



Clawed Girls

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BECAUSE THROUGH THE BEDROOM WINDOW I saw the sky had cleared, and because all along the cusp of weathered branches were the small green reaches of a premature spring, and because I was full of sorrow and sick of longing, I woke thinking of Magdalena.

The apartment is quiet. The apartment is Dan's. He's the twenty-second man I've fucked since I was violently raped seven months ago. Dan is a partier, and he keeps the place haggard: empty bottles, cigarette stains riddling the sofa. He keeps his heroin in a hollowed-out textbook beneath the bed. Last night, while I practiced drawing form, charcoal stains like bruises crawling up my wrists, Dan wrapped a bright blue band around his bicep, turned away from me while he injected. He's never once offered me the needle. And while I sketched the curve of Dan's back, the taut side-view of his jaw as he clenched his teeth, as the drugs entered, my phone rang. I didn't answer. Then, the small jingling notification—voicemail.

"Magda's dead," a gruff boy from long ago grumbled through a crackling line. "I remembered you were friends. So I thought—well—you'd want to know."

Now, the usual group of crows shuffles across the rain-slicked telephone wires that swoop and dip downhill, the thick black chords fencing my horizon. Out there, the mountains of West Virginia unfurl to the east: brown and pock-marked with small farms, shanty houses long abandoned just off the highway.

The brown ribbon of the Monongahela curls through the trees, and on the riverside a blush of wildflowers is exposed in the thaw. The earth, a catalog of wombs and graves.

The bedroom floor is adrift in paper. Collections of myths and legends strewn about, fragments of memory scrawled across pages and smeared by my own impatient hand. In here, I'm tracking something otherwise unseen, frozen in the unending reels of recollection, receding into long gone moments I can relive without consequence. I envy the sterility of memory, the orderly fulfillment of expectation. I'm frantic, trying to save everything I remember, trying to make it concrete, bring it back into the world.

Dan left early, while I was sleeping, to work a double shift at the gas station down the street. He's been generous, letting me stay these two weeks, the longest I've remained in one space since my own dorm-room was left bloodied, bed-frame cracked, my rapist's semen lingering humid in the air. So I flit alone between my shadowed work and the window, just as a moth is drawn to the light it cannot comprehend. My head is full of grey powdered wings, battering furiously against one another, pumping the stagnant air, searching for an escape.

I was told there is only one way this world was born. God's fingers swirled the dirt and drew man from its rhizomes, himself the muse. A masculine birth. A cosmic membrane of refracted light. A rain that lit the earth in shades of jade. But I know just beneath the surface of our world hard scales of rock converge and overtake each other, the earth quaking, its hot molten center roiled and ready to erupt.

"That's how the world will end," Magdalena once told me. She'd said we're the people of the *Nabui-Ollin*, the Earthquake Sun, the fifth sun over the fifth cycle of this world. This world will be plunged into ultimate destruction, all the fault-zones cracking open and snarling their wide toothy mouths, the world swallowed into the depths of fiery chasms.

The body lay burst-open and steaming on the other side of the chain-link fence. Twenty of us pressed together: our sweatpants knotted tight, the hoods of our sweaters pulled snugly around our faces. It was early December and the fence was laced in hoarfrost. The season's first shroud of snow collected thinly on the soccer field's shorn grass.

Mr. Markson was leading our morning's stretches, the class grumbling against the cold, when the train's whistle engulfed his instruction. The unwavering shrill rang out over the schoolyard and was not unfamiliar. The eight a.m. freight was always punctual. But this morning, the conductor locked the brakes, and a flurry of sparks surged across the rails as the train hit something. The tracks wailed and the freight cars, full of Virginia clay, growled against each other.

As a child, I played hopscotch along the steel and wooden ties of these Manassas rails, paused only to feel the rumbling, sensing the train's fast approach before I heard its whistle, its heavy, coal-driven birdsong ringing through the trees.

Years ago, a classmate had thrown herself before a train, arms opened in welcome, scattered limb by limb across the same tracks. This day—a Monday, I was newly sixteen and it was early December, the sky low and glowing like angels' sleeves atop the bare tree line—the train had hit a white-tailed deer. When we saw the body, it was that girl we thought of. The doe's blood pooled. Her neck, twisted. Her mouth, agape. Her hind leg torn from socket and splayed backwards like a long bony tail. From her stomach streamed bright pink garlands of viscera. And fifty-feet away a haze hovered over the tracks, and down the line the train slowed, a metallic hum creeping through the frozen ground.

