

Luz at Midnight

by Marisol Cortez

Joel Takes a Node Tour, an excerpt

Headed out of the coastward-sloping sealands and back up toward the city again, they stop at a Buc-ees nestled in the armpit of a highway on-ramp. While Sister Soledad runs to the restroom, Joel stands in the middle of the store's long rectangular space, in a place where Sister can't possibly miss him, feeling lost with notebook and pen in hand. What a waste of space, he thinks at first, before realizing the architectural design is intentional, as all design must be: it is a space meant to be filled with people. People in camo, shorts, and flipflops; people in t-shirts with funny slogans—Check Meowt, reads one, below a cool cat in sunglasses. An Indian family pulled by a white poodle on a leash. Rural youth with Skrillex undercuts and trans flag patches on their backpacks, some of whom will leave for the city and some who will stay. People passing through and people who live there. People to fill a perimeter lined with foam coolers stacked beneath taxidermied deer heads arranged to look like they are fighting antler to antler; with bagged road snacks weighing many pounds; with peanut butter fudge and Dippin' Dots, kolaches and tacos, piles of smoked meat and sausage, belts and belt buckles, pyramid displays of pickled okra and quail eggs. Monster soda fountains with 20 selections and a rainbow of flavor additives. It is amazing—incredible, in the sly double sense Sister had captured in her comments about the flows of money moving through the sealands of South Texas. Would I miss this at all? he wonders, imagining the collapse of civilization he has always assumed was imminent and inevitable.

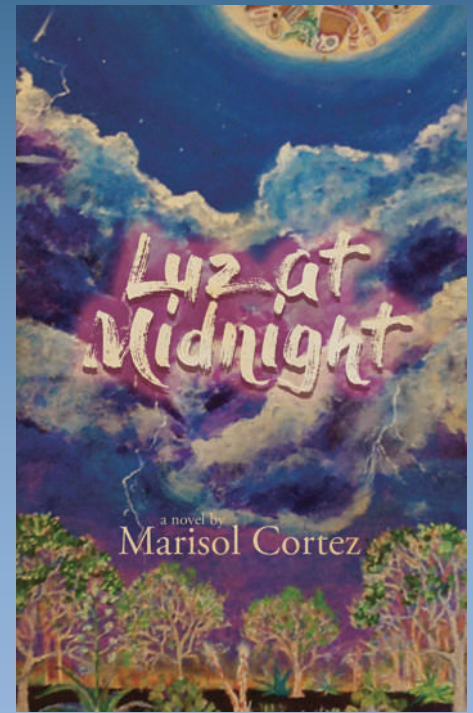
Back in the car once more, he feels exhausted from hard listening and careful response, from shooting photos and taking notes. Beside him Sister chats on, but Joel's attention drifts. Out the window, lightning flickers within a gathering of thunderheads miles away, off in the distance some place where it may rain. He thinks of an interview he read not long before, with a clean tech capitalist interested in harnessing lightning power: a "lightning farmer," he called himself. A T. Boone Pickens kind of cat, a self-made West Texas entrepreneur interested more in opportunities to be taken, markets to be cornered, than in ecology as permanent economy. Anyway, who wanted permanent economy when you could have volatility, when you knew how to surf the booms and busts of the Pecos desert with the best of em? Heaven's Plenty: that was the name of his start up. This guy was a born-again too.

Apparently, previous attempts to harvest lightning had all proved ill-conceived. Apparently, thunderstorms were as powerful as atomic bombs, and strokes of lightning so hot they could melt sand into hollow glass channels where they struck the ground. Apparently, the intense heat, light, and voltage of a single stroke of lightning was so powerful it could—at least theoretically—re-engineer matter at the atomic level, scrambling electrons so as to instantaneously form and reform reality. A carrot into a unicycle: poof! Heat and light into electricity and possibly into dollars, just maybe, plz?

But all that heat and light had proved difficult to capture. Earlier schemes had attempted the obvious, constructing towers, industrial lightning rods essentially, which shunted energy away to a storage device. Yet the ax of Tlaloc had proved too wily and unpredictable to be channeled efficiently. Not only that, but by the time lightning struck ground there was little usable energy to be captured. You'd have to construct dozens of towers to power a few lightbulbs for a year.

