Nicolasa Sandoval Murillo had not quite reached her thirteenth saint’s day when the hunger came upon her, sudden and sharp like talons round her gut, in the middle of the night. She crept wincing but quiet to the kitchen, where her grandmother’s clay *olla* of beans cooled slowly upon dying embers in the wood stove. Snatching up a cold tortilla someone had left on the roughhewn table, Nicolasa uncovered the jar and began shoveling the spicy mixture into her mouth. Soon she found herself gagging—the beans, normally delicious, tasted of ash and bile. With a frantic lurch she stumbled out of doors and vomited onto the mucky street.

The door opened behind her, and a figure emerged with a petroleum lantern: it was her grandmother Florencia Murillo—Mamá Lencha—and in place of anger or concern, a look of resigned understanding smoothed the woman’s wrinkled brow.

“It is the hunger, yes? It awakened you.”

Nicolasa nodded, her empty stomach too queasy for speech.
Lencha sighed. “I had hoped to put an end to this, leaving Tlaxcala with your mother and aunts, coming north to this territory of New Mexico. But the curse is in our blood, as my own grandmother assured me.”

“What … curse?” Nicolasa shivered at the late autumn chill beneath the clear night sky, and Mamá Lencha set down the lantern to wrap a shawl about her thin shoulders.

“Once every fifty-two years,” she whispered, embracing Nicolasa, sharing her warmth with the frightened girl, “another woman in our family becomes a Tlahuelpuchi. A drinker of blood.”

The stars above wheeled in dizzy spirals. Nicolasa’s mind quailed as if an abyss had opened before her. She shuddered, crossed herself, shook her head in denial. “No. No.”

Lencha stroked her hair, tried to calm her. “I fear it is true, Nico. I was only ten when the hunger flowered in me, more than half a century ago.”

Nicolasa struggled to grasp the implications. A girl on the cusp of womanhood, she was scant years from forming a family of her own and weaving her existence into the weft of her community. She wanted this night to be a dream, for Lencha to be a liar, but she trusted her grandmother more than anyone in her home, in the town of Las Vegas, in the entire world. There was no avoiding the truth of the revelation.

“So … you are a vampire? And now … I have become one, too?”

“Bah, vampires. No, we are nothing like those undead monsters. We live, we work, we eat and sleep. At the end of our divinely allotted time, we die. But once a month … well, once a month we must feed.”
An electric thrill rushed along Nicolasa’s nerves at the words. “We must feed? On … blood?”

Lencha leaned her weathered forehead against her granddaughter’s, her milky eyes glinting strangely in the late November moonlight. “Yes, my love. On blood. The blood of the innocent. We feed, or we die.”

The following day, Lencha announced to the family that Nicolasa would be sleeping with her now, affording the three older sisters more space in their cramped quarters. Miguel Sandoval Luna, Nicolasa’s father, objected weakly, pointing out that Maria, the eldest, would be marrying soon and that there was no need for the move. But the house belonged to Mamá Lencha: she was the family matriarch. Wisely, Miguel fell silent and let the women manage the household affairs. His wife Fidela gave him an appreciative nod, and the two of them ducked into the workshop that occupied the front room of the house, the family millinery and cordwainer’s that sustained them economically. Lencha, meanwhile, oversaw the transportation of Nicolasa’s meager belongings to her room.

All day the hunger coiled inside the girl like some ancient wyrm, thrumming in her veins, setting her hands to twitching and legs to wobbling. She could eat nothing, and her mother fretted over her while her sisters glared with suspicious envy. Nicolasa tried to imagine what it would be like now to gossip with her cousins and neighborhood friends, but the gnawing need inside her muddled all fantasizing. When she thought on Abelino Castillo, the young man who stared at her during mass and whose gangly, angular body had visited her dreams more and more often in recent months, she could not help but imagine what his blood would taste
like, hot and salty and rich like her mother’s beef broth. By evening, the girl was dizzy with shame and anticipation.

