

LETTERS FROM PLACES THAT ARE NOT WHERE I WANT TO BE

Javier A. Padilla Gonzalez

Rocio,

I am so dramatic and I think that I am dying with every second that passes, and life is so beautiful.

Hope to hear from you soon,

Javier.

Dear Colorado,

You gave me opium and imposing mountains. You were too cold for me, but I miss the suburbs and their Christmas lights. I am frightened by yucca and I saw a rattlesnake once. You make me feel like I do not belong anywhere inside of your borders, but I also cannot exist in a place where I cannot see the faint blue outline of the Front Range. Frankly, you were my first love, and I resent my mother for anchoring us to your impenetrable red soil.

Take care,

Your son.

Dear Moses,

What else did you expect from your people when you uprooted them and moved them across deserts for forty years? Of course they were going to dance and drink honey wine and search for new idols. A golden calf is appropriate imagery for people searching for home. After all, domesticated animals are part of the reason people were able to establish empires and cities.

Wishing you patience,

Javier.

To my guardian angel,

Do you like it here? It is always raining in this city. I used to love the rain, but now I am always damp and my socks are molding and if I stand in one place too long I am afraid the overgrowth will tangle me into place. I have found purpose in trying to find a place. I pity you.

I release you?

Javier.

Hi mom,

I am just writing to tell you that I am feeling sentimental, and I miss you. I am not sad and I don't want you to worry. In fact, the world is so big and so full of people. I am certain there will always be someone around to carry my feelings.

Love,

Javier, far from you.

Hi mom,

The world may be too big

Sincerely,

Me.

To all of the gas stations along the road from Colorado Springs to Jalostotitlán,

Have you seen Santo Toribio stop in to refuel? He is about my height, with black cropped hair and blue eyes. He was last seen wearing a singed black tunic. He smells oddly of gunpowder, and there are usually two or three wanderers trailing closely behind him. He might be my uncle (great). I am afraid that he is lost, but he is guiding a group into a harsh heat that will incinerate flesh. I have some questions to ask him about my family's situation. I am afraid the immigration lawyer that I previously contacted speaks a different language. I have enclosed a couple of relics that he might want back.

I appreciate your assistance,

another traveller.

Dearest Mimi,

That night that we were dancing in the cabin that your grandpa built, when the molly started wearing off, I became melancholic because I was jealous. I was jealous that you felt so entitled to a property, or that you could love it so much. It was obvious how much you cared when you started the fireplace, or when you remembered to put it out, or the way you brushed your hand over the gaudy wood paneling when you first opened the door. You sat outside in the snow for two hours and stared at an aspen tree that was due to be cut down soon. I was jealous of how powerful you became in that cabin, or the way you could relax on the garish leather lounger in the living room. You could go on for hours about the time that your sister peed herself in that room or the couch that your mom fell asleep on when she was going through her divorce and she got too high. That night that we were dancing and there was a blizzard outside, I was praying that the snow would cover the house and block the exits and we would become trapped. I did not want us to die, or develop frostbite. I was just praying that if I spent enough time there, it would also become my place. Maybe I hoped that if we got too cold we could both cut down that old aspen in the backyard for warmth, and you could tell someone else about that time we cut down the aspen in the backyard for warmth. That is, if your mother does not sell the cabin to pay for the divorce. In any case, my jealousy has subsided.

Thank you for sharing your place,

Javi.

To the mosquito in my room during a full moon,

I wish that you would die outside with my blood still inside of you.

I hate you,

Me.

Severin,

I should have told you that I was not looking for a relationship with you. I cannot admit to myself that I will never be comfortable in one place, and being near you could be considered a place. I find myself replaying the music and noise I heard in Calle Jesús Maria in my head. I enjoyed our first date when I was rolling too hard, and I lost my debit card, and my head felt like it would fall onto the turntables. I miss the chaos, and I never wanted to cook minestrone with you because it takes too long. I would have felt restless.

You should read this,

Your Cicciolino.

Dear Canyon de Chelly,

You felt very close to divinity. The cottonwoods were in bloom and the early morning light illuminated every white cotton ball and they all looked like sprites. I was told a story about scorched peach trees, and the sprites fell into ashes. I wanted to leave and I wanted to stay. I wanted to hover near the tip of Spider Woman's leg.

Respectfully,

Javier.

To Tswana, my love,

A magazine that we should care about is having a party this weekend, and I have four pairs of shoes. The boots are muddied and scuffed, the other boots are knockoffs, the loafers were 200 pesos, and the converse are covered in dog shit. My lover invited me or demanded that I attend with her, and I feigned disinterest when I accepted her invitation. My boyfriend is out dancing with my friends, and they love him, and I feel like I am cheating on all of them. They believe that I am staying in because I have to write. My best friend's girlfriend wrote to my Mexico City roommate from Chicago: "Jav can be flakey, so IDK." I have a growing suspicion that he is only my 'friend' now. I am playing with the thought of texting my Colombian lover, and telling him that I am coming to see him later this month after all. It will probably all end the same. I will move and restart and pillage and run. It is what it is.

