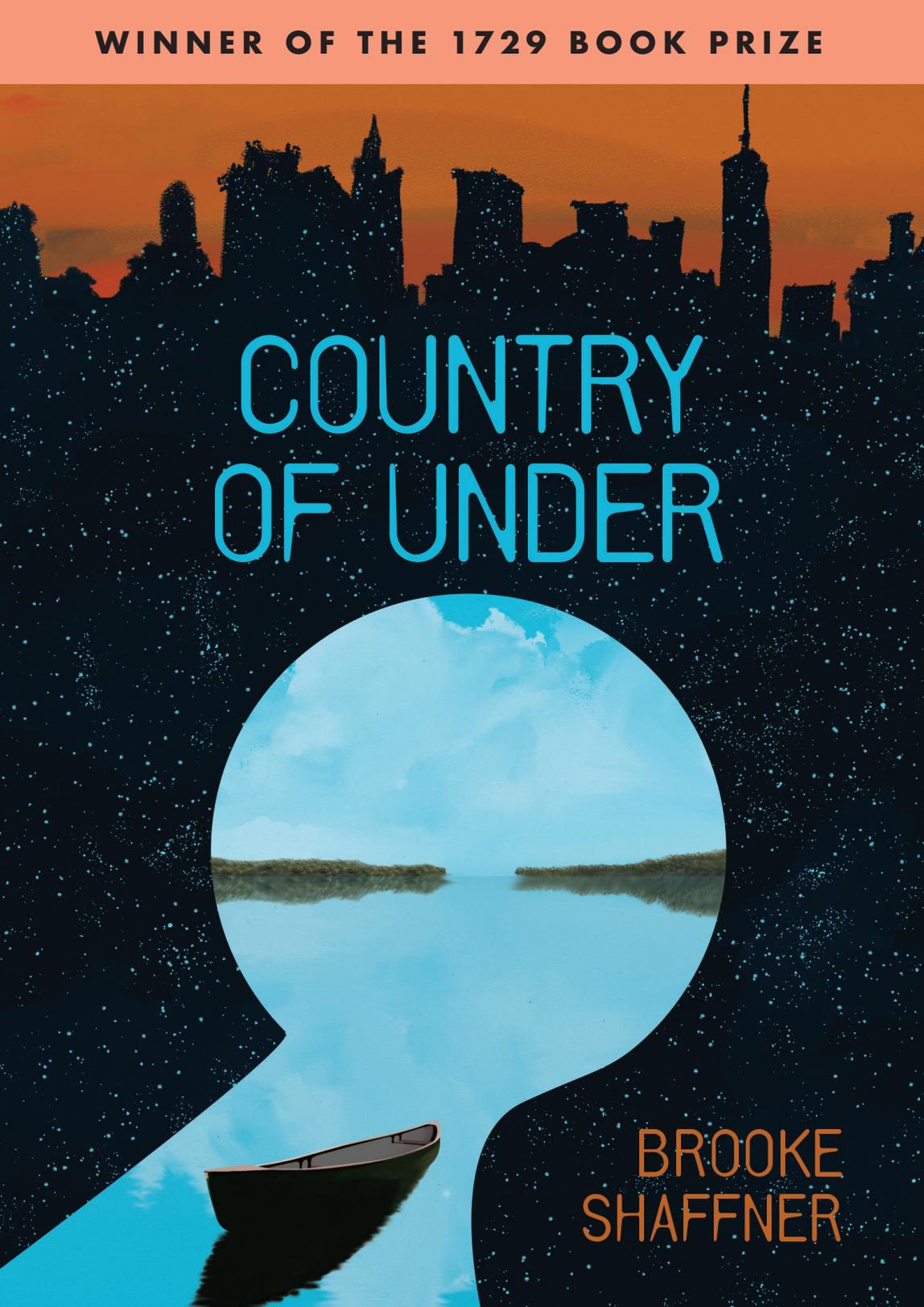


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COUNTRY OF UNDER



BROOKE
SHAFFNER

COUNTRY OF UNDER

A NOVEL

BROOKE SHAFFNER

Mason Jar Press | Baltimore, MD

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We're not trying to become something, we're trying to un-become. We're trying to undo ourselves.

—Reverend angel Kyodo williams

We believe each other into being.

—Jennifer Michael Hecht

COUNTRY
OF UNDER

CHAPTER 1

Marin taught Pilar to swim in the *resaca*. *Resaca* was the name Rio Grande Valley people gave the old riverbeds of the Rio Grande that were no longer part of the main channel. Rivers cut from their mother. Pilar had never known her mother. What she knew was the *resaca* buoying her, her father cradling her so that she stared up at the bowl of the sky, no clouds or houses to break its blue. All of it a womb in its still, enveloping edges. A world birthed by her father, its borders the ends of his arms.