Last autumn, the conductor of the train that killed the girl visited our school. He stood on the auditorium stage, spotlighted and small, wringing his hands. He was meant to talk to us about rail safety, meant to remind us that, sometimes, it takes these heavy freights miles to stop. But the students in the auditorium sneered and gawked. They asked him, What did her body look like? Did she explode on impact? Ruptured like a piñata? Did she scream? Is it true, what they say, that a dead body shits itself? What were you thinking when the train finally stopped, and you had to climb out, and you had to walk back along the length of the track and find her, crumpled there, amongst the catgrass?

The crowd of students dispersed and Mr. Markson pushed through. "Go inside," he said to us. "We'll finish class inside." He was young. The bright copper flash in his dark brown hair the same as his five-year-old daughter's, a girl who waited for him at home, who loved him. Come summer, Mr. Markson would shoot himself on his father's grave. We would hold vigil, the wax of the small white candles beading like bullets and trailing hot onto our fingers.

“What a waste,” he said, and he shook his head.

Magdalena pressed her small body against mine, pressed her way back to me. Five-feet tall, the top of her head reached my chin. I rested my head on hers, smelled the bite of cheap detergent on her sweater. Alanza stood behind us, her hulking body blocking the wind. We were the last to leave the doe behind. The place where everyone had gathered already a moon of muddied glass, the compressed snow frozen over into a thin layer of ice. Mr. Markson jogged beside the fence, waving to the small silhouette of the conductor emerging in the distance, calling to let him know the track was clear.

“People used to cut open dead animals and sleep inside them to keep warm,” Magdalena declared as we walked toward the gym.

“Where do you get this shit?” Alanza said. “You’ve got to be fucking with me.” Her wiry hair, pulled tightly into a low pony tail, caught small flurries of snow.

“I’m serious, puta. Educate yourself. That shit is warm,” Magda said, tightening her hood. “I’d crawl inside that bitch in a heartbeat if I was stranded in the wild.”

Alanza curled her nose in disgust. She spit at Magda’s feet and then ran ahead, throwing open the heavy doors, the metal cracking against brick.

“She’d rather knock someone’s head in than learn something new,” Magda grumbled. She looked up at me gravely. Her large eyes shadowed by a bob of black hair. Her eyeliner thick, dark wings fanning across her lids and arching to a point at her temples. And beneath the folds of her sweater she hid her butterfly knife, one of her many secrets and a gift from her father, as well as the six-inch scar blazed across her collarbone.

“We gotta be the change we wanna to see in the world,” Magda said, gripping my shoulders, a fire brimming behind her cheeks. “That’s some Gandhi shit right there, you feel me?”

As we stepped over the threshold of the gymnasium doors the train moaned alive behind us. A tired sigh of old cold metal, bending and thawing. Mr. Markson crossed the soccer field toward us, disturbing a night-black crowd of crows that had gathered there, that were waiting for the air to still and the ground to settle before they moved to feast.

I remember how the Occoquan waned in winter, the catgrass along the shore all dead and folded beneath the snow. The riverbed, soft. Bottom-dwellers retreated into the folds of sediment for warmth. The green vitreous surface spread thin. Long twisted roots groped out of the exposed banks, clawing toward the tide, witnessing its diminishment.

Magdalena told me the Coatzacoalcos was nothing like this. It is wider, she said, dirtier. Curving through the lush valleys of Veracruz, its grey bowels oozing with garbage and petrochemicals. But its soil was rich with the marrow of long gone lives, the dust of worlds reborn sifted in the sand. And beneath that river, a heartbeat, a shifting of the earth.

The Occoquan: the seam of my world. I told her I dreamt it had frozen over into a huge unmovable block of ice. And for some reason, God had grown very angry, and the river cracked, splitting in half, opening up. And the whole of the world caved through, collapsing into the broken belly of the Occoquan.

Magdalena said she, too, dreamt of her river: long terrible dreams of her mother's silver bracelet slipping from her wrist, sinking in the dark tide. In her dreams, the river is impossibly deep, and it hurts her lungs to swim, and the water grows thick and hot. And always, right before she wakes, she reaches the bottom, and palming the riverbed she finds that it is scaled, a great black back all leathered and breathing.

She told me her childhood waits for her there, barefooted, knee-deep in the shallow shore of the Coatzacoalcos, the place where the serpent hides.

I'd cut my hair to look like Magdalena's, sliced my long brown curls to the jawline. At four-hundred degrees my straightener blinked its red eye and I opened its hissing mouth. The ceramic burned my hair into a slick, stalk-straight mess of frayed ends. Downstairs, my mother watched a television program about the sanctity of maidenhood. Virginity, she'd told me, was the last salvation for the sinfulness of my female body, with all its missing parts, with all its dark spaces.

