You Will Be Loved: a Mixtape

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Recommended Citation
https://doi.org/10.15760/etd.7747

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You Will Be Loved: a Mixtape

by

Ariana M. Rosales

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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Portland State University
2021
Abstract

The following mix-genre portfolio represents my work in literary translation, nonfiction, and fiction writing. These poems, essays, and stories explore the role of gender and sexuality in familial and interpersonal relationships in the social, historical, and political context of contemporary Bolivian and American cultures. The characters inhabiting this collection experience alienation while seeking belonging and meaningful connections in the face of an uncertain political future. These pieces explore themes such as marginalization of queer people, the subjugation and closeting of the indigenous in the face of mestizaje, and the colonial legacy shared by Bolivia and the United States.
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Literary Translation
Manifiesto (hablo por mi diferencia)

Pedro Lemebel, 1986

No soy Pasolini pidiendo explicaciones
No soy Ginsberg expulsado de Cuba
No soy un marica disfrazado de poeta
No necesito disfraz

Aqui está mi cara
Hablo por mi diferencia
Defiendiendo lo que soy
Y no soy tan raro
Me apersta la injusticia

Y sospecho de esta cueca democrática
Pero no me hable del proletariado
Porque ser pobre y maricón es peor
Hay que ser ácido para soportarlo
Es darle un rodeo a los machitos de la esquina

Es un padre que te odia
Porque al hijo se le dobla la patita
Es tener una madre de manos tajeadas por el cloro
Envejecidas de limpieza
Acunándote de enfermo

Por la mala suerte
Por las malas costumbres
Como la dictadura
Peor que la dictadura
Porque las dictaduras pasan

Y viene la democracia
Y detrásito el socialismo
¿Y entonces?
¿Qué harán con nostros compañero?
¿Nos amarrarán de las trenzas en fardos con destino a un sidario cubano?

Nos meterán en algún tren de ninguna parte
Como en el barco del general Ibáñez
Donde aprendimos a nadar
Pero ninguna llegó a la costa
Por eso Valparaíso apagó sus luces rojas

Por eso las casas de caramba
Le brindaron una lágrima negra
A esos colizas comidos por las jaibas
Ese año que la Comisión de Derechos Humanos no recuerda
Por eso compañero le pregunto
¿Existe aún el tren siberiano de la propaganda reaccionaria?
Ese tren que pasa por sus pupilas
Cuando mi voz se pone demasiado dulce
¿Y usted?
¿Qué hará con ese recuerdo de niños

45
Pajeándonos y otras cosas
En las vacaciones de Cartagena?
¿El futuro será en blanco y negro?
¿El tiempo en noche y día laboral sin ambigüedad?
¿No habrá un maricón en alguna esquina

50
Desequilibrando el futuro de su hombre nuevo?
¿Van a dejarnos bordar de pájaros la bandera de la patria libre?
El fusil se lo dejo a usted
Que tiene la sangre fría
Y no es miedo

55
El miedo se me fue pasando
De atajar cuchillos
En los sótanos sexuales donde anduve
Y no se sienta agredido
Si le hablo de estas cosas

60
Y le miro el bulto
No soy hipócrita
¿Acaso las tetas de una mujer no hacen bajar la mirada?
¿No cree usted que solos en la sierra algo se nos iba a ocurrir?
Aunque después me odie

65
Por corromper su moral revolucionaria
¿Tiene miedo de que se homosexualice la vida?
Y no hablo de meterlo y sacarlo
Y sacarlo y meterlo solamente
Hablo de ternura compañero
Usted no sabe
Cómo cuesta encontrar el amor
En estas condiciones
Usted no sabe
¿Qué es cargar con esta lepra

70
La gente guarda distancia
La gente comprende y dice:
Es marica
Pero escribe bien
Es marica

75
Pero es buen amigo
Súper-buena-onda
Yo no soy buena onda
Yo acepto al mundo
Sin pedirle esa buena onda
Pero igual se ríen
Tengo cicatrices de risas en la espalda
Usted cree que pienso con el poto
Y que al primer parrillazo de la CNI
Lo iba a soltar todo

No sabe que la hombría
Nunca la aprendí en los cuarteles
Mi hombría me la enseñó la noche
Detrás de un poste
Esa hombría de la que usted se jacta

Se la metieron en el regimiento
Un milico asesino
De esos que aún están en el poder
Mi hombría no la recibí del partido
Porque me rechazaron con risitas

Muchas veces
Mi hombría la aprendí participando
En la dura de esos años
Y se rieron de mi voz amariconada
Gritando:

Y va a caer, y va a caer
Y aunque usted grita como hombre
No ha conseguido que se vaya
Mi hombría fue la mordaza
No fue ir al estadio

Y agarrarme a combos por el Colo Colo
El fútbol es otra homosexualidad tapada
Como el box, la política y el vino
Mi hombría fue morderme las burlas
Comer me la rabia para no matar a todo el mundo

Mi hombría es aceptarme diferente
Ser cobarde es mucho más duro
Yo no pongo la otra mejilla, compañero
Yo pongo el culo
Y ésas es mi venganza

Mi hombría espera paciente
Que los machos se hagan viejos
Porque a esta altura del partido
La izquierda tranza el culo lacio
En el parlamento

Mi hombría fue difícil
Por eso a este tren no me subo
Sin saber dónde va
Yo no voy a cambiar por el socialismo
Que me rechazó tantas veces
No necesito cambiar
Soy más subversivo que usted
No voy a cambiar solamente
Porque los pobres y los ricos
A otro perro con ese hueso

Tampoco porque el capitalismo es injusto
En Nueva York los maricas se besan en la calle
Pero esa parte se la dejo a usted
Que tanto le interesa
Que la revolución no se pudra del todo

A usted le doy este mensaje
Y no es por mí
Yo ya estoy viejo
Y su utopía es para las generaciones futuras
Hay tantos niños que van a nacer

Con una alita rota
Y yo quiero que vuelen compañero
Que su revolución
Les dé un pedazo del cielo rojo
Para que puedan volar.
I’m not Pasolini asking for explanations
I’m not Ginsberg expelled from Cuba
I’m not some queer disguised as a poet
I don’t need a disguise

Here is my face
I speak for my difference
I defend what I am
And I’m not so strange
I’m disgusted by injustice

And I’m suspicious of the democratic process
But don’t speak to me of the proletariat
Because being poor and a faggot is worse
You must become bitter to stand it
It means avoiding that gang of boys on the street corner

It means a father that hates you
Because his son has a limp wrist
It means having a mother with hands burned by bleach
Aged from cleaning
Holding you as if you were ill

Because of bad luck
Because of bad habits
Like the dictatorship
Or worse than the dictatorship
Because dictatorships end

And democracy comes
And right behind it socialism
And then?
What will you do with us compañero?
Will you tie us by our hair in bundles and ship us to an AIDS colony in Cuba?

Will you put us on a train to nowhere
Like the ship commanded by General Ibáñez
Where all the girls learned to swim
But none of them managed to reach the shore
That’s why Valparaiso’s red lights went dark

That’s why the whorehouses
Shed a single black tear
For those trannies that got eaten by lobsters
In that year that the Human Rights Commission doesn’t remember
That’s why compañero I ask you
Does the Siberian train of reactionary propaganda still exist?
That train that flashes across your eyes
When my voice begins to sound too sweet
And you?
What will you do with those memories of us as children

Jerking each other off among other things
While vacationing in Cartagena?
Will the future be in black and white?
Will time become night or day without ambiguity?
Won’t you see some faggot standing on a street-corner

Destabilizing the future of your new masculinity
Will they let us embroider birds on the flag of the fatherland?
I’ll leave the guns to you
Since you’re the coldblooded one
And it’s not that I’m afraid

All my fear wore away
Dodging knifes
In the sex dungeons where I was forced to exist
And don’t be offended
If I speak of these things

And take a look at your package
I am not a hypocrite
Don’t a woman’s breasts make you lower your gaze?
Don’t you think all alone up in the mountains we would have been up to something?

Even if you would hate me later
For corrupting your revolutionary morality
Are you afraid of life becoming homosexual?
And I’m not only talking about sticking it in and pulling it out
And pulling it out and sticking it back in

I’m talking about tenderness compañero
You don’t know
How hard it is to find love
Under these conditions
You don’t know

What is like to deal with this leprosy
People keep their distance
People comprehend and say:
He’s a faggot
But he writes well

He’s a faggot
But he’s a good friend
He is really nice
I am not nice
I accept the world
85  Without asking for niceness  
    And they laugh anyway  
    I have scars on my back from being laughed at  
    You’re certain that I think with my ass  
    And with the first electro-shock from the CNI
90  I was going to give up my secrets  
    Don’t you know my gender  
    Wasn’t learned in the barracks  
    My gender was taught to me by the night  
    Behind a street-post
95  That manliness that you boast about  
    Was shoved into you in the army  
    By a military killer  
    Like the ones that are still in charge  
    My gender wasn’t given to me by a political party
100  Because they rejected me with laughter  
    Many times  
    I learned my gender by participating  
    In the hardship of those years  
    Though they laughed at my faggy voice
105  When I was yelling:  
    And it will fall, and it will fall  
    And even if you can yell like a man  
    It wasn’t your voice that made it go away  
    My gender was the gag
110  It wasn’t going to the stadium  
    And starting fights for your local team  
    Football is just another form of repressed homosexuality  
    Like boxing, politics, and wine  
    My gender was to bear the mockery
115  While eating my rage instead of killing everyone  
    My gender means to accept myself as different  
    To be a coward is so much harder  
    I don’t turn the other cheek, compañero  
    I put out my ass
120  And that is my vengeance  
    My gender awaits patiently  
    For the masculine men to grow old  
    Because at this stage of the game  
    Liberals sell their flaccid ass
125  In congress  
    My gender was difficult  
    That’s why I’m not getting on this train  
    Without knowing where it will go  
    I will not change for socialism
That rejected me so many times
I don’t need to change
I’m more subversive than you
I will not change just
Because of the rich and the poor

Throw that bone at someone else’s dog
Nor will I change because capitalism is unjust
In Nueva York faggots kiss each other on the street
But I’ll leave that to you
Who is so interested

That this revolution does not rot entirely
I’m giving this message to you
And it’s not for me
I’m already old
And your utopia is for some future generation

There are so many children that will be born
With a broken wing
And I want them to fly, compañero
And that your revolution
Will give them a red piece of the heavens

So that they can fly
Tirinea

Jesús Urzagasti

1

Tirinea es una llanura solitaria, con árboles fogosos y cálidas arenas expulsadas del fondo azul de la tierra. Perdida como esta en la memoria de los ángeles, la vida allí no ejerce ningún control y soy yo el único sobreviviente. Hasta hace poco se ignoraba su existencia, pero ahora que ha desaparecido circulan infinitas versiones, sobre las cuales me guardo de emitir una opinión definitiva. Soy viejo, celoso, bajo de estatura y, seguramente por la edad, noto cierto carácter caprichoso en mi conducta actual. Prisionero de las más extrañas manías, el escaso tiempo de que dispongo me lo paso dando vueltitas en mi habitación misteriosa. Ya he sobrepasado la edad en que los ojos seducen al mundo con una dulce mirada y debo confesar que la vida en mi comienza a despedir un desagradable olor. Jamás he padecido enfermedad alguna, ni un pequeño dolor de muelas, de manera que mi cuerpo se ha deteriorado por su cuenta y con una envidiable uniformidad, sin dejarme el intervalo necesario para una oportuna reparación. Tengo una salud a prueba de balas: las enfermedades han tenido el tino de retirar a tiempo sus manos agresoras, lo que al fin y al cabo revela un íntimo temor en ellas. Ni de joven he querido pensar que soy la enfermedad en persona, mucho menos ahora que soy viejo; pero muy a pesar mío esta sospecha ha cundido en mi ser y ahora no me queda la mínima duda de ella. Ciego, torpe y más sordo que un pañuelo mojado, no soy el más indicado sino el único que puede hablar sobre Tirinea; lo primero indicaría un
reconocimiento a mi capacidad, no es mi caso desgraciadamente. Tengo la suma autoridad, mas estoy seguro de que el aprecio y la consideración en ninguna ocasión se me harán llegar. ¿Puede importar todo esto a un viejo como yo, que se ríe a menudo sin motivo, al que nadie mira con buena cara y que despierta en los niños un incontenible deseo de burlarse? No lo creo, francamente.

2

Si vivo bien, si me lavo regularmente y me peino con esmero, si uso calzoncillos y me gusta el alcohol, si tengo mujer o me mantiene una lejana y sospechosa prima, esto y lo demás constituyen un secreto sobre el que nunca di el menor indicio; pero no he podido evitar la circulación de los rumores más desatinados al respecto. Hasta se me tilda de loco, lo cual es cierto pero no justifica, en modo alguno el acecho permanente de que soy víctima a causa de este asunto. A mi edad nada me puede interesar, ciertamente. Quizás por eso me pregunto si es justo que los jóvenes, a quienes se les adjudica una vida placentera, se ocupen con tanta pasión de Tirinea, tal como lo hacen hoy en día. Pero también me digo si no hay un alto grado de injusticia en mi pregunta. Esto me produce vómitos y me encapricha aún más. Porque, para mis ojos vencidos, Tirinea solo representa el camino de la nostalgia. Su desaparición me envejeció de un día para otro; pero ya me repuse, es decir, me acostumbré a esta súbita vejez.

3
La casa ya era vieja cuando yo llegué. La clara luz de octubre y la frescura del
lugar fueron alabadas después de mi arribo. Pronto aprendí a reconocer a mis tíos, pero
solo a una amé verdaderamente. Se llama Héctor Ángel. Solía pasear conmigo bajo los
naranjos hermosos que nunca más volví a ver y me enseno a levantar los pies por un
motivo inaccesible a mi razón. Aunque desapareció como por encanto, conservo todavía
esta insólita costumbre. No se habla del tío Héctor Ángel en la casa, por lo menos nunca
lo oí nombrar; creo que si existió alguna vez, fue por una horrible equivocación. Aunque
así fuese no me importa, porque lo tremendo fue la escuela. No me imagina yo que a una
determinada edad los hombres asistieran a la escuela. Como nuestra casa estaba en pleno
monte y la escuela nunca está en el monte, aprendí a leer antes de ingresar a ella. Luego
de las primeras lecciones, mi padre me ensenaba a dibujar un loro mientras me refería las
hazañas de Bolívar. Como una oscura esperanza permanece en mi corazón la promesa
que hizo el Libertador de cruzar desde el Orinoco hasta el Cabo de Hornos, ilustrando su
aventura en un banquete. ¿Estaba Páez ahí? No podré precisarlo nunca. Me impresiono
tanto el relato que mi padre asumió la figura del héroe y prendió en mi la idea de
comprarle un par de botas. Sin embargo, en la escuela no la deban tanta importancia al
Libertador. El primer día de clases nos hicieron dibujar una casa’ me olvide totalmente de
incluir una ventana, como que me obligaron a hacer un círculo en la parte superior de la
pared. El segundo día me di cuenta de que no sabía dividir; llegue a la casa y mire a mi
padre, incluso ahora no podría asegurar si conoce esta operación tan funesta…
Lorenzo Ibarra y Orlando Bishop son amigos ahora. Orlando dice que no tiene con quien salir a pasear, como para justificar algo que no entiendo. A Lorenzo le ha crecido la barba en su rostro cuadrado, está sumamente gordo y se rumorea que es el más pegador de esta zona. Recuerdo que olvido rápidamente el golpe que le di en la escuela y que estudiamos juntos algunos años en Tarija. Después lo perdí de vista y sin motivo comencé a ponermee triste y a llorar cuando leía el Nuevo Testamento en el solitario caserón de la calle La Madrid 1077. Es una época bastante difusa y a veces me parece una mentira, tanto como ese tiempo que compartí una habitación con Manuel Fascos, un muchacho que entendía las matemáticas al hilo y de cuya fama fui testigo. A Manuel le llegaban unas encomiendas maravillosas, me acuerdo del pan y de los dulces. No era mezquino, lo recuerdo tan bien como su dificultad para hablar; era el colmo de lengua bola y, sin embargo, hasta ahora me llama la atención que sus amigos ignoraran su defecto. Sufran al no poder burlarse de él y con ellos toda una generación.

No sé por qué me impresiona tanto el cura León Mocchi. Hasta diría que le tengo miedo. El examina a nuestro curso en materia de religión. Me dice que repita el Credo; no se ni jota y espero que me pida otra cosa. No me lo pide, me despacha y comenta algo raro con sus camaradas. Afuera gira pausadamente un grupo de alumnos, cada uno por su cuenta en un problema común. Yo me iré al Chaco, luego de las vacaciones a Salta, después de Salta a la mierda, pienso al bajar las gradas. Un tío mío estudio en Salta. Me acuerdo de una fotografía suya, con pantalón corto y una gorrita, cosas que ya no se usan,
al menos las medias tan largas y feas. Este mi tío es ahora un borracho terrible que ha vendido todas sus tierras. Hace algunos años le dieron una señora paliza y nuevamente se fue a Salta, pero esta vez lo llevo mi padre. Allí se curó, pero muy luego volvió a beber: de nada le valió escribir correctamente en una maquina portátil y vivir en una casita blanca más sano que un gorrión. Es el único de la familia que tiene la nariz excesivamente larga. Mi hermano Cope también tiene una reverenda nariz, mama sostiene que la sacó de su hermano Honorato. ¡Quien sostiene lo contrario! Lo que por agua viene por agua se va, conforme lo sentencio mi padre en un cuaderno de cuentas del año 1949. Solía escribir sus notas en un cuaderno de rayas azules y rojas. La letra inclinada y fuerte. Siempre me ha gustado la manera tan suya de hacer la letra f; un tiempo lo imité, pero luego me salió a mí la f que me correspondía. Es joven todavía. Tiene cuarenta y seis años y yo veinticinco. ¿Será porque estoy escuchando música que así lo siento? Tengo mil caminos abiertos y la noche no se anima a cerrarme ninguno. Soy su preferido por lo visto y, sin embargo, no saco ninguna tajada: apenas suelo apoyarme en la ventana. En la distancia veo las casitas, algunas azules y otras sin color, la niebla cerrando el paso a la luz. Me considero joven, pero a veces no tengo deseos de nada y renace en mi la idea que me obsesiona desde mi niñez: la muerte. Lo malo es que ha dejado de ser una idea. Pero hay épocas buenas para mí, me olvido totalmente de ella y me ausento hacia la oscuridad. Ahora hay mucha apatía en mi ser y no tengo el ánimo bueno para hablar, aunque no ignoro lo que corresponde a mi vida y lo que ella espera de mi muerte. Sólo miro mis manos. Antes me bastaba observarlas para que el universo me ofreciera sus secretos. Ahora no me dicen absolutamente nada. No sé si aún tengo fuerzas
para sorprenderme o si el mundo estable ya encuentra la hora propicia para su venganza. 

Escucho una música maravillosa, pero nada consigo al recibir sus pasajes cercanos a la memoria verdadera. Es discutable todo esto. Menos no lo que será mi vida mientras mi silencio no opine sobre ella. Esta noche no me interesa opinar. Para rascarme la pierna he pasado la mano izquierda sobre la tela del viejo pantalón de mi padre. Me enferma de cólera esta uniformidad que me ofrece la vida para evitar que yo manosee a la muerte. Me siento sin pasión para nada. Mi cuerpo está presente. El gran solitario espera su ración de alimentos, pero aún le quedan fuerzas para obedecer; no le propongo nada especial, pero se resiste a esta pobre exigencia de mi ser. Me gustaría hablar sobre música, pero no puedo. Acabo de pensar en Buenos Aires no me reconforta en absoluto. Tampoco me resulta saludable recordar la cara que mi hermano Cope me ha dirigido desde Córdoba. Ha vuelto agotado de mi oficina, pero en esta hora ese agotamiento no tiene ningún significado para mí. No puedo emitir ni siquiera un simple chillido para declarar cuán hermoso es sentirse prisionero de una belleza muda. Los días que todavía no han sido esperan añadir a mi memoria lo que ahora con extrema dificultad recuerdo. Es cierto que existe una enorme diferencia entre lo que soy y lo que era en otra época, pero que lejos estoy de reconocerme tal cual seré en los días que se avecinan. Como ya es tarde, Orana está durmiendo. Siempre la encuentro de costado, con loa cabellos sueltos. Las mujeres duermen con entera confianza e inspiran el mismo sentimiento. Antes de existir tanto el nombre como la mujer, había ya entre ambos una diferencia singular. Para legalizar esta diferencia clandestina nació el sexo. La mujer es una cosa y el hombre otra. Fácil resulta decirlo. La luz o la oscuridad. Cualquiera de ellas. ¿Acaso tiene
importancia? La mujer es el eslabón perdido, mi amigo bolas de higo: ante su sola presencia cesan todas las búsquedas y pierde su encanto el agua que se hace astillas hirviendo en la caldera…

En todo lo que llevo vivido nadie me ha preguntado de Ramón. Cierto es que no hay motivo para ello. Ramón es un primo mío – hijo de mi tía Panchita, hermana de mi padre – que murió en 1956 a los veinte años de edad, víctima de una curiosa enfermedad. Junto con el vi la primera película de mi vida. Recuerdo a las bailarinas que levantaban las piernas y daban vueltitas y cantaban el vals Estrellita del sur. Creo que ahí se originó mi melancolía y no veo la razón para removerla. Por eso, venga o no venga al caso, declaro que no soy afecto a la caza y que tranquilamente puedo pasarme días y días sentado en una silla, entre la luz y la oscuridad, sin la mínima convulsión. Demás está decir que ignoro los orígenes de esta defectuosa inclinación y que este asunto no me preocupa ni me ha desasosegado en los años de estudio que llevo. A propósito, he tomado la decisión de dejar la universidad. La carrera de ingeniero no es que no me llevará a ninguna parte, sino que me arrastrará hacia donde yo no quiero ser llevado. Ya en Salta lloraba amargamente por motivos que todavía permanecen en el más profundo misterio y que, según veo, no podré explicarme nunca. Esta noche he visto una película que, lejos de apaciguarme, me ha turbado más aún. Antes de salir hacia el cinematógrafo estaba a punto de completar una lámina de dibujo técnico, pero la tinta se me vino abajo y la decisión fue tomada con una feliz velocidad. Hasta redacte las siguientes líneas para mis padres:
“Me siento mal. Hace tiempo que guardaba el secreto en mi alma. No por mí, sino por ustedes. Estoy enfermo de ese mal que no tiene cura. Es inútil aceptar por más tiempo la vida que llevo, salvo que se quiera ahogar mi existencia con la muerte”. Sin embargo, no creo que esta nota sea enviada. Como es habitual, las cosas se quedarán en mí. Tengo veinte años y estoy contento con mi decisión. Me causa gracia y a la vez me entristece lo que me ocurrió la semana pasada: estaba de lo más bien, tomando café en el club universitario y de repente me asalto la irresistible idea de marcharme a Salta. Hice las maletas, pero no pasó nada. Cachín trataba de desanimarme, y al cabo permití que lograra su objetivo. Con esto no quiero aminorar los poderes de persuasión de mi amigo, solo me guía el deseo de revelar mi cobardía para disuadirme yo mismo. Ahora que he tomado una decisión más certera a mi juicio, me pregunto ¿Qué les diré a Cayetano y a Córdoba? Hasta ayer no más les enseñaba química, quizás la única materia en la que me destaco. Como hacerles saber que, desde este momento, me opongo terminantemente a que una circunstancial habilidad mental me lleve al desastre. Salga como salga, saldré airoso de mi compromiso. Por otro lado, considero que gracias a mi decisión me apartare de ellos y de sus inclinaciones. De un tiempo a esta parte me fatigan con su insistencia de llevarme a fiestas; yo me niego y me opuse siempre, pero no en todas las ocasiones, he salido victorioso, de manera que se ha hecho visible mi torpeza para el baile. Mi timidez añadida a mi fuerte introversión ya no es un secreto para nadie, y con tales incidentes lejos de envanecerme por mi auténtica conducta interior, esta ha terminado por preocuparme. Allá ellos. Con una extraña alegría dejare de considerar como un defecto lo que tal vez es mi única virtud. Pasando a otra cosa, juzgo que me he portado mal con
Orlando porque hace meses que no le escribo. Lo aprecio mucho y le estoy agradecido por hacerme notar con inteligencia sus mayores conocimientos de la vida. En las últimas vacaciones casi todos los días estuvimos juntos, sin contar los viajes que hicimos a la zona de d’Orbigny. La fotografía que le tome junto al río, rodeado de árboles, la tengo al alcance de mi mano, pero mis ojos no quieren verla. En esta noche soy un joven dictador y me siento obediente. Pasando a otra cosa más, me alegro lo que acabo de comprobar: miles de personas transitan por esta ciudad, ajenas de su destino: unas van al cine y otras están al borde del suicidio, estas compran mesas o cierran un negocio mientras aquellas se sienten irritadas por algún contratiempo; le sucede una cosa e impiden de esta manera que les ocurra otra. Muchos de esos seres están destinados a ser mis amigos o mis enemigos; todavía no lo son y así caminan, como yo, y no pueden explicarse el extraño temblor que les estremece el cuerpo. HE aprendido a reconocerlo, pero al tiempo lo dejo en su labor y no lo interfiero. Que tomen los litros de agua que deben tomar antes de que llegue la hora sagrada. Yo mismo debo ingerir la ración que me corresponde hoy. Pero antes no quisiera ni acordarme de la universidad y sé que no podrá hacerlo. Soy muy fosforito y me pondré insóportable. Quiero dormir en paz, como un animal encerrado en la caja más diminuta que pudiera existir – que no existe, naturalmente --, para no recordar absolutamente nada.

Suele suceder que la vejez lo priva a uno de su innata imparcialidad. Se adora lo que uno de niño juzgo con encomiable mesura. Lo digo por experiencia y no quiero
discutir con nadie este asunto. Porque lo que me preocupa es otra cosa y muy distinta. Atañe a mi vida lo que voy a decir, lo que tantas veces me sorprendí custodiando en medio de un silencio exasperante. ¿Qué diablos va a pasar una vez que yo me mueras, con las maravillosas imágenes que guardo de este mundo; o, sin ir muy lejos, con las opiniones vertidas por Albert Camus en *Combat*, o con *Ser y tiempo* de Heidegger, que no he leído? Me asombra la lucidez de Camus y cuando leo algún pasaje de su obra lo veo desplazándose como pato en la laguna en una calurosa tarde de verano. No es culpa suya que no lo pueda imaginar de otra manera. Me enteré de su muerte el año 1960, en la Biblioteca Municipal de Tarija. En ese momento ni siquiera sospechaba yo que iba a tener la imagen que del guardo ahora en el fondo de mi corazón. Casi una cosa similar me sucede con *Ser y tiempo*. No he leído ese libro y no creo que a mi edad pueda ya leerlo; por otra parte, estoy enterado de que su autor se ha dedicado a la poesía, cosa que, de ocuparme de su visión, me evitaría el penoso trabajo que implica recorrer innumerables páginas al servicio de lo incognoscible. Hace algunos días un amigo me dijo que tardó tres años en devorarlo. Dudo que yo viva ese lapso y, en caso de decidirme, su lectura apresuraría mi desaparición. Pero justamente no es eso lo que quería decir. Para mis adentros sostengo que es maravilloso vivir en este mundo, existir en un mundo propio, sentirse asediado por una infinita cantidad de hechos milagrosos, ignorar la mayoría de ellos e irse a la tumba complacido por la correcta elección. Según veo, mi destino ha sido ignorar *Ser y tiempo* y el curioso mecanismo con que se ponen en movimiento las naves espaciales. Aunque me fallo algo, supongo que esto es lo que quería decir. Según mi costumbre, me encaprichare un poco. En un mundo lleno de
jóvenes, que puede hacer un viejo sino es encapricharse. Esta actitud nubla el entendimiento, pero pone en movimiento las últimas fuerzas del corazón. Con lo que me sucede más nublado no puedo estar, de ahí que me moriré alabando mi capacidad para endemoniarme. Lo demás no me interesa lo digo de verdad. La pregunta sobre el fin que tendrán las imágenes que el mundo me procura, una vez que yo haya muerto, es lo que endiabla mi existencia. No tengo la menor idea de ello y por otra parte acaba de empezar el espectáculo que más me gusta: la lluvia. El otro día oí alabar la magia de un escrito que lleva el siguiente título: Viendo llover en Macondo. Es cierto que sucesos de esta índole no me causan ninguna sorpresa, pero no niego que producen una secreta emoción en mi destartalado ser. Además, está lloviendo de una manera tal que reviven en mis lluvias remotas que edificaron los perpetuos muros que me separan de mi infancia. Por estar envuelto en la oscuridad, la lluvia me convierte en el único espectador del solitario goce de la vida. Se turban mis ojos, nada más. En cierto modo la suerte me ha marginado y de aquí a un tiempo mi boca será clausurada. Por supuesto que ya no me interesa saber si mis padres hacen o no caca. Este enigma producía estragos en mi alma de niño. A los mayores les atribuía la condición de inmortales y durante una buena temporada me negué a aceptar que expulsaran los residuos de los alimentos que ingerían con tanto hagan. Es que no había visto morir ni hacer caca. Para eso uno llega a viejo. Para vivir haciendo caca en manos de la muerte. Si a lo largo de mi vida hubiese consagrado todos mis esfuerzos en amaestrar avispas, si hubiese sido el primero en lanzarme en paracaidas o se me hubiera ocurrido inventar la máquina Farsimus, que todavía no ha sido inventada, según la prensa oficial mi inmortalidad ya estaría asegurada. Estarían desesperados de
asistir a mi muerte. Como no hice nada de eso, nadie espera mi muerte y solo yo la aguardo con un extraño fulgor en mis ojos meditabundos.

