

2015-01-01

A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky

Jesus J. Silveyra

University of Texas at El Paso, j.silveyra@hotmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [Modern Literature Commons](#), and the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Silveyra, Jesus J., "A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky" (2015). *Open Access Theses & Dissertations*. 1159.
https://digitalcommons.utep.edu/open_etd/1159

This is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UTEP. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UTEP. For more information, please contact lweber@utep.edu.

A HOUSE ALL WHITE AND EMPTY AGAINST THE NIGHT SKY

JESUS J. SILVEYRA

Department of Creative Writing

APPROVED:

Lex Williford, Chair

Luis Arturo Ramos

Mimi Gladstein, Ph.D.

Charles Ambler, Ph.D.

Dean of the Graduate School

Copyright ©

By

Jesús Silveyra

2015

*Para Vicky, Ivonne, Pame y Lina
por tomarme de la mano y ayudarme a llegar hasta aquí.*

A HOUSE ALL WHITE AND EMPTY AGAINST THE NIGHT SKY

by

JESUS J. SILVEYRA

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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 2015

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the many friends who helped me to shape and write this project with their invaluable readings, comments and experience. For their direct assistance: Luis Arturo Ramos, Jon Nehls, Diana Esparza, Luis Álvarez, José Durango, Wendy García, Sam Brown, Justin Stone, Aaron Romano, Katy Seltzer, Paula Cucurella and Paul Guillén. For their teachings: Rosa Alcalá, Benjamin Alire Sáenz, José de Piérola and Mimi Gladstein. For his time and advice: my thesis director, Lex Williford. For their generosity and support: the Brixey family: Lina—of course—and her father Jack.

Thank you all.

Preface

I. The Writing

My first approach to *A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky* was a short story entitled “Árboles.” I wrote it after an anecdote: One night, in Ciudad Juárez, a friend of mine went outside his house to smoke a cigarette and found a decapitated body hanging from the fence of the house across the street. Until his eyes became accustomed to the dark, he thought it was a tree.

The first two drafts of the short story were centered on the willingness of our societies to consume the products of the horrors that other people have to endure. In the first version, an artist named Gottfried replicated the corpses of several young men murdered in Ciudad Juárez, and stylized them as pruned trees. These trees—these sculptures—chained to the fences where the victims were originally found, were the material of Gottfried’s art show. He engraved the invitations onto the blades of hatchets, and under the excuse of purging the families’ grief by confronting their loved ones living once more as art, the hatchets were sent out to the parents of the victims. A married couple who’d found the beheaded corpse of their son chained to a fence, the protagonists, attended the show. The emotion was too much for the story—for me, really—to handle. That version ended with the victim’s father recovering—or “felling”—the representation of his son from the fence. To do this, he used the hatchet, or invitation. The local and

international media were present at the show, called by the artist to photograph the families in the moment of their catharsis.

I wrote this first draft four years ago, when the media had turned Ciudad Juárez, immersed in the drug war, into a mythical labyrinth of sensationalism and death. The biased representation of the city did as much harm as the armed conflict itself. No company wanted to invest in the city, and those who had done so were convinced to move their money elsewhere. We lost our loved ones to the violence, yes, but we also lost our jobs and then our houses to the economic crisis. To this day, complete neighborhoods remain abandoned. We learned to live in fear and shame and poverty, and it was unbearable. In a state of supreme anger and frustration, I wrote the first draft. Obviously, what I'd intended to be an ethical discussion of the responsibilities of journalism and art instead became a political harangue with no shape, no gravitas and no power.

It took me two years and one more story to understand what “Árboles”—by then rewritten in English and entitled “Felling”—was trying to do.

I had been working on a different project, a collection of short stories—a project which included the early versions of two short stories now present in my thesis—when I registered for Professor Luis Arturo Ramos' Advanced Fiction Writing class. That early project was unified by centering every short story in Ciudad Juárez—utilizing the drug war as backdrop—and by attempting to round up the main themes with little vignettes I wrote following the example of Ernest Hemingway's first book, *In Our Time*. In that class, Professor Ramos helped me to shape my project by doing three things. First, he asked me to read *Así en la paz como en la guerra*, a beautiful and devastating collection of short stories written by the Cuban Guillermo Cabrera Infante. The short stories in this book are unified by the setting of the Cuban Revolution and like

Hemingway's *In Our Time*, the short stories are linked by vignettes that show the violent, ruthless outlets of the war. Second, Professor Ramos couldn't understand the actions or images presented in my short story "Felling"; they were abstract, muddled. He asked me, then, to tell him exactly what happens during the art show. I did. He then told me that I should write everything as clearly as I had said it. Finally, Professor Ramos recommended that I write one more short story in which, thinking of the project as a cohesive whole, I showed the relevance of the border during the first phase of the Mexican revolution. He even gave me the title.

Unlike "Felling," "I Want to Tell You a Story" has changed very little over the course of the last two years. This fact doesn't mean it hasn't revised significantly. It has. What I mean to say is that the changes have not affected the content, only the strategies to tell it more effectively.

Following the recommendations of Professor Ramos—perhaps to a stupid extent—I wrote everything in "I Want to Tell You a Story" as clearly as I possibly could. The result was a third-person point of view objective narration of the life of a father of a missing girl from Ciudad Juárez. This was a problem. The life of this man was a nightmare, and how can a nightmare be told objectively? First, I thought that the best idea was to switch to the subjective first-person point of view, but since it threatened to turn into an emotional outpour, I decided to stay with the third person. What changed was that, attempting to sculpt my writing after J. M. Coetzee's work, I started to use free indirect style to tap into the character's mind and pump out the emotional turmoil without allowing it to overflow into the main narrative. The result was a much stronger fiction piece, though still weak in many aspects, particularly in its representation of the protagonist's surroundings. The problem, I found out, was that the descriptions lay on the page like dead pigeons.

Around that time, I read *The Naïve and Sentimental Novelist*, by Orhan Pamuk. In that book, Pamuk discusses a concept usually attributed to T. S. Eliot. In his essay “Hamlet and His Problems,” Eliot wrote: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion” (n. pag.; emphasis in the original). Pamuk exemplifies Eliot’s concept with the use of snow in Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*. Right after, Pamuk says: “Whatever the writer’s intention may be, the features that I am calling the ‘landscape’ of the novel—the objects, words, dialogues, and everything which is visible—should be seen as integral to, and an extension of, the hero’s emotions” (105). Though I do not presume that my prose doesn’t lie on the page like dead pigeons anymore, this brief passage helped me enormously. The life of a father who has lost his daughter is a life that has come to an end: Nothing will be the same for him because his life has been irreparably broken. By figuring this out I was able to come up with the element of the daughter’s backpack full of dried pens and textbooks completely filled-out—not by her, but by her disturbed father—and I also developed the image of the broken pavement and houses, cracks that seem to extend through the landscape as far as the eye can see.

I haven’t directly mentioned the effect of Professor José de Piérola in this project, which is important. In one of his classes, I learned about Pamuk and Coetzee but also about the basic elements of free indirect style thanks to a couple of books by Mario Vargas Llosa. Though *The Perpetual Orgy* helped me to understand the dynamics of free indirect style (and also of communicating vessels, a device I use in both short stories to flesh out the underlying effects of history and politics), it was with *Cartas a un joven novelista* that I got a better grasp of the technique and discovered a more effective way to narrate the short story of the felled trees.

Instead of talking about points of view as pronouns, Vargas Llosa talks about points of view in terms of the place occupied by the narrator: the third person's place is outside of the story; the first, inside; and the second is ambiguous. Though the narrators of all my short stories are third person, this notion of place rang a bell. Since an objective narration couldn't capture the nightmarish atmospheres of both "Felling" and "I Want to Tell You a Story"—and knowing that the emotions of a first person narrative would have overflowed both narratives—I decided to relocate not the narrator but the protagonist of the former. The result is that the original couple of protagonists are no longer the parents of the beheaded victim but just another couple visiting Gottfried's show. They have their own story, their own secrets. But this isn't the story that I wanted to tell.

In "Tesis sobre el cuento," Ricardo Piglia discusses, as a first thesis, how every short story tells two anecdotes simultaneously: the nature of the short story, then, is dual. Piglia poses a rhetorical question: How can an anecdote be told while another one is already being narrated? This question, he says, synthesizes the technical difficulties of the genre. Classic short stories, like those written by Poe, tell a *visible* anecdote while weaving secretly, elliptically, fragmentarily, the *hidden* one. The surprise effect takes place when the second anecdote appears, with precision and clarity, on the surface. Piglia's second thesis states that the secret anecdote is the key to the form of the short story. The modern version of the short story (favored by Anton Chekhov, Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway) abandons the surprise ending and the closed structure. It works the tension between the two anecdotes without ever resolving it—this modern version narrates both anecdotes as if they were one. This technique is important because once I had distanced the protagonists of "Felling" from the emotional core, I was able to create a simultaneous anecdote: I had Paulina and Antonio, a couple whose marriage was

crumbling, and I had Cortez, a man deranged by the loss of his son and the impunity that comes with living in México. At that point, I needed a device to get closer to the emotional core, which was now Cortez. This was how Paulina Zamora became a reporter writing a story about the life of Cortez.

In *The Classic Plot and the Invention of Western Narrative*, N. J. Lowe affirms that what we understand as “plot” doesn’t really exist, and that when trying to describe it “we are describing not a property resident *in* the text, but an aspect of our *experience* of that text” (15; emphasis in the original). Lowe goes on to explain:

In a plot, the text becomes a game of detection. The narrative snips, elides, or conceals key elements of the story, and the reader is challenged to piece it together again. There is just one clue: all events are linked by the logic of natural causality. By applying our own experience of cause and effect, we can rebuild a personal model of the story events from the text. Those events still carry their native charge; but the activity of repeatedly answering questions of ‘Why?’ has exposed a structure of dominating causes, and with it a sense of the life of value. (13)

We are biologically equipped, Lowe seems to say, to make sense out of fragments, to integrate loosely interrelated facts into coherent, wholesome narratives. In my writing, this idea is fundamental on a practical level, as well as on a highly subjective one. The first level can be summarized with the expression “trust your reader.” What this means is that we, readers, are capable of making sense of things and events without being lectured, and, more importantly, we assign a higher value to those meanings we have to work for than to those handed out on silver platters. The experience of reading, then, is richer when we are active participants.

The second level was put into motion by the disgust and distrust I feel for the governments of our time. During every single step of the writing process, this project threatened to become a pamphlet, a childish tantrum against the paternal figures of power, a ridiculous piece of political propaganda. For every step that I took forward, I had to take one back and breathe.

What was the text trying to do? What was I trying to do? In writing, writers are utterly unimportant. I fiercely believe this. The only thing that matters is the text, the text, the text. By reading Lowe, I understood that the reader would ask “Why?” naturally, and that the only thing that mattered was his or her answer, never mine. My job as a writer was to provide the answers to other questions—What? When? Who? What?—and trust that the readers would do their job.

The thesis I wrote for my Masters in Spanish is an analysis of a Spanish Golden Age *comedia* written by Juan Ruiz de Alarcón. It is a political text and as such the ending is conciliatory. There is, however, a missing link in the causal chain: the long-term effects of a key and stupid decision made by the king, are not revealed because the political critique would have been both unaesthetic and dangerous. Nonetheless, this is an evident hole in the logic, and because this hole appears at the end of the *comedia*, the void transcends the fictional universe. The reader, then, has to fill out the blank outside of the text—or theater or *corral de comedias*—which means that the hole has to be filled out in a moment when the fictional material comes in contact with the historical context. Deciphering the ending demands utilizing both fiction *and* reality. This strategy allowed the dramatist to subtly create a parallelism between the politicians in his play and the real politicians of XVII century Spain, without fearing an Inquisition that had been rejuvenated to silence dissidents. The meaning, in this *comedia* by Ruiz de Alarcón, became an actualizing and dynamic process of discovery.

“The modern secular individual,” Pamuk writes, “despite recognizing deep down the futility of his effort, cannot help reflecting on the meaning of life as he tries to locate the center of the novel he is reading—for in seeking this center, he is seeking the center of his own life and that of the world” (163). When I decided to hold back the political load of my writing—at least the most evident load, the one that sounded like a bawling child—I also decided to trust my

reader. The nightmares represented in my project, the pain, the darkness and hopelessness, they originate from a source that is more powerful than my characters (who are only allowed to react and resist, but never to plan), a source which is, of course, the corruption and ineptitude of the three levels of the Mexican government. If reading implies, as Lowe says, “applying our own experience of cause and effect,” as well as the “activity of repeatedly answering questions of ‘Why?’” then I expect that readers will come to their own conclusions, that they will find that in all this gloominess there is a “structure of dominating causes” that doesn’t belong to the text, but to the real world.

Though both “I Want to Tell You a Story” and “A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky” are short stories about loss and deception, as well as about institutional violence and oppression, I expect the morality of the texts to come from the decisions taken by the protagonists, not from me lecturing the reader. If I did my job correctly, the reader will not ask if the characters are good or bad, only if their decisions were the best they could make under their circumstances: to resist and keep their dignity, or to give in.

Since I can be as stubborn as a goat standing in the center of railroad tracks, it took me quite awhile to figure this out, but once I did, writing the rest of the short stories—“Not the Cold Winds, Not the Snows,” “The Sea of Tranquility” and “The Day God Came to Visit,” all written directly in English—was fairly easy. The rules were set. The characters would do the rest.

II. The Characters

I started writing fiction late in my life, and I did it mostly out of ignorance. I wanted to

understand violence, where it comes from and the form it takes once it finds its way into the victim's life. I spent many days in front of my computer back then, during the drug war, trying to make sense of the demands and particulars of the short story. It was common to hear gunshots, shrieks and sirens outside, but I learned to tune them out. It took me a while, then, to visualize the corpse after each shooting, and a little longer to understand that the corpse meant a void, a hole in the lives of a vast network of people. Those shots were the sound of the deaths of husbands and wives, of mothers and fathers and sons and daughters. The deaths of friends and teachers. There were so many shots.

When I was a kid, we received the newspaper in our house. I read it every morning as I ate my breakfast. I was thirteen years old and every day I read about murdered women found raped and torn to pieces in the desert. The victims had physiological aspects in common: they were about the same height, same skin and hair color, and they usually worked in *maquiladoras*. The pattern was so perfect that I read those stories as if they were chapters of a novel—a detective novel, of course, since I was very young back then to think or expect otherwise. I became obsessed. I read and waited for a nice ending, for a Dupin or a Holmes or a Marlowe to catch the bad guy so I could move on to a story that was less dark and menacing. But I kept on reading and I kept on waiting. Even though my mother had breakfast with me every day, every day I dreaded finding her name written in the headlines.

We all know that these stories do not end, neither the story about our wars nor the one about the violence against our women. In a sense, these stories are the same. Sure, they are both violent, but more than that, they are stories that keep on going because they share an active, dual core: the disregard for human lives and the disregard for the laws written to protect those very lives. My characters come from this place. Writers like George Orwell, H. G. Wells and Ray

Bradbury—among many more, of course—have worked on what might be called “the problem of the future.” If our present was built on the idea of democracy, and now democracy is dead, then what? I’m not talking about elections here—which are usually not fair or equalitarian to begin with—but about democracy’s most basic responsibility: to represent the common individual in the decisions taken by the government. Modern-day politicians represent their parties, themselves and those entities wealthy enough to finance further elections. This lack of equilibrium is obviously not new. What is more or less recent is the fact that democracy has a price which very few people can afford to pay. Our future, then, the future of the common people, is a problem.

I wrote this long digression to underline the fact that as governments grow towards the money source, the power of the common individual is pushed against the ground. We all have seen this many times, for instance, in the worldwide protests of 1968. Though the one in México was particularly savage, it is only an example, among hundreds, of the brutal repressions planned and executed by our different governments. The phenomena of the global, massive protests have gained strength since 2010: the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, the protests for free education in Chile, for justice in México and the U.S., for better living standards in Greece, Canada, Spain, Italy, Brazil and Argentina, for clean elections in Venezuela and Israel, for peace in Palestine and elsewhere. All these protests have many things in common, but one of them is quite perplexing to me: they have been infiltrated by their governments.

A protest is the public manifestation of a social concern. The protesters’ goal is for their concerns to be listened to by the government so the government, of course, will correct the roots of these concerns. In short: a protest intends to make governments climb down from their clouds and have contact with the people who keep such clouds puffy and comfortable. So why does this

contact have to take the form of a violent infiltration? Why such reticence from the governments to listen to the people and do their jobs efficiently? In 2008, in Ciudad Juárez, Rubí Frayre, sixteen years old, was murdered. Her mother, Marisela Escobedo, accused the boyfriend. The man fled the state. Receiving no response from the institutions, Marisela used her own meager resources to track the murderer down to the state of Zacatecas. The man was brought back to Chihuahua and though he confessed and even disclosed the site where he had buried Rubí's body, the man was absolved by the judges. Marisela then started a long series of protests that ended in the city of Chihuahua, in the plaza in front of the offices of the newly appointed governor César Duarte, where, one night in 2010, Marisela was shot to death.

This is the story of many women from Ciudad Juárez. Hundreds have been slain for belonging to the wrong gender and living in the wrong place. Some of their mothers and fathers, husbands, brothers, friends, have been killed or threatened and forced to leave the state for seeking justice for their loved ones. It doesn't matter that I was told many of these stories firsthand; this is, after all, common knowledge. What matters is that nothing has, is or will be done about this institutional terrorizing. It is the same panorama with the victims of the drug war—many of them murdered and/or *desaparecidos* by the government. So what options are there for the relatives of a victim? If the government will not represent them—quite the opposite—what can be done? What future is there not only for societies without representation, but for generations born and raised under the impression that justice is a symbol of nothing?

This is the setting in the short story “Not the Cold Winds, Not the Snow,” the center and dramatic peak of my project. These are also my characters, people looking for answers in those places where answers should be found, but finding nothing. From this point on, my characters are forced to reevaluate their positions in their worlds.

As opposed to my previous writing project, in *A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky* I decided to work almost exclusively with female characters. This wasn't a stylistic decision because I don't think of women as tropes. I took this decision for different personal reasons, all of them independent and absolutely idiosyncratic. First, writing from a woman's point of view was a challenge. For a male writer, the creation of a female protagonist implies the rethinking and shedding of many gender preconceptions, if not all of them. Literary characters are verbal constructions that demand to be understood as individual entities, not judged: "Let us always keep in mind that the art of the novel yields its finest results not through judging people but through understanding them, and let us avoid being ruled by the judgmental part of our mind. When we read a novel, morality should be a part of the landscape, not something that emanates from within us and targets the characters" (Pamuk, 23). Understanding, I'm convinced—along with tolerance and respect—is what our societies most desperately need.

The other two reasons for writing a book led mostly by female characters were much simpler and much more personal. I was raised by my mother and my grandmother, I have a beautiful sister and a beautiful girlfriend who remind me that the lives of women in Ciudad Juárez—and in many other places—are not worth a dime. The feminicides are one of my obsessions because they are the physical reaffirmation of an effective power that I can't understand. As I said earlier—surely influenced by Montaigne—I started writing, and kept on doing it, out of ignorance.

The third and final reason is the realization that since we, men, have historically been in charge of things, we are responsible for the state the world is in today. It's time we allow somebody else to take the reins.

III. The Form

I wrote—or finished writing—four book-length projects during the MFA, all of which have had an impact on the rest. The first project was the thesis for my previous master, a critical essay on a *comedia* by Novohispanic dramatist Juan Ruiz de Alarcón. The title of this long essay is *Los límites de la razón*. I mention this again because I could only finish it after reading some of the material for Professor de Piérola's class, and because the writing of this book allowed me to realize that I have a higher appreciation for literary works which are open enough to instill in the reader not the sensation of completion, but the uneasiness of an unanswered question. I don't believe that readers want to be spoon-fed. I respect those writers who believe otherwise, but it is not my style, and their readers are not the ones I'm looking for. Readers are smart and sophisticated. They like working for their meal because they know it tastes better this way.

The second project was a collection of short stories entitled *La rabia chica*. This was complicated. Originally a part of my thesis, this book consisted of five parts. Parts 1 and 2 were groups of two flash fictions (short stories under 1000 words) followed by a short story without a word limit. Parts 4 and 5 were the same, except that the order was reversed: one short story followed by two flash pieces. They were the “reflected” image of Parts 1 and 2 not only in the arrangement of their contents, but also in that the characters of the first stories (sometimes the protagonists, sometimes secondary characters) reappeared in the last. This, at least in my mind, gave the book a sense of circularity, as well as a complex, actualizing reading experience: the past is always alive.

Loosely following Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, I wanted Part 3 to be a fragmented, long narrative with characters and a time-frame independent from the rest of the book. In Anderson's work, George Willard is a recurrent character that fulfills many purposes. One of them is to serve as time marker, or anchor. This device allows the reader to understand the period of time in which the stories of the book take place in relationship to the life of Willard. In "Godliness"—a long text when compared to the rest—the objective time precedes the life of Willard. This long, fragmented story has its own context. I wanted to do something similar with my book, so I placed "I Want To Tell You a Story" right next to "A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky," and started working on the dramatic summit, "Not the Cold Winds, Not the Snow", and then on the conclusion, which are now the short stories entitled "The Sea of Tranquility" and "The Day God Came to Visit." It took me the whole summer to write these three short stories and to adapt the first two, and then I had to cut the whole thing out for several reasons. One of them is connected to my previous thesis advisor's availability, so it isn't worth mentioning. The other is because the project took a life of its own, it loomed over the rest of the book and cast a shadow that was way too long for the tiny space Part 3 had to offer.

Though they are now independent books, both *La rabia chica* and *A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky* have many aspects in common. I have already said that the parts of the former were originally divided by vignettes. Because of their topics, the vignettes were better suited for the latter project, so I moved them and edited them so that they would, in a more imagistic and condensed style, reflect on the subject matter discussed in the short stories. The vignettes, in short, serve to underline and expand on certain aspects of the book. One of them, for me the most important, is the experience of time.

The events portrayed in the short stories take place during a six-month period, from September to March. Though the months are mentioned in the texts, I also worked on developing the atmosphere of the changing seasons to enhance the feeling of time moving. In the short stories the time is linear, which gives the book a sense of conclusion. It is different with the vignettes, where a cyclist leaves his house in Ciudad Juárez to attend his classes in the university in El Paso, and then returns to his house at night. This is a cycle, of course; it has a sense of unity and causal relationship. During one of our meetings, my current thesis director, Professor Lex Williford, recommended the reading of “The Swimmer,” by John Cheever. This short story helped me to verbalize the problem I was having with the vignettes, which is that even though the cycle begins and ends, it has to leave in the reader the sensation that it has been going on for far longer than the time it appears to be representing, and it also has to imply that the cycle will start anew. With this, I wanted to represent the history of the slain women of Ciudad Juárez, a phenomenon that appears to have come to an end, but has, in reality, remained in motion, immersed in a silence created by our apathy and disregard for human lives. Simply put: what has happened before will happen again.

I would like to end this preface by briefly discussing a problem of form, which is, in my opinion, a good problem to have. So far, I have referred to the pieces that shape my book as “short stories.” But are they really short stories? In Professor Ramos’ class *The Folding-Screen Book*, we read several books with the intention of analyzing how a collection of short stories can also be read as a novel. Examples from the bibliography include Nellie Campobello’s *Cartucho*; Jan Neruda’s *Cuentos de la Malá Strana*; Rolando Hinojosa Smith’s *Klail City*; and of course Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* and Joyce’s *Dubliners*. Our conclusions were that such collections

of short stories can be read as novels because they give an impression of unity by utilizing a common context and recurring characters.

I wrote “I Want to Tell You a Story” and “A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky” following my poetics of what a short story should be: a circular, self-contained narrative where the characters are forced to react to a setting that is more powerful than they are. In “The Sea of Tranquility”, a fragmented short story, I applied the same poetics to every fragment, except that here I wanted to see the world of the characters as if reflected on a broken mirror: different women, affected by the same event, make their own personal, independent decisions. “The Day God Came to Visit” posed a particular challenge: since the actions had to come to an abrupt and absolute end, the circularity of the structure had to be worked out on an abstract level, not on a dramatic one. “Not the Cold Winds, Not the Snow” is a different animal. Because of its dimensions and shifting point of view, the structure is expansive, rather than circular. I wanted to create a sense of community, and then I needed to destroy it. This is, in other words, a novella that contains the key to understanding the book as a whole.

Though I have discussed the problem of form with Professor Williford—to whom I’m forever indebted for his careful readings and generous time and advice—the problem persists: did I write a collection of short stories or a novel? Is the question beside the point? As I’ve said before, I’m convinced that my answer on this matter is absolutely irrelevant. What’s important is the reader’s experience of the book.

I hope you enjoy it.

Cheché Silveyra

Ciudad Juárez, April 4, 2015

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	v
Preface.....	vi
Table of Contents.....	xxii
Part I	
<i>Should Anybody Ask</i>	2
I Want to Tell You a Story.....	3
Part II	
<i>By Human Teeth</i>	24
A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky.....	25
Part III	
<i>Lina</i>	45
Not the Cold Winds, Not the Snow.....	46
<i>They Will Not Fall</i>	84
Part IV	
The Sea of Tranquility.....	86
<i>You Know He's Crying</i>	124
Part V	
The Day God Came to Visit.....	126
<i>So Luminous, So Strident</i>	145

Bibliography.....	146
Curriculum Vita.....	151

Part I

You will lose control. You can see it: the truck so close it'll make you hit the curb. Your bicycle will overturn and the truck will run down the old man as he begins to walk across Avenida Lincoln.

You're on your ass now, lying on the sidewalk. Up ahead the truck brakes and stops. It is huge and dark. It huffs. It honks. The old man's standing still. He's all right. He faces the truck and hits the humped hood with his walking cane. He hits it once, twice. You can't hear what he's screaming, yet you'll never forget it.

"No more!" the old man shouts. "No more!"

But you can't hear him. As usual, you don't listen, do you?

The old man takes fast, shallow breaths. Like a buffalo, he snorts. He stands in front of the truck and he seems just as massive, just as powerful. The truck lunges forth. The man inches forward. The chest, the hood, they touch. They wait.

You're watching, yes, but you will not see the old man smash the truck's headlight with his cane, the driver getting out, the gun, the muzzle, the yell: "Kneel down!"

You'll grab your backpack, get on your bicycle, ride away over the international bridge and cross the border into El Paso. You will not hear the old man shout, "No more!" And stand his ground. And raise his cane one last time.

Should anybody ask, you didn't see a thing.

You never heard the shot.

I Want to Tell You a Story

— 1 —

Lorenzo Cajina parked his 1989 green Geo-Metro in front of his father's house, on the spot where the asphalt cracked into a spider web pattern. A fault in the underground, he believed, drove the cracks outward, one of which had already chipped the curb, split the sidewalk and left a deep crevice on the red façade of the house where he had been taught to listen to his elders. Now he visited every other week and told himself, each single time, that he'd fix the house for his old man if he could only get two, maybe three days off in the theater and dedicate all his time and energies to the task because he just couldn't see, and didn't want to know, where the crevice ended.

And maybe the fault was the reason why no one came out anymore, not even to gossip or water the dying trees in the afternoon. After all, the city, Ciudad Juárez, had regained its peace; the war was over. So now that the shootings in the streets were mostly a thing of the past, could the cracked pavement be the reason for such quiet? A fear, let's say, of the ground caving in and one falling through the hole and disappearing, just like that, like nothing, like air, into the black womb of the earth? But he was wasting time. Did he need a reason for the street to be empty, or just its emptiness, that private space where he could take deep breaths and review his plan before facing his old man once again?