I hope you can feel that I miss you,

JavlexP.

Severin,

You make me feel less restless and that is enough for now.

Love,

Your Cicciolino.

To the border crossing in El Paso or Juárez,

I always looked forward to seeing you. It may have been masochistic, naive or alchemical. You were change. I was either going to become brown or American. I always wondered who I was when I stood right on top of you. I could have lived in one of the border patrol checkpoint booths—the really cramped ones where the officers are always smoking. I could live in constant excitement and fear.

Loosen up,

Javier Alejandro Padilla-Gonzalez.

Pedro Padilla,

You used to be a reference point for my life. An amazing stela carved with the cardinal directions, rooted deeply into sand caves. Since your pulmonary embolism, you are a point that I try to avoid. I know all of your riddles, and I don't think that you know that you keep repeating the same riddle. Maybe you cannot recognize me.

I hope your life was enough,

Alex.

Hi mom,

I met a boy and he is really sweet. Unfortunately, I am trying to get out of this relationship. I have been cheating on him with a girl who hates me, and it is fulfilling some stressed desire or prophecy. I would move to Switzerland with him and have his kids, and that scares me. All of my friends say that he is not cute enough to be with me, but I think they are jealous that I have found a place in someone and I could die tomorrow. He hates ice cream just like me. How is dad?

Honest,

Your son.

Hey Tony,

I still love you, and I never told you how you made me feel that night that you picked me up on the side of Powers Boulevard. My parents were angry that I was spending time with you, someone that my brother had outed to them. I wanted to get dropped off at home so you could pick me up as we had planned, but they refused after they heard that you are gay. When I jumped out of my dad's car and he drove away, I felt very lost. I could see the faces of some drivers, confused as to why I was potentially homeless. I dressed in a very preppy manner in those days. The mountain was silhouetted, and I could see the lights from a few homes blinking at its crest. You were so happy to see me that night. Your pimp-my-ride Honda that you love to talk about was my home. I am still trying to find another neon home outside of my family.

I hope that I am not outing you again,

Javi.

Hi Elliott,

Thank you for driving me to the beach on my twenty-first birthday. I hope that someday a luminous, prophetic angel can wake you up drunk to the sight of searing white sands and sharp crystal waters in Pensacola, Florida. It was all so new and shiny and pure and everything unlike me that morning. I loved spending time in New Orleans with you and CJ, but it could not compare to the salt of the ocean in my tired lungs. I know we do not talk that often anymore, and that you are anxious about talking on the phone, but I still love you. New Orleans was nice, but your stepdad might be a little racist and I think your stepbrother was hitting on me. It all washed off at that beach.

Javi.

Dear Saint Isidore,

I moved to Jalos right around the time that you were supposed to bless that desert with flooding showers. You might have taken a break that year, but I could still feel you holding your breath. Everything was tense and muggy and my grandpa started dying. I wish the dam would have broken. I wish you could have released me, and I could have floated south, to something else. But the dam held dry mud, and everything was stagnant. The donkeys were all awake at night, and tired during the day. My other grandpa's mule got cancer, and her unfortunate diagnosis dashed her dreams of pregnancy. It all made no sense and nothing seemed natural. Some days it was so hot that it made me wonder why anyone would live there, let alone die there.

Explain yourself,

A loyal dissident.

Chavela Vargas,

Did you miss your hometown? I wanted to say something about your liver, swollen with Mexicanness and mezcal, and your lungs coated in tar and mexicanness. Was everything you exhaled Mexicanness and the souring flesh of a donated organ not accepted by the host? Or was your liver bloated with a painful tequila? Was it trying to dislodge itself from under your cage, and forcing itself to crawl East? Maybe it wanted to be outside of you: not East, and not West, and not South, and certainly not North. I saw your custom-made chair at a museum nearby recently.

Congratulations,

Un fan.

to the vegetable vendor in Mercado Los Alamos,

I do not know your name yet, but you are not my usual produce guy. I hope you can forgive me this one time. It was late and you were one of the only stalls that had not packed their crates for the evening. I know that your shop is the first produce stall to the right of the East entrance. I also know that you were trying to overcharge me for those champignon mushrooms last Saturday. The price difference was about 40 pesos a kilo. It is petty, but I cannot help thinking about how you referred to me as a “guero” when I walked up to ask for the price. I noticed that you looked at your coworker, and you both looked at me, and decided on your price for a guero. I could have afforded the price difference between my usual mushrooms and your mushrooms, but I chose to buy huitlacoche. From you. Why did I purchase produce from someone who had offended me with his price-gouging plot? I bought huitlacoche because I wanted you to know that I live here, and that I think I know how much a kilo of champignon mushrooms should be worth. I can also pronounce huitlacoche impeccably, and I kind of know how to cook it. Maybe I wanted to act strange so you would somehow reflect on the way that your well-intentioned, colloquial Spanish slang makes me feel like I will never belong here. Maybe I am writing this to myself. I will be back one of these days to confront you directly about this pressing matter that you probably do not remember. The huitlacoche is still in a Ziploc bag in my fridge.

