

Spring 2024

He Asks Me Why I Started This, These Paintings

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Recommended Citation

Mazza Sere, Frankie, "He Asks Me Why I Started This, These Paintings" (2024). *Senior Projects Spring 2024*. 184.

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He Asks Me Why I Started This, These Paintings

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

Acknowledgements y Agradecimientos

Thank you-

To my advisor, Nicole Caso, for her patience, guidance, and good humour (*panqueque!*); I am deeply grateful I had the opportunity to work with you

To Jenny Offil for her help and encouragement

To Cole Heinowitz for her guidance and for so much, truly

To Adhaar Desai for his junior literature seminar- it was invaluable

To Rabbi Joshua for the information on blessings and for his willingness to help

To my mom, Laura Mazza Gonick, for the family story that started this and for answering my questions

To my family (Stef, KKat, & Slue) and all those who encouraged me to write

To my dear Zoie & Nory for listening to me go on and on

Gracias a Maricel y Cora de Las Brujas, y a mi Tío Matu y sus hermanos (Alfredo, Carolina, y Meri), aunque no termine escribiendo sobre Evita, estoy muy agradecido por todo lo que hicieron para ayudarme

And thank you to my great grandmother, Carolina Muchnik, without whom this story would not have started

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Introduction

For the sake of not spoiling the story, the author has opted to include an afterword instead of an introduction or foreword. You are welcome to read the afterword first, if a foreword suits your needs better. I will warn you that there will be spoilers in it (there will be a small bold [spoiler warning] for those sections).

Ceibo Flowers

Recently, I found some journal entries from when Tolashka first arrived in our family. I was turning pages in old sketchbooks, black cover almost brown, *Property of Liana* written in overcareful script; finding memories to reacquaint myself with, and this was scribbled in between and along the edge of some small sketches. I've read it a couple times over the past few days.

Our parents don't talk about it. Or at least, not to us. In the kitchen at night, at lunch when the boys eat in the fields, when they think I've already left for Agnesia's house or they don't know I've come back early. That's how I found out Annatola is coming to stay with us. They call her Tolashka, endearing her name, murmuring as if to comfort themselves about her, about her little brother. I imagine greeting her when she arrives- she's my age, well, younger, but *close enough* they say. I know I'm supposed to greet her like an old friend. I'm too young to have old friends, but *we have to make her feel welcome, she's with mishpokhe now*. We aren't her family, but I don't say that. Really, I found out *Tolashka* is coming here, coming to Argentina, because my little brother, who they allow to "help" with the threshing, ran inside for water, for *limonada*, and heard them say something. Since then I've been listening. They're planning what to say to us. I don't know why, it's not like they think we don't hear about the atrocities of what we came from. Maybe they think it's different because she's our age. They treat me like I'm young, like they haven't had the community in our living room, in our kitchen, sitting just outside, the smell of cooking, sometimes

ours, sometimes almost gaucho, mixing in the air with lighter gossip that flows into stories of attacks- of conspiracies: a little boy was killed to make our matzo, we folded his blood into the dough, laughing. Sometimes I have bad dreams, that the gauchos here believe we are monsters, too, and they swarm into our houses screaming *monstros*, pulling us out of bed by our hair. I wake up in the middle of the night, crying, trying not to scream. I sit by the window and draw the gauchos' angry faces, their fingers long and sharp, our hair under their nails. If I draw them out they can live on the page instead of in my mind and my shaking hands can be still, stiller, then I fall asleep again.

I don't remember the last time I had one of those dreams. I remember other nightmares that came later, that replaced the gauchos. Those dreams lasted longer.

Presumably a couple days later I wrote this:

Tolashka is coming. Our parents told us at dinner last night, over the blue plates, over the one with the chip my Tate always takes from Mamá's place setting. Mordechay asked if we have to share rooms with them. He was told not to ask silly questions, where else would they sleep?

Oh goodness I remember being just as frustrated with sharing rooms, but I was four years older than Mordechay and desperate to show it. I was just growing out of calling our father Tate then.

The next entry is accompanied by a small sketch of folded clothing and a flower. A couple of faces, the steward hanging out of a train as it passed, a wicker handbag and the gloved hand holding it. There is also an arrow pointing back, its line crosses four pages back to the first glimpse of a beautiful boy.

Tolashka is coming today. We are waiting at the train station. I love the train station, but not for the same reasons Mordechay does, he runs towards the tracks, getting too close to a passing train and my mother screams *MORKHA* and he comes running back. I love the people with all their different faces, all their different eyes, all their different smiles, all their wonderfully imperfect teeth. I come here sometimes when I don't have anything I should be doing, and sometimes when I do. Sometimes I draw them. I saw the most beautiful boy, he came to town and has been here for a week. He helped with the threshing. I'm too afraid to ask about him because Agnesia will say *Lianaaa, does someone have some little feelings?*

There is a little drawing I made of him a couple days ago- the first time I saw him- as he moved away from the train, his pants hemmed nicely, but scuffed, the sweet slope of his shoulders to his waist. I hid it away with my other drawings, almost shameful even fully clothed. I know what Agnesia would say: that we should wait in our *bosquecillo* by the Paraná, hidden by the willows, the aspens, and the one ceibo that leans over, setting its red flowers gently in the water. She would say we should hide there and wait for him to go swimming with the boys. Sometimes we go, and she openly stares at them from our hiding place, while I hide my embarrassment by

drawing them, focusing on the anatomy, each pose, how a lifted arm pulls muscle taught, how the muscle ripples and settles back as they bring their arm down again. I think of his hemmed pants by the shore, how I could draw the folded cloth, its shadows, the details in the grass, perhaps a ceibo flower resting on top. Agnesia would lean over and point out the flower's pistil, standing at attention.

My thoughts are interrupted as the train comes in and people come pouring out. I'm blushing and I don't quite know why. My Tate holds Morkha's hand and my mother stands on her toes, trying to see Tolashka, which only makes her as tall as my Tate's shoulder.

After the crowd has dispersed, a blonde girl and a little boy who looks like he is *a punto de llorar* stand in the dust up towards the far end of the station. We walk towards them as quickly as possible, and my mother gathers them in her arms, exclaiming and welcoming, comforting the boy, Haskel. I'd forgotten his name although they'd told us, *Haskel*, she says, *here's an empanada, do you know what that is?* I think this is when I'm supposed to talk to Tolashka, but I'm not sure how. *She is your shvester now, Liaye, remember to make her feel welcome, yes?* It wasn't a question, my mother does not say *yes?* as a question, it means *do as I say*, if you listen closely, if you know her.

Haskel. We all called him Herschel, little deer. And he was dear to us, for the time we had him.

They have been here three days, Haskel is quiet. I tried to give him one of my books to read, but he doesn't know how to read and it made him cry. Then from the kitchen, my mother's voice *Liaye! What did you do?* I fixed it. I read him a story. He liked it. I think he did at least, he is so quiet, as is his sister. They don't say much. *It's the atrocities, nebbishes*, my parents say, strung into long sentences about their suffering. *Nebbishes*, I think, *pobrecitos*.

Then there are a couple pages of *molle* tree drawings. The almost grape bunch shape of the red clusters. One drawing of Morkha's face when we dared him to eat a whole cluster, and a quick sketch of Herschel laughing. I should send that drawing to Tolashka.

There was one *molle* tree in the middle of the town that we would all gather around, we would have contests of who could eat the most and sometimes we would have fights with the small, round berries. In the weeks after the fruits became ripe they could be found forgotten in pockets, accidentally kicked under furniture, or left in heaps all over town. That tree is gone now. It was cut down when it seemed that Adamas was becoming a more metropolitan hub. Of course, everything is abandoned now in that area of Entre Ríos, but sometimes I like to pretend that young parents have settled back into the town. That their children are having *molle* fights and contests, that trees have sprung up from the forgotten fruits left at street corners, and older siblings, told to *include the younger children*, told *watch them*, *I need you all out of the house*, leave the little ones to nap in the house-like shade of the weeping branches as they play.

I stare at the sketch of Herschel the longest, I'm glad I can remember him happy. I think we all somehow knew he wouldn't live long.

He became very ill a couple years into living with us. Morkha was sent away to keep him healthy. Tolashka and I were old enough that Mamá wasn't worried about us becoming seriously ill from Herschel. We were old enough to take care of him as he died. Mamá tried to send Tolashka away, to protect her. Tolashka would not go. She stayed until the end, stayed almost silently, returned to the quietness of her first days in Adamas. She spoke in low tones to him and did not speak to us beyond asking for warm water and a cloth to soothe him, beyond thanking us for the food we brought to his room.

We buried him near the vines he and Morkha would steal grapes from, pelting each other with them, seeing who could catch them in their mouths with the most skill. We planted a little molle tree above his grave. This was Morkha's idea, a way of remembering when *el niñito triste* had laughed the hardest.

I remember being too afraid to ask Tolashka if I could draw him one last time. I still regret not having one last gift for her, one last remembrance, something to hold onto.

The next entry after is a sketch of a hand filled with grapes, a vine curling over the wrist, and then:

It has been two weeks, and now the beautiful boy- I know now that his name is Mauro- has not gone swimming. He also doesn't have stick fights with the boys. They call him snobbish but then he starts a mud fight, he isn't above getting dirty. He holds discussions, on books, on stories he has read, some philosophy, questions they

can all mull over. Never Talmud, never Midrash. He's quite odd about it when it's brought up. I hear all of this through Mordechay, who I cannot trust to know what he is talking about. I hear some things through Agnesia, and sometimes Clara Luzina, who has two older brothers (I only have Mordechay at home, who is still a child. Simón, our older brother has gone to university in Buenos Aires to be a doctor, and Agnesia only has two older sisters). Clara Luzina, *Calu*, tells us what she hears through her eldest brother, who is loud and brash, and through Franco, the gaucho boy who works for their family. Her younger brother is gentle and smiles at me. Agnesia likes the older one, she thinks he is bold and daring. This is not true, he is arrogant and annoying, overconfident. He starts fights with Franco.

Franco lives just outside of our community with his grandfather. He is friends with the other gaucho boy who we all think is in love with one of Agnesia's sisters, and she, in love with him.

This is not important, what is important is I know where the boys play now, by Calu's family's corral. I can go draw them, anatomy studies are important. As is learning to draw figures in motion. Then, when I get bored, I can turn to draw the horses.

I never got bored of drawing them, I was infatuated by one *beautiful boy*, but of course I was trying my best to never admit this, even to myself.

I am amused by what I thought philosophy was at that time, I don't think Mauro knew as much as I credited him with, I think he just made the world rose-colored for me.

We called Agnesia's sisters the Brezkrovnenas, it was their last name, changed from Brezkrovny to Brezkrovny *nenas*, the Brezkrovny girls.

Clara Luzina Sapovar, amusing that I used her two first names, we called her Calu in the *Valderos*. I had forgotten her brothers: the older, who left shortly after this journal entry, was a man made for the city, and the younger, who I had spent hours imagining as my husband before a certain someone had arrived in town.

Oh goodness and the *Valderos- Valderos viene de la palabra en Yiddish para bosque, y -eros* was our Castilian ending.

Mauro stayed with Calu's family as well, they had the most land of all of us and needed the most help. Franco often stayed nights there when the work went long instead of walking all the way back across town and a little ways further to his grandfather's home. I suspected it was more than the walk that kept him.

He talked to me! Mauro did. I was sitting by the corral, I'd had to shake a horse off my hair as I was drawing, its soft velvety lips making the strands stand up and out of my braid. I was drawing a mud fight that had turned into a fierce debate, about what I don't know. I glanced up at the boys and there was Mauro, leaning forward to look at my paper. And there I was, scrambling to hide it and fix my hair and explain that he- that they, that the boys were good references for my drawing and anatomy and his face broke into a smile and he *laughed at me*. The indignity! But it was a lovely laugh, his lip gets a little caught on his top teeth and his eyes disappear. He introduced himself to me and looked like he might have sat down with me if the boys hadn't started yelling *Mauro! Este idiota está equivocado- he's not right!*

Tell him! and the replying *Yes I am! They're lying!* devolving into squabbles as someone started to pick some mud up again. He dashed off to mediate.

Mauro dominated my journal entries, I don't know why I picked up journaling and dropped it so suddenly again. No, that's not exactly true, I do know, or I suspect. I couldn't quite tell Agnesia about my crush, I didn't want the teasing or her amateur matchmaking. I had to get it out somewhere, my big, bursting feelings. It still makes me smile now, I loved that feeling. I couldn't tell Agnesia, even though she was my best friend, and then, not too much later, there was a secret to keep, even from her. I was so afraid of it being found in the pages of my sketchbook that it kept me from writing about it or anything else. Even though the writing quickly stopped, a few entries after this one, the memories and stories in the drawings are almost more vivid, hold me almost more entirely.

