Okay. Here they go. The drama. The crying and screaming. It’s one of those official days when families can meet each other across the border. It’s not even light and they’re already here, hundreds of them, waiting for the guards to say go. Blue shirts for the Americans. White shirts for everyone who isn’t. They are so fucking loud, almost louder than the swooping TV helicopters. And then the guards say go, and everyone runs at each other like the border version of The Amazing Race. On the U.S. side, we’re the lucky ones, no? We got everything. But it’s the White Shirts that hand over small foil packets to the Blue Shirts: chimichangas, flautas, churros. The TV crews do interviews for rich Americans to watch on their phones. Afterwards, people go home. The TV helicopters fly off. And then it’s just the geckos and snakes and me.

Geckos. Border Patrollers run up and down most of the day and catch the ones who come through the holes in the fence or the sugar-cane fields. I used to think Border Patrol was everywhere, like bad breath. But they just don’t have that many guards. It’s not hard to work out the burrito breaks.

Snakes. They patrol the rape trees near the border where the coyotes take the women and girls. The snakes work with the coyotes. I’ve seen them drag off women with their kids. I don’t know where they go. Maybe a place where they have to be prostitutes.

I dress like a boy.

First rule: Don’t look like you’re fresh off the border. The Seventh-Day Adventists give away clothes on Fridays. I got tennis shoes, a gray baseball hat, green sweatpants, and a blue sweatshirt that I had to wrestle from this guy. He jumped me. That’s mine. Like I should just hand it over. I kicked him on the ankle (Alex: Always go for the ankle, knee, and crotch) and while he was yelling for his mami, I was gone.
Tried stuffing my hair in the baseball hat but it falls out quick when you have to run. Cut my hair off. A girl on her own stands out. A kid in a baseball hat is just a kid in a baseball hat.

The church people sometimes give a little plata, usually mothers with kids, and I buy tortillas and beg peanut butter from the stand near the bus station. Sometimes the mothers give me tortillas and ask where my parents are.

Mami and Papi are here on the U.S. side, too, but they’re in detention. Border Patrol got them as soon as we crossed. Me and Alex ran, but Alex went back to the other side. He didn’t follow me. He always follows me.

Mami says when we were babies we thought we were the same person. You realized you were two and not one when you were sixteen months. But we never grew out of the feeling of being one. The only difference is that Alex is a guy and he likes that macho rap bullshit. I tell him he should listen to Beyoncé because she understands what it is to be a woman in trouble. Alex says I’m not a woman in trouble but what does he know? He’s shit-for-brains thirteen. Which makes me shit-for-brains thirteen, too, but at least I have taste in music. I keep trying to teach Alex taste but he’s a slow learner, and it’s not just music.

Like, when he crushed hard on the class asswipe, Camilo Dias. Pendejo had the comb-able eyebrow and the cool jeans. Okay. I hated him, but what can you do? Guy was hot. Day in, day out, Alex is going on about Camilo’s great pinche smile and Camilo’s great pinche teeth and what it would be like to kiss pinche Camilo. I got bored listening to Alex. Okay. I got worked up about what it might be like to kiss Camilo. So I did. And it broke Alex’s heart and it was like I broke my own. Alex is really sensitive.

That’s why I worry about him over there. Sometimes I think I should go back so I can take care of him. But what will happen to Mami and Papi when they get out and we’re not here? So I’m waiting for them to get released, and then I can tell Alex. I don’t know why he didn’t follow me. At least we’d be starving and homeless together.

