters and their familial rites-of-passage, I address themes of voyage, estrangement, violence, and subtle redemption. The writing hinges on the idea of island living as a claustrophobic act in which subjects are focused on a primal instinct of survival. My working title is *Pris*n Sex. The censoring of the “o” in the title signals that the collection contains evidence of the abject and crude realities that are usually censored or repressed by society. Prison is allegorical to a systematic dysfunction of livelihood. Sex serves not only as the literal exchange of fluids and pleasure but the raw literal and figurative exchange of undisclosed stories that are also secreted.
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Xavier Navarro was born and raised in Puerto Rico. His works have appeared in *Newport Review* and *Small Axe: Salon*. In August 2014, he attended the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference on a Work-Study Scholarship. He was recently longlisted for the 2015 Hollick Arvon Caribbean Writers Prize, offered by the Hollick Family Charitable Trust, the Arvon Creative Writing Charitable Trust, and the NCG Bocas Lit Fest (Trinidad and Tobago) and will be pursuing his Ph.D. at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln on a scholarship.
And if a man become
the heart of a giant, the song
of a giant, each one of us
laughing like a giant,
if each one of us fulfill
the exact measure of a man,
and if the goat, at the same time,
is singing as it’s dying
among men are singing
and dying, the youngest
cousin among us, butcher,
slaughter, elbow deep
in the animal’s belly,
does not sing,
the carcass, bloodlet
now, also silent,
as if its stillness
were a source of music too.
The way, in death, one becomes
all the sounds one cannot make—
The sum total of everything
the living cannot say. Sometimes
we have to sing just to figure out
what we cannot say.

-Patrick Rosal
“Bienvenida: Santo Tomás”
Boneshepherd

“Our needs devise the frames we live our lives in, and it’s the lucky few for whom they’re not prisons.”

-H. Nigel Thomas
Behind the Face of Winter
The Sounds of Rain: Ghost Etiquette

Edict: 1

Even if we’ve seen ice tips collect on the independent fragments of our hairs, we don’t move. We are what we are because of heat. We are the last of those dreamers that end up as fictitious sediments, the lines carved onto the thin brows of our fathers, anger easily permeated in restraint, because the smallness of where we come from leaves us smaller. If it happens that we long for those simple words, the burning houses catch up to our trailing clothes, we are consumed and overran by each grain of sweat that evaporates in a guarded well, and if the brooks waken the tangled ripples from long drained desire, then we can grow. Our fathers chose to spout. In the direction where we follow back and backward paths that have led to now here. We create insatiable cement and soon digest the ocean as hydration. Our paths have led us to here, to now.

We can almost reach the stars, they say. As if it were sweet and becoming.

Millions of fire ants pacing and placing without any recognition for what has been learned and discussed within the trimmings of paper masks, linings within overused dresses, between the written syllables that we’ve developed, inscribed into the deepest wells and greatest towers, they crowd the specs of rubber left in our walking trails, we’re left to find each other in hide and seek.

I’m much more interested in the question of who we cannot be, because then it is explained in romance, in love anecdotes said only to satisfy our dreaming.

The scene is the one we build of the wild.

Bags in the sky are quiet globes, a world in and of their own. If I could weave their slow melody into you, I think you could see how beautifully they move. I don’t believe there’d be any loss. I’ve taken snapshots of the grudged adhesive that holds the cement upright, their eccentric movements devoid in repetition. As danced and coordinated in boney ballets orchestrated by widows, channeled by wind that pours into their open jacket, and glows through the light in my day.

We’ve tired of dreams, of how they pick through bouncing elasticity. Our bags, they rebel. Severing the long and tired. Like it all and appoint them to the tiny sickle said to shear the ends of my long fingers. An astronaut can see their ascension through her scope. An arena of pale white buddings gather in the deep blue field, resisting. I know that it doesn’t frighten us. I know we can call to living, and care for our rhythm, for a people. Know that all we asked for was to care.
A Bridged Country

When they came to strip us of Chuchu, Ma spat on the oficiales. After Daniel ran away from home and hadn’t been back, it wasn’t exactly bread and butter dining. You could hear the vans parked outside of the building. They beat-boxed a masquerade, throwing a fog of party bus techno lights, and Chuchu would soon be swerving on that stretch of highway that crawled its way towards San Juan.

He sat cornered, roasting on the barred balcony as the sun ventilated its primetime special in el barrio. El Casero, as he was known by us—lanky man who always wore his Sunday best on a day basis—was zip-tied to a basketball pole for striking the masked men who berated the residencial with controlled silence. Packs of ghosts, disappearing into each space and returning with bags filled of meow meows and soft barks, black bags dragged behind each moving statue and tiny holes cut into each sack, brown eyes bright through the small creases.

“Don’t you dare take him,” Ma yelled out as she was restrained.

“Orders are followed, it is our responsibility to maintain sanitary conditions,” the figure said.

They had come to clean the mess we rolled ourselves in. They had come because the alcalde told them to. They came with false expectations; we never wanted to be clean.

***

Casero was the meanest cabrón that idled through the courts during mealtime. He would convince the oldies that he was cool because he sharpened his clothes to cut eyes, and if you looked too quickly at his gator shoes, you’d tear up blood from the glaring leather. Danny idolized Casero. He would tell me at night that he was going places, that
Casero would bring hope to el barrio and that there wouldn’t be a need to push around el local anymore to make ends. That was Danny’s wish, but Ma wasn’t having it. So she went out and bought Chuchu from Casero. I believed it distracted everyone from the naked man in the room, the signs that were laminated in bronze lettering pointing up our nostrils and every fool boy from that shack. Running header: we were breadcrumbs. Birds were there to keep us from getting too fancy-eyed.

I stared from our balcony looking at Ma fence through Casero’s stock of dogs. He would sell them to drug thuggies at steep prices but kindly withdrew his haggle in order to satisfy a lonely viuda.

“Baby, I’ll sell you a pit for just 300. Pup that was bred by me especially for you from la madre patria. He’s about two months young. Your breed will like him,” he said through cigarette smoke coming from his bulbous lips.

“Ay no se. They’re a dangerous kind.”

“Only if you raise them to be. But I don’t think a fine fox like yourself would have to worry about that with your boys looking after it.”

She shied away from that comment and continued rummaging through the rusted cages. Casero probed her as she leaned, he’d flare his eyes every time she bent over, her brown dress lifting above her quads. With a keen drag of his cigarette, he walked up behind Ma and brushed her thighs with his pelvis. He patted her down and coiled his fingertips just under the edge of the dress.

“I’ll give you a discount if you’ll do me a favor.”

“What favor?” She turned to look at him. He blew a smoke cloud towards her while he cupped her chin. They stared for a moment, speaking through glares. I hadn’t
thought, at that moment what that actually meant, but I figured there would be a good long prayer said to Jesuscristo—a bit of fuck, coño, and que rico to add to the flavor.

It had been a lonely time for Ma. She descended into the life of a common puta, picking up smoking like wild fire, later using her body to get little jobs here and there. She knew Casero before she married Pa. When he died, Casero skipped his way into Ma’s skirts and eased her grief with his fabled anaconda lullaby. See, I’m not sure if Danny was delusional about Casero, that maybe he’d take up Pa’s place. Maybe Danny really thought Casero was fat lady luck flying in on that rainbow he needed to get out of here. He became so caught up in mimicking Casero’s speech, his strut, his rhythm. There were times it was just sad to see the two of them standing next to each other, an experienced cat teaching a hairball how to roll. Yet I knew Casero toyed with Danny, hanging over his head his late fucks with Ma. Almost telling him within earshot, that he easily won over Ma’s affection while Danny had to be there picking up the pieces, not only the XL condom wrappers but even at times, the baby battered blankets Ma was just too lazy to wash. It drained him.

We spent the days neglected. Skipping school and trolling the basketball court with college leftovers from the Caribbean University—a box of a building that hired any worker to teach remedial subjects to hopeful peeps. One by one, after the mirage of a better life faded, you’d see the boys drop off single-file. They’d tail their asses towards cock fighting, selling, soaking. Me and Danny hatched out of that shit.

“You think we’ll ever make it to the metro?” I asked Danny.

“Don’t matter much, there’s no difference here or there. Besides I don’t think Ma would do good alone.”
“I don’t want to be here anymore than you do, Danny.”

“Grow up, Marcos.”

I wanted to follow him wherever he went. I’d grow up. Right there.

Danny and me attempted to progress on our schoolwork. Ma yelped for God 15 minutes straight that night. The knocks of the wood banging up the concrete serenaded the apartment.

“There goes Ma praying.”

“Leave it.”

It wasn’t like we hadn’t grown accustomed to male wooers after Pa danced his way out of the picture, but something about Casero, that old bag, pissed me off. Though he manicured clean, shaved every hair on his body and even girls our age frolicked over his aging muscles, the wrinkles on his hands unmasked the years. Danny cooled his anger with his fantasies while I tapped my pencil on the table, syncing with the thuds of wood.

“I want him out of here,” I said.

“I said leave it, Ma’s got her own crap to deal with without your bitching.”

I kept attempting to focus on the police sirens that shuttled their way past the residencial. My eyes fixed on the mosquito that bit my leg. Or the tiny cockroaches that skated on the kitchen walls.

“I’m going in there, Danny,” I said getting up from the table.

“What are you on, Billy Jean? Easy with that moonwalk. You’re not doing that,” he said grabbing my wrist and tying me back to the table.
“Listen, here’s a way to cope with it,” Danny got up and ran into our room. He returned with a VHS and handed it to me. “Take it to the bedroom, it’ll relax you.”

“What is it?”

We both stood there shaking the VHS between our hands.

“You’ll see, mijo. I’ll warn you though, lower the volume of the TV when it starts.”

I took the VHS and made my way into the bedroom. The room darkened as I entered and sat on the bed that overlooked the tiny TV. Static from the set cloaked the room with a grey light. In a sudden change from colorless to a sharp image of a familiar bed, I saw two images embracing each other. Their naked bodies stroking at each other’s genitals. An aging male figure with muscles that primed his sagging skin, while the woman, petite figure, and a handful of breasts began 69ing on the bed. The bedroom door was closed. Our bedroom door was closed. But I recognized that hair, black and coarse, easily malleable. Scars of a cesarean on the stomach.

My dick kept poking at me. Asking for attention. The echoes that resonated through the apartment continued to thump with wood against concrete. It was music to the throbbing in my jeans. Moans of “que rico, more papi, sí” harmonized with desire that soaked into the flashing images on the TV. An erotic film performing similar positions I’d grown used to seeing in flashy pornos Danny used to slip to me. I couldn’t control the movements of my hand strokes. I began to mime the repetitive thumps around me.

Casero just breezed by me and Danny on his way to the door. He tossed us a wink as he threw his shirt over his shoulder.
“Come by tomorrow and pick up Dogo for the boys. Don’t be late nena because I have plans that night,” he said closing the door behind him.

