Gravetender

by

Lily Acevedo

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GRAVETENDER

Lily Acevedo

State University of New York at New Paltz

We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Arts degree, hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis.

Heinz Insu Fenkl, Thesis Advisor
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

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Gabriel followed the procession of folded paper boats as they made their way upriver, north. The river wrapped around the wooden cabin where he now lived, and on the days they sailed, he always saw them from his front door and took the time to roll up his pants before he left the steps. The river never raged, but often still little boats would get caught on its stony bank. Gabriel had taken to stepping in the cold water, so blue it was nearly black, and freeing them from the rocks and the sparsely growing, too-dark blades of grass. The boats were filled with rice, precious cargo he carefully collected in a jar, but it felt wrong to leave them empty, so out of respect, he filled them with wisteria petals and *mosaic* before sending them back on their way.

Gabriel escorted the line of boats upriver, where they reached the Northern Woods. He stood at the water’s edge and kept watch until the last one was swallowed by the trees. They, the trees, were all too tall, too thick or thin, and in their shadows lurked *cucos* with a hunger that nearly rivaled the hunger of the Woods themselves. It was for good reason no one who wanted to return would wander into the Northern Woods. Gabriel knew that should he choose to enter, the woods would lead him out to the same place by the river, but it was because he had buried her beneath those trees, because she was rotting in a bed of roots, that he couldn’t bring himself to step across the threshold. And so, he didn’t know the little boats’ final destination.

He hoped that they all made it to where it was they sailed. He hoped the wishes and the memories folded into the paper would be heard. He did.

Wind blew through Gabriel’s hair, raised mounds along his arms. Leaves from fallen trees outside the woods—or trees outside that had long been bare—scrapped against the rocks, and fragments cut into his skin. Gabriel found something soothing in the moments right before he went to work tending to the graveyard. He almost left his shoes just where they were, hanging from his fingers. But he realized that if he should step on any glass in his bare feet—and bleed—
the ghosts would surely have his head.

Gabriel put on his shoes and rolled down the bottoms of his pants. He hardly realized how cold his legs had been, even as they began to warm. Even with his shoes on, he still felt the stones beneath his soles as he walked left towards the black rusted fence that hugged the cemetery. It was tall, with pointed spikes, and it wasn’t easy to climb over comfortably, but there weren’t any gates on that side—the river side—because who would’ve thought that the back would need an entrance? It didn’t bother him, regardless, and parts of the fence were missing. They had been since before Gabriel had been there, and the gaps were large enough for him to pass without even needing to shuffle sideways.

He rather liked the cemetery that time of day—the early morning. It was mostly peaceful, mostly quiet there, and though the fog never lifted, it would lighten. The grass that grew between the graves was a green that was almost too dark. Moss grew on the stones that were laid in the ground, meant to be stepped on, and in some cases, on those that were not. But not a single tomb was caked in mud, not a single headstone toppled over. Even the shards of glass that grew each day there, in the graveyard, no longer shattered, splintered, underfoot, and instead grew neatly. Like little budding flowers.

There was a great wisteria tree that marked the threshold between the town’s graveyard and the one to which he tended. No matter where he was, if he could see the wisteria tree, he saw it standing vividly, almost with a gentle glow, against the distant, hazy wall of white.

He saw Mireia in the distance, playing near the wisteria tree. He soon felt the cold breeze of her fingers tugging his pants, just as he knew he would the moment he saw her.

“Gabriel, Gabriel.”
He stopped for her, but didn’t kneel down. She clung to him anyway, her arms just barely long enough to wrap around his waist. The cracked concrete mask that she wore dug into his side, and, just a little, pushed up her face.

“Your present’s waiting for you by the roots,” she told him.

“Is that why you were playing so close to the edge?”

“But it was a girl this time, Gabriel!” Mireia let him go in exasperation. “She was so pretty. Her hair was dark and super silky even though it was all like FWOOSH and her eyelashes were long and looked really soft.”

“Mhm.” Gabriel started to walk again, slowly, feeling the weight of his legs. He worried that if he didn’t keep moving, he’d stop caring to move.

“If I got to grow up, I wish I would’ve looked like her,” Mireia said, nodding her head as she followed along. Her hair was untied but bloomed flowers, and as she moved, the ends of her hair and the petals that made their way down the strands, faded to fog.

Gabriel didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t say anything at all.

Mireia walked with him for just a short while more, but by the time they were just a few rows away from the carpet of petals around the base of the wisteria tree, she stopped and gently tugged Gabriel’s pocket. He still felt the stone somewhere deep inside his bones, but he didn’t think twice before pausing for her.

“Are you still going to visit my grave later?”

