2023

From the Green Room: Notes on a Saltwater Girlhood in the Borderlands

Izabela Garcia-Arce

FROM THE GREEN ROOM: NOTES ON A SALTWATER GIRLHOOD IN THE BORDERLANDS

By

IZABELA GARCÍA-ARCE

Bachelor of Arts in Writing and Rhetoric, Pepperdine University, Malibu, CA

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of:

Master of Environmental Studies, Environmental Writing

University of Montana
Missoula, MT

April 2023

Approved by

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of the Graduate School
Graduate School

Mark Sundeen, Chair
Environmental Studies, University of Montana

Pardis Mahdavi
Provost and Executive Vice President, University of Montana

Caroline Stephens
Environmental Studies, University of Montana

García-Arce, Izabela, M.S., May 2023

About *From the Green Room*

Chairperson: Mark Sundeen

In this debut book, Bela García-Arce explores what it means to reconnect with saltwater roots in tiny coastal towns across Baja California through a collection of personal essays. She starts by telling the story of her foundation—about growing up in San Diego and falling in love with the ocean, about what it was like to be a young Mexican girl with a family with no interest in the water. She leans heavily on humor to deliver playful jabs at the toxic masculine beach culture while also revealing how she played a role in combatting it. Between exploration of toxic sludge spills and the lack of clean water, García-Arce also examines how the constraints of Mexican culture and religion have ostracized her from her family. Her prose—sometimes dry, sometimes lyrical, leave the reader with the itch to wade into a body of saltwater. This memoir explores the tension of Mexican-American identity while also showing us what it's like to drop in during a summer south swell, what it's like to dive for lobster with your own gloved hands.

This book finds the bridge between William Finnegan's surfing memoir *Barbarian Days* and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. We see a surfer's story told through the lens of a Mexican American waterwoman, a narrative never-before seen in print. By unpacking the fabled Baja California surf trip, every SoCal surfer's rite of passage, Bela is forced to come face to face with an identity split—the cerebral existence of the White Bela in contrast to the Brown Bela. Is she going to align with the Bela that craves adrenaline hits or with the Bela that makes tortillas and exists within the confines of Mexican machismo?

García-Arce's work is inspired in part by the New Journalism in Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. In search of literature that does the same for Southern California surf culture, she began writing about her own experiences, the experiences of her friends, and the oceanic narrative that dominates SoCal lineups.

Table of Contents

Incantation

I was drowning.

I was absolutely sure of it.

The first two waves I had ducked under with ease. But the third was bigger, more powerful. I tried to get underneath it, to mimic the dolphins like we were taught. But the churn of the whitewater had dragged my twelve-year-old body and backwards, expunging the ground I had covered on my swim. The wave threw me up, and I surfaced sputtering. My breathing was ragged, filling my lungs with fear rather than oxygen. I didn't want to keep swimming. But the fourth wave was on the horizon. Instead of resuming the swim freestyle, I tried backing up, treading water shakily. The longshore current that ran parallel to the shore was pulling south, and I realized I was drifting away from the group, away from the buoy we were tasked with touching. I was stuck in the impact zone.

The fourth wave was even larger, rising to what I would later learn was roughly six feet in height. It swallowed me. I remember opening my eyes in the bubbly darkness, limbs uselessly thrashing, hands reaching out in hopes of breaking the surface. All I could hear was the thunder of the breaking wave, of the lip curling in on itself and collapsing into the pocket. When I finally came up, eyes stung, and I felt like I swallowed glass. I couldn't believe I was still alive.

I wanted out.

There was a firm hand on my shoulder.

Turning to the right, I recognized him quickly. It was Darby, the head State Parks officer and instructor in charge of the junior lifeguard program my parents had enrolled me in. I always saw him as a tough, serious man, in charge of logistics and discipline and safety. He's the kind of man who would recognize down time as an opportunity to brush up on first aid skills or practice

our pushups. But in that moment, he didn't seem to have an agenda. He treaded next to me like we had all the time in the world, like he didn't just witness me flirting with death.

"You need to be diving deeper, Bela," he explained to me. "Duck deeper than you think you have to. We'll grab sand together." He smiled, and I was oddly comforted by his crow's feet and sunglasses tan. I imagined for a moment that he was my dad.

I nodded, still unable to speak.

As the next daunting set approached, Darby told me to get ready, to slow down my breathing. He offered me his bicep and I grabbed on, letting him drag me down. I tensed, awaiting an onslaught that never came. With my left hand extended outward, I seized a fistful of sand and brought my body down against the seafloor beside Darby. Opening my eyes allowed me to watch the dark tunnel of turbulent wave pass over us. We were below the strongest current, avoiding the southbound drag that had just minutes earlier been propelling me along the crumble of the crashing set wave. This time, it was like I had a backstage pass, a view of wavemaking from beneath. Without the fury of the whitewater, I was able to hear the benign thud of the ocean. I was not in danger, I realized. I was in utero.

Darby took me through four more waves like that. I don't recall at what point I let go of his arm. But I remember feeling free. My disproportionate tween body hidden beneath a fire engine red rash guard found a sanctuary pressed against the sandbar, watching the aquamarine of fish swirl with each passing wave.

I trudged out of the water after making it around the buoy and watched some of the boys run towards the shoreline with boards tucked under their arms. *Riding* waves? *I want to do that.*

I went home and begged me dad for surf lessons. He told me he might know a guy.

Part I: Para que te recuerdes de mi apellido[1]

My sister held my towel and keys as I tweezed bits of neoprene out of my knee.

It was a chilly day in June by Southern California standards. The gloom wasn't really burning off and the north swell had brought waves that gave me brain freeze if I stayed beneath them too long. Summer was around the corner, but I still exited the water shivering.

And to make matters more exciting, I got dragged across a boulder on one of my last waves. The low tide had exposed the barnacled boil before, but by the end of the session, I was getting careless. A tough wipeout had thrown me into a rip current that sucked me straight over the rock. I put a hand out to catch myself but only succeeded in slicing my palm on the sharp lips of the mussels and banging my knee against the serrated side of the structure. The dainty puncture cut through my wetsuit, and black material embedded itself into my knee. I was more upset about the hole in my wetsuit than the hole in my skin.

My sister watched me extract the last shreds of my suit from the cut, her face half disgust, half hanger. She had patiently waited on the beach for me for the two hours I spent in the water. But it was midday, and we hadn't eaten yet. I loaded the board into the back of my truck and asked her what she wanted to eat.

"Chicken Coop?" She smiled, knowing I couldn't resist.

Still wiping sand from my eyebrows, I responded, "Chicken Coop!"

The infamous National City Chicken Coop[2] is a red and yellow stiped farm-style drive-through open 24 hours a day that sells the best rolled tacos north of the border. It sits sandwiched between the Filipino seafood market and the Popeye's by my grandparents' house. They sell the

---

[1] Translation: "So You Remember My Last Name." A line from "Latinoamérica" by Calle 13

[2] I'm sure it has a better name, but I've never looked it up.

kind of rolled tacos there that sober you up quickly, that make you feel like you've gotten over your cold, that help you pretend nothing else exists outside of eating tacos.

My sister and I bought an agua de jamaica[3] to share and ordered a dozen, *con todo*[4].

***

San Diego's south side is home to cheap burritos and children-of-immigrant angst. We all grew up with two languages on our tongues—the one our mothers spoonfed us that came out in grocery stores or with our grandparents and the one we mastered in school. In an effort to be more *American*, many of their parents dropped the hyphens and gave their kids one last name. I thought myself not so fortunate.

"García-Arce."

Gar-see-uh R-say

And so, there became two versions of me, personas my little sister affectionately referred to as White Bela and Brown Bela.

White Bela dragged herself out of bed before dawn to surf Sunset Cliffs and fist bumped old local bros in the lineup. White Bela went to college in Malibu and picked up spearfishing. White Bela is just Bela. No one ever tried to pronounce her last name.

Brown Bela practiced making tortillas with her grandmother and snuck out to party in Tijuana on weekends. Brown Bela danced norteño[5] with her uncles at weddings and can drunkenly sing all the words to "La Llorona." Brown Bela is actually Izabela Dinora García-Arce Sanchez Mariscal.

---

[3] Mexican style hibiscus water
[4] With everything. Cheese, avocado, sour cream.
[5] A style of dancing popular in Mexico's northern states and Baja California.

As badly as I wanted to combine Belas, I didn't know how. My white American friends didn't understand the culture I grew up in, where straddling a border meant you run errands in Tijuana to pay a quarter of the price you'd be paying in the US. Where young people don't move away from home to *chase dreams*.

My childhood bedroom sat eight miles north of the international border that separated us from Tijuana, a place that always seemed to smell like cigarettes and gasoline to me. I have always been drawn to the ocean, an addiction shared with no one in the Mexican family I grew up with. The Garcías of the Sonora desert are accustomed to the heat. I rarely get thirsty, a trait I inherited from my dad, a García who spent summers ranching for his grandfather in the highlands of Nayarit. He has never truly understood why I choose water over land.

The Arces that came to the United States from Mazatlán have old roots in the sierras of central Baja California. It is said that my great grandfather had over 20 biological children. My grandfather, one of the many bastards, grew up with his maternal family on the mainland, *en México* and became a Sinaloense.[6] My grandfather has never had contact with his Arce relatives *de la Baja*[7], a connection lost to the Sea of Cortez.

I didn't know any other brown girls that surfed, let alone Mexican girls who did. I camouflaged myself with RipCurl, Riffe, and Volcom to try and fit in with the north county surf legends. I learned to cross step on a longboard and duckdive on a shortboard. I watched Taylor Steele surf videos from the 90's, revering Rob Machado threading a barrel and Kelly Slater nailing sharp frontside snaps. I shared joints with the surf bums and prayed to the Lords of Dogtown.

---

[6] A person from the state of Sinaloa
[7] From Baja

At 24 and nursing a dejavu heartbreak, I decided to spend my summer in Baja California. It had been a scab I reopened after two years only to be met with the same disappointment as the first time. I should have known better. The waves of Southern California where I first fell in love are haunted, polluted by crowded lineups and bittersweet flashbacks. I took the Liam-sized hole in my heart and filled it with maps and pesos and extra surf wax.

I went to Baja searching. For what exactly? Among surfers, the waves of Baja California are a rite of passage. Tales of empty lineups, free beach camping, and pocket-change fish tacos seduce us like bears to berry bushes. Maybe I thought that if I survived the journey, White Bela would become a *real* surfer.

I drove down past Tijuana fully equipped with camping gear, a spare tire, and my mother's coworker riding shotgun. Ever afraid of narcos and Mexican machismo, she had invited him along on my trip as a precaution—a *man* who was a decent surfer and didn't mind skipping out on a few days of showering. Despite his inability to drive a stick shift and his remedial Spanish, I agreed just to avoid an argument. I would rather weather a 30-year-old stranger than her hurricane of hysteria. He would only be sticking around for the first ten days anyway.

***

Casey forgot a leash for his board. And I snapped my spare on the first day in the water when we camped outside a hidden surf hostel run by a leathery gringo a few hours south of Ensenada. We were two surfers with only one leash between us, and the closest surf shop was two hundred miles in the wrong direction. My mother was concerned I would die on the side of the road at the hands of a cartel. I was concerned that Casey, the balding redhead who also managed to forget cash and his visa, would be my Grim Reaper.

***

I had heard of the fabled Baja dirt roads before beginning my drive. A mix of sand, washboard, and loose gravel, these roads were notorious for destroying gringo tires and confusing gringo drivers. A few days into the trip, Casey and I were once again lost on one of these infamous dirt roads. After an hour and a half in second gear, I began to sweat. This was the longest we'd been lost. The sun was beginning to set, reminding me of one piece of Baja advice I clung to religiously—don't drive at night.

I was finding out the hard way that in the desert, roads can change from day to day. Maps printed even a year before can fail you if there has been any rain at all. In these parts, precipitation, when it falls, falls heavy. Peninsula Vizcaíno will sometimes go years without seeing any rain. Saguaros, sage, and the occasional palms make up the vegetative diversity along the coastal stretch. The cotton candy sky showed us vultures and osprey but offered no solace.

As a kid, I was told stories of El Cucuy, the misshapen hairy beast prominent in Mexican folklore. My father would tuck us into bed and tell different versions of how the monster came to be—sometimes he was something like a werewolf, a cross between a rancher and a wolf. Other times, he was a faceless shapeshifter, appearing as someone you know before returning to his horrific true form. El Cucuy was meant to reinforce my father's warnings, "Don't go where you shouldn't go. Don't do what you shouldn't do." *He* was what came for kids who disobeyed their parents. As I drove along that godforsaken road, all I could think about were my father's bedtime stories. I was somewhere I shouldn't be. I was prey for El Cucuy.

I could tell Casey was nervous too. We hadn't spoken much during the hours we spent in the car, so when he finally mumbled, "Sorry I can't help you drive," I offered him a tight-lipped smile and the aux cord. I looked around for something, *anything*. No signs. No people. The occasional coyote.

As we crested the three-hour mark, I began to come up with plan B. We had water and tents and some old snacks left. *We could roll the dice and try again tomorrow*, I thought. It wasn't ideal, but it's not like I had any cell service out there to come up with plan C or D. Better not waste the half tank of gas we had left.

But up ahead, we saw something, a cloud of dust coming closer. Casey and I both leaned forward, desperate. A cream-colored sedan whizzed past us, blasting music as it did so. The driver offered me a wave I too-eagerly returned. There I was rolling along in all-wheel drive wondering if I should air down my tires and this guy was flying over boulders without much clearance. He gave me hope.

After another few minutes, I saw a sign from the heavens—a paved road. In that moment, there was no sight more beautiful. There was no indication as to whether I should go left or right so I took a chance on what I perceived was the miniature outline of civilization in the distance and turned left. My choice led us to a small town with speed bumps that can probably be seen from space—Bahía Asunción, population: 1,453.

Following a mural that read, *Campo Sirena*, we pulled into a dirt lot that claimed to have Wi-Fi and cheap camping on the beach. The town itself sits on a point and has one central dirt road running through a collection of abarrotes[8] and small houses. Casey and I celebrated with Tecate and tacos de almeja[9] that night as we overlooked a crescent-shaped bay full of pangas[10].

Daybreak brought fierce sunlight and hot Europeans.

We were sitting in camping chairs watching the sun rise when a beat-up Toyota Highlander with Arizona plates pulled up next to us. Out stepped Jasper and Inga, the two most

[8] Convenience stores
[9] Clam
[10] A small skiff, popular for fishing in Mexico.

beautiful people I had ever seen. Tall and tan with doll-like features, they looked like they belonged in a telenovela. I could hear Casey from somewhere next to me mumble, "Jesus Christ!"

So, when the couple asked if we'd like to go surf with them and some locals, Casey and I nearly fell out of our chairs in a haste. I don't know if I could ever thank them enough for what came from that invitation.

***

We had weaved through countless sand dunes to get to the surf spot, following Jasper and Inga's instructions. *Turn right at the white shack. Go for a while. Turn right at the stick with the beer can on it*. The spot was pristine. Aside from a couple of kind local boys, we were the only ones in the water. The kids were incredible. They surfed with shredded suits and on broken boards, beating us drop for drop. Unlike the breaks in Southern California, we shared waves, cheering each other on through every tummy-turning wipeout and snap off the lip.

I was shivering when I got out of the water. An offshore upwelling left water temperatures just barely kissing 60 degrees Fahrenheit, and I had worn too thin a wetsuit. As I climbed back up the cliff, shortboard tucked under my arm, I noticed a man sitting by himself next to a longboard. His black pirate's beard hung down to his collarbone under a perfectly curled mustache. He was covered in tattoos and sported multiple nose rings. Inga encouraged me to go talk to him since her Spanish was as poor as his English. She didn't want him sitting alone.

I went up to him, "¿Qué onda?[11]"

He smiled and introduced himself.

---

[11] What's up?

He was Aldo Santoro Arce.

"Yo también soy Arce,"[12] I said, tilting my head to the side.

Aldo let his hand reach out towards the horizon, towards Bahía Asunción and explained, "Todos somos Arce.[13]"

I learned that Aldo is a fourth-generation fisherman. His father was a fishing legend for decades up until his untimely death the year before. Aldo told me about Bahía Asunción's fishing cooperative, the first one established in Baja California, back in the 1940's. Before taking over his father's role in the co-op at 32 years old, he spent a decade as an ocean photojournalist. He worked with the government in the states of Baja Sur and Baja Norte to protect their waters from the narcos. His photos hang in many government offices in Mexico and are published in several textbooks.