La Llanura, Marin called it. The Flatlands. He'd bought a crumbling house on an acre of property outside of San Jacinto's city limits, the nearest gas station a mile away. Their neighbors were citrus groves and sugarcane fields, their visitors migrating birds. This was how Marin wanted to raise Pilar, how he wanted to live. The land's vast silence and ravaged beauty made sense to him—sun-dulled, windswept fields, patches of dirt overtaking the grass. Only the *resaca*—rippled by white birds lifting, blood-streaked by the setting sun—promised more. At night, it lapped the dock like a watery heart; the mournful wails of trains carried across its surface.

Marin had intended to take the swimming lesson slowly, to float Pilar on her back before turning her over and gliding her around on her belly, but with a sharp kick to his ribs, she wriggled free. Her head slipped under water for an instant and fear shot through him. But she popped up

like a cork, shook the water from her hair, smiled. He swam toward her and she paddled backwards. Again her head slipped under; again she popped up smiling.

Marin began to lose Pilar then, in the resaca. He had not been prepared for the sharpness of her kick. He opened his arms and waited for her to return. He lifted her onto the dock and they sat at its end, Pilar in his lap. He breathed heavily, as he did when he was anxious. He held Pilar too tightly.

What Pilar didn't learn from their rabbit-eared TV, she learned quickly in school. She came to understand that her father spoke Spanish, a language the tough kids reserved for swears. By first grade, she understood almost everything in English. By second grade, she understood too much. Her teacher talked about conjunctions, but those words didn't join anything—the children unlearning their parents' language as fast as they could. They moved her into the gifted class.

She understood that two worlds existed, La Llanura and the world outside. Once a week, she and her father drove a half-hour to the supermarket. A cool blast of air hit them as the doors slid open and they entered a fluorescent-lit labyrinth of colored boxes and cans. People were dark-skinned and dark-haired. Their round bellies and breasts pressed against their T-shirts. How easy they were with their bodies. They bumped elbows and carts, chatting with people they knew. Even when they passed strangers, there was some sign of community.

Marin and Pilar were a world unto themselves—silent, stark, pale. They glided through the air-conditioned aisles like ghosts. Adults didn't seem to see them; children stared at the strangeness of their pale skin and hair. Pilar's hair would darken to her father's muddy wheat color when she got older, but as a child, it was white-blond. Her face, like Marin's, was all Germanic angles—high cheekbones, strong jawline, straight nose. She was the tallest in her class. When she'd asked her father why they looked different, he'd said his father had come from Menonos. Mennonites. When

kids at school asked her what she was, she told them, without knowing what it meant, that she was a Menono. The word made them laugh.

Children in the grocery store stared at Pilar, and Pilar stared at their mothers. She loitered, watching them wheel their carts slowly through the aisles—hips swinging, singing to the Muzak, their voices floating out on clouds of vapor when they ducked their heads into the freezer. Their babies chatted happily to themselves in the cart seat, dimpled rolls of fat on their swinging legs. Pilar eavesdropped on the women’s strangely accented Spanish: Mixed with English, it skipped like rocks. They were full of talk and laughter. Marin and Pilar laughed at home, like it wasn’t something to do in public.

Marin had to circle back to retrieve Pilar. “Come on, mija,” he whispered. His voice was so soft that Pilar, entranced with a louder world, didn’t hear him. When he put his rough hand on the back of her neck, his palm was damp with worry.

The cashier spoke Spanish but couldn’t understand Marin’s Bolivian accent. Marin turned to Pilar. She began to translate but was distracted by the escalating tantrum of the boy behind them. The boy wriggled free of his mother and was soon writhing, red-faced, on the floor. “*I want it!*” he screamed. Pilar stared, open mouthed.

Still, Marin wouldn’t use the English he knew. He pulled Pilar to him, kissed the top of her head, and whispered into her hair. His words were lost, but Pilar understood that he was saying, *You’ll never scream like that. That language is not for us.*

Pilar knew that saying things aloud made them so. Two worlds existed, La Llanura and the world outside. The girls of Freddy Gonzales Elementary played house and the house had a mother, father, brothers and sisters. In the world of La Llanura, there was only a father. To ask about her mother would be to say aloud that something was missing, and then it would be.