8

Cuando llegué a Tarija el año 1956, descubrí la enorme diferencia que había entre mi aldea y la ciudad. Ahora ya vivo aquí cerca de dos años y he perdido en cierto modo la visión primera, es decir, ya no me impresionan los contrastes. La primera dificultad que tuve fue mi intolerancia frente a la dicción de los tarijeros; en este aspecto no sostengo que mi expresión sea correcta – nosotros, fuera de no hablar bien, marginamos la letra s de las palabras –, sencillamente me produce melancolía ser un proscrito en medio de una naturaleza también extraña. Semejante alianza indispone mi corazón. En orden cronológico, la primera vez que Salí de casa fue el año 1954, cuando me llevaron a Villamontes y me dejaron allí para que me desasenara en el colegio durante un año. Vivía a la orilla del rio Pilcomayo Hay mucha niebla en mis recuerdos, sin duda algunos se perderán sin dejar huellas en mi vida y serán sustituidos por hechos no menos reales pero más recientes. Villamontes queda a cien kilómetros de mi pueblo y la naturaleza rara vez cambia de opinión en un espacio tan breve. Sera por eso que considero el trasladó a Tarija como mi primera y autentica salida. Tengo dieciséis años y mi situación es casi idéntica a la de todos los estudiantes que llegaron de las provincias. De esta convicción ningún provecho saldrá a mi encuentro. Noto que, al contrario de lo que les sucede a los otros, no me empuja el mínimo deseo de dominar la ciudad. Tengo pocos amigos y en la primera oportunidad me alejo hacia el monte, al otro lado del rio. No sé lo que consigo
allí, en medio de los arbustos, pero francamente no puedo prescindir de estos breves paseos. Seguramente el gusto por el espacio que la soledad deja, es lo que me lleva tan a menudo a esos parajes. O si no es eso, qué diablos será.

Hace poco le confesé a un amigo mis preocupaciones. Le dije que no tenía la menor idea de mi origen y por otro lado ignoraba hacia donde me dirigía. Me contestó que esas eran preguntas que todo el mundo se las hace en cuanto comienza a balbucear las primeras palabras. Me dejó seco y me llenó de vergüenza. De ahora en adelante estos interrogantes me están vedados y madurarán por su cuenta en mis entrañas y yo seré el único responsable de sus corrosivos resultados. Ya no me importa. En estos días percibo perfumes lejanos, y extraños, son aromas de mi infancia sin duda; atribuyo su presencia desaladora a un incuestionable motivo: estoy viviendo en una ciudad cuyas costumbres son opuestas a las de mi tierra y esta de algún modo tiene que ofrecer resistencia, pero no perder su privilegiado lugar en mi corazón. Comprobar que soy un dócil prisionero del colegio no es nada al lado del mapamundi azulado que me infunde un temor inexplicable. Un muchacho del primer curso es muy solicitado por los alumnos de cursos superiores, por su extraño conocimiento de la geografía universal; conoce al dedillo la ubicación de los ríos más insignificantes y la existencia de ciudades y pueblos, tengan o no importancia, no le es desconocida es bizco, de ojos azules y su altura tan reducida que ninguna ropa le queda bien. Eso es todo en lo que se refiere a Lestach y de no ser yo testigo de su asombrosa memoria, nada quedaría de él en la mía. Paso a otra cosa: ¿qué
hago yo en el colegio San Luis? No me destaco en ninguna materia, pero mantengo una envidiable posición en todas, lo cual, en resumidas cuentas, no es más que una refinada muestra de indiferencia. Para que sacar conclusiones precipitadas de una actitud inconsciente y por lo tanto para que avergonzarse antes de tiempo.

10

Me ocurre algo raro con Leoncio Suárez. Hace cosa de tres años que nos separamos. No he tenido ninguna noticia de él y por otra parte en todo este tiempo no me acorde una sola vez de su persona. Lo creí definitivamente perdido, a solas con su universo cerrado, metiendo un ruido espantoso en el interior de una botella, como un maravilloso insecto capturado por equivocación. No es así. Renace en mí, fresco como una lechiga, pero como siempre, sin ningún significado a la vista. Claro que yo ya no estoy en Salta y, aunque Leoncio se quedo allí, no puedo asegurar que allí siga. Probablemente ha viajado a otro lugar mas distante y ha encontrado la muerte en una estación anónima, tan de sorpresa que no le dio la mínima oportunidad de resistirse. Como no confiaba en su destino, su recurso favorito era retroceder; si la muerte se lo alzó, no tardara en echarlo otra vez a la vida: es sumamente difícil hacer caminar a Leoncio Suárez. El año 1958, cuando lo conocí, ya le faltaban casi todos los dientes del maxilar superior y algunos del inferior; se conducía con naturalidad y su risa franca era tan oportuna que no dejaba tiempo para el misterio, lo que privó a muchos de sus amigos de inquirirle sobra la prematura perdida dental que lo quejaba y fomento la ilusión de que esta falla física era parte de su condición. Yo cierro la boca en este asunto. A mí sólo me
asombra que Leoncio Suarez aun pudiera perdurar fuera del terreno más propicio a su existencia: mi memoria. Esa sola posibilidad me enmudece de dolor. Si no ha caído víctima de la locura, debe haber ideado un complicado sistema de defensa en base a los hábitos más insólitos. Considero que es su única salida, el único escondite para los hombres que Suárez tiene la generosidad de representar. Hablo con experiencia, porque mi caso no es diferente sino idéntico al suyo: un ser desmemoriado se olvidó de mí por completo. Por el momento mi única ventaja es mi extraña y maravillosa juventud, pero en el fondo ella no significa nada, porque todo lo que me revela no tardara en esfumarse. ¡Que se haga humo! –digo con pesar. ME acostumbro a todo. Hace tan poco que abandone el colegio y, sin embargo, me parece que esa época nunca hubiera existido en mi vida. No me basta recordar la tristeza con que nos despedimos lo bachilleres. A juicio de algunos compañeros se terminaba el mundo, se nos echaba del paraíso sin haber cometido ningún crimen. De ser así, el más feliz es el regente: se graduó en el colegio San Luis hace veinticinco años y hace más de un cuarto de siglo que ocupa el puesto. Cuando nuestra promoción se despidió de sus maestros queridos, el regente lloro como si fuera la primera vez y se emborracho como si fuera la última ocasión. En realidad, llora y se emborracha todos los años, ahora me doy cuenta de ello.

En cambio aquí, en la universidad, estoy como sapo en otro pozo: no es mi casa y mi casa verdadera se ha desvalorizado en el recuerdo. Se de algunos estudiantes que son fieles a un pacto sellado en la flor de la juventud, es decir, se reúnen cada fin de semana
para festejar los años transcurridos en el colegio. Asimismo, me enteré de que en algunos casos esta costumbre se prolonga hasta la vejez. Hace menos de un mes un compañero de facultad se suicidó en plena fiesta. No me conmovió en absoluto su decisión.

Simplemente estoy apenado por los secretos que se llevó de este mundo, de los cuales, a partir de su muerte, es el único dueño. Era joven, ahora ya no lo es. Muchos seres estaban destinados a conocerlo, pero ya es imposible. Situaciones horroresas o felices debía tenerlo por protagonista. Los seres que estaban destinados a conocerlo se han hundido en la nostalgia y no saben por qué. Las situaciones mencionadas solo se producirán por compromiso. A este mi amigo la muerte lo estará esperando en Vano toda la vida. Yo puedo dar testimonio de ello y para eso estoy en este mundo.

12

Lo que puedo poner en claro no es mucho, pero me siento contento. No comprendo casi nada de la vida y me dejo gobernar por ella. Juzgo que es mi juventud la que me hace proceder así. Ya soy otro y ni siquiera me he percatado. Aunque lea las aventuras más fantásticas no puedo reprimir el deseo de encontrarme tendido bajo un árbol, gozando las delicias de un clima todavía desconocido por mi cuerpo. Finalmente, no he leído las aventuras fantásticas ni he dado curso a mis deseos. Por esta causa no me atrevo a opinar sobre nada, mucho menos a llamar la atención sobre mi persona. Sostengo que lo ideal sería conciliar las aventuras que reclama mi mente con las pretensiones de mi cuerpo. No hallo ninguna solución para el enigma y más de una ocasión me olvide
completamente del asunto, lo que al fin y al cabo no deja de preocuparme.

13

Esta vez puedo aclarar que pertenezco a otra raza, la de los extinguidos, a la de aquellos que favorecen el reinado de la muerte. Esplique hace poco que vivo en un mundo real pero invisible. Como soy viejo, nadie me lleva al apunte, de manera que esta verdad padece de melancolía en los rincones de mi alma. Entonces es natural que confíe más en mis sueños que en la gente que pasa silbando un chachachá, y que haya terminado por considerar a aquellos como mi única realidad. Es indudable que muchas verdades desaparecerán conmigo, lo cual no me molesta mucho. He comenzado siendo el testimonio de la vida; ahora soy su secreto, porque vivo en manos de la muerte. Dos o tres imágenes, de las muchas que me asediaron, se hicieron perdurables, las otras se fueron a buscar eternidad en otros brazos. Hay una edad en que todo comienza de cero, con una luz nueva en el corazón, en la que uno es el único invitado de la soledad y ella se hace esperar para siempre. Yo estoy en esa edad. Soy boliviano, esa es mi nacionalidad. Me alegraría mucho si esto pudiera servir como una adorable pista. Un boliviano que desea ponerse en contacto con una araña de Feruntalguay, a la que nunca he podido imaginar siquiera: de tanto buscarla en los rincones de mi habitación, se me humedeció el tabaco que suelo fumar en las noches.
Bolivia no tiene mar, ni salida al mar. Según se nos ha explicado en tantas oportunidades, debemos reconquistarlo el año 1979, si es posible antes, y vengar así a nuestros padres, castigar una infamia que el continente todo apoya con su silencio. Así sea. Pero hablando en oro, cuando yo nací Bolivia ya no tenía mar y a mi patria me cuesta imaginarla de otra manera. Si volvemos a tener acceso al fabuloso mar, habremos cumplido con el designio de nuestro sueño. Nada más y nada menos. Desgraciadamente yo no estaré aquí. Partiré hacia la luz para que la tierra me devuelva a la oscuridad de los océanos. Allí dejare de ser un mediterráneo. La muerte de un boliviano no es nada graciosa si se entiende que la mayor parte de su vida se la pasa en la Argentina, estudiando o pelando caña, uno que otro panza arriba en las playas de Europa, el esto en Cochabamba, meno aquellos que están confinados. Así es, otra vez. Mientras tanto, imagino lo chistoso o melancólico que debe ponerse uno al mirar desde un satélite artificial un pequeño país mediterráneo.

Dos menos nueve minutos de la madrugada del viernes 3 de marzo de 1967. Me llamo Fielkho y estoy escribiendo algo que mi cuerpo exige para vivir, es decir, para establecer el equilibrio entre mis ojos y el mundo. Las razones verdaderas yo mismo no las entiendo. Cuando permanezco en silencio mis oídos perciben la música del universo; son apenas sonidos, pero bastan para hacerme perder la identidad que guardo con ese camión que acaba de zumbar, por ejemplo. Todo me parece un diario y está bien, aunque sea gracioso. Esta tarde me visitó un amigo al que no veía hace mucho tiempo; perdió el
tiempo, mi amigo, porque el tiempo no pasa en vano. Hace tan poco que he nacido, pero mi vida ya la perdí y apenas la miro desde mi solitaria habitación. No le hago ninguna señal, la dejo en completa libertad. Si se hunde, no me sorprenderá mucho; si no se hunde, no festejare su fechoría. No vine a hacerlas, ni a amparar las mías. Hace un mes viaje al Chaco a visitar a mis padres y vi que mis hermanos crecieron más de lo que yo esperaba. Comprobé todo eso y di media vuelta, de modo que estoy de nuevo aquí. Donde es aquí no lo sé. Mientras pienso que no me moriré de hambre, miro la canasta tarijeña empotrada en la pared. Desde su interior un foco de no sé cuántas bujías proyecta una luz que me alivia de algún peso anterior a mi existencia. Acabo de rascarme el pabellón de la oreja derecha y me sorprendo llamando pabellón a ese pedazo de carne que me cuelga. Aúllan los perros en la distancia. Sin duda, hay un hondo significado en esos aullidos y no estoy muy lejos de desentrañarlo, pero he tosido a tiempo y así aniquile los gérmenes del poder en mi cuerpo. Vuelven a aullar los perros. ¿Cómo hacerles saber que ya estoy inmunizado? Me pareció ver algo en la cama que tengo. Pienso esto mientras el mundo duerme. Piense que te piense, si tu no me quieres, quieres que me enferme. Lo que he pintado de negro ha perdido su color. Y está bien. Porque nunca se sabrá qué es lo que he pintado yo, puesto que yo, al pintarlo, ignoraba que iba a perder su color. Más claro agua porque acaba de sonar una campana. Quien se ocupará de hacer resonar las misteriosas campanas de la noche. Sea quien fuere el Señor de las Campanas, también duerme como todo el mundo y sin sentirse un privilegiado. Duerme de costado y en toda su vida más de tres veces no se suena muerto. Cuando el que toca las misteriosas campanas de la noche se suena muerto el alba es más hermosa, el día de una indecible
frescura, pero al sonador se le quiere reventar la cabeza de dolor. Aunque en este momento pase y repase un ejército de demonios, no me olvidare del dolor que engendra la clarividencia de la felicidad. Si yo hubiese sabido que iba a morir, no venía a la vida. Si yo hubiese sabido que iba a vivir, no estaría escribiendo estas palabras en este instante.

Tengo exactamente veinticinco años, cuatro meses y dieciséis días de existencia en este mundo, lo cual si era así, ahora ya no lo es. Qué tendré yo que ya nada puedo tener. Algo debo tener que ya no me importa no tener, algo parecido a un soplido cariñoso que alguien le da a uno en la oreja cuando uno está solo y solito en la oscuridad se sus sueños. Por eso será que no me importa no tener nada, ni un soreté, como dice Cachín, que tampoco tiene nada. Si quiero pensar algo, pienso que cada instante me salvo como por milagro de la muerte. Esto me vuelve engreído y mal hablado, y hasta cierto punto anula mi innata afición a la fotografía, por eso también me causa gracia verme sentado, meta escuchar música. Sé dónde se encuentran los fósforos y me satisface saber esto. Eso es lo que se y esa es toda mi alegría en este momento. De solo pensar en las arrugas de los pantalones o en las lavanderías, me muero de risa, quizás porque a cada instante imagino asistir al despegue de la naves que se van para no volver. Hablo de las que no existen, de las que no envejecen nunca; para que opinar de cosas viejas. Hay un viejo refrán que no guarda ninguna relación con lo que estoy haciendo ahora. Haz y verás, reza el viejo refrán. Porque lo que estoy haciendo ahora es ver al animal que duerme en mí, mientras el me sueña viendo lo que hago ahora y se tira de risa. Cuando este animal fabuloso despierte de su efímero sueño, se caerán las estrellas y se asustaran los enfermos.
Tirinea

By Jesús Urzagasti

1

Tirinea is a lonely plain with fiery trees and warm sands ejected from the blue depths of the earth. It's lost, as it were, in the memory of angels, where life exerts no control, and I am its only survivor. Until recently its existence was unknown, but now that it has vanished endless stories circulate about it, on which I keep myself from offering a definitive opinion. I am old, bitter, short in stature, and probably because of my age, I notice a certain capricious character in my behavior as of late. A prisoner of the strangest compulsions, the little time that I do have, I spend it walking in small circles in my mysterious room. I have already surpassed the age when my eyes could seduce the world with a sweet look, and I must confess that life in me begins to give off an unpleasant smell. I have never been sick with any illness, not even a toothache, so my body has deteriorated on its own and with an enviable uniformity, leaving me without the necessary time to repair it. I have bulletproof health: diseases have kept their nasty hands off me all this time, which in the end unveils in me an intimate fear of them. Not even as a young man, would I have wanted to think that I was the embodiment of an illness, much less now that I am old; but in spite of myself this suspicion has spread and now I have no doubt about it. I’m blind, clumsy, and deafer than a wet handkerchief, as a result I am not the best candidate to talk about Tirinea, but simply the only person able to. The first would indicate a recognition of my ability, which is not the case unfortunately. I
hold the highest authority, but I am sure that I will never receive the proper appreciation or consideration. Does any of this matter to an old man, who laughs for no reason, and to whom nobody looks at kindly, someone who inspires in children an irrepressible desire to mock me? Frankly, I don’t think so.

2

If I live well, if I wash myself regularly and put effort into combing my hair, if I wear underpants, and if I like liquor, or if I have a wife, or if I am financially supported by a mysterious and distant cousin, this are secrets I have kept without giving anyone the slightest hint; but I have not been able to prevent the circulation of the craziest rumors about me. I have even been called insane, which is true, but in no way does it justify being constantly stalked as a result. At my age, nothing interests me anymore. I wonder if perhaps it is not fair that young people, who have been granted a pleasant life, would care about Tirinea with such passion as they do today. But I also ask myself if there is not a great degree of injustice in my questioning. This makes me nauseous and even more uneasy. To my defeated eyes, Tirinea only represents the path of nostalgia. I was aged overnight by its disappearance; but I did recover from it. Or rather, I have gotten used to this sudden old age.

3

The house was already old when I arrived. After my arrival, the clear light of October and the coolness of the place were praised. Soon I learned to recognize my
uncles, but there's only one that I truly loved. His name was Héctor Angel. He used to walk with me under the beautiful orange trees that I would never see again and taught me to aim for the impossible, this for reasons I no longer remember. Even if he vanished as if by magic, I still have this unusual habit of talking about him. No one talks about tío Hector Angel in the house, at least I never heard the mention of his name; I think if he ever existed, it was all a horrible mistake. Although if it was, I do not care, because the important thing was school. I did not imagine that at a certain age, men had to attend school. Because our house was in the middle of the country and schools are never in the country, I learned to read before ever enrolling. After the first lessons, my father taught me how to draw a parrot while describing Bolivar's achievements to me. The promise the Liberator had made to cross from the Orinoco to Cabo de Hornos lingers in my heart as a dark hope. Was Páez there? I'll never be sure of it. I was so fascinated by the story that in my eyes my father assumed the figure of the hero and even gave me the idea of buying a pair of boots for him. However, at school they do not assign much importance to the Liberator. On the first day of school, they made us draw a house. I totally forgot to include a window. I was forced to draw a circle at the top of the wall. The second day I realized that I had not learned how to divide; I came to the house and looked at my father, even now I couldn't be sure if he really understood this grim operation...

Lorenzo Ibarra and Orlando Bishop are now friends. Orlando complains that he has no one to go on walks with, as if to explain something I don't understand. Lorenzo
has grown a beard on his square face. He is exceptionally fat and rumored to be the best fighter in this region. I remember how quickly he got over the punch I gave him at school and that we studied together in Tarija for a few years. Then I lost sight of him and for no reason began to despair and cry while reading the New Testament in the lonely house on Calle La Madrid 1077. It's a rather scattered time and sometimes it feels like a lie to me, as much as the time I shared a room with Manuel Fascos, a boy who was gifted in mathematics and whose fame I saw firsthand. Manuel used to receive many wonderful parcels. I remember the bread and the sweets. He was not petty, I remember him as well as his speech impediment; he would stammer and stutter, and even now it strikes me as odd that his friends ignored this defect. They suffered because they were not able to taunt him, and along with them a whole generation.

I don't know why I'm so intimidated by Leon Mocchi, the priest. I'd go as far as to say I'm afraid of him. He is our religion teacher. He always tells me to recite the Creed; I don't even remember the first word. I hope he will ask me to do something else instead. He doesn't, he sends me away and says something strange to his priestly companions. Outside a group of students are taking a stroll, each with a common problem of their own. I'll go to the Chaco, after the holidays, I’ll go to Salta, and after that I’ll go fuck off, I think while walking down the stairs. An uncle of mine went to school in Salta. I remember a photograph of him, in shorts and a beanie, items that are no longer in style, at least the socks, so ugly and long. Now, this uncle of mine is a terrible drunk who has sold
all of his land. A few years ago, he received a severe beat down and went back to Salta, but this time my father took him. There he got better, but very soon returned to drinking: it was of no use to him, the ability to write well on a portable typing machine and to live in a white house healthier than a sparrow. He's the only one in the family with an excessively large nose. My brother Cope also has a such a large nose; mom maintains that he took after her brother Honorato who doesn't agree with her. Easy come, easy goes, as my father wrote it in a ledger from 1949. He used to write his notes in a red and blue striped notebook. His handwriting sloped and strong. I've always liked the way he wrote the letter f; for a while I imitated him, but then the letter f that belongs to me revealed itself. He's still young. He's forty-six and I'm twenty-five. Is it because I'm listening to music that I feel this way? I have a thousand paths open, and the night does not inspire me to shut down any of them. I'm his favorite apparently and yet I don't get any extra benefits: I barely lean on the window. In the distance I see the houses, some blue and others colorless, the fog closing passage to the light. I consider myself young, but sometimes I have no desire to do anything and the notion that haunts me since childhood is resurrected in me: death. The bad news is, it's no longer an idea. But the promise of good times ahead remains, sometimes I totally forget about it and I retreat into the dark. Now there is a lot of indifference in myself and I am not in good enough spirits to talk about it, although I don’t ignore what is relevant to my life and what life expects of my death. I'm just looking at my hands. It used to be enough for me to observe them so that the universe would offer me its secrets. Now they tell me absolutely nothing. I don't know if I still have the strength to surprise myself, or if this stable world has found the
appropriate time for its revenge. I listen to wonderful music, but I get nothing after receiving its passages close to true memory. All of this is debatable. Except what my life will be so long as my silence doesn't provide an opinion about it. I'm not interested in giving an opinion tonight. To scratch my leg, I pressed my left hand over the fabric of my father's old pants. This uniformity that life offers sickens me with anger and prevents me from groping death. I feel without any passion about anything. My body is present. The great loner awaits its ration of food, but it still has strength to obey; I don’t propose anything special, but it resists the meager demands of my being. I'd like to talk about music, but I can't. I recently thought of Buenos Aires; and it doesn't comfort me at all. Nor is it healthy for me to remember the letter my brother Cope has sent me from Cordoba. I’ve returned exhausted from my office, but at this point that exhaustion doesn’t mean anything to me. I can't even utter a simple squeal to declare how beautiful it is to feel prisoner of a voiceless beauty. The days that have yet to pass hope to add to my memory what I now remember with extreme difficulty. It’s true that there is a huge difference between who I am and what I was in another time, but how far away am I from recognizing myself as I will be in the days to come. Since it's late, Orana's already sleeping. I always find her on her side, with her hair loosened. Women sleep with complete confidence and inspire the same feeling in others. Before man and woman existed, there was already a singular difference between the two. To legalize this clandestine difference, sex was born. The woman is one thing and the man another. It's easy to say. Light or darkness. Any woman. Does it matter? The woman is the missing link, my friend: in her presence all searches cease, and the water loses its charm and it’s
reduced to splinters in the kettle...

In everything that I've been through, nobody has asked me about Ramón. It's true. There's no reason for it. Ramón is a cousin of mine – the son of my aunt Panchita, my father's sister – who died in 1956 at the age of twenty, victim of a strange illness. It was with him that I saw the first movie of my life. I remember the dancers who lifted their legs and turned around and sang the waltz, Estrellita del Sur. I think that's where my melancholy originated, and I don't see any reason to end it. Therefore, whether this is relevant or not, I must proclaim that I don’t care for the hunt and that I can spend days and days sitting quietly in a chair, in between light and darkness, without the slightest tremor. Needless to say, I do not know the origins of this flawed inclination and that I am not concerned or dismayed by this matter in the years that I’ve been in school. By the way, I've made the decision to drop out of college. It’s not that engineering will not take me anywhere, but that it will drag me towards where I do not want to be taken. Even back in Salta, I cried bitterly for reasons that still remain the deepest of mysteries and which, as I see it, will never be able to explain myself. I saw a film tonight that, far from appeasing me, troubled me even more. Before I left for the cinema, I was about to complete a technical drawing sheet, but the ink spilled, and the decision was made with speedy joy. I even wrote the following lines for my parents: "I feel bad. I've kept this secret in my soul for a long time. Not for me, but for you. I'm sick with a malaise that has no cure. It is useless to accept longer the life I lead, unless I wanted to drown my
existence in death." However, I don’t believe that this note will be sent. As usual, things will remain inside me. I'm twenty years old and I'm happy with my decision. It's funny and at the same time I'm saddened by what happened to me last week: I was fine, having coffee at the student union and suddenly I was overwhelmed by the irresistible idea of leaving for Salta. I packed my bags, but nothing happened. Cachín was trying to discourage me, and in the end, I let him accomplish his goal. I do not want to diminish my friend's powers of persuasion with this, I am only inspired by my desire to reveal the cowardice to deter myself. Now that I have decided with more certainty in my judgment, I wonder what I will tell Cayetano and Cordoba? Until just yesterday, I was still helping them with chemistry, maybe the only subject that I am good at. How to let them know that, from this moment on, I am absolutely opposed to a circumstantial mental ability leading me to disaster. Any which way, I'll get out of my commitment. On the other hand, I believe that thanks to my decision I will stay away from them and their inclinations. Since some time, I have grown tired of their insistence to take me to parties; I refuse and have always resisted, but I did not emerge victorious in all occasions, so that my awkward inability to dance has become public. My shyness in addition to my strong introversion are no longer a secret to anyone and with such incidents, instead of taking pride in my authentic behavior, it has ended up worrying me. So, there they go. With a strange joy I will cease to regard as a defect what perhaps is my only virtue. Moving on to something else, I feel as if I've behaved poorly with Orlando because I haven't written to him in months. I appreciate him very much and I am grateful to him for making me aware of his greatest knowledge in life. During the last vacation, we spent almost every
day together, without counting those trips we made to the d'Orbigny area. The photograph I took of him by the river, surrounded by trees, is at my fingertips, but my eyes do not want to see it. Tonight, I am a young dictator and I feel obedient. To speak of something else, I'm glad by what I just confirmed: thousands of people transit this city, oblivious of their destination: some go to the movies and others are on the verge of suicide, some buy furniture or close a business while others feel irritated by some mishap; one thing happens to them and this prevents another from happening to them.

Many of these beings are destined to be my friends or my enemies; they still aren't and so they walk along, like me, and still can't explain the strange tremor that stirs in their bodies. I've learned to recognize them, but at the same time I leave them to do their work and I don't interfere. Let them drink a few liters of water before the holy hour comes. I must ingest my own ration today. But first I would rather not even remember college, and I know I won't be able to do it. I'm very irritable and I'll become unbearable. I want to sleep in peace, like an animal locked in the smallest box that could exist – that does not exist, of course, – to remember absolutely nothing.