And so, it wasn't until I found myself sitting on a sandy oceanside cliff 600 miles south of where I was born, did I finally begin to understand the significance of my last name.

I asked him, "¿Todos pescan?[14]"

"Todos pescamos,[15]" he nodded.

Every day, they send around 400 kilos of fish up to Ensenada and the United States, depending on who pays more. They catch all their fish via rod and reel. No nets, no traps. They have a 24-hour watchman stationed at their southernmost point looking for poachers. The ocean around Bahía Asunción is so rich that they never have trouble catching fish. They monitor their populations closely and pay attention to their catch. The ocean is their guide. And when the surf is up, they ride waves.

---

[12] I am also an Arce.
[13] We are all Arce.
[14] You all fish?
[15] We all fish.

The people of Bahía Asunción are people of the sea, he told me.

"Y tú," he said looking me in the eye, "éres nuestra prima."[16]

***

The people of Bahía Asunción took me in. They fed me fresh fish and took me out on their boats to swim with turtles and sea lions. I left to put Casey on a plane in La Paz, a 10-hour trek during which I thought of only them, the fish people from an unknown town who only started using money ten years ago.

They were waiting for me when I returned weeks later with a college friend in tow. I remember walking into an abarrote and the young woman behind the counter said to me, "¿´Eres Izabela, no? Me dijeron que Izabela, nuestra prima, iba regresar."[17] Word travels fast when cell service only exists inside homes.

When I had messaged Aldo announcing my return, he wrote back, "Tú mandas, Izabela." *You command.* If you call any Mexican child's name, you're likely to hear them respond, "Mánde." The literal translation means, *command me*. These responses reflect the scars of colonization, from when the Spaniards laid waste to Indigenous Mexico.

It is said that Hernán Cortés saw the tip of Baja California and was reminded of a book by Spanish author Garcia Ordonez de Montalvo. This book mentioned a mythical place, a paradise island ruled by beautiful (and likely fetishized) black women who lived in harmony with the land. They would feed encroaching men who found the island to their griffins. They obeyed a matriarch called Calafia, inspired by the Muslim name for ruler, Khalif or Khalafia. Montalvo named this fantastical place *California*.

---

[16] You are our cousin.
[17] You're Izabela, right? They told me that our cousin, Izabela, would be coming back.

During the weeks I spent driving around Baja California, I never saw another Mexican girl in the water. I've heard talk of two—girls living in Bahía Tortugas that allegedly visit Bahía Asunción once per year to surf its pristine left-hand breaks. I asked Aldo if he knew of any girls in town who surfed. He said some used to but then they got married and now their husbands rather they don't, so they don't. The mermaid girls lost their scales. It's a shame they no longer feed encroaching men to griffins.

***

Aldo and I spoke briefly in September, two months after my visit and one month after his birthday. I saw the headline about Hurricane Kay, the hurricane whose stormy girth was expected to ravage Bahía Asunción, the town that never sees the rain. I nearly fell off my bed in a hurry to open WhatsApp. It took him two days to respond—days I spent obsessively checking the Facebook pages of friends in from the town. The damage was sizable, but there were no casualties. *El canto del diablo,*[18] Aldo called it. He rode out the storm with a friend on a sailboat, finding a legendary cove near Bahía Tortugas that provided some boat shelter from the monstrous waves.

Aldo told me I'll always have a home in Bahía Asunción. I returned the invitation without thinking. *Stupid*. His smile only slightly faltered. He made a comment about not having a visa, and the shame festered inside me. We both know the visa process can take months *if* you're lucky enough to get approval.

It angers me that I can never show Aldo my home the way he has shown me his. But then again, what would I be showing him? Fish tacos filled with a catch that he probably reeled in himself. Crowded surf breaks infested with fermented man-bros who will try to heckle him out

[18] The song of the devil.

of the lineup. Kelp forests missing abalone and clams, where sea lions often swim around with hooks on their lips. The place I call home illustrates an apocalyptic future, what Bahía Asunción could look like and will hopefully never become.

***

I like to think I take after the Arces Baja Sur. They're saltwater people who spend more time in the ocean than on land. They make the best ceviche, and they ride hard for their local little league—Los Navegantes. They'll go years without seeing a drop of rain and then weather the most merciless of storms. They fish every day and pick up their surfboards when there's a swell. They dance on the beach on weekends, and they always share their Tecate.

In Bahía Asunción, I was White Bela and Brown Bela. But perhaps there was never a White Bela. Maybe the things about me that made me White Bela were just Brown Bela things in disguise.

But something still nags at me. Would aquatic Brown Bela still exist had I been raised in Mexico? I hope she would, but I'm not so sure. Perhaps machismo would have gotten the best of me. Perhaps I would've adopted the fear my mother tried to instill within me if I didn't have gringo friends unacquainted with fear. In a town where everyone shares my last name, I have yet to find my brown girl mirror. I'm not sure where her place would be.

In the afternoon lulls, I wonder, *do brown girls really surf?*

Part II: [Becoming the] Chill Girl with an Exoskeleton

Two years earlier.

I sat in my pickup truck on Pacific Coast Highway waiting to go night diving for lobster with a guy I just met. I got out, shuffled around back, and checked the gear again. Suit. Weights. Gloves. Fins. Flashlight. Mask. J snorkel. Lobster Gauge. Knife. Dive bag. I'd never night-dived before. Was I on a date? *Okay, back in the car*.

8:30pm. I let my fingers fiddle with the edge of my sweatshirt. I watched the headlights glance off my truck's rusting tiger stripes, the scars from my father flying through Tijuana roundabouts. Liam arrived in his eighties Jeep Wrangler. I could hear the manual transmission. *Oh god*, I remember thinking, *the gas mileage on that thing*.

Though it was dark, passing headlights allowed me to spot his milk chocolate waves and goddamn fraternity sweatshirt.

He waved and skirted past me as I opened my car door, busying himself with inspecting the gear sitting in the truck bed. He was a tornado of energy, bouncing between our cars, opening doors, occasionally speaking, half to me, half to the sky. He told me to sit tight while we waited for the others.

Others?

***

I spent most of my childhood playing in saltwater.

And though this is not abnormal for someone raised in San Diego, it was abnormal for my family. I have no memories of my mother ever allowing the waves to reach past her ankles, and my father never learned to swim.

I would pad along into the water, often dragging a sister or cousin along with me, and plunge headfirst into the seafoam. My mother would pace along the shoreline yelling, "¡Ten cuidado!" She always wondered why I turned toward the ocean and not her.

I made a home of every beach I visited. The sand crabs became my friends. I would dig for them with my toes and let them give me pedicures. I later learned that their presence meant that surf perch were likely biting. Fish where there are sand crabs. Fish where there are birds.

I remember the first time I caught a wave. I was 12 years old sporting a white and blue Ripcurl rash guard and a set of pigtail braids. Some dusty blonde old timer, a friend of a friend of my father's, sat on a longboard behind me and pushed me into a mashed potato wave. I was waltzing on water. *Hell, Jesus Christ himself had nothing on me.* I dove off the board and let the white water wrap up my tumbling torso.

"Again," said the man.

My upbringing relied heavily on summertime junior lifeguard camps—every Southern California ocean baby's rite of passage. I would get dropped off in the early morning nervous and frigid then picked up in the afternoons sunburnt and defeated. Lifeguard instructors would roll us in the sand and send us off to a buoy 300 yards away through pounding surf.

"Again," they would say.

I learned to seek out rip currents. On open water swims, they saved me energy—sucking me out quickly, protecting my endurance. If I managed to jump into a rip current on a surfboard, I could make it past the set waves without even getting my hair wet.

I remember sneaking out of my house in high school to go night surfing during El Niño conditions. Water temperature was in the low 70s. October air in the low 80s. I took four friends, brand new surf babies, all of us piling into my mother's old Chevy Tahoe. We rolled the veteran

vehicle out of the driveway with the headlights off. We didn't bother with wetsuits. The impatient Santa Ana wind tugged at our glow stick necklaces and tickled our cheeks.

The full moon even came out to play that night, allowing us brief previews of the dark walls of water approaching us before the waves would break. The surf was kind, mushy that night. Every time someone got caught up in the rinse cycle, the faint glow stick luminescence gave color to the white water. The only ones paddling out, we would giggle before ducking below the surface when the border patrol would drive by on the sand. It was near midnight—a perfect time for them to catch people swimming to America. We saluted their taillights with paint-chipped middle fingers. But to be fair, my grandfather did repeatedly wade out onto a beach three miles south of where we were. Forty years before. I guess he wasn't the only one.

***

Liam stopped toying with the contents of my trunk, his eyes following a gargantuan Ford Raptor with a blinding overhead light bar that pulled up just ahead of us. A dude in a camo hoodie and a trucker hat hopped out. He was smaller than I had anticipated. His passenger door burst open and out popped an overly excited teenager with hair like charred tumbleweed. *Classic.* The Aquatic Country Boy and his Sidekick strolled over to Liam and exchanged Neolithic handshakes. The two boys then shook my hand and asked me if I had ever done this before. I nodded. "A bit."

I opened the truck bed, and the ordeal began. Liam opted to change next to me, probably not wanting to make me feel left out, but this just made me feel self-conscious.

"We caught like six legal size bugs between us last time," Liam said, recounting his previous dive. I nodded along as I adjusted my weight belt again, securing my knife into its sheath.

I watched him carefully though I should have been paying attention to the excessive amount of fog-deterring toothpaste I scrubbed into the tempered glass of my mask. He looked like every other surfer boy I grew up with, but Liam's presence seemed so scattered and chaotic. I didn't quite know what to make of it. By this point, he had gone through most of my gear, inspected the wheels on a skateboard I kept in the cabin, and already thought he'd forgotten items only to find them minutes later. Like with everything I did, I had a system. I was almost grotesquely organized, laying out each piece of gear in the order that it needed to go on me. But his cyclonic essence was making me question whether I'd forgotten something too.

When I pulled my long fins out, I looked up and realized he held up an identical pair, a mirror image. We nodded at each other curtly and finished getting dressed.

He put half his suit on and then remembered he had to pee and moved maybe three feet away to do so. He threw terrestrial belongings into my car *like we were friends*. He then realized he forgot his gloves inside after I hit the lock button. This would become an ongoing pet peeve—him saying he was ready and then his eyes would widen, "Wait!" as he would hear the doors click.

***

The more time I spent in the water, the more severe my addiction became. My parents feared the physical dangers—lethal currents and white sharks. I never did.

The demons living in my head were bred by heckling locals, dominant surf bros, and ostracizing high school beach boys. In my most formative surf years, I remember abandoning a paddle out and almost puking in the sand, taunts of season's past still echoing in my ears. And maybe I would have been less bothered if I saw people in the water who looked like me—girls with brown skin and dark hair, with mothers that yelled at them from the shore in Spanish. My

imposter syndrome grew as the years went on. The more I learned, the less I believed I knew. I was always giving away my priority on waves encroaching dudes who challenged me.

In the faces of every male surfer in the water, I saw remnants of cupcake blonde thirteen-year-old boys in matching red rash guards who would trash talk foam board users and flaunt their fiberglass shortboards. They were kids who learned about the ocean from their parents—adults who went into the water. I should've known they were full of shit, but as a shy tween entering a new sport, I heeded any hierarchical insight as a warning. Maybe if I didn't piss off the groms that were better than me, they would let me into their little club.

I remember waiting in line for the bathroom at a high school party. A cluster of local half-baked surfer bros stood nearby, their frosted tips all touching as they struggled to all look at the same phone screen. They began berating someone's social media profile.

"All her photos are in a fucking thong bikini."

"Who even carries a longboard like that?"

"She doesn't even surf!"

Their words raked over her body like they owned the landscape.

Intrigued but petrified, I peered through one of their elbow crevices to see what they were laughing at. *For guys that seemingly hated this girl, they sure spend a lot of time looking at her*. I caught a glimpse. She was my friend.

I adapted to survive. Like lobsters adapting to swim backwards and pee out of their faces, I conformed to pseudo idiosyncratic surf speak and the chill girl lifestyle. I learned to live in a continuous state of constant apathy, unbothered and unoffended. I tolerated boys I should have smacked, but I never let anyone get close enough to pierce my soul. I found safety in emotional inaccessibility. I began growing an exoskeleton.

I said the names of beach towns—San Diego, San Clemente—like a *gringa* so I could be understood. I feigned *oh yeahs* every time the white boys showed me photos of their bronze selves on vacation asking, "Don't I look Mexican here?" I knew I wasn't ever going to look like a SoCal ocean girl poster child. But I sure could act like one.

College gifted me sanctuary in friends who existed ignorant to the patriarchal paradigms that infiltrate saltwater sports. This previously land-locked group of white girls didn't feel gut-grilling guilt when they accidentally cut someone off. They weren't apprehensive about heavily localized spots. Seeking wipeouts and legendary glow in the dark surf sessions, they looked to me for knowledge. I was their guide. So, I took my imposter syndrome, stuffed it in a bottle, and tossed it into the ocean.

Before I knew it, I was spending weekday mornings scurrying across glass-infested asphalt wearing half a soggy wetsuit and hoping I hadn't just left the surf wax melting in the bed of my truck.

I remember dinging my board on poorly placed stop sign one of those mornings and thinking, *fuck I definitely will have to patch the rail later*. Turning back, I yelled, "Come on Tatum!" She scampered over and caught me quickly. We both had class at noon and at this rate, if we didn't shower, we could make it. Tatum shook her hair out, showing off her blondish brown locks adorned with algae.

"Oh dude, you're sunburnt," I gestured at her forehead.

She laughed and pointed at my ankle, "And you're bleeding."

***

Suited up around Aquatic Country Boy's vehicle, we planned the dive: enter east of the multimillion-dollar mansions, swim west through the rock structures, and exit the way we entered. Sidekick spoke up, "How do we know if ther're legal size?" *He must be new.*

I cleared my throat and held up my silver lobster gauge. "You measure the carapace exoskeleton that covers the cephalothorax, which basically means the head—from the horns to where the tail starts."

All three boys looked at me. Liam began to laugh, "Cephalothorax, cephalothorax. We must measure the cephalothorax," he went on in a high-pitched nasally voice. I couldn't help but laugh along, letting my jaw relax. And in this moment, with my defenses in disarray, I did the unthinkable. I playfully pushed at his bicep. *Woah, Bela*. That must have been a glitch in my design. I clipped the gauge to my belt and tried to ignore my hyperactive heartbeat.

The coldest dives of the year in Southern California mean 55-degree surface temperatures, only decreasing with descent. In a 5-millimeter suit, I strap 12 pounds to my waist, allowing me to stay near the seafloor without much exertion. More effort means less oxygen. I minimize my movements by bending at the waist and avoiding fin thrashing on the dive down. Lobster gloves are lined with Kevlar. The too-large gloves protect my hands from the piercing underside of the Pacific spiny lobster tail, which contracts when they try to swim away. Dive gloves aren't made for little hands like mine, but I sometimes pretend that big gloves will get me big bugs.

***

Lobster diving found me in Mexico. I was an older teenager, sitting at a restaurant in Tijuana with my family. Where I come from, we cross the border for restaurants, the vet's office,

a night club. *Vámonos a Ensenada* means brunch on a Sunday. We let other vehicles scar our bumpers knowing they won't pull over.

Two men emerged from the sea hauling foot-long reddish orange bugs in nets strapped to their waists. I couldn't stop staring at them, seeds of curiosity already taking root. I took to YouTube, letting it teach me about a world where you enter the sea hungry and exit with dinner in your hands. I studied the way divers cleaned their gear and prepared for oxygen deprivation. The freedivers of the world will hate me for saying this, but freediving can be watered down to really intense snorkeling. Or scuba minus the oxygen. Whichever you prefer. To freedive, you operate on a single breath hold, clearing your sinuses several times through equalization on each drop.

I saw the lobster as a tangible validation of my authenticity, a token of ocean badass certification. The idea of going out and grabbing a flighty arthropod off the ocean floor with my own hands set my ambition ablaze. There would be no tool between me and the animal—no rod, no spear, no net.

