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Disintegration and Other Stories

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Disintegration and Other Stories

Senior Project Submitted
to the Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College:

by

Brian Araque Pérez

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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THE POOL

I'm a strong believer in fairness because things don't always go my way. Not everything is fair. Things didn't go my way when I touched the cat piss and it wasn't my fault. When I think back to those days my mind is filled with images of Javi. I don't know what happened to Javi, he could still be wandering about his neighborhood, still living with his mother, or maybe he got up and left all together. Back then I don't think I could say anything was really my fault, because a lot of those things weren't in my control. My mother was the one who made the decisions. She decided that I should go to my primary school in Corpus Christi, and that her boyfriend, Marcello, should stay to live with us, and that Javier Reyes and I should spend so much time together.

Just touch it, for just a second, Javi demanded. He kept trying to convince me and he towered over me as he said it. I was only eight years old then. He was three years older, meatier than me, and sometimes I even thought he was fat. I'll give you five bucks if you do it Juan, he said, it's not that bad. Javi motioned his hand forward as if he was making a high five and gestured me to do the same. I raised my hand into the air stupidly and stared down at the piss-filled pad that lay on the floor. The piss was a dull yellow, and the cat, for some dumb reason even after months of practice, couldn't figure out how to keep his piss in one spot. Javi quickly grabbed a hold of my wrist and I shouted and begged for him to stop. I screamed...*Javi!* Over and over I said his name, but he just kept on laughing. He bared his teeth and they were outrageously white, like they were spray-painted, whereas mine were teeny and yellow. Finally, my hand was pushed against the mat. Tears rolled down my face and Marcello walked into the

living room, his heavy footfalls sounding like thunder. Your mother has a serious migraine, he said, you two will see each other tomorrow anyways. My mother was the one who set up all the playdates me and him had. My life revolved around her plans, even if she was making them from her bed. She called me to her room that night, as she does every night, to pray. Marcello was watching television and was stretched on the farside of the bed. He only had a pair of white boxers on and the sounds of the soccer match filled my ears. The room was almost totally dark, the television's rendering of the field flooded the room with a dull greenish-gray glow, and I could see Marcello's body clearly, even the folds of fat beneath his chin. On the night table beside him, funny enough, were family photos. A portrait of my father still stood there. Everytime I glanced at it I could hear my mother's voice. *Remember, he's still your papi.* Beside my father was an image of my younger self riding on top of Javi's back, my wide grin and tooth gap revealing all my innocence. Javi was so thin back then. On the wall above them the wooden plank, the one that seemingly moved all over the house, the one that was shaped like a fish, was illuminated by the television screen. The plank was inscribed with a bunch of corny inspirational quotes about God. I couldn't read it all, but I knew it by heart. *Dios bendiga a quien entra esta casa... Dios proteja a quien sale... Dios de...* and the rest was covered in darkness and that was okay because I knew the last word was *Paz*. Dios bendiga a quien entra esta casa. I walked over to my mother who was sitting so upright her spine could've been a steel rod. I couldn't make out what she was saying, but I could see her mouth murmuring in the glow. Dios bendiga a quien entra esta casa. I set my knees upon the wooden floor and rested my head against her thighs. Dios bendiga a quien en— She began speaking our nightly prayer.

*En paz me acostaré, asimismo dormiré... ¿quién me libra del temor, quién me quita esta
ansiedad, si no eres tú?*

She caressed my black hair as I prayed. You're going to be hanging with Javier tomorrow so don't misbehave again. It'll make things awkward between me and Mary Carmen.

Back then I imagined Javi to be my brother. That summer he showed me how to be a man in all the places where I thought I was helpless. He taught me how to doggy paddle in the middle of the pool without sinking to the bottom. You have to trust your legs, he said, no ones gonna come help you, he kept on saying. I begged him to let me quit and if I tried to walk away he would drag me back in, sometimes by my hair. I would run out of the pool quickly, my feet thumping against burning concrete and leaving shadowy prints behind. The harsh Texan heat would shrink and dissipate them in seconds. I'd have to make new ones before Javi would toss me back in and bark at me. He trained me like this at least four or five times until I got it right. After swallowing all that chlorinated water I could feel the resentment in my blood.

The deep end was lined with floating red and white buoy beads. One time I remember grabbing on to one while Javi was with his mother on the shallow side. I floated there reveling in my isolation. I liked being alone, not completely alone, but I enjoyed the peace reclusion offered. I could feel my skin darkening in the sun and I drifted there as I watched the world unfold around me. Beside them a boy screamed *Marco* and all the other boys *Polo'd*. The boys swam in circles until one of the slower ones was caught; he flailed and screamed and the shouts turned to laughs and cheerful splashing. Their eyes were dark, like my own, but they were also filled with light and watery reflections. The pool's deck was lined with recliners and the oily backs of middle-aged women baking in the sun. I saw a skinny white boy at the snack bar swallowing a

hamburger that was almost the size of his head. He looked like a mess— his face was freckled endlessly, his blonde-hair disheveled like a bleached bird's nest, and his nose was slathered with white cream.

I kept my focus on Javi and his mother. They were beside all the commotion, they were next to the steps that led out of the pool. Her name was Mary Carmen, but I would always call her Señora Carmen. She was light skinned, always wore these massive shades and her chestnut hair was streaked with blonde. She must've had Javi at a young age because she barely even looked thirty. Her bikini straps had snapped and her sunburnt shoulders were totally visible, her arms were the only things keeping her top in place. Please let me help you...I could hear Javi trying to persuade her. Javi circled around her and she kept her back towards him, protecting her chest. With nowhere to swim to she eventually pressed herself up against the wall of the pool. He continued to creep towards her. The noise of yelling kids and gossiping parents stopped me from hearing it all clearly, but I could hear him laughing like his advances were jokes, just his silly sense of humor. After a few moments she retaliated. Ay... shut up she yelled, you're annoying me she told him. He remained unfazed, still confident and at some point he even perched his chin right onto her shoulder. He stood behind her and his hands extended outwards, rested on the wall in front of her, and they seemed to be on their way to her hips. Señora Carmen turned and pushed him away, wrapped herself in a towel, and climbed up the steps that led you out of the shallow end. She exited through the metal gate and shut the door with a slam.

He gaped at the gate for a few seconds like he couldn't believe it. He grunted and punched the water. His hands were balled into fists and the veins on his neck strained as he tilted his head back and then looked right at me. He was so tall for a twelve-year-old. Even back then

he was around his own mother's height, so he must've been at least five feet and a few inches. His hair was dark and closely shaven to his head, almost buzzed. And as he waded through the shallow end of the pool the water rippled away fiercely like it knew to make way for such a huge boy. We walked back to the house shortly after. He lived in an apartment complex where every house was the same pale-peach color and every window was dressed in rusted metal bars. I called my mom, I don't want to sleep here, I told her. I'd rather be with you and under my covers. It's too early, Juan. Don't you think it would be rude of you to leave so soon? Let Javi show you a good time and tell Mary Carmen that you are thankful. I didn't raise an unthankful son. Between our silences I could hear the sound of a soccer announcer that must've been playing from the television. I imagined Marcello totally nude, flipping through channels in one hand and playing with his penis with the other.

I was assigned to set up the table. I covered it in a big plastic tablecloth and set out paper plates. I poured water into three dixie cups. I never knew Javi's father, but there was a photo of him that sat on the sink of Javi's bathroom. I would hear his name through whispered conversations between my mom and Javi's. I remember overhearing a phone call between the two. *Quim is with his new family now...I think he's working at the auto shop on García... he doesn't even ask about him.* My dinner that night was a chicken breast with a piece of cold cheese sitting on top, accompanied by plain white rice. Señora Carmen claimed it was chicken parmigiana. It was always my favorite.

After dinner Javi bothered Señora Carmen for dessert. He lifted his shirt and rubbed his belly like some emaciated beggar. Twenty dollars, that's all you two are gonna get. Buy ice cream or whatever you'd like, but come back before nine or else I'll have your mother calling me

all night. *¿Dónde está Juan? ¿Qué tal con Juan?* I don't need any more interrogation. Señora Carmen placed the money in my palm.

We walked out into the night. The sky was already a somber blue color and I could see the deep black rolling in from the east. A shiver shot up my spine and I hugged my own body in hopes of finding warmth. As we stepped outside Javi immediately stopped me.

Juan, let me see the money.

I held it out and he ripped it from my hand.

Let's go back to the pool, Juan.

It's so cold. And it won't be open, won't we get caught?

If you jump off the diving board I'll give you the whole twenty.

They were my twenty bucks to start with anyways. I followed Javi to the pool grounds. There were three diving boards that towered over the deep end. My mind couldn't help but fixate on the tallest of the three. For being so damn heavy looking, Javi hopped the wire fence with ease. I squirmed through a hole that was ripped at the bottom of the fence instead. The pool seemed so much more massive at night. The plastic recliners and umbrellas were all packaged and put off to the side. Otto's, the snack bar, was sectioned off with a rickety metal gate. Hanging above the gate was H MBUR UESA FANTASTIC S. Beside the sign were the remains of a metal bullhorn that was probably smashed by a couple punks.

