

## Pac Man on the Southern Border

The way I see it, we were just as bad. Nostrils big as handcuffs. Arm pit hair like fly strips left in the kitchen too long. And still we looked good. We knew we looked good. And we'd rub it in your face like butter in a saucepan. Girls came here thinking they'd go North. But most stayed. Like Isabel. She had these eyes like tide pools. So much life was stranded in those pockets of water and light. She came here asking about something. Directions, money, it didn't matter. The point was she was in the door. You know how it was back then. We could still smoke indoors. The bar light fell on her like amber-colored sap, dim and viscous as the men like mosquitos trapped inside it. She decided to stay. Who's fault was that? It was ours, coño. It was mine. Stay awhile, I told her. Make some money on your way north. Waitress. See how you like it. Then some boracho walked in with a hair follicle handshake. Arms grew out of it in strands. His nose slanted between his eyes like a % sign. Round, shortsighted and alone, he was a walking monocle. He took Isabel to a back room. He closed the door. She held him like a water spider. The tension between them was only on the surface. But in a place like this, that's all that mattered.

Why didn't you leave here? I asked Mikaela.

What I want to know, Mikaela said, is why Isabel never left you. I had no idea. I'd lost friends over her. My parents disapproved of everything we did. Anyway I looked at it, Isabel was my woman in red. I saw her by the light of bridges burned to get her.

I don't know, I said to Mikaela.

I've got time, she said. Tell me where you and her left off.

Pac Man on the Southern Border

I saw her in our bedroom window. “Isabel, please don’t,” I shouted. First she hurled insults. Then she threw drawers of clothes. And lastly, my dresser climbed into the window like a gargoyle. It leapt out of the second story. Its fuselage crashed on the lawn. Clothes floated down. My daughter and son dove into the shirts like spirits leaping into bodies. My daughter climbed atop the dresser with our bed sheets in hand. She spun the white fabric into beams of light. Her entire body was a lighthouse, a life-long turn towards the lost and the dark. “Splinters, honey.” I motioned for her to come down off the broken dresser. She refused. Wonder went barefoot through the world and so would she. My son tied a makeshift parachute of bed sheets to his backpack. Wind filled the sheets. His heels left the ground. His body began lifting into the air. “Let me go,” he said. He kicked his legs free of my grip. “He’ll be fine,” Isabel shouted. She knew what happened in our bed sheets never carried anyone away.

As Isabel’s husband, I’d become winter sunlight, something a woman could see but no longer feel. To her, a man was nothing more than a bruise. He defined himself by the size of his swell and how fast he could disappear. Isabel yelled I couldn’t keep my pants on. Standing on the front lawn, I pulled them off just to agree with her. I made myself naked to make her feel uncomfortable with being right. The gesture didn’t work. Lacking trust, our relationship had become closed-captioned. Her attention was divided between watching me and reading part of a screen.

I ran up to our bedroom. I pulled back the curtain. Isabel was in front of the mirror. She put her finger against the glass. Old, dark wood framed the mirror. She traced her finger along her jaw, another shoreline for beauty to leave high and low tidemarks on.

She had hazel-green eyes. Looking at her, I felt I'd seen a ghost. For someone not possessed by it, beauty lived in what it could haunt. Isabel took my hand. She was leaving me, she said. I'd grown up Catholic. Penance always bought more sin. I asked what I could do to change her mind. But Isabel wasn't negotiating. She smoothed her dress on her lap. She stood to go. She walked out my front door. Her footsteps fell like lemons from their boughs. Each thud gave voice to what was lost.