Ma came up to us and sat down, her face dripping with sweat and her black hair sheared at the ends, a knot gesticulating at us her full commitment to our happiness. There wasn’t much said between us. The stares were enough. As she sat there panting, Danny scooted his way next to her and combed her hair, brushing it down to a more presentable shape. She just looked into his eyes and smiled. But I couldn’t.

***

Chuchu wasn’t very big the day he tripped his way through the door. Ma had bought him an oversized black studded collar. He’d stumble around attempting to lift his round body, often gnawing at the leather strap left over. I grew a liking to him from the very first barf on the new rug Ma had bought. I hoped he was a rebel, he’d fit in perfectly with Danny and me. We wanted to be rebels, but for some reason it was always me who put up the front. Danny would admire the thugs, the down hipsters, the pushers, but whenever he saw Ma weak, he’d come flailing to her aid.

“Do your work, Daniel. If you don’t graduate, you’ll have to join the army,” she said as she dried the plates in the kitchen while Danny passed each of them to her.

“Ma, I’m not joining those sellouts. I’ll pass and start up a business with Casero, he mentioned something about working with dogs.”

“Mira imbécil, are you stupid or something? Casero works with dogs for fighting, nothing else. You’re not getting caught up in that mess.”

“Ma, he’s got a plan, ok? Better than those fruity dreams Marcos keeps entertaining about universities,” he said this as he whistled an elongated note to me. I
tugged on a yellow rope with Chuchu. I didn’t tell Danny about the envelope that came in
the mail. I didn’t tell Ma about it either. I hoped to keep it a secret from them until we
found out if Danny was going to graduate.

“Fruity dreams? Coño hijo get your head in line. Your brother’s been doing good
in school, maybe he’ll get in at Arecibo.”

“Nah, he’s not thinking Arecibo. He’s stuck on Río Piedras,” Danny said,
laughing. Ma smirked and let out a giggle upon hearing my idealistic wet dreams.

“Marcos, Río Piedras is a long shot. You’d be lucky if you made it into Arecibo.”

“Do you think you are better than us?” Danny said, flicking water at me from the
sink. “Are we not good enough for Dr. Marcos and his air head?” Danny insisted. I kept
playing with Chuchu, ignoring the droplets that fell on my cheeks, wiping the ones that
got irritable, the ones that Danny swam in, slapping my cheeks with his authoritative
force. Pa smiling in Ma’s grin. Pa chuckling in Danny’s laugh.

I tugged Chuchu all the way to the bedroom and lay on the bed hoping for Danny
to fail his year. He spent his time in a tally waltz with the girls he recorded. “Don’t you
worry ‘bout a thing Marcos. When you start spicing up your dick with pussy juice, you’ll
learn what it means to be a man.” Pa used to say the same thing. When we’d be sitting in
the living room as a family, Pa would grab Ma’s thighs and high-tail his fingers up her
skirt, and she’d always playfully attempt to slap them away, smiling that same smile she
always shone through her teeth, as if telling us something through her dark eyes, asking
for forgiveness.

I walked out of the apartment looking to air out my frustrations. I had taken the
sealed envelope that I hid under the TV set from our bedroom. Wanting to escape from
the gates that trapped me there, I pranced towards the entrance of the complex. Old lady loca sat on a bench. Her life soaking through her pores, letting in the bad sun that cooked her into a bronze statue. She was that eighty-year-old fossil that wore diapers to avoid the dripsies. She yelled out to anyone who crossed paths with her that the world was ending, we were all doomed, and nothing would save us. She fancied herself the prophet of Lomo and christened her subjects with her apocalyptic words. I frowned at her and frowned at the boys playing basketball. I saw the dogs walk around the residencial. The gates open. They could come and go as they pleased, but they remained, lying down, smelling their behinds, choosing to stay.

***

You and Luis headed the caravan that overtook el residencial Tito Lomo. You were given orders by the mayor to seize the pets harbored by the residents. The imminent threat of overpopulation and risky sanitary conditions was the only reason given. The residents however ignored their government handouts—buying and selling the lot of dogs amongst each other, creating gardens of manure and a smell deep in excrement. Most of the afternoon was trapped with an eastern sun, a haze of Sahara dust dancing on the thin clouds. You stood with a rifle in hand and a two-way radio saddled on your shoulder. You’d oversee the abductions from your lead car at the northern entrance of the complex, drying thick sweat that fell from your head on the patch of blue-collar. You grew impatient as dirt rose from the scramble in cages. Moans of cats being tossed into duffle bags; dogs stung with Tasers if they weren’t compliant while others noosed with a thick rod were dragged into the kennels at the back of each van. The noises barked into the
open space of the central basketball court. With more noise grew your need to leave. You wanted to return to your house with the cool mountain breeze.

Luis stormed into apartment six. The door buckled from its hinges tearing itself away from the hollow wood lining. Marcos ran out of his bedroom and threw himself at Luis. His mother did the same. They performed a maddening play, screeching those sounds only a god would care to listen to. Their tears soothing, the only response.

After an hour of work, you straightened your stance and signaled your goons to group.

“Luis, finish up that last section. We’re heading out,” you said.

“We driving straight?” Luis responded as he threw a duffle bag full of cats into the back of his van. His shirt stained with damp yellow and patched with the sting of urine. Your arms marked with steady grazes and blood dried to black.

“Let’s hope so, no surprises on the way,” you said.

“None. But the vans are at full capacity. The weight is straining the wheels.”

“Then let’s get a move on.”

You investigated and collected animals from the apartments, dragging along Chuchu by his collar, pushing him into a kennel. The drive moved away from Barceloneta and neared Vega Baja. You led the caravan of four vans as they came upon the bridge. Your mind strayed into the line of water that could be seen. The tops of flowered trees cut across the valley and decorated the nestled mountains.

“Eh jefe, we have a problem. We need to pull over.”

“Shit, Luis. We need to make time. If that shelter closes, where do you think we are going to drop off the cargo?” You yelled into your shoulder.
“We need to stop,” Luis repeated, his breath muffled with every break. Tires slowed as the line of vans pulled to the emergency lane and came to abrupt stops. Luis was the first to open his door and walk towards your lead van. The other men in the two exterior vans slowly made their way out, slamming their doors as they tailed Luis.

“Luis, qué carajo pasó that we need to stop in the middle of a bridge?” You said, confronting him.

“Some of the dogs are dead in my van. There are some cats that also died. The smell tells it. We weren’t supposed to bring dead animals to the shelter,” Luis said.

“It’s going to cost a hell of a lot of money to euthanize this many maldito animals,” you reply. The highway was desolate. “And to bag the ones that died, disposing of them is going to create paperwork.”

“Boss said to take them straight on,” the passenger said to the Luis.

“I’m not driving all the way to San Juan with dead satos.”

Over the mountains, the houses began to light up under the darkening sky.

“We toss the dead over,” you said signaling at the horizon. You grasped a duffle bag, opened the zipper and strewed the white, black, calico bodies out into the landscape.

“Oyé, mano, what are you doing? Are you insane?” Luis ran up and tugged the duffle bag of cats.

“The live ones, aim for the rift in between those trees,” you said as you mangled a living cat, its green eyes melting with the tight grip on its neck. “That creek spills into a sewage duct, that’ll drown them.”

“Drown them? They’ll be dead on impact,” the man said.

“The stubborn ones won’t.”
Luis overlooked the men digging into the vans as they tossed the animals—each of them, as if opening boxes of toys on Christmas morning. He did not participate in the fire sale. Yet you mockingly toed your way to the edge of the bridge, humming a tune by Tito Puente. You painted the sky with the animals in dreaded syncopation. At the peak of each tree, you were sure to use the ink of brown cats; they blended well in the green canvas. The heavier dogs would be better off mixing with water, so you used your hands like a pincel, and dashed the light with streaks of big bodies. Your drumsticks conducted the overture. You were the king of the timbal.

***

I returned to the apartment at night.

He tossed the plate at Ma as I tackled him.

“Malagradecido,” she said.

“Cool it, Danny. What’s gotten into you?” I said as I clawed him to the ground.

Danny and me wrestled in a floor tango while Ma began the assembly line process of throwing out his clothes over the balcony. And in a momentary lapse there was immediate quiet. The tango had ended, the music had come to death. Danny shrugged his body away from mine and stood glaring at Ma.

“Take them with you maldita sea,” she yelled. Her hand grasping a plastic bag filled with steel jeringuillas. “I hope you meet him there.”

“I’m done with this shit. You’ve turned into nothing but a ghost. It’s no wonder you’re alone. Take a look around you, there’s nobody there. I’m gone,” he said stomping his way towards the door. Ma’s imposition fell as quickly as it rose.
“Hijo, please,” Ma ran towards him letting the bag drop to the floor. “Don’t go. Get help but don’t go.”

“Get off me.”

Danny slammed the door behind him.

“Are you ever coming back home, Danny? Ma hasn’t left her bed in a week,” I said to him. We sat there for awhile. Tata cooked us a meal in the kitchen.

“I’m thinking of staying around here, Marcos. It’s much cooler. Besides, Tata gives me food. And a beat up car that I can use to drive about. I’ll start it up again around these parts.”

“What about school then?”

“Ah, forget about that hole, mano. Life’s too short to be messing with books, look at what happened to Pa. He fed us that crap our whole lives and now look at him, staring up at us from the ground.”

“The government showed up in Lomo and took all the animals. Chuchu is gone,” I said in a dead tone. Danny just fiddled with the couch cushions and stretched out his hands in the air, letting out a sigh.

“Well mijo, what can you do?”

“What you mean what can you do? Show some compassion, dude. Shit’s getting slushy around there. Casero’s been living with us. He’s pushing hard now. And well, you know what that means for Ma.”

“What. She’s el carro público then. What’s the difference now, at least she’s getting paid some,” Danny said standing up from the couch.
“See Danny. That’s the type of crap that pisses people off.”

“Don’t start growing some big cojones now. You wouldn’t want to get slapped around,” he said. The kitchen pans clattered in the backdrop. “Listen Marcos, Chuchu’s gone, we can’t do nothing about it. He was a temporary thing in your life, like Casero, like any man that comes around that place. Ma’s been sleeping around since Pa kicked it. Look for a way out.”

“Like Casero, right? The mighty Savior. The guy you always pulled pants down, sucking that dick any chance you got.”

Danny stared at me. His fists clenched and shaking, ready to rumble. His eyes flaring like Casero’s had the day Ma transacted for Chuchu.

“It doesn’t give you a right to sell those tapes around the block. It doesn’t give us a right,” I said. My eyes growing heavy. “You know that shit killed him. You knew she would flip when she saw that bag. I told you not to get involved with Casero.”

“Fuck her man. Tata’s been more of a mother than that perra. Pa treated her exactly the way she was supposed to be treated,” he said.

