

In your junior year at Redford High, Micky Rockwell, a white boy who would later drop the “y” off his name upon realizing that even more of this world would be his when he graduated from boy to man, said in AP U.S. History class that he’d rather rape women than be gay. “Micky the Rapist” jokes ensued, condoned—indeed, initiated—by your teacher, Wilhelm Ziegler, grandson of Nazis who, upon realizing the benefits of assimilation, dropped the “-helm” and went by Will. Mr. Z liked to give freebie quizzes on occasion. Instead of having you write an essay in fifteen minutes on the social, political, and economic implications of a chapter in the American Pageant—your, my, our universally shared history—he’d administer a very obvious one-word answer question (to which typical responses included “the West,” or “Abe Lincoln”) to help inflate your grade by saturating your knowledge of U.S. History with the superficial (which, in this historical moment, by the 2020’s standards, is actually relatively advanced). On one such occasion, Mr. Z posed a 25-point all-or-nothing question with a slightly narrower lens on American history, focalizing one of its hyperlocal, contemporary microcosms: “*Who is ‘the rapist’?*” he wrote on the board. And on this particular quiz, Roberto Sánchez, a boy who carried his name *as given* from birth into adulthood—bearing no childish appendage whose severance would deliver him to manhood, bearing instead a howling *O*-suffix that Anglicization yearned to gag or silence into “Robert”—a boy who was Mexican (like you), left the page blank (unlike you, who wrote “Micky”), turned in nothing but his one and only name alongside the date and class period in the upper right corner, and received a zero.

Relatedly (stay with me) your conspiracy theorist uncle dies the day after Christmas.¹ He liked blue, your dad says. He had a blue Pontiac, and he—who died never having completed high school, left his parents’ home, or felt his mammalian lusts reciprocated as he lullabied himself into nocturnal emptiness each of the 31,000 nights of his life—really liked the color of it. “So we put him in a little blue box, cremated him, and buried him on Monday,” your dad says, sounding almost pleased. The burial took place forty-three days after the uncle died, because of delays imposed by “the Covid.” Americans really like boxes—being bordered on all sides, by skin, colors, structures that please them in and after life. Blue is safe because it connotes flowing blood locked within a closed system, not spilling wild from skin. Americans really like blood, too. They consolidate property in marriage in tandem with bloodlines. But sometimes in this confluence, things curdle. When your parents mixed bloods like some kind of hauntingly sallow milk and blood orange citrus, the chemistry gave way to rot. You and your bro came out looking purely white. You wear heirlooms of your white father’s

¹Okay, you say, but don’t change the subject until you’ve made clear—what’s the point of the story here? To that I say: the injustices of high school American history are merely the first in a series of points that will, eventually, constitute everything. Stay with me. Quizzes and citrus and sanctions and kisses through blue masks and cutting board lines will constellate. They will rely on each other to convey what this essay is about. You won’t know ‘til you know. But stop here if you’d like—if you’re already whiplashed out of sustained interest. Or continue, if other things do not press you. Though promise me one thing: you will give no more attention to the body above than to the footnotes beneath.

face like each feature is a 3,000-pound paperweight. Your skin is a hazelnut whose wrapping paper's been grated off by colonialism into oblivion; you're left to be the color of the inside of a dense, fat, mildly sweet nut. You wish to extract the deeper pigments of your skin, lasso your freckles and birthmarks into a cluster, a galaxy of brown stars, rein them together with a strand of your hair, migrate them under your heel, restitch them there, and let them explode—like how some people stamp out the dying embers of blunted cigarettes, only you would reignite everything you crush underfoot with your big bloody Mexican citrus magic.

You posit that your complexion is part of what led to your parents' divorce. Your pops most definitely rigged the Punnett squares. A little mix-up on the 2x2 criss-cross diluted his kids' chromosomes; indeed, he seems the type to approach procreative sex like a game of tic-tac-toe. For revenge, your mom cheated with a twenty-seven-year-old who worked for your dad. So they split,² and you can't taste your ancestors' tongue anymore; though Spanish was spoken to you since birth, you learned to cross your arms like a continent, press your lips together as the foam of español advanced to kiss you at the shore. You were all, "*Retreat, lengua—endeavor not to kiss once more.*"

And for your shitass Spanish today, your mom would be chucking your own chanclas at you, had you stuck around San José. She'd go to throw one—unsubtly asking, "Where's you chus?" and you'd tell her "No los tengo, I don't have"—I hear you—you'd be telling her she can swap in the Saucony for the sandal and dole it out—¡DALE! though tennies don't ride the hot dry July air like a sandal does, those hitchhiker mosquitos coat-tailing the straps, sailing the night to deliver a smack with a side of enough bites to send you into anaphylactic shock and brand you with a bruise to boot. All she can do now while you live The East Coast Life is throw her own small world—the one all Mexicans are issued upon arrival. Growing up, you saw your brown cousins had a much smaller world than you, though they refused to lazy lollipop drool over the surface of it to get to the heart, like most gringos do. In a memory, your best cousin Yomaris is repeatedly throwing a jawbreaker *hard* to the ground, toning sinewy her ten-year old future-chancla-pitching-arm like she's in perennial spring training. She, todos los primos, y tus tías—they aren't here to do the work of sucking for pesos on the dollar in real time. The jawbreaker begins the size (and durability) of the Earth; Yoma gets to the core in twenty minutes. That night you and the cousins retreat, four to a bed;

