

LULLABIES OF LA JAULA

Inspired by true events

WGA/w #1983508

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OVER BLACK:

Corazon de leona tienes a veces.
[Yours is often a lioness heart.]

- from *The Prison Poems of Miguel Hernandez*

FADE IN:

EXT. A BEACH - NIGHT

Fifteen-year-old DAHLIA RAMIREZ shivers as she walks barefoot along the shoreline, her T-shirt and jeans dampened by cold sea spray.

The SOUND OF SURF is an undulating backdrop to her Spanish-accented voice as she narrates over action on screen.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
Every Mexican child knows the story
of La Llorona, "the weeping woman."

The receding tide sucks at her feet.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
According to the legend, La Llorona
drowned her children in a fit of
rage...

She spots a large, heavy-looking rock, lifts it.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
... and then she drowned *herself*.

She carries the rock toward an open backpack lying on the sand.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
And ever since, they say, La
Llorona's ghost has haunted the
waterways of Mexico: rivers,
barrancas, even the sea...

She drops the rock into the pack, which is filled with books.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
... stealing away children she
finds near the water's edge.

CLOSE ON a book in the backpack: an American history text,
the Statue of Liberty on its cover.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 The child stealer's motives aren't
 clear. Hatred? Greed? Insanity?

After arranging the contents of the backpack, Dahlia touches
 the topmost book tenderly: *The Prison Poems of Miguel
 Hernandez* - before ZIPPING it closed.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 As children, we didn't know why.
 All we knew was that we would be
 taken from our families if we
 played too close to the water.

She strains to lift the pack, heaves it onto her back.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 But the water is so appealing.

She tightens the backpack's buckles and straps, struggles to
 stand under its weight...

... and wades into the sea.

SUPER: TEN MONTHS EARLIER, TEPITO ("BARRIO BRAVO") MEXICO

EXT. BARRIO BRAVO - DAY

Slanted late afternoon sun shines on brown faces in a
 colorful, bustling marketplace

- Food stalls display pig's feet, snouts,
- an ancient-looking woman ladles ceviche into clay bowls,
- and a harried mother pushes her way through the crowd,
 dragging a dirty toddler behind her.

But beneath the buzzing commerce, something darker moves at a
 slower pace. Packs of young men with expensive relojes and
 cheap sunglasses snake their way through the streets - as
 pedestrians avert their eyes, give them a wide berth.

EXT. BARRIO BRAVO - EVENING

The sun sets over the barrio, painting it in hues of pink and
 orange, turning chaos into beauty.

INT. RAMIREZ FAMILY HOME/BATHROOM, BARRIO BRAVO - NIGHT

Fourteen-year-old Dahlia is wrapped in a blanket, lounging in an empty bathtub, reading.

Her mother, DOLORES RAMIREZ (MAMI), 30s, TAPS on the door before entering. With pomegranate-red lips and shoulder-length hair is teased at the crown, Mami styles herself after the telenovela stars she grew up watching.

[IN SPANISH-ACCENTED ENGLISH]

MAMI

Dahlia, there are four of us in this house. This is not your private library.

She smiles at her daughter, shakes her head.

MAMI (CONT'D)

What are you reading *now*?

Dahlia shows her mother the book's (ENGLISH) title - *Volcanoes: Rivers of Fire*.

Small for her age, and awkward, Dahlia moves with the jerky self-consciousness of a tween.

DAHLIA

Did you know that all the water on the earth was breathed into the atmosphere by volcanoes?

MAMI

Your Abuela needs to use this bathroom, too. And your brother.

DAHLIA

I can't turn on the bedroom light when Abuela's sleeping. She yells!

She imitates her grandmother's gravelly voice:

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

"Cierra la pinche luz!!"
(Turn off the fucking light!!)

Her mother smiles at the impression.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

In America, will I have my *own* bathroom?

MAMI

Back to bed, now. Tomorrow you'll help me with the tortillas and migas. Día de los Muertos is only two days away.

DAHLIA

Why can't Felipe help? Because he's a boy?

MAMI

No. Because he doesn't wash his hands after he pees.

She rubs her hands together, mimics the making of tortillas.

Dahlia makes a "ewww" face and both CHUCKLE as Mami makes a *close the book* gesture before exiting.

INT. RAMIREZ HOME/FAMILY ROOM, BARRIO BRAVO - DAY

Earth-toned pillows and woven rugs give the tiny room a cozy feel.

Sitting on a sagging sofa, an empty vase on the table in front of her, a pile of wilted dahlias in her lap, Mami is building a bouquet.

She HUMS A MELANCHOLY CORRIDO as she works.

Dahlia shares a SQUEAKY rocking chair with her diminutive ABUELA, and as her grandmother runs shriveled fingers through her hair, she leans into the scalp massage with an expression of bliss. She watches as...

Mami selects a stem, trims its lower leaves, then places it - just the right color, in just the right position - among the rest.

She looks up at her daughter.

MAMI

Dahlias for my Dahlia.

She considers the flower.

MAMI (CONT'D)

Not the most elegant flower, but the toughest.

Abuela nods agreement as she braids Dahlia's long, coarse hair.

ABUELA
Grows in the highest mountains. In
the harshest conditions.

Dahlia leans in to the bouquet, inhales.

Her mother lifts a red dahlia from the pile, quizzes her.

MAMI
Red is for...?

[DAHLIA LAPSES INTO SPANISH]

DAHLIA
Espera. Lo sé.
(Wait. I know.)

MAMI
In *English*, Dahlia. You need to
practice.

[CONVERSATION CONTINUES IN ENGLISH]

DAHLIA
Red is for beauty?

ABUELA
Eh, beauty. It only leaves you.

MAMI
More important than beauty. The red
dahlia means *strength*.

She adds it to the bouquet.

As Mami works with the dahlias, the bouquet becomes more
vivid. Individually, the flowers are spindly and faded; in
combination they're resplendent.

DAHLIA
(reacting to the bouquet)
Ooooh.

MAMI
All they needed was a little water -
and each other.

Her expression becomes wistful.

MAMI (CONT'D)
I've always dreamed of working in a
flower shop - in the City of
Angels.
(MORE)

MAMI (CONT'D)

(beat)

When we join your Papi--

Abuela GROANS, rolls her eyes. Mami ignores her.

DAHLIA

They have florerías in Los Angeles?

MAMI

Of course.

DAHLIA

Imagine how the shop will smell!

She points to a purple dahlia.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

That one's pretty.

Mami nods but doesn't add it to the bouquet.

MAMI

This is a Día de los Muertos bouquet. The purple dahlia is not for celebration.

DAHLIA

What does it mean?

But before her mother can answer...

ABUELA

It's a warning. Of *disloyalty*.

She looks at Mami pointedly.

ABUELA (CONT'D)

The purple dahlia means: You are being *betrayed*.

Mami glares at her mother.

DAHLIA

Which color was I named for?

MAMI

You know the answer.

Dahlia smiles shyly because she does, but wants to hear it again.

Mami lifts a white dahlia from the pile, cuts it at the base of the bud.

MAMI (CONT'D)
White. For innocence.

ABUELA
The girl can't stay pure forever.

MAMI
Not *that* kind of innocence. My
greatest wish for my daughter...

She tucks the white flower behind Dahlia's ear.

MAMI (CONT'D)
... is that she never know the evil
in the world.

She leans back and admires her daughter lovingly.

MAMI (CONT'D)
Now into the kitchen! We need to
start the migas!

Dahlia slides off her grandmother's lap, and as soon as she's
out of earshot, Abuela addresses Mami harshly.

[SPANISH, SUBTITLED]

ABUELA
Why do you make the girl think
she's going to live in America?

MAMI
Because she *will*. Vicente--

ABUELA
If your husband was going to send
for you, he would have done it long-

SOUNDS from outside interrupt: VIOLENT THUMPING, BARKING
SHOUTS

The front DOOR OPENS, SLAMS shut.

INT. FOYER - CONTINUOUS

Just inside the door, Dahlia's brother FELIPE, 15, crumples
to the floor - his face bloody, chest heaving, eyes wide with
shock.

Dahlia recoils from the sight, presses her back against the
wall...

... as Mami and Abuela come running from the family room.

MAMI
Felipe! Oh no!!

Blood runs from a wound on his brow, and Dahlia GASPS.

Mami's expression registers shock, then rage.

MAMI (CONT'D)
Thugs!

She moves toward the door, but a SHOUT from Felipe stops her.

FELIPE
Mami! Don't!! They have *guns*.

ABUELA
Stay inside, Dolores.

Abuela leans over Felipe, fretting, wringing her hands, getting in the way.

MAMI
Mama, go into the kitchen. Make him
some of your 'remedy.' Use the
tequila on the high shelf.

Abuela shuffles off.

MAMI (CONT'D)
Dahlia, bring a bucket of cold
water. Then cut one of Felipe's T-
shirts into strips - from the pile
of clean laundry beside the sink.

But Dahlia only continues to stare.

Seeing that her daughter is still frozen, Mami YELLS...

MAMI (CONT'D)
Dahlia! HELP your brother!

... jarring her into action.

INT. RAMIREZ HOME/FAMILY ROOM - LATER

Felipe lies on the sofa, his head wrapped in homemade bandages, as Dahlia sits beside him holding an ice-filled rag on his eye.

He GROANS, and she touches his hand in a gesture of comfort, then whispers to him, out of earshot of the adults in the adjoining kitchen.

DAHLIA
You told them "no"?

Felipe reaches for the half-empty glass of Abuela's 'remedy' on the floor beside him, is unable to lift it.

FELIPE
My arms don't work.

Dahlia lifts the glass to his swollen lips. He gulps.

FELIPE (CONT'D)
They gave me til Día de los Muertos
to change my answer to yes.

He's woozy; his words are slurred.

DAHLIA
And if you don't?

He avoids her question - and her eyes.

FELIPE
They want me to be a lookout.

DAHLIA
But what if you don't change your
answer? What will happen then?

FELIPE
What do you *think*?

He downs more of the 'remedy'.

INT. KITCHEN - LATER

Abuela stands at the sink scrubbing blood from her grandson's clothing as Mami paces.

ABUELA
We'll take him to the doctor in the
morning.

Mami stops his pacing.

MAMI
There's no need. Those cholos knew
what they were doing. There won't
be any permanent damage; he
wouldn't be any good to them, then.

She looks at the front door as if imagining something terrifying beyond.

MAMI (CONT'D)

A doctor will ask questions. And if
they think he's answered them...

Abuela nods understanding.

ABUELA

No. No doctor.

Mami wipes perspiration from her forehead, looks into the
family room, sees that Felipe is asleep.

And the frenetic energy in the house begins to subside.

INT. FAMILY ROOM - NIGHT (LATER)

Mami and Abuela argue in low tones as Felipe lies on the sofa
- in a deep, intoxicated sleep.

ABUELA

Oh? And *how* are you going to call
him? I thought he was the only man
in America without a phone.

MAMI

He has a phone.

ABUELA

Then why doesn't he buy *you* one?
(under her breath)
Begging the neighbor every time you
need to use a phone...

At her daughter's pained expression, she softens.

ABUELA (CONT'D)

Dolores, my smart girl: Think! What
has that man ever done for you?

Mami SCOFFS, turns toward Felipe.

MAMI

Vicente loves his son.

ABUELA

He *left* his son.

MAMI

He didn't leave. He went ahead.

She kneels on the floor beside her sleeping son, smooths his
hair.

MAMI (CONT'D)
When his father hears of *this*...

Abuela SIGHS.

INT. RAMIREZ HOME/KITCHEN - DAY

Dahlia helps her mother fill backpacks with canned food and bottled water.

DAHLIA
How many days' worth?

MAMI
Your Papi said probably five, but it could be up to eight.

DAHLIA
(carefully)
He arranged everything? You're *sure*?

Tired of defending her husband, Mami ignores the question.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Leaving on Día de los Muertos. It seems... disrespectful.

MAMI
What do you mean?

DAHLIA
On the day of our ancestors? To cross the border, to do what so many of them died *trying* to do?

Abuela has shuffled into the room.

ABUELA
Our ancestors aren't jealous of us.

She pats Dahlia's cheek.

ABUELA (CONT'D)
Los muertos want to see you *thrive*.

Then, to Mami:

ABUELA (CONT'D)
Where's the plunger?

Dahlia GIGGLES and Mami rolls her eyes.

MAMI

Under the sink, where it always is.

Abuela shuffles out the way she came in, and Dahlia sits at the kitchen table, overcome by sadness.

DAHLIA

(looking after Abuela)

Mami, how can we leave her?

Her mother pauses, continues in a somber tone.

MAMI

Your Abuela has your aunt and
uncle... just down the street. And
your cousins.

She goes to Dahlia, strokes her hair.

MAMI (CONT'D)

We'll send for her when we're
settled, mija.

Dahlia forces a weak smile, and her mother resumes the unloading of canned goods from the cupboard.

MAMI (CONT'D)

Besides, that trip is *much* too
danger--.

Mami stops herself, but the word "dangerous" hangs in the air.

MAMI (CONT'D)

(in attempt to distract)

Here. Take this.

She hands Dahlia a can of spinach.

MAMI (CONT'D)

To flavor the pintos.

But it's too late. There's fear in Dahlia's eyes.

INT. MAMI'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (LATER)

A TAP on the door as Mami changes into her nightgown. Dahlia enters, looking sheepish.

MAMI

Go to bed now, my flower.

But Dahlia sits on her mother's bed, struggles to say what she came to say.

DAHLIA

I wish I was strong. Like you.

Mami pauses, considers.

MAMI

This danger came for Felipe. When danger comes for you, you'll be strong.

She regards Dahlia thoughtfully. SIGHS.

MAMI (CONT'D)

You should stay.

Dahlia doesn't argue, and her mother sets her shoulders as if coming to terms with disappointment.

MAMI (CONT'D)

Yes. You'll look after your Abuela. And work on your English for the day when you'll join your Papi and brother and me.

Dahlia is visibly relieved - and ashamed.

Mami goes to a bureau, rifles through it, withdraws a worn paperback.

[END SUBTITLES; CONVERSATION CONTINUES IN ENGLISH]

MAMI (CONT'D)

Your Papi gave this to me when we were dating.

She handles it gently, sits on the bed beside Dahlia.

INSERT: *The Prison Poems of Miguel Hernandez*

DAHLIA

Who's he?

MAMI

Miguel Hernandez was a Spanish revolutionary. He wrote these poems while he was in prison, in the 1930s.

She opens to a random page.

MAMI (CONT'D)

This is how I learned English. See?
One side is Spanish; the other
English.

Looking at the page, she becomes solemn.

MAMI (CONT'D)

This one's about his son. His wife
wrote to tell him their baby was
starving; they had only onions to
eat.

Dahlia leans in.

MAMI (CONT'D)

Of course there was nothing he
could do from prison. But he didn't
despair. He wrote a poem about his
son's laughter and called it
"Lullaby of the Onion."

She reads:

MAMI (CONT'D)

My child lay in a cot of hunger;
he was fed onion blood.
Laugh, child. Your laughter is
victor among flowers and larks,
a sword most triumphant.
In your cot, guard always
laughter's every feather.

DAHLIA

What happened to the baby?

MAMI

(softly)
He died.

DAHLIA

(horrificed)
Of starvation?

Mami nods.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

I don't know if I like poetry.

Mami turns to a dog-eared page.

MAMI

This one's my favorite.

She reads:

MAMI (CONT'D)
 They shall not bind me, no.
 This world of chains
 for me is naught.
 Who will confine a smile?
 Who will wall in a voice?
 I am tall, buoyant, free.
 Tall, buoyant, free, free.

DAHLIA
 That one's better.

MAMI
 Will you keep it for me?

Dahlia takes the book.