My first few attempts at freediving were a kooky shitshow. I had a mask, suit, and bodysurfing fins. I had dragged a friend along with me, but being ill-equipped, the best I could offer her were swim goggles. I told her to bob around near the surface, so her eyes don't pop out from the pressure of the drop, having read that fact in an online freediving chatroom. I would poke around the rocks and near the tiny anemone communities, not yet venturing into the kelp kingdoms.

Over the months that followed, I swam deeper into the bull kelp, testing the upper limits on my breath holds and finding animals that I had only ever seen on documentaries. Sheep crabs. White seabass. Hermaphroditic sheephead. I'd try to join schools of anchovies even though they

would just scatter and regroup ahead of me. I loved laying in the eel grass looking up at the surface, little crabs trying to pinch my ass beneath me. When I couldn't be in the water, I'd watched Kimi Werner take hundred-foot drops and artfully transform into an underwater predator.

I've probably watched hundreds of hours of freediving tutorials online, all of them advertising taking $700 introductory courses. *Comedic*. My method became trial and error. I did follow their golden rule, though: never dive alone. I probably lugged every single friend on a dive over the years, including my sister, whose eyes still panic swell at the sight of set waves.

Every paycheck bought me more gear. Every dive taught me a lesson. Some lessons were more pungent than others.

I had been diving for nearly a year the day I had my first real scare.

I was on a dive in college when I spotted a lobster trap below me. Being nosey, I dropped down to get a better look. Several monstrous bugs had been trapped already. I felt sad for them, unable to roam around with their friends before becoming somebody's meal. Part of me wanted to try and free them, *let those commercial guys come and get them down here*. Though I was pretty sure it would be illegal for me to tamper with the traps, I moved in for a closer look.

I was nearly out of air. Time to surface. *Oh*, I thought as I looked down, *I fucked up*. The gauge dangling from my belt had somehow gotten caught up in the metal squares of the cage below me. The metal curves of my tool were hooked inside the trap so perfectly that it looked as if the gauge couldn't possibly fit through the small opening.

The chest convulsions were beginning. Though uncomfortable, chest convulsions indicate that you've used roughly 30% of your breath hold capability. Yet a anxiety began to well inside me. I was 20 feet down. Underwater currents began pushing blades of kelp into my

face, obstructing my vision. I tried to surface again, hoping that the gauge would just slip right out as confidently as it had slipped in. I was met with the jolt of being tethered to the metal death trap. Even underwater, lobster traps are large and unbelievably heavy, ruling out the possibility lugging the contraption upward.

My trembling fingers seemed to lack dexterity as they battled the kelp. But as the current pulled back, I could see the tangle more clearly. *Turn it sideways, you idiot*. I freed my gauge from the cage and kicked to the surface, panting frantically once I felt a cool breeze touch my lips. *That was close*.

I looked around. My friends splashed happily in the intertidal zone, ducking beneath the sponge of the surf. They would've had no idea.

I no longer venture near traps.

***

We stood at the water's edge waiting for the one half-ass wave to pass. I watched Liam turn his flashlight on and I did the same, pretending I'd done this countless times before. He shoved his neoprene feet into his fins, held my eyes for a moment, then backed into the surf. I had been half bracing myself for a mini lecture, a safety spiel other ocean boys had tried to give me before. But his intentions weren't to coddle me. Thinking I'd had the ocean boy algorithm memorized, his divergence puzzled me.

I would later learn that he judged my diving proficiency by my actions and the jargon I'd met him with, not by the bikini I sported under my wetsuit.

Initial drops are clumsy, cut short by inadequate breath holds. My body always needs to be reminded that we've done this before. Increased lobster nocturnal activity doesn't mean those

little buggers completely let their guard down. Beaming them with a flashlight startles them, so there is no room for hesitation once you commit.

A half an hour into the night dive, I felt my salty self begin to wake. I no longer had legs. I had longer breath holds. *I was a pinniped.* I spotted lobster after lobster, pinning them to the beds of eelgrass or seafloor they were shuffling across. Most were juveniles, too young to keep based on their size. They always look bigger underwater.

Following the streamof light emanating from my right hand, I scanned the rocky algae structure, looking for the reddish twitch of an antenna or an arthropodic shuffle, telltale signs of a lobster on the move. I remember spotting a sneaky antenna trying to disguise itself amongst the grass. Going in half blind, I shoved my palm down into a crevice, hoping I wouldn't be pulling out a moray eel. Feeling the familiar ridges of the carapace, I smiled and pulled up the spasming bug. I turned him over. *A male*.

The lobsters on my leg gripped my wetsuit through the bag hanging from my belt. *Hey now*, I would bat at them as we brushed through kelp forest, passing dens of drowsy bright orange garibaldi, California's state fish.

***

The first time I brought home a lobster to my college roommates, I tried to tickle them with it. By chasing them around our manicured living room, I got Tatum to pet it. Mackenzie was far less inclined, but she did name him Joe.

Joe was swaddled and stuck in the freezer for a hibernation nap that would ultimately lull him to death. Lobsters require about two hours to fully die via freezer. Once he was thawed, I broke off an antenna and inserted it into Joe's anus, retrieving the poop sac upon removal. Nobody wants to eat that. I liked breaking down my lobster into sections, scooping the meat out

and drenching it in lemon juice and white wine. Joe was fried, breaded, and tossed amongst grocery store discount section mac n cheese. One lobster fed the three of us roommates with leftovers to spare. I loved coming home and lifting my catch before them announcing, “Dinner’s on me, ladies.”

I have never met another woman freediver, let alone a Mexican one. I’ve had friends who I’ve taught to freedive, but I’ve never come face to face with another girl who brings knowledge that is her own, whose origin story mirrors mine. I hope to meet one someday. But I also worry—will we like each other? Will we rejoice upon realizing we share a scent? Or will we circle each other with barred canines, two females occupying the same cage?

I met Liam in the final week of October during my last year in college. I was sitting on a skateboard in the back of my friend Evan’s car. Liam sat in the front seat. We shook hands, sizing up one another half-curiously.

Evan looked at his fraternity brother, “Bela’s a freediver too. We’ve been wanting you two to meet for a while.” Liam nodded in approval, his brown hair cautiously tickling his long eyelashes.

A few days later, I was walking through the university main square on a breezy afternoon when I heard a voice call my name. I turned around and spotted Liam playing cornhole in front of a philanthropy booth.

“Hey, wanna go night diving tonight?” he asked casually, still looking at the little bean bag sailing through the air. I nearly let my jaw clatter against the smooth cement between my feet.

“Yeah, sure. I’m down.” Calm and collected. *Nice*. I walked away trying to contain my double-edged stoke.

***

We stumbled out of the water around 11 pm, drunk on saltwater and high off hunting adrenaline. Though the water-logged wetsuits kept our bodies lukewarm, the weight belts fought every step we took. Fidgety lobsters swayed by my side, occasionally headbutting my knee.

Liam and I dragged our feet, letting Aquatic Cowboy and Sidekick get far ahead. The full moon hung low and cheddar cheesy, probably laughing at our ankles getting pelted by whitewash pebbles. Liam spoke softly, as if we would be waking up the empty stilted beach homes we strolled beneath. Up until this point, I hadn't actually directly addressed him yet. Poaching my contact information from a friend, he sent me a time and location—that was it. Our mutual friends called him by his last name, so as we trudged along inspecting our bugs, I asked him, "Hey, um, what do you want me to call you?"

"Liam," he said with a smile.

"Liam," I repeated back, avoiding his all-consuming gaze. Nobody had ever looked at me like that before.

***

The next few months were a saltwater blur. As dive partners, Liam and I played amongst the algal fortresses and took my kayak to offshore kelp forests. We even managed to get our hands on a few octopus but never harvested them.

My first octopus was a yellow and blue beauty. She took her time crawling up my arm as I shouted for Liam to come over and see her. She and I made eye contact as she tinkered with my snorkel, her body splayed out across my chest. She never inked. But why would she? I was her friend.

On many occasions, he would get his hands on a Horn shark. He would splash around, wrestling it delicately while saying something along the lines of, “Look Bela! It’s biting me.” I would pull my mask and snorkel down around my neck and tread next to him rolling my eyes secretly wishing I had brought a camera. He would later show me teeth marks on his bare limbs, and no matter how many times I scolded him for getting exactly what he deserved, Liam would shoot back a lopsided grin and laugh. “That’s the point.”

We set our friendship on fire. The more time I spent with him, the more I craved spending time with him. I lent him the *Tao Te Ching.* He read it twice, returning my copy with annotations nestled into the margins and a letter at the end. Out of the water, we explored the caves and trails of the Santa Monica mountains, letting nightfall mute the outside world. Liam told me about his upbringing in Connecticut and how hard it was for him as an adolescent outsider to feel at home in the San Fernando Valley. We talked about broken households and our aspirations to live happier lives. I taught him about lobster sex identification and shallow water blackout. He taught me to drop in on waves with power and to lucid dream.

I wrote more than half of my senior thesis from Liam’s bed. Waking around six am meant I could put in a good three hours of schoolwork before he would stir.

***

By the time Liam came around, I was well-versed in how to interact with aquatic boys. I could easily interpret the various meanings of *chaaaa* and *duuuude* depending on the tone of utterance. However, years of adapting to emotionally unavailable ocean boys had left me emotionally stunted. I didn’t know how to verbally convey feelings aside from being nonchalant. I was the chill girl who always carried extra dive gear and knew exactly where to find the

leopard sharks, but I couldn't be honest with the boy I loved. My exoskeleton was made of titanium.

So when the time came, many full moons after that first night dive, he asked me what I wanted. We were done with school. And it would probably be harder to see each other, right? In a panic, I blurted out *friendship*, though that was painfully far from the truth. The fear of losing him entirely was paralyzing, and yet, chill girl was suffocatingly concerned with becoming an inconvenience. The imposter syndrome had washed up on the shore at my feet, bottle uncapped.

His stoic stare fixated on my car radio convinced me that this was what he wanted. *Maybe he's even relieved*, I thought.

***

Night diving with someone you've slept with who you are no longer sleeping with is weird. *Ver*y weird. The silence falls heavy, and I thank the ocean goddess that the noise from Pacific Coast Highway leaves little room for speaking. If we were still together, perhaps I would be making jokes about wetsuit mishaps and accidentally flashing cars passing by. I didn't. Though I have the advantage of not having to slip into a dive suit naked, I still must coat my body in a generous layer of lubricant to slide into the exposed neoprene. As he carried on his tornado antics, I forced myself not to watch him.

Most of the dives that came of the next year were an opaque few and far in between. He then moved to Santa Barbara. I moved to Montana.

I never told him how much I missed him.

***

The heartache that followed propelled me into a state of resuscitation. *I don't want to be like this anymore*, I'd say to myself, feigning detachment from emotion all the while being eaten alive inside. I longed to bring back the Bela who cried over dead crabs in the tide pools and said

what she was feeling without the fear of *sounding too much like a girl*. But shaking a ten-year-old habit is hard. But becoming the cucumber kind of cool is not irreversible.

I decided to make more of an effort with my friends. Telling them I love them. At first, they would double take when I said it back, too often expecting a nod or a cringey thumbs up. I started claiming my own waves, waves I used to habitually yield. The confidence I started constructing was nurtured by vulnerability, by allowing myself to sit with looking stupid, to be emotionally naked with another person, to be honest with what I want. Slowly, I began poking holes in my exoskeleton.

***

Waders are far easier to slip on than a wetsuit. They don't constrict my ankles. They don't suction my neck. They keep the water *out*.

I fiddled with the caddis fly, unsure of myself. My casting, awkward and underdeveloped. I looked around, and the child in me feared making eye contact with an experienced angler in the distance shaking his head. *No.* I was fly fishing on the Big Blackfoot River. Deep breaths. I didn't know what the hell I was doing, but I had to start somewhere.

"Your rod tip ought to follow your line," an old woman nearby reminded me. She smiled. I smiled. We chatted afterward and she handed me a beer.

October in western Montana is not October in Southern California. The leaves have minds of their own—changing hues and diving to the ground in a gradual, dramatic fashion. Crisp mornings and mountain air mock the idea of bikinis and short sleeves. In the mountain west, water lacks salty buoyancy.

***

Alone atop a mountain and pretending hard enough, I could just barely make out the sea. Bug season had begun.

Gorditas de mi tía

I pulled up to Tío Chuy's llantera[19] in Cabo San Lucas almost two weeks and over 1,000 miles after beginning my journey through Baja California.

Casey and I spent our last night together locked in our separate rooms soaking up the comforts of privacy and WiFi. I hadn't had a moment to myself in what felt like forever. And I desperately needed a proper shower. We'd emerged the next morning around 10 am so I could drop him off at the international airport in La Paz. We exchanged a few words, and I didn't hug him goodbye.

Pulling away from the airport restored my sense of liberty. I could blast Bad Bunny or a Drew Afualo podcast. I could count highway cattle aloud. I could think and feel completely at peace. I meandered down Highway 1, along the same road that claimed Tío Carlitos' life ten years before. He'd been sideswiped by a semi that was attempting to pass going the other direction. He hit his head. Every other guy in the car walked away from the accident. They tell me Tío Chuy was never the same after the death of his youngest son.

***

"Allí viene la loba de la montaña[20]" my Tío[21] said to me as I entered the shop. He looks so much like my abuela. His delicate brow, his round eyes, his Aztec nose. He is her only sibling, and though they haven't lived in the same place in over 55 years, they talk almost every day.

The Mariscal side of my family came from Mazatlán, Sinaloa to Baja California about fifteen years ago. Up until then, Tío Chuy had been a charro, a traditional Mexican cowboy.

---

[19] Tire/basic mechanic shop. They're all over Baja.
[20] Here comes the she-wolf down from the mountain.
[21] He's technically my great uncle, but I was taught to call him uncle.

Nowadays, Tío Chuy and Tía Chela live atop a hill in a Cabo San Lucas suburban neighborhood where the streets are narrow and blocking a driveway is the only way to park on the street. He runs the llantera now with one of his sons, my Tío Modesto.

Tía Chela embraced me tightly as soon as I walked through the door of their house. It had been several years but she smelled just the same, of papaya and sugar cookies. She'd let her canas[22] grow out, and she felt more delicate I remembered.

***

My abuela and her brother had nearly identical families in alternate universes. Seven children for each of them, small Sinaloan spouses, and grandchild count in the double digits. Some of their kids even share the same name. There are four Carloses, four Raquels, and three Lauras. But my abuela went from Laura Mariscal to Laura Arce at the age of 14. And though she birthed all of her children in Mexico, the Arces now all reside in the United States. She and abuelo Panchosito, like most of their children, gave up Mexican citizenship for the promise of *a better life*. As a result, some of their grandchildren don't speak any Spanish and don't even know of their cousins in Los Cabos, most of whom speak no English.

My Tíos gave me Tío Carlitos' old room to stay in, which houses a giant portrait of Jesus Christ and another of Tío Carlitos, the same one that sits on the ofrenda[23] in the hallway and that hung at his funeral. I had vivid dreams in that room that left me feeling exhausted in the morning. I slept for the first two full days of my visit, only waking to shuffle to the dinner table and eat a meal meant for someone three times my size. My Tíos don't skimp on portions.

[22] Gray hair.
[23] Mexican altar honoring the family's dead loved ones.

Tía Chela has been making sweet gorditas for us for as long as I can remember. She'd open her suitcase on visits from Cabo San Lucas and extract four or five freezer bags full of the cookie made almost exclusively of sugar and butter.

Tía Chela likes to make fun of me for making a taco out of everything. I can't just eat the machaca[24] and beans with a fork and mix in bites of rolled up corn tortilla. I have to make a monstrous concoction of evenly distributed machaca and bean filling and fill my mouth entirely with every bite. On top of that, I like to bring one food up onto the chair so my knee rests just below my chin.

"Como tu prima, Adelia,[25]" Tío Chuy chastised as he tapped my knee with his finger.

***

On my third day in Cabo San Lucas, Tía Jaqui invited me over for dinner and said her family would take me around the city. It was my first time returning as an adult. The bounciest and most energetic of the Mariscal Raygoza sisters, she listed four or five beaches we could go to before I could even accept her offer.