This time, Gabriel knelt. “What do you think?”

Mireia giggled, and then she was gone.

Gabriel walked along one of the many paths between the graves until his shoes were buried
in petals fallen from the wisteria tree. A parcel wrapped in cloth and knotted tightly sat on the
very edge of the tree’s self-laid violet skirt. The parcel must have been prepared by the older
woman from the town who was the first to leave food for him beneath the tree—he could tell by
how sweet the fabric smelled of soap and rice, how the knot was tied not just tight but neatly,
and how the cloth was ironed before being pulled around the corners. Gabriel thought about the
old woman’s hands, how thin and papery her fingers looked as they crossed her chest and pushed
back hair that hadn’t fallen out of place. They had reminded him of saplings freshly pulled from
the earth, with branches you’d have to peel because they wouldn’t snap. Her hands had also
reminded Gabriel of Tío Fito’s smile whenever he helped weed their neighbor’s yard.

The offering that day was heavy.

“We’ve been neighbors for...twenty years?” Fito wiped the back of his hand across his brow,
filling in the streams of sweat with dirt. “Besides,” he grunted as he uprooted another plant
desperately holding on, “you know how tough these weeds are. She’s too old to be doing this
herself.”

Gabriel looked down at the thin white petals that softly quivered between his hovering hands.
“But she spit at you.”

“Papito, sometimes people do things that are unfair or unkind, but the only thing that says
something about you, is what you do about it.”

“She spit at me,” Gabriel said, much softer.

The only sound for a while was snapping roots and the tearing of the earth.

“Almost done,” Fito broke the silence. He stopped working for a moment, resting his elbow
on his knee, and smiled at Gabriel, who had never looked up from the single flower. “What do
you think about going to Cruz for a sandwich and a milkshake after this? As a special treat.”

Gabriel clenched his jaw and nodded.

The wisteria tree was fully blooming. Always fully blooming.

Gabriel unzipped his bag and traded the box for the washed and folded cloth from the last time someone from town had left him an offering of food. Different things came from different houses; there was a man who left him parcels of naked boxes, all of different sizes, very early Sunday mornings, and a young woman and young girl who sometimes came by late afternoons and left a single heavy box, swaddled in soft, patterned fabrics, sometimes pink and sometimes adorned with ducks. Gabriel refilled the bottom of his bag with flower petals and, all at once too tired to zip it back up all the way, began the walk back home.

The cabin had been forgotten and felt so unlived in by the time that Gabriel found it, but it didn’t stay that way very long. It had been so full of dust that there was hardly any air, and all of the furniture had been in some state of disrepair. The cut counter between the wide window and the stove, which was hardly half the size of most other counters, had scars from careless cutting on its surface, from dropped metal pots and pans, and still bore the stains left behind by whatever life was lived before. There was little he could do but treat it kinder, and it was still plenty strong, so now the counter space was home to a least a dozen glass containers pushed so close together that they sometimes sang when he walked across the floor or the stove began to hum.

The first thing that Gabriel did when he got home was make coffee. He filled the old iron pot that he kept on the stove top with water and set it to boil, and while he waited he gently set
the thin copper filter in its place over the glass coffee pot and scooped in three heaping spoonfuls of grounds. Once the water bubbled, and the bubbles popped, he poured it over the grounds and waited beside the counter as mud slowly dripped and filled up the glass. It dripped one drop at a time, and though he had tried to figure out what was causing the block, he was too afraid of breaking the filter to handle it harshly. The coffee always came out burnt, almost stale, even with two spoons of sugar. There was always enough coffee left in the glass pot for a second cup that he left next to the stove.

There was a forgotten table he had found behind the cabin—in the overgrowth he could never bring himself to cut—whose white top was caked with dirt and whose metal legs had been so rusted that they hardly even moved. Gabriel had cleaned the dirt from every crevasse the best he could, and carefully removed the rust from first its joints and then its length. He brought the table where it would be safe inside, and sometimes covered it in a warm, clean sheet, and sometimes left it bare. It was really where he should have been eating, when he ate, but there were always other things that wound up resting there instead.

There were other things inside the cabin—the stove, the shelves, the cabinets, the entire bathroom—but of everything that had been left to rot, the most in need had been the couch. It had been so badly broken that Gabriel didn’t dare to ask it bear his weight for what must’ve been a good few weeks. He did the best he could for it, and while he was sure it wasn’t quite the same as it once was, he had been able to find enough pillows to replace its missing arm, and managed to fix its broken back so it stayed sturdy, even if it would only ever be able to lay flat. He supported it against the wall, and it was more of a bed now than it was a couch, but it didn’t creak or snap or fall to pieces. Gabriel had filled the couch with quilts and pillows, never
bothering to straighten the warmth of comfort away. It was comfortable. He liked to sit there, and he liked to imagine that the couch liked when he sat there, too. He would’ve slept there, if he ever slept.

