

RANE ARROYO

Dreaming Of Rob Thomas

In white T-shirt, a day's beard's
shrug, he's a camera, Sartre in
a sex club, the matador between

myths, hunter on a horizon, as-
teroid on steroids, innocent eying
the dark path in the forest, heart's

hypnotist, Greek statue in boxers with
I ♥ NYC sewn in blood red letters,
a pirate exhausted by his hunger.

*

He doesn't know me when I'm dressed,
a shuttlecock after the crowing, last
night's insomnia waiting to shower,

the facts of his fling with me like
cities to raze with dazzle and denial,
his simplicity put away for Bloody

Marys and coffee séances with friends
who not only look jaded, but are,
and envy the shine we cannot hide yet

*

Phone calls: a blind item in the paper,
about us? But no one knows or else
epistemology is a con job for we don't

stumble about without spin doctors as
our fakirs, we don't fuck up good luck.
Running down the streets, we leave a trail of

breaths behind us, each an eñe waiting an n,
and we're drunk on our youth, sure we're
street corner sphinxes with grins to spare.

RASHAAN ALEXIS MENESES

SON JALISCIENSE

I'm looking for my son. I've found my way into another one of those
backyard quinceañeras. Music plays loudly through a crowd of sweaty teenage
boys and girls. They are blasting that awful stuff they call hip-hop and shaking
their culos shamelessly. I'll be glad when I don't have to deal with this anymore.
These pochos like to think they're still in touch with their roots but the truth is
most of them haven't stepped a foot in Mexico. I know what this country
promises, and that doesn't amount to anything if you don't know who you are. I
wonder if my son really understands this. Does he know where he comes from
and what that means?

"Don Salvador," says a voice from behind. A screen of cigarette smoke
greet me as I turn around. It's them, the ones who have strung out their lives
playing every weekend at birthdays, baptisms and bodas. Year after year, they
crowd into their rusty four-banger Datsuns and beat-up Toyotas and drive to all
four corners of Los Angeles just for a chance to play their music. It's the small
thrill of their day-laboring lives. They fool themselves into thinking that they're
musicians, that they bring art to these backyard parties with the store-bought
carne asada and a keg of beer.

"Salvador Flores, what brings you here tonight?" Ganso asks. Ganso,
with his big body and huge hands, he's the leader of this sloppy band of
mariachis. Ganso drinks and smokes more than he breathes. His name means
"duck" because there was a time when he could blow his trumpet like a natural.
He had something, but his days have long been over and his trumpeting just
seems sad and silly now.

"Have you come to play for us?" his mustache bristles when he speaks.
The rest of my son's band-members chuckle to each other as the buttons on their
charro jackets gleam under the moonlight and their instruments shine bright and
brassy. They look at me with weary gazes and I know I'm not welcome here.

"Viejito," Pozal calls, pulling out a milk-crate for me. "Siéntate, come
join us. It's been a while, no?"

I don't want to but I take a seat. Ganso waves a cigarette in front of me.
I shake my head, declining his offer. They're between sets. I can feel their hearts
racing, even though the rap music is booming. Their breaths are hard and heavy.
Their fingers are twitching and they're eager to play again. Ganso can't stop
tapping his feet. He has songs in his head and he knows what they'll lead with
for their next set.

"Where's Pedro?" I ask.

"You've come to take your son back to Mexico so soon? He can't even
finish his last gig? You've become a real hard-ass, you know?" Ganso shakes
his head and flicks ash in my direction.

I look away. I have nothing to say. This isn't my world. It hasn't been
for a long time. Pedro must understand why.

"He's good, Salvador. You know that don't you?" Pozal says. The rest of the mariachis nod. Ganso stamps out his cigarette and starts fingering his trumpet. Seeing him in his weathered charro suit, his paint-stained work-boots peeking out from his black pants, he is exactly how I didn't want to end up. This is no kind of future for my son.

"If I was as good at his age, nothing would've stopped me," he says. "Nothing should stop talent like that. Pedro was born to play."

I try not to hear these words. They're not his father. They don't even know what it's like to raise a son, not really. Ganso had a boy, but when he couldn't put down the bottle or give up the music, his wife left him. He hasn't seen his family in fifteen years. Pozal's son grew up. I've heard that he deals in Mexico City. Pozal doesn't talk about him anymore. The rest of the mariachis are bachelors and they'll die that way, without any stability or a family to make them whole. They're lucky enough to get a steady paycheck, let alone a steady woman.