Finally night fell, and Nicolasa sat on her grandmother’s bed, her heart galloping, fearful but voracious. Lencha shut the door, latched it, and mumbled a few unintelligible syllables. Then she turned to her granddaughter.

“Now we begin. First, let me share what I was told before I first fed. None of us knows how the curse arose. Some say the old god Huitzilopochtli thus damned the daughters of his sister, Malinxochitl, who tried to lead the Aztecs astray when they left Aztlán. Others claim that the blood thirst was born of the betrayal of Malinche, she who helped Cortez conquer Mexico. A few insist that Spanish wizards cast a heinous spell upon mestizo women when all this land was part of New Spain. Those of us from the state of Tlaxcala wonder if our condition might be the price the descendants of Tlaxcalan Indians pay for standing against the Aztecs.

“None of that matters, of course. You simply need to understand what is required. Once a month you must drink the blood of a child. To do this, you will transform.”


Her grandmother knelt to unlatch a copal-wood chest beside the bed and began rummaging around. “Each of us is born with a tonal, an animal soul. Few of us ever see it, and only a handful can bring it forward. A tlahuelpuchi can.”

Turning, she handed Nicolasa a feather. The girl took it, ran her fingers along the shaft. “A bird? Am I to become a bird?”

“Yes. A large, predatory bird. Likely an owl. We will open this window, transform, fly to a nearby house with an infant child, pass over it in the sign of a cross to lull the family to sleep …”
Nicolasa’s skin prickled in horror and something akin to delight. “And we will go inside to feed, yes?”

Lencha nodded solemnly and stood, her old joints popping. She put her hands on the girl’s shoulders, stared into those anxious eyes.

“But we only sip. Enough to calm the hunger. You must never drain so much of the child’s blood that it dies. The consequences …” Her voice hitched, and a strange cloud of misery shadowed her features. “The consequences are unspeakable.”

Relief took some of the edge off of Nicolasa’s anxiety. “Oh, thank the Virgin! I had imagined such terrible things. But it is just a little blood, after all, no? We sip and we fly home. Everything returns to normal for another month.

“In essence, yes.” Lencha reached for the lantern on the bedside table. “There is, however, a catch.”

Half an hour later, they both sat naked on the packed dirt floor. Nicolasa grimaced as Mamá Lencha, mumbling the word “nodiyeti” over and over, pressed the lantern against first one thigh and then the other before passing it to her granddaughter. Wincing with the pain of it, Nicolasa did the same. Her legs, weak all day, went completely numb.

“The creature you have felt curled up within you for hours, child?” whispered Lencha. “That is your tonal. Grip your feather and release the beast. Give way. Let it take hold.”

With an appalling sucking sound, Lencha abruptly pulled her hips away from her legs, trailing sticky strands of some translucent pink sludge as she dragged herself toward the window. From the gaping holes below her buttocks, talons began to emerge, wriggling.
“Oh, Holy Mother, I do not think I can …” Nicolasa began, her voice edging toward hysteria, but then she felt an odd tugging at her groin and an uncontrollable urge to be free of her legs, like yanking at a loose tooth or picking a scab. Looking down, she saw she had detached herself as well. Gibbering the nonsense word she had learned minutes ago, the frightened girl held tightly to her feather and began pulling her truncated body toward her grandmother.

Lencha was trembling wildly upon avian legs, outstretched arms sprouting feathers, her aquiline nose hooking into a black beak. She was wreathed in an eldritch glow, a faint blue phosphorescence that limned her form against the darkness.

Every inch of Nicolasa’s body ached and itched. Her *tonal* squirmed in the depths of her viscera, struggling for freedom. The girl gave a weak groan and set her consciousness aside, turning control over to the beast. The change was immediate: her taloned feet scratched at the black earth, her face twisted and stretched, her young flesh blossomed with hundreds of feathers. In moments she was transformed. A massive screech owl, golden plumed and magnificent, she twisted her head around to regard the great vulture perched on the windowsill, the trunkless legs sprawling useless in the dirt.