MAMI (CONT'D)
 Now curl up to sleep with me. Like
 when you were a little girl.

And Dahlia does.

INT. MAMI'S BEDROOM - NIGHT (LATER)

Awakened by her mother's SNORING, Dahlia tiptoes toward the bedroom door, stops, searches in the dark for the book of prison poems. Then takes it and a blanket to:

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Dahlia wraps herself in the blanket, climbs into the bathtub, and READS aloud [IN SPANISH]:

DAHLIA
 (from *Prison Poems*)
 Niño radiante...

She switches to ENGLISH:

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
 Radiant child,
 my blood moves with you
 ever forward.
 Blood of mine, advance,
 do not retreat.
 All things propel you,
 universe of a light
 and golden body.
 With you I'll always conquer time.

CLOSE ON her mother's handwriting in the margin beside the poem: *Dahlia*

INT. RAMIREZ HOME/KITCHEN - PRE-DAWN

Felipe hangs back from the tearful good-byes between his mother and grandmother.

[SPANISH, SUBTITLED]

FELIPE
Didn't we do all this last night?

Mami hands Abuela a key.

MAMI
Now you have a spare. So you can
stop locking yourself out.

They embrace, wipe each other's wet faces.

Abuela pulls Felipe in for a hug and whispers:

ABUELA
Take care of your Mami.

As Mami and Felipe move toward the door...

... Dahlia enters, dressed in multiple layers of clothing and carrying a bulging, well-worn Dora the Explorer themed backpack.

Mami's expression reveals anxiety... and pride.

EXT. A TRUCK BED - NIGHT

Dahlia peers into Mexican faces lit by dim slivers of moonlight: young and old, male and female - all of them frightened - crammed into the bed of a tarp-covered truck.

As they bounce along a dirt road, a toddler vomits into his father's hat, and the man apologizes to the others. Some GROAN; others respond with "No hay pedo."

Dahlia sinks her head into the soft flesh of her mother's arm.

EXT. A DESERT - DAY

Dust kicked up by the departing truck floats in the air as Dahlia, Mami and Felipe stand listening like attentive school children to CARLOS, 30s, a scrawny, leather-skinned Coyote.

He hands them each a length of cloth.

[IN SPANISH, EXCEPT: Carlos switches to broken English when he wants to appear authoritative.]

CARLOS

You step on it. So it covers the
bottom of your shoe. Then tie it on
top. Like this.

He ties the cloth strip over the top of his shoe. The others do the same.

He takes a step.

CARLOS (CONT'D)

See? No footprints.

He walks on, and they follow.

Already, all three are drenched in sweat. And already, they're struggling to keep up.

PRE-LAP: The WARBLE-WHISTLE of an elf owl

EXT. DESERT - EVENING (LATER)

Saguaro cactuses look like phantoms with outstretched arms in the dark.

Dahlia and Felipe follow behind Carlos, but Mami is clearly struggling. Pale and shaky, she leans on Dahlia as she walks.

Felipe tosses a blanket on the ground, motions for Mami to sit. He takes Dahlia aside.

FELIPE

When's the last time you saw her
drink water?

Dahlia gives her mother an assessing look.

DAHLIA

This morning. Right before we ran
out.

FELIPE
You gave her the bottle. But did
you see her *drink*?

Dahlia thinks. And realizes.

FELIPE (CONT'D)
Last time I saw was the day before
yesterday.

Dahlia's eyes go wide, and she yells to the Coyote, nearly a
quarter mile ahead.

DAHLIA
Carlos! Hey!

The Coyote turns, regards them with disdain, then continues
on, widening the gap.

Mami curls into a fetal position on the ground and Dahlia
looks pleadingly at Felipe.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
She needs water. Tell him!

Felipe, injured from his beating, limp/runs ahead, catches up
with the Coyote.

FELIPE
My mother can't go on without
water.

CARLOS
(in broken English)
I TOLE you: bring water.

FELIPE
We did! We didn't know it would
take this long. We need water.

The Coyote looks annoyed, but backtracks.

He addresses Dahlia and Mami, points into the distance.

CARLOS
Jugs of water are in the shrubs up
ahead. But you need to *walk* to get
to them.

Mami GROANS at the thought of more walking.

MAMI
You go ahead. I'll catch up.

Dahlia shakes her head, addresses the Coyote angrily.

DAHLIA
Go and get them!

CARLOS
(in English)
I tole you in beginning. I walk one
direction: forward. You keep up or
get leave behind.

FELIPE
I'll do it.

He regards the Coyote.

FELIPE (CONT'D)
Just tell me where.

EXT. THE DESERT - NIGHT (LATER)

Dahlia walks through the desert in near-total darkness.
Something SLITHERS across her path, and she draws a SHARP
BREATH, pauses, then continues on.

She EXHALES relief as Felipe comes into view. He's sitting in
the sand beside a shrub, CRYING.

FELIPE
Don't look at me!

Beside him are two jugs of unopened water.

DAHLIA
Water!
(beat)
What's the matter?

FELIPE
My arms...

She remembers.

DAHLIA
You can't lift them.
(realizing)
Of course you can't. You shouldn't
even be carrying a pack.

She lifts one of the jugs, tries to carry it, doesn't get
more than a few steps.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
 Drink some, so it's lighter for me.

Filled with shame, Felipe shakes his head.

FELIPE
 Not until Mami drinks.

Dahlia opens the jug, drinks. Then motions for Felipe to tilt his head and pours water into his mouth.

After drinking, Felipe SOBS with shame.

Dahlia lifts the now-manageable jug.

DAHLIA
 Come back when you're ready. We need your help dealing with that cabron.

Felipe wipes his tear-stained face.

EXT. THE DESERT - DAY

The color has returned to Mami's face, but she continues to struggle as they walk. She leans on Dahlia.

MAMI
 Tell me about volcanoes.

Dahlia thinks.

DAHLIA
 Do you know about Mt. Pelee?

MAMI
 Where's that?

DAHLIA
 An island. In the Caribbean.

Mami INHALES, EXHALES. They continue.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
 It was the worst eruption in the 20th century. Only two people on the whole island survived.

Mami GASPS in pain, tries to pass it off as an expression of interest.

MAMI
 Wow.

DAHLIA

One was this shoemaker that lived on the very edge of the island. The other one was a prisoner. He was locked in a dungeon, and his cell had thick stone...

Limping now, she emits an involuntary GROAN.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

... walls.

Carlos and Felipe are getting farther and farther away. Still, Dahlia and her mother keep walking.

MAMI

I never should've brought you.

Dahlia thinks of more volcano facts.

DAHLIA

Krakatoa, in Indonesia? When it erupted, it made the loudest sound in the whole history of the world.

MAMI

(mumbling)

It was selfish of me.

DAHLIA

"The Scream"... You know that painting?

She pauses in their slow, painful shuffle, makes a wide "o" with her mouth to mimic the famous painting.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

The thing the guy's screaming about? It's Krakatoa, erupting in the background. The painter could see it all the way over in Norway, where he lived.

MAMI

You made that up.

DAHLIA

(laughing)

Did not!

Finally, Mami smiles.

Dahlia's mouth is so dry that LAUGHING makes her COUGH. When she recovers, she sees that Carlos and Felipe have stopped.

When Dahlia and her mother finally catch up with them, the Coyote is pointing into the distance - and saying something about "the devil."

EXT. EL TÚNEL DEL DIABLO, U.S./MEXICO BORDER - NIGHT

Darkness and dirt. The effect is claustrophobic as Dahlia and Mami struggle with every step.

When a scorpion crosses her path, Mami SLIPS while moving to avoid it, and Dahlia grabs her elbow before she hits the ground.

Carlos SHUSHES them.

CARLOS
You hear that?

He points upward. The three listen to the MUFFLED WHIRRING of vehicles from above.

CARLOS (CONT'D)
La policía fronteriza find a new
tunnel every day. You want them to
find *this* one?

Mami shakes her head: no.

CARLOS (CONT'D)
Then *quiet!*

As they continue, Carlos takes up the rear...

... which places him directly behind Dahlia. He watches her backside as they proceed - until Felipe notices and trades positions with her.

FELIPE
(to Carlos)
There. You can stare at my ass.

Carlos resumes his position in the lead, and the group continues in silence.

EXT. EL TÚNEL DEL DIABLO - LATER

Covered in dirt and dust, the family struggles to keep up with Carlos, who looks and moves like a gopher.

Mami is limping badly now, her face contorted with pain.

Gradually, a shaft of moonlight appears in the distance - the tunnel's end - and Carlos motions for them to stop.

MAMI

That's it. That's the meeting point.

She collapses with relief.

CARLOS

Wait here.

As the Coyote goes on ahead, Dahlia joins her mother on the ground. They lean against the rock wall, and Mami distributes bottled water.

Dahlia GULPS it, and Mami pulls a blanket from a pack, drapes it over her.

MAMI

You're doing so good.

But Felipe is pacing, becoming more and more agitated. He mumbles angrily.

FELIPE

My fault... All of this. Estúpido!

MAMI

(to Felipe)

Mijo, sit!

He punches the tunnel's caked dirt wall, then finally, sits.

EXT. EL TÚNEL DEL DIABLO - LATER

As Mami sleeps, Dahlia and Felipe have a hushed conversation.

DAHLIA

You can't blame yourself.

He shakes his head with self-loathing.

FELIPE

You don't know what I did.

DAHLIA

What?

He looks at the ground.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Felipe, WHAT did you do?

FELIPE
I told the cartel "no."

DAHLIA
I know that.

He shakes his head emphatically.

FELIPE
I told them I didn't want to be--

DAHLIA
You didn't want to be a lookout. I
know.

He rubs his face, EXHALES.

FELIPE
I told them I didn't want to be
JUST a lookout.

Dahlia stares at him as she absorbs what he's saying.

FELIPE (CONT'D)
That fight - I started it. I was
mad. Cause I didn't want to start
at the bottom.
(beat)
They didn't come to me. I went to
them.

He looks at the tunnel, at his suffering mother.

FELIPE (CONT'D)
And so all of this...

Dahlia stands, turns away from him, and faces the wall, her
forehead pressed to the dirt.

DAHLIA
(speaking into the wall)
Oh my God, Felipe. How could you
let us--

FELIPE
I didn't mean for us to leave!!
(beat, as he softens)
But then when we did, I thought...
We could finally be with Papi. And
it would all be worth it.

He LAUGHS at himself, bitterly.

FELIPE (CONT'D)
My whole life, all I ever do is try
to make that pendejo proud of me.
(beat)
But he never is.

FOOTSTEPS...

... as Carlos returns from the end of the tunnel, GRUMBLING
under his breath.

Dahlia nudges her mother awake.

MAMI
What?

CARLOS
Nobody there to meet you.

MAMI
What do you mean? Did you see a
blue truck?

Carlos shakes his head.

MAMI (CONT'D)
He'll be there. The sun isn't up
yet.
(beat)
We just have to wait.

The Coyote looks annoyed, tosses his pack against the wall of
the tunnel, sits - and reluctantly, waits.

EXT. EL TÚNEL DEL DIABLO - PRE-DAWN

While Mami and Felipe sleep, Dahlia is awake - watching
Carlos move something from his pack to his pocket. The glint
of metal is momentary but unmistakable.

Mami and Felipe wake to the SOUND of the Coyote ZIPPING his
pack.

FELIPE
Where are you going?

CARLOS
You paid for the end of El Tunel
del Diablo. This is the end of El
Tunel del Diablo.
(in English)
I don't get pay to wait.

Felipe stands. Looks at the dim light up ahead.

Mami notices that the Coyote is preparing to leave.

MAMI

Just wait with us a little longer.
We can't do it alone.

She moves closer to him, lowers her voice.

MAMI (CONT'D)

The cartel will kill my son if we
go back.

Carlos only shakes his head.

CARLOS

You should have considered that.
And how your husband is a pendejo.
Whah kind of man leave his family
in the middle of the desert? Puto!

He LAUGHS, then pauses, seems to consider.

CARLOS (CONT'D)

For another 1800 pesos, I'll take
you the rest of the way.

MAMI

I gave you everything I have. My
husband will pay if you take us all
the way.

He just SPITS, tightens the laces on his shoes and heaves his
pack over his shoulder.

DIM WHIR of VEHICLES from above.

MAMI (CONT'D)

Can they find the entrance?

CARLOS

Not if you're quiet.

Dahlia WHIMPERS softly, and her mother rubs her back.

The Coyote regards Dahlia, pauses, considers.

CARLOS (CONT'D)

I tell you what. I'll wait...

MAMI

Oh, thank God!

CARLOS
... behind there...

He nods toward an outcropping of rock.

CARLOS (CONT'D)
... with your daughter.

He pulls an 8-inch Kelso from his pocket and points it at Dahlia, motions for her to move away from her mother, as Mami makes a panicked, GUTTURAL NOISE.

Dahlia only stares, a deer in headlights.

Felipe sees the knife...

... and a cloud of dirt rises as he RUSHES the Coyote.

For a moment, the two seem locked in an awkward, extended hug...

... until Felipe backs off, looks at his shoulder, watches as blood reddens his shirt.

Dahlia makes a MEWLING SOUND, and Carlos aims the bloody knife at her.

CARLOS (CONT'D)
Shush! It's only a scratch.
(to Felipe)
Sit!

A shocked Felipe sits, Carlos KICKS him in the head, and Mami GASPS as her son sags into unconsciousness, blood from his shoulder seeping into the ground.

Carlos motions with the knife for Dahlia to stand up, but Mami holds her tightly.

At the DRONE OF MACHINERY from above, she looks up.

MAMI
You touch her and I bring ICE down
on *all* of us.

The Coyote reverts to his broken English.

CARLOS
Then you never see your kids again.
They put them in cages, now-the-
days.

He points the knife again, this time at Mami.

CARLOS (CONT'D)
Let her go.

But Mami holds tight.

Carlos SLAPS her, and Dahlia GASPS, then CRIES.

MAMI
(pleading)
She's only 14.

Carlos shrugs.

Mami looks at her children - as if memorizing their faces...

... then turns toward the rock ceiling above - and SCREAMS.

MAMI (CONT'D)
HERE! DOWN HERE!!

Carlos is momentarily stunned - then sprints back through the tunnel, as:

SOUNDS OF STOMPING FEET, SHOUTED COMMANDS, and WHIRRING MACHINERY descend.

And BORDER PATROL OFFICERS storm the tunnel.

We see from Dahlia's perspective as:

- Mami is manhandled, forced to her feet and pushed toward a vehicle.

- Felipe regains consciousness and is ordered to RAISE HIS ARMS ABOVE HIS HEAD.

But he's confused and panicked - and his injuries make it impossible for him to comply.

Dahlia SCREAMS IN ENGLISH:

DAHLIA
He can't!

But in her panic, she reverts to SPANISH:

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Esta herido!
(He's wounded!)

The BARKING ORDERS CONTINUE. Soon, multiple Officers are SHOUTING at Felipe, their rage-filled voices overlapping.

BORDER PATROL OFFICER #1
RAISE YOUR ARMS!

BORDER PATROL OFFICER #2
HANDS IN THE FUCKING AIR!!

Felipe looks from one to the other - confused, overwhelmed, and frozen in fear.

Time seems to slow for Dahlia, and she hears as if from under water:

- POUNDING of her mother's fists against the window of the jeep she's been loaded into, and

- THUDS OF IMPACT as two Officers take turns KICKING Felipe.

DAHLIA
(screaming)
STOP IT!! STOP!!!

His defensive gestures turn to jerking, then quivering, until finally, his WHIMPERING stops.

Border Patrol Officer #1 kneels, feels for a pulse, locks eyes with Border Patrol Officer #2, shakes his head.

The white cotton lining of Felipe's pocket sticks out of his jeans like a flag of surrender, unnaturally bright against the dark and blood and grime. The only clean thing.