Tío Genaro is married to Tía Jaqui. When we'd visit Cabo San Lucas as kids, he used to take my dad out urchin hunting, which looked more like Tío Genaro launching himself into the rocky intertidal zone getting pelted by relentless surf and my dad watching from the safety of land. My dad used to ask Tío Genaro how he survived the waves. Tío Genaro would respond, "Es más fácil si no subes a respirar.[26]"

This was the same guy that fought off an armed robber in a Domino's pizza shop. The guy that used to scrub barnacles from the bottoms of boats in the Cabo San Lucas marina by

[24] Mexican beef usually dried and rehydrated that my Tía mixes in with eggs.
[25] Just like your cousin Adelia.
[26] It's easier if you don't come up to breathe.

hand and without goggles. Tío Genaro, the true *choyero,*[27]*,* born in La Paz with his drawn out accent and cowboy slang.

He drove us around all evening even though he had only just gotten off of work. We sat at Playa Santa María for a while and watched the ships come in and out of the little cove. My cousin Lisbeth told me they come here to people watch. Rap music echoed from the boats, and the little sunburnt figures onboard swayed along to the music offbeat. People whooped and took body shots and posed for big group photos. We stared as some of them jumped into the water, their limbs flailing as they cannon balled down.

"¿Te metes al agua?" I asked her after my swim while we played with the large grains of damp sand.

She pulled her sweater more tightly around herself even though the temperature was definitely in the high eighties. "No. Está muy fría."

I feel connected to Lisbeth and Adelia in a primal, feminine way. They were the girls I was closest to in age. I remember playing with them in the dirt lots of Mazatlán when were were young kids, riding in the back of Tío Chuy's pickup truck when he would take us into town for raspados.[28] We'd come home to our parents with sticky hands and pink cheeks.

But there is a divide between us, a set of topics I know are off limits. I know I shouldn't ask them why they don't know how to drive. I shouldn't ask them if they ever want to live anywhere besides their parents' home or the homes they'll one day share with their future husbands. I shouldn't ask them to join me in the water, let alone join me on my trip.

As much as I long to connect with the Mexican side of my family, I can't ignore the fact that traditional systems of machismo and assigned gender roles are even more palpable than in

[27] A person from Baja Sur. A term that comes from the choya plants native to the area.
[28] Mexican shaved ice.

the place where I grew up. Tío Chuy was horrified by the idea that I would make the drive from my house to his. So much so that I even lied about the stretches I took alone. I think they all thought it was a joke when they got the call. And I know that to a certain extent, they have a point. Violence against women in Latin America is vile in the least graphic cases. You're lucky if you find fragments of charred body parts of disappeared women last seen at a bus stop or walking home alone from school. I try to empathize with my family's fears and dispell their worries. But, like my Tío said, una loba[29] lives within me, la guerrera[30] that aches for adrenaline and high-stakes and the thrill of being completely and totally focused on catching the next wave, bringing home the next fish. I don't know where she came from, but she's mine.

***

At the southernmost point of Baja California stands the Arch of Cabo San Lucas, where the chilly Pacific meets the lukewarm water of the Gulf. It was formed 115 million years ago, during the Cretaceous period. People come from all over the world to see the arch in person, to ride out in a glass-bottom boat and capture a shot of the tip of Baja California. Sometimes the meeting of the two waters is angry and discolored, with underwater currents that have been known to drown even experienced swimmers. Sometimes the union is tranquil and snorkelable, even for inebriated Americans on all-inclusive yacht tours.

But the people of Cabo San Lucas and San Jose del Cabo, the twin city, know the Pacific Ocean's vengeance well. They hold their breath during September's hurricane season. Historic storms have been known to plunder the city. My family was left without water and power for two months after Hurricane Odile in 2014. They survived off rationing out water from their individual emergency tanks, having been able to plan ahead. But they were lucky that year.

---

[29] A she-wolf.
[30] A woman warrior.

Sometimes my showers at Tío Chuy and Tía Chela's house shut off. Or nothing would come out of the bathroom tap. It only really bothered me when I had a head full of shampoo, but I worried for them. When I asked Tía Chela, she shook her head, "Los hoteles."

I learned that the hotels have priority when it comes to water supply in Los Cabos. Tourism is the largest source of income, and happy guests with water coming out of their faucets pay. Nevermind the people of the city. They get the leftovers. Every hotel is required to have a desalination machine to take water from the ocean, but sometimes their demands cut into the city's total supply. Nevermind the natural desert oasis left with contaminated groundwater thanks to reckless Canadian and American mining exploits from the last century. I learned that there are eighteen golf courses between San Jose del Cabo and Cabo San Lucas.

***

My cousin Alejandro turned 27 while I was in Los Cabos. He was excited for me to see what a real birthday party looked like, one where the family carne asada began in the late afternoon but the norteño band didn't arrive until midnight and then would play until 7am. I don't know how the guy with the tuba survived.

Tío Joel spun me around, determined to show everyone that I can dance as well as my mother, who is known as the last person to leave the the dance floor. I sat with Tía Lucy when I hit spells of introversion and she pointed out party guests, telling me back stories and chisme[31] I ought to know. Alejandro strolled around his part, a ballena of Modelo always in his hand as he greeted everyone, asking them if they needed anything, cracking jokes with his dad, and occasionally pointing at his dog, Loki, who would bark from his bed on the roof.

[31] gossip

After dancing with a few of Alejandro's friends, I crawled into my Tía Lucy's bed around two in the morning and fell asleep in my dress, missing most of the wild festivities. I was told the next morning that my Tío Joel slept in a chair and that my cousin ,15-year-old Jonathan, emerged from his room at 4 am and screamed at the party guests to all go home, which only welcomed laughter and more tequila shots.

The whole house shook con el latido de la banda,[32] but a Mexican childhood taught me to sleep through anything—thunderstorms, quinceañeras, telenovelas. My sister and I used to make beds out of my abuela's shawls beneath speakers at parties, only half-waking up when our dad would carry us firefighter style to the car, one kid on each shoulder.

***

I picked up Dahlia the next morning from the airport in San José del Cabo hungover and lethargic. We stopped at Tío Chuy's house and my aunts overwhelmed her with hugs and shoved various tupperware into her hands. Tío Chuy had even picked up the warm chicharrones[33] he knew I loved and packed them into a plastic bag for our continuing journey. The last thing I wanted to do was keep driving, but we had plans, and I needed to get back in the water.

[32] With the heartbeat of the band.
[33] Pork rinds.

Part III: La muerte de San Juanico

We'd arrived in the dark, after I spent two hours breaking the number one rule about driving in Baja California: don't drive at night.

But there were waves coming.

And that made the six-hour trek from my Tío's house worth the scare. Hurricane Estelle was a whisper of an impending south swell I'd heard about from other surfers along my journey. There were dozens of other cars parked on the cliffs, all of us having made the pilgrimage hundreds or sometimes thousands of miles for the chance of a couple days of epic surf.

We'd slept in the car. Too exhausted to set up the tent, we opted for the front seats instead, reclining them as much as we could and quickly succumbing to pitch black slumber after a quaint dinner of off-brand Cheeto puffs and Tajín-flavored peach rings. My Subaru sat pointed upward at a slightly alarming angle, so we had no indication of how close we were to the cliff itself. The answer we received in the morning—very close. But we saw only cerulean sea and Orange Crush sky.

Dahlia's eyes were already open by the time I blinked myself awake. We looked at each other, both of us burrowed beneath towels, then at the rising sun that illuminated one of the most sought-after longboarding waves in all of Baja California—Scorpion Bay. Located in the coastal town of San Juanico, Scorpion Bay is home to seven point breaks, and legend has it that under perfect hurricane conditions, all the points connect, producing a ride that can last minutes. Every obsessed surfer who charges Mexican waves knows about Scorpion Bay. The town receives thousands of dirt bag surf rat visitors every year, but only a few hundred locals call the fishing town home. The town's main road is only partially paved, and the nearest ATM can be found three hours away.

Nicknamed Scorpion Bay because of the scorpion tail shape of the cliff, the journey to this surf spot is often more dangerous than the overhead waves themselves. People will always ask which road you took to get to Scorpion Bay. Did you take the North Road or the South Road? Assuming you're coming from California or Baja Norte, the South Road adds seven hours of driving but is mostly "paved." Sure, there are potholes the size of your car and the occasional cattle or goat crossing, but it's passable.

The North Road, from the point at which you turn off Highway 1 to the entrance of San Juanico, should take you three hours under favorable conditions. The off-road path has no marking or signs and changes depending on the last rain. The advice is always, *don't try to turn around. Stay on the grated path. Make sure you've got high clearance, all-wheel drive, a caravan, a tow rope, a shovel, and some plywood*. Thanks to the advice of a surf camp host in Baja Norte, I adjusted my trip so I wouldn't have to encounter the desert hellscape that would likely leave me stranded in a mudflat. Surviving the North Road is a badge of honor I have yet to attain.

***

Dahlia and I were the first ones in the water the morning that the fat swell arrived. As I kneeled down to wax my 25-year-old mini Malibu, I heard the first of the murmurs I would be hearing the rest of the day. *Mexicanas?* Part of me liked the attention. I liked feeling like an aquatic unicorn. The other part of me felt lonely. I wanted badly to blend in. But here, *brown girls don't surf*.

We started at Second Point and worked our way to Third. Paddle. Turtle. Turn. Paddle. Take the drop. Cross step. Wipe out. Get out of the way. Paddle. The sets ranged from four to six feet in height. Ideal, I thought. This was Dahlia's third time surfing. And six-foot waves are

much bigger when you're lying at their base. I probably should have been more concerned, but she was there each time I looked over my shoulder. Dahlia has always been braver than me.

She was the first friend I ever made in this world, born just a couple weeks after my arrival. Dahlia taught me to climb trees and squeeze below wooden fences. She often came to school with gashes and bruises, souvenirs from her backyard adventures. I've watched her hit the ground hard more times than I can count—on the playground, on the soccer field, out of the pepper tree at the house she grew up in. When we were five, she convinced me to play polar bears on her parents' bed, a game that consisted of pawing at each other and colliding in midair, our rendition of bear wrestling. She knocked out my two front teeth that day. And her parents didn't find them for ten years.

I kept my eyes on the horizon for the next set as Dahlia paddled up to me, hair askew and a bit out of breath. She laughed, "Dude, I don't know how, but I think I just caught a wave backwards." I stuck out my tongue and shoved her off her board, gulping saltwater when she pulled me down by my leash.

Sets of larger waves occasionally came in, forcing me and Dahlia to scramble to catch them in time. I remember one distinct wave that made my stomach flip flop. The drop was steeper than I'd anticipated, the wave faster. I teetered for a second but stayed on, carving wide up and down the face. Dahlia yawped from somewhere in the impact zone and I turned just in time to watch her slip into the whitewash after her own wave. We recounted our favorite rides as well as the numerous wipeouts, spitting saltwater as we explained to each other how the waves smacked us down or dragged us across the reef.

A little girl with doll blonde hair probably around 7 years old popped off her surfboard right next to me around midday. We were between sets and the ocean was quiet. Her dad owns a

surfboard company in the north county of San Diego, near beaches whose neighborhoods always make me feel like a guest overstaying their welcome. She told me about how her family has been coming down to Scorpion Bay every summer since before she and her brother were born and how, “it’s just more convenient to own a house down here, you know?” I nodded, pretending I could relate. What was I supposed to say?

I caught the longest wave I’d ever ridden, tiptoeing to the nose of my board and back down, lowering my visor to duck diving brown boys in the lineup. One teenager in a red t-shirt called out to me, asking where I was from. “San Diego,” I answered.

He shook his head and asked me where I was really from.

I rolled my eyes and responded, “Pues, soy Mexicana, wey.” Half the truth. The boy nodded his head approvingly and outpaddled me to the next set. I watched his effortless strokes as the dark blue waves lifted him against the purpling sky.

***

Dahlia and I spent the few days we had in Scorpion Bay chasing sets, only stopping for naps in the dirt and marlin tacos, courtesy of my Tía. Between surfs, I would float, letting the saltwater caress my aching back and ease the crunching in my uterus. I’d lift my feet up periodically to examine the delicate gashes I’d acquired on the tops of my toes, what happens when I surf on a reef without booties.

I was making my way back to shore on the third day, paddling lethargically when a middle-aged American man paddled up and tried to make conversation with his remedial Spanish. *God, why do men always feel the need to speak?* I looked at him over my shoulder, wishing I’d worn a less cheeky bathing suit.

“Olas…buenas, no?” he asked, making a ripple wavey motion with his arm.

"Sí," I shot back quickly.

He tried to say something else but the pounding of the set behind us and the morning breeze impaired my listening abilities. The man switched to English, asking what I was going to be up to after surfing.

I shook my head, "Perdón pero no te entiendo."

But by then we had reached the shoreline and were met by a boisterous Dahlia who shouted at me, "What's up BROTHER!"

Goddammit Dahlia, I thought, eyes wide. I didn't dare look back to see the man's face as I ran up the cliffside to retrieve my chanclas.[34] The local band of surf fisherman that rent surfboards out of their old school bus for free were laughing as Dahlia and I made our way back to the campsite. Though they probably hadn't heard, seen this before. "A él le gusta las chavitas,[35]" they told me apologetically before offering us beer and bean tacos.

Long after the sun went down, we ended up at the Scorpion Bay Cantina in plastic Coca-Cola chairs watching a UFC fight. Dahlia loves UFC. She tried to educate me on the different kinds of swings and how the point system works, but I mostly just stared at the bioluminescence we could barely see from where we sat.

When she started smack talking the heavy favorite, heads began to turn. Groups of men began to listen, some of them even taking back their bets. Soon enough, the cantina filled with hollering and fist pumping, none of us totally clear on who we were chanting for. *Ballenas* of Tecate, liters of the Mexican lager, kept making their way to our table. By the time midnight came around, we were huddled in a circle, listening to the oldest fisherman in the LA Dodgers t-shirt talk about the difficulty of meeting lobster quotas in the winter months, about the narcos

[34] sandals
[35] He likes the young girls.

who periodically come into town to claim the harvest, about the impending residential takeover by rich American surfers *in need* of vacation homes. The man extended his arm and said the plots of land we camped on will be divided up into villas, and the surf rats will be kicked out by the end of the year. Rumor has it.

Dahlia and I had already seen bits of this gentrification. One palapa made of palms beside a mega hacienda, private and gated. Gringos on quads or all-wheel-drive golf carts with expensive surf racks drilled on their sides. The cantina will be torn down, the camping eliminated.

And the sand is disappearing. The older fishermen told us that the onshore wind used to blow sand from the cliffs down to the beach, resupplying Second Point with the sandbar that would often get dragged away by the waves. As more and more two-story vacation villas with overhead fences are erected, the sand's journey to the sea is stopped. Jagged reef gets more and more exposed with every season, making the waves less consistent. The fishermen don't yet know what this will mean for marine life. But for the surfers, this could indicate the beginning of the end of Second Point.

Earlier in the day, I chatted briefly with an old gringo while we surveyed the surf. He was sporting a San Diego Padres baseball cap. With the tide coming in, the point break began to change, and the sets were breaking closer to shore. I told him about how much I wanted to surf along the Nayarit Riviera in the state where my father was born. He scoffed, complaining about Sayulita crowds and about how hidden spots are no longer hidden spots and about *how much better things used to be*.

I've grown tired of people telling me I *should have been there* twenty years ago.

Modern day colonization in Mexican coastal towns doesn't just look like rascacielos[36] in Cabo San Lucas and trendy overpriced restaurants in Cancun. It also looks like hipster bohemian hostels owned by foreigners who can't read their own Sanskrit tattoos and boast about how Mexico has *healed* them. It looks like homogenous beachside wellness retreats in Todos Santos, American expats retiring in San Felipe and benefitting from the favorable exchange rate. And once a place is known and tagged on social media and has served its time as a romantic background, onto the next *unknown* place. To journey on to discovering the next town with the sweet old woman who calls you "mi amor" and starts tossing tortillas before the sun has come up.

But then again, who am I in this place? Yo nací allá.[37] Sure, my skin is brown, and I was born before my parents obtained their own US citizenship, but I don't know what it's like not to have an American passport. I am a visitor in familial territory.

