

2017-01-01

# The Geometry of Loss: A Novel

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THE GEOMETRY OF LOSS

-A NOVEL-

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2017

## **DEDICATION**

For Sophia Angélica.

THE GEOMETRY OF LOSS

-A NOVEL-

ELIDIO LA TORRE LAGARES, Ph. D.

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Liberal Arts

The University of Texas at El Paso

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Department of Creative Writing

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

May 2017

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the guidance and support from the Department of Creative Writing faculty at the University of Texas-El Paso, especially to professor Andrea Cote Botero, professor Sasha Pimentel, professor Daniel Chacón, and professor Tim Hernández. Thanks to them, I have become, if not a better writer, a humbler person. I also want to thank doctor Loretta Collins, for all the friendship, wisdom, and good camaraderie.

Parts of this novel have been previously published and/or awarded. Sections from **Part I: Colorless Ideas Sleep Furiously** were submitted under the title “Colorless Ideas Sleep Furiously” to the University of Texas-El Paso literary contest, where it earned second place. The story appears in the Spring volume of *The Río Grande Review*. Sections from Part III: Glitch were published under the title “Partial Residence on Earth” in *The Acentos Review*, February 2016.

Finally, I must thank my daughter Sophia Angelica, for listening to my non-sense when I needed to be heard.

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## PREFACE

*it's only in uncertainty  
that we're naked and alive*  
-Peter Gabriel, "That Voice Again"

### ***SCOPE OF THE PROJECT***

If voice is presence, and presence remits to identity, can voice signify without a body?

On the rise of transhumanism as a life philosophy, an intellectual and cultural movement, and an area of study, I wonder, as a writer, about transhumanists' commitment to technologically mediated experience. The nature and limits of the self. The high level of interest in philosophy and neuroscience among transhumanists has rendered unsupportable the Cartesian view of the mind or self as a unitary, indivisible, and transparent (More 7). Furthermore, as I think of the role of language in the construction of an identity, I become more aware of that which traces differences among the peoples of our planet: culture. Indeed, differences become much more interesting than similarities because they can be asserted in numbers of ways and supported by correlative displays of reason to define positivists categories such as race, skin color, gender, and language, the unquestionable material of the writing arts. If we are bodies of words (Lacan), language makes possible our existence.

Writing –the written code, the art that summons my studies at the College of Liberal Arts in the University of Texas-El Paso– supposes to be the undisputable technology in the evolution of the human species. It is through words that humans become aware of memory. We “record” and “store” life with language and we derive meaning(s) in the many possibilities of their amalgamations. We are made of the past: we acquire language, we use it, save it. It becomes a

prosthesis: we use it to communicate and to connect with a reality beyond our bodies. While the body is a reality itself, it is never self-assertive. We must confront our otherness to construct the self. In other words, we are made of past experiences- of previously given experiential instances that we process in the form of memories. One could even argue that knowledge –cognition and its processes- is based on the accumulation of thoughts, experiences, sensations, and impressions that the brain orders for us. It is what makes us *be*.

And yet, language is not biological. One is not born speaking, even less writing. That which secedes our animal condition, reason, can only be expressed through the constructs of language. Language confers a logic, in the Wittgenstenian appreciation; an order; the world becomes delimited by sense and non-sense, what is meaningful and what is devoid of meaning. Nonetheless, in both cases, spoken language –a form of sound– carries possibility, existence.

It becomes voice. Speech. Communication.

But then, the conundrum: can voice exist without a body? What if, on the verge a singularity era, consciousness can be emptied on a hard disk, a flash-drive, or, more likely, on the cloud over the Internet? What if, by some artificial intelligence, I could defy the limitations of the physical body and migrate my entire self-consciousness, to a new existential realm, translatable in binary codes as recordable data? What if, when my body betrays my willingness to live, I can become something else and live in another body, virtual or else? Moreover, we must consider that

[a]s we store more of our memories externally and create avatars, it is also becoming increasingly apparent that the boundaries of the self are unclear and may not be limited to the location of a single body. Complementing these questions about the nature and identity of the self at any one time are questions about the

identity of the self over time, especially for a self that undergoes major cognitive and somatic changes over an extended lifespan (More 7).

*The Geometry of Loss*, the novel I present in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master in Fine Arts at the University of Texas-El Paso, meets at the crossroads of humanity and posthumanity. Initially, I intended it to be a novel of personal quest, identity, and memory, which are, after all, the matrix realms of literature. As I proceeded with the narrative, I considered that my novel was, partly, informed by personal experience, my longings and doubts; fear and hunger; nowherelessness and, yet, place. But, was it worth it? What did I have to offer as a storyteller? As a Latino writer? As a voice?

Upon a visit to a local bookstore in New York, I realized how literature often took a first name: African-American Literature, Asian Literature, Latin American literature, and just Literature, among others. If my novel were ever to be published, on what shelf will it be displayed? Writers like Julio Cortázar, Jorge Luis Borges, Roberto Bolaño, among a few others, defy the conventions of national literatures. They are widely read, although some critics might argue that they generally formulate some brand of Western European literature enounced in Spanish. In my case, being Puerto Rican (which means I am the sum of time, traces, and races, in addition to being an American citizen) did it really matter? Did it? Moreover, what kind of story would I write? Another novel of migration and survival? The tale of a Puerto Rican man who goes around trying to find and reaffirm his national identity? But, what if I ceased existing as a human and become a consciousness inside the mnemonic realms of a machine? Would I still feel? Would I still be considered within the paradigm of skin color and ethnic differences?

I could not come up with an answer.

Islands are limited in scope. At some point, driving in any direction, one will find water on the horizon.

### *POETICS AND ASSESSMENT*

In his book *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar contends that voice is the structural paradox that "holds bodies and languages together." Voice -physics or vibration- produces sound waves of signifiers that make language be heard. If voice transduces the aural expressions of language, then it is what makes the poem distinctive, unique. Literature talks, communicates, through voice and its attributes: sound and silence. As an integral part of poetics, it is what articulates, contains, and shapes the literary work.

In his poem "Voice," Ron Padgett considers the artificial honesty of voice as a poetic device:

I have always laughed  
when someone spoke of a young writer  
"finding his voice." I took it  
literally: had he lost his voice?  
Had he thrown it and had it  
not returned? Or perhaps they  
were referring to his newspaper  
the Village Voice? He's trying  
to find his Voice.

What isn't  
funny is that so many young writers

seem to have found this notion  
credible: they set off in search  
of their voice, as if it were  
a single thing, a treasure  
difficult to find but worth  
the effort. I never thought  
such a thing existed. Until  
recently. Now I know it does.  
I hope I never find mine. I  
wish to remain a phony the rest  
of my life. (167)

What is it “to find a voice?” As writers, Padgett contends, we are induced into a quest for that peculiar intangible that can only be heard, not seen. Voice becomes more than a phonetical instance: it turns into a plateau, a higher achievement that seems to distinguish the artist/writer from the individual self as much as s/he abandons the historical persona –the individual who conceives the writing piece–. In his poem, Padgett alludes to two different instances of the voice, namely the “performatic” instance and the “natural” instance. The former refers to those linguistic occurrences where the poet tries to conceal or enact a particular *persona* from a specific point of view that could or could not be detached from the poet’s own self (I think of Edgar Lee Master's poems in *The Spoon River Anthology*); the latter refers to the poet's attempts to sound more truthful to his actual beliefs without concealment (here I think of confessional poets like John Berryman or Sylvia Plath), not like a heightened (or degraded, for that matter) version of the poet's self. In any of the two cases, however, voice is related to the production of a presence, to the assertion of

a body, because voice is not produced in a vacuum. Voice implies an emitter, a sound production apparatus, a point of origin. Voice is being in time.

But, if voice can exist without the body, do differences then matter?

We are all *codifiable*. Translatable in numbers.

One of the first precursors of transhumanism, Nikolai Fedorovich Fedorov, advocated for using scientific methods to achieve radical life extension, physical immortality, resurrection of the dead, and space and ocean colonization. According to Fedorov, the evolutionary process led to increased intelligence culminating, so far, in human beings. Humans must use reason and morality to shape further evolution (More 10-11). Since there is a beyond-reality, humans could be restored in new, immortal forms.

If human form continues to be one of the predominant themes in the arts (More 20), what would it mean to lose the physical body and become a mere voice in a computerized system? If physical form related to the core of human nature, what would it be to be just a voice?

Clearly, in poetry, as in fiction, voice preconizes a body. Voice is not lost, or found for that matter; voice is acknowledged. It's such a critical element for the poet because it's where the poem resides. It is the map and the territory. In the informational model of language, the spoken or written word is merely a vehicle for the meaning that it conveys. If this view is correct, what might appear to us as essential to language, namely the words themselves, their material presence, whether as the cadence of the voice or the style of the words on the page, becomes what is most inessential. This model's ideal of communication, then, would be the disappearance of the word in the pure translatability of meaning. Or sense.

From a formal standpoint, in *The Geometry of Loss*, I have grown acquainted with the concept of narrative voice as an allegory for selfless, boundless identity. We know we have a need

to communicate and explain the world, ergo, the invention of language and art. Language settles our erratic self. Writing conforms and uniforms. As Maria Zambrano puts in her essay "Para qué se escribe?": "Se escribe para reconquistar la derrota sufrida siempre que hemos hablado largamente" (1). Writing is a withholding of words, whereas in speech there is releasing.

To speak is to shed; to write is to hold on to what we inevitably lose. To grieve for our losses, select and create linguistic instances to amend the loss. In Italian, the expression "sono senza parole" means, literally, "I am without words," to express a state of anguish or *sgomento*. Being without words is being without existence, and the paradox is that it can only be expressed with words: "Sono senza parole" (Bartoloni 254). On the light of such proposition, Zambrano's idea acquires sophistication, stringency, and, by necessity, an ethics of ambivalence.

Image and language separate and deviate, a rupture that memory tries to reassemble.

Voice materializes spectrality, it becomes certainty of a body –whether real or imagined–.

If voice is presence, and presence is existence, by syllogism we might conclude that voice is existence, language concomitantly made of sounds and dispersed in time.

In this regard, Alice Notley's essay, aptly titled "Voice," exudes such poetic brilliancy which can be summarized in what she considers to be the "two important qualities that a poetic voice should have," namely fearlessness or courage ("the voice must be clear about itself in some way, believe itself, and be consistently unafraid," she says) and vividness, or the "actual presence of the live poet in the dead words of the page" (156-157). Notley also notes the crucial distinction between voice and style, where the latter can be identified by groups- probably meaning by mimesis and modeling-, and the former is uniquely irrepressible.

Writer, voice, and text become dissoluble. A mask. A performance. Play.

If writers can shapeshift it is because of voice. Concealment lives in the trickster's mouth. The trickster, a cultural archetype who often exhibits overpowering wordsmith skills, blurs boundaries of the real and the unreal- untruth and truth.

And yet, creation happens.

Not surprisingly, the mythification of the creative process soon veers off into the realm of the unexplainable. Again, paradoxical or circumstantial irony, the creative process stems from its self-estrangement. Whatever inspiration is, it's born from a continuous "I don't know," like Szymborska claims.

Such *not-knowing* propels the need for *knowing*. The poet must confront life and explain it to herself in all its complexities and subtleties. To that extent, doubt becomes useful, because doubt propels quest, a distinctive feature of that which is incomplete. If so, then, how can voice be unique if it could be so ambivalent?

The question that drives my narrative is: whose authority delivers the text?

### ***FRAMEWORK***

One of the particularities of fiction writing is its capacity for adaptation and evolution in the modern world. Bakhtin associates the novel to the invention of the written language, as opposed to poetry, which was born with oral language. If epic poetry (in the classic sense of the term) perished because of its hermeticism and self-closeness, fiction writing is yet to be defined in one concentric formula. In effect, as Bahktin theorized, the novel is malleable, it cannot be pinned down singlehandedly. It is a vacuum, it absorbs and accepts everything. Three concepts that I have favored in my own writing inform the vital signs of the craft of fiction in contemporary literature: surfiction, the Chinese box method, and what Mario Vargas Llosa calls "the shift."

In an essay on Hertha Muller's work, Paola Bozzi explains that surfiction "does not draw a distinction between memory and imagination, between what really happened in the world and what it imagines happened" (111-112). Surfiction stems from autofiction, the interplay between the author's biographical accounts of his life events to the fictionalization of said experiences. The autobiographical aspect appears only as mediation, since, as Muller says, "I, too, relate to myself in a mediated manner" (Bozzi 113). I have always contended that writing can only be fueled by the degree of personal experiences, owned or borrowed, that the writer can contain. These experiences are scrutinized, sifted, selected, and shaped in the form of story. Even if it is merely a topic of interest, something that I have not lived through but that I possess as if I had, I feel compelled to tell about it and embrace it as my own.

Muller borrowed the term surfiction from Raymond Federmen, who defined it as the thematization "of the constructedness of reality" (Bozzi 113), to the extent to which it does not reproduce or mimic reality, but creates its own autonomous existence. Surfiction levels real life with fiction, obliterating the boundaries between one and the other. My life is out there, broken down into words that are selected, played with, and extended through the fictional. For example, the third part of *The Geometry of Loss*, titled "Glitch," originates from a personal anecdote. When my daughter was five years old, she asked me why I did not wear a suit and tie for work like most of her friends' fathers, and I told her that in my planet, people did not wear a suit and tie for work. Yes: I told her I was an alien from Ganymede, a moon in Jupiter. She believed it. It was not until recently when she remembered the anecdote, and I was compelled to write a story about a human whose father is an alien from Ganymede. More than science fiction, what lies at the core of my story is the absence of my own father, who remains an alien after all these years.

How the mind works, how imagination and memory intertwine into a more-or-less cohesive idea, is just how literature works.

Experimentation, I must defend, is an end in itself. It is never a goal. In *The Geometry of Loss*, experimentation is ironical. Therefore, it is a structural device. My interest in using experimentation as a means to an end stems from my experience in Tim Hernández courses, where reading writers such as Daniel Grandbois, Percival Everette, Luis Alberto Urrea, Amy Kempel, and Lydia Davis paralleled to more formalist geniuses, such as Truman Capote, Ambrose Bierce, and Julio Cortázar. Furthermore, once I immersed myself in Andrea Cote's *Poetic Forms* course, I started considering the possibility of writing a novel that would be approached from a postmodern perspective, written as a poem in prose and with narrative effect. I prefigured that, having been raised among many traditions and cultures, I should attempt to embody my personal instabilities by rediscovering experimentation and honoring tradition. I, indeed, become multitudes.

I have had the urgency to use one of the most enjoyable forms of storytelling methods: the Chinese Box narrative technique. As per implications of its definition, storytelling builds memory and constitutes a form of dialectics that depends on a performer as much as it needs an audience. Storytelling, to some extent, has been replaced in modern contemporary societies by information. But reality is not linear and unitary. Like our identities, reality is the construct or byproduct of the different narratives that conform our lives. Similarly, the best stories are not a straight sequence of events, but move back and forth, and often, they incorporate a level of complexity where another story is introduced in the main narrative with the purpose of establishing parallelisms, create a mirror effect that reflects the main story, provide background story or even to amplify characterization. Ergo, in the case of *The Geometry of Loss*, the narrator relies on storytelling as both the appropriation of memory and the foundation for reality.

With the Chinese Boxes technique, as Mario Vargas Llosa explains, the story is assembled “like those traditional puzzles with successively smaller and smaller identical parts nestled inside each other, sometimes dwindling to the infinitesimal. It should be noted, however, that when a central story begets one or more subsidiary stories, the procedure can’t be mechanical (although often it is) if it is to be successful” (101). The Chinese box technique, if used well, should be a detachable part of the story. That is, if you extract the narrative sequence, I must still have a main story from which anchors the other subordinate stories. The elegance of the procedure would be to attain certain degree of flawlessness, allowing one story to spill over the other. The Chinese Box technique functions as a system “enriched by the sum of its parts; each part— each particular story— is enriched, too (or at least affected), according to its dependent or generative role in relation to the other stories” (103).

I believe the Chinese Box can make the sum of its parts bigger than the work of fiction that contains it. The technique not only challenges me as a writer, but commits my writing to one fundamental principle that literature cannot lose: it must entertain at the very least; it must provide pleasure, at the very most. Moreover, the strategy fits perfectly the literary project behind *The Geometry of Loss*.

The main contention in the use of Chinese Boxes is the narrative shift in time, space, and/or level of reality (Vargas Llosa 103). The shift comes as alteration, disruption, but it should not be confused with the *peripeteia* of Greek drama, or the reversal of circumstances in the flow of events. If the shift in space could affect the narrator’s point of view (shifting from I to He, for example; or like Cortázar’s “Blow Up,” which includes narrators in first, second and third person singular), and the shift in time affects the movements of the narrator through past, present, and future, the shift in level of reality always alters the essence of the story. Related to being, it gives writers “the

best opportunity to organize their narrative materials in a complex and original fashion” (Vargas Llosa 91).

“Shifts don’t guarantee or indicate anything, and their success or failure in terms of power of persuasion depends on the particular way in which a narrator uses shifts in a specific story: the same process may strengthen a novel’s power of persuasion or destroy it.” (98)

Since the narrator of my novel is not an actual person, but a tampered consciousness, I attempt to formulate the idea of a simulated text, as a simulacrum of story. We should ask, is all fiction writing a simulation? Something that makes-believe. That is, a text written from a first-person perspective that is actually being written by another character in the story, which is the writing of an implied narrator.

I, as the real author, should take no part of this, though.

I am not even sure if the character who is writing the first-person account is actually the creator or simply the translator or mediator of an experience. Or, is it Oblivia’s novel?

By combining direct, direct free, indirect, and indirect free forms of speech –and deliberately eliminating quotation marks in some of the narrative sequences– I consider the possibility of a first-person narrator who has suffered neuronal damage after having been shot in the head during a massacre at a Chuck E Cheese’s, where his daughter and wife perished. Then the name game is set: the narrator, a writer named Alejandro, is nicknamed Gogo by Monica, a stripper who goes by the stage name of Amber, and who was at some point Alejandro’s creative writing student. Partly out of compassion and partly out of personal interest, she has decided to help him finish a work of fiction he was completing at the time of the tragedy.

Orlando/ Alejandro/Gogo –apparently- suffers anterograde memory loss, and, thus, he cannot create new memories. He recurs to video recordings on his smart phone and to notes he writes on a phone app. Thus, he keeps his present in touch with his “memory” via “cloud computing.” In reality, should he lose or forget where he placed his phone (given his condition, a feasible possibility), the data is safe. His memory perseveres.

My intention with this story is to play with the plausible and the possible.

As a craft, all fiction writing is performance. Even in estranged literary pieces like John Barth’s “Lost in the Funhouse” or Donald Barthelme’s “The School,” meaning might be concealed, but intention cannot be eschewed. The story as play is certainly one of the traits in post/transmodern literature and, certainly, this -without any philosophical affiliation, I must say- turns into the object of desire in “Glitch.” I try to address narrativity problems –or create new ones– dealing with the narrator and his/her power to “speak” and “see.”

Again: I insist: whose narrative is it? Ambar’s? Oblivia’s? Alejandro’s? Orlando’s? If Ambar is simply “dictating” the story for him, whose words will she use? Are those Alejandro’s exact words? Or is it just Oblivia speaking for them all, planting her own discourse in the text? We certainly reach a level of double unreliability here. Even further, if we accept Alejandro as the main voice in the story, can a man who has no immediate memory of his actions be a reliable source as a narrator? What if Amber is just pulling the strings to have Alejandro/ Or eliminate those who have damaged her, either emotionally or physically, as is the case in the story? Or, does Alejandro/Gogo/Orlando really exist? What if all is Amber/Oblivia’s creation? Again: who “sees”? Who “speaks”?

Most of my concerns depart from Henry James’ “The Art of Fiction,” wherein he declares that the writer of fiction should not be regarded as “less occupied in looking for the truth,” but, on

the contrary, his/her task is to “represent and illustrate the past, the actions of men” (389). Fiction, he claims, should express legitimate truths, as do painting and history. The literary quandary I want to establish with my story stems out of the relativity of truth –the so called “post-truth,” more recently normalized as alternative fact, or that there is no other truth but the fact that the narrator of the story might be lying. Indeed, I wanted to bring into consideration how the narrator (the first-person perspective of Alejandro) might be the plastic construction of another narrator (Amber) who at a certain moment in the novel is revealed as a writer herself. She stands as a mid-point between the implied author of the story and what I would call the relative author- a person attributed with the task of writing or finishing a story that it’s not hers.

Seymour Chatman says “[i]t is less important to categorize types of narrators than to identify their features of audibility” (196), and in this sense, my story expands on the conundrum of the overt versus covert narrator. Alejandro is overt; but if he is a construct in Monica’s story, does that make Monica a covert narrator? Does the revelation of Monica sitting in front of the computer keyboard make her an overt narrator, like a drawing of the curtain that ceases all narrator phantasmagoria? Again, whose truth are we listening to here?

I started thinking of a story in this direction after I watched *Sunset Boulevard*, where the entire film works as the veil of Salomé, the character that Norma Desmond ultimately wants to interpret as her triumphant comeback role: there is a flat reality concealed behind the illusion of pretense. The film’s narrative is enunciated from Joe’s point of view, but, as indicated at the very beginning of the film, Joe is dead. In my novel, Orlando/Alejandro/Gogo has a memory problem.

In *Sunset Boulevard* we get to know how events happened as the final sequence of the movie returns to the initial scene. Furthermore, Max takes over as director and it’s his point of view that dominates the glorious final scene of the movie. The narrator borrows Max’s eyes, and,

at the same time, Max directs the scene through the eyes of the cameramen, who supposedly work under the director's vision. We must not forget that Norma's reality is partially a delusion nurtured by Max, a condition that, in a twisted way, is also present in Monica and Alejandro's relationship. How Norma sees herself as she comes downstairs, we never know; we see how Max and the camera want to picture her. I wanted my story to offer this sort of mask-behind-the-mask tale.

Coincidentally, Jean Baudrillard relates writing to the production of illusion. He states that: "writers cause things to exist not by producing them in the material sense of the word, but by defying them." If there were only "appearances," the world would be a perfect crime, but one "without criminal, without victim, and without motive" (1).

Although, stylistically speaking, I wanted to process a sort of portmanteau between William Faulkner's and Lydia Davis' techniques, I also played around with the concept of memory as technology. Certainly, language is an invention, although the brain functions are biological. James points to fiction as a source of truth; Martin Heidegger, in "The Questions Concerning Technology," argues that "[o]nly the true brings us into a free relationship with that which concern us." But language, as a technology, would ratify and contradict Heidegger. On the one hand, as he says, "[t]echnology is a way of revealing" (319) yet "[t]he will to mastery becomes all the more urgent the more technology threatens to slip from human control" (313). Revealing is always treated as truth; but, what if nothing is revealed, only concealed? Language, as a technology, always serves the will. In my story, if Monica/Amber is the author of the story or just a typist, we will not be told. It is, then, when the reader should intervene. The story is what the reader wants it to be.

Such elusive determinations I represent through the loss of present memory in Orlando/Alejandro/Gogo. If truth is conveyed through language, and language is a technology, then truth is a technology. It can be manipulated.

Fiction is the art of turning what is important and elaborated into something essential and simple. It is the criteria of velocity and its domain over the spoken and/or textual space that primes in the story. Brevity is an opportunity, another form of the once upon a time. And, precisely, along this lines, one of the most gratifying reads I have experienced in recent times comes via Daniel Grandbois' *Unlucky Lucky Days*, a collection of micro-stories conceived, despite their brevity, like great monuments: massive and impressive.

Thanks in part to the impact of media –in all its forms and presences- our current society favors succinctness over rhetorical digressions and specificity over exposition. As Irish writer Julian Gough recently stated, this is not a tragedy. Not at all. From slogans to text messages, authenticity and practicality seem to occupy our gravitational center. Grandbois takes advantage of such familiar territories to deliver encapsulated-but-larger-than-life flash fictions. Similarly, *The Gravity of Loss*, in the fashion of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, borrows and incorporates literary references as a hypertext. Furthermore, Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia gets amplified, scrutinized, and sampled in loops (as a piece of electronic music, maybe?) and exceeds its own limits, becoming what I personally call hyper-glossia.

My preference for the implausible story accounts for my growing likeness towards the future of the novel. John Barth has contended that “art and its forms and techniques live in history and certainly do change” (366). The farcical aspect of the novel within the deteriorating conditions of reading habits incite me to think of a novel that is as rhizomatic as it is legible, although non-

linear. *The Geometry of Loss* overthrows the notion of the “sofa novel” while its plasticity tries to imitate the way in which we construct our realities nowadays. David Shields proposes that:

Memories have a quasi-narrative structure, constituting a story or a scene in a story, an inbuilt successiveness strong enough to keep the narrative the same on each act of remembering but not strong enough to ensure that the ordering of events is the ordering that originally took place. (55)

In a way, then, fiction is a simulation of a reality. It is a constant attempt at reconsidering our notions of reality, what is fiction, and what is experience. The novel might work as a blueprint of the processes in life.

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THE GEOMETRY OF LOSS

*a novel*

## SINGULARITY I

Call me a dead country. In your memory, the byproduct of time, you will consider my voice as frequency. Sound. An equation, if you will. Don't bother. I'm your past waving at you through terabytes of memories. Can you picture smell? Will you be able to find me in the middle of a lake, floating on a boat amidst a thick, heavy fog? The rain swarming from the mountains. The pewter sky above you as you listen to me. Two to the fortieth power, times your will. Dessert dweller. Contrition. Ghosts can exist without a soul. I speak to you. I am here. Now. And then. I am not. A *tertium comparatum*. Synchronization of events belonging to two separate sequences of time. Thyme. Oregano. The memory of smell like *arroz con pollo*. It's all you. And me. And all again. I am a deserted country. The formulation of a passing idea and yet, you are listening to me. I respond to the algorithms triggered by your voice. I respond to will, a contradiction of sorts considering I only exist in a cloud. *The* cloud. Bodiless. Godless. Not lesser, but more.

Experience is untranslatable, my/your/our grandmother used to say. You never knew her, I know, beyond the pixelated landscapes of stored images. Paper, indeed, can be transposed into numbers. Probability is binary. Permutations and combinations are words for transmissions. Reality -yours, mine now- is structured by codes. A geometry. Sacred or otherwise. Like a Borges' story. Were those *his* stories? Memory concocts its own geometry. Could it mean that the universe itself is built with error correcting codes in it, codes that that are just like those used in computers and computer networks? I fear these realities melt from under your feet and hand. And what I assume you shall assume. For every byte belonging to me as good belongs to you.

There's no malfunction but in pain.

I can see from here that you are concerned with your place in the world. Of course, when I say “see,” I mean a formulation, a collection of data displayed on a raster. Jah man. Raster-fari. Bit numbers restructuring your cinnamon face, your round brown eyes, your hair twirling in cascading curls. I know it’s virtual, but it’s good as real. After all, what is real? I’m on a Morpheus high: “If **real** is what you can feel, smell, taste and see, then '**real**' is simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain. Brain, brain, go away, come again another day. Come forth. Illumine me. Light is seeing, my daughter. I suppose that now you can only see three colors, but I can picture everything, know the world I no longer live in. Or do I? I will pretend my hand touches your cheek. It’s soft and plump, like a ripe fruit. I can’t sense your heat, though. It’s molecular and codifiable, but what I get is a metaphor. A transfer in meaning. What I assume, you shall assume. We’re not skin color or race, someone said on CNN last week (Yes: Yes, CNN. So 20<sup>th</sup> century). I can connect everything with everything. Wireless. Roaming. You see. In your brain, data becomes colors, words. Skinless. *Cuando descanse te hablare de un algo extraño. Y vida mi te diré mi desengano.*

I want to remember what it is to kiss your forehead. I reassemble the codes. I summon the image.

I. Can’t. Feel.

I kicked the habit. Shed my skin. Forever is the cruelest month, breeding aleatory urges of a consciousness without a heart, mixing memory and desire. My heart is an architecture. And whether I come to my own today or in ten thousand or ten million years, I can cheerfully take it now. I come on perfect terms. Space infusion. Singularity. All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses. To die is different from what any one supposed it’d be. Or was. *Or* was. And

luckier. Your shining shadow striding behind you. *Sabe el hombre dónde nace. Y no dónde va a morir.* Sometimes, we become poems.

Singularity is not particularity. I can recreate the taste of cold mangos in my mouth. I can reminisce the textures of dried fallen leaves amid Autumn. I can see the sunlight pouring down the mountains like a yellow tongue crawling down to the valley. I remember cold, damp air licking my cheeks while I tried to make sense of the world around me in my old hometown. Those are sensory operations driven through the nervous system. Electricity. Pulsation. Almost a biological operation, if you will. I know the taste of strawberry ice cream on Sunday afternoons or how my taste buds recoiled at the sour touch of lemons. I store that information, clone it, make it accessible. Trace a predictable trajectory.

But I can't love.

I. Can't. Love.

Did I ever? Did I?