Pool lights and moonlight were my only guides through the dark. The pool water swayed against the concrete shore. The water looked alive and I could imagine myself drowned, motionless on the pool floor. I stepped over the diving board that was bolted to the ground. My

hand touched the middle diving board. Javi placed his hand over mine and shook his head. No, the next one.

Hold still, he said.

He pulled me by the collar of my tee and brought me close to him. My back was almost pressed up against his stomach and his head lurched above mine. He pulled my hands to the air and popped my shirt off. My buttons were undone and he buried his thumbs into my waistband and popped my jeans off too. He slid my little undies off with one graceful motion. I looked over my shoulder. My face was well lit whereas his was stuck in the shade. I squinted into the darkness. His eyes looked like black puddles.

Can I ask you a question? A personal question?

He looked at me confused.

Why haven't I ever met your father?

He's busy most of the time.

With what?

With work.

What does he do?

Lifeguard.

Can I meet him one day?

Not if you still want twenty bucks.

I began my ascent and each metal rung felt like icicles beneath my naked feet. I looked down to his expressionless face. His unwavering eyes drove me forward. I edged toward the tip of the board and peered over. My heart was beating so fast I thought it would hop out of my mouth.

Looking back it must've only been around eight feet high or so, but it didn't feel that way back then. What are you waiting for? I'm not afraid, I thought. I looked out to the night which was terribly dark, and starry too, and the water which was teal and inviting. I'm no longer afraid of myself, of Javier, of this water beneath me, or of the cold air that makes it so hard to breathe.

If you don't jump, I'll push you, he yelled.

He started to count down.

Three...two...one...

As Javi walked towards me I grabbed his forearm and dived off the board. We plummeted into the water. The lights were blinding and all I saw was a green haze, and Javi's body just looked like a falling ball of flesh. I swam to the surface. I waited for Javi to emerge. A few seconds went by, then another few, and after that I was so worried I dove to the bottom of the pool. He was thrashing and flailing and failing to swim. I dragged him to the surface where he spat up water and cried. His face was contorted and overflowed with pain. His eyes welled with tears and they offered the same blue brilliance the pool lights reflected. He took off his soaked trousers and shirt. I summoned all my courage to speak. I'm sorry Javi... I didn't mean to. It's just that you scared me. I didn't know what to do. He walked to my pile of clothes and put my own shirt on and threw my jeans into the water along with my socks and shoes. What are we gonna tell your mom Javi? Maybe we got lost?

He made his way over to the hole at the bottom of the fence and squirmed out. He left without offering a word.

I walked out of the pool with no shirt on, and the soggy paper bill clenched in my fist. When I got home Marcello laughed and then he brought my mom in. She didn't laugh.

How could you, she said. How could you do this to Javi, she said. Mary Carmen called and told me everything. Stealing the pool keys from her, breaking and entering, forcing Javier to do those awful things. You've become so violent, Juan-Carlos.

I locked myself in my room. I thought about crying but then I remembered Javi, kneeled over with tears and pool water all over his cheeks and nose and then it all seemed so pointless. I laid in bed almost totally naked except for my shorts and the twenty dollar bill that I left sitting on top of my chest... As I fell asleep I imagined Javi completely sunken at the bottom of that pool. With no air left in his lungs, his arms swinging wildly, and a bubbly plume escaping from his mouth. That terrified look on his face, the terrifying moment beyond the diving board, the Javi I remember. God bless Javi I thought.

BIRTHDAY HIT

Happy Birthday. It's your birthday. It's your birthday and you were assigned a big hit today. Our *Querido* is the one who gave it to you. Our *Querido* is your benefactor, a cartel boss. It's your birthday and you have been thinking it over. Today is a big day for you. You have fourteen years and still no kill to your name. You're never supposed to talk about a hit and maybe that's why you're so goddamn quiet all the time. You have trouble focusing and you have a bad dreaming habit. Dreaming about the rolling hills beyond the slums of Pereira. The way they curve and twist into dark places covered by overgrown jungle and how they fold into one another and you wonder about the hills outside the valley. You dream about the *pozo* that's next to your house that's filled with muck and a stash of .38's and a G3. You pick up a pistol and fire it into the sky, shooting down every bird that sings too early, before your mother has fixed you a cup of black coffee and an *arepa* with queso. *Pa pa pa*. The sound of your pistol and the beating of your heart. *Pa pa pa*. You can hear a dog howling. It's our *Querido* and he's walking an obese bulldog. Our *Querido* looks at you with a solemn face and understanding eyes. His shoulders are wide, his arms are hefty, and the curls of his beard are well kept. He has a broad smile with huge white teeth and he loves to put them on display for you. He taps his fingers on his teeth just to show off. *Pa pa pa*. His eyes are opaque puddles and you point the snubbed nose of your pistol to the darkness and you feel your finger pressuring the trigger— the toes of your feet curl and then, bewildered, you look down your bed to see your foot pointed like a ballerina's. You come all over yourself and feel so very guilty about it. It's your birthday.

HOW TO GRIEVE

I was never friends with him and I couldn't ever remember wanting to be, but still, I couldn't help but think that the casket was completely and utterly unnecessary. Why did he die? Why did he have to go and die on such a random and meaningless day like that?

When I picked up the phone I was still groggy from dream. I hadn't transitioned from dreamscape to my college dorm room properly yet and the two bled into one another. In my dream I was swimming in an ocean, its vastness was never ending and there was no shore to be found so I was stuck swimming infinitely. My mother was the one who called me. I swam until I heard her somber voice. The dismal tone shocked me and violently shook my face.

Murió tu abuelo. Please...get here soon, Mijo.

She started to sob uncontrollably, talking about all the times she had tried to reunite the family, the barbecues we used to have in his backyard, the heavy gold Jesus piece he got in Bogotá that my uncles were apparently fighting over. I tried to make my voice sound as genuine as possible before I lifted the phone to speak.

Yeah, I'll be there soon. Yeah it's so sad.

It's so funny to see the bereaved try to interpret a death. We all have our own special ways of doing it. I do too, despite not being overwhelmed by grief or anything. On the Greyhound back home I looked out the window and thought about my tios, tias, and primos, faces I hadn't seen in so long. I walked into Tuterá funeral home wearing a slim tan suit with skinny lapels. I like looking stretched out and thin, especially in crowded places. Makes me feel seamless, like I can choose to slide in and offer some part of myself at any moment while simultaneously acting like

I'm nobody, someone you're supposed to walk past. The funeral home was bone white with chipping paint and the edges of the roof were deteriorating a bit. Like the shingles were black fingernails being chewed off little by little. It was one floor, and I smoked a Camel cigarette on the portico with my grey-haired father beside me. He was silent except for the hollow greetings he handed out to the other family members who came shuffling in. I gave out handshakes and hugs, and whenever anyone tried to offer condolences in some way all I really managed to reply were things like "It's okay, I'm just glad you came," and at some point I think I said, "It's no big deal." I thought they looked like clumsy penguins, a big cluster fuck of awkward people huddled around Abuelo's coffin, a group that rarely ever gathered like this. There was a lot of internal strife that plagued my extended family. Before his death, my aunts and uncles and their respective children had decided to detach themselves from him. Most of them had gone years without talking to him. The man who almost single handedly brought them to the suburbs of Westchester from the rural outskirts of Bogotá. He was the lucky mestizo that made the gamble all immigrants make when we come over to this place, and he succeeded, too. He reminded them of all the bad times I guessed. Memories of his drunken breath, fits of rage and obsession with the American dollar, these people didn't want to think of Colombia at all. One day as my father drove me to school in his Chevrolet van, I bugged him about it. This was way before Abuelo's death. Way before any of us could believe that a guy that stubborn and sturdy could ever die. I gathered all my courage before I spoke.

Don't you care, Dad? It's almost been a whole fifteen years since you saw him last. He's your dad.

I asked him, as if he never thought of these things. He looked lost in thought. We rode in silence until we approached a red light, the ticking noise of the turn signal felt relentless and infuriating. He kept his eyes on the road. I don't think he could've looked at me in the eyes back then.

He's my dad. So what?

He was decidedly quiet after that. Even though I kept on talking about how sad it was, he wouldn't budge.

And what if that were us? I finally said. What would you do then?

He refused to offer me a response. I felt so incredibly frustrated after that. Just admit it, I thought, just admit that you're sad, that's all I wanted, really.

Halfway through the open casket service one of my favorite cousins, Fernando, entered without a word. He walked up to the front row of the metal foldable chairs. The casket holding Abuelo was dark cherry wood, polished enough so you could see a smoky reflection of yourself in it. I hadn't seen Fernando in about a year, but he had grown so much since then. He was a staunt teenager. The curls of his beard looked slicker and thicker, his jawline more defined, as if puberty happened over night and he woke up with the voice and stature of an aged gaucho. He sat down and the air around him was so serious. He kept his hands locked and his face was frozen in a frown. He sniffled like a little kid and let tears well up in his eyes. When the rest of the boys, the younger cousins I never really got along with, came around the corner and joined him in the front row they began to place their hands on his shoulders and they pushed and shook him tenderly. Their faces were clowney and contemptuous and they snickered like Fernando had said something funny. Fernando looked at them and shook his head, his lips slowly and reluctantly turned into a smile. He couldn't help but wince and laugh. His smile suggested that

unspoken and tender ‘Shut up’ that we give to our close friends when they somehow, in an annoying way, manage to cheer you up when you’ve already decided to feel and act abysmal.