A DOUGH-FACED OFFICER approaches Dahlia,

... BARKS AN ORDER

... and her world goes silent before it goes black.

INT. A BUS - DAY

From Dahlia's perspective:

Brief moments of lucidity and a BUZZING that sounds as if it's coming from inside her.

Faces of dirty, sullen children being transported in what looks like a school bus - but with barred windows.

An overheard conversation in heavily Spanish-accented English:

BOY #1
They don't have a king; they have a
press-ident.

BOY #2

That's what I said. They barely have this press-ident that he wants to be brown. So he sits under this ma-cheen all day, trying to get brown. But he's too white that it don't work. The ma-cheen barely makes him orange.

(beat)

That's why he hates brown people.

BOY #1

You say "barely" too much.

BOY #2

Shut up, puto. I barely even say it!

INT. A BUS - NIGHT (LATER)

Dahlia is given a pill and water - and a command.

STERN VOICE (O.S.)

Swallow.

From her perspective:

- The sun swirling through a grimy window.
- Then setting.
- The world being painted black.

PRE-LAP: Children's VOICES - MURMURING, MOANING, CRYING

SUPER: NOGALES DETENTION CENTER, ARIZONA ("THE CAGE")

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

Dahlia wakes to painful light. She shields her eyes with her forearm, finds herself lying on a thin mat on hard ground. Above, a ceiling made of cyclone wire.

She's in a cage. A cage filled with children.

[CONVERSATION IN THE CAGE IS IN ENGLISH, EXCEPT WHERE NOTED]

A small, brown, spiky-haired boy is staring at her. Sweet-faced and scarily skinny, HECTOR speaks in broken English.

HECTOR
How many Messican it take to change
a light bulb?

The world seems to quiver, and the boy continues to stare.
His chubby cheeks are a mismatch with his bony body.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
You give up?

He tilts his head, as if studying an exotic zoo animal.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
I tell you how many Messican it
take to change a light bulb: Juan.

Dahlia lifts her head and winces with pain.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
Is funny?

He looks at her expectantly.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Just say "yes."

DAHLIA
What?
(beat)
Yes.

She begins to sit up.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
(to Hector)
What's this place?

HECTOR
Donde?

DAHLIA
Si. *Where?*

HECTOR
The cage of La Llorona.

Dahlia is shocked into sudden alertness. She sits up too
quickly, closes her eyes against the ache.

DAHLIA
What?

HECTOR
Where she keep the kids she steal.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Hector, why don't you go see if
NURSE TERESA has gum for you?

Hector runs off, and Dahlia focuses achy eyes on the teenaged girl sitting cross-legged on the mat beside her.

ESTEFANI is 17, with light brown skin and large round eyes in a heart-shaped face. She wears her silky black hair long and loose; it covers her curvy body like camouflage.

ESTEFANI
You speak English.

Dahlia nods.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
That's good, cause my Spanish
sucks.

A little girl plops into her lap; Estefani ties her shoelaces, watches her scamper away.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
(to Dahlia)
Hector wasn't trying to scare you;
he really *thinks* that.

DAHLIA
That this is La Llorona's cage?

Estefani nods.

ESTEFANI
You're in Arizona. Nogales
Detention Center for Immigrant
Children.

Dahlia looks at the cage-like structure, which houses about 50 girls and is situated inside a tent the size of a house.

DAHLIA
I saw this on TV. But I didn't
really think--

ESTEFANI
What's your name?

Dahlia ignores her, becomes agitated.

DAHLIA
I need to find my--

ESTEFANI
I'm Estefani.

Dahlia struggles to her feet and looks at what resembles a parking lot. But instead of cars, girls - of all sizes and ages. All of them brown.

Dahlia becomes dizzy, sways on her feet, but continues to scan her environment.

DAHLIA
My mother--

ESTEFANI
She's not here.

Dahlia sits back down to keep from falling.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
(again)
What's your *name*?

Dahlia BREATHES. And with her answer, tears.

DAHLIA
Dahlia.

She wipes her face angrily, puts a hand over her eyes.

ESTEFANI
Pounding in your head?

Dahlia nods.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
That's the drug. You need to drink water.

Estefani nods toward a 10-gallon water cooler equipped with tiny paper cups - in the area between the cage and the tent.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
There's water in the morning, but it runs out by afternoon. And they don't refill it til the next day.
(beat)
Not as much bed-wetting that way.

As Estefani moves through the open door of the cage toward the water dispenser, the eyes of the nearest Guard follow her.

Dahlia takes in her surroundings. Each girl has a sleeping mat, a thin, metallic-silver blanket, and a small pile of belongings: grimy clothing and flip flops, grungy stuffed animals.

Pacing the space between the cage and the tent wall are four GUARDS - dressed in jeans and fluorescent green T-shirts stamped with huge block letters: STAFF.

Estefani returns with a tiny cup of water; Dahlia drinks.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

You should go back to sleep if you can. The drug's still in you. There's nothing to do here but wait for the bad food, anyway.

Before she's done talking, Dahlia has fallen asleep.

PRE-LAP: FELIPE!

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Estefani shakes Dahlia out of her nightmare.

ESTEFANI

(groggily)

You okay?

Dahlia sits up, recalls her new reality.

DAHLIA

They killed him. My brother.

She says it without emotion, dazed, as if telling herself a story. Estefani nods; she's heard that story before.

ESTEFANI

I'm sorry.

Dahlia scans the room, which is lit by a yellow/green haze. Children seem to float on silvery rafts in a foggy lagoon.

When her eyes adjust to the night lights, she spots a cardboard sign in the space between the cage and the tent wall that reads, "Bathroom/Baño." But the door to the cage - which was open during the day - is now closed.

Estefani follows her gaze.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

You have to go?

Dahlia nods.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
If you raise your hand, one of the
Night Guards will let you out.
(beat)
Usually.

Dahlia raises her hand as a Guard approaches, but Estafani pulls on her arm.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
(fear in her eyes)
No. Not THAT one.

A portly Guard comes into view.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
That's Aldo. He's...

ALDO seems to saunter rather than patrol, his belly bouncing, his bulgy eyes scanning the cage full of girls.

ESTAFANI
Just... Wait for another one.

Dahlia waits for Aldo to pass, and her raised hand is acknowledged by another Guard. His KEYS JANGLE as he opens the cage door, and Dahlia wades through an obstacle course of little girl bodies.

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

Dahlia watches Estefani pull a hoodie over the head of Hector, who is sitting in her lap, then scans the tiny bodies surrounding them.

DAHLIA
Where did they all come from?

ESTEFANI
Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala. A
lot of them are Mexicans that got
separated during border crossings.
That's you?

Dahlia nods.

DAHLIA
Nobody has a phone.

ESTEFANI

Yeah, it's like those '80s movies
where nobody has a phone and
everybody's always dancing.

(beat)

But without the dancing.

She nudges the boy in her lap.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

Hector, this is Dahlia.

HECTOR

Dahlia is flower.

DAHLIA

Yes.

HECTOR

My mama has flower. *This* part.

He touches the inside of Dahlia's wrist.

DAHLIA

On her wrist? A tattoo of a flower?

He nods.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

What kind of flower?

HECTOR

A *beautivo* flower.

ESTEFANI

He's learning English. Beautiful's
his favorite word.

She smiles a motherly smile.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

But he knows not to speak English
around the Guards.

She squeezes the boy affectionately.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

Right?

Hector nods.

HECTOR

Si, *senorita*.

He GIGGLES.

DAHLIA

Why not?

ESTEFANI

If they know you speak English,
they put you on the "adoptable"
list. You don't want to be on that.

The NOISE LEVEL RISES as children seem to wake in unison, as if in response to some universal, internal timer. Girls line up for the bathroom or water dispenser.

Hector runs off, and Dahlia looks after him.

DAHLIA

If the boys have their own tent,
why--

ESTEFANI

The smaller ones sleep with *us* at
night. They're... *safer*.

Dahlia's expression registers the horror of the implication.

DAHLIA

Why does he think he's in La
Llorona's cage?

ESTEFANI

I'm guessing he grew up hearing
stories about the ghost who takes
kids from their families. So when
he was taken from his family...

DAHLIA

But why do you *let* him think that?

Estefani considers.

ESTEFANI

It's better than the truth.

She looks at the emotionless face of the nearest Guard.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

He thinks La Llorona steals
children because she *loves* them.

DAHLIA

I have to find out what happened to
my mother.

She fixes her eyes on a Guard, starts to get up.

ESTEFANI

It's better to stay away from the Guards. And the Admins. They won't tell you, anyway. All they say is: you're being processed.

She points to a woman in a T-shirt stamped NURSE sitting at a desk in a corner of the cage.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

If you *have* to talk to one of them, Nurse Teresa's like, the only nice one. And she speaks Spanish.

Dahlia looks at the nurse - a redhead in her early thirties, so white she looks almost bleached. She starts to walk toward her, but the worry on Estefani's face stops her.

Dahlia turns, sits back down, starts to tear up again.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

(soothingly)

If you wait, your mother will come for you. You just have to wait.

Dahlia looks into the girl's big brown eyes, then slides back under her metallic blanket...

... and waits.

EXT. BUS STATION, TEPITO, MEXICO - DAY

A bus with barred windows SQUEALS as it pulls into the station.

Mami steps off and walks slowly, dejectedly, across a crumbling parking lot.

EXT. MARKETPLACE, BARRIO BRAVO, MEXICO - NIGHT

A nondescript shop positioned a good distance back from the market's main drag. Mami enters.

Although empty of patrons, its shelves are full: of dark, rancid-looking bottles of olive oil. A dusty cash register is unmanned against a far wall - and beside it, a door.

Mami knocks and is admitted into a meticulously clean, ultra-modern office.

Several BUSY YOUNG MEN in their 20s operate office machinery: industrial-sized copier, thermal laminator, 3D printer, photography equipment.

An older MAN IN CHARGE shakes Mami's hand as she scans the output of all this industry: stacks of documents with freshly-inked words: "Permit to Re-Enter," "Refugee Travel," and "Employment Authorization." She takes off her wedding ring, hands it to the Man.

EXT. U.S./MEXICO BORDER - DAY

A shaky hand extends a document to an IMMIGRATION AGENT.

CLOSE ON: his face as he examines it - then the face of its bearer - Mami - just one of many DAY WORKERS crossing on foot as a group.

He waves her on.

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Estefani is reading to Hector from a book with a tractor on its cover, but he quickly becomes bored, pushes it away.

HECTOR

Tell the La Llorona story.

DAHLIA

La Llorona? That's a *scary* story;
it's not for bedtime.

He GROANS a complaint.

ESTEFANI

It's okay; he always falls asleep
before the scary part.

HECTOR

Tell!

ESTEFANI

Bien, bien!
(beat)
Once, in a tiny village in Mexico--

HECTOR

(annoyed)
Once upon the time!

ESTEFANI
 Sorry. Once upon a time, in a tiny
 village in Mexico...

Hector moves from her lap to his mat, settles down beneath
 the blanket.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
 ... a woman named Maria...

HECTOR
 La Llorona.

ESTEFANI
 That comes later. Right now, she's
 still Maria.

Hector concedes the point by nodding.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
 One day, while Maria was at the
 market, she met a rich, handsome
 stranger.

HECTOR
 (mumbling)
 Desconocito.

ESTEFANI
 Yes. A stranger. He told Maria she
 was the prettiest girl in the whole
 village.

Hector's eyes are closed, and Estefani SIGHS, stops her
 narration.

HECTOR
 Continúa!

Estefani smiles, continues.

ESTEFANI
 Maria and the rich, handsome
 stranger got married. And they had
 two children.

HECTOR
 (sleepily)
 Juan and Guillermo.

DAHLIA
 Those were their names?

Estefani gives an amused shrug.

Hector's BREATHING takes on the heavy rhythm of sleep, and Estefani pulls his thin blanket up around his shoulders.

As Estefani lies down on her own mat, a CAGE GIRL continues with the story, and the nearby children who have been listening shift their attention to her.

[The Cage Girls act as a kind of Greek Chorus throughout, each one representing the migrants of a particular region.]

[IN SPANISH - ENGLISH SUBTITLES]

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN

One day, Maria's husband told her
he had business in a nearby town,
and he would be back soon.

Dahlia glances at Hector, is relieved to see him fast asleep.

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN (CONT'D)

But weeks went by, and then months,
and Maria realized her husband had
abandoned her and their children.

AS WE HEAR CAGE GIRL'S NARRATION, WE FOLLOW MAMI'S PROGRESS:

EXT. A BUS - DAY

Mami rides a bus filled with a mix of Americans and Chicanos, stares out the window as they pass a sign: LOS ANGELES FREEWAY SOUTH

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN (V.O.)

But one day, Maria noticed a fancy
car cruising through town. The top
was down, and she could see that
her husband was behind the wheel.

EXT. A CHICANO NEIGHBORHOOD, LOS ANGELES - DAY

Mami walks down a street, consulting the paper in her hand, looking at house numbers as she goes. Each house is more dilapidated yet ornately decorated than the next,

- some strung with sun-faded Christmas decorations,
- others with broken-down cars under hand-built carports.

Mami stops in front of a house. With no trees to shade it, the tiny dwelling has a parched, brittle look - as if it could burst into flame at any moment.

She INHALES, seems to brace herself before approaching the dried-out front door.

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN (V.O.)
 And in the passenger's seat of her husband's fancy car was a woman - younger and more beautiful than Maria.

EXT. HOME OF VICENTE RAMIREZ, LOS ANGELES - DAY

Mami KNOCKS on the door, and a WOMAN, early 30s, in a ragged housedress, answers. We see but don't hear the heated verbal exchange between the women.

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN (V.O.)
 When she saw her husband with another woman, Maria was furious.

EXT. HOME OF VICENTE RAMIREZ - CONTINUOUS

VICENTE, a stocky Latino in his 30s, comes to the door, shoves the WOMAN back into the house - then faces Mami with a shaky-looking bravado.

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN (V.O.)
 They argued. Maria's husband said it was over between them, but he wanted his children. He would be coming to get them the very next day.

Vicente and Mami argue on the front porch of his house.

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN (V.O.)
 After the argument with her husband, Maria ran home and held her sons in her arms. Then, in the dark of night, she took them to the river...
 (beat)
 ... and drowned them.

Mami yells at Vicente...

MAMI
 Your son is dead!

... and he recoils as if struck by a blow.

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN (V.O.)
 Later that night, Maria went back
 to the river. And this time she
 drowned herself.

RETURN TO:

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Dahlia watches the faces of the listening children - some
 rapt, others too desensitized by trauma to react to anything.

CAGE GIRL - MEXICAN
 And now, Maria's spirit walks along
 the riverbanks of Mexico, trying to
 replace her lost sons by stealing
 children she finds at the water's
 edge. They call her "La Llorona."

A SMALL CHILD'S VOICE (O.S.)
 (whispering)
 The weeping woman.

EXT. HOME OF VICENTE RAMIREZ - DAY

Mami stands in the street in front of Vicente's house and
 WEEPS.

EXT. THE CAGE - DAY

Finished with her story, Cage Girl (Mexican) lies on her mat,
 pulls her blanket over her shoulders, and closes her eyes.
 Her listeners do the same - each child retreating into her
 own nightmare - of a weeping woman and a riverbed.

Dahlia glances at Hector and Estefani - both asleep. But as
 she waits for sleep, Dahlia is distracted by Aldo, who slows
 his pace as he passes. His eyes meet hers, and he smiles his
 predatory smile.

EXT. THE CAGE - DAY

At the SOUND of WHISTLE, girls walk single-file through the
 door of the cage, then out of the tent.