Gabriel watched the wind work its way through bare branches and bushes, and early morning rolled into evening while he listened to the water and wind that surrounded the cabin. He placed his half-finished cup of coffee down in the sink and carefully unpacked the food that had been left for him that day: uncooked meat was kept swaddled inside of thick brown paper and tucked away inside his tiny freezer; leftover arroz con gandules was stored in the fridge, next to the glass bottle of milk; sliced plantains went on the shelf below the rice; a single bunch of green onions was hidden away in the vegetable drawer. There were still some potatoes in a bowl on one of the tables.

When he was finished, and the dishes were washed, Gabriel stepped into his shoes and went out the door, trying to work the weight out from his bones. He walked along the river, between the water and the broken metal fence, until he felt the chill coming from the Woods. He looked into the trees for longer than he should’ve, thinking about the paper boats.

It was night outside the storm-battered stone walls of the lighthouse. Waves beat against the rocks and sprayed salt up into sheets of rain, and the rolling thunder pounded in the wooden floors in a way that reminded Gabriel of the beating beneath his own skin. He stepped farther back into the shadows when he heard the frantic creak of the steep stairs above his head, but it wouldn’t do him any good; there were no lights, right then, inside the lighthouse that were turned on, and when lightning flashed it flashed so bright that not a single shadow was too brave to hide.
The keeper of the lighthouse was an old, haggard man with hair so coarse and white that it might have very well always been that way. Gabriel had only ever seen him running down the stairs, hobbling out of breath and almost always one wrong step from death. But the lighthouse keeper never fell. His fate was something far less decisive than an end.

By the time the old man made it to the landing at the floor farthest down, the floor at which Gabriel always waited, he was too out of breath to waste pleading with the ghosts locked inside the picture frames that lined his whole journey down. Gabriel never managed to make out the questions the old man seemed to ask, nor the ones he seemed forced to answer, but Gabriel always saw the terror in the old man’s eyes just as it overflowed, flooded, drowned. This was when, of course, the old man always saw him, too.

“You stay away!” The old man crashed into the corner of a tiny hallway table. “Stay away from me!” The old man fumbled in the kitchen drawers, searching until he found a single match. He threw himself back up the stairs, his hurry slowing him more than the nightmare ever could.

The old man only ever took a single match. A single match to light the lighthouse. But then, what did Gabriel know about lighting lighthouses? Certainly, the old man knew a great deal more.

Gabriel waited for the thudding to be far, far overhead before he dared to move. And when he did, he went straight to the cellar hatch to take a canister of kerosene. Every step he took stuck to the weathered wooden floorboards and left some of him behind. He locked the hatch on his way out, and slowly climbed the winding stairs, his shoulders weighed down by the oil, and his heart by the break in the old man’s voice that still silently echoed against the walls. So much of Gabriel was lost by the time he reached the top, and the storm seemed much softer as it howled around the tower. Against the glass. Gabriel poured the oil into the lighthouse’s
maw, then closed its metal jaw so that he himself wouldn’t melt away. He then gently sent off the heavy bags of sand that were lined up atop the railings. He watched them drift and twist so slowly on their journey down that he almost thought that they were dancing in the flashing lights.

Rafa was watching Gabriel clean the graves—all of which had their names stolen by time—in the north eastern corner of the graveyard. Rafa was a slightly older man, with fine lines etched into his hazy skin and an expressive face. He must’ve died when he was neither old nor young. Petals only grew along his temples and were strewn through the short hair that hugged his ears before falling softly on his shoulders. A precious few would fall onto the stone that was pinned firmly to his chest, where they seemed to melt like snow but didn’t even leave a stain. Rafa sat atop his headstone, legs and arms crossed and feet planted firmly on freshly cleared grass. His headstone was worn nearly smooth, only faint grooves alluding to the words that once were carved into its face. Mireia’s headstone was cracked and crumbled and held together by only moss and glue. Both were buried in the north eastern corner of the graveyard.

“Gabriel, Gabriel!” Mireia twirled around him until she was in front of him. “Tell me a story.”

Gabriel paused for a moment, holding gently to the soft cloth he used to clean, and watched mosaic settle on his skin. He had never been very good at telling stories.

“Once upon a time,” he began, as he started to clean again, “there was a little rabbit. He had ten older brothers and ten older sisters, and the little rabbit himself was born with nineteen other baby rabbits.”

“Woah,” Mireia said, “that’s a lot of babies.”

