

# LO QUE QUEREMOS (WHAT WE WANT)

THESIS EXHIBITION AT THE HERBERT F. JOHNSON MUSEUM OF ART

A Thesis  
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
of Cornell University  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

by  
Paloma Vianey Martínez Acosta  
May 2021

© 2021 Paloma Vianey Martinez Acosta

This thesis is dedicated to all women in Latin-America, who every day survive the atrocities of caused by gendered violence. The following works, in a sincere but manifesting way, are a protest against the corruption and patriarchy dominating over our lives.

In a reality where gendered violence institutes the ways of living for women in Latin-America, walking into a fictional, unknotted dimension seems compulsory. We are forced to live in perpetual fear. We are victims of the violence encouraged by contemporary patriarchal culture. LO QUE QUEREMOS (WHAT WE WANT) portrays our desperate desire for peace in contrast to our reality of a world filled with femicides and corruption. The Mexican rebozo (a traditional, colorful shawl) is abstracted and repurposed to provide a phenomenological, visual getaway from the atrocities happening to women in Mexico. Paintings and sculptures displaying distorted images of my native city, Ciudad Juárez, are fashioned with this garment of power. With these images, I examine an idyllic landscape where safety is a right, but also condemn the injustices of gendered violence. I express sentiments of confinement, based from personal memories, which have been revisited through present universal quarantine conditions. Through the knotting, I attempt to evoke an experience of entrapment and imaginary but much desired liberation. I physically create knots to question physical spaces and its permutations. I sculpt, paint, and draw knots to alter the reality of surfaces and suggest contradictory but complimentary feelings of liberation and tension. The knotted rebozo is a framed escape to the violence-less life I always dreamed of living, but also protests against all injustices preventing our peace.

This exhibition was funded in part by the Cornell Council for the Arts, Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation, the Mexican National Fund for Culture and Arts, and CONACYT.



*LO QUE QUEREMOS (WHAT WE WANT)*, Thesis Show at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art.



*The Weight of Our Fear*, 60" in diameter, plaster, oil paint, chain, nylon fabric, and rebozo fabric from Ciudad Juárez, 2021.



