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I Hunt For Stars Alone: A Novel by Ricardo Quintana Vallejo

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*SCHOLARSHIP*POETRY*FICTION*TRANSLATION*

I Hunt for Stars Alone: A Novel

Ricardo Quintana-Vallejo

For my mom

—
My head against the window,
timeless. I am at once watching the raindrops
stream together in little rivers,
going to school—cold and barely awake—
and now, going to my uncle's house.
The inside of the car smells of gasoline,
Brother is mad; so is Grandfather.
They wish they were home.
I might wish I were too. I have to hear about
the bullfights, the hunting talk,
the joke about the castrated dog
being gay,
'cause gay to them is ballless.
But, despite it all, I do get to see Cousin.
He is also thirteen. He has freckles
and long hair and nothing will ever happen,
but he'll sometimes mention,
when it's just us,
that he's circumcised.
The goosebumps are all worth
the heat, the joke, my boredom
against the window.

—
Uncle is livid that Mom is taking us away.

Who'll take care of Granfather?

But she's been unemployed for years,

and no one will hire an old divorcée

in Mexico.

He's helped like a good Catholic man:

that charity that crushes.

"I've tried," she says,

"got a forged birth certificate,"

but even a woman fifteen years younger

does not make sense—they think—

out of kitchens

out of wedlock.

Mom is too

big-mouthed

big-hearted.

It always bothered me,

Mom picking up dishes,

Mom helping to cook,

Mom taking care of men—

all sitting around burning cigars.

Why is she not them?

So, we are going,
far from this mess.
Goodbye cobblestone roads,
smoggy cool early mornings,
bleeding bulls, ballless dogs,
invertebrate Spanish men.

—
Scott is an old soldier. He has a lover in every port
(most were girls).

Years later, when Mom reads about poor teenagers
forced to invite GIs to their beds,
for something to eat,
Scott says he is innocent;
he paid his!

This callous transaction of capital;
its cruelty is lost on him,
is like bleeding-hand-made, 5-dollar sweaters from halfway
across the globe.

Scott has a thing for brown women
and thinks “gringo” is a slur.

But it’s not all bad.

He takes beautiful pictures of Mom smiling.

Mom’s smile floods her face, makes her eyes shimmer.

(Her glossy eyes are the first stars I saw.)

Scott has a map on his wall with pins of the places he’s
conquered:

cursed masks from Sri Lanka,

kisses from poor girls in tents.

Like Alexander, he's seen, and he's taken.

He's our ticket to the US.

—
Mom packs our bags for the first time.
(The second time she packs,
when we go to Indiana,
the trip will be forever.)

Yet before we go to Indiana,
this time we have to take a trip to Juarez—
the borderland where migrants go
to see the consulate and show
we're healthy, bright, and not
the worst our country has to offer.

Tourist visas are given elsewhere,
but this Juarez trip is a necessary
rite
for those who seek
permanent residence.

It's the first taste of difference,
the desert heat so distinct
from Mexico City's lush cool forests,
colonial cobblestone roads,

green mountains,
extreme altitude.

I must prove to a tall blond consul
my English classes have paid off,
that I've seen *The Little Mermaid* in his language
and know my ABCs and my fragile little family
won't be a burden on his state.

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Juarez was a city of death and hope,
El Paso's green contrasted the desert wilt
on the Mexican side. A border trope,
to color our migrant dreams in gold gilt.

Here we went along with others, unfurled
our humanity to prove. First, some tests
of plagues long gone from the developed world
and too an interview for hopeful guests.

We showed (in speaking the mighty language)
we could fit civilization. English
can be the passport for those who manage
the consul's doubts to extinguish.

I hence erased in this, a migrant prayer,
my mouth, that thus just so, became a square.

—
I'm fourteen when I arrive in Indiana.

Brother and I fly alone

since Mom arrived before

and went off to Vegas—Scott thought it'd be cooler

to have Elvis marry them.

The plan is to start ninth grade a few weeks in,

a new millennium,

a new country,

and I wonder,

if it'll be like the movies?