² *You ask why the ocean / once and for all / divorces the shore. Why wouldn't she? Water gives / besos to a continent for centuries / y yet: North America almighty does not move. Land like that / longs to lock into its likeness / reaffix to its own kind / so no / it does not move to kiss / the water back. Land like that / wants Pangaea back / naïve / thinking Pangaea was just / one thing. / Do not forget the nights / the Northwest coast of Africa laid long / against the Eastern seaboard of the States / or when South America cradled into the / span of what America calls south. / Don't forget that yesterday / there was the belly of Brazil / and upon it the hands of Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Gabon / lain like aunties', nephews', neighbors' palms / praying with the baby beneath. / It was just yesterday / trust me / I still / see it. / Look at the limits / of your body to orient your love / to its beginning. / There is such a thing / as another country. / You cannot be the only one.*

having cheated your way to the center of some big American candy, when it comes to sleep, everyone jockeys their way *out* of the center, not wanting to be the midnight pissur, holding it in while firewalking over the slumberers on either edge. Tía y Tío sleep on a pullout in the living room, your tío having slammed the world that was given to him down and built a house for his family behind that of his parents³—albeit one that was too small and seemed to slouch down a cliff over a creek alleged to have alligators that only your older cousins could see.

In the morning, your tía gives you all a sleeve of Oreos to the ratio of one tall cup of white milk⁴ each. It's 1999. You go to catechism on Tuesdays, so on the weekends, after mass of course, it's Sunday school in the streets. While your tías smoke/don't cook, you roller skate over broken sidewalks,⁵ collect dead bees, study Yoma's fifth grade ovulation diagrams, mistake the Sabbath for sábado 'cause your Spanish sucks and you sin on Sundays anyways—religiously.

Yoma has got an astronomical anomaly on her body: an amalgam of brown dots covering her ankle. *Stella novae*, firework foot, corporeal phenomenon of great public interest, it is her trophy: intergalactic confetti on her skin, so that she always has an escape from this world to a moon and stars and universe that are hers, and so that you—half-and-half in the ethnic sense though phenotypically in the coffee creamer sense, and lacking your own celestial birthmark—cherish the undercover nightlights you create with that heel, guiltlessly crowding a three-person bed to four, the pallor of your own feet mingling in the glittering brown starry night sky with Yoma's, humorously.

When you leave California for the U.S. capital in your twenties, you seek sisters of the foot widely. The Hispanic woman who rings you up at a luxury grocery is reluctant to sell you a very ripe guava.⁶ Making less than a living wage, she throws laughter like a jawbreaker through her mask against the plexiglass between you, and you still manage to get pegged. “Hab you try this before?” You are a Mexican, a card-carrying one—can attest *tu madre* with her *dual citizenship* and her *hot ass temper* boiled up in *¡Agascalientes!* and always *¡simmering!* straight out of a *vat of ¡pig fat!* This is to say: tú, una Mexicana, are *familiar* with The Guava®, though you are *sin morena*. Sin the

³You still hold out hope every change of presidential administration that the next HUD director is Latinx; your people are masters at the “house in the back of a house”—the cornerstone of further promising housing policy.

⁴JT is tall and white, like many things, especially like a glass of milk. You will meet him decades later, a DC corporate comms professional with a built-in rabbit's foot where his Achilles heel would otherwise be, his ankles poised permanently atop life's most advantageously slanted starting blocks, keeping him ready to circle a track he could merely lap with his eyes and win first place, and further boosting his height. JT, who refers to the contractor who verbally confused sandstone for granite in the completely unimportant renovation of his backyard staircase a “fucking retard,” in decidedly less public-facing “communications expert” parlance. JT, for whom “The Supremacy White” becomes a stand-in, a nickname in the style of Spanish syntax, a sort of synecdoche, between you and the Colombian au pair down the street, with whom you nanny the neighborhood kids—JT's son among them. Each day Javier greets you, he includes in his opening remarks the question: “How is *The Supremacy White*?” (You answer, “*As ever, Javi. As ever.*”) JT, who, the last time you see him, will be veiling his plants frantically in mesh to wall them off from the impending Brood X cicada invasion—seventeen years in the making—as if it were a plague of locusts or braceros burrowing up through the Earth, as if his garden of petunias and class anxiety were sitting just north of Juárez.

⁵Might I add that such shoddy infrastructure endemic to low-income neighborhoods would not fly—would not be given an *inch* of runway—under the jurisdiction of a Latinx-headed HUD? You would agree.

⁶Como Yolanda, you are! Can't get enough of them guavas.

touch of brownness in your fingers, which would render you and the fruit more congruous, grant you more ethos in the holding of it. She shakes her head as she rings it up, a stress ball in consistency, then changes her mind, rolls the weight of the rot off the scale, and subtracts the cost from the total. She takes you for a garbage disposal, an ignorant colonial curator of putrid fruit, doesn't understand that you're fluent in the firmness of guavas, and that you have developed a formula in which you a) take the deepest ripeness, that which is too immediate for the world (you are the *glutton* of its neglect) b) eat it, and by virtue of doing so c) remain alive. *Too gringa for this guava*, you bet she thinks. *No...* you (don't actually) say, on the other side of the fake glass. Holding the phonemes hermetic inside your mouth, you articulate nothing, instead merely salivate *Atlantically* to her the truth: (footnoted below so that you strain to hear it, decibels inside your head).⁷ She laughs at you—you—with your tumid water balloon, your tender companion. She lets you have your *preciosa hermosa* overripe guava, proxy for your people. You hold it in your palms, the accomplice she won't be to you.

