



12-15-1987

Fading Star

Luz Maria Martinez

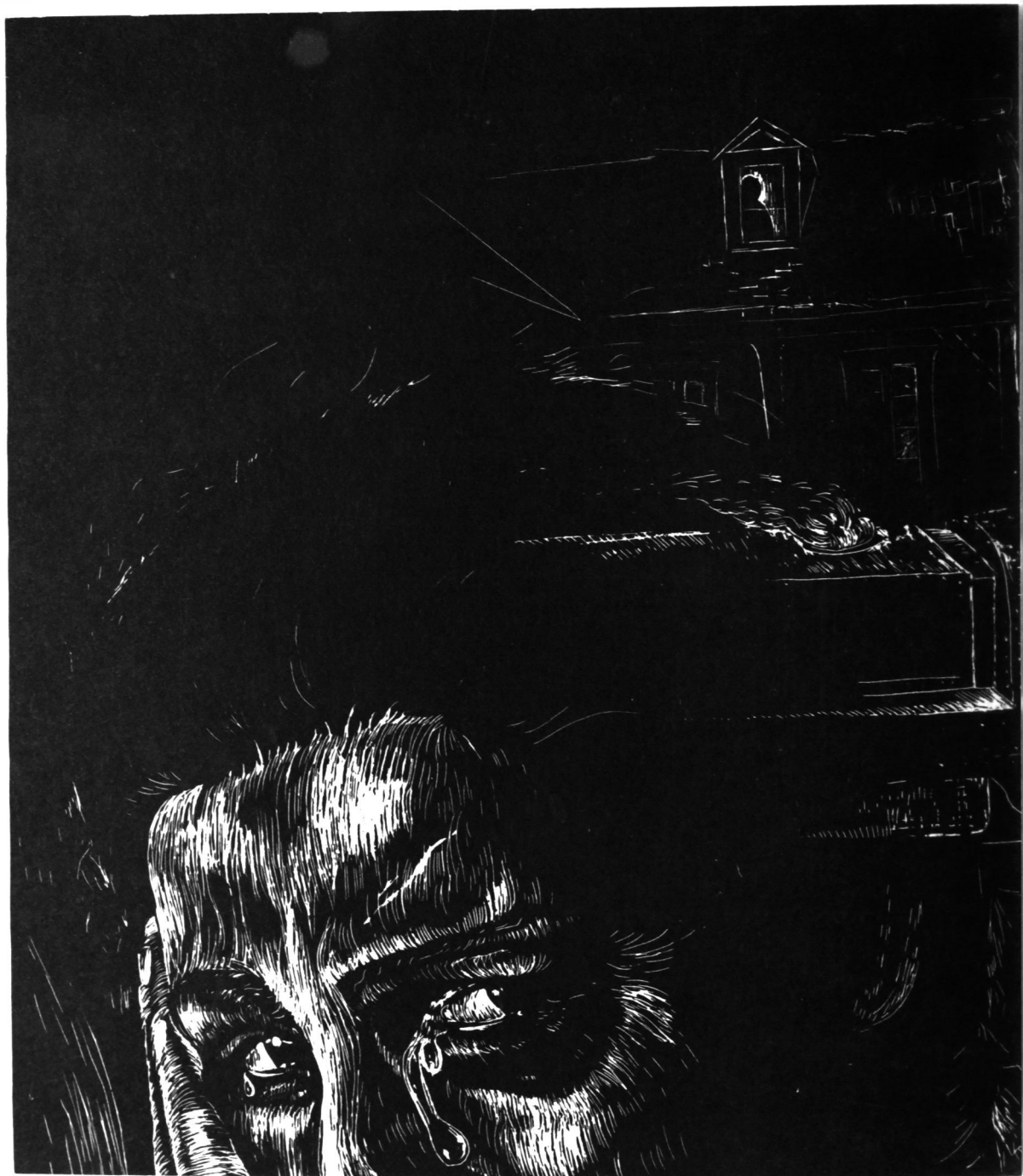
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Recommended Citation

