

## EN LA COLONIA I CANNOT FIND

I dream in a house filled with winter,  
a house always between stages. My aunt,  
in the country where I am a child,  
watches as her dream house develops:

walls of cardboard and wood planks  
make way for cinderblocks; doors  
to each room go from bedsheets  
to knobbed, solid doors; the floor

remains dirt long past childhood,  
past when I stayed there, long into  
the stories I hear of deals made  
with narcos to keep safe the house

I used to dream in. Her house different  
each year I slept there, memories  
now different colors, the bottoms of  
my feet the color of the earth

I walk across feeling winter, each  
small step picking up more of the earth.  
My aunt paces, wanting more for herself,  
each step as dark as mine. In dreams,

we talk in the same house I try to place  
years later on a map of Matamoros:  
not the crowded colonias near the bridges,  
nor the populated, street-lined center

nor the blocked-off Zona Industrial.  
My eye veers further down dark swaths  
of map, unmarked and undeveloped,  
one road straight into the open fields

and ranches of makeshift shacks  
and shacks shifting, made into  
the country we find ourselves  
dreaming in now. We counsel

each other in Spanish and English,  
say we did not know, no sabemos,  
what the country would be like,  
nor what would happen there.

We walk amidst changing walls,  
our steps marking the path,  
and the path marking our soles,  
the earth molding to where

I relive nights of winter,  
of not knowing  
this is the nature of longing,  
of faith, of not being satisfied.

## CUSTOMS

A child, I hide *El Presidente*, wrap a shirt around the bottle. I can hear the amber fluid as it lays secret at my feet, each glug as the car idles forth says: *lie, lie*. My aunt rolls her window down, meets my eyes in the rearview: *¿Sabes que decir?* I nod, my jaw tight. The river sloshes and sways underneath the bridge; each car shifts with shaded conversations. I hear laughter, cringe. Hear the smacked chisp of impatience, wonder what I've done wrong. When it comes time for the script, my teeth knit hard against themselves with each word: *You a U.S. citizen?* I count out three clicks of teeth before my aunt says yes. *You have anything to claim?* Two clicks, no. The man looks to me – I try but cannot see his eyes, his sunglasses reflect a silver world where I'm made smaller, double, as if given two choices, two strange lives across the faces of two rivers – *U.S. citizen?* One click rises clear over the glug of my heart before I can answer, before I can gulp over the engines, the river, over the silence to say: *Yes, sir.*

## BLACK-EYED DIRGE

Death in twisted mesquite trees  
in your ashy skin and spit  
in childhood memories of wanting to look clean

Death in the handshake and the nail-biting  
in the fear of the unknown  
in the way things we do not know constitute the world

Death and its unknown face ignored,  
become background to what is living, to what we know

Death in the man in the bushes you read about in the *Caller-Times* on a visit home  
you remember nothing else from that month

Death behind the Black Eyed Pea restaurant  
in the same parking lot shared with a Wal-Mart  
across from a Circle K and Best Buy  
facing South Padre Island Drive and Everhart

Death in the same parking lot you made your way across hungry  
in the white noise of passing cars and passing lives  
in the oceanic silence of a city at night  
in the silence that is not silence, not the absence of sound but the distance of it

Death in the distance between each person so that our lives do not resound against each other  
in what you imagine fills that distance  
in what was considered a shadow, then a dog that wouldn't move

Death in the shouts at what was not a stubborn dog but a man

Death in the restaurant abandoned, excavated, emptied  
in the man abandoned, excavated

Death in an ambulance where a body is bagged like a suit to be delivered  
in a body bag full of nobody, no known thing

Death now a restaurant hollow as a chapel without believers  
without celebration or ritual  
a home for the things we do when not dying and losing our names

Death a visit home, newsprint musing its inks with yours

## NIGHT MATTER

In a house without electricity, what matters  
is having clean paper, and enough light for words.

Crouched at the window, by the streetlamp's light, I write.  
When the light clicks off, ask my hand if it matters.

Even when I can't tell what word lays at my fingers,  
I know the force and heat is my matter.

My eyes make out the paper as a glow  
registered by some animal sense that makes it matter.

The night sky fills with bits of shell and bone,  
or so I write in ink, in night-matter.

*Since men learned print/No night is wholly black.*  
since I learned night, my print is holy matter.

Frost spoke of being *acquainted with the night*;  
having words with it, *neither wrong nor right*, is another matter.

You who read and move on to other matters,  
the night knows who between us must do the dying.

## CONDITIONING (AIR STUDY)

Conditioning is what is done with  
soldiers, the heads of children  
and dogs, what is studied

in the swipe and tap of  
our fingers across screens.  
Conditioning is

your legs red at noon,  
the concrete of a city blurred  
by the same fever

falling in sheets  
of sweat down your back,  
your head ringing,

swimming in light – Conditioning is  
the hubris of weather by button,  
the shift-of-belt-buckle mentality of:

It don't matter even  
the holes in the sky  
or the waste in the water,

we can fix this, fight  
the sun's mad knuckle.

\*

Your aunt hates it when you block the fan  
while she watches TV. Any time you do,  
a sandal shoots past your head

and smacks the glass  
like a fish flopped on concrete,  
that sad sound of being

out of place. You are used to it.  
Used to sunflower seed shells  
popped between teeth

counting down each salty  
second. Used to the shells  
collecting in the trash

like the black and white  
wings of some creature  
that has to be gnashed at

for the summer to pass.

\*

Walking down the hall  
and feeling the cold  
seep through the cracks

of other people's places  
is an exercise in memory;  
thoughts of faces

working outside  
when the sun scolds  
skin raw, forgets

how to hold back;  
thoughts of another life  
where you walked down streets

until your shoelaces  
were bit away  
to the knot,

where you held a small  
fold of dollars  
like aces

allowing you to sit  
a little longer, hold  
a coffee in a diner

a little longer  
when it got too bad  
outside; thoughts of

how it's always bad  
even when it's not  
your hand anymore

or your back  
just your impoverished  
pride walking beside you,

feeling the cold  
like whispers of  
heaven, how

heaven might mean  
being set aside  
and not allowed to go back.

\*

Down the aisle of a bus  
with a broken A/C,  
a boy follows his mother,

his whole body shoved forward  
by the clamber  
and shuck

of a stop.  
His open palm  
hits his mother's waist;

she swats it,  
switches  
her cell phone

to the ear closest  
to him. As she descends,  
the boy's fingers

trail the sky  
and spread,  
letting through

light.

## QUESTIONS AFTER THE ELECTION

In her story  
about being told  
by her white bosses'  
white secretaries  
*Vote Trump! You  
better vote Trump!*  
as she punched out  
from work  
as usual, tired  
and body-sore,  
does my mother know  
she gathered  
the darkness of each  
corner of the factory,  
and the darkness  
of the drive home  
switching between stations,  
nothing sounding right,  
and the darkness  
in her mind  
listing  
all the work  
waiting  
for her at home,  
and the darkness of  
the night over  
Corpus Christi,  
and how these  
darknesses spill over now  
into every word  
I'm urged to write,  
because nights like these  
are ink, and her story  
of pretending not to hear,  
but telling me  
what she heard,  
what was said,  
is a story of darknesses  
being separated, made distinct  
as words on a page,

which hold darkness  
in one form until  
we close our eyes  
and darkness shifts  
to darkness  
shifted—  
at the end  
of her shift,  
does she know  
about the darkness  
I will hold  
for her?

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