

Picking

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

The garbage bag bumps behind you through the glass-strewn median. You startle when the 18-wheeler barrels past. A cigarette spatters orange on the pavement.

"Cochinos." You stab a soggy diaper. *"Pigs. All Americanos."*

The watch you found last week shines Indy-Glo green. Two more hours, no more breaks. Rats stare at you, their eyes fearless pinpricks, but you reach around them for the Corona empties, the crumpled McDonald's bags, and wait for dawn to spill, a broken yolk across the desert.

You scrape crushed rabbit from the asphalt, gagging at the smell. Dead animals still get to you, haunting your dreams. Those nights Simona soothes you, reminds you of Spring, when you can quit and pick berries in the valley, then asparagus, almond, and, when the baby comes, grapes. Sometimes you curse yourself for listening to her, for leaving La Paz, but she wanted a better life for the child. It's not her fault construction dried up.

Orange flecks the clouds. The cool breeze reminds you of the *Coromuel* winds, and you try to thank God for this job, but you can't. You can only pray for this shift to end.

You hear the thrum of blowflies before you see the white-swaddled object, larger than the rabbit; a dog, perhaps, or small coyote. At one end, a thatch of black. Your heart races even as your walk slows and somehow, you know, even before you reach down to unwrap the sheet, expose the face, you will never again pick trash on a highway.