Something hits me on the back, I turn around and Pozal is nudging me with his guitarrón. "Toque," he says. His look is serious, as stern as the first day I met him when he insisted that I join the band. I had played a few songs at a party and after that he kept hounding me. I was tempted at first. It seemed an easy way to make a hundred dollars in one night. When I refused, he snatched my son behind my back. They've been playing together for almost a year.

Ganso is still nudging me with his guitarrón. "What are you scared of?" he urges. "Come on, have you gone completely dead in the heart?"

I grab the instrument, my hand unsteady. I'm afraid I won't remember how to hold it, that they'll see this in me and pounce. They're watching me. I can feel their scrutinizing gaze. Their ears prickle as they wait for the first note to hit. I rest my right hand against the chords; they are taut and almost cut through my skin. The guitarrón has its own heartbeat. I can feel music starting to pump through me. My own heart begins to race.

"Papi?" out of the cloud of smoke and music, Pedro steps in front of me. Without thinking, I set the guitarrón down. It slides easily from my hands.

"You're early," my son says. Sometimes when Pedro speaks to me or to strangers his right cheek quivers. He is a skinny, gawky boy except when he plays his music. With his vihuela, he can almost carry himself like a true mariachi, if it weren't for the awkwardness of his age. Pedro is young, only sixteen years old, he still has so much to learn.

"I came to see you play," I answer him with a tight hug.

"That's nice," he says and gives me a reluctant embrace before stepping away. Pedro takes his place next to Pozal and together they play a few notes, testing their sound. Ganso pats the empty milk-crate, motioning for me to take a seat again. I watch my son. For the rest of the night Pedro is lost to the music.

Ganso leads the last set with the typical standard, "La Negra." It's a quintessential son jalisciense, one of the original rhythms of mariachi. There are huapangos, sones joroches, rancheras, jarabes and boleros, but sones jaliscienses are the classic form. They're even named after the cradle of mariachi. In the

green valleys of Jalisco, where El Salto rushes down the emerald hills of our hometown, Cocula, fast African tempos taunt the violin to keep up with Spanish guitars and Mexican vocals.

With his trumpet, Ganso whips his players into a wild syncopated frenzy. While Pedro's vihuela and Pozal's guitarrón drive the counter-rhythms. But these intricate sounds are lost on this crowd. No one here could know or appreciate the tradition that Pedro and his mariachis perform. To these teenagers, all they hear are some empty tunes that their parents make them listen to during family get-togethers.

The song quips to an end and the boys and girls clap loud and excited. I'm surprised they want more. I would've thought they'd be impatient to get the old stuff out of the way so they could carry on with their wiggling and jiggling. Even though they trip through the dance steps, Pedro and his mariachis have this crowd craving for more.

Ganso starts the next song by reaching across time to play an aged melody, "Amapolita Morado." He blows the tune back at us with a fury that has swept hundreds of miles of deserts and mountains. Pedro steps forward without faltering. Everyone is turned to him as he plays. He has one of the more difficult tempos to carry. "Amapolita Morado" is one of the most challenging and traditional of mariachi songs. The chords are tricky, either you sound like a fool or you can convince the audience that you're a virtuoso. I wonder how he learned this tune. Who taught my son to play this son jalisciense with such precision? Does he know this is the backbone to mariachi?

Pedro commands his listeners. My Pedro, who fumbles with hammers and adzes, could hold a vihuela perfectly in his arms at the age of two. His fingers dance along the strings of his vihuela and all the energy of the party gravitates toward him. In front of this crowd, my son towers. Pedro winds up his music then lashes it back to us like he's lassoing every listener into a relentless zapateado. No one can help from stamping their feet. No one here can keep from driving their heels into the earth with every beat of his music.

Every now and again, he takes a misstep and stumbles with the chords but no one in this crowd will notice. No one but a real musician will know that Pedro is still learning. The other mariachis oscillate around him with their lumbering bodies. They haven't the stamina to match Pedro's vibrancy. Their faces, toughened like cured meat, seem to grow older each second Pedro plays with them. He takes all the heat of the moment for himself, leaving the rest of us wanting a piece of him, hungry for just a scrap of his youth. Or could it be the other way around? Could Pedro's vitality be draining with each note that he plucks, until he wastes away like the rest of these payasos, who string out their lives from one weekend to the next?