***

The older fisherman with the Dodger blue shirt said my name as I sat there spiraling. He invited me to return, to hang out with the lobster of Baja Sur, to learn from them. He's saving me a seat on his boat, an offer that he claims has no expiration date. I'm not sure why. He looked at me like I was a specimen, a surfer who sports a bikini, a diver who prefers to go down without oxygen. Surely, he's met others who dive and fish and surf in a town where almost all people do is dive and fish and surf.

I said we were leaving the next day.

"Encuéntranos,[38]" he responded. I nodded.

---

[36] Skyscrapers
[37] I was born over there (on American soil)
[38] Find us (again)

We raised our ballenas that night—to hurricane Estelle, to the UFC victors, to the death of Scorpion Bay.

Part IV: Moses Goes Spearfishing

I was milling around in Loreto, a town on the Sea of Cortez awaiting the arrival of my next companion. I was tired of blasting the air conditioning in my car. And though I don't know anything about cars, I know I'm terrified of overheating my engine. I could feel the sweat sloshing around between my bare feet and the rubber sandals I had on as it mixed with dirt to form a kind of special edition Bela mud.

With the dense air making it so hard to breathe, I didn't last long on the uneven sidewalks. Out of nearby options, I popped into the local Catholic mission, knowing well that the adobe building would banish humidity. I was relieved that there were only a couple of people there. For a reason I couldn't quite put my finger on, I didn't want to feel seen. The holy water welcomed my desperate fingers, and I dabbed remaining drops onto the nape of my neck. From the open door, I had an obscured view of the miniature airport, so I could keep an eye on incoming flights. Awkwardly taking a seat in the back pew, I waited for my sweat to dry and for God to speak to me. I guess he was busy.

***

I was the most religious I'd ever been while I was in college in Los Angeles, the hedonistic capital of the United States. But being new to Malibu, surrounded by more white people than I'd ever seen up to that point in my life, and desperate to break into the local ocean culture, I was more than willing to be indoctrinated by the cult of surfers for Jesus.

This was before I knew Liam and his lone-wolf hotheaded atheism.

I showed up to the first day of collegiate cross country practice and found that our orientation would be kickstarted by a prayer. As everyone bowed their heads and closed their eyes, I played along, cracking an eyelid every so often to see if the others were all serious. They

were. The coach spoke of blessings and gratitude and talked directly to Jesus Christ like they were pals. At Pepperdine, the social and academic power belongs to the most faithful students, even in the athletic spheres. The non-religious people quietly swim upstream, never explicitly commenting on their lack of faith in God, but also not bothering to hide their headphones during mandatory convocation sessions.

***

My family is Roman Catholic, performatively so. Sure, we went to church and youth group every Sunday from the time I was in the first grade through my junior year of high school, but my mother would never let us attend pro-life rallies or anti-Planned Parenthood demonstrations. She would always whisper things like "Remember, we don't believe that" when my sister and I encountered the recurring vanilla homophobia taking place during weekly services. I don't even think we owned a bible.

But we received all our Sacraments and confessed our numerous childhood sins before a priest in his white or green robes. I made most of mine up and kept the most embarrassing admissions to myself. I often zoned out as the Father would tell me how many "Hail Marys" or "Act of Contritions" were necessary for my penance. I'd stare at the little sliver of football jersey peeking out from beneath his robe The Mission San Diego de Alcalá sits across the freeway from Qualcomm Stadium, which was home to the San Diego Chargers when I was growing up. If there was a home game, we'd often see the priests in single file crossing the bridge after they ended mass a few minutes early to make it in time for kickoff.

Catholicism was just a thing we did: a tradition meant to pacify nervous grandmothers and ensure that our souls weren't destined to rot in hell once we died. Belief in a God was creed, the undeniable. The rest seemed to me like a means to fill blank space, a kind of cherry picking

one-size fits all suggestion that we could take or leave. I had never heard of Nondenominational Christianity before starting college. To me, religious institutions could be compartmentalized into large branches of the same tree that then split off into slightly differing factions. Alternate versions of the same reality. But as my teammate once explained , Nondenominational Christianity refuses to abide by the rules of any particular Christian denomination, only overlapping when it comes to the Bible being the sole authority figure. Even then, biblical teachings are always up to interpretation. “We believe in God and Jesus and the Bible,” she said as she enlightened me one day after practice, “not the other fluff.”

At eighteen, I was intrigued by the almost anarchistic narrative told by the tall, wealthy white people who skipped work on big swell days and considered brewing their own kombucha a personality trait.

Tatum was like me. From a family that said they were Catholic just to say they were somewhat faithful. She too was curious about the world of Bible belters that just might be onto something. She was my teammate first, then my friend, then my roommate. Tatum loves heavy metal and pure mathematics and Taylor Swift and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. I taught her to surf, and she later taught me to snowboard. Together, we dipped our toes into the world of nice people worship and prophecy and free bagels with organic cream cheese on Sunday mornings.

***

Though most of my close friends in college were at least somewhat religious, my introduction to God-fearing ocean people began with Jonah: a 6’5 volleyball player. Tall, dark, and handsome in the gringo sense. A prodigy pianist. A spearfisherman. A surfer. And he had a boat. I kept bothering him—asking about his day, about what kind of fish he’d caught, about the westerns he fawned over even though I found them painfully boring. We became friends. We’d

flirt sometimes. His celibacy seemed almost satirical, but he was serious: he would only kiss the girl that would become his bride. That wasn't going to be me. I was a foot too short and possessed a mouth too foul to be considered by the chaste former homeschooler who would rather spend the day fishing than do anything else. He was too good a Christian boy, but he entertained my friendship for a while.

It took two years for him to tell me about his secret lobster diving spot, an offshore abandoned pipe that had become home to a mega colony of bugs evading rocky reef hunters. Dive spots are like psychedelics: they should only be shared with trusted friends. In freediving and spearfishing there is a fear that if you share a spot with someone unworthy, someone who doesn't appreciate the fragile ecosystemic balance of the underwater world, the spot will become overfished.

I proved to Jonah that I wasn't a careless kook by upping my dive vocabulary thanks to YouTube and attending beach church that took place under a white tent on Sundays. Pastor Bryan was a bald, middle-aged man with three strawberry blonde kids whose sermon attire always consisted of plaid flannel on khaki. Church attendees mainly included local students and Malibu surf faux-country folk. The kind of people that drove lifted trucks with hefty surf racks and whose children, named Willow and Forest, only drank alkaline water. But they were kind. The families of the Malibu Gathering fed us scrappy college kids better than we deserved and never failed to ask how school was going or how God was working in our lives when they'd tenderly touch our shoulders.

Tatum often watched their kids during Sunday service while the parents sang in the band. I'd look over at her pushing translucent toddlers in Patagonia puffies on the swing set waiting for Bryan to finish up so we could go surfing or freediving. I never developed the attention span to

listen the whole time. I'd zone in and out and watch the sway of the Eucalyptus trees or the children falling off the nearby play structure or the back of the head in front of me that almost certainly was blocking my view. I don't know why we always sat in the back. When people would come up to me after and ask what I thought about the sermon, I'd nod and let them do most of the talking. The messages were so often the same. *Have faith. Forgive. Do good. Have faith again.*

Many of the Malibu Gathering families lived at the Point Dume Club, a private community with cookie-cutter homes imitating upscale trailers, roads paved like butter[39] and oceanside views of the best sunsets in the area. And they had easy access to Little Dume. It's the second best right-hand point break in LA County after the infamous and heavily packed First Point. But there are hardly ever any crowds at Little Dume. The closest access point sits behind a gated stairway opened only by custom keys possessed by those who live in the Point Dume neighborhood. Keys to Little Dume are worth more than designer loungewear and botox in Malibu.

There is an alternate path though. Those desperate enough for the tubular waves can park along Pacific Coast Highway and hike a mile along the shoreline dodging rocks and waves to reach the Malibu Mecca. However, the path can become nearly impassable at high tide, the best time to charge Little Dume. And though I'd taken my surfboard on that arduous walk more times than I can count, I still show up to the break sore every time. Having key access saves you the hour you'd spend walking roundtrip and maximizes surf time. Not to mention, the asphalt along PCH can give you second degree burns on hot days. I always gambled a burn over the hassle of keeping track of flip flops.

[39] Really fucking good surf skate pavement.

By my junior year, I determined that obtaining key access to Little Dume would be critical to my surf life. At that point, Jonah moved into a shared a room with his friend, Brad, in an apartment complex that had shared access to a single Little Dume key. I told myself I hung out with them mainly to increase my chances of surfing Little Dume and less because I found them interesting. Half a lie. I wanted to like them, and maybe part of me did. The part of me that craved ocean knowledge and local status and saltwater friends. But I also wanted to protect myself. Their surfer boy ambivalence made me insecure, like they could one day just one day pack up and forget about me. It seemed like all that mattered to them was God and fishing. A state of enlightenment I kept falling short of.

Tatum and I would always make sure to say *hi* to them before and after church and casually invite them to surf. We'd pretend to ponder where we ought to go with the hopes that they would suggest a session at Little Dume. But Brad loved Zuma Beach, the crowded shorebreak with short, fast waves. Sometimes we'd roll our eyes, go along, and surf the shitter wave just to preserve the integrity of the friendship. Other times, we'd suddenly remember that we *actually had other commitments* and huff our way down to Little Dume the long way, weaving through the wet rock booby trap and cursing the boys that wouldn't give us their gate key.

***

Freediving with Jonah felt like swimming alongside an eel. Long and narrow, he'd slither between rock crevasses with his Hawaiian style three-prong spear and wait. He was usually successful. But there was something boyishly paternal about the way he interacted with me, the way he interacted with my female friends. I hated when he referred to us as, *you girls*. It made me feel silly, incompetent, reminded me of all the reasons why I usually spotted men wading into

the water and women waiting on beach towels with a book in hand. I felt the sting of Jonah's unsolicited patronage most in the ocean.

We once dove Escondido together, an exposed and fairly popular beginner lobster diving spot with a beach entrance. It was midday, and the lobster were hidden. Or at least, those that were left. Escondido is such a heavily harvested spot during lobster season that by January, it's hard to find any bugs there at all, and hunting during the day lowered those odds. We would end up going home empty handed. But as we swam from barren structure to barren structure, Jonah kept stopping to educate me, about how large Calico bass need to be to be harvested, about the eggs on the underside of female lobsters, about the spines hidden behind Horn shark dorsal fins—marine life secrets I'd already come to know all too well.

On our way back to his truck, he started, "You know you're supposed to measure the lobster from horns to tail to see if they're big enough."

"Oh yeah?" I pretended, idly fiddling with the lobster gauge hanging from my weight belt. He didn't notice.

Maybe I should have been appreciative that somebody was talking to me about topics I liked to talk about. But I felt like I was sitting in on a lecture, not actively participating in a conversation. He never asked questions about my life. Sometimes I volunteered information. We mostly just talked about fish or surfing. Maybe if I would have paid better attention, he would have taken me out on his boat.

But it wasn't always his fault. Sometimes I would ask him questions I already knew the answer to just to fill the space, to see what he would say. Though the answers he gave were usually spot on, the monologues that followed tested my attention span more than church did. But I had committed to being his friend, sermons included.

My friend, Cori, wasn't particularly fond of surfing with Jonah and Brad. She'd come along if we were headed to Little Dume but scrunch her nose if either of them tried to give her any pointers about arm stroke or popping up or anything else they thought she sucked at. A proud Midwesterner falling in love with the ocean for the first time Cori would boldly paddle away to where the waves were shittier and later tell me, "I don't want to be coached."

***

For access to the world of brackish Malibu life, I prostituted myself to the Lord. Except He wasn't really into me. I attended after hours worship and Bible study events hosted in the Point Dume Club. I hoped to find community amongst these people that I thought I belonged with. I'd always felt like an outcast in the family I grew up in. My aquatic inclinations were freakish and dangerous to them. These Malibu Christians never bat an eye when we'd talk about surfing or freediving. They rode hard for big surf and were seemingly less exclusive than the ocean folk I'd encountered prior in San Diego, the boys that always seemed to have someone more hardcore to surf with and prettier girls to talk to. The Christians wanted more recruits, so I thought. But the fit wasn't quite right.

I never talked about my upbringing with the Malibu Christians I thought were my new community. To them, Tijuana was a place where you go to build houses for people with your church for a week every summer, a place where all the children run barefoot and love to press their brown cheeks to white ones. San Diego's multicultural South Bay was the last pit stop before these border crossing events but never somewhere they would think to *hang out*. What was there even to do there? To them, I was their little brown friend who could make the "dankest" burritos and could translate what the university cooks and cleaning staff were saying. I

played the part of White Bela in Malibu unaware that Brown Bela was who they thought they knew.

I remember once going to a community service event encouraged by my Spanish professor, a gringa from Texan whose accent too easily revealed her English mother tongue. For extra credit, we good Christian students, were sent to the Malibu Labor Exchange, a sometimes-shaded corner of the parking lot beside a trailer near the public library and the new Whole Foods. The nonprofit allegedly helps pair laborers and cleaning people in search of day work with employers, Malibu housewives in need of help they wouldn't have to legally hire. As students in a Spanish class, we were tasked with helping English to the people in search of work. We'd try to teach them English words in the hour or two we'd spend there.

Laundry.

Windows.

Mop.

I hated being there. Something about the way Porsches pulled up and rolled down their windows reminded me of a fast-food drive-through. Busy, important people shouting out their order as the person running the exchange that day would look around and select a candidate that would fit the needs of the client. For the other Spanish students, this was a cross-cultural experience, the chance to try to communicate with someone who almost always only spoke Spanish. The few times I went there, I always left feeling nauseous. The people there could easily be my relatives, my old neighbors, the people I grew up with. For me, they weren't exotic charity cases. We would chat in Spanish about where they came from, about their children, about how much they missed home. They were people that knew a part of my familial backstory that the friends I arrived with knew nothing about. They saw right through me. I felt like a beacon of

hope and a sellout. Sometimes they showed me photos of their kids, daughters that often looked like me.

I would watch them disappear in the passenger seats of cars with custom paint jobs and naively hope they would be treated well.

***

When I was thirteen, I learned about the Walrus Effect. The phenomena that explained sailors jumping to their death in pursuit of walruses they perceived to be mermaids. What happens when good men are away at sea for too long and miss the company of women.

"We just have to wait for the Walrus Effect to kick in," said my middle school friend in the bathroom as she applied mascara and pulled on the booty shorts she wasn't allowed to leave the house in. What she meant was—we have to wait for the dumb pubescents around us to realize how desirable we were. We were the walruses, impersonating the idealistic versions of femininity. At that age, I still thought boys were gross, so her take seemed stupid. But seven years later, I found out that I, too, was a waiting walrus.

I was waiting to be noticed by the too-tall volleyball spearboy, to be baptized by the Malibu surf community, to be considered worthy of the most hidden gem dive spots. I stood by convinced that the day would come when I would truly be absorbed. I think Tatum wanted that too. We waited, but the day never came.

I often felt tokenized during my time in Malibu. But the ulterior motives went both ways. Maybe I was using the holy saltwater people for their ocean knowledge, their access. Maybe a part of me hoped that if I fermented long enough, I could believe their convictions. Meanwhile, the community was using me as a demographic check mark to disrupt their homogeny, to diversify their bubble. I'd often get attention when people mentioned any country south of the

border. They would look at me with wide, interested eyes and nod along as I'd bullshit something that sounded compelling and went along with the narrative that I was their local spokesperson for all things Mexico.

***

Liam and Natalie were the beginning of the end for me and Christianity.

I first noticed Natalie when she came to surf with a group charging Little Dume one afternoon in September of my senior year. She was Jonah's little sister's friend, a beautiful six-foot blond girl who grew up playing beach volleyball and devoting her existence to Jesus. She struggled pulling on her spring suit, a tactic I later realized was probably brilliantly orchestrated, and Jonah helped tug her arm through the rest of the sleeve. That's when I knew. Our days of ocean antics and occasional flirtation were coming to an end. All along he was looking for a sidekick, a partner he could mold. There wasn't room for two. And I was right.

And at this point, my close friends were cracking. For me and Tatum, the final straw was attending a prophecy night where Jonah's older sister allegedly "healed" people and announced messages from God customized to reach individuals, particularly the skeptics. Tatum looked over at me and whispered, "This is fucking weird." And suddenly the mist cleared. We started declining invitations to church dinners punctuated by living room readings that never seemed to allow for an appropriate time to excuse yourself. We stopped texting our friends about carpooling to church and fell out of Bible studies altogether. We started getting used to the long walk to Little Dume and took risks of our own in pursuit of new dive spots. And so, Tatum and I fell from grace. And though most of that had to do with a prophetic wakeup call and Jonah abandoning our friendship, the Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx we'd read for class certainly didn't help keep our faith alive.

