

Gusanos

by Clare Boerigter

I.

Mateo got me drunk and told me about his mother's parties. I stared at my reflection in the half-empty glass and lost myself in the white organza and tulle, the light strings and floating lanterns. Teo masked his familiar scent with cigarettes and cologne, but I could still smell the sweat lacquering his forearms, Argentina moist on his dark skin. He bought another round of tequila, and we drank to Cash and the mountain, my throat raw and roaring, the drowned pink worm dancing against my lips like a second tongue.

The small room filled up with eyes watching this príncipe and his boyish gringa. I leaned on the bar and laughed like my father, Mateo spinning words into worlds and building horizons with his long hands.

He vomited later, outside in the dark, his broad shoulders heaving like great shuddering wings. I held back his long hair, the black strands ash against my rough palms. Standing, he rubbed spit from his cheek and looked at me. I found him beautiful, and the lack of a camera weighed on me.

There was a photo of him from earlier that week when we had met in Buenos Aires, another from the train where he had fallen asleep against his own hand, a third from two days before when he had tied a blue bandana around his head and grinned at me from under the shadow of his pack. That was a different Mateo, and I began to see the man who summited mountains.

We hiked out of the pueblito and turned toward camp. In the silence, I felt the finger light touches of the peak on my shoulders.

The wait was almost over.

II.

We forded the river, crossed the valley, ate dried mangos, and watched the sun begin its ascent of the sky. Under the weight of the mountain's shadow, Cash rubbed his palms against his thighs and thought. I took his picture because of the look on his face, the lines around his eyes like striking claws. He flicked his head and the curling tip of his braid snapped against the gear on his back, asking to be touched. Behind me, Teo was singing, and if his Spanish could have been tasted, it would have lingered like caramel, elastic and soft.

Cash spat, and I framed the mountain in my lens, tracing the steep walls of the eastern side. Beneath the lightweight fabric of my clothes, the fine hairs of my body rose up, and Cash, who felt something like this, ran his knuckles over the smooth rock, tilting his head back as though listening.

III.

Teo came to the rock like a conquistador, but Cash breathed it, his body flowing in delicate surges up the mountain wall. I had documented enough ascents to know that Cash had the instinctive gift that every climber hungered after. He read the rock with the gentlest brush of his fingertips, rode its intricacies.

I rested in a shallow alcove above them, my slackened line allowing me to lean away from the wall face. I caught the wind ruffling Teo's hair and his half-lipped smile. I focused on his thick and calloused hands and found dark markings on the pale stone underneath his palms. Tight lines etched like worms.

Below us the valley spread and the three rivers doubled back into each other. I breathed in the beauty and lowered my camera, wondering after the feel of the fall.

IV.

I learned about these two men through my camera lens. Most mornings Cash prayed, and breaking camp he always seemed to leave some little thing behind: a string of raisins, a red band from his hair, a small white stone from the riverbed many feet below. One morning it was an elaborately twisted grass figurine.

He'd made it to look like a man and pinioned it between two rocks on a small cairn. Kneeling, I framed its features against the landscape unrolling below us. Cash's shadow broke the scene moments after I took the picture.

"This isn't what you should be photographing."

I tilted my head back to look at him, found myself surprised by the jumping lines in his jaw. His voice did not betray his anger, but his face was not as steady.

"I like these little things you leave."

"Mateo wants pictures of his climbing, his tent, his pretty face. You should take photos of those things."

"Cash," I said, affronted by his sudden authoritarian tone; I'd never taken orders well, "This is what I do."

"Look, I've got something to do here, too. And if I'm to do it, I'm going to need you to stop following me with your camera. No more photos of me, no more pictures of my offerings."

Offerings. That word surprised me. A glimmer of the fantastical in my silent, pragmatic lead-man.

"I've seen things like this before." I tried to explain, "In Mexico—"

Cash's lip curled, something like disdain darkening his eyes, "Just no more pictures. Not of this."

"But Cash, you're as much a part of this climb as me and Mateo. And this thing you do—"

"Is not something to photograph," he spat, swearing quickly in Hopi.

I couldn't resist the pull of his stormy face, the way he had set his body up against mine, all cast-out shoulders and tense lines. I took his picture.