My daughter joined me at the window to watch Isabel leave. I called my daughter's attention to the red traffic lights down the street we lived on. I cupped my hands and blew into them. If I kept my hands cupped correctly, the sound produced was similar to that of a bujo, or owl. The traffic lights turned green. The change in color occurred the moment the sound left my lips. My daughter was delighted. She asked me to do it again. The clock turned from 11:59 to midnight. This time when I made the sound, the lights turned to a flashing yellow. This failure of magic made my daughter search my face in a way that made me uncomfortable. Her eyes were the color of sea ice, a blue disappearing from this earth. It was past her bedtime. I tried leading her to her room. But she loved staying up late. She loved the fear at the top of the stairs. She loved the light in the hall leaking under her bedroom door. She stole her mother's lipstick. The red hue on her lips looked like the light underneath another, secret door she had yet to open. Until she did, we were everything to each other. Our hands were two halves of an hourglass. When cut, they spilled the grains by which we measured time. She winced when I touched her. Some piece of furniture thrown out of the window had hurt her. She put her arms straight out and pretended to be a scarecrow. It was a game we played. Pain was a bird that we could scare away from landing on our skin.

“Get out of here,” she yelled.

“That’s against the rules,” I said. “Scarecrows can’t talk.”

“No, look,” she said. Kids were stealing my clothes off our lawn. She smiled at the boys the way a mouse runs baseboards, a small-frightened thing running from one corner of her mouth to the other.

They went to the water. We chased after them. Seen from a sufficient height, the Rio Grande appears like a neuron deciding between a nightmare and a dream. My son skipped his rock first across Bahia Grande. Then he taught his sister how to skip hers. I swam out to where their furthest throws landed. She got a little better. I swam a little further. We would play this game when she got older. Her phone calls would come across longer distances. I’d go farther out to receive them. Eventually, we wouldn’t see each other. Hit me, I yelled. I splashed the water. Right here, I yelled and pointed to my belly sticking out of the water. My daughter sailed her next throw. The stone ricocheted off my paunch. They cheered. I gasped. I swam back hurt. I told myself to stop being an old man. Reflected on water, skyscrapers’ vertebrae grew in a sclerosis of light. Their reflections walked on the water with a stoop, at an angle, that would soon enough be mine. Four skips away, my sides cramped up. Three skips away, their rocks shot like steamboat canons over the Mississippi raising Tom Sawyer from the dead. Two skips, my daughter and son dove into the water after me. This is what I wanted. Not for them to reach me, but to be part of what swept me away.

On the shore, my daughter untied her brother’s parachute from his back. She offered it to me as a towel to dry off. We’d been on this beach before. My son was smaller then. This was before he put his sister’s dolls in the oven and watched like an

Pac Man on the Southern Border

astronaut peering through the glass at a world on fire, before he smoked two bowls a day, when the tail on the letter ‘a’ still turned *wonder* into *wander*, and before the animal holding that tail lost its balance in the world he made for it. It was here that I handed him his first kite. It was a warm, clear day. He smiled, as though the kite tugged at the corners of his mouth. He travelled with it for a few steps. A strong breeze pulled it out of his small, fat fist. He tumbled over in the sand. He grabbed both of his feet laughing and rocked onto his back to see it disappear. He was doing the same thing inside of his body. Each of his cells flew a kite with a double helix tail. Over time, he let trillions go into the blue skies of his outermost veins. On the shoreline of his last living cell, I wanted him to build sand-castles ten, twenty stories high, to run up their staircases and chase the double-helices slipping from his hand.

We headed home. Isabel couldn’t have gone far. I drove to the bar, her home away from home. A drunk lay on the curb like newspaper print, full of stories until he got too wet to hold himself together. I pulled up to the bar’s front door. The man at the entrance had these pontoon muscles keeping him afloat in a sea of admiration. Everyone liked him. His face was cast in shadow, like numbers on a die. He and Isabel knew each well. He worked at the tattoo shop next door. She got new ink done whenever our relationship wasn’t working. This time, she tattooed railroad-crossing arms across her eyelids. When she closed her eyes, each eyelash leaned like a man after a train he’d just missed.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“What’s that?” she asked. For her to hear better, I had to stethoscope my apologies. I had to press them firmer against her chest. We spoke the way we felt

Pac Man on the Southern Border

obligated to tip. We gave only a percentage of the total, inner lives we lived. She took the keys. "Come on, let's go home," she said. She drove us from the tattoo parlor in a light rain. The window shield was sonogram shaped and displayed everything in its infancy. New sections of the city appeared and receded behind us. Isabel's mascara ran down her cheeks. Her eyes resembled logged hillsides, bare of expression and recessed into her cheekbones. But now there was first growth. She smiled, albeit slowly, the way grass unbends after being walked on. The corners of her smile were the oven-crisped edges of our relationship, the parts I loved best. We watched the sun come up over the skyline. Dust along the horizon changed the sunlight from a light blue to pink and finally a deep-red. Similarly, she wanted obstacles to not limit but color the life she had yet to live.