It often happens that old age deprives one of their innate impartiality. One loves what one judged as a child with commendable moderation. I say this from experience, and I’d rather not argue about this matter with anyone. Because what worries me is something very different. What I am going to say concerns my life, which so many times surprised me while guarding in midst of an exasperating silence. What the hell is going to
happen once I die with all the wonderful images I have of this world; or, without going
too far, with the opinions expressed by Albert Camus in Combat, or with Being and Time
by Heidegger, which I have not read? I am amazed at Camus' lucidity and when I read
some passage of his work, I see him moving like a duck in the pond on a hot summer
afternoon. It's not his fault you can't imagine it any other way. I learned of his death in
1960, at the Municipal Library in Tarija. At that moment I didn't even suspect that I was
going to have the impression of him at the bottom of my heart that I now keep of him. A
similar thing almost happens to me with Being and Time. I haven't read that book and I
don't think I can read it now at my age; on the other hand, I am aware that its author has
dedicated himself to poetry, which, if I entertained his vision, it would spare me the
sorrowful job of trekking through countless pages in the service of the unknowable. A
few days ago, a friend told me that it took him three years to devour it. I doubt that I will
live that long, and if I decided to, reading it would hasten my disappearance. But that's
exactly not what I meant to say. Inside, I maintain that it is wonderful to live in this
world, to exist in a world of my own, to feel besieged by an infinite number of
miraculous events, to ignore most of them, and go to the grave delighted that I’ve chosen
the correct moments to remember. As I see it, to never know Being and Time or the
curious mechanism by which spaceships are set in motion has been a part of my destiny.
Even if I missed something, I guess this is what I meant to say. According to my custom,
I'll be a little capricious. In a world full of young people, what is an old man can do if not
become capricious. This attitude clouds our understanding but sets in motion the last
remaining forces of the heart. With what happens to me, my mind could not be any
cloudier, so that I will die praising my ability to vilify myself.

I'm not really interested in the rest; I tell the truth. The question as to what end
will the images that the world offers me serve once I am dead, is what impairs my
existence. I have no idea about it and on the other hand I have just started the show that I
like the most: the rain. The other day I heard high praise for a piece of writing bearing the
following title: Watching it Rain in Macondo. It is true that such events do not surprise
me, but I don’t deny that they produce a secret emotion in my ramshackle self. Besides,
it's raining in such a way that recalls in me, the remote rains that formed the perpetual
walls that separate me from my childhood. Being shrouded in darkness, the rain makes
me the sole spectator of the lonely joy of life. My eyes are disturbed, that's all. In a way
death has relegated me and a short time from now, my mouth will be permanently shut.
Of course, I'm no longer interested in whether my parents’ poop or not. This enigma
wrecked havoc on my soul as a child. The elders were given immortal status, and for a
long time I refused to accept that they should expel waste from the food they ingested so
eagerly. I had never seen anyone die or take a shit. That's why you get old. To live
shitting at the hands of death. If I had devoted all my efforts throughout my life to
training wasps, if I had been the first to jump off with parachute, or I had thought of
inventing the Farsimus machine, which has not yet been invented according to official
press, my immortality would already be assured. They would be desperate to attend my
death. Since I didn't do any of that, no one expects my death and only I await her with a
strange glow in my contemplative eyes.

8

When I arrived in Tarija in 1956, I discovered the enormous difference between my village and the city. I’ve lived here for about two years now and have in a way lost all of my first impressions, that is to say, I am no longer impressed by the contrasts. The first difficulty I had was my intolerance of the locals’ diction; in this respect I do not contend that my pronunciation is correct – in my town, unless not well-spoken, we disregard the letter s in words – it simply causes me melancholy to be an outlaw in the midst of such strange nature. Such a combination makes my heart sick. In chronological order, the first time I left home was 1954, when they took me to Villamontes and left me there to attend school for a year. I lived on the banks of the Pilcomayo River. There is a lot of fog in my memories, certainly some will be lost without leaving a trace in my life and will be replaced by facts no less real but more recent. Villamontes is a hundred kilometers from my village and nature rarely changes its mind in such a short distance. Maybe that's why I consider my move to Tarija as my first and authentic exit. I am sixteen years old and my situation is almost identical to that of all students who came from the provinces. No benefit will come to meet me from this conviction. I note that contrary to what happens to others, I am not inspired by the slightest desire to conquer the city. I have few friends and at the first chance I go away to the country, across the river. I don't know what I get there, in the middle of the bushes, but frankly I can't do without these short walks. A taste for the space that loneliness leaves is surely what takes me so often to those places. Or if it's
I recently confessed my concerns to a friend. I told him I had no idea of my origin and on the other hand I didn't know where I was headed. He told me those were questions that everyone asks as soon as they are able to babble their first words. It left me astonished and embarrassed. From now on these questions are forbidden and will mature in my bowels on their own, and I will be solely responsible for their corrosive results. I don't care anymore. These days I perceive distant and strange scents, aromas of my childhood without a doubt; I attribute their desalinating presence to an unquestionable purpose: I am living in a city with customs opposite to those of my land which has to offer resistance somehow, but not lose its privileged place in my heart. Confirming that I'm a docile prisoner of the school is nothing next to the bluish globe that instills in me an unexplained fear. A boy in first year is highly sought after by the students in higher grades for his bizarre knowledge of universal geography; he knows the location of the most insignificant rivers and the existence of cities and towns down to the inch, whether important or not, they are not unknown to him. He is cross-eyed, with blue eyes and his frame so small that no clothes fit him well. That is all when it comes to Lestach and if I wasn't a witness to his astonishing memory, there would be nothing left of him in mine. Speaking of something else: what is it that I do at San Luis school? I'm not a stand-out student in any subject, but I hold an enviable position in all of them, which, in short, is nothing more than a refined sign of indifference. Why draw hasty conclusions from an
I feel something strange about Leoncio Suárez. It’s been three years since we saw each other. I haven't heard from him, and on the other hand in all this time, I didn’t think about him even once. I thought him conclusively lost, all alone, with his universe closed, making a dreadful noise inside of a bottle, like a marvelous insect trapped by mistake. It's not like that. He reanimates in me, fresh as a lettuce, but as always, without any meaning in sight. Of course, I'm no longer in Salta and, even though Leoncio stayed there, I can't be sure he remains there. He has probably traveled to another, more distant place and found death so suddenly at an anonymous station that it didn't give him the least chance to resist. Since he did not trust his destiny, his favorite resource was to back away; if death lifted him up, it would soon bring him back to life: it is exceedingly difficult to make Leoncio Suárez walk. In 1958, when I met him, he was already missing almost all his upper teeth and some of the lower ones; he behaved so naturally and his candid laughter was so fitting that he did not leave any time for mystery, which prevented many of his friends from inquiring about the premature tooth loss that afflicted him and fostered the illusion that this physical defect was part of his condition. In this matter, I keep my mouth shut. I am only astonished that Leoncio Suarez could still endure beyond the most conducive realm to his existence: my memory. That one possibility hurts and makes me sick. If he has not fallen victim to madness, he must have devised a complicated system of defense based on the most unusual habits. I consider this to be his
only way out, the only hiding place for the men Suarez has the generosity to represent. I speak of experience, because my case is not different but identical to yours: a forgetful being forgot about me completely. At the moment my only advantage is my strange and wonderful youth, but deep down it means nothing because everything it reveals to me will soon fade away. Let it vanish! I say with regret. I can get used to anything. It hasn’t been long since I quit school, and yet it seems to me as if that time never existed in my life. It's enough for me to remember the sadness with which we bid farewell to high school graduates. In the opinion of some of my peers, the world was ending, we were thrown out of paradise without having committed any crime. If so, the happiest is the principal: he graduated from San Luis school twenty-five years ago and has been in the position for more than a quarter of a century. When our graduating class said goodbye to our beloved teachers, the principal wept as if it were the first time and got drunk as if it were the last time. Actually, he cries and gets drunk every year, I realize that now.

Instead, here at the university, I feel like a toad in a foreign pond: it's not my home and my real house has lost value in my memory. I know some students who are faithful to a pact sealed in the flower of their youth, that is, they meet every weekend to celebrate the years they have been away at school. I also learned that in some cases this custom can last into old age. Less than a month ago, one of my classmates committed
suicide at the height of a local party. I wasn't moved at all by his decision. I am simply sorry for the secrets he took from this world, of which, as of his death, he is the sole owner. He was young, now he’s not. Many beings were destined to know him, but it is impossible enough. Horrible or happy situations must have had him as the protagonist. The beings who were meant to know him have sunk into nostalgia and still don't know why. The situations mentioned will only occur by compromise. My friend, death will be waiting for you in vain all your life. I can bear witness to it and that's what I'm in this world for.

What I can make clear isn't much, but I'm happy. I understand almost nothing of life and let myself be governed by it. I judge that it is my youth that makes me proceed like this. I'm a new person and I haven't even noticed. Even if I read the most fantastic adventures, I can't suppress the desire to find myself lying under a tree, enjoying the delights of a climate still unknown to my body. Finally, I have not read the fantastic adventures, nor have I given up in my desires. For this reason. I dare not comment on anything, much less draw attention to myself. I maintain that the ideal would be to reconcile the adventures that my mind claims with the pretensions of my body. I find no solution to the riddle and more than one occasion I completely forget about the matter, which, after all, I am constantly concerned.
This time I can clarify that I belong to another race, to that of the extinct, to that of those who favor the reign of death. I explained recently, that I live in a real, but invisible world. Since I am old, no one takes note, so the truth suffers from melancholy in the corners of my soul. So, it's natural that I trust my dreams more than people who spend whistling a chachacha, and that I've ended up considering those as my only reality. There is no doubt that many truths will disappear with me, which doesn't bother me much. I began as the testimony of life; but I am now a secret, for I live in the hands of death. Two or three images, of the many that besieged me, became enduring, the others went to seek eternity in other arms. There is an age when everything starts from scratch, with a new light in the heart, in which one is the only guest of loneliness and she makes herself wait forever. I'm that age. I'm Bolivian, that's my nationality. I'd be very happy if this could serve as a lovely track. A Bolivian who wishes to contact a Spider from Feruntalguay, which I have never even imagined: so much time has been spent searching for it in the corners of my room, that the tobacco that I smoke at night has grown damp.

Bolivia has no sea, not even an exit to the sea. As it has been explained to us on many occasions, we must reconquer the sea by 1979, sooner if possible, and thus avenge our parents, punish an infamy that the continent endorses with its silence. So be it. But speaking in gold, when I was born, Bolivia no longer had a sea and it’s difficult to imagine my homeland another way. If we have access to the fabulous sea again, we would have fulfilled the blueprints of our dream. Nothing more and nothing less.
Unfortunately, I won't be here. I will leave for the light so that the earth may return me to the darkness of the oceans. I'll stop being a Mediterranean there. The death of a Bolivian person is not at all funny if one understands that most of their life was spent in Argentina, studying or peeling cane in the fields, a few, perhaps belly up on the beaches of Europe, but the rest in Cochabamba, except those who are confined. That's right, again. In the meantime, I can imagine how funny or melancholic one must become when looking at a small landlocked country from an artificial satellite.

15

Nine minutes before two in the morning of Friday, March 3, 1967. My name is Fielkho, and I am writing something that my body demands to live, that is, to establish a balance between my eyes and the world. The true reasons, I don't understand myself. When I stay silent, my ears perceive the music of the universe; they're just sounds, but they're enough to make me lose the identity I keep along with that truck that just buzzed by, for example. Everything seems like a journal to me and that's fine, even if it's funny. This afternoon I was visited by a friend that I hadn't seen in a long time; wasted time, my friend, because time does not pass in vain. I was born a short while ago, but my life has already been lost and I can merely look at it from my lonely room. I don’t signal to it; I leave it in complete freedom. If my life sinks, I won't be too surprised; if it doesn't, I won't celebrate misdeeds. I didn't come here to make them, or to take mine. A month ago, I traveled to the Chaco to visit my parents and I saw that my brothers grew more than I had expected. I verified all that and turned around, so I'm back here. Where it's here, I
don't know. While I don't think that I'll starve, I look at the Tarijeña basket recessed in
the wall. From within, I do not know how many spark plugs can cast a light that relieves
me of some weight before my existence. I just scratched the lobe of my right ear and I'm
surprised to call lobe that piece of meat hanging from me. The dogs howl in the distance.
There is certainly a profound meaning in these howls and I'm not far from unraveling it,
but I've coughed in time and thus expelled from power the germs in my body. The dogs
howl again. How to let them know that I'm already immunized? I thought I saw
something in the bed. I think about this while the world sleeps. I think of thinking, if you
don't love me, you want me to get sick. What I've painted black has lost its color. And
that's fine. Because you'll never know what I painted, since, when I painted it, I didn't
know that I was going to lose its color. Clearer water because a bell just rang. Who will
take care to ring the mysterious bells of the night? Whoever the Lord of the Bells is, he
also sleeps like everyone else and without feeling privileged. He sleeps on his side and in
his whole life, he’s not more than three times do not sound dead. When the one who rings
the mysterious bells of the night sounds dead the dawn is more beautiful, the day of an
unspeakable freshness, but the wants to burst his head in pain. Even if at this moment I
pass and review an army of demons, I will not forget the pain that engenders the
clairvoyance of happiness. If I’d known that I was going to die, I wouldn't have come to
life. If I'd known I was going to live, I wouldn't be writing these words right now. I am
exactly twenty-five years, four months and sixteen days of existence in this world, which
once was that way, but now it no longer is. What will I have when I can't have anymore?
Something I must have that I no longer care about not having, something like a loving
breath that someone gives to one in the ear when one is alone and alone in the dark is his dreams. That's why I don't mind having nothing, as Cachín says, that doesn't have anything either. If I want to think of something, I think every moment saved me as a miracle of death. This makes me smug and foul spoken, and to some extent, cancels out my innate fondness for photography, so it also makes me amused to see myself sitting, to see music. I know where the matches are, and I'm happy to know this. That's what I know and that's all my joy right now. Just thinking about the wrinkles in my pants or laundromats, I'm laughing, maybe because every moment I imagine attending the takeoff of the ships that leave so as not to return. I speak of those that do not exist, of those who do not age with the neck; to have an opinion on old things. There's an old saying that's unrelated to what I'm doing now. Do it and you’ll see, the old saying goes. Because what I'm doing now is seeing the animal sleeping in me, while he dreams me seeing what I'm doing now and laughs. When this fabulous animal wakes up from its short-lived dreams, the stars will fall out and the sick will be frightened.
Nonfiction
In Virginia, we lived on the thought of food. There were four of us, cooks who became friends working at the diner. There was Khaleed and Mohamad, brothers from Egypt who I had met in my ESL class a year prior. There was also Hassan from Sudan. It was he who had recruited me for the job. I was not a Muslim and became their friend almost by mistake. I had never worked in a kitchen before, but Hassan offered me the job after he heard me complain about my stepfather. He cleaned and installed carpets for a living and only took me along to do the parts of the job he was too lazy to do himself. Worse, he never paid me any money. It was the first big fight I had with my parents. After my mother finished screaming, she accepted my decision only on the condition that I give her half of my earnings. I agreed, but I also told her that I would never go to her church again, that I had been an atheist since I was eleven years old, and that the last thing I needed in my life were more fairytales.

This was the fall of 1999. I was sixteen years old. I smoked Newport cigarettes and took every opportunity to dissociate from the disaster that was my life. Up until this point, I had known nothing about American food other than from movies and TV. On the plane, I had been impressed by the efficiency of a sandwich assembled from processed ham and American cheese product. It quickly became my go-to snack. My family didn’t have money for sit-down restaurants, and when we did not eat at home, the food came from a drive-through window. I was unimpressed by this fast food, which tasted too sweet for my palate. This extended to our groceries. For the first few months, everything tasted bland or chemically altered. Eggs had no color. Tomatoes had no flavor. All the
potatoes tasted the same. Carrots didn’t even taste like vegetables. Even Coca-Cola tasted different. But there was the convenience of course. Microwavable hotdogs. Instant mashed potatoes. Sugary cereal. Chicken nuggets. Macaroni and cheese.

In Bolivia, the food was rustic, especially in Cochabamba where slow-cooked stews served in clay bowls were the standard. Scoops of rice. Big-boiled potatoes. Bony and fatty cuts of meat. Entire ears of corn. Fistfuls of fava beans. Salad was a simple affair of tomatoes and onions dressed with oil and vinegar. Salt and pepper. Sometimes cheese. The main meal was lunch, and it was a pleasant affair. Everyone had already been to school or had spent some time at work. Everyone felt accomplished and grateful to take a break. Sometimes there was fruit and a nap afterwards. But in Virginia, we ate bland meals made quickly, and late in the day, when everyone was tired from school or resentful from work. There was no work-life balance, only convenience.

The night before my first day of American high school, before that big yellow bus had collected me early in the morning and deposited me in front of a building that looked like a prison, my parents had sat me down and explained the dangers of public schools. I was not to make friends with any Black classmates or any Muslims. Asians were okay, so long as they were Christian; the same was true of other Latin American immigrants. The first friend I made was a Bolivian girl about my age who had immigrated six months prior and still had not adjusted to the change. She had attended a school only a few blocks away from my old school in Cochabamba. Her grandparents were even from the same small town as my grandparents. Unfortunately, she was a Jehovah’s witness, a fact I
foolishly shared with my mother, which led to one of our very first fights. As result, I quickly learned to disobey my new parents. I discovered how to shoplift makeup from the department store. Since my stepfather had forbidden it, I used swearwords and took the lord’s name in vain often and with great relish. I wish that I could say that I broke all of my parent’s rules because I was an enlightened person, but the opposite is actually true. I had dragged my own prejudices along with my backpack when I came to this country. Be it my parents’, my own, or someone else’s, prejudice governed time.

Three weeks into my sophomore year I tested out of ESL class, which meant that I could be put in regular English 9. This meant that I was now only one year behind the traditional students. My guidance counselor was impressed; she said that if I applied myself, I may even be able to go to college one day. Mr. Boyd, my new teacher, seemed uncertain. He had good reasons. While I was able to read and write well enough to fill-in the blanks and bubble-in the correct answers to pass a test, I could not for the life of me pronounce any of the fucking words. I also could not understand anything anyone said unless they sounded like my ESL classmates or Mr. Rogers with closed caption on television. To make matters worse, my voice had begun to change. I could feel it getting away from me, escaping into thin air, or falling like a drop from the roof of a cave, a drop from my head to my throat and down to my chest. I sounded nothing like myself. The only logical answer to this discomfort was enduring silence.

The truth was that I was disappointed. Naively, I had bought into grand ideas of prosperity in America. But opportunity seemed to exist only for those who could afford it. The fault, I thought then, had been my mother’s, but every one of us was guilty of
believing falsehoods at the time. She had left Bolivia eight years prior after my parents’
divorce. During our time apart, she had worked single and double-shifts, remarried,
gotten a green card, worked two or three jobs, and build a whole new life for herself. A
life that for eight years did not include me or my little sister. We cried when we were
finally reunited, even though I felt like I was hugging a stranger. She introduced me to
her new husband, who fed me Big Macs and promptly began sculpting me to be over-
worked and silent.

I was initially curious about my mother’s new husband. He had immigrated from
Bolivia around the same time as her, but unlike my mother he spoke rudimentary English.
A former alcoholic, he had met my mother in church, which he attended religiously four
or five days per week in order to manage his addiction. He was short and bald, and so
uncomfortable in his sobriety that any little obstacle he encountered during the day made
him explode in anger. He called women who wore makeup harlots. He thought women
dying their hair to look younger was jezebelic. That’s what he called it. *Jezebelic.* He was
obsessed with King David and biblical masculinity. If manhood was a weight, he was one
of those men who measured themselves based on how much of it he could lift. How loud
he could yell. How hard he could hit. In that sense, my stepfather never saw me as a
threat. Instead, he regarded me with suspicion. The suspicion that I would never be able
to lift as big a weight, or throw that weight as far, or be as heartless.

On my first day at the diner, Khaleed introduced me to Mr. Habibi, the manager.
He talked to me about cleaning, sanitation, and the dangers of unseen filth. I understood
bacteria from biology class and promised to work hard to keep things as clean as possible. He was a small, quiet man, who sat in the corner of the breakfast counter with a calculator and a note pad while he read the newspaper. Whenever you asked him for something, he either nodded in agreement or frowned disapprovingly before you even finished speaking. Khaleed spoke to him in Arabic in the same tone I used to speak with my uncles in Bolivia. Familiar but with respect. Khaleed showed me how to use a chef’s knife.

This is the handle. This is the blade. You need to cut something, you come to me, I cut for you, he said. I’ll teach you later.

I worked with Khaleed on Fridays and Saturdays. I worked with Hassan the most. Thursday through Sunday. I only worked with Mohammad when he was covering shifts, but he was the one with the car, so he was always around picking up his brother and giving us rides from home to work, or school, or the library. It was thirty or so hours a week, making five dollars an hour, under the table.

Mr. Habibi deducted an hour each day to cover our breaks and shift meals. In all honesty, I appreciated the transparency. Unlike working for my stepfather, I actually got breaks and a meal instead of having to wait until we could bother my mother to make us food at home. The reason Hassan had recruited me and not another one of his Muslim friends was this: he was looking for someone to be in charge of prepping the bacon for the weekend breakfast marathon. The diner’s secret to short-order breakfast involved pre-cooking hundreds of slices of bacon ahead of the weekend rush, so the morning cooks could quickly crisp it up on the grill and serve it. Friday nights were too busy, so the
bacon bonanza happened on Thursday nights. Hassan supervised the first few times. I laid out sheet after sheet, thirty or so pieces at a time over the flat top grill. I genuinely didn’t mind. I wanted to learn.

As hard as the job was; I knew that it was better than the dish pit, which was staffed by Don Martín. A recent arrival from El Salvador, Don Martín spoke as much English as he understood it: zero. He replied to every request by saying.

Yes, I do this for you.

He was a short stout man that worked almost every available shift on account of his seven children who were waiting in El Salvador and counted on him to send them money. Sometimes he took naps in the broom closet.

On Friday nights, the diner filled with suburbanite teenagers that came in droves on their way to a movie or the mall, along with their friends or a date. Some of them were my classmates. I saw them park recent-model cars before stuffing themselves on burgers. On weekends, wealthy cheapskates came by the diner on sunny days to show off their toys and occasionally ordered well-done steaks. On those days, brightly colored vintage cars with shiny chrome bumpers stood still for long hours in the parking lot. The building was a giant pie case of square windows with walls painted in stripes of red and blue with shiny metal panels in between. A neon sign on the roof hummed at all hours of the day. Behind it, a hole-in-the wall bar shared the kitchen. The whole thing was an American fraud. Underneath the sheen of neon and chrome, the signature inviting aroma of pancakes and bottomless coffee served on a laminate countertop was fulfilled by poor immigrants most of whom could barely speak English. The namesake of the restaurant
was a giant machine at the entrance of the diner that accepted coins and bills of up to ten dollars in order to play oldies and top-40 hits.

It’s not even a real jukebox, said Hassan. It’s a CD changer that accepts coins.

My parents had set clear boundaries for me around Black classmates, but they had not mentioned a single thing about Black teachers. Mr. Boyd was unlike any Black character I had seen on television up to that point. In all regards, he was just like any of my other teachers. He wore collared shirts and wool sweaters. He didn’t seem threatening or violent. Plus, I was glad to have left ESL behind. Not only had I grown tired of the Hispanic boys in class along with their constant bullying, but I had also grown sick of reading children’s books and fairytales. I was happy that no one would ask me to read *Clifford the Big Red Dog* out loud in class ever again. All that changed on my first day in Mr. Boyd’s classroom when I discovered the class was in the middle of reading *Romeo and Juliet*. From the moment I gazed at the pages of the book, I knew that I had made a mistake. None of it made any sense. I looked around the classroom for friendly faces, there were none. A feeling began to sink in my gut. Mr. Boyd explained how biting your thumb was funny in Shakespeare’s day. I don’t remember why, but I feared being sent back to ESL simply because I didn’t understand what was so funny about it.

For the first time in my life, I began to emotionally prepare for failing a class. Mr. Boyd was kind and spoke gently while explaining the themes of the play. He explained the narrative arc to me using the blackboard. He drew a truck, inside the truck, there was a protagonist. The truck was the conflict. The protagonist was driving the conflict over a
hill. The hill was the plot of the story. Then Mr. Boyd went on and on about Mercutio and Romeo and how their relationship was the same if not more important than Juliet. Or at least, this is what it sounded like to my teenage ears. None of it made any sense. Life was not that simple. Not even in retrospect: no one moment fundamentally defines one person. Mr. Boyd was calm and took time explaining things to me. I promised him that I wasn’t stupid. I had excelled in math and science for as long as I could remember, but never in English. He must have felt pity for me, a socially-inept sixteen-year-old immigrant kid who wore nail polish and hair mascara and spoke broken English. He gave me a Prince CD and ask me to stop by after school if I wanted extra help.

I told Hassan about English class during our next shift. He was always eager to know what the classes with the white kids were like. Hassan had lived in the US since elementary school. He seemed to speak English fine, but had always struggled with tests.

I can’t spell for shit, he said. English doesn’t make sense.


We could chat because the shift was slow on Thursdays. There was the dinner rush, and afterwards there was the bacon business. I learned to appreciate whenever the opportunity came to prepare an entree instead of flipping a burger or assembling a sandwich. It wasn’t anything refined, this was not French Cuisine; it was an American diner. The Fish Special was white tilapia, skinned and deboned, prepared with clarified butter and paprika, then broiled to a crust. I would be lying if I said I did not feel pride while I sprinkled parsley and reached for a lemon wedge. I welcomed every chance of making Chicken Parmesan, which seemed ridiculous to me at first, but I grew to enjoy
the combination of boiled noodles and fried chicken smothered with sauce with burnt cheese on top. I even enjoyed making the Mixed Grill Special, which was an eight-ounce steak and a grilled chicken breast served with vegetables (a generic combination of peas, corn, chopped carrots and string beans) along with a baked potato.

On Friday night, the shift was less about the quality of the food than it was about the quantity of plates served. The number of egg flats used. The amount of mashed potatoes scooped. Along with the hours of heat endured, the burns and near burns, and the occasional mishap with a knife. Sometimes, Khaleed brought in a boombox and we listened to Hip-Hop or Rock and Roll. We took turns taking smoke breaks and sang along to “We Are the Champions” loud with our foreign accents until Mr. Habibi came in to tell us to turn the noise down. We listened to African and middle eastern music which I had never heard before and immediately found to be joyous and contagious. Hassan liked to play with the cleaver and pretend that he was a butcher. Khaleed was always cleaning his station or sharpening knives. He started me off chopping vegetables and showed me how to cut onions really thin.

The owner of the restaurant was a man from Jordan who drove a brand-new Escalade and only came to the restaurant once or twice a month. He had a son about our age who spoke unaccented English like my white classmates. He used to claim valuables from the lost and found before the staff could get their hands on anything. He asked me where I was from. He had never met anyone from Bolivia before. He asked me if I knew how to dance salsa. I told him the truth, that I had been raised evangelical and that the
only dancing I’d seen my family do involved a tambourine and speaking in tongues. He was unimpressed.

Mohammed eventually dropped-out of school that year and began working full-time. He still gave us rides and bought cartons of cigarettes for us to split. He had gotten a fake ID and now spent his weekends going to night clubs and bragging about his late-night adventures. Hassan had a round face. He had facial hair which depending on the day made him looked ruggedly handsome or vaguely homeless. You could tell that Khaleed and Mohammed were related. They had the same build, the same head shape, the same shoulders. Khaleed was generous and laughed easily. He insisted on preparing my meals on the days we had shifts together.

I make it really good for you, he’d say.

Mostly he was trying to get me to stop eating all the corned beef. That was the only food I had found that reminded me of home. Salted meat, first boiled, then fried to a crisp. I used to eat it with everything.

Try the meatloaf! I put the bacon in it. Khaleed added.

I looked at him unconvinced. He could not help the way he looked. He had a big belly and a messy beard. His hair was already thinning, and he feared he’d go bald at a young age. He had a large nose, thick eyelashes, and dark eyes. He looked instantly Arab, like a Middle Eastern villain in a Hollywood movie. Which I imagined mattered little in Egypt but made a world of difference in suburban Virginia.
As for my own looks, I wasn’t doing any better. The switch to an American diet had turbocharged my metabolism and with it my puberty. A recent growth-spurt had made a joke of most of my pants. Worse, my feet had become so big that it was hard to find tennis shoes that fit me in the women’s aisle at K-mart. I had also taken on the habit of over-eating and returning meals every day, a fact I shared with absolutely no one. I feared the weight of my changing body. It made me feel actively ugly. I was afraid that I would become hairy like Hassan or Khaleed. I began shaving my arms and legs regularly. I painted my nails with markers at first and later with polish that I had shoplifted. I tried bleaching my hair with hydrogen peroxide, but it didn’t work. I removed the mirror from the downstairs bathroom and took showers with the lights off in near pitch-black darkness. Anything instead of having to look at myself.