My jeans were tight like Magdalena's. My shirts were black and torn like Magdalena's. I wrapped gauze around my breasts to flatten them, pulled the soft mesh tight around my chest until I could hardly breathe—until my womanhood was ambiguous, hiding the body that made me unholy, that made me

prey. I thumbed black lipstick, like tar, across my mouth; when I smiled, it turned my teeth to coal. I kept the lipstick a secret from my mother, hid it in an old Arturo Fuente box beneath my bed. In the box, too, I hoarded the blades I stole from my mother's razors, since I was not allowed to have my own. And sometimes, at night, when I got tangled in the folds of my skin, and my limbs felt heavy, and my bones ungainly, I pulled out the razors and slashed at my flesh, releasing the pressure building there.

The television thrummed through my bedroom floor. Some bodiless voice wept, begged for Christ's forgiveness, and the electric congregation sang, *Amen! Amen!*

When the doorbell rang I found Magdalena on the front porch, wet from the rain and little bouts of hail. "Did you walk?" I asked, stunned. She lived across town, in the web of broken streets and grey-hunched roofs, where ambulances paused at the neighborhood's entrance and waited for a police escort before they entered.

"Bitch, I don't have a car. And I don't ask no one for favors," Magda said, waving away my concern and brushing past me, her wetness dampening the belly of my shirt. "I take care of myself, *hermana*."

The first time Magdalena came to my parents' house, she'd hovered a long time in the foyer: the vaulted ceiling rising far above her, the great picture window casting beams of sunlight across the wooden floor, the ornate rugs, the closed and curtained French-doors of my father's office. She'd moved slowly through the rooms, the *many* rooms. Her hand barely touched the bannister as she ascended the stairs, where she stopped at the landing and glared at the long hallway of bedrooms.

Magdalena took off her wet shoes and left them by the door, led the way back to my bedroom, pulling me by the hand. Once there, we closed the door, and she stripped to her underwear, laid her wet clothes across the floor. She said, "I've brought something for us," and she flipped a CD into my boom-box. I blushed at the Winnie-the-Pooh stickers plastered across its plastic face, but Magda didn't seem to notice. Then, the staccato of Mozart's Symphony No. 25 trilled through the room, overwhelmed the sound of proselytization rising like heat through the floor.

I played the violin, and loved playing Mozart most of all: his effervescent undulations, his frantic melodies. Magdalena always asked me to play for her,

though I never did. My violin rested in the corner behind her, locked in its black case, its casket, untouched for weeks. I worried if I played for her she'd find my rendition flat, my pacing lazy, my version a cheap mimicry of the original beauty.

I knew Mozart was just seventeen when he wrote this symphony and already halfway through his short life. I realized my own life might be halfway through and I'd have no way of knowing it—my body, already decaying.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked. I twirled a long string trailing from my shirt around the tip of my finger. The skin swelled purple.

"Not one. Many," Magda said. She dug through her backpack, laying out in rows all the things sodden and soaked: a wad of one dollar bills, a bandanna, two collections of Dickinson, pages of Plath she'd torn from a library book and pocketed, all rain-warped, all darkened. "Why?" she asked.

Because I hate and fear my own body. Because I'm afraid of death, of never being forgiven.

"Is this because Johnny Fuck-Face fingered you on the bus yesterday?" Magda said before I could answer. And I could feel the boy's hand wriggling down the front of my pants, his hot breath on my face: *Don't you want it?* I remembered how the early sky was all cloud cover, and it was dark, and the cold was unrelenting, so I leaned against him, his warmth pressing through my coat.

"How do you know about that?"

"Alanza told me. She said everyone is talking about it."

"So what if I did?" I said, and she said, "So you're a *whore* if you did."

I wanted to tell her that I'd been in control, that I told him to do it: that I took what I wanted, that I wanted it at all. The symphony turned over its next syncopation. A dump-truck barreled down the street. The woman on the television downstairs cried on, her ragged breaths shaking the floor. "Where is Alanza anyway?" I asked.

"Robbing a 7-Eleven," Magda said, easy as telling me she was walking home, or picking up groceries, or having dinner.

"Sounds fun," I said, putting on my attitude, doing my best imitation of Alanza's stiff shoulders, of Magda's tight jaw.

Magdalena lurched forward and backhanded me across the face. I touched my hot cheek in astonishment, my eyes welled.

"That shit ain't for you," she snapped. "And it ain't for me."

