

# Pura Vida

## The Garden

*When the Dutch colonized South Africa,  
They encountered a creature,  
Unlike anything they had seen before.  
It was angry, it was violent, but above all, it was wild.  
“A wild beast,” they proclaimed.  
And so it was born,  
The wildebeest into human understanding.  
All they saw was a wild animal,  
But their fear had kept them,  
From seeing the cruel world,  
In which this beast was born.  
For if they did, they would have seen,  
A reflection of themselves,  
In the predators of the savannah,  
As colonizers have always been,  
The instiller of anger and violence,  
Within the so-called wild beasts of the world,  
The self-proclaimed lions of the Serengeti.*

Carlos had waited so long for this day.  
Finally, a change was coming.  
Finally, he could leave Costa Rica.  
Finally, his life could begin.  
The place where every sentence began and ended with *pura vida*,  
Was the only place where his didn't exist.

He was only 17, but he knew exactly how his life would be if he stayed.  
He'd seen it all before, his cousins would finish school, find a job, and slowly lose all hope.  
He could see it in their eyes, empty of life, full of pain, the pain of life south of the border.  
The stalks of sugarcane knew them better than their own families.  
He couldn't live like that, he'd be happier six feet under,  
At least there he could rest in peace.

Carlos had known for a long time that his future was up there,  
Across five borders, in the land where no dream is out of reach,  
In the land that made life easier down here, the land that gave people hope.

You could see it in their eyes, the families of those brave enough to make the journey,  
Their pupils would dilate as if they'd seen the light,  
After spending their whole lives in the dark.

Ever since his father, brother, and sister left, he never saw his mother anymore.  
She was imprisoned by their poverty, forced to work two jobs, she didn't have any help,  
His father never sent money home, his siblings never spoke to her, she didn't deserve that.  
She never had time for her garden anymore, the garden she raised him in,  
He watched her lilies as they fought to stay upright in the downpour below the kitchen window,  
The lilies he may never see again.

His excitement began to fade as the realization dawned on him.  
Would he ever make it back? Who knows if his siblings ever would,  
And he knew his father was never going to.  
The slight drizzle outside turned to a downpour.  
The sound of rain on their metal roof always brought him peace,  
But now it was tearing him apart.  
He had never been apart from his mother for more than a week.  
Now, he wasn't sure if he'd ever see her again.  
He looked around their house, which somehow felt smaller than normal,  
It wasn't much, just a wooden shack divided by curtains to make separate rooms,  
But it was his home, he had grown up here, it was a part of him,  
And even though he wanted to leave it so badly,  
He knew would always miss it.

He could hear his mother approach, her footsteps dragged up the walkway to the door,  
There was something so calming about the way she jiggled the key in the old lock,  
A sound that reminded him of his childhood, something he had never appreciated,  
Not until he realized it would soon be gone.

His mother walked through the front door,  
She had been at work, but came back during her lunch break to say goodbye,  
She looked defeated, dark circles under her sad eyes, neither of them had slept much last night,  
The past month consisted of daily arguments between the two of them.  
His mother tried everything to convince him to stay, but all her attempts ended the same.  
When his heart was set on something, there was no changing it.  
That was her son, just like her.

You have everything?  
Yes, Mama.  
Extra shoes?  
Mama.  
Water?  
Mama.

Do you need money?  
Mama! Stop, please. I'm okay.

His mother paced around the small room, eventually finding her way to the kitchen window,  
The same spot he had been standing a moment prior, right next to the lilies.  
In her angst, she began to clean, putting away dishes left out, picking crumbs off the floor,  
Anything to distract her from the rain that was falling, from the storm that was coming.

Suddenly she stopped, Carlos knew that look, she had an idea,  
His mother rushed off to her bedroom, he could hear her grab something,  
Then she darted through the curtains and into his bedroom,  
She emerged a second later with his overalls and a needle and thread,  
And took a seat at the kitchen table.

Mama, what are you doing?  
She didn't respond, instead she took to his overalls with the needle and thread,  
Driving them into the denim with swift precision, like she had done so many times before,  
And sewing within a pocket, hidden behind the chest.  
Mama? What is that for?  
But she said nothing, and continued to work in silence.  
Mama! Please can you please just talk to me?  
Without stopping, she said, before you leave, you need to know one thing,  
It is not the white man you should fear, but those who look like you,  
The ones that come from the same place, the ones taking the same journey,  
The ones that will do anything, absolutely anything to reach America.  
They will not hesitate to end your journey if it means they can continue their own.

She knew the types of people he would meet along the way,  
How they would see the innocence in his eyes and use it against him.  
The next time they met he would be different, that is if they even met at all.

Once she finished sewing the hidden pocket, she pulled out a few hundred dollars,  
But before she could place it inside, Carlos stopped her,  
No, Mama please, I don't need your... But she didn't let him finish.  
Stop, I don't want to hear it, she said, if I'm going to let you go, it will be on my terms,  
There was no arguing with her this time, Carlos knew this wasn't a battle he could win.

Once she sewed the pocket closed, concealing the money within the fabric of the overalls,  
She stood up, walked back to the kitchen window,  
And watched as her garden soaked up the fresh rain,  
She knew it would bring fresh blooms and new life to her garden,  
But right now all she wanted was for the Sun to return,  
And her son to stay.

She couldn't bring herself to look at him.  
When she did all she saw was that little boy again,  
The little boy that loved spending time in her garden,  
Chasing lizards and finding his way into the mud puddle next to her lilies.  
That puddle dried up a long time ago, but the lilies were still there.  
They always would be. And so would she.  
His *pura vida* may be in America, 3000 miles from her,  
But her garden would always be here.  
Waiting for him.

Her tears began to fall.  
He tried to reassure her.  
Or was he reassuring himself.  
He didn't know anymore.  
She pulled him in close.  
His tears began to fall.

There was a knock at the door.  
They pretended not to hear.  
Their time was up, they both knew it.  
But knowing and accepting are two very different things.  
She had a hard time letting go of her son,  
And an even harder time opening the door.

On their front doorstep stood Victor, a man his mother knew from work.  
He was short. He was skinny. He was not ideal.  
But he had made the journey three times before,  
It was Carlos' only choice.

His mother gave Victor a look that would put fear in any man.  
She didn't need to say anything, Victor got the message.  
Don't worry, I'll take good care of him.  
Carlos knew this was a lie.  
How was this man, if he dared call him that,  
Supposed to take care of him?  
Carlos was only 5'7, but seemed like a giant,  
Next to the 5'2 Victor.

His mother pulled him in for their final embrace,  
She squeezed him tightly, as if the harder she squeezed, the harder it would be for him to leave,  
Her mind unwilling to accept his departure, and doing everything it could to stop the flow of time,  
To stay in this moment forever, where in her memory, he would always be,  
She never knew a hug could hurt so much.

Just before he stepped through the doorway,  
She had the sudden urge to reach out,  
To grab him and pull him close,  
To wrap her arms around him and never let go,  
She'd lost everyone else to America,  
She didn't know if she could be alone again,  
She wanted to reach out, but she didn't,  
She just watched him go.

She didn't get one last hug,  
She didn't say, I love you, one last time,  
She just watched him go.

Her baby,  
Her little boy,  
He was the center of her world,  
And now he was gone and she was alone,  
She could have said something,  
She should have said something,  
But she didn't, and now he was gone,  
She just watched him go.

So from now on, when she thought of him,  
When she tried to picture his handsome face,  
Tried to remember the way he looked the last time she saw him,  
She wouldn't be able to, because instead of reaching out,  
Instead of grabbing him and pulling him close,  
Instead of wrapping her arms around him one last time,  
Instead of saying I love you one last time,  
She just watched him go.

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Next thing he knew, Carlos was out in the rain, walking down the road turned to mud,  
Watching his mother fade away in the distance, standing in the doorway of their small home,  
Where she would forever be.

His mother pulled him in for their final embrace,  
It was painful, sudden, and over much too quickly,  
Like all endings seem to be.  
Next thing he knew, he was out in the rain.  
Walking down the dirt road turned to mud,  
Watching his childhood fade away in the distance.

As they rounded a corner and she disappeared from his view,  
He felt a chill pass through his body, pulling him from the past and placing him in the present,  
A feeling as though he was being watched,  
His eyes searched the dense foliage alongside the road,  
Looking for the source, but unsure if he wanted to discover it,  
But as soon as he went looking the feeling dissipated,  
And his eyes found their place of the ground,  
Where his feet dragged through the mud,  
Protesting a journey he knew he must take,  
But no longer wanted to take.

I'm tougher than I look, you know.  
What?  
I may be small, but I've done this before.  
Okay. Carlos wasn't interested.  
Neither was Victor's left eye,  
Carlos watched as it wandered around in its socket,  
It must not have realized Victor was trying to act tough.

Victor worried Carlos.  
He didn't know what it was.  
Maybe it was the vaseline in his jet black hair.  
Maybe it was the lazy eye.  
Maybe it was the way he walked. A slight limp that looked like a waddle.  
His skinny arms swinging limply at his sides.  
He looked like one of the little birds his mother would feed in her garden.  
A little wet bird.

The bus stop was only a quarter mile from his house.  
It was waiting for them when they got there.  
A yellow color he knew once had been white.  
The seats were empty and cold.  
He sat down, placed his head against the window,  
And watched as the raindrops raced their way to the bottom.

As the bus came to life, and began its journey down the road,  
His mind kicked and thrashed, desperately fighting against the flow of time,  
For so long he had wanted to leave, but now that his moment had arrived,  
All he wanted was to stay, to remain in his mother's garden,  
Among the lilies and roses, listening to the rain fall upon their petals.  
He needed one last look, one last glimpse at the home he grew up in,  
At the woman who raised him, he needed to see her one last time,  
But where he wanted a right, the bus went left, and his tears began to fall,  
He felt the current sweep him away, taking him farther and farther from his home,

From his mother, from this moment, towards his future in America,  
A place he needed to see, but never would,  
If he didn't let go,

Of everything he knew and loved.

