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Volume 27
Issue 1 *Blue Apocalypse* (2018-2019 Issue)

Article 5

5-1-2019

Border Babies

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CU Commons Citation

Caro, Montserrat (2019) "Border Babies," *The Promethean*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol27/iss1/5>

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Border Babies

Montserrat Caro

I

The place I call home is divided in two. There is a fence in the middle that on the North side is bare, its color palette ranging from a grey to a brown, with spontaneous oxidation stains. But on the South side it has life, it comes alive with its warm colors, thoughtful art, and inspirational words. On the South side of this fence, we try to celebrate; even our heartbreaks bring color and life to every aspect of living. On the North side of this fence, dreams are said to come true, but it is not always specified at what cost. I like to call the North side of this fence San Diego, California and the South side Tijuana, Mexico.

II

St. Charles Catholic School was like any other elementary school. Our favorite part of the day was when the bell rang and it was recess. We would all run outside, the boys headed for the patchy green field to play soccer and the girls to the yellow and red playground. Sometimes, when there was a helicopter flying over the field, everyone would yell at this boy in my class, Pedro. Everyone would tease him that “the migra,” or immigration, was here looking for him and his dad, and that they needed to go hide. Everyone, including Pedro, would laugh. Other times, the helicopter flew so close over the school that the engine roared louder than our own thoughts. When this happened, we had lockdowns because there was word out that someone had illegally crossed the border and was on the run. We all sat patiently in our locked and dark

classrooms against the wooden cabinets, keeping quiet just in case someone tried to hide in our school.

III

Juanita is a woman in her forties with dark brown hair that is always up in a bun. She is a woman with clear, soft, light brown skin and faint wrinkles around her mouth and eyes. Once a week, she comes over around 10:00 a.m. and works cleaning our house. She knows us all very well by now yet always ends up putting my brother's clothes in my closet and my dad's clothes in my brother's drawers. She has two young boys and is married to a typical macho Mexican man, of whom she is sometimes afraid. She calls my mom Señora Irma and tells her that she is her best friend and favorite person to work for. My mother and Juanita have an agreement that if anything happens to Juanita, if she is deported or detained, my mom should be the one contacted, and she will take care of her children.

IV

On weekdays at 4:00 a.m., I am most likely sleeping with the company of my white and grey cat, far into my dreams. For some, weekdays at 4:00 a.m. mean hardworking people are on their way to make it past that fence so they can get to work on time. When the sky is its darkest blue and the moon is still on its shift, countless people get into their cars to make that commute towards the North. When I am deep asleep, dreaming about meeting Frida Kahlo and having a conversation over coffee and cigarettes, people are preparing to start their day. On these same weekdays, my uncle wakes up and gets ready for work while my

aunt makes him breakfast and packs him a lunch. When he is done with his meal, he kisses her goodbye and she gives him his blessing with the sign of the cross. She goes back to bed and he drives towards their “American dream.”

V

We are told what we can and cannot have in our possession when we make our way towards the North side of the fence. We cannot have flowers, most fruits, meat, or Cuban cigars, among many other things. There is always a line of border patrols who are in charge of checking the validity of what you are declaring and ultimately deciding if you can continue on your journey. On some days, there may be a man or woman begging for money amongst the cars. They may be blind, crippled, or sick. But if they are too close to the North side, the officers will push them away with shoves and screams, showing no mercy. Other days, you may be forced to step outside of your car after having waited for two hours in the same spot, crouching behind it in fear because a person was found with a gun and everyone was told to do so. And other days, you will make it to the border patrol, and to your surprise he is one of your kind and you mumble, “Traitor.”

VI

There is a place on the North side of the fence that has sky high murals depicting the struggles of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans in “the Land of the Free.” If you stand in the center and look to your right, you will see Cesar Chavez leading a crowd of people, their skin dark and rigid from working long hours in the field under the blazing sun. If you

look to your left you can spot a small playground resting on a patch of grey sand. The playground is silver with hints of the colors it used to be: red, blue, green, and yellow. If you look ahead, you see the Virgen de Guadalupe holding a cross that says “not forgotten” in her left hand and carrying a jug of water for those making it across the fence in her right. She is marching towards you alongside her people. And if you look behind you, you can admire a small garden housing fluorescent green cacti. This place, its art, its history, and its people, is a hidden gem.