You can never speak enough Spanish to speak up in moments like this. You actually never speak up, even when you got a handle on the conjugation a given situation calls for. You walk out of that store, jamming your contested POW guava into your handbag, deep into the mass grave of all your other silences. Quietly, its jaundiced body sleeps in a bed of notes you've scribbled into the inner-white canvases of every silver gum wrapper your lonely mouth has ever devoured. These notes of things you simply cannot say tell a long story. Taken together, they are Dickensian in their serialization, as well as in the comic repulsiveness of their characters—mostly you, a backstreet riffraff scrivener, filthy, famished, and penniless in the sooty shadows of local industry, writing just as you live—upon *scraps*. They are tiny footnotes, aching to be banknotes in an otherwise impoverished handbag. They largely catalog an encounter you had with someone in the woods after a year apart, six months into Covid. You wanted to see him that day. It was the only day you had. He wouldn't take off his mask to talk—not even at a distance. This refusal *destroys* you. Upon the waxed-backed Fruit Stripe wrappers that rupture across the floor of your purse, you wax poetic about your hunger in ways that do not always make clear the nature of your starvation. When you gather up the confetti-composite every month or two or three—when a new season screams it's time to

⁷ “I know the taste of the fruit on the inside of this skin. Not by its color alone, but by touching it—I find the ones who feel most like kin—who feel ready, and when open, wear the pinkness of beginnings—the blush of an early fever, unconsummated desire in the itchy zenith of an allergic spring—when it has been warm for long enough but not even close to warm enough but you are in an adolescent fervor, ready before the world says it's ‘time,’ swollen self-bitten lips, in love. Tell me what you think I need to know to understand how to kiss you, *hermana*, and I'll recount to you, a *tu boca*, without ever opening it, exactly what this bulbous fruit can bring.”

shovel out all the lusty litter, to clean house—you end up with foolish fistfuls of the next great American lyric novel—*foiled*. Mira, like—⁸

There's a version of this story upon gum streamers where you and he both take off your masks. You didn't live that version. It may have occurred in another genre, on another continent whose shores take delight in the unrelentingly insistent desire of the sea. There's a version of this story where you were never wearing masks to begin with. But it doesn't take place in the now, nor would it ever in the boundaries of America.



Months and hundreds of thousands of deaths later, you find yourself out of a job, babysitting around the clock to break even on food and rent, but back in communion with your feet people—sort of. You accept work taking care of a kid in the neighborhood, joining a slew of local nannies on exchange programs from places like México, El Salvador, Colombia, Perú, España. The sole male

⁸ “*our mouths gagged back from wetness of air not knowing how to breathe in masks that hot
breadth that could only belong to september. your kindness was not enough for me. i wanted
your body. a year unseen.*
oh. now you have left me to kiss figs.”

I must confess: I shake down
fig trees in alleys
to keep me
from eating
you.

Once, after heavy
summer rain
I saw
displayed, open-
faced
a fat
fuchsia-
filled

fig,

halved.

wet.

wanton.

kissing

the

lip

of a garbage bin
that lay
underneath
the fig tree's lowest
branch; the autumn moon
rose undeniably soon. And the August
fruit had long-since shriveled up
like my un-shaken
un-figgish
crush: gone
back to the Midwest without kissing
me, perhaps knowing
I was a wild thieving thing
who could crave communion
with fig-strewn-garbage-lid-lips.
As usual
I dig
the roots
of a new
lover
too soon.”

among you—Javier, a Colombian economist turned au pair in his late twenties who came to America to improve his English by taking care of a small, barely comprehensible child—situates himself at the head of the women-and-Welch’s-fruit-snack-strewn benches in the shade of the Hoffman Elementary School playground, where an autonomous orb of Latinidad swells that region of the blacktop. They are like a crew of deferential bandits camped out in a bagel’s hole—undermining the hallmark of its structure, yes, but within clearly-inscribed limits. Among the nannies who *don’t* sit for hours eating the kids’ snacks, there is a flat-stomach aesthetic, a brand that unequivocally refutes the fact of motherhood. This is a *girls’* job, a *high school girls’* job, a *crop top girls’* job where ribs and muscles weave into each other like a brown breadless basket on display below every pair of thirst-denying breasts in the cohort. Javier refers to the nanny gaggle as his Latin American “harem;” he then calls this a bad joke. You call life a bad joke. “Some of these girls do this for years, spend years on this playground,” he relays. Javier has gathered multi-generational knowledge, longitudinal data, and extensive oral histories from the information superhighway that is the Latina harem. Jesus, you say, sounds like hell. The two of you look out at the playground, locate a child whose parents let his curls grow to reach his shoulders and subsequently never mandate that he groom or bathe. You then pinpoint a child you both generally agree is an asshole. Deeming them “Jesus” and “El Diablo,” you will them to duel from the refreshment-laden spectatorship of the barrio, replete with its lukewarm mozzarella sticks and equally inspiring twelve saltine crackers in a bag. You then become distracted by a slightly older child, an elementary-upperclassman as it were, who is insanely good at soccer. You nickname the prodigy “Little Messi,” animate referee hand signals exclusively in his favor, and collapse to your increasingly unsupple knees when Little Messi succumbs to injury. You emphatically waive his conscription into the ongoing fight between good and evil you previously staged, even as morale wanes bilaterally and the need for escalation to break gridlock becomes clear. Little Messi has a career ahead of him that will inspire millions, and no kind of interference, be it a ploy by the defense, a state-sanctioned takedown, or otherwise, will be stood for. You’ve long forgotten your own children—that is, the ones you are formally charged with. Instead, you are occupied realizing that Hoffman Elementary is the site of the modern actualization of Dante Aligheiri’s imagination, where childcare work is at once menial, degrading, hellish—while also vital, venerable, angelic. Hoffman then, it follows, exists as a buffer between heaven and hell—a purgatory to which Hispanics congregate to await deliverance. The brutal transnational migrations of Latin American people fleeing their homelands on foot for North American safety do not locate their terminus at Hoffman; instead, the school is sanctuary to those who traverse the globe on visas to shrink their worlds down to playgrounds that fence in the tensions and indignations of white affluence with the intensity of a crucible. Young women, and Javier, come to los Estados Unidos to expand their language skills, only to pare down their vocabulary to proficiency in infantile concerns.

