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Holding Up the Sky: Research-Based Fiction Writing

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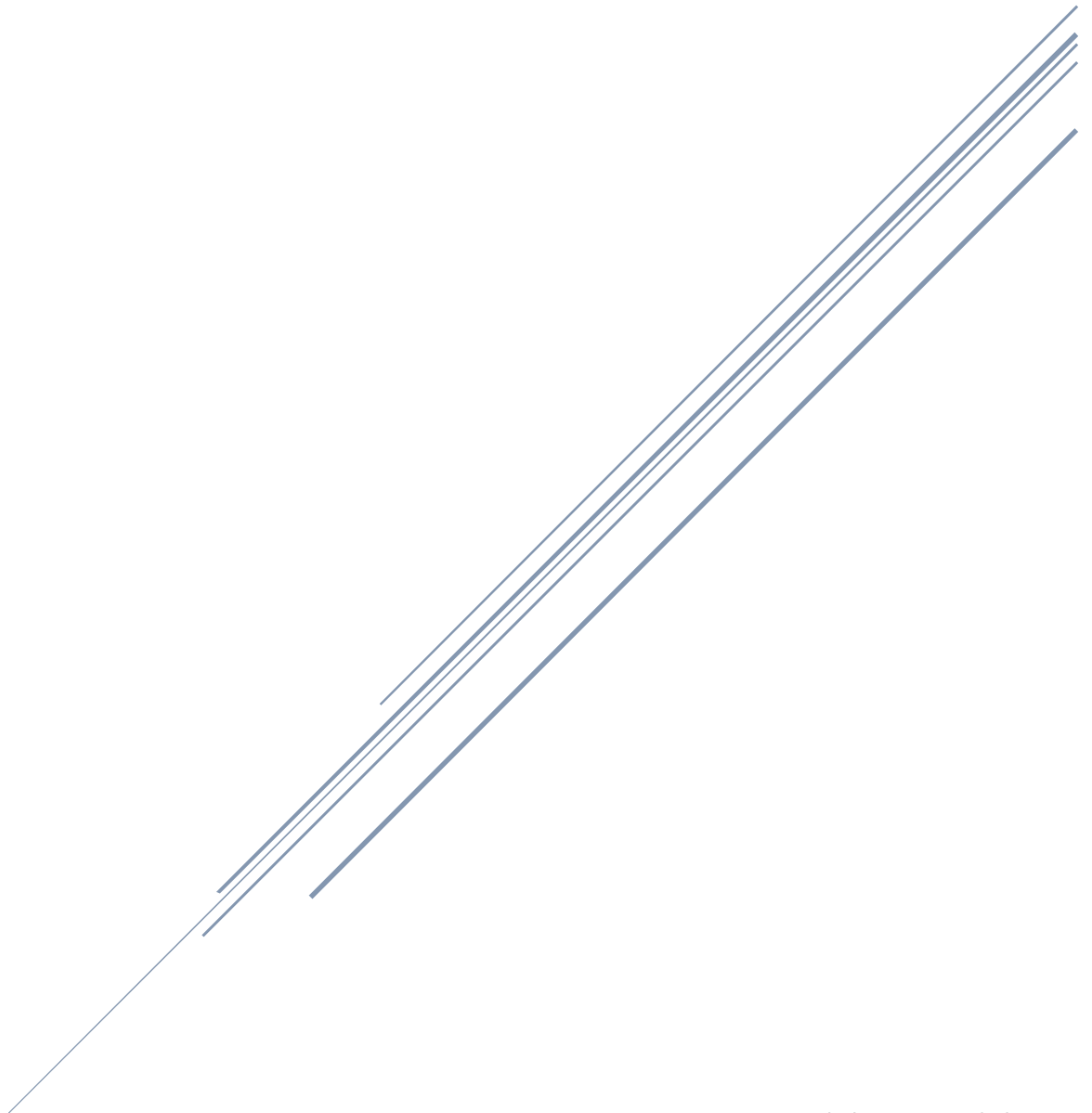
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HOLDING UP THE SKY

RESEARCH-BASED FICTION



MADELYNN STUART

UCARE FALL 2019 – SPRING 2020

THE TRAVELER, WEARY AND CAUTIOUS, crests the hill, the raw and frozen earth slipping beneath her feet. A setting sun miles behind her lulls the township ahead into a sleep of soft lights, quiet buildings, and low-speaking bar patrons. She treads carefully down the icy slope and ignores the throbbing weight of her knapsack on her right shoulder. The windows of the building on the edges of the town glow yellow with dim light. Her body senses the weight of her experience and the lives that have crossed paths with hers. The closest building—a formerly foreclosed house repurposed into a dim, cozy locale for casual drinking and small, simple gatherings—sits in a large, trimmed-short grass blanketing plot of land apart from the others. A bell hanging above the door jingles as she enters and finds a seat near the modest fireplace.

Across from her, a young man sits reading a novel while the traveler thaws her hands a few inches from the flames, dying with the sun. She rejects the offer of a beer from the waitress circling the room. Instead, the traveler requests water as the young man stares at her over the edge of his novel in an obvious attempt to be mysterious that is, nevertheless, obvious. He examines her—from her unruly and matted hair to her weathered long fingers to her worn shoes, soles caked with mud solidified by the cold. The traveler returns his stare with dark, hooded eyes. He averts his eyes to the words on his page, albeit surprised but willing to politely ignore her over his own ravenous curiosity.

A few minutes pass, and the waitress brings the glass of water. After thanking her, the traveler zeroes her attention on the young man, who continues to pretend to read.

Moments pass before the young man stops and drops the book down in his lap in a swift motion. Emboldened, his patience escapes him as if it never existed in the first place. “Where have you been?” he says. A blunt question, unexpected by most. “What I mean to ask is: what

places have you been to? You look like you have..." He trails. Less confident under her gaze. "You look like you have been a lot of places."