She stared at me, and I stared over her shoulder, across my unmade bed, and out the window, afraid to make eye contact. A crow skipped along a branch outside, shook the last of the snow from the fingers of an oak. The full white sway of winter had washed away, left the earth red and raw and soft. And on the hill's edge, just within the gloom of the tree line, something stirred: a slick dark nose flicked past a gnarled trunk before retreating into the gray haze of the woods that yawned out far behind the house.

Still, in the shadows of my periphery, Magdalena held her gaze. Her hand reached into focus, touched my face. "Little *gringa*," Magda said, her voice sweeter now, and kind. "Don't you get into the thick of it while I'm trying to get out." She kissed my cheek lightly, a rosette stain on the corner of my swelling lip. She turned my face toward her.

"You look out for yourself *here*," she pressed two fingers against my forehead. "And take care of yourself here," she slid her hand between my legs.

She laid me on the floor and hovered over me, her black hair dangling around her face. "Do you know how to masturbate?" she asked. I shook my head. "Let me show you," and she leaned down and kissed the white of my collarbone.

The CD skipped and *Salvation!* chanted hollow through the floor, and outside in the broken boughs of the oaks and the persistent rain, Magdalena's Gods watched, and waited.

One Tuesday, we ditched school after some girls flipped Magdalena's tray of food down the front of her shirt. Our school's two cafeterias grappled like tectonic plates, one overlaid against the other. The first floor cafeteria, dimly lit with beat-down tables from the seventies, was where the gangs congregated: the kids loyal to the *Sureños* on one side, the kids loyal to *MS-13* on another. The second floor cafeteria, with clean lunch lines and brightly painted murals, was for anyone who wasn't Hispanic.

Usually, Alanza and Magda and I did not eat. We sat in the stairwell, waited for the bell to ring for the next class. I didn't eat for the fashion of it, pretended the growling in my stomach was applause, a celebration of an empty and slimming stomach. Alanza and Magda did not eat because they couldn't afford to. Magda had been saving money for that Tuesday, the day the cafeterias served

pizza. She was the first in line to fill her plate. But she chose the wrong line in the wrong cafeteria, and when the girls tipped her tray Magda said nothing, turned on her heel and led us down the stairs, led us out the emergency exit doors at the back of the school, left the alarm screaming behind us.

It was a violet afternoon. As we walked, the thinned, naked canopy rose around us into a troubled sky. The bodies of the trees were black, the silver light not yet touching their trunks or their lowest boughs. And all along the grass a fog swelled and faded in the wind.

We'd made it as far as the brick factory, where the sidewalks were bright orange and red. The blue warehouse, too, was peppered with the shades of the absent sun. Across the street, the crater: the earth split open and mined.

The clay-dust clung to the bottom of our shoes, stuck to our clothes like pollen, a red film veiling us. Alanza shoved her hands in her pockets, hobbled stiffly down the sidewalk. The dry air had lulled us into a false sense of warmth—with the snow washed away and the rain at bay, we thought maybe the clouds would part and the sun's heat would once again descend. Though thinner now, the clouds still hung steadfast. Far ahead, Magda walked alone. From a distance, her narrow hips, her smallness, made her look like a boy. Her short hair shimmered and swung across the top of her neck, where spine met skull.

"Will she be all right?" I asked Alanza, taking two big steps to catch up with her wide gait.

"Oh sure," Alanza said. "She'll be fine. She's just hungry. We'll get her home first, and then I'll get you home."

"I don't need help getting home," I said. I knew this road. My childhood home waited three streets over, with another family and other lives moving through its halls, its meager rooms. We jumped the railroad, and as we cleared the tracks the crossing chimed behind us. The train howled and its smoky breath grew bolder above the trees.

"You do need help," Alanza said softer, slowing to match my steps but never taking her eyes off Magda, her dark form rushing ahead. "You may have known these roads once, but not anymore."

The further we walked, the more the sidewalk broke apart. The concrete fractured, its weather-worn slabs jutting up sharp. I thought I knew the neighborhood we walked through, thought I knew the green and blue shutters, the

smoke-tailed chimneys. But these houses had bars across their windows, had rusted-out cars raised on breezeblocks in their yards. On the blackened porches men smoked cigarettes and chattered, spit wads of phlegm across our path as we passed them. I lowered my head, Alanza stared forward.

I thought I'd played here as a child, rode my bike down these hills, plotted for Capture the Flag in these woods. But the trees were all gone. Half-built buildings abandoned and rotted stood in their place. The barred-up eyes of those musty dark homes glowered down at us. And in the distance, a clap of thunder. Alanza yelled ahead. A gust rattled the dry branches of the trees, and a brood of police sirens sang their usual song from somewhere back beyond the railroad tracks.

