The Desert Fathers

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The Desert Fathers: A Novel

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Thesis

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DEDICATION

To my loving parents.

Soli. Gloria. Deo.
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These are they by whom the world is kept in being.
-The Lives of the Desert Fathers

So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.
-1 Corinthians 13:13
BOOK I
JAVIER
The children march from the plains where they were captured to the banks of the river where they are ordered to drown one another.

Two men push them along with a clattering Fargo truck that coughs smoke and stench into the Sonoran air. Javier, driving, wipes the sweat running from his forehead into his eyes. To distract himself from the parade in front of him, he has pinned his conscription notice on the dashboard. Nineteen-forty-three. Nearly three years old. Small patches of sun-burnt skin, slick with sweat, show through the children’s threadbare clothing. Shredded, their shoes fold and flap in the wind and catch against stones that, in the children’s weakness, they cannot clear. The windows are down but an acrid smell still lingers in the cabin, the ash of cigarettes imbedded in the cushions damp with perspiration from his and his companion’s bodies. Roberto, the other man, walks beside the truck and raises his hand, signaling Javier to halt.

“Here,” he commands.

For the unknown years of the war Javier gave just over two years of his life to Roberto, who vowed he could get him out of the conscription. And now he knows that he has sacrificed his entire life.

Javier despises Roberto’s crooked smile, his teeth stained a locust yellow, and he too sweats, his face darkened by long hours in the desert sun that dries them both out. Javier stops, and knowing what is soon to come, feels the swell of nausea grip his stomach, suffocating his throat.

This must happen, he assures himself, thinking of his wife and child.

Reaching behind him, he takes his canteen from an exterior sleeve of his haversack and
drinks.

Roberto steps onto the truck’s running board, using its roof to balance himself. In doing so he exposes the long white scar on the underside of his forearm. Javier does not understand how Roberto can so easily tolerate the heat, the burn of the metal against his skin.

“Roberto,” Javier says, scratching his thick beard. “It could be easier.”

Leaning down, Roberto pauses and Javier cannot decide if Roberto’s glare is one of scorn or consideration.

“We don’t have to do this.”

But Roberto says nothing, and turns to the children. “Drown someone else and you will live.”

He hops down and steps backward, reaching into the cabin.

“You will be fed,” he says, holding up a metal pail. “You buy your life at the price of another’s.”

Javier leans against his arm, trying to ignore the exhausted faces of the confused and hopeless children who sway in the breezeless morning. He closes his eyes to picture his wife’s fingernails, the way they caressed his scalp with a sharp force that his own nails, chewed to pink stubs, cannot provide.

The children remain motionless, frightened into silence, and Roberto, impatient, drops the bucket. He winds through the children, pushing them aside without effort and clutches the arm of a small, unsuspecting girl. The sound like a rock bursting in the heat of coals makes Javier shudder and he puts his fist to his mouth, biting his forefinger. She
falls to the ground and hang by a dislocated shoulder. Amid her howling tears, she kicks her legs in resistance. Roberto drags her into the river and Javier lunges out of the pickup.

“Roberto,” he protests, surprising himself with the strength of his voice.

“Get back in, Javier.”

Swallowing, Javier creeps to the truck’s door but does not obey Roberto’s order. He builds his disobedience slowly, smoothing a firm foundation before he can raise a bulwark against him.

The girl’s pale face hangs with a nauseous resignation, her eyes straining to stay open.

“Like this,” Roberto says, his head strained, looking to the children.

He throws her into the river and kneels on her back. With her struggling the water foams. Javier tells himself to remember his wife, tries to hold onto a memory with the same useless struggle with which the girl fights Roberto. Then, the girl’s flailing ceases and the mangled spider’s web of her black hair spreads out in the crests and troughs of the current.

Roberto’s face remains emotionless, as if smoothed and thumbed from clay. He lumbers out of the river. While she starts to drift downstream, he bends over and, cupping water in his palms, splashes his face. Javier sees the children’s eyes, fixed on the girl floating away, unaware that Roberto has come ashore, his pants darkened from the water. His breaths, deep, almost panting, contrast his steps, strong and assured. He takes the arm of a boy and places it on the shoulder of another. He leaves them and walks to the hood of the pick-up.

“You should get in. The water’s cool,” he says to Javier. “Refreshing.” He runs his
hands through his damp mane.

Arms crossed, Javier stares at him and retreats to the cabin, silent. Inside the stifling truck he tries to ignore the mass of children struggling against each other, frothing the water with their will to survive. Glancing down, he stares at his conscription card. He repeats the date in his head, calculating the month he received it and how old his child would be now.

Almost two years, he thinks.

Roberto’s grating voice disrupts his imaginings.

“How long until—”

“No more than two hours,” Javier interrupts. He does not want to hear Roberto’s voice. “We’ll be there before dusk.”

Leaning close to the steering wheel, Javier grips it and lets go.

“What’s he going to do with them?”

He wants to ask the question but does not want to hear the answer.

Roberto, brushing his hand against his pants, says, “You know. Sell them. Whole. Parts. It’s all the same.”

He reaches in and takes the canteen from the passenger seat, and Javier knows Roberto’s eyes are fixed on him, peering over the lid of the canteen even as he gulps from it.

“It’s not all the same.”

“Start moving again,” he says, tossing the canteen back to Javier.

Though thirsty, Javier sets the water on the floor behind him, not wanting to press his
lips against the same canteen as Roberto. The truck rocks as Roberto once more stands on the frame and whistles, his shirt damp with sweat. The same dark rings have formed around Javier’s armpits, as though they had been carved from the same red rock.

“We’re moving out,” he barks to the children, like a dog at an idle flock. “Get up.”

They obey.

*

Javier waits with the remaining children in the cordillera that traverses the eastern coast of the Baja Peninsula. A sea-breeze tumbles over them and Javier attempts to deny that he enjoys it. His mind oscillates between sporatic memories of his wife, pregnant with their first child, and the presence of the children here. Out of the corner of his eyes he sees their small hands—some with dislocated fingers, others with bruises in the fleshy cup of their palms—dig into the two pails of rice with porcine greed. They shove the grain into their mouths with disregard, white kernels sticking to the corners of their dry, white-cracked lips. He folds his conscription card and puts it in his pocket. Stepping out of the truck, he walks towards the cliff, his clothing flapping in the coastal wind.

In the sea below him, Javier sees the fishing boats and scows floating on the cerulean turf, appearing motionless from his vantage point. The thin lines of the tide, breaking on the coral and coast, move imperceptibly. He leans over the edge looking past the scrub shooting out from the rock to the cliff’s foundation. It is a sheer drop from where he stands to the Sea of Cortéz below. With Roberto gone, he looks to the children and glances over the precipice once more, gauging the distance. Chained together, if he could push even one of them over, he is certain that the rest would follow. They are not strong
enough to keep from falling. It would be an act of kindness, he assures himself. To end their lives quickly, mercifully. He cannot set them free and to kill Roberto would be to condemn his wife and child to the poverty he is trying to free them from. His only option is to kill the children and make it look like a failed escape.

He steps onto the flatbed and the children pour out what is left of the rice onto the sand-littered planks, pushing the pail towards him, and eating the remains as though they fear Javier will steal it away. They sit on the periphery of the truck, their backs against the wood edges built to keep them from falling or jumping off. Laced through fetters on both ankles and anchored to a loop near the truck bed’s edge, their chains run together. Javier lifts the irons, their heaviness surprising him. He puts one arm through an unoccupied shackle and it burdens his hand. He does not understand how their frail bodies can support such weight. He nevertheless tugs the chains, a weak gesture that he hopes the children will interpret as his desire, but inability, to free them.

They do not even look at him.

When an old truck, much like the one Javier drives, parks beside him, he frees his arm and Roberto leaps out of the passenger seat.

“Trouble?” he asks, not looking to Javier but unlocking the back hatch of the other pickup. He moves with a meticulousness that disturbs Javier.

“None.”

He tries to make his voice sound convincing.

A stranger steps out from the driver’s seat. His age surprises Javier. A thick, silvering head adds dignity to a body that does not lack it. The man’s shoulders are firm and round
and, were it not for his hair, Javier would have thought him young.

“This is it?” the man asks.

Javier hears in the words not disappointment but disgust, and finds himself grateful the children cannot understand them now.

“I thought there’d be more,” the stranger says.

“We lost some in transit,” Roberto replies. Peeling an orange he tosses the rind to his side where some gulls squawk over it. “They were weak.”

“There’s only ten. So I’ll pay for ten.”

Tearing out a slice of the fruit, his fingers slick with its juice, Roberto says, “You’ll pay for the twenty you requested, the twenty we found, and the twenty we transported.” The orange wedge bulges in his mouth. “Or you’ll get none of them.”

The man puts his hand over his mouth and grunts. “Bring them down,” he orders.

Roberto tosses Javier the keys and when the children are unlocked, he holds out his hand to guide them from the truck-bed, but they do not touch him. Most avoid his eyes.

Javier sets them in lines before the stranger who walks in front of them several times before starting his inspection.

In the past years Javier has learned that every buyer examines his merchandise differently. This man lifts a tuft of a girl’s hair and smells it. Cringing, he lets it fall and turns her head. Javier shifts his weight when, like a butcher eyeing a brisket’s marbling, the man bends back her ear and licks his finger, running it along the crease of her lobe and her skull. He does this for both ears, rubbing the grime that comes away between his thumb and forefinger. Javier hears a trickling and he looks down to see a stream of urine
flowing down the girl’s leg. Though he says nothing, Javier wonders at the man’s silence. Her knees shake as the man lifts her arms and pinches her skin, thumbing the upper portion of her unformed breasts. He moves down to the next child, a boy. He forces the boy’s eyes closed and turns his head in the sunlight. He sighs and stands straight.

“‘They aren’t the best,’” he says, brushing off his hands on his pants. “‘Probably won’t bring in much.’”

Kicking the chain between two children, he writes in a small notepad.

Calculations, profits, Javier guesses.

“Load them up,” the man orders, reluctantly waving his arms to prod them to his truck.

Instinctively, Javier stands guard on the far end of the pickup, his arm spread out like his father taught him when herding cattle. He feels the truck lower with each foot the children place on the flatbed, tipping the scales where his wife, his child, stand in the balance. The familiar, empty, bovine countenance reflects in the faces of the ten children he ushers into the stranger’s vehicle.

*

The inside of their Andrade apartment is sparse and dark. In the walls there are cracks through which the sound of a whore’s business resonates. Decrepit bulbs swing from loose wires barely attached to the ceiling and some other light leaks in during the day from the poorly made wooden door.

“I’ve been in worse,” Roberto says.

“There aren’t any mattresses,” Javier says, setting his rucksack on the floor.
“You have your sleeping pad,” Roberto says. “That not enough?”

“I want something softer.”

The room smells of wax and chalk dust and Roberto, ignoring Javier, runs his hand along an old oak table, a light patina of dust sticking to his fingers. The wood underneath still retains some of its dark veneer. Other than this table, two chairs, one of which is turned over, and an abandoned refrigerator, there is no furniture. A small bronze cross that a previous occupant hammered into the stone decorates the wall across from the door.

“What are we supposed to sleep on?”

Roberto grunts at Javier’s concern. “Buy a mattresses, if you’re so delicate.”

“Where?”

“From the fille de joie next door,” Roberto jeers.

“Be serious.”

“I am. One way or another, she’ll sell you a place to sleep.”

Javier sits in a chair, away from Roberto, where a shadow splits his companion’s body in two. He quarters an apple and slides the slices off the knife into his mouth.

“Maybe you’ll get a used discount?”

The sweet smell wakens Javier to his own hunger. He lifts his rucksack and sets it on the table and coughs in the dust that rises against him. There are bags of food in the backpack and a spare canteen. He takes his conscription card out of his pocket and pins it to the top fold of the rucksack.

Accustomed to dirt-encrusted hands, he pours a palmful of granola into them and eats,
putting his feet on the table. For a moment, the chill of the room and the evening breeze that sneaks in through the door’s cracks calm him. He smells himself but imagines it is the stink that comes from working in a field, from rubbing against cattle as they are forced into their pens at the end of a long grazing day. And for that moment he believes himself to be in the comfort of his home. He can even smell his wife’s washed hair, like honey and walnuts, and he breathes it in, while from their bedroom the cooing of an infant bounces.

Then, he opens his eyes. Roberto, still in the corner, tosses the squared apple core beside him and it wobbles against a wall. Every so often, the walls shake with a loud thump and the muted sound of laughter and moaning seeps in from the other side.

“Okay,” Javier says, slapping his knees. “I’m not sleeping on the ground again. I’m going to find a mattress.”

“Where?”

“There’s some buildings that look abandoned. Maybe there’ll be a mattress in one of them.”

Roberto sighs and stretches himself over the floor. He puts his hands under his head, facing the wall, and says, “Don’t get lost,” and Javier knows he means, “Come back.”

“You haven’t earned the right to see them again. Not yet,” he says. Reaching into his rucksack he takes out a compendium of Aristotle and begins reading by flashlight.

Javier says nothing.

In the dwindling light, he discerns little of the alley. But even in the dark streets, the small distance between him and Roberto unburdens him. Faint candle-glow flicker in
neighbors’ windows. The houses are the result of the migrant workers, bold but inexperienced. Gaps litter the edges of the walls, few of which are level. The roofs consist of metals hammered together, laid flat on what would otherwise be open-air buildings.

Some avenues down, three men stand in a doorway, their faces glistening with sweat, passing a cigarette between them.

Javier feels their stares pound against his back.

They’re talking about me, he thinks.

After he passes them, he walks through the lingering chiffon cloud breathing in the pungent tobacco. Slowing, he turns around and approaches them. He asks for a cigarette and points and makes a smoking motion until one of them hands over the nubbin. He takes a small toke and pushes out the smoke through his nostrils, handing back what’s left of the cigarette.

“Gracias,” he says.

He steps off the cracked cement porch and asks if they know where he can locate a mattress.

They don’t answer him.

He pauses, half expecting an answer but all he hears is something that sounds similar to los niños.

How can they know? Javier thinks.

He walks faster, feeling his heart panic in his chest like a caged wren.

The empty street echoes his footfalls. Even the sand falling back into Javier’s boot-
print has a sound: a trickling hourglass. He sees a pin-point of light, no more than a mile out, where the last of the mountains rise like sidereal altars. He steps out from the dark of the buildings into the empty stretch from between Andrade’s homes and Andrade’s mountains. Then, soundlessness surrounds him. For a while, he stands and stares out into the night-inked sea that stretches for hundreds of miles in front of him. The mountains’ silhouette reminds him of the dark tresses of his wife’s hair, thick and black as polished onyx. He pictures running his hand through it, gently caressing his way past whatever tangles he meets. But he cannot remember the feel of her hair, only its hue, and the way it curled over her ears.

The sand, still warm, provides a cushion for Javier. He settles down and lets out a sigh, the ache in his hot, swollen feet numbing to a dull pulse in his constricting boots. Even in leaning against the building, its uneven, jagged brick and rock scratching against his back, he rests, arms on his knees, hands limp—grateful.

Distract and tired, he writes in the sand. Its soft granularity mollifies him, whose fingers trace the same oblong circle with hypnotic rhythm. His chin falls forward and, startled, he jerks back and hits his head against the wall. The impact wakens him, but the pain subsides after time and Javier rubs it, checking for blood but there isn’t any, though a hard lump is already forming.

Brushing away the circle, he makes vertical lines counting the days he has left until he can see his wife again, until he discovers if he has a son or a daughter. He remembers the thought that eight-hundred days would pass quickly. Just over two years. And now that he has forty days left he stretches back to recollect the seven-hundred-sixty already
served and each one spreads out before him like a list of accusations.

But he waits for his remission, that pardoning stamp of his wife’s lips to his.

He tries not to think that she might not forgive him, that her love for him would evaporate in the desert of his crimes, or that, like an ancient well, it is already dry.

He digs his fingers into the sand and erases the dashes. Pushing himself up he walks around the buildings and drifts down the street parallel his, leaving the sand stick to his clothing. There are no lights and no persons.

Starting to succumb to exhaustion, he returns to the apartment. Roberto lies still and seemingly asleep, his book spread open on his chest.

Javier unrolls the thin mattress pad—that does little more than separate him from the ground—kneeling on it. Old, odorous shirts stuffed away in his rucksack serve as a pillow. At first he tries sleeping on his stomach but his elbows, touching the cold, hard floor, nettle him. With a grunt he rolls onto his back. Outside, sand crickets chirp and their noise enters the apartment in a faint hum. He hears the steady sound of Roberto’s breathing, arms crossed on his chest, his revolver next to his pillow.

Javier lies restless, still astounded at how easily Roberto falls asleep, and he wonders if he will ever sleep with the same ease again. He shivers at the thought. His lower back stiffens and though he turns on his side to find a more comfortable position, his hip pinches against the floor and he slides to his back again. The blanket he has is small and when he hugs it close it exposes his ankles. Replaying in his mind is not the children’s floundering but the stick of his back against the truck’s seat. The sound of his shirt prying loose from its hold. The thin blanket he has clings to his chest with the same
sultry adhesion.

“I know you hate me,” Roberto says, his eyes closed.

At first, the words seem to come from nowhere. Javier imagines holding his wife’s hands, interlacing their fingers and feeling the smooth webs between them, the folds of her knuckles.

“I know you hate yourself,” Roberto continues with a subtlety that makes Javier wish he could shut his ears with as much ease as his eyes. “But I don’t care what a man believes as long as he’s willing to pay for it. One man believes in Christ and another in Moses.” The words trickle from his mouth like a dripping faucet, slow but strong because of their steadiness.

Javier pictures a small hand in his, the fingernails tiny but sharp. Even in the vision he is nervous to touch the hand, to feel the soft flesh, worried he might somehow harm it.

“So what? They give their money to priests and rabbis. But I believe in the deity of the highest bidder. Like God, I demand a tribute. Unlike God, I do not deliver sons and daughters from altars or rivers.” Roberto shifts in the sand but does not change his position. “Though I would drag them out of their tombs if it meant more for me.”

Roberto shrugs the words more than speaks them. “Time and chance or men and knives. When the result’s the same the method’s of little importance. We all end up mangled.”

In Roberto’s silence, Javier’s conscription card, concealed in the folds of his rucksack, continues the nocturnal tirade. It whispers his name, spitting it out like wormwood.

It is his wife’s voice.

He has memorized every word on the page and his fingers are sensitive to fresh
creases, the old wrinkles familiar to him like the imperfections of his wife’s skin. He traced those lines with the same finger he traversed along the paper in the days before he departed. He had pushed his smooth face into the back of her shoulders, his nose resting on their curves as he breathed in the smell of their love-making. As they rested in the tangled sheets, he had kissed the flatness of her stomach, wondering at the life growing within.

They had whispered in their loneliness their fears and joys and Javier now remembers holding his breath with each word his wife spoke, so he could breathe it on to the paper that would separate them, to imbed her words into its fibers and make its words hers.

He waves it under his nose and inhales, imagining a scent long evanesced.

“Two years,” he had said, combing her eyebrow with his thumb. “Two years. That’s it, and then we’ll be together again. In a better place than this.”

Her hands were nestled between her chin and her pillow. Javier thought she covered herself intentionally, keeping a distance between him and her that was only to increase over time. He wanted to have her against him, her breasts held next to his chest, their warmth shared, but she separated them. The tear that dampened her pillow dismantled his words more than anything she could say.

“But you won’t be here,” she said, rubbing his hand on her belly. “He won’t even know you when you return.”

Secluded in the night, the conscription weighing in his hand like a shackle, he cannot shake the image of the drowned girl from his mind. She stands in the middle of the river, her faced contused and swollen. Dressed in the rags she was taken in, the hems lapping
water hungrily; she is alone in the river, staring at him alone on the bank. She says nothing, has never said anything and, Javier hopes, will never speak. She appears in the quiet moments when the storm of her death overwhelms him, engulfs him just as the river had swallowed her.

The first time, two years ago, he closed his eyes and murmured his wife’s name over and over like an impotent Te Deum. When he opened his eyes the children were still there. They arrived in open-air trucks, covered by a thick green canvass stretched over the beds in the back. Roberto had handed him stacks of children’s shirts, lifting them by the twine binding them together. If it hadn’t been for the lump of the bow, Javier would not have been able to feel the difference between the rags and the thread. He knew that what he held were not changes of clothes nor blankets for the cold, but the coverings of children already murdered.

These things are imbedded in the piece of paper Javier holds. Each creased line charting a different memory that welds itself to the notice, becomes inseparable from it, so that what was a chance for heroism is now a scroll of villainy.

Laying on the hard earth, Javier is acutely aware of the space between him and his family. Until this moment, he has thought of them separately, as his wife and his child. He has not allowed himself to imagine his child whole before this point, too fearful that the image would be fragile. He once pictured hands perfect with ten fingers and feet with ten toes; he imagined two eyes that untiringly stared into his; he saw only sections of his child, perhaps as a way of redeeming the once whole children. But now he allows an image to grow. Part of him wants a son, and yet he can only picture a daughter in his
arms. She has the same color hair as her mother but her nose is his own, small and round with the fraction of a divot at the tip. He imagines kissing her knees and her toothless smile at the tickle. Proceeding her laugh, she brings her feet to her mouth and she tries to rock and play away from him. And then she laughs. But when he picks her up and holds her close she begins to cry. The sound is drawn out, a screech, more instrumental than human. He can feel the small lapse between her breaths, when she breathes in with a small arc of her back before wailing. He brings her close and shushes her. Setting his nose against hers, he tries to calm her, murmuring softly and affectionately. Pressing her tightly against his chest he rocks her back and forth, feeling her rapid breaths slow and the pulse of her heart grow dim. Then, she is quiet, and he lays her against his shoulder and resting her head against him and, for a moment, he put his own against hers. But when he sets her down her limbs fall limp and putting his ear to her chest he hears neither sound nor rhythm. Only his stifled quivering, and the imagined feeling of her still warm cheeks against his fingertips that brush them in soft, gentle strokes.

Javier wants to tell Roberto that he will suffer for his brutality. He wants to chronicle for Roberto in detail the lacerations he deserves but he turns his back to Roberto and says nothing. When he is sure Roberto sleeps, Javier stares at his conscription notice, holding it in the scarcity of light trickling in through the holes in the walls.
ALEJÁNDRO
He sips from the metal coffee mug he holds in one hand and, in the other, studies the picture of the man who murdered his son. Even from the picture Alejándro can tell the man is tall. He stares at the camera, his arms crossed and forearms defined along which a line of blood runs, dripping down. Turning the photograph over, a picture of his son, Diego. A small boy. Shirtless, he holds a mango in one hand. His smile is the forced smile of an eight year old, his hair unkept and belly pushed out. A white, lambdoidal scar marks the boys right hand.

The dusk-gray sky carries a strong wind that smells of approaching rain and chokes the loud, flapping fire.

Tilted as though listening for some secret word in the quiet photograph, there is a weight he carries on his head. His years in the war trained him to hear, the hours spent with a radio’s headphones pressed against his ears. He acquired a precision, a delicateness, from the slight motion of his fingers, the slow turn of dials, that gained the ability to detect the small scars in a person’s voice, like braille for his ears.

When he stands, the coffee mug falls out of his weak hands and into the embers. Hissing, it brings out the thick smell of ash. He scrambles to gather the mug, hoping that some scarce water will still be caught in the bottom, free from soot or dirt. Of the little possessions he has left, he is grateful that, despite his loneliness, he still has his dignity. No one witnesses his grief; he has to hide nothing. His knees and back ache, unable to be straightened so that his tall stature is made striking by a hunch. He has the remnants of broad, oxen shoulders, strengthened from pulling up the fishing nets full of mackerel though the once-concealed bones are now distinct. His clavicles form two pits and the
knobs of his vertebrae stick out from beneath his shirt. But his wide hands retain their own subtle strength, the remains of the years his father trained him as a fisherman in the Sea of Cortéz. They would sway in the ketch his father built, the port behind them, distanced to the color of the taupe hills. Fore and starboard of their boat was an island of black obsidian with a blanket of cormorants resting on its rocky surface. Though they might have been separated by months, perhaps years, Alejándro remembers this as the time he asked his father why he wasn’t a farmer. His father said that those who run with wolves learn to howl.

Just a little while longer, he thinks.

His camp is nothing more than a small pit in the sand with a few flat rocks near it and a patch of earth smooth from where he slept. A poor man’s bivouac, his years of conscripted militant service reflected in its simplicity. Like an anchorite, he forswears possessions that will not aid him in his son’s rescue.

The wind cuts through the passes of the cordillera and whistles, a piercing groan.

The world’s decaying, Alejándro thinks.

With a weak hand he parks his truck outside the bodega, where the wind bends the desert shrubs, holding fast to the ground, and thin petals, torn from a cactus blossom, swirl past him and he sees even the strong yucca plants in the distance bend underneath the wind’s strength. Their leaves, shelling the trunk like husked corn, wave in the wind. Andrade surrounds him. The buildings like war stories: hollow, sad, ruined.

His black beard, the texture of shorn lamb’s-wool, itches and as he scratches it coarse sand falls into his lap.
The bodega’s windows, marked by a faded sign—the curves of the letters worn away by the desert wind and owner’s neglect—clouded with dust and for a moment he fears that the store is abandoned. Surrounding the letters, a small viola, gourds and wheat-ears. The approaching storm keeps the streets empty, which he is grateful for, people only accentuating his loss. But then the door opens and a woman, her face wrinkled and aged more than her years, walks out carrying a brown paper bag that crinkles under the weight of her groceries. For a moment Alejáンドro considers helping her but his hunger, which roils in him, pulls his eyes from her and focuses on the bodega.

The sign distracts him, the painted instrument troubling him.

As he adjusts the pegs slowly, he remembers teaching his son to tune by ear, as his own father had taught him. He would take his son’s thumbs in his own and move the knobs while Diego controlled the bow.

“Hear that,” Alejáンドro said, resting his lips against his son’s head.

Diego, always a quiet child, nodded.

“Play me a C.”

Diego, his hands unsteady, drew out a weak C.

In the absence of María, music took on a maternal role, comforting them both in an absence Alejáンドro burdened for them both.

“Very good,” Alejáンドro said, kissing Diego’s head. “Now, what do you want to play?”

“Your song,” he said, leaning his head back to try and look Alejá尕ro in the eyes.

The song he played was a popular sailor song he often heard in port, though played on
fiddle and accordion. The rhythm made Diego laugh before he could speak and the way he reached out and touched the instrument, his eyes painting the instrument with infant curiosity. They played a game together where Alejandrō would pluck a string and Diego would gurgle some sound, as though he and the violin formed a bond that Alejandrō hoped would be something to share over a lifetime, not the short breath of eight years.

The way soldiers played in the barracks was not the way he taught Diego, not the way he learned from his father, to sway with the notes like the waves lapping their boat’s hull. Music lost its place in the percussion of war but still, the small instrumental painting makes him want his violin back, to see if there yet remains a sound that is good, peaceful. Full of memory without pain.

He breathes deeply, clenches his eyes to dam the tears that rim them. Diego’s voice fades from his mind but the song remains and he hears the sad stretch of the accordions like a failing heartbeat. Even the memory of the sound brings to him the smell of the port, thick with the smell of the fish market, the brine of salt water and the stench of barnacles clinging to the dock, the underside of his cutter. Fog coming off the water. It was his father who taught him that the wharf song could still be played on the violin and when they were alone at sea, showed him how to play.

The music ceases with the abruptness with which it started and Alejandrō, getting out of the truck, forces his back straight and strides into the bodega.

The stale scent of trapped and heated air, of sweat, and eggs he sees the grocer eating—shaking salt on each forkful before chewing them noisily—confronts him with antagonistic strength, taunting him with their proximity. At their smell he salivates. The
eggs’ surfaces appear polished and Alejándro, though he looks throughout the store, keeps coming back to glance at the food. He strolls through the four aisles, looking on the three shelves that hold stacked tins and glass jars, pickled vegetables and meats—onion, sauerkraut, radish, pork. There are a few jars of pureed yams. Alejándro picks it up and brushes his thumb over the label, recalling the ravishment with which Diego used to eat the food. He sets it back on the shelf. Most of the grains are concentrated on the left side of the store, or stacked in cloth sacks dirty with flour- and seed-dust along the walls, kept out of the passways. On the right side, miscellaneous items in no discernible order. A stack of old, discolored newspapers show a celebration in Times Square, people holding their hands high, a V formed with their fingers, commemorating the victory in Europe. Their celebration, the distortion joy brings to their faces,

Alejándro turns and sees the grocer watching him, gnawing his food like a cow. Looping through the rows, Alejándro, pretending to contemplate a purchase, makes his way to the counter and waits for the grocer to notice him.

But the proprietor, ignoring him, returns to his meal.

When Alejándro tries to speak the dryness of his mouth keeps him from articulating. His throat makes a sticking sound, his tongue coming unstuck from the roof of his mouth. He speaks slowly, weakly.

“Do you have beans?” Alejándro asks.

The proprietor glares at him.

“I couldn’t find them.”

“What kind of beans?” the grocer asks, continuing to read a newspaper.
“It doesn’t matter."

The grocer takes his time responding, exaggerating his chews so that a sloshing sound falls out of his mouth.

“For planting? Or eating?”

“Eating.”

Annoyed, the grocer sighs. He flips through a few pages of the newspaper in front of him before coming around the corner.

“There,” he points, to the back corner.

“Where?”

The grocer pushes off the counter and walks to the back. Alejándro takes an egg from the plate and chews twice before swallowing the rest in a hurry.

The grocer brings back five tins, setting them on the counter.

“And water?” Alejándro asks. He runs his fingers over the tins like he is changing the frequency of a radio, precise and searching, able to move and detect the miniscule variations, the hidden language even in the scrape of a can against a wood counter.

The man steps back, pinching his nose when he brushes past Alejándro.

“Behind you,” he says, gesturing without looking.

There are a few five gallon barrels tucked away in the corner.

“Anything else?”

“Yes,” Alejándro says, pausing. “Saddle blankets.”

“You mean for horses?”

“Yes.”
“Why? You don’t have any horses.”

Alejándro does not look at the grocer when he answers. He watches the door. Peers through the window. “That doesn’t matter.”

“No. I don’t have them.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“The ones I have aren’t for sale.”

“Ammunition?”

“No.”

Alejándro sighs a brief regret. He had seen the town from the west, where its beige buildings nearly disappeared in the swallowing dust that rose in the midday heat and wind. Caught in the dilemma of pursuing his son’s murderer or supplying his own needs. When he had felt his tongue cling to his teeth, a thick, white, and bitter phlegm threading between them, he knew that further pursuit would guarantee his death and make Diego’s. His body groaned with the approaching dehydration and his gravid hunger.

The grocer glares at him, asks, “Where are you from?”

“The coast,” Alejándro answers, hearing the squawking of the gulls as though they flew near his ears.

“What are you doing here, then?”

“Looking for this man,” Alejándro says. He reaches into his back pocket and hands the grocer the photograph. “Have you seen him.”

Bending over the counter, the grocer takes the picture, squinting over the rims of his thin glasses. “Why you searching for him?”
“Son killed,” Alejándro stutters.

“No. I don’t recognize him,” the grocer replies, handing back the picture.

Forming his answer Alejándro becomes distracted, his eyes grow distant and fogged with the glaucoma of painful memories. He mutters something and the grocer scoffs.

“Get out of my store,” he orders.

Alejándro gathers his purchases and exits the bodega. Some of the egg’s powdery yoke still lingers on the sides of his tongue and the crevices of his remaining teeth. Alejándro rolls the powder around, savoring the paste it becomes. Outside, a boy stands with his arm hugging the wooden beam supporting the canopy. At the sight of his thick, dark hair, Alejándro halts. When the boy turns around, Alejándro sets his items on the porch.

“Where are your parents?” he asks the child. The boy’s playful eyes pierce Alejándro. He points an innocent finger across the street and his eyes accuse Alejándro of things he already condemns himself for.

His back aches and he allows his display of sturdiness to slouch, the stiffness relaxing as he drags himself to his pickup.

He leans against the dusty truck and watches the lightning approach. The patina of sand hides the pale green color of his truck. Its wheel-wells succumb to rust and the tires seem small for the size of the truck, which looks pieced together like a makeshift raft. The driver’s rear wheel-well is a broken, brown shale shade of rusted. The small cabin has two thinly cushioned seats and little space behind them to put more than a shotgun
and a pillow or blanket, though Alejándro finds a way to fit a rucksack there as well. But the truck bed, spacious, is filled with many objects. There are two saddle blankets, rolled up and shoved together in the upper passenger corner, covering the imbedded loops for securing larger objects or smaller livestock. Cords of rope sit next to the red and black diamond-patterned blankets. Two iron-grey pans that look like they had been hammer-formed are in the middle, cushioned by sepia-colored rucksacks that bulge with their contents. A small pot for boiling water rests in the pans. There are no lids. Shoved against the rucksacks are an M1 Garand, .30-06 Springfield, and a ten-gauge shotgun with boxes of ammunition lining the bed for three rows, some two-hundred rounds. Some gallons of water take up the last corner—the driver’s side—with a spare canteen tucked between them and the bed wall. On the other side, covered by a small tarp, whose corner bent back, are rows of canned food, unlabeled. Along the edge of the truck bed, small metal hoops and hooks for securing a covering. Alejándro runs his hand along the tarp hitting it twice to make sure it is secure, taut, water-tight.

He can see for miles in either direction, the stretch of a rarely traveled road in front of him. In the moments the wind settles, he hears the clank of an old car sputtering towards him, its dark adumbration crawling towards him like a threat. He straightens his back again and waits for the car to approach and then pretends to adjust some object in the bed of his truck. A young man, uniformed in khaki fatigues, parks near him.

“You good?” he asks, shouting out the downed window because of the wind.

Alejándro turns to him and forces a smile, nods.

“I’m fine. Thanks.”
“I can give you a lift into town, if you need it. Looks like a nasty one’s coming in,” he says, thumbing to the dark sky. “And I’m heading towards Blythe.”

“No. Thank you.”

The man shrugs and put his car in gear.

“You come from the west?” Alejándro asks above the noise of the car.

“Yessir.”

“Anything strange out there?”

Alejándro crouches near his dying fire, wrapping a wool saddle blanket around his shoulders, protecting himself from an abrading world. His eyes, once vibrantly green, are two collapsed calderas and his throat is an ancient and arid wellspring. He sees the world through the fogged mirror of his own eyes, darkened with a sedate glaucoma, as though everything slogged through the growing haze of uncertainty. Looking out at the horizon, his skin protrudes over his cheekbones sagging from a mouth hung open, too grieved to close it. A strand of drool, thick with phlegm and dust, catches in his thick, wiry beard, but he does not notice. His gaze, his concentration, centers over the desert, empty before him, hopelessly hoping for a sign of his son, Diego.

Eighteen months earlier, when he started, sleep was as scarce and precious as water. The echoing howl of a lone coyote startled him to wakefulness and the puff of a jackrabbit scampering across the sand raced his heart. There was a time he made his bed near a cluster of blooming nopales and, in the morning, rolled over, forgetting he was not in his recently emptied bed. He had been startled, his left hand covered in the nopales’
spindles, tugging at the thin skin until the needles broke loose from the plant. He twitched, hotter than the sand he sat in, as he plucked each spear out, his hand trickling blood. Even knowing they were not poisonous, he sucked the wounds, the cool pressure soothing, and spit out the blood until the wound was clean.

He bears them with the pride of an accolade, the pin-prick stigmata on both hands, and would have shown them to his son if he had been old enough to understand a father’s scars and sacrifices.

For months he has slept outside, now immune to the discomfort of rain or dew sticking to his clothes when he wakes, of sand that irritates the webbing of his hands.

Behind him, a battered pick-up truck holds his few remaining possessions. A rolled green cloth, looking older even than the truck, hides three rifles. Shovels and pick-axes crusted with dirt lay next to it.

The right elbow of his plaid shirt is patched and the button from his collar is missing. His pants, once fitting on him, would fall off but for the belt Alejándro wears, an heirloom from his father’s Great War uniform. He has only one or two more changes in the cabin of the truck. His stench, now unnoticeable to him, grows from having neither time, place, nor desire to wash.

Lightning cuts through the sky thick with towering, dark clouds that seem to swallow the light, not just block it. He stands over his fire-pit, staring at the storm’s forefront. Feet rooted in the earth, his boots faded but firm, he studies the sky. There are not yet any showers, only wind. But he knows the strength of unexpected rain. He surveys the elevation around him for concern that he has camped on a flood-plain.
He walks some hundred yards from his camp in either direction and decides to move. He rolls up the saddle blanket and plays with its frayed edges before smelling it quickly, enough to remind himself of the fading smell of his son. When his wife gave birth, he wrapped Diego in the only blanket he could find, the blood pouring from María like water leaving a watermill. Taking his slick body in his hands, he could not find a firm grip and so he set the nameless child down in a saddle blanket and dried him off. In the motherless years that followed Diego played on the blankets, fascinated by their large patterns that he patted and grabbed at, rolling over and weaving his scent into the fibers.

Once folded, he sets them on the empty passenger seat and when the rest of his camp is packed he drives to higher ground where he can spy the mesa intersected only by the river that cuts through it.

He sees the black crests of the mountains and shoreline reflect in the river when it silvers in the lightning. Rain pelts the back of his head and he gets in his truck. Illuminated by a flashlight, he studies a map, its surface faded. His fingers move from the bottom of the map tracing the route he has followed, marked in an ink browned by the sun. Tangential lines, dotted, mark the paths he thought probable or possible. The solid line runs nearly straight north along the Baja coast, about to cross the border into California.

A streak of bone-white lightning ran down the sky daguerreotyping the plateau for miles. The wind crashes against the truck, rocking him back and forth. He leans his seat back and tries to fall asleep. The rain, mocking applause against his windshield, his roof, keeps him awake and with the flashes of lightning he sees shadows cast from nearby
saguaro's and their arms, long and thin, remind him of the priest, Baldomero, bent over yet solid, the remains of an ancient ruin survived through long years of neglect and battery.

In a moment of clarity, he takes his pot and an empty tin out of the truckbed and lays it out near his passenger door as the first loud pellets of rain hit his windshield.

Tranced by the constancy of the rain, Alejándro thinks of the time when Diego was a baby. He would fall asleep holding Diego against his chest in the cool room after dusk. Entranced by the way his child’s chest once pressed against his own when Diego breathed, Alejándro would fall asleep before he tried, his hand protecting his son. Each slept in a silent trust of Alejándro’s strength.

But now, Alejándro is not able to fall asleep.

In the waning moonlight, his rucksack glows with a tempting sheen behind him. He slips a hand from out of the blanket and reaches for his bag’s handle. It is heavy and wedged between the seat and the truckbed wall.

He sets it on his chest, stringing his hands through the bag’s straps.

The strands of the saddle blanket tickled his lips and they smelled like his son’s hair.

He falls asleep to the ocean of reticence that floods down on him.

The first glare of dawn wakes him, sprawled out across the two seats where a rhombus of light crosses his eyes. He stretches and pulls the uncomfortable roll of saddle blankets that has bunched under his back. The pot he had laid out is cool, filled with water and he brings the tin up to his lips, careful to not cut himself on its jagged edge. He chokes, tonguing out a large gnat he pinches away and flicks into the sand. After he fills his
canteens with what remains of the runoff, he unharnesses the tarp and takes out small sticks of dry wood and molds out a hollow with the heel of his boot. When the fire is steady, he squats near the fire and stirs the pot of beans. He hears the fork scrape against the bottom. After itching his beard he licks from the fork the cold, bitter drippings.

Behind him, a few yards beyond where his truck is parked, a saguaro houses a family of cactus wrens, their song echoing from its hollowed limbs. The plant remained firm against the last night’s storm, its arms old and bending, almost mendicant in posture. Alejándro, wanting the birds to stop their chorusing, tries to not look at them while he cooks.

Tying a slip knot—a knot his father taught him—on the canvas he glances out to the river that sheens in the morning. Some miles in the distance, near one of the last sharp bends before the river disappears into the flat plateau of desert, a gray object pollutes the current. He feels a tenseness grip his chest but ignores it. Ignoring the curiosity at first, securing the rest of the tarp, he gets in his pickup and drives. Thin stems of the soaptree yuccas grow in clusters and beyond them a thin trail of dust rises and drifts in the near windless afternoon down to the riverbank. He continues for miles, seeing nothing except a desert willow on the roadside, its large, lilac-white blossoms swaying in the wind like flags of surrender.

As a child, Alejándro enjoyed being alone on the boat, returning to port where the crudity of the stevedores and fisherman took on the piety of prayer because he was once more around men. Isolation prepared him for this exile. The ropes were old, abrasive against his skin like the calloused hands of his father.
When he nears the obscure mass, he stops the truck. The engine sputters to a halt. The brakes pierce a screech. Above him, descending to the banks of the river arrhythmically, a kettle of vultures circle. His face pales when he steps out of the truck, stumbling as he walks. A hot stone of nausea settles in his stomach and his limbs go numb.

Caught in the fluvial spume, the white foam washing over and catching on their turned ankles and ripped clothes, a mass of children slosh. They are trapped, bumping against each other in the current’s quiet lap. Alejándro crosses himself, stepping into the river. Wadding to the opposite bank, where their bodies buoy, he passes through the orange flotsam, the mutilated remains of their organs, that sway from their open bodies with the stream. Their limbs are bloated, swollen and discolored, cloudy. Bruises still linger on their skin. Their wrists and ankles scarred.

Some rocks catch the thin membranes floating from their bodies, slick like moss and sheer as lace. The vultures land on the rocks and hammer their beaks against the stone until they bring up the organs. In that minute, Alejándro despises them as though they are responsible for the children’s deaths and he tries in vain to drive them away.

He falls to his knees, his waist dipping into the water that smells of offal and river-worm. He weeps, his hands hovering over their decaying arms, afraid to touch them. He moves their small bodies, the water under them discolored. Though he tries to suppress it, he wretches. He walks upstream some paces, to splash clean water over his head, his neck and back, cleaning his beard. After he smacks the back of his head a few times, shaking the water from his long, greasy hair, he covers his mouth with a handkerchief and
returns to the children. The first child he moves is face-down and he twists her around, the long hair the only indication left to gender. He carries her back to his truck, where he clears out the bed, putting what his necessities in the cabin, and leaving beside the river what is not. He places the first one down like a father laying his child to sleep. The kerchief does little for the smell and Alejándro snorts, shaking his head to rid himself of the putrescence.

He shoos the vultures away and they hiss at him, spreading their wings in obstreperous semi-circles. Like a reflex, he shoots one of them perched on a rock with his revolver. Seeing the mess of feathers and blood fall away from its post satisfies him for a moment, but the remaining vultures either circle overhead or surround the carcass and peck at its flesh.

The sound of its hollow bones cracking disappears as he wades through the water. He picks out the bodies with longer hair first, moving others away to get to them and he places the girls with each other. With only a few bodies left, he wades back in. His heart pained with each beat. The boys he turns over, placing his hands over the departed’s eyes. He looks for the lambdoidal scar on the boy’s right hand where a fishing hook caught and twisted in a swordfish’s flailing.

One child remains. The body has his son’s frail build. Though matted down, the hair retains the same curls that decorated Diego’s head. Alejándro cannot bring himself to move for some time, his legs numbing in the chilling water. Fearing the last child would be his son, he squats in the water like an indecisive peregrine perched above its prey. Folding his hands he rests his head against them, trying to build the courage to draw the
boy to him. His hands against the boy’s cold, slick back, he cannot turn him over. He lifts up an arm, and he does not see one at first but his feet slip and he falls into the river before he can be certain. Losing his grip on the boy, the body starts to float down the river. Panicked, Alejándro lurches forward, cutting his knees against stones, desperate and scrambling to get a hold of the boy again. When he does, he stays in the river. Snot dribbles down his chin, a thick rheum coating his lips. Relieved that his son is not with the children, he weeps.

His arms numb and they fall into the river.

Then, a fear grips him, as if the water lost all temperature. His eyes dart around, looking for some hidden secret in the current. He fears that his son had been swept downstream. He put his hands on his head, growled, and moaned, and shivered simultaneously. As he stands his saturated clothes nearly fall off him. He reaches his hand out downstream as if he could reach his absent son and draws it back, biting the side of his fingers to keep from weeping again.

When he puts the last child into the truck he stretches out his arms and leaned against it.

