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A Land to Call Their Own

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A LAND TO CALL THEIR OWN

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Fine Arts – Creative Writing

Department of English
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A Land to Call Their Own

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Abstract

My thesis project is a novel of historical fiction centered on a Mexican family in the Saginaw River Valley, in Michigan, during the year 1918 near the beginning of the sugar beet boom. In the novel, the family, the Acevedos, own and operate their own farm amid the increasing use of migrant farm labor in the state. The Acevedos and the betaboleros they employ must navigate life’s vicissitudes as experienced through the lenses race and class differences to the community of rural Michigan, as well as gender and family dynamics, throughout the course of the story.
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Over the course of his life, Ernesto Acevedo has experienced his fair share of set backs and defeats. More than, he might say. Whatever indignity he has had to suffer, there has always been some consolation in the knowledge that everything he’d gone through was to ensure that his family could have a better life. So here Ernesto stands with his eldest son before his very own barn on his very own farm, his family’s reward for all they’ve endured, the one tangible thing he might pass down besides the rusted pistola he carried out of Mexico when he was only a boy.

The large heavy doors to the barn gape open, and Ernesto holds the frayed ends of the thick hemp rope he uses to keep the doors closed against heavy wind and the odd scavenging animal. The knot that once joined the two ends of rope is intact. Someone came in the night, sawed through the rough braid, and left the makeshift latch in the dirt for him and his son to find in the morning.

Through the open doors they can see inside to the great pile of their things amassed in the middle of the barn’s dirt floor. It is a mess of horse tack and shovels and other yard equipment, rope cut into pieces of varying length, oil lanterns, bags of horse feed slit open and poured onto the pile. The dumped feed looks soft and wet, and the smell of kerosene wafts around the entry. One of the horses, the blond one, a sweet and docile creature, is nosing around the spilt oats and grains only to snort and toss his head. Their stalls are open and no other horse is in sight.

The clench of nausea grips Ernesto’s stomach. It is like an invisible hand reaching in, squeezing, a force from somewhere outside himself. The strength of the sensation alarms him; he’s never reacted this way to seeing his possessions tossed around or broken before. Not that it happens all the time, but it has happened. He had thought he left that worry behind when he
brought his family up out of the laborer’s camps and became a landowner. His vision wavers momentarily, and he is dizzy. He gulps air to settle his stomach and quiet the anger, which he deems will not serve him here.

—They even stole the horses,—Roberto says from behind his father. —Hijos de putas,— he says.

The spell of dizziness passes from Ernesto, and his vision clears. In the spell’s wake he is exhausted and there is a fogginess to his thoughts.

—If so, someone would notice their new horses. They would have to explain.

Ernesto speaks with some difficulty at first, but the words and thoughts become stronger near the end.

—Papá, are you alright?

Roberto puts a hand on his father’s back to steady him.

—I am fine. I have not eaten, is all.

Roberto brings Ernesto over to a bench against the outside wall of the barn and sits down with him.

—I can bring you food,—Roberto says.

Ernesto is weak but improving. He pushes on his son until Roberto stands up from the bench.

—I am fine, m’ijo. Take some men and go find the horses. They won’t have strayed too far.

This was something he knew from his father. A thoroughly tamed horse will wander from the stable if it is left open but will not runaway. They will look for grass to graze on and water to drink. A very well trained horse will return to the stable after it has had its fill.
Roberto leaves in a hurry, like there is no time to waste. It is a good thing, Ernesto thinks, that he has a task to occupy his mind. No good can come from him dwelling on this act of vandalism.

Before he enters the barn, Ernesto walks all the way around it. The cut rope from the door is still in his hand, held loosely. He is looking for the slogan, the redundancy of words scrawled on the wall meant to deliver their message. There isn’t one. The outside walls of the barn are clean, and for that at least he is grateful. He cannot imagine his wife and daughters having to see some hateful message, some slur directed at them as much as himself, written on their home. He pushes that thought from his mind before it can grow roots.

Inside the barn, his heart falls within his chest. The destruction is of course more devastating than he could see from outside. All along the walls where ladders and lanterns and other equipment hung, those things have been pulled from the boards, hooks and all. He owns three ladders of varying lengths and each one lays on the ground, their rungs snapped in half. The ladder to hayloft has also been hacked apart. He does not see his ax.

The smell of kerosene is much stronger inside and makes it hard for Ernesto to get a full breath. A sudden shock of fear goes through him. A single match, he thinks, and all would be lost. The blond horse comes to where he is and noses his shoulder. He rubs its neck, feeling slightly ashamed. The horse should be his priority.

Digging through the pile of his tossed and broken belongings for a useable piece of rope, Ernesto detects another smell: the sharp scent of urine. He straightens, wanting to yell, to swear, to wring the necks of whoever wrecked his barn. His body trembles with the need to lash out, and he kicks a wood crate that used to hold his wife’s canning jars, now all shattered. The crate
remains intact as it flies across the barn. It clatters against the wall, and the blond horse tosses its head with a nervous sound and moves sideways away from the noise. Ernesto’s shame renews.

—No hay tiempo para tu tontaria,—he tells himself.

A vision of white sneering faces rises in his mind before he banishes the thought of the vandals at last. Beneath the trash he finds a clean length of rope and fashions it into a makeshift halter on the horse’s head. He ties the horse up outside and takes a moment to breath the clean cool air. The morning clouds are breaking up and a robin’s egg blue is showing through the cracks. He receives this as a sign of the good that is still there under the bad.

Back inside the barn, he finds a bucket intact and uses the broken off brush of a push broom to sweep up the spilled feed. That and anything covered in kerosene he puts into the wheel barrow and carries off to the burn pit beyond the chicken coops. On one pass he finds the empty kerosene can in the yard, which tells him at least which way the vandals went when they were done.

Before long he is dizzy from the smell, but not like before. The sensation after seeing what was done is still strange to him. He has no good idea what it could mean. Even after most of the debris is collected, the smell lingers, though not as strong. He hopes to have everything cleaned up and put back into some order before anyone other than Roberto can see it.

By the time Ernesto finishes cleaning up the mess in the barn and returns to the house, it is late in the morning. He is careful to keep the screen door from banging against the frame when he comes in. It is a habit of his to come and go quietly in the early hours when the house is still dark and cooler than the outside. That his wife and young children get to sleep in past the waking hour of most laborers is a particular point of pride for him. It has made all the years he spent
working himself near to death worth the hardship. That and the pride of being able to say he owns something so precious as land.

He grinds beans to make to make coffee, pouring them into a pan with water, and setting it on the stove to boil. They own a percolator for the first time in their married lives, and his wife, Rosa insists on using it. She says Ernesto’s method wastes too many coffee beans and she is not wrong. Making coffee this way reminds him of how his father did it when he was a boy. The way it filled their tiny house with its rich, earthy scent, the hint of char from what had burned to the bottom of the pan. Try as he might, Ernesto could not make it quite the same way.

The water in the pan sizzles around the jagged floating debris of ground coffee beans, and a ring of dark bubbles foams at the pan’s edge. He takes the white paper bag down from the shelf above the stove, the words Pioneer Sugar printed on in big red letters. It makes him think of his family. They are the pioneers here doing something people like them have seldom done. And like pioneers, they are going to survive and make something permanent.

He pours from the bag into the boiling coffee. A cascade of white granules slips beneath the black surface and disappears. The sugar makes a gentle shushing sound as it falls, and the light from the candle catches the occasional granule making it sparkle like a gemstone. This from beets, he thinks. Since he began farming sugar beet just a few years before, he only buys Pioneer and displays the bag openly in the kitchen. This is how he expresses his loyalty to the culture and to the company that takes his sugar beet and makes it into this.

Before he realizes, he has poured too much into the coffee. He stirs the boiling pot until he can no longer feel the grit of sugar against the spoon. The coffee is too sweet, nearly undrinkable for most, but Ernesto has grown to like the sweet sensation. He welcomes the cloying acridity of it on his tongue against the taste of burnt coffee.
From the front room the screen door slams and startles Ernesto, making him jump. A small wave of coffee laps over the lip of his cup and wets his sleeve. Roberto comes into the kitchen. He is all noise from the screen door to his boots scraping and clamping over the wood floor. The difference now to the quiet of the moment before is jarring, and while Ernesto struggles to reconcile the two he misses what his son is saying to him.

—Qué? —Ernesto says. He swipes at the cuff of his sleeve.
—I asked, did you save any coffee for me?
—Of course,—Ernesto says. —I have not had time to drink it all.

He smiles at his son from beneath his heavy mustache, showing a lot of teeth. For some reason this face used to make his son laugh and laugh when he was a boy. Roberto sees him but merely goes and checks the pitcher where they keep cow’s milk, but Ernesto knows it’s empty.

On any normal day, Roberto would have done the milking by now.

Ernesto begins to get up from his chair, but Roberto claps him lightly on the shoulder so that he stays in his seat. He takes the pan from the stove and fills a cup from the cupboard. It is funny to Ernesto that his son always reaches for the closest mug to hand. Ernesto himself likes to use the same mug every time, merely rinsing yesterday’s grounds from the bottom if he finds it dirty. He considers warning his son but doesn’t. Instead Ernesto watches him over the rim of his own cup, waiting for him to take a drink.

—You think Joe will be by today? —Roberto asks.
—We are still waiting on seed for the sugar beet, so I would hope,—Ernesto says.
—Good thing Joe stiffed us. Again.
—Supongo que sí.
Joe Vanerp is the local fieldman to the Michigan Sugar Company. He represents the regional fieldman who reports to a foreman in the factory refinery on the conditions of crops, growing practices, harvest times. From Joe come all the company’s wishes and complaints as far as the farming of sugar beet is concerned. And while it’s true they get their allotment of seed later than most, usually last, Ernesto believes it is with good reason, not what Roberto suspects. And yet, Joe might not even show. He has a way of not bothering overly much about keeping his appointments with their farm. Despite all this, Ernesto finds himself genuinely liking the man and he has a feeling the sentiment might be shared.

Roberto takes a drink and almost immediately spits it onto the floor. He makes a sound that is something between a gag and a scream. The accidental prank is more than Ernesto expected it to be. He laughs past the point of breathlessness, until his face is hot and two fat tears roll down either side of his face. It takes a long time for him to regain himself, wheezing and wiping his face. A good long laugh is exactly what he needed this morning. Already he feels some tension draining from him.

Roberto has had enough time to fill the kettle with water and place it on the stove. He does not look at his father while he does so. The metal heats, and the thin walls of the kettle make a popping sound as they expand. It whistles, and he lets it whistle for a moment before taking it off the heat. His cup is half-filled, and he fills it the rest of the with hot water. Only then does he turn around.

—I wish you would put the sugar in your cup and not the whole pan,—he says.

His son sits at the kitchen table, across from him, hunched forward and feet crossed under his chair like always, the coffee cup waiting steaming between, his hands. Moments like this have a way of catching Ernesto unaware with the warmth and ferocity of the love he has for his
boy spreading through his chest. It comes at unpredictable moments with even the subtlest gesture. It is this way with everyone of his family.

Then Ernesto feels the strange sensation in his gut again. At first he thinks it is the sugar. Too much has on occasion made him feel sick. But this is not that. He feels something inside him, something that is not a part of him, and it takes hold and pulls. The force is so strong that he braces himself against the table, though he hasn’t moved. Then there is a feeling of separation, like a page being torn from a book. Ernesto is the page. The scene before him is gradually obscured by silent pulses of color, like what a person sees with their eyes squeezed shut, only his are open. There is the sensation of movement, then nothing. He muerto, Ernesto thinks.

And then his eyes clear. He is seated across from a chubby boy no older than twelve at a table in a tiny hovel. The aroma hits him, a thing he can not quite place but could never forget—at once sweet and smokey, a spice that tickles his nose, an oily scent that hangs in the air. This is the shack were he grew up on the rancho de Don Guerrero. Ernesto is too shocked to move except to turn his head and take in the scene. There are the pots and pans they own hanging from nails in one wall; in the opposite corner is the pile of rugs covered by a horse blanket where he and his father slept. Thin light is coming through the heavy canvas flap that covers the lone window.

When Ernesto turns back to the boy he is drinking from a clay mug. Nothing seems to be disturbing him. On the table between them is brown clay pot, and Ernesto holds a cup of his own. He takes a drink and as the bitter-sweetness rolls around his tongue, the subtle heat of cinnamon and something else he has never been able to place, he knows what day this is.

—Te gusta, chico?—he asks the boy.
Though the words come out of his mouth, it is his father’s voice he hears.

—Sí, papá. Me gusta mucho,—the boy says.

That would make the boy himself.

—Bueno. Esta mañana vamos pa’ otro lado del rio,—he says.

He tries to say anything else, but his tongue is stuck. He can only say his father’s words as he remembers them.

—Con Demonio?

—No se llamas así.

He has never really forgotten them.

Darkness invades the scene, and the voices continue speaking of the day ahead though they grow quiet and distant.

With a gradualness like waking, Ernesto finds himself seated exactly where he was, Roberto lifting the mug to his lips, eyes concentrated on the rim. He wonders what has just happened, both relieved and confused to still be alive. His stomach is still empty, and he is suddenly ravenous. A little unsteady he pushes back from the table goes to the counter where there is a basket of apples. He takes one and bites into it again and again, biting as he chews until his mouth is too full for more. The juice runs sticky into the corners of his mustache. When he finishes he leans back against the counter, momentarily sated.

—Is everything alright?—Roberto asks.

Ernesto kisses Roberto’s hair. It smells of hay and soap.

—I am fine. Only hungry.

—Are you sure? You’ve been acting strange today.
—I am fine. Did you find the horses?—Ernesto asks.

He does not want to talk about himself, what he’s feeling or thinking. He needs turn this strange occurrence over in his mind first. It would be nice if he could dismiss what he saw as a dream or hallucination, but even now the details are with him so firm as if that past has literally just happened to him.

Roberto sits back in his chair and traces a half moon shape on the rim of his cup, watching his thumb move either to distract himself or gather his thoughts. Ernesto waits patiently, watching his son’s face. A thread of worry tickles the inside of his chest. What if the horses weren’t nearby as he thought they would be? Or worse, what if the vandals hurt them? He feels the need to move or squirm.

—Papá, aren’t you angry at them for what they do to us?—Roberto asks.

—I am absolutely angry, m’ijo, do not doubt it. But ask yourself what good is there in anger? What will it give us?

—So we just roll over and take whatever comes?

—No, of course not.

—Then what do you we do?

—I do not know.

Ernesto’s son opens his mouth to say something and in the same moment his daughter, Linda, comes into the room. She is already wearing a plain white blouse and dark colored skirt, which, in the dimness of the kitchen, makes her torso seem to float disembodied into the room. The vision of it is unsettling in the wake of all he has just seen. He blinks several times before the burning white shape of his bisected daughter resolves into her whole self, and by then Roberto has closed his mouth.
—Good morning, papá.—Linda says. She comes in and kisses her father on the cheek. —
Good morning, Beto.

—Morning,—Roberto says.

He raises his cup to her and then takes a long swig. His cheeks and upper lip are naked of any stubble. The hollows dimple inward as he drinks. It occurs to Ernesto that Roberto is always clean shaven at any time of day. This didn’t used to be the case, he is sure.

Linda checks the pan on the stove. Ernesto looks at his son over the table who looks back at him, then at his sister, all without moving his head. Linda pours the coffee slowly, taking care not to dump the grounds that have settled on the bottom into her cup. After a moment’s consideration she stirs in a spoonful of sugar. Ernesto watches his son to see if he will stop her from drinking and he doesn’t. She chokes down the too-sweet coffee without spewing it all over and immediately dumps the contents of her cup. This second time around, the joke only makes him chuckle, but even Roberto smiles and shakes his head.

—Papá, why?—Linda says. Her voice comes out strained.

—He got me too,—Roberto says.

—It was an accident,—Ernesto says.

—Then someone should have warned me.

—We suffer as a family,—he says, still smiling.

Linda makes a face at him and resumes rinsing her mouth. While she empties the foul brew from the pot and brings the percolator out of the cupboard, Roberto stands up from the table.

—We can finish our talk later.—he says to Ernesto.
All but the barest hints of intensity are gone from his voice. Ernesto simply nods in response. Roberto pushes his chair in and sets his cup in a tub in the sink. Linda looks over her shoulder at both of them but otherwise doesn’t move from in front of the stove. Roberto kisses her on the hair before moving past her.

—Hasta luego, dulce,—he says.

She throws a kitchen towel at his back

—Oh,—Roberto turns once more to Ernesto,— I put the blond back in the stable. He’s in there with all the others.

—Thank you, m’ijo,—Ernesto says.

—Bye.—Linda says, once more looking over her shoulder then back to the stove. The screen door bangs shut.

—What is he going to talk to you about later?—Linda asks, turning from the stove.

—It is nothing,—Ernesto says. —Only business things. Boring things.

Above him Ernesto hears the rest of the house coming to life. Floor boards creek as Luz and Liliana stir in the room they share. Linda is with him in the kitchen, which must mean his wife, Rosa María is upstairs tending to Oscar, their youngest at only five years old. Often times Ernesto is already out in the field by now, so he doesn’t get to see his family in their morning routines. It is nice that for once he can sit here and enjoy knowing they are awake and starting their days.

Then he remembers why he is in the house now and all the strange things that have gone on already and what has yet to happen. He is still waiting for Joe Vanerp to come with the sugar beet seed. And once he has them he will need the additional men promised. They should be coming by train any day, but if they come too soon, when he has no work for them what will he
Keep them idle in the camp or find some kind of work for them is about all he can do. And like that his worries gather and build until they all but drown out the happy sounds of his family who don’t know what happened in the barn and won’t find out, so long as he has any say over it. He stands, kisses his daughter on the forehead as he sets his cup in the sink and steps out to continue the day’s work.
Early morning light just begins to soften the eastern sky over the line of trees that separates the tracks from the uncultivated fields beyond. Tired brown faces fill the windows. Most of them are men, but there are women and some children as well. They’ve seen the ads in La Prensa and elsewhere, in Forth Worth, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio:

PRIMER SALIDA DE LA MICHIGAN
Se necesitan braceros para la Michigan Sugar Company
Su pasaje es GRATIS de ida y vuelta

Most of them have been on the train that long. They massage the backs of their thighs, stretch tired muscles. Women and girls hold the occasional small child still asleep from the ride. A few men pass around tobacco, and cigarettes are rolled. People who didn’t know one another before the train, or even before getting off here, standing smoking in tight little circles laughing and slapping one another on the back. They shuffle to stay warm in the northern chill, but they are excited. The promise of better pay in El Norte has them all hopeful they can make enough to take care of their families back in México, to move back and live well.

The pre-dawn chill is rapidly leaving the air and in the light of the sun men and women on the platform can no longer see their own breath. They turn this way and that to see as much as they can of this new place. The land is flat and extends for a long way west and south until their view is broken by a line of trees. Beyond the brown brick and red tiled roof of the station they can see a city rising up. One of the men, Manuel, looks straight up, and the sky is still deep navy.
He watches a long time while it fades to purple then red-gold, then like an eye opening from sleep, the rich watery blue of open country that he loves so much.

Then the commotion begins. A man shouts to them in English and just a little behind his words another shouts presumably the same directions in Spanish. With the two shouting over one another, the words get garbled and lost in the middle until someone understands they want all the new laborers to gather into lines. Everyone follows suit, the little grouping break apart or spread out into lines, effectively ending the friendly chats. The people are loaded into great big wagons pulled by horses or trucks depending on where they are going. None of the laborers know which farms they are going to. Those decisions have been made for them. Manuel is told the name Acevedo as he steps up on the runner of a wagon and takes a seat among complete strangers.

By the time the ones bound for the Acevedo farm arrive it is midday, and gauzy white clouds have closed over the sky. Two trucks, dragging fifty laborers in all, and a few families, pull onto the farm. Many of them were told they could not bring their families. Men who left wives and children in Texas or even further away, look on them unhappily. There is the feeling that these ones are somehow getting something extra. Already some are suspicious that the ones with families will try to stay after the end of their contract. The fear is that this will cause trouble for the ones who don’t.

The trucks come to a stop at the back of the property where two crescent shape rows of shacks face a small pond. The shacks are not large, and suddenly the ones who came alone don’t feel so cheated. Each is set apart from the others so that no two share a wall. There are a few men and women already in residence, and they stop to watch the newcomers disembark. Most of the faces are white, though a few are black and brown. A white man with a dark black beard throws
his hat in the dirt when he sees them in the wagons. He snatches it up and stomps off to one of the shacks. A few others look down at the dirt and shake their heads.

When they are let off they are instructed to find empty shacks to put their belongings in. It seems that even the dozen or so laborers already in the camp, have chosen to separate themselves according to community, and suddenly there are more of them than any other group. The white folks squeeze a little closer together in their groups, not out of something so simple as fear necessarily, though there is a nervous energy about their part of the camp, but to cling momentarily to something familiar.

It is late that first day when they get to meet Don Acevedo. By then they heard all about him from the other laborers. Still some of them are skeptical. He must be something like a foreman, perhaps he only rents this land from someone. Others took the fact that they were working on a Mexican-owned farm as a sign that their hopes in El Norte had not been misplaced.

He comes down from the main house in horse-led cart with his son. In the back of the cart are a few bags of rice and dried beans. He also has bundles of cut wood. All of this his son hands down to some waiting hands.

—Hola todos,—Don Acevedo says. —Hello everyone. You are brought here by the sugar company as betaboleros, which means you will be planting, growing, and harvesting sugar beet. It is hard work, but the pay is good. You will be valued here.

The people clap where there are pauses in his little speech, and he seems embarrassed and tries to speaking quickly over the applause.

—Work will begin soon. In the meantime, look to your foremen, and they will tell you what needs to be done.
At the end of his speech, Don Acevedo climbs down from the cart to introduce himself to the newcomers.

After days in the new place, while there is no work, they still marvel over the land here. How it is flat for miles then suddenly hilly, how any space at all feels carved out from an infinite and ubiquitous woods, how, though many of them have never seen an ocean, while on a rise in the land they can see into the distance over the tops of trees, which spread out like a great green sea, each peak and rounded top undulating in the wind exactly like a wave. Michigan they say, the sound in the middle coming out like a twig snap, not the sound a body makes passing through tall grass, like the white and black laborers say it.

In their shacks on the edges of the fields, the families and the lone betaboleros hired onto the Acevedo farm are waking. They received word the night before that today would be the first day of new work. They are eager for it. The women are up early to start the community fire with deadfall and what wood is left from what Don Acevedo provided. Rice simmers in a few pots by now, and cold beans are mixed in. At this hour the men are be more eager for the coffee boiling away.

It decided early this was the fairest way to dole out the food and wood given by the don. Lines form naturally to receive the food. Slowly as the dawn grows brighter people begin talking while they wait. They say where they have come from and who they left back home and what they plan to do with their earnings when the season is done.
The deep brown soil churned up by the blades of Ernesto’s horse-pulled plow is almost rich enough to eat. When he attempts to count his blessings, like he is tempted to do in times like these, when he efforts seem to count for less than the whims of others, just to see the good things all lined up in his mind, it is without a hint of irony that he realizes they all rest upon a single word. Tierra. His family is a blessing, as a whole and each member individually: three beautiful daughters growing up healthy and strong-minded, and on either side of them two handsome sons, one poised to succeed him, the other with nothing but potential laid out before him. And his wife who has fearlessly followed him on what could have easily been a foolhardy pursuit. It could only have been with her assent that they used everything they had and made a bid on this farm. That and la buena ventura. As with every time it creeps back into his thoughts, he banishes it from his mind. What is done is done.

It is nearly noon, and the sky is all the way open. He stops the grey horse with no name—none of his animals have names—in the dusty lane between two fields. The blade of the plow is caked in dark soil, nearly black when it was churned, now turning brown and hard in the sun. He scrubs his face with a bandana from his back pocket. Like those of the vaqueros, he thinks. His thoughts drift back to the rancho in [city or region of Chihuahua]. He has not seen their equivalent here in the Midwest. Some rough foreman, but nothing like men on horses with guns. At least those were the men Don Guerrero employed.

Ernesto’s latest anxiety tickles his insides like a loose thread: the seed for this crop of sugar beet hasn’t come in yet. It’s like this every season. Joe comes around and takes up the contracts for planting, always visits Ernesto’s farm last, and so pays him last. It never creates a
large problem, but then he’s never been later than the betaboleros the sugar company brings in. Now he has laborers looking expecting to work and be paid, but little work and no money to give them. If they sit idle too long, Ernesto is afraid they will go find work elsewhere. He plows the field as much for something to do as to be prepared for when the seed comes.

For now he has some of the betaboleros picking strawberries. He has made sure to have something for the men who have their families with them. It means that there will be less for the laborers who stayed on to finish that job, but he can’t afford much more than this without dipping into his savings. Once he has proven himself to these people, things will change, he tells himself, over and over again.

In the field adjacent, men stoop to pluck ripe strawberries and drop them into wicker baskets. The industrious rhythm of their work is mesmerizing. They light on a a couple of plants in their row, backs bent but steady, only their arms moving. Their forearms remain parallel to the earth, picking being a motion of the wrists and fingers, plucking each berry in a quick flicker of movement. From his place in the lane, Ernesto only sees little flashes of red when the fruit drops into a basket, like cinders in the dark. It is quick but delicate work, Ernesto knows. They must be careful not to break the fruit, and the leaves can cut. The constant throb of pain in their backs can turn their hands into blunt instruments tired and cramped, all grace worked out of them. It’s back-breaking, Ernesto knows; he’s done it himself, but could not last at it now.

They are like bees in their work, diligent and necessary parts of a working natural machine. It is somehow mesmerizing, but the sight of them makes him sad as sometimes bees do. The vast majority of them will never know more than the work they do for the colony. They keep it alive and at the same time are the most vulnerable to death. He feels guilty for watching
and for the separation between him and them. But for a stroke of luck, he would still be one of them.

He stands there for minutes watching the laborers and betaboleros bend at the waist, hands hidden in the green fronds. His eye settles on one, a woman he doesn’t remember calling on that morning. She is near enough for him to notice the way that the plants tremble slightly in time with her picking: one, two, three, four red bulbs of fruit drop and roll lopsidedly into her basket. She straightens, and just when Ernesto becomes embarrassed, thinking she has caught him staring, Roberto approaches her. He must have given her work, Ernesto thinks, knows something more about her than I. Ernesto knows that she is alone here. She is pretty, but the men seem to leave her be. Now an unsettling suspicion creeps into Ernesto’s mind that maybe his son is the reason.

Roberto talks with the woman long enough for it be out of the ordinary. He cannot hear what they are saying, but it looks like Roberto does most of the talking. Then he spots Ernesto watching. This time Ernesto is not embarrassed, he wants Roberto to know he’s been seen, to think about what he is doing. At the same time, Ernesto does not want to jump to conclusions.

Roberto nods to Ernesto and tugs on the brim of his wide straw hat. When he turns back to the woman he points to the plants she has just picked. Ernesto still doesn’t know what he’s saying, but it is different from whatever he was saying before. When Roberto moves on down the row the woman looks after him. She seems angry. Even as she crouches again before the strawberry plants, she is focused on Roberto with an intense stare.

A pair of gloves hang limp from the back pocket of her coveralls, one in danger of slipping free and falling lost into the dirt. Ernesto realizes her hands are bare. She takes two shuffling steps and is about to return to work when she sees Ernesto watching. She stops. He
points to her, waving a finger in the direction of her loose glove. She looks around to see if there is anyone else he could be gesturing to. He points to his own back pocket on the side where her gloves would be. She is very still for a moment, her eyes hidden by the brim of her hat. Then she returns to her work, more quickly now. It takes a moment for Ernesto realize what he is point at. His embarrassment returns. She picks that plant clean and makes two more shuffling steps without standing. The loose glove falls from her pocket without her noticing.

He will go talk to her, Ernesto decides. The horse will stay in place long enough for him to tell her she dropped her glove, and maybe that will be a way to ask about what she and Roberto were talking about. The breeze turns and brings with the rich, musty smell of manure to his nostrils. Sweat stands out on his brow though it is early April and the day is cool. And then he feels it, the sickening twist in his belly. It feels so like emptiness as if he is only hungry, but the emptiness floods him. The blots of color appear before his eyes once again, blocking out his vision of where he stands. He is somehow sucked into the emptiness within himself.

He is in another time and place. Vaqueros sit the backs of horses with long guns resting on their thighs, and he sits a horse among them. Unlike them he doesn’t have a gun. Their presence on the hill above this shallow prairie valley is as much meant to keep watch for poachers and bandits as it is to intimidate the workers into productivity. He has not seen this valley in many many years, and never in this way. His father brought him here once to show him how others on the rancho were made to work. He wanted to impress upon Ernesto the privilege he received because his father was important to the don. Once again he finds himself in someone else’s place in time.
The men and women are dressed in white blouses that their sweat has turned a dingy gray and wear either skirts or canvas pants. Wide hats shade their faces, but he can tell their skin is dark, darker than most of the vaqueros watching over them. Far darker than that of Don Guerrero and his children. Crouching or on hands and knees they pick beans out of this arid field. Mexico is dry here, and Ernesto can feel the tickle of thirst in his own throat. He knows these people are poorer and more in fear for their lives than any people he has ever met since. There was little happiness for the peónes on Don Guerrero’s rancho.

Though he recognizes the land and the people, Ernesto doesn’t know when he is. He stands in the saddle thinking he might be able to see the compound, but he cannot. Not that seeing it would tell him more than confirming where he believes himself to be. The vaqueros all turn to regard him. They are annoyed and seem tense about something in the valley, though Ernesto does not know what.

—Sientáte, Acevedo,—one says.

So he is an Acevedo here. That is good to know, but which? He has his suspicions but checks his hands for clues. They are a younger man’s hands, smoother than his own. His clothes are plain but sturdy. A dyed blue shirt and dark pants tucked into leather boots. That is the giveaway. These are his father’s boots, though in finer condition than he has ever seen them. He tries to ask the men what they are about but cannot form the question.

He looks down the line of men to either side and is surprised to see a boy, not much older than thirteen. The boy is seated on a horse of his own close to one of the older vaqueros. At first he thinks the boy might be him, but that can’t be right. Ernesto does not remember this moment and the his father, if that’s who he is here, is far too young. Then he recognizes him. Younger than Ernesto ever remembers him, there is no mistaking he is El Demonio, son of Don Guerrero.
He was older than Ernesto growing up and terrorized him. More than that, he had a dark reputation among the adults too. So why was he here seeing Demonio now? The boy Demonio points down the hill at something Ernesto can’t see. Suddenly all the riders are hollering, whipping their horses, and moving down the valley in a frenzy. Only Ernesto and Demonio remain on the hill. The boy turns and looks at him, the vaqueros are yelling still and firing their guns, there is screaming.

Without warning or reason or sensation, Ernesto finds himself standing behind the plow, just as he was before. The woman he was going to talk to is further down the row now, nearly to the end. The same weak spell comes over him and he hangs on to the plow for support. There is whistling and shouting from the end of the lane. Where Ernesto half expects to see a line of charging vaqueros there is Joe Vanerp, standing on his toes and waving his hat over his head.

Joe’s not dressed for the field and rarely is these days. His tan slacks are held up with red suspenders over a white shirt. Ernesto guesses he’s wearing nice leather shoes. Too nice to dirty them by walking down the row. It wasn’t so long ago that when Joe came to visit he still had dust on the knees of his coveralls and dirt under his finger nails. Even then he had the distracted habit of running his thumb nail under the nail of each finger to pick the dirt away.

The laborers and betaboleros stop picking to stand and look. In most cases, when Joe Vanerp comes to his farm, it’s to talk to the betaboleros. Heads pop up from rows where previously Ernesto hadn’t seen people working. Dozens of brown and white faces watch as this white man nearly jumps in the air as he calls for Ernesto.

—Ernie! Come up on to the house.
He winces at being called *Ernie* every time, but has never said anything to Joe about it. He would like the man to notice his discomfort and merely call him by his name. It isn’t so hard to pronounce, even the way white people say it.

Joe hands down the orders as he receives them from the field manager who receives his orders from the plant manager of the factory in Sagniaw. It’s a long way for word to travel, and more often than not the message gets garbled somewhere between here and there. He’s usually on their farm no fewer than three days a week to correct some misinformation. When he does, he at least has the respect to refer to Ernesto as Mister Acevedo in front of the gathered betaboleros. He even pronounces it more correctly than most.

Ernesto is groggy from this latest slip back through time. The meaning of it all still escapes him, and now that it’s happened twice it can happen again and again. It is so strange a happening he can’t even begin to know how to think about it, so he doesn’t. Like everything else he can’t do anything about, he sets it aside to examine later, when he has more information. Joe is already jogging up to the house. Ernesto decides to focus on how grateful he is to see this man. And if Joe is so excited, Ernesto reasons that maybe he will have cause to be too.

Inside the kitchen, the hot damp air closes in around Ernesto. The sweet, vegetal scent of masa steaming competes with the brighter savory aromas of cumin and garlic. Other spices are too subtle to detect under these, but they are there. His wife’s spice cabinet is deeper than most peoples’ wardrobes.

Rosa is standing in the doorway with a big wooden spoon, more a paddle than an actual spoon. It is dark with moisture halfway up the stem, and she is using it like a prod to guide the younger children, Liliana, Luz y Oscarito, through the kitchen and back outside again with their
plates of food. It is not unlike guiding a boat with an oar. She turns the children and sends them on their way past him.

—Don’t run or you will spill your plates,—she says after them.

—Hola, papá.—Luz says on her way past.

—Adios, papá.—Oscarito says.

Liliana only blushes and runs by.

His wife gives him a look that is both worry and exasperation. Behind her Joe is already at the table with with napkin tucked into his collar and a plate of food in front of him. A pile of shredded chicken sits next to a small lake of soupy pintos and a lump of sticky white rice. He ladles molé sauce onto the chicken then uses his fork to fill a tortilla from the middle of the table. Linda is sitting across from him eating carefully with a fork and knife. She has avoided taking the messier foods, glancing up every so often to watch the man across from her.

Ernesto wraps both arms around Rosa’s waist and draws her to him. He kisses her face, and she doesn’t respond. He kisses her two more times when she finally relents, smiling, and kisses him back.

—You said he would come this morning,—she says quietly into his cheek.

—I said he was due to come this morning. You know how often he comes late.

—The man is too excited. When they are excited I get nervous,—she says.

With her eyes narrowed beneath her wrinkled brow and the paddle in her hand she looks more suspicious than nervous.

—I don’t think we have to worry about him,—Ernesto says. He kisses Rosa once more and she kisses him then raises the paddle between them and guides him into the kitchen.
—Ernie,—Joe pauses to wipe his mouth and stands to shake Ernesto’s hand,—I was just complimenting your daughter on her table etiquette lessons.

Linda looks up from her plate and smiles a very expected smile.

—Yes, she’s becoming quite the young lady,—Ernesto says.

—The very picture of gentility and poise. I hope she’ll forgive us menfolk our crude and savage table manners.—He gestures for Ernesto to sit as if this was his own table.

—It’s good to see you, Joe,—Ernesto pulls a chair out for Rosa then seats himself. —I’m eager to hear this news of yours.

—After lunch.—Joe says through a mouthful of food, then excuses himself with a finger.—It can wait until after lunch. No sense seasoning this lovely meal with boring farm talk.

He winks at Linda who, sensing she is being addressed, looks up and smiles politely.

The screen door bangs, and Ernesto jumps. He hates the sudden sharp noise. It is of course Roberto, making heavy steps in his boots, calling out his presence before he enters the room:

—Oye, mamá, ya tienes la comida? Estoy muerto de hambre.

He stops himself from saying more if there was more for him to say when he sees Joe sitting beside his father.

—Rob! I’m glad you’re here. You should hear the news too as it’s going to affect you as much as your father.

—Pardon me, Joe. I didn’t know you were coming. What’s the news?

He looks over the man’s head at his father.

—After lunch,—Ernesto says. —We can take a walk and talk about what we need to talk about.
—Ah heck, I might as well tell you all now. I’m just having the hardest time containing my excitement.