I changed my focus from the boys to Abuelo’s resting face. Abuelo’s face looked how it always did except a bit waxier, and somehow, more full of life.

Seems like he’ll just pop right back up and grab you. Don’t it?

It was my tio, Rulfo. He was the youngest of Abuelo’s sons. The only one of the sons that stood by the casket. His eyes were glossy and a brilliant brown color.

But it’s true, he added. He’s dead. It’s weird, but he’s gone.

I nodded in silence. Between our silences I could hear another one of the sons, my tio Juan in the far corner of the room among a group of middle-aged guys. His voice boomed like my abuelo’s once did. He was talking about golf in an otherwise silent room. He always talked about country clubs and the courses in Santo Domingo he got to visit last summer and the summer before that one.

You should see my new driver, he said to the guys. 750. It cost me 750 for a driver.

The atmosphere of the group changed entirely when we got to the burial ground. The cemetery was dominated by silence, even Juan shut his mouth up. My mother's eyes ran with water and she buried them in her handkerchief. We were all given white chrysanthemums to toss into the casket before they shut it for eternity. As I tossed mine in I wondered— should I toss it near his face? On top of the casket? Did he even like chrysanthemums?

I thought back to the things he liked: the Colombian national soccer team, he notably hated the Mexican teams even though, or rather because, one of his daughters married a man from Guadalajara, Andrés Escobar even after he scored a goal against his own country, pork

rinds, his Jesus piece, Coronas with a slice of lime, and the surround-sound stereo system he had installed in his home. I thought of his home. The one I seldom visited as a child and never visited as a teenager even though it was only a twenty-minute walk from my own home. I thought of the phony chandelier-looking light fixture that hung in the living room. The one that was so low I could've knocked it down when I used to visit, despite being so short back in those days. In the later part of his life he spent most of his days with the television remote in his hand. The T.V. would usually display busty blondes playfully looking into the camera— novelas, the weather women, a corny speed dating show called *Doce Corazones*. Cartagena women are the absolute best, he would always say.

As I threw the flower I could hear my mother's wails. She was the only one screaming, even though she was a biological stranger among her father-in-law's mourners. She shouted his name. His name rang in my ears like a mantra. A name that, when I heard it, made me sit up straight, I felt the need to clench my jaw, his name put me on edge, reminded me of the habitual obedience I offered him, my past fear of him. I wondered when the flower would wilt. I imagined his future body surrounded by decayed petals, their whiteness turning into a burnt brown color, a color that would seamlessly blend with the color of his fading skin. Maybe it would serve as a reminder: all things fade, even your tanned skin. I thought back to his basement. Where he kept those Bose stereos he always talked about. I remembered the day he introduced me to those stereos, when they were newly bought and stored in his dank basement. We were watching the shows he always watched, I was probably around twelve years old back then. At some point he let out a preparatory groan— the living room reeked of Heineken and pork and my face cringed. He managed to stand and he gestured me to the staircase that led downstairs.

C'mon, coño, he belched and followed with a laugh. I've been meaning to show you something.

My heart felt weighted by dread, I wanted to go home, but I nodded and followed instead. His footfalls sounded ogre-esque and the room was in shambles. In a damp shadowy corner I saw five Bose speakers huddled around each other like they needed warmth. He put his meaty hands on my shoulders and shook me like he loved me, loved me like a son.

It cost me 600 dollars, he said through smiling teeth. His greed shone through yellow decaying bone. 600 American dollars, he clarified.

His meaty grip tightened around my shoulders.

It's muy cool, Abuelo. I smiled back. It's muy cool.

Those moments feel so far away now. A part of me still thought he would emerge from those dainty flowers and climb his way out of the ditch. I imagined him bellowing something about life being too short and then he'd laugh at my father who, for the first time in his life, had allowed himself to tear up.

He was my dad, my father choked, he was my dad.

DISINTEGRATION

The grocery store I used to work at wasn't the greatest—the restrooms were decrepit and the toilets were cursed to never flush, the customers were pretentious assholes, and the work day would never seem to end. The manager's name was Angel and he was so uptight that the veins on his forehead looked like rivers roaring upstream, pulsating with every step he took. His deep black hair was speckled with grey spots. When I first applied to the job he had a frantic energy. Can you clean? He asked me. Yeah, I can do anything, I responded meekly. I became a front-end cashier and when the first-string janitor failed to show I'd be next in line to mop the break room or unclog the garbage disposal. Back then I was broke and desperate to pay rent on time. My mother had always been hard on me growing up. I think it's because she never really wanted a daughter; she and my biological father were hoping for a son, but they ended up with me. When my mother got pregnant for the second time that guy went and stepped out on her even before they found out that the second pregnancy was a boy. I had recently moved out of my mother's home, leaving behind my cozy childhood bed and my chubby kid brother. When he was a baby I thought he was destined to be obese: he was filled to the brim with baby fat. The folds of fat on his arms undulated and they reminded me of the sleeves on my old *North Face* puffer from high school.

Angel was really paranoid in those days and he still is. His hand was always on his stomach whenever he examined the fresh produce aisle. He would pick apart at the pyramid of oranges and consider them thoroughly. The fruit we ordered was fresh and gleamed beneath the fluorescent lighting, but Angel always had a face of contempt like he couldn't tell if he could

stomach them or not. The first phase of the hunger epidemic broke out at the beginning of the recession. Men in every state were dying of hunger, or rather a lack of hunger and a refusal to eat. There was a viral video circulating on *Facebook* where an infected Miami man was forced to eat by his buddies—you could tell by his body that the man had been afflicted by the disease for a considerable amount of time. In the video, for whatever reason, he was shirtless so you could see the outline of every rib and the deep depression of his sternum. The spaces between skin and bone were like little pale tarps viciously pulled from end to end. The other guys force-fed him a couple of Big Macs and a soft serve from *McDonalds*. In the background the guys giggled among themselves over the victims' suffering. The man's face was colored by regret and strain. Based on his facial expressions I wondered if he had a pistol pointed at him or if he simply wanted to die. After his third Big Mac and half-way through the vanilla shake, swirls of dark purple and red spilled into the whites of his eyes and I remembered thinking of a blood orange. Eventually his body spurred into a convulsion, silencing the laughter of his company. Maybe they thought it was a joke. A condition where a person just doesn't want to eat no matter how starved, ridiculous. Hot wisps of steam arose from him, pulling back his already taut skin, further revealing the bone that had been so clearly visible before. As the skin melted and after the steam dispersed all that was left was a smoldering pile of brownness and bits of bone. Evaporated man scored six and a half billion hits on *YouTube* too.

Within a few months of the outbreak I had seen my fair share of wilting men, destined-to-die men, but sometimes I still struggled to discern a recently afflicted man and someone who just happened to be naturally thin. Excessively baggy clothing sometimes was a giveaway, a hider, but you could never really know for sure. One of my co-workers, Javier,

another cashier at the store and coincidentally Angel's son, gave me some advice on the issue. Yo, just look into their eyes. There's just nothing there, he said, no will to live. At first, I couldn't tell if Franco was afflicted; his eyes were fearful like I would imagine a sick person's to be, but he had a glimmer of desperation, a lively sort of clinginess.

I had been working at Angel's store for a few months and that's when Franco, a co-worker who I had crushed on for quite a while, started losing all his weight. I liked him for his clowney attitude. He was the face of the in-store deli we had, working the register and the slicer. He had an octopus tattoo with tentacles sprawled across his forearm and wore a muddled quartz stone necklace wrapped up in black string. During my first week on the job he asked me if I liked Amy Winehouse and then offered an invitation to drink gas station Rosé at his place. I laughed in his face. He texted me later that night, "hey" and brilliantly followed up with a "what's up?" I texted back almost immediately. "You fuckin wish." I never went over to his place until things got really bad, but I always enjoyed his company. We often spent our midday breaks together in his beat-up Subaru legacy, smoking kush from an opalescent bowl that was shaped to resemble a dragon's head. He was kicked out of his parent's home sometime in highschool. I remembered so clearly the way he recounted it. It was an incredibly hot day. You could see the humidity shimmering above the parking lot pavement, like a black suburban desert. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and gave me a frustrated look. You know when a person just can't get you, no matter how hard you try to explain shit? He paused to press his lips against the piece, he inhaled deeply and puffed his chest out like he was facing off with an imaginary opponent. He passed the pipe to me, the mouthpiece was shiny with his spit and I pressed my lips to it. That's why you're cool Jaz...I don't need to prove shit to you or anything like that. You just

mind your own business and I like that. I could feel the smoke flowing through my chest and because I wasn't as dedicated a stoner as Franco was, my throat protested. The dryness was unbearable and I buried my mouth into the inside of my elbow. Franco laughed and pursed his lips in an exaggerated way; he stuck his tongue out too as he mimicked my series of coughs. Franco saw more sides of me than most. I trusted him more than anyone else in the store and he probably knew more of my personally embarrassing stories than my mother or brother did. Back then I didn't understand my inability to express my feelings: they were overwhelming and raw, so I was only able to realize how I felt after he had become afflicted, when steam started rising from his body.