“The rabbit family lived in a cozy little nest in the stump of an old, hollow tree. Their home
was hidden in long grass and their door was covered by moss and hanging ivy. The mamá rabbit would go out to find food while the older children went out to play, leaving the new baby rabbits safe in their nest. The mamá rabbit only ever came back to feed the babies once during the day, before everyone came home for the night, because she was worried about leading the dangers that lurked inside the woods back to the nest.

“There was a wolf living in the woods around the time that the little rabbit was born. They caught sight of the mamá rabbit and, clever wolf that they were, quietly followed her home and waited for her to leave before gobbling up her newly born babies. Out of all twenty little rabbits, only one little rabbit survived.”

“Our little rabbit?” Mireia asked.

“Our little rabbit,” Gabriel told her.

She gasped.

“He curled up in the corner of the nest, in the very back where the shadows were at their darkest, and hid from the clever, hungry wolf. When the mamá rabbit came home that night, the last little rabbit cuddled into her side, scared but alive. The only thing the mamá rabbit was able to do was cry and cry for her children.

“The days became weeks, and the weeks then went on, and the mamá rabbit still couldn’t stop crying. The littlest rabbit tried to cheer her up by telling her that he loved her, sleeping curled into her side, and nuzzling her nose whenever she started to sob. Nothing he did seemed to work, and the mamá rabbit was so heartbroken that she didn’t read to him before bed anymore, didn’t rub her chin on his head anymore, didn’t even tell him she loved him anymore. She didn’t say much of anything anymore, not to the little rabbit and not to her ten other boys and ten girls when they came home for the day. The cozy nest they once lived in became a cold place filled
“When the little rabbit wasn’t trying to make the mamá rabbit feel better, he was trying to play with the older rabbit children. He ran through the trees chasing balls with his brothers and hopped through the tall grass in the meadow with his sisters. But his brothers never tried to pass him the ball, and his sisters sprinted too far and too fast and always left him behind. None of them said a word to the littlest rabbit. None of them looked at him, either.

“The little rabbit decided the only thing he could do was leave home and find a way to stop the mamá rabbit from crying—to find a way for them all to be happy again. So one early morning, the little rabbit packed himself a little bag and said goodbye to his mamá, to his brothers, his sisters, even though he knew they wouldn’t say goodbye back, and then he went off.

“The little rabbit was frightened, having never been out on his own before. He hopped through the forest sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, hiding in every thick bush and tall patch of grass that he came across. He saw other creatures that lived there, in the woods, but every time he thought to go up to speak with them, the image of the Wolf’s bloody maw flashed through his mind, and he couldn’t bring himself to.

“Days went by and the little rabbit wasn’t able to find any happiness on his own. The woods were big and he was small, and he knew that if he didn’t ask someone for help, he could search them forever and still never find what he wanted. A small twig snapped on the other side of the brush, and the little rabbit gathered up all of his courage and jumped through the leaves. He found himself face to face with the Wolf.

“The little rabbit was so scared he couldn’t run away. He saw himself, trembling and staring right back, trapped inside the Wolf’s big yellow eyes.

“Hello, little rabbit, said the Wolf, with a deep, rumbling voice. They sat back on their
haunches, too lightly for a creature their size, then they asked, *What is your name?*

“Mireia!” Mireia answered so quickly it took Gabriel by surprise.

He gently swept away the shards of glass closest to her as he gathered himself, then as he started to clear the rest of the grave he amended, “the Wolf asked the little rabbit.”

“Oh.” Mireia giggled.

“But it had been such a long time since anyone had said his name that the little rabbit couldn’t remember what it was. The Wolf took no offense at the silence, and asked the little rabbit if he came for a visit. The little rabbit still didn’t have the courage to speak, and was stuck staring at his own golden reflection. This time, the Wolf got up and started walking away.

“Seeing the Wolf turn their back made the little rabbit’s chest get even more tight. *Wait!* he cried out in a panic as he hopped after them. It had been such a long time since anyone had spoken to him, even the words of a wolf eased an ache in his heart he only just realized was there.

“The Wolf sat back on their haunches again, waiting patiently for the little rabbit to hop around their big body and stand in front of them. *You must need something important of me,* the Wolf said, *to call out when you’re so clearly frightened.*

“I’m not frightened,* the little rabbit said stubbornly.

“I can smell fear,* the Wolf told him at the very same time a cold breeze began to blow.

“The little rabbit found himself shaking again, like the leaves on the trees that he only ever saw become brown and fall down once in his whole life. He didn’t know if it was because he was scared, or if he was just cold, standing in the Wolf’s shadow.