Her eyes shine; she had expected him to ask. "Everywhere, it seems." She stretches her arms out in front of her as if she can touch her thoughts, feel them in her grasp. The gesture taunts the young man because he wants to be able to feel the elusiveness of her thoughts slip and dribble through his fingers. She holds a secret he wants to know. Sighing wistfully, the traveler's hands dance in the air as she speaks. "Where the oceans kiss the land, and the canopies of trees graze the sun, and the deep desert valleys where the wolves howl throughout the night." Then the traveler reaches across and takes the hand of the young man, tracing the lines of his palm with her calloused index finger. "Oh, I have been everywhere."

The young man tugs back. Her grip tightens. The tips of his fingers curl hesitantly. In a reflex, the young man scowls. A part of him regrets asking. The traveler's eyes move and shift as if examining every small nuance of his face while thousands of images swirl beneath the surface of her irises, and the young man's body falls rigid. The traveler tilts her head back, releasing him from her grasp, and sits back in her chair. For a moment, she closes her eyes, listens to the hums of the other patrons in the background, and opens them again. The stories are gone.

A log in the fireplace crumbles and drops into embers and ashes.

"You saw them?"

He pauses, stutters. He knows what he saw. "Saw what?"

"The tales; the *epics*. The narratives my eyes hold." She leans forward. The young man stumbles over his words as her keen eyes swirl and shift. "Yes," she says, "I've seen everything."

As if unprompted and not of her own accord, the words spill from her mouth. A river whose current sweeps the young man away.

The Just Judge of the Night

I TREKKED THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS of El Salvador, winding roads made of earth and high-reaching trees as entire villages shut themselves indoors for the night. Lights turned out. Candles extinguished. Children late to come home tiptoed through the bush, whispering in the shadows, and pointed at me, an outsider, as I traveled down the middle of the path, swinging my knapsack in circles behind me like a game.

Pillars of fog descended over the trail in front of me without warning, swirling through the bush. The children scattered like rats, shouting, pulling each other toward the quiet rows of homes in search of safety and shelter. Out of the bushes scurried a boy—barefoot, dark-haired, and wearing a t-shirt cut a little too small. He seized my arm and pulled, speaking in frenzied Spanish. Frantically, he yanked me toward the village, his eyes wide and darting in every direction as he scoured the dark landscape. A figure emerged from the growing fog riding on horseback, rising higher than the trees to cover the moon, a hat pulled low, the brim covering his face. Lifting his chin, I saw that his face was merely a cloud of snaking smoke that knit and wove together, leaving my body and mind senseless, paralyzed. I tripped on a rock when I tried to back away, and the child and I fell to the dirt in front of the being looming above us. Moving away from me, the child tried to scurry from the being's gaze, fixed on me. The tendrils of his features flicked as the horse brayed and shifted its legs.

The child quivered, frozen in place sprawled a body's-length from me. "El Justo Juez de la Noche," the boy said. He threw his skinny arms in front of his face and cowered in front of the horseman and his steed; the horse curled its lips and stamped. My eyes followed the snapping of the black corded whip trailing from the hand of the headless man as he beat it back and forth

through the air. He lifted his wrist and cracked it against the road beside the boy who shook harder and whimpered under his breath. Silently, the judge pulled the whip back, leading the rein of the horse, and the boy scrambled to his feet and sprinted through the bush to the dark village.

The Judge turned to me. “La noche es peligrosa,” he said, flicking the whip at his side. He guided the horse forward to stand over me. Its eyes, wild yet tamed beneath the watch of the horseman, warned me to tread lightly. Warned me to take care as I traveled where I did not belong. Warned me to heed the night. Then, the Just Judge disappeared into the trees.

Lights

THE TRAVELER SHUDDERS AS IF she senses the presence of the horseman while her mind centers again on the young man and the heat of the fire. “He protects the night,” she says, gazing at the flames in reverie, “but the people fear him, though not everyone is afraid of the dark.”

Curious, the young man rubs his left thumb across the palm of the right hand and concentrates on the ridges mapping his skin, trailing them with his eyes. He says, “I don’t think I understand—”

“A girl I met.” The traveler smiles. “A girl, Lucy. She respected the dark but had no fear. She told me of adventures and excursions, a transient in her own right, who felt the beat of the darkness like her own heart, spinning stories in the wonder of the deep inkiness of night...”

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Out of the grass rised the lights. You could never have too many lights, but only certain kinds of lights, like stars. People threw fits about electric lights—pollution, they called it, like making the world brighter hurts it, like people believe seeing something makes it worse. Did this mean they like the dark? My momma always turned out the lights, even when I asked her not to, but she was the one who controlled lights, not me.

In the dark, you couldn’t see the cars. They hid in the pitch-black like they were waiting for you, teeth of a buried monster jutting through the surface of the Earth, and you walked in dim light, sneaking around in the middle of the unknowns. Mick and I used to sneak out at night through our bedroom window down the limbs of the big cherry tree in the back of the farmhouse

and drop into the dry grass below so we could walk to the cars at night. Momma never let us visit the cars, even though we lived just down the road. She always told us the whole place was haunted, that the cars were taken from the impound lot where the cars go after they've been in an accident where someone died, and the ghosts stay with their cars because they can't leave. Mick and I wanted to see the ghosts.