Franco lost his flirty spirit when the disease grabbed a firm hold of him. He no longer poked around my register during breaks, no more jokes about my ardent obsession with him, he moved inconspicuously during breaks and grew thinner with each passing day. Less than a month later he was gangly, jaundiced, with a forlorn expression permanently slapped across his face. I imagined his body beneath the store's uniform, sharp clavicles draped with thin skin and a navel section so concave it'd probably make me feel sick.

During his lunch breaks Franco stared out the store front's glass facade in a helpless way. He never brought lunch with him and seldom brought a water bottle. The image of his water bottle had brought me back to the days when the epidemic was in its infantile stage, before it was labeled an epidemic, when I was a sophomore at Park Avenue High and everyone had switched from gossiping about the blowjob Donna Jacobs gave Kyle Tanner back in ninth to conspiracy theories and a whole lot of bullshit did-you-knows concerning the mysterious disease. Our local news-station had advised that water, if not horribly irritating to the patient, could help stabilize

the sufferer's condition. Even my mother got into it. One day I came home still agonizing over an overwhelmingly difficult chemistry exam. My mother was reading an advice column from *Cosmos* magazine with her, unbeknownst to any of us at the time, soon-to-be disintegrated boyfriend. Pauly reported feeling a little under the weather, I can barely even get myself to smoke a Newport, he retorted like it was the most mind-boggling discovery he'd made all week. His breath always smelled of nicotine or meaty grease and I could never help but focus on the small coal sized mole on his neck that was decorated with a single, pube-like hair. I don't miss him very much. The column offered some ridiculous advice. The title read: *FIVE WAYS TO SAVE YOUR MAN!* The list of D.I.Y. remedies was extensive, and some talked about Eastern traditions of meditation and ear acupuncture, among other stupid ones like taking ice baths three times a week to keep your body's neurons firing and reminding it to stay in one piece. My mother was gentle and warm to Pauly, she prepared food for him like garbanzos, sauteed chicken, and rice, and kept on doing so even after becoming aware of his affliction and distaste for food. Oh, still not hungry? He would always wave her away like a fruit fly, without offering any tokens of appreciation. Her belief in water as a cure was strong and she force-fed Pauly water until his will had died out, and after that he consumed nothing at all. His bitterness worsened as he approached his skinniest and penultimate form. It was a week or so before he evaporated when he started acting all pissy and existential. His thighs and calves had lost so much strength that he hobbled around on a cane. He became a master of self-pity and invective: any time my little brother whined about the trunk of broccoli we encouraged him to eat or questioned the health benefits of cauliflower, Pauly would whack his cane against the wall of the adjacent room. The whacking would be accompanied by sharp *shut up*'s or a chastising groan.

Despite his clear outward distaste for food and even us, my mother kept on cooking for him. To an outsider she would look totally ridiculous, the woman cursed to cook til the end of time. It reminded me of that Greek myth where the guy was surrounded by food, but the fruit-bearing branches would always retreat before they could be grabbed meanwhile the water at his feet would drain before being sipped. I would call her out on herthe pointless labor and she would always give me a wave and say Oh, I'll just save it for later anyway. She once brought a bowl of oatmeal to Pauly only to have him slap it to the floor in response. He shook his head in disapproval. My mother motioned me over to clean the mess in silence. When he wasn't screaming at me, my mother, or my little brother he stared out the window of the room he shared with my mother. It looked out onto Berry's Bakery with its massive metal walls that loomed over all neighboring buildings. Berry's was a monopoly, there was not a single other structure in town that challenged its square footage, and nothing came close to eclipsing its height. The last day that I ever saw Pauly I had come home from school to find him looking lost among the purple evening before us and the dome-shaped top of Neri's; three silvery spires stuck out from the roof and they spewed dull-colored gas into the otherwise perfect sky. I called out to him. Pauly, do you want some water? He offered me more silence. You sure? You look a little pale, I said. He shook his head and didn't turn it toward me, his eyes stayed glued to the horizon. The next day I came home to find his spot empty. Mama, where's Pauly? She responded with an irritated shaking of her head. Jazmin, please take out the trash, you never do anything around the house. I rolled my eyes hard. I grabbed the garbage bag and made my way down the steps to the three metal containers that lined the front of the driveway. I lifted the lid and dropped the bag. I looked on to the evening horizon that was purple again and noticed about a block away a trash

receptacle with smoke leaking out of it. I made my way over, wondering if it was filled with cigarettes or some burning thing. I lifted the lid to an escaping plume of steam and two half-melted *Glad* bags spilling out Pauly's remains. Just a bunch of dust, and because I made the discovery that Pauly smelled even worse as a sack of ashes than he did as my mom's boyfriend, I closed it quickly.

The last day Franco worked in the store he faced his ultimate shame. While carrying a tray of chicken cutlets, his arms shook violently and the tray vibrated in his hands until it rattled on the floor beside his fallen body. His jeans had slipped from his waist and coiled around his ankles. I was surprised to see two belts alongside a tangled webbing of shoestrings that failed to do its job. His face was flush with embarrassment like his emaciation secret was exposed, as if the outline of his ribcage hadn't been pushing through his white tee's for the past few weeks. The other guys in the deli offered help getting up, but Franco was reluctant to accept it and refused to go home early. He stared at the spilled chicken with a look of determination. I've never seen so much want in his eyes. I'm fine, he announced to everyone, I got cutlets to make. He went on with the day as if everything was normal. At break time he came over to my register and asked for a sip of my water. Shocked, I offered him the bottle and he took a fat gulp. He lifted his head up for a dramatic swallow and his adam's apple pressed violently against the skin of his throat, threatening to break free. He winced and locked eyes with me. He offered me resolute silence for a few moments and I wondered if he could breathe, if his lungs had thinned and shriveled up into dust yet, if his stomach had become twisted and decayed so that even water would struggle through it. I imagined him upchucking and spraying the water into my face. Really needed that,

he said. Thanks Jaz. There was something scared in the tone of his voice. He was the only one that called me Jaz, our other coworkers never bothered to shorten Jazmín. After that day Franco totally disappeared, he never came back in for his shift. He didn't even bother to return the company tee or the employee discount card.

Male employees and customers became more rare as time went on. The market for food in general was basically being cut in half. *Whole Foods*, *Stop n Shop*, and all the big names in the food game suffered in the stocks. I even heard *Amazon* was cutting back on their food deliveries. Men all across America were starving themselves willingly or I guess unwillingly depending on how you looked at it. For some reason, turning into a cloud of hot steam was preferable to eating for the afflicted. At first the whole thing seemed weird to me, why complain so much? Especially when the thing you're complaining about is food, what's so bad about food, right? They didn't want food, but at the same time they were afraid of shriveling up and becoming dust. Our store survived because Angel was quick to respond. He catered to the forthcoming dominant population. He bought a corny neon sign for the store front. FEMININE PRODUCTS. It burned bright pink and he refused to turn it off even during the day, only letting it die when closing time came around. He stocked up on tampons, pads, basic toiletries and anything non food related. The male staff started to drop one by one. The kind man who worked at the in store bakery dropped fifteen pounds before admitting himself to the county hospital. The obese janitor relished in his condition until his back skin loosened and dragged behind him like an elastic cape. Chris and Javier were the last of the guys still working. Angel had relegated me to more and more janitorial work when there was no one else that wanted to clean. Taking out the trash I once overheard Javier and Chris's smoke break. "If you're already skinny as hell, can you tell

when the steam will start to come out?” Javier let the smoke languidly spill out of his mouth and re-inhaled the vapor back through his nose. “When I was sweeping out the front end yesterday I saw a business type man walk by with smoke coming out of his head. Like his brain short circuited and started sputtering out gas.” Chris laughed. “Poor fucker... I bet Franco doesn't have too much time left either. Angel should've fired him way before.” I wanted to go let the little shits know how stupid they sounded. How they probably couldn't even walk if they were that thin. Chris paused for a moment with a pensive look on his face, “what's the worst place to blow up into steam? You know, if you had to choose.” “Turning into steam anywhere sucks, but the best...the best is probably when you're fucking, right when you come. Imagine... now that would be unreal.” I felt anger flush through me, I curled my fingers and began to put all my gravity into a fist, but then Angel came out. His face was furious and he waved around a clipboard in his right hand, gesturing for them to get back inside and work for once. They crushed the cigarette and let the embers yawn and sizzle out on the pavement. After the two entered, Angel turned his gaze and latched his eyes on to me, visually analyzing me, trying to get at the inside of my head. He went back in without another word.