EXT. RECREATION FIELD, THE CAGE - DAY (MOMENTS LATER)

Dahlia follows Estafani past the line of tents to: the "recreation field": an area of sand and scrub-brush enclosed by a barbed-wire-topped fence.

They pass girls playing hopscotch, and lonely-looking children curled up in shady corners with worn out books or toys.

DAHLIA

What happens to the little ones?

ESTEFANI

Some of them go home. The other ones... if nobody comes for them, they give them to Americans. Well, sell them.

(beat)

But Americans mostly want English speaking kids. That's why you should never let them hear you speak English.

DAHLIA

But *you* speak English around them.

ESTEFANI

That's cause I barely speak Spanish. Anyway, I'm 17. Too old to adopt out. They want kids like you. What are you, 12?

DAHLIA

Fourteen.

(beat)

But why don't you speak Spanish?

ESTEFANI

I was born in San Diego; I lived there my whole life. My boyfriend lives in Tijuana. I was visiting him and they picked me up on the way back home.

DAHLIA

Why don't your parents just come and get you, then? You're not even illegal.

ESTEFANI

They don't know I'm here. They probably think I got kidnapped or something.

Her face darkens.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
They're undocumented.

She glances at the Guards.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)
If I give them my real name or
address, my parents get deported.
So... I don't have parents. I'm
just a street-kid.

They find a patch of shade, sit and watch a bunch of sweaty
boys kick a under-inflated soccer ball around.

DAHLIA
How long have you been here?

ESTEFANI
A while. It's hard to tell.
(beat)
I figure they'll keep me til I turn
18. Mostly cause I'm a free baby-
sitter. But once I'm an adult, they
have to let me go. Six more weeks.

DAHLIA
But how will you prove you're 18 if
you can't even tell them your name?

ESTEFANI
Yeah, I haven't figured that part
out yet.

EXT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Dahlia fishes a book from her pack: *The Prison Poems of Miguel Hernandez*, and in the dim light, runs a finger over her mother's signature on the inside cover: *Dolores Ramírez*. Then reads.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
(from *Prison Poems*)
Far off,
you, lonelier than death.
You, feeling my prison
in your arms.
In your arms,
where freedom beats.

INT. A GOVERNMENT OFFICE - DAY

An American flag hangs limp in the stale air of a grey administrative office.

From behind a wall of bank teller style windows, expressionless CLERKS face off against a crowd of Hispanic adults.

In line at one of the windows is Mami - haggard and gaunt now, with red-rimmed eyes and greasy, matted hair.

Words of relationship rise from the throng:

My son... My aunt... Mi hermana...

And names: Hernandez... Garcia... Rodriguez...

One word is spoken more urgently and frequently than all of the others: **DONDE?!**

Suddenly, a DESPERATE WOMAN'S shrieking voice cuts through the din...

DESPERATE WOMAN
HE'S ONLY FOUR YEARS OLD!!!

... followed by a brief, compassion-filled silence.

The din rises again, and is interrupted again, this time by a HOARSE, FURY-FILLED MALE VOICE.

INFURIATED MAN
What do you mean you don't know?!
HOW COULD YOU NOT KNOW?!

After the brief silence of shared grief, the din returns, drowning individual voices like an ocean wave.

Mami has reached the front of the queue. Her gentle manner has been replaced with an animalistic desperation, as she responds to a question we don't hear.

MAMI
Ramirez! I TOLD you three times!

Then another.

MAMI (CONT'D)
My daughter!!

INT. THE CAGE - EVENING

THE FOOD MAN (a stooped, apologetic-looking Latino in his 60s) wheels a cart into the girls' cage and dispenses the food-of-the-day to a line of hungry children: one scoop of rice and one scoop of refried beans.

Dahlia devours hers in a few bites; the others do the same.

INT. THE CAGE - EVENING (LATER)

Dahlia and Estefani toss empty plastic food bowls into a large garbage bin, then return to their mats.

Dahlia lies back, stares at the barred ceiling.

DAHLIA

My Abuela made the best frijoles
refritos.

Estefani uses a piece of sewing thread as makeshift dental floss.

ESTEFANI

Your grandmother's still alive?

Dahlia nods.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

That's too bad.

(beat)

No, I mean... I don't know what I'd
do if I didn't have my grandma
watching out for me from the other
side.

CAGE GIRL - PANAMANIAN (O.S.)

You're *here*, so your grandma didn't
help you *that* much.

Hector is escorted into the girls' cage by a tall, dark-eyed 16-year-old.

JUANALBERTO's eyes meet Dahlia's - and linger - before he turns back.

Estefani notices.

ESTEFANI

You want to stay away from him.

DAHLIA

Who *is* he?

ESTEFANI

He walks Hector over from the boys'
tent at night.

(quietly)

He's MS-13.

Dahlia looks at JuanAlberto's departing back.

DAHLIA

He doesn't look like a gangster.

ESTEFANI

We all look like gangsters; haven't
you heard?

She sniffs Hector, who has plopped himself down in her lap,
then scrunches her nose.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

You smell like lard.

He looks confused, and Dahlia translates for him.

DAHLIA

Hueles a manteca de cerdo.

Hector GIGGLES. Then FARTS. Then GIGGLES again.

The girls fan the air. And can't help but LAUGH.

HECTOR

What you call a Messican that got
his car stoled?

Dahlia glances at a pair of chatting Guards.

DAHLIA

(to Estefani)

I can't believe they teach him
racist jokes.

Estefani shrugs.

HECTOR

(impatiently)

What you call him?!

ESTEFANI

I give up. What do you call a
Mexican whose car was stolen?

Hector gives his expectant smile.

HECTOR

Carlos.

Dahlia and Estefani GROAN, and Hector asks his follow-up question.

HECTOR (CONT'D)

Is funny?

ESTEFANI

Yes it's funny, you little monster.

She tickles him.

HECTOR

What is monster?

ESTEFANI

It's something beautiful.

Hector smiles shyly.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

Where's your book?

He hands it to her.

ESTEFANI (CONT'D)

(reading the title)

Monkeys at the Zoo.

HECTOR

(excitedly)

Monos!!

(but then)

What is "zoo"?

Estefani pauses, looks at the cage surrounding them, is at a loss for words. Dahlia gets up and heads toward the bathroom; she can't bring herself to listen to Estefani's answer.

EXT. RECREATION FIELD - DAY

A fight breaks out between TWO BOYS on the soccer field. A THIRD BOY joins in. Then a FOURTH.

The girls watch, horrified, as Guards stand by like spectators, enjoying the show.

JuanAlberto finds Hector in the mass of little boy onlookers, lifts him onto his shoulders and carries him away as the brawl gains momentum.

Boys trade blows as a circle forms around them.

BYSTANDER BOY #1
Grab his balls!

BYSTANDER BOY #2
Get that pinche cabron!

DAHLIA (V.O.)
(from *Prison Poems*)
Hatred fuels the flame.
Voices like lances twang,
voices like bayonets.

A Guard finally steps in, uses his baton to beat on the back of the smallest boy, who crumples to the ground - and continues to be beaten as he lies unresisting.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
Mouths as fists come,
fists like hooves arrive.

JEERS rise from boys on the sidelines, and TWO MORE BOYS join in the fight - which turns suddenly against the Guards.

The boys don't stand a chance against the men. Still, they KICK, GRAB, POUND FISTS against the Guards' legs with gestures that look more like tantrums than attacks.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
Chests like raucous walls,
animal-tough legs.

More Guards arrive - out of nowhere. And with them, the TAT-TAT-TAT OF TASERS.

Boys lie in the dirt, contorting like epileptic marionettes.

And finally, their limp, spent bodies are carried away.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
The heart pounds,
spins, explodes.

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Dahlia's face is pale as she and Estefani SING A LULLABY to Hector, trying to drown out THUMPING SOUNDS followed by CRIES OF BOYS from somewhere beyond the girls' tent.

The smaller girls WHIMPER and hold their broken dolls close.

EXT. RECREATION FIELD - DAY

As she stands watching the boys play soccer, Dahlia hears the sound of dusty FOOTFALLS behind her, and a VOICE.

JUANALBERTO (O.S.)
See it way out there? The Warning
Rock?

Dahlia turns to see JuanAlberto, follows the direction of his gaze.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)
Out past the fence. Blue and
orange, with the face of Atlaua
painted on it.

DAHLIA
Atlaua?

JUANALBERTO
The Aztec god of water.

Dahlia squints into the distance, looks for a colorfully painted rock.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)
They prayed to her to prevent
drownings.

DAHLIA
I see it!

JUANALBERTO
I'm JuanAlberto.

He gives her a charmingly shy smile.

DAHLIA
You're the one who brings Hector
over at night. I'm--

JUANALBERTO
I know.

She smiles, looks back out at the distance.

DAHLIA
What's the Warning Rock warning
about?

JUANALBERTO

A well. It's flush to the ground,
so you can't see it unless you're
right up on it. The gringos don't
know it's there. They don't know
how to read the warning.

DAHLIA

How do you know about it?

JUANALBERTO

There's a hole in the fence.

DAHLIA

You tried to escape?

JUANALBERTO

No. There's no place to escape to.
I just wanted to see the rock up
close.

They stand in silence, both looking at the bit of color, of
their culture, in the sand and barbed-wire-filled horizon.

DAHLIA

The poet, Miguel Hernandez... Do
you know him?

JuanAlberto shakes his head.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

He has a poem about a well. It
gives me hope.

She recites in Spanish:

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Un albanil queria. Piedra tras
piedra, muro tras muro.
(then, translating)
A mason wanted. Stone after stone,
one well after another.

JuanAlberto listens, his dark eyes drawn into the story - or
its teller - as she continues.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Reia. Trabajaba. Cantaba.

This time JuanAlberto provides the translation.

JUANALBERTO

He laughed. He worked. He sang.

Dahlia smiles.

DAHLIA

Un albanil queria. Pero aquel
hombre labraba su carcel.

JUANALBERTO

A mason wanted. But that man was
fashioning his jail.

DAHLIA

Y en su obra fueron precipitados el
y el viento.

JUANALBERTO

And both he and the wind were
thrown into his work.

He considers.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)

He dies in the well he built? But
you said it gives you hope.

DAHLIA

The American president is always
building. "Stone after stone."

She looks out at the still desert.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

But the wind is coming, I think.

A SHRILL WHISTLE breaks the spell, and the two move toward
their separate cages.

EXT. A BUS STOP IN A DESERT LANDSCAPE - DAY

Mami steps off the bus, looks out at a horizon filled with
tents, walks toward it.

INT. A CAGE FILLED WITH IMMIGRANT CHILDREN - MOMENTS LATER

Mami is led, along with a group of other parents, through
rows of miserable children.

She raises her hand to her mouth to keep from gasping - or
screaming - as she looks into the grimy, hopeless faces of
little brown girls.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 (from *Prison Poems*)
 No one has seen us.
 Blinded by sheer sight,
 we've seen no one.
 All the mothers of the world
 tremble, hide their wombs.

EXT. (THE WRONG) TENT CITY - LATER

Mami's steps are heavy as she exits the tent city, her face haggard. She walks beneath a sign...

TORNILLO, WEST TEXAS DETENTION CENTER

... then breaks down into body-wracking SOBS.

EXT. RECREATION FIELD - DAY

Dahlia watches two tiny Cage Girls play a HAND-CLAPPING game:

TINY CAGE GIRLS
 (singing in Spanish)
*A sailor went to sea, sea, sea
 to see what he could see, see see
 But all that he could see, see, see
 was the bottom of the deep blue
 sea, sea, sea*

She smiles as Hector runs toward...

... then past her.

She follows him, and sees:

JUANALBERTO (V.O.)
 Hey Buddy!

Hector fidgets with excitement; he's holding something behind his back.

HECTOR
 (to JuanAlberto)
 I made you a craff!

JuanAlberto smiles *hello* to Dahlia as Hector hands him his gift: a tangle of bright yellow yarn at the end of which hangs a metal ring.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
 Is *bautivo*. No?

JuanAlberto examines it, looks to Dahlia for help; she shrugs.

DAHLIA
What *is* it, Hector?

HECTOR
Is a key chain!

He beams at JuanAlberto.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
For when you get a key!

JuanAlberto breaks into a smile and pockets his gift.

JUANALBERTO
Gracias, Hector. I'll keep it
always.

HECTOR
What kind of basketball do Messican
play?

JUANALBERTO
I dunno. What kind?

HECTOR
(indignant)
I was ask Dahlia.

DAHLIA
I don't know either. What kind of
basketball do Mexicans play?

HECTOR
Juan on Juan.

He smiles proudly.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
Is funny?

Dahlia and JuanAlberto LAUGH, and Hector smiles as he's led back to the boys' cage. Dahlia waits to see if JuanAlberto will turn back to look at her...

... and he does.

EXT. RECREATION FIELD - DAY

Dahlia is sitting in a patch of shade watching Estefani supervise a hopscotch game as JuanAlberto approaches with Hector on his shoulders.

He sets the boy down, and Hector runs to join a soccer game. Dahlia and JuanAlberto watch him play.

DAHLIA

How long has he been here?

JuanAlberto winces as the 5-year-old aims for and misses the ball.

JUANALBERTO

Nobody remembers him *not* being here.

(then, off her look)

You don't have to worry; nobody will mess with Hector.

DAHLIA

Because they think he's got this badass, *connected* bodyguard?

He's silent.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Is it true? You're MS-13? That's what everybody *thinks*.

JuanAlberto continues to watch the boys' game as he replies.

JUANALBERTO

If everybody *thinks* that, it works the same as if it was true.

He glances at her briefly before turning back to the game.

DAHLIA

JuanAlberto... that's a dangerous game! If all the *boys* think it, sooner or later the *Guards*--

JUANALBERTO

It's only til Hector gets out of here. Then I'll go back to being a kid with no friends that can't even throw a punch.

He reacts to the soccer game.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)
Ejecutar!

DAHLIA
You never play.

JUANALBERTO
(matter-of-factly)
Need feet for that.

Dahlia looks at his feet - notices that they don't match.
JuanAlberto pulls up the left leg of his chinos - to reveal a prosthetic foot.

Dahlia tries not to react.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)
When I was Hector's age, I played
football every day in the street.

His cadence slows.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)
But in my country, in El Salvador,
we have what you call "Street
Bosses." And the Boss of my street
had a fancy car he liked to show
off; he didn't like kids blocking
the streets.

The boys CHEER as a team scores.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)
So he put the word out: any kid who
played in the street would lose a
foot.

Dahlia looks again at JuanAlberto's mismatched feet - and
GASPS.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)
He only had to do it once. After
that: no more boys in the street.

He looks nostalgic.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)
I loved football.

DAHLIA
But... he got away with it?!

He shrugs.

JUANALBERTO

My parents organized a protest.
 (with a pained grimace)
 Turned out, he hated protestors
 even more than kids.

He turns toward the expanse of desert. Then, in an unconscious movement, touches his scapular necklace: a heart of Jesus pendant on a sterling silver chain.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)

After that, I went to live with these American missionaries. They were... kind. They helped me get *this*.

He looks down at his prosthetic.

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)

They told me one day I'd go to college in America.

DAHLIA

Then how did you end up *here*?

JUANALBERTO

When the new regime forced them out, I had nowhere to go. So I came to "the land of the free."

A Guard strolls past.

DAHLIA

What did the Admins tell you? Will they hear your asylum petition?

JUANALBERTO

They're "processing" me.

Dahlia SIGHS, then sets her shoulders in a posture of determination.

DAHLIA

I think you'll do it. You'll go to college in America.

The END OF RECREATION WHISTLE BLOWS, and for a moment, JuanAlberto appears torn by indecision. Then he leads Dahlia gently into a blind corner, out of the view of the Guards...