A month after the introduction of Natalie, Liam sauntered into my life, introducing me to the world of night diving that Jonah always seemed too lazy or maybe too afraid to do. Though Liam certainly had his surfer/spearo dude friends, he wasn't afraid of lone wolfing. He was the only person I know who would drive an hour away to paddle out during 15-foot swell days and come home without telling anyone. He'd spend five hours at a skatepark alone and be perfectly content.

So, I found my new dive partner, one that challenged by abilities and didn't try to explain lobster diving to me. In fact, he often assumed I knew more than I did. And this time, I had the boat.[40] And he had the proper speargun. Together, we'd make it out to the far kelp forests, dive beneath desolate piers, and occasionally use someone's outdoor shower beside the beachside restaurant he worked at after our night dives. He told me he knew the guy, that he had permission, but I would then lift a finger up to his lips when I spoke too loudly.

***

Jonah went on to become an All-American in men's volleyball and marry the ocean girl he handcrafted. He lives with his wife somewhere by the ocean teaching beach volleyball with his siblings to the next generation of Jesus jocks.

Rockfish camouflage to their environment. Herring go about their lives in massive schools. Female sheephead go change sex when their token male dies. Fish adapt to survive. There is safety and support in community. Though *rugged* individualism boasts independence and a laissez-faire way of life, loneliness can become consumptive, eating you alive from the inside out. I didn't want to feel isolated, so I adapted.

[40] Well, a kayak.

Malibu taught me to smile and nod profusely when asking people about their day. I learned to speak with conviction without really saying anything at all. I learned to sauté speech with phrases like “I want to be more intentional about…” and “wow, that’s amazing,” especially when talking to church elders or professors. And though I no longer subscribe to the Christian newsletter, I do often think about the people I’ve met with the Bible verse tattoos and surf scars and vegan cowboy hats. Sometimes I miss superficial banter about faith and work and nothing at all that somehow would make me feel like I just made a new friend. I wonder if the Gathering congregation survived the pandemic and if they’re still luring in local students with surf idolatry.

***

A year after we graduated, many of us returned to Malibu for a latent commencement ceremony postponed in the heat of the pandemic. Tatum, Cori, Katie, Grace, and I paddled out at County Line, a surf break that we often passed on because we didn’t want to make the half hour drive from campus. Unless it was really firing. But if County Line was going off, Zeros or Staircases probably was as well. And we usually opted for a less crowded spot with slightly less sick waves.

But that evening in May we were giddy from not seeing each other in several months. So, we made the drive. The surf was exceptionally shitty. Small. Mushy. Full of closeouts that didn’t allow people a chance to even make it onto the face of any wave. The water still hadn’t warmed up yet. There was hardly anyone out with us strange for a break like County Line. And having loaned my friends my longer boards, I was stuck on a shortboard that gave me the best chance of catching nothing.

But we didn’t care. We rode the sloppy foam beside each other holding hands for the few seconds that the waves would allow. We made seaweed lassos and crowns and skirts and threw

the slimy kelp at each other while we waited for the slightest bump of a wave. We sat watching the sun sink behind the mini sets and turn the sky terracotta.

Katie pointed to the horizon. Whales. Probably Gray whales given the time of year. We could see them spouting purple water against the texture of the low distant clouds. One by one, we began smacking the water in delight. Then, a low murmur. I knew what was coming. *The doxology.* Someone always starts it, a satirical habit we picked up from the men's cross-country team. It's a short liturgical chant, a form of praise to God. We used to joke that it was our university's anthem. Soon enough, we were all singing, belting in unison. Grace twirled her seaweed rope over her head. Tatum playfully double fist pumped, her fingers tangled with algae.

Circling closer together, harmonized the finale. *Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghoooooost.*

We laughed so hard, we missed an entire set of semi-decent half-foot waves, likely the best ones of the day.

***

The sound of a plane. I remembered that Josh would be landing soon. I still needed to pick up tortillas and ice from the nearest OXXO.[41] Abandoning my temporary holy sanctuary, I walked away from the mission without turning back. I got back into my car and messed around on my phone until I found a retired playlist of hymns. I shuffled it, letting an old rendition of "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" play on full blast while I silently mouthed every word I no longer had faith in.

[41] Popular chain convenience store in Mexico.

Part V: All Along the Watchtower

The sunlight hit our tent with vengeance, announcing daybreak. And Aldo had promised to take us freediving.

I rolled out of my respective sleeping bag and smacked Josh over the head with my foot on my way out of the tent. His snoring grew louder, as though his deviated septum sang just to annoy me. I pulled a sweatshirt over my head and nearly tripped over Nacho, the dog frequenting our campground in search of leftovers. Pushing my toes gently into the fur of his stomach, I was careful to avoid the ticks. My watch claimed it was nearly 7 am, time to get moving if we were going to squeeze in a surf before a dive.

Josh is my best friend's ex-boyfriend, my ex-boyfriend's best friend, the twin brother I never asked for. And he just so happened to have a week off in the middle of July when I *needed* a driving companion. My mother was thrilled when I told her my old college friend would be joining for the final week. *Ah*, she must have thought*, protection*. Because his wiry frame, beat up sandals, and slightly-better-than-middle school Spanish would truly be menacing if push came to shove. But he is an experienced surfer. I've never worried about him in the water. And I've known him since we were 18. We're friends. I drove six hours to retrieve him from the airport in Loreto and then another six hours to reach Bahía Asunción. My lower back hurt and my ankles ached. Because like Casey, Josh can't drive a stick.

I shook the tent and watched as he attempted to burrow further into the corner. *Mi guardaespalda.*[42]

I huffed, "Dude. Get up."

[42] My bodyguard.

At last finding the intensity in my stare, he stumbled to his feet and dug his flip flops out of the sand.

***

We'd just hung up our surf wetsuits when the hot Europeans pulled up in their renovated Toyota Highlander with Arizona plates, the makeshift home they'd bought in Puerto Escondido. Inga pulled a little vile from her pocket, flea and tick treatment for Nacho, who had become attached to them, though he'd never fit in their Barcelona apartment. Jasper pulled their snorkels from the trunk, rummaging through their blankets and camping gear to get there. When we met them, they'd been traveling around for six months, trading labor for lodging.

Aldo arrived in his deep ocean blue Hummer with a longboard strapped to the roof and told us to get in. He zigzagged through the town and put on a music video for us to watch on a little tablet for our three-minute drive to the dock. I hardly ever eat a proper meal in a Mexican restaurant located in someone's living room without a music video playing in the background. Car rides seem to be no exception. The small port was quiet when we arrived. It was a Monday, and the men had already gone fishing.

Aldo and his friends dragged out a long, shaded panga into the bay. They told us that they were starting a tour company, California Adventures, to increase tourism revenue in the town. The waters near the bay have hosted passing orcas, whale sharks, makos, and the occasional sunfish. As they await unanimous approval from the fishing cooperative, they planned to give practice tours for free, starting with us. They said it would be unfair that only some fishermen benefit from revenue made possible by community boats and community knowledge.

"Además, somos amigos.[43]" They wouldn't even let us leave them any *propina.*[44]

[43] And we're friends.
[44] tip

We sped along, and Aldo performed his tour guide speech for us. He would reach his arm out to the mainland and names several rock structures, many of their names vulgar double entendres. He'd slide in subtle jokes and ask me how to say the names of certain species in English. If the tour company was to be successful, they would have to learn English.

There was a twinkle in his eye when he curled his handlebar mustache and asked, "¿Quieren conocer a las tortugas?[45]"

The four of us turned to each other and simultaneously sputtered something along the lines of, *uh, fuck yeah*.

After a few minutes, Aldo's right-hand man cut the engine. We'd arrived at a large structure that jutted out from the sea, almost big enough to be an island but made entirely of rock. Gulls and cormorants circled above. The water around the points of the structure created mini whirlpools from the surge of the gentle swell.

"Aquí," Aldo pointed down into the ocean with conviction, "Aquí están las tortugas.[46]"

I remember wondering how he could be so sure. We were far from the dock, having cruised along for probably about a half hour prior to the stop. And aside from the rock formation, we were fairly deep, not yet pelagic but no longer intertidal. Josh seemed hesitant but put on the rest of his wetsuit at first but quickly jumped in behind me.

Aldo was right. I spotted a green sea turtle almost immediately. Then another. Then another. So, two became four became six became eight and so on until I ran out of fingers to count turtles with. They swam slowly, unbothered by our presence. Unlike the few turtles I've spotted in Southern California, these weren't covered in scars. Their mannerisms led with curiosity, not fear. The harbor seals soon joined us, swimming bellies up below us, tilting their

[45] Do you want to meet the turtles?
[46] The turtles are here.

heads with curiosity and holding eye contact. I swam beside bass bigger than any I'd ever seen. I popped up next to Josh cand tried to steady my breathing.

"Dude!" I laughed, shaking my head.

"I know," he panted.

Aldo told us that in Bahía Asunción, it takes longer to drop a line than it does for a fish to bite. Saying *fish on* is unnecessary. If you've got a line in the water in Asunción, you've got a fish at the end of it. This type of fishing is foreign to me. I'm used to throwing out a line and waiting what feels like years as the apples of my cheeks begin to redden from the sun and games like "I Spy" start to grow old. I'm used to reeling in juveniles, too tiny to keep. The largest fish I had seen prior to this day found safety in California's Marine Protected Areas. Unfishable waters.

Before returning to town, Aldo said we had one more stop to make, a visit to la colonia de los lobos marinos.[47] The island Aldo talked about is home to thousands of them, sea lions that live cuddled up one on top of the other with dominant males keeping watch over their specific territories. Mature male sea lions can weigh up to 1,000 lbs. They tilt their chins upward and shout, announcing their presence and warding off any curious intruder. Their heads are easily the size of my torso, and their bites often carry "seal finger," a bacterium that caused joint inflammation and in the olden days was treated most often by amputation.

Aldo motioned for us to jump in. Jasper asked about the lions.

"Si se acercan los lobos, no se animen.[48]"

"Pues, no mames," I whispered to Josh mid-laugh.

---

[47] The sea lion colony
[48] If the sea lions approach you, don't get closer to them.

Aldo told us that the juvenile sea lions sometimes like to nibble on fins. Except that we weren't wearing fins. When I reminded him of this, he scratched his beard and told us to be mindful of our toes. One by one, we hopped off the boat. Though the water was clear, it tasted of seal shit, a flavor I'd become accustomed to after diving in San Diego. I adjusted my mask to watch the lions fly by like mud brown torpedoes beneath me. The males took an interest in us first, sizing up our aptitude and judging whether we would be any threat to their mates. We tried to remain close together and hoped that our black suits weren't misleading.

All was well until I met Jasper's wide eyes underwater. He was looking at something behind me. A bull sea lion was sniffing my toes. Can mammals even sniff underwater? He was the biggest male I'd seen all day. I felt my heartrate begin to pick up, and the lion's gaze moved from my feet to my stare. It was as if he could sense how freaked out I was. I pulled my feet into my body, curling up like a ball while keeping my eyes on him. We stayed that way until I ran out air and was forced to pump up to the surface. After a couple deep inhales, I looked back to the spot where he had just been, but he was gone. I focused on taking deep breaths on my swim back to the boat. Sea lions are awfully cute until you're in their territory. I climbed the ladder hoping that there was nothing intriguing about my ankles.

At the tip of sea lion island, around the corner from the colony of lobos solteros,[49] sits the watchtower. Fishermen take their turns keeping watch for poachers in shifts of 3 days at a time. They come packed with food and lights and jackets to protect the marine life of Bahía Asunción from illegal harvesting. Unarmed and confined to a tower, the best that the watchman can do is radio the coast guard and alert the fishing co-op if they spot any piratas.[50] Men with guns and reinforcements here have unofficial jurisdiction, whether their business is legal or not.

[49] Unpartnered (single) male sea lions
[50] pirates

"Gobierno y mafia están así,[51]" Aldo comments, shaking his own right hand with his left. He tells us that Bahía Asunción is fairly protected though. Having some of the richest bounty in Baja California is profit for the Mexican government as well as the town. Being the oldest co-op in Baja, the fishermen have convinced the government that it is in their best interest to keep the mafia from raiding the town's catch. It also helps that Aldo, the nationally renowned photojournalist and former government employee, is a fundamental part of the co-op. Other towns with less profitable fishing or less government connections, towns like San Juanico, aren't as fortunate. When they get raided every few months by the narcos, they aren't compensated for their losses and must pick up the slack themselves.

We waved to the current watchman, Aldo's cousin on duty.

***

I became a poacher in San Diego.

It was the summer after I graduated college, and my friends were in town. We were diving just outside of La Jolla Cove, the popular tourist location where parents let their kids approach sea lions the size of refrigerators and clumsy kayakers in large tour groups lose their GoPros. The Cove neighbors a small stretch of cliffside caves that'll toss you around under the right kinds of swell conditions. It's like a cave wave pool. Except real. We swam out as a group of approaching kayakers led by a teenager in a yellow rash guard closed in on the entrance of the cave. Getting in the way of kooks is how you get hurt.

Liam surfaced with a silver rainbow shell in his hand. It was a large, about the size of a Costco croissant with a series of holes running along one side. *Abalone*. I paddled close and he showed me the shell. I put the multicolored inner side against my face and nuzzled into its

[51] Government and mafia are like this.

smoothness. One by one, we each took our big breaths and folded down, sinking down to the ocean floor in the search for souvenir shells of our own.

All seven species of abalone native to the Pacific Coast of the United States are endangered species, some even critically endangered. Overharvest and changing ocean conditions have driven the famous mollusk to the brink of extinction. The red abalone was the only thriving wild abalone market until an oceanic temperature rise in 2018 along the west coast decimated the population. But aquaculture, or abalone farming, keeps the delicacy on permanent menus. Abalone farms exist all over the world in response to harvest restrictions that swept through one country after another. Shell biproducts from these farms are often made into jewelry.

It's illegal to harvest wild abalone in Southern California, and because we can't prove that we didn't kill the abalone before taking home their shells, the taking of shells is also illegal, even if they were just found on the beach or on the ocean floor. We didn't want to get fined or have our fishing licenses revoked or any other consequence that would come of us simply trudging out of the water shells in hand. So, we hid them. Liam helped me unzip the back of my wetsuit so I could stuff his shell and mine over each triangle of my bikini. I swam back to shore getting pinched by jagged barnacles along the rims. When I finally took the suit off a half an hour later, my chest was full of scrapes. I spent hours hunched over my shell, cleaning it with a pocketknife I would lose to TSA two years later. I gifted the polished shell to my dad on Father's Day that year.

I wanted to feel bad about breaking the law. But I didn't. The abalone shells that you find lying along the sea floor in La Jolla are almost always without their inhabitants. They're skeletons, and unlike hermit crab shells, they can't be repurposed as new shelter for crustaceans or other mollusks. There are hundreds that simply sit along the bottom of popular dive spots in

San Diego County. I understand why the Department of Fish and Wildlife in California doesn't trust the public. I've seen beginner spearos[52] draw their bands on fish that they aren't allowed to hunt. I've seen lobster bros take bugs without measuring their catch. Being the only girl in the dive crews kept me wary, and I rarely felt confident enough to call anyone out, to cast a stone.

Taking home an abalone shell felt different. Maybe it shouldn't be. Maybe I'm partial just because they're pretty and the animal that grew the shell is already dead. I like pressing my cheek against the always-cool inner side and running my lips along its ridgelines. I like filling it with earrings and necklaces. I'm not being fair. I know that. And yet, the next time I'm weaving through underwater rock canyons and spot the glisten of an overturned abalone shell, I'll probably pick it up and nestle it inside my wetsuit.

***

The sun began to set as Aldo sliced up Calico bass meat to make us the best sashimi I'd ever had. He began to tell us about his blip, the dark period in his life where he strayed from the co-op. When he made his living off hunting sharks in Baja Norte.