Another entry about Mauro:

We are friends now. I think he may have *little feelings* for Tolashka. He likes my drawings. I showed him the *bosquecillo*, he likes it. I swore him to secrecy, but Agnesia is still a little mad. She'll get over it. He likes the ceibo flowers, I do too. One time he told me he was never able to start the first rows of plowing in his town. I don't ask why, he seems to shy away from talking about his town and I don't want to ruin this moment. He tells me he hopes he could maybe plow the first rows here, in Adamas, someday. I hope so too. He talks about traveling, I hope he stays. He is playing with some small willow branches as he talks. Before he can say anything more about his

town, perhaps even to cut himself off, he places the branches he has twisted into a crown onto my head, sticking a ceibo flower into the front of it. He is so close I can smell the *mate* on his breath and see how long his eyelashes are. I don't think I breathe until he leans back to admire his work. I stare out at the Paraná, I think about running out into it with all my clothes on; my face feels hot and my dress is suddenly too tight around the shoulders. *Sos la reina de las flores* he says.

I like being his friend. Maybe I can help him with Tolashka, or maybe Clara Luzina, I think he'd like her.

As we were leaving the *bosquecillo* he gave me a poem, written out by hand, copied from some book he read in passing:

Soneto de la Noche

Cuando yo muera quiero tus manos en mis ojos:

quiero la luz y el trigo de tus manos amadas

pasar una vez más sobre mí su frescura:

sentir la suavidad que cambió mi destino.

Quiero que vivas mientras yo, dormido, te espero,

quiero que tus oídos sigan oyendo el viento,

que huelas el aroma del mar que amamos juntos

y que sigas pisando la arena que pisamos.

*Quiero que lo que amo siga vivo
y a ti te amé y canté sobre todas las cosas,
por eso sigue tú floreciendo, florida,
para que alcances todo lo que mi amor te ordena,
para que se pasee mi sombra por tu pelo,
para que así conozcan la razón de mi canto.*

My Spanish isn't as good as I would like it to be, yet. He carefully transcribed it out for me in Yiddish, too:

*When I die I want your hands on my eyes:
I want the light and the wheat of your beloved hands
to pass their freshness over me one more time
to feel the smoothness that changed my destiny.*

*I want you to live while I wait for you, asleep,
I want for your ears to go on hearing the wind,
for you to smell the sea that we loved together
and for you to go on walking the sand where we walked.*

*I want for what I love to go on living
and as for you I loved you and sang you above everything,
for that, go on flowering, flowery one,*

*so that you reach all that my love orders for you,
so that my shadow passes through your hair,
so that they know by this the reason for my song.¹*

Somehow he knew. He knew our lives would move in and with each other. He knew when that first moment was planted how the *semilla* would sprout, would grow, how its sapling bark would be rough and strong and beautiful. He knew the sweet reds of the flowers, the soft down of the pods, how the painted seeds from our tree would remember him.

This is the last written entry. And from there on there are drawings that form pieces of memory. Nightmares; vines and fruit; skin pulled taut over muscle; rings and ceibo flowers; small sketches in the corners, bigger spreads wet with dew, lips pressed to them. Seeds that remember him.

¹ Poem by Pablo Neruda, Translation by Nicholas Lauridsen

Sewing, Religious Leader, Flood Story

I know some memories have faded, made room for others, but I am unsure of what exactly I've misplaced. I remember my apron with some of the first embroidery I'd ever done. I think that it was the first because my mother had helped me with it. Little blue flowers with yellow centers and curling red lines. I do not remember the name of the elder who came to town. I don't know if I should call him an elder. An old man. He was the one who came to share religious teachings. This is what I am supposed to remember, but I suppose I was more familiarly acquainted with my apron than with him.

I remember disliking him. He was the type of man who commanded respect. I did not give it to him, at least rebelling in my mind. I did not trust him. When it was our turn to host him at our house I laid the worst spoon at his place setting. I did not trust the quietness of Tolashka, sitting next to him at dinner, and later heard her stilted telling of his fat old fingers rubbing the hem of her skirt. The next day he praised purity. This was the beginning of my disbelieving. The thought was clear in my mind at thirteen- *if the adults trust him, trust the religion he speaks, how can I trust them, how can I trust the higher power that holds him in high regard.* Of course the likelihood that I phrased it in exactly those words is low.

I have never been good at sewing. If fingers scarred more easily mine would be covered in needled pink-red freckles. I did not like to wash things, it rubbed my fingers raw, the tops of my index fingers and the crease between them and my thumb. There were little pink-red freckles covering any needlework I left uncompleted until nagged to finish it, nagged to wash it, nagged to wear it, embarrassed by my uneven seams. The nagging was not because I felt myself above sewing. I actually thought it was quite romantic, contemplative.

But I would eventually start crying from frustration in those evenings, while our brothers took turns struggling through their school or religious readings aloud, assisted by my father. And so my mother would allow me breaks to draw. I still have some of those notebooks, I believe, small black cover almost brown. I've found one, the others must be somewhere. I'm not sure where, and some pencil sketches have smears, spilled coffee, or are simply faded by age, but I do have them, somewhere. I found one the other day. Full of Mauro and ceibos and molle peppercorn fruits.

Tolashka and I had schoolwork as well, but for Morkha and Herschel it was mostly religious instruction, overseen by our father. I say our father although it was rare Tolashka called him by that name, preferring to call him uncle or some other title, showing her respect.

Most of my memories are of summers, school years and learning blur together for the most part. Many, if not most of those nights I imagine us huddled together in the winter, although I know that they took place mostly by muggy summer lamplight.

Nights that were so hot our skin felt weighed down and our hairlines felt soupy. *Grillos* creaking in corners of the house and in the grass outside. The river roaring by after rains, brown and muddied, branches reaching out to the living trees like people, half drowned. Young boy half drowned. But the rain and full water did not carry that anxiety before that night.

There was a knock at the door, the Vasermanns couldn't find him, couldn't find their son. I can't remember his name, something with a C.

Earlier in the day we'd laughed it off- *boys and their silliness, practicing to be grown up gauchos* (us girls practicing at being *the pillar of the household*, which always put me on edge). There was a knock on the door, and in my mind, for the drama of the retelling, the Vasermanns were soaked to the bone, but they couldn't have been- it had not rained since that morning. We went out, my father, Tolashka, and I. The boys were too small and stayed home with my mother.

The Paran, which curved around the edge of town, had broken through the dike, constructed along the river's shore. It had broken through at a point near our land and had flooded into the edge of our yard, making puddles that sunk us into *barro* up to our knees. The dike had been built two years before when the Sapovar's dog had been carried off by the summer storms. It was maintained when needed, but there was a break. The water right at the curve had gotten so high it had begun to wear it down from the top- we knew this because we saw it beginning in other places- but of course there exists the possibility it could have simply broken through. The curve was where the lower end of the forest started, our *vald*, and Tolashka and I started along the bank there towards lights we saw ahead. Then there was shouting. I recognized Mauro's voice and felt, even in the potential danger of the situation, Tolashka's posture change at the sound of Franco saying something about *No, no don't set it down, it will go out!* This was before Agnesia had laid her claim on Franco, and Tolashka found other things to be busy with. I started running toward the sound, Tolashka behind me, and I turned to her and shouted for her to go back for our father- that I was close enough to see so she could *Take the lantern! Go!*

I slowed my pace, trying to make out the shapes of what I was rushing into. I saw Mauro, Franco, and Aharon on shore, and a downed tree hanging out into the Paran. *What's*

happening? What's going on? Franco was too busy yelling to the others. He was taking off his outer shirt. *Mauro, what's going on?* He pointed out to the end of the tree. *What?* I didn't see anything. *Look.* He was exhausted, exasperated. And I looked.

This is when I realized the Vasermann's boy was smarter than we gave him credit for. He did not do well in school. He didn't talk much. But he had wrapped the sleeves of his shirt around the small end branches of the tree in a sort of sling to help his arms while the current struck his body repeatedly against the trunk. Franco was wading in. At that moment my father arrived. He charged into the shallows, which were frothing where the shore usually was. He gave Franco a good shove back towards the riverbank, bracing himself on the tree as he waded in. The water was almost up to his waist when he turned and yelled something back to us that was lost, rendered unintelligible by the sound of the water. He gestured to the broken end of the tree that was still on land, making a hugging motion. Mauro understood first, he passed the lantern to me and went to brace the trunk. There was a moment of frozen fear between us on the shore, then the boy's father, who had arrived with my father, rushed in next to Mauro, planting his feet in the mud, Aharon right behind him. I passed the lantern to Tolashka, waded a little way into the water, braced the trunk. Franco waded past me, up to his hips in the water, braced the tree. Only then did my father climb on top of the trunk, crawling over it towards the end. He took his own shirt and wrapped it around the boy's hands, who at this point was a little less than conscious, then hauled him onto the tree. The tree bucked and swiveled, knocking into Franco who let out a mangled grunt and slipped under- I let go and grabbed for him for all I was worth. I felt his arms, then his nails dig into my arms and Mauro grabbed me around my waist and we hauled Franco to the shallows. My father was almost to the shore, the boy's arms slung

around his neck, the tree tilting dangerously. Mauro rushed back and braced. I sat with Franco on the shore, Tolashka next to me, holding his head in her lap. The drama of it, he was fine enough.

My father knelt in the muddy sand. Holding the Vasermann's boy over his knees he hit the heel of his hand between the boy's shoulder blades with increasing desperation. The boy let out the sound of *alguien ahogado* brought back to life, coughing then throwing up brown-gray water.

The boy slept for three days, Franco had a broken arm, and I had his claw marks, grooves in the skin of my inner forearms. It didn't feel worth mentioning in light of everything, but when we got home Mamá fussed over me, and I couldn't help but enjoy it a little. We were all sick the next days- after being damp and exhausted, falling into bed. But we were all alright, everything was going to be alright.

Making empanadas (Grandmother Memory)

It is January, sweltering in the Buenos Aires *apartamento que comparto con la familia de mi hermano, Simón*, and this memory is slogging itself through the humidity between my ears.

I roll out the dough. It's too hot to be doing this, I just want to go to the river. It sticks to the rolling pin and my clothes stick to me. Everything is damp.

"Thinner."

I'm trying. I hate when our abuela's birthday rolls around. Mamá says not to call her *abuela*.

"You have to start from the center."

Tolashka parrots Mamá behind her back and I feel a little better.

I add flour and its remnants turn doughy on my palm and between my fingers. It's too hot.

The dough stretches under my hands, elastic, then snaps. I bunch it back into a ball and knead it together, but the flour stays in wrinkles that refuse to fuse back into the greater whole. I don't want to be here. I want to be swimming. It's Abuela's birthday and we're making something she's never tried. Never will try.

My hair is falling into my face. I want to cut it off. Mamá says once I'm married I can shave it all off, cover it. I don't want to cover it. I want to shave it now.

I roll out the dough. Again.

"Good Lié," she stands next to me and puts her hands over mine. "Now, out from the center."

I know this is sweet, I know she cares for me. But it's too damn hot. I pull against her, *I know how to do this*, but she pushes back.

"Liebchen, try to do it the right way." She tries to guide my hands, I push the other way, the rolling pin clatters to the floor.

She's dead, it doesn't matter. I want to say, but I don't. *I don't have any connection to this birthday, to that woman.* I'm the reason we're making empanadas, I wanted to try something new, and Mamá wanted to make me happy. She's trying, I'm being horrible.

I only have one memory of Abuela. I'm four, because Mamá tells me that's how old I was. When we crossed over on the boat I was five. I do not remember this. I was sick the whole time, better I don't remember. I'm four and I am sitting on her lap, she is feeding me something sweet and whispering into my ear not to tell my Mamá and I am laughing because her breath tickles my neck. She smells like eucalyptus, maybe, because when I walk under those trees I think of her. But of course I could have made it up. I could have made all of this up. She smells like eucalyptus and lets me pull her scarf off and touch her fuzzy head. She smiles at me and her hands are wrinkled and soft, her wrists slightly weak and faltering as she lifts me up a little.

We left her on the other side of the ocean, *We knew she wouldn't make it across*, Mamá says. She's right, *abuela* died a week after we left. It took a while to sort out, none of our letters answered, some sent back, and then the last letter *We regret to inform you...* I don't think they

regret anything. At that point our town near Kiev had been occupied, so I have reason to believe that letter didn't exist or was forged by our parents to make the news softer for us.

It doesn't matter.

The dough is sitting here, on the table, and I realize I have probably been staring at a swirl of flour for a while. Mamá has gone back to stirring the beef and Tolashka is crumbling bay leaves in her hand to add to the pot. I dust off the rolling pin and begin again my battle with the dough.

I'm crying a little and I don't know why.

Probably because it's too damn hot.

We knew she wouldn't make it across, my Father says. He too is like a memory in the house, telling us some somber fact or remembrance, fading into his readings, bookkeeping, Midrash; walking quietly, gruffly out of doors.

A Profound Sadness, Playacting in the Woods, Little Gray Buttons

There's a profound sadness that hits me late at night. It has resided somewhere in my body since I was young and I haven't quite been able to bear parting with it. Familiar pain. It's some sort of emptiness, sitting at the back of my mind, sitting just below my lungs- it seems to hide during the day, perhaps somewhat soothed by something warm like a loaf of bread, like blackberries in the sun. Perhaps by the lovely things, by the things in my childhood and adolescence. The doves under the eaves of the porch. Clouds of flour spiraling in the light from the window, when we're all laughing, dusting our hands from rolling out dough.

