

CLOUDS OF DIRT AND GLASS

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CLOUDS OF DIRT AND GLASS

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Abstract:

There is a large goldmining colony near the top of the Peruvian Andes named La Rinconada. Over fifty-thousand people have made a home here, and my composite novel, *Clouds of Dirt and Glass*, follows the lives of a select few. Diana struggles with coming of age in a permanent place she thought would only be temporary; Antay battles his own and his sister's demons; and fathers struggle earnestly to understand their children while working more hours than their kids spend awake. Every day is surrounded with a haze of ice and snow and low-flying clouds and mists—and the knowledge that one day, soon, the mines will run dry, and this town will be abandoned, and eventually forgotten outside stories and tellings of a place and a people.

Each story exists in its own microcosm, but the setting is a static backdrop that threads each together. Protagonists of some stories appear as supporting or even background characters in others. Themes dealing with power struggle, class conflict, gender roles, and family echo through these stories not unlike the sledgehammers that reverberate out of mineshafts and into the streets of La Rinconada.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Story	Page
I. Lo Oculito .....	1
II. A Recipe for Wedding Cake .....	13
III. Pallaquera.....	21
IV. A Recipe for Water: Three Ways.....	34
V. Of Mercury.....	38
VI. The Glass Canary in the Gold Mine .....	39
VII. Of Gold .....	42
VIII. Come the Hero .....	44
IX. A Recipe for Chocoflan .....	54
X. An Exorcism .....	56
XI. Sonic Boom.....	64
XII. A Recipe for Caipirinha .....	67
XIII. Road to La Rinconada.....	68
XIV. A Recipe for Chilaquiles.....	78
XV. Small Gifts Presented.....	80
XVI. A Recipe for Cuy al Horno .....	88
XVII. Of La Rinconada .....	90
XVIII. The Girl from the Clouds.....	91

## LO OCULTO

I carried my wooden bucket upside-down as I made my way to the watermen. I tried to picture their trucks, lined up along the cliff, a short drive from the paved roads that didn't run all the way to our homes in La Rinconada. We carried our water into town ourselves, and we carried gold out.

My mouth was dry, but I clenched my lips together to avoid the snow's siren-like call. When I was younger, I'd tried to taste the snow, but it was stained with mercury just like the lake water that surrounded us. The metal taste filled my mouth along with stealing what little saliva I had. The sky sent each snowflake down as a sort of poisonous Trojan horse, and while I crave its cold and its wet, I knew that both would be overpowered by pang and sting.

Ice and snow pelted the Earth and my face, but the lake appeared untouched. The snow fell, and I thought surely touched down on water as easily as land, but a ring of dirt and stone surrounded the lake along with abandoned copper pans. The whole thing looked like a rusted bolt. I walked closer to the body of water, passing it like a stray bullet, and for a moment I heard a slight sizzle or crackling emanate from the lake. My hands burned from inside my mittens; they sensed being close to work, so I clenched my fists to protect them from thoughts of gold, copper, and acid. Mercury hid the acid in the lake. From above, I could see quicksilver ribbons stream through the lake, but below I knew acid ate away the white from sky as easily it did flesh from bone.

Past the lake, now overlooking where the trail to the watermen would have been, I tried to jump to and from footsteps already sunk by another. My boots, gifted by Mrs. Guerrero, were two sizes too big, and I didn't trust them to hold me up on slick of snow. I used the footprints of others like a mountain climber used holds, but I used them to climb down instead of up. I hopped from one hole to the next.

Had the watermen made it up the mountains that day? In this snow? If not, I blamed myself, and while I and my parents would be thirsty, we would have to wait one more day. Or however many days it took for the watermen came back. I would go down the mountain each time until they did. My tongue ached for water, my skin, for warmth, and my legs, for rest.

The route down the mountain was fogged; the falling snow became an opaque wall at a certain distance. I would put trust in my legs to remember when to turn as my eyes would not be able to see if footprints of the past filled. I clutched the bucket to my chest high enough to take the initial blow of wind so that my scarf might stay warmer longer.

It made sense in my head, but even beneath layers of cotton and wool, I felt exposed. The mountain itself dug its way into my skin along with cold and ice that came with.

I lifted a covered hand and pulled my winter hat tighter. Turning with the footprints, I saw a yellow dot begin to form in the white wall of snow. Slowly the dot grew into another woman. I met eyes with Nina as we walked up to one another. I was happy to see my closest friend during my long and lonely walk. She was carrying her own wooden bucket covered in a snow-speckled red cloth. She pulled the scarf from her mouth, and I mirrored her.

"Diana, you're running a bit late," she said. Her lips sank into a frown. One of worry rather than judgment. The kind of frown she gave me after her brother, Antay, and I had broken up almost a year ago. "I waited for you as long as I could."

“Hey,” I said, “I have a really good reason this time.” I raised my feet out from the prints they had sunk into, holding them for her to look.

Her expression had seemed concerned before, but sympathy was washed away in her smirk. “I see, so you were,” she raised one hand, made air quotes, “shopping.” She stumbled forward a bit, recovering before any water could spill. The cloth grew darker on the side nearest her body. My mouth was jealous.

“These were actually a gift.” I said, a phrase I had said many times before but rarely meant. “Mrs. Guerrero didn’t say I could keep them actually. Yet.” By now, I and all the other pallaqueras working for Mrs. Guerrero knew to check the monthly paycheck “fees” listing for any gifts that she had given them. I looked down at the boots. The blue denim was shoved inside the white fur that stuck out from inside the brown of the boot. Mrs. Guerrero had started giving me gifts, or rather lending me gifts, after a year of babysitting her son in addition to my duties with the rest of the pallaqueras at the lake. In a settlement like La Rinconada, built atop a mountain for the sole purpose of extracting gold, all work revolved around that lake and the mines that fed it.

“Okay, I was gonna call you a liar, but Mrs. Guerrero taking back her gifts is in character,” she said. “So it’s at least a good lie if nothing else.” I supposed that was the best I could hope for. She covered her mouth back up, her dark yellow fabric swallowing her face once more.

“I wanted to ask,” I covered my own face. “Is Valerio still waiting for me? And is there enough water, or should I just go back now?”

“Yes, Diana” she said, “Don Juan is still there.” I hated when she called him Don Juan. He wasn’t like that, but she couldn’t believe we spent a purely plutonic night with one another. Her eyes looked up the mountain past me.

“And the water?”

“Dia.” I watched Nina start walking back up the mountain. “You best be quick.” We pushed on past one another, her towards home with her brother and parents, and me towards Valerio.

The word “quick” beat into my head like a mantra. I had put off going to the watermen when it started snowing a day earlier. I thought, or hoped really, that the snow wouldn’t last, but I was wrong. The snow had begun to beat down harder and faster, and I had effectively made my life harder.

I imagined Valerio waiting for me at the plateau of the mountain. I hoped he was dressed warmly, and maybe even in his truck with the heat turned up. Heat that came from electricity, unlike the fire my family made within a ring of rocks in a shallow hole we dug in the center of our home. A fire that ate more wood each day than grew this far up. We had to take turns gathering firewood, and if we had none, we’d hold onto each other, covered in blankets. When we’d first moved, I thought my parents had been overreacting in our huddling together, but then I saw the frozen girl that first winter.

She was face down in the snow. I didn’t know yet to leave the body be. I had thought she was someone who might have fainted, fallen asleep, or didn’t really understand the concept of snow angels—or maybe even that I didn’t understand how to make snow angels in this town because I had been used to lying on my back several thousand feet closer to the earth’s core back in Lima.

I walked over to her, a ponytail sticking up and then falling flat to her back. I tried to play with it before I tugged at her shoulder. Her hair was frozen in place, though, and her shoulder was stiff. My arms ached as I pulled her side and forced her mouth to face upward. I wanted to scream when I saw what used to be her face, but what had now been frozen into a black mask—death’s mask people had called it—which was blacker than anything I’d ever seen. I stared at it for a long while before some invisible string pulled at me. I inched my finger towards the frostbitten flesh.

I ran back home, sat next to the fire into which my mother had been tossing scraps of a shelf we didn’t really need, into the fire that we did.



I exhaled into my scarf, thankful for the heat, and nervous for the heat's quick transformation into cold and moisture. I wondered if Valerio had ever seen death's mask, or what types of cosas ocultas he might have had.

Maybe he too kept it from everyone.

One night, I tested out a plan that I dreamed up. I decided to run away with Valerio. I had gotten the idea from my friend Antay. He had spoken of running away at one time, and I had told him he was crazy. I promised not to tell his secret plan, but now he's gone, and I was here. Maybe I was the crazy one to stay, but I was happy he'd gotten out.

Months passed, and I had started going to get water more often than ever. Once, my parents and I had gone in shifts, but now I offered nearly each time to go myself. My mother thought I was just growing into a responsibility that I had shrugged off when I was younger, telling me I had nothing to make-up for, and that I didn't owe them anything.

She was wrong in that I did owe them a lot, but I wasn't that selfless at the same time. My father was closer, though. He joked that I had found a boyfriend, and that I used getting water as an excuse to steal a few kisses in secret before going to get water from the watermen and heading back home. He was wrong about having a boyfriend, and he was wrong about the kisses, but the sentiment was close enough. When my face got warm, he'd exclaim that he was right, and my mom would tell him that he was just embarrassing me. She didn't want him to be right, and I assured them both that he wasn't. I told them the truth: I did owe them a lot, and getting water was the least I could do. I just didn't tell them that if I hadn't met Valerio, I would not have gone each time anyway—even if I did owe it to them. They smiled, and they bragged about this little act to others, and it was only Nina I entrusted my secret motivations and with my talk of Valerio.

Over the months I'd spent getting water from Valerio's truck only—receiving half-off my water some days, and walking back home with a mouthful of water, which he gave free, and spitting into a flowerpot onto a seed that might never grow—we had grown to be close friends, I liked to think anyway. I felt safe around him, and I felt a comfort that came with trusting someone. A trust that only came from a consistent and reliable friend that, almost never, let me down.

“Okay, say it again, one more time,” Nina said. “You want me to lie to your parents, you're going to run away with a stranger.” She counted off on her fingers, looked upwards, as if forgetting something even though I hadn't said anything like that. I started laughing. “And, I forget,” she said, continuing to hold a straight face. “Where am I supposed to look for your corpse? And we just had breakfast, so should I start looking around lunch?”

I pushed her shoulder, it gave in easily and we both laughed. “Nina, don't be so morbid. I'm not going to die.” I remembered the girl's face, the mask of death staring into me, eyelids showing through to eye.

“Okay, you're not dying, Di. So you aren't running away with a stranger?” She crossed her arms, and I knew that while her words were meant to dissuade me, she would still do what I asked of her.

“Valerio isn't a stranger,” I said. My arms mirrored hers. “He and I are friends, and we have been talking about hanging out for a weekend for a while. So will you cover for me? I'm not even asking you to go to my parents' house and lie. Just stay at home, talk about my shift with Mrs. Guerrero, and how I'm working the whole weekend watching Gabriel again.”

Nina's arms uncrossed, flopped to her side, and she let out a long and forceful groan. “All right,” she said. I leaped onto Nina, wrapping my arms around her and squealing with excitement. “But,” she said, “you owe me bigtime if I run into your parents at any point over the weekend. I swear.”

That afternoon I walked the route to the watermen, later than most start their trek. I kept my head down. I had borrowed Nina's yellow headscarf so that if someone saw me, they might have a chance at thinking I was her if I just kept them from seeing my face. My nose was smaller, my skin was lighter, and I was just overall less pretty than Nina was. I wondered if wearing her headscarf, I might absorb some beauty into my forehead or if my naturally messy-looking curls would learn her hair's secret of having perfect and wave-ridden locks.

Mostly, though, I hoped no one asked why I wasn't carrying a bucket as I walked down to the watermen. I carried a small twig I'd found with me, and passed others, thinking I could come up with an excuse about preemptively gathering firewood—though it was spring and nearly summer.

Valerio and I had talked about me spending a weekend with him for a while. He knew about the living conditions of La Rinconada, especially working so closely, and said he wanted to show me Cardenal, his pet vicuña. I had told him that until I met Cardenal, I would not believe he existed.

When I got to Valerio, he was talking to the last watermen there aside from himself. Valerio's water looked almost completely out, and I bet he had some of the same thoughts I did about looking out of place. He was out of water, yet he was still waiting around instead of driving home, done for the day, sold out of his merchandise—fresh water for a settlement with no drinkable water itself.

The other waterman waved to me when he saw me approaching. "Hello there, miss. Will you be purchasing a bucket today?" He held up a thin, plastic bucket. Most everyone in La Rinconada used wood, and if not wood, metal buckets. Plastic would warp its shape, carrying water up the mountain, especially the thin plastic buckets the watermen brought to sell. Wood and metal were sturdy, safe.

"No, sir." I waved the stick in the air. "I'm just out looking for firewood." The watermen's friendly demeanor turned frigid as his smile closed shut. "Have you seen any good kindling?" Valerio was biting his lip stifling a laugh from the looks of it, and I swore the light of the setting sun bounced off his pearl-white teeth just for him. The sun even taking special note of him.

Valerio stood by his truck as the other waterman, who had about half of his water left on the back of his truck, turned and got into his vehicle. The truck roared to life, a roar that echoed as he drove away.

“Gathering firewood?” Valerio let out the laugh that I knew he’d been holding in. “So I’m guessing you didn’t tell your parents that you were coming with me?”

My face turned warm again, like my father interrogating me about a boyfriend that I didn’t have. “Hey,” I said, “I hardly even tell my parents about my weekends at my boss’s house babysitting, so why would I tell them about this?”

He motioned for me to get into his truck, and for the first time since I was a child, I got to ride in a car. The streets of La Rinconada, if one could call them streets, were not fit for cars. The last vehicle I ever rode in was a bus that dropped me off on this godforsaken mountain, and now I was riding a truck down and off.

I spent the drive fidgeting with the twig I’d brought and staring out the window. It was my first time getting off the mountain since I’d arrived, and I wanted to watch the mountain disappear, savor its absence for what time I could. We chatted, made small talk, talked about our weeks. He hadn’t looked at me while he was driving down the mountain, and the roads looked tricky to navigate. Once we were off the mountain, I felt a wave of air wash over me. Like I had just taken a real breath for the first time in my life. Valerio’s gaze made its way over to me for an instant before he went back to the road.

“So,” Valerio said, “did you bring that stick as self-defense, or are you just really trying to sell your cover-up story?” He laughed at his own joke, and I laughed too. Laughter, off the mountain, felt so much better. Laughing felt like equal parts beating in my stomach and weightlessness in my lungs. On the mountain, it just felt like the beating.

I told him that I was just really into my cover story, and in a way I was. I thought about Nina having my back, and I wondered what my parents would do if they knew where I really was.

A small group of vicuñas was waiting outside the town that we drove into. I pointed and asked Valerio if one of those was Cardenal. Their fluffy white chests stuck out compared to their mostly brown fur. I wondered how something could stand on such narrow legs. If balance was a problem.

“Not even close,” Valerio said. “I’ve had Cardenal since he was a baby. Those guys over there are all wild.”

I fed Cardenal out of my hand in his pen outside of Valerio’s home, which itself squatted just outside the small city where he lived. Cardenal’s tongue and lips tickled as he ate the pellets few by few.

I tried not to stare too much at everything that excited me at his home. The wooden exterior, the doorknob, the toilet, a sink with running water. His home was small, barely larger than my own, but it had amenities that I hadn’t seen in almost a decade. The Guerrero’s had a wooden house, a doorknob, and the like, but I almost forgot running water, and not running a bucket of water, was a regular thing. I thought, maybe, I had dreamed that up in my childlike imagination. Like a dream that commits to your brain like a memory, stuck there, blending fact and fiction.

When he showed me his bedroom, almost reflexively, I jumped into the bed. I made a habit out of utilizing each and every moment of bedrest that was given to me to the fullest advantage. It took me a moment to remember where I was; instead of the usual guest bedroom of the Guerrero’s home, this house had only one bedroom I realized.

“Oh,” I said, “I didn’t realize this was your bed. I thought it might be the guest room.” I jumped back off.

“No,” Valerio said, waving his hands, “no, it’s fine. I was planning on sleeping on the couch while you were here. I can sleep in my bed anytime, really, it’s yours.” He turned on the light to a room connected to his bedroom—the bathroom. He said I could run the hot water until there was no more, and I

considered that for a moment. If he had hot water, how did it run out? Did he have to go get it somewhere, too? I didn't ask because I didn't want to seem dumb; I had told him I was originally from the city, and I did my best to not appear a stranger to such luxuries, but to accept them gladly as he offered.

After a bath, the mirror was fogged. I looked into the mirror, and wiped it with one hand. My hair was dripping water, and I remembered how my mom used to wrap her hair in with the towel when I was younger. I attempted the same. Once I was certain the hair and towel entanglement was sure to stay tied together, I wrapped another towel around my body, and I walked out to see Valerio. I had seen, in glimpses of movies that Gabriel watched at the Guerrero house, scenes similar to this one, and I tried to recreate what I thought I should do.

I walked right up to Valerio and I pressed my lips to his. I had closed my eyes, and I wondered if that was what a kiss was supposed to feel like. I also briefly wondered if I had accidentally kissed a wall. Motionless, cold to the touch compared to my bath-heated skin. I opened my eyes and watched Valerio pull away, eyeing me. I realized what I'd done, that it wasn't some dream I was in, and that in real life I had just kissed someone.

“Diana,” Valerio said, “I don't want you to get the wrong idea.”

I had the wrong idea. If kissing him was wrong that was. I thought about his words for a moment though, and I wondered what wrong ideas, aside from him being interested in me, I could have gotten. What should I say? Oh no, I didn't. Walk away, play it cool, act like it never happened. Maybe I should just tell him I tripped and that the little puff of air my puckered lips sucked into a sound was just how I said “ouch.”