And yet, it cannot go unremarked upon that they gain *some* valuable, if niche, problem-solving skills as well. Javi—if anything hamstrung by years of a microeconomist’s training—impeccably executes the same equation on the daily: Solve for x where

$x = \text{the tactics necessary to most quickly please rich white people's children}$

—or, if such an unknown transcends algebraic possibility, Javi, sensing himself under pressure, spanked by the sinisterly accelerating advance of the clock’s second hand, moves on deftly to solve for y , where

$y = \text{the force needed to coddle the proclivities, the incontinence, and the whims of a young crop of next-generation American Revolutionaries}^9 \text{ so that nothing is ever ever difficult for them ever.}$

The Trump Administration has ended, but you, collaborating with Javi, have doubled down on its agenda, toiling for minimum wage to give the white boy, whose parents bought your depreciated labor for him, everything he wants. The comedy is divine.

Another argument could be made that Hoffman’s purgatorial play yard is also a microcosm of D.C. itself. For one, Hoffman’s cement benches always dig your thighs deep, and the city has likewise transferred its gridlines to your body since you arrived; you bear more borders, fat folds that imply segregation—legs from hips, stomach from groin—body parts that no longer belong to each other. Your tongue was once a whole *lengua* which, throughout years of Capitol Hill schmooze,¹⁰ your partisanly-serrated Apple-Pie-on-the-4th-of-July-USA!-USA!-U!-S!-A! incisors sliced up so many times that it now hangs doglike from your mouth, flaccid, pink, and streaked with demarcations like both a piece of carne butchered to strips and the scratched-up cutting board beneath. Your tongue is a microcosm of your body and your greatest—failed—aspiration: for it to simply be one. pure. *American*.¹¹ thing.

⁹ You’d decided by mid-afternoon on the 6th that leaving D.C. would mean leaving everything behind. If white nationalist violence broke out in the Heights, nothing was worth taking with you. You were unwilling to even dunk a pair of underwear into a Target bag for the road. The best way to look back at something is to blow blue bubbles out in front of you—glean, from the soapy, ephemeral surfaces of small crystal balls, what inferno might befall the city that you leave. The bubbles will blow back behind you, and better they than you to be tasked with flavoring the land, popping into droplets of their former bodies’ salt.

¹⁰ As an unserious Congressional staffer during Trump’s presidency, you often sat in meetings in the Minority Whip’s office around a Last Supper table, spread with platters of Dunkin’ Donuts whose deep-fry and glaze would metamorphosize your pencil skirts into straight-jackets for your thighs in two weeks’ time, all while a man barked grand-sounding things to you and the other disciples, like: “One—pragmatism. Two—need. It is between those two pillars that policy is made.” It will later strike you, long after you’ve fled your tenure as a federal government employee, that American policy is made in a network of *many* rigid pillars—Ionic, Corinthian, and Doric—that do not parallel each other, and are stricken through by gridlines of streets that comb the broken diamond-shaped city, sliced off at the Potomac and pierced by the Anacostia—a river named for the people upon whose land said diamond is etched. The District is a lattice of contradiction, a big cut-up tongue.

¹¹ The federal city did your body *dirty*, did it *in*, which is to say, it did it *American*. Before the carnage, though, there were once photos of you in just a bra printed on cardboard posters advertising a \$20 all-you-can-eat vegan brunch at a cosmonauts’ skater + cannabis basement lounge in Adams Morgan underneath one of the Jumbo Slice pizzerias. This configuration hints with no subtlety that veganism is a petty footnote to the blanket of animal fat that above-ground patrons opt to cloak themselves in, but it also exists as a case study in audacity. Iterations of Jumbo Slice unfold like endless mirrors along 18th St, each self-identifying as “The Original Jumbo Slice”: the archetype, the OG, the Adam of Eves. Each establishment peddles an aggressive claim to authenticity, insists on a solipsism that pays no heed to the non-corroborative evidence of its compatriots next door, and makes no concessions to its clones. Which sparks a question: if we all say we’re “the real thing,” do we all become fiction? Or perhaps comedy? The Jumbo Slice among Jumbo Slices is a microcosm of America, sitting unaware of its derivativeness and unabashedly proud of its size on the 18th St AdMo strip.

