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## what we hold in our belly

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JJ PEÑA

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## what we hold in our belly

- Winner: *Big Sky, Small Prose Flash Contest* -

an old, mexican man in a blue truck pulls up next to me as i walk to the coffee shop down the street. he rolls down his passenger window, stares at me, & then licks his lips. slow & seductive.<sup>1</sup> the old man doesn't say a word. he just looks from my face to his crotch, which i know is blooming: a lotus opening its petals to meet the sun.<sup>2</sup> when i ignore him & continue walking, he calls out: *mijo! mijo! come here*. i don't respond. instead, i think about how he could get out of his car & drag me inside without any effort, no matter how hard i tried to make my body splinter against him. i think about how he looks like one of my uncles, how he probably has a wife & kid at home,

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<sup>1</sup> i once read a woman started covering her body head to toe after a man raped her. i thought she was silly to think clothes could protect us—we could be in a stranger's mouth in a matter of moments. my middle-aged boss tried to do this with me, when he walked into my office, pushed a chair against the door, & dropped his pants, hoping i'd take him in between my legs, let him be a cloud bursting.

<sup>2</sup> one of the perks of being seen as a sunflower by men, according to my sister, is being desired, receiving gifts by gaze-drunk men. but i never saw the rewards my sister promised would come my way—no violet jewels or coastal trips, just grasping hands, a stranger's knuckles jamming into my hips—& the only sunflower i ever saw was wilted, with slugs chewing into its center.

how he'd try to penetrate me with hard fingers. i also think about how he would feel—each touch a desperate cigarette butt extinguished.<sup>3</sup> i tell him i'm not interested & quicken my pace. he still follows, his car creaking in my peripheral vision. when the coffee shop comes into sight, he honks his horn, drawing my attention, & starts wiggling his tongue, a small worm rattling on a hook, baiting prey. he doesn't leave my side until i enter the coffeeshop. i half expect for him to come after me, walk inside & say, *i want your body. what makes you think it belongs to you?*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> during one of my tío's funerals, my cousin momo taught me about autopsies. *when you die, they send you to the butcher. he pulls out all your insides until you're chewing gum.* she told me our tía asked the butcher to slice up our tío into cheese slices, which was why his casket was closed. i thought his coffin was shut because he flew out the windshield when he crashed his truck, high on hookers & drugs, & ended up split in half. which is a tragedy i imagined would also happen to the old man who followed me home from the gas station, after he tailed me for fifteen minutes & forced me to pull over, just so he could ask if i wanted to get into his truck & have fun. fun that would have made anyone who saw me say, *you look like you've been to the butcher.*

<sup>4</sup> since i was a little kid, scientists have been saying holes are in the sky. small rips in the ozone. i used to think that meant you could see puddles in the air, that the moon & the stars were sucking us into space. for weeks, i went to bed hoping i'd wake rising up to the sky, my ceiling & roof crumbling away, my blankets whooshing in the wind as i traveled to the sun. how cool would it be to float all the way up there, in the sky, above everyone, all alone, where you're the only one who can praise your own body or watch it burn.