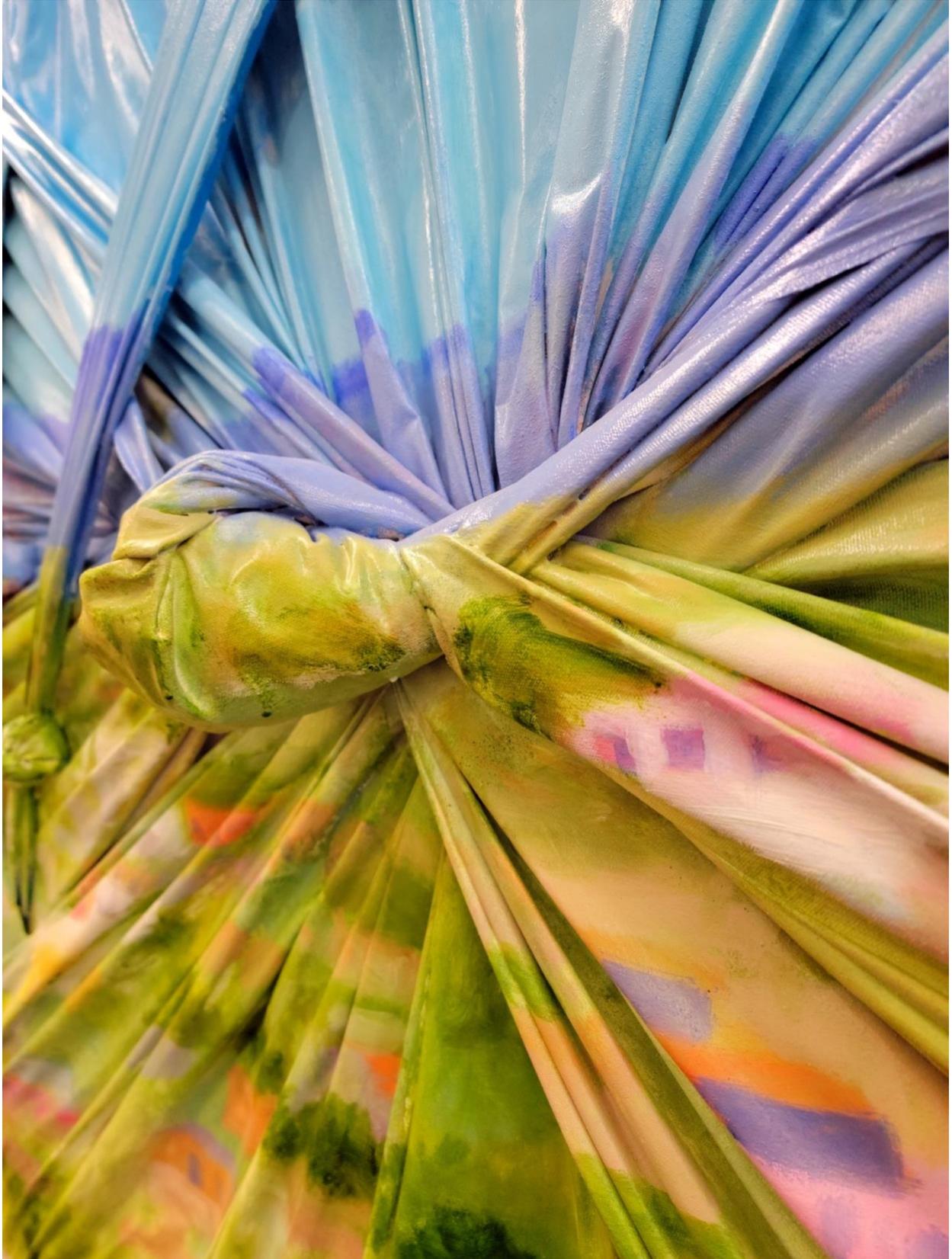
*The Weight of Our Fear*, 60" in diameter, plaster, oil paint, chain, nylon fabric, and rebozo fabric from Ciudad Juárez, 2021.