Javier and Chris had a bad gossiping habit. Javier thought he was all that because daddy owned the store. So he would walk away from his register leaving me to do all the little things he forgot or would fuck up anyway. Sometimes he would catch me cleaning out the restroom at the front end. The other day he saw me struggle with my squarish janitor cart cluttered up with bleach and sodden rolls of toilet paper. I could barely jam it in between my register and the restroom wall. He laughed and pointed a finger at me, murmuring insults into Chris's ear.

Looking at Chris I could see him laughing weakly, but he had a furtive look, his pupils rolled to the corners of his eyes in an attempt to avoid mine. When Angel wasn't in the store I looked through Franco's files, to see if he had a new employer, but no luck. During a lunch break I decided to corner Javier in the breakroom. His knees were knocked beneath a paper plate of chips and a pb&j. He ignored me at first, and said if I needed help cleaning I should ask Chris. I asked him for Franco's address which made his eyes widen then quickly they settled back to their typical mischievous look. I know you and Chris and him used to hang, I pleaded, do me a solid. He brushed the crumbs off his pants and onto the teal linoleum floor. He looked me firmly in the eyes. Franco is bad news Jazmin. You saw him didn't you? He was ready to burst. He probably already evaporated don't you think? I unleashed criticism after criticism and he grew antsy, tapping his foot, and he walked towards the door with his hand already on the handle. He let out a sigh. Listen, he's at 412 Oak across from the Pentecostal Church. He lives there and sometimes his little brother visits. Javier walked through the door and looked over his shoulder. You know I saw on CNN that there are red zones in San Diego and El Paso. The Southwest is fucked, and soon the Northeast will be too. You should be careful, move to Montreal or something. Or fuck it, who knows, he shrugged, maybe you'll go down as the first girl in history to get herself evaporated.

Franco lived in an intricate and previously densely populated apartment complex on Oak, with a faded brick facade and telephone wires dripping with shoes twirling from knotted laces. I knocked on his door. Franco? I knocked three more times. I waited a few moments, playing with my car keys and the black lanyard attached to it. After a few moments of silence and pacing up and down the hallway, I slammed my fist on the door repeatedly. I kept on doing so until I

grabbed the door handle and surprisingly found it open. I was shocked by what I saw. It was Franco laid out on a rusted bench press. Franco had headphones covering his ears and sweat trickled on his face. He had five pound dumbbells in each hand and he was hoisting them in the air above his chest, his arms extending about half of their full range of motion. He bared his teeth like an animal competing for dominance. He managed to push them all the way upwards then dropped them to the floor. His triceps bustled with stress and glimmered. Jazmin? He scrambled to get up and winced as he maneuvered to an up-right position. He gestured me over and I took a seat at his dining table that occupied almost the entire kitchen. I stared intensely at him. My eyes scanned his; I searched through his dark pupils and moved across the pink film lining his eyes.

How long? I asked.

How long do you think?

He paused and took a long stare out the room's only window, his fingers stretched and retracted like they were frostbitten and he was gauging how much feeling remained.

I've been doing a lot of reading, he said.

I read on some forum that some dying guy in Cincinnati lifted weights everyday and actually gained a few pounds.

He motioned me toward the kitchen and asked if I was hungry. I looked at him in the eyes again and felt my stomach absentmindedly being rubbed by my right hand. I told him to rest and suggested a shower as I picked apart at his kitchen; the only things I could find were old boxes of rigatoni and I was lucky enough to find rosemary and a plastic container of parmesan to decorate the pasta with. He stepped out of the shower and his pecs, defined mostly by lack of, still shone handsomely. He wore only a ruffled grey towel wrapped around his waist. I would check those

expiration dates, he said. I bought those back when I was supple and shapely. He gave a weak smile. I could feel an intent to tease in his voice, like the old Franco was buried beneath layers, stuck all the way at the bottom of him. I paused, afraid it was some kind of disrespectful gesture to eat in front of him. I moved the blue ceramic bowl to the side like it was already finished. He waved me over to his table still all vulnerable with his nude body relaxing in the cool air. His skin seemed less taut, a little fuller. Were dumbbells the answer all along? My mother won't let me see my little brother, he said. He ran his fingers along his ribs pensively. It's not *that* bad...is it? I started coming over every day after that. Sometimes I would even get him to drink water. I'd watch his gulps struggle their way down his throat. I imagined them hurting like hell. Drinking water feels more like sand nowadays, he said. To prevent himself from puking he'd shut his eyes as he drank. He liked to focus on those dark splotches you see after looking at lights or the sun. The negative impressions that pop up when you close your eyes real tight. I drank water with him sometimes and participated in the closed eyes ritual. They pull themselves apart then swirl into one another and sometimes I think the after-images are like dark stars. My eyelids give birth to constellations of splotches that flicker between darkness and non-existence. Once I opened my eyes to see him on the floor, water dripped down his lips and a small pool of water-spit formed at his feet. I grabbed him and let his body lean on my left side. Without much effort I got him to sit on his bedside, his arm was still slung over my shoulder and mine was pressed against the small of his back. He gave a weak smile and said quietly, if I could have one last fuck... I stared intently at his glossy eyes and noticed his chest rising and lowering, either out of breath or nervous. I thought of speaking, but instead I quickly pushed my lips against his. My upper lip slipped over and under his. I grabbed his hand and let it slide beneath my shirt, my breasts filled

his palms and overflowed. Surprised that he even could, he climbed on top of me and explored my thighs. As he grabbed hold of my hips my lower body filled with want. He entered me briefly and panted with effort. I could see myself through the reflection in his eyes. Another me, some other Jazmin fucking an afflicted person on his future death bed. I ran my hands along his ribs. I felt the urge to dig my fingers between the cracks. I wanted to grab on and rip them open as if they were doors hinged to his body, let the steam escape and finally see the hidden thing that was killing him from the inside.

The epidemic peaked a month after me and Franco fucked. His condition had worsened; he started to steam. One day while cuddling in bed, his body was surrounded by mine, he almost always chose to be little spoon, my hands ran down his spine. My eyes were closed, and his protruding spine created a rolling pattern. The sentence of his spine moved iambically, pushing my hand up into the air and bringing it back down for another accent. We hadn't fucked any more after the first time. He struggled to get hard and the lifting routine had also ceased. I turned him over for a kiss, but Franco coughed violently. He stood and put his hand to the drywall. With each cough a small wisp of steam, as if he was vaping or smoking, escaped from his mouth. He gave me a look, a serious stare.

Fucking hell, he murmured, fucking hell.

I'll get you through this, I cried, please.

I began to walk toward him and he dismissed me.

I need water... I need help.

And I'm right here I'll-

I need to be alone, he said sharply.

I offered more protest, more care than he wanted.

You don't get it Jazmin. Your body isn't betraying you. You don't get what it means to be afflicted. What it's like to lose your body.

I felt my chest cringing with frustration and denial. Frank had been so positive, until now, so healthy until now, so willing, he wasn't like Pauly. There's no way Frank could go and evaporate, I thought, not like the multitude of weak minded guys that already sizzled away. I felt nausea creep through my spine and a chill shot throughout my body. I wanted to upchuck the lunch I had earlier, a homemade bacon egg and cheese created turmoil in my gut. He exhaled a smaller less dense cloud of smoke and showed me the door. I never went back to his place after that. Some people started saying that the worst of it was birthed in Mexico and my mother watched *Telemundo* religiously. News reporters and journalists explored hospitals to find absent beds and nurses fanning fuming duvet covers. Some of the emaciated formed cults and roamed the streets, tearing down corporate and family owned store fronts alike. Middle America had fallen. *Milaukeans for Life*, the worst of the apocalyptic groups, were predicated upon the revival of male life, camaraderie, spirit, but they were mindless roamers who tore apart the countryside. PC Middle, my little brother's school, had shut down, and Angel's store too would eventually close. The disease became more indiscriminate, more willing to kill any guy off. Chris lied to himself for a bit, carrying on as if his new, more pronounced jaw line wasn't a red flag. Bye bye baby face! He would yell. I told him to go to Frank. He's lifting weights, I said, he's doing okay. The moron ignored it all. He left and began to work at Berry's. I stopped Angel in the produce aisle one day soon after.

Why did you let Chris run off?

He scratched dandruff off his hair and kept his eyes on the inventory clipboard.

Back to work, Jazmin.

So if Javier got sick you'd ship him off to Berry's too?

He paused, looked at me with disbelief.

Maybe you should think about Berry's too.

He asked for my name tag, two weeks notice, but I just told him to fuck off and evaporate. As I walked out the store in a pitifully intense fashion, Javier stood in place with a mop in his right hand, his face was sad, like he'd actually miss me. I found out that Berry's would hire anyone back then, the horribly skinny, the steaming, all were welcome. I walked into Berry's asking for Chris and all I got were a bunch of no's and not here's. I sat on the curb feeling defeated and lost. I needed a way in, I knew Cris was there, and Javier, the little punk, was my answer.

Of all the men in the world, how do you always manage to stay in one piece?