I couldn’t understand his logic. Yet I didn’t blame the guy. Ma was lost in her grief. The train of guys making their stops into our space had us tired. She expected each one to be treated like her man. They weren’t. But I couldn’t help feeling we raped Ma. With everyone we let slip into the apartment. With everyone that sold her jumping breasts to our neighbors. And that weight we carried around our necks, telling the crowds of Lomo that we were that puta’s sons, we were the twins that sold their mother to gigolos, no different than any ordinary pimp. We failed. We watched her over and over
die before our eyes changing with every moan she cried, asking for our forgiveness. And we’d simply wash our hands in a bowl like Pilate.

“Whatever, man, I’m heading back,” I said.


“No, I’d rather walk.”

“Don’t be a puss. Let’s go,” he said kicking his legs at my shoes.

We walked out of the house. I yelled out to Tata that Danny was taking me home. At the hillsides of Vega Baja, the outskirts of the town that met the highway would glow in a green bubble as if in that small section of PR, the amapolas bloomed a full party. The trees desired heaven, trying to escape the blueness of a tropical sky, a perfection that reflected a plastic mess. Danny and me walked down the concrete walkway towards his rusted Corolla.

“That smell, you smell it, Marcos?” Danny said stopping at the car door.

“Smells fishy. But bad fishy, like old tuna,” I said.

“Like a bad pussy,” he said as he walked towards the edge of the road where a small creek trickled its way down its side. We followed the smell up the road that moved its way up a long line of imposing trees, towards the bridge of the highway.

“It smells like death, Danny,” I said covering my face.

“Look in here, mano.”

He positioned himself over an uncovered manhole. A smell of old cheese and humid eggs soaked into my nostrils. You could make out black nose tips in the muck of still water. Clusters of white hair sprinkled themselves atop the goo. And, like a cork that
bobbed and weaved through a water landfill, icy eyes stared back at me, sinking me closer to their trance.

“Are those . . .?”

“Yup,” Danny said. He made to push me into the watery hole, but I dodged and shoved him away.

“Look over there,” I said pointing away from the road and into the shrubs of trees that flicked the belly of the highway.

We cleared the road and headed towards the bridge. A smell of sulfur pillows our push past the thin trees. When we reached the corner pillars of the highway bridge, Danny elbowed me at the direction of the treetops. There, skewered into some of the bare branches were cats hung by their legs, drooping like falling kites in the sky, tangled astray on the leaves of those trees. At the footing, lime blanketed the roots. Danny and me walked closer to the lifeless bodies of decaying eyes, a studded collar, dogs half smiling with their tongues licking the white powder, and cats absently shunning away from our existence.
I'll learn to love myself when I’ve sloughed off open boats that dredge those bodies to the sand. Because I’ve learned that love and self have all been taken by the guards guiding prison men to their beds. There are days I’ll learn to love in order to get by. Days numbered in tally marks on floor tiles. Days living in empty cells, replicated in the hands of bagged limbs. Soon, I can untangle the vines that have formed between us, the barrier used to isolate each of us. As if sex were the only means for normal affection. As if it meant a declaration in stride, that we learn to love and live happy, that we’ve written special codes to connect each other. This is for the voices that are no longer dreaming. The happy ducts under boisterous women, and the solemn vows to keep it all together.
Pris*n Sex

I’ve conducted myself like any man should. I’ve swum through the currents in a stink fantasy. If it reminds me of laughter, in building pebbles with green encasements, I’ll build a novel on the backs of abandoned bricks. We were given little. Creation allowed us stability. And I assume to be grateful, there will never be a scream like the one found when opening presents. We opened our presents in cellblocks, in cages, finding our own animal, soothing pleasures with tough confessions of love. It becomes customary to expect, and to have the sounds fill the empty space in a dim room. But my wife Amelia, before her death, neither wept nor praised our namesake. She slipped away carelessly, the sheets placed over her eyes, her red lips kissing the cream, marking an ellipse. And here we stand conversing, discussing the foundations of youth. I am old now. Yet you see me, as I see myself. And without a walker, without a name, I’m all forgotten.

Human relationships never made much sense to me. I see them as broken cars, illusions of mobility. We waste those interactions with lofty promises and end up dismissed.

“I’ve told you, and I’m sure of this, that the sheets are cold, the wine is dry, the air is fat. Push and pull on those strings, they tie the closet door shut, Amelia,” I repeat this to her and to myself. But she floats away, between the cracks, through the walls.

“Close the doors, spread the sheets,” she said to me.

The back of the closet deepened as I stretched my hand further into its mouth. We rummaged atop the dirty clothes. We wrestled to understand we were not alone.

“You think those people will care,” I said to her as I shrank smaller into the denim cloths’ slits.
“You think people are people.”

“People are recycled,” I responded holding her white skin over my palms, her touch molding into our ectoplasm.

“Byproducts of latex.”

“Like wearing a used condom.”

“People are used condoms.”

Rain was the closest I came to being alive. I swallowed every droplet, consumed each hydrating spot but never was able to keep my pores from rejecting its thin penetration. Amelia had warned me that if I wasn’t careful, I’d melt under a deluge. It seems like a tragedy, to see water flow without restraint. For some, it puddles on the ground; its resisting seepage into the soil reminds us that it may hold without disappearing. Yet it always evaporates.

“Will we evaporate under the sun?” Amelia said to me. The darkness of the closet masked her white expressions. Even though her eyes glowed like sandstones on a green pasture, she still seemed to be fading with the black.

“What choices are we left with? You’ve long blocked all of us out of your mind,” I said. She seemed satisfied with the response. She turned her transparent head towards the closet door and remained quiet for the rest of the night, her deep breaths creating a rhythmic beat that stirred the enclosed space.

I felt that if we were still alive, I would have kissed her. She would’ve probably done the same. Though age rattled out of skin and now our transparency cloaked the air, I felt a desire to procreate. She never turned to look at me. I felt alone.
The White Bear was a prison on our island. The White Bear had his claws punctured into the landscape as he has his claws drilled into my limbs. Time has long displaced my stay there. I doubt the old self would recognize what I am today. My arms tied to bedposts, a sense of resistance but self-satisfaction, and as much as I wiggled, I was pried open. His force pleasing me long enough for me to feel comfort, reduced but very much alive. The cackling of parrots in clouded skies awoke the saliva from their glands. Sharp spikes fell from open fists, and I remember engaging them with my mouth open, sheets red, and a smile smeared in ruby. They protected me. Long enough to remain in fetal positions with weekly inspections.

Amelia, still recognizing our separation but never addressing its effect on our marriage, was there when I was released.

“Something’s different in the way you walk,” she would say. “And you bite now when we have sex. I don’t like it. You bite hard. I don’t like it.”

“Something’s different in the way you feel. I don’t snug fit,” I said. “I can’t clean it out properly. But I’m happy.”

I held onto Fernando as he cried, his bib folding into his neck, his green eyes imagining all the joys of water. With storms persisting on the day of his birth, I always knew he would die before a flood. There was never any justification in why, when he learned to walk, he was able to smell the midday flashing lights. Oxygen banging against the heavy clouds, a torrent formed at the tops of mountains. Green sierras turned grey with brown streams loosening the mud, bathing the lonely trees with minerals.
“Fernando has grown since you’ve been vacationing,” Amelia reminded me. Time escaping with every burp he released. Every wet diaper smeared in green served as a memory detached from the spindle, a fray in soft shears of baby cloth. Fernando was found in the teeth of our cat; Fernando shook with the rotating movements of our fan.

“If you make too much noise, they’ll hear,” Amelia said to me as we continued to observe them through the cracks of the closet. “How will they conceive without recycling the rubber? He’s supposed to use it again. I thought I taught him well.”

“Amelia, the moon doesn’t shine brighter because the clouds remain or disappear. It is always brightest at night without hesitation. The sun hides us better when we cry. Remember the rain? We are not here to disguise our masks with faces. We are not here to swim with the sewing pins against cream waters. We cannot guide them in the right direction. They are on their own.”

“And we bake, rather than soak, if the sun is out with the moon?” She said still fixated on Fernando. Through the cracks you could see him. He sat naked with his wife. They spooned against each other’s thick skin.

“Careful not to melt against your tears, Amelia.”

At dusk, there are noises murmured by crawling insects. Little pops sound off like beer cans run over in constant sequence. The skulls of our kin swell with asphalt. I once heard of a woman who grew her breasts by drinking buttermilk. She was convinced they’d shield her from flying metal. I was told she fell from a bridge into the streaming cars below, and bounced right off of them back into her initial stance. Newspaper, newscasters, news mania growled at the idea that a woman could bounce with metal. She
was enshrined on television sets, becoming a parody of an angel. A swift voyage through telecasters and transistors reached a satellite on the highest peak of the island’s mountains. And people screamed at each other with hopeful suspense. They had witnessed the second coming. Riots forged in the trees. Burger King pastoral had yet to overrun billboards. In the ferns along roadsides, we understood that buttermilk grew in the faint breaths of jackals. When the kitchen cooking ends, a bar B. Q. is roasted on Sundays, right after the strands of early churchgoers returned from their dance in familiar beats. This woman beat the wave of consumption. She drew on her large breasts even after they helped her survive the fall. She grew stronger as each nipple produced strands of buttermilk, her lips softened with each suck. She lactated up until she could not consume any more fluids, and died of diabetes just before her 24th birthday.

Dusk is a reminder to Amelia and myself that we cannot blend well into our surroundings. The light doesn’t refract well with our blue silhouettes. Crystals are common on the sands of a beach full of garbage. The bottle tops erode along with the glass shards, leaving green and dark brown gems waiting to be caressed in wanting hands. I proposed to Amelia with one of those green disks. She kept it, still keeps it, in the water we consume.

“Green is the gift of the angels. In different showers. Brown. Blue. Black. They feed us with these ornaments,” I said.

“Angels and angles are both wanting new partners. I believe if you had a choice, you would still choose this over a clear diamond,” she responded. Her smile was sharp as it cut into the ends of her lips.

“Please make me the luckiest man in the world,” I insisted.
“Please look for a better line,” she said as she threw the glass into the ocean. She got up kicking sand at my direction and ran into the water. At the line of the horizon, I saw her turn into the bird that she always wanted to become. She would fly close to the sun and melt into its biting rays, welcoming the change of texture. She would fly just about anywhere, in any form, just as long as she could always look back at the clouds she passed through. I wasn’t able to follow her for too long but I never could forget seeing her flap her hands as the sun dipped under the ocean. But I didn’t run after her, looking to tie her back to me. Because I wanted to see her move. And I wanted to say to her, “goodbye, my beauty.”

Fernando had colic as a child. Amelia never regretted our marriage but she hated Fernando. Her exhaustion was as deep as the bruises stamped under her eyes. It was only after she died when she really made up for her roughhousing. It was a labor of resentment.