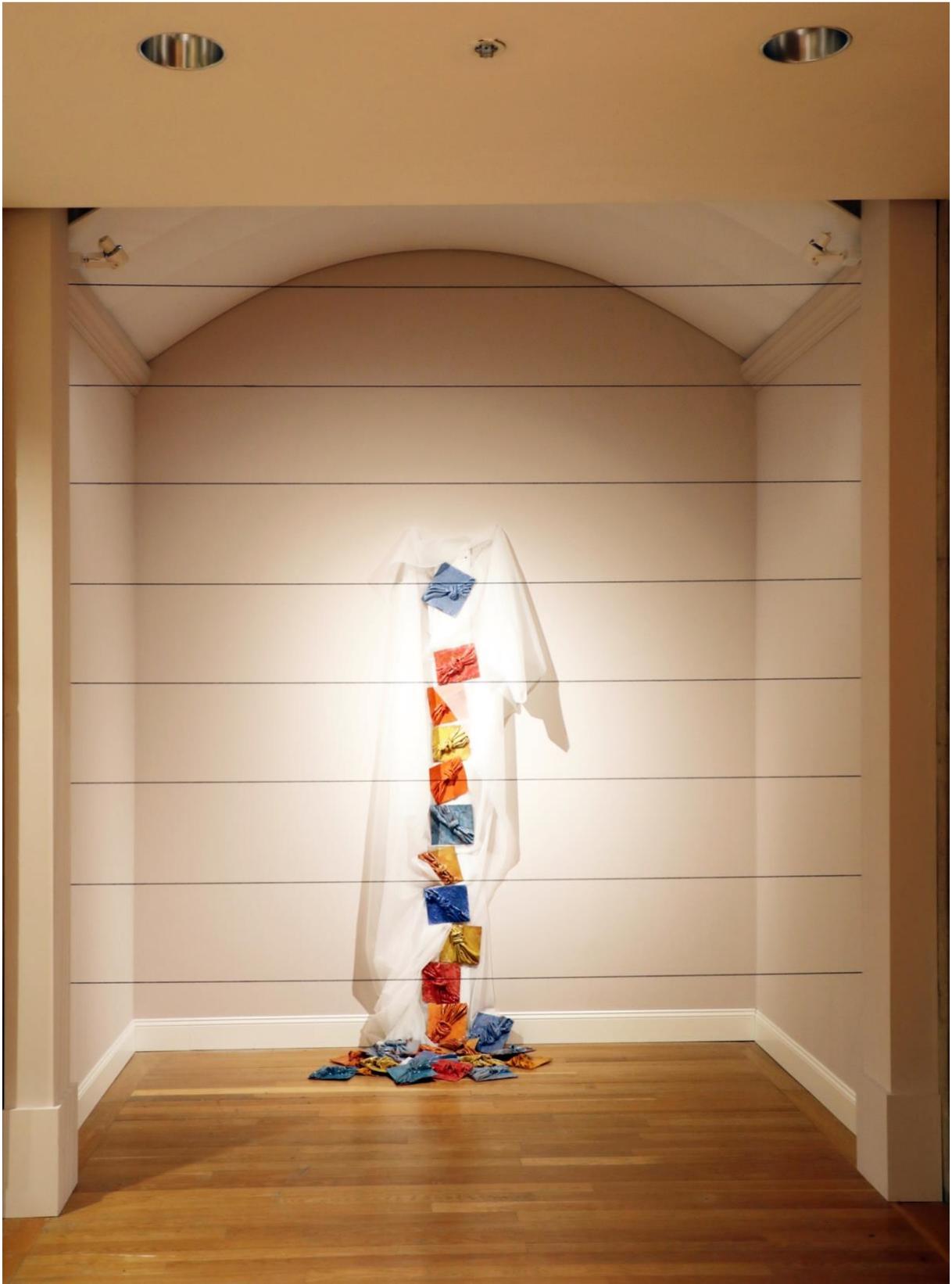
2 *Knotted Rebozos: A Façade*, 68" x 58" x 2", oil on canvas, 2021.



*Ciudad Juárez*, 60" x 40", oil on canvas and nylon, 2021.



*Ciudad Juárez*, 60" x 40", oil on canvas and nylon, 2021.



*Game of Rebozos*, installation, ceramics, fabric and thread, 2021.



*Game of Rebozos*, installation, ceramics, fabric and thread, 2021.



*Where I Escaped*, 72" x 54", oil on nylon, 2021.



*Where I Escaped*, 72" x 54", oil on nylon, 2021.



*Where I Could not Escape*, installation, oil on canvas and fabric, 2021.



*Where I Could not Escape*, installation, oil on canvas and fabric, 2021.

## UNDER THE REBOZO

(a short story)

The femicides cited in the following short fiction story, although novelized, were based from real events that have occurred across Latin-America. As a woman who was raised in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, which was previously considered the capital of femicides, I grew up imagining and coveting a utopic world without violence. With the following words, I explore an imaginary, femicide-free world all women dream of. However, I understand this illusion might never be accomplished under the current resistance from the governance in some countries of Latin-America.

A considerable amount of my childhood and teenagerhood was spent in confinement from the abrupt violence of my beloved home city. As the Covid-19 pandemic developed in 2020, it made me experience another version of confinement. I began rethinking about what it is to be shielded indoors for protection.

Additionally, I began thinking of safety as a privilege. Moving to Ithaca, New York, the safest place I have resided in, made me discover safety, a feeling often overlooked by U.S. residents. The ability to walk around the city, use public transportation, and just leave the house without being scared for my life, has changed me.



“Wait up, I’m coming home with you,” my sister yelled as she saw me exit the school building.

We rarely commuted home together, as her schedule was filled with extracurricular activities, advanced mathematics homework assignments, and other responsibilities that were catapulting her to success. Still, whenever she found the time to go home with me, I felt blessed to have her company. Mariela was only two years older than I was, so I had the fortune to grow up with her. I have always thought I was born with an instant friend I could share anything with. She was the one person who genuinely knew my intentions and sentiments.