La Llanura with its holes was home. Pilar tiptoed around the holes. She never brought anyone home. She kept the worlds separate.

That was the childhood Marin had known in Potosi, Bolivia. His father had left the Mennonite colony he was raised in for Marin's Bolivian mother and was dead to his Menono family. He'd learned Spanish and traded farming for mining. He'd reinvented himself for love. Marin's mother told him that his father had known only a few words in Spanish when they'd met. She said they hadn't needed words. To his sons, he was a mystery. He spent his days in a dark underworld that they did not speak about when he emerged. Marin and his brother Roberto would never have asked about their father's past. It was enough to survive the present. The mine's dust hung in his lungs until it killed him at 34.

A graveyard sprawled through the valley beneath Potosi's Cerro Rico Mountain. A sign over the graves read, *Silence for the men who lost their lungs*. Men died by 40 of the dust or the cave-ins or the backbreaking labor. They left a ghost town of wives and children who were then sent into the mines that killed their fathers.

Marin was 13, Roberto 11, when their father died and they took his place in the mines. They mourned underground, sadness a tunnel they felt their way through. There was catharsis in the work, an understanding. Marin led Roberto through the narrow passages; they threaded their way through death.

The light hurt their eyes when they left the mines. It pulled that shared dream—Marin and Roberto—apart. Their edges sharpened. Their mother did not ask about the mine, and they never spoke about it. She had dinner waiting for them. They prayed and ate and the ways of the world—the lightness of its touch—returned.

Marin worked the graveyard shift in a graveyard. When Pilar was still a baby, he had driven past the sprawling San Jose Cemetery and seen a sign on the gate: *Wanted: Night Watchman*. The road was lined with knotted

oaks in a climate only spindly palms and squat mesquite trees survived. Their boughs moved like the hands of God. Marin had wandered into the church at the edge of the cemetery with Pilar on his hip, shook his head when the priest asked if he had experience. The priest had looked at Pilar, who'd given him a toothless grin, and asked, "When can you start?"

Marin had worked the night shift his last three years in the mines. He was comfortable being at odds with the world's clock and more comfortable among the dead than the living. Though Holy Rosary Church paid him a pittance to guard the cemetery's 1,500 tombstones from vandals, thieves, and brujerías, the job allowed him to raise Pilar. When she was a baby, he strapped her to his chest in a sling and walked her to sleep among the dead, singing softly. She was a good sleeper and usually slept through his shift. When she got older, he would leave her and return before she woke. He gave up sleep until she started school, catching a few hours when she napped.

Marin was paid to guard the elaborate tombs of ex-mayors, doctors, and ranchers, but it was the unmarked graves he kneeled beside to mark with sugarcane. He returned to Potosí's graveyard, guarded the graves he'd left behind. The church didn't want visitors to see graves being dug, so they had Marin dig them at night. On hot summer nights, he took off his shirt and worked until sweat ran over his ribs. Because of his lungs, he stopped to catch his breath, but he was still strong, the muscles of his back and legs working in tandem, the arc of the shovel through the dark a dance that obliterated all other thoughts, even the thought of the motion's end—of the hole he was making and what it was for.

After those afternoons of trailing mothers through the supermarket, Pilar's father would cook a big meal of beans, rice, tortillas, and—one Sunday a month, when they splurged on meat—carne asada. Pilar couldn't eat fast enough. "Slow down!" Her father would laugh as she reached for another helping. How much pleasure he took in watching her eat.

When dinner was done, they would sit together in the old rocking chair on the porch, watching the sun go down.

“Háblame de los túneles.” Tell me about the tunnels, she would say as the sky darkened.

“Buscamos la vena,” her father would say.

“Vena?” Pilar had asked the first time he told her about the mines.

“We sought the vein,” her father had translated. He’d run her fingers over the veins in his wrist.

Pilar understood now that he meant the vein of silver threaded through the mine’s rock. Still, they always began this way. Still, she pictured the tunnels as pale blue.

Two brothers—Marin, 13, and Roberto, 11—enter a small, over-stripped mine, the kind left to child miners. They pass under a rickety wooden doorframe buttressing a stone arch. Inside, their carbon flame headlamps do little to cut the darkness. The arch gives way to jagged rock tunnels.

They feel their way through the shadows to the shrine to El Tio. He sits on a rock throne in a hollowed-out alcove, a clay devil with a mountain goat’s horns and ears, eyes made of metal ore, teeth made of broken glass, and a man’s body draped in pastel streamers. There are lit candles on his upturned palms and at his feet and offerings of coca leaves, cigarettes, and grain alcohol. In church, the brothers pray to Jesus and the Virgin, but El Tio is god of the mines. Marin and Roberto always kneel before him, light candles and lay candy at his feet. They ask him to pull silver from the vein, to protect them from cave-ins.