The first time, we couldn't find the cars in the dark. The next time, we brought these camping lanterns Daddy left for us in the cellar before he went away. Once we'd climbed down the limbs of the big cherry tree and dropped into the dry grass below, we waited to turn the knobs on the lanterns until we were far enough away that Momma couldn't see us from the sofa in the sitting room where she slept now because her and Daddy's old bedroom was haunted too. The lightbulbs of our lanterns flickered on, rusted and carrying a film of dust that clung to the delicate glass, and we held them in front of us by their rusted metal handles. My arms shook, but I tried not to let Mick see because he was shaking too. Mick grabbed my hand. Our hearts beat in our fingers. I kept shaking.

Daddy was never afraid of ghosts. He used to tell us in a thick Gaelic accent about his childhood, walking the Ghost Road and coming face-to-face with the Lady Gowdie and her horned likeness, herself on a dark path by the biggest mountain he'd ever seen. He said he shook her hand and bowed. Then he winked and told us that she reminded him of Momma when they first met after he came to Alliance.

Daddy always had stories like that, stories that made Momma smile as she whopped him over the head with her house slipper.

Other than small sets of trees, the land was shapeless and covered with low growing shrubs blanketing the hard-packed dirt. The cars rised out of the ground like skinny teeth of the cracked

open jaw trapped under, packed together in a messy unfinished circle. I stood on the edge, a few feet back, as Mick wandered ahead of me, holding his lantern with an outstretched arm, wove between two vehicles, and brushed the fingertips of his free hand against the underbelly of the car above. Finally, I walked to the center of the ring and dropped my lantern to the ground. The cars' shadows cast across the ground shook with the lantern on uneven soil.

"I don't know why Momma believes in ghosts," Mick said. I couldn't see him from where I stood, but his voice bounced off the deformed metal around us. After a moment, he peeked his head out from behind the structure, his sharp elven features shadowed by the lanterns. He looks like Daddy.

"Daddy believed in ghosts," I said.

"No, Daddy knew ghosts. That's different.

I shrugged and watched the shadows dance.

"What're you doing out here?"

Mick scrambled and hid behind the cars as Momma stalked forward, her hair disheveled and eyes wide and angry. She tightened the belt of her terrycloth robe around her gaunt, bony waist and seized me by the ear to pull me down to her level. "Lucy, where's your brother?" she hissed. "You not supposed to be out here. Mick!"

Trembling, Mick stepped out, and she cursed, let go of me, and chased him as he tried to scamper away. She gripped him by his shoulders and shook him. "Boy, y'know it's dangerous out here, but you keep defyin' me. *Look at me.*"

Mick, keeping his chin low, met her eyes. She glanced over her shoulder at me, no longer fuming but eyes welling with tears. "You know you ain't supposed to leave me alone." Momma crumbled to the ground as if sand was trickling out of her body, and she couldn't bear to stand.

Mick sat with her and threw his skinny arms around her shoulders while the tears trickled down her cheeks in small streams. Creeping forward, I stepped across the dry dirt, and her tears hit the ground, soaking into the earth.

Beads of light bloomed. I stopped. Reached down and turned off my lantern. The light ebbed through the earth like a spider's spindling web and spread over the dirt as Momma's sorrow lit the world around us, outshining the dim glow from our lanterns. From where the tears landed stretched tendrils of pulsing light through the cracks in the ground as the cars became totally visible, the stars bleeding in the inky night, and I finally kneeled beside Mick and Momma and watched the night brighten and the ghosts that Daddy knew dance around us.

THE YOUNG MAN SITS FORWARD in his seat, pauses, before standing up. The bar has all but emptied, save for the circling waitress and a few stragglers who stayed for last call, and he walked behind his chair, placed his hands on the back, and watched as the traveler blinked the stories away from her dark eyes.

“When you told me you’ve seen everything, you actually meant you’ve seen everything,” he says.

Keeping her eyes closed, the traveler smiles at him, weary, the shadows of the low lighting of the fire dancing across her blue-veined, pale skin. “I would not lie to you,” she says.

“Why have you traveled so much?”

“I wanted to see the world; I wanted to leave my home.” A moment passes, and the traveler opened her eyes, which still swirled with images and tales. “I knew the life I had before was not the life I wanted, so I left, and I learned to find beauty in so much of the life I saw around me and in those I met wherever I went.”

He cocks his eye at her face, at the blank and indiscernible expression she displays like a fresh blanket of fallen white snow—untouched and cold. “You mean like the girl from before?” he said.

She nods. “The girl, Lucy, yes.” The traveler wrings her hands and then interlocks her fingers as if she wants to keep from letting something go. “I met her in the plains. She was very young at the time, but, the first time I met her, I could tell she had already lived a lifetime. It is her story of sorrow, and the story of the people in El Salvador of their fear, and the experiences and emotions of everyone else that matters the most, not my own. I do not matter as much as they do.”

The waitress stops to ask if the young man or the traveler need anything more before she begins to prepare for a party the bar is hosting, and the young man waves her off with a dismissive flick of his wrist, not even sparing a glance toward her, more intrigued by the traveler's words than the possibility of another beer.

She continues and tilts her head to the side. Her gaze, seemingly fixed on his face, looks past him. "Sometimes, I think we forget that being different is what defines a community. Finding those similar to us gives us a sense of belonging, though, if every individual group remains separated from one another, we remain divided. Together, we are enough; separate, we fall short." She sighs. "When I was young, I learned to stay within myself, to keep from others, and to reject the outcast, the strange, the straying. We obeyed without cause. We trusted with suspicion. We drew our own conclusions from our own understandings and did not venture outside of our personal view of the world, like we knew what was best for ourselves.

"But from El Salvador, I learned that fear can be healthy, that it can keep us safe and is meant to guide us down one path or another. From Lucy, I learned that grief can manifest itself in multiple forms, and it can eventually lead to a beautiful moment of healing. By seeing and appreciating, I have found the truest form of myself as well as a community of which I would rather be a part than from where I came. As I said, that is what matters."

