



Bees circle her hands, hovering near her skin as if to know her. Natalia licks her dry lips and dribbles water around the iris, petunias and zinnias that unfurl in the late-day shade, watching the dirt turn dark and soften, its tiny cracks filling and falling together. She inhales the sweet perfume and listens to the hum. After dipping her fingers into the watering can, she strokes the dusty orange and purple petals, moistening them clean and bright.

*Pobrecitas. Bebed, bebed el agua,* she whispers. Poor little ones, drink the water.

She talks to the flowers in Spanish because like her, they grow brighter when they hear that special music.

Natalia's family stories and feelings won't conform to the new language's short, hard syllables, but her husband insists she learn, to become a good citizen in this place. He scolds her, saying she's not in the old, but the New, Mexico now. So for everyone and everything but the flowers, Natalia struggles through the English.

His breath puffs peppery-sweet from the cinnamon candy she gave him an hour ago. He kisses her, and a bee hovers closer to tap and taste the sticky spot on her cheek. Allowing the bee, she brushes the sweaty hair out of her boy's eyes. He asks for a drink from the little watering can. She hands it to him, still more than half full, heavy for someone so small. His little shoulders and arms strain to raise it to his mouth, and his eyebrows draw together. Frustrated, he tilts the can as if to pour some out, but she says, No. No.

How to say? *El agua es oro.* Water is gold.

He shakes his head, confused, so she taps the dimple on his cheek and stands, pressing her hands low into her back, stretching. When she holds out her hand, he sets down the can, takes her fingers and walks with her. In the kitchen, she dips his tin cup into the bucket, then holds it to his lips.

*Bebe, bebe, mijo,* she thinks, but stops herself. She clips the thought into, Drink, my son.

She wets a rag and dabs his red face, thinking, how to say? The words shift in her mind, then rattle like pebbles in her mouth.

It is hot, no?

Yes, *Mamá.* Very hot and thirsty.

She sends him into the cottonwood-shaded yard with the little watering can and his favorite toy, a small red tractor. Natalia smiles, imagining the brown sugar cake she will bake for his fourth birthday, when his father comes home.

She watches her boy settle down, kneeling to push the tractor over the hard red ground. From the washtub at the window where her husband's shirts are soaking, Natalia can hear and see Coro playing. He disappears and reappears, curtained behind the clean,

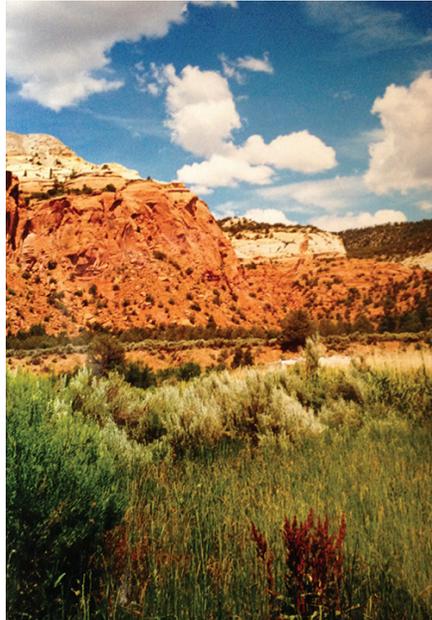
sunlit bed sheet that lifts, waves and droops like a cloud clothespinned against the canyon breezes.

She remembers how he would run away, last summer. She would tie the back of his overalls to a cord and attach that to the clothesline, to keep him safe so she could cook and wash. Then he slipped out of the overalls, proving she couldn't hold him. She found them dangling there, empty, while he ran around the yard naked, laughing. Chasing him made her more afraid than angry, because his need to run from her might mean he would be like his father, wild. Always beyond her reach, taking long trips, and angry when he had to come

home. Yes, it frightened her, but when she held Coro again that day, instead of punishing him, she gave him candy for running back to her. She loves her husband that way and she will love her child the same. Natalia believes in the mystery, the way bees return to flowers.

The motor oil is difficult to scrub out, even with the bar of lye soap, so she rubs the shirt sleeve on the washboard. Her thumb cracks open by the nail and blood tints the suds pink. The soap burns in the split skin, so she shakes her hand and presses it dry on her apron, where a little drop of blood leaves a crimson sign.

