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Dust : Polvo

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DUST : POLVO

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2014

DUST : POLVO

by

JONATHAN S. NEHLS, B.S. Industrial Design

THESIS

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PREFACE

Mario Vargas Llosa in his book *Letters to a Young Novelist* describes the inclination to write as a sort of rebellion, a rebellion that stems from a sense of dissatisfaction with life as it is and an urge to question reality (7). I don't know that I would have described my inclination to write in such terms, but certainly, I would agree, I write because the world never *is*. The world as determined by ideology and belief, by common sense, by "truth", often does not square with the world I encounter, and I write to disinter what agitates beneath the surface of reality, to interrogate the moment's "truth."

In attempting to chart the origins of this novel, I again quote Vargas Llosa, who later asserts, "The novelist doesn't choose his themes; he is chosen by them...My impression is that life...inflicts themes on a writer through certain experiences that impress themselves on his consciousness or subconscious and later compel him to shake himself free by turning them into stories." (17). To identify what inspired me to write this novel, I would have to untangle a snarl of dreams and readings, snatches of conversation overheard, stories lived and told. Vargas Llosa has often described writing a novel as an inverse strip tease (*Historia Secreta*, 4). In the beginning the writer is naked, and when finished, fully clothed—that is to say, the autobiographical material exposed in the writing of the novel is covered up, interwoven with the work, creating a disguise that often the author himself can't recognize, woven from his demons and obsessions.

The themes, stories and characters that have marked my consciousness are many times beyond my own personal experience, but nonetheless, affect me as, however odd, however foreign, a startling revelation of the human condition. I often search newspapers, the internet, books for such stories, they are not difficult to find. I am moved by stories that call into question our professed values, the sort of stories that beg the question: How can this be? and more importantly, why? Stories we don't want to believe, periodical tragedies, bizarre incidents that crop up every so often, stories I can't shake free of, many of which take place daily in the border lands: eleven immigrants found starved or suffocated to death in a rail car, trapped for months, mummified in stifling darkness; hundreds of women kidnapped, raped, tortured, mutilated and killed, while the perpetrators of the crimes go unpunished; an avowed neo-Nazi, who called for armed patrols and land mines along the border, murders his girlfriend and her family, and turns the gun on himself. Stories that go unvoiced, ignored, buried in our collective memory.

It disturbs me to find I live in a world where such things are possible, a world that can stomach such horror. And the reaction to such tragedies disturbs me as much as the tragedy itself. Tragedy happens to others, not you, and when it strikes, they always say, I didn't think it could happen to me. We digest others' horror as inescapable. We shrug our shoulders and say, these things happen. God works in mysterious ways. It is what it is. Stated more succinctly: tough shit or fuck it. Struggling to keep it down, to alleviate our indigestion, we finger a culprit (we make order of the arbitrary), and the victims themselves become perpetrators. We say, they knew the risks, they shouldn't dress like sluts, they should have seen the warning signs, and accept hopelessness and absolve ourselves of guilt. René Girard describes this sort of scapegoating as the resolution in the cycle of mimetic violence. Lost in battle over legitimacy, disputants only forget their quarrel when an invented crime is pinned to a scapegoat, and once dead, feast in its honor.

What I have noticed about such stories is that in accepting their occurrence (admitting our helplessness, demonstrating our indifference, scapegoating), tragedy becomes normalized.

In *Language and Power*, Norman Fairclough delineates the naturalization of ideology. A dominant discourse, the dominant ideological belief system, seeks legitimacy through containing and suppressing competing discourses. Thus established, the dominant discourse comes to be seen as natural, common sense, as the only valid means of understanding reality (91-92). In the stories I mentioned above, the dominant discourse was carried out to its logical—though extreme—conclusion, and the tragedy rationalized as a natural result of the victim’s transgressions. The scapegoat, the marginalized other, the voicer of an opposing discourse, once stripped of their humanity, unites the community through their humiliation and destruction (Girard). The humiliation of the other becomes ceremonialized, embedded in the core of dominant discourse, however contrary to its professed values. Intrinsic human dignity, justice, the value of life, extend only to those who partake in the dominant discourse.

I see this as a disconnect I’ve witnessed between cultures, between sexes, between generations, between peoples living in the same space but speakers of different discourses; peoples who come into contact but do not interact in any meaningful way—who interact in a sort of mechanistic exchange of common sense and trained responses. A disconnect that creates a datum from which the whole world is judged, reified, categorized, ordered and decided. What strikes me, is our capacity as human beings to easily restrict our humanity to a confined set of learned values—ideological constructions—extended to an imagined population deemed worthy to partake in those values. Those like ourselves (whoever we claim to be) privilege what we “know” at the expense of what is different, foreign, other. We project our common sense, our “truth” onto the world, despite evidence which everywhere belies those constructions, yet so convinced, deluded by our beliefs, we actually act them out.

I’ve strayed here from the purposes of this preface, because I find in this paradox my motivation to write this novel. I’m troubled by society’s tendency to distance itself from the horrors that surround us while horror is deeply embedded in its ideology. With such conditional values, families can proudly pose beside a lynched black man, and the tortures of Abu Ghraib

can be dismissed as a fraternity stunt. In researching this novel, I came across a number of immigrant based games. The games depict a stereotyped image of the immigrant: Mexican, dark skinned, shoeless, wearing a sombrero; and present the immigrant as an object of prey. In one game, Border Patrol, the screen displays a desert in the form of a shooting gallery. There is one objective: “To keep them out at any cost.” The player floats a gun sight over the screen, snaring three types of “illegals”, who dash over the border: a gun toting, bandolier clad Mexican Nationalist; a gun toting drug smuggler; and a “breeder”, a full-term pregnant woman tethered to a child who in turn yanks a baby. The player gets points for each immigrant they splatter in a gush of blood. The actual human beings, immigrants who suffer and die, are trivialized, objectified. The game presents a model of violence. The player frames the world in gun sights, and though they may not act out the role in real life, he understands who he *is* and who they *are*. Violence against *others* can be fun, rewarding, an acceptable, though not publicly sanctioned, means to affirm authoritative discourse and superiority; the playing out of mimetic violence. Susan Sontag in her essay, “Regarding the Torture of Others”, contemplates the tortures of Abu Grhaib. She writes:

The issue is not whether the torture was done by individuals (i.e. “not by everybody”)—but whether it was systematic. Authorized. Condoned. All acts are done by individuals. The issue is not whether the majority or a minority of Americans perform such acts but whether the nature of the policies prosecuted by this administration and the hierarchies deployed to carry them out makes such acts likely.

What is left unsaid but understood, the codes transmitted but denied, work to announce that those deemed inferior deserve to be humiliated and tormented; and those who carry out the humiliation, as Sontag points out, have no sense of wrongdoing. They only acted out what was all along expected.

In including all this, I didn’t intend to define a theoretical grounding for this novel, but rather provide a background of what compelled me to write it. Before I started this project, I

didn't see it in these terms, nor did I write with these concepts in mind, but rather, came to see it this way in process and after the fact.

Throughout the writing of this novel, I struggled with the moral considerations of writing, ultimately, a pessimistic work. In a series of interviews with the *Paris Review*, John Gardner spoke of three forms of moral fiction:

The highest form is moral fiction in which you see absolutely accurate description of the best people; fiction that gives you an idea how to live. It's uplifting: You want to be the hero...In the next form of moral fiction you see an evil person and you realize you don't want to be like that. Like Macbeth...you want to be different than the protagonist—you want to be better. Then there's the third form, wherein alternatives don't exist. Not for fashion's sake or for the cheap love of gruesomeness, but from anger and concern, you stare into the smoking volcano.

Sometimes I felt I was writing, perhaps, an exploitive book that depicted grief and suffering and violence without an underlying moral purpose, but after reading Gardner's interview, I believed, of the three types of moral fiction, I was writing in the third strain, writing not to show how to be or not to be, but writing to understand, and, as Gardner said, in "understanding, hunger for a world not like this." I wrote with the intention of depicting the horrors of the world as they happened, to neither lessen the horror nor exaggerate, but to understand.

I also struggled with writing about characters very unlike myself. In countering Walter Besant's declaration that a writer should limit her subjects to what she knows, Henry James contends, "Experience is never limited and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads, suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue" (64). James went on to say, "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost" (66). I went about writing this novel with this in mind, to take in everything I could. I visited both Ciudad Juárez and Tucson and the borderlands to the south, in order to familiarize myself with the terrain. In the fall of 2012, I took a class based on

the feminicidios in Ciudad Juárez which detailed the public discourses surrounding the tragedy. By reading journalist accounts, first hand experiences, fiction, discourse theory and analysis, this class gave me a thorough grounding in the conditions of indifference and suffering caused by seemingly arbitrary violence. In order to get a better understanding of the Minute Man Movement and its discourses, I consulted a number of books, articles, documentaries, and websites. In addition, I read a number of books on el coyotaje and the immigrant experience of traveling to and living in America.

I can trace the origins of this novel to an anecdote I was told, and a few news stories I read, stories that marked me much in the way Vargas Llosa describes. The anecdote was told to me by my mother who teaches in Denver Public Schools. It had gotten back to her that a former student, a young girl, had been killed. The girl and her family, who had long before immigrated to the U.S., travelled back to their hometown in Mexico to celebrate the girl's quinceañera and upon returning home to Denver, were waylaid south of Cd. Juárez by a group of men dressed as police. The men kidnapped the daughter and held her for ransom. When the family was unable to pay the ransom in full, the men killed their daughter, returning a finger as proof of the deed. Since, as far as I know, the family has heard nothing from police regarding the crime. This took place during the height of violence in Mexico in 2010.

Around the time I was told this story, I read of a Colorado couple who had been attacked while vacationing on a lake straddling the U.S. Mexico border. The attackers were described as pirates with ties to the Zetas. The husband and wife had rode out on jet skis to visit a church that had been underwater since the damming of the Rio Grande, which in recent years had appeared again due to drought. As they neared the church, they were attacked, the husband was shot and killed but the wife survived, returning safely to U.S. shores. A public outcry resulted. The wife told her story on major network news programs and pleaded for justice and the return of her husband's remains.

What struck me about these two stories were not the similarities—two families vacationing in Mexico lost a loved one, but rather, the differences, the value of life granted the American man, and the indifference to the life of the Mexican girl. The American wife was afforded access to a nationwide audience, which prompted investigations on both sides of the border, including the FBI, while no such attention was paid to the Mexican girl’s disappearance, and presumed murder. It seemed to me, the victim’s lives were assessed two disparate values.

A few years later in the spring of 2012, a year or so after I entered the MFA program at UTEP, when the beginnings of this novel began to take shape in my mind, I came across news articles, reports, and documentary videos detailing the rise of the Minuteman Movement. The Movement formed in part as an offshoot of the Nativist Movement and an increase in immigrant traffic caused by Border Patrol Operations Hold the Line (El Paso), Operation Gate Keeper (California), Operation Safeguard (Arizona), and Operation Rio Grande (Texas) which collectively diverted the flow of immigrants into desolate and previously little traveled routes. Nativists stoked anti-immigrant sentiments by pointing to data that showed whites would be in the minority by the year 2042, depicting immigrants as diseased, uneducable, and criminal, and hyping the reconquista narrative that the Mexican government was acting out a plan to take back the American Southwest (Beirich). In this narrative, immigrants share a coherent ideology and are bent on subverting American society with the end of “...replacing it with an uncivilized and inferior culture” (Beirich). With increasing levels of Latino immigration during the late 1990s, nativist activity spread across the U.S. and took hold in Arizona. Around the same time, the Border Patrol operations mentioned above forced immigrants and smugglers to divert their routes from major cities into isolated regions, with the greatest increase in traffic occurring in the Sonoran desert. The operations proved to be an inconvenience rather than a deterrent, resulting in a spike of immigrant deaths, and an increase in human smuggling carried out by criminal organizations, accompanied by an increase in related crimes: extortion, kidnapping, and rape (Figueroa).

At the same time, ranchers along Arizona's southern border began carrying out vigilante hunting parties, tracking down immigrants, holding them at gun point and turning them over to the Border Patrol. Their actions caught the attention of anti-immigrant activists and drew leaders of openly racist groups. In 2005, Jim Gilchrist's Minuteman Project drew hundreds of supporters to the border and international media attention. The Minutemen fashioned themselves as a neighborhood watch group, concerned citizens calling for border security against possible terrorist attacks, and American patriots demanding that laws be enforced. The Movement gained credibility with support of public figures, most notably, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, Fox News' Shawn Hannity, conservative pundit Pat Buchanan, CNN's Lou Dobbs, Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio, Arizona Senate majority leader, Russell Pearce, and Congressman Tom Tancredo (Rep. CO). Within a few years, hundreds of similar groups cropped up around the country (Beirich).

However, the Movement soon splintered, divided by ideology and greed. Some maintained their purposes were nonviolent, only meant to aid the Border Patrol, while others vowed to take back their country by any means necessary, proposing border militarization (fences, landmines, shooting on sight), vigilantism, mass deportations, and migrant concentration camps. Such heightened rhetoric drew extreme elements, "By promoting an explicitly armed vigilante response to illegal immigration...[the Minutemen] were riddled throughout by people with violent dispositions, people who advocated violent solutions...[who] loved nothing more than to dehumanize Hispanics" (Neiwert 244). In addition, infighting soon broke out over finances. Leaders accused one another of embezzlement and fraud (Neiwert 240-242).

Within a few years the Minuteman Movement came under scrutiny. It was revealed that a number of high profile members had criminal histories, ties to white supremacist groups, and in short order, a number committed vile criminal acts. Shawna Forde, who had connections with Minuteman leaders Jim Gilchrist and Chris Simcox, was convicted of the 2009 murder of Raul

Flores and his 9-year-old daughter, Brisenia. Forde suspected Flores of being a drug smuggler and planned to burglarize his home in order to steal money and drugs to fund her splinter group, Minuteman American Defense. Gilchrist and Simcox claimed to run background checks on each member (a doubtful claim), but failed to detect Forde's criminal record, which included charges of fraud, burglary, and prostitution. J.T. Ready, founder of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, along with Simcox, and later founder of the U.S. Border Guard, shot and killed four people during a rampage in May 2012. Ready's girlfriend and an infant were among the victims. Afterward he turned the gun on himself. The incident was determined to be an act of domestic violence (though conspiracy theorists blamed drug cartels and the FBI). Ready was an avowed neo-Nazi with a criminal record and had been dishonorably discharged from the Marines. In 2006, Russell Pearce (primary sponsor of the SB 1070 bill), helped Ready secure a position as Republican precinct committeeman in Mesa, and later supported his run for city council (Beirich). Finally, Chris Simcox, featured over twenty-five times on CNN, co-founder along with Ready of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps, who had a record of domestic abuse, assault and molestation, was charged with child molestation in July 2013. Such violent and abhorrent crimes led to disavowals and the official dissolution of the Minuteman Movement.

I mention these cases in particular, because from them I began to create a composite figure. I envisioned a character who had a tendency toward violence, who'd been disillusioned, pushed by the sudden disintegration of the world as he knew it. I imagined a character who would be enticed by the Minuteman discourse. A character who'd be taken with or at least entertain facile theories/conspiracies that explain the current state of the world. A man surrounded by other men who share his fears, and espouse paranoid fantasies: looming apocalypse brought about by the New World Order, race wars, barbarian invasions, Islamic terrorists, liberals, communists, homosexuality. Men who bemoan their sense of diminished power and alternately blame it on this or that other. Men who, with a straight face, could paint

President Obama as the antichrist or condemn an entire swath of the population to slavery. Men who would act on these beliefs.

Meanwhile, in the fall of 2012, I took a Spanish class entitled “Narrativas del feminicidio en Ciudad Juárez”. The class focused on a multidisciplinary analysis of a number of texts regarding feminicidios in Cd. Juárez. When I took this class, I was familiar with the serial killings of women taking place in Cd. Juárez. Haunted by the story of the young girl who’d been kidnapped, held for ransom and murdered, I saw the class as an opportunity to understand the conditions under which such an atrocity could occur.

The term feminicidio, or femicide in English, was coined to differentiate the murder of women as result of the systemic oppression women suffer in patriarchal societies (Russell 15). The word carries with it the connotation that a woman’s murder resulted out of hate, as a punishment for a woman who transgressed patriarchal norms, such as fidelity or celibacy, or a woman who dare aspire to a position traditionally held by men (Segato 37-38). The murders committed against women in Cd. Juárez were characterized as feminicidios due to certain similarities: the victims were young, poor and traveled long distances to attend school or work (many worked in the maquiladoras); the victims were kidnapped and imprisoned, tortured, raped, mutilated, strangled, and murdered, their bodies dumped; the police charged with investigating the case often mixed evidence from one crime scene with another, lost evidence altogether, fabricated evidence, or displayed a level of incompetence that suggested complicity; victims’ families, lawyers representing victims and journalists investigating the murders were threatened, attacked, sometimes murdered; scapegoats were charged with little or no evidence linking them to the murders and coerced to confess after torture (Segato 44).

Rita Segato describes in her article “¿Qué es un femicidio? Notas para un debate emergente” what she terms the “hermandad mafiosa” (41). This brotherhood, a manifestation of patriarchal power, is a network whose members include not only organized crime or “narcos”, but the economic elite, politicians, public administrators, and law enforcement who all, to an

extent, profit from crime. She suggests that all men, the “hermandad masculina”, benefit to some degree, as they exercise their power through violence against women. The impunity in Cd. Juárez can be seen as a result of these power relations. Brotherhood members communicate and affirm their power through violence. The murdered women are messages sent amongst members, through which “...se da un pacto de semen, un pacto de sangre en la sangre de la victima, que sella la lealtad de grupo y, con eso, produce y reproduce impunidad” (41). Their shared crimes, to whatever extent each member is involved, work to guarantee their loyalty, a sort of extortion that implicates each member. Segato compares the murders to crimes committed by a totalitarian regime: a secret power disappears a certain type of woman (poor, independent, perceived as sexually promiscuous—women who threaten the status quo) to exhibit and reaffirm their power (47).

The public and political discourses articulated in Cd. Juárez worked to deflect blame by condemning the victim, relying on stereotype and common sense to reinforce the power structures of the dominant discourse. In both America and Mexico, from Mexico D.F. looking north, Cd. Juárez has been characterized as a city of depravation, a place where all is permitted, where the accepted role for women continues to be that of mother, and women who act in the public sphere, whether it be working for a maquiladora or seeking education, come under scrutiny, and many times are pegged as sexually promiscuous (Tabuenca 413-416). In 1996, the then Chihuahua State Attorney general declared, “Las buenas en la casa y las malas en la calle” (Monárrez 37). When public officials were forced to acknowledge the feminicidios, they claimed the victims were homeless and even prostitutes. Implicit in their comments is the explanation that the women were killed because of how they lived, that they sought it out, and even deserved it (417-418). I was shocked to read such statements made by Mexican public officials, though since, I’ve come to find such dismissals and condemnations of victims are not confined to Mexico but common in America, and throughout patriarchal societies.

Another line of the dominant discourse, seen operating in the comments above, can be found in religion. Women in Mexican society have traditionally been taught to aspire to the model of the Virgen Mary, what is known as “marianismo”. A woman’s worth is measured by how faithfully she emulates the archetypal image, or how badly she fails. In this discourse there are three types of women: virgins, mothers, and prostitutes. The virgin is obedient, innocent, dresses modestly, never calls attention to herself, and marries before having sex. The mother does everything around the house; she cares, nurtures, protects, pardons, lives for her children and husband, and only has sex to procreate. The prostitute is easy, has sex for pleasure or work, takes contraceptives, and corrupts men (Gaspar de Alba 81-82). Through these archetypes “...la mujer se convierte en una criatura sacrificada, servidora, subyugada, culpable y dispuesta a sacrificar todo por los demás...” (Vásquez ctd. in Washington, Ciudad Juárez 51). A woman’s worth then, comes through sacrifice. Diana Washington Valdez in her article “Ciudad Juárez y la cultura del sacrificio” notes the use of the word sacrifice in media to describe the feminicidios. She goes on to suggest that the idea of death is a ritual necessity, existing in the collective consciousness of Mexican culture and in humanity in general (51, 55). In Mexico, after the conquest, Catholicism replaced indigenous religions, and their idols were substituted with saints. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ took the place of literal sacrifice, as in each mass his crucifixion is relived. With the death of Christ, Mary becomes *Mater Dolorosa*, constantly mourning the death of her son.

I think what surprised me most from these readings was that women themselves were moved by this discourse, so immersed in the patriarchal ideology they took it as their own—had no other choice, and in doing so, found meaning in their lives through suffering. They were resigned to suffer, and in their submission they came closer to the image of the Virgin. I began to form an image of such a woman. I imagined the mother of the girl who’d been kidnapped after her quinceañera, tried to understand her suffering. A woman who understood her suffering as a trial from God and accepted it as punishment, an absurd admission of guilt—the only guilt to be

assigned in a system that pardons, even rewards, the most ruthless. In creating such a character, I understood I risked perpetuating the stereotype of women as powerless, but I saw it as an opportunity to condemn the injustice of a system that grinds women into submission.

In almost all of the novels and movies assigned for this class, the protagonists invariably took on the role of detective. I found this ridiculous. I came to see the police as ciphers, masked with authority—men who were part of the “hermandad mafioso” in a cycle of mutual extortion, none who were brave enough to denounce the others, and doomed if they actually carried out their duties. There were and have been no genuine investigations. At most their efforts can be seen as placation, in no way based on truth or justice. In these texts, the victims, those who’d suffered, were relegated to secondary roles behind the heroism of the detective, and I wanted to privilege the victim by showing their resiliency and strength through their suffering. I saw no place for a detective in the novel I imagined, other than the mother herself.

The narrative threads that weave throughout this novel emerged from these two disparate worlds. As the title suggests, dust, a symbol of death, of change, of ephemera, is mirrored, from dust to dust, as the novel alternates between two narratives of mirroring disintegration. The first focuses on Levi Sale, an out of work mechanic living in Tucson. His wife, Monica, eventually leaves him and takes their son, Jarret, with her. The majority of Levi’s narrative occurs in Tucson and the borderlands to the south. The second thread focuses on Nancy Velázquez de Salinas, a Mexican immigrant who lives in Denver. Her narrative begins with a return trip from Hidalgo de Parral, Chihuahua, where she went, along with her daughter Erika and son Armando, to celebrate her daughter’s quinceañera. On the way home, her daughter is kidnapped, ransomed, and never returned. Her narrative continues in Ciudad Juárez, and then on to Denver.

In the case of Nancy, the loss of her daughter throws her into a depression, causing her to question the meaning of life and challenging her belief in God. Nancy begins to see her search for justice as futile and increasingly isolates herself from friends and family. As for Sale, the loss

of his job and the loss of his role as breadwinner for his family cause him to drink heavily and act out violently in order to maintain his power as head of the family. He searches for ways to impose his power on others and gets caught up with a group of criminals in the veil of Minutemen, who roam the southern Arizona desert, seeking to catch and humiliate immigrants who cross the border. The two narrative threads intersect when Sale and his fellow Minute Men encounter a girl abandoned in the desert—fitting the description of Erica (who may or may not actually be her). The climax of the novel results in the utter dissolution of both characters and their families.

These stories could easily have formed the beginnings of two separate works (I had been told this more than once), but I came to see the stories as complementary; similar in some ways to the structure of Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* but more explicitly linked. Like *The Wild Palms*, the two narrative threads are separate and remain separate for the majority of the novel. Vargas Llosa termed the use of this technique as communicating vessels:

Two or more episodes that occur at different times, in different places, or on different levels of reality but are linked by the narrator so that their proximity or mingling causes them to modify each other, lending each, among other qualities, a different meaning tone, or symbolic value than they might have possessed if narrated separately...

(*Letters...* 124).

I made use of these stories as communicating vessels, as Vargas Llosa does in *The Green House*, in which the form and content are linked, in order to reflect the breakdown and discontinuity of the character's lives, forcing the reader to examine how these narratives relate to each other, to perhaps intuit the dissonance I myself have experienced. Both stories are related by loss, by the disintegration of ideology, belief and family, and the ensuing psychological turmoil this disintegration creates.

In depicting this narrative world, I felt an obligation to draw it true to life. As Anton Chekhov writes in his letters, "Artistic literature is called so because it depicts life as it really is.

Its aim is truth—unconditional and honest...The artist should not be the judge of his characters...but only an unbiased observer.” He goes on to state that it is not the artist’s duty to preach, but to articulate the problem and leave it to the reader to cast judgment. He later says, “It is time for writers to admit that nothing in this world makes sense” (qtd. in *Prose* 244-245). This might be a bit of overstatement, and of course, contradicts the whole endeavor of writing, the purpose of which, it seems to me, is to do precisely that, make sense out of chaos. I take it to mean that the most any writer can do is tell what happened, not reckon what God would think or dictate the writer’s own beliefs, but to allow the characters themselves to tell their story and the reader to inhabit their world, to understand.

My hope in creating a narrator for this novel was to do just that, craft a voice that would mimic the characters’, a voice filtered through their consciousness. In *The Perpetual Orgy*, Vargas Llosa analyzes the variety of narrative voices in Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary*. I would describe the narrative voice employed in *Dust : Polvo* as what Vargas Llosa calls The Invisible Narrator: “...an absence that speaks, a glacial, meticulous observer who does not allow himself to be seen, who becomes indistinguishable from the object or the subject of which account is being given” (*The Perpetual Orgy* 188). Such a voice “lacks subjectivity” and recounts much in the way Chekhov describes, or rather, the narrator never makes himself explicit. I found the limited omniscient best suited to this end. Throughout, the narrator maintains the third person, in past tense, often entering the minds and dreams of the characters, making frequent use of free indirect discourse, and taking on the subjectivity of the character, as if the character told the story—the narrator never strays too far from their perspective. I studied *Madam Bovary* and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, in order to learn from their use of a similar narrative voice.

That is not to say these are the only narrative voices. There are instances where the characters themselves tell stories, such as the between-chapter sections where Balkwill recounts monologues to Sale. Juxtaposed with Balkwill’s monologues is the second person recounting of Armando Sr.’s journey through the desert. This voice works much in the same way as the

invisible narrator, or perhaps a first person narrator, though I chose the second person as a means to create ambiguity, similar to the voice found in Carlos Fuente's *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz*, in which the filtered consciousness doubles back upon itself, a voice of both recrimination and encouragement, a voice that says: *how did you get yourself into this mess, and you can do it.*

Of course, in rendering the world through fiction, though my intention may have been to draw the world true to life, true insofar as the actions and motivations of characters emerge from their wants and needs—not imposed, the narrative world inevitably alters reality, as Flaubert says, the writer transfigures and embroiders it (Vargas Llosa, *The Perpetual Orgy* 126). Vargas Llosa describes this as the added element. By observing certain aspects of setting over others, by describing those things—of the innumerable things a character might see, by creating symmetries and resonance, the writer alters reality.

As the novel is set near the U.S. Mexico Border, delineation, fencing off, closing out or in, marking and defining spaces is featured but through the lens of disintegration—how those spaces are trespassed, how borders, how privacy fracture through encroachment. I present this in a number of different ways: in setting through focus on the unstable, dust, shadows, what is broke and needs fixing—but here, Sale and Nancy see the world as rigid and hard, but increasingly, the upheaval of their world destabilizes their vision. It is also presented bodily through sexuality and its limits—rape, losing control of the body, the body as object for the other, and in wanting to control others. Sale wants to impose, to cage, to understand the world in simple terms of black and white. His struggle stems from a world everywhere escaping his grasp, refusing the terms he's set. For Nancy, her suffering stems from the loss of control, of others encroaching on her will, and she eventually submits to her powerlessness—her acceptance of suffering becomes the only meaning she can make of the world. The actual border between spaces, thresholds are a recurring motif represented by doors, gates, stairways, streets, railways and trains, bridges, storage tanks, warehouses, la quinceañera/adolescence, the desert

as a place between civilization and chaos, waiting rooms, and police/border patrol/military checkpoints.

Interconnected with and opposite to disintegration, to chaos, is order, but again, I explore order through its relation to disintegration. The ideas of progress, of an established economy, a system of meritocracy through supply and demand—capitalism, are depicted dissonantly, with an eye on its detritus of excesses, as seen in human smuggling, ghost towns, the ruins of stores, mines, highways, buying and selling—the cycle of creation and destruction. Representatives of law and order, authorities, police, military, border patrol, Minutemen are found throughout, not from the duality of good and evil, but as a spectrum of authoritative representatives, often well meaning, sometimes corrupt, and in a number of instances entirely ambiguous, wolves in policemen's clothes. Ironically, they themselves are often powerless, naïve, too caught up in or thoroughly convinced by the discourses of their mission to step back and question their own words and actions, or on the other hand, cynical and indifferent, using their power corruptly. Martin Heidegger writes:

Since reality consists in the uniformity of calculable reckoning, man, too, must enter monotonous uniformity in order to keep up with what is real. A man without a uni-form today already gives the impression of being something unreal which no longer belongs.
(qtd in Kundera 153)

Both Nancy and Sale become acutely conscious of the uniforms others wear, and having been stripped of theirs, no longer belonging, they lose touch with what is real.

Inscrutable powers work upon both Nancy and Sale. Nancy takes the provided discourse of religion to its logical end, tries to find some meaning in her trial, and blames herself. She finds herself in an absurd Kafkaesque nightmare. As Milan Kundera writes in his description of the Kafkaesque, “The person punished does not know the reason for the punishment. The absurdity of the punishment is so unbearable that to find peace the accused needs to find justification for his penalty: the *punishment seeks the offense*” (103). Sale, however, having been

stripped of his uniform as worker and father, assumes the role of the victim, and blames those he thinks guilty of his predicament—accepting no blame. His urge to control, to dominate sexually, to project his reality onto the world, masks an underlying fear that he is powerless.

Finally, I explore identity, both the creation of a personal identity and that of others. This can be seen in the discourses of numerous characters, in how they reify others into simple categories of opposites: sinner/saint, virtuous/promiscuous, legal/“illegal”, citizen/foreigner, man/woman, gay/straight, enemy/friend, and as a foil, the ambiguous figures of imposters and coyotes/tricksters. Both Sale and Nancy will come to doubt their identities and those of others in reference to their disintegrating constructions, developing a sense of paranoia, questioning authority, perceiving the world as undone. In an effort to rebuild their worlds, to refortify their beliefs, both will be shown engaging in various discourses such as religion and politics through means of TV shows, telenovelas, the internet, newspapers, and conspiracy theories.

There is a saying, alternately attributed to Confucius, Native Americans, Benjamin Franklin, that goes: “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I may not remember. Involve me, and I’ll understand.” Gardner and Chekhov make this statement, and perhaps it can be traced as far back as Aristotle, who says that tragedy ends “...in pity and fear in a catharsis of such emotion” (Aristotle 6). Tragedy, then, can be understood as a trial that vicariously moves the audience through compassion. Gustav Flaubert writes in his letters, “Both good and bad society merit study. There is truth in everything. Let us understand each thing and cast blame on none” (qtd. in Vargas Llosa, *The Perpetual Orgy* 87). Robert Stone says:

We *need* stories. We can’t identify ourselves without them. We’re always telling ourselves stories about who we are: that’s what history is, what the idea of a nation or an individual is. The purpose of fiction is to help us answer the question we must constantly be asking ourselves: Who do we think we are and what do we think we’re doing?

“Yes—oh, dear, yes—the novel tells a story” (Forster 45). In writing this novel, it was important for me to come to some understanding of those stories that marked me, and in rendering them

through fiction, I hoped to achieve the sort of catharsis Aristotle describes, to understand, and to ask: Who do we think we are and what do we think we're doing?

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DUST : POLVO

I

That Sale found himself in this position, months out of work, asking his wife for anything, when he was the one that gave, shamed him more than he'd admit. But he asked.

He sat on a stool with his elbows on the kitchen counter, a foot on the rail, a foot on the ground. He held out his palm to her in explanation. "See, if I go to the auction, sell the pelts, I don't have to claim that against unemployment. They won't know one way or the other. I still get what's coming to me." He watched the coffee maker steam. It gurgled and hissed.

She stood with her back to him. The faucet ran and steam rose and clouded around her. "Why do you have to go all the way out to Globe?" she said.

"It's either there or Phoenix. I told you. They only buy twice a year."

"You should have thought of that maybe. You had the money last week." She turned and looked over shoulder. "We have other things to worry about, or at least I do." She at glared at him. "Jarret needs new glasses."

"New glasses? I just bought him glasses." He met her eyes and dropped his glance

to the coffee maker. "I'll pay for the glasses. I'll get the money; I'll pay for the glasses. You know how much I stand to make?"

She didn't answer. She stooped at the dishwasher, clanked the silverware and crossed the kitchen and dumped them in a drawer. She stood with her back to him.

"I'm up. I'm looking for work. Yeah, I shouldn't have gone, okay?" He flipped his hands up, showed her his palms if she turned to see. They were empty, clean. He put a finger to his forehead and snapped it down as if flinging sweat. He turned to the empty seat next to him in search of support, some fellow martyr who'd agree with him: his wife was unreasonable. He gestured to her back, and shook his head. Why did she have to be like this? "I haven't had a drink all week."

She laughed. "It's Tuesday." She crossed back to the sink and grabbed another handful of silverware.

"What did I do to deserve this? You think I did this on purpose? I'm not the only one down on my luck, just look at the economy. This is the worst economy since the great depression, and somehow it's my fault. What do you expect? Do you want me to just roll over and die? Is that it? Maybe we'd all be better off."

"Levi," she said. She closed the drawer. "Keep it down. Jarrett will hear you."

"Let him." He huffed. "Jesus. You're the one pushing this."

"Go," she said. "Do whatever you want."

The faucet ran and he heard the trickle and gurgle of water down the pipes. The tink of contracting metal. "Jesus Christ," he said. "Come off it. One day, five hours, I leave, I come back." His elbows planted on the counter, his hands up, asking her to find a single fault in his reasoning. "I make money. We make money."

"Good for you. You can make whatever you want. You always did. All the time."

She stomped out of the kitchen and came back with her purse. “How much? Fifty? Sixty?”

“I don’t get you. You want me to get work. What’s work? Making money. They pay a hundred dollars a pelt, if it comes out, that’s nine hundred. Nine hundred dollars for driving.”

“They paid you last week.” She turned to him now, fishing through her purse. “What’d you do?”

“I don’t get it. When did I ever take something from you? You went to school. No one’s complaining. How much did that cost? Who paid for that?” He held his hands out flat in front of his chest, pointed with both hands at his chest and jabbed. “I didn’t pay for that?” He squeezed his lips together and shook his head, challenging her. “What do I get for appreciation? A thanks would be nice. You think this is what I wanted? When did I never give you money? And you hassle, you hassle, like I’m some kind of bad guy. Like I got control over everything and I just wanted this to happen.” It didn’t matter. If she didn’t want to give him the money, he could get it himself. He could get rid of the Camaro, sell a gun; he had more than he needed. That’s what she wanted anyway. For him to have nothing and then what would he have?

She looked into her open wallet. She shook her head all the while. She ripped it open and ruffled through the bills. She looked up and glared at him, holding the money out. “Take it.”

“Fine,” he said. “If you don’t want to give me the money. Fine, God damn it.” He thought, God damn it, he thought: you bitch—not a thought yet but he meant it in his stare. He tried not to think it but thought it the more. God damn bitch. He clenched his fist and burrowed his thumb into it and squeezed. “Fine. This is how you want to play

it?” He pressed his thumb against his cheek bone and drew it down slow. He stood and went to the table. “Where’s my keys?” He picked up his jacket and checked the pockets. “Where’s the God damn keys?” He threw his coat down and stomped into the family room, scanning. He said real slow: “Where the fuck are my God damn keys?”

His wife hadn’t moved and yelled from the kitchen. “Take it.” She went to him. “You know what? Fine. I know. I’m sorry.” She squinted, about to cry, her look said *go ahead, how much?*

* *

That Friday he went out to Globe. He’d gotten less than he expected, but well over \$500 for nine coyote pelts. It could’ve been worse.

On the trip home, he stopped at a pawn shop and picked out a bracelet of silver and turquoise for fifty dollars. He bought it for being an asshole, for even asking for money. He didn’t want to be like that, but God damn it, she treated him like a child, and he was the one who put her through school. Who paid for that? Whose name was on the mortgage? He deserved respect. She acted like all along he never had a job. Something went wrong and all the sudden he’s on trial. He didn’t hold a spotlight to her, every nickel and dime, and every last cent. When he was the one, he gave, he provided. She just didn’t know what it was like to have everybody look at you like some piece-of-shit bum and freeloader. Women could. He didn’t tell her he felt worthless, that he couldn’t face anyone, any man.

He didn’t tell her he stopped off at the Shelter Bar before he came home. And when entering, smelling of beer, he didn’t tell her anything but, “There was an accident,” and “I got some money,” and then handed over the bracelet, saying, “Here. What I tell you? It’s nice, right?” And then he kissed her and smiled like anything he ever said he

never meant.

He was the one giving. He was that one that gave.

* *

It was almost an hour drive to Arivaca from Tucson. All the while Sale thought about his son, and the equipment he packed—the four-man dome tent, the sleeping bags and cots, the camping grill, pots and pans, all stored in heavy canvas bags and tightly packed and secured in the truck bed—none of it he'd bother to use now, since the boy wasn't along. What was the point?

He couldn't back out on a promise and Balkwill expected him that afternoon. Sale had worked with Balkwill's son, and on Derek's recommendation, he'd been hired to exterminate coyotes who'd been pestering the livestock, thirty dollars a head. The coyotes hadn't yet killed any livestock, Balkwill explained over the phone, but he'd seen them stalking more and more, early in the morning, even afternoons. They'd gotten into the feed. They're greedy little thieves, Balkwill told him, trust him on that. He knew coyotes—four generations in Arivaca, not counting his own kids who'd left. His grandpa had worked the mine.

Sale had trouble getting him off the phone. The man liked to talk. Balkwill told him of a time he'd found a calf slaughtered. He thought it was coyotes, picking off the weakest of the herd, but when he got close he could tell it wasn't. The slit marks were clean, made by a knife. In those parts, the people liked to think, aliens, but Balkwill didn't get carried away by such nonsense. The butcher showed some skill, must have known its anatomy. Who else would pass through the desert at night and butcher a calf?

Sale knew the answer he wanted, but didn't feel comfortable saying, unless it slipped out. His wife was a Mexican, not a Mexican-Mexican, but born in America, she

didn't even know Spanish. He knew just what the old man wanted him to say: illegals, wetbacks, spics, and though there was some pleasure in saying it, he said nothing.

Balkwill just huffed over and over—Sale couldn't tell if he meant to laugh. And then he said: "Someone who's hungry. Jesus, can you imagine?"

In the twenty-three miles between Amado and Arivaca, Sale counted twelve Border Patrol units prowling the highway or pulled off on the shoulder. As he passed, he lifted his hand in a sort-of salute. Not to be friendly, but because he felt he had to, to prove his innocence, to say, see, *I'm not one of them. Leave me alone.* Among the brush spread over the valley, he noticed a fifty-five gallon tank set on a stand with AGUA written on it. He thought, what the hell?

Sale pulled in to find Balkwill exhaling cigarette smoke, lounged on a hammock in the spare shade of the acacias planted around the ranch house. He swung his legs from the hammock, dropped his cigarette in a coffee can, and greeted Sale. He went behind the garage and returned driving a Gator.

He invited Sale to follow him. "Looks like your truck can handle it." The Gator peeled a cloud of gray dust, and Sale followed in its wake. He led him down a dirt road along a barbwire fence, to the edge of the property. Gnarled mesquite fence posts, this side pastureland, the other, overgrown with mesquite. Ahead, twenty or thirty cows lazed in the shade of sycamores. Balkwill got out and chucked a hay bale at them, and broke it up. He looked back at Sale and nodded. They drove on, crept up a ridge, came to a gate that opened up to Cerro Colorado wash. Balkwill opened the gate, and Sale rumbled over the cattle guard. On the western horizon, Boboquivari Peak poked into the sky like the burnt finger of some ancient giant buried alive. Otherwise, not much to see, flat land rippled here and there across the valley, patched with mesquites and brittle

grass. Cerro Colorado was hardly more than a hill.

Sale joined Balkwill in the Gator, and Balkwill pointed out where all he'd seen coyotes of late. They passed Poston's Grave—the mine foreman said to've been killed by Mexican banditos, revenge for executing a suspected thief, and putting down an uprising. "Not his grave though," Balkwill said. "It's a Mexican buried there, miner who died in a cave in. Poston's grandsons fixed it up like that." They went on and passed the Heintzelman Mine, the shafts mouth, the ruined barracks, a rusted hull of a truck, and looped back to Sale's truck.

Balkwill warned him about the illegals, drug smugglers that passed through at night, and advised him to keep his pistol at hand, and if he happened to see any, ignore them, call the Border Patrol. "And for Christ sake, don't be Rambo. Don't open fire. But." He paused, took a pull from his cigarette and looked down, watching the smoke escape from his mouth. "You ain't likely to see nobody. Their like rattle snakes, more scared of you, than you of them."

"I always heard said, the only good snake's a dead snake?"

"I happen to agree on that, but It's better to be safe than sorry." He took a pull from his cigarette. "Don't be shy. We have a bed at the house. You're welcome to say."

"Thanks but we'll see what all I get."

Balkwill rested his hand on the steering wheel and said, "Have at it."

Sale went about spraying the lure he'd made in and around the barracks. The lure was three-week-old raw chicken and water, set to stew in bucket. He let the meat reach the proper level of taint. Smelled so bad, he thought, it'd knock a buzzard off a gut pile. The grounds were cluttered with plastic bags and backpacks, t-shirts, water bottles and gallon jugs. Coke cans. He grabbed a few beers from the truck, some sandwiches, a

canvas folding chair and shouldered his rifle, and readied a lookout a hundred yards uphill, near a few rusted tanks pocked with bullet holes.

By evening he managed to take down only three. Dying, the coyotes jumped and flopped and flailed and ran out their life, and Sale skinned the coyotes right after the throes. He strung them up with cables looped on either end, sticking their feet in the holes. He thought of his wife. He never regretted marrying her, even now with her as she was, but sometimes when she wouldn't let him be, if she'd just cut him some slack. He hung them from exposed rebar jutting from the barracks' wall. The bladders released and urine puddle at his feet. That tallow musk of recent death. He cut, following the hairline from one hock to the next, going up and over the bunghole, and then cut cuffs on each hock, scraping and peeling. The light from his flashlight bobbed, as he pinched it between his jaw and shoulder. Whenever he paused to pull on the hide, he stabbed the knife in the exposed muscle. She knew he'd been planning the trip for weeks and he woke up this morning and finds Jarret and her headed off for the boy's soccer game, and she telling him she didn't know what he was talking about, that he promised to go to the game. With legs skinned, he yanked down, the skin broke from the muscle, crackling, and he snipped where it snagged. He pulled down and down on the skin from the torso until the hide hung over the coyotes' head like a hood. Fat webbed an oily sheen over the exposed muscle. Someone had to make money in the house. He made a promise, and he couldn't just back out. She had to bring up his drinking, his dad and his drinking. The head was tricky and required more snips where the pelt folded away from the muscle, and Sale snipped and snipped. He heaved and the hide ripped up to the ears. It always surprised him how easy the knife slipped through the cartilage of the ear. He snipped the ears and then pulled and sliced till the pelt slipped to the coyotes' muzzle. Maybe he

went too far sometimes, but he loved her, going too far showed it. Otherwise he'd just walk out. It never seriously crossed his mind, leaving. He loved the boy and wanted to teach him. Sale had learned to use a rifle before he picked up a baseball bat. Nothing wrong with that. Maybe he shouldn't have yelled and tore off like that, disappointed as he was, planning for the boy to be there. He snipped at the nose, and turned the pelt inside out, and left the three skinless coyotes sprawled out on an upturned chain link fence. Left them there for what? A warning for smugglers, illegals?

* *

The muzzle of Sale's rifle, a Remington 700, stuck out the window of his GMC Sierra. He aimed vaguely—he could see nothing for the dark—at the bucket of rotted meat he set out among the ruins and waste of the Heintzelman Mine. He looked to the sky, scanned the horizon. The stars stood out in the darkness like salt on a blackened pan. The sandy dirt of the Cerro Colorado wash, of the Altar Valley beyond, the iron woods, mesquites, chollas, agaves, the crumbled barrack walls, were nothing but a black screen, the suggestions of shadows. The whole landscape hardened black in the absence of moonlight, darkness against darkness.

He imagined the strands of barbed wire that lay over the wash, snaking and coiling with other strands up to a chain-link fence. Fence sections rusted and leaning, or fallen over all together, and sprawled atop, skinned, the carcasses of the coyotes he'd shot that evening. He imagined sand creeping, sand in their mouths, dusting the muscle and bone, claiming them.

He struggled to interpret movement in the dark. He watched shadows. Shadows of shadows. Shapes made out by the shades of darkness, melted into the other, and Sale inventing their formation.

The only sound in the truck or there about came from his own shuffling. Every now and again, he'd rub his cuticles against the stitching of his shirt, loosening the skin. When the skin flaked, he bit it off and chewed it or spit it out. No thought about his hands, the coyote flesh and blood he'd handled, the tallow smell.

He imagined a train of immigrants going north, hunkering down among the ruins of the mine. Smugglers armed with AK 47s stalking out in the shadows. Bobcats come to rummage and feast. The coyotes it seemed had been spooked, some message of death passed between them. Animals could smell a ruse, knew a trap, could root out a lie. He would see nothing more tonight.

He should drive back to Balkwill's, ask to stay the night, but the promise of one more, of thirty dollars, convinced him, and anyway, it was past midnight. He grabbed a beer, and stuffed a slice of cheese with pepperoni and dipped it in mayo, and ate and drank. Sweat had soaked through Sale's hooded sweatshirt, but he wore it still. He rested his beer on the rifle bolt, the rifle leaning against the dash.

He thought about coyotes and their pelts, and how easy they slid off, unzipping, he called it. He'd tell people if anything proved the existence of God it was coyotes, how easy God made their pelts slip from their bodies, and the perfect musculature.

His eyelids felt heavy and he blinked for seconds at a time. His head drooped to his chest, he slid off toward the console, and slept, stooped over, his hand cradling the beer. The ocean in his dream was much like the darkness of the night, dark, solid, rippled and unmoving. The sky too, black but emptied of stars. He treaded water and his head bobbed on the surface. He felt a tightness squeeze him like a vise. The water he tread solidified, turned to sand. He was buried, only his head above the desert floor.

The hoot of a pygmy owl jarred Sale from sleep. The darkness overlayed by a flash on his vision. He felt a presence in the truck, or outside, hovering close. He shot a look at the passenger seat, then reeled to make out the bucket, the barracks, the coyotes on the fence. No movement, no sound. A pocket of fog dispersed as he focused back on the barracks. It was nothing.

Dew had gathered on the inside of the windows. Pinpricks of moisture. He wiped the window, and looked off at the ruined barracks, breathing heavily. Waste huddled against the walls. The walls were tinged red from the settled dust. The sun was just coming up, but Sale couldn't see it, obscured as it was by Cerro Colorado. Just the clearing darkness.

He roused himself, and got out to take a piss. Twenty feet from the truck, he found the bucket tipped over, dragged from the barracks. Coyotes had gotten to it. The rim gnawed, and the dust stained pink and chalky around its mouth. "God damn it," he said.

The coyotes he'd splayed across the fence had been dragged off in different directions. Each ravaged, mostly tendon and bone, a pink spray of blood in the dust around them. They even managed to lap up the thickened blood. Flies hovered. Sale had watched an elephant dismembered on National Geographic, a week to scavenge 12,000 pounds to the bone. He gauged the time he slept to be about five hours.

He gathered what remained of the coyotes and doused the carcasses with lighter fluid and set them on fire. The fire crackled and black threads of smoke slithered upward.

Cannibals, he thought. His son would like to hear about that: his dad asleep, his truck surrounded, coyotes ripping their own to shreds. He'd tell the boy ghost stories of

Mexican uprisings, aliens dissecting cattle, smugglers armed to the teeth. He'd tell of the coyotes he bagged, maybe have a hat made from one of the pelts, like the one worn by Davy Crockett. Sale wanted his son to feel he had missed out. That this trip was better than the last.

After a while, the fire sputtered, the smoke thickened and Sale pissed it out.

He finished the last five beers that morning while exploring the ruins of the old Heintzelman mine, finding trash heaps and trails, evidence of illegals passing through. He took target practice, lined up beer and coke cans, and sent them plinking off, emptying a box of ammo with his nine millimeter Beretta.