I did none of that though. Instead, I murmured that bathwater had gotten into my eye as I turned away, hoping tears wouldn't actually fall, but prepared in case they did with a foolproof and airtight excuse. “Wow, it sure is getting late,” I said.

“Hey,” Valerio grabbed out for my arm. I pretended to fight his grip, but I wanted his touch. “Diana, let’s talk about this.” The last thing I wanted to do was talk about it. It felt like I had just fallen into the lake and his wanting to talk about it was the equivalent of everyone making sure that I knew I had fallen into the lake. I knew.

I turned back toward him. My imagination was so vivid I felt like I could feel the lake on my face.

“What’s there to talk about?” I said. I was really hoping he would want to talk about having seen the frozen girl that I had. I wanted him to tell me we shared that, so even if we didn’t share feelings, we shared that. I hoped that his next words were anything aside from the kiss. I still had warm bathwater running down my cheeks.

He wiped the bathwater away with one of his thumbs, which I thought was a weird thing to do. I just use a towel usually, and then I let the rest evaporate. “Diana, I do like you,” he said. My stomach jumped.

I tried to shoot my body a signal from my brain that I hoped sounded like *cálmate*. The butterflies weren’t listening though, and I felt a unique combination of glee, sorrow, and nausea. I was waiting for the “but.”

“But,” he said. I knew it. He had complete control of my brain in that moment. The butterflies too. He shot a signal loud and clear, and the butterflies instantly turned black in my stomach and plummeted into the lake of acid beneath them. “But are you sure you want to do this?” I wanted him to shut up. Did I look like someone who was unsure? Everything he said bit into me like cold into my bare skin. No matter what he was saying, the message was the same as before. It was so much colder in here than before. “Tell me that it’s all okay. That you’re okay. Diana?”

My face had been bitten off by the frost in his speech by now. I had become the frozen girl. My eyes burned in a way that my eyelids could never save them from, and my teeth were stuck in the same, lipless, permanent smile that was on her dead face. It was a bittersweet moment. “It’s okay, Valerio,” I said. And maybe it would be okay eventually. “I’m okay.” I would say anything to get him to stop looking at me like I looked at the frozen girl when I’d seen her myself.

“I just think we should slow down,” he said. I nodded in response, gnawing at the inside of my lip to keep away gravity from pulling at the sides of mouth. His white as snow smile didn’t have that same warmth to it anymore. He pulled me in for a kiss, and I kissed back, but somehow everything had been ruined. The kiss felt wrong now.

“No, you’re right,” I said. “I don’t want to rush into anything,” I said. I kept saying, but I wasn’t meaning. “I just really like you.” I meant that. A bit of warmth rushed back into me, but it was a cocktail of anger and embarrassment for this moment, and I couldn’t let him see or know that.

“It really is getting late, though.” Did I say that? Or did he? I heard the words, but I couldn’t tell who said them.

The snow had slowed down, and as I came to the plateau, which I could only tell as my body realized it was causing itself to lean against a flat surface instead of the rest of the leaning mountain, I looked around at the white wall searching for a sign of Valerio, but all I could see was snow.

I fell forward, a gust of wind blew me from behind, and I didn’t fight it. I felt my face touch snow as I heard the bucket sink into slush, and it stung. The smell of metal filled my nostrils. I remembered the death-masked girl, and I wondered if she felt the same stinging before she died. Had she already been numb before she fell forward.



## A RECIPE FOR WEDDING CAKE

These The first rule to a successful marriage is a successful wedding, and the wedding is intrinsically tied to the cake. A lot can be said about a couple through their wedding's cake. Katarina and Ale had a wedding this previous summer, and although I know that you could not attend, I thought you might find what I have to say worthwhile. Dare I say important?

Firstly, this story won't make any sense if I don't add foundation first. You will recall Katarina and Ale met at university. This was true, but they didn't meet in their political science class's discussion section. On the contrary, they met in a taqueria bathroom after the bars closed one night.

I was watching from the line, waiting to order, when Katarina walked up to Ale. She had just finished putting money into the jukebox and playing our song: the English song "Rhiannon", by Fleetwood Mac. I didn't hear what she said, she was drowned out by the music, and I can't be sure if what she told me was true, so I will try my best to relay a middle ground.

Katarina made it a rule not to drink the last half hour at the bar before ordering tacos to soak up the tequila—everyone had their own anti-hangover superstitions. Mine was to only take shots and sip on soda water while dancing. When I saw Katarina walking over to Ale, it didn't feel momentous. I'd seen this trick before. She was walking in his direction only once the line had shaped perfectly so that the slope

between Katarina and Ale aligned with the trajectory for the women's restroom. Calculated. She fell right into him, just like I'd seen her do to many men before Ale.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I swear I'm not that drunk." Katarina slowly climbed to her feet, with the help of Ale. His expression quickly morphed from shocked to delighted—again, not an uncommon response. She was wearing a short, black dress. Nothing too extravagant, but you would guess that she didn't own a pair of shoes with less than four-inch heels. "It's just these heels." She decided to walk barefoot after that. Ale introduced himself and offered to help her to the restroom, and the rest is history.

You're not off the hook that easy though. I had to hear all about the gritty details the next day. Katarina brought Ale into the restroom with her, the family restroom. You know the one? When it's locked, the red paper shows on the knob. I wondered if they had locked themselves in there indefinitely while I ate my tacos at a booth with strangers. It was too packed to feel comfortable telling them they couldn't sit with me.

I was watching a woman named Rosario vacuum tacos into her mouth. I watched in horror and envy as she inhaled half-a-dozen tacos al pastor. Drool was dripping from her boyfriend's mouth, and he didn't appear able to speak. I was happiest for his presence since Rosario didn't know how to shut up. She spoke with her mouth full of taco, and I watched bits of meat fly from her mouth and imagined those bits flying into Katarina.

Ale kissed her neck before he kissed anywhere else. Not just the first time they kissed, but anytime. She told me that he spent a good minute kissing her below her chin and complimenting her perfume before he would attempt to meet lips. Katarina found it as endearing as she found it annoying. She wasn't the most patient person, and she wasn't all that interested in romance. This isn't to say that she doesn't believe in romance, but when so few romances can statistically work out, it starts to bring up nihilistic views on foreplay. Foreplay, in this sense, became a necessary evil for Katarina. Foreplay was like an oasis in the middle of the Sahara Desert, and without that oasis, that desert was going to be very

dry and a lot less enjoyable of a walk through if you catch my drift. I had, on a number of occasions, suggested she just use lubricant if she was so opposed to the buildup and preamble of sex, but she maintained that the squirting noise made by the bottle of lube made her dryer than any lubricant could withstand or change. I told her she was being ridiculous, but alas, it was probably her pride. She was young and she couldn't rely on her own body's ability to get wet with men.

So she let him kiss her neck for sixty seconds—counting them down no doubt. She let him grope her breasts while she kept her hand firm on his cock. She didn't move it away toward anywhere else. She wanted one thing from this man, at the time at least, and he wanted all of her. I think she liked that, though, his wanting her. She guided his hands away from her pussy until she wanted his fingers inside. Then, she tilted her head away and pretended it felt better than it actually did in order to take a break from the effort that kissing took. She leaned her head against the stall and let out pants and moans, pretending they were meant to be louder ones that she was attempting to stifle because of their public setting. Each time, when Katarina knew it was time, she'd mutter something that would make her cringe when she thought back later. Something like “put it in me” or “fuck me” or “I want you inside me right now.” These, again, were necessary evils themselves. Someone can tell it's an act if one were to say “okay, I'm ready, put your dick in me.” That is the language of longtime lovers—Katarina and Ale had just met, and so, she went with something more evocative of the moment: “cogeme, cabrón” she whispered into his ear.

I played this scene over and over in my head. There was nothing spectacular about this guy, and she told me about others, but there was a look in her eyes with this one. A look in her eyes that she's never had before.

Meanwhile, Rosario was wiping up a puddle that was forming on the table underneath her boyfriend's mouth. I hate the texture of saliva on hands. It reminds me of my grandma. She used to spit in her cups—don't ask me why—and sometimes my hands would feel that glob of saliva while doing the dishes. It was liquid, but there was some body to it. It was like water if it were body temperature and only

moved in slow motion. My memory of touching the spit felt like it was in slow motion too. Eventually, I learned to wear gloves. If you can't stop people from spitting, you have to stop yourself from getting spat on. And sometimes you have to spit back at those that spat on you. And no, I didn't spit on my grandma.

Katarina started seeing Ale more and more, and I started to see her less. Pinche perra. I watched her use up and throw away man after man. They were worth to her the price of the condom they put on. But we had been friends for so long, and if I tell you anything, know this: I loved your mother.

Within months, Katarina had moved out of our apartment, and I was alone again. She had moved in with Ale, and I had moved on with my life. At least until I saw that she was getting married to him. That's when I got an idea: I would bake a cake.

The day before her wedding, I set my plan in motion. It was the first time using this kitchen since I had moved in with Rosario and her boyfriend. The kitchen was a bit more cramped, but it had a working oven. What more could I ask for? The oven was a pale black color—the kind of color that made you wonder if it had been charred from white or if it had faded from a darker, more vibrant shade of black.

I found the recipe I was using from an old Brujería cookbook that my grandmother had given me before she passed. There were some weird recipes in the book, in fact, most of them didn't look like recipes at all. They were all handwritten, and it looked like different handwritings would pop in from time to time. Different colors of ink, too. The wedding cake recipe also didn't have amounts of ingredients, so I had to go with my best guess.

“I knew I should have looked at the recipe and not just the table of contents,” I cursed. I was stirring the batter when Rosario came into the kitchen. She watched as I poured sugar straight from the bag into the largest mixing bowl I could find at the store.

“Hey, are you making tacos?” she asked. I stared at her, dumbfounded for a moment. Here I was pouring sugar into a giant bowl and she thought: tacos.

“It’s cake. I’m going to a party today,” I said. A wedding was a kind of party anyway, but it’s a depressing type of party to admit to going to single or without even a plus one. My arms were aching from stirring the huge amount of batter I had decided to make. Rosario stared at me, unmoving.

“I didn’t know you baked,” she said. By now she was walking around and gathering her keys and jacket.

“I don’t.” She nodded at me, knowingly. “It’s for my friend though. She loves white cake.” It was a white wedding cake with buttercream frosting. Speaking of butter, my grandma seemed to have hated it. She was really mean to butter in this book. I didn’t know why she was talking to her foods, but then again she was a bruja, so I didn’t question it too much. I heard Rosario leave the apartment.

“Now you better rise,” I said to the cake. “I am putting a lot of work into you, and I expect the same in return.”

After the kitchen was sufficiently dirtied, every pan had been coated in batter, and all the tiers were layered and frosted, it was time to set all the dishes in the sink since it was Rosario’s turn to do dishes. Thankfully today landed on her turn. I wiped my hands on a fresh, unused plate, and I set it in the sink before I got dressed for the wedding reception. Initially, I was going to try to make the ceremony, but time flies when you’re baking a wedding cake for the first time from a recipe that asked you to hurt the ingredients.

When I showed up to the reception at the nicer community center in the city, I made sure to walk in like I knew what I was doing. Some catering staff were walking around placing food on a line of tables meant

for grazing. I shouted to someone that looked like they knew what was going on, but not like they cared about what was going on just in case.

“Hey,” I shouted to a woman with a short, bob haircut. “Where should I put this wedding cake?” She didn’t look up with her whole head, she simply shifted her eyes up to me. If I could hear looks, I would have heard a low growl coming from her eyes.

“Just put it at the dessert table with the other one.”

Success. She didn’t suspect that my cake was a fraud. Or, she knew it was, and she just didn’t care. Either way, I was in. My cake was at the ceremony, and I was happy I had come this far and would now be immortalized in this day. If only for my own memory, and now for yours.

Apparently, Katarina had caved to what Ale wanted. When I set my cake down, I realized that the real wedding cake was chocolate—or at least its frosting was. Katarina hated chocolate though; I was sure of it. The real cake looked like a machine had made it—straight lines, even frosting, and decorative icing maneuvers like pink frosting flowers atop the brown, chocolate icing.

My cake, on the other hand, was an uneven layering of white, buttercream frosting. Some parts of the cake weren’t fully covered, but I imagined it was fine because the cake itself was white. The lopsided layers were noticeable from up close, but from far away it looked fine. Or if you squinted. I didn’t have time for decorations, so I took the little bride decoration from the top of the chocolate cake and placed it onto mine. Now it looked like the two cakes were meant to be there—more-so than without anyway. I went to sit in the parking lot to wait for guests to spill in. I didn’t want to be seen as the first one to arrive and get instantly recognized. We were roommates for a while; we did intimately know one another. And maybe not being recognized was scarier yet.

People came, walked up to Katarina and Ale and shook hands, hugged, cried. I cried too, but I didn’t make a group event of it. I sat and waited for everyone to eat and watched the two cakes closely.

No one seemed suspicious that there was an extra cake. Maybe the cake plans were made too far in advance to remember? Katarina seemed happy. I saw her point to my cake. My heart started to raise. What was she saying? Her lips moved, and Ale nodded, and then my heart sank back down when they kissed. Glasses made clinking noises. There was so much food around me and all I wanted was to puke.

There was a moment, a singular glance, when Katarina and I made eye contact. It was quick, but it lasted forever. It was in that moment that I saw she no longer had that look in her eyes that she had before. The look I was jealous of? It was gone. Replaced with something I couldn't know because I didn't know her anymore. I wasn't sure if the look was better, worse, but I wanted more than anything to know what that look was.

When it was time for the cake to be cut, Katarina and Ale both walked up to the cakes and were both given a knife. I wanted Katarina to eat my cake and know it was me who made it. I wanted her to taste the lemon zest I added because we used to ask for extra lemons at restaurants, coat them in sugar packets, and suck on them together. I wanted her to taste the cake and know that it was my hands that stirred the batter. I wanted her to cut into it, and know that she had cut into me. But she didn't. Ale cut my cake, the white cake, the fake cake. Katarina cut the chocolate. Ale dabbed frosting from my cake onto Katarina's nose as she bit into the chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. He was rubbing her nose with my cake, rubbing it in my nose at the same time.

But again, that look of wanting that she used to have? It was gone. I couldn't tell at the time if it was because she had what she wanted already, or if she no longer wanted it. I was pretty sure a lot of people ask themselves that same question. "Do I really want this?" Of course you do. "Do I want something else?" Of course you do, too. "Am I okay choosing this over the potentiality of something better?" No, but you do it anyway. Katarina did it anyway.

As I got up to leave the wedding, I heard it. I turned to see Katarina and Ale walking to the middle of the dancefloor as “Rhiannon” started playing. I could not begin to infer what this meant to Katarina. Was she playing it for me? Did she replace “me” from the “our” in “our song?” Replace me with Ale? Or was the song always Katarina’s song and never anybody else’s?

Regardless of the answer, the reason, or anything else, I knew I had to leave. That was the last time I saw your mother, but I hope that she forgets me. That’s all I could ask. I know how much it hurts not to forget her.



## PALLAQUERA

My father's words echoed through the mountains around La Rinconada the day we arrived. Some semblance of those echoes sounded each morning as the sun filtered through my makeshift barbed wire windowpanes, the light flooding the dirt-floored room and projecting a spotlight onto the flower pot next to my mattress. It was filled with potting soil and a single seed hidden beneath the surface. I wasn't allowed to waste water, what little money we had, on a plant. No plants grew in La Rinconada. I lifted a handful of the potting soil.

“One or two years up here, and then we'll leave.”

My father's deep voice felt to my ears then like the dirt felt now as it sifted through my fingers. It was warm and, at the same time, empty. I was grounded through his words, and I liked to imagine he meant them. That we really were going to leave, originally, before I spent the bulk of my youth in La Rinconada. That he really thought moving was best for us. Living in a place where every breath felt like it was taken through a straw.

I threw on my dress, pocket newly sewn into the side, and draped my shawl over my head and around my shoulders. The way my mother had shown me so many times. The sun was up, so my father was already gone. He had told me the night before that he didn't want to wake me—that I'd need my rest.

The smell of my mother's cooking wisped into my nostrils as I got to my bedroom door. I placed my fingers into the curves of the sheet metal that separated me from the rest of the house and walked through.

My mother cooked in silence, her back to me as I sat at the rickety table. I took my place in the newer of the two wooden chairs; the other one was splintered and worn. After she put the eggs onto three separate plastic plates, I could make out a soft sizzle coming from the cast iron pan that rested on flames.

"Mom." She looked at me with stung-red eyes. A cold shot through me and my tongue fell, numb. I lowered my eyes, unable to say more. My mother's hands told the story of my own in the future: rough palms, discolored past the knuckles, like she dipped her hand in chocolate milk and the residue never completely came off.

"Diana?" I shook my head, taking back whatever I had wanted to say, now forgotten. "I made sunny-side-up." She set two of the plates onto the table. The other was already wrapped in tinfoil, reused each morning, for when dad would get home.

The soft clatter of plastic cutlery against plastic plates filled the air between us. We ate in the quiet of our separate chairs and spaces. We weren't used to sharing a table, but Mrs. Guerrero had gotten us a matching chair a week earlier, in anticipation for my eighteenth birthday. I would be surprised if she and her husband didn't find some way to justify taking the price of the chair from our family's pay at the end of the month. As it was, we could barely afford the one thing not sold at the Guerrero family's stores: fresh water.

I got up and set my plate and fork in the washbasin. I would have to go to the watermen today; yesterday's rain had kept everyone trapped indoors. I needed to clean the grease from the plates, and my hair, but that might take more water than I could carry. We could only go so long without water in the house.

I heard the sound of dirt and pebbles clinging the roof of our home. I looked back to my mother, and she worded an inaudible let's go. We both knew that sound meant the other pallaqueras were making their way through the last road before our own.