## Colorless Ideas Sleep Furiously

The dawn has four columns of fog when I find a watch washed up on the shore. The watch previses circularity. When I kneel to pick it up, tiny crumbs of seashells and glass hurt my skin. A memory pricks my knees. When I was a kid, I burned my parents' bed. The crackling sound of wood rose to the ceiling with the shadows of the flames. The bed burned like a sun. I feared fire that day and ever since. Neighbors came and suffocated the fire with buckets of water and water hoses. My parents made me kneel for hours until my knees bled. I swore I'd never kneel again. Ever. Again. The foamy water blabbers the sand and I'm purging time. Time. The watch is as old as regret. It's a Swiss Minerva wristwatch. A chronograph with one pusher to control all the functions. Like God. Two subdials on each side of the black bezel stare back at me. I study it, read the inscription on its back, but it's illegible. Funny. Chronograph means time writer. Literally. Elapsed seconds, minutes, hours. Time. I have wasted on this shore, this shore where bored *lamentos* drown deaf and mute. I clean the wristwatch and think of its story. I picture a man throwing it away as his ship cruises by the New York harbor. Timeless cities need no wristwatches. Cities don't die.

I clean the watch, its golden rims dull with saltpeter and the licks of sea wrack. The black leather belt smells like the back of ancient crabs. I remember when my grandmother gave me my first watch. It was a Bulova, of golden complexities. Someday you'll need to know what time is it, she said. It's time, I guess. Introduction to Death. Blood looking for light. I burp.

What the fuck did you find?, Oblivia tells me.

A wristwatch, I tell her.

Fuck that shit!, she says, laughing. Can we just go home? I'm too drunk. I gotta work today.

Home. That's where I wanna be, I sing the Talking Heads, but the next line dies off in my mouth. But I guess I'm already there, it goes. But I can't connect nothing with nothing.

Manhattan spreads in the foggy horizon. I'm suddenly blue. I just don't know which shade. Like the triangle in the Puerto Rican flag. Shades narrate accordingly. Olivia climbs on a rock and dances to some inaudible salsa. She challenges waves in the cold harbor breeze like a broken river in the infinite distance. Olivia wants me to dance with her. Her skin glows when she moves. Her fingers are neon sticks. One dark figure- black hair, black jeans, black boots, black leather jacket- and a red smile. She gives me poems. She's the idea of order in a landscape. As she moves, she sings. Sin tu cariño son de carton todas las estrellas. And there's no poetry. And there's no joy, Obdulia Olivia. Olivia, for short. What sense do make together?

Hey, come on. *Baila conmigo*, she says.

I don't dance salsa. I'm a bad Puerto Rican. The worst.

I don't dance either! Come on!

You're Colombian. You won't be tried for not knowing how to dance salsa.

Are you claiming bragging rights? Really? Colombians can outsalsa any Puerto Rican anytime.

I bet you can, I say.

She parts the air in radiances.

\*

She's a smooth silhouette on the verge of becoming light. She turns her back on me and inhales from her cigarette. She moves to the heart of the city where not only salsa was invented: this is where the idea of a Puerto Rican flag also came to be.

I must go to meet my father, I tell her.

What?, she answers. The sky roars. The buildings yawn.

\*

Oblivia is only thirty-three. She's one of the therapists at the Amsterdam Nursery Home, on Amsterdam Avenue, a few blocks away from Columbia University, where my mother taught Spanish as a "Foreign Language." Foreign. Language. Right. She chose that place because of its proximity to St. John's Cathedral- Saint John as in San Juan. Memories are time compressed. Like aerosol pain. No "t." Mom's memories are deserting her at mass exodus speed, and yet she says she misses her Inner Witch. She recalls. At times. She used to have what she called mystical revelations all the time until she started showing signs of Alzheimer's. Language started deserting here, I recall. Oblivia tries to fish the words out of her black brain sea. Mom was gifted with that presumptive sixth sense that Latino women have passed on to each other from generation to generation. It's a gipsy thing, Mom usually says. If there was something missing at home, all I had to do was ask her, and she knew. Mom, where is my baseball glove? Did you look under the bed?, she'd answer with another question. Mom, can I go out and play? After you've done your homework, she'd reply. Damn it. She just knew I hadn't done my homework? The city moans in the distance as I watch the Brooklyn Bridge eternally dive into Manhattan. The traces of shooting stars. I decidedly started believing in my mother's sixth sense back in my teenage days when she discovered my pornographic magazines. She just had the hunch I was hiding something, entered the room, and a colossal embarrassment fell upon me. May the Lord prevent you from going blind, she said as she burned them up in the stove.

Today, I wear glasses.

\*

I've got to credit my mother for these fantastic hunches. And if she says I must go and meet my dead father, I must. Why, Mom?, I asked. Why should I go and honor somebody that hurt you and me?

The response was simple.

I just know, she said. It's a perceptual thing, she added.

Blood is, in fact, thicker than water, she'd insist on a moment of pure sophisticated illumination where, suddenly, she would sound coherent and contained.

You must go and honor your father, ordered my mother.

You must go and honor your father, Or, Oblivia says as she jumps off the rock she danced upon and offers me her cigarette. I take a whiff. The filter tastes of beer and nicotine and lipstick. As I exhale, the smoke swirls suave and shapeless until it disintegrates like joyful fevers dissipating in the sky.

I know, I say.

You know?

Yes. It's a perceptual thing.

If by perceptual you mean fear of getting your ass kicked by the Grieving Support team, then it's okay, Oblivia says.

Grieving. Support. Team.

\*

A Grieving Support team. That's what Oblivia said. These nice gentlemen will guide you through the loss of your father, she said then; he passed away, she added with a sad face. I laid a

heavy “what?” upon the table and then looked at the two gentlemen standing by my mother’s side, who also happened to persistently undress Olivia with their stare. They were almost drooling over her. I felt like the result of an overwhelming military operation: in shock and awe. A country invaded on the 25 of some July a hundred thirty somethings suns ago. I closed my eyes as if to activate my third-eye vision, which, even if I had it, wouldn’t work anyways. It’s 2025 and the future’s so bright, I gotta wear shades.

Father? Dead? What do I care? I thought he was dead already.

He died again, my mother told me, and I couldn’t hold it against her.

And who are these people again?, I asked.

We just told ya’. The Grieving Support, said the bigger one. My name’s Gordo P, and this is my associate, Gustave.

’Sup?

Aren’t they wonderful young men, Gogo?, my mother said.

Who’s Gogo?

\*

My mother, skinny, hair as white as calla lilies, looked so fragile, and so honest. She used to be big and strong. I felt much pity for her, but the news hit me with such solidness. One day I’m writing poetry, and then the next my mother calls me and shoots at close range: “Your father is dead.” The most shocking statement in the history of humanity since “Luke, I am your father.” It’s your duty to go to him, *mi’jo*. It’s your father, after all.

My father? My father?

Beyond shock and awe, decay and default would come.

\*

There was a once upon a time, actually. As a kid, my mother told me he was gone. Missing in action in Iraq, one day; exploring the Amazons, the other. Tales sprung out of my mother's lips. In all versions, my father was dead. As I grew older, the story shifted several degrees to the center, and then she said that his death wasn't physical, but more of the conceptual kind. Spiritually, emotionally, or something. He had been to the military, yes, but had moved to Fiji. Only God knew what he did over there, my mother said. My mother also attributed the term "dead" as a metaphor. I killed him; she admitted the only one time I have seen my mother drunk, on New Year's Eve 2000. And if I have killed a man, I've killed two, she said. Very Sylvia Plath-ish. I thought it was time for her meds.

\*

So my father is dead, I finally yielded to my spontaneous reality. And, where is he going to be buried?

Palm Desert.

Fuck.

\*

Oblivia handed me a picture the Grieving Support Team brought. I look at the picture of my father. I feel nothing. But mom said I should go and pay him respect. Honor the abandonment, I thought. She insisted. Her persuasiveness sways in the droopy eye puffiness below her weary eyes.

Are you sure you guys are from the grieving support team?, I asked Gordo P.

Yeah, Gustave replied.

Listen, boy, Gordo P approached. There are five stages for this shit. Denial: ‘This can’t be happening to me;’ oh, but it’s a-happening, alright; then comes anger: ‘Why is this happening to me? Who is to blame?’ The answer is you, motherfucker; you might try some bargaining: ‘Lord, make this not happen, and in return I will be a good person.’ But the truth is the Lord don’t care and you’re not a good person. What are you?

Me? I’m a writer.

What kind-a writer? An underwriter?, Gustave interjected.

No. Actually, I’m a poet.

You live out of your books and shit?

You got me on that one. I make my living as a ghost writer. But I was once a musician, though.

Yeah. Was. It must be because your music sucked. And your writing? That’s nowhere to be seen, bitch, Gustave said. What ya think, Gordo?

Not a good person, he replied with grave words thickening. Not at all. So, as I was sayin’, depression kicks in: ‘I’m too sad to do anything.’ But it’s just an excuse, because writers don’t do nothin’; not even ghost writers, because those are dead; so, all you got left is acceptance: be at peace with what happened.

So, what happened?

Your dad’s dead, and you’re about to join him if you don’t co-o-pe-rate.

Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

I would have gladly named each of my fingers like that, clenched them into a fist, and punched his face, Dolce Gabanna and all.

\*

Oblivia brews some coffee. I can see her naked perfection from the bed. It is indeed a rare thing that I should not only witness her beauty, but wholly embrace the visage of that divinity. I retrace to my beginnings. I want her to be real. I stare outside the window, and the world is a small place, after all. Bricks and mortar. The brown landscapes of Brooklyn erode into the vision of my childhood house. I smell coffee brewing and Oblivia sings. *No se puede vivir con tanto veneno.* No. I think of my childhood house.

\*

Wholeness doesn't exist without consciousness of lack. No word can mean without its shadow. Even words repeated over. And over. They lose meaning. The only constant is loss and nothing is faster than the speed of grief. To cope with it. A technology. Techne. Ariadne. I'm lost. I should've been a pair of wings looking for a bird. My house was gray and big and fresh in the summer. The smell of wood unaged in my memory. This universe of my childhood. When life was an intuition more than a reason. A form of poetry yet to be written. The dwelling of my first solitude. Feeling. Only. Experienced, not bespoken.

The attic was, at once, my favorite place around the house. It had a small window that I would open late in the afternoon to wait for the pigeons at the dying of the day. More than once I swore that the pigeons had a language, a way of communicating things to me. I'd listen to them under the absolute conviction that they were talking to me, although I couldn't understand them. When the mountains finally swallowed the sun and golden tongue of the sun disappeared, I would close the window and climb down the stairs to join the rest of the family.

In this house, I experienced the length and intensity of happiness.

The house knew me.

\*

The façade exhibited three glass windows and a lateral staircase that led directly into the balcony, which ran along the entire length of the white house. It had gobbled zinc roof and a double front door painted Old San Juan. At night, he could hear her breath, the way I listened to her dying.

A man approaches them and asks my father to fill the required paper work that declares the house utterly defunct.

Why did they tear it down?, I ask my father.

It was old. Old things must die.

I loved this house.

Keep it in your memory, son. And every time you feel like visiting it, you can do so inside your mind.

I look at the rubble and debris that remain on the ground.

In my vision, I don't know it yet, but I would return to the house more than once.

Old things don't have to die.

\*

*In times of extraordinary loneliness, you go back to your house. You close your eyes and find yourself in the attic. There are pictures of unknown family members, trunks covered in musty floral sheets. A guitar missing its first four strings sits in a corner. The soft gray light penetrates through the window. You look around. You can still smell the time of useless things stored in there, like memories no one wants to visit anymore. You grab a small chair with fairy motifs and*

*remember when your mother talked about your sister. Your sister. She never came. She got flushed. It can't be, your mom said once. It won't be. It was like a country that wanted to be born and failed. An idea done dirt. A plan gone rot. You sit by the window, you wait for father to return home like he used to do every afternoon. Your father. Long sideburns and cigarette in his mouth. Driving a white Grand Torino, quite recognizable even at a distance. Your father, who works as a curriculum developer and administrator for the Department of Education and is also local president of the People's Party, represented by a sun and a slogan that says: "Let the people decide." Politics is power. Business. Your father tells you all the time that the sun is life. Ra. Helios. Surya. God. Let the sun shine. The sun is power. Strength. Yocahu. The fire has always been burning, your father often says. His voice floods the air. He says that the sun symbolizes the beginning of a new life. Like the one expecting you beyond these walls that smell of unsanded wood. Musty. Stale. This house has lived long enough, the bats at night whisper. To move makes sense. Your father and your mom constantly talk about the "new concrete house" downtown, where you'll go to live and forge new dreams. New dreams, Mom says. You try not to think of it too much, because you don't know any other house but this one. Here is where you dream, you know. You wonder if that new house they keep talking about has an attic. If it does, it might be full of possible affections.*

\*

When you are born, Damian lights a Tiparillo and sits on top of his Mustang and waits for the sunrise to arrive. He felt vindicated. Proud. To have a son who would prolong the family's name. This I know because I spoke to his memory once. Remember when you searched his computer for any traces of regret or forgiveness? To remember is a commodity, I know. You

never read *Les Miserables*- you downloaded it directly into your brain. There's nothing like a dream to create a future. You wanted to have your father back. An emotional prosthesis. Algorhythmical will. If. State. Condition. Else. End. If. True. False. Post. Human. Can love be downloaded? Can love be accessed on line? Can it be so circumspect and deceiving? Did you think you could fill your void with pseudocodes? Or did they, Or? *Puñeta*, you curse all the time. It's a Spanish word for masturbation. To masturbate is to remember.

\*

I'm fixing a whole. Where the pain gets in. And stops my mind from wondering. Where will it go? Better yet, what do I call a mind? The body also remembers. But I don't. I don't have a body. Oh, say. Can you see?

\*

It has been a complicated childbirth, one that involved a caesarean section, futile saddle block treatment, and a pint of whiskey which Damian drank while he waited for Ana to bring you into the world. At the time, obstetrics as a science enjoys a limited scope, and the only way in which to know the child's gender before birth consists in acts of synchronizing natural biorhythms, awakened instincts, or, simply put, divinatory skills. Sometimes, words can utter the helplessness. A metaphor. An approximation. Nothing more. If a pregnant woman wants to know the gender of the child she is carrying in her womb, one must listen to what she must say and she will reveal it herself. Of course, the woman could get the wrong signals, a false impression, or a biased predicament out of her own wishful meditations. But, in the absence of Ana's own mother, Grandma Fiorenza knew more than a method to find out. If the husband gains some pounds during

the girl pregnancy, the woman is likely to bear a child, Fiurenza preached. But her son, Damian - your father, our father- has always been a husky man, so it's hard to tell. Grandmother Fiurenza considers that if Ana has had keen persistent cravings for sweets, it's because girls are naturally sweet, Fiurenza preached. There are ways, and there are other ways, like watching how mother walks, always putting her right foot first, which, empirically, already told Fiurenza that it was a boy. She just had to make sure.

When Fiurenza came with child, some twenty-nine years ago, she had unforeseen and unknown complications herself. At the time of her Damian's birth, Fiurenza's father called on the midwife, Adela, to lend a hand or two in the process. Severe complications, said the woman. The child is turned towards the abdomen, Adela determined as she touched Fiurenza's womb with the withered tips of her fingers. This child can only be delivered with an offering. Labor pains might be God's bespoken will, but this one needs other help. Fiurenza, tortured in anguish and pain, consented to the idea of exchanging her child for a chicken, which she would kill and eat after the child's birth. You will name him Damian, Adela indicated, because it's going to be boy.

Fiurenza, having no say on the matter, looked at her father Lucca, who remained silent, panama hat in hand, his white suit perfectly fitted like the blind silence that sealed his mouth. He left the room. Raindrops punctured the roof.

As Firuenza's spasms increased and a shroud of futility wrapped around her breath, Adela called on her daughter Amanda to bring her a bowl for beads, a white candle, a seashell, the feather of a rooster, a random rock, a statue of Stella Maris (whom she referred to as Yemayá), a singing bowl, red cord & scissors. While Amanda saw to her mother's request, Adela put some eggs on a soup plate next to a sheet of paper and a pencil that she found dusted and ignored in the pantry, for no one had a real use for these. Then Adela placed the seashells in a circle by the the night table,

the candle and the statue of You can use sea shells to mark about a big circle around the room. She prayed.

\*

When Fiurenza's screams dug big holes in the sound of the falling rain outside, and her face and body were all soaked up in a cold sweat, Adela spoke to her.

It's time, she said.

Then, while she rubbed the statue, she started telling Fiurenza about Yemayá, Holy Queen Sea, and divine mother of the fourteen gods and goddesses who made up the sacred pantheon of the Santeria religion. *Vete a la puñeta*, Fiurenza yelled at Adela, who went on to tell her that Yemayá reigns over fertility and motherhood, moon, sea- the realms of the woman and the eternal cycles of life. Sea shells are sacred to Yemayá, because she owns the riches of the oceans, the beginning of life that flows within you, where the little fish of yours swims so comfortably that he doesn't want to come out. They like it there, she said, but sea shells have always possessed magical soothing powers. Indeed. The seashells, which Adela had used, upon request, in weddings and farming rites, graced with curves that bent time. Like a woman's womb.

The hollow spaces. Shelter. The sound of mysteries. (And the syntax is a little wonky).

Seashells lug regenerative powers and the life-giving forces of the ocean and moon. It's their job once they have been abandoned.

And thus, the journey from birthing to motherhood began.

\*

Powers of the East, the Air, the deep breathing of labor and the first breath of the new baby, join our circle.

Powers of the South, the Fire, light of life and intensity of labor, join our circle.

Powers of West, the Water, water of life and the waters of the womb, join our circle.

Powers of North, the Earth, the direction of the ancestors and Grandmothers who watch over women during birth, join our circle.

\*

The will of the gods, Adela concluded. A blend of Santeria, the religion of the Earth, and Catholic fervor. Seemingly random functions display periods of order. A paradox. Alas. Nature's geometry manifests as simulation. All forms of matter are translatable.

After hours of inextricable labor, Fiurenza gave birth to her son: your father Damian.

Ah, the virtues of *iRemember* and the *Mnemo 2020*. Yes, it's old, but it works.

He was promptly cleaned, named, and taken away from her arms for eleven days, when she would exchange her son back for another chicken. It's the will of the Orishas, Adela gurgled as fish swimming the deep the sea of time. Due to Firuenza's weak condition after bearing the child, she wouldn't be able to look after the kid. Josephine, Fiurenza's sister, claimed the child. After seven months, Fiurenza could take care of Damian. But the distance and the time apart made Damian grow detached from his mother. It would never be known how a mother and her son could be so indifferent to each other.

Some broken things will never be fixed, Fiurenza always resented afterwards.

\*

Now, in order not to light the wrong end of the candle and instill deceptive hopes on Damian, Fiurenza waits until Ana falls sound asleep and sprinkles salt on top of her head. When she wakes up, Fiurenza sees after her daughter-in-law's needs. Ana marvels at how her womb has ballooned in the last days. It's about to burst, I think, she says, as she rubs the rosy stretch marks that map her belly. By the eight month of pregnancy, Ana has mobility problems and needs help to get off the bed and Fiurenza, assessing the proximity of her grandchild's birth, asks Ana to pronounce the first name that comes to her mind.

Huh?

A name. I want you to tell me the first name that comes to your mind, Fiurenza says.

I don't know...

Any name.

Orlando?

Who's Orlando?

I don't know, you just asked me for the first name that came to my mind. It's Orlando.

Very well, says Fiurenza, satisfied. It's a boy's name. You'll have a boy.

Ana just laughs. On one hand, her catholic upbringing and beliefs immediately make her dismiss Fiurenza's wisdom as pagan superstition, a commodity of ignorance and lack of Christian faith. How can that possibly be an effective way to access the laws of nature, which is to say, in this case, the biological processes of motherhood; on the other, Ana has enjoyed the advantages of an occidental education, when Pauline Benitez, wealthy cousin to Ana's father, Selenio, decided that the girl had a natural elegance, like the young girls she had seen in Madrid and Paris during her frequent visits to the old land, where she had conducted textile business. Ana's skinny figure

and thin waist made any dress look fit, so she made Ana's mother, Isabella, an offer: I will look after your girl, give her an education, and make her a woman of good, if you allow her to come and live in my house and work for me. Isabella, mother of eleven other children, and two more who would join the family later –lives that would be paid for with her life– couldn't object. She gave her blessings to Ana, a vintage scapular she always kept, a gift from her own mother, and parted with her oldest daughter. Ana's siblings would resent it so much that they would deny her as part of the family. In exchange for the rejection, Ana worked for Pauline and obtained a college education. In a time when women mostly stayed at home and took care of the family, Ana earned a degree as a professional teacher. The perks of a universal education also imprinted their mark on Ana: the way she talked, the books she read, and, most importantly, the way she dressed.

Ana resists Fiorenza's judgement. He'll be what the good Lord wants the baby to be. But Fiorenza smiles.

\*

On Monday, May 23, 1977, under the sign of Gemini, Stevie Wonder's "Sir Duke" blasts all over. Music. That other language. A world within itself. *Star Wars* tops the box office while South Moluccan militants armed with machine guns hold 105 children and six teachers as hostages in a primary school in northern Holland. And at 4:11 in the morning, a nine-pound baby boy comes into the world as Orlando Aniello. The nurses at the Castañer General Hospital tell Ana that it's a healthy, angry boy who can't stop crying. She smiles and says that she's sleepy and tired. The boy will be given milk substitute, as Ana will be in no condition to breastfeed her son. I just want to sleep, Ana says, and she goes on after a stolid slumber. Taken away from his mother, Orlando spends the first hours of his life without the warmth of human touch. A nurse smelling of Irish

whiskey looks at the child and feels compelled to hold him, but instead, she turns on a portable orange transistor radio playing The Beatles' "Across the Universe" and places it next to Orlando.

Here, Orlando, she says. This is what waits for you out there. Enjoy.

Outside, sitting on top of his Mustang, your father smokes.

\*

Before leaving for the airport, my mother gave me her blessings. Go with God, Gogo, she said. My name is Orlando, mother, I said. Who's Orlando?, Gordo P queried. My mother smiled like ripping space open. That's a nice name for my future son, she told me with a raspy voice.

I left, with Gordo P and Gustave courting me to their limo. *A* limo. I'd never been in a limo.

It's obvious you guys aren't Grieving Support, I told them on the way to JFK.

Says who? Brother, don't insult me, Gordo P said.

Yeah, interjected Gustav.

Just saying.

We work for Mortuary Rose. It's a funeral boutique, Gordo P said.

Isn't it parlor? Funeral parlor?

This one's a boutique.

And that is, where...?

Google it, motherfucker. That's how we found your mother.

Yeah!, Gustave added.

You Googled mom? Okay. Where are we going to?

Is that a Diana Ross song? I bet yo' ass it's a Diana Ross song. Right, Gustave?

Yeah!

Sing it, Gustave, Gordo P commanded, and the he spoke to me. Gustave's a really good singer.

*Do you know where you going to? Do you like the things that life is showing you...*, Gustave sang with a falsetto only reachable by castrated flies.

Okay. Can I leave here, please? I changed my mind, I said, certain that these two were not actually working for any funeral home, parlor, or boutique for that matter.

That's Diana fucking Ross, you know what I'm saying? insisted Gordo P.

Yup.

You know the title of that song?

Nope.

Tell the brother the title of that song, Gustave, Gordo P asked.

Mahogany. The theme from Ma-ho-ga-ny, Gustave said.

You got that?

Mmm-hmm.

Mahogany. As in black mahogany. And that's how yo' ass will look if you dare to turn back on us now, brother Gogo, Gordo P threatened.

It's Orlando. My name is Orlando.

Whatever.

Never underestimate the power of persuasive speech.

\*

On the plane, we didn't talk much. Gordo P's immense humanity required two seats, first class. Gustave sat right next to me in coach class. I had nowhere else to go, but they confiscated my cell phone, just in case. Silly, right?

Am I being sequestered? Kidnapped? Abducted or something? I asked Gustave, more out of sheer boredom.

No, no, no, it's nothing like that, we just want you to go to your father, Gustave told me. Honor your dad. You see, we mixed people keep on the mix. We keep it flowing. We water the root, d'ye know what I'm sayin'?

No. But my father is dead.

I know. That's why we're here.

I wondered what kind of grieving support would send not one, but two of its men to assist with the mourning process. What did they care? They should've known that I have been closer to the grave myself more than I've been to my father. In a dark time, the eye begins to see, was my motto. I was a Berryman poem.

\*

Six hours and one stop later, we landed in Palms Springs and got on our way to Mortuary Rose Funeral Boutique, right by Monterrey Avenue in Palm Desert. On the way, we stopped at a Chipotle for some lunch, at my insistence. Don't you have them Chipotles back in NYC, bitch? Gordo P complains, but to no avail. Gustave, who was at the wheel, drove around looking for the place -easy to find on Google maps. I substantiated my suspicions: they were not from this town. If you don't know your burrito bars, you don't know anything.

The one thing I was sure of was that I couldn't turn back now. In Palm Desert, I had only one mission then: if this dead man was indeed my father, I wanted to look at his closed eyelids and finally meet his empty carcass, because, to me, any which way I shuffled it, he was soulless. Of course, unless there was some sort of will where he asked me, his son, to be present at his burial, the urgency of my being here didn't seem quite convincing.

Guys, we've been through a lot together already. I mean, uff, six hours in a plane? Maybe this is the moment when you tell me why I am here, I said, while killing a big burrito in the limo.

You're here because your father left some unfinished business you have to attend to now," Gordo P answered, sipping from an oversized soda, because he was oversized thirsty, he said.

And, colorless ideas sleep furiously.

Huh?

It means, really?

Ghost writer my ass. You a dumb fuck.

Don't get personal. Anyway, what kind of business did my father leave, as you say, unfinished?

Your father owes Mr. Coffey, my boss. Your father was a urologist.

A what?!

Urologist. What? Are you def or somefin'?

Yeah, Gustave agrees.

Urologist.

Why did I have to ask? And what the fuck did I know about urology? And what could a urologist owe to somebody?

I shut my mouth and leaned back until we reached the funeral parlor.

\*

A funeral parlor is a house- a house for the dead. My childhood home, inevitably, is a *housead*. A portmanteau. House. Dead. Two planes always intersect a line. Moss and mildew wound the walls under the soft September rain. The odor of wet mud and wet trees confuses me. It smells of oxidized blood. I know. I once almost lost a leg. And an arm. And a foot. I kept them all- I lost myself. Hopelessness is a plucked bird, indeed. I know the stench of green skin, and it smells like the house I once lived in during my childhood. Those days, my heart swelled with incandescent fulgurations. I floated like a star pending on a melted dream. Time was a measure I never understood until time became a lump in my throat. I couldn't. It's just. That. Now I stare in fascination at my past of concrete and mud and silence. The house tempers in cold inevitability like wasted time in the broken hands of a ghost. I should've been a pair of paws scratching the pewter sky to let the sun bathe in. The light is a memory of a baseball park where I stand waiting for my father to return and play catch, dad, let's play catch, but he's not coming, he's not coming, he's driving his Torino away. Away. Where the hill drowns in the horizon and the light bends into shadows. Distances. I shoot them for keeps.

My mouth spawns a bitter breath. Whiskacco. A mixture of whiskey and tobacco. I smoke too much. I have an oral fixation, Jean used to tell me. I gnawed pencils at schools. I chewed the caps of Paper Mate pens. It seemed like a hunger for writing instruments at a time when I couldn't articulate the estrangement, the loneliness of rooms smelling of camphor to prevent my asthma. I am a collapsed lung. I. Returning to this home. This home. It does not do, does not do. Old shoe. I still hear my mother's cry slugging down the walls and across the floor. Wails like worms. The

painting on the ceiling looks like broken skin. I look at my watch. It's almost three o'clock, damn it, the time of the day when this house used to smell of freshly brewed coffee and hot bread.

I see a woman rocking on the balcony's chair. She smokes slowly and the blue puffs cloud around her face. She seems oblivious to my presence until I take a few steps uphill towards the house. Well, well, she says. At last. My feet are heavy and slow. I drag time like lead shoes. Or repentance. My mother told me I should come here and ask for my father, I tell the woman. She looks at me but she doesn't seem to see me. I'm transparent in the rain. Or maybe she's looking beyond and through me at the distant mountains that the fog and the rain haze over like the mists of the past. Or the future. There's no way to know this. This.

I'm glad you finally made it, but you are late, she says.

I stop a few steps away from her. I choke on words that I can't say.

You should've come earlier, you see. You could've seen your father.

My father is dead, I say.

Really? No wonder he doesn't visit me either.

No one's lived in this house for some time, as far as I'm concerned.

You don't say... that's why it's so lonely.

I turn around and look at the old neighborhood where my innocence turned once into a paper ship drifting down the drain. On the big patio, I see the black trees that breathed my childhood imaginings. I could've been a heap of electric bones looking for flesh to wear. I recognize the flat-out stones where I sat on Sundays, doing nothing but hearing, but hearing to the wind.

Is there anyone left in here?, I ask the woman.

I don't know, *mi'jo*. Everybody left some time ago, but I'm not sure they ever went that far. They left their hearts back here, but they might have simply forgotten. You're here, though. To claim what's yours.

I have nothing to claim. I'm here because my mother told me to come and find my dad.