“Do something with that rat!” She said. Fernando cried in his crib, the cement of the walls echoing through. She stomped over to the kitchen and tossed a plate against the floor. I hadn’t known then how close she was to taking the pieces of beige porcelain in her hand. In her eyes, her flaring red eyes, I saw a glimpse of her cutting into Fernando’s throat, the blood trickling its way down his neck, his cry gargling while his esophagus flooded with red paste.

“Sing a lullaby, Amelia. Sing for me,” I said stretching my hands out to her. She kicked the broken plate from the ground to my knees, the pieces firing against my kneecaps, hitting the wooden table.
“Fernando, my boy. Fernando, stop it just for a second.” I said as I ran towards his crib. Amelia continued to trash the remainder of the kitchen.

“I’ll stuff that doll up with a few knives if you let me. I swear to you!” Amelia retorted.

I leaned over and grabbed his frail body. In that moment, I knew it was up to me to shield him from any influences that would wound him. Fernando had to dispel his soft embrace and degrade himself in order to rebuild a coliseum in the empty lot his mother would leave. The bricks would climb above glaciers and continue to grow in an upward mobility, hoping to crack the sky just long enough for him to make his bed among rain clouds. There is evidence that we cannot learn to love, only learn to forgive. I’ve gone through this over my head for as long as I’ve been allowed to recollect. In memories, I find that that very city built by Fernando barred any intruders. I was never able to imitate it, and it wasn’t long before I forgot what it meant to forgive. Amelia would need a gate. I built her the taverns that she ended up living in, the trenches where she would curl into infant balls, and if it hadn’t been for the White Bear, I don’t think she would have been able to see past that evening; Fernando would’ve been hanging by his neck from our balcony.

Amelia paraded into the bedroom with her hands full of metal plates and metal spoons.

“Noise! Here, some Noise!” She screeched as she hammered the spoons into the metal pots. The sound recoiled against the walls and hit my ears with a concealed punch. I wanted to toss Fernando at her. I was betting that she would drop the act and catch Fernando’s flying body from the air. Maybe it would have given me time to sink through
the floor. I wanted then the abilities I have now, to transcendence in-between physical spaces.

“Noise. You want noise, Amelia!” I said choking Fernando by his neck. “Here, stab him. Go ahead, end his bawling. I really hope you can shut his damn mouth with that spoon.”

“I will. Don’t you tempt me you son-of…”

“Go ahead!”

“Go ahead, go ahead? That is all you can ever do, you bitching coward. Give others orders while you hide behind that dick of yours. You bitch.”

“Don’t even start.”

“You bitch…”

“Amelia!”

“You and your little bitch…” I interrupted her banter and shoved Fernando into the air. His small body soaring into the yellow light. He was transforming into a sheet, spreading from one end of the room to the other. We stood there watching Fernando glide through the small bedroom until his body bounced against the end wall and dropped on our bed. His crying had ceased. Amelia looked down on her percussion instruments. I knew we had followed down the path of the blind, attempting to grab at each other in a dark space but being unable to reach out and touch the skin of each other’s hands. Fernando would see us smiling at each other, each of us pictured in a metal frame, collecting dust as distance fused itself with the cracking film.

“Noise stop. Noise go on,” Amelia said as she picked up her spoon and continued banging it against the pot.
In a cave, on the steep hillsides of Jayuya, I told Amelia that Fernando had fallen in love. He had met someone that was apparently worth marrying. Tides are fearful of the beach. They reduce themselves in order to allow safe passage for the animals that we own, for the animals that could be captured by the chains we toss on them. Amelia shepherded a mass of cattle along the mountainside, she found them lost far off from the town and escorted them in levitation. At night she set them aloft. She tied each of them with a transparent rope and tugged them up the mountain, the cows floating in different colors—dried up balloons that followed Amelia’s air walk.

“And these little stragglers you’ve brought along with you,” I said.

“The lonely cattle need a strong guide to the slaughter,” she responded. She returned the animals to the earth. They grounded with the ability to cry into the open darkness, their long snouts salivating at the dried grass near the cave. Their twisted horns reflected the stars in the sky. Under the company of transparency, I understood an animal’s mutation. They would journey, as they just had, only to meet each other at the bottom of food cartons in pandemic grocery stores. If they could have hid up on the hillsides until their strength deteriorated, they would have ended the suffering of the innocent. The slaughter of kin was the closest we could be to a heavenly state. That happiness was discovered by an authentic voice, the cry of a mule, the iced eyes in a masked face, only served as permanent dissatisfaction. We welcomed their single-filed march, and I helped Amelia guide them towards the abyss of our meeting cave. I knew that Amelia would be right in her decision. She allowed them to eat what little grass grew in the interior of the cave. I knew she gave them their last meal as treatment for her own mutilation. The animals ate with swift strokes. Animals herd next to each other for
comfort, in order to ease their loneliness. They commune in order to deal with their own mortality. But humans don’t. We separate in order to fortify what little fallacy we can for ourselves. An animal’s humanity is reflective of our own insanity.

Amelia tied the cattle together again with her transparent rope. She levitated them as she drew them over the edge of the cave opening. We watched them follow one another out into the open space, the clearing blanketed by trees, the cascading river indenting itself into the crevices of the landscape. Amelia played her hymn with quiet reminiscing of the tune she had played with pots and pans. One by one the cattle fell from their floating cloud, their moans crumbling with the weight of their bodies spiked into the tops of delicate trees.

“Fernando will marry this girl. You know this Amelia,” I said.

“Fernando is no longer our responsibility. The most we can do is look over him as we would have if we were still alive,” she said turning to me. Her long hair swept the floor as she flew over the stalagmites. Amelia was impressionable when it came to discussing how we were going to look after Fernando and his separate voyage. There are moments when we impressionable spirits, are able to grieve in proper dereliction, and our heaviest sentiments are abundant. Amelia worked to establish a base in that cave for she knew that total absolution was an impossible measure to live up to, that we’d be condemned to riot.

“If we help him conceive, do you think he’d help with our safe passage?” Amelia said.
“He is neither aware nor content with it all,” I said attempting to intercept Amelia’s unsteadiness. “We are picaresque beings, stifled by the very encasements that trap us.”

“There is sense in the storm. There is reason behind gender mutilation,” she said.

“We traverse through the streams in veins, yet we cannot purify the guilty monkeys, the backs that are found scabbed by the whips of history, the scars painting a montage of beautiful affliction. We are loved because we are damned. We are cursed because we cannot cease to give up on hope.”

In times of creation, I always brought Amelia the greatest presents. She wandered into the glass kitchen, the backs of cabinets filtered through a glossed lens. She prepared food on those particular mornings for Fernando and myself, and for a brief stint in time, she was happy. I always crushed papier-mâché into boxes, as if to stuff the limited space with crowded excess. She never complained while rummaging through the clutter in order to reveal a white mask attached to a black stick.

“It’s masquerade season. We are headed to a ball,” I would say. She yelled in ecstasy, crowning Fernando as the new king of the night. I only held hope that she could justify her creative cackle.

The city is condensed into small pockets. In these miniature holes I’ve seen the dirt of wealthy jeweled ladies christen the derelicts. Because the weather allows for constant mobility, we are unable to wash the dark stains from the streets. I washed the poor souls with what little grace I could give them, yet they remained tainted by each passing car. Presents given to obese children, presents to corporate heads in steel spires, dreaming to scrape the tip of the stratosphere. I once embraced a favor asked of me when
I returned from Mars. I brought with me red rocks and wanted to pass them out to the street singers. They accepted them happily with a muted embrace. But it wasn’t long until the dogs cornered every happy customer with pestering barks. I witnessed the mutt’s tear into vagabond flesh, the red stones bleeding onto the dirt piss pavement. The rain scattered the clumps that collected near sewage ducts. The men became murals where common people walked, not like Hollywood stars, but gum filaments spiraling undertow to the cadence of stomping feet.

Amelia wanted to chaperon Fernando until his timely death, she wanted to escort him through the drowning, the van submerged under the flash flood that tipped the metal box into the city’s small pockets of nature. She would swim around the drowning bodies and kiss Fernando as he attempted to gasp for air. The bodies would see the current she built, the continuous water pressing atop of the sinking van. Gongs were only used when accidents occurred, when the fast driving of the human spirit cut into the ultimate swaying pendulum. I struck the silver plate with my welcome mallets, Fernando’s eyes reddening with the pressure of asphyxiation. Amelia touched his wet cheeks, reminding him that water was the purest way to die. He shivered with resistance, punching the glass in slow movements. Amelia simultaneously repaired the small cracks he made on the window. Rain continued to pour and Fernando’s steady resistance slowly quieted. I continued the welcoming chorus; the trees that oversaw us shivered with every hard bang.

“If we stay here much longer, he will sense our presence, Amelia,” I said. But Amelia continued to peek through the cracks of the closet. She observed Fernando’s bare back and his deep thrusts into his able-bodied bride.
“Not until they finish,” Amelia finally said to me. We are deep distractions. Forms free of contour, caged skeletons penetrated by men and women, men and men, women and women. The White Bear creates apathy in all its subjects. I’ve never questioned why Amelia chose rain. Even though I understood its clear purpose, it never forgave Fernando. The White Bear was under the scars in my face, under the tears near my bottom, and still I felt its soft presence sooth me when I was unable to stop crying. Amelia told me that I would miss it, all the savagery, an animal set free in a concrete wild. When I float through its abandoned halls, I see the claw marks on the cell walls. The scribbles of pencil against the bareness of white. A man is standing groping his genitals, ejaculating over the face of a hermaphrodite, a gun jammed into the anus of a fat woman as she gives head to a small dick. The holy cross is set on fire, as the Jewish star shines over the bedposts. I see the marks on my wrists and the faded residue on bed sheets, the knots serving as small nooses. I’m horizontal, receiving the clear lubrication of god’s kiss.

There are greater masks hidden in the airport, just a few miles east from the White Bear. Amelia frequented the soaring birds. She’d tell me that flight was ethnic cleansing, mass population deserting the limited island. Fernando wasn’t allowed to fly. And before my death, I only became a parachute in cell cages. Amelia only took comfort in flight. Perhaps her juncture was ignited with death, and by then, the only means to see freedom was pasting herself against the aluminum frames of the booming airplanes.

Instinct tells me this isn’t real. And Amelia sounds off in a corner, laughing away at my expense.
“You’ve masked the face that frowns,” she said. She remembers fornication like I remember the push. She reminds me that it is all sanity and an emotive reflex. I hopped over the brushwood in order to dance my way around her stale eyes. She lingered behind me, without expressing any sense of satisfaction, and claimed that my love had strengthened to a brute force, the banging of metal against hollow wood fixtures.

I looked at her as she bent over, her shoulder blades pressing through her skin. I continued to prance around the treetops as she remained in her receiving position, her hair, old and dry, carpeting the roots of skin foils forming on her cheeks.