## The Jungle

*No two things are ever the same,  
But something about them is quite similar,  
The immigrant and the wildebeest,  
They are driven to search for a life,  
Which cannot be found in one place,  
Not because they want to,  
But because they need to,  
An instinct deep within them,  
That takes them far, far away,  
In search of change.*

Carlos didn't know how to feel,  
So he tried not to.  
A numbness he found comforting,  
As he left his world behind,  
In search of change.

They pulled into the bus station in the heart of San Jose,  
A place where all Costa Ricans come to start their journeys,  
People coming and going, families uniting and separating,  
It should have made him feel better, to know there were others like him,  
But nothing could pull him from his daze,  
Or so he thought.

As Carlos and Victor moved from one bus to another,  
And sat down in another plastic seat, which somehow felt colder and harder than the last,  
He never felt the eyes following his every move.  
They weren't green like his, but had a similar light behind them,  
Her's just shined a little brighter.

Hey overalls!

Carlos blinked a few times and picked his head up.

Yeah you!

Carlos looked around as if waking from a dream, and tried to identify the owner of the voice.

Hello??

It seemed as if the crowd of people before him parted in two, revealing a girl about his age,  
A girl that seemed so familiar, yet he knew they had never met her before,  
She smiled with such passion that Carlos could almost feel it, like the warmth of a fire,  
He felt the frost around his heart begin to melt,  
Uhh hi, Carlos finally said.  
Nice overalls, she said with a giggle, then pointed to her own.  
A black pair with a heart sewn on the chest,  
The same place his mother had sewed money into his own.  
As she boarded the bus, she took the seat to his right, between him and Victor,  
Who didn't even seem to notice her, at least not like Carlos did.

I'm Roxanna.

His stomach felt funny, his palms were sweaty, and his mind went blank, she was beautiful.  
Deep brown eyes and curly black hair that bounced when she spoke,  
A smile that you couldn't help but mirror, and a giggle like novacaine.  
Just like that, his pain was gone.  
I'm Carlos, nice to meet you.

So, why are you going to America?

Carlos was taken aback, how did she know?

She must have seen the shock on his face, as she quickly said,  
Oh come on, it's not like it's a secret you know,  
Everyone here is going!

Carlos looked around the bus,

There were men and women, children and grandparents,

Even newborns in their mother's arms.

Every type of person could be found in those seats.

Really?

Yeah! Well, except for me. I'm going to live with my boyfriend in Mexico!

Ouch, that hurt, Carlos thought, but he didn't really know why.

It's not like he was here for her, or any girl for that matter,

He was here for, well, he couldn't really remember,

All he could think about was this boyfriend of hers.

But why? He thought.

I just met her.

You're soaked! Aren't you cold?

No, I'm okay.

Are you sure? I have a blanket if you want to share!

It's okay.

Come on, you're shivering!



I'm okay, really.  
He could feel her eyes on him,  
What were they looking for?  
Finally, she said, what's wrong with you? Are you gay or something?  
What? No!  
Then why are you being so weird?  
Well, you have a boyfriend.  
So?  
I don't think he would like us sharing a blanket.  
Oh come on, stop being so uptight,  
I'll share my blanket with whoever I want,  
No one tells me what to do.

Carlos couldn't help but smile,  
The blanket was paper thin,  
It shouldn't have kept him warm,  
But it did.

So, Carlos, if that's even your real name, why are you going to the US?  
To work.  
Ughhh, boring. That's what everyone says!  
But it's true!  
It may be true, but is it the truth?  
What?  
How about this, why do you need to leave Costa Rica?

Carlos had to think for a second, no one had ever asked him that before,  
When you say "to work", people just accept it and move on,  
So why did he need to leave Costa Rica?

Well, I guess it all started when I graduated high school,  
I always thought I would go to university, I graduated at the top of my class in high school,  
But when I found out I couldn't without a scholarship, I knew I needed to leave.

None of my family members went to college,  
I see what type of lives they live now, I can't stay here knowing a better life is out there,  
I need something different.  
What that is, I don't really know,  
I just know I can't stay.  
See, now that's the truth, I can see it in your eyes.  
Really?  
No, but it would be cool if I could!  
There's that giggle again,  
The one that makes the rest of the world,

Seemingly disappear.

So what about you? Why do you need to leave Costa Rica?  
Well, first off, I'm Nicaraguan, not Costa Rican,  
And second, it's kind of a long story, but basically,  
I've been living with my grandma ever since my parents died,  
And I don't know, recently I've been waking up waiting for things to change,  
Waiting to feel different, but I'm tired of waiting around.

The light behind her eyes began to flicker,  
Darkening her brown eyes to a shade close to black.  
I've waited long enough, she spoke softly.

The world around Carlos slowed to a stop,  
As he watched Roxanna come to the verge of tears.  
He felt her pain wash over him, cleansing him of his own.  
How could he have been so ignorant?  
He still had a chance to see his mother again,  
He couldn't imagine what his life would be like,  
If she was gone forever.

But you know what, that's why I'm leaving,  
Because change isn't going to come to you,  
You have to go out and find it.

Her eyes met his, and just like that, her sadness was gone,  
In its place was a smile that could warm even the coldest of men,  
And eyes burning with a fire that could light even the darkest of nights.

Out of all the travelers,  
Of all the people starting their journeys,  
Neither of them knew how they found each other, but they didn't question it,  
Instead, they pulled the blanket over the two of them,  
And stared out the windows of the bus,  
As they left their worlds behind,  
In search of change.

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As the bus moved on, deeper into the jungle, and higher into the mountains,  
Carlos and Roxanna never noticed the Sun go down and the jungle go dark,  
They never saw Victor grow tense and his eyes narrow in the night,  
As they talked and laughed, and explored corners of each other's minds,  
The world around them began to change,

Soon they would too.

The first border stop of their journey arrived in the dead of night,  
Most of the passengers were asleep, but the experienced ones,  
The ones with careful eyes, watched as the Nicaraguan soldiers emerged from their shack,  
Assault rifles in hands, flashlights swaying in the darkness, and hats pulled low over their eyes.  
Ready to steal from the poor and give to themselves.

As the doors swung open and the first two soldiers stepped onto the bus,  
Carlos felt a deathly cold wash over him, far colder than the night permitted,  
A feeling he had felt on that dirt road turned to mud, but not like this,  
Nothing compared to the chills that raced down his spine.  
He watched as the soldiers stood at the front, their eyes hidden beneath their caps,  
Scanning the seats with their flashlights, amused by the fear in the passengers' eyes.

Suddenly, Carlos was unable to move, unable to look away,  
Until a beam of light caught his eyes, pulling him from his paralysis,  
Thrusting back into his seat, back into the moment.  
Carlos' head dropped into his lap, hiding his face from view as one of the soldiers approached,  
Who took the passports from Victor's outstretched hand, clipped them against his arm,  
Causing the money to fall into the burlap sack in his hands,  
The soldier repeated this on the other side of the aisle and continued to do so,  
Until all the passengers had been accounted for,  
Never once did he look at the photo inside,  
To look at the person they were stealing from,  
It didn't matter to them, if you were born below me, you are below me.

The whole process lasted no longer than five minutes before they returned to their shack.  
A cool breeze drifted through the bus, reminding the passengers the doors were still open,  
Leading Carlos to wonder why, what was the bus driver doing?  
His hands were glued to the wheel as he hadn't moved since they stopped,  
But just before he could ask Victor, the chills returned,  
And a glimpse of light crossed in front of the bus.

Carlos shook his head, I must be seeing things, he thought,  
He looked out his window into the dark jungle beside the road,  
Another chill shot through him, accompanied with that feeling, as if someone was watching him,  
The goosebumps on the back of his neck directed his eyes back to the front of the bus,  
Where his eyes met those of a young girl adorning a white dress,  
Now I know I'm seeing things, he said to himself, but as he looked over at Roxanna,  
Who sat with her eyes wide in disbelief, he knew she was real.

The little girl seemed to glow in the dark bus,  
She couldn't have been older than seven or eight,

But her eyes belonged to someone much older,  
And hidden deep within was a light that Carlos had seen before,  
But never expected to see here.

The two watched as she approached the seat on the other side of the aisle,  
Where a man sat with his head down and his eyes glued to the floor,  
Ever so lightly, she tapped on the man's shoulder,  
Causing him to jump from his seat and dart down the aisle in terror.

Roxanna leaned over and asked Carlos about the girl,  
But he had no idea, so she asked Victor, who tensely responded,  
The coyotes put her here, to let robbers and thieves know this bus is theirs,  
That this bus and its passengers are not to be messed with.  
But why a little girl? And why in a white dress?  
Because if you put a man with a gun on the bus, you'll be met with two,  
You put a little girl on the bus, no one will touch her, and no one will dare rob this bus,  
Because she'll remember your face.

A wave of nausea hit Carlos, it was sickening,  
That men would use a little girl as protection from other men,  
That this world wasn't as quite as it seemed,  
That his journey wasn't going how he thought it would.  
As the bus traveled on and crossed border after border,  
First Nicaragua, then Honduras and Guatemala,  
And they ventured deeper and deeper into this jungle, the less he realized he knew,  
About the world around him, which had always seemed so simple,  
About the people he met, who never seemed so selfish,  
And about himself, someone he thought he always knew so well,  
But in reality, had always been a stranger.

## The River

*It is not chance that allows the wildebeest to cross the river,  
That keeps him from the jaws of the crocodile,  
It is not chance that keeps the wildebeest coming back,  
To the river of death that must be crossed.  
Rather, it is something close to fate,  
A force that brings together the courageous and cowardly,  
To a place where one's destination,  
Is determined long before their arrival.*

The rain never stopped/ceased.  
Neither did the bus.  
It felt like the two continued in spite of each other.  
The bus would climb higher and the rain would fall harder.  
It was a battle they had fought a thousand times.  
Day after day, year after year,  
There will always be a bus full of travelers making their trek through the rain.  
Nature has never made it easy on those traversing its lands.  
The ones who appreciate this Earth most of all.  
The ones who see the beauty in nature's cruelty.

The rainy season in Central America runs from May to November,  
So it was quite unusual for this much rain during March.  
This however, in no way deterred the travelers aboard the yellowing bus.  
Actually, many of them saw this as a good sign.  
As immigrants, they all considered themselves optimists,  
But really, they had no other choice,  
One couldn't hope to survive this journey with cynicism.