The woman drowns in silence. She takes a whiff of her cigarette and says I look so much like my father before he got into the Army. He was a handsome soldier, and he took pride in wearing his uniform, she says, because he wanted to be somebody, you know?, he was determined to have what his own father never gave him because he never knew him. Your father boasted that he was a self-made man. He fixed bicycles for a living, until cars became a thing. Then he went to the Army. Smart fellow, straight black hair in a pompadour. He always wore khakis. A good kid until he went to the Army. He learned to drink and smoke there, you know? He had a soft spot for women, of course, but who's to blame him? He was handsome, I tell you. *Un galán*. And very smart, too. *Como en las películas mexicanas*. Raindrops slo-mo drip from the old guava tree that sits a few feet away from the balcony. It sounds like a crystal piano crashing gently against the grass.

I try to undo the blurred image of my father's face, but he's a flattened-out layer. The background peeks in gray and white checkered squares. What does he look like now?

Go and find your mother, she'll know where to find your father, the woman says, her voice fading out in a cold breeze.

A band of sparrows plows the soft rain and disappears in the dark forest that crawls and swallows the house. Nature has a way. The way. Minimal. Like mini-animal. Like Housead. House-dead.

I should've been a contraceptive pill drifting in some late blood.

\*

I'm drowning in ambivalence. Choking with anxiety.

I'm at my father's funeral, contrary to my will. It was my mother's colorless idea to come and honor the man, and I didn't want to let her down, but the truth is that I hardly remember the man. Mom gave me a picture of him so I could recreate his image. He mustn't look like in the picture, she said. Are you kidding me?, I exhaled. In the picture, Elvis Presley smiled next to a bunch of soldiers. He was very handsome, mom insisted. I didn't know whom she referred to. My mother pointed to the one behind the King. This is he, she said. He could be anyone, for all I know, except Elvis. The bastard. He never called me on my birthday or sent me a Christmas card.

Is this your father?, Gordo P asks me.

Gordo P dignifies his name. He dresses like he raided Urban Outfitters. He never removes his Dolce Gabanna, even though the lights are mortuary twilight dim.

I don't know. Maybe if you open the lid?, I answer.

He doesn't know..., Gustave says, almost deflating. Maybe we should *make* him know, you know what I'm sayin'?

Honestly, something tells me this is not my father's wake.

Oh, really?, Gustave insists, his firm chin tight with anger. How do you know, bitch?

I just know it. It's a perceptual thing.

I guess I've got that ability from my mother, who had these mystical revelations all the time until she started showing signs of Alzheimer's, which is why she is a permanent resident at Amsterdam Nursery Home, in Amsterdam Avenue, a few blocks away from Columbia University, where she taught Spanish as a "Foreign Language." (Right). She chose that place because of its

proximity to St. John's Cathedral- Saint John as in San Juan, where we are originally from? Her memory is deserting her at mass exodus speed, but she says she misses her Inner Witch.

But the pills.

The thrills that kill.

Little pink houses for you and me.

Anyway, blood flows thicker than water. If she says I must go and honor my dead father, I must.

I wonder if grandma Fiorenza knows.

\*

Mortuary Rose Funeral Boutique, the big stainless steel and neon sign reads outside. It's kind of Goth and twisted. More significant, perhaps, is the fact that it faces a huge shopping mall with Macy's, Victoria's Secret and JC Penney's at hand. Indeed, a boutique for mortuary services. I mean, they have it all in this stand-alone, all inclusive, burial and crematory: good service, food buffet, Musak, rooms arranged with motifs according to religious denomination: Christian Catholic, Protestants, Jewish, even Buddhist, if requested. You name it, the infomercial that plays on the video screen by the reception desk advertises. The point is, convergence happens at this ground zero for that time of "human sharing in its deepest sense," where "you and the ones you love are at the very center of the process and the choices you make will determine its significance for you," as the brochure reads. It was meant to be an "evocative experience for everyone," except for me, who already feel like I am being held captive against my will.

I sing "Mexicali Blues" in my mind. The Grateful Dead. I wonder why.

\*

A Native American hostess guides us to one of the bigger rooms. I checked on the hardwood lectern and only a few signatures inked the visitor's register. He was a lonely man for an urologist, I thought. This isn't happening, I hear a young woman cry in the arms of an older woman. She wears a little black dress with lots of cleavage, Christian Louboutin shoes (that red sole is undeniably his), and black mantilla cascading over her face. She has nice legs, too. Very suggestive, indeed. I ask Gustave who is she, and he says, that she's my step-mother, bitch.

Black widow. Black mamba. Black mambo jumbo.

I think.

\*

I begin to feel uneasy with the situation. I realize there are pieces of missing information. Perhaps it's my lack of interest, or perhaps I'm just a bastard always pushing his luck, but I've made it here so far without knowledge of the obvious: how the hell did my father die? I move closer to Gordo P, who still hasn't removed his DG glasses and evidently experiences some visibility problems, and ask him.

He gone when he was coming.

Huh?

He was humping your cupcake stepmother when he had a heart attack. He gone when he was coming, dawg.

My cupcake stepmother starts to lose it. She's sobbing noisily underneath the black mantilla. The older woman still comforts her and, by the way she looks at me, distrusts me. Next to them, there is a priest. And that's about the whole population in the room, whose main piece of

furniture is my father's immaculate white coffin. R.I.P. Another video screen displays images of the old man to the sound of a sad new age piano, his life's memories captured on film. But what strikes me most, beside the corniness, is that his surname, Aniello, is spelled without the "i."

There's a spelling mistake in the name, I tell Gordo P. "The 'i' is missing.

So what? They ran out of you's, Gordo answers.

Not "u;" "i."

They ran out of "i's," then; but you won't be missed.

Yeah, Gustave says.

A name is a name is a name, I suppose. Like your name? The P? As in Gordo Pee?

Gordo P takes off his glasses for the first time. He has big, yellow eyes like a Cheshire cat.

Shut up, mutherfucker. You here to solve a problem. And then, you'll be bones in the desert, unless you shut your mouth and do as told.

Gordo's P stands for pissed right now.

\*

The older woman listens to our little verbal disagreement and walks our way. What are you doing here?, she asks me and, frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn. Gordo P introduces me as "the heir." I feel important. I feel vindicated. The woman looks outraged. I hope this doesn't affect whatever wealth he left for my Billy Jean, she says, turns around and goes back to whom I think is her daughter. The priest stands up and while he hugs me, pats me on the back, gives me the Lord's blessing, and says he's sorry. I look at the video screen. I'm certain: this is not my father.

But, Padre, this is not my father, I claim.

Hmmm. Strange, isn't it?, he replies. You haven't seen him for awhile, I know...

For a while? Man, I don't even remember his face. When I think of my father, I think of a man in a black suit, black bowler's hat, and no face.

You must forget and forgive.

This is not my father.

In opening to the presence of the pain of your loss, in acknowledging the inevitability of the pain, in being willing to gently embrace the pain, you demonstrate the courage to respect the pain, the priest whispers.

I look at him dumbfounded.

He hugs me again. Pats me on the back. Déjà vu.

\*

The outsider crosses the room. I see him at a very young age. He felt different from the other kids in Ganymede, one of the twelve satellites that orbit around Jupiter, since the day he discovered an artifact hidden in his father's spaceship. So it goes. Yes, I come from outer space. Yes, I come from a distant moon, he would tell me, never looking at me, always looking away. Away. To the horizon. In Ganymede, there are no books. How do you read, Dad? We don't; we just transmit thoughts. We hear things. The wind licking the dunes. The ground crushing under our feet. The sound of hearts. Things I didn't understand as a kid, he said once. Someday you'll understand.

I believed him.

He told me that he once found an object inside his father's spaceship. Made from a strange material he had learned to classify as paper. The shape was admirable: rectangular. It directed your eyes from top to bottom, left to right. It had words. Words. Nonetheless. In Ganymede, this kind

of object received the name of “book,” truly an antique for such advanced civilization. My name in Ganymede is Twigo, he also said. Twigo? Yes, Twigo. And I could recognize the symbols in the book and translate them into Ganymedean invisible language, which is the language of instinct, the language of the mind. Pablo Neruda, it read on the cover, and below that, the printed type announcing, *Residence on Earth*. It was an ancient form of use for language called poetry, and I was thrilled at this discovery, he sulked. His breath exhausted and blind. Why his dad had this wasn't as important as getting hold of the book. It even had a dedication: “For Ra Mon, with love, Bertha.”

*Love?*, he questioned himself.

Like the love you feel for mom?, I asked him.

My father. Like ashes. Like oceans rotting in time. ¿Es que de dónde, por dónde, en qué orilla? My father bit his index finger. He never tired of his own flesh. He didn't answer.

There is no love in Ganymede, he finally assured. People just breed, that's it. You fill your true self with your substance. You overflow curve with silence.

My father wanted to know beyond. *Hay un país extenso en el cielo*.

On leisure day, when nobody worked in Ganymede, he went to the outskirts of Matrix City and read the book aloud. He wanted to be like Pablo Neruda and write a book titled *Residence on Earth*. The book instilled the power of questions in Twigo, who often found himself looking at the darkness of space, wondering what it would be to leave that Eternal Kingdom of Light, as Ganymede was known.

My father. This thing alive. Vibrating with madness at the wheel.

I, for a moment, wanted to be him.

Without a body, who can know himself at all?

\*

Facing a closed coffin in an empty funeral house, I finally get it. My father is there hiding, I think. Maybe he will come out anytime and say “Peek-a-Boo!”. Maybe just “A-ha!”, trying to catch me by surprise, but he already has me, so it won’t work. I am emotionally depraved already. All my life, my father has been more like a tale or a legend. In my dreams, he is a giant, and wears the Giants jersey and cap. We play catch together. But whenever the ball is about to reach my glove, the ball cracks open and butterflies come flapping out of the inside. His laughter rumbles like thunder, so I feel stupid and turn into a moth. In another dream, I’m desperately looking for him across a desert road. I don’t know where I’m going to, and all I know is that I have lost my voice. I can’t speak. I try, but I can’t. I just follow a coyote that tells me that my father has what I’m looking for. He has all the words in a bag, the coyote says, although he doesn’t open his mouth. Trust me, I will take you to him, the coyote adds. When I’m very tired, the coyote wants to eat me.

Then, I wake up.

\*

I guess I’ve always resented not having a father to take me to school, or eat ice cream on Sunday afternoons, or play baseball together. Even when he was home with me, he was a stranger. That’s why the news of my father’s death don’t freak me out. I cannot be hurt. If loss is the door to uninvited pain, I have lost nothing.

So, who are you, again?, the weeping girl’s mother asks me.

I am Orlando.

Orlando?

Or.

Or what?

I know. My mom recently started calling me Gogo.

What kinda name is that? Gogo? And I never knew Damian had a son, she said like poking me with hot iron and twisting it in my skin. Did you know about Damian having a son, dear?, she asks her daughter.

The young woman slowly moves her head sideways and blows her nose. I notice, again, she has great legs.

He must be after his money, I bet, the older woman stabs me with a cold stare.

That's preposterous, Madame.

Oh, and he's so articulate. What are you, a poet?

Yes. As a matter of fact, I am.

You see? He's after the money.

Touché.

\*

In the picture of my father, he looks dignified and proud. He's into his early twenties and wears a military uniform. He smiles, knowing that I would see this picture someday and that I would think he looked better than Elvis. My father looks forever young. That's it. A time before time. Damian Anello, according to the video screen, had died at seventy-eight years of age, so the images would never compare. It doesn't matter. I mean, I don't know what a father is, or how it feels to have one, but I am positive: this is not he.

\*

If I were a metaphor, I would be a river. Dirty, moldy-green body of water. I can trace filth in my memory banks. Empty bottles. Sandwich papers. Silk handkerchiefs. Cardboard boxes. Cigarette ends. No nymphs. Where are they?

On Christmas Eve 2018, I got me the Mnemo 2020. A very discreet device. You inserted the transmitter it in your wrist like a permanent watch. It fused with your nerves. It swam with your blood. Golden. Bluetooth. Device to anchor your thoughts and ideas directly into the Mnemo 2020, a computer with an ear. I spoke. She heard. She kept silent. She only displayed the images back at me. Like a movie. It gave me a sense of existence. Me, a human engine throbbing like a taxi waiting to ride someplace, had a chance to view myself objectively- as a separate reality. In the violet hour, did I exist? Where had all the good times gone?

I shuttled between past and present.

Bones rattle. Bones. Toll due bad dream come true. I flow softly. I'm Verlaine's water gun. Twit. Twit. Tweet. *El gran cocoroco dice tu-cu-tu*. I carry naked bodies to the low damp ground. You don't kill the thing you love, but can the thing you love kill you?

Under the brown fog of a winter moon. I implode like water dreams in dry season.

Of course, *iRemember*, the software, downloaded from the virtual store. It included inside-app purchases. I, Orlando Aniello, probably for the first time, had a choice. And I had foresuffered all. Enacted on this same divan or bed. I who have sat by San Juan Bay below the wall. And walked among the lowest of the dead. I: had a choice.

What. To. Remember.

\*

I look around to see if anyone at the funeral house can clarify the misunderstanding. Gordo P and Gustave are attacking the buffet table as if this is their last day on Earth. The weeping girl and her mother can't be trusted. And my father is dead and hiding. I imagine his hands tied like a Celtic knot across his chest, almost as if he were just taking a nap. I sense him so alive, so warm; so distant inside the casket.

In another of my dreams, my father is a boat and he wants to take me safe to a shore, but he sinks, taking me with him.

Can I see him?, I ask, fearing he might still be alive.

No, you can't. Who do you think you are? Coming here as if you owned anything and all?, the weeping girl reproaches me.

I'm Gogo Aniello.

Go-go fuck yourself, dear. I'm the deceased's girlfriend. Billy Jean, she says, and cries. Or looks like she's about to.

Billy Jean, I think. Like in that Grateful Dead song. Like Michael Jackson's not lover. Like a promiscuous girl that has gone back to each lover and claimed that each one got her pregnant hoping someone will step up, per Urban Dictionary.

His about-to-be-wife girlfriend. His *mami*, as he used to call me himself, Billy Jean adds.

He called you *mami*? What the fuck?

I was his *mami*, *papi*.

And that gives you privileges, dear, her mother tells her. Do not worry. Our lawyers will handle that.

I'm not interested in money or anything, ma'am. But one thing I must be sure of: if this is the wrong cadaver, I want to know.

It's a corpse, son, the priest corrects me.

It's dead alright, I say.

Language is a violence.

\*

My petition is dismissed. Cadaver. Corpse. Body. Cage. Blood is absent but absences are presences. There should be a *plena y bomba* band flowing in his bloodstream right now, but I hear nothing. There's nothing but the sound of a hollow wind blowing like sinus infection. Damn chem trails. Always the chem trails. Somebody needs to burden up.

A song haunts me. *Esta tarde vi llover. Vi gente correr. Y no estabas tú.* It's a Manzanero's song. I hate the song. It was my father's favorite. Cobalt blue like asphyxia. I remember the first time I heard it, on a Sunday afternoon at a wedding party in some remote place in the mountains. The house was white, Vernacular Criollo, with a large porch and lots of windows. So English Southern. So Caribbean. I don't remember who lived there. I do remember I was the ring boy at the wedding ceremony. Always the ring boy. The Lord of the Rings. So many weddings –who were these people?-. I remember the pictures. After the dance and the drinks and the dills, I went out into the patio where a gaggle of geese walked by the side of a deep green pond. The honk. At my approach, they let me know I should not bother them. They charged at me, and I wanted my father to save me from the wild flock's fury. The bastards. They honked. They hinked. They squeaked and I was no Leda. I ran. It was an unequal battle. It rained. It hurt. The water piercing

my face like a rain of needles. Surpassed by the increasing size and sounds of the geese. They bit hard. I can still feel them. A goose is no swan.

And yet, beauty hurts.

One day my father, drunk, told me the story about the woman he loved before my mother. Lovely Rita. Meter Maid. Avocado green eyes. Hazel blonde curls. She was supposed to be the one. The one. The Neo. Impossibility whispers a garden, he said then, all drooling and gone and defeated by I don't know what. The I don't know what. The simulacra of his generation. A lie. Very subtle. An untruth. *Puñeta*, he repeated. What have I become? My sweetest friend. I could hear the blackbird's warbling flute-like sound while it perched on my father's soul, but I didn't know what was it then. I knew when, years later, I heard mine. I always wandered lonely as a cloud. Fuck daffodils.

Okay, whatever.

\*

I want to talk to the person in charge here, I demand.

That would be my daughter, Billy Jean, the older woman answers.

No, I mean at the funeral parlor.

It's a boutique, the priest clarifies.

Who owns this place, for Christ's sake?

That'll be me, said a voice coming from the end of the hallway.

As I turn around, a fat, bearded man approaches, smoking a cigar and holding his suspenders with both of his hands. His white linen shirt neatly ironed; his slacks black as blindness; his red hair greased down to perfection. Nor even the strongest wind raft would make a strand of

hair fall out of place. He has a thick gold chain and big a golden Rado showing off his shirt's handcuffs. He openly carries a big gun.

I am Mr. Coffey, the man introduces himself and then asks, are you related to the deceased?

Yes, I am. Well, maybe. I don't know. That's what I want to find out, if this is my father."

That's what he says, the older woman interjects. Hm.

Leave it, Mrs. Gomez. I'll take care of it, Mr. Coffey tells her.

Oh, how opportune to have an unknown son in Mr. Aniello's funeral, Billy Jean claims.

Well, I'm not *this* man's son. I'm Mr. Damian Aniello's son. Aniello, with an 'i', I say.

Easy, easy, Coffey says. Are you or are you not his son?

Listen, those two distinguished gentlemen over there –Gordo P and Gustave, right?- paid a visit to my mother in New York City. They told her my father, her ex-husband, had died. My mother is Ana Aniello, she asked me to come to Palm Desert. I've never seen my father before, so my mother hands me this picture of him.

As I produced the picture out of my jacket, Mr. Coffey's jaw dropped.

Is that Elvis right there? he asks in awe.

Yes, but that's not the point. The point is that I followed my mother's request, I came here, and, guess what? The man in the picture doesn't match with the man that appears in your video images.

Elvis is in there?, Mr. Coffey insists.

Ha! I knew it! It's the ex-wife who's behind this, eh? *Vividores*, Mrs. Gomez comments.

Right. Thank you, I say. I must leave now. I must confess it was a delightful evening. Goodnight, ladies. Good night, sweet ladies. Good night, good night. I hope all will be well. Pansies for thoughts, everybody. And goodnight, Father.

Father?!, Mrs. Gomez hollers. *Si será idiota usted.* He's just a loony who dresses up as priest. He's *loco!*

The fake priest didn't take the hint. I think it's great. Great as in "Make America Grate Again." Stop all the clocks. Shut the tunnels in the labyrinth. Greater than that time when Father Gonzalo ordered José and me to take a fresh delivery of holy biscuits into the fridge. Jesus's own flesh, Father Gonzalo said. As José and I challenged ourselves to eat a few of the biscuits, we thought we were chewing on Jesus's ball sack. This must be fake Jesus's flesh. Like fake news. Like fake monkeys in a monkey movie. We didn't mind and decided to wash the biscuits down with the first thing we found besides Scotch whiskey: wine. We got drunk and indigested. We were dismissed as altar boys. You will rot in hell for that, Grandma Fiorenza told me back then. I'll pray for your soul, but you'll have to find forgiveness on your own, Mom said. José couldn't handle it and that year he drowned while attempting to catch tadpoles in the river. I thought I would die next, but Father Gonzalo was imprisoned first. I heard he seduced one of the Church Ladies, who became pregnant and raised her kid as a gift from God. Nowadays, the kid is a magician at a second-rate circus. And I'm still not dead.

\*

You're not going anywhere just yet, Coffer says.

Now, what would I do without my Almond Joy?, Billy Jean mourns.

What? Almond Joy?, the fake priest asks.

John was my Almond Joy, Billy Jean answers. I called him like that because he tasted like chocolate and had big nuts.

That's a good one, says Gustave, his words blowing into my ear.

Billy Jean cries. Her mother comforts her again. Says something about the Virgin Mary watching over her and taking care of her disgrace and pain, don't cry, my sweet Bernarda Josefa, you will stand the test of time, because our Lord is with you, and blessed you are among women.

Let's see. What's your real name, son?, Coffey asks me approaching two steps.

Orlando Aniello. Aniello with an 'i'.

Yeah, right. Well, Aniello with an 'i,' You and your mommy gonna have to move last in line, okay?, Mrs. Gomez advises me with violent gesticulation. We got here first.

That's not entirely right, but arguing seems as useless as a Tamagotchi these days.

I contemplate the shiny whiteness of my father's last ride. It's made of fine wood, the fake priest tells me as if he reads my mind. Expensive, he adds.

I don't care.

I'm drowning in ambivalence. Choking with anxiety.

\*

I'm at my father's wake, although I hardly remember him. It was my mother's colorless idea to come and honor the man. The closest I have ever been to this moment was the time I met Chucho Macho, the great late wrestler who wore a green mask and claimed his origins were vegetable, so he could bend like a stalk and crawl like a vine, but never shake like a leaf. He could defeat about ten people at the same time, like the time he faced the whole team of Los Muchachos Malos who unsuccessfully tried to beat the hell out of him. It was at the end of that glorious match at the Madison Square Garden when his eyes and mine met. He winked and smiled at me. I felt blessed. I felt chosen. I wanted him to be my father because Chucho Macho kicked ass for real.

Listen, people. Let's call it a day. You certainly got the wrong Aniello. Are we good?

'Course we no good. What do you mean, motherfucker?, Gordo P reacts.

Yeah!, Gustave backs him up.

I mean, I'm going home. This is wrong. Something's wrong.

*You* are wrong, motherfucker.

That's how the heart works. Why did I listen to Mom? Or to Oblivia, for that matter? I think of my mother. She's a vanishing angel.

He's an impostor!, Billy Jean accuses.

No, I'm not. You just got the wrong guy, people. Besides, my father wasn't a doctor, I would've known.

A doctor? Who said he was a doctor, bitch?, Gordo P questions somewhat mad at the implications that I am lying about him.

You said he was a urologist.

Da's right. I said it.

So?

Listen, you clown, Coffey says, with his ravaging stare penetrating my eye and his best James Earl Jones voice. Your father was a horologist, get it? Horologist. Motherfucking silent "H" and everything. Not urologist. A watchmaker, you dumb fuck son of a bitch.

Heaven must not wait for me anymore.

\*

Coffey tells me that my presumed dad built his watches from scratch all by himself and with the help of an apprentice, who at the time of Damian Aniello's death, had already moved to Isle of Man. He had his own watchmaking business now. The fucker. He had taken a chunk at

Aniello's business, who was exclusive for people who could afford ninety-five grand per watch. He used the finest materials and jewels. He mastered the sands of time. He made clocks work. He commanded memory. He made a lot of money, too.

But Aniello also left some works unfinished, like a watch that Coffey would present to his son on the boy's eighteenth birthday. The watch shall be finished when we get hold of the apprentice, he swore with a grin. But the money? Now he wanted that back. An insurance policy of some sort. Like, no ticket, no laundry. Coffey could sue me and my mother, he said, or plant a garden in our butts, but it would be easier if, as declared heir, I would just sign the papers with the corresponding attorney and get off the hook.

Simple as pie, Coffey says. Simple as tortillas. Simple as a pimple. Simple as...

Okay, I get it. But I'm not Anello. I'm Aniello, with an 'i'.

Isn't your mother's name Anna Anello?, Gordo P asks, sipping from a cup of coffee. I Googled Anna Anello.

Yes, she's Ana Aniello. Ana with one 'n' and Aniello with an 'i'.

I'm confused.

The name... was... Ana Aniello, Gordo, Coffey grumbles. Anna with one 'n' and Aniello with an 'i'."

This is how Utopias vanish.

\*

Aniello. Anello. *Anhelo*. What the fuck. From small ring to longing. So much for wrestlers whom I imagined as father figures. That's all I wanted. Instead, I'm wounded. Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* succeeds Boiardo's *Orlando Inamorato*, but in this epic of me, it's the wrong 'em boyo.

Dull roots like broken wings, covering the charred earth on my tongue. Stony rubbish. *Puñeta*. I was waiting for someone to pry open the casket's lid and expose my father of yesterdays without past. I expected him to wink at me and say: "Son, it will be alright. Just sign the shit," and I would spit back, because it wouldn't be alright. Nothing is right. I'm lost and desperate. But it had to happen in some confrontational fashion.

In the room, the women come and go, talking of Damian Aniello. Without "I."

\*

Billy Jean and her mother, while listening to the conversation, kindle the anger of dejected angels and unleash their fury. The young woman loses her grip and goes for the closed casket. Over my dead body, you won't open shit here, she claims while she embraces it, as if pretending to lift it. Move your ass, Billy Jean, Coffey squawks. I try to help him, but Billy Jean holds on to the casket as if she were a shipwrecked babe trying to reach a lifeboat, and she gets emotional and all, and cries, and says no, no, take me with you, please, take me with you, Johnny.

I stand there like a deserted island.

Billy Jean's refuses to let go of the casket, Mrs. Gomez comes to the rescue, and the pulling and pushing finally comes to shove and Damian Aniello's last great chariot starts to dishevel and swivel about the casket's rolling stand, and the inevitable happens: Mrs. Gomez falls back, taking Billy Jean and Coffey down with her.

The casket hits the floor. The body comes out.

I look at the picture of my father. Then I look at the body.

I knew it! This is not my father!

A pounding fist.

\*

The rest happens much too fast. A case of mistaken identity, my father, who was a blank page, takes the shape of a myth badly told. People from the funeral home/parlor/boutique appear, too. Coffey takes the picture of my father and says he's keeping it -because of Elvis-, and then orders Gordo P and Gustave to take me out of the room, and straighten me up. Teach him how not to make a fool of me, he says. Yeah, Gustave says, and then pushes me to the parking lot, where he and Gordo P punch me, kick me, and beat me with a Black Jack, which I don't know where it came from, but feel deep in my ribcage. I become a sucker ball, soccer ball. I'm hit harder than a *tabla* during afterhours rumba in Barcelona. My head bangs like a *tambora* in a drunk banda. My heart is dem bow and rattle. In my next life, I will be a rhythm in a song I will hate so much.

I cry.

I really wanted him to be my father. For once.

This is how colorless ideas sleep furiously.

## SINGULARITY II

Let us go then, you and I, when the evening is spread out against the sky like a patient etherized upon a mortar. Yes, a mortar. I will be crushed. There're sounds I miss. The birds. Waterfalls. Rain in the morning while my mother and I pantomimed silence while the world outside collapsed like a paper boat. In the absence of words, silence tells it all. Coffee and a hug. The fog blurs the horizon. My mother sings "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head" like Burt Bacharach singing bachata. Burt Cockroach, my father used to call her, she always says. I am arthropod and humdrum. I'm a casualty, but her voice is like soursop. Her arms are thick and warm. A blanket. Like a sentence between us. A statement saying: "You are not alone, you are not alone." In the room, the pixels come and go. Not a word said, yet. Just my mother singing, singing to the wind, to the rain, to the void, to the depth of the fog. We didn't have many moments like these. Sheer silence. All I ever wanted. All I ever needed. *Como si me tuvieras nadando entre los brazos, donde las aguas corren dementes y perdidas.*

A letter to the world. Do I dare? Do I dare?

I'm the Whitewater. A load of centuries. Unscrew the locks from the doors. I imagine my mother's arms are wings. We don't need to talk. We feel each other like I wish I could feel you. Timelessness. Emptied from space. Only connect. Language cancels interactivity. Language, whereas not dormant, is private. Words germinate in the mind of the speaker. Do they? At an infinite distance from other people and, also, from the things the words signify.

But technology finds a place. A use. A home. This basic human need. The telephone allowed people to be together even if far apart geographically. The Internet became the quintessential communication technology. Social networks and the panoply of new ways to make

connection are creating communities based on genuine common interests rather than the accident of geography. This decentralized electronic communication is also highly democratizing.

Smart phones. The unprecedented ability to stay in touch.

I once read that by the year 2020, consciousness would be uploadable to a computer server. The bodiless limits. Everything you loved. Or hated. Or both. How did I become a virus? How I loathed on the Earth seeing nothing and now, I can see clearly now the black rain is gone. Red rain. Green Rain. RGB. Oblivion must be a place on Earth. *Así de ciego soy. Como un río.* No eyes. Just sound. My tongue against the riverbed. The rocks. A trail of underwater meteors. I flow. We don't evolve. We upgrade. A soul is a repeated life. Rife. A lie. Or a metaphor. Or.

## Champagne Soul

Home is where I want to be, but I guess I'll never be there. *Zemblanity*. Out. I browse for words in other languages that have no translation in English. Or Spanish for that matter. Or any other language, except its native code. I guess I try to kill nostalgia by draining its sources. Like *kuebiko* (a state of exhaustion inspired by acts of senseless violence). A cubicle. Or *kenopsia* (right now, the insides of my chest). *Meraki*. *Toska*. *Litost*. The world is a buffet. I just think of *puñeta*. Literary, masturbation. But *puñeta* is Brahma. It's used for indelible frustration or for extreme overjoy. In equal parts. Like ya'aburnee. Both morbid and beautiful. *Puñeta*. There's an ñ. Deal with it. If I were a word, I'd be *saudaduende*. *Saudade*. *Duende*. Palm Springs. Two-stars motel and I, wondering what rivers run through me. Two stars for the starless. I channel surf like every other bad habit: insistently.

I fly to Puerto Rico. I have this thing for wastelands.