My favorite subject in high school was chemistry. I had recently learned about kinetic-molecular theory which explained the properties of plasmas, as well as hydrogen bonding, the volatility of solids and liquids, and the forces that affect their boiling and melting points. But I was still a child of logic and therefore unsophisticated. I was prone to black-and-white thinking and had no idea of how to talk about anxiety, depression, or eating disorders. There was no language in my head that could possibly hold space or articulate my gender dysphoria or my suicidal thoughts. Instead, there was the constant conflict with my parents, which took up a lot of my energy, but it sure did not feel like anything that could be resolved by driving a truck through it. There was also the matter of my sexuality, to which I had given a lot of thought to. What it would be like. What he’d be like. Who would undress who. But the only conversation I had with my mother about
my sexuality ended with her telling me that if I ever did anything vaguely homosexual in her house, she would douse me in gasoline while I slept and set me on fire.

My counselor had been eying a STEM pre-college program at a prestigious Virginia university. She asked me if I had ever been to Williamsburg. The Science Technology and Research (STAR) program recruited promising students from disadvantaged backgrounds and offered them an opportunity to spend the summer living on campus while attending college prep and SAT courses. It all sounded like a dream. My counselor told me rosy stories about Thomas Jefferson and Monticello. She told me that I would need three letters of recommendation and that I would have to enroll in additional math and English credits through an alternative high school at night in order to meet the criteria. She also signed me up to take a tour of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science with a group after school.

I dreamt about faraway places, particle accelerators, and fast-moving nucleons. I looked over the brochures and practiced how to pronounce the name of the dorm building and imagined what it would be like to live in the Taliaferro Hall. My little sister was also learning science in elementary school. This upset my mother and her husband which prompted their pastor to drop off tracts and leaflets at the house. That day, my mother’s husband gave me a pamphlet that showed an illustration of a Tyrannosaurus Rex wearing sunglasses coming out of Noa’s Ark. He told me not to believe the devil’s lies. My mom forced my sister to watch poorly-made documentaries about religious apartheid and the persecution of Christians. She began to say that everything was satanic. They began
attending late-night vigils at their church. Harry Potter books. Pokémon cards. Rock and Roll music. Whatever secular contraband those valiant Christian parents had confiscated from their sinful children was burned in a small pyre in a lot behind a Methodist church on Seminary road near the Community College. Meanwhile, my stepfather went on and on about werewolves, transsexuals, and lizard people. That’s when my parents barred us from keeping non-Christian books in the house which simply prompted me to spend more time at the library and to only come to the house to sleep.

These were the months leading up to the millennial, my parents and sister left to spend Thanksgiving in New York with some family friends. My stepfather had spent days planning the route on paper maps in the living room. I was scheduled at the diner as usual; my parents didn’t even bother to invite me. After a while, I fell into the routine of work, school, homework, sleep, and waiting for payday. Waiting for Monday and then for Tuesday. Feeling the expectation on Thursday. Finally getting that envelope on Friday. I began to save to buy a car and an electric guitar. Yet I still felt like I had no friends. In Bolivia, most of my friends had been girls, and I was close to many of my cousins. But in Virginia, my parents refused to socialize outside their church which didn’t leave me with many options. There was my little sister, of course, who was about to turn twelve and whom I overburdened with my blossoming teenage problems daily. She was a dusty little girl with round cheeks and pretty dimples, but she was already worried that she would not be able to enter middle school at the appropriate language level. Besides, she was not into fashion or makeup yet and hadn’t shown interest in any gender. When my parents weren’t around, I found time to watch public television with her. We watched
children’s cartoons like *Arthur* or *Dragon Tales*, or waited for Jacques Pépin to come on, so we could watch him debone a chicken or bake a tart.

At school I asked my chemistry and algebra teachers for recommendations which they were happy to write. My ESL teacher did not feel comfortable, since I had been in her class for the short duration of three weeks, she felt she didn’t know enough about me as a student to write one. This left only Mr. Boyd whose class I was almost certain to fail. To my surprise, he wrote one anyway. I forged my mother’s signature and gave the application to my counselor.

Conflict at the house deescalated for a while, but then my parents became aware of Y2K. The panic began with my stepfather who made phone calls to members of his congregation asking them where he could buy a gun. My mother talked about freezing meat and buying toilet paper. After calling their pastor, they started to prep for catastrophe and attended long overnight vigils at their church.

What if Jesus comes back? My mother asked me defiantly.

After Christmas, my stepfather began collecting water in the upstairs bathtub and in large buckets. I made the terrible mistake of trying to logically explain to my him how computers worked. How this doom scenario, planes falling from the sky, bank accounts disappearing overnight, cars suddenly not starting, was impossible. Or at the very least, very unlikely. I was still explaining the difference between software and hardware when he shoved me and threatened to beat me up. He told me that I was a know-it-all, that I
had an effeminate voice, and that I was always manipulating my mother. I asked him to
give me an example and my mom had to physically prevent him from hitting me. Sure, I
was good at school (not that it mattered), but I had no social sense. I promptly blurted out
the next logical or obvious remark, even if it was unhelpful (especially if it was
unhelpful).

This would be the last time my mother would interfere with her husband’s fists,
but it wouldn’t be the first or last time that my mother would abandon me to my fate. I
had seen this before. I had noticed how the Hispanic boys in my ESL class behaved when
they had just arrived in the country. They were doe-eyed and gentle, yet I saw how over
the course of weeks they began to realize whatever privileged place they held at home
had evaporated in this new environment. They grew angry and became violent. They
began to threaten others with their fists in order to assert their dominance one way or
another. The thought of ever becoming someone like that disgusted me.

My parents and my sister spent New Year’s Eve at an overnight vigil waiting for
god to reveal himself, or the apocalypse, or aliens. At work, the diner was empty, but the
bar on the other side of the kitchen was chockfull of patrons with party blowouts in their
mouths ordering an endless string of appetizers to counter their drunkenness. Hassan and
I fielded the orders with great efficiency. Chicken fingers. Onion rings. Mozzarella sticks.
Cheese fries. Buffalo wings. Popcorn shrimp. Chips and salsa. The occasional order of
spinach and artichoke dip. I watched the end of a century on a tiny black-and-white
television in the backroom of the kitchen near the dish pit. One of the servers asked me to
check the fryer (someone’s calamari was about to be extra-crispy).
When the new year came, it was as anticlimactic as expected, like life caught by the freezing of memory. I made a chocolate chip pancake with ears like Micky Mouse for my sister and two large breakfast platters with extra sausage for my parents. I paid for it out of my own money. I figured they would be in a terrible mood because Jesus hadn’t returned, but they’d be less angry if at least there was food ready to eat. For my shift meal, I cooked big chunks of corned beef and improvised a salad with onions and tomatoes. Then, I smoked a cigarette.

A new millennium had begun.
Dis·mem·ber

*It will never be known how this story ought to be told, in the first
person or in the second, using the third person plural or continually
inventing modes that will serve for nothing. If one might say: I will see
the moon rose, or: we hurt me at the back of our eyes, and especially:
you the blond woman was the clouds that race before my your his hers
their ours your faces. God damn.*

*Julio Cortázar, “The Devil’s
Drool”*

I

Shelly was nineteen years old, and she did her best to get by. Blond hair and a
cherry vine tattoo; her family called her Treasure. It is unclear to us how long she had
known Red or how they met. Red may or may not have been involved with a gang (this is
still unclear). What we know for sure is that Shelly was involved in a police
investigation. She had been busted for possession of a small amount of marihuana and
was serving as a police informant, cooperating with an on-going investigation. We know
that the attackers ambushed her, kidnapped her, beat her, and murdered her. We know
this happened after an officer in the Police Department¹ outed her to her neighbor.

Forensic reports indicate blunt trauma to the head. We also know for fact that Shelly tried
to fight off her attackers because her hands were severed and disposed of separately to

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¹ A member of the Drug Unit at Maddison Heights P.D. gave enough details to the drug dealer’s housemate
to reveal that Shelly had provided critical information that led to his arrest. On a witness deposition, after
being asked why he outed the victim, the police officer simply stated, “I don’t know.”
hide any DNA evidence. Shelly kept secrets under her fingernails. The attackers used a screwdriver and a hatchet to dispose of her body.

Her burnt torso was found days after her murder, in October.

Her arms were not discovered until March.

It took four years for the police to charge her murder.

II

You used to be afraid of syringes and needles. Of sharp objects piercing your flesh and depositing foreign substances in your body. You were a sickly child, coming down with one respiratory infection after another. The most accessible solution for your family was a penicillin injection. Each sore throat, each earache, each runny nose led to an eventual antibiotic shot. You were eight years old when you learned the word: AMOXICILINA. But it was not until you were ten, that you learned words like:

Bronquitis.

Amigdalitis.

Bronquitis Crónica.

These visits were a family affair, late in the day, when your father was home from work. Or in the middle of the night, after your fever got so bad you could swear that you were seeing stars. Each episode went something like this. First, your parents took you to a nearby clinic (a primary care practice run by a German nunnery). You waited with all the other patients and their maladies, and other times you were the only patient. Eventually,
the doctor saw you, examined you, and diagnosed you. You stuck out your tongue. A light was shined in your eyes, an instrument inserted in your ear, a stethoscope pressed against your chest. You breathed in. And out. In. And out. Then your back. You breathed in. And out. In. And out. The doctor inspected your lymph nodes with his index and middle finger. One of your parents, usually your father, delivered the bad news. If you wanted to not be sick anymore, you had to get an injection.

Un pinchaso, he said.

Un pinchaso? You said.

Just a pinch. Then he used his most reassuring voice to tell you that he would take you to get ice cream once you got better.

Two scoops. Coco y Dulce de Leche. On a waffle cone.

Your father brokered these arrangements calmly. Are you going to be strong?

Si papi, voy a ser fuerte.

Getting you to consent to the injection was easy. Your parents never participated in the administration of these shots. Having accepted your fate, you nodded, and three or four nurses, all of them nuns, entered the examination room. Your muscles tensed up. Your heart rate accelerated. Your adrenalin kicked in. But the nurses held you down. Then, the head nurse carried out the task. Unlike your siblings, you were made to take a

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2 Just one block away from Cochabamba’s Main Square (la Plaza de Armas 14 de Septiembre) was the confectionery of my childhood. Thirty-six flavors of ice creams, fourteen different types of cakes, plus other deserts, and food for adults.
daily spoonful of cod liver oil, thick, and salty. Your parents worried daily about you
developing something called:

Neumonia Ambulante.

It was also around this time that my parents divorced, and my father began to
express his affection by buying me whatever I wanted. I asked for a fish tank. He
made me start small. A globe of thick glass. Sixteen fistfuls of gravel. Five
pitchers of water. A plant. An air pump and an air stone. Once it was filled, I
could barely lift the thing. I kept two Guppies at first for several months. My dad
was encouraging. He bought me books, magazines. I read about marine life and
dreamed of orcas and faraway places. I learned about water parameters, filters,
and the nitrogen cycle. About ammonia. About nitrites and nitrates. My father
encouraged my learning, but he never became interested himself. He couldn’t tell
a Molly from a Platy, or a Neon Tetra from a Cardinal Tetra. He was a stranger
to this underwater world.

III

Corals are marine invertebrates. A coral colony is made of many individual
polyps living in clusters, attached to the seabed. Although related to anemones and
jellyfish, corals are different because they produce a mineral skeleton, a basal plate of
calcium carbonate called calicle. Corals build their own environments: coral reefs. Some
corals grow into asymmetrical plates, others sprout caps and domes, yet others form lobes

3 From late Middle English “kālonē,” meaning a settlement of retired soldiers acting as a garrison.
like mushrooms on trees. Shallow water corals need sunlight. These corals grow on limestone needles. The photosynthetic algae living in the gastrodermal cells of these corals provide the host with food as well as the green, brown, and reddish colors we associate with them. But corals come in many colors. The purple, blue, and mauve colors found in some coral species are present in the polyp’s tissue itself. Corals are among the most long-lived species on the planet; some deep-sea clusters have been alive for more than 4,000 years. Reefs are home to many species, including rabbitfish, with their hare-like mouths and dark eyes, they school together in unison, staying close to each other to avoid predators. When predators break their ranks, the remaining shoals become easy prey. Individual rabbits being chased by themselves don’t fare well. Corals do have natural predators. Crown-of-thorns Starfish are well-known killers of coral reefs. The process is slow. They eat the polyps one by one and strip the coral down to their bones.

IV

La Unión de Estudiantes Secundarios de La Plata in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a group of high school students advocating for reduced transit fare, plans to carry out a strike. Leaders of the union are identified as students from El Colegio Nacional de Bellas Artes and La Escuela Normal Nº 3. Meanwhile, in Paris, a surveillance unit sent by the Military Junta monitors Cortázar. He has been labeled a Marxist. His literary work is now banned in his native country. He is not alone. La Cantante de Tucumán is also in Paris. In the loneliness of exile, La Cantante records one of her most successful albums. But it’s

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4 The first written use of coral as the name for a color (in English) was in 1513.
not until her return that her voice takes hold as an instrument of mourning and resilience. She sings:

Es mi destino

Piedra y Camino

De un sueño lejano y bello, viday

Soy peregrino⁵

Back at home, a group of grandmothers are protesting the disappearance of their grandchildren. Las Locas, the newspapers call them. But Las Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo are resilient. Every Thursday they march around the plaza demanding information on the location of their grandchildren. They tie their hair down with handkerchiefs and ignore instructions from the military police. As they walk by a transistor radio plays songs by La Cantante. Even though her music is being censored, her voice still finds a way to emerge in barrios and high-rises alike. Her voice comes through, and not just in her hometown, but everywhere Spanish is spoken.

V

When they arrived in Abya Yala in the year 5,031, Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo⁶ came with them. Like so many, he supported the practice of human sacrifice.

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⁵ “Piedra Y Camino” by Atahualpa Yupanqui
⁶ In this motherfucker’s notebook, Natural Historia de las Indias (1526), he describes members of our indigenous nations as effete men who cover themselves from the waist to the knees and wear strings of beads and bracelets and the other things used by women as adornment. He ridiculed how we did not engage in the use of weapons, nor what he called, “anything proper to men.” He is one of the first colonizers to document how gender did not conform to European cultural norms on this continent.
Pyromania and death lurked in his eyes. There are estimates of the number of people he sacrificed, but that number does not exist in our language. We do have words for death and pestilence, but no words like sodomy or natural law. But since they did not speak our words or understand our symbols, they could not know our ways or understand our science. Deluded by his sense of supremacy, he called our land *Tierra Firme*. Even though we later learned that the name just meant Mainland (in colonizer speech). They ridiculed us because we only had farming tools and no weapons. They set their attack beasts on us. They despised that we chose grandmothers as elders and leaders. The colonizers did not understand the way we braided our hair or marked our bodies with ink. When they looked at us, they called us evil. We had no word for evil. Some of us were killed because of who we shared a bed with. Some of us were killed because of how we dressed. Most of us were killed for worshipping the wrong god. The truth is that we knew many spirits intimately, but they would not understand this. The colonizers who were headmen or principals were revered by their disciples based on the number of lives they had taken. Our lives were just another trophy to them.

**VI**

Dee was twenty-five years old and a registered nurse. She was on vacation in St. Martin, Mississippi, when she decided to hook up with Dwanya. Dwanya was a Sailor in the US Navy stationed at Keesler Air Force Base for training. We don’t know much about what happened, but we do know that Dwanya had sex with Dee. This was
confirmed by the Sailor himself. How? Why? When exactly did he decide to kill her? That remains unclear. What we know for sure is that he didn’t stab her once, or twice, or even three times. He didn’t stab her five, or six, or ten times. He didn’t stab her fifteen, or twenty, or thirty times. We know he stabbed her with a ten-inch, fixed-blade Gerber knife. That we do know. We also know he didn’t stab her forty, or fifty, or even seventy times. He didn’t stab her one-hundred times. Forensic reports indicate that the victim was stabbed one hundred and nineteen times. We know he abandoned Dee’s body in a hotel room. We know Dwanya took a shower after the murder. We know he left the water running after he was done, and that Dee’s body was discovered by her friends. Months later, the prosecutor made a plea deal with the sailor because he felt the evidence was too slim for a jury to convict him. Heat-of-the-moment killings are often reduced to manslaughter in Mississippi.

VII

Some corals have the ability to self-fragment; each polyp can clone zirself. These colonies are made entirely of identical twins. Other polyps produce larvae. When the larvae emerge, each individual must swim in the open reef to find an exposed portion of the coral skeleton in order to survive. During this time, the larva is vulnerable to small fish in search of an easy meal. If successful, the larva will anchor zirself on the basal plate, grow into a polyp, and begin zir work adding to the coral’s skeleton.

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7 A combat knife designed by a former US Marine (and Currently a Director at the United States Military Academy at West Point) for Gerber Legendary Blades in Tigard, Oregon.
The reef is always growing.

A polyp can grow to be no bigger than a pinhead or up to a foot in diameter.

Shallow water polyps have a symbiotic relationship with the algae in their gastrodermal cells. For the algae, their relationship with the polyps provides an ideal environment. So long as the polyps remain at a depth where they are reached by enough sunlight, the algae will photosynthesize and generate enough nutrients for themselves and their host. Other polyps feed on a variety of small organisms, from microscopic zooplankton to small fish. Some polyps have six tentacles while others have eight. Some polyps possess a stinging apparatus. Contact with palytoxin, a highly toxic naturally-occurring and potentially lethal substance found in some corals, can bring about flu-like symptoms such as coughing, fever, chills, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, chest pain, shortness of breath, runny nose, fatigue, dizziness, speech disturbance, muscle weakness, cramps, spasms, and a bitter metallic taste in the mouth. A flap in the polyp’s body opens up. A barb fires into the unsuspecting prey. A polyp uses its tentacles to immobilize and eat its prey.

It is still unclear how long polyps can live, but the Great Barrier Reef along the coast of Australia has been growing for at least 20,000 years, and some coral skeletons are known to be at least 40,000 years old. Yet no toxin or barb is able to protect Coral from its greatest threat, changes to our environment. The systematic warming of the ocean impacts the zooplankton on which corals feed; it also affects the algae in the corals’ gastrodermal cells. When this happens, the corals expel the algae and begin to
lose color. With a diminished food source, the bleached coral weakens and begins to die.

The increased temperature also makes the polyps more susceptible to viruses.

VIII

Injections manifested again in your adolescence as cold hands in latex gloves pinching your deltoid; stretching your skin flat between thumb and forefinger; needle at a ninety-degree angle. Ouch.

Measles, Mumps, and Rubella.

Tetanus, Diptheria, and Pertussis.

Varicella.

Hepatitis B.

Meningitis.

Needles followed you into your professional life in the form of tithers and tuberculosis tests. One quarter-inch needle under the skin.

Tuberculin.

You learned English and practiced how to pronounce the word: PHLEBOTOMIST. But needles were only an occasional necessity until you discovered tattoos and piercing needles.

The lobes (first).

Upper ear cartilage (later).
Nose ring.

An industrial.

An industrial piercing has two entry points.

Piercing needles are hollow with a sharp point to create a clean hole. As the needle passes through your body it removes a small amount of your skin and tissue in the immediate area of the piercing wound. This allows for your wound to drain and heal.

Tattoo needles are different. They range in a variety of sizes and groupings:

- Magnums.
- Tights.
- Flats.
- Liners.
- Shaders.

Round liners and round shaders are pretty straightforward. They line and they shade. Flats, Magnums, and Turbo Needles are more complex. Flat needles (shaders) are arranged in a straight line and can be used to shade in geometric areas. Stacked Magnums are made of two layers of needles that are mostly used to shade, color-pack, and fill-in larger areas. Curved Magnums achieve the same effect, but they are softer on the skin because they are rounded at the edges. Tattoo artists are trained to keep the needle at a consistent depth of about one sixteenth of an inch. Turbo needles are hollow point needles. This does not mean that the pins themselves are hollow, but rather that the pins
are arranged in a circle, with a hollow spot in the middle. The pins at the center are pulled back, so they don't penetrate the skin at all. Turbo needles reduce trauma and hold significantly more ink than other needle groupings.

Scratching.

Burning.

Stinging.

These are the words associated with getting a tattoo. The sensation varies on the person and the body part although the techniques remain largely the same. Did it hurt? Sure, but you wouldn’t assign this pain a number or even a word. When it got bad, you bit your lip.

The artist asked you, Are you okay?

You mumbled in agreement.

The closer you are to the bone the more it hurts.

You mumbled in agreement.

The pain eventually ends. And when the artist finally wipes the blood off your body, you feel relief.

Eventually you heal. You’ll carry these markings for the rest of your life:
On your right forearm: Abstract\textsuperscript{8} (of two flocks of birds clashing).

On the inside of your arm: ADN & Estrógeno\textsuperscript{9} (a drawing of a double helix structure crossing a chemical-bond illustration of estrogen).

On your left forearm: Moneda de Ocho Reales\textsuperscript{10} (a silver coin minted by colonial powers that went on to become the first world currency).

On your left calf: Hello Kitty Bow\textsuperscript{11}.

After I had proven to my father that I could sustain life, he allowed me to get a fifty-liter tank. Then another. A cold-water tank where I kept a Black Moore\textsuperscript{12} with protruding eyes, a high dorsal fin, and a long quadruple caudal fin. I also kept a Fantail, with metallic orange scales, and double anal and tail fins. A tropical tank where I kept two silver Cory Catfish that would waddle with their whiskers on the gravel and occasionally shoot to the surface to gulp for air. I kept a pair of Swordtails that dashed from one side of the tank to the other, chasing after one another. I kept a Hatchet Fish that stayed directly below the surface of the water and occasionally jumped when panicked (this prompted me to get a lid).

\textsuperscript{8} A reminder that all dichotomies are false dichotomies.
\textsuperscript{9} A reminder that (as a linguistically conscious collection of bacteria, 200 different types of cells arranged in the shape of a featherless, two-legged ape in search of a little meaning, value, and care, while facing inevitable, unavoidable, and inescapable oblivion) it’s okay to feel a little anxiety.
\textsuperscript{10} A reminder that my ancestors are not abstractions, but bodies that were sacrificed over and over again in order to amass treasure for the colonizers.
\textsuperscript{11} A reminder of the child I was once, and the person I have committed to being until the day that my body fails.
\textsuperscript{12} In Spanish, these fish are called “telescopios,” but in English their name is a reference to the black North African Muslim inhabitants of Al-Andalus.
I got a pair of neon tetras and within days, the color went out of them. They both died. We went to the aquarium shop\textsuperscript{13} and we bought another pair. Then another. They both died. Finally, I read in a book (or a magazine, I don’t remember) that Neon Tetras need to live in groups. With this new knowledge, I convinced my dad to get ten of them! And a week later one of them had white spots near the gills. Then two more. Later that day one of them died. Then the rest of them. These fish, no matter what I did, kept dying on me.

IX

Kelly was thirty-six years old and a dancer. She was well known in the ballroom scene in Detroit. She hoped that one day she could be a designer and a buyer in the world of fashion. It is unclear as to when she began seeing Albert. Reports show that Albert was routinely in contact with many sex workers in the area, but he kept going back to Kelly. Records indicate that Kelly and Albert met several times for sex. Kelly had tried to stop seeing Albert because of his ongoing bursts of anger, but Albert continued to contact Kelly and offered her more money. The medical examiner’s office ruled that Kelly died from a single shot to her left underarm. Albert was the Pastor of Logos Baptist Church. He worked in downtown Detroit as a security guard for the Great Lakes Water Authority.

\textsuperscript{13} Just two blocks away from Cochabamba’s Main Square (la Plaza de Armas 14 de Septiembre) was the aquarium shop of my childhood. Six rows of fifty-liter tanks divided by type of fish. At the entrance they had a humongous tank that contained eight Discus Fish and a shoal of Cardinal Tetras.
After Albert shot Kelly, he drove in to work and waited an hour to call 911. He abandoned her body in the Six Mile and Woodward area where she was found by police.

X

The Earth’s oceanic and atmospheric phenomena predate modern humans by millions of years. The temperature near the surface of the waters around the equator is very warm in the western Pacific yet cool in the eastern Pacific. This pattern is interrupted periodically by changes first noticed along the continental coast by early settlers of present-day South America. This phenomena aids in generating heavy rains over southeastern Asia and northern Australia but keeps parts of the South American pacific coast relatively dry. When this pattern is interrupted, rainstorms follow the warm water to the central and eastern Pacific, dry conditions affect East Africa, northern Australia, and southeast Asia, while droughts occur in northern Brazil along with soggy winters in North America. While the patterns can be predicted, no two cycles are alike or are experienced for the same duration. When scientists created a model to track and predict these patterns, they called it: El Niño and La Niña.

XI

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14 In the recording of the 911 call, Albert described the crime by saying, “I pulled my weapon out … it appeared to be a female, but when the voice came through it was a male.”
15 Between 560 BCE and 590 BCE, the Moche capital was flooded, rebuilt, then overrun by sand dunes. The Moche moved their capital sixty-five kilometers north because atmospheric phenomena and coastal weather led to a sustained period of torrential rains and flooding, which caused the river that fed their irrigation system to change direction.
16 The warming of the surface waters in the Pacific along the equator.
17 The cooling of the surface waters in the Pacific along the equator.
You were twenty-nine years old when you consented to Hormone Replacement Therapy. A nurse practitioner taught you how to self-administer the injections.

Wash your hands with soap and water for twenty seconds.

Dry thoroughly.

Put on gloves (optional).

Use an alcohol pad to disinfect the top of the vial.

Attach the drawing needle to the syringe.

Remove cap.

Draw.

Use an alcohol pad to disinfect the injection site.

Remove and dispose of the needle (in a sharps container).

Attach injection needle.

Remove the cap.

Grasp three or four inches of the muscle between thumb and first finger.

Insert needle at a ninety-degree angle.

Pull back on the plunger (if blood enters the syringe, do not give the injection).

Inject by pushing down on the plunger.
Leave the needle in the flesh for a few seconds after the plunger is all the way down.

Remove needle from the injection site.

Apply bandage (if necessary).

Dispose of needle and syringe (in a sharps container).

The preferred location of these injections is the front of your thighs, alternating weekly between your left and your right thigh. You told your father about the first injection.

He couldn’t wait to tell you how your childhood was. You used to be afraid of needles, he said.

Papi, that was twenty years ago.

Your brother said that you will never look like a woman.

(You’re entirely okay with this. You know how he looks at women).

He stayed quiet for a moment.

You know dad, estrógeno\textsuperscript{18} is a masculine noun and testosterona\textsuperscript{19} a feminine one.

You always notice these things.

Yes, dad. Always.

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\textsuperscript{18} From Greek “οἰστρος,” meaning passion, frenzy, madness, bite, sting.

\textsuperscript{19} From Latin “witness, one who testifies or attests.”
Remember when you wanted to be a scientist? your dad said.

A marine scientist, you reminded him.

Yes. You wanted to be a marine scientist20.

Papi, that was twenty years ago. I also wanted to work at the Hello Kitty factory and become a helicopter pilot21. Bolivia is a small, landlocked, and underdeveloped country; your childhood dreams were as audacious as they were impractical. Your father always wanted you to become a lawyer, like him. But you are who you are22.

The truth is that I didn’t tell my dad about HRT right away. In fact, that didn’t happen until three years later. We were sitting on a bench, at La Plaza Abaroa, in La Paz when I told him.

“A mí me vale un rábano,” he said. “Yo soy tu papá, y siempre voy a ser tu papá. Tu eres mi wawa23 y siempre vas a ser mi wawa24.”

While it’s important for my own personal narrative that my dad loves me and accepts me, I find it more important to state the obvious—his opinion doesn’t matter. The truth is that there are millions of things that my father doesn’t understand. What does my dad know about American LGBTQ Culture? What does my dad, who has never lived in the United States, know about wild parties and gay clubs? What does my dad know about wearing high-heels and miniskirts

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20 I am not a marine scientist.
21 I am not a helicopter pilot.
22 I am a transgender person.
23 From Quechua, “wá-wá” meaning infant, baby, or child.
24 From Quechua, “wá-wá” meaning kid, offspring (gender-neutral for son/daughter).
and kneeling down at gloryholes high on ecstasy and cocaine? What does my dad know about the “discreet” men who show up in my DMs late at night, to see if I’m down to fuck, but would never be seen with me in public? What does my dad know about asking a man to wear a condom? What does my dad know about PrEP or getting tested for HIV?

He knows nothing.