But you digress.¹² Back to sports. Dante's elementary turf and blacktop as a small-scale manifestation of D.C. The argument goes like this: traditionally, on the field itself, fairness reigns supreme. Rules are clear; consequences for fouling are predetermined. Games are won by scoring more points than your opponent. Simple math cannot surprise. But by merely traversing the lines of the playing field—the negotiating table, the idealized institution—to step back onto the concrete terrain of the wider world—you impregnate your future with vulnerability, perhaps with your own demise. You exit the safe haven of sport and enter a realm in which rules do not apply.¹³

You feel this un-rightness working for the boy's family. When his mom officially invited you to join her family's **pod** to be her kindergartener's minder, she let you in on the rules of membership, which seemed to preclude your—though not *their*—permissions to interface with *extra-*pod** individuals, as well as your broader capacity for intimacy. The latter of these prohibitions was to remain in effect not only throughout your tenure as her under-the-table child care provider, but was to endure in the years that would follow—years of neutered desire—so that when the time came for you to stand on the shores of other lives, you would still be swashed and backwashed by the cold waters of your younger promise, and the waves would gradually climb you further with each lap—gorge more of your calves with every advance—and deliver new bouts of garbage of increasingly lower caliber (washed up Funyun bags, finger condoms, pints of Rite Aid half-vanilla-half-chocolate ice cream—eventually, blue masks) to your feet with every crash. You agreed to each one of these miserable ensuing years stipulated by the verbal contract—you endorsed the aftershocks, the full inertia of your bad decision to do this—in a covenant that the boy's mom inscribed on your neck by the writ of her wealthy grin. You auto-signed it with your economic impotence. You said *Yes* to this—and at that point, why not *more*? You all but took a Sharpie to

¹² *Again* with your lingual lamentations, *again* with your politics—you really endanger yourself, you know? You risk the exile of your entire story—of everything you will ever say—to the footnotes. Learn to stay on task.

¹³ *“The Curdling Match: A Play”*

Characters:

Milk [M. Tall, white, a chip on the rim of his glass. Doesn't owe you a drink. Doesn't owe you anything. Doesn't like your nickname for him, “Lech-hey” or “Lech” or “Leech” or something. Launches frequent diatribes on the subject of immigrants' unwillingness to assimilate, to “learn *the language*.” Uses definite article “the” to suggest English constitutes default speech. On paper, frequently mixes up “are” (v) and “our” (pn) (e.g. “Are plane is late”), conflating possession/ownership with the act of simply “being”. This is unsurprising. In Milk's worldview, “are” and “our” are (/our) not merely homophonic; they are synonymous—to *exist* is to *have*. Two units of the same duplex, property of the same landlord.]

Jugo [Goes by “Juice” depending on context/region. Stature like SunnyD; stage presence like Tang. Tannish yellow, notes of orange—color of everything, come to think of it. Squeezes residual life out of corners of the city the local government let ripen to perfection and then rot. Wastes no resources. Wastes no time. Does not treat life as waste. Sweet, unrefined, hard to break without unusual force—a good cousin of piloncillo. A drink that tells you what it is when you taste it.]

SCENE 1

(Milk and Jugo compete in a curdling match. It does not matter who won. They step off the ice into another game in which the winner is predetermined.)

Enter Milk.

END SCENE

carrot in an addendum: you would cede as much of your life to this job as the waves of your very good memory of it would stretch to.

You're pouring applesauce for him one day, splashing it uncontrolled, jar to bowl like mini-bursts of pale diarrhea while you listen to his mom help him with la tarea, licking his ears unclean with her gringa Spanish more obnoxiously than she lathers cream cheese the color of his skin onto a basic AF GF bagel—a bagel which serves as the objectification of both your compassion for him and your integrity for this job, which is to say where those things materially exist, they are highly-processed and nutritionally-impoverished, and furthermore, it is the gaping hole in the middle of a bagel that defines it after all, anoints it as a brunch sex-symbol, gives it its thesis, its ethos, *makes it what it is*. Much like the breakfast icon, at the core of your dense, unwholesome compassion and integrity, there is nothing.

The boy's mom practices yoga *highly* occidentally, presents herself in public in facemasks with the word "NOPE" across them in glittering silver cursive, and publicly shames her six-year-old as an expression of her own embarrassment at his wearing anything other than "low rider"¹⁴ socks in conjunction with shorts in public (this sartorial cataclysm of "crew socks" occurred on *your watch*, by the way). It's this particular set of desires, anxieties, and the refusal she wears on her face in no uncertain terms (with and without the sequined "NOPE") that makes your world impossibly small. She and JT sure as hell don't let you take him near Columbia Heights,¹⁵ replete with pupuserías and sometimes with overdosed bodies in the streets. Pedestrians side-step these bodies—no matter how alive, how dying they may be—out of disallowance. Out of a fear of somehow *losing*, as if it were upon the stillness of still-warm, perhaps mortuary-bound, usually brown skin that the rock in a game of hopscotch had landed. In the Heights, AC window-unit condensation occasionally lands in your

¹⁴ Idiotic appropriation of the term "low rider" used here to mean "ankle"

¹⁵ My reflection's an abacus making math in the panaderia glass;
CoHi shows me I've become an apparatus— beads rusting
On rungs, displaying an age I can't sum. I have firewalked
This neighborhood uptown, tightrope walked it down, tight

Shorts' lines hugging salted thighs, Sauconys stitching side
-walk blocks as I walked, mending the always-breaking heart
Of this palpitating country. & whenever I turn back & see the seams
Split apart I become a mother running after her child: not the boy

But the city I love. I take off down 14th before the future is lost. I want you
To imagine this city is a grid or imagine it is a mouth
Of deceit, and that 14th Street is the line between the two front teeth.
Remarkable line, unbending line, line that gives me the audacity

To eat. Where there are girls turning double dutch in the gaps
Between cars & where there are girls rushing to enter the open mouth
Of jump ropes' swings like the world outside is a living womb
They're leaving behind

To dance with the air
The earth
The to & fro
Beneath their feet.

mouth while you walk, and not even binding your face in NOPE would re-route those drops from making their way in—that shit finds you. It’s a neighborhood that would never let you claim a dietary restriction or a FODMAP diet to abstain from its flavor. And so, the boy’s mom and JT set you off each morning on a leash they do not slack up throughout the day, and by mid-afternoon you’re wound so tight around the giant homes of Mt. Pleasant that you feel like a tetherball, traveling in circles of increasingly diminishing radii as your imagination shrinks too, coiled, slammed to its finish: 6PM, the final strangulation of the pole. Mornings before work, you frequently awake to vague strangulation, stroking your neck, checking for lines.

