

Fall 1981

Santa Elena Crossing

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SANTA ELENA CROSSING

Señor Luna, the language has failed me.
I cannot tell you how you carried me those mornings
to the front of your leaky rowboat,
my seven-year-old's hands clinging to your shirt.
When we appeared in the shade of these cliffs,
you'd call to my father, *el Pientor*,
then laugh your deep laugh as you set me in the boat
and pulled us across the muddy river
past the dark line on your trousers.

The pictures he drew of your children
as you made them sit still on the rotted bench
must still lie in your dark, square house
from the day your wife placed them
between the folds of a blanket.
On our way to see crazy Jesús
she warned us he was evil, stole goats at night,
hung the skulls in his house. All day
he rocked in the shade of an ocotillo
and spat in the sand. She never talked to us again.

Sometimes we brought oranges.
Now I bring news I cannot say
to you, that my father, *el Pientor*,
has not painted in years. In Santa Elena
crazy Jesús is dead, burned out of his house
so long ago, black soot around his door
is almost worn away by wind.
In front of your house, your wife
sits in his chair skinning rabbits.

And you, Gilberto Luna, pulling me in your rowboat,
you don't know that I have come back
to see the places my father painted,
to ride in your leaky boat.

But once he painted you from memory:
bent over this boat in your wide hat,
bailing water with a rusted can, the wind
lifting the tails of your yellow shirt.