

i.

My sister is curled next to me on the mattress we share as shadows from the kerosene lamp contort the features of her face. A handful of lizards hug tight to the cement walls of our small room, pace lazily upwards. Drops of rain ping rhythmically, an accelerando on the corrugated metal over our heads.

I'd like to say my sister is curled like a pampered cat. One of those horrible creatures with ridiculous names like Fifi or Fluffly, choked ever-so-gently with a diamond collar (and, for certain, not the imitation kind), as cool central air tickles its fur like smooth fingers running across its length; a bored expression on its face as that damned feline takes in the glowing high-rise view. It's a view I can only imagine, having never set foot in a high-rise; never stood at the base on the outside of one, either, as its towering shadow descends over me, enveloping me, dominating my entire body in the way my own foot does to the cockroaches that strut with bravado across the dusty tile flooring of our home. No, the comparison is all wrong. Given the warped condition of our mattress and the bedsheet washed translucent and coarser with each scrubbing at the metallic ribs of the washboard, I both laugh and ache to admit it's all wrong. She's no pampered cat.

She's a dog.

One of those shabby, wandering mutts curled on the dry, brown earth for a bit of respite from the heat, from the rocks thrown at it, before it must wander again.

No, my sister is no pampered cat.

Just look.

Look how she doesn't claim space on our mattress. Look how she takes only what she needs – and humbly, at that. She would take even less if she could, asking for so little and giving back a bit of what she's received, winding her limbs tighter underneath herself, folding into layers that

seem to defy physics as her volume is reduced in this nightly transformation. She'll remain like this, unmoving, throughout the night, frozen and condensed in the slightest swirl of an apostrophe left hanging alone on a page. (And what statement can that make?)

She is not me.

I splay my arms, my legs, stretching them out as though they were bands of rubber pulled to ridged tension. I move, I roll, I bump into my sister who, even in her sleep, offers a whisper of apology and curls tighter yet. I claim every inch possible as my own.

Dolores. *Mi hermana mejor.*

My older sister who works herself each day into this unmoving nightly stupor with cursed repetition. The daily futility of her chores is the eagle that comes to devour her liver day after day, only for the organ to repair and present itself again for the pecking. (*Oh, Dolores, don't you realize yet? Hercules is not coming for you!*) I'm certain her body is even too tired to dream. Instead, it shuts down like a lamp unplugged; a lamp that serves its light and heat throughout the day – as it offers itself, its energy, unrelenting – and is then pulled suddenly from its outlet and goes dark. Except, that analogy is all wrong, as well, isn't it? Here, in our home, electricity is a sporadic luxury, so Dolores, knowing I write these words, would surely scoff at me:

Your analogies are for the gringos!

Stop trying to appease those who cannot see you.

Don't you realize yet?

You are invisible, too.

Invisible like me.

But do YOU see me, sister? I want to ask her, scream at her. The question burns from my eyes as I watch her now and I sear it into the back of her sleeping head. You, close enough to feel the heat of my body, the wind of my breath, aren't you just as blind to me? Do you know my

dreams? No. I am just a shade that tracks in more dust for you to sweep again and again. I am the feathers of the bird that swoops to peck at you.

Oh, but *mi hermana*, for you I'll re-write my words.

That, I can give you.

You are the candle burned out, the wick run dry, a flame simmered to a dim flicker before PUFF, the light is replaced with streams of smoke that dissipate and are forgotten. You are the mop made of rags torn harshly and tied, squeezed tight with hands burned raw so that no drop of water remains, a mop left in the corner of the kitchen, propped into place, until morning.

Dolores.

Dolores who doesn't take space on our mattress or in life, itself.

Dolores's world no bigger than our little *ciudad*. Her influence no wider. Her space is a spot on a map – a beauty mark that rests on the tip of a nose – of our town, a mark that grows smaller as you step further back from the view until it is hardly a stab of a pencil point on a map of our country. And to the world? Invisible entirely. As though she takes up no space at all.

ii.

Yo, me llama Flor.

Yes, they are just letters. Letters on a birth certificate pressed firm with a glossy seal making them official, permanent, and true. Just letters. Those letters are representations of sounds, sounds to string together to create a word, a name. My name.

Como se llama? How do you call yourself? What sounds are arranged to make you who you are?

And *is* that who we are? Is there definition in our names? Do the letters assigned to us bring with them some fate, some destiny, some burden to bear?

I cringe when I hear the question spat from the lips of outsiders, a foreigner whose tongue grows fat and swollen with our language when it's meant to be smooth, layers of skirt in a dance that sweep and twirl brushing the floor with a delicate scratch. *Koe. Moe. Say. Yama?* Their voices like the harsh caws of a crow that startle us off our mattress to a new day, the bitter call that insists we are who we are called.