VII

The place I call home has an unnecessary fence in the middle. It is used to restrict the flow of organic things yet does nothing to stop the flow of ignorance. While this fence is still up, people on the South side will continue to believe that the ones on the North side are pretentious. They will continue to believe that the only place where big things can be done and people can make it in life is on the opposite side. And people on the North side will continue to fear horrible violence on the South side. Until this fence is torn down, whether it be physically or not, people on either side will continue to view themselves as rivals.

Just as my home has been divided in two, so has the home of many others. Yet each situation is unique. Sometimes it feels like the sun and the moon only rise where you yearn to be. Sometimes it feels like you are exactly where you are supposed to be. Other times, you don't know where you truly want to be, or who you want to be. The division may be physical, emotional, or mental. But the division is real.

I

Zabdiel lives in Vancouver, Washington where the sky is mostly grey and where the pine trees are high enough to whisper into the moon. Almost every morning, he wakes up to raindrops stuck on his window and almost every night, he closes his eyes to visualize his home: a small town in the countryside of Veracruz, Mexico where the summers are unexplainably hot, the sky always a clear shade of light blue, and the mangos extra sweet. He sees himself lying on the dry grass, rain falling onto his face, breathing in the humid air until his mom calls him inside to join her and his grandma for afternoon coffee.

II

In the seventh grade he fell in love with art. His favorite part of art is creating it, painting his thoughts onto an empty canvas. In the seventh grade he was given the opportunity to travel to one of the art capitals of the world with his favorite class. He would meet Mona Lisa face-to-face and see with his own eyes the beautiful architecture of the country of Love. Everything seemed perfect. He had the money, time, and desire. All he was missing was permission from his parents. When his parents said no, he realized two things: he was trapped in “the Land of the Free,” and as long as he was just an alien in this country, he would not be accepted for who he was.

III

If he could, he would drop anything and everything to see his family again. To lie on the hammock and watch the sun get lost behind the

trees on a still, warm afternoon. To stay up day and night filling in holes in his mind and heart with memories and untold stories. To ask his family what life has been like since he left, if they think of him as much as he thinks of them. To kiss his abuelita's cheek in the morning before sitting down and having breakfast. To take the love of his life down the seemingly endless dirt path to the beach—the same one his dad took the love of his life as a teenager. To meet up with the same stunning ocean that his parents once knew. To lie next to the ocean and listen to all the sounds his parents heard, and to look around and see all the beauty his parents grew up around. If only he could, he would.

IV

They were walking towards the glorified land where the grass is said to be greener and the sun is said to shine brighter when he broke into tears. Two years old in his mother's arms under the still, clear sky with scattered plush clouds surrounding them. He cried uncontrollably, his mother nervous, as everyone would blame her if something went wrong. They had been on this journey for what seemed a lifetime, making their way to their new life. Suddenly, his mother looked into his big brown eyes full of tears and whispered, “shh vamos a ir a ver a tu papi.” *Shh, we are going to see your daddy.* Once those words sank in and he was reassured their journey had a true purpose, his crying came to an abrupt stop. In his two-year-old mind, he was not making this journey towards a glorified land but towards his family: the only thing that mattered then and that has ever mattered.

V

His home is divided between reality and what seems to be real. On Monday mornings when I wake him up at 8:00 a.m. to leave for work, being a twenty-year-old brick mason is his reality. On the drive to work, strolling through the streets of Veracruz seems like a far-off dream. But on Saturday afternoons when he sits around the kitchen table and his parents share stories about life back home, reality shifts. The visualization of strong banana trees standing tall outside the kitchen window is his reality. In the blink of an eye, he can be in Veracruz holding his grandmother's arm as they make their way to the corner store. And yet his body sits on the wooden chair of his parent's apartment in Vancouver, Washington. It's on days like these that reality becomes blurry and the borders which categorize his home disappear.