Late that morning, he went to Balkwill's to get paid.

"Hey now," Balkwill said, "it is the hunter." He heaved himself up from the hammock.

"Yes, sir," Sale said.

"Can you help an old man?" He put his hand out. He wore a shirt that read: Harley Davidson Bagdad, Iraq. Balkwill ambled toward the porch. "Follow me," he said. "Any luck?"

"Yes, sir, I got three. Not what I hoped." Sale said.

"What you do with the bodies?" Balkwill neared the screen door and yelled, "Babbie!" He looked back at Sale and shook his head. "Babbie! Get my checkbook."

"You leave the bodies out there then? Babbie!" Balkwill shaded his eyes and got close enough to the screen door his gray mustache brushed against it when he yelled again, "Babbie!"

Sale crossed his arms. "I burned them." He lifted his hand to his mouth and chewed on the cuticle of his pinky.

“Good. The carcasses attract all types of varmints and disease.”

Balkwill’s wife came out with the checkbook and he introduced her as Barbara. She had short, thin hair and thin lips, or a mouth but no lips. She thanked Sale and was glad to meet him and told him how pesky the coyotes could be, getting into the feed and all. They left the garage door open one night and they finished off the dog food. Rascals.

“They’re clever,” Sale said, tapping his temple. He thought she looked like a man, and wondered what it was like to wake up to a woman who looked like that. She must smell like Icy-Hot. She looked to be wearing a barrel under her clothes. Sale thought of his wife, he was lucky.

He turned down the coffee and monkey bread she offered. She thanked him again and handed over the check. He took it and looked at Balkwill then back to her, took it and folded it and put it in his wallet. Take money from a woman, he thought.

Balkwill invited him back to the garage, and offered him a beer.

“Sure got a mess over there, all that trash,” Sale said.

“What are you going to do?” Balkwill washed away the matter with his hands.

Sale shook his head and shrugged.

“Those people come from places where they got no education or manners. It’s a loss.” Balkwill’s head shook minutely. “I’ll be damned. Have a few minutes? Sit a while.” Balkwill motioned over to a sofa in the garage.

“It’s everyday,” he went on. “Just a month back or so we come driving home through the back country and these Mexicans flag us down, ragged and grubby, close to dying. Anyway, from what I understood, they’d been out there in the desert for six days. No food, drinking from puddles and troughs. Got robbed, I guess. They just wanted to be picked up, whether it was us or the Border Patrol.

“Anyway, we come into town, and stopped there at the store, bought them some cokes. We wait there, right, for the Border Patrol, guarding them sort of. They finish their cokes, and well, what do you think they do?” Balkwill shook his head in disbelief, his hands out in front of him, massaging the air, looking for an answer. “They throw the cans right there in the street. Trash bins five feet away. Trash bins in the store, on the corner. But that’s what you’re dealing with. It’s a whole other, it’s a whole other mindset. That’s how they are, I mean, you can take the man out of the country, but you’re not going to make him, you can’t teach these people. Not that they want to learn anything in the first place. It’s what’s in their blood.”

I tell you, Levi, it's an unforgiving land. Takes its share of lives. A few times a year I'll come upon a body. Skulls bleached, glinting in the sun, the only white for miles, grass growing right up through the ribcage, bones in the dust. Not to mention, those lately dead. Half eaten, swollen, rotting. And the smell. It's the smell that gets you. You ever had that smell on you? The worst. It gets all over you. Smell it everywhere. Worse than dead cattle. There's no way around it. But in time, the land itself, the sand and dust, takes it in and swallows it. Like a litter box. Never knew what happened, bones in the dust for 10,000 years or one.

To look over the land and say here. A desperate and stubborn lot must've been, to root their living from this land. To look at it, you wouldn't expect crops to take, you wouldn't expect a seed to sprout, ain't hardly water. What in Jesus name lured them? To look at it, to feel the heat weigh down, the heat, and say, here. What life must've been for the settlers, for the Mexicans, and the Indians before. The whole vast sweep. You are alone. All God's creation and the sun. Not a tree but cottonwoods and sycamores natural to it, and only those along the creek bed, just a gutter, really, for when the rain comes. Otherwise, creosotes, chollas, sage. I don't know. A man today, myself included, couldn't bear it, hacking a life from nothing, a land with no measure, just on and on, and nothing but your own hands and head.

They were a different breed. They could see a land like this, vast, sparse, and see life. Or maybe it's they had no other choice. Alone. Cast out. Fed up with what shank they'd been served. Out for gold. The seven cities of Cibola. But maybe, just a new start, something to call your own.

Anyway, it's hard to say what drives a man. Some balance between greed and self preservation. Some thought to what God might think. My great grandpa was a

ranch hand, heard the call, lured by the gold rush. He worked that shut up mine you poked around in. The Heintzelman mine. They mined silver and copper, processed in adobe furnaces like the Stone Age. For years, he lived in the barracks, saved, bought this land. Arizona didn't exist then. He laid claim, settled this land, carved out his piece of heaven. That's four generations of Balkwills on this land.

Four that is, including my own. But when I'm gone, who knows? Four generations. Still, I'd rather die than sell, but I can see it coming, once my body cools, my own kids will have the land parceled out and sold—if they can find a buyer. Not many now a days who could stomach this life, who'd have the grit. Not of this new lot. Not with all the hassle. My sons enjoy it out here, on the weekends, but see it as a sort of vacation. Not a way to make a living. To tell the truth, I don't even know what they believe in. They took off just as soon as they could. Derek joined the army, liked it better in Tucson. Cody went up to Phoenix—see my grandkids twice a year. And my girl, she's off now in California. California. Hope to God I never set foot in that state again. I would die happy. You know in a couple years there's gonna be more Mexicans living there than whites, Americans.

II

Nancy had never seen so many uniformed men. She heard of the violence back home in Denver, but didn't expect what she saw. Caravans of Policía Federal, pickup trucks four and five at a time, patrolling the streets of Ciudad Juárez, the carretera de Chihuahua, and roads leading to her hometown of Hidalgo del Parral. The men posted, it seemed, around every street corner, wearing helmets and body armor, masked, armed for war. When she, her daughter and son, arrived in Parral to celebrate her daughter's quinceañera, she refused to hire off-duty policemen to stand watch at the celebration, but gave in to her family's pleas, and spent the whole night angling her camera to deny their presence.

And she did not expect to see them when she woke that Good Friday.

Nancy sat in the passenger seat of her friend Diana's car, Diana, rubbing her arm to wake her, as they drove north toward the border. She woke lightheaded, her stomach empty from fasting, and her fingers tingled. She squinted at the splash on the windshield—the afternoon sun shone white and spears of clouds flattened and smeared over the blue horizon. That stretch of Federal 45 crossed between sierra La Candelaria and sierra La Rancheria, rising to the east and west out of the desert scrublands, half

way between Villa Ahumada and Ciudad Juárez.

Ahead lay a checkpoint: a barricade blocking the right, northbound lane. They came to a stop. A black truck was parked behind the barricade and two off to the side of the road, all facing south. One of the officers sat on the barricade, a foot touching the ground. He wore a white T-shirt, black cargo pants, and boots. His arms were ropey and tattooed. Sun glinted from his glasses, and he cocked his head and smiled.

Behind him, men were dressed in uniforms, some outfitted in black bullet proof vests, black helmets, ski masks, others stripped to the waist, their hands on their guns, their guns at their waists, hanging from their neck, guns across their bodies. They leaned against the patrol trucks or sat in truck beds on benches or lounged in the cabs with the doors open. She could see their faces stooped toward air conditioners.

The trucks idled and the air stunk of gas. They'd passed through other retenes, and she knew not to look at them, but toward them. She looked at the one sitting on the barricade and swerved her glance to the dash, toward Diana in the driver's seat and her hands rubbing the steering wheel. She tilted her head and looked to her daughter in the backseat, could hear her son behind her rattling beads.

The one sitting on the barricade sauntered toward the car. His eyes, when he took off his glasses, nearing the car, were wide set and deep in the sockets like an owl. His hand held to tap at the driver side window and Diana downed the glass before his tap fell.

"Inspección," he said. He smiled, stooped and looked into the car. Another car came to a stop behind them and he stood and waved them on. He stooped and rested a forearm on the roof and pressed his hand on the door. His head inside the car. A crucifix, Jesus upside down on the cross, was tattooed on his forearm. He looked at each

of them in turn.

He stood up and nodded to the other men. “Okay,” he said, “Identificaciones y tarjeta de circulación.” He stooped again and looked in the window, looked passed Diana and Nancy to the back seat, and said to Erika, her daughter, “Hello, niña,” and gave a fluttering wave. Erika’s hair was still set in ringlets from her quinceañera. “Okay, let’s see what we got. No se preocupen.”

Diana offered up Nancy and Erika’s passport cards from her purse, and took out her license. Nancy fished out her son, Armando’s, passport card and handed it over.

The officer went back to his truck.

Diana winced and told Nancy she thought the officer was drunk. Nancy turned to Erika and smiled. “Venimos llegando.”

The officer took a while with their IDs. The other officers took turns in front of the air conditioners. Three hopped down from the truck bed nearest, and walked toward the car, looked in the windows. Nancy glanced but did not look.

The breeze was slight and the air warm.

Nancy overheard, or thought she made out, coming from one of the men, “...a la chingada con esa mierda, güey, bajála y ya.” In back of one of the trucks, a man stood up, and grabbed the crossbar. From what she saw, he looked to be completely naked. “Yo me la cojo, a la pochita. Me la pelas, güey. Yo me la cojo.” She didn’t believe it, did she hear that?

After a few more minutes, the officer with the IDs strolled back to the car. He’d put on his sun glasses. The glasses reflected a white spot, the sun shining in each lens like aspirin. “No. No, no,” he said. “¿Son sureñas? No creo.” He pointed with two fingers at Nancy and Erika. “Esas, no se parecen a la foto.” He put his head in the window to

get a better look at Nancy. “Esa, en la foto es más gorda, más blanca.” He flicked the card at Nancy, who put it in her purse. “Y esa.” He went to the back window where Erika sat. He took off his glasses. He leaned his forearm against the top of the door and put his face to the window. He tapped on the window with his forefinger and motioned her to put down the window. He put his head in the window, close to the girl’s face. “La niña tampoco. La de la foto, es más flaca, más morena. ¿Es tuya?” he asked Diana, who shook her head no. He went to the next window where Nancy sat. “¿Es tuya? ¿La pochita?” She nodded.

He laughed, and said: “Los nombres no son.”

He returned to where Erika sat. He opened the door and undid her belt.

* *

Nancy spoke not a word since the men had taken Erika. One of the trucks had left off trailing them a while back. She wept now, a stifled panting. Mascara streaked around her eyes, and a smear ran down her cheek. She watched the land flash past in a dull blur of yellows and browns. The bushes had shed all their leaves and the grass stalks were flattened by the wind, though no wind blew. There was no sign of spring.

They sped over the flat road northbound into Ciudad Juárez. Diana had stopped telling her not worry, they would get the money, they would get Erika—to think it, to hear it only made Nancy cry more. Diana gabbed, went on with her chismes, something about a pregnant sister.

Meanwhile, Armando sat in the back whipping himself with beads. His cheeks and forehead reddened.

She watched the road in the far distance, beyond the cracking grooves, the lines, where it dwindled to a single point. No point at all, she thought, just there at the end.

Power lines ran along the highway. Far ahead, cars piled up and seemed to stop. Further on, another retén came into view. The highway merged into one lane and they filed in behind a line of cars. On the shoulder stood a compound of gray-green barracks with SIEMPRE LEALES written on the nearest wall. The soldiers wore desert camouflage.

They pulled up to the checkpoint booth. A Humvee, camouflaged with the same print as the soldier's fatigues, was parked behind the booth. A soldier assessed them. He asked them where they came from and where they were going. He stepped out and looked inside the car. He stood before each window, tilted his head and seemed to whisper something into the walkie-talkie at his shoulder, and then passed to the next, appraising them.

As he stood at her window Nancy stared at the dashboard, her face red and swollen, eyes blacked by mascara. She held back the urge to pour out her story, Erika taken just moments before, to someone, anyone, this man. Was it the same checkpoint? The same men? The same unquestionable authority that would take what it would?

The soldier returned to the booth and Diana petted at her arm as if to stifle her. "No digas nada. Todo saldrá bien."

Armando sat behind Diana, his head nodding rhythmically and he whipped himself in the face with strands of beads. Erika's backpack sat on the seat beside him.

There was a minivan with all of its doors opened parked a ways up, under a corrugated roof. A family stood behind the van with their arms crossed, staring at the pavement.

They didn't ask for ID or registration. Didn't say anything, but watched from the booth. He stepped down again, went to Armando's door, leaned to the window, and

watched the boy bowing and whipping himself. He stuck his face into the open window and said finally, “¿Y él qué?”

Nancy stroked the back of her neck, coiling a hair round her finger.

Diana gathered her hair, and looked at Nancy, sitting silently. “Es que él es tontito,” Diana said, motioning at the boy.

Nancy nodded in agreement, looking down at the dashboard.

The soldier glanced at the booth and then looked in at the boy. He came back to the front window, and stooped down to catch Nancy’s eye. She glanced at him and he gave her a sympathetic smile. He shrugged, swirled his hand, pointed up the road, and said, “Pos, ándale.”

They went on. Off to the side, semis were parked, the road lined with tires cut in half and painted white. Officers inspected cars parked under an awning opposite the semis. Behind one of the cars, a man was being frisked. Four soldiers stood around an extension ladder that leaned against a lamppost.

A semi, hauling two sides of a house on two separate trailers, pulled out in front of them. They set off and passed the semi and sped on under the crisscrossing wires of an electrical substation.

Traffic wafted behind and against them, pickup trucks and semis. Onward, the dunes of Salamayuca rippled, the sand swallowing what little growth.

They passed a pecan grove and a hacienda hidden deep, just visible behind the naked, red and fizzling branches. Nancy, wiping her tears, could just see the hacienda beyond.

“Hijos de la chingada,” Diana said, looking off at the hacienda. She went on, but Nancy didn’t follow, and stayed silent. *Las pinche policía, los militares, las*

maquiladoras—¿Sabes? ¿Y las autoridades? ¿El presidente? ¿El gobernador? Y esa gente fronchis. Corruptos-cabrones, todos. You can't trust anyone, Diana explained. She didn't trust her own husband, and they lived in the same house. They would pay the ransom. They would get Nancy's daughter. It's the city. Everyone's dirty and everyone's clean.

They neared Ciudad Juárez, passing vast tracks of salvage yards, warehouses, a giant mound of gray dust outside a factory—dust let loose at its peak, chain link fences, planes ascending while others came down. Palms and junipers and ocotillos lined the medians. The highway became a city street.

At a stoplight, Nancy looked out the window, gasping, wheezing almost, she tried to keep quiet. She hadn't more than nodded or wiped her eyes since the men had taken her daughter. She looked at an ocotillo on the side of the road. She imagined the branches as the trajectory of a hundred flies spooked from a carcass, spooked and scattered, the branches gnarled and tortured, drawing the course of their flight.

They stopped at an ATM outside a Banamex, where Nancy withdrew all the money she could. Afterward, they parked at an S Mart just up the street.

Nancy made calls to her dad, her husband, her two sisters-in-law in Denver and her brother-in-law in Houston, her voice jittery and halting as she explained what happened. They all promised to send money.

They went on to Walmart, and spent the better part of two hours parked outside, waiting for her family to call with the transfer codes. Nancy pulled and twisted the hair on the back of her neck. Armando rocked in the back seat, hugging himself, a string of drool hung from his chin.

None of this could be happening, Nancy thought. They were good people. God

only hurts bad people—pecadores. Maybe it was the quinceañera, Erika, stayed up late. She might have snuck off. No. She was a good girl. She was a good girl.

Nancy asked why they didn't call the police.

“¿La policía?” Diana said. “No hay.” Who did she think those men were? If they weren't police—and they probably were—they were protected by the police, and if they weren't protected by the police, they would kill the police who went after them. They killed three last week. The only police who did their job were dead. “Tienes que hacer lo que dicen. ¿Entiendes?”

Nancy's family called with the codes, Armando had fallen asleep and they left him in the car. Inside, they edged and elbow, through the crowd, stood in line, and in less than twenty minutes Nancy picked up the money. The cashier didn't even ask for ID. All in all, Nancy collected 800 dollars, 400 from her brother-in-law in Houston, and 400 from a sister-in-law in Denver. The others sent through Western Union.

From Walmart they went on to the Elektra. They traveled west down avenida Paseo Triunfo de República and on to avenida 16 de Septiembre, and a ways down, passed the cross streets of Paraguay, Perú, Ecuador, Colombia, Honduras, Nicaragua.

Two Policía Federal patrol trucks drove up ahead, near but pulling off in the distance. Two officers stood in the bed of each truck, each with a leg up resting on the lip of the truck bed, another sat on a bench with a shotgun aimed upward between his legs. The same trucks. She remembered their nosing rifles, the muzzle up against her breast, against her face. The policeman wore black bullet proof vests, black helmets. Nancy imagined Diana pulling up beside them to plea for help but the police only turned away, would turn away endlessly, showing their backs, as if they had no face. However they approached their backs would appear. When Nancy looked to find them in traffic they

had disappeared.

The traffic plodded. The sky was blue and somewhere waning, the sun shone brightly. As they passed over avenida Ejército Nacional, the Franklin Mountains over El Paso came clear into view, and again as they rose over calle de la Raza.

They neared the Elektra and the Plaza de Armas and the bell towers of Catedral de Ciudad Juárez came into view at the end of the street. They parked and on the sidewalk, half mannequins wearing jeans were lined up along the plate glass window of a store called Alta Moda. The mannequins were just hips, legs, and feet, no torso, no breasts, no arms, no head. A red saw blade ripping: the reflection of the Elektra logo across the street reflected in the plate glass window behind the mannequins. The mannequin's asses posed toward the street.

Nancy was afraid to get out on traffic-side of the car, so she crawled out behind Diana. Armando slept.

There was no one in line at the Western Union counter. The clerk had graying frizzy hair, cut short, a broad forehead, and a chin that tucked into his neck. He seemed to scowl but he smiled, his teeth broad and gray.

Nancy gave her name and the transfer number, and when asked, without thinking she produced the passport card Diana had given her to cross the border. She had memorized the name: Teresa R Mejía Bejarano. Teresa R Mejía Bejarano. Teresa R Mejía Bejarano. Date of Birth: 12 Nov 1977. She saw her mistake when the card slipped from her hand, and knew he wouldn't give her the money.

"No, señorita," the clerk said, "ese no es el nombre que me aparece aquí." He held up the card and flipped it over. "¿Dónde conseguiste eso?" He looked closer at the ID. "Pos no. No te pareces."

“¿No confían en mí?” Nancy said.

“No es cosa de confianza. Esas son las reglas, señorita. Lo siento, pero, es una medida de seguridad.” He leaned toward the telephone beside the register and was about to pick up the phone when Diana nudged in front of Nancy, lunged over the counter and swiped the card from his hand. In the same movement, Nancy was dragged out the door with her, crossing the street and off down the road.

* *

When they arrived that evening to Diana’s house, failing to get all the money from any of the nearby Western Unions, her family failing to send by other means, Nancy feared not only that her daughter was dead, but she, her son, her husband, her family in Parral, would all be hunted down. Some knowing force had turned against them, they were cursed. Fingered by the devil, guilty of a crime, but someone else, some judge knew of their guilt and had marked them. If only she had more time, she would atone. She saw Diana’s house as her punishment, the first of many.

Armando had a fit as they were coming in. He hit himself in the face, drawing blood, and clawed Diana when she tried to help Nancy calm him down. They finally managed to put his weighted vest on, but only after neighborhood boys gathered outside the fence. Others watched on from open doors.

When they got inside, Diana whispered to Nancy, complaining about her neighbors: “No me hablas de esos cholos. A la chingada con esos cholos. Todos. Todos los días con su bulla y mierda.”

Nancy looked at Diana. *What did it matter?*

“Nomás, Digo,” Diana said, “no son mala gente, nomás que no les hablo. Pos son gente sinvergüenza con sus chismes y todo el rollo.”

After a few minutes, they put Armando on the sofa. Nancy laid on him awhile, he stopped grunting, and panted, his eyes rolling up into his skull like he was trying to read something on his forehead. His lips strained.

Diana offered to make dinner, and Nancy said nothing. She only wanted to shower. To collapse under a stream of water. When Armando lay quietly, she looked out the window, through the metal lath and the wrought iron window guard.

The house lay on the south side of barrio La Chaveña, on the corner where José de Urquidi ends against Paso del Norte. From outside Nancy thought it looked like a prison, and from inside looking out. Razor wire capped the white wrought-iron fence. The second story didn't have a roof, just a wall with razor wire coiled atop. From below, the second story looked like a watchtower. The first story was painted a pale green, and the second, half turquoise, half unpainted.

Across the street, the houses were built against a train-yard fence. A patchwork of concrete block houses, corrugated roofs held down by railroad ties and tires, second stories emerging here and there. The house fronts appeared to be a single wall, a wall with doors and windows. Colors marked the break between houses: lime, mustard, salmon.

Through the louvered windows and the iron grates, Nancy watched a woman who sat on top of a cooler, outside an open door, next to a sign that read \$80 TRIPAS. A few boys stood outside Diana's fence, trying to see what happened to the boy who'd thrown a fit. Across the street, two boys sat on the high curbed sidewalk above a drainage grate. One banged a stick against the grate bars, beating out some rhythm. Nancy watched but couldn't hear. She thought of her daughter.

Diana offered food, but Nancy wasn't hungry.

Nancy didn't sleep at all that night before the arranged drop-off. The clatter of trains kept her up. One after another, a sustained roar. Towers of stadium lighting rose from behind the houses and shone on the tracks behind the wall. Something behind that wall was kept from her. Through the night, she was left only with the beating roar and scream of trains. She couldn't tell where one train stopped and another began, where one train headed, north or south. Alone, the trains neared as the screams of babies, thousands of babies screams climaxing and held for a second with the thunder of their passing, and then the clack-click or click-click-clack chugged off and receded into the night. And just as soon as the tracks lay silent, the screams rose again. A river that ran both up and down stream, scattering from that point.

In the distance you hear a bark. With the bark a stab in your stomach, the fear you swallow, tell yourself: don't think. Don't think of the dogs they might unleash or already have, la migra, on your trail. Don't think of Nancy, of your newborn daughter. Are you being followed? Have they found your track? Is this man you follow, your cousin, a fool leading you into their hands? Could you run in the scatter, survive alone? Don't think about running, no one else seems to have noticed. You tell your feet to move, and they move, without your order. You don't have to think about that, you go on, in this, your first night in what you believe to be America, somewhere in the chaparral outside Hidalgo, across the Rio Grande, in Reynosa.

Your cousin told you when he saw the look on your face, after you'd all just scrambled up the banks, stood almost naked in your sopping underwear, as you put on your clothes, he told you: "No te preocupes, carnal. Ya estamos. ¿Ves las luces? Allí vamos. Tranquilo, carnal. Es un brinco no más." You wanted to believe him, want to. He tells you if they come, if you have to run, to keep your eye on the postería, watch the power lines to gather your bearings. Watch the lines and go north. You look now and there they run, above the darkness of the snagging brush, the cables blacker still than the blackness of the night. You can't help but think, if they catch you, if you get lost, of the stories told. Los rinches who like as not would gun you down, as an animal, a criminal, with every right and yours but to die. Heard told of corpses on the path, men who'd hung themselves on barbwire, or lynched, a noose hung in a tree, bones below, half buried when come upon, skin leathered to the crispness of fried chicken. The dog's bark echoes in the distance and everyone ignores the bounding call. There is danger in each sound, the rattle of a leaf, the snap of a branch. You breathe. You do not think. You breathe. You move, compact, clinging to your pack, ready to bolt at the slightest

threat, and the dog's bark recedes and the bark disappears.

III

Tires crunched on the gravel outside Sale's house. He knew it was his wife and son. But still he got up, holding his pants, unbuckled and unzipped, his erection off to the side, and in case it wasn't them, he went to the window.

The trunk of her Malibu stood open, parked behind Sale's project car, an '84 Camaro, and there, at the trunk, they both stood, gathering the handles of grocery bags. His wife always came home smelling sour of work, the messes of children dried and caked into her clothes: Play Doh, paint, glue sticks, vomit. Her pants were smeared on the back pocket. She must've sat in something. Sale assumed it was four, Tuesday? Wednesday? when his wife usually got off work at the day care. During the summer, Jarret went along with her, but no one forced the boy.

Sale patted down his weakening erection, pulled up his pants, and then went back to the computer and turned off the volume. Muted, bodies thrust and rubbed on the computer screen. He had almost gotten off, and lost three hours before he knew it, in search of the right video. He shut down the web page, and the video: Big ass drill in Brazil.

The first step she took in the door, he wanted her to shut up. Her voice carried

through the walls, frantic and muffled. Sale buckled his belt, made sure his zipper was up, and shut down the web pages he'd opened, pop-ups of other porn sites, and live-action cams. His son responded to his wife above, muffled—the walls in between, a voice different only in force, but smaller.

He'd meant to look for work. He applied for jobs he wouldn't even consider if he got called back: bars, restaurants, Walmart, landscaping. Work that required background checks. Work he applied to just to tell his wife he'd done something that day, and for the last six months.

That afternoon, he posted to the Arizona Firearm Owners Association's discussion forum, under the screen name NavySeal49:

Coyote Extermination Services Offered: Anyone with coyotes harassing livestock or being annoying for any reason, or just know of a good spot, please let me know. I work for \$30 a head and would be happy to help you rid your property of these obnoxious critters.

His screen avatar was a man with a shaved head, wearing black leather, his arms crossed in an X, hands gripping stainless-steel Desert Eagles, and his head bowed as if in prayer.

Feet pattered down the hall. The door opened a crack.

"Dad," his son said, "there's chicken."

"Yeah." His voice cracked and he cleared his throat. Light entered dimly from the small windows set high on the wall. Tepid air blew from the vents and agitated the dust that hung in the air. "I'll be out. I'm working on something."

"Can you take me to soccer practice?" Jarret said, his head sticking out from behind the door.

Sale craned his neck and angled the computer screen away. "Yeah." He leaned

back, closed his eyes, pressed his thumb and forefinger into his eye sockets and rubbed. He then dragged his hand over the stubble on his cheek. He opened his eyes and looked at his son. "Of course, son. I said I would."

"Okay. Mom said we gotta hurry."

"Yeah."

The boy ran off down the hall.

"What's the hurry?" Sale asked, but the boy was gone, his feet patted down the hall, and the muffle of voices rose again.

His son yelled from the kitchen, "Dad, come on, Dad."

When Sale got to the kitchen, he realized it was past six. He thought of another lost day. Woken at six-thirty for breakfast, back to sleep when they left, and up again around eleven to look for work. He filled out a few job applications and felt worthless. His wife paid the monthly bill for the internet, and the cable, and the mortgage. His wife helped with gas, questioned his hunting trips, and paid attention to the mileage gauge. His wife didn't know of the money he'd saved and stashed.

She'd bought chicken and sides from Safeway. She set out a stack of foam plates and plastic forks. A two liter of Dr. Pepper and a stack of plastic cups sat near the sink. A bucket of chicken, biscuits, tubs of coleslaw, mashed potatoes, and macaroni and cheese were set out on the maroon counter. Jarret sat on the other side of the counter with a drumstick in his hand. He chomped and snuck bites of macaroni and cheese from the tub on the other side of the counter.

"Hey," Sale said, looking toward, not at his wife.

"You better hurry up and eat," Monica said. "Jarret has to be there at seven." She turned to Jarret and told him if he eats too much he'll throw up, and then took the

drumstick from his mouth and told him to go get ready.

“Thanks hon,” Sale said. He gave her a kiss on the cheek, a kiss she turned away from. He made his plate, scraped a few globs from the tubs, grabbed a breast, and sat down at the counter.

Monica busied herself putting away the groceries. When Jarret was out of earshot, with her back to Sale she asked: “Why are those skins still out in the garage and that mess?”

He stared at the oven and finished chewing. “They still have to dry out. Take my spot, I’ll park in the street.”

She went on stacking canned spaghetti sauce, soup, vegetables. She held up a can of refried beans and Sale caught her glance—she went on like she never looked. He chewed and forked a mouthful of mashed potatoes. His fork chafed on the foam plate. He expected her to ask about the job search and if he’d got any offers for the junked Camaro parked in the yard, and maybe something about the loan from her sister.

Jarret’s cleats ticked on the linoleum. Monica scolded him about wearing the cleats. How many times had she told him? but the boy was gone out the door. Sale sat and finished his plate. “We in a hurry?”

Monica looked at him, a look that asked him to leave.

Sale stood, flipped the lid of the trashcan, and dropped the plate. “All right,” he said. But before he was out the door, his wife told him to buy a gallon of milk, and gave him a twenty.

He took the twenty, and folded it, and put it in his wallet. “Hasta la bye-bye.”

In the garage, Jarret crouched on the concrete in his wife’s spot, picking at the gummy strings that webbed over a coyote skin. “Smells like glue,” Jarret said. His wife

claimed the smell made her sick.

“Come on,” Sale said. “Let’s go.” He put his cell phone in the console. The check engine light was still on. He jerked the shifter in gear.

Sale drove down Dodge and headed east on Speedway Boulevard, asking the drivers ahead if they knew they were driving cars, because it didn’t seem like it.

“Assholes, come on,” he said as he swerved to pass. “God damn it, move.” He saw Jarret flinch at his anger, sitting silently, clutching the armrest. Sale smiled at the boy and explained, “They need to learn to drive.”

Practice had already started. Boys and girls dribbled between cones in the long shadows of pines spreading across the scorched field. Mothers stood under the trees, clapping or pointing or talking with arms crossed. Others sat nearby on benches. Jugs of water lay at their feet.

Jarret got out and ran to join the team. Sale sat in the car for a minute and considered the women. He read a sign near the sidewalk: Non-Potable Water, Do Not Drink, and stared at it for a while, letting his vision blur, taking shallow breaths. He just about started the truck again, when Jarret dribbled to the nearest cone. He passed the ball and looked at the truck and waved, and Sale nodded. He lumbered out of the truck and stood on the sidelines, and nodded to the other parents.

They divided into teams and started scrimmage. There wasn’t much skill to it. They chased the ball and whoever got possession was mobbed, a chaos of jabbing feet, flailing arms, the ball then slipped out here or there, headed the opposite direction—same thing again, but the other way. The grass stomped flat, dust rising in splashes at their feet. Mothers cheering, the coaches yell. Sale nodded and clapped, and said, “Okay, good.” No one noticed him. He felt the sweat roll down his back. He watched, wondering

why boys and girls had to play on the same team, at eight and nine-years-old. And then Jarret ran with the ball ahead of him, Sale saying, “Go, come on.” The ball went out of bounds and Jarret picked it up—the boy’s puffy nipples sticking through his shirt—and threw it to a girl, who trapped the ball and nudged it onward. The girl flat chested as a TV screen.

* *

At the stoplight, Sale looked east down Speedway and saw the Fry’s sign, and remembered the milk, and felt the whole again and again of life. He wanted life to stop. No more shopping or hair cuts or shaving. This was life. Life could be hard, and steady, and messy and if he had his way, he’d never have to think of getting something because he’d already have it. To think and then *have*, to see and then *have*, to have and have forever. He wanted an unlimited supply of food. This woman *and* that woman. A bunker to warehouse an unlimited supply, in a shelter underground. This was the anger he felt, doing something he’d done, doing it again, buying toothpaste, and shampoo, and jeans, and frozen pizzas, toilet paper, and then within two weeks, a month, a year later, buying deodorant—or asking his wife, replacing the boy’s broken glasses, attending to the check engine light. Soccer practice. He hated this about the world. The again and again of it, and all these people doing the same thing. Having this but not that. He’d get the milk on the way home.

He pulled into Shelter Bar’s parking lot, and took a spot next to a Ford F-250, a truck he knew well. Derek Balkwill’s truck, he knew it by the bumper sticker, ☼ THIS IS MY PEACE SIGN centered on the back window. Only two other cars were parked out front. The bar had no windows, but a wall: columns of poured concrete framing panes of red granite where windows should have been. It was happy hour.

Sale knew Derek would be there, and when he passed through the smoked glass door, he thought of turning back, of enduring the soccer practice, watching the soccer moms clap and the kids stumble between cones, playing a game he didn't care to understand. But he thought he owed Derek thanks for the work with Balkwill. Whenever he saw Derek, he remembered what his wife said about him, that he was a psychopath. You could see it in his eyes, she had said. His wife had all but banned Derek from coming to their house, and Sale from seeing him. Months back, before Sale lost his job, he and his wife had people over for a Cardinal's game. At some point, his wife found Derek in their bedroom, his hands shoved in his pockets, smirking like he had every right to be there. The dresser drawers were opened. Derek said he was looking for some towels. His wife told Sale about it when everyone left. She swore Derek'd been through her panties and stole some, that he done it before, she knew he had. But Sale thought she was being paranoid, hysterical like she sometimes got.

He knew Derek a couple years now. They both worked at Auto Zone, and if it wasn't for Derek, Sale would still have his job, his wife liked to remind him. Sale didn't see it that way. He could see the connection, but he blamed the company, and the bureaucracy. To him, to the local police, the community, Derek was a hero. One night when Derek was closing, this guy stumbled in wearing a heavy coat with the hood pulled over his head and a fake beard covering his face. The man took a gun from his pants and herded Derek and the manager in back. While the manager was fumbling with the safe, Derek slipped out a side door, grabbed his .40 Glock from his car and returned, startling the man who dropped his gun and bolted. They never caught him. When reporters asked why he did it, he answered, "When you're faced with being a chalk outline on the ground. I've been trained, it's automatic. If it's a question of him or us, it's not a

question.” Gun rights groups boycotted out front of the store. The next day police came and interviewed everybody who worked there. Sale was stupid enough to admit he too kept a gun in his car. A week later Derek got fired. The company claimed they had a zero tolerance policy. It was a slap in the face. He did the right thing. Afterward, Sale knew they had it out for him. Six months later, the district manager came, they did an audit, and determined sales were low, which was bull shit, and let Sale know he was out. He heard they wanted to change the store’s culture, whatever that meant. PC bull shit. They fired the manager too. Sale got unemployment at least, not Derek. Sale felt they’d both been wronged, and he liked to think he’d do the same.

Inside, the bar was dim-lit by industrial lights, like the inside of a mine shaft or a bomb shelter. It smelled dank. The music played in a loop of classic rock: CCR, The Stones, Hendrix, at that moment it was The Doors, “Waiting for the Sun.” He found Derek in the back, in what they called the war room.

“What, you miss me?” Derek said. He shook Sale’s hand and pulled him in for a hug. “I thought you quit drinking.”

“That was last week.” Sale took a stool and bellied up to the table—a round sheet of glass set on a 50 gallon barrel with fins welded to it like a bomb embedded in the floor. Posters lined the walls: land to air missiles, tanks, marching soldiers, a cowboy riding a warhead. A TV anchored to the wall showed the Diamond Back’s game.

The waitress was pregnant, a slice of her belly showed under her tank top. They each ordered two drafts of Miller Lite. Sale leaned over as she walked away and could make out bare ass cheeks where her shorts ended.

They’d both been in the Army. Sale never went into detail about his time at Fort Dix, Fort Rucker, Fort Wainwright, and Fort Carson. No one who knew him now knew

of the dishonorable discharge. Whenever asked, he said it was the 90s, mostly jerking off. Derek was from Arivaca. He trained at Fort Sill, and served two tours in Iraq. He was a cable systems installer, and spent his last two years stationed in Fort Huachuca, Arizona, about half an hour from the border. After the attempted robbery, the public outcry, he had his pick of jobs, and now worked for Comcast. At the moment he wore his uniform, a black polo shirt and khaki pants.

“How’d it go with my old man?” Derek asked. “He’s really bent on those coyotes.”

“Sure likes to talk. Couldn’t feel my ass by the time I left.”

“You know, I can’t take it sometimes. He won’t shut up. And you can’t escape. You sit down and that’s the end of it.”

“Yeah, he had me there a couple hours. But it’s like you said, he’s gonna have me back.”

“Hell, by the time you’re done, you’ll have half my inheritance. More coyotes out there than dirt.”

“I’m happy to do it. There’s just nothing out there. Nothing respectable anyway.”

“No luck?”

“I can’t even get an interview. Hiring at Comcast?”

“I’d let you know.” Derek shrugged. “It is what it is.”

Sale huffed out sort of laugh. “It is what it is.” He brought his beer up, studying the glass’s edge, put it to his lips and drank till it was gone. He set it down and took up the second beer. “A day at time, is what they say.”

He told Derek about the trip to Balkwill’s, Derek’s dad’s ranch. Talked about the mine and the trash, the illegals cutting trail, problems Derek knew all too well, having grown up there. Told how he wanted his son to go along, and the fight—always, with his

wife who didn't want the boy around guns, he was only a boy. Sale said *he* was a boy once. Jesus, he learned to shoot a gun before he swung a baseball bat. Now they want to treat boys like they were girls. Treat them like sissies, everyone wins, everyone gets a prize. There's no winners or losers. One time, he told Derek, his wife had bought this sailor outfit for his son to wear to church. Sale told her he looked gay, like a little gay sailor. "I just about tore it off him, and thought about burning it. I mean, Jesus Christ. Dressing him like a doll."

"That's what gets me," Derek said. "You got these liberals. They want everyone to win. It's like the illegals, you can't punish them. They end up taking what they never earned." He glared off at the wall, turned and looked suspiciously about the bar.

Sale met Derek's eyes for a second, saw an unsettling glint in his eyes, and then looked down at his beer.

Derek hushed his voice, and said, "You hear of those illegals that sued? Took a guy's land in a lawsuit. All he did was smack one in the head and rough him up a little bit. The ACLU comes in and ruins the guy—and he's the American. They give his land to people who invaded. They got paid off for being illegal, more rights than you or me have. God damned-multicultural-PC bullshit. You know what would have happened if he just went on and killed them? Nothing. Even if they had all the evidence in the world against him, there wasn't no witnesses. Wouldn't get nothing to stick. Just blame it on the drug smugglers and coyotes. Simple as that."

Derek leaned over the table and glanced over at the bar. No one sat near them. The only other customers sat at the bar, watching the Diamondback's game. He whispered, "So what do you say about those barrels?" He paused. "I'll pay. You know I'm good for it."

“I told you, I can’t. What am I supposed to tell my wife?”

“Tell her it’s water,” Derek almost yelled. He surveyed the bar, drank, and spoke again, whispering, “Tell her I’m working on a bug-out shelter and I need a place to store it. There’s no room in my apartment.”

“She’s pissed off at me as it is.” Sale held his beer up and drank. He chewed at the cuticles of his pinky, and put his beer down and worked on his thumb. “She doesn’t even want to know about you.”

“A hundred dollars a month. You don’t have to do anything.”

“A hundred dollars.” Sale shook his head. “What would I tell her?”

“Hey, it’s water. Plausible deniability. It’s just a couple months.”

“I can’t do it.”

“You can do it.” Derek’s eye sockets seemed to sink in his skull and his eyes blackened like steel rods sheared at the surface. Sale understood then what his wife said about Derek’s eyes. He had this look like he made you up right there and he made you gone. The look you got from war, the thousand mile stare. That was the look he gave now. “You can do it. I did you a favor.”

“You know what, fuck you.” Sale stood. “I don’t need this. I told you, no.”

“Hey, bud. Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just a favor.”

“It’s not a favor, *bud*. I could go to jail.”

“It’s not illegal. It’s the intention. Just think about it.” He gripped Sale’s arm. “Come on, huh? Forget about it. I’ll figure something out.” Derek’s glance drifted upward. A mosquito hovered and dropped, flew around his head, near his ear. He swatted and the mosquito wafted out in front of him. He clapped his hands and opened them. A tiny imprint of dust smudged his palm. He looked down to find it dead, flailing

in the rings left by his beer, but looked up to see it wobbling in flight. It flew and fell. He swatted at it and it disappeared. He took a long gulp of his beer, paused a second and then finished off the rest. Derek signaled the waitress over, and ordered two shots of Jack Daniels, and two more beers each. He told Sale it was on him, and Sale didn't say no.

The waitress returned, balancing the tray, her arms awkwardly wrapped around her belly. As she walked off, out of ear shot, Derek tapped Sale's forearm and asked, "What's the best thing about having sex with a pregnant woman?"

"What?"

"You get to have sex and get your dick sucked at the same time."

"That's sick," Sale said. He shook his head and laughed, but laughed too loosely.

"You're a sick man."

Derek nodded and held up his shot and offered, "To better days."

"I'll drink to that."

Sale threw back the shot and swallowed. He looked up and grinned and nodded and clenched his teeth against the burn and swallowed. They sat in silence a few minutes watching the Diamondback's game.

Derek stood up to take a leak and when he returned and looked up at the score, nine to three, he dismissed what he saw with a sweep of his hand, as if swatting cobwebs. "Team's worthless," he said. "I just remembered, they're worked up for a muster? My dad didn't say nothing?"

"Yeah, he told me."

"What do you say? They're getting together at a neighbor's ranch."

"I don't know. A bunch old men sitting in lawn chairs aiming their guns at the

desert. I can do that on my front porch, in the shade.”

“It ain’t that bad. The old men sleep early. Leaves the night to tool around, off road. Patrol. It’s like being at war, swear to God. Closest thing I felt to it since, but no one’s giving out orders. As long as the Border Patrol don’t get in your face. Just mind your business, stay out of their way.”

“I don’t know.” Sale sighed and shook his head. He thought of his wife.

“Just think of it like camping. Take out a cooler full of beers. We get bored we can go fishing. They stock the lake with bass. Maybe pick off a few coyotes.”

Sale felt over his pockets, searching out his phone. “God damn it. What time is it? It’s like a casino in here.”

“Just past nine.”

“Shit.”

“What?”

“I got to pick up my son. How much do I owe?”

“What are you talking about? It’s on me.” Derek grabbed Sale by the shoulder, and patted him on the back. “What about it, huh?”

“My wife’s gonna be pissed.”

Sale got up, righted his steps, and headed to the bathroom, but thought against it, turned and left. The street lights had come on. The neon sign above the bar buzzed and shone blue, a nauseous light wafting like dust. Out west a pinkish-purple haze hung on the horizon where the sun fell. The cars groaned past on Speedway Boulevard.

He rode out to the field. His wife had called nine times. He drove around the park, and ducked his head in search of his son. Nobody but a couple bums sitting on a park bench, backpacks and blankets next to them. After a second round-about, Sale

decided to ask the men if they'd seen a boy. He took his Berreta from the console.

He held the pistol against his stomach and slipped it under his belt. He crossed the field. The yellow light of the street lamps rippled on the stale grass and dirt, the light put to wobble by swarms of moths. The center of the field was dark. He felt the cool metal against his stomach and the pressure on his bladder. He wanted to piss right there.

The men sat in the darkness of a tree's shadow. Sale staggered over, and the men startled by his approach, and made sounds like crumpling paper, stashing something in their blankets.

Sale stood off a ways. "Any of you seen a boy?"

"Why?"

"My son."

The two men looked at each other. The man, the bum, Sale could see, smirked.

"I have a son," the man said, the one who smirked. "You got a cigarette?"

"Don't fuck with me." Sale took a couple steps forward, pressing the gun against his stomach.

The man looked down at Sale's crotch. "What, you offering?" The man laughed and the grin hung on his face.

Sale pulled his arm up and pointed, a jabbing point. "I will...don't fuck with me."

The man squinted. He looked up at Sale's face and his grin faded. He was silent a moment, and sat up. He looked off past Sale and pointed toward the corner of the field. A pair of legs dangled from the ridge of the chain link backstop. A black body camouflaged in the darkness. A hand waved, and dropped.

* *

The bums slouched on the concrete benches with their paper bag booze and sneering eyes. Sale wanted to snuff the look off their faces, but turned, thinking out each step, and stomped across the field. The trees blackened in the dark and their shadows blotted the field, the grass sparse, the ground hard. When he reached the backstop, he looked up at his son.

“You forgot me,” the boy said.

“I just lost track of time, that’s all,” Sale said. “Come on down, son.”

The boys refused to come down, kicking his legs, the crossbar of the backstop bouncing beneath him. The chain link tinkled. He still wore his shin pads.

He goaded the boy with offers of ice cream, rented movies, McDonald’s, but nothing, just the boy looking down on him, shaking his head, swinging his legs. Across the street, a few porch lights came on. Sale glanced at the houses and said God damn it under his breath. He looked up at the coal sky. The spare glinting stars. “If you don’t come down, son, you’ll regret it. I’ll climb up there after you.”

In the truck, the boy sat with his knees to his chest and his arms wrapped around them. “Where were you?” He slumped against the door and looked out the window.

“I wasn’t anywhere.” Sale turned the ignition and started toward home. It irked Sale the boy could make him feel guilty.

He gazed from the boy to the road and back. The boy leaned against the door and rested his head on his fist. He squeezed his knees to his chest. Sale pulled onto Dodge Boulevard and the boy broke his silence: “Stop watching me.”

“Get your cleats off the seat.” He considered what the boy thought of him, what his wife might have told the boy. If his own feeling of uselessness made him such in the boy’s eyes. It wasn’t his fault. He was doing the best he could. He thought of how to

make it up to the boy, bribe him some way.

Sale passed the house and drove back to Speedway and looped around on Bellevue so he could park outside the house without his wife taking notice. He parked near the fence that separated their house from an apartment complex. A construction dumpster in the parking lot hid Sale's truck from view. He wanted to do something with the boy. Sale watched the house. "You want to stay out late? We can go to a movie."

"You forgot me, dad," the boy said.

"Yeah," he said. "I lost track of time. But what do you think? Your pick."

"Can mom come?"

"You can't tell your mom. It'll be our secret." He winked at the boy. "Any movie. I'll call mom and tell her we're at the movies."

"Okay."

Sale explained what they needed to do. The boy would sneak in and grab a roll of quarters from his desk drawer and then they'd head out. He'd make a stop at the pawn shop—the quarters were the special ones he'd shown the boy, silver quarters. Sale invested in silver. An afternoon, not too far back, he sat down with the boy and emptied out a five gallon water jug they'd filled with change. He told the boy you could never know what the world would come to. That it was good to have *real* money not the phony paper the fed was printing up. Sale held up a dollar and told the boy, "Soon enough we'll be using this to wipe our asses." And asked the boy if he knew the Germans had to pay for a loaf of bread with a wheel barrow full of money. It wasn't much of a stretch. Sale didn't trust *that man* in the White House: "He's a liar." They sifted through the change on the kitchen counter, ordering the pennies, dimes, nickels, and quarters. They even found a few half dollars which he let the boy have. Sale explained: "What we're looking

for are quarters and dimes minted 1964 and prior—that's silver. But there's another way you can tell." He picked up a quarter and held before the boy's face. "See the edge? Look close. See how it's copper. Not silver. That's how you can tell. Silver quarters don't have that copper inside. You want the pure silver." Of the lot, they found two dimes, a 57' and a 62'. He gave them to the boy.

They got out of the truck and went to the boy's bedroom window. The light was on in the kitchen and he thought of his wife at the table waiting for his call. He popped off the screen and tested the window. It gave. The blinds were down, so he had to fish out the cord and pull them up. He hoisted the boy and sent him through the window. "Be quiet," he said.

He looked back toward the kitchen. A ways down the wall, a ladder was propped against the gutter. The mortar squashed out between the bricks, sloppily, and dried there, squashed out as if whoever built the house was too lazy to finish. Who the hell would've thought of such laziness? While Sale waited, he took a piss on the side of the house and then called his wife from behind the dumpster. She had stopped calling after nine.

She answered: "Where the hell are you?"

"Hi. Nice to hear your voice."

"I've been calling for an hour. Where's Jarret?" She paused. "Have you been drinking?"

"What? Jesus, give me some credit. I'm not the bad guy here. Where are you? Maybe I should be asking."

"Where's Jarret?"

"We're at the movies. I left my phone in the truck."

“When are you going to be home?”

“In a little while.”

“Incredible. This is just unbelievable. I can’t believe you. How much did you drink? You know what, don’t bother. I’ll pick Jarret up. Where are you?”

“Who are you with? Who’s that talking in the background?”