They walked with an organized chaos in their formation. The few hundred women formed a mudslide through the trenches that made up the main roads. The woman leading the group, Mrs. Guerrero, had a smile on her face. She stepped into a puddle, splashing a wet brown stain onto the dresses of the two women immediately behind her.

“Good morning, Diana! And happy birthday!” Her words seemed genuine, but then again, they always did. Her smile glowed red with her signature lipstick. Her and her family were the only ones with makeup in all of La Rinconada.

“Good morning, Mrs. Guerrero.” I forced a smile as the group came to a halt. “Thank you again for the chair.” Mrs. Guerrero's hair bounced as she nodded, and I wondered if she might be shaking her head more forcibly than usual to show off her new perm.

The women from this road were all hurrying out of their homes and joining the group. My mother came from behind me, shutting the no-knob door behind her. She didn't look at me, and I almost told her that I was fine. Almost.

My and my mother's walk to the lake was shorter than it was for most others. We lived on the lowest road in La Rinconada. It was reserved for newcomers. The idea was that, since the oxygen was thinner as you moved up the mountain, the lowest road would be for those not born in La Rinconada. I didn't think the air was much thicker though.

There was hushed chatter as we walked through the underpass. It wasn't a long tunnel, but it was dark, and whispers bounced off the stone walls. When inside, everyone knew to head straight forward, to stay away from the wooden boards on the walls, and to never walk through the center. The beams in the

middle, along with the planks on the sides, had kept the tunnel up since I first walked into the underpass a little more than a decade ago. The first time, I remembered being underwhelmed as we stepped through the other end and saw the shabby dwellings plaguing the summit.

Walking through the tunnel heading away from La Rinconada, or at least toward the exterior, the view was better. Mountains ran along the sky, snow covering their peaks until the mountains faded into the smoke of the clouds. I wondered what life was like off the mountain sometimes. Zhiwei and I used to imagine how the world was changing while we were away from it. We agreed that water must be free off the mountain, and no one died from hunger. We told each other that we'd make sure to keep together once we left. Once, we would say, never imagining it as if.

The lake up in the mountain fed streams that flowed down to the base. Its large body of water was framed by a row of circular copper pans and bulky metallic cylinders—tools of the trade. The entire lake was a deep sort of blue, and it was motionless enough to look like a painting from far off. Painted with silver and with poison.

Mrs. Guerrero placed her hand on my upper back. I wondered if she sensed my hesitation. She began a lecture on the dangers of the lake; she told me not to drink the water as if my own parents hadn't had the decency to tell me this countless times when I was younger. She talked about the precautions we would take if it began to rain, but she said the copper pans could protect us from the acid rain if we couldn't make it to shelter.

“Thank you again, Mrs. Guerrero.” She had never known another home. She was born, raised, and rooted here. She had no memories of a time before or without La Rinconada. “I hope I catch on.”

“Oh, you will, don't worry.” She patted my back. “I know a lot of you ladies are nervous your first day, so I'll be right there beside you if you have any questions. Training day is easy, dear.”

I wrapped my shawl around my shoulders tighter and felt it loosen around my head as a soft, frigid chill blew through the group. I could see others doing the same. Even in spring, the cold was inescapable, but luckily there was no snow, and it wasn't windy today. It was calm and gentle. As if the mountains themselves were trying to make it up to me.

"Diana," my mother's voice was soft and weak, "I forgot to tell you that your father was sorry he couldn't see you off today." Her eyes weren't as red anymore. She whispered, so Mrs. Guerrero wouldn't hear, a soft apology.

"It's fine." I wasn't sure if I meant her apology or dad's. But it felt like the right thing to say. "I understand." It was hard to forgive someone who uprooted you from your childhood home and friends. Even if they were your parents.

"I'm sure Joaquin is going to love hearing all about it when you see him tonight!" Mrs. Guerrero offered. My mother and I nodded in unison. After working all day in the mines, it was hard for him to stay up or converse. After fourteen hours in a mine, anyone would be dead tired. "It's always an exciting day. The first day as a pallaquera for your daughter, and the last day of extraction for you." I was happy for my mother, and she was probably happy too, but I also hoped she felt guilty. It was my mother's last day as an extractor, but it was my first. I vowed to never raise a daughter here.

I lost my footing once, when we made it to the lake. The ground around the lake was loose stone and jagged rock. Mrs. Guerrero and my mother, on either side of me, grabbed my wrists when they saw me stumble, making sure I didn't fall. Each for a different reason. Mrs. Guerrero's hands were not like my mother's; they were like mine. Solid in color, smooth, and untainted with labor. It felt good to the touch. My mother's hands grated me at her palms, but they were inhumanly slick at the tips. Water came to my eyes, so I gulped a mouthful of lake-stained air. The taste of metal covered my tongue like the yolk from breakfast. It was hard to swallow.

Mrs. Guerrero shouted to the group that they could get to work, but she told the new women to go with her. My mother looked back to me as her and the rest of the pallaqueras climbed the rocks with poise, some not so gracefully held onto their mothers as they went. Must have been new too.

“Welcome to the pallaqueras, ladies.” Mrs. Guerrero spoke as if reading a script. “As you know, not everyone elects to take on this difficult position.” I bit my cheek. She should have said no one. I eyed the two other women around me. I recognized Kamala, but I was surprised we shared a birthday. I always thought she was younger than me. Growing up, no one spoke of birthdays. The other woman was a stranger. “Gertrude moved here with her husband recently.” Kamala and I smiled to her in welcome and in apology.

“Yes, he came to work in the gold mines, and I wanted to help financially.” Gertrude seemed as authentic, and naïve, as any other outsider.

“That’s wonderful, dear.” Mrs. Guerrero ate this type of thing up. “Your main job as a pallaquera, Gertrude, will be to separate gold out of the unrefined ore using the copper pans, nitric acid, and mercury provided. You may call me Mrs. Guerrero, and I’m the head of the pallaqueras. My husband manages the mines, but as you two know,” she motioned to Kamala and me, “the pallaqueras help squeeze as much gold out from the land as possible. And we squeeze a pinch of gold into your pockets each month!”

A pinch was probably the proper term for how much pallaqueras earned. The Guerrero family took rent, groceries, and tuition from La Rinconada’s schools out of everyone’s pockets each month. The Guerrero family being in charge of everyone’s salary and expenses equated to accruing debt, as many needed advances in order to afford water from the watermen. This jail cell of a mountain in the corner of the world was our home now.

Each woman stood around six feet apart from one another as they worked on the edges of the lake. I imagined they would talk to one another as they worked, but a hush pulsed through the air instead of voices. Mrs. Guerrero had us observe one of the pallaqueras whom I recognized as Kamala’s older

sister, Sana. She had only been old enough to work for a couple of years now, but I could see the change. I saw her hands eroding away as she submerged the copper pan in the water with both palms. She had placed the ore and mercury into the pan before cupping water into it, and now it floated in the water. It looked almost pretty—silver streaks floated in clear water, the copper below it. If only it weren't sapping the life clean out of her.

Then it started to bubble. Silver bled into white, and steam appeared as Sana turned her head from the chemical reaction and resulting gases. Maybe mountains didn't disappear into clouds. Maybe they disappeared into the smoke created by other mountains' own pallaqueras. Artificial clouds of acid and metal.

“Ah yes, there we go,” Mrs. Guerrero said.

“What? Where's the gold?”

Each question made Gertrude look more like an outsider, and I wondered if that was how my mother had been seen when she first joined the pallaqueras. Mrs. Guerrero pointed to the globules of silver that had formed on the surface. Sana set down her pan, picked up a large syringe, and sucked up the silvery bead. I imagined that was what a tumor extraction would look like.

After, Sana rinsed her hands in the lake. I saw her slip a loose strand of hair back under her head scarf. I tightened my shawl as best I could lest some mercury and acid splashed from one of the pans as we observed for the rest of the day.

Some of the older pallaqueras brought the younger ones more ore each time she finished with the last, and I wondered which was worse. Extracting the gold, or thrusting it on the others. But the older pallaqueras did not escape the job of extraction; they had just been promoted or, more likely, used up. Often times, when one's daughter became a pallaquera, a promotion was in store for the lucky mother.

The lunch at break was provided by Mrs. Guerrero, as she made clear, and was a small portion of bread, cheese, and water. She also made certain everyone understood to take only one bottle of water. I tried to give mine to my mother because I hadn't had to work all day, but she made me drink it.

Before the end of the work day—hours of women bringing rocks to other women who splashed the rocks around with acid and liquid metal—Mrs. Guerrero called us new pallaqueras over. She wanted to make sure we understood our roles starting that next morning. We all voiced our agreement and said that we understood the job, but I think we just understood that we had to agree.

Kamala and I were probably more shocked than Mrs. Guerrero with what Gertrude said next. The one question I hadn't thought to ask, and the one answer I had never been given. Not just today, but my whole life up until now. Why had I never asked my mom? Why hadn't she told me?

“Does it hurt?”

I could tell from the look on her face that Mrs. Guerrero didn't know what to say. And from the look of her hands, she didn't know the answer.

The walk back to town today was the most difficult since first arriving. Back then, it was difficult because we had just climbed a mountain, and my body ached from the three miles of physical exertion. Carrying the weight of me. Slowly, I was beginning to feel the weight of my family on my shoulders, in my chest, and in my hands.

Where everyone turned left to go through the underpass back to our homes, I stopped. I felt them pass me; no one said a word, and maybe no one noticed. I stood there, staring out at the mountains as the sun was setting. The snow still covered the peaks, but by now it had bled into a burnt orange along with the sky. Like mountains topped with fire. They started to blur. The heat from the flames must have been obscuring the image. I could feel that heat on my face too.

“Diana.”



My mother's voice cut through my absent-minded gaze. It was my turn; I looked back to her with watery eyes.

“Mom?”

I didn't think that she turned away from me because she didn't care. I didn't think she left without hugging me because that was easiest. I wanted to believe that she loved me so much that she was going to let me leave. This was the out; this was me choosing to stay or go. I clenched my fists and started walking away from the underpass.

The trail down to the watermen was more familiar and comfortable than the trail to the lake. This path was a more solid dirt. There was a row of trucks sitting where the mountain plateaued, three were left, hoping to sell the last of their water and goods before driving home. Their trucks were carrying jugs, the size of some families' dwellings, full of water. There were a few spigots along the edge of each jug. One of the watermen waved me over.

His smile was whiter than anyone's in La Rinconada, and it looked lighter pressed against his dark, sun-tanned skin. I toyed with the idea of him being a Guerrero that lived outside of town. When I asked him for just a sip, his smile didn't fade, and he obliged. He introduced himself as Valerio to me, and I thanked him before I lowered myself to the spigot and filled my mouth. The water tasted clean, especially compared to the air at the lake. I swished it around in my mouth and held it there as I made my way back home.

Breathing through my nose, I could smell the crisp and dirty air of this place. The ground I walked on was stained with mercury, just as I would be soon. I tried to focus on the water in my mouth—savoring it but not swallowing.

I walked through the front door, and to my bedroom immediately on the left. I could hear the splashes of my mom using the water to do dishes in the washbasin, or maybe washing her hair. I kneeled

down and spat my mouthful of water into the pot and onto the seed. I thought the water would take longer to absorb, but the dark markings formed instantly. The soil drank it, thirsty.

The splashes in the other room had stopped. I heard my mother's voice calling me. It was soft and far away, but I heard it.

"I didn't think you were coming back." She said from outside my door. "Can I come in for a minute?" I walked to the door. I placed my fingers into the curves and contemplated telling her no, it was just a moment, but I still thought it. I opened the door. "Diana," she said without stepping forward, "I don't know what to do either. You know that your father and I never wanted this to be permanent."

"Mom, it's fine." I had been wanting to say that all day, but it was hard to lie to your mother while she was crying.

"I just don't want you to feel like you have to stay. That you owe your father and I anything." Tears were welling up in her eyes, and I was afraid to tell her the truth. That I wanted desperately to leave. "We just want what's best for you."

"I know. You've both always wanted what was best for me."

They just never knew what was best. And I couldn't leave with nowhere to go. Maybe if I could go back and tell them never to move to La Rinconada, we would have been living somewhere with wooden floors. These were the cards we'd been dealt though, and I had to help my family play the game.

"With me working, it's only a matter of time before we can all leave."

I said those words with the same confidence I had heard in my father's countless times before. Gradually, my mother stopped crying, and we chatted for a few more minutes standing in the doorway. I hoped I was right about us leaving. She told me that dad was playing poker, he normally played on weekends up near the mines, and that he'd gone after she'd told him that I wasn't coming back home with

her. My mom said she would wait up for him to let him know that I was back home. We hugged, finally, before saying goodnight. Her long, straight hair brushed against my shawl, still around my shoulders.

I stared at the flower pot as the sun inched towards it that morning. I had woken up before the sun, and I heard my father leave through the front door. It felt routine already. I woke up and wrapped an emerald-colored headscarf around myself—it was tighter than the shawl from the day before. My mother and I smiled at one another, which felt forced, but we were coming to terms with me becoming a pallaquera.

We joined the others and walked down to the lake. Mrs. Guerrero, though still boisterous, did not concern herself with me during our walk as much as the day before. It was warmer today, and the warm days were the worst. Not because it was hot; on the contrary, it was never actually hot in La Rinconada. These days were the worst because you grew thirstiest. The sun beamed down on us just a little heavier than usual.

I decided not to look at the lake while we approached it; instead, I looked past it. To the mountains overlooking. I knew that we had just come from the summit of the mountain, but to me, these peaks seemed higher. Their rocky exteriors were more jagged and uneven than the cliffs where our homes were built.

We were at the lake, and there was no more looking past it. Kamala and Gertrude and I had somehow gravitated to one another during the walk here, and we stood together as the other pallaqueras walked to the lake. I saw my mother's face look back to me before turning forward again, becoming indistinguishable among the other few hundred wrapped heads.

It was Sana who spoke to Kamala, Gertrude, and me. Mrs. Guerrero was watching us from a chair, away from the lake. She sat in the shade with a bottle of water. She and her husband were the only

people who could afford to buy their water pre-bottled. The bottles said ‘spring water’ on them, and they had pictures of mountains—not our mountains.

“You all watched me yesterday,” Sana motioned, her fingers glossy, to the three copper pans next to her. “I can show you once more if you’d like.”

She could show me a thousand more times if it meant I wouldn’t have to do it myself. No words of protest from the three of us. We submitted. I expected it from Kamala, but I was surprised to see Gertrude keeping her mouth shut. All three of us walked forward to take our place as pallaqueras.

I picked up my copper pan for the first time. The cold of it pinched my hands. I thought it would feel warmer for some reason. I took in the sensation of holding it, knowing that I would be holding it every day for a long time. I heard Sana’s voice as she led me to my mother’s old spot along the lake, but I didn’t listen. I thanked her and she smiled weakly back at me as she handed me a syringe. I put it into the pocket of my dress. The two girls on either side of me worked in silence. One of them shot me a glance, quickly eyeing me over before tearing her eyes off me. Her face looked more like wrinkled leather than skin. I assumed that she had never had a daughter.

I looked down at the amber jar of acid at my feet next to the glass jar of silver liquid. My mother was the runner that brought me my first bit of ore. It hit the pan with a sharp metallic thump. She didn’t slow down; she had told me the night before she wouldn’t. She didn’t want to give Mrs. Guerrero a reason to take back her promotion.

I didn’t realize I was holding my breath until I finished pouring the acid, but then I held my breath again as I added in the mercury. The mercury seemed to dance on the surface. The separate droplets went in circles until they found one another, and then they quickly became fused in the acid around the ore. I saw bubbles forming and inhaled sharply. The gas given off by the mixture cut into my lungs and made me cough. I saw both women at my sides look in my direction.

I brought the pan to the lake, the mercury dissolving into the acid. I stood on the flat rocks and tried to plant myself firmly. I looked out to the lake, lined with pallaqueras, and saw its deceptively beautiful blue closer than ever before. A natural lake mixed with acid and metal. Shores speckled with mothers and daughters murdering mother nature. I slowly kneeled, gripping the copper as tight as I could with both hands.

The water burned.

## A RECIPE FOR WATER: THREE WAYS

Water may be prepared a number of ways, but I will start with the easiest and most common method of preparation: the sink. Often times, you should go to a sink in your own home and turn the faucet until water comes out. There might even be a way to control whether it is hot or cold. If you don't have running water, I suggest you go to your neighbor's home and see if they have some you could take.

If your neighbors have running water, and they're kind enough to lend you some indefinitely, then you are all set. You have successfully prepared water. However, if they are unkind—hostile even—about you taking any water from their home, you should not resort to force if at all possible. This is why I suggest: burglary.

The best method to burgle is to stalk the family from which you intend to steal. Go to their house at different hours on different days. Take notes on their routines. Notice at what day and at what time they decide to air out their home and open the windows. Note how often they forget to lock their front door—do they lock their front door? You will have to check it, quietly, a few times. Check the windows too. You should consider looking around for where they might keep a spare key. Under a mat, in a plant, in a fake rock, above the door? Be as thorough as time will allow. In descending order of ease, the best methods to break into a home are as follows: find where they keep their spare key and utilize it; find out if

and when they leave their door unlocked and enter at such a time; find out if they lock their windows and sneak through them. Once you've found your way into the neighbor's home when they're asleep or unsuspecting, you may safely turn on their kitchen sink as described earlier.

That is how you prepare water from the tap.

## II

Melting ice or snow is a popular method for obtaining water in many cases and for many reasons. If you don't have running water in your home, and you don't have the time to burgle your neighbors who do, then melting more solid and frozen forms of water might be the best method for you.

### A:

Collect: pot, flame under the pot, snow.

It is important that you understand that putting snow directly into a pot will ruin the pot and thusly ruin the drinking water. Instead, you have to add premade water to the pot first. If premade is unavailable, skip to section B before continuing with part A. After you have a bit of premade water, you are ready to add your snow and ice, or either one, or neither one because you already have some premade and maybe that's all you needed. In any case, you are free to add as much snow now that there is premade water protecting the pan. Melt it over the flame, and you will have drinkable water before dehydration sets in.