Somewhere deep in those mountains lied Talisman,  
A city divided by a river, with one half in Guatemala and the other in Mexico,  
It seemed to appear out of nowhere, one second they were surrounded by jungle,  
The next thing they knew, they were within the heart of the town,  
Surrounded by brick and mortar, salesman and storefronts,  
Lost in the flow of travelers from every corner of Central and South America,  
All trying to cross the bridge, the bridge above the river,  
The river that separated them from Mexico,  
The river that would decide if their journeys would continue, or come to an end.

As they neared the river, small cars and motorcycles poured into the streets,  
Slowing traffic to an eventual stop, as they all waited for their turn to cross,  
And fought off the salesmen spilling into the streets,  
Each one seemed more relentless than the last,  
Desperately trying to sell whatever they could get their hands on,  
To feed themselves, to feed their families, or just to feed their greed,  
We're all feeding something.

Everything one could ever need could be found here,

From churros and chips to paintings and parakeets,  
Carlos watched in awe of it all, the chaos of travelers and salesman,  
The two have always relied on each other,  
Wherever there is one, you'll be sure to find the other,  
Even on a day like today, a little rain wasn't going to keep either of them down.

As Carlos looked out the windows of the bus,  
His eyes felt a pull towards the bridge at the end of the road.  
Where the soldiers stood waiting with their eyes locked on the travelers,  
Covered in dark green uniforms with rifles strapped to their backs,  
They moved between the cars, their hungry eyes searching for threats,  
For a reason to use a little extra force, a reason to flex their power,  
A reason to end someone's journey, to show who is in control, and who is not.

He shifted around nervously in his plastic seat.  
He hadn't been this uncomfortable since he first boarded,  
Back in Costa Rica, on the street where he grew up.  
He knew it was only a couple days ago, but it felt so long ago now.  
Like his whole life had been waiting on this bus for whatever lay across that river.  
The river that was being guarded by fifty guards and fifty guns.

After an hour of waiting, impatient and in angst, the travelers neared the river's edge,  
There they pulled off to the side and a soldier approached the yellowing bus,  
When doors swung open, the strength of the river came pouring in,  
Soaking the passengers in its sound and mist, and with it came that feeling,  
A numbing cold that seeped into bones, making every hair on his body stand on edge,  
Taking Carlos back to the jungle, where it had been so dark that night.

The soldier boarded the bus and without a second's hesitation,  
Began to collect their passports, tossing them all in his burlap sack,  
And then returning to his place at the front, with one last look at the travelers,  
Amused by the effects his power had on them, he stepped down of the bus,  
And walked over to the soldier's station beside the bridge,  
A square, tan building on the embankment, with no windows and only one door,  
Through which he disappeared with the sack.  
A few seconds later, he emerged and returned to the bus,  
His hungry eyes burning with desire for more power than which he needed,  
And called out the first name, Martinez, he shouted, You're up.

A man towards the back of the bus stood slowly, his hands trembling with fear,  
And made his way to the front, where he passed by the soldier,  
Who watched him closely, relishing in the terror upon the man's face.  
Carlos watched as the man got down off the bus and walked over to the building,  
Where he disappeared through the doorway.

After what felt like an hour, Martinez emerged from the building,  
And the soldier at the front shouted out another name, Jimenez.  
Roxanna squeezed his hand, and he felt a calming presence fall over him.  
Carlos stood with poise and immediately felt eyes watching him,  
As he made his way into the aisle, and past the soldier.

As he stepped off the bus, the sound of the river threatened to overwhelm him.  
He could feel its strength, renewed by the recent storms,  
Its rapids running high, eating away at the embankment,  
Where its conquerors stood, using its divisive power to decide,  
Whose journey will continue and whose journey will end.

Before he entered their lair, a cement building with a sandy exterior,  
He walked past Martinez, who had relief on his face, but fear in his eyes,  
Buena suerte, he said, but it wasn't a matter of luck,  
The river had already made its decision.

When he entered it took his eyes a second to adjust,  
The room felt smaller than it looked from outside, was it the lack of windows?  
Or the soldier lurking in each corner, guns on their hips,  
Like a crocodile with its mouth open, its razor teeth on display.

In the center of the room,  
There were two tables with a soldier behind each,  
The right one was interviewing a traveler, so Carlos went to the left,  
Avoiding eye contact, he took his seat.

Did I tell you to sit?  
No, señor, lo siento señor.  
Sit back down.  
Sí, señor.  
Shut up.

Where are you going?

America, señor,

Why?

Work, señor.

There's no work in Costa Rica?

Well, there is but...

Carlos was cut off by the soldier at the other table, whose patience was running thin.

What's wrong with you? Why are you staring at me?

The traveler remained silent, his eyes locked on the soldier in front of him.

The soldier threw his chair back and shot up from his seat,

Unable to accept silence as an answer.

The soldiers in the corners grabbed ahold of their rifles,

Their prey was venturing too close to the river's edge,

Carlos looked over, the traveler had frozen, unable to respond,

He sat paralyzed with an open mouth,

And eyes wide with fear.

Don't look at them! Look at me!

Lo siento señor, Carlos apologized.

Now answer the question, why are you leaving Costa Rica?

I'm going to work for my father in America.

Where?

Los Angeles.

His soldier began to write.

The other began to scream.

WHY ARE YOU STARING AT ME?

The soldiers in the corners began to emerge from the shadows,

Like crocodiles rising to the surface of a murky river.

The temperature of the room dropped suddenly, so cold Carlos could see his breath,

As chills shook his body, thoughts consumed his mind,

What's wrong with him? Why isn't he responding?

Answer him, answer him, answer him, Carlos begged.

But the traveler could not hear his thoughts,

Over the sound of his own heartbeat, pounding harder and harder,

As the crocodiles converged on the poor traveler.



THAT'S IT. TAKE HIM, he commanded.  
Without hesitation, they lunged at the traveler,  
Wrapping their jaws around his neck, sinking their teeth deep into his flesh.  
As they dragged him to the water's edge, the traveler writhed and fought,  
Helplessly thrashing in the shallow water, fighting against their inhuman strength,  
But there was nothing he could do, so he gave up and succumbed to the river.  
Just before he disappeared beneath the river's murky water,  
Carlos met his eyes, wide with terror, they mirrored his own,  
In fact, they easily could have been his own,  
But the river had chosen to show Carlos,  
Rather than make an example out of him,  
How cruel nature can be.

As he was pulled beneath the river's surface,  
He was no longer a man, but the beast they turned him into,  
Wild and untamed, defiled and misunderstood,  
As they had once been, and forever will be,  
For there is nothing more beastlike,  
Than directing one's suffering onto another.

You're good to go, Carlos' soldier said.  
What?  
You're good, now go.  
Carlos stood slowly,  
His stomach churned, threatening to empty itself across the room,  
Somehow he found his way to the door, stepped into the light,  
And continued his journey.

The world had gone silent, the river's hunger was satisfied,  
Nature had reared her ugly head and showed Carlos what fear really is,  
What it does to a man, how it strips him of his sight, of his thoughts,  
To show him a lie, the one he tells himself, the one he tells others,  
To bear the pain of this world, to believe one has control,  
When in reality, he has nothing,  
But his words,  
And his eyes.

# The Night

*During migration,  
The wildebeest will find itself,  
Under the gaze of many different predators.  
Lions, crocodiles, leopards, and cheetahs,  
But there is one quite different from the rest.  
One who prefers the dark to the light,  
The dead to the living.  
Wherever they run,  
Chaos will follow.  
Prey to some,  
Predators to all,  
The hyena.*

It had been days since they passed the river,  
Days of driving through the endless Mexican desert,  
Days of ravenous hunger that tore at his stomach,  
Days of waiting for that place on the horizon,  
Where they would go their separate ways,  
And now it was almost here.

He knew she'd be getting off at the next stop.  
He'd been thinking about it since the moment he met her,  
Since the moment he saw those big brown eyes,  
He knew they'd leave him.

She wasn't his, and she never would be,  
But right now, it felt like she was, and deep down,  
He didn't want it to end, but he knew it would, it had to.  
He could see it now, the way her curly hair would bounce,  
As she ran down the steps of the bus, and into her boyfriend's arms,  
The smiles on their faces, the passion in their embrace, the love in their eyes.  
It all made him sick, that she was so happy with someone else,  
But at the same time, it made him happy, that she was happy,  
He hated it.

When they pulled in to the station, he never looked at her once,  
Carlos' eyes were glued to the windows, searching the bus station for him,  
He knew her boyfriend would be waiting, probably with flowers,  
If he's Roxanna's boyfriend, he must be a good guy,  
Not just anyone deserved her.

But while he was preoccupied with finding the mystery man,  
Roxanna was watching him, trying to memorize his face,  
The curve of his jaw that made him look tough, almost intimidating,  
But how his green eyes caught her attention, the way they shone through,  
Cutting through that rough exterior like emeralds on a mountain,  
And his sweet voice, and the way he made her laugh,  
She knew her boyfriend wouldn't be there, he never was.  
So instead, she savored these last few moments with Carlos,  
She'd never met anyone like him, and she knew,  
They'd probably never see each other again,  
Since the moment she met him,  
She knew it'd be like this,  
She hated it.

When the bus came to a stop, Carlos was still trying to find him,  
And Roxanna didn't know what to do.  
What is he looking for? Why is he doing this?  
Please look at me, please, I can't leave him like this, please.  
I need to see those green eyes one last time.  
She reached out, but just before touching him she pulled her hand back,  
She couldn't take it, they didn't have much longer, this was her last chance,  
Who knows if they'd ever see each other again.

She'd already lost so many people, so many moments she wanted back,  
So many words left unsaid, so many regrets, she couldn't let this be another,  
So she grabbed his hand and pulled him close,  
His green eyes found hers, and her lips found his,  
Where they stayed for what felt like forever,  
Because that moment would stay with them,  
For forever.

But as the seconds trickled by, and the travelers began descending from the bus,  
Roxanna slowly pulled away from him and got up from her seat,  
Trying to hold back the tears she knew were coming,  
Goodbye Carlos, she said softly, Thanks for everything,  
I hope you find what you're looking for.