“Are you joining me today? Don’t you have somewhere important to be?” I asked teasingly. She knew I respected all her endeavors.

“Not today! I get to spend the rest of the day with you,” Mariela sounded content.

We walked to the bus station enjoying each other’s company. Other students knew that when we were together, we probably did not want other people’s company, so most of the time we were left alone. Our conversations could range from classic literature to contemporary music. I could talk absurdities with her, and she would never judge me. During our bus ride home, we were conversing about the math teacher’s new girlfriend, and how she was significantly older than he was. Whenever we were gossiping about people at school, we looked around us and made sure there were not familiar faces around.

“Do you remember when we were little and you won a goldfish at the annual fair?”, I asked randomly as I saw a young child with her mother holding a small plastic bag with a goldfish swimming inside it.

“Yeah, and it died the next day,” she said this in a regretful but accepting voice.

“We never bought a fish again. I remember how you cried for days.”

She started smiling, until that smirk on her face got interrupted by her vibrating phone. She searched for the deep pocket in her backpack and pulled it out.

“Oh no, this is my internship. I should take this,” she was disappointed as she knew our time together was going to end with this phone call.

She talked with them promptly, and although I could only hear the blurry voice of her boss, I could sense the desperate pledge for my sister to go into the office during her day off. She hung up and looked at me with an irritated look.

“It was my boss, she needs me.” she dragged her voice when she said this.

I understood she had responsibilities. It was impressive that she was already considered essential in her team, when she was only an eighteen-year-old intern. She was in her senior year of high school, but she was an exceedingly successful young woman who was going to get into the best training programs in the nation. Being the smartest sibling, my parents had done a great job at nurturing her potential. When she was only six, my father was working on a sophisticated puzzle. Whenever he worked on one of these, he knew he was going to solve it, but the mental logic it required was fairly advanced that it usually took him days to solve. He was then impressed when my sister entered his office and deciphered it under one hour.

My father began to think her first-born was gifted, but he wanted scientific proof of her intelligence. Mariela was taken to a sophisticated clinic to get her brain analyzed by specialists. Although I was only four, I still remember waiting in the lounge of the futuristic looking building. My father was pleased when he received the results that she was scientifically categorized as a genius. That day, she began to be treated as such.

Not that we were drastically disciplined differently, but both my parents wanted Mariela to manifest her full potential. Having a gifted sister made me feel special too, and I would never shut up about her, to the extent that people abhorred being around me. I appreciated her intelligence, so I always encouraged her to keep working hard, which meant me not displaying my disappointment whenever she had to leave me.

Mariela apologized again for having to take off and I neglected her unnecessary apology. She put her phone in her purse, stood up, and got off the bus at the next bus stop. As I watched her figure get smaller through the window, I began to mentally plan the rest of my monotonous evening.

The next morning, I realized I did not hear Mariela get home. I always liked visiting her room at night, and she would tell me all of her office drama, but I went to sleep before I knew she got home. I immediately went to her room to query about her late arrival. It was unusual for her to come home late, and when she did, she would justify it. I walked into an empty room, void from her warmth and joy. My mind began to explore the dark possibilities of her disappearance. I did not, however, want to hypothesize on my own. I immediately went to my parents' room to ask if they had noticed her absence.

I entered the master bedroom to see my mother weeping on her silk bed. My father was yelling on the phone, nonsensically screaming to a forensic team. The chaos immediately made me realize the worse had happened: my sister had just become a victim of a femicide.

I woke up startled after I realized that cataclysmic scene was a horrid, vivid nightmare. Although femicides stopped occurring before I was born, my mind still managed to torture me by making recreate those unlawful moments of history. It was also odd to dream about us when we were teenagers. This was probably my brain reminding me how much I missed my sister. We still lived in the same city, but when she began a family, we naturally drifted apart. It also did not help that she worked more than fifty hours a week as the director of a nonprofit organization she founded.

