

Presente

I.

“Beginning in early March, migrants reach the tip of the peninsula and if the weather conditions are favorable, just after sunset, migrants leave Mexico and head north across the Gulf of Mexico. The trip across the Gulf is 600 miles and with good weather takes about 18 hours. Arriving on the Texas coast midday, some of these birds stop on the coast; but most will fly inland until nightfall.”- Houston Audubon¹

In 1993, an eight-year-old girl stood beside her two younger sisters in a small Salvadoran village and listened as their mother explained the journey she would take north to look for work in the US alongside their father: “I’m leaving, girls. Just long enough to get running water for my mother’s house. Just for three years, in three years, I’ll come back.”

“We always waited for her,” the daughter would recall across the eight years of separation that followed. “And she never came back.”

Now a grown woman, she sits beside me on a park bench in Texas and considers what her mother’s migration meant to her as a child: “We never believed that she was telling us the truth. We thought it was that she didn’t want to come. We thought that coming here was like in El Salvador, when I would go to the capital and come back home the next day. I never imagined how far it was.”²

II.

“Many species of birds, called neotropical migrants, nest in North America and spend the winter in Latin America. Twice each year these birds migrate the long distances between wintering grounds and spring nesting locations.” - Houston Audubon³

An older woman from Mexico sits on a sofa in a modest Houston suburb and explains about the back and forth.

First, her husband went north...

“I was alone. He would send me money if the kids wanted shoes. If they needed clothes, he would send me money. To eat, he would send money.”

Then, she followed...

“I left my five kids in Mexico with my mother. The youngest was two and a half. It’s hard, because when you leave kids behind, you’re over here living well and they’re over there... They were fine. They ate well because we sent money. From the moment we started working, we always sent them money.”

In time, she returned south...

“I breastfed my baby,” an unplanned sixth child whose needs competed with her work as a live-in housecleaner. “When he was little, I would feed him and then leave him in the room to go to work. Every time I fed him, he would wail and cry. It was so heartbreaking. One time, I peeked in and found

him asleep on the floor. He'd climbed out of the crib and fallen. I told my husband, 'He's not suffering for a lack of diapers, he's not suffering for food, but he's suffering for the best in life. I'm going home.'"

In the end, the family lived a perpetual back and forth – in America, a modest suburb; back home, the *rancho*...

"We call it a *rancho*," she explains, "because it's small, a little village of about twelve houses. But not all of them *lived in*, lived in. The people who manage over there, it's because of the ones who are here, because the ones who are here send them money to build the houses."

Back and forth, houses and marriage beds empty and fill as migrants leave and return and leave again.

III.

"Defined as those bird species that cross the Gulf of Mexico from the Yucatan Peninsula to the U. S. Gulf Coast (Texas to Florida). Trans-Gulf migration is characteristic of [certain] species, but does not exclude the possibility of some circum-Gulf passage either. Bird migration is not black or white. In the biological world there are rules, but there are always exceptions." - Texas Parks and Wildlife⁴

In the exceptions to these migratory rules, certain losses are sustained along the way.

At Mexico's southern border, seven out of ten Central American women who cross into the country on their way north is sexually assaulted.⁵

In Mexico in 2010, over 11,000 of these migrants were disappeared one six-month period.⁶

At the country's northern border – a line that spills neatly into the gentle curve of the Gulf – over 310 migrants were massacred from 2010 to 2012.⁷

On the other side, the US border patrol tallies the human remains of migrants killed in the crossing: 9,225 in less twenty-five years.⁸

In US detention centers dispersed along the 1,900-mile border, 4,368 children were forcibly separated from their parents from 2017 to 2020.⁹ As of this date, at least 1,000 still wait to be reunited.¹⁰

On April 7th of this year, an official funeral procession began a 2,100 mile journey from the US-Mexico border south to El Salvador. The caravan carried seven bodies – a fraction of the men who died ten days earlier inside a locked cell in a migrant detention center in Ciudad Juárez. Forty were killed in all, left to suffocate in an uncontrolled fire by guards who would not unlock the steel doors.¹¹ As migrants, they were tossed to the flames. As cadavers, they made their final pilgrimage in the company of an official armed escort with a guarantee of arrival within three days.

Among those who died: Manuel Chox Tambriz, Francisco Chiquival,¹² Carlos Alberto Pacheco,¹³ Nando Maldonado Pérez.¹⁴

IV.

There is a kind of embodied art practiced in Latin American cultures of resistance to state-sponsored violence. Where protesters gather, the names of the disappeared are called out one by one, to which the crowd responds, *¡presente!*¹⁵

In this ritual summoning, the silences that slip between each call and response hold the presence of every absence – a mother’s goodbye, a husband’s empty place at the table, remains in the desert, a *rancho* populated by empty houses and the ghosts of those gone north.

For every call, a response. For every absence, a summoned presence.

“On any given night in the spring and fall, hundreds of thousands—and at times millions—of birds migrate across North America. From large herons to warblers to vireos, sparrows, and other smaller species, blankets of birds flow across the continent. While it’s a largely unseen migration, it’s not a silent one.”—Audubon¹⁶

Elizabeth Cummins Muñoz
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¹ [“Spring Coastal Migration and Fallouts,” Houston Audubon.](#)

² Elizabeth Cummins Muñoz, *Mothercoin: The Stories of Immigrant Nannies*, Beacon Press, 2022.

³ [“Spring Coastal Migration and Fallouts,” Houston Audubon.](#)

⁴ [“Trans-Gulf Migrants,” Texas Parks and Wildlife.](#)

⁵ Paola Iliana de la Rosa Rodríguez and Lahys Sandy Antony Maia, [“Migrantes centroamericanos en México: entre la violencia y los abusos de las políticas de control fronterizo en Estados Unidos,” Revista Brasileira de Sociología](#), vol. 8, núm. 19, pp. 59-79, 2020.

⁶ Ana Srovin Coralli, [“Mexico’s Search for Disappeared Migrants has Evolved, but Challenges Remain,” Migration Policy Institute](#), 20 May 2021.

⁷ [“Mexico’s Search for Disappeared Migrants”](#)

⁸ Adam Isacson, [“Weekly U.S.-Mexico Border Update: Migrant deaths, buses from Texas, smugglers and social media,” WOLA Advocacy for Human Rights in the Americas](#), 29 July 2022.

⁹ [“Family Separation – A Timeline,” The Southern Poverty Law Center](#), 23 March 2022.

¹⁰ Geoff Bennett, Saher Khan, and Kyle Midura, [“Hundreds of migrant children remain separated from families despite push to reunite them,” PBS News Hour](#), 6 February 2023.

¹¹ [“Llegan a El Salvador Restos de 7 Migrantes Muertos en Incendio en Ciudad Juárez” N+](#), 9 April 2023.

¹² Evelyn Boche Ventura, [“Llegan a Guatemala los cuerpos de 17 migrantes fallecidos en el incendio de Ciudad Juárez,” El País](#), 12 April 2023.

¹³ [“Llegan a El Salvador”](#)

¹⁴ [“‘No one deserves to die that way’: Family awaits loved one’s remains after Juárez fire,” El Paso Matters](#), 2 April 2023.

¹⁵ Diana Taylor, *iPresente!: The Politics of Presence*, Duke University Press, 2020.

¹⁶ T. Edward Nickens, [“Listening to Migrating Birds at Night May Help Ensure Their Safety,” Audubon](#), Sep.-Oct. 2013.