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Aching Knees in Palm Springs

One gray Thursday in winter break,
Albert and I plucked patches of grass
From petunia beds wide as swimming pools
Within a condo complex; one-story stucco blocks
For old men who wipe sweat with dollar bills.
We spent our school vacations in shivers:
Raking, trimming, and mowing frosted yards with Dad.
At the eighth hour of kneeling,
The weight on my knees was too much for me.
For each fistful of grass, I stood up to stretch
And let the cold air sneak under my shirt.
When Dad noticed the weeds slowly filling the can,
He turned to me red-faced and said,
*You're packing down the dirt, kneel on the lawn
And weed the beds from there.* I said,
I am at least entitled to some circulation . . .
I kept the truth from slipping past my chapped lips,
How I didn't care about dirt and weeds
From a bourgeoisie's garden—these few men
I learned about in Sociology class—
Who raked in more hundred-dollar bills
Than I did citrus leaves in a day.
I wanted to tell Dad that these men didn't care
If Mexicans spent ten hours—or even a lifetime,
Weeding out the same bed the following week.
To only tell him about the hours I felt wasted,
When we could've rested our sore backs on a bed
And drowned in the lake of a much deserved sleep,
Or sailed through Tierra del Fuego, us standing
On the deck and never bowing, not even to the sun.
Or how he could have learned to read,
And I would finally show him a poem I wrote.
But I didn't. Because I knew what he would say—
It's the only way to put you through school—this oily sweat.
I kept my tongue hidden behind my teeth,
And watched my brother hunched over, tossing weeds
And years inside a green plastic can without a word.

Contemporary American Hunger

We were the newest broke Mexicans to settle in Indio,
 Mom having quit her job at school
 To rest her neck, tense from hovering
 Like a desk lamp over the Special-Ed kids.
 Albert and I, barely hip-high
 To our mother, unaware of our budget,
 Salivated as we thought about the dry buns,
 The Grade B patties of Argentine beef at McDonald's—
 For what our TV eyes believed was the best lunch in town.

At McD's, we paid for two cheeseburgers.
 Mom pulled out her blue purse, laid out
 A buck thirty-eight—
 Two dull quarters,
 Six dimes, five nickels,
 And three parking-lot pennies.
 The cashier's forefinger counted
 The change as Mom held up the line,
 While the regulars tapped
 Their feet behind her. She stood red-faced,
 For these burgers slid towards her
 On a bright plastic tray.

Bun by bun, Mom bulldozed
 With a plastic knife the spread of ketchup,
 Mustard and chopped onion
 Before slicing the burgers to give each of her sons a half.
 Satisfied, we ventured through a rainbow
 Of tubes and balls with the other kids,
 Their stomachs full of Big Macs or Happy Meals.
 But we were happy too—better than staying
 At home on a Saturday
 Eating potato tacos after our yard chores.
 Did Mom sit there and watch us play?
 I only remember her fingers neatly wrapping
 The remaining half in the greasy red and yellow paper,
 Then tucking the lump away in her purse, sustenance for later.

Learning Economics at Gemco

My mother pushes a grocery cart,
 I tug at her blue, pleated skirt.

She puts her change into my hands,
 For the old soul slumped against the wall,
 His gray mouth covered by a beard of wind and dirt.

I place the coins into his cupped hands
 And he stacks two neat columns of cents
 Next to his seat on the curb.
 He nods his chin, half-solemnly.

I turn back to mother,
 Suddenly a cop—he came out of nowhere—
 Tells me *Take the money back*.
 I brush the coins
 Back into my palms like table crumbs.
 As the old man,
 Silent as those pennies,
 Gets cuffed and hauled off to jail.
 I ask Mom why?—
 We only tried to help.

The cop says bums make thirty bucks a week
 Begging for change
 And are not too unhappy
 When arrested
 Since they get food, shelter,
 And a hot shower for at least a week.

My mother pushes the grocery cart without a word,
 Knowing that as newlyweds she begged outside markets for change
 While Dad stole bread and sliced honey-ham inside.

Las Cucarachas

Roaches sniff
with their two
strands of hair
around the kitchen
and slip through
the cereal box-tops
as easily as any envelope
slides beneath a door.
They munch on dry corn
flakes you thought
were raisin bran.
In the bathroom,
they dip their faces
in the uncapped
toothpaste and massage
their bellies
against the bristles
of your toothbrush.
At night, they climb
over the ravine
of your mouth
while you snore
and become the first
things you see waking
from a dream.
They tickle your toes
when you put on
your boots.
When I turn on
the light before work
I see them
on their knees,
elbows resting
on the roach trap,
pincers pressed
in prayer,

offering thanks
and grace
to a god who favors
them with the lost
harvest of the earth.

The City of Date Fruits and Bullet Wounds

for Alfred and Sam

You're cruising the streets
Of Indio, it's Friday,
Late night in the city
Of date fruits and bullet wounds.
You're driving, your best friend
Next to you tugging
At his seatbelt. Two more
Are in the backseat:
The one sitting left stares at the neon
Lights of a 7-Eleven as you wait
For a left turn on Highway 111.
The other one sees two cars pull
Up next to yours.
They've mistaken your best friend
For his older brother,
Yell a few *fuck yous*
And *watcha lookin' ats*,
Strike your car with beer bottles.
Each minute feels as long as a city
Block, not nearly as short as our lives.