He takes a moment to look at each one of them before continuing. Even Rosa and Linda. Joe doesn’t have the same problem talking business in front of women other men do. He owns a farm of his own not far from theirs, given over mostly to sugar beet, and he lives there in a house full of daughters. Eight in total, no sons. Though he has foremen run the day-to-day operation in the field, his oldest daughter Ruth manages their interests. She is said to speak with Joe’s voice in his absence, and the foremen obey.

—We’re getting our own factory, right here, and it’s going to be a cooperative. We’re going to process the sugar beet we grow ourselves.

The man nearly applauds his own news he is so happy.

It is the middle of the afternoon when Joe grabs his hat and coat off the back of his chair. This dishes are long since cleaned away and three coffee cups sit empty on the table. Ernest even brought down the bag of Pioneer Sugar and set it right in the middle. Rosa and Linda have both gone off to other chores and distractions. Distantly his other children scream in play with one another.

—The factory is going up whether we pay into it or not?—Roberto asks.

He says this like there is a chance they will choose not to. Paying into the factory isn’t just an investment into their farming operation but into their standing in the community. Who could look the Acevedos in the eye and tell them they didn’t belong knowing they had paid directly into the town’s future, the state’s future, hell the future of the whole damn American sugar industry? In Ernesto’s mind the money is already paid.
—We’ve broken ground already,—Joe says.—This factory is happening, and nothing can stop it.

—It sounds like an incredible opportunity,—Ernesto says.

—For argument sake,—Roberto says,—what happens to farms that don’t pay.

—Well we take the money direct from the advance for the seeds, so you don’t actually pay anything.

—Sure, but what if a farm doesn’t agree? Doesn’t join the cooperative?

Joe puts his hands on his hips and stares at the floor for a moment. It is the first time Ernesto has seen him frustrated.

—I suppose any farm that didn’t agree would get its allotment as per the existing contract, but any future dealing with the sugar company would be up for negotiation. Though I don’t know why any farm would.

—We still don’t have our seed, Joe,—Roberto says.

In an instant the look of frustration and confusion leaves Joe and he smiles at them both, genuine and clean.

—If that’s what this is about, I assure you it’s coming tomorrow.

—No offense, Joe,—Ernesto says,—but you’ve said that before.

—That’s true, that I have. And I miscalculated then. See, we had you on a later schedule because of your distance from the refinery. We didn’t want the extra mileage to affect the sugar content of your harvest. Anyway it was with your best interest in mind. Now with the new factory, that won’t be an issue. What I’m saying is we don’t have to stagger your production anymore.
He delivers all this like it is the best news he has ever given a pair of farmers. Ernesto at least is happy to hear an explanation. It is not enough for him to blindly trust.

—So, tomorrow then. I have your word?—Ernesto asks.

Joe puts his hand out, and Ernesto takes it.

—In the morning. I’ll see you first thing.

He offers his hand to Roberto who also takes it. Joe appears to take the handshake as the conclusion to their discussion and exits without another word.

—Pinche cabrón.—Roberto says to the closed door.

—Ay! Hijo, calmáte.

—De acuerdo, Beto.—Linda says.

She is suddenly at the window watching Joe’s truck kick up twin dust clouds on its way to the main road.

—What is this? My own daughter is spying on me?

—Not spying. I was only afraid it was bad news.

—Well as you heard, it was in fact good news.

—is it?—Roberto says.

—I don’t trust him.—Linda says.

—He smiles too much.—Roberto says.

—He is just being friendly.—Ernesto says.

—Beware white people when they come already smiling.—Linda says.

She is quoting her mother.

—Okay, that’s enough.—Ernesto says.
He is not comfortable with the idea that his children are so quick to mistrust white people, even though he can’t exactly say they are wrong to. His fear is that they will dwell on that mistrust and become wary, bitter people. And yet, Roberto’s question still rings in his ear: what do we do?

—Roberto,—he says,—afuera, por favor.

The look that passes from Linda to Roberto is quizzical, and he merely, barely, shakes his head. It makes Ernesto wonder how much Roberto shares with his sister.

The most natural place for the two to talk is in the barn. After a few days the smell of kerosene has completely dissipated. There is still much to be replaced, but there is not physical trace of the vandalism.

—You didn’t tell Joe about the attack,—Roberto says.
—I have not told your mother either,—Ernesto says.
—I wondered about that. I haven’t said anything to anyone.
—Not to anyone?
—No. No one.
—I did not want Joe to see us as vulnerable.
—I’m pretty sure he already does.

In the presence of the two of them, the horses begin to fidget and make excited little nickerings. Ernesto takes up a bag of apples he keeps just for them and feeds them one by one while Roberto stands as he was, silent. The gray, the most robust of their animals, tosses his head a little at Ernesto’s hand. He’s always had some trouble with this one. Roberto has more luck as of late.
—I think we should store the seed somewhere else. Someplace more secure. Just to be safe,—Roberto says.

—Where do you propose we put them?—Ernesto asks.

—In the main house maybe.

—Then we would have to tell your mother why we will be storing them there. Stomping in out of the muddy field every time we need to reload the seed cart.

—We put a guard on it then.

—Who?.

—I’ll do it.

—And get out of doing the real work? No.

—We will put a heavy lock on the door. Does that make you feel safer?—Ernesto says.

—I only want this crop to go well,—Roberto says.

—I know you do, m’ijo. We both do.

Ernesto squeezes his arm and slaps him on the back. He wants to pull his son into a tight embrace the way he used to when Roberto was small.

—Come up to the house later,—Ernesto says. —We can play cards after dinner

—Lo siento, papá. I have plans already.

—Oh? What kind of plans?.

Ernesto wants to ask more directly about the woman in the field but would rather Roberto just tell him.

—It’s nothing special,—Roberto says.

Whatever he is doing, Ernesto hopes his son will act honorably.

—Next time then,—Ernesto says
They step outside and the afternoon sun is already low over the trees. The shadow of the big shade tree by the barn extends long over the yard. Roberto walks back toward his small cabin on the other side of the windbreak. It is much cooler now, and Ernesto shivers. It is almost a blessing they don’t yet have the seeds. A bad enough frost could kill any early growth and ruin the crop.
Linda sits outside in cool grass with the moonlight on her, a book open in her lap, trying to read the same page for the third times, her eyes traveling over and recognizing the words without registering them. This is what she does when she has trouble sleeping, and she has been having a lot of trouble sleeping lately. When she lays in her bed listening to boards of the house settle around her and sleeping family, a strange thrill grips her. It’s something she feels in the air around them all, something lost amid the busyness of waking hours, dispelled or displaced by the light of the sun. In the dark and quiet house it is acute and gnawing. She finds its companion in the droning of crickets and spring peepers and other creatures she doesn’t know making noise in the lively night. It is like a buzzing in her body, a new awareness that she cannot name. It tempts her into places she has been told she should not go, like out in the dark at night. The sensation is thrilling to her because she feels more adult for having sensed it. There is something in the air that her father and Roberto talk all the way around but never touch on openly. Lily, Luz and Ocarito are dumb to this sensation, and she is glad for that in a way. She feels somehow special. Apart, the way Roberto is apart from her because of his age.

Her sleeping gown in damp under her and around her ankles where it dragged through the grass. Little green blades stick wetly to her feet and curl around and between her toes. The cold in them is needling, but she doesn’t feel it too much if she doesn’t think about it. when she hears the sound of someone moving out in the yard.

Instinctively, she lays back in the grass with the book open on her chest. Through its weight she can feel the dull thud of her heart. Closer than she would have expected a dark shape moves through the yard, definitely a man. She does not dare sit up, but lifts her head just enough
to be able to see him pass. The man stops once and looks over his shoulder, back toward the
house. Linda holds her breath and waits for the moment when he turns toward her.

The man looks forward again and continues on his path away from her, in the direction of
the strawberry field. Before moving far he stops, looks back and forth, and for a moment Linda
believes he knows she is out there and he is searching for her. She is certain he will see the white
of her sleeping gown against the darker grass, like a beacon. For a short while he stands there,
hands on his hips, as if he is considering something. A direction, and action perhaps. Something
in the way the man carries himself does not fit with a person wandering around in the dark. His
steps are incautious, he moves like he is pushing at something in his way despite being in an
open yard, he even shades his eyes as if from an invisible sun. It isn’t until he hangs his head and
then turns all the way around to look back the way he’s come once more, like he is somehow
lost, that she can see the man is her father.

Linda is both puzzled and oddly excited. She has never known her father to do something
so strange before. What fear she had of being caught out in the middle of the night by a strange
man has turned into a wicked-feeling curiosity. She will learn a secret about her father,
something none of her other siblings will know. Not ever Roberto.

Her father moves again in the direction of the fields, this time with more confidence, and
she sits up slowly. She looks back over her shoulder, like he did. The house is still dark, and
there doesn’t appear to be anyone in the windows. She wonders if that was what he was checking
for, to see if mamá or anyone else was watching from a window. Before he can get too far ahead
of her, she closes the book and rolls up onto the balls of her feet. Her gown, against her knees is
so bright white it seems to shine. Acting on an impulse, she slips it carefully over her head and
wraps the book up in it to protect it from the dewy grass.
She moves light and quick after her father, sticking to the darkest parts of the yard, both arms around the bundle of gown and book to hide its whiteness. The acute feeling of her nerves makes her hyper aware of the noise all around her, but still she steps silently, picking out the softest patches of grass to muffle her footfalls. Her whole foot never touches the ground.

At the big shade tree she puts the wide trunk between her and her father. He has not looked back again. She tucks the bundle under a thick exposed root and peers around the trunk. He is heading down the hill, cutting a diagonal to the strawberry field. She moves around the opposite side of the trunk. There are very few places to hide between the fields and this tree. Little dips in the hillside, barely perceptible in the daylight make darker pools of shadow here at night, but the moon is near full and is high and bright in the sky. At this moment she realizes she doesn’t know how far this is going to go. He could wander to the far end of the property. Beyond the strawberry field is the shed where they keep the horse cart and then the shacks of the laborers’ camp. What would happen if one of the men saw her, she thinks. For a moment she loses sight of her father and the little adventure is over. She is disappointed. When he reemerges from one of the shadow pools not so far away, Linda doesn’t think about it, she just begins to move down the hill.

Trying to be quick, she loses her footing on the slick grass and goes down. She slides some before rolling to the side, not stopping until she feels herself surrounded by more dark. Her heart beats terribly fast, and she is sure her falling made a sound. She isn’t sure if she cried out as she went down, surprised as she was to be suddenly tumbling in the dark. Her lungs want her to gasp, but she tries to swallow each breath, cheeks puffing rather than expelling the air. She forces herself to breathe slow. Lying on her back as if on a bed made of the earth, she listens above the pounding of blood in her veins for shouting or some sound of a person’s approach. In
time she hears the crickets again. Above her she sees stars. Beyond the yard she sees her father’s shape, moving slower now, among the strawberry plants.

Crouching now, she moves at a different diagonal. There is pain in her hip and shoulder where she fell. She no longer feels light and quick, but tired and hobbled by bruising and cold. The sharp little stones on the gravel path that rings these fields dig into her tender feet. She sucks a breath through her teeth without thinking, and, afraid he’s heard her, makes leaping steps to clear the stones. She is at the irrigation ditch at the front end of what’s to become the sugar beet field. At first she thinks she will jump across the gap but imagines the noise that will make. She stretches one foot down and finds soft mud. It is cold and her feet sink in up to her ankle. This is where I have to decide, she thinks, whether to turn back or go on. But that is no decision. Turning back now would mean risking her father seeing her as she climbs the hill. She will either have to wait here until he passes or cross the muddy ditch.

Both of her feet are nearly numb from cold when she crawls, hands and knees into the sugar beet field. She tries to rub them in the taller grass of the bank of the ditch but she can’t feel if it is doing anything. The pain is enough to make her want to cry or scream out. She forgets about her father for a moment, and the night and the book that might be ruined in her sodden gown up the hill and the men in the shacks and is only concerned with the fact that she is naked and cold on the edge of the field. This is stupid, she thinks, how utterly foolish. I am a damned fool. Thinking a curse word makes her feel a little better, a little braver. Why am I even doing this, she asks herself.

As with any time someone asks themselves to investigate their own motives, a thousand thoughts move through her head at once, not all of them helpful. All the little justifications she made to convince herself it would be a exciting to sit out in the yard at night are there. But the
book she couldn't manage to read, the sleeplessness, the buzzing sensation in her body, the aged feeling of knowing something was up are all because of the one time she saw her brother, Roberto, sneaking through the yard toward his little cabin in the dead of night wearing his nicest clothes. A woman in a plain but lovely dress went sneaking in the opposite direction off toward the shacks. Linda was sure they had been out together.

Crouching again, Linda moves between the furrows in the beet field until she is sure she is hidden from her father. The turned up earth is hard-dry and scratchy and cold against her bare skin where she had imagined she could almost sink into it. It doesn’t seem to matter how well she hides. His concentration is on the ground in the row. He crosses one then another, moving up and down before crossing again. Plainly he is searching for something, but why do it now rather than in the light of day? He seems to grow frantic, tossing his hands in the air every few steps. Then he stops and stoops. He is tugging on something like a root or rope buried in the soil. After some work he comes up with something limp like fabric. And then her father seems to shudder with his whole body, and it is as if he suddenly becomes aware of where he is. Linda presses herself flat into the furrow to keep from being seen. Her father is looking all around, not searching now but frantic. Looking at the thing in his hand seems to calm him somewhat. He slaps it a few times across his thigh, and the sharp clapping sound reaches Linda an instant behind the action. She can’t tell what it is, but he looks at it a little while longer before shoving it in his back pocket and hurrying back toward the house.

She waits for her father to disappear under the shadow of the big tree then counts slowly to one hundred, then again to be sure, before she moves. At the bottom of the hill she rolls in the
wet grass and rubs her feet in it in hopes of clearing the dirt and mud. The coolness is soothing at first, but soon her skin itches. Linda is up the hill again and concealed from view by the trunk of the tree and the great spreading darkness beneath its canopy. The cold is getting to her now, and she is tired and anxious at the same time. She wants to rest and to be clean but knows she’ll have to wait until morning to wash up. She hurries to put her dressing gown back on. It too is wet and sticks to her, and where it sticks to her is like a cold, ghostly touch. It makes her angry and also makes her want to cry. And then she sees them.

Roberto and the woman in the pretty dress come walking through the yard. Que buena suerte, she thinks. Had he come by any earlier he would have risked their father seeing him, and with one of the workers no less. She realizes he is a grown man but doesn’t know how their papá would feel about Roberto courting one of their laborers. Though he is kind to everyone who comes to work for him, he has told them over and over again that there must be a separation, that the bosses and the workers cannot mix in certain ways. She does not know why that is, but Roberto breaking the rules this way feels thrilling. In her mind it is romantic.

If they are talking as they walk it is too quiet for her to hear. Both of them walk with their arms at their sides, heads down as if watching where they step, though they don’t seem to be stepping carefully. And then at the top of the hill they aren’t walking together anymore. They simply break. Roberto swings his arm out at waist-level, his back already turned, as a perfunctory goodbye, and she waves back with her arm only moving at the elbow, a simultaneous bending of her fingers. She watches Roberto disappear beyond the far side of the hill, and before there is anything she can do, the woman is passing by her tree.

—Dios!—The woman sucks in a hoarse breath when she sees Linda clinging to the trunk.
—De donde viniste?
The woman wraps her arms around her own stomach and crosses her legs, bending at the waist. She makes a hissing sound as if slightly in pain. Linda steps out from behind the tree, brushing dirt and sticks from her dressing gown as she does. The woman crosses herself, but it seems automatic rather than emphatic.

—Lo siento—Linda says.

Up close she can see the woman’s dress is rose-colored and frayed at the edges. Though someone has done work to fix the worst of them. There are red flowers with green leaves embroidered around the neck-line that is just low enough and wide enough to show the beginnings of her collar bone. Linda decides right then she will ask her mother to make her a dress just like it and tries to study every line and stitch as they’re standing there.

—Eres la hija del dueño, no?—The woman says. She reaches out to pinch the fabric of Linda’s dressing gown, pulling it out like a fan or a wing, and inspects the stains. She clicks her tongue at the sight of it. —Quien te hizo esto?

—Nadie,—she says. Then —Yo.

The woman looks at her and shakes her head. With a dismissive gesture she continues walking past. Linda is annoyed that the woman is being so casual now, that she won’t stop and explain what she is doing out here.

—I saw you with my brother,—Linda says.

The woman turns. There is a second’s pause before she speaks.

—Did you now?

—Of course. And not just tonight.

—And what do you think?

—I don’t think my father would approve.
Again she pauses. Linda can see her tongue move behind her teeth.

—Who will tell? His daughter out in the night in the dirty dress?

Linda has no intention of telling her father, and not just because she would have to admit to being out in the night or for fear of him realizing she might have seen him in the field. The woman seems to be waiting for a reply. She crosses her legs again where she stands. In the moonlight Linda can see her wince.

—What were you doing?—Linda asks.

—We were out to a dance.

—Was it fun?

—Yes and no.

—I didn’t know there were dances.

—There is much you do not know.

—Are you in love?

The woman looks surprised at the question. Her mouth opens to laugh, but she closes her teeth and holds her midsection.

—Ay, chica. You ask too much questions. And the wrong ones. Ask your brother if you want to know more. Only you may not like his answer. I have to go.

The woman begins walking down the hill. She sucks in a breath with almost every step. Before she’s halfway down Linda catches up to her.

—What’s your name?—she asks the woman.

—Concepcion. Connie.— She says it in the flat way people have of speaking around here.

—I’m Linda.

Connie steps more quickly down the hill, and Linda watches her jog, knees close together, until she disappears into the darkness of the ditch where Linda had been. She is waits to see Connie re-emerge from the shadows on the other side. After a couple of minutes she reappears where she went in walking more easily down the gravel path to the shacks. Without stopping she looks back and sees Linda waiting on the hill and makes a shooing motion with her hands. Linda waves to her and heads back to the house.
Ernesto surveys the land around him from where he stands on a grassy windblown hill. He looks back over his shoulder and is not surprised to see, further up the hill sits the old gray house he remembers. Gray because the green paint of its earlier days is all but peeled off the warped and weathered siding to show old and rotting wood. Some hang from a single corner nail and swing in the strong winds that come unimpeded across the rural flatness of Indiana. The old man has told him before he built his house here because it was the only hill for miles around. The long grasses sway, each blade looking like a tiny green flame until they are blown flat by a sudden strong gust, show their white undersides.

*When the grass on the plain and the leaves on the trees turn to white in the wind, it means a storm is come.* That was a bit of folk wisdom the old man of that old gray house had taught him. It took some time for Ernesto to realize that “turn white” meant the leaves literally turned on the branch and exposed a paler side of themselves. He looks up at the sky shading his eyes. A dirty grayness has locked out the sun.

He wants to believe that this time he is dreaming but knows that is wrong. The last he remembers he had climbed into bed beside Rosa. They lay face to face, dozing lightly as the house quieted, then when they were certain all their children were asleep, made quiet, gentle love to one another. Ernesto has always been shy about his children being able to hear him and Rosa in their lovemaking.

Now he is awake, he is sure. He does not remember falling asleep, if anyone ever does, but there was no pain or blots of color before finding himself here. For the first time he wonders what happens with his body during one these episodes. He knows that time passes in the present
while his mind at least is away in the past. He can’t simply vanish. Someone would have noticed by now. The best he can hope for is that he is still in his bed, seemingly asleep. He is not ready to tell Rosa yet about what is happening to him.

This particular episode is strange. Ernesto remembers this moment. It happened to him, long after his father had died. He does not like to think about this moment. Back in the house a man is dying, delirious from old age and pain, injured in an accident. Ernesto should go back and tend to the man. He was always good to Ernesto and his family. He deserves better.

Ernesto knows he can’t go back. The past plays out exactly as it did, and he is powerless to change anything. He’s not sure he would if he could. Life would be drastically different for his family.

It’s been long enough that he doesn’t remember exactly where to go. Down the hill from him is a fallow field where the old man had men dig a watering hole for the cows that are no longer there. Was it east or west of the house? Ernesto tries to recall and remembers the old man hand on his shoulder, his weak voice in Ernesto’s ear, telling him where it was buried, calling him son.

He looks all around, shading his eyes against the diffuse brightness coming through thin clouds, and finally spots the stand of reeds grown up among the prickers and weeds. He lets his head drop and turns to look at the house one more time before going in.

It’s funny how he remembers being a lot more nervous the first time. He was certain the son would show up unexpectedly, after years of staying away, and discover Ernesto in the act. He can see now that he was never in any danger. That some how makes it all the worse.

Deer flies and mosquitos bite his arms and forehead just beneath the brim of his hat, and he knows he is close. It takes some hunting, but he finds painted wooden marker, an old broom
handle lacquered blue. From there he bends down and digs around in the mud until his hand closes around the heavy knot of an oiled hemp rope. The feel of it in his hand, knowing what is at the other end, makes him tremble. He remembers having trembled then too.

He pulls on the rope, hand over hand. Slowly a larger shape makes ripples in the water as it nears the surface. La buenaventura. Just as it is about to break the surface the light goes out. The abrupt change startles him. There is sweat covering his body, and in the cool night air he immediately freezing. He shivers all over, and that’s when he realizing he is holding something in his hand. He recognizes where he is at last. Somehow he has found himself in his own strawberry field at night holding the glove the dropped by that woman.
The seed comes the next morning, as Joe promised, sixty acres worth instead of the usual forty. The original amount already took up half of Ernesto’s land. When he protests, Joe assures him it is just for this season. One big push at the start to get the new factory going strong. Ernesto agrees and voices his decision to join the cooperative. They shake on the deal, and Joe promises to come by soon with the official contract.

And so the planting begins, only a few days behind schedule. The wind blows cool, and clouds make routine and lingering passes over the sun that make Ernesto shiver, yet when the sun shines through it is hot and raises bulbs of sweat on flesh of anyone standing under it. Michigan is a place of tricky weather, but the sugar beet is hearty plant. As long as there isn’t an early frost to wither his crop in the first couple of weeks it will grow strong enough to survive.

It is on this day that Felipe returns. He is first seen a long way off as another dark shape on the road by trio of betaboleros, one boring inch-deep holes in the soil mounds, the other two dropping in the seeds. To these men he looks more like a transient, a beggar, a freeloader than a laborer. Like someone who will walk in off the road and ask the boss for work, which he will do poorly or never finish. He will take advantage of the kindness of other workers here for the season. Serious workers know where to meet up. They come in on the boss’ wagon or some other contractor picks them up and brings them by. The men are confused when this figure turns down the path that crosses in front of the fields rather than approaching the house.

—Presumptuous.—one calls it.

—Que huevos, tiene.—another says.
Then they see the boss, Don Acevedo hustling down the gravel path. They think this big guy is going to get an earful for sure. Only, before the don reaches the man, they realize just how big and dark this stranger is. The don is no weakling, but he is short, and more than one betabolero has commented on the man’s gentle streak. It’s one reason the people like him, and one reason why some of the men think they can slack off and get away with it.

The big stranger drops his pack in a clatter of metal cup against metal pan. When the pack drops, these men can see the big knife on the back of the stranger’s belt. The man who’s been boring holes for seeds tightens his grip on the pole. Then the don and the stranger are clapping hands, shaking vigorously.

They hear the stranger say: —Hola, jefe.

—Hola, cabrón.—they hear Don Acevedo say. They’ve never heard the don call anyone cabrón before. He’s always seemed too polite for that kind of rough talk.

Soon the men in the fields who could see the two meeting were laughing along to the don and this stranger slapping one another on the back. They don’t know why they’re laughing except that a moment ago they thought they might see their don, who they appreciate and respect, if for no other reason than the fact that he did something they didn’t expect to see another of theirs do in this country, killed in his yard by some rough vagrant..

The workers who have been back to the Acevedo farm a season or two recognize Felipe and go about their work, some taking it slow knowing the days of leisurely work are done. Some work harder, faster, as if to say to the rest, might as well get used to the grinding labor now, because when Felipe is in the field, you will work harder than you ever have.
With some astonishment from the newer workers and some resentment from the few that had been to work here before, Don Acevedo puts an arm over Felipe’s shoulders and turns him toward the house, which they disappear into for some time.

It does not take long for the betaboleros to become friendly with one another. They tell crude jokes to pass the time in the fields. The men laugh with their mouths open to the sky while the women mostly roll their eyes. The spirited ones who shout down the men are answered with a crude comment of their own.

They play practical jokes on one another. It starts with Manuel banging two pots together yelling fuego over a napping betabolero. Things only escalate from there. One man’s shack is filled with foul smelling smoke, another has his clothes stolen as he is bathing in the pond, but Manuel’s treatment is the worst.

Someone learns Manuel is deathly afraid of snakes and acquires a length of green hose from the supply cart that visits their camp every week. A couple of betaboleros paint it to look just like the poisonous snakes in the borderlands. While in their rows, one of the pranksters attaches it carefully to Manuel’s ankle with a bit of twine. On cue another comes up and asks him *¿Qué es eso?* in the most casual manner. When Manuel sees the vague shape and coloring of a snake he spooks worse than any horse. He runs past the end of the field, and everyone hoots and laughs. But then he keeps running.

Manuel disappears into the woods and is gone so long men have to be sent out to look for him. They find him in some leafy fronds under a tree that it appears he tried to climb to escape the snake, when he fell and knocked himself out. The men carry him back still unconscious with the toy snake dangling from his ankle. That gets a big laugh until Felipe comes and cuts the
snake away and shuts everyone up. In the morning Manuel wakes with a horrible rash from the poison sumac he had fallen into. He can’t work for days because of the itching, and Felipe declares all pranking done.

It is only a few days of boredom before a couple of men ask the driver of supply cart about getting their hands on a pair of roosters.

It isn’t until a month after Joe Vanerp first spoke to him about the factory that a foreman comes in a truck, the words Michigan Sugar Co. bright and freshly painted on the side, to ask Ernesto to provide workers for its construction. He asks for any man with building experience or a good strong back used to carrying things. His preference is for any white American workers first. After that he doesn’t care.

—This farm is mostly Mexican laborers,—is all he says.

—Makes sense.

Ernesto doesn’t bother to ask what he means.

—How many do you need?—he asks instead.

—We’re calling for ten.

—Ten from everybody? That is a lot.—Ernesto says.

The foreman looks at him for several heartbeats.

—It’s based on what we think a farm can reasonably spare.

—Well I cannot spare ten. We are behind as is.

—The numbers suggest your men might be of more value to the cooperative putting up this factory.
He says it without looking at any papers, which is what Ernesto assumes is in the briefcase he carries. And he doesn’t clarify what their work on the factory would be more valuable than.

— I can spare you five.

He thinks about who he would keep back. Certainly Roberto, who would never consent to working at the factory over the farm anyway. Felipe he would keep, and for some reason the image of the woman who had dropped the glove came to his mind. He still has the glove, and it is not yet clear to him why he has it in the first place.

— This is not a negotiation. You signed a contract. You really should have had someone read the terms to you.

Ernesto has not yet seen a contract.

— Joe and I have a handshake agreement.

— What sort of operation do you think this is?

Ernesto’s hands are on his hips, and he presses them harder into his sides to keep them steady. He feels the flesh around his eyes tighten, the eyes themselves begin to sting. This happens whenever men talk to him in this way, as if he is stupid and beneath them. A single tear wells in the corner of his eye, his peculiar response to being angry and cornered by a man he does not know. He looks down at the dry dirt and at his feet. His boots are crusted with soil that is graying as it hardens and dries.

This man grinds his fists into his own hips, making sharply angled wings with his arms. He’s leans forward, one eye half-closed, the other wide and thrust into Ernesto’s face, ducking his head a little to see beneath the shelf of Ernesto’s brow, trying to catch him by the eyes with
his searing glare. The man, so like a menacing bird now that Ernesto has a strange fear of being pecked, speaks with a low cruel voice. Ernesto can feel the man’s breath on his cheek.

—You’re going to give me the men I came for, so I can say I didn’t waste gas just to come out here and argue with a stupid fucking Mexican.

Ernesto looks up at the man. He cannot speak because if he does, he knows his voice will catch and he will sound frightened or cowed, though he his neither of these things. A quivering runs through every one of his limbs. All that unspent energy caged and looking for release.

—Ten men. Comprende, son?—the man says. He rests back on his heels, triumphant. —And they better be strong. I’m going to work them like they never have been.

Not far across the yard, Ernesto sees Roberto come out of the barn all ready shaking his head at some kind of bad news. Roberto has his hat in his hand by the crown, tapping its brim against his other palm. In turn he spots Ernesto with the foreman and puts the hat back on his head. He starts walking toward them, chest out and squaring his shoulders as he walks.

It is embarrassing to him that to be moved to fury also means him being unable to answer, and he cannot bear to have his son see him tongue-tied. Or worse, for him to hear a tremor in his voice and think he is afraid.

—Fine. Ten men,—he tells the foreman. —I’ll send them this afternoon.

As an automatic gesture he sticks out his hand. The foreman looks at it a moment and, grimacing, takes his hand. He squeezes like he’s really trying to hurt Ernesto, jerks him close, and squints into his face.

—How’d one of you manage to get land out here anyway? Who’d you rip off to make that deal?
Ernesto doesn’t answer, and it doesn’t seem like the man wants or expects one. He turns his back on Ernesto and stomps back to his truck. The door makes a long metallic squeal when he slams it. The dust it raises as the man drives off rises higher and higher until the truck is obscured from view.

—Who was that pendejo?

Roberto is suddenly there watching the drifting dust from behind his father’s shoulder.

—Este hijo de puta? Nadie.

Roberto is about to say something, but Ernesto cuts in.

—Have Felipe help you pick out ten strong men. We need to send them to help build the factory.

—Why don’t they hire more laborers?

—They will in time, I am sure. They need people now.

—It is going to rain. We’ll need betaboleros to pick weeds when the rains stop.

—I know.

Felipe drives the wagon across the bridge and over the Saginaw River, the back laden with the Acevedo Farm’s ten best laborers. He wanted to send the slowest, stupidest ones, of which there are a few, but the jefe said no. Then, laughing, he suggested they send this woman whose name he does not know, but he will learn it. She is pretty and young. He was joking of course, but the jefe was quick to say absolutely not. After a beat he added that they only want men. Send them our best, he said.

He was thinking about the woman as he drove the men into the city. Hard to tell under her coveralls, but to him she seemed thin with little womanly curve to her. The work probably
makes her tough, and the thought is exciting to Felipe. He day dreams about all the ways he’d like to take her. He so distracts himself that he almost runs the cart into an electric street car that comes clacking up on their left side. The men in the back shout, and the driver of streetcar rings his dinky little bell. Manuel, a man he had judged as fearless—at least he never seemed afraid to work—jumps from the cart and rolled in the dusty street, even though the car is never really close enough to hit them. Felipe only slows a little so he has to jog and jump back in. That ends Felipe’s daydreaming, and all for the best. If the jefe is saving one of his female workers for his son, it wouldn’t be the first time Felipe has seen something like this. It iss best to stay out of the way.

Likely these men haven’t seen much of the town. They’d have gotten off on the train and someone, Roberto quizas, would have been there to collect them and take them to the farm. If they are impressed, he can’t tell. They look up at the tall brick buildings with their long rows of windows, the shops and restaurants—comida para blancos. He doesn’t take them through the parts of town where they would see the white signs that declare a space to be for Whites Only. They aren’t everywhere, but they might as well be. As the cart rolls through the streets the people don’t stare in open hatred like they might in other cities. Here they all avert their eyes, pretended not to see a man moving right by them. Felipe can tolerate bald disdain a lot better than being invisible. He wonders what these men have seen. By the way their heads turn to take in as much scenery as they can, he judges them to be fairly green. Construction is not like farming, he thinks. It will change them.

The bridge over the river rises in the middle, the horses’ hooves thump the heavy beams hollowly, and the construction site comes into view. The blue green water rushes right past men already at work everywhere in a plot of yellow dirt that’s being sectioned off with stakes and
ropes. Men are digging and hauling and running one way only to run back again. Black men, brown men, and white men all crawl over the dirt like ants. There’s a sound of pounding and shouting that is all the louder for it bouncing off the gurgling waters. It looks to Felipe like they mean to build right up the waterline.

The men in the wagon are all looking forward, those in the very back standing to look over the heads of the ones in front. Felipe swears if Manuel falls out again he’ll get out and toss him into the river.

—This is where we work now?—a man they call Panuelo asks.

Felipe nods, grunts, not wanting to explain the obvious. He doesn’t know how the man got his nickname, has never seen the man with a handkerchief or so much as heard him sniffle. He has done something hilarious or humiliating and that’s just what he is be called now.

—And they will pay us?

This from a man named Alfredo, a little older than the jefe wanted to send, but Felipe picked him because he is diligent and will keep an eye on the other men.

—That’s a good question,—Felipe says. He doesn’t say more because there is nothing to tell. He’s never seen business done this way before. The sugar beet is changing everything, he thinks. The jefe maintains his farm on the grace of this ugly root and the blancos love for everything blanco and sweet. If it weren’t for the demand, no one would have sold him that land, of this Felipe is sure.

—Where will we sleep when the day is done?—Manuel asks. —I see no shacks.

Normally Felipe doesn’t tolerate so many questions, but as he sees it he is no longer responsible for these men. They’re someone else’s workers now. And besides that they are
scared, though not a man among them would acknowledge it, would sooner bust your teeth in for suggesting it.

—Oye, chicas! Suenan como mis niñas. Sientate, Manuelita.

The men laugh elbowing Manuel who sits slowly, stewing briefly before breaking into a smile. They quiet as the Felipe drives the cart onto the dirt lot. Their mirth feels mocking in the sight of so many sweating, grimacing men. A man in a clean shirt comes up beside the cart.

—You here to work on the crew?—he asks Felipe.

—I’m working already,—he says. With a thumb he indicates the men behind him.. —

Hauling fresh produce.

The man squints up at him then back at the men.

—Well come on off the cart. You’re late as it is.

And with that the men step off, one and two at a time. With each body’s leaving, Felipe feels the cart through the wood boards becoming lighter. He shouts at their backs as they walk away: —I’ll be in this spot at dusk. Be here or be left behind.

The man in the clean shirt looks up at him.

—There’s plenty of work for you too if you want it.

—Muchas gracias, señor. I have a job.

—This pays better than beet farming. We might even keep some laborers on when the factory is built.

Then the man with the clean shirt walks fast to get ahead of the men and waves them in a direction. They all follow.
It has rained for days without any sign of stopping soon, and Joe tells Ernesto he needs to plant more sugar beet. They stand beneath the large tree at the top of the little hill. The rain plinks down through the thick branches to drip on their heads. His betaboleros are already soaked from the walk from the shacks, or they were already soaked from drips escaping leaky roofs. Now more than half of them stand empty. More and more workers are being requested. More and more who come off the train are sent not to his farm, but to the factory. Felipe at least is still with him, and Roberto of course. Ernesto hasn’t been out to see it yet, but Felipe has told him it is taking shape. They may even have it operational in time for this harvest. Joe sure seems to think so.

—I want the planting done here.

Joe indicates a field on the map that Ernesto had intended for beans.

—My pintos go there, Joe.

—Not this season, amigo. We need a big production to make our investors see the value in our sugar company.

—I thought we were the investors.

Joe actually laughs. It isn’t a mocking laugh, but annoys Ernesto nonetheless.

—We’re just the cooperative. We got it started, but it takes more than what we put in to make it work.

What Joe doesn’t seem to understand is that the beans are not just for selling. His family eats those beans. What little he can afford to part with he gives to his workers. In the lean winter months beans are sometimes all they have to sustain themselves. And yet Ernesto wants this to work as much as Joe. It is not at all for the same reasons, but he is convinced that his faith in the sugar beet will be rewarded. Already his family is more comfortable and more well-provided for
than he could have imagined. So he argues no further, and Joe indicates he wants to speak to betoloros, which means Ernesto must translate his words.

—We’ve got more seeds for sugar beet, and can’t wait for the weather to change. We’ll need to work in the rain.