Who could've guessed

two towers would fall

the day after we arrive?

“The unmentionable odor of death

Offends the September night.”

Are we lucky to have caught

a last flight before the rest were grounded?

Is it fate

we have our resident cards

some days before

the debate starts
about whether foreigners
are human beings?

—
Back home in Mexico, Brother and I shared a room.
In Mexico we lived in an apartment building.

Once, we had friends over and Brother thought
it would be fun to fill some water guns
and shoot at the ducks in the television.

Soon, the building's staircase was a river,
washing us down, all giggles.
Grandfather didn't notice, he was
in his own room, detached from us,

his own waters flowing away from us,
ever further.

Mom came fuming.

She'd worked all day
and came to find a flood
where stairs should be.

She was all water now too,
tears of anger escaped her eyes,
no matter how hard she tried to keep them inside,
in her, as she grabbed Brother so hard
she ripped his t-shirt.

She was suddenly all hands,
all rage, her exhaustion turning—
tearing any fun from Brother.
She separated him from the sensation.

Who knew water could bring about
such a metamorphosis?

—
Yet Mom also turned into foam.

Once,
a spark from the construction next door
lit the first floor neighbors'
makeshift rooftop of their patio.

The flames burned taller than the building,
as everyone tossed buckets from their windows.

Mom was all strength when she ran
down the stairs, got the extinguisher,
pulled the pin,
like a soldier arms a grenade,

and put out the fire.

She was the hands,
and the flood,
and the tears that wouldn't stop,
but she was also the foam
from the extinguisher;

she was also the hero.

—
Once in Mexico,
I forgot to ask Mom
to sign a form for school.

In the morning, I asked her sheepishly,
but she had a routine.

Her routine was set.

The pressure of the world came
crashing down
on her. She suddenly couldn't do everything.
The fear of the messy world
broke her.

“Why would you ask me right now?”

She screamed; her hand raised in the air.

I braced for the slap.
I was ready for the red tingly sensation
(well known).

But Brother's hand wrapped around her wrist,
tightly.

“No more,”
he said calmly, certain;
and couldn't help but notice
that Mom's skin inside his hand felt
soft and feminine.

“But why can't he ask me at night?” (When
her world is in order). When she can tend to
differences in the routine?

But Brother doesn't care, if
her universe collapsed.

“No more,” he wrapped even tighter,
and let go.

Later, I gathered my coins; rummaged through the furniture
for change
to buy him a bag of chips,
the most precious thank you I've ever given.

—
There is a moving walkway in front of the Virgin of
Guadalupe
(as if she were an attraction)
that you see for a moment
before you need to move on,

and small ladies that ride the walkway
twice, thrice, praying (alongside gringo tourists
with cameras)
and devotees,
and us.

On weekends we used to visit
la Virgencita and I watched Mom talk to her
under her breath—and I learned to talk to her
myself.

We used to ride the subway to the basilica every Sunday.
The trains were empty and noisy,
the acrylic windows covered in illegible writing,
scratched on with keys and pocket knives.

Once,
I snuck out and went to see her by myself,
to talk to her on my own,
tracing the system map with my finger (scared to get lost).
I ate a torta de milanesa and a can of Coke all by myself
(it was divine)
and saw a skinny man with acne scars
give a fat man wearing paint-stained jeans
a blowjob in the last car of the train.

I asked her for forgiveness,
for enjoying the bubbly sweetness of the cold soda,
the skinny man wiping his mouth, while the fat man
looked away, also ashamed.

I promised I wouldn't do that,
I was sure I wouldn't be that,
if she could keep us safe, together,
not knowing then that there are promises you're not
supposed to keep.

—
Brother is older than me.
And one day, he'll be gone,
off to prison.

But when we were little,
we collected stars together
on the Nintendo 64
and shared a room.

He is a man and Scott will approve. They'll shoot hoops
together.

Brother wants a dad
more than anything.

I am much better being invisible,
the less I run, wrestle, and shout,
the more they leave me alone...

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