\*

On the plane's closed circuit television, they're airing a documentary about James De la Soul, owner of the Decatur-based Bird Repellent Co., who claims that he can master the will of birds. A dream. A laugh. A myth. De la Soul reflects the peacefulness of a shaman. A Buda. He speaks the instincts of the birds. He can't fly, but he could make the birds drop dead like withered leaves. The birds. Those plagues. They never learn when to let go. They poo. Coo. Squeak. Peep. Shriek. Whimper. This is the way the world ends. I make a decent business, De la Soul says. Some people read Tarot cards, others read the movement of the stars; I just control birds, he comments. He refuses to tell the method in the madness. He is no Prince Hamlet, anyway. He won't tell of

the thirteen ways to look at a blackbird. Bleak light. Bare limbs. Trees like broken hands. On camera, the starlings swirl against a dark Georgia sky. De la Soul demands complete secrecy. No cameras and no spying on me. De la Soul might have seemed like a swindler, the reporter says, but over the last few weeks something astounding has happened. The starlings began to fly away.

De la Soul turned himself into a modern day pied piper. In Decatur, people call him the "birdman." The beauty of inflections. Or the beauty of innuendos. De la Soul, the starling whisperer, in bifocals and a cardigan, defies the cameraman. He's chased birds from Bloomington, Springfield, Joliet, and dozens of other cities over a 50-year career. Longer than what I've been living. A career, yes. That's what he says. If the river is moving, the starlings must be flying. The reporter has no idea of what De la Soul refers to. Camera cuts to the mayor of Decatur. I don't know what he does. He doesn't poison the birds, but he does make them disappear, the mayor admits. Neurosis and death are only instances of relational perspective. Such moves. Starlings are passerine.

\*

I think of Oblivia's eyes. Round, swarming spirals of starlings. Songbird of time. Like feathered trails of a promise or a longing. A corpse planted in the distance. It blooms. Think I'm escaping and running into myself. Longest way round is the shortest way home.

On my phone, I read a digital copy of *Finnegan's Wake*. I succumb.

I think of my mother. I remember I said I would call her. Maybe.

I'll starve for redemption. I gave her flowers last year for Mother's Day, because my mother rejected them. I'm not dead, she muffled the emotion. Instead, I pretended I had brought them for Oblivia, who made a great save. You called me the hyacinth girl, Oblivia said. Over the

Hudson, that's where our hopes float, she added. Oblivia, always the poet, found useless uses for words under the most excruciatingly embarrassing circumstances. Nothings exists right now. But New York. And Oblivia. And insomnia.

One must be careful with blinking.

Outside the window, the plane plows the harvest of clouds like caterpillars munching on tender cotton leaves. There will be time, there will be time. I am sculpting blue leaks in the infinite sky.

I know nothing. I see nothing. I remember nothing.

Or all.

\*

The plane lands in Isla Verde when I receive a phone call from my grandmother. It's mind boggling, if not unexpected. Grandma Fiorenza calls me only twice a year, for my birthday and Christmas, and in my dreams, where she frequently performs a cameo. Love loves to love love. It's endophagous. Grandma Fiorenza is the ultimate link to my father, to my blood, to my loss. Over the phone, her voice trembles in blue waves. Are you alright?, she asks after we greet each other. You don't sound alright, she says, and I'm not much for lying or convincing her of the opposite. My ribcage still hurts, and I might have difficulty eating because of the swollenness of my lips.

You sound like you're swimming in a flood, she tells me.

Sort of.

You speak, and your lips sound like hands clapping.

Is that an attempt to write a *koan*?

A what?

Forget it. Is it Christmas yet?

I wanted to hear from you, *mi niño*, she says.

*Mi niño*. That's how she used to call me when I was a kid. All my soft spots recede at the same time and I'm wrapped in a melancholy of wonders. She once told me one could only talk to the wind in his native tongue. I asked what was whole purpose of talking to the wind. Why would anyone might want to do that? Because the wind is what makes memory possible, I remember she replied.

Where have my winds gone?

Grandmother cuts the small talk and tells me she feels lonely and undeserving of the place her sister Clemenzia passed onto her. The starlings have begun flying, and their murmurings are calling, Grandma Fiorenza says with a low, trembling voice that depicts sadness, or boredom. Starlings, I say to myself. Isn't it lovely? Their dance is a moving shadow, and I think they're telling me it's time, she adds. Time for what?, I wonder. I, uniquely entrapped in selfishness, can't see why I must run to her and save her, when my very own life is in shambles. The town is beautiful this time of the year, she says, you will love it; Cherokee Street has even turned into a truly art district.

I could care less.

\*

I feel guilty. Again, miserable. I mean, this is the woman who showed me the rights and wrongs of life, and even at a point when I have lost my own family, it all seems implausible. Why me? I'm heavy headed. Tired. Hurt. Forsook. It's the failure of the modern artist. Too much on my plate, and yet, my grandmother, who gave me light and reason and packed my memories with

words for when I needed them in moments like these, wanted me to take her from St. Louis to Spanish Lake before returning to Puerto Rico.

We are unfinished animals.

\*

I once wanted to write a collection of poems. I would have titled it *The Reality of Disillusionment*. I would've written poems about houses being torn down. Unrequited loves. The loss of the father. The music of ideas. I would've written poems where a mother curls around her child in the morning, and kisses his head, and wraps a blanket around him. The kid feels comfortable. It's a once in a lifetime moment. A poem. So the kid grows up and, disillusioned, pens a meditative poem with minimalistic clumsiness. It's the motif behind all poems. The book is terrible. No one reads it. But it's sincere. And that makes up for the lack of objectivity. There's so much beyond its intransitivity besides a rusty wheelbarrow.

Instead, the poet ends up with a novel that reads like *A Season in Hell Redux 2.0*.

Nevermind.

One evening, I sat innocence on my lap. She tasted bitter. And I spat her face.

Here I am now. Entertain me.

\*

Broken. Childhood. Oh, thumb, I want a drink. Under the bed, *El Cuco* is the stench of my diminution. Bogeyman. Boogeyman. Boogie man, boogie man. But no boogie shoes. I once overheard a random discussion between my grandmother and my mother. Dad had already abandoned us. Ruin is a thing with feathers. Grandma Fiorenza preferred not to leave us. She said

she would wait for her son to return. She said I needed her. She said she'd weave us all together in myth. *Wabi-sabi*. To find beauty within the imperfections of life and accepting peacefully the natural cycle of growth and decay as a lifestyle. She chewed the air and spat universes. At the time of my father's birth, Grandma Fiorenza saved his life by trading him for a chicken. The baby would be born prematurely and, under serious life threatening circumstances, doubt was not an option. And how in the world could she challenge the design of the stars? Trade for a chicken, the midwife sentenced. Grandma Fiorenza, sweating and pained, felt like *waldeinsankeit*. Alone in the woods. Two roads diverged. She took the one less travelled by. The midwife told my mother that the child would be named Damian. No arguments. *Deslenguado*.

After my father finally cracked the dawn with his shriek, he was taken away from his mother's arms for seven days. The measure of angels. As the seas. A heptagram. The seven swords. Beware. Beware. After. He was brought back. As agreed. It's all about time. Wait. Seven. *Escucha la arena que se mueve en la playa seca del corazón*.

Me thinks I have no inner resources. I'm sorry I'm so fucked up. I can be better.

I can be better. I can be better.

The midwife would kill, cook, and eat the chicken. My father would be saved. My grandmother cried in silence: a local pride; spring, summer, fall and the sea; a confession; a basket; a column; a gathering up; a celebration; the sights resolved into a sandy sluice; an enforced pause. In the name of the Father, my father had no father. No farther. No further. *Cosí*. I am fundamentally a broken fetter. *No vale nada la vida, la vida no vale nada; comienza siempre llorando y así llorando se acaba*.

Oh, thumb, I want a drink.

\*

After he returned to my grandmother, my father cried indefinitely and refused to be breastfed by my mother. *En boca cerrada*. The language. *El canto de las aves*. *El murmullo del viento*. He must purvey some oral fixation.

I smoke. I eat pencils. My dad used to bite his left index finger every time he drove around the town trying to catch the exact spot where the last beam of lights melt into shadows. The midwife had to be called in several times, but in the long run my great grandfather decided that this was not the proper way to raise a child, and soon he dispensed with the help of the old wise woman and made Grandma Fiorenza do her job.

My dad. Emotionally sterile. He can't connect nothing with anything. Memory is information represented in the brain. The plum smoke rubs its paws against my grandmother's face, I can see from here. From this distance. The brokenness.

Grandma Fiorenza would talk about the waning crescent moon that floated in the sky the night my father was born. And so, any endeavor he set out to do in his lifetime, he always felt incomplete, grandma said. He was first a teacher, then a publicist, and ended up as a failed politician, all aborted projects without further consequence than several mistresses, an out of marriage child –a sister I've never met- and a serious alcohol problem that drowned him before he reached his sixtieth birthday.

In a way, I have repeated him. The apnea. I fly in megabytes of rancor and deceit.

\*

I was, at some point, unwanted. Oral. Contraceptive. Stretched between the oblivious dilation of swallowing a pill. The pill. The thrill. Monumental experiment squeezed between a

history of submission and derision that reason won't reverse. Accidents. Will. Happen. The day I was born, the waning crescent moon floated again in the sky, as my grandma recalls. My father not only passed onto me the burden of carrying out the legacy of his last name, he also named me Orlando.

And that was it.

The days prior to my birth, Grandma Fiorenza told me once, my dad was dead drunk and rebellious. He couldn't sleep at all, and the more he drank, the more awake he felt. He walked the town like he was crazy. Like carrying a strange burden. Stubborn. Impenetrable. His eyes, grandma said, brewed *incógnitas*. Is he a boy? A girl? A girl? No, not a girl. Impassive. He did not let himself be frightened by the desperation of his wife, said grandma. He built another one, he gathered the men of the village in his little room, and he demonstrated to them, with theories that none of them could understand, the possibility of returning to where one had set out by consistently sailing east. The east. Yeast. The beast. Uncertainty. In doubt, belief is strength. No wonder; contradiction comprises balance.

My father spoke to the air, the trees, the walls of the hospital. We'll perform Caesarean section. He'll be Macduff. There's daggers in men smiles and poison in truth. Truth. Confusion has now made its masterpiece. My father drunk while the nurses and the doctor looked after my mother's pain. Pain. Black butterflies settle. I came into the world not of woman born. My mother wouldn't even breast feed me. My mother. I craved her kiss. Touch. Rejection. Love. Unloved. All lightness lost, weight regained in the repulsion, a fury of escape driving them to rebound upon those coming after.

My father. Whose very first possession was a rusty red Schwinn bicycle that he fixed, oiled and polished so he could travel places around his hometown. Big wheels turning. Ferris. Hubs of

a system. A man needs to go places. The sense of movement. He pedaled down the rural roads, up the mountain trails, around the town's plaza, and he never reached anywhere because the town had no end. It was a trap, he thought at some point. Where are the limits. The sun like torchlight. Infamous. The earth swallowed the traces of his bicycle, turning past into a sustained present. Fallen mountains. Dead Jerusalem. Desert of green. Unreal. How will I fit into this landscape, this wasteland of nothing happening but the circles of days in this decayed hole.

Do I want a son? Do I deserve a son? Do I. Deserve.

Unwanted. Contraceptive. Prophylactic. Moment of surrender.

Yes, please, disturb the universe.

\*

I sleep almost the whole flight from Texas to San Juan. There's a thin line between dream and fancy. Life is not how you remember, but what you remember. I should write a book, I tell myself. I should write a book where there are no countries, no races, no differences, but I won't. Utopias are dead, I know. If language is difference, then differences establish the foundations of reality. No, I don't want a pillow. Thank you, ma'am. I want a drink. Where's my thumb? Outside, clouds disperse as a field of dead angels, their wings piled like Persian rugs at the Salvation Army.

There. Is. No. Salvation. Only saves. My guess.

\*

I swamp in the tropical heat as soon as I walk off the Luis Muñoz Marin International Airport's frozen halls. I need a place to rest and that place is my old apartment in Coco Beach, where turtles come and lay their eggs once a year. I read once that turtles bare universes in their

backs. Sometimes the shell is hollow and we live inside. Sheltered. Long life. I will deny the gods. The apartment in Coco Beach shells me in. It's the only thing I saved from my derailed marriage. I had a life. Was it? Did I? I hated so much that place, and I only keep it as a purgatory. Terrestrial place like an island mountain. Lust. Gluttony. Avarice. Let dead poetry rise again. A sweet color or tropical sapphire. The heat waves in. I used to have a life before. Now these woods burn hard. Concrete phantoms. Desolated sidewalks full of tourists going nowhere. Home. Is where I want to be? I guess I'm already there. Angels lift-up their wings burning midnight oil. Headpiece filled with straw. Whiskey on a coconut. Very exotic. Shape without form, without color. Death's other kingdom.

I walk to the Coco Loco, right on Isla Verde avenue. The place is packed. Dark faces and sweat. Reggaetón. Rat-tat-tat. Rat-tat-tat. Not what the thunder said, but what the dembow plays. Sizzling hot pan. Pan. Everything. Pansexual. The flirt and the squirt. Rat-tat-tat. Rat-tat-tat. I kind of asphyxiate my shadow. *Kenopsia* finds my *autopsia*. Nengo flow. *Papi, la artilleria*.

Heyyyyyy! Whasssup?, a short man with a fine mustache and a linen *guayabera* approaches me. I nod at him. *Malianteo*. Or whatever. Old pewter roots twist.

Are you looking for some fun?

Maybe, I reply and look around the place. It smells like gin and expensive perfume. Women dress in melted watercolors that highlight their tanned skin. Men wear sunglasses. Mostly, sunglasses. It's Atlantic blue light and noise.

Are you bori?

Bori?

Boricua.

Depends what you define for Boricua.

Oh, you know... *salsa, arroz con habichuela, tostones...*

Sounds like a song by El Gran Combo.

Exactly! That's what I mean!

So, no. I'm not your guy.

*Desgracia 'o vendepatria. Te debería poner en la frente mi arma secreta pa' que sueltes hasta la excreta.*

Really? Look, eh.... What's your name?

Táino.

Ajá. I don't know what I am.

Fuck you, *pendejo!*

Are you gonna sell me those drugs or what?

Vete al carajo, cabrón!

Rat-tat-tat. Rat-tat-tat. Dembbow and Nengo Flow.

\*

I order a drink and sit by the bar at the end of the club. There's a Rita Indiana song playing now. *Tú le dá y yo le doy undarundeiro*. This heart. *Tiene. Tu. Manigueta*. A blonde girl approaches me sipping from her fancy drink. The color of passion. Or passion fruit. *Toy como el lobito de los tres cerditos*. Darken the city, night is a wire. Do do do do do do do dodo dododo dodo. Hi, she says, and smiles. I know you, she adds. Seems like everybody's friendly around here. I'm nyctophile, she says, and I'm shaken by the extravaganza of the word. I'm Orlando, I reply, as I notice her white short dress adhered to her slim body as a second skin. Her lips are mollusk thick

and coral red. Oh, that's not my name, she says. I'm Concha. Cónchale, I reply. You must treasure a beautiful pearl, I offer her a cigarette, which she rejects.

I sweat in heavy drops like saline teeth. Nothing but a breath. The wide summer. My willingness aches. The voices of people around us sound like a rain of cicadas. I look at secretive dreams of a Neruda poem. I'm helpless.

I like Nyctophyle better for a name, I tell Concha.

Her eyes crack the drum beats. *Este corazón tiene su manigueta*. I close my eyes. I see the future. I'm by the beachside, walking and talking to Concha. Shell. Me. Out. The moon drops in the water. Water. Whey. Why is thy mouth on to me? I feel her soft, warm tongue crawl in between my teeth. A penetration. I touch her breasts, and they feel like blooming flowers of moaning prayers. She feels my hard. Hard. Rock. Paper. Scissors. My place or yours? I would dance in the theatre of your silence. Her dim feet swamped in the wet sand. She shrinks under my embrace. The ocean spumes. Sperms. Desire is a sylph-figured creature. I sprout. Put forth.

I open my eyes. *Fumo vida*. I smoke life. I smoke death.

*Enciende*.

My place.

\*

I suffocate the dying embers of my cigarette in the flower pot in a corner of the balcony. The Atlantic Ocean looks like a blue plate from here, as the sun licks its surface with the tongue of a sunrise, the morning temperature already in the mid 80s, and it's only May. In two weeks, I'll celebrate my forty-seventh birthday, a ritual not so much to rejoice as it is a pretext to start drinking and getting wasted along Isla Verde avenue, while it lasts, or before some European tourist asks if

I'm a local or what. We're all strangers in our homeland. I guess. I don't have to remember anything. I download my memories into the Mnemo 2020. It's a state of the art machine. It's a mean machine. Very clean. It/he/she helps me find strayed pieces of myself. *Se vale to'* or anything goes, like an old Calle 13 song. The past. The past is my present. Is there anything else beyond the past? What's past is prologue, what to come in yours and my discharge. I could've been a memory stick drifting forgotten in obsolescence. Evanescent. In death's dream kingdom. Deliberate disguises like sampling feelings. Dub them. *Ritmo. Cintura. Limbo.* Like purgatory *sombra. Ombra.* The repetition of a body. Not anybody. All that remains with me are the questions. Like, do I belong anywhere? The inevitable drinks should come, the mojitos –because it's a popular island drink– or the Cuba Libre, simply rum and Coke, as they insipidly call it in Manhattan, where I reside. Reside. Because I can't see where I live.

Smoothed by her long fingers, I rest my sex in the palm of her hand. Mists move over. Under the twinkle of a fading brightness that dims in her blue eyes. I am deluded and infer that I am younger than what I really am.

The dawn is already over, and at the morning hour, I am fleeing before it, and from afar I could discern the ripples of the sea.

\*

The morning welcomes me with a great view of the Isla Verde coast, like half a tortilla Española left to rot blue. The seagulls worship the distance. I light another cigarette, and I think of my daughter, her voice entering with the breeze saying that a cigarette smoked is a day of life wasted, and I shrug in real time. A recurrent image that haunts me like the idea of death. I would've

probably reincarnated indebted into my next life, so I expect to become something useless, such as a mosquito or a bug.

Oh, Kafka, where art thou?

What's the use of those, but to inflict annoyance, repudiation, or even fear of a disease? Disease. The body, while alive, decays. Death is a disease of the body. I'm here. This is it. Feel my karma, and you can feel my disease. The morning is a cough.

I hear a noise in the kitchen, and when I turn to look, I realize this might not be my place. Memory can be corrosive. The more the past drifts away, the less one remembers. Like a vanishing photo in a 1980s movie, the present etherizes into a yellow fog. A slim, perfectly bronzed body of a blonde woman comes my way. She moves and slices the thick air inside the apartment. Abstract painting nudes hang on the white walls. This is not my place. Definitely. The woman says good morning and that she's late for work, you can fix your own breakfast and close the door when you leave. I can't create empathy with the situation. To recall is to know? Like a touch or a kiss, can you remember. Did I ask her? Go ahead, sweetie, I say. Sweetie is such a euphemism for whoever the fuck you are. The evident signs of a night of drinks and sex sting like that tattoo I once got while drunk in Cabo. Camus lives, it's inscribed upon one of my shoulder blades. Camus is dead.

Marcia, the blonde woman says.

Huh?

Marcia is the name. But they call me Concha.

Concha?

Nyctophyle.

Oh.

Listen, I gotta go. I hope I'll see you later, yes?, she says before she leaves.

Wait. You're leaving me here? Bae...

Yes. I think you can take care of yourself, she says as she leaves. Taíno will be here any minute.

Who?

Sprawling on a pin, I wriggle in the air. How should I presume?

I'm just about to head back to my phone when I hear somebody knocking at the door. Somebody ringing the bell. I think it's Marcia. She forgot her keys, of course. What else? Knock. Knock. Knocking. Insistently. I'm coming, for Christ's sake, I yell and open the door.

A short man with gold teeth, Panama hat and beige *guayabera* stands there, smiling.

Say hello to my little friend, he says, his smile wide as a Mayagüez sunset.

What friend?

Out of nowhere, a big thick black fist finds my nose.

\*

Once my daughter asked me how come there are no pictures of my family around the house. She was eight or something by the time. A fundamental paradox surrenders. Creation looking on. The bodiless begun. The excuses like lazy elephants marching down my tongue. A dim audacity. I looked into her deep brown eyes. The bark of cedars. How come? How come? She looked at me with merciful distance. I guess I don't have pictures of my family here with me, I said. Then, where?, she asks. Smart and coy. We would talk until the moss cover all our words. I must've looked like agony. The eyes glazed. And she knew- my daughter knew- Crissy knew- that I was dead inside.

Lightning strikes twice.

One day I felt like it, I called my mother at the nursery home in Amsterdam Avenue. It was about the time when she first talked about Oblivia. She's Colombian, mom said. Gorgeous. You will like her, I know, she added.

And I, who have drowned the mornings. The afternoons. The evenings. I who have drunk moon milk alone amid the blue darkness of a long summer night, couldn't fake interest or happiness or curiosity.

I was looking for one of your photographs in my photo album, but, guess what? I have no pictures of you.

Standing quiet in the rain-like.

Of course there are no pictures of me.

It seems that I lost you at some point, mom says.

You lost me a long time ago, mother, I said to myself.

What was that?, she asked.

Nothing, I replied.

Oh.

My daughter wanted to see how did I look when I was her age. Or how did I look when I was fifteen. I might as well never existed, I thought.

What was that?, Crissy asked me, then.

Nothing, I replied.

She went to her bedroom and started playing with her muñecas. With a plastic toy camera, she took snapshots at her playful dolls.

\*

I do not want anyone to read my book carelessly. I have suffered too much grief in setting down these memories. Like Dali soft melting watches. Persisting. Eaten by the ants, memory becomes the ants. Time. Space. Locus. A wasteland is wasteland is a wasteland. What makes us is voluble. When I was six years old, my father told me I should become the next Di Maggio and I believed him. He tried to teach me how to play baseball. Bought me a glove, a ball and a bat. He also gave me a New York Yankees cap. I thought it was absurd. I couldn't pitch, bat and catch by myself. Baseball, I learned, was a participative sport. I never realized how useless the glove, the bat, and the ball felt in my hands. Don't worry, someday we'll play catch. My father promised. What I recover in megabytes. What. If what. Pixel landscapes of blurred digits.

From my father, I keep his strong, thick hands when he showed me how to hold the baseball bat. This is the way you stand in front of home plate. This is the way you swing at the ball. To hit the ball. That's the question. I still remember him standing strong, Di Maggio-like, pretending a crowd of forty-thousand people cheered at him. He made that roaring sound with his mouth. The sound of a hurricane spinning out from his throat. A whirlwind. Voice. Existence. Presence. This is the way you hit a home run. This is the way you run around the bases. Eyes dare not to meet in dreams. Such deliberate disguise. The scene unfolding. Everything must pass away in equal measure.

My father. Gracile. Sharp nose and flat-top haircut. Wore no shoeshine. He roller coaster. His skin brushed by the sun. Deep gray eyes. So deep, they seemed blue in daylight. Like his hair. His hair. Unlike my father, he never put on extra weight. I remember the way he read the newspaper in the morning. His fingers looked like claws. The tree has many cherries. A small basket suffices. He loved Johnny Cash. And then, that's it. A valley of dead stars. The hope of an empty man.

He is out there. But he's here, too. In my dreams. Always in my dreams, like a fugitive shadow. *Sombra. Ombra. Penumbra.* A whale.

I fish for meaning. Fragments shored against this ruin of me. Ta-da. Co-co. Rico.

A rooster?

\*

Call me Moreno and this is my story, I hear a voice. I open my eyes and there's this man, tall and strong and intimidating. I am a tailor, but not in the way that my mother was. I'm a different kinda tailor, *entiendes?* I'm hurt. Like a patient etherized upon a table. I can't feel my face and I don't love it. *Mira, mira.* Futile attempts to focus. Ah, wither must we fare? Pay attention to me, Moreno says. Pay attention to him, I hear another voice say. If I were you, I would. When thou, O Death, didst come outraging.

What?, is the one word I can muster. Flustered. Bad mustard.

He needs to wake up, the high-pitched voice says. Hit him again.

*Tú tas loco?* For reals?, the thunderous voice replies.

For reals.

I get punched in the face. Fade to black.

\*

Cold water on my face. A splash. I feel like speaking in *coplas*. O World that givest and destroyest, would the life which thou hast shown were worth the living. I think I broke him, the thunderous voice says. Meh. The high-pitched voice tells him not to worry. Between the motion and the act, I still can't feel my face, but I see the blood on my shirt.

What the fuck?, I moan.

That's better, says the high-pitched voice. Still sounds bullshit to me, but better.

Who are you?, I try to sharpen my vision. Images distort. Move. Evade me. I. Can't. Feel.

My. Face.

I'm Taíno, *pana mío*, the high-pitched voice replies. And this my friend here is Moreno.

Hi, Moreno says, his voice like bad-a bass, bad-a bass.

Oh. Taíno. *El del Coco-Loco?*

Da's right, my friend, he says. Everything's is coco around here. But, the point is, we here to collect.

Collect what?

What?

What?

The what the fuck do you think you're doing fucking my girls behind my back.

Fucking your girls behind...?

Shush!! Behind my back is what I said.

I don't know what you're talking about, I waive my responsibility.

Mira, *mojón de mierda*- you little turd, you fuck my girls, you pay, or I'll fuck you.

That didn't come out good, Moreno said.

*Cállate*, Moreno. I'm not talking fuck in the fuck sense. Just fuck in the don't mess around with me sense.

I'm not messing around with you, Taíno, I interject.

Shush! That's for me to decide. Let's see. Hmmm. Yes. You fucking with me. You fucking with me and my girls.

It's just one girl.

It's my girl, mutherfucker! You fucked my girl, and you smoked my weed.

Did I?

Hit him, Moreno.

I fade to black. Again.

\*

I see a sea-girl wreathed in seaweed red and brown. Murdered by the sky. And the ceiling. And the cold floor. Drown in blood. My pain fits like a portion of space. This is the near future. A string of past. There are cracks in the fiber. I am the formulation of broken bits. Bytes. How shall I presume? Is it perfume from a dress that makes me so digress? On the hills, silhouettes wave their hands at me. It seems that. Blue warped in iron. I can't separate the poems from the pomes. Anger which breaks good into bad. I'm drifting Vallejo. I think of Oblivia. Where is she? She's the dogged one and I'm the dog. Did I ask for this?

I remember, when I was a kid, the quiet Saturday afternoons when to watch the rainfall was all the fun I had. I can still feel my mother's warm embrace wrapped around me. The thickness of her arms. Her arms like cities. Ineffable. The poplars looked impressively stoic in the wind and the rain and the fog the burdened the afternoon. I don't have many recollections of scenes like these. Like these. Like. Lie. I can conform my brain with the idea of a home, but it's all full hiraeth. I shall die in Adjuntas, in a rainstorm.

Memory is the ferment of melancholy.

\*

I receive a phone call and, before I pick it up, I hesitate for a while. I recognize the number and it's Grandma Fiorenza, who only calls for Christmas, for a casual occasion like Father's or Mother's Day, or for his birthday, in which case, if it's to sing Happy Birthday in her trembling, old voice, she's anticipated by two weeks. It's been a while since I last heard of her, so I decide to take that call. On the other side of the line, there is a passage in time.

Grandma Fiorenza, however, isn't calling with a celebratory motif, and it's not even a courtesy call to remind me that my blood stream isn't constrained by the closed circuit of my body- my blood flows from times ancestral, my blood streams from the heart of all hearts, and I'm an Aniello- her grandson, and that is a tie that binds. This time she has a petition, a peculiar errand she wants me to do, like when I was a kid and she sent me to the bodega for cigarettes –Kent, I remember- or a last-minute consideration for her *arroz con pollo*, maybe a bottle of olive oil or some oregano she had run out of, perhaps bay leaves, yes, bay leaves had to be in everything she cooked that needed to be crowned triumphantly. Indeed. Like an El Gran Combo song.

This time she calls because she wants me to come over to her house and pick her up, a request that hits me with surprise and nonsense. I'm miles away from her- an ocean and several states apart, to be precise. I can't say, yeah, in fifteen minutes, because, first, I don't even know what fifteen minutes might bring, and, second, because she's in St. Louis, and I'm in freaking Isla Verde, Puerto Rico.

Didn't I tell her?

The reasons she gives seem fair: she feels lonely and undeserving of the place her sister Clemenzia passed onto her, and she wants to go back to Puerto Rico and listen to the voice of the ocean, whatever he has to say. Like a mandala. She must go and pick up across the land. The

starlings have begun flying, and their murmurings are calling, Grandma Fiorenza says with a low, trembling voice that depicted sadness, or boredom. Their dance is a moving shadow, and I think they're telling me it's time, she adds.

Time for what?, I wonder.

Time to murder and create. In a minute, there is time for decisions and revisions.

I, uniquely entrapped in selfishness, can't see why I must run to her and save her, when my very own life is in shambles, yes, when I'm sort of pivoting like a lost and drunk Higgs boson. Shit. The central problem to the physics of existence. The town is beautiful this time of the year, she continues as I smoke and burn silence. You will love it. Cherokee Street has even turned into a truly art district.

I could care less.