He turned off the engine.

The sun was setting fast. He got out of the car, popped the hatch open and grabbed his daughter's backpack. Too fast for September, he thought, and followed the crack on the sidewalk into his father's house and locked the door behind him.

As on every other Monday, Lorenzo set Gabriela's backpack—pink but spotted brown with age now and patched with little scraps of old jeans—by the leg of the kitchen table. He moved the greasy pan and dish out of the sink, turned on the hot water, plugged the drain and let the water pool. He squirted lemon detergent under the water jet and drenched a rag. The kitchen smelled of lemon and chorizo when he wiped the table. It made him think of his old man cooking the same meal on the same day of the week: was he not telling him to keep on going, to not give up?

Break a leg, Lorenzo.

The sun came in through the kitchen window in dark orange hues. It was getting late. Lorenzo put the dish and pan in the drainer, then washed his hands and went to work.

He unzipped the backpack and pulled out the only textbook, *Algebra*, with empty pages Gabriela might fill out to complete her homework. He set the book carefully on the table, methodically, as if she'd been reading it and writing on it only a minute before. This way, if his old man came downstairs he would see the book and Lorenzo could say, "She went out for a walk, father; she'll be back in a couple of hours." A crazy line, yes, but rather important, essential, he'd say. He had to earn it, though. By working in the theater he learned that a scene had to provoke the unquestionable, natural chain reaction that kept the story flowing in a straight and truthful line. His old man, however, knew this from birth. Storytelling was in his blood. Lorenzo had to be careful, then, so he toyed with the angle of the book, with the distance from the spine to the edge of the table, and shifted the angle once again. Still, after six years of coming

to his old man's house and setting up the same scene every other Monday, the book seemed to him a stage prop. Lorenzo could see his own hand, his own will, in the book lying on the table. The problem, of course, was disappearing. He had to erase himself from the scene, and so he shifted the angle a bit more, a little less to the right, and left it alone.

He grabbed the blue pen from the backpack, opened the book and tried it on a corner. The pen made a deep crevice in the paper and left behind no trace of blue. Was that all it took to destroy his scene, a dry pen, a faulty prop?

Tossing the pen back into the backpack, he wished he shared his old man's ability to find the lines, the patterns and turns and details that made his stories spiral into seamless and infinite labyrinths. His old man believed that we create stories to make sure that our lives, and the lives of those we love, endure in time a little longer, though in a more human, less hurtful existence.

One morning, for example, when he was a boy, Lorenzo woke up to the approaching wail of an ambulance. His mother had passed away from pneumonia the month before and her death had left with him a sharpened sense of loneliness, the clarity that everything will unexpectedly, unequivocally, come to an end. So that morning, when Lorenzo couldn't find his father in the bedroom or the kitchen or the living room, he went outside to search for him.

Two patrol cars outside flanked the ambulance. His father stood between the cars, staring at the house across the street.

"Something bad has happened, Lorenzo," his father said. "Do you remember the neighbor from the blue house, the radio host? Do you remember how he roared at night?"

Lorenzo didn't remember anyone from the neighborhood being on the radio, but he'd seen the man from the blue house walking up and down the street in a light brown suit and Panama hat, smoking like he'd never have a chance to smoke again. He talked to himself all the

time. “He knows you, man,” that’s what he whispered through the smoke. “He knows better than to mess with you.” And the screaming, yes, Lorenzo remembered the screaming after dark.

“I remember him,” he said.

“That’s good, Lorenzo,” said his father, “never forget him. On his radio show, listen to me, on his show he depicted two lovers at the beach, and he used nothing but sound. People say that, with salt and eggshells, he created the footsteps of the lovers sinking in the sand; that the tide was warm club soda, wood pipes and pebbles; the kisses, the complex rubbing of his wet hands. But like most stories, Lorenzo, this one didn’t have a happy ending. The woman, you see, was married, and one night the husband found them in the beach house. He walked into the bedroom and shot the lovers to death—*bam! bam!*—with two halves of a coconut slammed together. The husband left behind a broken transistor radio, an old spyglass and a trail of sand leading to the bedroom. When the police produced the sketch of the murderer, it roared as the sea under a full moon.”

The paramedics appeared in the door of the blue house across the street. The man on the gurney, the neighbor, was handcuffed to the rail.

“Is that why they’re taking him away, father, because he screams at night?”

His father knelt down, grabbed Lorenzo’s face with both hands and squeezed.

“No, Lorenzo. *Screaming* is not the word. They’re taking him away because he *roars*.”

Throughout that morning, Lorenzo felt his father’s fingers imprinted on his face. He felt them like a small fire on his skin. But in the afternoon, when he had returned from school and his father from work, he didn’t ask whether a couple could be killed with sound. The whole incident, however strange, had disappeared inside his head. Yet something remained, even to this day, in the form of a roaring sea now distant and tamed, trapped inside a little box.

* * *

Lorenzo pulled Gabriela's pencils out of the backpack. He admired his old man's idea that a form of justice existed in the twists and charms of fiction. His daughter, for instance, would never see justice. She was simply gone. When someone dies, he thought, the void's complete and endless, but then it becomes a part of ourselves, like a missing limb. When someone moves away, filling up the void's a matter of distance and time: a visit, a phone call, a loved one coming home at the end of a long trip. A person who's disappeared, though, is a meal getting cold on the table. Like the scene he attempted to set up on the kitchen, the disappeared were both absurd and necessary. Never a part of history or oblivion, the void remained and roared to be fed.

Sharpened into useless stubs, Lorenzo dropped Gabriela's pencils into the backpack and grabbed the purple highlighter. He uncapped it and smelled it and it left a trace, a vague coloring on his fingers when he pinched the tip. The marker, too, was done. So what if he bought new school supplies, the same brands, the same colors, even used the same store? But what if she had grown to like black fountain pens and green highlighters? Maybe blue or yellow or orange? Those details were of the utmost importance. He could choose the wrong color and ruin the scene. To convince his father, the scene had to follow a solid, natural logic: no club soda or salt, no two halves of a coconut slammed together; only the tide, the sand, a couple shot to death by a jealous husband.

With the book opened on the first page, Lorenzo read each word as the highlighter turned them into a hardly visible, chalky purple line. "Mathematics is a study of patterns—finding patterns and explaining why such patterns exist." As it is with stories, he thought. He shook the

marker up and down and tried it once more, following the same sentence in a single and deliberate stroke: “Mathematics is a study of pat” The faint purple line stopped there. Lorenzo put the highlighter to his lips and whispered, “Don’t do this to me, goddammit, please don’t.” He shook it again and tried it again and then he stopped.

There was a hairline fracture on the plaster, a thin crack running from the ceiling to the window and out into the waning sunlight. He imagined himself following the crack into the sunset, disappearing into the light, erasing himself from this house, this time, this story, swallowed by the crevice and spat back inside this kitchen.

— 2 —

Every other Monday, for six years straight, Lorenzo followed the same rigorous plan: he cleaned the kitchen and set Gabriela’s books on the table, paying attention to the tiniest details until the scene was perfectly laid out and then, and only then, did he go upstairs, sit next to his old man’s bed and listen to the story Lorenzo knew by heart, the one his old man told him on every single visit.

Lorenzo started by leaning on the bedroom’s doorjamb, for a second or two, to get his eyes used to the dark, to breathe through his mouth the hot, stale air. That was no way to live, the windows closed, the curtains drawn, but his old man said he felt safer shut in, safe from the outside and the light.

“Hello, father,” Lorenzo said once the darkness had settled in his eyes.

A low gasp then filled the room and faded. As on every other Monday, Lorenzo waited for the bed sheets to ruffle, for the switch to click and the light from the bedside lamp to illuminate his old man's face on the pillow, his drowsy eyes, his skin dried and cracked like a prayer prayed a million times and never answered.

"My granddaughter, Lorenzo, where is she?" his father said waking up, pointed to the chair in the corner of the room and gestured at Lorenzo to drag it by the bed.

"She's downstairs," Lorenzo responded sitting down. "You know, doing homework."

"Did you lock the door?"

"She's twenty now, father, there's no need—"

"That response, Lorenzo, keep it for when I ask you how old my granddaughter is. Now do tell me whether or not you locked the door."

"Yes, father, I locked the door. She's all right, she's fine."

"She's a beautiful young woman, Lorenzo. You got to take good care of her."

"I know. I do."

"Don't do that, Lorenzo, don't humor me. I always watched after your sister and now..." with his finger, his father traced an arc in the black air because no words could express his truth, only half a circle, only the black air. "And my own father, he looked after my sister with great care, and yet you never met your aunt. There's something in our women, Lorenzo, think about it, there's something that makes the world despise them."

Despise, not *hate*, was the word to describe the history of women. Hate, his old man would never use such an imprecise vulgarity. We can only hate that which we weren't strong enough to love. It wasn't hate what lay at the root of the violence against a woman, Cajina or not, but the fact that they were insignificant. *Despise*, then, was the word.

“You might think me crazy, Lorenzo, but the years make you see the world differently. We like to think that the world doesn’t mind us. That’s a lie. The world is watching and in due time we get the bill for every wrong we’ve committed. It’s not a matter of luck, but of time. And while you might think of it as karma, I know it is a curse.”

“I don’t believe in curses,” Lorenzo said not because he meant it, but because it was the line that kept the story flowing. Third call. Break a leg.

“My god, Lorenzo, how would you know?”

His old man closed his eyes. Lorenzo took a deep breath, trying to detect the roses in the garden of the Zamoras next door. Though on every visit he left the front door open and unlocked—in case Gabriela returned from her walk—the air in this room never freshened, never smelled like roses.

“I want to tell you a story,” his old man always said, his gaze fixed on the black air of the room.

And every other Monday the story began exactly the same, with the sunrise of the third day of Francisco I. Madero’s revolution in Ciudad Juárez, back in 1911, the day Lorenzo’s grandfather found the body of a beautiful girl floating among the water lilies of the Río Bravo.

Like most human mistakes, the war had been inevitable. His grandfather, a young man of bowler hats and British cashmere suits, used his wealth to relocate to El Paso just before Villa, Orozco and Garibaldi let loose the battle that’d leave Ciudad Juárez at their will. That spring was a magical time of sorts, explosions and shots beyond the river down south, ballroom music in the northern country.

On the first day, Lorenzo’s grandfather leased a single room at the Hotel Sheldon and slept until five in the morning. He left the hotel after having breakfast and walked down Oregon

Street to the American National Bank to set up an account, then arranged for a telephone call to Mrs. Ramírez, the woman in charge of his dry-goods store in Ciudad Juárez. They'd taken as much merchandise as possible to her house and the houses of relatives and friends, Mrs. Ramírez said, so the losses would be minimal in case of a raid by the revolutionaries.

That was quite fine, what else could they do?

When he hung up the telephone, the banker, Mr. Lehmann, seemed to be working on a thought.

"Who knows how long this war will go on for, not to speak of the rebuilding it'll take afterward to get businesses back on their feet. And more importantly, what if Madero wins? Will his government be welcoming to businessmen like you? Have you asked yourself that question?"

"It's kept me up a night or two, I admit. But on sleepless nights, I remember an old expression: 'When there's blood on the streets, buy land.' It had lulled me into sleep a night or two. And now you're here, and you surely have something in mind."

Lehmann pulled a ticket from his jacket.

"These are sold out," Lehmann said, "impossible to get unless you have some friends, and I'd like you to meet those friends."

Lehmann handed him the ticket for the Hotel Paso del Norte: "Come live the Revolution from the safety of our roof garden." Grandfather accepted the invitation and promised to be there at four, but regretted his decision as soon as he stepped onto the roof.

Two men wearing brown cotton suits and Panama hats stood on round wooden tables to look above the multitude gathered along the balustrade. A woman in an olive green hobble skirt sat on a chair on top of a table and looked south through a pair of field glasses. Grandfather

couldn't locate Lehmann, so in the heat of May he worked his way up to the front of the crowd, standing on the tips of his feet to gulp in the air above the people.

He felt the gasps on his neck, the hot air of the cheers when Villa blew up the Ketelsen & Degetau store in Ciudad Juárez. The column of smoke touched the clouds as he reached the balustrade. He thought of the audiences at bullfights, the sharp energy released whenever the bull came out victorious. Below, El Paso's brick and concrete buildings stretched southward in clean cut squares: the Grecian Theatre on El Paso Street; El Paso Laundry on Santa Fe Street; and then the border, the adobe houses, the flames. The woman next to him patted his back. He smiled, loosened his tie and tried to breathe, but the air had turned hot and dry, like ashes. His store was on Calle Galeana, three blocks down from the fiery remains of Ketelsen & Degetau's.

The woman patted him on the back again and he looked around for the woman's husband, decided to have a word with him about her unwomanly behavior. Touching his back, insistent. Who did she think she was? But the woman pointed a finger to the far corner of the terrace. There was Lehmann, a glass of cold champagne in his fingers. Grandfather slithered through the crowd and once he'd drunk the cold champagne, he thought it had been silly looking for that woman's husband. He'd just been missing that drink his whole life.

"Thank you," grandfather said.

"It's nothing, Mr. Cajina, we're celebrating. Aren't we, Mr. Samaniego?" said Lehmann, extending his hand toward a man in a bone-colored silk suit, fat cheeks and double chin slopping over the collar of his white shirt. "This is Mr. Cajina, our investor from over the border."

The girl by Samaniego's side had light-brown skin and black hair twisted in a bow. She wore a white long cotton dress that stretched across her waist and hips. She looked south, her fingers laced together, her thumbs rubbing against each other like she was praying a rosary. She

swiveled back and forth. Grandfather noticed Samaniego's arm reaching down the girl's back, to the small of her back, perhaps a little too low and evidently flexing his fingers to the rhythm of the girl's swiveling.

"What are you celebrating?" grandfather asked.

"We, Mr. Cajina, are celebrating the triumph of the revolution," Lehmann said.

"It's a little early to claim victory, no?"

"Perhaps for the rest," Samaniego said, "but we won with the first shot." Swiveling to the rhythm of the girl in his hand, he explained how he'd cut deals with both Díaz's regime and Madero's revolution. "Whoever wins, it doesn't matter a goddamn thing."

Grandfather asked what he'd agreed with Madero, since it seemed like Madero was stepping ahead in the fight.

"Everything," Samaniego said, "from roads to water lines, is ours."

A waiter came with four glasses of cold champagne. Lehmann collected the empties and handed out the fresh round. The girl didn't want hers, but she took it when Samaniego whispered something in her ear. They all raised their glasses and drank to the revolution. Samaniego used a finger to push the girl's glass up from the stem, and held it up until she'd drunk it all. Her knuckles turned white around the glass and her eyes were wet. Samaniego made a sizzling sound with his mouth as he ran his hand down her back. The girl closed her eyes and hurled the glass over the balustrade.

"You'll have to excuse me, gentlemen," Samaniego said. "Mr. Lehmann will walk you though our deal. We'll talk tomorrow. Dinner's on me at the Toltec Club."

Samaniego grabbed the girl by the wrist and pulled her away. She left the smell of flowers behind, jasmine, perhaps lilac, as they walked away into the multitude. The brown

tweeds and hobble skirts, the white cotton shirts and Panama hats opened up as the couple passed them by and faded into the Hotel Paso del Norte.

“Shall you join us,” said Lehmann, “you’ll double your fortune in two years.”

Grandfather asked about the competition. Lehmann said Samaniego had none, then raised his glass and grinned.

“That’s a very powerful man,” Lehmann said.

“And a very beautiful girl.”

“She is, but you shouldn’t mention her again.”

They drank to the future and moved on to The Gem for whiskey, where they listened to a guitarist sing a corrido eerily similar to “La Cucaracha” but a good seven or eight years before it became popular among Villa’s army, a version of the song which wasn’t about a cockroach drugged on marijuana quite yet, but about an old horse that survived the battle on the victorious side and perished the next morning, dead of a heart attack.

At dawn they left The Gem and walked to the border. On the other side of the Río Bravo a man caked in dust dropped face-down on the ground and put his arms under his face and slept. They found the girl’s body halfway from Madero’s headquarters, floating amid the bright pink water lilies, her left side underwater and the rest ashore. The bow had come undone and her hair waved with the lapping water as if riding a horse. Her arm on the bank was raised in a fist, her white dress torn across the chest. She was missing a breast. She was barefoot. A dog by her fist chewed on a black shoe. The war was over.

“Like I said,” Lehmann repeated, “never mention her again.”

Out of greed, his grandfather had obeyed Lehmann and lived his life as if the girl had never existed. But he never forgot that morning, her body surrounded by water lilies.

Strange that when he lost his fortune he didn't think of her. Strange that he had to wait until finding his own daughter strangled to understand the curse he'd brought upon the Cajinas.

That's what his old man said, anyway. That was his story.

As on every other Monday for the last six years, the story of the revolution stopped here and his old man opened his eyes and stared at Lorenzo still sitting by the bed. His old man looked weak and tired, but like a prayer that hasn't been answered, his story wasn't over, not yet.

"The curse we carry within our souls takes our women away, Lorenzo, your aunt and your sister, so that we'll never forget my father's history, his wrongdoings and silence. That's why you have to watch over my granddaughter, never let her out of your sight, never forget she's there, exposed to a world that despises her. Never forget, Lorenzo."

History. Oblivion. The curse was living in between.

"Give her a kiss from me and come back soon. I want to tell you a story."

Lorenzo put the chair in the corner and saw his old man's face disappear against the pillow when he turned off the lamp.

The return down the stairs always felt like climbing down a deep crevice. Unlike in his old man's story, Lorenzo had never had an aunt or a sister. He'd had a daughter, Gabriela. She'd used black shoes, same size and style of a shoe found in the desert six years ago, next to a human bone so small it couldn't have belonged to his daughter. That was history.

"How's my granddaughter going to walk in the desert with no shoes?" his father had asked around the time of Gabriela's disappearance, around the time they found the shoe in the desert. "Here," he said, pulling some coins and a crumpled twenty pesos bill out of his pocket, "buy her a new pair of shoes, Lorenzo."

His father had denied her disappearance, erased it from history. She became oblivion.

It was a week after they found the shoe when he heard his old man's story for the first time, a little part of history he'd twisted until the blame came to rest on the greed of Lorenzo's grandfather, a history molten and recast under a logic with so many turns and patterns that in the end the victim was not his granddaughter, but an imaginary sister and an imaginary daughter. Why? Maybe the pain, when inflated by a lie, was a lighter load to carry. Maybe hope was stronger than truth. And what was true, anyway? Gabriela was gone. Just gone. Wasn't she?

As he did every time he visited, Lorenzo returned the books to Gabriela's backpack, the pencil he'd carefully arranged on the table. To blame his grandfather was crazy, sure, but at least his old man had found a form of justice, a way to distribute evenly both blame and punishment. And if he thought that Gabriela was out there taking a stroll, visiting friends, then he certainly believed that she would return the same way she'd vanished while walking off to school. She would appear out of the bursting air or the waving sand. His old man's story was a crazy lie, yes, but it was better than to imagine Gabriela's corpse lying somewhere in the desert.

Lorenzo zipped up the backpack. As on every other Monday, he walked out of the house and followed the crack on the sidewalk to his car, turned on the engine and drove away, leaving behind his old man's house, the dying trees, the pavement cracked into a spider web.

— 3 —

With the waning sunlight coming through the kitchen window, the purple highlighter sparkled in his hand. Lorenzo watched the speck of light dim as the sun went down behind the mountains. It

was time to go upstairs and listen to his old man once again. Third call. Break a leg. And he would, he'd go upstairs and face him, but he wasn't ready just yet. What if his old man came downstairs and found a dry highlighter carefully set by him on the kitchen table? His old man would detect the falsity of the scene, the fractured logic. And what would Lorenzo say? "I lost her, father, and now I can't find her."

In the evening's half light, he walked out of the house and followed the crack in the sidewalk to his green Geo Metro. He glanced at a cyclist on the street, heading north, then put the highlighter in his pocket, flung the hatch open, took out the cardboard box and dropped it onto the pavement. Two pencils—two much-needed pencils—were missing from Gabriela's backpack. They weren't on the carpet or under his orange apron balled up in a corner. He grabbed the apron and spread it out and read, "UTEP Dinner Theater" embroidered over a sketch of the Franklin Mountains in El Paso, but found no pencils.

He put the box back inside the car and pulled out the stack of copies, white paper, black ink, "Desaparecida" written on top in bold letters highlighted in purple. "Gabriela Cajina," it said, "missing since September 12, 2010." Below, her photograph, her smile and ponytail, the plaid school uniform and the sweater that, if the photo was in color, would look deep brown. He put the stack aside. Inside the box he found the usual: a heavy-duty stapler, a regular stapler, a roll of scotch tape, a plastic box of colored pins and no pencils.

Was it time to drop the curtains, turn on the lights and clean the dinner theater, collect the dirty plates, wash the molten ice cream? Was it all really over?

He heard a woman's voice coming from the Zamoras' little garden next door to his father's house.

"Lorenzo," she said. "It's been ages. How are you?"

A cradle behind her, by the front door of her house, the woman stood by the rosebushes, holding a basket wrapped in yellow cellophane.

“I’m in a rush. I don’t have time right now,” he said, strolling to his father’s house.

“I’m sorry, Lorenzo, I understand. It’s just that I’m moving back in with my parents and I thought that, well, since I’ve seen Gabriela’s posters all over the city I was wondering, you know, if there’s anything I can do to help. I’m going through some difficulties myself, a tough divorce, and I’d love to do anything that isn’t crying and moping around the house.”

She smelled of roses and had faint bruises on her neck, but her hair caught his attention first, how long she’d let it grow. Her features weren’t clear in the dusk, but he remembered her.

“There’s nothing to do, Paulina. Thanks, though, for asking.”

“The offer stands. Let me know if I can help. How’s your dad?”

Stubborn and blind, he thought. Oblivious of the world beyond the limits of his house.

“Just the same,” he said.

“I still remember the stories he told us at night.”

“He loved doing that.”

“Do you like telling stories also?”

“I was born without that gift.”

Paulina removed the yellow cellophane from the basket and crumpled it into a ball.

“You look like him,” she said.

“No, I don’t.”

“You do.”

“How?”

“Something in the shape of your face. I don’t know, your lips, maybe your cheekbones. Not your eyes, though. I remember your dad looking at me like I wasn’t real. His eyes changed when he told a story and I thought he truly saw castles instead of these old houses, that he saw me like I was a bush or a bird in the scenery, an ornament in his story. He saw the world better than what it was, that’s what I thought, and I admired that. But your eyes are different.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“You do that.”

“I got to go now. It was nice seeing you.”

As he closed the door behind him, he heard Paulina say, “Good luck.”

As he pulled all the textbooks out of Gabriela’s backpack and laid them on the kitchen table, he thought of luck. Maybe he’d forgotten the pencil between the pages of a textbook. He flipped through them, finding his own handwriting on the pages. He thought of a story he’d heard in the theater, that Bela Lugosi, after playing Dracula, finished his days sleeping in a coffin. The actor never made it back. Dracula infected Lugosi’s world and the world was never bright again. Lugosi, then, created his own world, a world less painful than the real one, so fragile and driven by the need for luck. Crazy, sure, but if you want crazy, Paulina, come on in, I’ll show you the kitchen! Just be quiet; my daughter’s doing her homework. Yes, the world was fragile. It could be squeezed between the fingers, like Paulina’s neck. It could be twisted. A father could fill out his daughter’s textbooks and imagine that the world was less cruel. If he had the right set of eyes, a father could imagine a better place, a better life.

The men who took Gabriela away, he imagined them well dressed, driving a brand new car, their tongues pronged and sweet and black, their hands smooth, strong like rocks polished by

the river. He imagined his daughter watching them fascinated. He imagined himself watching them fascinated. She got into the car with those men, so he got into the car with those men, too. Why not? What harm could come from men like them? Lorenzo imagined the men in the front seats, him in the back seat talking, laughing, adjusting his brown sweater, pulling down his plaid, high school uniform skirt.

The men drove past the Cristo Negro hill. He asked, “Where’re we going?” but they didn’t answer. He felt the prick of fear in his stomach and tried to open the door and screamed, but the men subdued him. He prayed in soft whispers as they dragged him by the hair into a shanty in the middle of the desert.

Lorenzo imagined his quivering lips disappear under the fist of the driver, his front tooth clattering away on the cement floor. The other man undid his pants and took them off in a single movement of his arms and waist. Then he grabbed a length of rope and twirled it above his head and hissed, stroking his flaccid penis with his free hand.

Lorenzo didn’t want to imagine anymore, but the logic of the scene was solid and natural. The story had to run its course. He had to lose a breast. All who came before him, they all had lost a breast. No reason for it, just human will, a pattern whose existence is yet to be explained. He wondered if they would use a knife or their teeth. He wondered if he’d scream. And he did scream, of course he did, at the moment in which the blade penetrated the skin. The men never flinched. There was no hate in their eyes, rather a sense of wonder, of power, the spark of a desire that wasn’t sexual. They put their hands between his legs and rubbed. They put their blades and hands on his stomach and opened him up. They filled him with strong, smooth hands like rocks polished by the river, then left him in the desert to become sand.

* * *

In the kitchen, Lorenzo dragged the highlighter over “Mathematics is a study of patterns—finding patterns and explaining why such patterns exist.” He dragged it back and forth and then again until the sentence became a weak purple smear.

The textbooks thudded when they hit the bottom of the backpack sitting on the chair, and the highlighter clicked inside the front pocket. The chair looked odd when he grabbed the backpack to hang it onto his shoulder. It looked out of place, so he pushed it back under the table, screeching against the floor. With the lights off, the kitchen seemed like no one had been there at all.

Upstairs he leaned on the doorjamb of his old man’s bedroom to get his eyes used to the dark. He smelled the hot, stale air and went inside and dropped the backpack by the bed. It was time to tell the truth. He wouldn’t listen anymore. It was time to be heard, to make his old man understand that Gabriela would never come back.

He opened the curtains. He opened the window.

A burst of fresh air blew into the room. It smelled of roses.

“Hello, father,” he said, but the bed sheets didn’t ruffle this time and no light came from the bedside lamp. The room remained quiet when he called out his name a second time.

“Father.”

Lorenzo dragged the chair and sat down by the bed. He turned on the light and touched the cold skin of his old man’s face and then his own. He recognized the pattern on his own dried skin and wrinkles, soundless cracks relentlessly, slowly, tearing his body apart until the sun and

the sand coming through the crevices settled down for good, forever, like a story with no absolute end now liberated, never to be told again.

Part II

She will have a question. You will see her under the slant of light coming through the classroom window: white, beautiful and distant, a doll with her hand raised.

You will have a question, too. The same you've always had. The same as always.

You look out the window and see the border, the apathetic sun setting behind the Sierra de Juárez, Cristo Negro, Lomas de Poleo. In that place, for many years, they've dumped your women. The place has evolved, and from a wasteland of women it is today a graduate course at the University of Texas at El Paso.

You could raise your hand now, but your question's gone.

This is what's going to happen: You'll imagine the doll walking at night on the other side of the border; you'll imagine her on a street with no lamps and no pavement, the sun coming up as they find her naked amid the gobernadora bushes.

The doll beaten, her breasts ravaged by human teeth, her bones already scattered, half-eaten by dogs.

Her arm above her head, her hand poised to ask for just one chance.

"I have a question," the doll says.

A House All White and Empty Against the Night Sky

As they walked nearing the bazaar, Paulina Zamora leaned closer to Antonio so that their shoulders, their fingers, brushed against each other.