The nosotros does not stick in Ernesto’s throat despite the disingenuous way Joe used we. With the way they are shorthanded, Ernesto will be poking holes and dropping seed with the rest of them. Of course they will first need to lay the fertilizer and turn the soil. It will be long and miserable days in the mud and more of them than usual.

Joe reminds the betoloros again how deep to drive the holes, how far to space the seed, all things they know well. Ernesto is faithful in his translation. Planting in the rain comes with the added danger of the seed washing away, and none of them can afford this now.

—It will be cold,—Joe says. —And it will be more exhausting than normal. But it will be worth it.

Vague promises like these always break Ernesto’s heart a little. In those who haven’t done this work as long, he sees faces light up with hope only to later realize the rewards are not what they expected. For Joe’s part he at least stands out here like one of the rest. He wears only a wide-brimmed hat to protect himself from the rain. Ernesto sometimes has to remind himself that Joe too was a farmer once, and would have Ernesto and the rest believe he still is.

—Okay, hasta luego,—Joe says.

He always says this last part with an upward inflection, raises his arm in a motion like he is releasing a bird. The betoloros turn and head toward the field, their instruments in hand. Each of them ducks their head as they step out from under the shelter of the tree.

—Go hitch the plow,—Ernesto tells Roberto. —I need to speak with Joe a moment.
There is talk among the betaboleros about Concepción. She has heard nothing in particular, which is to say, small knots of men become quiet, hushing one another, when she passes. She is accustomed to men noticing her, even though it is not usually welcome. It is odd to them that a woman would come to the farm alone and do this hard work. Some men are fatherly and try to explain things to her or dissuade her from this work. It seems like every one of them has a son who would take care of her. She doesn’t want it. Others follow her around the yard. They call out to her and compare her body parts to pieces of fruit, a feast for their consumption. On other farms there have been more than a couple threatening encounters, men cornering her in a barn or cornfield or coming into her shack in the night. No one has managed to violate her, gracias a Dios. She carries a boning knife, which she took when she fled her mother’s house, and sleeps with a machete under her bedroll. She doesn’t want that either. She wears men’s clothes to hide her body, but it hardly matters to the ones who want something from her.

This whispering though is a different sort of worry. Ever since the first night he asked her to the dance, she has avoided working too closely to Roberto. He came to her early in the spring when they planted the first crop of strawberries. She had put away the tools she used to make the holes for the seeds to go, and he waited, concealed but not hiding on the other side of the great tree in the yard. What he wanted was obvious, or so she thought, and she realized as her heart quickened at the sight of him waiting and watching that she too was open to him. He is barely older than she is, and in some ways younger. Taller than his father, but the don’s daughters are tall—something they must get from their mother.

He didn’t say the things other men did.

—Do you have a dress?—Roberto asked.
That was how he made his proposal after greeting her.

Farming had made him solid and sure in his movements, and she was surprised to learn he was a good dancer. The dance hall was like something from memory, the lights and sounds were nearly the same, but the color was muted. Someone had cleared and gutted a barn, and there was a band that played music that she thought of as sad.

—Te gusta la música?—she asked him at one point.

He shrugged, and she felt cords of muscle move under her hands.

—It’s an excuse to get close to someone.

This he said into her hair as she pressed herself closer.

There were young people, white, black, and brown, each group keeping carefully to itself, but all holding on to someone and swaying to the same rhythm. A table against one wall had refreshments, a drink called pop that was sweet, fizzy, and spiced with ginger. She had never had a drink so interesting before. When Roberto excused himself she went to the table and drank one of the bottles. It stung in her mouth, but the sensation quickly faded and left her with the sweet taste of sugared ginger. She drank one then another, waiting for Roberto, savoring the bite until she was full. Other young ladies in nice, homemade dresses like hers smiled at her as they moved passed in the arms of their lovers. She felt like a girl for the first time in she didn’t know how long. She wishes it had ended there.

When Roberto didn’t return to dance hall for some time, she went out to look for him. And he was there at a shed past the outhouses talking close with a lovely blond girl. She hadn’t understood why Roberto was so stiff with her until that moment. He was there to see another girl, a white girl. Afterwards he gave her money. He tried to do it by way of thanks for her help,
but it still made her feel bought. Then he told her that if she wanted to help him again there would be more. She hid the money in a secret place and never said a word.

It’s been some time since Ernesto had an episode. He’s not quite sure what to think of them really. They don’t frighten him, exactly, except that he doesn’t know what will trigger them, or what happens to his body when he goes. When he is in it, he feels himself fully there, wherever there may be. In the time since the last episode he has thought there must be some meaning behind places and times he is shown, but what that meaning is eludes him.

Sitting on the edge of his bed at the end of long, he holds the glove Connie dropped. He finally got her name, from Linda of all people. He had been strangely afraid to approach her himself, not sure what it would look like to the other betaboleros, and to Roberto. He considers having a talk with Linda to discourage her from getting too close with the betaboleros. There’s no telling what has driven Connie to do this work, and he certainly doesn’t want his daughter getting any strange ideas. She is smart and well-behaved, and her future can only be brighter than that of someone toiling in hot wet field for so little. That is not the life he has given so much to provide for any of his children.

—Qué es eso?—Rosa asks. She is standing in the doorway in her sleeping gown. Her long dark hair is pulled into a braid for sleeping, and she suddenly looks like the young woman on the other side of the fence that first caught his eye so many years ago.

Ernesto smiles and pats the bed. She sits, and he kisses her, taking the braid gently in his hand. When he was a young man, he did not imagine love would be like this: decades and several children later looking on his wife and seeing back to the girl at the very beginning of their life together, loving so much more the grown woman now reclining in their bed. He would
not trade this one for that one, but given the chance to go through life with her a second time, that he would do.

—Es un guante,—he tells her. —Nada más.

She lies back looking at him, waiting. The longer he looks at her like this, the more he feels the tiny lie break up inside him. Shake him and the pieces would make a sound like a dried gourd. She reaches across his lap and takes one of the fingers between her thumb and finger. At first he thinks she will take it from him, and he relaxes his grip. It sits there in the cradle of his fingers. She only rubs the stiff canvas between hers, then releases it and turns to brush the dried soil off her hands onto the floor.

—Donde esta la pareja?—she asks.

—No sé.

It’s only half a lie. He wonders if Connie keeps it still in her back pocket or if she’s discarded it. He has never known a Mexican woman to throw out something that still had a use. Perhaps it sits on a crooked shelf in her shack waiting for its mate to return, and perhaps she is even now wondering where the other has gone, if it has been picked up by another somewhere who might have found some use for it.

He sets the glove on his bedside table and turns down the oil lamp until there is almost no point in having it on any more.

—Lo encontré cerca las fresas. Pensé que era importante.

—Importante por qué?

—No sé.
He lies on the bed on his side so he is facing her. With the light this low, her face seems to move like water, her expression changing, becoming twisted and horrible. She touches his face and her features resolve into her own.

—Qué podría ser importante sobre un guante sin pareja?

—Eso es la cuestión.

Out in the field, it’s hard to hear much above the steady pip of the rain on a wide-brimmed hat, but a staggered crop of hacks and coughs sprout up from the betaboleros in their rows. Everyone is cold and shivers in their soaked clothes, no matter how many layers they wear. Even Felipe has to pause multiple times, mid-insult, to cough or clear his throat. In better weather this might’ve caused some of the betaboleros to laugh, but laughter would only incite a fresh round of hacking.

The youngest have been left at the shacks with their mothers. The woman Concepción is the only woman working the field in the rain, which impresses some of the men. There is little talking going on. The constant gray more than even the cold late spring rain brings down their mood. The sun has been missing even longer than it has been raining. Days spent under a dark curtain make the land look bare and evil.

For a time there is no work, and so they sit huddled in their shacks around small guttering fires or spend most of their time trying to seal leaky roofs. Still there is a little something in the ground to raise their spirits: tiny green shoots. The first sign of the first sugar beet crop of the season is showing through the muddy soil. Like the hands of yawning children their little leaves have opened to the rain. Each drop on a sprig of green makes the little plant shudder. If the rain were much harder there would be worry that the fledgling plants would wash away. And there
would almost be no work today if not for these shoots, because amid the first sprouting are also choking weeds that must be plucked to make way for the growing beets. The relief is plain on the don’s face when he looks up at the clouds, and whether its for the green or the lightness of the rain they can’t say. He is out in the field working beside them. Roberto is out there too conspicuously distant yet not too far from where Concepcion bends to her picking. If the rumors are true, he at least isn’t showing her any special treatment in saving her from working in rain and mud.

Even as they do their plucking now, they know it will have to be done again, almost as soon as the rain ceases, in the field they just planted. With luck they will have plenty of work through the end of the season.

The Acevedos sit around the kitchen table in a halo of golden lamplight. Rosa deals out the playing cards in twos and threes. With no work to do the day has stretched interminably long, and no one but Roberto has left the house all day. Ernesto feels the light drumming of a headache behind his eyes. The young ones have grown restless during the rainy days, and with nothing to do themselves, no way to bleed off their child energy they turned to fighting with one another. Luz taunts Oscarito by holding his favorite toy out of reach until he cries then bites her. Then the house fills with her wailing until she bites him back. In this way they trade fits until they are separated, Rosa spanking both of them with a hard-soled shoe.

Even Linda has had to be scolded for pulling her sister’s hair when Liliana closes the book she has on her lap and loses her place for her. Neither of her parents have had to scold her in years.
Surely it has rained this long and hard in the years since they’ve lived in this place and this house, but not one of them can remember a time when it felt so oppressive. At the worst of the screaming, Roberto left to take dry wood to the shacks, useless boards from the shed at the edge of the yard that they could burn for cook fires and warmth. He too was agitated by the rain. He felt caged in and surrounded though he was free to go wherever he wished. He had a whole other house to go to so long as he didn’t mind getting wet. It also filled him with a particular longing that he could not fix.

When the grey light of day turned early to inky dark, a calm settled over the house. Days are meant to be bright, Rosa thought, and when they aren’t for so long, even the night being dark as it should is a relief. Now Oscar sleeps curled in Ernesto’s lap, thumb in his mouth, the other hand clutching his father’s shirt pocket. Liliana and Luz are upstairs in their room already brushing out their hair in preparation for sleep.

Rosa finishes her deal and on the short stack of leftover cards turns up a Jack of Spades. She tries to hide a grin behind the five cards fanned out in her hand, but the others see it. To her left Linda shakes her head perturbed. She is easily frustrated by games of strategy and skill, in large part because she is so good at them. When she sees a bad hand coming, her natural inclination is to scrape out a victory however improbable. Across from her, Roberto tucks his lower lip into his mouth. It seems the round will not go well for them. When the turn comes to him, Ernesto orders up the bauer. He can take one trick, maybe two if the cards fall right, but he has faith in Rosa’s tell. In response, she pulls her cards to her chest and smiles at her husband over the table.
—Que mierda!—Linda says, slouching in her chair. In the next instant she is startled, looking at everyone staring at her in surprise, just realizing what she’s said. She is slow to cover her mouth with her hands.

—Good to know Papá gets his money’s worth out of those pinche etiquette classes.— Roberto says.

Then Rosa breaks. At first the laugh spills out of her in a tiny trickle of sound. She tries to look stern and the mirth barrels forth. Soon everyone joins in. Then Rosa lays down her cards, pointing at them and laughing even harder: four clubs with the Jack of Spade jeering up at them. Not even an ace to save her. It would have been a losing hand for sure.

Ernesto laughs harder then. So hard he can’t catch a breath and tears turn the scene to splotches of yellow-gold light. His belly moves enough to bounce his young son out of sleep, who looks around the table squint-eyed and confused. The laughter continues in the way that little things, a look, a gesture, a seemingly assured victory turned to defeat becomes humorous when everyone involved is happy, keeping the feeling aloft like a balloon on shortening breaths.

Then they are quiet again. Each one holds their stomach, Linda, red-faced, fanning herself with her cards. Ernesto feels a pain in his side, but it’s a good pain. He no longer feels the drumming behind his eyes.

Oscarito sits up in his lap.

—Papá, ya está lluviendo?

The four of them are quiet a moment. They listen for what feels like a long time until Linda gets up from the table and goes and opens the front door. She sticks her head out and comes back in.

—It’s stopped,—she says.
It is night, and Linda is out of the house as soon as she can be sure Oscarito, Luz, Liliana, and their parents are all asleep. She was right to suspect Roberto and Connie would sneak off again once the weather was clear. Only two days have passed since the long rain, but she is surprised they waited. She barely could. All through the gray days, when she couldn’t make excuses to be out in the yard in order to catch brief glimpses of Connie working in one of the fields or carrying one thing or another to or from the shed, she daydreamed about the woman. In her imagination the two of them are sisters and have so much more in common than she and Liliana, who is many years younger. And that much more than she and Roberto because he is only a man. The fact that Connie works like a man makes her all the more interesting to Linda.

She imagines a future in which the two of them sit on the porch in the chairs Roberto makes, sipping coffee with cream and sugar while Connie tells Linda all the things she’s seen. Linda herself has no need or desire to travel because Connie’s stories show her. She talks about Mexico, the way her father seldom does and her mother can’t. These are only daydreams of course. She has not had the chance to talk to Connie since the night in the yard.

And yet she has this sense that everything is not what it appears to be. Since that night, Linda has turned the encounter over in her mind so much she can’t be sure that what she remembers is actually what happened. Ask your brother, Connie said. Only Linda doesn’t want to hear it from him. And as much as she wants to hear it from Connie, she wants to see them together with her own two eyes even more. And almost more than both, she wants to see this dance. You may not like it, Connie said.
From behind the big shade tree she watches Roberto waiting by the gravel path that divides the fields. He is hard to see standing in the shadows, but the way he moves, shifting from foot to foot, pacing in little circles, he seems impatient. Then she sees movement further down the path. Connie is wearing the same dress, the skirt swishing side to side as she walks. She looks back over her shoulder several times before she reaches Roberto.

Though the days are getting warmer, the night air is chilly. Linda wants Roberto to take off his jacket and give it to Connie. They stand there only for a moment, Linda waiting for some touch between them, but then they turn and begin to walk down the path to Roberto’s little cabin. With their backs to her, she feels like she can follow without being seen.

She is prepared for this. Her dress is a dark navy like the sky tonight, and she wears a darker coat to ward off the cold. She keeps her distance, moving slowly to avoid making too much noise. In the evening stillness every sound she makes seems closer and louder than it ever does in the daylight. The brush of her shoes in wet grass is like a shout in her ears, and she picks her feet up a little more to quiet them.

Roberto’s house is little more than a one-room cabin set back into some trees on the far side of one of the fields. It is on the opposite side from the betabolero’s camp and far from the main house. Linda often wonders if Roberto gets lonely out here, or if he prefers to be separated from them. It seems like both are true one day to the next. She would be lying to herself if she didn’t admit to thinking about a house of her own more and more. He and their father built the house in the autumn with money from their first sugar beet harvest. It has a good roof, solid walls, a wood burning stove, and there is even a small porch with a chair for sitting.

At first she thinks they might go inside where she can watch them through the window but then she hears a snort and sees their sturdy gray tied up to the rail on of porch. This surprises
her. Their father would not be happy to know Roberto had one of their horses out at night, risking a broken leg. Not that he would yell or do any other such thing to express his upset, but Roberto so loves his father it seems he can’t bring himself to do anything that would disappoint him. Unless for the sake of someone he loved more.

Linda had to crouch quickly behind a tree when Roberto turned to offer Connie a hand up onto the horse. Though she takes his hand, she sweeps up onto the horse’s back so smoothly it is obvious she doesn’t need it. Roberto climbs up behind her, and Linda’s heart beats a little faster. She imagines herself on a horse with her own back pressed against a strong tall man. Not her brother, not any man in particular. The thought of it sends a pulse through her body, a newly familiar feeling. She crouches lower in the underbrush around the trees, and Roberto and Connie ride by at a careful walk.

She has planned for this since the middle days of the heavy rain. On the first clear morning she hid the bicycle in the trees on the other side of the road. Now she pulls it free of the brush, careful not to make too much noise. They have a good lead on her by the time she mounts it, but that is also part of the plan. If she is too close they will spot her for sure. The bicycle is well oiled so that it doesn’t squeak when she peddles, but it isn’t silent like she hoped. With luck, the sound of the horse’s trotting in the gravel lane will cover her.

She had expected to be headed toward town, but Roberto takes them in the opposite direction. They ride for long enough that Linda doesn’t know how far they’ve traveled. Some miles at least. Her face is hot and she can feel the slick tickle of sweating by the time their horse trots off the road. She pushes stray wisps of hair off her forehead with a hand and allows the bicycle to slow.
At the place where Roberto turned the horse she dismounts the bicycle and walks it a little ways into the trees that line the road. Again she stashes it among the brush, deep enough that it can’t be seen easily from the road. Through the trees she sees the soft glow of string lights and hears music playing. Carefully she picks her way to the edge of the treeline, snagging her dress on prickers and catching her hair in the thin, finger-like branches of skinny trees. Her legs and arms itch with sweat, but she forgets it all when she where Roberto and Connie have gone.

In the wide open field a big red barn stands with its doors open. Cars and trucks and wagons are parked in the empty field gone to grass, the horses munching contentedly where they are tied. A line of people wait to get in at the front where a young man sitting behind a table accepts a coin from each person as they step up. She sees couples and lone young men and groups of young women all waiting to enter. Two strings of white lights dip from festive, ribbon-wrapped poles to meet above the doors, ushering in the revelers. Laughter drifts back to her from the line, the smoothest sound of pleasure Linda has heard. Through the big open doors, dancing couples swing in then out of view again only to be replaced by another couple than another, like some kind of moving picture. There are horns and the sharp tap of drums, and just barely at this distance she can feel the thrum of a stand-up base, like a tide coming in and just touching her toes. They are all so beautiful it makes Linda’s heart ache a little to be one of them.

At first she doesn’t see Roberto, searching the entry line with her eyes. He and Connie should be easy to spot, since all of the other people in this line are white. Then she notices the rectangle of light on the side of the barn. Another line of brown-skinned people waits to get in. Their line moves much more slowly than the other. The man at that door peeks his head in every now and again and waves a few people forward only to halt the line again after they pass. They wait in darkness, move forward, wait again. When Roberto is at the head of the line, he drops
two coins into the man’s hand. And when the man tears two paper tickets off the roll and hands
them over, Roberto passes one to Connie, and they are inside.

Linda waits in her spot for a long while. This is the part she did not plan for. After
following Roberto and Connie, seeing the place they go to, knowing what they are about, she
thinks, now what? Her curiosity should be sated, but it is not. From her hiding place she can
barely see into the barn. There is some festive bunting on the one wall she can partly see, with
the seemingly unending parade of white couples flitting by, gliding to the music. Lovely as they
are, it isn’t these people she wants to see. It isn’t enough to see where Roberto and Connie go.
She must see what they do there. She must get closer.

She didn’t think to bring any money with her. On the dresser in her room there is a mason
jar that she slowly fills with the pennies, nickels, and dimes her father brings her sometimes
when he comes back from town. She may have a whole dollar in there by now. It hasn’t yet
occurred to her what to be saving them for, but the idea of a lovely yellow dress comes into her
mind. One that looks like flower petals strung together, that moves when she spins. And then a
handsome young man would see her and the dress and want to spin her to see the petals move. In
her mind he is not as rough-handed as her brother or father. His hands on her waist as she spins
don’t snag the fabric with their callouses, but glide effortlessly. She doesn’t imagine him to be
big either. Tall certainly, and slim-waisted, not delicate but graceful. She saw in a book once a
photo of a Spanish matador, and that is the man who comes to mind.

The lines at both doors are empty now. The men who handed out tickets are standing
together at the opposite corner under the lights in the front, smoking cigarettes. They are closer
than she would like. She moves carefully along the trees’ edge to the gap that serves as an
entrance for the trucks and carts and horses. The driveway here is wide and rutted by wheels,
made of strewn gravel, but it is mostly in shadow. She waits for the moment when the men at the corner are turned away from her. A pretty blond girl in a blue dress comes out the barn door. She is alone and looking about. The two men turn to her, and when they do Linda sprints across the gap. She tries to step lightly and make little sound but she misjudges a step, and her foot goes into a rut. The sudden loss of footing sends her tumbling, but she slides into cool wet grass. The men, watching the girl disappear around the corner, haven’t even noticed.

Linda crawls so she is behind a wagon wheel and sits to calm her fast-beating heart. Her ankle starts to hurt. She expects at any moment a voice will call her out, but no one does. Once her breath and heart have slowed she looks over her shoulder and through the spokes of the wagon wheel to the side door of the barn.

Through the smaller door she catches glimpses of moving figures. The elbows of men’s coats, the frilled and spun out edges of women’s skirts, but no faces. On her hands and knees again, she crawls to the other end of the wagon. She tells herself she’s crawling because it’s easier to remain hidden this way. Each bump of her toe on the ground sends a fresh shock of pain through her ankle.

She has to use the wagon wheel to stand, pulling herself to her feet with the rim. Closer to the door there is a truck, and from there she thinks she will be able to see into the barn. She takes a deep breath and slowly puts all her weight on the bad ankle. It is painful to stand, but she can bear it enough to walk. She curses her carelessness. There will be no getting away quickly if she has to run.

Limping, she makes it to the truck and then, using the side for support, moves to the front fender. Over its hood she can see inside to the brightly lit dance floor. Men and women hold onto one another, turning gracefully, their faces shining in light. They are all as dark-skinned as she is,
or darker, and they are all beautiful. She is filled with a longing to join them, hurt ankle or not. They are the loveliest thing she has ever seen.

Then Roberto is in the doorway surrounded by light. She can’t see his face, but he is looking all around. Linda ducks so he doesn’t spot her. She peeks out from the front of the truck in time to see him walk quickly around the back of the barn. Is Connie there, she wonders. She has not seen her come out. Maybe he upset her, and she ran out. Women are always running from brutish men in her books. After a moment, steeling her nerve, she ducks out from behind the truck into the shadow cast by the barn to follow him.

By the time she makes it to the back of the barn, Roberto is a ways off and headed in the direction of an outhouse. Linda deflates against the back of the barn. She has risked being spotted all because her brother has to relieve himself. The slats of the barn wall reverberate with the pounding feet inside, and she feels the vibration in her ribcage as a counter rhythm to the beat of her heart. She waits for Roberto to disappear into the outbuilding, but he passes it by, moving around it. Is he going in the woods? She knows boys do that as often as they can. Or maybe Connie has stormed off after all.

She has to move quickly to not lose him on the other side of the building. With the clouds covering the moon, the shadows are deepest here. The light from the front barely reaches this far. Careful again of holes, she limps to the side of the outhouse and peers around the corner. A little ways off there is a sizeable work shed, just before a thick line of trees. But there is no sign of Roberto.

What now, she wonders. There is too much open ground between the outhouse where she is hiding and the shed. Despite the dark, anyone looking is bound to see her if she tries to dart to it. If she is caught, she will certainly be sent away, or worse: the commotion will attract Roberto.
and she’ll have to explain herself to him and likely their father later. She decides not to chance it just yet and breathes slowly to calm the beating in her chest and blood rushing in her ears. Then there is the sound of footsteps. Heavy feet swishing the longish grass of the yard coming toward her. She crouches and keeps herself very still. If they don’t come around to her side of the little building or pass from far enough away, she won’t be found out. The outhouse door creaks open then shut. She hears a man’s grunt, then a stream hitting standing liquid. It is mortifying, and she nearly runs back the way she came when at the shed she sees Roberto. He comes around the corner from the far side, and then Linda nearly gasps to see him pulling the pretty blond woman in the blue dress by the hand.

He brings her to the door of the shed and, pushes it open. Linda does not understand what he’s doing. She looks around, but Connie is no where in sight. Who is this woman, and why is Roberto with her? At the threshold of the shed, the woman presses close to him and drapes her arms around his neck. She is nearly as tall as he is. Their faces meet in the dark.

The outhouse door creaks open again then slams shut and the man steps out into the grass. Roberto and the woman seem as startled as Linda. The woman pushes Roberto into the open door a second before the man calls out.

—Hey there, sweetheart. You lost?

The way he says it sounds amused and almost sleepy.

—I was looking for the ladies,—the woman says.

Her voice is clear and strong, but there is an edge to it, like panic. Just barely inside the door, Linda sees Roberto. He is pressed close to the wall and just out of sight. If he were any further back, she wouldn’t see him. Linda hears the man’s slow heavy steps in the grass before she sees him walking out to the shed.
—It’s not out here, but you are.

The woman says something back, but Linda doesn’t hear it. It is lost to the music coming through the back wall of the barn, and Linda wonders again where Connie could be. The woman flattens against the shed wall as the man comes near. He rests his forearm on the wall above her head, the man hovers over her, nearly touching her. The woman’s face is turned away toward the open doorway. Just inside, she can see Roberto’s hands balled into fists. The toe of his boot inches past the doorframe. Then the woman steps away from the wall and lays a hand against the man’s cheek. He comes away from the wall too, in step with her. She is saying something more, and the man is nodding with her words. She takes her hand from his face and shoos him in the direction of the barn. He walks backward with a hand on his belly. He adjusts his suspenders like a man looking forward to a big meal, then turns and disappears beyond the other side of the barn.

The woman collapses against the shed, a hand to her chest. Roberto emerges, and she buries her face in his chest. He pets her hair, and they sway gently, side-to-side, holding one another. She doesn’t know this woman but she has never seen her brother so angry nor so tender in all her life. So much has happened so quickly that she finds herself feeling dizzy. Giving no thought to the man or being seen, she backs away from the outhouse. She wants to go home.

Linda is almost to the truck when she hears a woman laughing behind her. Connie stumbles out the door, giggling, wiping sweat from her brow, a glass bottle of golden liquid in her other hand. She tries to get to cover, but her ankle throbs and she feels lightheaded. The pain makes her stumble, and she slaps a hand on the truck’s hood to catch herself. Connie spots her.

—Who is there?—Connie calls out.
Her voice is deep as if pulled up from a well of anger. She sounds threatening, and Linda’s first impulse is to run. She knows Connie won’t hurt her but neither does she want to face her anger. Not now. Connie slips her hand into a pocket Linda hadn’t noticed on her skirt and moves toward the truck.

—It’s only me,—Linda says. She tries to keep her voice quiet.

—Who is me?

Linda shushes her and waves her over to the truck. Connie comes around, her hand still in the invisible pocket.

—What are you doing out here?

Linda opens her mouth, but any explanation she could give seems stupid to her now. All that comes out of her is air. She looks at the pocket near Connie’s thigh, and Connie withdraws her hand quickly.

—Chica, why are you always dirty and sneaking?

—I’m not always.

Connie laughs at her, but it’s a sweet, giddy sound. Linda had thought before that Connie was pretty. She likes the curl of her dark hair when it isn’t bound for the fields. But in this moment she is struck by her beauty, the bold music of her laugh, how she doesn’t hide it behind a hand but doubles over clutching her belly with the force of it. More than ever before she wishes Roberto would choose her over that other woman, whoever she is.

—Que pasó con tu pie?

Linda doesn’t answer that question.

—I saw Roberto with another woman—Linda says.

Connie clicks her tongue.
—Never mind that,—Connie says.
—You know about her?
—I said you might not like it,—she says. —The answer to your questions.
—But why?

It is a question for everything, about Connie and Roberto, about the blond woman, about the silly future she had spun in her head.

—Quien sabe? El amor es el amor.

—I wanted you.— Linda stops herself, feeling her voice get thick. She takes a breath and wipes a tear away. —I wanted us to be friends.

Connie reaches out and pulls her into a hug. The embrace is tight, and she is surprised by the strength of Connie’s arms. She wraps her arms around the woman’s waist and nestles her face into Connie’s shoulder. Connie holds her there awhile, then kisses her hair and releases her.

—You smell like the forest,—Connie says.

This makes Linda laugh.

Connie smooths the hair from Linda’s sweaty forehead with both hands. —I have had no friends for a very long time.

—Can I come visit you?—Linda asks. —In your shack?

—That would not be good,—Connie says. —But I will see you.

Connie looks back into the shadows behind the barn.

—Your brother will be back soon. I will tell him we need to take you home.

—No,—Linda says. —I don’t want him to know I was here.

—You can’t go back yourself.

—I got her by myself, I can get back the same way.
—That was different. We were there even if we did not know.

Connie has her by the shoulders. Her grip is strong and she shakes Linda slightly to emphasize her words. Linda looks at the ground. There will be no convincing Connie to let her go, she is sure.

—Do this for me,—Connie says. —Porque somos amigas.

Without looking up, Linda nods. Connie smiles and hugs her again.

—Gracias,—she says. And she releases her.

Then Connie holds the bottle out to her.

—Drink this,—she says. She steps backward toward the door. —Voy a volver, un minuto.

Linda watches her go. When Connie is inside, she turns and hobbles back along the truck, to the wagon, and waits for the men to look the other way. She takes a long drink from the bottle and nearly coughs. It is fizzy and sharp, and she feels it in her nose. The stinging fades, and the taste is pleasant, sweet even. The men look away. She moves as quickly as she can, keeping to the darkest shadows. They never look her way. At the bicycle she drinks the rest of the bottle and leaves it there in the trees.
Connie and Roberto plod slowly through the country darkness on the back of his father’s great gray horse. Their pace is maddening to Connie, but they dare not go faster. Breaking one of the horse’s legs out here would be a disaster in so many ways. The whole ride so far she has been restless. She pushes herself up on the pommel to better see past the gray’s head, to see further into the night. There is no sign of Linda.

She is not usually so alert on rides back to the farm. Often she is tired in a delighted way and allows herself to lean back against Roberto for warmth, and he does not protest. He is always smiling when they leave, and there is a lightness to him. He talks to her the whole way back about nothing at all, his family, the business of the farm, but of the woman he sees he only sighs with what Connie believes is a heartsick delight. She has never been one to sigh, nor has she ever been heartsick over anyone.

Tonight Roberto is silent. For once she wishes he would talk, whatever inane romantic thoughts are on his mind, anything to distract her from her worry. She did not tell him his sister had followed them to the dance, saying to him instead that they had to leave early, right then. He did not argue but looked all about as if he already knew she was there hiding in the shadows. Of course when they got to the spot the little mocosa was gone. Roberto simply helped Connie up onto the horse’s back then climbed up himself. He didn’t know anything.

She considers telling him even though she is sure Linda would not want her to break her confidence like this. She is new to having a friend, and this girl baffles her. Linda would rather risk the danger of the road at night just to avoid being caught. What does she have to fear in being found out? Is it okay to betray a friend’s trust for her own safety? A glimpse of white on
the side of the road catches her eye, and she nearly gasps. They come along side it, and she is leaning way out to get a closer look. Her grip slips on the pommel. Roberto catches her with an arm and rights her on the saddle.

—Cuidate,—he says.

She feels foolish. The white is only a spray of night-blooming flowers. Anyway, Linda is wearing dark clothes to keep from being seen. Clever. Connie is thinking of the nightgown she wore the night they met on the hill, the grass stains and smudges of dirt, the way Linda herself was dirty and mussed. She can’t help but picture her friend hurt on the side of the road, and it is the thin, dirty cotton she imagines.

Linda is alright, she knows. Or at the very least she believes it. Her worries are sound, but the girl did managed to make it to the dance on her own. In any case she would have to tell Roberto to make him go faster, and if she did, he certainly would spur the horse into a run. And the likelihood of breaking a leg then is so high. She makes herself lean back against Roberto, and it is like leaning against a rock. She likes this horse for its sturdy gait, but it too seems agitated like it wants to run. She wonders if it smells Linda or is picking up Roberto’s mood. It steps aggressively and bounces her uncomfortably against Roberto’s chest.

—Something has happened tonight,—she says.

He does not respond right away. In the wake of her words there is just the slow plodding of the horse’s hooves on the gravel to fill the silence. It lingers so long she is surprised when he speaks.

—Are you going to tell me?—he asks.

—I mean with you,—she says. —Something is different. You are moody tonight.

—I am not moody.
—That is what a moody person says.

Roberto is quiet again. All around them frogs are croaking. It sounds to her like there should be thousands out there in the high grasses back behind the trees. She stops waiting for Roberto to speak and instead listens for the different night noises. Under the frogs there are other cascading sounds. Crickets are one, and something that sounds like the babble of water over rocks but not quite that. Much that she hears she cannot identify, but that doesn’t matter so much to her. The sounds of the natural world make the night feel crowded.

A memory comes to her suddenly of another shack in a small dusty town near the border. There is a strange double sense in her head to think of the days when everything a few miles north from her home was el Norte, while today that border is days and days south of her by the fastest means she knows. She remembers laying on a thin mat in single room divided by curtains that didn’t quite touch the floor. She remembers rough sounds creating a different kind of rhythm in the night, her mothers sudden cry arrhythmic. When she turned her head, in the gap beneath the curtain, she saw half her mother’s face, one eye seeing her back.

—It was nothing, really,—Roberto says.

Connie has nearly forgotten she was waiting for a response. Her memory had took her far away for a moment, but she is grateful to be back.

—A big nothing to make you quiet,—she says.

Again he is quiet, and she feels sorry. Too often lately, she thinks, she is sharper with him than she needs to be.

—Did you see her?—she asks. Maybe it is petty not to ever speak the woman’s name, she thinks. She has no special grudge against the woman, her jealousy all but entirely faded. Still Connie does not want Roberto to think of her as some accomplice.
—I did.
—And it was not what you hoped.
He sighs, and it feels to her like a pressure breaks in his chest.
—I don’t know what I hoped.
—That it would be different, more better. But it was the same.
—That’s not it exactly.
—That is what all men hope: every day better and more.
—There was something else.
—What else?
—I don’t want to talk about that part.
—Okay. But you are still you and she is she, and there is still all this secret. That is what I am saying.

He is quiet once more, but this time it feels contemplative. It is a silence she can join him in, as if they are both thinking of what is and what can and cannot be. She wonders what Linda will say in the morning to explain her injured ankle. She would guess Linda will say she hurt it jumping out of bed before all her limbs were awake, so eager to start her day. She imagines Linda is the kind of girl who greets the day so.

—You know I don’t enjoy the secrecy, right? That is not any part of why I need to see her. It’s only necessary. It would be bad for her as well as for me if people knew before the time is right,—Roberto says.

—Things cannot keep going this way,—Connie says.

—I know,—he says—but now is not the time. Soon. After the harvest or after the factory perhaps.
Longing and excitement are braided into his words with a third thing. Fear, or maybe doubt. Wanting something to be true and not believing it can be is the most foolish thing she can think of. It is better, in her experience, to quit one or the other before foolish hopes bring their inevitable miseries.

—I mean that I cannot keep doing this with you.

—Why not? I thought you liked the dances.

—Do not pretend to think of me. Todo eso is for you and you only.

—Don’t say that. You make me sound terrible. Besides, I need you.

She expects those words to sit hot on her heart, but they don’t. They slip away on the light breeze of the horse’s passing, almost without touching her at all.

—You do not.

—None of this would be possible without you. And I know I haven’t said it, but I’ve tried to show it. I am grateful to you.

—Why do you need me? What for?

—Keep your voice down, please. You know why.

—If so, then why would I need to ask? Tell me.

—You know, for protection.

Connie laughs without meaning to. The sudden sound of it is much louder than the frogs and insects. For a moment it is the only thing she can hear, and in it’s wake she is a little startled by it. A laugh like that might be heard a long way off and by anyone listening for on-comers.

—I protect you? Que macho soy. Que fuerte.

—That’s not what I mean, and you know it.

—No me digas lo que yo sé.
—I mean to say, when people see us together they believe what they see.

—Until you leave me on the dance floor alone. Then they believe you are a cabrón.

—Eso puede ser. But neither do they suspect anything.

—Tu esperas.

—Is it the money? I can give you more.

She sits forward and turns to regard him. From the look on his face she can tell he regrets what he’s said, but it isn’t enough.

—You think I am like your whore? You can throw money at me, and I will do as you like?

Immediately she can see he misunderstands some part of what she has said. Anger ripples his face in lines she hasn’t seen on him. His lips tuck into his mouth and he bites down on them making his dark moustache look like an angrier frown.

—Watch what you say about her.