It is not until he pulls the canvas tight across the cargo-bed, tying down the side, that he understands what he is doing. The fabric is uneven with the bends and rolls of knees and arms and shoulders and heads stacked on top of each other. He runs his arms along the edge, feeling the coldness of their bodies, the dampness that seeps through the cloth. Leaning against the truck’s side his chest rises and falls. For a moment his exhaustion controls him. Closing his eyes, his breathing ebbs, slows. The ligaments of his fist
hands strain against his skin as he shakes in anger. He does not understand the brutal injustice concealed in front of him. To drown a man takes hate and strength. To drown children—abused and battered children, broken already, their death nothing more than sport—takes something inhuman, a thing Alejándro cannot find a word for.

He head hangs loosely between his shoulders, his eyes closed and nose dripping into the sand. There is a long interim between his breaths, which are loud and deep. The trembling starts in his hands and spreads throughout his body.

Nauseated, he controls his breathing and closes his eyes until the faintness leaves. Even when it does his neck feels inadequate to support his head and he collapses against the door of his pickup, his hot breath pushed back in his face.

Like cattle, he thinks.

* 

At dawn, he drives southwest and crosses the river again, cleared of the splanchnic remains, washed away by the amnesiac stream. A new body catches his sight. larger than a child and it lies on the opposite bank of the river. With a jerk that pushes him forward he stops his truck and wades in and sees it is a man, his skin still dark and full of color. His feet are wet, touching the shallow part of the river, his pants soaking up more water than they are in. Putting his ear to the man’s chest, Alejándro hears a distinct heartbeat.

He’s alive, Alejándro thinks.

He stares at the man, his face clean-shaven, the faint hint of an uneven tan runs along his jawline.

Supporting the man’s head, his hands touch a hard lump and, brushing aside the hair,
Alejándro sees the bruised swelling.

Who knocked you out? he questions.

He pulls the man into the river and keeps him afloat until he crosses over again. It is not until he steps out of the water that he feels the brush of cold metal against his wrist and finds a Colt revolver tucked in the stranger’s pants. A tattered green rucksack that fell from the man’s shoulder still rests on the other shore. For a moment Alejándro considers abandoning it but the man looks nourished and the allure of sustenance compels him to tread through the current a third time. He holds the bag over his head while he crosses.

*

The man is still unconscious when Alejándro leafs through his rucksack. He yawns, taking in the breath slowly and he can hear his heart beating with the muted throb that swells in his ears and it sounds like the footsteps of his son. Inside, an unloaded Colt revolver and some old, lineless pieces of paper, folded together and stapled, on which there was nothing but numerous lines grouped into clusters of ten. Alejándro sets them aside. Pinned on the rucksack’s flap, a conscription notice two years old. It is wrinkled and the name is either faded or scratched out. Holding it, Alejándro looks at the stranger. He brushes his little finger along his forehead several times before tucking the card into his back pocket and continues his pilfering.

A few bags of food—some nuts, dried fruits, granolas—half-eaten, flatten at the bottom of the bag. He tears them open and pours the grains into his hand, licking off the clusters that stick to his sweating palm. Their crunch is a welcome relief from the soft
give of overcooked beans and cactus paddles. He takes a handful of fruit, eating them one by one, guessing which were cranberries, raisins, or blueberries. He chews them slowly, enjoying the full sweetness of them until they turn into a watery paste and he replaces them with a new fruit until he has eaten more than half of what he found. Twisting the bags closed, the food drops out of the torn sides and camouflages in the sand. He regrets his haste but still stretches, satisfied, out on the ground and looks at the star-filled soffit above him.

As a child he would stare at the stars for hours with his father, laid out on the deck of their boat rocking on the lightless ocean that sometimes reflected the constellations when the moon was new or clouded over. Falling asleep to the lapping against the boat’s hull imprinted onto his memory a sense of permanent peace and the knowledge of his father’s presence next to him secured him like the anchor that kept their boat from drifting beyond the sight of land. His father explained the constellations to him not in their Greek names but in terms of knots and Alejándro always remembered them as such. Scorpius became a Figure-of-eight knot. Gemini a Granny-knot. In his own way, Alejándro planned on teaching Diego the constellations not in terms of knots, but in stages of fishing. Orion—that, according to his father was a Shroud knot—was the Cast and Perseus became the Kill.

It was underneath the stars, on his father’s boat, that Alejándro first heard his father say, “He who runs with wolves learns to howl.” He had never considered his father wise but in their own way the words seemed a prophecy now in the process of being fulfilled.

If his father had been with him, he would have called the stranger a catch but Alejándro
sees him as a stalk in need of threshing.

The fire’s voice dies to a hiss, ambering the soles of the stranger’s shoes but leaving the rest of him in the night’s dark. Alejándro props himself against a rock that comes to the center of his back, his feet stretched out towards the chilling fire. Though uncomfortable, he stays still, staring at the unmoving mass.

To distract himself from the exhaustion that hangs off his shoulders he takes the conscription notice from his pocket and holds it up to what little light is left, hoping to add some clarity to the faded lines. The thin paper turns to the color of beeswax but none of the former marks are any clearer. Alejándro folds the conscription along a well-defined crease and keeps it in the palm of his hand, resting it against his thigh.

For a moment he contemplates whether to keep the card, to hide the entire bag.

The man’s rucksack is within reach and Alejándro stretches, pulling it towards him. Pinning the card back in onto its fold, he steals one more handful of food and spends some time picking the harder kernels of hazelnuts and Brazil nuts from his teeth. At first he uses his finger, with the sand and dirt trapped underneath them, put a bitter taste in his mouth. Then he uses his tongue. While he knows the man is still asleep he takes the three bags and pours them into the one with the smallest hole. Tying them shut he puts them in his own rucksack and sets the bag behind him, tucked against the rock he leans against.

His legs are tired. Sore. Even rubbing their tightness does not relieve them but causes additional pain. Alejándro thinks they might be bruised but he does not know. He has not seen his own legs in over a week, having no opportunity or need to undress.
He looks to the east where a gibbous moon ascends and he knows it is after midnight. Constellations dissipate and vague, unformed animals wander in the plains where, by the moon’s light, he can see their shadows following them. With a last puff of a hot coal in the firepit, he falls asleep.

The moon has moved a few degrees when he jumps from his sleep, hearing the draft of some nocturnal beast pass him over. He shakes and slaps off what exhaustion lingers and rises, taking his revolver from out its holster. He does not know why he has waited to wake the man, but his dreams, filled with specters of Diego, drive him to movement again.

With a quick kick, he brings the squared tip of his boot into the ribcage of the sleeping man. The cry that comes from the man’s mouth imitates that of a captured rabbit, hollering in the falcon’s closed talons. He rolls to his side, clutching his side, his eyes still closed.

Alejándro straddles him, squeezing his legs against the ribs. Mercy cannot be shown until Alejándro knows if mercy is deserved.

He aims the revolver at the man’s head but cannot bring himself to arm it.

Without introduction, he asks, “What were you doing by the children?” His voice stays calm, each word distinct, filled with the serious inquisitiveness of a man intent on receiving answers.

The stranger coughs, his eyes watering and a glistening rheum covering his upper lip.

He grunts.

Alejándro, disgusted by the man’s intolerance for pain, puts a hand on the man’s
shoulder, to keep him from twisting. He repeats his question.

“What were you doing by the children?”

The one thing keeping the man from answering is his labored breathing. It whistles as he exhales, rasps as he inhales. Then, he coughs and turns his head to the side, spitting out a wad of dark blood that dribbles down the corner of his mouth. It bubbles with saliva.

“What were you doing by the children?”

“What children,” the man manages to force out, the words barely audible.

“In the river.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

The man’s eyes are still closed. Clenched shut.

He’s trying to hide something, Alejándro thinks.

“The children. Drowned in the river.”

“No,” the man mouths, turning his head.

Alejándro does not know if the man is denying future accusations or concealing what he knows.

His legs have stopped thrashing and his arms hang loose at his sides. A sweat of fatigue darkens his shirt.

Alejándro squeezes his knees together, as though truth lay hidden in the stranger’s ribs. The man screams out, his back arching even against Alejándro’s weight.

“Don’t lie to me,” Alejándro yells, the first betrayal of emotion in his voice.

“Why were you in the river?”
“Getting away,” the stranger pants.

“From whom?”

“Getting away,” he repeats. His head wobbles in the sand.

Alejándro slaps the man’s face a few times, hard enough to bring him back but not to disorient him.

“Tell me what happened.”

“Getting away,” he says.

Impatient, Alejándro shoots the revolver into the sand just above the man’s shoulder. Surprising even himself, he forces a stern countenance, trying to keep his head from trembling. His eyes open for a moment, wide and frightened, and his hand grabs at his face. A red splotch from a gunpowder burn.

“Tell me.”

Alejándro feels the man’s rapid pulse beat against his thighs, his breathing shallow and fast. In this moment he is connected to the man like he was once connected to his wife: the intimate details of his body laid bare against Alejándro’s strength.

“Can’t breathe,” the man gasps.

Alejándro does not get up but scoots backwards, though he might not have were he not confident the man hid some secret, some key to Diego’s deliverance, and sits on the man’s legs.

He waits a minute until the stranger’s breathing steadies.

“Tell.”

“I was running away,” he pants. “Trying to get out of the war.”
Calculating, Alejándro thinks of the conscription card in the man’s rucksack.

“A man was helping me cross. Pointed out the way and then tried to rob me.”

His hand falls away from his face.

“I was running to the river. I was tired. I tried to get something to drink.”

“And what happened?”

“Then, I remember the smell.”

Alejándro does not believe him. He does not want the man’s story to be true. If the man’s story is true, he is no closer to rescuing his son.

“But what about the children? What do you know about the children?”

“Nothing,” the man says, shaking his head that streams out the sand beneath him into a smooth divot. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Alejándro stands, his limbs buckles underneath the sorrowful realization that Diego is still lost to him. The man rolls to his side again.

“Water?”

Alejándro, taking the man’s own canteen from his rucksack, drops it into the man’s lap. He pours it in his mouth, choking on it and then sits up.

“What’s your name?”

“Javier,” the man says.

Seeking to assert his dominance, his ownership, of the camp, Alejándro stirs the fire to some weak life. Alejándro takes his place again by the rock. With his knife he swirls a mound of sand, mumbling while his eyes are fixed on the greying embers. He replays the moments before and after seeing the children, piecing together the hours he tracked the
men. He suspects Javier of being one of them but wants to pull up the roots of wickedness all at once, in a single, painful tug and he knows this possible only by the slow axing of the exposed roots around the tree’s base.

“Do you have food,” Javier asks.

“No.”

“Yes you do.”

“Not for you,” Alejándro answers. “Not yet.”

He reaches out his arm and takes hold of the draft card he pinned back in place. He lifts it up between three fingers. Holding the notice in front of him Alejándro cannot help but feel resentment towards Javier. Even the way he holds the card, at a distance, as if he could catch the cowardice from overexposure, confirms his disgust.

“Who’s this man you were following?”

Javier does not answer.

“If you answer, I’ll give you something to eat.”

Javier remains stubborn.

“And drink. Even pulque, if I can find it.”

Taking a breath, Javier says, “I wasn’t following him. He was my guide. Showing me where to go. There’s a difference.”

“Fine,” Alejándro says, allowing the distinction. “What was his name?”

“He told me to call him Roberto. Don’t know if that’s his real name.”

“Why wouldn’t he use his real name?”

“I don’t think they use real names in his line of work.”
“Which is?”

Alejándro asks the question trying to calm the quiver in his voice. He believes he has found a link to the man responsible for Diego’s disappearance.

“He’s a coyote.”

Alejándro runs his tongue over his gums, teeth carpeted with plaque rough and sore where they meet. In nodding slowly, he tries to hide his disappointment and gives Javier an opportunity to gain control of the conversation.

“Where’s my food?”

Alejándro throws Javier a tin of beans.

“How am I supposed to open it?”

“Where were you going?”

“Why are you asking me all these questions?”

“Where were you going?”

“You have no right to ask me these things.”

“I have the right of a father,” Alejándro screams, jumping across the firepit. In the moment, he unsheathes his knife and brings it down into the sand near Javier’s throat. The only part of Javier that moves is the rounded part of his throat, rising and falling as it glistens in a sweat. Alejándro does not see the thin, frightened eyes of a man beneath him but the pelt of a dying animal. He wants to approach Javier like his father in the gutting of a wild animal, or of the harvesting of a crop, impatient and forgetful of the hours spent in the hunt, the months bringing up the stalks before their produce blossomed.

“So do I,” Javier says.
Alejándro slides off Javier, dragging his knife with him that cuts through the sand. Javier tucks his legs up and rolls out from underneath Alejándro.

“I’m trying to return to them. My wife was pregnant when the war started. When I was drafted. I wasn’t going to leave her and my child husbandless. Fatherless. A friend introduced me to Roberto, who said he could get me across the border, where I could hide until the war was over. He could make sure my wife and kid came over safely, later.”

Alejándro stands. His limbs ache. He knows he has ruined his body in his search for his son, as if every inch between them scrapes away at his thinning cartilage, his weakening muscles, his dry bones. When he moves he hears their groaning, worried that they might shatter at any moment. His breathing, even in sleep, like a slowly deflating balloon.

A wind that falls from the mountains chills him, and he looks for an unfound morning on the horizon. There are still some hours left until dawn but his eyes have grown dim and the stars blur into a milk-blue sheen over their black backcloth. Picking up the tin he shoves his knife into its top, the grating pop startling Javier, but Alejándro does not apologize. He works the blade around the circumference, unintentionally, but not regretfully, leaving jagged edges. After he wipes the blade, coated in a black, bean-water film on his pants, he hands the tin to Javier.

“You’re not going to heat them?”

“I can’t spare the wood,” Alejándro says, stretching out in the sand. “Just eat them and go to sleep.”

Alejándro shifts so that Javier sits just outside his periphery. For the moment, he
does not want to see him. Amid the scrapping at the bottom of the tin that aggravates
him, Alejándro stares out southeast until a milk-blue spill drapes over the jagged horizon,
remembering the days when Diego would press his thumb into the dark earth and drop
seeds in the depression, covering them over with dirt packed too firm. Javier’s noise
becomes the chink of a plowshare against buried stones. He must do this now, fill in his
memories with the things of the present. Banal, insignificant moments become the
tangibles of his memories, or whatever is left of them. To run his hand through his son’s
hair he must feel his own. To hear his son’s laugh a wolf must cackle. It is not that he
confuses the real world with an imagined one but that their significance comes from the
other. Rescuing his son destroys one but saves the other. Finding his son extirpates them
both.

“Thank you,” Javier says.

But Alejándro does not hear him. He has fallen asleep with his hands folded on his
chest, as if he were dead or, for the moment, at peace.

*

The morning larking distracts Alejándro and he massages a stiff neck, wondering if he
had fallen asleep.

Javier’s chin rests against his chest.

Smart man, Alejándro thinks.

He expected Javier to attempt escape in the night, almost tempted him to it. Javier’s
flight would have given Alejándro more reason, more ground, to interrogate him, mercy
being then more optional.
Letting Javier sleep, he picks up the discarded tin and throws it in an empty cloth sack. The left over pieces of wood still salvageable he takes, testing them first to see if they are still hot, and the ones that are he leaves until he is ready to depart. In the bed of the truck, he clears a space for himself and slides the wrapped mass of his rifles up to him. Without looking he reaches behind him and brings up boxes of ammunition, first loading his .357. He thumbs each bullet into its chamber with a slow precision, almost hesitant to arm the revolver. Each time he pinches a bullet he eyes Javier, making certain he is still asleep. When finished, he takes the M1 Garand. A separate box holds dozens of en bloc clips, the eight .30-06 calibers with a thin coruscation from the dawning sun.

He takes the magazine out before spreading it on his lap. First, he unclasps the shoulder strap and runs the butt and stacking swivels between his fingers, checking for rust or wear. He untwists the knots in the strap and folds it twice before setting it by his side. The butt plate is solid but the stock shows signs of use, the polish rubbing away from abrasion with the other rifles in the canvas. He works with a meticulousness learned by working with his father. As a sailor nothing was to be out of place. A loose rope, a misplaced anchor or fishing hook could be disastrous if a sudden squall arose. But here, in the desert, a sand-sea where no waves crest or trough, death rests in more delicate scales where even a speck of dirt could tip them to his harm. Pulling back the bolt he looks through the rear sight and down the barrel, seeing the ring of white through the other side. Taking the wire brush, he works it through the barrel a few times, removing the pulverulant debris that would make a kill shot a wound or less.

With his fingernails he pries away the pollution in the bayonet stud until he can work
the bayonet on with a smooth motion.

He takes off the bayonet and conceals it in his boot. Then he wraps the rifles together and puts the canvas bag in the cabin, moving around the inessentials. The few tins remaining he squares into the driver’s corner of the now nearly empty truck bed and boxes the ammunition, sliding them underneath the passenger seat. The space cleared reveals the imbedded loop in the bed used for securing things.

As the sun breaks away from the mountain, he stands in the truck bed, looking over it one last time to see if there is anything else he can remove.

His replacement clothes are stacked on the front seat, folded haphazard.

He jumps down and walks to Javier, tapping his feet, on the tip of Javier’s boot. When he stirs, Alejándro says, “Let’s go.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“I’m not taking you anywhere,” Alejándro answers. “If I leave you here, you’ll die. I don’t want another man on my conscience.”

Alejándro stretches his legs on the step of the truck. The passenger door opens.

“No,” Alejándro says to Javier.

“What?”

“Just because I don’t want you to die doesn’t mean I trust you.”

Javier does not move.

“In the back,” Alejándro orders. “Arms.”

Javier sticks out his arms and Alejándro binds them together.

“Now sit.”
Looping the rope through the eyehole, Alejándro anchors Javier to the pickup.

“Here’s water,” Alejándro says, tapping the two canteens he’s left near Javier.

“And a bag of food.”

Javier glares at Alejándro.

“Your food.”

*

Trapped in the closed cabin, the downed windows allowing an inadequate amount of air in, Alejándro wishes that his role were switched with Javier’s. Then, he wishes that he was chasing Diego through the corn fields, prying apart an unripe husk to show him the signs of ripeness. He follows the river’s current, west, hoping, not knowing, that the children were carried this way. He digs his hand into the bag stolen from Javier and shoves the grains and fruits into his mouth, ignoring the pieces of sand and dirt come unlodged from his fingernails. They grate against his teeth, rubbing raw the sensitive areas of his gums that he has not kept clean for months. Once the gums ache each bite seems to pull against his teeth, rattling them loose with the unsteady movement of the pickup. But, the belief that his son lies on the outstretched tips of his fingers, he eats to sustain himself.

The fuel gauge remains steady, though, with a few more days of traveling, Alejándro will have to find more diesel. And he will have to find some way to pay.

As the sun crests, Alejándro finds a grove of high mojave yuccas and parks in the small arc of their shade. He picks a section of the copse with branches low enough to
keep Javier from jumping out of the truckbed.

“Don’t stand,” Alejándro says.

An impatience rises in him. After closing the door to tell Javier to stay, he goes back and opens it, pushing the litter around until he finds the folded map chronicling his journey. The line he has drawn is his signature of admittance to defeat, each circle a proclamation of cowardice that he is determined to keep hidden from Javier. The simple line that stretches from one country to another bifurcates a man’s life, as if the beginning and endpoints could be life before and after Diego.

He throws the map and a pen over the rim.

“Show me where you crossed,” he orders.

Javier stretches his back to reach the map, fallen on the floor. He unfolds it and indicates the place where Alejándro found him.

“Not where I found you,” Alejándro barks. He cannot decide if he suspects Javier or if it is only a distrust. “Where’d you find that coyote?”

“Here,” Javier replies with a quick gesture.

He points to an area of the map not ten miles from where Alejándro spoke with Baldomero.

Alejándro pushes Javier’s finger away with his thumb, keeping it in place as he folds the map and squares the area with a pen. He puts the map in his back pocket and realizes he is winded.

His chest rises and falls like the belly of an exhausted bison, toppled on deserted plains.
The yuccas offer a poor refuge from the midday.

“We’ll rest here,” Alejándro says.

Alejándro sits in the passenger seat with the door open, his feet on the ground. He studies the landscape with that same deliberation that determines every movement of his, as though he calculated an ambush of the mountains in front of him. That horizon leers at him with a malefic impenetrability that enters him imperceptibly, like a plague carried on the soft backs of rats. The world gloats before him, declaring with every skittering lizard or hawking bird, its ability to not only forget the plights of its inhabitants but boast in its apathetic acceptance of them, as though the world were designed and written by a bitter, melancholic playwright.

Surrounded for months by the unfeeling mass of degenerate clay, broiling rock, and parched sky, he does not remember how to treat another human. Even talking, a purely functional speech that serves his purpose and directs him towards his goal, is toilsome, but the presence of another man, not considering the presence of another man without his son, lays on Alejándro a new millstone. He does not know if mercy will be the death of him or the key to retrieving his son, but he will not allow himself to engage in the same evil that led to his son’s disappearance.

“Get up,” Alejándro says.

Javier, his head swaying in the heat, the collar of his shirt ringed wet.

With some water poured in his hand, Alejándro wakes Javier, splashing his face. A satisfied sigh escapes him.
“Can you get up?”

Javier’s voice is weak, but he answers.

“With help.”

“Slide to the edge,” Alejándro says, meeting him at the back of the truck. He unclasps the door and puts his shoulder out for Javier to rest on and lowers him to the ground still supporting him when his weak legs bend against the earth.

“Take some more water,” he says, putting a canteen to Javier’s lips.

As Javier drinks, Alejándro estimates how much water he has left, first for himself and then how much he can spare for Javier.

“We’ll need more,” he says, inadvertently, out loud.

“More what,” Javier pants, his eyes closed and head tilting forward and back. But his words are stronger, more confident and Alejándro does not worry that with the approach of dusk, Javier will revive.

“It doesn’t matter,” Alejándro answers. He keeps his watch on Javier, making sure he does not fall over. “We’ll need to fill up on some diesel soon. We’ll get more of what we need then.”

Dusk is still some hours away and the yuccas provide poor shade with the sun passing its zenith.


He pulls Javier off of the truck and rests him against the side away from the sun. Climbing into the cabin he pulls out the folded tarpaulin and stretches it across the far edge of the truck and ties it to the strong stems of the yuccas. His hands bleed with a few
small cuts from the yucca leaves and he leaves them to drip blood to the sand, thinking the smell will attract a wolf or fox that he could kill.

Dark and cool, the trapezoidal patch delivers them for some hours from the heat.

Alejandro forces Javier to drink in small sips, putting the smallest dried berries and grain kernels in his hand to swallow with the water. Then, before he knows it, Alejandro feels the warmth of the sun against the lower part of his back exposed by the truck’s undercarriage. He stands, having to slouch to keep from knocking the tarpaulin down, and brushes off his hands. He scratches his beard and the blood trails, rusted and dried, flake off and catch in it or fall to the sand. The small scars, nothing that will last, blacken and congeal. He does not have much time before night blinds him.

“Stay here,” he says to Javier.

He takes out his Garand from the cabin and straps it on his shoulder, walking towards the mountains where their shade cuts across the land in a diagonal partition.

Leaving Javier behind, his mind returns to Diego. Like a man drowning, Alejandro breathes in memories of his son to keep him alive, though each gasp makes the suffocating between the memories that much more painful. He wants to shed his guilt, of not protecting his son, but his guilt has become his beating heart, fueling all his actions. As he steps into the mountains shadow, he wonders if Diego has a chance at some respite from the heat. To keep himself from stumbling on any memory that would devastate him, Alejandro conjures images to propel him forward in his search, but they leave behind a charred residue like that of a consuming fire, bound to destroy. The remembrance is his way of soothing his guilt, a house of lies he carefully builds to shield him from the beating
sun of the truth: that Diego is dead and no toil or search or love of his is strong enough to bring him back. And the farther he goes in his search for Diego the more distance he puts between him and a scarred past in need of healing. The internal peace Alejándro has forgotten even exists is inextricably bound to Diego and Alejándro fears that, once he accepts Diego’s death, all he will ever know is rage and a bitter heart as dry as the desert that cannot bear life.

* 

He drives northeast, away from the river and towards the dark mocha-colored mountains in the east, near Andrade.

“We’re heading back to Andrade?” Javier asks.

Eyes narrow, Alejándro glances at him. “Yes. A problem?”

Pouting his lips, Javier shakes his head, his arm propped on the door.

Abandoning the road, Alejándro’s truck convulses against the uneven terrain.

“Where in Andrade?”

The tires crush beavertail cacti and their broad purple flowers.

“The church,” Alejándro answers, hesitantly.

“Are we staying there?” He does not look at Alejándro.

Near the foundation of the mountains the bell of an old monastery glistens briefly. Its walls are camouflaged by the surrounding summits.

“I don’t know. What’s in Andrade that you don’t want to meet?”

A mile from the hermitage he passes an old fence, dilapidated and sagging, its barbed-wire rusty and drooping, nearly touching the red-colored sand beneath it. Log-posts lean
and split and the fence continues on for miles in either direction, running east to west.
Weeds grow along it, twisted in the wire invisible in the twilight. A sign, as old as the
fence, weather blasted and worn smooth from the wind, identifies the city as Andrade.

The monastery is smaller than Alejándro remembers. Leaving Javier behind, he treads
through the sand leading to the door is burnt red, with paw prints from a fox leading
away from the building. Alejándro pounds on the door, shouting for the priest, Baldomero.

“Igamé,” he shouts. “Igamé, Sacerdote.”

The sun, setting, beats against his back. He feels his shirt stick to him.

The door opens and an old woman, bent over, smiles at him.

“Sacerdotisa,” Alejándro pants. “Where is Father Baldomero?”

She starts to answer but he cuts her off.

“Baldomero,” he shouts. He walks through the sanctuary, following his echo. He
steps past the mosaicked, pious men, their faces severe in their holiness. A roseate light
thickens through the windows and drapes on the sandstone floor.

“Baldomero,” he repeats, drawing the name out.

Passing the lattice-work of candles he dips into the matchbox and pockets a handful.

“Señor,” she says.

Alejándro does not hear her. Frenetic, his head moves in examination, glancing
through each empty pew, behind the altar, back to the narthex and under each stained-
glass window before his eyes rest on her.

Her head is uncovered with hair more transparent than white, her scalp visible and
spotted beneath it.

“Señor. I am Sister Nadia,” she says.

“What’s happened to Baldomero? Where is Father Baldomero?”

The fear that Baldomero has disappeared pierces Alejándro. The sanctuary’s silence is not solemn but damning.

The seconds draw out between the end of his question and the beginning of Nadia’s answer. Like Job in his ashes, he waits in the muteness.

“He’s outside,” she answers.

“Is he well?”

“He’s fine,” she says, not understanding his panic.

“Let me see him.”

“He doesn’t like to be disturbed in the garden. He’s probably drawing.”

“Please,” he says.

He sees Nadia’s eyes travel his person. She sighs and tells him to follow her. She opens a door that leads out into the church’s garden.

He sees the aging priest sitting in the shade of a sprawling desert willow, the blue streak of a hummingbird flying haloing his head and flies to the tree’s streaked blossoms. His head leans back, his body pressed against the trunk where branches have been cut out to make a place for him to sit.

“This is where he comes to draw. To rest,” Nadia says.

Alejándro bends down and places his hand on the priest’s knee. “Father Baldomero,” he says. Beneath the cloth, he can feel the hard, distinct patellar bulge, damp with sweat.
from the day’s increasing heat. “Father.”

The priest’s eyes flutter, refusing to open in the intense sunlight. He brings his hand up to guard his eyes.

“Alejándro?” Baldomero asks.

“Yes, Sacerdote,” Alejándro answers. He sees a terse smile crawl across the priest’s face.

“Help an old man up,” Baldomero says, his gentle voice familiar. Alejándro stretches out his hand, slowly, with the palm up, his scars hidden from Baldomero. The priest takes the offered hand and brushes the dirt off his smock. The birds on the ground scatter.

“Why are you here?”

“Help,” Alejándro answers.

“Of course. And in what way can I help you?”

“It’s better to see,” he says.

Alejándro walks him to the pickup, careful to hide his hands from Baldomero’s sight. He folds back the canvas. Flies crawl across the children’s bodies like beggars and the miasmal stink of them spreads out. Baldomero crosses himself three times, bringing the neckline of his habit up to cover his nose.

“Kyrie eleison,” he stutters.

Their turgid limbs knot each other and Alejándro stands at Baldomero’s side. They stare in silent bewilderment.

“I want to give them a proper burial.”
Baldomero recognizes the way Alejándro looks at the children, as if they were still alive.

“Yes. Yes, of course,” Baldomero says, choking. “I’ll get you a shovel.”

“I already have one,” Alejándro says. “I wanted your prayers.”

*B*

Burying the pickaxe into the earth, Alejándro draws it out with the arced motion of one accustomed to handling fishing poles. He tries to keep his hands away from Baldomero and ignores his growling stomach, rumbling like a landslide. Every so often he looks up and sees the birds hop from one willow branch to another, or to a cactus, and he pictures wringing their necks, their deplumed bodies turning over a fire built in the quiet middle of isolation. The only sound the crackle of fire and the slurp of succulent skin off the roasted fowl. He salivates. And digs.

Baldomero drags one body out of the truck and Alejándro hears the young girl’s feet hitting the ground like two dropped stones and they make small trails to the hole he digs.

Don’t tell him, he thinks as they cross her arms and lay her in the grave, making the sign of the cross over her and then over themselves. The priest says words in Greek but Alejándro does not understand them. He returns to digging, the spray of dirt hitting his feet.

Covered in sweat, the dirt sticking to him and covering his scars, he goes to the truck and carries another child and lays the boy to rest in another grave. He tries not to shiver at the feel of the child’s cold, soft elbow against his hot forearm.

Seven of the ten graves are filled.
You don’t need to tell him. He’ll think you’re weak, Alejándro thinks.

Baldomero takes hold of the shovel.

“No,” Alejándro says, pulling the shovel away. “They’re not yours. They’re not your burden.”

He has more important things than feeding you, Alejándro thinks.

He fills in the grave, unable to ignore the way the clumped dirt hits the girl’s body, how the skin still ripples and how her closed eyes do not twitch when dirt clings to her eyelashes.

While Alejándro finishes digging, Baldomero sits underneath a willow and ties together a wooden cross for each plot. Walking past him, Alejándro takes hold of the last child, a little girl, and pulls her out of the truckbed. One arm hangs loosely at her side, some four inches longer than the other arm and its limpness startles Alejándro, who can feel the empty socket where her shoulder once rested. He jumps back in fright, leaving her on the edge of the truck and heaves some paces away. Her face is twisted, swollen around the cheekbones, where it looks like small, sharp rocks punctured her skin.

Crossing himself, Baldomero says, “Kyrie eleison,” again. He appears to be walking upright, his arms held out for the child. Though he shambles, he takes hold of the girl, his strength hidden underneath the drooping, brown habit. He steps into the grave with her, whispering something over her and lays her down. He reaches out for Alejándro’s hand who helps him out of the grave.

Ten wooden crosses, tied with white string, mark their barrows, the ground swollen above them in small mounds.
When Baldomero starts to make the sign of the cross, Alejándro interrupts.

“Wait,” he says. Grabbing his shirt, he buttons it and tucks it into his pants and stands at the girl’s side. He nods to Baldomero, who says the same Greek words he spoke over María years ago that Alejándro still does not know.

“Thank you, Father,” Alejándro says, panting. He takes the leather canteen Baldomero holds out to him. After he drinks, he adds, “For helping me.” He pauses, wants to fill the silence that fills up the space between them. “And for giving up the space for them.”

“Don’t thank me,” Baldomero snaps, his voice gruff and weak, like one tired of speaking. “There is no thanks for this.” He turns from the sites.

Resting underneath the willow, Alejándro looks up to where Baldomero stands.

“You need something to eat,” he says.

“No,” Alejándro says weakly.

“Don’t,” Baldomero says, his voice authoritative, firm. “Don’t do that. You’re hungry. Let me get you some food.”

Though he has known Baldomero for years, Alejándro does not want to follow him through the church. His tongue slides through the gaps left where teeth used to be, the gums still sore in places. Scars cover the back of his hands like leprosy and old calluses roughen his palms. Baldomero draws Alejándro to his side and steadies himself with Alejándro’s strong, though hunched, balance.

They enter the church and calm now, Alejándro is confronted with the memories of the sanctuary. He averts his gaze when they near the altar where his wife laid on a rickety
catafalque days after Diego was born. His arm tightens around Baldomero’s.

“We have some water, upstairs,” Baldomero says as Alejándro climbs the stairs behind him. “We’ll wash, and I’ll get you some food.”

The kitchen window scans out to a small balcony overlooking the desert vistas peaceful underneath the dimming sky and a gibbous moon that rises to its keystone though now horizon-low and translucent. Wooden boxes plastered on their sides with white sheets, their black lettering faded and illegible, line the underside of the shelves. A wood-burning stove lies against the outer wall and two cast-iron pans hang on hooks to the oven’s left. Everything has the sense of being preserved, protected from rust or even the signs of wear, and other than the soot, uncleaned for some time, in the bottom of the wood-stove, nothing about the kitchen would indicate its use. Adjacent to the small kitchen is his walled off bedroom that has its door open. Baldomero steps in front of Alejándro as though to keep him from looking into the impoverished room.

“Over here,” he points to the corner, where there is a washbasin and a chunk of soap. “You wash first.”

Alejándro immerses his hands in the tepid water, a film of sweat and dirty floating on the surface. The pores and crevices still hold the black dirt that does not easily wash away and even when he scrubs his hands with the soap it only turns the pollution into a tawny foam. He drops the soap into the basin and searches for it. When he holds it, its hard but slick surface resembles the bloated calves of the children and he releases the bar. His hands still covered in suds, he flicks them off and dries them on his pants, his shirt, pressing them under his armpits.
A plate of half-eaten dates, fragments of their viscid, parchment-skin littering the dish, rests on the cleaned counter.

“Some remnants from breakfast,” Baldomero laughs. “Have some,” he offers, taking two himself.

Alejandro reaches out for the dates, exposing the red irritation that marks his hands. Dozens of scars and half-healed cuts course along his fingers. When he looks at them he thinks of his father’s fingers, the way they knotted and crooked from the wear of rope and pulleys.

He laughs from embarrassment and quickly closes his lips, careful to not expose his teeth.

Baldomero disappears for a few moments and in that time Alejandro sits in one of the old chairs around the table and falls asleep. He startles when Baldomero shakes his shoulder and sets down a small, white bundle.

“Some cloths,” he says. “For your hands.”

Nodding, Alejandro wraps his hands. Baldomero sets a plate stacked with thick slices of brown bread that smells of cinnamon in front of Alejandro.

“There’s butter too, if you need it,” Baldomero says.

“Do you have any water?”

“There’s a pump-well downstairs. Out in the garden. Do you mean for now?”

“Later. And some now, if you can spare it.”

“Take some food too,” Baldomero says, placing a box of dates from one of the crates.

“I’m sick of medjools. Fifty years of eating them. Take these.”
Alejándro reaches out his hand and balances the box.

“Do you have a bag for them?”

“Yes,” Baldomero answers. He wipes his hands on his vestments and shuffles behind the counter. He pulls out an old flour sack, smacking it against the counter.

“It’s fine,” Alejándro says, reaching out his hand. “The flour won’t hurt them none.”

Baldomero hands him the bag and Alejándro pours the fruits in.

“Thank you,” he says. “They’ll be easier to carry in the bag.”

In silence they walk into the garden. Sand crickets cease their trilling as they approach and their shadows stretch out against the earth, blue in the luminescence. They walk past the fresh, white crosses, outside the garden’s fence, as though they were primitive mounds raised years ago to where a pipe bends to the ground.

“There’s a bucket right inside that door,” Baldomero says, pointing.

Alejándro returns and puts the bucket underneath the opening and Baldomero pumps until water sluices out. Cupping his hands, Alejándro drinks from the flow and splashes water over his face, neglecting to keep his bandages dry.

“Stay here,” Alejándro says.

He disappears around the corner and comes back carrying his two canteens. Their mouths even with the spigot, he squats and motions for Baldomero to keep pumping. He fills them one at a time, setting them aside in the sand.

Gathering them, he turns to leave when Baldomero takes hold of his arm.

“Alejándro,” he starts. He puts his arms behind his back and takes a step forward. They both let Javier walk away and he leans on the truck’s door. “Who is he?”
“I don’t know. Found him by the children. Thought he needed rescue at first.”

“And now?”

“Now—I just don’t trust him.”

“What are you going to do with him?”

“Nothing. Not now. Claims he was being chased. We’ll see what happens.”

They stand in view of the new graves both men with bends to their backs.

“For all my study and for all the things I have seen, there is no answer for this,” Baldomero says, his gaze surveying the cemetery. “There’s a place in all of us that’s either an oasis or a desert.”

Alejandró stands, his eyes unfocused, wandering from Baldomero to the desert willow and the graves beyond it and back to the sand between him and the priest. With loose fists, Alejandró taps the side of his legs. Baldomero takes one step towards him and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Remember, Alejandró. A paradise or a wasteland.”

In the pause Alejandró contemplates what to say. He wants to tell Baldomero that he knows the difference between a lizard sprinting and the patter of a fox’s gloved paws. That deer don’t hesitate when they trot, unless you make some sudden movement. That when he hears Baldomero’s words he cannot decide what it is he hears. Whether it’s sympathy or didactic apothegm. Instead, he raises his head and looks in Baldomero’s eyes.

“He’s dead, Father. What rain would nourish this waste?”
BALDOMERO
“Keep the wolf at bay.”

Baldomero prays, kissing his rosary—a black iron cross, the color of his skin, contrasted by the unpolished white cypress beads. The votive offering to his left has two small flames the shape and size of large raindrops.

He envisions Amadea, thin and cold, her skin the color of a murky pond. He knelt at her bedside, the room empty, and held her right hand, her bones thin reeds between the pebbles of her knuckles. Running the fleeced back of her hand against his chin, he counted the minutes by her weak breaths. She spoke through a sieve of sputum that thickened each day, but had not yet muted her. Do you remember the hacienda, she asked. He smiled and kissed her fingers; said he did. He felt his ring pinch her skin but she did not react. In her dark and fading irises he saw the reflection of a candleflame bending in the windowsill. We would wake in the light that came through our windows, he whispered. Her hand could not clasp his.

“Keep the wolf at bay,” he repeats, kneeling behind the Eucharist Table. It is a prayer his father had memorized as a slave in an Alabaman mountain quarry before Baldomero was born and had taught him when he was young and learned how to wield a pickaxe, to protect the fields from scavengers. But now, he prays against the bone-gnawing jackal of old age that settles in his chest. The dormant consumption that claimed his father’s life.

He has repeated the prayer for over a year, when the first pangs of the disease scratched his lungs, and fears that his constancy evidences a blasphemous distrust of God. Yet, like the murmuring Psalmist, he continues in his prayer with the faith that it will be answered.
In between coughs, he presses away the pain-induced tears, his back to an empty church, and crosses himself, his face brightened by the candles lit for the souls of the departed, the sick, the lame, the abused, and the lost. The church is vacant save for two elderly women dressed in black who sit close together in the third pew, staring at the steps leading to the altar.

Doubt ruminates within him.

She does not need to know, he thinks. Not yet.

The belief that his diocese has failed drifts over him, a piece of sandalwood caught in the tide’s rising, scratching the shore of his conscience. Though the stained-glassed windows remain intact, unaged, the purlins rot above him and he wonders if the sagging roof is yet in danger of collapsing. The rounded backside of the pews have lost their luster and wear to a pale shade, from age not use. The sanctuary gathers dust on all its surfaces and neither Baldomero nor Nadia, his acolyte, are vigorous enough to clean it. The main hall smells of damp stone: the scent of a congregation’s prolonged absence.

Where, years before, the wood drank the aromatics of incense and sweat like a parched nomad, there is now nothing but the empty smell of earth, and stale bread and wine.

He finishes his prayer and reaches out to his side, feeling the tablecloth yellowed and heavy with sunlight and age. Blue veins and rounded tendons show beneath his thinning skin. His large knuckles keep an old, tarnished wedding ring from sliding off his finger. The stone aggravates his knees but he cannot find the strength to stand.

In the past years the lines on Baldomero’s face have deepened, and nothing resembles the body of the farmer he once was. His ankles ache in the morning and at night his back
strains from all his bending and standing. The cross that has hung at his chest for years has either worn smooth or his fingers have lost their sensitivity to its elaborate edges. But Baldomero is grateful that his eyesight has not diminished. He does not yet have to bend over the pages of his Bible to read its small words.

He sees a mother holding the hands of her two children approaching the side votive altar. The younger child wears thin sandals that Baldomero notices are nothing more than black cloth tied to her feet with leather straps. The older child does not wear shoes, feet darkened from long and open exposure to the land. Baldomero watches them pray, smiling as he sees the imitation of their mother. They lace their fingers they way she does and bring their hands up to their lips, watching their mother who has her eyes closed.

The thought of the children’s simplistic faith, content with imitation, makes Baldomero smile.

Then, after crossing herself, she places two small candles in each of their cupped palms. Baldomero does not know if they see him, obscured by the elemental table. They walk along the pews with hands placed in ragamuffin pockets, the mother surreptitiously quieting their already muted steps. Staring at the pews, Baldomero thinks: they are my children, too.

From underneath the table he notices an approaching shadow, the tap of small feet on the pavement.

“Father Baldomero.”

He hears the voice of his acolyte, Nadia, not yet fifty.

“Father Baldomero,” she repeats.
She whispers the words but binds them with a tense urgency.

He does not want to rise, to appear behind the altar to the surprise and amusement of whatever congregation remains in the sanctuary.

“Yes. Sister Nadia,” he answers, pushing himself up with the support of the table.

“Father, did you see those children? They’ve stolen the holy candles.”

“I know,” he says.

“And what are you going to do about it?”

“Nothing,” he says. He watches as the family vanishes behind the doors. “I’m going to do nothing. She takes the candles because she can’t afford to buy any. She doesn’t want her children to spend the night in the dark and that’s why they are taking the candles.” After some time, he adds, “To my shame they are too afraid to ask me for them. I should be giving them what they need,” he turns to Nadia. “Whether they ask me or not.”

“But what will we use when the candles are gone?”

Her tone wears him, exaggeratedly worrisome that would make one think they desecrated the altar.

“I don’t know,” he says, shrugging. “Paper. Or simply use words?” he inflects, as though the idea were novel. “What if we were to offer those? A sincere prayer.” He raises his eyebrows.

Pacing away to a smaller room in the church’s narthex, he hopes to get away from Nadia but she follows him.

“Regardless, they are still stealing. What if someone comes to pray and there are no
candles left?"

"Then I will make them candles," he shouts spinning to face Nadia.

His voice draws the attention of the two widows. Baldomero lowers his head and sighs, looking at the two women out of the corners of his eyes. He relaxes his fisted hands and Nadia, open-mouthed, stares at him.

"I’m sorry, Sister," he says. Massaging his head, he says, “I’m tired. Very tired. Forgive me.”

"You don’t sleep anymore."

He shakes his head.

"I hear you in the night. Always pacing around. It’s your dreams again, isn’t it?"

"I feel something," he answers. Part of him wants to tell her about his sickness, about the death he knows he will suffer and yet he wants to spare her this knowledge. “There’s some threat here. A heaviness that keeps me from sleep. I feel that I cannot lose an hour praying against it.” Turning away from Nadia he enters Saint Anthony’s niche. The years of his priesthood have passed by in an astonishing rapidity, like the memory of a dream. Memories of the past year are as nebulous as his childhood, now eighty years gone. Mumbling his prayer, he lowers himself, sunlight falling in through the barred window to his right. He feels helpless in his old age, an impotent relic among old icons, useful for nothing but decoration.

When he finishes praying, he runs his thumb against his dull wedding ring, his heart drumming.

The world is not indifferent, Baldomero tells himself in the dry cell decorated with the
saint’s iconography.

The room looks out to an iron-fenced garden. From outside Baldomero hears goldfinches chirp. Perched in the blossoming desert-willow, the sun brightens their yellow feathers and deepens the flowers’ magenta petals. Green-plumed hummingbirds dash through the branches. The flowers’ redolence, almost like roses, drifts in through the open-air window and he breathes it in.

Amadea, he thinks.

