

Present Tense

By Shuly Xochitl Cawood

My student, Elenita, won't learn past tense.
She winds her lipsticked mouth
around words, chews the verb ends
into peppermint gum.
She shakes off the "ed" as easily
as she tosses her auburn hair.

For her it's a tense of failure:
tried, wanted, wasn't.
I frown and shake my head;
she shrugs with eyelash flutter.

She slinks
into my English
language class
in tight shirts,
hips snug in jeans,
hair pressed straight, in place.

She slides into Fernando's crook of arm
and giggles into his eyes.

She is present and perfect
this Torreón spring
as she saunters from class
with Fernando clutching

her books.

She leans into the flap
of his black shirt
and they disappear
into yellow desert sky.

Tonight I will read her essay,
the small, still words a sigh
of ink—

nothing to shove the crook
of Fernando's arm open

like the latch on a gate
giving way.