“*Please don’t eat me,* the little rabbit asked, as strong as he could manage.

“To his surprise, the Wolf started to laugh. It was a low, gravelly sound that was as warm as
was chilling. The Wolf relaxed then, laying down but keeping their head up. I’m not going to eat you, they said.

“Really? the little rabbit asked as he inched closer.

“You have nothing to fear from me, the Wolf promised. Even if I was hungry, you wouldn’t fill my belly at all.

“In that instant, the little rabbit got so angry he forgot all about his fear. You can’t trick me! he cried. I know you eat bunnies much littler than me!

“It’s not that you’re small, the Wolf told him, it’s that you’re already dead.”

“I know what happens next!” Mireia grinned smugly, from one ear to the other.

“Do you?” asked Gabriel, who had no idea where this story was going from the moment he’d started to tell it. He zipped his bag and pushed himself to his feet.

Rafa continued to follow them, sitting on different graves with his arms crossed over his chest. He hadn’t said a word.

“Yup!”

“What happens next?” Gabriel followed her a short distance down to the next set of graves.

“Well, the little rabbit ran away from the Wolf—obviously.”

“Obviously.”

“And he ran and he ran until he reached a big, old log that fell into a pond a long, long time ago. And then he cried and he cried, and he cried so much that he woke up a mushroom that was growing next to the log.

“Cállate pendejo! The Mushroom was really angry at him.

“The little rabbit didn’t know that mushrooms could even sleep, let alone talk, but he still said sorry for disturbing it.
“What’s got you so sad, anyways? the Mushroom asked him. And then, when the little rabbit told it about what the Wolf said about him being dead, and how none of his family talked to him so it was probably true, it said, *I used to be a star; you know. Fell straight outta the sky and—*”

Mireia made a squelching sound with her mouth, “*that was that.*

“The little rabbit was listening so closely that he stopped crying. *I’m sorry to hear that,* he told the Mushroom. And he was.

“*Don’t be,* said the Mushroom. *Being dead’s not all that bad.*

“*It’s not?* the little rabbit asked it.

“*Nope,* said the Mushroom, *because when you’re dead you start to see that everything’s made out of stars, and that the stars are made out of everything! You’re never afraid, and you never feel lonely.*

“Then the little rabbit gasped and said that he couldn’t be dead! Because he was so scared of the Wolf, and he was so very lonely. He told the Mushroom about what happened with the other baby rabbits that got eaten, and how his mamá rabbit never stopped crying, and how nobody loved him so he went all by himself to try and find a way for them to be happy anyways, and then all about the big mean wolf. The Mushroom told the little rabbit it was sorry because it couldn’t bring back the baby rabbits that were dead, or make his family love him, or make the wolf less big and scary. But if he wanted to eat it, he was allowed to, and the Mushroom would make sure he never felt lonely ever again.

“*Are you sure?* the little rabbit asked it. *I don’t think I want to eat you.*

“*It’s okay,* the Mushroom told him, *because we’ll both be a part of everything one day.*

“So the little rabbit eats the Mushroom and falls asleep. He was so tired because he ran a lot and he cried a lot and after eating the Mushroom his tummy was super full. When he wakes up in
the morning, he hears the Mushroom in his head tell him, *Good morning.*

“*Good morning,* the little rabbit says, too—even though he can’t see the Mushroom any more.

“*Even though you can’t see me, I’m still here,* it tells him. *Everything you feel, I will feel with you. Everything you see, I will see with you. Everywhere you go, I will go with you.*

“Then the little rabbit goes to the pond to have a drink of water, but neither of them recognize what they see in the reflection. The reflection is of a little fuzzy rabbit with super soft fur and a face that’s made out of stone and with beautiful flower buds growing out of its back.”

Gabriel had stopped cleaning. For a moment, he and Mireia just stared at each other.

“The end,” she happily declared.

Gabriel didn’t know what to make of any of that.

“Mijo,” Rafa said rather suddenly, now that their story was done, looking straight into Gabriel’s eyes with an intense, but unreadable, expression, “when was the last time that you ate?”

Gabriel hesitated; he couldn’t quite remember.

Mireia hugged his waist, her stone face pressing into his stomach. “Are you hungry, Gabriel?”

“No.”

Rafa sighed and leaned heavily to one side. “What’s the point of everyone leaving you food if you forget to eat it?”

Gabriel didn’t have an answer. But the food he got was always gone by the time the townspeople left him more, so he was sure he must be eating it at the right pace.

“Gabriel, Gabriel.” Mireia grabbed the hem of his pants pocket with one hand, and used the
other to point to the sky. “Look at the moon!”

The moon that night was huge and bright and hanging closely, just above their heads.