When you two were seven
Or maybe ten, I remember
You were skinny as my father's
Yard rakes, and you were leaning
Under a grapefruit tree.

Your plump best friend doing
 Pull-ups on a branch,
 My brother counting them off.
 You grew up with your friend
 Together like two grapefruits
 On the same stem, the ones we
 Peeled in the dusk
 Of an October Monday.
 What did you both not know
 Of each other?
 The first whiskers in the sink,
 Fingers crawling under a skirt.
 My brother always spoke
 Of you two, side by side
 In a world of mud-dark places
 And dusty streets.
 These memories spread thin
 Like field dust on our shoes
 After a short-cut home.
 That's where we want
 To go, right? But not the homes
 Like our houses, but places like where
 You bumped into my brother
 And me outside the market,
 When our grandfather was still breathing
 Steadily. You were melting
 Hershey Kisses between your teeth
 And cheeks, your legs
 Still broomsticks.
 It's these places where we dropped
 A little bit of our souls
 Like loose pennies
 From our pockets.

Alfred, stay like you are
 In my first memory:
 Not when you're in your car and
 Two boys step out and fire.
 Not when you duck
 Under the dashboard knowing glass

Can't stop a bullet any more
 Than a chest bone.
Fuck it, you say, I'm hit.
 You throw yourself over
 Your best friend like a blanket
 Of flesh, take a few more
 Hits for his life,
 Until some homeboys watching
 From across the street
 Scare off the locos with a few shots
 Of their own. Your engine
 Bleeds transmission oil.
 Your last breath cold
 On your best friend's neck.
 I only want the grapefruit
 Peels in the dirt,
 My brother and I
 In the parking lot
 After a trip to the candy counter
 With grandfather, unwrapping
 One piece of chocolate after another.

The Story My Grandfather Told My Mother a Few Months before His Death

Anoche, I fled this place of horrors. These viejos moaning for painkillers, they make me, they make me tire of them. I was fed up of its janitor's stink. To save the strength in my legs I slept for three days. The swelling in my feet deflated. The clock read half past twelve. I wore my paper gown without zapatos and walked along the highway's shoulder and stepped on every piedra. I stepped on bottle caps. I stepped on broken glass . . .

And you didn't come across any coyotes out in the desert?

I flung rocks at two or three. Bared my teeth and gums. Growled. Los coyotes weren't the problem though. The cars were. They drive faster en la noche, afraid of espíritus walking in the dark. I struggled against the car's air resistance, but lost my balance and tumbled on the shoulder with the Styrofoam cups. Before my body came to a stop, another car passed through and I rolled again. Then raced one more car after another, until I picked up wind and was somersaulting with the plastic bags. I hovered over an onion field and remembered I knew how to fly as a boy. Nightly, I flew over the fields to pick the next day's crops so there would be less work waiting. Below me, El Rancho Viejo, and I remembered how to land: one knee comes out, point the other leg down.

Did you fly through the chimney?

Why didn't I think about that? When I arrived at el rancho, I was too weak to unhook the chain and let myself in. And after all that trouble. I rested on a rock, doodled self-portraits in the dirt for every decade of my life, until I got my strength. I walked back to the nursing home and stepped on sticks of dried mesquite. I sneaked into bed without being missed. When I woke up you were here.

Maybe it was a dream, Apá? It sounds like a dream.

It was no sueño. Check beneath my feet for thorns. Check and pull them out.

I Go Dreaming, Raking Leaves

It's been six years since I've strangled a rake,
 Dragged its green teeth across grass,
 And still I'm raking leaves during my sleep.
 Citrus leaves abundant as body hair.
 I rake a small pile, toss half into a plastic can
 And another pile takes its place. The leaves never stop coming.
 The same way one cleans a wound and the blood keeps rising.

Network of Bone

I

No muscle in sight. The sandwich flab
 Circles across the navel like Saturn's rings.

Shoulders diving-board narrow.
 Hips the width of a cereal box.

As the Greeks to their skies, someone
 Once connects the constellation of Hercules
 With the moles on my back.

II

Though my arms appear thin enough to shatter midway a set of push-ups, my biceps are oranges covered in flesh. Darker skin from the elbow down, it's not a farmer's tan, but a gardener's—after summer months of mowing and raking in T-shirts from the previous school year, whose tears and holes have me looking back, holding on to nothing.

III

I've seen men my age whose arms are bigger than my legs.

IV

Even with the grace and speed of Mercury's wings
 Donned on my ankles, these feet
 Couldn't outrun an arthritic greyhound.

V

I've learned patience through facial imperfections: cheeks scarred by scratching and the picking of high-school zits. My ears stick out like satellite dishes casting shadows of their own as I walk down a sidewalk at high noon. My nose—a question mark tracing back to Zapata, who opposed the state at every turn. Left eye out of focus because of slight astigmatism blurs the grace of the world, making the orange blossoms of La Quinta appear like desert snow. Teeth stained yellow with the constant sips of Coca-Cola, teeth straightened by metal brackets and wires, have now shifted out of place, like pebbles in Mojave wind. My hair, midnight waves receding from the shoreline.

VI

My heart beats endlessly behind

This visible network of bone.

My heart pumping evidently that this man

Walking the streets is not a skeleton out of coffin.