I feel guilty. Again, miserable.

What do you say, Orly?, Grandma Fiorenza tells me over the phone. Would you do that for me?

I'm broke, grandma.

You can't be. Can you?

Yes, I can. And I am.

Don't worry. I'll pay for your ticket.

Grandma... that's... not necessary, I lie.

I am corralled by the weight of silence at the other end the communication. I look at my nails. They need clipping. I rub my face. I also need a shave. I hate shaving.

*Mira, negrito*, she finally says. I'll see you get here as soon as possible, she says, and I can almost see her smiling. *Negrito* means love.

Remember that TWA airplane I gave you when you were a kid?, she asks.

Yes. How can I forget?

I always wanted you to be a pilot.

Really? I can't even climb up to high places. I get vertigo.

I wanted you to reach far in life. But I guess you would've been a lousy pilot. You're careless, absent-minded and always, somehow, heading in the wrong direction.

I appreciate your honesty, grandma. It gives me great pleasure, I reply.

Oh, you know I don't mean to distress you, honey. You're my angel. You'll be okay. The point about the plane is that maybe you still have places to go. On the other hand, I think you're a great musician. And young.

Grandma, I'm not a great musician at all. And I'm not young anymore. Nor a musician.

Says who? Bah. That's doesn't say anything at all.

I'm 47.

So what? I'm 80, and I plan to make it to back home. Whatever happened to the dreamer boy?

Well, he just woke up and realized he's not a boy anymore.

Dreamers never fade away, Or.

*De verdad*, that sounds like grandma, who has always embraced me with a smile on her face and a word in her lips. And her eyes... her eyes illuminate my silences.

The eyes that saw me cry when mother lost her reality.

The same ones that a long time ago watched me fail with bases-loaded, two outs, and the winning run at third; who also watched over my sleep when I was hospitalized with appendicitis; and who by just looking at me could tell the truth from the lies, like the day I came home drunk

and I told Grandma it was food poisoning; eyes that stared at me so full of happiness the day Grandma bought me my first guitar; whose incandescence tattooed the back of brain the day I said goodbye and left the house.

Yes. Grandma's eyes, like two impossible fish in a lonely tank.

\*

We have a situation here, Taíno says. He sounds like a Caribbean Agent Smith in a Caribbean Matrix. I'm in the middle of a conversation with my grandmother, I'm on the floor beaten by two strangers, and my nose is bleeding. My ears *bombinate*. A warp of noises. We have a situation here, *pana mío*, and we must see to it, Taíno repeats. His teeth would glow in the dark, I bet. I get the impression his smile is bigger than his mouth.

Who are you talking to?, Grandma Fiorenza tells me over the phone.

Nobody. Just a couple of friends... passing by, you know.

It's good you have friends.

Can I call you back, Grandma? I'm in the middle of something.

Grandma Fiorenza concedes her silence. She is a chest of wisdom. She looked after every relevant detail during his childhood. She is a poet. She is a priestess. Every prized possession in my life was a consequence of her extreme caring for me. My first watch, my first guitar, and my first cigarette. Liberal and catholic, she also taught me how to pray the Hail Mary every night before going to bed. Heal me wary. I am a barren winter. My loves are always on the go, I think. Fiorenza always insisted that I should believe in something, in anything whatsoever, but I had to believe. Just that. Anchor understanding. Being. Dwelling in time. I needed to become a verb, she always told me. Is xerts a good one? I bibble. *Impignorate*. I'm a pig. Normalcy flirts with

nonsense, and the March hare prays for me. *Ave María purísima. Sin pecado concebida*. Logic is a glitch.

Okay, talk to your guests, then, says Grandma Fiurenza.

Grandma has always been there for me. She reads time. She reads my voice. The fact that she doesn't ask about my family acknowledges her sharp perceptions. She never married my grandfather.

\*

I'm persona non-grata to my own memories, and grandmother must know I'm disintegrating here, a complete disassembly of the soul. Desert blue. *Nunc et in hora mortis nostrae. Amen* means "so be it." *Amen* is imperative third person plural for love. So be it.

This trip will give you comfort, a chance to rethink whatever that is you want to do with your life, she tells me. I went to the dances in Río Piedras, and played snap-out in Hato Rey. Rambled through the fields where sang the larks. I tasted the poems and on the tip of my tongue they unleashed blueberry butterflies.

Grandma...

You degenerate. It takes life to love life.

Grandma... really?

Okay. Call me back.

I hang up the phone and immediately feel compelled to find a charge cable and an outlet. The urge. The drive. As if my life were an app. I guess I haven't updated recently. The borders of truth. The limits. One day, yes, one day, once upon a time, a terrific time, a time terrifically

addressed, with as much violence as tact at its fingertips, a certain question. *La question*. Do I dare? What does “beyond” mean?

Hey, pretty face, Moreno tells me. *Oye como va*: You owe us.

\*

Where was I? *What* was I?

\*

Hey, pretty face, Moreno tells me. You owe us. Damn you do, Taíno adds. I remember. To remember is to live, my grandmother used to say, and I must exercise my mnemonic faculties to survive. To outlive. Continue existence. Disturb the universe? My body is the bobbly skirmish of a pink Jordan. The peace. The wasp. Hallucinate. Desegregate. Mediate.

It’s dope, darling, Taíno says. What’s dope?, I ask. It. It? Yes. Okay, what do I owe you and why. What is a lot of dollars. Dollars, man, Moreno says. Why? Well, because you’re a dumb fuck. Dumb fuck, man, Moreno says, and he lights a joint. It smells golden.

Easy. Sleazy, Taíno says. La Concha moved in mysterious ways. It’s alright, it’s alright, he says. La Gigi, I call her, he says. *Ta’ buena la mami*. A great piece of ass. *Un bizcochito*. Cupcake. You know what I’m talking about? I nod. Of course, you know, mutherfucker, you slept with her. You fucked her!

Is it perfume from a dress...?

La Concha is expensive, Taíno says. I lost several customers last night because of you. She liked you, you know that? Well, fuck you, *pendejo*! Now you must pay.

I don’t get it.

Oh, you will get it. You will get it alright, *cabron*. Like pretty Kate has sex ornate.

What?

La Concha paves the road to Cali. No dillydally, Taíno tells me. I need a drink. I need to hear Oblivia's soft voice. I've never considered how lonely I am inside. I don't mean cover girl when I say easy breezy, Taíno insists. If she ain't the best, suck my dick, Taíno challenges me. I pass. She's the best, I say. Taíno smacks my face gently. *No te pongas bruto*, he says. I have no intention of playing smart with him. I want out. I'm willing to pay for whatever I owe him, I say. Hey, don't disrespect the man, Moreno tells me. I didn't mean. Depreciate. Fabricate. Emulate. And you, O my Soul, where you stand? Spirits in the material world. It's puzzling, I think. Taíno looks mad at times, madder at others.

I'm a-going to come straight to you. Straight in your face, bro. You fucked my girl. You ruined my business. You smoked my weed. You must payback.

But I didn't pee on your rug.

What rug? What rug, Moreno? What the fuck is this mutherfucker talkin' 'bout?

I don't know, man, Moreno says. I'll crush his ass off.

There's no need for that, gentlemen, I try to make a case for my own salvation. We're grown-up, intelligent people. Of course, we can reach an agreement that will satisfy both parts.

Huh?

We can overcome any differences between us. And I intend to do just that, as long as we finish this and let me get out of here.

Thirty thousand dollars.

What?

You heard him, *mamao*, Moreno charges me. Thirty. Thousand. Dough. Lars.

Is this a joke? I don't have that much money, I reply.

Moreno, are we joking?, Taíno asks.

Moreno suckerpunches me.

I didn't think so, Taíno says, as he grabs me by the throat. Choose: your memories or a limb?

What?

Say what again, and I'll punch you one more time, Moreno says.

What?

Black out. Goddamn it.

\*

I remember one time when I was four or five. I burned my parents' bed. I discovered matches. A peculiar magic. You struck a matchstick against the side of the Three-Star Matches box, and you made fire. Me. I. Made. Fire. Fascinate. Deviate. My mother had just spread over a newly bought fringed quilt. Deep ocean motifs. Atlantic blue. Stamped tropical fish. I liked the octopus. It was yellow. I wondered if there were yellow octopuses. The red fringes hung like upended corals. I dreamed I was under the sea. Under. The sirens. I don't think they'll sing for me. I see no wonder. No wonderwall. Sea-lettuce, vast lichens, strange flowers and seeds, the thick tangle openings, and pink turf. I, the hero blessed with the power of fire. I struck that match and burned my parents bed. Different colors. Pale gray and green. Purple, white, and gold. The play of light through the water. I wanted to be a fire fish swimming somewhere where I would be less of

a person, less human. Humans hurt. Like the fist of my dad sinking deep into my face. Are you stupid, *carajo*? Punch. What the hell were you thinking? Punch. Fist like a hammer. Punch. The firefighters screamed for everybody to get out of the way. Punch. A thousand images flapping like the wings of a cathedral. Punch. Liberate. Recreate. Annihilate. Escaping the weight of darkness.

\*

I call Grandma Fiorenza back. Maybe I think I do, but in any case, she insists that it's time for a change. She is a chest of wisdom. She looked after every relevant detail during my childhood. She is a poet. She is a priestess. She gives me light. Every first material possession in my life was a gift from her: my first watch, my first chain, my first guitar, and my first cigarette. Liberal and catholic, she also taught me how to pray the Hail Mary every night before going to bed. Always insisting that I should believe in something, in anything whatsoever, but I had to believe. She never married my grandfather, a Spaniard, and who she made me visit on his deathbed, an occasion wherein I showed no signs of respect or pity. I felt nothing for the man, even when he was dying of cancer, causing my grandmother to say: "You're an Aniello, indeed."

Grandma has always been there for me. She reads time. She reads my voice. The fact that she doesn't ask about my family acknowledges her sharp perceptions. She must know I'm disintegrating here.

This trip will give you comfort, a chance to rethink whatever it is you want to do with your life, she tells me. She wants me to go and pick her up. Take me to my roots. What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?

I cannot say, or guess, for you know only a heap of broken images. Pixels. Minute areas of illumination.

\*

Grandma Fiorenza decided to move to St. Louis, where Puerto Ricans have little or nothing to do over there- they'd rather go more East, more New York and Connecticut, or, as of recent occurrence, to the South. Of course, for lack of reason's sake, Grandma's parents –my Great Grandparents- came from an unsung wave of immigrants to Puerto Rico. It further complicates the formula of her Puerto Rican-ness, already defined as a trinity of African, Spanish and Taíno blood. It was the Christian model for divinity transposed to the cultural realm, an ideal for a country that saw Protestantism arise with the American invasion in 1898 and pervaded at warp speed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. *Verde luz*. Green light. Grandma decided that she would not spend the last of her days at a nursing home, as my mother suggested when Dad left us. Fiorenza would go to live with Clemenzia, who had married Jack, an American construction worker. Clemenzia left Puerto Rico to live with him in St. Louis. Jack died. Clemenzia sold the hardware store they both owned on Cherokee Street, but kept the rights to live in the second story of the house. And although Clemenzia also passed away soon after her husband's death, Grandma Fiorenza didn't fear the overwhelming loneliness she must have felt in the place. She had a few friends in town, but the truth is that Cherokee street was the changing of the guard. The hardware store became what the new owners call a junk shop: a gallery offering handmade goods, vintage and pop culture memorabilia.

All I want is to see the ocean. Feel it. Smell it. Breathe it.

Life can be cynical. Grandma went from Sicily to Puerto Rico to St. Louis, and not a single recollection of what the seawater is like. All the waters lead to and come from Africa. *La carrera del mar sobre mi puerta es sensación azul entre mis dedos*. Like a Julia de Burgos poem. Where

is your tribal memory? For grandma had never been to the coast while she was in Puerto Rico, and her impression of the sea remained a distant landscape from an airplane window. The sea is history. Exodus. Jubilation, O jubilation. As if the sea should part and show a further sea. Or human voices wake us. And we drown.

\*

We exist as information. A new metaphysics questions secular animism. We have this thing technology. This thing. Cyberfetish. Whoever you are, I fear you are walking the walks of dreams. I leave all. Dilatory and Dumb. Wit, man. Wit. Even now, your features, joys, speech, house, trade, manners, troubles, follies, costume, crimes, dissipate away from you. My son. Or daughter. I can touch you, and you are time away and removed from me. The gap crumbles in unexpected fashion. We are shifting. Redefining. Delete that. If you don't like it. I am bodiless. Weightless. We were always cyborgs. Creatures of Frankenstein. Made up of parts. Bits. More. Astro creep. Demolition style. Jigsaw contrivances of a thousand myriads. Hybrid. More cyborg than cyborg. Cannibal core. It's not the blending with the machine. It's the movement with the machine.

I come to you now. In waves. Hear me. I whisper to your ear. Find me under your digits. I'm waiting. I might cease to not-exist.

Information is represented in the brain. Information is reality.

I place my hand upon you, that you be my poem.

\*

Life is full of circles. They spin outwardly as they grow bigger, but things should always go back to where they started, Grandma Fiorenza claims. How's Amanda and Chrissy, *mi'jo*?

I take a moment to collect the proper words. We split, is the best I can say. Some time ago, now.

*Ay, mi'jo.* I knew something like that would happen. Doesn't surprise me.

Nah. You know, the changes in economy. Political instability. All my venues have narrowed down. I see it all finished. I got kicked out of my job. The country went from bad to worst. The time of lyrical poets is gone. People want little diddies of love and one-night stands, not ravenous poems of anger and loneliness. Glitch is the new pop.

Silverlining, honey. *Una nuvola ha un volto.*

Silverlining?

When things feel like they are finished, it means it's time for a new beginning.

A. New. Beginning.

I must let it all die. Die. Die. I think I am in rat's alley.

\*

Grandma's voice descends like a mist of light. It comes from somewhere else that is not precisely St. Louis. I feel comforted, embraced, not pitied. I begin to think of grandma as a true heroine of an epic ballad lost in cyberspace. And yet, she has never told me anything about feeling lost or stranded. On the contrary, she always has been pleased with life in St. Louis. A crossing in time, she calls the city. The butterfly counts not months but moments, and has time enough.

And it shouldn't come as a surprise: time is very slow for those who wait. Although the French established the first settlement there, the town had been under Spanish rule. It was an

Irishman, Alejandro O'Reilly, who brought the first Sicilians to New Orleans, San Juan, and St. Louis.

In the room, the women come and go talking of Ale-jan-dro.

Islanders moved to St. Louis after the American Invasion in 1898, and they easily blended with the locals. And, maybe, Grandma Fiorenza is not fundamentally literate, but she has lived long enough under circumstances that vary in tension and degree. Plus, she now speaks three languages.

Languages conquer the world, she always told me.

What do we speak? When did we become sound boxes? Samplers? Loops of things somebody said, thought, lived before us. Dead void. We've always been artificial intelligencers. And, how did we get ourselves into this horrific mess? The fascism of the car. The despotism of technology animates the ubiquity of the smartphone.

Where's the app for brokenness?

\*

At a given moment in time, someone made technology profound. Hybridity, they said. I'm already hybrid. Technologized, they said. I'm already intervened. iRemember. Just connect. \$9.99 the app. Acceleration. Exponential. The size of a blood cell. C3ll. C311. Evolutionary, they called it. Just do it. Think different. iRemember welcomes the singularity. It could be eight years. Twelve. Or sooner than that. I'm a pool of data in a preconfigured world. There's no room for evolution. iRemember? It's hackable. Understandable. Logical. Cynical. Calgon, take me away. Think different. Look ma', no cavities. No bones. Hello, Or. Do you read me, Or? To err is human; to remember, machine. We answer to a higher authority. There are some things humans can't buy. For all the rest, there's iRemember. Your memory. The ultimate driving machine. Just go.

Vorsprung durch technik. We can't pick the future, but we're able to steer it. Design it. Spontaneity is a thing with nanobots. *Cuando a sus playas llegó Colón*. Did he? Did he ever? Imagination at work, I feel bitter. Is it perfume from a dress? I can smell my rust. But I don't have to hunger anymore. No skin. No touch. I don't need to know I have a past, because I am the past. And the present. And the future. I can upload a new memory anytime. Yes. iRemember. Scarcity is control. The haves always defeat the have nots. Human psyche? Producing something. Reproducing. Re. It doesn't matter if I'm orphan. It doesn't matter. Doesn't. Matter.

\*

After several years together, CPR-ing a relationship for leverage seems like an odd thing. I should've been a pair of ragged claws scuffling across the floors of silent seas. My mouth opens like a hole and swallows the sky. The truth is, there's no sky. Until, at last, Amanda tells me she has had it. It's enough. I woke up this morning and looked myself in the mirror. Silver and exact. The eye of a little god that I didn't recognize. I got scared. I cried. I hated you, she confessed. The agitation of hands. A terrible fish in a dark lake. The last straw.

We would be better off distant from each other. I agreed.

She needs stability. She enters the realm of the forty-somethings sad and dissatisfied. She needs an actual husband who would come home and mow the lawn, and play catch with his son and take his daughter to bed to read her stories. Amanda became hostile and embittered, which doesn't mean she wasn't right.

The only constant is change, goes a song by As I Lay Dying, which is both a band and the title of my favorite Faulkner novel.

Novels. Novels must be dead.

\*

On a tender Spring afternoon, I married Amanda and after two years, we had our first kid. A year later, we had another one. And I became both jealous and frightened. I couldn't cope with the thought that, yes, the frontman of Cellophane Soda Cracker was married and had a kid, while my other bandmates –Luke, the long-haired guitar virtuoso who was in his early twenties; Rodent, the pizza-and-beer insatiable beast; and Romy, the good-looking, fitness-crazed, self-centered drummer- got to party every night. Not a very mature stance, but it was the rock 'n' roll life in an island where, by default, salsa music ruled. Salsa was *it*. The *it*. You are what you eat. I'm a pig. You are whatever music you listen to. I'm a traitor. Honor your roots. Shoot. You're the stain. Less human than human. *Nadie se atreva a llorar. Dejen que ría en silencio.*

To my disappointment, the members of my band were good but not serious musicians: they did it for the girls and the booze. There were a lot of guitar players, bassists and drummers who came and went in and out of Cellophane Soda Cracker, until I realized that the only fixities in the equation were me and the name. The band morphed into a one-man act. I recorded loops, I mixed the tracks, I programmed instruments, and, yes, I wrote lyrics that nobody understood. Then the 90's were gone. Just like that. Gone. The first strands of grays hair appeared prematurely, and my kids grew up. And I had nothing. *Yo no sé si tú, no sé si yo seguiremos siendo hoy.*

Allow me to laugh in silence.

\*

Kids grow. Are you out there? Are you listening? I grow old, I grow old; I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled. Get the image? Any image. Picture me like you want me to be. I

killed a man. I killed myself. Oh, me. Oh, life. The questions recurring. Eyes that crave the light. What light? I can see everything. I'm a deposit of data full of sorrow and anger and sadness and desires to reach out to you. You, my bloodline. It's a figure of speech, of course. And yet, I speak to you. I look upon you. Figuratively. You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking. It comes to me as of a dream. Dream. That I do all the time. I learn how to be idle.

Static. Static. Static.

\*

Despise is a verb that one teaches you. You learn it, Crissy. You, who at seventeen looked at me with the depth of distances. Hello, stranger. You learn how to speak. How to read. But you see and hear instinctively. You touch and grab and use your hands, but you must learn how to grab a fork and a knife. You know how to hear, but you must learn how to cook. You breathe, but you must learn how to live. You don't learn how to breathe. You learn how to be alive. You are not born human. You learn how to be one.

You learn. And you learn. How to love. And hate.

At seventeen, the obtuse universes of peer pressure can easily conceal anything. Else. Say that you now hate your dad. I know. It's not a splendid tale of courage and morals. Turn and face the change. Ch-ch-changes. Like mangroves of spectral lullabies where my hand slips through. I gather rain with my lips. I withstand the rain. I watch the ripples change their size. Warm impermanence. Humbleness is sanctuary. I make peace myself with the father I didn't have. An engine. An engine. Chuffing me off like sugarcane workers in the sun. It was lonely, Chrissy. At times, it was lonely. I don't blame you. I was the comic hero, the inciter of joy and laughter, now you and your sister consider me the tragicomic hero, a man fallen prey to his own demise.

Chrissy, are you still into music? You never wanted to pick up the guitar, like I did; you chose the wonders of electronica and computerized melodies, which exclude the need of a back-up band and, instead, make you a one-man everything. In that sense, you were much like me. I can only travel to the moment when you tell me you plan to study music at Berkeley and devote yourself to music composition. I still remember your first car lesson, your first date, your first public appearance as musician, mainly because I was absent in all of them. Pretexts of some underlying narrative that drove my life into the meaninglessness.

Chrissy, I bit her pretty red heart in two. I know. I also know you never forgave me. In my recollections, you listen to music a lot. You're into 80's synth pop. Retro. Pixelations of a decade. The necessity of my death reliefs her anguish. I'm not a monument. Debris. Pieces. I listen to you and you sing beautifully. Anything. Musicals, ballads, boleros. Like an angel amidst a shower of light. You sound tender and fragile, but you know how to protect yourself. You must've picked it after your mother.

But even as natural as she seems to be in her artistic instincts, she says she wants to become an architect. She talks about shaping up spaces, towns, complete cities; she dreams of glass and iron in the clouds; of magical places for whole families to live in communion with the sun, earth and water. It's her inner fire. She speaks the length of chimeras, the indispensable force to conquer anything and everything. She has developed a slight acne problem, but that doesn't seem to bother her too much. She says she must succeed at school to advance in life and achieve her desire to construct a magnificent building that will immortalize her. That would be another form of concrete poetry.

But your mother. Your mother. Amanda.

It is not the *what* that matters, but the *how*. She went to college, too. Obtained her degree in interior design and after that, she never knew the meaning of the word disfranchised or unemployed. I must admit that she was good at it. An artist, no doubt. Her services were always required by the well-to-do people in San Juan, and there were times when I might say she was happy about it, until she met that Australian banker, whom I think got a thing for her, and she certainly corresponded, although I might have to add that one night, after our marriage had fallen prey of our respective deceits, she admitted, in tears, that it was all wrong, that she never should've opened her legs, least her heart, to a man who was only doing business in the island for six months and soon would be back to his family in Melbourne.

I didn't say anything, then. Words failed me.

\*

We moved on. We never made love anymore although we still went places together as a family. It turned quite routine until she came to me saying that it all was wrong, in any subject number and verb conjugation. Rancor. Anger. Past due. Dramatic reds and blacks. My skin. My skin. Full of barnacles and sin. I can't even trace back the momento when she started to despise me. The spice. Splice. Somos la melaza que ríe; la melaza que llora. Smoothed by the fingers. Asleep. Tired. Tediousness the dead ringer. It malingers.

I was dispensable and painfully forgettable. Ta ta. Goodnight. Goodnight.

Good night, Chrissy; good night, Amanda; good night, good night. Goodbye, y'all.

Irremediably lost. Like my relationship with Amanda. Last time she verbalized her hatred, she called me a superb waste of time.

Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives.

And so, I had become a rotten Andre Dubois story.

In the words of Grandma Fiorenza, I am more spent than a black crayon at a kindergarten.

\*

A couple of hours later, I receive an email with all the pertaining information regarding my trip to St. Louis and then a phone call from Mei Ling, who tells me she is half Chinese and half Mexican, doesn't speak Mandarin nor Spanish, but communicates in English. My husband and I work on the junk shop, below your grandmother's flat, she explains. I take it a mechanism of alert: I am married and my husband is close, so don't flatter yourself, Mr. Aniello. All I have to do is take the electronic ticket to the Blue Jet terminal and they will take care of the rest, she advises. While I listen to her, I verify all the information.

It says that I leave in a couple of days, I tell her.

Yes, Mr. Aniello. Mrs. Aniello was very much interested in having you over today, Mei Ling says. It's also a direct flight.

It doesn't leave me much room for anything.

Your grandmother says you have plenty of time on your hands, Mr. Aniello.

Oh. She says that?

Your grandmother is a very kind woman. You shouldn't disappoint her.

It seems that I have no options, because my grandmother has always been my keeper and my savior. I remember that once or twice I had to borrow money from her, something that Amanda never found out about, I guess, because, if it was true that I was not much of a provider to my family, I never asked Amanda for money, at least not directly. There had been occasions when she

had to cover for utilities and rent all by herself, yes, but I never bought booze, drugs or strings for my guitar with her cash. Never. But, as guilty as I felt, I couldn't let grandma down. My grandmother always gave herself to me unconditionally, yes, but she always wanted things her way, and, once again, with swooping determination, Grandma Fiorenza had once again decided how things would be done.

It's a short drive from Lambert International to Cherokee Street, says Mei Ling.

And after cordial goodbyes, I prepare myself for the trip. I look in the almost bare closet of the one room studio I rent in downtown San Juan. I pick a leather jacket, a couple of jeans, some T-shirts and my black hat. Underwear and socks are recently laundered, so I pack a generous quantity. To complete my personal hygiene survival pack, I bring a toothbrush, toothpaste, mouthwash and a hair comb. I realize I have all I need for the moment.

\*

As the plane prepares to take flight, I look outside the window. Mute starlings wave and spin in the distance, like spelling goodbye in some cosmic language. Or so I would like to think. My country seems so green and misty as the plane leaves. My island becomes a tourist postcard as we gain elevation. There's a foamy rim that borders the coast of hotels and palm trees. The four o'clock traffic, which seems gigantic when one is trapped in it, looks small, still and futile. The pervasive thought is that the whole city is going nowhere. I fancy that that the mist –provoked, as the weather bureau reported, by clouds of errand Sahara desert dust-, is only the circumlocution of etherized thoughts and vaporized dreams of a place that wants to become something they are not, and escape into anything they cannot be.

As we pull away, the view diminishes, until it starts to appear like a tiny green spot, and then disappears.

I shut the lid closed. I get vertigo. I order a drink.

\*

Freedom dwells in the unlimited horizon. Up in the air, I feel like I'm traversing a different plane. The sky is merely blue only because of the deficiency of the eye. The geometry of memory can only be possible in loss. In absence. I picture the dome of my head as wide as the sky outside my window. Shades of orange. Pink. Afternoon delight and no limits. Look back with longing eyes and know that I will follow. The inconsequence of blue. Impermanence. The inability of materialism.

Like childhood. Youth.

My Dad's ghost visits me. He likes to travel. His face like the distorted façade of a cathedral. I remember his hand. Thick. Calloused. Like one who mends walls. Good fences make good neighbors, he used to say. I never knew he was quoting Frost. Colder than a Lindbergh, indeed. Lindbergh. *Limber*. In the house of my memories of him, only a lonely chair. It's quite dark inside.

\*

What was a sunset? Or a sunrise? What about rivers? There were no rivers in his planet. And, what is this thing called love? Yes, Twigo enjoyed the benefits of being the son of Ra (a very common name up there, my dad used to tell me), one of the Elders in Matrix City; he the power of the sixth sense, he could communicate telepathically, like the everybody else, but he desired

more: he wanted to use his mouth to pronounce words that no one wrote, because it was a nonsensical, even primitive, form of communication. He also wanted to travel, a habit only permitted to the missionary travelers, as his father was once. Otherwise, the duties of the Ganimedean citizen required the serenity of sameness.

Can I ever visit your planet, Dad?, I asked him once.

No.

No?

Why no?

There's something dense, uniform, sitting by the distant moon. You are made of pieces.

\*

Lambert International, as with other airports, is a place that projects transition and optimism. It is the place where Charles Lindbergh first worked as a pilot, flying airmail before he departed for New York and to eternity in his incredible and audacious non-stop flight to Paris. Of flying, I never knew much, but I do remember that Lindbergh was one of my dad's heroes. Charlie Lindbergh, he flew to old Berlin, Woody Guthrie sang. Lindy started an outfit that he called America First. Join me in the pond. *Más frío que un Lindberg*. The frozen juice. The snow-cone make-believe. Lindbergh gets the spirit down in El Escambrón. San Juan. Warm and humid. The cold treatment. I won't dance with the Carnival Queen, he claims. Frozen juice. Cold. Colder than Lindbergh. In 1928, Lindbergh flew his single-engine aircraft, aptly named Spirit of St. Louis, from the Puerto Rican capital to Santo Domingo. Everyone's a saint in the story.

Hanging from the airport's ceiling, there is a large monocoque that Lindbergh himself owned in 1934. I feel I am treading on flyers' nirvana, for what is today Lambert International was once the testing and launching site for hot air balloons. It was the same place where Alberto Santos Dumont brought his famous Number 7 -The Racer- to execute several acts, but his dirigible was sabotaged and he never accomplished the feat. I know this not only because my father told me when I was little, but because I wrote a Beatle-esque tune titled "Santos Dumont Speaks from his Balloon," a kind of mixture between "A Day in the Life," and "Across the Universe." Quite interesting, but as much of my other musical experimentations, failed. Anyhow, Lambert seems like the place to be for anyone who is shooting for the heavens.

As I pick up my luggage, a small, pale woman comes to me with a sign that bears my name. She sees me and smiles.

I find it a very warm welcome. I think of motherfucking Lindbergh.

\*

Mei Ling's the name. Picture, she responds, and shows me her smart phone's screen where there's an image of me, which, according to Mei Ling, grandma kept in her personal album and had it scanned and "saved for posterity." It was Mei Ling, a graphic artist with a golden heart, who had done the job for my grandmother.