As she walked down the aisle, her eyes never left his,  
Until it all became too much, and her tears came pouring out,  
Giving way to a river, a river to take her far, far away,  
To a place Carlos would never be, but would always imagine,  
Whenever he would feel lost, like he took a wrong turn,  
To picture what his life would look like, if he got off with her,  
And gave up on his *pura vida*.

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It had been hours since he had seen the light of day,  
But his eyes never seemed to adjust to the darkness of the desert.  
Many of the passengers had already forgotten the warmth of day,  
The evening chill was seeping into their skin, and would soon become unbearable,  
The Sun's light was long forgotten, the night's all they could think about.

They had turned off the main road a few miles back,  
There were no signs, no streetlights, no people.  
Just an endless dirt road taking them farther and farther into the desert,  
In hopes they could find the oasis that would rescue them from their thirst.

Carlos' legs ached to move,  
To free themselves of the cruel, plastic seats they were chained to,  
For so long he had been at the mercy of the bus,  
He wanted to regain control of his story.

A yellow glow began to appear at the end of the road,  
Coming and going as if shrouded in fog.  
Were his eyes deceiving him?  
His mind was telling him yes, but the two had done this before,  
His eyes merely doing their job while his mind fought reality.  
But as the light at the end of the road grew, slowly materializing into the last bus station,  
The fog in his mind began to dissipate.  
A one story building lit by dim yellow lights, surrounded by an empty desert,  
Bland and square, it sat like a rock in the sand.

As they pulled in, Carlos' eyes were pulled towards the darkness surrounding the building,  
An abyss that seemed to tug at him, luring his eyes into its emptiness,  
Turning his stomach, nauseating him, and filling his mind with fear.  
From that dark night three sets of headlights broke free,  
Carlos jerked his head away from the window,  
His eyes unaccustomed to the light after so much time in the dark.  
As he turned away from the window, his eyes met with the girl in white,  
Victor's warnings bounced around in his head, but like the darkness,  
He couldn't look away.

Her curious eyes were searching for something in his own,  
But before he could wonder what she was looking for,  
She stabbed her hand into his pocket, hoping to find money within.  
Her eyes flickered with mischief, and she squinted at him as if to say,  
Yeah, I did just do that, and guess what, there's nothing you can do about it.  
But seeing this, Carlos couldn't help but feel sorry,

That this world had made her like this, that it taught her to steal,  
Not because she needed to, but because she could.

He reached down into the secret pocket, the one above his heart, and pulled out a few dollars,  
Holding them out, he watched as her eyes changed once again,  
First disbelief, then joy, and then finally,  
A light appeared behind her eyes,  
One he had seen before,  
In the girl who used to warm that seat,  
Who would forever warm his heart,  
A light that would lead him home,  
To his *pura vida*.

She reached out and took the money with her delicate hands,  
And gave Carlos a smile that he couldn't help but mirror,  
She never stood from her seat, but seemed to float out of it,  
Gliding out the doors of the bus and into the cool desert night.  
Towards the headlights she flew, where the shadows were waiting,  
To extinguish her light with one of their own.

As the headlights retreated and turned to red in the darkness, slowly fading into the night,  
Carlos watched as the shadows began to gather at the light's edge,  
They surrounded the bus, waiting for the meal they had been promised,  
Like the hungry dogs they were,  
The coyotes.

One by one,  
Each of the travelers descended from the bus and took their first steps of the night.  
Carlos and Victor led the way, walking deep into the darkness,  
Until the yellow light of the building could no longer reach their faces,  
Reducing them to shadows,  
Like the ones that surrounded them.

The deeper they went, the clearer they became, the shadows didn't belong to men, but beasts,  
Hunched over on all fours, their mangled figures writhing in the darkness,

The deeper they went, the clearer they became,  
The shadows bore no resemblance to men, no creature Carlos had ever seen,  
Hunched over on all fours, they crawled across the dry, desert rock,  
Their mangled figures writhed and struggled with each other,  
As if they were all fighting over something, something Carlos couldn't possibly understand,  
Something few men could understand, but of course, this made sense,  
For the shadows did not belong to men, but to beasts.

From the abyss emerged a car to match, a black Monte Carlo with a man at the wheel,  
Wearing a mustache tinged with red, and a cross around his neck.  
Stay here, Victor said, as he left Carlos, and got into the car.

Carlos stood and watched as the two men talked in the front seats,  
In quiet voices they spoke, discussing the terms of their arrangement.  
Without a word, Victor motioned Carlos over to his side of the vehicle,  
Dinero, he whispered.

Carlos reached into the pocket of his overalls, hidden above his heart,  
Pulled out his money and handed it to Victor, who gave it to Jesus,  
The man with blood on his lips, and God in his name.

Jesus nodded, stuck his key in the ignition, and brought the car to life  
As the headlights came on, Carlos watched as the shadows scattered,  
Retreating into the darkness, unaccustomed to the light,  
They would forever belong to the night.

The Monte Carlo drove towards the yellow lights, and down the road from which they came,  
Its red lights disappeared in the night, leaving them in the darkness once again.  
Carlos expected the shadows to move in on them,  
To devour them like the prey they were, but none came, none dared make a move,  
For they knew the beast was near, making his move on the two,  
He had claimed as his own.

What are we waiting for?

The coyote.

Not Jesus?

No.

Who then?

Victor took a deep breath,

Almost as if saying his name would cause him to appear.

You want to know his name?

Carlos wanted to say yes, but found that he couldn't,

The words were there, but something was holding them down.

Victor didn't wait for his answer,

His name is... Pirata.

Carlos knew it was coming, that feeling he had become all too used to,  
The sudden drop in temperature, a cold in his bones,  
Chills that raised every hair on his body, telling him a predator was near.  
Around them the desert went quiet, and the shadows moved into hiding.  
Carlos could feel Victor shift beside him, he could sense his fear,  
He felt it move from Victor to himself, a fear that he didn't need or want,  
But it was here nonetheless, and like the darkness around them,

It wasn't going away.

A cool breeze drifted between him and Victor,  
And a chill raced down their spines.  
He was getting closer.  
As Carlos stared out into the abyss,  
He felt his eyes playing tricks once again,  
The void around him seemed to permeate through him.  
Reaching into his mind and pulling from it his deepest fears,  
And placing them before him, closing his eyes only made it worse.

Carlos saw them first, two white shoes flying through the night,  
With a shadow trailing close behind,  
Tall and slender, it wore a cap and dressed in all black.

With a gust of wind, the shadow was upon them, its white shoes floating in the darkness,  
It stood just a few feet away, but Carlos couldn't make out its face,  
No eyes, no mouth, no nose, just a void,  
That consumed all courage, all strength, all life.

Pirata, Carlos spoke into the night.  
From the void emerged a smile, its teeth sickly and yellow, and sharper than broken glass,  
He felt dizzy, nauseous, looking into the teeth of the shadow caused something to stir,  
Deep within him, anger mixed with hate, feelings he locked away, feelings he didn't want,  
But might need on a night like tonight, feelings that might save his life,  
Carlos felt a smile of his own rising within him, this shadow would not best him tonight.

Vamos, the shadow hissed,  
And it was off, the white shoes moving in the direction of the bus stop,  
Whose yellow lights felt a little dimmer than before.  
There was no time to think, Carlos flew after him, Victor close on his heels,  
And the two followed in the footsteps of the shadow they called Pirata,  
The coyote that would lead them to freedom.

Just before stepping into the yellow light of the bus station,  
The shadow tore off to the right, along the night's edge, to the back of the building,  
Where a group of travelers stood together, huddled underneath a dim yellow light,  
Staring out into the darkness, awaiting their coyote.

Pirata stood far enough to show them his shoes and shadow, but far enough to hide his face,  
Vamos, he demanded,  
Paralyzed with fear, the group stood still, unable to leave the safety of the light,  
Carlos and Victor watched behind the shadow, never getting too close, never straying too far,  
They could feel his impatience growing, his figure hunching lower and lower to the ground,

Bones snapping and rearranging themselves, coarse black hair growing along his spine,  
Fangs ripping through the night sky, and a bloodshot eye filled with hunger.  
VAMOS! The beast howled.

The cornered travelers had no choice, they were forced into the darkness,  
Joining Carlos and Victor as they followed Pirata into the night.

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They ran through the moonless night for twenty minutes until Carlos saw the glow,  
A small shack built from cinder blocks holding up a thin metal roof,  
Pretty similar to his own house, but this was no home.  
As the group approached, Pirata stood at the shadow's edge,  
Never daring to venture into the light, where his face could be revealed.  
Go eat, you have an hour, he said, and the shoes were gone.

Carlos went first, he walked into the shack where twenty travelers stood in line for food,  
All waiting with paper plates in their hands for their turn at the table,  
Where an old woman in a tattered pink dress angrily scooped rice and beans,  
Throwing them down on plates with such force, and such impatience,  
She couldn't have hated anything more.

The old woman turned and shrieked at them,  
Newbies! You're gonna pay me \$8 and you're gonna eat what I give you!  
You hear me? No complaining, no whining, and no extras!  
Now get in line before I change my mind and you get nothing!  
The travelers jumped in line, paid their dues, resisted her awful stench, and in return received,  
2 spoonfuls of beans, 4 spoonfuls of rice, and a hard boiled egg from hell.

Eat!  
You have one hour before you're out of here!  
If I see any leftovers I'm going to charge you extra!  
Sleep!  
You're going to need it, you worthless pieces of shit.

Carlos never slept, how could he?  
Instead he sat there, in a room packed with travelers,  
All impatiently waiting for the call, that would tell them they would begin,  
The night they had waited so long for, the last night before the rest of their life.

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He could feel the seconds crawl by like the cockroaches across the dirt floor,  
Each one seemed a little slower than the last.



It didn't feel like an hour, but days, for days he sat on the dirt floor of that decrepit shack,  
Watching the old woman take the traveler's money, and leave them hungrier than they arrived.