I'd like to say it isn't present, or *as present* with my friends, with the *Valderos*, but that isn't really true. We distract ourselves with our plays, impressions, stories, but sometimes we sit together in silence and just *ache*. We don't really know why. We don't talk about it. It's something about how our parents tell stories. But they tell them as facts, they tell them as *this happened* and then *that happened*. It's a way to revisit the past, *our* past, to share, without living it again. And we inherit more than their way of telling stories, they tell stories, too, that are full of emotion, full of gesticulation, and full of guilt that twists emotion out of our listeners, out of those we address, leaving fact, losing fact, loosening fact. It's all factual. All the times and dates and places cataloged until they forget and the way we speak to each other turns from words to hardened frown lines and teary eyes. And silence. Then some inane topic. To clear the air. But the atmosphere stays heavy, we're all looking away from it, trying to make our skin blind to it.

We felt the weight of hardened frown lines, the prick and soreness of teary eyes in our *vald*, the night Aharon got up, the night he said *I have a story*. Blasé, he took Tolashka's apron, placing it over his head to emulate a woman's hair. I started sketching the curve of his back as he stooped himself forward, contorting, becoming a caricature. Then he backed against a tree, hands up, propping himself against the rough bark he started screaming, wailing. If I went back in my sketchbook I could see the dark line where the pencil skittered off the page. If I went back, but I don't.

Please, please, don't hurt us.

Aharon's voice was pitched up and pleading.

None of us could move.

He let himself fall.

Please, please.

I could hear blood rushing past my ears. I saw his mouth move, but didn't want to know what he was saying.

And then Tolashka getting up, she must have been yelling *STOP STOP* as she held onto his wrist and he started shaking and then she was holding him.

We all sat in the silence the sound of crying creates, the silence that is so loud, and so heavy, silence that bristles up against your skin. Later that night I could hear Tolashka crying quietly, trying to keep herself still, barely shifting under the sheets.

That was the night we stopped telling stories from before we came to Argentina. Without talking about it, we simply stopped.

Other nights were better, we playacted little skits about the adults in Adamas, the ones we had disdain for, the ones we were fond of. Franco stole wine from his grandfather, who was too drunk, too aching, too lost in a past war to notice. Once when Franco was younger he spouted word for word a tirade of his grandfather's reasoning as if it were his own. Full of *el gobierno nos abandonó, y los indios sucios, los mataría, pero me hicieron trabajar en sus fincas, hijos de puta, y vos vas a ser un hombre real, aunque sos un bastardo, desgraciado, hijo de puta. You will be a real man.* And he would take his horse's reins, a horse that had been dead for years, and try to beat the man into him, then give up, saying it was no use, nothing would save him. Franco changed the way his grandfather spoke about us, about the immigrants of Adamas. Where his grandfather said we were all imbeciles, impotent, a long horrible list, Franco would say we were welcome, we were his friends, we belonged. At some point Franco found out his mother had been *una india sucia* and inferred his grandfather had driven her away. Then Franco began stealing from him in earnest, he started listening to us when we said *are we so different from los indios? Los pogroms de los Rusos, y la guerra del gobierno Argentino a través de los gauchos.* We carried the fear our parents brought from Bessarabia, Franco carried the guilt his grandfather would not. He began to have more and more of his own opinions, began to stay more and more at the Sapovar's, at Calu's house. And so we had wine, and when we had wine we had music, singing songs we all knew, trying to write silly new ones with drunk-nonsense words.

Then there was one night. Franco had stolen something. Something from a visitor to his grandfather. Something from this man's large pack. A pack, Franco told us, piled high with fabric, bulging, with the rustle of plants inside, the clatter of what could be bones.

That was the only time he saw his grandfather cry. The stove by the weathered wood table, the kettle sitting on the corner, burn marked. Two cups of tea, one small pink bag with a drawstring. His grandfather crying, from sadness to joy, back again, talking to this stranger as if he was talking to god. The stranger sipping the tea slower, more carefully, more calmly exclaiming at some beauty in that small cramped room, some beauty that Franco, without a mug warming his hands, could not see.

The two men were deeply engrossed in the way the lamp sitting at the center of the table was throwing off light, enough so that Franco went unnoticed. Quickly slipping the pink drawstring bag into his pocket as he passed, pulling his shoes on, closing the door quietly. He took the metal water bucket from the well. He was at the *bosquecillo* that night before the rest of us, finding dry wood and stacking it in the middle of our clearing, starting a fire, telling us what his grandfather had done. He had waited to open the bag until we were all there, all the *Valderos*: Calu, Aharon, Tolashka, Angnesia, Mauro, me. He opened it, shaking out its contents onto his hand as we all watched, anticipatory. His palm filled with little gray buttons and we sat back, disappointed and a little puzzled.

Maybe that's not what your grandfather had. Mauro was a little dubious.

But I could swear it was.

Let's try anyway? I said, and I could see Agnesia was a little disappointed she hadn't gotten to comfort Franco first.

So we boiled the water, put in the buttons. We set the now charred pail in the Paraná to cool, taking turns sipping the bitter "tea." Someone had molle in their pocket and those got passed around after the pail. Then we sat, waiting.

At some point we gave up and lay on our backs. Someone started humming and I could feel it vibrating in my chest, the stars were beautiful and the shadows of the leaves in the moonlight flickered over our faces with the red shadows from the fire. Someone had started humming and I could feel it like pollen settling on my skin. Someone else hit their palms against the packed dirt and I could see it shaking the stars, who were falling gently and resting on the leaves above us. I could hear Mauro's voice now, having caught the melody of the humming, he startled singing a wordless harmony. And the harmony was inside me, I could feel it filling me up, it was green-purple and leaking from my eyes.

Calu sat up. *I have a story.* And she told a story of a woman who grew pearls underneath her skin as a gift from the golden fish she had saved from her fisherman husband. Every injury she sustained would turn into a pearl that would drop into the hands of those deserving. Her husband would pinch her at night, trying to get the pearls out from under her skin, and finally, frustrated and furious, he threw her into the ocean.

Aharon was crying, fearful. Tolashka, balancing on a spider web made of silver, she told me later, and almost falling into the fire, walked towards him. She held him in her arms. I saw them melt into one person, a person with parts of each of their bodies, and then I was that person, too. I was without any sort of personhood, any sort of role or obligation, but full of energy and calm and love, and everything at once. That was the first time I wasn't a woman. And my clothes were laying by the fire and I was wading into the Paraná, and I was that fishman's wife and I was the golden fish, and I was no one at all. And I was cool, and

cold, and warm, and floating. And Mauro was standing next to me with my hand in his and the bottom of his shirt floating in the water, his body fully covered but warm and cool and soft and floating, flowers laid in the water. And Agnesia and Franco were blowing air into each other's faces and waving it away. The next morning everything still felt bright and beautiful and I had scrapes on my ankles and a burn mark on my hip. And it was beautiful, and I loved it.

That Night: Stealing the Muchnik Name

I visit my memories, watching, somewhat removed, seeing a young version of myself the weekend we went to Uruguay, when Mauro became Mauro Muchnik in the forged eyes of the law. I spectate, staying at a distance that becomes shorter and shorter until I am hurled back into the emotions of the past. I watch Mauro, filling out paperwork, adding two inches to his legal height. With the shoes he wore then, the ones with the wood soles, it wasn't quite a lie. I remember that weekend, sitting in the office, dusty army jacket and the one small window. I remember I was thinking of a night ten years before, I had the biggest *little feelings* for him. I'm smiling now, remembering.

In my notebook I'd written *There is a little drawing I made of him as he moved away from the train, his pants hemmed nicely, but scuffed, the sweet slope of his shoulders to his waist. I hid it away with my other drawings, almost shameful even fully clothed.*

I wrote *He talked to me! Mauro did.*

I wrote he called me *la Reina de las flores, his flor.*

I wrote *it was a lovely laugh, his lip gets a little caught on his top teeth and his eyes disappear.*

I remember when I thought he had *little feelings* for Tolashka.

I remember, too, not long after those entries, the night I caught him in the moonlight. There were many moonlit nights after that, but that night was the first. It was November, the heat starting to ramp up before it became choking, before it became so rancidly hot we wished we'd never wanted winter over. *That night was the first.* It sounds almost saucy, but the first wasn't quite *like that.*

I was wandering, walking slowly towards the *bosquecillo*, incidentally thinking about Mauro- but when was I not. That night I could have stayed in the shadows, I could have sketched him in the near darkness, adjusting and readjusting my thighs against each other as they stuck together in the heat. I almost did- the moon shining on the water, illuminating the edges of his body, his back to me- but something in me called out to him. If I traced us back to the root, to the moment that started it all, it would be the first moment of that night; when I called out *Mauro* and my voice bounded off the far shore. He half turned towards my voice, revealing himself, the silhouette of a curved chest, as he slipped below the water; surfacing again through soap bubbles, his face sitting just above the quiet ripples of the Paraná.

That night his voice was quietly commanding, entreating me, so afraid: *turn around*.

Mauro Muchnik, a man pretending- he was questioned at first, in the early days of his arrival to Adamas. Plied for answers, for information about him, about his family, until the inquisitors were met with a boy's shining, almost brimming eyes and his lips pressed together, jaw clenched. His quick, clipped explanation of how his family, the Muchniks, had been lost to illness. *His family*. The illness wasn't a lie.

He owed the Muchniks everything. His words, not mine. They gave him work and a place to sleep, studiously ignored when his chest grew soft and mountained. The day when they were haying, when he was nine years old, hot and damp from sweat, too much so to notice the blood running down the inside of his legs. Reb Muchnik sent him home to *get water* for all the workers so they would not see. That evening there were towels placed outside the pantry door- Mauro's room for lack of space- when he would not come out for

dinner. They graciously kept to simple foods that night, ones that were not stored in the pantry to avoid disturbing him. Such was their quiet kindness.

They hid him when a Gaucho came to town, looking for his daughter. Mauro outlived the Muchniks, survived them, perhaps used to the diseases of the country- perhaps due to divine providence. He believed with a quiet earnestness as I was losing faith.

Mauro Muchnik, a stolen name, a stolen family, a stolen history. From the small town in Bessarabia my family came from. My parents had known the Muchniks, and had almost been in business with them before the Russian mandates dictated which jobs our people were *fit for*. That night I realized the significance of when my father said *The Muchniks- wasn't their son named Menashe?* And Mauro's artful *manejo de la conversación*, steering subtly, guiding his interrogators gracefully away from suspicion. My parents liked to believe- and we let them- that they had set us up. Had set me up with Mauro, paired us together.

That Night, his voice was quietly commanding, entreating me, so afraid: *turn around*. That night I saw the bruises on his ribs from the strips of cloth he used, crossing over each other to press down, sculpt himself into a shape so painstakingly constructed, keep the tissue of his chest from curving outwards, soft over worked muscle.

That night it was too late to turn around, I had already seen what he kept hidden.

That night the new dreams started, replacing the childhood nightmares of gauchos. These were half waking, creeping between sleep and daylight hours. In them I would be walking into his house, my feet wet, and looking down, stained red. And him with his knife, tissue peeled back from muscle, blood between the kitchen tiles. He would speak his last

words to me, stoic or fearful, other times silent, always too late, too late. Always nothing I could do.

That was not how he died, and slowly, the dreams eased.

That night was not when the jokes started. They came years later, before Carolina, then after. *Impotence*. But it was a cover, a shameful safety from a truth that could devastate our life. There were times after our *Mariposa* was taken from us that we would stay up arguing after dinner about a fabricated swelling in my stomach and a made up loss. Back and forth until all that remained were the words we had already said, repeated, losing meaning. He would not let me. *We have already lost one child, mi flor, why again?* In those days, past his supposed puberty, he would use dye along his jaw, a shadow of a shave, not quite close cut.

Years later, Simón- the only other person who knew Mauro's secret- told us of the one doctor in England, the one who had devised a procedure, his work vilified as *unnatural*, as *una mutilación de las hembras*. Mauro would dismiss the idea each time it was brought up, saying *How would we get there? Where would we get the money?* He would try to lift the somber mood, say *I am an old man, better to live with a familiar ache than a new pain. You still want me around, don't you?*

Sometimes, still, I worry it was for me. Years after the nightmares stopped, I confided them to him, whispered in his ear. Perhaps if I hadn't he would have chosen differently, perhaps my fear found its new home in him. Of course I still wanted him around. Mauro, they have a word for us, dirty and spoken in hatred, in fear. Our nephew, León, comes home from universidad, *Transsexuals*, he says, giving me the definition. And the part of me that has learned to be a woman *aches*.

In the morning after that night- That Night, it seems to stand, monumental in my memory. In the morning, steeped in blood-dream fear, I almost refused to milk the cows. We went out, boiled cloths in our hands, warm for cleaning full teats so they would not shrink from the morning cold. My thoughts churned into the pail. *To be a woman is to be milked, to be bled dry, bleeding a child into this world.* Hay sticking to the soles of my shoes, grain in the pocket of my dress, yanking Clotilde forward, her bell jangling, tying her to the barn post, pulling up the stool. Thinking that I too would be a stubborn cow, kick backwards into bulls, refuse to be mounted. There was always the creeping, crawling disgust in me, but that morning it had opened like rotting fruit, split to find maggots frothing in their rabid dance. My mother had said when I was older I would want it. *The most beautiful thing a woman can do is carry a child.* The most beautiful thing a woman can do is think for herself.