He shivers, the remnants of a sickness gathering its final strength inside him. His lungs twist and they grate against each other. His eyes throb with every cough that razors his chest with a pain his father knew. Though Baldomero’s back did not bear the scars his father’s did, internally, his lungs share the same lacerations, the same affliction.

He rushes outside where the cough bends him over and he sweats from the exertion with which the sickness yokes him. His slow, delayed departure. The hull of a barque breaking through thick coral.

When the fit ends, resting with his hand against the church’s chiseled stone, he spits into the sand. A viscid lump of raw sienna hue, encased in a bloodied saliva. With his foot he brushes the sand over the mass, its stench stinging Baldomero’s nose. What once, even months earlier, would have only tired him now exhausts him. He takes his time catching his breath, feeling the air pass over his throat’s scars. Even in the windless day, a cloud of dust rises against the horizon. Curious, Baldomero stares intently, wiping the corners of his mouth with his frayed sleeves while he is still leaned over. His habit sticks to his skin and his balding head glistens. Absentmindedly, he circles his thumb over the
granular walls, the rock still cool from the night. He sighs and stands straight. Just beyond him is the church’s garden and he stares at the way the flat, green sails of cactus stop the wind while the leaves of the desert willow rise and fall like an infant’s wave. For what seems a long while he does not move but looks at them with disembarked sight.

“Father Baldomero?”

He turns and Nadia stands peaking out of the dromos’s corner.

“Are you alright?”

“Yes, Sister,” he nods, half-looking at her. “I am fine.”

He does not want her to see the sputum, to hear his chest’s rattle, to insist that something is wrong and subject him to humiliating examinations.

“Go back inside now. It’s too hot to be out here.”

“That’s why I came out, Father. Isabella’s here. She asked for you. Should I send her away?” she adds after some moments.

His hand rubs the wall. “Do you think that same desert willow will be recreated, Sister?” He points with his other hand. “Will it be this same one? That I’ve spent so many hours underneath, that I’ve come to know? Or will it be all new ones? A new tree that will mean nothing to me, or no more than a shadow represents a person?”

“I don’t know, sir,” she says impatiently, adding, “Should I send Isabella away? She’s waiting.”

“No,” Baldomero says, shaking his head. “I didn’t know if she would still come. She’s late,” he says, surprised. “It’s not like her.” He guides himself up with his hands against the walls and walks next to Nadia, supported by her.
“It’s not proper,” Nadia adds. “For her to be here.”

Baldomero stops and holds Isabella back. He stares at her.

“Where else would it be proper for her to be, Sister?”

“Supine,” she quips. “Not prostrate.”

He pulls his arm from hers and steps to the side. “If you are without mercy perhaps you would better serve a house of ill repute than the house of God. Madams are in more demand than mothers these days.”

Leaving Nadia behind, he pictures Isabella waiting in the confessional and wonders whether she comes from a sense of devotion or duty. Though he knows he has no reason to, and hopes he is wrong, he believes her faith to be inherently fragile, shattering at even the slightest disturbance.

Isabella’s regimental confession involves arriving at dawn, her head covered, and she relates to Baldomero the catalogue of sins she accumulated over the previous night. “The sooner to confess the sooner to forget,” she justifies.

“She’s in the confessional,” Nadia nods when they step into the shade of the sanctuary. It takes some time for Baldomero’s eyes to adjust to the darker room.

Isabella, neither young nor particularly beautiful, nevertheless has hair that shimmers to the jealousy of the other whores. Baldomero sees the way they eye her when she passes, the white lace from her shawl made vibrant by her sable strands.

He fights the sleep that still leadens his eyes and walks alongside the pews making his way to the confessional. Even more than her profession, Baldomero feels her youth puts a distance between them, connected by the decrepit bridge of common faith. Yet there are
moments he remembers where she appeared to be advertising herself through the partition, tilting her head when she speaks or listens as though casting a lure from her eyes, almost flirting her way to repentance. Purchase the only affection she understands.

Baldomero opens his door and lowers himself into the seat. It is uncomfortable but he tries to ignore it.

“Hello, Father,” Isabella says, in a tone that has become familiar, filled neither with shame nor apathy.

“Good morning, Isabella,” Baldomero replies. He tries to mask the exhaustion that sickness has laid on him covertly. Her early morning confessions wear on him and at times affect him for the remaining day. The small respite is broken by her presence.

“Forgive me, Father. It has been two days since my last confession.”

For once, Baldomero is grateful at the lapse between her visits.

“Tell me your sins,” he says.

“I have slept with men.”

The familiar words still prick his ears. She details more but his mind strays and he thinks of the things he will have to do before he can climb into his bed again. There are weeds in the garden that must be uprooted and a few cactus fruits that will spoil unless picked and used today. In preparation for Domingo’s pre-vespers arrival, Baldomero must put extra pesos from his savings in the votive collection and still the service for vespers has to be prepared. He rubs his head that stiffens with a precursory ache.

“I am too old for this regimented service, Baldomero thinks.

Isabella does not look at Baldomero when she confesses, her sight fixed on the plain
wooden door in front of her, and so he does not see when her lips stop moving. He wonders when he would hear, for the last time, her same repetitive confession, and if it would come from a change in her or from his death.

“Our sins are forgiven, my child.”

“Is there no penance?”

He waits a moment and considers whether he should administer penance. He looks at her through the wiring. Her threadbare clothing barely covers her shoulders but the way she wraps her shawl around them leads Baldomero to think she does not display them willfully.

“No,” he says, his old voice soft with mercy.

She pushes open the door and he says, “Wait.”

She stares back at him, her hand still keeping the door from closing. Baldomero clears his throat.

“Penance is for the repentant. It is a gift, Isabella. And I do not give it to you.”

Silent and with bowed head, she blinks, her mouth agape.

“Isabella, when will you repent? I cannot bear to hear again of yet another man. Isabella, turn away from your sins.” Part of him regrets the question when he sees her face distort.

“To what? To turn from harlotry to poverty?”

“No,” Baldomero strains. He leans toward her, putting his hand on the partition.

“Turn from harlotry to piety.”

“You don’t see, Father. I could never be holy. Unfortunate but true.”
“No,” he says, squeezing his head. “It’s here,” he utters. “Turn here.” He jerks his arms. “Here there’s shelter. You’d lack nothing. But we both know you won’t. Only one of us knows why.” He plays with some imperfection he sees in the confessional door. “Have dinner with us. Tonight. After vespers,” he offers, inwardly questioning if it is his way of apologizing to her.

She drapes her face with annoyance, aggravation. Moving her jaw side to side she does not answer. She exits the confessional and adjusts her shawl around her.

“Isabella,” he pleads. “Consider it,” he shouts and after she leaves the church he doubts if he will see her before the next morning.

“You know she’ll come back,” Nadia says, coming up to his side.

“I’d rather she’d stay than come back.”

“If you want to let her sin affect you too, I can leave you to it,” she says. Baldomero turns and stares at her, surprised by her boldness. “But if not, there’s work that needs finished in the garden.”

Too bright to look at, the sun hovers over the low ridges of the mountains, spindled in the fog and haze that collects around their rocky crests. Most of the dirt in the garden has turned to a hard, taupe clay that cracks in tectonic fragments and weeds push up through them to litter the ground in the fulfillment of some ancient, biblical curse. Little grows except for agave and beavertail cactus that weaves its way along the iron-fence and contrasts the dark metal posts with its yellow flowers and brown fruit. Taking a flint rock, Baldomero scraps away the glochids from the pears and breaks a fruit off, tearing one in half. Inside, a bright redness that stains the tips of Baldomero’s fingers and
moistens them with the juice that pours from its flesh. He sucks out the liquid and chews the fruit, casting the rind out into the desert. When satisfied, he wanders through the small patch and picks out the weeds. Some are thorned and he leaves them for last, using a small hand-shovel to pry them out.

Underneath the pale earth, a darker layer reveals itself.

Like the man who searches after his sins, Baldomero thinks. The deeper you dig, the blacker the heart.

Tucked inside the door that leads to the garden there is a small woven basket that Baldomero fetches and carries with him. Looking for young, budding nopales, he picks them off before they can thorn and layers them in the basket. With them he will make his, Nadia’s, and, hopefully, Isabella’s dinner. A cluster of three agaves line the far side of the garden, their leaves sea-green. A tall shoot from one of them rises above the fence.

He knows there is no reason for Isabella to come to dinner, that there might even be harm in her staying an extra hour in the church.

But it would only be physical harm, right? Baldomero thinks. It could heal her.

In the garden’s corner there is a pump-well and a bucket beside it that Baldomero fills and pours over the plants. He yawns, covering his mouth while he sets the bucket down and his eyes water. His body does not exactly ache but it is not comfortable, too deprived of useful sleep from supplicants that come to him in all hours of the night.

After the plants are watered and the bucket replaced, to shield himself from the desert’s heat while he makes sure all the flat pads are free from bristle or spine, he sits underneath the willow, all but his sandaled feet in the shade. The nopales’ flowers scent
the air around him. Seeds from the willow’s fruit drop and roll on the earth, the smaller birds gathering around Baldomero.

A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way side; and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it, Baldomero recites.

The finished pads he lays in the dip of his habit, between his legs, and runs callused thumbs over the brown eye-spots, his long nail digging out the thin bristles and pinching the larger spines with his fingers. Some minutes later he sees the faint outline of a truck rocking on the desert’s uneven terrain. His body, unmoved for some time against the unkind willow trunk, is tender. A dull pain, persistent and pervasive, lingers in his lower back when he turns to move. His feet are numb, swollen and blue. Even his eyelids are sore and the growing heat drains the vitality out of him. When the wind rustles the crisp leaves above him Baldomero thinks of the sea. His eyes closed, the sound of leaves against each other becomes a thalassic lulling and he drifts towards sleep.

But he is not there yet.

Even in the haze he can imagine he is on the coast, the Cortéz wind lifting the untucked ends of a unbuttoned shirt, revealing the hair-patched chest, red like the earth. Unaccustomed to wearing one, he plays with a polished ring on his left hand. He hears his name called behind him and when he turns he sees nothing but the cliffs that lead out to the sea below and hears the cackle of sea gulls that sounds like the cry and laughter of children.

He wakes when a warm hand touches his knee.
He watches Alejándro carry each child to the empty plot behind the church. It opens to a wide mesa without vegetation or mountainous break in the horizon.

And when Alejándro asked for prayer, Baldomero agreed from priestly habit.

But now, immobile at the truckbed’s edge, captivated by how little the bodies resemble children, he questions if, in the nearly seventy years of his priesthood, he has truly prayed even once.

The children’s hair trembles in the evening breeze. Not one of them retains anything that resembles a nose. Dry sockets, cavernously black, that stand like stains against the beneficence of God. The bruises around their wrists—those bodies that have them—reminds him of Alejándro’s son and wonders how Alejándro can handle the fragile corpses without succumbing to wreckage.

He sits underneath the willow tree and ties together ten white crosses, all the while listening to the grunt of Alejándro who plows into the dry earth with a strength numb to pain.

Though there exists between them an intimacy established from the death of Alejándro’s wife, Baldomero does not want him to walk through the church. Emptiness and haggardness, with naked shame, expose themselves in every blackening brick and unpolished pew. And all these tarnished elements present themselves as evidence of Baldomero’s failure. Dirt smudges between the tile-grooves and sand wears away the ornate chiseling, besmirching the beauty and integrity of his church.

Baldomero brings Alejándro to his side, steadying himself on the splintery arms of the
pews. Wheezing, he stops walking and grips Alejándro’s arm. He bends over and coughs into his fist.

“Father?” Alejándro asks. He turns and supports the priest. “Father, are you alright?”

Not able to make more than a clicking noise from the back of his throat, Baldomero motions for Alejándro to lower him into the pew. His fit weakens but there lingers a sharp pain that twitches at the back of his eyes and he wants to close them, to stop seeing light, and even for a moment wishes he were blind. But that does not stop the white flashes from detonating. Then, catching his breath, he nods. “I’m fine now. Just let me sit here a while.”

He runs his hand along his leg, the roll of his loose ring coming through the thin fabric. The scriptural touch of the metal, its incantatory movement against his skin, calms him. He continues to hold Alejándro’s hand, feeling his tough calluses against his own.

“The sun must have worn you out,” Alejándro says.

“It’s not the sun,” Baldomero says, shaking his head. “Not that. I’m old, Alejándro. I feel it everywhere. Can barely gain a respite from it. I tremble. It’s harder to get out of bed in the morning and harder to get in it at night. I’m exhausted throughout most of the day and have trouble concentrating. Oh, not all the time. That comes and goes, but it’s there. Like one of those uncomfortable doctrines. You can’t ignore it is what I’m saying.”

Alejándro sits in the pew beside Baldomero. The quiet of the sanctuary contracts the space between them.
“Oh, I didn’t think that I would ever be this old, Alejándro,” he groans, laughing at himself. Gripping the sides of the pews he tries to push himself up but Alejándro has to help him to stand.

“Some fifty years ago, I sat here. This very pew,” Baldomero says, looking around him. “I imagined the poor flocking to me, Alejándro,” he whispers. “I asked God for a sanctuary where people vied for their seats, and that generosity would fill the offerings. I thought people would say my name with respect and that I would wear colorful vestments, not ones stained with dust and sweat. Instead, he gave me the see of Andrade. A place so poor that, even if we were roofless, we wouldn’t have enough for renovations. But I’ve never gone hungry,” he says, his voice pausing over the words, contemplating them as he speaks. “Not once. Mothers have given up their food so that I could eat. It sickens me to think that the young ones might have not eaten because of me. I don’t know what their lives are like. I’ve not known hunger. I’ve not known cold. I’ve not known the shame that they do, walking around with little more than rags on. I don’t know their suffering. How can I say that I served them well when they did the serving? They’re too poor.”

He sees Alejándro’s eyes, staring at the votive altar.

“Did I ever tell you about my father?” he asks, tugging on Alejándro’s arm.

“No, I don’t remember.”

Baldomero leads him back up a flight of stairs hidden from the congregation’s view to the room behind the altar where Baldomero lives.

“My father taught me two things,” he begins. “The first was pain,” he says, holding
up a finger. “The second was how to forgive. I was thirteen when he told me that he had been a slave for most of his life—he even took off his shirt to show me the discolored mounds that mangled his back. I wasn’t ready for that sort of weight and worse yet he knew that I wasn’t ready. That was the pain. But even in hurting me he gave me a cure. By showing me how to swing a pickaxe—the same pickaxe he slaved with—into the earth. That was forgiveness.”

Hoping for some sign of connection from Alejándro and finding none, the man’s face sombre, dark limestone formed from a restless ocean, Baldomero opens his mouth, inadvertently making a smacking sound. His eyes roam along the ceiling and he sees the thin strands of cobweb hiding in the far right corner. A section of the ceiling sags between two purlins. When he returns and sees Alejándro, whose eyes stay still but look far beyond their proper ken, he continues, as if nothing separated the flow of his story.

“I didn’t know it at the time. How could I? But even then my father prepared in me those things that he saw were lacking: strength, fortitude, faith. I suppose in some ways he was a prophet, if that’s not what fathers are. Should be,” he corrects. “They see, somehow, what their sons will need and spend what time remains to them instilling those things in their sons. They need to display them.”

Unfittingly, the birds in the willow sing.

“And those who don’t have sons?”

The words hurt Baldomero as much for what they mean to him as to Alejándro.

“You do not know what it is like. I don’t need an adage or mystic insight, Father,” he says.
Baldomero forces himself to speak quietly. “And what is it that you need?”

Alejándro breathes deeply and looks away from Baldomero.

“How can I help you, Alejándro if I don’t know you? Go back. Go back home.”

“No,” he answers, shaking his head. “Not yet.”

“You know there’s nothing left for you out here. Don’t go down this vengeful road.”

“It’s the only thing left for me,” Alejándro cries. “That’s it. Without—” He stops and lowers his voice, looking at his knees for a brief moment. “It’s not home. But it’s what I have. And I need to return.”

They step into the kitchen where they can hear the evensong of birds and see a corpulent moon rising, hazy like a projection in the sky. Baldomero offers Alejándro a plate of dates that have sat out since morning and breaks away from him.

Entering his bedroom, he incants within him, Keep the wolf at bay.

To the right of his bed is an old wicker chest containing extra blankets. They smell musty and Baldomero smacks them, dust rising from them. Below the blankets is a book, thin and leather bound and it catches Baldomero’s attention. He sets the blankets on his bed and bends down to pick up the notebook, exposing a half-used candle he ignores.

“Are you hungry? I have some bread from yesterday. It should still be good,” he offers from his room.

Alejándro does not answer.

He flips through the pages, charcoaled images on each page rubbing their black against the back of the previous page. There are drawings of birds—vireos, thrushes, hawks,
bluebirds—blossoming nopales hiding the pricked ears of a fox, the ruined walls of the Alamo mission. Two-thirds of the volume are filled with these sketches, detailed drawings of Baldomero’s that he had half-forgotten. In the left corner of each page a date is scribbled, reaching back to 1880, when Baldomero was five and first fell in love with avifaunal plainsong.

The second drawing, one of a finch, whose head pokes out from its nest in a saguaro, brings back a vivid memory, as though Baldomero drew the picture only a month before. And he marvels at how few pages are filled. This dearth of talent part of his legacy.

Tying the book closed, he sets it on his night-stand, resting his hand against it, closing the chest lid, leaving the candle behind.

Blankets in hand, he sets them down on the edge of the kitchen table and shuffles to the counter, careful that the rap of his cane should not disturb Alejándro. In a basket are some hunks of bread, hard but not crumbling. He puts them on a plate, adding the few remaining dates. He knows the pains of hunger, of long days combating the internal affliction, hiding from the external oppression of the sun and the hot wind.

After some time, Baldomero, wondering if Alejándro had not heard him, peers out of his room. In a chair, his head lowered and arms folded, Alejándro sleeps. Even in his rest a visible tightness spreads over Alejándro’s shoulders, as though he resists sleep.

Will two blankets even be enough, Baldomero asks himself, looking at the sarcophagal thinness that remains of his friend.

An unexpected knock on his door startles Baldomero.

“Father?” he hears Nadia ask. “Father? Are you in there?”
He moves to the door quickly, looking back to see if the noise disturbed Alejándro but he still sleeps with his chin against his chest, his right arm stiff on the table. When he opens he puts his finger to his lips and blocks Nadia from entering. “He’s asleep.”

“Domingo is here.”

Baldomero cringes, runs his hand through what is left of his hair.

“Is he asking for me?”

“No, not yet,” Nadia says. “But he’s pacing up and down the side-aisles, mumbling something I can’t make out.”

“Fine. I’ll be down in a minute.”

Before he leaves, he sees Alejándro’s scarred hands on the table.

Fisherman’s hands.

From the moment Baldomero steps into the sanctuary, he is aware that Domingo notices him. The man’s hair is long, thick with the grease that clumps it together. His face turns, grows wide with the worry that Baldomero will pass him by.

“Father, Father Baldomero,” Domingo stutters, running towards him. His smile reveals a mouth with few teeth remaining, and those left of various shades of yellow and brown. His gums are red and receding so that all his teeth appear elongated.

“Good evening, Domingo.”

He holds his hat in his hands and speaks with his head tilted towards the ground. He rocks back on one foot. The hint of cheap bourbon on his breath. “Lots of rain we’ve had.”
“Yes, but it should help the crop.”

“We’ve had a dry spell for certain.”

Baldomero waits to see if Domingo, unprompted, will say what he needs. Even though Baldomero, through disheartening repetition, knows that Domingo is asking for charity, he wants to hear it from him, hear him admit his need for help without dragging it out of him. Both of them wait in silence, Domingo’s mouth open and drooping.

“What can I do for you, Domingo?”

“Well, you see. I’ve had some problems.”

Yes. I can smell them, Baldomero thinks.

“Is it money?”

“Yes,” he stammers. “I’ve . . . given away my last peso. And now I don’t have enough to eat.”

But you have enough to drink. “Okay,” Baldomero sighs. “If you wait here, I’ll get you something.”

Baldomero goes to the votive box and opens it. He brings out a handful of pesos and presents them to Domingo.

“No,” Domingo says, holding his hands up. “I couldn’t.”

“It’s all God’s money.”

“But you could have used it. For something else. Someone else.”

“I am using it,” Baldomero says. He takes hold of Domingo’s wrist and pulls it towards himself. “Here. A gift from God.” He places the money in Domingo’s palm.

“Use it well this time.”
Moving his jaw, Domingo nods.

Baldomero pinches the bridge of his nose.

“I’m boring you,” Domingo says.

“No. I’m just tired.”

“Why would you be tired?”

“Because I’m old, Domingo,” Baldomero snaps. He bites his lips and crosses his arms, fighting the impulse to say something worse to him.

“Well, no need to apologize for that,” he says. Putting on his hat he takes two steps backwards and, bowing, says, “Thank you, Father.”

The church now empty, he returns to his room where Alejándro still sleeps in vigilant repose.

Overwhelmed by the inundation of supplicants, Baldomero lies down on his bed and thinks of his wife in the quiet moments of his day that drip empty like the closing moments of his life. Her sable hair, the night-dark slope of her eyelashes. When she smiled, dimples formed at the corners of her mouth and there was a curve to her front teeth as though laughter had carved a path through them. Walking through their house he hears the stomp of horses outside, their shod hooves stamping into the ground with whinnies of excitement. Their bedroom door opens and he sees her sitting on the edge of the bed, her figure blearing in the morning light that seeps through their bedroom window, combing her hair with her fingers. She turns her head and smiles, saying something lost in the sound of his imagining.

Then he sits up in his bed, the tenseness in his lower back, the tenderness of his
kidneys, reminding him of the distance between memory and present. Accustomed to a life without timepiece, he gathers from the angles of the shadows in his room that he has one hour before vespers starts. Bible and paper lie on his desk, a stub of a pencil lying across them. He approaches Scripture not by any system or pattern but simply, opening his Bible and reading whatever book and chapters he exposes. Within minutes he has two sheets filled with observations, stories and examples, a faint outline and he pens the prayer he will close with. He sets his hand on top of the pages and looks around him again. When he goes out to wake Alejándro and Javier and invite them to down for vespers, the chair Alejándro had been sitting in is empty, but Javier, sprawled on the table, sleeps, with a piece of discolored paper clutched in his fist.

*  

A blue light seeps through the stained-glass windows, the sanctuary dampened with a holy-glow that nearly hides the man sitting in the last row of pews. Like an apparition, he materializes almost out of the thin air, startling Baldomero. The man’s motionless head gives the appearance of prayer but when Baldomero approaches he sees that there is a map spread out on the man’s legs, which he folds surreptitiously and tucks it into his back pocket. He does not smile but even through his talking Baldomero can see he has malformed teeth, and he cannot close his lips all the way.

The man says nothing but walks through the rows, pretending to not notice Baldomero’s presence, his face studying all the corners of the sanctuary.

“What are you doing here?”

With his hands crossed behind him, the man continues to wander. Glancing over his
shoulder, he says, “I’m Roberto. I’ve heard of you, Father.” Even the small gesture of respect surprises Baldomero.

The man stands facing the wall of icons, above the votive offering. In a calm response that chills Baldomero with its soft confidence, he says, “I’m looking for someone. Perhaps you’ve seen him?”

“I’m the only one here,” Baldomero answers.

Bending over he rubs his finger over some imperfection in a small icon. “I don’t believe you.”

“There is Sister Nadia. But we are the only two. Vespers is soon to start. Please stay. It is our evening worship.”

“Has there been a man around here?” he asks.

Baldomero answers, “I don’t know what you mean.”

“A man. A stranger,” Roberto says, sitting. “Someone you wouldn’t have seen before. He isn’t exactly tall but carries around with him a rucksack that looks heavier than it is. Never lets it out of his sight. Big beard. Had. Had a beard. Has there been a man like that here to see you?”

Roberto’s voice is stringent, but neither disrespect nor hostility fringe his words. In rhythmic iambic, his feet tap the ground.

“I see a wolf,” Baldomero retorts. “In need of thrashing.”

Expecting Isabella and being met with the deformity of this man disrupts the expected flow of Baldomero’s day.

The man gives a sigh of annoyance and stands. He towers over Baldomero and when
he comes closer, Baldomero smells the acridity of motor oil, its black smudge staining the underside of his fingernails.

“Look, Father. Don’t think your pious dress or sallow cheeks draw any pity from me. I’d like a direct answer. And if it helps you any, just imagine I’m God.” He adds with some pause, “Imagine you’re praying.”

“I do not speak lightly in the presence of God,” Baldomero answers. “Nor am I in the habit of committing blasphemy.”

“Then I will. Two days ago a man I know disappeared from this town. His name is Javier. He owes me a great debt. If he comes looking to you for sanctuary, don’t trust him.”

“What reason would I have to distrust him?”

“There are things you don’t say to God, and then there are things you don’t say to a priest,” he says with a self-satisfied twist of his mouth.

“Then what reason do I have to trust you?”

“None,” the man says, with greater ease than Baldomero expects. He makes his way for the narthex and turns back to Baldomero. “But you’re a man of the cloth. Have some faith.”

He walks out and disappears beyond the dromos and Baldomero feels the nervous palpitation the man’s words plant in him.

* 

A paucity of voices fills the sanctuary, singing a dissonant phos hilaron. From where Baldomero stands, he sees women cradling newborns against their breasts and old widows
who sit together, leaning against their wobbling canes or holding the back of the pew in front of them. On the other side, leaning against the back wall, Domingo rocks. Baldomero knows that when he starts speaking, Domingo will sneak out and wait until the sanctuary empties to come back in with all the secrecy of a guilty child. Then he will confess that the money he received not hours before he has already spent on drink and he will ask forgiveness.

*Phos hilaron hagias doxes*, Baldomero sings near mutedly. *Athanatou Patros.*

The back of the widows’ withered hands disquiet him, the thick veins like a roadmap underneath their diaphanous skin. He steals a glance at his own, folded in front of him. Spotted but healthy, they are loosing their sensitivity if not their strength. His father’s hands were as rough as his own and, though he is a priest, Baldomero still has the hands of a farmer. There are times he misses the tilling, spending the night alone in the field, the feel of damp clothing against his skin and the feel of harvesting, of tearing produce from the earth. But, after laying his father in the ground, taking anything out of it seems sacrilegious.

*Ouraniou, hagiou, makaros, Iesou Christe, elthontes epi ten heliou dysin.*

The hymnals, most unused for years, come unstitched, their binding old and pages leprous with foxing. Holding them, Baldomero cannot help but feel that their disease has somehow spread from him.

*Hymnonoumen Patera, Hyion, kai Hagion Pneuma, Theon.*

He blames the irony on God, that holding the book of praises will cut off his life. He knows his life has not been short and his longevity has been filled with vitality but he
fears death nonetheless, even hates it, and believes he does not deserve it.

_Axion se en pasi kariois hymneistoi phonai aisiais._

Even after decades of belief, Baldomero trembles at the thought that his faith is changing; not diminishing, but passing from one wick to another; a parishioner lighting one candle with the flame from another.

_Hyio Theou, zoen ho didous, dio ho kamos se doxazei._

Some women in the congregation shoulder themselves in the threadbare scarves of prostitutes, the poorest of them wearing patchwork clothing knitted together from the scraps and discards of Andrade, and even some charity from a diocese near Galveston, Texas. Grouped together, their singing is loud and grating.

Nothing like an offering, Baldomero thinks.

But, despite their unclothed shame, their faces display a peace that Baldomero envies and admires. They know what awaits them, and he knows what their business is, cringes at it, but for the moments they are in the church, surrounded by the sanctity of others, the future is staved, barricaded while he speaks.

The empty pews around them evidence that the other women, afraid whoredom to be contagious, judge them. At first, Baldomero sees their tranquil hymning more than he hears it, sees it stamped on them with the penalty of their own skin, whether it be syphilitic rotting or a purpled eye of resistance. But he does not see the symbiosis, does not see how their chancreys or contusions or stigmas, only slightly hidden by the thin fabric of their outfits, of cesareans, feed their worship. The decay of his hands kept him from lifting them but the fester of their bodies raises theirs.
Built with iniquitous bricks, Baldomero’s church, like the lives of his parishioners, is plastered over with shame if only to hold it steady and keep it insulated from the outside world.

He feels he wears the rags of a convict, not the humble habit of a priest; no fetters clatter between his feet but the pillory of a long cross weighs him down. In front of the lectern, he sets his hand on the Scriptures. The thin pages of his Bible rustle under his fingers like the sound of crinkled wax-paper. Indentations where pen marks rise and faded notes fill the volume that has come unglued in sections, held together more by a vain, determined love than anything else.

He stands at the pulpit, the withering congregation in their seats, silent except for the stray cough or sneeze. He does not want to begin and so he distracts himself with the feel of the page, its smell long lost in the absorption of his sweat from resting against his chest when he fell asleep in the autumnal breezes that fell off the mountain slopes. The eyes blink and the coughs are louder and more frequent until he opens his mouth.

There is always a pause before Baldomero speaks, the words welling up out of him, taking time to emerge.

“Where is the brother who has faith? Where is the one who hopes? Show me the one who loves and I will show you the man who does no evil. If a man possesses these three virtues—these gifts—though he be poor, he is blessed. Even our own Lord declares the poor to be blessed, how much more the poor who hopes? Now, a man with even one of these noble virtues is rare but the one who possesses all three is a jewel. For if faith is the surety of what is not seen then that man has all things; the one who hopes has even when
what he has is taken away, and the one who loves goes so far as to give away what little he has.”

He does not recognize his own voice, thickened and garbled with the phlegm more present each day than the one before. Trying to clear his throat with a cough, he loses his place in the text and mumbles as he tries to regain it.

“There is no reason a Joshua tree should grow here. It is not made for this climate. Yet they flourish,” he paces along the altar, his hands behind him. “This is the man who remains steadfast under suffering. We all suffer. It’s as human an experience as laughter,” he says, seeing Alejándro sitting in the back, secluding himself from the rest of the congregation, his face drawn with a weariness that Baldomero knows. “And as terrible as war. Even as commonplace as breathing. These two words, ‘breathe’ and ‘suffer’ are related. Breathing stems from a word that means ‘to bear a child’. Suffering, also, means ‘to bear’. Suffering, then, is a sort of breathing.”

Sallow faces stare back at him and he wonders if they hear what he thinks is being said.

“We have come out of a war and now see the wounds which, though gained on the battlefield, are just now beginning to bleed. But these wounds, unlike those of the body, will kill us if we stop their bleeding, for it is breathing. Suffering is the lung of healing.”

Though he speaks it is not his words that mute him. Though he tries he cannot force himself to continue. He longs for the days when he was young even if his youth does not follow him. To be alone, sitting under the corn leaves that jag the night sky milk-blue with stars, its zenith darker and thinner than the curve along the horizon under which any remnant of humanity had long disappeared.
“We must learn to suffer, and suffer rightly, because our Lord suffered,” he twists to peer at the cross. “And why did he suffer? Because of hope. Because of faith. Because of love,” he says. “The one who loves suffers because they dwell with each other.”

A strong pressure grips his pelvis. Ignoring it, he continues. “Like the Joshua tree, love was not meant for the arid conditions of suffering. But it thrives in that desert nonetheless.”

The sudden warmth, damp and pungent, that spreads across his hips and down to his knees, soaks his cloth and clings to his legs with a hot shame that Baldomero fails to hide. He blushes and protects himself with the podium. The thin hair, nearly invisible in bright sunlight, mats his head, damp with the sweat of embarrassment. Large ears that still strain to hear. A mouth losing its teeth like he loses his days. A back that hooks like the cane he trembles on and knees that require more sitting than standing.

Embarrassed, he fakes a cough that soon elevates into strong hacking.

Isabella stands in front of the other prostitutes, their lips round and plump, hair like a blossoming tree, making their way to the altar for the Eucharist.

The tears forming in his eyes from the realization that he no longer has mastery over his body. Because what he wants to hide most is his trembling hands. He holds the bread in front of him and places it in the mouth of the first woman. *Eis to onoma tou Patros, kai tou Hyio, kai tou Hagio Pneumatos. Amen.*

Passing them, he fears that they smell his incontinence.

Delaying their inevitable business, the whores stay around the narthex, making way
when others wish to pass them by. They speak only to each other, ignored and shunned.

Since he does not want to be exposed, Baldomero stays behind the lectern, pretending to busy himself with scripture and loose-leaf papers that are really pages falling from his Bible. His eyes dart up occasionally, seeing if the indecipherable chatter he hears waning is because the whores are leaving. They stand near the doors, laughing as they share cigarettes between them. The five of them stay in a semi-circle and make light-hearted curtseys, admiring each other’s dresses. Isabella stands nearest the door, her head shifting towards him and then back to her companions.

The other women clatter with laughter, and they repeat, loudly, what one of them has said.

“He snorted like a pig even more than he smelled like one.”

From the pulpit it appears that Isabella forces a smile.

He gathers the papers together, leveling their edges. Sniffing the air quietly, he is desperate to know if his wetted clothing smells. He feels the weight of it on his hips, pulling on his already loose belt. The doors clang with their heavy metal hinges and he tenses, relieved that at last they are leaving, emptying out the sanctuary. But Isabella shuffles away from them and approaches him, and a bout of nausea swells and he shuts his Bible, not bothering to adjust the loose pages that flag out of it, hoping that he can ignore her in his rush.

“Father Baldomero? Father Baldomero,” she repeats, quickening her pace to catch him. “Father, are you alright?”

Her voice does not match her face. Not delicate, but a mended bone, strong in the
“I’m fine, Isabella,” he says, turning from her. She steps in front of him.

“You’re lying,” she says.

“Just recovering from some sickness. But it’s leaving,” he says, suppressing a cough.

“Why don’t I believe you?” she asks, her voice mocking inquisition but is sincere in its pity.

“No one trusts priests,” he draws out sarcastically.

She smiles. “Especially those who confess to them.”

“Are you going to stay for dinner?”

“No,” Isabella replies, her head dropping while she still looks at him. She shakes her head kindly, as though he should have known her answer.

He shrugs, adding, “Do you pray often?”

“Every night,” she says, her face void. “Before and after every man.”

“Then pray for me, too, Isabella. I fear my prayers are lost.”

He tramps down the stairs shifting his weight to keep from falling and Isabella offers her arm. Tearful that she might smell the urine that soaks his habit, he keeps a distance between them. But he does not want to offend her, as though she were a leper. She continues to speak, not waiting for Baldomero to respond.

“I must confess,” she says rapidly. “Now.”

He fears she will smell his accident in the small confessional. “It must be now?”

“My business is not the worst of my sins,” she says.

He does not hear her, but it is not a deliberate ignoring. The wetness that sags his
clothing begins to chill him. Beads of urine maneuver down his legs, some catching in their remaining hair, others making it down to the curve of his tendon, tickling his heel.

Drawing Isabella away from the sight of the crowd with his hand, an unintentional gesture of protection, they walk to the confessional.

“Bless me, Father,” she says, before Baldomero can seat himself. “For I have sinned.”

He spins the wedding ring on his finger and murmurs his familiar prayer. Not realizing how little time has passed, he interrupts. “Your sins are forgiven, my child.”

“Father,” she says, blinking. “I haven’t confessed yet.”

“I’m sorry, Isabella.”

“I hate Nadia, Father.” She tumbles the words.

“What? Why?”

“It’s the way she looks at me. The way she acts as though touching me is the same as—” she snorts and glances away. When she comes back she stares at her lap. “I know I deserve it. Her scorn. But, Father, I’d die if I didn’t do this.” Her face darkens and contracts, her eyes tight with a judgment of their own. She shouts, “You think I like what I do? You think I’m proud of this?” she asks, holding up the ecru shawl that covers her head. She puts her hand in front of her quaking lips. “But, still. I’ve hated her. And I hate her still.” She licks her lips and yawns. Calm now, she says softly, “There’s too much guilt in me to leave room for hate.”

Baldomero’s hands, resting on his damp cloak, do not move. He sits motionless in the still church, and blinks.

“Am I forgiven?”
“You are forgiven,” he says, forcing a grin. “Go, and sin no more.”

When the door shuts and echoes through the empty sanctum, he collapses to the floor and hides his face in his hands.

The warm water, tenebrous in the room lit by only a few candles, fogs and Baldomero runs his hand through the bath letting the water drip off him before dipping his arm again.

In his room, Baldomero hears the distant tremble of thunder, drying the back of his thighs as he rests on the edge of his bed. He rubs his swollen knees and tries to straighten them but he gives up, pained and aggravated. His feet come down with a thud against the wooden floors of his bedroom.

His room, now dark, is in need of light and Baldomero strikes a match and ignites a new candle that smells of honey. A small earthenware plate holds his dinner that he eats while he reads.

He rolls a piece of bread in the small pat of butter and reads from the Psalms.

“Free me, LORD, from evil folk, from a violent man preserve me. Guard me, LORD, from the wicked man’s hands, from a violent man preserve me, who plots to trip up my steps.”

Either from piety or praise, he folds his hands and rests them against his lips, kissing the burnished ring.

“Keep the wolf at bay,” he prays.

In one sense, he knows why the prayer drifts from his lips like the slow dripping of a rock spring. He cannot decide if the prayer is the offering of a penitent or a apostate. To
lose one’s trust in God after the years of faithful service questions if faith ever existed.

He rests his hand against the Book’s pages, thin and inked with his notes.

The solid mass beneath his hands comforts him, and he closes his eyes, listening to the musical percuss of the rain against the walls. He tries to mumble a soft kyrie to its beat but is embarrassed by the sound of his own voice and quiets himself. Instead, he repeats to himself the verses of a memorized psalm: “Father of orphans and widows’ judge, God in His holy abode. God brings the lonely back to their homes, sets free captives in jubilation. But the wayward abide in parched land.”

The image of sacrificed firstborns pollute his mind. He sees the decimated bodies of the children Alejándro buried and pushes the Bible across the table, as though it were guilty of the turpitude.

A piece of paper slides out as the Bible stops against the wall. Baldomero stares at it, curious that it could elude him during all his turning of pages. It is a pencil sketch of a goldfinch, with a branch segment to perch on. He does not need to see the date on the back to remember it is the first drawing he gave to Amadea. He smiles and lays the picture against the candle-stand, where it is safe from both the flame and dripping wax.

Thunder dynamites the sky, startling him.

Yawning, Baldomero throws open the covers of his bed, made of unpolished teak, unadorned except small orbs on the top of the bedposts. A small, oaken nightstand next to it holds another candle—with a shorter stand—and the old, leather-bound sketch-pad, worn as his Bible. The mattress is soft but not comfortable. Like the old monks, he sleeps on a straw mattress and covered himself with a quilt his wife made him before her
death. It was of simple design, a taupe colored cloth with three, white, interlocking rings in the center.

Stretching out his legs, Baldomero sighs, relaxed. The pain in his knees is numbed for the night and it is as though the humiliation from earlier is gone.

I’m old, he reasons, sinking into his mattress, feeling the hard floor beneath when he shifts. These things happen.

Closing his eyes he tries to shut out the thoughts that crawl through him with arachnid tickling. Alejándro’s hands, mangled in some way, appear in the blackness of his hoped for rest and he cannot banish them from his mind. They appear hennaed, the scars turned a sour brown in the hot sun. He turns onto his side but the hands are there still.

Unable to sleep, he puts on a pair of moccasins, new and warm, and makes his way to the anteroom separating the sanctuary and the rectory. A candelabra flickers, its burnished surface glowing as if a flame throbbed inside. In the sanctuary two different colored stones separated the room into the old room and the new. It runs from one wall to the other, passing underneath the third row of pews so that when their shadows are cast, there is little to show where the division lay. The darker stones often appear wet, glistening over with age and use, as if made from shards of pitchblende, though they are only smooth and reflect light whereas the newer stones absorb it. They are three pews deep from the end of the altar and they mark where the old Church ended. The gray stones, streaked with black stains, remind Baldomero of their foundation, of the refugees they harbored.

There has always been a mournful air to the church, Baldomero believes. The stain-
glassed windows encircling the sanctuary peer down with a martyr’s pity and in the
gloaming, sorrow seems to stick to the pillars, draping them with a thick grayness broken
only by the morning. Wind passes through the miniscule cracks in the doors, the
windows, as old as the foundation of the church, and Baldomero hears the chamber filled
with a murmur of voices, like a whispered Orthodox chant, singing of the hope of
redemption.

He bows his head, pained, and turns his hand for support to the back of the nearest
pew. Along the wall of the sanctuary, behind the lectern and Eucharistic altar, three rows
of candles still flicker. In front of them, Isabella kneels, her body quivering.

The hollow tap of his feet against the stones draws her attention. She finishes her
prayer as he lowers himself into the front pew.

“Isabella, I failed you today.”

She plays with the tassels on her scarf as she sits on the steps.

“I was distracted.”

Sniffling, she looks away and then turns her head slightly towards him. “I know I
bother you with my confessions,” she says. “Don’t say you aren’t. Anyone would be.
But if you could see, even for one day, what it’s like—how I live—you’d want to spew
out your sins too.” She scratches her nose. “I don’t know if confession makes my sins
forgiven, Father.” She stands and sits next to him. “That’s not why I confess. What do
you think I see when I look at myself in those broken mirrors? Hate. Not even pity.
Only hate.” Isabella dries her eyes with a ragged handkerchief, embroidered with initials
not her own. “Tell me,” Isabella continues, looking at Baldomero for the first time. “Do
you pity us or do you love us?"

Her face, stern and carved with the expectation of dismay, stares back at him. In her countenance he recognizes the same grief that afflicts him, the same plaguing locust of a question that gnaws at him: When will this end?

“I wanted a sanctuary where people vied for their seats, where generosity overflowed the offering plates. Where people said my name with respect. I wanted clean vestments, not these ones stained with dust and sweat, but colorful ones,” he says, pinching his cloth with some disdain. “But that’s not what I was given. I was entrusted with prostitutes. With sots. With orphans and widows. But you are a gift, Isabella. All of you.” He wants to reach out and touch her hand, hold her fingers. “There are even times I envy you. Because of your faith. I see scars all over you and each one is a cause for you to remain silent, yet you confess. Where most would be mute you speak. So I ask, how I am able to lead you? What sort of man is it that is lead by his sheep?”

He raises her hands to his lips, kissing each of her palms. Then he stands, wobbling but supported by Isabella.

“I should not keep you from your prayers, Isabella.”

She rubs the front of her dress and nods.

“I won’t be long, Father.”

“Would you mind if I joined you, for one prayer?”

He kneels before the candles and strikes a match, the gilt icons of the Christ-child in Mary’s arms reflecting the flame. Next to him Isabella’s lips move but he cannot hear what she is saying. Holding the fire against the wick, he whispers, hoping God will hear
him.

“Keep the wolf at bay.”
BOOK II
JAVIER
When Javier wakes Roberto is gone.

If it were not for the humid apartment, with the browned apple-core still in its corner, filling the room with its pale scent, he would think his world were a dream. What little sleep he had was filled with imageless sounds, motion without vision—the tumble of a truck over rough terrain. For some minutes he lays sprawled on his stomach, enjoying the cool foundation chilling his body from the hot air around him, scratching the beard that irritates him. He opens his eyes and looks around. Roberto’s pack lays on the table, and his other belongings are rolled up and secured in a shadowed corner. In the daylight, the room appears larger, increasing the sparseness of the night before.

Javier’s mouth fills with the bitter dryness of a long night and he reaches for his canteen, finishing its contents without taking a breath. Stepping outside from the damp darkness of the apartment into the desert’s growing heat, he glances up and down the street and then relieves himself against the building.

The twittering of horned larks from the exposed rafters of an empty apartment across the street is the only sound in the alley, but Javier, still dreary, does not hear them. He fans himself with his shirt, stepping back from the wall.

With Roberto gone, Javier is unsure of what to do. He squints as his eyes still adjust to the brightness and finds himself retracing his route from the night before. Javier strolls past the stone slab where the three men smoked their cigarette, which still lies discarded in the sand, and he questions how three men could have stood so apparently comfortably on its small surface. He contemplates picking up the stub, even to smell the tobacco if there was none left to smoke, but hurries past when he hears something fall inside.
Already he feels covered in the town’s dust, settling in his clothing like sparrows building their nests.