Pedro doesn't understand what it all means yet. There's a tradition behind mariachi, a whole being you have to slip into, and if you let it, the music can consume you. I had always wanted to be the best but that doesn't come easy. A mariachi should have a repertoire of at least three hundred songs memorized. Some of the best mariachis can play five hundred by heart. That takes time that most workingmen don't have. It's not enough just to memorize those songs. You need to play them so well, you can make a crowd of people believe that the tables and chairs are dancing with them, that the world is just one never-ending, colorful zapateado. To play like that, one must be a maestro. Music should sweat

from a mariachi's huevos. But who can live off of this? This is what my father once said to me and this is what I must tell Pedro.

After the set, he comes to me with his face flushed. The music is still running through him.

"I played 'Amapolita Morada,'" he says. His voice competes with the thumping hip-hop that has taken over again. "Did you hear me?" He is proud and has every right to be.

"You were good, hijo." I nod and smile to my son. He gives me a deflated look. This is not the reaction he wants. I reach out to grab him. I am proud of my son and he should know that. But the rest of the mariachis crowd around us, hugging Pedro and patting him on the back.

"You're something else, caballero. Qué sabroso!" Ganso says. He winks at my son before lighting another cigarette.

"We'll never find someone who can play like you," Pozal tousles his hair. These men surround Pedro, and I feel like each of them wants to snatch a slip of his music before he leaves.

On the drive home, he sings to himself. He's still in the trance. I lower the volume to the radio, "When we get back to Mexico, you can learn from a real master," I tell him. "You don't have to fool around with tile-layers from Sinaloa."

Pedro stops singing. He's silent.

"Why don't you play anymore?" my son finally asks in a tone so quiet I almost can't hear him.

I don't answer him right away. I shouldn't have to explain myself to my son. I left my guitarrón back in Cocula along with my four daughters, my grandchildren, and my wife. Four years in this pinche country, what I look forward to most is returning to Azucena with pockets full of dollars. Finally I tell him, "We have to take responsibility. We all have to earn our living, Pedro."

"Why can't I stay here with Tío? I could keep working with him and send money back home," his words come out like a whine.

"Your place is with your family, in Mexico. Your mother and sisters need you."

My son nods but he doesn't really seem to hear what I say.

"Morning, Sal," my brother-in-law, Eduardo, says from the stove. The kitchen is sizzling with his breakfast. The smell of fried eggs and pork fill the house. Roc en español blasts from the radio. My two nephews, Pedro's cousins, Gus and Sam, stuff spoonfuls of cereal into their mouths. They look like chipmunks. Each of them nods to the sound of what they call music. I raise my eyebrows to them and take my seat at the table, grabbing a tortilla and an empty plate. I try to enjoy the lack of conversation that I know won't last for long.

Pedro eventually joins us and heads straight for the fridge. He lingers there, stalling any talk that his uncle might direct toward him. Eduardo glances at my son and finally speaks, "So, Pedro, you looking forward to going back?"

He pokes his head out, and with obedience answers, "Yeah, it'll be nice."

"Just a couple of days before we head home, right?" I say to Pedro as he sits next to me. We haven't spoken since our talk in the truck. Now, Pedro doesn't just avoid my gaze, but picks up the newspaper and pretends to read it. My son never reads the paper.

"Well, we're glad to help you and Azucena out," Eduardo continues.

I force myself to be gracious; "You've been a big help getting our family on our feet. Pedro and I have made more here in the last four years than we could probably make in ten years the time in Cocula."

"No problem, compadre. Just be sure to send my sister my love," Eduardo takes his seat at the table and with a self-righteous look of concern, raises his eyebrows and asks, "will you and Pedro be able to find work back there?"

I hated talking to this man. Tired of his patronizing, he's always acted like he's doing charity for us. Eduardo couldn't survive two days in Mexico, and he should know that. He tried it but he's a pocho at heart.

"The Garza furniture factory is finally re-opening, and Azucena is entering us into the job lottery," I force another smile and beam it straight at him. I want to throw him a punch and knock his teeth out. I haven't felt the least bit grateful to him for putting us up. He owed Azucena after everything she did, raising him and the rest of her brothers and sisters. He skipped out on her family when they needed him the most. This was the least he could do.

"You'll have a lot of good experience now, Pedro. Right, Sal?" Eduardo winks at my son before turning to me. I raise my fork in agreement wishing instead I could stab him in the knee with it.