XII

When they arrived in Abya Yala in the year 5,008, Pedro Gutiérrez de Santa Clara came with them. He was convinced that we worshipped giants. He did not understand our language, our rituals, or our icons. He did not understand our cosmology. We had never even seen a giant. We did not know what giants were. Many of us died. His uniformed slaves were especially skilled at the art of harming others. He ordered us to be cut to pieces, so we could be fed to his beasts for refusing to hear the voice of his god. Our matriarch took a shell from the sea and pressed it against her ear and heard the voice of life speak. She then took the book the colonizers claimed to be the voice of god and pressed it against her ear. She could not hear a thing. His butchers used a short knife to flail her. First her forearms. Thin strips of skin coming off of them. Then her knees.

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25 In this motherfucker’s notebook, Quinquenarios o Historia de las guerras civiles del Perú (1580), he proposes the idea that indigenous people learned sodomy from evil giants who were sent by Satan and who the natives worshipped as gods. The thing is, he really believed that giants existed. His transculturated European magical thinking shaped his views of our people.
Her neck was next. To skin her thighs, he had his slaves slice just a few inches at the hip, then pull her skin like you would pull a hide from an animal. She was still alive.

None of us ever saw a giant.

XIII

On International Women’s Day, Bolivian women take to the streets to protest. Bolivia has the highest rate of feminicidios of any country in Latin America. A judge has recently ordered the release of a group of four suspects known as La Manada who are accused of gangraping a young woman in Santa Cruz. The parents of the boys have hired a law firm to give a press conference. On the streets, women covering their faces with purple handkerchiefs clash with police. Molotov cocktails are thrown. Tear gas is deployed. On the wall there is graffiti written in English:

MOTHERFUCKERS.

A Young woman holds that sign that reads: NÍ UNA MENOS.

Another holds one that says: LA POLICÍA NO ME CUIDA; ME CUIDAN MIS AMIGAS.

Another sign reads: NÍ LA TIERRA, NÍ LAS MUJERES SOMOS TERRITORIO DE CONQUISTA.

La escritora writes on her column: machos, by being heirs to their nature, feel that they must one way or another fulfill some transcendental tasks, they think that they are in

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26 Those who desecrate that which is fierce, loving, tender, nurturing, caring, protective, and truthful.
some way predestined for a heroic purpose or set to become the individual bearers of some deep truth. She encourages machitos to do better.\footnote{Young motherfuckers need to realize that now is the time to self-actualize.}

\textbf{XIV}

During a recent global bleaching event, the Great Barrier Reef of Australia experienced almost a ninety-percent rate of mortality in some locations. Similar events have been documented in Hawaii, Indonesia, the Caribbean, and elsewhere. Because of climate change and global warming, corals remain under imminent risk of destruction. Coral reefs constitute an oasis of biodiversity in what would otherwise be inhospitable, nutrient-poor waters. Although reefs make up for less than one percent of the ocean floor, they are home to more than twenty-five percent of marine life. As the coral begins to die, other animals lose their habitat. In the past forty years, coral abundance has declined eighty percent in the Caribbean Sea, and approximately one-third of all corals around the world are under threat. Eventually, the reef will collapse, and the coral skeletons will be ghost towns.

\textbf{XV}

There’s a plethora of sizes when it comes to needles and syringes. Different measurements. Different gauges (the inner measurement or opening of the needle). Different lengths (intramuscular injections require extended needle lengths). Learning how to self-administer injections wasn’t smooth. At first, you often forgot to leave the needle in after pushing the plunger down and a small amount of liquid pooled on the
injection site. On those days, oil oozed out of your flesh and pooled on your skin, the bandage did not help. You have since learned to first warm up the vial of ESTRADIOL by rolling it back and forth along the palms of your (sanitized) hands. VALERATE oil is easier to inject when it’s warm. When it’s cold, it forms crystals and becomes thick and syrupy. It wasn’t easy at first, but over time you became better at it. You learned to leave a little bubble in the syringe to prevent the oil from tracking out. You also learned about the z-track technique, when you pull the skin and tissue before the injection causing the needle track to take the shape of the letter “Z”. This zigzag track line prevents medication from leaking from the muscle. After a while, you began to notice changes. Your skin got softer. Your hair, too. Your breasts felt sore. You learned that you bruised more easily. You began to crave canned sardines and smoked herring. After a long while, you found the formula that you were most comfortable with.

Three milliliter syringes

Eighteen-gauge needles for drawing (one inch long).

Twenty-three gauge needles for injecting (one inch-and-a-half long)

Hello Kitty Band-Aid (optional).

But progress is not linear. Along the way there was bruising, and more than one spot of blood. After many weeks, you noticed how your nipples began to point upwards. One time, you pulled the needle out too soon while you were still pressing down on the plunger and your blood squirted all over your thigh. Your breasts became sore and began to grow. You still get panic attacks some days. If your heart rate shoots up and your
adrenaline clicks in, your hand will shake, and you will end up with a bruise the size of your thumb. After about sixty injections. You noticed how your nipples got darker and your areolas had grown in size. It took you two years and three months to fill your first sharps container.

One-hundred and nineteen syringes.

Two-hundred and thirty-eight needles.

XVI

Nikki never had a Sweet Sixteen party. But she was very glamorous by the time she started high school. She wanted to be a make-up artist. Her favorite rapper was Nicki Minaj. She liked to modify and design her own clothes. Her mother keeps a picture of Nikki from when she was five years old; she’s wearing a blonde wig. Nicki usually stayed at friends’ houses. Her parents were divorced. It was one of those nights, at a friend's house, that she met David. David was twenty-five years old. They began messaging over snapchat. We don’t know the exact details, but we do know that Nikki went missing on June 6th. She was reported as a missing person by her mother on June 10th. We also know that Nikki and David had sex. This was admitted by David himself. But it was not until a hiker came upon her skull that a murder investigation was opened.

Clark County Search and Rescue located other evidence, including Nikki’s clothing, jewelry, and her hair extensions. A forensic analysis confirmed the remains were Nikki’s. She was strangled to death. David said that he had met her and that he had
gone to work that following morning. Police indicated his phone data showed he had been at an adult store early that morning, making numerous calls to escort ads.

   Nikki’s remains had been scattered along a wooded embankment near Larch Mountain.

For six months, her body went unfound.

   David posted bail and is currently awaiting trial.

   He lives in Vancouver, Washington and works in Portland, Oregon.
In Remembrance of:

Shelly Hilliard (19), Detroit, Michigan.

Dee Whigham (25), St. Martin, Mississippi.

Keanna Mattel “Kelly Stough” (36), Detroit, Michigan.

Nikki Kuhnhausen (17), Vancouver, Washington.
Baby Teeth

I met Spec while visiting Dr. Kang’s office, a building shaped like a DVD-player, way past the bottling plant near the Portland International Airport. I noticed zir right away because most of Dr. Kang’s patients were elderly. I had waited six weeks for the appointment, and so had Spec. I needed a root canal, which was the perfect excuse to score the big boys. The vikes. The percs. Even some OC’s. The thing was Dr. Kang never asked you to sign a narc contract. He wasn’t afraid to write you a paper script, either. So, like most of his younger patients, Spec and I had chosen his practice for similar reasons. If you could copy one of his scripts, you could have it filled at two or even three different pharmacies. No one was the wiser.

I’ve seen you, ze said when we made eye contact. Zir eyes seemed far and green, fading blue hair falling over zir brow in thin bunches. From across the waiting room, in those office chairs that were almost too small for my butt, Spec’s voice was warm, buzzy, and different.

I had tried to get a good glance of zir stocky calves in those fitted jeans while flipping pages of a science and technology magazine.

Your name is Reyes, right? You work at the credit union.

I just go by Rei, I said.

I cash my paycheck there. Every two weeks. What are you here for? A cleaning?

Nah. Post build-up, I said.

What’s that? Ze asked.

It’s part of a root canal? I added.
Yikes. Which tooth?

Ha, I said. All of them.

At the time, I was in the process of getting two root canals, two crowns, and eight fillings. My teeth were the last remaining proof of having grown up in an undeveloped country where children don’t get fluoride treatments. To keep things on an even keel, let’s just say that I’m Bolivian by birth and American by passport. Spec had never met anyone from Bolivia before.

That’s how it began. We didn’t call them dates. We didn’t call it dating. But we shared sweet secrets with one another, like Spec’s weakness for deep-fried candy bars. Ze pointed at the incriminating tooth with zir index finger. Spec was a referral from the resource center. I had been there. Years ago, when I first had arrived at the city, back when I knew not a soul. I confessed to Spec that I had resorted to drinking condensed milk straight from the can. No chewing required. Ze laughed. We had so much in common but didn’t quite understand it yet. We were too young to comprehend our own nature, but we intuited our connection, so we kept on each other’s company. Maybe it was because of the way people looked at us. And I don’t mean the interracial thing. Spec made it impossible to be inconspicuous. While I was comfortable with fading into the background, Spec had badly dyed hair and an obsession with tacky, western style shirts with pearly buttons that glistened the sun. People stared at us. Spec liked showing off zir fingernails, each painted a different color. Layer upon layer of crackling nail polish ready to fall apart and reveal zir humanity underneath. I always wore slacks and baggy button-down shirts in muted tones. I didn’t see the point of owning any clothes that I couldn’t
wear to work. From my old man, I had inherited his dark, wavy hair and his long legs. From my mother, her caramel skin tone, thick wrists, round cheeks and swollen ankles. The faint beginning of a mustache seemed permanently etched above my lip. We were both booted and pierced. Spec had many stick-and-pokes, while I only had two tattoos at the time.

We wandered along the developing eastern district where I rented a small apartment. We walked in and out of cafes and shops on the main strip, spending as little money as possible, telling our stories. It didn’t take long to introduce Spec to my favorite destination, a cheap dive, lit only by black lights, where the servers didn’t bother with napkins or stirrers. The drinks came stiff and glowed in the dark. Occasionally, some roided out jerk would try to start a fight and would get thrown out by the bartender. But mostly, the regulars simply ignored us, content to spend their time challenging the predictable outcome of those new video poker machines.

Spec and I took preventive measures on the threat of an impending toothache. We quietly popped a vike or two, took shots of rail vodka, and waited for our bellies to warm up. In a few minutes the lights at the bar had gotten twice as big. Spec told stories about zir grandmother. How she used to make waffles and fried chicken. I thought that was just a stereotype. By the time the third round came, we made fun of the tree-hugging kids a few tables over who looked like they snuck out of high-rise buildings wearing sandals to shop at the Farmer’s Market.
Every now and then, we would sneak into the bottomless-drink place for brunch. I knew one of the servers and they’d let us share an entrée. Mimosas all around. Or at least, until the conversation would flow easily. The tables were small and only sat two people. We picked the corner spot by the bus table whenever we could. Sometimes, we even ordered coffee. We’d look around and make up stories about the couples and families in the restaurant. Spec would mimic a movie voice and say, …he was a man and she was a woman.

I giggled every time.

He bought her flowers.

And?

She swooned in his arms.

And?

He held her tight.

Now You’re boring me. I said finally. It was the third or fourth time Spec had told that joke.

What’s your deal today? Ze said.

I don’t know. I responded.

No, I mean, what’s your story?

Shit. Well. I grew up in Pasadena. My dad got sick one day and he racked up a lot of medical bills, we didn’t have insurance, and the bills were like more than a hundred thousand dollars. The next day, he told me he bought three one-way tickets to Bolivia.

Did they just leave you here?
It’s a bit more complex that.

Isn’t? Ze said. Did they teach you to speak Spanish?

Yeah, I guess. I passed a test at work, so I get paid an extra dollar an hour. But I don’t think I’ve had a customer that speaks Spanish come into my branch before.

So, you chose to stay?

I was still little when I came. I don’t remember much. But yeah, the night before we were supposed to leave the country. We had our bags all packed up, I snuck into their room, stole a wad of bills, and ran away with my stuff. I moved a few times. I was fifteen then. I’ve moved all my life. I thought I’d only be in Portland for a few years, but here I am still.

Do you talk to them? Ze asked. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.

No, it’s fine. I talked with my mom a few times. I wrote them a letter. Then, things just sort of died. My dad had passed away a few years ago. They wouldn’t understand, you know. It’s like they’re from another world.

Oh, I’m kind of the same.

In which way?

One day I just grabbed my shit and left. I was in Savannah Georgia for a long while. Lots of people like us there, on the street most of them, but still. Then I got bored, so I left for Atlanta. Then I was in Kansas City – which is in Missouri – In case you didn’t know that. I wanted to make it all way to San Francisco, but the kids at the train yard said that it was fucking expensive there and I wanted seasonal work. So, this was the next best thing.
And your parents?

My mom’s been dead since I was little. My Grandma kind of raised me, but then, like two year ago, she went and got ill. Then there was only my pop. He and I don’t get along. I was crashing at my friends’ place. Then I was renting a room, but it got complicated. I surf couches. Sometimes I shower at the resource center. Spec stirred the vodka-tonic with zir finger. My pop used to beat me pretty regular.

Suddenly the room was really loud. I finished the rest of my drink. Hey, I said while staring at the ice at the bottom of my glass as if it were the bottom of the sea. My dad was a piece of shit, too. He was one of those angry, macho guys who couldn’t follow directions, even from his bosses. He couldn’t hold a job. My mom and I wouldn’t know he’d gotten fired, but I’d be riding the school bus one day past the home improvement store and I would see him standing there, like a wetback. I paused then I drank the melted ice in my glass.

I see people by the hardware store doing that.

I need another drink, I said.

Later that day, Spec and I crossed the river. Across a view of the river thru the glass on the bus window and over the brick-colored solid steel truss of the Broadway bridge. We rode all the way to Skidmore Fountain. By ten at night, the tourist had all taken their umbrellas back to guest rooms in the suburbs. A block from the fountain, under the Burnside Bridge, men in polo shirts and cargo shorts with headlamps on their helmets minded the perimeter. There were rows of tents by the Sisterhood Café. Spec
made friends and gained favors by distributing food among the street kids. Ze waited until the grocery store marked down items from their deli section. Ze distributed the food among old friends quickly. This was also an opportunity to exchange the goods from our last dentist appointment. Ze turned two chickens, and a few loaves of bread along with some Vicks into some fat joints, a bag of mushrooms, and even some acid tabs. Once we were out of the range of bike police, Spec pulled a joint from zir bag. Ze looked both ways, like a kid crossing the street, and lit the thing up. As ze exhaled, the smoke billowed. We took our time. Spec would always pass the joint with a little flare of the wrist, as if glad that no harm had come to it while ze held it. We walked slowly intentionally stepping on the lines in the ground. The contraction joints. That’s what they’re called. The lines on the ground that most children are afraid to step on.

We looked around for cops before taking finishing the joint. Spec started skipping. I was too self-conscious. Spec appeared disappointed in my shyness. Still, we walked past security gates locked behind thick panes of darkened glass. Neon signs advertised exotic dancers nearby. We checked the pay phones for change and walked for several more blocks until we found a good place to sit near the park. When our feet got tired, we sat at a bench and stared at the sky.

What do you think Lewis and Clark were looking for? Ze asked.

Somewhere where nobody knew them, I answered.

Yeah?

Yeah,

Lewis and Clark wanted to make themselves into heroes or something?
And what are you looking for? Spec said.
I don’t know, I said. The next thing to run away from, I guess. Spec laughed.
We told lies and tall tales, stories about men with hooks for arms, exaggerating every detail, and laughed until our cheeks hurt.

It was late, and the returning bus left us eight or nine blocks from my place just a little before midnight. On that leaf-strewn walkway past the Pacific madrone and Japanese maple trees, we walked over the soft bits of moss sprouting in the cracks of neighboring driveways, and through the pungent mist that hung in the air, like the tang of evergreen and the smell of rain in autumn. Around the bend, we found the glass-paneled entry doors that swung into the curtained foyer of my building. A room covered in thin, green carpeting and variegated wallpaper, where old-fashioned furniture and a decommissioned fireplace gave an air of black-and-white sitcom nostalgia. It was rumored that at some point at the turn of the century, the lower-level apartments had served as stables, back when the building had been a brothel or a bordello that hosted the debauchery and redemption of fugitives and refugees.

I thought about the condition of my apartment. About the last surviving cans from a twelve-pack of domestic lager in the refrigerator along with the ketchup and mustard bottles. The ketchup half-full. The mustard half-empty. The congealed dine-out orders in Styrofoam caskets, that the city had recently banned. The small pile of dishes from the thrift store that lived in the sink until they were needed again. The baseboard heaters that hadn’t been turned on since last winter. The record player that sat atop a broken suitcase.
The scattered shoes all over the dirty carpet where a plastic cup from the bodega’s soda fountain had spilled half-full of orange soda without a chance for a twenty-five-cent refill.

If Spec was bothered by the soap scum that yellowed the shower curtain, or the stuffy air that never fully ventilated after showering, or if ze was concerned that the dust-bunnies underneath the couch would trigger zir allergies, I wouldn’t have known. And if Spec was impressed by my mint-condition re-issue of Nina Simone’s Black Gold, or my collection of Raymond Chandler books; or if Spec was perplexed by that forty-five of Richard Nixon’s Watergate Speech from the dollar bin at the record store, ze did not show it. And if the blue-scarlet lights of a passing police car turned sunset pink in between our glances and biting lips, I still could not have understood how Spec and I could fall so easily into something as bittersweet as the irresistible seep of marijuana in a darkened room.

And while it’s true that politicians spoke of us as they would scribble on bathroom stalls and op-ed pieces began appearing on newspapers along with crude and threatening declarations, there was a moment that lasted long enough for us to blink that would have otherwise been lost into the moonless night and beyond the relative safety of my apartment, a moment when we both knew that the space between the curbing and the wall was only large enough to hold the parts of ourselves ready to be left behind. It was important to know then, even though in fact we were both clueless at the time, that you can be certain, even if it’s only for a moment, that you will be loved.
What happened next wasn’t because of immaturity, or impatience, or impulsivity, but despite those things. Spec moved into my apartment because ze needed a place to stay and I had room. We had known each other for less than a month by then. And there we were, Spec, again, the most incredible person that I had ever met. I was so proud to show zir how I had rented one of those carpet cleanings machines from the grocery store. I almost got the stains out, too. I showed zir where I kept my small collection of records. Thirty-six. One for every paycheck since I got that job at the credit union. We merged our stash of pills and weed. Combined our music collection and shared the only closet in the bedroom.

Spec made protest signs that read: QUEERS DON’T WANT TO GET MARRIED; QUEERS WANT TO GET FUCKED! I was too shy, and painfully self-conscious to make any protest signs, let alone be seen at a protest. (Or worse, a parade). I was a bore. Everything I had learned up to point had taught me to hide in plain sight by wearing khaki pants and baggy polo shirts. Anything not to call attention to myself. Spec explained the difference between stone butches and diesel dykes to me while introducing me to radical zines like, Zir Zir Zir! Which you could only get by mailing a two-dollar bill along with your address to a P.O. Box in Savannah, Georgia. Spec was proud to display zir artifacts in the living room. A few copies of detective novels. A pig’s heart in a mason jar filled with antifreeze that reminded Spec of zir father. An urn containing the remains of a cat that ZE had rescued from a shelter, only to find out it had some strange disease, and died a month later anyway.
Winter came, and Spec could not stop complaining about the drippy and dreary weather. It was New Year’s Day, and Spec had gotten up early to cook breakfast. I stayed in bed and thought about the night before, about the noisemakers and the silly hats that Spec had insisted us on wearing. I thought about the sad and cynical joy of playing pinball by myself in the back room of the bar. The literal bells and whistles. The struggle against gravity. The inevitability of losing. The impending doom, the flashing lights, and the beer-backed shots. By all logic, I should have had a massive headache. I guess the pain killers were working.

It was early or cloudy. I couldn’t tell at first. I laid under the covers, naked, waiting for Spec to return. Our room smelled of clay, lavender oil, and sex. Three days’ worth of clothes were piled into a neat heap on the floor. The clock’s battery had died weeks earlier and we hadn’t bothered to replace it. The street outside our window was deserted. Everyone in Portland must be hungover, I thought, while droplets fell on a massive puddle like meteorites.

I caught a whiff of the air coming from the kitchen, the smell was invasive, like wet hay and boiled meat. When it arrived, I saw that it contained rice and pork and beans that looked like large, yellowed teeth with big, black cavities in them.

What kind of food is this? I asked.

Eat poor one day. Eat rich the rest of the year, Spec said.

I grabbed the bowl from the rim in order not to burn myself. The food sat on my lap. Too hot to eat. This. Looks. Disgusting. I said, but Spec had already returned to the kitchen. Across the street, a new building was under construction. The plastic tarp that
covered the scaffolding had come loose in the night and hung by the side of the structure. Large, tinted windows had recently been installed on the front. Their reflection showed the enormous puddle and a neon sign that read: JESUS SAVES, backwards.

Are they supposed to look like that? I said.

They’re black-eyed peas. Spec said. Rice for riches. Peas for peace.

From up close, the contents of the bowl actually smelled like food. Like good food, too. The kind that takes a long time to make.

The greens are for money. Spec added.

Greens? I said, still unconvinced that anything named after a color could possibly taste good.

Only a little bit, Spec added. They’re kind of bitter so I didn’t use very much.

What did your family eat on New Year’s, anyway?

The words started up in my head like misremembered places. Like remembering abandoned furniture or donated clothing. Rallying specific memories of the texture of food, but not its flavor. Words that rhymed with one another, but I was never sure if they were the names of dishes, or ingredients, or the names of distant places, or maybe even of distant relatives. A fifth of vodka was waiting to be christened by us in the kitchen. I had hidden a six-pack at the bottom of the pantry, in case Spec began feeling guilty, like it sometimes happen after a night of heavy drinking.

I don’t know. I said finally and began picking around the beans.

How can you not know? Ze said, You have to know. You ate it.
I was already chomping down a juicy but tough piece of pork. It was like chewing on a wet towel. McDonalds, I lied, still chewing, and turned on the television. My mom loved chicken nuggets.

Spec got on the bed with me. The public animation channel had reverted to playing children’s cartoons with synthesizer soundtracks.

And before that?

Hey, I said. I think this is one of those episodes where the bad guys win.

On the television, overly muscular humanoids fought strange, otherworldly creatures with lasers and swords. The hero had been killed, or rendered blind, I couldn’t tell. A humanoid female with enormous breasts and voluminous hair, the hero’s love interest, wept by his side. Like his allies, she was worried that without him, evil could not be contained.

Those are always two-part episodes, Spec said. To-be-continued, and all that.

No matter. I added. We don’t need to see what happens next.

As for my family, we were not wetbacks, we came to this country in an airplane. Not that it mattered or that Spec would even understand. It was just that my parents never learned to speak English. For years they had promised to learn a new vocabulary word each day. They bought CD’s and workbooks at the flea-market. I used to cringe when I would come home from school to find them practicing in the living room.

—Cama!

…bed
I cringed as I watch the words dribble out of their lips as they were children with marbles in the mouth. They eventually gave up once I was able to interpret their needs to teachers and customer service reps. Unlike me, my parents hated this country because it lied to them, and often betrayed them. Every late fee. Every bounced check. My father, who had cleaned the windows of skyscrapers in Los Angeles, got dizzy at the sight of his bank statement. They met other immigrant families who spoke English with a combination of admiration, disgust, and envy. I was young, but I knew my parent’s stories were like a hand-me down clothes: something to outgrow.

By the time the holidays were over, Spec and I had grown accustomed to our routine. We had pizza on Thursday nights, late when my direct deposit hit. Spec had to cash zir check so we went grocery shopping on Friday nights. We ate bulk cereal for breakfast on Saturday and took turns paying down on the electric bill. On Wednesdays Spec would march down the hall of our building with a hamper of messy clothes and a roll of quarters and return with neatly folded piles of domestic bliss. I took out the trash and collected the mail from our lockbox. I had learned this routine early in life. By the
time I was eleven, I translated all my parent’s mail, I even wrote their checks and signed their names: GUSTAVO MONTAÑO GALVAN and CECILIA NÚÑEZ DE MONTAÑO.

Mysterious paper letters landed on our coffee table and Spec would stick them in zir bag when ze saw them. I understood that right away. Secrets are like treasure. They must be buried. Excavated. Then buried again. I never opened any of Spec’s letters. Not even the hand-written envelopes with return addresses in places like Arkansas or Tennessee. Places where people like us, supposedly, did not exist. Yet the letters Spec got looked like invitations. If people wrote you letters with pen and paper, I thought, they must really care about you.

Then there were our dinners at home. Spec liked to steal old-fashioned glass-bottles of cola from the grocery store where ze was working. Every now and then, ze would sneak out with a few bottles in zir bag. We would twist them open during dinner and drive the sharp ends of the bottle caps into the drywall. I thought it was stupid at first, but two-by-two, the evidence of zir petty theft spread throughout the living room wall like chickenpox.

I was able to borrow my supervisor’s car from time to time. We had been hired at the same time. I think she felt bad for having been promoted ahead of me. But I used it to drive Spec around town on special occasions. Careful to never exceed the speed limit. Always looking out for cyclists. We did this a few times. Spec enjoyed having an excuse to wear a unique outfit and do something wild with zir hair. Ze had traded the last batch of oxy’s for a new pair of hiking boots. We had had a few days of hailstorms. Those were
always exiting. Then we had rain while the sun was out. And that was my favorite. The double rainbow.

The days were starting to get longer. We walked out the door as if we were respectable people. As if the world respected who we were. We’d promise ourselves to have a steak dinner and a glass of wine, but somehow always ended up eating burgers and ordering drinks and more drinks. After our meal, we’d get out of the city and drive to Hills Dale or Lake Oswego to look at single family homes that we could never afford. This one night, Spec pointed at some dark, southern looking thing with a neglected yard, the for-sale-by-owner sign had barely survived the rainy season.

We pulled up the driveway. There, we sat in silence in front of someone else’s forgotten, empty house.

I grew up in a house like that, Spec said. The house was angular. Long. Like a cartoon

of a house, only for real.

Yeah?

Except the siding was white. Fading. Peeling. But the paint was technically white. What kind of house did you grow up in?

I don’t know.

You don’t know?

Well, in Bolivia houses are different. It was like this long series of rooms. You had to dash across the courtyard to use the bathroom. It was weird.

You had a courtyard?
It was my grandfather’s house. I think. The whole thing was brick except the outside. It was a colonial façade with a big metal gate. I don’t know how to explain it.

Like those red-tiled apartments that look like they came from Spain.

I guess, like that. I said, surprised that I had never thought of it before. Yeah, they were kind of like that. But when we moved to the U.S. it was shitty apartment after shitty apartment.

What made them shitty?


But you wear a lot of beige, Spec said.

I think I secretly hate it.

Wouldn’t you want to live somewhere else?

This, a house where nobody lives? No. I don’t think so, I replied.

What’s wrong? Spec said, concerned, as if I was covered in sharp things and could hurt someone simply by moving in the slightest.

I was silent for a long while.

I decided to cut our date short because I felt uncomfortable. Spec was quite for the whole ride home while we listened to zir new favorite thing, an electronica group who used an intense and distorted whistle that cried and whimpered as if it were a person. The accompanying electronic beat came with sinister arpeggio and a contralto voice informing some distant and obscure lover that Frankenstein’s would want them for their
parts, especially their head, which was lovely. Frankly, I thought the whole thing was disturbing, but I kept driving because I wanted to get home and get this thing off and just lay in the room for a while. I was hoping Spec would be in a better mood soon.

We came home thirsty that night. Spec took zir shoes off, snuck zir arms into zir top and took it off. I hate wearing this thing, Spec said. I untied my shoes and unbuttoned my shirt as if it were a sophisticated exercise in patience. Spec was replacing zir earrings with studs.

When I was done unbuttoning, I shouted, the floor is lava! and sprang onto the bed.

Spec followed suit, stumbling along the way.

We found ourselves on top of the covers, undressed to various degrees. I exploited the opportunity to push zir down on the bed and lay my cheek against the warmth of zir inner thigh. We felt particularly decadent and fed each other chocolate bars, which we kept underneath the mattress, until our combined guilt had sent us both running to the bathroom, with chocolate still trapped between our teeth. With the faucet running, we spat onto the sink what looked like chocolate milkshakes.

We tried to watch television. The Public Broadcasting Channel was on and the host was interviewing some sort of environmental scientist. He was doing a terrible job of it, too. Interrupting the guest, trying to get past the facts, and onto the next segment of the show where local children got to ask adorable, but inane and ultimately asinine questions. Scenic footage of salmon spawning in the riverbeds followed for several minutes along
an instrumental track that sounded like bluegrass, either way, it had banjos in it. Spec’s eyes were riveted to the screen. Salmon make a perilous voyage upstream past hungry eagles and bears to mate in the forest creeks of the Pacific Northwest, related the detached voice.

Does testosterone make your skin wrinkle? I asked Spec. Like, does it age you?