What will they hear in my voice when I answer? Will the sounds of my letters carry portent? Will it make them SEE me? Or will they stop short at the letters, themselves; my name no more an identity than a label stuck firm with clumps of yellowing, hardened glue to an aluminum can stacked amongst all the others?

Four letters. That's all I've been given but I claim them; harness them and ride them like they are a quartet of stallions charioting me far from this space, bringing me past borders and boundaries, jumping me over ravines and mountains, and vaulting me into a world beyond this speck on a map.

I claim the destiny conjured by the letters just as the old seer – wrapped in sequined rags that glimmer less and less with each of my visits and despite each wad of dollars I press into her cold, aged hands – conjures an image in her crystal orb.

Ah, yes, child. It is clear and true. You are the green arm within the seed still buried deep in the dark of dirt only begun to sprout, only begun to push your way out to the light and air through the walls of the shell that confine you.

And in these moments, as she calls me her child and assures me my future with confidence and encouragement -- even as her hand is extended in an eager reminder of our arrangement -- I feel embraced in a warmth that my own mother can't duplicate. This is not because my mother doesn't love me but because she loves me too much to lie or be tempted by money -- even if it's

more money than has ever been pressed into the pockets of her cotton, ¾ length dress that is dusted with the masa she mixes with arthritic hands as she ignores the pain and accepts her reality, just as she calls me to do with my own pain:

“Ah, *mi hija, siempre una soñadora. Las estrellas*, how they tease you by shimmering so bright and how they trick you by appearing so close as to catch them. *Pero, lo siento, hija*, our family was not blessed with arms that are long. *Las estrellas* are out of our reach.”

My arms are still growing, Mama. Just watch. See. What’s in the reach of my grasp will not be dictated by the generations of *nuestra familia*, who tug at our feet from their plots in the ground insisting that we stay rooted to them. With each pull, I’ll resist and, in that resistance, my arms will stretch longer, taller and I’ll burst free. So, while your feet, Mama, may feel weighted, encrusted with the drip-drying cement *el gobierno* pours onto our roads now, driving us towards ‘progress’, I will not be held here. I will bloom.

That is the destiny of my name.

Me llamo Flor.

iii.

Ella, se llama Dolores.

Pobrecita.

The heft of her name bends her back and shoulders in the slightest arch that I fear will continue to curl her forward until she can no longer look me in the eye. As she rises each morning, unfurling from the bundle she’s made of herself, and her shadow is cast by the rising light, thrown against the pale wall of the small room we share, I see her bend in black and white. Cracks on the wall splinter through her shadow and I’m a doctor suddenly in front of the glowing screen highlighting the film of an x-ray. And there. There’s her bend.

The heft on her back that pulls her down, I fear I place on her, myself. The firm grasp that I hold to the faith in my name means, of course, binding her to her own. A Heaven without a Hell. A God without a Devil. True faith is not sorting through the *jocote* fruit of the *mercado* baskets choosing only the ripe and sweet and good and kind. True faith is accepting the basket blindly for all its contents.

If I am to be the flower, she is to be the pain.

Dolores, my sister, whose hurt, whose *dolor* in life was presented to her at birth and sealed firm. She makes no effort to reverse the arch, to fight the bend. She makes no struggle against the name that weights her. She carries it, stoic, balancing it together on her shoulders alongside of the barrels of fresh water she journeys for daily. She refuses the nicknames I present as I try to alter her fates.

Mi gordita.

Mi feita.

Piernas de pollo.

She laughs at each one and on her face an expression of gratitude. Gratitude but resignation, nonetheless as she sweeps each name away, her hand the broom and without words, I hear her nonetheless, “Go, Flor! Fight your way up through the dirt. *Pero, por favor, dejame.* The ache of the dirt that weighs on my body is mine. And though it plants me, holding me firm to this space, this small, tiny space, it is the very dirt that feeds my roots. The *dolor* is me and I am it. I am who I am, Flor. Your words cannot write me a new story. Your pen is no magic wand to wave and swirl and concoct a potion of words – nouns and verbs and adjectives – all thrown into the pot, a paella you try to season and alter to your taste. My plate has been presented and I will be satisfied with it. I am who I am.”

iv.

The smell of my country is everywhere like the scent that lingers on my abuela's cardigan – the one, thin, pale and yellow that she wore everyday over dresses despite the heat of the fires she labored over or the sun that pulsed above her head. The sweater that we, as children, identified her with, the constant that remained even as her hair turned gray and her body withered with time to an appearance unrecognizable.