The term “supremacy white,” in Javier’s parlance, feels like a forced duplex. Either word contains what’s essential; naming the color alone—white—would suffice, like when a color is also a thing: as goes orange or plum (fruits), so goes white (supremacy). Once as a child you awoke in blood—nose, knee, elbow—likely after a night you spent crying because you were Mexican—a fake-ass one, nevertheless, a one—and your dad didn’t want you to be. You wanted to please him, to be *one* thing—not have to bear the duplicity, the duplex-icity, the discomfort—and were convinced that thing was to be purely white. You wanted to split yourself and let your other half die in her sleep. You wished the traces of it could be relegated to a footnote—like Yoma’s galaxy—all symbolic brownness housed there. You could stow it in your socks, even if they had to be like mid-calf or knee-high to completely hide it AND you happened to also be wearing shorts (so-called “low rider rule” be *goddamned*).¹⁶ These dry blood nighttime fantasies cross your mind as you divorce blood and urine from your 28-year old body at La Clinica del Pueblo, losing ancient humors at your doctor’s visit, retaining ancient pain. You realize your blood is lighter, more slight than your urine from years of attenuation. Butterfly needles once extracted from you a sweet, bright, electric juice. These days, phlebotomists instead stab you with a butterfly’s stripped-off cocoon and drain you of blood that wears itself like homogenized milk; none have been able to summon that juice. There is a can of “Purple Plums in *Extra Light Syrup*” sitting outside the building—an abandoned food donation, as if waiting for you—its contents still thicker and truer than the blood and all the humors you left behind at La Clinica. *Esta comedia es divina*.

The boy you babysit talks incessantly, tramples you with white noise, treats you like the elasticity on the surface of a trampoline. His eyes bleed glossy satisfaction as he scrambles sun-colored crayons together like little messy eggs, breaks oranges onto the page as prelude to later in the afternoon when he will break the rind from what his mom has miseducated him to call a “naw-

¹⁶ Reminders of your duality, however, are not so easily tucked away. You still feel the pain of your mom’s fingernails trying to make an even road down the middle of your scalp, battling the natural part that had given one side of your face *más pelo que el otro*, before she also carved out compulsory Selena bangs. You were unshakable disciples of Selena; your thick-banged forehead, a perennial ofrenda to her memory. You still wear yours today.

rawn-haw;” he will not appreciate the juice. He says, “Yellow and orange are always in competition to see who gets to be the color of the sun.” Because he’s someone else’s son, you don’t look directly at him. Instead, you stare fixedly into his unpracticed rendering of light.¹⁷

Occasionally, the kid poses important questions. His mom told you when George Floyd was killed, he asked: “So it’s only called ‘murder’ when white people kill Black people, right?” You’re not as taken with his infantile sagacity as his parents are, however, awaiting with bated breath the moments in which his innocence will refract things you probably already knew about life. You can’t stand him, especially the way he indiscriminately flips “P’s” backwards over an imaginary axis, renders lowercase “b’s” and “d’s” with *100% inaccuracy*. You feel like you should try to access empathy for this child learning to write and erring over what to him are likely inscrutable script differences. To humble yourself and check your impatience, to rouse your linguistic stagnancy, and because you have a language school voucher, you enroll in an Urdu course. The script confounds you. What confounds you more are Urdu’s highly particular words like “chachi”, the woman your father’s *younger* brother marries who is distinct from an aunt your father’s *older* brother marries (bari ammi), or blood-related aunts who are your father’s sister (phuppi) or your mother’s sister (xala), or your mother’s older brother’s wife (bari mamani/maami), or your mother’s younger brother’s wife (chhoṭi mamaani/maami). The assonances of these words sing the varied natures of who exactly we are to one another within our families, and in doing so, hold a specificity that frightens you, threatens to define you *too* acutely. The boy continues flipping letters recklessly over the axes of an invisible coordinate system you were not aware your lives were operating on; you want to throw him in the trash. Instead, you drop Urdu, and then you quit your bullshit glorified babysitting job, though not before playing hooky¹⁸ in Virginia as your swan song—the day you

¹⁷ Light was hard to come by in Vermont, where you staked out the first four months of the pandemic in isolation, single-handedly augmenting the Hispanic population of the state by 20%, you estimate conservatively (though by orders of magnitude, more realistically), and thus shifting 2020 census data nontrivially. All of this to your great credit. You occupied a friend’s empty second home, whose living room she called “the living womb” because its walls used to be an inner-guava pink before she painted them white all over, and it is in between these two pillars—these two paint swatches, rather—guava and white—that you located your life. When George Floyd was murdered, you had been completely without human contact for months, and you were burning a Vanilla Almond-scented Yankee candle you’d found in the house down to disappearance. This is how you passed through the purgatorial spring of 2020, the pandemic still new, squatting in an empty blue house on a frozen rural mountain. Protests roared, and you watched a pearly white tub of wax shrink down into itself at the hands of a well-contained fire over the course of over 100 days. In late May, when the wax was almost gone and you could no longer wait, and you knew you’d never be able to reignite the stub of a wick tomorrow if you extinguished the flame tonight, you let it burn, all night, and at dawn it still burned, reckless hot fire, angry fucking fire, heating its jar into a crucible, threatening to but ultimately never shattering the glass that contained it as the wick bloomed its final fire in the shape of everything but flames: yellow and orange combusted in competition to see who got to be the color of the stars, of flushed kisses, of daffodils and daisies and mums, of all the flowers Vermont was only just beginning to hum as though it were not aware that it was spring in America and America was on fire. The candle’s fire, a thumbnail image of America, a microcosm of America, burning everything within its system of glass, throwing shadows in the shape of everything upon the white walls which had once tasted like guava and wore themselves pink like a womb so that room held those who came and went from it in a constant state of birth and rebirth, endless renewal, the first moments of their lives again and again and again, before it was painted over and this was no longer true.