### B:

Collect: a human mouth still within the skull and with living body temperature, snow.

This process is a more rudimentary one. This preparation method is most savory to those without access to running water, premade water, or if your water moves at more of a slow-walking speed.

Many resort to this method of water preparation in extremely urgent and deathly situations—such as falling into a geyser and getting burns all over your body, but just narrowly escaping said geyser before being completely boiled alive. Once you’ve successfully been found by your friends that you got separated from due to the darkness and blizzard around you, and you have drunk through all their premade water reserves, they might try to utilize this method of water preparation in order to keep you alive while the others travel, in vain, to get a doctor.

What your friends will want to do is put the snow directly into their own mouths, wait for it to melt, and then let the water they have prepared drip from their own mouths to yours. It is hardest for Maria seeing as the two of you used to date, but she is keeping a brave face through your screams. Why can’t you fall asleep? If you could fall asleep, you wouldn’t feel your body dying, painfully, while onlookers hope for someone to come and help. There will be no help, but there will be something to drink.

That is how prepare water through the melting of snow and/or ice.

### III

Last, but not least, there is the option to gather water in place of preparing it. If a small body of water is nearby, take a bucket and bring a smaller body of that small body of water home with you. Then, you may give this water to your family to drink and bathe in. You should not touch the water. I know, I know. You’ve already followed the above instruction and allowed your entire family to come into contact with and consume the water from the still body that you greedily robbed.

You forgot the most basic rule here in La Rinconada—don’t drink the water from the lake. It’s tainted with metal poisons. Your family’s skin is starting to show signs. Their stomachs are in pain, and your daughter’s eyesight has gone dark. She can’t see you, and she can’t see why you would knowingly



give her lake water to drink. She trusted you. Your whole family trusted you and you let them down—you put them down.

When you're burying your family in a joint grave to cut costs, you will speak.

“Thank you all for coming today. It means a lot to me, and it would mean a lot—” you say, voice breaking for authenticity. Good work. “It would mean a lot to them.” You motion to the closed casket with multiple bodies inside. “They were taken before their time.” Who were they taken by? Why are you still here? These are questions you hear muttered among the guests watching you speak at your murder victims’ and family’s burial. “And they live on through me.” You begin to cry into your hands. No one can see if tears are forming or not; is this all an act? Do you actually mourn their loss?

All funerals are a test, in fact. Guests come from near and far in order to see which loved ones will express the most grief. It’s a competition in a way. There are no winners, only losers. You lose because you feel loss, some lose because they don’t, but most lose because they have to come for familial ties, look down at their knees quietly, and pretend they will miss a presence from their life that was absent for as long as they can remember anyway.

Looking around at the other guests as your family is lowered into their graves, you notice that no one else is crying. You’re the only one mourning as much as you think your family deserves. You lose again.

This is how you gather rather than prepare water.

## OF MERCURY

These hands are marked by mercury. The god, Mercury, is the god of commerce, and at the same time he is the god of thieves. The ancient Greeks knew then what took me my entire life until this point to know. But Mercury is better known as the messenger of the gods. What messages are being sent through these marks?

The planet, Mercury, has the shortest orbit around the sun. I assume this means that seasons almost don't exist on that planet. A little under 90 days in each year means the weather patterns have to be sort of constant. But then again, the weather in La Rinconada is constant and monotonous. It is cold here and nothing else. At least Mercury has both hot and cold every day--too bad both are so extreme a human would die in a second. Not that humans have much reason to go to Mercury. It is barren. The surface is gray, and gray means death.

Mercury is also the metal, quicksilver. It is this mercury that has marked my hands. Meaning there may be no message from the gods. This also means that while my hands are tainted from honest work, I will be seen as a thief if someone were to recognize my hands. The poor are often considered greedy; this sounds like a contradiction to me. How can someone with too little be accused of taking too much? The quicksilver has rotted my hands and it has rotted the lake. The ground around the lake is dead, too. Mercury is poison, but I must admit it is a pretty poison at the very least.

## THE GLASS CANARY IN THE GOLD MINE

Rocks rained like water, pouring around him and filling his ears with thunder. Alejandro felt a stone slam against his helmet and shoulder, knocking him over and shattering his flashlight, sprinkling glass in large triangles around his feet. He pushed his handkerchief into his nose and around his mouth, sending a sharp pain through his shoulder. The dirt and dust floated, invisible debris around him after the cave had toppled in on itself. He felt the airborne dirt poking his skin and brushing over his clothes. Gold dust, tainted and unrefined, stung his eyes worse than the onions his wife had been chopping as he left to work for the night. The thought of his wife crying, hanging her head above her knife, and telling him not to go. The stench of onion followed his memory.

He told her that he needed to, that taking the late shift at the mine was the quickest way out of La Rinconada. She told him that he was being foolish, and everyone knew that the night shift was suicide. Her cutting was slow, and she hadn't raised her gaze from the onion. Each cut created a dull beat as the semi-rusted knife hit the plastic cutting board. She flinched as Alejandro tried to comfort her; he wanted to tell her that he would be okay and that she had nothing to worry about, but he hadn't. Instead, he took a deep breath and let out a shallow, soft, and breathy *perdón*.

Then he was out the door, walking the path through town and to the mines for the second time that day. Rocks littered the unpaved walkways, water streamed slowly from the curved sheet metal of the townsfolk's dwellings. He looked down to inspect his footing and to make certain he avoided wetting his

boots. One day he'd paid no attention, and he had carelessly stomped through the water. His feet festered in his wet, woolen socks, and he'd been forced to stand through his shift.

Alejandro rubbed his eyes, still stinging. Squinting downward and around his boots, after the cave had finished falling in on itself, he felt confusion wash over him. He had expected to see inky blackness, but shimmers of light shot from the dismembered shards of glass, like silver arrowheads against the cave's floor. Dust floated around these beacons. It created a fuzzy and unclear image, and he thought at first it might just be an afterimage created by him pressing his eyes with the balls of his hands. He raised his eyes upward, but above him was the coal black blanket of the earth. When he looked back down, the glass no longer glistened, but the ghostly shapes remained burned in his vision.

He felt around the ground; the pieces of glass were exactly where he'd seen the light reflect. He took a deep breath through cloth, and he picked up a shard of glass the size of his thumb. He marched forward, slowly, clutching his shard like a dowsing rod. Only instead of water, he was hoping to find his wife and his daughter. He whispered their names with each step.

Katarina. Diana. Katarina. Diana.

He stumbled, looking for the source of light he hoped he hadn't imagined, tripping over a piece of ceiling jutting from the ground up to his shin. At least, he thought, if he hurt himself now, it would seem like the cave-in had injured him and not like he had fallen thanks to his own clumsiness.

He held one arm straight forward, feeling around the void, and the other kept his handkerchief over his mouth. He would look up, then forward, then down at the glass, hoping to find the light, hoping to find his way out. The darkness consumed his sight so entirely, his blinks felt like bursts of color. He could see thousands of sparkling stars in the night sky of his eyelids—greens, reds, pinks, blues—but as he opened his eyes, that sky was stripped from him, and he was left with the nothing of space between rock and dirt.

After he trod around for what felt like hours, whether in circles or not he could not know, he thought of his daughter. Yesterday she had been in her room, playing with her soil-filled flowerpot, imagining it would someday grow. He told her countless times that it could, that it just took longer up here. He told her smile was enough sunlight, that her breath was enough sustenance, and that if she worked hard enough, that her tears and her sweat would be enough water for any flower on this Earth to grow. He wished, somehow, the light that he'd seen earlier had been cast from her smile.

And then an arrow of silver shot through the black once more. He thought it might be his imagination, so he held still, staring at the shard. He blinked his eyes and rubbed them with his kerchief, but the silver still shone. He raised his head, and he saw what he'd seen in his eyelids this entire time. Stars spotted the sky above him through a gaping and misshaped window made from mountain.

Alejandro bit the glass with his molars and grabbed onto one of the rocks sticking out from the wall and above his head. When he was satisfied with his tugging that the rock might be able to hold his weight, he started to climb. He stared only at the wall, the dull glow of glass in the corner of his vision. His shoulder ached, holding the weight of him, but he willed himself higher. As he gripped flatness, he felt a gust of relief blow over him, raising him out of the cave and above the Earth once more. He collapsed onto the ground, the glass falling from his mouth and next to his face. His body was covered in sweat, and his shoulder was on fire. His breath fogged the glass, but as he breathed in, the glass still shone.

## OF GOLD

Gold has always drawn people in. And for good reason. Gold doesn't die in the same way people do. Gold is immune to oxidizing, which my mom says is a fancy word for saying oxygen doesn't eat it. My mom went to college.

Humans are a different than gold though, and that's why everyone is jealous of it. Oxygen eats us, but slowly. We need oxygen to live because we breathe it, but that same breath gets us just a little bit closer to death. Haven't you wondered? How people die when they're old? Oxygen finishes eating them. It's like a cat playing with its food. There is no such thing as a natural death in the animal kingdom my mom told me. All animals have a different level of resistance or resilience to oxygen, to the stomach acid of the planet.

Still don't believe me? Well why do you think antioxidants are popular. In fact, we could all be a little more anti-oxygen.

Oxygen is kind of like fossil fuels if you think about it. Animals based their entire way of life on it, on breathing. Even the animals that breathe underwater are still taking in oxygen. We based our lives on oxygen, and now it is killing us. Would nitrogen do this to us? No. Would hydrogen? Probably yes honestly. Maybe elves live so long in lord of the rings because they breathe nitrogen. I wish we could breathe nitrogen and live for hundreds of years.

Like gold. Gold can stick around. Humans bring gold up from the earth, spend their lives finding and hoarding something that will outlive them.

Maybe, in that way, the gold is hoarding us.

## COME THE HERO

My mother told me that she'd made something special for my first day of fourth grade in La Rinconada, but that I wasn't allowed to peek. Inside the brown paper bag, I learned from peaking, was chocoflan and a dollop of whipped cream. My mouth watered thinking about my favorite dessert, and I tried to focus on that to avoid worrying about the friends I didn't have yet at Guerrero Elementary.

My father walked me to school, holding my hand the entire way. We lived on the outskirts of town, so we were a little more than half an hour's walk to the school, but I forced him to take me thirty minutes earlier than we needed to be. I didn't want to be late, and waiting at home just made me more anxious.

We walked up the frozen dirt path, past identical metal sheds we called homes. It was still freezing cold, and I was wearing a too-big, puffy winter coat. It was white, like my mittens. By the time I could see main street, I was gasping for air. Our neighbors assured us that we would gain our 'mountain lungs' soon, that we would suffer only shortly. They had been somewhat right about the lungs.

"Diana," my father said, "this isn't a race. Let's take a break."

"But dad, I want to meet my new teacher," I said, catching my breath in the space between every other word.



“Your teacher probably isn’t even there yet, Dia.” He spoke slower and more cautious than before. Like he had been preserving my antics, but was spoiling them for my own sake. There was a single bench on main street, the one in front of Guerrero’s Groceries, which was the only grocery store in town.

My mother had taken me to Guerrero’s Groceries once over the winter to show me how to shop if I needed to ever. She showed our family card, and they marked off the groceries we got. I thought it was amazing, to not have to have money to buy groceries. It made sense after that trip, that we really did move to La Rinconada to save up money before we moved back to Lima in a few years. But then my mother said the groceries had cost more than she’d thought they would, and explained that the groceries came out of their salary each month.

I sat on the bench reluctantly, rolling the brown paper bag’s opening as thin as I could get it before unraveling it each time and starting again. If someone had told me that the store was made from driftwood, I would have believed them. Even 17,000 feet above sea level. The wood felt soggy and weak, and I imagined that the bench longed to be closer to the sea, stripped from its home and taken up the mountain.

I could see the school at the end of main street.

“But what if I’m the last one there?”

“Your classmates won’t be along for a while yet, so catch your breath.”

We had spent the winter in this city, arriving early June, and I hadn’t met any other kids. I had spent my days cramped at home reading an old, tattered book that I had brought with me—La ciudad y los perros. My mom and dad hadn’t read it, but they saw the two dogs on the cover and thought it would be a nice present to get me before moving. I liked the story, despite the violence. But it instilled fear of

changing schools in me, I thought that there was no way my school could be worse than the academy depicted in that book.

Looking around main street in the dim light of the morning, there was no one. The silence was deafening.

“Where is everyone?”

He shrugged. The concept of everyone being tied to the same schedule, tied to the mines, eluded me. No one was out yet because we were early; everyone else would arrive on time, most everyone.

My father took my hand in his own, signaling it was time.

A boy showed up to school with bruises on his face and a busted lip. That was my first my memory of Antay. We, as a class, had just been discussing classroom expectations and etiquette. I thought our teacher would run over to him and rush him to the nurse; this was La Rinconada though, not Lima. Instead, Mrs. Villanueva yelled at him for showing up thirty minutes late and told him to take his seat, already cursing his name as if familiar with him.

Antay walked with a strength about him that I admired. I would be crying if the teacher yelled at me on the first day. He glided through the rows of shabby desks, and he stepped over the spots on the ground with missing tiles without looking. Mrs. Villanueva lectured about how showing up on time would prevent incidents like the one Antay had, presumably, had that morning. He walked past all the other students that sat in chairs with small, arm-sized desk attachments. Not even enough space for a spiral notebook, which no one had. No one took notes, and school supplies weren't kept at the store in town. She went on to say that she couldn't protect us outside her classroom.

One of the boys near the back, the bald one called Beto, had stuck his foot out, trying to trip Antay. It made him stumble, but he didn't fall. Beto and a few of the other boys around him laughed, and Mrs. Villanueva must have not seen it. If she had, she didn't let on at least, but Antay appeared unfazed.

Antay sat down at the desk next to mine. I had chosen my place in the classroom strategically. I was sitting in the back corner near the window and, more importantly, the cubbies where we all put our lunch bags and coats. There was a closet door beside the cubbies that I had seen Mrs. Villanueva put her own coat into. I turned around each time the teacher turned to write on the chalk board to make sure the chocoflan hadn't disappeared.

Mrs. Villanueva had started writing the name of the president on the board. I put up my hand. She had written 'Pedro Pablo Kuczynski,' but I knew that wasn't right. We had talked about it in school last semester.

"Mrs. Villanueva," I said, barely above a whisper. I was surprised when she turned around. She smiled, warmly. I was excited to impress her.

"Ah, yes Diana? And please, call me Ana," she said.

"He isn't the president anymore. Martín Vizcarra is." My words were like smile seeking missiles. Her face dropped in the explosion.

"No, you're mistaken, Diana," she said, colder than before. "You named the vice president. It's an easy mistake."

"But—"

"No buts." She cut me off.

Her smile returned as she went back to the lesson. My heart sank to my stomach, and my eyes felt hot. I bit my lip to keep my face from morphing into a frown. That was when the paper triangle hit the

side of my head. It didn't hurt, but it caught me off guard, and I flinched. It fell onto my desk with a soft patter, like wings.

"Cock-of-the-rock," Antay whispered.

I widened my eyes. "What-of-the-huh?" I whispered back.

"Cock-of-the-rock. The bird?"

"Can't you just call it a tunti, at least? Like a normal person."

Mrs. Villanueva shot her head back at the class in the middle of writing down more names. Antay and I both sat perfectly still, facing forward, praying she hadn't deciphered where the whispering had come from. She turned back around, which reminded me that I should check on my chocoflan, but instead I looked to Antay.

He motioned with his swollen eye at the paper triangle. I mouthed an 'O' of understanding when I saw the writing. Cock-of-the-rock, or tunti, was the code for passing notes, since that bright orange bird was infamous for flitting from mate to mate like a piece of paper from desk to desk.

I had to stifle my laughter and keep my eyes to the board. He had written that I should be the one teaching class.

"I'm serious," Antay said. "You probably know more than her. You taught me more real stuff today than she did all last year probably."

"A single name?"

"Yupp."

It had started snowing a little before they let us out for recess. Antay was rubbing some of the fallen, off-white slush onto his cheeks. The kids seemed to already know one another. There was a group of girls speaking in hushed voices close to the school, and a bunch of boys rolled an old-looking tire around the snow and mud in the front school yard.

The school was probably the most well-built structure in the whole city. It was stacked with red bricks, and the floors were tiled inside. The windows were small, but they were glass. I missed having a window in my bedroom.

“Last year?” I asked.

“Yeah, this is my second time in fourth grade.” He looked to me with fists full of snow pressed against his face. He wasn’t wearing mittens, and his jacket was too thin for winter. Most of the kids in my class wore jackets just as thin. I noticed Beto and two of his friends pointing over towards Antay and me, and we stuck out our tongues in unison. We laughed together. It was nice to have made a friend so fast.

“Why are you in fourth grade again?” I kicked some of the snow with my boot. It landed on Antay’s sneakers.

He looked up at me like I’d hit him, and I instantly regretted asking.

“You wouldn’t like me if I told you,” he said.

“Try me,” I said.

“My family is Quechua.” he said without missing a beat.

I laughed. It wasn’t especially funny, and I didn’t mean to, but I had expected something dramatic, like from the book I’d read over break. With a name like Antay, him being Quechua wasn’t a well-kept secret either.

“Why are you laughing?” He looked genuinely puzzled.

I made several attempts to stop laughing and start talking before my sentence fully came out. “It’s just that,” I said, “why would being Quechua make me hate you?” I wiped my eyes, where newly formed tears were starting to form from laughter. I hated that I cried so easily. I wanted to be able to get yelled at and remain stoic like Antay.

“My dad says people don’t like us,” he said. “He says that is just the way things are, and I can’t change that.”

My stomach growled. I imagined I was eating the chocoflan instead of standing outside in the cold, falling snow. Suddenly the snow in Antay’s hands looked more like whipped cream than anything else.

“I’m an outsider,” I said.