“We build cathedrals to save our imagination,” I said.

“I’ve destroyed any hope of that. I’m sorry,” she said while imitating a bird’s long beak. It has become so coated with salt and sand, the land urging prison sex in a new city of dreaming spires. Dead towers hung by hooks against a black canvas. Paint botched in every stone and stencil, proof in nails bit. The big push forcing her to file down each protein plate to slits as thin as eyelashes. I tell my son that if a girl’s horny for you, no matter what situation you’re in, do not turn her down. Because that is something you do not want to miss. We forged our signatures on bending hearts. We produced granite and titanium. Cage bars and caged cells looking to pass out of her veins and her love for you, or me, has flowed into a bulging eye. I see her standing, happy to be free, happy to no reign.
Serving the Migration
Edict: 3

You’ve seen crumbled cities built on rubble. They move. They’re malleable to the worn winds that sweep them. And the crests of rivers melt under the steps we’ve walked: edges of compacted mud encrypting miles. There is a story told about resistance. There is a resistance to every story. Those rivers connect history with a false modernity. Each duct flowing languidly wears down the linings of clay. But these rivers cannot eat history. History’s erasure ensures that. So those derelict structures grind into powder and rubble. Rubble bagging your arms to the ground, a weight felt at the tips of rhinestones, bending against a falling ceiling. You’ve seen all proof, yet you continue. As if it masks error.
How to Kill Your Mother

there’s a lantern guiding me through the happy claps of school children play and
light in order to see inside this mammoth big green tusks dangling from his
salivating ivory he pushes his tentacles aside his pubic area a metal brush grinding
up against each follicle ingrained in each stencil i’ve seen the tombs of my
mother and father caressed by the undertaker subtle differences that align
themselves in ordinary rectangles as the sky transforms its vast blueness into
checkered patterns
gruel tin can jeans in a jar
dreams to clean suicide a comfort and absence my mother always remembered
the lack of emotions expressed by mama never claiming to you any reaction on
cheap cremated surfaces mama always stumbled under her drooping skin her
face caked in flour outlined with blue and peach highlights now you see her pink
shyness never saying i love you never holding you in a delicate petting a false
smile cooked on her and whenever you came around mother what little spices she
managed to stream over the dry turkey felt constipated it could never be enough
so the words escape me and skip over tall ink written on the indents of paper folds
forgotten divorce spreadsheets that never pushed through legal mama refused to
hold a job after her retirement from her days as a seamstress i helped hold up the
figure of our house the trembling walls bending under the weight of my medical
sedation mother masked our family’s insecurity with work my medical papa
boasted to my brother and me the only time she appeared in the newspaper a pride
only he would wear sedated
work has always been my safety even at the expense of my family do i live to regret it now that your father is no longer around i suppose sometimes she would say to me for days at a time i sat hoping that their return from the weeded graveyard would allow redemption over my mistakes from the laughter i had when marcos fell and twisted his neck 360 degrees his dreams wrung out like sweat squeezed from a drenched towel even if you could manage another drop out of the dampness it was hardly enough to fill a glass he knew my father and fathers know their surroundings but he wasn’t crazy and my father knocks on the cement caging if you cage an emotion long enough that emotion grows caged if i’ve been grateful to see white soft cubicles as forms of escape i can now begin to understand why i’ve forgotten the emotion of love

***

I wanted to help. I wanted to heal. My brother’s addiction strengthened the bond he had with mom, as their receptive attitudes towards instability grew. I wouldn’t have given so much power to a medication. I would have heard his indifference coughed through the moist air and the whispers he murmured to himself when dad died. His hair grew, and his beard flourished down his wide cheeks. (If you’ve listened closely, you can hear the instability in what he is saying to you. So, don’t listen.) It’s the voices that keep him alert to his surroundings and remind him that dad swam hard. The sounds banged on windows and glass. Taps now cause him to convulse. He’s reminded constantly that he is not alone and is comforted by what he has repeatedly said, “father has not yet left and is sitting right next to me.”
“He’s addicted, and it’s those pills. They are causing him to hallucinate. They are causing him to become aggressive,” she said.

“If you would follow the procedure, if you would follow the protocol the doctor has prescribed, this would be much easier,” he’d yell back. “But because you’re too busy wanting to be correct, to control, to maintain your beliefs and impose, you are so stuck up your ass to make things easier on me…”

“It’s not about you. And why can’t you take responsibility for your actions? Not everything’s about you.” I interrupted them in an attempt to channel his ire into the depths of his own ears.

“Forget it, he’s not going to listen!” She said. Her eyes red, her shoulders slumped. She paced in and out of my brother’s room, and it comforted me. Because it meant she was not done trying. I always feared that the moment she decided to escape and accept my brother’s change was when any possibility of pacifying him would end.

“Just let me handle this mom, please,” I responded and closed the door behind me. In that room I dictated to him his possessive personality towards the medication. I listened and tried to contain the only real feelings I had. The sun shone into the room’s tight space. The white tiles bordered with brown grout collected dust from our dog’s dead hairs. The empty bottles of Malta crusted at the tips, and dirty cups clustered near clean socks. Walls painted clean but covered in shredded posters. His computer glaring at his nose, reflecting hundreds of pages on Word: a book he’d written composed in word salad.

“Do you believe that people are connected, that they can be controlled? I feel for some reason people are trying to control me,” he said.

“What exactly are you getting at?”
“I’m asking if you think that we are all connected, like the internet, and that people, if they want to manipulate you or do things to you by just thinking it, by putting themselves in a trance and controlling your actions, that they would be able to do damage,” he said as he positioned himself on his bed revealing the sweat stains on his sheets. “How is it that people are so easily manipulated, that a person can talk and control them? I feel that since we are all connected so technologically, that somehow our brains have wired themselves into these circuits,” he continued as he gripped the computer tightly and shook it. The fans rotated down on him without relieving heat as his sweat creamed its way down his neck.

“It’s called rhetoric, the ability of persuasion. Nothing is compressed in a simple space.”

“That’s not what I am trying to get at.”

“Then what exactly is it you are trying for?”

Mama invited mom and us over for dinner. A week earlier, we had buried dad. The funeral had not struck me the way it had my brother. During the eulogies, mom, without flinching, simply praised dad’s fighting spirit. And though his body had given up, he maintained his dignity throughout. I watched my brother tear up and cry, I watched my cousins sob through entire speeches. They laughed away during the wake the night before, telling jokes that had nothing to do with dad’s obvious funny bone. I couldn’t bring myself to celebrate his life with laughter. Mom would always say, “I suppose that if you take a rooster and have it crow in the middle of the day, over a ledge where they pick up garbage, where homeless ladies crawl in search of food, the fowl is satisfied. Because
at least he is receiving attention. Even if it’s only a matter of positioning.” I was just learning about dad’s craving cock, his secrets and his infidelities that mom kept so tightly wrapped over her blank face. My brother mumbled to himself.

The dinner was cooked with fire, and it smelled burnt throughout Mama’s small house. Her couches were tightly wrapped in plastic, and a chandelier with wood trimmings spread shadows when the light hit it. Mom arranged the tablecloths and eating utensils.

“The food is ready, Delia. Put it on the table. And please get these kids to their seats,” Mama said, banging a wooden spoon against the steaming pot. We weren’t kids. We wanted to eat like men at the table with large plates towering over our faces. She’d repeat it again, and I’d become a greater man without her sly calling: you kids. We would take the place of the dead. Dad’s imprint on his easy chair and us living on his seat, on his bed, but we were still much too young to show restraint. If we could be anything to mom and Mama, I would’ve wished us to be men.

“Sit yourself there, sit your brother down. He’s outside. Call him,” mom said.

“I think he heard…”

“Call him! And don’t argue,” she snapped. I walked out of the kitchen and into the garage that was adjacent to the front of the house. The old and rundown. Neglect evident in the moss that ate at the edges of the walls—everything held up with a floor that mocked the superficial look of marble. He sat on a rocking chair caressing his shoulders. I snuck up behind him and flicked his skin.

“Food’s ready.”

“He said food would be safe to eat. And that it would be set to chill.”
“Food’s ready. You need to eat.”

I insisted in any way that I could. But he rocked himself back and forth watching the cars make their way down the hill. We questioned whether we could be faithful to our instincts, to see things for what they are. I had always hoped that he was just in a state of shock. He saw our dad strolling up the hill, his ears bent backwards from the tug of rose thorns, their green spokes cutting into his peach rind, the blood wet and dripping. He saw dad stumble to his side and whisper to him the secrets that made our mother sigh.

“If it hadn’t been for the sirens in the water, if it hadn’t been for the weak veins that could not circulate air to him, I think he would’ve made it out,” he told me.

“Sometimes it’s better to forget. Sometimes it is,” I said. I wanted to believe those words, and I guess I hoped that by seeing them float in front of me, they would seem more real to him, or to me.

My brother walked over to the table and waited to be fed. Mama and mom were seated next to each other separated only by the forks and knives that reflected against the chandelier’s light. The food was baked in serving dishes; the white ceramic inlays of shell carvings hugged the opaque rice and turkey. It was rare to expect turkey on an off occasion, an occasion that didn’t light up and shut down Douglas Ferns in humid weather, the likes that nipped at the tips of each dying blade.

I collect us into wooden houses and feed each mouth with Mama’s tryptophan and remember that it is sleep that soothes. There, we are in love and shameless, Papa luring us to tug on his index finger in which the ripples from his flatulence would rumble the cheeks of his ass. Dad would be satisfied with such an act and say it was good. He’d remind us that when we reached Papa’s age, we would have our fart humor revived.
I saw these images play on the lips of my brother and felt he knew how to communicate with them all. I saw in his eyes the same look that dad gave me a week before he was called in by the mayor of Barceloneta. He’d serve as a mass sterilizer to girl’s pregnant too early, animals unable to be cared for. Now they’re all women—as my brother and me transformed from boys into all men. In sleep, I knew we were stronger and cohesive, even if it never lasted. The turkey sterilized our tongues from the bitterness of brooding, lagged the lips and weighed them down before they set off. Dad said it was just a job. Dad said they were just cats and dogs.

“You keep on at it, and we are going to ship you off,” Mama said as she served him a plate of fried rice. The turkey was cut thin but managed to maintain a rubbery texture. “Hector was just the same, and we sent him to the streets to beg for a living. And don’t think we’re evil. We don’t turn our backs on each other, but I won’t handle it and neither will your mother.”

“That’s enough Ma,” mom interrupted her. “He’s dealing with it as he deals with it. You wouldn’t have someone telling you what’s the right way to manage?”

“I’d just slap him and send him on his way. No use pouting over the mistakes of others,” Mama replied. “Like your father, like you, all running down the same path. And you laugh, fat and happy.”