The young man scowls and furrows his brow. "I don't think I understand."

She stops and glances at a family gathered in the corner. Without hesitation, a man and a woman argue over rosy floral sashes, how to string them up across the wall in the small space they occupy. Three girls sit at the table, the two younger ones playing together with paper dolls. The oldest of the girls sits stiffly, her face twisting as the volume of the squabble increase, and clutches a string of small fairy lights in her manicured hands and. She's wearing plain clothes, but her lips

are painted a deep, dark shade of red, and her hair blooms in delicate twirling curls across the crown of her head. At the table, another chair holds a dress—heavy, sequined cream-colored top with a skirt full of artful, airy tulle.

The traveler says to the young man, “You will. The world is an open place, and there are lessons always to be learned, down every avenue imaginable.” She draws her hands across the upholstered arms of the chair and opens her eyes to the image of a man who fears of leaving the ground.

Up

I HATE FLYING.

On a plane for the eleventh time in my life, as it rattled into the sky, I gripped the armrests in my metal coffin and closed my eyes, waiting for it to be over. It was as if I could feel how sticky stiff the thick air was in my lungs and my throat, and the dim lights flicked through their plastic covers, and the child behind me promptly kicked my seat in a fit of rage while his ears pushed with pressure from the rising altitude. I glanced at my wife, sensing the nearness of our future, that children screamed and cried and kicked and did whatever they wanted whenever they wanted because they didn't know any different. When they were older was when they learned to suffer in silence.

Calm and relaxed with her elbow resting on her knee and the other hand placed over her swollen belly as if for protection, Hiya put down her book for a brief second to squeeze my fingers before returning to reading, her eyes scanning the pages with fervor; she liked whatever she was reading. I usually asked her about what she read, but that day, I focused on pushing away the mounting feeling of dread as my tin funeral box soared through the air on wind and jet fuel alone.

"Do not worry," she said, her eyes still fixated on her page. "Do not worry." She took her hand away, licked her middle finger, and turned to the next.

I did not move for the next two hours and stared straight ahead.

Crosswinds, at least that's what the pilot explained, met us as we descended, rocking the silver sarcophagus, and I imagined the wheels of the aluminum casket missing the tarmac completely and skating across the asphalt in a barrage of sparks and shrieks and steamy tears. Something would catch fire, the child behind me would kick more and scream louder, and my wife

would read her book and pat the baby in her belly and tell me not to worry as the world burned around us...

Snapped out of it.

Still in the plane, but we had landed now. A pale, middle-aged man stood up and cursed as he hit his hairless head on the low-hanging overhead compartment. Hiya marked her place in her book with a Target receipt from her purse and stretched, leaning forward to rise. "Samar, help me," she said.

I helped her get up, bit my tongue when I wanted to remind her that I thought it was too late in the pregnancy to fly, even with the note from the doctor. She would have been angry; I was glad I kept quiet. Holding her arm, we exited the plane and stepped out into the Chicago airport, much less crowded than Chennai, much less chaotic. I gripped Hiya nonetheless and pulled her close to me as she pulled me along through the throngs of people to stop at a row of chairs overlooking the airfield at Terminal 2. She rifled through her bag to find the phone number for our relatives who agreed to pick us up, and I fell into the chair and watched as everyone else waited. I looked on at the others also awaiting their fate in this airport, this place of in-between. Everyone in the airport wanted to be anywhere except the airport, yet we were all biding our time, drinking expensive coffee and eating overpriced sandwiches that had sat in a refrigerator all day and scrambling to find somewhere that sold umbrellas because you didn't pack one but it was supposed to rain the whole week wherever you were headed. I liked to watch because everyone here was a transient in some way with somewhere else to be. The airport slowed us down, flew us in a merciless rocket in the sky to our chosen destination on their timeline, whenever the airline gods of this forsaken place deemed fit, and we all met at this one place at the one point in time simply because we wanted to be somewhere else.

Hindus didn't believe in purgatory, this forever place of waiting to be somewhere else, but I could sense that it existed in actuality. I could not believe that everyone was always moving, from one life to the next based on your karma; there had to be a point where you just stood still and waited to be moved. Hiya placed the call, learned where the relatives waited for us, and we left.

Now, I sit on the porch steps to our apartment building, staring at the U-Haul truck packed by movers, a matter of months after the last time I flew in the sky, I feel as though I am still in the airport. I feel like I am watching as my wife struggles, as she visits the doctor with me in tow to learn what we never wanted to learn. As she rips apart the baby books and wipes her tears with tiny no-scratch mittens and smashes the Diaper Genie to pieces in the alleyway behind the building. As her calmness melts away along with the hope that grew in her belly for seven months.

I search for pieces of the woman who pointed excitedly at every stray cat on the street and liked to pull weeds from the garden in the summer and hoarded receipts in case they came in handy one day. Who made the bed every morning and always invited neighbors to dinner. Who always told me not to worry when I believed worrying was the only way to ensure nothing went wrong.

I can't find the pieces. They disappeared.

When I suggested moving back to Chennai, to stay with family, she didn't argue. She didn't say that Chicago was our home and will always be our home. She didn't say that Chennai was the past, a place that was good for us back then but not anymore. Instead, she nodded and waited patiently while I packed cardboard boxes with our belongings and met with the superintendent to end our lease earlier and bought the tickets back to India.

On the plane, as I grip the armrests in my streamlined death-trap in the sky, waiting for it to be over and breathing in the sticky stiff thick air, Hiya stares out the window and squeezes my hand. Her book lays unopen in her lap. “Do not worry,” she says. “Do not worry.”