“If you keep pointing, it’s gonna get mad and fall down on you,” Rafa warned her.

“So?” Mireia leaned back without letting go of Gabriel’s pocket, which made it difficult for him to stand still. “I’m already dead.”

The first thing that Gabriel did when he got back home was make coffee, but Rafa’s words still echoed in the back of his mind. He opened the fridge and took out the sliced plantains to eat while he waited for the water to boil. He couldn’t tell what they tasted like, or what they felt like between his teeth, but he was at least aware of how heavy his jaw was as he chewed. He ate them slowly. Every time Gabriel blinked, his eyelids grew heavier, too.

It was night, Gabriel knew, outside the storm-battered stone walls of the lighthouse. Waves crashed against the rocks and sprayed salt up into the rain, and rolling thunder overtook the sound of weathered wood in a way that reminded Gabriel of how one memory sometimes consumes another. He stayed standing, tucked into a corner with empty shelves and boxes, and looked up the steep steps high above his head, no more than shadows in the dark and almost bleached of color in the flashing light.

The keeper of the lighthouse looked somehow older, more haggard than before. He stood up on a stair so high around the bend that he was almost out of sight. His ashen hair was tousled and eyes, glassy filmed and wide, were fixed on one of the many photo frames hung along the walls. In the frame, a man and woman sealed away, both younger than the lighthouse keeper was then, but each missing a half of their face that the lighthouse keeper had. The old man stood
unsteadily, with one hand on the railing and the other on his head.

This was the first time Gabriel saw a captured moment clearly in the lighthouse, and it was the first time he heard the lighthouse’s keeper’s one-sided conversation.

“I know,” the old man’s voice harbored phantom pain, “I know—I know—how could I not know, you always told me, always—never let me forget! Never…I don’t know…I’m sorry, I’m…No, no—” the old man resumed his hurried, labored descent, “shut up! Just stop—stop talking, I—you never understood—never—!”

The lighthouse keeper fumbled down the last two steps and the glassy coating on his eyes poured out onto the landing floor in big, heavy droplets. Gabriel saw them spill and splatter. This was, of course, when the old man saw Gabriel too.

The lighthouse keeper shouted something at him, but it was so choked and garbled in his ears that Gabriel couldn’t understand a single word. Like being underwater.

It was early morning again. Soft hazy light filtered through the fog and slipped into the small wooden house, where Gabriel had decided he’d make his peace. Dancing streaks that weren’t any single color.

Gabriel was solid and sore but still not whole, sitting on the floor with his knee against the low round coffee table that was there long before him, and that he used to hate. It was the only thing Gabriel fixed or cleaned that showed him his own face in return. But the little table continued to hold more for him than he deserved, and once he decided not to look into its surface, his heart started to soften.

Gabriel got up and forced himself to take just a few more steps, just the ones it took to reach the stove and light the flame. He laid out two mugs on the cut-counter, between the window
and the stove, while waiting for the water to start boiling. Both mugs were decently sized, big enough to use but small enough to fit in what little space all the jars of herbs and spices left on the counter. The mugs were also both smooth and almost white, but one had recently been adorned with painted golden stars. Gabriel poured sugar in that one, and then for good measure, poured in a little more. Just as the bubbles began to pop, Gabriel replaced one pot with another holding milk. He slowly poured the water over coffee grounds, and then filled both of the cups. He waited. Looking at the window, stained but never finished, his gaze began to trace the fading lines of a face Mireia must’ve drawn in the fog some day before.

“Gabriel, Gabriel,” Mireia called, as she ran right through him.

Gabriel hummed in answer, but didn’t look up from the grave he had knelt in front of. He felt the chill of her tiny arms around his neck, and her weight against his back, as he plucked shards of glass from the dirt and put them into his duffel bag.

“Señor Caca’s being mean again.”

“Mira, ‘Señor Caca.’ Señor Culo Cagado.” Rafa drew the words out slow enough that this time Gabriel did look up. “Coño, you wanna say it, say it right.”

“Can we not?”

Rafa’s left brow shot up, unbalancing his already crooked face. “Hah? ‘Bendición’?”

“Bendición my ass.”

Mireia giggled into the back of Gabriel’s neck. He sighed and awkwardly stood up so Mireia could get down most comfortably. It was more for habit than necessity. She gently tugged on the front pocket of his pants before he could start to walk away.

“Gabriel,” he followed her gaze to the wisteria tree, “that girl is still here.”
The person that had come to leave an offering that morning was one that Mireia had grown very fond of. The person wasn’t Michael, but she would be Michael someday. Michael was neither tall nor short, neither small nor large, but Mireia was right to call her beautiful.