We were now smaller than she was: mom, my brother, and me. My brother smirked. Mom burst out in a cackle. She motioned her arms and covered her mouth with a hand cloth as her laugh was interrupted by spurts of coughing. She turned red, her eyes watered down and her smile continued to grow more powerful.
“You always have a way of making us feel better,” mom finally said. Her coughs worsened.

“Do you want some water?”

“Sit back down! Let her suffocate in her own air,” Mama said. She walked over to my brother and snapped the long wooden spoon against his wrists. “Just like your father.” She bent into my brother’s face and locked his eyes into the silver hairs that poked their way out of her wide nose.

“And you, Delia,” she continued. “Just like Hector. You all have been cut the same. Congratulations!”

Before I could even appreciate the many carefully threaded insults woven by Mama, I tried to concentrate on the motions of her jaws biting down and tightening as she clutched each sentence in the grip of her mouth. I understood why my brother isolated himself within his shell of mania. He just sat there, fingers intertwined in a prayer, his eyes scanning the insides of his glasses. And I was just as lost as he was, hoping the turkey cooked by Mama would take time to chew.

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in order to understand the polished tabletops i placed pictures of you and me over the brown grease they slipped off tossed themselves into vases without looking back at what i left behind i covered them with topsoil and watered them every day for twelve years in stability in decision here where we can grow coffee on beach vacations use the oil on a salamander sizzling under sun i want water he tried to side with my mother and continue to rant about the world about the philology in women’s curves and remind me that i assumed my own level of
responsibility but i can’t be blamed for becoming smarter than the average
puerto rican the vacations taken on sand rubbed off an aura so smug a fog was
released from bean bowels with every step taken the cloud floating behind him
stimulated erratic words that would not settle i want
rain kissed sewage rice on dead patties baby birds with clipped wings
smears of father’s opaque face on stolen picture frames i heard that he mumbled
in happiness for not being able to see his wife screw another man on his bed i’ve hoped that we could quiet the people that tell me i am ill willed because i desperately want her to care and give her the words mama never could i speak to you to understand that even though i used a dog’s jaw to tear the wings from changos i cleaned up the blood with the fur of calico cats i skinned them down to their fragile bones and did not complain or cry or even tug i used the ends of a switchblade to saw my way inwards their twitching reflexes only moved with the tearing mother caught me only twice and helped dab away at the white tiles she’d afterwards wash my wrists with bleach leaving behind brown patches in calico patterns i’d wear them as i showered to remember the smell of clorox and the mist left behind by the cats mother smeared on my wrists neosporin and i knew that father’s cats would seek me out and cut again
i told mother that father’s grave was too shallow and that he could hear the relentless sobbing in the tombs next to him that space cut into the earth was neither natural nor comfortable and at night i slipped away without them knowing and uncovered the heavy white slab from father’s view and he welcomed
me with a sickly smile but still had his color on his cheeks even if they were
pampered on blacker than when his cells circulated throughout his face if you
could stare into the pallbearers of that day you’d realize that we didn’t complain
over father’s fat water weight but i complained when i used a crowbar to help
him breath because it only reminded me of my grandmother amelia she resisted
by draping herself over father’s casket amelia too old having seen her children
leave this earth all too early amelia lamenting the makeup that was placed on
father’s cheeks

get him out of there he’s going to suffocate he needs to breathe she said her
skinny bones pushed themselves against the unstable totem that kept the coffin
raised he’s going to suffocate he won’t be able to breathe please

mother attempted to help her off the floor as father’s coffin fell to her feet his
face smirked at finally being able to position his head out of stiffness people like
their dead all padded and pruned the men and women roared in a silent gasp as
my brother helped place him back to rigidness back to paralysis i could hear him
whisper in a gargled voice veils used to wrap air and lift dryness he appeared
beside me without anyone really seeing how drenched he was motioning his hands
against an imaginary glass and though his body was angry serious and tight he’s
clearly happy to wet the floor without anyone seeing

don’t you worry son for she will soon be here with me don’t you worry my
boy we are all able to swim better and can you see that makeup on my face
how terrible remember to pray dear that is all we can do now remember to pray
he mocked my grandmother as she was aided back onto her two feet his voice grew louder as he talked into my ear amelia started making her way past me she froze at the sight of dampness on the floor the air conditioner dripped in a soft rhythm above my father next to me squeezed the water out of his tailored pants

when i awake i want to believe in my mother if you look twice under my eyelids you can see the scars that formed because i never took off my contacts their slits cut into the white space leaving imprints that vein towards the back of the eye two lines that fork right along plain view then disappear my mother was born with green eyes i insisted on buying hazel colors in order to find the in-between people would remark on how beautiful my eyes could have been people could remark on the individual beauty that did not make its way out of me

***

She drove the Jeep right by the skulking sea sand. The beach roads that string their way throughout the island tangle with the forestry, the car lanes undivided, rather unified resembling a singular road. Mom would sing with La Lupe as her boleros played. She told me that she learned to appreciate boleros because Papa danced with her in the slow step movements; he’d smile down as she followed his feet.

“If you learn these steps, you’ll learn to slow down your surroundings. Look to feel the movements, the sway resembles a floating cloud. As you should. As you will,” he’d tell her. Mom preached to my brother and me that La Lupe carried a presence when she was on stage.
“I first saw her at the Lion’s Club in New York. We drove down from Connecticut. I couldn’t believe how graceful she sang. Yet her voice’s anger would pound our ears. She was wonderful,” mom recollected as we continued to drive nowhere.

I could only imagine her as a child, cradled on a seat as Mama slapped her on her knees, reminding her to be still, Papa diving into his clear liquid in brown bags. Even if it was a skewed image, I was pleased in putting together a smoky bar, mom’s green eyes glowing with the blue and white lights and Lupe dancing her songs in a controlled Santerian trance, her voice let loose by the trumpets, her hips skipping with the piano keys. Mom explained to me that Lupe disappeared after her fame peaked, that she lost herself in the streets of the Bronx and never made it back to Cuba. She lived the rest of her days in an old abandoned home, her fans coming to visit her here and there, still insisting she could hit her notes. Even though her body weakened, and she dressed in attire suited to placate the anger and feisty growl from her voice, she persisted on with the sounds of a changing season, lunatic and surviving, foolish and alive. But she remained steadfast to her cause like our own Julia de Burgos. They roam the streets together, misplaced and deserted and are only remembered by those maddened with the sound of their say-sos. I live to see if their voices could be heard in the white noise of radio stations. I wanted to have experienced what mom was able to, to see the troubadours of our nation pick at a microphone as crowds engaged them with their strong gestures.

When I was just a few years younger, I woke up in the middle of the night. It was raining. My dad was sleeping in the living room. The broken glass from the mirror was still left in front of my mom’s door. I tiptoed into the kitchen where there was a black radio rusted by the salt in the air, the knobs to tune the signal were difficult to move and
would leave brown and grey glitter on your fingers. I managed to smuggle it under my arm and made my way back to my room. My bed sheets were cold even though I had only been gone for a few minutes. I sat there and plugged the cord into the wall. The radio’s red power light flickered on as I tuned the signal. Voices would fuse into each other as I managed my way through the stations. My room was dark. I remember hearing her voice sting through the silence in the space, her anger seeping through the two small speakers. I blended her voice with other jockeys’ that rose and fell under my control. The curtain from my window flapped with the wind as specks of rain snuck through the screen. Lupe’s voice stood out from all the others. She captivated me in a trance, and I couldn’t stop myself from returning to her roar. As I played with the tune, I was startled by a dark silhouette at the door. It stood without moving towards me but rather swayed like a tree in an open field.

“Pa?” I said in a hoarse voice. Lupe’s melody still played through the speakers. She sang about la gran tirana as the squeal of violins fuzzed into the dark room. “Pa?”

The shadow danced on the white tile below its crowning base. I held onto the radio, pressing the speakers onto my bare stomach, the sounds vibrating against my skin. It finally stretched out its hands. I retreated further into my bed, dropping the radio on the mattress, my hands pushing me back against the wall. The shadow inched closer to me with its long poles stretched out and Lupe greeting its presence, their warmth filling the empty room with a gravitating pull. All around me objects were thrown into the silhouette of the figure. Without resistance, they were sucked into its shadow, hands still outstretched. I shielded myself under my sheets until I felt a tug at the end of my bed, the sheet pulling itself away from my face, my body bare against the openness. I was
reluctant, but I finally stretched out my limp arms and grabbed the shadow’s transparent black outline. We danced to the final beats of Lupe’s greatest masterpiece. I followed in broken movements the stubborn caress of the cold shadow as it led me out through my doorway.

Mom never explained to me why she never divorced him. I could feel the pressure building on her cheeks for she carried on them the soft impressions that hid from the world, from me, and my brother, the reality of continued secrecy. I was never told about Tío Hector and his relationship with Dad, or the severity of his own sickness that blanketed every member of my family with cheesy smiles. My brother weighed in for these past situations with absenteeism at family gatherings. I tried my best to decipher the truths behind his greying glasses, for there were many, yet he would turn in his ballot and elect to engage in the superficial entrees that were served. His own mania was quietly building over the years, pieced together by the memories that I could never recall. He’d glue them with mom’s own stubbornness and create a figure in white that within its outer darkness was mixed in heavy bearings. A fragile urn not painted with all the glories or accomplished satisfactions of gold, but instead incomplete stories.

She drove into the gaps that were hidden from clear view, the Jeep’s wheels crumbling the leaves of the fallen palms.

“Did you guys know that I was a singer when I was younger?” Mom said as she parked the Jeep into the shade of a leaning palm tree. “Your grandmother would play the piano in the old home.”

“Which grandmother?” I said.
“Amelia. The house she had where your father grew up. You don’t remember? She used to play piano until her arthritis affected the movements in her fingers. Your dad would always swoon over my singing. He always said that is what caught his attention.”

“Being in choir doesn’t count as a singer,” my brother said. He scratched his chin and moved the carton of orange juice from his lap. “I sing in the shower. Am I a singer?”

“Yes, you are,” she replied.

The midday sun was crowded by a group of clouds. Along the trails of sea foam and seaweed, you could make out the algae that danced underneath the weight of the water. We got out of the car and paraded down a small sand dune. At the banks of the beach, there were plastic plates and glass Heineken bottles left around dead campfires. My brother strayed from my side and made his way to the seawater. I felt an urge to cry. The heat of the sun bit my cheeks and repressed the desire. Mom wilted onto an old tree stump, her brown curly hair banged against her contrasting green eyes. She monitored my brother as he tossed branches of wood that washed up back into the retreating water. I found the holes imprinted by crabs to be sections in the sand where they wrote codes to each other: when to dig out, when to let the water take them back, when to decide it was all over. My mom didn’t call to me. Or to my brother who sank deeper and deeper into himself. I heard her hum boleros, her smile held tighter than what I imagined Lupe’s to have been.

“It’s nice, isn’t it? The ocean,” I tried saying to her. I mumbled the words. She did not hear. We heard a noise, a yell from a man and the scream from a woman.

