

*A Time of Seductive Birds*

The girl arrives in Costa Rica on a Thursday. It will be a time of windows and watching in a country of optimistic green and apathetic clocks. She does not own a hammock, but she will soon. She does not know how to sing, but she will listen to the wind and she will travel through the night and song will find her.

She takes a taxi to a terrible hotel in somewhere San Jose. Mold walks across the tiled floor in the lobby and the men sitting on the low benches outside kick empty bottles, their eyes like rabbits. In her room cockroaches skitter and hush and slide. At night they are a blanket of sound tsk tsking over the tile and across the headboard.

In the morning, she arranges her backpack. Water, iodine pellets, sleeping bag, camp stove, panties in a plastic bag at the bottom, journal in a plastic bag at the top, swimsuit, knife, pens to write her way through. The girl washes in the sink, the hair on her legs curled gold. The sun of her life is high in the sky. It will burn. It will shoot through rainbows and tree limbs and the top of her head.

She is 23, lean and muscular, sundress a flaxen blue. The girl does not know, but she is like an illuminated fish deep in the ocean, equipped with light organs. Those who see her do not forget.

At the entrance to the train station, she steps into a doorway and stops. She has not halted of her own accord; only realizes she can go neither forward nor back. She stares at the clock tick ticking high over her head on the far wall. Her delicate hands reach back—the backpack is perhaps too wide for the doorway. Her fingers reach, pat the folds of backpack and twine around thick, calloused fingers that are pulling at the belt of her pack. The girl is unaware of the thieves

that are rumored to carry razor blades with which to cut the pack belts off tourists. She only knows these surprised fingers, their stun at her twining around theirs—a moment of open curiosity—finger pad resting against finger pad. There is a liminal, quiet lean and then another man pulls the first and she is released into the swarm of bodies in the station.

Flash of a buttery smile, funnel of bodies, a ticket to Puerto Limon for two dollars. The train will come at seven, the woman who sells her the ticket says. Hands create a map in the air: this way, then that, past the bathroom with the broken sign past the soda, a café with the darkest coffee. There, she tells her, there, her hands a kind of music. Not so far.

This line, laid by Chinese, Italians and Hondurans will take eight hours to traverse. The girl will not be in first class with the aging baroque décor and tropical fruits laid out like seductive birds. She will ride in the cars with peeling paint and bodies fast together, fleshy and velvety, the talk a bright, moving tapestry.

The train pulls out, grabbing at the rails, mostly on time. The girl's backpack is at her feet and she sits next to a tall man with impossible skin. He is her age perhaps, straight-backed, with skin like cream with a teaspoon of dark coffee. He radiates. Dark lashes caress the air like butterfly wings. They sit and lean. The train crawls through the jungle outside of San Jose. It stops to catch its breath. There is the sound of metal hitting metal. It moves forward again. At a station, hawkers strut onboard announcing their wares; mangoes with chile powder, plastic bags of ice dribbled with a crimson liquid, and yellow and green blossoms of popcorn. The man buys a bag of ice and dips his finger. He turns to the girl and presents his finger gone scarlet. She buys a bag of ice and together they turn each of all five fingers the color of rich blood. Neither of them speaks as the man, she has discovered, is from Argentina. She does not know his language, no he

hers but there is a new kind of language with their travel. It is hands and eyes and sugared ice and smiles that carry an ocean of meaning.

The girl sleeps and drifts. She has never felt this kind of rich aloneness. Her body is a page in a book that is being written. She watches the window of the train click click clicking past fields of cocoa and maize and banana groves. A window of paradise red flowers appears and disappears. A window of steep mountain terrain, green enough to call itself a God.

And sometime after the mud and the riot of birds, after the sleep that closes and opens her, the man begins to sing. She wakes and listens. She can feel the warmth of his body, spine straight and loose. He is facing forward, his eyes closed. His song is neither loud nor soft. It is meant not for their air nor the passengers nor for her. It is a song sung for the man's pleasure alone. A rosary, the girl thinks, the tenderness of his lips like a finger counting beads. He sings and smiles, and they sway as the train moves toward the Atlantic. The girl has never seen a man sing like this before and the song gathers inside her like loam and seed, a song growing into an impossible whole, drifting inside her with sonic weight. In Puerto Limon, she will carry her backpack to a beach with a breeze of blue and wild trees that makes her weep. And deep in the night she will unfold the song and try it in her mouth. A stranger's gift; a thing she will carry.