So many other things are worse for your skin. The sun is worse for your skin, for example. Smoking and smiling are also bad for your skin. If you stretch your eyelids to put on eye-liner—like I’ve seen you do—for example. That’s bad for your skin, ze added.

Okay, okay, okay. I pleaded. It’s just, I’m not ready to be old, I said.

Let’s get to being twenty-three before you even think about that. Ok?

Suddenly, my shoulders were shaking.

Spec silenced the television and asked me to be quiet with zir index finger because outside the sky was rambling, and ze liked the sound of thunder. I had started wearing a tank top to bed ever since Spec had moved in and I occasionally forgot that my shoulders were exposed. I had been growing my hair and I could feel it on my shoulder when I tilted my head or lifted my shoulders. It was a new and interesting feeling at the time. Spec was gleeful after the thunder. ze rubbed on my shoulder to check if I was okay.

On the television, a small girl with cute, but unnecessarily large bangs, asked the scientist whether the boy salmons were more likely to be eaten by bears than the girl salmons.
It’s not salmons. The scientist corrected. He scanned around the room, presumably, looking to the adults. It’s just, salmon.

And that’s all the scientist was willing to say on the matter.

Did you know that they cannot determine your sex based on your baby teeth? Spec’s eyes were still caught up in the cinematography of fish swimming and darting in so many directions as the camera drew near them.

What? I asked.

Because your body has not been affected by secondary hormones yet. Spec clarified.

My mom used to keep my baby teeth, I said.

Oh, was your mom one of those creepy moms that kept your baby teeth?

What’s creepy about that?

She was more concerned with your parts than in you as a person.

She was exactly like that. Do the injections hurt a lot, a little, or like nothing at all?

It like brushing your teeth, Spec said.

On the television, impressive footage of rivers and lakes at the foot of mountains paraded beavers, eagles, and even Orcas for a petition for funding. In that river, over three million sockeye salmon were expected to return to spawn.

That’s a lot of fucking salmon, Spec said.

I laughed so hard that night and continued to do so for many nights.
We were still so young. But we were so bad at being old. We still giggled and cried. We were, in our most tender moments, just children who never learned the importance of brushing their teeth, reaching for the paste only out of pain or desperation, scoundrels who never learned their lesson. But back then all that mattered was the warmth of Spec’s breath in my ear. And the sandy sound of zir voice echoing from the black-and-white tiles in the kitchen. Like biting an apple with every word. I felt it in my mouth when ze spoke. The air in the room was thick and sweet. The window was open. The drizzle was quiet. That night got chilly, and the base-board heaters smelled of burning dust. The Union Pacific announced its presence within city limits in the near distance.

Spec was still not used to living in the city. Ze sometimes mistook bus numbers or the rail lines. mistaking which places you could get to by rail like the zoo with places you could only get by bus like the Rose Gardens. I remember Spec went dumpster diving after Valentine’s Day and rescued hundreds of roses from behind the grocery store. Some were still budding, others were green and had never turned color, yet others had wilted before the day. Spec spent hours picking the best ones and made me a bouquet of a hundred garbage roses. Spec took me there on a picnic once. We had this bag full of items from the Deli at zir job with sale-by tags from the day before. I wish we could be here during the sunrise, Spec said.

There’d be no one here, I said. Everything would be closed.

That would be the best part.

It seemed like some sort of dream. Maybe it was.
When I came home from work the next day, Spec was gone. No notes. No calls. No explanation. Nothing. Just shapes and silhouettes imprinted on dusty shelves. When I realized that the drugs were gone. I felt a pang in my chest. There were two Oxies left in the case for my glasses. I took them and washed them down with the nearest thing.

Things got confusing after that. I headed out to this bar or that bar. Wherever was cheap. I paid in cash and I didn’t tip. If some bartender out by the Central City Shelter refused me service, I don’t remember. I sat alone and try to let my mind go blank. I walked past the soup line, where the line of shifty indigents wrapped around the block. I don’t remember crying, but if I did, it was probably because of the cheap vodka.

The next day I felt like crap. I had to rework my schedule. I took my cashbox from the safe, and because my eyes had been red from crying, My supervisor assigned me to the drive-thru. The teller window of the credit union was a mouth of bullet-proof glass that fogged easily in the drizzle. I responded to the calls of customers whose tinny voices were muffled by the static of the circuit. In a few hours, I had collected deposits and signatures from more than fifty strangers.

For the last part of that afternoon, I worked in the back office, reconciling deposits. When I got bored, I began searching for names like NÚÑEZ and MONTAÑO in the banking system. I re-entered them as NUNEZ and MONTANO. Whoever had originally opened those accounts must have known a special trick because I couldn’t figure out how to change them back.
Later, at night, I couldn’t sleep. I opened the window because the heat was on too high and I wanted to feel a breeze. Suddenly, I had a terrible toothache. I went into the living room, popped a combination of Motrin and Percocet and washed them down with the last of the vodka. I felt like I had swallowed rocket fuel. The pain rang from the corner of my mouth and reverberated through my skull like the sound of a bronze bell. I stood in the room lit only by moonlight. The bottle-caps covering the wall were shiny. I rummaged the kitchen, opened every cabinet door, emptied every drawer, ripped the sheets off the bed, under which I found Spec’s toothbrush. I held it until my knuckles turned white. As if I hadn’t had something of zirs to hold onto at that moment the ground below me would have opened up and I’d fallen into some dark and fiery chasm. I collapsed on the bare mattress and waited to fall dead asleep.

The next morning, called in sick to work. I went to the grocery store where Spec had worked. I entered at one of the doors, walked the length of the floor, passing each of the cash registers, where the only two girls working peered at me. They both had long blonde hair and one of them wore too much eyeliner. They must have known. I thought. They must have known Spec was gone. One of them probably got called in to cover zir shift. At home, I put Spec’s toothbrush in my drawer. I asked to borrow my supervisor’s care; I lied and said that it was a family emergency. I needed a new start, so I checked my bank account, and decided to go back to the day laborer center. The young white man was there, in the trailer, but this time he had a blue polo shirt on. We went thru the motions of hiring some help.
Forty dollars? I said.

Yes, forty dollars as a minimum. If you’re going to keep them for more than four hours, you should pay them $10 an hour. You’re welcome to tip them, too, in fact we encourage that.

Forty dollars then.

Then we walked towards the open door of the trailer. He yelled at two men in the crowd. He then spoke to them, in Spanish, it sounded like he had marbles in his mouth. When the two men came into the trailer with the young white man, I got to see them more clearly. They were two portly men, though short in stature, appeared used to hard work. Their arms were dark skinned, their hair was dark. They had big cheeks and eyes sunken in and around their sockets. They wrote their names on the clipboard slowly: USNAVY CONDORI and USARMY CONDORI. I wasn’t sure which was which, but one of them asked,

You talk Spanish, friend?

People often make that mistake. They think that because I look like them, I’m supposed to be their friend. Nope, I Said. No español, trying to sound as American as possible.

They got in the car. I stopped for a minute to appreciate the situation. Buckle my seat belt. And then I took them back to my place. I showed them the living area where the contents of my life were scattered all over the floor and I told them that I needed the walls cleaned and painted and brought painting and cleaning supplies. I tried to project some sense of authority over them because I was an American or something. I looked for
their shoulders to sink or their eyes to gaze at the floor, but they seemed unconvinced, they stood still as monoliths, their unimpressed features engraved on their faces. Soon they began to rub their forearms with the palms of their hands and finally started walking around the messy room, moving clothes, shoes, and left-over pizza boxes out of the way.

After two hours, I decided to make cups of noodles for everyone. They were happy to take a break and eat a snack. You guys have interesting names? I said, as they held Styrofoam cups with both hands. USNAVY, is it? And USARMY?

Yes, said the quiet one. I carefully poured the boiling hot water from a kettle.

I’ve never heard names like that. How did you guys end up with these names? I said. They looked at each other again until USARMY told his brother to tell the story.

When me and my brother were born, our mom wanted to come to this country. They think is good if we have American names. So, she go to American Embassy and find our names. They see them on shirts. USARMY murmured something into USNAVY’s ear. Yes. Our mom no school, you see. He went on and noticed the pile of porno magazines on the coffee table. You like magazines? he asked, and his brothers tapped on his shoulder and pointed at all the pills on the floor. What’s these things? Trash?

Those were a prescription – medicine – for my toothache, I said, and pointed to my tooth and made a face of anguish.

Here everything is medicine. Head hurt… medicine. Stomach hurt… medicine. But I miss Peru. Head hurt… you chew coca. Stomach hurt… you drink mate. You know mate?

Like yerba mate? The green drink?
Yes. Yes. Like that, but with coca.

Well, I’m sure people in Peru also take medicine.

True. Is true. In the city they don’t chew coca. They don’t drink mate

What did you do when you had a toothache?

My mom cure toothache with rabbits, baby cuy rabbits.

Cuy rabbits? You mean Guinea Pigs?

Yes, they are pets here, but there, we eat them like chicken. When I was little, I could not sleep. My tooth hurt. I thought my mouth was exploded. My mother picks up baby rabbit and say to me, press against your face where hurt. I take baby rabbit and push with my face, push. Then later, the pain. Gone.

Gone, I said. Just like that?

Yes. I put the rabbit in the floor and the rabbit run away crying because he now had tooth pain.

I sat there without knowing what to say next. We finished our noodles in silence. They finish spackling and painting the walls in just two hours. I was afraid to ask them if they felt tricked liked my parents did. As if they had managed to cross the fence, only to have to paint it. By the time they were done, their jackets were splattered with paint and their hands looked tired and chalky. I gave them each forty dollars and dropped them off where I found them.

I wondered if these brothers would live in the U.S. long enough to be crushed by the irony of their names. Maybe I’d walk past Burnside and see them lying flat on the floor like dollar bills waiting to be picked up. Maybe they’d be gone, having exchanged
this city for some other part of the country. I wondered where Spec was and what ze might be doing then. Trekking across the state to some remote destination like a burning ship launched into the night.
Sociedad Anónima

No one was there to greet me at the airport when I finally landed. My sister had died four days earlier. After missing her velorio, I ended up missing her burial as well. I had excused myself with a text message. I told my father that I was sorry, and I was. After missing my connecting flight, I was waiting on standby for the next one. I carefully omitted that I’d had too many drinks before the first one and ignored the announcements over the PA system. It was four in the morning when I finally carried my bags through customs. The Aduana Officer looked at my American passport and stared unceremoniously at my face.

Place of birth?

Cochabamba. I said quietly.

He frowned, but with little fanfare his large forehead and dark eyes nodded me through the line. Another officer began to look in my bag. I had already planned an explanation. On the plane I had memorized and practiced how I would answer uncomfortable questions about the medication in my makeup bag, but he handed it back to me without any discernable expression on his face and I simply moved along.

The same diagnosis that had ended my mother’s life so long ago had also taken my sister. This was something I had given a lot of thought to since I was only a few weeks away from my thirtieth birthday. Like my sister’s death, this trip did not feel like the beginning or the end of something, as much as it felt like more of the same.

I followed the crowd that had left the plane into the terminal where arrivals and departures converged into a large, circular atrium with a dome for a roof. All the shops
and boutiques were closed. The only sign of life came from an instant coffee kiosk, where weary travelers haggled with an Aymara boy in charge of dispensing hot water from an electric kettle. A giant analog clock on the wall marked the time. With nothing to do but wait, I stared at it haplessly. The clock’s hands mimicked the sundial moving from the top to the left, then down, then right, then back at the top and instead of sobbing and grinding my sorrow into the ground, I kept my eyes open and managed to contain it. While it was not in the best of circumstances, I had returned without humiliating myself or asking for forgiveness or obliviousness from anyone.

My sister had been hospitalized for a month, but no one had foreseen the complications that would end her life. Or rather, doctors had speculated for too long about their medical opinions before it was too late. I pictured a group of men in white coats arguing among themselves, probably ignoring whatever my sister was trying to say to them.

Unlike some of my aunts and uncles who stopped talking to me and about me entirely, she never questioned the way I was. But when she found out, the tone of our relationship remained muted and distant. During our last conversation, she told me that she was fine, that she was sick of all the tests, and I believed her. Our last call had followed its monthly format, a strange formality born out of obligation, or maybe loneliness. She reminded me of our mother in that way. First, she talked about my father. He had promised again that he was considering retirement. Then she talked about my extended family. My aunt Alecia who was making an addition to her house. Her daughter, my cousin Julia, who had begun medical school and no longer had time for
friends or family. She listed my cousins, one by one—many of them had children now—and she told me what they were up to even though I hadn’t asked, and in all honesty, didn’t care. What I wanted to know was about her, but like our mother, she had learned the habit of leaving herself out of her own conversations.

Some military fraternity had invited my dad to a party and for the first time, mostly because of her condition, he had declined. At no point during that call had she mentioned any urgent signs or unusual symptoms. I couldn’t know if the end had come as a surprise for her. Death was such an awkward business. After an hour waiting at the airport, I was recognized by the driver my father had sent.

I am Jacinto, he said. Emiteria’s ahijado. I don’t know if you remember, but I used to drive for your dad’s taxi company. Jacinto was short and thin. His head was kind of triangular, with a sharp jaw, a broad nose, and close-set eyes. He was wearing a striped jersey in support of a local team, the Strongest futbol club. He looked at me in the eye, and said, now I have my own business. As if I were supposed to interpret that, and I did. I knew exactly what he meant.

I think I remember you, I said. Nice to see you, Jacinto.

So, you’re the General’s other daughter, he said.

I am, I said. I expected to hear a mocking tone when he said it, but it didn’t register. I wasn’t used to it. Being called the General’s daughter. My father had left the military so long ago, but those kinds of nicknames stick. He spent most of his time pretending to retire. My sister had put it succinctly with her last breaths. They were just conferences. Meetings. Consultations. Supervisions. He no longer called it a job.
Jacinto offered to take my bag. But I declined. His taxi was a Japanese import. I sat in the back while he got in the driver’s seat. It took me a while to realize that the car had originally been a right-hand model. The steering wheel and the shifting stick had been repositioned; a makeshift speedometer hung from the doorframe, but the dashboard and all the instruments were still on the right side of the cabin.

This is my baby, he said. It’s a work in progress.

We drove thru El Alto on mostly empty streets, Jacinto’s eyes ahead on the road. We drove past la feria 16 de Julio. Even though it was still early morning, vendors were already setting up their post and stalls. Soon after, he began speaking with an ease that can only come from being a taxi driver. He offered his condolences. I was surprised by how well he knew my extended family. He talked about local politics. He complained about the state of the roads in the outskirts of the city. Mis tíos. Mis tías. They had all been at the velorio and some had stayed for the burial, but all had found themselves in buses and planes back to the valley soon after, complaining about the perpetual cold. He talked about my aunt Juana, my father’s youngest sister, who had finished remodeling her house in the lowlands.

From the car, just before daybreak, we could see the city. La Paz, the seed of Bolivian government, a crater high up in the mountains, a hollow basin carved into the rock full of lights shimmering like crystals. The air was crisp and clean. We had caught a brief break in the rainy month of February. La Paz operates on its own timeline. The sun had already risen over La Ceja but downtown remained trapped in darkness. Behind us, I
lost myself in the intensity of the blue and yellow horizon. In no time we were on the
highway and on the way home.

I found my father on his laptop in the living room. Everything looked exactly as it
did after my mother died. All the pictures and the decorations remained the same. Even in
old age, my father still woke up on military time.

That’s why you don’t get gringos to build your house, he said. They can’t
measure to save their lives. That was the way my father was. He had long become
accustomed to abandoning and resuming conversations as if no time had passed in
between. He hugged me, but if he had experienced any emotional reaction to his
daughter’s death, I honestly couldn’t tell. He moved on to explain that the original deed
of the house had listed measurements in yards instead of meters. He had been planning a
new addition and had uncovered the error at the city’s real estate office. More square
meters meant a new appraisal, forms, red-tape, bureaucracy. The kinds of things that
brought out the worst in my father.

Can you believe it? he said.

No, I said. It happened so suddenly.

Changing all the paperwork on the deed of the house is going to be a nightmare,
he added. I may have to bribe someone.

I nodded in agreement. In my years away, my body had grown accustomed to
living at sea level. I was fatigued and vaguely nauseous. No one ever got sick in La Paz
until outsiders started coming here. Then, some gringo doctor had to invent a diagnosis
for it. A diagnosis for your body adjusting to the shape of the world. Altitude sickness. I
felt like a foreigner, like some strange tourist wondering around the vestiges of my childhood.

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After a long nap, my body began to remember itself. I walked around the house looking for changes. Almost everything remained the same. I saw my sister’s picture in the living room along with several flower arrangements. She was prettier than I remembered. Her cheeks were still full, plump. She had dark freckles near her dimples. Her features were soft, and delicate compared to mine. She was the General’s daughter, all right. There was an air of the General in all of us: the same brown eyes, the same forehead, the same birthmark near our left eye. Until recently, she had been living in the lowlands. She was a teacher and hated La Paz like most of my extended family. But my father had been too restless for Quillacollo, the small town in the valley where a shoe factory and a sunflower oil manufacturer had built a series of stables to house their workers. Eventually the Shoe Workers Union came and built actual houses and that gave birth to the town.

My grandfather had been the eleventh attorney licensed to practice law in that rural province. The way my father talked about grandpa; his life had unfolded like a ribbon. Graduated from secondary at fifteen. Completed university by twenty. He was practicing law before he turned twenty-one and became president of the bar association at age thirty. I had never understood the way in which men fuel their ambitions. For all its apparent charm, leather tanning, pastures, and sunflower fields were not good enough for my father. He joined the military, so he could see the country. By the time him and my
mom were married he had moved to the city. Cochabamba. But even with a half-million people surrounding him, my dad felt like his home was in the middle of nowhere. He could still smell the dirt. So, this time, dad took his family to the capital, where he could properly fulfill his duty to blood and country.

By the time I was in kindergarten, my father was already an officer in the Engineering Corps of the Bolivian Army. For twenty-six days out of the month, my father, the civil engineer, lived in military camps and slept in trailers, sometimes in tents, sometimes in hotels, while overseeing the construction of Bolivia’s major infrastructure. Highways. Bridges. Bunkers. Prisons. Even office buildings. His division cleaned jungle and laid asphalt. My father was the lead engineer that built the bridge over Rio Branco that crosses onto Brazil. There’s a plaque with his name on the bridge. They were always giving awards to my father. But he always had the good manners not to boast about his accomplishments.

I was born the year after the last military dictatorship fell. My conception must have been one of those celebratory fucks that can only happen right after the last shots have been fired and the dictator has fled the country. I imagine my dad, ever brave, protecting my mother in the living room of our house. He would have pulled the mattress away from the window, and my mom would have checked it for bullet holes. Then they would have made passionate and revolutionary love on it. Or maybe my father was not home when that happened. Maybe he played for the other team, the one that had trained the paracos in Panama, and was later seen driving a windowless van, transporting union leaders from the city to an undisclosed location in the jungle where they would have been
put to rest. Or maybe he was part of an elite team trained by the CIA and the Butcher of Lyon himself, the one who had tortured that socialist novelist before ordering his disappearance. The one whose family comes out every year asking the military to release the location of his remains. But every military family has those stories. They’re just that. Stories.

When my father was in the city he would change into civilian clothing. Freshly washed jeans and sweaters that my mother purchased for him, measured, and took to the tailor to have them properly fitted. When he and my mother had to go out at night he often dressed in a suit or a formal military uniform, with a green shirt, a deep green jacket and even a greener tie. These are some of the last memories I have of my mother: she in a sparkly dress, wearing dangling earrings and a shade of lipstick that wasn’t flattering for her. She had spent the afternoon at the salon, her nails were perfect and a hint of the smell from the perm still hung in the air. Mom attached los Gafetes de condecoración on my father’s lapel. Stripes. Bars. Stars. Red. Yellow. Green. A coat of arms with a condor on it. Mi papá, el proveedor. Mi papá, el milico.

Unlike my aunts and uncles in Quillacollo who went through the process of building their homes one floor, or addition at a time, my father went to purchase a home already built by an American businessman who had decided to return to Florida after one of the coalition governments wasn’t able to keep the peace. By the time I started school, we lived in La Zona Sur, in a modest home, if you consider our surroundings. Most of the other houses had guard dogs, and some even had pools and watchmen who patrol their yards with flashlights at night. We didn’t have dogs or guards. But my parents employed
a couple from the highland provinces who helped mom with the upkeep of the house, preparing our meals, and timing our departures and arrivals. Emiteria, our domestic worker, and her husband, Domingo, who helped as our driver and our gardener and often did other work when he was not working for my family.

They lived in a tiny house, in the back of our lot, past the water tower and next to the concrete sink where Emiteria washed our clothes for years before we had a washing machine. She and her husband didn’t have children but spent all of their spare time building a house in El Alto, the sister city, past the outskirts of La Paz where the temperature is ten degrees colder at night, and there was no electricity or sewer system then. Domingo drove us to school, and he watched the empty house when we were traveling the country. Sometimes Domingo and Emiteria fought. They never did so in front of my parents. But sometimes, I could see them from the window in my room arguing about money. Domingo would wail his arms and threaten to hit Emiteria who would then threaten to tell my father. My father paid both of their salaries to Domingo because he was the man, and it was his responsibility to manage his family’s finances. They had been working for my parents longer than I had been alive.

My father had paid Jacinto to drive me around while I was in town. Without anything better to do, I decided to make the most of his company. From our neighborhood, we went to Obrajes on Avenida Hernando Siles. I reconciled my sights with memories of my infancy. We drove on Avenida Veinte de Octubre and soon we were in Sopocachi. I saw the cable car system that connected the various boroughs of the city. I saw college students with blue hair hanging out in the cafes near La Universidad
Católica. La Paz had not changed, or rather, it had changed in an expected way. The way cities change skyline and morph their character until they look more modern and sinister.

From the Casco Viejo we saw the façade of government buildings, palaces built in the 18th century blocks away from glass high rises on Plaza San Martín. Circular pillars and apartments. Jacinto had wanted to avoid the Public University District, but I insisted that we go there because I wanted to see how the university had changed. Before we even got near it, we saw a group of medical students protesting. They were wearing surgical masks, blocking the street and burning tires. They must have not agreed with the government’s new healthcare policy. In La Paz, civil unrest is the popular sport, and rage is a localized illness. Protests had been organized all over the city, but only the streets near the Public University appeared to be affected. Riot police were assembling nearby to crush protesters.

Jacinto told me about his life. He had been driving since he was sixteen. Without the foundation of a primary education, the schools in the city had proven too difficult for him. This in spite of my parents’ attempts at finding him a good school and paying his tuition. Although her godmother, Emiteria, had been initially disappointed by his decision, she understood that schooling was not something that suited everyone, especially her ahijado, who in spite of having learned Spanish quickly as a boy, had still not learned to read. Jacinto did the next natural thing. He began driving one of the taxis owned by my father. He did this for a few years before finally quitting. Emiteria then allowed him to apprentice with a truck driver who’d come from the same small town.
A few months later, he had found work driving a truck from the Yungas Region into the city. He drove for eight, twelve, sometimes eighteen hours at a time on those narrow, bumpy roads carved into the ridge of the mountain in order to bring fruits, vegetables, and other goods to the city. During summers, he drove to Arequipa and brought back televisions, computers, and other highly coveted items until he had saved enough money to buy his own truck. During the lean times, when no one would hire him, he drove laborers looking for work from the valley and into the city accepting the meager contents of their pockets as payment. Sometimes he transported livestock, like chickens and Guinea pigs. Each day, dozens of men woke up in the wee hours of the morning in towns that laid beyond El Alto and packed themselves like sardines into the back of any truck headed for the city; more than half the men who rode in would not make the trip back.

The city calls to anyone who wants to better themselves. Some of the men, those who spoke rudimentary Spanish, had the good fortune of finding jobs as doormen or janitors. Some were even luckier and were able to apprentice with a carpenter or a mason, who would offer them room and board, a cot and a simple meal. The rest would spend whatever they earned on food and liquor and at the brothels on Calle Figueroa. Yet others were not able to find any work and were stuck in the city and you could see them sleeping in the filthy entrances of downtown buildings and in front of cathedrals. La Paz crushes those who can’t bleed money out of its concrete walls.

Jacinto didn’t earn much, or at least that’s what he told me, but he was very careful with his money. Driving long distances eventually took its toll. He wanted a
permanent home in the city instead of the constant coming and going. Jacinto sold his truck in order to buy his first taxi. Then he bought another. Then he finally got this one, a recent-year model that had arrived damaged by a flood in Japan and bought cheap at auction in order to restore it. The car had been painted white with racing stripes. On the back window, a decal reading: Mi Querida Copacabana. Jacinto talked about his small town. About growing up in a fishing village. About how the air felt there during the bitter months of July and August.

Jacinto wanted to show me how El Alto had evolved since the days of my youth back when it had been considered an area too dangerous to visit. Digital modernity had been fully embraced. Where there had been humble dwellings twenty years ago, the new face of indigenous wealth manifested as multi-purpose buildings with shops at the bottom levels and luxury suites at the top. Architectural designs that looked like futuristic robots and flat screens displaying animated advertisements. Crowded cafes where everyone stared at their tablets or laptops. Houses inspired by pre-Columbian designs painted in bright neon colors and lit by environmentally conscious LEDs. By noon, the market had swelled in numbers and Jacinto did his best to avoid the incredibly heavy traffic. Every Thursday and Sunday, more than 10,000 vendors take to the streets of El Alto and form one of the largest street markets in the world. Tens of thousands of shoppers attend the flea market each week. Clothing. Lumber. Livestock. Crafts. Food. Vehicles. Guns. Everything can be had at la feria and there’re no checkout lines or credit checks here, only cold, hard cash.

Why did you stop working for my dad? I asked Jacinto, just for something to say.
Because your old man was ripping me off, he said calmly while avoiding stray
dogs and pedestrians alike.

How long did it take you to figure that out?

Too long, Jacinto said, then stayed quiet for a while.

Why do you still drive for him?

I don’t drive for him. He said dryly. We have an agreement. Plus, I own three
taxi now. I don’t need to work unless I want to.

I paused to consider the possibilities. Of how else Jacinto could earn money.

I drive the General’s friends around. He knows how to make an impression, your
dad. He uses a rental company. But he’ll give me the keys to a Lincoln Town Car if the
accionista is American, a Renault if he is European, or a Great Wall if he is Chinese.

And what do you do?

I wear a blazer and act professional. I take them wherever they want to go, no
questions asked. Whatever they need, I get. I grew up in your backyard, I know how to
keep secrets.

I had never been interested in the family business. When I started school in La
Paz, my father received a scholarship to study in Brazil and began to be gone from the
house for longer periods of time. He would leave for five or even six months at a time.
When dad was away, we would stay home on the weekends. Sunday was Emeteria’s day
off and my mom would cook simple meals or order delivery and wait for my father’s
weekend phone call. Domingo was no longer working for my parents then, though he still
lived with Emeteria in the little house outside. Our lives coincided at meals and mom
began taking radio cabs from home to school to pick us up since Domingo had stopped driving for the family. Mom made sure dad talked to each of us on the phone for at least ten minutes. First my sister, who was eight years older than me. She and mom stood next to each other, while mom held the receiver, as if both could speak into the telephone at once. And then me. He would ask about my homework assignments. Or tell me which team had made the next round of La Copa America. On the phone, he would tell us that he was proud of us; we were the reason he worked so hard. This was all for us somehow. He was also proud of himself, although my father wouldn’t say that aloud. Then he would promise us ice cream or a visit to the city center upon his return.

Sometimes mom would leave me alone with my sister. And I’d pile up on top of her because I was still little, and we’d watch the color television from the four-post bed in our parent’s room. We watched cartoon cats. Cartoon dogs. And cartoon dinosaurs. My sister and I used to be able to create explosive laughter just from staring at each other’s faces. Until she began to talk about things that I didn’t understand. That was also around the time that the furniture in the house began to change. Mom had discovered import catalogs. I remember a series of middle-aged women who wore high heels in spite of the cobbled-stoned streets and the steep inclines of the city. They’d come to show her inventory sheets of interesting and desirable furnishings. First, we got the rugs. One under each table, thick and deep burgundy in color and faded gold edges. New sheets. New duvet covers which needed to be dry-cleaned. She also bought rugs to put under each of our beds. Then, one winter when dad was visiting us, we all went to a tropical resort in the lowlands where mom fell in love with the lamps in our hotel suite. Heavy
brass bases and wiry arms, with shades of interconnected seashell circles. My father argued with the hotel manager for thirty minutes until they sold him six of them and had them delivered to our house by military parcel.

