

# Ventriloquist

ESTEBAN RODRIGUEZ

No spotlight, no stage or stagecraft,  
no props or voices prompting laughter  
from an audience, no hand but the hand  
I use to lift this dummy from the dust  
and darkness, that unmarked box casted  
to the back of my parents' closet.  
Because backstories are hard to connect  
with, I make no attempt to uncover  
the reasons it's been forgotten, assume  
it's a collectable, a gag gift, a memento  
dressed in the same black and baggy suits  
all grandfathers are buried in. I press  
his shoulder to my chest, run my palm  
through his blond and poorly stitched hair,  
over his cheeks coated with blush,  
that coquettish constellation of freckles,  
that cold skin that feels as though  
an embalmer had given it its final touch.  
Though slack-jawed and broken,  
his mouth is still sculpted for monologues  
and conversations, for the right moment  
to slip in another punchline, or for me  
to continue wherever I imagine  
his performance left off; tell a joke,

sing a song, practice switching between  
 two lexicons until I find a middle ground.  
 Even as a son descended from diasporas,  
 I am spoon-feeding myself a second alphabet  
 I can't pronounce, unable to distinguish  
 between accents, when and where to use  
 the single and double *r*'s, or to dislodge  
 the diphthongs clumped like excess saliva  
 around my gums, inflecting my diction  
 into a dialect of doubt, and going so far  
 as to abbreviate the emphasis of certain  
 vowels, as I listen to the *E* in my first name  
 slip from the *s* it's been paired with,  
 while my lips, chapped with the English  
 I love, slowly repeat a catalogue of code-  
 switching adjectives and nouns, phrases  
 and idioms, kitchen table lectures my father  
 always begins with a *Que chingaos*,  
 or the Spanish my mother uses to indicate  
 the severity of a subject, *Esteban*,  
*tu papá te está esperando en el corral*.  
 And there are tildes, inflections, gender-  
 specific pronouns I mismatch and write  
 down on a Babel of Post-its, intending  
 to later figure out, remembering that suitcase  
 of grammar my parents' parents carried  
 over, and which remained untranslated  
 when it reached its second generation,

settled on my tongue, because like this dummy  
relying on the voices around him for reference,  
I'll replicate whatever speech I'm taught,  
feeling that regardless of the worlds  
I live in, I'll be mouthing a language  
that was never mine to inherit.

