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The Decay of the Angel

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: Alexander Ramirez is a writer from Sacramento, CA. He was a 2021-2022 Olive B. O'Connor Fellow at Colgate University, and he holds a PhD in English from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. His fiction, nonfiction, and refereed articles have appeared in *Image Journal*, *The Missouri Review*, and *The Journal of American Culture*, among other publications.

Once upon a time, on a dead-end street, when the schoolyard had emptied for the summer, but the blacktop would come alive at night; when the hose water flowed hot, and the A/C units were sealed with foam; when Avery would let the neighborhood kids practice combinations on his punching bag; when the speed bumps sparkled like gunmetal; when the palm trees swayed like gods; when the Yang brothers spit tequila in their rooster's beak; when the old woman down the street painted her tree trunks pink; when Pascual tried to clown Reggie about his scuffed Filas, and Reggie told everyone how Pascual had gotten rid of the itching on his crotch; when the boys played marbles on the sidewalks for keeps, and there was no more spiritual way to pass the time than by studying the ribbons of color in the heart of a cat's eye; when Pete beat a Sureño with an aluminum bat; when he told him he was lucky he hadn't used wood; when your parents told you not to ride past the seven-eight-hundred block, or else you'd get beat; when your dad would come home from work at six, if you had one; there were three little boys pedaling fast down the boulevard, the breeze blaring in their ears like a clarion call.

The boys didn't slow in the intersection before the school. They didn't wave to Avery in his garage or to the old woman in her garden. They didn't even bother to drag their sleeves across their foreheads to keep the sweat from their eyes. Their bike chains whirred. The boys rode blind. At the dead-end gates, they slammed their heels on their brakes, drawing faint rubber frowns across the gravel.

In the relative silence that followed, they thought of how they had all complained at some point or another that their neighborhood was truncated. They could each recall times they'd overheard adults discuss the idea of feeling trapped there. But as they slipped past the broken gates and guided their handlebars down the initial slope of dirt, they considered—for the first time in their lives—that the boulevard might be beautiful because it ended.

"I told you not to bring that," said Frankie, the oldest and roundest of the three. He gulped for air, and his wet belly stained his tee-shirt. "I'm talking to you, Ezra," he said. But it was Ruben who turned his head. He was the tallest of the boys, and though Frankie was a year his senior, they would enter the middle school together come September.

"Shut the hell up, Frankie," said Ruben, his voice cracking before soaring over the curse word. "Don't yell at my little brother like that."

Frankie inhaled to shout, but his tire tread caught the edge of a machine-made bitemark in the earth. He dipped to catch his handlebars and tripped through a thicket of dead grass. When he recovered and righted his bicycle, the boys concentrated on navigating the dry waves of dirt and the pyramids of abandoned trash. The bridge and the train tracks were less than a mile away, anyway.

They passed the rusted hulk of Rosemary Johnson's old refrigerator in reverent silence, but after staring at the revolutions of his front tire for too long, Frankie glanced up and said, "You weren't talking like that back there, Ruben. You weren't saying 'hell' or 'damn' to them. Not when it was Checho trying to fight you."

Ruben stopped his voice as it began to crack again. He fixed his eyes on the horizon. Ezra was ahead of them, leading the way, and the setting sun had begun to smear the rim of their world peach and pink.

"What was that?" said Frankie.

Ruben cleared his throat. The red, flashing heels of his brother's light-up sneakers disappeared over a ridge. "His gun," said Ruben. "Checho said he had a gun."

Frankie shook his head. The beads of sweat caught in his hair dispersed like a cluster of struck marbles. "He only said that because he knew you were scared," said Frankie. "They wouldn't have bothered us if your little brother had just let them see that stupid toy."

Ezra stopped his advance and looked back to watch Ruben and Frankie clear the landmark he'd just passed. He was about the same size as his bicycle. He held the handlebars the way most adults held grudges. "My mom said I could bring my monito with me if I wanted to," he shouted as he reached into his pocket. He leaned the chassis of the bike against his ribs and raised a glow-in-the-dark Robocop action figure above his head. "And my dad told me that I don't have to show anything that's mine to anybody."

Ruben told his brother to put the toy back in his pocket.