The sound of a real threat is there behind the words, more than she thinks she has earned. She was not referring to his woman, but she does not correct his understanding.

—I say what I mean, unlike you. Get off my horse,—she says.

It is a silly thing to say, but she doesn’t go back on it. Instead she pushes at Roberto with both hands, not with enough force to throw him—she isn’t sure if she could. The horse comes to a gradual halt, and astonishingly Roberto swings a leg over and is standing in the rode. Connie puts her feet into the stirrups and with her knees urges the horse forward. The horse obeys.
She is tempted to gallop off, out of sight at least or maybe the whole way back, but she doesn’t. For fear of the horse’s legs, she tells herself. She keeps the horse at its same gentle pace. Roberto, walking quickly, keeps abreast of the horse’s shoulder. Neither one looks at the other.

At the barn, Connie dismounts the gray. She almost drops the reins to let them dangle loose, but the moment before they would slide from her finger she holds them. Roberto comes around the front of the horse, patting his neck gently. Connie passes him the reins, and as he takes them the corners of his mouth curve barely upward. Without a word he takes the horse into the barn.

When he comes out again after several minutes, he seems surprised to see her still standing there. She is a little surprised herself. The long silence of the ride gave time for her temper to cool, and now she feels a little foolish for fighting with him. In the past she would have left any man who upset her and never looked back. Tonight she does not want to go back to her shack with this silence between them. She will not leave until they have spoken some words together at least. She is no less bothered by the whole situation, the sneaking and the tricking, but if Linda is her friend she feels Roberto must be too.

—How is the horse?—she says.

—Your horse, you mean?

They look at each other a moment. He is still angry, she thinks. If there is to be another fight, so be it. Then he grins and shakes his head, and it is like a pressure releasing between them. She laughs and is glad to be laughing with him.

—I think he likes me better anyhow,—she says.

—Creo que sí.
—Roberto…

She begins to speak, but doesn’t know what she wants to say. She thought she would tell him that she would continue to go to the dances with him, but before the words could come out her heart pulls them back. It would be a nice gesture to say it, but she would not mean it. He seems to know already.

—We can talk about the dances some other time. If you still don’t want to go, I will find another way.

She sighs. Unable to say more, she simply nods. Feeling the pressure of tears behind her eyes, she looks away.

—Sleep well, Concepción,—he says. —Tomorrow is another day.

He puts his hand out to touch her somewhere, perhaps her face, hesitates, then settles for her arm. He holds it there a moment, and she puts her hand on his other arm.

—Buenas noches, caballero,—she says.

Then they part, going opposite directions.

Connie is nearly to field before the camp when she hears a noise off to the side in the direction of the house. Her first thought is that Linda must be hiding again, waiting to catch her coming back, but something about the quality of the sound stops her. Instead of looking for Linda, Connie crouches in the shadow of the ditch surrounding the field. She listens and after a moment hears it again. It is a squeak and groaning sound, one sharp report then nothing, like a rusted axel turning once then stopping. Then there is the quiet murmur of a voice deep, quiet, and insistent. A man’s voice. It is answered by another.
From the ditch she can see the work shed just opposite the gravel path that runs between the fields and the hill to the house. The door is open, a yawning portal into inky darkness. She cannot see inside, but now she is sure the voices are coming from inside. She lays her body against the inner bank of the ditch and makes herself as still as possible. Wetness seeps into the front of her dress, covering her from collar bone to knees. Tiny bugs pick their way over her arms, but she doesn’t dare move to swipe them away. Her pulse quickens painfully in her throat as she watches the dark doorway.

For several minutes nothing happens. She worries about Linda. Who are these men, and did they find her on the road and bring her here? She realizes she is listening for her friend to cry out in any way. And if she does, then what, she asks herself. Roberto’s cabin has never felt farther away than it does to her right now. A strange and unwanted lethargy creeps into her limbs, her legs feeling suddenly weak, as if her body does not want her to go. Half-a-dozen times she tells herself now is the moment, she will spring up and out of the ditch and run past the three fields and the trees between here and Roberto’s door. She will bang on it until he opens up. And then, she does not know what. She remains still.

Felipe, she tells herself. She will go to Felipe. Behind her the field is open, the new growth barely ankle deep. The moon is only half full, but there is light enough to see a person out there in the open. And what if it is men from the camp? She must do something, cannot lay here doing nothing. She is about to move when a man steps out of the black doorway.

He is tall and has to stoop to not hit his head on the doorframe. The man is dressed like a farmer, flannel shirt, overalls. He wears no hat, and she can see in the dim that his hair is blond and the flesh above the panuelo covering his face is white. He looks about the yard and his gaze seems to stop on her. She stops breathing, in case he can hear it. He is looking at her but in an
unfocused way, and she realizes he is looking at the fields. When she lets out the breath she is holding, she puts her mouth to the cool damp earth and exhales slowly. The green smell of grass and the fecundity of soil, the light stench of plant rot, fills her nose. The familiarity of it is almost comforting.

The man pulls down the panuelo and wipes his brow with the back of a hand as if he has been working. She sees his face though it is not one she recognizes. Then the man says something over his shoulder and two more men emerge carrying something between them. Whatever it is, its long and dark in the half-light and Connie nearly gasps before the whole shape of it is revealed. It is the blade to the plow. These men too are dressed for work, and she can see the white of their brows and arms. They hustle the blade away, back toward the road, as quick as its weight will allow.

The blond man disappears into the shed again and steps out with another man and the old plow blade. This one is so pitted with rust as to be useless. It’s edge is jagged like a broken tooth. Still they find it worth stealing. The other man surprises her. He is tall and gaunt yet his arms seem strong. More than strong enough to hold his side of things. He does not wear a panuelo like the other, and his face is deeply lined and brown. A thick black moustache curves down either side of his mouth. Even at this distance and in the dark he has an angry look. He does not seem like the others who were rushed and looked wary of being found out. Even the blond man, who is obviously in charge, is not as bold as this one. He is neither rushed nor slow about their work. She does not recognize this man either, which makes her strangely glad. If she did, it would mean he was a betabolero of this farm.

All four men pass out of darkness, the last one closing the door to the bar behind them. Once they are out of sight, Connie lets herself breath easier but still refuses to move. She doesn’t
know what she is waiting for until distantly she hears a motor engine turn over. Only then does she know the men are not coming back.

Finally finding her limbs full of energy, she bolts out of the ditch. She might be crying or it might be the cool air hitting her eyes. Either way, tears stream down her cheeks by the time she makes it to the shed door. She flings it open, afraid of what horrors she might find inside. She imagine again the dirty thin cotton of Linda’s nightgown. Connie cries in earnest when her eyes adjust to the deeper dark and all there is to see are the pieces of dismantled plows arrayed on the floor of the shed.
Ernesto stands in the doorway of the shed at the edge of his yard. It is dark inside. Over the shed and his home, the sky is turning pink but the sun is not yet over the trees. Roberto passes a lantern over Ernesto’s shoulder and he takes it. In its light he sees what his son brought him down to see: the horse-drawn plows lay spread in two pieces, each dismantled and making a V shape in the dirt. The heavy metal heads to both are gone as are the wheels, anything necessary to make them work apparently carried off in the night.

He steps inside and around the debris to illuminate the dark corners. He looks behind barrels and stacks of wood, vainly searching for the missing pieces. His heart sinks, and more than anger he is filled with a sad desperation at the loss. It is as if he is looking at one of his horses dead instead of some contraption of wood and metal.

—Who is doing this to us?—he asks, not meaning to be heard.

Once again he had checked for some message written on the wall, but there was nothing. Wanton destruction without ethos. It disturbs Ernesto to think how this might escalate. He hears his son shift his weight still outside the shed though there is easily room enough for both of them.

—It must’ve been late,—Roberto says. —While we slept.

He doesn’t know if his son means to answer the question or is asking a question of his own in his own way. Something else is said, but Ernesto misses it. His stomach clenches, colors fill his vision.
Suddenly the air is all wrong. It is much hotter here and dry in a way that makes him momentarily dizzy. He turns and catches himself on a post in the center of the shed that isn’t supposed to be there. He is not in the shed. Bright yellow light divides the inner darkness in vertical stripes, and the animal stench is too close. He can’t get away from it. It is shit and the musk of an animal’s fear sweat, and there is something sweeter: decay and blood. He tastes fresh vomit on his tongue and in the back of his throat.

—I said you wouldn’t like it,—a voice from below. —I told you so.

What he sees is more horrible than the smell can account for. A smallish creature is staked out on the dirt floor of this barn, legs together, arms spread, opened down the center. The broken bones of its rib cage make the chest cavity look like the bloody maw of some hell beast, and the image is perhaps not too far off. His mind is trying to make sense of the body laid out in cruciform before him, the red muscles veined in blue left bared. It’s organs, not torn out but carefully removed, are arranged meticulously around it in an order he cannot discern. He sees the hooves, and relief and revulsion mix uneasily in his guts. He finally registers the head of a goat severed from its body and set on its own base so the muzzle rests in the open cavernous chest. He feels like heaving, but it seems he already has.

Ernesto recognizes the boy kneeling beside the carcass. It is the same boy he glimpsed briefly while on horseback in another vision. Now that he sees him more closely and has time to take in his features, there is no mistaking the heavy eyebrows and square forehead of the one they called El Demonio. Growing up, he’d always heard Demonio was evil man. Don Guerrero’s bastard son by the bruja who lived in the woods. When Don Guerrero tried to claim her land for his own, she met him and struck a bargain. He would give her a son and an unmolested plot of land in woods, and in exchange she promised him prosperity until the end of his days. To ensure
that prosperity, he also required the son be delivered to him to live on his land once he came of age. If anyone knew Demonio’s true name, it was never said aloud for Ernesto to hear. One day the boy wandered in from the woods, a stranger to everyone but Don Guerrero, who greeted him like he had been expected. This is the story men on the rancho told.

—It will be a good harvest. Plenty of wheat and corn. Last year’s sacrifice has ensured for us a robust crop.

The boy presses the point of his knife slowly, carefully into the heart, as if wanting not to damage it, and brings it to the end of his nose.

—But there will be an insurrection among the field hands. They steal from us and hide weapons. If we act quickly, the rebellion will die under our horses.

—What is this?

He feels his mouth form these words and his lungs push them out, but the voice he hears is not his. Once again it is his father’s. What isn’t clear to him is whether the question is his or whether these words were spoken by his father decades ago. Because this must be a moment from Ignacio Acevedo’s life.

Demonio looks up at him from among the viscera.

—Are you frightened?—he asks.

Ernesto realizes he is. After all these years and all the distance he has put between himself and the rancho, this man, this boy crouching in the dirt terrifies him still. Demonio’s eyes, in the wake of the question, seem to glisten as if the prospect of fear excites him. And again Ernesto wonders, is it his fear alone that he feels or was his father also afraid. In this moment, when it actually happened, had Demonio posed this same question to his father, and had he felt this cold squirming in his guts?
—It’s what my mother taught me,—he says. —It’s what my father wanted me for.

Demonio stands abruptly. Ernesto can’t help but flinch back; the boy moves so quickly, fluidly like a snake. He stares at Ernesto intently. The knife with the goat’s heart still impaled on it hangs forgotten at his side. He moves his head to look at Ernesto from different angles, and it occurs to him how much bigger he is than Demonio. He has never been larger or more powerful than his tormentor before and is filled with the wild urge to strike, to knock the knife from his hand, take him to the ground and throttle him until he is dead. But as quickly as the thought occurs to him, Demonio tightens his grip on the knife and with a flick of his wrist sends the heart skittering in the dirt.

—You aren’t who you appear to be.—Demonio says.

—I don’t…

Know, he thinks. He was going to say I don’t know, but stopped himself before revealing too much. He doesn’t understand what has been happening to him, what these episodes truly are, and yet Demonio seems to know he is not his father. If this is not mere memory or a dream, then perhaps Ernesto can be hurt here. He may even be able to die. Demonio takes a step forward, and Ernesto takes one back. He is dizzy and can feel his hands shaking. There is a trembling in the center of him, and he feels himself begin to fall.

Rough, strong hands grip Ernesto’s arms, and his vision is blurred by wetness. He lashes out, meaning to punch, slap, push, but only succeeds in knocking the hands away so that he does fall.

—Papá!
The hands again, on his face, on his shoulders, shake him firmly. He feels a light sweat cover his body and he shivers despite not being cold. Weakly he pushes at the hands. He has no strength to fight, but his eyes clear, and in the lamplight he sees his son crouching over him.

Roberto watches his father eat, scooping beans and egg into a tortilla, chew quickly and swallow, like a starved man. The shaking has mostly stopped. His mother is there as well, a towel gripped in her hands. She has not taken her eyes off his father’s face. When he is finished, he sits back heavily in his chair and lets out a loud sigh.

—How do you feel?—Roberto asks.

—Better, m’ijo, gracias.

He wipes his mouth with a cloth, then his forehead. He seems out of breath. Roberto fills a mug with coffee and sets it before him. His father holds it between his hands for a long moment before pushing back his chair and getting the clay jar of sugar down from the shelf.

—Finish your coffee, then go upstairs and take a rest,—his mother says.

He puts a hand on hers, takes a drink, looks like he’s considering, but Roberto knows he will refuse. Likely so does his mother.

—Querida, I cannot. I have to speak with Joe.

—And what will Joe do but make you more worried?

—I will go,—Roberto says.

—No. If there is something going on he should hear it from me.

His father stands and seems steady on his feet.

—Maybe he will have answers,—his father says.
His mother gets up from the table as well and goes to the stove. She puts beans into a couple of tortillas and wraps them in a napkin.

—If you feel faint again, eat.— She takes his hand and places the bundle in it. Roberto notices the way she stumbles a little over the word faint, how she is careful not to say weak.

His father kisses his mother and heads for the door.

—Let us find a way to secure the doors. To the shed and the barn. If someone is going to steal or destroy our equipment, let us make it harder for them.

Once he is out the door, Roberto’s mother sits again. Roberto can’t sit. He wants to run out of the house and straight to the door of whoever dismantled their plows, who every trashed their barn. He doesn’t need to know why, just who, just a name. Or names. No one person could have carried the plow’s blade off with them. And if this is what they’re willing to do now, how much farther will their destruction go? Will they attack the fields next?

—You found him like that?—his mother asks.

—No, mamá. I was there with him. I took him down to the shed to show him the plows. Desmontados. He was just staring at them, mumbling acting strange. Then he fell back like something was after him.

—He is under a lot of stress.

—I know.

—More than usual.

—Yes. I’ll do better to help.

—No, m’ijo. That’s not what I’m saying.
She is quiet for a long time. Roberto looks up to see his mother staring at him. He sits across from her, and she takes his hands in his. He does not remember the last time he held his mother’s hand and is surprised by how small they are in his.

—Your father is not a young man,—she says. —I cannot tell him, and neither can you. Just know it and be ready.

By the time Ernesto has the horse and wagon out on the country lane, gravel popping under the wheels to the slow but steady clop of russet mare’s hooves, his head is mostly clear. He eyes the overcast sky suspiciously, but sees no sign of impending rain. He is almost grateful for the trouble with the plows. It is clear to him that whoever has dismantled the equipment means for him to be unable to clear his fields. But why? The second plow was old and almost useless from rust, a relic from before he bought the house and land, but in a pinch he could have cobbled together a working plow if that one had been left intact.

Maybe this isn’t a matter for Joe’s attention. He admits it is more an excuse to get out from under his wife and son’s scrutiny. The longer they stared at him, barely concealing their worry, it would be only a matter of time before he told them. He does not like keeping this secret from him, but he also does not want them to think he is losing his mind. Besides, Joe will want to know of this, he tells himself. This may be a more serious matter than Ernesto thinks. In Joe’s mind, any and every small matter on the farm has some influence on beet production, and for that reason he may be inclined to find a solution.

Try as he does Ernesto can’t rid himself of the sight of the goat, the horror of it as fresh as memory, not forgotten as a bad dream would be by now. This is how he is sure he was truly there. He hasn’t thought about Demonio in many years, but these episode keep bringing him to
this man. Why? For a long time, after he fled Mexico, he was sure el Demonio was after him. It was his fear of the man that made him believe so. Though it makes no sense, that old fear is creeping back upon him. What ever happened next in that barn between his father and the young Demonio, Ernesto doesn’t know. It is not a story his father ever told.

He hates to lie to his family, and if he keeps it up they are likely to think he is sick, maybe even unable to work. What if he is? Still, he cannot fathom telling his family about slipping periodically into the past until he understands why it is happening. Then he will lay it all out before them. Rosa and Roberto, at least. There is no reason for him to burden the younger ones with this.

There is more activity than he expected on the Vanerp farm. Trucks and empty wagons are parked on the wide flat lawn in front of the house. A boy, not much older than Liliana, hops off the porch steps when he drives up, and he pulls back on the mare’s reins.

—Hola, señor,— the boy says, pulling off his hat. It is much too large for him and looks even larger in his small hands. His hair is greasy with sweat and his overalls are dusty, but his face and hands are clean.

—Buenas dias. Dónde está, señor Vanerp?
—Con los dueños. Dicen que no molestarles.
—Esta bien, niño. Soy un dueño.

The boy brings the hat up to his face to cover a laugh.

—No me digan.

Ernesto fixes him with a stern look. It is the same look he gives his children from time to time when they have shown disrespect. There is no anger in it, but all the same it holds them.
The boy looks at the dirt and shifts his weight nervously. Then he looks back at the porch. Ernesto looks and sees a woman in a blue dress watching them from beyond the screen door and understands the boy’s hesitation. She comes out onto the porch, and he can see that she is younger than he thought. Around Linda’s age but a little older. She is tall and pretty, and yellow blond hair falls over one of her shoulders. He has never met this young woman, but it is clear to him this is Joe’s eldest daughter.

—It’s all right, Diego,—she says. —This is señor Acevedo. Daddy will want to see him with the others.

The boy looks back to him squinting like he does not know what that means. Ernesto is surprised. The young woman says his name right, like she has practiced it.

—Your name is Ruth, no?—Ernesto says. He stands up from the wagon bench and removes his hat.

—It is, Mister Acevedo.

Again she pronounces it correctly, fluidly. She smiles, and it is warm and welcoming. He has been to this farm twice before by invitation, to receive demonstration of planting and harvesting techniques, always him and Roberto alone, no other owners. He didn’t meet Ruth on either of those occasions, but Joe spoke of her with pride as a vital part of his operation.

—Diego will take care of your horse. He’s very good with animals.

She says this more to the boy than Ernesto, and beams at her.

Diego meets her at the steps and takes her hand gently.

—Encantado,—he says. And he is.

—Igualmente,—she says. Her cheeks redden.

He releases her hand, afraid he’s embarrassed her.
—Where is your father, miss?

—They’re all gathered in the barn, around back,—she says.

He turns to go, and she says, —How is your family?

—They are well. Thank you,—he says. The question throws him, and he realizes how rarely people here ask. —And yours?

She sighs. —It’s been a troubling day.

The barn doors are open, and he can hear the low buzz of men’s voices before he even enters. It has the quality of when men discuss an early frost or bad harvest or season of blight. He is nervous. He has never stood among so many of the other owners. Most he knows by name or reputation rather than by face.

Hal Jensen is there. Red-faced and talking animatedly to two other men, it’s unclear whether he’s angry with something they said or another thing entirely. He recognizes one of the other men with him as John Thornton, a giant of a man with a square head and a chest the size of a draft horse’s. He doesn’t imagine it would go well for Hal, a bean pole of a man, to rile him up. Then the men are nodding vigorously to one another, and Ernesto understands. They are all talking about the same thing. He hears the word sabotage repeated several times in the din.

The men’s conversations stop abruptly when Ernesto steps fully into the barn. Everyone turns to look at him. A thin line of panic shoots through the center of him and thrums as if picked by invisible fingers. In a beat the men all turn back to their conversations. Some, including Hal, check Ernesto periodically from the corner of an eye, but no one challenges his right to be there.

A large space in the middle has been cleared out and benches set down. No one is seated, and everyone is engaged in some pocket of conversation or other. Joe is in a conversation with
three other men. It seems he is mostly listening, one arm across his chest tucked in the armpit, the other hand in a fist pressed to his lips. It is the face Ernesto has seen him make when he is considering his options. Then he sees Ernesto and excuses himself to come over.

—Ah, God, Ernie. You too, huh?—he says. Joe gives him a firm one pump shake of the hand.

—That depends on what you mean. What has happened here?

He knows the answer before asking the question, but he wants to hear Joe say it.

—I’m afraid it’s sabotage, amigo.

Joe is wearing suspenders and nice pants, a white shirt. He looks more business man than farmer. The shirt itself is so clean and bright it seems to burn like a kerosene lamp in the dimly lit space.

—It is the same with me then,—he says. —Two plows dismantled. Whoever did this carried off the blades so they could not be repaired easily.

—Thank goodness we got that last field turned and planted then.

He scrubs a hand through his hair and grease in it makes it stick up like a short fin. He seems harried, more so than any of the men assembled, and more so than Ernesto feels. The loss of the plows is troubling, and Ernesto will have to spend money he otherwise wouldn’t have on repair. Joe has the look of a ruined man.

Ernesto pats his shoulder.

—It is good. Our planting is done, and now we only have to watch over them until the harvest.

The smile beginning to form on Joe’s face sours. He looks at the tracks in the dirt floor. When he looks back up at Ernesto, he is sweating lightly.
—Better get this over with,—he says.

He squeezes Ernesto’s shoulder and steps into the space before the benches. They’ve been laid out in rows in a semi-circle, like at a country circus. And the way Joe stands up there, face shining in the lamplight, the veneer of confidence, reminds Ernesto of the ringleader he had seen in Colorado, with Rosa before she agreed to marry him. For a moment his face feels hot and he is a little woozy. He cannot slip, not in front of all these men. He still doesn’t know what happens to him when he does, but it is sure to be disastrous for him if the other owners see. In his pocket is panuelo with the tortillas and beans. He eats one quickly, then another. By the third he feels steady but with a heaviness that makes him drowsy. The men are taking seats on benches, but he chooses to stand to keep from falling asleep.

—I think it’s these damn laborers the company ships in from the border,—Hal shouts above the crowd.

Other men grumble their agreement. The ones next to Ernesto look to him without turning their heads but say nothing.

—I caught one stealing red-handed just the other day,—another man puts forth. Ernesto doesn’t see who.

—It’s not the laborers,—Joe says.

He puts his hands out in a halting gesture, and for some reason he looks right at Ernesto when he does. A look passes over his face, and in it Ernesto reads something like an apology for these men. Remorse or pity for Ernesto perhaps. He doesn’t need either. If he weren’t used to listening to men talk this way, he couldn’t stand up in a place like this. Ernesto knows absolutely it is not the betaboleros sabotaging the farms.
—We do think,—Joe goes on to say,—that we’re dealing with paid men. Paid agents of the Sugar Men, working remotely for cane sugar outfits.

Another grumbling works its way through the crowd. A man spits at the ground nearly hitting Ernesto’s feet, and he isn’t sure if the man meant to curse the Sugar Men or him.

—And yes,—Joe says,—it is possible that some, some, of those paid men are laborers originally brought in by the Michigan Sugar Company, but it is highly unlikely.

—Look,—John Thornton breaks in,—the Mexican boys and the Blacks I have working for me are good hard workers, but they are desperate. They’ll do just about any damn thing to earn a buck.

Ernesto wants to shout back at these men. He wants to tell John Thornton and the whole lot of them that their workers are desperate because they make them so. But he holds his tongue. He is more and more aware of how many eyes dart in his direction and how often.

The men are all yelling their theories, placing blame before any evidence exists.

—I know plenty of white folk who’re desperate too. Just look at any lumberman who didn’t see the winds changing.

—Okay, okay,—Joe says. He waves his hands above his head as if to fan away the heated words. —This is not why I called you all here today. I need to get an idea of what sort of damage was done and how this is going to set back production.

Joe calls out a name, and that man responds with a report of the damages done to his farm. It’s a lot of broken or stolen equipment. One man’s pigs were let out of their enclosure and seemingly led to the newly sprouted beet field where they devoured almost half the fledgling crop. Another man had the tires on his truck slashed. In every case the damage is obvious and
was left for the farmer to find, but by the end only half the men gathered report any damage at all.

The mood in the room is much more tense now. It is as if speaking the damages out loud has concentrated the threat. Rather than feel lucky, the ones whose farms went unmolested in the night murmur about posting a guard, saying it’s only a matter of time. Ernesto considers pointing out that all the farms hit are ones closest to town but he still doesn’t feel like drawing attention to himself. Joe, for his part, has nothing to report, and his is only a few miles further out than Ernesto’s.
Beside Ernesto, Oscarito bounces on the wooden seat of the cart. The new plow blade is secure in the back, tied down beneath a tarp, and barely makes a sound as they trundle over the brick road on their way to the river. It is the first time Ernesto has driven out to see la fábrica being built there. A vague sense of superstition, or another feeling close to that, has kept from coming out to see the construction for himself. He has, up to now, relied on Felipe’s reports, after he drops off and picks up the men who no longer work his fields but live and pay rent in the tiny shacks. From those talks it seems Ernesto’s hesitation might have been warranted.

Before reaching the bridge that would carry them across the river, Ernesto turns the horse, and they take the road that runs parallel to the bank. Oscarito let’s out a small whine of disappointment.

—Qué pasó? —Ernesto asks

—Me gusta ver el agua—Oscar says.

—Mira, el río ya está allí.

—No es lo mismo.

—Lo mismo de qué?

Oscarito becomes excited. The cart is still moving, but he has to stand on the bench to explain. He uses Ernesto’s shoulder to brace himself, and he is no taller standing than Ernesto seated.

—Papá, desde arriba podermos mirar en el río para ver los peces.

—Hijo, los peces nadan en el fondo. Para verlos, yo te tendría que tirar en el agua.
He says the last part in what his children call his voz monstruoso, the guttural voice of beasts who eat naughty little children from the books he has read to them. The words rattle in the back of his throat a little painfully, and he hooks his arm around the boy’s waist. His children have never really been afraid of monsters.

—No, papá!— Oscarito squeals a laugh, and Ernesto is laughing too.

Ernesto releases his son and pulls back gently on the reins. The cart comes to a stop, and across the steel-blue water of the Saginaw River they can see the half-formed edifice of the new sugar beet processing plant.

—There it is,—he says to Oscarito.

He points across the river, guiding his son’s view to the long, red brick building. It is bound to be an impressive structure. There is no roof as of yet, and the windows are merely open holes through which Ernesto can see in to the interior. Light filla the inside from above, and he can see men walking around on beams, floors in many sections being incomplete. Though he has never worked in construction, he can’t quit shake the worry that the building should be further along by now. If it is meant to take their sugar beet by harvest time.

Oscarito at least seems impressed.

—It’s big,—he says. He squints and holds his tiny hands apart, like he could lift the factory off its bank and set it down in his lap.

—It will be even bigger when it is done.

They can see the half finished stacks where coal will burn to fuel the processing machines.

—Maybe I’ll work there one day.
—No, m’ijo,—Ernesto says. —You will never have to work in a place like this. You will run the farm with Roberto, just as he runs it with me now. Your beets will come to this place and be turned into sugar that will be sent all the way across this country. Perhaps beyond. And when that time comes, our name, your name, will mean something to the people here.

—What will it mean?

—Worthiness, y por Dios kindness. This is the future I make for our family.

They watch a while in silence. Oscarito leans back against his father, looking out over the water. The afternoon sun on the river dazzles Ernesto’s eyes as men bustle about the yard. A great many of them push wheelbarrows filled with materials into the building.

—Que están haciendo, papá?

Oscarito points to a spot down by the water. Men have been running back and forth to the waters edge, and Ernesto only now sees it, shading his eyes against the light. There a foreman stands on the shore shouting to a group of men tugging on ropes, some of them in the river up to their waists. Men with empty wheelbarrows come where others in the shallows fish about with their arms tossing things in. As Ernesto and Oscarito look on, the men at the ropes drag a large piece of machinery up out of the river.

They watch a while longer, and the machine materializes inch-by-inch out of the mirror-like shine of water. Once it is dredged up, the foremen come and walk in circles around it, making note of damage, Ernesto thinks. They point things out to one another. One man throws his hat in the dirt. Another removes his and holds it to his chest. The gesture is oddly funereal. Ernesto and Oscarito watch long enough for the river to darken once more to an opaque steel-blue, the light of afternoon dimming toward evening.
Without a word or final thought, Ernesto rouses himself gives the reins a shake, and they trundles off back the way they came. The gentle bump and sway of the wagon has Oscarito asleep in minutes, his head on Ernesto’s leg. The whole long ride home Ernesto tries to puzzle out how such a large machine would make it to the riverbank and into the water. He considers he is perhaps being paranoid—accidents happen—but as many people as he saw dragging it from the river, it must have taken almost as many to get it there in the first place.

The next couple of weeks are quiet. Nothing goes missing from the barn, nor is any of his equipment damaged. Ernesto figures these Sugar Men will strike again, but who knows how long it will be before they come to his farm again. Thieves and vandals, in his experience, are cowardly and rarely target the same place twice without knowing they can get away with it. Then he is awakened in the night by the whinnying of horses.

Considering all the sabotage so far, hearing them leaves an unsettled feeling in his chest, and he cannot not sleep until he goes down to check on them. He finds the barn door closed but unlatched and once inside reaches for the lantern hanging just within the door, but it is gone. Guarding the flame of the meager candle he is carrying with his cupped hand, he searches around, but it isn’t anywhere he can see.

The horses make gentle, agitated sounds once he enters the barn but they know him. He hears his father’s voice in the back of his mind: Pueden oler un extraño. It is such a vivid memory that he is afraid he is falling into another of his time slips. The memory passes, and he is still fully in the present. He turns toward the horse stall, and his foot touches something solid. It is the lantern, still warm from recent use. These horses, he thought, wouldn’t call out at the whiff of one of the betaboleros. They work the animals almost everyday. He couldn’t say for sure that
a stranger had been in his barn, the thought that someone may have intruded here make Ernesto’s flesh itch.

Then something touches him on the shoulder, and he spooks. The candle flame burns his finger when he crushes out the light in his surprise. He turns and, in the same motion, swings the lantern in a wild backhanded attack. It passes through the air not connecting with anything. A huge dark shape stands before him, outlined by the brighter dark of the open door. The silhouette of two points, like horns, stick up from its head and he can hear a slow heavy clop in the dirt floor as it steps up to him.

His fists are up, but Ernesto has never been a fighter. He fought and lost half a dozen fights in his life only because he’d rather lose a fight than run from one. The big heavy shape nudges his shoulder again, and, reaching out to push off of the beast, he feels its long muscular neck and soft coat. The creature snuffles close to his ear, and he realizes it is only one of the horses. In his relief he strokes the horse’s neck and breathes in its sweet and earthy scent. Ernesto’s hand comes away damp. He could swear this horse had been recently ridden, but who would be out at this time of night? Strange too that this horse is out of his stall and freely roaming the barn.

Once the horse is secured, the lantern reset and the barn closed up again, Ernesto walks the yard. Just to be sure, he tells himself. At the path leading to Roberto’s cabin all seems secure. There are no lights in any of the windows. He moves down the hill to see if he can catch the patrolman they’ve set. The man has been instructed to watch the fields, but he will occasionally pass by the house and barn on his rounds. Ernesto wonders if he’s seen anything. Then he thinks, if the man had seen something unusual, he would have roused Roberto or me. Standing there on the edge of the yard, he listens to the night he thought of a moment before as quiet. The
cacophony of night creatures is truly astounding, near deafening in its chaotic music, though he could not hear it until he stopped to listen.

It is the end of another long work day, and the betaboleros gather once more under the big shade tree in the yard. Every day Ernesto expects Joe to be there. He has heard that Joe is slowly making the rounds to the farms that were sabotaged. Ernesto feels slighted, but that is nothing compared to the fear that Joe is attending to some larger concern. The more he thinks on it, the more he is certain that the machinery he saw pulled from the river was an act of sabotage against the factory itself. Someone out there is trying to ruin their sugar beet industry.

What’s worse is the realization that he might have prevented all of it if only he’d known how to interpret the visions he has been shown when he slips through time. He is now convinced that they are a warning of some kind. And if he can provoke an episode, maybe he can figure out their exact meaning. For days he has carried the glove dropped by Connie in his back pocket, just like she carried it, hoping to be shown something. Nothing has come of it.

Then he thinks, perhaps it is a continuity, part of a loop that must be closed. As it came to him from Connie, it must also return to her from him. And yet he is still embarrassed to have her know that he has held the glove all this time, knowing it is hers. How would he seem to her then? He can’t walk up to her and present her with the missing glove, but he feels it is important that it pass from his hand to hers.

He stands before the betaboleros, just like the end of any other day.

—Alguien ha perdido un guante?
Ernesto holds Connie’s glove above his head. The wrist portion is in his fist, and the fingers drape over his own like a deflated hand. The betaboleros look around at one another, but no one moves to claim it.

—Nadie?

For some reason, holding it as he is now, Ernesto is aware of the poor quality of the glove. The seam is loose or broken in many of the fingers, and it is threadbare in the heel below the thumb. It is only really of value to someone who cannot afford a new pair, and of little value to someone who may already have one.

Connie stands in the back, not even looking at him. She has not heard him or seen her glove in his hand. Still he can’t bring himself to tell her that he saw her drop it, retrieved it that night, and held onto it for these past weeks. He sees others not paying attention, so he tries another way.

—Jorge?—he says, holding the glove out to the man who only shakes his head. —Julio?—He too shakes his head no. —Concepción?

At the mention of her name, the betaboleros turn to look at her. She looks first at all the faces staring back at her as if in astonishment. When she looks up at Ernesto it is with naked anger, and he has the sudden feeling of having made a grave mistake. It is strangely quiet in the yard with all the side talk stopped. Ernesto is frozen in place with the glove in his hand, eyes on Connie, and she is staring back into his. It is uncomfortable. He is aware of her holding him there. She could release him, but she doesn’t.

Then she says —No es mio.

—Vale,—Ernesto says, and lets his arm drop. —Bueno.
The betaboleros look to him now, all except Connie. The quiet extends, and then slowly they start to move away. Connie walks stiffly away, like someone in a hurry trying not to hurry.

—Did you get a chance to take care of the barn doors?—Ernesto asks his son as they leave the workers to their socializing.

—We did. The new handles will hold better. We put a chain and lock on it too. Same with the shed,—Roberto says.

—That should fix our little problem of sabotage.

Roberto looks unconvinced.

—You still don’t want to ask the men?

—I do not want to accuse them.

—It’s not accusing to ask if they know something.

—You would not know what that will sound like to their ears. No, we will wait and see if Joe comes tomorrow.

If he realizes Ernesto speaks from his own experience, it does not show. At times Ernesto feels that Roberto acts as though this has always been their life, not just the last few years.

—I think we should post a larger guard at least.

—I agree,—Ernesto says. It is a hard thing for him to agree too, because it is not so easily done. —I’m afraid we do not have the people. Everyone we have has worked long hours in the field already.

—I suppose it’s on us then.
It is already dark by the time Ernesto lowers himself onto the wooden chair in the kitchen. With a pained and weary grunt he removes his boots. The throbbing in his feet like the muffled beat of horses’ hooves on loamy earth, beats a steady rhythm just under the skin. It radiates up his calves, and he removes his socks and holds his feet out above the floor, flexing each toe, working out a cramp. A cool breeze comes in through the open window and momentarily soothes the ache. He has walked the fields and yard many times since the end of the day, and he can’t help but think how good it is to sit.

Despite his worries he still thinks, this is my favorite part of the day. Not the time or the light but the first moment after the work is done, when he comes in from the yard and sits in his own kitchen at his own table under the roof that his efforts help keep up. Through the ceiling above him he hears footfalls on the floorboards, his girls laughing, and Oscarito’s delighted squealing. The joy in it makes Ernesto laugh as well. This is how he knows that these worries of sabotage and delays are only for the moment. He and Roberto will guard against further attack, and once the harvest is finished there will be nothing more to worry about. These Sugar Men will have lost. All the Acevedos have to do is outlast them.

