

## WHERE THE METAL MEETS MY HAND

Isabel Kathryn Ball

**Oxana** did not think about the things she was supposed to think about. Not because she didn't know or care, but simply because she knew no life without the wall. For her, it had always been there. A plant from the earth that grew taller with age. The only difference was that it was a plant that knew no bounds of time. She never thought of the wall as something that could die, or that had been planted in the first place. For how could she think that? If the wall could die, then what she understood herself to be could die too.

The only time Oxana thought about the wall was the day she got stuck in it.

She had been late and she did not know by how many minutes. It was seven in the morning and the sun burned painful reminders into her back. With every step she took away from it, the rays reached farther across the earth and grew hotter, angrier. She was late and her shoes were already coated with desert dust, her dress splotted with sweat seeping out from beneath the yellow cotton. She was late and it was too late to fix her lateness.

She squinted her eyes to look past the large brown bars up the road, searching for the school bus impatiently puffing out exhaust fumes, but it was not there. *Chinguetes*. Her feet moved faster across the earth, in vain. The line did not look so long this morning. She could see the Monday officer inspecting a cane while the bony old man it belonged to waited patiently. He leaned against the white railing behind him, and Oxana watched his hands try patting it away; shifting forward, convincing himself he could stand as tall as the officer even while robbed of his cane. But the

old man had bones that were collapsing in on each other, and he was from this side, so Oxana knew he could only end where he started.

All this to say she would not make it to school today.

*Unless . . . unless . . . unless . . .*

She had heard about the things passed between the wall.

“Oxana, no te acerques al muro porque allí pasan drogas entre los agujeros.”

“Pobre niño, tenía 15 años y los chiles verdes le dispararon desde el otro lado.”

“Hasta que cumples 45 mi niña, no tendrás permiso de besuquear a los chicos entre los huecos del muro.”

So Oxana had her reasons for not loitering between the holes in the wall, or around them. But today she was late, and lateness made her less fearful for reasons she did not yet know.

She had always wondered what it would feel like between two bars of the wall. She imagined her feet flying above ground, three inches from Mexican soil, while her head bumped down on dusty pebbles that had found a home in the United States. What would the agent inspecting the old man’s cane say when he noticed her flying feet and heavy head? Would he be angry? Would he be confused? Would he think to laugh? She did not know. But today Oxana was late, and humor took her places she had not realized she could go.

*Uno, dos, tres, cuatro, cinco, seis, siete.*

Oxana counted seven bars. Seven bars for seven years of the wall being bars and not a fence. She did not remember the fence. She only knew that the wall had once taken on a different shape. On rare occasions, her mother would float away on memories of a fence you could see through. Silver and metal. Flimsy as a fence on a playground—one that had once shaken to the touch.

So Oxana counted *one, two, three, four, five, six, seven*, and aimed her eyes for the air between seven and eight. She slid her backpack off her body and let it fall to the ground. Would she be fast enough to make it through unnoticed? Unnoticed by the officer inspecting the old man's cane? Would her head or her feet make it to the other side first? Would she fit in the in-between?

It wasn't her mind that took her out of line. This did not happen because she could not think. It happened because even at her age she understood reason would not take her places she wanted to go. So she slid reason between the folds of her yellow dress and willed it to stay there.

Running: Oxana had never been good at it. But she wasn't running, only her body was. That game we play with children who are not yet attached to the full meaning behind words. Sometimes referred to as a trick, but a trick connotes malice. Oxana did not maliciously fool herself into thinking she was not running; she handed the task to her body so as to free up room for herself. Her blood sent waves through her body, pricking merrily at her eyes as her eyes grew wider, taking in dry air. She imagined the dust around her settling atop her lizard skin, only to be shaken off with each leap into the air.

*Que calorazo.*

But she was too close to mind the heat. The sun still chased her—begging her to stay. The bars stood too close to turn back now, and people were too busy with Monday’s business to care.

*Head or feet?*

*¿Pies o cabeza?*

She waited too long to think. Or perhaps she wasn’t aware she had been avoiding thought in the first place.