He does not know why he threads over the same path from the night before but he knows that movement is important if only to keep him from thinking of the long path that still stands between him and freedom. There are times he doubts his words to his wife, questions whether or not he would immediately return to her when loosened from Roberto. He knows that, were there not a child, he would run, not from guilt of the atrocities he trawled through, but from a need, after two years of servitude, to be without bond or claim, and whether the chains be made of hate and malice or love and compassion, the simple thought of connection sickens him as though it were a virulent bacteria, crawling through his cavities until his whole body succumbed to its pollution.

Out across the sunned vista he sees the heat-distorted shape of a church, cradled in the morning shadow stretch of mountains.

Go, he thinks. Leave. But what will she think. Coward to flee, coward to stay.

The thought enters him like a barroom dart, drunkenly thrown. It is not the ease with which Javier gives into evil that his wife will condemn in him, but the difficulty he has in flying from it.

Behind him the town stretches in its patchwork of intersections, the main road going for some two-hundred yards. He backs away from the open desert with slow steps before turning around. He idles through the thoroughfare, hands in pockets, kicking a coal-brown rock into his path. Lifting his head occasionally, he sees windows, opaque with dust, of the businesses and the homes or inns above them. Some are curtained but
most are naked to the early morning sunlight. He pictures himself in one of their beds, the curtains drawn and there is still some shade in the room. The soft sheets caress the back of his calves and when he wakes there is no damp impression of his head on his pillow. The window is open and the drapes lift in the morning breeze that comes down from the mountains and the first thing he smells is not his own unwashed stench but the scent of shrub blossoming on its slopes. He closes his eyes, seeing a cradle next to the bed where he and his wife wake in the sunlight, the color of a nectarine. The scent of washed linen and clean floors fills the room and a breeze that barely pushes the curtains stirs the room, cleansing the air in a constant stream.

Brambles catch in the deck-posts of the raised structures and an old man sleeps on his creaking rocking-chair some buildings down, his hat covering his head. A grocer on Javier’s right unstacks and opens boxes set in front of his bodega. The last drunks stumble from the rathskeller that never closes, tossed out by a prostitute whose matted black hair covers the breasts that her threadbare clothing cannot. She pulls the strap of her shirt up and retreats down the stairs, from which drafts the sweet smack of whiskey, and closes the door after her. Javier, hearing the bolt lock, makes note of the bar.

And across from the tavern there is a barbershop, its peppermint-striped pole motionless but through the windows on which “Barber” is written in large, rust-red letters, the edges of them cracked and peeling, an old man washes his hands. He himself is nearly hairless, except for the faintest hint of a white pentagon of hair just at the rim of his lower lip. Putting a bottle up to his ear he shakes it and, hearing the liquid slosh around inside, sets it down on the counter and spreads out an old once-blue towel on
which he places black combs of varying sizes and a pair of thin, silver scissors. Javier
believes the man sees him but ignores his presence. After washing his hands, the man
walks over to a bin near the window and kicks the lid off. Inside, large crystals of salt,
into which the man dips his hands and keeps them there, closing his eyes. After some
moments, he takes them out and dries them on a towel hanging on a nob to the right of
him and he turns the sign around.

Javier imagines his own hands in the cleaning salts, their softness when he pulls them
out, the way his mutilated fingernails shimmer with a polish. The faint outline of his
reflection distracts him from these thoughts. Staring at his reflection, faint and fading
with the light increasing, he thinks the reflection a prophecy as though he loses the
substance. He envies those he left behind, his wife and child, their freedom to clean
themselves, while he wallows in filth for them. He scratches his aggravating beard and
decides to have it shaved. As if his past were something that could be shaved off with a
sharp enough razor.

He walks in, the clean, mint-scented air a welcome contrast to the putrid stench of the
Fargo and the sweat-stains and scents trapped in the makeshift pillows he sinks his face
into each night. Not moving or even caring the barber might find him odd, he stands there
taking deep breaths, his nostrils flaring, as though ensuring himself from forgetting the
smell of the place.

The barber, walking back from the rear without a word, holds a strop and a razor blade
loose in his hand. He walks to the counter where he drops the blade and fixes it to the
handle, not once looking at Javier, who picks up the discarded newspaper while he waits,
pretending to read it.

“Where you from?”

The words startle Javier. They come out of nowhere.

“What’s it matter?”

“Well, I don’t know you,” the barber says, moving behind the pneumatic chair nearest him.

Javier starts. The man’s question angers him, but he wants a clean-shaven face. “I’m from south some ways. Just out beyond Los Algondes,” he lies.

“Ah,” the barber says, a word that Javier feels is replete with judgment.

“Just passing through here, though. On my way up to Shreveport. Wanted a shave.” Then he adds, “Razor I had’s rusted,” thinking to give further credence to his presence.

“Sit,” the barber says, smacking the chair with the folded cape.

The chair’s cushions are worn but they are softer than anything Javier remembers recently sitting on.

“What’ll it be?” Neither jovial nor hostile, the barber sets to Javier as a fleeting customer, something less than a nuisance.

“Just a shave.”

The barber starts silently, using a small pair of scissors to trim away the long curls. Javier hears the whisper of their separation, feels them brush against his skin or catch in the still thick parts yet untrimmed.

Then the barber mixes the lather, smearing it on Javier’s face and three old men walk in together. Hanging up their hats they fill the seats along the side wall. They nod their
hellos to the barber.

A radio in the corner utters more static than music but everyone ignores it.

The warm, cactaceous smell of the lather numbs Javier’s mind but he still hears the men speak.

“Mornin’, Tómas. Radio working today?”

“Not since the last time you asked,” the barber replies. “Can’t find no one to fix it.”

“Your son coming back?”

“Yep. Two weeks ‘n he’ll be home.”

“Missus must be happy.”

“She won’t stop talking about it. I had considered signing her up so she could go over there and be with him,” Tómas laughs. The other men join him, but half-heartedly. “Sure is good, though. Knowing we’re out of it now. No more sleepless nights, wondering.”

“And what’s with the crazy bastard, taking his own life?”

“Wouldn’t face justice. The coward.”

His eyes closed, Javier envisions the prostitute who threw the man out of the rathskeller. The scent of the shaving cream—her breath, wet with gentle kisses against his skin as he imagines the woman brushing her lips against him while he breathes in the fragrance of her neck. The fine horsehair brush—her locks falling against his face as they embrace.

The barber spins Javier around and when he opens his eyes he sees his clean face in the mirror. Lines, a mixture between dirt and darkened skin, runs slanted down his cheeks. Still, he feels clean, like the barber separated not only his beard from his face but
severed the bond between him and Roberto.

“Good?” the barber asks.

Javier slowly runs his blackened fingers along his face as though he had forgotten what his skin felt like.

Without waiting for an answer, the barber asks, “Done?”

“No,” Javier says when the barber starts to unclasp the cape. “A haircut. And wash it, too.”

He wants them not only for the invigoration he thinks they’ll bring him but for the opportunity to close his eyes once more and listen to the imagined talk of the prostitute, his hand on the bare of her shoulder, their legs coyly touching each other underneath thick, warm blankets.

“All finished,” Tómas says.

When Javier reaches into his pocket to pay him, he brings out the wad of paper. Folded in the middle of the bills is his conscription notice. He scrambles to conceal it and hands over the money, hiding his face from the old men who sit in their chairs and smile as he exits.

*

Andrade is quiet and motionless; the small town broiling in the Sonoran desert. The base of buildings quiver in the rising heat, the world slowly distorting as the day ages.

Traits Javier would have once ascribed only to Roberto have now sprouted in him: a sly examination of his surroundings, as natural and unnoticed by Javier as his own pulse. He sees the world from the corners of his eyes, looking along the periphery of things and
glancing at the road in front of him.

The grocer has retreated to his store though his door remains open and Javier contemplates purchasing a few earned delicacies from him. Though his hair still smells fresh his perspiring stench seeps through his clothing and he wonders if the grocer would notice it.

“Mornin’,” the grocer says as he stops sweeping, letting Javier pass.

There are tins of pomade and shoe-shine behind the counter and a jar of taffy next to the register.

A wooden shelf along the wall sits heavy with stacked bags of millet, quinoa, and hominy. Sacks of larger, oat grains line the floor underneath them. Javier ambles through the store, his head moving side to side and up the walls to see all the products. A white bag catches his attention. He picks it up and tries to smell the coconut through the bag, just getting the hint of it. He holds onto it and comes back to the counter, setting three small bags of coconut shavings, walnuts, and dried fruits on the counter.

While the man totalizes his purchases, Javier looks around the store. Behind him two chickens, plucked and beheaded, hang from a metal bar bored between two rafters. Their skin glistens, wet with the water of their washing.

“Forty-seven cents, sir,” the grocer says.

Javier takes out one the last bills he has and hands it over, waiting for the change. Though poor now, he counts on the money he has been earning with Roberto to bring his family out of their poverty.

“Here you are, sir,” the grocer says, handing back his change.
Javier reaches out and notices, high on a shelf behind the counter, a stuffed teddy bear, its dark brown arms coming to a point rather than a round paw.

“How much for that?” Javier points.

The grocer turns and leans back to see.

“One dollar.”

Javier thumbs out two quarters into the man’s hand and holds the bear in his other, putting the change in his pocket.

Wind touches Javier’s newly exposed skin when he steps out of the grocer. Squinting, he takes a fingerpinch of the strands and shoves them in his mouth, pocketing them near his gumline like tobacco. His saliva turns sweet, and the coconut lodged between his tongue and teeth, drive the worry of his indentureship away. He takes his time returning to his apartment, content to enjoy the salivating the coconut causes, how even his spit turns to a sweet drink.

The bear’s softness tickles his hand and he brings it up every so often to glance at its askew face, its bead-eyes and fabric nose more than asymmetrical. He pictures his child playing with the bear, falling asleep with it against his—or her, Javier thinks—body, holding its soft body like a shield against age. Javier smiles, making small circles with his thumb on the toy’s stomach, watching the soft threads bend and change color like wind through the grass.

Distracted from this thought, his eyes remain vigilant, though there is little need in such a small town. With each step he takes he imagines a new city where he might live once his indentureship expires. States whose names he has memorized from a map he
found lodged under the Fargo’s passenger seat. He like the sound of Mississippi and Massachusetts best, their repetitious sounds made him laugh to himself and he imagined he would enjoy living in a place where he had heard the trees were so thick they could keep the sunlight from touching the ground.

When he steps into the dark apartment, a rhombus of light thrown on the ground from the open door, the figure of Roberto sitting in a chair facing him frightens Javier to stillness.

Roberto sits with one arm propped on the table, his other comfortable on his leg. His feet are planted on the ground, two pillars of bedrock, dressed in laced-up boots that add to his dark and intimidating dress. His eyes stare out at Javier with a primeval hatred, as though he despised not only the man but the air around him, even the dust he touches.

“Close the door.” Javier wonders if Roberto’s lips even moved.

Javier turns his head for a moment, just to see where the door lies in proximity to him, and aides it closed with his hand.

“Where were you?”

“I just went outside.”

His yellowing teeth clench together. “I didn’t give you permission.”

“I had to piss,” Javier replies, motioning outside with a turn of his waist.

“You were gone longer than that.”

Javier forgets the absence of his beard.

“Where else did you go?”

Javier stammers for an answer. He worries that in the intervening moments his life
will be over, that he will not even have time to recognize or reconcile the fact that his life is ending but that it will snuff out in an instant, like a dew drop falling from a saguaro’s needle, gone before it hits the sand.

“The barber?”

His hand shoots to his face. Javier strokes it as though he did not realize his beard were missing. When he sees that Roberto is not as hostile as he might sound, he relaxes, answers, “Yes. The beard bothered me.”

Sucking in air through the portcullis of his teeth, Roberto says, “Sit.”

Javier takes his seat and sets the bags of food by his feet, hoping that Roberto does not notice or is not curious. Roberto spreads a map out on the table and makes a circle with his finger.

“We are here,” he says, enclosing the approximate location of Andrade.

“In three days we need to meet another buyer in Yuma.”

“That isn’t far at all,” Javier interjects, excited that he will not have to spend long in the stifling Fargo.

“No more than ten miles. What will be difficult is rounding up the number of children he wants. At least around here.”

“He’s giving us a number?”

“Said he wants at least eight.” Roberto straightens. “Doesn’t care what they look like. He’ll be using parts.”

Javier does not have anything to say and for some minutes Roberto remains silent, letting Javier simmer in the uncomfortable reality of his situation.
“If you go looking for those children,” Roberto starts. He does not look at Javier. He plays with his own fingers and changes the tone of his voice to a playful, taunting bounce.

“If you go looking for the ones still in the river, I’ll take ten days off your term.” He spins his chair around and sits in it.

Javier’s eyes dart up, searching Roberto’s posture for some sign of dishonesty.

“And,” Roberto continues. “And, one day for every child you find and bring back.”

Though he has no claim to it, Javier feels entitled to bargain. He strokes his chin, unaccustomed to its cleanness. “No. Cancel it all.”

Leaning closer to Javier, Roberto asks, “What?”

“All of it. If I find these children and can bring them back to you, give me my life back.”

Roberto considers.

“No,” he laughs.

“Then I won’t look.”

“Yes,” Roberto says, with no change in his inflection. He brings one leg onto the other and pries the dark leather boot off. “You will.”

“I will not.”

Both boots off, Roberto slides his tongue over his teeth, his stare malign. “If you want to see your wife and child, you will,” he says, with a vexed sigh. “I still have claim to you. Forty more days. Only after that are you a free man.”

Dusk. The two of them sit inside playing faro, the cards replete with naked women
painted on the back, the ornate borders, leafed and gilded, faded to the same ecru hue of the cards. To Javier, they seem caught up in a trivial distraction, placing their cards on top of the other, taking note neither or suit or value, simply delaying the decision demanded of him. Their door is propped open with a heavy stone heeled up from the sand outside their building and the few sounds of citizens—the rapid crescendo of their Mexican and the susurrant drag of heavy boots across sanded porches—drift into their stale-aired room, those noises the one sign of life Javier recognizes and holds on to, sustaining his belief that his life is not yet fully shackled to Roberto.

“Go,” Roberto spits, holding his cards low and fanned before him, then stacking them in an ordered pile near his hand.

Javier takes a random card from his deck and flicks it towards the pile.

“They were going to die anyway,” Roberto says, as though he answered an unvocalized question.

The concept that Roberto had such insight to Javier’s thoughts chills him and he shivers. The memory is a splinter closed over by the skin of his momentary apathy.

“They didn’t have to.”

“But you didn’t stop me,” Roberto says, turning over the king of hearts.

Javier says nothing.

“You could have,” Roberto responds, sliding the pile of cards towards him. Gathering them into a stack, he says, “I wasn’t armed. You knew it too.”

Javier does not want to speak. He knows it is true. Roberto shuffles, the sound like the breaking of bird wings, and hands the shuffled deck to him.
“It’s done,” Roberto says, stretching back in his seat as he discards his hand on the table. “Over with.”

He pockets the cards.

“Drink?” he adds, after some while.

“No,” Javier responds, his voice quiet, contemplative, as though lost in thoughts of fond memories and not the tumult of scrupulosity.

“Alright. I’m going out.” He stands. “You have until tonight to make your decision. In the morning, you’ll start looking for them,” he leafs through his fold of bills. “If you’re not here, well, that’s your choice.”

When Roberto steps out of the apartment, Javier throws his cards down and shouts for him.

“Roberto, wait.”

He follows Roberto out, kicking the rock away from the door that slams closed.

“I could use a drink.”

They walk to the rathskeller Javier saw earlier. An amber flicker illumines the staircase and when they reach the bottom there is a noticeable difference in temperature, cooler but still not comfortable. The few men in the tavern turn and stare at them, hovering over their pints as though protecting them from gaze or theft. The melancholic drunks line the barstools, quiet and serene as they drink the dregs of the barrels for next to nothing. More rambunctious drinkers sit along the walls, rocking with laughter and prostitutes—entrepreneurial enough to fake laughter. Roberto walks to the bartender and
Javier picks a seat in a dark corner, where he can hide and keep an eye on Roberto, biding a time he can slip back to the apartment.

A woman slides up to Javier, her dark hair a deep contrast to the ecru shawl around her shoulders. She smells like vanilla bean and he can see her searching for his eyes which he tries to keep fixed on the dirty mirror behind the counter. His eyes move away from the seat she occupies, tunneling a route of escape. She slides a glass filled with a dark amber whiskey. A drop falls over the edge and lands on his hand. He rubs it off on the round trim of the wood countertop.

“No a fan of whiskey?” she asks. Her voice is unusual and not unlike the alcohol in front of him. Aromatically sweet but stringent when swallowed.

He shakes his head, glancing at her but being careful to say nothing.

“Something else, then?”

He shakes his head, tucking in his lips. “No.”

She sighs, spinning around on her stool to lean back on the counter, her arms propping her up, though with a slouch. The heel of her boots rest against the horizontal beam connecting the barstool legs, the smooth arc of her calves exposed from her hiked up skirt.

“I’m clean, you know,” she offers as though bearing a gift.

Javier barely turns his head. “I don’t care.” Keeping himself from looking at her, he sips his whiskey, tonguing the half circle drop that clings to his upper-lip.

“Queer?”

“Married,” he answers.

“Most are.”
Smoke from the surrounding cigars shrouds his head and he can hardly distinguish her features, not two feet away. She kicks her feet and lands on the ground with a thud lost in the clamor. Reaching out her arm, soft, cold, she brushes Javier’s and grabs what remains of his rocks glass. She raises it and takes the drink, tossing the glass to Javier with a flirtatious sway. The prostitute gone, he hears the garbled conversation between Roberto and other men, crowded around a table. From the way they place their bets, Javier guesses they too play faro. Only when he is removed from the game does Javier realize how perfect a game faro is for Roberto, always calculating.

She follows him, sitting down in a corner booth, right of the door.

“I know who you are,” she says.

“You do?” he tries to hide a smile, his head leaned back, caught in the moonlight that comes in through the high window.

“You’re the man’s looking for his son’s killer.”

His eyes cannot close. He stares at the unwashed ceiling, his mouth narrowing to a small, triangular snarl.

“It’s brave, I think. Maybe even heroic.”

She inches closer to him, no more than an elbow’s length away.

“No,” he says. “I’m not him.”

She stays where she is, head supported on her arm.

“Then who are you? You look just like him.”

A quiet snort. Javier thinks of Gabriella. Wonders what he would say to her. A void fills his mind, the silence soldiers hear, after years in the barracks with none but men.
“I’m nobody.”

“I’ve known a lot of nobodies. They aren’t that interesting.”

For the first time since he sat in the pickup, Javier is aware of the growing patch of sweat on his back.

In the corner, her aroma strengthens. Drowns him. The curls of her hair a noose of silk. And he feels it tightening around him.

“You don’t say much.”

She smiles.

“I wouldn’t know what to say.”

“To a whore?”

“To a woman.”

She laughs. “I thought you said you were married. Don’t tell me your wife’s as quiet as you are.”

Turning his head to view her, he confesses, “I haven’t seen my wife in over two years.”

“Oh.” Her posture changes, becomes comfortable.

“I haven’t been able to see her,” he corrects. For once, he finds himself grateful for the war.

“I didn’t take you for a soldier,” she says. Her fingers caress the back of his arm.

“You don’t carry yourself that way.”

He forces a smile.

“What’s your wife’s name?”
“Gabriella,” he says, not looking at her but at the corner of the table between them.

“Gabriella,” she repeats. The men’s cheers interrupt her. “A beautiful name.”

He nods.

“I’m Isabella.”

Javier takes her offered hand. Her fingers are thin, longer than his own, and cold. The tips of her nails rub against his wrist and he shivers. When they separate, he glances at her hand to see if any dirt from his hands came off on hers. But in the rathskeller’s dimness he can make out neither smudge nor stain.

“Javier,” he says.

“A pleasure.”

She adjusts her shawl, shrugging her shoulders separately.

“Do you see that man over there?” Javier asks, scooting closer to Isabella. She responds, leaning in too. Javier tries to keep his eyes from the swell of her breasts.

“Don’t look for him,” he stresses. “Or he’ll notice you. But do you see him? A man with a crooked smile, like his jaw was broken.” He swallows, feels a drop of sweat roll off his eyebrow. He watches her scan the room for some time but he feels that she has noticed Roberto long before they sat.

“I see him.”

He reaches into his pocket, still staring at her. Sliding the money past his knees he says, “Distract him.”

“Distract him?”

“Keep him here. Get him drunk.”
“How about I distract you?” she says as she lifts the money off his knees. “This will buy you an hour. Maybe more.”

On the edge of the mattress, the ragged curtains limp against the closed window, Javier sits, his head against his arms, crossed over his legs. Behind him, Isabella snores and at a hacking Javier turns, leering. His clothes are scattered on the floor like evaporated shells of righteousness. Three sticks of cinnamon bark and a sprig of jasmine decorate the night-stand over which hangs a piece of a broken mirror. He hopes the squeaking springs won’t wake her. To put on his clothes seems an impossibility, like a snake crawling back into its shed scales. As he sits there, an emptiness like a starved stomach, every limb hollow and brittle overtakes him. At once he feels weak but a strong hatred fortifies itself within. Rubbing his face, he twists his head, peering at Isabella over his shoulder. Her limbs, sprawled under the rippling covers, are twisted but peaceful. The old paint on her long fingernails chips away and he remembers the way, the night before he left her, Gabriella she scratched his head with her own long, unpolished nails. At once, as though it were welded to the memory itself, he hates her. He pictures biting off the nails, the red, red blood welling to the surface like its own coat of paint. Ten times he repeats this until ten nails, like a snail’s shattered shell, fall onto the cover of the bed.

Isabella rolls over, the bare of her back exposed to him.

Even before he, with his feet, pulls his pants towards him he questions whose nails he pictured tearing off. The nails were Isabella’s, decorated; but the hands were his wives: a darker brown, the knuckles dry.
In the back pocket of his chinos a wrinkled lump bulges that he notices when one leg is in and he takes the object out. His conscription notice. Forty days left and how close he was to fidelity. He dresses quietly, shielding himself from seeing his reflection, to see his naked body as Isabella saw him.

Cradled in his shirt, wrapped and hidden from Isabella while he undressed, his Colt revolver. He holds it with surprise, almost not expecting or remembering it existence. A question and an answer. Rising slowly, careful to stay quiet, to keep from waking her, he faces Isabella, the back of her head against the flat, discolored pillow.

No one will care, he thinks. She’s only a whore.

Before he feels it he hears himself pull the hammer back, its click felt against his thigh.

Thinking of the children he tells himself, Keep your eyes closed. Keep them shut.

If there is noise entering the windows from the street below he does not hear it. Throbbing fills his ears. He does not even know if he breathes. She twists her head in her sleep, the white plateaux of her shoulders exposed, rising to her mounding breasts. Her face, peaceful, almost uxorial, turned towards him, wounds him. Brands him. As though he is a bull burned with the iron of her tongue.

And in her silent ownership, he thumbs the hammer back into position, muting its sound. Tucking the weapon into the back of his pants, he buttons his shirt, he opens the window and lets a nocturnal breeze dance through the room before he soundlessly leaves. Javier hears the raucous laughter below him grow and he steps out from the dim, descends the candle-lit stairs as though his family waited for him at the bottom.
In the night, free from the sun or sand-biting wind, Javier feels a new sense of freedom, disenthralled from Roberto. The unpaved streets swallow his footprints in shadow and in the morning they will be covered with a new layer of sand brought in by the morning wind. His disappearance would be questioned by no one, except Roberto. Not the barber, nor the grocer, nor the barkeep, nor the whores would notice his absence. But still his freedom is fragile and momentary. He knows he is not free, it is only the hours between bondages, when one pair of fetters is traded for another. Whatever Javier would like to think of himself, the truth is he is a runaway, whose master still has claim to his labor.

He returns to the apartment, empty of light and the apple scent from the evening before. Even that moment, the hours after drowning the children, seems distant in a stretch of time needled through Javier’s skin. Of all the memories, the murders in place of murders, the image of the girl with the dislocated shoulder haunts him.

He lights a short, paraffin lamp he discovered concealed in the dilapidated refrigerator. Alone in the room he shoves in his rucksack old shirts, yellowed with sweat, stained with the toil of his freedom.

Forty days, he thinks. Forty days.

He repeats the phrase like a metronome, keeping time and movement by it.

By the brazened glow of the oil lamp, Javier pours Roberto’s full canteen into his, careful to spill as little as possible, tonguing the drops that catch in the neck’s grooves. The black eyes of the teddy bear glare with yellow irises from the flame, watching him as it sits on the table, waiting to be stowed.
Forty days.

The lamp’s iron gooseneck groans as it slides to a flaccid halt against the dusty glass as the oil rises in wisp and stink. But Javier does not notice the sound or the smell. His intent is fixed on his flight.

Forty days or none.

When he moves too fast he fears the noise will attract Roberto and so he controls each motion, careful that neither hand nor sleeve nor leg brush against anything until the stillness panics him to move again with a speed making up for the time he lost in his caution.

A nervous thump echoes in his ribcage with each heartbeat, strained by the fear of discovery, of failing to escape and, after washing away the pollution of two years that clings to him like lichen-slicked river rocks, of being tracked through the desert like a maimed peregrine. He lays the toy in the top of his rucksack, packing it tight, and clasps the fold.

Roberto slides through the doorway, an apparition. He bears a look neither curious nor scrupulous but suspicious, a slow shifting of the eyes that wanders over the contents of the room in a touchless scanning as though his eyes where dim candles from an ancient lighthouse.

“What are you doing?” he slurs.

Javier knows the question is not one Roberto needs answering. He feels that he needs to answer the question more than Roberto needs to hear his reply. He wants to say that he is fleeing, that he is turning his back on him forever regardless of the threat of judgment
or retribution but he stands at the table with his hands on his backpack looking as if about to give a priestly blessing and ties the front flap closed and says, “Readying for tomorrow.”

Roberto, trundling farther into the apartment, hiccoughs. Like a taunting dog pawing its weaker prey, Roberto circles his backpack, Javier questioning whether Roberto knows it is empty or not.

“Good,” Roberto says.

Before he stretches himself on the same patch of earthen floor as the night before, he lowers the wick of the oil lamp, dimming the world so that denser shadows shimmer against the pock-marked walls. When he lays down, the long strands of his hair brush against the shriveled apple core, its rotten, pomaceous stench enticing the flies that now dance drunkenly on its hide that do not seem to disturb or even intrigue him.

Javier knows Roberto trusts in the strength of his intimidation, virile enough to be efficacious even while Roberto sleeps, as though he rested with Argus-eyed sensitivity to his own vulnerability.

Disgusted by the smell come alive only by his notice of the apple, Javier tiptoes to it and picks it up by both ends. The flies startle into the air and land on his hands, running over them in a nauseating tickle, some of which remain even after he throws the draff into the street, enticed by the film of sweat over his hands. He shakes them off and suppresses the sour burn that seems trapped in his throat from the fruit.

He takes his rucksack, loaded with his own essentials and with what he stole from Roberto’s, and slings it on his shoulder.
Forty days, he thinks.

Or now.

He hesitates a moment in the threshold, turning to look at Roberto, splayed out in the sand. When he draws his hand back, the door groans and he flinches, stopping to see if the sound has disturbed Roberto.

But he does not stir. From where Roberto lies three words rise with a strength that shakes Javier, as if he faced damnation.

“I’ll find you.”

And as though an internal metronome gives a final beat before the next movement, Javier reminds himself.

Forty days, he thinks, closing the door.
ALEJÁNDRO
They park adjacent to the inn, in front of the filling station with a canopy that sags and pieces of its metal roofing hang like moss from a tree-branch with no wind to stir them. One of the gas wells is tipped over in the sand, the bolts still sticking up from the concrete base. Alejándro pulls his truck to the side of the remaining pump, the clatter of his engine reverberating off the damaged metal canopy. He steps out, doubting the station still functions, staring at the awning through which blades of light cut. A jagged shadow is cast over the two pumps from a hole torn by wind or scavengers in the overhang, which connects to a ramshackle building, the windows half-boarded, the outside walls’ red paint chipping away and the edges of the sagging gutters rusting.

Javier jumps down from the truck.

“You want me to stay here?”

Unscrewing his gas-cap, Alejándro glances back at the building, seeing if anything moves inside. “For now,” he answers.

“What about my hands,” he asks, raising them.

“I don’t trust you.”

“You’re going to have to, sooner or later.”

“Later, then.” Alejándro takes the pump and flicks the lever down but the numbers do not rotate and he does not hear any flow of diesel. He shoves the pump back in its place but it falls to the ground and he steps over it, treading to the building. Some hundred feet from the station, he sees a haggard house, the wood black and half the porch rotten and sunk into itself. The house appears empty. Abandoned like the station. But there is still the possibility that some tins of food, too large or unwanted, wait in dilapidated
cupboards. Blankets, no matter how thin or moth-worn, would be on the beds and even
the curtains that Alejándro thinks he sees in the windows would be useful for a pillow.

“Where have I got to run to? You have the keys. Without food or water, I wouldn’t
last one day out there.” He puts out his hands. “Untie me.”

Alejándro nods out to the dilapidate building, which at one time may have been a lean-
to, the angled roof out of place for the rest of the hovel. “You think anything interesting
might be in there?”

Turning, Javier shrugs. “Won’t do me any good. With my hands bound.”

Approaching the station’s windows, Alejándro presses his face against them, his eyes
roaming the room. He can make out the penumbra of shelves through the clouded
windows and wonders if the masses on them are food or not. The thought of bread
distracts him and he closes his eyes, resting his forehead on the glass.

He tries the door but it is locked.

He knocks but when no one answers he turns to his truck, a madding pulse coursing
through him. He calculates how much farther he can travel and weighs the risk of finding
another service station.

Javier jumps down and retreats to the edge of the overhang.

Blue clouds saturated with rain ring the horizon, the sunlight graying their edges as
they approach. A wind kicks up and scatters sand and bramble, the loose metal shards
twisting and squeaking from the canopy.

“Watch they don’t fall on you,” an old man shouts to them from the door of the hotel.
“Once in a while I hear them come down.” His face’s scowl matches his dress. He has on
a denim shirt unbuttoned so that the hairs of his chest, still blond, stick out. The sleeves are rolled up revealing tanned arms still strong, the muscles distinct. His pants are made of denim as well, though less faded than the pale shirt. Leather boots, unadorned, unbranded, rap against the cement raise in front of the store.

“\textit{I could hear you breathing from inside.}” The man does not look at Alejándro but stares beyond him, in the direction of the gas-wells. “\textit{Come in.}” He is about to walk in when he spins around and puts a hand out to stop Alejándro. “\textit{Look. Careful you don’t step through the wood. Put a nasty hole in you you’d be lucky to heal from,}” the old man says, hiking up his right pants leg. “\textit{Got this one some ten years ago. Right around the time I was going blind. Didn’t know my way then.Damn near killed me with infection.}”

“How’d it heal up?” Alejándro asks.

“Oh,” the old man considers. “Don’t rightly know. Wasn’t my time, I suppose.”

He lets the fabric fall.

Before Alejándro enters the inn a rich smell of tomato and buttery shrimp drifts outside. He halts at the door, the scent reminding him of the salmagundi cooked by sailors in the harbor. He can almost hear the stretch of accordions on the boardwalk, their nautical voices pitched together in disharmony.

Inside, the heat intensifies and the old man falls back into a chair behind the low counter. No bell rings as Alejándro opens the door, the only sounds the chair’s grunting and the fan’s engine purring and the flapping of the papers weighed down by a smooth stone whenever the fan passes over them. Alejándro glances around the interior: a single
shelf to his right and a turn-of-the-century freezer opposite the door that reminds him of
the bodega where, when he could afford it, he would buy Diego ice cream.

The old man makes a smacking noise. With an odd roll of his upper lip, Alejándro sees
the old man is toothless.

“There another filling station nearby?”

“There another filling station nearby?”

“Not to my knowledge. Not for some hundred miles or so.” He puts his hand on his
chin. “That one empty?” he asks loudly.

On the counter, covered over with dusty plastic, is a map of the Californian-Mexican
border. Alejándro studies it and sees it is inaccurate and in the right-hand corner, a date
from the late eighteen-nineties in faded pen-markings.

“No one’s there.”

The old man breathes loudly, rocking back and forth with his hands on his knees,
forward in the chair. “Left without saying goodbye,” he murmurs.

Alejándro avoids looking at his diaphanous eyes, a muted blue underneath the haze
that reminds him of his worsening glaucoma. He has gossamer hair that rises in the draft
from the fan and the open window to his right. Behind him, a framed sepia photograph of
a young girl.

“Well,” he says, the tart word rumbles from his lips.

“I need fuel.”

Twitching, the old man says, “Of course you do. But that’s just what they don’t
have. Everything here a man could want except an escape.”

Even blind he sits in a disdainful way, his hands folded on his lap, as though Alejándro
is to blame for his loss of vision.

“Only problem is, other than them not being there, they haven’t had any gasoline for going on six months. Plumb out. Gone,” he flicks his wrist. “There’s none here, so unless you’re wanting something else, move on,” he flicks his hand. “And stop wasting my time.” The old man pinches his shirt, waving it back and forth as pinpoints of sweat coalesce into a stripe across his chest.

“I could use some food. And some water.”

“Now that I can handle. Won’t guarantee the food’s freshness, but it won’t kill you neither.” After a short pause, he asks, “Will you be needing any accommodation? Down here’s where I stay. Don’t handle stairs the best anymore. But I have three rooms upstairs.”


“The Holy Father?” he asks, his eyes widening. The old man shuffles out from behind the counter and venerably pats Alejándro’s shoulder with his chestnut hands, spotted and wrinkled. “Well, then. Your stay’s on me. Bring your things in. You’ll have some supper before I show you your room. Come on.”


“You trying to take advantage of me?”

“I’ll pay for the other one.”

“That’s fine then.”

He pats the counter for a notepad. “Now, how much water will you be wanting?”
Sliding it towards him, he takes out a pen from his shirt pocket and finds his place on the paper with his other hand as guide.

“Five is good. Ten if you can spare it.”

“Ten?” he asks, surprised. “Gallons? You planning on dying out there?” Writing a bill of sale, he marks down ten gallons of water, the writing slanted but legible.

The tone of the man does not bother him. His own father’s voice became gruff in elderliness and Alejándro believed that the old earned the right to be bitter. It was not his voice but the way he could not accustom himself to how the old man’s eyes looked.

“Yeah, something like that,” Alejándro sighs. They’re hungry, he thinks. Like they’ll swallow me whole.

“If you got something to hold the water, bring it to the back.”

“Now?”

“Might as well get it while you’re at the getting place,” he says, coming around the counter. “No knowing when it might dry up.”

Striding through the shade refracted with lakes of sunlight, he hits Javier’s leg, who startles and sits upright.

“What?”

“Old man’s telling me to come to the back. For water.” Alejándro waits for Javier to move. “And you’re sitting against the jugs.”

Javier jumps off the back and dusts off his pants.

“I won’t be long,” Alejándro says, his eyes warning.
The old man waits by the spigot when Alejándro turns the corner.

“Over here,” he waves. He feels for the water-drum and takes it from Alejándro.

“Right here.”

Sleeves rolled and legs spread, he grips the lever and pumps with the strength of a man half his age. The water sluices out and Alejándro watches the shadow of the waterline rise until the top when he says, “It’s good,” and the old man stops.

“You’ll have to carry it,” the old man says. “Pumping’s one thing. Carrying another.”

Alejándro takes it and walks side by side with the old man, who shambles with bowed legs, the result, Alejándro judges, of too many years in a saddle. A hunch slows his gait but does not seem to interfere with his strength. And though his hair is thinning, his face is dark and tough and does not match the age with which he walks.

“Thank you,” Alejándro says.

“See if you still offer thanks after you pay me,” he retorts.

“I thought—”

“The room is free. Water isn’t.”

When they come inside, Javier is standing in front of an open jar of loose-leaf tobacco, shoving fistfuls of it in a pouch.

“Who’s the son of a bitch messing with my tobacco?”

“Javier, put it down,” Alejándro orders.

Javier places the lid on the jar and moves his pouch on the counter behind him.

“The two of you tryin’ to hornswoggle me?”

“No,” Javier blathers.
“An old man who can’t see,” he says, shaking his head. “You take anything else?”

“No,” Javier answers, looking at Alejándro instead.

“Then jest take it. Too much bother. You’ve already touched it.” He shrugs off Alejándro’s arm and reclaims his seat behind the counter. He licks his lips, drawing them in after wetting them, his face in the slant of light that comes in through the window. It casts shadows from the deep wrinkles and makes his face look like a mask. Alejándro steps to the edge of the counter. He leaves a trail in the dust with his finger, trying to find something to say to the old man.

“How much I owe you?” Alejándro asks.

“Quarter,” he grunts.

Alejándro gives him one of the few bills he has left.

“No,” the old man says, giving him back the paper. “Coin only.”

“I don’t have coin,” Alejándro says. He turns to Javier. “You have any coin?”

Javier shakes his head.

“I have pesos,” Alejándro offers.

“Put what you can there,” the old man says without looking. He stares out the window, a hopefulness in his eyes that dance from the window along the vista.

“Waiting for someone?” Alejándro asks, recognizing the longing look.

The old man grumbles an answer that Alejándro cannot distinguish.

Outside, a cavalry of distant thunder.

“I need to get something. I’ll be back.”
Alejándro gets in the driver’s seat, slamming the door. Restlessness foments in him, a need to keep moving as desperate and necessary as breathing. He brings out the folded map from his glove-compartment and spreads it out half-width on his lap. Its creases wear away the color and some of the names printed on its dull surface. In the past years, he has drawn lines from the southern coast of the Baja to Los Algondes, connecting the several x’s that indicate the towns where he knew his son’s murderer had stopped. From Mulegé he went west through the mountains to San Ignacio and from there to El Vizcaíno until he crossed the border. Each marking a stamp recording the hope and woe he found in place of his son. He follows the jagged line with vermiculate fingers, stiff with his grief.

He opens his eyes. Sitting on an old hitching rail, black with rot that slopes on one side of the shanty, Javier rolls a cigarette. The old man stands on the second step to the stoop, facing out to the desert.

As if nothing happened, Alejándro thinks.

He tears his attention from them and looks again at the map.

After Los Algondes, I lost his trail.

He traces his hand from the city just over the border.

Somewhere between the river and Andrade, he thinks.

From his breast-pocket he brings out the photograph and sets it on the map, the picture of the scarred man up. He memorizes the way the man crosses his arms, the angle of his lips as they almost close.

When he puts his head against the window, closing his eyes for a moment, he feels the rattle of the wind and the massaging of his temple relaxes him, numbs him. His eyes take
on their own life, heavy and drawn back into him and he knows he is falling asleep.

A loud knocking frightens him and Javier is at the window.

“You coming in?” he asks. He takes a drag from his cigarette and exhales, the wind carrying the smoke behind him.

Alejándro motions him on.

“What’s that?” Javier asks, peering over Alejándro’s arm at the map and photograph.

Folding them quickly, Alejándro says, “Nothing,” and drives the car, leaving some small distance between him and the hitching rail. Before he gets out he sticks the photograph in his shirt pocket.

“Unusual weather,” the old man says, head tilted as though studying the whitening sky, patched with tortoise-shell clouds.

Javier has reclaimed his position on the hitching post, rolling a cigarette while the legs of his pants flap in the wind.

“If you want, you can have some dinner. Ride out the storm.”

“That’ll be fine,” Alejándro grumbles.

He steps onto the porch, avoiding the rot that sinks some of the planks.

“Boy,” the old man calls to Javier, who is some time in turning from the rail. “Son, get in here. Help with supper if you’re good for anything but lazing about, smoking other’s tobacco,” he adds, his complaint deadening as he turns into the building.

Javier heels the cigarette into the sand and follows the man inside.

During their whole conversation, Alejándro has kept his vision fixed in front of him, staring out at the storm replete with lightning. The rain drags the gray vapor of clouds
down toward the mountains. Behind him, he hears the quick slam of the screen door and their voices but only as a soft babel.

The wind speaks in laconic drafts that move the hill-patched sky along at a slow crawl. Alejándro stands off the porch, having wandered since he stepped off its rickety surface, hands crossed, watching the sky. Petrichor hangs in the air, clean but threatening flood.

The world first loses brightness. Then, color. But in that interim what pale green cacti there are turn dark like a northern deciduous. The mountains become mounds of cocoa-colored earth and the leaves of a soaptree yucca outside the lean-to transforms into a pale-sagebrush bouquet of needles with white suds spotted on its leaves. For the first time since his return, Alejándro enjoys the cooling breeze that ushers in another storm. In the distance a bolt of lightning cameras the mountaintops, revealing, in white flashes, the small cicatrices of trails on them.

And all sound drains from the world.

The silence breaks with the quiet roll of thunder so soft, Alejándro wonders if it is not the wind tumbling boulders down the distant mountain’s face. In the shadow of the heralding clouds their surface appears an igneous black and smooth. The sand spreads before him like a motionless, khaki sea, and he reminisces about the slow erosion of the towering rock pillar looming off the shore, the voice of his father warning him of wolves in the pitch of the cutter.

Behind him, a wooden groan turns his head. The old man stands there, thumbs shoved into belt loops. Silhouetted clouds darken against bright backcloths.
“Heat lightning,” the old man says, with a questioning inflection.

The clouds light in rapid, apoplectic bursts, turning them to shades of purple and pearl.

Alejandro does not respond. He does not want to speak, fearing his voice would betray him, weaken him.

“Staring won’t bring it back, son. Whatever it is you’ve lost.”

Bring him back, Alejandro repeats to himself.

A vertebral streak of lightning jags across the sky, the yellow bolt stretching for miles. The thunder-crack makes the old man jump and soon after Javier steps out of the lean-to.

“Come in,” the old man says, kind but commanding authority. “No sense standing out in that.”

He waits some time and still Alejandro does not move.

“It’ll come down upon you unexpected.”

The hotel’s interior holds in a sepulchral smell—stale, damp, old. Inside his home, the old man moves with as much ease as Javier or Alejandro, each piece of furniture encircled with a patina of dust—settled from the years of immobility—that disappears as the light wanes. Old sycamore wood-planks that have started to wear and spots of light infiltrate from the areas not flush. Window panes gray until they’re the color of murky water and their curtailed nudity looks out to the open plains away from the filling station and Alejandro’s truck to the empty wilderness and they rumble and reflect the beginning storm.

The old man says to Alejandro, “If you care for some coffee, there’s a pot on the
stove.”

Javier tilts back in his chair, a cup of brew in his hands. In the entering light, Alejándro can see the last small wisps of blue steam waft from the mug.

“This wood burning?”

“Yes. You’re surprised?” the old man gruffs.

On the counter is an already filled mug, its smell slightly repugnant. “Where do you find the wood?” he asks. He sees the liquid thicken at the bottom, not entirely opaque, but the coffee is more than a few days old. The first few sips are nothing more than bitter water syruping into a potent thickness that rubs like sand between Alejándro’s teeth.

“Don’t use it for heating,” the old man says, almost laughing. “Just cooking on occasion so I don’t use it much. Guess I’ll be eating cold things when I can’t chop no more.”

Cringing, he is grateful the old man cannot see his reaction.

“Have as much as you care for,” the old man offers. “It’s a few days old but I don’t mind brewing some more. Will need to make a new pot soon anyways.”

Behind the percolator, a stewpot steams. From the rich, sweet smell spreading from the kettle, Alejándro knows there is meat boiling inside. His tongue swells and mouth fills with saliva.

Shadows faint and Javier interrupts, “Don’t care much for electricity?”

“Eh?”

“There’s no lights in here.”

“No. Don’t trust it. Keeps a man up at night. There’s things God intended for man.
Night was never the time for doing things.”

“Then how do you see at night?”

In lieu of responding the old man taps the side of his head, exaggerating each jab.

“But, if you’re so uncomfortable with the dark, there’s an oil lamp above the washbasin there,” he nods to a corner. “I don’t got much. Anything you could give me would help.”

The request startles Alejándro. Javier’s eyes are closed.

“How much you got?”

Reaching into his pocket, Alejándro pulls out a handful of coin, some pesos mixed in that he separates to the heel of his hand.

“Not much,” he says.

“Just give me what you can,” he says, tapping the table.

Reluctant, Alejándro puts his money in front of the old man, two big peso pieces he presses beneath his fingers. They are almost all he has but he doubts he will need them later.

“Hard to make a living out here,” Alejándro says, hoping the old man will hear the abject bitterness in his voice.