She had been pressing him to help her with the story of some strange and faceless artisan, of some baskets she'd heard about from her newspaper's editor. It was a beautiful story of healing which, she believed, would help ease their own hurt. Antonio, though, had argued that healing for her was the same as forgetting, an idea fit for cowards and politicians. But she'd insisted, naturally. That September morning he showered and dusted off his camera. Paulina wore a plaid skirt and long boots, a light denim jacket, a touch of mascara and plenty of make-up to cover the bruises on her neck. On their way out she grabbed her notepad but not the umbrella. The weather, she felt, would turn out just beautiful.

They drove to La Chaveña neighborhood and walked downhill to the bazaar slowly, carefully, still distant and sore, yes, but as alive as the bazaar itself. The colored tarps above the stalls cast a soft glow upon them, a rainbow of sorts, like the rain had already come and passed. So perfect. As the crowd grew denser she squeezed into Antonio so close that he, had he chosen to do so, could have kissed her.

"Morning's warming up," she said. She could smell the mint from his shampoo.

Antonio nodded and winced, his scarred lip twisted beneath the mustache. The stubborn man refused to use his neck support because he felt trapped and suffocated in it. She could let it

pass for now. At least he'd come along, if only to stop her nagging. At least he was trying. She took his hand. He let hers go.

Antonio lifted his camera and pointed the lens at three students standing by the table of an antiques stall. The students laughed at an old toy: two wooden boxers on a wooden rail, their powerful arms—fixed to their bodies with tiny nails—swung at each other at the push of a button in the center of the rail. Their faces, black and blue and strangely youthful, looked like they had been going at it for far too long.

The shutter clicked twice. Antonio stepped in front of Paulina and walked around the students. She followed him, his shoulders green under the sunlight filtering through the green tarp. By the long table on the next stall, he stopped to review the photographs in the camera display. She leaned over but only caught a sideways glimpse: the first shot centered on their bruises; the second, on their glinting eyes. He discarded the second, which Paulina thought was the best photograph.

“Everything on the table's five pesos,” the stall employee, a woman, greeted them.

Used baby blankets lined the far corner of the table. Old baby bottles and pacifiers—their nipples fuzzy and speckled with dust—lay closer to Paulina. The employee rested her hand on a bassinet. Or was it a cradle? Who knew? What was evident was her pride in being pregnant, rubbing her belly as if polishing the crown of a fatherless prince. And the gauze pad on the right side of her face, for crying out loud. It had a greenish tint to it, almost brown. It needed changing, but the woman was too busy petting herself and selling garbage to take care of it.

“Thank you,” Paulina said, “we're in a hurry.”

The employee smirked, stared at Antonio like she needed to consult with the man of the house. But the man, unconscious of the world around him, rolled a baby bottle in his fingers.

“We should go,” Paulina said, pulling the bottle in his hand. “It’s almost ten.”

Holding fast to the bottle, without a sign of pain in his neck, Antonio turned his head at the green tarp ceiling, baby soothers and toy rails hanging from the metal frame.

“It’s early,” he said and pulled the bottle out of Paulina’s hand.

Paulina stepped back. His nape still black and blue, she wanted to grab his shoulders, lift herself up and put her lips on the bruise, eat his pain. She could handle the pain better than him. The stall employee asked if he wanted to check the cradle. He said, “I’d love to.”

Paulina stepped away.

She found the poster, taped to a lamp post, of a missing girl she’d met years earlier. Such a disgrace, what these poor girls were put through. She glanced around. Somewhere in the bazaar, a man who had lost his face was making a fortune selling baskets. A perfect story, a story of healing.

“Three for twenty, seño,” a girl said. She stood next to a carton drum full of used women’s clothes and scarfs.

“Not now, linda.”

Behind the girl, Paulina could see Antonio rocking the cradle, the trashy, pregnant employee by his side. If she only knew what living with Antonio was like, she’d step back. Did she even know how to keep a man by her side, what it really takes, or had she been knocked-up and dumped by every stall owner in the bazaar?

“Buying’s good for the soul,” the girl by the carton drum insisted.

Paulina smiled. The girl smiled back, a smile too honest for a peddler, too innocent with that chipped tooth of hers. Paulina wanted to say that buying was good for masking depression, but couldn’t do a thing for the soul.

“I’m actually looking for a basket, linda. Know where I can find one?”

“Just around the shoes on that corner,” the girl said, pointing at a man in a wheelchair singing prices for shoes: a pair for one hundred, two for one fifty.

“You know if he’s there now?”

“Mr. Wax?”

Mr. Wax. A man like a candle. Interesting.

“I guess. The basket man. Why do you call him that?”

Paulina took out the notepad from her jacket but had forgotten to bring a pen.

“Everyone calls him that. If you’re going to buy a basket from him, you should buy something from me, too.”

Paulina looked at Antonio looming over the cradle.

“Let’s make a deal,” Paulina said. “See that man over there, the one with the beige jacket and the camera? Go tell him that. Tell him a scarf would be great for his wife’s soul.”

The girl glanced at him.

“He looks angry or sad.”

He did. The anger, she could see it in his fists.

“Just go, linda. He’s fine, really.”

The girl went. Antonio waved her away.

Paulina grabbed a scarf from the drum, shook off the dust and gave the girl twenty pesos. The girl recited an elaborate thanks that Paulina didn’t wait to hear. She walked away, turned the corner and tossed the scarf aside.

* * *

A woman came up and looked at the prices of the baskets, dropped a bill into the money box on the sidewalk, took the change herself, glanced around and crossed the street, new basket in hand.

“See,” the artisan said, “I’m invisible,” his voice strong, coarse and deep, hard to grasp even at a distance of a couple meters. Wearing a black bowler hat and suit, he stood flat against a black wall, his face obscured by the brim of his hat.

“I can see you there,” Paulina said. “Those are your baskets, aren’t they?”

He nodded and crossed his arms. The morning had turned cool and smelled of rain. The baskets were made of woven cane and wicker, finished with a coat of red wood stain. Why had he not installed a tarp to protect them?

“We heard about you in the newsroom, mister...” Paulina thumbed through her notepad. Besides a doodle here and there, the pages were blank. “This is... well, this is embarrassing. I can’t find your name.”

He raised his head and the morning glow lit up his face. Paulina had expected much, much worse.

“I don’t have a name,” he said, words jumbled through his missing lips, sunglasses fastened to his forehead with a thin strip of duct-tape. She had expected a monster, a talking skull, the gaudy mascot of a heavy metal band from the 80’s. Yet his most striking feature was the softness of his skin, like white wax molten and hardened and molten again over the years, a little yellowed now with the patina of time. Mr. Wax. A man like a burning candle.

“Going unnamed would totally defeat the purpose,” Paulina said.

“Call me Cortez, then, if you have to.”

His hands were bandaged, his fingertips bloody.

“Cortez it is. My name’s Paulina Zamora.”

“I know,” he said. “I sent the note to your paper.”

Antonio walked up to them and crouched to photograph Cortez at a high angle. The shutter clicked once and then three more times in quick succession. He had an array of perfectly woven baskets behind him, yet he decided to shoot the deformities of the artisan. Paulina stepped closer to Cortez. Either his voice was dim, or the clicking unbearably loud.

“So you sent the note?” she asked. “Why? Need some free advertisement?”

“No, as you can see I don’t. I’ve read your work and I’d like you to write my story for your newspaper,” Cortez said, pulling out a small axe from his jacket.

“That’s an axe,” she said and hopped aside and bumped into Antonio. He pushed her back toward Cortez.

“It’s a hatchet, an invitation to an art show.” Cortez turned the blade on its side, leaving a smudge of blood on the metal. The blade was engraved. “Tala,” it said. “20:00 hrs.” She wondered who’d name an art show “Cut Down.” The date was that same night. Paulina recognized the address: an empty neighborhood, a living shame.

“I don’t do art shows, Mr. Cortez.”

“It’s Gottfried’s show.”

“I don’t even know who that is. Look, you sent us the note, you promised the story of a faceless man who made a fortune selling baskets. We’re here to do that story.”

“And you will, Paulina, but at the show. There, I hope, you’ll understand me better.”

“Really? Why? What’s at the art show?”

“Every reason to write about a faceless man.”

“We’ll see,” she said, her voice weak and unconvincing, her fingers clutched around the notepad. “You got to give me something. A guarantee.”

“Of what?”

“Of your story being worth our time.”

“Fine. Tell me what you need.”

The clouds cleared and the sunlight fell on Cortez. He lowered his head and his face disappeared under the shadow of the brim of his hat. The hatchet glimmered in his fist. Paulina heard the shutter click. How could Antonio focus on him?

“Tell me what happened to your face?” she asked.

Cortez put the invitation back inside his jacket.

“That’s an indelicate question,” Cortez said, the sun and clouds reflecting on his sunglasses. “I burned it off. How’s that for a guarantee—”

“Hold this,” Antonio interrupted, slipping between Cortez and Paulina. He gave Cortez a basket and stepped back. Antonio bent his knees, pointed the camera and shot.

“Why would you do that?” Paulina asked, looking at Antonio, looking at Cortez.

Then both men spoke at the same time, and at the same time they both fell silent.

The rain stopped on their way to the show. Antonio slowed down on the corner of López Mateos and Del Ejido, and turned off the wipers. Paulina took a deep breath and locked her door. Antonio leaned forward to check the street sign under the beam of the headlights, then stepped lightly on the gas. It was already eight, but she didn’t say a thing. The tires sizzled on the wet pavement. She took out her pen and notepad, put the pen to the paper, then closed the notepad

and pressed it on her chest. Once a symbol of success, the wet and empty houses glazed under the headlights and went black again as they left them behind.

“Strange choice for an art show,” Paulina said.

“Yeah,” Antonio snorted.

Too dark to see it, she imagined the scar on his lip shaking and twisting under the mustache as he blew out his stupid snort. She wondered what his scar would taste like. Metallic, perhaps, like a dagger.

“What now?” she asked.

“Abandoned schools and neighborhoods are Gottfried’s turf,” Antonio said. “Half his work’s done by choosing a space with a terrible past that he then uses to shock a people who’ve already been shocked enough to last two lifetimes. Of course, you’d know all this if you’d done your job. You should’ve looked him up before you got us into this shit, Paulina. That’s ‘what now.’ You should’ve looked.”

He snorted again and looked away. Paulina opened her notepad, then closed it. She stared into the dark street ahead, the beams of the headlights on the empty houses that not so long ago had been lined with the headless corpses of young men tied up from the wrists to the fences.

She remembered Cortez against the black wall in the bazaar, the basket in his hands, the loud click of the shutter. She had asked him where he got the baskets.

“I weave them,” he answered, “I weave every one of them at night, when it’s cool and quiet.”

A woman came and took the basket off Cortez’s hands. Antonio took it from hers.

“This one’s taken,” Antonio said.

“Why baskets?” Paulina asked.

“It’s soothing,” Cortez said, “doing something that you know has a real purpose.”

Purpose. Paulina had looked at his hands, bloody from weaving the cane. How could such penance be a real purpose? And was it soothing, or had he been trying to avoid her?

In the car, she said, “It wasn’t my fault, Antonio, you know it. That isn’t...”

But she didn’t know how to continue. *Fair*, maybe, was what she wanted to say next, if only to plant something in the space between them, a word so intimate and meaningful that could heal the silence or at least shorten the distance. But she wasn’t sure he’d understand. *Kind*, perhaps, was a better word. Yet they were nothing and driving in a pure darkness, driving by hollow houses with doors unhinged, trees felled and gone. Everything gone. Everyone. A neighborhood so empty, so real, so close to home. A barren restlessness. *True*, that’s what she should have said.

“Is everything empty?” she asked instead.

She saw a light up ahead, a white beam slicing the night in two.

“It is,” Antonio said and turned on the wipers.

The blades gnashed on the dry glass. And it was peaceful.

On the corner of Río Júcar and Del Ejido, Gottfried delivered his inaugural speech from a podium set on a riser. The podium had a hatchet and carved in the front it said, in Spanish, “Cut Down.” Local and El Paso TV crews covered the inauguration from the center of the street, the spotlights on Gottfried the only light. A faint glow illuminated the public, facing away from Gottfried, staring into the dark street beyond a red ribbon tied from one sidewalk to the other. Paulina recognized his shape among the crowd, and slid in next to Cortez.

“Where’s your photographer?” he asked.

“He’s around,” Paulina said and thought that he better be, or else they were in for another long night of shouting and recriminations.

Behind her, a little to the left, Gottfried shouted, “Death needs a face! Otherwise it isn’t death.”

“You look upset,” Cortez said.

“I’m all right.”

“You’re trembling. Is this about your photographer?”

“I’m fine, Mr. Cortez. Antonio’s not *my* photographer, and there’s nothing about him. It’s just that I’m not so good at these things.”

“What things? Art shows?”

“Yes, creepy art shows and creepy crowds.”

“If you’re going to do my story, maybe we should establish some sort of trust or bond. Rapport, I think, is the name the therapists use. I don’t believe that calling me creepy is going to help much.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think you’re creepy. There’s something odd, though, about all this.”

“Maybe you are just projecting your quarrel with your photographer.”

“He’s not *my* photographer, Mr. Cortez; he’s my husband.”

“I figured that out for myself. What I don’t know is what’s between you two.”

“Blindness. That’s it. Nothing but pure and stupid blindness.”

Cortez turned to Paulina. Even with the sunglasses on, she could see his weary look.

“Don’t treat me like I don’t matter, Paulina, like I’m not here. Let me know a little about you. After all, I’m here to let you know all about me.”

“Sight,” Gottfried shouted again, “is vital!”

He was right.

“We had an accident a few weeks ago,” Paulina said. “I was driving. I didn’t see the police truck run the red light. Antonio says he warned me, ‘Brake, brake,’ but he didn’t, honestly. He was knocked unconscious and the next day I started bleeding. I bled, you know, and there was nothing anyone could’ve done about it. It was an accident. Antonio wants to press charges. I don’t. I just want to leave it behind. Why is that so wrong?”

She wanted to turn around, walk away into the night and disappear, leave Antonio, Cortez, everything behind. But she decided to stay because that was the right thing to do, to stay, to wait, to weather it all.

“I don’t know what Antonio wants from me anymore.”

“By witnessing their bodies, that’s how we acknowledge the death of our loved ones and move on,” Gottfried had lowered his voice as he spoke into the microphones.

“What the hell’s that man talking about?” Paulina whispered.

Cortez shrugged.

“So you were pregnant?” he asked.

Paulina looked around for Antonio. She couldn’t find him.

“That’s enough rapport, Mr. Cortez. What are we doing here? Where’s my story?”

“In the spirit of good will, Paulina, so we can move on to our story, I will not tell you that I sympathize with your husband’s conflict and that you are so, so wrong. I will only say that I used to live around that corner.”

Cortez pointed his bloody finger into the dark street.

“And I will not tell you, in the spirit of good will, how little I care about what you think of my husband or me, and I won’t tell you to mind your own goddamn business. I will only say,

so we can move on to more pressing matters, that I'm intrigued and a little, let's say bewildered, because if you lived around that corner, it means you had money. So, in the spirit of good will, Mr. Cortez, please tell me you made your money selling baskets."

"But would you recognize the cold eyes staring back at you?" Gottfried whispered.

"I did not. Money's not the issue," Cortez said.

"It *is* the issue. You promised the story of a faceless man who made a fortune selling baskets, and that story's fake. You lied."

"I had money before and I have money still, Paulina. I've made more money selling baskets than I ever made before. Again, money's not the issue. And I'm not a liar."

"All right, then, tell me, were you a doctor, a banker?"

"What I was didn't matter back then and it doesn't matter now. What mattered was a good neighborhood, a healthy environment, the best for my family and all those broken promises."

"I thank Governor Duarte for funding this homage," Gottfried said, his voice cool and clear.

"What matters is that the first families moved out of the neighborhood after they found the Blanco boy," Cortez said, "hanged on that corner."

Paulina knew the story. Cortez meant the first of the two Blanco brothers, the second body found in a string of seven murders: heads missing, bodies cuffed to the fences, victims in their early twenties.

"Revel tonight in beauty and let us cleanse our souls," said Gottfried.

"We should've left right then," Cortez continued. "My wife said it was a passing thing, that I was out of my mind for thinking about leaving. 'Where would we go?' she asked. I

should've punched her. I should've punched her and tied her up and thrown her in the trunk and driven away from this hell. Goddamn it, that would've saved my boy."

"So you read the piece I wrote about Mrs. Arzaga? Is that why you want me here?"

"Your story was a ridiculous piece of political propaganda, Paulina. But you did something good: you made her look human."

"Wow, political propaganda. Amazing, coming from a basket peddler and fucking wife abuser. Do you really think that beating your wife... Do you really believe that more violence would've saved your son?"

"Of course I do. We shouldn't renounce violence."

"Don't you think justice is better than violence?"

"Justice? You don't believe in justice, Paulina. You believe in accidents. However, justice would have saved me, not him."

"Saved you from what?"

"From becoming invisible."

"You're not invisible."

"I am. And you are, too."

"I'm not."

"Where's your husband, then?"

"That's none of your fucking business."

"You're right, but you talk about justice when that's precisely what you're denying him. That's a vile thing to do to a father."

"Let us find ourselves," Gottfried exclaimed.

"It was a fucking accident. All I want now's to leave it behind."

“He’ll never do it. I can tell you that much. The rage, Paulina, it never goes away.”

Cortez’s voice, loud and garbled, sounded like the earth caving in under her feet, that moment in an interview when she knew she was onto a good story.

“And may your hard-earned peace live forever,” Gottfried shouted.

“What are you planning to do, Mr. Cortez?”

“Peddle baskets, Paulina. Peddle till I drop dead.”

The spotlights on Gottfried went off and left the public in total darkness.

Ecstatic, Gottfried yelled, “I give you back your sons!”

The lights came on once the fog machines stopped hissing. Gottfried had spray-painted every house white, roofs and walls, doors and windows, fences, bushes, and illuminated them with white light. He had machines spread artificial fog on the gardens, street and sidewalks. Yet, when he cut the ribbon, the public did not applaud. With their feet splashing in the rain puddles underneath the fog, the people moved forward in silence and the crowd swallowed Gottfried.

Paulina heard Antonio’s camera clicking fast behind her.

Among the crowd, she recognized Mrs. Arzaga, the mother of one of the boys found handcuffed to a fence on that same street. Paulina had written her story the previous year: Mrs. Arzaga had started an organization that every winter bought woolen knitted caps for the underprivileged children in Ciudad Juárez. Under the glare of the lights pointed at the houses, Paulina saw that she held the invitation in her hand. Cortez, too, had brought his along.

Up ahead, on the sidewalk, a white light came on. Chained to a fence was the first sculpture, a black tree with its branches sawed off and still dripping from the rain.

“This is grotesque, Mr. Cortez. What are we doing here?”

“Writing a story, Paulina. This is where it takes a turn.”

Along the street, one after the other, more white lights blinked on. The sculptures grew in height and complexity as they walked along: one branch, two branches, thicker trunks.

“How about telling me what happened to your face for a turn.”

“I thought you would’ve figured it out by now.”

“How could I? You’re wasting my time here.”

“You should’ve figured it out because you know the rage, Paulina, how it burns. You’ve seen it in your husband. You lit it up for him.”

“You have no idea what I’ve done for him.”

“That may be so, but you don’t know what you’re doing to him now.”

A young man in a green scarf stopped in front of them to catch his breath. Cortez and Paulina went around him.

About a week after his son was killed, Cortez continued, the police closed his case. One week. They said his son had been involved in drugs, that they didn’t have the manpower to investigate the murder of a criminal. Cortez tried telling them the truth, the simple truth, but they didn’t listen. Then he begged them and begged them and begged, and no one heard him. They didn’t even gasp when he dunked his head into a bucket of gasoline and lit a match outside the city hall.

“You see, Paulina, they denied me the very justice you so fondly talk of. You cannot imagine what that’s like. You think you can, but you’re fooling yourself.”

Near the end of the street, where the headless bodies had been found tied up from their wrists to the fences, a series of golden bubbles appeared floating in mid air.

Crouching before the crowd, Antonio took photos of a house.

“They found my son there,” Cortez pointed a finger at the first golden bubble, “felled like that tree. My son was cut down and whatever they left of him, they left it hanging right there.”

A row of black trees was lit up below the golden bubbles. It seemed like, with a little effort from Gottfried, the twisted trunks could become human legs close together, slightly bent and turned on their sides. The torsos stuck out straight and two branches stemmed out like arms chained to the fence from the wrists. Between the arms of the trees, each hollow held a golden bubble like they were human heads. The overflowing fishbowls were lit from underneath with golden light. In the water, two black fish with long colored tails circled each other.

Mrs. Arzaga walked toward the second sculpture. She couldn’t see the curb for the fog and she stumbled and fell to her knees. From the ground, she reached out and shook the tree from its legs. The fishbowl wobbled in the hollow. She shook it again and the fishbowl dropped in a shower of golden light.

Paulina closed her eyes and heard the fishbowl smash against the ground.

She remembered his voice then, *Stupid bitch*, she heard his voice inside her head, felt his fingers pulling her hair, pulling her out of the wrecked car. Her buckled seatbelt burned against her neck as he forced her out. Paulina released the seatbelt and was flung out, broken glass trickled down her legs, hot blood on her lips and neck. Emergency lights, blue and red. *Move it*, he said. They circled the car and she saw the other policeman swinging his truncheon against Antonio’s head on the ground, unconscious. *It was an accident*, yelled the officer who’d pulled her out. *You see that*, he continued, *that’s an accident, too, you fucking cunt. Anybody asks, you better remember that.* Yes, Paulina remembered. She remembered just fine.

She opened her eyes. Cortez stood by the tree next to Mrs. Arzaga’s. He held it by the shoulder with his free hand and brandished the hatchet with the other.

“I’m here,” he whispered to the fishbowl set between the shoulders of the tree.

His sunglasses gone, his eyelids burned off, his hat missing, too, clumps of thick black hair scattered on his waxy head, he couldn’t have been more different from the protagonist of the healing story Paulina had first imagined. A man like a candle, yes, but a candle burnt-out.

Cortez took the fishbowl, carefully lowered it through the fog and set it on the ground. He then straightened up and raised his hatchet.

Paulina turned away.

She heard the thud of the hatchet against the wood. The chain holding the sculpture rattled against the metal fence.

“I’m here!” Cortez yelled and then she heard it again. The thud. The thud. The thud.

“I was never pregnant,” she said, her back to Cortez. She was staring at a house and could feel the cold air from Cortez’s arm as he swung the hatchet against the tree. “I hope he’s able to see that I only wanted him as much as he wanted a child. I hope he’s kind enough to allow me to recover what I’ve lost. But I know he won’t. I’m afraid he’s too much like you.”

Then she walked away, walked along the white fog. She could hear the thuds, Cortez shouting, “I’m here, goddamn it! Look at me, I’m here!”

She heard him all the way to the car.

“I’m here!”

The photo came in a basket wrapped in yellow cellophane with two balloons tied to the handles, one pink, the other one blue. No card. Not necessary.

Paulina’s editor had rejected her story. It was too dark for him, too unreal. He got someone else to rewrite it and the piece came out as a charming story, one of survival and

healing through the power of beauty and artisanship, an example of a city coming back to life unscarred, unscathed, at peace. A lie. A beautiful lie. “No one ever recovers,” Paulina wrote originally. “We pick up the pieces of our broken lives—guard them safely inside our pockets—and keep on walking. But it takes a shattered mind and an irreparable heart to pretend not to hear the pieces clink together with every limping step.”

That was the truth. She’d seen it in Antonio and Cortez, both broken and limp, both pruned and felled like Gottfried’s trees. They needed to recover the pieces lost, and regardless of the consequences, they’d never look the other way, they’d never forgive the hand that cut them down. “While the rest of us merely decided to ignore the fact that we, too, are beyond repair,” Paulina had written, “men like Cortez decided that there’s no shame in having cracked, but in letting go.” That was the truth. No one ever heals. Too much for him, perhaps too much for anyone, the editor had decided to bury her truth under a comforting silence.

They printed the story next to Antonio’s photograph of Cortez holding a basket by the black wall in the bazaar, his hands bandaged, his fingertips bloody. Out of the boys left handcuffed to the fences in the Nogales neighborhood, Paulina remembered, only the head of a young man named Villezcas was ever found. Someone left it under the city Christmas tree two years ago, inside a basket with a red bow on top.

She tied the balloons to the back of the chair and pulled aside the yellow cellophane. The photo lay on top of a used baby blanket. Her back to the camera, she stood alone in the fog, looking over her shoulder at a house all white and empty against the night sky. Had he turned around, Antonio would have captured Cortez placing the fishbowl inside a basket on the passenger side of his car. He would have captured Cortez dragging the tree to his car, attempting to put it in the back seat, and the tree not fitting in. Had he turned around, Antonio would also

have captured Cortez driving the car into the show, trying to run down Gottfried, but crashing into a house.

“A tragedy,” the story in the newspaper said, “an awful tragedy.”

She took the empty basket out of her parent’s house. The cradle Antonio had sent the week before was still outside, filled with boxes now and other things like an umbrella, a baby-blue photo frame and another one pink, its glass shattered, the pieces tinkling, tinkling all the time as the wind swayed the cradle back and forth.

Part III

It's ten at night when you ride your bicycle again. University Avenue's bordered by ocotillos and puddles of weak copper lights every fifteen or twenty meters.

The wind is cold. You stop on the corner of Oregon Street to zip up your jacket. You hear the sounds pouring out from the bars on Cincinnati Street. As always, the drums and trumpets come from your left; to your right, Oregon Street slides down. Ciudad Juárez lies at the bottom, an ocean made of night and static lava.

They will come from your left.

"You're a fucking slut, Lina, that's what you are."

The man will try to grab Lina by the hair—reddish hair curled like flames flowing down a torch—but Lina will punch him first. She will punch him and he'll fall against an ocotillo. Then he'll scream, roll to the street, pass out. Lina will keep walking. She'll zigzag down Oregon Street, sinking in the ocean of Ciudad Juárez's night and fire, her hair a fire in that well of candles and mute prayers.

To drums and trumpets, Lina will blaze away and you will follow.

Not the Cold Winds, Not the Snow

Flags

They gathered one afternoon in Chamizal Park under the monumental flag, the common name of a Mexican flag twenty five meters in length but usually torn, or like it was that day, missing from the one hundred-meter-tall flagpole. It was late November. The people carried picket signs with enlarged photos of missing and slain girls and women from Ciudad Juárez. Over sweaters and sweatshirts, they all wore white or pink t-shirts.

Lorenzo Cajina had decided to do things differently. He fastened a faded-green canvas bag across his chest and wore a pink thermal tee under his white, long-sleeved shirt, the fabric worn to translucency now and shrunk over the years but still decent, or almost, yes, he'd say the shirt was almost all there and fitting enough to give an appearance of formality and respectability, so the people would listen to him, so he could lead the march in peace on the other side of the border.

That morning he'd woken up with a slant of sunlight warming the left side of his face, the morning glare slithering through his lashes and into his eye and pulling him, peacefully, out of slumber. Lorenzo had just moved into his father's house and the first thing he did was to take down the curtains. The need for oblivion and darkness had gone with his father, gone underground to become a seed and the seed to blossom into that strange, black flower sought with a passion by those in need of comfort. No, Lorenzo would face the world with no shades or

curtains, however cruel and gray the sight could be. He knew that the horrors of the world still awaited him: his daughter's bones in the desert, perhaps her infinite silence. But he also knew that he wouldn't have to face it alone, not anymore.