Marin remembered but omitted the blood of llamas sacrificed to feed El Tio. Every June, there was a fiesta at which the miners cut llamas’ throats and smeared the blood over the mouth of the mine, where it dried to rust. He did not tell Pilar that the silver ore veins were depleted, that they were lucky to find tin. He told her the silver was there.

“Roberto never wants to stop at El Tio. Not because he’s afraid, no. He hates El Tio. I make him kneel, leave candy. *Feed the Tio, or the Tio will feed on you*, I tell him.” Marin remembered but omitted their first day in the

mine when he'd opened his eyes mid-prayer to catch Roberto staring at El Tio's erect penis, his fist clenched around the candy. He'd passed his hand over his brother's eyelids like their mother had done when their father died. Roberto had knocked away his hand, kicked the candles down, marched up to El Tio and kicked him, cracking his clay balls. "Why'd you kill Papá?" he'd screamed and kicked El Tio again and again, tears trailing down his dusty cheeks. Marin had stamped out the fire spreading through the coca leaves and struggled to hold Roberto back. Their first day in the mine, when he kicked El Tio, was the only time Roberto cried for their father.

"The first time we went in the mines, Roberto marched up to El Tio and kicked him in the ribs—like you kicked me in the resaca. Locos—both of you!" Marin laughed, though it wasn't a joke: The Tio did not forget. In the telling of this story, he transmuted fear into wonder. He saw only the beauty of Pilar's head breaking the surface of the resaca like a seal's, of Roberto descending a three-story vertical shaft—a rock climber without a belay. In this story, he could save them both.

Pilar has Roberto's gray-blue, old soul eyes, the same intensity in her gaze and tight set of the jaw. She does not ask how he died. She has always known that Roberto died in the mines, that her father failed to save him, that his stories are pulled from that wound.

The story isn't about death, but about all the ways we can know and love someone, which are larger than death. Pilar closed her eyes and took the story into her veins. Like Roberto, she believed the silver was there. They move slowly through tunnels that snake and narrow, rise and dip, running their palms along the jagged walls, ducking under rotting wooden supports. They climb rickety ladders connecting the different levels. The passages tighten as they go deeper; the air thins with heat, dust, dynamite fumes, and toxic gas. Their eyes sting. They strip off their sweat-soaked shirts, hunch their shoulders then bow their heads then crawl on their hands and knees—a diagram of evolution in reverse.

They work as the Quecha Indians did, with picks, hammers, shovels, and brute strength. They chisel holes in the rock by hand, Roberto

gripping the stake while Marin hammers. Their boss has taught them to listen for the silver in the stake's ring, for explosions in the distance. He's shown them how to roll green dynamite sticks in paper, insert the sticks into the holes, light the fuse and run. Hit the detonator too hard and the walls explode. They have only minutes to evacuate after lighting the fuse.

"Carefully," their boss says. "Con cuidado, nunca a la fuerza." As if he can protect them. He lowers Marin and Roberto by rope down narrow, 12-foot shafts. He watches them fumble for finger and footholds, rocks sliding from under their feet. Marin remembered but omitted the boss's cough. He had five years at best. He peers down the hole with dusty eyes, eyes like their mother's, like every adult Marin knew—sad and passing sadness. Marin knew it was in his eyes when he made Roberto kneel before El Tio. He hoped Pilar could not see it.

Marin wanted to pass a different story to Pilar, a story like La Llanura—flat and treeless, the past burned clean, a plane on which to make themselves. The making is in the doing, the cyclic motions of the present—cooking, swimming, rocking—stretching into the horizon.

The story was not in the plot twists, but in the twists, the tightening, of the tunnels; the ritual of lighting candles before El Tio, making their way through shadowy passageways, listening for silver inside the stake's ring. They do everything carefully—*con cuidado, nunca a la fuerza*. There is only the danger of intimacy, of working 16 hours in darkness beside his brother, days of threading their way along an empty vein. Sometimes Roberto's headlamp goes out and Marin leads him by the hand; they move as one over the uneven path. Even in darkness, Marin knows the crook of Roberto's grimace, the chip in his left front tooth, his awkward grip on the stake. He could single out the meld of his sweat with the dust from a mass of 100 miners. There is no question of what to search for: They seek the vein.