And then, without a word, they leapt into the night air. The owl’s wings beat effortlessly at the cold, snatching at currents, wheeling higher in pursuit of the vulture. The simple adobe homes of this older part of town spread quilt-like below, and soon the vulture dipped toward one of the larger residences. Don Rigoberto. Owner of a grocery. Young wife recently delivered of a plump baby boy.

The owl mimicked the pattern set for it by the vulture: north to south, then east to west, soft hoots punctuating
every swoop. Then drop to the wood sill of the high southern window, work open the shutters with tip of black beak, flutter in to perch beside a mother curled protectively around her baby.

A chilly shudder: feathers retracting, revealing human flesh. Two naked, legless forms upon the quilt, like double-amputees from the War. The smell of the baby: sweet, tantalizing, vital.

Lencha touched the mother’s brow, whispered her nonsensical word, and then gestured at the infant. “Gently, now. Lips to his neck. Your teeth will protrude, puncture. Then you suck, slow. You will want to hurry. Do not. And when I touch your shoulder, stop.”

The taste was indescribable. Warm, living, mineral, salty-sweet. Nicolasa groaned with a bliss she had not expected, every inch of her body and soul alive as never before. Awakened. When she felt Lencha’s hand upon her shoulder, she wanted to refuse, to prolong the exhilaration. But she obeyed, pulling away, and her grandmother dipped her head to sip as well, the shimmering blue haze that blurred her form growing brighter with every swallow.

Then the flight back, every sight and sound a heady, tangible experience for heightened senses. Shifting back, easier now, then scuttling to forgotten legs, watching in dumfounded admiration as pink tendrils resocketed bone, knit flesh-to-flesh. Finally, nightgowns and woolen blankets, the warmth of another damned soul sharing a bed in the deep dark night, formless dreams that tumble from high cliffs and swoop endlessly over nothing.

The hunger was gone in the morning, and life continued spinning through its eternal cycles as if nothing had
changed. But Nicolasa could not look upon the world the same any longer. She began accompanying Mamá Lencha as she delivered the family’s famed hats and shoes to the wealthier area of Las Vegas, where the ranks of two decades of American settlers had been swollen by another ten years of post-war pioneering. As Lencha stood at doorways, on porches, under porticoes, conversing easily in lightly accented English, Nicolasa found she was herself picking the language up, more quickly than ought to have been possible. “It is due to the curse,” Lencha explained. “We learn the speech of the birds and the beasts with ease.”

When the hunger came upon them again in December, they soared across the river through light flurries and fed on a two-year-old Anglo girl left alone in a crib. In January the victim was a newborn suckling at its sleeping mother’s breast while they sipped at its rich blood. That February Maria Sandoval was married, and they feasted on the chubby twins of a visiting relation.

During mass each week at Our Lady of Sorrows, Nicolasa felt torn, worried. It was clear she could not confess to being a tlahuelpuchi and to drinking the blood of infants. She had no need of Lencha’s warnings to understand the danger of such an admission. But taking God’s body and blood into her mouth (nothing like blood, none of that hot sweetness) in such a state was a horrible violation of all she had been taught in catechism. To block this train of thought, she took to watching Abelino more and more often, until he caught the hint and approached her on the steps of the church one Sunday in early spring. For weeks they exchanged mere pleasantries and brief gossip, leaning against the red sandstone of the bell tower in full view of the congregation. Then Abelino spoke to Don Miguel and got permission
to visit with her on a Saturday evening. They sat on rough wooden seats far from each other, with Lencha as chaperone and the giggles of Nicolasa’s older sisters punctuating Abelino’s attempts at romantic declarations.

As friendship turned to courtship, Nicolasa insisted on feeding separately from her grandmother, arguing that within a year or two she would probably be married and needed to practice dealing with the curse on her own. Lencha reluctantly agreed, with the condition that she still decide which homes would be visited and which children would be victims.