Josh and I sat at the table beside Jasper and Inga, all of us sipping Tecate de maíz.[53] Aldo's dog, Merlin, rested his head on the tops of my bare feet. Being a Xoloitzcuintle, means that Merlin has skin like a rhino, hairless and grueso.[54] Merlin is so ugly that he's kind of cute. Xolos, as they are nicknamed, were the dogs of the Aztecs and are said to be the guides to the afterlife, accompanying people on their journey to the other side. Aldo filleted efficiently, breaking down ten fish before I finished one beer.

[52] Slang for spearfisherman
[53] The way some people in Baja refer to Tecate that comes in a red can. No corn involved.
[54] thick

Aldo said that around 80% of the fish tacos you'll find in Ensenada are made of shark. Shark hunting is a lucrative business. It'll make you rich and quick, but it's an ethical compromise. Hunting shark and selling the meat as "fish" is not in line with the ethics of the co-op, but the hunt is attractive, especially to the young men who need a way out of their small towns. He tells us that shark hunting is almost exclusively made up of youngsters.

***

Sometimes I feel like the lobos solteros, the eager contenders with nothing to defend. Like mother sea turtles that leave their young buried beneath a heap of sand and maybe cross their flippers in hopes that they make it, I am coming to terms with the fact that I cannot truly ever protect what I love. If the watchmen in the tall towers are constrained to their posts, only able to offer a call to an allegedly higher power while pirates sail away with their catch, what power do I have? I love the beaches that raised me, and yet as they are built upon and exploited, I don't do anything besides lament. I love the kelp forests I grew up with that these days are riddled with disease, poisoned by toxic sludge, and eaten away by a sea urchin population out of balance. And yet I just stand by, watching. I wander around like a desiccated Pacific Octopus without offspring, another rebel without a cause.

I am not absolved of my abalone shell piracy. The ethical lines I draw aren't always in congruence with the law. But the law may be the only thing keeping certain creatures alive. To think myself above it seems slippery at best and insidious at worst. How would that make me any different from the bandits who take without a license or harvest in the offseason exceed numerical limits?

I escaped to the purity found in Bahía Asunción in part because the ocean in San Diego sometimes makes me sad. Though the Marine Protected Areas almost always guarantee a dive

filed with salty critters, being in there sometimes feels like being in a museum. *Don't touch anything,* I have to remind myself. The barrier between human and sea creature feels thick as concrete, like we landlubbers are guests who do not belong in the underwater ecosystem. And maybe that's right. Maybe we don't belong anymore. Most of the Indigenous oceanic knowledge of Baja California has been lost to time. Since the time the Spanish arrived, the Baja Californios have been relearning what their place in the ocean ecosystem is. Angler. Caretaker. Lover. Friend. Protector?

There are signs that things used to be different. Take the Gray whales that visit Ojo de Liebre in Guerrero Negro every year seeking out their people friends. At the end of every January, pregnant mothers come to rest in the lagoon to have their young and rest for a few months before making the trek up to Alaska. They reunite every year with people like Aldo, who works for a tourism company that allows people a hands-on experience with the whales. It's one of the only places in the world where this act—human caressing whale—is permissible. Where the idea that a whale could love a human might be true. The whales rest their large mammalian snouts on the sides of the boats and wait for the kisses, for the gentle scratches.

I'd like to think there was a time when we were more symbiotically oceanic. And maybe that's just because I want an explanation for why I am the way that I am, how the Arces of California came to be stewards of the sea. Perhaps there was a time, pre-Columbian invasion, where fish littered the ocean and people celebrated the harvest and sang for the seals and returned their dead to the sea. Maybe the whales remember.

How to Fix a Busted Board (and a Broken Heart)

I didn't see the man that ran me over with his board.

It was near midnight. We were surfing Malibu's infamous First Point, a spot that I hardly visited for this exact reason. The glow stick that I stuck between my teeth was supposed to prevent this kind of thing from happening. He should have *seen* me. I was neon green. But the jackass wasn't supposed to be on the wave anyway. He had dropped in on Kieran, my old track teammate that rode an elegant 11-foot blue Almond longboard and historically patched his shortboards with pennies. I was well out of Kieran's way, but Jackass took the drop on an unbroken section I was paddling over, effectively cutting off Kieran's speed and driving the nose of his board into my rail.

The force of the hit turned me over, sending the glow stick flying from my mouth. He took two people out after me, I could hear them yelling *kooky motherfucker* and *dipshit* into the night.

Fucking First Point, I muttered to myself as I tucked the retrieved glowstick into the collar of my wetsuit. I felt along the rail until I hit jagged fiberglass. A middle finger-size cut through the resin, deep into the foam. I pulled my hand back and watched bits of fiberglass glisten in the harvest moonlight. Continuing to surf wasn't worth waterlogging the board, and so I paddled in, cursing ghostly Jackass for ending my session when I was just two waves in. Tatum eventually found me back at the truck playing with seashells.

Not knowing anything about how to fix my most prized possession, I sent a photo of the damaged board to Liam. At that point, he was still a bit of a mystery to me. We'd gone diving a couple of times, but I couldn't quite get a read on him. We'd exchange embarrassingly niche

dive memes one night then not speak for weeks. Maybe I just wanted a reason to text him. I heard rumors that he was good with ding repairs.

But my board was out of his range of expertise. He recommended a nearby surf shop that had a contract with a guy that did repairs out of Hermosa Beach. Resentment coursed through me as I handed over my thruster in the hopes that it would come back to me in three weeks' time.

I shuffled into the shop with my eight-foot blue board tucked under my arm and waited for an employee to notice me. Something about the barefoot blonde twenty-something year old dude that approached me caused me to stumble over my words. I remember feeling incapable of explaining. It was like when you go to the mechanic and they ask what's wrong and even though you know exactly what the problem is, you suddenly feel like you've forgotten why you're there and how to drive and what a car is. It was the kind of moment that made me wish I could just call my dad and hand the phone over. I felt *like a little girl*.

I coughed up a short, "There's a ding," and let the dude discover it on his own.

His eyes widened, "Oooh that's pretty fucked. Did you do this yourself?"

I shook my head quickly, wanting my moment of incompetence to be over. He marked the area with tape and handed me a receipt with an estimate. Liam said they'd probably charge me less than a hundred. And he was right. But barely.

Surfboard damage ranges anywhere from minor love dents to peach-like bruising to amputations. Little dings are normal, to be expected. If caught in time, lots of them can be patched with Solarez, the quick-drying surfer's resin, and a bit of sandpaper. It can be as simple as applying the tough liquid and leaving the board in the sun until it dries. More severe dings are often caused by rocks, shallow reefs, mishandling, or collisions. We repair dings because we are afraid of allowing water to enter the board, weighing it down, and making it more difficult to

ride. On top of that, the corrosive nature of saltwater means that the board will begin to degrade from the inside out over time. In more severe cases, surfboards can get split in half or lose large parts of the nose or the tail, often rendering them unrideable.

Though my board looked good as new when I got it back, I couldn't help but think about the next ding, when it would come, how severe it would be, if I'd be able to shell out another eighty dollars every time my board got busted. Unattended dings always come back to bite you in the ass.

***

After Liam and I broke up, I remember laying in my bed with my stuffed shark and typing *what to do when you're sad because of a boy* into Google. Millions of search results showed up. Magazines, newspapers, blogs, support groups, community forums. Everyone had something to share, and yet, no one had an answer.

Ten things to do after a breakup.

You deserve to be happy. Choose therapy.

The Do's and Don'ts of Breakups

I backpedaled as fast as I could and deleted my search engine history out of phantom embarrassment. Anxious that someone would peep over my shoulder even though I knew the house was empty. I told my friends some bullshit along the lines of, *it's for the best, you know,* and changed the subject. I smell their skepticism.

I worked a shitty pandemic job in a skilled nursing and hospice center in Santa Monica after graduation, where I made friends with people who would drop dead the next day. Every night, I'd go home to an empty studio apartment to stare at a ceiling in silence. Sometimes an entire weekend would go by before I realized I hadn't spoken a word aloud. I'd sit on my

balcony in the hammock I won at a work party raffle, reading a book and inhaling my hoarding neighbor's chain-smoking sloppy seconds. Sometimes her cat would jump over onto my deck and I'd scramble inside before she made her way onto my lap. My allergic ass would sit behind the sliding glass door and watch the cat take up residence in the hammock.

I surfed occasionally, becoming the weekend warrior I often made fun of in college, the one with a full-time job that was usually too tired to surf by the time her shift was up. The one that went home at 5pm, microwaved leftovers, and sank into the couch to start the next episode of *The Queen's Gambit*. Most of my friends had moved back to their respective corners across the country. Diving also became harder to do, with my favorite partner seemingly always out of reach. My world became my depressing desk job that paid my rent but not much else, crowded Saturday morning lineups, lonesome runs through the Santa Monica Mountains.

***

The Jackass Collison changed the way I looked at surfboards. I began to see them as individual works of art, as crafted vessels of equilibrium. My senior year ding repair journey began with YouTube, the place I turn to for information that I imagine used to be reserved for dads and sons and apprentice tradesmen. It's amazing how many men put tutorials out there on surf repairs. I tried to find a woman but gave up after a few scrolls. The baldies covered in dusty fiberglass would have to do.

Baldie #1 told me to start with sanding. Who knew there were so many grits? 60. 80. 150. 220. 800. 1500. Baldie #2 taught me about mixing laminating resin and Q-cell filler, along with a couple drops of hardener. The white powder and the transparent resin make up the patchwork filling, replacing the lost foam. It's supposed to dry a bit tacky, because it'll get covered. Baldie

#3 taught me about sanding resin, the top layer to the ding repair that then gets shaped down to mimic the original shape of the board.

I asked for a Makita sander for my birthday that Christmas. At 21, I felt like a child again. Following my dad around Home Depot while he enlightened me on the differences between brands and grits and other father and son shit. Trailing behind him, I was reminded of the time I asked him for a hardhat. I was maybe eight or nine years old and wanted to match him. I used to watch him put his hard hat on when we'd stop at job sites on the way to or from another errand. He'd roll down the windows and step onto the site to *inspect* something. I'd sit in the cab, matching hardhat on my head, ready to be his backup if he asked. He never did, but I'd still proudly accept the Gatorade and bag of Cheetos that often followed as my compensation.

Fixing serious board damage involves a blade of some sort, often a box cutter. You open up the damaged area, digging out shards of fiberglass and foam puffs. You could call this making the hole *bigger*, validating its existence, rendering it the area more vulnerable before it becomes strong again. This scares me sometimes. That once you begin the repair, there's no stopping or going back. The board would be left too exposed to ride.

I bought busted boards on Craigslist for dirt cheap. Four of them. Broken fin boxes. Missing noses. Fractured tails. Even a 5'4 fish with holes drilled into the deck and a leprechaun painted over the fiberglass. I didn't trust myself with my own boards at first, and their most severe repair needs were minor. And if I was to be any good, I needed to take on big dings. I wanted to practice patching boards I had no connection with to protect myself from the potential heartache of screwing up a board I actually cared about. I was afraid I would end up back at a repair guy with my head hung, knowing he knew exactly what I'd tried to do. I could discard a

board that was already desecrated, adding it to the collection of bisected boards in trash bins at beaches during the fat swells.

I spent that much of that winter break hunched over a shaping stand sanding or mixing resin and Q-cell filler while a Carol King album played. I kept a standard uniform—N95, my safety goggles, overalls, and a long-sleeve. I learned valuable lessons. The resin and Q-cell mixture should be the consistency of molasses. Fill higher than you think you need to so you can sand down to board level. Never take a sander to the rail. Noses are easier to reshape than tails. You can almost always dig up a patch job and start again. By the end, I couldn't color match, but thanks to those first four guinea pig boards, I learned to fix almost anything else.

***

My hospice job left holes in my heart. It resurrected suppressed pain and pushed its thumbs into the dings of my soul—the resentments left unaddressed, the sadness left unsoothed. Maybe it had to do with the fact that I felt friendless. Or that I hardly surfed anymore. Or that families often called the front desk to complain that *we killed their dad.*

I remember hiding under my reception desk on one particularly hard day. The morning was spent grieving a patient whose emergency contact refused to come say goodbye. Being unable to convince him over the phone left me feeling like I'd failed. I retreated beneath my station for a few moments until I could recall how to breathe. Lunch brought the angry Russian woman again, who would shout at me from the door I wasn't supposed to be opening that her father was being abused at the facility. Nurses and administration often hid from her in their tiny, windowless offices where they could take their N-95s off and eat a proper lunch in peace.

On this particular day, her words were searing hot. She banged her palms into the sliding doors I sat behind. "You don't know what you're doing!" she spat. "I am going to call the health

department and get you fired, little girl!" Her fervor overwhelmed me, pressing into a pain I refused to acknowledge. I remember looking away and excusing myself.

Most of the nurses were Filipinas, prickly mothering figures that loved to both scold me and feed me. One minute they'd be lecturing me on how to properly sanitize a landline and the next they'd be shoving Buko pie down my throat. One caught me slipping into the restroom with a trembling upper lip and red eyes. Her hand caught my bicep before the door closed.

"Oh my dear," she said, her accent thick with Tagalog.

"Ate," I tried, "It's fine."

"That bitch. You wait here."

I felt stupid. Unable to confront the woman on my own. I could hear my *ate's* yelling at the woman who brought me to tears, giving her hell. I was feeling so many things--anger, hurt, helplessness. But I still couldn't manage to say anything. Where was the girl that ran men off at clubs in Tijuana with an onslaught of curse words and the wave of a hand? Where was the girl who swam after Horned sharks and preferred hunting at midnight? To my coworkers, I was just a young receptionist with odd hobbies. I was stripped of the badassery I had worked so hard to attain. At a desktop every day, it didn't matter how knowledgeable I was about local dive spots and surf breaks. It didn't matter how far I could run or how long I could hold my breath. All they cared about was whether I could pre-approve insurance in a timely manner and run phones to patients in the Hot Zone without violating health compliance.

I took the hospice job because, in the thick of the pandemic, many of the jobs I actually wanted were not hiring. Newly acquainted with the workforce, I kept applying to jobs knowing I was just tossing my resume into the void. Not even Home Depot wanted me. So, when a kind hospice director called after reading my resume that was prostituting itself all over the internet, I

eagerly accepted. It felt nice to be wanted. But I quickly found out that my people-pleasing self was far too okay with being unhappy.

Will you work an extra shift? Sure.

Will you help fill-in-the-blank patient with scheduling their appointments? Yup.

Call Medicare? You got it.

I answered work calls at 8pm and always stayed after hours and never took days off. I'd pee as quickly as possible to avoid a potential phone going unanswered. I often lied to my coworkers, omitting details about myself that I thought they would deem too crazy, too weird. I don't think they would have believed me anyway. Every time people would ask me if I was enjoying my job, I'd say *yes*, with a mouth full of fib. I couldn't bring myself to demand anything-- PTO, a fair salary, holidays. Because of my age and my medical industry newness, I didn't think I deserved to complain. I wanted to be the chill do-everything receptionist who'd get gold stars for being helpful beyond my pay grade and never got angry.

Liam's text responses were sporadic that year. I only saw him a couple of times. He didn't even tell me when he moved.

I went back to my desk that day and didn't tell my supervisor about the breakdown. Her door was closed most of the day anyway. Instead, I began plotting my escape, the reunion with my old self, the path towards a job that might make me happy.

***

Repairing a surfboard takes time, patience, a tolerance for fiberglass. The more severe the damage, the longer it'll take to fix. Dents and hairline fractures are often ignored but almost always end up as future repair points.

That last semester of college, I began patching everyone's boards. Kieran's. Tatum's. Cori's. Josh's. Along with several of my own. The pandemic launched Bela's Board Repair, an underground ding repair "company," which just became an excuse to see my friends. I charged a quarter of what a surf shop would charge. I wasn't confident enough in my abilities to ask my friends for more money, friends who were also all on unemployment, floating around aimlessly like me. But all the repairs were watertight.

The couple that lived above us would complain anytime I tried to repair boards on our deck. It was against the rules from the HOA handbook for us to store surfboards on our decks. But the smell of the resin was far too pungent to work on boards inside my apartment. I wasn't about to kill my roommates. Mackenzie and Tatum said they didn't mind, but we all knew the smell of resin even in small doses is enough to make your nose twitch and your eyes water.