Alright, get up! Get up! Get out!  
Carlos didn't have to be told twice,  
In an instant he was out the door,  
He opened his backpack ready to put on his running shoes, but found nothing.  
He searched his bag in desperation, opening every pocket, even the small ones,  
Knowing nothing would appear, but hoping for a miracle,  
Someone had stolen them and he was left with his platforms,  
His big, heavy, clunky platform shoes, the last shoes in the world he wanted to run in,  
He'd now have to reach America in.

As this painful realization dawned on him,  
He looked out into the night and saw the white shoes in the darkness,  
Beautiful white Nike Cortez's, perfect for running,  
His face grew hot, anger boiling inside of him.  
The smile emerged in the shadow's once again,  
Almost as if he knew what lied in Carlos' mind,  
As if he could see everything from the shadows,  
While Carlos could see nothing.

The travelers approached Pirata outside the shack,  
All of them keeping a safe distance from the shadow,  
Listen carefully, he spoke.  
You're all here because you want something,  
Some more than others,  
If you want to reach America, you can go home now, you won't make it,  
If you *need* to reach America, if you have no other choice, if this is it, then you will make it,  
Because let me tell you, it doesn't matter what you tell others,  
Just don't lie to yourself.  
If you do, if you tell yourself that you really need this,  
And it just so happens you don't,  
You will die tonight,  
And I will be there,  
To take the money from your corpse.

Without another word,  
The smile reappeared,  
A sinister welcome to the night,  
And the shadow ran off into the desert,  
The travelers hesitated, but Carlos didn't,  
Without a second thought,  
He took off into the darkness,

In search of his *pura vida*.

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The travelers had been following in Pirata's footsteps for no longer than ten minutes,  
When they came upon the fence that separated them from America,  
A section of chain link fence with a trench dug beneath,  
The shadow reached under and pulled up the metal fence,  
Creating a gap just wide enough to crawl through,  
Go.

Carlos went through first, tossing his backpack over,  
Then dragging himself across the desert rock, under the fence, and into America.  
He wasn't sure what he was expecting, but he never imagined it like this,  
The land that lay in front of him, looked the same as behind,  
An endless desert, but he knew that if he kept going, kept moving forward,  
He would be rewarded, for his suffering, for his sacrifices, with an oasis to save him,  
From the desert he was born in.

As he stood there waiting, the rest of the travelers made their way across,  
Each finding their own expectations, not quite fitting with reality.  
No one saw Pirata slide underneath the fence, once the last of the group was through,  
He seemed to reappear on the other side, his white shoes emerging from the darkness,  
Placing themselves in between the group, and the desert ahead of them.

Listen closely,  
From here on out, you will not stop running, you understand?  
You will not...  
His voice stopped, leaving an unbearable silence in its wake,  
A chill raced through the group, unable to see his eyes,  
Making it feel as though the temperature fell much quicker than it did,  
YOU.  
In a flash the shoes were gone,  
Carlos whipped his head around from side to side,  
Searching the darkness for the shadow and his shoes.

WHO ARE YOU?

The shadow found himself at the center of the group,  
Carlos turned and saw him wielding a gun,  
With its barrel placed between a trembling man's eyes,  
A man that Carlos hadn't seen before.  
I'm no one! I'm just a traveler. Please sir, please don't shoot me, I'm...  
GIVE ME ONE REASON WHY NOT.  
I have money! Please sir, can you take me?

HAND IT OVER.

Well, I can't right now, but once we get...

The sound of a bullet entering the chamber stopped him cold.

Please sir...

A deep growl shook the ground beneath the travelers,

It felt as if it came directly from hell, but they all knew it came from the shadow.

GO.

Carlos thought the man had frozen like the poor traveler at the Mexican border,

He saw the man's life flash before his eyes,

The beast's teeth ripping into his flesh, tearing limb from limb,

But instead, the traveler turned and ran off into the desert,

And the group was left with the beast disguised as a man,

A coyote, a hyena, a predator,

A man that held their lives in the palm of his hand,

A shadow that would lead them to the light.

Follow my shoes, Pirata seethed.

And so they did.

## The Light

*We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark;*

*The real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.*

— **Plato**

Through the desert he ran,

Rock, sand, and dirt crunching beneath his platforms,

His lungs begged and pleaded for a more air,

But his legs didn't listen, and kept moving,

Sweat poured down his face and back,

A frigid cold that could not be felt,

Fatigue that did not exist,

In the shadow of fear.

Carlos didn't know how long they had been running for,

His only focus was on the shadow in front of him,

Its amorphous shape was impossible to track,

So he kept his eyes on the white shoes,

Which never seemed to trip or fall,

Like he had done three times already.

He knew there was blood dripping down his shins,  
But his adrenaline masked all feeling,  
A numbness he found unnerving.

Every once in a while, the shoes would disappear,  
This would send Carlos into a frenzy, searching the dark for those vile shoes,  
Desperately searching for that white in the night, the white that belonged to the night,  
But each time a snarl from the back of the group would reveal their location.  
Pirata made it his job to keep the group together, like a dog herding sheep,  
Nipping at the heels of those at the back, threatening them to move faster,  
GO, GO, GO. COME ON, LET'S GO!

Within the food chain, there are three types of animals,  
There are predators, there is prey, and there are survivors,  
Pirata was a survivor, sure his job was to assist travelers into America,  
But his goal was always the same,  
To survive.

GO. GO. GO. YOU'RE NOT GOING TO MAKE IT AT THIS PACE OLD MAN.  
Carlos turned and saw Pirata pushing an older man struggling to keep up,  
OLD MAN, I'LL TELL YOU RIGHT NOW, IF YOU DON'T HURRY UP,  
WE WILL LEAVE YOU, WE CAN'T AFFORD TO KEEP HOLDING YOUR HAND.  
Carlos felt a sickness rise from deep within him, he hated to admit it, but Pirata was right,  
The safety of the herd is always more important than any one individual,  
Carlos tried to push the thoughts from his mind, he couldn't worry about them,  
He had enough to deal with on his own, but the old man's wheezing kept breaking through,  
His desperate gasps for air, his wife's pleas for him to hurry up,  
Please honey, please, you have to go faster, but her cries fell on deaf ears,  
As the old man had already come to terms with his fate,  
Like a wildebeest separated from the herd,  
Death was close on his heels,  
And tonight it was adorning white shoes.

As Carlos tried to focus his thoughts, to push the old man's wheezing from his mind,  
Something far more troubling made its way through, a quick, high pitched laughter,  
Unlike anything Carlos had ever heard, for there was nothing human about it.  
It started off sporadic, the laughter would come in short bursts every few seconds,  
But with every step it grew louder, more sinister, raising every hair on Carlos' neck,  
Unconsciously, Carlos began to run faster, but the harder he ran, the more amused it became,  
Taunting him as if it could sense his fear, almost as if it were feeding on his fear.  
Carlos was sprinting now, gasping for breath, desperately trying to escape its awful sound,  
But there was no escape, the laughter was everywhere, suffocating him in its agonizing jests,  
It was if a pack of hyenas were surrounding him, toying with their prey,  
They knew the wildebeest was theirs, but why end the fun so soon?

KID. YOU BETTER SLOW DOWN IF YOU KNOW WHAT'S GOOD FOR YOU,  
I WOULD HATE TO SEE WHAT HAPPENS IF YOU STRAY TOO FAR FROM THE HERD.  
With a last burst of sick laughter, the beast took off into the night ahead of him,  
Its white shoes disappeared in the darkness, but the echoes of haunting laughter remained,  
Bouncing around in Carlos' mind, where the old man's wheezing had once been.

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As he ran through the once again silent darkness, Carlos fell into a rhythm,  
He was made for running, at 17, he was in the best shape of his life.  
One foot after another, mile after mile, they seemed to go by without him even noticing,  
It helped that his eyes never really adjusted to the darkness,  
He couldn't see how far they had come, or how far they had to go,  
Just an endless night sky full of stars, stars that weren't nearly bright enough to lead the way,  
But bright enough to give him hope, hope that he might once again see the light of day,  
All he had to do was keep running, and to keep following those white shoes.

MOVE, MOVE, MOVE. Pirata hissed, his impatience turning his whispers to roars,  
WE CAN'T BE HERE WHEN THESE TURN ON.  
Pirata motioned to a few silhouettes fast approaching on the horizon,  
The figures stood tall and lonely, with about 100 yards between each one,  
Carlos could see them in every direction for miles, they covered every inch of the barren scape,  
As they reached the first, Carlos realized they were metal towers standing about 50 feet tall,  
Surrounded by a chain link fence, covered in barbed wire, and crowned with a metal sphere,  
Lights.

After they had passed the tenth light tower, the white shoes stopped beneath the eleventh,  
Carlos came to a halt, always keeping a safe distance between him and the shadow.  
The rest of the group followed suit, standing just behind Carlos,  
As if he would protect them, while they awaited the old man and his wife to close the gap.  
When they finally rejoined the group, the old man keeled over and gasped for air,  
The wheezing had become wild, almost violent as he struggled to stay upright,  
His wife did her best to help him, but she could barely stand herself.

Old man, Pirata's voice rang out,  
The voice was eerily calm, absent of the impatience that was so obvious before,  
In the back, the old man tried to respond, but was unable to muster a reply between breaths,  
Pirata turned and made his way through the herd to the old man and his wife,  
The two kept their heads down, as they were unable to take their eyes off the shoes,  
To meet the shadow eye to eye, to look into the face of death and keep their faith,  
A faith that had grown weaker ever since the Sun went down,  
A faith that only knew the light of day,  
A faith blinded by the dark of night,

When one needs it most.

Why don't you and I have a talk?

Instead of waiting for an answer, the white shoes began walking off into the abyss,

And his high pitched laughter filled the air, sending chills down Carlos' spine,

And a wave of deathly cold washing over the group.

Shivering in fear, the older couple walked out into the night.

Their silhouettes faded away in the darkness, but their shaky breaths remained,

As they followed in the direction of Pirata, and his white shoes.

As the herd trembled beneath the dormant light tower, Carlos stood at the front,

Staring out into the darkness, trying to catch a glimpse of the white shoes that led him here,

But nothing came from the abyss, nothing except the laughter, the wild, howling taunts,

It surrounded the herd with its sinister sound, forcing them closer and closer together,

Each cackle would send a jolt of burning cold through Carlos, shaking every fiber of his being,

Chilling him to the bone.