¹⁸

I.

Playing hopscotch in Alexandria Javi told me I lost I need to start over cause my size

10 Sauconys hit the line every time These boxes are too small & I’m always tight

-roping some border by default It’s *my* fault What the fuck even is the United States

& why is every place I stand too small for my feet

Javi asks me if I miss Cali I say heeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee no He says that's interesting
because there is a lot of economic activity in Cali Did you know Cali is responsible
for a large portion of the GDP of all of the American economy To be quite frank I say
I prefer to lay on this field at Jones Point & undertake no economic activity

Sleep all day Play hooky from minimum wage Thieve time not money I mean really joke's on me
We make a bed where the Confederate soldiers lost & apparently forgot & where today I can see across
the Potomac the US Capitol tinted blue It & me Us Famously Making me feel I am always under fire
or under siege

II.

In the harbor
of half desire
Javi is asleep
beside me.

I whisper 'i love you'
for the first time
outside
my body

into some heavy
Southern air, drunk
with humidity. It is
the first time

in a long time
I say this
& I say it
into the inner-spine

of an open book
straddling my face
to do more than shade
me

& not to the guy
laying beside me
with whom I
entered this state

from
Congressionally
-controlled
territory.

I let
love
go
in the space
between
us
The space
between
me

the book
& Javi

because
Virginia is
for lovers

& so is

finally resign to the fact that your fits of alphabetically-induced rage on the job (regarding the endless *P/q-b/d* conflation) constitute ample grounds for your recusal.¹⁹

(N.B. You are instantly replaced by a seventeen-year-old child who commands the same wage as you.)



Nearing thirty and having spent the past decade employed either miserably or not at all, you're still a child who digs your heels into the ground trying to pierce cement, cheat your way to the center of the Earth. Get to the point. Like most people, you think New York is where you can most feel the core of the Earth when you walk, without breaking any jaws.²⁰ You're jumping the gun to move there, but you see prudence in a pause: a post-pandemic NYC embarked upon too soon warrants caution, like

my wasted
body
country
economic activity
fertility
good personality
marketability
poetry
polity
rhyme scheme
salary
sentimentality
tax refund, 2020
time
truth
vote
youth
time
life
time
life
time
life
time
time
time
time

¹⁹ And on that day you malingering, laying in Jones Point Park, losing \$15/hr, you consider there is a world that seeks to locate, classify, and taxonomize you with such exactitude on every possible axis, asking not “who are you,” but “whose are you,” and “how much are you” and “to whom are you that amount”? In this moment on the grass, you understand that it is *that* world you are hiding from. You feel nowhere, por que el origen no importa, especially when you're fucking off in a field on a workday like nobody's pride and joy—like nobody's oldest hija, youngest hermana, second cousin of some mamá who should've never been a mamá—like an unclaimed mujer. You belong only to yourself. But ask yourself this: when you play hopscotch, do you pick which squares to skip? All this time, have you been choosing which boxes to step in so you could make it farther in America than your family, to whom you are *exactly* this: the oldest daughter of the second oldest daughter and third of six children of the abuelos who came to America in the 1980s so that a few decades later their granddaughter could deface the family tree—redact her likeness and name by the methodical, streaky application of *BIC Wite-Out Brand EZ Correct® Correction Tape - White?*

Ask yourself: what are you throwing away when you toss the rock? Do you betray your lineage when you let it fall?

²⁰ 2020 was the year jaws held tight. The year we were gagged, lips behind mourning veils, mouths packed into body bags. Except for your half-sister, a Mexican girl who is named after a beloved, tragically killed English princess. She carried a tumor in her jaw that year, possibly reprimand for transgressing her status in some way with her royal-sounding name. You honor your sister's mouth and identity through the things you carry—rotted fruit in your pockets, its shape a slant rhyme of bulbous tumors. You honor her by performing yourself as a pallbearer of expired produce. Rather than burn sage to her good health or chip in for better dental insurance, you fumigate 14th St with perverse secretions of the tropics.

those lingering remnants of a sushi buffet spread you once ate in a landlocked state; the big city is something that is best waited out until after the final fish have gone, and a full refresh is laid. *But wait*—risky fish are not that apt of a metaphor for protracted virulence. One sees what you're attempting, but you're getting carried away. Your efforts at metaphor are losing steam.

And yet, you *can't wait* to puncture your footmarks into the city streets, arches of your feet electrified up like a cat's back by the shock in your heels. You are like Achilles, but strong *all over*. Ride the momentum of your audacity—take your failed metaphors too far: fire up stagnating midwestern sushi with your AC/DC, fudge the important practice of food safety, fry them right from raw into fish sticks with your magic Sauconys—shoes that Lois-Lane themselves into Súper Chanclas when the Brooklyn night gets too hot. New York is where your chanclas always hit the lines in the sidewalk just right: tiny borders in a city that doesn't need any lines to know that it is more than just *one*. That it is so, so many things.