Under the Willow Branches

THE EYES OF THE TRAVELER glitter; they glow with flickers of warmth and gold. Her voice—soft, velvety, careful—pulls the young man in like gravity. Underneath the surface, her tone tremors. “A boy sits under a willow,” she says. “His eyes closed as he takes in the heat of the day through the thin branches, his gangly arms and legs spread out in a still windmill of limbs. He dreams while the world around him continues on.”

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If I were faster, he thinks, I would chase the birds, and catch them. They would sing songs to me as I ran alongside them, chirping my praise, impressed by my long and lithe strides that give me such pace in our race toward the nests in the trees. I would run without failing, my energy never sapped but instead multiplying. With each leap, each bound, I would rise higher and higher until I soared on air, the clouds my only means of support. When I would be ready to be done—not because I was tired but for some other reason, like Mami told me it was time for dinner or something—I would glide to the ground and rest underneath the willow tree for a moment. If anyone tried to stop me, I would just run away, and they would never catch me.

If I were smarter, he thinks, I would solve all of the problems of the world. The sick would be healed, and the bad people would be good, and the sad would never have to be sad anymore, and Mami wouldn't dry her tears with Papi's left-behind ties and suit jackets until she ran out of water in her eyes and withered.

If I were older, he thinks, I would always know what to do. No one would tell me I was too young to understand, because I would be old enough to understand everything.

If I were stronger, he thinks, I would hold up the sky. I would wait as stars and planes and baby birds fell from their high perches, their altitude would dip, and I would jump up to action and rush to help them. I would only need half of my muscles since I'd be so strong, and I would pick them up so they never had to touch the ground again. Everyone would cheer for me; I would save the day over and over again because I could. I would be the one to lift them up and give them the boost they needed and make sure everyone safely got home and stayed with their families like Papi couldn't. I wouldn't let them take him away, wouldn't let them trap him on an island of sugarcane and guava that used to be home but isn't anymore. I would hold up the sky so Mami didn't have to.

If I were braver, I would sail from Miami to Havana, braving the Caribbean, so I could pull him into the boat, and we could cross back home to Mami together. Leave the past and El Líder behind.

If I were taller, he thinks as he wriggles his outstretched fingers in the air, I would stretch until my fingers plucked the leaves from the treetops. Then I would reach up and pick the sun, pluck it from the sky among all of the others suns. I would stroke its fiery licks of light and call it mine mine mine.

La Puerta del Diablo

I USED TO THINK THAT sleeping fixed everything. You lie down in bed then wake up the next day feeling like you can walk on fire because the stress and the hurt and the pressure and the exhaustion and the belief that the world could fall apart with the twitch of a butterfly's wings was all yesterday. You close your eyes and are engulfed in the comforting blackness behind your eyes. Today is today, and you are awake, alive, refreshed, hopeful.

Of course, thinking that way doesn't help when I am in the Devil's cave, at the Devil's door. The sweat trickling down between my shoulder blades, my sight fading a little each morning that I wake up, waiting for him.

I came here from Los Angeles twenty-eight days ago, hoping to make a deal, like most people do when they go off in search of El Diablo.

When my doctor first told me I was losing sight in my left eye and my right would soon follow, I went to see my down-the-hall neighbor, Margie. A withered yet ageless woman (in spirit), Margie reads tea leaves, tarot cards, and *The Washington Post* while she gets *The New York Times* so she has something "meant to be shat on" lining the floor of the expansive, warped parrot cages that rattled day and night by the squawking birds they hold. Sometimes, I let her read me, even though I didn't believe in whatever she was doing. Except that day. I needed to believe in it that day.

It was later that afternoon, right after my doctor's visit, and the whole world felt more heightened, like my senses were trying to override what my body was doing, blinding me. The disease, shortened to C.J.D., was too long for me to remember after hearing it twice in my life—once when my mom explained to me what happened to Tío Claudio after he tripped into traffic on

the street and got run over by a burro. A second time when my doctor spoke my fate into existence a few hours before I visited Margie. It rarely appeared in younger patients. At thirty-one, I was an anomaly. I would die in a year, but I would go blind first, lose my memory and my coordination. Lose me.

I remember now: The walls of her apartment were pasted with the covers of *Time* magazine and a ten-foot poster of Shaquille O'Neal on the wall opposite the front door, so the first thing you saw walking in was the NBA legend with his fingers curled around a rim, his feet dangling in a moment captured just after he muscled the ball into the basket. Margie didn't follow basketball, much less early-2000s professional basketball, but she liked the colors, the deep gold of his Lakers jersey contrasted against a dark crowd. I had asked her to tell me if I would ever be able to see again. I could see then, and I didn't know how fast the blindness would set in, but I wanted to know. I couldn't live and not know. I stared at everything I past because I wasn't sure if it was the last time I would see it.

Margie swiftly made a cup of tea. Chamomile. To calm me, she said. I don't know if that made a difference. She gave it to me at the card table in the kitchen. I drank my tea, and Margie examined the pattern at the bottom, her smooth forehead wrinkling between her eyes as she squinted at the residue. "Maybe," she said, not looking up. She swirled her index finger into the leaves, distorting them. Like I would be able to check her work.

"Maybe" was what she said, but she meant "no." Margie liked me, liked to talk to me over her tea and my mom's empanadas. She didn't want to get my hopes up, but she didn't want to crush me either. We both knew the real answer. It gravitated, unspoken, between us.

I thanked her and left, shuffling down the hall with one hand on the wall, making my way home by memory alone, trying to build my confidence while I could still see so I could stop myself from falling down the stairs, practicing ability to go out into the world without my eyes.

My mom had told me of a place not too far from our village when we lived in El Salvador. A place where you could meet the Devil.

I traveled for twenty-two days to reach la Puerta. In a matter of weeks, I would be totally without sight. Even now in the cave, it creeps in around the corners of my vision, a smoldering photograph burning slowly at the edges until nothing is left.