And again, in my mind, That Night. The night he commanded, gently begged me not to tell anyone. I was struck silent by this person, the man in front of me, someone outside of the bounds of what I knew could exist. He told me later how afraid he was, how little trust- but how much hope- he had placed in me. Years after, that night still stands in my mind, on the page, a watercolor soap bubble, sitting on the Paraná.

The Ring and the Cold River

There is a drawing of my ring on the open page of my sketchbook. On the page before there is a horse, bucking its back legs up, on the page after there is the stretch of the water of the Paraná. I remember this ring when it was new. I wear it every day, except on the days it makes me too sad to and I hide it in the top drawer of *mi comodón*. I suppose I should wear it as much as I can before it only fits on my pinky finger, before my hands become wrinkled and the joints swollen, until I wear it as it was given to me, on a lace around my neck. Perhaps I could draw the ring again now, with the chips and discoloration in corners that make my wrists ache to try and reach with a polishing cloth. Mauro's hands didn't ache like mine begin to. Since he passed some things have been left unattended. I remember the night he gave it to me.

He gave me a ring.

We don't know what we're doing or how we're going to do it, but it's beautiful. A purple stone with a gold flower floating, inlaid. He had gone to the city with Franco to sell some of Franco's belongings, recently left to him in his grandfather's will. Mauro and I had planned to swim in our *bosquecillo* when he returned that evening.

Nighttime, our bodies in the shadows cast by the moon through the leaves. It was warm enough, but we had brought a blanket to wrap ourselves up in. Summer days my mother paid less attention to where I was and with whom. I held the ring up in the space between the shadows, marveling at it. I could feel the breeze against my

damp hair. What I said next I wish I could have taken back. I told him that although I loved it beyond belief I couldn't accept it. He thought it meant I was rejecting him. I only meant that I couldn't prance through our town with a big, shiny ring and no explanation. He reached over silently, the soft curves of his chest folding to his stomach, his hair wet against his forehead and hanging into his eyes- I don't believe I will ever know anyone more beautiful than him- and slipped one of his laces out of his shoe. It was the shoe he had worn to the city, nicer than his work boots, and slightly too tight. He looped it through the ring, and taking my chin softly in his rough hand, bent my head towards himself to tie it around my neck. The ring was warm from our hands and I could feel it against my breastbone between the water droplets and my hair standing on end from the *cold*. I could feel his breath on my scalp as I bent towards his body. At first he didn't kiss me. One hand slid softly down the cord, resting lightly above the ring. The other traced the whorls of baby hairs along my jaw until his fingers found my lips, touching the shape of them lightly as if the moon had been hidden, as if we were looking into the shadows on each other's faces, as if he could not see when I lost my nerve and looked away. He is so beautiful. Strong, soft in the ways that matter to me, gentle, rough, walking opposite pieces that weave into each other, balancing. I settle my head into the curve of his neck. Around others, even the *Valderos*, he flirts with his image, rearranging it carefully when he puts it away for the night. He told me how his back aches from the strips of cloth he uses; I sewed him the lacing shirts and I massaged the knots away, but we were always clothed, a familiar intimacy different from this one. Familiar intimacy like a warm loaf of bread, or blackberries that are hot from the sun. This is different,

like the cold shiver when you wade into the Paraná at midnight and go too far out and might be swept away, but perhaps you want to be swept away. Maybe you want to duck your head under and hear the rushing of the water, a hundred little droplets on your breastbone, a hundred warm touches from two hands. And maybe you want to let the water into your mouth, caress it with your tongue, feel it as it cools the backs of your knees and shriek as it pulls you through rapids, kissing your neck. Feel the current pounding against the rocks, building to a dull roar and you are tossed up on the beach, panting and somehow so, so warm, although you are shaking from the *cold*.

Plowing, Understanding

Franco convinced us of many things in our lives together, persuaded our friends and parents. His charisma would somehow weave itself into the fabrics of his suits, beguiling older generations out of their disdain for mixed textiles. Perhaps we were losing our religion, perhaps he was losing it for us. I cannot blame him for my own departure, I stopped believing in little ways until what remained was comfort in tradition. It was almost disgustingly predictable that he was the arbiter of change, the one gaucho sweeping our community into forecasted prosperity.

Mauro and I had just been married. Tolashka and Aharon had only recently left for Bessarabia, to our fear and worry. Their wedding had been beautiful, more traditional than ours. I had cut my hair short, left it uncovered. It was almost too much, too quick for how everything was changing.

Companies had begun to come in from abroad, jostling through our town, headed north to establish corporate farms. Franco spent long hours conversing with fathers, with young husbands, with anyone who had potentially profitable land, aiming to convince us to grow for these bigger companies. He presented us with the opportunity to plant on a small scale, to perform crop assessment in our soil, writing down our findings in little paper charts with blue and red lines. He had a vision of our town as a metropolitan hub, of all of us buying more cattle, selling more grain, hiring workers of our own. A vision of us becoming part of the Argentine export that was expanding down railway lines, spidering a metal web of transportation into Buenos Aires.

We looked to Calu's father for his decision. We had begun to adopt Spanish more readily as a town, as a community, and so we called him Señor. Señor Sapovar was not the head of the town, but the Sapovars had the most land, and so we looked to him to see if he would bow to the change, if he would follow Franco's eager suggestion. But it was my father who bowed first.

The men came in gray suits, surveyed the land, sneered at us. They painted blue-white powder over the grapes that we had planted, years before, along the side of our wheat field. Morkha, who at this point had not yet followed Tolashka and Aharon to Bessarabia, was around sixteen at that time. He was old enough to know better than to eat the painted fruit, but ended up sneezing and coughing for days, eyes and lips pink and itchy. *What have you done* our father scolded him, more worried about the crops than about his idiot son, and the idiot son came to me for salve to stop the itching. I laughed at him as I spread it on thickly, and he sighed with relief, playing the part of the good natured dramatic.

The men in gray brought with them young *indio* men who slept in tents and did not speak to us. They plowed the field wrong, sang no songs, drank no *limonada* we offered. They cut down Herschel's little molle sapling when they came to plow. My mother, in some kind, fruitless gesture, still watered where the little tree had stood for a year after it had been cut down, but it did not sprout new growth.

At Sabbath dinner my mother struggled through her Spanish, unflinching at the clipped tones of the gray men who would spit words, broaden their shoulders, flirt with me; making crass jokes when the cat would snake between our ankles under the table, looking for scraps. My mother would ask after the health of their workers, hear from smug gray lips *indios sucios, no son nada de valor*. Then the gray men would laugh. It was almost a show they

put on- government endorsed humiliation of the *indios*. A government who had supplied that cheap labor. My father would sit silent, the Buenos Aires Castilian laughter pushing itself around his lack of understanding. My mother would brokenly translate *los hombres grises* and he would nod or keep still, listening *fijamente* to *un lenguaje* he didn't understand. My Spanish was better than hers, Mauro's better than mine, but it was not our place to help, not our decision to make. It was one of the only times I remember feeling ashamed of knowing Spanish, ashamed of having any sort of connection to this type of person, to anything gray.

I remember the town gathered to watch the young men plow. I remember the distaste in someone's tone in the crowd, *hombres grises*, and someone responding, *nos van a desangrar de color*. They stood watching the field, and I stood watching Mauro's eyes. His body was practiced neutral, carefully arranged outward self. His eyes were anxious, hopeless, reflecting the silhouettes of the young men in my father's field.

The papers had been signed: my father had granted a permission for a one-season lease to *los hombres grises*, allowing them the use of the yet unfarmed land he had given Mauro when we married. At that point the field was still technically my father's. Originally, it had been laid out that it would pass into our ownership later that spring once Mauro had plowed it for the first time; once we stood in the early blue haze, singing the new field blessings over the upturned soil, rich brown turning over tufts of green grass. My father had made that promise to us before *los hombres grises* came. Now our field was going to be plowed gray by *indios* serving out a contract for *centavos*.

I left our home early the next morning, wishing Tolashka was still in Adamas. Aharon's family had been able to bring a small collection of literature and religious scripts

with them to Argentina. I remember she said *they could carry all those books, swaddled like precious cargo-* and left the phrase uncompleted, with the silence between us of *-but not him, not Aharon*. Without Tolashka there, I was worried I'd have no chance of borrowing the book I needed. Even her strained relationship with her husband's family could have helped.

Aharon's father had gone to sit outside my parents' house to watch the young men stooped over in the field, cleaving into the earth, blistering their hands in repetitive movement. *They looked almost curled up, drying in the sun*, my mother told me, watching them when she brought out *limonada* to Aharon's father. He had left his wife and their daughter at home, shielded indoors from that same curling, drying sun. I cannot remember their names, Aharon's mother and sister, I wish I could, it pulls at something in my chest, a disservice, a forgetting, gray sweeping them away. I remember how I dressed that day, going to their house. My dress was longer, my hair was covered. My colors muted so as not to startle, my hands clasped. It was a farce I put on, a version of Liana I could button myself into to please, to cajole, to charm with modesty. We all knew each other, they saw me at my wedding, they knew my hair was short, they knew it grew warm in the sun, uncovered, unashamed. And still, that day I dressed to please.

Between our home, where I had left Mauro, still asleep, and theirs was a dirt road that turned my ankles and the hem of my dress dusty light brown. Sunbaked dirt thrown up by foot traffic and livestock. I remember feeling my tongue, dry and large in my mouth, as much from nerves as from lack of water. I remember Aharon's mother did not offer me *mate*, their family stuck to their ideals, would not learn Spanish. They would still be in Adamas if not for the town unbuilding itself, if not for being bought out and abandoned.

She did not offer me *mate*. Cool water with lemon burnt the cracks in my lips and we sat quietly, properly, at the table. Everything was dry that time of year, or rather that year in particular, when it refused to rain. I know her daughter was there that day, but I did not see her. I wonder if she was told to stay away from my immodest influence.

Aharon's mother led me into a room at the back of the house. We hardly said a word. She reached up to a tall shelf, retrieving four neat little volumes. I remember myself stiff inside my body, wanting to ask her to teach me the melody. Saying nothing but thank you, I went home.

The young men were in our field, Mauro's field, the field not yet fully ours. *Los hombres grises* were in the town center, buying the space for a trade store that would become our *almacén*. I felt sick, sick from the heat and sick from being too late. Too late to stop something outside my control, the lease had already been signed.

Mauro only returned after it was dark that night. I sat in the kitchen with dinner for him, kept company by the kitten pepper shaker and the borrowed third book open to the passage I had finally found. He did not speak to me, would not look into my eyes. He did not want me to see what he felt towards my father. I did not need to see it, I knew. It had been one of the first small secrets he'd told me when he came to Adamas, one of the first entries in my sketchbook *...he told me he was never able to start the first rows of plowing in his town... he seems to shy away from talking about it... He tells me he hopes he could maybe plow the first rows here, in Adamas, someday. I hope so too.*

I hoped so too.

I took him outside, to where the grass had been pushed up in clumps between furrows. The young men had left the plow, heavy, dirty, shiny metal gray to rust if the rains came. It was my father's plow, heavy, a struggle for me alone. I dragged it to the side of the new-plowed field, to the edge where grass was still growing uninterrupted. I took the third book with its open passage from my pocket, and, taking his hands in mine, set them on the handles of the plow. I sang the three blessings under the *Plowing, New Furrows* header on the page. I faltered with the words, not knowing the melody, stumbling over my imperfect pronunciation.

Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, shehecheyanu vekiymanu vehigi'anu lazman hazeh

Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, she'koho u'gevurato maleh olam

Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu, melekh ha'olam, Meshane habriyot

When I came to the end of the blessing he had only made it one fourth down the length of the field, plowing alongside it. I saw him stop, bow his head, sink to his knees. I held him and he shook, holding himself together, pitching in at the seams.

I had never been close to my father, I knew him almost exclusively as that role in my life, but not beyond. We lived at frequencies of feeling that could not intermingle with each other, as if we were water and oil, one in the shape the other left, floating in the same glass. We lived separate lives side by side, decanted from one another without animosity.

This changed for me.

I don't think he ever knew how much our relationship changed, because to him I was the same. I wonder if he noticed anything, if to him I was quieter, more reserved after *los hombres grises* came. Sometimes I feel the guilt of holding something against him, even if it was something he didn't realize he'd done. In my guilt I imagine him growing old, wondering why his daughter spoke less to him, wondering why, in the days after *los hombres grises* left, her husband seemed a dull gray under the shabbos candles as my mother lit them.

I spoke to my mother when the gray men left, I told her the story, abbreviated, abridged. I told her how Mauro had left his town, orphaned, before he was old enough to perform the rite of plowing the first rows. I reminded her of how the Muchniks died. I told her what she knew, how that rite follows becoming a man in the temple, how your father leads you to the plow, sings blessings over you. I told her *Mauro does not have a father*. I told her *Mauro did not have the opportunity to become a man in that way*. I did not tell her just how true that lack of opportunity was; I did not tell her that to Mauro it would have been an affirmation of a man who, against all odds, he had become.