Because she was a good girl, because her dresses were clean, the girls of Freddy Gonzales Elementary let Pilar sit in their circle. But she remained

on the periphery. When they played Duck, Duck, Goose, she was never picked to be Goose because she *was*—a gawky thing among so many sleek mallards. She did not want to be chosen. On the circle's border, she made sense. She listened to the girls talk of dance classes and roller-skating parties and stopped listening when they talked about their mothers. She unraveled cigarette filters believing they were woven by insects, pulled the fibers into wings.

One day as the girls compared the lunches their mothers had packed and rolled their eyes at their *dichos*, Vanessa Garcia, the most popular girl in the third grade, noticed how Pilar hugged her scraped knees to her chest and stared at the ground.

“What about your mother?” Vanessa asked.

Suddenly the circle's eyes were on Pilar, her face hot. “No tengo... I don't have a mother.” Hearing the rawness of her own voice, she woke to loneliness.

“What happened to her?” Vanessa asked.

Pilar's pile of wings looked wrong. She buried them. The girls of Freddy Gonzales Elementary waited for her to say something, but she'd brought that wrongness into being with words and would not say anything else.

She left the circle.

Vanessa Garcia and her circle of ducks whispered when Pilar got on the school bus home. Pilar walked to the back and sat by Melinda, who played with the boys at recess. Melinda of the gnarled hair, oversized Selena T-shirt with ketchup stains, snot on her sleeve. Melinda did not turn from the window when Pilar sat next to her.

Fifteen minutes into the bus route, Pilar said, “I like your earrings.” Her heart pounded. Melinda wore thin gold hoop earrings too big for her, the gold flaking off. Pilar was the only girl in her class whose ears weren't pierced. Marin had said no when she asked.

Melinda turned from the window and narrowed her eyes, like she thought Pilar was making fun of her. Pilar held her gaze, and there was

a momentary softening in Melinda's face, an almost-smile. And then she shrugged, wiped snot on her sleeve, and stared down at the dirty rubber floor. Her hair parted to reveal a purplish lump at the base of her head. Melinda touched it, gently, as if to see if it was still there.

Dust rose as the school bus pulled onto La Llanura's long gravel drive. A rock flew up from the wheels and cracked their window. Through that cracked window, home looked wrong.

Pilar wanted to swim alone—to wash off that wrongness—but Marin insisted on watching from the dock. Pilar remembered the writhing child in the supermarket. She wanted to scream, *You never let me do anything on my own!*, but she never yelled. That red scream throbbed in her chest as she dove off the dock. She swam underwater for as long as she could, far from her father. She swam until the world was muffled and dim.

But when she climbed out of the water, her father was waiting. He handed Pilar a towel, but she did not take it. She stood, dripping, arms folded across her chest, her heart racing.

“What happened to my mother?” She stared at Marin in that unbudging way she had.

Marin wondered how long she'd wanted to ask, this child who asked for so little. “Sit down, mija,” he said, wrapping the towel around her shoulders.

They sat together at the edge of the dock. Marin stared at the horizon, remembered riding, huddled with strangers, on top of trains and crammed between orange crates in truck beds. Walking through desert and brush. He kept to himself, migrated as a ghost does. His heart stirred absently at a sunset or a mother rocking her child, lifting like desert sand then settling back into oblivion, days dirt rocks trees sky running together, one country becoming another, dead so it didn't matter that the dust blew into his teeth, tongue, eyes. He hardly ate. Hunger had left him, he thought, for good.

Until he saw Luz.

He'd hitched a ride with a truck driver in Mexico City who'd agreed to drop him at the edge of the Rio Grande, where the river was shallow enough to walk across. Anticipation had kept Marin awake for the first half of the 11-hour drive, but sleep overtook him when night fell.

When the driver shook him awake, they were parked at the edge of a sugarcane field, the darkness thick as tar. The driver flipped on his lights and Marin saw Luz standing with five women. The women were afraid, but Luz shielded her eyes and stared at Marin—a halo of curly black hair, the curves of her silhouette engraved in his mind in that second before she grabbed the hands of the other women and slipped into the sugarcane. The stalks absorbed their bodies, sprang back as if they'd never been.