The yellow dog pants outside the screen door, wet brown eyes looking in. He's holding up the front paw that had the thorn in it, the one she soaked and picked out with a needle this morning. He surprised her with his patience, his silence in pain, and something like gratitude. When she's done with the laundry, she'll look at his paw again. Maybe some of the thorn broke off deep, or it might be infected. She knows what to do. She studied to be a nurse in the old Mexico, but she



can't do those things in the English, either, not well enough to work in a hospital here. She can take care of a dog or a child, anywhere.

The dog likes her too much, and her husband, too little. He claims she spoils his animals the way she spoils his son. He doesn't like letting the dog in the house, but it's so hot, she pushes the squeaky door open and lets the dog brush past her. She smiles and shrugs. Her husband won't be home for three days and the dog won't tell. He circles and lays down on the rag rug she points to, resting his head on his paws when she repeats her husband's words, Stay, Dog.

Even for this animal, she has to speak English. Don't be speaking Mexican to the boy or that animal, neither, her husband says, or they won't understand a thing I say.

This reminds her, she needs to practice for when he comes home from his delivery job. She whispers to herself, Is too hot? Too cold? You want coffee? Broke? I fix it. Please I need five cents for sugar. Ten for flour. Funny, she thinks, how the English word for *harina*, flour, the thing she uses for bread, sounds like *flor*, the Spanish word for flowers, the beloved feast of bees. But floor in English is what you stand on. These little differences are the hardest ones to remember, in translation.

She takes a pumice stone to the oil on the sleeve, careful not to shred the old cotton while she brushes the striped surface. Bent over the cloth, she glances outside, and when the sheet lifts, she sees him. Coro holds his arms out wide and spins until he falls down on the hard ground, laughing. Then the sheet falls.

For a little game to occupy her mind while scrubbing, she translates the oldest song she knows. The feeling of her mother in the song clings to the original Spanish, along with some of the meaning, but the sweet old notes cross every barrier. After she figures out the words, she tries singing them in the English.

Her song expands in her chest, a cool bubble of joy, an intention so pure it could lift her off the clay if she let it. She imagines a weight in her feet to keep herself grounded, releasing her translated song enough to bear her up, without carrying her away.

But the joy is irresistible, coaxing her deeper, back to her native words and the feeling of home.

*Nacemos de agua y tenemos sed*

*Pero, ¿dónde está el agua?*

Feeling glad but guilty, she tries it in her husband's short hard words again and louder, for her son. She wants to give the song to him in words he'll be allowed to sing, even when his father is home.

*We are born of water and we thirst,  
but where is the water?*

She looks up to see if Coro heard. He cocks his head, turns, smiles and waves. He loved music even before he was born, kicking in her womb when she sang. His father says it's nonsense, but Natalia remembers the truth; her baby sang before he spoke, greeting the world in notes before words. So always in her mind, and out loud when his father is gone, Natalia calls her son Coro, her choir.

Natalia rubs the fabric against itself, lathering as she sings more,

*Hiding in rock or flooding the arroyo?*

*Gone up to clouds or in the mountain snow?*

*Water is everywhere. Everywhere.*

*Water, anywhere but here.*

The oil stain is lighter now, almost invisible. She rinses out the shirt, twists it and squeezes it until no drops fall. Flapping the wrinkles out, she sighs and lifts her face for the breeze through the

window. Outside, the bed sheet floats up, revealing the cottonwood, but no Coro.

Her stomach knotting, she drops the shirt back in the tub and hurries outside, pushing apart the sheets that still smell wet. His toy tractor tilts overturned on the ground. Dog, who followed through the screen door before it banged shut, pants on three legs beside her. She holds a hand over her eyes and scans the black-dotted, red hills for her child.

The dog nudges her with his wet nose.

No, she says, pushing him away with her leg. She walks as fast as she can first north, then around in a great circle, calling, Coro! She scans the hard ground for little-boy tracks, but finds none. There is more dry clay than dust, with no hints for finding a child.

*Niño!*

The dog limp-trots past her, down a little slope to the edge of the dry creek, then crosses. He turns to look back at her, barking once. She hesitates, covers her mouth with her hands, then follows Dog east, farther from the house than she's ever dared.

The sun's heat is flat and heavy as an iron on her head, where her heart beats in red jolts of pain. She guesses it's been maybe two hours, walking behind Dog. He's not slowing down or speeding up, just hobbling with his head down, favoring his injured paw. She wonders if he's tracking a jackrabbit, wasting her chance. She prays he isn't.

Her breaths scorch her throat, in and out. She feels foolish to think how, before racing after Dog, she went back to the house for nothing. No water, no straw hat, no sturdier shoes. As if she could face this desert unprepared, as if being a mother doesn't always mean a long journey. She was stubborn, convinced her boy was playing just over that near rise, and then, over that next one, that he would never leave her so far behind. She was proud, convinced she needed only the cord of maternal love to bind him.

