duty

For the households without washing machines, the place to do the laundry by hand in Zacapu, Michoacán, was at La Zarca, the lake on the other side of town. My father carried the basket of clothes on his shoulder; my mother held my hand as we made the journey to the concrete washboards. We were still only three in that family, but my mother was pregnant.

Since this was women’s work, my father took me to the part of the lake where young people swam. I squatted at the edge, making the surface of the water ripple with the tip of a twig. I forgot all about my father standing at a distance, he too lost in thought as he looked at my mother kneeling at the washboard, a white mass of suds expanding around her. They were in their early twenties, chained to domestic responsibilities and anxious about money. But I didn’t know this yet. I only knew that they were all mine.

An empty bag of laundry detergent floated in front of me, its plastic body bloated with air, so I snagged it with the twig. One more game: I tried to fill it with water. But when I leaned forward I fell into the lake. My father and the sound of the women washing disappeared.

When my father pulled me out, I was too stunned to cry or complain as I stood naked in the sun, my shirt, shorts, and
socks splayed out on rock. I had seen this sight the night before: a tinier version of my clothing stretched across my mother’s lap, which was too crowded to sit on. I prayed my father, shaking his head at my stupidity, didn’t make the wish I had made last night: for the clothes never to be filled with flesh.