

*Mike Bragg*

*La Niebla*

*Aquí, mi pueblo*, we are like the folk down in New Orleans, only our hurricane hasn't come in yet. Our West is so small that the only way to make it bigger sometimes is to find a place in your mind without borders. Borders are important for people who own space, but around here you never quite see them. *Aquí, la frontera es una niebla en el extremo de la visión, cerca, muy cerca.*

I used to love Carlos for the way he would stop in his tracks and just look like he was thinking. His deep, cinnamon face would express so much by being blank. He would look like all that thought was taking over him completely. Back then, that was what made him different for me. I used to love Carlos, and I guess I still do.

*Mi abeja* was the only thing Papi would say in Spanish. My honeybee. *Mi abeja*, he would say, when you grow up, everyone will find out how important and wonderful you are. How will I ever share you, *mi abeja*?

I could never tell Carlos about my love for him. To do so would have been an affront to

the nobility of his spirit. To impose myself on him, overweight, ugly, would have been unthinkable.

Papi had come to Denver from the border regions of Texas before I was born. Back then, the Rio Grande had always been within a day's walk. Many people, Papi told me, saw the Rio Grande as a reminder of their struggle to enter the United States, or they saw it as a symbol of something like freedom, oppression, or difference, but Papi just saw a beautiful, wide river.

When I was really little, Papi would cut out pictures from magazines of things like Ayer's Rock, or Mount Rushmore, or Palolem Beach on the Arabian Sea, and he'd tape them up on the walls of my room. And there were always the Rocky Mountains, of course, behind trees in the neighborhood, behind houses and buildings, behind everything west.

What made me sad about Carlos was that he would always wear blue jeans, just like all the other boys. I wanted everything about him to be separate from the deathly normality, the smallness, all around us.

For my tenth birthday, Papi decided that we would go to the mountains, just me and him. But my mother convinced him that we could only go to the foothills because we didn't have enough money to be driving all the way to the mountains. My mother often talked about money. She was always talking, about something or another, because when she got started she couldn't seem to find a place to stop.

On the morning of my birthday, Papi drove us to the foothills in a little Mazda he borrowed from a neighbor. The long stretches of rolling, grassy hills along US-36 were terrifying and beautiful. New aesthetics traipsed in and out of my head.

For a long time, the mountains would seem to get closer, and then they'd be farther away.

Then they got huge, and Papi told me we were at the foothills. We were right at the bottom of Flagstaff Mountain, a foothill that was so tall that it hurt to try to look at the top of it. Papi decided that if we were going to climb it, we had to start at the bottom, where we were.

Carlos' parents were both born in our neighborhood, as far as I recall. They owned a little produce store a few blocks from the duplex where my family lived. Carlos started working there when we were halfway through high school. Then, he radiated a handsome aura of adulthood. Still, it was a bit sad to see him stocking lettuce, corn, and chiles.

A thin line of dirt going up through dry grasses and ash-gray brush, quickly lost around a bend, was the trailhead. Accents of orange, tangles of dwarf-tree branches meandered behind the grey, and behind that was the mountain, whispering in traffic noise and birdsong. Standing there, with my feet on the dirt, Papi holding my hand, that trail could have gone anywhere.

Up and over logs that were steps, through bushes higher than my head, passing by rocks pink and green and gray and red, up, up, up! it seemed like we climbed ten mountains. Sometimes the trail leveled out and I would find myself looking east. I could see the horizon getting farther and farther away.

There were no blocks on the mountain.

Near the top of the mountain, we followed a trail to a viewpoint that looked out on everything: lakes, and roads, and trees, buildings, farmland, airports, downtown Denver way off to our right, the huddled skyscrapers small and alone, cuddling each other for warmth. Papi didn't say anything for a long time. He just stood there behind me, his big hands on my little shoulders.

*"Mi abeja,"* he said, finally, "look. This is how the rich people see things. This is how

they know that you are where they want you to be.”

I didn’t understand what he was talking about, but I smiled, looked up into his scruffy face, and gave him a big hug. The way down seemed a lot faster - too much faster.

When we were in eleventh grade, Carlos’ parents told him that they weren’t actually his parents. They had adopted him from a mother in Peru whose husband had died. She couldn’t take care of him anymore, so she had enrolled in a government program that put Carlos up for adoption to a family in the United States. For seventeen years, Carlos had been a Mexican-American, but it turned out he was a Peruvian-Andean Indian.

Less than a month after he found out, he dropped out of school. I wish I knew why, but I don’t. I would see him sometimes, riding a little Huffy around the streets, but it was like he was looking at something so far away that it made our neighborhood like a piece of lint on his eyelash. I was in awe of him, more so than ever.

Me and Papi never got back to Flagstaff Mountain again, after my tenth birthday. A recession came around, and Papi began shutting himself in his room late at night, smoking his cigarillos and brooding over large sheets of paper with numbers all over them. In a sense, he never came out.

I guess it occurred to me at some point to invite Carlos to come up to Flagstaff Mountain with me. But if I had been afraid to talk to Carlos before, I was absolutely terrified to do it then. He was more godly than ever, and I was afraid that he would be disappointed in Flagstaff Mountain. I was afraid that the Andes in his blood would dwarf my little promontory.

During my senior year of high school, I hardly saw Carlos at all. I was working hard to get scholarships *somewhere*. The reward, the cost, was that I got accepted at full scholarship to a

school out of state, on the east coast. I went there for four years, and that's where I got my Bachelor's in Political Science.

I guess, in retrospect, I didn't get attached to anyone there on purpose. People were always a danger to the perspective I felt the need to gain. Afterwards, I came back to Denver. It took almost a year of looking, and hard times without money, but I found a job teaching second graders, the most adorable second graders. It's been eighteen years now, so I guess that some of the children from the first few classes I taught have already graduated college, themselves. Some of them, I know, have died. The rest are still around, somewhere.

I'm only two miles, now, from where I lived back then, but it's a completely different West here. *Aquí, la frontera es una niebla en el extremo de la visión.*

I heard through my mother that Carlos died of terminal pneumonia. For a month, I cursed myself for never talking to him, but I never asked about where the funeral would be. You see, I haven't been back there. I can't go back there.

It turned out to be a rumor. My mother admitted that, eventually. Carlos isn't dead, so to speak. He's probably working in his parents' produce stand. I'd rather not think about him, there. I like to think he still stops in his tracks sometimes, overcome by thought.