He blinked twice, slid his pack slowly off his shoulders and took three decisive steps in my direction before I realized what he meant to do. I danced out of his grasp seconds before his hand jumped for my camera. From the campsite above, Teo watched the ludicrous exchange: Cash lunging as I stumbled away, raised my voice, tried to reason.

"Cash, Cash...Cash!" He was herding me back around, trying to hem me into the rocks, "Alright! I shouldn't have done that. But Cash, stop this." He leapt for me and I tripped, fell over my own pack and rolled over backward, camera cradled to my stomach.

"Cash!" I barked, rocky crags nipping at my shoulders.

"That lens gives you no right! There are things here you can't even begin to understand," Cash snarled, his eyes bright.

Mateo's voice broke in as his hands hauled me upright forcefully, "Cash. Enough."

Cash dismissed me with a toss of his head and slid his eyes to Mateo, "She's a fool, and it's on you. I'm done."

Teo sighed through his teeth and watched Cash turn, yelled at his back, "We start hiking in ten!" I hissed, touched my neck, checked the camera.

"Leave Cash alone, yeah?" Mateo said.

"What? Mateo, he came after me!"

"But you were taking pictures of him. You've got to know he hates that."

"Teo," I laughed tightly, "that's what you want me here for. That's the whole point of *me on this mountain.*"

He grinned at me stupidly, reached out to ruffle my hair as though I was a kid, "And here I thought you were along for the fun of it all, the rush. First ascents don't come around every day, you know."

I batted away his hand as I tried to hold on to some of my anger, "I won't stop. You know I won't."

"And this is why I like you. Obstinate to a fucking fault."

I stuck my tongue out at him, and he made as though to grab it, laughing as I backpeddled and nearly knocked myself over again. Teo wrapped his fingers around my arm to steady me, brushed pine needles from my hair.

"But really, you should stop." His hand in my hair was deliberate and intimate, an appeal to familiarity.

"But why? This is what I do."

"I know, but I need Cash. He's going to get me to the summit."

I turned away from his suddenly serious face, looked up the trail toward the peak ramming up like a horn between the last of the trees. I thought about Mateo as a child, Mateo and his family tree. When I looked at him again, it was almost as if I could see death marking him on the gentle slope of his forehead. From further up, Cash shouted at us in Hopi. We were moving, climbing, getting closer.

V.

Mateo was from one of the wealthiest families in Argentina. On the walls of his grandparents' castillo, he could trace his lineage through the growing tree that had been attended by four generations of painters. The room was taken up with it, and a year earlier Teo's grandmother had raised the ceiling to allow for the progression of limbs. Teo hated the room, called it the funeraria.

In his first remembered memory, he had touched the wall where the roots began, and when he had pulled back, his fingers were slick with blood. Teo had cried out, but the sound was swallowed by the sound of the tree itself, alive and in agony. The bleeding had spread, dampening boughs in rich dark swathes. Mateo said that he had heard his own name called, saw a delicate stem unfurl, knew the tender claim against his life.

Teo thought about his place on that tree as we climbed. He said that moment would always be with him, and that only when death and life could not hide from each other could he ever begin to let it go.

VI.

We carried two tents, and often I slept alone, the light one-man obscuring only the sky. I heard the sucking sound of the wind as I rubbed my feet vigorously, planning to buy better socks for the next climb. Even Cash was too tired to feel angry, and hard words had been reserved for moments when we had the luxury to say them without losing our breath. My body hurt and my thin pad did little to muffle the contours of the ground. I welcomed the overwhelming smell of my own sweat, found beauty in the ache of muscles and the slow dulling pain.

Back home in the rig, I had driven with my left arm out the window and watching my hand play with the swells of hot dry air, I couldn't convince myself that it was mine. Pain changed that. When everything hurt, it was hard to forget your body. Hard to forget what you were given it for. It was this pain that settled me inside myself, and it was this pain that had brought me here. The climb was a beautiful, strange struggle.

I balled up in my insulated warmth and lost the thread of my thoughts against the steady foreign roll of my own heart beating.

VII.

Things started happening. The wrong things.

It was too hot. I tied my extra clothes to the loops on my pack. Laboring up the mountain trails, I was a rash of colors, bright reds and yellows, pure blue and summer sea-green, sleeves falling about, flapping. Cash pulled a pink bandana around his forehead and watched the mountain. Teo, ignoring the thaw and the shuddering weight of snow before us, told me stories, half-aware of my camera.

