ESSAY

On Nativity

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According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was born while his parents were traveling to Bethlehem to register, as required by law, with the census. Fast forward 2,010 Decembers—giving or taking a few for the ecclesiastical debate and/or shoddy recordkeeping around the dawn of the common era—to the advent of my own son's nativity. He wasn't born in a Bethlehem barn beneath a great star but in Michoacán's Star Médica hospital overlooking a bullring.

19.7°:101.2°; 20:23 hours; *masculino*; 2 kilos, 250; Apgar 9. The data of birth is quantifiable; a baby is weight, gender, and geography.

Too soon, I knew, he'd be more data. Too soon, we'd have to begin the process of certifying his identity, of classifying and designating and documenting a being who still felt like an extension of my body, our umbilical joining a residual cord, a phantom itch, a short in my circulatory wiring. But in those dim, reverential days and nights after his birth, my son did not exist anywhere but in my arms; he was nothing but sweet breath and drying flesh, his tiny fingers and toes printed with patterns unfiled anywhere. He had no name or nationality. Not on paper anyway. Not in Mexico, where the birth certificate would not be processed by the hospital, but by a public registry, which was of course closed for the holidays: *el día del Virgen de Guadalupe*, *la navidad* (*y*, for the bicultural kids, *el día de Santa*), and Three Kings' Day. My child belonged to nobody but us, his family, to me and his father and his one older brother.

And I didn't want to share my body's claim of him with any body politic: not any country-'tis-of-thee or *viva México*, not any notion of nation or state.

Country, as I wanted to see it, was a myth wrapped in a flag: a few blocks of synthetic color stitched together to symbolize the product of some great, invisible political jigsaw, a story reduced to star-spangles and stripes, to eagle, serpent, and prickly pear, to hammer and sickle, to crescent, to red sun. Country was lines on paper, a solid wall across shifting sand. I want to say country as identity wasn't bone-level, that it lacked the ineffable heft of family.

And yet—

And yet, I love my country with an esophageal spasm, an impulse trailing caveats. I see a soldier back from a war I do not "believe" in, and I go weak at knee and duct.

And yet, I love my country the shredding way I love the members of my family. During our turbulent teens, my sister threw shoes at my head and shrieked in public places how she wished I would cease to breathe air, but in spite of her trigger-ready dossier of evidence to the contrary, that same sister believes I am more exceptional than other people. I have been around enough to know that I am *not* more exceptional than other people, but I happened to be born on the side of a line that allows me to cross lines and still come home again.

And yet, for all I love the abstraction that is my own designated country, I also love the abstraction that is Mexico.

Native: natural state, what is inherent or born into us, produced by birth, indigenous, related to origin.

Nation: a distinct people, a tribe, or, literally, that which has been born; also, a political state.

In terms of place, of landscape and rootedness, of *terroir*, as the French say of the earth from which their wine grapes grow, the United States is where I originated. Or, to use that archaic phrase people refuse to let die, I was born on "American soil." And I am American by the fact of my birth, the steeping of my childhood (blue clay and tannins of maple leaves), and the trace of my ancestry. But what does it matter that the blood from which I descend has for centuries drained and decayed into ground bounded by the borders of this so-called country—since the Mayflower, since Roanoke, since (according to the more zealous genealogists in my family) the Bering Crossing? What of it? What has stilled blood to do with anything? What has time? What has dirt?

If ancestry determines our place in the world, then what about my immigrant ancestors? Shouldn't I feel drawn to my paternal great-grandfather's dairy farm in Switzerland? I have been there, and while the heavy smell of the milking barns reminded me powerfully of the days when my father kept dairy cattle, it mostly felt like being in a barn in Switzerland, nothing more. Nor did the requisite high school Gettysburg trip make me feel nostalgia for the Confederacy that members of my mother's family line led to defeat. I am not drawn by anything more than curiosity to the unremembered hamlet in England that allegedly persecuted my Puritanical forefathers, nor to that ancient savannah where my *Homo sapiens* progenitors grunted and rubbed sticks, nor to our Great-Grandparents' lost Garden, nor to the primordial swamp from which crawled the First Fish.