The heater clicks on and the apartment groans. I pace its small, square space. I've learned every inch of these few rooms, the way the light shadows the furniture, the dimples in the walls. I know every scent, how on warmer days the walls seem to sweat. I am in control of this space, fighting deterioration. And though Dan is an addict, he is patient. He lets me sleep with the lights on, wakes me when I cry out in the night against a force I won't reveal to him. All these flashbacks hammering me, hammering me, beating me into Dan's bed like the last.

"I can't tell you," I told him when he crouched beside me on the floor, when I held myself and rocked. "I just *can't*." And my rapist stood behind him, hand wrapped around the nape of Dan's neck.

"Good girl," a voice in my head says, too aggressive, too smoky, to be my mother's.

Still, the more I've learned this space, the safer I feel. Out the windows, past the short row of townhomes spread out below me, the trees of West Virginia still stand resolute. I returned here for the earth, to leave behind a world I could not fix. I thought in West Virginia I would be reborn.

The old woman in the apartment beneath me is frantic over her newly planted petunias. I press my forehead to the window and try to look directly down at the earth below. She's tying little grocery store bags over their velvet petals, their emerald leaves. A thunderstorm is brewing, we both know. A cold-front invading, an impending frost. Her shadow hobbles across the grass, and

every now and then I catch a glimpse of a knitted purple elbow or a wisp of white hair. She fusses and worries, frantic little *Ob, Ob's* rising up through the window.

And suddenly a rush of rain bellows fervently against the glass. Beneath me, the old woman's sliding door slams shut. The rainfall envelops the trees, the telephone wires trembling in the wind, the rooftops fading behind the grey. And there, stolen from the petunias and skipping across the muddied earth is one of the old woman's bags, the plastic pounded and lifted, trapped beneath the force of water and the force of wind. And then the old woman is out in the torrent, hurrying through the rain, her white hair soaked and translucent, her frail hands grasping the grey air as the wind exhales and steals the bag away, pitching it down the hill and out of sight. But the old woman presses on, following the bag until she, too, is swallowed by the wall of water.

On my sixteenth birthday, Magda and I crouched in the handicap stall of the girls' bathroom during class. I pulled a pair of my stolen razorblades from my backpack and we cleaned them with hand-sanitizer, listened for any approaching footsteps, and then carved each other's initials onto our hips. Magda helped me steady my hand, helped me drive the sharp silver edge deep. The blood budded along the crooked lines, trickled down to my pant line and soaked into the dark blue denim, blackening it. When we were finished, my right hip read M.V. Her left hip read M.F.

"Hey, if we're ever not friends, I can always say the M.F. stands for Mother-Fucker," Magda laughed, hiking her shirt higher and pulling her pants lower, dabbing at her hip with a wad of toilet paper.

"I hope we're always friends," I said, wincing as she dabbed at my hip with the same thin, white wad of toilet paper.

"Then we will be," she said. We sat down, stuck our legs straight out in front of us and leaned against the wall. One of the fluorescent lights flickered, shone bright green before sparking out and leaving half our stall in shadow.

"Tell me a story," I said, scooting closer to her so she could lay her head on my shoulder. She told me her favorite childhood story, the one her mother used to tell her before bed, the one about Coatlicue, the Goddess who gave birth to the moon and stars, who wore a necklace of severed hands, of hearts and skulls,

who wore a skirt of thrashing snakes, who was fierce and feared and loved.

What she remembered most, Magda told me, was her mother's work-worn palms brushing her face as she was tucked into bed. Her mother always whispered the fable because the moon and the stars were watching, because they were defensive of their mother.

We crammed into Alanza's small bedroom, threw our snow-powdered backpacks on the floor by the door and crawled onto her twin bed, our hands burning from the wind, our hair wet from the snow. Alanza's house had no heat, so we huddled beneath her quilt. Alanza sat in the middle, her thick hands gripping the tops of her knees. Her fingers, so wide and burly, seemed not to have knuckles. We were sharing our own scary stories, terrifying memories to embellish the four-thirty winter sunset darkening the sky outside. Magda thought it would be a release, a way to purge ourselves of our unseen demons. It was Alanza's turn. Her broad shoulders clenched, flexed. She pulled her knees to her chest and rested her head there.