Martinez, Luz Maria (1987) "Fading Star," *Westview*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol7/iss2/3>

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The cold, bitter wind whistled through the lifeless old house. Outside, the leaves were thrown about like worthless pieces of trash as two kids, a boy and a girl, passed by. They were poorly dressed in dull, shapeless coats that barely protected them from the harsh winter. They walked rapidly, almost running, because they were eager to get to their warm, cozy house where Mother would cuddle them and lead them to the fireplace. "My poor, poor babies," she would croon. Then, like most mothers, she would give them plenty of tender, loving care.

Mira heard them as they walked by, and she inched herself closer to the wall, thinking that they could see her. In her fear, she had squeezed her eyes shut, but now she opened them and glanced around her with a vacant, empty stare. The room she was in, which once had been a bedroom, was now void of any furniture except for a cracked, yellowish mirror and a green, faded sofa. The carpeting had been torn off the floor so all that remained was the naked wood. Mira shivered as another draft of wind penetrated through the abandoned house, and she

slowly got up, realizing that the only way to keep herself warm was by walking. Her steps were slow and noiseless as she made her way from room to room. They all looked the same, but her mind was not paying attention to her surroundings. As she went by the bathroom, she saw herself reflected in the tiny mirror above the destroyed sink. Her eyes, which were red from crying and not sleeping well, still held a shimmering, gossamer beauty. Mira moved closer to inspect one of the bruises her stepfather had given her a few hours ago and discovered

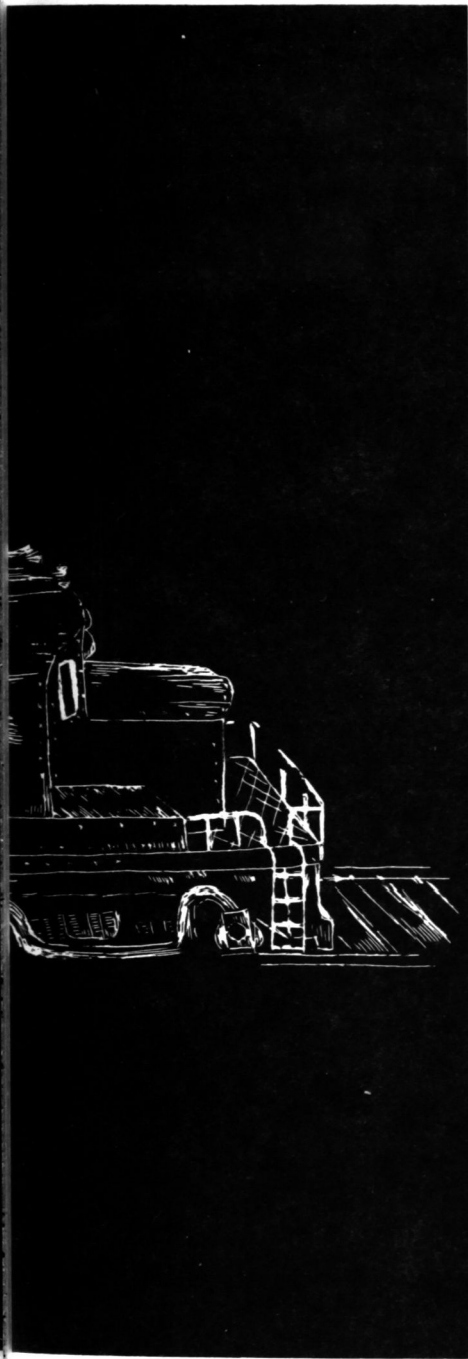


Illustration by Jay Hollopeter

that the swelling in her left eye had gone down, but was still very painful. Her big, lamb-like brown eyes filled with tears again as she remembered how badly and cruelly he had beaten her this time, but one shake of her head and the memories disappeared, at least for a while. "No," she said with clenched teeth, "I won't remember!" Carefully, she examined the rest of her thin, almost anorexic body. Her ribs were not broken, but she labored her breathing because deep breaths immediately sent waves of pain surging through her small frame. Her arms and hands were

bruised from where she had tried to protect her face; but otherwise, she found no broken bones. Without meaning to, the memories rushed upon her again, and she started her body-warming routine again with the same tired steps.