To me, disparity determined by birthplace seems both archaic and unjust, like modified serfdom, like segregated drinking fountains. That I can expect to be allowed to speak (if not be heard), that I can expect due process and presumed innocence, and—perhaps most of all—that I can expect to move freely, whenever and wherever I want, that I have so-called freedom because of where I was born while others are bound by their borders, suggests to me a disconnect.

Granted, it isn't so simple. While I am not physically constrained or contained by my borders, my Americanness is not clothing or even sheddable skin: it is apparent in the shape of my walk, the way of my teeth, the tint of the eyes through which I see.

Still, a large part of the reason I left my "motherland," became an expatriate, was simply to find out what it meant to be what I couldn't un-be.

And yet, at night I sing songs to my babies:

O beautiful, for spacious skies . . .
From California to the New York island . . .
Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord . . .

The first day we emerged from our home with the baby was *el día de los Santos Reyes*, the Feast of the Epiphany. We went to see three magi parade in blackface along the pink stone aqueduct. Between the bearers of what was meant to be frankincense came floats bedecked with life-sized elephants sculpted out of vine and Spanish moss. After the *desfile*, our first-born son

(who came to light "on the other side") toddled off with all the other children to release his wishes on the string of a purple balloon. The adult crowd, however, was more interested in my baby, who at two weeks was, by Mexican child-rearing standards, too small to be without walls around him, his wrinkled newborn face exposed to the open air. In spite of his inept parent, however, everyone wanted a peek. And more than a few strangers smiled with evident pride to know that this American's child had been born in *their* country. Their claim on him, whispered down the parade route, *es un güerito mexicano*, was the first fissure in my solitary claim of him.

In mid-January, public offices reopened in Mexico. Because it had to be done, my husband and I set out to start our new son's paper trail, to register the record and proof of him; we set out to get him documents, as in "your papers please," as in the sort that make one "documented," as in the sort that would make my Mexican-born son truly Mexican, and then American also. A flammable, disintegrates-in-water piece of paper on one hand, on the other, a first-class ticket, a certificate of pedigree, a club membership card, a get-out-of-jail free star on the belly of a Sneetch that even my toddler knew was silly.

19.7°:101.2°-20:23 hours-masculino-2 kilos, 250-Apgar 9 was about to become official: a named person, with named parents, and date and place of birth. Or so I expected. But bureaucracy is a lugubrious beast, slow and stubborn and inclined to speak in riddles, so there was a lot of time to think about what all of this officiating meant.

I thought, for example, of who I was on paper: Female. 33 years old. U.S. citizen. Licensed driver. Licensed fisherwoman. Licensed teacher. Valid passport holder. Organ donor. Registered voter in the state of New Mexico. High school, college, and graduate degree holder. Homeowner. Wife to Steven. Mother to Avery. Nonimmigrant resident of Mexico. In my particular experience, given my particular documents, papers have served to entitle and empower me, but the true purpose of licenses and certificates and visas, of course, is to categorize, to sort and order, to limit and exclude, to demarcate us versus other. Your documents please: slave, Jüd, resident alien, illegal.

In the Registro Civil in Michoacán's capital city, Morelia, my husband and I sat on wooden benches against the wall of an open-air courtyard and waited to meet the judge who would grant our son an *Acto de Nacimiento*, or legal birth certificate. Between us, on the stone floor, our swaddled baby

slept in his car-seat bassinet. And beside us were two friends I'll call Ana and Eric, who were there to serve as witnesses to the proceedings.

Spending a day waiting for a piece of paper was nothing new to our friends, or to most young people in high migration states like Michoacán. Perhaps more than most places, in Mexico, one's triangulated relationship to the U.S./Mexico border is also part of one's identity: I live at point X, my family lives at point Y, and our relationship to the border is Z. Resident alien. Green card holder. Illegal. Citizen. Temporary worker. Deported.