You can only reach our home village by bus after the plane lands in El Salvador, about an hour-long ride. From there, you hike through the jungle to the perilous cliff where the Devil lies in wait for you. It took me longer to get there, almost two-and-a-half weeks after reaching El Salvador. I didn't need a guide. I convinced myself I could see.

After a taxi ride to L.A.X. and three connecting flights and a bus ride and another taxi, I hiked until I reached the Devil's cave, a slit in a stone in the jungle covered in trees and foliage that I hacked back with my arms before slipping inside. Cool and damp and quiet, I listened to the animals outside and closed my eyes, imagining living in this kind of darkness for the rest of my life. I picked through the food I had brought with me, enough for a week or two, sat with my back pressed against the cave wall, and waited for the Devil to appear.

That is what my mom had told me, that the Devil frequents this dangerous rock, watching for souls to slip away so he can scoop them up and keep them like treasures in little jewel-encrusted jars. Only the best for his souls.

I heard that the Devil would sometimes make deals, give you something in this life in exchange for something from you in the next. I had a plan all worked out: my sight for my first-

born child. I could choose to not have children, but the Devil didn't need to know that. I would trick the Devil. I would be able to see. I would be able to live.

I have sat in the cave for days. The Devil does not come. I can no longer see the cave walls or the crack in the wall that legend tells me will break open when el Diablo is ready to appear. I can only press against it with my shaking fingers. I ran out of food yesterday, sooner than I thought. I have no water. I shout at him. I wave my in the air. I can no longer see even a few feet in front of me. Every once and a while, I would reach up and touch the low ceiling with my fingertips and try to ground myself.

Ultimately, the darkness arrives like a moonless night. I know I need to leave the cave. I know I have made a mistake. I can't remember how long I have been here. My body barely moves. On my hands and knees, I crawl out and lie on the lip of the rock overlooking the jungle hundreds of feet below. I feel the sun heating my skin, but I cannot see it.

There Are No Birds

MATYA GREW UP BY THE sea. She knew it wasn't a sea but rather a saline lake in the middle of the desert. The Arabs called it the "sea of death," but Matya always knew better. It was the "salt sea." It couldn't hurt anyone.

As children, she and Tali and Judah walked from their settlement to the beach front, maybe ten minutes away, through the dirt of the dry desert, pushing each other in the street and laughing and eating the airy Bamba they stuffed into their pockets before leaving home, the dusty peanut butter ringing their pink mouths and mixing with the salt in the air. She sees Bamba sometimes in the corner store now, sometimes in the Ethnic Foods aisle, sometimes with the rest of the American snacks. Matya will touch the plastic bag with her hand and smell the sea, but she has yet to buy it; she is afraid it won't taste like she remembers it. Maybe it was the thick scent of salt in the air and the sweetness of friendship and love that made it so delicious, eating one after the other until she ran out and snuck a couple from Judah's pockets when he wasn't looking, though Judah always knew. Tali would take some too from her brother. He always gave, never minded sharing, would glance over at her with his darting cerulean eyes and quickly vanishing smirk.

A cool breeze blew off the sea, and the three perched on the rocks of salt deposits a few meters from the water's edge, the sea lapping gently against the shore. Matya squinted and tried to catch a glimpse of the fringe of Jordan. She wondered if the bombs went off over there too, and she wonder if they ate Bamba. Later, she thinks maybe they did, but probably not. Maybe those far from home eat it now as a reminder of something close to where they used to live, just like she eats dates every day even though she didn't eat them growing up. She is too scared to eat the Bamba from the American corner store.

Once all that remains of the Bamba were the crumbs stuck to the insides of their pants pockets, they stripped down to their bathing suits, leaving on their rubber flipflops to keep the jagged salt rocks at the bottom from cutting their skin. They waded into the water with tourists, who watched them carefully. All the travel guides told the outsiders that the water was not safe for children, much too corrosive, much too caustic for young skin, but the friends had been going to the sea for years. Every Sunday, they put on their bathing suits and flipflops and took their colorful, faded beach towels. Tali always kept her blonde hair cut short. Matya wrestled her dark and curly mane into a bun with a stiff elastic band, briny from past uses. Judah tugged on the loose strands with nimble fingers. Matya redid the bun with a smirk.

Tourists always had cameras with them, taking pictures and videos of themselves floating in the brackish and glassy water, astounded by their own buoyancy and determined to commemorate it forever, to show the miraculous moment to their friends and families at gatherings and get-togethers. Matya thought she would have more time to take photographs with Tali and Judah at the sea, but she left too soon. She has none. All of the pictures of the trio were taken in the midst of the desert sand, surrounded by dunes and stout dusty buildings.

She recalls one, the one that got the closest to them at the sea. Matya stood out next to the brother and sister pairing, Tali taller than Judah even though he was older than both girls by three years, and Matya taller and darker than both of them. Her hair brown, her eyes black, reserved, her willowy frame precariously structured out of a long torso and skinny waist and small feet. Tali and Judah often blended together in a mix of blonde hair and porcelain skin scalded red by the sun. Like Matya, their family had been driven to the Holy Land from Europe in search of peace, acceptance. The three stood close together, wrapped in beach towels having just returned from the sea on a Sunday afternoon, smiling wide white-teeth smiles. Tali looking at the camera. Matya

and Judah looking at each other, her hand on his arm, his honey hair stiff with salt. Matya was fifteen. This was likely the last time she went to the sea. A few months after that picture, she left. She does not remember who took the picture.

The water used to slip over her deep brown skin like beads of oil. She realizes later that it is a paradox because how could the water be like oil if oil and water aren't chemically inclined to mix with one another? Oil and water separate.