He found the note on the pillow: "Off to work, corazón. Will meet you at the park before three. Besos." Such a lovely note after five weeks? Their relationship had settled in no time at all. But why not? Why not accept the good things of the world without question, with nothing but the understanding that we too deserve good things to happen to us? She signed the note "P." She wrote a post-script: "I'm afraid we have condemned the bed sheets to the fire." He pulled the blanket aside. On the brown sheets, a stain looked like a white flower in bloom, its petals moist to the touch.

Downstairs he put the coffee to brew, turned on the shower and waited for the vapor to warm up the bathroom. His picket sign was propped against the wall by the entrance door. Paulina had made it for him. The dowel was a little crooked, yes, but it'd drive the message home. A simple sign, it didn't even have his daughter's picture on the pasteboard. Instead it read, in thick purple letters, "Justice."

The white pasteboard fluttered with the burst of cold wind that came into the house from under the door. The sign slid against the wall and fell to the floor without a sound. It made him think of a white carnation falling in the night, its speed slowing, slowing down and its petals floating away from the flower and dispersing, each at a different speed, each of a different size, like snowflakes.

* * *

At least it won't snow today, Emilia Ortuño thought under the monumental flag. She had a pink ribbon tied across her forehead, a bouquet of white roses in her hand. She was smoking. She tossed the spent cigarette on the grass.

"You clean it up, cabrones," she said loud enough to be heard by the soldier standing by the flagpole. Why not? That traitor lived off her taxes. And that traitor—his walkie-talkie in one hand, his cell phone in the other—that traitor was going to get an earful. "You should call your mother, cabrón," she yelled, "brothels open early on weekends."

She wasn't angry, but when she spat on the ground, she felt better.

Her youngest daughter, Wendy Ortuño, held a picket sign made with a 2 x 4 wooden stud she had taken from a construction site two days before. She had just clocked out of the cafeteria in the university and the smell of lard and sweaty students in white and blue lab coats, the clanking plastic trays, the tinkling register, the sizzling fries, trailed off her body in imaginary lines of sticky and pestilent smoke as she walked to the bus stop at sundown.

Wendy heard footsteps coming faster, getting closer, behind her. On that street, they were erecting the foundations of a new building and the construction materials lay at arm's length. The blocks were way too heavy. The gravel useless. But a wooden stud would work. She grabbed the stud by one end and spun around on the ball of her foot. As she swung in a wide circle the stud hit the spine of a book, barely missing the breasts of the student who'd made the mistake of walking too close to Wendy. The student then ran like a crazy woman and left the book where it had dropped.

Whatever, Wendy thought. One could never be too careful in this city. Wendy took the book with her and when the bus driver asked what she wanted the stud for, she showed him the book, *Juvenile Osteology*, and said she was carving out a wooden bone for school.

But Wendy knew nothing about carving wood or bones or school. As a matter of fact, she'd purposefully forgotten the book on the bus, left it on an empty seat without even giving it a last glance because she couldn't stand the sight of the skull on the cover, the missing skin, the black wells instead of eyes. She had kept the stud, though, and walked home on the dark and lonely streets behind the cathedral, wielding the stud like a mallet. The morning of the protest march, she had grabbed a poster-size picture of her slain older sister, Ana García, and pasted it on a whiteboard and fixed it with tacks to the wooden stud.

Under the monumental flag, with the bottom part of the stud, Wendy put out her mother's spent cigarette, and with her shoe—a new red Chuck Taylor—kicked the crushed stub toward the soldier in a cloud of dust and grass and tiny rocks thumping against his khaki fatigues.

“You give them hell, baby,” Emilia said waving her bouquet of white roses at Wendy, “give them hell, but don't waste your shoes kicking dust at them, baby. One day, Wendy, remember this, one day you'll need your shoes to outrun these fucking assholes. So take good care of those shoes, baby.”

Lorenzo thought Emilia should tone it down. Violence would accomplish nothing. Behind Wendy, nodding in agreement to her mother's words, the soldier talked on the phone, his mouth covered with the walkie-talkie, no doubt, calling for backup. But Lorenzo expected the reinforcements to show up right there, at Chamizal Park and in a matter of minutes. That was his mistake.

The wind blew stronger and colder, not unbearable, but so much for the nice weather forecast, Lorenzo thought. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed Paulina's number. She didn't answer. They'd have to leave without her, but maybe she'd join them afterwards, for that drink at

the Kentucky Club. Mrs. Ortuño had been insisting on a drink at that bar since last week, so he'd make sure to call Paulina again. He told Emilia they should divide the crowd and get going. It was almost three in the afternoon and getting cold and they still had to cross the border. They shouldn't march at night. What was the purpose then?

Emilia pinched his cheek, "Hijito de mi alma," then took her thumb and middle fingers to her mouth and blew out a piercing whistle. Lorenzo's ears buzzed. Wendy didn't flinch but Diana León, her cousin, shook her head either annoyed or surprised. Diana's husband, Omar, tilted his head up and covered his ears with his hands, his elbows sticking out the sides. Thin and tall, he looked like a kite attached to a long, long string.

When the buzzing in his ears receded, the crowd was already parting into two groups: those with a valid visa—fifty or sixty people—moved to the right; the rest—the largest group—would march with Emilia on the Mexican side of the border.

He thought they formed an odd couple, Omar and Diana León, with their matching white cotton sweaters and twin binoculars hanging from their necks. They carried no picket signs, yet seemed to convey either an absurd or a very complex message. Omar almost doubled her in size, but so thin and tall he appeared to wobble in the wind. And Diana, an elemental strength ran through her body, like the minerals in a small but indestructible boulder that could roll over Omar and flatten him against the dirt, return him to the earth in a puff of dust.

When Omar said, "I'll see you later," Diana replied, "I'll be watching you," and raised her binoculars as far up as she could.

Omar forced out a laugh, glanced around and said, "You watch yourself and little aunty here." Then he put up his hand to touch Emilia's face.

“If you’re planning on using those bony fingers later on,” Emilia said, “you’ll keep them away from me.”

Omar laughed, again, and put his hand down.

Omar took off his binoculars and wiped the lenses with the ribbed bottom of his white sweater. He heard Lorenzo tell Emilia they’d wait for her signal, as agreed, then followed him to the front of the group with valid visas.

He barely knew Lorenzo, just knew him enough to feel sick with his airs of superiority, like he was a saint or something, like he didn’t walk but hovered just above the ground. Lorenzo faced the people and cleared his throat. What could he say that they all hadn’t heard before? Fucking Moses here. Lorenzo said they’d cross the border, then the park and head back south on San Marcial Street to—

The woman in braids at the front of the group was kind of hot, at least better looking than the one with the straw hat and the flat chest standing next to her. Omar wondered whether Lorenzo’s daughter had worn braids or a straw hat the day she went missing.

Lorenzo then asked the group to be courteous at the immigration checkpoint, to get acquainted with their marching partners so no one would be left behind.

Omar certainly wouldn’t leave *her* behind. He was staring at the girl in the white jacket walking from the edge of the park toward the group. Behind her, a truck sped away. But Omar didn’t see it, nor the two young men that came along with her. He only focused on the girl, on the girl alone.

* * *

Lorenzo thought it was great to see the youth take action in their community, the mismatching colors of their clothes notwithstanding. He greeted the girl in the white jacket and her two friends—one in a green-hooded sweatshirt, the other in red—and asked if they had valid visas.

“She does,” said the young man in green, pointing at the girl in the white jacket.

“You come with us, then,” Lorenzo said, “and you two with Mrs. Ortuño.”

The two young men ran to catch up with Emilia’s group, already crossing Avenida de las Américas to Los Indomables monument. Emilia stood in the avenue’s center lane, holding Wendy’s sign in her right hand like a staff, the bouquet in her left hand stretched forward to stop the incoming traffic.

Paulina Zamora called out Lorenzo’s name. Her voice was choppy, breathless.

Lorenzo stopped and turned to her voice. The group, marching towards the border, went around him like a stream around a rock, their signs flapping softly in the wind. With her hair in a ponytail, Paulina’s nose seemed just a bit longer and straighter, the tip an almost perfect square. Except for the eyes, she didn’t wear make-up, which made her look very pretty and young, even innocent with the sleeves of her pink sweater sliding just below her knuckles.

She flung her arms around Lorenzo’s neck and kissed him on the lips and cheek. Had he shaved that morning? Yes, he smelled of musk aftershave and his skin felt soft against her face. And his awful haircut, for crying out loud, it was finally growing into a tolerable shape. He looked handsome that afternoon, almost distinguished. Except for his dreadful shirt. It begged for a trip to the trash can, a merciful ending it’d find, she promised herself, as soon as she could get

her hands on those whitish noodles no one would have the gall to refer to as sleeves. But hey, not bad for a guy eight years her senior. And he carried the sign she'd made for him last night.

She had thought about the sign for quite a while. What could a man like Lorenzo—his daughter missing for six years now, his every effort to find her shunned and ridiculed by the government and perceived with a certain disdain, even disgust, by a community that wanted the whole affair forgotten, forgiven, resolved, it didn't matter how it ended as long as it ended and stayed forever out of their sight—what could a man like him expect from a march at this point in his life? If she had learned anything from Cortez—deranged by the idea that the only justice in the world was the one we make with our own hands—she'd learned that a man like Lorenzo could want nothing but the opposite. So she'd made a sign, a simple sign that went right to the point: "Justice."

"I tried calling you," Lorenzo said.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I had to finish my story for tomorrow and couldn't find a cab and I forgot my phone at home and, well, I had to run, but here I am."

The park was empty now, except for the soldier at the bottom of the flagpole.

"Guys in uniform give me the creeps," she said, then asked if the soldier had given them any shit.

"Not at all," Lorenzo said, touching her on the shoulder, pushing her gently until they started walking behind the march.

"Did you know he lives down there?" she asked.

"Who lives where?"

"The soldier. He lives in the pit at the bottom of the flagpole."

"No he doesn't. What pit?"

“There’s a pit under the grill around the base of the flagpole. That’s where they keep the spotlights and the motors to hoist the flag.”

“So what do you mean he lives down there?”

“The pit extends to the sides underneath. I once asked him to let me peek inside.”

“And he let you in? How come?”

“I don’t know, he just did. I mean, it’s not like they keep their secret files down there.”

And why would the military keep their secret files in a secret vault, she thought, when all they needed was a big broom and a nice thick rug?

Anyway, she was still working for the culture department a few years ago when one night, as she supervised the installation of a stage for a concert in the park, she saw the soldier crawl out of the pit.

“I was curious, I guess. What was he doing down there? I walked up to him, fumbling with my phone like I was sending a message or something. I heard some TV show coming from the pit. It was so weird, but I smiled at the soldier and said good night, made some small talk, made him laugh, then asked if I could look inside and he said I could. I swear, there’s a small bed and a small TV and a small fridge down there.”

“So romantic.”

“I know! I wanted to write about it, a great story, you know, so I could leave that ridiculous job and come to work for the newspaper. But no one would believe it. I mean, a soldier living under his flag with an assault rifle to defend it, with thread and needle to repair it?”

“That sounds bitter.”

“It does. But would you believe it?”

“No. I don’t know what I believe in anymore, to be honest.”

Lorenzo believed in something, though, but in his head that something lacked a clear shape and a precise name. His therapist had said that he needed to find that name, that precise word. Lorenzo bought a notebook and wrote, on the top of the first page, “I Believe In...”. Below, he wrote “Family,” a word so beautiful and broken it couldn’t be the one he needed. Then he wrote “Justice,” and scratched it out.

He’d never tell her, but that was where he and Paulina disagreed. She had knocked on his door last night, the sign in her hands, a face shining with pride. He said the first thing that popped into his head when he read the sign. He couldn’t say that justice is reserved for those who can afford it, and since he couldn’t pay for it, he had no need for it. What he needed was certainty, even if it came in the form of some brittle bones, of his daughter’s school uniform ravaged by the desert sands and the fangs of wild dogs.

But he’d accepted the sign and said, “That’s very thoughtful, Pau, thank you very much.”

There was a full moon that night. They went upstairs, to the room that had belonged to his father. Lorenzo had taken down the curtains, the rods—anything that might block his view from the outside—and they made love by moonlight.

Borders

From the top of the Bridge of the Americas, Lorenzo could see the U.S. customs building. The wind blew colder at the top of the bridge. On the car line going to El Paso, somebody honked the horn twice, then once for a longer time. Lorenzo had heard the tune before, in other marches and protests, so he expected the usual, “Get a fucking job!” Instead he saw a woman’s fist raised out

the window of her car, her thumb nail polished red. Lorenzo raised his fist too, his picket sign, and the woman honked again. He took her loud support as a good omen.

Tapping on his bag, Lorenzo told Paulina that they should move ahead of the group because he had the permits for the march. They slid between the people, their signs flapping in the wind. Omar talked and laughed with the girl in the white jacket, showing her his binoculars, saying he bought them to look at the pretty ladies, then looking at her through them.

Lorenzo and Paulina passed the group down the slope and went inside the customs building.

Two checkpoint booths open, both officers stood up and rushed toward the group.

“Stop! Stop right there, I said. Stop!” yelled the short officer.

They had their fingers on their holstered pistols.

Lorenzo stepped in front of Paulina, put up his hands.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the short officer asked. His name tag read *Rodriguez*.

Lorenzo said they were marching to Santa Fe Bridge.

“You can’t do what you want in this country,” Rodriguez yelled again and in a matter of seconds the building was full of men in blue and green uniforms. “Go back to your country now and do what you want there. Turn around now. I said now!”

“We have city permits for the march in my bag, sir. I’m going to reach inside and take them out.”

Lorenzo found the permits and when he looked up there was another officer standing beside Rodriguez. He was taller, a sense of authority about him. It was his mirrored sunglasses, perhaps, what gave that impression. Maybe the fact that he was older, or that he didn’t wear a name tag.

The tall man grabbed the permits and glanced at them and said, “Everyone back to work.”

All the uniforms dispersed, even Rodriguez.

“Let me see your passport,” the tall man said.

Lorenzo took out his passport card and handed it to him.

“You’re an American.”

“I was only born here, sir.”

“What are you marching for?”

“Our missing and slain daughters.”

“Why’s that our problem?”

He returned the passport and permits and flicked his hand and said, “Move along.”

Paulina crossed first, right after the officer had finished looking at her passport from every possible angle, asking her what she did for a living, where she’d been born, what she’d brought along, let’s say plants or animals or meats or fruits or vegetables, drugs of any kind, alcohol, tobacco, money in excess of ten thousand dollars. And what was the purpose of her visit to the U.S.? Now put your four right fingers on the fingerprint scanner, ma’am, but stay behind the red line on the floor. Now the thumb. Now the other hand, same drill, four fingers, then the thumb but don’t cross the red line, ma’am. All right now, move along.

Seven marchers had gathered in the customs parking lot when an officer showed up and said they had to move it elsewhere or he’d have them arrested. They moved to the corner.

Paulina told Lorenzo that her journalist friend would be waiting in the park.

“You go right ahead,” Omar said. “We can wait here and send the group your way as they cross, okay?”

He was talking to the girl in the white jacket. Lorenzo said that wasn’t such a great idea. Omar asked why not and Lorenzo said he didn’t know why. It just wasn’t.

“Then we stay here,” Omar said.

Lorenzo explained that they might help more in the park. Omar asked why again and Lorenzo kept answering he didn’t know. So Omar and the girl in the white jacket stayed in the corner laughing, their elbows and knees brushing against each other’s.

“What was that about?” Paulina asked as they crossed the street to the park.

“He shouldn’t be messing around with that girl when his wife’s marching in Juárez with Mrs. Ortuño,” Lorenzo said.

“Oh, you fucking men.”

“We’re not all like that.”

“I know, some of you are actually worse.”

Lorenzo didn’t say a thing. In those cases, there’s nothing a man can really say without stepping foolishly close to that thin line between a woman and a woman enraged.

“That’s my friend Javier,” Paulina said. “He works for the El Paso edition of my newspaper. He says he’s the only Protestant Cuban in the world. You’re going to love him.”

Lorenzo thought that he *better* like him. Javier was massive. He wore a bright pink sweatshirt and when he hugged Paulina she looked like chicken leg on a Mexican tablecloth.

When Lorenzo shook Javier’s hand, it was like shaking a brick.

“Hermano,” Javier said, “it’s a pleasure.”

Javier said he wanted to march with them and ask a few questions along the way for a note for the Sunday edition of his newspaper, if that was okay, of course. Lorenzo said he was welcome to join them and ask whatever questions he might have. Javier asked if he'd chosen Chamizal Park as starting point for the march because it was a symbol of cooperation between both countries. Lorenzo said he didn't understand the question. Javier said he'd read in a book on femicide written by Mariel Holguín, *Broken Dolls, Broken Language*, that during a flood in the nineteenth century the Río Bravo had moved south from its original and current location. Since up until then the river had marked the border between both countries, the land in between the old riverbed and the new one became, under a certain logic, U.S. territory. It was no man's land, really, until the sixties, when Kennedy signed the treaty that returned the territory, now Chamizal Park, to the Mexicans. All done peacefully. Not a shot fired.

Lorenzo said the group had chosen the spot because that was where the march began.

Behind Javier's shoulder, a group of five or six men, coming from the deep side of the park, walked toward the marchers. They carried dowels like baseball bats. The one in the front, a white man in his thirties, his head shaved, had a cigarette dangling from his lips. The black man behind him had long dreadlocks and tattoos all over his body.

Lorenzo held his sign with both hands and took a deep breath.

"Are you here for the march?" asked the man with the shaved head, then tossed his cigarette on a patch of grass and stepped on it.

Lorenzo said they were.

"We read about it online, wondered if we could join you."

The man hit the grass twice with his dowel, then leaned on it.

“We didn’t know what to write on the signs,” he said. “There’s a bunch of us behind the memorial right there,” he pointed his thumb back the way they’d come. “We’ve got staplers, pasteboards, markers, but we didn’t know what to write. We don’t know what the message is. I’m Jon, by the way,” he said extending his hand.

Lorenzo shook his hand and asked if they’d bought all the materials themselves.

“We hijacked an Office Depot truck,” Jon said and laughed. “These are Riley, Sam, Justin, Aaron, Tafari.”

They all nodded, said, “How’re you doing.”

They did look like they had just robbed a truck, or were about to.

Javier snapped a picture with his phone and asked Jon, in his best English, if they spoke Spanish.

“If you live in El Paso with a Panamanian wife like I do,” Jon said in a Spanish with a sort of Caribbean accent, very similar to Javier’s, “I guess you better speak it.”

Jon was right, Javier thought. Who needed English in El Paso? He asked about his group’s background.

“I know some are teachers and students,” Jon said, “a couple of designers and artists from all over the place.”

“There’re some lawyers, too,” Sam said, also in Spanish, “but I swear they’re nice people.” Sam, it turned out, was engaged to a Guatemalan woman.

“We should join them,” Jon said, “maybe you guys can give us a hand with the signs.”

In the parking lot behind the memorial, the Americans were drinking coffees and Cokes, talking, bursting out in loud laughs here and there. Justin had them gather up and explained what the gist of the message was. A blond girl knelt down on the pavement and wrote “For our

daughters' memory" on a pasteboard. She had the word *LOVE* tattooed on her knuckles and a cobweb on her neck. She stapled the pasteboard to a dowel, then stood up and lifted the sign and smiled.

It didn't matter what she'd written, Javier thought. She was the message.

At five past four, on the corner of San Marcial and Delta streets, Lorenzo borrowed Omar's binoculars, and through the diamonds of the several rows of chain link fences that defined the border, looked at Emilia's group, already assembled on Avenida Rafael Pérez Serna in Ciudad Juárez. A car went by on the avenue and honked and a man shouted something Lorenzo couldn't make out, but didn't really have to. Emilia rushed after the car, white roses under her armpit, and shot him the finger.

A little to the left, perched on a concrete bench and looking like a stone owl, Diana held her binoculars pointed at him. Lorenzo raised his fist, the signal that they were ready to begin. Diana didn't move a finger. She wasn't looking at him. Next to Lorenzo, Omar talked to the girl in the white jacket, telling her the story of a scar he'd gotten *in* jail, because he'd been *in* jail once or twice when he was young and stupid enough to get caught, and though the scar was hardly visible now, it'd bled like crazy back then. Jesus. Lorenzo inched to his left to stand in front of Omar and raised his fist once more. This time, Diana replied with the same gesture.

"Your wife's looking at you," Lorenzo said.

"No, she isn't," Omar replied.

Diana said something in Emilia's ear, and with Emilia's fierce whistle, the march began.

"Why don't you come with me to the front?" Lorenzo asked Omar.

“We’re staying right here,” the girl in the white jacket said, pulling Omar closer to her from his belt loop. Her face, hard and dark and daring, stood out from her jacket’s neck in the same way that a charcoal nose stands out from a snowman’s face.

In the front of the march, as they crossed Bowie High School, Paulina asked Jon what he did for a living. Jon said he was doing his MFA in Creative Writing, working a novel set on both sides of the border, stories that run parallel and without touching, like in Faulkner’s *The Wild Palms*. On the U.S. side, the story was about an unemployed American man who joins the Minutemen in Arizona; the other story was about a mother whose daughter is kidnapped on the highway near Ciudad Juárez while coming back from her quinceañera, coming back to the border to cross illegally to Denver. “The working title’s *Dust*,” Jon said, “but I’m open to suggestions.”

Paulina said she was terrible with titles, but promised to give it a thought.

Behind her, Justin said it was going to snow. The wind had turned colder and the sky had filled with gray clouds. Sam doubted it, but not Aaron. Being from Boston and all, he was used to the snow, and every sign of a snowfall was right fucking there.

Omar and the girl in the white jacket walked at the rear of the march.

“Can you believe this is a public school?” Omar asked and pointed to the football field of Bowie High School. “It’s better than the field the Indios used to play in Juárez.”

As the girl looked at the field, Omar glanced at the border. He could’ve sworn Diana was staring straight at him. He waved at her.

“So that’s the famous wife,” the girl said.

She grinned, her lips full and glossy, her teeth a bit crooked and she could eat less, but what the hell, with those lips she was the sexiest thing he'd seen that day.

"Yeah," Omar said. "You see a field like this in a public school, you know you're in the first world."

"You see a guy playing stupid in front of his wife, you know he wants to get in your pants so fucking much he'd beg you for it."

Omar hated blushing—the sudden heat wave to the face, the sensation that his clothes had just vanished in a room too cold and full of people. But he couldn't help it. He didn't blush out of shame, but out of the feeling of being overpowered. He'd been seeing a woman last year. Sneaking out on Diana was the easy part; coming up with money to support his house and his affair without getting caught, not so much. One night he found a pick-up truck in a dark neighborhood, popped the hood open with a screwdriver and pulled the battery from the handle as hard as he could. He ripped it off. Cables, bolts and brittle plastic went in every direction while his hand flew against the underside of the hood. He broke two bones from the back of his hand, dropped the battery and ruined it. He screamed. In the houses around him, the lights came on. People stared at him from the windows. They could walk out and lynch him. But they wouldn't. It took him a couple of seconds to understand this, but he knew they wouldn't come after him. They were too scared. He went home and told Diana that a hood had caught his hand while working on a car at the shop. His voice trembled and broke. What had made him blush that night was the moment when Diana embraced him and held him against her chest, like holding a small, broken animal.

"And what if I do want you?" Omar said to the girl in the white jacket, trying to deepen his voice. "I'm not going to beg just because I have a wife."

“I don’t give a fuck about your wife. She’s your problem. And I don’t care about the football field either. You know you’re in the first world when you see tall buildings like those,” she said, pointing her finger to the buildings in the horizon.

“That one’s a bank,” he said, his voice cooler now with the conversation veering away from his wife, “the other’s a hotel.”

“Have you stayed there?”

“I have,” he lied and felt composed now, fully himself again.

“We should check it out.”

“You play your cards right, we just might.”

“Don’t get your hopes up for today.”

“That’s a cruel thing to say to a man.”

“Maybe I’ll just say it to your wife.”

“Just give me your fucking phone number and I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Omar took out his phone and punched in her number and saved it under the name “Luis.”

At the front of the group, Lorenzo told Javier how he’d met Emilia Ortuño just a few weeks back. His therapist had suggested that he join a support group for the victims of femicide. He’d been hesitant at first. All his efforts to find his daughter had been individual efforts so far, like going to the procuraduría once a week to check how the case was going, which was never going anywhere; putting up posters all over the city; checking with the forensics labs every other week for unidentified female bodies. He didn’t believe these support groups could help at all, but when he met Emilia, her ideas for protests, her plans to pressure the government, he couldn’t say no.

“Mariel Holguín wrote that after the execution of Marisela Escobedo in the city of Chihuahua, marching for justice for the missing and slain women of Ciudad Juárez is an act of bravery,” Javier said.

Lorenzo handed Javier the binoculars.

“Take a look,” Lorenzo said, “see what’s going on at the rear of the march in Juárez.”

Javier took the binoculars and pointed out a patrol car following Emilia’s group. A common sight in La Habana, he told Lorenzo: the secret police, the not-so-secret police, the vigilance, the terror. One day, when he was thirteen, he said, he attended mass in the cathedral and was arrested for anti-revolutionary activities. He spent three days looking over his shoulder in a nasty prison, developing his first gray hairs before hitting puberty.

“So, you see, it *is* an act of bravery,” Javier said, handing back the binoculars.

“It is for them,” Lorenzo said.

Near Cole Street, the border dipped south. The street they marched on, Delta Drive, went straight ahead and turned away from the border. They couldn’t see Emilia’s group anymore.

“Good luck,” Lorenzo whispered. “I don’t see any bravery in marching in El Paso,” Lorenzo continued talking to Javier. “I don’t know if that answers your question.”

“You’re marching in El Paso now because part of the message is binational cooperation, but you’re going back to Juárez in a while.”

“We march for our daughters, Javier. We march to be heard, to let our daughters be heard and keep their memories alive, and not the cold winds, not the snow, could stop any of us.”

Jon tapped Lorenzo on the shoulder and apologized for interrupting. He asked if they could have a chat after the march because he was writing a novel that touched on the theme of the dead women of Ciudad Juárez, and he could use Lorenzo’s insight on the topic. Lorenzo said

they were having drinks at the Kentucky Club later on, in Juárez. If he wanted to join them, he'd be welcome. They could speak over a beer or two.

"Just keep this in mind," Lorenzo said, "our daughters didn't just die, didn't drop dead suddenly. That's not how their stories ended. They were kidnapped and raped, mutilated and tossed in the desert for the dogs. There's a pattern for this: same age and height, same hair and skin color. They didn't just die. They're not the dead women from Juárez. They were systematically *slain*."

Jon told Lorenzo he understood the distinction. The end of his novel reflected the nature of its morality. Death's unequivocal; a slaying carries political responsibilities. A blister on the asses of politicians, it made them sit on one cheek. The word *dead* was a softer cushion, a soothing pomade. It wasn't semantics. It was control.

Aaron leaned over Jon's shoulder and said, "I'm coming, too. Fuck the snow."

"One hundred and five years ago, during the Mexican revolution of 1911," Lorenzo told Javier pointing his finger at the tall buildings in the west, "for a dollar, more or less, you could go up to the terrace of that hotel and watch the battles in Juárez. Both Mexicans and Americans watched from a safe distance, like in a zoo. It's similar today. I understand the Mexican families who moved to El Paso because of the violence in Juárez. They're good people and they're scared. We're all scared. The problem's that El Paso is also safe for drug lords and corrupt politicians, and El Paso shouldn't be safe for criminals just because they have money. Would you lodge a pedophile in your house, next to your children, because he's promised to pay your mortgage?"