As a conspicuous American in Mexico, and not just one of the many U.S. citizens who were also Mexican, either officially or by association, living in a city where few tourists visited—to date this was the worst year of the drug war—I was a repository for limbo stories. The amputee who shined shoes in Las Tarascas Park, for example, had lived in Phoenix during the 1970s. He'd had a family there, traveled all over the West, divorced, and then remarried. But when he lost his leg, he and his new wife moved to Morelia to be close to her family. He'd since divorced the second wife and was making plans to go back to the United States to meet his grandchildren. One "pirate"—a taxi driver who wasn't eligible to join the official organization of *taxistas* because he wasn't "from here"—relayed that he'd been deported from the United States a month earlier. His wife and young children were all U.S. citizens; they lived in California.

My children are in Colorado.

My father works in Tennessee.

I have a girlfriend back in Georgia; she has blue eyes like yours.

As for Eric and Ana, they were from Chicago. He'd grown up there, they'd met and married there, and she'd given birth to their daughter there. But his documents had lapsed or expired and, although Ana and their American daughter were eligible to stay, they'd all moved back to Mexico to sort out Eric's status. For two years they'd waited, scraping together teaching jobs and assembling a new visa application.

In the pidgin Spanglish that was our linguistic middle ground, Ana and I commiserated about labor and delivery with an OB whose words—in the throes of giving light—we couldn't understand. We laughed, out of habit more than humor, about the fact that her American daughter was not yet a legal citizen of Mexico but had long overstayed her visa.

But Eric, who was homesick and happy to speak American English, didn't laugh when he told us his hopes to open a kennel for boarding and training dogs. Nor did Ana when she said she'd like to have a second child but couldn't risk having one in Mexico.

"We would never get home again," she said.

Then all five of us were summoned. When we entered her office, the judge admired my baby, then ribbed Eric, whose Chicago-ness was not lost on her, when she saw that his identity card was expired. He hadn't noticed. Ana rolled her eyes.

After the three of us had had our identities verified (or not, in Eric's case—a secretary stepped in to fill his place), we each swore and signed according to instruction from the judge.

Now the baby had a verifiable identity too, a name on paper: Winslow, after a character in the Carlos Fuentes novel *Gringo Viejo*.

This naming happened without fanfare, and after that we went back to the courtyard to wait some more. After a lull, Eric told us about crossing the border into the States and being made to feel like a criminal.

"I'm not a drug dealer. Just look at my record, it is clean," Eric had told Border Patrol when he was pulled out of line entering the United States.

"Shut up," the agent had snapped at him.

Like most 20-something males who've grown up in a U.S. city, Eric was disinclined to shut up on command.

"I have the right to speak," he said.

"You have no rights here," the agent shouted at him.

Eric hadn't backed down.

"Maybe not as a U.S. citizen, but I am a person. I have rights as a human being."

Again, Ana rolled her eyes. While Eric butted heads with U.S. Border Patrol, she'd had to wait for several uncertain hours on the other side, staying where she was only because she didn't know which direction she ought to go if she went.

Now we joked about this too: if he didn't have a paper proving he was human, how would anyone know?

I laughed wryly with the others. But I knew one thing: No matter how many lines I'd have to wait in or cross or sign my name upon, I'd flex all the

political muscle I possessed to ensure that my children's humanness would be beyond question.

I just didn't expect there to be so many. I didn't expect— exceptional as I was accustomed to feeling—to doubt my eventual success being anything but inevitable.

To be naturalized as an American citizen if you are a Mexican over 18, you must be a permanent resident of the United States for a period of several years and have been physically present for a prescribed portion of that (the number depends upon your marital status or military or ministerial service) without leaving the country for periods over six months. You must be able to prove your good moral character (i.e., you are neither a polygamist nor a terrorist, nor have you lied on your immigration application). Unless you are over 50 and have lived in the United States for periods totaling at least 20 years, you must be able to demonstrate an understanding of the English language (although two facts you might be called upon to know in order to demonstrate your civic knowledge of the United States include these: that a large swath of the United States was colonized not by England but Spain, and that places like New Mexico and Puerto Rico use Spanish as an official language). Finally, you must take an oath renouncing all other allegiances, pledging to support and defend the Constitution and, when required by law, serve the United States.