*Un golazo.*

The bars now squeezed her temples and grit against her sweat stained face. Oxana’s knees rooted down on the hard ground. Her hands still free, she took a moment to wrap her arms around the bars that held her head hostage. The consequence was pain, which she ignored; too curious to know if her fingertips would meet on the other side. They did, so instead of crying she laughed at her own joke. The only one to have taken notice of her strangeness was a small dog, yapping at the wall and at Oxana as it charged towards her. The dog paused inches away from her face and continued to bark in its lame attempt to intimidate. Oxana let her jaw rest and her fingers unknot themselves once she realized the dog would do nothing more.

“Kernel! Stop it right now. That’s enough, you listen to me.” A large woman huffed at the tiny animal, her floral patterned shirt out of place as she shuffled towards them. The dog closed its mouth and buried its nose into the dirt, snapping back into its domestication. Oxana watched the woman try to understand what she was looking at as she came closer. She watched her frizzy blonde curls roll back and forth atop her head as it shook, perplexed.

“What happened here? Are you hurt? Oh. Maybe you don’t understand me. I’m sorry. Oh dear. I just don’t know how you could have gotten in there. ¿Habla inglés? How long have you been here?”

“Yes. I know how to speak English . . . I’m stuck.” Oxana resigned herself to giving the woman a simple reply. She felt her temples pound against the bars at the thought of answering the questions to come.

“Let me help you get out, dear . . . Maybe if we jiggle your head a little we’ll be able to slide you back on through.”

“Okay.” Oxana’s arms pushed fiercely against the bars, willing her head to follow. The large woman gently kneaded against Oxana’s forehead, shifting it right to left.

*Nada.*

“It hurts. No more please.” The woman abruptly stopped her movement. Oxana felt her knees burn at having been dug into the pebbles along the desert floor.

“Alright, dear. Now that’s alright. I think the best thing to do is get some more help. I don’t know how to get you out of this mess. Will you be alright if I leave you here to go call for someone?”

“That’s fine.” *Chinguetes*. That was the last thing Oxana wanted: for her mother to find out what she had done. She knew she was supposed to be in school, she knew she would be in trouble for having gotten stuck in the wall, and she knew she could not get her own body out. So she stared after the large woman and her dog as they walked away and waited for them to return.

Fifteen minutes later Oxana heard wheels sliding across gravel. She looked away from the bird she was etching into the sand to find two migra vehicles barreling towards her. Her chest began to burn and make heat that snaked its way up the inside of her throat.

*Mis papeles.*

Oxana had permission to be on US soil—she went to school on the other side everyday—but her mother had warned her that living on the wall meant keeping your papers close, at all times, in the event of trouble. Her papers sat in her backpack, deeper within the country that now lay behind her, in a line meant to bring order to the wall's crossings.

The large lady was the first to jump out of the vehicles, frantically running towards Oxana with her tiny dog in tow.

“Dear, now it’s all right, don’t be scared. I asked these officers to come help me get you out. They’re masters at the wall, so they’ll know what to do. Don’t you worry, dear. Kernel and I will stay here with you until this is all over.” Three chiles verdes sauntered behind the large woman, and all four of them came to envelop Oxana in their shadows.

“What’s your name girl? This woman says you speak English. Is that right?” Oxana’s arms retreated from between the bars to touch Mexican soil, so that only her face could be blamed for violating their rules.

“My name is Oxana Maria Gonzalez Calles.”

“Well my name is Officer Morales. I don’t know how you got yourself here Ozana. But once we get you out, you’ll have to explain this before you get to

go home. Capiche?” Morales brought his radio to his mouth before she could respond, and mumbled a few words into it as he retreated to the vehicles. Without turning back, he signaled to the remaining officers, whose hands began to weave around parts of Oxana’s neck and press against her face. The surface of their hands were tough, as if made of brown paper bags. They turned her head one way, and she turned it the other; in defiance of their punishing grip. Her ears bent and raw against the rusty metal bars.

“Oaksana, they’re trying to help dear. Let them do what they need to do and you’ll be out of here quickly. Oh my, we need to let her mother know she’s here . . . can one of you officers find her mother? Or can Officer Morales?”

