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The maze

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Recommended Citation

Vera Tata, Maria Elvira, "The maze" (2011). *HIM 1990-2015*. 1770.
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THE MAZE

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
in the Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Fall Term 2011

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ABSTRACT

Many cities in Latin American countries are surrounded by slums. The inhabitants of the slums are often victims of corruption, famine and murder. The victims include everyone and especially affect the most vulnerable, women and children. They are the voiceless whose stories are lost and never told. Children who lack adult support have to pull from their inner strength to rise from hostile environments, nevertheless their lives are lived with ardor and immediacy, a way of life that is built within a culturally-layered community. It is in those layers that not only pain but marvels can be found. My creative thesis, interconnected stories that are woven into a composite novel, focuses on the lives of children in the slums who are constantly beaten down by the chaotic and violent ambiance. These children are of different ages but of similar circumstances, who rise to the challenge, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing.

DEDICATIONS

A mi mami querida, who taught me how to love. Con tus canciones de cuna, your shielding arms, y tu alma pura. Que Dios bendiga tu vida, porque tú fuiste la bendición de la mía.

To my papi who gave me the world, the stars and still has the universe wrapped.

And to my brother, who did nothing but dry my tears, incite my dreaming heart, and believe, more than I deserved, in everything I did. Even if the world never reads me, it was enough to know you did.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the Burnett Honors College for fomenting an ambiance of excellence and for providing an ever diligent and helpful staff with the adequate tools to guide us through our challenging intellectual goals.

Always grateful for my first, real, creative writing teacher, whose encouragement never allowed me to doubt or fail my craft. Like a watchful mother during the early stages of her child's development, you taught me the core values, so that I could grow and flourish without quavering. Thank you Dr. Darlin' Neal.

Special thanks to Dr. Martha Marinara for being constantly present (way beyond assigned committee duties) and never letting go during a most unnerving process. For your ingenious and attentive suggestions, and for your unrelenting grammar eye, which you never hesitated to lend me. Because, una Latina como yo, had all the heart forward but all the words backwards.

A most heartfelt thank you to the extraordinaire, do-it-all Dr. Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés. There are not enough words to describe the mentor that you have been to me. With your love and passion you held my hand, helping me to both realize my inner power, and build confidence in what lay ahead. There are no boundaries in your all-is-possible world, and sure enough, you made that my world, too. You were the answer to my prayers, ask La Virgencita and she'll tell you. I will be eternally grateful for every piece of wisdom you gave me, for every step you made on my behalf, and for every warm hug and cheerfulness you brought me. Una ponderosa Latina is hard to come by; it is no wonder that you became my role model and an everyday inspiration.

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DOWN DOWN AND DOWN AGAIN

“Buela, lie on your right. I can’t move you without Tito,” Manola said while putting the bucket of water on the floor. “Buela, move to your right, I’ll push you but I need your help,” she said raising her tone. The old woman started to shift as Manola pushed against her shoulder. She grunted, coughed and resumed her deep breathing.

Manola picked up the cloth beside her and sank it in the bucket. She squeezed the cloth enough to leave it damp, and began scrubbing the rugged skin. She scoured her back, her armpits, and behind. She rubbed between the creases, between the moles, between the hairy ones, too. Manola dropped the dirty cloth in the container and pulled on the saggy arm till the old woman lay flat on her back. Her wrinkled eyes furrowed even more as she opened them, the aged hand rose heavily to motion something in mid air. Manola moved away from the single discolored mattress that lay bare on the floor. She scooted towards the shabby wooden table that supported the TV. She turned it on and repositioned the rabbit ears till the black and white pictures illuminated the dim room.

The small television stood on the fractured, wood table. A spider crawled in one of its cracks, extending its web across the stains that resembled moss. “Let it live, it has a right to,” her Mamá would have said. Yet Manola’s palm came down with a loud thud, smashing it flat. She shook her hand till it became free of the furry legs. There were no rights in the Maze.

She picked up the bucket and headed towards the torn kitchen. She opened the rusty faucet; it puked dirty water in coughing bursts. Allowing it to run so, it resumed a feeble flow, and became cleaner. It made her remember the transparent, soundless flow from impeccable hotel faucets. Her Mamá looked so beautiful; wearing a blue and white uniform, the prettiest

clothes she owned. Few times she had taken Manola with her to her job, because nobody else could care for her. Manola watched her scrub things—already clean things. Put silky sheets, soft to the touch on a bed big enough for eight. Four would fit just fine. She filled a deformed pot and heated it on the only working burner.

The tin-sheet door squeaked as it opened, and Manola turned to see a boy whose bones were more visible than his muscles. He passed his hand over his shaved head and entered laughing. In between smirks he said, “I flew this time, Manolita, you should have seen me. Your group stood no chance, they needed you today, not that you could have prevented *my* awesome kick, but less pathetic for them, ya kno’.” He walked over to her and messed her hair playfully, then sat lolling on the wooden chair.

Manola smiled and replied, “Figures, you are that good. Glad you didn’t miss the boys playing today, tryouts are in two days, Tito—*don’t* forget. Besides, you know how hard it is to—”

“Yeah, yeah, hellahard. I kno’, whatever. They never seen the likes of me,” he said as his green eyes sparkled. Green eyes, like *hers*. How lucky he was to have them, “Any food today?” Tito asked.

Manola sank a glass in the heated water, filled it and placed it next to him. “Let it sit, it’s still hot.” She scurried to the counter and uncovered half a piece of loaf from a basket, and handed it to him. “I’ll sell more embroidery tomorrow, I’ll try and bring—” she stopped, fear stroked her spine. “Where’s Aileen?”

“Chill—I left her with Lupita, can’t expect me to carry her everywhere—I have shit to do,” he announced.

“What?! Dammit Tito, you are such a—,” her eyes met his feet, white Nikes covered them. “Tito, where ... *how* did you get those?”

“Shiny eh?—got them around. Oh, don’t give me that face,” Tito said motioning his hand dismissively. “They’ll help me for tomorrow, and they look fuckin’ *good*.”

Manola’s face grew hot for she knew he had no money to buy them. She was about to chastise him when she remembered Leen was down there, she had to get her fast. She turned from him and placed her feet in the ramshackle sandals. “I’ll get Leen. Keep an eye on Buela, will you?” she asked knowing it futile. “Don’t go out with those sneakers, you know it to bring trouble,” she said.

She stepped outside and lowered the muddy steps. The blazing sun pierced her eyes and she placed her hand in front of them. She shielded her eyes from the sun, but welcomed its energy in her tanned skin. She hurried down the narrow pathways, strolling between the maze of brick and tin clad homes.

In an alleyway she saw two older women kneeling—washing clothes. She pressed on, climbing downhill, squeezing between things, jumping steps, evading holes, down down, and down again. She wiped the sweat from her forehead and continued on. She spotted two children playing eagerly with branches—swords for them—not too long ago she would have joined them. She turned the corner, and the wind seemed to carry their laughter a few turns more. She passed the communal kitchen. The corn smell and the steam rose to her nose. Her stomach growled. She saw in the corner of her eye women of all ages making arepas, available to any who possessed ten coins, at this she hastened her pace.

When she was almost to Estella's "home" she encountered a familiar woman in a mini-skirt and heels way-too-tall to walk in. "Estella won't like you leaving your *baggage* behind, that's what she calls her," the red lips pronounced the words with a hint of pity, "but I'll be glad to watch her sometime."

Manola looked at her and merely smiled, she pressed on to knock on the only wooden door inside the Maze. The door creaked while it opened, a dark skin teenage girl stood behind it. "About time Manolita, she's in my room," the teenager said with arms crossed, her perky breasts revealed by a bra that was visible through the white tank top. Manola looked at her own nipples, her mosquito-bite nipples. Manola stepped inside one foot then the other. A fluffy soft feel in her step. She looked at her feet; they looked like two more pieces of dirt in the red worn out mat. All that was visible was a wooden counter, and a jar with plastic things inside. Manola followed Lupita through a narrow hallway, and they entered the first room to the left. The room emanated a concentrated strange smell for Manola, she could not make out what it was, but the few times she had entered Lupita's room, she had noticed it.

A petite fragile figure sat on the tattered bed. "Leen, nena, let's go home," Manola said. The six year old still carried her school bag on her bony back. She turned around, and her eyes lit up at the sight of her sister. "You hungry?" the older sister asked. The little girl nodded. "I'll make you something soon, wait outside the room a minute, I need to talk grown up with Lupita."

The girl walked outside and closed the door behind her. It was one of the few houses in the Maze, with an actual house plane. The room was barren—only a bed on a frame. *Would be nice to sleep far away from the bugs*, she thought. All else was white, gloomy and meager.

Lupita sat on the bed, Manola restrained from doing so. “Lucky you picked her up before Estella arrived, barely clients during the day, but still—she would have gone off on you, or on *her*,” the dark girl said. Her eyelids were covered in pitch black make-up. “She still ain’t talking, huh?”

Manola fell silent as she felt something slump in her chest. She glared at the ground. Her hand rose to enclose the medal from her necklace. “Not ever since Mamá got killed.” Her eyes burned but she maintained them fixed on the floor.

After a few seconds, Manola’s gaze met Lupita’s, an unspoken warm embrace between them.

“At least she lets you take her to school now,” Lupita said. “But you can’t leave her here, I don’t mind her, except—,” she hesitated to continue. “I didn’t mind watching her before, you know, before I started working. You gotta tell Tito not to leave her with me no more.”

“Yeah, am sorry. Tito was supposed to bring her straight home from school, but—,” Manola stopped, pensive. “I don’t know what he’s up to, he rarely sleeps at home. And today, he came home with Nikes,” she finished, heavily dropping the last word. Lupita’s eye widened, her postured stiffened. She did not say a word. “I don’t know what’s worse, how he got them, or that he is flashing them around the barrio,” Manola said.

“I would snatch them up when he was sleeping and sell them—get rid of them—before someone decides to want them,” Lupita advised.

“I’ll try, after the tryouts, he needs to get in.” Manola said.

“Would keep him outta trouble for sure,” Lupita said. “Besides don’t they, uh, pay for—what do they call it?”

“PT, private tuition. They have real teachers and stuff, and they keep paying, even if you are above the mandatory age for school,” Manola said. “They give you all kinds of meals, too, all just for playing fútbol.” She felt a smile spread across her face.

“Yeh, something like that, I did hear very few get in though. At least he won’t be walking around with those fools, thinking they all that,” Lupita replied. “Shit, they’ll get it for sure.”

Lupita looked consumed in thought, and Manola watched her awake from it by placing a hand underneath the bed and taking out a metallic box. That’s where she kept her things and treasures—stuffed animals, old fragments of magazines, drawings—the ones she probably wasn’t allowed to display when the sun went to sleep.

She opened the box and took out a bill. “Here,” she extended it to Manola, “get Leen some decent food.” Manola’s eyes were fixed on the bill, *that’s like...twenty coins*, she thought. *Two steamy fat arepas*. She stepped forward, then hesitated and simply swallowed.

“No, it’s okay,” Manola said. “I’ll clean shoes tomorrow at the plaza and sell some hand embroidery.”

“It’s nothing, really. Besides, what can you get selling those? One coin? I make that in a blink,” Lupita said but Manola shook her head profusely. Lupita kept her hand extended, “Aileen is *real* hungry, so just take it.”

Manola looked out the window, Aileen walked in circles, her skin a thin layer shielding her bones. Manola clenched her teeth.

“OK, but I’ll pay you back soon.”

Lupita handed her the bill. Manola folded it and placed it in her pocket. Her hand remained enclosing the bill. It had been so long since she had held one. Lupita got bills instead of coins—that's how she got paid. *Arepas everyday*, Manola thought.

“Does it hurt?” Manola asked.

“Does what hurt?”

“You know...when they, uh... stick it,” Manola replied. Lupita laughed and rearranged her hair. She looked at the ceiling, her hands and legs shifted position, then her black eyes stared at Manola. Lupita moved so different now, so confident, so *playful*.

“Nah, not anymore. Plus, I am lucky; Estella sends me the good ones. This place is kinder than that one outside, and thinking about it ... I'm sure Estella would have you. If you ever wanted not to go hungry that is,” Lupita said.

Her stomach rumbled. She had given everything left to Leen and Tito. She tried to ignore it, at times succeeding, most of the time failing. Her right arm ached. Her hand strengthened the grip on the weathered wooden box. “I clean shoes, for two coins,” she yelled among the crowded plaza. “Clean, shiny shoes, just two coins! And a hand embroidery for just one more!”

A child walked laughing, moving his hand from side to side, an ice cream ball fell from his cone, and splashed to the ground. The child emanated a shrill cry. “It's alright baby, I will get you more when we get home,” her mother said. He continued half whining, half jumping.

Manola skimmed across the pavement, and dipped her tongue in the milky cream. Licking, sucking. She was careful not to touch the floor too much. Manola rose and her face fell

upon a little boy. He was a few steps away from her. A dirty face, shabby clothes like hers. A scrawny little boy. Skin and bones. Skin and bones. Was that what she looked like? His eyes conveyed a familiar feeling, one that she knew all too well. She felt guilty; he had wanted a sip too.

“Shoes clean like new, quick and cheap, just two coins,” she announced. A bearded man approached her, a tucked shirt and clean pants. He was rich. The man stood upright while she took a dirty cloth from the box and a shoe cleaner container, which was almost depleted. She knelt on the hard pavement and began scrubbing. When she finished she extended her hand, he handed her two coins.

“Sir, its four coins. Two for each shoe,” she said, hoping her words would not stumble—she had to try. The man gave a hollow laugh. She pursed her lips. His hand reached his pocket, and handed her two more coins; his hand withdrew slowly, slightly touching hers. “Thank you sir, May la Virgencita be with you,” she rose, but the man blocked her path.

“I’ll give you ten coins and ice cream, think we could have a lil’ fun?” his broad mouth said.

He came closer to her, and passed his arm around her back, placing his sweaty hand upon her naked shoulder. Her shoulders shuddered and swiftly she broke from his arm. She ran, she ran as fast as she could. The wind whooshing through her hair, she ran far. Nothing in mind, she just ran.

She cursed under her breath at the thought of leaving the wooden box on the flight. She had run without it, and knew that now someone else—someone like her—held it. With it, the shoe cleaner. *Oh, well. It was almost empty.* With it, the hand embroidery. *Months of work.* With it, the last fabrics, needle, and beads she had. *Mierda! How will I get more?*

She could only think of one thing to sell.

Manola half walked, half jumped as she went. She turned corner after corner, her bare feet aiming for the shade. A whole patch without any shadow lay ahead. She left the shadow she stood on and ran, then changed her mind and jumped, then ran again. She made the rest of the patch in a jump-tiptoe fashion, the hot pavement against her forefeet.

Her stomach growled worse than usual. As she jumped between shadows, she saw a white stain on the floor. She remembered the ice cream, the little ragged boy, and thought of Lupita—she never looked like that.

Manola had lost so many things in that run, but what if she had stayed and *gained*? She remembered the sweaty hand in her shoulder and felt her body wince. She shook her head attempting to shake off the thought.

... *The good ones.*

She had to go to the top of the Maze. A full day had gone by with no food and tomorrow promised to be the same. She could bear it, perhaps, but could Leen? She had to find Tito.

The grass grew taller, the rocks bigger, and the shanties scantier. She walked among the fields, and this relieved her feet. Yet her legs grew tired. *Almost there*, she told herself. *But what if Tito is with him?* Manola saw the brick house that was painted white. It was off to the corner, she tried to keep her distance. She hid behind a tree.

Manola looked around; a woman with a long floral skirt was in front of *him*. A bandana covered her hair. Pitbul sat on a chair at the front of the house. A long chain hung from his neck, thick and bright, contrasting with his mahogany skin. Two tall men were next to him, vigilant.

Manola could not see the left side of Pitbul's face, but she had not forgotten it. No one in the barrio would. Everyone knew what he had done that night. The night he had part of his face blow off by a police shot. He had prevented the government puppets from taking Estella to jail. Puppets, that's what everyone in the barrio calls the cops. The cops are nothing but government and rich people's puppets.