... and kisses her.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

(from *Prison Poems*)

A kiss that goes to the future,
which pulses among the stars
for so many halted kisses,
for so many closed mouths
without a solitary kiss.
A kiss that goes to a future
of boys and girls who shall not
leave deserted streets or fields.
To them I drink from your mouth.

PRE-LAP: LOW, RATTLING SNORES OF THE CAGE GIRLS

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Aldo is on duty. As he walks the perimeter of the cage, the keys in his pocket JANGLE.

But Dahlia is in another world - of poetry and infatuation - as she lies face-down on her mat, reading from *Prison Poems* in the dim yellow/green light.

DAHLIA (V.O.)

(from *Prison Poems*)

When you breathe you wound me,
when you look at me you slay me,
your eyebrows are two black knives,
your black eyelashes.

She's shaken from her reverie by Estefani, who suddenly sits upright, beside her.

ESTEFANI

Look! There's actually water in the cooler tonight!

But Dahlia is distracted.

DAHLIA

He's not what you think, you know... JuanAlberto.

She continues in a conspiratorial whisper.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

He's smart.

She smiles wistfully.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

And... I don't know. He's really...

She looks over at Estefani's mat. Sees that it's empty and spots her spots her near the water cooler.

She returns to her poetry.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 With three wounds, he comes:
 that of life,
 that of love,
 that of death.

EXT./INT. ALDO'S TENT - CONTINUOUS

A faulty lamp creates a strobe effect, as Aldo SHOVES Estefani into his tent, his baton poised in a gesture of threat.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 With three wounds, I:
 that of life,
 that of death,
 that of love.

Flashes of movement in the dark:

- A belt buckle being undone.
- Estefani's eyes squeezed shut. Tight.
- A baton shoved between teeth.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 He arrived.
 He left his weapons:
 his claws,
 his thistles.
 The wild beast was sealed.

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

COMMOTION as the Food Man arrives. Dahlia tucks her book beneath her mat, gets up to join the line. She looks back at Estefani, who remains on her cot, unmoving, staring at nothing.

DAHLIA
 Estefani! The Food Man!

No response.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Are you sick?
(beat)
You want me to bring you--?

ESTEFANI
Just leave me alone!

Dahlia is startled by the barked response, gets in line for dinner.

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Estefani is still zombie-like as Hector sits in her lap, looking at the pictures in a book. She ignores him as he strokes her silky hair.

HECTOR
Like the hair of corn.

DAHLIA
Time for sleep!

She lifts Hector off of Estefani's lap and onto his mat. But as she pulls his blanket over his shoulders, he continues to stare at Estefani.

HECTOR
She's sad.

DAHLIA
She'll be okay.

HECTOR
She's sad because she's beautiful.

DAHLIA
Why would that make her sad?

HECTOR
You know how I hide sometimes?

DAHLIA
Uh huh.

Dahlia wipes a smudge of dirt from his cheek.

HECTOR
She never gets to hide.

Dahlia stares at him for a moment.

DAHLIA
 Okay, philosopher-boy. Go to sleep.

He turns onto his side and falls into the immediate, deep sleep reserved for children.

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

Dahlia wakes, sits up, starts to run fingers through her hair - but finds that it isn't there. Alarm on her face as she discovers that her long hair has been cut during the night.

She reaches for her backpack, fishes out a makeup mirror, and GASPS at her nearly bald head. Only short, jagged tufts remain.

She looks around furiously, spots a pair of child's safety scissors on the ground beside her mat.

DAHLIA
 Hector?!!

TWITTERS and GUFFAWS from Cage Girls.

CAGE GIRL - BOLIVIAN (O.S.)
 You're a heavy sleeper, eh?

CAGE GIRL - SALVADORAN (O.S.)
 It wasn't him.

The Girl nods toward Estefani...

... who is staring at Dahlia with empty eyes.

Dahlia crawls across the space between them.

DAHLIA
 (to Estefani)
 Why?

She takes Estefani by the shoulders, shakes her.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
 WHY?!!

But Estefani doesn't respond, only lets herself be shaken like a rag doll.

CAGE GIRL - SALVADORAN (O.S.)
 (matter-of-factly)
 Because he likes long hair.

Dahlia turns to Cage Girl (Salvadoran), who is methodically removing the insides from a stuffed bear.

DAHLIA

What? What did you say?

The girl looks up from her pile of stuffing at Aldo, on his perimeter walk. Dahlia follows her gaze.

As she watches him, Aldo glances at Estefani...

... and Dahlia shivers with the realization.

She crawls back to her own mat, grabs her blanket, returns to Estefani, drapes it over her.

Then she takes Estefani's hand, holds it, and sits beside her - like a guard dog.

Estefani closes her eyes, and Cage Girl (Salvadoran) goes back to her hollowed-out bear.

EXT. RECREATION AREA - DAY

Dahlia sits alone in the shade of a tent as JuanAlberto approaches. He tilts his head, gives her an assessing look.

JUANALBERTO

I like it. Very Emma Gonzalez.
Makes you look as fierce as you
are.

DAHLIA

I'm fierce?

JUANALBERTO

Of course. And...

He imitates Hector's accent:

JUANALBERTO (CONT'D)

... *beautivo*.

He kisses her - this time without checking for Guards.

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Estefani is still despondent, and Dahlia moves close, speaks to her gently.

DAHLIA
Estefani, give me their names and
address. Your parents.

But Estefani seems to be looking through her, past her.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
You *need* them, now.

No response.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
At least let me write and tell them
you're alive, so they can stop
wondering.

Estefani seems to focus, to consider. But her response is a
non sequitur.

ESTEFANI
(whispering)
Don't go near the water at night.

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Lying on her mat, Dahlia is startled by a THUD. Hector has
tossed his mat and blanket onto the floor beside her and
plopped himself down into Estefani's lap.

As he plays with her hair, Estefani flinches, then resumes
her unresponsive demeanor.

DAHLIA
(to Hector)
Hey! Where's our joke?

He just shrugs.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
And where's JuanAlberto? Didn't he
walk you over?

HECTOR
No.

DAHLIA
Why not?

Hector takes a picture book from under Estefani's mat.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Hector, where's JuanAlberto?

He becomes annoyed, tosses the book on the floor.

HECTOR
He went home.

Dahlia is stunned.

[She switches to SPANISH - ENGLISH SUBTITLES]

DAHLIA
Hector, what do you mean? Home
where?

HECTOR
To where he *lives*.

Estefani flinches, as if pained by the conflict. She lifts Hector off her lap, lies on her mat and turns away from them.

DAHLIA
But he was just here. What do you
mean? Where did he go?

HECTOR
(angrily)
I don't know! Back to his Mama and
Papa!

He turns his back to her.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
Stop asking me!

Dahlia stands, looks for a Night Guard, spots one.

DAHLIA
That's the one who speaks Spanish,
right?

Hector nods.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Stay with Estefani.

She approaches the Guard.

INT. THE CAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Dahlia is crestfallen as she returns to Hector, who climbs into her lap.

[IN SPANISH, SUBTITLED]

DAHLIA
Did he say goodbye?

Hector shakes his head, then reaches up, cups her cheek.

HECTOR
Don't worry. He won't forget you.

She fights tears.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
He'll forget *me*, though.

DAHLIA
Why would you say that?

HECTOR
Because there's not so much of me.
Even though I *am* beautiful.

She rocks him, HUMS A LULLABY. And after he falls asleep,
keeps on rocking.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
(from *Prison Poems*)
I see absence in all things:
your eyes mirror it.
I hear absence in all things;
your voice keeps pace with it.
I touch absence in all things:
your body is deserted.
I feel absence in all things.

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT (LATER)

With eyes swollen from crying, Dahlia removes two bright pink pills from a foil pack.

The CRINKLING SOUND awakens Estefani, who watches her by the sickly yellow/green hue of the night lights.

Dahlia washes the pills down with a tiny cupful of water.

ESTEFANI
What are those? Those pink pills?

They speak in hushed tones so as not to wake Hector.

DAHLIA
Nurse Teresa gave them to me.

Suddenly, a spark of life in Estefani's dead eyes.

ESTEFANI
What for?

DAHLIA
Sleep.

ESTEFANI
Do they work?

DAHLIA
I dunno.

Dahlia slides under her blanket, and Estefani watches.

Dahlia turns onto her side, and Estefani continues to watch.

ESTEFANI
Are you asleep yet?

DAHLIA
No.

Estefani adjusts Dahlia's blanket so that it covers her feet, and for a moment, seems to become herself again.

ESTEFANI
If you had somebody watching over
you on the other side...

DAHLIA
Like Felipe?

ESTEFANI
Or... anybody.
(beat)
What would you want them to do for
you?

Dahlia is silent for a moment.

DAHLIA
(groggily)
Send Mami.

Estefani watches Dahlia's breathing slow as she falls asleep.

Then she watches Nurse Teresa and waits - until she leaves
her desk unattended.

PRE-LAP - BUZZ of CHATTER and ACTIVITY

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

By the time Dahlia wakes, most of the children are up and about.

CAGE GIRL - CHILEAN (O.S.)
The little boy went back to his
tent.

Dahlia holds her achy head, then looks over at Estefani's mat, sees that she's still asleep.

But the position of her body is wrong. Dahlia reaches out to touch her, but something makes her hesitate:

The stiffness of her body. Or the empty pill bottle beside it.

DAHLIA
No.

She rolls Estefani over...

... and finds the corners of her mouth stained pink, her face greyish-white.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
What did you do?

Estefani moans; her head rolls to the side.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
(screaming)
NURSE TERESA!!!

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

Hector holds his hands over his ears as an emergency vehicle SHRIEKS away from the tent city...

... and Dahlia leads him away from an Admin who is shooin children back into their tents, yelling about there being NOTHING TO SEE HERE.

Inside the girls' cage, Hector sits on Estefani's mat, paging through a book she used to read to him.

HECTOR
(without looking up)
She's going home?

DAHLIA
Yes, Estefani's going home.

HECTOR
To Estados Unidos? Where she lives?

DAHLIA
That's right. The United States.

HECTOR
(reciting)
"The land of the vree and the home
of the vray."

DAHLIA
JuanAlberto taught you that?

He nods, and she smiles through heartbreak.

HECTOR
Is far?

DAHLIA
Well actually, we're *in*...

She stops herself, considers.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Yes. "The land of the free" is far
from here.

HECTOR
Maybe La Llorona will let her
visit.

DAHLIA
Maybe.

EXT. RECREATION FIELD - DAY

INSERT: "Dear Estefani, Get well soon so u could feel better.
Your frend, Marisol"

Nurse Teresa supervises a group of Cage Girls as they write
notes to Estefani, then fold them into origami flowers.

Dahlia finishes her flower-shaped note, approaches the nurse.

[CONVERSATION IN SPANISH]

DAHLIA
She's really okay?

Nurse Teresa avoids eye contact as she answers.

NURSE TERESA
She'll be fine.

She busies herself, collects paper and pencils strewn on the ground.

DAHLIA
Can I have her address? So I can
write her a real letter?

NURSE TERESA
I'm sorry, honey; I'm not allowed
to give it out. But I'll see that
she gets any letter you write.

It doesn't ring true... and Dahlia touches Nurse Teresa's arm
- a pleading gesture.

DAHLIA
Tell me the truth. Please.

The nurse SIGHS, seems torn. Then looks around to make sure
she can't be overheard by the younger girls.

She embraces Dahlia as she whispers.

NURSE TERESA
You were a good friend to her.

Dahlia slumps in the nurse's arms, then pulls away, finds the
nearest trash bin and tosses her flower shaped note.

EXT. RECREATION FIELD - CONTINUOUS

Dahlia finds Hector sitting in front of a mound of dirt, sits
beside him.

She watches as he marches little green plastic soldiers up
and down the hill of dirt, their broken-off limbs making them
look like tiny amputees. He bashes them together, making
LITTLE BOY SOUND EFFECTS as they collide.

HECTOR
KA-KSSSHHH!

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Lying on her mat, Dahlia watches Aldo pace the perimeter of
the cage - her jaw clenched and her eyes reflecting the
yellow/green of the night lights - like a cat's.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 (from *Prison Poems*)
 Time rains down, rains down.
 And one day, saddest of all,
 all the earth-saddening days,
 days that wolf-sadden me
 we go to sleep and wake
 to a tiger between our eyes.

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

As the other children wake, Dahlia stares into space - thinking. Then, she writes a note.

INSERT:

Dear Dahlia,
I ran away. Meet me out behind the soccer field at midnight.
Love, JuanAlberto

She folds it and tucks it into her pocket.

EXT. ALDO'S TENT - DAY (LATER)

During Recreation, Dahlia takes the note from her pocket and drops it on the ground outside of Aldo's tent.

Then as the children are ushered back to their tents, she stays outside, hides behind a garbage bin...

... and waits until dark.

EXT. RECREATION FIELD - NIGHT (LATER)

Crickets BUZZ and Dahlia's HEART POUNDS as she dodges the outside lights and heads toward the Recreation Field.

In the darkness...

- she searches the perimeter of the fence
- finds the hole JuanAlberto described
- and slips through.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 (from *Prison Poems*)
 The animals of day
 seek those of night.

EXT. DESERT BEYOND THE CAGE - CONTINUOUS

In the light of the three-quarter moon, Dahlia finds what she's looking for: the Warning Rock.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
Mid-day animal,
midnight disturbs you.

And just beyond it, a circle of deeper black than its surroundings: the well.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
The sun is away,
the moon is close by.

Dahlia kneels at its edge. But as she bends over the well, her forehead hits a solid surface.

DAHLIA
UH!

A stone lid is covering it. She GRUNTS with her attempt to remove it.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Get OFF!

But it's too heavy; the lid won't budge.

She sits back, brushes something absently from her ankle; hears it SCUTTLE away. Then SCREAMS with pain.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
AGH!!!!

She lies on the ground, clutching her ankle and MOANING in pain, as...

... FOOTSTEPS approach.

She stuffs her hand into her mouth to stifle her CRIES.

FEMALE VOICE (O.S.)
Dahlia! Are you okay?!

DAHLIA
Something bit me!!

NURSE TERESA
Probably a scorpion. Hold on. Here.
Lean on me.

Dahlia puts one arm around the nurse's neck and hops on one leg, back toward the cage.

EXT./INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

As Nurse Teresa re-enters the cage with a MOANING, limping Dahlia, a Night Guard approaches. But Nurse Teresa waves him away.

NURSE TERESA
We're okay. She found a bark
scorpion on her blanket and thought
she'd relocate it.

She motions to Dahlia's swollen ankle, and the Night Guard SCOFFS.

NIGHT GUARD
Shoulda just stomped on it.

NURSE TERESA
Yeah, we should stomp on things we
don't want around.

She continues to lead Dahlia past him.

NURSE TERESA (CONT'D)
(under her breath)
Or take their kids away.

INT. THE CAGE/NURSE TERESA'S DESK - NIGHT

The nurse helps Dahlia into the chair across from her desk.

NURSE TERESA
Put your foot up, and take off your
shoe and sock.

She takes an ice pack from the cooler beside her desk, applies it to Dahlia's ankle. Dahlia holds it there. Her breathing is fast and shallow.

DAHLIA
I can't stop breathing.

NURSE TERESA
Take slow, deep breaths.

She does, and her breathing normalizes.

NURSE TERESA (CONT'D)
So you *do* speak English.
(off Dahlia's look)
Don't worry. It'll stay our secret.

She applies ointment to the site of the sting, hands Dahlia a couple of pills and a bottle of water.

NURSE TERESA (CONT'D)
It's just Benadryl. To help you sleep through the pain.

Dahlia swallows the pills.

NURSE TERESA (CONT'D)
You want to tell me what you were doing out there?

DAHLIA
I guess I was sleep-walking.

The pain subsides, and the strain melts from Dahlia's face.

The nurse opens the drawer of her desk, withdraws a note.