On Father Rahm Street, the group turned west. The clothing warehouses and fresh produce stores on Stanton Street were closing for the day. The last shoppers dispersed in small

groups, like tumbleweeds at dusk, and the line of cars going back to Ciudad Juárez was as long and complicated as it usually was.

A small boy, eating a red, blue and green lollipop as big as his head, stared at the marchers, his eyes wide, attentive, confused. Lorenzo raised his fist. The boy raised his lollipop. His mother pulled the boy away.

“If you were to walk down south on Stanton Street,” Lorenzo said, “cross the border and keep going down Calle Lerdo, you’d get to a place where the streets form a small triangle. Somewhere around that area, I’m not sure where, Villa blew up a German store that sold ammunitions and arms during the revolution. Some say the explosion was heard as far as Las Cruces, but nobody knows this. It’s been forgotten. If I’m completely honest with you, the only thing I can do for my daughter is to not let her be forgotten. It’s hard work. If the history of someone as massive as Villa can be erased from our memories, imagine my daughter’s. Some of the parents believe that keeping our daughters’ memories alive is as much justice as they’ll ever see. They might be right, but I’m not looking for justice. I’m looking for my daughter. Whatever’s left of her, I want it back.”

“Someone said that if Villa were alive today, millions would follow,” Javier said.

“If he were alive today, he’d be killed again. But this time he’d die alone.”

At the foot of the Santa Fe bridge, under the first snowflakes, Javier said he’d love to join them for drinks, but he had a story to write. Lorenzo thanked him for his time and offered his hand, but Javier pulled him in and gave him a hug and two loud slaps on the back that Lorenzo thought were going to break him into little pieces. Lorenzo then faced the group and thanked them all for their support. A loud cheer rose as the Americans broke away.

* * *

A sign by the bridge's toll booth read, *Fare: eight-peso*. Omar reached into his pocket with the hand he'd injured by stealing batteries and pulled out a one-peso coin, then reached once more and pulled out a second coin, then a third... The girl in the white jacket moved behind him and said, "Let me help with that," and shoved her right hand inside his right pocket and ran her fingers along the seam of his underwear. She leaned over his ear and said, "Save this for tomorrow," her fingers squeezing his erection, her hand going rhythmically up and down. "We're going to check out that hotel one way or another." Then she let go and pulled out her hand, her fist full of coins.

Omar said they'd check out that hotel, no shit.

She handed him the coins. He counted them.

"What's that guy's name?" she asked.

"What guy?"

"The bitchy guy who didn't want you with me."

Omar glanced up from the coins and said, "Lorenzo."

"No last name?"

"Not that I know of." He counted eight pesos and gave her the coins.

"And the woman marching in Juárez, the one with the flowers?" she asked shaking the coins in her hand like dice.

"That's Emilia Ortuño."

"They're like the leaders or what?"

“They’re nothing,” he said and stepped aside to let her pass in front of him to the toll booth.

Her jeans were tight around her hips and ass and in his mind her jeans disappeared and she looked hot in that pink thong, and then the thong was gone, too, and he thought he’d better come up with some money for tomorrow, since tall hotels, at least in his mind, were expensive. On second thought, if he played his cards right he might get her to pony up half the price of the room. After an eight-peso hand job, how could she say no?

Flowers

“¡Hijos de la chingada!” Emilia Ortuño cried, her fingers gripped one of the dozens of nine-inch iron nails driven not through the massive wooden cross, but through the pink metal backboard, a bed of nails where the cross rested at the mouth of Santa Fe Bridge.

She placed her bouquet of white roses at the foot of the cross, snugged between two vertical lines of nails, then pointed her sign like a long, thick finger at the patrol car parked at the corner, the officers watching her, taking notes.

Lorenzo ran his fingers through Emilia’s white hair.

“What about those drinks at the Kentucky?” he said.

“Hijito de mi alma,” she said, “let’s get drunk and forget, for just a little while, about those fucking assholes.” She was pointing her finger at the patrol car.

But he couldn't imagine her forgetting, even for an instant. The depths at which her pain swam in slow and endless circles would make forgetting impossible. He knew that perhaps better than most: her pain, like the nails surrounding the cross, securely driven through her.

Avenida Juárez had lost every bit of elegance and effervescence it once had. Just a handful of bars remained open, but still the street smelled slightly acrid, as it always had, as if submerged in a strange and quivering darkness.

Lorenzo and Emilia climbed down the sidewalk to go around the piles of bricks from a construction site, the first he'd seen in years on that avenue. Paulina rushed up and ran her arm through the crook in Lorenzo's elbow.

Emilia looked at her and said, "You better buy this pretty woman a drink or two, hijito. Don't let her get away. If you plan on keeping the fight against the assholes, you're going to need a strong woman by your side or you'll crumble like a wet piñata. And she's so beautiful, just look at her. You're too old to be fucking around, anyway."

Paulina felt her cheeks turn hot. She could only smile and stare at the green glow coming from the neon lights of the Kentucky Club.

Don Raúl, the old bouncer, couldn't hide a grin when he saw Paulina.

"It's been a long time," he said. "Your friend, you know, the gabachito writer, comes here more often than you."

"Ben," Paulina said.

"Yes, Benjamín. Last time he gave me a copy of his book, autographed and all. I just stare at the pages and imagine the stories. I can't read English. Welcome back, mi'ja."

It'd been years since Lorenzo last had a drink at the Kentucky Club. The place was warm and looked exactly the same as it always had, except for the new digital jukebox, playing exactly the same music it had always played. "Come Fly with Me," maybe "Fly Me to the Moon," he couldn't name the song, but it was Sinatra.

Paulina and Lorenzo sat at a table on the left side of the bar, behind the wooden balustrade. Jon sat with them.

"You should order a Margarita," Paulina said, "it was invented here."

"I heard the exact same thing in a bar in Tijuana," Jon answered in a perfect Spanish.

"They don't know any better."

It was amazing, Lorenzo thought, how these gringos had learned Spanish out of respect for their wives.

The Margarita were strong and salty, and for the second round, they ordered Bohemia beers, too, as chasers.

Lorenzo explained to Jon how the procuraduría worked: a sort of police precinct but filled with snakes and donkeys and other regional animals who get paid—not a lot but enough to make a living—to perform tricks like shuffling papers and responding, "We're looking into that" to every question he'd ever asked.

Aaron, Justin and Sam came with tequila and Indio beers and pulled in some chairs and sat next to Jon. Justin asked if they knew how much to play a song on the jukebox.

"I'd say a dollar," Lorenzo said. "You can get quarters at the bar."

"Quarters, man," Justin mumbled. "I guess it makes sense."

"What are you playing?" Sam asked.

“I’m playing ‘Stardust.’”

“They don’t have Gillespie in here,” Aaron said.

“Not Gillespie, man, Willie Nelson! And that’s a digital jukebox right there. Those things connect to the internet, man. You could play anything from the Nazi anthem to Justin fucking Beaver in those things. But one atrocity at a time.”

Justin stood up, humming the first notes of Nelson’s “Stardust,” and went to the barman for quarters. Where the bar made a curve, the girl in the white jacket drank a beer next to the young man in the green-hooded sweatshirt. She stared at the table near the restrooms, where Omar sat with Diana and Wendy and Emilia, and blew Omar a kiss.

Omar stared back at the girl, looked down at his beer, then at Diana, just a brief glimpse to make sure she hadn’t seen the kiss. He could ask his boss for an advance, in case the girl didn’t want to fork out her half for the hotel. He ran his fingers on the bumps on the back of his hand and knew that knocking off car batteries was out of the question. Maybe he could take her to the shitty hotel in front of the nice one. They were both tall anyway and she wasn’t so bright she’d notice. The girl went to the restroom behind Omar’s table, shaking her ass like her life depended on how much it wobbled. Omar followed her.

“Slut,” Diana told Emilia. “She’s been flirting with Omar all day.”

As soon as Diana said this, she knew it had been a bad idea. The one time she’d caught Omar cheating on her, she’d told her aunt Emilia. Emilia then invited them for breakfast the following Sunday and once Omar had sat down, she slapped him over and over again, and if Diana and Wendy hadn’t intervened, she would have dumped onto his head the bowl of scalding-hot menudo.

But at the Kentucky Club, Emilia was in a great mood. She only said, “Oh, don’t worry, dear, he’s too fucking ugly anyway.”

Emilia then went to the bar and got some quarters and asked a waiter to help her with the jukebox. With the first notes from the guitar, she let out a sharp and loud mariachi yell. She removed the pink ribbon from her forehead and held it limp in her hand.

“Todos me dicen el negro, llorona,” she sang, her fingers running through the ribbon like it was somebody’s hair, a smooth and long strand of ghostly hair.

Ay, ay, ay, how she loved Chavela Vargas, the smoke in her voice, the tequila burning in her throat from a life of betrayals, the words charged with accusation and disappointment, a voice that had started singing a thousand years ago but was only heard once Chavela found it lying on the ground, pissed drunk in the darkest corner of a rainy night, and made it her own.

The second song started and she sang, “Esta noche te vas de a de veras,” this time staring at the girl in the white jacket coming back from the restroom, buttoning up her shirt.

“Put a disgraciada,” Emilia sang the invented lyrics, louder than ever, and spat on the girl’s yellow sneakers.

The girl raised her fist, but the man in the green sweatshirt pulled her away, saying, “Not here.” The other young man, the one in the red sweatshirt, stepped in between the women. Wendy, already standing by her mother’s side, had both fists clenched and ready and hard as rocks. Once the girl in the white jacket and the young men in sweatshirts had taken their seats at the bar, Wendy went back to her table and finished her tacos.

A flower seller approached Lorenzo’s table. When the last song ended, after the cheers and claps had faded out and she’d bowed down one final time, Emilia told Lorenzo they were leaving. Lorenzo said they’d be leaving, too. Paulina nodded, her head resting on Lorenzo’s

shoulder, their fingers laced together and his thumb rubbing circles on the web between her thumb and index. In her other hand, she held a red rose wrapped in transparent cellophane.

“So beautiful,” Emilia said walking out of the Kentucky Club into the heavy snowfall. “Look, mi reina, how beautiful it is,” she said to the picket sign she held in her hand, then kissed her daughter’s picture.

The Americans said goodbye and tried to shake Emilia’s hand, but she pulled them in and kissed everyone in the cheek and thanked them all for having the balls to show their support.

Omar and Diana walked out behind the Americans, then came the girl in the white jacket, followed by the two young men in the green and red hooded sweatshirts. The one in red looked to the opposite sidewalk and whistled an elaborate whistle, like a chirp. Then three men, like shadows unsticking themselves from a dark wall, started walking toward the Kentucky Club.

“Call me tomorrow, babe?” said the girl in the white jacket, running a finger across Omar’s lips.

Diana punched the girl in the mouth. The girl took a couple of steps back and dropped like a slab of stone. Omar backed into the windows of the bar. The young man in the red sweatshirt kicked Diana in the stomach. Diana bent over and the young man punched her in the face and sent her to the ground.

Sam yelled, “Motherfucker,” and punched him twice in the face and when the young man went down Sam rode him and slapped his arms away and punched him in the nose.

The young man in the green sweatshirt tried kicking Sam in the face, but Aaron lifted him off the ground and tossed him aside like a spent bottle of beer.

The girl in the white jacket stood up and ran towards the bridge.

Omar tried getting Diana off the ground, but she said it hurt too much and started crying. He saw one of the gringos lying on the ground, getting pummeled by a big guy with a crew cut. Where had the big guy come from? A few steps aside, another gringo tried to bring a fat man to the ground. The fat man had a crew cut, too. All of them had crew cuts, now that Omar noticed. They were cops, maybe soldiers. Backup was on the way. He thought of guns and truncheons, jail time if they were lucky. But they weren't lucky. They were up to their necks in shit.

Two police officers came running and Emilia hit the first one with her sign against his face. The other officer took out his truncheon and hit Emilia on the head. Her white hair puffed up like flour, and she fell down. As he raised his arm again, Wendy jumped onto his back. She flung her legs around his waist, drove her nails into his cheeks and pulled back.

Paulina had been staring all along, her head thudding fast, her arms cold, frozen at her sides. She remembered her accident with the cops a few months ago. She didn't give a fuck anymore. She let go of her rose and put her hands onto the sides of the officer's face and drove the nails of her thumbs into his eyes.

When the officer pulled out his gun, Omar took it from his hand and ran away with it.

Lorenzo stood from the ground, his nose was bleeding, his sight blurry. He leaned against a car and rubbed his eyes until he could see more or less clearly again. Through the snow he saw a fat man dragging Aaron away by the belt, like a long and heavy duffel bag. Wendy was screaming as Paulina drove her nails into a policeman's face.

A nightmare, a continuous black dream, a pattern as predictable as algebra. Another police officer wrapped his fingers around Paulina's neck and squeezed. Lorenzo picked up his picket sign from the ground and broke the dowel across his knee and held the long sharp wedge like a kitchen knife. If waking up from this hell meant soaking himself in filth, then so be it.

Wielding the sharp dowel, he stumbled toward the officer strangling Paulina. A group of police officers rushed against Sam and Justin and put them in handcuffs. The officers were led by the girl in the white jacket. She had a brick in her hand. The snowflakes swirled around her when she stepped in front of Lorenzo, stared into his eyes and arched her hand outward in a long swing. He barely had time to recognize Paulina's red rose on a small mound of snow on the sidewalk. Then, like turning off a switch, everything turned dark, silent, peaceful.

Animals

Javier Molinar's note didn't come out in Sunday's edition. *Conflicted*, his editor had used that word on the phone. His note *conflicted* with another, one buried in the middle of the newspaper.

"Did you read it?" the editor asked.

"I did," Javier said.

He had it in front of him, the newspaper folded in a neat rectangle next to his large coffee cup and his copy of Mariel Holguín's *Broken Dolls, Broken Language*. The book was two, three years old, yet it looked ancient under the light coming through the café windows, like the lapping shore of a river made of gray dust.

Snowflakes drifted in and melted on the floor. A man walked into the café followed by a draft of cold wind that ruffled the newspaper on Javier's table.

"Marchantes por la paz arman trifulca en cantina," Javier started reading the note again, holding the paper down with his thick finger. A vicious title and evidently manipulated, it didn't say what the words seemed to convey. *Don't mess with the government*, that's what it said

between the lines. First of all, those people had marched for justice, not peace. Even when the former's the mother of the latter, their intentions are different. But no surprises there. Whoever holds the gun defines the meaning of peace.

"What do you think?" asked the editor on the phone.

The note related how last night a group of protesters had gathered in a bar in Ciudad Juárez. After imbibing copious amounts of alcohol, the group had walked out and savagely beaten a young couple for not joining their drunken chants of protest. The two police officers who had heroically intervened to save the couple's lives, had been brutally beaten by the group led by Emilia Ortuño and her accomplice, a man known only as Lorenzo. The officers, as well as one of the brawlers, were in critical condition. The man, Lorenzo, was still at large.

"I think it's disgusting," Javier said and hung up, then dialed Paulina's number once more and once again he couldn't get through.

She wasn't mentioned in the newspaper, and that worried him more than the whiff of institutional poison crawling out of the note, a poison that could break women and language just the same.

Javier had a friend who worked at the precinct in Ciudad Juárez, if he could call him a friend, if he could call it a precinct. His job was to give nicknames to the daily detainees and sell them to the tabloids: *Javier Molinar, aka Sacacorchos, aka Porkchops, aka The Cuban Quiff*. Things like that. He'd know something about Paulina. Or he could find out. If he was his friend. Or if he needed money.

He dialed his friend's number.

"So you know?" Omar said, standing by Javier's table, looking down at the newspaper.

On the phone, Javier heard his friend say, “Javier el Cochalocas—” and hung up.

Well dressed and shaven, half a bottle of cologne lingering in the air around him, Omar held a small coffee in each hand and had not a scratch on his face, not a single bruise.

“Now, that was a mess,” Omar said.

“You look good for having been in a mess,” Javier said.

“Thanks.”

“Want to sit down?” Javier asked pointing at the empty chair. He wondered if Omar’s long legs would fit under the table.

“I can’t. I’m meeting my friend Luis right now. I should get going.”

“Just hold on a second. What do you know of Paulina? Is she all right?”

Javier stood up. Though Omar weighed about fifty pounds less than he, Omar was taller by a full head and good part of the shoulders.

“She’s in jail. She’s fine.”

“Jesus Christ. How can you say that?”

“She’ll be out on Tuesday. She’s in for disrupting the peace, no biggie.”

The snow was coming down harder now, piling up in the windowsills of the Plaza Hotel in front of the café. It would be a cold couple of nights in jail. Would they feed her? What if she was hurt? The image of Paulina cold and starving in a nasty jail popped into his mind with brutal clarity.

“No, she’s got to get out today,” Javier said. “How much is the bail?”

“No bail. No judges on Sunday. And it’s November the 20th, which means tomorrow’s a holiday. So, again, no judges. If you step outside, you can hear the drums from the marching bands practicing for the parade in Juárez. Don’t worry, she’ll be out on Tuesday for free.”

“Don’t tell me not to worry. You know anything about Mrs. Ortuño and Lorenzo?”

“Worry all you want, then. From what I know, Emilia’s in custody, in the hospital. Lorenzo’s on the lam. Cops say he ran with a gun he took from one of them, God knows what for. My guess is to sell it. Thing is, he’s considered armed and dangerous now, though he ran like a little girl. That’s what they say, anyway.” Omar couldn’t repress a grin.

“What about you?” Javier asked.

“What about me?”

“What did you run like?”

“Fuck you. I left early.” Omar raised his voice.

“Of course you did. Have you called Lorenzo? Forget it, just give me his number, please.” Javier tried unlocking his cell phone, but couldn’t control his fingers, twitching from fear or anger or God knew what. He grabbed his book and took the pen from his jacket and opened the book to the first page.

“Yeah,” Omar said, “I called Lorenzo. All I heard was wind. He runs fast for a fucking girl.” He was shouting now.

Javier swung the book against Omar’s face, but Omar stepped back, bending like sugarcane in the high wind, and barely dodged it.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” an employee said, standing between both men, but looking only at Javier.

“That’s right,” Omar said, “this isn’t fucking Cuba. Go back to munching bananas on your fucking island.”

“You, too. Get out before I call the cops,” the employee told Omar.

Omar looked down at him, teary eyed, and walked out.

“I’m sorry,” Javier told the employee, using his best English. “This isn’t me. Please, I apologize.”

Javier held the book under his arm, put the phone into his pocket, grabbed the coffee cup and the newspaper with one hand.

“So you’re Cuban?” the employee asked.

“Yes.”

“Long live the revolution, brother,” the employee said, putting up his fist, showing his black leather wristband with a red star in the middle.

The last time Javier used a cuss word he’d been at México City’s Zócalo, filming a political rally led by López Obrador, the strongest presidential candidate for the 2006 elections. A Cuban citizen at a time when diplomatic relationships between Cuba and México hadn’t precisely soured but rather been forced to kneel down and then shot in the back of the head with a bullet made in the U.S., he had taken a trip to México. An ordeal: Insufficient funds, insufficient equipment, insufficient politicians worth filming. Before crossing to El Paso and becoming a U.S. resident, he toured the north of México and evaluated his situation. His options seemed as barren as the landscape around him: the parched land, the solitary mesquites, the heat like a gigantic boot upon him, squeezing the air out of him. But options or not, he’d made the decision long ago—at the Zócalo in México City, under the warm and empty promises of López Obrador—and his decision couldn’t be undone. The third time their camera had malfunctioned, turning off on its own after exactly seven seconds of filming, Javier dropped the microphone, unknotted his tie and told his cameraman, “That motherfucker sounds like Castro. Nos vemos, hermano,” and walked away with no direction or purpose other than, well, walking away.

That initial lack of direction had led him to this point, a generic Sunday in a generic café, standing in front of a generic employee and revolutionary enthusiast who would never understand the revolution he so fondly endorsed, not because the revolution was too much for him to comprehend, but because its finer points would inevitably fly against his own convictions, a set of twisted and romantic notions that—only God would ever know why—had taught him that revolutions are fought and won by wearing black leather wristbands with red stars—Made in China—and dark green aprons—Made in Indonesia—and uttering warm and empty words—Made in México, but Assembled in Cuba.

Yet he couldn't muster the strength to say the words that swirled like honey water on his tongue, like the juice from plunging his teeth into the stringy meat of a sugarcane. *You're a fucking moron*—the words went down his throat like broken glass because he knew that if revolutions are never won by being stupid, they're certainly always lost by being a coward.

"You don't know what you're talking about," was all he could say to the employee.

Then he sputtered out of the café like a deflating balloon.

Crossing Oregon Street, Javier heard the military trumpets and drums coming from Ciudad Juárez. He hated the cold, but the snow looked beautiful in San Jacinto Plaza. He pulled out his phone and called his friend again—if he could call him that—and asked if he knew anything about Paulina, which he did. She was in jail for disrupting the peace. She'd be out on Tuesday.

"That's not possible," Javier said. "She's got to be out today."

"Not a chance," his friend said.

He could hear him chewing on something, maybe chips, maybe carrots. Surely chips.

"Don't you know somebody?"

“I might.”

“Who?”

“Just somebody, but it’s going to cost you.”

“How much?” His voice didn’t quiver giving in to bribery. It rather burst out of his mouth strong and self-possessed, a panzer tank crushing all qualms of corruption

“I don’t know, got to call first.”

“You know anything about an Omar León?”

“No, just some Diana León. She’s in the hospital, something wrong with her belly.”

Then he said he’d call back and hung up.

It’d cost him, God only knew how much. So far from Cuba, so close to México. He felt glad he didn’t insult the young employee. At least he had a dream, and as stupid as the dream was it was his own. Sooner or later he’d become a cynic, but it’d be on his own terms. No one can be convinced to become a cynic. To lose all hope, you had to see life burn down first with your own set of eyes, then brand your hands in the hot ashes.

That Paulina might need a lawyer was a strong possibility, corrupt officials or not. It’d be expensive. He might be able to give her a hand, maybe not in the long run, but at least to get her back on her feet. Waiting for the phone call in San Jacinto Plaza, Javier walked to the fountain, stared at the fiberglass alligators covered with snow. There’d been real alligators in the past. Some students had even taken one out and put it in the office of a teacher in the university, called Texas Western College back then. He knew that because he’d read it somewhere. What he didn’t know was how the alligators had survived those winters.

A young woman with a little girl walked up to the fountain. The woman had green eyes, red, curly hair and a bandage on her right hand, like she’d gotten herself in a fight. She told the

girl to stand still, then stepped back and crouched on the snow and pointed her phone at the little girl standing by the fountain bowl. Javier could hear the drums and trumpets coming from the south. The little girl could hear them too, apparently, stomping her feet in the snow to the rhythm of the drums.

He wondered how much a lawyer would cost in Ciudad Juárez. A better question was who'd take her case. Medics and lawyers, it seemed to Javier, were among the cartel's favorite victims, and God only knew how many of them were still alive.

He stepped away so the young woman and her little girl could have their photo shoot in peace. The woman said, "Smile, baby." The little girl smiled, still stomping her feet in the snow. She stood out from the white and green background, her pink jacket, her pink and white beanie with a canary weaved on the front, the bird safely set behind the black bars of a cage. Behind the little girl, in the center of the fountain, a fiber-glass alligator leaped up with its jaws wide open.

You'll stop by the red light in front of the El Paso Public Library. You'll recognize them—their bicycles just like yours, their backpacks just like yours, their haircuts just like yours. They'll ride their bicycles and dissolve into the night down Franklin Street, like your voice. You will not see them drop. You will yell, but they will not fall.

A few years back, the governor of Chihuahua set up a special program for the schools of Ciudad Juárez. It was called "Todos al Piso." This is how it worked: In the event of a shooting, the teacher would yell "¡Todos al piso!" and the children would drop to the floor on their stomachs.

Children trained to drop. Stay down. Stay down and save your life. Children falling down, falling down like brown leaves in the wind.

The class, like everything else, would resume after the shooting.

Outside the library, you yell. You do it every time. Every time you ride by this place, you yell.

And just like every other time, tonight your voice leaves no trail behind.

Part IV

The Sea of Tranquility

— 1 —

Run. That was the heart of it. Their lives rested on a word. *Run*. Fleeing, dragging her daughter along, how had she come to this? Defending what's hers, standing her ground? Emilia Ortuño had known this day would come, but she'd expected to face it alone. A dim light on the horizon, it had turned now into a wildfire lapping at her feet.

When you hear the shitstorm, Emilia, you'll run. She remembered what Paulina had said. *Promise me.* She did, she'd promised Paulina she would run. Hunted down like beasts, Emilia and her daughter Wendy had been hiding at her friend Vicky's and were now ready to bolt. A young woman of seventeen, her mother, a woman of sixty, and a friend, a woman of seventy-something, all wrapped up to the eyes in coats and sweaters and scarves, waited by the open door for a signal, an undefinable shitstorm which, like the breath of God, would blow them out into the cold winter air.

How had she come to this? Emilia had organized a march to push for the resolution of the cases of the slain and missing women of Ciudad Juárez, a protest which had ended in drinks, and the drinks in chaos. First a fight, then an ambush of cops and their goons and moles outside of the Kentucky Club. Emilia found herself at the hospital, in custody, with a sprained wrist and a broken skull. For two days—she'd learned from the nurses—she remained unconscious; confused and handcuffed to the bed for much longer. Once she felt better, the cops came asking

questions, handing out threats. *You'll be discharged and sent to jail. Mrs. Ortuño, you tried to kill an officer.* Those lying pigs, they'd burn her at the stake. *Why, Mrs. Ortuño?* She had a list, a good list, thorough. She kept the list to herself, though. Never talk to pigs. Pigs don't talk.

"Even though you're an obstructing, violent offender, Mrs. Ortuño," the detective had said, walking into the hospital room, pulling Wendy by the elbow, "you're under my custody and it *is* my duty to protect you." He nodded at the guard. The guard closed the door. "Protect you from anyone, even your own daughter. Put your hands flat on the bed, Wendy."

Wendy stooped to reach the bed. The detective stood behind her. He lifted her jacket and thrust his hands under her sweater and cupped her breasts.

"Don't cry, mamá," Wendy said dryly.

"Shut up, Wendy." The detective grabbed her hands and twisted them back and put her in handcuffs. "Go sit down over there."

The detective sat on the edge of Emilia's bed. He had a bruise beneath the right eye and kept his back straight, rubbing his fingertips on his left thigh. Like a fire catching its breath. A fire, Emilia thought, lit by me.

"There's no need for secrets, Mrs. Ortuño. We're all friends here. You'll be discharged tomorrow and you'll know how many enemies you've made out there. Just look at what they did to you. A real shame, real shame. That's why we're taking Wendy with us, for her own protection."

The fire lapping at her feet. She smelled the charred flesh. Hers? Wendy's?

"Where are you taking her?" Emilia asked. Her handcuffs rattled against the rail of the bed. "What are you going to do to her?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Mrs. Ortuño. We all love Wendy. She's tons of fun. Aren't you?"

He stared at Wendy and grinned. Wendy, unprovoked, stared back at him.

“We see Wendy after work everyday. Sometimes we drive her here ourselves. Don’t we?” He touched the bruise beneath his eye. “And now we’re taking her to a safe place to keep her warm and well fed. There’s nothing to worry about.”

“What safe place? Where is it?”

“It wouldn’t be safe if I told you. This is a secret place, Mrs. Ortuño, where the bad people after *you* can’t reach *her*. Now, if you have a better idea of where to take her, by all means let us know and we’ll negotiate.”

“Whatever you want.”