From somewhere within that darkness, within the laughter that haunted him,

Carlos could hear the whispers from the old man and his wife,

He couldn't understand their words, but he didn't need to,

To know they were begging for their lives, but their pleas fell on deaf ears,

As Pirata had already decided their fate.

When the whispers came to a stop, so did the laughter.

Silence regained its grip on the night and the white shoes emerged from the darkness,

But no longer were they being followed.

The group didn't need to see to know what happened to the couple,

Pirata had already told them, and he wasn't going to break that type of promise.

Carlos felt that sick feeling return, the realization that he was not in control,

That he was never in control, that he must rely on a killer, a predator to lead him to his future,

That the herd must move on, that this is how the world works,

It's survival of the fittest, and there is nothing,

Absolutely nothing he can do about it.

When Pirata reached the edge of the group, a shaky voice rose to meet him,

W...W...Where did they go?

Their answer came in the form of a smile,

Its teeth, once a sickly yellow, were now dripping in blood.

Once again that sinister laughter burst forth, causing the herd to cower in fear,

But not Carlos, who stood tall at the front, and confronted the beast head on,

There was no fear in the shadow of his anger.

With a loud crash from behind it, the smile vanished into the darkness,

Causing the herd to reel in shock, but Carlos stood firm, and looked out into the abyss.

He searched for the white shoes, looking everywhere for that white in the night,  
But the sound of heavy footsteps fast approaching pulled his eyes towards the sound,  
Trying to make out what could be creating such a commotion.  
Somewhere out in the darkness, something was sprinting through the desert,  
With every second the footsteps got closer, another crash through the bushes,  
It wasn't far off now, Carlos could hear the gasps for breath growing louder,  
Someone was heading straight for them.

With a last crash, a white figure broke free from the night, and barrelled into the herd.  
As chaos descended upon them, Carlos corralled the others as he identified the intruder,  
It was a short woman, no taller than five feet, but no lighter than two hundred pounds.  
Oh! Oh! She said between gasps, Help, please... can you... please... please... help me?  
The herd gathered around her, already taking her in as one of their own,  
The women in the group rushed to her side, and helped to catch her breath,  
But without hesitation, a voice rang out.

Get lost.

The group froze as the cruel words cut through the night,  
Please sir, I need help, I can't do this alone.  
The sound of careful footsteps filled the air,  
And the shoes revealed themselves once again,  
Above which appeared a set of teeth covered in fresh blood,  
Teeth ready to be sunk deep within the neck of the wildebeest,  
A wildebeest separated from the pack, desperate and afraid,  
Running for its life, into the jaws of the hyena, waiting patiently in the night.  
P...P...Please, tears began to break through her words,  
I... have money... I can't carry her anymore, I need help,  
Everyone froze, and the sick feeling within Carlos returned,  
As they looked at the woman, she pulled from within her white clothing,  
A baby girl strapped to her chest, blanketed in soft, white cloth, sleeping soundly.  
At this sight, Carlos nearly fell to his knees, the sickness taking hold of him,  
But instead of vomiting, words spilled forth, uncontrollably flying from his mouth,  
I'll carry her.  
Carlos knew the words were his own, but sounded like his mother's voice,  
They leapt from his mouth, from his heart, without him even thinking,  
She was right, he knew it was what he had to do.

Where's the money? Pirata demanded.

It's right here, it's all I have, she reached into her white clothing,  
Pulled from within a handful of cash, and held it out over the void,  
Pirata snatched it from her trembling hands, and devoured it whole.

Above them, the tower that had been sleeping came to life in a flash,  
Pouring its light on the group below, and across the desert,

Carlos watched as the other towers broke free, sending their light into the night sky,  
Revealing the desert that had been hidden from sight, and the horror that lay before them,  
The face of the shadow that led them through the darkness, the man they knew as Pirata,  
A beast of the night, unaccustomed to the light.

As the new light poured into him, Carlos shut his eyes, he could not bear the sight before him,  
The beast stood before them, its mangled body scarred and grotesque,  
Dark blood clung to its matted fur, bright crimson masked its face,  
And a hideous black hole sat in place of his right eye,  
While the other, black and bloodshot, shut itself off from the light.  
A fitting name for such a vile creature,  
He truly was a Pirate.

The creature collapsed to the ground, sending a horrendous sound into the night,  
Its wild eye searched the darkness around it, unable to see the shadows around it,

The beast collapsed to the ground, its body convulsing and twisting with laughter,  
and attempted to take up a defensive position, its head jerking from side to side,  
As if it expected something to attack from the darkness around them, from the shadows,  
The shadows where he no longer dwelled, the shadows he could no longer see,  
Within the center of the light tower's eye.  
Carlos wished for blindness once again,  
He couldn't stand to see this beast of the night any longer,  
The light had shown him too much, but now it was here, and like his fear, it wasn't going away.  
FUCK! Pirata shrieked, his voice seethed, he spoke between gasps, suddenly out of breath,  
Almost as if the light itself was taking his energy,  
RUN NOW, STAY AWAY FROM THE LIGHT.  
Pirata took off into the desert, his white shoes just as visible as his figure.

As the group descended into chaos around them, and scrambled after Pirata,  
The woman hurried to Carlos' side and said, while still trying to catch her breath,  
May God bless you!  
There were too many words flying around in his mind for him to respond,  
So he just nodded and forced the only smile he had in him,  
While she placed the carrier around his neck and laid her baby in his arms,  
The woman took one last look at her baby, then locked eyes with Carlos,  
And gave him a look that sent a shiver down his spine,  
A look he had seen many times before,  
In his own mother's eyes.

And without another word, the two ran off into the night,  
In the direction of the laughter that would forever haunt them.

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He couldn't feel his legs, yet they kept moving,  
Was it the cold that sapped all feeling, or the hours of running,  
The hours of carrying the baby girl that lay on his chest,  
The hours of fearful worrying, that if he fell,  
His blood wouldn't spill alone.

He kept his eyes locked on the ground, never daring to look up, but if he had,  
He would have seen the orange glow beginning to appear on the horizon,  
The end of the night was nearing closer, but the world around him felt so far away,  
There were no white shoes, no shadows, no *pura vida*,  
There was only her.

She had slept the entire night, immersed in her dreams, while Carlos fought for his life,  
So many times he wanted to stop, to rest, to breathe,  
But to stop now wouldn't bring any of those things,  
To stop now would bring only death.

He could hear the desert whisper softly in his ear,  
Stay, she joked, I may look and feel like hell on Earth,  
But what lies over this hill makes me look like your *pura vida*,  
The farther he climbed, the bigger the hill seemed,  
A hill that hadn't been there a second before,  
Almost as if the desert threw it in his way,  
Her last attempt to keep him there forever.

As he scaled the hill, which seemed more like a mountain with every passing second,  
The feeling in his legs returned, but along with it came an unbearable pain,  
Just lie down, she said, take a break, you've worked so hard, come so far,  
Don't you deserve a little rest?

Carlos pushed on, begging his legs to obey and his mind to quiet,  
He tried to focus on his steps, but the sharp pain in his feet, thanks to his platforms,  
Made it impossible to drown out the desert's cruel words,  
This is your last chance, she warned,  
When your dreams are shattered and your hope destroyed,  
Remember the peace that lies within the desert.  
There is a way of life here, an order, there is no such thing in the world of man,  
For humans are emotional creatures driven by love and fear.  
When a man listens to his emotions rather than his mind,  
He becomes more dangerous than any creature on Earth.  
One will never understand what drives a man like this,  
What he might do, where he might go, but you can be sure of what will follow,  
Chaos.

As Carlos neared the top of the hill, he felt her presence stronger than ever.  
It shouldn't be so difficult, but the rock continued to grow beneath his feet,  
climbing higher into the sky with every step.  
It was as if the whole world was conspiring against him,  
doing everything to keep him from conquering this hill.  
The dry brush, once a minor inconvenience, turned to barbed wire,  
its teeth digging into his legs, their jaws refusing to let go.  
He was losing the fight and he knew it.  
There was nothing he could do.  
He fell to a knee, he could feel death looming close.

He knew the desert is the coldest just before sunrise,  
But with his head down, he couldn't see the Sun's glow,  
Just the darkness that his eyes had known for so long,  
The night that had become his life,  
The night he would never forget.

As his other knee fell to the ground, and he shivered something fiercely,  
He felt a trace of warmth in his chest, a reassuring warmth, a loving warmth,  
It was the baby, the baby he had failed.

His body shook and convulsed, but as he fought the frigid cold,  
Orange seeped into the edges of his vision, burning his eyes,  
He could feel himself go, swaying back and forth, death was looming close,  
With the last of his strength, he lifted his eyes to the horizon,  
And watched as the rising Sun placed its warm hands against his face,  
Wiping away the tears he hadn't realized were there,  
And helping him back to his feet.

He watched as the early morning light spread itself across the landscape,  
The desert he had been running through all night,  
The desert he so despised, but also loved,  
Because he understood what makes the desert so ugly, and yet so beautiful,  
He suffered in those dunes, thirsted in her heat, and cried on her face  
But now he was here on top of this hill, watching the sunrise, soaking in her beauty,  
And feeling the love of a merciful God.

Because within that desert lay the most beautiful oasis he'd ever seen.  
He shook his head, his eyes were deceiving him, he knew it, but still it remained.

It was a neighborhood unlike any he had ever seen,  
The houses were so big, they could have fit an entire town,

And the roads, so smooth and clean, he could have eaten off of them.  
None of it seemed real after an eternity in the desert,  
He rubbed his eyes, but the oasis stayed,  
The oasis he waited his whole life for,  
This was America.

## The Morning

*When the lion is near,  
The wildebeest will run.  
When the lion is near,  
The hyena will hide.  
When the lion is near,  
It becomes all too clear,  
What one should really fear.*

The sound of footsteps behind him brought him back to the moment,  
Carlos turned and saw the rest of the herd dragging their tired bodies up the hill,  
Each one of them was nursing some sort of injury, swollen ankles and bloodied knees,  
They limped up the hill, which from his view at the top, no longer seemed as tall,  
But for them, there had never been a greater test.