NURSE TERESA
I found *this* on the ground outside Aldo's tent.
(beat)
It's signed "JuanAlberto." But he didn't write it. He *couldn't* have.

DAHLIA
Why not?

NURSE TERESA
Because JuanAlberto Lopez is currently being housed in Chino Youth Correctional Facility.

DAHLIA
What? No! JuanAlberto went home!

Nurse Teresa doesn't respond, just lets the truth sink in.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Jail, for what?

NURSE TERESA
Apparently he bragged to some of the other boys about his participation in gang-related activities.

DAHLIA
It's not true!

She starts to get up, winces with pain, sits back down.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
I mean, he might've *said* that stuff, but only so the other boys would be afraid of him. It was all made up.

NURSE TERESA
Well then... if that's true...

Her optimistic tone sounds forced.

NURSE TERESA (CONT'D)
... I'm sure he'll be released.

DAHLIA
No. He won't.

She looks out at the cage.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
To survive in here, he had to be a *pretend* gangster.
(beat)
But in *there* - he'll have to be a *real* one.

Nurse Teresa starts to disagree, tell Dahlia she's wrong. But she can't.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
They call us criminals. Then they make it so that's the only thing we *can* be.

She lowers her swollen foot, forces a smile...

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Thanks.

... and hobbles toward her sleeping mat.

INT. THE CAGE - CONTINUOUS

As Dahlia settles in under her blanket, Hector wakes beside her.

HECTOR
(groggily)
I thought you leaved me, too.

Dahlia touches his cheek tenderly.

DAHLIA
(reassuringly)
No.
(and then, hopelessly)
I'm not going anywhere.

MATCHCUT: THE YELLOW/GREEN NIGHT LIGHT DISSOLVES INTO...

... THE ARIZONA SUN rising over the tent city.

EXT. THE CAGE - DAY

Two PROTESTORS flank the tent city's entrance, holding signs.

One in Spanish: LIBEREN A NUESTROS NINOS

The other in English: LET OUR CHILDREN GO

EXT. RECREATION FIELD - DAY

Nurse Teresa finds Dahlia sitting in the shade, reading.

NURSE TERESA
How's that bite?

DAHLIA
It tingles.

NURSE TERESA
I think I know what you were trying
to do out there last night.

Dahlia stands.

DAHLIA
It's almost time to go in, so--

NURSE TERESA
I wasn't supposed to find that
note; Aldo was.

Dahlia's nervous expression is confirmation.

NURSE TERESA (CONT'D)
You thought you'd lure him out to
the well. He'd chase you, and then
he'd fall into--

Dahlia interrupts angrily.

DAHLIA
You don't know what he *DID*!

She grimaces in pain, and the nurse helps her sit back down
on the ground.

NURSE TERESA
(gently)
I know. Estefani left a note.

She joins Dahlia on the ground; they sit in a knife-shaped
sliver of shade.

DAHLIA
Too bad you didn't know sooner.

NURSE TERESA
I agree.

Dahlia looks out in the direction of the well.

DAHLIA
I messed it up, anyway. Even if he
did follow me... I didn't know it
had a lid.

NURSE TERESA
You thought they'd leave an
uncovered well so close to the
facility?

DAHLIA
I don't know *what* they'd do.

She looks at a group of Cage Girls playing hopscotch in the
sun.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
I didn't want him to do it to
anyone else.

NURSE TERESA
Where Aldo's going is probably
worse than the bottom of a well.
(beat)
He won't be doing it to anyone
else.

She moves closer to Dahlia, looks her in the eye.

NURSE TERESA (CONT'D)

But Dahlia, I'm not worried about him; I'm worried about you - what would've happened to you if you had succeeded. Even if no one saw you; even if no one ever found out.

She glances at the nearest Guard.

NURSE TERESA (CONT'D)

Honey, it's fine to hate them. Just be careful you don't *become* them.

Dahlia stares up at a single white cloud in the expanse of sky.

When the piercing END OF RECREATION WHISTLE BLOWS, Dahlia flinches. But Nurse Teresa doesn't; it's just one of the many things she's gotten used to.

EXT. NOGALES DETENTION CENTER ("THE CAGE") - DAY

The Center is growing. Construction equipment - trenchers, backhoes, cranes - crawl over, dig out, and tunnel through the desert, expanding the tent city's infrastructure, entrenching the policies that gave rise to it.

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

Dahlia wakes, runs hands through her hair - nearly chin-length now, denoting the passage of months.

She looks instinctively at the mat beside her, where Hector always lies - but is not lying now.

She sits upright, looks around at sleepy children, makes eye contact with the nearest Cage Girl.

DAHLIA

Where's Hector?

The Girl just stares.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

The little boy who sleeps...

She pats his empty mat.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

... here?

The Girl shrugs.

CAGE GIRL - GUATEMALAN (O.S.)
(in Spanish)
His parents came for him.

Dahlia responds [IN SPANISH, ENGLISH SUBTITLES]

DAHLIA
What?! When?!

CAGE GIRL - GUATEMALAN
A while ago.

Dahlia runs toward the nearest Guard, stops, grabs BILINGUAL
CAGE GIRL.

DAHLIA
Translate for me!

Bilingual Cage Girl looks confused.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
You speak English.

BILINGUAL CAGE GIRL
So do you!

But she allows herself to be pushed toward the Guard.

We see from a distance, Dahlia's conversation with the Guard,
with Bilingual Cage Girl translating.

Dahlia becomes more and more panicked, begins SHOUTING IN
SPANISH. But Bilingual Cage Girl distills all of it into one
sentence, which she delivers calmly.

BILINGUAL CAGE GIRL (CONT'D)
(to Guard)
She only wants to say goodbye.

The Guard leads Dahlia out of the tent.

EXT. MEETING TENT - DAY

The Guard motions for Dahlia to stop just outside of the
Meeting Tent, allows her to watch through the open flap that
serves as a door.

INT. MEETING TENT - DAY (CONTINUOUS)

From Dahlia's perspective:

An agitated, overwhelmed Hector is being embraced by a Hispanic couple as the MEETING TENT GUARD supervises.

HISPANIC WOMAN
Gracias Diosmio! Gracias Diosmio!
(Thank God! Thank God!)

The Meeting Tent Guard SHOUTS to be heard over the hysteria.

MEETING TENT GUARD
... his papers? Birth certificate?
You have a birth certificate?

The HISPANIC MAN finally understands, shakes his head.

HISPANIC MAN
No. No papers. But he is our son!

The Meeting Tent Guard hesitates.

MEETING TENT GUARD
As long as he *knows* you.

But the boy does *not* know them; it's obvious from the panic on his face... which builds as he squirms in the HISPANIC WOMAN'S arms...

... and finally... *erupts*.

HECTOR
Desconocidos!

The Meeting Tent Guard appears confused... and the Hispanic Woman's joy and relief turn to shock.

HECTOR (CONT'D)
Desconocidos!! Desconocidos!!!

HISPANIC WOMAN
(to Hector)
No! No somos desconocidos!
(We're not strangers!)

Finally, the Meeting Tent Guard understands. He begins to pull the Hispanic Couple away from Hector.

HISPANIC MAN
Hector, tu recuerdas!
(You remember!)

But Hector does *not* remember. He continues to SCREAM.

HECTOR
DESCONOCIDOS!!!

As Dahlia watches, several Admins converge on the tent and assist the Meeting Tent Guard in removing the Hispanic Couple.

Dahlia runs past them to Hector, and he wraps his arms around her neck as she embraces him, rocks him until he calms.

But her expression clouds as she watches the couple being led away in despair.

INT. MEETING TENT - MOMENTS LATER

Hector has quieted, and the SOUND OF THE HISPANIC WOMAN'S SOBBING is receding.

Dahlia looks Hector in the eyes, speaks to him IN SPANISH.

DAHLIA

Hector, remember when you first met
me? When I first got here?

He nods, wipes his chubby cheeks with the back of his fist.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Remember you told me your Mama had
a tattoo? Here?

She points to her wrist.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

You said she had a flower. A
beautiful flower.

She looks into the boy's eyes for recognition.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Do you remember?

He looks confused.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Hector, that lady...

She looks at the door.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Did she have a flower?

She points to her wrist.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

Here?

She watches as Hector, the philosopher-boy, who has lived in a cage for so long no one can remember how he got there, seems to melt before her eyes.

His face transforms as confusion is replaced by recognition, which is replaced by grief - which expresses itself in a single, agonized CRY:

HECTOR
MAMA!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Dahlia is startled into action. She bolts for the doorway...

INT./EXT. THE MEETING TENT - CONTINUOUS

... and runs, following the distant SOBBING of the Hispanic Woman she now knows is HECTOR'S MOTHER.

As she runs, Dahlia SHOUTS IN SPANISH:

DAHLIA
Regresa!
(Come back!)

But the Guards don't understand; they only glare at her in annoyed confusion.

Finally, she reaches the parking area...

EXT. PARKING AREA - CONTINUOUS

... where a Guard physically restrains her. She can only watch as Hector's parents are led away, toward a waiting bus.

She continues to YELL in Spanish.

DAHLIA
Él te recuerda! Él te recuerda!
Regresa! Él recuerda!
(He remembers you! He remembers
you! Come back! He remembers!)

But the couple are out of earshot, and Hector's Mother is forced onto the bus.

Dahlia looks at the Guards between herself and Hector's parents - and makes a decision.

She SCREAMS - IN ENGLISH:

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
 Bring them back! He remembers them!
 He remembers!

The Guard nearest her SHOUTS to the Guard in the Parking Lot,
 who SHOUTS to the Guard beside the bus.

And Hector's parents turn around.

INT. THE CAGE - NIGHT

Dahlia lies on her mat, cradling Hector's book, *Monkeys at the Zoo*.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 (from *Prison Poems*)
 You laughed, solar child,
 by the river. And that day
 the oldest fish of the river
 shed his gloomy air.
 And the water smiled at you.
 You are tomorrow.
 You are the universe
 that leads, in hope.

INT. NOGALES DETENTION CENTER/PLACEMENT TENT - DAY

Dahlia sits across the desk from a WHITE-HAIRED WOMAN.

Pinned to the wall of the tent behind her are children's drawings:

- stick figures with arms ending in round, six-fingered hands,
- grinning dogs
- houses with pointed roofs.

A name-plate on her desk gives the woman's title: PLACEMENT COUNSELOR.

As she explains paperwork to a WHITE COUPLE in their late 30s, just like in the crayon drawings, everyone is smiling.

Except Dahlia.

EXT. NOGALES DETENTION CENTER ("THE CAGE") - ARIZONA - DAY

Mami steps off a bus, and walks toward the tent city.

INT. THE CAGE - DAY

As Mami walks among them, Cage Girls glance up at her - some with hope, some indifference, others with sad nostalgia for absent mothers. She passes a recently-vacated mat, watches as:

- a tiny Cage Girl claims the abandoned silver blanket on top of it as her own, and

- an even tinier girl grabs the book beside it: *Monkeys at The Zoo*.

EXT. NOGALES DETENTION CENTER - DAY

Mami steps, exhausted and dejected, onto a bus.

As it pulls away from the tent city, out of her window she watches a White Man in a fluorescent green T-shirt rip up a protest sign. He deposits the pieces in a recycling bin stamped with the slogan:

THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY; DON'T TRASH OUR FUTURE!

INT. BACK SEAT OF A PRIUS - DAY

Her grimy Dora the Explorer backpack on the seat beside her, Dahlia stares out the window of the White Couple's car at the receding tent city.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
(from *Prison Poems*)
I know the routes well
I know the travelers
of the sea, of fire,
sleep, earth, air.
And I know you
who are inside my blood.
Don't forget me
for under the lead
that pins my bones
I still remember you.

EXT. THE BROOKS HOME, LOS ANGELES - NIGHT

The Prius pulls into the garage of a huge home situated on a cliff above the sea - in the kind of neighborhood realtors call "gracious."

A wooden staircase behind the house leads down to a private beach.

SUPER: LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

INT. THE BROOKS HOME - NIGHT

MICHELLE BROOKS, late 30s, is nervous. She wears a blond, beach-wavy bob and metallic pink Birkenstocks as she shows Dahlia her bedroom.

[IN ENGLISH, EXCEPT WHERE NOTED]

Standing just inside the doorway, Dahlia looks shell-shocked as Michelle points, Vanna White-like, to a large, abstract painting opposite the bed.

MICHELLE
It's neo-Azteca.

The painting is done in peaches and beiges - as are the bedspread and curtains and carpet - so that the entire room looks like an extension of the scene.

Dahlia steps toward it, reads its title.

INSERT: *El Coyote*.

DAHLIA
It only has one eye?

MICHELLE
Well, it's abstract. It's the
suggestion of a coyote.

Dahlia studies the painting: peach/beige brush strokes suggesting tufts of fur are juxtaposed with strokes of white. Red splatter suggests blood.

DAHLIA
What's it eating? Is that a--

MICHELLE
I don't think it's eating any...
Oh. Those are rocks. Well, the
suggestion of rocks.

Dahlia backs away from the painting and sets her Dora the Explorer backpack on the bed. It stands out as the only item in the room that isn't peach or beige - or new.

Michelle points to an expensive-looking backpack on the desk. Beige, with leather straps.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
 My guess was right. It looks like
 you could use a new backpack.

She lifts Dahlia's filthy, sun-faded purple and pink backpack gingerly, as if trying to avoid "cooties" and deposits it in the walk-in closet.

Then points to a window.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
 You have a view of the beach.

Dahlia looks out the window as she chatters.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
 The mattress is luxury-firm, which
 is a half-step down from firm. I
 thought you might not want a
completely firm mattress after
 sleeping on... But, we can always
 exchange it.

DAHLIA
 (awkwardly)
 Thank you.

As Michelle backs out of the room, Dahlia sits on the luxury firm mattress...

MICHELLE
 Well, I'll let you settle in, then.

... and looks warily at the abstract coyote's single eye.

INT. A PRIVATE SCHOOL, LOS ANGELES - DAY

Dahlia looks like a Lilliputian in a world of Amazons as she makes her way through locker-lined halls.

From her perspective: white face, white face, and another white face. None of the leggy, expensively-dressed Amazons make eye contact with her as they travel in packs - looking only at each other - or their phones.

Then finally: a Latina. And an assessing look. Followed by disdain.

MEAN GIRL
 (leaning in, softly)
 Hey, border bunny.

A Latina trying hard not to be, wearing foundation two shades lighter than her skin tone, blond highlights, and an Abercrombie & Fitch tee, MEAN GIRL "bumps into" Dahlia.

Then, as her books fall to the floor, Dahlia is shoved again - this time by MEAN GIRL MINION... more brazen, as minions tend to be. She speaks with just a hint of a carefully-erased accent.

MEAN GIRL MINION
Shouldn't you be outside, mojado?
Those leaves aren't gonna blow
themselves!

Hallway traffic slows momentarily as Rubbernecks welcome the diversion from whatever's on their phones. Some of the LAUGHTER is authentic, some forced.

By the time Dahlia has retrieved her books, the MEAN GIRLS have moved on. And so have the Rubbernecks...

... except for a DARK FACE like hers - unbleached, undisguised - that lingers a moment before offering a sympathetic look - but ultimately moves on, like the rest.

INT. THE BROOKS HOME/KITCHEN - DAY

Michelle wears an excited smile as she sits across the table from Dahlia, watching her unwrap a gift: an iPhone.

Michelle's husband, CLARK, late 30s, with mandatory hipster beard, hovers in the doorway.

Their expressions change from self-satisfied to confused as Dahlia glances at her gift, then returns it to the gift bag.

DAHLIA
No, thank you.

MICHELLE
But... we *want* you to have it.

DAHLIA
I don't have anyone to call.

MICHELLE
You'll make friends.