To be recognized as a "natural born" U.S. citizen if you were born in Mexico, you need a Consular Report of a Birth Abroad, or a CRBA, which is a document equivalent to a birth certificate. For this, we would need—as my Fulbright Scholar husband had plied his lauded research skills to finding out—the *acto de nacimiento* we had successfully obtained from the Registro Civil, proof of parental citizenship, and evidence of the pregnancy (ultrasounds and medical records). We would need an appointment at a U.S. consulate in order to submit these proofs (in multiple copies), which would be considered for approval at some later date and then the document could be issued. Once we had obtained a CRBA, we could apply for a U.S. passport. With a U.S. passport, we could take our baby home to the United States with us, either at the end of our employment in Mexico, or sooner, if the war—which had twice that fall blockaded Morelia with "a ring of fire" made of burning trucks across every road into the city—should escalate further.

My husband made his first attempt to schedule a CRBA application appointment the same night that we received our child's birth certificate. But the consulate in Guadalajara, one state away, informed him that CRBA applications were currently on hiatus while the United States was revamping the CRBA issuance process. Once the new-and-improved system was implemented, new births abroad would not be certified by the consulates that reported them but by two passport agencies in the United States. These new CRBAs would include "a variety of state-of-the-art security features to help prevent fraud and identity theft." In the meantime, little "automatic" U.S. citizens born abroad would have to suck their little toes and wait.

One can interpret my fury at this in two ways: (1) I took my rights as a U.S. citizen very seriously; or (2) I was unaccustomed to being among those who are told no when it comes to my entitlements. My child, born to parents who were citizens of no other countries than the United States, who were in Mexico with Fulbright, a U.S./Mexico diplomatic program, was supposed to be an automatic U.S. citizen. Like Barack Obama. Like John McCain. Like George W. Romney.

Whatever I felt for Mexico or wanted for my Mexican friends aside, whatever ambivalence I'd imagined I had toward this whole documenting ordeal, I now wanted my kid's CRBA and I wanted it right then. Mexico's war hadn't scared me, but part of the reason it hadn't was that I knew I could be at an international airport in 30 minutes if it came to that. I didn't like that other people couldn't do the same, I wished for them everything I had, but I wasn't going to surrender my privileges without a fight. Because one thing was certain: one can't show up at an airport, say "this child is a U.S. citizen," and expect to board that plane.

January idled on. In the United States, it had come to light that 90 percent of the weapons seized in relation to the drug war (that had by then claimed over 30,000 lives in Mexico) had been sold in the United States. But the "iron river" would not be slowed on the NRA's watch: the gun lobby was impeding a law that would require gun dealers in border states to report purchases of multiple assault rifles to authorities. In Ciudad Juárez, gunmen opened fire during a soccer game. In Washington, D.C., the Supreme Court rejected the appeal of a case I'd been following about a U.S.-born baby deported from the United States to Mexico, away from her U.S.-born, -raised, -resident mother,

having ruled in favor of the discretionary powers of the U.S. Border Patrol over the rights of the mother and child as U.S. citizens. In Tamaulipas, Zeta country, an American missionary was shot in a highway ambush and her husband stormed his bullet-riddled truck across the border in the southbound lane: the Texas governor's office blamed the incident on weak border control. In Michoacán, the local criminal organization was declared routed, and two new ones sprung up in its place, jockeying for status and territory.

By January's end, the CRBAs were still on hold indefinitely.

Now, even my usually placid husband got his hackles up. He sent e-mails and left messages and wound through labyrinthine phone systems rife with dead ends until he hooked a human on the line. That human, a U.S. citizens' services representative, told him blandly that they hoped to begin scheduling appointments for applications for CRBAs "sometime next month."

My husband was ready with the question: what did the consulate recommend we do in the case of an emergency?