They must be late in bathing Oscarito, he thinks. The boy is just five years old now, not much older than their farm, and he is quick and sly. Lately he likes to make his mother chase him before getting him to do anything, and she has had to enlist the help of their daughters in catching him. If it’s an annoyance, they never show it. The boy is so happy, every chase accompanied by peels of laughter and ending with all contestants collapsing breathless in a smiling heap.

Ernesto hauls himself out of the chair and inspects the burnt dregs of coffee beans in a pan on the little side table. He pours water over the grounds and sets in on the stove to steep. The
pan is dented from all the traveling it has done, cleverly patched once upon a time by a talented tinsmith in what feels now like another life. One where they made their coffee and meager meals over an open pit. They could easily throw this pan away and buy a percolator. These days it is used for making coffee, nothing else. Though they’ve never discussed it, neither he nor Rosa has brought themselves to getting rid of this old pot. Somehow Ernesto doubts his coffee would taste as good from any other vessel.

He sees that Rosa has dragged out the zinc basin and filled it with a few inches of water. She does this for him on particularly long days, knowing his feet will be sore. In the old days they used a metal pail—they used it for so many different things—but it was small enough that they had to take turns. This tub is big enough for two pairs of feet. Rosa likes to go barefoot in the summertime. It is his another of his favorite things to see her brown feet kicking up little plumes of dust in the dry parts of the yard. To see them flecked with the torn blades of grass in the evening if she walked out into the dewy grass.

He tests the water with his toe and finds it still warm. Rosa must have put it on before she went to wrestle with the boy. He fills the kettle with water puts it on the stove to boil and bring the tub water back up to temperature. It will be ready by the time Rosa comes. She will bring salt for the bath when she comes down. They will soak their feet together, touching each other under the water until she puts a wet foot on top of his knee. The water will make the fabric of his jeans dark while he rubs her feet, pausing occasionally to pick the little pieces of grass from them. And he will think, this is my favorite time of day.

The water in the kettle starts to bubble, and the heat makes the metal pop. The coffee bubbles in the pot. He pours it into a mug, takes the clay jar from its shelf, removes its lid, and sets the spoon aside. Tipping the jar, he lets the white granules of sugar pour out into his cup. It
makes the coffee too sweet, almost undrinkable, but he doesn’t care. This sugar is his. And there will be more to come. He will outlast these small worries, like he has outlasted so much hardship before. Buenaventura, he thinks. The windfall that came to him and his family was a reward not just for their endurance but for remaining good in the face of it all.

He relishes the shush of sugar falling into the cup, a sound not unlike the snow when it falls on the fields. A sound that has taken him years to hear. The sound of quiet, he thinks, and he doesn’t care if it is a contradiction or not. Taking up the spoon again he stirs slowly and through it he can feel the grit of the sugar between the spoon and the inside of the cup until all of it has dissolved. The kettle begins to rattle and jump.

—Rosa,—Ernesto calls to his wife.

He can hear her moving about on the floor above him, padding around on soft feet. The sounds of play have calmed. She must have gotten Oscarito finally in to bed. Now he is impatient to share the quiet hour with his beloved.

—Rosalita,—he calls more sweetly, up through the floorboards.

The sun was just below the level of the trees so they looked black against a sky of red-orange fading to a blue he thought he could reach out and drink. It had been a gray day to start, but the clouds had parted late in the afternoon without any rain. That was okay. It rained here often enough, another thing that had taken some getting used to. It rained often in Michigan, but when the clouds retreated and the sun heated the wet grass and trees and all the other green things, it was as if God himself breathed his own sweet warm breath of life on them all.

Ernesto hears a sound like the kettle whistling, but when he looks the steam from the cap is just a lazy plume rather than a steady jet. The sound stops then after a second starts again. He is listening intently for the sound that seems far away when the kettle whistling true startles him.
He jumps up from his seat and takes the kettle from the stove. In the dwindling steam he hears it again, not a whistle but a scream, and knows: it is the horses.

He comes out onto the porch in time to see three dark shapes running along the pasture fence, black silhouettes against the blueness of early night. They are too far for him to catch them, but close enough he can hear their feet pounding the grass. One of them stops, and Ernesto has the brief sensation that he is meeting another man’s eyes in the darkness. The figure seems unlike a man, something unholy. His stillness chills Ernesto.

—Come on,—a man’s voice shouts from the direction they were running. The figure takes off again.

He begins to shout, a warning or a threat, something quick and biting in Spanish, it almost didn’t matter what. He heard it clearly in the shouting man’s voice. These vandals, these thieves are white. The sudden furious rapidity of Spanish is usually better than buckshot at triggering a flinching escape in these white boys who slink around in the night to wreak their havoc. But a dull glow brightening the evening shadows on the grass off the left side of the porch stops the words flying from his tongue. Barefoot he comes around the end of the porch to see horns of orange flame twist their way out one of the stable windows and dance up to the roof. The horses scream.

—Madre, los caballos,—he says. Running through the yard he shouts it. —Los caballos. Los caballos.

He means to call out for Roberto, who he left on the far side of the property only not long ago. His son had just come to relieve him of his patrol. They planned to do this, trading off every few hours until it seemed like an unreasonable hour for sabotage. Ernesto had already locked up the equipment shed, fed and watered the horses, then locked the barn. So Roberto said he would
walk the farthest fields and work his way toward the house. Maybe he is close now, Ernesto thinks. If Roberto does not hear his voice, he hopes the flames will be enough to catch Roberto’s attention. A strange thing to wish for.

The evening dew is cold on his bare feet. It soaks through the cuffs of his pants and halfway up his calves almost immediately. He slips more than once as he runs to the barn but doesn’t fall. He continues to shout into the dark hoping to maybe rouse the weary betaboleros who will be gathered around their own fires or already asleep.

Faces appear at the upper windows of his home as runs by: Rosa, their daughters Linda, Liliana, y Luz, and Oscarito. In the glass he can see firelight reflected over the faces of his family. They see the fire too. Rosa is rapt, watching only him. They make eye contact through the glass. Her face is full of worry. He is sure she can see that he has no plan for what to do about the fire once he gets there. He will have to let it burn itself out and keep it from spreading to any out buildings.

They all appear stunned until Liliana and Luz begin to cry. Then Rosa says something to Linda that causes her to turn to her, but Rosa is gone from the window. Ernesto is past the window now. To see what his family is doing, he would have to turn back. Somehow he knows his wife is coming to help fight the flames, but there is no time to tell her to stay with the children. He will have to deal with that when she comes.

The fire dominates his attention. He can feel the warmth of the air long before he gets to it. Each step a little warmer than the last. It lights the yard in an unwholesome way, throwing diabolical shadows. The big tree looks like a pummeling fist, and the flames lick out toward its lowest branches. It’s as if the fire were a living thing reaching out for anything it can consume.
His father was a religious man and told him less about the loving nature of God and more about the horrors of Hell. Demons spawned in pits of writhing lurid flames, taunting and mortifying the tender flesh of mortal sinners. Remembering this makes him want to turn back, to run from the burning. The horses scream. It is not a sound he is used to hearing them make. The unmistakability of it is universal to all creatures capable of sound: the expression of utter terror and unavoidable, life-threatening distress. The sound of suffering. The shrillness of their alarm reaches into him, hooks the invisible parts of him, the things he thinks of as describing a man’s need to protect what has come under his care. What his father called simply la responsibilidad humana. His responsibility to God’s lesser creatures, to see to their well-being and right treatment where they could not. For his father, this meant specifically horses.

The quality of the air changes and instead of from the barn he feels the heat of afternoon radiating all around him. Light’s and colors blur his vision and resolve into sun-scorched afternoon. The cries of the horses reverberate down the tracks of time, but Ernesto hears them only in his memory. He is on the sandy bank of a swift moving river sitting atop another horse from long ago. His father is there, and other mounted men he remembers from the rancho de Don Guerrero. And there at the front of the group is El Demonio. He remembers this time and place. Heavy rains from days before made the river unusually fast and high at the ford. Demonio’s horse balks at edge of the water. No matter how he digs his spurs into its sides or whips its neck and shoulders with the reins, the horse only dances in tight circles in the sand. It’s eyes roll in terror until Ernesto can see the whites of them.

In Ernesto’s memory, Demonio is always man grown. The dark moustache hiding his upper lip and drawing down the sides makes for a permanent scowl. Here and now he is struck
by how young the man looks. No older than Roberto, though the comparisons end there. He is
dagger thin with a sharp intensity in his eyes that makes him seem dangerous. El Demonio was
easily Don Ramón Guerrero’s cruellest son, the worst of a batch of malvados born to fight one
another for control the family estate. He used to claim to young Ernesto to have been born of
Don Ramón’s union with a demoness. A part of him still believed it.

—Calmate, hijo,—Ignacio says. He brings his horse closer.

The sound of his father’s voice so close startles Ernesto, but to hear him call Demonio
hijo feels close to a betrayal.

Demonio shoots a wild, angry look over his shoulder at Ernesto’s father and leaps off his
horse. For a moment, Ernesto forgets what is supposed to happen next. He fears Demonio will
come after his father. Perhaps that was his fear in moment this all happened before. It feels to
Ernesto as if it is happening for the first time all over again. He tries to call out to his father, but
no words come.

Demonio holds his horse close by the halter and punches it repeatedly in the side of its
head. The strength and speed of the blows is terrifying to see. Though the horse should be many
times stronger than the man, it is unable to escape his grip. His rage seems to anchor him,
lending him strength. The horse cries out, in its confusion and pain unable to flee or fight back.

Then Ignacio is on the man. With one punch he dazes Demonio and with a shove sends
him sprawling into the river. The man disappears into the muddy brown water for only a moment
but when emerges he is already several yards downstream. The don’s men have their hands on
their guns but don’t draw them. Instead they rush down the bank after him. Ernesto and his father
are alone with the horse. The horse falls when he is no longer being punched, but the scream
seems to hang in the air.
It is perhaps the scream of the horse that brings him back. He is there in the night lit by the burning barn. Hot and cool breezes swirl around him. He stands in the yard, his feet wet and cold. He runs again, wide around the side of his barn, to the doors on the opposite side. They are shut and locked. The key is on a leather thong hanging from a hook in the kitchen.

Rosa is running toward him from the other side of the house. Her hair is loose and in her face, and a look of horror comes over her when she sees the flames but she doesn’t stop.

—La llave,—Ernesto shouts. He has to shout over the sound of the horses and the roaring flames. —En el gancho en la cosina.

Rosa slides a little and turns on her feet back to the house. She too is barefoot.

Ernesto looks about for something heavy to break open the latch. How long did he stand there, back in that other time, while his horses were dying? For the first time, he curses these time slips. What good is a warning if it comes after the danger? If that’s even what they are.

Running around the side he can see the light of fire bright orange through the unburnt slats of the barn. Here and there the light is broken by the large bodies of the horses, black silhouettes running desperate circles in search of a way to escape the flames.

He has four horses in all. They are not the most powerful or healthiest animals a farmer could ask for, but he had selected himself and chosen them with care. He used what little knowledge his father had passed down before his death. The man had been maestro de los caballos on the rancho de Guerrero, a respected position, but he hadn’t taught Ernesto much about caring for horses. He preferred that Ernesto learn to read, understand mathematics, be prepared for a better life. He gave Ernesto enough to know when a horse was lame or sick or liable to be ill-tempered. His horses may not be prize winning horses, but Ernesto takes pride in
them all the same. They are an essential part of the farm, each one increasing the productivity of his betaboleros nearly ten-fold.

He tries to count the shadows through the slats as his runs by, but inside is a chaos of light. Neither can he pick out the number or horses still alive by their cries. This close to the burning barn he can feel the heat envelope him. The night has the promise of coolness to it, on the verge but not quite summer—it seemed to come later to this part of the country than any other—but he is sweating through his shirt. He rounds the corner to the big double doors and finds the heavy chain looped through the door handles and closed by the heavy lock. He rushes to the doors and grabs the chain in both hands thinking to yank it and the door handles themselves free from the wood. The metal links are hot and sear his hands on contact. Up close like this, the heat is intense enough to hurt his skin. He drops the chain and jumps back. It could be his imagination, but he thinks the cries from the horses are weaker and fewer than before.

He steps backward until he is out of the most intense circle of heat. The weight of utter defeat settles on him as he watches the barn burn. Thick black worms of smoke pour from broken windows and where the roof has now caught fire. The fire touches the lowest branches of the big shade tree and spreads upward. He started with few options and is now down to none. Without really meaning to, he calculates the cost of this loss. It will be massive. If production isn’t set back a whole season he will not believe it. Joe will tell him to be thankful they got the sugar beet in before this happened. They will be lucky to get the beets harvested before they lose all their sugar without horses to pull the machines.

Over the roaring flames and the screams of whatever animals remained, he could just pick out another sound in the distance.

—Papá, papá!
He hears Roberto at some distance, and when he emerges into the circle of firelight he is carrying a woodcutting ax in one hand and his fist is closed around a heavy piece of metal tucked into the waist of his pants. Without slowing he goes to the door, attacking the wood around one handle with the ax. He doesn’t bother with the chain. After a couple of swings he has to retreat, coughing and rubbing at his eyes. The handle is still firmly attached to the door. Ernesto takes the ax from his son and runs back into the heat. They trade attacks like this. Their swings are clumsy in all the smoke, tears stinging their eyes, half blinding them.

After several strokes from the ax, Ernesto chops the handle free, and it hangs useless from the chain. The barn doors swing abruptly outward knocking Ernesto onto his back. He drops the ax in the fall. Air hotter than any heat he’s ever felt before blasts out from the barn. He hears Rosa call out to him without seeing her

Roberto grabs him under his arms and drags him farther away. Here the grass is still cool. Ernesto is drenched in sweat, and a cool breeze moves over him, making him shiver. There is a sick feeling rolling around in Ernesto’s belly when he still doesn’t see the horses. This is it, all for nothing, he thinks. Then one horse emerges. It steps cautiously at first but bolts when it is certain of its freedom. Roberto watches it run, still kneeling with his hands in this father’s armpits.

—Go,—Ernesto tells him.

Roberto runs for the gray.

—Tranquilo! Tranquilo!—he shouts. His attempts to soothe the horse only drive it away towards the fields.

Rosa is with him now, and he gets back on his feet with her help.
They watch as two horses more come out the door, slow like the first but they don’t bolt. One wheezes and coughs, shaking its great big head. It tries to trot a short distance but seems tired by the effort and stops. The other moves aimlessly on shaky legs, head down, smoke or steam rolling off its back. It makes a small pitiful noise before collapsing in the grass. Its chest rises, then shudders and falls with each labored breath.

—I could not find the key,—Rosa says.

They are holding one another. One tear, then another, roll down Rosa’s cheeks as she watches the horses in their agony.

—It would not have made a difference, my love,—he says. —We were too late already.

Out of the darkness men and women come from the shacks to stand just within the fire’s light. Like Ernesto and Rosa they appear stunned by the blaze before them. They look around for something they can do. One them runs to the pump and begins filling buckets with water. Others go to help him.

One more, Ernesto thinks, focused on the open barn. He knows he should be directing the people’s efforts to put out the fire, but he is consumed with his horses. The one lying in the grass is as good as dead, he knows. Still he repeats the directionless prayer: uno mas, uno mas, uno mas. It is alive, at least for now, because he hears it screaming. He moves away from Rosa to line himself up with the door. Looking directly in he sees it. The last horse is completely trapped by a low curtain of fire. Driven mad by fear or pain or both, it will not jump over it, though it easily could.

Ernesto’s foot touches something solid and heavy in the grass. La pistola llevado desde México. The one he carried with him across the border, wrapped in a panuelo at the bottom of the sack with the meager possessions, something of his father’s he managed to grab in his haste
to be gone. The uncomfortable lump he learned to carry in his pocket for years whenever he walked into a strange new town. The one Rosa had looked at with disgust but also a wicked fascination the first time she saw him give it its yearly cleaning. The last real artifact from his father, the one he could not get rid of unless he bequeathed it to his own son. It has fallen out of the front of Roberto’s pants when he ran after the gray. Ernesto stoops to pick it up. It’s heavier than he remembers. He has not held a pistol with the intent to fire it since he was a young man with a young wife to protect. Even hunting, he has only held a rifle a handful of times. It is hard for him to see the horse. Between the heat haze and the moving flames, the horse is only a large dark shape at this distance. If he does nothing, the fire will take care of it for him.

It would be clear to anyone that the horse is not going make it. He finds himself back on the sandy river bank standing over Demonio’s damaged horse. After the chaos and heat of the barn fire, it is almost a relief to be here again. Then a troubling feeling stirs in him, and he looks back over his shoulder. There he is, himself, young and pudgy, un gordito, his father sometimes called him. Gordito Ernesto is no older than twelve, and by looking at himself here, Ernesto can measure in days, how much time his father has left.

El gordito is watching the horse very intently. It is making a sad, confused whickering, laying on its side in the sand. Then el gordito looks to him. The sensation of their eye contact is horrifying. Ernesto remembers this day, looking to his father for an answer and instead the steadiest man he had ever known was not there. Instead a man overcome with profound confusion. Ernesto remembers the moment as it happens, the way it happened, and all that happens next.
He tries to coax the horse up to its feet only three times. The one eye he can see roves around in its socket unable to fix itself to one stable thing. The eye attempts to lock on to him as he moves carefully around the head, but it’s gaze slides off into empty space. At first he speaks gentle words and gives the reins a light tug. The horse heave up off its side without managing to get its feet underneath itself. It tries three times before laying its head back down on the sand.

On the second attempt Ernesto is more commanding. He speaks in his father’s firm voice, and for a moment he even has confidence in himself that the horse will rise. It puts two hooves into the dirt sending up tiny pathetic puffs of dust with each. It’s legs shake, and when it pushes it does so in two different directions and promptly falls back.

The third time, he begs, quietly so el gordito will not hear. He looks back and sees tears on the boys face. Ernesto prays in a whisper for the horse, and with colossal effort, him pulling on the lead, the horse stands. He makes an awkward little sideways dance, but otherwise appears to be okay.

El gordito behind him is relieved and lets out a small cheer. But when Ernesto looks at him his face close like a curtain drawn across a window. Ernesto already knows the horse is damaged beyond recovery. The horse tosses his head at some agitation, and his stumbling canter resumed. He draws a wobbly ellipse in the dust before the uneven movement casts him down again, legs still kicking as if to out run whatever terrible spell has befallen him. The sounds coming from the horse are of pure fear as if his world has suddenly become a nightmare, all control of his senses vanished.

Ernesto sits in dust and take the horse’s great oblong head into his lap. It jerks once against him, but seeing Ernesto in his roving vision seems to calm him. The massive body trembles and flexes awkwardly as if suddenly and disorientingly weightless. El gordito scratches
at the dirt with his feet, both afraid and wanting to see. Ernesto strokes the horse’s neck to soothe it, or perhaps soothe himself. Without stopping he pulls his father’s long knife from his belt, the one he used for butchering animals in the wild. It catches the sunlight and looks white hot in his hand. He pets the horse's neck with the dull side of the blade to keep him from panicking. El gordito is just over his shoulder now, he knows, though he doesn’t hear himself approach. Once, twice, three times he slides the knife harmlessly down the animal’s muscular brown neck before turning the blade gracefully and quick as he once watched himself do.

The horse dies in Ernesto’s lap. When he look up, Demonio is standing at the edge of the pooling blood. With his shirt soaked to his skin he somehow looks viper-like, more dangerous. He stares down at Ernesto not with anger or hate but a peculiar look of satisfaction as if his particular vengeance is already written but not yet carried out. Then Ernesto noticed two things: the demon-born man’s holster was empty, his gun lost when his father tossed him in the river, and still holds his father’s knife clenched in his fist.

The two men consider each other, and Ernesto feels the cold weight of death on his shoulders. He could change the outcome of this day, kill Demonio here and now. If he is quick enough, he can get his younger self onto a horse and flee Demonio’s men draw their guns. If he leaves the man bleeding, they will be forced to stop and tend to him rather than chase Ernesto and el gordito. If they ride fast they can make it home before word reaches Don Guerrero. They can ride north and maybe life would play out as it has, but with Ernesto’s father alive. Maybe.

But Ernesto has no stomach for killing. Slowly, deliberately he cleans the blade with the kerchief from around his neck as he remembers his father doing and slides it back into its sheath. This cements Ernesto’s reality, that his life is not his own, that he must act in obedience to
history and memory. El Demónio neither tenses nor relaxes. His reality remains the same as it had always been.

—Dame tu caballo, Ignacio,—Demonio says. The words are flat except for his father’s name. He says it with emphasis, as if he knows it is false.

Ernesto slides gently out from beneath the horse’s heavy head. His father’s own horse some paces away steps nervously in place. The scent of horse blood is in the air. He takes handfuls of dirt and scrubbs his hands clean, then his legs where the horse’s life blood spilled onto him. The slow deliberateness of the task makes Ernesto nervous. He fears Demonio’s impatience, but the man only stands there, still as the horse’s corpse. His father’s horse tosses his head and whinnies when Ernesto takes up the reins, but he is well trained and allows himself to be led. El Demonio mounts Ignacio’s horse with imperious grace.

—Continuamos,—he said to his henchmen. —Trinche este bestia y llevo a la hacienda.

He gestures to the knife on his belt casually. It had never been any kind of threat to him.

He mounts the horse and the other men mount theirs.

—Nos vemos, Ignacio.

Then he and his men trot their horses into the river.

Ernesto watches them leave. El gordito watches him watching them. He walks to the river’s edge and there is a glint of light in reeds. It is Demonio’s gun. He takes it and points it across the river. Demonio’s back is just visible as they climb the rise in the bank on the other side. Ernesto’s arm itches in the heat of the sun. Now, he thinks. Now. Then it is too late.

Demonio and his men ascend then drop out of sight.
He is closer to the barn now than is safe to be standing with the pistol, Demonio’s pistol, carried down the years and over borders to arrive in his hand at this exact moment and perhaps for this exact purpose, leveled at the trapped horse’s head. The death of this animal will be sad indeed, and though he will be grieved to do it, killing the horse feels like a kindness. His only regret is for the loss to his farm.

He can feel the heat sear and bubbling of his skin, and the scent of cooking meat fills his nostrils. Whether it was his own flesh or the horse’s, he isn’t sure, and for a split second he relishes that sameness. He squeezes the trigger and it is like a mouth opens in the fire.

It is perhaps only his imagination, but in the days to come, as he is laid low by the fever of infection brought on by his now burning arm, he will see over and over in theater of his mind the flames part. For an instant that stretches too long he can see the horse clearly through parted flames. Its mane is singed to nothing. Continents of blackened flesh spread across its flank and back, but it does not kick and rear as it did a moment before. The horse looks at Ernesto, and he at it. The two are briefly connected by a thread of calm. The burning in his arm and leg, which are absorbing the strongest heat from the flames, is like a white hot blanket of sensation. He does not yet feel the pain because it is all there is to feel. He does not feel his lungs filling with smoke because it is all there is to breathe. The bullet hits, and the fire swallows the horse again. He doesn’t see if his horse falls.

Someone throws a blanket over him from behind. It is soaked in cold water, and in the moment that it touches him, clinging to his skin, the agony of his burns come into stark relief. He cannot believe the pain. It is as if pain never existed in his world until now. The screaming is endless and feels like it is tearing its way out of his burning throat. Heavy arms lift him into the air and he has the sensation of floating backward, drifting like smoke. He is half-in, half-out of
his body. Men and women gathered around him. On one side of him Roberto runs to him, Connie
and the gray horse standing behind. Felipe, who sets him again on the grass hovers before his
face saying words he cannot hear. Rosa pulls free of the man holding her back to come to him,
and as she runs Ernesto sees behind her Oscarito, forgotten, seeing everything. He and his son
make eye contact over the distance, and all the while he is screaming and he cannot stop.
In the morning the betaboleros emerge from their shacks as if it is any other day. What choice do they have? They cannot lose out on the chance to work. The tang of smoke is still in everything on the Acevedo farm. It is in their hair and on their clothes. The sweet acridity of it makes them gag, but they cannot escape it. The women reluctantly start cook fires, children gather water, and there is an air of hesitation to all of it. The men stand around in groups talking with one another. It is almost the hour when they are to meet for the day’s assignments. For now they gather in the center of the horseshoe formation of their shacks. The comfort of talking with one another is charged with an anxious hum. They rub their necks while they talk about anything but the fire and laugh too easily. The quiver of nervousness is audible, and they clamp shut their mouths against a second outburst. It is already hot and humid. They sweat while doing nothing. Then one man blows out a long stream of breath. Everyone in his little grouping tenses.

—Que van a hacer, piensas?—he says. His name is Jose, but everyone calls him Chico because he is young and unmarried.

It is like a match on spilled oil. Everyone is talking about Don Ernesto: el quemado.

—Accidente, crees? O sabotaje?—another say.

—Que locura.

—Que lastima.

Everyone nods. They remove their hats when they speak of him. For once they do not watch their words in front of the children. Niños pull on their belt loops or thumbs, wanting to know if Don Ernesto is dead.

—Que piensas?
—Nadie podría sobrevivir eso.

They swat their children away and point them to their mothers. This is nothing for them to be worrying about. The truth is that none of them know. After Felipe threw the blanket over Don Ernesto, he and Roberto carried him into the house. He screamed the whole way and into the night. Most of them stayed a long while putting the fire out then stumbled to their shacks in absolute darkness. They went to bed without washing their hands or faces. Even now they are smudged with soot. They are in agreement about one thing: it couldn’t last, one of their own dueño of his own land, una granja de su mismo. The consensus among them is this is the end.

—Pero ya esta Roberto.

—Sí, sí, Roberto.

—Bueno, pues el hijo no es el padre. No es el jefe.

—No es mi jefe, de todas formas.

They slap the shoulders of the men speaking such disrespect when they see Roberto in the back of the cart that Felipe drives into their camp pulled by the last surviving horse. He climbs down from the cart, face slack looking somehow years older. He wears the same clothes as the night before, stained with soot the same as theirs. Though he has washed his hands and face, there are streaks of gray ash in his hair.

At first he does not look at them. They wait. Felipe stands beside him, shifting his feet. Every man woman and child is gathered in the little gravel plaza. When he finally lifts his head, he scans the crowd slowly, looking each one of them in the face.

—No hay trabajo hoy,—he says. —Pronto, va a ser mucho hacer.
There is a pause as if he expects them to say something. They look to one another to see if someone will fill the silence. Some linger on Concepción, standing in the back of the crowd. She is watching Roberto until she turns away to wipe something from her face. No one speaks.

—Mi padre les aprecia. Yo les aprecio. No nos abandonen. Por favor.

Roberto nods to the group of them then turns and walks back the way he came, leaving Felipe and the cart behind.

—Bueno,—Felipe says. —Los pa’ la fabrica, nos vamos.

Alfredo, Panuelo, Manuel y los otros make their way through the crowd to the wagon. As they pass, each man touches an arm or shoulder to halt them briefly. Put in a good word for me, they ask. If you hear of work, tell us, they say.

Late into the day, the talk turns from speculation about the fate of el jefe toward fear and desperation about their own futures. Everyone wants to know who could have done such a thing and to what end. Some of the families retreat to their shacks and begin packing their few belongings. They want to be ready to move the minute they hear of work elsewhere. This late in the season there will be little demand for more workers. Every man seems to eye the others as competition for the scant jobs they have yet to hear about.

Connie does not engage in much of the talk. She prefers to listen, to feel for a change in the winds. Unlike the others she is always prepared to run when danger becomes imminent.

Until now, the other betaboleros have kept a measured distance from her. The rumors of her closeness with el hijo del jefe served to insulate her while also making her an object of suspicion and disdain. Her disappearances on the nights she accompanied Roberto to the dances have not gone unnoticed. The same women who regarded her as some kind of loose woman
come to her now to ask what will happen next. Or they ask after the don’s health. How should I know, is the only response she gives them. In the inevitable silence, the implication hangs there. You know, some say. Occasionally they give a wink or a suggestive shrug, as if to say, it’s okay to tell me; a secret between women. I know nothing, she tells them, and they leave her, in a huff or with another sly wink or most bafflingly with a look of pity in their eyes, to report back to their little gatherings.

Some of the men watch her more closely as well. They talk in their groups, stealing sideways glances at her, then return to their chatter. It’s the ones who laugh after that give her the most concern. Low barkings like coyotes. In her experience, in times of desperation wicked men will seek to sate themselves on who they see to be easy prey.

She sits in front of her shack and cooks a small meal, refusing to retreat inside before dusk. It would be easy for her to slip away in the night. She could be in town by dawn. With the money Roberto has given her, she can take a train anywhere else.

Her thoughts turn to Linda. She hasn’t seen the girl since that night at the dance when she disappeared on her. It feels to Connie like longer ago than it actually is. Still, she feels a strong compulsion to go check on Linda at the house. The girl is tough, it’s true, but she is also young. Of course, she won’t go to her, cannot in fact without deepening the rumors about her. Besides what could she say to the lady of the house? She wonders if the rumors have reached el don’s wife. It is doubtful, but she feels a little spring of nerves in her chest at the thought of standing on the porch, knocking on the door, asking after her friend only to be turned away.

It’s bad enough that when the gray horse she and Roberto always ride to the dances fled the fire it went straight for the camp. And worse still that Roberto shouted her name as he ran after it. Likely hers is the only one he knows, but it speaks to their familiarity. The idea that his
horse was running to her, no matter how that might look to the others, is a little satisfying. Her heart hurts for him as well.

Que pena esta familia.

The complications are piling up. She has not yet told Roberto that she saw men at the shed. She thought it wouldn’t matter after he and his father noticed their handiwork. She thought they would take the same measure of precaution, but they did nothing. Perhaps if they knew it was more than one man. If they had some idea what the men looked like they could have brought that information to someone. Or better, they could have taken matters into their own hands.

No, this was not her fault, but neither would she tell what she had seen. She was keeping enough secrets already, one more would be little trouble. Because beside the fact that nothing she could have said would have changed events for el jefe, she couldn’t be sure Linda would see it that way if she knew. And if she told Roberto, that girl was sure to find out sooner or later.

In the middle of the night, Connie wakes to the sound of scratching at her door. Linda, she thinks. The girl must have disobeyed her warning and come to the camp. It is her way after all, sneaking out in the dark with nothing but a dress between her and all else. She is about to call out, but thinks better of it. Linda would not know which shack is hers. Quietly she pulls back the thin blanket and gets up into a crouching position. Perhaps it is an animal searching for food.

—Hola, Concepción.

It is a man’s voice, thick with drink, just louder than a whisper.

—Bonita Concepción, abre la puerta.

The wall beside the door creaks like a heavy weight is leaned against it. The man’s heavy breathing is audible through planks, as if it were right in her ear. Now the wood of the door
creaks. He is testing to see if it will open, but she keeps a rock wedged under the gap in the door so it will not open easy from the outside. A man trying to get in would have to break the door down. She reaches under her bedroll and slides the machete out of hiding, careful not to drag the blade and make a noise.

—Venga, chiquita. Me siento solo.

His voice is a dagger coated in honey. She recognizes it but cannot place a name on it. He could be any of them.

—No hay nadie protegerte.

The words are even closer, like he is speaking with his lips against the door. There is no room inside the shack to swing the blade, if it comes to that. She stands out of reach of the swinging door, gripping the handle with both hands. Her elbow is up, blade pointed, ready to thrust.

She hears footsteps in the gravel moving toward her shack.

—Qué pasa aquí?—It is Felipe’s voice.

—Nada, amigo,—says the man at her door.

—Estás borracho?

—Quizás.

—No es tu puerto. Vete a la cama, ahorita.

—Vale, vale,—the man says. Then much quieter, —Cabrón.

The man moves clumsily past her door, rubbing against the wall with his body as he goes.

Then she hears him again through the back wall directly behind her.

—Otra noche muy pronto, chiquita.
Walking through the rows of beet growth in the night, Felipe taps out a slow rhythm against his thigh with the ax handle in his fist, whistling an old corrido. The song is from the time of his abuelos, so old he no longer remembers the words. The quiet of the warm night air, gives him a solitary feeling like he is the only soul one-hundred miles. The green growth in the field is thick around his ankles now, a good sign. The plants are healthy with broad leaves, and he should feel good about this. It is the second night of guard duty, after the second day without work, and he can only think about how they should have done this sooner.

Only yesterday did Roberto tell him about the sabotage. Small things missing, the dismantled plows, similar things happening at other farms. He was so angry then he could’ve hit the young man. He could have stormed into the house and hit his friend, dying as he is in his bed. It was a flash of fury that left him quickly.

There is a certain tranquility to walking the fields in the dark. The tapping with the ax handle reminds him what he is about. He was told to pick alert and trustworthy men to trade off with, but he chose not to. It isn’t that he cannot find men to trust. He wants to be out here, wants the pendejos to try again.

He swing the ax handle a couple of times as he walks. The heft of it is good. Better than if the head were attached because he can swing it quickly. Some men might prefer the cutting power of the blade or the cold iron weight of a sledge, but those men are fools. Wood will crack a skull just as well as metal, and nothing beats speed in a fight. There is always the knife in its sheath at the small of his back, but he has never used that to cut a man. He has threatened men with it more times than he can count. A desperate vago will rush a man with a length of wood, but let him see light glint on steel, let him see that cutting edge and his man parts turn to water. Has this knife ever separated flesh? Yes. Deer, rabbit, and squirrel, yes. Never a man’s. He
would prefer to keep it that way, but if his back is against the wall, he will use it without hesitation.

He exits the field onto the gravel path that follows the shape of the base of the hill. The night is still and clear. He hears crickets and the spring frogs down by the pond but nothing else. A breeze pushes its way across the yard, and before he feels it he hears the eerie sound of wood creaking. His grip on the ax handle tightens, but it is only the sound of the bare branches of the big shade tree rubbing together, unmuffled by leaves, the loose timbers of the barn barely holding its shape moved by the wind. Looking up the hill the unburnt half of the tree almost obscures his view of the damage in the dark, but as he moves he sees the barn more fully. It is a dark silhouette against the night, but through its ruined parts he can see stars and sky beyond.

He wishes to see some light on in the house, any sign that someone is awake and alive inside. There should be a lamp or some candle lit by that kind man’s bedside. Felipe wonders what good it is to have a family if they are not sitting at his bedside, someone there at every hour, in case he wakes. Then again, he doesn’t know which window is his. Perhaps la mujer de la casa has ordered all flame kept far away from her husband, suspicious of its flickering light. What would I know about a family anyway, he mocks himself. He thinks fondly of the women he has known in all the places he’s been, the bastard children he may have left them with, and sends up a humble prayer. May they never know their father. He continues his circuit.

The path takes a turn and passes behind a windbreak, and there, set back into another line of trees is Roberto’s tiny house. It’s little more than a small cabin, but several times larger than the shacks down at the camp. A lamp burns in the window by the door. It’s big enough that Felipe can see inside to a bed and small table. Books and ledgers are open on it, but the man of the house outside on his porch, haloed in the light from the window. As he approaches, he hears
a soft metallic ratcheting sound. There is a pause and he hears it again and again. It is more familiar than he’d like it to be.

—See anything out there?—Roberto asks when he comes near.

He’s sitting there with his elbows on his knees and the pistola his father used on the horse in his hand. A cracked clay mug on the table beside him. Felipe climbs up onto the little porch and takes the other chair.

—You would have heard if I had. You would have heard a man begging.

—I don’t suppose they will be back. They’ve all but killed us.

Talk like that always makes Felipe suspect the contents of a man’s cup, but when Roberto raises the mug to his lips, he does not smell tequila or even whiskey. The man is drinking coffee in the middle of the night.

—You should sleep,—Felipe says. —You’re no good to us exhausted.

—I will. A couple hours at least, but not much longer. You should sleep too.

—Oh?

—There will be work tomorrow.

