A Desert of Dreams

I’ve never truly been able to see through my father’s eyes. The dark brown, glistening spheres never seem to meet mine. He loves the embrace of the warm, tender sun on the Cape, while I prefer cold days where the wind stings my skin and wraps me in winter. He’s a man of few words and enjoys the echoes of silence, yet I still spill my thoughts out to him in laughter, songs, and stories. He is a great listener and loves to see the passionate glow in my eyes as I draw out my big dreams in front of his patient, quiet gaze. The response is always the same:

He tells me to run.

I am doing what he has always wanted for me: to echar para adelante with my education at college and open my eyes to the possibilities in the land of the free. Yet, his eyes never had the chance to gaze up at the all the dreams that seem to flutter about in our New England skies. They saw a different sky, many years ago. One that stretched across the cracked, rust-colored desert where dreams, thoughts, and memories of a past life seem to be left behind to shrivel up in the unforgiving sun. He has never told me much about his journey to the United States: his eyes seem to shut down in discomfort from my sister’s endless questioning, “How did you even get here from Peru?”

The sacrifice seems impossible in my mind, just an untold myth of the humble hero in my life. My feet could never feel the weight of his steps. My eyes could never picture the endless
land that laid before him as he gave up everything just to give me a chance at something. But this seemed to change when I decided to open up the thick, cardboard pages of *Sanctus Sonorensis* (2006) by Philip Zimmermann in Special Collections. [Fig. 1] The book looked heavy as it lay on the smooth maple table top, absorbing curious stares from my classmates. Its cover was made up of a photograph showing blood orange lands, lifeless plants, and a bright blue sky sprinkled with white clouds. The gilt page edges and shimmering Latin title reminded me of all the years of Sunday school I had to sit through, thumbing my fingers through the glittery edges of my Bible just to see the light dance across the room. The cover transported me to a land that felt so familiar, yet I have never walked its rough copper surface. It displayed a place that had touched my life long before I opened the pages of this book, long before I was even born. It held the soil that tested my father’s strength and determination as he grasped for a greater future.

The land made him run.

I started to flip through the pages of the book. Images of the Arizona sky began to appear in dark, solemn blues as the sun barely broke the horizon. The pictures stretched across both pages, touching every edge of the confining borders of the book. Words began to build upon the lower edge of the awakening sky. They stood boldly in a small black front and were outlined in white as if halos were shining from their message.

*Blessed are the wetbacks*

*Blessed are the adobe brick makers*

*Blessed are the cropdusters*

The words led me into a meditative prayer as I stared at the opening heavens growing brighter on each page. I read the lines out loud like a devoted attendant of Mass, following the traditions that
were set forth by my ancestors, the same religious values that my parents hold so close to their hearts.

Blessed are the housecleaners

Blessed are the fence menders

Blessed are the day laborers

The sun’s sharp rays pierced the gloomy sky pictured within the book as the words landed softly across the room. Clouds seemed to bubble at the surface of the wide-open pages dressed in precious gradients of blues. I began to realize the weight of the words.

Blessed are the dishwashers

Blessed are the construction workers

Blessed are the cowhands

Each page was dedicated to different types of workers, with jobs that are never seen as worthy of praise:

Blessed are the truck drivers

Blessed are the pool boys

Blessed are the pecan gatherers

I realized that these are among the holiest kinds of people; they embody the values of sacrifice and love preached to me for years as I kneeled down for forgiveness every Sunday.

Blessed are the office cleaners

Blessed are the shepherds

Blessed are the garbage men
Yet, I never realized that the truth of learning compassion and resilience lay more within the people who anonymously surrounded me than within the morals contained inside the gilded edges of our Bibles.

*Blessed are the domestic workers*

*Blessed are the fruit tree pickers*

*Blessed are the bathroom attendants*

These immigrants are all people I have met or known, these are my people. They take these labor-intensive jobs, ones my parents sought and held themselves, in order to *luchar* to stay in this country.

*Blessed are the post-hole diggers*

*Blessed are the busboys*

*Blessed are the short order cooks*

They find comfort in praying to God for better tomorrows, for the strength and stamina to continue their fight for their families.

They are running.

Now in the photographs the sun began to escape, the joy began to fade. Deep oranges and timid grays kissed the darkening sky. Sharp unexpected words began to come out of my mouth as I read more of the prayer.

*And let us forgive los coyotes*

*And let us forgive the Border Control*

The word “forgive” rang in my ears.
I realized I had never forgiven the people who instilled fear into my father’s eyes as he looked up to the heavens praying to see the other side of the border. I had never had the strength or tolerance to see these people as anything other than monsters. Yet as the warm sun set behind the long sheets of clouds, I felt compelled to let go of my anger, to not give into the hate that burns bright within our troubled lands.

*And let us forgive the minutemen*

*And let us forgive la migra*

I wanted to understand.

I saw through my father’s eyes and felt his story unfold. Not in words or in exact accounts, but in the rush of the moving skies that start and end our days. I felt it in the weight of forgiving, in the duality of the life I live today. I am the proud daughter of two strong, resilient immigrant parents yet I live in a land that barely sees them as American. They are the dreamers, the people who embody the true American spirit of fighting for a better tomorrow. Yet at times, the darkness is blinding and we cannot see that we all gaze up to grasp at the same dreams in our American skies. Within all of our family histories, we have someone, like my father, who sacrificed it all to come to America. The humble heroes who taught us to keep our heads up high, breathe, and run after every opportunity given to us -- to *echar para adelante* -- like it is our last chance.

We forget to run together as a nation built by immigrants.

*Amen.*