Everyone saw what had happened that night, the rest knew from word of mouth. Lupita had told Manola the day after it had happened. She had told her how a rich client had complained of the service, and tried getting the puppets to close Estella's house.

Puppets—what a funny word to describe the cops. Was it because they were paid to do something? Like the vigilantes? But then Lupita would be a puppet, too. No, it had to be more than that, way more. It was because they didn't care. They didn't care about the barrio people. They were paid by people that didn't care.

The woman with the bandana handed him something and head-bowed. A head-bow for sure, the kind you show when you are not sure what you owe. The sturdy man motioned so that one of his vigilantes took it and placed it inside the house. The woman left, head-bowing one last time.

Manola glanced everywhere, but she did not see Tito. She decided not to stay any longer. What if he saw her? Surely, he would not do anything bad. She started leaving when she saw Tito approach the house.

He walked towards Pitbul. Two men followed Tito and another man ... crawling. No, the third man was not crawling; he was carried by one of them. Carried or dragged, it was far away. Manola tipped closer, still hiding. The man's hands were tied.

Arousal seemed to hit all the men gathered at once. They moved violently, their mouths protruded curses and devil phrases. But Tito stood still. Pitbul said something in between all the other men's excitement. Tito went closer to Pitbul. Pitbul placed his hand on the back of Tito's neck, but not threatening, not harshly; rather in a manner Manola had not seen before. It had a paternal air to it. He seemed to be instructing him or—commanding?

Tito nodded every time Pitbul opened his mouth. Pitbul withdrew his hand and waited. The men were loud, loud at Tito, encouraging him to do something. Tito walked slowly towards the men on his knees. The other men that held the man who was kneeling kicked him down; at this Tito ran and kicked him in the stomach. Tito kicked him once, twice, three times. Blow after blow. Manola looked away. She backed two steps, but she heard the man scream. She couldn't help but look, Tito was vehement, so vehement, Tito was ... Manola ran.

She ran not sure of what she had seen, but certain she did not want to think of it. She ran and stopped when her breath failed her. She closed her eyes, panting. She saw Tito so alien, so furious, so *possessed*.

Buela lay heaving, crickets heard in between her inhales. Manola pulled the thin cover up to her shoulders; the night was unusually cold. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep. Tito had

not come home. She had wanted him to come. She wanted her brother back. A thought crossed her mind making her eyes open. Perhaps, she didn't want him back, not like that.

It was Pitbul's fault. It had to be. She wished the puppet had blown his face off—completely. No, no, Pitbul had, he had done right. Still, every night Tito did not come home, there he was, by Pitbul's lap—listening, learning, changing.

Manola closed her eyes and thought of Tito. How he flew with the ball and how much he would learn in school. Tomorrow, everything would change for good. Tito would get in—if he did not forget the tryouts—and that would be the end of it. Tito would do fútbol, nothing else but play fútbol and study. Then, he would come home and sleep. Like he used to do, and be like he always used to be.

She closed her eyes. She thought of the fútbol ball, bouncing on the grass, Tito playing across the field, soaring by the other boys, and the ball bouncing, bouncing—Buela coughed, and coughed again, each time louder. Manola shifted to her left; Leen's feet faced her. Still smelly, Manola had not had time to make Leen bathe. Leen's stomach made a noise. She had gone all day without food—they all had. She had tried to find Tito, to ask for the Nikes to sell them, but then ... then she had seen him doing ... Manola turned to face the ceiling, and tried to ignore it all.

Manola tried to remember where the tent that sold beads and fabrics had been. She strolled across the stony floor and looked around; a butcher struck meat with such a force that his apron was splattered with blood, shirking children clung to a woman with saggy breasts, and a

man scratched his back with a wooden pole next to some youngsters engaged in some kind of martial arts. Manola closed her eyes and thought of the tent, was it yellow? A person bumped her shoulder. She opened her eyes, a stream of people walking about her. Tents and more tents were clustered together; white, red, green, yellow.

Manola zigzagged past a boy pushing a steel cart, and across a man selling pineapple-papaya-mango juice. She saw a dark-hair girl holding a woman's hand. They stopped to look at tomatoes. The little girl wanted to touch a dog, but the woman's hand would not budge. The little girl gave up and played with the tomatoes instead. Manola stared at them till they left. Manola's hand had been held like that, too. Now she could hardly remember where her mother's hand had taken her. Manola had not been back to the market ever since her Mamá's death. "Shoo!" the person selling the tomatoes said to Manola. "Shoo! Shoo!" his hands trying to whisk Manola away.

Stepping away from the table, Manola saw a tent with embroidered merchandise in it. She moved towards it. A foul smell soon reached Manola as her feet tried but failed to evade the puddles of water. A gooey liquid between her toes. *Chop*. A fish head flew to the floor, a yellow eye watching her. *Chop, chop, chop*. Decapitated fish lay on the tables, liquid dripping from the corners. A mixture of blood and guts overflowed the counters, soaking all the red and viscid leftovers.

Attempting to rid herself of the liquid she shook her feet, but they still felt sticky as she walked. She reached the table; it was covered with handmade embroidery, paintings and sculptures of the Virgin Mary. Manola wasn't sure if this was the same tent as the one her Mamá used to buy beads from, but it looked close enough.

“What do you want, niña?” the woman sitting behind the table said.

“I can embroider things just like this,” Manola said. “Think you need an extra hand?”

“Ay, I don’t have money to spare.” The woman shifted position. “I have no work to give you.”

“For food?—even if it’s just a little.”

“No food. No Money. No nothing,” the woman stood up. “I can’t help you niña, so move before you scare the customers.”

“I can’t buy the beads, otherwise I would,” Manola said. “What if I work for free? Then, if possible, you give me anything you can spare?”

“I said no. Now go.”

“Please, please. Anything you want, I’ll do anything.”

“I said no! Muévelo or I’ll ... ” the woman raised her hand.

Manola scurried away.

The sun reached almost every corner of the market. Manola’s shirt adhered to her skin. Her cheeks burned. She could taste her sweat. She walked between the tents trying to shield from the sun. She made her way back. She knew Tito would return home shortly; the fútbol tryouts would soon be over.

She saw a man eating mango. The juice from the mango dripped from the corner of his mouth. The man kept walking. Manola’s mouth watered—she could almost taste it. To her left, there it was, a stand exhibiting red mangos. Red juicy mangos. The stand was unattended.

Manola looked around and saw no one. She looked back at the mangos; a collage of red, orange

and yellow at her hand's reach. She shook her head and turned around. A mere two paces and she had turned back to the mangos. Her hand reached quickly for the first one and hurried away.

A woman screamed something; Manola knew it was at her. She had not seen the woman approach the table. Manola ran. The pavement was hard against her feet. She impelled her feet to move faster, but a hand reached her hair and pulled her back. The woman yanked Manola's hair while she took the mango from her.

"Zarrapastrosa! Thought you could get away with it, no?" The woman yelled at her, not letting go of her hair. "You dirty thief, you are gonna pay, you hear me?"

Manola tried to push away the woman's hand, but couldn't. The more she budged, the more the woman pulled her hair. "Think you can take what's not yours, eh?" The woman jerked the hair so hard, that it made Manola whimper.

"Déjala, she's just a girl," a man's voice said.

Manola could not see the man, but she felt the woman's grip lessen.

"I think she got enough," the man said. "I'll pay for it. Let her go."

The woman pushed Manola away. "You're lucky I need the sale, zarrapastrosa."

Manola looked up. The man was clean shaved, wore all black, and had a strange white collar. He handed the woman some coins and took two mangos from the stand.

"Here, take them," apologetic eyes said. *What are you sorry for?* Manola wondered.

Manola tried to steady her hand before taking them. He gave her a smile as she took the mangos. Manola tried to utter thanks, but no sounds came out.

Manola sat in the muddy steps of her shanty. Her fingers fidgeted. She wondered if Tito had gone to the tryouts this morning. She pictured Tito popping the ball above number two. Then swaying like a flash, only to stop abruptly—to tempt them. Mocking them with his feet; scissoring them in front of the black and white ball. And number three failing to see the ball rushing between his own two legs, while Tito flew—like he always did—between them, among them, unstoppable. “GOALLLLLLLLLLLLLLL!” he would yell off the top of his lungs. Leaving all the boys awe struck.

She realized when her mind came around, that she was on her feet. She paced back and forth. She heard footsteps and turned to face where the noise was coming from, Tito appeared from the corner. A grin was on his face. “So, what happened?” she yelled. He walked with long strong strides, and came near her.

“Kicked ass, that’s what happened!” he blurted out.

“Are you in?”

“They tell us tomorrow morning. Shit, they didn’t even see it coming, should have seen their faces, told ya they never seen the likes of me,” he said.

Manola jumped up the steps. Tito followed her, but when she looked from the corner of her eyes, she saw the Nikes. She winced. “Tito,” she said softly. “We need to sell them; I don’t want you walking around with them. Besides we have no food and—”

“Fuck no, all the boys kno’ am the shit, they obey me now. Even Pitbul takes me with him sometimes,” he said.

“Mierda Tito, you know how mom got pissed when you went around Pitbul’s block.”

“You kno’ what Pitbul says? Shit wouldn’t have gone down if I had been with him, *really* with him,” Tito said. “He’s fuckin’ right, he is the law.”

Manola shook her head. “He is no good and you know it,” she said and paused for a second. Her posture hardened, her eyes fixed on his.

“Give me the shoes Tito, you don’t need them anymore.”

He laughed his mouth wider than ever. “He’s fukin’ right ‘bout this house too, this house is a shithole. I shoulda gone live with him long ago.”

“This is Mamá’s house, what’s wrong with you? Give me the shoes!”

He looked straight at her, his eyes flared. “You think you can tell me what to do? *huh?*” his menacing body moving towards her, he gave her short pushes. “I take what I want and keep it, I ain’t gonna stand here and hear your fuckin’ whines.” He pushed her again. “See, you are fuckin’ weak.”

Manola’s vision blurred, her body shook, feelings erupted within her, burning her as they came up her throat. “Take the damn shoes off!” She roared staring him straight in the eye.

“Don’t ya fuckin’ dare speak to me like that,” his mouth sputtered, spit landed on her face. His hands flew forward, pushing her through the tin sheet door. She stumbled and fell to the floor. Aileen heard the noises, and came running from the other room. She watched Manola, then Tito, then Manola. She stood motionless. A voice groaned from the next room, the words unintelligible.

“Go ahead. Say it one more time, I’ll show you who’s boss,” he screamed vehemently.

Manola’s heart pounded, her eyes streaming. Tito’s eyes were so alien, as if possessed, but *green*—just like their Mamá’s. No, she would not let it happen. Not again. Her hiccup-

breathing stopped her. Her hands trembled. She tried to regain composure. She rose, slowly.

“Take ... them ... off,” she stuttered.

“What? I couldn’t hear it with all your baby crying,”

She shook, but stepped forward. She breathed heavy. She clenched her fist and threw herself on him, making his butt drop to the ground; she aimed for his shoes and tried to take them off. He shoved her away from him, got up and raced towards her. His hand rose; he threw an open hand across her face, and pushed her to the ground. “St-op,” a feeble voice said. Manola felt a blow on her back; she crouched in fetal position, covering her face. Another blow came. Blood stained his white Nikes. “NOOOO! *STO-P!*,” Aileen screamed. He halted, Manola still covered her face. Aileen wept loudly, shrieking. The blows stopped.

Manola’s back ached more than her stomach. But what hurt most was the constant squeeze in her heart. She pressed the cloth against the skin and finished rubbing the dirt from the old woman’s neck. The old woman’s breathing was deep and seemed to get clogged in her throat every week even more. She picked up the bucket of water and left her in the bed, absent as always.

She walked to the other room where Aileen was drinking a glass of water. Manola dropped the bucket and sat on the wooden chair. She stared at the table, the holes and dents and pieces that stuck out. She stared at them until her vision became blurry. Her stomach refused to even growl, it just sat there, empty. Aileen walked over to Manola and sat on her lap. She began playing with Manola’s curls. Aileen shifted positions, her hands jittery.

“Nola, Rafaela asked me ... she asked me why they had killed Mamá. I said I—I didn’t know,” the little girl said.

Manola’s vision refocused, her face looked for Aileen’s. She caressed her pitch dark hair. Aileen was not lucky either; they both had dark eyes, unlike those of their Mamá.

“Remember the watch Mamá used to keep in a box?” Manola said, the girl nodded. “It was granddaddy’s. I know you don’t remember him, but it was his. One day Mamá said she was going to a—inter, um, inter somethin.’ Well it was somethin’ important, somethin’ that might help us she said. So she borrowed clothes, and got all pretty. She wore the watch, too,” Manola’s eyes lowered. Aileen was attentive to her every word. “Well, a bad man came and wanted it. But she didn’t want to take it off. And he... he killed her,” She said.

The silence was interrupted by Aileen’s stomach. “Nola, am hungry,” Aileen said.

Manola caressed Aileen’s back. She could feel her ribs. “I know Leen, I know...,” Manola said. She placed the little girl on the floor and rose. She headed for the tin sheet door. “Stay here, I’ll be back soon.”

Manola stepped outside and before she started descending, she saw some cardboard stacked in the entrance, covering something. She knelt and removed them. The white Nikes were underneath. Not fully white anymore.

She paused, she felt her cheeks wet. She stared at the grass and the dirt. She saw an ant follow another. And then another follow those two. The ants kept coming, and kept following. Unhesitant, they followed the first one into the hole, a dark stretch of a hole. Did they know they were going into a hole? Away from the sunlight, away from the fresh air? It did not matter. They would still follow. She imagined the tunnels, dark crowded tunnels, only to reach a dead end. A

thought appeased her stomach; they would eventually come out again, out to the sunlight, to the fresh air. But first, they must go into the dark tunnels.

Manola took the Nikes and placed them inside. She would sell them, but that would only fix the immediate hunger. It would not last.

She stepped outside again. She walked slowly, between the pathways, turning in every corner. The stench of garbage and sewage filled her nose. She pressed on downhill, passed the empty communal kitchen, and kept her pace. She saw a bone of a man sitting in the floor, missing a leg, mosquitoes and bees surrounded him, a filthy dog his only companion. She moved lethargically, but her mind was fixed. She kept descending the steps, leaving many of the tin clad roofs behind. She went downward. Down down, and down again. She was almost there.

LA MUDA Y LA TONTA

La Profe, Dulcia de Mendoza, paces in front of the children, her long hair a swaying pendulum, her name a fitting tribute to her inherent sweetness. Aileen wondered if the dark smudge on la Profe's cheek would be hereditary. She would pass it down to her daughters for sure, but to her sons, well, the sons were the offspring of the devil as Buena used to tell Aileen. Who the devil was, Aileen did not dare to ask, but she knew it wasn't good. Buena used to rock in her wooden chair at night, each creak followed by a word. A mystic tale of preposterous proportions, but told with an undeniable craftiness that claimed veracity. Aileen would lie in bed listening until her eyelids shut, but her mouth, still in awe-struck position, swallowed in her sleep the seed of words that germinated, unacknowledged, in the shadow of her belly.

La Profe didn't have her usual smile on. Recess had been cut short for everyone; three boys had thrown rocks at a three-legged dog, which didn't sit well with La Profe's stomach. Other teachers didn't make a big deal out of it, but La Profe ... La Profe was of a sensitive kind. Her ardent tone asserted to the class that such behavior would be tolerated no longer. That animal life was to be respected as if it was your own. An idea that was new and odd to Aileen, no one besides La Profe would have given the matter much thought. She insisted that dogs can feel the same that you do. That they have a soul ... *like Mamá*, Aileen thought. Yet she doesn't say where souls go. Aileen nudges Rafaela and passes her a note: **Where do souls go?**

Depends on the soul

???

If they was a good soul or a bad one

a good one

Heaven

how do I go there?