The couple yelled in friendly jest. They threw torrents of sand at each other, packing them tightly into their fists. I giggled at the memory of my brother and me as
kids. We used to stay at the edge of the ocean and dive as deep as we could to dredge molds of sand. The melting lava of brown sediment would initially hack at our skin, only for us to find out later in the day, after we’d showered, that our skin was softer than gravy. I’d jump onto his back and smear sand on his head, and he’d wear it as shampoo, the two of us continuing our frantic battle until mom called to us.

   The couple continued until they retreated further away from where we were situated. I saw them embrace atop of each other as the two blended into one; she rode on him with the certainty of a cowboy. Their image slowly shrank and disappeared. Their silhouettes burnt out with the yellow punches from the sun as they withdrew like a fleeing wave into the angry rolling ocean.
I’ve wanted to talk to you about things before my time, things during, and the meaning after. Roles have stabilized and grow concurrent with modern staleness. I think, I know, I’m sure. I feel you work through me, and I don’t complain because I think I, like all of us, enjoy living at means that never existed. It’s the toys they give us. So we play.

The malls have taken over and have fed us with enough Krispy Kreme that those stuffed boys cum sugary paste out of their pricks. There was experimentation before there was a Plaza. I won’t talk about the lab rat status you’ve given us, and allowed us to keep rolling in that wheel. We wore proudly that badge of capitalism because we played with our Monopoly set and always expected to get out of jail. Daddy told us we were the playgrounds. And we bought into that trick because we needed to feel sovereign by culture.

They won’t tell because those billboards are sanitized, absent from the news about our sterilization. They won’t advertise to you that those beaches you long for are pressed with condom wrappers. Toes tipped with a love gun misfiring. I traverse because I am. I stay because I can’t. Leave any cost of living out of the bendición. The rent has increased, and we can’t pay. I’ve seen the future and have grown cold feet. I can assure you, this is not my home.
Places Called Home

A lone carcass bends against the great moss, its hind legs sweeping the dust from under it. In a space between the clearing, there is a mass moving through the bush
teething away at the overgrown grass. He sees its bottled neck cutting into those spaces almost gingerly. The yellow eyes damp from the morning mist. They were afraid. The eyes bounced on their shadows, lining them in straight patterns, collecting each dark rim with soft rope outlines. He tried to respire; his sweat dampened his trousers into a deeper green. The figure soon josted its last stare at them before it rummaged out of the gap between the vines and trees and disappeared into the sleeping mist.

The men spoke in whispers about the potholes on the road. They cautioned each other about the noise that they’d make if they stepped into the water, and the holes deep and gorged would file away at their thick socks like acid, and they all feared their watery steps would leave a trail making it easier to find them. The houses bearing the sidewalks crawled out of their pedestrian nooks, gravel cylinders toeing at the edges of tar. They hid from each other, behind the tangled webbing, their faces ingrown with distortion. Cement left behind as evidence for coming years, dignities salvaged as mementos for a people in modern rhythm.

He led them by a pond, collecting leather wallets from the ground and said to his men, “Pass them along, pass each, and put them away. You may be one of them.” His green satchel pressed against his naked chest. He gathered his pistol and retraced it, swiping away at the ash that collected on its spine. The wallets were old and aged with red dirt and dark blood. Each of the men moved their hands kissing the tips of their fingers with their nails.
Each man followed and tailed him. They paced through the mist, and the trees spoke to them with slits more dapper than morning dew, wood gonging beyond them, beyond terraces and further away than the cascading riverbank that collected them there.

“If it’s not too much time, we should stop and drink,” one of the men said.

“It’s early, and they’ll be on us soon. The pack is feeding.”

At the corner of the town, there was an old steel tower partially eaten at its footing by the salt in the air. The sky grazed its blinking red light and the men followed their leader to the fence that enclosed the summit. The mist from the morning did not give way, and the green of the mountains glowed in smoke and fire.

“You hear that banshee howl. They are tracking us,” the man said.

“We climb the trees then. We wait it out.”

“We wait and meet them? To give up you mean?” The man said.

“We wait.”

He had led his men out of the fire. The ash was still blooming. They waited at the end of the town and climbed the trees observing at a distance the faint ribs of Cerro Maravilla.

“Headed to the peak. After that we’ll restock on some ammunition and hike down to the Caribbean Sea. We’ll outlast them but we got to stay awake.” His hair tangled against his swollen eye, his mouth cut and bleeding.

“Are you awake?” she said to him. He patted her breast and pinched her. She felt the air in the room light up with the clear dust of the morning sun.

“We have to keep watch for the sirens to sound off, dear,” he would try to say to her, but she insisted on digging him deeper into the bed, the mattress inflating with the
weight of her body riding atop of his hips. They were wandering through the maze of blankets.

“You don’t think they’ll really make, do you,” she said and held him.

“I think they will,” he said.

“We have to amputate the hand, sir. It is far-gone and with all the pressure mounting at the columns. There aren’t enough doctors who can tend to each of you.”

“Leave it gangrened, at this point it’ll fall off on its own,” he said.

“Your hand.”

“When they kick us all out, it won’t matter much now, will it?”

“Yes, I know it is my hand.”

“Your hand and your wife and your kids, those kids leading the front. We need to leave here willingly. Take the ships and go.”

“I know it is my hand.”

The rain had cast away some of the mist, and the wind swept over their faces padding them with a slick wetness. There was a rummaging of high cane stalks at a distance, and the men all perked and grabbed for their rifles.

“You see them,” one of them said to him.

“I hear it. They’re here.”

Appearing out of the thin columns of cane were three large animals. They cloistered themselves by a patch of grass licking their thick coats. Their own massive hides barbarous and keen as if they spent their lives aged with violent and sublime
subtlety. One of the beasts, startled by movement, scampered to the corner of the grazing pasture. The other aided in flanking a vagrant mongoose that scurried out of the briar, its claws slamming down on its frail body. The remains scattered on the uprooted dirt. He could hear their breathing, he could feel their heat as he met their scent with his and his eyes fixed on the yellowness of theirs. They stepped closer to their tree and disappeared in the obstruction of a wooden branch.

“Where did they go? Do you see them, they were just there.”

“Wait. They’ll be up soon. Get ready.”

“Wait on them? We need to get out of here.”

“Be still!”

“Look over at the tower. If we jump off and run over, we could make it.”

“Be still.”

“Be Still? No, I won’t be still,” she said to him.

“I won’t. Let them take us away? This is my home.”

“Your home? It is not just your home.”

“It is just my home.”

“Then you can choose to stay in your burning tree.”

“It is just my home,” she sang.

The creature scraped the foot of one of his men, claw marks denting his skin and his blood swelling onto his patch of clothes. He managed a quick thrust of his dagger into the eye of the animal, and the squeal of it broke the stillness in the air.

“Grab ahold of your rope. Grab it, and don’t loosen your grip!”
“It has me good.”

“Don’t let it go.”

His body was pushed up against one of the branches, and he propelled his weight over the man. He stuck the dagger again into the other eye of the animal, and the animal let its jowls loosen. He fought the onslaught of rain that persisted. The creature stumbled down the branches with its eyes flaming, its weight glossing over the bark of the tree. It fell to a complete stop at the base. The pack ran and disappeared into the forest.

“The bastard clipped me. It’s not going to stop, the blood,” the man repeated.

He knew it was impossible to close the wound. His tongue licked the specks of rain from his lips. He felt the tug of the man continue. The men gathered around the injured and held his hand. He closed his fist into the ball of his stub and waited: waited for the rain to lighten and the man to pass. He heard the wails of the animals, and he soothed the cries of his men by singing to them, *time never healed, time never stopped, the world gone ranging, fading and stop.*

She showered in the mornings, and usually after sex, they would clean each other’s genitals with soft hand lotion. They maintained that caressing each other with a lubricant allowed their marriage to follow similar fluidity. She would tug on him as he pressed into her, and the two of them would glare into each other as the water from the shower steamed the windows. His infection was a loose case that the doctors did not understand, as if the bacteria were fabricated under radioactivity. It ate away at his extremities and coiled into the tips of his hands. “Sing me a song,” he would tell her from the bed. She laughed and they both sang to each other, “*time never healed, time never stopped, the world gone ranging, fading and stop.*” She collected her towel from the
floor and danced in front of him entrancing the body with a smile. She took care of him. On most days, they took care of each other, but on that day, she cared for him.

After awhile, the men stood up from the dead body, their clothes damp from rain and spotted with red.

“We must continue. They’ll be back.”

“We just leaving him?”

“His wallet,” he said. “Take it and leave it at the foot of the tree.”

The sun still had not managed to break through the glass fragments in the air. The small strings of black sheets rained with the overhead drizzle. As he walked, he whipped his hand and his stub at the floating powder. The men followed the torn and broken road and moved with its winding motion up the hill. They could see, as they often stopped and looked back, the tower, and felt the gnawing away of bones, the cracking sounds spreading out in the valley.

“Mighty good of you to try and save him back there.”

“Might as well have let them have him.”

“It’s our only chance. It was the only chance. And now we are soaked in his shit.”

“If you’re unhappy, then bathe in the river. Leave your clothes behind and have them track you.”

“You’re walking around without a shirt. I don’t see any of us harping on that.”

“If you want, then do it. Don’t look me up when they catch you,” he said as they reached an abandoned kiosk. The stands wore drenched newspapers and wrapped in plastic were bottle openers and old pastries. “We’ll wait here and catch drift in the morning. Along the road they won’t bother us. I think they’re satisfied for today.”
The men were uneasy about his remarks, as if he modified their existence into partial meals for the skulking animals. They knew that without his help, they’d be gone. But they also knew if chance came, he’d feed their overgrown bodies to them and make his way towards the gravestones near Toro, alone.

He left them at dusk. The men napped deep in a dead hollow tree, their rotating compasses spinning aimlessly at their hips. He noticed the footsteps that circled the camp just off of where the men slept. He followed those impressions and managed to mirror a perimeter that had been set before him. The mud tracks blending with the trims of waterfalls. The trees above him were abandoned by leaves and birds, and his shade was constant with his fixation to the ground. The pack was hounding them. He noticed their tail whips left behind grey streaks on white shrubs.

She was diffident and alone. The last of the community had already moved without them, and they waited for the words from his officer to help them vacate any last person left behind. He assured her that their kids would be able to climb the pillars of the radio towers and interrupt the broadcast. She maintained that Carlos and Darío were going to succeed. They lived on the fringes of Villalba, and the boats off the coast were drifting farther away, taking the final currents of light with them. The island had become nothing more than a dark stain.

“They’ve declared it, and they will fire up the towns if we allow them to,” she said to him. He rummaged through the curtains, peeked out the window and saw the men mobilized far away.

“We must go with them,” he said.
“We are not going anywhere where they head to. It is not our business to leave,” she said.

“Then it is our business to follow. We cannot survive unless we stick with someone.”