Even at first glimpse, Luz's pull was as magnetic as the moon's. Marin thanked the driver, hurriedly gathered his bag, climbed out of the truck. He could hear the women praying as they moved through the cane. *El Señor es mi pastor; nada me faltará. The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want.* Not wanting to frighten them, he waited until their voices were a distant hum before he stepped into the field behind them. He made his way slowly through the darkness, over the soft, uneven soil, the rough stalks cutting his face. He hadn't walked far before he lost all sense of direction. He listened for the women's voices, followed their prayers—*Sí, aunque ande en valle de sombra de muerte, no temeré mal alguno. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

It was like the mines, the men moving as one body through the tunnels. He'd come to know the other miners beneath words, sight. When his headlamp went out, he could trace the dimensions of their bodies, the parabolas of their pickaxes. Luz knew her way through the cane like that. Marin knew he was meant to follow her.

When he emerged from the cane, she stood with the women huddled behind her. She'd heard him. By the light of the full moon, he saw the switchblade she held against her thigh. She locked eyes with him, let him know she would use it. He loved her more. From the beginning, his love was sharpened by the knowledge that she would leave him.

“I won’t hurt you,” he said. She held his gaze a moment longer, then turned toward the river. It was spring, when the Retamal Dam raised the water from waist to shoulder high to irrigate crops on either side. Spring in that place marked by the bloom of white crosses along the riverbank, the corpses the Los Ebanos ferrymen hauled from the river, worms bursting from their guts.

The women waded into the river holding hands—a line of crosses—Luz at their center. It was 1984; Luz had been leading refugees of the Central American crisis across the river at night for months. She knew how to navigate the current and avoid the remolinos—whirlpools that toppled whole cows. The women’s prayers carried across the water. They said the rosary, squeezed hands instead of beads. It was well past midnight, black sky bleeding into river, creating some confusion over which mysteries to reflect on. Thursday’s rosary reflected on the Luminous Mysteries, Friday’s on the Sorrowful. The pockmarked promise of the sorrowful, luminous moon called them across that dirty river.

Marin’s mother used to pray the rosary when his father worked a double shift in the mines. He knew the prayers by heart but had not believed for years. Belief had dried up like the silver ore veins of Cerro Rico Mountain. *The mountain that eats men*, they called it. Marin left not because he believed in a better life, but because his old life caved in.

Something like belief welled up in him as he waded into the river behind the women. A baptism—their prayers merging with the current, ringing through the darkness, *As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end*—their linked arms a line of crosses moving toward shore. They took the river into their veins, swallowed mouthfuls of raw sewage and maquiladora runoff as they prayed. Luz did not pray; she pushed against the current. She held fast to the women, dark rush of the river at her chin. When she rose out of the water, wet clothes clinging to her body, halo of curls still dry, Marin was filled with faith.

“Papá...?” Pilar searched his face with those deep-set, gray-blue eyes that would have made more sense in a grandmother’s face.

Marin told the lie in English, which he understood but rarely spoke. “Your mother died giving birth to you.” In that tongue not his own, it seemed true. He saw Luz wade into the resaca until the water closed over her. In English, the words had edges. They left his lips and hung separate from him, from the night he first saw Luz. In that darkness, there were no edges—one skin, river became another. It seemed that both worlds could exist, that world of shadows and this sun-raked afterlife in which everything was exposed to the light—his daughter’s shoulder blades like broken things. Both worlds could exist: One made of language, that lie, and the other of feeling. The sharpness of sugarcane against skin might rise like a full moon in this desert. Two truths, like praying to the Virgin in church and El Tio in the mines. True that Luz brought him back to life; true that she left him for dead. She’d dropped them in these flatlands and returned to the river’s dark current.

“Why did she die?” Pilar asked.

“She couldn’t afford a doctor.” That part was true enough. To deter undocumented patients, the hospital had bought green uniforms for their security guards like the Border Patrol’s. Luz had seen a partera—a midwife.

The rest Marin told Pilar in Spanish: “Su nombre era Luz. She swam across the Rio Grande at night to give birth to you here.”

“What was she like?” Pilar asked.

“She was beautiful.” Marin’s eyes went glassy. “And smart.”

“Do I look like her?” Pilar asked to be seen.

Marin glanced at her—tall for her age, blonde, skinny, blue-gray eyes. “You look like me.” He waved his hand as if that wasn’t much to speak of, turned back to the resaca. He watched the patterns the wind made on the surface. “You’re smart like her.”

Pilar waited for more, but her father lay back on the dock and stared up at the blue bowl of sky until the edges of La Llanura folded around them. His breathing calmed, but the air in Pilar’s lungs, the air of La Llanura, felt thin and not enough.

The girls of Freddy Gonzales Elementary did cartwheels on freshly cut grass while Pilar wandered through the sugarcane field that bordered La Llanura, listening for Luz. Luz spoke loudest there, the stalks over Pilar's head, a shelter that threatened to swallow her. If she walked too far in, she forgot where she'd come from, couldn't tell one way from another.