“Don’t forget the milk.” She hung up. She could tell when he was drunk—she said the way he spoke gave it away. She’d scold him: The smell, Jesus. Think of your son—he’s watching you. Her eyelids puckered: Get a hold of yourself. Did you even shower today? Do you know what you did last night? I can’t take you anywhere. I can’t take this anymore.

She had no idea what it was like for him being out of work. She acted like he asked for this, that this was what he wanted. And what about her? He had all but caught her in a lie. He knew some guy was calling her. On top of being out of work he had to stomach her cheating on him? She was sure to bring her family in. Mexicans. Bitch.

Sale panted and punched at the air, heaved back as if to throw the phone and thought about kicking the dumpster. What the hell was the boy doing? It was past nine thirty. The latest movie showed at ten. He looked up and down the street to see if anyone was watching him and then walked back to the open window. When the boy appeared, Sale held up his hands in frustration. “Let’s go. Where are the quarters?” He took them from the boy’s hand.

He would have gone to Oracle Pawn, but they stopped off at Super Pawn, because it was on the way. He knew they’d jew him down. They only gave him ten times face value, half what he should have got. Overhead, they explained. A hundred dollars. He made another stop at the Rum Runner to pick up a half pint of Jim Beam. They asked if

he'd been drinking and he told them that was the plan. When he got back in the truck he said: "All set," and told the boy not to say anything to his mom.

"Okay," the boy said.

When they reached the Grand off Grant and Swan, he let off the boy at the ticket counter and parked and filled his flask. It was 10:15. The boy was disappointed, he wanted to see *Toy Story 3*, but it wasn't playing yet at the discount theaters. The only movies still showing were *Alice in Wonderland*, *Inception*, *Valentine's Day*, *Jackass 3-D*, *The Fighter*, and *How to Train Your Dragon*. When Jarret offered up, *How to Train your Dragon*, Sale said: "Come on, son, you don't want to watch that. It's half over. Remember what we talked about? How about the Fighter? It's rated R. You're a little man now, right?" Sale bought two for *The Fighter*. As they walked in, he put his hand on the boy's shoulder. The boy flinched.

I wake up at nights to their knocking, and Jesus Christ, if they weren't going to die, I wouldn't open. These liberals, they'll tell you just what you need to do, how to live your life. Everybody hold hands, sing Kumbaya. Let's all just get along. Make yourself at home. What's mine is yours. Let's all stick our heads in the sand. Then comes the surprise when you get kicked in the ass. It's not that simple.

What would you do if every night, every day for that matter, not one, but ten, twenty, fifty strangers—illegals, drug smugglers, who knows?—trespassed your land, vandalized and trashed your property? My home's been broken into twice. Out here in the middle of nowhere. They stole a four wheeler, guns, tools, jewelry—we can't leave. That's when it happened. We were in California seeing my daughter. A nice surprise she had for us. Introduced us to her way of life, her "partner". Good riddance. Don't get me started. Top it all off, we come home, and god damn it, that's what we find. And we were lucky that's all they stole.

Every day. It's every day. Before I go out to work, I have to take account of the damage. Load up my four wheeler with wire and PVC, and whatever else. I don't even bother any longer with the trash, forget about the trash—there's not enough time in the day to get to that. Just focus on what needs done, the fences, the pipes and valves. Think they'd have some, I don't know, consideration, a tool, a plan—I mean these coyotes, they know just what they'll run into, probably know the land better than myself, but no, they just pick up a rock and smash the valve, or the pipes, and doesn't matter if it's plastic or metal, they just pound and pound till they hammer it to pieces, and water spurting out everywhere—all night, till I come and fix it.

It's not just that either. I don't like to admit I'm afraid, but, hell—who am dealing with? I figure most of them are good people, I don't blame the immigrants, I

don't hate them, it's not about race like the liberals try to make out—I know plenty of good people who is Mexicans, I could give a shit if you're a monkey or Jew, but there's an element you just can't trust. There's a criminal element. You can't know who they are, who they're involved with, might be some spic from the country or some bad ass sicario, some ruthless son of a bitch. I've seen men out here with AK-47s, in broad daylight. Some days, some nights I hear them holler and fire off their weapons just for fun.

I don't know whether or not his is true, but, this rancher, lives out near Sells, had a drink with him at one of the musters, he told me he had a helicopter, a Black Hawk, true to God—said Mexico painted right on its side, a bonafide-tear-your-ass-out helicopter, come down right outside his house. Said he felt like it was an alien encounter, couldn't believe it. All these men, military looked like, get off, AR-15s, ski masks, body armour—the whole get up, and there's this truck out near the road, a gas truck. They get out, and another truck comes on, they talk to them. And just like that the helicopter takes off, the trucks gone. What are you supposed to make of that?

Sometimes I feel like it'll get the best of me. See over there, hell, all along the house, we had Texas Sage planted. Some years back, had to tear out all the bushes—they liked to hide in there and sleep. I'd go out at night, and I swear, they'd scare the living daylights out of me, rolled up and sleeping there. For a long time, I didn't have the heart to wake them, thought hell, must've been some journey. But came a time, when I got fed up. You see, ten, fifteen years ago, I can't remember but once stumbling on a Mexican, four of them, cupping water out of a trough, and then came to be a couple times a month, once a week, now every day and night. You don't know who these people are. All over my land, up through the valley, you find these little lean-tos,

huts out in the brush made out of trash. There's just so many of them. So many of them.

It's like were under siege, and I'm on a permanent stakeout. Me or my wife have to be home at all times. If we leave, I call a neighbor. I swear, I set aside one third of my time to dealing with all this happy horseshit. If they want air for their tire, you give it to them. If they want water, you're better off handing it over, because if you say no, they'll break a water line to get it, take it right out of the cow's mouth if they have to. I had built a gate out there, they could just open and shut, simple enough. But it doesn't matter, they cut the fence, and, next morning, I have to go out and track down the cattle. Why fight it? I could cut the trail right through my land, but wouldn't do no good. They'd just cut the fence, cut trail somewhere else, out of spite. We have to go out every day, every day, check the tanks and valves, and the fences. Watch them parade over my land. Just give them a Mexican flag and it's Cinco de Mayo. We're the front line here. Witness to an invasion.

IV

Nancy stared at the windshield. Sand pricked and whooshed over the car. Diana drove, southbound to the drop off. A billowing wall of dust rose, and wafted before them. She glanced in the rearview, Armando's head rocked in and out of sight.

The money was in the glove compartment stuffed in an envelope, 1,200 American dollars, all they could pull together in twenty-four hours. They were 800 short.

Sweat stood out on Nancy's forehead, below her eyes, above her lip; sweat melting the foundation she'd rubbed on that morning in a hurry, tinging strands of hair near her temples. She hadn't bothered with her eyebrows, and for this, her face appeared blank with their absence, masking a fear so deep and paralyzing, it left her unable to talk, to scream.

In the back seat Armando stooped forward and thrust back, working his arms like he was paddling a row a boat. He did this for a minute or so, and then grabbed a magazine, opened it and put the pages to his mouth. He rocked. He dipped his body, nearly touching the driver's seat with his head. He clasped a handful of necklaces, rosaries and strands of Mardi gras beads, beads he then brushed against his face as he rocked.

Nancy turned and said, “Ya, Mamo. Ya.”

The boy pitched forward, again and again, knocking his head against the driver’s seat, nudging Diana as she drove. “Calendars,” he said. “Calendars.” He rattled the beads and whipped his face. He pinched his chin to his shoulder and pursed his lips and grunted.

She wouldn’t leave him back in Juárez like Diana wanted, but wish now she had. “No,” Nancy said. “Dejate de eso.”

“Calendars,” Armando said. He whipped the beads against his face. His eyes wide open. “Calendars!” He lashed and lashed his face.

There were times when the boy threw fits and there was no way to calm him. Born in America, her husband thought it was tainted water, and treated the boy like it was something he could control. A full grown boy, a lunatic, her husband explained the boy’s illness to their friends and family: Es tontito.

She wanted to beat him. Smother him. She threw off her seat belt, and rummaged, straining between the seats, at the floor in the back till she found the box of puzzles, what the boy called calendars, in the pouch behind her seat. “Okay. Ya.” She tossed the box on the seat beside him. “There, you calendar.”

He calmed, ran his fists down his face, and bobbed. He took the box.

She felt Diana’s worried glance but ignored it. The tunnel of dust before them, an expanding and contracting wall that gave way as they drove on.

Diana wiped a tear from Nancy’s face. “Todo saldrá bien,” she said. “Así nomás, pagamos y ya. Te darán tu hija.” She dropped her hand and patted Nancy’s leg. “Así nomás.” The dust was alive, furious.

Nancy felt the dust in her lungs, in her teeth, in her eyes, coating every pore. She

wanted to wipe it clean. If they paid, everything would be fine. Everything will be fine. They just need to pay. She glanced at Diana. What does she know? Does she, could she have anything to do with this? Coyotes do this for a living: smuggle, kidnap, extort, exploit. Wasn't that what she was? But Diana wasn't a coyote, not really. They were friends—comadres—they grew up together. She helped set up Erika's quinceañera. She paid for the cake. They went to confirmation together—*Eran* comadres. But still, Diana knew where they'd be and at what time. If she knew those men. If they paid her, if she paid them. If she knew such men.

But no, they were in this together. Diana could have left Nancy and her son in Ciudad Juárez and taken away the passports. There was no doubt of her loyalty, she would do anything for Nancy. She would bear this again: the gaunt faces of men, cheeks carved and grizzled, leering, insinuating, venomous eyes, ravenous eyes, dead eyes, stares that enter bodily, casting a viscous grime of evil—lujuria—Nancy felt dirty, guilty, under the eyes of those men. She would have never come back, but for her daughter. Not for Diana, yet she was there, and what chat could it mean: friend or coyote.

Nancy saw Diana's hand on her leg, and cringed, drew her knee away. She crossed her arms and held them tight to her body.

Gusts of wind swirled up around the car, sand flushing. A fine dust hung in the cab. They neared the drop off.

Nancy felt as if woken from a nightmare: a strange man stalked her through the market, a park, school, church. She never saw him but felt the presence. Like a fog, like the dust of Hidalgo del Parral. The dust her Grandfather inhaled working in the mines, dust billowing, laced with poison. That moment when she woke from a nightmare and the presence entered with her, dread.

When she woke from these nightmares the presence hovered at her bedside, mutated, mutilated: a naked woman, skin sopping wet, slick and rotted, skin peeled and hanging. The woman's white, green hair glowed. Gray and green, her body glowed. Nancy never looked at this ghost, but knew her at once as La Llorona. Guilt, terror, shame filled her, strangled her, until seconds passed and the figure evaporated into the shadows of her room. Her school uniform on the floor, cloth dolls with red yarn for hair piled in the corner. The curtain separating her room from her parents wafted, touched by the wind. La Virgen de Guadalupe, hanging on the wall, came forth, yet veiled in darkness. She felt this presence as they drove.

"Todo saldrá bien," Diana said.

Grains of sand pattered the car. Nancy rubbed her arms, felt the goose bumps, and imagined each patter of sand as the burst of her pores swelling.

The car swerved slightly to avoid a torched-out truck, abandoned on the side of the road. The truck leaned forward, the front, driver-side tire shredded. They were getting closer. They had passed the burnt-out truck yesterday, after her daughter was taken. The truck's cab was charred. She expected to see bodies burned in poses of escape, reaching out to the desert. To think of where her daughter was: Erika, *su pollita*, *mi'ja*, bound hand and foot, face down on the cratered dirt floor of a shack, darkness enclosed by corrugated metal, maybe a soiled mattress in the corner, a man there, dark and featureless, and her daughter face down, in the dirt, tied like a pig. A pig. A puta. She couldn't go any further, to what she knew they were doing—what men will do. Her mind wandered just up to that wall but refused to go further.

Now past the burnt out truck, they were within range. Any moment. Nancy lifted her head to see if the checkpoint was coming, if the men were somewhere to be seen, but

all she could see were the edges of the highway.

Soon, at intervals, a red light swept over the car, filtered through the dust. None of them noticed. The flash of the light quickened and a siren rose. Nancy gripped Diana's arm, still at the steering wheel. She gripped the door as if preparing for a crash. She closed her eyes. This wasn't happening.

* *

Nancy tensed and Diana pulled the car to the shoulder. The squawk of the siren neared, dampened by the wind. A red light swept over the car, wafting through the dust, but there behind them, faintly. A pattering smother, the dust lashed and retreated, the car bound in storm.

Nancy sat and pulled at the hairs on the back of her neck. She watched the truck pull up and park in the side rear view mirror. The wash of lights and the last muffled bleep of the siren ceased. In the back seat, Armando rocked silently, focused, leaning over his puzzle. He held a piece near his face and his hand shook steadily.

The truck started again, inched forward, and pulled up next to them. A semi thundered past, blaring its horn, swallowed by dust in its passing. The man nearest pointed, a single jabbing point like the strike of a snake, and the truck lurched and started down the road.

"Andale. Sigale." Nancy screamed. They fell in behind them, and drove. Dust swept across the road. Some ways on, the truck pulled off. A man got out, unhooked a post from the barb wire fence and threw it aside. There was no road there. They followed in the trucks wake, jolted by ruts and bushes, dust engulfing the car. The truck came to a stop near a shack with its roof caved in.

Nancy watched the truck. A dark figure at the wheel, another beside, veiled by the

fog of dust. They turned their heads in conversation. She thought she recognized the driver, his wide set eyes, deep sockets, remember his hands, arms in the window, where he'd touched her, where he'd have touched Erika, the tattoo of Jesus nailed to nothing but the man's skin. The men were content to wait.

When she realized she was pulling at her hair, she brought her hand down to her stomach, and pressed her nails into her palm. She closed her eyes and prayed, a prayer of salvation, her daughter's life, her own. *Madre santísima, cuídanos, madre...* She pleaded. She would accept any suffering but this, dark imaginings, her daughter surrounded by men in a dark room, dust troubled through the streaks of light, the sound of belt buckles, Erika whimpering on the floor.

Nancy was guilty. She should suffer, not her daughter. Any sacrifice. But they must have her, somewhere in the truck, in the shack. They would take the money, though it wasn't enough, bring Erika to her through the dust. *Mi cielo, mi cielo, mi amor, mi cariño, mi pollita.* They would go home. Tomorrow, home in Denver, she and Erika would go through the gifts of her quinceañera, the stuffed animals, the jewelry, the perfume. Erika would try on the clothes, she would model. They would forget about this. Some shared nightmare in the dust of the Chihuahuan Desert, a warning from God. She crossed herself and kissed her thumb, her fingers pressed in a fist.

The men sat in the truck, dust swirling around it. She could see them laugh. They talked as if at a bar, as if only worried which beer to order next, which woman. God only punishes bad people, *malvados*. This can't happen. This can't happen to me, to us.

The wait sucked the air from the car and they waited: no one spoke, Nancy with her fist balled at her chest, her eye lids pressed shut or glancing at the truck; Diana watching Nancy or the mirror above, her arms clasped about her or fingers running

through her hair, checked gestures of reassurance; Armando poised above his puzzle, oblivious.

Finally, there was movement in the truck. The driver shifted and reached behind the seat. He pulled on a mask and put on a helmet. Covered his owlsh eyes with goggles and put on gloves. Shouldered the strap of his AR-15. He got down from the truck and approached. The same man from the day before? The one who unbuckled Erica's belt and pulled her from the car. The one who'd put his hands to Nancy, under her clothes, fondled her, pinched her, touched her. Was it the same man at all or another? Could there be other such men? All men.

The man pressed his head to his shoulder, against the gusts, but otherwise strode untroubled by the wind, the dust that swirled about him. A black uniform. A badge on a lanyard flapped at his chest and now he tucked into his vest. Some nameless agent, a ghost, a presence whose existence no one would admit.

When he reached the car he halted and looked in, bracing himself against the wind. Goggles with smoked lenses. A faceless mask, not even a sliver of skin. No mouth, no slit for a nose. One hand was at his chest, holding the strap to his AR15, the other hovered about his face, around his goggles, over his nose, trying to block the dust that shifted and blew. He faced away from the wind and turned back to face Nancy. He pointed downward for her to open the window and she did. He leaned into the car and rested his elbows on the roof.

Armando shrieked and grunted, and scrunched up against the door, his hand flapping at his face.

Nancy leaned away from him, the butt of his rifle hung near her face. A current of dust swirled in the car. Nancy's face blank and pale.

He touched her cheek with gloved hands and held out another. She turned over the envelope. The rifle butt grazed her chin as he adjusted, leaning his right arm against the door. He opened the envelope and looked at the bills, but didn't count. Armando still shrieked, and the man leaned down to look at him through the open window. Expressionless, mechanical, a black mask, helmet and goggles. The boy quieted. He stood and shook his head and shrugged. "Falta," he said and walked back toward the truck.

She felt a pain in her stomach as if she'd swallowed a mouthful of needles, spines that grabbed at her insides. She opened the door. Diana reached out to her and said "No, no." She shrugged her off. She watched the dust come in through the door and dust go out, thinking he would come back. In a moment Erika would be sprinting to the car.

When the man mounted the truck and Nancy saw the red of the brake lights, she got out of the car and stumbled toward the truck with her arms thrust out before her, yelling, "¡Lo tenemos! ¡No se vaya! No. Tenemos el dinero. ¡No se vaya!" But the truck had already taken off, and as it tore off, gravel shredded and fell at her feet. She screamed again: "No. ¡Suéltela! No se la puede llevar. Es una niña. No. Es una niña." She grabbed at the truck now far off and gone in the eddying dust. She leaned against the wind, her arms out to balance, her black hair whipping. She fell. She knelt on the dust swept ground, shrieking.

She felt herself being lifted, guided back to the car, Diana embracing her. The door stood open and when Diana tried to make her sit, she jerked away and shoved her to the ground.

In back, Armando huddled against the door and panted. She threw the door open and grasped at Armando, trying to pull him from the car. Diana came at her from

behind and grabbed at her as she grabbed at Armando. She turned, laying on her back, and kicked at Diana.

“Pero, qué haces,” Diana said, and staggered, grasping at the door before she fell into the grass.

Nancy lay on her back, leaning her elbows on the car seat, watching Diana flounder amongst the grass and tarbush, Armando huddled against the door behind her, groaning. Nancy gasped, her chest rose and fell. She wanted to say something, but her tongue had thickened and she forgot. What could she say? What was it? She huddled up with Armando against the door. She couldn’t hug him, he wouldn’t let her, but her sobbing seemed to calm him.

If the whole of it, Nancy, the car and them in it, the very fiber of the earth, rose and came apart, dispersed, disappeared, she would feel no surprise.

Diana crawled to the car. She stretched her arms out to Nancy, who took her hands and pressed them. Nancy pulled her close. The dust took on a shimmer, as if fizzing, bursting in the air.

For some time they lay very still, even Armando was calmed by the weight of their bodies. Dust fluttered around them, in and out of the car.

Diana rose. She said nothing. She closed the doors, steadying herself against the car, and got in driver’s seat.

Nancy saw Diana’s eyes in the rear view mirror, her hands patting down her hair. Nancy balled her hands, her arms wrapped about her. “No,” she said, stifling a cry. “No es, no puede ser.” It couldn’t be real. She only heard wailing drone of the wind, swelling from her own ears.

They pulled out onto the highway, crossed over the dead, pressed grass of the

median, and started off back toward Ciudad Juárez. The dust roiled on the road's surface. The dust rose, a wall porous but firm, slithering, flapping, all-encompassing. They entered the dust, entering and entering. They passed the charred truck.

On a ways, the dust had cleared, and just visible at the horizon, there in the fog of dust, a crag swelled like a wave about to break but frozen in its breaking. They rode in silence. Driving as if toward an immense sea. The roar of the wind. The roar of the sea. The road curved and signs emerged pointing this way and that. Warning signs: VELOCIDAD COTROLADO POR RADAR. Diana struggled to bear the wheel against the wind. The whole of the earth ascending toward the sky.

As they neared Ciudad Juárez, passed through the military barricade, the storm waned and the world seemed to rematerialize as something real, something inescapable, but there and burning, smoke wafting over the whole of it.

There had been a number of calls to Diana's phone, from Denver and Houston, from Parral, but Nancy refused to talk. They began calling not long after they'd passed into Ciudad Juárez.

Nancy could see Diana's eyes in the rear view. She told her to answer the calls, but Nancy just looked out to the window where the dust coiled through fences, barbed and chain link, along the side of the road.

Diana explained what happened to the callers: Nancy's husband, her sister's in law, her father. Nancy could hardly hear her speak, the hushed tones, that somehow the quiet would lessen the blow, the words would slip away, become vapor, dust, make the whole of it unreal, borne away in the fleeting seconds the words hung in the air.

To even say what had happened meant to make it real. If she abided in silence, Erika would appear. They'd wake up at home in Denver to the roar of traffic on I-70, the

smell of dust and exhaust, or perhaps in Parral, the smell of coffee, Erika's favorite cereal Chachitos set out on the table. If she closed her eyes, if the world disappeared, she would wake in her childhood room and Erika's quinceañera dress would be hanging there in the closet.

* *

When they arrived at Diana's, Nancy showered for an hour. She scraped the dust from her skin until it swelled and shone red. And now, settled in the dusk of Diana's family room in front of the muted TV, she felt dust all over her body, in the creases of her skin, her hair, her ears. She tasted dust, the grains on her tongue. Her throat dry and scratchy. She coughed and swallowed. Water did little to ease the burn.

Armando knelt in front of the enormous, flat screen TV, his face inches away. His hands rubbed at his face, and every now and again thrust out as if to pinch, to yank something from the world on screen.

Nancy often wondered what the boy thought of the world. She saw an emptiness in his eyes—not empty of intelligence, but hope. They betrayed an intense fear of a world that swung suddenly between calm and terror. Between stupor and rage. His rhythms, his rocking, his twitches, the calm of order would fail all at once, and he'd lash out, frantic and uncontrollable, shrieking and grunting, his head bobbing as he turned over tables or threw all within reach.

She remembered his rage when he ripped the head off his changuito and ran his hand over broken glass. And moments later, when his terror gave way to exhaustion, how she held him, and he let her hold him. "Todo se arregla," she soothed. His blood stained the changuito's head and he held it to his body, whole again. She sang: *Los*

pollitos dicen pío, pío, pío.

She watched the muted figures pass on the screen, beyond her son's head. She could make little sense of the world she saw, though she knew the story. It was a repeat of the telenovela *Fuego en la sangre*. She could remember their names but not the story, their actions detached from any sense.

Her glance wandered from the screen to the ironing board, Diana's husband's pants; the two windows, blocked almost entirely by the TV, the kinked blinds; a potted plastic plant.

On TV she watched Fernando, the conniving gold digger, stumbling drunk, contemplating Sofía, his wife, as she slept, looming over her. He got in bed and Sofía woke and struggled. She recognized the words Sofía mouthed: *No, no*.

The lights came on and Diana entered, asking what she was doing in the dark with the TV muted. Her family had called again. A phone was ringing. Diana insisted she call, or answer, but she didn't so much as refuse.

Diana was at her side with three cell phones in her hand. She watched her hands fumble with the phones, flip them open and shut, and finally offer the ringing phone. "Pero habla mujer," Diana said.

Nancy slumped back in the sofa cushions. She hugged a pillow, thinking how soft it was. The cotton, all of these strands of cotton, wound, balled up inside the pillow. What fabric was this? Like leather but soft. An animal hide, a pig, a cow. She saw Erika tied up in a shack, in a basement, somewhere scarcely lit. Darkness. Her skin. Naked, soft and battered, bruised the shades of darkness, blood, drying blood. It had happened, it was happening right then. Cables, bats, broom sticks, knuckles overgrown with hair. A man's voice from the darkness: *Did she like that? Of course you do. ¿Más? No te hagas*

que no te gusta. Te gusta que te dé, puta.

Nancy saw a hand on her arm, cold, hairless, thin. Plastic nails with diamonds glittering. It was Diana offering the phone. It was Diana asking if she wanted something to eat. She had put a pizza in the oven. Why didn't she go bed? The room was ready. Diana would care for Armando.

Nancy watched Diana's lips mouthing and felt the tug at her arm. She was guided to the boys' room. There was an X of red caution tape on the door that read: DANGER DO NOT ENTER. The door opened and she went ahead, Diana's hand at her elbow, at the small of her back. She let herself be steered to one of two double beds.

A cool blue light glowed from a window between the beds, softening the flood lights from outside. The covers were pulled and Nancy entered, wrapping herself. She turned toward the wall. Diana's shadow stood on the wall, it cowered for a second as if to comfort her, and then there was no shadow. The door shut.

Nancy closed her eyes but she didn't want to sleep, to fall into a world somehow darker than this. A world where shadows formed into figures. Figures entering her shelters: school, a church, her bedroom, her dreams become dread.

She heard muffled voices, the TV from the other room. Footsteps, voices, the clink of glasses and silverware, a toilet flushing. The chug of trains that passed and the moan of their whistle.

The front door opened and closed, a man's voice, low and garbled. Soon after Armando was brought into the bedroom, and laid to rest in the other bed. She faced the wall. Shadows loomed, lingered, left. The boy settled and seemed to sleep.

Was it the husband? Nancy hadn't met him. He didn't come home the night before. Diana had said he was working *al otro lado*, waiting for money so people could

go on their way. Diana had told her it wasn't bad work, el coyotaje. They helped people. She and her husband were good people. It was better than the maquilas, where Diana worked when she first got to Juárez, "Pura gente naca, sureños sangrones. Las maquilas son pura pinche puteadero." Diana told her she'd never work in the maquilas again. She had fun when they went out after work, that's how she met Genaro, but now, she was afraid to leave the house. "La ciudad es una desmadre." In Juárez, without a man, it was better to stay home, and anyway, she had the boys to take care of. But she'd never go back to Parral—"Al rancho no regreso, allá no puedes hacer nada. La gente habla y habla." Nancy was lucky. "Arreglaste, mujer," Diana told her again and again, as if by crossing the border, she'd reached a land free of work and suffering.

Nancy sat up. She heard voices through the door. Saw the blackened silhouettes of plastic trophies arranged on shelves, a crucifix. The sliver of light under the door. A deep blue pulsed at the window. The digital alarm clock on the nightstand read: 3:17. The voices raised to shouts.

She made out snatches of their conversation. Diana asking if he knew what time it was, where he'd been, was he drunk?

The husband shouting, "¿Ya vas a empezar?" Diana had been gone all week, and *he*, he had to eat at his mom's, take his clothes to be washed there, and now when he comes home, where's his food? She heard the clatter of something turned over, a plate, a bowl? and then silence. She heard a hiss break the silence, a gurgle, a swallowing.

Minutes later, the husband's voice: Why are the boys sleeping in their room? Why are they still here? "¿Esa mujer y el pendejito?"

She heard Diana murmur, explaining the situation to her husband: They kidnapped her daughter! Nancy's terrified, Diana was terrified, she doesn't talk or eat,

she won't even take her family's calls. "Somos comadres." Does he understand?

But what did it have to do with him? They aren't family. "No es pedo de nosotros. No tiene ni una chingada que ver." This was his house. He couldn't be expected to shelter all the women with lost children. He asked her what she was thinking. Two women traveling alone, Diana shouldn't have gone. He told her not to go. If it was so important, he said, why didn't she call the police? And then he laughed. File a report. Make a flyer. They got exactly what they deserved. He told her he wasn't sleeping on the couch.

There was silence again, and then minutes later, Nancy heard the husband say, "Me voy," and the sound of the door slam.

With the thud of the door the house was silent, and as the night before, Nancy couldn't sleep, her thoughts hazily on Erika, on God. Images of Erika in her arms, holding her as she wept, protecting her. God somewhere, *María. María madre de Dios. Dios te salve, María. Llena eres de gracia...* She heard a hissing as she closed her eyes to sleep. Not the sound of whispers or threat, but that of a vacuum, the whoosh of suction, just audible, something disposed of or consumed. There was the wall and the soft blue light.

She got out of bed, ducked under the sheet covering the window. She stood for a while, with the sheet on her back, watching the concrete blocks that fenced the house. Was something there? *...protégenos de nuestros enemigos...* She returned to the darkness of the room. The green digital numbers flickered. Armando slept. The wind droned, and from above, she heard the metal clank of flapping vents. The train whistles blared, whined, drawn throughout the immensity of the night. *...ruega por nosotros pecadores, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte...*

You shuffle now in the penumbra, cloaked in the presence of shadow, the spectrum of darkness, nothing but yourself, the rasp of la brasada, the muscles ferment, the sweat and the layers of darkness, nothing but yourself lost to yourself, no thought but the step in front of you, not even this thought: peristalsis bears you on. You step, walk, grip the straps of your backpack to ease its weight on your shoulders, the water bottles that dig at the small of your back, the ache long since lodged, a throb, could you lose the pints of water? Will you need it later? For moments your situation weighs on you—walking, hiking, stumbling, mounting—you are already here, you are almost there, but how much longer?

Your cousin pushes, it's just over that hill, just pass that stand of brush, that wash. "Mire la postería, carnal. Llegamos."

He is not a coyote but a guide, your own flesh and blood, as you, your grandfather's grandson, your father's brother's son. You are always almost there. A chatter in the distance you mistake for a helicopter. Every sound, the rattle of locust, the grate of branches, a coyote's howl, threatens, and you mistake them, assign them powers beyond their present danger. Imagine a roaring hum, a rattle, a siren and assign it to the approaching migra. Those that stagger, those that lumber ahead and behind, struggling below their own loads, a formation of ants, they are your family. If you lift your arm, reach out, you would touch your brother-in-law, who you've promised to protect, and beyond him, your cousin who announces every so often, "Venimos llegando, venimos llegando." But nothing indicates an end to the journey. The lights off in the distance remain on the horizon, glistening, melting. You focus on the ground, the feet ahead of you, your own, that sweep below your eyes, that move apart from your will, despite you. Bones and muscles and ligaments tighten and bend

and stretch. You are pain. You are numbness. You are the forgetting of the pain. Thirst, hunger, pain tamp and pack and scatter. The skin that rubs and balloons and bursts and burns and scorches and numbs, for stretches of time, is forgotten in the march and march, the movement, can not stop—go, go, at your heel, the bony outgrowth bleeds, but you feel only the wetness. Inertia itself spurs you, there is no thought, the mesquites rake at your face, nopals and agaves stab at your legs. For a second you think, I should have worn a jacket, and then you think, it is so hot.

V

The June sun glared, rising, baking the cab, and Sale sat in the passenger seat, squinting through the glare. Dust peeled off behind Derek's truck and fanned out over the rutted dirt road that jarred the truck and bounced them in their seats. "How long's this supposed last for? I mean how much time do you have to put in?"

"Not much," Derek said. "Depends. Usually a day or so. Most of these just end up being a circle jerk, more of a get together than anything else. A potluck dinner. Truth is, I don't see much point in it, but some of these guys get real worked up, and they're neighbors, so my dad feels like it's a duty. They get the worst of it, being right on the border and all. You're dressed for it." Derek looked over at Sale and nodded. "You'll fit right in. Don't worry. They're good people. Nothing much ever happens."

He felt uneasy. The way Derek talked about the whole thing. He didn't want to capture anybody, see anybody. He didn't want to think about the fight if his wife found out.

Up a ways, they came upon a metal gate where the road forked and a man stood outside, leaning against a post with a foot resting on the gate. A sign hung from a log above and read: *Cairns' Ranch*. Another sign hanging from the fence read: *WE DON'T*

CALL 911. The man, who Sale saw now, was little older than a boy, maybe fifteen, wearing camouflaged pants and a khaki shirt, and shouldering a rifle. The boy shielded his eyes and peered through the windshield, Derek waved, and the boy gestured on down the road.

They drove on, past the feed lot where cows bunched up, their heads poking through the fence, feeding from troughs, and on past a series of trailers and small tanks and stacks of railroad ties. They rode down a few more minutes into a valley where a circle of SUVs came into view, trucks, and campers parked around a grouping of canvass shade tents. The Minute men Civil Defense Unit had set up camp on the border, ten miles south of Arivaca and ten miles east of Sasabe.

A few men worked here and there putting up tents, unloading gear from truck beds, their arrival unnoticed. Others lounged in folding chairs and sat at picnic tables. A few nodded, a few lifted their hands up and waved. Men dressed in work clothes, flannel, or military fatigues. Guns holstered at their hips. Derek pointed out a black powder cannon set downhill from camp.

Smoke rose from the shade tents, and a few women labored below at barbecue pits, or bustled, setting out stacks of paper plates, cups, tubs, and foil food containers. An American flag rippled above the tents. Altogether, they were few, not much over twenty, Sale guessed.

They pulled up alongside a Ford F-250. Outside it smelled of burning meat. Derek said he'd sign them in and headed toward the tents. Sale unloaded. A few minutes later a woman approached alongside Alan Balkwill, Derek's dad.

"Levi."

Sale came around the truck.

“This here is Levi.” Balkwill clapped him on the back and turned to the woman. “This is Mary.” Levi took her hand. “Her husband owns the land here, that ranch you passed.” Balkwill clapped him on the back again. “Levi’s been giving me a hand at the ranch. She likes to meet all the new recruits.”

Sale nodded and looked her over. She wore cargo pants tucked into boots, a low cut shirt, a tank top—a wifebeater and a sports bra. The stretch marks started high on her chest. He looked and was caught looking and when he met her eyes he wheedle out a smile, and looked away.

“We’re glad to have you.”

“Glad to be here,” he said.

She told him to set up wherever and offered to scrounge up some help. “Dinner’ll be on around four, burgers and dogs, so you’ll have to fend for yourselves till then.”

They pitched the tent, laid out the cots and sleeping bags, and set up folding chairs outside, opened the cooler and sipped beers and ate sandwiches Balkwill’s wife had made. Many of the others knew Balkwill by name, mostly men, middle-aged and older. They seemed to know Derek. Balkwill introduced Sale with a clap on the back, as if he was a son returned from a long journey, and Balkwill hardly knew him.

“Randy owns the land here,” Balkwill said, after one of the introductions. “We’ve been neighbors now how long? Thirty years at least.”

“Thirty-five years.”

Balkwill shook his head at his son. “And the time goes. Getting old.” He patted Sale on the leg. “Randy here wants to have a little sit-down with you, seeing as how it’s your first time. He’s in charge of the operations. Runs a tight ship.” Balkwill and Derek stood. “See if we can’t go snag a strip of bacon.” Sale watched them go.

“It’s good to have you here,” Randy said.

“I’d always been meaning to come down and see what it’s all about, but family and all, keeps me busy.”

“I understand. It’s a sacrifice. We could use the help of a good patriot. Our numbers have been down. I’m one of the founding members, out here since the good old days. Five years ago, weekends, we’d have a hundred people out on patrol, now we’re lucky to get twenty.”

“That’s a shame.”

“We’ve had a few bad apples, nobody from our group, but other chapters, splinter groups. Some people who have no business out here. Reflects badly on us. Mostly media spin.” Randy shook his head and scowled. “We like to keep the nuts out, make sure our people are on the up and up. I’ll have to ask you to a few questions, get to know you a little bit. No offense, I hope.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“Well, anyway,” Randy went on, “we have to go over the standard operating procedures. Basically just CYA.” He handed over a plastic bound manual. “All our field ops are based off the manual. It’s mostly just common sense. You look like you’ve done some time in the military.”

“Yeah, I did my time. Army. Eighty-eight to Ninety-four. Basic at Fort Dix, on to Fort Rucker, Fort Wainwright, and Fort Carson.”

“I could tell. It’s one of the honors of this work. I’ve met a lot dedicated men, highly trained, intelligent men. I’m proud to know you. So let’s get the questions out of the way.” He wrote balancing a clipboard on his knees. Where from, what work he did, family, motives. He looked up at Sale. “Sorry. I’m not nosy. We just have to get this all

down.”

“Sure.”

“If you’ll turn to page three there. Alright, so the gist is, be nice, be smart, use common sense. We’re under scrutiny, the media, the public, agitating bleeding hearts—we don’t see them out here as often as we did. But just in case be on your best behavior. We got the whole world watching us out here. It’s always good to have a camera on you. Document any interactions. All they’re after is to ruin our reputation. They’re just waiting for us to screw up, so don’t give them any ammunition. If you see illegals on your watch, call the Border Patrol. They’re in charge. Know when it’s time to get out of the way. Let them handle it, they’re professionals. We don’t want any confrontations. It get’s messy, so tread lightly. No bodily contact with the IAs. Do not speak to them or threaten them. We’re not their friends and we’re not they’re enemies. They’re hungry and tired and won’t likely pose a threat. If you want to give them water, place it at their feet. No physical contact. Wait till the Border Patrol comes and takes them into custody. They’ll be fed and housed and sent back to Mexico, and likely return in a day or two.” Randy laughed and shook his head.

“Where we at? Page five. No trash, take out whatever you take in. Respect the property, it goes without saying. You’re my guest. No fires, no off-roading. Bring a jacket. No fires. Remember the boundaries, no trespassing. We’ll give you a station, so you’ll know where to be. Onto seven. If you don’t have a radio, I know Alan’s got an extra. No problems there?”

“No, sir.”

“All right. Let’s go to page ten. So we’re gonna have you out on the line tonight, so again, common sense, be quiet, keep your light off, if you think you see something be

absolutely sure. Listen for dogs barking, breaking twigs, gravel, but keep your noise down, stay in one spot. Let's see, twelve, climate, have water on you, pace yourself. If you don't feel good, don't push yourself. We're not eighteen anymore." Randy swatted at him with the manual.

Sale looked at him, shook his head once. "Nope."

"Page fourteen. All right, now, a little bit of the lingo. We refer to the sector, it's the general area here, about a mile so on either side, and each man is assigned a station, basically a post, about a hundred yards from each other. When you're out there look for landmarks and keep an eye out for other volunteers. When you get to your station stay there till someone relieves you. Before we go out, get a sense of the area, feel free to take a walk. Let's see, sixteen. Okay, we're not Rambo or Davy Crockett, this isn't Vietnam or Iraq, and we're not fighting an army. All we do is observe and report. Nothing more, nothing less. If you want to blow off some steam, do it somewhere else. I don't mean to imply anything. I have to go over this with everybody. Seeing as how you're the only new comer." He rolled up the manual and smacked it on his open palm. "So there you have it. All in all, you shouldn't expect any problems. I almost forgot. I see you have a gun there. Is that a Berreta?"

"That's right."

"Just a reminder, and I don't have any doubt, but guns are only to be used for protection and protection only."

"Understood."

"Anyway, that aside. We're here if you any questions and we're happy to help. So any questions?"

"Nope."

“Man of a few words, huh? Last thing I’ll need from you is your signature. Take a moment to read if you’d like.” Randy handed over the pledge and a clipboard.

Sale signed and handed it over.

“That wasn’t too painful, was it?”

“I’ve been through worse.”

* * *

The cannon thundered, the barrel thunked, and the crash echoed out over the desert, over the jagged hills. Smoke billowed and dispersed, blew over the men and women gathered around, dressed in digis, camouflage or plaid. They looked south to Mexico but saw no sign of the cannon blast.

“Just so we’re all clear,” Randy said, “that was a blank. I don’t want anyone to go around starting rumors that we’re launching missiles, provoking a war. I just like to start off a muster with a bang, and carry it through over the weekend.”

Sale stood with a Styrofoam plate balanced on a beer can, the leftovers of potato salad and coleslaw smeared across it. Dust hung in the air and coated his tongue, the grains grated with the last bite of his burger. He folded his plate. Dust rimmed his beer can. He took a sip, washed it through his mouth and spat. He watched with the others as Randy rubbed his hands and wiped them off and then strode a few steps from the cannon.

“Gentleman,” Randy said, “and ladies of the Minute men Civil Defense Unit, Tucson Sector, I’m proud to be your host for this muster. For me, it is always a privilege to meet with like minded and civic minded individuals who care about this country, concerned Americans who want to make a difference, good and honest, salt-of-the-earth patriots trying to protect what is left of our homeland. We all know, first hand, that the

Border Patrol is undermanned and overwhelmed and can't adequately stop the flood of illegals and drugs. They do good work but that's just the facts. And that's why we're here. We're here to set a precedent. Here to make a difference in our Country's future and our children's future, and the future of our children's children. You should be proud to be part of this history-in-the-making. What we're doing will change this country for the better."

Sale raked his teeth over his tongue and spat. He looked for somewhere to throw his plate and empty beer can.

"We've been blessed today," Randy continued, "with great weather for the muster. God is looking down on us and he's smiling. God helps men who help themselves. I don't think I have to tell you that Arizona is the cradle of liberty and it *must* be preserved at all costs. The terrible invasion taking place in our country, every day, every hour, every minute. We're the last stand.

"Our last time out, we found burlap sacks and ski masks stuffed in a thicket. How many times have we found the same thing? What would 'good, hard working, family folk' be doing with contraband way out here? I don't have to convince you, you've seen it firsthand. These IAs flooding our country, now some may be decent folks, don't get me wrong, but a good number of them are drug smugglers polluting *our* streets, where *our* children play, and infiltrating *our* communities. And it's sad to think that this is happening in *our* Christian nation. Is this America the beautiful? Or a landfill?"

Someone from the crowd yelled, "That's right."

"Talk about environmental disaster. That's why we're here. To protect our country, our values, and our way of life. When I look out and see so many faces, men eager to stand up for what they believe in," he paused a moment and wiped away a tear.

“Sorry, I get worked up.” His voice quivered. “It makes me proud. I know for a fact we’re doing the right thing. It may be a struggle, but we’ll win out. God is on the side of right. What we do is imperative.

“Our operations tonight will consist of search and rescue, and sitting the line. You’ve all been assigned your duty for the night. If you’re out on search and rescue, be sure to have something to write on. We like to keep track of how many IAs we sight, and how many are captured by the BP. The body count helps us gather figures and justifies our continuing operations.

“One last thing, tomorrow we have on the agenda a trash pickup and fence repair where illegal border crossers breached the fence. So don’t wear yourself out tonight. Remember the S.O.P., be safe, keep your nose clean and don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

* *

The camp glowed in the darkness. Lamps hung here and there among the tents, flashlight beams darted, cablights shone from trucks and SUVs.

Sale stood at the tailgate of Derek’s F-250, along with two other men, Travis and Barry, who volunteered to patrol the wash out east of camp. The men were younger, the youngest of those at the muster. Sale glanced at the bumper stickers on Derek’s truck: ☉ THIS IS MY PEACE SIGN ran across the back window, and flanking either side of the bumper: Dale Earnhardt Jr.’s signature scrawled over the number 88 and PLUG THE HOLE! SUPPORT SB 1070.

They had their gear set out on the tailgate and in the bed. Body armor, gas masks, search lights, night vision goggles, and each had been furnished a two way radio. Derek picked up a bullet proof vest and thrust it at Sale and said, “We don’t fuck around.” He

smiled at Sale and nodded.

“The old folks here,” Derek said, “they just like to camp at the line. We like to see a little more action, we go out a ways up the corridor, and wait. For fun. Just have some good old fashioned fun.” He flicked his eyebrows and smiled. “You should see their faces.” He laughed.

“They see our guns,” Travis said, “how we’re dressed, and just about shit their pants.”

“You compensating for something?” Derek said, grinning, looking at Travis’s crotch.

“Maybe, but if I could kill something from 300 meters with my cock, I wouldn’t need a gun.”

“You need to be packing,” Sale said, grabbing his crotch.

“You packing?” Travis said.

“Locked and loaded.” They laughed.

“But seriously,” Derek said, “You know. I’m not a gun nut, but I’ve got an AR-15, .38 handgun, and an Ak-47. I think it’s unpatriotic if you don’t have at least a .45 and a .22. Who knows what laws they’ll pass.”

“Hell,” Barry said, “I’ve got a thousand rounds of ammo rolling around in the trunk of my wife’s car.”

They went on, discussing the inevitable, looming gun grab and the ensuing government oppression, chaos. Apocalypse or something like it. George Soros and the Bilderberg Group and the New World Order. The first step, they agreed, was taking guns. Liberals forcing their babble, blurring the lines, confusing people, spin doctors playing mind games. If they didn’t stand up and say, look, I’m not going to take this, talk

straight or else—let them know there’s consequences—if you don’t stand up, they’ll take you for everything you own. And that man in the *White House*, talk to a scientist or economist, he was leading this country right off the edge of a cliff. You had to prepare for any contingency.

Derek’d already begun prepping, and just bought some land for a bug-out shelter. “If shit hit the fan,” Derek said, “and God forbid, I had to protect my family, all I’m saying is, that we’re survivors. They won’t get mine.”

Derek slammed the tail gate, and told Sale to take shotgun, while Travis and Barry posted up in the truck bed. They drove east, down the rutted road that skirted the border, rumbling every so often over cattleguards. Their plan was to stakeout in the hills on either side of the wash, wait, watch, and in a few hours reconvene, have some beers, and change stations.

Around a hill where the road curved and dropped, Derek flicked off the headlights and slowed, swerving at rocks and ruts that popped out of the faultless dark. A ways down, they pulled up. Barry and Travis hopped out, raised a hand and disappeared into a black wall of creosote, mesquite, and ocotillo.

They went on to the other side of the wash, the truck tunneling through the dark. Derek pointed out all their positions, Sale saw nothing but the rise of the black hills against the night sky. Derek had Sale post a couple hundred yards up from the road, while he went to hide the truck.

Sale climbed a rise and hunkered down near an outcrop of shale, leaning close to the rock wall with a view of the wash. He glassed the brush with the night vision goggles, and found Travis and Barry’s positions across the ghostly haze. Derek was out of sight, nearer the road, somewhere along the slope.

For the next hour, he sweat under the body armor and endured the mounting wind. The wind stirred and before long, swooped and plunged and surged. His forearm held to his face against blasts of dust, he squinted into the needling sand. The grit lined his teeth, burrowed in his nose, in his ears. Nearby mesquites bowed, grass whipped. The wind rooted through the brush and drowned out any sound he could name. But he heard them still, and jerked to pin the invented source: snapping twigs, howls, gravel underfoot, engine chatter. Yet when he glassed the wash, he saw only a sickly glow—the clouding dust, and he'd lost sight of the others.

He felt eyes on him and palmed his holster. Then he noticed near below, branches bending independent of the wind like a shark fin parting water. He swore he heard the tramp of feet on gravel, tree limbs crackling. Barry's voice broke on two-way: "I've got something here."

Sale answered: "I see it." He glassed the wash and tried to make out Barry's position. Shadows, fluttering tree limbs, the swirling dust. He determined to go but glassed the wash another minute or two. He saw branches bend a hundred feet north.

No sooner had the adrenaline curdled in his stomach than he felt the barrel of a gun at his neck. He tensed and raised his arms from his body. A hand grabbed at his hip, took his gun. What the fuck? he thought. You idiot. Your wife, your son. Their faces for a second. What was he thinking? A flashlight blinded him. He squinted, tried to think of their faces, plates of Styrofoam blistered and shriveled in a fire. He saw a gunshot blast out in the wash, heard its cough echo to a murmur. In the glare of the flashlight, sweat or tears blurring his sight, he made out a man in black. The flashlight held at his shoulder. Ski mask. Body armor. An AR-15 slanting across his body.

A kick to his calf spread his legs and hands ran down his body, patted him,

scrounged his pockets. They took his knife, his wallet, car keys and cell phone. A voice said: “You down. Down.” And they shoved him in the back and struck his knee from behind. His knee buckled. “No move. You down.” The voice was badly accented.

He lay face down in the dust, panting. He whimpered and said, “No. No.” The blood pitched in his heart, spouted and wrenched. He covered his head. Ran his fingers through his hair to ward off the shot he knew was coming. He saw the boots and closed his eyes. The darkness struck through with a strobing light like static on a TV screen. All of it shuddering. Ocean waves rippling and nauseous. It pressed on him like a vise.

“All right. Jesus Christ, man. That’s enough.”

A hand ran across his back. Clapped him there. The hand at his face. “You’re sweating, man.”

He opened his eyes to see Derek’s face, a ski mask pulled up on his head. “You’re sweating, man.” He patted Sale on the back. “You all right? You look like a whore in church.”

Sale rolled over and sat up. Dazed, trying to make out the three men crouched down around him. His hands planted on the ground, he fingered the sand, grabbed a handful and flung it in Derek’s face. “You fuck.” He lunged and tackled Derek to the ground and pounded his face and said, “You fuck.” The AR-15 lay just below where he gripped Derek’s vest. He yanked the vest and flailed till the other two pulled him off.

Derek sprawled back, leaning on his elbows. He sat up and spat. Blood and dust on his face. “Jesus, Sale. Lighten up.” He wiped his eyes, massaged his jaw, and then looked at his hand. He sucked in and spat a black cord of blood. “Have some fun.”