As he watched the group struggle up the path, he felt a cold breeze pass through him,  
And with it came a hint of laughter, the sound he had become so accustomed to,  
No longer had that same bite, that same power over him, like it had during the night.  
He slowly turned, and saw a familiar figure that hadn't been there a second before.  
Pirata stood with his back to Carlos, his dark silhouette outlined by the rising sun.  
The coyote tore through his cigarette, throwing clouds of smoke into the sky,  
Burying him and the beautiful view in a sickly yellow haze, through which Carlos could see,  
A restlessness, an angst, the fidgeting of the hands, the tapping of the feet,  
The feeling that had consumed them during the night continued to linger,  
On the backs of their necks, in the corners of their minds,  
The feeling within predator and prey alike,  
A gaze that no one can escape from,  
The feeling that let them both know,  
Death is watching/ The lion is near.

A chill passed through the two of them,  
Without turning, the coyote spoke,  
Beautiful isn't it?  
His words were followed by a hollow scoff, a long drag, and a shake of the head,

Yeah, that's what I thought too.

As the two stood there unmoving, the rest of the herd gathered around Carlos,  
Each of them trying to get a better look at the view through the smoke.  
I know what you're all thinking,  
We're in America now, we made it, what do we need this guy for?  
The coyote slowly turned, so they could all see his eye, and the empty socket next to it,  
And after taking one last drag, he flashed that vicious smile,  
You aren't the first, and you won't be the last to think that,  
But if you really think you can make it without me,  
If you think this world is better off without me,  
You won't make it one day in this country,  
You're better off walking back into the desert,  
And at least there you can die in peace.  
With a burst of laughter, the coyote said,  
That's what I thought, now let's go.

In one swift motion, the coyote threw his cigarette to the ground,  
And started walking down to the street below.  
At first the group was still, but as Carlos took his first steps,  
The herd did too, and followed the beast into the suburb.

As the coyote led the herd through the quiet streets,  
Lined with towering white mansions that seemed to loom over them,  
Carlos felt the world shift beneath his feet, from up on the hill, they had looked so perfect,  
But here on the sidewalk, he could see them for how they really were.  
Their gardens made him nauseous, vivid yellow flowers empty of life and love,  
Flowers that you'd never find in his mother's garden, in any part of Costa Rica,  
And their lawns, their sickly yellow green lawns that betrayed him from afar,  
But up close, he could almost hear their cries for water, their cries for help,  
And the houses, glaring at him with their dark windows covered in bars,  
Windows in which he could see his reflection, mirroring his sunken eyes,  
Almost as if he was on the inside, trapped within those white walls,  
Forever imprisoned in their empty halls.

As they ventured deeper into the maze of houses Carlos lost track of the turns,  
Each street looked the same as the last, but Pirata continued to move at the same steady pace,  
Walking through the neighborhood like he'd lived there all his life,  
Leading them deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of white houses,  
Until they finally reached a street with a junkyard at the end,  
Its chain link fence reaching high above the tallest roof,  
Behind which were stacked cars covered in rust and grime.

The closer they got to the junkyard, the more he wanted to run,

To turn and sprint back where they came, to run back into the desert, but he knew he couldn't,  
Something within those stacks of decomposing cars was pulling him closer, calling his name,  
But he didn't want to listen, he covered his ears, but it did nothing to stop the feeling,  
The Sun may have been slowly climbing into the early morning sky,  
But as soon as they crossed the gates, Carlos felt it grow stronger,  
That darkness from the night before lurking somewhere in that junkyard,  
Patiently waiting for the right moment to make its presence known.

You two, go wait in the van, the coyote said to them,  
A van yellowed from years in the Sun, without wheels it sat chained to the Earth,  
Just a few feet away from the wall of decomposing cars that separated them from the world.  
So Carlos and Victor separated from the herd, and made their way over to the van,  
While the coyote led the rest of the travelers into the heart of the junkyard.

When Carlos threw open the backdoors of the van,  
The heat that had been accumulating within came pouring out, flooding over him,  
Filling him with a warmth he hadn't felt in so long, a warmth that reminded him of home.  
Finally, he thought, an end to the cold, the constant shivering, the endless chills.  
All the seats besides the front two had been ripped out, so he found a spot on the metal floor,  
Where he laid down and let his muscles relax, while Victor closed the backdoors,  
And kept a careful eye on their surroundings, so Carlos could get some rest.  
Just a quick nap, just for a little, he told himself.  
As his eyelids came down, and sleep took its hold,  
Victor kept watch, and Carlos dreamt.

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Something yanked Carlos from his sleep, and he shot up from the floor,  
His mouth was dry, he gasped for breath, but something was wrong,  
He was drenched in sweat, yet he was freezing cold.  
Victor, who was peering through the back windows, whipped his head around,  
And threw a finger up to his mouth,  
SHHHHHHHH.  
Carlos gulped and slowly rose, then joined Victor at the window.  
As he peered through the tinted glass, and he saw what the man had been looking at,  
Pirata was whispering into a radio, and moving very carefully along the stacks of cars,  
The coyote was peeking through the broken windows, trying to see through to the other side,  
What he was looking for Carlos didn't know, but he wasn't interested,  
Instead his focus was on the front of the van, where he could feel something lurking close,  
That darkness he had felt when they first entered was here, and knocking on the window,  
Not in an attempt to enter, but to make its presence known,  
To let him know that he is never out of reach,  
That it is watching, and always will be.

But just as soon as it came, he felt it dissipate, run into hiding,  
Not far, but just out of reach, and his attention was drawn back to the coyote,  
That had somehow made his way to the top of the cars,  
And was peering over the chain link fence at whatever lay on the other side.  
But after a few minutes, Pirata made his way down,  
Hopping from car to car without a sound, as if he weighed nothing at all.

But as he stepped off the last car, a tire broke loose from the top,  
And came crashing down to the ground, where it released a thundering crack,  
A force that shook the tower of cars, and stopped all of their hearts.  
In the silence that followed, the three of them froze, too scared to even let out a breath.  
But as they waited, the temperature began to drop, and something on the other side,  
Began to make itself known.

Hello? Is anyone there?  
Said a man's voice from the other side, it was friendly, almost caring,  
But underneath Carlos could hear something lurking,  
Something that made every hair on his neck stand on edge,  
A beep from a radio rung out in the silence,  
And the border patrol agent's voice grew low as he whispered something into it,  
I can help you, he said, it's okay I'm here to help.

No one moved, and silence regained its grip on the van,  
Finally, after what seemed like an hour, Pirata crept back over to the van,  
And slowly opened the backdoor, Stay here, I'll be right back, he hissed.  
DO NOT MAKE A SOUND, his eyes turning his whispers to roars.  
But as the last words left his mouth, a gasp came from the front seats of the van,  
All three turned and saw a glimpse of white, a trace of fabric in the passenger seat,  
A second later, a head popped out, followed by a second,  
The woman and her baby, both adorning faces soaked in fear.  
For the first time, the baby had awoken, her hazel eyes shining with tears,  
And a second later, came her screams of anguish flooding the van,  
Killing the silence that had kept them hidden.

On the other side of the fence, something powerful started to move,  
Footsteps that shook the Earth, and a thundering growl that surged through Carlos,  
The darkness was back, and had its hands around his throat, gripping tighter and tighter,  
Driving the air from his lungs, and the words from his mouth.  
The woman was convulsing, rocking the baby back and forth,  
Doing everything to get her baby to quiet, but there was nothing she could do.  
PLEASE... SHE WON'T STOP... I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO...  
The woman cried out, but Carlos was frozen in place,  
Unable to look away from those hazel eyes,

That looked just like his own.

Without hesitation, Pirata took off into the depths of the junkyard,  
And Victor began to follow, but stopped when he realized Carlos wasn't with him.

CARLOS WE NEED TO GO.

But he couldn't hear him over the screams that were consuming him,  
From the eyes of the woman, who was begging for his help,  
PLEASE... PLEASE HELP... SHE WON'T STOP...

Her desperate eyes searching his for an answer,  
As he had been there before, her light in the night, their savior,  
But now all he could do was watch as she begged God to save her,  
PLEASE GOD, PLEASE MAKE HER STOP...  
PLEASE...

As the junkyard descended into chaos, the tower of cars began to shake,  
On the other side of the fence the lions began to gather, hurling deafening roars into the sky,  
Throwing their weight against the fence, digging their teeth and claws into the chain link fence,  
Doing everything in their power to bring the metal barrier crashing down,  
Anything to satisfy their hunger, their empty stomachs,  
To feed on the weak, the vulnerable, the powerless,  
Like they had done so many times before,  
The lions were here.

CARLOS WE NEED TO GO NOW.

Victor grabbed Carlos by the shoulder, but he broke free from his grasp,  
And ran to the woman's side, PLEASE COME WITH US, he begged.  
The woman turned to him with tears streaming down her face, and shaking uncontrollably,  
I... I... I... she began to say,  
Carlos looked down, and the baby shaking in her trembling arms,  
The baby who's hazel eyes had once again hidden from the world,  
The baby who had suddenly gone silent,  
I... I... I...

He felt the darkness creep up behind him, and place a hand over his mouth,  
His lungs began to burn, and his body began to freeze,  
As he realized what had happened,  
The baby in her arms was unresponsive to the woman's shaking,  
All her desperate attempts to wake those sweet, hazel eyes,  
Ended the same.

The woman had suffocated her only child,  
In her desperate attempts to silence her,  
By trying to save them,  
She killed them both.

Carlos felt his vision blur, and the shadow descended upon him,  
Drowning him in the darkness once again, but no matter how dark it got,  
Nothing could hide those screams,  
I... I... I... I KILLED MY BABY.  
I... I... I... I KILLED HER.  
KILL ME PLEASE...  
KILL ME...  
PLEASE.

Victor pulled Carlos from the screaming woman,  
and dragged his limp body from the van,  
Into the back seat of a black Monte Carlo,  
Just before the lions broke through the fence,  
Bringing the tower of dead cars tumbling down,  
And sending dust into the sky.