Abuela Amarillo.

The cardigan carries her scent woven into its fabric even now long after she's died, a scent so embedded in the stitching that it's a yarn itself and I think if I dare try to extract it, the whole sweater will unwind into a looping pile of knots on the floor.

The smell of my country is like that, too.

It seeps up the trunks of the coconut trees and through its leaves. It swims with the ash of the volcanoes that blanket the ground in soft, gray snow. It hides in the pockets of the uniforms of school children and in the tattered shoes of the boys playing *futbol* in the vacant lot.

Or, perhaps, it's just in me, tattooed in my sinuses – marked permanent with remembrances. It's a glowing, orange-colored smell thick with warmth and smoke. And it soothes me. Like the arms of *mi papa*, thin but rosy with muscle when he would lift me, cradling me to his chest, too powerful to be called an embrace, but too warm and loving to be anything but.

It must sleep in the dirt, too, swimming up the stems of the *maiz* plant as they stretch tall and green and blossom with cobs that swell. It's there even before the corn is placed on the embers or dropped into the silver vat, boiling bubbles rising around it like water nymphs nipping at the dangling feet of a swimmer.

Roasting at the vendor's boxy pushcart, that corn releases the scent of my country into the air tonight and it swirls in currents as children run, as couples stroll, as rickety metal carnival rides spin – rides pieced together by men with bones that are just as rickety, whose teeth, spotted with rust, move loosely in their mouths just as the bolts on their constructions do because, in both cases, you can make do with what you've got.

The scent tarpaulins over the streets that are squawking with all of the noises of tonight's *carnivale*. It protects it, blesses it, seals it, much like the net my mother domes over our mattress and tucks defiantly, lovingly to keep out the mosquitos. There are no parades of floats decorated garishly, with women shimmying in costumes, beads strategically but minimally placed. The music played comes from the stereos of cars, the bass blown out long before. We *bachata* in the streets, nonetheless, to tinny trumpets. Fireworks come from the men – the idiots, let's face it – that run galloping through the center, *torito pintos*, costumed like the asses they are, spraying fireworks from their hunched backs into the crowd of screaming, laughing, cheering, clapping, ducking and hiding onlookers.

This *carnivale* is ours. Its sights, its sounds, its smells, are ours. I hold it to me, tensing my arms tightly around it, protecting it all – *los ninos, los abuelos, los campesinos, los vendedores, los musicos, y los borrachos, tambien*.

I breathe them all in.

So when I hear their laughter, I seek out the source, knowing immediately it's a laughter out of place. My eyes find the pair of them quickly, their silly outburst giving them away, but no more than their appearance.

We have blond girls in my country – both real and formula-made – and the shades of skin here fill a diverse, delicious palette – from burnt butter to apricot, from caramel to cocoa, from parsnip to potato. We have no need to pause in awe at the spectacle of blue eyes, either. It's nothing new.

But these two.

They are a different blonde, white, blue-eyed. They are a different sort of laughter, too. I watch them as they listen to the vendor explain the recipe for *elotes locos*. I watch as they lean in towards him, their smiles, giggles and nods at his words like the condescending attention a schoolteacher gives to a child who is presenting a painting – an unidentifiable masterpiece. He is, to them, a child that holds up a bumpy, yellow canvas with creamy white and spicy red lines. That grown man and his charring, steamy creations are a novelty to them, an experience they'll share with their social media friends in a competition for view count.

#OMG

#HeIsKindaCute

#wtfisthisorn?!

#UmNoThanksJustAPatOfButterForMe

I watch as their noses wrinkle and their pink lips purse as the vendor paints. I watch as they steal the scents of my country and critique, their smartphones at the ready to capture it all.

And suddenly, the rage is there.

It's a storm, a torrent that breaks open. From my depths, flashes hot, pulsing and orange. I am the scent. I am the smoke. I encircle them and though they do not see me.

They walk away, protected by naivety. I'm left to steam like the corn in the vendor's outstretched hand.

v.

My brother, of course, was given a name, one long, a cumbersome tribute to his lineage meant to shield him with the masculinity of all the men that came before him, and bless him with their

best attributes. Eliazar's mind (though not his penchant for drink, please) and Vladimir's might (not to be used on the women this time, though) and Victor's courage (though please not his misfortunes in love). Yet as the years grew on and the meat failed to attach itself to my brother's spindly legs that only grew upward and as his gait became lumbered, his words seldom and low, it became apparent that my brother would need a new name.