I quickly got out of bed as I was afraid to be late. I had never been late, and I was not going to let one scary dream about feminicides break my flawless punctuality streak. However, I did take my time thinking about which rebozo to wear. I tried to reserve my neutral and monotone rebozos for work and leave the playful and chromatically charged for social events. I took out an Egyptian blue rebozo from the closet and knotted it over my body.

I walked out of my apartment complex and began walking to the Under the Rebozo building. The transportation system was impeccable at Ciudad Victoriana, but I enjoyed the phenomenological passage by foot. I admired the ethereal composition of all the rebozos worn by the Victorians. Although wearing a rebozo was mandatory, everyone

seemed joyful to sport one. What was once a shawl worn by Mexican women, it was now a fundamental element of society. Because of the rebozo mandate of Ciudad Victoriana, the rebozo had to be worn at all times outside of home. Only when a Victorian was genuinely comfortable with another Victorian, it was acceptable to remove the rebozos.

Ever since the engineering of the contemporary rebozo, gendered violence stopped. This rebozo technology was introduced forty years ago, and it took collective effort for femicides to dissipate in a period of ten years. Because of this, my sister and I were able to grow up in a world where we do not have to be afraid. Unlike our ancestors, we did not have to live in confinement to protect ourselves from the crude male violence that once dominated these territories. I walked freely, feeling safe, a privilege I thanked my mother for. She was a true pioneer for eradicating femicides.

My mother was a true hero who has endured an unfair amount of agony. The only personal connection I had with femicides, was through my mother's pain. I will never forget the first time she told me about aunt Nora. I was thirteen years old, and although I knew her sister had been unfairly murdered, I had never heard the story from her own voice.

I was waiting in my bed waiting for my mother. She always read to me before I went to sleep. She began this tradition with children's books, but she had moved on to advanced literature the week I turned thirteen. I deeply enjoyed my mother's voice as she read through the pages of prominent, romantic writers. That night I was not going to experience that. She walked into my room without a book, but rather holding a bracelet that had belonged to aunt Nora. As soon as I saw that exquisite jade bracelet, I knew it was time for me to hear her pain.

“Aitana,” she said my name softly as she walked into my room.

“Hi mom,” I greeted staring at the bracelet in her hand.

“I will not be reading you a story today,” my mother said in an obvious stone.

I did not respond, as I realized tonight, she just wanted to be heard and needed me to be attentive to this story I knew I would never hear from her again.

“I think you are old enough to know the true story about my sister Nora,” I could see the tears develop in her eyes as she looked down to the floor. I wanted her to make direct eye contact, but I knew this was very difficult for her.

She began telling the story with an appreciative ten-minute speech about what a wonderful person she was. My mother spoke of her sister with such compassion and unconditional love. She described her as a self-less, hard-working person capable of accomplishing anything she set her mind to.

“She was very intelligent and dedicated. At school, teachers were always impressed by her mastery of any subject. They were all disappointed when she had to quit high school to generate an extra income for our family. You know, we were very poor, and my father’s salary was not cutting it. My parents were very upset by her decision of quitting school, as she was gifted, but the dire situation ultimately made them cede and accept it.

“For a moment, it was nice to have her extra income. She took a job at as a factory worker. It was a monotone position where she was not using her brain at all, but she would always assure this was temporary and she would ultimately resume her education. I was fifteen and two years younger than she was, but even at that age, I knew it was all a mistake. I had read all about that international factory, and how they took advantage of

the cheap labor of this city. It was also located at the roughest area of the city, where most femicides had been occurring.”

My mother stopped to wipe her tears. Her pause elongated when I gave her the glass of water I kept next to my bed. She drank the water and took a deep breath to continue.

“Because of the harsh violence present in that area of the city, she would always try to be very punctual when arriving home. The distant location required her to take two different buses in the morning and in the evening. She would leave the house at 4am and then come back around 7:35pm every day. I remember one day it was already 7:40pm and had not arrived, she immediately searched for a pay phone when she changed buses letting us know her first bus had been late.