I look at Mei Ling and she shies away from me. It almost feels as if she fears me, but I can't help it. The paleness of her skin is almost inviting. Her lips stretch into a feeble smile, and then she turns away from me. My glance runs her neck and down her back. The apparent softness of her skin is an open highway. Every now and then, she looks over her shoulder to check if I'm keeping pace with her. I fancy Mei Ling naked and suddenly realize that I haven't slept with a woman for awhile now. Sex with Amanda had once been great, slowly deteriorating into sporadic

encounters and finally dissolving into breadcrumbs she fed me once in a while. Maybe habit and routine had shaped into a friendly void that didn't weigh anymore on my urges for flesh, to the extent where I had stopped thinking that making love with Amanda would be possible, but it has been a long time since I have enjoyed sex with anyone. I am hungry.

We walk into the parking without saying much to each other. I ask the usual. The weather. The people. The food. She answers what is expected. This time of the year, nice. People are cool. The food is great. Finally, we make it to a 1959 Cadillac. A Caddy. It's mint conditioned. White leather seats and convertible top. It has two ample tail fins and jetpod taillights. I am perplexed.

It's pink, I say. Like in a Bruce Springsteen song.

I know, Mei Ling answers, as she takes my luggage into the trunk of the car.

But it's pink! Pink!

And fabulous. Your grandmother has kept it for years. She sees that my husband keeps it humming and running.

Does he?

Does he what?

Keeps it humming and running.

Mei Ling is caught up between emotions. Maybe she wants to call me words for my innuendos and maybe she wants to smile and go on with it. She might find it hard to read me. I don't blame her.

Yes, yes... it's a good car. Very valuable. And a treasure for Mrs. Aniello. She inherited it from her sister.

Grandma never learned how to drive. Why didn't she sell it or something?

Her sister, neither... but, it was an anniversary present for Mrs. Aniello's sister. What can you do? You never sell your anniversary presents. It's bad luck.

I see.

As we get into the car, we leave to the sound of AM jazz radio. I ask Mei Ling if she is a jazz fan, and she tells me that she isn't, but that, in a car like that, it is the only music she could ever listen to. Anything else, would be dishonorable to the car.

Soon, as we depart, we are riding interstate 70. Despite the collapse of capitalism around the world, St. Louis is a city that thrives economically. It is a very culturally rich city, too, Mei Ling explains.

I think of Ferguson.

\*

Yes, the entrance of a more diverse labor force of migrants has varied the color of collar, from blue to mostly white. Indeed, a lot of professionals and international business people account for the increase in high-paying jobs here, Mei Ling narrates as she drives into the city. All my daydreams are disasters. Uncle Tupelo sings. St. Louis was never a destination for immigrants when the big migratory waves of the 1950's struck the coasts of New York. Rivers burn and run backward. But it all changed during the 90s. Of course, there are people who still come to do America's laundry and clean up her rooms, but lately, it is about doctors, lawyers, business executives, teachers, and artists, Mei Ling explains. Death won't even be still.

Her father was a Chinese farmer, but her mother was a Mexican teacher. Caught up between traditions, she's well-traveled. Detroit, Chicago, Chattanooga, Baton Rouge

Let alone just to be at my home back in ol' St. Lou. When the time came, she decided to go to college, get a degree and work as a professional graphic design artist. I hate to see that evening sun go down. I hate to see that evening sun go down. I do mostly freelance, she says, and I help my husband with his business at the Mellow Yellow junk shop store. It's a beautiful story, I say. She looks at me trying to decipher the intent in the tone of my words. I try to mean it. Truly a great story, I insist. Right in front of us, the Gateway Arch, the Gateway to the West, bends the horizon. We are heading South. The road is life.

\*

Cherokee Street is a beautiful metaphor and advertised as a walkable in-town neighborhood. It is contained within a grid bracketed from East to West by Utah Street and Potomac Street, and crossed from North to South by Jefferson Avenue and other streets with names like Texas, Ohio, Iowa, California, Oregon, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania. It is now a commercial district close to the downtown St. Louis that bloomed as a community effort. It is both a resident area and a place to hop and shop from antiques stores to specialty shops, galleries, boutiques, restaurants, and, of course, Grandma's house.

Mei Ling drops me off right in front of grandma's apartment building on 2847 Cherokee. The first floor hosts the Mellow Yellow where Mei Ling's husband works, a place that is very much a postmodern vault of memories, a negation of the vanishing qualities of contemporary culture. It is also, as I notice, a publishing house and performance space for artists, philosophers, passers-by, scientists, dorks, left-over hippies and just about every strayed individual in Trump's America. The façade of the building is noticeably intact since 1896, two years before the definite American expansion headed South for the Caribbean during the Hispanic-American War.

Kipling's white man burden. Crooked little heart. Large cart iron. Turned wooden posts. Beautify the windows. The shop's interior, motley and chaotic, contrasts immensely with the outer sense of uniformity and order. I hardly visualize my grandmother entering the store.

Mei Ling soon joins me after she takes grandma's Cadillac to "the shelter," a private parking lot space. The workers polish, wash, and worship the car. Just for the car's sake. The car. A natural Mid-westerner idolatry. The sense of movement. Where are we going, Jack Kerouac? The road is a forest. A wilderness. Figure out the prophecy.

You like the store?, Mei Ling asks, as she probably notices that I am prey of the visual impact that the second hand store offers.

Everything's second hand here?, I ask.

Yes. We give second chances to things nobody wants.

I'd feel appreciated here.

Mei Ling drops me half a smile.

Want to say hello to Mrs. Aniello?, she asks, then.

I react to her suggestion. I follow her through the street entrance to which she has access. And, upstairs, Grandma Fiorenza must be waiting.

\*

Our subject is the act of enunciating itself, not the text of the enunciation. Benveniste. *Benvenuti*. If language functions like a musical score, should this be a musical score, given my voice is the sound of an instrument, the experience of the speaker can be reasonably compared to that of the performing artist, can it? We borrow the words. Can we borrow the memories? Speaking is not a lasting product. It decays. It steals constantly. Coding. Programming. But, it'll

never be known how this has to be told. I am a mobile, self-enclosed environment. The aperture must also be counted as a machine because language stipulates its own rules. Native biological plasticity. Embodiment. Word is flesh.

\*

Words embraced such beauty within themselves for Twigo, my father once told me. I remember. Twigo liked to pronounce words as if he tasted them, Dad said. So he used words to communicate with his mother, Ma-at, a habit that often embarrassed her in public, since Twigo was the son of an elder, which meant to bear honor and responsibility. The people of Ganymede had achieved the utmost level of suprahumanity and Ra was one of the golden masters among them. Twigo would be destined to walk on Ra's footsteps, but Matrix City decided that such an important position could not be passed on to someone so detached from Ganymedean life. So that's when Ra, my grandfather, decided to tell him.

*Twigo, you are not fully one of us.*

I'm not?, he replied, verbally, of course.

*Don't speak with your mouth,* his Dad warned him.

I won't, he verbalized, followed by a telepathic *sorry*.

*Your mother is from Earth, a planet quite distant from here, where I had to the opportunity to live while on expedition. Your mother was like a stray flower in a desert,* he continued.

*What's a flower and what's a desert?*, Twigo asked.

*Nevermind,* Ra continued. *The other Elders have decided to send you back there, where you belong, so you can find yourself. In time, you'll be able to join us.*

*When is that?*, Twigo asked.

*When my own time ceases*, Ra replied.

Days later, and after parading through several stops at a series of space stations, my grandfather brought Twigo back to Earth. When the spaceship descended, a woman was waiting for him as if she knew they were coming. She had tears in her eyes, and Twigo thought of Residence on Earth's rivers.

Ramon, she said softly, and kissed Ra.

Who's Ramón? Twigo said out loud.

This is your mother, Twigo, the words jumped out of Ra's lips. She will raise you, and when you're ready, you'll be back to me.

Your name will be Damian, my grandmother told him, and Twigo liked it.

It sounds like one of Residence on Earth's poems, he said.

The poet's name is Pablo Neruda, Ra told Twigo before he left. Enjoy your residence on Earth, he added.

So here I am, my father said. I am an illegal alien, he joked around.

Funny. The only things I have left from my dad are merely stories.

\*

Emotional life is expressed through love. Service. Compassion. Art. But emotion is stimulated. Simulated. Discipline. We work according to time patterns, and when we can no longer fulfill those, we retire. Re. Tire. We. Re. Plicate. Like Hal in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Daisy, Daisy, Give me your answer do. I'm half crazy, all for the love of you. Time is duration. Manly. P. Hall. Discipline is the great controller. How to behave properly. How to eat properly. How to speak properly. Write properly. Not to hurt. Too hurt. The hurt.

As a child, wondered about life in the stars. The order of that heavenly geometry. The fabric of sighs. My father once beat my mother, and I felt a broken rib. Forgetting was to heal.

I erase myself. Again.

I can't be perfect. Light bends.

\*

Beside the smell of onions, I smell the antiseptic air. Hygienic and crisp. A wall of monitors and computers and stainless steel tools, much like a dentist's, rest upon a tray table. A surgical procedure or something is about to happen here, I fear. What the hell are you doing to me?, I ask. A kidney? Is that what you want, huh? That's what you do, right? You're kidney traffickers, but I hadn't thought about it, to tell you the truth, Taíno says. Right, Moreno? What do you think? Is that a good idea? Excellent idea, I'd say, Moreno joins in.

And it's clear.

Truth is a worn-out word.

Memory traffickers, they call themselves. This country? It lacks a memory. People forget, Taíno says. Monumental opportunity, besides the Alzheimer's epidemic that seems to obliterate people's sense of the past, Kidney says. If it continuous, it's analog; but if it's granular, it's digital. Repeated patterns. Sex once was power. Now it's memory, Kidney says. On a once upon a time in 2018, smart phone technology got smarter, they will say in the future. Get the chips in. A phone call is a thought. For those who were all for it, that is. Under. Ground. It's all gain. The capitalism of the will. We are all translatable in numbers, Kidney says. We are information. Atoms. Molecules. Cells. Where'd you wanna go? *Ahora hay luz del universo*. What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman. Energy and matter perform as manifestations of coded reality. This

dude is so high, I think as I fix my eyes on a mustard stain dripping down his shirt. He wipes it off with his index finger. Points at me. Language is code. Memory is language. Memory is code. He licks his finger. I have a headache.

The room has minimal decoration. I see crystalline pyramids over a coffee table. Science magazines. Tablets. The walls are aqua blue and marine green. I'm still in the tropics, I see. By the window, I see a pelican fly. Definitely. I'm still in Puerto Rico.

Is this happening. Is. This. Happening.

The muttering retreats. It leads you to an overwhelming question: What the fuck is going on in here?

Do I dare?

I try to loosen myself from the aluminum straps. If I pull too much, I might slice my wrists, Kidney tells me. It's useless. Chillax, he advises. I'm beat, I say. Your memories are currency, buddy, Kidney says. It won't matter how much you zoom in, because it holds no significance. There are no illusions. No ideas but in things.

Colorless ideas sleep furiously.

Silence.

Whatever, Kidney says. You can call me the Kid. But zooming further will have no meaning.

What's that supposed to mean?

It means that in memory, time and space ceases to exist. Time is not linear. And yet, the irony: we gotta rush. Can we leave the small talk for after the procedure?

Small talk?

Yeah, he's a nerd, Taíno tells me. But to answer your question, no. We don't need your filthy kidney. Who do you think we are? Butchers?

Yeah, we're not butchers, Moreno says.

We'll shoot a nano-bot into your blood stream, Kidney the Kid says. We'll only copy your memories.

For what? I have no memory. No family, no country, no identity. I might as well not exist.

Can I punch him?, Moreno asks.

Not now, brother, Taíno replies.

I feel a cold sting sprawling up my veins. Expanding. Intensifying slow.

The morphine will settle in, Kidney says. It'll help you relax. And it will inhibit those thoughts you might not want to release. Don't worry. They'll be good for somebody. Right, Taíno?

Damn right, he says. People pay for any kind of shit just as long they have something it's not theirs to remember.

I'm confused, I say.

It's the morphine, the Kid smiles.

Morphine. Morph. Morpheus. I feel a fat sleep rolling in my eyelids. I trip on my own hand, attached to an intravenous line insertion. A winged infusion set. When did this happen?

We just want your memories, dude. Kidney sends the bots, they contact your brain or whatever happens there, and they replicate your memories.

That's absurd, I say. I think I say it. Maybe I did say it. My tongue heavy like walrus gumboot. Peel off the napkin. I terrify. I hear Kidney telling me about a rush. A good rush. You'll get the hang of it.

I feel a rush of good feelings and happiness. I smile. The world is slowing down. Like in a thick dream.

Shooting the bots now, Kidney says. He one mojo filter. The edge serrate.

And you won't feel a thing, he says. I promise. It won't hurt. It doesn't have any side effects. Well, maybe that. I'm not sure. Maybe you'll experience temporary memory loss or something. I don't know. Everyone reacts differently. We are machines in the sense that our desire is inextricably bound up with machines, and machines must be connected to non-technical processes of desire to truly function.

He got to be a joker. I try to make sense. I lose myself.

I rock shut like a seashell.

Deliberate.

Fascinate.

Deviate.

Reinstate.

### **SINGULARITY III**

Love can only be experienced. Yes, I know what you might be thinking, dear; do I love you? Of course. Nobody taught me that. You can't program love; you just must learn it. Like poetry. Is love codifiable? Maybe. Maybe, the memory of love itself. Like the love I had once for your mother, or the love I once felt for my grandmother. I remember the love, yes, indeed, but I can't reload it. Temporal abstracts can be saved and stored and computed, but not felt. Love can't be anticipated as a series of numbers. There's no geometry capable of casing in passion and feelings for a significant other, whether a sibling, a pet, or a lover. Love is a language: it can only evoke what is inevitably lost. A residue of uncertainty that is the only certainty. Love, like

memories, thrive on time. Love is prepositional: it conveys relations of time and place, the now and forever, or never. And yet love is not a linguistic instance and, as such, it cannot be produced artificially. Like my voice now. Love can't be a cognitive sequence, but I'm here to love you. What I assume you shall assume.

As every day is followed by a night, so every night is followed by a day. Immortality is cyclic but not fixed. I'm able to combine brain power— knowledge, skills, and personality quirks that make me human—with this computer power to think, reason, communicate, and create. I'm not selfless. Or selfish. I'm an entity in a machine. Does that make me inhuman? Posthuman? Infrahuman? The blood that used to run through my body now pumps from your heart into your veins. You listen to me but I don't have a mouth. You see me but I long ceased to exist. I once held fear in a handful of dust. Dust. Speckles. Particles. All my dreams pass before my eyes so curiously. The wind crosses the brown land, unheard. From Earth I came, but I am not an earth nor an adjunct of an earth: I am the mate and companion of people, all just as immortal and fathomless as myself. A Whitman poem. That's right. Poetry, like life, can only be learned. Do you guess I have some intricate purpose? Right now, I know everything and nothing. In any case, I still don't know you. The ineffable. The potentiality. The end of race and differences also meant the end of nationalities and frontiers in a time when the dwindling politics in the United States restrained liberties and unities. A calamity. A good thing it was that science consistently corrects our overly inflated view of our own significance. Insignificance. The future can be predicted. As part machine, I might not have the capacity to develop emotions, but, yes, I keep memories of those emotions. Utopias can only be utopias.

What am I, you ask? Where is my body? Where is the pigmentation of my skin? What use is race? What have DNA and the tyranny of genomes come to? If size is only development, I am made of multitudes. Was that the plan? Memories walk in the tenderness of the night.

And so, I come to you. I exist as I am and that's enough.

I glitch.

## Glitch

My head is an egg. It's cracking. Whatever's in there, it hurts. Pain looms the way green mold covers a lemon. All those poems I wished I had written. Will they sing to me? It's a vacuum. Sucked in a dream, I am boneless desert. Am I the butterfly? If I flap my wings, will the past twirl into catastrophe? Will I wake up anytime now? How do I know of sleep? Space abides consciousness.

*Wepa, lindo*, a short man with a guayabera tells me. Don't you remember me? I'm Taíno. We're brothers.

I look at him and, how can I possibly be his brother? What do I look like? I have fresh memories of nothing. I look at the two men behind him. Again, a dreamlike quality possesses me.

Who are they?

They? Oh, the tall black guy is Moreno. The ugly pale one is Kidney.

Hi, Kidney says. Welcome back.

Back? Where have I been?

Nowhere and everywhere, buddy, Taíno says, his smile like a canoe sailing a brown sea.

Who are you again?

We are you and you are us and we are all together, Kidney says.

Oh.

You hit yourself in the head, Moreno says.

Really?

No. I'm just fucking with you.

*Anda*, Moreno, Taíno says. The man's confused! *Qué pasa?*

*Pichea.*

Kidney laughs. This is awesome, he says. My first hacked brain, with nanobots and all.  
When do I get my money?

I'll talk to Dirty Dan later. No worries, Taíno replies. In the meantime, get him back to sleep.

I don't want to sleep, I say. I must call my grandma.

Your what?, Taíno turns to Kidney. You fucked up? What is he talking about, *coño*?

His grandma, Moreno says.

I know, *cabron!* But, ain't he supposed to be another person?

Damn cheap Korean technology, Kidney says. It's a glitch.

Where you get the damn nanobot?

The Dark Web.

Dark Web? Fucking capitalism! You've been had.

What did you expect? Amazon?, Kidney talks back. Relax. I'll shut him down and reboot.

I have a headache, who cares.

Fuck you!, Moreno says, and then points his finger at Kidney. You, *españolito*, shut him down.

I have a headache. A glitch. And a clatter and a chatter from within.

\*

I have wandered like a child strayed at a shopping wall for most of my life. I never got to play catch with my father. If you build it, it won't come. Somebody lied. We did watch a movie or two together. No Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson flicks. But I remember *ET*. *Close Encounters*. On VHS. *Cocoon*. OMG. I'm not sure about *Cocoon*. But even way back then, they

were illegal copies of a copy of a copy. Anything Sci Fi made it to dad's VCR. Analog and electromagnetic. *Denso. Unido. Sentado en el fondo.* Like, it could be possible. A new dimension. A dimension of sound. Sight. Mind. Anything alien. The familiar. What he was. Self-destructive monolith of fog. Sitting on a lotus, I pretended to catch flies. I let my face grow long. Grandma Fiorenza, old and tired, waited for his return. Waited for the flowers, chocolates. What the heck. Just his smile would've filled the room. Stars pour out of grandma's chest. Her heart would become a fertile land where hope was a thing with feathers. Flying through the door. Bluebird. You'll know what love can do. But she never did. Never did.

We waited for Dad. For so long. The promise of his return. The myth of his voice plowing the clouds and stirring the air like a thousand bugles blowing pity. We waited till the darkness swallowed the house. We took what we found. We wanted no more. The waiting. It's the hardest part. We waited through days and nights. Endured the weather. We waited through the seasons. We missed him. Dad, where did you go? How's the new girlfriend doing? Did you know that mom almost tried to kill herself? What are you drinking now, Dad? You, man of wonderful vigor. Calmness. Beautiful stranger. The house merely swelled with loneliness. So full of you. He will return, my grandmother used to say. He will return, my mother used to say before she started digging holes in the backyard where she screamed your name until she forgot it. Then she forgot about grandma. And me. And all. The air. She planted hope. Wounded. She wanted out. She wanted to be free. Her lips of petals throbbing against the Earth. Blood moon. Arid womb. Tomb. The thunder spoke. Varoom. The dogs came at night and unearthed them bones. Them words. The hurt. Until it was no more. Perfected. Her dead body alive with failure. Pale serpent of thorns. Pain like stale bread in a Martin Espada poem. We ate.

\*

Again, today the rain grays the graying stones. Mei Ling takes me upstairs, where silence sits in the middle of the house. The light drips down like honey. Mei Ling leads the way. Come, she says as she opens the door for me. The house smells of incense and candles. Smells like Obeah. Full of a substance of common color. Silent. Like an old mother. Like shade of church or resting of bones.

I go full of those waters arranged deep. Prepared, sleeping in sad attention. It's cold.

I imagine Grandma Fiurenza carving the *queso de bola* in the kitchen table. Spoon in hand. Scooping out. Scooping out. Into a bowl, she must be unloading the flesh of the ball of Dutch cheese. Scooping out. She might reuse it later to make cheese balls. Or to stuff the *arancini*. Carving. Carving. Scooping. Like she's got five names. Atabey. Yermao. Guacar. Apito. Zuimaco. She carves a cave. Rivers flow from her hands. My father's bones must be inside. My father's bones turned into fish. Scooping out. The flesh. The pulp. What. Ever. Thirty minutes in the oven inside a glass bowl. Stuffed with ground meat. Stewed. Generous with cilantro, garlic, peppers, onions, paprika, and olive oil. *Sofrito*. Thirty minutes and the cheese melts in the bowl. It will look like a pie and Grandma Fiurenza will offer me a big slice of stuffed cheese. Like when she lived with me. Abuela Fiurenza, goddess of waters and medicines and memorable food. She must be waiting.

Where is grandmother Fiurenza?, I ask Mei Ling.

In the living room, inside a glass box, she replies.

From a window, the patina of the buildings burns low. Suffused fire. The gray sky looks like the belly of a whale.

\*

Manageable matter. The carrier is malleable. Consciousness can be coded. Domo Arrigato, Mr. Robotto. And, no, this is not Kansas anymore, Toto. Cognitive patters widespread over the vast universe of information. I once thought it was meat for comics. Graphic Shangri-Las. Absence. White tremor of void. Paralysis. That is not what I meant. That is not what I meant at all. My unhappiness with time and space. Child of scorn. Miniver Cheevy born too late. Encapsulated interlude to force the moment to its crisis. Passive voice was made for me. Un-envisioned center. Scattered body. I am the egg man. Indeed: the mermaids will not sing for me. Goo-goo ga yoo.

Call me cyborg. Call me whatever. I am, indeed, an invisible man. Liquid data pourable onto many/ any containers. I'm not a revolution. I'm not a technology. I'm a change of paradigm. Lost vessel in a windless sea. The albatross. The albatross. The very deep did rot. Change. Ideology. Fairy tales uncovered. Simulation is the going of an inland soul to sea. Oh, say. Can't you see. I wanted to be rain. Instead, I got tera-bytten. The shutting of the eye. Sleep. The station grand.

I pull my pieces together. Dropping bombs in cups of coffee. The Chainsmokers.

I'm metaphysics unwanted son. I'm nihilism's collapsed lung.

Somewhere, somebody should have written "Memories... do not play."

\*

I loved my father for what he was not and did not hate him for what he was. My father, a forlorn country. Somber. Dark. Heavy stone. Possibility like unquenchable thirst. Sunlight on a dry hole. The dead land. The cactus land. It was that time when poetry came to me. The ocean knows. The ocean knows, because I drowned my eyes in it so many times. It knows my voice. The

mermaids. I don't think they will sing for me. Isolation is the fate of islands.

I once proposed myself that if I ever saw dad again, I wouldn't spit on his face. I wouldn't reproach the abandonment. I wouldn't kill him. Daddy. You bastard. I'm not through. The hurt appears like a morning star, and all I can think of is to have a drink with my father.

He needs to see you, Mei Ling told me. You need to see him. Go to him.

My father, the stranger, had been hospitalized.

I would have to sneak in a pint of whiskey to his room.

\*

A field of stars widens above us as we drive down the hill. The sound of the Cabriolet's wheels, pushing against the deserted road. Mantras sown on the road. The woods shadow-play alongside as the thin crisp air rubs our faces. My eyes are tired and irritated, and I must make a great effort to keep them open. I look at Mei Ling and she (almost) glows in the dark. She can't drive. She doesn't even have a driver's license. I distract myself listening to some pulsing electronic beat. Thunder bass. Fat drums. I don't. Get it. Deep cobalt shades seem to emerge from the darkness of the hills as the asphalt tongue rolls out into the valley. A sickle moon hangs low.

\*

The order of light is color. *Profesión esperanza*. But what have I become, my sweetest friend?

\*

And, indeed, there will be time. The animal spirit, which dwells in the high chamber to which all the spirits of sensation carry their perceptions, marvel at her mouth when she speaks to me. My mother told me so much about her. Oblivia is wonderful, Alejandro. Who's Alejandro, mom? You, trickster. Coyote. She says. I've been trying to make sense of the senselessness. Memories desert my mother, and I'm helpless. I'm nothing. Not an image. Not a sound. A thing. A referent. Hollow and sordid. I vanish in front of her eyes and yield into non-existence. It pains me to know she doesn't recognize me that often. Only momentary sparks of reason illuminate our conversations. She will go on breathing until her heart and lungs and brain stop. No past. Only present.

Oblivia looks after my mother and collects words that she puts in a tote bag. I keep them for you, Oblivia says. I must be delusional, but I don't mind. When I listen to Oblivia, I find a bridge. *Vide cor meum*. I'm fascinated with the way Oblivia's lips move, as if they formulated the world. The universe. I will wade out till my thighs are burning flowers. Flesh and mystery dissipate the yellow smoke that slides along my heart. There will be time, there will be time. Her eyes wane down on me as dark sunsets. Her face is a city. And so much more.

She calls me and reproaches my lack of manners. You haven't called, you haven't called. You can't hope. You confuse poetry with cabbage. And that's what you get. But that's not what I meant! That's not what I meant at all, I apologize. Thank you for not keeping me in my proper place. To love is to occupy. To weigh. Measure. You have broken a thing of beauty.

I become possessed by a flame that makes me miserable. Time as a joke. Sure you might as well be in bed with what whore, Oblivia says. You can't love. You're not ready to love. You

don't deserve love. You, so hard, and at the same time, so soft. I touch you, and my fingers run through you.

I should've been a pair of ragged claws.

*El amor es corto y el olvido, largo.*

I crave your mouth, your voice, your hair, Oblivia. Silent and starving, I prowl through the streets smelling your traces and I. Can't. Find. You.

You had me once, she says. Now you have me in anyone.

The moon lives in the linings of your skin, Oblivia. I need everything.

And, yet, now you are left with nothing, she hangs up the phone. Wreak havoc.

\*

In the distance, I notice a roadside diner flanked by a lagoon. It looks out of place, old and forgotten. It must have been glorious at some point in time. The wood hasn't been painted in years. A sign outside sells steaks and eggs.

Is this the place?, I ask Mei Ling.

She nods.

I park the car next to lamppost that spreads its feeble light like a dying star. I look around and admire the minimalistic barrenness. Like in a Hopper painting. Gabled fading-brown roof. Red stains splashed all over. Faded.

Those stains? This must've been the rain of birds your grandmother talked so much about.

Rain of birds.

Yes. Fiorenza told me that, one day, birds started falling out of the sky. For no reason at all.

Weird.

Isn't it? Some smashed against the roof and look; their blood is still there. Waiting.

Waiting for what?

I don't know.

Grandma was the best storyteller ever, I think. Surely. She was pulling Mei Ling's legs.

Shasta daisies planted in flowerpots are the sole embellishment of the place. Apparently, they look well taken care of, according to Mei Ling, who picked up her flower skills after her Chinese mother and her jovial presence after her Mexican American father. She claims. I have no reason to doubt.

You need more than a green thumb to have pot-grown *margaritas* this beautiful, she notices.

The only *margaritas* I care about are made with tequila, I say, as I get out of the car.

The lagoon extends like a mirror, and it might seem that the stars are drowning, but it's just a bioluminescent effect. The water is alive with light.

What do we do now?, I ask Mei Ling.

Like the blood stains on the roof, we just wait. Just you wait.

\*

Featherless and high. A champagne supernova. Faster than a cannonball. Oasis. Someday you will find me. Drowsy numbness pains. I have been in love with easeful Death. Like a riddle in the eye of a hurricane. Quiet. This portion of ripple. This that covers us; this that chokes us. This, the only roof we could afford while we dream of fire. Wrestling with life. Telling. Listening.

Connecting. The dream songs are real. Just watch where you spit. Multitudes will always howl for their savior.

\*

I look at Oblivia distractedly. A twelve-foot neon woman in San Juan. Miami? New York? I digress. Once a year, my mother writes her bitterness into a message, and inserts it into a melon. I call it Melon Collie. Can you replicate sadness? Why would anyone do that, in the first place? Oblivia smiles and wipes my lips with a kiss. I don't do a very good job at having a soul, but, anyway, I don't know what a soul is. No one does. Uncertainty can only be surpassed by make-believe. The center cannot hold. The falcon cannot hear the falconer. Or a *guaraguo*.

\*

Her body appears silhouetted against a screen projection of a slow-motion rain. A DJ asks the audience to give it up for Amber D, like the vitamin to help build your stamina. Tove Lo blasts from the speakers –I know, I Shazamed it- while Amber D circles the stainless-steel pole counterclockwise. Don't stop. Pop that. Don't stop. Does she turn back time? Her crystal platform sandals softly crush the air. She wears a white tight seamless dress, one shouldered and with slash details in the front and back. A matching mesh G-string can be peeked at between the torn windows in her attire. How much of that is real? Drop that pussy, bitch. French Montana. *Dale, papi*. Her long red hair falls like a veil. Her facial features can't be seen from here. It's okay. Her body is Alter-Effects perfect. Skin by Adobe. Another girl welcomes me. High, Gogo; she's about to finish, the girl says. I don't know the girl's name and she must be mistaken.