She received me with kindness, with sympathy, she said *this does not make him less of a man, or any less Jewish*, touching the root of the problem without understanding its depth. She said *you have to understand*. It's not that I didn't understand, I understood the financial opportunity my father bowed to, I understood the *positive changes* expansion brought to our town. Despite her kindness I felt her saying *was it not you who wanted change, Liana? was it not you who learned Spanish? you who whose attendance at temple has become rare?*

And I tried to understand with grace. I tried to speak without showing the fury of seeing someone I loved, someone who had lost and endured so much, have more taken from

him. Something they didn't even know they had taken. Of course, since I was young in my twenties then, I was told I had to understand, *understand* as always *the decisions made by your elders*. Of course no one told my father *you have to understand*, no one told him what he had taken from Mauro.

It became another step in my unbelieving, *otro paso* away from our religion that held people in its care, in safety; a religion we kept, restrictive until it was convenient to be unrestricted, until it was convenient to ease and lose tradition. Perhaps we were losing our religion, perhaps "progress" was losing it for us. I cannot blame my father for my own departure, I stopped believing in little ways, losing even the comfort of tradition.

Mamá in the Past and Mate in the Present

We had sheets with little red flowers. No, red crossing stripes. Those were for winter, cozy, warm. Freshly married mornings when we would curl into each other in the cold, leaving the day for later. The summer sheets were worn, but expertly unstained. My mother *the washerwoman*- the woman who could remove any stain. Those sheets were from her wedding trousseau, which Mauro and I avoided thinking about too deeply for fear of discomfort. They had lace along the top edge, the kind with little white strips of fabric made to look like flowers, curving into and away from each other with smaller woven threads between. It was rough, it scratched a little, but was so beautiful, so carefully preserved. I cried when they ripped. This was after her death. And I sewed them, with more care than I'd ever sewn anything, into handkerchiefs, to keep in breast pockets and in the ends of sleeves.

When I was young, I did not believe I could live without her, I wondered how I would ever be able to. When the time came, I simply did. At her death I forgot our shared love and kindness. I was flooded with everything I had ever done wrong, everything I kept from her; every time she was kind, and I was angry in return, the sharpness of my adolescence getting the best of me. Flour on the floor, lives and experiences lived outside of what I thought she could understand. I still miss her. Even to the end she was strong, stronger than I feel myself to be now. Perhaps I have let myself be lost from her, I could take a page from her book.

I bought her a novel not long after I left home to live across town. A town that was a little bigger now. With an *almacén* and a building under construction that said *theater coming soon*. I bought her a novel- Mauro had sparked a love of books in me. We had a small bookcase in our home. I worried, thought perhaps he would laugh at me for reading cheap

romance, but he very quickly began to ask after the protagonist, the dashing hero, striking poses to make me laugh. Smiling to remember feels like stretching the stiffness away.

What I bought Mamá was a book, but what I had attempted to give her was *un descanso*. I wanted to give her a rest, hoped against my knowledge of her that she would use it. Resting to read. Sometimes, she surprised me. She had learned Spanish, she was not stubborn in that way at least, unlike my father. She would write down words she didn't know and we would hide in my old bedroom after Sabbath dinner, going over the list and giggling about the rugged protagonist. That was when I began to get to know her. Not as my mother, but as a woman, and I remember wishing it could have happened sooner. I don't believe that it could have, that our friendship could have constructed itself or flourished in any way when I was living in that house. When I lived with her, I lived within the rules of that house, the structure, placeholder titles like *Mamá*; love for her without knowing her, love for her love towards me.

When I left, living farther from the river, I missed the sound of the Paraná, her dangerously high water rushing by in the summer, just enough sound to keep my mind still, lulling me into sleep. Lulling me into sleep with the slight anxiety of waking up to puddles in my parents' kitchen, making the tiles slick, the packed dirt of the living room becoming soupy. When I left it gave me enough space from my mother to want to spend time together, enough space that we weren't stepping over each other in the kitchen, crushing toes, accidental elbows thrown and received. So once a week we had Thursday evenings sweating by the stove, cozy instead of crowded, pulled but not pushed into proximity.

Tolashka had gone back to Bessarabia. Argentina, Entre Ríos, had never quite been hers. She told me this. Or I assumed. Adamas was a good place to grow up, but still, never quite right. She felt herself called to record our history. She married Aharon before she left, almost as a step towards leaving, something to do in order to get there, protection, safety, continuity. I don't believe my father would have let her leave otherwise. And even with their marriage she struggled against his anxious herding of our flock. But she had made her mind up long before she told any of us her plans. It wasn't permission, asking for our counsel, it was an announcement, it wasn't up to any of us.

Theirs wasn't a marriage of love, at least in the romantic sense. For Tolashka and Aharon it was a connection like friendship, like a partnership, like an understanding. He had come to our town only *un poco antes que ella*, but his family had arrived before him and settled in Adamas with a baby on the way by the time he was able to make the crossing. Despite that difference, he and Tolashka found comfort in their similarities, in the things they had both stood unwilling witness to.

I remember nights spent in our room, Tolashka and I. We talked about our boys, when she still wrung her hands in the overemotion of infatuation for a certain Gaucho. The hand wringing and giggling faded into a more stable, temperate care as she found herself reflected and understood in Aharon, letting go of the flighty levity of her crush on Franco.

We shared secrets, the two of us. I never shared his secret, Mauro's. I take that secret now, not to my grave, but to my weakness, to the time that the strength of wanting him remembered as he was outweighs the strength of a promise. We talked, she and I, late at night by lantern, pressing a sweater against the bottom of our door to muffle the light and sound. Tolashka held resentment for Aharon's family, holding it for him because he would

not. He was sick, back then, seven years old, left with family friends who would be crossing in five months for Uruguay. He said his family left him in Bessarabia because they cared for him, wanted him to be well enough for the boat, where illness was an inevitability, cramped, crowded together, filthy. Tolashka tells me, anger in her eyes and in the corners of her mouth *they should have stayed*. She has her sheets bunched in her hands. Once, she cried. We both pretend it is for Aharon. Borrowed catharsis, disguised. Perhaps she believes it is selfless pain. We never talk about what she saw, what was done, what she could not escape witnessing. Sometimes she would scream in her sleep. Twice, when I woke her, she told me what she saw, almost prophetic for wars years later. I do not want to remember those half-dreamed memories, I do not look at those drawings, graphite and ink that trap them onto paper. They sit on the page, closer to still when placed out of my mind. Of course they still live in corners of *mi cerebro*, no memory is ever fully gone, but I pretend forgetfulness as a comfort to myself. What I have chosen to lose to the gaps of memory do not sink alone, they drag at the edges of other remembrances, weighing them down, distorting them, fraying them. I wonder, sometimes, if it is too late to reassert my ownership of them, reclaim them; too late to pull them out of the chasm, dust them off.

The water is boiling on the stove.

A wispy whistle from the kitchen. I turn off the burner, pour it into a thermos. Pour the *yerba* into the *mate*, tilt it against my hand, shake it, brush away the green dust from the leaves. *Bombilla* against the angle of the settled *yerba*. Waiting for the water to cool. It feels a shame to drink it alone, I yell *Simón* down the hallway. He is at work. His wife, Rebecca María, comes from the kitchen, she brings honey for *el amargor*. This is our unintentional ritual. At 1500 hours. *Ya vamos a tomar el té, cuando lleguen los chicos para visitarnos*. But for

now the house is quiet. She brings the *miel* and we sit quietly, Simón's wife and I, looking out the window.

Childless, Uruguay Trip

I didn't choose to be childless. It was more of a latent choice that kept repeating itself. I do not feel childless. I'm surrounded by family, by Simón and his children, grown up children. I tell myself that I do not feel like I missed anything. Perhaps someone being mine, of my own creation. There are jokes in the family that my paintings are my children, that I wouldn't have space for ones who could cry more than ochre pigment stains across the heel of my left hand where I steady it against the canvas, not yet dry. The jokes fly up like sparks from a fire, burn little round holes in my patience.

There was a little girl once. Carolina, *Mariposa* we called her. With us for two years. We believe she was around five. And then her mother was found. Her mother found us. We had gone to Uruguay, Mauro filling out paperwork to become Mauro Muchnik in the forged eyes of the law, adding two inches to his legal height. We were in the area just outside the outskirts of Montevideo, now Peñarol or Sayago. I don't know how Mauro had found this place. He wouldn't tell me. He told me not to dress too nice, or too poorly. He told me not to ask questions and keep my wallet tucked inside the pocket of my camisole, or laced up between the layers of fabric against my chest. He told me not to ask questions. I asked him later where they had gotten the government print paper for the little booklet. He said he didn't know.

It was a dim room, one window to our right with a bookcase just below. Fluttering papers stacked high enough that one could only see a passing foot for an instant before it disappeared behind the coat rack that stood at the far side of the window. On the coat rack hung a military jacket, as if it had just been set there, but I remember seeing dust in its

creases. Dust that billowed when the man we had come to see sideswiped it, stepping too forcibly around the desk to question us. The uniform on its coat rack, I couldn't help but think, had been strategically placed to inspire *confianza* in their work, in their papers. And as I waited for them to bring Mauro back from taking his photo, keeping the boredom at bay, I wondered about the possibilities of how that uniform could have possibly ended up there.

Mauro returned to the room, and we were escorted out by the boy who had been standing by the side door when we arrived. I gathered he was paid to stand there, to keep watch, paid to smoke and look nonchalant. What a job. A job where he would assuredly be the first one threatened, the first one... he looked a little odd around the elbows I remember, they pinched in on him, a practiced readiness. He had an accent I couldn't place.

It had been stupid to bring Carolina with us to Uruguay. Idiotic, really. She should have been left at home, left with my mother for one night. Carolina had loved her *abuela*. They would play dolls together, my mother constructing detailed, flourishing stories of their lives in high society. I can't remember why we brought Carolina, our *Mariposa*. Maybe to be a family, have a family outing, a vacation. Maybe to calm the anxious air around the whole trip.

We had left her with *la matrona, la ama de llaves del hotel* while we were in that cramped, dusty little room in another part of town. She was playing with one of the maid's sons. Playing at something in the dirt in the middle of the courtyard. The hotel was one story and painted mostly a faded red. It wasn't in need of paint, as if that red color had come already faded. There were yellow accents on the walls and big-leafed banana trees, only reaching up to my shoulder, planted every so often along the building. There was no fruit. I remember the trees had no fruit because Mauro was explaining to a very dusty Carolina that

there needed to be a girl tree and a boy tree to pollinate and she was about to ask if we had pollinated and if she would have a baby brother when I cut in to suggest we go to the central square. That perhaps we could get bananas with lunch. We ended up buying her two mangos (all hers!), and a coconut which we shared, passing it around. It was cool and somehow lighter than water and I felt it in the creases of my tongue. The man who had sold it to us (*veinte centavos*- but we were tourists and easily ripped off) had taken his machete, twirled it around his arm, whittled away the green outer flesh- then in one fluid motion, once it was thin enough, plunged the blade into the top. Carolina was gleeful. I remember this. She was laughing. She was wearing sandals because her feet got too hot. She was wearing a little smock with sheep I had embroidered, grass, and a wobbly butterfly she had done herself in pink and blue. We called her little butterfly, *Mariposa*. And the coconut stand man smiled and said "*panambi*." I'm sure he told us the story of his travel into Uruguay, but that story didn't stay. Some details. He pointed to a scar on his cheek. He was tan and it stood out, white and pink. His nose was flat, his hair was dark. His eyes were small and brown, and beneath the laughter of his performance was a tiredness- And I realized how tired I was. I leaned into Mauro and he put his arm around me. *Mi flor*, he said, kissing my hair. The man was telling Carolina how he had jumped from a moving train, gripping a vine he mimed its break, his falling, falling. *Oof*. He landed in the imaginary land of his story. He was fighting some jungle animal as it clawed at his face. I was looking out over the ocean, missing the next parts of the story. I could hear Carolina laughing, pretending to be a tiger. We began walking home, tired and happy. Carolina's forgotten second mango passed between Mauro and me as we walked behind her. A little juice from the corner of his mouth dripped onto his shirt- he never wore that shirt again- and when she ran back to us he lifted her up into the air,

Mariposa, Mariposa you're flying! And there was a shriek. I remember he almost dropped her. We were at the edge of the main square, leaving the market. Another shriek, closer. We held her between us. Everyone was looking. My heart was in the pit of my stomach. How could someone have found out? Had the slouching cigarette boy figured it out, his gaze lingering on Mauro as we left? Who had he told?

Carmiela!

I searched Mauro's eyes. I had asked to never know his name, the name had before he lived with the Muchniks, he was only *Mauro* to me. I was asking *Is that you?* without words, and he was replying *No, not me.* The relief hit me a split second before the woman barreled into us. Before she was holding Carolina in her arms and we were pulling at her to let go. But the woman sank to her knees, grasping Carolina and crying, sobbing. And Carolina, surprised, was crying too, *Mama, Mama!* And I knelt by her, reaching out my hand to a child who was not crying for me. *Carmiela, Carmiela, my baby, my angel, my girl.* The woman's face was red and blotchy with tears. Carolina was clinging to her.