“Got to survive somehow,” the old man responds, unapologetic. Feeling for the pesos he puts him in his shirt pocket and pats them until he hears them rattle.

Moving through the shack is like trekking through a slough. The thickness of memories drowns the empty distractions of the wilderness. Vast mesas stretch for miles uninterrupted save by towering red-rock. Cacti, dead, stand indistinguishable from
thriving saguaros. But here, sepia photographs decay in old coffee grounds, names and
dates illegibly faded on their backs. Broken epitaphs, toppled monuments, they are the
forgotten remains of a neglected past.

“Check the stewpot,” the old man orders Alejándro.

He lifts the lid and smells the rich tomatoes bubbling in a shrimp broth.

“What is this?”

“Zarzuela.”

The kettle gurgles and billows out its humid breath into the room quiet with hunger
and exhaustion. With the wooden spoon next to the pot, Alejándro stirs and tests the
food, clumps of rice coming up with the sauce. He holds the rice in his mouth for some
time, its warm weight pressed against his tongue, between his teeth and gums. He rolls
the rice around his mouth before chewing. What he might have gained from the pittance
he acceded to his host pales in the feast awaiting him, and the small hovel became a
tabernacle.

“Ready?”

A thunderclap rumbles through the floorboards and shakes the pot-lid.

“Guess so,” Alejándro answers. He looks around the room, darkening as the storm
fronts its way to them. “Smells like salmagundi.”

“Related, culinarily speaking.”

Alejándro speaks, stirring the zarzuela. “A friend of mine used to make the best
salmagundi. Been years since I’ve had a bowl.”
“Should be done now,” the old man says, waving for Alejándro to come to the table.

“Just bring the pot over.”

Alejándro sets the stewpot on the blackened ring in the table’s center.

“What about spoons?” Alejándro says.

“On the counter somewhere,” the old man grunts.

Rusted coffee cans line the walls along the counters to his left. In some of them a thin layer of used grounds sit on the bottom, falling through the holes in some of them. A few of the oldest ones are in haphazard stacks in the corner. He tilts them to look for the utensils but most of them are empty. Aggravated, he looks through them with growing rapidity, flicking them back to their spot and they clatter against each other. The pulverulent grounds pour onto the counter, interspersed with paper fragments that feel like newspaper, their ink faded.

“What are you doing,” the old man asks.

“I can’t find your goddamn spoons,” Alejándro shouts. The tin’s noise infuriates him. He pushes away from the counter before he throws the coffee cans down. “There’s too much litter here. You find them.”

He sits down and crosses his arms.

“What times I’ve lived through,” the old man laments. “Old men humbled and disgraced by wandering vagabonds. Set to tasks in their waning.” He groans as he stretches to stand, balancing on the back of his chair until he steadies his other hand on the countertop. He pats his hand on the shelf, feeling his way to a can adjacent to the wood-burning oven. Utensils jangle inside.
“The blind see,” the old man says with acerbity, shoving the can into Alejándro’s chest.


“You don’t have to be old to notice those things,” Alejándro says.

“You don’t have to see, either,” the old man says, tapping his eyes.

“I think I’ve seen things as would make Caesar blush. Just no more substance to us now. Been frittering it away for some time.”

“I think we’ve all seen things, old man,” Javier states. He serves himself a large bowl mounded with the end of the wooden spoon. He cups it and commences his meal as he leans back and rocks on the rear legs of his chair. Eating the zarzuela rapidly, clattering his spoon on the bowl, he draws the annoyance of Alejándro and the old man, both of whom stare at him with their own visages of disdain.

“Things that’ll put the fear of God in you, while taking out your belief,” the old man starts. Alejándro hears a slow confidence born in the saddled command of cattle.

“I’ve heard man was born for adversity and most of the stuff men do to each other would confirm that and make you think God didn’t care nothing for us. It’s my opinion that we didn’t care none for God and that’s why we’re the way we are.” He clears his throat, bringing his chin down. “I know of a father,” he says, pausing often as though the story’s telling is difficult. “Who was walking with his daughter outside a known speakeasy. Right here. Not three miles from where you’re sitting.” His eyes seem to grow even paler and they fall, directed more at the table than where Alejándro sits.

“Wasn’t yet noon and he was stumbling drunk. Turned to his daughter and asked her for
money. When she refused, he beat her until she collapsed on the road. He took in her scarf and stayed some hours. When he came out she was dead. Rivals and murderers. Drunkards and slanderers.” He tries to hide his lip’s trembling. “One way or another we all come under judgment.” He sips from his mug. “Three wars I’ve lived through,” he holds up his fingers. “Wars that’d make even the most stalwart contemplate deserting.”

Alejandro must force himself to not look at Javier.

“In my life I’ve seen men give their lives to free the negroes and men die to keep them in bonds. Both thought they was right and were prepared to die for it. Just shows there’s no stability in man. Nothing inherent in him that grounds him. He’s got to want it. Stability. Search for it. Suffer for it. What I’ve seen is a world that cries for peace with the voice of war, that calls for love with fists and spite, a world that wants harmony with homogeneity. We want a world that contradicts itself because that’s what we are. Walking, speaking contradictions. Emptying the vestiges of humanity and calling it progress.”

“So why’d you come out here, then?”

“I didn’t want no share in mankind, not while we acted with apeine ignorance and aggression. Wouldn’t let my children be raised in such company of the wicked. But I found the same out here, waiting for me. As though it foresaw my coming. It’s a dark day when a man faces that pit inside him and can stand tall and say, ‘There is no pit.’”

For a while the only sounds in the room are Javier’s noisy eating and the rattle of rain against the windowpanes. Occasionally, the stove hisses when some water drips down its short, metal chimney. The few drops of rain that bead to the windows cast orbicular
shadows on the floorboards, twisting the western and northern panes into a dank mosaic. Silence. Each man sits in his place mute with full stomachs. When he takes hold of the cold coffee mug, he remembers that he has not thought of Diego for some hours. He closes his eyes and tries to picture something about Diego, some feature that would bring the rest of him into focus. The wrinkles on his forehead, the slope of his nose, how soft his ear lobes are. Even the pain of his absence is slowly being washed away, the recollections now like a lifting fog. He wants to pick up the bowl in front of him and throw it outside into the sand. His sated hunger condemns him, gavels through him with the pangs of guilt and shame as though bringing an edict against him, accusing him of astorgious crimes. But he keeps on eating with a ravish energy. He keeps his gaze from meeting the others’, passing over the objects in the room he had not noticed before. There is a simple wooden cross hung on a wall above the washbasin. The walls are paintless and look like they have never been decorated. Every element of the hut is exposed and naked except the small partitioned corner that Alejándro sees holds a thinning mattress. Behind him are the coffee cans. A blue flash washes the room and the low resound comes from the weakening storm.

Alejándro stands and steps towards the window. He puts his head against its cool surface.

“But when you come out here, you’re forced to peer down into that darkness. You think about things that would’ve never crossed your mind before.” He wrinkles his nose, a silent snort. “You come to find the desert’s the perfect place for a man to find out who he is.”
Javier pats his forehead with a handkerchief. “Spicier than I thought,” he laughs.

“Maybe we’re talking about this pit when what we really mean is God. Maybe it’s God we’re staring at and our reaction shows us for what we really are.”

Leaning with his arm against the wall, Alejándro turns and asks, “You really think that?”

“It’s a thought. The thing is I don’t suppose God much cares for this part of the country. Won’t say he doesn’t, but it seems as though that’s the case. Others’ll tell you the desert’s the way it is cause God abandoned it to demons, thieves, and drunkards. But that ain’t it. God’s closer here than he would be in cities. There’s too much weight here, too much God for much else. Moses didn’t find God in Memphis and from what I remember it weren’t in Ur Abraham spoke with Him. We’ve left it to God. Let him alone to the corners of the world. We left it not because it weren’t hospitable, but because God was there.”

Javier, tilted in his chair, stands and walks out the door.

“I’m tired,” Alejándro says. “Show me my room.”

*

No key is needed to open the door—it is already ajar.

The floorboards are thin strips of wood, not flush, and like drops of paint on the floor, light from below shines through the small holes. Two beds separated by little more than a lampstand touch opposite walls and an opaque window, sealed shut, looks out to a dark vista. On the sill there are knife marks where someone tried to pry open the window. Maybe for a quick escape, Alejándro thinks.
Any pattern or design on the needlecord blankets has faded.

“How long did you say you’d be staying?”

“For now,” Alejándro says, looking out the window. “One night.”

In the glare of the window, Alejándro sees the moth-embers glow upwards as he hears the thud of Javier throwing fuel on the fire.

“I’ll leave you the lantern. Do you more good than me,” he laughs.

Alejándro sets his rucksack on the far mattress and collapses on its edge, bouncing in its cushion. It feels odd. Unnecessary, even.

“I’ll come down with you,” Alejándro says, the sudden desire for his saddle blanket compelling him outside. “Left one thing outside.”

When the old man disappears behind the ragged partition, Alejándro lumbers towards the door where he can see Javier’s adumbration against the yellow fire beyond his pickup. The screen door screeches and slams and Alejándro hobbles down the ramshackle stairs, kicking up dust in the path to his truck where he takes out his saddle blankets. In the distance, the eyes of a passing desert fox reflect green in the clear moon, every sea visible on its chrysalid surface. The fox pauses its prancing and turns to look in Alejándro’s direction but starts again and disappears in the night.

An odd sound draws Alejándro’s attention and he sees Javier prying up the loose planks from the old man’s porch and dropping them in a pile by the fire. “I’m going to see Baldomero tomorrow,” he says, leaning against the truck’s wheel.

“I’ll stay here,” Javier mocks, drawing in the sand with his finger.

“I’ll be gone one hour. Two at the most. You won’t get far.”
“I wasn’t planning on escaping.”

“Good,” Alejándro says, taking up his blanket.

He goes upstairs and lays down on the sycamore flooring. The grain of the wood and the patina of sand agitate his head, his elbows and wrists, but he does not move, knowing that the discomfort will soon dissipate. The low-light glow of the lamp waltzes on the walls and his limbs are still weighed down by his grief. A threnody of scars tattooed on his body. The small places of his body he forgot existed suddenly come to life with a new pain, invigorated by his utterance. His gums sting and his tongue touches the hollow spaces teeth used to occupy. He has no knowledge of when he lost them. His long hair brushes over his ears, tickling them. Feet ache, discolored with contusions on the heel and arch, and the toenails are brittle and fulvous with blood and bruise.

Looking at his injuries that seem beyond recovery.

It is the first time in nearly two years he has slept in a house. He closes his eyes and puts his hands under his head. Against the wood-grain fingers long accustomed to the give of sand become irritated. He hears the sounds of the old man moving about in his curtained-off room, Alejándro’s stomach feeling the give of the planks as the old man turns on his mattress. Turning on his back, he opens his eyes, half-expecting to see the spill of stars above him. But the shack is grey, not the black world with milky-blue stars above him.

Javier begins to snore, a quiet gurgle at first. He has forgotten how to sleep around another human.
The noise, the shifting.

In the hot night, trapped beneath a wooden canopy, Alejándro sweats, the smell of his bath already replaced by the months of stench stored in his body. Now, from his position on the floor, Alejándro hears Javier’s breathing. When the old man had pulled the curtain closed, his breathing had been heavy. But now it sounds like the quiet steadiness of a child.

“It’s not him,” he whispers, his back to the room.

“It’s not him.”

One ear presses against the floorboards. He feels the thumping pulse of his heart in one ear and with the other hears the muted breathing. Like one startled he sits upright on the floor, staring at the curtain, moth-eaten holes along the edge where it is hooked to the ceiling.

It’s not him.

He runs his fingers over the diamond patterned blankets that fascinated Diego as a child. In the winter, he would place the blanket over Diego while he slept and when he woke he would coo underneath it, playing with the frayed tassels now worn or torn off.

*

The nocturnal parishioners leak out of the doors.

All four of them.

The light from the sanctuary reveals a man leaning against the church, who stands straight when the doors open.

Alejándro waits in his pick-up while the last of them, a young woman with a thin
shawl wrapped around her shoulders, leaves. The man pushes himself off the church wall with his leg and follows her at a distance.

Inside, Baldomero is walking through the rows, adjusting the hymnals. Standing in the shadow of the narthex, Alejándro plays with his keys, gazing at the small aspects of the church, its uneven lighting, how one set of windows glows while the other remains shaded. Baldomero rests in a pew, his head tilted back and even from his distance Alejándro can see the priest’s shoulders rise and fall with his labored breathing.

“Don’t make an old man come back there,” Baldomero sighs without turning around.

“I doubt I’d make it.”

Like the cobblestone pier, his strides on the slick, rock floor find their own means of balance, slipping into the crags between them. When he comes to Baldomero’s pew he does not sit but stands by its arm, still holding his keys.

“I just wanted to say I’m leaving,” he says,

“You’re going home?”

Neither look at each other. Their visions cross, Baldomero staring at the altar, Alejándro at the wall.

“What’s left of it.”

Baldomero, gripping his chest, rocks forward, his fist covering his mouth. His eyes are clenched and Alejándro drops next to him and puts his arms on the priest’s back.

“Father?”

Shaking his head, Baldomero continues to sway, his body convulsing with silent coughs. When he lowers his fist, the knuckle of his thumb is red with blood. “I think
I’ve little more time for lessons, Alejándro.” His face is pale and even his eyes he moves weakly. “Those we adhere our love to are those that close fetters about us. There is no escaping being the prisoner of another. The only question to ask is whether or not you are willing to lock yourself to another person. Forever. They stay chained to us,” he wheezes. “Whether in life or death. We drag their weight around and the weight,” he rasps, “either makes us stronger or cripples us.” Raising his left hand he displays his discolored wedding band. “But there is joy in this captivity. Remember that, Alejándro. No man is more joyful than he who is prisoner to a beloved.” He clears his throat and his rasp is gone. “If I could go with you I would.”

“I know.”

“Decades ago,” Baldomero marvels, widening his eyes. “Some morning after my thirteenth year (I never knew my birthday, you know), my father pulled me out of our bed and told me to get dressed. I remember being excited but only through the cloud of exhaustion; I don’t even remember what he said. Just something that pushed me to get dressed. I put on an old shirt and tied my shoes.”

Like my father, Alejándro thinks, picturing himself in the gentle rocking of his father’s boat.

“I didn’t know until after he died what my father went through to acquire these for me; I’ve lost them since. When I stepped into the graying dawn—there was always fog in the early mornings—he was waiting for me with a haversack and a pickaxe each slung on the same shoulder.

“I asked where we were going, but he just started to walk.” Baldomero stares straight
ahead now, his body rigid in the pew. He resumes in a frailer voice. “Just walked and said, ‘Don’t fall behind.’ His back soon laced with sweat and I tried not to notice that his shirt stuck to the scars that deformed him. For a while I recall hearing only the tap of the pickaxe blade against the haversack handle. But we walked for some time, maybe two hours, until we came to an empty field, the recently harvested corn husks bent over like a mesa of broken bones. Pressed against the hard earth, they crunched beneath our feet.”

Alejándro sees Diego’s feet following his own, footprints in the sand as they tread to their dock.

“The morning mist had long evaporated and we stood in the middle of this field, woods behind us and on either side; in front of us, nothing but more field.

“He dropped the haversack and it sent up a sheet of dust. Still holding onto the pickaxe he trudged forward. I guess he expected me to follow because he turned around and came back, pulling me,” he says, touching the place on his arm. “He was forceful but didn’t hurt me. Still startled me, though. One at a time, he stomped his feet, grinding the heel into the ground. ‘Anchor your feet,’ he said. ‘Never let your feet move.’ Then, he lifted the pickaxe above his head. Though it couldn’t have been more than a second the time stretched out like an ocean. But he brought it down into the earth, again and again. I felt the earth thump beneath me like a heartbeat.”

Baldomero pauses and Alejándro shifts on the bench. His eyes fly across the corona.

“‘You use your shoulders, your back, to move,’ he said. The summer-dry clods broke apart into coughs of dust that rose to our shins. My father continued to dig. ‘Never your arms.’
“He grunted, his forehead dripping sweat. ‘Say it,’ he ordered,” mimicking the way his father spoke. “But I couldn’t move. The shape of my father maddeningly digging kept me from moving. I feared that, should I step closer, he still would not stop digging. Even if I passed in front of him, he would pass the tool right through me and into the earth. Already a hole large enough for me to kneel in spread before him. And then he shouted. ‘Say it.’

“‘Never your arms,’ I repeated.

“He didn’t look at me. Always kept his eyes on the next place the blade would hit. ‘Your hands have one purpose,’ like he was speaking to the earth. ‘To hold the axe steady.’ I could hear the pause in his voice, the place where he would breathe between words. ‘Your strength does not come from your hands.’

“Even before he started his shirt was damp and now it was like a translucent layer of skin, a wet molt that I wanted him to shed. He slowed, the last few blows arched and forceful. For a moment he leaned on the handle, waiting to catch his breath. He coughed for a long time and it sounded as though something was stuck in his throat,” Baldomero says, tapping his neck. “But it was really more here,” he sets his hand on his chest. “In his lungs. The beginning of his death.

“‘Now you,’ he said, holding the handle out to me.

“I hesitated but took the tool and set my feet firm, trying to hide the fact that I compared my stance to his to make sure it was good. I wanted him to think I had the knowledge, the ability, within myself. Inherently. Like something passed down from father to son through the blood.
“We did this every day for a month. His voice, when he spoke, grew harsher though week by week he spoke less. At night when he was asleep, I could hear a rattle that, for me, staved sleep (I never connected the two until after he had died). But during this time, I would touch my back, frightened that I was growing the same marks that disfigured my father’s back. And even though I never discovered any lesions, I still checked thoroughly.

“Now, after this month, we were walking through a wooded track of land. The flat, blue petals of the cowslip were fading and wild geraniums were in full bloom and fragrant. Honeybees circled from flower to flower, their flight sending up a miniscule symphony. Landing in the thick ash branches a pair of cuckoos throated their grunts to each other and a flycatcher chirruped its single note, content as a carillonneur. At first I mistook the cuckoos for owls but when I saw my mistake I pointed them out to my father. ‘Where? I don’t see them,’ he said. I guided his eyes with my finger. ‘There, in the low branches by that birch.’ He saw them then, but only their retreating flight,” he says, pointing toward the cross as though it were the tree the birds perched in.

His voice livens and he sits with his shoulders against the pew. “This time I carried the haversack. Wrapped up inside was a piece of bread and lard, with a piece of chicken for us to share and we went through the foliage until the tree-line receded and the foothills of the Appalachians were in the east. This is where, unexpectedly, my father taught me his prayer.

“‘Keep the wolf at bay,’ he sang.

“He sang the words without reverence but I heard in them a prayer filled with efficacy and piety. Simple. The rise and fall of his voice was like the rise and fall of a whip,
driving away fear and doubt. Somehow, I knew they were words my mother never heard, would never hear, because he was not the man to speak them at home.”

With a predatory ferocity, the last memory of him and Diego springs on him. They took their time walking along the empty beach, a few miles from the pier. They sat in the sand and Diego brought his knees close to his chest, his arms wrapped around them. Alejándro knew, from the way Diego rested his head on his hands, that he was wrestling with what had just been said. He had taken Diego away from their home to tell him he was going to Europe. He did not want the memory of separation to linger in the walls.

“After his voice died, the crack of old pine cone and thick Georgian grass beneath our feet continued the anthem. We walked a long time in this hymning silence,” Baldomero says.

They made their way to the harbor, Diego planting his feet next to his footprints, asking if he would ever grow as big as him. Even bigger, Alejándro answered. Scooping him up, he put Diego on his shoulders.

“So what does it mean?’ I asked, hesitant for fear that he would think me stupid. ‘What does what mean?’ ‘The prayer,’ I said, snorting with a childish frustration. ‘It’s not a prayer,’ he said. ‘It’s a song. From the quarry.’ But I kept silent,” Baldomero stresses, his head cocked slightly. “Convicted he had unknowingly uttered a strong prayer.

“When we passed out of the woodlands, I saw the quarry stretch open, its gray rock an insatiated grave. There was a spongy cushion to the damp forest soil that we left for the hard clatter of stone.
“Portions of the pit would glisten like a thousand fishes’ scales were imbedded in the walls. I could not find a way down but my father, who I slowly realized had trod that path many times when he was in chains, knew it very well. There was a strong smell of sulfur the farther down we went. These walls towered above me, their surface hewn with stigmas that had made many white men wealthy. And my father,” he says with a caesural moment of gratitude, “bore the collateral.”

Alejándro distracts himself by watching how Baldomero spins his ring around his finger.

“When we came to the bottom, I saw a small weave-basket discarded in the rock, far too new to have been abandoned there years before. ‘Son,’ my father rasped. ‘Come over here.’ He let the pickaxe swing from his shoulder, the blade resting on the ground like an ark. ‘Take it,’ he ordered.

“I obeyed. I held out my hands. He set the pickaxe in them with an unsteady doubtfulness, as though he didn’t want me to bear its weight. He walked over to the basket and picked it up and set it at my feet.

“‘Now, fill this basket with rock,’ he said. I stared at him and were it not for the pained tilt to his eyes, I would have thought him cruelly joking. I bent down and took a large black rock in my hand but before I could put it in the basket he slapped it away. ‘No. From the walls,’ he explained.

“My first swing did little more than make a white speck on the rock, though I thought I had put strength behind it. I didn’t understand how I was going to fill this bucket. But I knew that if my father said it must be filled, it must be filled. The wall came off in
chunks, most no bigger than my spread hand, which did little to fill the bucket, but eventually, my arms sore and shirt soaked, the basket was full. He touched my shoulders and then he tore apart the piece of the bread and we ate that together.

“After the small meal, I could see there were tears rimming his eyes but by some exertion he kept them from falling. ‘Now, son,’ he started, and paused. His throat moved like the words were trapped inside but when he opened his mouth again, nothing. I waited. He closed his eyes and I imagined that I could hear him singing ‘Keep the wolf at bay,’ but instead he said, ‘Now, son. Until you carry one hundred of these buckets out of this quarry, you will not leave.’

“I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to say. The way he had spoken left no room for questions; he intended me to fill and carry one-hundred baskets of rock out of this deep, deep pit.

“‘Go,’ he said, calmly, his eyes closed. But I didn’t move. When he opened his eyes and saw me he lunged forward and screamed, ‘Go,’ and, I was so frightened I considered running out of the mine right there. But I picked up the heavy burden and swung my feet, making my way to the top. It must have taken me as long to reach the top again as we had been in the quarry. I could feel every part of my body and yet my entire body was numb. But my father kept pace right behind me. Stopped when I stopped, moved when I moved. ‘Keep going, son,’ he said when I would set the basket down. I didn’t allow myself to think that when I reached the bottom I would have to fill the basket again.

“ Twice more I filled that basket and twice carried it to the top. I was halfway ascended on my fourth trip when I collapsed. I could not go anymore. Too weak to even
keep my eyes open, I felt a cool shadow cover me and then the earth lost its heat. I was off the ground and could feel my father’s arms supporting me. But I hated him. I didn’t want to touch him. ‘Why?’ I asked, in what could have barely been a whisper. ‘Why put me through this?’ My ear against his chest I heard the wild war drum of his heart, the way his gait turned to a shuffle. Rocks and pebbles were kicked off the path’s edge to the base below.

“He dropped to his knees when we reached the top and he set me on the ground. Drops of sweat hit my face. ‘This is what I have done. For you,’ he said. ‘This is what our freedom cost. I have done this so you will never have to.’ He pushed himself upright and lifted me by my hands.”

Baldomero blinks.

“Then he looked at me and held my chin. ‘Now you know grace.’”

In Baldomero’s words Alejándro is able to hear of the devotion of another’s father. He contemplates the nights he spent on board with his own father, with nothing passing between them but the sound of tide and cormorants and the orbit of stars. The nights that will now stretch before him with dolorous solitude.

Clutching Baldomero’s cold hand, Alejándro says, “I never thanked you, Father.”

“For what, son?”

Alejándro glances to that memorized place, where his wife once lay shrouded in flowers and lace. “Burying him,” Alejándro quivers. “I wish I had been there. That I could have helped.”

Baldomero responds by placing his hand on Alejándro’s knee.
They sit for long, mute moments.

“Help me up. Help me up,” Baldomero motions with his head.

The knots at Baldomero’s knuckles shiver Alejándro.

“Come. We’ll walk together,” he smiles.

The shuffle of the priest’s feet against the sandy floors sounds like holystones against a deck.

“Alejándro.” Baldomero holds onto his shoulders. “Do you think you’ll find some peace now?”

Alejándro’s eyes glistening with a hope he has learned to trounce. “Peace? Maybe. Our fathers were different, but for all my father’s flaws he was still good to me. For me, there is no chance. It’s been stripped away. So if I find peace, I think it will be many years from now.” He cannot look at Baldomero. “I do hope this is not good-bye.”

“So do I.”

*

At dawn, when he stares out the sealed window he sees nothing: not the brush covered slopes, nor the mesa littered with cactus-husks, nor the trodden pathways of fox and mule deer threading through the sand like dry arteries but only a vast stretch of open land with neither promise nor hope of holding his son. All these things become meaningless expendables in an already barren, stark world that trickles empty more each day like a slow leak in a water-pitcher.

For a moment he considers driving away until he remembers that his tank is nearly empty. The side of the hovel hidden from the filling station’s view is fertile: clusters of
desert sand verbena and corncockle purple in the ascending sun while the stout green anemones of aloe vera run amuck along the foundation of the old man’s house. A miniscule spider, its body of translucent alabaster, crawls along one of the stalks, stepping into the beaded water that still clings to the leaves in the shadowed land. The old man’s porch takes on a new look of dilapidation. It is no longer the look of depression but of neglect and abuse. To the right and left of the door strips of wood have been pried up leaving large holes through which a leg or even an entire torso could easily slip. On the right side the looting is sporadic but on the left it is constant, making on large gap between the door and what is left of the porch, isolated to a small corner where an old rocking chair dusts over and looks ready to collapse should even a painted bunting sojourn on its armrest.

Near the tires of his truck are clumps of sand the color of rust.

* 

In the corner farthest from the door is a small bathtub. Alejándro moves towards it, feeling the smooth edges. Hard-water stains ring the inside. A rusty smell lingers around it. He distracts himself with the details of the life he once took for granted, as though they could be the foundation of a new existence. The house he is building. To empty his mind of those tenacious memories. He nears the coffee-strewn counter and looks in the cans again without touching them. Peering out of some, now visible from his scuffling them around, are old photographs half-eaten by old grounds sticking to their edges. The stoics they capture stare at him with vapid faces chiseled from the same quarry of sorrow he is buried in. A likeness of the old man garbed in the gray military of the South holds a
rifle butted to the ground. He stands alone against a backdrop of plain-field flatness. He moves some of the stacked tins, most of them empty, except the cornered one. He sees a small piece of stuffed cloth, no bigger than his thumb, sticking out of the top. In another, an empty liquor bottle, a date scribbled on its neck. Alejándro quietly reads the date and glimpses the old man in the chair behind him. Returning to the previous can, he pinches the cloth between his fingers and draws it out. An old, moth-chewed rag doll, her black-stitching smile still joyful amidst her decay. One bead-eye is a different color than the other and her skin has jaundiced and clothing sickly colors. Even her hair has grayed from her youthful blackness.

He cradles the doll in his hand and sets it in the old man’s lap, his open palms waiting in his lap as though anticipating what Alejándro would place there.

“Tell me about her,” Alejándro says, his voice soft, like one requesting a last story from a father.

He sees the old man caressing her face with his dirtied thumbs, twirling the locks of her yarn-hair, feeling every inch of the doll like her fabric were the words of his memory.

“She was my only family,” he starts. Then his voice softens, loses the stallion’s strength from before and whispers like low lying branches rustling against thick Kentucky bluegrass. “She was my daughter. Her mother died in childbirth because we couldn’t get to a doctor. I raised her myself, the best I knew how. Tried learning to braid her hair the way she showed me to, but I always ended up hurting her. I like to think it was because she didn’t have a mother she launched into womanhood so goddamn fast, hoping it wasn’t my roughness that drove her there. But I don’t know. I said to myself that I should have
seen it coming, my—. Well,” he trails off, resting the doll on the table in front of him.

“I weren’t always blind so I still remember what she looked like. Clearer I think than if I still had sight.”

He leans over and gums what’s left of the cold gruel off his spoon.

In the silent interim Alejándro thinks that a child who won’t speak is better than one who can’t speak. But the tears that cling to the man’s eyes condemn his judgement.

“The pain of a parent is an ever burning brand, and a father’s scars rage and quell eternally,” the old man mutters.

“What was her name?”

The old man, mouthing “no,” offers nothing more. He rolls his lips over his untoothed gums, keeping his hands near the old doll, brushing against her knobby legs. He starts to pull off a knot caught in the cloth but stops and pats it back into place.

For the first time, Alejándro notices how the old man’s clothes sag off him.

“But she’s gone,” he spits, patting his eyes. “And nothing don’t change the fact that she’s gone. Just because you don’t speak about him doesn’t mean he’ll be waiting for you whenever it is you go back home.”

It is as though Alejándro can smell the remnant scent of his son wafting out from the hallways he once roamed. The memory of his son is stitched to the house in physical patches. Alejándro can still see the section of stone stairs Diego would sit on and wait in sun or shade for him to come back from the fields. His little legs, with knees nearly disappearing beneath the cuff of his shorts, playing out a rhythm only he heard until he would leap off them and into his father’s arms. A hedge of aloe vera grows along the
front of the home, where Diego would squat with rapt wonder at the miniscule wildlife within its cupped leaves.

The old man continues, “You pray again and again for forgiveness and though you might have it you come to understand you won’t ever feel it. That comes when laughter comes from tears. And when there’s no one to laugh, what can you do but dry your tears? But those prayers. Whether you could help or no, they become the guilt.”

He pauses.

“It runs through our minds like blood through veins.”
BALDOMERO
The turmoil of his youth returns in the matinal moments before Isabella arrives to confess. His life, the memories of distant plantations and deathbeds, unravel within him, a poorly threaded tapestry loose with holes of sorrow. His father’s words—”They won’t let a Negro in the church. You’ll have to find your own way.”—are the spool on which he began weaving.

When he wakes to a goldfinch’s warbling his mind grows lush with the Georgian foliage of elms and firs, where, as a child, he would sit in the saddle shaped roots and listen to the vireos and thrushes sing in the pale morning until their song tired in the rising heat of the day. Now, the dim light of muted saffron and orchid-blue is too intense for his eyes so he brings the thinning quilt over his face, his bald skull still exposed to the cool dawn air, and massages his aching temples. Without effort, instinctual, he pictures how the bird perches on the parapet, sunlight hitting its back as he imagines how a charcoaled sketch would take form—the angle of shading, the slope of the beak, the stance of the feet. In his youth he would not allow himself to sketch the birds unless he could decipher their calls, their vocal patterns, whether shrieks of danger or trills of mating, and by the time he was fifteen there was not a genus in the state he could not identify simply from listening to one of its throated symphonies. Years later he realized that his careful attention to birds, hearing them, coming to understand what was in their wordless voices helped him in knowing what was in the prayers, the confessions, of his congregation—his flock.

After the death of his father, he trekked west carrying his father’s pickaxe and his mother’s Bible. And there were new though far fewer, at least sparser, birds for him to
enjoy, but they were vibrant, almost ostentatious in their plumage. The tanagers soon became his favorite to draw and before he acquired some paper he used the blank pages at the end of his Bible to sketch.

She will be here soon, he thinks. She’ll want to confess.

But he cannot push himself out of his bed yet. His warm quilt allures him and he rests with his hands rising and falling with his strained breathing. He closes his eyes underneath his blanket and imagines what it is like to be dead. He does not bring himself to imagine the moment of death, what it is like to die, but tries to conceive what it is to be no more. Even when he reaches the calm where the mattress beneath him and the blanket above him disappear and they feel like an extension of his body he still hears the chorusing of birds and the trembling pressure of his bladder and the shame of only two nights ago returns to him. His stubborn limbs ache and stiffen, demanding extra effort to move them. When, while coughing, he throws his quilt off him and stands, his back tightens and bends him over against his will.

For a moment he blames his pain on Isabella. Her persistence pesters him, forcing him into the habit of waking early. Were he younger, her ambition might encourage him. But now, in his dwindling years, her vigor is exhausting.

Eyes closed and back clenched, he tells himself that a good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.

Fearing Nadia will smell the urinary stench, in the room or on his sheets, or that he will have the feel of slick skin beneath his habit when Isabella arrives, he tramps through the kitchen, managing to reach his bucket in time. The embarrassment of the night before
returns to shame him. To hide even further the evidence of his growing incontinence, he pours the bucket over the balcony, aiming for as bare a patch of land as he can.

When he shuffles from his bedroom into the adjacent kitchen, one of the goldfinches startles and flees. The bird’s flight disappoints Baldomero, whose ritualized mornings become meaningless. The morning song interrupted the ceremonial daybreak, and now he believes that he has neglected a regimented pattern that bestowed grace and strength to his day.

He props himself up against the counter, half-empty bowls left out on it. His chest quivers before he bends over coughing. Lights flash in his clenched eyes and a needling pain travels from his neck to his forehead. When he stops coughing, he slides to the floor, his back against the shelved counter. His pale feet spread out before him on the cool floor. He keeps his eyes closed and tries to control his breathing.

The thought of Isabella keeps him awake. He forces himself to his room where he hangs his black-iron cross around him.

He sets aside his blanket, folding it over his arm twice and sets it on a small wooden crate near the veranda door. The garden below him is loosing its color, though not its life. He hears the larking of wrens, the chirping tanagers, the warbling goldfinches, a euphony skittering from the garden. Their tiny forms move along the stoned path plucking seeds from between the rocks onto the desert where some drink from the pool of water collected in the cactus’s open flowers. To the south of the church, behind the garden, he can see the outskirts of the children’s graves, shadows of the crosses cast over them.

An imitation of the atrocities his father bore. He touches his back, running his fingers
between his shoulders.

And then he wonders—how long until his own death.

The consumptive bricks of his own tomb encase him.

Though it causes him pain, like his knees are being wound around a capstan, he kneels when he prays in his room, always on the left side of the bed. The words which once seemed strong, pious, now sound empty and ineffective. Hollow against the damp cave of inevitability.

“Keep the wolf at bay,” he trembles.

Now, in the blue-grey dawn that alchemizes into a vibrant display of copper and sapphire, Baldomero is awake. Splashing some water on his face and neck, he cups his hands and drinks a few palmfuls that coat and cool his stomach.

He descends into the great, arched tomb of the sanctuary, its soffit weak, letting sand and dust fall to the floor. He tramps down the stairs, balancing himself with both hands against the railless stone walls, placing both feet on each step until he reaches the bottom, where he stops and tries to ignore his fiery kneecaps. The staircase looks out to the altar, where the clay pyx and bronze ciborium lie across the clothed, trestle table. The humbleness of their appearance, old and fragile, discomfits Baldomero, reminds him even in the administration of the Eucharist of the impoverished state of his diocese.

Even though Baldomero searches the confessional and Saint Anthony’s cell in the narthex, he finds no trace of Isabella. The eerie quiet of the church in the creeping morning hours transforms the sanctum into a sepulcher. The windows are thick with dust and judgment as they peer down on the aging Baldomero. Even the hagioscopes leer at
him, reverent eyes condemning him from the empty pews.

Doubting his thoroughness, he checks the votive-offering again, hoping to find Isabella there. But all he sees are the many vacant candlestands and the fading icons, their gilt coverings flaking off. In her absence he realizes, through his disappointment, the excitement with which he looked forward to her daily arrivals. Her confessions did not always stay confessions but they became the intersections where two dissonant lives converged. He came to notice things about Isabella, the way she would brush her hair with her palms facing out, or how certain aspects of her face were vaguely familiar to him, though he never saw her outside the confessional long enough to recognize the semblance. Black wicks lean or hide beneath a blanket of wax that spills over uneven edges and congeal on their sides.

Moving from instinct and a concern that the intercessory candles would go out, Baldomero hastens to find the boxes of candles tucked away in the small basement, dry and cool. Walking down the stairs is no longer something he can do without concentration. He remains uncertain of the distance between the stairs and sets one foot down before moving the other and the creak of the stairs seems to be an imitation of the noise his bones make. He moves boxes that are empty and tries to slide others that are heavy, full of old, donated hymnals rendered anachronistic by the dwindling attendance and the populations’ inability to read Greek. Other crates hold driftwood icons, the paint chipping away from their gilt coatings, the tips of the saints’ fingers worn away by abrasion. He pushes these things aside, grateful that the cellar hides them, keeps them from the sight of the congregation and even allows him moments where he forgets their
presence. Then, tucked away in the far corner, he finds a box of unused votives. Their bodies are hard, unyielding. Like the unconverted, Baldomero thinks. Not like the soft flesh of those waiting for ignition. Taking them by handfuls, he carries them in the loose folds of his habit, shambling up the stairs trying to balance himself with the railing and keep the candles from slipping out of their cradle. He rests at the top of the stairs for a moment, his breathing labored and shallow and he senses a rattling in his chest that feels like pebbles tumbling down a hill. A hard, forceful cough dispels it and he continues his task.

When once young, he would put the candles in their place with a dexterity acquired from administering the Eucharist, hands steady and sure. But, now, his hands tremble. Not paroxysmal shaking, but a quiet unsteadiness that interferes only because it reminds Baldomero of his deterioration. After some time, the candles rest on their stands and he steps back, admiring its completeness. At one time, the glow of them bronzed the ashlar walls behind them, gave a certain reverence to the church that Baldomero misses and so he lights as many of the candles as he can, leaving enough for visitors to light.

When he says his prayer, his repetition, he crosses himself and tries to ignore the avifaunal canticle that sweeps in from the garden, euphonic with sounds that grate Baldomero’s ears with their praise.

“Father,” a dark voice says.

When Baldomero turns around, Roberto stands in front of him.

“I’ve returned,” he says. “So that you might thrash me.”

He walks ahead of Baldomero to the confessional, his gait expecting Baldomero to
follow. The wired surface separating him from the wolfish man who leans on his knees. They sit for some length of time, wordless. The man’s fetid odor of old tobacco and sweat fills the booth. His posture disturbs Baldomero, who thinks it looks like he is leaning in to whisper or hear some arcane secret, some gnostic key. For all his stench, his clothing appears new. Maybe even pressed, Baldomero thinks. But his discolored smile outweighs them both.

“Should I wait for you to start, Father?” the man asks. His tone, verging on respectful, surprises Baldomero, who stumbles in his response.

“No, no. Start when you’re ready.”

“I heard your sermon. Well done. But I think it ignores some things. And I wanted to talk to you before I went my way.” He adjusts his seat, resting his head against the back of the confessional. His knees touch the door.

Baldomero gives a nod of gratitude and asks, “What things did it ignore?”

“Evil,” he utters lightly. “Suffering from evil.” He puts his hand on his chest, his forearm disfigured with a jagged, white scar. He shakes his head and moves closer to the screen. “For me, God does not exist. I do not believe in a god and doubt I ever will. So, for me, all things are permissible. Am I right? I judge myself. I am a law unto myself. Just as, for you,” he says, gesturing with an open palm, “all things are permissible because you believe in God. It even says so in your scriptures. And if all things are permitted, suffering should go away; for without suffering, there is no evil. Without evil, then truly all things are permitted.”

“I don’t know,” Baldomero says distinctly. He blinks, knocked off by Roberto’s
brazenness. “What if God were to show himself to you? Would you turn around, and believe then?”

“If I were to be made certain that God existed, I would have no choice but to turn around. *Metanoia*, you call it? But, isn’t it true that all men only believe in that which, to some extent, they already know to be true?”

“Interesting. How so?”

“Men believe in God not because he is necessary but because man cannot stand to imagine a world without him because of fear. Fear, yes. But that which stems from fear cannot be love. At best it would be servitude. What is there to fear in a world with no God? A man like me. Who has beaten everyone to the conclusion that everything is permissible, with or without God. Someone once said that if God did not exist it would be necessary to invent him. That does not go far enough. Now, years later, someone wrote that if the devil did not exist it would be necessary to invent him, and that man would create him in his own image. Even by this logic, which seems far more plausible than some gnomic animosity,” he says with a dismissive wave, “I would be God to the devil. And if the devil, created in my image, does that which is like me, then it could not be evil, but only good, and he would no longer be the devil.”

There is a pain in Baldomero’s chest, not entirely physical, but not incorporeal either. It is like his consumptive throb migrates to his heart. He does not know what to say and part of him wants Roberto to leave.

“The nature of evil is the nature of the self. Evil knows only itself and therefore can never be good, for goodness knows itself and others—there’s the crux—because it can
never stand to be known by itself alone."

Putting up a finger, Roberto asks, "Would you say then that evil, in knowing itself, recognizes it is evil? Be careful. If you say yes then evil must be judging itself. And to judge, one must look beyond the self, as you call it. And then your evil is no longer evil, but good." His posture has the lean of pride. Baldomero’s heart beats as though every word Roberto utters thrashes his body and he cannot reconcile his spiteful posture with the respect found in his eyes.

“Evil fights against that which is most unlike it. Does one need to know warmth to understand cold? A freezing man knows his condition, his danger, without ever having stepped foot in a desert. So it is with evil. Both evil and good know themselves and it is precisely because evil sees itself that it strives against that which it is not. Because both good and evil are alike in this: they yearn to make all things like themself. Evil to corruption, good to perfection. And goodness shares itself with those against whom evil fights.”

Through the holes in the cloth canvas the mid-afternoon light drops in, distracting Baldomero. He feels the heat cover his scalp.

“Forgive me for asking, Father, but this interests me.”

Roberto’s cautious tone and his askew glance perturb Baldomero, his voice a mask through which his dark eyes leer. He squeezes his knees, tight from not being able to stretch.

“I find it curious. Your being a Negro. And a priest.”

Baldomero taps his knee twice. “What’s curious about it?”
“Nothing to be ashamed of, Father. I just know that those same people who proclaim what you believe—the forgiveness of sins, the inclusion of all men, neither slave nor free, but all one,” he moves his hands from side to side. “These are the same men who deny you so many things. How can you love them? How can you serve them, or even believe them? Why would you want to? They deny you ordination. It’s clear you’ve made your vestments yourself, and why wouldn’t you? I would too.”

“You don’t serve for the recognition.”

“No, true. Esteem is the poison of service. But look at it out there,” he says, and Baldomero peeks through the holes. He is in a church wasting away. Its walls corrupt with decay. The old wood holds in the day’s heat with miserly strength and lets in the night breeze like a spendthrift. The laymen, too poor to repair anything, limp away from the building crippled with shame and neediness. Poverty within, poverty without. Grieved, Baldomero feels as though his heart throbs in his throat. He makes the sign of the cross. Behind him, through barred windows that open out to the garden, the morning light pours in like a drink offering.

“Have you been ordained?”

“No.”

Roberto stretches his head back, a lean of contemptible understanding. “So that’s why this is the way it is. You’re a guerilla priest,” he laughs. “Without ordination, you’d receive nothing.”

Baldomero glances along the walls, the contributions hanging on the walls.

“Your ambitions are those of younger men, Father.”
For some minutes Baldomero imagines what his extended years would hold. He sees people in the pews, gazing at the pulpit in admiration and submission. Young eyes and old ears alike sit interspersed in the congregation. They go forth in joy, wearing his words like amulets around their necks and seals on their heart. He sees a church, the interior built of sandstone, with ashlar walls and the inner sanctuary’s ceiling rises to the very top of the building—an undecorated dome letting in a column of light from its windowed apex. There is a single apse where the Christ hangs, spaced between two windows; the semi-dome shows a chipping and faded painting, an ancient saint kneeling before a blossoming tree in the desert being visible, though even in the vision it is evident some of the painting is missing. The long walkway through the sanctuary is lined with six pillars on either side. The east side has seven windows depicting the days of creation, and on the west are seven windows displaying images of the seven bowls. Stepping from the portico outside—on which there are twelve pillars as well—a short dromos leads to the vaulted sanctuary in which there are three rows of twenty-four pews and the polish of all fade away with use. He tries to keep himself from thinking of Isabella but her absence announces itself with stentorian strength. Thoughts, situations, tirelessly flood his mind as he combats the fear they bring. He sees her in a dark room and can smell the humid air trapped in her apartment. The mattress of her business, thin and ragged, glistens with sweat, the sheets twisted around her leg, and her tatters drape over her with only the remnant of decency. Very little light comes through the brick-sized holes along the ceiling but in the light that does Baldomero can see the thick dust that pollutes the room, falling and rising like snow until it settles on some already dark, dirty surface. Because of this light he notices the
rise and fall of her chest, her breathing. Then he sees her stretched out in an empty alleyway. Face down in the sand, a clot of blood stains the back of her head. Her arms lay at odd angles, as though he cannot see where the curve of her elbows are, pushed back into her body. One palm lays flat on the ground, the other up and open like an unconscious beggar.