"Mamá didn't say I have to keep it in my pocket," said Ezra, and he lifted the small, plastic helmet from the figure's head to demonstrate that it was removable. He rotated the right appendage, a

machine gun turret with Rapid Repeat Cap Firing, to show off the point of articulation. In the warm cast of twilight, the action figure's glow-in-the-dark body was the same color as the nests of dead and dying grass all around them.

"Robocop's a bitch," said Frankie. "Put him back in your pocket. The Terminator would blow him away, anyway."

"No," said Ezra, pushing his bicycle toward the next incline. "Robocop would win. He's the good guy. Terminator's a bad guy."

"Sometimes the Terminator's a good guy," said Frankie. "You would know that if you were old enough to watch the movies."

Ezra rolled to a stop at the summit of an overlook. "If he's only a good guy sometimes," he said, mostly to himself, "then he's a bad guy." Ezra loitered near the metal skeleton of an overturned shopping cart, gazing at the expanse ahead. Then, loud enough for Ruben and Frankie to hear, he said: "There's people coming."

The older boys arrived by his side in time to see Pascual bounding in the distance, long-limbed and vulpine, kicking stones and crushed cans from his path. He grew larger as he approached them under the overlook.

"Why y'all so sweaty?" said Pascual, peering up at the boys.

The sparse whiskers above his lip shined wet. In one hand, he held a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor; his saliva had mixed with what remained of the brew, diluting its rich color, dulling the gold to beige. In his other hand, which traced invisible circles in space, he clutched a tin of lighter fluid.

"Where y'all coming from?" he said.

While the boys helped one another angle their bicycles down the side of an outcrop, Pascual turned to scan the field for the blonde woman who trailed him. She moved toward them on chunky platform heels, her ankles bending as she battled for balance. Her thin leather purse strap bit into her shoulder. Pascual repeated his questions to the boys, and his jaw danced like he'd been taking sips from both containers in hand.

The boys told him they'd been riding bikes, that's all.

Pascual looked at Frankie. "How's your mom doing?" he said. "You seen Pete around lately?"

Frankie told him, "No."

Pascual giggled. "Y'all lying-ass fools are sweaty as hell," he said. His jaw danced double-time. "When you see Pete, you tell him I said what's up, all right? And you can tell your mom I said that, too."

Pascual brushed past the boys and their bicycles, pulling the blonde woman along with him. She adjusted the heft of her damp hair, streaked aquamarine, over her purse-strapped shoulder to block her face. Ruben and Frankie moved forward at once.

"Is that that guy who put DDT on his weenie to kill his crabs?" said Ezra.

"Shut up," said Ruben. "You know it is."

"That lady went swimming," said Ezra, looking back at her. "Her hair's all yellow and green from the chlorine. It looks like the grass back here."

Ruben shook his head and gestured at the curtains of smoke ahead. "Well, it doesn't look like the grass up there."

Ezra pinched his nose. He let it go as he began to lose control of his handlebars, and Ruben told him that he'd just have to deal with the smell. The boys wheeled through rows of burnt, black grass. Tufts were smoldering all around them. Plumes curled, lacing thick, white knots in space. And the air still reeked of Pascual's lighter fluid.

The bridge and the train tracks only came into view through the haze. The boys would venture into the field often, especially during the summer months. Sometimes, they'd go there to collect cans and bottle caps. Sometimes, they'd place pennies on the tracks, and then scurry away to the safety of the archway. They made a habit of storing all the items they found—or stole—in the shade of that same archway, and the silence and the solitude of the locale made them feel like it was theirs. Frankie took cans of spray paint from his mother's shed, and together, the boys tagged the walls under the bridge with words they never used at home. They kept marbles and empty shell casings and whatever else they came upon in the neighborhood behind the loose bricks and particle boards that they used to make bike ramps. Sometimes, they just went into the field to throw rocks and look for jackrabbits. But mostly they went there to hide.

Ezra rushed toward the final embankment, like always. Frankie and Ruben lagged. They watched the lights in Ezra's heels dim as his body receded and paled in the wafting smoke.

"People are going to know we were scared to fight," said Frankie. "We're not going to be able to ride around anymore."

"No one was even trying to fight you," said Ruben. "And my little brother was there. You don't get it because you don't have one."