Teo adjusted his stride to mine, brushed his hands through his hair, "Los abuelos used to tell stories about a dragon on this mountain, how it set the foothills on fire, swallowed the old village. You've seen the burn area, the scorch marks."

The gnarled obsidian trees, smooth like sand and oddly scentless, covered most of the southern side. Thistle and flagging weeds rustled in the charred roots. Years later, still nothing else had grown.

"They still leave things for it. Goats, sheep, little bits of metal."

I thought of the faces in the bar the night we had been in the pueblito. There had been some strangeness in them, and I remembered with sudden clarity a young man reaching out to touch my hair.

"La gente don't even like to climb much further up than the foothills. The men like to say it's because the dirt isn't good for farming, but the women don't hide the reason. Did you see the kids running around in the pueblo? The women teach them to make little dolls, and they leave them in the trees around the mountain. Just little things for the dragon."

I thought of Cash, of the offerings he'd left and that I still carried with me, sealed into photographs. Cash remained silent, his face almost tender. He was almost always looking upward.

It was because of Cash's sky eyes that we weren't lost to the storm billowing up around the eastern side. We huddled for hours in the seams of a rock scattering, our bodies pressed tight, Mateo's heavy breath a tyrant in my ear. The winds made noises like I had never heard before. Teo mumbled something about carnival and being so drunk that the fireworks looked like exploding stars.

"No," Cash murmured, "nothing speaks like this mountain. Like her."

And the winds howled beautifully and brought a wet layer of ice and snow to the mountain's rough skin.

VIII.

Cash cooked, carried a small pouch of cornmeal, and told us that he grew up in the backwaters of the Rio Grande. He spoke a Spanish-Hopi hybrid, and if he was good at anything, it was staying alive. Cash knew the walls and the ground and the rocks, and even my unease at his superstition could not overshadow his animal deftness. Cash measured, and Cash calculated, and more than once I had wondered if the thin scars on his forearms and the fading ink of a tattoo were mementos from some sand-and-bomb war.

Mateo paid me for my ability to document, paid Cash for his ability to keep us all breathing. Pressed close to Cash then, I discerned what I could from his lined face. What sort of a man was it that had time for the practicalities of day-to-day survival and the fantasy of a mountain-dwelling dragon?

I felt as if I could look at those distant dark eyes all day and never really know.

IX.

We made camp late that night. The fresh snow made us all nervous and walking forward, we were trapeze artists. Snow-masked crevices spiderwebbed the mountain. To fall would have been a sharp way to meet death, lost to unseen teeth.

Only one tent. The pressure of bodies to my sides felt safe. The knots carving up my skin had lessened, the hum of the wind fading in my ears.

"We'll go down tomorrow," Cash said softly, shifting onto his hip, "we don't know the trail up, and I'm not risking it with the snow as weak as it is. Once we make it to the eastern wall, we can wait her out a bit, see how she firms up."

Mateo rolled up against me from the right, "With only four days hike left?"

"And a climb up the costillas."

Teo pushed forward, his hair falling into the thin space between my chin and the turned up collar of my coat. He would argue. "If we go down, we're done. If we go down, we've failed."

Cash laughed and ducked his head, dry lips brushing my jaw line, "If we go down, we don't make the ascent. The only failure I know of involves my funeral. Or yours."

I couldn't stop thinking of the costillas, the ribs. A beautiful nasty stretch of scrabbling to the top, the stone wind-smoothed. The rocks sloped up in crags like the bones they'd been named after, and in the place where they met was a short stretch of flat ground: the summit.

It occurred to me that Teo was here to flirt with death, to posture some in the face of his fear. Cash, with his level gaze and hard eyes, wanted to survive this climb for another and another yet. And I, I found that this was the only place where living was anything at all like what I had been promised.

X.

We did not sleep. The silence seemed to be trying to speak to me, and I could feel the bodies on my right and left as they grew distant.

"Tell me something Cash."

He started with a deep growling laugh in my ear, "There isn't anything I could tell you that you haven't already seen. I see you watching, your eyes all funny."

"Tell me about something I haven't seen yet. Something I can't."

Cash was quiet for so long that I wondered if he had decided not to speak. Mateo rested his head on my shoulder, his breathing hard and unhappy. We were both of us swimming in ourselves and fighting. It was too warm, the snow deep and thick and treacherous, the way up and the way down riddled with unforgiving falls.