The trash, the corridor runs right through my land. You wouldn't believe the trash. A river of trash running through the desert. These people, they have no respect. They fill up the troughs with trash, like they got no sense. Trash up clean water. Sure, it's for cows, but Jesus. Then they expect to drink from our water. They cut my pipes, smash the valves—the water flows out all night. I thought of putting some soccer balls out there so they'd get distracted. You see those bikes in my garage? Found those. They ride bikes right through the desert, packed down with drugs. Crack and methamphetamines. Marijuana. I don't know. Get those first few miles out of the way, I guess.

That sheriff, what's his name, in Phoenix. Arpaio, yeah, him. He proposed they come out here with illegals, ones waiting to be deported, have a chain gang pick up the trash. They did it up there, but no one signed up for it out here, and I understand, have them hauled out here again, all the hassle. The shit you find, I mean Jesus, used razors, dirty clothes—they just take off all they're wearing, water bottles, sleeping bags, blankets, trash piled up knee high. Sweaters, jeans, soap, medications, food, batteries, cell phones, rope, radios, shoes, water jugs, shit. Diapers. They've done clean ups out here and hauled out three dumpsters worth of trash, some areas it's packed three feet deep.

Seen panties and bras hanging from tree branches—that's them rape tree, rape the women there and then hang up their panties like it's a scoreboard. Marking their territory. Jesus. Just a couple weeks back, you remember Randy, right? We went out to his land for the muster? Anyway, he tells me the Border Patrol finds this girl, not a woman, a girl from what they could tell, the body being decomposed. Had a bag over her head, no pants, signs of rape. Either died of thirst or strangulation. Think maybe

they done it to her while she's dying. Not that they'd notice she's dead, God damned animals, Devil's work. I don't doubt it. There's some sick people. They probably made the father and mother watch while they did it. Good God. Can you imagine? And you know the worse part? They'll never catch them, no one'll get punished. Probably have the men in custody right now and never know it, never could tell who did it.

That's why we need keep them out. The criminal element. Had a neighbor propose, of course it's a joke, a stupid idea, but it made me laugh. He says they should build a forty foot wall, forty foot up, forty foot down, forty foot wide, made of compacted garbage. Had this idea that all the homes, all across America, should have trash compacters in them. They collect the trash, all smashed up into little cubes, and ship them out to our southern border, right here, where we're sitting, and brick all those little cubes up into a massive wall. Have towers built up, and sensors and all that technology, but you don't have to spend near as much, right, because it's trash. It goes forty foot down to keep them from tunneling, forty foot high, forty foot wide—that'd make it a long run, case they happened to climb to the top. They'd have to cross a line of machine gun fire from the towers. It sounds stupid, but it's not that crazy of an idea. Not only that, he told me, as the garbage decomposes, there's always a new source of trash. Plus, it cleans up the landfills, and creates jobs for truck drivers, construction workers, and machine gunners. I told him, that's a stupid, stupid idea, maybe not a bad idea, but I'd kill you first, before you build up a wall of trash on my land.

VI

Nancy woke to find Diana's hand on her face. She wore a teal dress with a scarf wrapped around her neck, her hair down, concealing most of the bruise that drew up to her ear. "¿Tienes frío?" she asked. Diana told her she was cold and adjusted the scarf to cover her neck. It was Easter morning and Diana and her boys were going to mass.

Diana's boys stood, dressed for mass, in the doorway and watched her. She didn't want to see, didn't want to be seen. Diana shooed away the boys and left, and came back with a cup of tea. Nancy sat up, holding the cup with both hands. She tried to sip but only inhaled the vapor.

Diana wrapped the scarf around her neck, and told Nancy she'd be back in a couple hours. There was cereal, frozen waffles, toast, eggs, tortillas, but Nancy wanted nothing. She was told to help herself. Nancy hadn't eaten since Friday morning in Parral, now two days before. Diana left a phone for her on the nightstand next to the boom box.

Armando got out of bed and left the room. He had peed himself, Nancy could tell by the yellow ring on the fringe of his shirt. She forgot to tell Diana. At home he slept on

a bed covered with a plastic sheet. When she got up to gather the sheets, the floor seemed to lean against her, and she lay back down.

She spent the rest of the morning in bed. She heard clanks and pings, the rattle of Armando wandering the house. The TV was on or it was off. She'd open her eyes and peer around the room, the trophies, a dart board on the wall, the boom box, the sheet over the window. Where was she? The phone rang and rang. She covered her head with the pillow. Tried to stop breathing. Screams, Armando wailing.

She finally answered the phone. Listening, not talking. She heard Armando Sr., her husband's voice: "¿Diana? ¿Me escuchas? Oye, oye." She hung up.

The phone rang again and on the third call she answered, "Sí, soy yo."

"Ay, mi amor. ¿Pero, qué pasa?" He was on his way to buy a bus ticket and would arrive late that night. The cost didn't matter. It was his fault, all of it. He should've never let her go. Not alone. He'd bring money. He had money for the return crossing, but didn't say where he got it.

She knew what it meant if he came. All the money they'd saved. He could lose his job—that's why he didn't come in the first place. He always said, *Enfermarse es un lujo ¿Sabes? Y vacaciones, ja, no hay nada de nada*. He never missed a day. He would die at work. They'd just started roofing a new subdivision in Brighton, an hour north of Denver. It was good money. He'd be replaced. They would lose everything. The house, the cars, everything. She knew how much it meant to him. And to just give it all up, move back home. To what?

They'd been planning the quinceañera for years, and she wanted to be with family, *her* family. She wanted to show their success, their beautiful daughter, parade her in front of everyone. Give Erika what she never had. Armando wanted to save

money, have it in Denver, but she insisted.

She convinced him to stay, to send money, but wait. There was nothing he could do. She knew it was her fault. God had marked her.

When Diana returned that afternoon, Nancy demanded she take her to the police.

“¿Para qué?” Diana said. “No hacen nada. Pueden ser los mismos—ellos mismo.”

“No me importa,” Nancy said. “Me llevas o voy caminando, llamo taxi, pero voy.”

Diana relented.

* *

The afternoon sun splashed over the windshield in splinters. They mounted the bridge just past where calle Lerdo turned into to Juan Gabriel, on their way to the Fiscalía. Diana drove; Armando rattled beads in the back seat. Nancy looked out the window, nothing to suggest it was Easter. A train sat idle on the bridge adjacent. Off in the distance, she read the careening letters, broad and white, on the face of Cerro Bola:

CD JUAREZ

LA BIBLIA ES

LA VERDAD

LEELA

She crossed herself and brought her thumb to her lips. The voice of Rocío Durcal lilted on the radio, the guitar trickled, the trumpet sputtered: *...qué clase de persona él se cree que soy.*

Ahead barrels blocked the left lane and cars edged in front of them and formed a line. As they approached, she saw a pile of sand bags and a shade tent. Policía Federal trucks parked beyond. *Nada ha sido en serio...* She made out helmets above the sand bags stacked chest high. The helmets bobbed, appeared, disappeared. A policeman

stepped out from the sandbags with a clipboard. *Así son los hombres*. Helmeted, masked. He pressed his thumb to his shoulder, turned to it, spoke. He yawned, stretched, and scratched his neck. He motioned ahead and the cars moved on.

...poquito a poco te coja, te toca...

When they pulled up to the tent, Diana rolled down her window.

The officer drew near...*hasta al fondo de tu corazón*. “Apagalo,” he said.

“¿Adonde van?”

Diana glanced at her, killed the engine, and looked up at the officer. “A la Fis...a la Fiscalía.”

An officer leaned against the sand bags behind him. Another officer stood out ahead, facing them, his hands resting on an M-16.

“¿La Fiscalía?” He wore sunglasses over his ski mask. He took them off and rubbed his eyes. “La Fiscalía.” He yawned and rubbed his eyes. He glanced at the car and scratched his neck. He turned to the officer behind him. “Van a la Fiscalía.”

The other looked at the car and said nothing.

“Ándale.” He flicked his chin for them to move on.

Nancy watched him wave the next car on in the rear view mirror.

The crowd in the courtyard outside the Fiscalía moved about Nancy in a stifled groan. Diana refused to come along, said she’d watch Armando in the car, and wait. Mutterings, whispers. Glances and lowered eyes. Measured gestures. Arms crossed, arms huddling loved ones close. Smiles, laughs, sobs. Children clung to hapless men and women, trailing from their hands. Amongst the crowd, men in suits, lawyers? detectives? swaggered, their heads thrown back, smiling, eyes that ordered and took in everything in their line of sight.

She felt like they were watching her. Who? She shouldn't be here. What was the point? She tried to conjure Erika's face, but saw only a deflating balloon that slipped and sucked away. Her jaw clenched, she stopped and covered her eyes and sobbed into her hand, recovered, moved on—only dust, she pretended to those watching, her glance swerving, flitting over the ground.

She neared the entrance of the Fiscalía, and amongst the falling feet of the crowd, she noticed the outline of a dead body spray painted on the concrete. Red paint splattered over the chest. Graffiti scrawls between the crowd's scissoring legs: *justicia ya, capitilismo...* Across the courtyard, near the road, pink crosses were planted below metal palms in beds of gravel, a message written out on each: NI UNA MÁS, BASTA CON LA IMPUNIDAD, JUSTICIA. In the parking lot, shade tents were set up outside opened van doors where vendors advertised copy machines. Vendors sold burritos and soda. The crowd milled near the doors, to the road and on out to the parking lot.

An old woman hooded with a rebozo sat on the steps with her head between her knees, a plaid nylon sack beside her. She rocked in a sort of trance. Nancy could not see her face, but heard her whisper: *Que me lleven a mí, que me llevan a mí*, over and over. A panting rhythm, a sort of sob.

Above the old woman, hung an array of horizontal metal louvers, shading plate glass windows. Glass the color of an ocean. The windows were covered with posters of missing people, mostly girls. Here and there a few men, boys, an old man. Entire rows hung with copies of the same poster. Girls dressed for a quinceañera, in school uniforms, in graduation robes. Men outside their homes, at barbecues, their family cut out of the photo—an arm around a shoulder, heads spliced. One poster lapped atop another like snake scales, here and there, older flyers, frayed, weathered—molted from

the window's surface. Names, birthdates, height, weight, what clothes they wore, what other names they went by. The array of faces like squares of a chess board.

She climbed the stairs and pulled at the door but it didn't give. Inside, only those uniformed and suited strode back and forth, beyond the rows and rows of chairs and bowed heads. Nancy pushed the door but it wouldn't give.

A man opened the door from inside and said, "Hay que jalarle." A woman exited, followed by a young girl. The man held the door open for them and held it open for her. "Pásale, pásale," he said. Before he stepped out he said, "Que Dios te bendiga."

A guard stood near the entrance and motioned with his head and eyes toward a reception desk near a metal detector. Nancy glanced up at the high ceiling, someone walking above—a head that glided along the second floor rail. She fixed her gaze on the tiled floor and crossed the waiting area, past rows and rows of chairs to a maple receptionist's desk that bowed out into the passage. A guard stood beside a metal detector and stared ahead.

Nancy's hands were cold and tingled, and she rubbed them at her chest.

The receptionist looked at a computer screen, typed, and said, "Espérense." She yanked a ticket from the dispenser and held it up, her hand jabbed, searching, insisting the ticket be taken. "Ten," the receptionist said, and handed the ticket to her, a number, 68. "Allí," she said, motioning with her head to the chairs, her gaze locked on the computer screen.

"Gracias," Nancy said.

"Para servirle." The receptionist smiled, looking at the screen.

She took a seat in the last row with her back to the plate glass window. Past the heads in the seats before her, stood a glass wall, cubicles, the doors marked by numbers

on plaques: 1 to 5. The glass was sandblasted to the height of the door. Everything was painted white. Every surface gleamed.

She waited, sitting beside an old woman wearing a dust mask, her black hair pinched by yellow straps. A web of wrinkles branched from her eyes. Copper skin hatched with creases. Nancy could just hear the woman murmur. She rocked and fingered a rosary, passing the beads between finger and thumb. Her head was raised to a TV screen anchored to a column. She looked to find the old woman on the steps outside but she was gone. This the same woman, she thought.

Nancy casted swerving glances at the others seated nearby and followed their eyes. The TV muted, framed Gloria Trevi and an interviewer, sitting together, cross-legged on the edge of a water fall that flowed into a pool. The camera shook as it closed in on Gloria's face, she brushed aside her hair and smiled.

Nancy peeked at the old woman's face, at the dust mask and the skin that puckered at its edge. The white mask against dark skin. A mask to muffle against the cold, the dust, disease. To hide, she thought. She wanted to hold the woman's hand to stop the nervous thumbing of the rosary. She glanced so as not to catch her eye, feared what a shared look would invite. If the woman were to see her looking, if she knew she was looking, Nancy would feel guilt, the need to apologize, to condole. If the old woman saw her glance, she'd have to smile or nod, but more likely, she'd look away rather than acknowledge their shared desolation that neither had allowed to settle, to take form, to become real. Better to deny their shared lot.

She checked this urge as she had so many times before. The urge to comfort, to share grief. She knew other women's pain, their shame. In Denver, when she first started her job downtown, clearing tables at a brew pub on Curtis, she shrunk before the

immensity of the buildings, the jostling of the crowd. Businessmen, students, Americans—people who knew where they were going and how to walk amongst the crowd, how to read the signs, how to speak the language—streamed down the sidewalks along Sixteenth Street Mall, whereas she burrowed, faltering between them on her way to work. She looked up to the sky and felt nauseous, as if she looked down from the tops of the buildings, not up. The skyscrapers warped as she peered at the sky, their lines curving inward.

She would pass women like herself, or sit across from them on the bus. Women wrapped in jackets, hoods, scarves, to hide the company uniform they wore beneath. Her uniform was all black, a long sleeve shirt, *Rock Bottom* embroidered over her breast, pants with a crisply ironed crease, bulky black boots. She glanced at these women—las otras mexicanas—with shame and longing. A glance that swerved the second their eyes met.

When she had to catch the bus after midnight, she longed to reach out to them. But her clothes tinged with the smell of grease—fried onions, bacon, hamburger—clothes spattered here and there with ranch dressing or ketchup, droplets that had dried—she'd given up going to the bathroom before she left and rubbing out these stains—dressed like this, she met eyes only to evade.

Eyes like her own. Eyes that caught hers for a second, and reluctant, humiliated, darted to the nearest flat surface. Glass, concrete, the back of a bus seat. With what dignity, with what pride, could she look them full in the face? These women like herself, with whom she felt a bond, a knowing. Back home in Parral, she might have joked at the sight of them: trigueña, prieta, morena, indio, chilango, but in Denver, in gringos' eyes they were all the same, unseen. She could tell they were like her from the color of their

skin, but more so, from how they glanced at her, and how she knew she glanced at them—they regarded each other—*Mujer, yo te veo. Yo sé que es tú vida*. A look of compassion tinged with shame. A mirror held out to the other.

Nancy regarded the old woman beside her. She waited, and stared at the TV, the back of heads. Outside the sun had passed on over the building, and the plate glass had darkened.

An officer now summoned the old woman by name, Susana San Juan, placed a hand on her back, and gestured toward the cubicles in front of them. The old woman gathered up the stack of papers from under her seat and went on. Nancy prayed for this to be over with, for this not to be.

And then she felt a tremor on her thighs. The cell phone, Diana calling.

“Ya vámanos,” Diana said. “Ya es tarde.”

Nancy refused to leave. Diana insisted, they shouldn’t be out at night, even here, and promised if they left now they could have flyers made, and they’d come back first thing in the morning. Armando was waiting in the car, driving her crazy, Diana pleaded. He hadn’t stopped crying since she left. She felt like tying him up. What did Nancy expect her to do?

She hung up the phone.

Diana called again and she answered, saying, “Me quedo. Váyanse ustedes.” She hung up and slouched down in her chair. Better here, she thought, than home with Diana. The thought began to creep, it was Diana, she was the one, she planned it all along. No police because it was her. Diana knew men like those men, her husband was such a man.

And suddenly Diana was there. Armando swayed beside her, his arm pumping.

Diana swept the waiting room with her gaze. She whispered, “Vámanos.”

“Me quedo hasta encuentren mi hija.” She crossed her arms and burrowed down in the chair. She stared ahead.

Diana turned and looked out the plate glass windows, at the darkening sky. “No sea así. Ya es noche.”

Nancy turned to her. “No voy contigo.” She gestured for Armando to come but he only swayed and bobbed his head. “Ven, mi’jo. Ven, Mamo.”

The boy looked at her and then his glance wandered. He took a step toward Diana and stood behind her.

“Nancy,” Diana said.

“No me acercas.”

The guard had taken notice, stood watching them with his hands resting on his rifle.

Diana stroked the scarf at her neck and turned casually to the guard and smiled. She turned back and said, “Nancy, no hagas eso. Tenemos que ir. Vámanos.” She stepped forward and put her hand on Nancy’s shoulder.

Nancy jerked away, and screamed, “Suéltame, suéltame. No me tocas.”

“Ya,” Diana said. “Tranquila.” She bent over and took Nancy under her arms and tried to lift her.

Nancy twisted from her grip and slapped at her.

“Está bien,” Diana said. “Quédate aquí con tus locuras.”

The guard walked up behind Diana and stood there. “¿Qué es la bronca?” he said.

Nancy looked up at the guard and cowered. She ran a hand down her face, and then grasped at Diana who helped her to her feet.

“No es nada,” Diana said. “Es que ella está mala.”

* * *

That evening they went to a copy shop across the street from the hotel and had missing flyers made. The attendant seemed wary, standoffish. He fixed his wide set eyes on the computer screen, and did not look up. Two, three times a week, he explained, someone would come in requesting a flyer for a missing person. He had a preformatted file in the computer. He didn’t ask questions, only needed the details. Who they were, who they were involved with, what they’d done, didn’t matter—he looked up at Nancy, smiled disarmingly, and said, “El inocente no tiene que explicarse, así que no pregunto.” He laughed. Nancy watched the pinheads of sweat bead on his forehead, his thinning hair glistening with hairspray, his meaty fingers darting over the keyboard.

The man asked for details, and Nancy told him: height, weight, what Erika was wearing. She recited the story. Nancy, Diana, Armando, and Erika were waylaid at a checkpoint on the carretera de Chihuahua by a group of men dressed as Policía Federal—the man stopped typing and wiped his forehead and advised against saying they were police. These *men*, she went on, kidnapped Erika and demanded a ransom. When they returned with the ransom the following day, the men directed them off the highway down a dirt road, took the money, and they haven’t heard anything since. The man simplified the story and explained they didn’t want to call unwanted attention by blaming the police or narcos or even mentioning that men had kidnapped her. Simply: she disappeared.

The header read: *Desaparecida* and below, *Ayúdenos a encontrarla, Erika Velázquez Salinas, 15 años. Desapareció 2 de abril de 2010 en la Carretera de Chihuahua. Si tiene información sobre su persona, favor de comunicarse con sus*

familiares al teléfono (656) 698 24 64. The number was that of the cell Diana had lent her. She provided a photo, a close-up of Erika with her hair curled and bangs slanting across her face, crowned with a tiara. The same photo Nancy had set up to be taken in a studio in Denver and placed on the quinceañera announcements. Nancy had never seen her daughter so beautiful. She hoped, as her daughter posed for the photos, tilting her head and smiling, that Erika might find a man. A good man, a better man than those she had known. And as the copy machine shot out copy after copy, she thought, her daughter was no more than a photo printed on paper, and copied a hundred times.

Before night fell, Nancy and Diana locked Armando in the car and went out and taped copies to the side of payphone hoods, electrical poles, and abandoned storefronts. Diana told her not to hand them out to anyone, to just tape them where people could see them if they chose to look.

Some store owners told them they didn't want any problems, to take down the posters, and go up the street, their eyes flickering from one passerby to the next, darting beyond to the cars passing. They'd tongue their teeth and shake their heads in condolence.

As they made their way down the street, back to the car, and again, drove on to another street, Nancy's limbs grew heavy. Her fingers numbed. She worked at peeling the edge of tape, but couldn't manage, as if her hands were gloved. Everything she touched seemed felt through a barrier. She tucked the roll of tape under her arm and felt the blood throb, and the tingling in her fingertips. She clenched her hands and squeezed them together. And suddenly her body felt foreign, light. It went on without her consent. She'd taken residence in a phantom. God had fingered her for her sins, for some shameful offense.

Afterward, they drove back to Diana's. Twilight descended and the street lights glowed yellow. A deceptive silence pierced through by groans of vibration. The distant peal of a train, the rush of cars, somewhere a gunshot or nothing. She watched Diana's eyes flit between the side and rearview mirrors. The dusk, shriveling light, creeping darkness. Diana told them they shouldn't have stayed out so long. At night they should be home.

Back at Diana's, Nancy lay on the sofa and looked at the TV screen and herself reflected in it. Armando had flung the remote control at the wall and gathered the batteries that popped out, and sat now on the ground, where he shook the batteries in his hand like dice. He paused and smelled his hand and rocked and shook the batteries like dice.

Diana sat down and took Nancy's head in her lap. She passed her hand through Nancy's hair, soothing: "Deja todo a la justicia divina. Dios se encarga de todo. Todo se pagarán. Déjalo en las manos de Dios."

The thought creeps in your mind, as persistent as the hunger, thirst, the throb—death. As persistent as the sun’s scorch, as the silence now fallen over the column of men before and behind. You push it from your mind, but it remains. In each gasp of breath, each trickle of sweat, each heavy footfall, death. You once thought it impossible: you live, walk, burn, bleed, ache. You feel the spasms in your stomach, the retch you swallow. The grit of dust in your teeth. You are alive. Once too alive to believe in death, but now, in all you feel, death, the closeness of it. The line you walk beset. Its venom oozing. You think, how many days? How many more?

La brasada’s spined tentacles draw back. A clearing materializes, beyond the swaying backs of those ahead. Before you now a wash of bleached earth, not white soil, but dirt bleached under the roaring glare of the sun and the waves of nausea, the throbbing cloud on your vision. Still beyond, you make out in the distance, a metal sheeted barn, its roof glistening on the horizon. You gather it must be midday, the shadows leaning from mesquites, clumps of nopals, and stunted, gnarled yuccas. Your cousin decides to wait out the afternoon, find refuge from the heat. You all shuffle along the receding brush, and then kneel, sit back, sprawl in the shadows of a mesquite. Your cousin warns about standing here, “Esperamos,” he says, and promises, “Es brinco no más. Casi, casi llegamos.”

The food you have brought—candy bars, crackers—have long since gone out. You glance at the hands of those where plastic bags uncrinkle, cellophane wrappers crackle, and chocolate melts on their fingertips. Crumbs lining their lips. The lines of their hands marked with dust, and even so, you would lick their fingers clean. When they hold out their hands, offer a cracker, you shake your head, not meeting their eyes. You would give, but won’t take, and if roles reversed, they would decline in turn—that

is, so long as you're on your feet, so long as you can deny, and you would like to think, if it came to that, like a soldier in a movie, you would urge them on, take one last drink, go, go, you would tell them, and they would remember your sacrifice forever.

That afternoon, there is little talk. Grim smiles meet your own. You remember stories of crossing. They told of desperation—those who went before you, those who returned, first hand or from a cousin, some guy they knew. They saw it on TV. In the throes of fatigue—skin so dry when they pinch themselves it stays pinched, like putty, red eyed, skin paled—immigrants driven by the fear of death to turn themselves over to the migra, or with clawing hunger, sick of heat, hallucinating, alone in the desolation, driven to off themselves. Tales of hemmed in travelers, of castaways, survivors driven to cannibalism take hold in your mind. You smile at your fellow travelers, your family, because they smile, but think, they think the same. You heard tell of men who resorted to tearing open rodents, jackrabbits and armadillos, eating them alive and drinking the blood. To resort to that. Normal men who had turned to darker instincts. Men like you or your brother-in-law and cousin who rest now, stretched out in the shadow. You see stone and wish it bread. You sip water, sip for fear it too might be your last. And now as the day wanes and the shadows stretch out toward you from the other side of the clearing, as your mind turns toward these darker thoughts, you see the nopals and consider ripping into the fibrous meat, spines and all, but the others are there and they'd see you, and just then your cousin rouses, stands, and you find yourself doing the same.

VII

Sometimes he dreamed of masturbation. The women he watched, most of them, looked like his wife, and to his reckoning this squared. If God existed, this was one of the exceptions he made; and surely, God existed.

He'd gotten sucked into these live web cams. They claimed to be dating sites—*Your Wife Will Never Find Out, Free To Join, No Bull Shit, Browse Bitches*, but it was just women, sitting in front of a computer camera, posing, with dildos and other devices ready at hand. He felt guilty the first couple times, but he didn't plan on doing anything about it.

The women were categorized: young, old, black, Hispanic, Asian, exotic, fetish, BBWs. Women who'd do everything he wanted, when he wanted, how he wanted, women who took it where he wanted. Malleable women under his control, or that of another man, their perverse comments and desires written out on the message board—his control or another's amounted to the same thing.

Sometimes he doubted whether the women were videotaped or live. No way to tell. He was careful. Before he got down to it, he'd look out the window at the street, two fingers flexed the blinds, making sure no one was around. Maybe someone was out

there, out of sight at the moment he looked, but there somewhere, in a van, microphones planted somewhere in the house. Then he thought, no, but it wasn't out of the realm of possibility. A government big enough to give you what you want is big enough to take what you have.

Sometimes it took hours to find the right girl. The girls all had stage names: Sexy_nadine or Juanitasexx1—unimaginative names like this distinguished by the adjectives: hot, squirt, XXX, bitch, horny, dirty, wet: nasty_milk, candy_slave. Their names made claims, but he thought he would be the judge. After paging through ten or twenty women, he'd settle on one, the most promising. And he liked to think she looked like his wife when she was younger.

There was a message board beside the video screen where you could talk with the girls. All of the users had to have screen names to chat. Sale went by NavySeal49. Some of the other users would ask where the girl lived and said they'd plan a special trip out to Las Vegas or Colombia or Vietnam to visit. Some of them were a little sick, they had foot fetishes or asked for piss and shit. Freaks. Sale rarely chatted, but when he did, he tried to remain respectful: You're beautiful. I'm in love. I'd give anything for a night with you. Some of these other guys were pricks, and he wondered who the fuck they were and why they had so much time on their hands.

One morning, discouraged by his job search, and after some hours at the live cams, he found a girl he liked, that he'd like to finish with. She was beautiful and perfect, and Goddamned sexy:

Name: spice_latina21

Age: 21

Gender: Female

Sexual Preference: Bisexual

Country: Colombia

Zodiac: Scorpio

Height: 4'9"

Weight: 120 lbs.

Hair Color: Blond

Eye Color: Brown

Ethnicity: Hispanic

Cup Size: D

Pubic Hair: Bald

Languages Spoken: Spanish, English

Measurements: 40-27-38"

He watched her on the screen and put his hand down his pants, knocking on the underside of the desk drawer. spice_latina21 sat on the edge of a bed. A bed with thin white sheets. Flowers and butterflies were pasted to the beige, concrete wall behind her, also hearts and lips. Sheets hung from the ceiling on either side of the bed. A pattern of Strawberry Shortcake was printed on the sheets.

She sucked on a lollypop, removing it every now and then. When she took it out she smiled, showed her porcelain teeth, and moistened her lips. She had straight black hair, olive skin, and thick glossy lips she pressed together to keep moist. Her skin glistened with sweat or oil. She bit her lower lip and pursed them and sent a kiss at the camera. Silver harp shaped earrings dangled to her shoulders. She wore a sports bra that, God damn it, she'd never take off—unless you paid, and Sale was considering. Finally, he waited, she stood up on the bed and revealed her purple panties with a tiny

bow just below her belly button. A purple triangle.

The message board read:

Spoonjack: Let it out mami. Let's see your feet. Your feet! Do you have toys?

What kind of toys?

Fracture99: can I see more of your body. Gold show?

DaddyMike: turn around ass up so we can get a sneak peak of that asssss!!!

spice_latin1: yes bebi in pvt

Spoonjack: Put on miniskirt-school girl. Caliente. Grande verga.

NavySeal49: Hey baby, face flat on the bed.

Sale thought it was funny in the girl's profile it always read: Languages Spoken—Spanish, English—English for sex, I horny, I wet, baby, you big, I like, language enough to get through the transaction.

spice_latin21 seemed distracted. She kept looking off the screen like she was talking to someone, or something was there. A baby? A boyfriend? A pimp? Sale didn't dwell long on this, nor much cared, but sometimes it was another woman. A voice, though he couldn't hear, she didn't have a microphone, talked from off screen and she responded. She sat back down and pulled out one of her toys, a pink vibrator that looked like a magic marker. He would like to make some joke to someone about these women's toys, but he could never admit what he did to anyone.

A hand broke in from off screen. It was a man. spice_latin21 sprawled back on the bed, cowering, spread eagle, leaning on her hands. The man grabbed at her throat but she slipped away and fell back over the bed. He punched as she fell, and hit a glancing blow on her back, a muted blow but a visible thudding. The sheet ripped off as she fell. She clambered to her feet, slipping as she did, her feet tangled in the sheet. She

stood now and held the sheet to her chest and a hand out as if to ward off blows. She was crying. Sale thought this was part of the show. Foreplay.

The man's back took up the screen. Sale could tell he had her by the throat. He wanted him to get her, for a second, to see what he would do. In that moment, to be in his place. She clawed at the man, smacked him in the face. Maybe she likes it, Sale thought. Deserves it.

The man shoved her across the room, and knocked the stand where the computer sat, angling the camera toward the sheet wall. spice_latina21 fell into the sheets that divided the room. The sheet came down and she, wrapped in the sheet, thrashed to get out. Behind her, there was another bed and a girl standing with a sheet to her chest crying, reaching out to the girl on the floor. The man stood above the sheeted bundle and kicked. The other girl took off running, naked, her butt cheeks thundering. The man turned back to the computer, his arms filled the screen. He threw over the stand where the computer sat.

Sale watched as the camera fell, tipping back. He saw a corrugated roof and rough hewn beams. When the camera fell and lay on its side, a hall was revealed, divided by sheets, and each stall had a table where computers sat. A few girls stood watching in the hallway, some naked, some in panties, some fully clothed. The camera jostled and the screen went black.

* *

She had never caught him outright, with his pants down. She had never actually seen a naked woman on his TV or computer screen. But he had been caught in that moment of paralysis when she entered his office without knocking. Later, Sale figured, she did it on purpose, to humiliate him, to hang it over his head.

As her face came into view from behind the door, he could see her cringe or flinch. She held on to the door handle and seemed to debate backing out. Sale too flinched and took a second to gather himself. Garbled moans escaped from the speakers. His pants undone, he shoved his stomach up to the desk. Nonchalant and frenzied, he clicked the mouse, swiped at it and sent the arrow across the screen, shutting down each page. The pages lingered a moment too long.

He knew that she knew, and he knew she wouldn't touch it. He knew her, and she didn't want to know. He thought of it as a sort of standoff, not then, but later. As he clicked the Xs to shut down the pages, aiming, taking fire, he remembered what Little Bill Dagget said in *Unforgiven*: "Look son, being a good shot, being quick with a pistol, that don't do no harm, but it don't mean much next to being cool-headed. A man who will keep his head and not get rattled under fire, like as not, he'll kill ya." Some wisdom he might pass on to his son.

His yank of the mouse mastered, his paralysis overcome, he wanted to know why she barged in like that. "What?" he said.

She said nothing and held on to the door handle. She placed her other hand on the door and closed it some.

"What is it?" He leaned back in his chair and put his hands on the hand rests.

She stood there and looked at him.

"What?"

She let out her breath and looked down at the floor. She crossed her arms and leaned against the door jamb. "Did you get to fixing the door today—I can call someone to fix it."

"I'll get to it when I got time. Don't be calling nobody."

She looked at him.

“What?” He wiped a hand over his brow and dropped it on the handrest. “Oh, come off it.”

“Dinner’ll be ready in a little bit.” She closed the door.

Sale huffed and lippered meaningless words and shook his head. He lifted his hand and gestured to the door as if asking a ghost: *See what I have to deal with? What did she expect?*

Later he tried to explain it away: pop-ups, viruses, technology, all these hackers, you can’t can’t control it. He joked his computer had got an STD.

* * *

Sale sat in front of the TV, a beer within reach, watching a man wrestle a mattress from a storage unit, roll it out and flop it onto the pavement. In front of the roll doors, the ground was littered with plastic tubs and trash bags. He drifted off to sleep.

He woke to the sounds of his wife in the kitchen, rushing water, plates and silverware in the sink. He turned to see his son rush past, and through the kitchen, his feet tramping down the hallway. “Watch out, bud.”

“What are those barrels doing out in the garage,” his wife said.

He lolled his head back and looked at the ceiling, blinking the sleep from his eyes, showing he was listening. “Yep,” he said.

“I said, what are those barrels doing in the garage.”

He pinched one eye shut, looking at the ceiling. “What?”

“The barrels.”

He thought about what he thought up to tell her: he’d bought the barrels for a little project he had going—cattle troughs, barbecue grills, rain water storage—a

barbecue grill was most likely. It seemed sound, believable so long as it involved money, they'd be for sale, he decided, she couldn't deny him that. He even bought metal lathe for the grill. Anyway, he knew she wouldn't bother to test their weight.

"It's a project I have going. Barbecue. I'm gonna cut them in half, put some legs on, weld on a grill."

He heard her sigh, could imagine her shaking her head, and turned and placed his elbow on the sofa's back to see if she was. "What?"

"You know what," she said. "I don't have to tell you."

"It didn't cost me nothing. They just give them away."

"It's not gonna blow up or anything. I mean, it's not poisonous."

"Yeah, I got it from the dump." He knew she'd snoop, find the barrels tucked under the work bench, behind the tool chest. "Toxic waste it said right on the side."

"Is that how you spend your time?"

"Jesus. They had them at Pancho's by the dumpsters. I asked, they gave them to me. It was cooking oil, I don't know. It's not toxic." Derek never said what was in the barrels. There were no labels. Sale didn't want to know. He convinced Sale to store them after the fight in the desert—made an argument, something convincing to Sale when he was drunk. He said, I don't know, I don't know, as they unloaded them, watching the street, the neighbor's, but no one saw. Derek's eye had almost swollen shut, the eyelid ballooned, the socket ringed. He had paid Sale two hundred dollars.

"It's not a big deal," he said.

"They'll probably never leave the garage." She smiled at him.

He leaned over the armrest and looked at her. "Why don't you say it?"

"What?"

“What you think.”

“No one’s saying anything.” She put on *that* look.

“What do you mean by it then?”

She stood over the sink with a plate in her hand and glanced at him and looked down. Water dripped from the plate. She didn’t say anything.

He stood and crossed the family room into the kitchen. His steps sure, too sure, as if he had to think about each step before the next foot fell. He stood across the counter from her.

“This is what you do.” He ran his tongue over his teeth and made a sucking sound. “You know, I’ve given everything to this family and it doesn’t matter. Does it matter? Does it matter to you?” He planted his palms on the counter.

“I didn’t say that.”

“You want to take me down every chance you get.”

She shook her head stupidly, looking for all the words she didn’t find. Water whooshed at the faucet. She turned it off and held the plate in her hand, a film evaporating at its center.

“What are you looking at?”

“Nothing,” she said.

Sale shook his head and took a deep breath. “Be better off with another man. That’s what you think.” He jabbed his finger at her from across the counter. “That what it is?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been keeping track. That what you want?”

“Don’t start that again.” She put the plate down and ran a forearm across her

brow. "Where do you come up with this?" She stared off at the counter.

He tried to catch her eyes. "No?"

She shook her head and stared at the counter.

He heard a squeak from the hallway, the boy's shoe as it touched the linoleum.

The boy stood in the entryway to the kitchen, swaying, watching. His chubby hand wrapped around a baseball glove. Dimpled knuckles. He needed a haircut, Sale thought. The boy's puffy nipples showed through his shirt.

"Hi, bud," he said. "Why don't you take that out back? Find some of your buddies. Let daddy and mommy talk. Maybe I'll be out."

The boy went on. The door swung open, shut.

She turned on the faucet and went on with the dishes.

Sale sifted through the papers and envelopes on the counter. He suspected lately she'd been talking with the boy about things that were none of his business. Things between them. Finances. "Where are my keys?"

Water burst from the faucet. She clanked at the dishes in the sink. "You didn't have time to do the dishes?" she said.

"Are you hiding my keys again?" he said.

"You had all day." She craned her neck toward him, her chin against her shoulder, her hands at work in the sink.

Sale glared at her.

She turned back, looked down. She scoured a pan. "Did you look for them?"

"Why would I be asking? This is just like you. I have things to do you know. I have to take care of things." He pushed off the counter, walked around it and came up behind her. She tensed. "Where are they?"

“Don’t,” she said.

He whispered, “Where are they?”

“How should I know?”

“Where’d you put them?” He turned and yanked open a drawer. A screw driver, rubber bands, paper clips, a stapler, thrust forward by the force, clanged. “They were right here, where I always put them.” He slammed the drawer.

“Did you check your pants?” She faced down toward the water.

“I’m not stupid.”

“What about your office?”

“There not anywhere they should be.” He put his arm around her waist, her back straightened. “I should know.” His hand drew up along her back.

“No,” she said.

His hand settled at the crook of her neck. “Give me a reason.”

Her hands swished in the water. “Don’t.”

He jerked her by the neck. The water dripped from her fingers, flung out in strings as he yanked her.

“No, no, no, no.” She cowered, his hand at her neck, cringing. The water rushed from the faucet.

“Give them to me.” He dragged her out into the hallway. “This is not up for negotiation.”

“Stop.”

“You should have thought of that.”

“Stop. Please, please, Levi. You’re choking me. No. No. No, no, no.”

* *

It was night, in the middle of the road. He stumbled over the rocks in the median. Beyond midnight, in his dream. Cars rushed past and he saw a streak of light run across the doors. The streak hung in the air long after. No visible source of light, but the shadows layered as he watched the pavement and walked at the feet of his own shadows, the shadows advancing ahead of him. The shadows traveled over the ground, asphalt, dirt, he had crossed the street and arrived, the sun'd dawned, the morning well on, to a storefront he had never seen before. He journeyed far, watching his shadows. The sun he couldn't find, hung somewhere on the edges. He entered through a roll door, his father appeared, accompanied him. His father held out his hand and showed the boy why they'd come, an ox beetle the size of his palm. He understood he was a boy and they had come to capture the beetle in amber. He understood it was a taxidermist's workshop though nothing indicated this, no skins, no carcasses, cars parked inside, looked more like a mechanic's shop or a garage in someone's house. A boy came out, or had been hovering there all along, slight with wispy blond hair. His father explained what they wanted. It was a special order so they would have to come back another day. His father disappeared, but Sale stayed on and wandered around the shop. He tried to stay hidden, not let anyone see him, though his father gone, to the boy it seemed empty. Time passed, he grew from boy to man as he moved through the store. Carcasses of bears, wolves, coyotes, raccoons, splayed, and were spread out over work benches. Skins strung up to be dried. Owls and hawks, stuffed, were suspended above from cables. Moths pinned to felt and framed. Startled, the boy came upon him, had been searching for him. The boy offered him a plastic beetle suspended in resin. The boy was gone. He turned the resin cube over, and saw an empty cavity, the opposite of its outer shell, pins molded in the plastic. He looked around for his father. Alone, surrounded by all these snarling

animals. He looked at the plastic toy beetle suspended in resin, translucent as an ice cube.

You see those tanks out there? Put out there by the government—protection? a fence? Border Patrol can't handle half, a tenth of what's needed. So they put out water. Not that it keeps them from busting my pipes. Their rationale was, it's cheaper to put out water than deal with the dead bodies. Too many die. So they did their accounting and figured it was cheaper. Can't deport them all. Cheaper than picking up the bodies. They do autopsies—knowing damn well what killed them. Go through the bureaucratic rigmarole. Register the bodies, store the bodies. They can't hardly ever find the next of kin, and if they could? Probably have to pay to have them sent down to Mexico, and who do you suppose pays for that? Abetting the crime. Coming to this country illegally is a crime.

Now, don't get me wrong. I like Mexicans. Not saying I don't. There's plenty of good Mexicans. But living in this country is a privilege, not a right. Hell, my son fought for this country, I served myself, and sometimes I feel like all we got for our trouble was this lousy t-shirt. Just because you swim a river or crawl under a fence, don't give you the right to be here. Period. I got a saying: 'I like water, but don't care for floods. I like Mexicans but don't for illegals flooding our country.' They want to live here, they abide by our rules. Period. We shouldn't make it easier on them. They should have X amount of months to get their shit in line. No ifs ands or buts. If you can't abide, kindly see your way out.

What really makes me angry is seeing illegals protesting our country, because our country works and theirs don't, so they can milk it. That's why they're here in the first place. They know our country has laws, and we care. Not like these banana republics. We get the backwash of all these backwater shit holes. What do you think would happen if they protested in Mexico or Colombia? Snared by rifle sights, and

gassed to disperse. Wholesale massacre, that's what. You got George Soros out there paying people to protest. These protestors are cowards, they should go back to their own country, protest there, change their country, not ours. If you don't like it here, don't like how you're treated, you can't handle it, then kindly see yourselves out.

VIII

“¿Y el papá?” the officer asked. “¿Tiene papá?” The officer wore a suit. A lanyard hung from his neck. A pen tucked into his suit pocket. The officer, who had introduced himself as officer Rincón, guided Nancy and Armando in from the waiting room, through the smoked glass door to the interview chamber.

“Sí,” she said, “Claro.”

“¿Por qué no vino?”

“Está en Denver.”

The officer rubbed his thumb against his temple. “¿Viene en camino?” The wall behind him was maroon.

“No.” She fingered the strap of her purse. Armando sat in the chair beside her, staring at the smoked glass wall, bending in rhythm, rubbing his leg, his other hand clasped, tapping his face.

“¿Y el niño estuvo?”

“Sí.”

“¿Habla?”

“Dice algunas cosas.”

“¿Qué tiene?”

“Es autista.”

“Fue testigo entonces.”

“Sí.”

“¿Pero no habla?”

“No habla mucho.”

The officer picked up a clipboard, looked at it and set it back down on the desk. He asked her to state her name: Marina Velázquez de Salinas.

He looked at the boy. “¿Puede calmarlo?”

Armando sat up and cupped his ears with both hands, and patted them. His eyes bulged and he leaned back as if cringing from a slap.

“No,” she said.

Rincón arched his brow, produced a pair of eye glasses and put them on.

“¿Empezamos entonces?” He began by excusing the wait, they were busy, but that did not mean they were not interested in resolving the issue. She was in the right place. He assured her that they were there to help. Her and her son’s well being was very important. He insisted she should trust them. Their physical and emotional integrity was the main priority of the police. They could help. He smiled and nodded.

The officer glanced at the boy. His mouth closed, he ran his tongue over his teeth. His eyes narrowed. He sat up straight and smoothed his tie. He smiled at her.

He informed her that there were many options at her disposal. He had some printed literature, pamphlets he would provide after the interview. Literature that would help her cope with the traumatic event, and direct her toward institutions that provided free legal advice and psychological treatment, and additional services and support she

might need. “Estamos para servirle. Cualquiera cosa.”

Nancy looked at the desk.

“Empezamos entonces.” He adjusted his tie, sat up straight, and smiled. He picked up the clipboard and took a pen from his breast pocket.

They were returning north from Parral, she recounted, after celebrating her daughter’s quinceañera. They were four: she, her daughter, her son, and her friend Diana.

He interrupted her and asked about this friend, Diana, was it? and why she was not present.

“Tiene miedo,” she said, but she did not mention Diana waited for them in the parking lot. She didn’t know, she went on, how many men there were, ten at least. Three trucks parked on the shoulder and a barricade placed in the road. She described the men and what they wore. Uniformed like Policía Federal. The trucks marked with shields and Policía Federal pasted on the windshields. She could only remember one man, with wide set eyes set deep in the sockets. He looked like an owl.

The officer coughed and cleared his throat. He took a deep breath and touched his temple. “Disculpe,” he said. “Continúe.”

She spoke with her eyes fixed on the desk, glancing up at the officer every so often, as if to confirm her own story, to herself, to him, that what she said happened, and happened how she said.

At first it seemed the men were police, and it was a normal retén, but they waved other cars on. She heard their comments. They looked drunk. They insulted them. She could tell they were bad men. Before she knew it, her daughter had been taken and sat in one of the trucks. A few of the men had guns pointed at them. Big guns. She didn’t

remember what they said. They demanded money. Sent them off. She was crying, and remembered one of the trucks trailing them. The truck followed for a long time it seemed. It turned around after they passed a hacienda and a pecan grove. They gathered money and returned the next day, but it wasn't enough.

The officer interrupted, asked why they didn't come to the police.

They didn't know what to do, she responded. They were afraid. She crossed her arms and pressed her hands to her chest. She cried.

“Es que, no sé, no sé” she said. “Me la llevaron. Me la quitaron. Animales. Animales despiadados. ¿Y después qué iba a hacer? Dicen, no llamen a la policía. Si llamamos la matan. Si no pagamos todo, la matan.” She sobbed, and held her hands to her chest as if hugging her daughter, the thought of her daughter.

Armando patted his cheeks and wheezed. She looked at the boy, about to throw a fit, and took a deep breath. She held a hand out to the boy who shook his head and huffed and pulled away.

“Entiendo lo que me dice,” he said while looking at the desk, “y puedo comprender como se siente. Esta situación es difícil.” He paused and adjusted his eye glasses. He leaned and glanced at his desk, unleafed a paper and set it aside. He nudged a box of tissues toward her. He waited.

She collected herself, sniffled, took a tissue and wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

He smiled and bowed his head. She should feel comfortable, he told her, confident to freely state the facts of the case without fear of reprisals. The criminal deals in terror, which can occasion unnerving behavior, causing the family of the victim to be less than forthcoming. She should not allow any reservations to impede the case.

Emotions were natural. She should speak about her emotions and preoccupations, especially those pending and pertinent to immediate concerns related to the case. She was not guilty of any crime, and should not feel guilty of having invited the crime upon herself. She should speak freely, and be honest.

This woman, he asked, this friend, how did she know this woman, did she trust her?

“Somos amigas,” she said, friends as long as she could remember. Diana was the only person she knew in Juárez. She had been with them at her daughter’s quinceañera, a madrina, and they’d been staying at her house. “Es buena gente.”

“¿Dices que tiene miedo?” he asked.

“Sí.”

He rubbed a finger under his nose, touched his glasses. He wrote on the clipboard. “Continúe.”

They returned the next day, Sunday, yesterday, she went on, but not with all the money. The men had them drive out to near where her daughter was kidnapped. She remembered there was a charred truck on the side of the road. Around there, two trucks pulled up, the same ones, with flashing lights and siren. The men motioned them to follow, and they did, off the highway on a dirt road. The trucks drove ahead and behind. It was windy. The dust pounding against the car. They couldn’t see past the truck. The men parked outside an abandoned house. The windows were broken out and the roof caved in. Nothing else in sight, because of the wind and dust.

The man who looked like an owl, he wore a mask, a helmet, but she could tell it was him. He came to the window, took the envelope. She remembered all he said was: “Falta.” They got in the trucks and drove away. One of the trucks or another truck or a

Policía Federal truck followed them and then disappeared. The men didn't contact them. They didn't have a phone number. It was two days they went. They hadn't heard anything.

The officer picked up another bundle of papers, moved some others aside. He made a grave face and shook his head. He glanced at the bundle and set it down. "Es difícil," he said. Certainly, it was an urgent matter. Time was of the essence. They were not dealing with rational men. These men were likely desperate, violent, and on drugs, or involved with the selling and smuggling of drugs and humans. Probably murderers, he lamented. They must proceed with a certain level of tact. "¿Sí me entiende? ¿Comprende lo que estoy tratando de decirle?"

"Sí."

A kidnapping was a sort of transaction. The victim, her daughter, was to the kidnappers nothing more than merchandise, valuable merchandise. However, unlike a typical market transaction, the object possesses a particularity: there was only one seller, in this case the kidnappers, and only one buyer, the family. The family thinks with their heart, the criminal with their wallet. Neither thinks objectively.

He proceeded to ask her a series of questions to which she could answer only no. Did she have any particular fears for reprisal? Did she know the men? Was there any possible proof, or evidence of the crime, did they write anything down on paper, or give her a phone number? Was there proof of life—a picture, an article of clothing, had she heard her daughter's voice?

