

Catalina Barroso-Luque (b. Mexico City) is an artist who constructs stories inhabited by voices, texts, images, bodies and objects. She also writes in English and Spanish, using processes of performativity, self mythologization and translation. Catalina works between Mexico City (MX) and Glasgow (UK).

THE CURVED MOUNTAIN

CATALINA BARROSO-LUQUE

Capulhuac

The dog's shaggy head turns towards me, emerging from the blackness of the tarmac. The headlights reveal an expression filled with shock and fear, bloodshot eyes. My chest rams against the steering wheel, arms and hands held stiff as I attempt to steady the weight of the spinning automobile; the left wheel drives over the pelted mass – a volt of violet goes through my body – I cannot stop. There are no resting areas on this rural two-lane road, only the dried marshland and my brother's calm voice telling me to breathe.=

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Xinantécatl

We decided to climb the volcano a week after the winter solstice. My brother Luis leads the way. Marisol, my younger brother Roberto, and I follow.

Twin lagoons, named after the moon and the sun, sit at the top of the snow-capped volcano.

I read in an article that ancient artefacts were found deep in these steel-blue waters. Wearing sub-zero dry suits, archaeologists plunged through nine levels of frigid hell to reach the bottom of the caldera. The group emerged hours later. Their heads, torsos, and arms doubled in the mirrored waters: legless monsters carrying wooden sceptres,

fossilised copal, maguey spines, and obsidian knives. These objects were once carried up the mountain as part of a ritual voyage and the blades used to lacerate the body.

Maguey agave, however, is foreign to this high-altitude landscape. Little grows four thousand meters above sea level, except Rosa de las Nieves and Hartwegii pines. We see a rose specimen in the frozen grasslands above the tree line. The flower is neither white nor supple. Instead of petals, pale green serrated rays in concentric circles run around a lavender-blue anther. I crouch down to inspect the specimen. My hand stretches towards the stem to grab it, but a saw-toothed leaf tears through my skin, causing red beads to form on my finger and drip onto the snow.

We continue walking until we reach the volcanic rim. We scramble down, crawling on all fours over crags and six-foot boulders. Tension throbs below the plaster on my wounded finger. We are all finding it hard to breathe. The predatory convoy that was stalking us has caught up. A trail of blood led them our way. Marisol panics! Fear shoots from heart to lungs – her chest rising and falling, eyes following the policeman’s hands as he strokes the machine gun that hangs from his shoulder.

The pale skin of my brother’s wrist cuts through the darkness. His outreached hand holds onto a thousand peso offering. The police take the money. They then open the door to their truck’s trunk and drive us away.

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Cuauhtémoc

A friend walks me home in the thickness of winter. The moon is there in front of us. A large yellow moon that fills our eyes and stretches and darkens the lampposts’ shadows in equal measure

Inside the apartment, I go towards the windows to pull down the blinds. A furry grey head emerges behind my reflection. Its sable eyes glare at me. The lights of passing cars strobe over its prone, barely visible face, pupils flickering with the fluorescent sparkle off the street lights outside.

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Tepalcingo

I swing my body forward, catapulting my right arm into the air, and strike the copal tree. My two hands grasp firmly onto the plastic handle, slashing through white and brown bark as I attempt to dislodge the machete. I can feel my heart palpitating, my pupils becoming wider, rounder, open to the vision of my hand’s engorged veins, the static tension in my fingers, the blade riding up and down over the moss-covered surface as it further penetrates the tree.

The movement comes to a sudden stop. I inhale and let go.

The timber is green and filled with sap.

It clings to the machete. A couple of forceful movements create several new incisions: fifty-millimetre lacerations that fan around the initial cut like a sheaf. I pull on the knife and drop it onto the ground. I then reach the wound and dig my fingernails into the moist pulp, pulling its rough outer skin. What remains of the mottled bark is scraped away, spurred by the mute thrill of peeling each layer off in ever larger sheets.

My left hand stretches into the canopy above as if searching for something; five fingers find a frond from an oak branch that hangs overhead and tear off one of its delicate leaves. I bring the leaf to the centre of my chest and lodge it inside the fresh slit.

