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“Portrait of My Mother Studying for Her Citizenship Exam,” a Poem by Eduardo Martínez-Leyva

From the Collection “Cowboy Park”

By Eduardo Martínez-Leyva

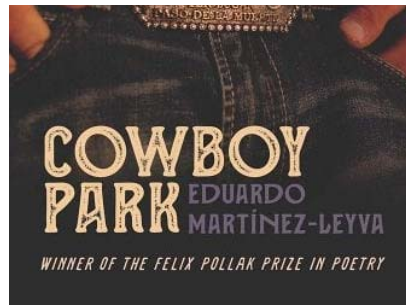
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"Portrait of My Mother Studying for Her Citizenship Exam"

She sits on the corner of her bed, head tilted to one side. Licks the tip of her thumb and flips through the thick booklet, trying to remember where we left off. Two weeks ago, the mint-colored Bronco parked in the neighbor's driveway. The youngest one left in handcuffs and they haven't heard from her since. My mother sighs, "Pobre de México, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos." I am ten. And so far away from God, I feel. Angelo and I take turns teaching her, tracking English like dirt into our home. The only savior they tell us we need. If only it could be that simple and true. To build her a life out of mud and syllables, of saliva, colonies, and state capitals, treaties and phrases coined during a long-ago war, written in a textbook—pretty cursive. *Give me liberty or give me death*, she repeats. Even the birds' names she has to learn. And after all those evenings, rehearsing and memorizing the mythology of it, no one could prepare her for the early morning raid, the strip searches at the border, the child who gets deported. If you ask me, it's hard to believe in God, especially when years later she's still forced to dodge slurs and bullets from a white man who aims a gun at her in the supermarket. *Give me liberty or give me death*. But for now, she'll settle at the corner of her bed, skimming through lines and sentences, narrowing her eyes as her fingers move to the following page, mouthing out words, unfolding a wrinkled map she smooths open with her hands, pausing before using her index finger to trace the dotted lines. She pores over these texts for hours and hours. Focused. Determined. Always pensive and gentle. Careful but intentional, like when combing for ticks on the head of her firstborn son.





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Eduardo Martínez-Leyva



Eduardo Martínez-Leyva is the author of *Cowboy Park*. He was born in El Paso, Texas, to Mexican immigrants. His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Boston Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Frontier Poetry*, *The Hopkins Review*, *Best New Poets*, and elsewhere. He has received fellowships from CantoMundo, the Frost Place, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, and the Lambda Literary Foundation, along with a teaching fellowship from Columbia University, where he earned his MFA. He was the writer-in-residence at St. Alban's School for Boys in Washington, DC, and teaches and resides in New York City.



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