He wanted to be certain he understood what she had told him. Her daughter was kidnapped south of Juárez on Carretera 45, they returned with a portion of the ransom which was taken by the men who had kidnapped her. She had nothing, nothing written,

no way of contacting them, no proof a crime was committed at all. The only witnesses were, he paused and looked at the boy, gestured with his hand, “Él, y una mujer que tiene miedo y no hablará con la policía.” He adjusted his glasses with a knuckle, pushed them to the bridge of his nose. “Es así, ¿no?”

“Sí”

The officer went on. Was there any physical contact? “¿Abusaron de usted o de su hija? ¿Las tocaron?”

“Sí, nos tocaron.” She looked down at her hands where she held a tissue that she’d torn into strips. She rolled the strips between her fingers.

Had they been threatened?

“Dijeron que la iban a matar si no entregábamos la lana.” She sniffled and whimpered, tears ran down her cheek, and she wiped them off with the shredded tissue.

The officer cleared his throat. He tapped the pen on the desk.

Armando stood and paced about the room, pounding his chest and grunting. Nancy rose and tried to sit him down but he jerked his head and wheezed. She took his beads from her purse, and opened his clasped hand. He took the beads and looked at her and then looked at the smoked glass wall. He took a step and stood facing the glass, close to the wall, nodding his head, shaking the beads, looking at his reflection.

Nancy sat down. “Ya se calmó,” she said. She glanced up at the officer, looked out from cornered eyes. Felt somehow she was implicated, each word, each explanation, her son and his tremors, his disease, were a judgment against her, and the officer too judged, thought she got what she deserved. She deserved to suffer.

The officer tapped his pen on the desk and asked if she remembered anything else.

“Las trocas no tenían placas.” She rolled the tissue between her fingers. “Y el hombre, él que parece tecolote, tenía un tatuaje de Jesús aquí.” She ran her hand from her elbow to her wrist.

The officer looked behind him as if something was there, someone listening. He tilted his neck, it cracked, and he looked up at the ceiling. He told her, good, this all helps. He picked up the clipboard, the pen in his hand, and placed the pen in his chest pocket. He swallowed.

“¿Cuándo sabrán algo sobre el caso?”

It was difficult to say, he explained, with any certainty. Such cases are often difficult to resolve. With no evidence, they could only depend on her testimony, and it wasn't likely that any evidence would be found at the scene of the crime, as it had been windy in the days following the kidnapping. In normal cases, the protocol, the department and state procedure, calls for a waiting period of seventy-two hours, at which time, the victim's family would return and enter an official missing persons report, and until that time, they would not be able to begin their investigation, it being within the seventy-two hour period before which a missing person is officially considered to be missing. Though, in his opinion, the case of her daughter was not a case of extortion, but a kidnapping with other intentions.

He had decided to have the case transferred to another unit within the Fiscalía, La Fiscalía Especializada en Atención a Mujeres Víctimas del Delito por Razón de Género. He assured her she would be contacted, and gestured to the door.

* *

In the two days that followed, Nancy was miserable. They went to the Fiscalía each morning and returned late in the afternoon. She told what happened to a new officer, in

a different section. She was shuffled through the halls from one cubicle to another, where she told a new officer what happened. There was nothing new to tell. The officers nodded, smiled reassuringly, and understood.

In the afternoon, when they returned to Diana's, she'd shower and shower, but never feel clean. She'd lay in bed and look at the ceiling, suspicious of the wall's tilt, afraid the walls would clap shut on top of her. Armando shrieked and panted—calendars, calendars—he'd huddle up to her, trying to burrow beneath, and she'd let him. She'd roll to her side and stare at the wall. His fists, elbows, knees gouging at her body as he tried to pull her upon him. Dust crossed the room through angled rays of light.

She heard the whispers of Diana's boys at the door, complaining: When would they get their room back? Figures entered, who? Had they come in at all? Diana with offerings, the boys slipping in for games, play weapons, toys, Diana's husband now remorseful, sober, watching her beside Diana. She heard their conversations with Nancy's family—someone should come for her, but there was the distance, the cost, the crossing, the border.

At night, in the train's whistle, she heard the lament of the dead, screams, the terror of evil spirits. She sneaked around the house at night like a mouse. Went to the bathroom but didn't flush, stood and watched the ripple of water in slow escape, leaking, hissing. She stood in the shower and looked at the shower head, her hand resting on the valve.

As Nancy lay in bed, Diana would enter from time to time and sit next to her, "No te preocupes, mujer. Todo se arregla. Dios se encargará de todo." Diana rubbed her head, smoothed her hair, never mentioning, only hinting at what had happened. "Si

Dios quiere.” The burros that Diana brought remained untouched on the night stand, replaced with a bowl of soup or chicken and beans or toast left uneaten. Diana held cups of cinnamon tea to her mouth and she drank. There were dahlias in a vase on the nightstand, and a candle, unlit, with the sticker-image of the Santísima Virgen de la Soledad. Diana would cross herself and pray, and then hold Nancy’s hand. A mumbling *Ave María* that began: “Dios te salve, María. Llena eres de gracia...” and faded to a of sort chant Nancy couldn’t follow. The sound of Diana’s voice was soothing to her though she could tell Diana had forgotten the words.

Nancy watched Diana come and go, but gave away none of her suspicions. Diana told her, the truth was she didn’t have any one to talk to. Diana sat with a pair of her son’s jeans on her lap, inside out, as she sewed a patch on the knees. They were so worried about her. Nancy listened and when her eyes drifted to the ceiling, to the blistered paint bellied out above her, Diana would ask if she could hear her, if she understood. Nancy turned and looked at her, silent, watching.

After the prayers, Diana would complain to her about the city, Juárez, about the fear. No one went out at night, or during the day—the checkpoints, policía, narcos. The immigrants—sureños huevones, chilangos jodidos. As she talked, she would pause and pull her sweater or a scarf or the collar of her shirt up over her neck, brush her hair to the side, covering up the bruise. When she glanced at Diana’s neck, Diana leaned her chin to her shoulder. Genaro, Diana’s husband, was hard sometimes, but he had his reasons. She went on: el vicio, gente mañosa, drogadictos, jotos, mariguanos, maquilocas. She told her not to worry about Armando, how she had changed his underwear, how he just ate, how calm he was sitting so close to the TV. Diana asked her if she liked her hair, it was blonde, she dyed it herself. She held her nails out to her.

“¿Qué dices? Bien fashion, ¿no? ¿No me veo más blanca?”

“Tú sabes,” Diana said. “Todos los días lo mismo, lo mismo, lo mismo.” She had to have the clothes cleaned, the kids uniforms ironed, take the boys to school, have food ready when they got home. On top of that, three, four times a month she helped someone cross, they’d leave the boys at their grandma’s, Genaro’s mom. There was a house in Truth and Consequences, New Mexico. She’d wait with them till the money came, or Genaro would. “Hay mucha carrilla. Aquí, hay que moverse para vivir.” Diana went on about a woman she had just met who wanted to cross the border—arreglar. “Qué mujer más fresa,” Diana said. She acted like she was better than Diana. Maybe she was good looking, but she’d probably end up a whore. She was staying with her cousins. Diana swore there had to be ten people living in the house. The kitchen stank of onions—“Imagínate.” They probably hadn’t cleaned in months. Besides, she dressed like a prostitute, “Ay, qué naco. Naquísimo.” Diana told Nancy it was nice to have someone to talk to. Genaro didn’t listen.

Somewhere she could hear Armando crying. Nancy turned from Diana, to the candle on the nightstand, La Virgen de la Soledad. She prayed. Diana left or came back. Sat on the bed. Repetitions. Maybe it was before or after. Maybe she never left.

Diana sat on the bed where Armando slept, and he was there, huddled in the corner, huffing, his eyes seemed to tremble. Night had fallen. Above, a light shone from a domed fixture that looked like a white breast, the fastener a nipple. Diana went on about an episode of *Mujeres asesinas*, her hands thrust in a bowl on her lap, kneading dough. An image formed in Nancy’s mind. She could see Diana in a room with the windows boarded shut. The shadow of Diana’s husband stood guarding the door. No furniture. Immigrants stooped and clustered against the wall. Diana continued

recounting the episode, kneading the dough, how Belinda, the singer, the lead actress, was so thin and beautiful—blanquita, blanquita, and William Levy, her TV husband—papacito. She described the house, a marble floor of the drawing room gleamed, velvet curtains, modern metal and glass furniture. The immigrants held one another, their clothes soiled, ripped to tatters. Booted or shoeless. The dough stuck to Diana's hands, and she worked in some flour. Everything so luxurious. All the women in dresses and the men in tuxedos. Counts and countesses ringing in the New Year. Diana couldn't understand how a beautiful man like William Levy could be so evil, los ojos azules. Drunk and drugged—mujeriego: "Pero sabes que todos los hombres son animales. Tienen sus necesidades." Diana had disappeared among the shadows of the room, the immigrants clung to one another, men and women, children, and Diana's husband now uniformed, a policeman, a soldier, goading them with a gallon of water. In the end, he had sex with all the women and his wife killed him. "Como dicen: la perdición del hombre es la mujer." He held out the water and lured them out the door, the women and then the children.

* *

A white erase board hung on the wall. Nancy sat at a table across from officer Alarcón, having just finished recounting her story again. Armando lay on the ground by the door. The room was small and sparsely furnished. Three chairs and a table. A clock anchored to the wall. She was told this was La Fiscalía Especializada en Atención a Mujeres Víctimas del Delito por Razón de Género. They had been at the Fiscalía since seven thirty that morning, the clock now read three.

She recounted the story without conviction, doubting, tearing up often. She looked at the telephone or the box of tissues. She tore apart pieces of tissue and rolled

them to pellets and dropped them in her purse.

The officer listened, leaning over with his elbows on the table, one hand squeezing the other. His slicked hair came to a point at his forehead and aligned with a cleft in his chin. He held a pained smile as if suffering from heartburn. Through the interview he seemed preoccupied with the boy, glancing at him often.

The boy would stretch, fling out his arms and then draw them in, palsied with a clenched fists. He often kicked the wall. Stood, paced, shook his beads. He lay now on his stomach with his face to the ground, drooling and rasping.

The officer looked at the boy, and turned to her and began to speak, but stopped short and looked at the boy whimpering and groaning. He clenched his lips, collected himself and turned to her. He assured her they were there to help. She should have every confidence in their intentions and expertise.

In his experience, it was common for a young woman to go missing for a day or two, and return soon after, having been with a boyfriend, or gone dancing. Though he understood this was not the case with her daughter, but she had to understand the difficulties they often faced. Certain women resorted to extreme measures and exposed themselves to considerable risk in order to be with the object of their affections or to have a “good time”. There had been instances of young women faking their own kidnapping. On the contrary, he did not mean to suggest that her daughter was of the sort who would engage in such conduct. It was only from necessity that all possible avenues be exhausted.

False claims stretched their efforts thin. That being the case, it was imperative that the department and state not waste man hours on a case which would likely resolve itself with the normal passage of time. There were certain mechanisms, he explained,

paperwork and procedures that must be attended to before pursuing an investigation. She should rest assured that the authorities charged with the investigation of the case were sufficiently competent to understand, intervene, and take action, and if needed, provide protection to the victim, as well as to her and her son. Though, he equivocated, there may be some delay. Seeing as how she didn't have a current photo of her daughter available, and there was little evidence to establish a case. In addition, there were further hindrances due to the current climate in the city and other jurisdictional issues.

That being said, he encouraged her not to lose hope, and in the meantime, he suggested she begin an investigation of her own, at least until circumstances availed themselves, at which time an officer would be assigned to the case. She could have posters made up and visit local hospitals to see if any patients had materialized corresponding with her daughter's description. He advised her to use the number he provided rather than a home phone or cell due to possibility of extortion by outside parties. But regardless, if there were any developments, they would be in periodic contact with her concerning any advances, and she could contact them at her convenience to follow up on the progress of the case or express any anxieties.

He looked down, and turned over a page, considered it. It was also important for her to form a safety plan, measures that could be taken to ensure their safety. This implied a full understand of the gravity of the situation and the risks that might arise. It was possible that the situation could again present itself. He meant to say it was possible the kidnappers might seek further compensation, and if that were the case, he ought to be contacted at once. The kidnappers likely had a list of family members, phone numbers and addresses they'd procured through threat to the victim. Threats may come in the forms of direct expressions of intent, such as threats against the person, threats

against others close to her, threats of death.

He instructed her to always be aware of her surroundings. Be aware of arms or weapons that could be present. Avoid dark streets, do not go out at night, and if possible, change her habits, walk against traffic so she could see oncoming cars. Establish an understanding with friends and family, have their numbers at the ready. Be aware of anyone watching or following. Any form of threat should be documented.

Before he dismissed her, he offered pamphlets with the names of clinics and support centers.

* *

At the third interview, she had come with a picture of her daughter, the same studio photo of her daughter wearing a tiara, dressed for her quinceañera. The officer asked her to describe what her daughter wore, what she looked like the day of the disappearance, her demeanor. Hair dyed purple, bangs fallen over her face, pulled back in a pony tail. Black glasses with thick frames. A purple hooded sweatshirt lined with imitation fur. She didn't tell of the fight over Erika's hair, layered with purple streaks—what would they think back home—the type of girl who dyed her hair that color. She didn't tell of the piercing in her upper ear, the pierced dimple in her cheek. She wore purple socks. A bracelet with pewter beads that spelled out her name. A belt with checkered silver and black squares. They asked about her panties with straight, grim faces, as if they weren't getting to that all along. Men whose digestion was as regular as their emotion. Smiling, watching, nodding, understanding.

Months before, they sat at home in Denver, she and Erika at the table, magazines spread out. Nancy was thrilled, and Erika was finally coming around to the idea of celebrating her quinceañera. She could see Erika's excitement. Magazine clippings were

collaged over the table top. The beautiful dresses: print, lace, glamorous, beautiful. *A drop-dead designer dress. The girls smiling faces. Never, never so happy. It is a big step for a young woman. A girl who wants to go out and have fun. Their confidence, American girls. We're gods, we should go out and embrace it. Fabulous. Everything I ever could have hoped for. Feeling feminine. Sexy. The quinceañera of a lifetime. Friends, family, a young man. A career, God, happiness. The American Dream. Dream.*

When she closed her eyes, bowed her head, whimpering, cried into her hands, the officer nudged a box of tissues toward her. Her eyes pinched shut, she saw Erika on the dance floor of Mil y una Divas, dressed in the white gown they had bargained over. She had convinced Erika to wear white. She gossiped with her cousins, arms crossed, self conscious of being so feminine, of eyes on her, the center of attention. She had never seen her daughter so beautiful. Her hair falling in ringlets from the tiara that crowned her head. Children's feet pattered across the dance floor. She watched the boys and girls, a pinch and a scream, playing, hugging, trying to drag one another to the ground. The boys' shirt tails came untucked and the girls' hair frayed from their buns. Her niece, a girl no more than four, pranced alone on the dance floor, swirled, spun. Music played, *No te metas con mi cucu...* The girl crouched, hopped and stood, pulled up her skirt. The skirt spread, her arms extended, she made butterfly wings as she whirled and floated over the floor. The girl's ruffled panties bared. The clack of heels, the girl's mother twisted her arm, swept her off the floor, and pressing the girl against her shoulder, spanked her. The lights whirled against the wall and the girl howled.

Fiscalía General del Estado

Unidad de Personas Ausentes o Extraviadas

Ayúdanos a Localizarlo



ERIKA VELÁZQUEZ SALINAS
15 Años de Edad

CHARACTERISTICAS:

ESTATURA: 1.55 MTS APROX.
PESO: 68 KGS
TEZ: MORENA CLARA
CEJAS: SEMI POBLADAS
NARIZ: CHATA
CABELLO: NEGRO Y LACIO

COMPLEXIÓN: ROBUSTA
OJOS: NEGROS Y RASGADOS
CARA: REDONDA
FRENTE: MEDIANA
BOCA: MEDIANA
LABIOS: SEMI GRUESO

SEÑAS PARTICULARES: NINGUNA

VESTIMENTA: SUDADERA MORADO CON LETRAS: PINK, PANTALONES DE MEZCLILLA AZUL, CALZA TENIS BLANCO

FECHA DE DESAPARICIÓN: VIERNES 2 DE ABRIL 2010

LUGAR DONDE DESAORECIO: CARRETERA DE CHIHUAHUA

¿Tienes información para encontrarlo? Por favor comuníquese con las
Oficinas de Gobierno

Telefono:
Ciudad Juárez Chih. (656) 555-2300 ext. 9437 y 8385

The path you follow narrows and there is no avoiding the thorny brasada. The tingle and burn. Your arms stippled with pinpricks of blood, dusted, streaked with sweat. Your jeans torn. You grip the straps of your backpack with a tight fist and brace your chin against your chest and for lengths at a time, walk blindly and bump into your brother-in-law ahead. The branches and thorns close in. You burrow behind the others and el monte takes a hold, strangles, scrapes.

Down this tunnel of thorns, you see your father's face, his look of jeering disappointment when he'd come home to find you sitting in front of the TV. Vago, vale madre, aún los maricones trabajan. ¿Qué tipo de hombre eres? He sat down and you said nothing. He slapped you on the leg and gripped your knee and told you it was a joke. You could find work, there was work at the mine, and he asked why you bothered with school. You turned over the remote control. He told you to go do your homework and laughed. You stood, but before you stepped out of the room, he told you to stop, and shook his head and smiled. He told you there was work in the mine, and soon you worked there alongside him. The terraced slopes, the earth movers, the conveyor belts, down, the craggy walls, the darkness of the cave, the light that shone from your head, the narrowing walls, the grinding, the dust. You left, went to the city, Parral. You got work there, met Nancy, your daughter came—Erika, the name you decided on, American sounding, looking at her, you knew, you hoped. Still there was nothing, petty day jobs that got pulled out from under you, told the next day there's no more work, and when you go to claim your pay, they ask what you will do about it—in that moment, when el jefe smiled at you, jeeringly, you knew. You thought about robbing him, killing him, plotted a kidnapping and ransom, all in the time it took to turn and walked out, and you hated yourself—you will never go back to that, you promised. You

knew, looking into your babies eyes, there was more for you, and here you are now, whapped in the face by a palo verde limb.

No one says a thing, but grumble and pant when, the monte too thick, you are forced to double back, your cousin telling you the path he knew had closed. Any urge to recriminate, is swallowed. No one here suffers, none that would admit it, their thoughts already beyond this slog. You least of all, though there is pain, there is hope. You march, your foot goes, the other, you must, what other choice do you have? and your body attuned, seems borne of its own force releasing your mind, shutting the sources of pain. You will dream of walking through bushes. You will dream of a tunnel, of a cave, of a narrowing, the walls creeping. Es un brinco no más, you hear. You want to speed up and reach your cousin and take him to the ground and shake him by the shoulders and scream: ¿Llegamos? ¿Llegamos? ¿Llegamos?

IX

When Sale's wife was at work and the boy at school or with her at daycare, and too at night, when everyone had gone to bed, Sale watched TV. Shows about justice and certainty. Certainty that everything can be identified, catalogued, databased, registered. Certainty of right and wrong. Shows in which every last citizen, criminal or otherwise, might be known—by their hair, fluids, bones, possessions, by the skin trapped under their fingernails. The entire body from city to DNA dismantable, verifiable to the molecule, knowable from tooth to nail.

The following program shows real-life individuals facing criminal charges. They are presumed innocent until proven guilty. Viewer discretion is advised. The gravelly voice over explains, For homicide detectives the clock starts ticking the moment they are called. These are not actors. There is no script. This is real.

Voice Over: *Tucson, Arizona. Ten P.M..*

Birdseye view of intersections at night. A wash of headlights cuts to a broad shot of Tucson, the moon overhead.

911 Operator: *Tucson Police.* The moon against the black sky.

Caller: *My son and a friend were skateboarding under Veteran's overpass and*

they think they saw a body.

Time remaining: 47:59:02. Police rush to the scene, sirens blare, lights whirl (stock footage). The crime tape unspools. Graffiti on a wall. An overpass spanning an arroyo.

Voice Over: *When detectives arrive, they find the body of a naked woman.*
Ground level view of the victim's bare feet splayed. A sandal on the ground. Sobering music, a scan of the crime scene: the steep walls of an arroyo, the underside of an overpass.

Detective 1: *One of those nights.*

Solemn, detectives crouch over the victim's body. Flashlights spray the pavement.

Detective 2: *Is that a stab wound? Looks like she's been eviscerated.*

Crime Scene Investigator (Crouches under concrete beams): *Down here we have blood.*

Detective 1: *More cuts along the backside. Ligature marks around the neck.*

Crime Scene Investigator: *All the way down to here we have blood.* (Points to blood on a beam). *We got a star in blood over here.*

Detective 2: *This guy's a whack job.*

Voice Over: *Twenty feet away, detectives find what could be the victim's possessions.* Numbered evidence markers. Tickets, receipts, The Gospel of John. An envelope with the name Daisy Perez.

A time-lapse of a thumbnail moon rising over a cactus, and passing off screen. The coming dawn. Tucson Police Department. *Time Remaining: 36:22:51.*

Voice Over (A picture of the victim on a computer screen): *Back at headquarters, detectives look up Daisy Perez on the state database. The victim was a homeless*

woman, known to panhandle in the vicinity.

A shot from inside the patrol unit. The street, tall buildings passing by. Detective 1's sunglasses in the rearview mirror. *Time remaining: 30:17.42.*

Detectives canvass the neighborhood: parking lots, tenement housing, trailer parks. Detectives approach a street vendor.

Detective 2: *Have you seen this woman?*

Street Vendor (Wearing an apron, face blurred): *No, ma'am.*

Detective 1 (Back in the car): *Thing is, you don't know who's telling the dang gone truth and who ain't.*

Detective 2: *It's a fine line between a suspect and a witness.*

Detective 1: *It's like déjà vu all over again.*

A time-lapse panorama of the city, from day to night. Clouds streaming over the moon. Morning. Detectives entering units. Streets flashing by. Day laborers on street corners. Fastfood restaurants. *Time Remaining: 16:12:51.*

Detective 1: *At it again, shaking the bushes.* Montage of detectives showing the victim's picture.

People who recognize the victim: *That's Daisy. She didn't bother nobody. All she did was beg for money. She's as innocent as a kitten.*

Voice Over: *The clock ticks and time is not on their side. With no solid leads, the case seems to have gone cold. Time Remaining: 00:00:00.*

Clouds time-lapse across a blue sky. Pigeons perch on wires, scatter and flap away. Headlights dissolve into streetlights and in turn the flickering cityscape and the coming morning.

Voice Over: *Two days later, there's a break in the case. Detectives get news from*

the crime lab that foreign DNA samples pulled from the victim match a parolee convicted of lewd conduct. The suspect is thirty-two-year-old Esteban Contreras

Afternoon time-lapse of the interstate. Officers, guns drawn, stand before a door in the hallway of a halfway house.

Chorus of Officers: *Police! Open the door! Let's see your hands. Do not move! Face down. Your hands! On the ground. Take him!*

Grainy surveillance video. The interrogation room.

Detective 1: *Your name had come up in a couple of things.*

Suspect: *I don't even know what I'm in here for.*

Detective 1 spreads crime scene photos before the suspect, both of the victim and another sexual assault victim.

Suspect (Leaning over looking at the photos): *It wasn't me. It was something inside me.*

Detective 1: *You will be charged for these crimes.*

Suspect: *I knew this day was coming. I dreamed it. It's God's will. So be it.*

Voice Over: *Contreras has been charged with first-degree murder. Sobering music. Suspect hand cuffed wearing white prison jumpsuit. A closeup of a tumbleweed swaying in a gutter. Contreras has since been charged with the murder of another homeless woman, and is awaiting trial. He is presumed innocent until proven guilty.*

Sale lost track of how much time he'd been in front of the TV. What day is it? he thought. Beer cans, Miller Lite 2x4s, stood or lay tipped over on the coffee table.

He drank the 24 ounce cans in an effort to drink less. If he bought a twelve pack he'd drink the whole thing before he knew it. He didn't want to drink, to feel how he did. His heart beat through his stomach. His blood gurgling. He breathed heavy like

someone who'd been shot. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He opened them and sat up.

Leaning over with his hands planted on the couch cushions, he looked around the room as if someone was watching him, at the blinds before the sliding glass door, behind the dumpy recliner, the fireplace, anywhere someone might be hiding. He suspected tampering, that everything had been taken and replaced with exact replicas—the very fabric of the Navajo blanket that covered his legs, the veneer of the mission style entertainment center, the very grains of particle board. The fishy stink of the swamp cooler that blew. In those seconds, as he gathered his bearings, these fears passed through his mind, but he knew just as quickly that no one was there, that no one would bother.

He laughed it off. He was fine.

He passed shame from drinking. And for a while, hours, sometimes days, he'd resolve to quit drinking altogether. He was careful to eliminate signs of his habit from around the house. He didn't want his son to think, to know. For himself, growing up, he found out who his father was. The kind of bastard who'd go to his son's high school football practices and yell at his coaches from the stands: *What the hell you teaching these kids? Teach them to hit. Knock their teeth out! Ever heard of Ray Nitshcke? They hit like queer fairies.* It started after Sale had made varsity. He'd have to coax his dad down from the stands, the old man reeking of Wild Turkey and blathering for the boy to get his hands off him. Who did he think he was to tell his dad what to do? His coaches threatened to call the police, and after the fourth time hauling his dad to the parking lot and dumping him behind the wheel of the Bonneville, he gave up football altogether, dropping off his helmet and pads that same day.

But Sale wasn't like that at all. His wife and son didn't joke they could only talk to him before noon. Or did they? He had it under control—if he could just get work. He could hide this from his son but his wife knew. It pissed him off that he should feel this way.

Some days he would look in the trash can in his office, and there'd be five or six beer cans, a flask of whiskey scrunched in amongst the trash. He'd forgotten to take out the trash and couldn't remember what he'd drunk and when. As if someone had planted those empties. If he drank whiskey he'd say something he couldn't remember and didn't mean, and his wife would ask him, when she talked to him again: "Do you remember what you said last night?" Sale would say whatever it was, he remembered but he didn't mean it. But he didn't remember and he probably meant it. It was like a dream that stood in for reality and he could never remember his dreams.

For the most part, he stuck to beer, and held himself to a few 24 ounce cans. He'd be at a task, fixing the rollers on the sliding door in the family room or working on the Camaro, readying it for sale, but couldn't be motivated to finish unless he had a little something to drink. Before he knew it, he was off in his truck, convinced he had something else to buy, a bolt or some cam grease, and anyway, it was only a drink or two.

He'd alternate purchases between Circle K, Chevron, BevMo, Total Wine, Plaza Liquors, Super Stop, Quik Mart, 7-Eleven, Safeway, Fry's, and Walgreen's. If the store had a drive-thru he took it. He never wanted to be recognized by cashiers, to have them think he drank too much or think anything about him at all.

* *

He pulled in to the Circle K off Grant and Alvernon. He had his mind on a couple of tall

boys of Miller Lite—there was always a deal, three for five dollars. It was late afternoon and so hot the crumpled up receipts on the passenger seat had turned black. The sun was white as aspirin and the sky clear, blue and cloudless.

As he entered, he was startled by a cardboard cutout of a woman in a bikini, beer in either hand, a cooler at her feet. He thought the cutout was a real woman. A woman propped up where he expected to see nothing. A few people were lined up at the register, others wandered the aisles or filled Icees or peered through the glass doors of the refrigerators.

When he reached the stacks of beers, he saw that the fridge was under lock and key. He considered leaving when he saw the line at the register. He just wanted some beer. He didn't want to ask permission for the doors to be opened. What was this, China? Just as he was about to leave, one of the workers came back and opened the doors for another customer. When the worker opened the door, Sale said, "I'm just gonna grab a couple three, thanks," and reached in and fished out the beers.

In line, the people ahead of him, and those that gathered behind talked in Spanish. He held the beers like a pyramid and when it was his turn he set them on the counter. The clerk, a woman, a Mexican asked for his ID. She wore a bracelet like the one he gave his wife.

"I'm old enough," he said. "Believe me."

She asked if he'd been drinking and he turned his neck to consider the others in line and then said, "I'm about to."

She told him she still needed to see his ID.

He looked at her as if she was kidding and then said, "Fine," and took out his ID.

She looked at it and asked if he'd been crying.

“What?”

“Crying,” she said.

“Why?”

“Your eyes, they’re red.” She passed the ID through the register.

“Allergies,” he said, and shook his head. And thought, what the fuck, bitch. Just give me the beers.

“Your ID don’t pass.”

“What?”

“It’s expired.”

“What the fuck difference does that make?” He planted his hands on the counter.

“No,” she said. “You need to leave.”

He looked back at the other people in line and back at the clerk, his hands still planted on the counter. He looked near the door at the cardboard cutout of the woman in a bikini, and her smile turned mocking.

He snatched his ID from her hands and said bitch under his breath. As he walked out the door, he yelled, “You need to leave. All of you.”

* * *

Sale sat on the couch watching TV, in the dark, the TV flashed and washed over him. Everyone was asleep. He was fed up thinking about his life. He gnawed at his cuticles and chewed the skin he bit off. He touched his face, the stubble that had grown, rasping. He tried to force his skin back to where it had hung when he was younger. He pinched his jaw, his thumb below his chin. He mapped out the bone beneath. He imagined the bone. How fragile. This was all he was. He could crush his jaw if he wanted. How simple. How easy it would be. To peel off his skin and get to the bone. What were these things?

Bone, muscle, ligament, gristle, skin, fiber, fat?

He imagined his body quartered, a butcher's slab, a wood chipper, a body turned to ash in the first wave of a nuclear strike. A body composed entirely of ash. A fragile compound, ash compressed. He imagined his body frozen in ash. As ash, he stood, his arms at his side, and still alive, he stared out of this body like an animal inside a skull looking out the eye holes. He had this feeling since he got older that his body was holding him in. Inside he wasn't what he was outside, and if only he could separate the one from the other. The pain in his joints, that crackling of glass shards crushed between bone. He remembered *Terminator 2*, and the bodies of ash dispersing in currents, in the vortex of the aftershock.

He slept then in the wash of the TV's flash. He dreamed he was in his childhood home, upstairs in his parent's room, lifting the blinds. He was a boy. He felt it wasn't his house. He looked out the window, off at their backyard turned swampland. His dad was in the room, but Sale couldn't see him. He too split the blinds to look out.

Out in the swamp there was some commotion. Mexicans emerged, slogging in the muck. A bright light shone over the swamp and the Mexicans scattered. A slatted light cast against his face, slatted shadows. His dad appeared with a gun, showed it to the boy. He aimed and shot out the window and disappeared, but still present as if floating about him.

Outside, police searched the swamp, the high grass wafting over them. The blinds yawned open and the room filled with light. The police looked at him in the window, just a boy. They materialized in the room, and the room shifted, turned into the room below, he now standing before the backdoor. Sale had let the police in. Someone was killed. He told them his dad wasn't home, but he could feel him hiding somewhere. Sale swore it

was an accident. Tell your dad to be more careful, the police said.

* *

He stood in the bedroom doorway, the light from the hall at his back. His shadow cast on her as she slept. It had been a month since the last time, or longer, and only a handful of times since he'd been fired.

He'd stood there like this a number of times, a little drunk, his hand wafting out toward the doorjamb to steady the slanting floor, watching his wife sleep—she'd claim she had to wake up early or Jarret would hear, but that was never a problem before.

He felt the slurp of blood in his veins like slurry forced through a cable. He looked away from his wife, and watched his stomach, his heart beating through the skin. On the other side of the bed, at the window, a numbed light shone from the blinds. He thrust both arms against the doorjambs. What was he doing?

The boy had to be asleep. He had no idea what hour it was. He closed his eyes and rubbed them and wiped away the blur. He squinted and couldn't help from blinking. Blood slushed through his veins. His heart fluttered. He could feel the skin of his face as if it were a mask he could take off. For a moment he looked at the carpet, burped and then swallowed. He wanted to spit. Before a move to the bathroom he burped again, and decided against moving, and stood, his hands pressed against the door jambs. A flurry vibrated on his vision, translucent orbs floating just off the surface.

He went toward the bed. She asked him what he was doing when he started. The light from the hallway made her squint. He pulled back the covers and grabbed at her. She told him to stop. But he went on. It had been awhile. She put up her arms and he could feel them beneath the weight of his body. "Come on," he said. "Yeah." He panted. He worked her shirt up. These extra large shirts she wore to bed, his old shirts. He

always told her they made her look like a little girl. She wasn't wearing a bra. He tugged at her panties and she told him to wait a second, and she slipped them off herself. He sucked at her nipples. He tried to kiss her lips, she turned away, but he found her lips and kissed—asked permission. He smothered her and she went limp. He thrust and she gave. She was all give. She absorbed it, motionless beneath him. He still had on his underwear and shirt. He maneuvered her legs like a TV antenna. Spread out, folded, pressed together, forced to one side. Finally, he angled her legs, the left flattened against her chest, the other dangled off the bed. Opened, flexing. "That's it. There. There. That's it." He went at it, grinding. He panted and said: "Yeah, come on," but couldn't finish.

* *

Sale woke up. He thought he was in the bedroom, and then realized he was in the family room. The light leaking in through the vertical blinds caught him in the eyes and he squinted. God damn it. He pressed the heel of his palm to his eye socket. He wobbled his head. He sat up on the couch and looked at the TV screen. The pain already creeping in his head, the pain swelling against his eyes. No one was home, thank God. He should have waked to his wife cooking breakfast. Bacon, hash browns. His son should've woke him, and he, laughing—hey champ—roused, grudging to wake, bracing for another day, smiling for his son. This is where I want to be, here. Life is good. It is what it is.

He tilted his neck, it cracked. He looked up at the ceiling, the minuscule, chalken stalactites knifing down. If it wasn't this day, it would be another day. Working. Looking for work. Impressing people. Look what I can do. This whole fucking show. In a couple weeks he'd have to meet with her family for the Fourth of July, and they're Mexicans. They celebrate. Celebrate anything. Saying things in the right way so people think you're this man or that man, not to offend. Faking it, that's what he was sick of. Go along with

the production, you fucking asshole, where would you go? Buying shit. Christmas, Easter. Fourth of July. Smiling.

He lumbered up from the couch and threw off the Navajo blanket. He looked down at the coffee table, and saw some sort of beetle crawling. He blinked, rubbed his eyes with the back of his hand, and looked again, but it was only a crumb. Droplets of sweat beaded on his forehead. The swamp cooler groaned and blew tepid air. Sweat soaked through his shirt, down his back, on his chest.

He went to the kitchen. Nothing left out for him to eat, just a scatter of papers and envelopes, unopened bills, drawings his son had sketched at daycare. A crayon drawing of him and the boy out hunting. A tent, a cactus strewn bluff and coyotes frolicking in the background, coyotes piled dead near their feet. He scuffled over to the cabinet above the stove, and took out a bottle of ibuprofen. He flicked the top and shook out the pills into his hand. A few trickled off onto the stove and slipped down into the drip pan below the burner. He swallowed four pills and drank from the sink. He set about making scrambled eggs and coffee. They were out of milk.

He wandered back over to the counter and flipped through the papers. Bills, credit card applications, super market coupons. A note from his wife scratched on an envelope with a sharpie. Jagged letters, not round, not her usual hand. *Went to Leslie's. Jarret's with me. Don't call. Please.* Please was underlined. What the hell was this supposed to mean, he thought, a warning, a threat? When did she write it, last night, this morning, days ago?

The kitchen took on the smell of cheese, eggs and the pungent reek of lacquer. A cord of smoke rose from the stove, seeping from under the pan. He shuffled over and lifted the pan and swatted at the smoke. Below the orange glow of the burner, the

ibuprofen had carbonized to a rat turd. He left them to burn and replaced the pan. The smoke alarm chirped. His eardrums quivered at the squeal. He pulled out a chair, stepped up and took the battery from the alarm and pocketed it.

He scraped the eggs out onto a plate and sat at the counter. He read the note again, and again, trying to decipher its meaning. He ate and the rank stench of lacquer charged the kitchen and he thought, that bitch.

* *

That morning he stewed over the letter, paced from the kitchen to the family room. What the hell did she mean, *Don't call*? One moment he had a sinking feeling that the note was somehow binding, that they were through, and the next, he thought it a joke. She'd never written a note like that. They fought, like anyone else, but it didn't mean he didn't love her. Last night, what was it? He tried to piece it together. He'd gone to the shelter, came home late. He remembered Derek's face and Barry. They kept feeding him drinks. He didn't remember leaving or the drive home or why he'd slept on the couch. He must've parked out on the street last night and snuck in. It didn't make any sense that she would leave.

He'd had a job his whole life, mowing lawns at the age of twelve, at fourteen collecting trash and cleaning bathrooms at an amusement park, at sixteen a warehouse job, by eighteen he was in the Army. She didn't know real work. She didn't know what it was like to work and then not work. What it was like not to find work. Sure, he'd go out sometimes and come home late, maybe drank too much, but what man didn't? He lost his temper, but never laid a hand on her. He'd never do that. He was the one. He paid for her school. He paid. If they fought, he'd pay his penance on the couch and she'd wake him and tell him to come to bed. But not of late, not last night. She'd play silent a

couple days: “So you’re not talking?” he’d ask. “Not talking? Understood. Loud and clear,” and then he’d bang around the house, making his presence known, slamming doors, running tools out in the garage. Later, it was as if nothing ever happened, and he couldn’t remember anyhow what they’d fought over. But since he’d lost his job, she’d been cold. She once told him not to stop by and see her at work. She didn’t want a scene in front of the children. Like he couldn’t control himself. He knew what she was really saying: What’s wrong with you? And what about her?

He finally decided the letter didn’t mean anything and if she didn’t want him to call then he wouldn’t. He shoved the letter in his pocket. He hadn’t yet thought of drinking, and when he did, he resolved not to. He could quit. Whenever he wanted.

That afternoon, he went to work on chores long since neglected. In the garage he glanced at the barrels under the work bench and thought about driving out to the desert and dumping them. Let Derek worry about it. But he paid. He gathered his tools: a rubber mallet, a wrench, crescents, a crowbar, a drill gun, screwdrivers, WD 40, a shop vac, and the new roller assemblies he bought a few weeks, a month back.

At the patio door, he unscrewed and popped off the aluminum guard from either side of the panel. He squatted on a scrap of carpet laid over the threshold and stood every so often to take the pressure off his knees. Each time he bent down or squatted, his knees crackled like Velcro being ripped. Sweat soaked through his shirt. Finally, he removed and installed the assemblies, vacuumed the track and greased it, had it sliding like new, and in less than an hour. He replaced the broomstick in the track that served to secure the door if the lock failed. He stood and tottered for a moment and wished he had a drink to steady himself, already feeling that tingle. There was the bottle of Jim Beam hidden in his office, but he could hold out till things cooled over. She never

appreciated his work. She had no respect. He worked for everything he had, everything she had.

He went outside where the ladder was propped against the gutter and had been now for two months since mid April. Lightheaded, he looked up to the sky. The sun shone above, an aspirin crushed to powder on a sheet of aluminum, giving off a searing heat. He grimaced. It must've been well over a hundred and ten. For a moment he wanted to throw up. In April he'd gotten the swamp cooler up and running, but in the last few weeks it stopped blowing cold. He'd bought an extra pump and spider to run more water over the pads. He gripped the ladder's side rails and jerked his hands back and said, "Shit." The ladder burned. He climbed the ladder, steadying himself with the heel of his hand, and when he reached the top, he squinted at the glare of the bleached gravel. He thought of all the work involved. He'd never finish before they got home. It was too damn hot. If he turned off the cooler, the house would turn into a pressure cooker, and she'd bitch about that.

He decided to wash the dishes. He cleared out the coyote skins from the garage, rolled them in a tarp and wrapped them with bungee cords, and stuffed the bundle up in the rafters. He stowed his hunting gear, and made enough space they could both park in the garage. Neat, ordered.

He thought he should make dinner, tacos maybe, chili, but first he'd shower.

When he got to the bedroom the bed spread lay on the floor, the sheets mangled, the bed liner ripped off, and the mattress exposed. She always made the bed. He thought for a second they'd been robbed. Maybe she'd been kidnapped, the note meant to throw him off. *Don't call. Please.* He crossed the room and split the blinds and looked out the window to see if his truck was there. It was. Some of the dresser drawers had been left

open. Her panties and bras rifled. Maybe it was some pervert. He thought of Derek. A weight in his stomach. A shadowy rape scene. The thought flashed of tracking the son of a bitch down, throttling him, his hands squeezing, a vise grip on his neck. In the closet, on her side, empty hangers kinked this way and that. The luggage was missing. Her jewelry taken. The bathroom stripped of makeup, the soaps she used, shampoo, toothpaste, perfume. The blow dryer gone.

They come into this country and what do you think they want? They'll turn this country into another Mexico—they don't even learn the language. My family founded this town. Think I should give it up, just give in? I won't leave. They won't chase me off my own land. Say, okay, go ahead, take what you want. This whole country's awash with it. Think it's their country and they can't be bothered. They partake in free public services. They get totally reliant on handouts, gimmes, think the world owes them something. They know how to game the system. And in the meantime, they flood the country with democrat voters, and tip the scales. Then you have all these immigrants who wait, and play by the rules—they want to talk about treating people fair and equal.

How many times have you heard of this-or-that-underprivileged so-and-so who gets his third trip to rehab, taxpayer funded, and gets a smack on the wrist. Then hard working folks like you and me get the book thrown at us, guilty on all counts. I had one DUI, I blew a .09, just barely over the limit. First and only offense in my life. I got the max sentence and fines, lost my license, had to take classes. It's still on my record. How many times do you see on the news, an illegal from Chihuahua, or wherever, ends up killing a whole family and already had five DUIs? The republicans don't have the balls, they want the cheap labor. These people can't even see the end of their noses. The hypocrisy is so thick you can cut it with a knife.

Don't get me wrong. I understand why maybe they'd be angry, got nothing, no opportunities, and all their government gave was instructions to head north, telling them our land was theirs once, so feel free, go north, and take what you want, but none of that has anything to do with me. Spouting our-land-was-stolen crap—anti-American Marxist influences at public schools. None of us here has anything to do with

what happened in the past. Maybe they're right, maybe they're land was stolen, but how was I involved? Every last man would be jailed if he had to pay for the sins of his fathers, somewhere down the line. But to say to me, that my family, my neighbors, hell, the country, those living, did any more than just try and make a living and get along, that's delusional. That's evil. And that's the problem.

They come up here, breed like rabbits, sucking off the government dole, looking for a handout. Don't expect it from me. Handouts, that's rich. I pay for what's mine. I take what's mine, and it isn't much. You want me to apologize? To roll over? Now the taxpayers have to pay the tab. With their anchor babies and free health care. Free school lunches. Living tax free. Must be nice.

You know, I taught my kids to respect this country, respect themselves, respect your mother and father. Family first. Fear the lord and love your country, love being an American. We live in the greatest country in the world. And the-powers-that-be are trying to tear down what took so long to build. Hell, you won't recognize this country in twenty years.

X

Nancy looked up, past the corrugated roof, at the trees and light glimmering amongst the pine needles. The stream below lapped against the rocks, swirled amid the boulders and trickled on. She heard him breathing, her cousin. Heard his hands rub as he wiped the dirt off, and heard the fabric of his jeans when he brushed them off. She felt a flutter in her stomach and her heart beat. In the shade it was cool.

“Cierra los ojos,” he said. He stretched his arm out to feel her chest.

She kneeled with her hands on her knees and shrunk from him. She leaned back and sat on her bottom and pulled her knees to her chest. She looked down at her knees and the indents of pebbles and pine needles. “¿Por qué?” she asked.

“No más quiero sentir el ritmo. Sentirá rico.” He whispered, hardly more than breathed the words. “Cierra los ojos.”

Her sister and Diana had left them alone, and probably watched now, she thought, between the slats in the shed. He had told her he wanted to show her something down by the stream. It would only take ten minutes. Her heart throbbed in her chest and the flutter in her stomach slowed, a slowly branching thorn. She hugged her knees to her chest and shook her head.

“Cierra los ojos.”

She looked behind her, up toward the shed, and down toward the stream. She could hear him breathing. She teared up and closed her eyes. Two tears coursed down her cheek.

He leaned over and kissed her on the lips, forced his tongue against her teeth.

She could taste the tamarindo popsicle they’d shared. She turned away.

They’d kissed before. Her family went to visit her uncle, her father’s brother, and cousins in Cuauhtémoc. She woke to him in her bed. Her two sisters slept beside her. She lay rigidly and pretended to sleep. His hands fumbled over her body. When she turned to brush him off, in hopes he’d leave, she saw her sister’s eyes. They seemed to ask, *what are you doing?* She clamped her legs together and whimpered but her cousin didn’t seem to notice. He massaged her legs and kissed her neck. He touched her. His other hand tapped at her back.

The stream trickled against the rocks. A moth flapped and fell and disappeared down the bank.

“¿Por qué lloras?” he said. “Parece tonta cuando lloras.” He slid his hand in between her legs, and burrowed down. “¿Puedo poner la mano ahí? Se sentirá rico.” He touched her face with his other hand and wiped away the tears, leaving a smudge of dirt. “Eres preciosa. Nunca te lastimaría.” He told her he could feel her heart beat, down between her legs.

She looked back to the shed, but heard nothing, saw no shadows moving between the slats. There was no one else around. The thorns branched through her body. She felt numb, dizzy. She leaned back, whimpering, as if tranquilized. Her hands tingled.

He took her hand and guided it to his crotch. “Eso es lo que me haces.” He

unbuckled his belt and pants. He spread her legs. “Cierra los ojos. Esto puede doler un poco.”

She looked down toward the stream and held out her hand before her face. Her sight blurred as if a clear plastic bag had been pulled over her head. Her body jerked from the thuds.

“No puedo disfrutarlo si sigues llorando,” he said.

She watched her fingers, opened and closed her hand. The pine needles worked up through her hair, but she didn’t feel the stab. How, she thought, could she move her hands like that?

* *

Having finally managed to sleep, Nancy woke to voices outside the door. She rolled over and saw Armando sleeping in the bed next to her. He breathed heavily. She sat up and leaned against the wall of unpainted concrete block. The beds had no head rests, just mattresses set on the tiled floor. A boom box sat on the nightstand between the beds. The alarm clock read 6:50. A candle. A bouquet of flowers wilted in a vase. A blue, soft light filtered in through the Real Madrid sheet that covered the window. She couldn’t tell if it was morning or night, and it wasn’t until she recognized Diana’s voice that she understood where she was. Erika must be in the kitchen with Diana, helping with breakfast or dinner. But Nancy always woke first. Erika liked to sleep in.

The other voice she heard was a man’s, a murmur. She recognized it. Her father’s, but it couldn’t be. The voices droned on but she could make nothing out. She felt dizzy. A tightening that grabbed inside her chest, now her stomach. Her head drooped and she thought she was going to be sick. She let out a sob and knew all at once why she was in the bed, why she was still at Diana’s. There was no news. She would never see her daughter

again.

She pulled the sheets off and saw that she wore a large purple shirt and gray sweat pants, not her own but Erika's. She had no idea what day it was or how long she'd been sleeping, how long trapped in this room. She rubbed her hand through her hair. It was greasy. She wanted to shower.

She looked around the room, at the shelved trophies, the photos on the walls. A poster of Batman: The Dark Knight. She looked at the doorless closet. Inside, clothes hung and below sat a cabinet, an old kitchen cabinet with a Formica counter and a missing door. Inside the cabinet, a metal wire crate was filled with action figures, a variety of plastic guns. A hockey mask.

At the foot of the bed, near the door, she saw Erika's backpack stacked on top of her suitcase. She got out of bed and went to it. She unzipped the backpack and pulled out a paper bag with ribbons for handles. A pink Victoria's Secret bag stuffed with cards and trinkets from the quinceañera. Envelopes opened and others still sealed. She kneeled and swept the suitcase against the wall. She took an opened card from an envelope. *Quince años, ilusiones, ilusiones a montones, sueños aún sin realizar.* One by one, she took out the cards, and read. *Mariposas nacen, y se posan en cada flor. Sueños y alegrías. Dios nos entrega la vida. Hoy es tu noche. El sol, hoy, nació para ti. Un cuento de hadas escrito por el dedo de Dios. Eres única. Rosa. Jazmín. Alas. Estrella. Ilusión. Más bella y dulce. Nena deja de ser su nena. Cisne. Comienzas a vivir. Mágico. La pureza de tu alma. Re-locas y alucinante. Mundo perfecto. Sin fin de alegría.*

When she opened the cards, money fell out. She snatched the sealed cards from the bag, and now neglected to read the message or even note who it was from. She bent them, working her nails under envelope's lip, until she ripped them open. All the while

she cried, stifled cries, wiping the tears with her shoulder. She forgot about the thank-you list she planned to have Erika write out: Name and Gift, and slipped the money from each card, stacking them by denomination, dollar or peso. She tossed the cards and envelopes, bent and crumpled, into a pile near the door. She held up a 200 peso note. Crisp, uncirculated. The contoured line depiction of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Her face framed by coif and veil. A medallion at her throat. Nancy had no idea how much money was there but knew they had all they needed. Enough to pay the ransom. Diana had been hiding it from her.