CLARK
Everyone in your class has a phone.
This is the latest model.

DAHLIA

The only person I want to call is
my *mother*.

(beat)

And she doesn't *have* a phone.

Michelle and Clark exchange a *what to say* look.

MICHELLE

(to Dahlia)

Sweetie, you know that if the
Center *could* have reunited you with
your mother they *would* have, don't
you?

Dahlia nods politely.

DAHLIA

I have a lot of homework.

Michelle SIGHS.

MICHELLE

Go ahead, then.

EXT. SCHOOL BUS STOP, LOS ANGELES - AFTERNOON

Dahlia steps off the bus, a solitary figure among the other
girls who walk in groups or pairs toward the cluster of
upscale houses.

But Dahlia walks in the opposite direction - toward a city
bus stop.

INT. CITY BUS, LOS ANGELES - LATER

Her new, beige backpack on the seat beside her, Dahlia peers
out the window as...

... suburb becomes city.

EXT. DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - EVENING

Standing on a sidewalk, Dahlia consults a scrap of paper: a
printout of the Yelp list of Los Angeles florists, several of
which have been crossed out.

She tucks the list into her pocket and enters:

INT. A FLOWER SHOP, LOS ANGELES - EVENING

We see but don't hear a brief conversation between Dahlia and the shop's proprietor, who shakes her head: No.

A dejected-looking Dahlia exits the shop, draws another line through the name of another flower shop on her list.

INT. THE BROOKS HOME/KITCHEN - NIGHT

At the CLICK of the front door, Michelle, sitting at an empty kitchen table, stops typing frantically into her phone.

MICHELLE

Dahlia?

Dahlia enters sheepishly.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)

It's seven o'clock!

Dahlia shifts her backpack.

DAHLIA

I took a bus downtown.

MICHELLE

You what?

DAHLIA

I needed...

She fishes through her pack.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

(withdrawing it)

... this special kind of protractor.

She offers an ingratiating smile.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

I guess I *do* need a phone after all.

Michelle is too relieved to be angry, too stunned to respond, as Dahlia heads upstairs.

INT. THE BROOKS HOME/DAHLIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Dahlia sits up in bed reading her well-worn copy of *The Prison Poems of Miguel Hernandez*.

Then shuts off her reading light, slides down beneath the covers - and stares into the dark.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
 (from *Prison Poems*)
 Within these four walls
 I alone and a volcano.
 I alone upon this bed
 all frost, and my volcano.

INT. HIPSTER RESTAURANT, WESTSIDE LOS ANGELES - NIGHT

Dahlia sits across from the Brookses in the kind of restaurant that calls itself a bistro.

Hers is the only non-white face in the room - aside from the ones featured in a series of black-and-white photos on the walls - of farmers and field workers engaged in a variety of food-related tasks:

- grinding corn
- sifting flour
- hauling burlap bags filled with herbs.

Michelle and Clark study the menu.

MICHELLE
 Clark, did you read the "Journey to Sustainability." Chef Branson hiked through the Rain Forest to learn about the region's spices from the locals.

CLARK
 (skeptically)
 Uh huh.

But Dahlia is studying the portraits on the wall.

A SERVER who could easily be a super-model approaches.

SERVER
 Do you have any questions?

Her smile is supernaturally white.

CLARK
 I think we're still deciding.

DAHLIA
 I have one.

She points to a portrait on the wall - of a broad-faced indigenous girl sorting beans.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
What's her name?

The Server looks at the photo, smiles uncomfortably.

MICHELLE
Dahlia, I don't think she can tell us--

SERVER
I don't know her name, but she's one of the generous peasants Chef Branson met in his travels.

DAHLIA
Is he here? Maybe he can tell us her name.

Clark shifts uncomfortably in his seat.

CLARK
Dahlia, I don't think the chef has time to--

SERVER
I'd be happy to try to get you some information about that young woman.

Michelle looks mortified. But the Server smiles soothingly.

SERVER (CONT'D)
It's no trouble.

She returns to the kitchen, leaving the Brookses torn between risking further mortification by admonishing Dahlia in public and pretending nothing is wrong. They go with pretense.

MICHELLE
What looks good to you, Dahlia? I'm thinking about the lamb medallions with coconut fennel chutney.

But Dahlia remains preoccupied by the black-and-white photos.

The Server returns.

SERVER
I'm afraid I couldn't find the name of that particular girl.

DAHLIA
You asked the chef? The one that
wrote the story?

The Server's nod is unconvincing.

Clark CHUCKLES artificially at diners who have turned their attention to his table as Dahlia points to a photo of a wrinkled, stoop-backed farmer.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
(to the Server)
How about *that* guy? What's *his*
name?

The Server is flustered, looks to her left and right as if seeking an escape route.

Clark switches from fake amusement to anger in an instant.

CLARK
Dahlia!

He glances at nearby tables, lowers his voice.

CLARK (CONT'D)
(whisper-yelling)
Stop this.

Dahlia gets up from the table and heads toward the ladies's room, and the Server speaks to the Brookses in an apologetic tone.

SERVER
I think they might be *stock* photos.

Michelle's expression turns to dread when she notices that Dahlia has veered away from the bathroom and toward the kitchen. Clark and the Server follow her gaze.

SERVER (CONT'D)
Oh no.

Clark hands Michelle his car keys.

CLARK
You get the car. I'll get *her*.

Just then, from the kitchen a British-accented VOICE:

CHEF (O.S.)
Get her out!

As Clark escorts her from the kitchen, Dahlia doesn't resist, but continues to SHOUT.

DAHLIA

If they were so *generous*, how come
you can't remember any of their
names?!

CLARK

(yell-whispering)

Why are you doing this? I don't
understand why you're doing this!

They push past a family entering the restaurant.

DAHLIA

Don't ask about the girl with the
beans! They hate it when you ask
about the girl with the beans!

INT. THE BROOKS HOME/DAHLIA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Dahlia sits up in bed in the moonlit room, in a crazy staring
contest with the one-eyed coyote in the painting on the wall.

DAHLIA (V.O.)

(from *Prison Poems*)

I sought to undress,
rid myself of what cannot be,
make my look dull and absent.

EXT. BEACH BEYOND DAHLIA'S WINDOW - CONTINUOUS

Against a backdrop of purple clouds, the moon seems to drown
itself in the ocean.

DAHLIA (V.O. CONT.)

But the black, distant stuff
comes with me, dark with dark,
to meet the dark.

EXT. BEACH BEYOND DAHLIA'S WINDOW - DAY

A scuffed and sun-bleached Captain America action figure lies
abandoned on the sand.

EXT. BEACH BEYOND DAHLIA'S WINDOW - NIGHT

The ocean slams against the base of the wooden steps that
connect the beach to the house on the cliff above.

EXT. SCHOOL BUS STOP - LOS ANGELES - DAY

Dahlia's hair is nearly shoulder-length now, indicating the passage of months. As the school bus approaches, she has a change of plans and turns toward the city bus stop.

EXT. DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES/GUADALUPE'S FLOWERS - DAY

As she walks with stone-faced determination through city streets, Dahlia's cellphone CHIRPS.

SIRI (O.S.)
(mispronouncing)
On your left: Guadaloop's Flowers.

Dahlia enters.

INT. GUADALUPE'S FLOWERS - DAY

We see but don't hear a brief conversation between Dahlia and the FLOWER SHOP WOMAN behind the counter, then watch Dahlia walk dejectedly toward the door.

Until:

FLOWER SHOP WOMAN (O.S.)
Oh, wait!

Dahlia turns to see Flower Shop Woman returning from a back room, waving a paperback.

FLOWER SHOP WOMAN (CONT'D)
There was a Mexican lady that
worked here.

She approaches Dahlia.

FLOWER SHOP WOMAN (CONT'D)
Did the lady you're looking for
like poetry?

Dahlia's eyes grow wide as she takes the paperback.

FLOWER SHOP WOMAN (CONT'D)
You can have it. It's been just
sitting here since she left.

INSERT: *Laughing Out Loud, I Fly: Poems in English and Spanish* by Juan Felipe Herrera

Dahlia takes the book.

DAHLIA
The Mexican lady. Where did she go?

FLOWER SHOP WOMAN
I'm sorry. All I remember is... she
took a lot of days off.

EXT. GUADALUPE'S FLOWERS - CONTINUOUS

Dahlia sits on a curb outside the shop, opens the book, looks at the inside cover. But instead of a name, she finds a list.

INSERT:

- Aurora Contract Detention Facility, Aurora, CO
- Homestead Temporary Shelter for Unaccompanied Children, Homestead, FL
- Southwest Key-Pleasant Hill Shelter, Pleasant Hill, CA
- Tumbleweed Shelter, Phoenix, AZ
- Karnes County Residential Center, Karnes City, Texas
- South Texas Detention Facility, Pearsall, Texas

The list goes on and on... with an X mark beside each name.

Dahlia runs her index finger over the X marks, as if touching the ink could connect her with the writer.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
(from *Prison Poems*)
They say I seem another,
at a remove, out of your womb.
A blast of dust blew up
and blinded, choked, hurt me.
I swallow dust since then.

INT. UPSCALE CLOTHING STORE IN A SUBURBAN MALL - DAY

Dahlia and Michelle look through racks of sexy, floor-length gowns.

MICHELLE
This one's pretty.

Dahlia scrunches her face at the rack of dresses.

DAHLIA
I don't need a quinceañera.

MICHELLE
I know you don't need one.

DAHLIA
I don't have any friends to invite.

MICHELLE
It could be just family.

DAHLIA
Your family.

Michelle is prepared for the sting, doesn't react.

MICHELLE
No. You're right. Mine and Clark's.

Dahlia looks again at the rack of dresses.

DAHLIA
Quinceañera dresses aren't
really... slinky.

MICHELLE
Oh. What are they?

DAHLIA
They're... princess-y.

MICHELLE
What about *this* one?

But Dahlia is across the store, in the Bridal section.
Michelle finds her staring at a princess-y gown.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
These are wedding dresses.
(beat)
You could wear white?

Dahlia nods... eagerly.

Michelle looks at the price tag, does a double-take. But
Dahlia is actually excited about something.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
Maybe we could make it less...
bride-ish.

DAHLIA
We could add some big red bows.

Michelle reins in her horror.

MICHELLE
Really?
(beat)
Okay. We'll get one of these...
gowns. Then we'll go to the fabric
shop and get some...

She can barely bring herself to say it...

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
... big, red bows.

Dahlia smiles.

INT. LUNCH ROOM OF DAHLIA'S SCHOOL - DAY

Dahlia sits alone and picks at her lunch while flipping through the book of poems from the Flower Shop Woman.

The BELL RINGS, and she's about to tuck the book into her bag, when something in it catches her eye. On a random page, handwriting:

Vicente Ramirez
602 Aldama Street, Los Angeles

Instead of heading to class, she heads toward the nearest exit.

EXT. A CHICANO NEIGHBORHOOD, LOS ANGELES - DAY

Dahlia consults the address in the poetry book as she walks, then stops in front of a brittle-looking house with a blue pick-up parked in the driveway.

A DIRTY TODDLER is playing with a toy truck in the yard.

He looks like *her*.

DAHLIA
Hola. This is your house?

The Dirty Toddler ignores her. His ears have pricked up at the SOUND OF AN ICE CREAM TRUCK approaching.

Dahlia waves down the truck.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
You want an ice cream?

She tries IN SPANISH.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Helado?

DIRTY TODDLER
Si!

Dahlia points to the pictures on the side of the truck, stops when he indicates his favorite.

DAHLIA

Esta?

He nods, and she purchases the treat, hands it to him. She studies his face as he devours it - the significance of their resemblance sinking in.

When she asks...

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

(IN SPANISH)

Is your Papa home?

... the boy runs inside, yells...

DIRTY TODDLER (O.S.)

Papi!!

... then returns to the yard, and plays with his toy truck under a dried-out shrub near the porch.

Dahlia steps onto the porch, her chest heaving as she waits.

When her father appears in the doorway, she unconsciously takes a step backward.

She stiffens as he embraces her...

... and looks past him, into the house, where a Woman eyes her with curiosity before closing the door.

[CONVERSATION IN ENGLISH]

VICENTE

Oh my God! Where did you come from?
Your mother told me about Felipe.
She didn't know if you were...

But Dahlia pulls away, collapses into a plastic porch chair, buries her face in her hands.

Vicente SIGHS, sits in the chair next to her, looking like a scolded schoolboy.

She finally looks up at him, face contorted, as if struggling to keep from being sick.

DAHLIA

(as if answering a long-held question)

This is why. Why you never...

He stares at the floor.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Mami was here.

He nods.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
And she saw...?

She looks at the Dirty Toddler. Vicente ignores the question.

She EXHALES then, shakes her head - makes a conscious effort to get past the pain, to get from this man what she needs.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
I need to know where she is.

Her father shakes his head.

VICENTE
I don't know. She came, she blamed
me for everything... then she left.

Dahlia struggles to slow her breathing.

VICENTE (CONT'D)
Do you want... water?

DAHLIA
Papi, you need to help me get home.

VICENTE
(glancing nervously at his
house)
Home *where*?

DAHLIA
Home. To the house in Tepito. To
Mami and Abuela.
(beat)
You don't just forget about your
familia! You don't just *abandon*
them!

At the word "abandon" Vicente flinches.

VICENTE
No, you don't. You have to stay
with the ones who need you the
most.

He looks at the Dirty Toddler playing in the brittle yard.

VICENTE (CONT'D)
 (slowly)
 Mija, things are not the same as
 they were.

Then takes a cigar from his pocket, rolls it between his
 thick, working man's fingers - to buy himself time.

DAHLIA
 What do you mean?

He continues to roll the cigar, doesn't light it.

VICENTE
 There *is* no "house in Tepito." Your
 mother sold it - so she could come
 here.

DAHLIA
 But the house isn't hers. It's--

VICENTE
 It *became* hers...
 (gently)
 ... when your abuela passed.

Dahlia closes her eyes. BREATHES in this latest loss.

VICENTE (CONT'D)
 I'm sorry, mija.
 (and then bitterly)
 You Mami blamed me for *that*, too.

Dahlia looks up, into the cloudless sky.

VICENTE (CONT'D)
 Your mother... It was a while ago
 she was here; I don't know where
 she is now.

Dahlia stands, paces the porch. Thinks.

DAHLIA
 Then I need to stay with you. Just
 until I can figure out--

VICENTE
 Dahlia, you need to understand.

He looks at the Dirty Toddler.

VICENTE (CONT'D)
 I can barely feed my *son*.

Dahlia's grief takes a turn then, and she SEETHES.

DAHLIA

You owe me, Papi! You owe me--

VICENTE

(angrily)

I owe? What kind of girl talks to a father like that?

She gives in to the tears then, and her father squints in discomfort.

Responding to the SOUND OF CRYING, the Woman comes to the door, wipes her hands on a dish towel, and calls out.

WOMAN

Felipe!

Dahlia is stunned as she watches the boy respond to his name.

And as the Woman ushers him into the house, Dahlia glares at her father.

DAHLIA

Felipe?!!

Vicente drops his cigar onto the porch. Then stands, raises his hands in a defensive gesture.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)

(rage in her voice)

You *replaced* him!

Her father backs toward the door of the house, turns and goes through it. But Dahlia follows.

INT. HOME OF VICENTE RAMIREZ - CONTINUOUS

Inside, Dahlia encounters the Woman, notices her bulging belly, puts on a false smile.

DAHLIA

Felicitaciones. Niño o niña?
(Boy or girl?)

The Woman looks at her belly, smiles warily.

THE WOMAN

Niña.
(Girl.)

Dahlia shakes her head in disgust, turns to her father.

DAHLIA
You replaced *all* of us.

She goes to the door.