“Yeah, but you are Peruvian.”

“I was born in Mexico, though. What does that have to do with anything?”

“Everything. Nothing. I don’t know,” he said. He paused for a long while, and I thought more about my mother’s dessert. “People think that we work for less money than other migrant workers. They’re just looking for someone to blame, so that’s why I have to get beat up, do you see?”

“Is that why your face looks like that?” I pointed to my lip, as if he wouldn’t know what I meant. He didn’t have the chance to answer because the teacher rang her bell, forcing us all back into her room. I watched Antay walk as I followed behind him, that same strength, that courage emanating from him. I wanted that same courage.

Lunch had finally arrived after having to learn math for an hour. Antay and I hadn’t been able to pass the tunti all period because Mrs. Villanueva had prepared problems on the board while we were at recess and

had us all taking turns solving the equations; she kept her eyes on the class, but she especially focused on Antay. I had thought about what he'd said all through math class.

I was the first one to grab their lunch sack. Lunch was usually held outside Mrs. Villanueva said, but since it was snowing, she let us eat in the hallway. She went to the teacher's lounge, and from the route she took, I assumed it was upstairs. I waited outside the classroom for Antay. Since we had talked all recess, I thought we could eat lunch together too. The students leaving the classroom looked like the streams that flowed down the mountains. But the flow of students stopped, and Antay still hadn't come out.

I looked up and down the hallway, and I noticed that Antay wasn't the only one missing. Beto was gone too.

"Antay?" I called into the classroom. "Antay are you there?" As I walked into the room, I noticed that Antay's cubby—the one with the purple jacket he'd been wearing at recess—still had its lunch bag inside. I heard something hit against the door of the coat closet in the back.

I walked, to the door in the back. "Antay?" I hoped that he had just gotten himself locked in the coat closet and that was it. "Antay, I'm coming in." I turned the doorknob, but I was met with resistance when I tried to push the door open.

"Go away." A flat, nasally voice said.

I pushed harder, but who or whatever was keeping the door shut gave way, and I fell into the coat closet, clutching the chocoflan still inside the paper bag to my chest. I fell right next to Antay. Beto was holding down both of Antay's arms and hovering over him. Another kid, with curly hair, had Antay's legs. The last kid must have been holding the door shut.

"What gives?" I said, trying to stand back up.

“I said go away,” Beto spoke again. “Besides, we were just giving Antay the lunch he deserves.”

The kid that had been holding the door shut kicked at Antay’s side with his bare foot. I saw Antay squeeze his eyes shut, but he didn’t make a noise. I didn’t have the same composure, and I let out a gasp when the blow hit. Beto raised his fist.

“If you stay, you’ll get what he’s having,” Beto said. I dropped my lunch bag and grabbed onto Beto’s arm, trying to pull him off. Barefoot pushed me off him though, and Beto swung at Antay, right where his lip was already busted. Blood began to pool below Antay’s mouth.

“Stop it!” I didn’t mean for it to come out so loud. My voice cracked. “Please, stop.”

“Why would we stop?” The curly-haired-kid spoke up this time.

“Because if you do,” I paused. I didn’t know what to say. I looked down at the brown paper bag. “Because if you do, I’ll give you my chocoflan.”

All three boys perked up.

“Prove it,” Beto said. “Where’s the flan?”

I showed them the contents of my lunch bag. They all nodded in agreement. I held out the chocoflan to them, the chocoflan that my mother had made special for me, and I handed it over. It felt like my heart sank into my stomach, and I just wanted the Earth to swallow me whole. Maybe it wasn’t the same kind of strength that Antay had shown, but it was a start.

Antay stood up and wiped the blood from his lip onto his sleeve. He didn’t speak at first. He walked over to his cubby and rummaged through his lunch bag for a bowl of white rice, and he handed it to me. We sat in the classroom together, eating from his bowl of rice. It tasted like water, but it was dry. It was kind of hard, but my stomach had been growling since recess. I tried to forget about the chocoflan, and I tried to imagine how I’d tell my mother later that it tasted great.



“Why did you do that?” He said, after the rice was almost gone. I thought he’d at least thank me. Maybe even have a smile on his face. He spoke with rice in his mouth. “You know they’re just going to do this again.”

“Well,” I said, “I’ll be right here for when they do.”

## A RECIPE FOR CHOCOFLAN

Turn on the oven, let heat meet with chill, the two will stir together and create twisters of uncomfortable pockets either too hot or too cold. They will never be just right, but you will close the oven door—until you're ready to open it once more—anyway.

Now, grab a Bundt pan. If you don't have a Bundt pan, you will have to find something else that resists the heat of the oven and allows the molding of circular ridges for the delicate shape of chocoflan. For this recipe, I decided to use: my hands. If you don't have my hands, yours will work just fine.

Coat the hands, either yours or mine, with softened butter. Softened butter, as a reminder, must be left out. Leave it out of everything. Don't let the butter play with anyone, don't involve it in your conversations, in fact, don't let the butter in the house until you're ready to use it up and throw the rest away when you're done. If you can't follow these instructions, you will not have softened the butter. Make sure to fully coat the hands, as this will insure that none of the chocoflan sticks to the flesh as it comes out of the oven. There will be no saving the hands, but then again, you never needed them anyway.

“Yours or mine?”

Shh. Don't talk, conserve your energy. Dunk your palms into cajeta—you can lick a little bit off if you'd like, but try not to get too attached to the fingers as their nerves notice your tongue and your taste

buds notice the unsinged skin. This, as all things, will not last. Go run water for the bath. I won't tell you what that's for yet; it will be a surprise.

Pull leftover butter from the waste bin and cup it in your hands. Walk over to the counter. Do you see the sugar? Don't talk. Just nod. Knock the sugar over into your hands. Feel the grains overflowing and falling to the floor. Don't clean it up right now; beat the egg. Hit it as hard as you can. Don't worry if it cracks and shell gets into the chocoflan because that will add texture, character, and a choking hazard. There is flour and cocoa powder in a spare Bundt cake pan on the table. Go tip the pan over into your hands.

No, don't open your mouth, don't think, just do as you're told. Yes, good. Squeeze your hands as hard as you can, over and over, to make sure the mixture becomes homogenous. Anything less and you'll ruin it.

Okay, you may quietly open your mouth. Hold it open. Don't swallow these next items as they're poured inside in this order: eggs, evaporated milk, cream cheese. Close, swish, gargle. Mix it all together. Open once more for the condense milk and vanilla. This could have been added earlier, but it would have made the first mixture too sweet and you might have been tempted to swallow.

Now gargle the ingredients; don't close your mouth, it's too sweet now. Spit it all out into your hands. Don't worry if it starts to blend with the cake batter you've made in your hands. Sometimes things look like they are meshing well together, but throw them into a heated situation, and they'll separate. This is how chocoflan is.

The chocoflan is prepared, and now it needs to bake. Open the oven and place your hands inside. Careful not to spill any of the batter. Leave your hands in the oven for the next hour; close the door. Do you remember the bath that I had you draw? Go ahead and get in. I'll wake you when the chocoflan is ready.

## AN EXORCISM

The night I realized that my older sister was possessed by a demon started like any other night, but it ended with me making up my mind to save her.

When Nina handed me the coin, I held it to the window. The silvery glow coming from the coin made me question if it had really been copper-colored before night had come or not. The wind howled around the mountain that held our home; my body shivered in reply. Most the words were faded on the coin, but I could still make out “reserva” and a tiny tree inside a box. I hated sapo, but Nina insisted we play it each night. It was our bedtime ritual. Like how some people prayed.

I tried to recreate the same flip of the coin as Nina had done. Her eyes followed me in the moonlit bedroom. I flicked my thumb and the coin plopped onto the dirt floor nowhere near the bucket, let alone the slit in its bottom. I fell back into the bed we shared, hoping that I could sleep. I pulled the blanket over my head to block out what little light there was along with Nina’s voice.

“Antay, you have to move your thumb faster than that, or else you might as well be dropping the coin straight down,” she said. Nina pulled the blanket off of me and snapped her fingers.

I groaned at her. “Your girly thumbs are just better at flicking, Nina.”

“Do it again.”

I sat back up and accepted the coin once more. With my free hand, I pressed the warm metal down hard on my thumb knuckle. I released, and the coin jumped up once more. When the coin landed in the bucket, I could feel that familiar pulse of excitement. It passed when I saw I hadn't made it into the crack in the bucket. I carried the coin back the few steps to our bed and handed it to Nina. It was her turn, and she'd already let me go twice.

I watched her movement in quiet and stupid awe. I pretended not to be impressed with the practiced way she could flip a coin, the perfect spin she could apply to a circle of metal, and at the accuracy she could make the coin land within the crack of the bucket. It was a sort of useless super power that she possessed, or some sort of magic, but I couldn't remember a single time when she had flicked the coin anywhere but directly into the bucket's slot. I watched as she closed her eyes, which she hadn't done ever before, flicked her thumb, and listened to the sound of victory.

"Luck," she said. Neither of us had even looked into the bucket, but we both heard the soundless swish of the coin hitting the dirt through the bottom of the bucket, no sign of wood and metal clashing.

"Magic," I said. She laughed, but I wasn't joking. I suspected that she might not be playing fair. I didn't know how, and I didn't know if she knew it or not. For a while I had suspected, but after the blind bullseye, I was certain her *sapo* skill was unnatural.

I went to see Milagroso the next morning. I told Nina that my stomach was hurting, so I couldn't go play with her at the lake. Nina told me I was just lazy before she ran off leaving me alone. Milagroso was the only *brujo* in town that would talk to kids without their parents around, or at least the only *brujo* that I'd found so far. He was wrapped in what looked like a black dress, the cloth swayed when he moved, his arms too tiny to take up the space in the sleeves. The same type of fabric that made his dress also lined the walls of his shack. Milagroso's gray hairs seemed to emanate a thoughtfulness along with reflecting what little light filtered through the holes in the roof.

“What brings you to my tent, dear boy? Take a seat.” Milagroso said. His voice was raspy with age. It was a wooden shack, but I assumed he meant the tent he’d made with fabric on the inside. Like a blanket fort. He shuffled dry leaves, sliding them back and forth across the table he sat at. I took my spot in the chair across from him, looking past him to the bookcase in the corner of the room.

I had come to Milagroso a few times before. Sometimes it was about school, sometimes it was about family, and just recently I had come to ask him if there was something I could do about my neighbors keeping me up at night with their shouting. The solution to the latter, he had told me, was to go to their house and thank them for being so noisy late at night and keeping me awake. Each bit of advice he’d given me had helped.

I told him about Nina’s special powers, and how she told me it was luck, but I told him that I was sure it was magic of some sort.

Milagroso gave me a long, stern, silent look after I finished my story. It was look that told me he was thinking, that he was taking what I said seriously. “And you’re sure,” he said, “that this is not coincidence? That this isn’t luck?”

“I’m certain.” I felt a surge of energy kick in with those words. Like when I made the coin into the bucket.

“What I have to say, you may not like hearing,” he said. His eyes lingered on my face, and I wondered if he was searching for doubt or hesitation in my expression. I tried to make my face cold like metal. An expression that would mean ‘I’m serious’ and that would stay on my face like the tiny tree in the box on the coin. “Okay, Antay. Your sister is most likely in contact with demons if not already possessed.”

I felt the tiny tree of my face wither in its box. “Deep down, you know, I think I always knew.” Nina had beaten me at many things, being a year older than me, but nothing ever as consistently as sapo.

Milagroso was turned around as he rummaged through his bookcase. He opened several books before settling on a large, red hardback. He flipped through the pages so fast, I thought he might be tearing the pages out rather than turning them over. “From what you’ve told me, Nina has most likely been contacted by Sapote,” he said. He stopped flipping through the book, and then he showed a portrait of a fragile looking man with a crown on his head and a toad attached to his shoulder. “She may not know that the Prince of Hell is attempting to possess her, or that she’s even made contact.” He raised his head slightly, and for a moment I thought his head had floated from his body. His black dress camouflaged into the background of the matching fabric behind him. “Often, kids accidentally invite his presence when expressing uncertainty or a lack of understanding.”

At hearing that, I hardened my face once more. “What do I do?” My voice cracked as I spoke.

He spoke softer now, barely a whisper. “You must let the wind guide you, and then you must purify Nina with leaves, grounding her soul to the earth.”

I breathed in his words like I was drowning and his advice was air. Milagroso told me that performing an exorcism was the only way to rid Nina of this demon, and that, if we did not act fast, she may never be able to expunge his presence. I tilted my head forward as if to start a nod, but I stopped. I watched him put several of his leaves into a black fabric bag, and I briefly wondered if he had a sewing machine nearby, and if he made everything from his walls, or if he had excess fabric outside of the shack.

“Her eyes must be closed or the demon may see your leaves.” He plucked a single leaf from the bag and placed it in his open palm. “If that happens,” he clenched his fist, held it there, then let dust fall from his hand, “he will grip her tighter, my son.”

He had never spoken to me in such a serious tone, and it made me feel important. After living my whole life under protection and in apprenticeship of my sister, finally I would be able to help her.

Milagroso motioned for me to hold out my hands, into which he dropped the velvet pouch. He spoke what he said was a blessing, blew on the bag, and told me to exorcise my sister—secretly. I hopped out of his shack, wind closing the door for me as I rounded the corner to let the breeze guide me to my sister, gently cupping the blessed leaves in their pouch—the power to save Nina in my grasp.

I spied on Nina for a minute, peeking around the corner of a large rock. She was running away from a boy I recognized from school that was her age, a year older than me. They were either playing pilla-pilla, and he was chasing her to tag her, or she was under attack. Either way, I knew it would be nearly impossible for him to catch Nina without the aid of his own personal demon threatening possession. I took note of the location of a few scattered possessions near the lake's edge: a glass jar filled with liquid, an empty copper pan still right-side up, and a leaf-less tree branch, which was a bit odd because there weren't any trees this high up in the mountain, so branches were rare.

A gust blew past me, and I pressed the pouch gently to my chest. Nina's hair jolted toward me, and I thought for a moment a shadow cast over her face—the demon no doubt. I wondered, briefly, if demons were contagious. Then I remembered what Milagroso had said, about being certain.

I shook the idea of airborne Prince of Hell from my mind. That would be ridiculous, I thought. I pushed myself forward.

Nina didn't look possessed when she saw me coming, but I didn't lose my resolve. Sapote couldn't fool me, and now I just needed to fool him to free my sister. Nina smiled and called my name, told me I had to catch her now. Her smile went from playful to trickster.

Her earlier running had seemed casual and light-hearted, but she turned hard and began sprinting like the devil, and I realized that during this game she was untargetable. Unless I played it smart, of course. So, I ran. She was taller than me, and her legs were at least a couple inches longer than mine, but I



chased her as best I could. She raised her legs in high kicks, holding her dress with her hands, revealing black shorts underneath. Her laughter, along with her lack of arm-pumping, was like a brake pedal—the more she pressed, the faster I gained on her. I tried to hear innocence in her laugh, but it tasted of mockery in place of her usual blameless boisterousness.

Slowly, and surely, the demon prince was taking hold.

The boy she had been playing with before I'd arrived, by now, had stopped jogging half-heartedly away from me as he came to realize I was not interested in chasing him. Nina ran in circles, away from me, for minutes. I wondered how long she could keep it up. I started taking note of the pattern we might be running in—afraid it could be some sort of demonic summoning circle.

Still laughing and unaware of her surroundings, Nina tripped over the large branch. She raised her hands fast enough to catch her own weight, and I took in the image of her yellow dress hanging over brown of the branch and gray of the ground. Even now, standing above her, it felt like she was higher than me. She was yellow; she was the sun, and all that surrounded her were gray skies. I took the pouch and overturned it above her head.

The red, orange, and dull-colored leaves drifted downward. They crisscrossed midair, quickly, becoming a flurry of warm colors approaching her black hair that was streaking on her pale dress. As the leaves grew closer, I felt it: the wind.

Nina turned back to look at me just as the leaves were going to land, and as Milagroso predicted, not a single leaf did. A zephyr, soft and gentle, came into existence from within Nina. The leaves shuffled away, like a bird after hitting a window, and I watched as they traveled and drizzled onto the lake like sprinkles, a red leaf taking the center of what appeared to be a circle of leaves in the water.

Demons didn't fight fair.

“What was that?” Nina said. Her voice sounded infected with confusion, one of the key causes of Sapote’s hold on her. I felt I should quench her thirst for knowledge, but I knew that would be giving Sapote a look into my scheme.

“What was what?” I said.

Nina stared at me, long and hard, then she turned her eyes and saw the leaves still floating on the water of the lake. The red leaf stood out, but when I followed Nina’s gaze, it felt like the yellow one had grabbed her attention. “Did you just—” she said. “Did you just dump leaves on me from nowhere?”

I was caught, and I knew Sapote had to know what I was doing, but I hoped that if Nina remained in the dark, he just might as well. I was still holding the velvet pouch over her. “No, I didn’t.”

Nina’s expression grew more confused. “Tarado, I saw you. I see you.” She stuck her tongue out at me. I couldn’t think of a better excuse than denying what had happened, so instead, I tagged her and ran.

It was my turn to sprint, and it was only then that I understood the fear of being chased. I felt my lungs pounding for air in my chest as I ran from a demon that had possessed Nina. There was a danger, in running from these intertwined souls, and it was like being chased by sentient fire. I ran back into town, wind slapping my face, slowing my escape. I couldn’t bring myself to look behind me, but I knew that if I did, I would see a face that appeared to be Nina, but I would also see an expression on her face that she would never make herself. I ran until I got to the sheet metal of our front door, flung it open, and leaped into the bedroom. I didn’t know if Sapote had even followed me all the way home, but if he had, he didn’t show himself right away. I waited in my and my sister’s bed until the sun knelt behind the peak, the moon already high in the sky ready to take over.

I readied the coin.