As she walked, she thought about the kids that had gone by earlier. They were going home from school, she supposed. Tiredly, flashes of nagging teachers and school fights came to her. Mira had liked the first day of school, but as the days went by, she had decided that this place was just another reason for girls to dress up in their nicest clothes and for boys to act their coolest. The boys had never tried to impress Mira, for they thought her a skinny, boring girl. Mira hadn't cared about their attitudes. All she wanted was to be left alone, and she had been. All through elementary school and junior high, she had been a loner. She remembered that in her freshman year of high school all the girls had been excited about having boyfriends. Mira's own unawakenedness yearned to be satisfied; so for the first time, she longed for a friend she could talk with. None of her classmates, however, wished to be seen with her; so Mira had looked somewhere else for companionship. It had been wrong, she knew, but soon she was seen with the outcasts of the school--tough, foul-mouthed kids who came to school to pick fights and get expelled. Mira had quickly adapted to their ways. For her first fight, she had cleanly knocked out Betsy, one of the most popular girls in school because the saucy girl had "suggested" that Mira change her clothes at least once a week. "I don't know just how in the world you can stand to wear the same old baggy jeans every day," the girl had commented with a flick of her picture-perfect permed hair. Mira had learned that the best way to irritate people was to smile at them, so she had given Betsy a sunny grin. The girl's mouth quickly dropped open and after a few seconds of stunned silence, she had screamed, "White trash like you shouldn't be allowed to walk the streets!" That was all the provocation Mira had needed. With a swift turn of her clenched fist, she had socked the offender square in the eye. The poor blonde never saw it coming.

Later, sitting in the principal's office, Mira only half-heard his accusa-

tions. He had called her a troublemaker a few times, and then had sent her home for a week to "think about what she had done."

Home. Mira's thoughts took a different route. Her mother, once a beautiful, happy woman, was now an abused, beaten wife. Her second husband, the man whom she had once thought of as a loving, caring person, had turned into a cruel, sadistic man. He enjoyed beating her until she lay at his feet unconscious. Soon, however, he had tired of beating the same body, so he had turned to his five step-children. All of them were older than Mira, and soon they had all left home. One day, her older sister, Teresa, had come to take her mother away. "Mother, please come with me," she had begged. But her mother quietly refused. "I can't leave him," she had whispered. "Who would take care of him?" Teresa had wept and begged, but the determined woman hadn't changed her mind. "But why, Mother?" Mira had asked. Her mother had only stared at some invisible object on the floor, and Mira had run from the room, angry. When James had come home that night, drunker than usual, he had been in an unusually good mood. "How is my princess today?" he had asked his wife while patting her on the head like some pet. He went on talking sweetly to both of them, acting like the caring, understanding man he wasn't. His attitude puzzled Mira, but she was on her guard. The problem began during dinner when Mira accidentally knocked over the salt shaker. James jokingly but cruelly taunted her. "What's the matter, girl? You've got the grace of an elephant!" Mira managed a tremulous smile, but she sensed the calm before the storm. After supper, she washed the dishes and tried to sneak to her room, but she hadn't made it to the hallway before she heard him call "Mira, bring me a beer, will you honey?" She took him the beer; but when she turned to leave, he suddenly grabbed her by the wrist and with a flick of his hand sent her sprawling across the room. "So, you want to get away from me, do you?" he said in a slow, menacing voice.