You die and hope that you was good

sí, sí ... but now, without dying

You can't

The kids that stoned the dog—said La Profe—had been sent home. She stops pacing, lets out a long sigh, and taps her forehead. She does this often; when a kid cheats in class, when one repeatedly misses school, when another stops coming back. That's what she did when Nola stopped coming, but that time, she shook her head, too. A paper airplane hits the blackboard, and Aileen can just see La Profe growing into a speech again about how paper is indispensable, how the school has so little left, how last month they had to spend their days counting with their fingers instead. Of how irresponsible, of how rude and unnecessary that is ... but she doesn't, her voice has wearied, her mouth dried. She simply goes to the blackboard and writes down some numbers. It's a subtraction and the number is big, so Aileen copies it down: eight hundred and eighty-six, minus fifty-four. La Profe's hair is silky, and Aileen is hypnotized by its swaying motion. It looks like that of her Mamá, so thick and black. *Will she let me braid it, like Mamá used to? Six minus four—two. Maybe she'll tap her forehead if I ask her to let me braid it. Eight minus five—three. Maybe it's not a good idea. Eight hundred and...*

“Aileen, will you tell the class what the answer is?”

Aileen's throat tingles, her lips open, but nothing comes out.

"It's ok to get it wrong, we are here to learn."

Her answer is right but she can't tell La Profe. Everyone but Rafaela giggles. Someone behind Aileen says softly but mockingly that La Tonta is rubbing off on La Muda, and giggles some more. La Profe taps her head and then asks somebody else to answer; a boy confidently calls out a number, yet gets it wrong. La Profe's cheeks grow red; it's not from anger, it's from frustration. It's been well over a week with the same kind of subtraction, the same homework, the same problems ... over and over. Whose failure is it?—the kids, hers? No, it's the rampant poverty that's beheading education, that's beheading, well, everything. "Does anybody know the answer?" She asks. Rafaela looks at Aileen's paper and shoots her hand in the air. "Eight hundred and thirty-two," Rafaela says. La Profe nods and writes it in the board. She wants the children to practice more at home, she says that she knows it might be hard for some of them but that ... *If I can't go to Heaven, then ...*

Can a soul visit me?

I don't know. Who you wanna see?

Mamá

La Profe dismisses the class for the bell has stopped working months ago. The books get shuffled in the backpacks, and they all hurry to leave. The patched hole in Aileen's backpack is giving out, so she holds the backpack in her arms instead of on her back, carrying the weight with her hands. A chorus of kids from class follow Rafaela and Aileen —*La Muda and La Tonta, La Muda and La Tonta, La Muda and La Tonta*. "Don't pay attention," Rafaela whispers, saying

it more to herself than to Aileen. Aileen doesn't mind being La Muda but Rafaela minds being La Tonta, even if it isn't true. Rafaela is older and taller than her classmates; she has repeated the same grade level twice—math just isn't her thing. Rafaela grabs Aileen's hand, forcing her to hold the heavy backpack with her right arm only, and she pulls her forward. *La Muda and La Tonta, La Muda and La Tonta, La Muda and La Tonta*. They giggle and laugh in between chants while the girls' feet scurry down the stairs.

Rafaela's mother, Soledad, sits under the tree's shadow that hits the low stonewall which surrounds the school. That's where she waits for Rafaela on the hotter days, but lately, that's every day. Aileen scuffs a piece of gum stuck to the floor with her shoe while Rafaela kisses her mother on the cheek. Her Mamá also used to pick her up and Nola from school, but Tito, well, he didn't have to wait; he was un chico grande and could walk home by himself. Nola and Aileen had to wait, but they didn't mind: Mamá would hold both of their hands, and on hotter days like this one (if it was Friday), she would buy them both a raspadito ... how long it had been since she had had that ice-fruited cup, each time a new flavor—mango, guanábana, fresa—so refreshing, so tasty, so—

“How's your 'buela?” Soledad asks Aileen. Another lady with a befitting name; abandoned by her husband and of deceased parents at an early age. And, as spilled by Rafaela, she is still lonely at heart even if she has a “sugar daddy” to look after her. Aileen isn't sure what a sugar daddy is exactly, but she knows it's un hombre con plata, and an owner of a butchery. Pero, bien feo, peludo y gordo as Rafaela had described.

Aileen stares at the gum, it's almost scraped off. Rafaela tells her mother that Aileen's Buela is not doing well. But she doesn't tell her that she no longer leaves the bed, that she barely

moves, that sometimes it's hard to tell if she is asleep or awake. But, how could Rafaela know? After all, Aileen hasn't told her. Soledad caresses Aileen's hair, which makes the girl look up at her to see lashes batting away at flabby eyes. "I'll find time to drop by, okay?" Soledad says. She was a good friend of her Mamá, that's how Rafaela and Aileen had met. The stories the girls had both heard about their mothers running around each other's houses, playing Cinderella; Buela was always the evil stepmother, and whoever had raced from school faster got to be the princess—the deserver of the prince's love, the other was the fairy godmother. Yet the prince never came for either one.

"Tas flaca mi'ja," Soledad says, and she is right; Aileen is now as feathery as a dry leaf, easily blown by the wind. "Want to come home with us tonight? Rafaela has been driving me crazy about asking your 'buela to let you come over."

Rafaela jumps about and pulls Aileen's hands, "Dale, dale." She says. But Aileen knows that Nola would get worried and shakes her head.

"Tomorrow," Soledad says. "Come tomorrow."

The two walk away hand in hand, the smaller one a perfect fit for the lighter, bigger hand. The bodies shrink to pocket-size figurines and mingle with all the other things—the trees with their waving leaves, the pony-tailed girls jumping rope, the man who sells raspaditos and his four-wheel cart—that eventually Aileen can no longer see them. She keeps staring in case she'll see another glimpse of the happy jumps Rafaela makes every now and then.

Even in the shadow, the rock is fairly hot, and Aileen pulls her skirt to cover more of her legs. Yet it won't budge, she has outgrown it. And Nola said there's no way they can get another soon. Maybe, she could ask Rafaela to lend her one? She swings her feet, each heel alternates to

hit the stonewall she sits on. Tito hasn't arrived yet, and that's no surprise. The days that it's his turn to pick her up result in her waiting by the stone wall, swinging her feet. Yet, today, he is unusually late. Her tummy prickles in a way it never did when her Mamá was around. She needs to see her, to tell her, that without her, things are not going well.

Nola had been clear that Mamá wasn't coming back. That she couldn't. That's why they had to dress in black (although they had to mix what few black clothes they had with those of another color—"just find something without holes," Buela had said) and sang and prayed and cried. If she couldn't come back to stay, then maybe she could come visit every once in a while.

The tree's shadow moves and Aileen with it. She has done it a couple of times now, and the worry sets in. Sweat trickles down her temple, her neck, her armpits. Her fingers are restless. It's the first time he hasn't come get her but ... *I can be a chica grande, too*. She jumps off the stonewall but isn't sure if she can climb the steep hill to her house. She has no one to hold her hand or take her a cachipo—to ride the world on the fastest stallion. A stallion with green eyes and sleek, tanned skin. Tito would place her on his shoulders and back then, when his hair was long and not shaved, she would pull it—left, right, left—indicating where she wanted to ride. But it doesn't matter, really, Tito hasn't carried her like that since Mamá had ... But she can do it. No hand, no cachipo. She's a chica grande.

The air is still and dry. A fly flaps around the room, lands on the wall, on the corner of the bed, on Buela's arm. Aileen whisks it away with a quick hand. She sits on the bed with her feet in front of her, like a dirty porcelain doll forgotten by her owner. She hasn't heard her 'buela

breathe or snore. She presses her ear to her back and listens; a deep stream of air moves inside Buela's body, and suddenly she lugs a sigh. It startles Aileen. She wonders how it is possible to stay in the same position so long, without moving. Buela still wears the same black clothes.

The first month after the funeral, she would roll to the end of the bed, drag her feet to the kitchen, then back to the room to use the bathroom, and then return to bed. She would eat a little, talk a little. Nothing more. But as the days passed, she did less and less of everything. Nola had tried to convince her to wear something else, but Buela wouldn't budge. No matter that the mourning clothes had ripped here and there. No matter that she had other patched-up clothes. She just wouldn't budge.

Nola changed her religiously; washed her clothes, dried them and put them back on. But only when Tito was home and willing to help, which wasn't often. It was routine. Buela didn't move and hardly ate. Just grunted and coughed. She had ceased to speak, in a way, much like Aileen. Although this spurred from the same loss it was governed by different mechanics; the one who wants to cannot, and the one who can does not want to.

A screech sounds as the tin-sheet door opens. "Leen, am here," Manola says. Aileen remains on the bed and doesn't come out to greet her as always. "Leen ... nena?" Manola enters the room, walks around the bed, and sits next to Aileen. Aileen doesn't look at Nola; she stares at the big pee stain in the mattress. She peed last night, again, in the same spot. Was that why Tito slept less and less at home each night? Was that why he didn't ride her a cachipo no more? She had never peed herself when Mamá slept next to them before. She had felt safe, even in her dreams.

"You ok?" Manola's hand reaches Aileen's chin to raise it.

She isn't. How could she be? A sullied face in which dried tears had made grooves down her cheeks.

"You are hungry, I know, I'm sorry. I have a loaf of bread. It's yours."

Aileen shakes her head. Hunger, strangely enough, isn't bothering her right now. She doesn't really feel her tummy; its emptiness is almost familiar, bearable. Like a leech, that sucks the life out of you and sometimes, when you are not paying attention, you don't feel it leaving you.

"Eat a little, sí?"

Another shake of the head.

"Bueno, I'll eat half, and leave you the other for later." Manola combs Aileen's hair with her fingers. "Where's Tito? Did he leave already?"

A hunch of the shoulders.

Aileen doesn't tell Nola that she had to walk by herself. That she did so rapidly, and her eyes hardly left the street. That some boys yelled out something and she wasn't sure if it was at her or not, but she knew better than to answer, and pretended to be deaf. That she saw the rock on which Tito, Nola and her used to stand, and make shapes with their bodies that resembled that of the clouds—a frog, an elephant, a dog. She feels the mattress rise and then sink, time has stopped and, at the same time, merged; Nola has already left and returned with a damp cloth and a bucket.

Manola cleans Aileen's face and says, "Remember what Mamá used to say?" Two black eyes the size of a walnut shells stare back. "Being poor is no excuse for being dirty." She dips the cloth in the bucket and moves over to Buena. She touches her skin lightly with the wet cloth,

trying to alleviate her sweaty skin. She moves Buena's shirt here and there. Aileen taps Manola's shoulder then points at two dark, red spots in Buena's lower back and flanks. Puzzled looks between the two sisters. They hadn't seen those before.

Children ran during recess like disoriented bees, chasing one another, stumbling on each other while playing tag. Loud laughs and shrill cries of amusement echoed in the closed patio. A few boys tossed and bounced a ball, some girls sat on the floor singing and clapping their hands. It was Rafaela's turn to jump the rope, and so she did. They had picked the letter "d" for her, and so she sang: "Daniel te quiero mucho," and jumped once, "poco, nada, para nada," jumped a second time, "para pura vacilada," at the third she landed away from the rope. Another girl entered, "j" her letter ... "Jorge te quiero ..." And so they kept, while Rafaela went to sit near Aileen.

"Dale, let's jump the rope together," Rafaela pleaded for the third time.

Aileen felt she had no strength left, her body had sunk in the wall and it wasn't quite capable of moving yet, much less ready to jump a rope.

"Did you ask your 'buena to let you come over today?"

Aileen had forgotten to ask.

"El gordo"—Rafaela meant the butcher—"snores at night, he's a pretty heavy sleeper. Bet you we can put lipstick and eye shadow on his face, and he won't wake up!" Rafaela laughs and Aileen with her.

“You know who snores way too loud? My pops,” says a girl sitting across them, her clothes clean and without patches. “Mom had to go to this Santera’s house to get an ancient remedy that combined with her spells made him stop snoring.”

“So, it worked?” Rafaela asks.

“Sí, sí.” The girl with carefully braided hair answers. “Mom can finally sleep all night long. This woman, she does all sort of things ...”

“Like what?”

“Bueno, she can cast a bunch of spells. She can make any boy you want fall for you. Anything you want—the high spirits talk to her, she speaks to the dead, too. She passed a message to my mom from my dead aunt.”

Aileen pulled on Rafaela’s shirt. That’s it, La Santera, that’s what they needed—she could help them. She pulled on her shirt briskly.

Rafaela turned to Aileen, a wide smile on her face. A boy had walked near them and had heard them talk for he said, “Yeah, Yeah, La Bruja—” Crouching in front of the girls. “She’s quite insane, too, she eats children.”

“No, she doesn’t!” called out the braided-hair girl.

“There’s a bunch of skulls in her room, bloody guts everywhere, she’s a savage,” countered the crouching boy. “A Bruja.”

“She’s not a Bruja. It’s different.”

“Is it now? Not her. She’s a Bruja.” He drew a skull in the dirt with a stick. “You haven’t been there, a qué no?”

The braided-hair girl shook her head.

“They call her La Bruja ever since two boys from my street went there and only one came out.” He drew an “X” across the skull.

Aileen stopped pulling on Rafaela’s shirt. The braided-hair girl got mad, stood up and left. The kid was about to leave as well when Rafaela asked, “Where does she live?”

“I can take you there if you like.” He got up. “But I won’t go in.” He motioned them to follow him and said in a low voice, “We can jump the stonewall when everyone starts to go in. That’s when I always do it, ‘cause teachers are too busy getting everyone in order.”

Rafaela nodded, Aileen wasn’t so sure anymore that she wanted to go, but paced after them. The swarm of jittery bees clustered and dispersed as the teachers tried to gather them in. The boy helped the girls jump the stonewall and then jumped himself. They ran a block or two, but Aileen felt her breath leave her. She panted; her hands on her bent knees. They let her rest then kept walking. They were school-zone free.

“It’s not far from here,” the boy said.

They had arrived at a barrio similar to that of Aileen’s. Huddled tin clad homes shaped a narrow path. They had difficulty walking because it had rained all morning, and the mud smeared their toes and heels. A sticky sound, followed by the flap of their sandals marked their every step. They climbed till they could see the end of the path; a small brick house that was painted blue crowned the hill. The boy pointed at it, “That’s it. Don’t get eaten!” and laughed as he strolled back down the path.

Rafaela took Aileen’s hand and walked towards the blue house. Aileen pulled back a bit.

“He was full of it I bet you.” Rafaela asserted. “Nothing to worry about, I promise. Besides, you wanna see your Mamá or not?”

An old lady opened the door at the third knock and led them to sit on the sofa. “She’ll be right out,” she said and proceeded to rock herself with the tip of her toes on a white wooden chair. To the girls’ surprise la casa de La Bruja wasn’t scary. The sofa’s color faded from a dark green to an olive green with a few holes in between the loose threads. Another room separated by brown and orange columns of beads. A small television set parked in the corner stood dormant. A few old, torn, and doodled magazines were scattered on a scratched table. Rafaela turned and smiled to Aileen, “See? Nothing to worry about,” she said as low as she could. Aileen returned a feeble grin.

The curtain of beads moved as a woman’s gaunt head, black as charcoal, peeked out. With an “Adelante” the girls stood up and went after the woman who had already disappeared from sight. As they moved past the beads, an amalgam of smells swirled up their noses; cigar, alcohol and something phosphorous. A large altar covered in white cloth exhibited pots filled with seeds and cakes. Baskets full of apples, watermelons, pineapples and breads. Large and small carved statues of saints were ordered in the altar’s center. It was embellished with floral necklaces, bird feathers and many scattered lit candles. Tall, hand painted crucifixes guarding its four corners. Single cattleyas stuck out from the abundance of yellow and white roses of every bouquet. A statuesque black Virgin Mary wore a crown of flowers, and was surrounded with marigolds. The windowless room was stalked by a penumbra, in each corner a plate with salt and mustard-tone bone structures—*skulls*. Aileen twitched and Rafaela did so too, they gave a few steps back, but La Bruja had come up behind them and softly pushed them forward. She laughed, “Don’t be scared,” and sat them at a red, circular table in the middle of the shadowed room. Aileen grabbed Rafaela’s hand, the sound of banging drums in their ears.