"Of course. Can one man confess to another even the simplest sin and the other man stay silent? A speck," he says, touching his chest. "And a plank," he indicates Baldomero. "But even if I had a board in my eye I could still see that you carry a certain . . . nervous disdain around with you. You love the church but hate that you hide behind your garment."

His hands beneath the view of the partition, Baldomero picks at the prickling fabric over his knees. Though he tries to suppress the thought, Baldomero thinks of the Johannine scene where a woman declares, "Come and see a man who told me everything I ever did." He brings his hands together, the joints ache, and he spins his ring but tries to hide it from Roberto.

"Wouldn’t you say that this denial of your rightful place, is that not an evil?"

"Yes," Baldomero whispers. If I could claim a rightful place.

"What?" Roberto leans forward, turning his ear towards Baldomero’s chamber. Knowing Roberto heard him.

"Yes," Baldomero screams, his face shaking. The hall echoes his words. The consumption in him wakes. Shaking the confessional, he puts his hand out to still himself but there is not enough support in the seat. Above him, disappearing into the purlins,
some bird flutters. It dislodges a small cascade of dirt that Baldomero brushes off his shoulder. Leaning back only pushes the sickness’s talons deeper into his chest.

Roberto disappears in the flashes of light. He cannot even hear if something is said. When the fit passes, he lays his head in his hands. His hair thin and a sickly color, small tufts of it fall out from the back. His habit sticks to him. With bloodshot eyes and a damp face, he peers at Roberto. Even he cannot decide what it is he feels for him. A mixture of loathing and curiosity, the lure of wickedness. In his presence Baldomero feels disarmed; Roberto’s words are unsheathed swords.

“Suffer me to ask you one more inquiry.”

Baldomero wants to throw the man out of the confessional, out of the church, and leave him to the heat of the desert. But he touches his ring and calming himself, says, “One more.”

“What is God to you?”

“He’s more than a question,” Baldomero wheezes, covering his mouth with a fist.

Roberto smiles and rubs his jaw. “Of course, of course. But what I meant to ask was why you became a priest. Surely there’s something you know of God that drove you to this place?”

“I know that all suffering comes from evil, yes,” he nods. “You are right. Yet suffering is used to its own destruction. And if suffering kills evil, how can one not love within it? Now, to love suffering itself is evil, which only increases suffering and to no end. But you can love suffering for what it cleanses. Evil by its nature is suicidal. Once pregnant, it gives birth to suffering that, if delivered properly, kills its mother,”
Baldomero stresses.

“Yet you believe in a Father who sent his own son to die. A filicide. And you condemn me. These are the things I do not understand. A God who would condemn his own son to such agony would certainly thresh those who claim to be his servants.” He pauses. “Does that frighten you?”

“Good by its nature has the capacity for sacrifice. Though it is inherent it is not compulsory. So he whom you despise because he gave himself over to evil, and over to suffering, not for suffering but for sacrifice, loves infinitely because he suffered infinitely.”

“And why not?”

“Because you’re missing one thing. The main thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Sacrifice. For you, murder is gain, and nothing but. You enjoy it. You gain by it. But for him, for God, it’s nothing but sacrifice. That’s the difference. You think that because you’re the last man standing, you’ve won. That all others have fallen by you, in front of you. But sacrifice is something different. A soldier who lies on a battlefield, wounded, dying even, may take joy in knowing his sacrifice has aided in bringing down the enemy. In defeat we find victory. Who knows what the man will find who gives his all? Who can stand naked at the end of his life without shame or regret?”

“Faith doesn’t require that one understand. It requires change.”

“Father. Don’t play with me as though your words were esoterica. There is a faith that understands. It isn’t doctrine. It’s the believers themselves. It’s that last thing you
said. Faith ‘requires change.’ You could even say that those who are unchanged have no faith.”

“If everything you say is true then I ask you: How do you call that which is either good or evil? Surely everything falls into one of those two categories. What is your standard?”

Baldomero’s hand brushes his rosary. He stutters. “By asking that, you’ve shown where you stand.”

“I was never uncertain of that. I know where I am. The question is, do you? I ask what your standard is because you say you serve the good, maybe you would even say ‘The Good.’ In these walls, it’s easy to believe it. The smells, the somber light. Voices soft, reverent. It’s enough to make one believe in holiness. But why is it you are here, where it is good, and not there,” he points outside, “where it is evil? Evil then, seems superior. Stronger. It goes where it is not. It has motion. Life, you could say. Goodness stays where it is. Stagnant. Dead.”

Something fills the confessional. A feeling Baldomero is unaccustomed to. He wants to leave behind his robes, fold them and tuck them away in the booth.

“You see, Father. It isn’t that I don’t believe your thoughts, your arguments. I don’t believe you.”

“And what would I have to do, Roberto, to make you believe me?”

“Now there is nothing you can do. It would come from compulsion. It wouldn’t be genuine nor would it be faith. I would become your God,” he smirks, vituperative. Waiting, Baldomero does not respond and Roberto says, “I’m finished.”
They exit the confessional together, both somber, as though they both know that they’ve left something behind, that they’ve emerged more solid versions of themselves.

“Bear with me, Father. I have one more request.”

Folding his hands in front of him, Baldomero waits, raising only his eyebrows.

“Bless me.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in any of this.”

He shrugs. “Just in case.”

For the first time Baldomero bemoans mercy, understands that this is the reason Roberto has probed, like a surgeon infecting his patient.

He raises his hand slowly, stopping as his thumb reaches Roberto’s forehead. He hears every breath and when he makes the sign of the cross over him, his eyes closed, Baldomero intones, “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.”

But inwardly he prays, “Keep this wolf at bay.”

“A man can respect his opposite,” Roberto replies, standing. “Even if he hates him. How much more difficult it is to respect a man so alike except in one or two areas where they differ.”

“Even in vipers there is wisdom,” Baldomero says. “But also poison.”

Roberto splays out his hands and shrugs. “And every antidote is made from poison.”

He bows to Baldomero and takes three steps backwards before turning. When he is parallel with the offering plate he stops. Holding up two twenty peso pieces, spreading them with his thumb, he says, “For the children of Andrade, Father.” Dropping them in the offering they sound hollow, ringing like a dropped gavel.
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In the kitchen, Baldomero kneads his bread for the day, shoving his fingers into the giving dough to placate their swollen soreness and occupies them with something to do other than ache over the absence of Isabella. In front of him, three bowls hold dried cranberries, dates, and the third, cinnamon. He throws in a handful of each, working them into the lump that he places into the oven.

Though the kitchen provides an inner sanctuary for Baldomero, separate from the one below, his mind succumbs to the weightiness of Roberto’s anti-theodicean confession. He can look out over the dry mesa and believe that some judgment has ravaged the land, that some thing has burned the land to a ruin. But, stretching in front of him, a broad plateau that reaches to the mountains forming half of the cordillera enclosing Andrade, umbrae from the mountains, breezes falling from them carrying the scent of sycamores, yuccas and saguaros, flowered nopales, century plants blossoming once before death, red foxes scurrying along the desert with their young; these are the things he will miss, that he already mourns as lost and it is because of these remnants of divine favor that he believes, even if the land is despoiled, life is not wasted.

Waiting for his bread to bake, he stands in the archway. Below him, the garden tree rustles.

My first night in Andrade, he thinks, I stood right here. Looked out to the same mesa. This was an untilled field. Waiting for a harvest.

He tries to swallow but cannot.

It was a puerile hope I had. And it brought this leprous aspiration. Only now, he
thinks, looking at the tarnished wedding ring the color of his wrinkled hands, do I see how foolish I was.

A yeasty aroma wafts through the kitchen and Baldomero sets the bread aside to cool.

Not mid-morning and he already tires. His sleep no longer rejuvenates him. Aches, as though they’ve become inseparable from his bones, linger throughout the day. From underneath a folded blanket resting on a crate near the balcony he takes his Bible, reading where the pages fall open.

“I pray thee, let me go over, and see the good land that is beyond the river, that good hill country.” Baldomero closes his eyes and can smell the coastal wind, the glimmering land where he and Amadea wed.

He takes his bread and places two thumb-thick slices on a clay plate. It is not until he sits, before he takes a bite, that he thinks about how much he will miss eating. From the simple taste of a wafer on his tongue, the quick way it softens and dissolves, to the heaviness of his homemade bread. They are small comforts in the midst of the slow peeling away of all pleasures. The things left for him are those things that would have once seemed unnoticeable to him—to drink without dribbling, to finish a meal before it turns cold, to need no help relieving himself, to wake with sheets as dry as the night before.

The second slice has a more pungent kick of cinnamon and it reminds him of Amadea’s laugh, the way her breath would fall out against him and the spicy smell of it would surprise and tickle him. Through those uncalled moments Baldomero holds a firmer picture of her than the deliberate imprisonment of ordered memories, his desperate
attempt to hold onto memories.

Descending the stairs, his fingers brush against walls that fall in miniscule grains to the floor, their slow erosion imitating his memory. Every time he envisions Amadea, seeing her as she was—with chestnut hair and fingernails that glistened like opals, a voice that spoke with seraphic beauty and cherubimic force—he looses more of her. He can no longer remember the thickness of her hair, or the way her lips parted when she smiled, whether the corners broke apart all at once or slowly like the opening of a wax seal.

He steps into the sanctuary, through the rows of pews adjusting, unnecessarily, the hymnals and psalters. The stained-glass window, of a seraph holding a bowl of judgment, seems to keep light out instead of pouring it in. A thin coating of soot and dust shrouds the windows, particularly those above the votive offering. They have not been cleaned in years and are as dark inside as they are outside. And in this same way, in the quiet accumulation of sins and hate, Baldomero feels that his priesthood has stolen his life. The building he knew intimately has become labyrinthine. And the scriptures he once memorized and revered are trite aphorisms in the valley of death’s shadow.

The pews’ varnish wears away to a thin, epidermal crust, opaque in places, translucent or bare in others from hands gripped along their rounded edges or shuffling against the flatbacks. Some of the handrests wobble and splinters, as large as a man’s finger, pry off their appointed settings. They fill the sanctuary with a smell of old, dry wood, dusty and on the brink of decay, putrid with years of sweat soaked into the wood. Even the Christ seems covered in an eczema, its once-bronze flesh turned to green over time and neglect to the point of permanence.
This is my legacy, he thinks.
Bringing his folded hands up to his mouth, he feels the cold ring sting his lips.
Her death was the beginning of mine.

He collapses in the pew and puts his head in his hands. The bench shakes with the rocking of his weeping and his choking cries. When sound does come, it echoes through the empty hallways. Nothing in his empty church comforts him. Everywhere he looks he finds nothing but a reminder of Amadea’s absence. The mournful faces of saints painted on the walls, the pallid skins of icons, the agonized contortions of Christ’s face, and the ten white crosses that lean in the shifting sand like a decalogue against God’s goodness.

The votive offering allures him and Baldomero shambles to its bench where someone has opened the book to the Psalms.

“Let everything that has breath praise the LORD,” he reads.

He looks at the vacant church. He sees in each pew a grave waiting to be filled. They are covered not with dirt but with false words slung out by a gravedigger hunched from age and use.

“Do the children have breath,” he screams.

Picking up the Psalter he throws it across the sanctuary, leaving a pathway in the sand as it slides to a stop.

“Can Alejándro spare the breath to praise you. In between his sobs, is there room for hallelujahs? Can I spare what little breath I have to praise a God such as you?”

His hands tighten into fists. He stares at the ceiling, moving in a circle as though
looking for God in the buttresses.

“The old outlive the young? Look,” he shouts. “Look at how your words are bitter on my tongue.”

His mouth sags, twisted like crewel, and his eyebrows furrow.

“My father—a slave. A slave marked with the scars of his lord. And look. Look at me,” Baldomero demands. He pushes up the sleeves of his habit but that is not enough. He tears at the front until his chest exposes and he kneels. “Do you see your scars? Do you see the marks of your whip, Lord?”

His knees groan like chained bears against the hard stone floors, shooting the ache through his legs and back so that his parts melt into one pained, indistinguishable whole. A gleam of sweat coats his chest that he feels rise and fall in the humid air of the sanctuary, and even the few candles add a tangible heat. His arms splayed out as though preparing for crucifixion; his eyes steady on the ceiling with the glimmer an expected answer. His eyes—the one youthful thing about him—fill with the vigor of expectation that has not withered in the long dearth of silence. In a way both mystical and physical, Baldomero feels he can sense every inch of the church. On his knees, everything—from the clay plate he neglected to clean upstairs, to the staring eyes of the saints carved in the gray stone of the dromos—all these things are visible to him as though the church has, after decades of rites and liturgies, finally come under Baldomero’s headship. And everything serves the cultic purpose of preparing him for sacrifice.

The empty santcum fills with the answer of God’s silence and his crucifix slips from a fold in his habit. Baldomero instinctively clutches it with one hand and closes his eyes.
He hears a noise come out of his mouth, soft, rustling, like an owl cutting through a headwind. He realizes he is praying. But, with the incorporeality of a phantasm, it vanishes and he finds himself bending, nearly prostrate, muttering, “Keep the wolf at bay.”

The dust from the floor sticks to his forehead, his nose, and lips. When he finishes his recitation, he licks them, not thinking, and coughs from the taste and aggravation. Though only three successive puffs, he holds his chest as though it would fall off while he dislodges a ball of phlegm. Holding it in his mouth, unwilling to spit it on the floor, he hacks it into the sleeve of his still open habit.

He picks up the Psalter and brushes its leather covers off, setting it back in its place and walking through the church upstairs with a sprouting sorrow born of the bitter roots that spread through him like chaparral.

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He sees the clay plate on the counter, a small finch pecking at the remaining small bread-crumbs. The tapping of its beak against the plate, quick and hollow, leads Baldomero to think the dish will be spotted with tiny cracks and holes. The finch, startling at Baldomero’s presence, retreats but almost immediately flies back to the parapet where it shuffles its legs, waiting for an opportunity to approach the feast again.

The kitchen still retains the faint scent of cinnamon, a piquant aroma reminding him of the way the curtains Amadea hung wafted in from the open windows of their hacienda, carrying with them the earthy smell of the plains. He closes his eyes and touches his old wedding ring, spinning it over his finger while he steadies his breathing. She stared back at
him, her hair falling over her bare shoulders. The light coming in was white in the windowpanes, darkening her face as he shielded himself from the brightness.

He recognizes the grating sound building in him, a scratching that begins in his chest and claws at his ribs; the eviscerating lungs. With each cough it grows in strength, from painful to unbearable. The last months his father endured—the gurgled speech, stained bed-sheets and clothing that shrouded him in embarrassment, how even the faintest breath eventually caused pain—these memories stir in him a wish for a quick death, a fast demise like his father’s. He wishes he could ask him if it is cowardice; if he ever wished for death in the quarry the same way he now longs for the death of his sickness that bores him hollow.

These fears exaggerate the dull ache in his limbs, a pressure in his elbows, his fingers, that hurt to bend and hurt to keep straight. For a while he stands in the center of the kitchen rubbing his hands, thumbing the back and the knuckles with small, soft circles. With a shiver, he comes to and clears his throat. In a small, vacant washbasin he sets the clay plate and heads for his bedroom, considering whether he would lay down and let the heat of midday pass. On the small night-stand the old edition of De Imitatione Christi lays on top of his sketchbook. The sketchpad’s cover is worn, old and the corners frayed from the distant years of use. He thumbs through the drawings, remembering the algal Georgian pond where he drew a kingfisher gliding over the surface and the low branches of a maple, an oriole perched and singing, the first bird he recalls hearing.

Holding the sketchbook between his arm and body, he trudges down the stairs and sits underneath the willow, its blossom-colors gone, and thumbs through the collection of his
drawings to a clean page. Baldomero holds the sketchbook against his legs, waiting to draw until he sees the first line appear on the page like a shadow. A flock of verdin jump from branch to branch, their yellow heads making them easy to see. Baldomero listens to the birds. Near the base of the tree, a red storksbill grows. The petals flap in the breeze, a soft rustling from its fern-like leaves.

A still-sharp pencil nestles in the sketchbook’s crease. He takes the pencil in his fingers, unable to grip it strongly. His knuckles seem to have a will of their own, drawing back even when he desires them to stay firm. His fingers seem useless in their crooked state, refusing to straighten. In this he knows that his end is near, when his last pure pleasure is stripped from him.

Parts of him are picked away, bit by bit.

“Like those little birds,” he laments. “Pecking away at what is left of my humble life.”

There is no response.

He remembers his father’s death the way he remembers the tide, ebbing and flowing with rhythm, forgetting that distant storms could swell its serenity into a vicious surge. He has never accustomed himself to the reality of never speaking to his father again—he even wonders if he would recognize his father’s voice. Reaching an age almost twice as old as his father was at his death, Baldomero questions whether his father would still be the teacher or the student, though he is certain his father would rebuke him for such thoughts. Still, the question remains in his mind.

Sitting underneath the willow, its branches heavy with blossom and lethargic birds, his feet numb, Baldomero feels the prick of regret remembering his words. The lines are
unsure, unimpassioned, simply curves denoting nothing but effort. His hand remembers the feel of paper beneath it, caressing his heel and small finger as his hand brushes over the page. Trying to draw a verdin’s orbicular breast, he hesitates, doubting his skill and starts over with the simpler limbs of twigs the bird would perch on but drops of sweat fall off his forehead and stain the paper. He wants to tear the page out but, from instinct, turns it and keeps the record of his failure as though he’d have time to learn from it.

Underneath the willow, Baldomero watches the sky turn an oyster-shell-blue as dusk approaches.

The birdsong has ceased some hours before and other than a scorpion dragging its underside along a rock or the burr of a locust’s wings passing by, there is little sound. Baldomero rests with his head against the willow’s trunk, fighting off sleep while enjoying his solitude. The rest that comes with the lonely silence.

And then the darkness of Isabella’s hair, the way her eyelashes curve to touch the fringe of her eyebrows, the tiny indentations at the corners of her lips and the slight roundness of her front teeth, the way she held her hands in her lap, like a fragile pincushion, when she talked and how she confessed with the boldness of one assured of her forgiveness infiltrate his mind; his desire to see her is, in some way, the desire to see his wife again, to supplant the last memory of her, frail and sallow, with the spurious image of youth: firm, ambitious youth. He admired her dreams as though they were his wife’s. The confidence with which she spoke of her eventual freedom as though her present confinement daunted her none. In her he finds the seeds of strength he wishes he possessed and a return to the past that allows him, however momentarily, to deny the
present.

He coughs, tries to clear his throat but the hack comes from deeper in his chest.

Restless, his legs tired and back stiff, and from no motivation other than boredom, he slumps to the church’s narthex. He turns around and walks back to Saint Anthony’s chamber. He leans his head against the bars and thinks of his wife. Of Isabella and Nadia. Of his father. The lush woodlands of Georgia and the feel of a pencil between his fingers for hours without tire or ache.

The tonsured statue of Saint Anthony holds a toddler in his arms, high and close, protecting her from harm. He leans his cheek against the child’s head, lilies pinned between the two of them, and Baldomero thinks the child’s look speaks of quiet security. Anthony’s dress is simple: a brown, hooded robe fastened about his waist with a belt of rope, from which a long rosary sways. His eyes are compassionate and humble, meeting neither the child nor the beggar to his right, at his knees. The old man, whose ribs are exposed, the sinews of his muscles rigid underneath his pallid skin, takes a loaf of bread that Anthony gives him covertly, with dignity. The child holds the bread-basket out to Anthony with one hand and with the other, blesses the poor beggar.

Baldomero, thinking of Alejándro, feels the wooden hair of the child.

He does not pray but sits, admiring the fixed way Saint Anthony holds the child, protects her in a way that stirs Baldomero. Just outside the window he can see the white crosses over the graves of the children, their mounds now worn flat.

Across from Saint Anthony’s shrine, the door to Nadia’s chamber is closed. The space Isabella and Amadea occupy in his mind leaves little room for him to think of or
remember Nadia. But, of a sudden, he remembers that he has not seen her for the entirety of the day. He knocks on her door, gently at first.

“Nadia,” he whispers, putting his head against the door. He tries to listen for sounds from the other side. At first he thinks he hears something, a quiet thud and a shuffle like someone dragging a box over a sanded floor. But it is his pulse against the frame and his breath that he hears. He knocks one more time, louder, more forceful.

No one answers.

An unexpected sound shakes Baldomero and the church’s doors fly open. A man’s strained voice speaks convulsively, becoming unintelligible in the sanctuary’s echo. Baldomero’s initial fear augments, hearing panic and concern, not hurry and suspicion, in their voices. He peers out from the vestibule and sees a young man he recognizes from the bodega carrying a body through the center aisle. The dark hair that hangs over the man’s arm reveals to Baldomero the identity of the woman.

“Isabella,” he whispers. He finds himself taking steps towards the man. “Isabella,” he yells.

The grocer turns around. His face is red, veins defined in his forehead.

“Here,” Baldomero points, moving in front of the bench. “Lay her here.”

He sets her on the pew, lowering her head slowly, her hair wet with sweat.

“Thank you,” Baldomero says, crossing Isabella’s arm on her chest. At her side, he lowers his head and touches the side of hers. Both eyes are purple, swollen to the point where even her eyelashes disappear. Her nose is broken and her lips bulge, a color more
like loam than flesh. Crusted on their corners, blood. Both of her ears have been boxed.

A white patch of blood-flecked scalp where tufts of her hair have been uprooted brings Baldomero to trembling. He squeezes the sleeve of her arm, nestling his face between her and the seat of the pew. A milky rheum coats his lips. His fingers hover over her mutilated body. With a broken voice he asks the grocer, “What happened?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know,” he pants. Collapsed into another pew, he puts his hands over his face. “I found her like this. In front of my store.”

Her bunched skirt exposes blood that stains her calves and ankles. Baldomero reaches forward and pulls the dress over them.

“Bring bandages,” he stammers to the grocer. “And any pureed food you may have. I’ll pay for everything.”

The man leaves without a word.

He hears Nadia walk through the sanctuary. “I don’t want her sleeping on a pew. She’ll need a mattress.”

“If we have one, she’ll use one.”

“Then I’ll bring her mine.”

Upstairs, he wanders through his room and kitchen, twirling his ring with one hand. His eyes do not fix on anything; they barely perceive the furniture except to guide him around it.

He thinks back to the year he met Isabella. In those years she had not changed. He saw her first through the confessional partition, when she came early in the morning, often before light was anything more than a milky haze. She spoke to him in Spanish
though he heard her later speak English. She said, “Forgive me, Father,” as though she were speaking to someone else, like she didn’t realize Baldomero was present. He remained silent, listened to her list her sins—envy, lust, hatred, covetousness—with a calm, emotive recollection as though the list were habitual.

The catalogue ended and Baldomero, almost in a daze, took some time saying, “Your sins are forgiven, my child.”

His hesitancy had made her laugh.

“Too many sins to forgive a whore of, Father?”

“Too many sins, yes,” he had answered. “But they don’t exhaust forgiveness.”

Her nervous smile, which he could see through the mesh divider, relaxed into an incredulous gape. She glanced at him a few times before crossing herself and stepped out of the confessional.

Now, Isabella suffering below, he wants to run down, bend by her ear and hear her sins one more time. To hear how she says them with the confidence that they are gone when she speaks them. And then he wants to confess to her, to tell her what she means to him. He would hold her hand gripping her fingers, not her palm, and tell her her faith startled him from the moment they met and continues to provoke him to a deeper faith in redemption.

Throughout the church, the low rumble of distant thunder reverberates, muffling the sound of Baldomero dragging his mattress down the stairs. It does not occur to him to push it from the top. He lowers it one stair by one stair, keeping it steady until it is in

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the middle of the altar, beneath the crucifix and behind the gates littered with candles that glow yellow in the evening.

Damp, his robe clings to him and he picks it away.

Outside, the wind grates against the building, flashes of lightning illuminating the stained-glass windows depicting the Virgin in cobalt blue robes and the Saints and Disciples, each in varying stages of their passions.

“Help me carry her,” Baldomero says.

But Nadia does not move.

“Nadia.”

“Would our Lord touch her?”

“While you help me, ask that question of yourself. Now.”

When Baldomero lifts Isabella, supporting her by her shoulders, he remembers his father in the quarry. Until they set her on the mattress, Baldomero surreptitiously feels her back for scars.

“You’re tired,” Nadia says. “You should sleep.”

Isabella’s juvenile limbs, thin sticks of gypsum, lay motionless on the mattress.

“I cannot sleep with your blinding indifference before me,” Baldomero shouts. “You show no kindness toward her, no compassion.” Calming, he says, “I will watch over her tonight.”

“You know that wouldn’t be proper, Father,” she responds.

“I want you to leave,” Baldomero says, wiping Isabella’s forehead with a damp cloth. “And I want you to think of this,” he stands. Approaching her he nevertheless keeps a
distance between them. She lets her arms at her side. “When I read of the slaughter of
nations, of plagues and illnesses sent by God, I accept these things far easier than the
death of individuals. Even iniquitous, I find their demise tragic. And then I think of the
death of the faithful servants. Prophets were rejected because they spoke things no one
wanted to hear. These men of God were old before their time. Thrust into holiness.” His
upper body convulses and he falls to the floor, hacking. Nadia rushes to him and though
he tries to push himself up, his stubborn coughs chain him. He wrenches her supporting
hand. “When I was able to draw, I would make mistakes. More mistakes than successes.
But I learned to make those errors part of the art.” He refuses to let the cough surface.
“My point is this: though a wayward line mar the drawing initially, who knows but that,
through the blending of colors and shading of other lines, it not only becomes essential to
the whole, but that around which everything revolves?” He looks to Isabella and plays
with the loose folds of his habit, bunched over his legs, thin beneath the cloth. Do this
thing for me, Nadia. Please.”

She bows to him and goes to her chamber.

Hearing the hinges of her door screech shut, Baldomero lowers himself into the seat.
His limbs resist the motion. It is late, he is tired, and the approaching rain swells his
joints.

When her lips shake or her head moves, both movements faint, even more
imperceptible in the dim light, Baldomero reminds himself that she is still alive and he
suppresses his urge to cry. The heat of sorrow still wells behind his eyes, coating his ears
and scarfing his neck, but he crosses himself, kissing the back of his rosary and prays over
Isabella.

“Keep the wolf at bay,” he says, his hands parallel above her.

Studying her face, he follows the lines and contours of her cheekbones, rock-domes in the midst of flatland. He wonders if men will want her again, knows that others have been more disfigured but still questions, finds himself hoping that she will be cast out of the whorehouse. Her hair mats to her forehead. He loosens one of his sleeves and bends at her side. Brushing aside her hair with one hand he pats her head with the other until the beaded sweat is soaked up and her forehead is dry again. A cool wind proceeding the storm Baldomero feels in his bones blows through the sanctuary. Candles flap. Wood moans. Demoniac shadows waltzing over Isabella’s abused body.

Cold, Baldomero creeps up the stairs to his bedroom. It appears even smaller, missing its mattress. But a single blanket remains folded beneath his night-stand. When he walks by the opening in the kitchen and he sees, through the blue flashes, the rage about to pour down. The clouds swallow the mountain peaks and crash their bolts down onto their surface, bombarding the desert with the rolling echo of their attack. Though gone from Isabella’s side for no more than a few minutes, he feels he has abandoned her, left her alone. This throws him into a coughing fit and he reels, the corners of his eyes sharp with pain at each hawk.

When he returns to the altar, he wraps the blanket around his shoulders and sits in the chair, his head, weighty with exhaustion and age, tilts back. His back numbs with approaching sleep but the pressure in his joints keep him awake. His wrists swell and his elbows cannot find a comfortable angle. Every vertebrae crushes the bone beneath them.
His stomach gurgles and he tastes bile swell in his throat. He can smell it on his breath when he slowly, quietly, breathes it out.

In the quiet of the sanctuary, where sleep eludes him, he hears the steady patter of rain against the sandstone walls.

The heavy doors open and Fanuco enters. His clothes are drenched but wrapped in plastic he presents jars of puréed foods and a stack of bandages.

“Wait here,” Baldomero says. “I have some money upstairs.”

“Pay when you can,” Fanuco responds while running out the door.

Baldomero bows his head.

He toys his rosary beneath his garb, the hard cypress beads rolling between his fingers until he wakes for a moment and looks around at the sanctuary with an unfamiliar glaze, as though perceiving holiness nailed in the walls. Lightning stains the room blue. His hands travel the rosary beads, uttering fifty-five silent prayers for Isabella.

In preparing for holy communion, Baldomero would walk through the aisles, making the sign of the cross so that when he entered the row he would start and finish as he exited. Now he slouches in the chair, old and chilled, and stares at the Crucified above the pyx and ciborium that defy tarnish. The face is twisted, depicting forever the torture inflicted. The jaw looks displaced, the eyes bleary in their bronzing. His shoulders disappear beneath the skin as he hangs from the horizontal bar. They are both dislocated, the weight of his body supported by a chest vivid with each rib like a fleshy ziggurat leading to his head, crowned with a weave of thorns. His sternum stands out like an
His breathing steadies and he turns to watch Isabella again. Her face is calm and the discolored cheekbone faces him, a pastiche of blues and violets. Her shoulders peek out from the thin blanket and Baldomero looks at their roundness with sorrow, thinking of his father’s strong back, his solid shoulders, how he had never known them as anything but mauled.

My father never knew old age, never knew decay the way I know it. Even when the sickness took his life, he had the build of a man who worked the fields.

I should out live these dry bones, he thinks and pictures himself swinging the pickaxe into the crusted earth that chips away in puffs of dust and loosened clumps revealing more parched land beneath.

The candles dance and are snuffed out, so forcefully and unexpectedly, no wisp of smoke rises from their wicks. The wind takes on a new, swinging the doors of back and forth like rusted shutters on a dilapidated house; that racing wind sounds like a pierced scream and it tosses the habit of Baldomero and his balance is almost thrown off him.

Isabella’s eyebrows twitch.

He turns and faces her.

“For so many years,” he begins, cutting a small piece of the bandage. “For so many years you’ve confessed to me and I’ve remained quiet. On the night of our marriage, we horsebacked down from the Sierras that disappeared beneath a night dark with a new moon. The step of our horses’ hooves through the sagebrush and loose rock kept us awake like the postlude to our whispered vows until we came to an old hacienda I
discovered and squatted in some months before.” While he clears his throat he toys with his wedding ring, his eyes angled away from Isabella.

“I helped her dismount and took the saddles off, hitching the horses to the canopy-covered railing, while she went inside.”

Pauses, listening for Isabella’s breaths, he wets the gauze and pats away the blood on her lips.

“I brushed their warm necks while the chomp of their oat dinner sounded off like the dying clockwork of our journey,” his voice, suddenly stentorian. In the quiet of the night, I could hear the lapping riversong of a stream flowing strong from the melted snows and the sound like a falling sheet when an owl swooped down and conquered its prey. The constellations remained bright, unveiled from cloud or moonlight until the dim flicker of a candle reflected in the window, which I curtained some days before.”

Above one eye there is a gash, hidden, perhaps, by her hair. He puts a covering over it.

“We laid in each other’s naked grip like we were discovering a new religion within the other’s arms, content to listen to the homily of our breathing and the bray and snort of our horses outside the window, nipping at each other before their own sleep.”

He closes his eyes.

“In the morning I woke to the richness of cinnamon she rolled into a dough and I learned his recipes from her and, as you know,” he puts his hand out, “have adhered to them doctrinally. We sequestered ourselves to the vacant hectares surrounding the homestead, leaving unused rooms to their mystery and naming the mule deer that
frequented the near pastures until they became wild domestics.

“I remember one night, when we readied the horses in that stillness near dusk, and rode out over the browning low hills until the sky bruised and turned to ink. Taking a blanket from the back pommel, I told Amadea about my father. That he was a man who died as poor as he was born, that the only possessions he earned as slave were a knowledge of humanity and the scars on his back, and of these I inherited only one. ‘What about your pickaxe?’ she asked. ‘He bought that after,’ I dismissed. The humid shame of my father’s past silenced me. I saw the vivid crosshatch of my father’s back in the ridges that scarred the foothills,” his chest rumbles, a deep cough interrupting him, “and turned to whisper to her in the dark. ‘You married the son of a slave,’ I said. ‘I know.’ She said the words with the hint of admiration. ‘Our son, our children. They will have slave in them.’ ‘We all do,’ she said, putting her always cold hand against my cheek. That night blears with the distance of years like a mist over a lake, and though I try, I cannot remember more.”

He nods his head in an almost indiscernible tilt.

“For sixty years those words have bound themselves to me and I still pour over them now and again, discovering their truth.” He sighs, biting his lips. “I look around at the things I am enslaved to, the trite possessions that still lay claim to me,” he speaks with nostalgic precision, slow as pitch. “The chain of their presence rattles wherever I go; they stay with me like a brand or tattoo.”

Rain pummels the building, droplets falling through the ceiling’s cracks, wetting his wrist. He looks up and catches another drop in his palm. He washes her ankles, clears
away the blood than ran through her toes the same color as her painted nails.

“But when I see you, your broken body and battered soul, I understand who my pains were for.” He spins his wedding ring and in the candlelight sees the paler skin underneath, a cicatrix of pigment wrapping around his finger. Swallowing, he blows out the flame.

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In the morning, Baldomero wakes, his limbs stiff and neck sore from sleeping in the chair and Isabella is still asleep and the memory of the storm remains like a single drop of dew. Baldomero does not want to see Nadia. He walks outside where deposits of silt and small rock gather in piles maculating the desert like the carcass of some immense giraffe. To the side of the chapel the garden sits in disarray: flowers uprooted and twisted around the metal gateposts, the pebble walkway littered throughout, branches from the willow, bereft of its blossoms and vacant of hummingbirds, sway from ligamented limbs. Beyond the garden the small graveyard. Nine of its ten wooden crosses washed away without trace and the last leaning like a one-legged centenarian. The mounds that plotted their graves lay flat, undetectable amid the desert flatland that camouflages their resting place with the same arid disregard that covers the land for miles.
BOOK III
JAVIER
With a cigarette withering in his mouth, Javier steps off the hotel’s weak porch that groans with his weight, content to leave behind the old man and Alejándro to their dinner. Lightning courses the atmosphere, spreading out like wide-blue deltas in the thick air. Their conversation taxed him but in the openness of the landscape, with their voices audible but not decipherable, he looks around and smiles, alone in the quiet of the wilderness. Other than the dim oil-light coming from behind him nothing else brightens the horizon. Lying in the sand he hears a crunch like a cricket in a lizard’s jaw.

He transposes the small mountains beyond him into the rising pinnacles that surround his home. Rocks that look out to the Pacific, shimmering in its adamant stillness. The imagined ache in his legs is nearly tangible, picturing himself trekking up the cliff sides, past the fenced pasture where he keeps ten head of cattle. Even in the desert he can smell the manured fields, the breath of a cow that snorts while it chews. His wife stands in front of their doorway. She holds the hand of their daughter who lets go and runs to him, throwing her arms around his sun-burned neck and shouts, “Papá.” He lifts her, feels the bare of her back brush against his forearm and the three of them walk into their house. He contemplates how the first things she would have felt would not have been his arms, that his touch will come as a distinct memory, something isolated in a moment and a place, not something given as beyond her memory, as something inseparable from his role as her father. The three of them walk into their house. Nothing has changed. No erosion from two years of burial. The door frame still slants to the right so that Javier must bend to clear it and the sweet smell of magnolia from outside comes in on the breeze from the coast. The stone hearth flickers with coals, dying from their use to prepare the meal set
on their table.

He hears the screen door groan open and slam with a quick clap. He turns around when he sees Alejándro slump out of the hovel, and takes a long drag, finishing his cigarette.

“Until today,” he exhales. “I can’t remember the last time I had my own cigarette to smoke.” He holds the cigarette up in the yellow moonlight that falls over the building’s slanted roof, its metal chimney coughing a thin veil of smoke into the clouding night. “There must be enough for twenty more cigarettes in here,” he smiles, weighing the pouch in his hand. Alejándro, his posture crooked like a twisted branch broken off from a tumbleweed, has not heard Javier. He shivers and rubs his arms. “You have anything to build a fire in there?”

But Alejándro remains stoic.

Javier flicks the nubbin into the sand and stands, smacking off the back of his pants. When he steps onto the porch, he imagines the sound of their give as the aged creaking of his own home.

He tests the strength of the boards, rocking on his heels and then bends down, legs wide, and pulls on a single plank. The first three rows of nails give and the board bends; they smell of wood-dust and the thick grain hurts to hold and when he does ply the plank free he breaks it against his knee until it is sore and the shin bruised.

“What are you doing?” Alejándro asks, a porcelain mug in his hand.

Javier straightens and tries, with the same silence Alejándro exudes, to defy him.

“Stop it.” Alejándro orders, walking away.
Jumping off the porch, Javier asks, “Why? I’m cold. It’s not like the porch isn’t ruined already.”

“It’s not yours. Stop.”

The pickup lies close enough for Javier to reach out and touch it and the edges of the fire lick the rim of his boots. Even the shadowing mountains loom close and Javier feels suffocated. He shuffles, leaning against a tire.

“I want to leave,” Javier says. Out of the corners of his eyes he peers in the direction where, days before, he slept under the same roof as Roberto, the light spearing the roof, falling on the small target of his conscription card. Even the thought of Roberto causes him to palpitate. Leaning back on his arms, he moves his fingers in the sand. “I don’t want to stay here.”

Chewing the zarzuela, Alejándro says, “So go.” He returns to stirring the leftovers.

Near the filling station a coyote barks and a small, white pack of them appear, visible in the slopes of moonlight that fall through the decrepit canopy. Without stopping, they scamper through the sand and vanish.

Javier’s shoulders fall. “I can’t just go.” He scratches his head, forgetting the sensitive lump on the back. He distorts his face but rests his hand on the contusion.

“Why not?”

“I’ll die out there,” he shouts, tossing his arms out.

“You could die here,” Alejándro states. The ceramic mug rings with the tap of his fork.

After licking the paper, Javier lights another cigarette, tossing the timber into the coals.
“Why did you take me from the river?” Javier asks. He watches Alejándro, whose gaze is intently fixed on the small pile of embers.

The dry wood cracks in the flames.

He abandons his expectation of a response when Alejándro answers. “Instinct.” The word falls out of his mouth, weak, unassured. “At first I wasn’t sure what to do with you. Whether you had something to do with the children’s death.” He flicks the contents of his mug into the fire. They sizzle and the smell of them is soon gone. “But I don’t think I even asked myself that question then. You looked battered, and I wasn’t going to chance letting you go.”

“Still think I had something to do with them?”

“You’re alive,” he says, slinging his saddle blanket over a shoulder. “I wouldn’t waste my time with questions.” He lumbers up the decrepit stairs. Before he reaches the door, Javier, still sitting, turns to him.

“What day is it?”

Alejándro pauses at the door, his hand on the screen. “Thursday, I believe. Lose track of the days lately.”

Javier calculates silently the amount of days he would have remaining.

No more than a handful.

They would have passed quickly.

The resinous light wanes from the dimmed oil lamp in the hotel and Javier stretches out and rolls another cigarette.
He does not know if he sleeps, the images clear and sensory, a dream.

Only when he sees Alejándro pull away in his truck does he realize he is awake.

Though he hates him, Javier recognizes that, even unknowingly, Alejándro is an aegis against Roberto. But, in keeping him from his family, Alejándro forces him closer to Roberto, nearer threat than freedom.

His heart beats with an anticipation, waiting to see the door of his home and to step through its threshold, leaving behind everything he would spend the rest of his life forgetting. He corners his nose into the cup of his shoulder and smells himself, unwashed for some days. The hinds of blackbaldy steer caked with the brown of dry mud and feces, their tails sashaying to drive the flies from their bodies—the stench of them: the stale earth and hide scent kicked up by travel, the hundred beasts stowed together under the hot sun, their fat bodies brushing against one another in confinement. It is the smell of days on horseback, surrounding the herd and pushing them towards food, back into the stable. Days of work, the satisfied ache in his thighs, a tight cramp in the arc of his foot from too many hours in the saddle. He finds himself judging the land he lies on, hating it for its dearth.

The tobacco smoke drains out of his nose, its burn like the char of the late-watch fire. The clouds, lightninged into a purple canvas, advance beyond the mountains and a black sky opens above him, a clear ocean overwhelmed with white vessels anchored in its ebb and flow.

Upstairs, in Alejándro’s room, he crouches over Alejándro’s rucksack and sets aside his pilfered bags of food. The shaved coconut tastes even sweeter after the pungent
tobacco and he lets the juices collect in the wineskin of his cheek. His Colt revolver is still missing, though this does not surprise him. But in the bottom of the bag, concealed beneath a piece of fabric, a picture of a small child. In his cupped hands he holds a halved fruit and smiles awkwardly. He studies the picture and sees the small white scar on the boy’s hand. Instinctively, Javier closes his eyes and searches the faces of the children he and Roberto kidnapped. Like the first imaginings of his child, he can picture them only in fragments: in freckles, or missing teeth, the way their ears folded down or how long their hair was; characteristics that can be easily manipulated. Relieved, he cannot recall this boy, shamed by the knowledge that there are more children than he can remember.

Turning the picture over, hoping to find a name or a date, solidifying the possibility of his innocence from this boy, the cold eyes of Roberto stare back at him. Even from the photograph, Roberto’s dislocated smile lends to the likeness a trompe l’oeil of peril. His proximity to Roberto, the possibility of his being discovered, crashes down on him like a landslide. Roberto’s words, the overt promise of pursuit, echo in his mind. He creeps toward the window, its curtains resembling cobwebs more than fabric; pushing them aside with his fingers he peers out the window, quickly scanning the area for any sign of movement. All at once his hatred for Alejándro disappears and he wishes he had not only the man’s rifle, but the man himself, beside him.

I need to leave, he panics. Striding to his room, he shoulders his rucksack and grabs the food from Alejándro’s room. The stuffed bear rests on top of his belongings. He squeezes the arm, memorizing its softness before letting go and shoving the bags into his rucksack.
He makes sure each stair catches his feet, maintaining silence. When he reaches the bottom he glances behind where he hears the old man snoring behind a tattered partition, its holes black eyes staring back at him. He forgets the slam of the screen door and winces when its clap startles him. But the house remains still and Javier makes his way to the back where he sluices water until he drinks his fill.

He allows himself a moments indulgence where he imagines where he would be, had he stayed with Roberto.

In Yuma, he thinks.

He knows that, above everything, he needs a way to carry water. The filling station across the road might have some empty jar but he does not want to risk the noise. Trying to remember how far Yuma is from Andrade, his fear is not dispelled. He recalls the map Roberto showed him, the miniscule distance between the two cities.

While waiting, headlights, orbed in the distance, and faint, tunnel towards him with vermiculate haste. They come down the straight road through the darkness and Javier stretches in his seat and watches their slow approach. A sudden tightness grips him and he fears.

He’s found me, Javier thinks.

Spinning, he retreats behind the truck and peers out, watching the truck pull off the road near the filling station and he hears a man get out and shut his door. Looking back, he sees the still-orange embers of his fire and kicks sand until they’re extinguished. When parked, the man walks around his truck, his head down, looking for something that might have dropped from his vehicle.
Roberto? Javier questions.

His heart beats with hemorrhaging intensity, as though a mountain has been laid on him and he’s been ordered to tunnel himself to freedom with nothing more than a dull teaspoon. Sand sticks to his sweaty palms as he crouches, hiding himself. Too far away to see the man’s face, Javier analyzes his stride, the way his boots come down with deliberateness, as though months of thought took place in the immeasurable second between steps. The metal clang of the gas pump. Its nozzle banging against the truck in the darkness. He wouldn’t be so careless, Javier thinks. He has to keep the man in his vision, boxed by the undercarriage of Alejándro’s pickup. The man keeps returning to the flatbed. From his supine position, Javier sees that when the man gets into the flatbed, he can peer over the cabin and after a while Javier knows the man glances in his direction.