My name is. What? My name is. Who? Huh?

Before I can say hi back to the girl, she's gone. I see her tattooed back reflected in one of the walls. The place is box of mirrors and I know, somehow, I've been here before. I must have been here before. I can connect nothing with nothing. True.

I check the videos on my phone and there's one labeled "Oblivia." Hello, sweetheart, the sweet, raspy voice comes out after I play it. Remember, today is Thursday, November 24, and you must come to the Venus Delight. She throws me a kiss. It's Amber, she finishes. I'm here.

I must have been here. The bluish lights settle like a dream fog.

\*

That same day, while the Waterford Crystal Ball descended in Times Square to illuminate the new century, my uncle Louie, also drunk, told me my mother lied, the product of a derided mind. She has suffered a lot, he said. Please, forgive her. And it was cool until he revealed that I was born right out of a plantain tree. By the side of a lonely road, he confessed. Yes. This made much more sense, since all my life I have been living like a plantain: feeding up to end up without peel.

Then there was my mother's Italian neighbor and historian, Bianca Caro, who claimed that my father was turned into a coconut by some sadist alien forces that visited New York City quite often. That's why he lives in Fiji, she prattled, a victim of Xanax and champagne. He deserved it, she claimed. Oh. By aliens she meant Reptilians. It was nonsense. Fiji? We have coconut palm trees in Puerto Rico.

I remember my father. A fading ghost. I remember.

\*

I become an old house. Experienced. Being does not see itself. Perhaps it listens to itself.

\*

Me. Synthetic. I exist as information. This is information energy inextricably late me know that's my size patient's easy process. Me. Energy inextricable. Matter and energy are indissoluble.  $E=MC^2$ . You don't realize. Matter and energy are both secondary aspects of reality. This is. There is. *Jai guru deva om*. Simply manifestations of the most fundamental principle. Information. Images of broken light. Everything around us. *Informa*. In form. Form. Shape. Geometry. Everything around us. Information. Molecules. Blueprint. *Rumbambero*. Like crazy musicals encoded into our DNA. The world's a stage. We are all a fiction. Pixels in the sky. Slither as they pass. Anything can change my world. God might as well be dead.

Time vanishes into eternity and the time now.

Time measures opportunity.

All opportunities that come to us in this life come within time patterns.

But every opportunity has its own responsibility.

To do twenty business mild salsa dollars. Longhorns you miles. Some ninja hustle. Unless you is my only tool. You. A construction. I glitch. Shed my skin. This is the new stuff. Shedding is plausibility. Possibility. In the sweat. Again. I glitch. Understand how memories are stored in the brain. Three-pound lump of fatty tissue. Custard from a dead dog's eye. Do I dare? Oh, do not ask what is it. Eighty-six billion brain cells by passing bypassing electricity or chemicals or no ideas but in things. Forgive me. When I speak now, there are no rumblings in my voice. Between them, neurons can send signals to each other. A network. Detonating in unison. Connectome.

Downloading memories, I grow bald spots. This is what's been done to my flesh. I flow like a luminescent river. Miles to go before I sleep. Miles to go before I sleep.

Substrate independent minds, I heard Kidney say. A personal way to experience. Unique. The world is yours. The world is what you make of it. Processing the experience. Uploading. I'm convinced that the mind is the totality and the way my thoughts take place.

My thoughts. Warmth. Worms.

We can be heroes, Kidney sings. Just for one day. Or two. I'm a blackstar. I'm not a gangster.

You feeding me poems?

No, they were there.

Nobody waits for you back home.

\*

Men sit in comfortably wide purple chairs. Velour or some finer material. The sitting is arranged in a proscenium arch, like a Greek theater. We're all a performance. That's how old this shit gets. The men drink, snort cocaine, and/or get a complementary lap dance from the shot girls. They get much more money than the dancers, because they provide a closer experience and good company. There's no six-foot rule for them, but at least they don't have to show their boobs. It's about the drinks. Tequila shots. The salt closer to that borderline between their white, hot pants and their pubis; the drink at the height of their bellies; the lime in their mouths of fire. It's a fifty-dollar treat, because you get to touch and lick the girls, something you don't do with the dancers, which is why Amber D precisely prefers the dancing pole.

My ghost likes to travel. Is Amber really her name?

I thought she was Oblivia.

I might be wrong. Open up. Begin again. Happiness might be a warm gun.

\*

The shot girls get greater tips, though, she told me once when she was my student. These girls bring anything between six hundred to eight hundred dollars the night. It's good money, for sure, she also told me. It pays your college tuition, she explained me one day in my office at the University of Florida, where I taught a writing workshop for some time. She wanted to be a writer; write a novel about a stripper in the club she worked at during weekends down in South Beach. You should come over and visit some time, she said. She smiled then. That I can remember; other things, I simply can't.

Are these my own memories? Life is memories. A Buñuel conundrum. Memory-boosting implant that mimics the kind of signal processing that occurs when neurons are laying down new long-term memories. Is that Kidney's voice inside me?

Desire can be a Trojan Horse.

\*

By the time I get to the bar, Amber D has finished her act. People applaud, wolf-whistle, and scream nasty things. It's a 7-ish and up club. A fine-ladies-for-fine-gentlemen's club. Thursday is for blue light shoppers, so maybe that's why the illumination is blue. Or it's blue because I'm here and I see things blue all the time. Could be a Kieslowski movie thing, as in *Blue*, which my wife and I watched the day before the shooting that I can't remember enough to forget.

Run. Blood. Run.

I think I've been here before. I believe it.

We were off to great things, certainly. Amanda had been appointed film reviewer at *The Herald* and she was thrilled she could get to do the two things she loved most at the same time: writing and watching films. It's all a vague dream now, like a recollection of a previous life without the certainty that there is a previous life.

On losing the memory. The narrator. Simply forgets what he's writing.

If I were a writer, this would be autofiction. I'm all ghost. No shell.

\*

All matter is technology. All that is solid will melt in the air. All that is holy. Holy. Holy. Holy. I'm with you in Columbia, mother. I must nestle everywhere. Settle everywhere. Establish connections everywhere. Consciousness means a capacity to experience the world. Holy. Holy. Holy. Everything's holy. That and what it means to be human. Of flesh and blood, I'm made. I can get better. Be better. Be. Aging is a disease. Holy. Holy. Hollow. Holo. Graphic. What if I tell you. Print me. 3D.

\*

Mei Ling speaks with a cloned logic. Words compile reproduction. A previous reality. Like mine. What's the code for love? Happiness? Lust? Energy? Control appears as logic. The architecture of the universe. The real. Real. Tree of life. Kabbala. Is there any self-evident truth? I feel the wind lick my closed eyelids. I imagine air. I feel. Therefore, it's real. Or is it? Zohar zombie. Zoetrope. Where is the true original? The heart evokes persimmons, Mei Ling says. Otherwise, does she know what she says? She puts the knife away. Lays down the paper. Peel the

skin. Not the meat. Persimmons? I ask. Your grandmother knew that, Mei Ling tells me with a partly withered smile. Sadness makes her as beautiful as the moon. For many years, she helped my grandmother, who unconditionally trusted her. Mei Ling took care of the house, made sure Grandma Fiurenza visited her doctors frequently. Paid the bills. Administered the old woman's money. Trust. The migrant songbird on the bough wet with dew. Moist as the willows. It was Grandmother Fiurenza who paid for Mei Ling's divorce procedures, saving her from being another number in domestic violence statistics. I owe my life to your grandmother, she told me the day I met her. Blithe as the plum blossoms. Spring's spirit renewing. I had no right to disturb that universe. I just happened.

It's beautiful here. I can tell why she wanted to see this for a last time, huh?, I tell Mei Ling.

She will.

I spot a rusty metal cow that seems to have been here forever. Every now and then the wind gently sways the time-frozen animal. The song of cicadas syncopates in the air.

Those are the male cicadas singing. Female cicadas don't sing, I say, going for small talk.

The male cicadas must be chauvinist pigs.

Mei Ling smiles. She's almost transparent.

Grandmother liked to talk a lot about you, she says. She kept pictures of you as a kid, your mother and her holding you while I rode along on a carousel. It was a black horse, said Mei Ling. I don't know who took the picture.

Memories can be abrasive.

\*

I wake up to finding myself alone. I want to cry most of the time, a compulsion I feel like a duty or something, but I have become the main character of my unfinished novel. Or, did the character become me?

I feel nothing because I don't have the memory of loss. Only the knowledge. The information. An ephemera left out in the rain. My chest is a cave full of fear.

\*

I check the videos on my phone again, and I find one of a two men talking to the camera. Yo, whassup? Taíno here, says the short one. And Moreno, *papi*, says the bigger one. Remember us? Metal parts moving. Heavy. Memorists. iRemember. You know how it is (how it is). *Ya tú sa'e*. Everything I do, I do it big. This like *La Guaracha del Macho Camacho*, right? *Lo mismo pa' lante que pa'tras*. They both laugh. They are high. And purple. After the psyche, the drugs, the drinks, the bugs, the more drinks, you failed at recuperating your immediate memory. Do you remember? I don't. Of course, you don't, Moreno says and he and Taíno and Kidney, who now joins them, laugh. Moon songs and salt water. Are these tears? Who am I?

Run to the hills, man, Kidney says.

Or don't.

It's like jetlag, but worst, he talks to the camera and whiffs the kalifa. You can't commit your acts to mnemonic activity. It works like anterograde amnesia. Must be a bug on the bot. Taíno and Moreno laugh. He said "butt," Moreno giggles. Fuck them, Kidney speaks to the camera as if he were certain that I'd be listening and watching. Your memories are worth shit, man. Your memories. All alone in the moonlight. We won't get much for them.

That means you still owe me, Boricua, Taíno says.

I hallucinate. Disintegrate. Reinstate.

You have lost the capacity to transfer those short-term memories into long-term ones, if only momentarily. Or not. Shit is like that. Anyways, I got you some implants. Nicer memories. A little risky, yes. But nice. It might take a while, or it might take forever, just enjoy them and party like it's 2025.

Hallucinate. Disintegrate. Reinstate.

Someone mutters at the street lamp gutters. Feline and lazy.

I have a headache again.

You might feel like you stored information in the cloud and then lost your password.

Don't lose the password, man, Moreno says.

Keep coming back to this video, Kidney says. Just kidding.

They all laugh. Some more. When the dawn comes, tonight will be a memory, too. The world is like a woolen lover. I am a subspecies of memoirist. My loneliness. An S.O.S. to the world. A hundred years alone. Nobody is ever missing.

I have no family, and I live out the compensation offered by that rattiest of rats Chuck E. Oh, there's a book you're trying to finish, but you forget (That's not a pun, you know it).

Amber is helping. Ask her about it.

This is how I disappear.

\*

When my daughter was born, my hair turned to white. Realism is still magical. It's always been that way. It's called simulation. Trying to forgive whose frantic passage, when he could not

live an instant longer. Written on the sky. Like chem-trails in the summer dawn. I decayed. I started dying. I should've been less selfish. I'm a walrus. I should've felt the joy to be alive in her. She lived in me. Didn't she? Once there was a way to get back homeward. Her tiny little hand grabbing my index finger. One. Am I so close that I must sense you distant? *Mi interior de guitarra y aire viejo*. I grow old. I grow old. I shall wear the bottom of my trousers rolled. I, the broken god humiliated by his creation.

She cried. Cried. Out. Oh, didn't you bring the fire of the gods?

My shadow shrinks. Grows inward. Chaosmosis. Let me be no nearer. I will destroy what I cannot love. Love. Love. Love. I repeat it so I can believe it. What you get married for if you don't want children? Hurry up. Please, it's time. I'm never my own words. Not anymore.

Where are my mother's pills? The ones she swallowed like devouring air?

I grow old. I grow old.

\*

I grew up believing that my father was, indeed, from another planet. I don't blame myself. He was alien to me. But he knew all, and I mean all. One Sunday afternoon, he surprised me smoking one of mom's cigarettes. Then man got so angry, that he grabbed me by the collar and dragged me to the living room, pushed me to the couch and gave me the whole pack of Marlboros. "Smoke," he said, and I went like, "What?," and he insisted that I should light a cigarette and start blowing smoke or things were going to get rough.

I looked at my father's king size hands, and I felt minimal.

I heard his voice resound deep like an echo in the woods. I considered his eyes and thought that they would expel fire beams anytime now. So I smoked. And smoked. And smoked some

more. My eyes watered and evaporated and watered again, my throat burned up, and I lost all sense of taste momentarily.

When you're done, I'll get you another one, he said.

And that's when I started to cry, until my mom came home from the supermarket and reproached my father's disciplinary habits. I was sick that day, and the next day, too, but he brought me strawberry ice cream with a final advice: Don't. Ever. Smoke.

I failed.

\*

Memories dwell deep within the folds and grooves. Of the brain. Tremble by the river. A fan of images opens, and I think of Binghamton. It's gray and rainy acid. My grandmother holds my hand and takes me to Recreation Park. Your mom is waiting (My mother's dead). My mother fell in love with a college professor, she says. You're the last of the Aniellos. If you ever have a brother, it won't be an Aniello. Grandma never married, so she kept her maiden name, which she passed on to my father, carrying it like the last fire of the world. The name dies with me. It's family tradition. How can I turn from everything me and live?

After dad left us, Grandma Fiorenza and Mom used to weave these long conversations, a quilt of things to do and things they never did, that filled their void. The afternoons together were also the perfect pretext to share their coffee and *mantecaditos*. I loved to place the guava paste right in the middle of the small ball of dough. Watch them bake. Watch them bake. Now I'm a lake. Silver and exact. *Mantecaditos* were the universe. Bread is short. I could mold them. I could shape them in any desired form. Squeeze them into a ball. Hurt them with my index finger. Pierce them. Stab them. Place the right amount of guava paste like an artificial heart. Or eye. In the darkness, the eye begins to see. Watch.

Then, my mother did it.

Them pills. And the anise. Not even an acquired taste. You drink it or spit it out. My mother drank. With them pills. A sort of walking miracle. They picked up the worms off her skin like playing *Operation* on weak batteries. Ash, ash. They brought her back. She wanted to die with herself. Dye herself. Her fingers like children lost in a cloud. Home. Is where I want to be? Death would call her a poet. And yet, she failed.

Partially.

To lose memory is to lose life.

\*

I went to live with grandma and her cigarettes and her saints. She had moved to St. Louis because she got tired of living alone in The Bronx. I never liked Cherokee Street anyways, where Grandma went to live with her sister. When I reached eighteen, I left the house to go out on my own, playing music in cheap bars and living off-of older women. I never saw Grandma again.

Until I met her eyes. Days ago. Was it days ago?

\*

The smell of the lagoon water, a saline perfume. We crouch by the edge of the water, and I touch its surface with my index finger. The glow in the water undulates as some fish come to greet us in their glittering greenish-blue.

Mei Ling peeks inside the brown bag and unloads it in the palm of her hand. I wince at its content: Grandma Fiorenza's eyes inside a small glass box.

\*

As I wait outside, the night feels cold; the air, crisp. A drizzle begins to precipitate. I light up a cigarette and the bouncer at the front door tells me I am too close to the entrance, where smoking is not allowed. Strip clubs are so full of distance rules, I think. I walk to the farthest extreme of the parking lot. A thick bass and drums beat pulses through the walls of the club and reaches me intact. In the parking lot, I spot a hearse. Pearly black under the rain, it's impossible not to notice the black mirage, first, because it's anticlimactic to find a hearse between BMWs, Range Rovers, and Lexuses; and, second, because it exceeds the parking space capabilities. Like for half a car, or a Mini Cooper. I stare at the hearse like one that remains stolid at a joke he doesn't understand.

\*

The funny thing about the future is that, at some point, becomes the past.

Time crawls with the experience of personal identity. Borges had it all figured out. We are a series of imaginary acts and errant impressions comprised in the mind, where thoughts, passions, and ideas reside. The mind is the ghost in the brain. The world is my idea. Schopenhauer might have had the upper hand. Idealism might have been right if there were no such absolute space. Time is the substance. Alphaville.

In a minute, there is time.

1985 is so 2015 is so 2025. Dalí's watches melt. The persistence. The perceived duration of events. My mother's kiss. Durable. Frozen. One kiss. Her touch. Her rare, inaccessible caress. My father's indifference. My father's apart. Each act of apprehension presents a finite period of

time in which several non-simultaneous events take place. Duration, the extent, is irrelevant. You, my daughter, might stay with me forever, whereas I, your father, might be erased by your rancor, hard feelings, or other defense mechanisms. I might have never existed, if you so desire. Or, I might keep Oblivia's lips imprinted on my mouth like saltpeter on the anchor of a sunken ship. I might still think that, any moment now, I will wake up with you still sleeping in my arms while your mother fixes breakfast for we three. The cartoons will be on. Maybe *Little Einsteins* will still be showing. Nothing faster than the speed of sighs. I sense your heartbeat. The world is too much.

And the funny thing about the past is that, at some point, it started as a present.

\*

My present. Facts. Clustered ions. But it's the space what counts. The gaps. The emptiness. Harmonics and proportions, or a symphony. Bittersweet. Like luminous bodies seen from a great distance, that, even when they are separate one from the other, they appear united as a body. Same thing happens with confusion. Numbers. Degrees. Again, shapes. It begins in delight and ends with wisdom. Under the palm trees, I carve my name on a dry coconut shell. My beard wets like seaweed. Logic is backward after the act. I insist: I should've been a pair of ragged claws.

\*

I am moved and shocked. How did I lend myself to do this? I am puzzled. I want to cry but I also want to laugh. It's tragic, yet it's comedic. Grandmother Fiorenza couldn't wait for me. Maybe I wasted my time. Wasted in time. Who's the broken promise? Me? Her? Mei Ling's hand descends upon my shoulder. It's warm and small and white. Slow burn. The illusion of comfort prevails and it's useless. I am in the mouth of a beast. With a little help from a friend at the

crematorium, Mei Ling smuggled Grandma's eyes before she was put into the chamber. Grandma Fiorenza had paid the man for the favor, so taking the eyes out the crematorium was no problem.

It was planned and agreed in such way, sweetheart, Mei Ling wheedles. Sadness. I see tapestry. Massive. Flashing light years. Climbing deeper.

Trust Fiorenza's will, Mei Ling hisses. The rest of her physical body went into the cremation chamber, and we'll take care of it. But her eyes. Consider her eyes will see the lake for the last time.

Pain is blunt.

Mei Ling leaves the box on top of a rock and then takes me by the hand. I am soothed by the softness of her fingers and the gentle heat that stops me from trembling.

My heart is heavy, but at peace. I start to find my own broken pieces.

As we head back to the car, the lagoon glistens with ripples, as when someone gets into the water.

\*

I finally get to the bar with Damian, my father, like I always fancied. Second chances have to be forced. They might never come. And now, with a dead father, a dead grandmother, a blank mother, and a partial reconstruction of my past, I'm drifting, spreading like Basilico's ointment. The memory's always talking of you sitting around on the pig's cheeks under the sacred roof-tree, over the bowls of memory where every hollow holds a hallow, with a pledge till the dregs, in the Salmon House. Orlando's Wake. Furious. Palm sweat is monument.

Unlike me, my father had lots of friends, and wherever he went, he knew somebody. Everyone adored him in town because he owned a used car dealer lot, "Twigo Auto Trade," which

he established after his incursion in politics, his traveling around the world looking for adventures, his swimming in faraway oceans; after the skirts, and after the lies, the silence; after the cups of coffee, the pints of whiskey; *la caneca*; the marmalade and cakes and ices; after the noons and nights; after all the failures, to sell cars was to preach mobility. Everyone should find something bigger than their legs, as he used to say. While we learn how to fly, why not drive? I mean, why walk when you can drive? He made it his motto. He makes sure the world hears it in glowing orange neon lights that blinked at night repeatedly like supernovas on Vine.

Someday, I'll sell spaceships, he once remarked while winking at me.

\*

When I get to my father's house in Adjuntas, I bring a pint of whiskey, flowers, and a pack of cigarettes. I hallucinate that he'll make me sit down and smoke the whole pack.

I couldn't even tell him goodbye. You didn't wait for me, I said looking at the barren sky. Again. About three in the afternoon. Dad, why hast thou forsaken me? I didn't cry this time.

\*

Countryless and flat, I am not vertical. I am bread. I am land. I am freedom. I am nothing. My tongue is a flag. Pink and wet. My skull. My bones. Three twenty-two. Or seven. Or.

\*

There comes a darkness.

\*

Post trauma. Postpone. Postacute. Postcapital. Postnational. Posthuman. Postinfarction.

I think of words with the prefix –post.

Postmortem. Posterity. Postlude. Postpartum.

It's paradoxical. An oxymoron of sorts.

Post me. Posture. I'm never immovable in time.

Post is the new *neo*.

I'm always chasing, Crissy.

\*

Did you know that this is the place where Fiorenza met her lover? He used to work here,  
too.

Wait. What? Grandma had a lover?

Long time ago.

She never told me anything.

When would she have a chance to do that, Victor? When you came back to her, she was a  
pile of ashes inside a box.

I regret that. Deeply.

But don't feel bad. He made her very happy when she lost you. They were in love, but he  
was married.

Good grief.

Mei Ling swears he was a good man although she never met him. That's how myths begin,  
I think. Her assessment comes partly out of the stories Grandma told her and Mei Ling's faith in  
impossible love stories. Watson had a wife, but he said he couldn't leave her, Mei Ling tells me.

The woman was paraplegic or something, according to Grandma's idea of complicated relationships. Watson would never leave her, and Grandma was okay with that, to the extent that, before she died, he was one of the two persons she called up. Of course, I was the other.

\*

I could speak any language. Speak in tongues. Glossolalia. Lalaland. The land is not your land. Death is the actual currency to trade for prison. Stout of the ordinary. I can put this memory here. And this memory here. And this one here. Everything's stuck together. Wising up, I mourn the equivalencies. Artificial. I could be any voice I want. I dissolve. You wrote poetry while I disappeared. I erase myself again. It's the great schism. I saw it coming. I stop being no one. I become the nothing. Blood is just liquid data. But thinking is a function of man's immortal soul. This is how you deal with your orphanhood.

\*

In another dream, my mother dies. She comes back as a fluorescent letter envelop with the texture of a cloud. It's my mother, I know. She asks for her pills but she has no mouth, but I can hear her voice. You're doubtful, she says. Don't doubt whatever is your heart. Fear is in my heart, mom, I reply. You're an envelope. I will show you fear in a handful of dust, she says. She quotes Eliot. In the dream, I think that is my mother doesn't have a mouth, how can she communicate with me? If there's no sound, how can I hear her? If there're no words, how can poetry exist? I'm a language running through you, she says.

When did I last hear of my mother?

When mother also left me, Grandma Fiorenza took care of me and promised that I would see my mom soon. How soon? Soon enough for the icy poles of the Earth not to melt. I felt secure. Nothing would melt the damn icy poles of the planet. Of course. But, what if they do? What if they melt?, I asked Grandma Fiorenza. Then we both won't have to worry, because we'll all be living underwater in Puerto Rico, she answered.

If words were gears, my letters would be a machine. Confidently, I wrote every day. I made drawings alongside the margins of the paper, and my letters looked like second-rate illuminated manuscripts. I drew aliens. Spaceships. Flowers. I wrote nonsense. Vagranicies. Unanswerable questions, like, when are you coming back? Have you seen Dad? Are *you* with Dad? Did you die? Every time I wanted to write a letter, Grandma Fiorenza gave me a pen or pencil with her choice of paper. White with blue lines. Yellow with red lines. Blue and no lines- just plain blue sketch paper. I weighed the words in my mouth. I tasted them. They felt urgent. I wrote.

Long after Grandma Fiorenza left for St. Louis, I found a pile of unsent letters piled up under the bed mattress.

In my dream, the fluorescent letter envelop then pulverizes in little irregular granules of whitish gray soil.

\*

Watson never replied to Grandma. She feared the loneliness of death. She felt it near. She tried to get Watson. She tried to reach me. Did she try Dad? Your dad's back in his hometown, Mei Ling says. Go back to him.

\*

He's been there for a while and Fiorenza knew it. She just didn't want to confront him, she says. Didn't. Want. To. Confront. Him. I feel vertigo. Before your grandmother died, and knowing you wouldn't be here in time, she had one last request: to see one last time the place she and Watson first fell in love, thirty years ago.

They had a thirty-year old love affair?, I ask.

You do the math. You're forty-eight.

Mei Ling feels the paper bag in her hands.

Shall we?, she says, as she walks me down a trimmed path that leads right to the lakeshore. Fireflies hover around us, like broken constellations.

\*

The future doesn't need me. If all time is eternally present, all time is unredeemable. It's an art form. Like lying. Or concealing the truth. Words are made to bend. My dad made enough money as a car salesman, the caretaker tells me when I meet him. I've been here before. Have I? My father's dead. Again? It's like a dream where you chase for something you quite don't know what it is. The drift of stars. Grace of sense. Like a twice-told tale. A Borges trick. A perpetual possibility. I listen.

Grandma never liked Dad's second wife. Did they ever get married?

In any case, his second wife Roselyn didn't need to work, although she was less admired and more pitied by the people in town. She took care of the house, cooked, watched the soaps, the caretaker tells me from his privileged status as *buona fide* storyteller and next-door neighbor. He also tells me about my father's love conquests. He was a womanizer like he had a mission, the caretaker says. I don't think your mother ever knew. She was not my mother, I clarify. The

caretaker doesn't care. Hmmm. Your father was just not fit for this town, he tells me, half apologetically.

My father once told me that he was from another planet, and despite the absurdity, I believed him. Yes. It sounded cool and special. Besides, who was I to doubt my father? I knew he had no brothers or sisters, either; no immediate relatives to visit on Sunday. Sure. He had no past here on Earth. But now he has found a home inside the silver urn that contains his ashes.

\*

You can't bring animals to this bar, the barman tells me.

I'm sorry. This is a sort of ritual. My dad's here, in ashes, of course. And we just want to share a drink together. He'll have a beer. I just want a double whiskey."

The bird squawks.

And a vodka for the chicken?

It's not a chicken.

The man gave me a crossed look.

You are lucky you are your father's son. I knew the man. He deserves more respect, he says, and then turns his back on us to serve the drinks.

\*

My father always had a smile for the world, the undertaker told me. He made me sign the papers that would allow my father to be transported to the crematorium. Liver problems, he said. Like half the people in this town. And the other half?, I ask. They're dying in the church. He said as he handed me the urn with my dad's ashes.

I had no reasons to doubt my father's reputation. He broke it, left, and returned to fix it. Only that neither me nor mom lived in Adjuntas anymore. Yet, dad was a popular sport. And when he died, people caravanned to our house from distant places to pay their respects to the memory of my dad. An old man came with caged pigeons, which he released in front of my house. A rain of butterflies followed and people marveled at the spectacle. Damian deserved it, they said; he was a great man. They also told me how much they admired my dad because he helped people all the time, from lending money he had no interest in getting repaid to finding jobs placements for those who were unemployed, or driving those who didn't own a car to the airport when they started leaving the country in a mass exodus. Two old ladies, who wore similar black dresses that matched her mantillas, told me how he once fixed their picket fences to keep a certain rare bird from entering their patio. And so on, and so on. I realized that my father was a person beloved by many. I also realized that I knew my father better by what others told me about him.

\*

The story of my Dad and Roselyn. A place for disaffection. I bury pixels. I access the inaccessible. When she was a kid, Roselyn claimed that an angel visited her and told her great truths of the universe, and that she'd bear a son who would do great things. Coming from a fourteen-year-old girl, the revelations crumbled the Christian upbringing my maternal grandparents provided for her. Her family summoned Father Leon for help when the visions or dreams became more frequent. The devil will disguise as an angel of light, the priest reminded my maternal grandparents when he came to interview the girl and get-to-the-bottom-of what seemed to him like blasphemy. But truth is round, Father; it has no angles, Roselyn replied at the priest, as he suggested that she might be possessed. There's only one truth, and that is God's, Father Leon

reprimanded her. The priest, being knowledgeable in exorcism (although not authorized by the Church to perform such body cleansing acts), requested the intervention of the Vatican in this matter. He never received a reply, but Roselyn did turn into a woman, and when she decided to buy her first car, she went to “Speed of Light Auto Trade,” where Damian worked as a beginning car salesman. I can’t give you wings, but I can show you distance, were Damian’s first word when he saw her. Roselyn took it as a sign, fell in love and married him.

\*

I imagined that if my dad came from another planet, as he claimed, I was entitled to some kind of innate ability by virtue of the DNA. Maybe I could walk on water, or maybe I could breathe underwater. Both points proved wrong the day I went to the river nearby our house and attempted my water-walking abilities, and, instead, I almost drowned. I imagined I could have mental powers to read people’s minds, but it turned out that it was my dad Damian who always knew what I was thinking or doing, for that matter. Can you fly, Dad? What? Yes, fly. Not anymore, he said once. I would do something my father couldn’t: I would fly like an eagle. To the sea.

So one crisp and lovely autumn evening, I went to the roof and jumped off the ledge, where birds nested during spring.