When Nina came to bed, she didn't ask me where I'd gone earlier. I didn't tell her; I assumed she already knew due to supernatural intuition. I had practiced flicking the coin into the bucket for hours, preparing for my test: *sapo*.

"You're eager tonight," she said. I half-expected her to say "eager to lose," but she left that bit out.

"I just want to get some sleep. So let's hurry up and play," I said.

"And here I thought you just wanted to play a game with me." Her voice hinted at a tone that could have meant she was sad if she were still my sister, but I knew better. Her feelings were not her own, and each human aspect or reaction in her life was now merely pretend. Demonic acting attempting to seduce humans, uncertain and less knowledgeable humans than I, into letting their guards down and trusting a demon spawn.

Normally, I'd expect to lose at *sapo*, but instead I waited in anticipation. For the first time, I wasn't certain of the outcome of this game. I flicked the coin, and it landed near the bucket, but I still missed. On Nina's turn, she shot me a cocky smirk, and she winked at me as she flicked the coin without looking. We both heard the silent ring of her victory once again, and my body sank deeper under the covers than usual. I hadn't just lost this time; I had failed Nina, and she was still possessed.

I ran it through my head again and again; how do I beat this thing? Milagroso had already given me his tools and advice. I had to kill this demon with hope I decided. I would hope it to death and save Nina.

We played *sapo* each night, and each night felt the same—like a little piece of Nina was vanishing as Sapote took over. She had begun croaking like a frog each time she won. Slowly, her croak was getting more believable. She would draw it out, like she was trying to burp the alphabet, but she couldn't think of

any other letter other than “o.” Unrelated to that, I began to nervously burp the alphabet while plotting how I would save Nina.

I didn’t go back to Milagroso after my failed exorcism. I was afraid he would be angry with me for losing his leaves. He had to get them from the bottom of the mountain, so leaves were as hard to obtain in La Rinconada as money.

I had gone back to the lake each day after our pilla-pilla game, but the leaves had vanished into the lake. I carried the branch around as I poked the water and hoped a leaf would sprout from either the lake or the branch, but none did. I waved the branch in the air to hear the sound of cutting air, and a bit of bark flung off behind me, sped up by the wind, which made a constant whistle as it passed the lake, carrying a stench of ammonia as it picked up droplets skimming the top, creating a poisonous mist. I breathed it in anyways.

“Ouch,” Nina’s voice sounded from where the bark had flown. I turned to find her cupping her hand on her forehead. It was cloudy, so her pale dress looked even paler, the color even more washed out than normal. She was holding the bucket and the coin.

“What are you doing here?” I said. I had been playing with her less during the days, saving our main interaction for our nighttime ritual. I wondered if the emotion on her face was her own or Sapote’s.

She dropped the bucket onto the ground and held the coin in her open palm. “I thought you might want to play, Antay.” I wondered if she had followed the wind to me this time, like I had to her. “It’s gloomy out.”

I sniffed in the ammonia-ridden air, and I nodded that I would play. She smiled, and the familiar practiced flick of her thumb proved equally skilled outside of our bedroom. Even with the wind blowing in resistance of the coin’s journey, her shots hit their mark.

A gust of wind blew over the lake once again. This one had such force that I covered my ears to protect them from wind burn. The sun was setting, and it was almost time to go back home. We looked past the lake, watching yellow of the sun turn to red, and the lake's water appeared to imitate the color change.

Nina readied her thumb, but she paused to wait for the breeze to pass. I watched as leaves blew on the wind, circling her from above. It was like a halo of yellow leaves, a Nina-sized tornado. Or maybe even tiny sister-sized tree. The wind stopped, and the leaves fell gently around her to form a golden ring. I said the word "exorcism" under my breath. I thought I could see Nina's body language shift. Like she was a clumsy newborn vicuña, waddling on four stilt-like legs. Her fingers looked shaky.

I watched as the copper coin flew from her thumb; I closed my eyes and listened. I heard the silence of the coin touching dirt in place of bucket. The sound was different this time though, and without opening my eyes, I knew it had to have missed the bucket. Nina said nothing, not even a croak, and she picked up the coin and bucket before I had opened my eyes. We walked back to our home in shared silence.

I never asked, but I knew what happened.

## SONICBOOM

We used to have sleepovers at your house just outside of Lima. Neither you nor I slept, but you thought I dreamed while you didn't. You would walk to the creek in the wood each night, and I followed, close enough to see you but far enough to be unseen by you.

In gray spaceman pajamas, you navigated through space between trees and rocks. You tied bright orange strings around branches, and I rubbed my fingers on their knots. Your strings tethered me to home.

The splash you made when you jumped into the water, finally breaking the silence of our walk, popped the sound barrier like a rocket as you left my atmosphere. You left me and your pajamas behind on that shore. I heard you wading in the stream, home in nature, but I could never follow.

My place was on solid ground and yours was not.

When you climbed back ashore, I would run back home, following string and memory. I watched from the window as you came out of the wood. The moon reached its zenith as you sneaked into the room. I closed my eyes. I imagined telling you that I was with you, ask if I could come without being secret.

I felt your warmth climb inside the bed as you got back under covers, and I dreamed of space.

## A RECIPE FOR CAIPIRINHA

Grab the cachaça, I ask her.

The sound of glass shatters the air, broken bottle stirs into sugarcane liquor. Clear islands float in a sea of spirit like ice in a caipirinha. Like Rembrandt's painting, my kitchen becomes the Sea of Galilee, or maybe its storm, but that moment is stolen by time as glass and spirit settle.

I pull the lime from the cupboard and cut. Lime juice can make fresh wounds sting, and I feel this because my palm bleeds into the lime, and its juice becomes muddled. I toss it all into my cup, sprinkle sugar on top. Blood and lime and sweet mix.

The cachaça, on the floor, shards of bottle dotting its ocean, must be added last. Cupping my hands, I pick up the puddle, hands stinging from cuts, some dry some bloody. Cachaça and glass drop into the cup, but some splashes out. I lick it up and suck at the bitter and distilled juice. Bit by bit, the liquid vanishes, but it hurts to swallow, and I don't spit.

She walks over a sticky, dry, sugar plain. The once clear liquid has turned to white, staining wood, she wants to share from my cup once more, but this time I don't ask.

I drink it all.

## ROAD TO LA RINCONADA

Alejandro had been trying to find work for months, but jobs were scarce even without an entire factory of former employees looking for work. He had interview after interview, but never a call back. He sat in waiting rooms, listening to the sound of his former employees as well as strangers tapping their feet, rehearsing answers to common questions, and to their stomachs gurgling in rhythm with the air bubbles in the water dispensers. Then something else started to bubble up at these pre-interview get-togethers—hope formed in waiting room whispers.

Rumors of work spread through all of Lima that winter, falling onto hungry ears. Supposedly, gold had been found in the mountains, in a mining colony called La Rinconada, which had grown from a single family along with a few miners to the size of a small city in the span of just a few years. Tales of poor folk becoming rich in a matter of months fluttered through the streets, eventually nesting in Alejandro's ears. He began dreaming up his own stories of how he might retire young and live happily with his family, perhaps he might be better off, even, than when he still had work at the factor. But he persevered with his job hunt, and he told himself that these stories were just that, stories.

Alejandro stepped out of a taxi and into the cool winter air after paying his fare. He hadn't taken the ride all the way home, and he had to walk about two kilometers yet to get home, but he had been doing this each day he interviewed for the past few weeks in order to make what little money he had left last. The garment bag he held over his shoulder rubbed his neck with each step, interview attire enclosed



now. The shoes creating an uncomfortable bulge that thumped his lower back every few paces. He made sure to change into street clothes in the bathroom after he finished his last interview at the mall. There had been no waiting rooms to sit in that day, and talk of La Rinconada—which by now felt both as significant and mythological as El Dorado—had not come up.

Even with his eyes closed, Alejandro could walk home with ease, he thought. He sent his body into autopilot as his mind ran replayed his interviews in his head, coming up with better answers to the questions he'd been asked earlier. What is most important to you in a workplace? He had told them clear communication between management and workers, but really having a workplace was the most important thing to him at this point. How did you hear about us? It's a mall, so of course he'd told them that he saw the sign in their window, but he had sent an application to each store in the mall. What qualifies you for assistant manager? He said that he managed an entire factory of workers, but at the interviews a day earlier, he had refrained from mentioning that. He would test being overqualified, underqualified, and everything in-between depending on the day, his mood, or his feel of the interviewer. The outcome was always the same: thank you for coming in, we will be in touch.

As he turned his favorite corner, where a yellow taqueria split into blue, his eyes widened. He recognized a face hanging in the doorway, the familiar scraggly beard and thin lips of Ernesto from back in high school. Ernesto had been scrawny back when Alejandro knew him, and while his face was still narrow, he had grown bulkier. Ernesto was speaking to someone that Alejandro didn't recognize, which was good because that meant he may not get caught as he tried to sneak past him.

Alejandro kept his head down, hoping that he was stealthier than he felt. He saw Ernesto wave goodbye to the man he'd been speaking to, and then he turned and looked at Alejandro. He heard his voice, and there was no mistaking it. "Why if it isn't Alejandro," Ernesto said. "I'd recognize that plucked unibrow anywhere, Ale."

“Goddamn, Ernesto?” Alejandro said. “Have you been lifting weights?” He forced a smile, but he didn’t want to see anyone from high school. Let alone talk to them.

“I heard that you started a family, man. Good for you.” Ernesto said. He pat Alejandro on the back so hard that Alejandro stumbled forward a bit and had to catch himself.

“I guess I have. What have you been up to, Neto,” he said. “Other than lifting weight apparently.” He rubbed his shoulder as he spoke.

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, Ale.” Ernesto said, smiling. “I left Lima for a few years, and I just got back a couple of months ago.”

“That sounds great, wey. We all need to get out sometime,” he said.

“Wey? Spend some time in Mexico?” Ernesto said.

“Oh yeah, sorry.” Alejandro waved his garment bag as he tossed around a lie in his head. “The company I’m working for right now deals a lot in exporting to Mexico, so you know, I picked up a mannerism or two. Also spend some time speaking to friends back from university every so often.” He figured sprinkling in some truths might make his lie of employment sound more believable. “So I guess I also got out of Lima for university, too. Where did you go?”

“Well nowhere abroad, but that sounds great, man. I spent a few years in La Rinconada is all.” When Ernesto mouthed those words, Alejandro felt a pang of wonder. “I’d been hearing talk about gold, and I finally worked up the courage to move there. I made some money and decided to come back to open up my own restaurant.”

“Wow,” Alejandro said. “That sounds really exciting. How was La Rinconada? I’ve heard people talking about it like some kind of fairy tale.” A cool breeze blew through the street and made Alejandro’s neck hair stand.

“It’s not a fairy tale, that’s for sure.” Ernesto’s smile lowered and his expression became more serious. His eyes dodged Alejandro’s as he turned his face. “It’s hard work, but if you’re willing to put forth the effort, you’re rewarded for it.” His eyes seemed to cloud over as he spoke of La Rinconada. It felt awkward to Alejandro that someone could speak of La Rinconada without a sense of childlike wonder or awe, but it made him listen. “I don’t regret my time there, and I wouldn’t own a taqueria now if I hadn’t gone.” He looked back to Alejandro and formed a smile once more. “But you sound like you are doing great, so I would never recommend you go there. It is definitely a last resort.” Ernesto let out a laugh, but the tension in the air was still thick.

“Hey, listen,” Alejandro said. “It was great to see you, and I’ll have to try your taqueria sometime. I’m sure it’s great.” He started to step away from Ernesto. “I will bring my family by when we find the time, Neto.” Another lie. He knew that he would try his best to avoid this path home. Adding the few minutes to his stroll was more than worth avoiding Ernesto or anyone else he might know from high school.

If Alejandro had been anyone else, that conversation with Ernesto might have dissuaded him from leaving Lima in search of a city of gold. On the contrary, that conversation picked at Alejandro over the next several months. His mind slowly scabbing, festering, as he ran out of places to look for work. Ernesto’s words “as a last resort” rang into his ears after each failed job application and interview. He and Katrina talked about the possibility of moving to La Rinconada late at night more often than not, and soon Alejandro’s parents, with whom they had moved in with back when the factory first closed down, were part of the discussion as well. Alejandro felt guiltier the longer he went without a job. Diana groaned about her dissatisfaction with the decrease in mealtime diversity. Soon rice and beans were an everyday expectance. Alejandro finally agreed with Katarina that they ought to move to La Rinconada sooner rather than later, and so a date was set. The day after New Year’s, they would make their way to the mountains.

He and Katarina had saved money to buy a coat for Diana for Christmas that year, who was now (proudly) seven-and-a-half years old. The coat had gone on sale the first day of summer, just in time to buy it for the holiday. Diana's eyes widened in excitement as she pulled the white, puffy coat from the large gift bag and tissue paper they had reused from her birthday. Alejandro's parents feigned excitement when Diana showed them the coat as well, sliding around the wooden floorboards in her socks like she was ice skating.

As she danced around the house in the coat, which fit her like a white gown and nearly touched the floor, Alejandro and Katarina told her the news that they would be moving to a new home. They tried to phrase it like it was an exciting change, but as they feared, Diana wasn't happy to find out she would be moving schools and leaving behind her elementary school friends.

"Diana," Katarina said, "You will get to make new friends, and in a few years we'll come back to Lima and you can see all your friends and tell them stories about living in the mountains."

"But I don't want to," she said. "I want to stay here with my friends. Why do we have to go?"

"It's an adventure," Alejandro said. "An adventure and an opportunity, Diana." He wiped away a couple of tears from her cheeks. "We'll come back, don't worry." He meant what he said. He planned to come back after he had made enough money to set them on course to continue their life in Lima. He just didn't know exactly how long that would take, but he thought for sure not more than a few years from what Ernesto had said. He had spoken about La Rinconada less fantastically than anyone else, and his depiction still sounded optimistic to Alejandro, and Katarina agreed.

They spent the following week packing everything they would take, and explaining to Diana that her friends could not be packed. On their last night in Lima, they had a small going away party for Diana so that she could be with her friends one last time. Diana played it brave and refused to cry until they all left, but Alejandro could see how hard it was for her to run outside to play with her friends one last time. The next time they saw each other would be years from now, that was for sure.

Alejandro looked up and saw the mountains receding into the mist and clouds. A bus had dropped them off, along with a couple other families and men, somewhere they had announced as Ananea. This town was as close as paved roads were made to La Rinconada, someone had said on the bus. The rest of the journey would be on foot. His wife held one hand, and his daughter held the other as they moved forward, following the others. The higher they climbed, the tighter Alejandro gripped their hands. He knew, after speaking with Ernesto once more recently about why people came, that there was always work. He had told Alejandro that no one gets turned away, and Alejandro prayed that was the case with himself. He also hoped that Ernesto had not figured out that he had been inquiring about La Rinconada for himself, but by now, he supposed it didn't matter. They had brought the last of their money, hoping to find shelter and food when they arrived.

“Just a few years up here, and then we'll leave.” Alejandro heard himself say, not sure if he was telling himself, Katarina, or Diana.

Diana had been quiet for much of their trip, but seeing the mountains in person made her eyes widen, and she asked questions about what it would be like living in the sky. He was honest with her, and he told her that it would be colder, and he also told her that living together in the sky would be practice for when they went to heaven. Katarina squeezed his hand and clicked her tongue at that, unhappy with the comparison. The straps of his backpack grew heavier, and he hoped that Diana and Katarina didn't feel the same amount of burden weighing on their own backs.

The path up the mountain itself was mostly hardened dirt—hard from the cold and from the steps of others he guessed. The steps of other men, women, children looking for a future in the sky. Patches of short, dried grass littered parts of the earth just off the trail, but these green stepping stones grew more scarce the higher up they got. They paused for a moment to share the last of their water with one another. He gave Diana the last sip from his water bottle. Looking around, he noticed something absent from his

vision: trees. Grass was present, even if it appeared dead or dying, but not even a dead tree could manage this high in the Andes. That would be something Alejandro would grow used to.

They took another break when they came to a small lake. It was dark and reflective, and the bank was made of clean, flat rock. It was unfamiliar to him, having a lake surrounded by anything other than sand or greenery. They had seen the others continue past, but Alejandro wanted to take the opportunity to fill up his now empty water bottle. It was cold this far toward the sky, but not cold enough to freeze the lake. As he lowered his water bottle into the lake, he felt a tingle on his fingers. Katarina tapped him on his shoulder and pointed out floating garbage in the water. When Alejandro pulled his water bottle out, his fingers felt prickly, like countless needles were stabbing from all directions. He poured his water bottle out, and he told Diana that it was probably best that they wait to get water until they reached town. He motioned for Katarina to take Diana's hand now, and he rubbed his own together trying to soothe them and massage away the uncomfortable sensation.

They saw another lake, this one a bit larger, and walked past this time without stopping. This lake was different from the last in that it was inhabited. Hundreds of people were gathered around the lake dipping their hands in the tingling water, all of whom were women. Alejandro would later come to find that these women were pallaqueras—a title reserved for nearly all working women in town, which encompassed any role outside of mining.

The travelers that were ahead of Alejandro and his family were all huddled in a small group along the path now, and a new face was turned towards Alejandro, waving him to come.

“Welcome, welcome,” she said. “Is there anyone still coming?” She was smiling, and her voice sounded confident and loud.

“No,” Katarina said. Her voice had a thirsty, dry rasp to it. “I mean, we were the last ones from the bus if that's what you meant.”

“Good,” the woman said. “That means I can welcome you all to La Rinconada, now. First off, all who are looking for work need not worry—you have it here.” Sighs of relief echoed from the strangers in the group as well as from Alejandro. He had figured Ernesto had not been lying, and that he would be able to find work here, but after spending the better part of the year jobless and interviewing, the idea of finding it now, so easily, felt dreamlike. He wondered for a moment if the tingle in his hands were from being asleep. He crossed his arms and discreetly pinched himself for good measure—a happy pain rang in his forearm.