“What we want is exactly what you need: safety and peace. You argue that the men sentenced for Ana’s murder are scapegoats. This crazy idea has derailed your life as well as Wendy’s. It’s put you in harm’s way, led you into one too many restless nights. Your daughter’s murderers are in jail. We want you to drop all this nonsense and lead a normal life, a peaceful and safe life, for Wendy’s sake.”

“I’ll do it. Just leave her alone, please.”

“Don’t do that, mamá. Don’t beg.” Wendy remained serene, stolid.

“*Don’t beg, ma...* that’s a feisty one right there. I’ll tell you what: We’ll draft an affidavit today, bring it in the morning for you to sign. Then I’ll drive you home myself.”

“I’ll sign it, but I’d rather crawl back home than ride with you.”

“Suits you best, Mrs. Ortuño. Both of you. But here’s the hook: Your signature means nothing. This is the deal: You *will* disappear from the face of the earth. I don’t care if you crawl inside a cave or down into the sewers or move to a cotton field in the asshole of the world.” He stood up from the bed, his movements graceful and daunting, a swaying flame searching for a

dry fabric to light on fire. He went around the bed to where Wendy sat and lifted her by the elbow. “Because if I see you again, you’ll be organizing marches for two daughters.”

He turned Wendy around and removed the handcuffs.

“I hope we’re on the same page, Mrs. Ortuño. Wendy looks all grown up, but she’s seventeen, a dangerous age. She’s the wrong sex in the wrong city. Food for thought, Mrs. Ortuño.”

Today, standing by the door of Vicky’s house, to the sound of a shitstorm—a car crash, a woman’s shout, a gunfight—Emilia yelled, “Go!”

Vicky fumbled with the latch. Wendy stepped in and pulled it open.

“Let’s go!” Emilia cried again.

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Vicky said.

The ladies rushed out of the house, got inside Vicky’s 1989 burgundy Cougar and sped westward on Calle Tepeyac.

“Oh, my God!” cried Vicky, stepping on the gas.

“You keep your head down, baby,” Emilia told Wendy, peeking back through the space between the headrest and the seat. “Where are we, Vicky?”

“I don’t know!”

“Keep going, then.”

The day before, Vicky had sashayed into Emilia’s hospital room a little after the detective’s visit. She’d brought with her, once again, one of those arrangement of white roses and balloons that Emilia always sent to the women in the maternity ward. Those were the women who needed the

cheering up. They'd just had little babies, so they were the ones who needed some faith in the world. Under her arm, Vicky carried a manila folder and a plastic bag.

"I have a surprise for you," Vicky said, singing the *you* like a chirping bird. She wore a champagne-colored blouse with puffed-up sheer sleeves, red lipstick that had stained her upper teeth and showed when she smiled. And that day Vicky was all smiles, red teeth and all.

"If it's those crazy ladies from that crazy church of yours, I'm going to vomit."

"Don't get nasty, Tita."

Emilia hated being called *Tita*. She wasn't fifteen anymore. She'd told her repeatedly. Not that Vicky gave a fuck.

"I'm not being nasty. I'm just not in the mood for idiocies."

Vicky glanced at Wendy and stuck out her tongue. Wendy giggled.

"I hope you're in the mood for leaving the hospital and going home, then."

"Don't play with me, Vicky."

"I'm not joking, Tita. I got you a lawyer."

"How's a lawyer going to help me?"

"Remember Leobardo Batista? He used to play basketball, the tall boy with the thin mustache no one liked until he rode by in a red Cadillac and opened his office and lived forever after under a perpetual rain of panties. You know his office? It's in the corner of Lerdo—"

"What about him?"

"He's the most charming man. He's after me now, but he's too old and uses dentures. Anyway, I managed to convince him to get you a..." Vicky dropped the plastic bag on the bed, opened the folder and read, "...a writ of amparo, that's what they call it, you know, the lawyers. It means they can't arrest you. I brought a dress so we can leave right now."

A dress. Vicky's dress. Emilia shivered. From the plastic bag, Vicky pulled out a black dress with pink rhinestones down the breasts. It was surely illegal to wear such a thing inside a hospital.

"Vicky, I'm fifty years beyond the age of a proper cabaretera."

"That's all I have that'd fit you."

"What are you saying?"

Vicky went around the bed and unlocked the handcuffs that tied Emilia to the bed.

"Where did you get that key?" Emilia asked.

"Everybody's got one. You get dressed, Tita, and stop asking questions."

Emilia rolled up the dress and pulled it on above her head. Wendy helped her to untangle herself, unzipped the dress and started again, but from the legs up.

"The last time I wore a dress was for my baptism," Emilia said, stepping out of the room.

A young woman, her hair red and curly, was going into the room next to hers with a can of Sprite and bag of McDonald's in her hand.

"The guard's gone," Emilia said.

"I told you. You're free to go."

"Good, he's an asshole."

"He is," said Wendy.

"He's a good man, once you've given him a hundred pesos. Let's go this way."

"What did you do, Vicky? And why are we leaving through the emergency exit?"

"Oh shut up, you dreamless, old woman."

* * *

The ladies left the hospital and drove north on Montes de Oca, behind the beautiful ruins of the Fonart buildings, and turned left on Henry Dunant.

“Why are we going to your house?” Emilia asked at the corner of Avenida de las Américas.

“Leobardo’s going to call. After all, you can’t go to your house. It isn’t safe. Cheer up. It’ll be fun.”

But that night the lawyer still hadn’t called and the police had camped outside Vicky’s house. It would all come to an end with Emilia wearing a ridiculous cabaret dress.

Wendy had fallen asleep on the sofa. The manila folder Vicky had brought to the hospital lay beneath her purse on the coffee table. Emilia opened it and read the document.

“What’s ‘adulteration’?” Emilia asked, walking into the kitchen. “Like adultery?”

“I suppose so. I don’t know,” Vicky said. She was doing the dishes. “Where did you read it? What else does it say?”

“It says ‘adulteration of alcoholic beverages.’ What is it?”

“Oh, that’s when you water down the whiskey and sell it like the real thing.”

“And who’s Osvaldo Paredes?”

Vicky’s argument opened into two different avenues. One, the straight and smooth, had to do with Vicky’s husband, who at one point in his life had owned up to three cantinas and gotten into so much trouble he wouldn’t leave the house without consulting with his lawyer first. The writ Emilia held in her hand had been processed when Osvaldo was caught selling adulterated whiskey. Since the writ ensured his freedom, Osvaldo kept it in the safe. It had remained there until that morning, when Vicky pulled it out, twenty years after Osvaldo’s death.

The other side of her argument twisted and turned like the branches of a dried mesquite.

“Your whole life, Tita, you’ve lived in fear. You’re strong, yes, and you’re fearless when it comes to facing problems. But your family’s been threatened for years and that’s no way to live. I remembered what the writ did for Osvaldo and I wanted the same thing for you. I thought, ‘maybe we can run away and live our last years in a better place.’ All we needed was that paper, one car and one hundred pesos.”

“‘*We* can run away’? You’re not making any sense. The writ’s useless, Vicky. You lied to me and turned me into a fugitive! You’ve put me and my daughter in danger!”

“Leobardo’s looking for a way out. He’ll call any minute now. I promise.”

“Is there a lawyer at all? Are you senile?”

Vicky sighed and gazed at the floor as if searching for the right words, the kindest words. She dried her hands on her yellow apron. When she looked up again, she seemed tired.

“There *is* a lawyer, Tita, but you’re missing the point. They’re going to kill you. And Wendy. You were safe in the hospital, but once outside, what?”

“You’re crazy. This is all your fault.”

“I don’t have to listen to you. I’m going to sleep.”

“Good, I’ll strangle you in your bed.”

“I have Osvaldo’s gun.”

“I hope it’s loaded.”

“It is.”

Emilia returned to the living room. Asleep, Wendy looked peaceful. That’s a daughter’s job, Emilia thought, to dream. A mother’s mission was to guard her daughter as she dreamt. Emilia picked up the phone and dialed Paulina’s number. In her visit to the hospital, Paulina had

looked every bit as beaten and tired as Emilia, but not crazy, not hopeless, not yet. On the phone, Paulina said, sure, Vicky had a loose screw or two, but she wasn't wrong. *They're out to harm you, Emilia, and you know it.*

Emilia lay back on the sofa and closed her eyes. A vision of the desert came to her, the sand gray and jelly-like under her feet, a dune up ahead with a flattened top, a dune like a breast, an incomplete breast, as if someone had bitten off the nipple. *We had a deal*, the air whispered. Emilia climbed the dune, her feet sinking into the fleshy sand. She saw the flesh exposed, the muscle, the dried blood around the biting marks. *We had a deal*. She glanced at the mountains and the mountains were Wendy's face, her eyes and mouth sculpted in the silent stone, her hair a wave rolling down into the sand, rolling, rolling down.

It took awhile, driving through a stretch of old streets, but Vicky finally found her way to Avenida Lerdo. Crossing 16 de Septiembre, Emilia caught a glimpse of the cathedral, the open sky beyond. That would be as close as she'd ever get to her home on Calle Fierro. She imagined her house with a notice nailed to the door: "Evicted."

The ladies parked outside the Carlos Villarreal building.

"Do you know if attorney Batista's in his office?" Vicky asked the parking attendant. He said he was. "Would you do me a favor?" Vicky rummaged through her purse and pulled out two coins of ten pesos. "Would you let him know Vicky's downstairs?"

So the attorney's real, Emilia thought. So she's not crazy, just different. The blond hair no longer appeared as a dyed distraction to her aging face. The roots were white. The eyes were fading. Not a shadow but a real woman, one ravaged less by the years than by the times she'd had to endure.

“What did you mean by ‘dreamless’? You think I have no dreams?” Emilia asked.

“I never said that,” Vicky said.

“You did. Yesterday, outside the hospital.”

“Oh, all right. It’s the truth. You have wishes, Tita, not dreams. You wish for justice, for a better world, a world where everything would go according to your plans. But no dreams. Dreams are about freedom and love and adventure.”

“Dreams of adventure and love? You’re pushing eighty, Vicky.”

“Yes, precisely. How much time do I have left? My family visits only when they need money, and if I say *No*—either because I’m tired of their bullshit or because they’ve wrung everything out of me—if I say *No*, they stop calling. I’m tired of living for somebody else. I want life, not time. What good is time if I can’t enjoy it?”

Emilia could detect it anywhere: the desperation.

Vicky pecked the lawyer on the lips. Gray suit, blue shirt, no tie. Honest eyes with a mischievous grin. Emilia might learn to trust him.

“I have news,” the lawyer said, “good and bad. I can’t get you a writ against aiding and abetting Mrs. Ortuño because, of course, no charges have been pressed against you, Vicky. Still, should you run into trouble, call me pronto.” He smiled wide and happy. Emilia understood why Vicky didn’t like his dentures. “You would be Mrs. Ortuño. It’s the same with you: no charges. Whatever they want from you it’s off the books, and that’s the bad news. So for you, for all of you—since I know Vicky’s going along—I have this.” He reached inside the car and handed Vicky a set of keys. “They’ll be looking for your car, so I want you to take mine.”

Run. Paulina’s voice rumbled inside Emilia’s head. Would it ever end, the running?

“You can’t stay in Juárez,” the lawyer went on. “Go to Chihuahua. I have friends there.”

“After what they did to Marisela Escobedo, I don’t think so.”

“Good point. Still, *you have to go.*”

The lawyer opened the door for Vicky. She removed her keys from the starter, held them next to the keys the lawyer had just handed her.

“I told you,” Vicky told Emilia, holding two handcuff keys side to side, one in each keyring, “everybody has one.”

The lawyer walked the ladies to his car, a ’75 mint-green Mercedes.

“Are you going to tell me where you’re going?”

“Not yet,” Vicky said climbing into the Mercedes.

“Take care of this car. It’s a 280S. I love it with all my heart.”

“I know. I’ll let you know where it is soon.”

“Good enough. Have a happy Christmas.”

Outside of Ciudad Juárez the desert opened up like a vast and empty sea, a different kind of desert, a cleaner desert, more innocent, a faithful companion to a highway built for those who were on the run. Emilia rolled down her window, the cold air like a slap on the face.

Run. The word returned again. Run from a life of anger and political organizing. Fighting for justice, what was that anyway? Run. The word was wrong. Emilia put her arm behind her seat, took Wendy’s hand in hers.

“Let go,” she whispered and squeezed her hand tighter.

At last, yes, at last she could let go.

Wave after wave the dust slammed against the windows. Carla Romero had parked her 1995 white Blazer at the foot of a hill torn down the middle by a pathway flanked with bottles and empty beer cans. Enrique lived at the top. Made of plywood and corrugated tin for roof, the shack flickered like a flame in the wind. Going halfway up the path, she saw that her black jeans and boots had turned brown. If she stood still, she thought, in five minutes the desert would swallow her up.

The front door of the shack had been secured with a padlock. Carla kicked the door. Then yelled his name over and over. Enrique. Enrique. Enrique.

If she had her gun she could shoot off the padlock. No, if she had her gun she wouldn't be here now, would she? No, of course she wouldn't. If she had her gun she'd have done things differently from the beginning. Fuck it. It was already Thursday afternoon. Time for plan C. She could climb down the hill and get her tire iron and pry the door open.

She heard the sound of pebbles sliding down the hill around the house. A man lying on his back on the hillside stared at Carla through the rocks sticking out the base of the house. He put a finger to his lips, said, "Shhhh."

"Who are you?" Carla whispered.

"Who are *you*?" the man whispered back.

* * *

The previous week, Carla had climbed out of her Blazer wielding her nine millimeter Smith & Wesson. She left the Blazer's engine running, aimed the pistol at her sister's house and took cover beside the door. Then she yelled, "Police!" and went inside.

The Christmas tree lay on the floor, the sofa blasted into cotton tufts. Judging by the mess of spent cartridges, she guessed someone had been practicing with an AK-47. In her niece's bedroom, the scene was the same. They'd also lit the corner of her duvet on fire, but it had failed to ignite. And for unknown reasons, they'd shot the vanity mirror. Carla saw her face, fragmented as if it was a puzzle.

"I can't find Luisa," her sister sobbed coming into the room.

"Did you call her?"

"She's not answering. I went to Karina's. She hasn't seen her since last night."

"You see who did this?"

"I was at Vero's across the street. I saw a black truck and thought it was Luisa. I was opening the door when I saw them getting out with cuernos and shooting the doors open and then shooting at everything inside."

"Did you see a thunderbolt? On the truck or tattooed on their arms or something?"

"Yes, a tattoo on the arm."

No news of Luisa wasn't exactly bad news. Mixed up with a bad crowd, the worst kind, that was the bad news. But maybe she was hiding somewhere safe. Carla uncocked her pistol and tucked it into the waist of her jeans.

"We got to go. We'll find her today, I promise. We'll stop by Karina's. She'll talk to me. That's a promise too."

* * *

The following day Carla sounded the siren behind a black Miata, then turned on the emergency lights of the patrol truck. The black Miata set its blinkers on and pulled over by the Mercado Juárez, the place as silent as a cemetery. No more mariachis. No more endless beer. Nothing to celebrate.

“It breaks my heart to see the mercado like this,” said David, Carla’s partner.

“Drunk fuck,” Carla said, opening her door.

“Don’t call me that.”

Carla went for the driver’s door of the black Miata; David stood by the passenger’s.

“Good evening,” Carla shone her flashlight directly on the driver’s face. “Where you coming from?”

“Work,” the driver said, squinting.

“Usually work this late?”

“Sometimes.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“State government.”

“Oh really?”

“Really.”

Carla turned off the flashlight and stepped back so the driver could see her face.

“Fuck,” the driver said.

“Step out of the car.”

The driver got out and mechanically put his hands on the roof of the car and spread his legs. Carla ran a hand around his waist.

“Any weapons inside the car?”

“No.”

“Anything illegal?”

“No. What’s this?”

“Routine.”

“How much?”

Carla slammed his head against the roof of the car.

“Next time you speak, I’ll whip you in the mouth with my pistol. I’m looking for the man we caught you with last month, the coyote.”

“I don’t know any coyotes.”

Carla put her hand on his crotch and squeezed.

“Come again?”

The driver growled. She squeezed harder.

“He’s gone,” he muttered, “he’s gone. Tell me what you need and I’ll get it for you. Just tell me.”

“Two women,” Carla said, relaxing her fist. “I need them across the river, safe and sound and fast.”

“That can be arranged.” The driver breathed deep, shook his head, exhaled. “That’s expensive, though.”

“Is it? How much?”

“Thirty.”

“Thirty thousand?”

“Yes.”

“How far would thirty grand take them?”

“Las Vegas.”

“Nevada?”

“New Mexico.”

“So thirty you say?” Carla asked. The driver nodded. “Let’s see how much we have.”

Carla reached for the driver’s wallet. “Five hundred. Search the car,” Carla ordered David.

“Come on,” the driver said, “we can work something out.”

Carla turned the driver around and pulled out her pistol and whipped him across the mouth.

“Take a look, cap,” David said, dropping a plastic bag onto the roof of the car, a bag that looked as big and heavy as a softball.

“Is it cut?”

David licked his finger and plunged it in the cocaine and sucked the powder.

“A bit.”

“How much would you say that’s worth?”

“Forty, fifty if you cut it more.”

“All right.” Carla took out the driver’s identification and tossed the wallet inside the car.

“Enrique,” she said, reading his driver’s license, “you owe me fifty grand now. You’ll take my women to Las Vegas, *New Mexico*. You’ll do it next week for thirty grand. Then I’ll take my twenty thousand that same day and you’ll get your stuff back. Is that clear?”

Enrique nodded.

“Get in your car,” Carla said, “and get out of here.”

“I can’t,” Enrique mumbled, holding on to the door.

Carla and David went back to the patrol truck and drove away.

At five forty five in the morning, after one long and cold and mortally boring night shift parked under a lamp-post, Carla’s eyes could no longer tell if the sunrise was real or if some active part of her brain was urging her to look toward the light, any light at all.

A simple assignment: “You see Emilia Ortuño, you bring her to me,” her boss had told her. He gave her a photograph and the address of a house on Calle Tepeyac. “She might be hiding there, might not. Don’t let her see you. Don’t fuck it up. You’ll be relieved at six.”

Carla taped the photograph onto the dashboard and patrolled the area until five in the morning, when she parked the police truck in front of the house, under the lamp-post, to take a little nap.

She didn’t see the 1990 green Geo Metro, racing in the direction where Privada Hidalgo makes a T with Tepeyac. It came straight toward her door. She woke up with the car already wedged under the patrol truck and a woman—early thirties, slender, dark jacket—a woman crawling out the window and bolting down Calle Tepeyac in the direction of Avenida de las Américas.

“Wake up!” Carla yelled at David.

Her door jammed, pinned in by the tiny green car, Carla grabbed her AR-15 and broke the glass with the stock. Kneeling on the seat, she propped her elbow on the edge of the window, aimed and shot three rounds. And missed twice.

* * *

They locked Carla in a blue room in the police headquarters to be debriefed. She imagined the forensics team like kids on Easter Sunday looking for the missing bullets. What the fuck had happened? One finger, one trigger, one bullet, all small, all insignificant. One woman, one shot to the head, one charge of police brutality. How could that happen? She'd been attacked. She'd been asleep. Her body reacted. Muscle memory. Training. The body reacted, except for the eyes, still dreaming of a long, dusty road leading the hell out of here.

Carla received a text message on the phone: "Where the fuck r u? Their outside the house." Seven thirty in the morning. Half an hour late for her meeting with Enrique. By the way things looked, they'd keep her in that room for a long time. She'd miss the coyote. Time for plan B. Renegotiate. Exchange coke for cash. Put sister and niece in a bus to Guanajuato. Villahermosa. Zacatecas. "Stay put," Carla texted back. "Dont make a sound. Ill be there soon." Zacatecas worked. Anything outside of Ciudad Juárez would work as long as it was done today. She had a vision of two headless women floating in the middle of a lake of blood. Her stomach churned. Her throat tasted of bile.

"How is she?" Carla asked as her boss walked into the room.

"You shot her in the head," he said, "you figure it out."

"Is she dead?"

"Unless you have a small fortune under the mattress, you better pray she is."

* * *

That afternoon Carla laid herself on the hillside around Enrique's house, beside the man she'd found hiding among the rocks. The sky was brown with dust; the night, approaching.

"I wish I had my pistol," she said. "It'd make things easier."

"Having a pistol and things being easier go together like turds and coffee," the man said, wiping dust from a pebble on his brown jacket. "If you don't have your pistol, you don't have your pistol and that's that. The real question is why don't you?"

He put the pebble in his mouth.

"I shot a woman today," Carla said.

"I never heard of no dead woman stealing someone's pistol."

"She's alive."

"That solves it."

Carla closed her eyes and covered her nose and mouth under the gusting sand.

"They took my pistol away. I was suspended," she said, wiping the sand from her eyes.

"You're a pig," the man said and turned his head to Carla, "you're a pig *and* a snake, pinchi chota. When it comes to people like you, cops, all due respect to the animals, they're one and the same thing, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you a fucking thing."

"It don't matter none."

"Stop staring at me."

"I won't. I'm getting your face right in here, cop," he tapped his temple, "every line in here, every hair and wrinkle right in here till I know you with my eyes plucked out. That's the thing you do with pig-snakes, you get their faces. Then you get them for good. And there's something you better get inside that pig head of yours: There's no money in that shithouse, and

the man is mine. There'll be no putting him in no trunk, no driving him to no bank or safe house or nothing. This sky right here, this is last damn thing he'll ever see."

"How do you know about the money?"

"I reckon you're not here to get your oil checked."

"Fucking asshole. How do you know there's no money inside?"

"I don't."

"Then he might have some."

"For all I know, he might have a pink horse on a tricycle going in circles around the Christmas tree, and it wouldn't make any difference."

"It would."

"Then suit yourself."

The man looked up at the brown skies. He had a two-day beard and wrinkles on his face that looked like cracks on the sunbaked desert floor.

"Did she have it coming," he asked, "that woman you shot?"

"No."

"Then why'd you shoot her?"

"I fucked up."

"Of course you did. Guns are the devil's work. A machete," he tapped the left side of his jacket, "you can trust a machete. No one ever pulled out a machete he's not going to use. Once the sunlight hits the edge of the blade, it's you or the other. You pull in closer to know what he's made of, to know what to carve out. A man, you take his head; a bitch, you take the guts."

"What did he do to you?"

"Same thing he did to you."

“He took your money.”

“Why would I give him my money?”

“To cross you over.”

“Over what?”

“Over the river.”

“The fucking gringo. What is it with you people and the other side? There’s nothing for you there. And if there is, they’ll never let you have it.”

“That’s where you’re wrong.”

“I’m not.”

Carla heard a rustle and turned around, ready to pounce.

“Hold your water, chota,” the man said, “he’s not coming tonight.”

“Then what are you doing here?” Carla asked, lying down on her back again.

“I’m waiting.”

Waiting. Carla hadn’t considered that possibility.

“How long you been waiting?”

“A while.”

Time. That was the enemy. Enrique had lost the cartel’s coke, now safely stashed in the pocket of her jacket. Suppose the cartel found out. Suppose he told them he’d get it back today at seven in the morning, but, hey, no coke. Ten hours later, no Enrique. Now suppose he’s lying somewhere in the desert around her, getting eaten by wild, starving dogs.

But what if Enrique was on the lam? Better find him fast. And alive.

“Let me talk to him first,” Carla said.

“No. Whatever’s in the house is yours, after I’m done with him.”

“I got to talk to him.”

“I said no.”

He unzipped his jacket, pulled out his machete and rested it against his leg.

Carla glanced at him from the corner of her eye. With her left hand, she could get him on the face and knock him out. She would hit him three times and when he stopped moving, she'd take his machete, then his head.

As the sun set behind the sierra, Carla reached for a rock the size of her left fist and waited for the night to fall.

— 3 —

Mariel Holguín stood by the hospital window, staring at the moon and the stars and all the things of the world that had lost their names. How new it all seemed, the bright and tiny houses below, the streets spotted with light, the cars slicing the earth like comets cutting across the sky. How wonderful and terrifying the anonymous night.

She returned to the bed and sat beside her sleeping baby. Enjoy it, she thought, peace is an instant, my love. He needed a haircut and it would not be long before he said his first word. She would get better, she knew it. A woman here needed as many tools as a mechanic and more skills than a brain surgeon to survive. And she had survived. Mariel would teach her son all she knew, even if she had to learn it all again.

Her head wound, a pea-sized hole above the left ear, was healing well. The swelling had subsided and the smiles on the doctor's face had surely meant progress. Meanwhile, her baby

would not wake for a couple of hours. She could leave her room and all its silence behind for at least ten minutes.

From the nurses' station, Janeth Ramírez saw her coming. Mariel walked like a blade of seagrass. Long and slender, her gait had a gentle sway and twitched sometimes as if jerked by an invisible undertow. With part of her dark, wavy hair shaved for the surgery, she still retained a certain elegance seldom found in a woman under her circumstances. Janeth would say, if confronted with such a question, that Mariel looked like a woman who'd been sent to hell and just didn't give a damn.

Mariel had remained conscious during the admittance and arrival procedures. She bled profusely and her blood pressure dropped steadily. As they wheeled her to the ER, Mariel locked her gaze on the eyes of the paramedics, the head of nurses, the doctor, Janeth. In her eyes, beneath the blood and curls of her hair, the woman yelled desperately, silently, for help. The doctor rolled her head sideways to examine the wound. Mariel rolled it back and stared at Janeth and screamed through the breathing mask, "My baby was in the was in the car full of blood where is my blood. Where is my blood?" She fell unconscious then and remained in a coma for two weeks. A month later, her speech and language comprehension remained affected. She spoke in word salads, yet she'd found a way around it.

Mariel leaned her elbows on the counter at the nurses' station. Janeth cradled her arms, rocked them left to right. Mariel put her hands together, as if in prayer, raised them to her left ear and leaned her head to the side and closed her eyes. The baby's asleep. Janeth looked over her shoulder and pointed a finger at the door. Mariel nodded, took two fingers to her lips as if she

were smoking. Good idea. Janeth patted a bulge on her pocket and announced she was taking a break.

The cold February night had safely settled in around Mariel's shoulders when the last wisp of smoke camouflaged itself in the moon, somewhere in the shore of the Sea of Tranquility, a silent and beautiful image condemned to live inside her head forever. Would she write again, talk again? Would she come to understand a sentence or a word, either written or spoken? What would she work on, without words? How would she support her baby?

The day she was shot, Mariel had scheduled an interview at seven in the morning. At six she got the baby in his car seat, locked the door and went around her 1994 black Sentra—almost new, she thought, feeling the pang in her stomach, the pang that reminded her that no woman had ever needed a man to raise a child and be successful. As Mariel opened her car door, a woman rushed past her. Then Mariel heard the shot and felt a sharp sting in her head. She turned around. In the distance, a police officer, brandishing an assault rifle, ran at her. Mariel lunged inside the Sentra and covered the car seat with her body. She yelled for help, but the words that spewed out of her mouth made no sense at all. The blood on her son's clothes was too much: She kicked an officer in the mouth when he tried to pull her out of the car, she kicked a detective in the crotch, a paramedic in the chest, until they finally pried her out, bound her wrists and legs to the gurney and shoved her into the ambulance.

This was her story, and it would never leave her head. What was life when the body was free and the mind a caged animal? Was it life at all? Since Mariel recovered consciousness, she had received visits from the mayor, the police chief and the policewoman who, because of her inability to look at her in the eyes, Mariel assumed was the one who had shot her in the head; her

editor had also visited, even the newspaper owner, and not one of them had the power to fix her. How could she heal if she couldn't understand what the doctor thought was wrong with her? How could she follow his instructions?