I remember a snap in my chest, I can feel it again now, like something broke open and cool coconut water was flowing down the back of my head and the sides of my neck and pooling in my stomach and its sweetness no longer tasted good. The creases it had melted into, refreshed, had become cracks and the sweat from our dusty day in the sun was stinging. Stinging my skin, stinging my eyes. I could feel an uneven cobblestone pressing into my shin just below my knee, it felt hot and wet. Later, when we got back to the hotel, the two of us, I saw the dried blood in a line down my leg. I had knelt too quickly, with complete disregard to the unrepaired state of the road. I had felt all of the stinging, snapping physicality. But I could not understand. I refused to understand.

The woman, Mariamne, had sent her daughter first, to escape. Sent her at the age of five with a family friend who had become ill on the crossing. When they arrived in the port in Argentina, the woman was so delirious she had to be taken for medical treatment. Carolina was put in the charge of an old professor who took her to one of the *colonias judias*. All she could say was she was looking for her mother, her mother would meet her there. She did not know where *there* was. At the first settlement no one knew her. The professor, whose destination was that first settlement, graciously took her to the next large one, but no one knew her there either. He wanted to return home, he was old, his bones were aching, but he ended up at the third, in our kitchen in Adamas, explaining to us the little he knew, explaining that he could not care for her. And so she became our daughter, in her five year old mumbling crying, tripping over her own name, tear soaked, hiccupping *C-car-car*, she became Carolina, *Mariposa* tripping into our lives. Months later Mariamne had crossed to Uruguay, where the family friend was supposed to have traveled with Carolina after they docked. She asked everyone the first months, the first year. *Have you seen my daughter? Please, my daughter, Carmiela*. Sometime in the second year she had given up, Carmiela could be anywhere, she could be nowhere at all. Mariamne told us this, three times, when the only thing I could repeat was a numbly dazed *what?* Then again Mauro, back at the faded red hotel, repeating the story as I sat on the edge of the bed.

I did not sleep that night. I was not awake, either. In the morning we must have gone back to the little basement room, back to the man with his window blocked with papers and a military coat. Must have paid him for the little government paper booklet, *Mauro Muchnik* printed neatly on the first page. We must have taken the train back. We must have been picked up from the train station, then unlocked our front door and gone inside. I say *we must*

have because when I awoke from the night I did not sleep I was at our kitchen table, the table with the kitten pepper shaker and the bowl of salt. I say *we must have* because I did not remember and did not want to.

The irony of it, of the many ways I could deconstruct her given name *Carmiela*, and the name we gave her, *Carolina*, *Mariposa* was not lost on me. A fleeting sweetness in our lives, *Carmiela*, *Caramelo*, *Miel*, *Mariposa fly away*.

The scar on Mauro's hand, reaching from his index second knuckle to the heel of his thumb, was my fault. In my grief I tried to burn her portrait. The portrait I had painted of her, careful, gentle, *Mariposa sit still*, both of us laughing. He was quick in reaching into the flames. That was the night I finally cried. I moved again, I spoke. I took down the salves from the pantry. That night I saw that both of us were burning.

So I laugh when the jokes fly up like sparks from a fire, burn little round holes in my patience. I laugh when they talk about my paintings as my children. Or at least I try to laugh, I try to be good natured. Only Simón knows, the others were too busy with their own lives, or chose not to remember Carolina. Simón, the oldest, the doctor, looked at Mauro's hand, re-dressed it from my careful, skillless care; sat at our kitchen table, and for all his faults, sat quietly and he listened.

Pink Water

Before our *Mariposa*, when we were freshly married, Agnesia and I would do our laundry together. It was easier, more cheerful, we gossiped, laughed, and offered support to one another. Then our Carolina came along, and Agnesia helped me with the toughest stains and the toughest lessons of having a small child. I didn't want to lie to her. Mauro said *No*, he tried to forbid me to do it, he pleaded with me, *mi flor, te suplico*, but finally, he agreed. But still, we didn't want to do it.

Worried she would be able to tell the difference between blood and dye, from smell or color or texture, I collected the blood from each month in a little bucket, covering it tightly with a canvas rag. It was winter so the sheets with red crossing stripes were on the bed. I remember checking the bucket to see if it was enough, checking because I was ready. Mauro had gone out to do something in town, I can't remember what. I stood in the middle of the bed in my underclothes, the bucket gripped in both hands and poured it down the insides of my legs onto the center of the bed. I remember turning off my mind so I would not think about what I was doing, just the next step, and then the next. I took off my underclothes and folded them, setting them behind the stove so they would dry quickly, then took the pot of water off and poured it into the wash basin and some into the pitcher, adding some of the perfume Mauro had bought me. It smelled like springtime. Once the water had cooled enough I sat in the basin, slowly cleaning myself with a cloth. The steam coming off of the water had made the whole kitchen smell of perfume, and as the water was turning pink with the blood left on my thighs I was struck with how wrong it all was. Smelling like spring in the middle of winter. And I started crying, feeling claustrophobic in

the little tub. I got out, and not having dried myself ran to our bedroom to hide in the bed. I got in, shivering between the red striped sheets, curling my feet into the center of the bed. The center of the bed was wet, my feet were red, slick. Shaking, hiccuped breathing, I got out of bed, leaning against it on the floor. I don't know how long I was there. It could have been a couple minutes, the minutes felt like hours and then Mauro was home and he was taking me in his arms, carrying me back to the kitchen, wrapping me in a blanket, heating up water. He was setting me gently in the basin and humming some soothing little song to me as he helped me sponge myself off as if I were the newborn.

It was the one time when Agnesia and I washed our clothes together that we did not speak. We did not gossip, we did not laugh. She sat there, silent in her pity, as I scrubbed furiously, wearing away the skin between my thumb and index finger, stewing in my guilt as the water turned pink.

Teaching Her to Paint

It was not so many years ago that *mi sobrina* Isabella was still living with us, when I showed her how to paint, how blue and yellow are part of the bark, it isn't just brown.

Beautiful, Carolina, I'd tell her. She is not Carolina. I know this- am I pretending? Or perhaps forgetting, losing myself in memory.

It's Isabella, Tía.

Yes of course, dear, a beautiful tree.

I show her the paintings of my childhood. I skip the pages of monsters, of blood, and of tissue soft over worked muscle. They can find those when I'm gone, I wouldn't be here for the embarrassment, but I will not lose those drawings to time. I would not hide them, destroy them, lose them on purpose. But I cannot see them be discovered. I cannot bear to be examined, to hear questions about them. I cannot bear to have them seen, but I am aching to show them to someone who will understand. I would write notes in their margins, but I don't want to taint them, change them, try to synthesize them into words, reduce them. Maybe as time passes I will ask Isabella, I will tell her. *Remember Tío Mauro?* Don't forget him. Don't forget his story, but do not expose him. This is how we loved each other, find someone who loves you like this. This is the difference between sex and making love.

I barely know her, *mi sobrina*, Simón's daughter. I think there is too much of our history in my mind to properly record the present. There is no margin left, no blank page for anything other than the coupling of the present with the past, seeing double, seeing Carolina in relief, above, in front of, behind Isabella as she cleans her brush.

We had her two years, two years of *Mariposa* and I repeated the moments of those two years over the next twenty. I have lived a lifetime with a girl who ages from five to seven and back again.

So many of the *Valderos* are gone. They have passed on, scattered through towns and countries, even to the soil itself. They have had children and lost their pasts in them. I will not lose our past, my past. *I will not lose myself in anyone, save myself.* These promises bend and change and ripple into something new.

I have lived a lifetime with a man pretending. A real man, a history stolen.

I have lived a lifetime as a woman, not a woman. Woman as a title given. A title earned in play-pretend. I think Mauro's history is more real than my own.

I am lonely without him, a fact, not something to admit. I am lonely without the self I was with him. Lonely reliving connection.

I come back to my legs crossed in wool pants. Gray-brown, brown-gray. Purple ring warm below my sweater. I come back to the apartment, spacious, crowded with love that I have removed myself from, a little too cold. I come back to myself in the present *Isabella, Mariposa, what is your favorite food?*

We make arroz con leche. She would tell me about a boy at school, tells me now about her Fiance, smiling. I almost tell her it doesn't have to be a boy. I wonder where my *Mariposa* is now, is she married, does she have a little girl of her own; teaching her how to embroider, lopsided stitches behind her careful, practiced ones.

When *Isabella* leaves to meet her friends I ask her if she would like to learn how to embroider. She says *Sí, Tía Liye* and kisses my cheek, wrapping her scarf around her neck, and she's out the door.

I Stop

I do not think. I cannot recount days by the hospital bed.

I do not think. I cannot paint shades of white and pastel blue. I can mix each color perfectly, sun on the bedspread, purple in the shadow of the shades drawn halfway down the windows matches purple underneath his eyes, my *beautiful boy*. Blue gown, H is for *hembra* on his chart, clipboard beige. He sees me. He sees Simón, our family asks *can we see Mauro*, Simón says no. Three days before he dies, Simón says yes. We bring his clothes from home. We send the nurses out, we place his hat on his head, prop him up in his brown suit, red flower pocket square. It is the brightest thing in the room. The children are scared, they do not know what a dying man looks like, he smiles at them. We chat, we pass around *limonada*, empanadas from a different place, our usual shop was closed. He says they smell different, I still regret this. We asked the nurses not to come in, one comes in anyway.

Fernanda?

Simón takes her out into the hall. We kept Mauro's birth certificate in a small wooden box with a lock. Fernanda [REDACTED]. He knew at some point it would become necessary, something beyond forged identification. We pack our family out. *Mi sobrino*, León, asked when Tío Mauro was coming home, *ya pronto cielito*, I say. Even my lies felt washed out, tired. What color are the lies?

I am tired. I feel undeserving of tiredness, *he withstands more than I*. I tell him the same things every day, every hour. *Tolashka has gone to Bessarabia, Herschel has passed, we have not spoken to Clara Luzina in years*. The details get muddled, the names switch. *Why can I not see Franco?* And

I do not know how to tell him. I tell him Franco is ill, he says *I am gone soon anyway*. I tell him Franco is traveling, he says *I would come back home for him*.

Two days before he dies I am guided outside by a nurse, she tells me I need to move myself, I need to remember that I am alive. I tell her she is out of line. I walk in circles in the alcove by the side of the hospital. I walk to the *parque* in Palermo. I sit on a bench set back from the cracked sidewalk. I am frozen by everything in my body screaming to go back. The nurses commend my devotion to my "friend." There is a tightness in my chest that begs me *go back*, begs me *run away*, begs not to feel anymore, and then spirals again through *go back* and I am caught running in place in my mind. Water droplets on my breast bone, their presence there feels cold and unfamiliar, they spill down from my face, catch themselves on the hem of my blouse.

I am granted two miracles in my lifetime.

I feel this miracle, laying light on the back of my hand, red, with its yellow pistil standing at attention. I bring it back with me. I move out of brighter greens into gray tall buildings with tall windows, into white, and brown, and blue. Into hallways that stretch. Into nurses that hurry. Room 218. I do not think to be afraid to go in. Each time I leave, I return to a man who has begun to blur around the edges, a man I misremember happy, I misremember youthful. I sit by him. He turns his shadowed eyes from the window to me. Even the skin of his face is tired, it sinks itself into laugh lines, crows feet. We are tired, together. I give him the ceibo flower, the little miracle. He thanks me with confusion in his eyes. I forgive him his forgetfulness, holding the consolation of his cocktail of *medicamentos* against the bruise it leaves. He sleeps, and I cry quietly to not wake him.

Sun on the bedspread, purple in the shadows of the shades, blue hospital gown. Brown suit, red pocket square, packed away. Pale, worried hands, mine on his, nurse manicured nails, brown patched skin, puckered scars, operation after operation.

I do not want to recount days by the hospital bed

by counting how many times the sun traveled up the bedspread
and into his eyes

by the deeper purples

by the increasing number of pucker pink scars around brown
patched skin

It's nothing, a mole. Then three moles. He said he always wanted freckles, when it started.

I will not paint the shades of white, and beige, and brown. Not the blue hospital gown.

Unfolded pocket square. I bury him with one part missing from his suit. I keep this, I let two years pass. I keep this, and keep his suits waiting in the closet. And the empanadas from the corner store unbought. And the balcony plants who try to die as I neglect them, until I am ripped open by guilt. And I keep this, and I keep still. I do not paint, and the world stops. I stop, but the world continues.

Writing Letters

I've started writing letters. To myself, in my mind, I write them like little conversations. Like someone telling a story to no one in particular. I write them across my mind when my wrists ache, things I'm not ready to say to anyone else but to the memories who live with me. I begin and finish paintings, molle tree, dusty red hotel, imaginings of aging hands.

They're a way of remembering, holding visual memory in green leaves, flood water, little blue butterflies. I paint one piece of a little apron with sheep on it, bigger hands guiding little ones, blue butterflies peeling off the fabric into the air above their heads. These are little stories I tell myself, little half truths and full truths, stories I keep myself company with. They echo between our family home in abandoned Adamas, deserted, perhaps torn down. Through the trees, skipping branches and getting caught between leaves (ceibos shaking and moaning). Across the water, skipping surface ripples, stumbling over stones, catching on a wave they're pulled down into the deeper currents of the Paraná. Struck up again into the air, into the sunlight, they slouch into corners, hang themselves on blades of grass at the edge of the field that will not be plowed again.