La Bruja's hair was wrapped in a white scarf, her neck adorned with shell and bead necklaces, a single gold ring on her index finger. A voice that seemed to scrape her throat came out, "It is not often I get niñas to come by." Her eyes, black glossy pearls that looked beyond them, demanded, "Tell me, what do you seek?" Rafaela uttered a broken word, she tried again, and even though not broken it was inaudible. Aileen stared at the skulls, something was moving inside the black holes, slithering in and out. "Tranquila," said La Bruja, "they aren't of niñas." Aileen could hear herself swallow. A chirpy laugh escaped La Bruja's mouth. Aileen was sure the skulls had laughed with her, she squished Rafaela's hand.

"Bueno, bueno ... let's start with a reading, sí?"

In a swift pace La Bruja brought a bowl of water. She traced an oval with chalk, sprinkled some agua bendita, and rhythmically hummed a prayer. Her hand emerged from the bowl with cowrie shells, and without breaking the chants she touched the feet, arms, shoulders and heads of the girls. Right after La Bruja had done so, Aileen felt a pressure on her head as if an iron hand was pressing down. La Bruja took a sip of rum and sprayed it from her mouth, then inhaled a cigar. Her shadow rose higher and higher, merged with the smoke, danced and twisted. Its mouth opened to exhale a cloud of fumes that swirled around La Bruja's body, which made La Bruja spin in circles, her dress undulating as it flew. La Bruja's chanting became raucous, and resonated in the room, piercing Aileen's ear. The shadow peeled itself off the wall and gained girth, becoming fatter and fatter, climbing La Bruja's back, raising above it, nearing the girls. Sharp fangs as those of serpents grew from the shadow's wide mouth, which opened large ready to swallow them. Aileen trembled and her eyes with her, sweat dripped from her brow. Its open-

mouth face darted towards them; Aileen shut her eyes and embraced herself. The loud chanting stopped, the sound of shells hitting the table followed. She dared to half open an eye.

“Look what we got here,” La Bruja said with a slight, continuous wiggle of her body. The cloud of smoke had vanished, the shadow evaporated. All of the cowrie shells lay face up. “That hasn’t happened in a long time ... You are both here, but it is you”—she looked at Aileen’s pale face—“who needs the answer.”

Rafaela’s hand was sweaty and cold, but Aileen wouldn’t let it slip from her grasp.

“I am told that your life changed drastically at exactly four months ago. Is that so?”

Aileen nodded.

“That an old lady fell ill? And you wonder if there is a cure, but there isn’t one, she is sick of heart, a broken one that cannot be fixed. She lost her most precious thing ... what was it?”

Aileen wanted to say Mamá, but her throat burned and without water she was not sure she could muster the words out.

“Bueno, I am also told that your future can be better, will be better ... Oh yes, but a betrayal from a close male to a loved one must happen first, for it will set things in motion. Wait ... I am told, I am told that you are followed,” the last word echoed in the air, *followed, followed, followed*. Aileen shivered.

“Followed?” Rafaela blurted out. “By what?”

“Yes, followed”—her eyes fixed on Aileen —“You seek something that already walks with you,” La Bruja said. “An Egun.”

“And what is an Egu—” Rafaela tried to finish.

“An Ancestor spirit, that’s why you are here, no niña?”

Aileen wanted to nod but her face was frozen, Rafaela nodded for her.

“She wants to bring back her Mamá’s soul.”

“Look niña, she is already here, you just can’t see her.”

But Aileen wanted to see her. And, was her Mamá able to hear her? Aileen waited for Rafaela to ask another question, one that would luckily resemble her own.

Rafaela’s valor shuddered for she voiced no more questions. There was something about not being able to see a being that shared your walking space, which made her arm hair stand on end. She looked about her, hoping to see the unseeable.

Aileen pulled out from her backpack a notebook.

How can I see her?

“uhm ... well, there’s something you could try. It’s an old enchantment. Based on the raw power of the name. It must be done in front of a mirror, when the room is dim, but not too dark. Find something of hers, something that might still bear trace of her being—a hair on a brush, an unwashed shirt, perhaps a lipstick. Look at the mirror, think of her face, of her eyes ... and call out her name three times. But no more than three times.”

With the comb in hand, Aileen could feel a little tickle underneath her nails from the hairs. She held it tightly, thinking that the more she pressed, the more connection she would get. Her Mamá’s shirt a dress on her. Her lips scarlet, yet she was told to not concentrate on anything but her Mamá’s features. And so she thought of her Mamá’s thick lips, her broad nose, and the

little space between her lower teeth when she smiled. And of her bright green eyes—just like those of Tito’s—with the yellow surrounding her black pupils, a sunflower, she liked to boast. She had a sunflower in her eyes. Aileen stared intently at the mirror; a dark shadow taking form. She had to call her Mamá’s name. It wasn’t that long of a name either, for she had no middle name. A named that meant hope. A name that made the tongue quiver if allowed to linger a little longer against the teeth’s wall, like the maraca of a rattlesnake.

“E—”

“Es—”

“Es ... pe—”

“ ... ”

LUPITA AND LAS MARÍAS

The scarlet red walls, although not pink, were proof of Lupita's intricate character. Which was, after all, what enchanted and attracted her customers like ants to honey. Her tenacity, otherwise annoying, was stealthily wrapped in a perspicacious humor. With clever words (and a little help of her luscious techniques) she had their heads spinning with mirth and their clouded minds ready to cosset her. Of course, not all were susceptible to her charms and wit, but when the right ant came along, the results were, well, quite rewarding.

Lupita had wanted a rosy wall, but red was much better than the previous barren and depressing white room. The idea, like all her other ideas, had come from a magazine that a certain client had brought her. But this magazine was different from the old ones she had. The magazine had no wedding gowns, no expensive cosmetics, no fashion items—which, anyways, weren't sold anywhere in the barrio—it was of advertised furniture. One page had slick, bright green colored chairs with no legs or arm-rests, in which the back and the seat fully connected to form a single silhouette. The next page displayed a highly adorned chandelier with tear drops that promised to gather and disperse the light, silverware utensils with vines that twisted and turned across the handles, and intricately carved maple tables with hand painted designs in their cabinets that contrasted with the mustard-yellow walls. She had never imagined how so many things could fit in a room, much less what they were all used for. Truly, she cared for none of the fancy furniture—what would she do with it, and where would she put it? Instead, she was enthralled by the joy emanating from the colored walls.

Convincing Estella to let her paint the walls in her room was another ordeal. Estella had never been keen on changing things around the house; change too many things and something bad is bound to happen, she used to repeat as a parrot would. So it came as a big surprise to the women of the house when a client of Lupita showed up with a bucket of paint.

Since her debut, Lupita had climbed the ladder quickly. She always satisfied the clients beyond the norm and new customers always came in asking for her. Lupita was good for business, which wasn't rare given the fact that she was the youngest—fifteen—and so the most desirable in the brothel. But it wasn't this exactly that had turned Estella's decision around, which had been, from the very beginning, a very definite no. It had been the fact that the other females around the house had turned verde de envidia. "Lupita got this, Lupita got that," was the common gossip. All the girls had been trained to keep clients happy, to lure them to return. And so, a few of them, every now and then, got a gift. What infuriated the rest was that for Lupita this was the usual. This jealousy—a thing that was very good for business indeed—had changed Estella's mind. "Get your asses to better working then," had been the response of Estella to their complaints. And, work, harder and better they did. Yet their covetous nature was easily unveiled, which prevented gifts from flowing their way very often.

And so it was that Estella granted the painting of the wall. But, not pink. It still had to look like a room in a brothel.

Lupita skimmed the pages of her furniture magazine until she found something that caught her eye—an oval shaped mirror adorned with flowers in its frame. *That shouldn't be too hard to get*, she thought. Not having to fight for a spot in the shared mirror of the small bathroom would be a bonus. She could arrange her hair and color her eyelids for hours. She folded the

page, closed the magazine and opened a wooden box. She placed the magazine inside and then the box underneath the bed.

As soon as she stepped into the narrow hall, the high pitch voices of the women echoed. The first seven women to work for Estella—commonly known as Las Marías—sat around the room, some on the sofa, barefoot, with hair rollers and pins domesticating their stiff, unruly hair. They had been picked up—at the ages of sixteen and seventeen—for different reasons and renamed. All the names contained “María” as the first or middle name. But, it was María Lola, of coffee skin and broad hips, who had been saved from a lurking death. Life had been less than kind to her, then again, to whom had it been kind to in the narrow, muddy streets of el barrio? After her mother’s death, she had been placed in an orphanage managed by foreign Catholics. The food was scarce and the holey roof allowed a certain lullaby to stream from the buckets on rainy nights. María Lola’s mother had thrown herself off of a bridge, but it was said that it wasn’t suicidal thoughts that spurred the action but rather the hallucinations that had incited her to do so. The only thing María Lola took with her to the orphanage from her mother was her dependence on drugs. And since the nuns weren’t quite capable of dissuading María Lola’s habits, she found herself going back and forth between the streets and the orphanage. It wasn’t until Estella found her unconscious and lying like road kill in the early hours of a Saturday morning, that her life turned for the better. Estella could spot a vagrant easily and soon after María Lola, the rest of the first seven girls were found and offered a new home. Although the septuplet held equal standing in the house—higher in hierarchy than all the other females and below the master head of Estella—María Lola was the one who arbitrated them.

“He brings a shoebox”—María Lola’s thick legs drop from the table to the floor—“and takes out a dildo, this size,” she says as she spreads her index fingers nine inches apart. “And am thinking, this guy can’t get it up or what? I take out some lubricant ‘cause that shit oughta sting, when el tipo drops his pants and turns around.”

“Oh, no!” one of the women say, another covers her face laughing.

“Am searching man, I am, but the guy has a culo peluo, peluo. And, I can’t really see where the hole is ‘cause he’s moving his culo like an eager dog,” she says and a roar of laughter follows.

“Was it pink?” one of them shouts.

“The culo or the dildo?”

This time the hyena-pitch laughter brings feet thumping.

“When I found the damn hole,” she continues, yelling above the laughter. “He wants me to thrust it hard you kno’? No lubricant, nothing.”

“All the skinny ones are maricónes, ya sabes,” says Estella who walks over with a broom. She makes the women raise their feet while she gathers the dust. Her house is exclusively of women, ten in total. She has her reasons for not doing the other kind of service. It’s against God for starters and even though the money would double, she was taught since very little, that being associated with any sort of gay liaison was an irrevocable ticket to hell. Other lesser sins could be forgiven by a priest almost as easily as a sweep from a broomstick, given, of course, the right amount of punishments and Hail Marys.

Estella had taken a liking to Lupita even more so than to Las Marías. She wasn’t big on expressing any caring, but she couldn’t help but like a girl who had been born inside her brothel.

In Estella's home, abortion was simply not an option so pregnancy as a consequence was forbidden. But, somehow, Lupita's mother had fallen into the trap of believing one of her frequent clients, one who assured her that he loved her and that if she was capable of conceiving a child, he would take her away with him. Of course, this had been a fantasy of sorts, for when all things were said and done, the man had stopped visiting her. From day one Estella had made the rules clear and if anyone in the brothel disobeyed, they could find their way somewhere else. Estella's decision to this occurrence was irreversible; the baby was to be born and kept—she wasn't about to let a baby be born in the streets, after all it was an innocent, God-sent creature—and the mother, well, she had sealed her fate away from Estella's secure roof.

Lupita had been given the freedom that any child could have, all up until her debut at the age of fourteen. But she had seen all to be seen inside the brothel; the men thrusting it in and the women moaning it out, the bruises made by brutes that would never return and the preparation of a special ointment for it, the accidental choking of a client, the blood dripping from Pitbul's face from a police shot in front of Estella's front door steps, and the smile left on the faces of the viejos whose heart had stopped on top of María Lola or Andrea María. She had breathed in all the teachings: to open and cross your legs erotically, to contract your vagina like a crab's claw, to wash your insides with warm water and vinegar if something went wrong, to conceal your thoughts and feelings, to inflate their ego with credible although untrue praises, and to pray to La Virgencita every night. This was the only knowable life. The role of women. The natural thing to do.

Lupita had no baggage of a previous lifestyle. There was no dark shadow haunting her steps. No alcoholic stepfather to abuse her, no pinching and hungry stomach to steal her sleep, no

father to burn out cigarettes on her cheeks and hands, no mother to tie her to a chair while she went to work permitting the bugs and roaming rats to bite her. There was no blemish in her life, like life had been for Las Marías and for all the other females of Estella's home. She wasn't often reminded by such grim marks that she shouldn't be thrilled by life. She was free to put her teachings to good use and to bring things into her life that brought her pleasure. She had never, before her debut, owned a thing—not a mother, not a toy, not a schoolbag—and now through merit she had earned things, and they were just for *her*.

The chatting, which could easily be confused with noise in a henhouse, became diluted in Lupita's thoughts. El Señor Ricardo—Lupita's loyal customer of every Wednesday night—was un tipo bueno, like the ones Estella liked to select for Lupita. He was a sweet man, one of those rare ones that liked to kiss her forehead before leaving. Yet it was always a strange encounter, for he was taciturn like death and had trembling hands. His eyes never met hers, as if he was ashamed of himself and not of her. Unlike the others, he wouldn't let Lupita do anything to him, and if she tried, his face would transfix into an indecisive expression that ended up fusing embarrassment with anger. He was older than her, about twenty-five, but one of the youngest that came about the brothel. He wasn't good-looking but few who came were, yet it was his strange touch, which transmitted a deep wanting and guilt, which transmuted Lupita's thoughts about him. At first, she had been indifferent to him for he had given her no apparent kindness. No magazine, no nail polish, no chocolate snack. And, how could she ask for them? Every time she was to open her mouth, he would place two fingers in her lips and shush her.

With time, she felt strangely inclined to know more about him. All she knew was that he wore no wedding ring and that he failed to shave properly most of the time, leaving patches here

and there and continually showing the cuts of a razor. He was clumsy in bed—his penis would slip out way too frequently or fail to find the hole—and had sweaty hands. But that was it; she knew nothing more except for his name, which anyways, was bound to be fake. What puzzled her most was that usually he preferred to lie beside her and simply watch her sleep and the nights he did decide to touch her, he liked to motion his hips slowly and refused to come inside of her. Except for one night, in which he pounded her while tears streamed down his face and fell on Lupita's. That night he kissed her feet, cried some more, and mumbled something that sounded like an apology only to sprint out of the room barely dressed. That was the only night he failed to kiss her forehead.

After that night Estella voiced her discontent about El Señor Ricardo. She had said that he had too sensitive a heart, and that although he had a heavy pocket, she wouldn't think twice about forbidding his entry if he so kept it up. Lupita wasn't sure what Estella's worry was with El Señor Ricardo, but she had given Lupita a clue; he was too attached to her and didn't treat the whole thing as purely a sexual encounter. María Lola had warned Estella that the guy had some tornillos sueltos, for he was falling for Lupita, and who, in their right mind, would fall for a puta? Lupita didn't quite understand the depth of María Lola's claim, but she did understand that it could persuade Estella to block his entry. She didn't want to lose the only man that touched her as if she was made of crystal, the only one that was afraid to break her. Lupita thought of offering a gift to María Lola, something she could ask clients to bring, in order to sway her to stop the pronouncements against El Señor Ricardo. But she thought it might appear pretentious and exasperate María Lola enough to cause the contrary effect, so she refrained from doing so.

A loud knock on the door brought Lupita's attention back to the room. That someone was knocking on the door seemed odd because Estella's brothel was closed from two to four in order for the women to eat and be ready again for customers. María Lola was ordering María Josefina to open the door, who in turn ordered another woman to do it for her, yet it was Estella who unlocked it.

"What do you want?" Estella growled.

A frail voice responded but Lupita couldn't quite catch the words.

"Tas loca, niña?" Estella shifted her weight to her other leg. "Do you want me to go to jail? Ándale, leave," she said firmly.

Lupita tilted her head enough to see who it was; Manola's scraggy face hung low with cheekbones that were even more prominent than last time Lupita had seen her. She flew from the spot she had been sitting in and raced to the door. Lupita waved eagerly at Manola, who returned a wide smile.

"Ándale, pirate ya," Estella said as she moved away to shut the door but Lupita placed her foot on the way.