Alanza told us how the dirt-dusted asphalt burned around them. She, robbed of her only doll, a limbless sack of pilled stuffing, plastic head lolling, its face rubbed off. The boy gripped it by the crown and raised it out of her reach. The other children swooped in and circled, cackling at the spectacle. He shook the doll each time she lunged, the small body bobbing like a buoy on the current of Mexico's humid breeze, like a hanged-man dropped and writhing.

But Alanza's nine brothers had taught her a thing or two about power—she balled a fist, *thumb out* she remembered, and jabbed a punch into the boy's gut, and she kept punching, her fist slamming over and over into the boy's stomach, even after her doll had fallen from his clutches.

Late that night the boy's father showed up at her home, breaking down the door and brandishing a gun. He held Alanza down and stripped her, but when he saw her six-year-old body, her protruding tummy, her small nipples just flat spots of darkened flesh, his manhood, thrust against her, wilted very fast. He said, "How lucky you are to be too young." Then he pressed the barrel of the gun against the side of her head to teach her a lesson in humility. Her mother screamed from the kitchen. The boy watched from the splintered doorway, pleased and hungry.

Her mother named her only daughter *Warrior*, because she didn't believe in fairytales. So that night, Alanza hugged no one, gave her doll a cold under-the-bed burial before she climbed beneath the covers.

She told us how Mexico's desert air was incomprehensibly still that night, the moon a golden disk dangling far out of reach. She stayed awake to watch it slink across the sky, its light unwelcome in her room, a harbinger of monsters. In the moonlight, her furniture sprang to life: dark limbs scaled the walls from behind the dresser, the corners of shelves sprouted teeth, the bedframe stretched its pointy claws.

To garner courage, she prayed to Chalchiuhtlicue, the goddess of water, of rivers and the sea. She of the Jade Skirt who had drowned the Fourth World, pummeled the earth with a fifty-two-year rain. But Alanza did not ask for flood, nor a baptismal tumult of rain. She wished for Chalchiuhtlicue to return and once again swallow the tempting moon, extinguish its garish yellow face so it could mock her no longer—so she could be left alone, enveloped in the soft dark, and fear the shadows no more.

When Alanza finished telling her story, she did not look at us when she asked us to leave. So we left her: we left her behind in her mold-ridden bedroom, her mother coughing and wheezing down the hall—left her with a perpetual cloud of cigarette smoke hovering in the air and catching the flashing lights of the police cruisers as they whined down the street outside: her fire-works show, her red-white-and-blue.

Magdalena paced the aisles of the used bookstore, the thick oak shelves nearly reaching the arched ceiling, where dark splotches of mildew crept along the tiles. The spines of the paperbacks were worn through and white, their pages trickled from their limp mouths when Magda opened them. Sometimes, she stuffed the pages back into the book and returned the book to its small plot on the shelf. Other times she folded the loose pages gently, slid them into her pockets, and moved on.

There was a smell of shit growing more pungent the deeper we walked into the store. The heating in the building was broken, the owner had told us when we entered. His yellowed fingertips trembled as he lit a cigarette and exhaled, smoke curling into the still air and lying thin across the books stacked around

him. Throughout the store he'd set up little space heaters. Their frayed wires sparked as we passed, the exposed pages of adjacent books singed black. The store was cramped and cluttered, the aisles trapping us—I wondered if we'd be able to get out if it all went up in flames.

"What're you looking for?" I asked Magdalena. The bookstore's one-eyed tabby wound through our feet, meowing for attention. When neither of us knelt to pet him, he scaled the shelf halfway up, grey face staring down at us with an unblinking eye.

"Anything," Magda said, slipping a copy of Nietzsche off the shelf and into her backpack, next to the two volumes of Virginia Woolf she'd stolen from an earlier aisle. She flipped through a collection of post-modern poems, sighed, then returned it to its place. "Look at all these men," Magda said, waving her hand. "I'm going to take on all of them. Just you watch me." She smirked, the dim yellow lights smoldering the iris of her dark brown eyes. "I'm going to know everything. I'm going to get out of here."

At the very back of the store we found collections of sheet music. Magda flipped through them excitedly, tossing me copies of Bach and Vivaldi and an old, torn-up collection of Josef Suk.

"And, Mozart." She smiled, holding the collection next to her face. The familiar portrait of Mozart peered out, a sly sideways glance eying Magdalena. "You can play Mozart, right?"

"Of course." I rolled my eyes, feigning boredom the way Magdalena did when her intellect was questioned.

"Are there any female composers?" Magda asked, flipping through the rows of sheet music and then looking at me expectantly.

"I don't know," I said.

"You *should* know," she said.