He wore the employee t-shirt, name-tag still hooked on, tan pleated chinos, and ankle high hiking boots. His dark black hair was greasy and dangled to his shoulders. If he kept his mouth shut, some poor girl could mistakenly think of him as pretty. He asked me to follow him, we moved through an alleyway adjacent to the building and made our way to a back door with the EMPLOYEES ONLY sign hanging above it. He sifted through the keys on his carabiner and jammed one into the door, opening it. I shot him a suspicious look.

Cris got a copy of his keys when he started working here, he explained, he only trusted me with them...this place...it's fucked. We made our way through meandering halls and dull corridors until we found a complex webbing of conveyor belts moving at high speeds. A bowl

structure deposited molds of dough that poured slowly, like cement. The place was massive, white walled like an old hospital, and the main production lobby was the most terrifying. Not a single woman could be found: I saw all sorts of men. Some looked jaundiced, eyes so sunken that they could sink totally at any moment, some still moderately healthy, decently weighted, and some were actually steaming. Javier walked up to one of the steaming men, yelled and waved his arms, but the man kept his dead-eyed stare on the conveyor belt. His spidery hands played with the amorphous dough, he gave it shape, a sphere, and did so repeatedly. He was an elderly white man, in a blue gingham button up, and his combover had lost most of its hair, revealing his shiny scalp. Smoke slowly slipped out of his right ear, but he kept on working with his dough.

Hey, you're gonna die any second man, Javier said.

He gave us silence. The smoke from his ear rose to the ceiling and funneled into a ventilation system.

You're gonna die old man, Javier said pointlessly. You're gonna die.

We worked our way through the line, another man, skinny, but not horribly so, wearing a beautiful green satin shirt, and tinted sunglasses. He looked like he worked at a car dealership. He shot us a glance as we walked on by, but was disinterested and turned around quickly. On one end of the room I noticed something, a Berry's employee, a woman, escorted a shaking man into an alcove. She had a sharp face, piercing eyes, and a diligent posture; she stood tall as if she was trying to see above a crowd of people at a concert. The shaking man had smoke leaking out of his nostrils. He was surely about to evaporate. I could tell by the emptiness of his eyes.

Hey! I yelled, excuse me, miss?

She didn't heed my question as she disappeared through into another room. Javier looked at me with a suspicious look. We followed her into the room and I could feel my heart sinking with disbelief. The room was a sauna of steaming men. Multiple benches lined each side of the corridor, but there were no doorways to other rooms. It was like a walk-in-closet. The Berry's worker, her name tag said Janet, sat the man down on a bench right next to another steaming man. These men were far more afflicted than the men still out on the assembly line. Without any sort of clothing on them, I found it much harder to differentiate between them. The multitude of skin and steam, the protruding bones were unbearable to stare at and Javier put his hand to the wall and clutched his chest. I forced myself to sift through each afflicted figure to see nothing more than the templates of a male body, their external parts were disintegrated, the more unique chunks of flesh that had once clinged to bones had left; they had been reduced to their internal parts. Some spaces were filled by the remains of the departed, steaming bone dust. The lady turned around, her eyes were a beautiful yellow-green. Her voice was smooth and placaiting.

Please exit the sauna room, only the afflicted can stay here.

Anger was absent from her voice, she was just doing her job. Javier and I stepped out.

I'm looking for two men. Franco and Chris, Chris just started working here the other day and Franco too he-

You should leave miss, she said. This time it felt more frustrating to hear no anger in her voice.

She turned towards Javier.

Feel free to stay if you'd like. We really take care of all our workers, dying or not.

Javier scratched his head nervously and bit his thumb. He told her to hold on for a moment and dragged me to the side.

I'll do you a solid. I'm still going to look for Chris, and if I see Franco I'll let you know. I'll text you when I get out. We can meet at Angel's or your place afterward.

I was hesitant to lend him all my trust.

Okay, I said, see you soon then.

I left him with a hug and I left Berry's with my hands balled into fists and I could feel the turmoil welling in my eyes. I walked up the huge hill on Oak Street and cut my way through the post road in order to get to my house. I looked onto the horizon at Berry's and watched the film of smog slowly layering itself in the atmosphere. I entered my house with a feeling of abandon, but I carried it on and opened the front door. I stood still in the kitchen before my mother and little brother.

Franco's dead, I told them.

Oh sweetie, I'm so sorry, my mother said.

My little brother stayed silent. He poked at a letter soup spelling out gibberish in the bowl. It's okay, I told her, we weren't all that close, just a coworker.

More silence ensued.

Actually I'm thinking about working at Berry's, they hire loads of people.

She nodded in approval and I looked out the window to see our driveway, lined with the silver trash cans. All of our neighbors also had their trash sitting out front, waiting for a pickup that would never happen. Most of the garbage men had evaporated by that point. I imagined Pauly's remains in each of them, spewing out steam, melting through the Glad or Kirkland brand trash

bags they would be placed in, and then melting the green or silver plastic or metal of the receptacle itself. Leaving leaking pools of dust on our pavements.

“BIRTHDAY HIT” CONTINUED...

It’s your birthday and you have been thinking it over. Today is a big day for you. Fourteen years and still no kill to your name. You are lucky. You think about Pedro and how he likes to yell at you. You have so many years, but you still act like a baby. Pedro looks like a bronze statue in the doorway of your home. His leather boots are caked with mud and he leaves ugly footprints all over the white wooden floor. To the left of the doorway there is a picture of yourself back when you were just a kid. Your little baby hands grabbed onto a single finger of your mother’s sickly and spidery hands. She was sweet and she loved you even though you stole *buñuelos* from the bakery in Pereria and spent so much time with Pedro. His hair is too long and his eyes are filled with a desire that could never be satisfied. He’s a *soldado*, a soldier. He’s a *sicario*. He’s the one who put you in contact with our *Querido*, our benefactor. When your mother passed away your abuelita had to come and take her place. Abuelita knows you best. In her heart you could never be a *soldado*; your hair was short and well-kept and always parted down the middle, you managed to maintain white teeth, your smile so toothy and innocent, she wouldn’t want to imagine them any other way. Your adult self– would your teeth mature? The crooked ones would they align themselves, cut the slack and straighten out? You look back to Pedro, the muscles on his arms are toned and his voice has a booming sound and refuses to squeak like yours occasionally does. You are wrapped up in your favorite blanket while drinking a cup of coffee. You imagine Pedro thinking to himself, you are no *soldado*. Behind him you see two little boys playing in the street, one riding on the other’s back. The boy on the ground drops the piggy-backer in a swift motion. He starts giving him *cosquillas*. He squirms about, his smile

massive, and his cheeks rise up into squinting eyes. His eyes look like honey in the sun's dying light. They are laughing and their joy is almost palpable, they're too loud you thought. You decided to yourself that they would never be soldados like you or like Pedro. Pedro stares down at you with an impatient face. Pedro calls you by your nickname. Lee, he says, let's get a move on to *La Cresta*. There is work to do. Soldado work. *La Cresta* is the most dismal barrio you can imagine in all of Pereira. You think of the long walk that awaits, you dread the path uphill to the mountain ridge where the slum intensifies. Before you exit your home you look at your father, asleep on the couch. One hand rests on his chest and the other extends outward and hangs off the bed. He's a stretched out man. Like someone found him as a boy and grabbed a fistfull of hair and yanked him toward the sky and he stayed that way. You think he is gasping for air. His breaths are shallow; his snoring is stuck in an infinite loop. His cheeks are rosy, curvy, and soft. You try to remember if his footsteps are louder than Pedro's. *Clop clop*. You think of him as too skinny. You wish he was meatier, filled with more fat, more warmth. *Clop clop clop*. You remember the boys outside. You stand up and dust off your grubby trousers.

Pedro motions you to step out, to begin the walk uphill, the steepest slope in the valley. Before you leave your home you look over your shoulder. It's your abuelita with her silver hair tied tightly into a bun. Not a single loose strand to be found. Her eyes look so gentle. Her wrinkles are never ending and you love to study them. It's so different from your perfect skin. The leathery skin on her forehead creases into itself, creating a whorl of wrinkles. Her eyebrows are permanently furrowed as she reads her *Santa Biblia*. There's a golden string that she uses as a bookmark. It's attached to the top of the spine and hangs between the two pages. It reminds you

of your father's one gold tooth. You walk over to the front door and look at your abuelita in the eyes.

Lee, no me esperes, you say.

You and your abuelita share a lot of things. You share the same home. You share the same scarf for when it gets cold at night. You share a nickname. 'Lee'. And most importantly you're both over thinkers. You two think way too much and it's not a good thing. You told her not to wait because you know she has a bad habit. A habit of waiting for you to return. When you stay out late at night, usually helping Pedro out with the little menial jobs that our Querido gives him, the leftover thievery jobs no one else wants, stealing cigarettes or swiping valuables from an electronics store in town, your abuelita would wait for you. It would be deep into the night, pitch black out. You would preemptively take your shoes off, open the door slowly to avoid a racket, and she would be there. Sitting in her rocking chair, still reading her Santa Biblia. Her voice could make your heart sink to your stomach. *¿Mijo, y a estas horas...qué son estas horas?* One day the streets will no longer call to you, she once said to you. God will call you, she said, and he will say your name, and you will answer.

