**Practice Girls**

Vincent Antonio Rendoni

Carmen didn’t get a quinceañera.  
Mom said she’s dark enough as is.

But Abuelo wasn’t having it.

So, when I turned 15, he starched my shirt,  
pressed my pants, and called me into the garage   
and put me before a painting of vaquero and a virgin  
and told me to make a cross.

Out we went in his truck, a Ford older than creation

He upfront, whistling The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down,

And me strapped to the trailer,   
with a rope and prayer.

First things first: A really big lunch at Little Pat’s.  
Mijo, he tells me, you will need your energy.   
A stale doughnut and flat coffee.

Gristly steak and eggs.

Mijo, he says, don’t worry.

Your father did this. Everybody needs practice.

So eat.

When I’m done, he ties me down

and takes me south   
where the air is thick with jet fuel

and the drainage is bad  
where there’s a secret street,

crocodile cracked with standing water,

where women laugh and pick each other clean

in front of a building without a door.

I wish I could tell you the specifics  
of when he cut me loose.  
Just someone asking my name.

The smell of Aqua Net and Kent 100s.

Soft hands. Charm jewelry.   
That clear-as-day feeling that whomever she was

couldn’t have been much older than me.