Do you see me? Pilar would whisper and wait—the stalks scraping her cheeks, arms, and legs—until a hot, dry wind hit her body, blew a hole in the distant cane, a hole in the shape of a woman, twisting. Pilar moved toward it and the hole closed over. She thought if she got close, she would see her mother. If she got close, she would be lost.

Do you love me? Pilar dared to ask, and some days there were answers in an upwhirl of glittering dust, the rustle of mesquite tree pods, the ripples on the surface of the resaca. Some days no matter, or perhaps because of, how much Pilar wanted her mother, she wouldn't come. Or she left suddenly, the way the light leaves when a cloud passes over the sun—warm on your shoulders, then gone.

On those days, Pilar tried to outrun the emptiness. She ran up and down the guttered rows of the nearby citrus grove—the trees strong and squat, their ragged limbs heavy with fruit—her heels digging into the soft soil until her calves ached. She reached her hand through halos of gnats to gather the fallen fruit, stretching her T-shirt into a cradle for a half-dozen bruised oranges. The citrus grove ran to the edge of the highway, the sharp clean smell mingling with the exhaust of old trucks. Pilar crouched between the last of the trees and waited for the trucks, the sound of loud boys laughing inside, hands dangled out open windows. She hurled the rotten oranges as hard as she could. The thud they made on a door, splat on a windshield, was satisfying. But when all the oranges were gone, the emptiness returned. It gnawed at her stomach, the taste of diesel and overripe fruit on her tongue.

That winter was a long, gray rain that kept Pilar from wandering through the sugarcane. On a day in late February, it beat against the school bus windows so that her father, waving, blurred as the bus pulled away. Pilar sat at the back of the bus with Melinda, who made room for her but stared out the window until they got to school.

Pilar's teacher, Mrs. Guerra, always read the class a story after recess. While everyone was grabbing a carpet square, Pilar saw Mrs. Guerra forcing Melinda to stand with her nose in the corner. When Melinda peered over her shoulder, Mrs. Guerra pressed her nose back into the corner and held her there until she stopped wriggling. Mrs. Guerra's cross swung on its chain. She was a small woman, but her hand seemed massive on Melinda's bird-boned back.

Mrs. Guerra sat in her rocking chair and began to read. Five minutes in, Melinda began to cry silently, her shoulders shaking. Pilar narrowed her eyes at Mrs. Guerra, who kept reading. The feeling of being pinned built inside her until it produced an equal and opposite reaction.

It thrust itself out of Pilar's mouth as if it had a life of its own: wet, insolent muscle.

At precisely that moment, Mrs. Guerra looked up. "Pilar!" Her brow furrowed. "I'm surprised at you."

Pilar stared back wide-eyed. She'd loved Mrs. Guerra, loved school until that afternoon. She bit her tongue and picked at her bug-bitten legs through the rest of story time. When it was over, she had no idea what the story was.

Mrs. Guerra made Pilar stay after school and write, *I will not stick out my tongue* a hundred times on the chalkboard. The words hunched their shoulders then bowed their heads then crawled on their hands and knees. When she'd gotten to 50, Mrs. Guerra put her hand on Pilar's back, gently,

though Pilar thought of her hand on Melinda's back, and said, "That's enough." She let Pilar read while they waited for her father.

He looked tired when he arrived. His body was too big for the child's chair he sat in. Mrs. Guerra told him in broken Spanish what had happened. Her father leaned forward, struggling to understand. Pilar stared at the floor.

"You know you're one of my favorites," Mrs. Guerra said to her. "That's why your behavior this afternoon surprised me. Is Melinda your friend?"

Pilar shrugged.

"Pilar es una buena chica," Marin insisted.

Pilar was a good girl. She stayed in at recess to do homework. She stood aside as the other kids fought to be first in line.

She was supposed to translate for her father, but that wild child with her tongue thrust out had no language. Pilar held Mrs. Guerra's gaze—the bones in her face sharp as knives. Marin saw Pilar's refusal to look away and was afraid for her.

Marin and Pilar were silent as they left the school. Already the hallways were empty and dim. When they stepped outside, the rain had stopped and the sun had emerged from the clouds. The light was so bright that Pilar's vision went black. It seemed she was inside a dark bubble when her father said, "Mija, you can't do that." He scanned the parking lot, lowered his voice: "I am *illegal*." She had to be good or he would be sent back to Bolivia.