A boy, even with vitality of youth, slogged slow and cautious-footed as though the thoughts he carried required this deliberate effort. A boy whose friends coaxed him, first pleadingly, then with taunts – unsuccessfully into games that required speed or agility. A boy whose mother towed him by the wrist to make certain she'd be at the corner in time to catch the bus. A boy who just couldn't—wouldn't – will his feet faster – for why, when at this pace he found his footing in life?

So my little brother became, as he already was, Tortuga.

Sweet and fitting, endearing and perfect, the name took hold. In each shout or whisper of his name – for it to be spoken and actualized – I smile, because he is affirmed, my brother.

EXCEPT.

Except when the men from the gangs speak it. Out of half-lowered windows in cars they slide slowly past our home through half-golden rows of teeth in their half-concealed effort to sound sincere, they seem to seethe my brother's name. A ring of heat born from the rot and smolder of their slaughtered (or stolen or raped) morality encircles the sounds they make as the words are spit from their lips.

Tortuga. Tort-oooo-ga. They draw it out as if to make music of it, a perverse song meant to pacify and entrance. Snakes masquerading as the charmers, themselves.

“Tort-oooo-ga. Aren't you tired of playing pretend with little boys waving around rusted machetes? Want to know what a real weapon feels like? Come on, Tortuga. Come play cops and robbers with us. We can show you how to protect those sisters of yours. There are animals lurking all around this country of ours that would tear at the flesh of them if they could get close to bite.”

We have a bag that sits propped in a dusty corner of our home, a bag that's ready to be filled with his few shirts and pants and his one pair of shoes as soon as the permissions come through, as soon as the money materializes. We'll send him north, to *Tio* and *Tia* who live in New Jersey where sometimes it snows and where he'll learn to speak English and *mis primos* will tow him by the wrist to catch the bus for school. And he'll be safe. The tattooed, branded arms of those gangsters won't be able to extend their clutches into the suburbs of the north where minivans tote children to soccer practice.

In the meantime, the bag sits.

In the meantime, they circle. Circle and flash – teeth, weapons, chains, rims. Circle because they have nowhere to go, closed out of opportunities – of jobs, land, education – because they are brown and poor and unwanted. Do I cry for the snake that enters my home because his forests have been taken over by those laying claim to them through power and force and money? Or do I slay it?

And in the meantime, I take Tortuga to *la playa* where I can hide him in the shade of the coconut palms and where the ocean's waves can drown out the promises (the lies) the men hurl at him. I hold his head between my hands and direct his eyes out on the water's expanse.

That! I tell him. That water that seems to go on forever? That seems to have you contained on this land that has you walking so slowly? That is your invitation. It does not bind you, it carries you! Like the hatchlings that will break from shell and sand and enter the channels and currents, let this water help lift the encumbrance from your back and move you where you need not be tempted to be anything but who you are.

He nods at me, a slow and deliberate acknowledgement.

vi.

It's the softest – almost imperceptible – noise the camera makes when she takes Tortuga's picture. People always describe the 'click' of a camera, but this was no click. Her fancy smartphone made a much more refined noise than a 'click' could describe. A stifled hiccup? A

gentle snap of a tongue against the roof of a mouth? No. Here's the sound her camera made as it captured the image of my scruffy, untamed *hermanito*: It shuttered like the deadly slicing bite of a bear trap, teeth snapped quickly, making easy prey of my slow-moving, eager-to-please little brother; caught in her trap, by the glimmer of the strange toy in her hand and equally by the glimmer of the girl, herself.

He must have thought she was pretty. Maybe he even considered her beautiful – a rarity in his small world of familiar sisters, oversized aunts, and homely neighbor ladies who destroy any sense of sexual intrigue as they string up their bras and panties – plain, worn, achingly unsexy – on the clotheslines outside.

“Is that your dog?” she asked and when my brother's eyes turned downward to the dusty ground, away from her blonde-framed face, and a smile crept shyly onto his face, she tried again. “*Tu perro?*” She couldn't roll her ‘r’s properly and the word came out all harsh but Tortuga didn't correct her. He lifted his eyes, revealing more of his smile. With feeble, awkward gestures she instructed Tortuga to pick up the dog. He did, like a puppy himself.

She raised her phone up, focusing. Though the panic rose within me instantaneously, the words were slow to form. *Pare!* But only a noise escaped. A puff of pain. It made no difference. The bear trap scissored and Tortuga was caught in a lasting frame.

She stepped forward to pet them both – Tortuga and the dog – with pats on their heads. Perhaps she meant gratitude or kindness, but it read as further condescension, the hunter stroking the pelt of her prize.

She walked off down the road, her phone a bump in her back pocket now. Her steps were light as though the stolen sanctity -- *our* world, *our* space – had no weight at all.

