

## Undercurrent

The acequia unwinds before me, a silver ribbon beneath the dusky sky, a bull snake in the weeds. I quicken my pace to catch her, but my wife just lengthens her strides, stretching the distance between us. Married only nine months and already I'm losing sight of a woman who once filled my eyes so completely. I've interrupted her evening jog again, disturbed her solitude on the banks of this irrigation canal, and she runs hard after her mother's ghost, chasing a vision I cannot yet see. I find her at a turn in the dirt path under a canopy of cottonwoods, stroking an artifact in her palm, a pottery shard kicked loose from its shallow grave. I reach out to touch it, to take it, but her fingers curl like a spider, into a fist. She turns from me and bolts into the blue shadows. I hesitate, then follow her along the water's edge.

### 2.

The water arrives with the light, with the blue and yellow of dawn. It flows south through the arteries of the ancient acequias, through the dark furrows of alfalfa and beans, down to the roots of the Rio Grande Valley. My uncle senses it coming. He rises from bed with the first window curtain glow, toenails scratching denim, pocket change spilling like stars. I hear him, bare heels thudding against the hardwood floor, shovel blade scratching the flagstone path outside. Slipping on my cutoffs, I join him. Dandelions pop in the breeze like the goose bumps on my legs. I stand on the ditch while he clamps a crescent wrench onto the rusty headgate bolt and cranks hard. Our geese notice first, then our ducks, guinea hen, goat, peacock. They charge the canal with squeaks and squeals and fine silver spray. I step into the water and join them. Awake. Alive. Green.

3.

The acequia gurgles beneath us, swollen with spring rain. I sit with my girlfriend, my first girlfriend, on a footbridge near our high school in Albuquerque's north valley. Close your eyes, she tells me, and we kiss. I taste her strawberry lip-gloss, hear the thrum of honeybees, smell the musk of fertile mud. Parting from her embrace, I grip the wooden bridge with my right hand and reach down with my left, palm flat, inches above the canal. I feel it: the trembling air, the water breathing.

4.

It has a life of its own, my uncle says. Each week, an hour after he opens the headgate, the water meanders through our yard, saturates the soil, seeps into the driveway, pours into the gutters and flows halfway around the block. Neighbors complain, the ditch boss threatens and classmates tease me at school. Shovel in hand, my uncle fortifies berms, digs trenches and clamps the headgate bolt early. Still the yard floods. In time, the street lamp leans at the curb, the peach trees split with rotten fruit and the red ants drown in their holes.

5.

My head fills with blood as I pull hard on the chains and my Keds blot out the sun. My baby sister swings beside me singing off-key to The Beatles. Our mother prunes a nearby rosebush; red petals for my dead father. Her shoulders glisten with baby oil. The air smells like birthday cake.

"Hush," she says, standing abruptly, switching off the transistor radio, then gazing over my shoulder at the ditch behind us. I plant my feet in the grass and follow her eyes behind our back fence to a man sitting in the blue shade of an elm, watching us. His hair is greasy black and his lips are twisted into a thin smile. At his side he clutches a brown paper bag.

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My mother scoops up my sister, jerks me into the kitchen and latches the screen door. “He’s here again,” she whispers into the phone. “Same one as last week.”

I scramble into the back room and peek through a hole in the window screen. The man rises, turns to the kitchen, wipes his mouth on his sleeve, and sings, “I wanna hold your hand.”

6.

He approaches with open hands, but I don’t see him at first because I’m burying nail-studded boards along our back fence to discourage firewood thieves. I glance up and he’s there—an apparition in rags, a shadow against the red sky. I’ve seen him before through the back bedroom window, shuffling south along Guadalupe Trail from the bar at Valley Bowl. He’s saying something to me now, asking me something, chewing long sticky words in his knothole mouth. I lean back into the gate but he keeps coming, boots stirring puffs of dust. A nail gleams in the dusky light, a sliver spike against his leather sole. He steps into it, full weight on his right foot, and he shivers in silent pain. Our eyes meet, and a current forms between us—my fear and his regret—then he retreats up the ditch bank, hands in his pockets, blood in the dirt.

7.

My grandfather cut our first ditch, five years before I was born. He took his shovel blade and dragged it from our property to the feeder canal, forever linking our quarter-acre of land to the currents of the Rio Grande. My father was there, too, flicking away his cigarette to join in. They dug deep in the red clay, these unlikely partners, a construction worker from Corrales and a pharmacist from Des Moines, both 52, brought together by a woman thirty years younger, my mother, who was pregnant with my big brother. White sun streaked through the cottonwoods.