Pilar didn't really know what *illegal* meant, but she knew it had to do with the fear and the hiding. She knew not to ask questions. Her eyes adjusted. The rows of silent cars boxed into white lines, glinting tar, and fields of dirt beyond came into focus, and the red prickle of rage was pulled into dust.

Her father put his arm around her. "The Bible tells us not to take on others' battles," he said softly, but felt the hard prayer boards of his child-

hood. It was something his mother had said. To thank the priest who'd given him his job, Marin took Pilar to Mass once a month.

Her father's words dissolved like the story Mrs. Guerra had read. It seemed to Pilar that she'd been dropped from the sky into that glinting black lot and was seeing everything for the first time. She read her father's face—sad and passing sadness. She saw how the light shattered, dancing off the cracked mirrors and rusted chrome, how it broke before it was held.

They drove home in silence. The long gravel drive that ran to the house was riddled with puddles of rain.

A black car was parked beside the house. When they got closer, they saw a man in a dark suit at the door. Her father's knuckles were white on the wheel.

"Stay here," he said when he got out of the car.

Pilar sat motionless in the truck, promising so hard in her head that her lips moved that she would be a *good girl, good girl, good girl* if they didn't take her father away.

When Marin got to the porch, the man held up a badge. Pilar watched them talk; her father kept shaking his head, *No*. The windows were up, but by the way he shook his head, the slow movement of his lips, Pilar could hear him saying, "No, sir," the words misshapen in that language not his own.

He was breathing hard when he returned to the car. He told Pilar that he needed to talk to the man, to go play outside. "Yes, sir," she said.

Pilar walked slowly through the citrus grove, her tennis shoes sticking in the mud. She gathered all of the fallen oranges she could in her T-shirt, whispering, *Good girl, good girl, good girl*. The black car was still in the driveway when she returned. She rolled up her jeans and waded into the resaca to rinse the mud off the oranges. The water was cold and by the time she finished, her feet were blue.

When she walked into the house, her father and the man were sitting across from each other at the kitchen table.

“That was the last time I saw Luz,” her father said, and the man wrote on his notepad.

Seeing her father’s hand tremble on the table, Pilar again felt the red prickle of rage beneath her skin. “My mother is *dead*,” she said to the man in the suit, her heart racing. The hardness of her voice echoed in her head.

The man stopped writing, raised his eyebrows at her father.

Pilar laid the oranges so gently on the table that her father kissed the top of her head and whispered, “Gracias, miya,” before shooing her back outside.

Pilar wanted to press her ear to the door and listen but made herself walk down the long gravel drive, side-stepping puddles: *Good girl, good girl, good girl*. She lay in the grass staring up at the sky, her red windbreaker tied tight around her face. Thick gray clouds gathered, but the sky held its breath until finally the black car with its tinted windows drifted past like another cloud and drops began to fall.

When she walked into the house, her father was still sitting at the table, watching the rain beat against the windows.

One of the oranges had rolled onto the floor. Pilar picked it up and sat beside him. She peeled the orange and handed him slices, the sharp sweet smell overtaking the smell of rain.

After dinner, Pilar washed the dishes and got ready for bed while her father rocked on the porch and watched the rain. He did not come to tell her a story. Pilar tried to sleep but every time she closed her eyes, she saw dark puddles in the road, low-slung clouds, the black car.

She found her father on the porch. “Háblame de los túneles,” she said and led her father by the hand into the house, into the story.

Her father tucked her in and they began as they always did: “Buscamos la vena,” he said. Pilar held two fingers over his pulse as if she knew the story would keep him alive.

Her father led her by the hand through the mine. They did everything carefully—*con cuidado, nunca a la fuerza*—but he couldn't finish the story. He could not save Roberto. He stared at the dark windows.

The low, mournful keening of a night train stirred up questions. Would the man in the black car take her father away? Why had they been talking about her mother? The unspoken hung like clouds in her chest. She opened the window, breathed in the rain.

“How did he die, Papá?” The blood beat so loudly in her ears that she hardly heard her words.

When she turned from the window, her father looked at her like she'd killed Roberto.

The train was gone but the wind howled, forced its way into Marin's dead lungs. Dust caught in his throat. He coughed and couldn't stop. The cough tore through his chest, wrapped its fist around his breath. Still coughing, he slammed the window shut. “You're too old for stories.”

He went back out to the porch, his cough trailing through the house. The porch boards were weathered and sagging. Pilar lay in bed listening to the creak of him rocking, the rasp of his cough. When he left for his night shift, silence filled the house. The weight of it sat on Pilar's chest. She cried without sound, careful not to break it.