"It's about time you asked me about the mountain. I've seen you looking at her all these days, but what your eyes are seeing isn't right. You don't watch for the way she settles down and breathes, how she lifts herself up to spit out the winds and curls and shakes to shed off the snow."

"You believe a dragon lives up there?" The words sounded strange from my lips, as though my speaking them had lent them a certain right-ness.

"The mountain *is* the dragon. She bares her teeth, and you and I both cower. What are we doing now?"

Teo spoke abruptly to my throat, his eyes closed tight, "My grandfather used to tell me stories about this mountain. He lived not far from here when he was young and trying not to be my great-grandfather. He said he would get up early to say good morning to the dragon on the mountaintop. With the rising sun, it looked like the peak was alive with fire. He said the dragon had to have the most beautiful view from up so high and asked me if a fire-worm cared about those sorts of things."

"If this mountain is a fire-worm," I asked without thinking, the thought of heat pressing on me, "then what are we?"

Cash laughed again, a barking sound from his stomach, "We're worms to this mountain, gusanos in the ground."

Teo snorted, propped himself on an arm to lean closer to Cash, his delicate throat bones inches above my nose, "There is no dragon, Cash. There is nothing but us and this mountain. The only gusanos here are the ones dead in your cornmeal."

XI.

The tension beneath the seams of the tent brought some feeling back to my numbing body, enough to make the balls of my feet ache and spit warmth up the veins to my ankles.

"This mountain, she's something beyond us. She's beautiful, she's deadly. And yet here we are, facing her, making something out of her, using her to make something out of us."

I thought about Cash's words as the night settled, thought about his dragon and my mountain, how perhaps the two weren't so dissimilar. He prayed to her with small gifts as I gloried in her irrefutable beauty, photographed with reverence.

XII.

I had found them the day before. Cash had left the little pouch of green wool on a rock and after capturing it from four angles, I had loosed the straw tie with stiff fingers. I didn't understand why he would leave it. The normal offerings were bits of things. This had been more. Cash had pinched out the corn powder with his thumb and first finger, made daily peace with sprinkled particles and soft prayers. I couldn't know, but it looked like the pouch had been with him awhile, holding penance close to his body. Forsaking it had left me cold.

Inside were worms. Their bodies fat and looped, parts leading into parts leading into parts until one was indistinguishable from another. They must have crawled in down at the valley camp during one of the wet nights, rising up only as Cash's cornmeal had dwindled. They had all died now, firm and pale, a shiny, purplish-gray.

I had taken a photo despite the bile climbing into my mouth, caught the lifeless forms against the beautiful rising slopes: gray-green rock flowing into a dove-snow peak.

XIII.

I was counting footsteps as we descended and humming one of Cash's folk songs to ward off the silent unease. I imagined the things I would eat first: the salmon smothered in miso, the undercooked steak, the yellow cherry tomatoes so easily mistaken for flowers.

Teo had started screaming. I couldn't see him. The line connecting all of us threw me forward as I took his weight and hit the ground with an unforgiving clap, slid after him toward the fissure. I made myself into desperate points, scraped my knees and elbows, juted my hips and chin, grasped at the sheened surface with my teeth. The only thing I knew was that I could not follow him down.

Behind me, Cash threw himself backward with a howl, and we floundered to a halt. Facedown, I took in great gasps before I rolled myself over, the line painfully taut between the three of us. All I could make out of Mateo was the red cord where it rolled over the edge. Cash was on his knees. He said nothing but wrapped his hands around the rope and began to pull. For a moment all I could do was stare, watch his muscles strain, and then I was on my stomach crawling toward him.

I couldn't see Teo, but the stillness of Cash's face told me the exact moment when we pulled him up over the lip. Cash was on his feet, walking back with a bracingly choppy step. I heard Mateo crying and pushed myself to my knees, surged toward Cash in blind panic and dragged Teo across the snow.

Cash dropped down to Mateo. I stayed on the ground, heaving, too frightened. It was a long moment before I looked.

We moved him, or tried to, but we were lost in drifts, and between us he curled suddenly broken, suddenly small. I was no longer sure if the things Cash cast off with almost every step were offerings, penance, or a simple lightening of the load. Another storm was rising behind us, and we dug in behind an outcrop of small boulders.