"Wait, wait," Lupita exclaimed. "She's just hungry."

"I'll do it well," Manola's voice implored. "Lupita can teach me."

Las Marías who had heard Manola from the beginning burst out cackling.

"And tell me, niña fea, who would want to bang a sack of bones?" María Lola said.

Lupita wanted to reach for Manola to let her in or bring out some money from the tin box for her.

"What are you, ten? You don't even have tetas for Christ's sake," yelled María Josefina.

Estella turned around and fired at her, “Coño, I told you not to use the Lord’s name in vain.”

“She’s eleven,” Lupita defended. A mocking chorus of uys followed.

“You are too young and could never pass for a girl of age,” Estella said with somewhat a softer tone. “And I’m not ‘bout to give you a limosna either, if I did so for every beggar that came knocking my door I would be outta business, so get to it.”

“She can earn it,” Lupita’s eyes pleaded. “Have her clean something, or cook ... whatever.”

A shared silence; Manola with a blank stare, Lupita rubbing her fingers, and Las María’s gaze fixed on Estella.

“I won’t give you money, one plate for the day and that’s it,” each word gravely accentuated by Estella, as to make sure none were missed. “Get your ass through the backdoor at 1 o’clock in the morning—I don’t want a soul to see you come in,” Estella stepped back. “Your work will end when I say so and if you leave as much as a dirty spot, you are out. And don’t you bring that tadpole of yours with you.” The door banged loudly missing Manola’s nose by an inch.

Estella was surprised both at her own kindness and at her soft spot for Lupita. She knew the girls had played when little around the streets, and that Lupita esteemed her a bit too much. The truth was that Lupita would sneak out to try and help Manola anyway; she had done so before. And well, better have that filthy rat close to her house, than have Lupita walking God-knows-where trying to find her. After all, the house could use more cleaning. Who knew, maybe

after a couple of years and some better feeding Manola could turn out to be of some use and profit.

Las Marías and the rest of the women dispersed around the house, some picked up the sofa's cushions, others took their hair-pins out and shuffled their hair. They tossed things out of the way, changed shirts, exchanged bras, and exposed the watered-down liquor for the customers that would come in slightly drunk and ask for more.

Lupita went to her room. She picked up her favorite pink bra, the one with the least wear. She undid her ponytail. Pulled her boobs up and pinched her nipples. She retouched the red nail polish on her left index finger. Covered her legs and arms with sesame oil. Brought the jasmine flowers she had picked up in the bushes and placed them near her bed. El Señor Ricardo had to be about to arrive. She checked in a pocket mirror—no trace of make-up from the previous night—just as he liked. It had been the only time he had said more than two words, only to ask her not to ever wear any of that on her face again.

She took her panties off and climbed on the bed. Her belly pressing against the sheets. One leg straight and the other slightly bent. She would pretend to be asleep, and hope that her bottom was provocative enough to induce him to enter her. She needed him to be sexual. To assure him that it was okay, that indeed she liked it—from him—and that her praises were true and not just credible. That somehow, despite his clumsiness and inability, she, for the first time in her life, felt something, something good ... something that only his sweaty and tender hands spurred.

The door opened and the clank of a belt hitting the floor thundered in her spine. He was fast and desirous. He had never acted as such. She opened her eyes when firm, dry and fat hands

grabbed her hips forcefully. They weren't *his* hands. He went in—as a dog seeking a female in zeal would—burning her insides. She didn't turn to see who it was. It didn't matter. It wasn't him.

“She’s very picky with the entrance,” Lupita said. “It has to be spotless. It’s mostly the mud their shoes bring in, but don’t worry about that”—she pointed to a smudged, red mat—“it won’t come out.”

They went behind the wooden counter, where all the liquor bottles plus a baseball bat were stored. “This is where you’ll see Estella,” Lupita continued. “Especially if some new client is waiting, which isn’t often ‘cause she likes to keep it tight. Know that she won’t want you back here. Just make sure you stay outta her hair, and you’ll be fine.”

The hallway was darker than usual because the light bulb had burned out, which allowed a framework of light to be visible around the edges of the doors. Lupita’s voice lowered as they walked through, “If they are slightly open, it means we are done with a client. So, come in and tidy up,” Lupita said. “Keep a low head and make sure you aren’t seen too much. And, don’t speak to the clients, at all.”

Lupita opened her room and led Manola through. She would tell Manola all her secrets. All the tricks she had learned over the years. Although it was apparent that it would take some work and patience. Manola had half-moon shadows underneath her eyes, but nothing some cover-up couldn’t disguise. Her clothes were ragged and she was covered in dirt from head to toe, something easily fixable with a hot shower and Lupita’s old clothes. The real issue was that

it was true; Manola was all bones and no boobs. And she was younger than what Estella dared to work with. After all, the police had been stalking around the block not too long ago ... But even though Estella had negated Manola from working in the brothel, Lupita still hoped that eventually Manola would be allowed to become one of them.

She wanted a friend in the house to whom she could confess her thoughts about El Señor Ricardo. Of how worried she was that, for the first time in six months, he had failed to come visit her. But that she wasn't like her mother and wouldn't want to run away with El Señor Ricardo. What for? Being favored by Estella was the only lottery ticket she wanted. All she needed was given to her right here in the brothel. And her status only got better and better with time. This was her home, and although she knew that all the women in the brothel had an expiration date, she felt as though Estella would never run her out. Estella hadn't said it and Lupita hadn't asked it. But she knew Estella's treatment with her was different. She also knew that one day Estella would grow weary and old, and someone would have to take over. She hoped that this someone wouldn't be María Lola. It appeased her to think that even though María Lola ordered other females around, she wasn't Estella's minion.

Like Estella, the person who handled clients had to be gifted enough to mask their face into a friendly and un-sarcastic one. And to be able to unravel words that could persuade and a presence that could impose. María Lola, no doubt, could impose, but she lacked all the rest. Lupita, indeed, had all the rest, and the strong presence, well, that could be learned.

Manola uttered a strange noise, which sounded like an inhaled whistle with an added "o", and moved around the room twirling as a little girl would in a movie stuck in slow motion. "It

looks so different, so ...” she said and gradually came to a stop as if she were una muñeca a cuerda whose last pull had come to an end.

“Pretty?” Lupita said. “Yeh, I have been getting some things here and there.” Her favorite was a wooden jewelry box that resembled a shrunk dresser. There she had placed the earrings and bracelets she had made herself out of beads, and the necklace with a medal of La Virgencita, that Estella had given her on the night of her debut. The dresser was brought by one of her past, affluent clients for, like El Señor Ricardo, it was common for nearby city dwellers to come to Estella’s brothel, which sat at the mouth of el barrio’s steep climb, and so, it was quite accessible to the urbanites. This client had a particular interest in staying secretive; his wife, as he told Lupita, was everywhere, but to track him down here would be quite the challenge.

“Real nice,” Manola said.

“I’m getting a mirror with flowers,” Lupita continued. “I mean, I don’t know if they have this one exactly”—she pulled a magazine underneath her bed and opened the marked page—“but I betcha they have something like it.”

Manola took the magazine but her eyes appeared to fail to connect to the image in front of her. A null reaction. Lupita stayed quiet, waiting for a response, for Manola to move or to talk about something else. But nothing. She wouldn’t say or do a thing, several minutes went by, and Lupita’s fear grew.

“Are you ok?” She asked even though she knew the answer.

More silence. Manola’s body stationary. Her eyes teary.

“Is Tito ok?”

“Dunno,” Manola paused as if she needed to assemble more energy. “He left weeks ago.”

“Where?” Lupita asked and stood up from the bed when Manola started weeping. “What happened?” She placed her hand on Manola’s shoulder. “Don’t worry am sure he’ll be—”

“She is not breathing.” Manola’s words burst out as a hiccup waiting to happen.

“What?”

“She is not breathing.”

“What do you mean, who?”

“Buela,” Manola said in between sobs.

It was Lupita this time who remained silent. She had seen Manola’s grandmother once or twice. She didn’t know the woman much more than she had known Manola’s mother. Maybe a couple of words exchanged between the two, more indirectly than directly; “behave,” her grandmother would say, or “Don’t you be keeping her from home late,” not really waiting a response back from Lupita. Much more like an order or a warning. Neither Manola’s grandmother or mother had opposed to the girls making mud castles, or figuring out a way to feed a bird whose wing was broken. It didn’t matter much that Lupita was the little girl that lived in the brothel, with no mother and no one to braid her hair. Manola was the lucky of the two back then. The loved and cherished one. Lupita knew that Manola’s grandmother had been sort of sick right after Manola’s mother had been killed, but Manola had never revealed the gravity of the situation. Perhaps, she hadn’t wanted to face it herself.

“After I came here to ask Estella,” Manola’s tone diminished with each word said, “I went back home and ... she ... she wasn’t breathing.”

Lupita let out a long sigh followed by a smothered “shit”. She took a few steps back shaking her head. “Where’s Aileen?”

“Home. Sleeping. She doesn’t know,” Manola said wiping her runny nose. “I just ... I didn’t know what to do.”

“Is okay,” Lupita said squeezing Manola in a hug. “I’m gonna get Estella, she’ll know what to do.”

LOS REYES DEL BARRIO

Am tired of doin' the same shit. Of packing up drugs an' burying guns. Of selling coke bags an' cleaning the twister bikes. Of watching the ravaged kids scramble like rats on roof tops, tryin' to find something to steal, to trade for paco. Poor shits can't even afford the real deal. They are the living dead, rubble accumulated in the corners of el barrio, not going on for more than four years, just to be replaced by more rubble. Paco has that curse, gets you addicted in two hits, gets you forgetting all the screwed up fucks that came 'bout an' ruined your life, but man, those two hits fuck you up good.

I didn't end up like them 'cause of Pitbul. Tha's why I owe him more than I can ever pay him back. But I sure am tired. I want to carry an uzi like Coco does. And not having to threaten with the handgun but never really using it, 'cause if I got in it deep, the damn old thing won't work right half the time. Pitbul says I gotta be patient, that I need to stay on the down low, that am real good, got potential an' shit, that one day it'll be my turn. You are reborn, ya kno', once you come into Pitbul's crew. A whole ritual with a santera, she opens up chickens an' does vainas bulda de raras like pat our bodies with rosemary an' circle around us with incense. Thought all that was like mitos—not real—for ignorant people, but hell, I sure ain't thinking that now. All that tribute, so that Los Santos will look after us, an' we in turn will do so for our barrio, our people. Then we carry out our first trial commission from Pitbul, to make sure we got the guts, that we won't freeze or pee our pants, make sure we are machos.

Mine was real simple. Had to cut a fucker's face for bein' a sapo, an' el güevon thought he could get away with ratting out one of Pitbul's crew to the fuckin' government's puppets—the putos cops. Tha's the law, man. Ya can't go 'bout yapping your mouth to the enemy—no matter

if you gonna get shot in the head. Gotta press your fuckin' balls and take it like a man. Like a fuckin' loyal man to your barrio. Ain't no matter what crew you belong to, what part of el barrio you come from—la boca or the upper-end—it don't matter. Ya press your balls an' hold it in. Ya die with grace, or ya get your face marked, so that every time ya dare leave your house, ya gonna get owned. The punishment ain't gonna be death, is gonna be tryin' to come back home with your ear glued to your head. Is gonna be living knowin' ya shamed your whole fam.

Julian's feet are up in the table, his knees skinned, they always are. He's a clumsy runner. And last time we stole a radio bulda de caro from the car of a ricachón, he fell twice when the dude went after us. Pedro snorts some coke next to me, even though he knows we heading out soon. 'Echale bola, he says, pushin' me toward it, but I shake my hand. El cagado does it 'cause Coco don't really care what we do, an' Pitbul's out. But Pitbul has been real clear about that—gotta be alert an' clean while we out. I only use the shit occasionally, when we binging an' lookin' for girls that will let us stick our pingas in. But I see that Pitbul doesn't snort or smoke it, an' so I won't either.

It's Friday an' we have to wait till Coco finishes fucking his girl. To call her his girl is just a formality, she ain't really his; she's a slave to the coke, tha's the reason why she comes before the weekend hits. She used to be all pretty, wearing her brown hair down an' her boobs real high up. Now she's thin as hell an' her hair is all greasy. I came in her once, when Coco wasn't here, but she was as good as doin' a corpse. Coco's fat culo appears an' disappears from the edge of the curtain. We call him Coco 'cause there's not a hair on his head. Funny thing is he doesn't shave it like I do. And the weird-ass Asian mix in his blood—not a hair on his legs or arms—can't explain his bald head, nor his missing eyebrows. Coco grunts a last time an' leaves

her laying spread across the mattress. She's visible from the other edge of the curtain; her black bra covering just one of her breasts, her skin drenched, her eyes slowly loosing grasp of reality, that sensation of floating, of drifting away from to'a la mierda, from this pothole. The only escape.

We head out to la boca of el barrio where it meets the city. Coco supervises the bunch of us, but am the oldest of the kids, I'll take charge of the cagados soon. And then, I'll carry the uzi. For now, we walk ten feet apart from each other, Coco being the last. Sometimes we stop at the communal kitchen, where we get free arepas, but not today, says Coco, we have no time. Coco's walkie goes off, an' he halts us, sayin' that we ain't gonna be selling coke to randoms, that El Conejo is on his way. His cousin is a funny-looking dude, bulda de alto y bulda de peluo, with two real big front teeth. Tha's all ya see when he opens his mouth, two big-ass mutha fuckin' golden teeth. How mierdas he is Coco's cousin, I dunno, 'cause they sure ain't look related. El Conejo passes by me an' gives a hard smack to Julian's balls, who was bending to pick up a cigarette butt, an' gives a jump from it. Güevo-sucking maricón, Julian yells. And we all crack up when Julian slips trying to chase after him. Te cagaste to'o, says El Conejo roaring of laughter an' pinching his nose as if Julian had actually shitted himself. He's 'bout his cousin's age—thirty-somethin'—viejo pal coño. The fucker punches my shoulder an' tells me, I have a mamasota waiting for you, y está como Dios manda, with tetas the size of watermelons, you'll see, you gonna come before time cabrón. And I get stiff, just remembering the last puta he brought me, her tits could swallow my face, an' those were melon-sizes. El Conejo swings his rifle from his back to show me a new carving, a rabbit smiling, he is 'bout to say somethin' when Coco, comes between us an' asks—Qué pasó lacra? Why we headin' to see the Ripers?

El Conejo shakes his head, an' his goofy smile fades.

Mierda, I dunno, El Conejo mumbles, some shit went down last trade, say we cut 'em short on purpose.

And now what? Coco asks.

Pitbul said to take 'em some bags, talk it out.

We ain't never gotten along with the Rippers. Those güevones have a hold of all la boca of el barrio. We always gotta be real awake when we head to the lower end, but they bulda de easy to spot—they have R.I.P. tattooed in their necks. The head was un malandro that had lived in California awhile, an' somehow the fucker made it back an' began his whole gang here. Rippers speak in gringo code or some shit. Fuckers made their name 'cause when they kill someone they like to bury 'em properly—a tombstone an' all. Ya always kno' if one of yours got killed by them, 'cause they engrave R.I.P. in the stone. They are known for ripping any pendejo's tongue out if a fucker owes them a little too much. They say the Rippers keep the tongues stacked in jars. I would trade my handgun to see that shit.

Coco is not hiding his uzi but he's not flashing it around either, he's sweating more than normal, an' that spikes my nerves. Something's up. But I see the usual; a naked girl playin' with a yellow balloon while her mother washes her with a bucket of water, wild dogs diggin' in hill-piles of trash an' a boy shitting next to 'em, some old dudes playing domino in a corner, an' a kid flying his papagayo, while another, with a mud-painted face, chases a dove with a slingshot. That, I do miss. Walking around with nothing to worry about, just flyin' it, free from the ground, an extension of your arm, lets ya reach the sky. But you gotta grow or you'll get eaten. Gotta be able to defend yourself, to own others, to have respect. So that no bullshit will go down, so that

nobody dares lay a hand on you or your close ones. Even if we ain't got nothin' to eat, we have that. Respect.