Might even see my shadow under the truck, he thinks.

Javier scrambles around him, desperate to find some means of defense. Out of the fire sticks a plank, burnt in half, close enough to reach. He grabs it and brings it to his side. He closes his eyes and focuses on Roberto, lying on the ground, his eyes closed and arms crossed under his head. The way he was when he left. In the dark of the apartment where the light poured in like an épée. The moments he hesitated, before, where he could have guaranteed his freedom, now return to him. The way Roberto seemed to know Javier’s thoughts, the instant interpretation of his movements and hesitations. His hand moves towards the brand. Hearing the man approach, the sand crunching beneath his feet, he tightens his grip. Those words, the threat of Roberto finding him. They rise like an abatis in front of him. The man stands halfway between his truck and Alejándro’s. He
hears his heart like a second breath, the sand scattering in small circles under his mouth and Javier wonders if the man can hear the rattle of them. He sees himself bringing the wood through the air, down onto the sleeping Roberto’s skull, his eyes opening with the force of the contact. Javier can see the wrinkles in the man’s denims now and he moves from prostration to a crouch and when the man moves around the corner Javier brandishes the weapon back, his waist twisted and ready. Swinging before he even sees the man’s face he hears the break of the skull and feels the splintering of the wood, finding the body sprawled in a knot of limbs, blood collecting in the sand as though the desert spat out a reprobate offering for the vulture’s matinal nourishment.

*  

Javier drives from under the filling station’s canopy until he can see his breath in the grey hour of dawn and feel the warming band of sunlight that falls on his forehead. His hands, slick with blood, cannot grip the steering wheel and when he wipes his forehead, damp with panic, red smears trickle down his face. He leans forward in the seat, bouncing with the movement of the truck. The body lies wrapped, held down in the truckbed by its own weight and with the back window open Javier hears the tarpaulin flap in the wind like a chrysalis breaking. He could tell only too late that the man had not been Roberto, only after the board had demarcated the face into two halves. The blood gloved his fingers when he went to pick up the head, to see if the man was still alive. Javier untied the tarpaulin from Alejándro’s pickup and laid the body in the back of the corpse’s own truck, some dozen yards away. Javier grabbed his rucksack, still on the passenger seat of Alejándro’s truck, and brought it with him.
When the morning breaks, he pulls to the side of the road. He relieves himself against a dead saguaro, hollow and echoing with the trill of young flickers. He looks back at the flatbed, panting, his hands on his hips. Snorting, he studies the horizon and shields his eyes from the sun. Sitting in the small shade of the truck, he looks out to where a lone Joshua tree towers over a bramble of churras and old yuccas. The yuccas’ leaves are a frosted green, flat but thick and spearish. They are few and surrounded by churras, their light grey bark nearly hidden by the thick clusters of needle-like leaves sprouting from its limbs. He climbs onto the flatbed, bending down to move the body, and halts. Blood has seeped through the folds of the tarpaulin, blackening it with the moth-like silhouette of what remains of the man’s face. Its eyeless sockets staring back at him, reminding him of his misjudgment.

Roberto’s still out there, Javier thinks.

He touches the man’s shoulder, thinking almost for a moment that he has fallen asleep and that a light touch would wake him. But the body remains motionless, stiff in its cloth sarcophagus.

The gilded flicker undulates from the cactus to the higher branches of the Joshua tree and for a moment Javier rests his head against his knees, listening to the birdsong.

You don’t have time for this, he tells himself, forcing himself to keep the image of home from becoming polluted with the sight of Roberto. He said he’d find me.

He rummages through his rucksack, looking for the Colt revolver but does not find it. In the bottom, fallen off of the top flap, he picks up his conscription card, torn in a corner and folded from the movement. He remembers that he would have just over one month to
serve with Roberto at this point and his heart begins to throb with a gripping fear. The stain of war without any of its honor. The body sprawled before him like a putrefactive accolade. The days marked behind him: eight-hundred days, the threadbare roughness of children’s clothing; forty days, the river; ten days, here among the dead, fleeing; and where he will be at seven days is arcane. He imagines Roberto waiting for him at the door of his home, waiting like a sentient predator. Without weapon, where would Javier be? Nothing more than a infantryman without rifle or sidearm. But he could easily get to the yuccas without injury, break off a leaf by stomping on it and use it as a weapon. He could pin Roberto to the ground with a quick stab. But he does not want Roberto to die asleep. He wants to see the fear of death, the cowardice Roberto accused him of, in eyes that fade to death.

He leans the body against the leaves of the yuccas, hearing and feeling the bladed leaves cut into it as the weight pulls him back. And then the body stops, propped up by the strength of the plant that has wired him like a marionette. Javier leaves him behind, wondering what other things he has buried—wife, child—with the man, whose name he would never know, whose face he had never seen.

* 

He rides south from Andrade in the stolen pickup laden with the supplies he will need to cross the border and find his wife and child. If they have not abandoned home, Javier thinks, we might have enough to come back. On the passenger seat, its front facing out, his rucksack slowly collapses into itself. Other than a loaf of brown bread wrapped in butcher paper and his conscription card—still clasped to the top-fold—it is empty. The
other food he has stored behind him. From the rearview, the rosary the priest gave to him swings.

His conscription card is nearly faded, penumbras of letters ghosting its sepia surface. Looking at the place where the date was once prominently stamped, he calculates the remaining days, his hope of bringing his family out of their poverty gone.

He rushes home with the excitement of a free man and the speed of a convict. The wind flows over his skin, a dry river that he courses through. He estimates that not three days separate him and his family. Passing Los Algondes he will go through San Ignacio and continue west to Diaz Ordaz, where the smell of cattle will roll over the hills before he sees them grazing and the brown slope of his house will come into focus.

But excuses weave through his mind, eroding his hope of clemency and when night falls, he parks the truck and watches the cuneiform shadows that decorate the ceiling, and, as though deciphering their meaning, grasps that where he is returning to is not home but a purgatorial abode, some place of exile where he waits for judgement. Still, he finds the hope of them staves sleep, hearing his child’s voice for the first time, pressing his lips against Gabriella’s, feeling her fingers brush against his stubble.

Thin sirius clouds blanket the waning crescent moon and he drifts toward sleep hearing the wind pass over the dark land.

He kisses the notice, imagining Gabriella’s eyes in the paper’s stains. He tries to guess what she will be wearing when he sees her again. Whether her gingham dress of checkered white and green, or her russet skirt and black cotton shirt, or blue serge and white. And then, when he pictures her, she is draped in an shawl, old and discolored, and her clothing
is threadbare.

* 

In the morning, he runs his left hand through the cool sand, at first digging his fingers in deep but then running the tips of them along the surface. After some time, he brings up a handful and scrubs his hands clean, using spare water in his canteen to wash off the sand and grime. What remains of his fingernails, layered like shards of slate, shimmer with a new polish. Clean down to the cuticle.

* 

The first blue hints of mountains. He sees them like entering a dream—preexistent. Sand turns to pebble, onto rock and earth, fertile. Yuccas disappear, replaced with wild lemon trees, limbs heavy with fruit. The sound is different, when he steps out of the truck his feet are not muted by the soft drum of sand. He hears them hit, the heel clapping against the stone. Two disinterested oxen—a cow and a bull—mill their grass and low as he comes near.

Only two? he questions. The first tremor of fear, the premonition of the small pasture where his cattle graze is unkept, tall weeds rising and flowering at his knees. Honeybees hover around the clover and he pushes them off when he walks past.

Five arrogant and sauntering alpacas scrutinize the remaining cattle.

He stands at the cow’s side, brushing with his hand her mottled hide, the field smell of loam and manure rising from it.

* 

He walks to his house’s threshold, the scent of wild coriander wafts over him on a
breeze sent up from the ocean that he can hear in the distance. He puts his hand out and touches the door frame, feels the wood-post, the way the grain feels against his skin. His heart keeps him from speaking, its own rapid voice usurping his own. His arms steadying him on both door-posts, he breathes deeply. Anxiously. There is no noise from inside. No scamper or laughter. Only a susurrant echo from the ocean. The seagulls. No sound of a knife coming down on a cutting board. No crackle of a fire. No speech or even the rustle of a dress against a wall.

Not even the muffled sounds of adultery.

In the house there is nothing.

“Gabriella?”

He would say his child’s name but he does not know it.

He walks in and the chairs are upright, pushed against the table, a dark brown ring where he had set down a hot skillet and Gabriella had noticed the smell. An oil lamp set in the center, its wick low and black. The hearth, with its grate for cooking, is filled with soot, islands of wood cinders littered throughout. Javier takes one in his hand and pushes on it with his thumb. It crumbles with little effort.

Old, he thinks.

He tosses it back into the hearth.

“Gabriella,” he shouts, stretching her name out. A fluttering, and outside, a nest of magpie scatter.

In the corner a small rocking-chair sits idle, “Aureliana” carved into the headrest, and Javier wonders who constructed the chair, whether the hands caressed his wife the way
they passed over the finished product, studying every inch for detail. He reads the name again.

Aureliana, he thinks. My daughter.

He runs his fingers through the letters, feeling their slopes and rises like the ridges between his daughter’s fingers. The conviction, his inability to picture anything but a daughter, returns to him, the only connection to his child.

A smell lingers on the chair and Javier cannot decide if it is from the cedar or remnants of Aureliana.

He sniffs, wiping away the rheum that drains from his nose, blinking rapidly to keep his eyes clear.

Raucous, the magpie return.

When he stands he turns around, drinking the emptiness of his home until he is intoxicated with sorrow. Nothing moves, the world nothing more than an abandoned painting. He taps the edge of the rocking chair with the toe of his boot and listens to the wooden creak as it sways against a lightly sanded floor.

In the kitchen the knives are gone. Discarded, a clove of garlic sprouts on the window sill. A jar holding flour has shattered, spilling its contents onto the counter, white dunes in the kitchen’s flatness. The dry smell filling the room. Small paw prints wander through the flour-dust; they lead to a hole in the wall and end. Left beside the jar, a mortar and pestle and a flat stone for cooking tortilla. Beneath the window, a milk jar, still full. Javier takes it up, the milk turned yellow and solid. He drops the jar back on the counter.
From the back window he can see the pale stretch of the ocean beyond the cliff, hear cormorants circling and diving for their prey.

*

In the field he approaches the last cow of his ten oxen. Suspicious, she snorts and moves away. He keeps the gate-door open and walks back to the house.

“Go,” he says, taking the bell off the bull. He taps its neck. “Go.”

She does not move and Javier does not know if he expects her to.

“I can’t keep you anymore,” he says.

He thinks of the fields of neglect, overgrown with thistles, the silent way they lie underneath the lazy trod of cattle.

*

Sitting, he stares out the back window, his left arm resting on the table. In his right hand he holds an old, wrinkled piece of paper, the ink nearly faded completely. The edges of it pick up on a strong breeze but fall down almost as quickly. He traces the center crease with his thumb, his gaze elsewhere. The first fold. It is a transcript of the night, years before. Her eyes, discerning the distant years, were the same blank parchment now before him.

*

He enters the house as though he’s already lost it.

Surveying the rooms, he pushes in the chairs, leaving a finger-length’s distance between them and the table. With a wickerbroom he dusts off the hearth and shovels out the ashes, putting them in a bucket and taking three trips down to the cliffside where he
throws them over and they are carried to the south by the wind. What remains of the
woodpile outside he splits and stacks inside, putting three pieces in the hearth. But he
does not light them. Sitting on the ground he pries off his boots, his toes blackened with
grime. The toenails the color of sulfur. The arch cramps and he massages it. When the
pain leaves, he sets them by the door, ready for the next morning.

The world discolors and the sun is visible, dangling above the ocean’s edge, its
reflection a cone of light.

He shoulders his rucksack and heads for the pickup. He reaches inside and feels a
softness. Drawing it out, he remembers the teddy bear, its paws and nose a different
color than the rest of its body. He lays the animal on the rocking chair and leaves. There
are minutes of sunlight left, half the sun above the horizon, half below. He feels his
clothes lift in the coastal wind and he closes his eyes, drawing absently in the sand.

All things he gives up as lost and they uproot themselves from his mind. The image of
his wife and child dissolve and the structure of his home collapses in embers.

A sharp pain, like a beesting, pierces his shoulder and he hears the crack of a rifle.

Blood the size of an orchid petal stains his shirt.

He does not turn around but struggles to his feet and stands firm, facing the ocean. He
tries to steady his breathing and closes his eyes to picture the way Gabriella laid her head
on her pillow. The way she blinked. She reaches out and touches his face as he waits for
the rifle’s second report. But it is engulfed by the rhythm of the waves crashing below
him, gentle and soft and steady; how he imagines the laughter of his child.
ALEJÁNDRO
In sleep the sounds of war return, quiet at first and then cannonades of terror and when he startles from sleep he reaches out to touch the son that had slept beside him for two years.

His hands hit the wood planks and before he opens his eyes he can perceive the slosh of water against the side of his cutter.

No grandchild to wake in the middle of the night and take out to sea. His father’s lessons end with him.

In the pitch of the boat, Alejándro sits on deck, legs crossed, tying an eye splice. In the distance, he notices the pale pink light hanging in a high window from some house nestled in the shadowing far north corner of the port, a soft beacon that comforts him in its familiarity. He saw the same light when he and his father came in from nights on the water, a catch of swordfish bubbling black blood onto the deck like the last notes of a pianissimo symphony, his arms tired from the strain of its conduction. The light comes from a dockhouse, where Benecio established a tavern when Alejándro was in adolescence. Now, when he sees the light, he recalls the radio lights, spread out over the ocean, the red constellations of Allied cruisers that Alejándro could never name. While he learned to bear night’s quietude from his father, all human sounds drained from his ears like a fluid, the war taught him to isolate himself with a ship-to-shore language that made the death of soldiers easy.

Pulling the ropes tight through their loops, he finishes and casts the rope over the jibboom, anchoring one end the the mainstay.

Alejándro sees a curve in the horizon, the stars like holes in a soffit poised on collapse
and like a broken pillar of support, the stone island rises in front of him.

He walks under the rope, its rough strands brushing against his head. They smell of the light char on the end of them from Alejándro’s string-whipping. Gripping the bight he tests the strength with two quick tugs and then a constant pull.

Strong enough, he thinks.

He glances over his shoulder, at the light burning in Benecio’s tavern, wonders if someone stares down to the pier the way he stares at the windows. He is aware of his hunger, of long days left unsatisfied from it, and now he longs to be in his friend’s kitchen.

But then he’ll ask, Alejándro thinks, his fingers loosely holding the noose.

A dock-horn, with it’s congested pachydermal bray, startles Alejándro.

The sky grays and threatens squalls. He keeps the wharf behind him, ignoring the gull that perches on a dockpost wet with tide, and stares at the rock pillar three miles out. When he moves his head, the pillar disappears in the blear of his strengthening glaucoma.

Slate-black and massive, the base, slick with crashing waves, has a marmoreal appearance, even from a distance. The top is wreathed with clouds, specked with diving cormorants. Sitting fore with his knees brought up to his chest, his mouth against his legs, he thinks of the night his father took him to the island.

They had left their house in the night, quiet to keep from waking his mother. He knew his father was going to come to the door so he slept on the edge of the bed and crept out. They walked down to the shore, Alejándro expecting to hear the usual sounds: the rub of rope against wood, shouting and words his father told him not to repeat, the slide of fish
against each other, falling to the dock spotted with avifaunal white-wash. Music. But, when their feet fell into the sand and their steps became quiet, he heard the wash of the tide. A constant invitation to silence against the shore, the slumbering water’s breath. A half-crescent moon hung from the rock-pillar like an orange earring. “Come on,” his father had said, tapping Alejándro’s arm. He held a paraffin lamp close to the clove hitch that held the boat to the quay. “See how strong it is? Simple and easy to untie,” his father had said. “But it will not slip.” It was the first knot Alejándro learned, practiced with a small rope and a branch until he was satisfied. The sputtering engine, foaming the water, interrupted the otherwise silent night and Alejándro watched the slow disappearance of the dock and shore, vanishing, becoming nothing more than a shadow against a black horizon. The lampglass’s dim fire gave off little light, the oil low. He could not see past the mast it was secured to and its loose window-frames clattered in the boat’s pitch. At the helm, his father whistled a tune Alejándro recognized from his days at the dock and wondered if he had written it. From the shore, he had never imagined its immensity, the way his neck strained when he tried to take in all of it at once. The engine stopped its purr and once again Alejándro could hear the tide. But the crash against the rocks was different, not broken or cut by the dockwood, the litter of scows and fishing boats. It was a song, full of the cormorants’ counterpointed call and a soft percuss of water. Alejándro’s father motions to quiet him, putting a finger to his lips. Lying on the deck, two saddle blankets spread underneath them, they stared at the stars.

Alejándro views the same stars, his eyes seeing a smaller sky now, and he wonders how much longer he will be able to see the canopy at all, the constellations his father
renamed for him on this same deck, slowly disappearing, decaying like a buried corpse.

He sleeps on a small mattress where he can view the rock pillar through a port-side window.

Delicately, he runs his fingers where Diego once slept, where the sink of his impression lingered from years of use; over the blanket that covered them both.

He wakes in the blanket of sailors cursing in the early morning. The light of dawn drips through the port windows.

When he steps on deck he sees a section of the harbor through the rope’s bight, still temptingly hanging from the boom.

The color of sky and sea seem to have reversed, the water and clouds imitating the other’s dervish circling. Behind him, the port teems with orders and movement. Fathers give orders to their sons, teaching them their trade, showing them how to fold the nets, how to untangle them.

His hand firm against the mizzenmast, Alejándro berths his cutter, tossing the ropes to a stevedore.

Why did I listen to him, Alejándro thinks. Tying the clove hitch in a single, quick motion, he averts his sight from the shirtless youngmen, their ribs still distinct, walking on their boat’s bulwarks.

“Coming in from a night on sea?” the dock worker asks. His eyes shift toward the eye splice, dangling from a boom.

Alejándro scrambles on the deck, surreptitiously pulling down the eye splice and
throwing it starboard.

“No, Ernesto,” Alejándro says, holding onto the rigging. He steps on to the dock. “A morning sail.”

His clothes still hang off him, though he does not have to secure his belt as tightly.

“Well, it’s good to see you, Alejándro,” Ernesto says. “You’ll be staying long, or putting out again before long?”

“Won’t be but a day, if I’m not windbound.”

“Winds have been changing. You shouldn’t be hindered.”

The stringent smell of barnacle splashes the air, damaging the hulls of ships, visible in the first few feet of water, made clear by sunlight. Arms crossed, Alejándro studies the blurring mass, their accumulation like the guilt of memories.

“Ernesto,” he says, reaching out to get his attention. “How thick would you estimate those barnacles to be?”

“Oh, I’d say you won’t need to scrape for another month or so. Depending on how long you’re in wharf.”

Alejándro shoulders his empty rucksack.

He walks past vessels more extravagant than his own, and some more decrepit. Three-masted ships, their sails furled standing high above the sides, hatched with Jacob’s ladders. Most of them are sloops, here and there cutters, most without bowsprits. In the distance Alejándro notices another cutter, but gaff rigged, its three staysails raised like shields. From the far end of the dock, Alejándro walks past crews moving as a unit, their motions synchronized and familiar to each other. They call to one another, warning

Hearing Ernesto’s rapid thud approach him, Alejándro moves to one side.

“Tomorrow’s Friday,” he says, panting when he reaches Alejándro’s side.

“What?”

“Are you sailing tomorrow? It’s Friday, you know.”

“Oh,” Alejándro concedes. “Yes. Well, maybe I’ll stay one more day then.”

“Can you afford the groundage?”

“I’ll have it for you,” Alejándro assures him, having to mask his embarrassment.

On shore, on top of unused crates, destinations faded and some illegible, stamped on their surfaces, greenhorns sit. Their legs hit the empty boxes, waiting for work. Alejándro follows the loaf of black bread that they share between them, watching it shrink until the smallest boy finishes the last piece. When he passes them two lean together and laugh. Surreptitious, he holds the waist of his pants, hating them for the shame they can make him feel.

Three-stringed fiddles and an accordion’s fogged drawl—the player leaning with the shrink and swell of the bellows—vie for dominance against a trumpet, guitar, and vocal trio. Two brown cymbals, dented from use, hide behind the guitarist, waiting.

Tucked away in the northwestern corner of the port, a dockhouse, supported by stands that seem ready to warp and snap, advertises food. Derelict stairs that Alejándro could climb blindfolded wind to its deck and when he enters, the smell of salmagundi invigorates him. Inside, save for two sailors who seclude themselves to a table against the back windows, it is empty. He sets his rucksack down at a spot near the door. The
clatter of pails, pots and metal colanders, ladles and the high pitch of a kettle boiling tumble from the kitchen, the racket of a mess hall.

A thin man approaches the counter, drying his hands with a brown towel. Veiled in the cloud of his glaucoma, Alejándro does not recognize the man. When he notices Alejándro he grins and walks around the bar. He picks Alejándro up in his arms, shaking him.

“Ben?” Alejándro asks.

Benecio guffaws.

“Ben, put me down.”

Benecio drops him and stands with his hands on his hips, settling his laugh. He snorts through one nostril and holds his apron out like a bowl, expelling a yellow mass into it.

“Sorry, Alé. Have a bit of a cold. Good to see you,” he says, hitting Alejándro’s shoulder.

He hates the playful familiarity with which Benecio greets him, the lack of somber respect for his lost son, even a sensitivity to his more than apparent frailty. As he holds onto his friend’s forearms, thick with hair and tattoos—a jolly roger over his elbow—he wonders if their friendship died with Diego, with the war.

He tries to think of what to say, what things to talk about. With Baldomero those things came easier because there were things the priest could do; but here, with Benecio across from him and a suspended friendship between them he wonders if their bond rusted with Diego’s death.

“I’m hungry,” Alejándro admits, bringing his sight up to Benecio’s after he says it.
Benecio’s face widens. Throwing his hands up, he says, “Yes, yes. Go. Find a seat. I’ll bring us out some food.”

Alejándro watches while Benecio disappears behind the kitchen doors. The yolky scent of salmagundi wafts through the open kitchen-window and he feels his shirt grow damp with the steam that drifts out of it as well. A metal clatter from the back is followed by Benecio’s dialectal cursing and Alejándro laughs, walking to an empty table. He pulls out a chair by its rough back and sits in the uncushioned oak seat. On the table names of women cross the names of sailors carved into the table with such thickness there is no longer a smooth surface larger than Alejándro’s thumb.

It is in the small details of the tavern that Alejándro regains the memory of the place. Lanterns, from large gaffs screwed to the decorative rafters, hang unlit. One creaks, its metal notes gratingly jubilant. From where he sits he views the door on an angled wall that looks out from the dock. Behind him the row of windows line the far wall, allowing a panorama of the harbor. They are clean though one of the panes, near a table, is broken at elbow height. An old sailor sleeps, collapsed on a table, his flecked beard poking out from his arms, pillowing his head.

“Who’s he?” Alejándro asks, nodding to the man sleeping on the bench.

Two plates balanced on one arm and two steins gripped in his other hand that spit on the table when he sets them down, Benecio says, “Oh.” Wiping his hands on his smeared apron, “Some local drunk. I let him come in from time to time. Just too lonely not to.” Benecio disappears quickly after placing the dishes, coming back with two forks and a knife.
“This table,” Benecio sighs. “Well, you know the rule,” reaching into his pocket. He brings out a large pocket knife, unfolding the blade. He gives the handle to Alejándro.

“Carve the name of someone you love in the table.”

Heavy in his hand, Alejándro accepts the knife like an unwanted gift and stares at the scarred table. He sees the place where he would carve his son’s name, where it would hide itself between the names of others and remain safe until erased by the carving of other names on top of him, like shovelfuls of dirt over his grave. “No,” he whispers, closing the knife with the palm of one hand. “No, I don’t think I can.” He lays the knife to his right, does not bother to push it towards Benecio.

In the ensuing quiet, he plays with his food, forming it into a circle on the periphery of his plate. He picks out an onion petal, moving chunks of egg and fish onto the fork before eating.

“Well, how is it?”

Alejándro chews slowly, the memory and smell of it deceiving. He nods before he swallows and raises the glass to Benecio.

“Where’ve you been? Nearly four years since I’ve seen you last,” Benecio asks, rapping the table.

“The war,” Alejándro states. The way the words leave his lips is familiar, the way all soldiers speak of the battle: like something they are grateful for losing, and yet pine for it at times.

“That was over a year ago.”

A gray gull flies into a window and retreats.
“I heard about Diego,” Benecio says. He crosses himself. “I’m sorry.”

Alejándro forces a smile. He looks out a window facing east and sees, shrouded in thickening fog, the rock pillar. Below, the port stills; rigging and hoisted sails, chock-a-blocks and strops, rattle and sway.

“I remember a time,” he starts, tilting his head, leaning back slightly in his chair.

“When Diego would squat on the pier, fascinated by the movement of the tiniest ants,” Benecio smiles, pinching the air with his fingers. He lets his chair fall forward. “He’d point them to you, right? Like he had found a treasure you knew nothing of.”

“Thank you, Benecio,” he quivers.

When Alejándro speaks, he does not face Benecio, but stares at the man’s shoulder.

“When I came back I carried the soldiers I killed like they were facts about my body. I have ten fingers, ten toes, a stomach; I killed twenty-three men. They were something I could half-ignore, that I would be aware of only when I dwelled on them.” He scrapes the side of his fork on the empty plate. “Crossing the sea I heard stories from other men. Saw their wounds, heard their scars. The way soldiers hold their damages in their throat,” he says, scratching his beard. “You leave a battlefield thinking you leave the fighting behind. At least the first time. And then you hear the screams. Whistles and whirrs. Sounds made by machines that become human and noises made by men that sound mechanic. You don’t even notice the transition. The way the fighting refuses to leave. How you bring it back with you. I thought I could leave that hate on the shores. That I could, or would, be cleansed by the ocean between me and home.” He moves his eyes to the open kitchen window where the steel machines condense with steam. Keeping his
sight there, “I never imagined that the greatest battle would be here, waiting for me.”

Benecio crosses his legs, leans away from the table. He drinks his coffee in the pauses where Alejándro breathes.

“I don’t remember what I felt at first. Thought that it was a nightmare, and that I would wake up in my barracks and hear the soldiers snoring. But the days drew out like a nightwatch. I didn’t know at first all the things that were buried with him. How many things we mean by a life. I was given this,” he says, reaching into his back pocket. “An old photograph of the man who killed him.” He hands the picture to Benecio, who quickly swallows his coffee and sets down his mug. Wiping his mouth before taking the likeness, he looks at it from spectacles hanging off his nose. “Do you know him?” Alejándro asks.

The first heartbeat of hope courses through Alejándro’s arteries as Benecio studies the picture, moving it closer and hemming.

“No,” he says. “Don’t know him. Too many people passing through here though for me to keep track. Ask Ernesto. He has that mind won’t let anything go. Perfect port authority.”

Egg from the salmagundi sticks in the thick trap of Alejándro’s beard above his mouth. When the food is gone he runs his finger in the greasy pool and licks it clean.

“What do you want more?”

Alejándro tilts his plate, considering.

“On the house, of course.”

When Benecio returns, head bowed, he asks, “Have you heard anything from
“Baldomero?”

“Seen him not four days ago.”

Benecio’s eyes brighten. Two men walk in and he stands, moving to take their order.

“Comes around here every Thursday or so. Around dusk. After he closes his place.”

When Alejándro leaves the dockhouse, an empty twist on his face, the sky is still pallid but the wind has lessened. A tall sailor slides past Alejándro into the busying restaurant.

“Will you stay here?” Benecio asks, joining Alejándro on the porch.

“I don’t know,” Alejándro answers. Below, trying to spot his small cutter, he sees the masts of the ships rise like spears against the firmament. The noise and bustle of the dock once held some allure. “It’s not the same anymore. I don’t know that I could love it the way I used to.” Gulls throat their harsh calls, circling above the dockhouse, caught in a maelstrom of hunger. “I wouldn’t even know how to.”

The wind blows over them muted and sere.

“Come back,” Benecio asks, putting his hand on Alejándro’s back. “Around nine or ten.”

“Why?”

“Just to sit,” Benecio titters. “Think about it.”

He walks past tables stacked with produce. Blood oranges fragrant and dark. Papaya with its sac of marble-seeds, unpitted avocados, and pineapples lined in rows. Women balance baskets on their heads and keep their children close. The merchants shout at
them, holding out the fruits, demonstrating their ripeness. Villagers pick them up, smell the rinds, run their thumbs along the skin. A mango, carved in half, settles from its wobble and Alejándro takes it up and inhales, the nectareous scent thick and tempting. Its juice trickles over his fingers and he licks them one at a time, keeping the fruit in his free hand.

“How much?” he asks the merchant, busy with other passersby who ignore his aggressive proliferations.

“How two centavos,” he responds, turning to Alejándro only to answer him.

Placing a the money on the man’s table, he takes both halves, not bothering to ask if the price is for the whole or half.

Bold seagulls litter the boardwalk, waddling for discards. One of them flies off with the two-toned rind Alejándro throws away. In the distance Alejándro sees an arm raise and a glint of sunlight in the man’s hand. He brings the object down again and again.

A cleaver, Alejándro realizes when he nears enough to hear the chop against a woodblock.

Piled behind the butcher the day’s catch of fish stink, their scales paling and drying in the heat. Their eyes are clouded and blood trickles off the table and collects in the cobblestone beneath the table. The butcher throws the severed heads into their own pile. Viscera sticks to the man’s fingers like warts and the unrelenting sound of decapitation disgusts Alejándro. Next to the butcher another man with a long knife cuts through a bacalao’s ventral side and, putting his fingers in its mouth tears out the colorless organs that hang like a mute windchime. They sell parts of the fish, halves, wholes, heads,
letting nothing go to waste. The dock teems with constant babel. Crates shuffled on and off ships; sailors sweating and swearing orders to one another. Alejándro walks under a large net bloated with gray limbs of shrimp. When the net is cut their small bodies with black appendages, scatter into a small mound and the sound of their frictionless bodies sliding against each other nauseates Alejándro.

Turning around, he heads to his cutter. Already the noise dwindles and he stops by the boat’s side and listens to the sound of the bay and for the first time since the war, Alejándro feels the tremor of hope enter him like a wound. The slow diminishing of sound.

He swings a leg over the simple bulwark and walks under the boom where, hours before, he slung the eye-splice that now lies like a thick molt on the deck. He sits and sighs, relieved to be back on his cutter where noise is natural and pure. There is nothing to decipher or distinguish on the water. No list of codes or operations to occupy him.

He picks up the eye splice and wraps it around his arm, securing it for some later use, and tosses it on top of his mattress.

In the cabin’s door-frame lines have been scratched, dates inked next to them. On the opposite side the same markings, with dates lost to wear. With his thumb he feels the indentations, the chronicling of his son’s growth that barely reaches his ribs. He has to bend down to read the dates. Smiling, the notches recall the excitement inherent in Diego. The confident way he would assure Alejándro that he’d grown.

“Diego,” Alejándro chuckled. “It’s only been two days. It takes a long time to grow.”

“But I know it, Dad. I know it.”
“Okay,” Alejándro said. He walked with him to the cabin door. “Stand straight,” he said, putting his hand on Diego’s soft knees. “Make sure you’re back against the door.”

“Am I taller?”

“You’ll have to stop moving for me to tell,” he laughed. He slanted the dull knife so that there was a quarter-inch between the last measurement.


“Look at that,” Alejándro said. “You’ll be as tall as me one day,” rubbing his son’s head.

The harbor bell rings in the distance and Alejándro glances behind him. Sniffling, his eyes twitch.

Too much noise, Alejándro thinks.

Inside the cutter’s cabin, there is a mattress immediately to the right of the stairs and against the starboard wall, with a red blanket folded in the military fashion covering half the bed imperfect only because of the discarded eye splice. Next to the bed, a washbasin and mirror, white with mold. Though there’s a light in the ceiling it does not work. A small table, enough for three men at most, takes up the port-side. From the color of the wood, the table appears to be a newer addition, something Alejándro built and added later. It is the color of sycamore but lighter and stands on a young oak trunk, sanded smooth and anchored into the hull. A small row of circular windows above the mattress and table. Enough light enters these windows to reveal the plague of dust that floats in the boat’s air. So thick it has a smell. Hidden behind a small curtain, a propane stove with a single cabinet, with only one working hinge, above it serves as his kitchen.
Tired, Alejándro lowers himself onto the mattress which sags underneath his weight, the thin padding doing little to masque the springs supporting him. Rubbing his aching temples, Alejándro swings his legs off the frame that digs into them and pulls the rope from under him. He listens intently for the harbor ringing and does not know if the sound he hears is real or imagined but soon, closing his eyes, all sound deafens. He does not feel the weightlessness of sleep but rather feels himself sinking into the bed, believes in an apathetic way that he is nearly touching the bottom of the boat. Every limb has its own heaviness, its own way of immobility. And for this, even for paralysis, Alejándro is grateful.

He does not know how much time has passed, but, feeling it to be hours and thinking of Diego like a sore he cannot help but tongue, he opens his eyes. There is no change in the light of the cabin.

The thickness of his beard aggravates him, aware of it within his boat like the presence of a stranger. When he tries to stand, his legs, numb, sway under the mattress and hit something. A muffled thud and he feels his foot move a flat object beneath the mattress. Without looking, it is almost as if he knows what it is. Bending down he draws out an old tattered box, the hinges nearly the color of the leather. he takes hold of with a solemn reverence. He sits on the edge of his mattress, opening the object slowly. The inside is coated with a red felt, soft and thick but worn thin in places that rub against the instrument and frayed along the edges. In one hand he draws forth a violin and sets the case on the seat behind him. The violin’s stain is dark, though there are scuffs on the upper bout and chips along the edge. To the right of the chinrest a small gold plaque
displays the faint initials of his grandfather.

Unwilling to shatter the silence, he pinches a string and plucks it, quietly.

A single note, lasting no more than a second.

And his life returns to silence.

But in a life of weights and measures the quiet is balanced by his solitude. Alone, there is nothing to distract.

The mildewed mirror provides little reflection for Alejándro to shave, but, with a damp cloth, he scrubs a corner clean enough to see, without distinction, half of his face. He stares in the mirror for a long time his eyes moving back and forth over a face he does not recognize. Of the two eyes one is visible and it fixes him with a pale iris, questioning and weak. Like reading a map it travels over the unfamiliar beard, like a rocky terrain, and looks for some place of familiarity to land. Just below his nose, on the left, a small scar where no hair grows. The nick he received from the same swordfish who scarred his son’s hand. He touches the small valley, his beard tickling the finger that feels the divot, odd and dryly vermiculate.

Behind the mirror he finds an old razor, still sharp. He scraps along his skin with a sculptor’s precision, chiseling away everything that is not the art beneath. The sound of the blade—soft, not what it should be. As though it has lungs and each inch cut is another exhalation. Soon the basin is filled with the thick, unmoving caterpillars of his hair. He leaves the moustache, his scar made more visible by the surrounding smooth skin. Splashing a few handfuls of fresh water on his face, leaned over the basin, he looks
at his face again. Wrinkles where they should be, the jawline distinct as always, his flat chin remains flat. But still he does not recognize his face. There is something alien in it, or, rather, something missing from it.

In the creosote of the humid night, the marmoreal tower disappears beneath the fog the ocean wafts into the sky. Even the pink light hanging in Benecio’s window disappears. Lights swinging from close ships’ rigging provide the only light. The world exists in fragments, in frequencies, and he knows them only by traveling through them. Each ship comes and goes in a veil, discernible but untouchable.

The sound of his foot against the wharf alone assures him of movement.

The nocturnal market comes to life with intoxicated laughs and belches. There is a drunk priest who fondles a young whore and Alejándro turns away, wishing he had Baldomero’s pickaxe in his hands.

Stumbling around to find Benecio’s stairway, he stops at the bottom, one foot on the first step; his hand grips the railing. Two fears bind him: the fear that someone will be there and the fear that someone will not. Pulling back, he paces away from the stairs. Like the headphones of his radio, the isolation of his cutter lures him and, before he climbs another step, he stares out to where he thinks his boat is, hidden by the fog. He can almost hear the aged, wooden sounds that would fill the cabin’s darkness. But Benecio’s swarms with the sounds made by a few boisterous sailors who glance at him when he walks by.

In their celebration, Alejándro is unable to discern whether they are arriving or leaving.
The lighting, a thick baft coat of ochre, gives the restaurant an atmosphere of stifled memory, as though the sailors came there to forget their sorrows before they started to drink. The drunk sailor Alejándro saw before, his beard thick as baize and gray, reclines near and open window, the smoke from his ivory pipe drifting out of it. Alejándro sees him turn and watch as he enters the room. His eyes rest on Alejándro before returning to watch the thalassic chorale. Alejándro notices, with eyes of experience, the way the men raise their glasses. One of them has his leg propped on a chair. He leads the others in their song. From the angle of their lips they would appear to be joyful and a year ago Alejándro might have guessed that they were returning from Europe. But he knows not to trust the lips. He does not have to look at their eyes to hear the hidden sorrow in their voices. It comes through in the way they transition from one song to another. There is a pause, an indecision as to what song to sing next, as though the thought of what might come hinders their flow. It stops their celebration. In their midst he looks for Benecio.

“Benecio,” Alejándro shouts when he comes to the sailors’ table to collect their mugs.

“Benecio, have you—”

“Wait,” he mouths, holding up a finger as he disappears in to the kitchen.

He sits by the old sailor, dressed far warmer than necessary. A twilled cotton overcoat and chinos.

The old sailor laughs with the other sailors, the mouthpiece of his pipe clattering against his teeth, strong and white.

“Oh, you don’t want to sit here, son,” the sailor says, in a way that is both filled with gratitude and surprise. “Why don’t you join them?” he motions with his pipe, carved
into the shape of a barque, the figurehead jutting into the mouthpiece.

“No,” Alejándro assures, holding up a hand. “No, that’s alright. I’m waiting for someone.”

“A woman?” he smirks.

“My friend.”

One of the sailors brings his hand down onto the table and the dishes ring. Both Alejándro’s and the sailor’s attention is on the celebration.

“That’s better,” the sailor says, smoke falling out of his mouth.

“I just want to see a familiar face.”

“We all do. You in the war?”

“Yes,” Alejándro draws out, giving a slow nod.

“What’d you do?”

“Radio operator.”

The pipe’s mouthpiece clatters between the man’s teeth.

“Glad to be back home?”

Alejándro twists his lips and looks away from the gathering at the bare walls. He wants the restaurant’s supporting legs to slip, and the revelry to implode. A man paces through the door, his face shadowed by the poor lighting. Alejándro stretches, hoping to see the man walk towards him, sit down next to him. He strides to the party’s side and they welcome him with shouts and hugs, spilt beer soaking their coats slicking the wood-floor.

“Were you good at what you did?”
Alejándro confirms with a silent nod.

“When were you first sure of it?”

“Of what?”

“That you were good at what you did?”

“Just sort of came to it, I guess.”

“That’s not very interesting,” the sailor laughs. “Tell me a story about it.”

Furrowing his eyebrows, Alejándro shifts in his seat.

“I was stationed at the end of a long corridor, about twenty yards from the farthest point our commander would walk to. There were lights some three, four meters apart, running along the top of the hallway,” Alejándro motions. “I was on duty, listening on the short-wave for any interference or codes that might be sent over radio-wave. I remember falling asleep to the hum, like it was a slowly flowing tide that washed over me with a lethargic power. I had a dream where I was fishing and woke when one of the copper pipes started dripping its condensation. Other than the static coming through the headphones, I don’t remember any other sound. I remember a great feeling of being alone. Perfectly alone.” Alejándro lets the last words fall out of his mouth, a realization, a revisiting of the moment.

“Did you enjoy it?”

“No,” he answers, his eyes wide. “I’ve had enough of loneliness to ever wish for it again. Perhaps, at the time, I enjoyed aspects of it. The quiet, the interval where I wasn’t hearing explosions or men crying. But no. Not being alone.”

“And this was when you realized you were good at what you did?”
“I’m getting there. It was the passing of that feeling. At that moment, I might had been alone. But I sat down and bumped my knees against the chair. And it was that bump that struck me. I put my headphones back on. I was supposed to be intercepting German signals that night; but the war was ending. We all knew it. Now, before this there were times I could pick up stations that played music. Mostly German opera, but still it was beautiful. Didn’t care what they were saying. I was sick of listening to words, words, words,” he says, flicking his hands. “But for a moment, the woman’s voice made the war disappear.” He keeps himself from looking at the sailor until he is certain he is in control of himself.

“And this is when you knew you were good? This?”

“You spend years listening to letters and numbers that hide the deaths of hundreds, of thousands, and words become vicious. But that night I knew the war didn’t claim me. I could still hear beauty.”

The sailor puts his pipe in his mouth, his head nodding slightly.

“Well, it’s getting late,” he says. Only one leg bends when he stands, the other hitting the bench with a wooden dampening. Limping with a confidence Alejándro envies, he stops at the door, gripping its frame. Though weak and hobbling, the man walks on his wounds, on his memories of war and home. He turns around and smiles, saluting Alejándro, showing the white bottom of his pipe that he pockets and disappears into the dock-night, the clomp of his prosthesis lost, overpowered by the songs Alejándro hears as though through static.

The old sailor gone, Alejándro is left to wonder why he opened up to the man. He
tries to get a clear image of Diego, something tangible, as though by sharing him he’s lost some of him again.

The chorale continues their celebration with wakeful vigor. Waving their arms they order more rounds of drink and food, putting the money on the table, unnecessarily. Alejándro wants to take the pewter steins and bring them down on their heads. The scent of their honey-beer, warm and uxorial, floats to him and he pictures holding a mug breaking their teeth and taking them by surprise until the blood discolors the rim of the tankard. Their joyful chantey becomes dirgeful.

Left by himself, Alejándro observes the still vigorous gathering. Benecio brings them out a kettle of some stew and asks if Alejándro needs anything.

“I’m fine,” Alejándro says, nauseous from his imaginings.

When their song finishes, they cluster in smaller groups. Some of them point at him and a man, the cleanest of the group, turns around and glances at him.

Don’t, Alejándro thinks.

The same man strolls towards him, his gait still strong and accustomed to military poise, his limbs, though loose, still controlled. Alejándro guesses from the man’s walk that he has never known injury. Don’t come over here, Alejándro thinks.

The man’s laughter slows and when he stands in front of Alejándro he is still grinning. “Come join us, friend,” he says, his arm stretched towards the table he left. “We have too much food and too much drink for just us. You’re welcome too it.”

“No,” Alejándro responds, looking around the man at the quieter table.

“You won’t be imposing. You just came in too, right? Raise a glass with us. Fellow
sailors.”

“I can’t celebrate.” The man’s decorations draw attention to themselves and Alejándro tries not to look at them.

“Then commemorate.” His stance is open, welcoming.

“Thank you. I’m waiting for someone.”

“Wait with us.”

He hears the booth groan before he is fully awake. Benecio sits beside him. The room is empty, the chairs straightened and tables cleared, a glisten on their surface, the punch of lye in the air.

“I’m sorry,” Benecio says. He sits close to Alejándro, their shoulders touching.

“I was dreaming,” he says, unprompted.

“A nice dream?”

“Are there nice dreams anymore?”

“I hope so,” Benecio mutters, playing with his thumbs.

Stretching, Alejándro rubs his face. “In the dream I held the hand of my dying María. I was caressing it and enjoyed its softness so I brought it up to my chin.” He swallows. “We whispered because I feared that if we spoke too loudly she’d die that much quicker. She laid in a bed I had never seen before, a house that I had promised to build her. In the other room I could hear a baby crying, his wailing hollow, like a tocsin. She said I was squeezing her hand too hard and that I looked angry.” He sets his hands on the table and leans forward. “She must have seen me glance at the door because she looked there too
and smiled. Said that he was the son of her strength. That she had given everything for
him. She looked at me expectantly and laced her fingers through mine. I thought I could
feel her heartbeat through the back of her hands.” For a while he blinks, his eyes shifting
to and away from Benecio’s, who sits silent, a mug of steaming coffee cooling in his
hands. “We stared at each other a long time.”

A gust of wind moves a rusted windowpane, grating in the otherwise silent tavern.