Frankie inhaled a reservoir of air, the same way he did before he argued over baseball and pro wrestling. "Oh, okay," he told Ruben. "Well, I don't got no daddy I'm afraid of, either. And it was just Checho trying to fight you. He's not big enough to whoop your ass like your daddy does, so I don't know why you were so scared to fight."

There in the white haze, Ruben dropped his bicycle, letting it rattle against the earth. Frankie smirked and laughed, but he stopped once the tenor of his voice betrayed his nerves.

Ezra's voice reached them from a distance, telling them to stop. Then he appeared, jogging down the incline, his small figure snapping through the wisps of lingering smoke. His voice was already hoarse. The soft pools of red light around his shoes deepened as he stepped between Ruben and Frankie.

"You guys have to stop," he said, again. "There's a body under the bridge."

The boys set down their kickstands and slid into the scraped pit below. They crossed the cracked bowl of scrub and litter and starthistle. Frankie found a heavy branch among the rocks and refuse before the archway, and Ruben and Ezra peeked around his shoulder. After a moment, Frankie said: "I think it's moving." And at the

sound of his voice, the body in the archway swung upright and tilted back, pinning an enormous set of wings against the graffitied wall.

Its flesh was blue-white, like school-lunch milk. The torso was mottled with violet bruises. Some of the bricks and particle boards had been disturbed, overturned. Old spray cans and bubble gum and a mesh bag of marbles had been strewn about. As the boys gawked, they were reminded of the way the Sureño's arms and neck had looked after Pete made his point with the aluminum bat.

"Is that its head?" said Ezra.

There was space in all directions where a neck might have connected its torso to its crown. A dull sphere hovered over the body. Ezra said it looked like some kind of machine. Ruben said it was more like a crystal ball, or a floating marble; and as they spoke, the fluid inside the sphere began to roil like pond water.

Frankie dropped his brandished branch. He told Ruben and Ezra about the first time he found a dead bird behind his mother's shed. "I think I was four or five," he said. "Birds always look a lot bigger in the dirt than they do in a tree." The brothers waited for Frankie to elaborate, but he stayed silent so long that the creature shifted again.

"Is it pointing at me?" said Ezra.

One arm trembled in space, a soft cowl of flesh hanging beneath the elbow. The boys followed the path blazed by the stub of its forefinger to Ezra's front pocket, which glowed yellow-green in the shade of the archway.

The creature crawled forward, the weight of its wings listing on its back, but the boys never startled. Ezra stepped forward and presented his glow-in-the-dark action figure. The stub pressed against the molded plastic, and as the creature drained the figure of its photons, the violets on its flesh began to wilt away. Soon, the body resolved itself to bone-dry smoothness. And the great marble head, having flushed itself of the murky water, revealed a sparkling band of motes that powered its emulsion.

But as the creature lowered its arm to support itself against the earth, the hand crumbled into the dirt. The wrist and elbow followed, making it appear—for a moment, at least—as though the arm were simply reaching toward the core of the planet. The body rode its own momentum into a dust cloud that sent the boys scattering. The dust settled, and then they reconvened to see that even the brilliant head had lost its orbit. At last, only the creature's wings remained, tented over a pile of warm ash and broken glass. An air horn was blaring in the distance.

When they recognized the sound, the boys sunk deeper into the shade. The tracks rumbled overhead. Behind a screen of falling rock that filled the frame of the archway, Ezra leaned his head against his big brother's arm. Frankie inched closer and squeezed Ruben around the shoulders. The horn blared, and the boys guarded their ears and each other. And they remained huddled under the archway well after the caboose had sliced away.

"Y'all lying-ass fools down there crying?" said Pascual.

The boys turned toward the voice, wiping their eyes.

Pascual stood on the lip of the embankment, alongside their parked bicycles. "I knew that's why y'all came out here." The breeze rippled his baggy shirt, plastering the cloth to his breastbone. The smoke had cleared, and the blonde woman became visible behind him. She reached his side and raked her hair. Pascual emptied a packet of sour gummies into his mouth and pointed toward the archway. "Hey," he said, still chewing, "there go them cry-baby hoes who been running from you."

Checho and his gang came pedaling around the bend. Their wheels had pegs and gear sprockets, and they rode into the sun-baked pit, laughing as their tires bucked over stones.

"Come out," said Checho, leaping from his seat on a set of handlebars. He spread his arms wide. The hairs on his stomach ringed the border of his bellybutton. "Right now," he said, "or I'll go in there and drag your ass out."