Would she make a print to be passed around, smudged dirty by the hands of her friends back home in the north as they murmured their comments, judgements? Or perhaps it would be quickly deleted from the memory stores of her camera. A *flor* picked from its field and discarded all in the same swoop of the arm.

What is worse than the conquistador? The fool who takes with no passion, whatsoever – be it hate or love – but only indifference.

vii.

I.

Stole.

It.

Back.

Tucked away in my bag amongst the avocados and plantains, that shiny posh smartphone sat. Imagine the contrast for a moment: The silvery metal, smooth and boxy nestled between the fruits of matted browns, yellows and greens – colors of the natural world – bumpy and oblong. Technology amongst the earth. The new with the forever.

A camera. And my brother.

viii.

I was young – just a child – when Abuelita Amarillo began her steady decline, her careful-footed pace down the mountain of her life – a mountain that was sizable with years especially when viewed through the lens of science, science that cautions us in our pursuit of longevity against habits like drinking coffee black and bitter at a young age and pouring generous amounts of *crema* atop every meal be it chicken, rice, beans or just rolled up in a warm tortilla, for what it might do to the currents and channels within our bodies. And science, if not common sense alone, suggests avoiding dwelling in impoverished, war-stricken, gang-infested areas for extending your quality of years. And yet, her mountain was sizable, *mi abuela*.

My nine- or ten- or eleven-year-old mind was never preoccupied with concerns of the other girls. I didn't worry if my favorite top would be dry off the line in time for me to wear after school to walk past the boys where they liked to hang out and drink *Kolachampan* on the stoop as they showed off the machetes they acquired, the cast-offs from their fathers when their usefulness in chipping anything to put a few more *colons* in their pockets was beyond repair. My young mind

was instead scorched with images of abuelita confined to her bed at that time. And the achingly unfathomable and bitter realization: That this was all she had. These sights, these smells, this singular, restricted view from her reclined position was all she had, a landscape of grim walls, a worn bureau with a mirror above that – by the Grace of God – was not in line to reflect her situation upon herself.

These thoughts would burn me with anxiety, a claustrophobia so real, I would rush to open the thin curtains that draped down over the metal bar windows and pull her bed into the stream of sunlight. Even as she'd protest – *no, no, muy caliente* – I'd feel the anxiety ease. She did not hear me, did not understand, refused to try, when I pleaded with her to look out.

See out the window, Abuela. Let your eyes take you as far as they can. You may still have more than this one, little, room if you just stretch. Stretch! Reach, Abuela!

Her meager yelps, like that of a small cat, would eventually draw the attention of my mother who would rush in to scold me, shoo me and replace my grandmother in the shadows. And my ache would return. And it's remained there, in the pit of me, since Abuelita Amarillo's last ghostly exhale in that fated tomb of hers.

ix.

We are a country of seismic activity, a land built up on a steamy, glowing, hissing and angry ground below us. More than twenty volcanoes stand across our nation of humble size. They tower like armed sentinels to remind us that we must always stay alert, we must never fall into a confidence of security and calm as this is a land that cannot be tamed.

But I am not afraid of them.

Even when they have growled and shook in their ferocity, even as they have spewed their heat, even as my neighbors ran from them, their cries muffled in the necks of the children they clutched in their arms, I have never been afraid. I think they are wondrous. They are potential.

From here I stand and see the expanse of my country, in all its beauty. And here, at these heights, I cannot hear the dismissing laughter of those below when I speak my intent to break free, claim

my space and make the world see. But here I also see lands beyond my country, too, in an infinite space that encircles me; lands that don't know that I exist, that *we* exist or, more importantly, care. And I'm tempted to call to the Devil, to swear to sacrifices like those made on this very spot since ancient times, so long as he makes them see. Make their eyes open wide and fix them upon me; make their legs frozen in place so that they cannot turn away. Make them see that I am here. Make them see that I pulse with heat and passion and intelligence, too. Make them see that I am here and I am more. I am more than just this small frame of brownness covered in clothes faded soft. I am not a fixture of a daily routine, a small, nearly invisible wheel in the machine that must run relentless. I am not some flirty, witty hashtag on their travel photos. I am not a shade they can pass right through. I would ask him, the Devil, simply this: Make them see.

But of course, I do not invoke the Devil. I dare not. Perhaps it's the fear of my grandmother, her scolding disapproval that radiates from the yellow sweater of hers tucked now in the sack on my back. I can see her bony finger wagging in front of me. (Maybe I can't escape the ancestors even at these heights, after all.).

I close my eyes and I will wait, with the sack on my back stuffed with all that I may need. I will wait to burst with seismic energy and ride the waves of lava beyond the boundaries I have been so stuck in.