

THE CONQUERED SITS AT
THE BUS STOP, WAITING

VERONICA
MONTES

STORIES



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Executive Editor: Diane Goettel

Chapbook Editor: Kit Frick

Book and Cover Design: Amy Freels

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The Conquered Sits at the Bus Stop, Waiting

She chooses a red stone, places it on the center of her tongue, sucks gently. Her toes are covered in dust. She was young once, tender-skinned and lush, the whole of her like a forest. The men came one after another, circumnavigating the expanse of her body, licking its contours, extracting gold. Her hair sprung from her head like coils, but all that remains now are tight whorls of black set like punctuation marks along her scalp. When you call out, she will cover her eyes as if you are made of sunlight.

The Sound of Her Voice

It happens when she speaks. Her husband's face disassembles itself, and the pieces do not slide back into their proper slots until she stops making sounds. Sometimes she forgets and a single word escapes her—a word like *no* or *when*—and her husband's left eye migrates to the right side of his forehead for a moment. She cannot bear to see him out of sorts in this way.

It's her fault. Her side of the conversation was always filled with pauses because she could never seem to find the right words, and so she would backtrack and come at it in a different way, a way she felt might be better, or might better express, maybe, the point she was trying to make. Her husband once mentioned that he didn't like this, that her tendency to speak in spirals was maddening. *You're driving me fucking nuts*, he said.

She makes use of gestures now. There is a whole language, after all, that incorporates fingerspelling and body motion. She's consulted a website that claims this language can improve relationships. Also—did you know this?—gestures are an effective way to speak with babies who don't yet vocalize. She keeps this in mind for the future.

Maybe she'll take a class in this language. For now, though, she wings it (*holds arms out to the side, tilts body to the left, then the right*). Near dinnertime she raises both hands, fingers spread, so that her husband knows

his meal will be ready in ten minutes. Later, when he's settled onto the couch to watch television, she cups her hand around her ear to ask if he'd like the volume turned up. Sometimes a raised eyebrow is enough to telegraph her message, and she's found that there are many different ways to nod even though they all mean *yes*. He seems grateful for this silence; he sighs as if content.

In bed tonight she places her cheek over her husband's heart to indicate that she'd welcome intimacy. She's surprised to find that his heart-beat feels like a tiny punch, punch, punch against her face. It makes her laugh (to herself). Afterward there is a rustling outside the window, and she knows that it's the two deer who come to feed off the apple tree at midnight.

Can you hear— she begins.

He strokes her hair. He places his hand over her mouth. *Shhhhh*, he says. *Shhhhh*.



Photo: Martin Delfino

Veronica Montes was born in San Francisco and raised in the Filipino American enclave of Daly City, California. Her short stories have appeared in print journals such as *Bamboo Ridge* and *Prism International*, as well as in many anthologies including *Contemporary Fiction by Filipinos in America*, *Growing Up Filipino*, and *Going Home to a Landscape: Writings by Filipinas*. Her flash fiction appears online in various journals including *Wigleaf*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Cheap Pop*, and *Lost Balloon*, among others. She is the author of *Benedicta Takes Wing & Other Stories* (Philippine American Literary House, 2018).