Michael stood under the Wisteria tree with the bag of parcels held in her arms, against her chest, leaning back beneath the weight. When Gabriel had first seen her, he was sure to walk through only the very backmost row of graves, cleaning glass from dirt as he kept her in the corner of his gaze. When Michael had first seen Gabriel, her eyes turned everywhere but to him, and looked like she wanted to call out, or even cross the threshold made by the Wisteria tree. She did neither, and instead she had stood there for a while now, scanning the far side of the graveyard with flitting eyes and shifting her weight from right to left and left to right like she was fidgeting. Her hair was thick and pieces that the wind blew veiled her face that her hands were too full to push away.

Her arms were like saplings freshly pulled from the earth, with branches you’d have to peel because they wouldn’t snap.

Gabriel sighed and gently took Mireia’s hand off of his pants. He slowly made his way closer, careful to step over small glass buds as they bloomed around his feet. He made sure to keep a row of graves between them.

“Do you need something?”

When Michael saw him coming, she had straightened and squared her shoulders as much as she was able. She was wearing soft black sweatpants and a thick off-white mantle adorned with fine embroidery along its edges. She tripped over her words some, but eventually held the bag a little further from herself. “Here. For you.”

Gabriel went to move, then hesitated, then he stood before her. He took the bag first by its
leather handles, then as he lifted the weight from Michael’s arms, and she let go, he placed a hand at the bottom.

The offerings were heavy that day.

Gabriel put the bag down by his feet, and switched the parcels with the empty boxes from his duffel.

“Here. For you.” He handed the bag, much lighter now, back to Michael, in the same way that he’d taken it, only this time in reverse. Michael awkwardly scooped the bag first from the bottom, then put her arm through the handles and held it on her shoulder.

“Thanks,” Michael said and smiled slightly, and pushed her hair out of her face only for the wind to blow it back.

Gabriel nodded slightly and bent down for his own bag that he then held on his shoulder.

“Um—!” Michael jolted forward before Gabriel could walk away. She stepped back again when he turned back to her, and looked everywhere but at him. “Thank you…for taking care of the graves.”

Gabriel wasn’t sure what to say.

“Everyone’s been freaked out—with the Northern Woods growing closer, and the air, and glass coming out of the ground, and this wisteria tree…” Michael shook her head and looked down at Gabriel’s feet. “You don’t know how much it means to us all to know that the people buried here are still being cared for.”

This time Gabriel found words sooner. “I’m…happy I’m able to help.”

Michael’s brows furrowed as she smiled. They were angled and velvet black. She finally looked at Gabriel. Her jaw was sloped and her eyes were flecked with gold. “Are you a witch?”

Gabriel felt the air inside his lungs escape his body with the wind. There was once a witch
who told him he was much loved by *mosaic*, but he himself was not a witch.

“I’m sorry—I know it’s probably rude to just ask like that.” Michael looked away, “It’s just—there’s something I really need help with.” She squared her shoulders and looked back into Gabriel’s face resolutely. “I’d pay you, of course. I don’t have money, but I’ll give you anything I have.”

Gabriel was not a witch, but he worried what could be so important for her to offer someone something as dangerous as anything. “What sort of ‘something’ do you need help with?”

“You mean you’ll—”

“I don’t know,” he said quickly. And then he exhaled deeply through his nose. “But at the very least I’ll hear you out.”

There was someone in the village that Michael cared for very deeply: an older man who lived alone in a drafty studio apartment for as long as she could remember. He was the kind of man who had very little to give, but the way that he gave made it seem like he lived with an excess that most people only see in their dreams. He kept to himself, but did so with a smile and an open front door, and he wore a heart on his sleeve that was so big and so warm that someone like Michael couldn’t help but stay close to thaw the chill of the world. The man was notably hollow of late, from his unmanicured nails to his throat when he laughed. There was an absence deep in his eyes that clouded his face and Michael didn’t know how to describe it but spent a long while trying. He had been drained of the light he once was full of. Like a lake that had been drained of all of its water.

Saed and Jovan, who Gabriel could only assume were people from the town, said that the man would be fine; whatever pain he was feeling was pain that would pass, and after he was given some time his wounds would crust over and heal, as all wounds tended to do. The old
woman who Michael reminded Gabriel of, who Michael called Abuelita, warned her that not all pain is the kind of pain that will pass, and not all wounds are the kind of wounds meant to heal.

Michael didn’t know what kind of pain the man was in now, what caused him to pull into himself and gently shut his front door, but she knew that she couldn’t just sit and do nothing. She told Gabriel that the man had been there for her when she needed someone the most. She didn’t tell him anything further than that, and from the way her hands moved to hold herself close, Gabriel thought it would be cruel to ask.