Nicolasa’s first solitary feeding was sheer ecstasy. She was able to drink more deeply, waiting until the infant began to struggle weakly before releasing it. Fire raced along her veins, and when she caught her image mid-transformation in a mirror upon the door of an armoire, her feathers seemed to glow like burning bits of sulfur.

Over the next few months, emboldened by the surge of power from so much innocent blood, Nicolasa realized that her gifts extended beyond the time of feeding: she could lull people into a trance for about a week afterward and make herself fade into the darkness at night, skills she used mockingly against her sisters and to sneak out for innocent trysts with Abelino. The boy’s kisses were nowhere as blissful as the rush of warm red from a sleeping child, but they awakened other, more human hungers in her. Her grandmother, who always seemed to be keeping a watchful eye on her, warned Nicolasa repeatedly that she was rushing into power and womanhood with little understanding of responsibility, and though the girl feigned compliance, she continued to do as she pleased.
This growing independence filled Nicolasa with conflicted notions of the universe and her place in it. When Father Shiffini mentioned original sin in his homilies, the curse brought upon mankind by Eve’s disobedience and Adam’s foolish love for her, Nicolasa felt nauseous. Doubly damned by God. A young woman, she shouldered a larger portion of the blame for humanity’s fallen state. But who railed against the men, against their mismanagement of households and nations? Where was the sermon condemning the slaughter of thousands during the War? Disgusted by the judgmental arrogance of flawed men, Nicolasa reveled with even greater abandonment in the exhilaration of her undeserved punishment.

Then came the night that she swept out of a high window in delirious stupor and saw a child wandering alone along the narrow streets. Swiveling her strigine head, she detected no one, and her tonal fairly howled with greedy desperation. Dropping to a mesquite branch in deep shadow, she called to the sniffling waif with a sweet mother’s voice, luring him away from the houses.

Then falling, eternal arc, talons on his flesh, a feathery embrace, the shuddering change, gripping him through bootless struggle, sinking teeth deep and taking heady draughts, heart beating against her naked breast, slowing, stopping. The taste of life’s final drops upon her tongue. Warm summer air like a caress, her tonal screeching for joy within her, leaping into the sky, higher than ever, riding the wind shear, jet currents ruffling the plumes of her crown.

There was no going back, and no waiting for the feeding night. Once a week, shamelessly mesmerizing her own mentor, she would slip out and quest. Seldom did she find children out of doors, so she would enter homes at random,
fading into darkness, and drain babies to their very deaths. Their empty eyes and motionless limbs haunted her dreams at first, but lust for power and bliss bleached away that vacant, broken staring until Nicolasa felt not a twinge of regret.

By September of 1874, the town was abuzz with fear. Something evil was ripping infants from the bosoms of their mothers, ending their lives. Lencha soon suspected Nicolasa and confronted her in the shop while her parents were out purchasing leather and fabric.

“You have become ezzyoh, have you not? Blood mad. Murderous.”

“Mamá Lencha,” the girl began.

“Shut your lying mouth. You have the audacity to put your own grandmother in a trance to carry out your hellish deeds? All those innocent children, dead, gone forever, trapped in Limbo because you cannot control yourself like a true woman! Do you not understand the danger you put your family in? The entire town suspects witchcraft. Those Jesuit priests that Bishop Lamy invited from Naples, Italy, to set up a boy’s school in town? They have arrived, and rumor has it that among their number is an exorcist. Any day now men who hunt monsters like us could come smashing through that door and drag your mother, your father, your sisters, all of us away!”

Nicolasa felt her chest constrict with panic, but she remained outwardly impassive. “You just want to frighten me.”