Pain seeps from the lesion. White honey drips onto the foliage below. A soft breeze blows through, followed by the voice of rustling leaves. “Go!”, they say, *“Gather the sap with a maguey’s limb. Pour it into a mixture of wood chips and ash and allow it to dry. Set it alight. Burn it until all that remains is smoke.”*

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Chicomóztoc

We start in the desert, snaking through a forest of stones and garambulla cacti, driving up the Sierra Gorda in search of Coahuacatépec, the curved mountain. Fog blankets the range crest, its peaks stretching towards the sky as the asphalt winds up a cliff lined with conifers and mist. Clouds come down to meet us, condensing into dew before descending into the jungle.

The following morning, we travel down to a village above a cave. We leave the car at a large metal gate that guards the entrance to the path. An elderly lady asks us to wait for her son and a group of gringo tourists. Together, we hike down a treacherous footpath, rambling between dry tepehuaje, jopoy and palo de arco, hands holding onto the skeleton of once corpulent ceibas. Leopard orchids hide from the scorching midday sun by hanging beneath bare branches. Mossy silver and green bromeliads with purple flowers soften this ragged, leafless landscape.

We arrive at a dormant river bed. Giant boulders tower over the bone-dry sand, forming a natural staircase. Cool, moist air pours down the cave’s mouth. Stalactite and stalagmite fangs line the roof and floor. The guide leads us over its lips and into the dark and slippery insides.

As the vault opens, our guide directs us toward an opening covered with chirping black velvet and stinking of guano. I climb in on all fours, my spine taking the form of a small cavern as the igneous matrix wraps around my curled body. The space darkens and closes in: each gram of rocky earth holding up the mountain hugs my neck, back and bare arms.

Light breaks through a slit in the bedrock. My hands extend forward as I flatten my body and crawl towards it with both arms and legs. I emerge

covered in mud from brow to waist.

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Xaxalpa

The shovel cuts the ground and draws a curved line. It is early morning and the lunar shape is barely visible amongst a potpourri of fallen leaves, ashes, and pieces of bramble. A machete and a recent fire have left their mark on the partially eroded forest floor – whitish grey against shades of brown. I press my foot over the top of the blade, lean onto the shaft, and use my body as a counterweight. The edge of the shovel pries the land open. A dash of silver emerges from the darkness, followed by a heavy mound of soil covering the metal plane. I lift it out. Drop its contents. And repeat the gesture. Iron chopping through grassroots as I dig a fifty-by-fifty centimetre pit.

I get down on my knees, fold forward, and reach into the orifice. My hands sink into the earth as I take hold of two brown clumps. Like a child playing, I squeeze the stiff balls of clay between my palms and thumbs, ramming the remaining fingers into their moist centre. What once appeared to be stone yields to the pressure; particles of sand and organic material sift through my fingers.

A plant pot with a young oak sits next to me. Two winters ago, I picked up a handful of acorns from the dwindling old-growth forest surrounding my mother's home. I wrapped the nuts between damp sheets of kitchen cloth and left them to

germinate under the sink. The seedlings bore a whitish tail; they grew into supple green twigs.

I turn towards one of the saplings. Ten fingers clasp onto opposite sides of the cardboard pot, the left hand softly pressing on the flimsy surface as the right receives the baby tree. I place the oak inside the hole, arms sweeping dirt inwards, hands cradling it. Pain prickles my right middle finger – a blackberry thorn is stuck onto its dry skin. I pull it out and purse my lips around the sore, the sensation of sand on my tongue masking the sting.

I run a hand over my forehead, drawing on it an arch of blood and sweat. I walk to my mother's house and wash my face. I find an empty paint tub and fill it with water. My arms wrap around the plastic receptacle: I am one with the bucket. In the midday heat, each cumbersome step between saplings and faucet is a dedicated struggle; each droplet is a precious jewel. Water vapour rises from the mud as the sun claims the soils moisture. It is then I realise I must repeat this ritual at the end of the day.