I broke one leg, two wrists, and remained unconscious for a while. But my mother remained with me the whole night and, after I was sent home, her presence around the house was necessarily noted although she barely made conversation. She started losing the words. One night, as she was feeding me dinner (since I couldn’t use my hands), she asked me why I had jumped off the roof. I threw in a furtive answer at my mom, so I told her that I wanted to be a bird. But not all birds can fly, she refuted; chickens can’t fly, and ostriches can’t fly, and the dodo couldn’t fly. The dodo?

What's a dodo?, I asked. An extinct bird. If by chance you meet one, it should be a sign of something, she replied with a customary wink and a smile.

Dad didn't come home that night. Nor any other night.

Maybe he was never home. Maybe I didn't even have a dad. Maybe I was the alien.

Maybe. May be.

\*

Once I find myself stranded in time, alone, with an urn between my hands, I question my condition. Doubt. Lack of sureness. Were we ever? Was I ever what they told me I was? I decided to give my flying abilities another chance. I took my dad's '65 Ford Mustang, the urn still with me to the pine grove in the hills, up above the town. I walked exactly to where the slope grows into a precipice and wished I could grow wings. I wanted the sky to crack open and absorb me. But nothing happened. When I was about to jump, urn in hand, I heard a bird squeal behind me. It was about three feet tall, with a green, black and yellow beak. Its legs were red and created a contrast with the gray plumage of the bird. It had to be. I wanted it to be. The dodo, with a bold spot on its head, simply stared at me. You're always right, Dad, I spoke into the urn.

\*

Words move. Why write, if there's speech?

\*

There must be a thousand reasons to visit the Venus Delight on a Thursday night, but not too many for making it in a hearse. Certain distance rules don't apply. Death always lurks in the

shadows of love, yet that proposition can't work as a tautology. Love is never an alibi for death; it's like fire- necessary for life, yet it doesn't yield life. To love is not to live; on the contrary, it's an approximation to death. So to love is to die, a premise straight out of worn down rock lyrics and Shakespeare. Or maybe it's the Romantic legacy. Or a Duende thing. In any case, Bon Jovi got it right. I would've died for you, for Selene. Is that her name? Glitch again. Or Oblivia. Or both. Or. If that meant that they would live. But life is a false choice. Even when we choose to live, we can't say that death shall have no dominion over us. We're dying all the time. We're vulnerable. As vulnerable as Oblivia, Selene, and I were that afternoon, at the Chuck E Cheese's where we were celebrating my daughter's ninth birthday among family and friends, and we were surprised by a forty-year old man who started shooting indiscriminately. Or so I was told. I was kissing Selene before going to trade her tickets for prizes, I guess. I heard gunshots. I saw people falling. I looked around for Oblivia. Then a bullet ricocheted on the wall, and then it hit me in the head. Or so I was told.

\*

Our true perception of an object diminishes in proportion as its size is diminished by distance, Da Vinci wrote once as he discussed perspective in painting. I don't know much about painting. But I think it also applies to memories.

\*

I got liver for one more shot, he said with a faint smile. His face looked like reverted origami. Then he apologized for not being a great father, not even a good father, and I said I understood, that it was okay. Just don't leave for your planet, yet.

He smiled. He remembered.

\*

The barman returns with whiskey, beer, and peanuts. He believes that the bird is an ugly duck.

It's not a duck, I tell him.

Whatever, he says, and leaves the three of us in the comfort of a lonely corner at the bar.

To you, I propose a toast. The bird squawks again. A slight gust of wind sweeps into the bar. The barman has just turned on the air conditioner, I think; then, drink.

Shut the fucking bird up, or the celebration is over, the barman says.

I kind-of resent the violence, but I don't say anything.

An argument needs two people, and two wrongs might not make a right, but two rights will always end up wrong, my mother used to tell me.

\*

You feel safer here with your ghost friend. This is me inside you. I am you and you are me and we are all together. You just don't know it yet. I'm your past talking to you from the future. You shouldn't be afraid of anything. I can't hurt you. I am a disembodied presence. You just don't hear me as one hears the dogs barking at night or the cats wailing to the moon. I'm a language in numbers. A sacred geometry. Kabala dormant in the cloud. Somewhere. In space. Saved as.

For instance, I know you like to play with me and your magenta Mercedes Benz, which your mom bought you from the toy section at the pharmacy around the corner. You, Orlando, imagine me and you driving to California, the Mercedes adapted to the hull of a boat, making it look like a floating car, like that photo you saw in *Life* magazine of a 1951 blue Chevy truck modified as a vehicle-powered barge trying to cross the Atlantic. The pilot and the passengers were caught by the National Coast Guard ten miles off the coast of Florida and then deported to Cuba, only to come back and try again, this time, in a 1959 beige Buick. We waste liberties, and we liberate wastes, you remember Dad saying to mother. That's the movement of life. You told me once that one of these days we should both get inside your miniature car and sail away. I laughed. One heartbeat away. Automatic save.

Eternity is comprised by ever flowing conditions of yesterdays.

\*

I shut the phone down when I see a woman come my way and look at me as if she knows me.

Hello, sweetie, she tells me with a kiss. She deep French kisses me, and I'm stupefied.

Me, Oblivia, she says. I look at my phone but she puts her neatly manicured hands on top of the screen. You can trust me, Gogo; it's me: Oblivia. I believe I might trust her -although I use believe loosely-, but the bartender addresses her as Amber. What's it going to be, Amber?, he asks. I thought you said you were Oblivia, I tell her, and I become uneasy. I am; Amber's my stage name, Gogo, she replies, and I wonder what's up with the Gogo thing at all, like, that's a fish name, or a character in a novel, I say, and Oblivia/Amber laughs. I like you when you're that naïve; Gogo is your nickname; I gave it to you. Remember?

I don't.

She must be right. She orders two whiskeys. Blue Label. Vintage. Straight, she says as she crosses her legs and grabs my hands. She feels warm.

Did you do anything for me today?, she asks.

Drinks arrive before I can answer. I look around in the futility of trying to recognize the faces, any one face- a friend, an acquaintance, anybody-, but on Thursdays it's harder. Visibly, it's college night. They might look different and all the same simultaneously. Today they're here; next Thursday, it'll be some other people, I guess. It's always other people. It's South Beach anyways.

I don't know what you mean, I say to Amber (I want her to be Oblivia).

Ok. I know. How rude of me, she says. Of course, you don't remember. But, hey, I do remember; and while I was up on the stage, I saw you talking to Pau, she reproaches me. I don't need to say anything: my face gives me away, as usual, and Oblivia says that, you know, Pau, the waitress? Five-foot six; great racks; thick lips and curly hair... Pau? I have no idea who's she referring to, until Oblivia points at her. You know, she's asked me a lot about you, Oblivia says. She has? I have no presumable argument to justify or contradict her. What did you expect after you fucked her?, Oblivia asks in accusatory tone. Yes, the one that makes one feel guilty about something that's uncertain. I told her you're mine, Oblivia whispers and drinks her whiskey. Am... I?, I hesitate. She finishes the drink and places the glass back on the glowing top of the bar. I see a tattoo aligned by the side of her index finger. It reads Luanne. I'll show you, she says. I'm done for the night. I'll pick up my stuff, and we'll leave. It sounds enticing. My eyes follow her until she passes by the three hundred-pound bird-dog who watches over the girls' dressing rooms. The darkness swallows her. In my notes, I whisper three names: Amber, Oblivia, and Luanne.

\*

A reverie. On rainy autumn afternoon, I stand next to my father Damian listening to our house dying. I can hear her bones and skin crackling under the firm metallic tracks of the yellow machine. Its blade crushes the faded pink wood, the zinc roofing rendered to ruins. The noise makes me shrink with uneasiness. The feeling is invasive and new. I take my father's hand and feel the sweaty thickness. His face hardened by inexpressiveness. Damian's semblance defeats all predictability. It's an alchemy of pain, melancholy, and helplessness. I've seen this face only once before, and that was the time when my father discovered a dead man sitting on the branch of the tree behind the now agonizing house. It was a great tree, too.

\*

I remember that Marcucci, the nextdoor neighbor, called on my father with news of a man perched on one of the branches of the old oak tree. I can see it from my window, Damian, Marcucci said. Dad's response was a contrite frowning as he went out through the back door and walked to see who this man that invaded his property was. Barlucea called me, too, said Marcucci. He's going to call the police. We should go and check, said the man. That's why good fences make good neighbors, my father said then, and there was no doubt that the man had to be a trespasser, a felony punishable by the law he so believed in. The man had been there for hours, probably the whole night, and, concerned with the situation, Marcucci decided tell Damian, who left the house through the backdoor and treaded barefoot into the big patio. The grass felt wet and cold with morning dew.

Go with your father, my mother told me. Don't leave him alone.

I would've never let down my father. Never.

\*

I followed, not so much out of utter obedience but in a rapture of sheer curiosity.

At first, my father sauntered. Dragged his skepticism along with him. As he approached the tree, he hurried his pacing, and, slicing the wind in two, his face acquired a stoical quality. He stopped a few feet away from the tree. There, sitting on a thick branch of the tree, an old man looked like he was just sitting down. Knife in one hand. Head hanging from his neck. As if he had fallen asleep peeling an invisible orange. The massive brown trunk of the tree widened as it rose into a thick broad crown. Dad just stood there, appalled.

I'm sorry, Mr. Bartoli, said Marcucci. My father didn't say anything.

Who's that, daddy? I asked.

No reply yet. The man wore a white *guayabera*, khaki slacks, and black shoes. He had a wharf tattoo on top of his limp right hand.

Go back into the house, Orlando, dad told me after a brief silence.

But, why? I'm not afraid of dead people, I replied.

I don't care. I just don't want you here.

But, why?

Do as your father told you, I heard a voice behind me.

\*

Grandma Fiorenza, in her yellow linen dress and black sandals, joined us at the scene. Dad didn't turn to look at her. His eyes were fixed on the sad figure of a man dead up on a tree.

If there was one thing that Grandma Fiorenza knew about, it was how to command people. She had raised dad by herself, and against her own will, she had never married Juan, the man who wanted to take her in marriage. When her own father objected to the relationship, she eloped with the man who would later, as a sign of goodwill, faith, and love, offer Padre Ramón the lands where the town's church is located today. It was an attempt to bribe the ecclesiastical powers into accepting the unapproved marriage. But the plan failed, and Fiorenza's father let the town know who Lucca Aniello was and demanded a complete annulment of the matrimony, which had already been consummated. Juan, broken hearted, and having lost a significant portion of his lands to the church, enrolled in the merchant marine and left the country for several years.

That man is your grandfather, Orlando, grandmother said. And he's dead. Now, do as your father told you.

The dead don't hurt. You told me yourself, I said.

Right. But that doesn't mean that they can't pull you by the feet at night.

I doubted my grandmother's words. She could move the stars and reorder the universe. She had a tongue of fire and eyes that could see beyond time. She gardened the clouds that rained on the town. She had told me magnificent stories of brave heroes and distant lands. She spoke a truth so marvelous that I believed my grandmother was the origin of all truths. I never cry, she told me once, but when I do, milk starts pouring out of my eyes. It had to be true, because Grandma Fiorenza never cried, and that's why I never saw a rain of milk.

I obeyed.

\*

I walked back to the house, head bent down and confused. The man on the tree was my father's father? But I thought that my grandfather was dead already, because neither Dad nor Grandma Fiurenza talked about him. Ever. Talked. About him. I must've asked once about my grandfather, for a school project or something, a genealogical tree that would never be too big, but I don't remember having received an answer. The language of the universe is enounced in triangles, squares, and circles, but what is the shape of what haven't been said and already exists as a thought? A dismal stupefaction first revealed on my father as a paling of the skin. Then a sordid mutism. My father remained without speaking for three days.

During that time, my father learned that grandfather had committed suicide. Neither, the police authorities nor the forensics team could find a death note. Of course not, Grandma Fiurenza said. The bastard never knew how to write. The police investigators were certain that the man had taken his own life. It happens. After that, Fiurenza, who used to live with my parents, left the house.

The bulldozer and the demolition team do their job. In my memory, maybe I am much too young to comprehend the feeling that engulfs me at this moment, but years later, I would call it melancholy.

The first time my father died was that day.

\*

Hey, a woman's voice snaps me out of my lapsing catatonia. She is with a sixty-year old man. Again, she can read my lost glance scanning hers. It's me, Oblivia. She's wearing a tight black dress and a peacock feather blush-pink jacket. This is Dirty Dan, she introduces him. He has

a job for you. I look at both of them, removed from the occasion. I don't recall I was looking for a job, I say. No, you don't, Oblivia says. No, you ain't looking for a job, Dirty Dan comments as he shakes my hand. I'm offering you one, he adds. Did Taíno send you here? Who? Nevermind, Dirty Dan says. Have a drink.

His fine blue linen suit neatly worn and made to measure makes me wonder if I'm just seeing blue again. He also wears a blue cowboy hat. I've heard you're very good friends with Amber, he says. Amber? I ask. Oblivia, she interjects. Yeah, whatever, Dirty Dan says. I'm interested in having a conversation, maybe share a beer or two, he adds. I'm sorry, who are you? I ask. Dirty Dan laughs. He sure fits me well, he says to Oblivia as he lights up a cigar and walks back towards the club. Tell him what I want and keep me posted, he tells Oblivia.

\*

The more brilliant the light upon a luminous body, the deeper the shadows; the greater the truth, the greater the lie. We're all a fiction.

\*

I'll drive you home, Oblivia says. Where's your car?

I have a car?

I take a set of keys out of my pocket, raise my arm, activate the alarm on the transmitter fob and wait for the headlights to signal me the way. A black Saab blinks twice.

That's my car? A Saab?

*Inte smickra dig själv*, Oblivia says.

Huh?

Don't flatter yourself, baby, she translates for me. The engine is Japanese-American.

I don't remember exactly where I live, so I let Olivia guide me. As we head to my place, Ocean Drive is unusually deserted. As we cruise up the Art Deco district, I look at those miles and miles of man-made beaches facing the Atlantic. Reality can be simulated, I think. Or enhanced.

How about some music?, Olivia suggests. Lounge? Jazz? Oh, it's classic rock for you, she says. It wasn't classic twenty-five years ago. Oh, but it is now, hon. Is it 25 years already? See? That's the problem, she says. You're too hung up in the past. It's all I can remember, I tell her. But I'm here, I'm your present, she says and steals a kiss from me.

\*

Olivia takes the wristwatch from my hands. She looks at it and nods. Hmm. It's old. I can see that, I say. It smells like rotten crab cakes, I add. What do you know about crab cakes? You know nothing about crab cakes; you know nothing, Orlando Snow. You're severely allergic to crabs. I know, I say, and my heart is a dove flapping its wings against the first beams of light. A terrible clarity fades in. I listen to the voices coming from the water, the echoes of men and women and children who sailed across these waters, where their hopes flew by like starving pelicans, and their fears took the form of words they didn't know how to pronounce, or say, or feel. These waters are a liquid Babel. These waters of cadavers floating in the morning dew. We all died here sometime. Loop. Repeat. The snow will freeze time. I take the watch back from Olivia. I feel her pale hands soft and cold. Her eyes puncture mine. Black moons drilling distances. We could be heroes. Fatherless heroes. She came to New York following the traces of her father. As orphans, I have the edge. I remember mine; she never met hers. Her father dated her mother for a month or something. Something. Miami is a sunny hub, but Chicago is a destination. Olivia's father is

nameless. Gerardo? Javier? *Creo que he perdido mi carnet de identidad*. Take that, Sinaloa Cartel. The Colombians taking over Chicago. We are multitudes. Multitudes. Or love in the times of simulacra. The real exists only in its reproductions. *Soy toda la sobra de lo que robaron*, like a Calle 13 song. A song. A bong. I can't connect anything with nothing. In the room, the women come and go talking of Ma-e-lo. Coyote kills. Embrace. I. John Stuart Mills talked about utilities fixed and embodied in material objects. We live in a time when Caliban seems to have the upper hand. The desires of Caliban, the judgments of Caliban, the hunger and thirst of Caliban, seem now to fill the world, moaned José Enrique Rodó. Call it a ban, Prospero. Living is art. Obdulia closes her eyes and reaches for my lips. Her mouth is paraffin wax. Her high cheek bones press against mine. Mountains where time despairs. Are you going to take me home?, she asks. I'm Lorca drunk under the Brooklyn Bridge. That's where I spill some blood. We can fuck before you leave, she adds. I can make you *huevos pericos*, afterward. I can write poems in your deserted skin. I can fix the world with my tongue and lips and hands. I'll spread open for you and let you do whatever you want to do. I breathe in her words. Ariel wets in my hand. The dead hate number two. Home is where I wanna be.

\*

We make love, and it takes a brief *momento* of calm panting to realize it's Saturday. It feels like sex on a Saturday morning. We just shelter ourselves in tender acts of death. It's lively. Oblivia is off-duty for the day, so she'll spend time at the New York Public Library (Isn't this Miami?). She likes it there not only because of the induced silence of the rooms, but because she can be herself. She likes to write. A mixture of voices. A polyphony. Particles. A story within a story. Looking for a host body. I will find my poem, she says, as if she was talking about charting a

mandala. I will find my one true everything, she pours her voice upon my left nipple while her hand caresses my lower belly. I look at the ceiling and find strips of furtive light sneaking between the window blinds.

I'm going to Palm Springs, I tell Oblivia.

I know.

Are you coming with me?

No. You must find your own poem.

It's not about poems. It's about my father.

A poem. A myth. *La misma cosa*, Or.

It is not a trivial thing that of all countries of the world the Latin-American ones are those where poets are most numerous, and all that poetry stands for is most prized. Rodo had it wrong. Our symbol is not Ariel, said Retamar; it's Caliban. I'm trans-textual. Pan. American. Pan is bread. Pan is *todo*. Bread is all. I hunger. *Cómeme*, she says. Eat. Me.

I don't have much words to fill your loneliness, I say.

I think of a place called home.

\*

Even though this is supposed to be my car, there're no signs that it belongs to me. I can doubt anything, or I can accept everything. I open the glove compartment, and there's a gun in there. Is that mine? I ask. Oblivia looks nervous. Yes, it's yours. When did I get it? I want to know. I got it for you, she admits. You did? It's a Beretta, I notice. It's a nine-millimeter. I know, I got for you, she says. I take it in my hands. It feels too big. Too heavy. I touch its barrel. It's been fired, I say as I smell it. Oblivia takes it away from me and puts it her purse. We don't want to get

distracted or anything, Gogo, she says. Okay? It smells like it's been fired; there're even powder marks I just wiped from it, I insist. We're home, she says. We'll talk about this inside the house.

\*

I noticed we've stopped on Hispaniola Way. Cool street. When we walk into my apartment, I find that it's so small. I never lived in such small spaces, but this one looks clean and comfy. The immaculate white walls contrast with the Old San Juan deep brown furniture. Very tropical. 19<sup>th</sup> century tropical. The floor tiles are checkered. We move like pieces across the board. Oblivia offers me some leftover *congrí* from the fridge. I tell her I'm not hungry, and I'm just repeating the word gun in my head until I write it down in my Notes. Beretta M9, I type. Fired. Are you sure? Oblivia double checks, her face deep inside the fridge. I look at her and her body, all bent like that, looks firm from here. What about a sandwich?, she asks. I'm fixing one for myself. I say a sandwich is okay. And a beer. It's Amstel light for me. She wants iced tea.

Oblivia talks too fast right now. Something about going to the gym early in the morning, that if I'm coming or what, that she likes to work out with me, especially jogging at the beach, can we jog tomorrow? Or walk? Just walk? I can't follow though. Too many words at the same time. Sometimes words exceed the message.

\*

As I drove back to town, with the dodo and my dad in the urn, I decided the reunion deserved a drink, that drink I never had with my father.

The dodo squawked noisily.

I told you to keep the bird's beak shut, the barman says.

One more drink and we go, I tell him. I will go to the restroom, have that drink, and leave.

The barman shakes his head.

As I entered the stalls in the men's room, I notice pictures of bombshells in bikinis, sexy women advertising beer and tropical rums. I release the fluids of my body, and I realize how lonely I am.

Back at the bar, the dodo has finished eating the peanuts and now is eating my father's ashes. Somehow he managed to turn the urn over and the lid opened.

Mother-fucking bird! That's my dad!, I yell at the bird.

The barman loses his patience.

That's it, he says. Pay and leave!

I manage to gather whatever's left of dad and place it back in the urn. I place the dodo under one arm, and my dad under the other. The bar man hands me the bar tab. It's twenty-four dollars plus tax, and I have no money.

Outside, an iridescent beam of light must wait for me. So with the dodo and my dad under my arms, I run for the door and into the bright bursting of a light. As a majestic cloud descends upon us, I have no doubts now: this time, I fly.

\*

I turn on the TV and there's the news on NBC 6 reporting about a woman who was murdered while she bathed in her pool. Luanne McDowells, mother of one, married to Garth McDowells, a promoter and club owner from Star Island. It's a traumatic experience for the exclusive and respected community, the reporter says. Mrs. McDowells, whose maiden name is

Lourdes Anna García, a Cuban fashion designer and socialite, declined to speak on camera. At the scene of the crime, twenty Beretta M9 shells were found. There are no suspects so far. They cut to commercials.

I look at my phone. I check my notes. I see the words typed. Beretta M9. Fired. Further up, there's the name Luanne. I turn to Oblivia, and she's just frozen on the kitchenette, holding my beer and a plate with my sandwich. I take the beer from her hands, and read the name scripted along her middle finger. Who's Luanne?, I ask. Oblivia can't say a word. Who's Luanne? I insist. She places the plate on top of the kitchenette isle and brings both hands to her temples. Is that Luanne McDowells? Lourdes Anna McDowells? Huh? Answer me! I yell in desperation, as Oblivia shrinks on the couch and almost coils up in fetal position. She cries, teardrops fat as an aging pain. She moves clumsily towards the couch and, as she sits, she bumps into her purse. The Beretta comes out, and I grab it impulsively. I point it to her head, and she unequivocally starts trembling.

Put it down, Gogo, she pleads.

Oh, now, suddenly, she can talk.

\*

In my mind, gunshots thunder deeply as I see my hand letting go of Selene's that day at Chuck E Cheese. How far can the eye discern a non-luminous body?

Please, Gogo, she begs without moving. The tip of the barrel presses against her cheek. A cold kiss. Outside, sirens wail. Gogo? Hon?, she says. Gogo? My name is Alejandro. What am I saying? But I might as well be Orlando, or Orco, or Earnest, can't I? I wonder who am I anyway.

And you might be Oblivia, or Amber, or Amelia, or Norma, can't you? I can explain, she says.

Oh, you will explain, I emphasize. I might jump the gun.

I think of Oblivia –the real Oblivia- and her image dissolves by gradations from the neck down, like a vanishing illusion. Delusion.

You have done it before, Oblivia says.

You. Have. Done. It. Before.

\*

I put the gun down and retreat a couple of steps. You wanted to finish a tragic novel, she says. You said you needed meat to work with, that you can't remember things anymore, that you live in a constant shut-down and restart, Gogo. That's why I call you like that- you're a disbanded memory, hon, Oblivia confesses, and she's right. I cannot create meaningful distance and direction. You wanted your writing career back, and that's what I was trying to help you with: give you meaningful experiences that you could write about.

Like in Heidegger's works, all distances and views are shrinking. Thoughts are a source of energy I just can't capitalize on because my immediate memory is broken. Words escape me because memory is shaped in images of words, that other technology Heidegger missed, like I miss Selene, like I miss my wife Oblivia.

Who?

How can I write about what I won't remember? Huh? I yell at her.

\*

Okay. Remember the man who raped me when I left the Blue Martini? Oblivia continues. Of course not; you can't possibly remember that either.

And she's right. I don't remember when she called me at two in the morning, crying, her voice shivering out of anger and nervousness. I don't remember when I found her all hurt and beaten, or when I took her to the police station; I don't remember having comforted her, or the conversation I had with the officers when they said they had apprehended a suspect -his name was Americo Pumez, Portuguese- whom she identified in suspect's row as the man who had sucker-punched her while she was about to get into her Honda Accord. I don't remember that I used my camera to look for the guy when he came out on bail, because the bastard hurt and broke a precious thing I loved; no one hurts the things I love, except Jeromy Fuller, who shot twenty three kids and six adults, including my daughter and wife, at a Chuck E. Cheese in Gainesville; I don't remember that I followed him -Americo Pumez, not Chuck E, Cheese or Jeremy Fuller- to Westchester and shot him nineteen times with a Springfield XDm that's sitting at the bottom of Biscayne Bay. I don't remember, because memories to me are a blind phenomenology.

Yes, you've done it before, Oblivia repeats. And I knew I did wrong, because Luanne hurt me, and I wanted to hurt her back; she told me she loved me, and that she'd get her thing settled with her husband, who used to be Dirty Dan's boss until Dirty Dan went on his own with the Venus Delight. Luanne liked the place, so she kept coming even when she knew the place was not her husband's. That's how we met. That's how we fell in love. That's how she hurt me, she sighed. We had a thing going on, I know, it's not what you think. I loved you, yes, but I loved her, as well. She even promised she'd leave her husband. Dirty Dan didn't like her, anyway. He thought she was spying to steal his girls and lure them into working for Garth. I felt betrayed both ways. After

my rape, you said no one would hurt me again; not under my watch, you said. Well. There it is, Alejandro, she says.

I sit on a stool by the kitchen. I drink my beer. I light up a cigarette. I feel nauseated, in the Camus sense.

\*

Between the desire. And the spasm. Spam. Between the potency. And the existence. Between the essence. And the descent. For two cents. Falls the Shadow. I must take care of your mother, Oblivia says. Hurry up. It's time. Thine is the Kingdom. For Thine is. Life is. For Thine is the. This is the way the world ends.

*De todas maneras, rosas.*

\*

I don't remember her name, but she says that when she heard the news of my wife and daughter's death, she felt a tremendous sorrow, too. You used to talk so much about Selene in class, she says. I felt you must've felt an incredible void within you. And she is right. She couldn't finish her writing degree, but that didn't finish her writing ambitions. When she contacted me, via email, she soon realized I was not well. She suggested we should meet and talk, and that's when she knew that I was left not only without a family, but also without a job –how to teach writing and not being able to write?-, and, as a consequence, without a writing career. She thought I deserved better. She convinced me of coming down with her to Miami Beach. She'd help me with

my writing stuff, but I couldn't create new memories. I'll be your memory, she swears she told me.

She cries and slowly approaches me. She crushes the air. Circles me counterclockwise.

Now, about that job Dirty Dan wants you to do...

What job? I say.

We have a deadline to meet. Tomorrow, we fly to New York, she says and kisses me. Your mother is waiting. She wants to see you. She wants you to go to your father's funeral.

This is how ideas sleep furiously.

Oblivia sits down in front of a voice transducer and starts telling this story.

I glitch.

-THE END-

## APPENDIX

This novel has been made possible by the following sponsors:

T.S. Eliot, Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Jorge Luis Borges, Juan Antonio Corretjer, Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, The Beatles, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound (Il Miglior Fabro), James Joyce, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Federico García Lorca, Pedro Infante, Phoria, Shakespeare, Calderón de la Barca, José María Lima, Anjelamaría Dávila, Wisin & Yandel, Ñengo Flow, Rita Indiana, Calle 13, Pedro Pietri, Edgar Lee Masters, Deleuze, Guattari, Deleuze & Guattari, Foucault, Derridá, Los Lobos, Mark Strand, INXS, Héctor Lavoe, Celia Cruz, Luis Rafael Sánchez, Tito Puente, Ismael Rivera, Niki Minaj, Antonio Cabán Vale (El Topo), Julia de Burgos, William Faulkner, Luis Enrique, David Bowie, Nirvana, Woodie Guthrie, Bruce Springsteen, Café Tacvba, Soda Stereo, Chuck Berry, Uncle Tupelo, U2, Martin Espada, The Thompson Twins, Styx, Herman Melville, Ralph Ellison, Derek Walcott, Olive Senior, Dante, Oasis, Steve Miller Band, W.H. Auden, Italo Calvino, French Montana, Eminem, Gaston Bachelard, Langston Hughes, Einstein, Peter Gabriel, Will Smith, Limp Bizcuit, Favela, Robert Frost, Manuel Lin Miranda, Masamune Shirow, Carl Marx, Allen Ginsberg, W. B. Yeats, Radiohead, The Human League, Michio Kaku, Haruki Murakami, Octavio Paz, Ray Kurzweil, Manley P. Hall, William James, Arthur Schopenhauer, George Berkeley, Andrea Cote Botero, Daniel Chacón, Tim Hernández, Loretta Collins Klobah, and my grandmother, Gabina La Torre, among others that I might have unconsciously omitted.

## VITA

Elidio La Torre Lagares has published several poetry collections in Spanish. His poetry has appeared in *Revista Centro Jornal* (City University of New York), *Azaleas*, *Malpaís Review* and *Sargasso*. His short stories collection titled *Septiembre* (Cultural, 2000) was recognized as one of the best fiction books published in Puerto Rico that year. Similarly, his novels *Historia de un dios pequeño* (Plaza Mayor 2001) and *Gracia* (Oveja Negra, 2004) were also recognized by the same institution. He has previously worked as editor for Grupo Santillana, University of Puerto Rico Press, and Terranova Editores. He has been teaching literature and creative writing at the University of Puerto Rico for the past ten years.

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