Our home changed. The furniture and the curtains changed. The cabinets changed. The china and silverware changed. The floor in the kitchen changed. Our clothes changed. My sister began getting her hair done at salons downtown on a regular basis. Mom had the pink tiles in the bathrooms redone with slate tones and added shiny golden fixtures. By the time the carport was built, Domingo, our gardener, had abandoned Emiteria for another woman, and my father, ever generous, doubled Emiteria’s salary. By then all of us had started attending weekly racquetball games with other military families. My father joined charities, fraternities, and even the Free Masons, but even I knew by then it wasn’t a secret society as much as a drinking club for men like my father.

When he eventually returned to the country for good, he was fluent in Portuguese and had brought some of his military friends to spend a couple of days with us. I saw him unload suitcase after suitcase filled with toys and books that he had brought for us. Games that looked like television shows and dolls for my sister, even though she was too old for dolls at the time; a chemistry kit and a play set of metal plates that connected with nuts and bolts that was meant to teach children engineering principles, meant for me. His efforts to show his friends around the city were thwarted, however, as all three of them fell ill with altitude sickness and were confined to the house for days. Red-faced, with their cheeks plump with fatigue, they could barely walk down the street or accomplish the smallest task.
The timing had been perfect, as none of it mattered. When the new administration assembled a cabinet with the mission to shrink the government’s size and expenses, many of the state’s assets were sold at auction. My old man was vivo. He formed his first Sociedad Anónima. They purchased construction gear: cranes, lifts, trucks, and paving equipment. My father closed the deal with a big family meal. But his guests ate almost nothing during their goodbye dinner. Upon my father’s return, he was able to get an office post at one of the military bases in the city and he no longer traveled the country. He also convinced the neighborhood association to set up two guard stations on our street and hired off-duty policemen carrying submachine guns to keep an eye on the neighborhood at night.

I was about to finish middle school when my father called me into his study. He said that I was growing up soft and docile. He blamed it on city life. I knew what he meant. I had known this about myself for a while, but back then, I had already learned to keep secrets. He thought it’d be best for me to see how he had grown up. Although he didn’t say it overtly, I knew what he was getting at; he still expected me to grow into someone that vaguely resembled him. He told me he wanted me to see his old school. It had been set up by a Jesuit Monastery who brought apprentice priests to the country after they had completed their education in Spain. They each taught a different subject at the school while attending seminary. Es un buen arreglo, my father had said. He thought it was innovative to have foreign teachers in a rural school, even though the school had been open for almost a century. This small town had been the birthplace of my
grandfather. I was to learn where I was from by living in a town I had not known existed until then.

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It was my first year of secondary when I left the capital for the interior, for a small-town east of the middle of nowhere called Cuatro Esquinas. A town next to big empty lots full of dirt, and roads made of dirt, and houses that were also made of dirt. At least I didn’t have to live in the dormitories. My family had arranged for a room to be furnished at the country estate of one of my father’s wealthy friends. The house was an example of Arquitectura Criolla, an ostentatious nine bed-room colonial revival home that suited a particular kind of businessmen from the valley region. The house was used to throw occasional parties and banquets but remained vacant with all the furniture covered most of the time. It was one of those houses with a gate, with red shingles and white walls, with rose bushes growing out of giant clay pots. Past the courtyard and onto the second patio were the groundskeeper quarters, where my room was. I had seen servant quarters in the city, but out in the country they were somehow even worse. The rooms had been built with adobe bricks and although they had been plastered inside, vinchucas made their nests on the outside, tiny little holes the size of sunflower seeds from which they crawled out at night to feed.

My room was the size of three beds. There was no TV although my father had said that he would send one by military parcel once I got acclimated. My room was the last in the second patio, next to the common bathroom and across the kitchen. Don Isidro,
the groundskeeper, was a retired teacher who lived with a Quechua-speaking woman and drove an old pickup truck. He was set to drive me to school every day.

By the time I woke up in the morning, café con leche had already been made and fresh bread had been delivered to the house by a boy from the town on a bicycle. Often, we had fresh cheese and butter because of the milk processing plant that was nearby. During the week, we ate soups and rice dishes. On weekends the woman—who spoke very little Spanish—would cook in clay pots over a propane burner for many hours. Meat turned into guisos in thick, spicy gravy. The smell was enough to fill both patios. Don Isidro mused at himself. He had been a rural schoolteacher for over thirty years. He had taught history and civics and as a result all he did was tell stories about the history of the town in an endless loop. About the shoe factory and the union workers. About the reasons why this avenue was named this. Why that street was named that. He knew the names of many families who had become prosperous and then moved onto bigger and more interesting futures in more interesting places. He spent the rest of his time staring at a small television in the corner of his room. On the way to school, I stared out of the window while the groundskeeper talked about the town, its history, its people. The dust spun into a cloud as we drove on a dirt road lined by eucalyptus trees and empty sunflower fields that had been harvested earlier that year. When he began telling me the same stories three or four times, I finally stopped paying attention.

I had learned pretty early in life that school was not a place to make friends. Most of the students were farm boys who lived in the dormitory. There were several boys from the city who smoked cigarettes to pass the time, trying to make the best of the situation
before inevitably being sent to military school after their next fight. Then there were
several students who were repeating the grade. Some for a second or third time. It didn’t
take long before I heard a whistle, or somebody called me a fairy and a freak. That was to
be expected.

There was a giant named Rabbit whose shoulders were wider than the teacher’s. He was taller than everyone in class. He looked like he could strangle you with his bare
hands. Rabbit was bad, but the worst of all was a boy named Leo, who walked around
intentionally showing a limp wrist and winked at me on my first day of school. This must
be the worst place on earth, I thought.

Unlike me, who tried to stay out of harm’s way and let boys be boys, Leo was
unnecessarily flamboyant and the perfect definition of obnoxious. Occasionally, he
smelled of menthol cigarettes. He referred to all the boys in our class as perros. And to
me, as perra. I disliked him immediately. During our meal breaks, I skipped the mess hall
to eat the lunch the Quechua speaking woman had packed for me. Sometimes fruit.
Sometimes a sandwich or an empanada. A small bag of frozen chocolate milk that had
thawed thru the morning while attending classes. I tried getting to know the son of a
Mexican dignitary who was dropped off with great affair every morning by a brand-new,
all-wheel drive SUV with tinted windows. I asked him where in Mexico he was from. He
said that he had never been to Mexico. He had been born in Quillacollo and his mom was
a Quechua-speaking woman.
Leo continued to try to start fights every other day. If it wasn’t something they said, it was something they did. Everything was an excuse to start a fight. One day, Rabbit called Leo a faggot during recess.

Well, you’re even a bigger faggot than I am! Leo told him. In spite of all logic, he appeared ready to exchange punches. You’re the biggest faggot of them all! he said, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

An apprentice priest who spoke with a Madrid accent saw the whole thing happen. He calmly reminded Rabbit that beating someone up in school would result in being sent to confession at the chapel. No doubt, such action would further result in having to pray many Ave Marias or Padre Nuestros, which would be of great inconvenience to his plans after school. Worse, Father Cristobal may punish him by making him sweep the chapel and stand the humiliation of having to perform a woman’s job in front of everyone. Rabbit stared at Leo then at the priest. Then he looked me in the eyes and spat on the ground with that look that men get when they don’t know whether they want to fuck you or kill you.

I dealt with my problems a different way. I tried not to confront anyone. If anyone asked for help with schoolwork, I’d help them, even if they had made fun of me before. I paid attention in class, raised my hand often when the teachers asked questions, and kept myself within eyesight of the priests in between class periods. I stayed in the classroom as much as possible and avoided the mess hall. Every day after recess, once all of the students had gone back to our classrooms, the novice nuns would arrive to sweep the
courtyards and collect garbage. I saw them countless times from the window. They wore brown habits and white veils; they worked tirelessly and never said a word to each other.

The Madrid priest served as our math teacher. The Barcelona priest served as our science teacher. There were other teachers, too, although I don’t remember them very well. The principal was also our religion teacher who taught us catechism. They took turns coming to our classroom where the whole class had to stand in unison to greet them. In composition class, our teacher was an apprentice priest from a part of Spain that I knew nothing about. He was the one that decided that Leo and I should share a desk and a bench near the front of his desk. He was the only one who treated us kindly.

The writing teacher explained the format of the class. We were to keep two notebooks for the duration of the year. Our cuaderno borrador, in which we were allowed to write with a pencil. This was our notebook to take our daily notes during class, write exercises, and copy lessons from the chalkboard. We were allowed to make spelling errors, and later correct, revise, and change things. This notebook was just for us. It was meant to be rough, unfinished. The writing teacher encouraged us to practice writing every day. Our cuaderno en limpio a was different matter altogether. We had to use an ink pen. Blue was the only acceptable color. These notebooks were supposed to be spotless. Our grammar and orthography were meant to be perfect. We were to condense our lessons, keep only what was absolutely necessary. We were to deploy our best penmanship. He introduced us to the Palmer Method.

The writing teacher would collect our cuadernos en limpio every Monday morning in order to give them to the vice principal. It was Father Cristobal, not our
writing teacher, who checked our work for errors. No one knew much about him because
he only left his place behind the confessional to lecture us when we did something wrong.
When the writing teacher returned our cuadernos en limpio to us on Fridays so we could
transcribe that week’s notes over the weekend, we saw all the notes and corrections from
Father Cristobal. He crossed out words, sometimes entire paragraphs, and annotated in
red ink. He even tore entire pages out if they were not to his standards. He assigned a
grade from zero to seven and nobody in class got higher than a six. He always tore at
least one of my pages and marked me down for penmanship because I didn’t know how
to write in cursive. Even so, I liked writing in my cuaderno borrador.

Leo wrote sporadically and asked how to spell words. He used a drawing pencil
with the rubber eraser at the top. He made a lot of mistakes and used his blue and pink
rubber eraser often. I used a mechanical pencil and a kneaded bread eraser. Like the ones
that my father used when making technical drawings on the drafting table at home. Leo
had the sneaky habit of peeking at my notebook. I wasn’t sure if he was trying to copy
me or he realized it also served as my journal. Leo wasn’t very good at school; he often
asked questions which had obvious answers and missed important details from our
lessons, but he wrote in a beautiful, tilted cursive writing that reminded me of my sister’s.
That was the only time I felt jealous of him. I had failed calligraphy class long ago and
had decided to simply print my letters. I wrote about far-away places where people found
every manner and mode of affection. It was silly, but I wrote about love. What I thought
it was. How I thought it felt. What I thought it meant. All the while, I wondered how
many more years I would have to hear the same dumb jokes about people like me in the classroom.

During my first week at the school, I overheard the Madrid priest talk to Rabbit like a calm and patient father. If you bounce someone’s head on the concrete floor—even if it’s only a few times—you are very likely going to end up hurting them.

Rabbit nodded in agreement.

Later I heard the Madrid priest and the Barcelona priest talking. It would only be a few more months until Rabbit would be off to military service.

*

I told Jacinto to take me to the cemetery. At the entrance he bumped into an acquaintance and decided to wait outside. El Cementerio General de La Paz, one of the oldest in the country, had originally been built by order of the Supreme Protector Andrés de Santa Cruz, a military hero, and Prefect of Chuquisaca. In the neighborhood that we now call El Tejar, the cemetery takes up fifteen or so blocks walled-off from the city, separated from the commotion by elevation and groves of trees. The cemetery itself is a miniature city made entirely of graves, tombs, and crypts, with pavilions of catacombs arranged like a labyrinth including numerous corridors, passageways, and alleys. My family had a small plot in one of the military blocks, near the Veterans Hall built to honor those who served in Los Acres or the Chaco War.

Inside the cemetery you forgot about the city for a moment. I could hear the wind whirring along those narrow hallways. A haunted whistling tone unlike anything else I have ever heard which muffled the cries of any mourning family. I remember coming
here as a child with my aunts and uncles, but never alone. Never by myself. I did come on occasion with my sister to visit my mother. But I don’t remember being scared of this place.

My sister told me the stories of the ghosts who haunted the cemetery. She told me about the ghost of Ana Paredes, an old woman dressed in black who wore an oversized hat that covered her face. In real life, she had opposed the construction of the cemetery because this field had been a sacred site for the Aymara people. Ironically, she became the first person to be buried here. Then there was the ghost of the priest from the mausoleum belonging to the Ascarrunz family. The cemetery is filled with dozens of mausoleums built over hundreds of years, where illustrious paceños including entire families have been interred. Among all these intriguing sepulchers, the most luxurious belongs to the Ascarrunz family which is carved out of Italian marble from top to bottom including baroque features. The ghost is said to have been a corrupt priest who had facilitated the family’s appropriation of marble meant to be used for restoring the National Cathedral. Finally, she told me about the ghost of the condemned bride. She is known to appear among the common graves. The public pavilions, some built up to four stories tall, where local paceños could keep their family members for ten years before having to find a permanent resting place for their remains. The ghost is said to be wearing a wedding dress in immaculate white with a veil. In life she had been a beauty queen, but she was born into a violent family, and no man dared to come near her. She’s said to have been killed the day of her wedding, at the peak of her youth, which left her wondering
aimlessly through the high-rises for the dead looking for a lover. This was when I was still young enough to believe in ghosts. And even so, I was never scared of this place.

My sister was placed next to my mother and the plaques with their names sat next to each other. There were flowers everywhere although some had begun to wilt. Soon, the rain would return and all that would be left will be the one vase. Musicians offered their services to those willing to dedicate a song to the departed. We left soon after and stopped to eat cinnamon sherbet and empanadas in the market stalls behind the cemetery as was traditional after visiting the dead.

This was the most relaxed Jacinto had been all day. He told me about his taxis. About fixing cars even though he’d never gone to school for it. He told me all about the work that went into converting a right-hand vehicle piece by piece. It was as much invention as it was repair. Jacinto was gifted with mechanical intuition; it was a shame that he was illiterate. Afterwards, we sped by on Avenida Costanera while Jacinto listened to hip-hop in Aymara. In the car, Jacinto began to sing. Words that I couldn’t understand, Wara kawara kawara k’ana kawa. Wara kawara kawara k’ana kawa.

What does that mean?

It means, we’re thousands and thousands; we’re millions.

And what does that mean?

It’s about Tupac Katari.

I’ve seen the graffiti.

He led the Aymara rebellion. He had been baptized as Julián Apasa by the bishop of La Paz himself. But when he saw how his people were being treated, he rejected his
Christian name and adopted his real name, Tupac Katari. His rebellion killed 20,000 bootlickers. Spaniards and colonizers alike. For this, he was sentenced to be quartered. That’s when they tie you to four horses and whip them until they split you in pieces.

Uh-huh, I agreed.

They asked him if he had any last words. He told them: you will split me in four, but I will return in the millions.

I didn’t say anything for a while.

Don’t be too impressed, Jacinto added. The Mapuche killed 40,000 Spaniards. We Aymara only killed half as many. But the Mapuche were warriors. We were herders and fishermen.

* 

When Rabbit finally got to Leo, I wasn’t with him. I didn’t see it happen. I just saw the aftermath. The missing teeth. The streams of blood. The broken nose and the two black eyes. One of the capillaries in his left eyeball had burst. I didn’t notice any of these details at first, of course. He had emerged from the far end of the field at the end of recess like a tired hiker and it took me a while to recognize what I was seeing. I saw the bloody pulp of his face and ran for help. While I waved my arms crying for someone, the nuns began to sweep the courtyard. It was then that I realized that the nuns were deaf. The priest told me that I was screaming, I screamed myself hoarse before realizing that they were mute as well.

Eventually the Barcelona priest came with help. Leo was taken to the city and did not return to the town for several days. He missed four weeks of school. This was the one
and only time I saw Father Cristobal come out from behind the confessional and into the field. He spoke to me. He took me into his private office. He explained that the convent across the farmlands was also a home for deaf and mute girls. Families from all over the state came to drop off their daughters because of their condition. The girls were raised in the convent. They were taught the Hail Mary and the Our Father in sign language. They were entrusted with the upkeep of the parish. They gleaned the fields. They swept the courtyards. They cleaned the convent, the chapel, and the school grounds. I didn’t understand it at first. It was so much to take in. The nuns had no name, and we could only call them sister.

I did not mean to begin spending time with Leo. Our writing teacher had asked me if I could take our daily assignments to him while he was still recovering. I only agreed because I didn’t want to disappoint him. No one knew when Rabbit would snap next, and I had no intentions of becoming his next victim. So, I asked Don Isidro to stop by Leo’s house on the way home. Where I expected a well, adobe bricks and lose chickens, Leo’s house was built entirely of brick and had a modern façade. We eventually met up on weekends. This became a routine. It broke the monotony. It was something to do. We sat in his dining room with our notebooks open and did our composition homework. We transcribed sentences. We wrote descriptions. We summarized and analyzed and synthesized. We invented words and discovered forgotten ones. We learned about history and vocabulary and Latin.

This is how I learned about Leo’s life, in which he spent month after month waiting patiently for his father and mother, who had immigrated to the United States, to
save enough money to bring him there. His room was built of plain brick with a tin roof, but inside, the entire place had been plastered, carpeted, and even had built-in closets. Leo had his own private bathroom connected to his room. His door opened to a patio with two lemon trees and several rose bushes. His room had obscured glass windows. You couldn’t see from the outside any more than you could see from the inside. Only shapes and silhouettes and the suggestion of movement.

Leo’s nose healed just a tiny bit crooked. But his eyes recovered eventually, and his complexion returned within a few weeks. Leo’s parents lived in Virginia or Minnesota. I don’t remember. Somewhere where it snowed in December. But they sent encomiendas with families returning to the country as often as possible, which was every couple of months. The packages were often carry-on suitcases. Every time they included a bottle of scotch for Leo’s grandfather.

Leo received clothes, candy, and school supplies. Notebooks with pretty cartoon characters on them which the priests didn’t allow at school. Athletic shoes in bright, metallic colors that I had not seen since leaving the city. For his birthday, they had sent him a new video game console, the same kind that I used to have back at home. Leo couldn’t play any games though because the voltage was different in the rural provinces. Leo had to wait a whole week after his birthday until his grandfather could get a ride into the city to buy a power converter.

Don Sebastian, Leo’s grandfather, spent most of his time listening to sporting events on the radio, drinking wine or sometimes scotch, while visiting with his next-door neighbor. The booze was kept in a cabinet in the living room. More than a dozen amber-filled
bottles with a red label and golden caps. Leo showed me exactly where they were when I
visited his house. The caps were wide and made of metal. They made a scraping noise as
he opened them. Leo poured until the cap was almost full. The smell burned at the edge
of my palate. Do you want one? He asked curling his lips.

Are you having one?

I'm having three, he said, proud of himself.

I avoided inhaling while he poured the second. The third one was for me and I
took it and swallowed it in one go. My throat burned and my eyes watered; the taste was
similar to the way that cooking meat smells. Leo had his third, as promised. He flinched a
little this time. Then he played video games on a color television in his room.

Do you have another controller? I asked.

Did you know in the United States they have flavored condoms?

So, I said. You don’t have another controller.

You can play when I get bored with this level. We can have more whiskey later.

The game involved a robot that needed to get across the screen without dying. If
he did, the character returned to the beginning of the level and there was no way to pause
it or save it along the way. He went on for several minutes until he found an obstacle that
he couldn’t overcome. I stared at the way Leo held the controller. The way he shook his
hands when the character had to jump. Typical of a beginner.

Hey, he said.

Yeah?

Let’s have more whiskey.
I smiled.

He did, too.

I don’t remember if he made the first move. I remember the beeping electronic music of the video game in the background. I remember my hands on his chest. The smell of scotch in his breath. I remember this heavy feeling on my chest, which made me have to take some deep breaths before we resumed kissing. It was me who felt him through his pants and unbuckled his belt. It was me who got down on her knees. I remembered his hands on the back of my head. How it felt to have him alive and moving inside my mouth. It was over quicker than I expected. When he was finished neither of us said much of anything. Leo eventually resumed playing. The robot went on and every time he got farther than ever, he was immediately sent back for the smallest mistake, falling into this pit or that pit, over and over again.

Leo got weird and started avoiding me at school after that. He stopped asking me to come over by his house and got into more fights than ever before. There were times where I was sure that he was drunk at school. I assume he went on playing the same video game until the power converter overheated and the reality of the Bolivian countryside had to be tolerated again. I don’t know what happened to him. Maybe he eventually reunited with his parents. Or maybe he went to barber college and became a hairdresser, or a tailor. More likely, he stayed in that town without work, never to marry, and took care of his grandparents until death. The same way, I presume, the nunnery continued to take in deaf and mute girls, taught them to pray, and how to clean the school.
My memories of Cuatro Esquinas are not foggy. They are simply unhappy. After my grades dropped, my dad had me pulled from the school and transferred me back to the city. It wasn’t because of Leo or Rabbit. It was the nuns; I couldn’t stand watching them anymore, every time I saw them, I felt angry and helpless. I don’t know what happened to Leo because I never told him that I was leaving. Things went more or less back to normal in La Paz except that I told my father that I wanted to go to university abroad. He nodded in agreement. He stopped giving me a monthly allowance. He said it was an investment. I began attending classes at the Centro Boliviano Americano on Saturdays and every day after-school. That was the year that mom died.

* 

Jacinto and I were stuck in traffic again. There were protests near the San Pedro prison. A group of women covering their faces with purple handkerchiefs protested the brutal killing of a young woman who had been found naked at the bottom of a ravine. Or maybe it was domestic workers who wanted social benefits. Or maybe it was shoeshine boys wearing ski masks, or perhaps some other anonymous collective on the verge of becoming vermin clamoring for an identity.

When we finally made it back to La Zona Sur it was already dark, and there was a luxury car sitting in front of the house. My father must have been talking with one of his business partners. Two men in motorcycles carrying Uzis stood guard by the parked car. Who are those people? I asked Jacinto.

Those guys? Well, unlike me, those men do in fact work for your father. I only know the one on the right, his name is Enrique.
How do you know him?

Well, during the festival of El Gran Poder, I once made a joke about getting a blowjob from the General’s daughter. I was drunk after the grand entry. He came to see me at the fraternity after the party, he grabbed me by the nuts and told me he would eviscerate me if the General ever heard me say anything like that about your sister again.

Sounds like something my dad would do.

He chuckled nervously for the first time that day.

Inside, the house felt enormous and empty. My father was busy with his business associates in his study. Emiteria had fixed tea and cold cuts in the kitchen’s breakfast nook instead of the dining room. I decided to go to my room because I wasn’t hungry.

My father came to check on me after a while. I was lying in bed, not asleep. This time he hugged me, and he meant it. He told me that he was going golfing the next day. It’s for an old friend. Something to do with business. Then he was gone.

The last memory I have of my sister and my mother together was that Christmas before school started. Mom had new parquet floors installed in the living room that summer. She had Emiteria wax them by hand ahead of the party. My sister had graduated from a woman’s college in the lowlands and was poised to start her job as a chemistry teacher in a private high school. I still remember the dress that she wore to the party. A green formal thing with sets of unnecessary ruffles. I remember the hors d'oeuvres, caviar and lox. I remember the dinner. I remember that night my sister had too much champagne and fell asleep on the couch in the living room and dad had to carry her to her room. The next morning her voice was hoarse, and her hair was lopsided and frizzed up. She and
mom watched La Farandula on the television, a show where beautiful women in tailored
dresses sat on designer couches in a fake living room to discuss recent gossip from the
shiny gloss on their lips. I remember the Christmas tree. I remember what we had for
breakfast. But if some peasant boy about my age had come to live with the help, I
honestly don’t remember.

I laid in bed waiting for dreams that would not come. I turned on the television,
but most of the broadcasts bored me. The sport channels had replays, of replays, and
replays. On the national channels the players had names like Gutierrez, Valverde,
Galarza, Urzagaste, while the players on the local channels had names like Mamani,
Huanca, Condori, Parisaka, and the players on the international channel had names like
Müller, Padolski, Gómez, and Kopp. I turned off the television. I brushed my hair for a
long while. Then, I took handfuls of coarse hairs from every part of my head and
attempted to bring them unity. One by one I shaped the strands into a single braid like the
women of these mountains had been doing for thousands of years. Finally, after so much
practice, I had gotten the hang of it.

I decided to go into my sister’s room. It looked as if someone was still in the
process of moving out. There were jewelry boxes on the dresser although there was
nothing inside. There was a bible and some of her old toys. I saw pictures from her
childhood taped to the vanity mirror. One was from her First Communion the other from
her Quinceañera. I remember feeling jealous of her outfits. I used to sneak into her
bedroom to try on her Quinceañera dress when I was younger. The dress was still too
large for me then. I wondered what it would have been like if I had figured it out sooner;
if it would have been different, had I told her earlier. I imagined what it would have been like to grow up together. To wear matching outfits; to sense each other across great distances. I found the key to her wardrobe hanging from the neck of a porcelain elephant, but when I went to open it, everything was already gone.
It happened right after the third spoonful of rice pudding with milk, that Mario had made, with an unfortunate small amount of cinnamon, a shame, that the landline in Manuel’s bedroom began to ring. There was a moment of shared panic when Manuel, stunted by the surprise, forgot that this was, or had been, his apartment, and that Mario, who had just moved in a few weeks ago, was still not acclimated to it.

Land lines do not carry good news. They ring only to bring doom and gloom into the lives of those still straddled with the technology. The telephone line had been a gift of sort. The phone company had been a cooperative. Each member owner held onto a stock certificate and received a phoneline so long as they were a member. This was until cell phones came from China and made everything obsolete. The stocks were now essentially worthless, but since the original member owner had been his mother, Manuel held onto it for sentimental reasons.

Is this Ms. Yupanqui?

It’s Mr. Yupanqui. Manuel said, before he had a chance to think about it. You probably mean my mother, Mrs. Yupanqui?

Outside the apartment, a hawk chased pigeons in the park. Manuel could watch it from the window. The days had steadily been getting sunnier since September and now, his bedroom caught enough daylight in the afternoons that Manuel had forgotten how pleasant it was to be there. The voice on the phone was small, accented, and unmistakably Potosinan, so that he knew immediately that it was someone from his
hometown. The reason the caller was disturbing a relaxed Friday lunch between two lovers, away from prying eyes, on the day before a national holiday, as the following: unless the lease on his mother’s tomb was renewed within two weeks, her remains would be exhumed and her place at the municipal sepulcher would be offered to the next person on the waiting list.

Manuel had been sure that he had signed a five-year lease, but he wasn’t one to argue. Did he remember? He had spent most of his first year of university trying to get rid of his accent. He had spent the rest learning how to fit in. And had it really been three years since her burial? And why did they not bother to contact his brother? Was he not willing to assume the responsibility?

Was it because he had paid for the burial all on his own three years earlier? This after getting at advance from It didn’t matter, the clerk said that if the lease was not renewed within ten business days, the remains would be removed and disposed of. There were options. If money was a problem, for example, he could pay to cremate the remains. Ashes take significantly less space. Plus, the new pantheons being built in the municipal cemetery in La Paz would make it easier to visit.

Did he even want to visit his mother’s grave? The truth was that, in fact, up until today, he had preferred to stay away. This couldn’t have come at a more difficult time. He took the man’s number and promised to call back. He considered it letting it be. There was the matter of his brother. If his brother was not interested in keeping the remains in a proper grave, why should he? After all, he had done his part. All those years ago, it was
he who had paid in advance for a simple funeral procession, a pine box, a plaque, and a few years on the municipal pantheon.

The constant moving of bodies was not uncommon. Some families to move their dead from the main pantheon onto urns once their lease ran out. Those families who owned mausoleums at the cemetery where the only ones whose remains would be safe. When Manuel had been on his second year of university, he had befriended a young medical student. They talked about bribing someone from the cemetery in order to buy a skeleton. This friend, who Manuel had been infatuated with briefly, dreamed of owning a fine human skeleton. Manuel had, at some point, thought about donating his body to science. Yet, he was terrified of the idea that all of those memories, lived-in moments, disappear the moment that the body fails.

Tradition instructed that the departed be honored for at least seven years. But traditions were debatable. The conversation with Mario was awkward, but he also understood. Manuel would only be gone for a day or two. He would take the bus to Potosi and find a solution to this problem. Mario hugged him and gave him a kiss on the back of his head. Manuel remembered the details of their relationship, how it started, why it meant something, and the conditions under which they met. None of which was appropriate to explain now. And to whom would he explain all this.

All Saints Day was only four days away. This holiday brought people to the capital in droves. Some were mourning. Some were celebrating. Some were so stunted by altitude sickness, that even in the glorious October weather, roamed the cemetery and the nearby markets like zombies. Manuel decided to travel that night. He packed light. The
bus terminal, a bright yellow building in the shape of a hangar, looked near abandoned at night. Eight or nine double-decker buses were parked outside. Exclusively on the arrival side of the terminal.