Frankie and Ezra filed out from the shade, wiping their noses. They set their backs against the scooped borders of the pit. Ruben did not emerge with them.

"Oh, come on, man, goddamn," said Pascual. He fished his tin of lighter fluid from the blonde woman's purse. "Ruben, your ass needs to grow up already," he said as he collected the woman's wrists in one hand—so that she couldn't snatch the fluid back.

Underneath the bridge, Ruben considered the creature's remains. The wind had started to spread the pile, and now a layer of ash covered the spray cans and the marbles and all the other stashed items. In the fifth grade, Frankie had made a slingshot with rubber bands that he'd taken from their teacher's supply closet. But it was not, Ruben saw as he started to dig through the ashes, among the toys and talismans that they'd stored in the dirt.

"What're you trying to hide now?" said Checho, and he started toward the archway, stomping over rafts of weathered cardboard. "If you can't fight like a man," he said, smiling back at his gang, "then you can at least get your ass whooped like one."

And Ruben's hands were heavy with loam. Unable to see where some tool of salvation may have been, he moved toward a memory. He thought he felt his hands sink into the earth, and when he felt them close around the barrel and the grip, he rose to his feet.

The blonde screamed as Pascual struck his matches, but it did nothing to mask the bark of aluminum against Checho's forehead.

He collapsed into his own lap like a fumbled doll.

Ruben carried the barrel of the bat over his shoulder on the upswing. There, he saw the blonde woman swinging her purse at Pascual's head. He bobbed and weaved and toppled across the parked bicycles. Checho's gang was already fleeing across the embankment. The fire was eating its way through a sea of dead vegetation behind them.

The boys ran.

Ruben felt Frankie pulling the bat from his hands, and then they picked up their bikes and screamed home.

As they walked up Ruben and Ezra's front lawn, they scattered their bikes and lined up at the garden hose. They drank water until

they choked. And when all the streetlamps turned on at once, like always—like some quiet, unappreciated magic that routinely swept the neighborhood—the boys sat down and rested. Distant bouquets of smoke rose above the line of rooftops. They watched the fire burn.

"What happened?" said Ruben and Ezra's mother.

The boys looked away from the sky in unison. She was standing by the door.

She stepped onto the grass, holding their infant sister in her arms. The baby was gnawing on an orange slice, pointing up at the faraway clouds. Their mother shouted to a neighbor. Across the street, Reggie stepped onto his porch with his handset and a tangle of telephone wires trailing him across the deck. Then Avery opened his garage. And the Yang brothers climbed onto their roof. And the old woman stepped onto the sidewalk for a better vantage point, shielding her eyes against the sunset.

The first sirens sounded in the distance.

Their mother waved the neighbor goodbye and trudged up the lawn.

"You guys were playing baseball when all this happened?" she said.

Ruben looked down at his dirty shirt. Frankie turned the aluminum bat in his hands. The baby girl squealed, asking questions of her own.

"Well, you guys can watch the firemen work for a little bit, but then you have to come inside and shower. Frankie, you can come and have dinner, but only if you go home and check in with your

mom first," she told him. "She needs to know you're okay." Before she disappeared into their home, she called out: "And no more playing in the field for a while."

The baby's laughter faded behind the front door. The boulevard was alive with activity, but the boys leaned back against the house, their eyes on the sky again.

"Are you guys okay?" said Ruben.

Frankie and Ezra shrugged and nodded.

"Are you?"

Ruben took a breath. "Do you think it's really gone?" he said.

Ezra looked down at his action figure. Frankie looked out toward the field, where the firemen were marching like a stream of red ants.

"Do you?" said Frankie, finally.

"Yeah," said Ruben. "That's good, right? That it's gone?"

The lights from the firetrucks swung across the face of the neighborhood.

"It's better," said Frankie. "Better's good enough."

The loops of hoseline in the street flexed with water from the hydrant. Avery convinced the old woman that the brigade wouldn't need her empty paint buckets, and he helped her carry them back up her driveway. Reggie put his telephone away and brought out a pack of cigarettes. The Yang brothers climbed down and joined him. And the boys watched all the smoke unfurl high against the firmament.

"It looks kind of pretty, doesn't it?" said Ezra.

"Yeah," said Ruben, "once it's over."