You will overcompensate for the daily fear of death by enrolling in too much life, you decide. You will go there, to New York City, away from the capital, away from that boy. And every time you overlay a line in the concrete with your big ass feet, strike it like a guitar string, you will partake in your own kind of refusal: an electric jolt of birthmarks, broken worlds and broken jaws, border hops, hopscotch, and bidi bidi bom bom.



The most asymmetrical kiss you ever had was not like fire and ice. It was like fire applied to something flame retardant—something totally indifferent, undiminished by receiving it. That was when you were twenty-three. You never thought asymmetry was a good facet of a kiss until you, voyeur, saw two people kissing through a mask on Kenyon Road. His bare lips pressed onto the pleated blue paper she wore, its color like the cover of those university blue books that tested you in college each time you opened them, only for you to write on white lined paper and by virtue of that fact alone, get everything wrong.²¹ When they released the kiss, you searched for a correct answer on the surface of the blue paper mask in vain. The D.C. humidity is a scapegoat for all bodily excretions, so it might in fact have been that he'd been daubing kisses like an envelope sealer onto a letter that was already soaking wet. Either way, no trace.

²¹ The test: For each of the following conjectures, give proof:

- 1) *You are not one but two.*
- 2) *Your r's roll less like marbles, more like dice.*
- 3) *White and brown are always in competition to see who gets to be the color of the daughter.*
- 4) *You are just one, not two.*
- 5) *You are the color of the sun.*

Proof (For conjectures 1-5): My fellow Americans have been instructed not to look directly at me.

QED

You wondered about the unconventional methods of this couple on Kenyon Road—for instance, how many others, if any, had been masklessly naked opposite her clad face? If none, then how many times, if any, had the mask been reused like a palimpsest once the saliva dried? You wondered once the saliva dried, like disappearing ink, if it meant they had failed to show their work on the test they took on their blue book of a mask—much like the way you failed so many times to prove who you were, to yourself, and to others. You wondered if the composite of the many layers of dried saliva delivered some kind of ongoing olfactory love note to her as she went about her day, smelling his kisses as she breathed in construction fumes, letting dog shit be purified through the sieve she wore stented by her lover’s drool—neutralizing everything from the perfume of garbage dumpsters to putrid fruit emanating from the pockets of light-skinned Latina passersby. You wondered about the state of saliva at large—if once dried from *any* surface of the body, its afterlife might swell there like a keloid, larger than the initial strike; if once dried, it still might ventriloquize messages mouthed onto skin in the past—sing; if once dried, it still might, however illegibly applied, impress some kind of love note in the wake of a real wet heat, past.

Whenever you finger a shriveled fig in your pocket or draw a guava regurgitating its own innards from your purse instead of the \$20 bill you’d been hoping for—you can’t help but dwell:

It had never been a matter of *how*, but *when*, you would kiss him.

You held onto this idea months before and months after that volta of status quo, when nothing changed; the mask straps held to his ears as your hands held a vibrator, the vibrator arched to smile into you the kind of smile inscribed on the faces of people asked to have their photograph taken at a funeral. All this, until you let it go, waking each morning alone, a grid of tender bedmarks insisted onto your body as you slept. But when you later saw those strangers kissing *through* masks, sanctioning a would-be DOA Covidian love through shunning death, sucking life, and imparting sanctity through a semipermeable membrane—you again felt a tug. Not for him. For fallen fruit. You felt jealous of the smack of garbage lips. There was no blueprint for these masks, no more that there had been one for your college blue books and the conjectures you could not prove, no more than there ever would be one for the virus. The test was a hopeless question. There was no answer key.

Each moment you lived after he didn’t kiss you felt like the moment right after he didn’t kiss you, until it didn’t

really matter anymore.

Because you lived. The cornerstone of sketch comedy is that in the end, the characters never learn. Hence by calling something a comedy, the onus to permanently evolve is off. But the shedding of

your humors at La Clinica put you unequivocally out of the business of comedy. You have no choice now but to learn. (Still, you may laugh.)

Sometimes the borders between you and other people are inscrutable, barriers you cannot see.²² Which also means there is likely *more to see* elsewhere. If there is something incomprehensible, something you *must be missing* in the main body of this life—*something telling you that in the foot* (-note) *there is some kind of love note, then*²³

which sky

do you pray

under

sleep under

dream

to

do you sail

beneath puddy

-backed stars

pressed

with a kiss

into the ceiling

of your

lean

-to

(heart)

or do you

make

love

²² *en la pandemia we learned something of outer space: people became planets orbiting us by 6 feet & we each, suns though not all of us look it some of us anchor the whole universe in our heels so that when we traverse borders our strides link two pueblos under the same glittering starburst of light. look up to see infinities of rosary beads prayers that all the world's peoples be assembled by a supernova de marrón*

²³ No, look at the sun this time. Back up above.

in outer
space
among stars
& their
remnants
are you capable
of love amid
the assemblage
of both real
& insinuated
light
i like
to think
god plays
paddleball
in the storm-taken
nights
knocks stars
on our
roofs
(yes, like rubber
elastic
& racket)
& then sows fruit
into the soil
of our souls.
i like to think
god masquerades
as rain
then re-assumes
the guise
of constellations

when we look

outside—

she meets

our eyes

we meet

her feet