On the third day after the fire men come up the hill from the shacks, armed with crowbars and sledges and shovels and claw hammers. Anything that can smash and or pry. Half the shade tree’s canopy is gone. Its blackened, hardened branches like exposed ribs let the sun burn through. The shadow that used to stretch to cover one whole side of the barn and the hill below is a skinny pool that darkens the base of the hill and little else. Now the ground at its roots is a litter of ash and broken sticks. Though the smell of smoke has faded from their camp and their clothes and hair, it is still strong here on the hill.
The barn itself is a sadder sight. The grass all around it in a wide circle is dead and brown. Through skeletal remains of beams and boards they can see clear to the ruin within. The horse stalls are a mess of kicked out boards nearly buried beneath the wreckage of collapsed roof. Barrels blackened and split, their contents devoured by fire. Everywhere nails sticking up from boards that fell under their own weight. The vaguely sweet smell of char recalls the rotting corpse of a deer taken down by wolves awaiting the carrion eaters.

In the dark that night, when the fire finally died, it had been hard to see the complete destruction. All their efforts with the buckets of water from the ground pump only served to keep the flames from spreading. They went to bed strangely hungry with the smell of horseflesh cooked and split by the heat. Smoke, lazy fingers of it, had curled from the smoldering pile for days after. Nothing they could have done would have saved the building.

They feel weighed down by the task in front of them, yet after so many days are grateful for the work. Felipe is waiting for them with yet more tools: axes and hammers and rope and poles with metal hooks. The look clean and new.

—We will salvage what we can,—he says to them. —Anything not twisted or ruined by the fire. Anything we can use to rebuild.

The betaboleros set about dismantling the gutted barn.
Rosa’s house is quiet. Mid-morning light glazes the lower level of her home a dull white. Her shifting the pots on the stove makes a clamor that is too loud for the space. She hates this quiet. It brings with it a feeling like la muerte has moved in and is gradually overtaking every room. As it is now, la muerte has taken up permanent residence in the room she once shared with her beloved. Stubbornly he clings to life but he will pass soon. Of that she is sure. She is not prepared for him to leave her, but his lingering, that he does not wake but moans in pain, the odor coming from his wounds, is all worse than losing him. When he dies there will be no returning to that room.

The heat of summer is upon them now. It is the same wet sticky heat of every summer in this place, but today the air feels tight around her. From the sitting room she hears the pot of beans begin to boil on the stove. She had forgotten they were on. She is sitting in a chair by the window and for a moment cannot remember when or why she sat.

—I cannot do this,—she says to the room. What she means to say is she cannot let her mind drift or risk losing it.

She opens the window by her chair hoping for a breeze, but the air is still. She goes about opening all the windows on this floor of the house. Before moving into the kitchen she pauses at the bottom of the stairs. His window should be opened as well, she thinks. His window. How quickly she has given the space they shared over to him. Not her husband, but the body that used to be his and the death that has come to claim it. For now she sleeps on a cot in their pantry, waiting until well after her children are in bed to slip into it, folding and hiding it away before they wake, like she did when she first met Ernesto.
She has slept in a pantry before as a girl, when she worked for a wealthy white widow, a vampiric sort of woman, as her sirvieta. And she felt like one. That woman would’ve sooner wipe her mouth with Rosa and toss her aside than show her a human kindness. Some nights she wakes thinking she has heard the woman call for her, fearing briefly in the dark that all the years since have been the dream and she has awakened back in her old life. Then her senses return, slow like the land appearing from under a dissipating fog, and it is Ernesto she hears through the floorboards above her head.

In the kitchen she stirs the beans, digging into the bottom of the pot with her wooden spoon. With a towel she opens the door in the stove and looks in and takes the poker off its peg on the wall and spreads the wood out to lessen the flames. It is only fire, she tells herself, it has no will of its own. She hangs the metal poker back on its peg and sees for the first time, the key on a leather thong hanging from a nail. The heat in the kitchen is suddenly too much. Her brisk walk from the kitchen, stepping quick and light on the balls of her feet, gives her the feeling that she is gliding as if in an unsettling dream out from the kitchen and onto the porch.

Rosa separates a single sheet out from the folds of the newspaper onto the cot before her. She smoothes out the center fold crease with both hands as well as she can, running them out from the middle of the cross shape to the outer edges. It is important to her that it not be wrinkled or torn. It is hard to straighten out the crease on the slack canvas, but she is not ready to return to the kitchen just yet. She puts the sheet up to test it against the window in the pantry. With one hand she holds a thin page to the glass and feel the cool of it in her palm. The day’s sun has not yet moved to this side of the house. It won’t until evening, which is coming later and later these
days. She wonders if that keeps them away, the Sugar Men, or if they’ve gotten all they wanted out of burning her husband.

It was Roberto who she first heard call them that. He didn’t mean for her to hear, talking in gruff whispers to Felipe on the porch. Felipe doesn’t come in the house anymore. They talked about paid men from Cuba or maybe money from Cuba paying men already here. No one knew who they were. They sounded like demons or ghosts. Hearing her son talk about them raised the hairs on her arms, and like spirit talk she thought of the Sugar Men being always there, just out of sight.

She measures the page against the width of window. One page is just barely not wide enough and not tall enough either. She puts up a second page to make up the difference across but doesn’t like the dark line where they overlap. She marks the overlap with a pencil and cuts carefully. She does this for the gap at the bottom as well and uses liquid adhesive to make them stick.

No one else has come by the house since the fire. She cannot say who she might’ve expected. The wives of other beet farmers, perhaps. The women in the camp who worked for them. But then she remembers being in their position, their exact position. When the old man on the farm in Indiana had his accident with the tractor, no one thought about his comfort. They—Rosa included—had to worry about their own next moves and where the work would be tomorrow. Only Ernesto went to the house to check on him—he was to the old man what Felipe is to their farm. More than the importance of his duties, he wanted to be there for the old man because of how good he had been to their family. And Ernesto was rewarded in turn for his kindness.
She steps back to take in her handiwork. Despite her care in measuring, the seam where two pages meet is still visible. It doesn’t matter where she stands in the small pantry, with the light coming through she can still see the jagged form of the barn. It is dark behind the thin paper, the silhouette of a ruined castle. She cannot stand the sight of it. Bad enough she cannot escape the smell charred wood and burned flesh, but to have to look at the source every time she turned around was too much. Every time she felt her pulse race and her jaw clench. She wanted the impossible: to drive a spear into the heart of the thing and make it hurt like her husband hurt. Even if she could, it would still be there, dark and smelling like death. With less care she separates more sheets and cuts them without measuring and sticks the pieces in the four quadrants of the window over the papers already in place.

It is a little galling to her that back in Colorado she would this minute be surrounded by sympathetic women, jovenes y ancianas, neighbors whose families also managed to stay when the Mexico they knew changed hands. They would sit her in a big upholstered chair, maybe even the one her abuela had with the rose-colored fabric that had faded to a soft hazy pink by the time of her death. Her abuela had sat in it every evening smoking her hand-rolled cigarettes, just like the men did. Of course when the women of the village came, they ignored Rosa and gathered around her mother.

She has three layers of paper on the window before she thinks maybe she should stop and wait for the men to finish. It is only the third day since the fire and already they are tearing down the charred planks of the barn. The dull tack of axes biting into weakened wood, the bone crack of weak timber breaking under the weight of the remnants or the heavy blows of sledges comes through the walls of the pantry. It is just loud enough to be the only thing she hears. What started as a chaos of noise and falling blows has settled into a rhythm. She has seen this in fields and
railroads and factory floors. Before long every worker swings at the same time, reaps with the same stroke, pounds with the same sledge, stamps with the same motion. They likely don’t even know they are doing it. The rhythm makes the sounds of their work incessant and impossible for her to ignore. She finds even her movements take up the time signature.

She remembers Abuela Gamona as a great big woman in every way imaginable—big voice, big arms, big thighs, big face, big belly, big anger. Even while she was alive the ancianos came around and told their stories about the early days and made Abuela Gamona sound raucous and lively and even fun. The woman they spoke of was one Rosa never met. They made her wonder if the stories were familiar to her mother or if they predated her, youngest of twelve who did not know her father. Abuela Gamona laughed a big, coarse laugh to the stories told about her, drinking a little whiskey in her coffee and smoking profusely, and Rosa could almost see the shadow of that other younger woman cast against the wall of their cabin by the hearth fire.

When she is done the room is much darker despite the time of day. Where the many layers of paper overlap—a whole Sunday edition’s worth—there is a jagged, black distorted cross in the middle of the window. It is the shape of something that could have been hammered together hastily by many hands from fire-blackened staves. The sight of it disturbs her only slightly, but it is better than the view of the barn. This is only temporary, she tells herself. She turns to leave. There are curtains in the linen closet, old and moth-eaten, the same curtains that hung in her bedroom as a girl, one lovely thing that she owned tattered by time, that will serve at least to mute the image of the piecemeal cross. Immediately she is startled by the tiny figure standing in the doorway. The sight of him makes her yelp, and he flinches but does not cry.

Oscarito, her once-bright boy, clutches the doorframe. Instead of her face, his eyes stay fixed on her knees. To look at him is to feel her heart break one piece at a time. In him she sees a
line of misfortunes stacked upon one another. If she had not run out after Ernesto it would not have been up to Linda to keep him in hand. If not for Linda’s injured ankle, she would have been quick enough to catch him when he ran out of the room and down the stairs after her. Linda still has not told her how she was hurt. She has told her a story about tripping after getting out of bed. And though Rosa heard the thump and the cry of pain, she does not believe it. Linda has always been a good girl, the way Roberto has and continues to be a good boy and now man.

From beyond the kitchen she hears the hurried uneven clomping of Linda’s footfalls. The strength of one foot compensating for the weakness in the other. The disembodied sound unnerves her. She looks down at her son, still cowering behind the doorframe yet not wanting to run away, the dual needs to hide and be close to his mother pulling so strong he freezes instead. Then Linda is there. She stoops to scoop him up, and he goes limp.

—Lo siento, mamá,—she says. A breathless whisper.

—You are supposed to be watching him.

—I only looked away a moment and then you screamed.

Rosa bristles at the idea that she screamed. The sudden appearance was un susto, nada mas. It was not like she cried out in terror. She is not afraid of her son, however spectral his silences and ashen complexion, like one always on the verge of vomiting. She catches a whiff of something acrid in the air.

—Never look away from your brother. Not ever again.

She surprises herself with her own intensity, but does not correct herself. She smells the burning again, only faintly, but it sends a shiver of dread through her all the same. Then she remembers the thing she forgot, curses—ay mierda!—and darts into the kitchen. The water is almost completely gone from the pot and the surface of the beans is dry and cracked as an old
river bed. Here and there the surface breaks in a little bubble and the acrid smell of burnt beans escapes in a little puff. She feels like she is going to retch, though she has smelled burning beans before. The trick is merely to add more water and spices to cover the taste, never stirring deep enough to scrape the bottom and churn up the blackened bits.

Instead she takes up the heavy pot in mittened hands and, holding it at arms length, marches past Linda bouncing Oscar on her knee out the back door and past the men dismantling the barn down the hill and to the drainage ditch before the beet field. With an angry grunt that becomes a shout she tosses the beans from the pot so that anything not stuck to the sides or bottom arcs out like a greasy tentacle then falls like a messy rain. She is suddenly keenly aware of the eyes on her now. The work on the backside of the barn at least has stopped. Workers walking the path to or from the barn are looking at her. The empty pot is sickeningly light in her hands, like it could drift away from her if she doesn’t hold on. Their attention is brief, but she feels the weight of their stares all the way up the hill and to the door. Linda is in the doorway with Oscarito on her hip. All her weight in on her good ankle.

—Mamá,—Linda starts.

—Go bring me another pan of water. I need to soak more beans.

It will be the next day before the next batch of beans is tender enough to cook. With their bean field taken up by beets, they can hardly afford to waste a single spoonful. She looks down at Linda’s foot and remembers the mysterious injury.

—No, never mind that. Where are your sisters?

—they’re off in the woods or down the lane.

—It is fine. I will do it.
And as if on command, as if a string were tied to the worst of his burns and the smallest efforts of his wife to keep the house functioning as it has, as it should, Ernesto makes the deep, grating moan of agony he makes now in his unconsciousness. Like the lowing of a cow in the presence of a predator, the distress in it is unmistakable. Rosa looks up as if to see through the ceiling and the floor boards above. The moaning continues.

—I will do it after,—she says.

She sets down the pan with its burned crust of beans there in the hall. Linda steps in front of her, trying to bar her path.

—Let me. You can get the water.

—Nonsense. You have Oscarito.

—He will be just fine alone for a moment, I swear.

—And what if you have to change your father’s bandages? What if the flesh peels off in a strip when you unwind the lowest layer? Will you bring your little brother in the room to keep an eye only for him to see his father all over again?

It isn’t until the last words that Rosa realizes she is screaming. She covers her mouth with both hands, not quick enough to stop the words. Linda’s face is frozen closed, but her eyes shine wetly. Oscarito cries mutely into Linda’s shoulder.

Rosa was only sixteen when Abuela Gamona died, the same age as Linda now. She had been a bitter woman longer than Rosa had been alive, cruel to her especially, and all her grandchildren in general. The loss left her hollow but not aggrieved like she thought she should feel. Not like her mother, who sat with a gut-punched look in the faded pink chair, old women bringing her plates of food she never touched. They say abuela changed when her husband left. He had cheated on her for years before marrying his amante gringa and heading to California,
saddling Abuela Gamona with eight still-young children. Her humor turned acid, and the fight she was always filled with became vicious. Rosa did not want that for herself, did not want to become that woman and leave that numb emptiness in her wake.

She is on the verge of an apology when she begins to cry. There is no sound to it but the ragged exhalation choked and release by the contracting of her throat. The tears push their way out from her ducts with palpable force. The pressure of it hurts her and makes a dull ringing ache in her head. Linda does not move. She stares at Rosa and has the look of someone startled by a sudden stranger. Still she holds Oscarito but loosely, and he is sliding down her hip. Then, like someone waking from a daydream, she lets Oscar down the rest of the way and pulls her mother to her.

Rosa has never let her children see her cry. They have seen her angry and they have seen her happy. They have even seen her sad but always in a general way. The sort of sadness that, when it passes, leads one into a deeper sense of happiness. She is embarrassed by these outbursts, but there is no bringing it back in now.

—Tu padre huele mal,— she sobs into the crook of Linda’s neck. Her whole face feels plugged with straw. It is dense and itchy behind her cheekbones and up under her eyes. —Sus heridas huelen como infección y muerte.

Somehow she missed the way Linda had grown. She is taller now than Rosa would ever be, but until now she always felt like she was looking down on her niña hermosa. It had been Ernesto’s idea to give her an American name as an invocation of the land of her birth, but Rosa decided on Linda. Every time they said it would be an incantation for her future, and it had worked.

—Entiendo, mamá, pero tu necesitas ayuda.
—De donde? No tengo nadie.

She feels petulant saying it that way, but the petulance also feels good, justified in its own way. Giving voice to her frustration, this particular sadness, helps deflate it slightly. Then she feels the little weight of Oscarito’s fist gripping her skirt. She lets go of Linda and looks down at him. He seems to be looking at nothing, holding her skirt the same way he held the doorframe earlier, like a tiny boat tied up to keep from drifting away. She could be a dock or a post or a sturdy tree, it would make no difference to him.

—¿Qué vamos a hacer con tu hermano?—she asks.

It is not an idle question. She hopes for an answer because, in the moment, she has none.

—Él va a estar bien. Dale un rato. Tu cuidas a papá, y yo a Oscarito. Tengo una idea sobre alguien que puede ayudarnos en la casa.

Ernesto is quiet again when Rosa climbs the stairs to his room. Only minutes have passed since he first cried out, but she feels guilty for delaying. Crying on her daughter’s shoulder feels like an indulgence, one she should forego to take care of her family. Now that he is quiet, she knows he has not awakened. Not fully anyway. So she is left to wonder if he has finally died.

She stands in the doorway a long time watching him. He does not move. The room is dark, more so than she intended it to be. She tells herself it is for his sake. Ernesto could never rest in even the softest of light. When she was a child and there was wood in abundance, she liked to sleep before the embers of the hearth fire, even on the nights when it was too warm to cover with a blanket. She liked the gentle coruscating light, like ripples in a pool but red and gold. In truth, she was afraid of the dark. It was a childish fantasy, how monsters belonged to
another world and were banished by even the slightest hint of light. Here in the room of her dying husband, the darkness is her shield.

When Roberto and Felipe first brought him up the stairs, carrying him with difficulty through his thrashing and howling, they set him down on one side of the bed as if to leave room for her. The whole house was in chaos. Roberto shouted out for towels and water to clean his wounds, Felipe shouted at Ernesto calmate, tranquilo, tranquilo, as if shouting it would make him obey. Liliana y Luz were crying just outside the door calling out for their Papá, and Linda stood behind them frozen in terror. Roberto yelled unkind things at them and pushed them out of the way to fetch the water himself. That broke the spell that had come over Linda and she hobbled after to help him. It was her who told him they had to boil whatever cloth they would use clean and bandage him.

Rosa had commanded Felipe to help get his clothes off of him. She unbuckled his belt and undid his pants. The buckle was hot, and his pants were still warm to the touch. Felipe got his boots off and tugged Ernesto’s pants from the cuffs. At the first tug Ernesto howled and kicked, bloodying Felipe’s nose, but he took hold again and pulled. A thin layer of skin came off with them and exposed raw red flesh. The two of them shared a look over her husband’s burned and naked leg. Felipe’s eyes were round and bright with horror, and he whispered an apology into the close and stuffy air between them. Without conferring, they both set themselves to tearing his shirt away from his torso and arm.

Only once they had him naked did Ernesto seem to calm some. He had not opened his eyes since they took him up from where Felipe had tackled him. Then they could see the blisters raised on his arm, dotting his shoulder and chest up to the base of his neck. His right hand was so
swollen it looked like a boxing glove. His right side down to his hip was livid and red, but his leg was the worst of all. The noxious stench of pus from his torn open blisters quickly filled the room. It was so cloying that it stopped Roberto at the door when he returned. He had to gulp the cleaner air of the hall before entering.

The three of them stood over the bed, Ernesto breathing quick and shallow through gritted teeth, eyes still closed. He had not spoken other than to scream since the burning. The watched a while longer and it was clear to Rosa they were all waiting for him to open his eyes or say something. Finally Rosa spoke.

—Move him to the middle, please.

He lays there on his back, naked still but for his bandages. The ones the city doctor put on him were soiled within hours. She has been changing them diligently since then, the interval between changings growing longer every time. Is this a sign of healing, she wonders, or another indication of his body failing. The doctor told them not to expect a recovery, that for a body so badly burned there was little hope. That was how he referred to her husband: a body.

Standing beside the bed, she can hardly see him in detail through the dimness. He is like a figure carved out of stone, frozen in uneasy repose. She has heard of cultures that venerate their great men by laying their bodies out for the people to view and briefly imagines calling the betaboleros to gather in this room. In her mind they form a long procession up the stairs and around the bed and down again. The men pull off their hats as they enter and the women weep into panuelos. The youngest children, the ones too small to work in the fields, ask quien es eso, and their mothers respond un hombre bueno.
She pulls a box of matches from her apron pocket, turns her back to the bed and strikes one to light the lamp on her bedside table. The light is yellow and much less useful than she wants it to be. Every dip and crevice of skin becomes thick with dark. Trying to peer at his bandages, she gets in the way of the light, casting a long shadow over him. For his bandages, she has tried to use white cloth whenever possible, to see the stains against them. They have needed changing so often, she has quickly run out. His burns are dressed now in cotton with a small floral print. Tiny purple, blue, and pink flowers peek out of creases and folds. The smell in the room is so pervasive, she has to bend down and put her nose close to the bandages to know if they are in need of changing.

She watches him a while, having moved to the side opposite the lamp so as not to obstruct the light. It isn’t that she doesn’t trust herself to hold the oil lamp over him. There is merely no sense in tempting fate. Standing over him, she gives in briefly to her exhaustion and allows herself to hope for some sign he has died. The first time the thought came to her, this dark wish crushed at her insides. It was like her heart and lungs were being pressed in a vise. She crossed herself like an old woman against the thought, and slowly it passed. Silently she prayed for forgiveness as she cared for her husband. The next time she came so did that dark wish. And again and again and again. And in time she came to recognize it not as a wish for death but for freedom, hers first, but his as well. It cannot be good for his soul, she thinks, to linger trapped in this ailing body.

The sooner she acknowledges the thought the sooner she is able to banish it. Long seconds tick by and she, in the stillness of the room, sees his chest rise. She bends to smell the bandages. Each wound smells more strongly than the air around it. She realizes she has not yet eaten today in the moment that the pungent aroma forces the hunger right out of her. The smell is
not so strong that the bandages need to be changed immediately. It will be soon, but she can put it off a few hours more.

—Hasta pronto, mi amor,—she says.

She kisses her finger and touches his forehead. After a moment she kisses them again and touches his lips. Then once more touching his chest. His face doesn’t change, and she leaves the room.
Roberto is grateful for the warmer nights. Gratitude comes harder and harder these last few days, but because his father had always told him to count his blessings before what he lacks, he tries. If the barn was going to be destroyed by fire, it was a good thing that the nights have allowed him to stable their one surviving horse outside his little cabin. It is good too that they have a horse left to them. Connie’s horse, he thinks. It made him laugh the first good laugh he’s had in what feels like forever, and just now he is filled with a peculiar longing. He wishes she was here with him. He would feel, not better but supported, less alone if she were here for him to talk to. She would interrupt him of course, at every turn, and ultimately the things she would say would frustrate the hell out of him. In the end though he would feel understood. For the first time, Roberto wonders how their friendship, if she too considers it one, feels to her.

In his mind he has worked out all the excuses he could craft to bring her to his house at night. He could promote her, like his father had Felipe, seemingly for similar reasons. His father used to sit out on the porch late into the evening drinking a coffee with Felipe and talking about Mexico or sharing stories from the borderlands. Neither place has Roberto ever seen. It occurs to him he doesn’t need to explain himself in any way. He is the boss now and if he wants to he can ride into the center of camp and call Connie to him. Who cares what the betaboleros would think? She does, he thinks, and papá would. And, he realizes, so does he.

It is night now, and he sits on his own porch in a chair with a wicker seat. One of the strands is broken and sticks up from the rest, poking into his rear painfully when he shifts his weight. He looks out into the thin line of the wind break that separates his cabin from the fields
and regrets building here. The coffee in his cup has long since gone cold, the ceramic cool to the touch. He can hear the horse grazing at the side of the house, even over the sound of insects and frogs. It’s large soft muzzle brushes through the long strands of grass, pulling it, cropping it. He thinks about how rarely he’s seen a horse’s teeth. Even when they eat it is their lips that do most of the work.

Ruth would not be flattered to know that this makes him think of her, and yet he imagines telling her. In his mind he sees her eyes widen and her mouth open slightly in surprise. Every time he does a small thing to upset her it seems to catch her by surprise. She says, *Explain yourself,* in that way she has, voice quiet and deceptively neutral. He knows this is a thing she says to children and the laborers on her father’s farm when they have displeased her. He would like to be offended, and after the fact he sometimes is. In the moment he is faced with her ire. It is not that he fears her—he could never be afraid of the woman he loves—but that he has upset her, a thing he wants never to have done though he feels as though he upsets her constantly. In his mind however, this is a set up. He smiles there on his porch thinking about it. He says to her, *It is not the horse specifically or its lips in particular but the softness of everything there that reminds me of you.* And in his mind she throws her arms around his neck and kisses him. Then to make him laugh she lips his neck like a horse grazing in the grass.

He exhales into the dark, trying to expel the heaviness in his chest. These daydreams only make him miss her more acutely. He has not made any arrangement to meet her since his father was hurt. There will be no dances in the foreseeable future, if ever again. He will have more to do with Joe now than Ruth, and even then Joe comes to their farm more often than his father went to Joe’s. Roberto can make excuses to go out there with the hope of catching Ruth alone, though there is no guarantee that he will be able to see her twice in one week if he is there every
day. It feels as though they have come to the end, and that makes Roberto more sad than he has ever been. Then he remembers, with much guilt, that his father is about to die.

Lamplight from the table just inside emanates dully from the window behind him. He prefers to keep the lamp inside to cut down on the number of moths flitting around him. The occasional one ticks and patters frantically at the window pane but leaves him be. The spare wedge of light barely extends beyond his porch, illuminating a small patch of grass, not even reaching the gravel path. He stands and pitches the last of the coffee in his cup into the dark. It slaps down somewhere between the grass and gravel. He can’t tell which it falls on. Immediately he feels a small pinch of regret—he’d take one more drink if he could—then it passes. He has barely slept since the fire but is not especially tired.

He cannot see the house from his cabin, and that is by design. The spot was chosen for privacy sake, and his father supported that. He never questioned Roberto’s need for separation. Now Roberto looks at the trees between here and there and considers cutting them down. They could use the wood for the new barn. He imagines doing it, he and Felipe and a handful of betaboleros dragging saws and swinging axes. He imagines being able to see clear across the fields and up the hill to the house. He wonders if it would be the right thing. He wonders that about every decision he makes.

When the barn caught fire, he saw the flames above the trees, and for a moment he didn’t worry. Fire is a terrible thing on a farm, but the blaze was too tall to be in the fields. All he had thought about in that instant was the crop.

He has not been up to the house to see his father since he and Felipe put him in the bed. In truth he has not been avoiding his father’s bedside. There is so much now that needs Roberto’s attention. It is easy for an entire day to be consumed before he realizes it has gone. Still he
should make the time. Maybe, he think, I don’t really want to see him. He realizes that he does not know exactly what he wants. And then it comes to him: he wants to tell his father about Ruth. He wants to ask him what he should do.

Before Roberto really knows what he is doing, he is at the side of his cabin throwing the salvaged saddle over the horse. The rich scent of smoke is still on it but muted and blending with the leather. He was somewhat astonished to find it intact under a pile of timbers in the barn wreckage. The horse squealed and rolled its eyes the first time he tried to put the saddle on, and he scrubbed it three times with soap to try and get the smell out. The horse consented to the saddle after that. He begins to walk the horse through the grass along the gravel path but then stops and mounts instead. They take to the gravel where few holes are likely to be. The horses hooves crunch the gravel noisily, but Roberto is not concerned that someone might hear him.

And then he wonders if Connie is awake and can hear him and the horse, if she recognizes the sound, and what she thinks if she does.

The ride to the Vanerp farm is long even in the daytime. Though a nervous energy thrums at his insides, Roberto forces the horse to move carefully. It is a fight to keep the horse in line. The whole way it seems to want to surge forward, and the effort of reining it in has Roberto tired by the end, though he is energized at the same time. He has never dared visit Ruth in the nighttime at her own home before now.

She has only told him where her window is, and he has to trust his memory of the two times before this that he has been to the farmhouse. He has taken his shoes off where he hitched the horse at the edge of the property to quiet the sound of his foot falls. The cold and wet does
not bother his feet. Instead he feels it most around his ankles where the dew has soaked his pant
cuffs and traveled upward. Dread flickers through him when he approaches the house on soft feet
through the yard. There is an unsteady light in the window that he believes to be hers. It is only a
candle, tells himself, and then asks himself who is the most likely to be awake at this hour, Ruth
or her father?

In his left hand he shakes a small collection of pebbles he took from the road. The longer
he hesitates the more he begins to fear not only rousing Mister Joe but being spotted by one of
his workers. He is sure to have set up a watch like Roberto has. He tosses a pebble. It flies in a
perfect arc from his hand and ticks against the windowpane. Roberto is ready to flee at the same
time as he transfers another pebble to his hand ready to throw.

And then she is at the window, and it is like he is seeing her for the very first time.
Indistinct, her form is just the impression of her. There is an instant of something close to terror
when he sees her limned in weak light because it is the instant before recognition. The instant
when she could be anyone other than the woman he loves. But he knows her by her shape as
much as by her face and by her smell. The way she moves her shape toward the window without
hesitation. She resolves into view and her hair is let down. It falls on either side of her face,
down past her shoulders and over breasts. He has never seen it loosed like this. There is the
slightest wave to it, but otherwise it is straight as a waterfall. Then he notices she is in a sleeping
gown, by which he is a little embarrassed, which confuses him until the feeling gives way to a
thrill of arousal. It stands out to him now, how little he has actually seen of the woman he loves.

She raises the window. He can see she is doing it carefully—he does not hear it from the
ground—and it is almost like she is seeing him for the first time too. With half her body stuck
out the opening, she looks down at him confused, eyes adjusting to the dark. He must be
indistinct to her, a blob floating in her view, but even so, her unknowing is colored by expectation. She seems to know she will not be unexpected by who she finally sees.

Despite all this, she looks surprised when she finally sees him. Not saying a word she points, her arm out straight from the shoulder, a gesture that commands attention and communicates her annoyance. She shuts the window again without waiting for him to move. By the time Roberto looks to where she was pointing Ruth has disappeared from the window. She did not point him off the property. The most obvious thing in the direction of her finger is a great big tree on the other side of a field of corn. He heads that way.

Roberto leans against the trunk of this massive tree. It’s bark is thick and unyielding as armor, the rivulets in each plate so deep and wide he can hide his thumb in them. A man walks past, far enough away to not notice Roberto if he remains still in the shadow of the tree. The man carries a heavy-looking length of wood over his shoulder like a giant cudgel, and Roberto assumes he is one of Joe’s laborers on night patrol. The man continues past without looking in Roberto’s direction, but still he feels the need to keep the great tree between him the house.

When the guard is well gone, Roberto hears his name. It comes as a loud whisper tinged with worry bordering on panic.

—I’m here,—he says into the dark.

Ruth comes around the tree. She steps high over the thick roots that nearly tripped Roberto before. Her head moves everywhere trying to find him; she did not bring a light. When she spots him, she jumps just a little and Roberto remains still, not wanting to spook her. Then she throws her arms around him, nearly falling into him, and it feels so good he hardly remembers what is like to not be embracing her.
When they separate, they look into each other’s faces in that searching way in the dark. Ruth’s eyes, nose, and mouth are elusive to Roberto’s sight. They seem to travel over the surface of her face, like leaves on a puddle. He looks down at her feet instead, and she is barefoot like him.

—My father is going to die,—he says.

It isn’t the thing he means to say, but it comes out all the same. Though he has acknowledged it from the start, this is the first time he’s said it aloud. He has avoided the words, not sure what would happen when he said them, as if saying it would hasten his passing. A part of him wants to have said mi papá va a morir. He may even have intended those words, but at the last minute his tongue chose English.

—I met him, you know? Here, when he came to speak to my dad.

—He didn’t tell me.

And why would he? He had come here with other concerns, and he would have had no way of knowing how important Ruth might be. Still the knowledge that they had stood before one another, spoke to one another stunned him. He felt his eyes fill with tears and was grateful for the dark.

—He was nice,—she says.

—What did he say?

He asks this knowing it won’t be anything special. Pleasantries at best.

—He was just a real gentleman. He took off his hat and shook my hand. He asked about my family. I asked about his.

Ruth’s voice breaks at the end, and Roberto takes her hand.
—I’m sorry,—she says. —I should be comforting you.

—We can comfort each other.

She presses close to him, and he can smell her soap and the oil of her hair. Despite grief and worry, or maybe because of both, he wants her. He tries to push that feeling out of his mind.

—I never got to tell him about you.

—You act like he is already gone. No one is dead until they are dead.

—You don’t understand, there is no hope. When something happens to us that is it.

They are both quiet, and in the silence he hopes she will not ask who he means by us. He hopes she will just know.

—What would you tell him?—she asks.

—About what?

—About me. You never got to tell him, but if you could what would you say?

The words come to him before he is ready to speak them. They are so clear and obvious to him that he is surprised they haven’t come to him so exactly before now.

—I would tell him, this is the woman I am going to marry.

Roberto doesn’t know what he expects. The moment he says the words he fears they are wrong, not in the sense that they are untrue, but that Ruth’s reaction will hurt him. And she does step back from him, and he lets her hand slip from his as she goes. He still cannot see her face through the dark, but the bottom half of it seems taken up by a cavernous shadow that he imagines is her mouth agape. He wishes there was even just a little bit of moonlight to see her face by. He waits and the longer he waits, the more sure he is of her answer.

—I don’t know what to say to this,—she says.

—You love me don’t you?
—Don’t be mean,—she says.

—It isn’t mean. If we are in love, like I believe we are, we should be married.

—You don’t have enough to worry about, you want to add one more thing?

—You don’t love me.

—Of course I do. But I have to consider what my father will say.

—A quien le importa lo que piensa tu padre?

—Don’t do that.

—What? Now I can’t speak my own language.

—Don’t use it to say things you don’t want me to hear.

—This was a mistake.

—Yes, it was. You shouldn’t have risked coming here. What if someone saw you? My father has a patrol out, just like everyone else.

—Yes. What if?

—It will be a lot harder to convince him to let us be together if he hears you’ve been sneaking around his farm at night.

—So you are saying you will marry me?

—I am saying I want to marry you, but we have to be careful.

Roberto cannot help himself. He hears she wants to be his wife and in his mind it is as good as done. He takes her up into his arms almost before she is finished speaking and spins her around. She makes a sharp sound of surprise and clamps her hands over her mouth before anything more escapes. The need to shout or laugh clamors at his throat, but he holds it in. His heel catches a ropey root that has looped out of the ground only to dive back into the soil like a sea serpent frozen in earth. They tumble, Roberto falling hard against yet more roots on his back.
—That was not careful,—she says, laying on his chest.

He imagines she must be able to feel the beating in his chest. Not from pain or exertion or anxiety. They have never lain like this, and the newness of it, feeling the entire line of her body as human weight on his, holding him to the spot, is a thrill enough to dampen the pain in his back.

He lifts his head from the ground to kiss her mouth. She makes a sound of protest against his lips then relents. She lets the full weight of her body rest on top of his, and he is overcome. He is careful and slow turning his body and letting her down on the soft and mossy ground. Now he is on top of her.

He kisses her, pulls back to see her face, brushes her hair from her lips with his fingers, and kisses her again. When he pulls back a second time, she looks away. He kisses the side of her face, down along her neck. For the first time he runs his hands down the length of her and it is thrilling. Then they hear a crunching sound, like someone stepping on deadfall. Roberto stops. Ruth slides carefully out from under him and they both listen. It is quiet again, Roberto turns to kiss Ruth once more, but she stops him.

—Let’s not chance it,—she says.
—We will be quiet,—he says.
And tries to kiss her once more.
—Not like this, Roberto,—she says. —Please.

He looks around him and the ancient tree that once seemed somehow romantic looms over them like a many armed thing. His want turns to embarrassment, and he too sits with his back against the tree.
Roberto wakes in the morning after a few short hours in his own bed missing his father more than ever. The night before, he had been spurred forward by a surety of feeling that had not been present in him since his father’s accident. He rode out to see his love heedless of the consequences, and in the light of day he feels guilty.

There has never been a woman before Ruth that he thought about in a serious way. He’d had boyish fantasies about women in the past, always trying to sneak glances down the blouses of laboring women when he was young and working for the first time beside his father in other people’s fields. In the summer when he turned seventeen there was Josefina whose family was working the same farm as his, who he used to sneak off with in the late afternoon to practice kissing by pond.

They were not serious about each other, he could feel it in the way their bodies touched just enough to be counted as a kiss or an embrace, all exploration without heat or hunger. When they were found out and separated by her father, a big man with voice like thunder and breaking rocks, they did not cling together or cry. Roberto did not fight when the man swung the heavy tree branch, not so much trying to hit him as putting up a circle that he would be reluctant to cross into. His own father was not so restrained. He rushed in and shoved the man to the ground. He lifted the branch like he was going to hit the man, but swung and tossed it into the pond instead. That was the only time Roberto has ever seen his father fight.

He has not thought about that day in many years. After the fight, when Josefina and her father went one way up the hill and back to camp, he his father another, he took Roberto past the shacks on a long walk down a gravel path. He was quiet for a long while, humming to himself and looking at the clouds changing color, until he finally spoke.

—La amas?—he asked.
Roberto only shrugged. In the moment he felt like he was in trouble, not just with the big man but with his father as well. He felt as if he’d let him down somehow, kissing a girl he wasn’t in love with. And he was beginning to fear going to the fields the next day, afraid the man would be waiting for him. He wanted to never see Josefina again.