It's more accurate to say that the birds acted like the oil, settling atop the water. Separate. Bulbuls and babblers and Chukar partridges, but the birds only settled there at night or in the early morning because too many tourists scared them away. Matya, Tali, and Judah used to chase them into the dawn.

Matya does not see these birds in New York. She sees robins and mourning doves and pigeons—insufferable little birds that wobble and walk like drunks and don't care where they land. They coo like immature jokers. She misses the call of the spectacled bulbuls: careful, measured, and beautiful. New York may have Bamba, but it does not have the birds. It does not have the piquant salt of the sea or the punctual hills of the Jordan Rift Valley, and that's okay because New York would not be New York without its skyscrapers and traffic jams. New York is not Neve Zohar; Matya knows that, though she wishes she didn't. Not as many bombs go off here. Her childhood, riddled with them until she left. The Palestinians and the Israelis were on edge. She stopped going to the sea for a while. When she left Israel, Judah was taller than her and Tali both, and Tali's hair grew past her hips. They watched Matya tiptoe from her home in the dark, towed by her mother and father. Matya did not see them.

She used to write to them, but it was difficult to send mail to her friends, Israelis deep within Palestinian lands. She loved Tali's heartfelt letters and Judah's quick-witted words that always fell to sadness at the end.

Astoria Park is the closest she comes to nature in this exile, and she walks, like usual, to the guardrail overlooking the East River. Matya sees Manhattan, Randalls and Wards Islands, on the other side. She tastes the river's salt in her mouth; she feels the water like oil on her skin. She hears the detestable pigeons. She senses the park behind her, still just a street nestled in front of a sloping hill. The water churns, foggy, a few feet below, sloshing against the concrete barrier. Matya wavers. All those years playing in the Dead Sea, and she never learned to swim. The sea always kept her from drowning in itself. Matya would lie on her back, Judah's hands hovering centimeters under her spine, and she would float.

The river invites her. It knows her desires, to feel the current and the immersion and the salt on her skin. Matya, her body frail and quivering, climbs the rail.

Alleyways

ELENA'S NOVIO IS NAMED GIOVANNI, sin duda un Italiano, which is fine with me but not with Abuela. Elena met him at universidad in New York, and Abuela says that's where she went wrong, because why couldn't she meet a perfectly nice Cubano here in Pequeña Habana, like the guapo college boy—Mateo García, I remind her—or Magdalena's stout sobrino—Luis, I remind her—or the one with orejas grandes—Javier, I remind her. She exclaims, "Javier!" and then comments that his beautiful, coarse black hair covers his big ears anyway. And if they had children, Elena's orejas pequeñas would mix with Javier's orejas grandes to create children with ears of the perfect size.

My sister rises promptly from her seat at the round kitchen table, the finish chipping at the edges, worn down in spots where our plates usually scrape, across from Abuela and paces. Elena pulls her curly hair over her shoulder and twirls it through her fingers, her feet padding back and forth across the two feet of space afforded to her in the cramped kitchen. Abuela does not look up from her knitting. Her arthritic knuckles shift like rusted cogs of a machine beneath her paper-thin skin.

Elena tells Abuela that Giovanni is just as good for her as any of the Cubanos, if not better, and she likes that he is suave, chévere, diferente. She likes that he speaks Italian and not Español. The language moves so much smoother; the dips and curves of the language more exciting.

Abuela scowls.

Elena likes that Giovanni eats risotto and not boliche. Gelato and not flan.

Scolding her, Abuela frowns and defends her Cuban cooking, asserting the Italians like to cut corners with their food, while Cubans se mantienen fieles a su cultura. I do not know what she means by this.

Elena likes that Giovanni likes soccer and not baseball.

Abuela knits faster. Baseball is a refined sport, one of patience and skill. Soccer is barbaric; you can't even use your hands. Besides, she adds smugly, Cubanos play soccer too.

Elena likes that Giovanni drinks martinis and not rum.

Rum is deep and smooth, and Vodka is watery. It burns you.

Elena likes that Giovanni can go back home, and she can't.

Abuela stops.

Elena releases a long exhale. "Me piro," she said, and she turns her back to Abuela and me, disappearing around the corner and down the hall until I hear the door to her room shut. She is well aware of what she said. What she said were the words she had been holding in her cheek since she met Giovanni, since she first heard that he was from anywhere but Cuba. That he was from somewhere that was so far away yet so much more accessible than our family's home that was only ninety miles away from our second home. A country of origin for a microcosm of one displaced people, cut off for what seemed to be eternity. Some of us rot outside the gates, reaching our hands across the sea for a memory slipping past, while the others rot inside, reaching their hands across the sea for a sliver of red-white-blue American hope.

Abuela looks at me. I look away. Abuela looks down. She drops her knitting needles into her lap and sighs.

I stand up from my chair and walk through the kitchen door to outside. The sticky Florida air clings to my skin like guayabate. In the alleyway behind our yellow stucco home sits Javier,

the young Cubano with las orejas grandes who Abuela believes will make an excellent novio for my shining and adventurously daring New York sister who wants to get closer to Cuba by going farther away. Abuela is wrong. His hair does not cover his orejas. They stick out on either side of his wide, tanned head, poking through the rivers of wavy black locks like jagged rocks in the water, rounded off by thousands of years of currents rushing against them. Javier pockets a skinny silver one-inch needle and rolls down his sleeves over the pockmarks dotting his arms and finishes his cigarrillo and walks back inside his blue stucco home across the alleyway from mine.