Got the fence worked out. Once a week, alternating eight poles
from the gray and rust pole: to the left for me on my side, to the right for Alex on his side. Eight because that’s our birth month. Twenty holes up from the bottom and four across. Our birth year. The first person to arrive pokes two fingers through and waits three seconds. If nothing happens, we wait for two minutes and try again. But we’re always there on the first try. I’ll poke my fingers through and immediately they’re caught and I hear Alex’s breathy laugh. Hey. If he gets his fingers through first I grab them like they’re first prize in the lotto. The minute our fingers connect, it’s like I’ve woken up. I can hear things and see things and smell things. I can definitely smell Alex:

—Parcero, you don’t have a shower over there in the jungle?
—And you are showering every day in the land of hot showers?
—Got better things to do than wash.
—Yeah?
—Going to Disneyland, watching the baseball—

He’s not laughing.
—Nina?
—What?
Alex’s voice is unsteady.
—You—so what are the trees like over there?
He wants to ask if I’ve seen Papi and Mami.

It’s an hour to walk to the Detention Center outside of town. On the way, there’s a water fountain at the gas station. So, you fill your plastic bottle and you start walking. You stay off the main roads because that’s where the van guys cruise.
I’ve been to the Center twice, but I can’t do nothing when I get there. You get to the building. You can see the front door. And it’s nothing but barriers and guards and cameras.
Mami and Papi will call when they get out. I keep my phone charged. It’s not a great phone. Like, I can’t get Internet or nothing, but it works. I charge it at the gas station or the 7-11.
Alex lost his phone when we ran. He’s trying to get a new one.

So, you walk like you know where you’re going. If one of those vans comes driving around and you can’t duck down into a doorway or alley, you stand near a family that has a lot of kids.
Most kids get picked up fast. The small ones don’t know what they’re doing. I don’t even know how they get into town without their parents. They just stand there, holding hands, and the guards load them into the van.

Kids like me, we know when the vans come ’round. I was in the 7-11 when los toombo rolled up. I was out the back before they’d even pulled over.

The only time I go to the 7-11 now is for charging my phone. And I go at different times: early morning, mid-afternoon.

Alex shakes my fingers.
—The trees.
—Well, the trees are big and wide, like at home. You can sit in them all day and drink Coke and eat French fries.
—You do that?
—Hell, yeah. It’s the U.S., pendejo. This is how we roll.
He doesn’t say I’m a liar,
—and what else?
I try to think what else there is to tell about trees,
—There’s a bird that comes.
I can tell he likes this bit. His fingers pinch mine.
—What color is it?
—It’s a black one. It makes this—
—No. It’s not black. It’s brown. A small one. Like the ones at home.

Bam. We’re back in the giant ceiba tree outside our house, making stories. Me with my back to the trunk, my legs stretched along a two-foot-thick branch. Alex is lying on a branch just above. His arm is dangling down so I can hit it, which I do—not hard—just to make it swing. He’s tearing leaves up.
—and Cora de Rojas sticks the sword through Mustachio’s stomach—
—and he goes aaaggggggb and dies. And the village—
Alex wriggles so he can look down at me,
—He doesn’t just die. He takes a long, long time. Because of the evil. Remember?
—No, he dies fast because of the evil. So there’s no more evil.
I do my it’s-that-simple face and waggle my hands. Alex shakes his
head like I’m the dumbest person in the world.
— He has to suffer because he’s made other people suffer.
It makes sense.

There are stories and stories. This one has to be real even though we both know it’s not.
— Right. I remember—it’s a small brown bird.
— What does it sound like?
I wait, like I’m listening to the bird,
— I can’t hear it right now —
— It’s nighttime, idiot. It’s sleeping.
I take a risk:
— No, this is the nightbird. This one tells your dreams.
— Ahhh. The Night Whistler.
He’s getting into it,
— Okay. If the song is high and pretty, it’s a good dream. But if it’s soft and low, it’s a sad dream.
— And sometimes the songs are a bit mixed. Sometimes the Night Whistler sings low and pretty.
Alex’s fingers pinch mine.
— What does that mean?
I was hoping he’d tell me. I think for a bit.
— It means it’s a good dream but you have to be patient.
Silence.
Alex:
— Can you hear it now?
— No.
He drops my fingers.
— Aguas, Nina! They’re coming.