But the human citizens' services representative wasn't going to take a name or send a fact sheet or even answer the question. She stayed on script: for that information we were to submit our query via e-mail to an info address.

My husband hung up the phone and called our U.S. congressman.

Just as living abroad for many years had made me a receptacle for immigrant stories, as an expat I had accumulated stories about U.S. embassies going to extraordinary lengths to fish U.S. citizens out of trouble. I had made it a matter of pride never to need fishing, but I believed my superpower would come through for me, caped in a flag. And yes, I felt privileged. And yes, I felt entitled.

But my fantasy was being frayed in Mexico. This began when I didn't get to attend the Fulbright meet-and-greet with the U.S. ambassador. The invitation, gold embossed on linen paper, actually came enclosed with a protocol letter stipulating that children were not permitted at the residence for security reasons. What, I wondered, did that mean? That the United States could not secure the ambassador's residence sufficiently for kids to be safe there? Or, more disconcerting still, did it mean that my American child was himself seen as a security risk? (I know plenty out there are happy to classify a toddler as a terrorist, but I hadn't known it was politically correct for U.S. govern-

ment officials to imply as much.) Instead of putting on the dress I'd brought for the occasion, I served a crowd of Fulbright offspring room-service pizza and we all watched *Cars* and no acts of terrorism were committed there or at the residence.

Now my confidence in my country's willingness to protect its too-young-to-vote citizens took another plunge: the answer to our e-mailed query, when it eventually came, was yet another e-mail address. It was not a name or a phone number.

"If you have an emergency or life-or-death situation," came this latest scripted response. "Please send us an email with your request . . . "

I am sure the time will come when e-mailing in the case of emergency is normal, but I wasn't satisfied. Where, I wondered, was that superpower cape? Was my country of self-evident truths, my country of immigrants, working so hard at ramping up its capacity to keep people out that it was keeping *me* out?

Weeks ticked by. The baby grew, the weather warmed, and we all went to see the monarch butterfly colonies that migrate to Michoacán each winter, fluttering more than a thousand miles to mate in the same stand of fir trees where their ancestors had mated several generations back, the previous winter. In March, the impregnated females would fly back to lay their eggs in Texas.

We joked about this. How humans had fewer rights of movement than butterflies and birds who migrate across borders and back again for the sake of food supplies and reproduction. We joked about butterflies crossing the border to give birth to anchor bugs.

We also joked about coyotes. Not the animals, although they too cross the border without harassment, but the *coyote* who gets you across the river, over the desert, to the United States. Our Mexican friends, who were more than a little gratified to watch us endure a miniature version of what they or their friends had been through, thought the *coyote* joke was pretty funny.

I wrote about it on my blog:

Should we smuggle him in our suitcase? Hire a *coyote*? Leave him in Morelia with his 14-year-old babysitter? Was it lawful to try to take him—an unrecognized U.S. citizen—with us? Or would we be committing human trafficking? Should I get a Mexican passport for him and get in the line for a tourist's visa to the United States?

Oh, no, that would never work, I snarked into the blogosphere; the United States would *never* grant a visa to a guy like him: an unemployed young Mexican male with insufficient ties to his birth country and more than a few reasons he might want to stay in the United States indefinitely.

It was the worst side of me, this fantasy of entitlement. But I clung to it. If it wasn't real—if the problem wasn't that Mexican families weren't empowered the way that I was as a U.S. citizen, but that in fact American families didn't have agency either over where we might choose to be—then, while the world was perhaps more fair, it was worse off than I'd imagined.

In one of those wonderful connection moments made possible by the Internet, another blogger answered my question.

"Here is the solution to your immediate dilemma," wrote Open Salon's political blogger Alan Milner. He then went on to explain how with a notarized statement from my doctor stipulating the details of the birth, paired with a writ of habeas corpus filed in a U.S. border state or in federal court, I could talk my way past Mexican border control and then meet the attorney with the writ on the American side.

"Once you are on American soil, with your child's citizenship in doubt, he automatically comes under the jurisdiction of the Border Patrol, a constabulary agency of the United States Government. As such, they may not refuse to honor a writ of habeas corpus, which is one of the most powerful warrants in our legal system."