She gathered up all the bills and looked for a place to hide them and then peeled open her sweat pants and tucked them in her panties. She took the Victoria's Secret bag—the earrings, necklaces and rosaries inside—and folded it and stuffed it under the mattress. She kneeled on all fours and raked away the envelopes and cards, and stooped to look under the door. A pair of black oxfords. A strip of white socks below cuffed pants. Diana's feet in sandals. The table leg shimmed by a strip of folded up cardboard. She could hear their conversation. Her father complained about the checkpoint near the dunes of Samalayuca. She rose and put her ear to the door, her hand on the doorknob. They went silent. The TV was on. She turned and made a move back to the bed, and then heard: "Nani."

She rested her hand on the doorknob. She opened the door and closed it behind her. Her face puffy from crying.

Her father sat at the kitchen table with his back to the ironing board and the sofa that divided the kitchen from the family room. Diana stood by the stove, wearing a new scarf to cover her bruise. The microwave was lit up, Tupperware piled on top of it.

At the table, a plate of rayadas before him, her father put down his coffee mug,

and gripped the arm rest, his other hand flat on the table, and pushed himself up. He wore a plaid pearl-snap shirt tucked into his pants. A bluish haze of stubble. His black hair was gray at the temples. He smiled, a crooked smile that showed the metal clasp of his partial. The metal clasp below the gums of his canine. “Mi’ja,” he said. He swallowed. He blinked and blinked. “Mi’ja.” He looked into her eyes. “¿Estás bien?” He held out his arms to embrace her.

Nancy stood in the doorway. Made no move toward him. She glanced at him and then stared at the table. When he stepped forward to hug her, she stood slack, her arms at her side. He hugged her and she shrugged her shoulders and turned her head away.

“Ven siéntate,” he said, and he hugged her. He kissed her on the cheek. “Siéntate, mi’ja.”

Her father guided her to the table and she sat down. Her father sat down opposite her and Diana joined them. Her father had brought the rayadas from home and he insisted she eat and she did but not the rayadas. Toast and grape jelly. She hadn’t eaten since they left Parral, how many days ago?

He’d taken the bus overnight. He left Parral around eight o’clock the night before. He told them of the caravans of policía municipal, federal, the army, riding in trucks, hummers, one after another like a parade. Three people were taken from the bus in one of the barricades along the carretera de Chihuahua. “No dejan pasar ni las moscas.” He laughed and then frowned and shook his head. “Qué desmadre.” He said he felt like a criminal, that maybe he’d brought something illegal, that in the check point when he’d been taken off the bus he feared he’d be jailed. “Pero ya saben.” Nancy could feel him looking at her. She could hear him trying to smile.

She picked the toast a part, bite by bite, pinching and tearing. She watched the TV

to avoid looking at her father. On the morning news there were four heads in shopping bags lined up on a sidewalk, propped up on their necks, as if they'd been buried, the sidewalk built up around them. The subtitle read: Hallan cabezas humanas en Ciudad Juárez. Everybody was worried, her father told her. He sipped his coffee. Blood pooled at the bottom of the bags. White shopping bags with the handles knotted at the crown of the heads, the bags pulled tight, puckered about the faces. The hollows of the eyes, the noses squashed against the plastic, the chins sticking out, the necks sitting on the concrete. Her family, he told her, had been calling day and night. He rubbed his hand against his cheek and it rasped. The heads in the bag seemed to sweat. The plastic, inside, speckled with condensation. The heads might have been rocks but for the ears pressed against the bag, the chins jutting out, strands of a comb-over pasted on a naked scalp of one of the bags left untied. Were the heads in the bag, she thought, before or after they had been cut off? Did the heads suck at the plastic, choke? Why wouldn't she talk to them? Nancy's mother wanted to come, but he wouldn't let her. The victims, between twenty-five and forty-years-old, had not been identified but the charred and decapitated remains of four men were found in a burnt-out Honda Civic, below a bridge where a sheet hung with the narcomensaje: ESTO LE VA PASAR A TODOS QUE LE FALTAN RESPETO Atte La Línea. The news reporter put on a somber face and turned to address the next camera.

“Nani, Nani,” he said. “Dime algo, mi'ja.” He touched her hand, and she left it there to be touched.

She looked in his eyes. “¿Qué quieres que te diga?”

“No seas así.” He patted her hand. They were there to help. They all wanted to find Erika. It was hard for everyone.

Nancy pulled her hand away and crossed her arms, her thumb stroking her chest. She fought the urge to pull at the hairs at the back of her neck. She turned to Diana and narrowed her eyes to a squint. Nancy couldn't admit to herself that she'd made a mistake. That her husband was right. That there was war. Heads in plastic bags. Charred remains. Owlsh men out in the desert armed with AR-15s. Her husband pleaded: stay, have the quinceañera at home, in Denver. But her home was in Parral, her family, her life. She wished she never left home, never went to Denver. She left for Erika. She wanted her to have a father, a better life. While at home in Parral, waiting for his return, Erika then just a baby, Nancy obsessed about anonymous women, his hand in their hand, his hands on their bodies. Cheap women. Liberal women. Women who needn't be bought. She looked at the ironing board, at the iron with gouged holes stamped like seeds in the metal.

Diana smiled. A bent pained smile. And at that moment, when Nancy looked at her, she imagined Diana counting the money, in the middle of the desert, desolate, in a wasted corrugate shed. Diana's husband and the skeletal, owl faced comando, smiling smiles of all teeth—bone surfacing flesh, stood beside her as Diana flicked the bills into a pile—Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz—on the rusted surface of a metal drum. The only light that of rods entering and revealing the trajectory of bullet holes in the rippled corrugated zinc—the most harmless product of drunks and rapists and murderers. Outside men gathered around pits of fire and other such makeshift shacks. And underground in a basement, somewhere beneath the barren waste where the yucca and ocotillo knifed crookedly over the dust, the very surface of the earth shifting, dust snaking in wisps, Erika was there, down, somewhere in the black of a lightless concrete cell. Naked. Belts rippling off like snake tongues. Flashlight beams held by men looking

on. Smacking and flesh. The lurid commentary. One and then another. A slave.

She wanted to accuse Diana—“¿Por qué lo hiciste?” She wanted to stick her hands down her pants and fish out the bills and hold them above the table, and say, “¿Por esto vendiste a mi hija?” and throw the crumpled bills in Diana’s face. *Perra arrastrada*. She wanted to slap her and sink her nails into her face, rip her lips off. Throw the small plate that lay before her, littered with bread crumbs, against the wall. But just as she stroked the edge of the plate, Diana’s smile seemed to even out. The scarf Diana wore had slipped, and she could see the bruise on Diana’s neck, like the black path of flame on burnt wood, the outer edges of the bruise yellowed. She couldn’t read Diana’s face, whether the bent smile said pendeja or comadre. Nancy wanted to go back sleep. Alone until the darkness flipped, became all. She closed her eyes. She pulled at the hairs on the back of her neck, twisting at the roots.

The TV news continued, the reporter now lamenting the poor turnout to Cd. Juárez’s Easter celebration this past Sunday. The mayor, who lived in El Paso, failed to appear as promised. They interviewed citizens. The camera aimed at their chest, faceless, anonymous citizens who said they were afraid to leave their house. “Jesús no anda por aquí. Pos, es una prueba. Dios aprieta pero no ahorca.”

When she opened her eyes, she saw her father making a face as if he didn’t know what face he ought to make. He looked like he was holding back a burp. Diana sat beside her looking like she was going sneeze or cry. She turned to Diana and asked: “¿Por qué estoy vestida así?” plucking at the purple shirt she wore. Erika’s shirt. A purple shirt that resembled a Colorado Rockies’ baseball jersey. DE LA ROSA written over the shoulders on the back.

Diana asked Nancy if she remembered the night before, but Nancy only stared off

vaguely at the iron set on edge atop the ironing board and shook her head. Last night, Diana told her, she had screamed and screamed for Erika's bags to be brought in from the car's trunk. When Diana entered the room, she found Nancy surrounded by weak blue light, sitting on the bed with her legs drawn up to her chest, hugging her knees. The sheets had been balled up and thrown into the closet. Armando sat on the bed next to her. He whipped his face with a beaded necklace, bowing now and again, his face grimaced, his eyes filled with terror. His legs pinched together; he had peed himself. When his head dipped, he closed his eyes, and uttered the sounds unnah, unnah as if reciting some prayer before language. Diana neared the bed and Nancy screamed for her to stay away, to get the bags. The bags! When Diana entered again with the bag and backpack she threw herself at Diana, screaming at her to leave the room. Now, as Nancy listened to Diana speak, addressing herself, for the most part, to Nancy's father, she remembered nothing. She saw the pleading look Diana shot at Nancy's father, as if to say: *see, this is how she's been.*

Some time passed, Diana went on, before she entered again. The bags had been rifled and the clothes strewn all over the room. The contents of Erika's backpack dumped at the foot of the bed. Some of the envelopes torn open. A hair brush, eyeliner, lipstick, toothpaste, makeup scattered amongst the clothes. Nancy sat on the stripped bed, propped against the wall, wearing Erika's t-shirt, Erika's quinceañera dress spread over her body. She glared at Diana accusingly. Her lips pressed to together and then parted, mouthing a silent nothing as if sucking on a tit. She glared off at nothing, stared through Diana, lost to the world. Her eyelids drooped and her eyes were glassy. She blinked slowly. She clutched the white gown to her chest. The bodice clasped in her arms and the ruffled train covering her body. The fabric slick, shiny, wet looking. Diana told

her now, sitting at the table with Nancy's father, she thought then maybe Nancy had tried to kill herself, but she found no medicines or drugs, nothing that would have brought on the fit. And so finding her in that state, Diana sat with her, calmed her until she fell asleep, and then gathered the clothes, the letters, Erika's things, and put them away.

Her father sat and fingered a napkin, tearing it into strips. The joy she had found in her father's face upon their greeting had shriveled. Empty of expression, as if the weight of the predicament had settled in, and he had just now come to accept this new reality. The same look, she remembered, when he had come to terms with something irrevocable—the dust-grit that marked the wrinkles in his forehead after he had helped bury his own mother, the sheen of sweat over his face when he agreed to her and Armando's marriage.

Nancy watched Diana's hands as they lingered over the table. Diana stirred, stood, and took their plates. The plates clanged and clattered in the sink. She heard Diana's boys talking, playing video games in their parent's room. Diana announced she soon had to take the boys to school. It had been decided that Nancy and her father would stay at a hotel—not that Diana didn't want them there, it would just be easier for everyone. She could still drive them if they needed. Genaro, Diana explained, her husband, he'd be home soon.

* *

They sat on the banks of the stream, and he splashed a stick in the waters.

Nancy sat with her knees held tight against her chest, and her head resting on her knee, facing downstream, away from him, her eyes closed.

He splashed the stick in the water. “Me debes de agradecer, ¿sabes?” he said.

She heard the flow of water. She sniffled, but no longer cried. She wiped her nose. It was over. The water rippled.

“¿Qué?” he said. “¿No te divertiste? ¿No te gustó?”

A snake entered the stream from the opposite bank and skimmed on the water’s surface and came ashore a few feet upstream from the boy. He stood, stalked. He cornered the snake in a hollow of the sandy bank and speared it with the forked end of the stick. The snake flipped over, exposed its stomach, lay still. “Mira,” he said. “Mira, lo atrapé.”

She didn’t turn to him, but stared at the rippling water. She must look terrible, she thought. She ran her hand through her hair, picking out the pine needles. She watched a leaf float down stream, buoyant, bouncing on the ripples. She wanted to throw herself in the water. Wash herself clean.

He couldn’t understand why she had cried, he told her. She had wanted it as much as him. It wasn’t that bad, and anyway, she should thank him. He stapled the snake in the sand, ground its neck and torqued. It wriggled again, writhed. It convulsed, silent, though whipping, its tail brushed against the sand. “A mí, me gustó,” he said. He stood with his back to her, grinding the stick into the dirt.

* *

Nancy watched a plastic bag flap, tangled in the spool of cyclone wire that edged the school’s roof. The school, Centro Escolar Dos Naciones, was a wall that wrapped around the corner of Pascual Orozco and 5 de Febrero. A white wall with a lime-green strip at the foot and lime-green doors and windows, shuttered and barred, but for one door where the students entered, students uniformed, wearing navy blue pants or skirts and white polos. A few students loitered outside the school, thumbs at their shoulders, under

their backpack straps.

Diana's boys got out of the car where they'd sat packed in the back seat with Nancy and Armando. Nancy's father sat up front and stooped some to watch the boys, his hand gripping his arm. The boys did not kiss their mother or even turn to say good bye; at that age, Nancy thought, when boys lost all relation but those they make up, embarrassed by those who brought them into the world.

They'd given Nancy little time to ready herself, and told her she could shower at the hotel, but she wouldn't leave till she showered. Diana had given her a plastic bag to gather the mess she made with Erika's cards. Heads in plastic grocery bags. She remembered, at home in Denver, the little bathroom trash basket lined with a plastic bag, and Erika's first pad tinged with blood sitting on the surface of the trash—the shame if her husband had seen it. She whispered to Erika how she must keep it hidden, wrapped in toilet paper, so no one might see, and to never, never flush it down the toilet—it might clog the pipes, make a mess, and then, everyone would know. She had refused to buy her tampons for what it meant if she used them, to be that type of girl.

After dropping the boys off at school, they went on to look for a hotel. Scarcely anyone walked the streets. They passed few cars. Nancy hadn't noticed before how empty the streets were. When was it now, two, three weeks ago? since they first passed through Cd. Juárez on their way to Parral, to her daughter's quinceañera. Ghostly figures, presences she felt, lay outside the edges of her vision, as if they heard the car's approach, and hid only to appear again once certain they wouldn't be seen. The sort of presence that dematerialized after she looked and looked and the shadow became a dress hanging in her closet and that rotted woman disappeared and the fear subsided.

For a moment, the car loping northbound, Nancy caught Diana's eyes in the

rearview mirror. She could see Diana's cheeks raised in what must've been a smile or a grimace. Diana told them they needed to be careful—people would be watching them. Everyone watched everyone else, and even if you thought you knew someone, you really didn't. Diana's family thought her husband was a carpenter working in Las Cruces. Most of his own family didn't know how he really made his living. Leaving the house, she went on, was a risk. Wherever she went, she drove in a different route there and back. If they—*they* could be anybody—followed you, even if they didn't know who you were or what you did, by driving a car you call their attention, they knew at least you had a car, and likely money to service the car, fill it with gas, keep it running. “No hagan nada que llame atención,” she said, and looked in the rearview mirror, at the empty street behind.

For blocks no one in the car spoke. The morning sun shone. Junipers, a random palm, pines, the budding mesquites and desert willows, planted into the sidewalk like electrical poles, casting scant shadow. Here and there, in the fractured shadow, people sat on plastic buckets, plastic chairs. Faded, sun-baked signs, below sun-baked awnings, announced *Tripitas y Bistec, Mecánico, Médico, Farmacia, Ginecólogo*. Many of the storefronts had been shuttered, covered by roll doors or smashed windows bricked from the inside. Signs hung from abandoned houses and stores: Se Renta o Se Vende. Empty lots where buildings or houses had stood. Fallen concrete columns, a rubble of concrete block, snaking rebar.

Nancy leaned against the window pane, fingering a rosary she'd taken from the Victoria Secret's Bag. She stared at the pavement flashing past, a lurching in her stomach as the ground fluttered below her gaze.

Well kept houses neighbored ramshackle houses—tangerine, lime, turquoise, fuchsia, lavender, mustard, peach—a patchwork of stucco painted and yet to be; patches

of paint spread over graffiti and graffiti sprayed over patches of fresh paint—layers of the same color but weathered and dingy or fresh. Paint faded on concrete surfaces, scoured by the beating sun, by sand charged gusts. Houses fenced by white spear-tipped rod iron. Windows covered with metal grates, and grilles, wire mesh, chain link fence.

As they drove, leaving Colonia La Chaveña and nearing downtown, Diana her head darting back and forth, told them of the hotel she planned to take them. Hotel Parador Juárez. It was cheap, they could afford to stay awhile. They came to a stop at avenida de Los Insurgentes where cars and busses clogged the intersection. Bikes loaded with plastic crates weaved in between cars. A woman, hooded by a blanket wrapped around her, pushed a red plastic grocery cart, overloaded with sheets.

“Tienen que tener mucho, pero mucho cuidado,” Diana said.

Nancy watched Diana’s blond head rotate on the other side of the headrest, back and forth to the flow of traffic. When they neared the hotel, Diana said, “Ay, no,” and stopped the car, holding up traffic. The two lane road was too narrow to park on the side. None of the cars behind beeped.

A metal mesh door leaned against the windows of the restaurant on the first floor of the hotel. Aged windows with a smoked sheen as if sandblasted, graffiti scrawled over the surface, some windows scored yet glossed with a silver tint, others tinted black, cracked panes pasted with packing tape. A banner above the shuttered roll door read: SE RENTA O SE VENDE and below, sprayed painted over the roll door: NO INCLUYE CUOTA.

The hotel shuttered, they went on, up calle Miguel Ahumada, the street flanked by shuttered roll doors. Diana knew of another hotel nearby. The traffic lulled as they turned down avenida Vicente Guerrero. Few cars, Nancy thought, for this time of the

morning, but what did she know of the workings of this city?

Two hotels sat on the corner of Paso del Norte and Vicente Guerrero. Hotel del Norte and Frontera Hotel, the former painted gray, the latter pink. Policía Federal trucks were parked out front. Across the street, at the intersection, vendors were setting up folding tables and displaying goods: shoes, new and used clothes, stereo equipment. They unloaded wares from huge plaid nylon bags or shopping carts. The fence behind them draped with clothes hangers, plastic bags flapping in the cyclone wire. Racks of hanged clothes. Food vendors with carts and coolers sold elotes, carne asada, chicharrones, soda. A billboard that rose above them read:

ENLÍSTATE EN LA POLICÍA MUNICIPAL

SIRVE A TU COMUNIDAD

NECESITAMOS HOMBRES Y MUJERES

Con vocación de servicio

Opposite the lettering was a photo of a police officer, his face cropped by the edge of the billboard, his waist likewise cropped. The M16 he held loomed large, at the ready.

Diana pulled in a side street and parked the car.

Nancy looked at Diana in the rearview mirror, then to her father who'd turned to face her. She shook her head. "No. Aquí no," she said.

Nancy's father gave her a pleading look. "¿Pos a dónde?" He got out of the car and went in. When he came back to the car he got in and shook his head. "Está lleno. Puro pinche policía." The man at the desk told him every room was taken, the whole hotel rented out to the Policía Federal.

There were other hotels, Diana promised, a few blocks up. They went on. Hotel Aremar, Hotel El Refugio, Hotel Imperial, all claimed to be full up due to a recent

reinforcement of police troops. But none of the hotels seemed to be full. Just a few police milled about the lobbies or occupied the tables of the hotel restaurants. Just a few Policía Federal trucks parked out front or in parking garages. Just a few black boots, black Teflon vests, black masks, black M-16s angling downward across black suited bodies.

After looping up and down, trolling the streets around La Plaza de Armas and on toward calle 16 de Septiembre, they finally came upon a hotel with vacancies. The six story Hotel Mundial had glazed silver glass and steel railed balconies and faced east. There was a Carta Blanca sign on the roof. From where Nancy sat looking up, she saw the morning sun reflected in a single pane of glass, a single pane out of the entire array of windows.

Her father got out, passing a few police standing outside, and entered.

Through the scored glass, she saw a clerk with his head bowed. He looked up at her father who approached, as if expecting a policeman. He smirked and wagged his finger and pointed, Nancy thought, at the policeman in the lobby and looked down at the computer and shook his head.

Her father tapped the counter, turned discreetly and looked behind him. He pointed out the window to the car and showed his hands, palms up, as if to say, *there was nowhere else*.

The clerk looked out at the car. He put a hand to his forehead. He looked at the computer and shook his head.

Her father said something, his hands still extended, pleading.

The clerk looked out at the car, turned and grabbed a key from the wall, and handed it over.

When Nancy's father returned to the car, the key lolling on his fingertip and a remote control in his hand, he knocked on Diana's window, and gestured toward the trunk. They would be on the third floor, separated from the other "guests".

Diana convinced them to only take what they needed. She would keep the rest at her house—you never knew who might be watching, taking inventory. Diana told them she'd be around this afternoon, and handed over one of her cell phones for them to use while they were in town.

The elevator was out. Their feet clacked on the tiled floors, up the stairs and down the hallway. Her father carried the bags and she followed behind with Armando, tugging him from his distractions. Sun filled the room, the drapes tied in a knot. Armando splayed out on one of the single beds and her father went to the bathroom. Worn, flower bed spreads. Framed reproductions of embracing cherubs hung over each bed. A TV was anchored to the wall opposite.

Nancy went to the window and found the sliding glass door that opened out to the balcony had been fastened shut by an iron crutch screwed into the track on the floor. Below, on the opposite side of the street, she saw a man, wearing knee-high rubber boots, dressed in camouflaged cargo pants, sitting on a pile of newspapers. A window display of women's heels at his back.

She heard murmuring, a TV perhaps, the groan of traffic, seeping. She wanted to take a bath. To remove the dust from her body. She could feel it, the grime, grease in her hair. She heard men's voices out in the hallway or from the street below. Was there anyone talking at all?

She could see his eyes, leering as his head entered the car window. Bushy eyebrows framing large black eyes. The black of the eyes. The owl, his face neared her

face, his nose sniffed at her hair. The slow exhale of hot breathe on her cheek. The smell of booze. His hand slipped down her shirt, grappled at her chest, worked at her belt buckle, groped. All the while his flickering smile: small white teeth like a child's, gaps between each tooth. He said something, he mouthed, his tongue lapping. His lips pursed. His head shook. The head, the arm, the hand slid out the window. Her fingers were numb as she struggled to pinch at her zipper and pull it up, button her pants, and pretend the man hadn't thrust his hand down there, fingering with coarse fingers, all the way in. *Adentro*. She cowered toward Diana and watched as he held his fingers to his nose and grimaced. "Está madura, esa," he said to the other men. He offered his fingers to be smelt, but they refused with scowls, shaking their heads, the AR15s wagging at their chests. He then wiped his fingers off on his pant leg, and smelled again.

She looked at the man before the shoe store window. She wanted to shower, but she wanted to sleep.

Numb and swollen and roving, you rove but even in your wandering you tire, this is enough for a lifetime. You vow to never fight the border, to find yourself somewhere and stay, but you do not know now how much you will miss home.

Your wife begged you not to leave. What would she do alone and with a baby? Many nights she cried, and begged, but you had made up your mind. She had her family, you promised you would be back, and more, promised money, the American Dream.

She too had heard tell of the crossing, the divide between family, what America can do to a man. Women who stay home humiliated, abandoned by their men, never get word, terrorized with the thought of bones picked over in the desert, buried in a shallow grave of migrating dust. She didn't fear so much the crossing, but what you might find. America would change you, make you want what you couldn't have—even just for a day, long enough to ruin everything. Different laws, different values. The temptation of women and drink. The chance you get blackout drunk and lunge a fist at the wrong man or get behind the wheel and sheer into oncoming traffic. The chance of another woman, many, blond haired, American women who have sex for fun, another family, and her sitting home like a fool. And she was right, of this you're not proud. There were moments you thought you could leave it all behind, family, country, just as she suspected, and start anew. She wasn't stupid: the hollow promise of a better life. But you promised her. When you asked her, hadn't you always been good? She cried again.

You had another vision, despite. Fed up living cramped with your in-laws, your wife and daughter and you, nestled in the same bed, and her brother snoring on the other side of a sheet, you thought: basta. You think back at the pang to smother him

then, with a pillow—Chingados. Cállate el pinche hocico, cabrón. He laughed when, just hours before, you told him and he admitted, that on occasion, his own snoring wakes him. But now he staggers on, two steps ahead of you. He is there, you know, but nothing more than a lurching shadow, decipherable only by its sway, cast before the pitch and shadowed malpaís, the rasping, scouring branches that everywhere grasp you. He is a comfort. Back and forth, the moving darkness.

You had another vision. Thousands, millions find what they look for. Enough for everybody. Why else would so many go? You dreamed of a house and land, your own, like the Americans, what you'd seen. Hot water, a stove, a microwave, a TV and a satellite dish with a thousand channels, a remote control in your hand, your grandchildren grown, speaking English and Spanish, practicing Medicine or Law. You saw your father sitting in a wheel chair, retired to your home in the U.S., he grunts and gestures for the remote, you turn up the volume and smile to your self.

Ahead your cousin signals to stop. It's relayed from the others he believes you've reached the rendezvous for the pick-up. You hunker down beneath the ragged shadows, shadows cast by the enveloping brasada and the night sky empty and dark, and as you sit now, you do not let on that you are afraid. You watch with the others the road, a black space beyond, the promised end. A rustle habitates the night, a sound like running water. Hours now you watch, catalogue your injuries, tip the last bottle to your lips. A steady silence.

You only want to see her face. When you left she looked at you hard, said nothing, and when you went to kiss her, she turned her cheek. Your eyes water, a tear rolls down your cheek. But you promised her. You promised her. And you believed all you told yourself. Hours waiting, the darkness pales, a purple haze looming, and now

your cousin rises, smiles warily, and says, “Eso no es. Está más allá. Vamos, cabrones.” Ahead the road: the rustle of running water, an irrigation ditch. You kneel and drink.

XI

When it came time for his wife and the boy to be home they didn't show. He didn't bother with dinner. *Don't call. Please.* He sat in his office before the computer. The lights were off and the daylight fading. He stewed. *Don't call.* What the hell was that supposed to mean? By now he had called and called, and was sent straight to voice mail, *Hi it's Monica leave...* He didn't bother leaving a message. He had called her sister, Leslie and got her voice mail after a few rings. He wasn't even sure of what he had done.

As the room grayed, a leaden weight bloated in his stomach. What did he do last night? Could she leave him? Whatever it was, he was sorry. He could, no, he *would* change. The bottle of Jim Beam sat three quarters full on the desk before him. Ice melted in a glass of thinning amber, near at hand. He clenched a fist and spread his fingers and clenched again. His fingers near the glass. The room darkened.

He saw his life alone. The slow, sure unraveling. The house gone to shit. The kitchen littered with crumpled up hamburger wrappers, foam cups, packets of salsa, trash bags piling up at the door. The fermented stench of trash. Wrinkled, grimed clothes in piles on the floor from which he picks through for his wardrobe. Dust clinging

to every surface. The mold creeping in the shower, growing at each tile joint. Some vaporous funk filling his lungs. Black mold grasping, spreading in blotchy tentacles throughout the house. It starts with a hacking cough. He waits for someone to remove him, to kick him out of the house, haul him to jail or throw him out on the street. He'd come to recognize men, bums, shambling up and down Speedway, filthy and wrapped in jackets even in the summer's swelter. He'd driven past the same men for years, living in arroyos and underpasses, in alleys, in limbo between existence and death, the state before total disappearance. Men not of this world. He saw these men, they did not exist, and soon he would not.

No. He would make things right.

The trash can in his office was full of beer cans—did he drink those last night, days ago, when? He'd gotten sloppy. He screwed the top back on the bottle of Jim Beam. Held the cup in his hand and pushed it away. He pressed down the trash and knotted the bag. He gripped the bottle by the neck, took the glass, got up and went to the bathroom and stood before the toilet.

He'd tried to control his drinking so consciously, he'd have to make an effort. If he put the bottle somewhere hard to get at, he'd be less likely to go for it. He hid a bottle in the vent in his office. When he wanted a drink, he'd have to pull down the grate with a screwdriver. This worked for a day or two, but he knew the bottle was there. He knew how full it was, and whether or not he could get drunk off it.

He dribbled the whiskey from the glass. The ice cubes plinked, a cube plopped and splashed in the toilet. He smelled the whiskey. What did it matter? The whiskey tasted watered down, cool on his tongue, warm down his throat.

For the next week he used napkins for toilet paper, paper towels when the

napkins ran out. He took showers sitting in the bathtub, whimpering. His body folded up in the tub. The drain plugged and the water rising about his body. The water rained down from the showerhead, and he sat stooped, till the water ran cold. He then pulled the plug and watched the tub empty. He whimpered, angry at how pathetic he was.

In darkness, he lay on the couch, the heated air spouting on him. The TV sparked and flared. Sweat dampened his shirt where his back pressed against the couch. She lied to him, he thought. He drank and gazed at the ceiling, seeing nothing but the flash of light shot from the TV. Blood thumped in his ears. Women were all the same. Droplets of sweat glistened on his forehead. Blood beat between his scalp and his skull, a feeling of fingers under his skin. He couldn't find work so she left him. He'd be the first to admit he drank sometimes, but it wasn't bad. His eyes dried, a spray of mist over his field of vision, flashes. It all had to do with money. When things go bad you find out who people really are.

For days in the afternoon, he parked outside the daycare where his wife worked and waited for her to come out. He parked up the street and watched the door in the rearview mirror. The sweat rolled down his back in the afternoon heat. The Check Engine Light shone with the key in the ignition.

He drank in full view of anyone who cared to see. The bottle drawn to his mouth, tipped up, he looked out to see a boy pass on a bike. He drank and looked the boy in the eyes. The boy sped on. He sweat and lipped half thought curses under his breath. He watched the door in the rearview. Pulled the keys from the ignition and singled out one of the keys and stuck it in his ear canal. He worked it around and then held it before his eyes and wiped the ear wax off on the underside of the seat.

She never came out or never showed to work. He watched her coworkers close up

for the day. Women he knew. He'd been invited into their houses. He scooted down in his seat and ducked when they drove by. He went on to Leslie's but didn't see Monica's car. She lied to him. Probably right at that moment, as he watched her sister's house, she was holed up with some asshole, taking it. Taking it like a two-faced bitch.

He watched her bank accounts and pulled up her phone records. Maybe she had another account, another cell phone. He made a list, eliminated the numbers he knew, narrowed them down to a few unknowns. Some guy called the house a few months back and said he had the wrong number.

What was it with women and the truth? It's like they live in alternate universe. She must've been planning it all along. He'd find her. He'd tell her his side of the story. He could fix things.

One afternoon he drove out to the 7 Eleven off Speedway and Columbus. He pulled in and saw a couple immigrant-looking Mexicans on either end of a bus bench facing Speedway. Between them, was an advertisement on the backrest of the bench read: Pregnant? Need Answers? Jesus Christ, he thought.

He parked and put his elbow up on the steering wheel and rested his head in his hand, the heel pressed to his eye socket. He shook his head and said, "God damn it." He got out and winced at the sun and shielded his eyes. A dead palm rose up over the 7 Eleven, brittle, the color of cardboard, ruffling in the slight breeze.

He went in and bought a beer and had the cashier give him his change in quarters. He exited and rounded the corner to the backside of the store. A shadow cast down over the parking lot from the neighboring building, a paint warehouse. He cracked the paper-bagged beer and took a long slow drink, and set it down on the lower lip of the payphone hood.

He rummaged through his pocket and pulled out a pad of stick-it notes with the list numbers. He dialed the first two numbers and got recorded message prompts for credit card companies. Another selling health insurance. He studied the list, and was sure he had dialed right.

He called another. A man answered. "Tucson Credit Union, how may I direct your call?"

"What's your name?"

"Hello?" A man's chirpy little voice.

"What's your name?"

"Teófilo, how can I help you?"

"The fuck kind of name is that?"

"Hello?"

"Who are you?"

"Do you need help with something?"

"Do you know Monica Sale?"

The man paused just long enough to make it seem like he was thinking of a lie.

"No, should I? Is this regarding an account?"

"Fucking cocksucker. I'll find you." He hung up the phone and fingered the change return slot. Nothing. He sipped the beer.

He dialed another number.

A man answered in Spanish, "Sí, dígame."

"You know who I am."

"¿Mande?"

"You know why I'm calling. Cocksucker."

Dial tone. *Please hang up and dial again .*

He waited. Took a few sips of his beer and scanned the parking lot. The sound of cars groaning past. The smell of asphalt turning to soup. He dialed the same number.

“Digáme.”

“Who are you?”

Dial tone.

He waited and called back a few more times and just breathed until he heard the dial tone, until finally the line just rung and rung.

* *

On the wall in the garage, in posters pinned to 2 x 4s, women posed spread eagle. Or with hips outthrust. Sprawled out on the beach, sand stuck to their skin. Skin puckered at sweating beer cans, sweat glistening, oiled skin. Hard nipples. Wet stringy hair.

He sometimes asked himself when he looked at the posters, at this woman or that woman: What hasn't she done? What wouldn't she do? The crease in the sliver of panty. Camel toe. Bark when I say bark. He had once thought it in the range of possibility, that bragging to a buddy, he could flick his hand at one of the girls in the posters, and in all honesty, point and say, “That one. I had that one. You wouldn't believe what she did to me, man.” He imagined the circumstances of how they would meet, how he might have them. This one or that one. Legs Ass Tits Pussy. All of them, on separate occasions, or maybe they're friends, they can all have at it. He was a mechanic, they need his help, they'd come to his shop--*can you please, please fix my car, I'll do anything* (this could happen, under the right circumstances). *Anything*. Or maybe, after a show at a bar, where one of the girls—any of them, dressed in a bikini—promoting the new summer beer, the new easy flow vent system, the new cold activated can—had just finished her

shift and stepped off the stage, he'd be there with a coat to warm her goose bumps from the air conditioned bar, from the ice cold beer. He would say something to win her over, convince her that she wanted what he had to give her—but in his imagining, there were no words, just an understanding, the power of his manhood. If he just had enough money, her skin greased, lubricated, a slippery slope and the next thing he knew, she was in his car, staining his seats with her slick body, and he taking her home. *Do what you will, you animal.* That easy. Whatever he wanted.

But now, as he glanced at the posters, even these women seemed to judge him. For a moment he stood under their gaze and felt sick, felt the contraction of shrinking possibilities. Paths, avenues, outs, dead ending. He was all he would ever be. He'd never meet them. Have them. Even the women in the posters who must by now be in their 50s (some of the same posters dressed the walls of his dad's workshop). The desperate ones. He could never have them. These women, who give themselves away to every man, would refuse him. But as soon as this doubt crept in, he shrugged it off, and thought, somehow, maybe, why else hang women in the garage?

* *

Sale stepped out the front door, trash bags in either hand, clanking and clinking, weighted with bottles and cans. He walked out toward the brick wall between his home and the apartment complex, and upon nearing, watched a man hoist himself up into the dumpster.

The man's bicycle was propped against the dumpster, bagged cans were strapped to a basket over the back wheel. Didn't even bother, he thought, to crush the cans before he bagged them. Lazy fuck. Bum. What do you expect from a Mexican? He laid the bags down and watched the dumpster. He put his hand to his hip, expecting to finger his M9.

Finding it missing, he ran his hand down his leg, then opened and closed it. He ran his knuckles across his palm.

He'd seen the man before maybe even a hundred times, gathering cans, crawling in dumpsters, pedaling on the side of the road with a swollen bag of cans, but something about today. He knew thugs and gang members paid bums to rummage through trash in search of personal information, pay them ten bucks for a bank statement, and then use it to steal their identity.

The man's head surfaced and sunk below the dumpster's rim. He stood, stumbled, the trash crumpling under foot, and looked at Sale. Sale glared, shook his head, picked up the bags, and turned, walked, clinking and clanking, back to the front door and laid the cans down outside. He went to his office, picked up the M9, and split the blinds, and watched the man unload a bag from the dumpsters. Watched the man load the bag onto his bike and ride off without looking at his house. He watched till the man was out of sight, and returned to the bags, and pitched them into the dumpster, the M9 in his pocket.

* *

In the days and weeks since his wife and son left, he woke up later and stayed up longer, each day more reluctant to rise than the last. He woke only to putter around the house, given up entirely his search for work, even the show of good faith, something he might have pointed to when his wife came home, showing her the form-letter rejections, the e-mails he received thanking him for applying—he puttered, posting items for sale on craigslist: his collection of flare guns, tools, the Camaro, and then repented and took this or that down, and then posted it again. People would call about this or that, a pneumatic wrench or a .22 Smith and Wesson, and he'd feel a pang in his stomach, suspected the

caller, thought: Where did you get my number? Who are you? Do you know my wife? But soon recovered, and lied, telling them, this or that had been sold, not wanting to part with it, and he'd take the advertisement down.

He lazed and worked at forgetting, still worried about his wife and son. He'd get lost at the computer, uncovering injustices and abuse, following links and links to links until a story's trail seemed to end. One day he stumbled across an article from the Denver Post. The title read: "Colorado Man Slain in Mexican Waters", and recounted the story of a man gunned down while ski dooing on the Texas-Mexican Border.

Sale could see it, just as the surviving wife had recounted to the authorities. They had set out en route, each astride a Wave Runner, to visit the sunken city of Old Guerrero, the ruins of which had emerged in recent years of drought from the receding banks of Falcon Lake, a reservoir formed by the damming of the Rio Grande. They neared the sunken city, watched the waves lap low against the walls of the old mission church—*Nuestra Señora del Refugio*, and just as the stained columns—bleached by years under water—came into view, the woman saw her husband crumple over, and slide off into the water. She heard the muted pop and sputter of gunfire, the whistle, the splash of bullets slurping in the water around her. Armed men burst forth, firing, pounding over the waves in two or three small boats. The article claimed the perpetrators were narco pirates. The woman circled back to retrieve her husband, but he proved too heavy, and the pirates, relentless in their pursuit, forced her to flee. They chased her until she came aground on American soil, in Zapata, Texas.

The deceased husband had been hired a few years earlier by an oil company that had launched a fracking venture in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. They vacationed frequently at the lake. In the picture that accompanied the first article, they posed on the shore of

some ocean, embracing. In the distance a cruise ship was buoyed at the horizon. You come to help a people, Sale thought, and this is the thanks you get. Dispatched, ended. It could have been him and his wife on the lake that day. They'd been a few times to Lake Havasu and rented jet skis. What kind of animals? The failure of justice. Jesus Christ, this woman had to wear her own husband as a bullet proof vest.

And now, as he looked on at the computer screen, at the latest article, "Family, Friends Mourn the Loss of Slain American", he thought, how does this happen in America? It made no sense. She was beautiful, the wife, and it was such a shame how her husband had died, but more so, the fact that she had to suffer. In the picture, she sat, forlorn before the crowd of mourners, 400 and more, mounted atop her husband's prized Indian motorcycle. Her husband smiled on at the crowd from a photo the size of a car door set up on an easel, flowers spraying from the frame. They gunned him down, a man who had no enemies. A friend remembered the last time they saw him, their last promise to see each other at church. He was the type of man who emptied his pockets for kids in Mexico when he crossed the border. He was a religious man and a dutiful husband. Who could wish him harm? The man would be missed, but his reward was in heaven.

The family's attempt to recover the man's body had been frustrated at every turn. No one from either side of the border—the FBI, Border Patrol, Texas Rangers, or Mexican authorities—could produce an adequate explanation as to why the return of the man's body had taken so long, a week now delayed.

Sale read through the comment posts that followed the article: "...how sad...heartfelt wishes to the wife and family...Mexico's in denial...corrupt, inept...shut down the border...It's time for Mexico to take care of its own problems or we will...send

the marines with orders shoot to kill...Blow up Mexico! (just kidding) LOL Boycott Mexico!!...”

He scrolled down and came to an invitation that must’ve been put up by Randy Cairn, the ranch owner.

by MMpatriotAZ:

CALL TO ALL FAITHFUL PATRIOTS!!

SOUND OFF!!!!

This is to announce to our members and anyone interested to stand in defense of our great nation. We are preparing to mount an operation along the border in Arizona. A patrol and defense operation that we plan to carry out to combat recent activities on the border here in Arizona.

In recent months drug cartels and narcos have increased activities, and these activities are threatening to pull our country apart. The newly implemented law SB 1070 is just the first step to assuring the safety of our citizens. While there is much talk in the media and Federal Government response, we must stand up as citizens.

Just recently an American Citizen was brutally shot down in cold blood on the waters of Lake Falcon and is suspected dead at the hands of drug cartel. His wife managed to escape fortunately with her life. The man’s body is still lying at the bottom of the lake and may never be recovered.

We as members of the Minutemen Civil Defense Unit along with other well

trained militia groups, with the greatest sense of service, offer our skills and resources to any and all law enforcement agencies. But first we are needing an accurate head count of willing members and new recruits before we get the ball rolling.

So, contact us if you are willing to make this sacrifice for the protection of our great country. Your commitment can be shown through time, effort, supplies or donations. Let us stand together with our brothers and sisters of Texas to secure our borders and protect our citizens.

Contact us at our website: www.mmcdefenseu.com

Dusk fell, and a ray of light settled just so on Sale's eye, and he couldn't but turn away. His hands hovered over the keyboard, and he looked at the screen, not knowing what to think. Time, effort. Brothers and sisters. Half measures. Whack a mole. Derek had talked about taking it to the next level, whatever that meant. He wanted to go out by themselves, take action. Sale had to admit it was fun, he never felt like that, blood pumping, the adrenaline, the authority, a situation of life or death.

He went to the window and lifted the blinds. The sun drifted down out of view. He sat back down and collared the bottle of whiskey. He held the bottle to his chest, and breathed in and out, and then lifted the bottle to his mouth, and swallowed, staring at the ceiling, the plaster icicles that hung down, and emptied what little was left in the bottle in one swig. Yellowed light, going brown, cast against the wall in slivers, marking the blinds against the wall, and the lightless room darkened with downing of the sun.

* *

Derek called and Sale met him at Shelter Bar. Derek's black eye had healed, no swelling, nothing more now than a purple worm under his eyelid and a rash on his cheekbone. Sale almost felt bad. Derek said he hadn't had a black eye since that bullshit assault charge a few years back. Derek put two fingers to his cheekbone and winced, "I thought you could take a joke."

"I guess not." Sale had almost forgotten he thought he was going to die. "Joke's not as funny with a gun to your head."

Derek took out his wallet. "I almost forgot." He handed over a hundred dollar bill.

Sale took the money and shook his head. He didn't want to talk about his life, but he said: "Monica left." He flipped the bill over and studied it.

"Like, for good?"

He put the bill in his wallet. He brought the beer to his mouth and looked at it with disgust and drank. "I don't even know. It's been a month now. She took Jarret. She won't take my calls. I don't even know where she is."

"She can't do that. You should call the police."

"I talked to her sister. She said she didn't want to see me. Said they were getting a restraining order."

"What the hell you do?"

"We had a fight. She's pissed off about the money."

Derek shrugged. He opened his mouth to say something, but shook his head.

Sale tipped the bottle up and drank. "What am I supposed to do? I don't even..." He didn't want to talk about it. "I don't even get a chance." He felt himself tearing up, and cleared his throat.

"Wait and see. Leave her alone for awhile. You know women. Some women." He

curled his lip and shook his head.

Sale thought about what he said, *some women*, and he didn't want him talking about his wife. What would he know about it? "I don't want those barrels." He took his wallet out, and held the bill, folded in half, between two fingers.

"Come on, bud. I'm lining up a buyer. Hold tight. Take the money. Get a lawyer. I know a guy, helped me out."

"What do I need a lawyer for? I'm not getting a divorce." He held the bill out.

"You never know. Hey, you're doing me a favor. Take the money."

Sale unfolded the bill and snapped it taut. He could send it to her. He could do that. "It is what it is."

* *

Sale took the invitation to patrol again. There were five of them, Derek, Barry, Travis, and Travis' friend, Clint, a man in his fifties who claimed to have served in Vietnam. They were all sturdy men, armed and dressed in fatigues. They split up into two parties—guerrilla style, Clint said, hit him like we did in Vietnam—and set out on foot, hiked a mile or more, staying near the edges of the wash. They tunneled through the scrub land, snagged by chollas and mesquites, and found nothing but pockets of trash they scraped through with their boots and lean-tos they tipped over and destroyed. No new signs, perhaps they'd taken to a new route. They reconvened after a few hours back at their trucks, which they had parked on Randy's property.

They sat now on the bed gates of their trucks before a campfire. The stars shone overhead, so bright they looked like clouds. The earth was black outside the campfire's halo, only the nearest brush lighted by the flame.

They talked about the Survivalist Show coming to Tucson. Talked about how

they'd prepared, stores of food and water, guns, shelter, what they needed to make it through when the shit hit the fan. They reminisced about their time in the service, bitched about their drill instructors: *The only thing I want to hear is your cunt lips slapping as you march. March. Have I offended anyone? Now shut up, dicks. That's a complement, D-I-C-K, stands for Dedicated Infantry Combat Killer. Be happy. The best part of Iraq is shooting another human being. Shooting them, and then leaving. The sky is blue privates, because God fucking loves the infantry. Has God? Has God offended anyone? Is anyone offended?*

They asked Sale if Randy tried to get him to sign up to the Minute Men, made him pay the fifty dollars for a background check. Sale said no. Good, they told him, they didn't do background checks—just took the money, and for what they couldn't say. They'd put him on a mailing list and ask for donations. “None of you assholes would be here,” Derek said, “if they did background checks.” They all laughed.

It was a racket. The leaders compromised the movement. They were in it for the face-time—to play for the camera, to pick up donations and get votes. They weren't committed. It was about action, taking things to the next level.

Sale watched the light play on the ground, the shadows dissolving and forming. He had no idea what they were talking about, but granted their words with a nod.

“If they were serious,” Travis said, “they'd take it to the next level.”

“Yeah,” Barry said. “You know what gets me? These politicians don't give a shit about you or me, or this country. They're in it for the money. If they cared about the integrity of this country, they'd put their foot down. It's about law and order. There's no difference between entering the U.S. illegally and breaking into your neighbor's home. Would you want someone breaking in your house?” Barry turned to Sale and gestured at

him with his beer. Sale shook his head. “These illegals,” he went on, “are stealing from the American taxpayer. Hell, the blacks don’t even like illegal Mexicans because the illegal Mexicans are cutting into their free welfare. Three quarters of immigrants don’t pay taxes but get free healthcare and school and housing. The government takes in less and gives out more to them and takes from those of us who can trace our family back five generations and we’re the ones that get put on the back burner. And that’s what this is all about.”

“I don’t get it man,” Derek said. “I can’t even—or I couldn’t if I wanted—go over to Mexico, you know, the military can’t go. And here they come, as free as they want, and they don’t even have to have pass ports or identification, and they just disappear. They don’t give a shit about the law. But when you’re in the Army, and you go to another country, and see how fucked up it is over there, you get another perspective. I’m gonna laugh, in forty years when this country goes to shit, when these immigrants takeover, and this country goes to shit, when they takeover—who you think Mexican’s gonna vote for? Who’d you rather have George W. Bush or Vicente Fox? We’ll get just what we deserve, giving these people inches and inches and feet. I’ll just laugh and say they’re you go, you fucking liberals. Got what you wanted.”

Sale sat and listened, took sips from his beer. He ran his finger against his thumb, nodding every so often, and saying, Ah huh. Yeah. That’s right. It is what it is. It reminded him of talking to his dad, nodding, waiting for the back of his hand if he chose to say otherwise.

“Think about it this way,” Clint said, “if you just beat somebody—for their own good, mind—you wouldn’t go up and have them take the paddle from your hand. What do you expect them to do with it? The price of liberty is eternal vigilance, and when your

government fails you, you *are* the government. I'm not doing this for personal reasons, but just because I remember what America used to be like. It was a different place then, and the values got lost in the shuffle. Now it's out of control. And we're supposed to just sit back and say cool, far out, like this new MTV generation. Nobody's mad and that's what scares me."

"You got to use their tactics," Travis said, jabbing a finger for emphasis. Sale noticed he had a spider web tattooed on the web between his thumb and forefinger. "That's the only way to get through to them. They stand on the street corners peddling drugs, jeering at little girls on their way to school. They have no problem slitting your throat and taking your money or selling drugs or raping your daughter."