Leaving this place will be a miracle. The house reeks of its residents. The kitchen table's always splattered with catsup and hot sauce. It's obvious that no woman lives here, nor would any woman want to. Eduardo never talks about his wife, Dolores, and how she died. He'd never admit that he had a hand in her death. He should have taken her to a doctor when she was sick, even if it meant deportation. Eduardo is a proud and blind man and it shows. He's fooled himself into believing he's something greater than he really is. A lot of men here are like that. I don't want Pedro falling into the same trap or he'll end up alone in a crumbling house. We eat the rest of our breakfast without speaking and let the rock music fill the filthy kitchen with noise.

We have one last job to finish before we leave. We've been adding on a bar and lounge for a Thai restaurant in East Hollywood. Eduardo contracted the work six months ago and we're pretty much done, just a few small details to finish. My forearms and back ache from painting walls. Every muscle feels tight, like strings over-strung; too much tension and I will break. I catch

glimpses of Pedro working. I wish he realized the value of his youth. He should know he could feed a whole family if he works hard enough. His cousins fool around behind me. They think I'm not paying attention, that I don't hear them screwing with their father's tools.

Gus and Sam grew up here. They don't know what it's like to be surrounded by family, to have everyone there to depend on and everyone to depend on you. I'm afraid Pedro is forgetting this. He seems to be forgetting a lot of things. I wipe my brow and catch my son staring at me. I can't tell if he's still mad at me, or if he's just trying to figure me out. Maybe it's both. Maybe he hasn't decided. My mouth is as dry as sandpaper, so I take a break.

In the kitchen, I sit down and finish a tall glass of cool water, and then lean back catching my breath. I don't realize how long I have my eyes closed but I must've fallen asleep. I am dreaming of Azucena and our hometown. I hear music, the rhythms of our country playing proudly. I feel the heat of the Cocula sun shining on my face and the warmth of Azucena at my side. The music grows louder and stronger and when I open my eyes, I realize it's not a dream. Someone is playing in the alley outside. The notes of "Paloma Negra" carry into the restaurant and I know it's Pedro.

I step outside to get a closer look. He doesn't notice me but plucks the strings of his vihuela. The branches from the tree shake and tremble above him. The alleyway is perfectly silent, save for my son's music. There's no sound of any traffic and I wonder if the cars and buses on the other side of the restaurant have stopped just so my son could play? Then I notice her, one of the waitresses, that Asian girl who always dresses in black like she's going from one funeral to another. She leans against the wall, her gaze steady on my son. She doesn't move. She is bound by his music.

Pedro starts the ballad, soft and melodic. His song is a bird just taking flight; the wings hit the air, lifting toward the sky. "Paloma Negra" is a beautiful ranchera. The words are melancholic but Pedro's notes soar. The waitress stands perfectly still. She forgets about the cigarette in her hand. An inch-long stem of ash threatens to fall off. She is a black silhouette illuminated by the light of my son. He plays for her. He plays for all the musicians in our family. And at this very moment, I believe he plays for Mexico.

The bird's wings spread to their fullest, encompassing the sky. Pedro doesn't just perform. He is the music. My son seems to contract and expand with the song's rhythm. He strikes a high note and blocks out the sun. The ranchera then dips into sadness so deep he couldn't possibly have felt it at his age. Yet, somehow, he rings out every note, every drop of bittersweet anguish that "Paloma Negra" carries. At the close of his song, he opens his eyes. His brow glistens with perspiration.

The waitress claps her hands in admiration. He gives her a nervous smile. Apart from his music, Pedro is awkward. My son doesn't know what to do with his gangly limbs; he fidgets with his fingers.

That waitress leans toward him. They stand so close, their hips brush against each other. Her black fingernails rest on his skinny shoulders as her crimson-stained lips whisper into his ear. My son lets out a soft laugh and its poison in my veins.

"Pedro!" I call out, my voice harsher than I intend. "Stop messing around!" I'm angry and I can't control myself. They both turn to me with innocent eyes. My son's face turns red; the tips of his ears are burning.

"Get inside and get to work."

He looks at the girl and says something but I can't hear them.

"Now, Pedro!" I yell, my voice bouncing off the walls and down the alleyway. Both of them start at the sound. Gus and Tony peek their heads out the restaurant's backdoor to see what the ruckus is about.

"Everyone back to work!" I say pushing them aside.

The day I've been waiting for, almost all my life it seems, has finally come. We are going home. We are going back to Mexico, but Pedro and I are stuck in traffic. The cars are frozen in four endless lines down the freeway. Our luggage is packed in the truck's cab. We take our few possessions with us, tattered bags filled with threadbare shirts, paint-splattered pants and a few dresses and nice blouses for Azucena and the girls.