EXT. HOME OF VICENTE RAMIREZ/PORCH - CONTINUOUS

Vicente YELLS at Dahlia's back as she walks away.

VICENTE
So, I'm weak!

She continues to walk away.

VICENTE (CONT'D)
All men are weak!

Dahlia turns, returns to her father, looks him in the eye.

DAHLIA
(with contained rage)
I knew a man who walked across a
desert to find water for his
mother. I knew a man who risked his
freedom to protect a little boy he
hardly knew. And I knew a
philosopher...
(fighting tears of fury)
... who thought everyone was
beautiful, even when they treated
him like an animal that belonged in
a zoo.
(beat)
So *no*. Not *all* men are weak.

She turns and STOMPS away.

EXT. A BUS STOP IN A DESERT LANDSCAPE - DAY

Dahlia steps off a city bus, wipes perspiration from her
neck... and heads toward a formidable-looking institution on
the horizon.

EXT. CHINO YOUTH CORRECTIONAL FACILITY, CA ("JUVI")- DAY

Dahlia approaches a gate marked Visitors/Visitantes.

INT. JUVI - DAY - CONTINUOUS

After writing in the prison's Visitors Log, Dahlia sits, smooths her hair, smiles awkwardly at the other visitors.

INT. JUVI - DAY (LATER)

The light has changed, and the other visitors are gone. Dahlia shifts uncomfortably in her chair, continues to wait.

INT. JUVI - EVENING

Dahlia is escorted by a MALE GUARD and FEMALE ADMINISTRATOR down a long, grey hallway into a small, grey room. They treat her gently, as if she is about to break - which she is.

Dahlia sees a file folder on the table between them, reads its tiny, printed label.

INSERT: Lopez, JuanAlberto

Female Administrator consults the file. And before she closes it, we get a glimpse of its contents.

INSERT: Altercation(gang)/stabbing

We see but don't hear the Female Administrator addressing Dahlia.

After she's done, Dahlia continues to stare at her, squinting as if struggling to understand a foreign language.

When Dahlia stands, the Guard does as well, and calmly, routinely wraps muscle-bound arms around her - as she flails.

INT. JUVI - LATER

As Dahlia approaches the exit, Female Administrator catches up to her - hands her an envelope with a surreptitious, *I shouldn't be doing this* look - then shoos her out the door.

EXT. JUVI - CONTINUOUS

Dahlia sits on a cement bench outside the entrance and empties the envelope's contents into her hand:

- JuanAlberto's scapular necklace, and
- the key chain from Hector - still without a key.

EXT. JUVI - CONTINUOUS

Razor wire-topped walls in the background, Dahlia walks away from the prison looking stiff, shell-shocked.

We PAN OUT until she becomes a speck in the panorama of the desert.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
(from *Prison Poems*)
My dead one,
you have left along with summer.
Are you feeling cold?
Tell me, from there below,
the words *I love you*.
Do you speak, under the earth?
I speak like silence.

INT. THE BROOKS HOME/FOYER - NIGHT

The front door CLICKS QUIETLY SHUT behind her as Dahlia steps out of her sandals and walks gingerly toward the stairs.

MICHELLE (O.S.)
This cannot keep happening.

Michelle enters from the kitchen, looking haggard.

But Dahlia has her story ready.

DAHLIA
My laptop broke so I took it to
this repair place down--

MICHELLE
Clark is at the police station!

Dahlia says nothing, and Michelle shakes her head in exasperation, waves a piece of paper in the air: Dahlia's marked-up printout of the Yelp list of florists.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
You can't keep doing this - cutting
school, going alone at all hours
into God knows what kind of
neighborhoods to look for your
mother.

Dahlia's attitude shifts - from defensive to defiant.

DAHLIA
You can't keep me from looking for
my mother!

MICHELLE
(slowly, emphatically)
You won't find her.

DAHLIA
Just cause you don't want me to
find her... Just cause you can't
have kids of your own...

MICHELLE
Dahlia, don't do this.

DAHLIA
(anger escalating)
... and you have to steal other
people's kids to feel like a woman!

Michelle steps back, as if struck.

Dahlia leans forward, then, seems to spit the word:

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Chíngate!
(Fuck you!)

Michelle flinches.

DAHLIA (CONT'D)
I'm gonna *find* my mother!

The two SCREAM over each other.

MICHELLE	DAHLIA (CONT'D)
Your mother's DEAD!!	Chíngate!!!

Dahlia stops. Stares at Michelle.

MICHELLE
Oh my God.

DAHLIA
Liar!! Why are you lying?!

MICHELLE
I didn't mean to... not like *that*.

Dahlia backs up against the wall, slides to the floor, puts
her face in her hands.

Silence.

Michelle begins to reach for her, but pulls back, afraid of
her reaction.

DAHLIA
(without looking up)
How?

Michelle leans against the wall.

MICHELLE
I don't... That's all they told us.
We were waiting for the right time
to sit you down and...

In the space of seconds, Dahlia unfolds herself, stands, and darts like a hunted animal up the stairs.

INT. THE BROOKS HOME/DAHLIA'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Dahlia LOCKS her bedroom door and sits on the side of the bed, breathing too fast, staring at nothing, processing, shaking her head: *no*.

Her gaze falls on *The Prison Poems of Miguel Hernandez*, on her bed-stand, and she picks it up, runs a finger over her mother's signature on the inside cover: *Dolores Ramírez*

Then gradually, the soft pain in her expression hardens - into calm...

... emotionless

... resolve.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
(from *Prison Poems*)
If I should lose you...

She stands shakily.

DAHLIA
If I should find you
under the earth...

She grabs her leather-strapped backpack...

DAHLIA (V.O. CONT.) (CONT'D)
Ever more absent
As if a distant train
went through my body,
As if a black, black ship...

... and begins to fill it with books.

DAHLIA (V.O. CONT'D) (CONT'D)
 Let me drink a distant water,
 delight in ghost depths.

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

Shivering as she walks barefoot along the shoreline, Dahlia spots a large, heavy-looking rock, bends to lift it...

... then carries it toward her open backpack, on the sand.

She drops the rock into the pack, which is filled with books.

CLOSE ON: an American history text, the Statue of Liberty on its cover.

After arranging the contents of the backpack, she touches the topmost book tenderly: *The Prison Poems of Miguel Hernandez* - and ZIPS it closed.

Then she heaves the pack onto her back, tightens its buckles and straps...

... and wades into the sea.

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT (LATER)

Dahlia COUGHS up salt water as she lies on the sand - and looks up into the glaucoma-clouded eyes of an ELDERLY LATINA.

DAHLIA
 (whispering)
 La Llorona...

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT (LATER)

When she awakens again, Dahlia finds herself in a lean-to constructed of garbage: tattered blankets suspended by chair legs and the broken spines of umbrellas.

Nearby, the Elderly Latina - clearly her rescuer, and clearly homeless - tends a trash can fire.

Noticing that Dahlia is awake, the woman adjusts the threadbare blanket covering her. Their eyes meet, and we see from Dahlia's perspective as:

... the Elderly Latina's face morphs into Abuela's face, she speaks with Abuela's VOICE...

ELDERLY LATINA/ABUELA
Los muertos want to see you *thrive*.

But as Dahlia sits up, the Elderly Latina has become herself again.

She untangles the scapular necklace around Dahlia's neck, helps her to her feet...

... points her in the direction of the big house on the cliff above the sea.

EXT. BEACH - DAY

A book washes up on the shore: *The Prison Poems of Miguel Hernandez*.

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

A wave like a greedy hand pulls the book back into the sea.

EXT. THE BROOKS HOME/BACK YARD - DAY

Dahlia stands looking out at the gringo version of a quinceañera:

- platters of Doritos and guacamole,
- a rented mariachi band, complete with sombreros, bolo ties and handle-bar mustaches,
- kids battering a donkey-shaped pinata with a selfie stick.

The yard is filled with mingling, CHATTING strangers.

DAHLIA
(to herself)
Desconocidos.

The word seems to pull her - and she looks out past the yard, past the pool and fence, over the cliff to the sea beyond.

But another memory pulls her back, away from the water.

ELDERLY LATINA/ABUELA (V.O.)
... want to see you *thrive*.

She pulls a scapular necklace from under the bodice of her white dress, caresses it...

MICHELLE (O.S.)
Dahlia!

... then tucks the silver chain back inside her collar then turns to respond to her name.

Michelle approaches.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
Come meet your cous...
(she self-corrects)
Come meet my brother's little
girls!

DAHLIA
You have a brother?

MICHELLE
(matter-of-factly)
I have two!

She forces a smile, allows Michelle to take her hand and lead her toward the foyer.

EXT. THE BROOKS HOME/FOYER - EVENING (LATER)

Clark tips the Mariachi Band as Guests depart, and Dahlia helps Michelle with the clean-up.

MICHELLE
I'd call that a successful party.

She regards the mess with distaste.

MICHELLE (CONT'D)
Let's leave the rest of this for
the morning.

INT. FOYER - CONTINUOUS

As they approach the stairs, Michelle smooths Dahlia's hair affectionately, then watches her trudge up the stairs slowly, heavily, appearing older than her 15 years.

And as she watches, a wave of remorse seems to weaken her. She leans into the nearest wall.

Then feels Clark's hand on her shoulder.

MICHELLE
(whispering, trance-like)
I thought we were good people.

His response is automatic and definitive.

CLARK

We are.

INT. THE BROOKS HOME/DAHLIA'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

As Dahlia begins to undress, she hears the DOORBELL CHIME.

INT. FOYER - CONTINUOUS

CLARK

Dahlia!

At the bottom of the stairs, Dahlia finds Clark holding a just-delivered box of flowers.

He smiles, motions for her to lift the lid. She does, and finds a dozen blue dahlias.

Michelle enters.

MICHELLE

Happy birthday.

DAHLIA

Thank you.

CLARK

I did a little research. Did you know that different colored dahlias have different meanings?

Dahlia indulges him with feigned surprise as he mansplains:

CLARK (CONT'D)

Blue means "good luck" and "new beginnings."

He hands her a dahlia, and she inhales. And with the scent comes memory.

FLASHBACK:

She's 14 again, watching her mother arrange a Día de los Muertos bouquet.

ABUELA

It grows in the highest mountains.
In the harshest conditions.

Mami lifts a red dahlia from the pile...

MAMI
Red means strength.

... and adds it to the bouquet.

MAMI (CONT'D)
I've always dreamed of working in a
florist's shop...

Her expression becomes wistful.

MAMI (CONT'D)
... in the City of Angels.
(beat)
Maybe when we join your Papi...

DAHLIA
They have florerías in Los Angeles?

MAMI
Of course.

DAHLIA
Imagine how the shop will smell!

RETURN TO:

INT. FOYER - CONTINUOUS

The CLUNK of a vehicle door brings Dahlia back to the present; she peers out the front window into the driveway.

From Dahlia's perspective:

A DELIVERY WOMAN closes the back of a florist's van.

Dahlia stops breathing, and her world goes white. By the time she's able to breathe normally again, the van is gone.

MICHELLE
I'll put these in a vase.

But before she does, Dahlia reaches into the box - takes the florist's business card.

INT. DAHLIA'S ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Dahlia struggles to unzip the back of her dress - but gives up when her arms won't reach...

MICHELLE (O.S.)
Dahlia? You okay?

DAHLIA
Uh huh.

... then kicks off her high-heels and reaches for a pair of high-tops.

INT. DAHLIA'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

In her quinceañera dress and high tops, Dahlia opens the door to her walk-in closet, rummages around until she finds an old friend: her Dora the Explorer backpack.

She stuffs it with the clothes she arrived in: a T-shirt, jeans, and hoodie. Then a book: *Laughing Out Loud, I Fly: Poems in English and Spanish* by Juan Felipe Herrera.

INT. STAIRS OF THE BROOKS HOME - CONTINUOUS

At the top of the stairs, Dahlia pauses...

- hears the MURMUR OF A TELEVISION from downstairs
- then descends, her arms loaded with blankets, her Dora the Explorer backpack strapped to her back.

INT. FOYER OF THE BROOKS HOME - CONTINUOUS

After placing her house key on the entryway table, Dahlia opens the front door quietly, then closes it - just as quietly - behind her.

EXT. A CHICANO NEIGHBORHOOD, LOS ANGELES - NIGHT

Dahlia walks past stores with Spanish-lettered signs where people with brown faces:

- sit at tables outside of cafeterías and panaderías
- whizz past on skateboards, and
- look up - at the girl in the red bow-covered wedding dress and high tops, toting a dirty Dora the Explorer backpack.

And then shrug it off, because this *is* L.A.

Dahlia approaches a florería whose address matches the business card in her hand.

INT. THE BROOKS HOME/CLARK AND MICHELLE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Just out of the shower and wrapped in a bathrobe, Michelle spots something on her pillow, goes to it...

... stares down at a flower.

MICHELLE

Dahlia?

She walks out of her room and into:

INT. DAHLIA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

But no Dahlia.

Michelle finds the Azteca painting in the corner facing the wall... and in re-hanging it, finally sees what the abstract brush strokes depict: a coyote tearing apart its fluffy white prey.

MICHELLE

(horrificed)

Oh!

INT. CLARK AND MICHELLE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

Back in her bedroom, Michelle sits on her bed...

- lifts the blue dahlia from her pillow
- reads the note wound around its stem,
- and wipes away tears.

Then she looks out the window...

MICHELLE

(whispering)

Good luck and new beginnings.

... into the dark distance.

PRE-LAP: THE SPUTTER AND CRACKLE OF A TRASH CAN FIRE

EXT. A BEACH - NIGHT

Waking beneath her makeshift lean-to on the beach, the Elderly Latina finds herself covered in layers of blankets - and a comforter in shades of peach and beige.

EXT. A FLORERÍA, LOS ANGELES - NIGHT

Dahlia stands outside of the shop, staring at a sign on the door: CLOSED/CERRADO.

She tosses her backpack onto the ground beside the door, and sits - her back against the wall, princess-y white gown spread out around her. One of its large, tacked-on red bows topples to the pavement.

Then, in the stillness, a WOMAN'S VOICE, HUMMING A MELANCHOLY CORRIDO.

Dahlia goes to the door of the shop, leans in, cups her hands around her eyes to block out the street light... and KNOCKS.

INT. A FLORERÍA - CONTINUOUS

As Mami walks to the door, her expression changes from irritated - to curious - to incredulous, and as she turns a key in the lock, her knees begin to buckle.

Dahlia enters just in time to keep her mother from falling.

As they embrace, Mami runs her hand through her daughter's short hair, steps back to look at her outfit, and mother and daughter break into LAUGHTER mixed with TEARS.

Mami braces herself by gripping the counter - on top of which is a box of fresh cut flowers. She reaches in, begins to lift a white dahlia from it.

But after studying Dahlia closely, she drops it and withdraws a different color.

She tucks the red dahlia behind her daughter's ear.

DAHLIA (V.O.)
(from *Prison Poems*)
They shall not bind me, no.
This world of chains
for me is naught.
Who will confine a smile?
Who will wall in a voice?
I am tall, buoyant, free.
Tall, buoyant, free, free.

FADE OUT.

OVER BLACK:

The contractor Southwest Key is paid nearly half a billion dollars per year to detain migrant children in facilities across the country.

According to a 2019 report by the Department of Health and Human Services, thousands of migrant children have reported being sexually abused or harassed while in U.S. government custody.

Since 2018, more than six children have died while in the custody of Border Control.

When asked whether it's "cruel and heartless to take a mother away from her children," former White House Chief of Staff John Kelly responded, "I wouldn't put it quite that way. The children will be taken care of – put into foster care or whatever."

Cada ciudad dormida despierta loca,
exhala un silencio de carcel.

[Every city that sleeps wakes in madness,
exhales a prison's hush.]

- Miguel Hernandez