**She scans the hard ground for little-boy tracks, but finds none. There is more dry clay than dust, with no hints for finding a child.**

She unties her apron and drapes it over her head, but the threadbare gingham gives no relief. Heat waves ripple and blur the difference between the earth and the sky, like orange, black and blue stripes faded together on an old work shirt. The green shrubs look flat in the distance, oil stains on the ground. Her skin flares. Her lips crack and she tastes her blood. She dabs it on the hem of her apron that hangs by her face and sees that other stain from her thumb, a dark brown blot beside the bright new red. The difference of color marks slipping time.

A hawk circles the deep wide blue. Insects buzz loud from every direction, their strange voices rising and falling in no rhythm she can follow. Familiar bees dive and hover near her face before sizzling away in coiled trails to suckle red-lavender locoweeds. She whispers after them as if they are nectared angels, You remember my boy from the flowers. Lead me to him. She prays more and struggles to believe.

After another plodding hour, the dog slows down, but he doesn't stop. She knows if she doesn't find her boy, she won't go back. Without him, there's only her husband and the English. Not even her little garden and their common secrets can sustain her, not without her choir.

Her eyes are gritty and she's too dry for tears. Looking around, she can't focus or see any shape she wants. She calls for Dog and squats next to a juniper for a few degrees of relief, a dappled moment of shade.

Dog is determined and almost doesn't come. He lifts his head, studies the distance, then limps back to her. His thick, oily odor is a comfort and she rests her hand on his hot bristled back, then leans her forehead on his neck. She notices the soles of her house shoes separated, flopping loose. Her toes are raw where blisters bleed. She's too dizzy to sit up, so she drapes her arms around Dog and slumps into a dreamless faint.

When she opens her eyes, she's shivering, lying with her hands thrown out wide, facing the sugar-crystaled black sky. Her mind is fresh with a dream of her mother shaking her awake, telling her, The boy is watering the flowers.

Natalia remembers under the cottonwood, the red tractor left behind, but the watering can gone with Coro. Maybe he has water.

The sun has fallen behind her, making her doubt her old world of a cool adobe house and a water pump by the kitchen door. She might still be dreaming. Darkness hides the desert's colors and details—the *piñon*, the mesquite, the juniper and the stones. But only waking eyes can burn so hot. The rising moon pours silver grace over the tops and edges of everything, and Natalia quickens as her eyes adjust. The cool air revives her from an exhaustion she mistook for death. And seeping over from the dream, her mother's voice sounds inside Natalia, floral with hope.

Up, Dog, she says, tugging on his velvet ear. He sits and steadies her as she wobbles to stand. She strokes the limping dog's back with her fingertips as they put their sore feet down and down again through the watery-silver night, passing among glowing *piñons* and juniper, some taller than she is. She tries not to picture how easy it would be to miss a small boy among them.

She wonders how far she must go, whether she is strong enough. She resolves to walk as many steps as it takes to meet the moon. She promises herself that she need only go that far. That when she stands below it's apex, her boy will be there, a small dark point in the freefalling light. She tells herself she can take one step, then a few more.

But before the moon's even halfway to the world's ceiling, Dog whines. Except for panting, it's his first sound since that summons by the dry creek.

They stop and listen. The insects are quiet, chilled out of song and when a coyote wails, she feels her heart sink. That must be what he heard. The dog turns his head and whines again. She turns, too, cupping hands behind her ears to catch what the dog already knows.

*Nacemos de agua y tenemos sed  
Pero, ¿dónde está el agua?*

The woman and the dog hurry straight through, not feeling the stickered and needled weeds that pierce them. They only know the sound and its meaning.

He crouches, clutching the watering can to his chest. Falling to her knees, she smells the damp earth, the precious gift he shared with the magenta loco weed. It is as her mother said. The child shudders and clutches her dress, but his dry, tearless cries crack into a laugh as she kisses him.

He tells her how funny she is, walking the desert with an apron on her head. She tells him how naughty he was, to run. But how good, and so kind, to water the flowers.

She breathes in the scent of his hair, urine and sweat. She promises, when they get home, she'll make his favorite *caramelo*. He lifts the watering can and she hears the whisper of the last drops he kept, pattering gentle music on the tin.

*Pobrecita Mamá*, he says, lifting it to her. *Bebe, Bebe. El agua es oro.*

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