I pulled up to our block. A neighborhood kid who'd taken one of my shirts ran past us. "Hey," I yelled. He was so small in my XXL shirt. With the long sleeves dragging on the ground, he looked like a little ghost. I started chasing him. He ran back towards our home. Had I been spray-painted yellow, my body would have been Pac-Mannish in shape and color. My white socks and mostly white underwear that Isabel had thrown out our window dotted the sidewalk. The little white bits of clothing made our street look even more like a Pac-Man board. I grabbed the shirt back from him. Isabel checked if he was okay. He turned around and hit her. Other little ghosts ran at us from all directions. One little snot kicked Isabel. "Try me you little shit," she said. Her voice never sounded so heavenly. If the sky had an inner ear to keep its balance while it spun, then her voice was vertigo. She spoke and paradise fell within reach. Bruises formed a technicolored border between wonder and pain on her skin. She yelped. That border, apparently, was not so porous as when we were young. These kids knew the rules. A

grandmother, a forgotten aunt, or just some cousin with a landscaping job was enough to make them run the risks. Some of them wore shirts sporting the *Trailblazers* and *NY Giants*. Others wore those shirts made for funerals: “*In Loving Memory of Zeke*” or “*Tallon 1997-2014 R.I.P.*” They were ghosts in two families. On one side of the border, their family gathered in a séance around the telephone, waiting for a response. And on the other side, families heard their footsteps in the shadows instead of their own children walking in the light. The cherries, strawberries and oranges had brought these families together before. But so did these little white baggies they smuggled across the border and dotted our streets with. I picked one of my shirts off the ground that said “*Wecenslau 1998-2014 R.I.P.*” Isabel took another. We ran towards my daughter. She steadied herself on my broken dresser, a scarecrow guarding herself against the fowls of light.

“Baby come here. Don’t run,” I said. My daughter looked at me with wild eyes. She had circus tent eyelids. Wonders were beneath them. She flexed her muscles and hit me. Her thimble-throated, tiny voice asked me “Why shouldn’t I?” Before, her words sleepwalked through her body. Now, the right questions woke her voice without startling the dreams guiding it. My phone rang. “Who is it?” my daughter asked. “Tell me,” she said pointing to my phone. It was my girl on the other side of the border that I’d left years ago. I was trying my best to keep these two worlds apart.

“Go ahead, tell her” Isabel said. “Explain the photos I found in our dresser. The little bags of coke. The letter. Explain why our things are all over the ground.”

I didn’t begin talking so much as treading water with my lips, keeping the conversation on the surface. My eyes used to hold the darkness in a theater, one that made others forget the world for the stage I proposed to them. But now the spell was

broken. I hadn't shaved. My unibrow looked like two hands shaking above everything I saw. And my chin fat had accumulated into a vague, Wi-Fi shape. The bigger it got, the further away from me people sat. My daughter saw me stumble over my words. She saw I could not speak to owls. I had no special power over traffic lights. I could not scare away pain. When she put on lipstick, a secret door would open. She would walk through it and hold it tight against me. I used to want an aisle-seat relationship with my family, one that I could exit while inconveniencing the least amount of people. Things were different now. "I'll show you what she looks like," I said. I took the lipstick and began putting it on my mouth. My daughter grabbed the makeup out of the broken dresser. She covered me in eyeliner, concealer, and foundation. From the dresser, she pulled out scarves. She pulled out bras and funeral shirts. She pulled out jeggings and Roos and sequined jeans. She wanted to see all of me. She wanted to dress me like all of the people that had loved and stopped loving me. My clothes were sprawled across our lawn and down our street. I'd have to pick them up before it got too light out and people saw. Isabel gathered our bed-sheets-turned-parachutes off the grass. She tied them around her body, ready to be carried away.