"That's what I'm talking about," Derek said, "taking it to the next level. You need to scare them. All they understand is violence. That's how they operate. You need to go out to one of those corners for day labor. Pick one of them up, put a pillow case over his head. Scare the shit out of him. Take him out to the middle of the desert and let him find his way back. Do it a couple times. They talk, tell others. I'm not talking about killing anybody. A dead man can't talk much. Before you know it, no more illegals. That's the beauty of it."

Jesus, Sale thought, he can't be serious. He thought about his wife and his son. What the hell was he doing out here? He rattled his beer, the remains sloshed at the bottom of the can. The beer grew warm quickly in the heat of the night. He tipped his neck and downed the beer. The last few sips tasted dull and flat. He crushed the can and threw it into the fire.

I don't give a damn. Call me unsympathetic, I don't care. I'm too old. Let's talk about common sense. You need an ID to cash a check, buy beer, check out a library book, but not to vote? How many illegals vote every year? And who do you think they vote for? We got that new law, which is a good step. Now let's let law enforcement do its job. If you're here illegally you need to be prepared to face the consequences.

Everybody's lined up behind that Chicago Jesus, that hopey changey bullshit. It's all lip service. They think they can brainwash people. What do you expect from a president who can't even prove he was born in America? I read Obama has more than sixteen Social Security Cards connected to his name, or his alias—Barry Sotelo. What does a guy need with sixteen Social Security Cards? That make any sense to you? I swear, people, wake up and smell the bacon.

Think about it. You can get arrested for hunting or fishing without a license, but not for being in the country illegally. Spawns from liberals, their political correctness. Bunch of peter puffers. Ignorance is bliss. Let's look at the facts. A girl needs a permission slip to go on a field trip, to take aspirin to school, but no, go ahead, have all the abortions you want—but don't tell your parents. You get labeled un-American if you question anything. Make any sense to you? New York liberals telling you how much soda you can buy. You got 80 year-old women being stripped searched by the TSA and A-rabs getting away with wearing head scarves don't get touched. That's how upside down this country is. They work over toddlers in wheel chairs, and nuns, and 80 year-old grandmas, but no, no, no, you can't touch an A-rab because it's against their religion, and who do you think started this mess? Might be Osama Bin Laden under that burka. Let's quit pussyfooting around and deal with the facts. Everybody's worried about hurt feelings.

We got no say on how this country's run. Children know what's best for them. A country of me. That's what we become. Me, me, me. My own spoiled daughter, she's wants to control every molecule that's breathed, and you can't have a civil conversation with her. Whenever politics come up around her she just puts her fingers in her ears and says, not listening. I get to feeling what's the point? I'm fortunate enough to have grandkids, but can I share what I know, pass on my wisdom? Derek's a good boy, hasn't found the right woman yet, but my son in Phoenix, he don't want me to talk about nothing but Mickey Mouse to my own grand kids. Not around the kids, he says. It's all about emotions. Nobody wants to look at the facts. It's the schools, TV. They have that I'm-gonna-get-mine-and-F-you attitude. Unions. Teacher's unions. Liberal thought indoctrination, retire at fifty. There's no sense of pride.

XII

They—Nancy and her father, Diana and the boy—traveled down Avenida Lerdo to the Fiscalía. Nancy's chin drooped against her shoulder as she stared out the window. Two and three story buildings passed by, every other storefront shuttered with roll doors. Electrical lines fanned out overhead, between buildings, between poles. They drove southward, where Lerdo turned in to Juan Gabriel, flanked by railroad tracks to the west. Plastic bags flapped in tatters pinched between chain links, still others ballooned with the wind. A fog of dust pressed down upon the city.

Nancy watched the back of Diana's head as she drove, keeping distance from the cars ahead. Armando sat beside her, wrapped in a blanket and wearing a backpack on his stomach. His legs outstretched against the seat in front of him. Each time the boy shifted, her father, jolted, turned around and shot her a look, and looked at the boy. She ignored him and watched the as they passed idle box cars of Union Pacific freight. They crested the overpass above Los Insurgentes, and off in the distance, the uneven letters painted on the face of Cerro Bola came into view:

CD JUAREZ

LA BIBLIA ES

LA VERDAD

LEELA

She leaned over Armando to see, and pointed to the mountain but the boy ignored her, rocking, his arms wrapped around the backpack. He blinked, his eyes focused on the headrest, a fidgeting gaze that seemed to take in nothing. Nancy made the form of the cross over her chest and kissed her thumb, clasping Erika's rosary.

The rails emerged, butting up against the road beyond the chain link and barbwire. A train rolled past headed north, tagged with graffiti. The police checkpoint of a few days before, now abandoned: piles of sandbags, kinked posts and beams. Tipped over spotlights with no bulbs. A message from the state government painted on a concrete wall: NO EXISTE DELITO SIN VÍCTIMA. Traffic clotted as they neared the Fiscalía. The parking lot was full out front. They inched along and parked in a lot behind a grouping of government office buildings.

Diana had told them earlier, and swore again and again, she would do anything to help, but she refused to talk to the police. *Ni modo, pinche culeros*. She wanted nothing to do with them. She didn't want the police to know she was alive, where she lived, if she could avoid it. There was no way you could trust them. She heard stories every day. People who'd gone to the police, who'd been harassed, extorted—raped, robbed. Persecuted, intimidated. A neighbor's son disappeared and returned with no head, hanging from an overpass, the rope lashed under his arms. And why? Their guess was as good as hers. They were vulnerable. They were an annoyance. Easy prey. Spite. Guilt. Justice—*Los vivos somos inocentes*.

* *

Floor to ceiling windows, sandblasted, reflected their image, Nancy with her elbows on

her knees, sitting on an aluminum, airport-style bench, twirling strands of hair on the back of her neck, and her father sitting next to her with the newspaper held out before him. They sat alone in an empty hallway.

The hallway stretched out on either side. There were six doors of white maple, three on either side of where they sat, a door at the end of the hall, and a hallway that led back to the Fiscalía's waiting room. Plaques marked each door with a number.

Through the windows, she could see shadows floating on the glass like vapor. A shadow passed. A file drawer opened and closed. The measured tones of an officer's voice reached her as whisper. The walls were painted white. Fluorescent bulbs droned above. A case for a fire extinguisher hung on the wall behind them. Heels clacked somewhere down the hallway. She felt like they were waiting in a hospital. She expected a doctor to step from one of the doors with news, remembered the dread, waiting for her son's diagnosis. From the terror in his eyes, the blank stare, she had thought it was blindness.

One of the doors at the end of the hallway opened. A man, handcuffed, wearing a yellow jumpsuit with the words IMPUTADO across his back, was ushered out, limping, and led through a glass door.

Heels clacked from the opposite direction, and neared. A woman approached, dressed in a pantsuit and holding a clipboard, a pen in her hand. She stood before them and asked, "¿Vásquez?" She looked at them and her eyes widened. She tilted her head. "¿No?"

They shook their heads.

She looked down at the chart and before they could speak and asked, "¿Valenzuela? Ah, no, ¿Velázquez?" She smoothed down her bangs and ran her finger

over her eyebrow, widened her eyes. They affirmed. She smiled, and said, “Entonces, pasen por acá.” She guided them back up the hall, gesturing with the clipboard, and explaining they’d been assigned another officer.

He identified himself as Officer Granados. He shook their hands, her father’s first, and offered to have them take a seat. The officer wore a black polo shirt and black slacks, a metal beaded lanyard hung from his neck with an ID, a flat expression, a sort of smile. He sat down, leaned back, crossed his fingers over his stomach, and tapped his thumbs.

He hoped they hadn’t been waiting too long and explained that he was truly sorry to hear of their loss, their struggles, he meant to say. It was a hard time in this city. The police force was stretched thin, and between the Army and the Policía Federal, it was difficult to get things straight. There was no communication. He would give it his best effort, but they had to consider his position. There wasn’t much they could expect, and he urged them not to get their hopes up. These sorts of things were left in the hands of God, and he felt with God’s strength anything was possible. “Hay que ser pacientes y tener fe.” He told them the officer who had been assigned their case was unavailable, and that, unfortunately, all of their papers had been misfiled, and they would have to go over it again, though he’d pretty much been brought up to speed.

It seemed to Nancy that Granados assumed Nancy’s father was Erika’s father, and when he addressed them, he spoke first to her father. He asked what their names were and where they were from, where they worked, what they were doing in Juárez, how long they had been there, who they knew. He didn’t ask what happened or why they were there. The other officer had made it clear.

Nancy explained they had been in Juárez only a few days, had just been passing

through on their way home to Denver, and her father had come from Parral to help.

Granados leaned over every so often to look at the papers on his desk, glanced at the telephone, and leaned back, and wrapped his fingers over his belly and rubbed his thumbs together. He scratched his head and looked at the ceiling. He glanced at her father while she spoke, as if expecting him to answer. His face unreadable—was this compassion? Nancy thought, judgment? He smiled and nodded, gravely. The look he gave her, disbelief, a patronizing seriousness, made her question the words that came from her own mouth. The sort of face you make when you understand nothing but know everything.

You have to understand the minds of children, he told them. They go out looking for a good time. They drink. And then, well, he looked Nancy in the eyes, lifted his eyebrows, tilted his head, and asked, what did you do when you were her age? She should know better than anyone, children have a life outside, hidden from their parents.

“No es cierto,” Nancy said. “¿Y qué tiene que ver con lo que sucedió?”

Granados told her to calm down. He knew it might be difficult to accept. He acted like he was at a loss for words. He held his hands in front of him, palms up, and shrugged his shoulders. “Tienes que ser práctica,” he said. He knew she was upset, and she didn’t want to accept the possibility, that maybe her daughter was not the angel she thought her to be.

Nancy lunged across Granados’ desk. The phone fell to the ground, papers spilled off. She hardly laid a hand on him before her father restrained her, held her down on his lap. She rubbed at her neck and then thrust her hand out at Granados. “Ustedes lo hicieron, ustedes. Cállate. Mentiroso.” She lunged forward again, snatched some papers from the desk before her father could hold her down. She crumpled the papers and flung

them at Granados and said, “Animal, animales. Cállate, tu. Cállate, mentiroso.”

Granados turned his head aside, as if to dodge her accusations. He then looked at her father. He looked for a while. He said, “Entiendo las cosas de mujeres. En momentos así, se ponen histéricas, y con razón. Pero hay que ser civil. Hay que tener respeto.”

He adjusted his collar, and turned to Nancy, and told her not to be ridiculous, to think that they had anything to do with it. It was *her* daughter. He was there to help. She was pointing the finger at the wrong people.

He turned and addressed her father. They had to consider the department’s position. They were understaffed. They had a lot of things to worry about. What did the city look like to them? It was a war zone. He was sorry.

He didn’t mean to say that her daughter was bad, but, in most cases, this was what happened.

“Pero,” she said. She struggled in her father’s arms. “¿Qué tiene que ver con mi hija?”

Granados held his hands up and brought them down as if to put out a fire. It was all part of the procedure, he explained. They had to establish the circumstances, have some idea of her daughter’s habits, where she went, who she ran around with. He told them they should start over.

“Ella no conoce a nadie aquí,” she said. “No somos de Juárez. ¿No entiende?”

That’s fine, that’s fine, Granados said. Why didn’t they just start from the beginning? He asked Nancy if she and her daughter had had a fight.

She squirmed in her father’s arms and made as if she’d lunge again.

Granados looked at her and tilted his head, held his hands up and brought them down. He looked at her father and scratched his neck. He looked at the telephone. It was

important, he explained. He would say then that they didn't have a fight. He smiled and nodded. Many times when girls go missing, they had a boy friend, someone they were not allowed to see.

"Fueron los comandos," she screamed. "Comandos. Ustedes se la llevaron. Los vi con mis propios ojos. El hombre tecolote."

Granados cleared his throat. He scowled, and shook his head, looked as if he had to sneeze. He thumbed his cheek below his eye. He looked down at the desk and picked up a clipboard and studied it. He took a deep breath, scratching his head. "¿Como se llaman ustedes?"

* *

When they arrived to the hotel each evening, the Policía Federal—helmeted, some masked, eyes concealed behind goggles that reflected them as they passed—lounged in the beds of their navy blue Ford F-150s that lined the street, or leaned against the shuttered store fronts outside the hotel. Still others stood on guard, posted at the door, on watch at the street corner. Dressed head-to-toe in navy blue, cargo pants tucked into boots, vested in black body armor, M16s slung across their chests, and side arms strapped to their thighs. Gloved hands.

The police considered them from their various posts of repose, and as they neared, whatever conversation, whatever joke, was left unsaid until they passed through the doors, and out of ear shot. The police offered some reassurance, their hands resting on the handles of their M16, a nod of the head, an opened door, a *buenas tardes*, to which Nancy's father nodded in turn, out of obligation, and Nancy herself pretended not to notice, staring at the ground, holding Armando close, avoiding the eyes trained on her. Inside too, they loitered in the cramped hotel lobby, hardly a path made for them to

maneuver. More than once they'd been snagged, a pocket or sleeve, on the muzzle of an officer's gun and had to turn back, eyes down, apologetic, for the officer to slip it off.

The ever present clench in Nancy's chest, her throat, clamped harder, despair took, and her glance ever swerving away from the blank and pitiless masks, fixed upon the ground, her shoes, on the tiles, and boots, and these, she imagined disappeared. She felt their gaze trained on her. A woman here where they sleep, a woman outside their use, or were they plotting? Her father wrapped his arm around her waist, and bounded her forward. She, likewise holding the boy, bundled him to her, grasped at his wandering hand. She didn't dare look into the boy's eyes. He whimpered and stumbled as they mounted the steps. And even here, in the stairway, officers sat or crouched or stood. Her father nodded and nodded and mumbled a greeting.

The hallway to their room hung with cigarette smoke. A doorway stood open and she saw high heeled shoes, stockings scattered. A few doors from their own room, a woman kneeled, cradling her head, a plastic cup tipped over beside her, lying in an amber puddle. Nancy looked back down the hallway, saw the woman. Her father produced the key and they entered the room. Her father locked the door, latched the clasp.

Nancy brought her son close, hugged him. He squirmed, looked at her face, and made eye contact, swung his head back and jerked from her arms. The eyes that met hers were filled with unknowing terror, the squirming vacancy she knew well, like he'd caught sight of the devil. She released him and he went into the bathroom and turned on the sink. She sat on the bed. "No puedo," she said. She stared at the ground and teared up. Her father came towards her, and she said, "Déjame. Ve que hace el chamaco."

She lay back and looked at the ceiling, the walls, the curtains tied in a knot and

the kinked blinds, the sliding door that would not open. The cherubs framed above each bed seemed to struggle now in their embrace, as if the cloud they lay on was a bed sheet they fought over. She noticed the TV was missing. Someone had been in their room and taken the TV. Had there been a TV? She watched the small bleached square on the wall where the TV had been anchored. A cable coiled and wrapped around the anchor. Her father scolded the boy in the bathroom. Mumbles, footsteps from the hallway, the drone of traffic. The whapping thump of a helicopter in the distance, nearing, passing.

Later that night her mother called and her father held out the phone to her, she laying in bed, and goaded her to speak. “Ay, Mi’ja,” her mother said, “Mi’ja. Te quiero. Se fuerte. Aguanta, Mi’ja, aguante.” Her mother paused, sniffled. “Esos hombres pagarán por tus lagrimas. Por Dios que sí.” Her mother tried to convince her to come home and let her father take care of the mess, she didn’t mention Erika, and referred to the kidnapping as *esa bronca*.

But Nancy insisted she would see her daughter again. She would find her. “Es mi deber. Tengo que encontrarla, salvarla.” She had been hard on her daughter growing up, strict. She knew her friends, where she was at all times. She never left her alone with men, with boys. Even when Erika was young. She’d eye Erika’s uncles, her own brothers, her own nephews. Kept a watch on their hands, an ear out at their conversations, insinuations, any word said one way but meant another. Afterward, she heard her father in the bathroom talking to her mother.

Later still, her husband called. At first she refused to speak, but relented. She feared his tone, his voice tempered with anger, a wish to say: *I told you so. You never should have gone, and now see, see what you’ve done, if only you’d listened to me, and what about the money? I will have to borrow from my brother on top of what I*

already owe him. But he said no such thing. “Gordis,” he said, “Voy de una vez. Te quiero. Me necesitas, así que voy para allá.” He hadn’t been to work all that week. He sat at home floored by the impotence. He prayed in the darkness that God would listen. Strained with doubt, not knowing, dwelling on every possible outcome—none good. They suffered with her. A part of himself, *mi propia carne*. He called his family, and they told him to go, but the house, his job—he couldn’t even explain to his boss why he’d missed work. She knew he couldn’t come, risk crossing over and perhaps never crossing back. All they had struggled to create, a new life, a hope for a better life, would be lost. The same rationale he used to convince her to leave Mexico in the first place. Opportunity, security, certainty, respect. Money.

Each night when they returned to the hotel room, they sought distraction, an escape from each other, from the doubt, the helplessness, but they found themselves each night in the throbbing silence of the hotel room, loathing the empty TV shelf and the fear that trapped them inside the room. Nancy’s father intended to ask about the TV that had gone missing. He had paid a deposit and been given a remote. He waited for a chance when the lobby would empty, not daring otherwise. Nancy knew his intention was only to tell of his intention, and distract her from the moment, the silences between them, the boy’s rhythmic tremors, the thought of her daughter.

There were nights when few words passed between her and her father. But more often, they’d busy themselves with card games, newspapers, magazines—they’d turn to comment on what they’d just read and remember what brought them to the hotel, and despair would wedge its way through their insides, present itself with a silent smile and nod, a denial. All along, Armando moved constantly, whipping his beads, piecing together puzzles. And soon, early, they were overcome with sleep, and her son would

motion her over to be put to bed, under her weight, his head drifting back on the pillow, his eyes rolling up—his eyelids never fully closed, and soon a trail of drool ran down his cheek.

And when sleep came, it came disturbed by the creaks and clatters, the hiss of a flushed toilet, bangs, shrieks, grumbling voices. A plastic cup clinking, clacking on the floor. Footfalls. Foreign sounds of a fragile asylum. Playful screams carried from adjoining rooms or from the hallway. Playful or fearful. They knew women were received in the night, but neither daughter nor father made comment, though the moans and grunts reached them, the insults and blasphemies seeped through the walls. Nancy knew her father knew she heard, awake listening, but lay paralyzed, still as dead.

One night, late, on toward morning, a woman or girl pounded on their door and screamed. “Por Dios, ayúdenme. Socorro, por Dios.” She shouted for help. The door knob turned.

Nancy propped herself up on her elbows and turned to her father who lay still as a rock with his eyes pinched shut. Armando slept sound.

The woman or girl whimpered, and it seemed she must have slumped down with her back to the door. A thump followed, her head against the door, and she spoke now in a whisper. “Sé que están allí. Yo sé. Yo sé. Abran la puerta. Se los suplico. Dios. Dios. Dios.” She implored and whimpered and thumped her head against the door.

Nancy reached across and placed her hand on her father’s bed. He turned as if startled awake, and looked at her, the gap of his missing teeth black, a scolding look, a look that said: *stay still*. When it seemed he understood what she intended, he shook his head but otherwise lay still. She slid out from under the covers and groped to the door, her bare feet against the cold tile. She touched the door and felt the thud against her

palm. Her father sat up and glared at her and shook his head. She wanted to whisper to the girl, *No temas, estoy contigo. Aguanta.*

The girl sobbed. “Sé que están allí. Yo sé. Yo sé.”

What little light oozed, entered from the slit at foot of the door. Oozed at its edges. She stood, touching the door, her other hand now grasped the knob. The thumping stopped, the gap at the foot of the door lit with yellowed light, and the door gave as the weight of the girl’s back was lifted. Foot falls neared from down the hall, and had been nearing.

She heard a man’s voice low, quiet, menacing. “Tú que chingados haces aquí. Métete al cuarto o te chingo.” She pressed her hand against the door and stood still. “Métete o te doy un chingazo.”

“Pero estoy sangrando.” Nancy could just make out the girl’s words, and seemed to hear them vibrating through her hand at the door. She whimpered and said “Estoy sangrando.”

She could hear him breathing, and he responded. “A ver, ¿dónde?” There was silence. He breathed. “¿Eso? Ay, eso no es nada. ¿Y la otra, dónde está? ¿Se fue?”

She could feel his voice through the door, felt it through her fingers, and her fingers burned from the pressure with which she pressed against the door. She knew if she let go, the movement of the door would be noticed, and whoever the man was, officer or pimp, would pound at the door, knock it down, and mark them as sympathizers or entrometidos. He’d drag them out into the hall and beat them, arrest them, or worse, and worse, and worse. But maybe, all of this was nothing more than her own exaggeration, making these men out as the worst of men, these men, the men she encountered. Men who would cut her throat as soon as look at her, men who at that

moment might be committing an outrage against her own daughter. She hoped that wasn't true, but felt it—the face behind the mask, masking nothing, faceless—when she passed them in the hallways. But somewhere there had to be a man with some mercy, some measure, some justice.

The girl's sobs turned to cries and the man said, "No es nada mí amor." He soothed the girl. "Es el efecto de la droga. La sangre se pone clara, es la droga, todos se pone un poco loco. Pero ya, ya pasó. Acuéstate a dormir y encontramos la otra." The girl said nothing more and their footsteps dampened down the hallway and a door shut.

She slid her hand down, let go of the door, it gave and creaked. Her father slumped down in bed and looked her, exasperated. She crossed the room to the window, ignoring him, and brushed aside the curtain and looked out at the street. She remembered her home in Parral, her home in Denver, if you were to look out at night to see some disturbance playing out on the street—a party out of hand, a drunk, a fight, a beating—you had to turn out the lights to look out the window, and if the lights were on, you had to wait, for the disturbed might be drawn to the quenching of the light. If you do not turn out the lights, those who you see in the dark can see you, see clearly the brush of the curtain, see the light.

In the darkness, she returned to bed, but couldn't sleep. She thought of the girl at the door, drunk, drugged, bleeding, maybe even now, raped in her sleep—she heard breathing in the dark. Though what she felt wasn't pity, one way or another, the girl had sought it, took the easy way out, and it anguished her to think of a world where, at your very doorstep, the most brutal of crimes, a helpless girl, must be ignored, because to open the door invited the girl's disease to spread. But was the girl helpless? In seeking to live as she did, what was she after? Was there any alternative? Who was this girl? Only a

girl, a girl abandoned, cast out, a lone runaway, an orphan. *Las putas no se pueden negar*. What did she give to those men, what did she lose? She could never have been one of those women, so low to please a stranger, and for the first time in her life she considered the desperation that would send a woman to that life, how her daughter now, perhaps, could be prodded, forced, and even in that moment, as she lay awake in a strange room, her daughter, perhaps, forced to submit, as the girl at the door. The thought formed, and her stomach emptied as in a fall from a height when gravity pulls, a freefall—her daughter might be one of these women, these girls, maybe it was Erika who pounded at the door and whimpered, but no, no.

* *

The light flickered. The hallway or the field surfaced about her white and dimly lit. The source of light buried by a sheer enveloping gauze. A light that receded in the sky or folded up into the ceiling. In the dream she knew it was somewhere she should not be. Objects hardened, materialized from smoke. Light fixtures. She walked down a hallway. A matrix of mirrored panes lined the walls and dissolved to glass and she saw closed blinds on the other side. The hallway grew, and the blinded windows retreated from her steps. She was afraid of walking, of pushing the walls from reach. The growing tiled expanse, both ceiling and floor, spread until she saw no walls. All at once she knew this place was the Fiscalía. She could see no one, but felt presences in the shadows. Her feet had rooted to the floor, and the floor and ceiling became unmoored and rotated about her. As the scene revolved, a shadow emerged. It was a girl wearing a hospital gown. She watched as muted footsteps incarnated into doctors and nurses who sidestepped the girl. Walls built up around her and the floor and ceiling spun to a stop. Voices breathed and figures dissolved and floated as smoke. Only the girl stood in relief. She feared it

was her daughter, and she could not free herself from the floor. The girl stood in silhouette and did not turn to face her. When she focused, she saw the girl's face had decomposed, or burst. She knew this girl but could not remember. It was her daughter and it was not her daughter. A hole gaped on the girl's face from ear to lip, from cheekbone to jaw. She bargained for the girl with some presence, a man, who stood behind her, but she could not move, only look, and she could not look away. The girl stood naked but also dressed in a hospital gown. The gash exposed the muscles and ligaments and teeth. Fattened glands like white worms. Bundles of plump white worms. She could not move and the girl could not move and the man stood behind them.

You do not let on you are afraid. Heads sway before you, backs, bodies. They go on and you go. You sweat, you smell yourself, or the smell that lingers from those ahead, stale onions, and you hold your head up and smell. The rising dust grits your teeth, but you can't help but breathe with your mouth open. You show no fear, other than sweat and tremble, the wary look in your eyes, you speak no fear. You watch the swaying heads, a procession, a pilgrimage.

You think of San Judas Tadeo, but know no prayer. Sunlight wheels in a flare of white needles, and you find yourself for a moment hoisted on your father's shoulders cuando fue a pagar las mandas. Just a boy in Parral, you watched the statue of La Santísima Virgen de la Soledad glide upon a river of bobbing heads, meandering its way, floating it seemed, en route to El Templo de San Juan de Dios. Your father hunched below you, you squinted, watching la Virgen dressed in mourning. Behind the statue, the street erased by a fog of sunlight, and before, light rippled on the heads and shoulders of the advancing crowd. Suited men clutched hats to their chests, white bands wrapped on their arms. Only soldiers or police wore hats. Women wore white dresses, heads swaying, as they neared. Signs jutted out into the street, you read: DENTISTA, CERVEZA Carta Blanca EXQUISITA. On either side of la Virgen, Mexican flags, held by soldiers or police, drooped in the absence of wind. As the statue overtook you, the crowd passed, you noticed men shouldered poles, bearing the statue onward. Your father lowered you to the street, to the swaying backs of devotees, and you followed, your father's hand at your back. Your prayers were wishes then, now, a pleading for your life, and you feel you understand just as little. As you think to pray, to pray yourself from this desert, you see la Virgen's face, pale as if having seen death, her eyes downcast.

You remember not a prayer but a story told of la Virgen's decapitation, the theft of the statue's head, and the manhunt that followed the discovery of the headless María. House by house they went till finally they came to that of la Virgen's most fervent devotee who spent hours daily, kneeling in prayer before the image of la Virgen. They pounded on his door and when he failed to answer, they broke in to find him dead next to a clothes' trunk. They emptied the trunk and found the head swaddled, the pale face pinched in a wooden whimper. You can't now understand this story, if you ever had. You are afraid, and only think: help me, help us.

You measure no time. Everything looks the same, you've seen everything before: la brasada—the low growing brush, yuccas, nopals, mesquites—the distant barns or ranch houses kept at the same remove—never near, always far, irrigation ditches and troughs from which you drink cloudy water, power lines and dirt roads and barb wire that go and go and go. Your cousin holds his hand to mean stop, and turns and looks down the file and nods his head and almost smiles, if it's not tears in his eyes, he hides, turning, looking up to a crossing ahead. A road separates brush from brush, lined, on either side, by barb wire fence. Man by man it's told: Llegamos, and there's hope in its telling, certainty.

There is something reassuring in everyone's mood. You're taken again by the sureness that set you on this path. You have done good, you will make right. You owe your father nothing. You will do what he couldn't. You will show him a man. You will have a car and a home and a yard with green grass, flowers, a garden. Your wife will be satisfied, your children successful. You will have your own TV and a satellite dish. You will send him money, and he will wait for it at the Western, proud of you and ashamed of your money, but he will thank you. You do not want to just live better.

Better. More. A sort of respect. Erase that look in people's eyes. Without the shuffle and scrape, the wait, uncertainty. Be your own man. You will learn to drywall, learn carpentry. You will have love, a wife, a daughter and son. You will teach them respect. Glory in work. Order. Do unto others. God and His inscrutable law. Whatever befalls you, whatever your given lot, is God's will. You shall be thankful. You will build for others, for yourself. Your family.

And now a hum nears, nears with a grumble of spitting gravel, the roar of an engine, and a pickup with a camper top comes into sight.

XIII

“We’re just talking here. You don’t have to start up with that. Come here.” The drone and rattle of locusts picked up. Otherwise it was quiet. The truck’s shadow pooled, warped in the late afternoon sun, shading them. They crouched in the shadows, and Sale pulled the boy toward him, held the boy to his chest. He held the boy out by the shoulders, the boy kneeling now. He looked at the boy and said, “Now stop that. When I was your age they had me learn with a 12 gauge. I learned how to shoot a gun before I swung a baseball bat.”

He looked the boy in the eyes and the boy looked away, at the rifle’s stock, the rifle leaning against the opened truck door. “You want to give it a try?” He nudged the boy. “What do you say?”

The boy’s hair, cowlicked, stood at the back of his head. “Okay.”

“Remember what I told you. This is a deadly weapon. Do you know what that means?” He scowled for effect but the boy stared at the ground. “You can kill someone with this. They never come back. You have to be responsible. Listen to me.”

The sun bore down. Though he crouched in the shadow of the truck, he squinted and the boy looked away. “Look at me I can’t tell if you’re listening or not. What did I

say?”

The boy looked up and looked down. “Be responsible.” He fidgeted with his shoe lace. “It’s not a toy.”

“That’s right. You take care of your gun and it takes care of you.” He got up and scrounged a cholla branch from the brush on the edges of the shadow and tossed it before the boy. “Like I showed you.”

The boy lay down on his stomach before the branch.

“Here take it. What did I tell you? How you supposed to hold it?” He handed the rifle to the boy.

The boy took it and perched the barrel on the branch. “Where?”

“The bucket.”

When the boy held the rifle in his hand, he trembled and looked up at him. The boy’s arms were greased with sun screen and spotted with dirt. “Do you have to be so close?”

He moved away and sat on the truck’s running board. “Hold your breath in when you’re ready to shoot.”

“My hands are sweaty.”

He said nothing. He gestured at the bucket.

The boy looked at the bucket set out against an embankment on the other side of the wash. His gaze darted, near to the shadows and back to the bucket but not at Sale.

“What are you doing? What I tell you?”

“I can’t hold it.” The rifle’s butt nudged against the boy’s ear muffs when he lowered his head to aim.

“How many times have I told you? Pay attention. God damn it. This is serious. If

you don't want to take it serious, you can just stay home. God damn it. Give it here." He held out his hand and the boy handed over the rifle. "See. That's how you hold it. That's it. Got it?" He looked at the boy, waiting for a response. "Don't start crying. Got it?"

The boy's chin rested on his chest and he looked up at him without raising his head. "Okay," the boy said, and Sale handed it back.

The boy asked him before he lowered his head to aim, "Is this gonna hurt?"

He laughed. "Just shoot and see."

The boy lowered his head and sighted, and then looked back, but not at him.

"It doesn't hurt. Trust me."

"But what if it does?"

"Jesus Christ." He looked across the wash and noticed a rustle. "Hold up," he whispered. He gestured for the boy to give him the rifle. A coyote sauntered into range, sniffing at the ground, wary. Skittish. It looked to be carrying something in its mouth. He looked at the boy who lay on his stomach, his elbows in the dirt, the gun still sighted.

"You want to get it?" he whispered. He put a finger up to his lips.

The boy nodded.

"You only have one shot."

"Okay," the boy whispered. He dipped his head and winked an eye shut and aimed. The shot sent the coyote scrambling.

He took the rifle from the boy and said, "That's close. I think you nipped it." He ducked down to see below the bushes, and took off running, the rifle in his hand. The boy ran at his heels. He reached the bucket and lifted the gun to sight, only to catch the wisps of dust kicked up as the coyote dove between creosotes and mesquites. He shouldered the rifle. He coughed and leaned over and sucked air, hands on his knees. He

searched the ground for blood but saw none. He turned his back against the sun and faced the ridge and leaned on his knees. “Jarret. Son.”

The boy appeared from an outshoot of rock along the bluff. His shirt bulged, and the boy cradled something there, and came running to his father. “Look. I got it.”

Sale’s chest heaved from the run, his hands pressed to his knees. He didn’t answer. Blood beat through his veins and static flashed on his vision. He stared at the ground, at his puddling shadow, at the velvet wrinkles, the ripples of fine dust, the invisible grains that misted in the air from the commotion. He tasted the dust. When he recovered his breath, he stood and looked at the boy, and said finally, “What’s that? Got what?”

“I got it.”

“What?”

The boy opened his shirt and a coyote cub mewled and quivered there. “He was running and I got him.”

“Now what are you gonna do with that? It probably has rabies. The mom’ll be back looking for it.” Sale paused and put his finger to its belly and its little legs stretched as if to push his finger away. It whimpered. “We could use it as bait.”

“Can I keep it, Dad?”

“Keep it?”

“Think Mom will let me keep it?”

“Mom?” He took his hat off and wiped his forehead with his arm. “You can keep it.”

The rest of the afternoon they sat in the shadow of the truck, the boy playing with the cub and Sale sighting the bucket and scanning the brush, telling the boy to make the

cub call—pinch it, prod it—to attract the mother, but the mother never came, and after an hour they loaded up the gear and headed home. In the truck, Sale told the boy he'd teach him to clean the rifle when they got home, and the boy said okay and held the cub up and then pressed it to his neck and the cub licked him. The boy cuddled with the dog, rubbing the cub between its ears.

Sale drove but turned to the boy for long stretches when he spoke. "You're gonna be the one who takes care of it. The first piece of shit I see, and it's over for that coyote. You have to clean it, feed it. Walk it, make sure it don't do no messes in the house. That's a lot of responsibility. You think you're up to it."

"Okay." The cub lapped at the water the boy poured from a bottle.

"Don't get it on my seats. Is he clean? I don't want it dirtying up the seats."

The boy capped the bottle and said, "Okay."

They were quiet a while. The truck rattled over the dirt road and in the rearview, dust masked the nearest hills sloping up toward Rincon Peak. Ahead, on toward Spanish Trail Road, the setting sun shone, flooding the sky white. Sale lowered the sun visor. Prickly pears grew in clusters on either side of the road. Palo verdes. Mesquites. Yucca. Saguaros stippled the scrubland. Every so often they roared over a cattle guard. Hawks perched on signs, on wires.

"Did you see it, dad? Right before I shot. It looked at me. He was looking right at us. What if I killed it? What would happen to the baby?"

"Die probably. They can't survive."

"Did I save it?"

"Sure. You did good."

He told the boy not to say anything to his mom, to hide the cub in a box and keep

it in the back yard. But later that night, the cub whimpered and cried and his wife found it and threw a fit. She couldn't believe he could be so irresponsible, so stupid. A grubby, nasty, dirty, diseased wild animal. In three months it'd probably chew the boy's face off. "What were you thinking?" she said.

He could hear the boy crying in the kitchen as they argued in the garage. He wanted to punch her in the face or throw her into the wall, but he didn't want to hurt her. He wanted to hurt himself. Could she shut up? "Why don't you shut the fuck up."

"Real adult. Okay, I'll shut up. Get rid of it. Get it out of this house."

"The boy wanted it. I'll take care of it, but I'm not coming home. I'm fucking out of here." As the door closed he could hear his wife say, "Good, who wants you?" He went into the kitchen and got his wallet and keys.

"Sorry, son," he said. He touched the boy on the head. He slammed the door. "Give it to me." He snatched the box from her hand. He went to the work bench, ripped a black plastic bag from a roll, opened the truck door, and tossed the cub on the passenger seat. He turned to her, his hand on the door, she wore an oversized t-shirt as a nightgown and her bare feet rested on the concrete. He said, "Maybe I should just go out and be done with it. That's what you want. Do us all a favor."

"Yeah. Yeah. That's what I want. You're a child. You're such an asshole."

There was nothing he could do with the cub. He'd tell the boy he left it in the desert and the mother came and found it and the cub would be fine.

He drove on a few more blocks. The street below shone gray and turned black between lights. Like ice on a deeply frozen river. He parked outside an apartment complex on Alvernon, where he'd watched an old man collect cans in a dumpster.

He lifted the box's lid. It seemed to be sleeping. He rubbed the edge of the bag,

opened it and slid in the box. He knotted it. He tapped the top of the box, the plastic bag was slippery. He got out and walked along the street to a fence where a dumpster lay open. If someone were watching, they might suspect him of throwing away some evidence in the dark of the night, in a dumpster on the other side of chain link fence. He pulled his arm back to pitch the bag over the fence, but stopped. He went back to his truck, slipped the box from the bag, and placed the coyote on the seat. “You little shit,” he said, and drove off into the night.

* *

Bills came due, addressed to his name. His name was on the mortgage. He was on the hook. He was the one who'd be ruined. He had no idea where his wife went. She canceled her credit cards. Got a new phone number. Made a last withdraw from their joint account the day she left. He took what was left and closed the account. Every Tuesday and Thursday for the rest of the summer, he sat in his truck and watched soccer practice, hoping his wife would show and he'd see the boy. She had to know, him at her work, outside her sister's house. He even considered making a trip up to Gilbert—that's where she was, he knew. All he heard from her one way or another, were text messages from her sister, telling him to cool off for a while, to back down, threatening to call the police if he didn't stop with the harassment. She knew he wouldn't go to a lawyer. There was the DUIs, his military history even she didn't know about. She'd bring up his drinking, paint him as a monster.

With his wife gone, he could no longer avoid selling off what he owned. If only to fend off the inevitable. This was his house. With her gone, he put a price on everything he owned. How else could he see things now?

For three days in a row, he tracked the items he put up for sale on craigslist,

reposted them, and watched marathon screenings of reality shows. Antique pickers scavenging barns, garages, out shelters; auctioneers selling off abandoned storage units; pawn brokers bargaining pledges. Men who picked through hoarded stockpiles: weaponry, toys, machines, cutlery, advertisements: signs and banners, advertising the same products scrounged from the dust. Not the trash they make today, he thought, the planned obsolescence, trash manufactured in backwater shit holes. The shows followed the same cycle, bought: sold. Just a matter of how it was got and where it's displayed.

Every once in awhile, Sale tried his hand at it. He attended garage and estate sales, picked up a few things here and there to sell for profit, but having to deal with pawn shops, their devalued estimates—he couldn't trust them, and rather than bother with the hassle of a garage sale, he posted his goods on craigslist.

The bottle sat on the coffee table in front of Sale, and alongside, sat the computer screen and keyboard he'd taken from his office. The tower case sat on the floor and cords trailed across the room to the nearest outlet. On TV an old man rummaged through a storage unit, climbing mounds of trash bags and boxes, he tossed out a hamper, bags of clothes, handfuls of hangers, a child's big wheeler. *Crap, crap, crap.* He tossed out a tire and pronounced: *Crap. It never ceases to amaze me,* the man says to the camera, *People spend all this money, paying month after year, storing trash they couldn't even bother to throw away themselves, and I just paid for it.* Sale laughed.

He took up the keyboard and set it on his lap, and placed the mouse on a pillow near at hand. Someone had just made an offer on his sandblaster, fifty dollars less than posted, and the unit was practically new. He leaned back and picked up the glass sitting next to him on the sofa, lifted it to his mouth and drank. He shook his head, looking at the offered price, and gestured to the screen with his glass and said, "Fucking tightwad,"

as if someone was sitting next to him.

He turned the TV off and saw his reflection. He listened to the swamp cooler's hum, the lolling slosh and trickle of water. He got up and turned on the fan and sat back down. The air came tepid and smelled of fish. He looked at the carpet. Shadows under each thread, layers of shadow that never stilled. The world unsettled, but there, and there, and there. A layer between him and it. His reflection in the TV screen mirrored him as he held his hand to his face and worked a piece of skin, dangling from a cuticle, in his teeth. He searched out the remote control and turned on the TV, erasing his reflection.

There were things he could not part with, things that he didn't feel right getting rid of. In the garage he found a tub with his son's Halloween costumes: a dinosaur jumpsuit from when the boy could just walk, cowboy, Indian, pirate, and of later years, Spiderman, and something Sale couldn't quite understand, Harry Potter—the boy traipsing around in a robe, wearing glasses and pronouncing some gibberish spells, but that's fine, he thought, if that's what the boy likes. Buried down amongst the costumes, was the coonskin cap he'd bought for the boy when they visited Tombstone.

As a boy he watched reruns of Davy Crockett, the king of the wild frontier, the legend. He wore his own coonskin cap, and fashioned a bow and arrow from a tree branch and a shoe string. His father had given him a knife that he'd loop through his belt. He and his brother dodged between trees, swinging and yelling, and as the younger of the two, he was forced to play the Indian or the Mexican, howling a war cry, slapping his hand over his lips. It would all degenerate to little more than rock throwing when his brother wouldn't let him be Davy Crockett. He hadn't seen his brother now for over five years, and his son had only seen his uncle but once. He hoped to take the boy out to San

Antonio some day to visit the Alamo.

When they first arrived that day in Tombstone—The Town Too Tough to Die—they took a stagecoach ride around the town, and later ducked into the cave mouth and explored the recesses of the Good Enough Mine. They wandered in and out of the shops along the boardwalk. He remembered hoisting the boy up on a stool and how they bellied up to the bar at the saloon. He slapped the bar and said, “Two sarsaparillas, one virgin,” and a he looked at his wife and said, “One margarita.” To which she rolled her eyes and shook her head and said, “If you don’t watch out it might just be two.” They ate hamburgers, and the boy talked about how he wished he’d brought his gun and holsters, and how he could take out every last one of those cowboy’s sauntering down the dusty roads of Tombstone. Sale encouraged the boy, nodding, said: “That’s right, son, you’d be a mean old rustler.”

Afterward, down the boardwalk, they took an old timey photo that now hung in their hallway, where the boy’s footsteps no longer trampled. In the photo, he and the boy dressed as lawmen and his wife, when he thought about it, dressed basically as a prostitute, a saloon gal. His wife modeled, perched up on the bar, showed leg playfully, wearing a low cut bodice and a feather boa. Wooden barrels were set out here and there, bottles stacked on shelves, moonshine jugs, wooden crates. He and the boy posed on either side of her, in dusters hanging down past their knees, guns blazing, handkerchiefs at their necks, and sheriff’s stars on their chests.

Before they left that day, they caught a reenactment of the shootout at the OK Corral, what Sale hailed as the main attraction. He told them to pay attention, if they turned away for a second, they’d miss the show. It’d be over before they knew it.

He hoisted the boy up on his shoulders, and pointed out where all to look, where

gunfire would come from, who were the bad guys, who to root for because he knew ahead of time who'd win. The boy had seen *Tombstone* before, and so had some idea what to expect, and to be sure, Sale drove home the importance of the town before their travel, getting his son and wife together to watch the movie, and told the boy that's where were going on vacation, right in the middle of all that lawlessness.

The men converged on the square. The standoff, the staredown. High noon. The boy perched on Sale's shoulders, tapped his feet against Sale's chest and Sale held him by the thighs. His wife rested her hand on the small of his back. Guns pulled, shots fired in percussive snaps. Snap, snap, snap. Snap—a man grabbed his ass, stumbling, and cowered behind a barrel, others lay writhing. In thirty seconds the gunfire was over. Doc Holliday and the Earps' guns exhaled smoke. The others stumbled or crumpled up or cowered in defeat, and the lawmen unloaded and finished them.

The boy shrieked, had been shrieking all the while. He wrung Sale's hair and shrieked the louder, sucking, gasping for breath, wanting to be let down. The aftermath of the show interrupted, the crowd circled around the boy, collectively thinking perhaps, he'd been shot by an errant bullet, a blank accidentally replaced by a charge. One of the actors rose from the ground, motioning to the others to get up. The boy balled now without measure. The actor held his hands up saying: *I'm not dead, it's just a show*. He neared and Sale lowered the boy from his shoulders, pulling his neck down to free his hair from the boy's grip.

In between his choking sobs the boy managed to say, "He dead. They killed him," and then unleashed another wave of sobs. "He's dead. He's dead."

"Jesus, son," Sale said, in a hushed voice, conscious of the eyes on him. He held the boy by the shoulders, and shook him reassuringly. "Come on, Jesus. It's just a show.

It's all fake."

"It's all make believe, honey," Monica added.

The boy hacked out cries that caught the next. He cried and swallowed the cries and the next cry hiccuped and he spat it out again, and cried the more.

The actor came up to Sale and his wife and nodded and shook his head and held his arms out. "This happens," he said. He motioned for the other feigned dead to rise.

The boy clung to Sale's leg and heaved and huffed and tears streamed, and as the actors rose one by one, circling and opening up their vests or dusters, showing no harm was done, not a one dead, the boy hid behind his father's leg, panting. He hugged Sale's leg, aware now that he was the cause of attention.

Sale palmed the boy's head and the boy clung to his pants and hid in the folds, and waited for the crowd to go on its way.

The actors held open their vests and showed they weren't wounded. "There, son. See. We're alright. We're alright."

And Sale held the boy out so he could see the men weren't wounded. The men held out their vests and dusters and turned around. One let his duster drop to the ground, kneeled and held his arms out as if to hug the boy, and Sale said, "See, see. You see that? We're alright, buddy. We're alright."

* *

The signs had been up all week. Garage Sale. Block Sale. The last of the unemployment came in, deposited into his bank account, and if he wanted more, he'd have to humiliate himself again. The people in that office squatting around in sweat pants. For now, he could afford to buy, find a good deal, flip it for a profit.

He pulled up to the curb, the engine idled. An old woman sat in a lawn chair in

the shade of a carport. A car parked behind her. A truck parked in the gravel beside the driveway. Three rows of tables were set out. A washer machine and dryer, a charcoal grill stood on the graveled front yard. The old woman sat forward in her chair, shading her eyes against the morning sun, and waved. He cut the engine.

“Good afternoon,” the old woman said, bracing herself to stand. “Or is it still morning? Been sitting here for so long. I can’t feel my legs.”

“It’s still morning. Been at it myself a while now.” He motioned to the truck. In the bed was a freezer he’d got for free, convincing the owner it’d be cheaper to have him just haul it off. He passed his gaze over the driveway. A blender, coffee maker, toaster, an alarm clock, all still boxed. Plates, pots and pans, books. A wheel chair. Wicker baskets, brass lamps, shoe trees, and frames sat on a knobless door propped by saw horses. Boxes stacked under each table.

“We just cleared out the house. So many things we don’t even use. A lot of things are brand new.” She placed her hand on a chest of drawers. “We have two of just about everything. Some things I bought, I didn’t even remember I already had one.”

“Got anything you’re looking to get rid of, have hauled away?”

“Hauled away? No. Not at the moment. Only what’s for sale.”

“What about that washer and dryer?”

“The pair’s priced at two-hundred. They work fine.”

He went around the tables to the yard. “Kenmore,” he said. “Fifty dollars for the pair. How bout it?”

“Oh boy, that’s too low. I don’t think I could do that.” A tall branchless saguaro rose from the center of the red gravel and a trail of ceramic snails led to the front door. A family. The one nearest him wore a bonnet.

“I’d be doing you a favor.”

“Well I don’t know about that. My son priced those. He’ll be back in a while.”

He tilted his head and cracked his neck and walked back around to the tables.

“Would you care for a bottle of water?” the old woman said. “We have plenty.”

He shook his head. “No. Thanks.” He studied the appliances on the table, newer models, opened one of the boxes, the blender was still wrapped in plastic. “What if we put some of these together? Make a bundle? These in the boxes, the washer and dryer, a hundred and fifty?”

“You’d have to wait for my son. He was going to take them if they didn’t sell. He’s just coming.”

Sale rubbed the heel of his hand against his closed eye. He sighed. Women, he thought. God damn it. He ambled over toward the car port, lifted the grill’s lid. He thought about the barrels in his garage. He glanced at the old woman who sat in the lawn chair. Behind her, cases of bottle water were stacked up against the wall. “That’s a lot of water,” he said.

“It’s for donation. Our church helps out an aid group, for the desert.”

He cleared his throat and looked at her. “The desert?”

“Angeles del Desierto,” the old woman said in a failed accent. “It’s a volunteer group. They take out water and blankets, give medical help. For all those poor Spanish people who have to cross the desert.”

“Illegals.” He snuffed and rubbed his nose. “You mean illegals.”

“No. That’s not what I said. I said Spanish people. They’re human beings,” she said.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. Okay.”

“They die in the desert. They’re trying to make life better for themselves.”

“Yeah. Everyday there doing it.”

“And they should be treated like people.”

“You got it. There it is. Maybe I should just give them my money. That’s what they want, right? My money, your money. It’s a free country.”