These images I return to, sometimes with the wrinkles set in, showing laugh lines, folded and refolded to obscure the text- lines of memory creased, furrowed to shreds. And yet others are polished, like the breasts on public statues, nipples worn down and smooth, laughter reflected from the warped faces of tourists, college boys, a husband with a disapproving stare stuck to the back of his neck like a *kick me* sign.

These are the things I cannot tell *mis sobrinos*. These are the things, the sayings, the way I let my mind wander into phrases, that are *Inappropriate*, that are the *Tell them in ten years*. I was always afraid of endings, I'd like to say I'm not now. I'd like to say it. Truths and half truths. I say what I like. I keep these little letters, practicing the basics of forgetfulness, toeing the line between letting myself forget and letting myself remember.

I reread Morkha's letters, the children have never met him, Tío Mordechay. In Mauro's last days I would recount to him *Morkha left three years after Tolashka, he is happy in Bessarabia, he has a lovely wife*. I try to forget reminding Mauro of our life, I try to distract myself and think of nothing.

I read the fantastical books that men write about their countries. I see the manipulated menagerie of memory, their childhoods peaking through. I see *mi sobrina*, Isabella, reading cheap romance. I smile while I ache, thinking about Mauro striking poses to make me laugh. I do not touch those books. I spend time looking out the window at the street, unfocusing my eyes at the grayness of it, imagining gray clouds reflected in brown-gray waters, a mix of the white skies of blinding winter clouds and black skies of late summer nights. Stars peek through. I see the need for fantasy those men write about, too. The drive to remember oneself, one's childhood, the history of one's country. History of Argentina. And this is my country, I suppose. *Mi sobrino* comes home from *universidad* and tells us that our writers write with confidence. He says *our*. And I suppose again that this is my country.

I spend time looking at my hands. They make me think of my grandmother's hands, or how I imagine them. I think of my mother's hands. Synchronal versions of her as only the

mother of my childhood, and as only the woman with the frail hands, crooked elbows, thimble on right index finger, closing, blinking eyes.

I look at my hands. I draw them as I write these stories. Moving slow with care, with gentleness not to rip a graphite winter sky, a painted summer night. My hands move slow to slow my mind, meditative. I am afraid of how I could forget. Mauro passed as he began to forget a shared past that, building steam, could catch up to the present and forget it, too. I am afraid of how I could forget in the calm way one is afraid of inevitability.

I've been writing letters, illustrating their twists and turns in oil on canvas: molle tree, dusty red hotel, imaginings of aging hands. I think of selling them, of calling Franco, but who would buy these odd amalgamations of discomfort and familiarity.

Odd amalgamations of discomfort and familiarity.

It's not so much that I am a woman, more that I have grown accustomed to being a woman. Like a slightly inaccurate saying that is repeated so often, with such certainty, that it becomes truth. *Mi sobrino*, León, comes home from university, he is studying to become a doctor. He says there is a third type of person, Simón and I look at each other, we know this. León, grown up child, says *one with mixed up genitals*, and I look in the mirror before my bath, passing it over my body- a familiar discomfort. There is a thought and a wish hidden behind my bones where the reflection does not quite reach. Years of being told to sit up straight, but only now as the fat leaves my upper body, leaves my chest to settle in my hips, does my posture improve. I sit straight to avoid the pain, creeping up both sides of my spine. There's

less of me to hide with the slope of my shoulders and they become sore from the unfamiliarity of being so close together.

I think of sewing, posture slumped forwards over my work. I remember sewing Mauro a small little shirt with laces across the rib cage, tying under the arms, and I remembering pricking myself. It was off-white fabric, perhaps it was linen, I remember it rough. Later, I made him a second one with little vines in the pattern of the cloth. I took the first shirt back then. It was stained with sweat and I embroidered our red flower across the chest (our ceibo, bowing to the water, *una flor de tu flor* I told him). I remember making it for the first time. I pricked my finger leaving a small red stain on the seam under the left armpit. I wanted to clean it, but there wasn't a way to wash it without causing a stir in the night. Without waking Mamá, who slept light and anxious. The fire was low, night embers that would have to be built up, and the well cover would scrape over its stone lip. Quite often, pulling off the cover would result in the two top stones tumbling forward, raising a cloud of dust and the chickens would squawk and then the dog down the road would howl, and our kitten- did we have her yet at that time? She was still small then, a little black kitten, Moni, who would set off yowling in fright because of the dog. She would stand at the door of our room, crying until Tolashka or I let her in. She was a proud little thing, but clumsy. She would jump up to the window sill, where she was allowed, and then over to the table, where she was not. In the ensuing ruckus from my mother and all of us trying to get her away from the Sabbath dinner she would make mad dashes in several directions, finally landing on the floor where she would groom herself and prance away, pretending she hadn't looked foolish.

There is no room for a kitten in our apartment in Buenos Aires, no room for a kitten to warm my hands as I paint. No lovely purring to disturb my light and anxious sleeping. No mad scramble at Friday night dinner. Friday Night Dinner, we call it now, when our university boy, Simón's son, makes an effort to come home, and cheese is served with *carne*. *And our father rolls in his grave*, Simón jokes to me every week. I laugh, try to think of everything except for *my beautiful boy*. Try to keep my mind away from him. I stay still, I do not look for drawings, I lose myself from memories. I hush them in the corners of my mind. And still they slink out into the sunlight.

I am granted two miracles in my lifetime.

I am sitting by the window, losing myself in *el gris de la ciudad*. *Me desangro de color*. The window is closed. The plants on the balcony are dying. *La esposa de Simón*, Rebecca Maria, did not water them, some sort of quiet respect for me, for his memory. Months have passed, she begins to nurse them back to health, quietly, surreptitiously. The window is closed, the plants have gone to seed, small bunches of brown held between dried petals.

Perhaps it was set back on the shelf crooked, perhaps *mi sobrino's* footsteps have shaken the apartment enough times to dislodge it, perhaps there is some divinity of care, some echo of those no longer with us.

I am startled by the soft slap of its cover on the floor as it falls just short of the rug. Black cover almost brown. I cannot pick it up. But I move towards it, and everything in my body aches, knee to hip, heart to moving, reaching hands, reaching forwards. Little black cover almost brown. My second miracle flutters from inside the back cover to the floor.

He gave me this poem again, written out by hand, copied from a book he read in passing:

Cuando yo muera quiero tus manos en mis ojos...

...When I die I want your hands on my eyes

tus manos amadas...

...your beloved hands

Wet spots appear on the page before I feel the tears on my face.

Quiero que vivas mientras yo, dormido, te espero...

...I want you to live while I wait for you, asleep

Quiero que lo que amo siga vivo...

...I want for what I love to go on living

y a ti te amé y canté sobre todas las cosas,

por eso sigue tú floreciendo, florida...

...and as for you I loved you and sang you above everything,

for that, go on flowering, flowery one

Agnesia and Franco, Truck Bed

It's been some years since Agnesia lived with us in *nuestro apartamento en Buenos Aires. El apartamento que yo comparto con Simón y Rebecca María*. Franco is on to his third wife now, and although we all joke, I think some of us truly believe Franco married his housekeeper so he could stop paying her. He lost his job as *el presidente del club* because of it, because it was unseemly, because it simply wasn't done; mixing classes, a maid and a businessman. But it's hard not to joke, to bring some levity to his history, especially with what happened with his second wife, Marisol.

Agnesia had been baptized Catholic on a Sunday, the day before she and Franco were married. The couple, Mauro, and I had taken *el tren* from Adamas to Rosario, where we left our things in the hotel, catching *el colectivo* to the church in San Lorenzo. She was baptized by a thin, balding *cura* with a great many buttons down the front of his black frock. It was my first time in a church, and despite the unfamiliar ornamentation all I could think about were *los botones del cura*. They reminded me of something I'd heard in passing, perhaps read in a book, of how medieval women would have been fined for having too many buttons in accordance with the sumptuary laws of Florence. Perhaps, though, it wasn't all I was thinking about, perhaps I was blocking out some sort of stinging, nagging irony. *El cura* had cured her of *la enfermedad de ser judío*.

We traveled by *colectivo*, the last of the night, back to the bigger town of Rosario with Agnesia still dripping from the baptismal immersion, ceremoniously dunked into what looked to me like a giant birdbath. On *el bus* we carefully wrung a lock of her hair onto the

baptism certificate below the *Year of Baptism* header, smudging where *el cura* had written the current year. Mauro wrote her birth year over the smudged line, trying to replicate the *cura's* handwriting. We had also given some excuse to the priest about Agnesia leaving her birth certificate at home, and so the certificate of baptism carried a more Castilian version of her last name.

Agnesia did not easily express regret. She was always stubborn, *terca como una mula*. I remember feeling regret for her, the sadness of this separation from her family. I was always the more emotional one. During the quiet ceremony, Monday evening in the second church, *la Parroquia San Miguel Arcangel*, I drew a small sketch of her and Franco, lifted up on chairs in an imagined *hora*, an imagined wedding dance. It hung for years in their living room, always hung back up with care after business dinners when it would wait patiently, hidden in a kitchen drawer. Agnesia did not take the sketch with her when she came to live with us.

Shortly after their wedding (and four years after ours- delayed because Franco was often away on business, saving up to provide for her as he believed *un hombre real* should), they moved to Buenos Aires. Finding *un apartamento* was easier for them than it had been for my brother, Simón, who even as an established doctor suffered rent hikes the Catholic couple did not. Their *apartamento* was a short commute to Franco's work, where he was, as he put it, *moving us forward as a country*, with work relations and dinners with *hombres grises* from overseas. He hadn't yet opened his *galerías de arte*, this was years before that. He had starched suits in gray-greens and browns, and long hours that expected Agnesia home cleaning the house and making dinner.

Their nextdoor neighbors were a somewhat elderly couple, the Nemicottis, attended to by their unmarried daughter, Marisol. The three of them lived in 21B and shared a wall

with a quite bored Agnesia, who would sometimes wish the walls were thinner so she listen in on their conversations. During her first week spent alone in their new *apartamento*, Agnesia made frequent trips down to the lobby to check for mail in the small lockbox with 21A in script across the front. On one of these trips she stepped out briefly onto the pavement, and unused to city doors, which were kept locked from the inside, found herself stranded on the street. Her knocking went unanswered by anyone inside, and she was left sitting on the stoop until she heard the click of low kitten heels on the floor of the lobby. She resumed her knocking and was met by Marisol, who had come downstairs to collect the Nemicottis' mail. Agnesia, with playful chagrin, explained what had happened and made conversation about the pile of mail Marisol had lifted out of the 21B lockbox. In the stack was a small magazine Marisol passed to Agnesia, noting that it was one of her favorite pieces of post to receive and that perhaps Agnesia would enjoy it.

Agnesia read the magazine in less than an hour, and upon finishing had knocked excitedly on the Nemicottis' door to invite Marisol for *té*. From that first introduction they became friends, growing close over discussions of that small magazine, *El Libro de Psicología Argentino*, drinking *mate*, playing hands of *truco*. Marisol had always been better at bluffing.

Seven, almost eight years of friendship. Agnesia and Marisol. Marisol had encouraged Agnesia to follow her interests, had supported her in starting a group, *Mujeres del Barrio*, a group to discuss their interests, to host each other when their husbands weren't home for *té*. The group had been meeting for two years. In the third year, Marisol's attendance dropped, she excused herself, apologetic, *my parents' health*, she said.

There was no reason not to believe her. No reason to doubt over seven years of friendship.

Agnesia, ever admirable to me in her conviction, kicked Franco out when she learned what had been going on. She left a copy of *El Libro de Psicología* burning on the Nemicottis' welcome mat. It was something we all dealt with during that time. Usually it was a pretty young receptionist, someone we knew of in theory, someone we had never met. Usually it was not seven years of friendship, seven years of *mate* and *truco* and shared love of a little magazine. There were lucky ones, of course, women who weren't quite believed, resented for their stories of happy, fulfilling marriages. I was one of the lucky ones, I still consider myself *afortunada*.

And so, in late September, Agnesia came to stay with me, Simón, and Rebecca María. León was at *universidad*, close to graduating then, and Isabella was engaged. I miss *mis sobrinos* around the house. Agnesia's two children had stayed with Franco, practically taking care of themselves until they moved to different places, distant from their parents.

I wanted Agnesia's company, was thankful for it. I wanted our lives overlapping again, with our shared memories worked into our skin, comparing bruises and scars; gossiping stories old enough they were practically harmless, an old blade left in the rain. Agnesia came to our home and I was grateful for the opportunity to support the friend who had been there when I needed her. There the year before, three years ago as I recount this, during Mauro's first surgery, his second one. There when I discovered my paintings made money.

We have an uneasy friendship with Franco now, me and Simón. In some small way, I believe we hold him at a distance out of respect for Agnesia. His business is partly in art galleries, in exhibitions, and he will sometimes take a piece from my most recent, show it, sell it. Sometimes I go to the openings, eat cheese, fruit, *chorizitos*. I avoid the wine, if it's red.

I have begun a new set of paintings, based on the sketches I most recently found, small sketchbook with a black cover almost brown. I think we all thought Franco to be a different kind of man, we converted him from gaucho to *judío* in our minds. And he was different, in the *Valderos*, at the beginning of his marriage; he learned from his mistakes, unlearned so much from his upbringing- he was open to that change. But it seems parts of his grandfather were deeply rooted in hidden places, places from which they began to creep out, leaking chauvinism, souring what we knew of our friend. And the money issues, issues he imagined, and in his tight fistedness he became *un avaro*. *Langa, forro de mierda*, but somehow he sees himself accomplished. I suppose he is, economically.