Once inside the bus, Manuel felt lost. On a window seat, at seven in the morning, Manuel set off on the nine-hour long ride across ridges and mountain passes. He had taken the same journey in reverse years ago, although back then, he had traveled during the day.

The clock of capitalism ticks each second and sounds each hour from the summit near the border, down the bumpy planes of the highlands, and even under the soil, all the way down the shafts of darkened mines, deep in the underground, where men remove their breathing masks to spit. Inside the bus, the air is stuffy and warm.

Manuel’s center of gravity shifts when he wears his binder. This is obvious when he rides standing on the city buses, holding the railing with one hand, while riding up the cobblestone roads of San Pedro or down to the University District in the mornings when the office workers rush from the cable car stations and high school students step outside of private buses in clean and neatly pressed uniforms. Manuel enjoys jumping off the bus before the driver has had time to fully stop.

In the city, Manuel lives for these bodily moments, movements, connections. The city arranges itself; it morphs and takes on the shape of whatever date or festival it happens to be. On casual weekends and paydays, crowds amass around banks and liquor stores. But on festival days, the
On these days the energy of the city is one of collective excitement and anticipation. The women on market stalls expect customers. The supermarkets line themselves. On those days, Manuel walks with the confidence of someone whose outlawed love is about to be satisfied. Crowds wait for stop lights to change while youth in zebra costumes dance on the crosswalks and help direct traffic. On these days, Manuel isn’t shy and would have made conversation with a stranger, or even ask the bus driver about the local classic: could The Strongest ever be able to beat Club Bolivar? Instead, the cold dark outside crept in and there was no one to speak to. The altiplano cold does not invade the city, but out in the open, it chills everything it touches down to the bones regardless of season.

The bus ride made him numb. Manuel tried to prevent his right ass-cheek from falling asleep. The latex chair was too warm on his thighs and he did not like how it felt when it touched the back of his knees.

The seat on the bus dwarfs him. His arms can barely reach the push-button on the side and his fingers are not long enough to grab the width of the arms on the chair. His feet barely touch the ground. His shoes feel small, overly tight. A switched-off television is mounted two rows in front. In it, Manuel cannot make the faces of the occupants sitting behind him, but his eyes continue to follow the shadows, shapes, and silhouettes that loom giant in the distorted background. He shifts the weight of his body away from the window. Other passengers on the second level also shift in their seats.

A group of cholitas from La Paz chat amicably in Aymara up front, their bowler hats secured to their heads by bobby pins, their words punctuated by occasional laughter.
The smell of linseed oil no longer lingers in the air, replaced instead by the stuffiness of the recycled air and the remnant of engine smell coming from heaters. Outside his window, there are no longer office doors, or brick buildings under constructions, or even a police station locked in darkness. Even when the occasionally passing car zooms by, there’s hardly any sound, only dust and the strain on his neck twisting to see out of the window.

Upon arriving in El Alto, the bus stopped so additional passengers could get in. A group of young men from downtown complained about the smell. The new passengers, women in polleras with their hair styled into thick braids were drinking linseed tea. The smell was warm and pleasant, though clearly strange to the city youth who had probably grown up only drinking soda and overpriced coffee.

Frost began forming around the trim of the window. The bitter altiplano air as cold as a mortician’s glove. Instead of brass bands or celebratory accordions, Manuel’s progression is silent, accompanied only by the sound of the bus engine, quiet and subdued. Now, tens of kilometers away from downtown, his binder was the bumpiness of the country road is a constant source of discomfort. Manuel knows does want to appear clumsy in public, so he reclines his chair, spreads his legs, and does his best to conceal his chest under an oversized sweater.

The sights quickly became monotonous. This lasted a long time.

Soon, Manuel was asleep, and in that sleep, he dreamt of the mountain that eats men. Cerro Rico, the enormous and slumbering giant, devouring his children, like Saturn. Manuel dreamt of the socavón, a mouth in the rock so deep and so dark that as soon as
men entered, they disappeared from sight, like satellites swallowed by the night. Manuel
dreamt that he was a monolith, silent and serene, floating near in the earth’s core, where
the memory of the world is still warm, and where silver deposits form out of the
primordial dust that blows out of the millennia. In that dream and dreams that followed,
there was only the vast darkness of space, and time, and that lumbering mutant, only half
awake, awaiting its commencement at the shore of an endless void.

In that dream, he can see the stars. Two neutron stars spiral towards one another
other, each larger than the mass of incandescent gas that his ancestors named Viracocha
and called a God. It is this stellar collision. An incident not accountable to the courts of
men, where he saw his own name written out which nowhere else could he have ciphered
out of the ledgers and baptismal records of his subconscious.

Hence place, from soil and flesh, there comes another form of clay as the echoes
of light in outer space surf on gravitational waves to manifest for us, mortals. In the shape
of a jaguar or a hummingbird, the stars beckon. Viracocha’s sons, Inti and Manco-Capac,
travel at a third of the speed of light. Down the line came, Pachacuti, the earth-shaker and
transformer of worlds. It was him that first saw potential in that giant. Having wiped the
blood of his feet on the bodies of his enemies.

In this dream, as small as a city but with the weight of a constellation, high-
energy neutrons smash into each other building gigantic atomic cores. Each atom A
transient astronomical event, a cataclysm as significant as the beginning of time itself.
Binary stars are always unstable. Whoever would seek out their history through the
unraveling of their loins must then stand mute, suppressed by the machinations of men
trying to divide life back into its origins. But it will be those insignificant mitanos, whose bodies will serve as base for the coinage of a prosperous dawn that would not exist for them; these slaves, under the indictment of a foreign god, will hammer away their essence in exchange for a conjectural destiny, a future that would not come. All the while, artisans from another world will engrave their faces on this cold slag in the crucible of our becoming. This is what silver is. This is where silver comes from. Soon, his slumber would be over. Manuel would wake up with only a vague feeling and no clear recollection of this dream, and if anyone would ask, he would say that he did not remember a thing.

When Manuel woke to thick fog against the black slate of rocky cliffs. Up in the clouds, where the memory of the world has turned to stone, that the slow descent into the mining region commences.

Manuel came with second wave of what were soon-to-be called Alteños. The children and great grandchildren of the Revolution, a memory so long sustained by now that they can even bear it. After the mines gave, some, those of them who had been union leaders or foremen, immigrated to the city and found work in other unions; others left for the valley and began cultivating coca; others set out to the lowlands looking for any job that wasn’t mining and where they would be called llama herders.

Manuel thought about silver as a precious metal. Silver was used in many bullion coins, sometimes alongside gold: while it is more abundant than gold, it is much less abundant as a native metal. Its purity is typically measured on a per-mille basis; a 94%--
pure alloy is described as 0.940 fine. As one of the seven metals of antiquity, silver has had an enduring role in most human cultures. Manuel thought about the history of silver in the colonial context.

Manuel’s mother had provided for him and sent him to school in La Paz from what she earned sorting through leftover stuff that came out of the mines. Every weekend, after working as a domestic worker for a well-off family, she left for the mountain. It was a job unlike anything Manuel had ever had to do for money. Manuel’s mother would sift through the rubble that came from the tunnels, since Manuel’s father had perished in the mines when he had been young, his mother had been allowed to sift through the rubble. When ore is truck, miners use hydraulic drills and dynamite to explore the vein. The first few blasts bring mostly rubble, unless a large deposit of silver is found, these are dumped at the side of the mountain where authorized members of the mining community are allowed to sift for silver dust.

Cerro Rico, as the Spanish called it, and Sumaq Urqu as Manuel’s ancestors called it, was the most important mountain to Colonial history. The Cerro Rico, which is popularly conceived of as being made of silver ore, was remembered in his history class for providing vast quantities of silver for Spain during the period of the Spanish Empire. It is estimated that eighty-five percent of the silver produced in the central Andes during this time came from Cerro Rico. As a result of mining operations in the mountains, the city of Potosi became one of the largest cities in the New World, rivaling even London or Paris. Even Cervantes mentions Potosi in Don Quixote. Manuel remembers these facts in a specific way.
The fog eventually let out and Manuel was finally allowed to peek at the sides of mountains. The vegetation sparse, paja brava and patches of brittle grass. Occasionally a small pack of llamas grazing, watched over by young indigenous boys. Then the bus paid the toll entering the interstate highway. They passed other buses, smaller buses, trucks carrying fruit or vegetables from the lowlands.

Manuel remembered the stories his mom used to tell. Stories about the devil and the mythology of the Andes. Upon arriving in Potosi, Manuel felt fatigued and tired. With all the delays, the offices at the municipal cemetery were closed and with All Saints Day.

That night, at the hotel, he couldn’t sleep. He watched cable television. Shows about murders, then a movie about a murder, then later fell asleep watching interview of famous people and woke up to the sound of the test pattern when all broadcasts ended.

Upon arriving at the cemetery, around noon, he was met with an ugly surprise. A clerical error, the clerk called it. They had been trying to get a hold of the deceased’s daughter and by the time they had finally reached Manuel, two weeks had gone by. By the time someone had finally made contact, his mother’s remains had already been exhumed.

Manuel asked how long his mother’s remains had been out of the sepulchre. The clerk apologized, but his mother’s spot was already taken and paid in advance by another family. His best option was cremation the clerk said. The cost was 300 bolivianos, he said. The clerk made a list of all the items they would need for the cremations. The list
felt arbitrary, but Manuel knew these kinds of tasks are always meant to be asked as a kind of favor. After all, he would not burn his mother’s remains himself.

Manuel went and collected items on the list. A trip to the ATM did not take long and took care of the cash. Then, he went to the market and bought coca leaves, the expensive type, from the Yungas region, and not the cheap kind, from the Chapare region. He felt an affinity with other mining families who were displaced from their jobs by the government found alternative source of income by planting coca in the subtropical valley region in Cochabamba. These families, he reasoned, were just like his, only luckier.

Finally, after haggling the cost of the cremation by twenty Bolivianos. He gave the clerks a pack of cigarettes, a bottle of singani, and two liters of diesel. He was taken to the fields behind the cemetery where piles and piles of bones remained. The two cemetery workers, both of them former miners, now grave diggers, and were also in charge of cremations.

Manuel thought about the journey. He thought about the universe, mining, silver, and fire. Then, he watched the two men light cigarettes, take turns taking swigs from the bottle and finally dousing the casket with diesel. Manuel remembered his second date with Manuel. It was Manuel’s third and Mario’s first pride. While walking down El Prado, street preachers screaming through a megaphone. Manuel and Mario had kissed in front of the street preachers. The fire had grown now. The entire coffin as burning. If the smell was burning flesh, he could not tell. It might as well have been the smell of burning
wood, or just charcoal. He thought about Mario and the street preachers and the fire just burned and burned.
December 24, Cochabamba, Bolivia

Mi mamá says I shouldn’t take money from the lockbox without telling her first. Which probably means that I shouldn’t. But she won’t discipline me or anything because that’s my dad’s job and he lives in Brazil now. The lockbox is hidden underneath the main table of our kiosk, so I crawl underneath and pop it open with a pencil. Tan fácil.

Helping my mom at the market used to be my brother’s job. But now he just stays at home and sleeps all day. That’s when he is not yelling at the television. Sometimes he doesn’t eat for days and just lies around complaining about the centipedes. Mi mamá says he is sick, but sometimes I think he is just lazy. Mi mamá keeps change in her fanny pack, like the old caseras in the market. Except she’s not old. Her hair is still dark and thick, and her hands are smooth, but she does have wrinkles under her eyes. She’s afraid some chorro will make away with our money. Pasa todos los días. So, we have to be extra careful. The only good thing about helping my mom at the market is that now I can have my own money.

We live three blocks from La Plaza de las Heroínas, the one with the big statue of women holding rocks and sticks. The same women who fought against Los Españoles when all men in town had died, been injured, or run off with women from other towns. That plaza! I’m only taking a five for now. I’m supposed to write a letter to my dad to tell him about the holidays. It’s not fair. My brother doesn’t have to. And my Dad never writes back. Plus, I never know what to say.

Our house is small. My brother and I share a room, which is something my dad complains about. He likes to say: boys need space. Men need a lot of space, which is why
he had to move to a bigger country. Mi papá is always complaining. He complains about
the school my mom enrolled me in. He complains about the teachers there, and the grades
that I got last trimester.

I should get him something festive. Algo navideño, but instead, I buy a postcard
with a picture of the city center. The Casco Viejo, those old buildings with red shingles
out in front, the high-rises behind them, and the cordillera in the background. Maybe he’ll
remember what home looks like. Even though, in truth, that’s not what the city looks like
at all. In the postcard, the city looks clean. There’s no graffiti. Or homeless people. Or
piles of garbage. Or buildings under construction. They must have taken this picture a
long time ago when the city was perfect. I’m sure he won’t mind though. Mi mamá is
always saying that he is forgetting what things are like here. Like how expensive things
are now. Or how my brother needs his medicine, or he will get expelled from school
again.

* 

Our kiosk is on the far end of the market, where the streets are still made with
cobblestones, and the sewer openings on the ground reek late in the day. The seasonal
market smells like dust and moss because of all the nativity figures for sale which are
freshly cast out of plaster. They have Joseph, and the Virgin, and baby Jesus. I’ve told my
mom that I don’t like the funny smell here. She just tells me to stop complaining.

You’re an hombrecito now, she says. Men are not supposed to complain.

I don’t get to play with any of the toys we sell. My mom takes a few items out of
the boxes each morning so shoppers can see the merchandise, but I’m not allowed to
touch. Instead, we just sit in the shade and wait for buyers. My mom says you have to pay attention in order to spot them. If they have holes in their clothes, they’re not buyers. If they wear cheap shoes, they’re not buyers. Mi mamá es viva. She can tell who can afford our merchandise. She waits on her folding chair, nodding at some of the people that walk by, but as soon as she sees this man in a suit, she yells, Casero! Este robot para su hijo.

I don’t have a son; he tells my mother.

¿Qué tal la muñeca para su hija entonces?

My daughter is too old for dolls, he says.

I think he’s lying, but now is the perfect time to pull down on my mom’s shirt and tell her I’m going to go play with Huascar, the boy that helps his mom at the other end of the street. She’ll let me because my mom doesn’t need help selling, only setting up and breaking down, and there’s no one to watch me at home. If mi papá knew I play with Huascar, he’d probably get upset. My dad says that indios are dirty and ignorant, but my mom doesn’t care. Huascar doesn’t smell like the campesinos that bring their produce from the provinces. And he’s the only boy around my age, and I’m forbidden from playing with girls anymore.

As soon as she gives me the okay with her eyes, I set off. Running on these streets is dangerous. You have to watch out for the cobblestones. Some are triangular. Some are rectangular. But some are just random rocks put in to fill potholes. Their jagged edges stick out. Many of them are broken, or cracked, so it’s easy to trip and scrape your knees.

The market is busy right now. Women clutch their purses and the hands of their children as they walk about. Everything is up for sale. Cassettes. Videos. Vegetables.
TV’s. Compact Discs. Stoves. Soap. Computers. Hats. Shampoo. On the corner, they even sell furniture. Beds. Wardrobes. Desks. Most of the stalls in the paved section sell clothes. On our corner, there is mostly holiday decorations and toys. Then there are the informal posts. I see Huascar first, then he notices me approaching.

!Choco! He says, you let your mom do all the work. Eres tan flojo.

He makes me laugh because he has a country accent. His family is from Capinota. I don’t really know where that is. I just know that poor people live there. He doesn’t wear campesino clothes. He wears jeans and tee shirts like my family and me. But I’ve seen him pinch a small lump of coca leaves and stuff them in his cheek. You can tell he’s indigenous because of his face. His close-set eyes. His flat nose. Huascar smiles with those big cheeks that look like bronze planets and it’s hard not to smile along with him. You can tell his mom is a chola for sure. She braids her hair and wears a pollera. His mom sells cheap toys. Wooden trucks. Miniatures made out of plastic. Huascar doesn’t own any toys at all. His family doesn’t have a stall, only a tent. They have to set up everything from scratch every morning. Huascar lays aguayos on the ground and his mom sits on the floor. He never buys food from the caseras. His mom brings a metal pot with lunch every day. But he has a boom box, and sometimes he lets me hold his hand while we listen to music.

Doña Saturnina just looks at me and smiles. She talks to Huascar in Quechua. I don’t understand what she says. I only know the numbers. Like, uno; uj. Dos; iskay. Tres; kinsa. Cuatro; tawa. Cinco; phisqa. Seis; sujta. Siete; qanchis. My grandma could speak Quechua, but she died when I was a baby, so there was no one left to teach me. That’s
q’encha. That’s when you have really bad luck. My brother has q’encha. When Huascar’s mom speaks, it doesn’t sound like I do. I speak with a city accent.

She speaks Quechua so fast sometimes she sounds like a baby sneezing over and over. And when Huascar answers, he sounds like a sputtering faucet trying to sing a song.

She is nodding now. Which is a good sign. Huascar’s mom smiles with her eyes. She sticks her pinky finger in her mouth to get something from in between her teeth.

He sounds calm.

She says three things.

You can tell they’re done talking when they are both nodding and Huascar’s face lights up and his cheeks turn slightly red. His eyes are dark and filled with mischief.

We sit on the ground behind a row of kiosks. He turns the old Panasonic on. I’m so sick of holiday music and priests with gringo accents talking about the meaning of the season. The sun is high in the sky. Summer is gentle this year. Huascar dials the radio to the oldies station. Everything is fine for a while until that song by Piero comes on. The one that goes, es un buen tipo mi viejo...

This station sucks! I say. They only play boleros, baladas, and music for old farts.

Fine, he says, and turns the radio off.

We sit in silence and I’m burning at him because sometimes he’s like this. He likes to control everything. I don’t know why. My brother broke the radio we had at home, and my mom says we don’t have money to buy a new one yet. When my dad eventually sends money to replace it, which he keeps saying that he will do, I will still have to share it with my brother and my brother breaks everything.
Where does your mom get her toys? I ask Huascar.

She has a comadre who brings them. We just sell them.

Do you get to choose what you get?

We just get whatever’s cheap. My mom says money is tight, he adds.

We get ours from the auction. My mom took me this year. The police catch the chuteros coming from Chile or from Peru and confiscate all their stuff. My mom has to hire a truck and get the neighbors to help her get them in the house.

Are any of them for you?

Only one, but I don’t like it.

Yeah?

Yeah, it’s a robot.

Why don’t you like it? Huascar said.

I wanted a teddy bear. Downtown, in the boutique, they have this teddy bear.

She’s a ballerina. She lives in a picnic basket.

You remind me of my cousin.

Why?

She’s a baby.

Are you getting any presents?

My dad is going to get me boxing gloves.

Oh yeah?

Yeah.
His mom is yelling now. I don’t know how Huascar can tell her voice apart from the noise of truck engines and the occasional plane getting ready to land at the airport. But Huascar is answering. His face seems flushed. His eyes are squinting. His mom comes around the row of posts, she sees me and smiles with her mouth half full of gold-teeth. I can tell it’s time to go.

She says goodbye to me in Spanish with a heavy accent. She too calls me Choco. Everyone calls me Choco. It’s because of my freckles and my brown hair. Well, my mom doesn’t. She always calls me by my full name. Especially when she’s upset. Sometimes she gets mad and yells at me, José María! Clean up this mess! Or José María! Don’t feed the dog from the table! Or José María! You’re an hombrecito, stop acting like that! José María! Don’t watch those TV shows or you will get nightmares. By the time I get back to our kiosk, my mom just wants to nag me about writing to my dad.

Okay! Okay! I am doing it. I am doing it.

I go to the back of our kiosk where no one can see. I look at the postcard. There isn’t much room to write anything, so I draw a picture of a centipede on it. One by one. I draw nineteen segments. Twenty pairs of legs. A pointy head with dark fangs. Back legs that look like antennae. It looks like a giant centipede is sleeping beneath the city. I sign my name, add the date, and seal the envelope.

* 

I didn’t always share a room with my brother. Only after my dad left and we moved in with my aunt. My aunt and my baby cousin have a room. My brother and I
share another. Mi mamá sleeps in the smallest room in the house. I hate sharing a room
with my brother, but my mom says we have to because we’re both boys.

Sometimes, when everyone is dead asleep, I sneak into my aunt’s room. She is
younger than my mom, so she doesn’t dress like an old lady. She has really good taste.
Her hair is always perfect, and she looks good in everything. Very carefully, I open her
chest of drawers and choose one of mi tía’s camisoles. I sneak back into my room and put
it on. On one of these nights a month or two ago, I was putting on a floral print when I
realized that my brother was awake and watching me. I stared at him in silence.

¿Qué estás haciendo, maricón?

Sometimes my brother wakes me up in the middle of the night to tell me what he
is dreaming. I don’t know if this is one of those nights. I pretend to yawn.

He yawns back. He stays silent and still for a stretch of time.

The house is dead quiet.

Turn the radio off, now! Turn it off, he says. You have to protect mom. You have
to protect her honor.

I knew he was going to say something crazy.

Right now, there are centipedes in my head, he says. There are centipedes in my
head and they’re crawling in there. They’re crawling all over my brain. Please, he says.
Please. The bug spray. I’m sorry, he says. Please. Like he’s crying.

I imagine dozens of centipedes crawling inside my brother’s brain. Hundreds of
legs crawling all at once. I decide to sneak into the kitchen. I cross the patio still wearing
the camisole I took from mi tía’s dresser. The fabric glimmers in the moonlight. The little
bow at the bottom of the neck shines bright in the night. Mi mamá keeps the bug spray
hidden, but I know all the hiding places. When I come back to the room, my brother is
crying for real. I used to be afraid of him. I was afraid that he might push me and climb
on top of me. He had busted the teeth of an older kid at school. He said he was defending
mom’s honor. The principal said it was about a fútbol team. At this point, mi mamá
doesn’t believe anything my brother says anymore. The weird doctor from the hospital
said that we shouldn’t disagree with him. We should just ignore the crazy things he says,
and wait until his medicine kicks in. I don’t know when that’ll be.

Back in our room, I give my brother the bug spray.

He takes it and sprays it all over himself and his bed. Our room smells like
chemicals. When my brother sleeps, he looks like a baby, except his body is long and
bony. He is holding himself tight. His arms are wiry and thin.

I go back to my bed still wearing the camisole. I’ll hide it somewhere in our room
before he wakes up. Mi tía has several of these. I don’t think she’ll notice. I drift to sleep
in a cloud of pesticide.

*

It’s almost seven, the market is getting empty and I’m hungry. I wash my hands in
the sputtering faucet behind our post. Sometimes, it sounds like there are voices in the
water. I take a ten from the lockbox while my mom is not watching and go look for
Huascar. The good thing about this street is that we’re near the corner where las caseras
sell food. In the morning, there’s donuts, salteñas, and empanadas. In the afternoon,
there’s hamburgersas, tripita, and salchipapas. But my favorite are the cuts of beef heart on a skewer with a boiled potato at the end.

¡Anticuchos! ¡Caserito! ¡Anticuchos! The caseras yell and everything smells like meat and charcoal.

I buy one for Huascar and two for me. I eat my food fast before it gets cold, but Huascar finishes before me.

¿Y la Yapa casera? Huascar asks.

The casera gives him another piece of meat and half a potato, extra.

I don’t ask for yapa because my dad says that’s only what poor people do.

How come you always have money? Huascar asks.

I take it from our moneybox.

Does your mom know you do that?

Sometimes.

My mom would kill me if I did that. What does your mom do when she doesn’t have enough money? He asks.

We always have enough money, I tell him. But secretly I feel bad. Sometimes mi mamá has to borrow money from mi tía. When neither has any money, they wash other people’s clothes. Mi tía brings big piles of blue jeans and button-up shirts from the high-rises and they wash them with lavandina by hand in the concrete sink in the patio. They hang it all to dry using temporary clotheslines. They take up the whole patio. So, on those days I am forced to spend all day with my brother in our room until the clothes dry. Then, mi mamá irons and folds and mi tía delivers them in her bicycle.
On our way back, we see a man. He is deaf or mute or something, but he is selling wrist watches using only sign language. He’s got four watches on each wrist. All kinds of watches. Some of them have a compass. Others have a built-in calculator. He’s also selling one that’s an FM radio. Huascar is telling me to come along, but the guy sees me and starts showing me the watch-radio. The guy shows me where the headphones go. How the little tune dial works. And most importantly, the retractable antenna. You can’t listen to the radio if you don’t have an antenna. By this point Huascar has disappeared in the crowd.

When I get back, my mom is complaining about how I sneak around. She tells me to stay put while she goes to get some food to take home. I’m thinking about taking more money to buy that watch, but I feel bad. A stuffy lady comes around and asks to see that big robot she saw here yesterday. When I go look, they’re all gone. The only one left is the one on display. I go look for the box, I know it’s in here somewhere.

I’ll give you twenty-five for it, she says.

But they cost fifty! I say, I know she’s trying to rip me off. Mi mamá says I should never let buyers rip me off. This is the very last one, so I’ll give it to you for forty-five, I say.

Wow! You’re quite the little salesman! Well, I’m sold. She hands me a fifty.

I go to the money box to get her change. My mom’s back, and she’s watching the lady take my robot and her change.

Your son knows his business well, the lady says, and my mom smiles and runs her fingers through my hair. I take the fifty and give it to her, but she says that I should
keep it and buy something I want. So, I immediately begin to tell her about the watch-radio. I take my money and run as fast as I can. The mute guy is packing his things and getting ready to leave, too.

By the time I get back to our stand, my mom is already putting everything away. She looks tired. I want to tell her all about the watch radio, but she is giving me that look that says, don’t bother me, I am tired. Mom is finishing stacking the tables. All the boxes are already put away. It looks like we don’t have much of anything left. In a week or two, the market will shrink back to its normal size. The eight blocks where the streets are blocked will be open to traffic again. Mom will sell her regular merchandise instead of toys. I will go back to school. Huascar and his mom will be gone. My mom will still have a post at the market.

She closes the stand with three locks and a heavy chain. The locks click. The chain clanks. Eventually the market looks like a row of metal boxes chained together. The big trucks that were busy loading furniture or refrigerators are gone. You can hear a loud motorcycle pass nearby. There are crushed cans of beer on the ground.

Did you write to your dad? My mom asks.

Yes, I answer. I did. I really did. I show her the sealed envelope from my back pocket.

What did you tell him?

Everything.

It’s late now and everything is closing. My mom has a bag of chicken and fried rice from la chifa to take home. Mi tía and mi prima Natividad are probably hungry. Mi
*tía will dress up for dinner. She always does. Maybe she will wear one of the dresses she wears to church. The ugly one with the puffy sleeves with the itchy, green fabric. Or maybe she’ll wear one of the prettier ones. Like the red dress with the zipper pulls shaped like hearts. Or the yellow dress with embroidered flowers at the hem and tiny tortoiseshell buttons that go all the way down the front. It takes a long time to button up all those buttons. Maybe she’ll wear a nice top with those jeans with rhinestones in the back pockets that are way too big for me. Mi prima Natividad is two years old. My aunt will let me hold her tonight. I will point at the ornaments on the tree and show them to her.

Ball, she will say.

I will giggle because Natividad is still a baby. She doesn’t understand what Christmas is. My brother will stay in our room. If he isn’t feeling sick, he will let me pick what we watch on the television. He will eat, take his medicine, and fall asleep. My aunt’s ex-boyfriend will show up late at night, after we fall asleep. He will be drunk and crying, like he often is.

Carolina! He will yell from the street, like he did last time. Mi mamá will threaten him. She will tell him he is disturbing the whole block, and that he needs to leave and never come back.

I promise to be a better man, Carolina, he’ll say. Then he’ll sob out loud, even though men aren’t supposed to cry.

I’ll try to stay up as late as I can, as I always do.
By the time we reach the main road, the streets are almost deserted. All the buses and trufis that would normally be crowding the rotunda near Avenida Aroma are all gone. Two minibuses are waiting for more passengers to get in while the group inside is trying to convince the driver to go already. I just want to open my box. Mom gives me the look and I go for it. I struggle pulling the tape with my fingers. It’s almost dark and everyone is leaving. I can smell rotisserie chicken nearby. There’s trash everywhere. Even vegetable peels. I wonder what my dad is going to do. I wonder if he is going to call tomorrow. I put my brand-new headphones on and plug them in. The dials are small, even for my fingers, but they turn smoothly. I pull the antenna out. I check the volume. It’s on, but I can’t find a single station.

There’s only static.