“One day, she was late, and we did not get a call. At 7:40pm, we all stood by the phone and waited. As time progressed, we all got equally tense. By 8:15pm, I was already sobbing in the living room expecting the worse. My parents were trying to tranquilize me, telling me maybe the pay phone she usually used was broken. But I knew that was it, my gut told me I would never see my sister again, and I was correct.

“The next morning my parents reported her missing. This happened so often that you could notice the authorities were desensitized by such events. Their indifference worsened our pain. We did not hear from them again, so I took matters into my own hands. I went to her workplace and interviewed everyone she had recently interacted. I found out she had not taken that bus alone, but a man she had been romantically involved with, accompanied her throughout her commute.

“This man had run away, and I was surprised I had never heard my sister speak of him, but she knew none of us would have approved of him. Months after, a friend of his called me. He told me where her body was. The when, the who, and the how had been answered. The pain of losing my sister had worsened by the authorities not caring.”

“I am really sorry mother,” I had no idea of what else to say. I stared at her admiring her ability to narrate this story through the pain.

“My parents never forgave themselves for what happened to her, and as upset as I was at them allowing her to work there, it was not their fault. It was the state’s fault for not providing a safe environment for women, and from that moment, I told myself I would change that.”

My mother stopped talking and we embraced in silence. It was true, she changed the world for women. Because of her, I do not have to worry about disappearing or, worse, witness the homicides of the women I love.

After my mother lost her sister, she fought for her justice, and that of all victims of femicides. She joined the Ni Una Mas movement, where she led protests exclaiming for safety. When she graduated from high school, she had already acclaimed a worthy reputation as an accomplished young activist. She was offered a position to be a trainee at the Under the Rebozo project, an idea that seemed impossible at the time.

Under the Rebozo was founded when my mother was a child, and she had heard of the project’s mission, so when she was recruited by them, she was proud to be a young member of the team. They claimed they were going to stop gendered violence for good, but it was going to take decades of arduous work. She was compelled by the idea of helping society and quickly became a pioneer for women’s rights.

Under the Rebozo did not act alone. This contemporary violence-free city I was able to enjoy was a collaborative effort of organizations that re-structured the previous incompetent, corrupt government. I was very humbled by everything my mother has done, and when she heard I wanted to follow her steps, she could not be prouder. Of course, she would have never pressured me into working at Under the Rebozo as an engineer, but I knew this was a project that needed to continue, and I had always been passionate about its mission.

When I turned eighteen, I changed my last name to be autonomous from my mother's accrued reputation. This is not something she asked me to do, but I wanted to independently build a career and find myself within this mission. I enrolled in the Under the Rebozo academy, which trained me to become a Systematic Rebozo Engineer. This required three years of academic development, followed by another two years of professional practices where I applied that knowledge.

Knowing that I was changing the world, every day I happily woke up and went to work to continue this vision of a city without gendered violence.

When I got to work that morning, I was still a little overwhelmed by my nightmare. I was thankful to live in a city without gendered violence, but I wanted to know for how long trauma would linger in the brains of women. The citizens of Ciudad Victoriana, in the last fifty years, have experienced the transition from living in a world dangerous for women to witnessing the first and only city free of gendered violence. My mother always explained how this vanishing of femicides was gradual. Our city had the record for the most daily

murdered, to the point where there was a daily murder count broadcasted on television every night.

Even when that murder count began diminishing, women were skeptical. After so many years of an apathetic government and a patriarchal culture against them, it took the community time to convince that gendered violence was on its last days. Regardless, the Under the Rebozo Project kept persuading and pushing the wearing of the rebozos responsible for peace. Once women started believing in them, which was when this city had not had a femicide in over thirty days, people began to religiously wear rebozos. When full communal wearing of the rebozo was accomplished, femicides came to an end.

One year after, this place became the first city without gendered violence. It was renamed Ciudad Victoriana and was governed by the people. Other cities are now modeling our rebozo system, which will hopefully result in a world where femicides do not exist anywhere. For thirty years, Ciudad Victoriana has been a safe zone. A place where I was able to grow up with freedom, a right my female ancestors certainly did not have.



“Are you ready to leave?” I asked my sister desperately.