“Sing to me.”

“You sing to me.”

“Time never healed, time never stopped, the world gone ranging, fading and…”

“Stop that! Stop that stop that stop it!” He beat the stub of his arm against the bedpost. She trembled against the wall and crunched at her lips, red seepage penetrated down her chin. Her eyes curled deeper into their sockets.

“It’s my turn,” he said finally and paced out of the bedroom following the low impacts of sirens in the air.

Posies of wrought flowers were placed at the heads of stone. He gathered the remains of those men and separated them next to their wallets. The sun was hot, and the air was humid. The village was still frantic from the fire, and the men and women and children were being collected with gunfire shot into the air. He could see them stumble against one another and crash their kneecaps onto the pavements, their cries muzzled by the laughter of the men. His shirt was torn into a worn vest.

“We have gathered them and given them a good orientation, sir,” a man called to him.

“Here’s what we do. Take the bodies of the dead and float them down stream. The newborns we give to the widows. They’ll need something to tell their story. I suspect you’ve quarantined and set a perimeter around the town. Take the remaining men out
back and shoot them on their noses. As for the women, take them to the cabins and enjoy.”

“Yes.”

The men woke to the cackles of a fire hearth; the damp evening collected the moon’s visibility as he poked through the charred meat with his red-stained dagger.

“The fire’s going to call them over,” a man said.

“The fire’s going to give us a meal. You continue to worry about what I do, and I’ll soon be too worried for this here knife to stab at you. Is that understood?”

“I’m just trying to…”

“No no no. Not another pipe. I think I’ll decide what’s right, and what is right is we need a hot fire to keep this up.” His mouth crumbled under his heavy mustache, his grin beaming over the dull blade. He stared into the overexerted look on the faces of his men; they quietly sat with pustules grinding their way out of their skins.

“The pack is near. They’ll be upon us in an hour or two,” he said.

The men began to mumble to each other.

“It is not of worry to you whether they reach us or not. All that should be of concern is us reaching that summit. We finish here this meal and we’ll be on our way. The two left are reorganizing, if you will. Probably trying to decide which one of us to pick at next. With all this rest though, they’ll have enough energy to down all of us. So, my suggestion is for you to stop your damn mumbling and get ready,” he stopped and turned his back towards them, his arms lifted and his head thrust to its side. “And please do so ever so quickly.”
They moved away from the fire and camp and made their way through the calico forest, the leaves on the floor soft and teeming, and the humidity suffocated within the ferns cluttering their march. Some of the plants were still green even as ash fell. He picked through the bush that cut out of some of the trees and chewed the remaining sticks to keep himself occupied and awake. His men sloughed in-between the dangling leaves, their posture disorientated as he marched at a pace too rapid for them to catch a slight breather. He told them they were getting close to Yuri waterfall. Most of the men believed that the rivers and basins would’ve turned into black gauntlets too thick to swim in, too dark and deep to even drink from.

“We are getting closer. Try to keep up,” he yelled back to them.

“From there we do what exactly?”

“From there we see if we can collect water. I know of a cabin near by that falls under the range. It’s supposed to have some extra cartridges we can stock up on.”

“And if there aren’t any?”

“There will be.”

When they reached the waterfall, the pool was thick and crystalized. A bed of ash was intermixed with twigs and leaves rotting into brown discs. The little water that fell from the cascade was dark, and drizzled delicately into its thick base. The men passed on through, without stopping or calling out to him as he did the same.

As they rose higher and higher braving the thinning air, the foliage gleamed with a more natural texture. The ash-strewn overhead was clearing as the rain curtailed its heavy body over the ledges of steeping rifts. Trees gave life to familiar sounds, and the brooks feeding the basins further south thoroughly wove through each stony reservoir.
The men would open their mouths to get some of the dampness in them, calling to each other while fading in and out of the wilding grove.

“We need a breather. Some water over there,” the men said to him.

“We are getting closer. We cannot stop now.”

“We need a breather.”

“Ok.”

Just off the ledge was a cave dug out of the green sediment. They walked into its open mouth, the darkness evaporating with their belt lights. Inside the cave, he was surprised by how the silt from the ground surface had dried into dust. A cloud hovered within its stomach, an uneasy dryness.

“It isn’t moist in here.”

“I know.”

“It isn’t safe then.”

“I know.”

He took from his satchel a long flashlight. He turned it on and probed the corners of the cave. Towards the end, he saw inscriptions carved on the rocks that led to a gaping abyss. There were old ropes, worn with mold, tied to stalagmites.

“She said she’d leave her remains in a cave. I don’t remember which one, but I’m sure she said it,” her voice spoke to him.

“Amelia is not going up there.”

“She said it!”

The ropes led him to a pond where some clothes lay at its edge.

“Who do you think left that?”
“Who else could it have been?”

“Look at the walls. Look over there.”

The men stood before its imposing surface. There were hieroglyphs on the walls, figures writ in black paint. He touched the cold shell. He felt the brushstrokes masking tender pressure from those years of creation, emotions captured within each painted face. Markings of great fearsome creatures, yellow orbs like eyes heavy from years of eroded experience. It was as she always reassured him, that they’d come when the ash fell, when the rifles and the electricity from that small space disappeared. The island was alone, and its true inherited beasts would range. They were in the way of a special make-up in divisions and revisions, scripts in the margins of a vast mainstay. But they’d be safe. He convinced himself of that. At the summit he’d find his boys, and she would greet them with a welcome that was fearsome and cruel, but one necessary to remember that they were the warriors and chiefs and stood firm to their roots. They would be fulfilled on that night, and in the little daylight from those eerie mornings, they would remain honest.

“It’s the fire,” he said. “We need to get there as fast as possible. Before the rain ends.”

“Before the ash returns and we run into them again,” they insisted.

“They’ll run into us,” his voice cracked. “I believe it is our only chance.”

“What chance? Don’t you see! We cannot continue on this anymore. Let us go back to the bay. Let us get on those last ships.”

“Go if you want!” He threw his stub against the rock. The blood dripped instantly.

“I am not going back. We are so close.”

The men walked up to him and surrounded him.
“We won’t become a sacrifice and feed for your ends.”

“Then leave. See if you survive in that mess on your own.” He pushed through their circle and made his way towards the tongue of the cave. The soft stream of water ran through his walking feet. The men looked into each other’s faces. They knew they had to continue.

The cabin stood near an old ceiba, its large roots trifled the wooden skeleton painted with pale and red giblets from sick and dead birds. They slouched and hid. They heard the clatter of metal spoons against glass. At the window they could see shadows managing yelps. He moved closer to the window and caressed the nose of his pistol. Inside there were three elderly women draped in brown robes resembling the skin of sheared rucksacks.

“Cut into the newborn and dab it with the chemical.” The women said.

His eyes scanned the area for the newborn, his breath clouding the window. His men tried to peek over his shoulder.

“Do we ask for them to let us in?” one of them whispered.

He ignored the comment and softly jerked his arm backward. He could make out the bellies of newborn children, about three of them, naked and lined up in a row.

“The widows,” one of his men whispered.

“Shut up.”

They worked on sharpening small knives. They tested the blades on the ends of the table and chipped away pieces of wood. On top of the tables were green jars. He could make out small figures, alien babies, wrapped and tethered around their waists with umbilical chords. There were jars brown with liquid, and sealed within their ghostly
cylinders were petrified phalluses. He scanned the area to see if there was any sight of ammunition.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Shut up.”

The robed women worked on one of the babies and covered its face with a dirty sheet. They painted its bare skin with a dark liquid and drew on it symbols of grieving eyes. The women fiddled with the knives and held each other’s hands and sang in high-pitched notes *time never healed, time never stopped, the world gone ranging, fading and stop.*

“They are creatures and they are filled with magic. They are mages, and they are using a religion to weaken the earth,” she said.

“You don’t know that. They are people like you and me.”

“They aren’t. You can’t be that blind. Think. We cannot go, please. We need to stay.”

“We are leaving.”

“We need to get out of here,” the man repeated.

“Ok.”

They started making their way out of the crevice where the cabin stood and began to climb the last remaining boulders that barricaded the radio summit. They could see its strong banisters shelved into neat metal sheets, large frames paramount in their presence. The steel was sturdy, and the fog and mist and ash receded at the tip of the radio tower’s red peak. They felt their shadows slip away from them. The animals surfaced at the crater of the road. The men stopped and stood in that dark passage.
“The path is blocked. It is not safe. We cannot face them in the open,” the man said.

“They are not here to let us pass,” he said.

“You cynical prick, we aren’t getting caught up in that.”

“Then what would you have us do?”

There was a large cry, and the waves of sound cleared the voices that occupied the air. The animals scampered toward the noises. The men followed.

The pitted road stretched into a wide circle around the mountain’s breast.

They could see in the space between the cloud of ash and the smog of rain small flickers of massive ships continuously drifting out into the deep ocean. There were pockets of fire in the landscape and towns stained in blotches of thick grey. The men continued to pace. They found a rhythm and synchronized their movements with the stride of the driving animals.

At the foot of the steel radio tower, he saw the animals tearing into the metal fence where he made out three figures. The boys did not cry or fight. She stood before them, guarding Carlos and Darío, the animals wheezing with restraint. Their sharp teeth slicked with saliva. She stretched her arms, and her long black hair hung freely. Her face was patched with dots of ash, but her eyes lingered full and great. The men watched. He raced to the border of the light. The animals stayed fixed on the boys and her standing gape.

“Don’t!” He yelled out. The beasts were unmoved by his voice. “Please, love. Climb the tower.”

“It is time for you to go dear,” she said and smiled.
“Let’s take the last ships. We’ll take care of them. Just climb the tower, and you’ll be safe there.”

“No, that isn’t the way.”

“Please.”

“Remember the song?”

“Yes, I remember.”

“Well, then.” Her face glowed, and she rose higher and higher. She tipped her dress and stood straight. They could see her glowing. “You know what to do then.”

He started off and the men followed, *time never healed, time never stopped, the world gone ranging, fading and*...

“Stop.”

She had come to her ideas with slim provocation, the mending of a dark and painful certainty that he was to do without her, as he was to do without them. There wouldn’t be resistance, and it remained steady, the flash of lights and the bane of her moral subjectivity. She was no more than a memory. He felt his hand tremble uneasy with this fact, they molded into splinters jagged enough to tear the hairs off arms. Only the song was essential. Their dead bodies were cold and still, her song left dreaming with the wounds. His moment of vindication had only surfaced a small truth, and the ash that continuously fell from the dying and dead was nothing but a brief reminder of the synapse passage anesthetized with hope. She was still blooming.

“Please, come with us. Please.”
“You know I can’t.” She smiled at him. The creatures jumped into her space, and she danced around their steps. She danced, and he was certain that she consumed them, her light penetrating through. Her gravity centered on one idle task. She smiled.
Bibliography