As Pirata slammed on the gas,  
And Carlos slipped into the abyss,  
He could hear the lions roars,  
As they tore the door off the van,  
And ripped the woman from her seat,  
As she clutched at her dead baby,  
And refused to let go.

Even as they tore her to pieces,  
And the screams poured from her lungs,  
She would never let go.  
It didn't matter how far they drove,  
How much time passed,  
Her screams would never stop,  
And she would never let go.

## The City

*Does the wildebeest ever look around the savannah and wonder,  
Why was I born with horns instead of a mane,  
With hooves instead of claws,  
With pain rather than joy,  
Why has life cursed me?*

*Or does the wildebeest look around and give thanks,  
For the usefulness of its horns,  
For the durability of its hooves,*



*For the strength found in pain,  
How can one be so lucky?*

When Carlos awoke, he found himself in an all too familiar place, the front seats of a bus. Like he had done so many times before, he closed his eyes, and tried to find sleep again, But the longer he sat there with his eyes closed, the faster the memories came at him, Flashing across the back of his eyelids, one after another, until he couldn't take it anymore, He shot up in his seat, and wiped the moisture from his eyes.

Carlos shook the images from his mind, and that sound from his ears, He wanted it to stop, to have the memories wiped clean, so he could start anew, But he knew he could never, even if he could forget them, To forget would be to kill a part of himself, All his memories, the good, the bad, and the ugly, Made him who he was, and he wouldn't trade that for the world, But right now, they were too painful, So he tried to put up that wall, And focus on the road ahead, For that's all that mattered now.

Carlos reached into the pocket above his heart, And handed Victor the slip of paper with his father's address on it. After a slight nod of the head, and two words, *estamos cerca*, Carlos laid his head back, and tried to think about what he would say, When he saw his father's face for the first time, As a man.

It wasn't long till they got off, but long enough to settle his mind, And as the dust came down, that usual color began creeping its way, Into the corners of his vision, the color that tainted all thoughts of his father, Red. A burning, seething, poisonous fire.

And while it wasn't an especially hot day in Los Angeles, When he the doors of the bus opened, and he saw where the bus had taken him to, It felt as if hell had descended upon him, flooding his entire body with an unimaginable heat, A fire that had been sleeping had awoken, and was now burning him from within. The address his mother had given him wasn't his father's home, But his business, Jimenez Stones, a jewelry store.

In all the years he spent imagining this moment, The infinite scenarios he played out in his mind, All the conversations and the paths each one might take, Nothing could have prepared him for this,

Because now that he was here staring at his name in green letters,  
His world was burning down around him,  
He had no idea what he was going to say,  
But he didn't care anymore.

So Carlos jumped down from the bus,  
And walked straight through those glass doors with such force,  
The little bell on top of the door almost flew across the room.  
On the left side of the store, a middle aged, gaunt looking man stood behind the glass counter,  
In his hand hung a golden necklace with a diamond on the end,  
But when the ring of the bell exploded into the silence of the room,  
He nearly dropped the necklace as his wide eyes shot over to the door.  
But as he realized who it was, and the shock in his eyes was replaced by disgust,  
Carlos came to a realization of his own, his father didn't recognize him.

We're closed,  
His father said bitterly, then turned back to the old white couple he was assisting.  
I figured you wouldn't recognize me, Carlos said back.  
His father sighed, and without looking away, said,  
Recognize you?  
Carlos felt the bile crawling up his throat, but kept it down and fired back,

Most fathers recognize their own sons, but I guess you're not most fathers.

His father froze, and the room became so silent Carlos could almost hear the necklace,  
Swing back and forth in his father's outstretched hand.  
After a few seconds, his father put down the necklace, took off his glasses,  
And said with a voice that wasn't his own,  
I'm so sorry folks, could you excuse me for a second,  
And feel free to try on any piece you want!  
But as he broke off from the couple, and his eyes moved from them to Carlos,  
He saw that fire burning behind those green eyes, a fire he'd seen before.  
As his father thrust out that jaw, he practically leaped across the room,  
And landing in front of the two of them, where Carlos could see that fire up close,  
He didn't know if his eyes were showing him the truth,  
Or a reflection of himself.

I don't have time for this right now, his father hissed, go wait across the street.  
Carlos turned, and saw on the other side, the face of Ronald McDonald staring back at him,  
When he turned back, his father had stepped behind the counter closest to them,  
You, he said as he motioned to Victor, you brought my son here?  
Sí señor.  
He looked down and reaching his hand under the glass counter,  
His father took out a rack of watches and said,

Pick any one you want, it's yours, and here's some money for lunch,  
And after placing a \$10 on the glass, his father walked back to the older couple,  
Who had finally decided on a necklace.

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As he sat across the street, in the warm plastic seat of the McDonald's booth,  
Eating the best meal of his life that he wanted to hate so much,  
He was doing it again, imagining the look in his eyes,  
When he punched his father in the face.

How could he sit there in air conditioning, surrounded by jewelry,  
While his mother crawled through the depths of hell,  
Working three jobs for years on end,  
Just trying to give her son a life he could be proud of,  
And even then, it still wasn't enough,  
He needed him to know,  
How much he hated him,  
For leaving his mother.

The hours that passed were torturous,  
They burned away slowly, like the coals of a tireless bonfire,  
And the longer he sat there, the hotter that fire burned,  
Until finally, his father emerged from his store,  
The blaze within him collapsed into itself,  
And from its ashes emerged an inferno,

It burned fiercely, melting the red plastic seats, filling the room so thick with smoke,  
He couldn't see anything besides those hideous green eyes,  
Shining their way through it all, searing into his mind,  
Where they would forever stay.

He shot up from the booth, and out onto the street, but before he could get a word out,  
A pair of arms grabbed him around the waist, but they couldn't stop the words,  
Or the emotions that poured out of him.

HOW COULD YOU  
DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU PUT HER THROUGH  
WHAT YOU DID TO HER  
YOU STRANDED HER  
YOU LEFT HER

As he fought the arms around him,  
He readied himself for the attack,

But as he watched his father implode,  
He knew there would be none.

You can stay at my place if you want to, was all his father said.  
The man couldn't even straighten himself,  
To look his son in the eyes.

Carlos felt that fire within him suddenly burn out,  
Leaving behind nothing but ash and tears.  
He didn't want to cry in front of his father,  
But it wasn't up to him, they were already here.

There were only two words on the tip of his tongue, and neither one was yes.  
Fuck you.

Yeah, I know, his father said.  
Come on, let's go.

The three men walked back across the street and behind the store,  
And piled into a car built like a tin can.  
His father dropped Victor off at a bus stop a few blocks away,  
Although he never expected to be, he was so thankful for the little man,  
He never would have made it without him,  
They never talked much, but now he wish they had,  
There were so many things he wanted to tell him,  
But right now, his mind didn't want to talk,  
So he spoke from the heart,  
*Pura vida.*

\*\*\*

When he walked through the door to his father's apartment,  
And the smell of rotting food smacked him in the face,  
The mold in the ceiling seeped into his mind.

There were no bedrooms or bathrooms,  
There was just one room, and in it sat a sofa, a bed, a kitchen, and a toilet,  
All of which seemed to be covered in a sickly yellow film,  
Decomposing along with their owner.

The man was shitting where he ate, and from the way he looked,  
You could tell.

Carlos sat down on the sofa, and didn't get up for a week.  
He sat watching that TV, not understanding a thing,  
But hoping desperately that something would stick.  
He needed to learn English as quick as possible,  
His father wouldn't let him come to the store,  
And for some reason, he couldn't seem to escape.  
No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to break,  
The chains that bound him to that sofa.

After another week of television and frozen dinners,  
It seemed the sofa had claimed his father prisoner as well,  
He no longer would leave in the mornings for work,  
But wake up in the afternoons, take his morning piss,  
And join his son on the sofa of the same color.

Carlos never asked his father why he stopped going to work,  
He didn't really care, he was just waiting for his sister to call back,  
To let him know she was on his way.  
They were planning to move to the Bay Area,  
Where they could both start fresh,  
She had been working as a maid,  
But the way she described it, she was basically a slave,  
She never got paid in anything other than food and a bed.

As the two weeks turned to four, he thought he'd never leave,  
The mold had been spreading up from the sofa,  
Crawling up his arms and legs, slowly making its way to his brain,  
Where he was afraid it would stay forever, and turn him into his father,  
The dead man who breathed silently next to him.

But on the day marking one month since his arrival, they burst through the door,

Knocking the rotting piece of wood off its hinges, and shaking the entire apartment,  
So that the dust came raining down from the ceiling like snow.  
Their were two of them, not much taller than Carlos, but an easy fifty pounds heavier,  
They walked nonchalantly into the small apartment, and his father shot into the corner,  
And hiding behind the toilet, he shivered and shook, cowering in fear.

PLEASE...  
PLEASE... I CAN GET THE MONEY...  
PLEASE...

Ignoring the empty cans and old food containers that littered the ground,  
And paying no attention to Carlos, they grabbed his father by the neck, and said,

Thought we wouldn't find you?

PLEASE...

I JUST NEED A LITTLE MORE TIME...

PLEASE...

As his father struggled in the man's grasp, his face turned from red to purple,  
And his words lost all their strength as the life drained from his eyes.

please...

But just before the light went out, they dropped him to the ground.

You'll double what you owe, he said,

Then one of the men turned to Carlos and said,

This your father?

Carlos nodded.

The man scoffed as he watched his father writhe on the ground,

That sucks.

The men left through the doorway, where the broken door swung on its hinges,  
And Carlos looked down at his father.

The man who he blamed for everything,

The man who made his life hell.

The man who hurt his mother.

Seeing him on the ground, a broken shell of a man,  
A man who was decomposing in his loneliness,  
Induced by himself, and his inability to conquer fear,  
Carlos didn't feel sorry for him,  
But he understood,  
How fear had crippled his father,  
How it had taken everything from him,  
How it would kill him.

Carlos helped the man up, the man he had once called the devil,  
And after placing him on the chair in front of the TV,  
He took one last look, walked out the door,  
And down the street.

Where to, he didn't know,

Somewhere down the river,  
He just needed to keep moving,  
For the journey of the wildebeest,  
And the life of an immigrant,  
Are just that, an endless search,  
For change.