THE TRAVELER, AFTER SITTING FOR HOURS thawing near the fire, rocks to her feet and sets the glass of water on the side table beside the young man's abandoned book. Beneath her feet squeak the worn and weary floorboards, she walks toward the fireplace and touches the clawed feet of one of the two rooster statues placed above the mantle. Silently, her fingers trace the grooves in the turquoise talons bolted to the wood and thinks of the blind thrill-seeker in the Devil's cave and the man who emotionally lost his wife who physically lost her child and the old woman who drowned because she worshipped the river. The traveler turns away from the poultry and looks at the young man. He sits on the edge of his plaid upholstered chair, his hands clasped in front of him, his thumb rubbing back and forth in a measured beat across the back of his other hand. Calmly, his open, innocuous gaze focuses on her face. He is curious. He is hopeful. He is waiting.

She looks away from him, and she feels so much farther from him than the few feet that span the space between them. Her throat burns, and she realizes that he wants her to say something; he wants her to fill in the gaps between these stories and his own, separate reality. She wants to tell him that she is just as far away, as removed, as lost as he is. She can't tell him how to pull the edges of the story together across the chasm because she doesn't know either.

The family decorating in the corner of the bar has grown by a handful of party guests, carrying gifts tied with frilly, elaborate bows. Each embraces the girl, now wearing the full dress of sequins and tulle, smiling broadly at every one in turn as she hugs and kisses their cheeks with affection. Softening her eyes, the traveler takes a step away from them, and her gaze meets that of the girl, who offers the traveler a faint tip of her painted lips. They all stand together, the girl and her family and her friends, grinning and giggling in their shared warmth for one another, their community.

Without another word, the traveler grabs her knapsack and leaves the tavern. Rapt, the young man follows.

The traveler waits outside for him. At the crimson-painted door, the young man hesitates, remembering he left his book on the same side table as her empty glass. His hand rests on the heavy copper door knocker as he stands on the threshold. The knocker, characterized by a skull with tentacles like a sea creature curling out from its center, has been discolored green by wear and the elements. Neither he nor the traveler had noticed it upon entering the establishment. He grips the loop, woven through two of the monster's tendrilled arms; he feels each of the tentacles raised suction cups like small beads of sand against the pads of his fingers. He shifts behind the traveler as she stands motionless at the edge of the building's wrap-around porch.

"You know," she says to the trees, her back to the young man who merely looks on as she stares at the sky, still stained delft blue with the deep, viscous color of the dark night, "I may have seen so many places and met so many people, and I will never know what it was like to be them, but I have an idea now. That's better than not knowing at all."

The young man pulls back and does not reply. He does not know what to say.

The traveler looks over her shoulder and meets the bright eyes of the young man with her own swirling, impenetrable gaze. In her eyes, the color dances and rages and sings and screams, all at the same time with stories of others.

"That family in bar," the traveler says. Her gaze holds steady as she scans the landscape before her, deeply dark. "Did you see the way they held each other? The way they relaxed and pulsed with warmth together as if they were meant to never be apart? As if they were always meant to hold pieces of each other in their hands, press them close and never release?"

The young man finally steps outside, leaving the bar behind, and allows the door to shut behind him. He stands beside the traveler as she turns to face him, drops her chin to her chest, takes a deep breath, and looks up. “I have one last story for you.”

Your Eyes See Beautifully

WHEN THE CHILD CRIES IN the unknown place, the woman holds him close to her breast and waits until the graceful rhythm of her heartbeat erases the fear of the unfamiliar and replaces it with the soothing nature of the recognizable. The child senses the safety in not only the beat of his mother's heart, but wrapped in the scent of jasmine, in her warmth, in the deep pressure of being held. It's a matter of safety and love. It's the feeling of home within the cocoon of the familiarity of a tender embrace.

The woman is there to comfort the child when he does not know his place. Her presence washes over him, and he stares his luminous brown eyes into hers, a mirror, and the two watch each other. Anxieties soothe for both of them—the child understands that a novel situation is bearable with the mother there, and the woman calms with the knowledge that her child feels safe and secured and protected and loved. The foreign becomes familiar for the both of them as long as the other is present; they are grounded in each other, all the while the world around them shifts and changes. Comforting, she wraps him in a blanket that smells of saffron and turmeric, brews him a cup of chai tea, the earthy scent wafting up and through his nostrils. The steam clears his mind and calms his tender spirit.

The two remain rooted in themselves and the home they once knew together, decorating in bright tapestries and delicate handmade pottery, detailed in swirling gold and red mandala designs. The woman watches as the child learns to walk across the ornate and detailed rug she brought from Iran now laid out in their small American home, learns to speak her twisting, sinuous language and their sharp, biting language, learns to eat her traditional food with utensils and their food that sometimes doesn't require as much as a spoon—and makes friends with people who have never

spoken her language or eaten food like hers before. Their young, picky mouths spit out the bademjam and gormeh sabzi, their faces soured in disgust. The child enjoys the food all the same, eats it despite their jeers and mocking tones, and he parcels the American sandwiches the mother learned to make with a fork in his elementary school cafeteria at lunch.

In the unknown place, their connections grow. They meet more people from their community through the local mosque and the Middle Eastern grocery store. People who speak her language and like her food, don't spit it out discretely into paper napkins like the mothers of the child's American friends who then use the napkins to dab stray streaks of dusty red lipstick.

The mother and the child occupy two worlds. She learns their language, learns to make their food to appease the child's friends while still introducing her food onto the table. Pizza and sabzi khordan for dinners and more baklava than normal because everyone loves the flaky sweet. They are still "us" and "we," the mother and the child, but they are also a part of "them," though not too much. On holidays and special occasions, she delicately paints their hands and arms with henna, each stroke rooting her.

Today, when the mother cries in the now-familiar place, the child knows how to comfort her. He brings her the blankets that still smell overwhelmingly of saffron and turmeric, brews her a cup of chai tea. No longer a child, he reminds her of the place they left and the place they are now, how it's different yet the same. It is enough to be here with one another and to know the places they have been together.