“If you’re not going to buy anything.” Her hand moved to her purse on the ground. She glanced toward the door in the carport. “My son’ll be home. I knew what kind of man you were when I saw you.”

“What kind of man? You don’t know me. My wife’s a Mexican.” He crossed his arms and laughed. He glanced at the street. He lifted his hat and pulled it down. “So how about that washer and dryer?”

When he got home he couldn’t let it go. He had trouble unloading the freezer, and it still sat in the truck bed. He thought of just stealing the water, backing up into the driveway and loading it up, but the way that old bitch treated him. People went out of their way to treat him like shit. All he was trying to do was get back on his feet and on with his life.

He sat now in his truck, watching the old woman’s house from a ways down the street. The night was well on. The house lights had been off since he arrived a half hour before, sometime after midnight. The carport had no door, cast in darkness, though he could see the water stacked where it was that afternoon. He slid on his batting gloves and took the knife, a ten inch bowie he’d spent the better of an hour sharpening.

He opened the door and saw his shadow on the pavement. The air hummed. Sweat soaked through his shirt. He watched his shadow advance and stood in the carport before the cases of water. He kneeled, placed his hand on top of the cases and

plunged the knife. The bottles crackled and crumpled. He plunged the knife. Water poured out on the concrete and soaked through the knee of his pants. A light came on out front. Across the street a window lighted. He saw a blind split, the light turn off. He slung a case of water out across the driveway, stood, and trotted to his truck. The street, the houses again were black.

* *

With the gun's barrel in his hand, a Beretta M9, he worked the bore brush through the breech. Though the TV was on, he ignored it. The coffee table before him wrapped by a trash bag and covered with newspaper. The factory case lay open on the table, the magazines spread out, already cleaned and oiled. The slide, spring and guide rail, field stripped, likewise cleaned and oiled. *Never let the sun go down on a dirty firearm.* The family room smelled of Hoppe's No. 9 and Rem oil. He'd set out a bowl where he dripped the Hoppe's out onto the brush and now, having finished with the brush, unscrewed it from the cleaning rod and screwed on a jag and fished a patch through the eyehole. *Take care of your gun and your gun will take care of you.*

He found cleaning a gun to be an odd therapy. Some days, when he hadn't even used his gun, with nothing else to do, he'd take them out and clean them. The smell of the solvents and oil were sweet in a way. He'd joke to his wife he should use it as cologne. How the metal slid and clicked. Satisfying. Stripping the gun, cleaning, lubing, piecing it back together. There was something reassuring about seeing how things work, how they come apart, and to think why they were designed that way. How far things had come and new innovations. With all the tools set out, the rod, brushes, patches, the solvent, the oil, he thought of it like an operating table. If his son were there, he'd ask him to pass him the scalpel.

Not that his wife ever let him teach the boy anything. He worked like hell all day, every day, and just when things got bad. Make his name a laughing stock. Twist his image in the boy's mind. All he wanted to do was teach the boy how to be responsible, what it means to be a man. Persevere. Do the right thing, even if it's hard. You can't trust a woman to do it. She coddled him. The boy would end up a fool like the rest of them, or a faggot. The way the boy always cowered around him, head propped in his hands, pinching his ears and folding them over till they were flat against his head. If he couldn't handle a tool or a gun, how did he expect it to go? The boy always ended up crying, but the boy had to prove himself in something.

He wrenched the gun rod from the barrel and a drop of Rem oil flicked up and into his eye. "God damn it," he said and pressed the heel of his hand to his eye. He worked a tear out with a knuckle, and said, "Dumb ass. Can you fucking do anything right."

He ran a few more patches through the barrel till the last one came out white, white as before he passed it through. He leaned over toward the lamp and checked the barrel bore. He put the gun back together and holstered it and sat on the couch and waited.

You could never know who you were dealing with. He had been saving the gun for the boy, but now he needed the money. Who knew what man might come to buy a gun? With what motive? He always did his due diligence. Whoever it was would probably try to haggle, when the asshole didn't know a hawk from a handsaw. Probably say, you show me yours and I'll show you mine, and then start down with his zipper, and Sale'd say, come on now, I meant your Arizona ID. Shit bags still get guns. It came down to common sense. If a wife-beater-wearing, shave-headed Mexican with MS-13 tattooed on

his forehead comes a knocking, you better think twice. Otherwise, it wasn't much of his concern. If he had an ID, that's all that mattered.

He coughed and snuffled and thought about who he was alone. Alone, really alone. He looked around the room, what a mess. He grunted and coughed and looked at the TV screen and saw no reflection, but an interrogation room on the screen. A lone black boy sat at a table being recorded by a hidden camera in the ceiling, his head in his hands.

He put the glass up to his mouth and swallowed, tipped it back and swallowed. He watched the bottom of the glass melt into light. He visualized the gun at his temple. Flat against his head, the side of his head, not in the mouth—but at the temple, that way there'd be no mistake, clean through both sides, no waking up from that. If you do something, you do it right.

He thought how to do it with the least spectacle. In the lake with a gun. His feet weighted. Lake Havasu, in some isolated cove. A row boat, something easy to cap size. An anchor tied to his feet. No evidence, no dragging for a body. The least hassle. Just disappear.

He looked to the door, a sound, a parking car. He always hoped his wife would come to her senses, maybe it was the buyer. He got up and split the blinds. Nothing. He went to the bathroom. Watched the froth on the water's surface, the bubbles, hundreds of bulbous eyes, the pupil the light above, and the stream dissolving and flushing up a hundred more eyes, yellow and clear.

He thinks of the boy. What would be best for the boy to think. Maybe that Sale had another family—was it better to feel betrayed or know his blood was diseased—it would haunt the boy for the rest of his life. Better to let the boy think he was out there,

maybe even think he was a success. Maybe he—the boy, could forgive him, love him.

Sometimes I feel like it's anybody's land passing on it. Places on my own land where I won't go at night. Some of the people out here, they go to work wearing bullet proof vests, I don't personally. Me, I just can't up and move, I have roots, this is all I know. We're tied to the land. Twenty years ago it wasn't so bad, hardly find any illegals this far out, away from the cities. I'd even help them, because Jesus, they come to the house just worn out and dirty, maybe just a walk from the border, but ten miles in the desert.

Some of the things I've seen out here, I mean, it's just beyond me. There was a couple times they'd set fires, could see the flames from the house. Lucky it was winter. Fire isolated to the other side of the road. Wasn't my land. One night I woke up to the grumble of an engine, not far off from the house. I looked out the window, and a bulldozer floats right past. I thought it was a dream. The headlights going out ahead of it, chugging along. I looked at the bed, my wife sleeping, and looked out and there it was. I stepped outside and watched till it disappeared. I guess they'd been doing some construction out near the park. Never found it. Imagine they just drove right over the border. I'd heard of them siphoning gas, but Jesus, stealing a bulldozer. There was one time I ran smack-dab into caravan of ten pickup trucks, twenty to a bed, packed to the gills like anchovies, the bumpers practically dragging in the dirt. They just drove on past. Some of them waved.

I've found the dead. The sun shining off the skulls. See them in the distance like a mirage, nothing shines like that. Just the glint off in the distance, and I know. I've found some ripe ones. Can you imagine dying in the heat out here? It's not something you want to see. The smell. Bodies all swollen and blistered up, skin broke open and cured like weld joints. It's a tragedy. Truly is.

I'd say the worst time, was what my wife found, he was still alive. He wandered

onto our property, the garage door was open. She found him stooped and leaning against the work bench. He had a chisel in his hand and was trying to work it up into his stomach. When she came in, he looked at her. I bet she just put her hands to her face. She says he took the chisel and just shoved it right in his neck. Died right there in the garage. He was pale, like he had rubbed sunscreen all over his face, his face all swole up. Had to have the police come out, clean up the mess, and write a report. She didn't talk for a week. Hardly won't go in the garage. It was some time before she told me what happened. I thought she just found him like that, but later, she tells me she watched it happen. I didn't know what to do. What can you do? It is what it is.

My kids try to convince me to sell. I was born here. Wouldn't get much anyway, all told. My wife, I can see it, she's almost reached her limit. A tough woman, but there's only so much you take. But I figure, what doesn't kill you...we can tough it out. I've got my opinions, but, don't get me wrong. I get worked up sometimes, but Jesus, there's some things you don't ever want to see. Most of the people they mean well, and I don't wish death on nobody, I don't mean to say they get what they deserve, but they know the risks, if you're willing to cross that line.

XIV

Nancy had told no one but her mother, not her sister, not her husband, and hadn't since thought to tell—to be called puta, to be cast out—but she couldn't suffer any longer alone, the dizzy spells, numbness, headaches, paranoia, a feeling she lived outside of her body. She had convinced herself it wasn't her fault, she hadn't asked for it, it was her cousin. She'd seen other women on TV declare, *Soy una sobreviviente, no una víctima*, and encouraged by the crowd, by the earnest talk show host. If she wasn't convinced, she'd never have had the courage to tell, much less, to her mother. But she felt she had to, she hadn't brought it on herself, she was just a girl and a woman now with a child of her own, she wanted to put it all behind her, unburden herself.

The talk between her and her mother took place years before, before she had moved off to Denver to meet her husband. Erika was only five, and they lived with her father and mother in Parral. Her father had built an extension off the back of the house, where the kitchen door opened to a sort of shack, lapped with wood salvaged from pallets and roofed with tin. Her mother had carved a nook in the corner of the room to store her sewing equipment, and fabrics. That day, she approached her mother who sat at her sewing machine set up below a window, a pair of her father's pants stretched

across her legs. She was at work mending the crotch from when he'd sat down too quickly.

"Tengo que decirte algo. Es..." She paused for some time, her hand at her neck, coiling a string of hairs around her finger.

"¿Por qué tan seria, mi'ja? Ven, siéntate." Her mother swept aside the fabrics and tin of needles from the bench beside the sewing machine.

She sat and crossed her legs and thumbed a pimple on her cheek. "Es que, es algo, es algo muy feo, y llevo muchos años sin decir nada, nunca, a nadie."

"Bueno, sí, pero qué es, dime." Her mother took her hands, snatched the hand that picked at her face. "Deja eso. Sabes que eso se ve feo."

She looked at her hands in her mother's hands. "¿Se acuerda de cuando íbamos de vacaciones a la casa del tío Quique?" She looked at her mother's face, and then back at her hands, cradled in her lap. "Cuando pasábamos la noche en su casa, ya dormidas, Marcos se metía en la cama donde yo estaba con Janett." When they were dead asleep, he bunched up the covers, and slid into the bed. She didn't want go in to any specifics, but said, he did things, things he shouldn't. And there were other times when they played las escondidas in the trees near the stream.

Her mother stopped her, "No, no," she said, and dropped her hands. "No es así, como dices." She picked up the needle that lay in her lap and stabbed it through the fabric. "No creo. No es possible, allí estaba todo el mundo."

Nancy's hand lurched back to her neck. "Así fue. Pasó varias veces."

"No, mi'ja, no puede ser." Her mother spoke with finality. Marcos was a very handsome boy and could have had any girl he wanted, why would he bother with her? She wasn't even pretty, her sister was prettier. So many pretty girls. Nothing like that

could ever have happened under their noses. It was probably a dream. Besides, Marcos was married now, they're happy. You dream. "Cosas así, no pasan."

She twirled the hairs in her finger tips, a few strands came loose and she held them before her eyes and rolled them between finger and thumb. Her vision glazed with tears, the strand twirled and she looked at her fingers, so close she could see past them, through them. "Así fue," she said.

Her mother looked at her but she veered her glance back to the strands between her fingers.

"No puedes decir eso."

"Así fue."

"Quizás tú lo estaba buscando." Her mother bundled up the pants, the needle and string, and planted them on the sewing machine. "Más bien, acuerdo que siempre lo seguías. Siempre, siempre a su lado cuando venía de visita."

"Nunca haría eso, mamá."

"Tú lo sedujiste. Lo buscaste." Her mother looked at her as if she was going to spit in her face.

"No," she panted. "Así fue." She pressed her fists into her eyes and sobbed. She looked up, into her mother's eyes. "Te lo prometo, te lo juro."

"Eso no pasó." She took up the pants from the sewing machine, unfolded them, found the needle and stabbed it through. "Niña, no quiero escuchar nada más de eso en mi vida, jamás, nunca en mi vida. Olvídate de eso." She would tell no one, not her father, no one, his own brother's son. She stabbed and yanked the thread, and again, and again. "Me das asco."

* *

They called in the morning and again that night.

Nancy sat on the foot of the bed, having just made it. She had showered and cleaned the hotel room and it looked now as if no one had occupied it. Her father and Armando had gone down for breakfast. The sounds of traffic rose from the street. She looked at the number, no number she knew, and felt her stomach swell. Who would call? Who would call with anything but bad news?

“¿Bueno?” she said. She held the phone to her ear with both hands.

The man identified himself as Comandante de La Línea. His voice groaned like a rusty hinge and sounded as if he was talking through his fist. Nancy heard a television squawk in the background and the broken roar of passing traffic. He told her not to speak, he didn’t want to hear her voice. If she wanted to see her daughter, she wouldn’t ask any questions. Listen only to his instructions. She needed to listen, he told her. She needed to hear what he said. Find something to write with.

Nancy rifled through her purse for a pen, clamping the phone to her ear. She found nothing to write on, and threw up the blanket and thought to use the bed sheets, but saw Armando’s puzzle box, and flipped it over. She sat, held the phone to her ear and balanced the box on her knees.

“¿Me escuchas?” Before Nancy could answer, he interrupted, he thought he told her not to speak. He could hear her breathing, that was enough. He and his associates were not people she wanted to meet, but she must already know that. They had the girl, Erika Velázquez Salinas. She was in good condition. They hadn’t touched her. Not a hair, not a thread of clothing.

He demanded one hundred thousand pesos. They wanted the money in small bills, 200 and 500 peso notes, in a grocery bag. The money was to be divided and taken

to two different locations. The first drop off would be near the statue of Tin Tan in the Mercado Juárez. There she would find a Styrofoam cooler and inside a note with instructions for the next drop off. She had to be there by nine o'clock the following morning.

Of course, he told her, there would be no police. They were not afraid of the police, but she had to understand, if they suspected police involvement, there would be consequences. And if the money didn't arrive as expected, he threatened, they would start with the fingers. Worse things. Things she couldn't imagine. Give her what she deserved. And if she didn't believe him, just look out the window. They were watching her.

Nancy tensed, felt as if somehow they were in the room. She looked to the ceiling, at the walls, the cherubs' eyes, suspecting to find holes, a camera. She went to the window and pulled back a slit in the curtain. Cars passed below, cars parked at the curb. A few police stood, having a conversation, coffee cups in their hands. The man with rubber boots sat on a stack of newspapers and held out one to a passerby.

We see you, he said. "Ya sabes." He paused. "¿Qué esperas?"

Nancy, startled by the voice, gasped. The dial tone sounded and quivered in her ear.

She found her father and Armando on the street below, talking to a street vendor next to his cart. She held out the puzzle box to her father and pointed to the demands she had scrawled out, as if her father had been there and knew what it meant. She took his arm and pulled him away and her father nodded to the vendor. Armando grasped the box and she pulled it away. When he didn't let go, she slapped him. She spoke, whispered, snapping out the words. The demands, the threats. They were there on the

street watching them.

Her father lay a hand on her shoulder. His face was stiff. He breathed heavily through his nose and shook his head slightly. “Dios mío,” he said. “Por Dios.”

They returned to the room. Nancy wanted to call, gather the money. They could manage seven thousand dollars. But her father refused, they would go to the police.

She didn’t want to go back there and be insulted. There was no investigation. They’d send to them to another officer who’d smile at them and nod and say he understood.

He told her he knew she was afraid, but they couldn’t do it alone. Look what happened when they did it alone. They were no closer. They needed help.

They hailed a cab and asked to be taken to the nearest mall. Her father sat with his arm across the backrest, glancing often at the street behind them. It seemed no one followed. They entered a number of stores, nervous, watching to see if anyone followed. After a while, they bought new shirts, hats, changed in the bathroom, and exited through the other end of the mall. They took a cab to the Fiscalía.

They waited for hours. A young woman in a pantsuit summoned them and led them through a maze of corridors, walls of sandblasted glass, to the Unidad Especializada en Delitos de Extorsión. When Nancy asked if she knew anything of their case and why they were brought here again, the woman only shrugged and held up her hands.

Officer Luis Angulo, a slump shouldered, copper faced man conducted them to an office with file cabinets and a desk piled with folders. They sat down and Angulo considered them from across the desk. He hoped they hadn’t waited long. He understood it was a trying time. He only asked that they be as truthful as possible, even

the slightest detail might lead to something.

As Nancy recounted all of what had happened—Angulo had heard nothing of the case—she spoke with a barely restrained hatred, mentioning each of the previous interviews, each different officer, how they’d heard nothing at all about the case.

Angulo’s suit jacket was too small. Every so often, he rolled his shoulders and grimaced, and when Nancy’s accusations were pointed, he became agitated, rubbing his fingers down his thumb and across his palm, and he’d open his mouth to speak, but Nancy continued.

When finally she came to the phone call that morning, he asked if they offered any proof of life?

Nancy shook her head. She mentioned the caller claimed to be the Comandante de La Línea.

Angulo interrupted her. “¿Dijo que era el Comandante de La Línea?” He chuckled and smiled and shook his head, looking at the papers on his desk. He looked up at Nancy’s father, and put on a grave face. “Eso se ve todos los días.” He shook his head. “No se preocupen. Es un grupo de mocosos jugando chingones.” They were lucky they came to him first. Otherwise they might have lost the money to a group of bottom feeders looking for an easy score. They’d been having a problem with false kidnappers—con men who’d see a missing person’s poster and call the number on the notice, claiming to be the kidnappers. He assumed they had made up a missing person’s poster and put the cell phone number on it.

Nancy nodded.

Angulo told her she would probably have to change the phone number. It was better to leave it in the hands of professionals, experienced in all aspects of negotiation.

Families were too close, they offered no objections to the demands of the kidnappers, and often facilitated the objectives of the criminal which encouraged them to commit more crimes. They attributed faculties to the criminal they didn't possess. An omnipresence, that allows the criminal to control even their smallest actions. Facing these circumstances, they needed to count on the intervention of a calm, calculating intermediary, who could negotiate rationally, without being sentimental. It was best to leave it to the police to filter out the real threats from the false. It went without saying, he went on, they would have to remove all the posters with that number.

Nancy had had enough. She stood and glared at Angulo, wanting to strangle him, and turned and walked out. She felt weightless, as if her body were just a shell, emptied but of air. Her father followed her out, pleading. She stood in the hallway, shaking her head.

Nancy called Diana and she met them at the Fiscalía. In the car, her father tried to comfort her, but there was no conversation. She could think only: no, this was not happening.

They retraced their steps from the previous weeks, peeled the tape from concrete walls and windows and poles, crumpled the paper. There were the other posters, those the police had made up for them, which they left. She saw the look in people's eyes, their glances swerving, not pity, judgment, disgust. Their eyes said: *she had gotten what she deserved*. She wanted to tear them down, each of the thousand photo copies of her daughter's face. The humiliation of it, to be regarded by those eyes. To leave her face to be looked at by them. To have only her face for herself, not for them to take.

On calle Santos Degollado across the street from the Gimnasio Municipal, they neared an abandoned house with no doors or windows, inside it was strewn with trash,

and against it, lay another house with sand scored windows where hung her daughter's face on a poster. It had been defaced. Black tears like blood dripping from her eyes. Vampire's teeth and blood.

Her feet throbbed. She felt sand pouring over feet, rising until she couldn't move. Her heart beat and with each beat, swelled. She saw someone in the glass. The shadow of someone. No. She put her hands against the glass to tear at it, but her hands passed through, escaping her. Loosed from her body. She closed her eyes. They took her by the arms and pulled her from the glass. She heard her heart beat, slow, could see it like waves.

She opened her eyes, looking out the window of the hotel room, the curtain knotted, at the empty streets, the grinding silence of the streets. And the shadows. The echo of the shadows. The phone rang. A different man, a different voice. There was no one in the room. She let him go on for a while. He said he had men following her. He knew where she slept, watched them travel to the Fiscalía, watched them. He *knew*. The police couldn't help them.

She asked to speak to her daughter and he put on a voice, pleading, a voice high pitched but choked, a man's voice, maybe even the same man faking it. "Mamá, mamá, mamá." That was all she would get before the money came.

She shrieked into the phone: "Sin vergüenza," she said. "Despiadado."

Her father came, looked at her and took the phone. "Hijos de la chingada," he said. The dial tone sounded. He said again: "Hijos de la chingada."

"Despiadados," she said. "Animales, animales."

* *

There were more calls in the days that followed. Pranks all of them. She turned the

phone off and used it only to make calls. They came to depend less and less on Diana, though every now and then she took them out on errands. They tried the hospitals, waited at the Fiscalía, spent countless, numbing hours in the hotel, wanting to leave, wanting to stay, the walls all that remained of the world. It seemed the world ended, without her, knowing nothing, there was no place to look and find her. The streets had no end. The streets, the days and nights.

She slept with her son in the same bed. The boy needing comfort, to be smothered, held down, restrained. He'd lift up the mattress and burrow himself below, wheezing, nudged at the air with his nose until relief, the pressure weighing down on him, till sleep overtook. And her father, a grown man, who could hardly stand being in the same room with her and the boy, humiliated by it all, needed support, the judgment upon her reflected in him and she having to excuse him of his own impotence. He hadn't mentioned the TV again but sat and looked at the anchor where it had hung, and looked at her, the boy, looked with blame, but spoke words of God's judgment and justice.

At night, he'd take his partial out, place it in a glass on the sink. The bridge was made of two porcelain molars bound by hooks that wrapped around the neighboring teeth. He could remove a part of himself, she thought, and he had no shame of it. He left the partial there on the edge of the sink as if it were a toothbrush, and somehow for this, something so intimate that resided inside his body, and its removal, the removal of his teeth, belonged to them all. Something that resided in him was now theirs, but nothing they wanted.

In a week, the glass would be broken while Armando took a shower. And Nancy's father doubled over his belt, pulled it taught with a snap and threatened the boy, but not before Nancy grabbed his arm. "Ni lo pienses." Stood in front of him. "A mi'jo no lo

tocas.”

Outside the hotel door, the silence was tempered by clacks and ticks and crashes, the silence struck through with a hum, a drone, the presence. Those nights, she lay in bed numbed until what-was-out-there dissipated to a calming static. She stared at the ceiling in the darkness. She did not cry, but stared at the ceiling. The ceiling flashed and vibrated. Streaked with rays. Blotched with whiteness. She blinked, her vision cleared and she stared, and the waves radiated, a web streaked, flashed on her vision of a white presence shot out and over, and she blinked and could see clear again. Orbs floated on the surface of her vision, invisible but black and white, gaps in her vision, everything *there*, but there at a distance, there at a remove. The light fixture. The curtain. The picture frames, the cherubs.

“Debemos dormir,” her father said. “Hay mucho que hacer mañana. Nani, apaga la luz.” She obeyed. “Hay mucha carrilla,” he said in the darkness. “Pero aguante, que aguante.”

The light filtered under the door, seeped in at the edges of the curtain, a faint glow even in the blackness of the fabric. The darkness of a darkness when eyes opened yet still blinded.

She prayed. A pressure in her throat, a touch and part of her lips. A gasping exhale. And it came back to her, all at once, returned. God keep her child, care for her in captive, that she be alive. Take *her* life. *Dios mío, ¿dime qué es lo que quieres de mí? ¿Qué daño hizo mi'ja? Castígame a mí, Señor. Quítame la vida a cambio de la de ella. Que me lleven a mí. Que me lleven a mí. Que me secuestren y me torturan. Que me lleven a mí. Pero tráemela de nuevo.* She was alive. She felt her alive. A slave. God knows. God keeps her. Take her to have her. End her to be made whole.

Hours waiting—watching. They finally mounted the bridge. From the top, the line of cars seemed to Nancy to have no beginning or end. The bridge was flanked with chain link fence, and a roofed walkway where people went here or there. The flags flapped ahead and in the rearview. Vendors zigzagged between cars, but straggled and dispersed as they lurched down toward the booths.

"No hay pedo," Diana had told her. "Nos mochamos con la migra. El cuñado de mi esposo trabaja de medio día."

Nancy saw for a moment the image of her father as it smeared behind the glass of the departing bus. To leave with what they had, their lives. To not lose hope, was what he said. Leaving, she thought, losing hope.

As they advanced, agents walked between lanes, a few with leashed dogs. They spoke to walkie-talkies strapped to their shoulders. Blank, erased, she didn't speak. She didn't bother to scold Armando who tapped at the window, grunting at the dogs that passed. She had no fear. What did it matter? The absence of her daughter? No. Sapped of any will. Unlike the first time she passed, worried that every word she spoke was being recorded. Diana coached her to say only what was asked. To respond in Spanish or not at all. Do not look them in the eyes, not to give them her eyes, but toward them, at the dash board, blankly ahead as if no question was asked. She did not think then to say what they wanted to hear. She had nothing to say.

The agent signaled with two fingers for them to move ahead, and then held his hand as a stop sign. He flicked two fingers. Ahead a hand emerged from the booth. Her mask had fused—this was her normal, constant, unmoved face. She was exactly what they were looking at.

Diana produced the documents.

“What are you bringing from Mexico?”

Mind in blank. Erased. Her father smiled and the sun glinted on his teeth, on the clasp of his partial. And the bus lumbered away.

“¿Qué traen de México?”

“Nada.”

“Okay.”

Into downtown El Paso. As if it was nothing from here to there.

They drove on to Truth and Consequences. DUST STORMS MAY EXIST NEXT 10 MILES. She and Diana stood on the curb and cried. She and Armando boarded the bus to Denver. The scrub brush, junipers and sage. Water tanks painted with pastoral scenes: Indian, Conquistador, Pilgrim, Cowboy. Clumped fur on the roadside. Crosses.

You can't tell how long but it's been a while. You sit with your knees to your chest, they cramp, but there's no space to move. Somehow you all managed to pack and hunch and cram, fifteen of you, into the bed of a too-small Nissan pickup. With each rut the truck jolts, and a boot digs into your back but you can't figure whose it might be. You think how the truck must sag and feel the stab of the boot when it bottoms out. The cab bakes. A sweaty head lies on your forearm. Sunlight seeps in through the tinted windows and beyond the heads and shoulders, through the glass jangling against the bed gate, you see only a spray of dust, twisting and ballooning behind the truck. You catch your cousin's eyes which light up and he smiles the smile of te lo dije. That's just what he said when you mounted the truck: "Oye, Carnal, Te lo dije, carnal. Te lo dije."

You want to spit for the dust in your mouth, but the saliva won't come, and if it did, you'd have to swallow. You listen to the others. They go on about trucks they plan to buy—Mejor que esa pinche troca culera. One of them takes out a clipping of that truck and passes it around—they all agree, theirs would be better. Some say they'll have a place, nothing fancy, but a place of their own. Others claim to have it already and if in need, their house is open to all. One holds he'll own a business—what, he doesn't say, and insists when they're settled, they all work for him. For everyone, hopes are high.

Then you all fall silent. You feel the boot digging in your back, the burn of your muscles, and the sting of your blistered feet. You can only guess how long, but the light has softened, and the cab grows dim. Dust hangs in the air. You cough and wish for water.

The truck swerves, the bodies slide and, for a moment, pack to one side. In that moment you float, and the next, crash to the bed floor, your arm tangled in the mass of

legs and arms and bodies. You see nothing. An immense weight crushes you to the floor. Your ribs strain, you take shallow breaths. The truck bottoms out, strikes the ground, and throws you up. Some hit the roof of the shell. You scratch and rake, find purchase, pull up through the bodies. The engine strains and roars. The truck jerks you and the others, heaves this way and that, hurtles onward.

All you see through the back window is the dust, and through the dust a truck that cuts and probes, and gains, looming now, sliding back and forth at the bumper. It disappears for a second, passing. You hear a clap and a hiss, the truck appears again, swerving, the back end slides and it pulls to a stop.

The truck pitches, fishtails, throws you and the others against the bed wall. Again you float and fall, hurl toward the cab, bodies crash down. An elbow jabs your throat. There is groaning. Your arm throbs and there is a spike of pain in your back. The back window is thrown open, the bed gate falls. Some lumber toward it, leap, and you see them bolting, this way and that. Dogs bark. There's a scramble. Boots scrape against the bed, hands grasp, arms flail. They empty out, but a few, yourself included, moan and crawl to fresh air.

You sit on the gate swing your legs over. They dangle. It's five feet to the ground, you push yourself off, drop. Your hand doesn't work like it should, but there's no pain. You see them run. The truck is nosed down in a ditch. The back wheel whirls, the tire blown to strips. You thought don't move, remembered when you and your friends got caught trespassing at a construction site. Your friends scattered, you stayed. You walked home, your friends were detained. Anyway, you can't run, you feel nauseous and kneel, and heave. Nothing comes, there is nothing to come but dust.

There's no point. They are too many. An officer comes over and offers you

water. He takes a look at your wrist, which you hold to your chest. He frowns and shakes his head. He says to you in Spanish, words of a pocho, “Todo se arregla.” He pats down your pants, pulls out your wallet. You have nothing but money, nothing to say who you are.

Some get away. They round up eight of you, your cousin among them, your brother-in-law too. They sit you down in a line. They handcuff the others with plastic ties, and leave you to hold your wrist. Dogs sniff at your feet. They will process you, hold you over night, and bus you back in the morning. You will return within a week.

All the while, your cousin gives you the glare of no digas nada, cabrón. He has told you what to do: say nothing, you don’t know him, they can’t do anything if they don’t know your name.

XV

Off a ways down the road a pair of headlights approached. Derek turned to Sale and said: “Fucking Border Patrol, I’ll deal with this.” Derek gripped the steering wheel as if he was trying to break it in half.

The Border Patrol unit pulled up alongside them, facing the opposite direction. The agent nodded and said, “Derek.” He turned to the officer seated beside him, and turned back to them. He nodded to Sale, and then to Barry and Travis who sat on the rim of the truck bed. “I see you’re dressed for the occasion. I thought we told you no camo?”

“I guess I missed that memo,” Derek said.

“That a bullet proof vest?” The agent shook his head and grinned.

Derek shrugged his shoulders.

The agent shook his head and looked up and then at his partner. “How long do you plan on being out here?”

“As long as we need to be.”

The agent sighed and cleared his throat. “We just got word they picked up some bodies about ten miles out. It’s hot tonight. Keep to the roads, and call us first. I don’t

want any headaches.” He started to roll up his window, but stopped. “Oh, and we got a call in, said there’s a girl got left behind. Could be something, could be a prank, but keep an eye out.”

“Will do, officer.”

The agent nodded once and turned to his partner and shook his head. The tires scraped, and Derek watched in the rearview as the red lights disappeared over the ridge. He turned to Sale and said, “Pricks. We’ll get something.” He turned the headlights off and drove watching out the side window and turned off where a wash opened up. He drove slow, jerking the wheel at bushes or rocks that appeared. He occasionally hit something which would scrape the underside of the truck. They drove for five minutes or so, and Derek turned the headlights back on and flood lights cast out from the truck bed. A helicopter chattered, unseen, above. The dust rose and fluttered in the headlights. They drove up and down the wash for a good hour, and then turned around, went back to the road and on to another wash. A few minutes up the wash, Travis or Barry slapped the top of the truck. The truck slowed and came to a stop.

Sale looked out the window at the brush beside him, trash, matted clothes, back packs, water bottles, and off a ways, he noticed a pair of shoes with legs, trembling.

“We got one,” one of the men said from the back.

“Dead?” Derek asked.

“No, don’t look like it.”

He turned to Sale and said, “Locked, cocked and ready to rock?” He took his pistol from his holster and pulled the slide. Sale did the same. They lurched up close in the truck.

The legs were bundled up to the chest, the body tucked up under a palo verde,

covered with mud caked jeans and blankets that must have been gathered from there around. Glazed eyes looked out, unseeing, squinting in the flood lights, like the flash of an animal's eyes in the darkness. Sale realized it was a girl. Black hair fringed purpled or red. She stayed still.

They got out and looked at each other. Sale went to the truck bed and took out a water bottle and offered it to the girl. She didn't move. "Go on," he said. He laid it on the clothes piled upon her. "Agua."

The other men stood back at the truck.

"Somebody gonna call somebody?" Sale asked. The others said nothing. "Do we take her? Do we call somebody? She doesn't look good."

The men looked at each other. Barry spoke, "Looks fine to me."

Sale turned to the girl, and said, "Take it."

The girl hadn't moved. The water sat where Sale had dropped it. He knew she was alive, he could hear her wheeze.

Barry said, "I'm about to give her just what she came looking for."

Sale looked back at them. "Do we call somebody?" One of them, Travis, wore a gas mask.

They came toward him. "You ever run a train?" Derek said.

"What?" Sale said.

"Get her legs."

Sale stood there, thinking, run a train?

"I'm not going to do it in the dirt," Barry said.

The three men grabbed at the girl. The water bottle tumbled to the ground, caked fabric slid off and she made no effort to fight, her limbs dangling. Travis took her by the

armpits, Barry the legs.

“What are you doing?” Derek said to Sale.

He said nothing, and watched them carry the girl to the truck bed.

“You want the honors?” Derek asked.

“What are you doing?” Sale said.

“First dibs?”

“What?”

“Fine. Your loss, bud.”

Sale stood there stupidly, looking at the ground. The ground was wavy with ripples, gently like water troubled by wind. He put his hand on his gun. “What are you doing?” He turned and picked up the water bottle and took a step toward the truck. He stood there. He put his hand to his mouth and chewed at a cuticle and looked at the ground, holding the water.

“Come on, Sale, what you waiting for? This is some good eats.”

Belt buckles clanked. Barry crawled up into the truck bed. Sale heard the tear of fabric. Saw now Barry’s head rise over lip of the truck bed. The truck thudded. “Come on now, bitch. That’s right.”

Sale stood there and looked at the other two, standing on either side of the truck bed watching. Derek looked at him, held a hand up that said, *you got to see this and get your ass over here, or else.*

Sale scuffled up to the bed and watched. Barry’s pants were bunched at his knees, his ass white as lime. He thrust and thrust, and the girl’s head lolled with each thrust. Her eyes wide open and her jaw slack.

“Hold up now,” Barry said, “I got to finish. Stop looking.”

Sale looked at the truck cab, at the bumper sticker that read: ☸ THIS IS MY PEACE SIGN.

Derek slapped Sale on the back and said, "It's your turn, bud."

Sale looked at him, but didn't understand what he meant, thought they would turn on him, make him lay on the truck bed.

"Have at it." Derek gestured to the truck bed, to the girl.

Barry pulled up his pants, kneeling in the truck bed. He patted the girl on the face and said, "Thanks."

Sale shook his head and said, "No. I'm married."

"Well look at you," Derek said. "A gentleman." He held both arms out, inviting. "Travis, have at it."

Sale pushed off from the truck bed and scuffled out into the spray of the headlights and sat down on a rock with his back to the truck. He heard the thud, the scrape. He held his face in his hands and closed his eyes. After a while he heard a whistle.

They dragged the body out and put it back under the palo verde. The girl wore a plastic bag over her head.

"I couldn't look at the bitch," Derek said.

No breath pressed against the plastic bag and the body sat slumped over. The hand lay in a pool of shadow in the dust. Sale knew something then he hadn't known before and couldn't say yet what it was. The wind picked up and dust rose in the air, thick as fog in the headlights, rising as if thrown, as if the earth could not contain it. Just as soon, the dust settled.

"What are you worried about?" Derek said. He slapped Sale on the back.

“What about the,” he paused and looked at the girl but didn’t know what to call her.

“What about the what?”

“What about the...”

“She won’t say anything. Don’t worry. They’ll find her.” Derek took him by the arm and slapped him on the back. “That’s how it goes.”

“Here,” he handed Sale his cell phone. “Hey, come on. Get over here.” He gestured to the others. “Get your guns. Get the masks.”

They stood over the girl, pulled down the masks, their rifles slanting down from their shoulders. Travis kneeled beside her.

“Make sure the flash is on,” Derek said. “Just touch the circle.”

Sale stood with the camera in his hand, framing the photo.

* *

She takes the saints out from the bedroom and displays them again around the house. El Santo Niño de Atocha, San Judas Tadeo, and La Virgen de Guadalupe. The kitchen counter becomes the altar. Fabric roses, ceramic lilies, the saints, candles, the guttering flames char the glass. She prepares Erika’s favorite meal, chicken salad and a store bought tres leches cake. “Esa comida no se come. Es para que ella no le falte qué comer,” she says in explanation to her husband, who shouts at first, Why does she waste money? It is over. There is nothing they can do. Move on. There is nothing they can do. He doesn’t mention the men, he doesn’t mention their daughter. *Olvídate*. Oblivion. His words edged with malice, but he softens. And when the candles again and again smoke the glass, he says nothing, but smiles at her and looks away, he takes a deep breath, no longer suggests they go out, nor talks of movies, birthday parties, Christmas a few weeks

off.

She finds no relief. No word. Nothing. Nada. She calls her cell phone daily, to listen to her voice: *Hey*, there's a pause as if Erika answers and waits for a response, she laughs, *it's me, maybe I'm here, maybe not. Leave a message*. Alone, she talks to the phone, hoping somehow it reaches her, holding the phone with both hands to her ear. If she listens real close, if she talks long enough, she would pick up. The blessing she is to her life, wherever she is she loves her, adores her with all her heart, she never forgot, never forgets...*que Dios y la Virgen te protejan de todo mal*.

There's no consolation in the embrace, in the blessings, in the advice, "Déjalo a la justicia divina. Es lo más bello. Todo eso se paga. Está en las manos de Dios." They tip toe, watch what they say, family, friends, priests. They say: she was so beautiful. They say: they think of her often. They say: she will always be in their hearts.

She wakes and remembers *her* name unsaid by others. As if disappeared in the silence. Her waking is the memory. The anguish. The void: What does it matter? What was there?

She plays the quiceañera sermon again and again. Her daughter's back to the camera, the priest stands on the stairs before the altar. *Mis mejores deseos para esta nueva etapa de tu vida. Toma en cuenta que Dios es lo más importante en tu vida. No se te olvides. Dios es lo más importante*. She leaves the DVD playing through the night. They don't know. They accept such things happen in this world. *Dios te regaló los padres que tienes. Dios te regaló esta familia que tienes. Dios te regaló todo lo que hasta ahora has recibido, porque te quiere y lo ha recibido gracias a Dios*. Armando paces, stops, stands close to the screen. Only the voice: *Entonces, no te olvides, que en tu vida lo más importante, lo que ocupa el primer lugar en tu vida, es Dios. Él te cuida*

y exige estar contigo, y quiere que tú estés en constante diálogo con Él, y Él está constantemente en tus pensamientos.

Armando rages and she acts in kind, straps him down. He squeals and jerks and pounds his head against the floor. She paces, she thrashes at the air and falls, shrieking. She prays, her heart throbs, and she unleashes the boy and smothers him in her embrace. “Mi cielo,” she says. A frantic grimace uncoils on his face, and she presses it to her shoulder. “Mi cielo, mi cielo, mi cielo.” *Tú tienes que aprender a dar constantemente gracias a Dios en tu mente, en tu corazón, y en tu alma.* Mi cielo, mi cielo, mi cielo, mi cielo. *Mi’ja.* The flash on her vision, vibrating shadows, receding and coming forth, hidden and apparent.

Her husband sleeps next to her and she watches him. Does he sleep? She splits the blinds and sees the empty streets. The dark night, the wall across the street where I-70 rises and the grinding silence of passing cars. Shadows. The echo of shadows. She is found by her husband, crumpled below the window, sobbing.

“Ya déjate de miedos,” he says. “Nadie te puede dar ya miedo. Haz por pensar en cosas agradables.” He sits, he holds her, he cries, he says, “Ya. Ya.” He eyes her as if she is a stranger. He smooths her hair. He cannot look at her without tearing.

She hates him, he never says their daughter’s name.

* *

The shadow of the Christmas tree pooled a jagged shadow on the floor, and Sale watched it creep to the imprints where the lounge chair, now sold, had been. He split the blinds and saw his wife’s sister parked out front, across the street, in front of a patrol car. There was a knock at the door. He’d been waiting and it had to be like this.

He opened the door and his wife stood there with his son. The boy rubbed the

fringe of his shirt between his fingers and looked at the ground. His wife glared at him. She shook her head and nudged the boy through the door. "Go on."

"Hey, Buddy," he said. "You got a hug?" He crouched down and held out his hands and motioned for the boy to hug him. "Come on, son." The boy crept forward and leaned his chest toward him, his arms at his sides. He took him, patted him on the back. "There you go, son. I have your present wrapped up in your room. Why don't you give us a second."

The boy looked to his mother.

She looked at Sale and shook her head. They hadn't yet stepped through the door. "No," she said. "Bring it out."

"Jesus Christ. Fine. Have a seat." He let go of the door and went to the get the present.

When he came back his wife was standing near the door, it was shut. "Okay," she said. "Let's get this over with."

"I get an hour. You're not even supposed to be here."

"I can have the police come in."

"Why do you do this to me? I'm trying."

"Did you get him a bed?"

"I got a Christmas tree. It's real."

"I don't know what to do with you."

"Can't I just see you? We're a family. I'm his father. I have a right."

"You don't get it? This is over. You're gonna have to shape up if you want to see your son."

He held the straps of the plastic bag out in front of him, the present unwrapped.

He tightened his grip. “Why? Huh? I got every right.”

“I can’t talk to you. You can’t do this to me anymore.”

“What’d you tell him? Why’s he like that.”

“Oh, come on, Levi. Let’s get this over with. Just sit down and give him the present.”

“I’m his father. I don’t know what you think I’ve done to deserve this. I only did what was best for the family.”

“I’m not...you can’t do this to me anymore. Either get used to it—this is how it has to be.”

“What about what you did to me?” he said. “You didn’t do anything?” he rasped, and went on in a whisper, “Fucking slut.” He let the bag fall to his side, held it in his left hand, in the right, the Berreta. “I know what you did. Convince everybody I’m some asshole and *you’re* the bitch.”

The trigger pulled. He looked at the gun in his hand. The shot came as a relief.

He walked over to her. The boy had fallen over, knocked as she fell. He kicked and pushed, slid himself under the tree. She lay on her side and reached for the door. He locked it. He bent down and looked at the boy under the tree. A spray of blood on the boy’s shirt, he wheezed and trembled.

“Don’t, son,” he said. He leveled the gun at the boy. “Don’t do that.” A blast, the smell of fire. Blood.

The door knob jiggled, clanked. The door thudded. A voice, “Open up. Open the door.”

He looked down at her. “I have money, you know and you can’t.” He stooped and looked at the boy. He gestured with the gun. “That’s it, Jarrett, son.”

The door thudded again, and he looked at it confused. *Open the door.* The thud of a foot. The jamb buckled. Splintering wood. Sale turned and went to the sliding glass door. He went out. *Let's see your hands!*

* *

From the window, she watches the rainfall in a puddle outside. The raindrops plop, the puddle swallows. Each drop jumps from the puddle like the nipple of a baby bottle. A girl walks in the rain, holds an umbrella, the rain spilling at its spines. For a second she sees it is her.

Shadows, shadowed objects fused, take on her shape. She sees her almost daily, talks to her, she looks long enough and finds it was a pile of clothes all along. She sits on the girl's bed and waits. She tells no one. She leaves the same mess her daughter left before the trip. The walls collaged in magazine cut outs. '¡AY GÜEY! ¡AY, AY...! DIOSITO...' Movie stars—Uma Thurman dressed in a yellow jumpsuit wielding a samurai sword. Photos of friends and family wrapped in paper frames she made. The Lord's Prayer written out in Spanish on poster board tacked to the wall. A table stacked with books, folders, makeup, hairspray, perfume, deodorant. Stuffed animals. Clothes strewn on the bed, on the floor, hangers. The backpack and suit case untouched since their return.

She watches the rain. There is a knock at the front door. She asks at the door: "¿Quién es?" The voice she hears says, "No es nadie, soy yo."

She opens the door. She has come home. "No lo puedo creer. ¿Qué haces en la lluvia, mi'ja?" She takes the girl into her arms and holds her. She sobs. "Pensaba que nunca iba a volver a verte. Pero sabía que ibas a llegar."

The girl at first cringes and pulls back, but relents and hugs her. She carries a

clipboard and a box of chocolates.

“Llegaste mi’ja. Qué alegría verte. Te ves tan bonita, mi’ja.” She hugs her again and ushers the girl into the house and seats her on the sofa. She wraps the girl in a blanket and kisses her on the head. “Siéntate, tengo tu favorito, tres leches. ¿Quieres la piña? Hay Mountain Dew.”

“¿Señora?” the girl says.

“Quiero que estés conmigo. Espérate.” She goes to the kitchen and returns with a soda and a piece of cake. The photo album from the quinceañera lies on the coffee table. She picks it up. “¿Te acuerdas? Eres tan bonita, mi’ja. Mi’ja.” She hugs her. She has disappeared, she has come again. She sees her, she holds her.

The girl smiles at her and takes the album. They flip through the pages. She asks the girl if she remembers this or that, if she could believe this or that. The girl smiles and nods. She takes a sip from the soda.

Armando wanders in rattling his beads and stands in front of the TV screen.

“Mamo, mira quién llegó.” She waves the boy over to sit, but he ignores her and crouches at the TV, rattling his beads.

“Oh, sí,” she says, and picks up the remote, the TV already on, the recording of the sermon playing. The priest speaks, *Y saber que en tu vida, teniendo una mente clara y un corazón y un alma que dan constantemente gracias a Dios, Él asegurará que no te va a faltar nada en esta vida.*

Cuando tú estás convencida de eso, lo de más de este mundo se te va. Se te va. Se te va. Es importante que te preocupes de tus deberes y, bajo los ojos de Dios, que te apenes. She asks the girl if she remembers. Armando crouches close to the screen, his nose almost touching.

The girl looks at Armando nodding at the screen, at her. She holds the clipboard and the box of chocolates. The recording plays on.

She smiles and sobs and holds the girl. She smells the girl's hair, runs her fingers through her hair, nuzzles her hair.

The girl slumps, pulls away.

She grips her, pulls her close again.

But the girl pulls away, pushes at her. She edges away and out the door like a shadow that was never there.

* *

The sun stood firm in the sky. He looked up at the power lines, all in his field of vision flattened. No movement or sound and the pressure of the silence. A shuddering. The power lines seemed to split apart the sky, as if each strip between peeled back. Line, shadow, light frayed and their construction frayed. He staggered around the house and came upon the ladder. He put a hand on the rail, a foot on a rung, but then sat and leaned against the brick, the squished mortar jabbing into his back as he slid to the ground. He had a gun in his hand. He looked, the dumpster, the fluttering spears of a yucca and its offshoots, each distinct from the last, spines wafting just so, reeled and dissolved in light and dark. In shadow. He looked, the tissues of the spears themselves, the fibers came into clarity. He looked to the ground. He held the gun to his head.

* *

Between finger and thumb she pinches at the root, the bald patches widening now, rolls the hairs. The loose hairs clot the drain and matt on the carpet, fluffs pile up in the corners. Single strands loop and coil, here and there, on the sofa, on the bed spread. She pulls them taut. They do not break but slide through her fingers.

The water rushes from the spout, steam rising. She tests the water with her toe, it burns. She eases her way into the bath. The water ripples. Her hair spreads upon the water, drifts down from the surface. Her arms sink, pull her down. Soothed, her bones slack, uncoil, she slumps down. She leans her head against the bathtubs' rim, holding her breath, her eyes at the surface. The water rises, spills over.

CURRICULUM VITA

Jonathan Nehls was born and raised in Westminster, Colorado. He attended Metropolitan State College of Denver, where he earned a Bachelor of Science in Industrial Design with a minor in Spanish. Upon graduation, he served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Panama for three and a half years, working in the indigenous, Ngäbe-Buglé region and later, in the Province of Los Santos. When he returned stateside, he taught as a substitute teacher in Denver Public Schools, and attended writing workshops at Metro State and the Lighthouse Writer's Workshop. Jonathan later received his MFA in Bilingual Creative Writing from the University of Texas at El Paso. During his time as a graduate student, he presented his essay "Cacography" as part of a panel entitled *iBi, bi, Monolingualism!* at the AWP Conference in Boston. He taught Composition and Creative Writing while at UTEP. *Dust : Polvo* is his first novel.

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