Outside the hospital, Mariel stubbed out her cigarette. She understood the car that skidded to a stop in front of her, the pregnant woman rushing to the emergency room. She knew those things. She knew that kind of car and knew how to drive it, but even the simplest pattern of numbers and letters on the plate was impossible to process. And the sticker on the trunk—an image she had seen a hundred times before—meant something to her body but nothing to her mind.

What Janeth knew of Mariel, she'd gathered from the staff and nurses, the endless notes on the newspapers and the stories on the TV: A patrol truck had been attacked by a woman who fled the scene, and the police, of course, had opened fire. One bullet hit Mariel's door and chipped away. A piece of shrapnel pierced her skin, cracked her cranium and lodged itself in the left temporal lobe of her brain.

Janeth saw her on arrival, at a point when it became undeniably clear that asking for overtime had been a mistake. At the time, she didn't know Mariel was a writer, only that the long-term effects of her wound were not yet conclusive. She understood the despair in her eyes like it was her own: the walls closing in, the floor, the ceiling.

By the end of the month she'd read Mariel's book on feminicide, *Broken Dolls, Broken Language*, as well as a couple dozen of her articles. Now, as they crossed the emergency room to the patients' ward after having a smoke, Janeth worried that Mariel would never have such

stories and language again, her voice made extinct. What would Mariel do for a living with no job, no family, a beautiful mind behind bars?

They could live together—God knew how much she needed a roommate. But that'd create more problems than it could resolve. As much as she admired her, Janeth could never support her and the baby for months or years or possibly decades, however long it took for Mariel to recover. But Mariel was a brilliant woman. She'd find a way around her limitations on her own.

"What did you feel when you saw the cop?" Janeth asked as they walked by the nurses' station. Not that she expected an answer. The cop who'd wounded Mariel had come to visit, and Janeth wanted to see Mariel's reaction. But when she asked the question, nothing happened, just a blank stare from Mariel.

Janeth touched her heart, rolled her hand out, formed a pistol with her fingers and touched her eyes. Mariel looked at Janeth, then at the floor. Janeth thought she'd gone too far. As they reached Mariel's room, Mariel snapped her fingers and sang, "Mujer, mujer, el diablo te viene a ver."

Janeth found the song online and played it on her cell phone as Mariel fed her son his midnight formula. Mariel laughed so hard when she heard the music that the baby began to cry. It didn't matter. They had communicated. The limits of Fobia's song notwithstanding, Mariel had expressed a sentiment: "Woman, woman, the devil has come to see you."

As far as Janeth remembered, Wernicke was the area of the brain that arranged language into meaningful sentences before leaving the mouth, and it was also the area that broke language into meaningful bits as it came in through the ears. Mariel's Wernicke's area had been turned off.

She couldn't produce a meaningful sentence anymore, nor could she receive it from the outside world. Songs, though, were processed by a different part of the brain. So was she supposed to go around singing like a clown, a note pinned on her chest, "sing if you want to communicate," like the village idiot? Should she sing "Help" if her house caught on fire?

Janeth had seen Mayor Serrano in the news. He said Mariel Holguín would receive the best medical treatment available and would continue to receive it until she completely healed. But Janeth knew that in the near future a doctor, one sent by Serrano, would come by and say that Mariel Holguín had healed perfectly well, and was perfectly capable of living on her own.

"Mujer, mujer, ¿por qué no te haces la muerta?" Janeth sang sitting on the bed next to Mariel. It hurt to sing it, but sometimes a woman had a better chance to survive by playing dead.

"Cuando no estés aquí, ¿qué voy a decir? Tendré que fingir," Mariel sang looking at her son. *When you're not here, what will I say? I'll have to pretend.* But pretend what? That she's a mother? A woman? That she's nothing but the shadow of what she used to be?

The baby, staring at Mariel, babbled back.

More than she could handle, Janeth left the room amid a barrage of "ma ma ma ma" uttered by the baby on Mariel's lap kicking, swatting at his mother's forever silent night, forever dark and meaningless.

The devil had come to visit. The devil had decided to stay.

Many years before, at the writer's conference called Literatura en el Bravo, Mariel had met a poet—Memet, she remembered, from Chile—who told her that during the dictatorship the military had attached electrical wires to his testicles and shocked the words out of him. "All of them," he said, "even my name and the name of my father vanished in a zap." She had found it

hard to believe, perhaps because he was downing his fifth glass of wine, perhaps his red sunglasses complicated the rapport or maybe the Bermuda shorts did little for her to take him seriously. But she believed him now, with a hole in her head through which all her words had trickled out.

And yet the things of the universe had not lost their names. They remained, locked and obscured, inside Mariel. “They broke my hands,” the poet had said, “so I had to invent a new pair to keep on fighting.”

Mariel put her hand on her son’s chest and whispered a promise. She felt his heartbeat, his breath, and through her fingers recognized his first word.

— 4 —

Paulina Zamora could see the patrol truck from the mouth of Calle Privada Hidalgo. She pulled over in Lorenzo’s green Geo Metro, fastened her seatbelt and rolled down the window. From her cell phone, she dialed Emilia’s number.

“I want you to listen to me,” Paulina said. “Will you do exactly as I say?”

“I will.”

“Take whatever you might absolutely need in the near future and stand by the door. Be ready to run the minute you hear a shitstorm outside. Who are you with?”

“Wendy and Vicky.”

“Tell them to be ready to scram, to grab purses, keys, whatever they need. Go.”

Paulina ran her fingers along the wheel. She'd never find him. Lorenzo was gone forever. He could've left more. Lorenzo could've left much more for the world if they'd given him the chance. He could've raised a just and strong daughter who'd never look down or away. Several grandchildren, a baby child he'd never meet. The world was a worse place without him, and perhaps that was the reason the world was managed by the worst kind of people. The best were tossed in the open sea to sink and be lost. But the best could imagine the shore and swim for it with unrivaled passion, while the powerful poured more water into the sea.

Paulina touched her stomach. She thought of the sea, that insurmountable beast, and felt a wave roll up from her belly and leave a coat of acid foam at the edge of her throat.

"We're ready," Emilia said on the phone.

"Are you standing by the door?"

"We are."

"One more thing. This is a promise: You got to promise me that no matter what you see or hear, you *will* run. Promise me."

"I promise I will run so fucking fast you'll never see me again."

Look at us, rats jumping off the ship while the real rats just crossed the river to live in comfortable houses in El Paso.

"Be safe," Paulina said and ended the call.

Paulina shifted the gear into first and sped the green Geo Metro toward the police truck.

A month before, in late November, her friend Javier had managed the impossible: to bail her out of a Mexican jail on a Sunday.

“Never underestimate the power of corruption,” Javier said. On the way to her house, he handed her a faded-green canvas bag he’d picked up earlier at the Kentucky Club. “Don Raúl found this on the street after you got arrested. He sends his regards.”

“Do you know anything about the others?”

“There’s nothing on Lorenzo. Diana and Emilia are hospitalized under custody. Diana’s fine, Emilia’s unconscious. That’s probably good, since she’s been charged with attempted murder of a police officer. They say she tried to gouge out some officer’s eyes. She’s in for a hideous battle.”

Paulina said nothing. The gouging, that had been her.

She needed Lorenzo’s car. That week, sometimes after work, sometimes during, Paulina had visited the morgue twice, the state jail once, the federal penitentiary once, and walked out of each place with no news of Lorenzo. She’d traveled in taxis, but couldn’t afford them anymore. And now she had to watch over herself and the child she was carrying. Paulina, finally, had an idea of where she could find the car. Chamizal Park, she thought, near the monumental flag. She found the keys in the green canvas bag and walked to the park. She found the car under a mulberry tree, all there, flat tire included.

“Looks like I can be of use,” a white-haired man said. He wore a black running suit drenched in sweat. He was struggling to catch his breath.

“You can,” Paulina said.

Cranking the jack, the man said, “When the river jumped north, there was a bar over there.” He pointed his thumb back above his shoulder. “It was called The Hole in the Wall. During the Volstead Act, the gringos could walk to the border, stick their heads through the hole

in the wall and have a perfectly legal, or almost legal drink. This whole place was known as Córdoba Island, full of Chinese peddling opium and locals dealing marijuana. This is no place to leave a car, that's what I want to say, even though the drug peddlers are all gone now."

"They all moved to city hall."

The man chuckled and nodded.

"They did, but you shouldn't say that aloud. Something could happen to you. It'd be a shame. The desert's a good place to bury women, that's the sad truth. And the desert's big and hungry. Don't do this to yourself. You deserve a better ending."

"Something's already happened to me, and I didn't do it to myself."

"All the more reason to be careful."

Paulina drove west by the river, past the sierra to the edge of Anapra. A dangerous place, everyone repeated like parakeets, as if poor people were inherently mean. Abuse made a person angry and dangerous. Millions shoved into despair and desperation, shoved against a wall at the end of some dark and foul alley, and they were called animals and criminals and mean when they lifted a rock to fend for themselves.

A fault in her reasoning. That's what Javier and the old man in the park had said. But what did reason have to do with what Ciudad Juárez had become?

Paulina parked outside Soto corner store, where the pavement of Calle Pez Aguja stopped and the desert dashed out toward the horizon. Odd, naming the streets after fish in such a poor place. Cangrejo, Pulpo, Pargo, like naming a blind newborn Picasso. An ocean millions of years ago, coral reefs that became mountains, then a lake, now a desert hardened by the sun, its vastness reminded Paulina that her place in the universe was at the end of the line. Lorenzo

might be out there in the desert, inside a cave or a shallow grave or lying naked by a lechuguilla, his body cold and stiff. And Paulina knew she'd see a fish leaping out of the waters of a new sea before she ever found his body.

"Mi'ja," the woman by her side, wearing a rose print dress, shook her arm. "Are you lost?"

"I don't know."

"Look at that little face of yours. Come with me. Try not to faint until we reach my house. My legs aren't what they used to be."

The woman invited Paulina to sit on a chair outside her house, built with planks and corrugated tin sheets across the corner store, on the edge where the desert and the pavement met.

"I'll get you some water," she said and rushed into the house. She came back with an extra chair and a glass of water she couldn't possibly afford to give away. "You're not from around here," the woman said, sitting down next to Paulina.

"I'm not. I'm driving, walking, you know, thinking."

"You have to be careful. If you want to come here to think, you knock on my door so I know you're out there. The pigs get nasty around here"

"You remind me of a friend," Paulina said, thinking of Emilia.

"A nice woman, I hope. Did something happen to her? People come here because the desert makes their pain easier to bear. Nothing's too big for the desert."

"Lots of things have happened to her. She's all right now, but not for long."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know."

"You better get knowing fast. Women in trouble don't last long."

The woman said she'd get her some more water and reached for Paulina's glass. She wore a yellow bracelet from the last presidential elections.

"Why would you vote for López Obrador?" Paulina asked.

"I always vote for him. I tell everyone to vote for him. I know that one day I'll gather enough votes to ruin the party for those motherfuckers in power."

A beautiful woman with beautiful ideas.

"I have to go," Paulina said.

The woman insisted on walking her to the car.

"Feel free to knock on my door anytime, mi'ja" she said.

Paulina got in the car and drove away. Through the rearview mirror she watched the woman—the vast, dark desert behind her back—growing smaller and smaller. The roses on her dress reminded her of the night Lorenzo vanished outside of the Kentucky Club. *I wish I could give you more*, he'd said and handed her a red rose. In the car, Paulina touched her stomach. She knew he would've given her more, that he would've given her all, but he never had the chance to do it. The woman, the desert, tiny now in the rearview mirror, went dark and disappeared.

The night before, on the phone, Emilia had clarified things: They were coming for her and Paulina would be next. It was only a matter of time. Emilia didn't ask for help. To the contrary, the acquiescence in her voice made the whole affair all the more vile and cruel. To turn a woman like her, a fighter, into a fearful old hag was almost unbearable.

Yet, before making the call, Paulina had to remember her last talk with Antonio, summon up the images, the voices. She had to be sure. She started with the white and pink cardboard box of the pregnancy test. Then his voice came to her.

“Javier told me what happened, Pau. You’re in a dangerous situation. What’re you doing? Where’re you staying?” Antonio had asked on the phone.

She hadn’t heard that tone in his voice since the hospital, after the accident with the police before the end of their marriage back in September.

“I’m at my parents’ right now. Where else?” she answered, sitting on the toilet with the pregnancy test between her legs.

“Our house, for example.”

“*Your* house, Antonio, remember? *Yours*, not ours. Besides, I haven’t changed my address, so *your* address is the one the police have. It’s actually safer for me here.”

Antonio sighed on the phone. She imagined his scarred lip quivering.

“That didn’t end well, did it?”

“I guess not,” she said, dropping the test in the sink.

“I was an asshole.”

“You were, but I deserved it. I used you. All you wanted was a child and I used you and I’m sorry for that, really sorry.”

She bent over the sink, her elbow on the edge of the bowl and her head propped on her right hand.

“That was a rotten thing to do, yes. I was so happy when you told me you were pregnant. You’re right, that’s all I wanted and you lied to me. But you had your reasons and I don’t hold it against you anymore. Jesus, it sounds like a century ago.”

“It wasn’t.”

“I know. Maybe that’s why I miss you so much.”

And there it was, two fucking red lines on the pregnancy test. Another fatherless child thrust into the putrid world. Pull out the welcome mat. Call the mariachis. Kill a fucking goat and have a party.

“I’ve missed you too, Antonio.”

“We should meet, you know, lunch or coffee.”

“Sure. You coming for Christmas?”

“I’m here right now.”

“What do you mean ‘here’? Here where?”

“I can see Juárez from the window, Pau. It looks like lava when it stops crawling and begins to cool. I’m in El Paso. I told you I talked with Javier.”

“I thought you meant on the phone.”

“He told me about your boyfriend. Can’t say it made me happy, but I didn’t know he was missing. That I’m sorry to hear. You deserve better, Pau.”

Paulina sobbed into her hand, away from the phone.

“How’re you holding up, Pau?”

“I’m fine,” she said, and then she couldn’t hold it anymore. “I’m scared to death and I don’t know what to do.”

“Tell me what you need, Pau. Anything.”

Anything. That’s what he had said a week ago. *I will do anything you need.* She’d take his word for it. For her child. For herself.

Paulina grabbed her passport, put it in her jeans and walked out of her parents’ house one last time. She got into Lorenzo’s green Geo Metro and turned on the radio. After a Christmas ad, the host went into a rant about El Paso being the safest city in the U.S. If that was so, then why

was a man killed last night in a bar? Then he played “Redemption Songs,” by Bob Marley. First world drama. Someone people needed to be awakened, she thought, to bad news.

The house where Emilia lay in hiding wasn’t far. Paulina drove around and saw the police truck parked across the street. Inside, the officers slept. Paulina turned south on Calzada del Parque and east on Hermanos Escobar, then pulled over by Don Salomon’s sandwiches. From that corner, she could see the police truck.

Before talking to Emilia, she needed Antonio’s word. She dialed his number.

“I know what I have to do. I know how you can help me.”

“What is it?” He’d been sleeping.

“How far are you from the bridge?”

The recklessness of her actions, the whole stupidity of it, took shape in her mind. Bullets had whizzed by her head, and for what? Had Emilia made it out safe? Three shots, three bullets with her name on them. Hadn’t that been enough? She should have turned on Ignacio Ramírez instead or running down Tepeyac like a crazy woman in the line of fire. Stupid. If she made it to the bridge, she’d never do anything like that again.

On Avenida de las Américas, at six in the morning, only the gas station had opened for business. Paulina stormed into the office, saying her car had broken down and she was late for work and could she please call a taxi and wait inside because it was too cold outside and she was pregnant.

“Take it easy, miss,” the old man said. “I’m on my way out. I can drop you off.”

The old man’s car reminded her of Lorenzo’s. She remembered watching Lorenzo as he rummaged through a box in the back of the car outside his father’s house, the stack of

photocopies in his hand, his daughter's face printed below the word "Missing." And Lorenzo's face, a man deranged by pain and loss. What about her own face? What had she looked like when she crashed Lorenzo's car against the patrol truck, the "Missing" posters fluttering all around her?

The old man drove by the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez near the bridge.

"I know you're not late for work," the man said, "but whatever you're running from is none of my business. We're all running from something. My son's a plumber now, somewhere in Arizona. He graduated from this university. An accountant. On graduation day he was walking out with cap and gown and the guard said, 'Congratulations. It's people like you who's made the world the piece of shit it is today.' Can you believe that?"

"Yes, I can."

"My son should be here with his family. This is not his fault. He deserves better."

We deserve the world, Paulina thought, but they won't let us have it.

She saw Antonio by the tourist center.

"Turn left here, please. That's my husband over there."

The old man stopped and Paulina said thanks and opened the door and got out.

Antonio embraced her. She said, "We better get going."

At the foot of the Córdoba bridge, Antonio grabbed her hand. Paulina let him.

"You look different," he said near the top of the bridge.

She had walked that same path with Lorenzo the last time she saw him, one month ago. A lifetime ago. *I think it's working*, Lorenzo had said, *the therapy. I feel better now. Different.*

"I've changed," Paulina told Antonio, "I feel different."

She read the plaque that marked the border between two countries and said goodbye, goodbye to Lorenzo, her country, herself.

“You should.”

“There’s something I’d like you to know, Antonio.”

“I’m sure it can wait,” Antonio said, squeezing Paulina’s hand and glancing, briefly, at her stomach.

At the top of the Córdoba Bridge, a young man ties a green scarf around his neck. His body trembles, his shoulders rise and fall and you know he's crying. The young man picks up his grocery bags, raises his head, walks again.

From the bags protrudes a loaf of bread and a very long poinsettia.

The cold winds of the Río Bravo run below the bridge. Over and over again the waves crash against the pillars, splashing the shores with sand and dust.

Just like you, more will come behind the young man to complete another cycle as they journey back home. But no one else will cry. Unlike you, unlike the young man with the green scarf, no one else will look back.

Part V

The Day God Came to Visit

The first rock hit the governor's face and with a thud it bounced away, sending a pair of sunglasses to the ground in a spin. The group, all young and full of energy and dreams—a utopian lighthouse burning out of control—they all whistled and cheered at the girl who had just cast the first stone. Even without the sunglasses, with crumpled newspaper sticking out the place where the rock had hit it, Mariel recognized the fat, bald head, the trimmed mustache, all the features of Governor Duarte crafted on the piñata. She extended the stroller canopy to cover Daniel, her baby, then the second rock hit the heart. A difficult shot. Hanged by the neck to a tree with rope, the paper governor swayed back and forth from the first hit and side to side and round and round from the dusty winds of March. The group roared.

Pepe pulled the sleeve of Mariel's sweater and pointed at the young people gathered in the center of the park. "Please!" she read in his smile. How far was this boy from becoming a young man throwing rocks at a piñata shaped and dressed to resemble a hated public figure? How long until his dreams became a torment, and the torment the fickle statement from his angry hands? Not long, certainly. Mariel could see it in his body, in the restless glint in his eyes about to spark into a flame. Teenage angst. A cool, young, violent crowd. Irresistible. But beating the hell out of a piñata and burning it on Resurrection Sunday carried an evolving, actualizing meaning: the hatred for the figure of Judas in the past had shifted now to the figure of modern-day corruption. Even if Pepe did understand the meaning, Mariel wasn't sure that Janeth would like her son exposed to it so early in his life. Mariel certainly wouldn't like it for her baby, so she

shook her head. Pepe frowned, said something that he knew quite well Mariel couldn't understand. So once again she said no. Pepe dropped his arms, letting go of one handle of the plastic grocery bag. A tomato rolled out onto the sidewalk, and to the thundering chants of the youth in the park, the wind pushed and rolled it out into the street.

The girl, Carmen, was something else. Younger than her brother Pepe, she possessed a certain innocence, not the one which comes with childhood and evaporates with age, rather an innocence built into the bone, yet as natural, as evident, as the sweat drops on her skin. Her hair, light brown and straight, was tousled by the wind. The violence in the park made her back up. She pulled the folding shopping cart along with her, the plastic wheels screeching, screeching lightly, and bumped into Mariel, who covered Carmen's eyes and nestled the girl in her arms.

In the park, a young man with thick brown beard and a blue sweatshirt stepped in front of the piñata and pointed at it with a finger. He turned to the crowd and shouted. The group shouted back. Carmen trembled against Mariel's breasts.

Unless the tradition of the burning of Judas had changed since Mariel was shot, the bearded young man had just posed a question: "Who killed you?"

It was the voice of God, a young bearded God. Who else could question the violent, vengeful mob embodying Jesus Christ, one multiplied in the group like fish, like bread? Who else could question the savior?

"Who killed you?" following the tradition, God shouted again.

"He did!" the group responded, fingers pointed at the figure of the hanged traitor.

"Stone him!"

Prosecutor, father and judge, God passed his sentence.

The stones flew.

On the street, a bicycle passed by, splattering the tomato and spraying the juice on the side of Pepe's white shirt.

God, from an empty bottle of Coke, squirted gasoline on the piñata and set it ablaze. The fireball swung on the rope and the rope burned and snapped and the flaming governor came crashing to the ground. The multiplied Christ kicked it, spat on it, then turned around and swarmed away, disappearing into the ashen air.

Long, thin triangles of dust and sand had swished into the house through the bottom corners of the front door. The air inside glowed with an orange, copper-like tinge. It made her think of caves, the minute dark spaces between Mariel's old furniture and the walls of her new house, the sensation a continuity of the key being too thick to fit into the lock outside a second before, the sensation that she had the incorrect house. A wrong turn in her life had landed her in the wrong place. But she didn't make the turn. It hadn't been her fault. No, not a fault, a mistake. Outside, Pepe had taken the key from her hand and turned it around and slid the key inside the keyhole.

Pepe left the grocery bag on the kitchen table and went to the living room. Mariel pulled back the stroller canopy, took Daniel out and put him on the floor. The baby ran to the bedroom, his black curls bouncing, his arms extended to the sides like a baby penguin. She thought the simile was suitable, since the chances of communicating with an animal were the same as communicating with her son. So, no, losing part of her brain hadn't been a mistake. It couldn't be attributed to bad luck or an evil curse, but to a lousy police officer, to a bad shot, to a stray shard which somehow found its way into her head. Somehow. Mariel plugged the drain of the sink, turned on the water, dropped the tomatoes in. At least that remained a familiar routine. The rest of her life was now a silent, cosmic joke. She took the canola oil and the napkins out of the

plastic bag, grabbed the antibacterial solution and mixed a few drops with the water and the tomatoes in the sink.

Daniel returned with a plastic bowl in his hand. In their bedroom, on a small table wedged in the corner, Mariel kept a bottle, a diaper and a bowl that Daniel had learned how to use to communicate his different needs. Mariel checked her digital watch: 14:35. On their own, the numbers didn't mean a thing. She had to compare them to a table chart on the kitchen wall, every hour written down: red for the day, blue for the night, the hours at which the baby had his meals tick-marked on the table chart, so she could compare the number on her watch and keep track of feeding times. Even so, the task was hard. As Mariel stared at the chart, then at her watch, Carmen took the bowl from her and nodded. Then Carmen fixed the cereal, sat Daniel on the highchair and began to feed him.

Her friend Janeth, the mother of Carmen and Pepe, had told Mariel the names of her children. She had written them down, shown her the birth certificates. It was all futile. Mariel could no longer make sense of language. So in her mind, Mariel had named the girl Carmen after a classmate and best friend from her childhood. Every Sunday, Carmen wrote the grocery list and paid and counted the change at the store, all those things that a bullet had denied to Mariel. Carmen knew the precise cost and number of vegetables and buns and patties she needed, and always bought a little more, just in case. Mariel depended on her, and knew she could never reciprocate. Mariel could only kiss her cheek, take Carmen in her arms whenever she needed to be embraced. Mariel could only be thankful inside, unconditionally silent, for keeping her afloat in a world that hadn't cast her out, but pushed her to the edge of irrelevance.

Mariel went to fetch the shopping cart with the rest of the groceries that Carmen had left by the entrance door. In the living room, lying on the sofa, Pepe read a thick, colored book. It

had cogs and wheels illustrated on the cover, flames and ghosts, a mechanized Pinocchio wandering the earth at dusk. The side of Pepe's shirt was stained red and a string of tomato seeds had adhered to the white cotton fabric. Mariel squeezed herself between the sofa and the table and pulled Pepe's shirt, revolving her index fingers around each other. "Change your shirt," she meant to say. "Take a shower," she gestured afterwards, her clawed fingers going through her hair. Pepe pointed at his book and frowned. "Stop bugging me," perhaps, is what he wanted to say. She had named him Pepe after a drummer she'd dated back in high-school. They both had that gesture, that ability to make her want to scream, "Do what you fucking want, then!"

Daniel finished his cereal as Mariel moved the tomatoes to the other sink bowl to dry. She plunged the onions and green peppers into the mix of antibacterial and water, then fixed Daniel's milk bottle and took him out of the highchair and carried him to their bedroom. Along the hallway, the baby moaned and kicked, trying to pull away from his mother's arms. He surely wanted to play with Carmen, but Carmen had homework to do.

Mariel walked into the bedroom. It was painted blue and had a poster on the wall of Freddy Mercury riding on the shoulders of Darth Vader. She went out into the hallway again and found her real bedroom. She put Daniel in the crib. He was bawling by then. Mariel left the bottle on the mattress and turned to close the blinds. The sliding glass door, protected with black wrought-iron bars, looked out into a tiny backyard with a lilac tree. It was in bloom, its white and purple flowers savagely flogged by the dust and the wind.

Who killed you?, she heard inside her head.

Then she heard the bottle thud against the floor. Daniel was eighteen months now and even if he was eighteen years, how could she ever talk to him, make him understand not only that it was time for a siesta, but that throwing things around had never fixed a thing in the world and

never would? Speak, amor, and let your words be your weapon. Her friend Janeth would have to do it. She'd have to talk to Daniel, teach him, mother him. That's all Mariel could hope for. So, would Daniel end up like Pepe? And what would happen to Mariel, Daniel's real mother? Would she retreat into Daniel's background and fade, not deaf, not mute, but just as well? A shadow. A faulty pillar. An old piece of furniture kept around for sentimental reasons. A simple metaphor. She picked up the bottle and tossed it into the crib and slapped Daniel's hand.

"I am your mother," she wanted to say.

Daniel didn't cry. He grabbed the bottle again and flung it at Mariel's face.

It will settle down, the wind, the dust. It will. It'll be all right.

In the garage, Mariel wrapped a plastic bag around the side of the charcoal tray and tipped it over. The ashes from the day before avalanched inside the bag and the finest elements rose up in a gray cloud. The ashes clung to her lips and lashes, crawled up her nostrils. They left dark streaks on the sleeve of her orange sweatshirt when she wiped her face.

The plastic bag burped a donut of ash when it landed on the bottom of the trash can on the sidewalk. Mariel stared at the façade of her new house, the arched windows delineated with ornamental brick, the red roof tile, the black wrought-iron fence. Monumental on the outside, ridiculously small on the inside. She looked at the neighbor's house, an ancient building revealing its heart of adobe through the broken coat of stucco. Mariel's house, her new house, was less a house than a loud statement.