"Tito, get up in that roof," says Coco. "Whistle if you see them coming. Rippers shoulda been here by now."

Coco signals us to take out our guns, an' I climb some rocks, put my foot on a pipe an' reach the cemented, flat rooftop. But nothing. They ain't nowhere; not in the narrow alleys that turn sharply in every turn, nor near the houses of different colors with clothes hangin' on the windows to dry. The view is fuckin' beautiful though. Ya can see nearly everything: the bunch of small-ass stores that got rebuilt from a fire with the whole barrio's help; the exact spot where Laurita—of a tight lil' ass—lemme tongue her an' touch her perky nipples; the bright yellow walls where all los mocosos, like I did, go to learn to read an' write. The high buildings ain't far off either; they are surrounded by mountains, an' sit in the valley clustered together as if the barrio was menacing it. But it's like Pitbul says, no matter how far away they like to pretend we are, we have already infiltrated them. And they, too, have infiltrated our barrio, bringing their corrupt cops an' rotten ricachones. How the fuck do they think we feel? Cruising around in brand new cars, when we ain't got shit to eat. They like to pretend we don't exist. I see 'em walking around in their fancy shit, not even turning a look to a beggar. Rotten ricachones come to la boca of el barrio to fuck our girls an' buy our drugs. And the cops are in it too, if we don't cut them a good deal, trouble comes down. But Pitbul knows how to handle 'em, he don't negotiate with 'em no more, he threatens 'em instead. Keeps wha's ours here. Tha's why he's different. Different from the Rippers an' any other gang in el barrio. Pitbul looks out for us an' says fuck to the money if he has to.

Mierda!—they popped out of nowhere. I want to whistle but they are shirtless an' already waving their AK-47s. Some wearing black bandanas, they are too many—seven, nine?—way too many. They never come for trade rounds in these numbers. Only two of 'em kids. Coco signals so that Julian an' Pedro bring out the bags, showing 'em the coke. One of 'em argues with Coco, I can't hear what they say, but he's mad. Not enough, I kinda hear. El Conejo steps down from a wooden box an' starts walking toward 'em. One carrying a gold necklace throws the bag out of Julian's hand, pushes him to the floor, an' sticks his gun in Julian's ear, which makes El Conejo aim his gun—*Suéltalo mamagüevo*, he screams at the Riper, but the fucker won't let Julian go. You want plomo, eh, cara e' verga? The Riper in front of Coco yells back, an' raises his AK at El Conejo. Put it down Conejo, shouts Coco, *bajala*. Rippers circling my crew, trapping 'em. D'ja think I woulda stayed eating snot, one tha's mad-ripped says, waitin' for yo boss to fuck me again? And tha's when I see the skull tattooed in his chest, the Riper ain't just one of the fuckers, he's their head. The fuckin' head. Coco waves his hands up an' down. They all screaming, can't distinguish shit they say. Pedro switches his gun from one to the other, which pisses a Riper off, an' the fucker elbows his face, Pedro drops to the floor, his nose bleedin'. Coco tries to calm 'em down again but one of 'em is pissed, real pissed. He shoots. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I'm aiming, but the shit won't fire. A shower of shooting, they all disperse covering behind anything they can ... an' Pedro, still on the floor, fires, but he aims wrong an' hits a girl, *the* naked lil' girl, a yellow balloon flies away ... her mother crawls next to her—blood everywhere. El Conejo fires his to all directions, crouching and racing away. Is all screams an' all runnin'. A Riper is nearing Pedro who's crawling 'cause his leg's hurt, so I shoot him, an' this time the shit does fire, an' hits the Riper's chest. Another Riper looks at me an' points his gun so I sprint. I Jump down the pipe an'

trip but am back up, flyin' through debris. I can hear 'em calling out, they following, they are in my heels. And all I can think of is that they shot him point blank, an' the splattered mess coming from his head.

I turn the corner so quickly my arm is cut with some metal that was sticking out. I look back to see two after me. I throw a stack of potato bags to the floor, but they jump it quickly, fuckers pick up speed an' so do I. Next corner—I bump a guy, evade some children playing ball, an' push one aside to reach stairs. The roof is filled with women washing textiles, I slip, an' my ass skims the floor a few feet, my gun slides away too far to pick up. I propel myself up, an' the Rippers are almost to me. One of them grabs my arm, but it's wet from the floor's water, an' his hand slips. Is over. There's the edge. Nowhere to go. They gonna get me, gonna get my tongue an' then blow my brains out. I don't look down—I jump.

Some trash bags break my fall, but I stand up wrong an' my left foot bends real bad. I look up an' the Rippers don't jump but they finding a way down. I ignore the sting in my foot an' keep at it. I can't go as fast. I hear 'em shouting, they 'bout to reach the corner. Am way too far from Pitbul's side. And am not gonna make it. I kno' I ain't. Am looking where to hide, a woman stands in a door, but as soon as I gaze at her she's already inside—knows trouble's coming—an' the door won't budge. The sweat slowly reaches my mouth, the smells an' sounds are stronger, louder. Of urine, an' the stink of trash, an' the roasting of corn. Of a baby shrieking, an' a dog barking, an' the terrifyingly-close hooting of the Rippers. Everyone moves bizarrely slow. I rub my eyes. Am not seeing well. My heart pumps at a minute's pace. I can hear an' feel the blood running in my veins, takin' its time, savoring every last turn. Am frozen, don't kno' how or where to move to.

A reflection of light catches the corner of my eye an' I turn my head, searching for the source—a flickering light—in the darkness of a narrow gap between the walls of two stores. I hurry to it, limpin' a bit. It's sheltered from the sun, an' I squeeze in, but it's hard to move through. The two Rippers run by, guns in the air, but they don't see me. I suck in air as if I had been holding my breath, a familiar smell. I don't hear shouts, or gunfire, or ... I don't hear a thing. The light is not here though; is all dim, as if I had entered a windowless room. I turn my head an' a ... a lady is dressed in white, glowing, an' she's galloping effortlessly. Her black curls bounce, but do so without weight, flying 'bout, not really bound by gravity. Her hair is so similar—similar to—Mamá? I chase after her, trailing after her smell, the smell of guayoyo an' papelón. Ma? I scream an' rush to her. She won't turn to me, but I hear her humming, humming the lullaby, the lullaby she used to sing to us ... And the words pop in my head, her voice so clear, so warm ... *Cabecita que sueña lino y almohada, mi criatura risueña cuentos de hadas.* My hand trying to reach her, I can almost touch her. *Déjame que te duerma mi carricito.* There is light at the end of the gap—*Cervatillo asustado de la mañana*—she's bouncing toward it—*Conviérte en un hombre niño adorado*—an' my fingers miss her hair by an inch. She enters the sun—a blinding flash—an' she vanishes. Her curls, her humming, her smell, gone.

Dale, quévalo—spits out Julian—burn that hijue'puta to the ground, and raises with his short-an'-skinny-ass arm the stolen AK-47, the shit's almost his size, but he sure points it high to the stars. The whole crew's here. Whatcha waitin' for? One shouts behind me, fire up el viejo 'e mielta ese pue'. We all kno' the war's on. That there ain't no going back. Pedro elbows a few to

squeeze in, hoppin' around with crutches 'cause he still can't rest on his wounded leg, lemme see, lemme see coño, says el cagado. Carlos trailing behind him—the new addition to the crew—he's eleven, a year younger than Pedro. We sure gonna need more tipos if we wanna stand up to the Rippers. Fuckers always had the numbers on us. But is on now. Ain't no going back.

We all kno' shit gonna rain down soon. But we live in it all our lives, we thrive from it. They ain't got nothin' on us. Just numbers. And numbers ain't family. Ain't the skill, the will, the trust of our barrio. They handle the lower end with threats, but we don't do that in our hold. We help 'em out, like Pitbul did with Estella's brothel an' her lot. Like Pitbul did with the communal kitchen, giving 'em cargo we stole. Our support comes from real trust, we have earned it, not demanded it like the Rippers. An' like Pitbul says, tha's gonna show at the end of the day, tha's what will make us prevail. Fuck 'em up for real an' take the lower end from 'em. But we ain't stupid. We kno' shits gonna rain down first. And many ain't gonna make it.

El Conejo stands in front of the piled up tires, his arms crossed. He don't make no sound, he ain't moving. He just waitin'. Ya can only see the Riper's beaten face, sticking out from the tires. His left eye swollen like a balloon, an' a canal of blood from his eyebrow. Pitbul's in the middle of the crowd. A machete in each hand. And the huge mark across his left cheek, with the nasty rounded bulge, tha's a mess of skin, holes an' scars. But that's like a brand now. And if it had been me, I woulda shown it too right after it happened. Tha's what he did, never covered it with a bandana, with nothin'. I would show it to all. Let 'em see that I too could protect el barrio, an' beat any mutha fuckah who came 'bout screwing my crew. Just like that, plomo to the head. Burn 'em up in the tires, microonda their asses.

Pitbul raises the machetes an' rasps 'em, a screeching sound tha's drowned by the hoots of all. El Conejo empties a bottle on the Riper's head. He beggin' El Conejo not to do it, fucker eating his own tears an' snot now. El Conejo lights up a match an' throws it. The tires melt, an' the Riper catches on fire. El coño e' madre screams an' twitches. Never heard such a fuckin' loud an' long squeal, ya can almost feel it. Not even when we stabbed the hand of an agüevoniao that had wanted to steal some hundred grams I was carryin', not even when un pelaito from our crew got shot in the stomach—'bout nine he was. No, this howl fires up my spine, makin' me twitch too.

When Pitbul found out that Coco had been wiped, he took two from our crew an' in the middle of the night, went down to the house of a Ripper—the one that had canned Coco—an' brought the fucker here. A move that meant the war was on. But it had been on for a couple of months, just not declared, tha's all. The Ripper don't scream no more, an' there's fuss all over, everyone roused, guns in the air, firing plomo to the sky. There ain't no cryin' 'cause life is just a moment. The clock is halting, little by little; we just don't hear the clicks. And this time, it was Coco's that stopped. We gonna avenge him—show the fuckers that if ya hit one of our crew, ya mess with us all—an' live it up. Live it up for Coco like there ain't no tomorrow. I raise Coco's uzi, my uzi now, an' shoot to the sky, lightin' up the stars.

We don't quiet down, we hug, bump our bare chests, an' push one another. The commotion carries us all to the bonfire, where Pitbul had sent us to set the party up, just above the communal kitchen. The whole upper-end of el barrio is up, an' having a hell-a-good time. The music blares through the tall speakers, yet the drums an' bongos can still be heard. A mulata shakes her fat, round ass, an' her tits rub against those of a negrita. Both sweatin' as if drenched

from a pond, lookin' all good. Some tipos with their arms tattooed, are doin' the dance-fight, snakes wrapped in their arms, to see who gets bit first. I find El Conejo sitting next to Pedro, he takes a cartoncito from his pocket an' hands it to me. It has the drawing of the rabbit from Alice in Wonderland—fuckin' hilarious—no wonder tha's his favorite. But there's no way in hell that am gonna take it again. Damn acid lasted for eight hours last time I took it, made the place melt around me, an' spawned all sort of shit. Pedro sniffs coke from a bill an' I do that instead.

Tonight's okay. Tonight we live an' celebrate.

One hand with beer, the other my uzi. I pump 'em up, while a carajita rubs her ass against my pinga. Fuck, it feels good. Real good. And we kings, we kings tonight. She turns around, an' I smack my lips on hers, stick my tongue in her mouth. She bites my lips till it pinches an' I can taste blood. This broad knows wha's good. I lick her face, her sweat. I finish my beer an' throw it in a can but miss. I put my hand in her shorts to touch her pepa. She likes it. Rubs her tetas harder against me, sucks my ear. I grind against her, an' I kno' she ready, she wet as hell. I take her hand an' move her to a corner, makin' her face the wall. She lowers her shorts, an' places my hand on her pepa again, an' I rub hard. Am rock solid an' I stick her, thrust it in, she moans, fights it off, so I dominate her, pushin' harder, pressing her until I burst. And I'm king, am king tonight.

I wipe the bugs from the nose. Pick up the toothbrush to clean the engine, damn oil an' grime always getting up in all the hard parts to reach. But am making it spotless, 'cause Pitbul said I'm ridin' it next time. Fuck-yeeeeh. Carlos stacks up some bricks an' comes near me. He

wants to help me clean the twister bikes. But I ain't letting. El cagado don't even know how. And I want it to look real good, sparkle and shit.

Pitbul is back and he's walkin' with a tipa. Her legs real thick, but not in the gettin'-mah-pinga-hard kinda way. She old am guessin' even more than Pitbul is. I put the towel on the floor near the bucket and the toothbrush 'cause they walking toward me. La tipa stops a few feet from me, and I see that she is Estella. She is starin' at me like she come to tell me somethin'.

Get in, Pitbul tells me, as he goes inside the house.

Whatha-hells goin' on? I have only seen Estella come here twice and ain't never been for a good thing. Maybe the cops came in and close her house again. Gonna spike the whole barrio if tha's wassup. Or maybe just need some dough for the week. Ain't make no sense either way, why Pitbul callin' me in for? But she don't enter, she stays outside.

He's sitting in his dark brown couch, which at night ya can't see what part is his arm and what ain't. Right next to the altar draped in black of La Santa Muerte. I used to see her cold, skeletal face as sinister but tha's before I came under her veil, under her protection. Pitbul has us surround her every Friday and Tuesday with red carnations and then he lights the candles. He always finishes his prayers with *bring forth your strength, power and omnipresence against those who intend to destroy me*. I repeat it, too, in my head, and I know she hears me.

Siéntate, Pitbul tells me, so I sit. It's takin' him long to say a thing and my leg shakes. He ain't never sat me down before. Not really. All he ever tells me is on the go, sorta shit you learn hands on. Ain't your theory type a guy.

Your grandma's dead, he says. Just like that, like a slap.

Starts saying somethin' 'bout she not wanting to eat. She not moving. And of bedsores ... bedsores, whatha? Ain't none of it making sense. I knew she wasn't moving much. Pitbul says Estella came to ask for help to move Buela for the wake—*the wake*—like for Mamá.

All the white lace lining surroundin' her, never seen Mamá so pale an' so still. Like a grown angel without wings. I was waitin', waitin' for her to open her eyes. The eyes all say I got from her an' to see myself mirrored in hers, just like I always did, when it was my turn for her to sing me to sleep. Leen was tired an' whining; people wanted her to be away, for her not to see. But I said, Naw, that she hadda see it, hadda be there, an' so I carried her. While her lil' face hid in my neck. And Manolita, she squeezed the hell outta my hand. I could hear her sobs, real hard, real deep. Buela stood behind us, but she didn't last long, she couldn't see her any longer. Mamá looked so beautiful, with her hands in her chest an' her rosary tangled on her thin fingers. I coulda stayed watching her, waitin', but they didn't lemme.

'Ta bien, Tito, let it out.

When Pitbul says that, I notice that my cheeks are wet. Fuck, I'm weak, like a stupid kid made of paper skin. I wipe 'em with the back of my hands.

There's no shame in it, Pitbul says, real men cry too.

I wanna believe him, but he never cries. And Coco, El Conejo an' the whole crew will laugh their asses off if ya ever as much as wince a tear. Tha's for women an' for maricónes.

Know what else real men do? Take care of los suyos. And you got a sister, no?—I raise two fingers—Bueno, you all they got now. You do what you gotta do, but you ain't never lose sight of that. Tú me entiende?

I nod.

It all flashes in my head. Of Manola passing me the ball to score an' clappin' when it hit the net. Leen ridin' on my shoulders from school, naming the animal-clouds. Of Buella lying in bed, an' me complaining 'bout having to help Manola bathe an' change her. Buella not moving. And Leen not talking. Until, until that day that I hit Manola. For what? 'Cause I felt de pinga for my insides were boiling, an' was all envergado 'cause she had wanted to sell my Nikes. And I couldn't come back, how the fuck could I? Leen ran one day that she saw me in a corner near the house, just sprinted, like fire was on her ass, like I woulda hit her too.

Take care of los suyos.