I drop. I hate these pinche green sweatpants. You can practically see them from space. I have to go back to the church and find dark ones.
I squirm on my stomach until I’m behind some scrub grass. Not much cover but I scoop up handfuls of sandy dirt, throw it on my pants, and make myself flat. From under my hat I can see the truck lights playing along the fence like a bad movie. Please please please let them drive past.
And then I hear voices from behind the fence. One gets louder.
One says *shhh*. The truck lights are closer. Things bang against the fence, like someone’s fighting. The truck stops about fifty feet from me. The guards get out. On the other side of the fence everything goes quiet. And then a shout. A scream, really, and the guards shine these enormous lights at the fence.

I scrabble away, hit the first shallow ditch, and lie low.

It wasn’t Alex, because Alex isn’t the screaming type. He never screams. But what if someone did something to him that made him scream?

The guards are yelling and whoever it is over the fence is yelling back. I move farther away, farther away, until I can get up and run.

Alex and me are always on the relay teams at school. First and fourth legs. Our teams win a lot of stuff. He’s good at the 100 meters. I’m better at the 800. We run the same. You can only tell it’s me because of the black braid. That I don’t have anymore. So maybe I can run faster now.

Outside of the town there’s a place where they make concrete. Next to that there’s a kind of shit pile with old panels of wood and rusting car shells. A few other *chavos* stay there, too, but no one stays long. Sometimes we share a tortilla or bread or anything we can get. We take it in turns to steal glue. It gets you through the no-food days. But I’m careful. You never know when the van guys will come by. Like, if you’re doping up, don’t stay in a car shell. That’s the first place they look. You want a ditch or a place behind a store that has room for one person only. The van guys like to collect groups of kids, like a four-for-one deal.

No one’s moving around the woodpile. No one’s in the car shells. I grab the half-sleeping bag I’ve hidden in the wheel well of what used to be a VW and slip behind a stack of rotting planks. Lucky for me, I can sleep anywhere. But I can’t sleep. Alex doesn’t scream. Alex is okay. I flip open my phone. No messages.

I sleep and wake up but it’s only the wind pushing the leaves around. The light is already coming through the planks when I wake up again. I check my phone. 8 a.m.
Alex and me never go to the fence two days in a row. It’s once a week, like we agreed. But I’m going tonight. I spend some time sending him our twin vibe thing. Alex—you there?
Is he hurt? I don’t want to think about what someone can do to a skinny kid.
Alex can sing like Usher. He can even dance like Usher doing Michael Jackson, except better. Alex does the Moonwalk like that’s how he always gets around.
And he always sends back the twin vibe thing. I’ll feel it any second now.

The time I was crying at school after this pinche guy I really liked said he only kissed me because of a bet: Alex knew I’d be outside behind the trashcans because I fold up really small.
The time Alex was sniffing glue at lunchtime. He was on the other side of the football field. It’s more like a dirt slab but they play football and do athletics and some lame end-of-school-year parade there. I got to him before the school guard did. Amelia, cute girl with blonde-brown curls, wanted him to ask her out and he couldn’t because, you know, Camilo. Alex said it was like her whole body was crying and he could feel it all over his body.

Any second now.
The rest of the day comes and goes. I’m behind the wood and then I’m at the 7-11 to charge my phone, which doesn’t need charging because I never use it. And then I’m walking past the back of the bakery. Bad idea. The smells hurt my stomach. And then the guy who comes out to smoke a joint hands me a bag with two rolls.
And says nothing and I say nothing because I know he’s not meant to give me anything and he’s not meant to smoke out there. Being high is bad for breadmaking or something.
And I cram down the first roll like I haven’t eaten in days. Which is true. And I want to eat the second one but I also want to give it to Alex. And then I don’t know how I’m going to give it to him because the fence holes are only big enough to touch fingers and that means I’ll have to shred the roll and what good will that do?
I do some pointless crying. Then I fall asleep and jerk awake.
How stupid can I get? Sleeping in the alleyway behind the bakery. I get back to the woodpile and find a different place to crash. And I’m out until I wake up again. It’s dark. I check my phone: 10 p.m. Weird how time comes and goes.