“My name, for those of you who were wondering, is Mrs. Guerrero.”

Mrs. Guerrero had gone on to tell us the story of how her family founded La Rinconada when she was little, a story that sounded close to rehearsed, and one that Alejandro was sure she enjoyed recounting. She went over paperwork with us all, and told us that our signature meant we were guaranteed a job, a home, and food. This was incentive enough to everyone in the group to sign, obviously not taking the time to read over the contract. Were there even lawyers in La Rinconada? Could anything in a document be worse than being jobless and poverty-stricken in Lima?

To Alejandro, La Rinconada’s faults made it feel real. He was almost happy to see piles of frozen trash lining the dirt path they were on. This way, he knew that it wasn’t a fairytale city of gold. He expected it to be hard, but he knew that in the end, it would be worth it.

Their new home looked like all the others; it was a metal shed shoved into the wall of the mountain. The sheet metal didn’t keep out the cold, there was no running water, and there was no electricity or heat. There were two small bedrooms, large enough to fit a twin mattress and still be able to open the door partway. There was no restroom, or plumbing in La Rinconada for that matter, and outhouses were individually maintained. Alejandro wondered if he would strike gold when he was first

digging his outhouse, but he soon realized the only gold was at the mines, which were down a trail on the far side of the city.

Their home did, however, have a sink that drained into the street that they poured water that they learned to carry from the men who sold water daily out of their trucks a bit down the mountain. It took a couple hours, but it was the most affordable method, and so either Katarina or Alejandro would make the trek every other day, and they would make what water they could carry last until they were able to get more.

Diana spent the majority of the summer at home, reading the same book over and over, as Alejandro learned how to work the mines. The first month he had been surprised to find out he owed the Guerrero family money, but he supposed they had given him and his family a home to live in as well as a job, and they made it clear that they didn't have to pay out of pocket for anything in La Rinconada. All fees were taken from his paycheck at the end of the month, which arrived in an envelope pushed under the gap in his home's door, since mailboxes and addresses had no place in this town.

What home life lacked in terms of comforts, work in the mines amplified through hard labor, which Alejandro had not been used to. He spent around twelve hours each day swinging a smallish sledgehammer, which Beto called a martillo, into the chisel that he wedged into rocks, breaking them from one another all day long. Beto had trained Alejandro when he first arrived, and they worked their shifts together most days. The only times that Beto didn't come to work were because he had picked up the night shift, which was rumored to pay more, but that wasn't offered until you had worked in the mines for at least a year.

Incidents weren't rare, but Alejandro had never witnessed one. He had only heard of them, mostly due to them occurring almost exclusively at night. "Beto, if accidents happen during the night shift," he said, "then why do you still take those shifts?"



Beto had smiled. “Well,” he said, “I pray to Awicha before I go, of course, and working during the night is the quickest route to real money.”

“Does it really pay that much more?” Alejandro asked, knowing his first year had come and gone, and he could take night shifts if he wanted now. He never had because Katarina feared for his safety, and he understood her worry.

A small prayer station was setup outside the mine he entered each day. It looked like a tombstone, but with gray-silver arrows engraved into the front instead of a name. To strangers and newcomers, this tombstone on a stone table could look like just another pile of garbage. Empty liquor bottles, beer cans, and rotting food covered the table. The tombstone itself was wrapped in soggy, torn, and tattered ropes. But everyone know it was Awicha’s shrine.

Brujos in La Rinconada replaced the familiar psychics that folks went to in Lima. Their job was along the same lines, but their role was mixed in with speaking to the deities of the mountains—Awicha and Chinchilico. After sessions, the Brujos would typically let the client know what to sacrifice (usually food, alcohol, or easily found materials) in order to have good fortune, since one day each month they were allowed to take as much ore as they could carry, and to avoid cave-ins. Soon, Alejandro found himself visiting Brujos after his shifts every so often. Superstition was contagious.

It soon became clear that without working the nightshift or without Katarina joining the ranks of the pallaqueras, leaving La Rinconada would never happen. He decided, without consulting Katarina, to try his hand at the nightshift before she went to join the pallaqueras, which she made clear she was doing no matter what Alejandro said as well. He figured, if she is going to make that sacrifice, he might as well make one too. They would make it out of La Rinconada faster if they worked together. So, after a trip to the Brujo, and after sacrificing a can of beer to Awicha’s shrine, Alejandro picked up the shift.

“Just a few years up here, and then we’ll leave.”

## A RECIPE FOR CHILAQUILES

Have you ever seen oil shimmer like this? I think my favorite part about cooking with oil is watching it sit there, still and soundless, and then watching it erupt when I toss something in for it to strike.

Cut tortillas into either triangles or strips. Toss them in. Flip only once. They should be lightly browned.

The oil spits indiscriminately. Some people learn to avoid hot oil, some ignore the burn, and others avoid the oil altogether, but I can't avoid oil—it calls to me.

Let the fried tortillas rest on a towel. Sprinkle with salt. Drain the tortillas of oil.

After the oil has finished coating everything—the pan, the food, my hands—I feel a sense of disgust. Like, something lured me into cooking with oil, but after I'm done with it, I feel like everything is all wrong. This feeling is not unlike masturbating to pornography that feels taboo, yet arousing. After orgasm, I have realized what I just watched, and I feel dirty. Like I am covered in oil and in need of a shower.

Make the salsa roja—dice tomatoes, garlic, onion, jalapeño. Get each ingredient as fine as you possibly can, and then start crushing. Crush them together as if you want to smother the life from them because, in fact, you do want that. You want to smother the life from these ingredients in order for them to create a new life. What once was four separate ingredients will now become one salsa. The tomato

plant cannot know of its full potential, but garlic knows. Though, garlic will lose hope in time. Just focus on smothering garlic along with the rest until the deed is done.

How do you get rid of oil? I always forget. I think I heard not to put it down the drain—I wish I could, everything would be much easier. Do I put it in the trash? Do I wait for it to coagulate? Why can't I remember?

Mix together the fried tortillas with the salsa roja.

Sometimes, when it's late at night and I know everyone is asleep, I like to pour the oil onto the floor. I step into a puddle of oil, and I imagine that I am being cooked, that the oil is transforming me into a better, more savory version of myself. If I coat myself in oil, maybe then I'll be easier to digest.

Serve warm.

## SMALL GIFTS PRESENTED

I had agreed to watch Mrs. Guerrero's son for the weekend when she asked, but Mrs. Guerrero didn't quite request favors so much as she demanded.

I felt small, insignificant, and frightened as I stood in front of the Guerrero family's home. Snow had stopped falling at some point on my walk over, and whiteness surrounded me above and below. The sky and the ground melded into one another. The home was made of wood, unlike the metal of the shacks belonging to the majority of residents in La Rinconada, and its dark and its brown cut through the white around it, no other houses in sight. Glass covered the windows; emerald curtains bled through the panes. I walked past the latrine out front, and I thought theirs smelled less foul than most.

The house was two floors, which was one floor higher than any other building in town. And unless dirt counted as flooring, the Guerrero family also had the only floors in town in general. The curtains behind the windows were most likely to keep out prying eyes, but it could have also been to brag about having lights. Sunlight wasn't needed in their home. They had the money to create their own.

I knocked on the front door several times before I was confident that my gloved knuckles had made a sound loud enough for someone to hear. Mrs. Guerrero answered the door, swinging her back with the motion of the door so that the back of her head and her wide frame greeted me and asked that I latch her necklace. The ghostly stench of ammonia filled my nostrils as I touched the gold chain around

her neck, and I briefly expected the stinging sensation of diluted acid to follow. The back of her head thanked me, and I adjusted my knapsack to a single shoulder.

Mrs. Guerrero instructed me to take my shoes off, pausing before the word “shoes,” and told me to leave them on the porch. She must have had to think about what to call them. I wondered, too, if they could be considered shoes when the tongues had fallen off. The soles were only attached thanks to the tattered laces that I tied from the bottom to the top of my feet, opening at the toe as I raised each foot, closing as I lowered them, and usually exposing my socks to snow, water, or dirt somewhere mid-step. They were mostly useful now for guarding my feet from rocks, and while the protection from snow and cold was abysmal, it was not altogether absent. If she paid my family and me more, I would have thought about purchasing shoes instead of settling for shoes with pauses.

My feet, now only protected by cotton sock, felt a wave of relief run through them, flat on the floors. The ball of my right foot felt especially elated as it made contact with the smooth hardwood as Mrs. Guerrero showed me into her home and told me what I’d be doing in her and her husband’s absence.

The first room of her home had a large, soft-looking sofa. Her son sat in yellow footie pajamas on the arm of the couch. He stared at the TV, nearly the size of their front door, as animated animals spoke in English while Spanish subtitles bubbled up yellow at the bottom of the screen. “Of course there’s no cable, Diana,” Mrs. Guerrero said. “But there is a DVD player.” She waved her hand at the glass display case in the room, holding what was most likely hundreds of DVDs. “You’re welcome to watch, but Gabriel isn’t allowed anything scary before bed. He gets nightmares.”

I waved to Gabriel, whom I’d seen at the Guerrero family’s store often, where he would sit behind the counter with candy or snacks usually. He stuck his tongue out at me, which I’d seen equally as often.

Mrs. Guerrero showed me through the kitchen. She told me what temperature to heat the oven to when I warmed the cuy choctado for dinner, adding in that I had to turn it off afterwards as well. I asked

if I was allowed to eat the cuy. It had been a long time since I'd tasted guinea pig. She then instructed me on my cleaning duties, told me that I didn't need to spray the floors before I swept unlike in my own home. She opened the kitchen closet, housing an array of cleaning supplies including the broom and duster that she took out and handed me. Mrs. Guerrero turned on the lights as we entered the next room, and when she saw me turn the lights off in the last, she smiled at me and admitted she'd forgotten that I wasn't born in La Rinconada. She said she was surprised I still had my city manners, and I thanked her in case that was a compliment.

I expected the stairs to creak like when we lived with my grandparents back in Lima, but instead the steps were sturdy and silent. She told me that I wasn't allowed past the first door at the top of the stairs for any reason. I nodded emphatically, and she informed me that each morning another woman came to clean what was off limits to me. That first room was to be my quarters while I was staying for the weekend, which she referred to as the guest bedroom. I didn't ask how often they had guests because I was pretty sure they didn't. The guest room did, however, have its own mattress atop box springs, and it took all my self-control not to leap into the pillows and wrap myself in a cocoon of blanket. I would only exit my cocoon, I imagined, to read a book from the collection kept on the two bookshelves on either side of the bedframe. I looked at Mrs. Guerrero and tried to focus on her gold necklace while she told me how to dust, which, in fact, involved going both back and forth with the duster.

Mr. Guerrero came from farther down the hall, adjusting the knot of his tie, urging Mrs. Guerrero to hurry. He told her that I knew how to clean, which made him right, and he said that all women knew how to clean innately, which made him innately a dick.

As I took the cuy out of the oven, garlic and heat both flooded the kitchen. Gabriel shouted to me from the living room that he wanted to watch *Scream*, and when I told him that he wasn't allowed to watch scary movies, let alone movies that he was eight years from being able to watch, he pouted and said that

movies made before the year 2000 couldn't be scary. According to him, the acting was too poor and the blood was too fake. I didn't follow his logic. I thought all blood was scary, but I hadn't seen the movie, so I told him he beat me and to put it in.

We bit into our cuy when the first victim got stabbed. Both of us not spending time cutting or tearing off bits, just biting right into the body of the flattened rodent. Bypassing the arms with scrawny fingers seemingly reaching. The sensation felt like a mixture of equal parts fear and pleasure. I thought of my own teeth impaling the guinea pig's skin, crispy, and compared my canines to the knife from the movie. The woman in the movie was on her back, mouth upward just like the guinea pig I was eating. The taste was familiar, nostalgic even, but I couldn't enjoy it. I hadn't eaten it without my parents before. I felt guilty for enjoying seasoned meat, heating, and movies while my parents were huddled in bed to keep warm. They probably had eaten beans and tortillas for dinner again.

I went to the kitchen and wrapped half my cuy choctado in a dishtowel I thought the Guerrero family wouldn't miss. They were all the same shade of green, but a few looked slightly more used than others. I made sure to grab one that was neither the worst nor best looking, instead unnoticeably average. I stowed the towel and food in my knapsack, for now, telling myself I would slip the dishtowel back if I found the opportunity. I wasn't a thief; I just needed something to put the cuy into. Besides, the Guerrero family already has so much, and it's not like they need extra dishtowels.

By the time I came back to the living room, the woman who'd been stabbed was hanging from a tree. I thought that this movie, though made before the year 2000, might be too scary of a pre-bedtime story for a nine-year-old.

I put back the talking animals.

Gabriel said, "I can have you fired if you don't change that back."

I said, "Your mother told me not to let you watch anything scary."

We locked our gazes with one another for a few uncomfortable moments, but he folded his arms in defeat.

I asked him if he'd want to split a bottle of water, but he shot me a puzzled glance. I realized he probably hadn't been brought up sharing water. We each drank a whole bottle to ourselves. It was cold from the refri, and I didn't pause to save any for my parents this time.

This water would be my secret, and I gulped it all. I put another bottle in my knapsack, I figured that the Guerrero family had a refri packed with more. What was the difference if I drank another or put it in my knapsack anyway?

They could spare some for my own family, I thought.

Sweeping a hardwood floor was easy. The dust gathered neatly, something I'd missed from Lima without realizing it. When we wanted to sweep our home in La Rinconada, we'd need to spray valuable water onto the ground beforehand. This way, the excess dirt and dust and pebbles could be swept outside while the floor, also dirt, stayed put. I'd made the mistake of sweeping without using water on several occasions, usually on purpose, hoping that it would work without having to waste resources, but it never did. That was probably what I missed most of all. Sweeping wasting nothing but time.

Shortly into sweeping the kitchen, my heart jumped at the sound of screams coming from the living room. I wasn't used to having a TV around anymore, and I wasn't used to screams being pretend. I argued with myself over the merit of what Gabriel had said earlier. Could he really have me fired? I hadn't been told how, exactly, the previous weekend babysitter had lost her job. Mrs. Guerrero only told me to keep it quiet about her hiring me. I understood it to mean that others might be jealous of the presumably easy overtime I was making in addition to gold extraction at the lake during the week with the other pallaqueras.



I let him keep watching. I liked having the horror movie backtrack to my banal routine. I imagined the suspenseful music being meant for me as I swept the staircase. I looked into the hallway, which I was not supposed to go down, as the music reached a dramatic climax, though muted through the floorboards. I took a few light steps past my doorway, waiting for a creak to sound. But it didn't.

I went into the guest bedroom to dust, instead. I dusted the bookshelves, eyeing the titles and pulling out anything I thought sounded interesting.

On one shelf there was a porcelain figurine, and it reminded me of the lladró collection that my mother once had. It let off a soft shimmer in the fluorescent lighting. There was a mixture of large and small pieces molded into one figure, it appeared.

The figure was a small fishing boat with an old man and a young boy holding a long fishing rod. Both had on surprised looks, staring at the end of the pole. A dog with a curved tail peered over the edge of the boat, closet to falling over. I wondered if the artist had made the hat on the old man separately or had molded the man with the hat shape originally. The hat, then, becoming part of his being rather than placed on top. I picked the boat up and pulled lightly on the little pieces. I tugged on the hat, which stayed in place. Then I placed two fingers on the fishing rod, this time, I jumped a bit as I heard screams from downstairs, pulling the porcelain pole from the old man's hands. It made an anticlimactic popping sound, like the first kernel of popcorn opening up on the stovetop from inside the pan. I half-expected another pop for a moment, but the rest of the figure stayed whole.

My blood went cold, hoping the figure was worth nothing and, if it was, that no one would suspect I had broken it. I imagined the old man and young boy's surprised expressions judging me as I tried to place the rod back in place, but it rolled out of his hands sloppily now. I decided, instead, to place to pole in my knapsack. I would take it away, make them question whether or not a rod had ever existed in the figure in the first place. I briefly considered placing the entire boat in my knapsack, but I figured

they would notice it missing entirely easier than they would notice it missing a single piece. I didn't want to steal it, but I didn't want to get found out.

After the fear subsided, I thought that maybe my mother would be happy with this remnant of what might have been part of a lladró. It might make her happy, to have part of something she once loved. Or it might remind her of something she'd lost.

Either way it would remind my mother of questions I didn't want to answer like, "where did you find this" or "did you steal this from somewhere?" Questions I'd been asked before when small gifts presented themselves. Usually in the form of an extra piece of bread showing up in our grocery bags that my mother hadn't paid for, a can of beans appearing in the cabinet when the day before we'd had no food. Gifts that the Guerrero family would give me and my family unknowingly. Being in their home felt no different than being in their store, the only store in La Rinconada.

I didn't want to steal, and I would never consider myself a thief, but I rationalized stealing small amounts of food. The Guerrero family had so much, and the only charity they performed came with a cost. I figured they would probably charge my portion of cuy to my paycheck at the end of the month. It probably cost nearly as much as babysitting their son for the weekend would pay. I had to make my stay a bit more worth it. The trick was to make it worth it in ways they wouldn't notice. Otherwise it would not, of course, be worth it.

I set the boat back onto the shelf. There was no longer a fishing pole, but it was thin enough that maybe Mrs. Guerrero would rationalize that it never existed at all. Unless she took inventory of all her belongings in her home like her store.

I set my knapsack against the wall and threw myself into the bed. The mattress was larger than any I'd ever slept on alone, and my body clung to the bed as if it had its own gravity, a pull stronger than the Earth's. I stretched myself as long as I could, mouth up like the cuy choclado, or the woman from the

movie. I hoped my parents would enjoy the cuy once the weekend was over and I went back home. I closed my eyes, still lying on top of the blankets.