An act of social attrition, that's how she came to own the place. They had sent a wad of documents to the hospital, along with a man armed with a brown suit, a wide grin and a black fountain pen. Her speech therapist had been there, too. She'd tried to explain what the documents

were about and that they needed to be signed, but it was the man, something in his demeanor, the smile, the suit, the fidgeting, something reeked of dishonesty. That he worked for the government was evident. The question was what they'd take away from her if she didn't sign, just as well as if she did. They'd already taken away her ability to speak and understand the speech of others. They had taken her writing, her reading, her means of living. They had turned her, overnight, into an ape. What could they possibly want now? Paper, a man with a grin offering his black fountain pen. She was about to lose something, but what? Mariel had pushed the pen away and closed her eyes.

With a single rip, she opened the charcoal paper bag in the garage. Mariel dumped the charcoal in the tray and stacked the pieces to form a well.

In the hospital, Janeth had separated the wad of documents in two piles, the No and the Yes piles. She explained to Mariel, with a drawing, that the Yes pile meant a house. She used a bill to explain that the deal included some kind of economic settlement, an allowance. Some sort of charity. There was a third thing, a handshake. No retaliation. That's what they wanted: peace. But it was easy to ask for peace, to demand peace, when they were the ones holding all the guns. She felt hate, pure hatred. Mariel had felt it only once before, years ago.

"Get out," her husband had told Mariel's lover. He had walked in on him and Mariel having sex in his own bed.

She'd never felt such shame before, her skin made of red-hot shame, her blood. And yet, watching her lover scurry out of the room with his clothes in his hands, she felt changed. A cool wave, her muscles tensed. Run, they seemed to say. Run away. She stood up from the bed. Her husband punched her down. He lifted her from her hair and punched her twice in the face.

"You're not worth the trouble," he said about to punch her once more.

He left the bedroom instead. Mariel heard the springs of the sofa squeal as he sat down. The fear came back, stoked, perhaps, by the pain in her face. An animal against the wall, she thought she'd finally understood the expression. But she hadn't. Naked, she'd left the bedroom and gone into her old kitchen.

Mariel grabbed a bunch of napkins and soaked them in canola oil and lit them up with a match and dropped them into the center of the charcoal well she'd made in the grill. She wiped the oil off her hands onto her sweatshirt.

The government, perhaps wisely, used paper to wash its hands. Pure hatred, she felt it when she signed the documents. Janeth and her children drove her and Daniel to their new house, a long string of tiny cells connected by a long and narrow hallway, lots of rooms with not a lot of space inside. Too much for her, even if she was healthy. She couldn't stand on her own anymore. The bullet might as well have taken her arms and legs. Her hate gave way to fear. Mariel took Janeth by the shoulders and walked her to a room. "It's yours," she said with gestures, pointing at the room and then at Janeth. Mariel had pointed at Janeth's children, too, then at the hallway. "There's room for everyone."

The napkins soaked in oil caught fire and would act now as a burner. Piece by piece, Mariel transformed the charcoal well into a pyramid above the open flame.

Anything goes, she thought, to survive. But had her life been in real danger? Why had she decided not to run? Back in her old kitchen, when she pulled the knife out of the drawer, had the driving force been fear or hate? She had approached her husband slowly, then coolly driven the knife through the edge of his abdomen and pulled it out and said, "There."

With the charcoal ablaze, she closed the grill's lid and turned the vent open to allow the fire to simmer and spread.

Mariel went into the house. No, it hadn't been fear or shame that made her stab her husband. It'd been hate, her ego yelling for retribution. Not an animal response, rather a perfectly rational, a well-planned and executed revenge. She had let him bleed for a while then, helped him out the door and turned the latch behind him. Soap, detergent, mineral water, baking soda, all useless. The blood stain on the carpet was impossible to clean.

We all leave stains behind, Mariel thought. This house, more like military barracks or the cave of the forty thieves, it surely had stains, she just had to look harder. For the government to have given her this house meant that something bad had happened here. A cartel safe house, a cave to conceal money or drugs or weapons or bodies or all of it at the same time. The house didn't belong in that neighborhood. Less a house, more a statement. *Beware of the house. Don't come near.* The owner had made sure of that. Mariel didn't belong in that house either. A stray bullet had led her here, then kicked the doors open for her.

Daniel closed his eyes when Mariel peeked into his crib. "Back off," he meant to say, "I don't want to fight." He'd grow up to be a strong, wise man. A leader. A hope. Would he be difficult, like Pepe? Would he frown, be ready to fight at the slightest provocation? Because Daniel could fight, he'd shown her that when he threw his baby bottle at her face. A fighter, he was in for a world of hurt. Could she ever teach him that the world despises fighters, that he should learn, as soon as possible, that no matter how strong he was, choosing which battle to fight was as important as fighting it? *The world breaks everyone*, a writer wiser than she once wrote, *and those it can't break it kills*. Peace is an instant, my love; war is the rest of your life.

Mariel ran her fingers down her baby's face and left a charcoal smudge, three black lines under his left eye. A warrior, she thought. May the world be gentle when it snaps your bones.

* * *

The evening turned out well: The wind subsided, the dust settled, the neighbors walked out of their homes in profitable hunger. The ladies loved Mariel's grilled salad: one tomato and one green pepper cut in wedges, half a Portobello mushroom diced, half an ear of corn shelled with a long knife, all hot and seasoned with a dash of pepper and sea salt, plus a simple topping of ground panela cheese on top.

Janeth took the orders and filled paper bowls with raw vegetables and placed them next to the grill for Mariel to cook. A plate with raw vegetables meant one salad; two patties close to each other on the grill meant one double burger. Four patties crowned with slices of yellow cheese meant they had a new dish on their menu.

And, of course, there he stood, among the ladies waiting for their salads: the bearded young man in the blue sweatshirt waited for his hard-earned meal. It was God. It was the young God from the park, the one who'd beaten up a piñata and set it on fire. He wanted a big burger. God's burger. Mariel giggled. It was all a joke. God glanced at her and smiled. He had a black eye. Since when was beating a piñata such a dangerous affair? Had his flock turned on him and his bloodthirsty tactics? Had the multiplied Jesus finally reneged from his father and said, "No more blood," and executed a coup d'état? Had God been abandoned to roam his creation in solitude and silence, condemned to face his own monsters with fists of bone and flesh?

God had looked up at the piñata, hanged from a tree in the park, then set it on fire. When she stabbed her husband, Mariel had looked down upon him sitting on the sofa. Only to exact revenge do we confront an enemy in contempt or admiration, because to truly hurt another, one must also be willing to hurt oneself. In an honorable fight, though, a fight in which our freedom,

our lives, our values are on the line, in a fight in which the gains are larger than ourselves, in such an honorable fight, anything goes: deception, treason, unbounded violence. But in revenge, the odds must be even.

“Yes,” she heard God’s voice, but the word she had to imagine.

Janeth pointed at the three patties and gave Mariel a thumbs up. God liked his meat rare. He pulled his fist out of his pocket—his knuckles fleshless, caked with dried blood—and put his fist above Carmen’s cupped hands and splayed his fingers to release a rain of coins in gold and silver hues.

Mariel handed him his meal wrapped in aluminum foil. He bowed, went across the street, leaned on a car and ate. Sad eyes, that’s what struck Mariel. Judas had killed his only son. For all the time, God had known it was coming. Mariel understood his thirst for revenge, how impossible it was to quench. And now his son had abandoned him. Had he known this, too, since the beginning of time, that he’d be left alone to sour and hurt?

One more salad to go. Mariel sliced a grilled green pepper. God had gotten himself into a fight. Why? Frustration? Anger? To punish a piñata was to punish a symbol, yet the symbols were all broken now. They’d been corrupted, turned into corruption themselves. The foundation of our symbols had cracked, cracked up the sidewalks and into our houses, Mariel thought as she ran her knife along the corncob and cut the browned kernels like tiny heads. They’re figures, sketches, soft tools of no use. Why fight a symbol instead of the thing it stands for? Mariel diced the hot Portobello mushroom and passed the paper plate to Janeth.

Sodom and Gomorrah had never been destroyed. Once a symbol or a parable or an analogy, better still a fair warning, they stood now as synonyms for our world. Sodom.

Gomorrah. Was it sadness in God's eyes, sadness for watching his creation go down the toilet?
Or was it remorse for being unable to rescue it, to pull it out from swirling down the drain?

The helplessness, that terrible nightmare. The loneliness, its faithful companion.

Mariel took off her apron, wiped her hands and crossed the street toward God eating a triple cheeseburger with his back against a car. She wanted to ask so many questions.

"Why did you do that in the park? The beating and the burning?" she imagined herself asking as she leaned next to him on the car.

"Because he's a traitor," she imagined him saying, "he killed us all."

"It was a piñata, just a doll resembling a politician."

"Today he was a symbol of all human failures, corruption, injustice. Yesterday he was Judas the traitor. If you see a difference, then perhaps your eyes work better than mine."

"And what about *your* failures?"

"I'm a broken symbol, too, Mariel."

"Of what?"

"Of power."

"You could change that."

"So could you. We're not that different."

"I can't even speak or understand what's being said to me."

"As I just said, we're not so different."

He wiped his beard with his sleeve and crumpled the aluminum foil into a ball and tossed it on the ground. He sighed. He smelled of alcohol.

"You stabbed your husband," he said, "why?"

"I sought satisfaction, I suppose. But instead I got remorse."

“And in your nightmares, Mariel, when you stab your husband over and over and over again, do you find satisfaction then?”

“No. That’s why it’s called a nightmare.”

“Then this,” he moved his hand in a wide circle, trying to encompass the world, “this is my nightmare.”

“And you came to bask in it.”

“I know why you talk to me at night,” he said. “This is the world you’ll leave for your child. He’ll spend his life fighting the wars you couldn’t win or weren’t brave enough to even fight. First he won’t know he’s being butchered for your mistakes. But in time, he’ll figure it out and he’ll hate you. You want to speak to your son. You want to teach him to be strong and wise, to stay away from the stupid herd, but you’ll never do it.”

“I will.”

“You won’t, you know it. Acknowledge that you’ll live in silence and die the same way. Acknowledge that you’ll be hated and despised and make your peace and live the best you can.”

He grabbed Mariel by the waist and pulled her in and licked her cheek.

“Let go of me,” she cried and slapped him in the face.

“You can’t hurt me, Mariel,” she imagined his whisper in her ear.

She slapped him again.

“Why not? Why can’t I hurt you?”

“Because I don’t care.”

Mariel felt a force pushing her sideways. God let go of her. She turned in time to see Pepe punch God in the face with his right fist and then the left. Then God caught both Pepe’s

fists in the air and turned on his heels and hurled the boy and sent him rolling down the street, slamming his face against the metal leg of the grill.

Mariel and Janeth knelt down beside the boy bleeding from the mouth. Mariel looked behind her. Except for the footsteps of a man who runs away, the street was silent and empty.

The living room pulsed with the emergency lights coming in through the window. The walls retreated into the brief darkness and seemed to cave in with the oscillating return of the red and blue lights. Daniel had finally stopped crying. He'd heard it all outside, seen it all. Mariel grabbed Pepe's book from the coffee table. She recognized Pinocchio on the cover, the stamp from a public library on the first page. The book was a graphic novel that actualized the original story of the wooden puppet: the Italian village was now a suburb, the woodcarver a modern-day inventor and Pinocchio a dreamless war machine that fired bullets from his metal fingers and spurted fire from his nose.

The day she was shot, Mariel had arranged for an interview with a young man who, during a protest years before, had been shot in the back by the federal police. The bullet had gone out through his stomach. Mariel had seen the video, the young man writhing on the floor, his viscera exposed. The protest had been against forced disappearances, a euphemism for official kidnappings and executions in Ciudad Juárez. Though angry, the protest had been peaceful. The protesters had covered their faces with bandanas and ski-masks to protect their identities. Mariel wanted to interview the injured youth, but her real interest lay on his parents. She imagined herself sitting in their living room, facing the young man in a wheelchair. She saw a shadow lurking from the hallway beyond, another from the kitchen, shadows that would follow him for the rest of his days, wheel him down the path of safety. Her story lay there. Did they feel

responsible, his parents? In a sense, they were. In the same sense, Mariel was. We handed our children a pile of shit and called it a world, she thought. Who could blame the youth for trying to change things, for trying to stop the madness? His parents had taken care of their kid, carved him out to be a good man, sensible to the perils of his time. But they could also have fought for a better world and give it to him, so he didn't have to fight for it. At least they could've tried. They could also have created a man who conformed to the state the world was in, a man without a sense of responsibility, an obedient man, a good citizen. A man who was liked and loved, a man absolutely unnecessary, but a man healthy nonetheless.

Mariel returned to the graphic novel. In one frame, the inventor, that modern-day Geppetto, tried to sell the blueprints of his boy to a man in a military uniform; in the next, Pinocchio burned a woman to a crisp. No reason, just a malfunction in the circuits created by a cockroach named Jiminy. What happened to conscience? Nothing, conscience didn't exist; it had to be created. A mother can raise a wooden boy and sit him in the living room and pull his strings and make him talk and move and give the appearance of life, and he'd be safe forever. Or a mother can raise a boy of flesh and blood and release him into the world and see the world break him as he stands his ground.

Who killed you?

I did.

A shout wandered into the living room. Mariel looked out the window. A second patrol car pulled over. God was sitting in the back, blood rushing down his brow. An officer, his assault rifle slung around the shoulder, took him out of the car and told him to stand still. Another officer put Pepe against the car, his hands on the hood, his legs spread open. Pepe, the fighter, had been tamed and trapped. Carmen, another fighter on her own terms, had surely called the

police out of innocence and good will, and had just found out that in the real world our most beautiful values can swiftly turn against those who so proudly offer them to others. There was another shout. This time it was Janeth. Mariel lifted Daniel and took him to their bedroom.

The boy, his viscera on the ground of a parking lot, he'd made a mistake. Mariel thought so back then, when she wanted to interview him. In the middle of that cruel and grotesque war in Ciudad Juárez—a war against drugs or the common people, who could say for sure what that hell had been other than a war between blind factions?—during the war Mariel had believed that the only answer was to renounce violence. Not to give up the fight, of course—she would never conform—but to fight not with the body, a war doomed to be lost. No, the war against the institutions and the criminals behind them had to be fought on a different field. The field of words, of ideas and beliefs. To change a mind would always be more powerful and effective than killing it. And more difficult, of course, but not impossible. Of this, she was convinced. She had hopes. But without words, forever silenced, how could she ever convince anyone?

Mariel turned on the light of her bedroom. The blue wall, Freddy Mercury on the shoulders of evil. Wrong again. An image came to her as she turned off the light. In her and Daniel's bedroom, she opened the sliding doors and went out into the small backyard. She imagined a small piñata hanging from the lilac tree. It had the form of a dragon and spat jets of confetti through its nostrils. From the branches of the tree, she could also hang tufts of cotton wool to resemble clouds, clouds hanging so low that they touched Daniel's curly, black hair. Like a giant, her baby would wield a wooden stick and bring it down upon the paper beast.

She embraced her baby. He flung his arms around her neck and leaned his head onto her shoulder. Generation after generation of modern-day Gepettos had sold their sons and daughters to an order established by the edge of a sharp sword. They'd been sold. They knew it. They also

knew that they deserved much better, and they were willing to fight for what was theirs. And this fight would be against the fathers and the mothers who handed them this hell as inheritance.

She now understood the wrath, the frustration of God. Sending his only son to save a world that fought with teeth and nails for its own damnation. She should teach her son to live a long and safe life on his knees, but she couldn't.

"I'm sorry," she longed to say.

Mariel kissed her baby and put him in the crib. Daniel stood up, his fingers grasping the rail, his eyes bright and opened wide staring at his mother in a way no one else would ever look at her. Love. Admiration. Abstractions, her mind trying to make sense of the world, trying to explain something as simple and mysterious as the gaze of a baby.

Love. Admiration. What would those feelings turn into when he found out that his mother had left him nothing but a pile of shit?

Mariel left her room and was crying when she reached the front door. The shouts had gotten louder. Not only Janeth, but also Carmen now. Outside, one officer had handcuffed Pepe and was trying to get him into the patrol car. Pepe resisted, his body stiff, his foot propped against the seat. The other three officers fought Janeth and Carmen and a couple of neighbors trying to free the boy. It was wrong. All of it. Couldn't they see that? Could they not hear? *There's something nameless inside of us*, a man once wrote and attributed the words to a blind woman. *That thing is what we are*. Nameless, Mariel thought. Wordless. She touched the officer on his shoulder and said, "The boy's not God not kill the hope." With his elbow, the officer shoved Mariel away, then pulled out his truncheon.

Standing by the trunk of the patrol car, God stared in silence at the struggle.

In her mind, Mariel said, "One word from you would stop this madness."

“It was my word that started it,” replied God.

Carmen shrieked when the officer hit Pepe on the head with his truncheon. Janeth, the neighbors, they pushed harder against the officers trying to hold them back. One of them, the one standing in the center, drew his pistol and cocked it.

Mariel ran her fingers across the wound in her head. Will the officers shoot? Will they go into the house afterward?

“Please,” Mariel said.

“No,” God answered.

Mariel approached the grill and grabbed the long knife she used to shell the corn. She remembered the sensation, the blade going through her husband’s flesh. She remembered the hate, but the hate was gone. This was only fear. This was only violence, she thought, the thing we’re left with when our words have died and our fears persist. Anything goes to survive.

She squeezed the knife’s handle and set her gaze on the soft flesh of the neck of the officer as he hit Pepe with his truncheon one more time. The world wouldn’t change overnight, but it would change. It’d take time, but little by little it’d be transformed. Everyone leaves stains behind, anyway. Janeth would do the same for her baby.

To change the world we have to start changing it now, she thought, drawing a wide circle with her arm and driving the knife through the officer’s neck. The officer went down on his knees, and on the ground, Mariel stabbed him once more.

She stared at God, his eyes wide open, his steps faltering as he moved away from the patrol car. “This is your flesh,” she said inside her head, “this is your blood,” and she pulled out the knife.

Then she moved against God. She heard the yells and knew what was coming. But she wouldn't run. She had decided to fight this fight, even if she couldn't win it.

Mariel aimed the knife at God's chest and pounced. The blue on his sweatshirt became a little more intense and wide, a deeper sort of blue, like a sky completely clear and endless through which she started to fall down. The wind, cool against her face, was louder than the shots fired behind her back, than the bullets cracking, shattering the words inside her head. The sky vast and bright, with no safe ground or shelter in sight, her body kept falling, falling down.

All the clubs on Avenida Lincoln are open once again. The owners painted the walls and cleaned the cracked sidewalks, set a thousand lights ablaze and hired guards to hold the fire at bay. Though the music floods out into the street once more in waves of banda, cumbia and electronic beats, the clubs remain empty.

You'll turn right on Cholula and then Ornelas and with every turn, on every street, a new dog will join the barking chorus and the music from the avenida will grow fainter and fainter and then it'll be gone. On Prolongación Montes de Oca you'll find every light of every house turned on, but you'll see nobody out in the street. Why should you? The lights keep the night away; the dogs, everything else.

It is strange, you think, how solitude can be so luminous, so strident.

Tomorrow you'll read the headlines: "Juárez vuelve a la normalidad." You will agree on the return to normalcy once you've read the article inside, small and buried in publicity, the usual pattern for an article such as this: They killed another woman.

You stop outside your house. It is dark and silent when you climb off the bicycle. You stand still. The dogs are quiet now. As always, the music returns and you're thirsty. You'll drink from normalcy—that soft, lulling side of life which every so often brings us back to silence—but not right now. Right now you'll find your water bottle, find your mouth in the night, find your keys, the door, turn on the lights and lock every bolt behind you.

The lights will do their jobs, as will the dark, as will the dogs.

Bibliography

Anderson, Sherwood. *Winesburg, Ohio*. Ed. Charles E. Modlin and Ray Lewis White. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996. Print.

Aristóteles. *Poética*. Trans. Salvador Mas. Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva/Colofón, 2006. Print.

Bachelard, Gaston. *La poética del espacio*. Trans. Ernestina de Champourcin. México: FCE, 2010. Print.

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2009. Print.

Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Trans. Nicolás Rosa. México: Siglo XXI, 2006. Print.

Borges, Jorge Luis. *Cuentos completos*. México: Lumen, 2011. Print.

---. *Nueva antología personal*. México: Siglo XXI, 2004. Print.

---. *Selected Non-Fictions*. Ed. Eliot Weinberger. Trans. Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine and Eliot Weinberger. New York: Penguin Classics, 2000. Print.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: Del Rey, 1991. Print.

Cabrera Infante, Guillermo. *Así en la paz como en la guerra*. Print.

Carver, Raymond. *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*. New York: Vintage Books, 1981. Print.

Campos, Marco Antonio. *El señor Mozart y un tren de brevedades*. México: Colibrí, 2004. Print.

Coetzee, J. M. *Disgrace*. Print.

---. *Elizabeth Costello*. New York: Penguin, 2004. Print.

- . *The Master of Petersburg*. New York: Penguin, 1995. Print.
- Cortázar, Julio. *Bestiario*. México: Punto de lectura, 2007. Print.
- . *Final del juego*. México: Punto de lectura, 2008. Print.
- . *Historias de cronopios y de famas*. México: Alfaguara, 2006. Print.
- . *Las armas secretas*. Ed. Susana Jakfalvi. Madrid: Cátedra, 2007. Print.
- . *Todos los fuegos el fuego*. Madrid: Punto de lectura, 2007. Print.
- . *Último round. Tomo I*. México: Siglo XXI, 2006. Print.
- . *Último round. Tomo II*. México: Siglo XXI, 2006. Print.
- Crosthwaite, Luis Humberto. *Aparta de mí este cáliz*. México: Tusquets, 2009. Print.
- Dorado Romo, David. *Ringside Seat to a Revolution. An Underground Cultural History of El Paso and Juárez: 1893-1923*. El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2005. Print.
- Dostoievski, Fedor. *Crimen y castigo*. Trans. Roberto Pauli. México: Diana, 1969. Print.
- . *Notes from Underground*. Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Vintage Classics, 1994. Print.
- Eliot, T. S. "Hamlet and his problems." *Bartleby*. N. p. n. d. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.
- Faulkner, William. *As I Lay Dying*. London: Vintage Classics, 2004. Print.
- . *Go Down, Moses*. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 1975. Print.
- . *Las palmeras salvajes*. Trans. Jorge Luis Borges. Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1999. Print.
- . *The Sound and the Fury*. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Print.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Trans. Ramón Ledesma Miranda. Madrid: Punto de lectura, 2010. Print.
- Frazier, Charles. *Cold Mountain*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998. Print.

- Fromm, Erich. *Anatomía de la destructividad humana*. Trans. Félix Blanco. México: Siglo XXI, 1989. Print.
- García Bergua, Ana. *Edificio*. México: Páginas de espuma, 2009. Print.
- Gardea, Jesús. *Reunión de cuentos*. México: FCE, 1999. Print.
- Gardner, John. *The Art of Fiction. Notes on Craft for Young Writers*. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. Print.
- Genette, Gerard. *Narrative Discourse Revisited*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. New York: Cornell University, 1990. Print.
- Greene, Graham. *The End of the Affair*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2004. Print.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *Four Novels*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2007. Print.
- . *In Our Time*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print.
- . *The Complete Short Stories. The Finca Vigía Edition*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print.
- Joyce, James. *Dubliners*. Ed. Margot Norris. New York: W. W. Norton, 2006. Print.
- Kafka, Franz. *El proceso*. Trans. Feliu Formosa. Madrid: El mundo, 1999. Print.
- Kundera, Milan. *El arte de la novela*. Trans. Fernando de Valenzuela and María Victoria Villaverde. México: Tusquets, 2009. Print.
- . *La insoportable levedad del ser*. Trans. Fernando Valenzuela. México: Tusquets, 2008. Print.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. New York: Mariner, 1999. Print.
- Lavín, Mónica. *Ruby Tuesday no ha muerto*. México: Punto de lectura, 2006. Print.
- McCarthy, Cormac. *Blood Meridian, or the Evening Redness in the West*. New York: Vintage International, 1992. Print.
- . *No Country for Old Men*. London: Picador, 2007. Print.
- Munro, Alice. *The Beggar Maid*. New York: Vintage International, 1991. Print.

- . *Mi vida querida*. Trans. Eugenia Vázquez Nacarino. México: Lumen, 2013. Print
- Olen Butler, Robert. *From Where You Dream. The Process of Writing Fiction*. Ed. Jane Burroway. New York: Grove Press, 2005. Epub.
- Pacheco, José Emilio. *La fiesta brava*. México: Planeta/CONACULTA, 1999. Print.
- Parra, Eduardo Antonio. *Sombras detrás de la ventana. Cuentos reunidos*. México: Era, 2009. Print.
- Petrovic, Goran. *Diferencias*. Trans. Dubravka Suznjjevic. México: Sexto piso/UNAM, 2008. Print.
- Piglia, Ricardo. "Tesis sobre el cuento." *Ciudad Seva*. Luis López Nieves, n. d. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *Complete Tales and Poems*. New Jersey: Castle Books, 2002. Print.
- . "Philosophy of Composition." U. of Virginia, n. d. Web. 28 Mar. 2015.
- Prose, Francine. *Reading Like a Writer. A Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007. Print.
- . *Blue Angel*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2006. Print.
- Ramos, Luis Arturo. *Los argentinos no existen*. México: Eón, 2008. Print.
- . *Los viejos asesinos*. México: Eón. Print.
- . *Violeta-Perú*. Print.
- Rulfo, Juan. *Antología personal*. México: Era, 2006. Print.
- . *El llano en llamas*. Print.
- . *Pedro Páramo*. Ed. José Carlos González Boixo. Madrid: Cátedra, 2005. Print.
- Ruiz, Bernardo. *De escritura*. México: CONACULTA/FLM, 2006. Print.

- Sáenz, Benjamin Alire. *Everything Begins and Ends at the Kentucky Club*. El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2012. Print.
- Saramago, José. *Ensayo sobre la ceguera*. Trans. Basilio Losada. México: Punto de lectura, 2009. Print.
- Schlink, Bernhard. *The Reader*. Trans. Carol Brown Janeway. New York: Vintage International, 1997. Print.
- Vargas Llosa, Mario. *Cartas a un joven novelista*. México: Alfaguara, 2011. Print.
- . *The Perpetual Orgy. Flaubert and Madame Bovary*. Trans. Helen Lane. New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987. Print.
- Wells, H. G. *La guerra de los mundos*. Trans. Anahí Ramírez Alfaro. México: Sexto Piso/Conaculta, 2009. Print.
- Williford, Lex and Michael Martone. *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Short Fiction. 50 North American Stories Since 1970*. New York: Touchstone, 2007. Print.
- Zavala, Lauro, ed. *Teorías del cuento I. Teorías de los cuentistas*. México: UNAM, 2008. Print.
- . *Teorías del cuento II. La escritura del cuento*. México: UNAM, 2008. Print.
- . *Teorías del cuento III. Poéticas de la brevedad*. México: UNAM, 2008. Print.
- . *Teorías del cuento IV. Cuentos sobre el cuento*. México: UNAM, 2010. Print.

Curriculum Vita

Jesús (Cheché) Silveyra received a MA in Spanish from the Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez and a MFA from the University of Texas at El Paso. He has been guest speaker in conferences on Spanish Golden Age theater in Canada and México, and has published academic articles on the topic in both countries. His short stories and poems have appeared in different publications in Chile, México and the U.S. In 2010 he won the Punto de Partida prize—awarded by the Universidad Autónoma de México—for best short story; and in 2011 he won the Boise Weekly Fiction 101 contest for best micro fiction. He was nominated for a Pushcart prize in 2012. Since 2014, he is part of the Jóvenes Creadores fellowship in the area of poetry; and in 2015, for a short story project, he received the fellowship David Alfaro Siqueiros.

j.silveyra@hotmail.com