Midway through the job, my grandfather’s shovel clipped something hard, not a root or a stone, but a ring, shining at him in

the mud like an eye. He plucked it free and wiped it clean - a band of white gold, stamped with the profile of Montezuma or Benito Juarez. He couldn't tell. The surface had been worn smooth by water and time. He didn't wear jewelry because he worked with his hands, so he handed the ring to my father, who liked the ambiguity of buried treasure in his back yard. He slipped the band onto the fourth finger of his right hand.

My father died when I was two. I saw the stamped ring once or twice rummaging through my mother's jewelry box. I don't remember his face, either.

## 8.

Benicio, my mother's uncle, couldn't see her, but he could hear her whimpering from the bushes as he stumbled from the acequia to piss. He was drunk. Again. And once more, he'd been kicked out of the dance hall for bothering women. After draining his fourth bottle of wine, he just wanted to get home and sleep. Despite his mother's warnings, and the stories he'd heard all his life, he took a shortcut on the acequia from Alameda to Corrales through the brambles of the Rio Grande bosque. He was halfway home when he heard the whimpering. It was just after midnight.

"What are you doing in there?" said Benicio. "Are you okay?"

The woman, it sounded like a woman, began to sob.

"Come on out of there. Don't worry. I won't bite."

Benicio parted the tangled branches to reveal a pale girl with her head and shoulders covered in a gauzy black shawl. When he reached out to touch her, she parted her veil.

A skull grinned at him, white as the moon.

"Dios mio!"

Benicio ran. Like a wild horse he ran. The woman chased him with the wings of an owl. Three times she swooped down on him and three times he beat her back with bloody fists. Finally, in the green light of dawn, he reached his parents' ranch and crashed onto the front porch, clawing at the door. Before he slipped inside,

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Benicio wheeled around to face his demon, but there was only the rustle of leaves, the scent of smoke, and the echo of laughter.

### 9.

The witch cackles from the poster at school, “Ditches are deadly. Stay away!” We swim the acequias anyway, although I can’t swim. My mother doesn’t like city pools, with the crowds and the chlorine and the water as blue as the eyes of rich kids, so she drives us north past Alameda to a feeder canal hidden by sweet grass and cottonwoods. She spreads a towel on the hood of her Comet, slices a watermelon in half and watches us from the shade. My big brother leaps first, shirtless and tanned, slipping through the ruddy water as quick as a trout.

“Look at me!” he shouts, gripping a driftwood log like a paddleboard. “I’m Tarzan!”

My three sisters go next, clucking like geese, pale limbs slipping beneath the surface.

I enter last, my stomach knotted, gripping the reeds along the bank. I’ll be okay, I tell myself, as long as I can touch bottom and bounce to the other side, weightless as Neil Armstrong on the moon. When I approach the middle, water laps at my chin. The undercurrent is strong. My toes claw at the mud, but I begin to drift. I pump my legs and slap my arms at the surface but lose my footing and slip under, swallowing deep. I pop up a second later and see something floating toward me. I think it’s the log, but when I reach for it, my brother shouts, “No! Don’t!” A rat slides by, inches from my face, belly to the sun, grinning with orange teeth.

### 10.

When the jack-o-lanterns blaze, emptiness fills the acequias. Weeds shrivel, clay cracks and wind moans through the drains like regret. I avoid ditches in the cold months, and the shadow men sucking in dreams through brown paper bags. I wait until Good Friday when the hard hats come with white trucks, propane tanks and sharp blue

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flames. I scramble outside to greet them, watching the ritual cleaning through the silver diamonds of our chain-link fence. Bottles burst, thorns sizzle, and white ash rises on the heat, filling the turquoise sky.

11.

Cottonwoods bloom around us, air thick with feathery seeds. I walk beside my daughter on a ditch bank during a visit to Albuquerque while my wife sleeps late in our hotel, dreaming as I left. At age four, our daughter knows nothing of acequias, pottery shards or peacocks, so I kneel in the dirt beside her to trace the crescent scar from a horseshoe, crunch the shedded skin of a bull snake, and toss a broken twig into the water for a pretend boat race, leaning toward a current that still pulls me home. "Daddy," my daughter says, glancing up at me with olive eyes. "Denver's home." She tosses her twig into the canal and it glides around the bend.

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