He is still some form of family.

Family in the way that I can draw ties back to shared childhood moments. Sometimes I find myself idly wandering through the hallways of how I imagine his mind to be constructed. Carrying my knowledge of him under my arm, dusting off family portraits with a mother missing, father missing, bruises on his back from horse reins. Franco, who was supposed to be *the real man*, appointed by his grandfather to that pedestaled post. Now penny pinching, stingy, arrogant, *macho*. I suppose he thinks himself some kind of Don Juan, now with his maid, and before her, with Marisol.

It was the end of September when Agnesia came to live with us. She had caught Franco, kicked him out, took *el colectivo* across Buenos Aires to knock on our door. *Everything in that horrible house reminds me of him. And there are some things too expensive to break.*

Less than two weeks later Franco and Marisol were married. Despite our disapproval and discomfort we were tied to him by our shared past. Tied to him in the way you are tied to a family member you don't particularly like: in your life for better or worse.

We got Franco's call on an October spring day. Starting into the humidity of summer, ceibo buds, wilting plants on the *balcón* gray-green against *el gris de la ciudad*. We got the call, line ringing, picked up, shock and dismay on Simón's face, reflected on ours as he relayed the news. News which had been directly followed by a request. *Drive the 24 hours with her in the trunk*. Marisol had died two days into the honeymoon. Franco did not want to pay for the transportation back to Buenos Aires. It feels ugly to even say. Simón took the truck. He told us she started to attract flies under the tarp. We do not know if this is true.

When we got the call Agnesia said *leave her, let her rot in paradise*. That night she slept on a trundle bed in my room, *you shouldn't be alone*, I'd told her. She only let herself cry once she thought I was asleep, and I lay, wrapped up in the sheets, sweating under the comforter, too hot but unmoving, allowing her privacy by pretending not to hear.

If she had been a different kind of woman the note she left us the following morning would have held an apology for her words, for what she said about Marisol. The note, left on the kitchen table, was empty of any sort of *sorry*, but I heard it in the sunhat she gave me and in the flan made for Simón when he returned with the truck bed empty.

I wear the hat when I paint on the *balcón*. The plants have begun to send up new shoots, green against the gray of the city.

Calling Franco and a Little Angel

I call Franco, he says *are you paying for this call, or am I?*

And I say that *I am* because he'll be in a better mood. I tell him León is doing well in *universidad*, I tell him to come over for flan, just for fun. But he never does, it stopped being fun years ago. Something about Agnesia lingers in the apartment, making him nervous.

He stops by for after-school *té* when he picks up my paintings. He has a small daughter with his maid- his third wife. *She is plump, nuestra gordita angelita*, he tells me.

I say I have a painting of the molle tree. A painting of the flood. He jokes that I better have made him muscular and water slicked, and it feels like we relax into old friendship for a moment. I do not tell him about the little painting of my ring. I hid it under my bed as if he would go searching through the house. I will not part with it. I tell him about the paintings that came from the little gray buttons- they hang as three scenes next to each other, pink and golden light emanating from the trees. I say there are more, come see them. He says *I'll come back Tuesday*, and asks for flan. I say yes and go buy eggs, and the little *chorizos* that became a small tradition for us, bringing luck for our exhibitions.

He asks me why I started this, these paintings, these scenes; that we had agreed on an exhibition without the specifics, without the theme pre-stated. I serve him *flan y un cafecito*, and I show him the molle tree, the flood, the gray button paintings with colored glowing circles around our fingers, around our ankles, around our smiles and voices. We discuss the placard that will hang on the opposite wall to my artist statement and I sketch his plump fingers and the sleeves of his tailored suit as he does the figures. I lose focus, in some moments I am pushed sideways by the feeling that something is wrong, a *profound sadness*

that I continue on with my life when everything should have stopped. Should have stopped and stayed still when bringing me empanadas from the *almacén en la esquina* stopped, stopped when Mauro could no longer go out to walk through *ferias artesanales*, when I would hold his elbow to go out on the *balcón*, watch the *autos* pass, watch the people. He'd tell me draw this, draw that, and I'd laugh. Sometimes he'd point, sometimes he'd say *a clown riding a libélula*, *Liye, mi flor* and then time he said *draw me with angel's wings-*

I am called back as Franco says *and discussing price- Liana, Liana, Liaye-* and he asks me *why hands* and I say something about tactile memory, feeling the stories that objects carry when you don't want to carry them yourself, or don't have room in your mind, room in your heart. I notice a fleck of green on the cutting board in the painting by my hands and my mother's, *making empanadas*, the ghost of my grandmother sitting across from us, head covered, hands folded. I write *fix green on cutting board* between my little sketches and notice a small graphite angel in the corner of the page, a *beautiful boy* keeping guard over the numbers, over the placard notes with my dedication to him, saying to me *por eso sigue tú floreciendo, mi flor.*

And I continue.

Afterword

A Note on This Afterword Before You Read It-

I'm worried this afterword will read as aggressive, it is not at all intended that way! Read it as playful, read it as conversational! I tried to write this 4-7 times before I ended up here, and it was wearying- because how are you supposed to write something that encapsulates your feelings on something you spent the last year working on and the past three years thinking about? My thoughts and feelings and whatever else are too big and scattered to put down in any exact way, and in a way that doesn't feel trite or dramatic.

A Note on Research-

The amount of research I did for this project is colossal, and I don't even actively remember half of it. There were small questions and quests for information that took up so much time: when do ceibos bloom, when is the dry season, when do Jewish girls change from two braids to one, what could the price of a coconut be in Uruguay at a specific time. It is entirely possible I got these, and many other things wrong, but it is historical fiction, and so this novella is made up almost entirely of educated, intuitive guesses and my own imagination.

A Note on the Language-

This note is not on the Spanish-English mix², but on my style of writing. Perhaps there are oddly formed sentences, perhaps there are too many commas, perhaps you don't like it. If you don't like it, you've probably not made it to the afterword. I aim to write the way that my characters think, the way that my characters speak. They interrupt themselves, they get confused and turned around, they

² but the Spanish-English mix will get its own footnote: I don't have much to say on this other than it was fun and I used Spanish when it felt right to. It was also a good tool for connecting the story to where it takes place, as well as being useful for avoiding using the same word too many times- although I could have tried a little harder with *ache* and *beautiful*, I know, I know.

forget to finish fragments of sentences. Anyway, it'll be odd, it will float some peoples' goats and will sink others'.

A Note on Gender- **[spoiler warning]**

This is *not* a cishet (cisender, heterosexual) love story. If you read it that way, read it again. Of course, there are the confines of the time period, so our central relationship may *appear* that way, as it had to, publicly, for safety. But that is not the internal or private reality of the relationship.

I am also worried that perhaps my use of *beautiful* in describing Mauro could be grating for some readers. I want to clarify that he is not described this way because of his transness. This is not a way to feminize him. I use *beautiful* because that is how Liana sees him. The word beautiful is not inherently gendered and is not used in a gendered way in this novella (and is not gendered specifically in Liana's use of it).

A Note on How I Came to This Project- **[maybe spoiler warning?]**

My mom had told me this story before. The first time was when I had either not known or (more likely, *most likely*) forgotten I was Jewish in tenth grade, bemoaning being a goy because I couldn't go with my friends to the Jewish youth group. The second time, I'd forgotten the story, and she told me again, sometime in early college: My great grandmother's mother's family had come over to Argentina from Bessarabia (now Moldova and Ukraine) fleeing the beginning of the Jewish Pogroms around the 1880s. Her mother grew up in Argentina and fell in love with a young man who, they found out a little later, was from the same very small town in Bessarabia. They were married and began a family, having several children, and among them, my great grandmother, Carolina Muchnik. She grew up hearing stories about the pogroms, about what people went through, what they witnessed. These stories influenced her art. Working mostly with oil paint, she became a well known

artist, with showings across Latin America, the US, and Europe, exhibiting her work alongside Picasso and Pollock, among others.

But Carolina Muchnik doesn't even have a wikipedia page. This novella started as a slightly fictionalized version of her life, that was the intention, but as I ran into dead end after dead end trying to find sources on her, it began to change into something more and more fictional. There are still real stories from my family in this text, some as underlying suggestions, some as nearly direct truth. 'Real stories,' plural, isn't quite correct, actually; I should say that there is *one* story in its entirety (I will leave my reader to wonder which one it is) and several smaller details from real life- Simón was a doctor, she was an artist. Some of those small details, though, have been changed to less exact truth- that her husband was from the same town in Bessarabia, and Carolina herself, a big personality, has made her way into two characters (maybe more when I wasn't paying attention [my characters tend to have a mind and life of their own that isn't entirely up to me]).

A Note on the Title- **[spoiler warning]**

It took me a long time to find the title. In all my initial ideas there were the central themes of Remembering, Forgetting, and the Ceibo- but they weren't quite right, they all sounded like the type of book you would find on your grandparents' coffee table and not pick up. In thinking about what titles grabbed me (and realizing it's usually almost entirely the cover art that draws me to a book), I found that books with Before/After or How (and other interrogative words) were the ones I was most likely to pick up. Those and ones with numbers or timeframes, but that doesn't apply to this work. I started experimenting with Before and Forgetting, but it still wasn't quite right, it felt more melancholy than intriguing. I don't know how it came to me, but Why I Paint appeared on the page. But it was too open ended and not directly or exactly referenced in the body of the work. So then I thought, *what is?* Black Cover, Almost Brown, but no, that doesn't grab you.

He Asks Me Why I Started This, These Paintings.

Oh.

I'd pick that book up.

But then I worried, *will people be frustrated that this never gets answered directly?*

But I thought that perhaps, at the end of the book, on the penultimate page of the final chapter, when this question is asked, that perhaps my readers will feel the answer; that perhaps it is a question that gets answered in little ways throughout.

Also it's fun to find the title in the piece/book you're reading and be like hey!! yay!

Bibliography (with little comments about the texts, so Annotated Bib I guess)

The author has chosen to include only the main texts and sources used, as there was much research done in avenues that either did not apply or did not end up being used- it also feels like a waste of space to add things like the price of butter in the US in 1910-1920 which was one of my google searches to try and extrapolate the price of a coconut in Uruguay at around the same time, so I am including only the texts that heavily influenced my sproj research, etc. although mostly I made choices in my writing that were made up but were adjacent to being historically accurate.

Main texts that were somewhere in the back of my mind when writing this:

Gerchunoff, Alberto. *The Jewish Gauchos of the Pampas*. Translated by Prudencio de Pereda, University of New Mexico Press, HarperCollins Publishers, 1998.

^ I am adding this text to my bibliography begrudgingly because it isn't well written and focuses entirely too much on breasts in a very male gaze-y way (but it was a useful recommendation by Professor Adhaar Desai- his Junior Lit Seminar was invaluable for my sproj)

Hernández, José. *Martin Fierro*. © 2009 RTM S.A. - Catamarca 1902 - Martínez

Buenos Aires - Argentina. PDF from the marambio.aq website,

<https://marambio.aq/pdf/elgauchomartinfierro.pdf>

^ From Intro to Latin American Literature, taught by my advisor, Professor Nicole Caso (I used this, somewhere in the back of my mind and potentially the wikipedia pages on gauchos or the gaucho guerra but I forget)

Muchnik, Daniel. *Inmigrantes: 1860-1914* [1st edition]. Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2015, pp. Agradecimientos - p. 15.

^ written by semi-distant family member. I only got through a couple pages of it, but you should see the amount of notes on those pages, it's kind of ridiculous (and funny)

Neruda, Pablo. "Soneto de la Noche." Translated by Nicholas Lauridsen, *The Metamorphosis of Life* [blog website by Guillermo Miguel Perez-Santalla].

<https://metamorphosisinwords.blog/2017/05/13/soneto-de-la-noche/>

^ I found this poem by fortune- and it fits so beautifully and perfectly. I know it's anachronistic, it was published a fair amount of time after this story takes place, but this is historical fiction- there's the liberty to pretend it's not.

Simonetto, Patricio. "A Body of One's Own: A Trans* History of Argentina (1900-2012)."

Youtube, uploaded by Latin American Centre, University of Oxford, recorded February 10th,

Uploaded February 17th, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBF043hY1_4

^ The vague memory of watching this video two years or more before writing my *sproj* influenced Mauro and getting his papers etc

Wengeroff, Pauline. *Rememberings: The World of a Russian-Jewish Woman in the Nineteenth Century*. Translated by Henny Wenkart, edited by Bernard Dov Cooperman, University Press of Maryland, 2000.

^ from a class taught on Women and Gender in Judaism (taught by Professor Cecile E. Kuznitz)

Lesser texts:

Gordon, Maggi Salgado. *Alberto Gerchunoff and "Bridge" on the River Plate*. American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, 1992. (pages 287-293)

Lispector, Clarice. *Family Ties*. University of Texas Press, 2010.

Rock, David. *Argentina 1516-1982: From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*. University of California Press, 1987. (pages 134- 143)