I head for the fence around 1 a.m. It’s too early. I could get caught. Alex could get caught. But I can’t wait any longer.

I count eight fence poles to the left, our birth month, and twenty holes up from the bottom and four across. Our birth year. I stick my fingers through for three seconds. Nothing. I wait for thirty seconds because I can’t wait for two minutes, then try again. Nothing.

I try one more time and then I feel something, like there’s air moving against the fence, and I yank my fingers back. There’s a swooshing sound. I don’t know what that is—a hand? A knife? A machete? Freeze. I can hear someone’s breath. It’s not Alex. It’s like someone’s about to speak.

I check up and down the fence. No patrol truck. I back away quietly, crouched down, doing the careful toe-to-heel thing Alex and me learned so we could sneak past Mami when she was hanging laundry.

I don’t want to hear if anyone speaks. I don’t want to hear them say something about Alex. Because Alex is in a safe place somewhere else.

It was stupid to come. I go inside my head and call to him.

When I’m far enough from the border, I walk another way back. It’s a risk to go through the neighborhoods but it feels like the van guys are going to be out tonight. I pass a house down a small street. There’s a huge blue tarp outside with maybe enough room for a small person. This is against all the rules I’ve made. Never go into the neighborhoods. Never go near any of the houses. Never give your name to anyone.

And what if he’s sick? What if he can’t move to get water or go to the toilet? Who’s going to help him?

I’m afraid to go back to the woodpile. I just want to be in a place
where I don’t have to think about the van guys. And that blue tarp looks inviting.

I free a corner and stick my head in and inhale. Brick. So they’re building. So I have to be out early. I set my phone alarm and dial it down low so I can just hear it. I’m settling in against the brick when I hear snuffling. I lift the corner just a bit and a wet nose comes in, followed by a small body. The dog and I get acquainted. Luckily it’s not a barky type. I still have the second bread roll in my pocket so I give the dog half. The other half is for Alex if I can find a way to get it through the fence. We settle down, breaking another rule. No pets. I can’t have a dog because I can’t feed a dog. The bread roll is luck. But here is the dog. It’s good to feel this small warm body against me. The dog yawns and sticks its nose in my neck. We sleep.

Early morning I’m off. The dog thinks about coming with me and decides it prefers the bricks. It’s a good idea in the end. I don’t want some dog running after me, making it easier for the patrol to track me down. I say goodbye and head off to the woodpile to see if anyone has glue.

Where is he? Is he hurt? And why isn’t he answering my twin vibe call? We’re always there for each other because that’s how it works. Except I’m not there for him now.

No one has glue.

I have to go back again to the fence tonight. Alex will be there. I just have to wait. I’m good at waiting.

It took forever to get our phones. Alex and me did the whole beg-and-plead for weeks, and when Papi finally agreed it was like he was giving us each The Phone of Gold. The-phone-is-a-privilege and don’t-expect-me-to-pay-for-long-distance and if-I-catch-you-texting-in-class. It doesn’t even get Instagram. It’s just phone calls. Like, that’s what a phone’s for.

I know someone picked up Alex’s phone. It was hard but I deleted his contact info and blocked incoming calls except for from Mami and Papi. When Alex does call, I’ll know it’s him.
It’s hard to find places to hang. You can’t hang for too long because people start watching you, and you don’t know if someone’s going to snitch. I wish I could go someplace where no one would look at me, but the detention center is here and Alex is here. So.

I end up back at the woodpile and the car shells and I spend some time trying to imagine what the cars used to look like and how fast they went and if you could put in a big engine and make them go faster. And I fall asleep under one of the shells. I wake up with this cold thing stuck in my face and I think the pinche cops have found me and it’s all over. But it’s the dog. How did the dog find me?

