

Abuelo's Broken Crown

I.

In the years before my grandmother departed
I'd visit each week, my father behind the wheel.
Her small, sterile apartment wedged in steel
frame: a tenth-floor suburban tenement, started
as a box for loved ones to die – I would ask
my father, he would in turn rebuke with silence.
A plan to die, her noble gift, rooted in defiance.
As she'd toil over stovetop, he'd uncork the flask
and sit, patient as a sniper, quiet in the chair.
I'd play with toys or draw portraits of us three,
while he'd coolly contemplate the miles driven
and what was lost amid the graying of his years.
We'd leave abruptly, unaware that this could be
the closest thing to routine our love had given.

II.

The closest thing to routine their love had given
these men was food. Kahlo feeds mi abuelo,
José de Jesus Santiago, on hard steps as day slowed,
crouched atop a Coca-Cola crate, a short give in
to sun. He laughs with the men whose skin chalks
and beads amid the leaden heat. Her basket is a full
harvest as she waves the men over, offers a bagful
of dried mangos & stalks of tomatillos in a box
to the lingering bodies, hands José pan dulce
and cold cajeta in a small mason jar, half-filled.
He turns to a man near him, a gristly golden face,
extending a torn half of the bread, as if bouquet.
These workers, carrying turbulence that has filled
many miles between them, all arriving at this place.

III.

Many miles between them, all arriving at this place,
are ghosts of him I carry. When I choose to speak
of my grandfather, mi abuelo, it is smoke-sweet
& static. He is a drifted, difficult-to-conjure face.
He is as much myth as miracle, as much a herald
of fate as he is the forefather of a fractured heritage.
He is a gift of brilliant bar stories spilling, pillaged
in wood grain. He is a thousand masks. He is feral.
He is fish tale. He is a liquor-lit brash that hollowed

my father into a ghost, his hands chimney up the frets
of smoky Southwest barrooms, end buried, balancing
in the mouths of the ones he loved. All of it, swallowed
amid memories of myth & labor, doubt & ample debt—
only by the thin thread of memory & reimagining.

IV.

Only by the thin thread of memory & reimagining
can I recall the story of my grandfather, walking back
from the frozen river north, carrying a rucksack
to the Ford Rouge plant for work, while haggling
no English. A stubborn will, he trudged there, tired
through two dozen miles in winter. When he arrived
to the factory, he showed the boss his hands deprived
of fear, his tough, rigid skin. With that, he was hired.
He was known as the lone mayor of his barrio, a king
there at the beating west river tide. Irene, nineteen years
his junior, would maintain the home in the evenings.
Lawyered on behalf of wives that, too, felt the ring
of hands in summit, inmigrantes huddled in quiet fear.
Whisper like pencil lead into the tender postwar air.

V.

Whisper like pencil lead into the tender postwar air,
all the names I scratch across my skin, all the thought
taken to harvest a second chance. My father came, hot
one summer. First born like me. Full head of hair.
Never said out loud, his hatred of abuelo's presence.
Instead, each time, the way he'd crank his neck back
when the name was mentioned, would tell it. Pack
a sweet nostalgia into his cold mind to ferment
with the rest of it and shrivel up like a box elder leaf
on the dry concrete each time. My grandfather died
a lonely death, months before my father's divorce.
Therein, I bared witness to what my father, the thief,
had turned into. We are a lineage of men that will try
any excuse before we accept the fault of our hands.

VI.

Any excuse before we accept the fault of our hands,
Irene would say, is what kept our elaborate lies pristine.
Her stories, like a lighthouse, were revealed fourteen
years after her death. How in her bravest dance,
she would search the streets of the city, back alley bars
to brothel bedrooms, each drug den & gambling house,

trying to find the sons that had strayed to the street.
She was brazen & beautiful, gratified by the little life
she'd made for herself. Her heart was as big as Belle Isle
when she'd rummage the flaring veins of the city
trying to rescue or resuscitate her kin. I don't know
if my father was one of the men that strayed but
I've learned to not need explanations to understand
this bedlam; my learning amongst a tattered tribe.

VII.

This bedlam is my learning amongst a tattered tribe.
These arms are rusted shovels from which I use, first,
to excavate the delicate pieces, to let wane & burst
into oblivion. I keep tugging at the conflated diatribe
tattered in each recollection, thumbing against every
epitaph — namesake, over & over. Incessant rage
when I consider the tools it takes to dress the stage
of my own conjuring. To make excuses for the leech
seething at each holy vessel, asking to take me back,
to belong here. Every flaw & fracture, mine. I know
no other way than to follow what's been started,
to navigate & make clean. I am the descent of that
ghost. The root that remembers, who glows & grows
in the years before my grand and eventual departure.