When I opened my eyes, the light of the room was still on, but I could tell from the window that night had fallen. I heard a screaming sound, that I knew was coming from the upper floor. Gabriel's screams came in bursts, broken up with moans and incomprehensible speech. I tried to focus, and I thought I might have heard my name for an instant, but I knew his bedroom was farther down the hallway. I wasn't allowed to go down there, under any circumstances. Not that I would help Gabriel from the nightmare he'd caused himself anyway. I was glad that he was still young, still lacked the power his family was known for.

I grabbed the small porcelain fishing pole from my knapsack and twiddled it between my fingers. The next day, I thought, I would have to see if there was a *Scream 2* for us to watch together.

## A RECIPE FOR CUY AL HORNO

There are many ways to make guinea pig. Cuy choctado is good; cuy al horno is better for a party like the one you're having later tonight. Skewer the guinea pigs first—one cuy is never enough. I recommend using bamboo. Set aside the guinea pigs and assure them that you will be back.

Gather garlic and crush it.

“What are your dreams, garlic?” you ask. Then, after listening to the garlic's response, after nodding along with a smile on your face and paying attention to the garlic, tell it that it sounds insane. “That will never happen,” you say. “You're just garlic. You'll never amount to more than that.”

Well done. The garlic is successfully crushed. Stir the crushed garlic into salt, cumin, and black pepper. The crushed garlic and other seasonings should be slathered onto the guinea pigs. By now, the skewered guinea pigs should have stopped squirming and be at peace. After burying them in seasonings, lay them down to rest for three hours. You can use this time to figure out how to use a grill.

Now that the grill is ready, place the guinea pigs atop. Turn them every couple of minutes to ensure even cooking and to prevent cold shoulders. Nobody likes cold shoulders. It is also important that you don't forget to

Now that we covered that, boil the potatoes on the stove. Boiling is the process of putting water in a pot and lighting a fire underneath. Sometimes fire and water mix well, but usually only if there is a metal or stone surface between the two.

Chop peppers, onions, chili panca, whatever's left of the crushed garlic, and some peanuts. These you will fry in oil.

The finished guinea pigs are now ready to be plated. They should appear to be whole, roasted, and crisp. As if any moment one could get up and walk off the plate. In fact, if you want to leave a live one and cover the dish before serving to a group, it makes a great party trick and treat.

“That’s how you know they’re fresh,” you say. Some of the guests laugh, some of them scream, but most of them cry because the air is still rampant with the stench of onion, and you didn’t air out the room. The guests are in tears; their eyes are burning. Most of them couldn’t even see the live rodent scurry off the table, knocking over two glasses of red wine that bleed into the white table cloth. The guinea pig gets away, your nicest table cloth is ruined, and good wine has been spilt tonight. You can rest assured that the entire night that you worked for is ruined, and you have only yourself to blame.

## OF LA RINCONADA

When you are the "most" of something, it feels like an accomplishment. My parents liked to say, "La Rinconada is the highest city in the world," and they were right. Until it was gone.

The old sheet metal houses still decorate the mountains, and the schoolhouse still remains, an empty shell. Shed by a locust that found new life elsewhere. After the mines dried up, and the gold had all but vanished, everyone was forced to leave. There wasn't anything worth taking from La Rinconada.

You know, I used to think that La Rinconada was at the corner of the world. "Rincón" means corner. And it was the highest populated town on the planet. Was. No one lives there anymore. And now I think its name makes more sense than ever. I had always fixated on the first part of the name—corner.

Seeing all these empty homes, these abandoned roads, and the Guerrero home ransacked and gutted, I finally notice the second half of the name. Perhaps the more obvious half, even. "Nada." This city was always a corner, but it was the corner of nothing and now there is nothing left. I will remember this place, but no one will know it again. There is no money here anymore, but then again, there never was.

## THE GIRL FROM THE CLOUDS

I never lied to my daughter, but I didn't tell her the truth either. Not the whole truth. I said once that I gave birth to her amongst clouds, and that I could feel the cushion of their puffy, lopsided formations under me as she came into this world brighter than sunlight. From the second she was born I knew she would be mi angelita. That was the truth; that was my truth. But that wasn't the whole story.

The April before I left for Peru with Ale for his work, we had gotten married. I was so far into my pregnancy at the ceremony that I probably looked more like a snowball in my dress than a bride, but Ale assured me that he had always wanted to marry a snowwoman.

After the wedding, we stayed with my parents for two months in their home on Playa de Hornos in Mexico City. Ale was working remotely from my parents' home while I stayed in bed reading novel after novel; Yuri Herrera kept me company with his prose since I was sentenced to bedrest and forced to be wheeled around in a chair if I left. I would have stayed in bed for the whole pregnancy if the doctor told me to. I didn't want any complication. I could see through the window to my mother's garden on the patio, and across the street was a well-maintained home and yard. The buildings falling apart on either side of my parents' home nearly vanished from my memory as wholly as they did from view. I hadn't lived in this house since I graduated from high school and moved away to university, in Monterrey, where

I met Ale. Seeing him in my childhood home felt wrong. Not like bad or unwanted, but wrong as in everything around me was painted in watercolor, and he in acrylic. He just didn't fit with the same sense of nostalgia I had being home with my family, and I had never brought him home to meet them since he went home to his own family in Peru during the summer and winter.

I didn't stray far from home most days. My family only had one working car, and the hospital was a forty-five-minute drive if you included traffic. Not many people trusted ambulances this far away now that poor, desperate medics without jobs roamed the streets in private ambulances, lurking in hopes of catching needy and distressed victims to make a quick buck.

My nieces and nephews ran in to see me each time school let out. I had many; my mother always told me our family was so large because the women have good luck and that our labors and pregnancies are quick and less painful than most. The kids would bombard me with questions each day. Was I having a girl or a boy? What name had I picked? Was it going to be twins? My niece, María, was especially curious the week before my due date. I had just told her that I felt the baby drop in my belly, and after that she would not rest until I let her feel. She lifted her hair away from her ear and laid one hand onto my bellybutton as she listened. She held there until she felt a kick, to which she proudly declared that I was having a girl.

“And how do you know that?” I teased.

“Easy. Her feet are small, and boys have big feet,” she said. When I laughed, her expression remained stoic. “It's true,” she concluded.

“Well, you're on the right track,” I said. “Everyone has small ones when they're young, but they grow as you get older, even if boys' feet grow more.”

“Not mine,” she said. “My feet will always be this size.”



“Okay, let’s make a deal,” I said. Her expression became one of excitement then, and she leaned in closer. “You promise me your feet won’t grow, and you tell my baby that hers will. That way, one day my baby—”

“She,” María interjected.

“All right,” I said. “That way, one day she will be able to run through fields, swim through rivers, and climb mountains.”

She wanted to shake hands on our deal, but I made her hug on it. She let out a laugh and told me that my daughter was kicking her and it tickled. Ale came home and joined in on our play-wrestling. I wished my daughter could grow up playing with her cousin, but I wanted a life that was better for her, and Ale couldn’t provide that here. His work was back in Lima. He made good money managing a clothing factory, and we both agreed that it was an opportunity we could not let pass. Both our families had little, and this job enabled him to provide a bit of comfort to them. We could send money to ease some of their burden and live well at the same time.

Ale wheeled me around outside that afternoon. The wheels of the chair squeaked along the sidewalk. I had asked him to take me to get pupusas at a Salvadorian place nearby because I was craving cheese and fresh air. My family was going to the park for a picnic, but I pleaded with Ale to take me to El Salvador Del Mundo instead.

There were so many clouds in the sky that I swore the oceans must have been white. A giant pool of milk replacing the Earth’s oceans, if only for the day, reflecting off the cotton of the clouds. My baby kicked as we left our street, like she knew. My back ached from bedrest. Ale pushed me down the sidewalk, which had been newly cemented while I had been gone those four years. Trickle of sunlight caught on the ground, forming yellow-white steams as it rained through clouds, every now and then splashing my eyes. The scent of foods from my childhood mixed in the air and my mouth was watering. I

clutched my stomach for a moment. I had felt a sharper pain than usual, but I didn't want to ruin the day with worry. The next one hit harder and I must have whimpered because this time Ale noticed.

"Is everything all right?" He asked. I must not have answered right away because he called my name, as if I had been aloof or distant. "Katarina."

"I'm fine. Our daughter just kicked me harder than usual," I said. "I think she got a kidney."

"You mean our son," he said.

"María assured me that we were having a girl."

We laughed together. I remembered seeing my old elementary school on our walk. It was behind a wall covered in graffiti and murals. The marks had changed, but they still washed a sense of nostalgia over me. Warm tones of reds and oranges were painted atop cooler tones of blues and purples. Large letters spelling acronyms I didn't know anymore. I wagered that scrubbing the spray paint off those walls would have been harder than removing the bricks at that point. Familiar chalk lines covered the blacktop where children still played avión, hopping between each of the squares.

The alley behind the school was less tagged than the wall in front. The blue dumpsters were overflowing with black trash bags, and the dumpsters were covered in spray paint themselves. On each one was white lettering with different colored outlines and backdrops. They all said average, nonsensical things, including one that read "nube" and another reading "basura." I guessed that this was the testing grounds for new paint cans rather than an eclectic group of gangs with mundane names fighting over territory. I turned my head back forward and could see El Salvador Del Mundo's neon, and I felt excitement growing inside of me to bite into a pupusa con queso.

I let out a gasp as I flung my hands onto my belly this time. The pressure felt different than the usual kicking, like I was stabbed from behind, but then the sensation worked its way forward. I looked up to Ale who seemed panicked, staring at my pelvis. I followed his gaze to find a damp shadow around my

crotch; a pale yellow liquid was dripping off my drenched dress and over top my chair. My legs were covered in the wetness. I didn't realize that I had been repeating "no" over and over under my breath until Ale answered "yes" and said he was calling an ambulance. I took deep breaths hoping to calm myself down as I heard him dial. In and out. In and out. I wished that breathing could stop it from coming. I thought if I breathed just right, maybe I would pause life, but it came and I clenched the arms of my wheelchair so tight that I worried I might rip them right off.

Ale ran down the street towards the Salvadorian place shouting for an ambulance. I saw him throw open the door before I leaned forward, bracing myself against the pain. My body felt like it was packing itself into a snowball, and each contraction hit me harder than the last.

People were walking around me on the sidewalk, both staring at and ignoring me at the same time. A young woman stopped to check on me. Her blue jeans were ripped and her shirt didn't cover her pierced belly button. I heard her voice, just barely, but I was listening for the sirens. I heard them in the distance, praying they were coming for me.

"Are you okay?" She said. "Do you need me to call you an ambulance?" Her hands on my shoulders were comforting and warm. She must have just left work, or maybe she was on her way there, because she was still wearing her nametag; it read "Diana." I felt a bead of sweat stream down my forehead. I closed my left eye to avoid the sting, too tired to wipe the sweat away. The woman restated ambulance and sounded out the syllables slower this time: "Ahm-bu-lan-ci-ah?"

"My husband ran to call one," I said. She offered to stay with me, and through grated teeth, as nicely as I could, I mustered a "please."

"It's going to be okay, just take deep breaths," she said. She started to breathe with me, making guiding motions with her hands and telling me to imitate her breathing. She offered me a drink from her water bottle, but I waved it away. I couldn't think about drinking anything right now—especially Ciel brand. They claimed to purify their water, but it tasted more like lake water and chlorine mixed together.

What she did was small at the time, but it meant so much to me. She was the woman who stopped to ask me if I was okay. She comforted me, for a short time, while I was sitting in the sidewalk alone. I wanted my daughter to grow into this type of woman—a woman that took action to help others.

The next moments were hazy. I saw Ale running back, the red of the neon sign framing his head's silhouette. The siren sound that had been in the distance moments ago was deafening now, and as the ambulance pulled up, two medics walked briskly out the backdoors. The license plate was from Nuevo León. They shoved Diana out of their way to get to me—she fell onto the pavement.

“Do we have your permission to take you to the hospital? Where is your husband?” One said. He spoke nonchalantly, no hint of urgency in his voice.

“I’m right here,” Ale said. He spoke as he was trying to catch his breath. “Of course it’s all right. I’m glad you were close.”

They lifted me onto the stretcher and into the back of the ambulance as another contraction hit. My insides felt like magma, slowly burning their way out. The siren was echoing against the inside of the ambulance. I saw Diana run toward me, reaching out, as the door slammed in her face. I tried to focus on Ale, now sitting beside me, the ambulance finally in motion. I was squeezing his knee, but he wasn’t looking at me. He spoke with the two paramedics. I saw him get out his wallet and hand them around 500 pesos each.

I could feel the pain hitting me faster and faster, and I felt like soon I wouldn’t have enough time to take a breath between jolts. I could feel the motion of the ambulance start, stop, start, stop. I cursed traffic more than I ever had before. There should be pregnant-women-only routes. Don’t women give birth every day? It would get used more often than the carpool lane the way I figured. People don’t carpool to work on holidays, but babies don’t wait for Christmas to pass before coming into the world.

It felt like hours had passed since we got into the back of this vehicle. I could hear Ale's voice shouting above my own screams. His hand was squeezing mine. The paramedics were shouting back, too.

"What do you mean that's not enough?" Ale said. "Ambulances aren't free anymore?"

"Sir," one of the two men said. "Sir, calm down. We aren't with ERUM. We are a private company that supports the local government with ambulances and medical services." As he spoke, I saw that he touched the pesos into his pocket. "I'm sorry, but it would take at least 3,000 pesos to get you to the hospital." The ambulance slowed down, again. This time the stop was different. It wasn't just a complete stop, it was a stop and lurch. As if someone had placed the ambulance into park. "I'm afraid you will have to wait for the public ambulance to arrive. We just called another for you."

Someone riding in the front had come around back to open the doors. My vision blurred as tears and sweat mixed. I was clenching the stretcher so hard that it took two of them to lift me off whereas only one of them handled Ale. They didn't place me on the ground, but instead, seated me on several trash bags that were lying outside the dumpster marked "nube" in that practice paint from earlier. The sweat and stick of my legs stuck like glue to the cheap plastic of the bags.

Ale was at my side now. "It's going to be okay," he said. "Everything's good." But he swore under his breath. I saw the ambulance as it drove away, Nuevo León license plate fading into the alley and turning out. Their siren was off now, but a siren in the distance was getting starting, and I hoped it was for me. The real ambulance, I thought. "I'm sorry," he said. He leaned his forehead into my shoulder, and he held onto my hand tightly, but I'm sure my grip was stronger. "I'm sorry I wasn't carrying more."

We were in the center of the alley, far from traffic. The trash I was lying in was soft, and I didn't want to think into that more than I had to. The sky was still glazed with white, not an inch of blue visible. Marijuana aroma seasoned the air, which was welcomed for once, as it smelled stronger than the garbage. A glint of sunlight reflected off the upstairs window of one of the buildings that made this alley, so I

knew the sun had cut through the clouds finally, somewhere, even if I couldn't see it myself, I could read it from that window. There was still good around me, and between contractions, I tried to focus on that. But I could feel the need to push coming.

I leaned my head back to let out a howl, and when I opened my eyes, I could see Diana running from the street toward us, as if she cut through the clouds like the sun to get to me. I mouthed her name on my lips. It felt right. She was back, and she brought with her a tinge of hope. I had felt so calm with her earlier, and I felt that having her there was right in a way. I twisted my face into what I hoped was a smile.

“Hey, I’m right here. I’m back,” she said. I let out another groan. “Have you been timing the contractions?” She looked to Ale who just stared blankly. “They were already pretty close when I was waiting with her earlier. Miss? I am going to remove your underwear, is that okay?”

I nodded. Not only did she slide off my underwear, but she raised my dress over my belly. It was the most terrifying and embarrassing moment of my life. I was lying in a pile of trash, half-naked, with a stranger looking into my vagina. “Is everything all right? Is my baby okay? Are you a doctor?”

“There’s good news and there’s bad news,” she said. “The good news is that I’ve given birth twice before to my own children.”

“And the bad news?” Ale said.

“The bad news is that I’ve never delivered a baby, and I won’t be able to say that tomorrow.”

I let out a long howl as the next wave of pain hit. Diana told Ale to take off his shirt, which he did. Then she uncapped her water bottle and rinsed her hands—I prayed that Ciel purified their water like they said they did. Then I watched her pour the remaining water on the shirt.

“I’m going to need you to get on your hands and knees,” she said.

“What do you mean on my hands and knees?” I shouted. She explained to me that it would be easier on everyone, baby included, if we let gravity help pull her out. She even said “her.” Like everyone but me knew my baby was a little girl before I did.

I was on all fours now, hanging over a wet t-shirt, trash all around me. I clenched my hands on the ground and felt my knuckles dig into the concrete. Diana was quiet now, but I could feel her presence behind me, like a guardian angel. Ale was in front of me, and I could see his lap, but I couldn't raise my head to look at him. He held onto my wrists and whispered that it was going to be okay.

I could feel cuts on my knuckles now, as I leaned harder into my hands. I was sobbing and fluid dripped from my mouth and nose in addition to everywhere else. I let out a long and hard scream when I felt the baby start to come out, already so far along its path. I heard Diana tell me to give it one last, hard push, and I did. I pushed with more strength than I ever had before, and more strength than I ever used since. It was the worst pain I ever felt, but when I felt that baby come out, the relief made it worth it. Or at least seem like it was. Like I had been in a desert for the past year without a drop of water, but I finally took a long gulp, and I could finally breathe in a world where I was no longer thirsty.

I was already holding my daughter, wrapped in her father's wet shirt, when the paramedics arrived. They took me to the hospital where they cut the umbilical cord and made sure her vitals were okay. Ale and I sat in silence, listening to the soft hum of the machines around us. Our hearts were both racing. I could feel his pulse beating through his palm, gripped softly around mine.

The doctor came back with a smile on his face, asked us if we had a name picked out for our healthy baby girl. It had already been decided. There was no other name that felt right, no other name that I would ever call my baby than Diana.

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