I worked out a strategy. I would open the sliding glass door and only let the half of the board that I was working on sit on the deck. I'd rest it atop two of our kitchen chairs and try to hide my project from the security guard whose booth sat directly across the parking lot from us. When the resin was dry enough, I would sand as quickly as possible. The older ladies upstairs still complained of course. Surfboards on the deck weren't our first offense.

We got fined that one time I took a daddy long legs from inside and released it into the hallway, our ticket reading, "bug eviction." We got fined the time Liam used my skateboard to drag my kayak into my parking spot. We started collecting pennies to hand over on our final day in the unit, but they only accepted traveler's checks, so they apparently didn't want to get paid that badly.

Once, the couple from upstairs tried to call the cops on us for a smell of paint they claimed was damaging their old lady lungs. They knocked on our door, and I threw the board I

was working on into the room I shared with Tatum and briskly ran to the couch trying to act natural. “Are you guys painting?” one of them said with a surgical mask covering just her mouth. Mackenzie pointed to her Crayola water acrylic paints and 4x6 canvas on the living room floor. “Yes?”

“Well, we can smell it from upstairs!”

Mackenzie started apologizing profusely, but the woman had already stormed off. It turned out that the neighboring unit was getting repainted. The cops still came, did a couple of laps and made small talk with the maintenance man, and left.

When they came down to apologize and bring us cookies, the woman with the red hair and yellow Hawaiian shirt referred to the woman in the matching blue Hawaiian shirt as *her friend*.

Mackenzie closed the door after cordial goodbyes and turned to us, “Friend my ass. I’ve heard them having sex every night for the past two years.”

Apparently sexually satisfied old ladies make the best cookies.

***

Neglected surfboards sometimes develop bubbles of water that made its way in via untreated lacerations and continuous surfing. These jaundice-colored bubbles live in the space between the foam blank and the fiberglass, eating away at the strength of the foam and weakening the board. They require a hefty repair. Josh once brought me an old shortboard of his, a hand me down from Liam, with a bubbling yellow section on the rail the size of my hand. I remember cutting into the blister with a box cutter and watching the saltwater pool onto the concrete beside my foot. The board lasted one more winter season before it split in half, feeble from its life of surfing shore breaks and shallow reefs.

Working a job that I hated in the isolation of a bustling city made me realize no one would be throwing me a life preserver. I needed to start addressing the parts of my life that made me unhappy. I'd let too many things go left unsaid, gone along with too many realities I thought I should *be okay with.* I didn't know the kind of job I wanted, but I knew I hated the one I had. I wanted to spend more time in the water, but I hated visiting ocean spots without my friends and without Liam. I wanted excitement, but I was filling my evenings with television and secondhand smoking. I needed a change, to spend time in a place with unfamiliar trails and unfamiliar people. Nobody would be coming to my rescue. I would have to save myself from the unhealed wounds and drain the saltwater from my veins to start anew.

My friends across the country all had similar dilemmas. Most of them stuck in shithole jobs and in awkward living situations, we'd cry to each other over the phone about being lonely yet make no plans to change our circumstances.

I quit the healthcare job, and the staff threw me a going away party. They ordered Chinese food and bought me flowers and handed me an envelope of cash that made me feel like an asshole for leaving them. I had enjoyed some of our banter and the happy hour events I could never afford. I had liked chatting with some of the patients and hearing about what their lives used to be like. Politicians. Musicians. Attorneys. All confined to hospital beds and in diapers, some of them unable to stay lucid long enough to hold a conversation. I would miss chatting with some of their children over the phone about how their parents were doing and how their days were going. A few even brought me chocolates on holidays. But that sentiment quickly changed when a patient asked me to call their insurance company about a year-old claim. My time there was certainly up.

Part VI: La raza

The Mariachi Man is back doing his little maraca dance on the bridge over the 5 again.

I watch him hop and two-step, giving my sister the full play-by-play as we giggle over FaceTime Audio.

"Fucking San Diego core," she mutters after shouting a few profanities at what I imagine is an encroaching New York taxi driver.

I look up again to watch as the man clad in a black and white makeshift mariachi outfit two-steps around on the chain-link bridge for no apparent reason. He has been frequenting this spot almost daily for years.

I pass a sign that reads, *Intl Border 10 miles*. A cue that I am almost home.

The seventeen-hour drive from Missoula, Montana leaves my back aching. My dad and I take turns sliding in and out of sixth gear as we glide down I-15. He sits shotgun now, his baseball cap resting low on his forehead, arms crossed and eyelids on display.

***

My father's family came to Tijuana before they came to San Diego. My grandfather, Juan Garcia, who us grandkids called Chabis, grew up on the family ranch in Nayarit and worked as a horse whisperer. On the weekends he ran. He even became a regional champion at 100 meters. Barefoot. But when you work on a ranch, sometimes cows step on you and shatter your ankle. And that's exactly what happened to Chabis. So, he abandoned his sprinter. He met my grandmother, a tough woman with a firm brow and tattooed eyeliner.

My father, the oldest child, was born in a house in Borbollón, a town that no longer exists. Nayarit lies nestled between the forests of the Sierra Madre Occidental range and the Pacific. Hence, it's really fucking hot. On the ocean side, Nayarit hosts some of the most popular

tourist towns, hot spots for bachelorette parties and surf trips alike. But my father's family ranch was located an hour from the water, in a desert landscape before you hit the forest. My father likes to tell stories about picking sugar cane on the ranch in his teenage years, in full long sleeves and jeans, because getting shredded by sugarcane leaves is worse than heatstroke.

He would wade into the ocean in the Tijuana beaches and tiptoe north until he came out in San Diego. He made sure to only go up to his neck and keep his feet always touching the sandy bottom. When he'd made enough money from the harvest, he would flag down a border patrol agent and get his free ride to Tijuana and then make his way back to Nayarit. But Chabis quickly grew bored of his agriculture job. He wanted more. So at night, after his twelve hour shifts in the field, he would sneak out of camp and go hang out in a welding shop, where he began to make his own outdoor lamps for fancy people. He became an artisan of sorts, selling his iron creations to Americans waiting in line to cross the border.

One day, a curious gringo took to Chabis' work so much that he offered Chabis a job and green cards for the whole family. That's how they built their new home in south San Diego and assimilated as best as they could.

So, my father became my father, repping the San Diego State Aztecs and the San Diego Padres. He went to school and got a posh spice job as a senior civil engineer where business meetings are conducted on golf courses and employee perks include a vehicle with blue overhead lights. But his tongue still carries an accent I wasn't aware of until a Midwestern friend pointed it out in college. I remember sputtering, "What accent? He doesn't have an accent. He sounds like everyone else's dad."

"He doesn't sound like my dad," she followed.

***

I remember what it was like to learn English. I would practice on my sister after coming home from kindergarten. Strapped into her little baby bassinet, she would peer up at me with owl eyes as I confused coupled consonants.

"The."

"Cough."

"Phone*."*

I'd watch nature documentaries and let David Attenborough wash *el acénto latino de mi lengua.*

***

My mother's father, who I've always referred to as Panchosito, was forced to head north from his home state of Sinaloa after he was arrested for beating up a gringo with a bike chain for whistling at my grandmother. Nobody was that surprised. This was a man who burned down a circus out of vengeance at age 7 (the same year he was kicked out of school) and would regularly hide in coffins to scare the nighttime mortuary cleaning staff. So when Panchosito ended up in the town jail yet again, the judge (who was also his uncle) finally told him, "Ya vete, mijo." *Go on, son.*

Panchosito took his family of nine and his second grade education to Mexicali, where he would regularly cross the border to work the fields. But Panchosito also became bored in the fields. He craved excitement. So, when he made friends with a gringo electrician in front of a 7-11, he pounced on the opportunity to learn. The two would meet daily after Panchosito's shifts, and the man would teach him about circuits and charges and voltage in muddy Spanglish. Soon, he became employable, and the familial green cards followed. And the Arce's too made a home of San Diego.

***

My sister, G, and I grew up in a house our dad built with his friends just north of the San Diego border with Tijuana. We'd happily take our dogs to the vet on the other side knowing that the ride back meant churros. I played club soccer at a field on the northside of the fence. On particularly smelly days, we would bring our red and white jerseys up to cover our noses and complain to our coach, "It smells like TJ!"

Overpopulation and a shitty Tijuana sewage system has wreaked havoc on the river and ocean ecosystems of Tijuana and San Diego alike. Tijuana simply doesn't have the infrastructure to address the runoff that always follows a good rain.

These days, Imperial Beach, the southernmost beach on the California coast, is only surfed by stubborn old die-hards with tattered wetsuits and melanoma noses. The contamination signs that used to be seasonal have become permanent, and it's common knowledge that if you surf there, your children will come out with three eyes. The beach my grandfather Chabis used to wade out of, once considered the best barrel in San Diego, now suffers the consequences of south swells that push Tijuana contamination north.

But it's not like the American side does much better. The Sweetwater River, which runs from its headwaters in the Cuyamaca Mountains to the San Diego Bay is essentially stagnant by the time it hits the urban zones. They say it's fine. They say the sulfuric rotten stench is just algae. It's normal. It's normal. It's normal. If it's so normal, why is the river surrounded by concrete and chain link fences? Why does it sit encircled by weaving freeways? Growing up, I didn't know it once was safe to drink from rivers. Why would we trust a mushy green river when we were told to never drink tap water?

***

G and I are hardly ever in our hometown at the same time. She's lived in New York City for the past four years earning an arts degree and pursuing a career as a professional dancer. She loves the fast-paced lifestyle that a big city offers her and is too anxious to drive. G will never move home.

But on the phone, home is all we talk about. We romanticize fish tacos and bring back memories of our local little league team winning the World Series. "Remember when they rode in on a firetruck? Or that photo of them with Obama?" We cry about missing our remaining childhood dog, Manta, a big girl just shy of fourteen. We gossip about which cousin's boyfriend has pierced nipples and what kind of trouble grandfather Panchosito's recently got into.

Sometimes the stars align, and we find ourselves sitting side by side on familiar beaches warding off ballsy seagulls. She grabs my arm as we walk into the surf and says, "Not too deep," and I oblige. I tell her which waves to duck under and which to splash into. I hand her a pair of swim goggles so she can doggy paddle around me and look for leopard sharks in the gentle impact zone. If the tide is low, I show her the tiny pools filled with cuddly anemones. Thanks to the longshore current, beaches like the ones we drive further to get to are often not dangerously contaminated. We cruise up the 5 and leave the South Bay for big rich person houses and cleaner water. G likes to play this game where we window shop for mansions on the La Jolla cliff sides. She points to the hacienda-style estate with the spiral staircase and rooftop lookout and claims it for herself. I point to the blue two-story with the outdoor shower and sheltered surf rack.

Beach days with G often end with us either at our favorite deli getting affectionately scolded by the clerks for not visiting or at our go-to taco shop ordering way too many carne asada fries for the two of us to finish in one sitting. We end days like these napping on the couch while *Modern Family* reruns play in the background.

***

On the occasion that I run into another San Diegan, my first question is always, "What part?" North County is not the South Bay. North County is cliffside inheritances and corporate CFO vacation homes. The South Bay is hole in the wall taco shops and Filipino seafood markets that never seem to run out of lumpia. Growing up in Torrey Pines is not the same as growing up in Chula Vista.

Being an elementary school kid in Chula Vista means you bartered Tajín-covered chips for spicy chile candy with your friends. There was probably a lady that sold tamales out of the trunk of her car in your school parking lot. Mexican Independence Day was an unofficial holiday, with kids often coming to school wrapped in the Mexican flag like *los Niños Héroes*.

High school in Chula Vista means you attend your fair share quinceañeras, where your friends spike the lemonade and somebody's uncle always gets dragged away from the venue unconscious. The DJs never fail to play—"El Caballo Dorado"—the Spanish version of Billy Ray Cyrus' "Achey Breaky Heart," a simple line dance that keeps getting faster and faster, testing your calves and slaughtering your quads. Quince nights always end with street tacos or tortas. Grease drips down your arm as you inhale one after the other.

Turning 18 in Chula Vista means you can go clubbing in Tijuana. This is a right of passage for all of us South Bay kids, even though being 17 with a $20 bill under your driver's license is the same thing as being 18. I remember sneaking out of my bedroom window a month after my 18th birthday to hit a TJ nightclub for the first time with my best friends. I remember the smell of cigarettes and gasoline as we walked across the border. I remember the acrobatic male strippers suspended above us in the club itself, glitter from their cheeks falling down to rest on mine.

***

According to the *San Diego Union Tribune*, Mariachi Man dances above the freeway to bring joy to San Diegans. He chose the bridge near Chicano Park because of its proximity to Barrio Logan, an old Mexican community that's being gentrified to become the new "it" spot. Mariachi Man wants to spread love to his community, his Latinos, *la raza*. I wonder what about a concrete bridge makes him feel most at home.

Beginning in the 1850s, around the time California became a U.S. state, the term, *la raza*, began being used by newspapers to represent people of Hispanic heritage, of mixed Spanish and Indigenous ancestry.

On one occasion, when I was far from home, away from coastal sage scrub, chaparral, and the Spanish language, I came across another Latino in a high-altitude mountain town. We chatted in Spanglish about nothing in particular, but when it was time for me to pay, he wouldn't let me. I asked him, why not? He placed his index finger over the brown skin on his wrist and looked me seriously in the eye and said, "la raza." I understood.

***

I left San Diego when I moved to college, tracing the coast up to Malibu, where burritos cost ten dollars and Aston Martins casually pull up to park beside you. After college, I stayed away. I preach my love for San Diego like a sermon, and yet, I haven't permanently lived there since high school. I've complained about lack of space, bitchy HOAs, roommates, or proximity to the ocean at every one of my other residencies, and yet, moving back home has never entered the equation. My family members like to give me grief about forsaking the life my parents and grandparents worked hard to provide, choosing to live elsewhere amongst strangers in an

unfamiliar place. To them, the fact that some of our family members have achieved homogenous suburbia means we've all made it.

I remember my dad's first camping trip his friends had invited him to in the High Sierras. They were astonished when he revealed that at over 50 years old, he had never actually been camping before. He rubbed the back of his baseball cap and smiled, "Well, my grandfather used to take me hunting for deer from the ranch in Nayarit for a few days, but we never camped. We just slept on the dirt with our heads on our jackets."

His friends still thought that didn't count.

For the longest time, my dad never understood camping. He used to ask me, "Why would you want to go hang out in a place that doesn't have water? Do you know how long we used to walk to get to water on the family ranch? Why do you want to suffer on purpose?"

With no answer to rival that, I would say, "Because it's fun."

What really changed my dad's mind was hopping on the Pacific Crest Trail with me for a short stint one summer. He rekindled his relationship with desert dirt, one he had forsaken for concrete. He taught me to find rattlesnakes, *serpientes de cascabel*, hidden among the prickly scrub. He showed me how to drain ankle blisters with a pocket knife and build a picturesque fire. We listened to coyote chatter all night as I asked him questions about his teenage summers on the ranch.

Though his love for Mexico and for Nayarit is undeniable, San Diego is his home. He lives for mountain biking in the east county on the weekends and drinking Ballast Point beers with an air of snobbery.

***

Sometimes when I'm drunk, I try and imagine the life I could live if I move home, a blueprint followed by eight of my cousins at this point. I would live in my mother's house *so she won't be alone.* Find a job in teaching or marketing or work for the county of San Diego. Meet a kind-enough Mexican San Diego boy whose mother still does his laundry and fixes his dinner plates. Marry him. Live down the street from my mother (or maybe in her fucking house because why not) and begin giving her grandchildren. Maybe I would get to surf on the weekends if my husband wasn't golfing with his college buddies. Our babies grow up bilingual and surrounded by extended family. We would work our 9 to 5's and relax in front of a TV watching the latest episode of whatever *Game of Thrones* spinoff is sexy at the time. We'd attend Catholic mass for holidays and funerals and bow our heads to the colonizer's God as a tribute to the Spanish in our blood. And we would be *happy*.

My family cannot fathom me wanting anything more than that.

***

At the end of this drive, I'll jump into the turn pocket that'll lead me to Sweetwater Road. I'll eat *chilaquiles* and *sopa de fideo*. I'll lay down in the carcass of my childhood bedroom and feel myself revert to being the girl that constantly fights with her mother. I'll surf alone and face the family that never fails to ask, "So when are you coming home for good?"

I'll lie again and say next year.