Above us the tabby cat disturbed a loosely packed shelf of books, a snowfall of pages cascaded onto us, disturbed the light and cast feathery shadows across our faces. Magdalena shook her head, swatted the music from my hands, and then stormed out of the store.

Outside, a cloud of bats crested and dove through the light spilling out of the store, the empty sidewalk and road gilded in streaks. A moonless evening, a dark walk home. A pair of crows warbled from the street, flitting from the sidewalk to the gutter, picking apart something lying there. Winter's breath was

harsh, scratched our dry skin and drew tears from our eyes. The owner locked up the shop behind us, lit another cigarette and flipped the dangling cardboard sign to Closed. In the window the tabby flicked his tail.

As she grew, Alanza kept a stolen Glock instead of dolls. Instead of growing old alongside her brothers, she left flowers on their graves.

The three of us knelt before her brothers' headstones, gripping sponges and scrubbing down the grey stone faces, red graffiti splattered across every one. *MS-13* was scrawled on one. *Pudrete en el infierno* on another. *Cock-suckers*, in English, arched across a third. The rest were illegible splotches and crude sketches of penises ejaculating on the engraved names. Here, the gangs like to mark their territory, their conquered, even after death. All nine tombstones were defaced. The paint ran, trickled down the stone and puddled on the ground.

"I'll kill them," Alanza said, scrubbing hard and rough. Magdalena tried to console her, said, "I have some poetry I could read to you. It's beautiful, it might help."

Alanza pushed her away, said, "Poetry won't clean these graves," and Magda said, "It'll calm you," and Alanza said, "Calm doesn't solve my problems." She stumbled to her feet, gripping a headstone to help her rise. She stomped to the edge of the graveyard. Magda waited a moment before following her.

I watched them from the graves, my fingers tingling and burning from the dollar cleaner Alanza had lifted from a bargain store. Alanza clenched her fists at her sides, bent over at the waist to rest her head on Magda's shoulder. Their faces were turned away from me. Their stillness was resonant, and their silence felt like another language, one I'd never be able to understand.

When they returned, Alanza muttered something about needing more cleaner. The stuff we were using wasn't working. When I stood, the knees of my jeans were stained red. Our hands were red, too, and raw, from the chemicals and the wind. We packed-up, walked through a misting rain to a convenience store four blocks away. Though the rain was light, our walking was slow and stiff in the cold, our hoods and coats soaked through.

In the parking lot, a lone *cholo* was working on his car, the trunk popped open and full of tools. He turned and whistled at our arrival, leaned against the

bumper of his car. “Already wet for me, eh *chiquitas*?” he chuckled, guttural and throaty like a frog. He reached out and pretended to grope our breasts.

Magdalena stopped first. She turned, sauntered toward him, threw back her hood and swayed her hips, pushed her jeans lower so the lace of her panties poked out, the red cloth flirting. My instinct was to follow, but as I moved to grab Magda, Alanza grabbed me. “Wait,” she said.

“Oh, you like this, *Papi*?” Magda half-moaned, and the *cholo*’s mustache curled over his bemused smile as he said, “I sure do.” Magda leaned into him, and then past him, reached into the open trunk of his car and grabbed the tire-iron lying there. Gripping it with both hands, she cracked the hard metal across his knees, and when he doubled over she slammed it over his back.

“Lookin’ ain’t for free, *hermano*,” she said. She took his wallet from his pocket and emptied it, left him simpering on the cold frozen asphalt.

We spent the money on better cleaner. We weren’t in the convenience store for long. But by the time we were leaving, our wounded *cholo* had gathered a wild, jeering cohort. Like a dark swarm of scavenging birds, they surrounded us, cawing in Spanish, in English, asking, “What neighborhood you reppin’?” asking, “You want some dick, girl?” Neither Alanza nor Magda moved as they circled. My knees buckled at the metallic flash of the knives in their hands. They did not touch us. They just looked at us as they circled closer, looked with hunger, looked with hate.

And then they scattered, retreated into the murk of twilight purpling around us, laughing at us over their shoulders as they disappeared. When they were gone, Alanza threw-up. Magdalena cried.

We walked quickly and silently back to the graveyard, flinching at passing cars, jumping at the crackling of the wind through the old telephone wires. Once we were inside the black fence of the graveyard, we felt relieved, comforted by the gentle calm of our little ochre hillside of the dead.

The lamps along the fenceposts flickered on, spilled pools of yellow light onto the earth. December hardened the ground, kept the clouds shallow and the stars lost behind them. The shadows of the trees deepened, their forms scaling over the hillside and reaching the graves, laying their dark ghosts at our feet. Thick black shadows like freshly dug holes stretched out behind each of the tombstones. I was sure, if we approached them, we could look down into all that blackness and see the center of the earth.

