

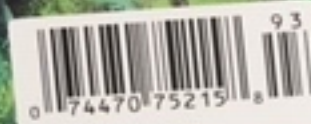
PRAIRIE SCHOONER

2019

FALL

\$9

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Chloe Martinez

Mandala of the Soapy Water

A few photos: sharp cheekbones, deep-set eyes, both bequeathed to his son, my father. Grandma remarried, erased him so thoroughly he turned into smoke rings,

the stock story she told: *went out for cigarettes one day . . .* and drifted away. My father, fathered by a cloud, became a painter, someone who could turn anything beautiful.

Martinez our name, our mystery, mispronounced by me until college. Then the apologetic *MARtin* in my mouth, the *er* tacked on quietly, as if to escape notice, was corrected.

Over and over *MartINEz* came back to me, the only way New Yorkers knew how to say it. So his name, at least, returned. Later, I searched databases for him. No trace. As if he never

was in the first place. Where a story of him would go is the sentence, *He was a dishwasher*—that odd formulation, as if washing dishes were a vocation, instead of a poorly paid, backbreaking job

that he must have hoped to trade for something better. Instead of a story, the vague notion that he was Puerto Rican. Or “mixed”: a little Spanish and Irish too. No story of who

his people were. The story is that he disappeared, but no story is told of where he went, or why, or what happened to him. He simply fades from family memory, in the murky middle of the 1950s.

Families gather around something, telling stories. What is there
at the center? Ring of smoke. In the absence of story, image:
soapy water, the white moons of plates coming up for air, sinking again.

Late night, hot restaurant kitchen, summer in the city. His rumpled white
apron, wet against the clank and spray of the sink. His sore back. His shining
soapy arms, circling. Ancestor. I want to imagine you another life.

Arrangements

Because the lilies aren't ready to bloom
the women of the wedding party fan out

across the reception hall, lean close
to each cluster of green and with two fingers

unlock the petals from one another,
nudge them apart enough to let light

slip in—flowers don't know what moves them,
they find themselves falling open,

one after another imperceptibly slow explosion,
awake, awake, they cry silently,

all around them the silverware
in formation, the wide-open faces of plates, expectant

white expanses of tablecloth, quiet now,
for the women have gone to pin white jasmine

in their hair, and the men pace on the lawn
in Sunday suits, squinting upward,

reading the sky for signs of rain.