"No... I... yes! I think you're a drunk, useless bum! Get out of here and let us lead a normal life!" Mira had screamed. James had been surprised by her reply, and his few moments of hesitation gave Mira a head start for the door. Just

(Continued on page 39)

signs of progress and regression

Giant Field

By Margie Snowden North

Unorthodox ideas
and playing hunches
are part of the oilman's game.

Shell Oil, New York, 1947. . .
Orders to forsake that block of leases
back there in Western Oklahoma--
Beckham County, east--
(Where is that, anyway?)
those leaves that have been
shocked and vibrated and measured and recorded,
prodded and probed and burrowed to 13,000 feet,
Dry hole
Judged a failure by appropriate committees,
approved for abandonment.

But Shell's new president* was an oilman,
a trailblazer (as oilmen are likely to be)
and the explorer in him overruled
logic and raw facts.

His ultimatum: Try 'er again, boys
Re-examine the prospect.

Unorthodox, yes.
Sensible to forget a failure
But they gave her one more try.

Jackpot
Ace up a sleeve
A giant field**, and more
120 million barrels
of gleaming black gold
because an oilman--
the most prolific gambler of them all--
played a hunch and won.

**Max Burns was quoted later as saying, "I don't know why, but I couldn't begin my job as president by condemning an area as having no oil." It was on his first day as Shell's president that he refused to abandon the sites near Elk City.*

***Giant field: term for an oil field containing more than a million barrels.*

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as she reached for the doorknob, however, James' hand shot out and he pulled her into the room by her hair. Mira touched her head now in remembrance. Yes, it was still quite sore. This time, she was sure that he meant to kill her, so she had fought him back. Her punches had been few; but because of his inebriated condition, she managed to throw him on the ground. She then ran out of the house and came to the only secure place she had known for a long time.

Now as she sat there, alone and afraid, she asked herself, "Why?" Why did her life have to be the way it was? Other girls led normal lives, but her life revolved around her stepfather and the kind of mood he was in. If he was in his usual drunk mood, she went around the house cowering and trying to hide, but it was useless. He usually found fault with everything she did, and he beat her for it. Her mother had stopped trying to protect her since the time James had broken her arm for doing so. She remembered the wild, crazy look he got when he beat her like a punching

bag. His eyes, full of hate and repulsion, seemed to probe into her very being while his clenched fists hit her again and again. Why did he hate her so much? Mira tried to please him, but he didn't care. Mira thought about the future. What did it have in store for her? Would she grow up to be like her mother? No! She wanted to be a nurse. But what chances did she have of even surviving?

The train whistle interrupted her thoughts. With a swift trot, she headed for the door and listened. Yes, it was very near. She would need to hurry if she wanted to be on time. She buttoned her worn jacket and stepped outside. At first, the cold numbed her, but then she broke into a slow, shaky jog. While running, she thought about what she was going to do. It was the only way out. Her life in this world was meaningless. The hurt and pain would be gone forever. Yes, she would do it! As if to reassure herself, she ran faster. From far away, she resembled a tiny struggling figure. When she arrived at the railroad tracks, she sat down, gasping for breath. Her eyes searched for the train and didn't find it, but the whistle came closer and closer. Slowly,

she got up and smoothed her hair as best she could. The tears were threatening to overflow, and she tilted her head back, looking at the dark, stormy sky. "God," she asked the Almighty, "Why did you put me in this world to suffer like this? What is the purpose of living if my life is controlled by such a beast?" As Mira uttered these words, a tiny patch of blue appeared in the sky. As if awakening from a dream, the truth dawned on her. Her brothers and sisters had not foolishly thrown themselves in front of a train. No. They had patiently waited and then just simply walked away. Why should she kill herself? Maybe she could become a nurse after all. Of course, it would take plenty of work, but she could do it. As she was thinking, she walked away. The train sped by, urging her to come back, but Mira walked on. Up in the sky, sunlight streamed through the patch of blue. Life wouldn't be easy for her, but after the storm, the most beautiful calm would envelop her. ■

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