Sí entiendo, I wanna say, but can't muster it, so I nod. I nod repeatedly an' lower my face, tryin' to hide a flood of tears.

A HOOK TO THE HEART

Manola stuffed her mouth; she savored vegetables and puffy plum tomatoes and ignored the little burn on her tongue from the hot stew sauce. She swallowed half-chewed rice, onions and black beans. She buried her teeth in what seemed the tenderest piece of meat she had ever eaten, and gulped at the thought of how long it had been since she had had any meat, any real food for that matter.

Estella's bunch sure ate like the ricachones of the tall buildings in the center of the city. Manola's Mamá had brought leftovers every day after work during a particularly hot summer. It was a brief period of splendid eating, when her Mamá had been employed as one of the cooks and maids for a wealthy family. A family that according to her Mamá was gigantic—of fourteen children, the first six of a deceased mother and the second lot of another. So, the food was always ordered in abundance and the excess was kindly allowed to be taken home by the help.

They were watched over by their 'buela in those afternoons of satiated bellies. Aileen would sit on the floor with a tank top and panties, and refuse to move claiming that her skin would get worn out if it got any clammier. Sweat—as assured by the little girl—was salty just like ocean water, and all knew that despite its benign appearance, water could erode rocks. Manola and Tito would fight over the middle spot on the bed. Whose turn was it? was the question that drove their 'buela mad, and that if asked one too many times, both Tito and her would get a hard smack—Tito on the head and Manola on her butt.

The choice of the television program was incontrovertible. At Buela's command the popular Telenovela was syntonized with a name similar to "Sea of Love" and "You or Nobody Else" and at times, "A Hook to the Heart". Society—life and death, love and sex, family and

betrayal—was portrayed with a distinct dramatic hyperbole. Despite their different, although eye-catching names, they all shared something in common besides their theatricality—they all failed to show, as Manola saw it, the life that everyone around her lived. The ordinary life. Every now and then a protagonist—of the name María, Marimar or Mari-something—alleging to be of humble background, came about and met a *ricachón*. After some twists and turns of the plot, and a couple of scenes that wouldn't even reach the mild category (a polite kidnapping or an eventual crime of passion) to Manola, the protagonists ended up married and fairytale-ishly ever after. Sure, Telenovela's drama brought in guns, PG-13 insults and impulsive behavior, but there were no rapes similar to those Manola had heard of since she was a child, like the one in which a woman's nipples had been cut off with a knife, nor of the one that she had almost witnessed two weeks ago—three guys menacing a butt-naked boy with a steel bar—before she ran from the scene on a Sunday night. No episode of gangs and police slaughtering one another and taking *barrio* lives as collateral damage. Or of a mother murdered for her watch, and of her children starving. Telenovelas were as "violent" as someone-stole-that-baby's-lollipop, a "violence" that served as a hook to the audience, a moment that caught them by surprise. Those programs never showed lives like hers. For Manola, it was the gruesome and barbaric-limitless violence that filled her daily life. And yet, Manola watched the Telenovelas and wondered if one day her eyelashes would get to be as long and thick, her breasts round and big, her outfits so beautiful. If one day, she too would find a *ricachón* that would want to care for her.

It was a strange thing to feel her stomach full as if it was an inflated balloon. A little painful even. So she leaned against the chair's back while she wiped clean the spoon with her tongue, promising herself to eat a tad more slowly the next time. The small, closed patio felt

warmer as the morning picked up. Manola had submerged bundles of clothes in large plastic bowls on the sink, waiting for the soap to pull out the dirt or the blood from the garments. The amount of stained clothes and bed sheets that ten women accumulated was impressive. No matter how much she washed and washed, the pile of dirty clothes only grew. Manola had spent one night cleaning, and already she had heard the incessant complaints regarding lack of tampons, clean towels, bars of soap, and of just *who* had used the last one and done so without warning the rest.

Lupita's voice traveled from the house to the patio. Manola tilted her head to see through the aperture left by the unclosed metal door a very tall and slender man. This man, that had to be one of her clients, looked around before bending over and kissing Lupita's forehead. He walked away and after an irresolute back-and-forth movement he went in for a quick lock of lips. Lupita remained put for a minute, and then walked toward Manola. The metal door shrieked as she opened it.

"Yummy, no?" Lupita said through thin lips. "Ya licked it clean."

It was then that Manola felt again the pressure of her bloated stomach. And made an effort to speak, "Was it nice?" It hadn't looked like the prolonged kisses in the Telenovelas, with the accompanying romantic music, and with the guy's hand passionately holding the girl's cheek. Somehow, it had looked just as sweet.

"Qué?"

"You know ... to kiss him?"

Lupita's dark skin didn't allow for blushing, but Manola knew that she was embarrassed, although she didn't understand why. Didn't all clients kiss her?

“You saw?” Lupita rushed to sit and grabbed Manola’s hand. “Don’t tell, ok? Estella will go ballistic, she gets mad if we”—her voice reached an undertone—“And María Lola will love to just throw dirt on the whole thing, she’s such a ... Pero, you saw him, no? Isn’t he just so cute? I mean, he ain’t Fernando Colunga.”

Lupita was making no sense. Manola hadn’t seen his countenance, or any other detail, but she felt pressured to say yes, so she nodded. But he sure didn’t look like Fernando; an unmatched man who just got handsomer with every new role. At least the guy was very tall, which was quite a rare thing.

“I didn’t think he was handsome when I first saw him,” she continued. “He was all quiet and weird at first. I guess he’s still a little weird though,” Lupita let out a jumpy-laugh. “But he don’t need to tell me zilch, sometimes he just holds me, he don’t do nothing else, just holds me and caresses my hair.”

That wasn’t on Telenovelas either. Her Mamá had held Manola like that too, with the hair caressing, and the melodic whispering of sweetened words that permeated her insides as bright sunshine would a darkened room. She understood what Lupita felt—the unison beating of tranquil hearts pacing away the hurt and mistreatment of an outside world.

“He doesn’t talk much, but he did tell me once that—you didn’t like those?” Lupita pointed at a side plate, with four fried plantain stripes.

Manola had been so occupied devouring the stew that she hadn’t even acknowledged the presence of them. She still felt too full. But plantains had always been her favorite, her *buena* had accustomed them to anticipate a bowl of fried plantains as soon as they stepped home after school—*the best I ever tasted, even better than those of Mamá*, Manola thought. These plantains

sure looked delicious, fat and greasy, powdered with cheese. She tasted a tiny bit, and sure enough, sugariness melted in her mouth as she pressed the plantain against her palate. She followed that piece with another and another while Lupita went on garrulously about El Señor Ricardo, and of Desiré María saving up to get rid of a mole that had grown on her nose, but that María Lola was the one who really needed help with her crooked, hook of a nose. Of how wonderful it was that she could see Manola every night and that Manola could eat all the stew she wanted. That Estella was a heck of a cook, and that if Manola thought the stew was good, she had to wait and taste her asado, or Estela's special dulce de leche. Manola had appreciated Lupita's ongoing talk, it sure had distracted her from the thought of her 'buela leaving her—*You knew we had no one else to care for us, Buela*—but she didn't want to hear about food anymore, her belly felt a tremendous pressure, and she dropped the fork, placing her hands on her belly.

“What is it?” Lupita uttered.

“It hurts bad.”

“Just stay still, it'll go away.”

Estella stepped into the patio followed by one of Las Marías. Estella had the pear shape typical of women who only grow fat in their hips. Yet a woman whose contour still bore evidence of what had been a voluptuous youthful body. But if that body ever enjoyed a thing, was hard to tell; Estella wore a perennial stern expression as if in her life she had never witnessed a pleasing moment worth remembering.

“The wake will be at your house,” Estella said. “Around four.”

Manola's stomach rumbled. *I can't remember your wrinkle-covered eyes Buela, before they became like those of a guacamaya, so small, so round, so spaced-out.*

The hurt and pressure made Manola stand up, and puke on a plant. Besides the acidic taste in her throat, she felt an immediate relief. Who would have thought that such a painful throbbing—although leaving a bitter trace—could come to pass?

“You okay?” Lupita asked, patting Manola’s back.

“Yeah, much better.”

“Coño, Lupita, I told you to give her just a little food.”

“She was hungry!”

“Si que eres burra,” La María standing behind Estella said. “Don’t you know she can’t hold down so much?”

“How was I gonna know?”

“Mop the damn floor before you leave,” Estella said to Manola. “Give her a little food again in an hour,” she said to Lupita. “I left Andrea María with your sister at the communal kitchen, so go up there after you finish. ‘Ta todo listo, the wake, where they going to bury her, all of it”—*Will they put you in a beige dress too, Buela? Like they did with Mamá?*— “You are in luck that some people owe me favors.” With that Estella turned on her heels and left the patio.

Somebody in the barrio always ended up taking care of things that went wrong, cleaning the mess of others. Washing the blood from the streets. Removing dead bodies and figuring out to whom did that disfigured face belong to, and of telling the relatives, if any. Picking up a drugged kid who had crapped himself, after days of people passing by him over and over, and using a hose to bathe him. Of consoling a mother whose daughter had been brutally beaten for being a sapo, and telling the police where a drug dealer lived. This time it had been Estella that had come to the rescue.

Manola sank the wet brush in the soap, and pressed the bristles against the clothes. She moved with the same back-and-forth motion that women do when they hit the pedal of the old sewing machines, the same rhythmical motion Manola used to do on her 'buela's skin with the wet cloth. *You abandoned us, Buela. Why were you such a coward? Dying is easy, but living is hard. What the hell are we supposed to do now?* Manola scrubbed the sleeve of a crimson shirt, and the pocket of a short. *What will happen to me?* Then, she drained the bowls letting the sanguine water escape, red streaks slowly crawling down to the sink's hole.

“Nola!” Aileen darted from Andrea María’s side, and crashed into Manola’s torso. The left side of her face buried. “I wok—up and Bue—would—‘ent do a thing ... ” she uttered between hiccup sobs. Aileen muffled some other things that Manola couldn’t understand. “Then she, she came in,” she pointed at Andrea María who was making her way to them. Frog eyelids threatened to swallow the black marbles staring back at Manola. Aileen waited, pleading for reassurance. For a promise that everything was going to be alright. Manola wished that she had a torso to crash into.

“Shoot, niña. I can’t be here all day—I gotta hussle,” Andrea María’s hoop earrings dangled back and forth as her head wobbled with each word. “I gave her some to chew, pero esta flaca only ate a little.” Andrea María held a plastic plate with an arepa. She always wore her black curls short like a baseball helmet, but the woman wasn’t bad looking. Just one too many lines appeared when she pursed her lips to smoke. It was a loud afternoon, with the shuffling of

plates, and the sizzling of the cooking pans. A child in the arms of her father broke into an explosive laughter that drowned all the chit-chatting.

“Best ya be makin’ it to your house now,” Andrea María’s harsh expression momentarily lessened in order for her to finish the arepa through yellow teeth. Manola had noticed that even though Las Marías weren’t biologically related, they sure shared the ability to unremittingly wear a cara-culo mask for a face. It wasn’t personal, really, she came to realize. It was just the only mask they owned. Their harsh expression was perhaps a trait they had socially inherited from Estella.

“You’re not hungry, then?” Manola asked, as the girls turned every other corner.

“No.”

The little girl had averred that her throat had physically shut-down after their Mamá had passed. Manola simply hoped that this was not another long-lasting reaction, this time to their ‘buela’s death. Manola stepped up the concrete stairs followed by Aileen. They trod upon dirt or cardboards, and went through small muddy tunnels, pausing to wait for their turn to traverse the tight and cramped path. They balanced their bodies using their arms as they walked on broken pipes, so as to not fall in the open sewers. They traveled underneath hundreds of tangled wires and rushed to the cornered trash—the only dry surface—among the large murky puddles.

They reached their shanty. A person or two entered or left it; Manola couldn’t recognize who they were. Although she thought she had seen one of them before, and as they came near a girl accompanied by a woman, Manola saw that they were Rafaela and Soledad.

“I’m so sorry,” Rafaela blurted as she hugged Aileen. The little girls clutched one another.

Soledad opened a plastic bag and took out from it two black shirts, and left other clothes inside the bag. “Brought you girls this to wear,” she said. Soledad helped Aileen change her shirt, while Manola held hers in her hand. It had been so long since Aileen had worn a clean, untattered garment.

“I came running as soon as I heard the news,” Soledad spoke while caressing Aileen’s hair. “I have been meaning to come visit but, anyways, I think, given the circumstances, it would be a good idea for Aileen to stay with us. Don’t you think?”

Aileen, disconcerted, looked at Manola. Now, they were both asking her.

“I mean, we just have a place for one. It took me a long while to convince Pedro—you know how men are, stubborn as hell. He’s a bit of a brick head, but well, money is tight and, anyways that way you wouldn’t have to worry about taking her to school or anything else. And if you need me, you know where to find me, always an open door for you.”

No one to come home to, to talk to, the sensation of having a human being next to you that cared ripped away, gone. Tito could give a shit about them, he hadn’t appeared ever since the fight. Manola would be alone. Alone.

“You can come see her any time you want. Just for a while, till she gets a bit older, you know?”

Their ‘buela had been the illusion that they were being cared for. That an adult was there to safeguard them. In truth, they had been on their own for several months. Estella still paid Manola’s work with just one plate of food, and in truth she could always save enough food for Aileen. But, Soledad’s house wasn’t far off. Aileen would be decently dressed and attended to,

and she could visit her often. It was selfish, Manola knew it, but she didn't want to let Aileen go, not without her. She wanted to go to Soledad's house, too.

"Come Rafa," Soledad directed her daughter toward the shanty house. "We'll be inside when you are ready." Soledad handed Manola the bag with clothes. "Those are for you mi'ja," and went inside.

Manola dreaded having to enter, and Aileen's stunned posture didn't help the issue one bit. She wished she had relatives, a cousin, an aunt, a grandparent left. Somebody who understood, that shared her pain. Somebody besides a six year old who could hold her, someone that would counter the shaking in her knees. To tell her that everything was going to be alright, for *her*. The house had a few strangers come and go, their 'buela had always been a secluded person. One or two would say *sorry* to them, but the words were vacant to Manola. As vacant as her chest felt.

A loud chitchatting made Manola turn around. It came from Estella and four of Las Marías, all of who were wearing their usual bright-color heels and bosom-cleavage tank tops. María Lola wobbled her weight from one foot to the other, sweating profusely. The other Marías, of lighter weight, walked less bothered and their laughter took turns between whooping coughs, high-pitched hyena sounds, and snorts. It was the laughter typical of mockery and gossiping, the only thing that temporarily erased their usual cara-culo masks. They carried trays of food, and stopped just a few feet from the girls.

"Don't you go puking this stuff, eh?" María Josefina, the tall, dark skinny woman with wild spring-like hair, said to Manola. "I made it myself."

"Déjala tranquila pue' ... poor girl, don't ya see we at her 'buela's wake." Desiré María fired at María Josefina. "And you always so disrespectful, her 'buela's ghost is gonna hunt you down," she said, and made the sign of the cross.

"Why you have to take it there loca?—Always so sensational, geez."

"Less talk, more praying," Estella said. "Come on, get the food inside."

But before the women stepped toward the shanty, María Lola asked, "Who's the little brat?"

"My sister," replied Manola. "And she isn't a brat."

"Bueno, if she cries, take her outside. I got sensitive ears, okay?"

"Not like she is gonna scream and break windows. What's wrong with ya?" Desiré María said.

"Have you seen their shanty?—fucking tight space."

María Josefina poked María Lola's shoulder, "Cabrona! Like you lived in a royal palace before you came to Estella's," she said. "Tú si que te las das de fresa."

"Some of us can because—what the?" María Lola's face went stone hard. "Mírala, coño," she nodded her head to the right and everyone turned to see in that direction. Lupita strolled next to El Señor Ricardo. "What the fuck does she think she is doing?"

El Señor Ricardo wasn't one bit cute like Lupita had said. His cheeks were full of acne marks, his eyebrows were an uninterrupted zipper, and Manola debated on whether one arm was hairier and longer than the other or not. But he sure was dressed the best out of everyone.