Her voice was languid, steady, and rhythmic. Like mercury dripping into a puddle, the little waves undulating without falter. Your stomach would churn and you hated to admit anything to her. It's not like anything was ever your fault anyway. The things you do are not even that bad. It's just stealing. She doesn't get it. Who would a sicario confess to? Your brain goes in circles as it always does.

Your abuelita has always been there for you. She still lets you call her 'Lee'. When you were a baby you couldn't pronounce 'Abuelita'. Your little mouth faltered at the *bue*.

Ah–bwuh–lee–ttah. One day you flat out called her *Lee* and it stuck. It was easier to just say ‘Lee’. It rolled off the tongue real nice. It stuck with your lazy father, your god-fearing abuelita allowed it, and you’re sure your mother would’ve thought it funny if she were still alive. Your whole barrio even joined in on the joke. Your friends thought it was funny that you called her ‘Lee’. A ridiculous name. One day when Pedro was over at your place he laughed when he heard the name. He teased you lightheartedly and told the rest of the *gallada*. All your boys started calling you ‘Lee’. The kids in your grade school joined in too. ¡*Mira, es el bobo Lee! ¡Qué onda Lee!* It’s like your original name was too bland, “Lee” made you more memorable. And you secretly loved the attention, you were a stand-out kid, you were a star by nature. You saw yourself in a new light. You were a soldado. You could be a sicario, making pesos like Pedro one day. You were Lee.

The sunlight begins to retreat from the outskirts of your barrio. Beneath the setting sun the surrounding pueblo turns into abstract splotches of orange and brown. The corrugated tin roofs of your barrio burn bright, the metal shine hurting your eyes. Look forward. Walk forward. As time goes on the light burns less bright and you start feeling cold. You reach the hillside summit where your pueblo starts merging with La Cresta. As you descend you see sheets of tarpaulin dressing make-shift shacks boarded up with soggy cardboard, and stacks of bricks scattered about. You see a kid around Pedro’s height smoking *basuco* with a metal pipe. His brown face glowing with sweat and you think of him as pretty handsome. You look into a dirt splotched mirror that lay against a cardboard shack. You are a soldado. A soldado with a skinny body, but broad shoulders and you have the hair of a Spaniard. You see your father’s face in the mirror and you feel the Colt in your jeans. It’s tucked into your waistband and the cold nose

presses against your thigh. You see an older looking man staring you down from the inside of his sloppy brick home. You imagine pointing your pistol at him. *Puto, what are you looking at.* Or even better, *Puto, get on your knees.* You and Pedro keep on walking until you make it to a part of La Cresta you've never been to. The sun is totally set now. The only lights you see come from gas lamps. You are a soldado. You keep your hand on your Colt. This guy is going to pay, Pedro says. You ask him what his crimes are. For being a cheap son of a bitch, says Pedro. Our Querido says he owes 100,000 pesos.

You walk up to a cardboard shack that sits right before a gaping ditch. The cardboard is old and ratty. You think to yourself that this must be the worst home in all of La Cresta. This must be the most miserable man in all of Pereira, to live in such a dreary home and to be on bad terms with our Querido. Our Querido remains a mystery to you. Querido is his nickname. You've heard in your barrio that his real name is Joaquín, some say it's Pancho, others say it's Tito. You've even heard that he's actually a Mexican drug lord who crossed into Colombia illegally to expand his narco empire. You don't really care about his name, you know it's all bullshit. It's funny because Querido means loved one or beloved. He was given the nickname Querido because he grew up without a father or a mother. They were murdered by guerreros. His father was dragged into some alleyway in Medellin and got thirty-eight machetazos. They say the father's body was cut into segments: hands, feet, torso, thighs, calves, and head all neatly severed like the person who did it thought they could just as easily be put back together again. You don't like to think about it. He didn't get much love growing up, and apparently that's why he spreads so much love around these days. Two or three hits a month. Still, he is notorious for treating his sicarios very well. 50,000 pesos for a hit. At least that's what Pedro once told you.

And he'll help take care of my mother, Pedro said. I could buy her a nice little place in Cartagena, on the shore so she can always look out to the horizon. I don't like looking at these mountains that surround us all the time, he said. Pereira is like a buried city, the cliffs looming over us. When things aren't so great you can't help but feel that the city sinks just a bit more every second. I feel so surrounded Lee, so suffocated. I wanna swim into the Atlantic one day. You nodded in agreement, you shared his feelings, but you wanted more than just a swim, you wanted it all. You wanted to dive right in, but you didn't know if you were gutsy enough.

Now you are fourteen and you've started helping Pedro, but only the little stuff so far. Today's your first hit. The biggest day of your life yet. You are so grateful for it. If you ever get the chance to meet our Querido, you'll know exactly what to say to him. *Thank you so much sir. Thank you for this incredible opportunity, I will not squander it, this I promise.* Your palms are sweating and you swallow all the spit accumulating in your mouth. Keep walking forward. You are a soldado. The door is a dirty old blue tarp. Pedro walks towards the house and he has to duck his head a bit since it's such a little shack. As Pedro pulls the tarp back and you see a man sitting on a dirt floor. He is scraping through a package of butter with his fingers. His mouth is smeared yellow and he looks up to you with bug like eyes. You better get on the floor puto, you hear the words coming from Pedro's mouth and you wish they had come from yours. You are the soldado. You want to pull out your pistol, but you can't. Your mouth is shut tight, unable to produce any intimidating words. You hope your silence suggests some sort of power. You're just a child. A child with a gun, not a sicario, says the man. For a few moments, silence lingers in the air. You and Pedro look at each other with an intensity you have never shared before. You both nod your heads in agreement. Then Pedro flips his .38 around and bashes the man's skull in with

the butt of his pistol. I don't wanna hear it! Again he hits him. Pedro is panting now. Pedro yells, you are *mierda, mierda* no one cares about! You look into Pedro's eyes, they are feral and they suggest that he wants to run, run all the way out of La Cresta if he can. Pedro stares you down and the silence weighs down the room. Should I kill him? You don't know if Pedro has ever killed anyone, and you hope he has some idea of what he's doing. Have you ever... killed anyone, you're shocked to hear the words escape from your mouth, the only words you've provided up until this point. The man spits on Pedro's shoes. Bobo, he yells, *niño bobo!* and he begins to chuckle but Pedro's boot flies right into his teeth. Pedro grunts, then gives you a frustrated look. Today's your big day hermano... you do it. He grabs his gun by the nose and hands it over.

You remember the day you truly thought you and Pedro became inseparable. It was only two years ago, you were twelve and Pedro was just sixteen. You were downtown in the center of Pereira. You were outside a cafe talking to a waiter while Pedro stole some empanadas. The waiter was framed like your father you thought. A lanky guy with chocolatey skin and a dark goatee. You chatted him up for a while. You even told him your name was Lee, you were confident you wouldn't get caught. You thought that your questions were actually pretty funny too. Do you ever hit your head on the doorway? Do you have to bend down to kiss your girlfriend? Pedro snuck behind the counter stuffing a backpack with treats that every kid loves. You ran out of things to say, but you realized thinking is dangerous so you kept on talking. You should meet my mother, the words came out of your mouth like they were memorized beforehand, sometimes people think she's my sister she's so young. She has tetas like this: you described exaggerated ovals in the air with your fingers. My father is always in bed or at the

bars. Pedro made the mistake of knocking over a tray of flan. The crashing metal signaled you to run back for the barrio. You turned away from the man, but he grabbed you by the collar and dragged you like a ragdoll back into the shop. Pedro just started throwing anything he could grab. You saw flying flan, buñuelos, the tray on the floor, a slew of utensils all up in the air. The floor was covered in silvery forks, knives, and spoons. Pedro started bellowing curses with a red face. The two faced off with their eyes, the counter still between them, you couldn't tell who had the stronger gaze. You decided that it was Pedro, he had a contemptuous smile, like he knew he could get out of this one alright. You couldn't tell if it was all a front coming from Pedro. The adrenaline was making him act out of character. He should've been scared shitless. He had never killed a man, he was no soldado, or at least definitely wasn't one back in those days. His forehead was covered in sweat, the fluorescent light made it shine. The store owner threw his hands across the counter taking Pedro by surprise. His hands curled around Pedro's neck. You worried he wasn't getting any air in his lungs. He's just a kid you thought, this isn't his fault he's just a kid who made a small mistake. This is the last time you'll do something mischievous. The veins of Pedro's neck were straining and you were impressed, they looked like rivers flowing up into his mouth. Pedro tried to speak but he couldn't. Say something. Stop just standing there, do something. Pedro's hand frantically foraged the counter beside him. He gripped a knife. He jammed it right into the waiter's bicep. The waiter yelped and got down on his knees, his hand covered the wound. Red ran through his fingers and dripped to the floor, you wanted to go back to your abuela's. Pedro collected himself on the other side. He was crying, tears mixed in with the sweat, and he grabbed the bag of goods along with the knife. He walked over to you and the owner looking like a ferocious baby. Hold him, he commanded you. You obliged even though

you felt like you wanted to be in bed and you felt like listening to Pedro didn't always work. The man moaned. It hurts you hijo de puto, it hurts, it hurts. You found his complaining annoying, the moaning in the air pierced your ears, all you wanted was silence. He was positioned on the floor, his body curled up into a ball. Shut up and listen, your voice sounded more coarse than usual. You won't get hurt if you listen. You approached him from behind. You put him into a full nelson, your hands clasping behind his nape, his arms were thrown up into the air and he moaned. The blood trickled onto your shirt. Relax, it's simple, relax. You were so beyond terrified that you couldn't tell if you were saying these things, if Pedro was saying them, or if they were just passing thoughts. Pedro looked down at you, his eyes looked like infinite blackness. He pointed the blade downward and lifted his arm to the air. Hold still, he said shakily, don't you dare move or I might kill you. I really might kill you. He counted down. Tres...dos...uno...