—Esta bien, m’ijo. Esta bien,—he said.

He put his arm across Roberto’s shoulders and hugged him to his side. Roberto thought that might have ended their little talk, but his father kept on walking. He walked slow, and it forced Roberto, who’s legs were already much longer, to step awkwardly. It was like he didn’t know how to move as slow as his father was moving, every muscle in his legs wanting to push just a little. Holding himself back was a conscious effort. Then he realized their pace was meant to give his father time to think out how he would say the next thing on his mind.

—A la larga, vas a conocer otras chicas. Si las beses…o mas, hagalo con el corazon entero y nunca solo para tus deseos sino para algo compartido entre los dos. Entiendes?

—Sí, papá,—he said.

His agreement came too quickly. He knew it was the thing his father wanted to hear, or rather that his father would be happy to hear that if it were true. Roberto gave himself more time to think over his father’s words and came to a truth.

—Creo que no la quiero a Josefina asi.

His father nodded like he knew it all along. He’d seen this look on the faces of teachers, when his parents sent him to school, and one of the children had repeated a lesson back. But then his father looked at him and smiled. There was a measure of pride in his eyes.

—Cuando encuentras a la mujer de tus sueños, no se permites a algien quedarte alejado de ella.
Later, as the sky was nearly dark, they returned to the shack. He remembers Linda holding onto Luz, who was still a toddler and making frustrated sounds wanting to play with some thing in the dirt. His mother was preparing supper, and her belly was heavy with Liliana who would be born later that summer. She watched them come as if she new they would be arriving at exactly that moment. His parents embraces, and he remembers seeing them and thinking his father might be trying to show him something, except he didn’t seem to see anyone but his wife. They were each the other’s world entire at that moment. Sitting on his porch in the early morning sun, he thinks back on the night before, trying to remember if in his passion and haste, he held Ruth in that same way.

Roberto is late making his way to the house this morning. He has his work gloves on but only waves at the men as he passes. They are still at work breaking down and clearing away the remains of the barn. Still he questions if rebuilding the barn is the best thing to do right now, but if all the promise of this new factory holds, they’ll be more than able to afford it. In a week or two the first harvest will be upon them. There will be steady work for them all in fields. Keep them working so you can pay them, his father would tell him, so they do not worry, so they stay.

It is a yellow morning, flat clouds turning the morning sky the color of butter. Already it is hot, and the insects buzz all around him. Grasshoppers leap forward away from him in long, high, graceful arcs as his boots swish through the thick grass of the yard. One more thing to take care of, he thinks.

He comes around the corner of the porch, and Felipe is standing there at the door. His mother leans against the doorframe with a towel on her shoulder. Her hands are dusty with
flower, but neither she nor Felipe seem to mind. When he approaches, Felipe steps back. Roberto kisses his mother on the check and says good morning. Then he shakes Felipe’s hand.

—How was the drainage ditch?—his mother asks.

He has the good sense to not look immediately confused, but it takes him a moment to realize she is covering for his late appearance. It is another thing he hasn’t taken into account. His father was always the first man awake on his farm, the first one to start the work of the day.

—Rosa says you expect rain,—Felipe says. He looks out at the clouds, dubious.

Roberto considers whether he would rather be thought of as lazy or a fool. The answer doesn’t come immediately to him, as he tries also to recall if Felipe has used his mother’s name in his father’s presence in the past. He is still groggy, and all this thinking is making him annoyed.

—Todo esta bien,—he says to both of them.

They stand there making an odd triangle. To Roberto it seems that both his mother and Felipe sense something is different about him. He feels exposed, like a liar trying to hide something. Only he isn’t trying hiding anything. He doesn’t expect that the change in him is obvious, or that he has truly changed at all in any fundamental way. Perhaps he is wrong. His mother in particular seems to want to say something to him. She glances at Felipe like she hopes he will leave. Felipe glances at her the same way, and Roberto finds himself annoyed by how familiar he is being. Rosa shifts the towel to her other shoulder.

—Bueno, I will see you para la comida,—she says. She kisses him on the cheek. Before drawing away she whispers a message. —Joe was here.

The name hangs like a weight above his head ready to drop. There are many reasons for the man to call on him, but only one dominates his mind at the moment.
—Hasta luego, mamá,—he says with the strength of a gracias.

She steps back into the house, and the screen door closes. When she disappears into the kitchen, he thinks he can hear her talking to someone. He gestures Felipe off the porch and they step down into the yard.

—What can I do for you Felipe?

Not long ago he called Felipe tío. He wonders if he’ll notice the difference, but if he does, it is unclear.

—You don’t waste time, do you, hijo?—Felipe says.

—We won’t be able to sustain operations long without a working barn.

If he thought the barn was a bad idea, Roberto wishes he would have said something before now.

—Not talking about the barn,—he says. —I’m talking about the girl.

This time there is no concealing his surprise. He delivers the remark so casually that it stops Roberto’s feet. A number of thoughts flit across the surface of his mind like so many hummingbirds. He turns and squares off against Felipe.

—How do you know about her?

—Did you think you could hide her away and we wouldn’t know?

Roberto is angry now, but more than that he is concerned for his future with Ruth. Nothing else matters in this moment; nothing is more precious to him. What is best now, he asks himself. He could attack Felipe here and now or throw him out or offer him money for his silence. None of those are good ideas, but his father’s words are ringing like a dinner bell in the back of his mind. His problem is, he doesn’t know what Felipe intends by telling Roberto this.

—What are you going to do about it?
It is an honest question, but he instills it with as much threat as he can muster. Let Felipe think twice about his answer. Let him weigh the options for his reply. He does not waste much time in thinking. Felipe laughs, but it is a bitter, dark noise that makes Roberto uncomfortable.

—Do? What is there for me to do? I came up to the house to let you know the girl had left camp only find her answering the door in a house dress. Do. I intend to keep myself out of it.

Roberto looks past Felipe’s shoulder to the house. It is quiet and still and gives no clues as to what is happening or who may be moving about within. Felipe doesn’t seem to regard his sudden confusion except to take advantage of Roberto’s distraction and close the narrow gap between them. Standing so close, he drops his voice and puts a finger in Roberto’s face

—I am going to say only this: the men won’t like knowing she’s getting special treatment just because you think she’s pretty. Hiding her as a maid isn’t going to make any difference. If it’s love, marry the girl. If its something else, just don’t parade her around the betaboleros.

Roberto is about to say something. He doesn’t know what words will come out of his mouth first, because on the one hand he cares what this man thinks of him in the end. On the other, he is not sure what will give away his relationship to Ruth and what won’t. Last night he was ready to take her to the church immediately and profess his love before God and the whole region. Distress and wanting have made him incautious.

While he flounders for his words a truck pulls onto the property. It enters by the gravel driveway meant for carts and motor vehicles but drives out onto the grass to stop alongside the two men.

—Roberto Acevedo?—the driver says. He is wearing a jacket and a loosened tie at his neck, his hair pasted to his head not by a workman’s sweat but pomade and comb. He leans over
the passenger seat to shout at them over the sound of the engine through the open window. He glances between the two men, not sure which one he is talking to. Roberto approach the window.

— I am,—he says.

—Get in,—he says. The man settles back into his and gestures to the door handle.

Roberto looks back to Felipe for any knowledge he might have, or even advice. The man is still, and his expression gives Roberto nothing.

— What is this?

—I work for Joe Vanerp,—the man says. As if that should give him all the authority in the world.

As before, the very mention of his name feels like someone putting a lid over the world. He says nothing and stares at the man. The man rolls his eyes.

—Mister Vanerp wants to talk to you.— He annunciates each syllable, speaking insultingly slow.

Roberto can’t help himself. He looks back to Felipe again and regrets it immediately. He wants to know what to do and at the same time he does not want this man to tell him what that is. Felipe turns to watch the men at work on the barn. Roberto does not want to get into this truck, but he doesn’t see how he has much of a choice.

—You know what needs to be done here,—he says to Felipe. He turns around and nods then walks off toward the barn.

The passenger door creaks loudly when Roberto opens it. He steps up into the cab and before he has the door shut behind him, the man is driving.
Connie sits at the kitchen table with her hands in her lap. She moves her head all around, but slowly, trying not to appear anxious. The table before her is long and uncovered. It’s surface is smooth and polished so it shines. It seems made of a single piece of wood, and she imagines the immensity of the tree that would have to be cut to find this piece of furniture at its center. When she runs her hand over it, she feels a seam where the wood can be pulled apart to make the table smaller. This too is a little marvelous to her.

She notices the cup of coffee in front of her has stopped steaming and deems it safe to drink without burning herself. She picks it up with her hand over the rim, gripping it by the sides, and drinks from the empty space her palm leaves. Over her knuckles she watches Linda watching her with the vacant-eyed niño in her lap. Linda has a dopey and forgotten grin on her face. There is a small wooden bowl on the table with a pile of white granules in it. Linda pushes it across to her. Until then Connie had thought it was salt. Connie dabs the pad of her index finger in the bowl, the granules much softer than salt, and touches it to her tongue. She almost laughs. It has been longer than she knows since she has had sugar by itself. Not wanting to be greedy, she puts a level spoonful in her coffee and stirs.

—There’s cream,—Linda says.

Connie doesn’t even get to say she would like some. Linda nearly dumps the child from her lap with how quickly she bolts from the table. In her absence, he stands there and holds on to the table’s edge, watching the direction she went in. He has blunt little fingers, and Connie thinks he will be short and broad as a man, like his father. He may even be chubby. She wonders what is wrong with him that just sits and stares.
Linda comes back with a cold glass bottle half-filled with thick cream. Connie pours one thick dollop into her cup, and it makes a little splash. She stirs it slowly. A muddy cloud billows in her coffee until it has all turned the color of silt. She brings the cup to her lips again.

—Chica, please stop staring at me,—Connie says.

Then she takes a sip. How long its been since she has had her coffee this way.

—Sorry,—Linda says. She is still smiling.

Linda pulls the child back into her lap. He does not resist or even seem to register that he is being moved.

—Has he always been like this?—Connie asks.

—No, this is only since the fire.

Linda busies her hands with straightening the chiquito’s shirt collar, and Connie can’t tell if she’s made her sad or not by asking the question. She is sorry anyway and tries to remember the child’s name but can’t. The house looms quiet around them. There is little else going on, but Connie hears some distant muffled sounds. The men are still tearing down the barn, and though they are closer here in the house, the sound of sledges and pry bars and wood cracking or smacking other wood is much duller here than in the camp.

Out on the porch Doña Rosa talks with Felipe. About what she doesn’t know, but she is sure her name has come up. It was a surprise to both of them when she answered the door. Felipe jumped, and she nearly did as well. She is better practiced at keeping her composure in front of men. He asked her Que haces aqui, chica, and it came out sounding harsh and accusing. The viejo was scandalized, but before she could answer, Doña Rosa asked Who is at the door. She asked him to wait and shut the door in his face. Though he was never particularly cruel to her and treated her much like any of the other workers, Connie does not like this viejo sucio. All the
time she would catch him watching her out of the corner of his eye. It doesn’t matter so much that he restrains himself if she can still see in his staring what he wants from her.

Connie tries to listen for what he is saying about her, but their voices are low and indistinct. If Linda were not here scrutinizing her, a kind of animal eagerness in her eyes, Connie would press her ear to the door or wait by the window. It is not that Connie doesn’t want to be alone with Linda, but she does not know how she is supposed to act in Doña Rosa’s house. Can they be friends, or will they have to keep that secret here as well? She will feel more comfortable when la doña returns to give her something to do. She is after all here to work, to help out as Linda put it.

In this relatively quiet moment it is almost as if she can feel the emptiness of the other rooms. Yawning spaces waiting for people to fill them. The house seems bigger than any one family would need. It is a white space, the kind kept by white people, and it is perhaps the contradictions of it that make her uncomfortable. At once wide and open and yet closed off to the world, closing its occupants in and away. Somewhere in its secret recesses a man is slowly dying.

—How is your father?—Connie asks.

She doesn’t want to keep asking questions that will make Linda sad, but she doesn’t know what else to say. And it has been since before the fire that they have been able to talk. She asks this question but realizes it isn’t really Linda’s father she wants to ask about.

—I don’t know,—Linda says. —Mamá hasn’t let me up to see him yet. She hasn’t let any of us.

—And you want to see him?
—I don’t know. Yes, I think, but after Mamá has been up to change his bandages there is always a look on her face.

—How does her face look?

—It’s hard to describe, but you can just tell she doesn’t like to go up there.

Connie reaches out without thinking. The table is wide enough that she couldn’t reach Linda anyway, and in the effort her arm knocks over the bowl, making a clatter and spilling the sugar over the tabletop. Flustered, Connie gets up to grab a rag, only she doesn’t know where they are. She is moving her head this way and that to find one, but then Linda is standing and leaning over the table to catch Connie’s hand, like a little bird out of the air. Linda pulls Connie’s hand to her face and presses the back of it into her cheek. A tiny tear slips out from beneath Linda’s eyelid, but there is a smile on her face.

The sound of heavy boots on the wood porch and a large silhouetted figure moving past the kitchen window draws Connie and Linda’s attention at the same time. Even without being able to distinguish the words, Connie knows it’s Roberto’s voice she hears. All morning she has been waiting for him to appear. Even when she wasn’t thinking about him at all, some portion of her attention was assigned to listening for him. The brief instinct to bolt rises up in her, but she quells it. Connie wonders what Roberto will think when he comes in and sees her sitting there. If he is startled and she laughs at him, his mother will know something hangs between them. And what will happen if she pretends to know him only from the field? Linda has her head cocked to one side, eyes unfocused. She too is trying to hear what is being said.

But then the talk stops and the door closes and Doña Rosa comes into the kitchen. Roberto is not behind her and neither is Felipe.

—What is this?
Doña Rosa points at the upended sugar bowl and the spray of white on the table top.

—You were just going to leave this for me to clean up?—la doña asks Linda, though it isn’t really a question.

Connie starts to speak, but Linda slaps her hand.

—No, mamá,—Linda says, —I only just tipped it over.

Connie takes her hand back from the table and stands up. She has no real reason to stand other than she thinks it is important to be on one’s feet when speaking the truth. In case one needs to run.

—Please do not lie for me,—Connie says to Linda. Then to Doña Rosa —I knocked over the sugar.

Doña Rosa looks from on then the other of them. Connie does not know if she should be nervous. She has been kicked out of homes for less. Doña Rosa rolls her eyes and throws the towel on her shoulder at Linda.

—No me importa who knocked it over as long as someone cleans it up. This is how we get ants.

It is nearly midday, and still Connie has done no work. Not knowing why she is in the house and what she is meant to do there is starting to weigh her down. Linda gave her coffee and water to drink, even Doña Rosa, who insisted on being called only Rosa, gave her food to eat but little to no instructions. She shows Connie around the lower rooms of the house.

The kitchen of course, with its long table, is the coziest room. It catches the early day’s sun and is bright and warm all throughout the day, with or without the oven’s fire. Off that is the dinning room with three windows in one wall, but that goes largely unused. There isn’t even
furniture; all their meals are taken in the kitchen, and Connie feels this is right. That room lets them past the front door into a sitting room with a few upholstered chairs with colorful blankets on the backs. Each chair has a little table, and on one of the tables is a small stack of books under a lamp. She wonders who reads them.

There is a small room that Rosa calls the office that has a table with a lamp and some notebooks set before a wooden folding chair and not much else. Beyond that is the laundry room, and Connie inhales the scent of soap. For a minute she is hopeful that Rosa will say something about her duties here, but she doesn’t. Instead they move to the back door of the house, which Rosa opens, and they can see out onto fields. The sound of men tearing at the remnants of barns are much louder. Connie can hear them curse at one another followed by laughter, all punctuated by the drop of a hammer’s head. This is the same door Linda brought her through when she led her up to the house early that morning. She has the sense here of having completed a circle of some kind.

A strange feeling comes over Connie then that she is standing astride two worlds and that a choice of some kind lays before her. Here her new life, comfortable and undetermined; there her old life, hard but knowable. Yet before her mind marks a preference Rosa is leaning out the door and pointing to a clothesline strung between two posts. A yellow bed sheet and a few diminutive dresses with flower patterns on them bow out like sails in the late morning breeze.

Then Rosa shuts the door. It takes a moment for Connie’s eyes to re-adjust to the dimness, and once they do Rosa is already down the hall and turning to the stairs. It is frustrating to Connie that Rosa does not direct her but expects her to follow. She has to remind herself she is not trapped. She can leave at a moment’s notice and never look back. Rosa is at the base of the
stairs looking up. Connie puts her hand on the bannister, thinking they are going up but Rosa does not move.

—Up there is the girls’ rooms, a closet for linens. My husband is up there too,—she says.

She turns to face Connie. With her body she is blocking the stairs, like she wants to prevent Connie from going up.

—You will hear him sometimes,—Rosa says. —He calls out in the night, and I do not know why at night, not with words. Tiene mucho dolor, creo.

The immense sadness in this house was not something Connie considered when she accepted Linda’s invitation. In fact she had been on the verge of leaving the farm. Her few possessions were already packed. She would have slipped out before the men awoke, before they were expected up the hill. Before the man Rajulio could visit her shack again. That night he had stood outside the back wall where the man on the patrol would not see him. He didn’t say a word, but Connie heard him breathing hard, pleasuring himself. She made the decision to leave right then and there, but forced herself to wait until she could be sure he was gone away. The knock on her door came before the sun, and she realized she had fallen asleep with the boning knife in her hand. She waited for the knock again and kicked away the rock and pulled it open before the second tap. Thankfully her arm was back ready to strike so she could hide the knife easily when she saw it was Linda.

The invitation felt like a salvation. Linda said she would stay in the house. And while this is better by far, Connie is now beginning to wonder how long she can live under the same cloud as these people. Rosa in particular seems exhausted, though not in any physical way. It is like her spirit has been taken out of her, worn around town by a much larger person, and stuffed back in.

—Linda can show me later,—she says. —Should we prepare la comida?
Rosa blinks once, very slowly, and then takes a big breath.

—Yes, it is probably time for that. Linda will be happy to show you her room, I think.

Can you cook?

—Some.

They walk down the hall and toward the kitchen. Connie does not know whether to say something about herself and Linda or not. She wonders how much the mother knows. Would she be unhappy to know that they are friends? Rosa laughs suddenly, and it startles Connie

—Tranquilate, chica, I can tell you are friends already.

—Mamá wants you to wear a dress,—Linda says to Connie.

They are upstairs in the bedroom she has all to herself. It is larger than the shack where Connie sleeps, taking up a whole corner at the front of the house. Even though the ceiling slopes at a sharp angle on one side of the room it feels spacious. Out the window near the head of her bed, Connie can see where the gravel path by Roberto’s cabin meets the road.

—That is where I saw you for the first time,—Linda says,—with Roberto. Only, I didn’t know what I was seeing.

—So you waited out in the dark for something you did not know?—Connie says.

—I wanted to know.

They speak softly to not wake Oscarito who is dozing in Linda’s bed. After la comida, they brought him up for a nap, and he did not fight them like most children would resist sleep. They waited, but Roberto had not shown. So they ate without him, and insisted Connie eat at the table with them.

—A dress, your mamá says?
—Yes, if that’s okay.

—If it is a rule, then it is okay.

Linda makes a face as if pained, and Connie does not understand why.

—I only have the one dress,—Connie says. —It is not a work dress.

—I thought you might,—Linda says. —You can borrow any of mine you like.

She is suddenly excited and talking loudly. They both look to see if the child is still sleeping, and he is. Linda waves her over to the closet with enthusiasm and nearly bounces on her feet the entire way. It takes several steps for them to cross the room.

Connie is taller than Linda and a little wider in her waist and hips, but the dresses fit her well. They are plain and comfortable, feeling like something homemade with care. She settles on a yellow dress with tiny blue and purple flowers printed on it.

—You look better in it than I do,—Linda says.

—You have growing yet to do is all,—Connie says. —Have patience.

She can see the longing in Linda’s eyes, and does not think it is for her but for being a woman in body and mind. Not for the first time, she worries if Linda sees her life and wants it for herself. There is freedom in the life Connie leads, but there is much she would rather have that Linda has already.

—But you can clean, no?—Rosa is saying.

Connie realizes she has missed something said to her, but she does not ask what. She is staring into the pantry where a cot has been made up for her.

—Yes, of course,—she says to Rosa.

—Do you have a man?
Connie doesn’t answer and instead turns to face her. What does she mean by this question and why should Rosa even care? Connie can feel her face getting tight. Rosa’s gaze is fixed on her face, searching her expression. Connie wonders how Rosa is interpreting her silence.

—Calmate, chica,—Rosa says. —I am only asking.
—May I ask a question?
—Of course.
—Do I have the job?

The waiting, the walking around the house like some fair attraction, the interminable questioning all has Connie at the end of her patience. She is ready to walk out the door and down the dusty lane and all the way to the train station in town if after all this she is denied this job. In fact she will not even say good bye to Linda when she does, she is so fed up.

—This is not an interview. Can you sew?

Rosa takes a fold of Connie’s borrowed skirt between her fingers, as if she’s never held this cloth before. Connie is momentarily stunned and can only answer the question.

—Bueno, I will teach you to sew your own dresses. Linda’s fit you not so well.

Rosa tugs at the waist on both sides, and Connie blushes.

—This room is temporary,—Rosa says. —Linda has already asked to have you stay in her room, but we will put you on this floor I think. We will clear out the office or something.

Connie stands in the pantry doorway studying the one window covered in newspaper. The patchwork job of it is translucent, letting a soft yellow light in at the edges, but in the middle is an opaque shape. It isn’t quite a crooked cross, but looks to her like one in the process of being
dismantled. Reflexively she makes the sign of the cross over herself. Religion makes her nervous, like she is being watched, and maybe this is Rosa’s intention. Connie could take the paper down, but would that be sacrilegious? Anyway, if she did, any man out there could look in on her. In the borderlands, she remembers brujas who mix potent spells in with their prayers and icons. In her mind she recites a prayer to la Virgen de Guadalupe that one such tía assured her would crush cualquier cosa maldita. Connie does not want to get embroiled with nada de lo mágico.

She slides her heavy pack beneath the cot, but doesn’t take anything out. Not even the blanket or the thin bedroll to make the cot softer. She unfolds the bedding Rosa left with her and lays it out for the evening. I will try this for a night, she thinks.

There are voices coming from beyond the kitchen. Rosa is saying something that Connie cannot quite make out, but it is past la comida and Roberto still has not been home. She feels a rush of nerves at the thought of him seeing her in his home, or his parents’ home at least. His mother’s home. She will have to do better at hiding their relationship than she did with hers and Linda’s. What would Rosa think if it was also apparent she and her son knew each other well? Imagining it made Connie slightly ill with worry. She glances once more at the pack beneath the cot, shakes out the skirt of her borrowed dress and steps out to greet Roberto as if for the first time.

Instead, she stands in the middle of the kitchen as Rosa leads a pink-cheeked woman into the room. Everything about her seems light, from the color of her hair, her eyes, her skin, to the way she steps. As if her feet do not touch the ground, like a wary cat. Connie has never seen Ruth Vanerp by the light of day and is immediately disappointed by how normal she appears.
Under the gas lamps in the dance barn she is radiant, seeming to give off a light on her own. Here she gives the impression of someone pretty having been doused.

Behind her and Rosa, Linda looks like she is about to choke. It is a reminder for Connie to keep her own expressions in check. She tries to tell Linda with just her eyes to stay calm. It is unclear whether she gets the message. Connie does take small satisfaction in the fact that Ruth’s mouth falls open the moment they see one another, though she closes it almost immediately.

Rosa sees none of the changing expressions around her, and for her part the expression on her face remains flat, neither showing open frustration or actual welcome. But it’s clear to Connie this woman’s presence is a nuisance to Rosa. Ruth jumps a little at Rosa’s hand on the small of her back, guiding her forward like a shy child.

—And this is Concepción. She just started work in our home.

Connie lets herself smile. Her name, unshortened, will be difficult for Ruth to say. She puts out her hand, and Ruth takes it, seemingly unsure what to do. She offers her own hand, but her grip is weak. She can’t say exactly what she was expecting from the woman. A finer dress, maybe in purple, and some kind of useless hat. White women always seem to be wearing hats that do nothing. Her dress is no more elegant than what Linda has given her to wear and is a soft and pretty blue.

—Encantada,—Ruth says. And though her voice quavers she says it like someone who has practiced.

—Would you like anything?—Rosa asks. —Coffee or tea?

—Whatever you have is fine,—Ruth says.

She turns away from Connie to face Rosa behind her, and Connie thinks she looks relieved.
—We have both. And different kinds of tea. Or milk if you prefer that. Whatever you could want.

Rosa says this as coldly as it is possible to say anything, like the words themselves are a thin glazing of ice over the things they represent. Ruth’s attention flits between the three of them, as if she feels suddenly surrounded.

—Whatever you’re having will be wonderful,—she says.

There is little wonder in her voice.

—Sientáte, niña,—Rosa says.

It isn’t until Linda sits that Ruth understands and sits as well.

Then Connie remembers her role here. Embarrassment spreads throughout her body like a chill. This whole time she has been standing there, delighting in this woman’s nerves like one more member of the household. She looks about the room for where the cups are kept, having not seen where Linda pulled hers from before. There is the sudden feeling of being tested and the fear that if she fails she will be tossed out, rejected from this house. This is not something that would normally make her anxious, but she feels sweat tickle her forehead and armpits. Rosa places a hand on her arm.

—Sit down, chica. I will get it.

She pats Connie’s arm before moving her aside gently. She is not impatient, and there is a hint of warmth in her voice. Or Connie believes so, at least. Connie takes a seat beside Linda, and as soon as she is seated, Linda grips her hand under the table. She doesn’t know if Linda means this to be reassuring for herself or for Connie. They both sit across from Ruth, staring at her. Being either incredibly brave or completely reckless, it is impossible to believe she is here in
this kitchen staring back at them. Ruth seems momentarily to wilt under their scrutiny and studies the grain in the table top, while Rosa busies herself at the stove.

The three of them sit there not looking at one another. Eventually Linda releases Connie’s hand and picks at a loose splinter in the underside of the table. The awkward silence makes Connie wonder what these two women would say to one another if they could speak unfettered. She is nearly certain Ruth does not know that Linda has seen her and Roberto together. Linda, she is sure, is bursting with questions. Maybe that is why she grabbed at Connie, to help control her impulse to speak.

At the counter Rosa pours coffee beans into the funnel of a bur grinder and turns the hand crank. Crushed beans drop into a pan under the grinder with a pinging sound that gradually dull as the bottom of the pan fills. She begins to hum a song that Connie knows she’s never heard but is familiar in the way things from the generations of ancianos always are. The three younger women watch Rosa work as if hypnotized. A full cup of brown sugar soughs into the pan. She rubs two sticks of cinnamon together then drops them into the pan and sniffs her hands.

Connie catches a hint of spice in the still air of the kitchen, but only just. That little smell is enough to cast her thoughts back along a thousand pathways, some good, some not. Then it is gone, and she does not land anywhere in particular. So intent yet dreamy is her friend that Connie believes Linda is forming a memory of this moment as it happens. It makes her curious to think what her future self will remember now looking back, to think that an older Linda is right now remembering all of them. And where is she in that moment that is also this moment? She does not believe the two of them are still together, and yet she can see herself there, Linda turning at a quiet moment between them to ask, do you remember when…
Ruth is absorbed as if watching a demonstration before her women’s group: a curious cup of coffee for entertaining. Each step she seems to be filing away, her lips moving silently, repeating and memorizing. Rosa pours water into the pot and notices them watching. She does not stop, but a small smile appears. For a moment the humming seems louder. One song ends, she puts the pot on the stove, and another begins. The crushed beans steep with all the other things in the pot, and Rosa slowly stirs it all. There is a hypnotic calmness to the stillness of her body and the movement of her arm. No one speaks before the coffee is poured and put on the table.

Rosa drinks without waiting for anyone, without blowing on the coffee’s surface to cool it. As if on a signal, the others take up their cups. Ruth sips from hers like something she wants to enjoy but isn’t sure she will. The cup is too hot for Connie, and so she waits. Already she feels a flutter in her chest creeping into her limbs. La energia wants to be used, and with nothing to do it will find strange ways to come out.

With three fingers guarding her lips, Ruth coughs delicately, a signal Connie has come to know as preluding a white woman speaking.

—Mrs. Acevedo, I wanted to come here in order to say how sorry I am for what has befallen you and your family.

She indicates Linda and then Connie, realizing her mistake too late to take it back. Rosa lingers over her cup. Steam drifts lightly over her face, and she inhales then drinks.

—How is the coffee?—Rosa asks.

—It’s very good. Thank you,—Ruth says. —I haven’t had anything quite like it.

—Well, it is coffee. Nothing exotic.
—It is different though,—Linda says. Her tongue clicks against the roof of her mouth, and she gets up from the table.

—Would anyone else like cream?—she says.

Again, there is a pause from Rosa before she speaks. It is like she is experiencing each moment several seconds after everyone else.

—Use milk, m’ija. I am saving the cream.

There is a brief sting of disappointment in Connie’s gut and in her tongue. She had been hoping for more cream but now wonders what the vieja could be saving it for. The possibilities make her mouth water.

—I never make this for my husband,—Rosa says.

Her words go into the mouth of the cup, and it is not clear who they are directed at. If they are directed at anyone or any of them at all. Connie has not spoken yet and feels conspicuous in her silence, so she asks a question.

—Why not?

—Because he does not like it.

Rosa laughs, but it is weak and filled with sadness. Will all of Connie’s questions dredge up some hurt? She returns to her silence. Linda returns to the table with the bottle of milk. She pours some in her cup then in Connie’s. The white billows beneath the surface of black like smoke.

—He says it is because it is so close to something he remembers, but just different enough to make him hurt. Nostalgia sin satisfacción.

The addition of the milk cools the coffee, and Connie takes a drink. Sweetness explodes on her tongue stronger than she expects. One gulp feels sufficient.
—To make it right requires special ingredients. A kind of sugar I have never seen here. A clay pot that I lack,—she says.

—What sort of pot? Maybe it can be acquired from somewhere.

Rosa waves her hand, seeming annoyed, dismissing the white woman’s gesture.

—Anyway, what are you sorry for? Have you done something?

—No, that’s not what I meant.

—Then what do you mean.

Her eye lids flutter like she wants to sleep, or maybe just to dream, to shut her eyes and let this moment pass. In her blinking Connie is sure she sees the wetness of forming tears. All this passes over Ruth’s face, and yet her voice remains calm.

—That it’s a shame is all,—Ruth says.

—Shame? What shame is there? A mi no me da verguenza.

—I only meant—

—I know what you meant, silly girl. We all know what you mean here.

Connie sucks in a long breath quietly through her nostrils. The air fills her chest and feels foolishly like armor, like something actually solid and impenetrable between herself and whatever is about to erupt across the table. When Connie was young and still at home she would hold the air in her lungs for as long as she could while her mother and some man, a different one almost every time, fought in the other room that wasn’t really another room. She would hold it until she started feeling dizzy, a little sick in her stomach and with a shooting pain in her head. Then she would let it out slowly. By then the man would be gone or her mother would have found some way to quiet him.
She has seen white women react to being talked to this way. They tend to walk away with their obvious and assured sense of superiority and fire back through their husbands or brothers or fathers. And yet, Ruth remains in her seat, head bowed like a scolded child. Cheeks red and hands folded in her lap, she stares into the whorls in the wood stain of the table. Only she can say what she sees in those frozen patterns, but she fixes tight on whatever it is, likely in an effort to keep from crying.

—I am,—she starts to say but stops, closes her mouth and begins again. —I did not want to offend you and I am sorry if I have.

She pauses and looks to Rosa who is not speaking. Her face has not moved one fraction from the moment she began addressing Ruth. She is beyond the need to explain herself to this woman who came into her home. Still she hasn’t dismissed the woman either.

—I really came to offer any help that I could. That is all, I swear.

Ruth is so earnest that Connie finds herself feeling sorry for the woman. Then she shakes that feeling from her mind. Rosa too softens toward her. The shoulders that had risen in the tension of the moment settle back down to earth.

—Child,—Rosa says,—does it seem as though we need your help here?
The ride by truck out to the Vanerp farm is far bumpier, dustier, and a great magnitude louder than going by horse. The acrid smell of burning fuel and oil makes it hard for Roberto to breathe, and the haze and grit of dust from the road fills their compartment like a dirty fog, tickling his nostrils and the back of his throat. The driver seems unperturbed. He is concentrating on the road ahead, not speaking, not looking at Roberto at all.

Roberto considers asking the man what Joe wants with him to get some idea of what to prepare for. Is it just that he was spotted sneaking onto or away from the house at night? Or is it worse, does he know about him and Ruth? And if that is the case, how much does he know? He decides against asking, against talking at all. The man does not seem bothered by this.

Roberto’s face is pointed to the open window, but he doesn’t watch the scenery moving past. He is mentally preparing the arguments he will present to Joe. If he is going to have to make his case to the man for why he should be allowed to marry his daughter, Roberto wants to have the most ironclad reasoning possible. He goes back and forth in his head, playing Joe’s side one minute to anticipate his refusal on a specific point then coming up with his own defense in return. The imaginary argument becomes heated, and Roberto finds himself getting angry. He shifts in his seat, imagining Joe telling him no over and over. He sees Joe being disgusted, angry, laughing in his face. He imagines himself striking Joe for the insult, taking Ruth and fleeing with her. The real dread comes when he sees himself abandoning his family for the woman he loves. He realizes he would do it, though the thought of leaving them, of not providing for them pains him. He is halfway through an imaginary apology to his grief-stricken mother when the car comes to a stop.
—We’re here,—the man says.

He shifts in his seat, turning to Roberto expectantly. He makes no move to get out of the car himself. Roberto mumbles thanks to the man on his way out.

The house feels somehow larger in the daytime. The white façade is weathered, paint faded to dull gray that reminds him of the cranky old men in town sitting in chairs before store fronts eyeing him as he drives the cart by. He watches Ruth’s window. The curtains are closed. No inside movement stirs the lace. Then he is up the five steps to wide porch and knocks on the door.

The inner door is open to let whatever breeze there is move through the screen. He can see a little ways into the house down a wide corridor with a wooden staircase leading up. On the right side of the hall are doorways with no doors attached leading to rooms he has not seen. The opening on the left before the stairs he knows leads into a large dining room and the kitchen beyond. If no one answers, he thinks, he can walk around to the back to try the door there. That is where Ruth is most likely to be. If he can see her before having to confront her father, he might be able to get an idea of what they’re up against.

He knocks again and a young girl comes into view from one of the rooms on the right. She is clutching a stuffed bear, its fur matted or missing in patches. She stares at Roberto through the screen and he can’t decide if she is frightened or confused by his appearance. Though he’s never met her, he knows her. He lets himself down onto one knee to speak to her.

—You must be Petra.

Petra says nothing. She stares into his eyes and slowly her thumb goes into her mouth. In the dim light of the hall her eyes look gray, though he has been told they are the same blue as Ruth’s and all of her sisters’. She is blonde too, like Ruth, though Petra’s hair is much lighter.
Cornsilk compared to Ruth’s straw color. Otherwise they are the spitting image of one another.
What he knows from Ruth is that Petra is youngest of her siblings. Their mother died giving birth
to this one. Ruth was only eleven when it happened.

—That is a very nice bear you have,—Roberto says. —Does he have a name.

The girl drops her gaze to the top of the bear’s head and hugs it tighter, like she’s afraid
he’ll take it from her. She understands at least, Roberto thinks. When Ruth talks about Petra it is
always with a thread of worry in her voice.

—Do you know the Spanish word for bear?—he asks. —It’s “oso.” Can you say that?

He doesn’t know if she is trying to mimic the word, but she appears to chew her thumb
lightly like she might be mouthing the word.

—Where is your papá, Petra?

She rocks side to side and looks at her bear again. He is losing her attention.

—Is your sister home? Where is Ruth?

Then a voice calls out from off the porch. It is Joe, waving his hat in the air and calling
Roberto’s name.

—We’re out back by the barn,—Joe shouts when Roberto stands and waves.