I’m so happy to see the dog. The half-roll is stale now, so I give it to the dog. Now he’ll love me and I’ll have to take care of him. The dog lies under the car with me and I scratch his ears and rub his chest. Then, like all dogs, he rolls over so I can scratch his stomach and I find out he’s a girl. I tell her not to get pregnant. There’s a lot of bad male dogs out there just waiting to take advantage of a nice lady dog. But she’ll probably fall for the first guy who licks her behind the ears.

We sleep for a bit and then I wake up and check my phone. Midnight. Way too early to check the fence but I’m too nervous to go back to sleep.

The dog comes with me a little way and then turns off down an alleyway. I’m relieved she’s gone, but all the way to the fence I keep checking behind me to see if she’s following.

I’m lucky enough to arrive in the shallow ditch just after the patrol goes by. I wait for a couple of minutes and then count eight fence poles to the left, twenty holes up from the bottom and four across. I stick my fingers through for three seconds. Nothing. I breathe in and out. And then his fingers arrive. I grab on to them.

—Alex. You—
—I’m okay. I’m okay.

But his voice isn’t okay and he won’t tell me because he knows I can’t do anything to help him.
—You—you eating? Food?

He laughs a bit.
—And what else would I be eating?
I want to ask what happened, if he’s injured, if anything is broken.
—So I waited on your fat ass yesterday.
—Well, I couldn’t come yesterday. I had an important meeting.
—Yeah?

He breathes in, uneven and hard,
—Signed a record deal with a big studio.
—Like Gil Motion?
—Psssh. Bigger than them or White Lemon.

I show him I’m happy, really happy:
—Of course bigger than them. Alex, you’re a pinche rockstar.

His voice is softer:
—And dancer.

He does Usher and Bruno Mars and dubstep and that dislocated shoulder thing. I don’t want to think about that.

I make my voice strong,
—So you’ll need to learn this new dance for your first video.

His fingers fall away from the fence.
—Alex?
—Yeah. I’m here.

The fingers push at mine.

I laugh like I mean it:
—Just like you to fall asleep.
—Yeah. That’s exactly what I was doing.

I smile. That’s more like it.
—You ready? You hold your foot.

His hand falls away again. I wait for him to grab my fingers.
—Nina, I—

I rush on,
—Never mind that bit. Then you drop your knees, swish your hand over your stupid greasy hair. Ha ha.

He’s breathing weird.
—And—then?
—And you jump and hit your foot against mine.

I jump and kick the fence. I hear a feeble knock from the other side. I know he didn’t jump.
—Then we do it again and then we turn around and face the other
way—other way, moron. You gotta get this right for the video.

And I bully and call him out until I can hear him copying the moves, as many as he can. I pretend like I don't hear him stumble and swear.

—Hey, Alex, we got a dog.
—Yeah?
—She follows me everywhere.

His voice is lower down, like he might be sitting. I crouch, too.

Poke my fingers through.

He touches my fingers,
—She there now? Can you hold her up?
—She—I couldn’t bring her. I’ll bring her next time. She does tricks.
—Take care of her. Okay. It’s a big responsibility, a dog.
—Yeah. I gave her some food today.

He coughs. It sounds rough.
—Nina, I’m going now. So, come after a week. Maybe two weeks. Maybe find a good place to stay with the dog—
—Our dog.
—Right. Our dog.

We hold fingers for a while. He pinches me and lets go.

I check for the patrol truck. Those lazy bastards. I don’t bother crouching. I walk straight back across the shallow ditch and across town to the woodpiles. Then I turn away and start walking out of town towards a black sign with white writing that shines under the orange street lamp: 1,343 miles to Los Angeles. I look around for the dog. She’s nowhere. Maybe I’ll stick around. Maybe I’ll start walking and she can catch up.

Alex is the best dancer you’ve ever seen. He’s fast and pretty and everyone watches him like he’s a star. When he gets here, we’ll start a dance club for kids. And he’s going to love our new dog, and Mami and Papi won’t even complain. And we’re going to live in Los Angeles where everyone walks to the bakery and eats hot rolls. And me and Alex, we’ll sleep in the ceiba tree outside our house where the Night Whistler sings.