She looked like she was going to cry.

“I’ll do what I can.”

“Really?” Michael’s eyes widened, and in them Gabriel saw someone he didn’t quite recognize.

Gabriel looked away. The wind blew gently again.

“And the cost?” She asked, after the leaves and the petals settled on the ground.

“What’s that?” Gabriel had pointed to a long, thin blue tube precariously placed on one of the shelves, next to a plant he had named Carina.

“Just makeup,” his mother had answered as she dusted mosaic from his hair.

“Why does Miss .Pixel always give you makeup?”

“She’s kind enough to give me something for helping her, even though she doesn’t have much to give.”

“But you don’t like makeup.”

“I don’t like makeup.” His mother knelt on the blanket they used as a rug. “But who knows? It might come in handy one day.”
“In case you like it when you’re older?”

“In case your tío brings home a girl and I need to give her a gift on the fly.”

“Mamá, Tío can’t even find his hat when it’s on his head, how’s he gonna find a whole girl?”

His mother had laughed, and when she laughed Gabriel was always so happy that he couldn’t help but laugh too.

Rafa was watching the two talking under the tree, still leaning against one of the graves that wasn’t his own with his arms crossed over his chest. He was wearing an unreadable face that made Gabriel feel heavy and cold and incredibly small. Mireia must have gotten bored waiting, and had taken instead to running and playing between the graves. In that moment she appeared twirling in front of Rafa until she fell over, into the dirt. Gabriel couldn’t tell from afar if she had tripped on Rafa’s feet or her own, but he knew she must have been laughing.

“A dress,” was Gabriel’s answer.

“I’m sorry?”

“It can be an old dress. One that doesn’t fit you any more, or that you just don’t wear.”

“I…I don’t think anything I have is going to fit you.”

“It’s not for me.”

There was silence for a long enough time that Gabriel noticed. He looked back at Michael, and not sure what he had been expecting, was surprised. She was smiling. It was a small smile that showed more in her eyes than her lips, but it was so unnecessarily kind that he found it unnerving.

“Any style preferences? Certain colors?”

“Anything is fine.”
“Okay.” Michael swept thick strands from where they had fallen to back behind her ear, and then she held out one of her hands. “It’s a deal.”

When his mother worked, she always started with a drink. It didn’t matter why they came, or if they were wet with sweat or snow, whoever came to her for help would spend some minutes sitting at the little table beneath the kitchen window while she hummed over bubbling on the stove. Sometimes it was coffee, sometimes tea, sometimes cocoa, or even sometimes nothing more than milk. Gabriel would watch her from the living room, tucked into the place that let him peek around the corner. His mother never put mosaic in these drinks the way she did when he woke up scared or couldn’t sleep at all because his nose was clogged. Whoever came to her for help would always watch her, too.

Michael came back later that same day. Cradled in her arms and swathed in frills both red and white, was a well-used silver vacuum flask, covered in peeling, faded stickers of roses and stars and something that might’ve once been a cartoon face. She fumbled with unwrapping it as she explained, “I’m really worried,” even though Gabriel never asked. She handed him the flask and then the rolled-up fabric—separately.

“I never got around to wearing it and it’s too small for me, now,” she said while eyeing all the frills. Her gaze shifted nervously up towards his eyes. “I can bring a different one if that doesn’t work, or…”

Gabriel waited for her to finish, but she didn’t. He told her what she brought was fine, and thought that she must think he’s taking something from her that only he could see. He left her there, beneath the wisteria tree, to brew something in the cabin kitchen that would fill the flask.
It wasn’t until the door was closed and his first shoe was off that Gabriel realized he didn’t know what Michael drank—let alone the man she was concerned for—but his chest felt tight and hollow when he considered going back to ask. As he poured freshly boiled water over coffee grounds, he hated himself a little more. He added sugar, steamed milk, and just a little cinnamon, and filled the flask to the very top.

He wrapped the two mugs he kept on the counter in an old, but freshly washed, hand towel to keep them from getting chipped.

When he went back out to where Michael waited beneath the wisteria tree, he told her to fill each of the mugs and sit with the man as they shared a drink.

“That’s it?” she asked him.

“That’s it,” he told her.

She looked into his face, this time not nervously but searching, for what felt to him like a long while.

“Thank you,” she finally said, even though her brows were still furrowed.

She didn’t need to thank him, and Gabriel wasn’t even sure she should, but he thought better of telling her either of these things. Instead, he told her that he hoped that it would work.

“Yeah.” Michael looked down at the heavier flask resting on the heavier bed she once again held cradled in her arms. “Me too.”