The older woman’s eyes misted as she shook her head. “No, Nico. In the town where I grew up, Tzompantepec, there were two families with the curse. My best friend was an older girl from the other clan: Ana Lima, eighteen,
beautiful. She went bloodmad like you. We tried coaxing her, restraining her, but to no avail. Death reigned in that town for nearly a year, until the leaders hired a curandero who tracked Ana’s movements and burst into her home with a posse of angry men. They discovered her legs and burned them, condemning her to that bird form forever. Then they lynched her entire family, even her little brother, not quite eleven years old. I remember watching them swing, tree limbs creaking … Is that what you want? The two of us trapped in feathered flesh? All the rest of them dead?”

The sudden waves of guilt were too much for Nicolasa. She began to sob. “I am so sorry, Mamá Lencha! I swear I will master this. Just … help me, please.”

The old woman softened after a moment and gathered the teen up in her arms. “Shhh. Your sisters will hear this scandalous wailing of yours. Of course I will help you. But we fly and feed together from now on, yes?”

Though her tonal snarled in protest, Nicolasa nodded weakly against Lencha’s chest.

A moment later, someone knocked on the door. Rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands, Nicolasa pulled away from her grandmother and answered. At the entrance stood an American in his mid-thirties or so, wearing a simple brown suit, boots and a battered slouch hat that he doffed politely, loosening grey-rimed blonde hair to tumble down above his pale eyes.

“Good morning,” he said in Spanish, his accent so perfectly Castillian that Nicolasa wondered if he might be a Spaniard and not an Anglo. “I have come to see about getting a new pair of boots made. And a hat,” he added waggling his old one pointedly.
“Oh, I do apologize,” Lencha broke in before Nicolasa could speak, “but my daughter and son-in-law are not here at the moment. This is their shop, you see. Perhaps if you returned after noon …”

He looked at them both for just a few seconds longer than was respectable, and then he smiled. “Of course. If you will just tell them Dr. Kindred dropped by. I will be teaching at the new school, not far from here, really. When I inquired after the best shoemaker in Las Vegas, I was informed in no uncertain terms that Sandoval was my man. So I will most definitely return.”

There was the slightest twitch in his cheek as he gave a small bow, replaced his weathered slouch hat, and ambled away.

“Odd man,” muttered Nicolasa as she shut the door. Her grandmother’s face was drawn with worry. “What is it?”

“The way he looked at us.”

“It bothered me, too. Strange clothes, for a priest.”

“He is no priest, girl. Perhaps a layman. Or perhaps …” She shook her head absently. “Forget him. In three more days the hunger will be upon us. We need to discuss which home we will visit. Care is required now that your foolishness has alerted the entire town.”

Lencha decided at last that they would feed in the poorest part of West Town, and she kept Nicolasa close to make sure her student attempted no further solo outings. Then the hunger came—monolithic, impossible to flout—and both women stripped themselves of clothes and nether limbs to answer the harrowing shriek of their need.

Riding fall currents into Upper Las Vegas, adobe *jacales* huddled tight against the sable wood, drifting on a downdraft
toward a garden muddy with autumn rain, then the vulture seizeing a denuded limb to halt its flight, grackling a useless warning as the owl wheeled about and saw the glittering black circle, suspended in a tin washbasin, drawing her down, reflecting her eyes in its mirrored surface, eyes that filled that glistening obsidian disk till her tonal poured forth and was trapped, outraged and howling, and the legless girl went sprawling naked in the mud.

Twisting, Nicolasa turned frightened human eyes on her shifted grandmother, but a dark figure hurled a rebozo across the great vulture, the tassled ends of the shawl tangling together, tumbling the bird to the earth. The girl dug her fingers into the mud, preparing to drag herself closer, but fabric fell across her shoulders and pinned her down. From the darkness boots came squelching in the mire: it was Dr. Kindred. The form that had trapped Lencha coalesced from night shadows as it stepped into the meager moonlight, revealing a three-cornered hat and robes.

_The exorcist. She warned me._ She glared at one and then the other. _Two men. It figures._

“Saecula in eius semini et Abraham,” declaimed the priest, brandishing a crucifix. “Nosotros patres ed est locutus sicut, misericordiae recordatus, suum puerum Israel suscepit.”