What this guy was doing with his vast oil and gas wealth, then, was piloting a method for harvesting power in the clouds, before lightning touched ground. Cashing out his big coal for big renewables. He had engineered a special balloon for it, a drone you could launch during thunderstorms. He was also working with the UT Permian Basin Department of Meteorology to devise a program that could predict the formation of rare, especially powerful kinds of lightning, like the elusive positive lightning which seemed to strike out of the blue, forming not from the bottom of a thunderhead but from its positively-charged cloud top, traveling horizontally for long distances before striking the ground. Because this bolt traveled so far before flashing, it accumulated huge amounts of voltage. The trick was to collect not upon striking but right before. It wasn't guesswork, it was science. All it

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Cover art by David Zamora Casas

Climate change, love and borderlands politics converge in *Luz at Midnight*, a new novel by Marisol Cortez that tells a climate change story unique to South Texas—belly of the beast for boom and bust extraction—challenging regional histories of environmental injustice while weaving a universal story of love and longing.

Deeply embedded in the landscapes of South Texas, *Luz at Midnight* tells the story of an ill-timed love that unfolds in the time of climate change. A genre-hopping narrative that layers story with reporting, poetry, scholarship, and teatro, *Luz* ultimately questions the nature of desire and power, asking: What throws us into the path of those we love, and what pulls us apart? What agency powers the universe—and do we have any agency of our own to create a different world from the one powerful others have planned for us?

Released in December 2020, *Luz* represents the first foray into fiction (Cli-Fi) by FlowerSong Press, already recognized throughout the U.S. Southwest for publishing the best in borderlands poetry. Go to flowersongpress.com



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required for success was enough time and money.

Joel likes the eccentric ones. This guy, and the scientist from Japan everyone had been talking about a few years back, who had experimented with water and demonstrated that emotions could shape the fate of water molecules. Love and gratitude caused it to freeze in perfect formation. Anger and heavy metal music created distorted, asymmetrical flakes. There was the guy who had mailed him a letter at the Volt office the other week, about a device he'd invented that converted atmospheric pressure directly into electricity—no fuel at all! He'd taped that one above his desk at work. I KNOW for a fact my machine does NOT violate any of the laws of physics and I Can prove that in Court!

And then there was this node business. Moving tons of earth to uncover ancient moon rocks and distill their metals chemically, to process pure ores into the promise of carbon-free electrons. The dream of all work and no waste. Tlaloc's fertile rains without his killing floods.

Yeah, you couldn't make shit like that up. As Sister drives on still pointing and talking, he gathers it all in his head like a snowball, rolling and patting it into shape, into story.



*BIO: Rooted in San Antonio, Marisol Cortez walks between artistic, activist, and academic worlds as a writer, editor, and community scholar. She is also the author of *I Call on the Earth* (Double Drop Press, 2019), about the displacement of the Mission Trails Mobile Home Community and is co-editor of *Deceleration* (deceleration.news) Contact: mccortez.net.*

Goddess Moment

This single mother of seven
wets the corn-flour, works it into a ball,
pats it flat and round,
lays it on the hot and ready griddle,
flips it with bare fingertips,
one after the other,
heaps them onto a warmed plate,
and offers them to us.

—Tom Keene and Muse



HABLANDO DE AMOR

Te Quiero

¿Cómo te quiero?
Como a los nopales de San
Luis Potosí.
¿Cuanto te quiero?
Como hay fresas en
Guanajuato.
¿Desde cuando te quiero?
Desde que cosechan aguacates en Uruapan.
¿Hasta cuando te quiero?
Hasta que se acaben los pinche charales de Janitzio.
¿Porqué te quiero?
Porque me dejas fumar mi puro en la cama.

—Cervando Martínez



Mi mujer es un mamey?

Mis amigos del Caribe y otras partes de America Latina
me han dicho que mi mujer es muy Hermosa,

“como un mamey” he oido.

Pero yo, no siendo del Caribe o de la Zona tropical no he
conocido muchos mameyes en mi vida.

Por eso, yo la consider como algo mas conocido a mi. Mi
mujer para mi es un mango.

—Cervando Martínez

