

State of Nature

Libertad Ansola Palazuelos

After the taxi stopped in the darkness Sol patted my lap and said we could sleep at her Nana's house. Her eyes were almost closed. I wondered what she could see from the small crack that separated her eyelids. Could she see me? Had she guessed I was getting nervous and that was why she'd said that? Had she thought that sleeping at her grandmother's put an end to the problem of being in the middle of the mountains at three in the morning? The problem was we didn't have enough money to get from the city all the way into town (it was seen far off in the distance: lights glittering like matches inside tall concrete boxes, far below us on the dark plain). I was sure it had been Marco Antonio, back in the city, who had stolen the money from Sol's wallet. On the other side to the faraway town, there was Nana's house in the landscape too, much closer. Sol pointed with her long bony finger through the taxi's window (her pink nail bumping against the glass) at the small pale cube illuminated by two lampposts at the end of the track.

Nana's stayed in sight all the time while we walked (it brought back the necessary sense of humanity to us as we marched uphill in our glittery clothes, panting our city breath, our handbags hanging from our bodies like deadweights). At least we were wearing sneakers. They go well with sequins and are comfy (at least that's what Sol says and I don't usually contradict her because it's better not to). White sneakers are designed specifically for almost-posh desperate girls like us, my mother says. She thinks they don't look elegant and tries to convince me to wear sandals or the pair of fancy shoes with a tiny bit of heel that she bought for my graduation. She always insists that I wear them again and swears that she's not going to buy me anything else ever again if I don't wear them. She always complains when she has to wash my white sneakers that always end up black when I come back home. But tonight, I'm not coming back. What would I want with a pair of sandals now? Being elegant is pointless, Mum, I think to myself while Sol walks ahead of me, like she's forgotten I'm walking with her.

We were desperate to reach the small white house that steamed in the cold with fragrant false security and false belonging. As we walked, I thought: why does my mother think the night is dangerous? Are we lost and subject to the perils of the wilderness? Is this the state of nature, and are we the embodiment of the city walking clumsily uphill a cobbled path? Are we caught

between the city and town, stuck in the mountains that separate them? Are these mountains (whose towering presence inevitably reaffirms their power) ominous for those who forget them when they submerge themselves in the comforts and luxuries of the town or the city (with their quiet rules, false security, and false belonging)? Was it freedom that you felt in the surroundings of Nana's house, on a winter night at three in the morning (or was it just a terrible hangover coming)? Was it all — city, distant town, wild mountains — trying to teach us a lesson? I think I never forgot about the mountains because I never wore sandals, not even flat ones. It was like I somehow knew we would end up here.

We had been drinking all evening and most of the night and had fallen asleep in the taxi, our heads supporting each other in a pyramidal structure. I imagine drool was dripping from my chin in a little cascade onto my lap (where my hands lay dead) because when I opened my eyes my palms were sticky and damp. Sol was asleep and when the taxi stopped, she half-opened her eyes (and kept them like that all the time while we walked to Nana's like there was a big bright sun in front of her). When the mountains could only be seen from a distance and the car was still sliding through the motorway and we were still safe with the taxi driver I'd remembered that we only had five euros left but I kept my eyes closed. When the ominous mountains were closer (and were no longer visible whole to the human eye because we were inside them) I was conscious that the taximeter was over five euros and I got scared. I told the man's inquisitive eyes pasted on the rear-view mirror that we only had five. 'I'm really sorry,' I said and felt helpless and embarrassed (despite still being drunk) as soon as I'd said it. The man said he wouldn't drive any further and the car stopped there. Sol said we were happy to get off even though I wasn't entirely sure I was happy. The eyes in the mirror looked like they could kill us but the car drove off, skidding on the muddy surface, setting us free in the wild (for a moment I imagined the police finding our bodies in the morning. Sometimes I get intense flashes of all the terrible things that could happen. I think this is entirely my mother's fault too).

