

TWO POEMS BY JUAN R. PALOMO

THE DAY THEY DO NOT SHOW UP

That evening he stands at the front door
searching for the twin beams announcing
his parents' return, even as he suspects
no headlights will pierce the dust
from the gravel road, not this evening.
Behind him his sisters heat los frijoles
y las tortillas on the wood stove.
They peel and slice and fry las papas,
as they've always done when their parents
work past dusk in the potato fields.
Only this time, they know. Comprenden,
somehow, que no es lo mismo. What
they had talked about and feared, is here.
And because they know, they do not wait.
They eat, alone, sin palabras,
at the oilcloth-covered table.
They imagine where their parents
might be but they do not talk about it.
They wonder when they will see
them again. If they'll see them again.
That night, he listens to his sisters consoling
each other in the bed next to his catre.
He does not cry, but as he begins to fall asleep,
he pictures the two of them
in the back of a green van,
his father holding his mother's hand.
They both stare into the darkness.

LIFE & DEATH IN MARATHON, TEXAS

It stands in the northern Chihuahuan desert
of west Texas. Long meaty, gray-green
spiny leaves jut skywards from its center.

In its lifetime, it has witnessed tens of thousands
of wailing, rumbling freight trains rolling

on the Union Pacific railroad, a mile or so away.
It has withstood snow, ice and withering droughts.
It is blooming now. Months ago, it began pushing

up a single thick stalk. Rising thirty feet or so,
the trunk branches out near the top. At the end

of each branch, rests a wreath, thick with tiny flowers,
each a fountain of sweetness for hummingbirds,
flickers, bumblebees and other desert creatures.

The blossoms are like miniature nuns in green habits
and yellow veils. With gangly arms lifted

as in praise or supplication, they cling together
in parachute-shaped clusters, graceful and aristocratic,
like a bonsai tree. In a few weeks, the flowers will

begin to wither. The birds and bugs will seek nectar
elsewhere. The drying petals will flutter to the cracked

earth. In the months to follow, they will be joined
by the rotting carcass of this *agave americana*.

The agave is often called a century plant. It is not.

A native of Mexico and Texas, it lives in the desert
a mere twenty or thirty years – not a hundred,

not anywhere near – before it blooms then promptly,
obediently dies, leaving behind seed pods,
which grow into “pups” and may become adults,

repeating the grow-bloom-die cycle. This agave is
already dying, in fact, the tips of some of its leaves

are becoming brown spongy skeletons, impotent
thorns pointed down. The agave is not dying because
it has failed. No, it is dying because it succeeded.

because it has done its job, has fulfilled its duty,
every cell having performed triumphantly.

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