“Is there anything else I can give you?”

“There is. A candle. Some matches, too? I’m all out.”

With an affectionate, gentle snort, Benecio smiles. “Of course.”

He comes back some minutes later carrying two candles the color of whale-bone and a
box of matches he sets in front of Alejándro. Underneath his arm, a wrapped loaf of
bread.

“What are you going to do, then?”

“Sail,” Alejándro answers. He keeps his gaze away from Benecio. “Keep sailing until
I stop.”

“But,” Benecio starts. His eyes discolor, swell. He has difficulty forming the next
words. “But where will you go?”

“I don’t know. North, maybe. East?”

Benecio snorts, twitching one nostril. He looks out to the sea and nods.

“But not here. I couldn’t stay here,” Alejándro shakes his head. “It’s like waiting for
the distress signal. I’d sit at that radio and know what was coming, would pray that the
bombs I’d already heard were imagined. But still that pitch would sound. Private, as
though the burden were laid on me first and alone. I’m waiting, still.”

“You were a good father, Alejándro,” Benecio says, placing his hand gently on
Alejándro’s shoulder.

“Don’t,” he interjects. “I’m not ready for comfort yet.”

They embrace and Alejándro lumbers down the stairs.

Alone, the pier, dark save for torchlights—silent, flaring tongues paralleling the
walkway—rests from the bustling activity of stevedores, merchants, sailors. Even sound
seems to take a sabbath. Peace descends in the stillness. Slouching and despondent,
Alejándro dangles his feet off the wharf, his shoes at his side. His feet ache, swollen and
pale from long months where going barefoot was not an option. The cobblestones are
smooth beneath his hands, the tips of his fingers falling into the space between rocks,
where sand and gravel contrasts the walkway. He listens to the breaking of the waves and
leans back.

What will I do now, he ponders.

The thought is interrupted when the waves, hitting the woodwork, splash the bottom
of his feet. He inches closer to the edge and lowers his feet in, wetting them completely.
A strand of algae comes up laced between his toes, the leaves heavy, collapsed on its own
stalk. It reeks, and he tosses it back into the ocean.

Peering over the baordwalk he stares into the nocturnal ocean. He pictures his face
under its opaque waters, and what it is like to drown, and his imagined face is serene like
the waters are a second womb. He ignores the stories, the facts he knows too well of
drowning. Closing his eyes he feels his body gravitate toward the water. But an unexpected wave crashes beneath him, soaking his head and the sudden urge to leave the boardwalk overcomes him. The rocks, too much like weathered tombstones, chill his feet. He carries his shoes by the laces and walks along the dock. Halfway down the pier, he stops, seeing the moon rise above the black rock causing a shimmer of light to cascade down the rock like a waterfall. Reaching into his back pocket he takes out the picture of his son. He tears the picture from the back of it and throws it into the surf.

Before he sets foot on his cutter, he senses something wrong, something secretive but unthreatening. The boat sloshes with the waves that comes around the breakwater but Alejándro hears a difference, knowing there is another person waiting on the boat. Nervous, he glances to his left, back towards the pier. The fog has lifted but this has not drawn anyone out into the night. The harbor rests. Nothing has been moved or ransacked and a quick scan reveals no one waits for him above deck. Slowly, Alejándro steps onto the boat, bringing his feet down quietly. Carried by the sea-breeze, the tintinnabulation of a buoy distracts him. From his angle he sees a shadow sitting on the edge of his bed and he wonders if there is a person below or if the fringe of his glaucoma grows. His eyes twitch in an anxiety he has not felt since the first whistle of bombs pierced the sky and sea around his cruiser. They blink separately, one after the other, as though Alejándro is too cautious to shut the world out for even a fraction of a second. He lets the memory of his boat control his movements, his gaze fixed on the figure in the dark and he keeps his movements slow, questioning whether the man espies him. All the imperfections of his craft flood his mind, the weak rigging, cracks where the masts are anchored to the hull,
nets not folded properly. He fights against them but they, with vigor, erode his concentration. He is an arms length away from the cabin. Overhead, a cormorant’s wings cut through the air and make little sound, but Alejándro hears them, and he turns to see the water spit rise when the bird’s hooked beak clenches its scaly prey. As though iron is placed on his shoulders when he passes the shadow of the cabin-door, Alejándro moves with even more precision.

Why hasn’t he moved, he thinks.

He reaches into his boot, where Javier’s bayonet kisses his ankle.

“Wait,” the man says, holding out his hand.

“Baldomero?” Alejándro asks, his voice riddled with uncertainty. A sulfurous cloud rolls from the match Alejándro strikes and he holds it out and Baldomero steps into its light. His eyes turn orange in the flame but they lose none of their expression, an endearment. “What are you doing here?”

“You must stop,” Baldomero says, holding onto Alejándro’s arm.

“How did you get here?”

Standing, Baldomero continues. “You must stop asking questions for now. Rest. You are hungry. I know you are. Eat,” he says. He opens his hand to the table, where a loaf of bread, raisins, and cold fowl wait. Alejándro stares at the fare, head tilted and eyes wide, whether from disbelief or enticement.

They sit in the cabin of Alejándro’s ship, a small, paraffin lantern in the middle of the table giving off a half-filled shine. Above them, the small, round windows peer out to a
darkness where sea and canopy are indistinguishable. They hear the boat pule on the waves.

His plate filled with thick slices of bread, torn from the loaf, a leg of duck, the fat of which still glosses in the paraffin, angled on the bread, making more room for handfuls of raisins and the orange hint of apricots hidden beneath them in the bowl, Alejándro begins to eat and does not notice that Baldomero does not join him.

“Is it good?”

Tearing into the duck leg, Alejándro nods. “I haven’t eaten this well since the barracks.”

“How long were you in Europe?”

Alejándro licks his lips and finishes chewing. There is a slight pause before he speaks. He is not calculating the days but calculating why Baldomero is asking him.

“One-thousand-two-hundred-fifty days.”

Unprompted, Alejándro continues to talk.

“I spent the better part of that time with my ears pressed to headphones. Listening for signals over the short-wave. You’d be surprised how quickly you long to hear a human’s voice, a real voice, when there’s so much machinery around. There’s ways men stay sane there. Some, odd as it may sound, in short bursts of insanity. They go over to the other side and get a distaste for it, so they never go back. Others drown themselves in liquor, surround themselves with women—you know these things,” he says, distorting his face to show disgust. “These are the things people confess to you.”

“Did you visit one?”
Alejándro pauses.

“There was a time, once. I was on leave. Radio operators don’t make many comrades, but I like walking at night, even alone. There was a woman who came up to me after an hour or so. I didn’t recognize what I was hearing at first. It sounded odd. Foreign. She stepped in front of me and touched the side of my face, her fingers folding down the top of my ear. After I followed her back to the bordello, I took out the money I had. It wasn’t much. She scoffed at it, said it wouldn’t even buy me thirty minutes. I said I didn’t want her for that. I wanted her to talk. That was it,” he explains. “I just wanted to hear the voice of a woman. A voice that didn’t have the sharp, deep resonance of bombs.”

“What did she talk about?”

“I don’t remember. It wasn’t her words I was listening to but just the sound of them. Their rhythm. I tried to interpret, not by what she said, but how, whether she was happy. Sorrowful. Aroused.”

“So you visited her many times?”

“I did nothing else with my money.”

The boat settles, adding its wooden drawl to their dialogue.

“Should I confess?”

“No,” Baldomero mouths, no sound coming out. “I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Throughout the months there was a change in the way she spoke. It wasn’t business-like. It became soft, almost like a lover’s whisper. There were groans in her words and I could see that even she knew pain. Knew loss. Maybe even more than I
have. But her voice kept me sane. Her voice taught me to grieve.”

There is a hesitancy in Alejándro. He fidgets, the left side of his face twitching. Suddenly, raising his gaze, his face brightens and he asks Baldomero, “Could I say a prayer for her? Even if I don’t know her name?”

The ship’s darkness hides Baldomero’s trembling chin. “I believe you can,” he answers.

Hunched over his half-eaten dinner, Alejándro, sallow in the lamp-glow, breathes with his mouth open. “Yes. Well,” he pauses, forcing a smile. “Maybe later.”

Sympathetic, Baldomero nods.

Yawning, Alejándro rubs his eyes. His bed stands out in the corner, its red blanket seductively soft in the shadow of the hull-windows laced with moonlight. The soothing rock of the boat only augments his desire to forsake Baldomero and bury himself in sleep.

They sit on boxes on the deck of his cutter.

“What are you thinking?” Baldomero asks.

Alejándro plucks the violin, adjusting the pegs until he hears the string’s right pitch. “Before Diego was born, I would rest my head against her belly, imagining that what I heard was his heartbeat. I don’t know if it was my wife’s breathing or the sound of her heart. Suppose it doesn’t matter. I would kiss her stomach, just to the left of her navel while she twirled my cowlick,” he pats his head. “When I was young, my father would take me into his lap and say, ‘He who walks with wolves learns to howl.’ So I said the words through the uterine shield, knowing it would be the only part of his grandfather he
ever knew.” He turns and faces Baldomero. Alejándro’s burnt umber face, his eyes discolored, dark paths of tears decorating his face like lost war-paint. “But then when I held him, when I saw him for the first time, something changed. I didn’t want him to have knowledge of wolves or corruption.” He lets his chair fall forward, flush on the planks. “I knew that one day he’d have to know. But after María died—I’d had enough violence. I swore that I’d raise Diego so that I’d never fear he would one day howl. You said once that fathers are prophets. My father was trying to tell me something. As though he knew years hence I’d be shoved into a fight I had no share in. I learned a new language there. One without words. Just noise. Like a howl. We all did and found ourselves hating the soldiers for that. You come back thinking you’ll remember how to speak. How to touch, but you forget those things over there. In the barracks it was easy to forget a life apart from war. Apart from claustrophobic existence. You start to forget that peace exists and then you can forget home exists too. That land is more than something to fight on. So soldiers keep pictures of wives, sweethearts, children in the top of their helmets,” Alejándro says, motioning as though a helmet were in front of him. “They put them in the inside cover of their Bibles. I knew men who pinned their pictures to some part of their bunk. We didn’t do this to keep ourselves from forgetting we had families. We needed to keep our families real. That’s why we never used portraits. They were artificial. Too—official. Photographs showing a scar or a mole, the dimples, small imperfections like the angle of a nose or the asymmetry of eyes, even the angle at which three strands of hair dropped from bangs. They gave us something tangible, something to study, to know our beloved as someone real. They staid human and left the
photograph behind.”

The coughing comes and it does not cease. Slowly, he leans forward, his arms too weak to move; he keeps them between his legs, his shoulders pushed forward. His body twitches with each cough.

“Father,” Alejándro yells, lunging to catch him as he falls off the crate. He feels the old man’s body beneath the cossack, the space between each rib a small, fleshy valley. Alejándro holds him close, the trembling passing through his body and he feels the coughs reverberate in his chest. Baldomero’s hands are limp on the deck, Alejándro keeping him from sprawling on the wood. He wraps his arms around the priest’s chest, the attack finished, Baldomero exhausted, breathes with swelling greed. His face drawn, eyes laden, his limbs are loose, motionless.

Alejándro finds himself cradling the priest, their heads together, calming him with soft, murmured words.

“Where did you keep your picture?” Baldomero rasps. He fights to keep his eyes open.

Alejándro’s eyes fall. “I had a picture of the man who murdered him. I put Diego’s picture on the back of that.” He speaks with the quiet shame of a criminal. “I told myself that I would have to take him out into the sea at dusk, where he could watch the sun disappear and distort in the ocean while we watched the stevedores dwindled to white ants on the shoreline. He wanted to run his hands through the water while the wind filled the sails, so I would sit next to him for a minute, hanging onto him while he leaned over and dipped his hand in. He swore that dolphins came up and tapped his palms.”
Baldomero smiles. “Let me rest my head here,” he says. “I’m tired.”

Alejándro rocks with Baldomero cradled in his arms.

“That’s better,” Baldomero whispers.

Alejándro hears the priest’s breathing weaken and feels his heart ebb.

From his time in the war he knows that the sense of hearing is the last faculty to cease before death. He leans over Baldomero, rubbing his thumb on the priest’s arm.

“When we came back from our trips, I’d put him on my shoulders. But I had to be careful. He had always been like his mother. Weak bones. So I had to bend down and let him climb on my back or I could dislocate his shoulders. Before he could talk I would put him up there and hold onto his ankles and he’d lean forward, resting his head in my hair. Like a metronome, I could feel his heart beat against the back of my head.”

He listens to the sails fill in the wind and thinks of the lost nights, quiet on deck with his father; good and silent. Memory without pain.
His shoes dip into the water like a paintbrush. Littered with puddles, the sand shimmers in the rising sunlight. The flotsam of petals and sediment, pebbles worn smooth over quiet centuries, gather like a silent congregation around willow trunk and iron posts. Once they were a pathway laid with care, now ruined in a single night’s downpour. Baldomero cannot remember a rain like it, drops detonating against the roof, the thunder capable of shattering mountains. And now the only sign anything but the night passed through is the ruin of a changed landscape.

One oak cross, older than the others, remains in the graveyard, the ten white ones lost to the voracious desert that swallowed them in the night’s deluge.

He runs his hand along the vertical axis, its rough bark like the hacienda’s windowsill. The rope binding the two beams together loosened, letting the horizontal bar slope to the ground. With limbs, shaking and exhausted, he lowers himself to the ground and unties the cross, setting the two sticks straight again. After fastening them, he digs a hole with his hands and places the cross upright over the flatland where a grave might have been, the still damp sand lodging under his nails. Then, he crosses himself, and intones a memorized psalm, uncertain that his words could be more genuine.

The detritus, wrapped around the posts like earthen scarves, reminds Baldomero of his father’s wrists, the way they were once chained together. Clutching the iron posts, Baldomero’s knuckles redden. He shuts his eyes, tries to distinguish the feel of his ring against his finger from the metal of the fence. Everywhere he looks ruin boasts of the world’s slow crumbling. And Baldomero finds it increasingly difficult to believe that the scourging desert and the sun, a horn of fire poured out each morning, do not somehow
stem from judgement.

If I were younger, he thinks, wondering if the words are a new prayer, a different way of fending off the inevitable decay he so long incanted against. He rests his head on the fence, neither hot nor cold, his eyes open to the sand below. Possibilities sweep through him, detouring his mind. He does not indulge just in fantasies about his age but every aspect of his life; wonders what his life would resemble if Amadea had not died; his fatherhood not only a conferred title but a state-of-being as well. He imagines he hears hooves trample over a worn path, their sound carried by the wind that holds in its breeze the smell of the coast.

The recollection of Roberto suddenly pierces him like a rusted spearhead.

Keep the wolf at bay, he mutters, rolling his head between the two posts. He pictures Roberto, the insolent way he crossed his legs in the confessional. An overwhelming, nauseating, sense of hatred immerses him.

Closing his eyes he tries to fight against the thoughts of what Roberto’s existence means. He remembers the bodies Alejándro buried, the way their faces were brutalized, branded without regard. The scars left behind by the flood resemble the scars of his fathers back. Unhealed wounds that make him grateful for his death and yet despise it all the more.

He encourages himself, Just a little while longer. The tenseness in his chest tries to exit but he forces it down, releasing it in slow, shallow coughs, barely parting his lips. Hold on for them.

Letting his arms fall he turns around and looks at the vast mesa that separates the
church from Andrade and Andrade from the mountains and beyond the mountains more emptiness. And just beyond the garden fence, a Joshua tree, its leaves green, shadowing a dilapidated white cross that seethes in the heat rising from the desert where Diego is buried.

He turns his back on the scene and trudges inside.

The floor shines in places where the water has not yet dried and in the corners of Saint Anthony’s niche he can see small pools of dark water that will stagnate soon. The votive offering is empty, the candles damp, their flames extinguished in the rain and wind of the night before. The icons hanging nearby peel away even more. But he ignores them. The ceiling’s slump continues to teeter on implosion, and ripples of water pulse where they drop into puddles.

Isabella still sleeps on his mattress, the altar dry, protected by the rooms above. As he nears the stairs he stops and stares at her.

How many men, he thinks, have looked on her like this?

The thought tramples his spirit and he bites his lip to keep his chin from shaking.

His cheeks swell with a cough he suppresses, not wanting to wake her.

Her body, covered, does not appear fragile as he thought it might. Hers is the beauty of a doll made of wood, weathered and whittled by cares and men. Like two halves of a shield her shoulder blades protrude, visible in the low cut of her dress. Her back is unbruised. Facing away from him he cannot see the crusting gore where her hair was wrenched out. What remains of it is pulled back and tied in a loose, off-center knot.

For some time he stands unmoved. A bird-trill echoes through the empty hall, the
pools of water beginning to reflect the colored windows above them as the church brightens. Behind him, hinges screech and Nadia walks approaches to him.

“I’ve put out the elements, Father,” she starts. “We’re going to need a new ciborium soon.”

He moves his eyes and sees the empty paten, the chalice covered in the white aes, ready for communion.

“How long are you going to let her stay here?” Her voice is abrupt, dissonant.

He raises his hand and speaks, his back toward her. “Do you possess no pity?”

Crossing her arms, Nadia answers, “She should have known this could happen to her. Or cared, at least. It was a risk.”

“You don’t care?”

Nadia does not answer.

“Nadia,” Baldomero stresses. He stares at her, yearning to find a feature on her face he recognizes. “I don’t understand you.”

“I’m worried about more than just her, Father.” She folds her arms. “What about the other parishioners? Wouldn’t their trust in you shatter if they saw her,” she points, “stretched out here as if in the basement of some brothel?”

“What do you see here, Nadia?” he shouts, pointing to the cross. “Is this what you serve? Or is it this?” he lifts the arms of her habit. “Tell me what you see.”

“Father?”

“Tell me what you see.”

“A bronze cross—” Her voice trembles.
“No,” he screams. “What do you see? Describe him.”

“I don’t know. A head? Eyes. His mouth hangs open.”

“And what do you see here?” he asks, turning her toward Isabella. “Can you serve him without serving her?” He steps away from her to calm himself. “Nadia, Nadia, what have I been doing? What have I been teaching you? No one foments in me such feelings of writhing doubt as you,” he lowers his head. “Unmerciful,” he emits. “What is in us that keeps us from being merciful, Nadia?” Unstable, his arms wobble as he lowers himself into the chair he slept in.

“I don’t know,” she answers, the shame-pitched voice enough to convince Baldomero of a beginning repentance.

“I don’t know either,” he sighs. He looks at Isabella. The sides of a bandage have come loose over the night. “If only we could see inside a person’s heart,” he laments, pressing the adhesive down. “How easy mercy would be.” His hands are cold, stiff to bend. He spends some time rubbing them, twisted in the chair to watch over Isabella.

Nadia asks, “Would it be mercy, then?”

“Indeed, no. But it can be learned. You serve faithfully, Nadia. But there is much you lack.” He covers his mouth with his sleeve, his chest shredding. He tastes the rust of blood on his tongue and spits it out before Nadia has time to see it. She does not need to know, he thinks. It is not the right time. “But the fault is mine. As your teacher, what you do not understand, I have not taught.”

Sitting in front of Isabella, a premonition of departure settles on him. And with it the shackle of regrets and failures that he would gladly have bind him to the earth. His
breathing rattles and the uncalled specter of his father wasted on his deathbed rises in his mind. Though their stripes are different, he sees in Isabella the same abuse his father suffered. Different chains but the same scars.

“Go upstairs,” he says to Nadia gently. “Prepare a dinner.” He listens for her feet to hit the stairs adding, “For three.”

He touches his wedding ring.

He looks for the bandages and salve Fanuco brought the night before. Sitting at Isabella’s head, his legs against the edge of the mattress, he loosens the sleeve of his habit and dabs the sweat from her forehead. Consciousness stirring, she moves more now than before and Baldomero is careful to tear the tape holding the swabs down. He tries to listen for her breathing but it is serene. Her right eye’s swelling has decreased significantly but the cut on her eyebrow crusts and pusses, yellow offal in a sea of brown gore. Folding the old cloth in half, he wipes away the pus and lays the salve over the wound. Putting his hand on the side of her head, he tilts it slightly, forgetting the lesion on her scalp. She winces but does not wake, the sound startling him and making him nearly nauseous with guilt.

The sanctuary is quiet. He lifts her head and rests it on his knee and begins to sing to her.

An old melody his father taught him.

His lips move through the words like a seamster through cloth though the rest of his mutinous body refuses to obey him. The long rebellion of death. His fingers will not pinch the tape or the bandages so that he cannot tear them; sputum distorts his already
atonal words. He keeps time by imagining the sound of his father’s pickaxe coming down against the quarry’s coal, the pit filled with black bodies whose shoulders rise and fall almost in unison, their backs a vile sheet music on which they nevertheless compose hymns. He hears his father’s singing loud and clear. The scratch of the woven basket against his shoulders returns to him and he, intuitively, touches his smooth back. If possible, he would ask his father if he approached death the same way he does now, moving from fearful to expectant, and when that transition occurred. If it was when his limbs became stiff igneous rock that he wished for death, or if it was at the first bloody hints of consumption. And the lessons his father taught him lie before him like buried pottery, faded by time and memory. He wondered if what his father learned in a quarry could be useful in a church, if, after years of hauling hewn rock out of a pit, his father had anything to teach about servitude, and everything found their answer in the memory of his father’s lacerated back.

Finished singing, he whispers, “In my pride, I used to think all the turmoil of this city would be swept away if only I had a few more years.” Though bending distresses his back, he leans over to be closer to her ears. “‘A little more prayer,’ I thought. ‘A few more alms, and the dam of salvation will break and flood this arid place.’ It troubles a man to live to see his aspirations unfulfilled, but that the hope of them still remains drives a wedge in me; for I want, more than anything, to see this land refreshed. Even without me. But I still want those years.”

Her eyes spasm and Baldomero hovers over them waiting for them to open; but they settle, and he rests her head back on her pillow and struggles to his feet. All objects
become a set of legs in his doddering, and he holds onto the trestle table while he puts one foot down on the first stair, and then the pew arms and balances himself on the wall until he comes to Saint Anthony’s narthex. The puddle will have to be cleaned before Holy Communion, before the laity enters the sanctuary and discovers its disarray.

They would sooner tolerate groundwater on the floor than a whore on the altar, Baldomero laments.

The chamber’s permanently opened door hides an old mop. Absorbing what little he can he spreads the water out to a thin veneer over the rock-floor and hopes it dries before the parishioners arrive.

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She hobbles up the stairs like a woman thrice her age, Baldomero supporting her with one arm while he balances himself along the corridor. He notices how she holds her dress, picking it up when her feet rise, the hem brushing the stone-hewn stairs, careful to preserve even her ragged possessions. Her limbs move like his, in fractions of the range they once possessed, with timid hands used more for stability than anything.

One shoulder leans more forward than the other, though she assures him with a slight shake that it causes her no pain. Isabella enters the kitchen first and she waits inches from the stairwell until Baldomero comes by her side. Nadia busies herself with plates on the counter, a stack of prosphora set aside for the liturgy.

Baldomero guides Isabella to the head of the table. “Sit here,” Baldomero says, holding the chair out for her. “It isn’t often we have guests.”

On the table Nadia sets a bowl of brown bread and a plate of salted mackerel next to it.
Though Isabella says nothing, the cautious way she approaches the chair, lowers herself into it, Baldomero knows her slowness stems not only from her injuries, but from embarrassment. Her back is to the terrace, the top of the desert willow visible between the columns. The shadows fall away from the building and Isabella adjusts her shawl around her, scooting closer to the table. After taking his seat, Baldomero pours a half-glass of wine for Isabella while Nadia continues carrying plates from the hearth-counter to the table. She sets them down with unnecessary force.

Baldomero avoids her eyes.

A bowl of mashed yams sends curls of richly scented steam into the air.

Then, Nadia sits.

Following Baldomero’s example, the two women bow themselves.

He reaches underneath the table and touches Isabella’s tepid hand. Her fingers fold over his. “Blessed are we who are poor, for ours is the kingdom of God.” He thinks of the joys he and Amadea had in the poverty of their discovered hacienda, the simplicity that bound them solely to each other. And contrasted to his bed that looked out to the chaparral covered fields, he imagines Isabella’s destitution, the bedroom’s light unchanging, damp and dark whether day or night. Like the dawn, he sees its end approaching. “Blessed are we who are hungry now, for we shall be satisfied.” From the long years of knowing him, though at some distance, Baldomero remembers the scars on the back of Alejándro’s hands, the sunken cheeks and starved clavicles from which his clothes hung like the flayed skin of a mule deer; he recalls the way they picked up the medjools, hesitant yet grateful. “Blessed are we who weep now, for we shall laugh.
Blessed are we when men shall hate us, and when they shall separate us from their company, and shall reproach us, and cast out our name as evil, for the Son of man’s sake. Rejoice us in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, our reward is great in heaven,” he says, reminding himself that his peace advances on him. “For in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets. Amen.”

His prayer finished, Baldomero opens his eyes. Nadia takes her fork and knife in her hands but Isabella does not stir. In between the strands of her dark hair that hangs over her bruised forehead, Baldomero can see her eyes, skittering between him, Nadia, and her plate. There is still a lean to her back,She draws her shoulders in as if frightened.

“Isabella,” he says, reaching out his hand. He does not touch her but brings his fingers close to hers, as she holds the table rim. “Isabella, aren’t you hungry?”

She licks her chapped lips. “Yes, Father,” her words slur. The dislodged teeth distorting her speech. “I am hungry now.”

“But you aren’t eating,” he says. “Is something wrong?”

Beneath the table he continues to hold her hand and is surprised at the strength with which she grips his.

“I want to be satisfied,” she whispers, her hair trembling. “But I don’t.” There is the sound of a tear hitting the fringe of a plate. When she looks at him it is momentary, lasting less than a second before she turns away. Wordlessly, Baldomero picks up his chair and moves it next to hers. Wrapping one arm around her shoulder he places the other on her forearm. She leans in to his embrace and rests her head against his chest.
Baldomero brings the plates one by one to Nadia, who stands at the washbasin, her sleeves rolled up and arms slick, dipping the plates into the shallow water and drying them with a towel that hangs on the basin’s brim. He walks slowly, a rattle in his chest that keeps him from a normal pace. He hands Nadia the second plate and she glances at him, her mouth open, eyes concerned.

“I don’t like that sound, Father.”

“What sound?” he asks, trying to suppress a cough that mauls his voice.

“That sound,” she says, turning to lean against the basin.


He returns to the table where he picks up the last dinner plate.

“When you eat with someone they reveal themselves to you. Without even knowing it,” he observes. His back still to Nadia, he holds the plate looking at its clayish surface.

“In small, imperceptible gestures, their inner-self tears down the wall between it and the external world, as though the object is touching its reflection. The way they hold their glass or how close to the edge their plate is; if they always hold knife and fork, and especially if they laugh—these will tell you countless things.”

There is a moment where Nadia looks up from her work and returns to finish the plate. Then, Baldomero asks, “So, what did you see?”

“What do you mean?”

“Tonight,” he says, facing her now. “With Isabella.”

Nadia pouts her lips, keeping her sight on her work. “She wore her scarf at the table.”
“Doubt makes a poor covering. Answer straightly. She wore her scarf because she
didn’t want to let it out of her sight. From fear. You know she has few possessions.”
He places the plate on the counter. “What else, what else?”

Nadia puffs, raising her eyebrows. The water trickles off the plate into the basin, like
rain hitting crisp, summer leaves.

“She hunched over her plate. I saw more of the top of her head than her face.”

“And why would this be?”

“She’s tired? I don’t know.”

“You do.”

Nadia does not answer.

“You were there, Nadia. You saw what I saw. You heard the exact same words I
heard.”

“Embarrassment?” she interrupts.

Baldomero sees her eyes searching his for confirmation.

“Yes,” she continues. “We shamed her.”

“No. No, Nadia,” he sighs. His head falls and his posture slumps to an angle of
disappointment. “She felt that she shamed us,” he says, placing a spread hand on his
chest. “And that wounded her. By our presence, she felt that something within her was
wrong.” He rests. “The same way you judge her, she judges herself.” Walking back to
the table he gathers all the pewterware, their clinging the only words. It is not until he
sets them in Nadia’s hands that he says, “What I’m saying is, whether for good or evil—
when you dine with someone you see them as human. What I’m asking is whether you
see Isabella or a whore.”

His legs tremble as he walks to the table, cradling the bread basket.

Her mouth hangs open.

“That’s why you’ll be blessing Isabella with communion from now on.”

Quickly, she objects, “That’s not lawful.”

“How many things in this church are not lawful?” he storms. She drops the utensils in the basin. “You know them. Give me a list.” He waits, his face burning, half-expecting her to answer his unasked question. “I’m not ordained. You are not ordained. Everything in this place has been rejected. The cross—from some Roman church in Galveston. The pews, the icons, the candles—from Yuma. And the laity—” He stops himself and breathes deeply. His eyes are red, his upper lip wet. His voice turns soft, pitying. “And you speak of what’s lawful? Nadia, how can you not understand? If it stems from love, then it is lawful.”

“Forgive me, Father,” she says, her arms on the washbasin for support.

“Nadia, Nadia,” he says. “I already have.”

He goes into his room, his mattress sagging without anything on it except for his leather sketch pad that sits on the edge, his wicker-chest open. Before he closes it he peers inside, the small, half-burnt candle the color of year-old honeycomb, standing off center. He pulls it out and places it on his nightstand, on top of à Kempis’s treatise. Shutting the lid he takes his sketch pad holding it in one palm, his other hand on it like he is bestowing a blessing. He is seeing his familiar room for the last time. Grateful for the room’s faithfulness, the quiet peace it provided, he runs his hands on the walls, the door-
frame, staring at them with curious eyes as though worried he would forget them. He sits
at his table and opens his Bible, letting it fall where it may. Pulling sheets of paper close
to him, he runs his finger along the small print, still distinct, with a sense of loss, as
though he knows that he will never sit in the chair again, nor feel the crisp pages with
scribbles in the margin from his young priesthood. The memories as distant and nebulus
as the thought of old age when he was young.

In front of his bed, hands resting on the low frame, Baldomero taps the wood.
Impatient, he kicks his bed and something drops behind his mattress. He brings out the
pickaxe from behind his bed, rubbing the iron head that still bears the crusted dirt.
Baldomero runs his thumb along the flat surface, the miniscule chips bringing back
memories of his childhood and the whisper of a memorized verse: “Awake and sing, ye
that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out its
dead.”

His eyes narrow, staring into the distance, fixated on some revelation.

“I dreamt of being an artist once,” he says, coming out of his room. Nadia sits at the
table, the same seat as during dinner. “Even when I came here, from Georgia, I still had
that hope that I would create art. Something of beauty. Here,” he hands the collection to
Nadia. “When I am gone, give it away.”

Before she opens it, she asks, “What’s the matter, Father? You’re frightening me.”

“Nothing, nothing,” Baldomero waves, attempting to dismiss her worry. “Just an old
man’s rambling.”

“No, it isn’t,” she protests. “Don’t lie to me. It’s that cough. I’m not blind, Father.
You’re sick, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he confesses. “I’m dying.” Before she has a chance to reply, he adds, “Nadia, listen to me. There are two forces that vie for the dominance of our souls. One is shame. The other is love. And how alike they sometimes seem. There is coming a time when people will revel in shame. When love, or what they think is love but is really such a deep shame, will swallow explicit shame. And then all that will remain is what they call love. And it will be false. Shame will mean nothing. People will celebrate what we loathe. What is holy will become a mockery and they will be lost in the darkness of their own creation, which is always dark because we are creatures of darkness. Shame is our natural state, so, I ask you, what will happen when man pulls down shame?”

His tone does not expect an answer, only thought.

“Forgive me this gossip, but look at Alejándro. There is shame in him, but where does that come from? Is it not his love for Diego that drives him to humiliation? But why? His is no wrong doing. When called to duty, he served and lost everything. Love turns to shame when there is no longer an object to love. But it is a different kind of shame. There is no word for this. And because the world is coming where shame will no longer exist, we, you, Nadia—you and Isabella and Alejándro—must keep shame alive by keeping love kindled. Because when people know their shame they can know love. And without love, we are nothing.”

“How can you speak to me so harshly when you have nothing but velvety words for her? For that whore,” Nadia screams, throwing a towel at Baldomero, holding it as it catches on his shoulder. “How can you have more love for her than for me? I’ve served
you here. I’ve done the Lord’s work.”

“You have, you have,” Baldomero agrees, speaking softly. He steps toward her, placing his hands on her shoulders. She tries to shrug him off but concedes. “But you still have more to do. I’m a dead man. I have days of life left. With one last duty to perform and I put you under one final holy oath,” he hesitates, waiting to see what her eyes say before her mouth. Though her lips are taut, he can feel her shoulders rise with a strong sigh. And then she looks at him. “Take care of her, Sister. If I don’t return, there’s something I’ve left her under my pillow. Give it to her.”

“No,” she protests. “I know what you’re going to do. It will kill you.”

“Listen to me,” he says, accentuating the rattle in his voice. “I am nearly dead. Now you’d take from me one more chance at life? Nadia, Nadia. There are many things you understand and I pray it is many more years before you come to know this. But it is true nonetheless. A man’s final year is his quickest. Over faster than a sunset. He does not want to spend those days regretting anything. Now, you go rest,” he gently pulls the last ceramic mug out of her hands. “I will finish cleaning. And, please, I need an hour alone. But,” he adds before she passes the table. “If Fanuco arrives early, I need to speak with him.”

After he dries the plates and stacks them in their corner, hanging the cleaned pot and pan from their hooks above the oven, and shovels the soot out from the hearth into a distorted metal bucket, he sits in the lightless kitchen, eyes closed, spinning his ring on his finger. In the cradle of his lap, the more than half-consumed candle he thinks of how long
and quick the years of absence become in the instantaneous acceptance of death, and how the when of his death is becoming less of a mystery. Now there remains only a “not yet”. Not yet because of Alejándro; not yet because of the sagging purlins; not yet because of Nadia; not yet because of Isabella; simply not yet. There passes before him the images of things left unaccomplished, things he will never do again. It is someone else’s task to mend the decrepit church. The same way he knows that there will be a sunrise tomorrow, that is the way he imagines himself taking communion one more time: distantly, empirically. Friends, parishioners, long deceased, return to him young and smiling, some with their familiar cigarettes hanging from their mouths. In his throat he feels the foreboding ache of an attack. The sounds of his father’s death, violent, one of his eyes pooled with blood from a broken vessel, repeat in his mind as though he were bedside with him again. The death of his father solidified his commitment to enter into the priesthood. It was then he first felt the heartache of unanswered prayer. He knelt at his father’s bedside and took the clammy, unresponsive hand in his own, whispering, “Keep the wolf at bay.”

He incanted the words ceaselessly for the two months of his father’s illness, a consumption that laid dormant but erupted with odious strength. The first pink stains had barely littered his kerchiefs and pillows when he was confined to bed and resigned to die. Believing that healing was concomitant with prayer, Baldomero sequestered himself at night, staying up until the sky turned cotton-white and slept in short intervals throughout the day. His mother, frail by nature and even weaker in her husband’s sickness, told him he was too young to apprentice and he should stay home with his
father.

“I don’t want to apprentice,” he admitted. He knew, instinctively, that his age did not keep him home. Their poverty did. It hung prominently, though ignored, in their lives like the Christ in an church apse. Everything somehow points back to it.

“I want to serve in the Church,” he said.

The words balmed the distance between him and his mother. She went out and, the next day, Baldomero found himself standing in a rectory in front of the local reverend. For the next month, he did not see his mother or father. He learned phrases in Greek, how to fill a thurifer with incense, but the first task he was given was filling the votive offering with new candles. They were soft and smelled of honeycomb, with a similar color, especially when lit. One time, when he made sure the sanctuary was empty, Baldomero licked one to see if it tasted like he expected. It had no taste but felt smooth and stayed on his tongue for some hours after.

Now, the candle in his lap, and the ring on his finger, are the last remainders of his wife. He remembers the way the window doubled the flame of the candle she placed in the window, when they stayed in the hacienda and built a life together. The way she cupped her hand behind the flame whenever she went to blow it out.

Her fingers touched this same piece of wax, he thinks. Held this same base now in my hands.

The candle under his nose, he drinks of the remembered aroma, imbibing its recollected scent. Setting it in the middle of the table he strikes a match and waits for the old, dark wick to catch. He lays the timber next to the candle. Its orange glow washes over the
oak. Seated, he holds the candle in front of him, watches as the flame withers on the last remnant of wick and says his prayer one last time.

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Alone, Baldomero bows his head before the icons. He prepares himself in his room, the leavened smell of prosphora filling the kitchen. While putting on the simple sticharion, its sleeves long and loose over his weakening arms, he whispers, “Blessed is God at all times, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen.” Hearing the sound of the sanctuary filling, he clasps the epitrachelion around his neck, making sure it flows unwrinkled behind him. “Blessed is God who pours out grace upon his priests,” Baldomero says, thinking of the hard stones of his father’s quarry. “As the chrism upon the head, which ran down into the beard, the beard of Aaron, run down even to the hem of his garment,” he continues, his voice trailing. He imagines his own coronation, what it would feel like to have oil poured over his head in symbol of consecration, to find his approval with man and God but the image withers and he stands with the two cuffs of the epimanikia in front of him, their thick brocade displaying a frayed, symmetrical cross. “At all times, now and always and for ever and ever. Amen.”

Putting on the right epimanikia, he intones, “Your right hand, Lord, is made glorious in might; your right hand, Lord, has crushed the enemies; and in the fullness of your glory, you have routed the adversary.” Eyes closed, inwardly he prays, “Keep the wolf at bay.” He slides on the left cuff, a thread catching on the edge of his ring. “Your hands have made me and fashioned me,” and for the briefest moment he does not know if he speaks to God or Amadea. “Give me understanding and I shall learn your
commandments.”

He makes his way to the stairs slowly, confident that it is the last time he will give his flock the bread and wine. He runs his fingers along the curved back of a kitchen chair, looks out the open doorway where the branches of the desert willow turn the color of honey in the setting sun. He hears tanagers chirp and the blur of a hummingbird skitter past.

Down the stairs he sees the Evangelion codex lying on the table, its bindings weathered, the gild long departed, revealing a blacker board beneath, not yet succumbed to decay. With a quick glance hoping no one notices, he sees Fanuco standing next to Domingo near the last row of pews.

He lifts the gospel book and his joints hurt, his shoulders and elbows hindered and he fears that when he presents the book he will drop it. Holding the tome against his chest, he walks behind the altar. The place where, not a week before, he concealed himself to pray. Hands aloft, steadying the evangelion, its binding like thick mole’s skin against his fingers, he makes the sign of the cross and says, “Blessed is the kingdom of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages.”

Before he starts the Great Liturgy he looks to the place where Alejándro sat some days before. The pew is empty.

“In Peace, let us pray to the Lord.” He sees the peoples’ heads bow, their hands folded in front of them. But he cannot think of them. Alejándro’s broken eyes stare back intently into his.

Before the antiphons begin, Baldomero passes by the Eucharist table, the paten
holding the loaves of prosphora. A white aës is draped over the chalice like a shroud.

But there is no antimins on the table, no iconic cloth without which the rite should not continue. And now Baldomero is grateful then that he has not been ordained, that he can bestow upon his congregation these symbols without the hindrance of ecclesial law.

There is no government in his diocese save love.

Stepping forward he intones the ninety-first psalm.

Do I expose my sickness, he asks hearing his own gravelling voice. Have I given them a cause for fear?

“For my days are consumed like smoke, and my bones are burned as an hearth. My heart is smitten, and withered like grass; so that I forget to eat my bread.”

He sees the laity’s dry faces, stretched thin with anxious lines, like the cracked earth of a riverbed awaiting a deluge

“My days are like a shadow that declineth; and I am withered like grass.”

He touches his old ring that no longer fits his finger, concentrates on finishing the antiphons before the fomenting consumption pours forth from his lungs.

“He will regard the prayer of the destitute, and not despise their prayer.”

Thinking of Isabella, upstairs, sleeping in the room he has lived in for decades on end, he cannot help but think of tomorrow morning, when she wakes, not retires, to a sunrise, its light blanketing her like a husband’s body.

He finds the eyes of Fanuco and fixes on them to keep himself from turning around and lifting Isabella’s bandages. He wants to kneel next to her, sings psalms to her and watch her heal but for now he knows that his duty is in front of him.
“He weakened my strength in the way,” he says, stumbling on the words. The remembered warmth of incontinence returns to him and he furtively touches the front of his sticharion, checking for wetness. But it is dry and he finishes the antiphon. “He shortened my days.”

He mumbles the last memorized verselet asking for peace and hears the communicants respond: “Kyrie eléison.”

The second antiphon starts.

“The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy.”

He comes, at last, to the final antiphon. “The floods have lifted up, O LORD, the floods have lifted up their voice.”

Lifting the prosphora above his head he closes his eyes and breaks it in half. The faithful come forward in a line, passing in front of him as he carries a wafer in the cochlear and spoons the unconsecrated bread into their mouths; he tips the chalice for them to drink, wiping its rim with a white cloth. The rattle he has suppressed in his chest spasms and his hand twitches, a small dribble of wine coming down on the catechumen’s lip. To his left he sees Fanuco keep his head down and Domingo rubbing one forearm as he nervously shifts and awaits his communion. Baldomero sees a line of prostitutes behind them move their eyes away from his and though he tries to steady his hands, they quiver and the cochlear knocks against the parishioner’s teeth; the bread falls off.

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In the emptiness of the church he walks, his arms tired with their burden and he stares at the crucifix in the apse. He thinks of the thousands of candles that have melted on the
votive offering plate, the smoke and prayers that rose entangled together. Isabella, propped against the wall, turns her face from Baldomero when he approaches. She pulls the blanket closer. The color of her eye deserves a new name; a thin white line is the only evidence of an eye in the swell. He carries with him a stack of papers lined with his handwriting.

“I must go,” he says, downcast.

Isabella raises her head and brings her legs up to her chest.

“For the one lamb who is lost. Everything in his life—everything—has been stripped from him. For nine years he’s known nothing but loss.”

She rests her head on her knees, speaks into them, her words dampened. “But the trip will kill you.”

“Then my life is forfeit. Fanuco will drive me. He’s already agreed.” Baldomero coughs and wraps his blanket around him. The consumption gnaws through him, each rib a razor that rattles against his chest, his throat a well of blood.

Isabella slurs. “Aren’t you scarred?”

“No,” he gurgles. “Yes.”

She slides close to him.

“There will be no memory of me.”

“Only a whore’s memory,” she says.

He twirls his ring, looking at the roof to hide his eyes. Sorrow cements his throat, makes it impossible to breathe. His neck weakens and he lets his chin fall on his chest. She raises his hand to her bruised lips and kisses the back, and does not let go.
“I want you to stay here when I’m gone,” he says.

“I can’t stay here. I’m impure. Everyone knows it.”

“The world saw him as impure too,” he says, his eyes pointing to the crucifix. “And they abused him. Did with him as they wanted. So the world does to you, Isabella.” He gasps for air. “Do you know what your name means? It means, ‘Devoted to God.’” He speaks quickly, in between the wheezes that muffle his voice. “Regain everything that you’ve given away, everything that’s been taken from you. Through my father’s scars I learned what it means to carry someone else’s burden. Learn to forgive through yours.”

He walks to where Isabella sits and places the bundle in her hands. Taking her head in his hands he bends down and kisses the top of her head.

He does not know it, but the priest’s moves towards his last act of freedom, breathing in the fresh coastal air coming in as the storm’s forerunner. He stands in the center aisle, letting his fingers run over the rough hewn edges of the pews. Above him, purlins rot and moonlight seeps through the windows. He sees the coast and hears the gulls squawk. He raises a prayer, first for Alejándro, then for Nadia, Isabella, and himself. A new prayer, words he has never before spoken and finds in them a new calmness. He bends over, the roiling sickness strengthening within him. His coughing fills the sanctuary like smoke from a thurifer. The pain ceases for a moment and he tells himself, Just a little while longer.

“Father,” Isabella cries to him. She hobbles through the aisle and when she reaches Baldomero’s side, her lips tremble. She takes his hand and places it over her heart. Her fingers brush the metal ring. “Now I know what an act of mercy costs.”
Her words fall like an anointing oil poured over his head.