“Her people are coming in a moment ma’am. They’ll be in charge of locating her mother.”

“Hey Morales. Could you come over a minute? This isn’t doing anything. I don’t know if it’s because she’s wiggling around and all sweaty or what, but her skull is just dug in here. I think the Mexicans are gonna have to pull her out from behind when they show up.” Sweat slid down from Oxana’s hairline and filled her eyes. She blinked to quell the sting, encouraging the salt water to glide across her eyelashes, towards the ground. It was decidedly a good time to cry. No one could tell the difference between her sweat and tears.

Morales called the officers back to the car. The large woman—who Oxana found out was named Chris—gave her bottled water and saltines while they waited. Oxana did not know for what.

*A esperar, a esperar, a esperar.*

More noise. Again came the sound of wheels sliding across gravel, but this time from behind where Oxana could not see. Heavy doors slammed lazily into place, and a sharp beep signaled a locked car. Rubber boots scratched against firmly packed earth and the scratching became louder as it drew near. Words like *autoridades* and *permiso* reached Oxana's ears, but she could not will herself to string them together. The sweat had dried along her skin in a thick, cool layer, and it lulled her towards sleep.

She came back inside a cloud of dust. Oxana's limbs squirmed to escape the tiny particles, only to remind her of where she was. A gentle breeze came in from the left and hummed along the loose yellow fabric of her dress. Oxana could not find the sun through the cloud that enveloped her.

*Is it day or night or a time in between?*

There were pushes and pulls that followed. So many that at times Oxana did not think they would ever end. She spent her days inside the wall, crafting a cloud that would never leave her, made by hands that clawed at the earth for dust. The voices of her mother and the large woman were the ones she searched for, hoping to drown out the parade of people who came and went.

"We simply don't have the resources to spare as an agency. Not to mention, it's not our responsibility as a country to account for citizens of other nations. It's tragic really—that the Mexican government hasn't put forth the manpower or funds to temporarily remove this portion of the wall. To get her out. A real shame."

“Mi niña, sé que no me vez desde el otro lado, pero si me oyes. Ya sabes que no tengo permiso de cruzar, pero siempre te estaré visitando hasta que te saquemos de aquí. Por lo mientras . . . confía en dios y en la señora Chris, ella te cuidará.”

“Oxana, my mom said I could visit you in the mornings before the bus gets here. I met that lady Chris who brings you food. She asked me to bring you some masa. Says your mom is gonna tell her how to make tortillas for you the way we like them.”

“Hi, dear. Kernel’s been gnawing at the door all day, dying to see you. Now I’ve brought you some more water . . . and I thought you might like soda to cool off. We’re roasting out here. Let me know if any of those reporters come back and I’ll make sure it stops. Your mom will take care of the ones on the other side.”

“A ver, a ver, a ver. Ay que intentar huevo. Huevo cura todo. Cierra los ojos, chica, voy a empezar por tu espalda. Hay te va . . . escurriendo, escurriendo el huevo . . . hay te va. Verás, esto te sacará.”

“Everyone out there knows you, you’ve stuck with the public. Would you be willing to share what it’s like? What you miss the most?”

“La situación no es nada simple. Es una cuestión de política. Política supremamente complicada. La realidad es que el muro no es bajo la custodia, ni el control de nuestro gobierno mexicano. El resultado: sigue atorada Oxana Maria Gonzalez Calles.”

*Segundos, seconds.*

*Minutes, minutos.*

*Horas, hours.*

*Days, días.*

*Semanas, weeks.*

*Years, años.*

*Vida, life.*

As time rolled in the direction of stillness, Oxana swore she felt her legs grow towards the depths of Mexico. Her nose stretch forward, as it soaked in the scent of production's smoke: the promise land on fire. Her hands, her most precious freedom, drenched at every hour by the rays that preyed on her. Sun by day and security's LED beams by night. She aged gracefully; inside of a wall she dreamt of when asleep, and when awake. A cloud of dust: there to float around her body and between the bars—a shield from the world's indecision.