Joe disappears on the other side of the house. When Roberto looks again, he only catches
sight of Petra’s heels as she darts into the dinning room doorway.

Roberto lets out a large breath before he rounds the corner of the house. He is nervous,
doesn’t know exactly what he will say, but determined to let Joe know his intentions to marry his
daughter. At this moment he doesn’t really care if the man gives his blessing or not. A surge of
adrenaline runs through him and when he comes around to see Joe with a man he doesn’t expect, making Roberto jump reflexively as if away from a snake in the path.

Joe comes over and shakes his hand, but he is still looking at the stranger, standing there in a blue uniform, a line of shiny buttons rising to white collar at his throat, a metal badge fixed to his breast. Brown grit dusted his black boots, which looked otherwise freshly polished. He had his tall domed hat under one arm, and sweat stood out on his forehead. It wasn’t yet noon and the heat and humidity were up to uncomfortable mischief.

This was a development Roberto hadn’t expected. He’d heard of men being lynched for their involvement with white women. Sometimes the most a man did was look at a woman with desire and an angry mob would swallow him up and leave his body torn and broken in a tree, a thing on display. That fear was always in the back of his mind, but he didn’t think this was that sort of place. Far enough north where fugitive black men ran and stayed to escape their masters not too long ago. The car should have been the tip off. They want him here without a means of escape. It is Roberto’s turn to sweat.

The officer’s expression is stern and imperious. His hands are clasped behind his back, and he purses his lips under a wide and bushy moustache. Joe has a hand on Roberto’s shoulder. He feels the pressure of it guiding him gently closer to the officer. Roberto stands firm where he is. Joe stops pushing and turns it into a clap on Roberto’s back.

—Sorry to send the car like some Bay City fat cat,—Joe says. —I only meant to be sensitive to the officer’s time.

Then he introduces them. The officer’s name is Sean O’Brien, and he nods when Joe says his name. Neither he nor Roberto move to shake the other’s hand. They are both wary of the
other. Roberto at least is ready to react to the smallest sudden movement. Only Joe seems relaxed here. If he registers the tension, he does not let it show.

—Whenever you’re ready, you can tell the officer about the arson,—Joe says.

That word seems to animate the officer. He puts a halting hand out to Joe.

—Let’s be sure it’s actually arson before we start calling it that,—the officer says.

His voice is rough, not unlike the sound the car’s tires made going over the rocks in the road.

—There’s more to the story than what I’ve been able to tell you, sure. Rob was there though, and he knows the details first hand.

A pressure that has been building in Roberto lets up just a little, and the sudden relief makes him momentarily confused about where he is and what he is doing. Then he comes back to himself and realizes they are talking about the barn, about his father being burned, and about finding who is responsible.

—We did not see anyone. Not me nor any of the betaboleros,—Roberto begins.

—What’s a betabolero?—the officer asks Joe.

—It’s what the migrants call themselves sometimes. It means farmhand.

Roberto doesn’t correct him. He continues with what he was saying.

—Only the day before, my father and I found some of our equipment dismantled.

—And you’re sure it wasn’t one of your boleros? Doing some repairs maybe?—the officer asks Roberto this time.

—I am sure.

—How is that?
—Because that could keep them from working. And if they cannot work, we cannot pay them.

—Well maybe they wanted a day off. How hard are you working your boys?

—Sean, that’s not how these men operate,—Joe jumps in. —They’re hard workers and proud to do it.

—They need to work,—Roberto says.

—Alright, alright. What else can you tell me? Did the broken equipment actually disrupt your work?

Roberto hesitates. Joe turns to him, awaiting his response.

—No, we were done with the plowing by then.

The officer does not bother to hide an exasperated sigh.

—We had a vandalism a couple of months ago,—Roberto says. —In our barn, some things were broken, stolen, our horses let loose.

Joe’s head cocks a little to the side, and Roberto knows this is the first time he’s hearing any of this. If Joe is upset to learn about this only now, he cannot blame Roberto for something his father did not tell.

The officer looks to Joe first, then Roberto. He lets his head hang and takes the four long steps to bridge the distance slowly. His legs swing a little stiffly out to the side as he walks. He drops his warm, meaty hand on Roberto’s shoulder. Roberto feels the weight of it land, and it makes a little slapping sound as it does. The officer smiles beneath his moustache, and his upper lip disappears and his teeth show.

—Now son, isn’t it just possible that this whole thing is an accident? Isn’t it maybe possible a horse kicked over a lantern that was carelessly left burning?
The officer looks over his shoulder at Joe and so does Roberto. Joe has his arms crossed and is tapping his foot in the dust. Roberto knows this silent conference between white people. The this-is-how-you-handle-their-kind smugness from the officer, the why-don’t-you-just-cooperate sternness from someone like Joe. Only, Roberto is surprised to see Joe staring at the officer, not him.

—Now look here, Sean. This man has a legitimate complaint. It’s true that not a soul got a look at the assailant, but their farm isn’t the only one to see some measure of sabotage. His father came to me the same day as a number of other men, beet farmers all, saw their equipment and lands vandalized.

The officer turns fully to Joe.

—It sounds like you’re cooking up a conspiracy.

Joe’s arms drop to his sides, and he is looking into the dirt. Roberto feels himself suddenly forgotten by the two men. It makes him want to clap in their ears or kick their legs out from beneath them, which he of course will not do. Part of him is still waiting for the moment the subject turns to him and Ruth.

—I know how it sounds, but I also know what these men are telling me. And they’re good, decent men.

For the first time in their conversation, the officer pulls a small square notepad from the pocket of his jacket and a little stub pencil.

—Fine. Give me these farmers’ names,—he says. Then he points the pencil at Roberto. —And I’ll be coming to your farm as well. God help you if you’re lying to me.

Roberto doesn’t know what to think of that. On the one hand, finding the man or men who did this to his father hadn’t crossed his mind. And on the other, police might make some of
the betaboleros nervous. It might give them the impression that his family thinks one of them is to blame.

After the officer takes down the names and shoves the notepad back in his pocket, he shakes both Joe’s and Roberto’s hand. Roberto feels his grip a little more forceful than he thinks necessary but doesn’t squeeze back. Then the officer is gone. He and Joe are standing there in sun. Distantly Roberto hears the sounds of a working farm: the chop of tools into stem and soil, the rough shouts of men, cows, horses, chickens all making their animal noises. And there is the smell of manure baking in the sun where it’s been turned with the soil, mixing in the earth. He breathes it in and holds it a moment.

—This is some kind of thing, huh?—Joe says.

He rubs at the sweat on the back of his neck and under his chin with a handkerchief.

—It is,—Roberto says.

He doesn’t know what to say to Joe, how to have a conversation with this man, if he doesn’t have some work related business to discuss.

—We’ve begun tearing down the barn,—Roberto says.

—Is that so?—Joe says. —You’re going to rebuild?

—Of course. You can’t have a farm without a barn.

—Yes, I suppose that’s true. Say, would you like a drink?

Joe is already walking toward the back porch of his house. He checks over his shoulder, back at Roberto and waves him up. Roberto has no choice but to follow him up the steps and into the house. He has only been inside once before when he accompanied his father for some business he doesn’t remember now. Everything about that day before crossing that threshold dissolved from his mind at the moment he first saw Ruth.
She wore a simple dress and apron, both of which were soiled and torn or worn in places. A streak of dirt arced down one of her cheeks like the tail of a falling star. There at the counter in the kitchen she set down a pair of buckets filled with vegetables so she could shake their hands. The state of her clothes or hands didn’t bother her in the least. When they touched that first time he felt the grit on her fingers and the softness of her palm all at the same time.

She smelled of animals and soil and good hard work. Yet she wasn’t wild. He could see it in the way she held herself there, confident and smiling. He had known wild women before, they liked to dress and talk like men, or what they thought was man-like. They liked to hawk and spit just so you could see it, and fight with you just to show you they would. Roberto always thought those women had a lot to prove, but Ruth did not.

The two of them made small talk as their fathers talked. Nothing of much importance was said, but it all felt charged with an electric subtext. When she spoke about the dance out on the country road headed toward Saginaw, it was in a way that suggested he knew all about it already. She was telling him exactly where to go, and Roberto knew he would see her again there.

Joe is at that same counter, no buckets or fresh produce. His clothes are a great deal cleaner than Ruth’s from that day. Two dark ovals of wetness, one under each arm, are the only thing to mar his clothing. He reaches out and passes a jar with a small amount of amber liquid. One jagged piece of ice sliding around. After Roberto takes his, Joe raises his jar in salute and takes a sip. Roberto does the same. The noxious gag of whiskey hits in him the back of the throat, and he clenches his face to keep his reaction mild. Joe laughs anyway, a good natured sporting laugh.

—The general store didn’t have tequila on hand,—Joe says.
It’s meant as a kind of apology, Roberto is sure, but it still rankles him. In any case the
type of liquor isn’t the issue. Roberto is not used to drinking. He has little use for the practice.
Out of spite he takes a larger drink, almost half the contents this time. He feels a souring all the
way into his gut while the fluttering rush of alcohol moves up and into his head.

—It’s a good whiskey if you ever acquire the taste,—Joe says.

He shows Roberto the bottle, and Roberto scrutinizes it but quickly forgets the name and
look of the label.

—Sugar is absolutely vital to the production of spirits of any kind, you know. It reacts
with yeast to make the very chemical that gives liquor its kick,—Joe says.

Roberto contemplates the contents of the jar. He is waiting for the feeling in his stomach
to settle before taking the rest of whiskey. Maybe once he’s finished, Joe will let him go. Then
he remembers that it was Joe’s car that brought him. He is at the man’s mercy unless he wants to
walk.

—Finish that,—Joe says,—and I have lemonade. That might be more to your liking.

Joe winks as he tips his head back and swallows his whiskey. Roberto does the same.

It takes a moment for Joe to crack more ice and fill their Mason jars, and the whole time,
both men are quiet. Joe tries the occasional whistle to some tune Roberto doesn’t know, but he
stops after what sounds like a missed note. When he comes back to the table, he has the whole
set up, jars full of ice, a pitcher of lemonade with honest to god lemon slices floating on the
surface. Joe fills both jars from the pitcher and sits down opposite Robert, who is poised on the
edge of his chair.
—If I’m being honest,—Joe says,—I like a good lemonade better than booze. The sweet with the tart. Whoever thought to mix lemons with sugar is a person whose hand I’d like to shake.

He drinks from his jar, and so does Roberto. The sour of the lemon makes him wince a second before the sugar sweetness hits. He’s always liked lemonade better than coffee, but coffee has a job to do. Lemonade to him is like liquid leisure.

—How do you like it?—Joe asks.

—It’s very good. Thank you,—Roberto says.

Joe drains his jar, and the ice clinks and falls against his upper lip.

—Don’t thank me,—he says,—my daughter, Ruth, made it.

This is it, Roberto thinks. He is halfway to bringing the jar to his lips but puts it back down on the table. He sets one hand carefully on top of the other. Joe refills his own jar and takes a much smaller sip.

—You know my daughter, Ruth. Don’t you?

Roberto stares back at Joe. He doesn’t know how to answer the question or if he even should, though it has an easy answer.

—She makes it this time of year from lemons off our own tree. I planted that tree the day we bought the land here. Ruth’s mother picked the spot. All before there was even this house.

Roberto tries to discern how far Joe is from dropping his trap. It certainly feels like he is being drawn in to something, but he doesn’t know why Joe doesn’t just spring it on him already.

—Where is she now? Your daughter, I mean.

—You know, I’m not exactly sure. She had some business she wanted me to come along for, but I was already waiting on you. I didn’t hear where she was going.
Maybe Joe wants Roberto to be the one to admit it. He decides to wait until he absolutely has to tell and takes another drink from his lemonade to cover whatever might be happening on his face.

—That girl is something though, and I am the most proud of her. She’s tough as nails but sweet as can be. She’s two things at once, kind of like…

He raises his jar and gives it a little shake, rattling the ice in the lemonade.

—I didn’t bring you here to talk about my daughter though, and the officer being here was mostly a matter of convenience. A two birds, one stone type situation. There’s something else on my mind I’d like to discuss with you.

Roberto is only surprised for a moment before the shadow of worry creeps over the nook in the kitchen where they sit. If Joe doesn’t want to talk about his daughter, the only thing left for the two men to discuss is beets. Roberto sits back in his seat and takes a long pull from the jar. The tartness makes his lips pucker, and he sets the jar on the table half-empty.

—Tell me,—Roberto says.

—I’d like to buy your farm from you,—Joe says.

Roberto drums his fingers on the table. For a moment he can’t believe what he’s just heard, but then it becomes all too clear. Of course the other farmers never wanted his family here in the first place. It only makes sense that they would try to take away their power at the earliest possible convenience. Roberto stands up from the table.

—I think it’s time I get back to my farm. We’ve got a lot of work to do, tearing down the old barn. So we can rebuild.

Joe also stands.

—Rebuilding a barn. That’s got to set you back some.
In truth, Roberto was worried. He wasn’t yet perfectly sure how much the barn repair would cost, but it would certain to cost a lot.

— I think we’ll be okay.

— Sure, but wouldn’t it be nice if the whole operation didn’t fall on your shoulders?

— You are asking me to sell my father’s dream. While he is dying in the house his hard work paid for.

— I can offer you good money per acre, and you wouldn’t even have to leave. You could manage the farm, just under my leadership.

Roberto truly cannot see what his father sees in this man and grateful he is not here to receive his offer. Though he wonders if this conversation would even be happening if his father weren’t confined to his bed.

— My father calls the land that we farm and the house where we live La buenaventura. Do you know what that means?

— Look, son, I understand wanting to do right by your father. I admire that in you, same as I admire him. The thing you have to ask yourself is whether or not you can.

— What kind of a question is that?

— A tough one I’m sure, but one I have to ask. Things aren’t so smooth as they seem and as they stand I can’t let one operation falter. We’re in a kind of war here.

— With who?

— Sugar men.

Roberto almost laughs for how ridiculous it sounds.

— Operatives hired by the cane sugar concerns in Cuba to sabotage our efforts here to build an American sugar industry, — Joe says.
Roberto wonders if the emphasis is meant only to distinguish Joe from the cubanos, though he doubts the farms there are owned by their cubano farmers.

—Forgive me, but this sounds a little…

The only words that come to his mind are Spanish ones, which he keeps to himself.

—Dismiss it if you like, but I’m pretty positive those are the men responsible for the fire. This makes Roberto pause.

—What do you know?

—Only that something similar has happened in other parts of the state. Other sugar beet operations sabotaged.

—Are you telling me that you could have prevented what happened?

—I didn’t know it was going to happen. I only found out about this wide-spread coordinated action when I got in touch with my contacts. After the fact.

Despite the heat in the little nook where they are standing, Roberto feels a chill. The idea that there are men out there wanting to tear down what his family has built is at once infuriating and exhausting. He feels an extreme need to lie down, imagines how nice it would be to fall into bed beside Ruth, the sun coming through the window in her hair. But that is a daydream only. They have never had the luxury of a bed together, and if he gives the farm over to Joe Vanerp he’ll have taken that chance away from him too. No way the man would assent to let his daughter marry a mere manager to one of his farms.

—You think getting rid of us is going to calm things down,—Roberto says.

—I didn’t say that,—Joe says. —But now more than ever I need to know that all the farms sending sugar beet to my factory are working at peak efficiency.

—I won’t sell to you, Joe. Besides, it’s not my farm to sell. Not yet.
Joe stares at Roberto for a long moment, hands on his hips. His head bobs in a nod that slowly increases. Then like a string has been cut, his chin drops to his chest, and he lets a breath out through his nostrils.

—Of course,—he says. —This was the wrong time to bring it up, and I apologize. I consider Ernie a friend and hope for his recovery.

Joe takes Roberto out to the front porch. Down below the driver who brought him here is waiting by the truck. He sits on the fender smoking a cigarette, his sleeves pushed up over his forearms. Joe extends his hand and, when Roberto takes it, holds him firmly there.

—It may surprise you to know, I have some knowledge of what you’re going through. I was about your age when my daddy died and I didn’t exactly do what he expected with what he left me. I did not grow up on this farm, did you know that? Much like your father, I bought the land, moved in, and made something of it. I saw what was happening after the logging industry dried up. I made a move, but more importantly I made a change that was more suited to my strengths. Just something to think about.

When he lets go, Roberto turns and heads down the steps without looking back. The driver tosses his cigarette in the dirt, and they both climb inside.

The drive back to his farm is as quiet as the drive away. The driver barely looks at Roberto, or anything else for that matter, but the road ahead. When he stops the car, it is on the road this time, not up to the house or into the yard. Roberto gets out and mumbles his thanks as a reflex before shutting the door. The driver offers a stiff nod and speeds away.

The combination of whiskey and the sugar in the lemonade on an empty stomach makes Roberto queasy. He has missed la comida, but his mamá is sure to have saved something for him.
Beyond the house the men still work diligently at their deconstruction. They make quick work of it too. The boards and debris from the first level are already out, leaving the upper level and roof resting on the ground. There’s a good chance they’ll be done tearing it apart by tomorrow. He’ll have to call on Felipe to go over the plans for the new barn. That can wait until later, he thinks.

From the porch he hears his mother’s voice before he even has his hand on the door. It sounds like she is in the kitchen. He only now remembers what Felipe said about Connie answering the door this morning. The thought of encountering her inside makes him hesitate. All the secrets he is holding onto weary him, and Connie intersects with almost all of them. He sees not choice but to keep them in for now. He opens the door and steps through.

His mother is talking to someone when he comes in. He can hear her voice from the other room. It is not a conversation, just her speaking with in the scolding tone he knows well. The tension he feels is only increased by the sound of it, though he can have done nothing for her to be angry about. The same kind of pressure hangs over a field before the first shock of a sudden rain. It makes him pick up his heels and walk softly. He comes through the dining room, and everything stops. The four women sitting there at the table all stare at him as if he’s interrupted something private. For all he knows, he has.

It is strange enough to see his mother and sister at the table with Connie, who he at least expected to be in the house, but then there is Ruth, of all people, his Ruth sitting beside his mother, her long pale fingers lightly touching the sides of a coffee mug. The air is slightly sticky and has the bright smell of warmed sugar. He cannot imagine what has transpired here, but his insides heave with the need to know what has been shared.

Ruth seems to be trying to tell him something with her eyes, but he cannot read it. Because of how they are seated, Roberto’s mother is behind her, and Connie and Linda are on
the other side. None of them can see Ruth’s face. Panic plucks at the veins in his neck and head so that he feels like his face is filled with cotton. Barely aware of what the other women in the room are doing, he knows he is staring at Ruth’s face too much but cannot stop himself. It is both startling and a relief with his mother speaks.

—You have met Joe’s daughter, Ruth, before, no?—Rosa says.

Without thinking, he begins to tell a lie, and Ruth breaks in.

—We have,—she says. —When you came to our farm with your father.

—Of course. It is very nice to see you again, Miss Vanerp,—he says.

Then, because he can’t think of anything else and is desperate to get away, to think, to assess all the implications of this new development, he says—excuse me,— and backs out of the kitchen, leaving them still staring and confused. Or so he thinks. He looks away as soon as he can.

He doesn’t know where he means to be until he is standing in front of his parents’ door. Though he does wonder if his mother sleeps here still or somewhere else in the house. All seems quiet on the upper level, but the longer he stands there the more he is able to pick out little sounds: a breeze moving through trees, the muffled tick of the betaboleros’ tools, the scrape of a chair in the kitchen below, the gentle snoring of a small child from Linda’s room, the subtle creek of the floorboards beneath his feet. Yet on the other side of the door there is only silence. Before he can argue against himself he opens the door.

There lies his father, a bit of bed sheet covering his lap and left leg, the bandages covering his wounds. They wrap around his right leg up to above his waist and his right arm. In the half light they look dingy and gray, and Roberto goes over to the window on the other side of the bed, draws back the curtains and opens the window. The breeze coming through is the
freshest he has felt, and in the light of the afternoon, he can see the yellowed parts of his father’s bandages.

Time to change them, he thinks and almost calls for his mother until his gaze falls on his father’s face. It seems dragged down, like his whole face is frowning. His thick black moustache has lost some of its color and his eyebrows dip, giving him the appearance of deep worry. If Roberto were to see this man in the street, he would have a hard time recognizing him as Ernesto Acevedo.

There is a chair by the bed on the other side, and he goes and sits in it. Taking his father’s uninjured hand in his, he rests his elbows on the bed and begins to pray. When he is finished, his father’s expression is unchanged. He did not expect it to be different, but he realizes he had been hoping for some kind of miracle.

—Para nosotros, no hay milagros. Entonces, quiero decirte de mi mujer.
Ernesto hears a man’s voice in the dark.
— I love her, papá.

It sounds so much like his son’s voice, but how can it be. His son is just a boy and too young to be in love with anyone. It’s possible he has heard this man’s voice before. Or what he is hearing now is from a dream half-remembered.

— Expectation is a tricky thing in cases like these, — a different man’s voice. It is distinct from the one that may be his son’s. The words come out long and flat, like the air has been let out of every vowel. A white voice hovering in the void above him.

— In this case, what is most likely is that he will die,— the white voice says. — Expect no miracles, that’s what I say. If he does wake before the end, he will be in tremendous pain.

Ernesto wonders who the white voice is talking about. The wondering seems to last for hours and then days but then also feels like memory. The sickening vulnerability of exposure wriggles in him like a worm on the palm at the realization that it is talking about him. He does not trust this examination from the white voice, the source of which he cannot see. It will say things about him that are not true—that he is dead when what he feels is very different from what he imagines that would be—that others will believe without asking him.

— When I am with her, I feel like I know who I am.— the first voice again.

It is much closer than the white voice, and now Ernesto is certain that it is his son. The voice soothes him. From his right side, something crawls in the darkness insect like. He feels it closing in, tiny legs, tiny mandibles pinching his arm and his leg.

— Will you give us your blessing when you wake?
The voice has Roberto’s same way of asking, without hope or fear for either outcome. Moments ago they heard fighting on the other side of the wall. A man and his son, both drunk, both tired, both angry at the same man but taking it out on each other. Roberto asked if the men would come in and hurt them too. —*No, mi’jo. Lay down your head and close your eyes and before you can count to twenty the fighting will have stopped and you will be asleep.* —*En ingles o español? —Did I say veinte or twenty?* That was a memory, he is sure. He tries to reach out for Roberto through the darkness, but cannot move. He longs to see through the darkness to his son, to know if Roberto is sleeping or still counting.

—*Estoy segura, or I would not say it.*

A woman’s voice vibrates the darkness. Only when his mind is roused to it does he notice the insects biting his right side. They scatter briefly but creep back in. He feels cold. Then sometime later he feels hot. He has forgotten about the water and the voices. Her voice reminds him of his wife’s when they were young, though it is not hers.

—*You can see it in the way he breathes.*—the young woman says. —*It will not be long now.*

He is moving. But, no, he is standing. Not still, there is an undulating, back and forth like a tide. But not a tide.

*La buenaaventura.*

Grass. He is standing in tall dry grass. It’s edges like tiny saw blades rasp against the backs of his hands, the exposed parts of his arms. He is swaying with grasses in the breeze, and sweat is cooling his arms, back, and chest. The day is cooling. It is almost nighttime.
Roberto. He tries to shout his son’s name, but it does not escape his chest. It is getting dark where he is, but in the wrong way, with the night creeping up from the horizon to swallow the sun. He turns toward the house and for a moment he does not know what house he’ll see.

And yet he sees only more soft hills of gently waving grass. The horizon beyond smolders like a bed of coals, and to look too deep into the glow makes him afraid. A man moves through the grass, descending the hill in Ernesto’s direction. He does not know who the man will be when he reaches the top of Ernesto’s hill. He cannot see the man’s face for the hat he wears, looking down so the brim hides him. The man moves like he is wading through water, spreading his hands to part the grasses as he approaches.

The man’s slow walk makes Ernesto nervous. He wants to flee the stranger. Feathers seem to light his back and arms, fall free, then disappear in the grasses. He tries to call out so the man will look up. He feels his chest fill with air that is not air, that does not vibrate in his throat to make noise. When the man begins to ascend the hill where Ernesto stands, he realizes the man is on fire, and so too do the fields go up in flames in his wake.

The man is his father, Ignacio Acevedo, dead thirty-three years and filled with fire. He grips Ernesto’s arm and a smile briefly crinkles his features. The man’s grip is like steel, just as Ernesto remembers it. Ernesto never saw his father age and weaken. Standing before him now, his father is arrested in time, no older or younger than the day he died. It startles him to realize that he and his father are now the same age.

When Ignacio lets go of Ernesto’s arm he feels the pressure for a long while after. Rather than dissipating, the warmth of it spreads throughout his arm, down his side and into his leg.

—Bienvenido, m’ijo.
—Te he extrañado, papá,—Ernesto says.

—Yo lo sé.

Ignacio looks around him at the grassy hills and smiles like a man surveying his own land. Behind him the burning path is slowly beginning to open like a fan made of flames.

—Do you like it?—Ignacio says.

Ernesto is not sure what his father means, and he shakes his head. Despite the cool breeze at his back, the heat radiating from his father and the burning grassland is noticeable and growing stronger. He feels trapped between opposing forces.

—You will like it better when you too are dead.

Until now he has thought little of death and dying, though he has known in the back of his mind that he is in the last half of his life now.

—I have a son,—Ernesto says. —Two sons, and daughters too. I am married, and we have been happy.

Ignacio smiles again, and the firelight dances where his eyes should be.

—I have seen them. They are beautiful. But take care; happiness soon flees from us.

Ignacio looks back, and the burning path has spread like a blanket consuming almost all that they can see. It burns without smoke or sound, but the heat is tremendous. Ernesto wants to step back from it or turn away. He somehow knows that if he does, his father will disappear.

—Qué estoy haciendo aquí, papá?—Ernesto asks.

—You are dying. But you will not die yet.

—Why?

The question makes him feel foolish, but he cannot think of anything else.

—I have a task for you.
The heat is unbearable now. He feels it move beneath his skin, inside him and inescapable.

—Cómo?—Ernesto asks. He finds it hard to say more, the pain makes him want to cry out, but he is afraid to do anything that might dispel the image of his father. As he thinks this, he sees in each flame a horse head tossing its mane. An infinite horses dance within the curtain of fire.

—Quiero que me vengas, m’ijo.

—How can I do this? I have not seen this man in many years. I cannot leave my family to search for him.

—You must not kill him with fire—the horse head says in Ignacio’s voice. —That will only make him stronger in the next life. That was his mistake: thinking I was dead when he burned me.

Ernesto tries not think of his father burning alive, or the stench of burning horse hair and meat. His own arm and leg radiate with the liquid pain of a deep burn.

—Please, papá, the pain is too much.

—El demonio está a la puerta,—Ignacio says.

—Papá, I do not know what you mean.

Distantly there comes a voice that causes Ernesto to turn his head. It is instinctual, and as soon as he looks away he feels the sting of regret. When he turns back, his father is gone and he is someplace else. Only the heat of the fire lingers.

Somewhere behind him, and a long way off, a boy calls for his father. In the dry grass he turns, and there is a room. His father is gone. He is in a wood-plank room, the boards worn and
gray and in some places twisted like old bone. The air is as still as a breath held in the lungs. The pressure of it pushes at the walls with nowhere to escape. It is humid and smells of human feces and rotted flesh.

A long time passes before he sees the large brass bed and the old man laid in it. He was a large man once, but the years of thick muscle of his neck and shoulders and chest have all but melted away. The flesh hangs loose and flabby from his arm as he reaches out for Ernesto. He hesitates only an instant before taking the man’s hand.

With astonishing strength he grips Ernesto and pulls him close, paper white flesh against his brown. The smell is only stronger, sweet and putrid all at once. His mouth fills with saliva and he wants to spit. He does not remember it being this bad.

—Son,—the old man says.

He is not Ernesto’s father. Ernesto himself is a father three times over before he has met this man, who was indeed good to him.

The old man whispers words, or he might be shouting and the level of a whisper is all his lungs and throat can manage. Ernesto watches the man’s weak chest heave under a wide and blood soaked bandage. The white rags fill with a red that is black at its center as man keeps speaking. Rojo de muerte, rojo del maldito.

He says many words, and they are instructions. Ernesto hears what the old man doesn’t say before he is finished: buenaventura. It is clear the man does not realize Ernesto is not his son.

Then there is screaming all around him and in him and emanating from him. His throat is thick and raw with it. And there is pain, so much pain, when he wakes in his bed.
Author’s Note:

The end of this chapter does not reflect the end of the novel. This thesis represents approximately three-quarters of the intended novel as it is currently planned.
Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION


Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 2012. Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing and Spanish.

Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Kalamazoo, MI, 2009. Associate of Arts in Liberal Arts

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor of Record, ENG 407A Business Writing, 2016–2018
Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV
• Instructed classrooms of up to 24 students over four semesters
• Reinforced core concepts of communication in business contexts over various mediums including written and electronic
• Taught numerous forms for writing including memo, letter, cover letter and resume, and reports
• Modeled real-world business writing scenarios through case projects and client reports

Instructor of Record, ENG 205 Introduction to Creative Writing Workshop, 2017
Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV
• Instructed a classroom of 15 students during the fall semester
• Chose specific readings in poetry and fiction to model different writing styles and techniques in both genres
• Developed writing prompts in poetry and prose to help students generate creative projects

Instructor of Record, ENG 102, 2016–2017
Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV
• Instructed two classrooms of 24 students each during the fall semester
• Generated original assignments within department guidelines to engage students’ writing abilities
• Created atmosphere of respect among students of diverse backgrounds and beliefs
• Introduced students to a variety of writing styles and genres with respect to specific rhetorical situations
• Graded and provided detailed feedback on all assignments throughout the course of the semester

Instructor of Record, ENG 101 Composition I, 2015
Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV
• Instructed two classrooms of 24 students each during the fall semester
• Guided students in their first-semester experience through assignment completion, and research and writing practices

Instructor of Record, ENGL 1100 Foundations of College Writing, 2014 – 2015
Graduate Teaching Assistant, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC
• Instructed a classroom of 24 students during the fall and spring semesters
• Attended weekly meetings to discuss classroom strategies and outcomes

WRITING CONSULTATION EXPERIENCE

Writing Consultant, 2018
UNLV Writing Center, University of Nevada Las Vegas, Las Vegas, NV
• Received training in facilitating learning environments for neuro-diverse writers, writers with disabilities, and multi-lingual writers
• Consulted on writing at every process stage in one-on-one face to face sessions with university students and staff
• Authored blog post on the culture of the writing center
• Lead a workshop on cover letter writing for students and staff of the university

First-Year Writing Studio Consultant, 2013 – 2014
Bate Writing Center, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC
• Tutored exclusively students of ENGL 1100 with careful attention to common assignments
• Guided students toward recognizing and correcting their own formatting mistakes
• Provided students with the tools to become stronger writers in their own right

Assistant Director/Writing Consultant, 2009 – 2013
WMU Writing Center, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI
• Tutored students of every academic level on various rhetorical styles of writing
• Helped non-native English speakers articulate their ideas in writing and achieve a greater command of English grammar and writing styles
• Assisted students during every level of the writing process on projects ranging from entrance essays to graduate programs, resumes, dissertations, academic papers and others
• Developed and presented topics to the International Writing Center Conference and East Central Writing Centers Association Conference addressing writers’ needs
• Promoted to Assistant Director after positive review and demonstrated dedication to the mission of the Writing Center

Studio Consultant, 2010
English Department, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI
• Visited a freshman English class for under-developed writers twice a week for one semester to teach basic writing concepts and assist in their understanding of assigned writing projects
• Advised students on rhetorical strategies for writing, moving from a basic to more complex understanding of composition.
• Encouraged students to share their own writing concerns and strategies in a group setting to promote a dialogue about writing
PUBLICATIONS

Short Fiction
“An Albatross is Just a Bird After All.” Blue River Review, 2017


“In the Water.” LitroNY Online, 2014.

“By The Time This Reaches You I’ll Have Fled.” Cheat River Review, 2014.


Book Review
“Talking in Circles, Moving Through Time,” a review of My Father Moves Through Time Like a Dirigible and Other Stories, by Gregg Cusick. NCLR Online, 2016

Professional Writing

PROFESSIONAL AND ACADEMIC PRESENTATIONS

Professional Conferences
“Creative Writing: Assessing and Assisting beyond the Creative Writing Class Workshop” With Dustin M. Hoffman, Amy Newday, and Rachel Neubauer. East Central Writing Center Association, Kalamazoo, MI, Feb 2011


Academic Conferences
“By The Time This Reaches You I’ll Have Fled.” Original Fiction. English Graduate Student Organization Conference, Greenville, NC, Apr 2014


“Lay of the Land: The Meaning of Absence in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road” English Studies Conference, Kalamazoo, MI, Nov 2010

AWARDS AND SCHOLARSHIPS

AWP Intro Journals Project, Fiction: “Mezuzah,” 2014
Judge: Daniel Chacón, Association of Writers and Writing Programs

Gwen Frostic Fiction Award, Undergraduate: “Olive,” 2011
WMU Department of English

President’s Grant for Study Abroad ($3,000), 2011
Haenicke Institute for Global Education/WMU Study Abroad

EDITORIAL AND PUBLISHING EXPERIENCE

Content Reader, 2015 – 2017
Witness Magazine, University of Nevada Las Vegas
• Read fiction, non-fiction, and poetry submitted to the magazine with consideration for style and quality of writing according to the issue’s theme and general tone
• Communicated with editors through Submittable submission manager
• Utilized Submittable functions to label works, leave notes for editors and other readers, and vote “yes” or “no” on individual submissions

Editorial Assistant, 2013
North Carolina Literary Review, East Carolina University
• Managed the journal Submittable account by screening submissions for their adherence to NCLR submission guidelines
• Sent rejection letters to authors of submissions that did not meet submission guidelines or the journal’s aesthetic
• Read creative submissions and made recommendations on whether to pass them on to the appropriate content editor
• Formatted articles, short stories and poems using InDesign software

Fiction Reader, 2010 – 2011
Third Coast Magazine, Western Michigan University
• Read fiction submitted to the magazine with consideration for style and quality of writing according to the magazine’s given aesthetic
• Made recommendations for approval or denial of submitted works
• Communicated with editors through submission manager with comments on each writers style and quality of writing

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant, 2014 – 2015
Stuart Wright Collection, Joyner Library, East Carolina University
• Aided John Steen in academic research concerning authors including Randall Jarrell, Peter Taylor, James Baldwin, A.R. Ammons, and others
• Utilized online search tools to pin-point archival artifacts of interest
• Composed posts for future blog aimed at informing students, faculty, and researchers about Stuart Wright Collection, to be attached to Joyner Library blog

LITERARY COMMUNITY SERVICE

Codex Workshops Volunteer, 2018
The Writer’s Block Book Shop, Las Vegas, NV
• Provided a weekly superhero writing workshop for a group of 8 through 12-year-olds

Volunteer, 2017 – 2018
The Believer Fest, Las Vegas, NV
• Assisted in tear down and set up of venues and stages for reading events

MEMBERSHIPS

President, Neon Lit Reading Series, University of Nevada Las Vegas
Vice President/Event Coordinator, English Graduate Student Organization (EGSO), East Carolina University
Event Coordinator, Sigma Tau Delta English Honors Society, Western Michigan University
Submission Manager/Panel Moderator, English Studies Conference, Western Michigan University

SPANISH STUDY ABROAD EXPERIENCE

University of Nevada Las Vegas, International Experience Requirement 2017
• Traveled solo over a period of six week in five major cities in Spain: Toledo, Granada, Sevilla, Madrid, and Burgos
• Emerged myself in local cultures by visiting museums, book stores, parks, and sites of historical significance
• Navigated the various cities and sites of interest by speaking Spanish

Universidad de Burgos, Burgos, Castilla y León, Spain, 2011
• Lived four months with a Spanish host family in order to experience full immersion in Spanish language and culture
• Studied Spanish language, history and art at the Universidad de Burgos
• Tutored Spanish university students in English
• Attended university-sponsored excursions to various sites of historical and cultural significance to Spanish life
• Travelled extensively through northern Spain