

Kristin Ito

## ROJO OSCURO



photo by Barbara Michalmen

### Rajo Oscuro

The girls and I all look different, a mix of too many things—unplaceable, incongruous, lost. I probably look most like I don't belong, that maybe I didn't grow up hearing the guitarron, that maybe I don't know the beat as well in my bones. I bring the flute to my lips, pull its long body up at my side, and I inhale slowly. For a few short seconds there is a stillness heavy like the clouds before the rain. I count off in my head and cover the instrument's small oval hole with my lips like I'm covering a wound in a stranger's broken heart. Then we begin, and that's when it pours, a deluge of sounds coming in sideways and together, voices and rhythm and endless crescendo until our lead singer's vibrato cracks through the air.

The other all-female mariachi bands in the state deem themselves divas or reynas or mujeres, but we are not sexy or sassy. We are Rajo Oscuro. The dark is good for me now, and feels something like home.

Our outfits are a twist on the charro: black skinny jeans with silver double buttons running down the sides, slim vests over crisp white shirts, silky bow ties falling lightly on our chests. Ornate belts with medallions wrap snug and low around our hips, heavy and comforting, like holsters. We each pin a flower in our hair, at the nape of our necks, artificial roses the color of wine.

Most nights we play at Los Gallanos, a popular restaurant and bar downtown where groups come for birthdays. Evenings at the restaurant are warm and weightless, and we roam outside on a patio aglow with twinkling lights. We walk from table to table, donning patrons with a large velvet sombrero and singing throaty songs into their wide smiles. Half of the patio is covered with a rustic canopy made of saguaro ribs, dry and perfectly weathered, the reclaimed wood of the Southwest. The other half is open, nothing to stop our voices from escaping like ghosts up into the purple desert sky.

When I was little and stood poised with my flute, I'd look down at the sheet music or my feet, not really out of shyness but out of some desire to be demure. But now I look straight at my audience, usually into the glassy eyes of someone who's had too much mezcal. Sometimes they look back at me with a lingering pause. But then I play the first somber notes of *El Condor Pasa*, and no one in the restaurant questions I am home.

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One of the girls, Emilia, comes to my apartment. I don't have anything for us to drink except a half bottle of Jack Daniels on top of the refrigerator. We take turns taking swigs from the bottle and I follow Emilia as she wanders into the living room.

"Is this your mom?" she asks.

It's actually my grandmother. In the black and white photo, she's young and dressed in a light-colored matchbox jacket and skirt, wearing delicate white gloves on arms held out to her sides, a pose that looks like 1950s glamour but is likely just due to the camera's snap mid-stride. Her easy smile, stained dark with lipstick, is directed at the photographer, my grandfather, a friend from childhood she'd married during their internment in Poston. After the war, they'd stayed in Arizona, two of the few who did not go back to California, as if to say to the government, no—you brought us here. You brought us here to the desert, and we will not go back.

Emilia studies the photo for a long time, and then she grabs my hand. We lie down on the brown shag carpet, feeling floaty. We say we can't stay up too late, we really can't, because Emilia has class in the morning at the U of A and I have my part-time job at the gallery store. But we talk and talk about our grandmothers, how hers too was a small Catholic woman with a lyrical laugh and a biting sense of humor. When our grandmothers died, we find out, they both left us rosaries, hers made of natural wooden beads and mine translucent ones that we'd held as children between our fingers, grandma's hands wrapped around ours, her whispered Hail Marys falling into our ears as we fell asleep.

It's late and Emilia finally gets up to leave, squeezes me goodbye. I watch from behind the screen door as she hops on her ten-speed, wavers a little, then starts her way across the flat, quiet city.

I turn off the lights in my apartment and think about my grandmother, banished to the desert for being different. I think about how I'm lucky, how I'm educated, how I'm comfortable—but how the only time I can hear the music of my grandmother's laugh is when I'm playing with the girls. I imagine our little band of latinas and mestizas and chinitas, awakening the women who came before us with the dark red melodies that flow through our veins and explode from our lungs. Tumbling into the blackness of the desert, our songs flower fast and fluid, like ink spreading quickly through water.

Kristin Ito lives and writes in California. Her work has appeared in or will appear soon in *The Los Angeles Review*, *WhiskeyPaper*, *Oblong*, and *Broad!*