This process would get us physically into the United States, but not together: having turned the baby over to the courts, I'd have to appeal to judges to reclaim him on the other side.

Of course, writs of habeas whatnot and relinquishing my baby to the custody of U.S. Border Patrol seemed beyond excessive, but the fact of it was that this was the only non-joking answer I ever got to my question of how I could take my undocumented baby into the country of which he technically was born a "natural" citizen.

When the baby was two months old, winter ended and with it the upgrade hiatus to the CRBA process. We didn't mess around with the consulate in Guadalajara but took the baby straight to the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City.

We had made an appointment, but we arrived an hour before the embassy opened in the morning and wandered up the block past it. The building

was a dark concrete structure on Mexico City's otherwise fairly elegant Paseo de la Reforma, lined with jacarandas not yet in bloom, hotels and banks, and racks of red public bicycles, and all of that punctuated by sculptures set in the middle of roundabouts like beads on a strand, nearest the golden Angel of Independence that is the symbol of that megalopolis. The embassy was barricaded, not only the building itself, but also, between the lanes of the city's central avenue, the median was fenced in with chain link fences cutting across the flower gardens, like a pen for an oversized dog.

Early as we were, we weren't the first. A long line was forming along one side of the building. Figuring we'd better get in it, we approached a guard at the access gate nearest this line, and he glanced at our dossier—a fat folder of ultrasounds, medical records, *acto de nacimiento*, passports, nonimmigrant visas, Social Security cards, marriage license, *aposteados*, certified translations of our Mexican documents into English, photocopies of all of this again, and again, and again—and then he sent us around to the front door.

There, the security guards threw away the snacks we had brought for our two-year-old, an odd choice, I thought, since unfed toddlers really can be terrorists (an opinion I already suspected the ambassador subscribed to). They also confiscated the fetal ultrasounds required for our application because DVDs weren't allowed into the building.

On the inside, our appointment was irrelevant. We waited away the day holding a number printed on a slip of paper and being called now and then to approach the Plexiglas windows and speak through the cracks between panes. Page by page, we slid our documents through to agents, sat back down with our deteriorating toddler and infant, then were called up again. It was almost a relief when we finally reached the impasse that, had this been a Mexican office, I would have seen coming. Although we had proved we'd both been born and licensed to drive in the United States, that we had U.S. passports, that we had wed and given birth to a child and were or had been recently enrolled in graduate schools in the United States, and had the identity cards to prove it, we did not have sufficient proof that we met the U.S. residency requirements necessary to pass our citizenship on to our child.

Six hours of restraining a toddler and nursing a baby without eating anything myself, on top of the sleep deprivation inherent to having a three-month-old baby, meant that in fact I was the bomb ready to blow the em-

bassy. But my husband still possessed the ability to formulate polite sentences in Spanish:

Wasn't this, the State Department, the very organization that had run our passport at every entrance and departure from the United States, weren't their own records their best evidence?

Alas, the agent shook her head no, sorry, and started to get that glossed-over look that we knew from experience signaled a denial.

Spring was rung in with a parade of children dressed as animals and carrying balloons. The monarchs made it to Texas. At Easter, I took my children to the parade on Morelia's Calzada, wherein Jesus carried his cross past my son's Montessori school and on to the plaza in front of the university, where we peeled off from the crowd before I risked having to explain the crucifixion and wandered off to the park gone purple with jacarandas.

A few weeks later, my older son celebrated his third *cumpleaños* with a piñata of the Pixar racecar Rayo McQueen from the market, cake and raspberry *gelatinas*, and his friends singing him "Las Mañanitas." Eric and Ana's American-born daughter helped him wipe frosting off his face.

Still, the baby had no U.S. paperwork.

For weeks I waited. The doorbell would ring and I'd put the baby down and run to answer it, knowing that most likely it was Alfredo, our auxiliary policeman, who came by periodically to collect our 20-peso contribution to his force-of-one. More often, he dropped by to ask for a donation to help him through the latest phase of his tragedy. His wife was in the hospital. His wife needed dialysis. His wife had to have her fingers amputated. His wife had died.