"What's his ass doing here?" Estella barked. "You want to tell me what the hell this is, Lupita?"

"That's what happens when ya spoil her rotten when she was young," Desiré María darted.

"She comes here thinking she's all that," Andrea María who had returned from leaving the food inside, joined in.

"Doña Estella, it isn't anything like that," he defended. "I heard about the wake, and well, I knew she was Lupita's friend. I just want to pay my respects, in a time like—"

"Who asked you?" María Lola said.

Aileen hid behind Manola, although the heat wasn't directed at her. Manola didn't understand what the fuss was all about. But she sure was glad Lupita was here.

" ... just letting her do whatever," one of Las María's continued.

"She gonna end up pregnant like her Má," another said. "Mark my words."

"I think—I'll just—you know, go inside now," El Señor Ricardo mustered out.

"You do that!" a María butted in.

El Señor Ricardo walked away as a scolded dog would; his head hung low, his back hunched, and his butt tucked in.

"I saw him on the way here," Lupita's voice was hardly heard among the missile-charged interchange. "It wasn't like ... "

"You are giving him the shit for free, aren't you?" shouted María Lola.

"History repeats itself," one interjected.

"Everyone just *shut up*!" Estella yelled. "Look, they are here. We'll talk about this later."

The women muffled phrases and words, but quieted down.

"*Tito!*" Aileen chirped and gave a little jump.

Manola turned to see a tanned boy advancing toward them, and it took her a bit to recognize that he was her brother. He looked different, and he wasn't alone. A crowd of men and teens hovered around him. Pitbul by his right side. All carrying guns and rifles. Tito walked with his usual confident stride, yet this time his steps were grounded, not so jumpy like they used to be. Some men nodded to Las Marías, others saluted with a kiss on the cheek.

"Buenas, Doña Estella," Pitbul greeted.

"Tas mamacita," A man with huge front teeth told one of Las Marías. "Like always," he said and licked his bottom fat lip.

"You are hairy-ugly like always, Conejo," she replied, grinning. "Come by to visit sometime, eh?"

Everyone knew each other in el barrio. Yet it was only now that it had dawned on Manola that Pitbul's gang were clients of Estella's women. She knew Pitbul and his people were trouble, but somehow, he didn't seem so scary right now. Even with his scarred face. Even with his gold watch and black Nikes which were probably stolen. Even with his two loyal, tall and armed vigilantes.

"Bueno, let's start this thing," Estella said. "It's getting late."

With that the women clapped their heels as they walked inside. Lupita gave a hard squeeze to Manola's hand and trailed behind them. The crowd of men and teen boys parked their guns on their shoulders and walked toward the shanty as well.

Tito stayed behind, his face turned to see Pitbul's gang go in. His hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. Aileen stepped out from behind Manola, probably wanting to see the same thing Manola was waiting for. But Tito didn't look at them, he just stared at the ground, his lips

pressed so tightly that only a single line was visible. Manola's throat burned. She felt an urge to scream at him, to tell him how wrong it had all been, to make him feel what she was feeling. She closed her fist and hit him hard in his chest.

His eyes darted from the floor to her; a sadness in his eyes, in his big, green eyes. Green eyes, like those of their Mamá. He looked older, taller yet not thinner. He didn't say sorry or I miss you or even what was going to happen. He didn't smile, or reassure them. He just walked between them, grabbed a hand of each, and took them inside.

GLOSSARY

adelante	Come in.
agua bendita	Holy water.
agüevoniao	<i>Slang</i> , spelled ahuevoneado. Stupid, torpid, stunned.
ándale	Get to it.
arepas	Corn pancake.
asado	Roast.
barrio	Neighborhood.
bruja	Witch.
‘buela	Abbreviation of grandmother.
bulda	Spelled burda. Very much, a lot.
bulda de alto	Very tall.
bulda de caro	Very expensive.
bulda de peluo	Very hairy.
cabrón	Derogatory term (unfortunate, asshole) but also used to refer to a friend.
cachipo	To carry someone on the shoulders.
(el) cagado	Used as immature (young) person who gets afraid easily.
cara e’ verga	<i>Slang</i> . Highly offensive insult referring to a description of the face. “Verga” being a penis.
cara-culo	Harsh facial expression.
(a) carajita	A somewhat vulgar way of referring to a girl.
coño	To express various moods, especially surprise or anger.

coño e' madre	Motherfucker.
culo	Rear end.
de pinga	<i>Slang.</i> Excellent, powerful.
déjala	Let her go.
dulce de leche	Sweetened condensed milk.
'echale bola	Go for it.
envergado	To be mad.
fea	Ugly (referring to a female).
fresa	Strawberry.
fútbol	Soccer.
gordo	Fat.
guacamaya	Macaw.
guanábana	Guayaba.
güevones	Stupid, very awkward.
hijue'puta	Spelled hijo de puta; son of a Bitch.
how mierdas	How the hell.
la boca	The mouth, the main entrance of a place.
la Virgencita	The Virgin Mary.
limosna	Alms.
los santos	The Saints.
los suyos	Your people.

macho	Having or characterized by qualities considered manly, especially when manifested in an assertive, self-conscious, or dominating way.
malandro	Gangster, delinquent.
mamá	Mother.
mamasota	Beautiful, hot woman.
maricónes	Pejorative term to refer to gay men; fags.
microonda	Name given to burning people in tires.
mierda	Shit.
mitos	Myths.
(los) mocosos	Small kids.
muda	Mute.
muévele	Move.
mulata	Mixed race female.
negrita	Black woman/girl.
niña	Girl.
paco	A toxic and highly addictive mixture of raw cocaine base cut with chemicals, glue, crushed glass and rat poison. (The observer, Annie Kelly).
papagayo	Kite.
pela gato	A poor or dumb person.
(un) pelaito	Spelled peladito. Young boy.
pendejo	Stupid, dumb person.
pepa	<i>Slang.</i> Vulva.

pinga	Penis.
plomo	Bullets, to fire a weapon.
profe	Abbreviation for teacher.
puta	Bitch.
puto	Gay.
qué?	What?
quévalo	Burn him.
raspadito	Grated ice with flavor of tropical fruits.
ricachón/ ricachones	Rich people.
santera	a priestess of Santería.
señor	Sir.
sí	Yes.
siéntate	Sit down.
‘ta bien	It’s okay.
telenovela	Soap Opera.
tetas	Boobs.
tipa/tipo	Woman/man.
to’a la mierda	All the bullshit.
tonta	Dumb.
tornillos sueltos	Loose screws, referring to someone not sane.
tranquila	Don't worry.

zarrapastrosa Unkempt, ragged or miserable person.

Phrases:

a chica grande A big girl.

a qué no? No, right?

ándale, pirate ya Get lost, now.

culo peluo, peluo A very hairy bottom.

el viejo 'e mielta ese pue' Piece of shit, old dude.

guayoyo an' papelón A clear coffee made with water and raw hardened sugar cane pulp.

güevo-sucking pato Dick-sucking faggot.

la boca of el barrio Literarily "The mouth of the neighborhood"; the main entrance of the community.

maricónes, ya sabes Gay, you know.

pero esta flaca But this skinny girl.

Pero, bien feo, peludo y gordo But very ugly, hairy and fat.

qué pasó lacra? What is going on lacra? Lacra refers to a person of low ilk.

sí entiendo Yes, I understand.

si que eres burra You are so dumb.

suéltalo mamagüevo Let go of him, dick sucker.

'tas flaca mi'ja You are thin girl.

'tas loca, niña Are you crazy, girl?

'ta todo listo Everything is ready.

te cagaste to'o	You shitted your pants.
te quiero mucho	I love you.
tú me entiende	Do you understand me?
un chico grande	A big boy.
un hombre con plata	A man with money.
un tipo bueno	A good guy.
una muñeca a cuerda	A wind-up doll.
vainas bulda de raras	Very weird things.
verde de envidia	To be green with envy.
viejo pal coño	Old as hell.
y está como dios manda	Common expression that literarily means: She is (looks) like God commanded.

Songs:

"cabecita que sueña lino y almohada,	Little head dreaming of linen and pillows,
mi criatura risueña cuentos de hadas,	My smiling baby from fairy tales,
déjame que te duerma mi carricito,	Let me take you to sleep my little rascal,
cervatillo asustado de la mañana,	Frightened fawn of the morning,
convérte en un hombre niño adorado."	Become a man my beloved boy.
"te quiero mucho, poco, nada, para nada, para pura vacilada"	I like you very much, just a little, not even a bit, only to mess around.

AFTERWORD

I was born in Caracas, a Latin American city surrounded by slums, and lived there until I turned twelve years old in 2000. I was like the *ricachones* which I mention in my novella—from a well-off family, and in a carefully crafted bubble that kept me away from the atrocities that the poor suffered. However, one must note that Caracas' middle and upper class are not exempt from the city's violence and turmoil. After all, in 2008 Caracas was considered to be among the most dangerous cities and was called "the murder capital of the world" by the *Foreign Policy* magazine with an official tally of 130 homicides per 100,000 residents (CNN World). There is no way to traverse Caracas and not see the slums. To me, Caracas is two worlds in one city, two dissimilar worlds that don't necessarily connect on a daily basis. At least, back then, I never saw them interact. The truth of this city's complexity always haunted me. I wanted to know about the life of those people that lived in the *ranchos* (Venezuelan term for the slums). Those tattered brick and tin-shed homes, that at night were beautifully woven together by lights. What was happening in that place that I could point my fingers to from the highway? What was happening in that place in which I could almost see their clothes hanging from the windows to dry? What was happening to all those voiceless children, the same age as me, in those dark alleys?

That I have a voice and they don't, forces me to try and render theirs. Even if the voices rendered by me are a distant reminiscence of what the lives of rancho children could have been like, of what their voices would have said, then their stories will not be entirely lost. Many of the ideas for my novella spurred from images and words that had stuck to my brain, things that I had heard, articles I had read, pictures I had seen. I found in my research three movies and a documentary particularly helpful in shedding light on the living conditions in the slums. My

understanding deepened regarding the dynamic between the police (or in this case an elite government group) and drug dealers after watching the Brazilian dramatic film, *The Elite Squad*, and was inspired by the scene in which a man is burned alive inside tires. Because of this and what I had read in articles regarding such practices, I was prompted to write a scene in which this so called microonda (literally microwave oven) way of execution was described. *Secuestro Express* was a dramatic film centered in Caracas which helped bring me closer to the possible motives of gangsters, and the idiosyncratic behavior surrounding them. Another Brazilian film which unveiled the level of violence to which children are exposed was *City of God*. The documentary *Favela Raising* was influential in my novella for it clued me in to what the everyday life was like (what did these gangster children engage in?); it depicted all the beauty of the slums and not just the gruesomeness.

Several authors changed the way I viewed the world and the manner in which I decided to approach my characters and the sociopolitical issues surrounding them. I have uncovered paradigms within my Latin American culture that I had been blind to before. The writings of Ana Castillo, Judith Ortíz Cofer and Nicholasa Mohr certainly shook my ground. In *So Far From God* Castillo's character—Sofia—is a sufrida, a martyr in a way, a woman that sacrifices her freedom, her time and everything she has for her children. That character's mindset and plight is also found in one of Cofer's short stories "The Witch's Husband" in which the narrator acknowledges that this sufrida paradigm is instilled in young girls through generations. By becoming aware of this mold in which Latinas have constantly been forced into, I have obtained depth in my portrayal of my main Latina-girl character—Manola. It is about passing down liberating knowledge just like Mohr's characters do in her novel *Nilda*. In which the mother, on

her death bed, insists to her daughter that she should fight to keep something of her own, and to not entirely give everything for the wellbeing of others. The mother passed down this liberating knowledge to her daughter, breaking the pattern of the sufrida paradigm. It is a pattern that can also be stopped with us—the conscious reader. Once Latinas become aware of this paradigm that has been passed down through generations, we are able to stop fomenting it in our future daughters any longer.

I have found that one of the hardest things in fiction is to capture the mind and heart of a character that is opposite to the author's sex. In my chapter "Reyes del Barrio" I strive to undertake this challenge. Accurately depicting the experiences and attitudes of young urban boys are but one of the appeals of Junot Díaz's *Drown* and Piri Thomas' *Down These Mean Streets*. They render boys that are highly sexualized at an early age, of absent fathers and with a desperate necessity to find a role model; boys that are thrown in the streets and forced to employ their savvy for survival. Their writings have altered the way I understand the actions and motives of young boys, and consequently their writings have transformed my depiction of the male character, Tito. These authors have also given me ample insight into a writing that is about an immediate moment, and of an undeniable sincerity. Their work is marked by an unapologetic writing that shatters all boundaries of comfort.

It is the boundaries of comfort which I, too, wish to shatter. It is my intent with this novella to disrupt the reader's comfort. To break the bubble in which one sits and to allow this world of the slums to invade not only one's thoughts but one's heart. My writing style intends to reflect and illuminate a world unapologetically. A world that forces its inhabitants to live in a constant survival state in which there is no time to apologize for one's actions, no possibility for

translation and God forbid if one is not able to interpret the surroundings and its people correctly. My writing style aims to stand as an allegory to this survival state—it forgoes explanation for its Spanish, for a translation of it, for a pause of the immediate moment, because none is found in the slums.

The use of Spanish language in this novella also aims to address further issues. Still in my formative years of creative writing I keep encountering an inner resistance to use italics for my Spanish words. Spanish is my native language and that of my family, so it is not a foreign language to me, yet because I was writing not only for a bilingual reader but also for the monolingual English reader I struggled to find a justification beyond this. The editors of *Iguana Dreams*—Delia Poez and Virgil Suarez—helped to shed light on this issue. In their introduction they expose that several of their writers questioned using italics as well, "explaining that in their lives of their characters Spanish is not a 'foreign' language, but rather a vital part of everyday speech and as such should not appear in italics" (XVI). My characters' lives take place in a Latin American setting, and their speech corresponds to their Spanish language and idioms, therefore making their language (as much as mine) not foreign at all.

The use of Spanish language also helped me illustrate the intricate connection between words and emotions that is found within each accent, within each vowel not pronounced. People living in poor and overlooked communities are often illiterate or undereducated, which makes language of an extreme importance. This creates a certain pride and ownership with the choice of words and the way they are used by Latin Americans living in such communities. Therefore, it wasn't only the issue of losing meaning and strength in the translation of the Spanish words and phrases, but most of all the fear of misrepresenting certain traits, temperament and character that

are shared by Latin Americans living in slum communities. However, I tried to work in a space that allowed me to both show these distinct markers of communication (which are interconnected with the rhythm of the words and that of the life of slum inhabitants) and still provide enough clues in context to the monolingual English reader as to not alienate him or her, even without the use of the glossary. I must add that I am ambivalent toward the glossary because it fails to convey the adequate meaning of the Spanish phrases and goes against the immediate moment of a reading, yet at the same time I find an obligation to provide a tool to a monolingual English reader that might not be familiar with certain shared cultural expressions of Latin Americans.

I aimed to utilize language as a uniting force. My intention was not to identify just a single place but a pan-ethnic community. I strove to create a world that was composed of these shared Latino cultural expressions without allowing a strong identification for a single country. As a Venezuelan, I was most familiar with our particular way of speech and my writing in English, inflected by my experience and my home language, as a consequence was shaped by it. However, I hope that I remained true to the assemblage of different colloquialisms. The reason why this works, as opposed to juxtaposing various different languages, is that first of all Spanish is only one language. The second reason brings me to the editors of *Iguana Dreams* for in their collection of Latino fiction they recognized that although each culture had its differences by having "a separate history and experiences" they still shared "a bond of recognition, a family camaraderie" (XVI). It is this shared sensibility that allows me to create a pan-Hispanic linguistic community. In part my idea of collecting word nuances of different Latin American countries, was to provide our Latino community with evidence of our pan-Hispanic sensibility, which is a sentiment that many are conscious of in the United States. That part of us, although United

States-Americans at heart, still remains unremittingly Latino. Not just Venezuelan. Not just Colombian, or Uruguayan, or Cuban, or Guatemalan or from wherever. But Latino.

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