The fissure had been sharp and narrow, grinding the skin from half of his face, throwing his shoulder out, bending his foot in an unnatural contortion. One of his eyes had gone missing beneath the bubbling flesh, and in the tent I worked away the blood. He stared at me and made these gawping sounds. He would have choked on the part of his tongue that his teeth bit through if Cash hadn't curved his finger into the back of his bloody throat and scooped it out. It had lain on the snow, very pink and soft.

In the photo it would look like a flower.

I tried to smile at him, but my face was frozen and stiff with my own dried blood, my nose a numbness in the middle of my face. Cash was diligent and silent, turning and splinting Mateo's foot. Teo's left arm hung like a broken wing, and together Cash and I made a sling and secured it to his chest. He was crying again when the shuffling and awkwardness of our quiet attentions were over.

Outside the dragon rose. Mateo gaped like a fish and I could see that parts of his teeth were sawn away. I curled around him more to keep myself from seeing what was left of his old face than to bring his body warmth. He collapsed against me as if he had been waiting a long time. My fingers found their way into his beautiful black hair.

XIV.

I thought about the worms: many-hearted, their bodies naked of defense, eyes little more than holes in their heads. Their rubbery bodies given the illusion of jumping life under the firey weight of tequila, the chalked in lines scrawling with ecstatic black frenzy along the mountain walls, the scar-purple, shiny and hairless corpses in Cash's cornmeal.

I felt Cash under one hand, his ribs like a perpetual series of rise-and-fall valleys, his heart a cautious expanding and contracting. Mateo folded to me, our legs a tangle of shins and knee bones. His breath still smelled like Argentinean dirt as it warmed the c-bone behind my ear, and when he moved, his nose dragged coldness and blood into my hair. I wished its redness could give him warmth. The tendrils from my scalp should have snapped and growled, should have burned holes into my body, should have shed embers and devoured us in ashes.

I thought of the mountain and its teeth against my skin, felt distant from my own flesh. I had come here to feel and to become, I had come here to test and to defy. I had not come here to die.

XV.

Cash wasn't gentle about anything. He brought me out of my sleeping stupor by running his fingers along my crushed nose and half-hauled me out of the tent. Dawn was creeping slowly across the wind-blown snow, and as I hurried to pull up my hood and cover my hands, I realized it was Cash's yellow pack that was catching the light of the sun.

"This is it. Last night it snapped colder than it's been in a while. The snow should hold us. If we go, we've got a chance. A good chance."

"Cash." It sounded like a plea, "Cash, Mateo isn't up for moving. Let's give it a few days, let his foot heal up some."

Cash shook his head and met my eyes steadily. "There's too many risks with that. What if this is the last cold spell? What if it just keeps getting warmer? Then we're talking an avalanche, not just the hidden falls. This is our shot. She's only giving us one. I mean to take it."

I sat down heavily in the snow. Cash growled, "I'm leaving in five minutes. You've got two choices and one of the most easy fucking decisions to make."

I felt like I should feel like crying, but I didn't. I was just cold and tired and bloody. I was still half-asleep, the mechanisms of my mind turning with a precarious slowness. A thought emerged from the creaking grind.

"But, Mateo?"

Cash looked up from where he was systematically checking over the climbing gear in his pack. He straightened, ran a hand over his frosted and red face, "Like I said, this mountain, she's making something out of us. You can call it what you want, but I came here knowing what I am and what I do. I survive."

I dropped my eyes from the intensity transfiguring his face. Over the tops of my boots, the light cut firey patterns against the rising slopes of the mountain.

XVI.

Mateo was a thing of blood and sinew as he lay in the dirt, divided from us. Cash and I still moved, still reached out clumsily with unseeing hands. Above us, the dragon reared. The sound of her roar climbed into my skin, and lessening my hold on Mateo, I gave him into the hands of our mountain. Worming through my veins, the pain was sharp and bright.

I took his picture in the half-light. It would show his profile, the side still wrapped in flesh, and the sleeping bag would cover the worst of his injuries. It wouldn't show his shallow breathing or the way he shuddered and pulled himself inward. It wouldn't show the blood or the bits of teeth he choked up earlier. It would show his hair like a dark wing making a halo around his face, spreading like the night sky.

Outside, Cash dropped the pack at my feet, settled his eyes on the beautiful rising sun. We were done waiting.