Honestly,

A Guero

A Pocho

Hi mom,

I still haven't found a home, and I think I may have to come back to you soon. I know the story of the prodigal son by heart, but I do not remember his fault. I have seen Oklahoma and New Mexico. If I do not return to you, then you can assume I died peacefully. You don't have to slaughter your best goat for my funeral.

Resting in Peace,

Javier.

P.S. - I am just scaring you into missing me more. Neither of us are permanent, and I am scared that one day I will miss you more than you miss me.

Ana Mendieta,

How did your body feel encased in all of those irritating, repulsive weeds, sliding in that intoxicatingly fragrant mud?

Let me know,

Javier.

Dear Kansas,

You are so small and flat, and I could have just driven through you. I stopped at a Subway in Abilene, Kansas, and the workers all seemed very content to be living there. Maybe they were just smiling at my cropped sweater. I always wear that sweater during road trips. You are so small and flat and boring and lonely, and I want to move to you. I want to stop moving with you. I want to be the tallest object for miles, and I love dandelions. My friend Melia told me that I just like it when people talk about me. I think I have been writing a story ever since I saw the brown-gray expanse of your horizon.

Sincerely,

Javier Padilla-Gonzalez.

Dear God (Judeo-Christian, maybe even Muslim),

I have entered every one of your churches, and if I am lying then you will just have to forgive me. I will never find you inside your house. Sometimes there are mosaics and sometimes there are baroque wood carvings laminated in cheap gold luster. It's tacky.

God Bless,

Javi.

To the girl in my third grade class,

I am sorry that you had to go to school that morning. It was some morning in the spring, and you had joined Mrs. Panos' third grade class late in the school year, when everyone had already chosen their best friend. I think you explained later that your family had just moved to America from Ghana or Ethiopia. You were wearing a beautiful white lace dress and bloomers and matching lacquered Mary Janes. Shana and Jessica were picking at your clothes, and I don't think you understood their words but you knew they were not kind. They must have been afraid of you, because people don't usually dress like that in the United States and you looked so beautiful. You started crying and you looked so lost and your dad had just driven away. I think you knew a few words in English, so you couldn't defend yourself. You stopped showing up to class a couple weeks later and Mrs. Panos told me that your family had moved again. I should have defended you, but I was scared of Jessica and I had been in your place before I learned English. I am sorry and I hope that you are happy in whatever place you are now, but we both understand that it is not easy or maybe impossible. Do not resent that dress or your mother for making you wear it. People can be cruel.

Thinking of you,

The little Mexican kid in the pink polo shirt.

Dear Javier,

Do you remember the other night when you were in the ocean, and it was very dark and it was a couple of nights after the full moon? The tide towered over you and there was no sea foam. The waves traveled around your body and it was peaceful, and warm, and inviting. The violent waters chose not to shake your rib cage and kick in your knees. You were with your boyfriend, and he audibly feared for your life, but you were being so stupid and selfish and you couldn't hear him over the calls of a siren. The horizon was indistinguishable from the sky and the moon was splintered over battered waters. You spun around to orient yourself by the position of the sea cliffs, but they had disappeared. The earth inverted and everything was black matter. You thought about drifting out to open waters, where no one lays claim to what is essentially nothing.

Take care of yourself,

You.

Dear Mexico City,

I was growing tired of you before the earthquake. Thankfully, you responded to my apathy. I had that feeling where my nostrils cleared and my stomach felt uneasy. I started fearing for my life. I rarely fear for my life. It was incredible to see your streets rolling under my feet and the power lines swaying next to me. The whole city felt it, and we all poured out onto the streets and I found Naomi and hugged her and I really loved everyone that had survived. There were no casualties that night, but I didn't know that yet.

Respectfully,

Un Extranjero.

Mom,

When you realize you have been sequestered, do you look to the lush lawns shielding your 1000-square-foot suburban home and feel some freedom? Do you also look to the mountains and imagine sprouting feet so long that you could sprint along the ridge for 20 minutes and find yourself lost in the Sierra Madre for the first time? Has English scalded your tongue so severely that if you try to roll your R's on the roof of your mouth, it stings? Do you like to receive my letters during my quest to find a home, when you consider yourself home? Do you miss your parents enough to stay with them forever? Do you want to keep moving? Do these questions make you wish that the earth would open up and swallow you whole?

I think that it is important to stage a pantheon of nameless, famous, unimportant and unmentioned ghosts that continue to guide and misguide me. Imagine yourself, walking along a strip mall during the first snow, huddled by some ubiquitous purple majesties. It is all I can imagine when I am far from you.

Love,

Javier.