Nicolasa recognized the Latin words: the _Magnificat_, chanted often in Our Lady of Sorrows at vespers. But the exorcist was reciting it backwards, and every syllable was like a blow against the thews of her soul. The bundle that held Lencha squirmed and buckled: the old woman struggled to retain her avian shape despite whatever magic was being worked upon her.

“Dominum mea anima magnificat!” the priest concluded with a shout, nodding his head at Dr. Kindred.
“Thank you, Pietro,” the American said, and he knelt beside Nicolasa. “Greetings, Miss Sandoval. I am sure you remember me. This is Father Baccalini. The two of us … well, you might say we patrol the darkness. We rout the monsters. As you can see, we know what you two are. We know what you in particular, young woman, have been doing. Now, I frankly would rather not have to destroy you. Clearly your grandmother has lived with this condition for many years without killing, and I presume she would teach you to similarly master your passions.”

Baccalini called out. “This one refuses to be held. She will be free soon, Philip.”

Dr. Kindred nodded and closed his eyes. Lifting his hand, he traced a strange glyph upon the air. “Tlāhuíhpochtē ximonēxtih!” he whispered harshly in some ancient tongue, and the shawl covering Lencha was stripped away by an unseen force. There lay her grandmother, panting and streaked with filth, eyes downcast in defeat. Nicolasa noticed that the fabric on her own back had slipped down slightly, uncovering her arms.

“Are you ready to talk, Doña Florencia?”

The old woman nodded, tears in her eyes. “Yes, shaman.”

Nicolasa felt a scream building within. Who were these men? What right did they have to capture her, humiliate her grandmother?

“I know,” Dr. Kindred continued in his soft, impassive voice, “that you cannot go without drinking the blood of innocents. I do not ask you to lay down your lives in rejection of this curse. It was placed on you unfairly, on your distant mothers in another age. So I offer this compromise: there are those who can procure from willing victims, not children but men and women with no carnal knowledge of another,
a pint of blood a month. Sufficient to sustain you, though your power will be weakened. No more transformations. No ability to fade or mesmerize.”

Lencha’s eyes widened with a sort of hope, but something dark twisted in Nicolasa’s gut.

“And why,” she spat, “should we agree to any such arrangement? Who are you? By the looks of you, an American. From the North? The South? What were you doing ten years ago, Dr. Kindred? How many boys did you slaughter on the battlefields? By whose authority do you force us into the mud like whores, offer us our lives while stealing our magic?”

“Be still, Nico,” her grandmother gently called. “These are men of God, child.”

“They are men, Grandmother, brutal and empty! And why should I give a damn about their God? Look what the bastard has done to me!” The young woman gestured at her hips, the sockets gaping dumbly. Beside her in its obsidian prison, her animal soul writhed and thrummed with violence.

The priest crossed the garden with heavy steps. “We know where you live, Nicolasa Sandoval Murillo. Where you have left your legs. Heed Dr. Kindred. His offer is not one I would make were the choice mine. Relent.”

The young woman gave her head a savage shake. “To hell with you and your threats. I’m done submitting. I will never relent!”

Rage roiling within her like a tempest, Nicolasa flung out a hand and overturned the washbasin, burying the stone mirror in mud and freeing her tonal. With a heart-rending shriek, she shifted into the owl and hurled herself at the sky. She beat furiously at the autumn air, straining for greater
height, numbed by hunger and indignation, the town of Las Vegas growing smaller and smaller, receding into the dark.

The owl spiraled ever higher as the men’s feeble hexes were shredded by vast thermals that caught her golden pinions and bore her screaming into the unknown. She was not condemned, not a victim, not yearning for pity or absolution.

No. Though pushed to the uttermost margins—forced to leave behind family, humanity, wholeness—there aloft amidst the star-speckled clouds, Nicolasa found something more exhilarating than power.

Freedom.