As I received no response from her, I walked to her room. We were getting ready to have dinner at the house of Uncle Sergio and Aunt Paola. Uncle Sergio was my father’s brother, and they were very similar in personality and appearance, even though he was twenty years older than my father. I always joked that it was like seeing twenty years into his future. I regarded them as a second set of parents, and I knew they also saw us as an additional set of children. They were both kind and humble septuagenarians.

“I asked you if you were ready to leave, you know how much I hate being late,” I yelled as I began entering her room.

She did not respond, but rather looked at me annoyed, grabbed her bag, and started exiting the house. We got in the car and she drove us to their house. I was still learning how to drive, but Mariela had already been driving for a couple years now. I was looking forward to being able to drive in a couple months, but it was also fun to have an older sister to chauffeur me around.

When we got to their home, they welcomed us with open arms. We had not been to their house for a while, and it felt like a pleasant encounter. I loved those Sundays when we were invited over, and even though it was not a holiday or anything in particular, we spent the day together enjoying ourselves.

At dinner time we caught up on the eventful past months. After not seeing each other for a while, it was refreshing to update everyone with news. I gossiped with my aunt, as Mariela and Uncle Sergio had esoteric conversations about mathematics. I always thought she had inherited her intelligence from him. They were equally smart and somewhat introverted.

My uncle was an impressive Mathematics professor at the most prestigious university in the city. He had been nominated for an uncountable number of awards and was respected by academics in mathematics worldwide. Most importantly, he was humble. I always admired this quality in accomplished people. Uncle Jorge was also an exemplary husband. He had been married to Aunt Paola for fifty years and still managed to get her flowers every month. They went on a date every Friday and had breakfast and

dinner together every day. They had steadily uneventful lives, but because they were active readers, they were able to have rich conversations.

We spent the rest of the evening watching a film created by my uncle's famous director friend. The movie was expected to be a blockbuster in the upcoming weeks, but he trusted Uncle Jorge enough to let him and his family indulge in his cinematic universe before it premiered. His status as a reputable mathematician led him to know influential people.

After enjoying the film, my aunt and uncle went upstairs. They seemed upset at each other. I ignored noticing this and started a mundane conversation with my cousins. They were all at least two decades older than we were, but we still got along well.

Our conversation was drastically interrupted by the sound of a gunshot upstairs. I instinctively began running up the stairs to make sure they were fine. On my way up, I heard a second gunshot.

I entered the master bedroom, where the gunshot sounds came from. I panicked when I saw my aunt dead and my uncle holding a gun.

My eyes opened in shock and realized this was another nightmare stemming from second-hand femicide trauma. After searching the web for a while, I discovered Femicide Hereditary Trauma Disorder (FHTD). All my conditions coincided to those from this disorder. According to my research, there are no treatments for this, but symptoms could be soothed with visits to the psychologist.

It was 5:00 AM and could not fall back asleep. I began to search for psychology centers that focused on finding a treatment for FHTD. I found out that about fifty percent

of women in Ciudad Victoriana suffer from this, a dismal aftermath of years of cruel gendered violence. It was shocking to realize that, even after my mother had fought for the elimination of femicides, mental havoc still persisted in the everyday lives of women.

I knotted a royal blue rebozo over my shoulders and began walking to work, admiring again the chromatically rich rebozos that made me forget about all my nightmares.

As a lead engineer in Under the Rebozo, I had the duty to sustain the performance of the anti-femicides rebozo. Rebozos functioned both emblematically and medically. A rebozo could not be worn by someone who had not excelled in the intensive patriarchy-bias training taught from the first year of school. This training assured gender equality and guaranteed the idea of a superior gender was non-existent. Once a person transitioned into adulthood by graduating preparatory school, they were allowed to wear their first rebozo. This was traditionally a ceremonial event where the rebozo was knotted in front of loved ones and representatives Under the Rebozo. The rebozo also, by being worn tightly, drastically changed the production behaviors of testosterone in the brain that was responsible for causing aggression, a combination of both homeopathic and medicinal techniques.

