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El Camino Real (“Muerte”)

Muerte. The Padres taught Tomolelu the word. Now it was all around him.

Did they teach us the word to kill us? Auxea, his father, whispered this under his breath.

But Tomolelu heard.

The old Ohlone scooped another shovelful of dirt into the trench, and more of the burlap bundle was covered up. Tomolelu leaned over his shovel and watched the dust scatter. It was hard to forget that inside the burlap were the skinny arms that had reached for him only yesterday. Nut’u. Her eyes wet with tears, crying out for him.

But now her eyes were dry. Tomolelu thought of her eyes, and how they would laugh. How, if she were alive, she could peek through the burlap and see the sky through the thin fibers. He was sure she would smile at the red and yellow and orange. It was the moment she loved so well – when the sun gave way to the moon.

For two whole days after they buried Nut’u, there was only Tomolelu and his father. The rest of his family – his mother, his grandmother, and his brothers, along with many of the Ohlones at Mission Santa Clara de Assis – had passed away with fever and returned to the Great Spirit. Or maybe they followed the Padres’ God; to purgatory or Heaven or Hell, still obeying the Padres in death.

Tomolelu wasn’t sure. If Auxea knew, he said nothing to his son. Either way, it didn’t really matter. They were still dead.

On the third day, the sickness spread to his father. Auxea came in from the fields, dirt trailing from his feet, his eyes glassy, his skin warm. He told Tomolelu he was tired.

Only tired, he said. He needed rest. And in a gesture most unnatural, at this point Tomolelu should have known, his father collapsed on the rug, curling his old bones into a ball and closing his eyes.

When morning came, Auxea, the most robust of the Coastanoans who had never missed a day in the fields, sent his son to Padre Dias.

Today, I sleep, he whispered, and closed his eyes.

Padre Dias listened as Tomolelu explained his father’s condition. The kindly old padre thought perhaps the sickness that had taken one-third of the Ohlones, including Auxea’s wife and children, had saddened the old man. After all, Auxea’s eyes had lost their spark, his steps had slowed, and

his shoulders curved forward as he walked. His gaze seemed forever fixed on the ground.

Yes, Padre Dias thought to himself, *the old neophyte was sad.*

Tomolelu ran as fast as he could, but it didn't matter. He could still see the burlap that covered Nut'u and the sprinkles of dirt as they fell, one after another and another. Tomolelu could still see his father; sprawled across the cold floorboards, skin burnished, eyes bright. In the last moments his cries had stopped, replaced by a narrow stream of blood which snaked across the old Ohlone's leathered skin, following a path of its own creation. It leaked out of his right nostril first, one drop at a time, but dripped quicker from the left. It crossed his lips, curved down his neck, and coagulated into whatever crevice it could find.

Just before Auxea followed Nut'u and the others to the land of the Great Spirit, far away from his mission home, he cried out. In a last surge of strength, the dark-skinned Ohlone, the convert with eyes that crinkled when he laughed, reached towards his son, who stood alone, shaking in the shadows. But the old neophyte spoke in the ancient language. Tomolelu did not understand. He knew only the words of the mission.

Muerte.

Padre Leandro finished the last rites quickly: two fat fingers across his head, his chest, his shoulders. Tomolelu watched as a sprinkle of holy water dropped onto his father's neck. It mixed with a drop of still-warm blood and managed to glisten in the windowless room.

Tomolelu wanted to forget. He pounded ahead; one foot, then another, and with every step and every gasp of air, he felt a little bit stronger. Almost gratitude. For Tomolelu had a chance to live; he was not *muerte*. He knew instinctively there was safety only in the land itself, away from the cries, the smell, the Padres. The mission.

But there was a problem. The land was Tomolelu's by birth, yet he had been separated too long. He had forgotten the hidden paths through the forests and hills and valleys. He had forgotten the shortcuts through the marshes and the fragrant orchards of walnut and fig. Instead of surrendering to the spirit that he could almost feel buried deep in the layers of soil and wind, and crossing through the meadow, Tomolelu followed the only path he knew: The Real.

It was only logical that he chose to follow it now, as he often did, trudging behind the wagon packed full of seeds and grain. Or perched on a pile of straw, his fingers clasped tight to an iron hoe, or a plowshare and a pitchfork, feeling the steady up-and-down rhythm. In ways, El Camino Real belonged to Tomolelu and the Ohlones as much as it belonged to the Mission Padres.

His pace was quick and steady; one leg after another, gazelle-like, with long stretches and reaches and soundless landings. Tomolelu was grateful for the road, for once again the Real had rescued him, carrying him farther and farther away.