The apartment shifts as the rain slows; the clouds flex incandescent across the sky. Behind the thinning curtain of rain the rooftops once again take shape. I open the bedroom window and let the damp air in, let it disturb the pages spread across the floor, let it hang sticky across my skin.

I imagine it rained a slow rain like this when they buried Magdalena. Her life: worth ten dollars and the pack of gum the mugger stabbed her for. I picture the sides of her grave dipping inward, mud sliding as they lower the casket. Only ten other mourners hover there beside her. Alanza is absent and unreachable. Fifty-feet away the highway whirls by, the final prayer consumed by traffic and a symphony of car horns.

Where beauty comes from, now, I think, will come from the tenderness of the dead. The farewell final, and resolute—a beauty so deep, it can't fail.

Magda was so *strong*. I always thought she'd outlive all of us, just to spite the rivers and the overturning earth. She taught me to be a woman, to be borderless. She was so much more than what the world thought of her. And, in a smaller way—sitting here in my selfish retreat sadness—so am I.

On the floor by the window, a drawing of Itzpapalotl, the demon goddess who seduced men, tore them open and devoured them. She, the clawed butterfly, the obsidian butterfly. I drew her the way Magdalena described: with a bat's wings, with the face of a crow.

Magdalena once told me how Itzpapalotl learned to love through fear. On a cold winter's morning, she found her river burning, the water's surface wrinkled and ashen, a flock of scorched birds darting out of flame and into smoke. Itz-papalotl's fear started in her throat, and then sank to her belly, clung there like a parasite. She huffed, and she paced, a thicket of nettles and blackthorn and brambles all tearing her flesh and grabbing hold of her.

And then, from within the curling black smoke, a child appeared on the riverside—little crowed girl chasing the scent of rain.

I'm walking down a hallway three years long, and I come to the entrance of Magdalena's home. Inside, it is hot and dark. Slivers of sunlight snake around the edges of the plywood nailed over the broken windows. In the other room,

a chopping, a smell of chargrill, smell of meat, sting of onion. They live in the lower level of a tiny duplex. The dog upstairs bays as two people argue, their shouts muffled and sinking through the floor.

In the two bedrooms her twelve cousins are napping. All children, all tufts of black hair curling out of the mounds of ratty quilts. Magda's mattress is pressed in the far corner of the smaller bedroom, sheetless, a sleeping bag full of holes unzipped on the stained surface.

She pats the mattress for me to sit, and I sit. She wants to teach me how to wear makeup, since my own mother is reluctant to show me. As she collects her things I notice, taped on the wall above the bed, a photograph. Rows of bright stone raised from the ground like small temples, all painted in shades of neon green and pastel pink, blues blending into the clear skyline behind. Some are adorned with flowers, others with bells.

"What is that?" I whisper to her, and she smiles, and she pulls me closer, and she says, "That's my mother." She taps the pink grave closest to the foreground. Years ago, when they'd visited Guadalajara, gasoline in the sewers and ignited and the underbelly of the city exploded, demolishing five miles of city streets and homes. Magdalena was three, was standing just far enough away, had strayed only a moment from her mother's grasp.

"One day I'll go back there," she tells me. To visit the grave, to string a wreath of bells. Then, she'll take all that's left of her mother's possessions back to Veracruz—the wooden horse-hair brush, the pearl barrette, the silver bracelet—and wash them in the tide of the Coatzacoalcos.

The river was named after the God Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent lost within the current. He, the god of light, of mercy and wind, his fiery heart the Morning Star emblazoned in the sky. Quetzalcoatl created this fifth world, spilling his own blood to raise the dead and birth the world anew.

So Magda will return her mother to the veins of Quetzalcoatl. She will weave a basket of reeds, place her mother's things inside, and walk out into the murky water, her toes caught in the sludge. And when she can no longer feel bottom, she'll set it adrift.

Her hands are wrapped in mine and we linger a moment in that musty room. Her cousins' rhythmic breathing falls in and out of harmony with one another. Her hand is so frail, already like an old woman's, with knuckles poking out like knots in a tree.

I realized I loved her then—and returning here, now, to this moment of peace once more, I realize I love her still.

“Will you hold still now?” she asks, and I nod. She pulls out a lighter and a black stick of eyeliner. She lights the end on fire, lets the flame linger a moment before blowing it out. It will make the liner look darker, smokier, she assures me. Then, she draws a matching pair of hot black wings across my lids.