That evening, I scheduled an appointment with a therapist specializing in cases of FHTD. For twenty-five years, she devoted her life to ameliorating the trauma of her patients. I wanted to know what caused this and if there was a future treatment. I went into my office and turned in the hologram projector. I dialed her fifteen-digit number into the keypad and stepped into the hologram platform so I could project myself into her

space. For this meeting, I placed a chair on top of the platform to create a comfortable conversation. The hologram platform began ringing and I patiently waited for Dr. Cecilia Ramirez to appear on the hologram platform across from me.

A woman in her sixties appeared, seating on a brown-velvet sofa. She was wearing a cadmium-red rebozo with yellow ochre stripes.

“Good Evening, Dr. Ramirez,” I greeted joyfully.

“Oh, please call me Cecilia. How are you?” she responded humbly.

“I am very good, thank you. How about you? Also, thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I have so many questions,” I said as I admired her presence.

“No, thank you for doing what you do. I have been working closely with members of Under the Rebozo community my entire life. What you have done for Ciudad Victoriana is beyond wonderful. And, I know you don’t like to advertise this, but I know who your mother is, and it must be a blessing to have her as a mother,” Cecilia expressed this with a genuine tone.

“Thank you, it really is a blessing to have been raised by such an influential and powerful woman, which I believe you also are. I scheduled this meeting, because I have been having nightmares. They relate to my family. Last week I had a dream that my sister and I were teenagers and she was a victim of a femicide. Last night I had a dream that my uncle murdered my aunt. I researched this, and I think it’s FHTD. I also read that it affects about fifty percent of women here in Ciudad Victoriana. I don’t think nightmares are that big of a problem, I can deal with them. But I am wondering if there will ever be a time when the trauma and consequences of past femicides will eradicate,” I changed my posture to mimic hers when I finished confessing.

“FHTD is not a disorder people are aware of, not even those who suffer from it. In my belief, we all have some form of trauma stemming from femicides. Yours are in the form of nightmares, but there are people who suffer much more critical mental conditions. Under the Rebozo has revolutionized the way we live by eradicating gendered violence, or violence in general, but there is still a long way to go. Because of the intense hardship we have endured, we will carry generational trauma for the next decades. I work with patients and teach them how to process and comprehend this trauma, but there is not a simple solution on how to eliminate this. It is also a battle that each person has to deal with individually, as you are doing with your nightmares,” Cecilia explained.

“Do you think there is anything I can do? Maybe change the technology of rebozos so they can diminish the trauma and negativity found in people?” I asked as I was desperate to help people and change the world again.

“Like I said, this is something that may persist during the next decades, but I believe will go away on its own, as generations grow accustomed to a world without gendered violence. Everything is still recent. I don’t think there is a need to intrude people’s brains and lives further by re-adapting rebozos.” she said in a semi-hostile tone.

“You think rebozos are intrusive?” I was surprised.

“I think they have done wonders for our city. I think it is beautiful for women to walk around without living in danger. I hope other cities, and ultimately, the entire world, adopts this technology. But I do think it is a transitional device and that when femicides and its memories completely vanish from the world, they should stop being worn.” Cecilia declared condescendingly.

“I think I have to go, thank you so much for your time.” I reacted fast.

I turned off the hologram and her image quickly disappeared. I began reflecting about my rude reaction to Cecilia and the role of rebozos in the future. I could not imagine a world without them, or them being thought of as intrusive.

Later that night I got home and unknotted my rebozo. I hung it in my rebozo closet and stared at my collection for a while. Flashbacks of my mother knotting my first rebozo in front of my friends and family began to appear. She gifted me a Phthalo blue rebozo with cadmium barium-orange and chromic oxide stripes. As I replayed that memory in my head, I took that first rebozo I ever wore out of my closet and knotted it over myself. I looked at myself in the mirror and saw so much of my mother in me. Her patience and her compassion for people. Her devotion for activism and her impeccable work ethics.

I sat down with a cup of chamomile tea, just like the one she used to make for me when we watched movies and thought about everything she accomplished.

I took my journal and began to write today's headline:

*I can deal with nightmares, femicides do not exist anymore.*