Damp rubble stuck to the soles of his feet and pierced his skin, but he continued down the Real. After almost an hour the sun rose to its peak, bursting with warmth and illuminating the valley. On either side of the road, ancient oaks stood tall among thin wisps of green, swaying with the wind. But Tomolelu did not notice, for his focus was forward on a destination that he could not yet see, but only feel.

A passing hint of the blue and green and garnished grey caught his eye as he scanned ahead, measuring his steps to his heartbeat and counting to himself. Tomolelu slowed to a stop, eyes on the ground, watching as the road below narrowed into focus. He bent over, hands on his knees, and inhaled short, deep gasps, willing his heart to stop pounding in his head. He stared at the dirt, moist from last night's rain, and in that moment a vision came, a time long ago on the Real. It sparked some remembrance in Tomolelu, the almost-man.

He rose to his full, thin height in one swift movement and faced the meadow, looking away from the path of civilization called "Real." Here there was more green and gray and yellow. Slender blades swayed in the breeze, taller and longer than their grassy brothers that hugged the road. Beyond the field, the mountains watched.

If Tomolelu had tracked the time, he would have guessed that he had been running for two passes of the hourglass, maybe three. His lungs burned and his breath came in great gasps. He sank down to his knees, and then collapsed, the wet blades against his spine. He stretched his arms out to his side and gazed up at the sky.

The brightness of the afternoon surprised him, and he shut his eyes, wondering briefly if the sunlight itself was a message from his father, from Nut'u, or maybe from the Great Spirit.

Tomolelu felt the scream rise up silently, from some deep down place in his chest. He sat up, his heart racing, eyes wide, and with his mouth open, and wailed into the bright afternoon. He slammed his fist against the hard earth with all the force he could muster, again and again and again. Around him, the meadow swayed in protest.

Like a child, Tomolelu contracted, crying, sinking back into folded legs, his spine curled into his chest. He lowered his forehead deeper and deeper towards the ground, and as the cool freshness of the earth brushed his cheek, his cries slowed to a halt. Tomolelu opened his eyes and listened.

Around him, the meadow grass swayed low as a heavy gust brushed past, lifting runaway strands of Tomolelu's hair into the air. It collapsed, circling around his shoulders, calming him, and reminding him of voices past; voices he had never heard, but knew well. They were voices that came to life in the pauses and punctuations in the stories of old; voices

that gained strength and form with each fireside retelling. They reminded Tomolelu of another time and another life; one far from his world of now.

His father used to tell him that if Tomolelu stood very still, he could hear the earth speak. Like us, he told his son, the earth has moods and secrets that it whispers to those who will listen. But Tomolelu never cared to try. That would have meant sitting still; waiting for more sand to pass through the hourglass just like the early morning Mass where he struggled to cover his yawn, sit up straight, and to keep his eyes on the Padres.

In rare afternoons Tomolelu would sneak away with Nut'u. Somewhere. Anywhere.

Here.

Yes, Tomolelu had been here. He recognized it now. He had been here before. He and Nut'u, on the way to the shallow end of Guadalupe, their favorite place, where they would balance with their toes gripped to slippery stones, their arms outstretched.

One afternoon they went deeper into the forest. On that day, he had led the hunt for the pebbles, and that afternoon they rested in the shade of an old willow, safe in the shadow of its drooping branches. His hand brushed along the juncture where bark meets roots. It was broad and rough and cold to the touch, until his fingers reached Nut'u's. Then she smiled and pressed her warm skin against his.

Tomolelu thought of the secret grove beyond the meadows. On that afternoon the sun went down long before they returned to the mission. They had to steal in under cover of darkness, hovering behind the horse pasture and corn stalks, waiting for just the right moment to slip by the mission sentry.

He inhaled, feeling the air glide through his nostrils. He felt his chest expand, and in the expansion, he heard the earth rustle in the movement of the meadow and the moan of the wind.

Yes, Tomolelu could hear the earth speak to him now. It called out, beckoning him back to the land of his ancestors. Away from the mission, away from the Padres, and away from the only world he knew.

Pressing his weight on his hands, Tomolelu stood up. In front of him – for as far as he could see – were waves of pale green sprinkled with clumps of clover and poppies of gold.

Yes, he knew this place well. He also knew which way to go.

Behind him was a half day journey on the Real to return to the mission, but Tomolelu had a feeling that no matter how far and how long and how hard he ran, the Mission Santa Clara de Assis would always be there. Yet, somehow, it didn't matter anymore.

Overhead, a last burst of brightness pushed its way through the afternoon clouds, draping the boy's shoulders in light. Tomolelu paused to take a last look at El Camino Real. Then he turned away and took his first step forward.