When we'd got out of the taxi and looked around us I felt sorry for myself and regretted wearing Sol's sequined top. I regretted carrying a party handbag in the middle of the mountains (we had filled it with tiny stones because empty didn't look the same and we didn't want to put anything of value inside). I also regretted having put on all that glittery eyeshadow (my eyes were itchy now so I rubbed them) and having arranged my hair into a ponytail for over half an hour in the mirror at home. The ponytail was now a tangled knot because I had fallen asleep in

the taxi and in the darkness it felt heavy, dragging me down as I walked. Marco Antonio had complimented me on the ponytail. He had looked at it as if he wanted to touch it but didn't. He did touch Sol's hair a lot, played with her curls, and even flicked his long fingers at the butterfly pin attached to it. He asked if it was a firefly or a butterfly, but Sol pushed his hand away (he still touched her hair more after that and she let him do it but rolled her eyes at me). We had lost him at the club and had run away without him. Sol said they were both jerks, him and his friend, the barman. Sol said girls were meant to run away and leave them wanting for more, that was the strategy.

When we'd got out of the taxi Sol's wallet was popping out of the left pocket of her glittery jeans. What use was it if it was empty? Her curvy body was pressed inside the shiny fabric, hugging it tightly, making things bulge out of the pockets as she walked. Inside the other pocket was the packet of cigarettes, scrunched up against her right thigh (if there were any cigarettes left, they would be smashed into tobacco curls and paper crumbs by now). The taxi driver drove off and left the two of us alone on the side of the road at the outskirts of Lencreña. He was pissed off when I told him we had only five euros left but it was too late anyway, we were already in the mountains. I picture his eyes, again and again, framed on the rear-view mirror, making me feel guilty (was it because that was who I really was, a reckless little fool? Was that what everyone thought?). We could only see his eyes in the rear-window mirror, but I could tell he was pissed off because of the way his eyes pierced mine in the darkness of the taxi and it made me think of a murderer burying our young bodies in a thicket in the mountains.

As we walked, I thought: how silly are we, wearing sneakers and sequins? How silly are we, thinking two boys have fallen in love with us because we ran away from them? I blamed my mother for putting these thoughts in my head as we walked (I blame her for almost everything, it's true). Why did I always think everything I did was pointless and stupid? Sol said it was fine, not to worry. At her Nana's house (that's what she called her grandma) there was enough room for the two of us in her bed from when she was little. Sol said the bed was big enough for both of us. How were the both of us going to sleep in a child's bed? How would I ever manage to fall asleep on a little bed with Sol?

We still had to walk for a little while, not much. The mountains were ahead of us, and Nana's house was that white cube almost shining in the darkness (at the opposite side of where the town was still glittering, like sequins) and she pointed with one of her long gel-covered nails,

the same way she had pointed through the glass when we were still inside the taxi but this time her finger didn't bump against any surface (it was free). She said we could spend the night, but we had to be careful not to wake up the old lady. I was worried we might not be silent enough, worried Sol or I would throw up loudly and the gagging sounds would wake up the grandma who'd reprimand us for drinking and smoking God-knows-what God-knows-where (nothing good ever happens at night-time she'd say just like my mother'd say). I thought about all the terrible possibilities as we walked and got closer to the house. Her nana was half-deaf, Sol said, so never mind. Ever since Grandpa died, she couldn't hear a thing. So, I shouldn't worry (probably she didn't want to hear, Sol thought). We kept walking, dragging our bodies uphill (holding our handbags tight where it became steeper and rockier), leaving a trail of glitter and sequins on the rocky path like runaway snails on a rainy night.

Libertad Ansola Palazuelos holds a degree in English, as well as an MLitt in Creative Writing. She is currently a Creative Writing PhD student at Aberdeen University. Libertad is a recipient of the LLMVC New King's studentship. She is also a shortlisted author of Aesthetica Creative Writing Award 2022.