The air is searing today. The sun's rays are so thick; it feels like I can crunch smog and grit between my teeth. L.A. is a hollowed out husk of a fruit that was probably sweet and juicy once, a long time ago in someone else's memory. I'll be glad to get back to Cocula. No one should have to live like this, spending countless hours on the road going nowhere. There are too many gringos here, too many Asians and Blacks, and too many faces like my own. There is too much of everything here, but no Azucena. Not my daughters, nor my family.

Pedro stares out the window. He is silent and stolid but it seems as if, at any moment, he could reach out and grab a piece of this city. He's pulled to it. He's young and has dreams, but dreams are soft and malleable.

One of my favorite Pedro Infante songs is on the radio. Pedro was named after this legendary mariachi and "Cien Años" is the song I once played for Azucena when we first met. I softly sing along and tap my fingers on the steering wheel.

"I want to stay here," Pedro says, as if our conversation the other night had never ended and we were just picking up where we left off. The traffic stretches out miles before us. I can't understand why he wants to stay in this land filled with people who don't want you even if you build their houses, wash their cars and water their thirsty lawns. Is it better to eat a little here and be hated or be at home with your family and starve? Pedro doesn't know what "home" really is and that's like not knowing your own soul.

"See that man over there," I answer, pointing to one of the many brown faces like ours, burning in the morning sun as he sells oranges and mangos at the edge of the freeway. I can see the sweat pour down his face while he tirelessly holds up those heavy bags of fruit.

"You want to end up like him? Is that what you want?"

Pedro scowls and shakes his head. "I can make something of myself here. I can be somebody," he insists.

I grip the steering wheel. The inside of the truck feels hot and stuffy now. I draw out each word, each syllable slow and hard, so my son will understand my exact meaning. I want there to be no confusion or doubt, no room for him to argue.

"You're coming back with me. You're going home, Pedro. Home."

My son clasps his vihuela to him with a fierce grip. His hands are so young; his skin is so smooth and unspoiled. Even his nails are perfectly trimmed for playing his vihuela. My own hands are over-worked. They splay gnarled and knuckled on the steering wheel.

"There's nothing there for me." I hear him say in a low and sinister voice.

I turn to him. His brow is set in the dark face of my father and he glowers at me with a steady gaze that catches my breath.

"Everything's there," I stammer back.

He's still clutching his vihuela case; his knuckles blanch from his grip.

"Can't you understand? I want to stay here," what was once a whine has now turned to a growl.

"No more, Pedro," I growl back, wagging my finger at him, "That's enough!"

"Just cause you couldn't make it doesn't mean I can't. You had your chance and you failed," he spits at me.

With one hand on the steering wheel, I grab my son by his shirt collar and shake him, "You knock this off, right now!"

We are almost cheek-to-cheek. He breathes hot anger onto me. I feel myself starting to shudder in our rage and loosen my grip. Pedro sinks back into his seat. I fix my eyes on the road and try to breathe.

Once again, traffic comes to a full stop. The trunks and roofs of the cars in front of me beam back the sun's bright light and it hurts my eyes. An anxious splinter of fear tears from me: we'll never get back home.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see my son unlatching the car door. I shout and try to grab him by his pant's waist, but he's too quick. He slams the truck door on me and all I get is my hand crushed.

"Pedro!" I yell at the top of my lungs. I pound, again and again, on the horn and scream out the window for my son. He runs down the side of the lane, holding his vihuela tight to his side. Traffic picks up, and he dodges the cars, his slim body darting through the gridlock.

"Pedro!" I howl into the city he runs to until I can see him no more.

JEAMEL MARIA FLORES-HABOUD

El rey

Yo estoy hablando en otra lengua
en una lengua universal
desde hace muchos siglos.
No se le insulte al Nazareno
no se le compadezca
trátese como un hombre
y un gran destino,
un ser enérgico
desquiciado
que amó a una prostituta
que ensalzó
el lado oculto del hombre
(el lado
que sigue oculto
porque su muerte
no sirvió de nada).
Tú, el que condenó sacerdotes
gobernantes
y a los peores
a los que se llaman santos
a los conformistas,
tú, crucificado loco
crucificado de cada día
(yo hablo de ti
no de esa degeneración
que hicieron de ti
y que llamaron cristianismo),
yo hablo de ti
y de tu muerte
y de tu amor por el hombre
que no sirvió de nada.

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