I didn't want to know Alfredo's latest chapter, to let in the guilt and sadness. But almost because of Alfredo's sad saga, I had to have that paper that was coming, any day now, hopefully before the impending U.S. government shutdown that would put a halt to all nonessential processes.

So I opened the door and took it in: Alfredo smiling sadly at me, his missing front tooth, asking "*Señora*, how are the children?" I smiled, mumbled something positive about their rate of growth, and intentionally neglected to ask after his family. Once Alfredo had gone away with his 20 pesos, I went back in to my baby, to feed him his mashed avocado while I continued waiting.

And the longer I waited, the less I cared. Now that the terror of having a newborn had started to recede, now that he seemed to have come to us to stay, now that I was starting to feel more at home in Mexico, the urgency of having that piece of paper had quieted in me. Or was I losing my enchantment with my own country because it didn't welcome my children for "security reasons"? Because it didn't see recognizing its citizens as "essential business"? Because it was more concerned with keeping people out than protecting citizens, with exclusion over inclusion or the protection of the family unit? Because it had effectively, by not recognizing my child, cast me out?

What was this identity I was seeking for my child anyway? My child had been born in the land of Hidalgo and Morelos, of Zapata and Villa, in the year that marked the bicentennial of Mexico's War for Independence, and the centennial of the Revolution, and in the midst of yet another Mexican war, but he would never be fully Mexican. Rather, he was the son of history, descendent of conquest, great-grandson of migration, offspring of globalization. He was and would always be a child of here and of elsewhere, of nowhere and everywhere.

No document could sum him up. Nor would any document entitle him so much as it would unentitle others, children who'd been born in other places to other parents all around the planet. The piece of paper would not bestow anything upon him so much as it would take from others. The right to move freely from place to place, to speak, and vote, and think that he could one day, if he chose to dream it, be leader of the "free world."

My husband and I had given him pieces of our DNA, our ancestry, our physical features; we would, when he grew older, tell him those cultural stories that would flesh out his identity further. Mexico would always be the geography of his birth, but his life remained unmapped. My husband and I were nonimmigrant residents in Mexico, we were temporary, partial, honorary members of this place. And place made us too, the way *terroir* shapes the body of a wine. I knew I'd been shaped by all the places I had been, just as I knew where I came from: I knew the smell of the very "American soil" I grew up on, but Mexico was where I then lived my life.

But nationality is not place, it's a body politic, a group of people, a club with a perimeter line. We wanted to give our son our nationality, not only because we believed it would be best for him, for his future, but because it

was where we had come from, because it was part of who we were. I still wanted this precious thing for my child, but the longer I sought it, the less sparkly it looked to me to be.

Again my husband contacted our U.S. congressman, and again that office made diplomatic calls on our behalf. This time, it took.

The courier who arrived two days later never took off his white motorcycle helmet. As I wondered who the alien was in this scenario, the spaceman handed me a manila envelope out of his leather satchel that was so slim it felt empty.

After I had signed for the package and the courier drove away, I went into my house and opened the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of blue paper that had the peculiar, plasticky texture of a new peso bill. At the top, embossed in gold, was not Mexico's eagle with its serpent but the American bald eagle: the Consular Report of a Birth Abroad, a rebirth certificate, with my son's American name typed across the middle of it. In my hands, it felt at once so substantial and so flimsy, mere paper, without any of the substance or sweetness of the person it represented, so permeable and absolute.

I slipped the paper in a drawer, where it would remain until we left Mexico. Then I strapped the baby on my chest, belted the toddler into a stroller, and we set off into our city where we were denizens not because we were entitled and papered citizens, not because we were "native" or "naturalized," but because our family lived and loved there. Because we had chosen it to be our home and by unfolding our lives had made it so. Because our status was not citizen or nonimmigrant resident, native or alien, but human and hungry for dinner.