Pedro's right arm was still hoisted in the air, shaking and frozen in time. He looked into the eyes of the waiter and then to you, you felt your spirits intertangling. C'mon primo! Now or never. I want to go home, my abuela is waiting for me. You were surprised to hear your voice sound so convincing. Pedro exhaled. Bueno, he said. He let go of the knife, letting it clatter to the floor. Pedro picked up a silver platter and brushed the crumbs off. With both hands, swinging as if it was a baseball bat, he slammed the tray into the waiter's face. You threw the waiter to the floor and Pedro shook out his hands as if they were filled with electricity. You and Pedro scurried out of there as fast as you guys could. The walk home was filled with silence and a reddish sunset. Pedro shoved a *pan de boño* down his mouth and sniffled almost the whole way. At your door you think about holding him in your arms. You looked down at his hands. Empty,

filthy, and bloodied. Your hands clasped together and you imagined him as a grownup. Tall, more filled out in the chest, a real soldado. Confident and not afraid of himself. Not like how you're afraid of yourself. You think far too much.

The Pedro from back then isn't like the one now. Right now you don't know who the current Pedro is. Your heart beats quickly and sweat beads on your forehead. The man looks at you with pleading eyes. He doesn't want to die here, you don't need to do this he suggests with his wide-eyed expression. You cock the revolver and aim it at his forehead. You don't need to do this. You are a soldado. Look at him in the eyes. Breathe. You look over at Pedro. His eyes shining bright, you can't tell if it's excitement or desperation. You expected more fear, but it's Pedro, why would you expect fear? He's capable of anything. He tries to silence the flailing man who is still stuck beneath his boot. The man is hammering at Pedro's calves with a balled fist, to no avail. Pedro's teeth are perfect you think. Tooth after tooth after tooth... all lined up like crystal dominos. They're colored orange by the gas lamps, but for a moment you thought the light came from the sun. You think about the rising sun, it's probably so late into the night. The man yells about inviting death to his door. Fear only affects those that let it, he says. He surrenders completely and stretches his arms out into a 'T' position. You wonder about time and how time passes. You imagine your abuelita kneeling over a wooden stool in the living room. Her naked knees, worn out and callused from so much kneeling. You have to pull the trigger soon. If it gets too late she'll get upset. You think about her warming arepas on the stone stove. The queso melting and rolling off the edges of the corn cake. You feel cool spit pooling in your mouth. The beating of your heart must be propelling saliva up your throat somehow. *Pa*. If you don't do it, I will, Pedro says. He releases the man from beneath his boot and starts walking

towards you. Pedro extends his hand towards your pistol. He looks so humongous in this gloomy home. A strong gust of wind flies into the shack. Tin cans and metal scraps roll and make a racket. The blue tarp flies open letting in silvery moonlight. The noise frightens you, the man on the floor lets out a horrible wail, Pedro bellows your name, the pistol you hold feels so very cold, and you feel your heart ready to jump out your chest. Bueno. You decide you are not scared so you forget to think and you close your eyes to point the pistol. *Pa*. You think it's over. You feel the pressure of the trigger lessening against your finger and let out a single, determined shout.

THE NIGHT FACE UP

And they went out during certain seasons to hunt enemies;
they called it the Flower Wars.

Halfway across the hotel lobby he thought that it was getting late, so he hurried to wheel his motorcycle out of the spot that the doorman had allowed him to park in. In the jewelry store on the corner he saw that it was ten before nine. He had plenty of time to get to where he needed. The sunlight was shining through the tall downtown buildings and he— going along thinking to himself, he didn't have a name— he got on the machine, relishing the ride. The motorcycle purred between his legs, and the fresh breeze rippled through his trousers.

He passed by the government buildings, the rose colored and the white one, and the series of stores with bright glass displays along Central street. Now he was entering the most pleasant part of the ride, the heart of the journey: a long street lined with trees, with almost no traffic and spacious villas whose gardens reached up to the sidewalks, barely sectioned off by low hedges. Maybe a little distracted, he was moving along the right lane as he should, he allowed himself to be carried away by the smoothness, the slight tension of the day that had just begun. Maybe that moment of carelessness kept him from being able to prevent the accident. When he saw the woman stepping out from the street corner, despite the green traffic light, it was already too late. He hit the brakes with both hands and feet. He skidded off to the left and heard the woman scream and lost his vision upon impact, as if he had suddenly fallen asleep.

He awoke abruptly to four or five young men dragging his body out from beneath the motorcycle. His mouth tasted of salt and blood, his knee ached, and as they lifted him he

screamed because his right arm couldn't handle the pressure. Voices that didn't seem to match the faces hovering above him offered jokes and words of encouragement. His only relief was hearing that he had the right of way when he crossed the intersection. He asked about the woman while he fought back the nausea that crept up his throat. As they carried him face-up toward the pharmacy, he found out that the woman, the culprit of the accident, managed to stay unscathed except for a few scratches on her legs. "*You* barely hit her, but the crash made the motorcycle flip on its side." Opinions, memories, slowly, take him on his back, there we go, someone with a lab coat was giving him a drink that relieved him in the darkness of the neighborhood pharmacy.

The police ambulance arrived five minutes later and they lifted him onto a stretcher where he got comfortable. With total clarity, knowing he was suffering from the effects of the shock, he gave the policeman his name and address. His arm barely hurt, blood was dripping down his whole face from a cut in his eyebrow. He licked his lips once or twice to taste it. He was feeling good, it was an accident, just some bad luck, but a few weeks of rest was all he needed. The security guard told him that the motorcycle didn't seem too beat up. Naturally, he said, since she was the one on top. The two of them laughed and the guard shook his hand when they got to the hospital where he wished him good luck. His nausea was slowly returning, little by little, as they rolled him in on a stretcher until they reached an area in the back, passing by trees filled with birds, and he closed his eyes wishing he was asleep or sedated. But they kept him for a long time in a room that reeked of hospital, filling out a report, and stripping his clothes off, replacing them with a stiff grayish shirt. They moved his arm carefully, without causing him any pain. The nurses were joking around the whole time, and if it weren't for the stomach contractions he would've felt really great, maybe even happy.

They took him to the X-Ray room where he waited for twenty minutes, and then he was taken to the operating room with the warm X-ray plate resting on his chest—the plate reminded him of a black tombstone— Someone in white, tall and thin, approached him and studied the X-ray. He could feel a woman's hands adjusting his head and could feel himself being moved from one stretcher to another. The man in white approached him again, smiling this time, with some shining thing in his right hand. He patted his cheek and gestured toward someone standing in the back.

As a dream, it was strange considering it was filled with smells, and he never dreamt of smells. First he recognized the stench of swamp, which came from the salt marshes off to the left of the causeways, the same swamp that was filled with pitfalls and quagmires. Anyone who dared entered never returned. But the swamp smell ceased, and gave way to a layered and dark fragrance; like the night in which he ran fleeing from the Aztecs. And it was all so natural, he had to escape the Aztecs who were hunting for men, and his only chance at survival was to hide deep within the jungle, careful not to stray from the path that only they, the Motecas, knew.

The thing that tortured him the most was the smell, as if even in the absolute acceptance of the dream something was revealed that was not normal for him, something that, until then, hadn't played a part in this game.

—It smells like war— he thought as he instinctively grabbed the stone dagger tucked away in his sash of woven wool. An abrupt sound made him crouch down and stay totally still except for his trembling. Feeling afraid wasn't something strange for him, his dreams were filled with fear. He waited beneath the cover of shrubbery and the dark starless sky. In the distance, probably on the other side of the huge lake, they must be setting up bivouacs, a reddish blaze lit

up the sky there. He didn't hear the sound again. It had been like a branch cracking. Maybe it was an animal escaping from the smell of war like him. He stood up slowly, taking a whiff of air. He couldn't hear anything, but his fear persisted like the scent, the sickly-sweet scent of the flower wars. He had to move on to make it to the heart of the jungle while avoiding all the bogs. He blindly crouched down at every moment to feel out the solid parts of the causeway, he moved forward a few steps. He would've liked to run, but he could feel the quagmires beside him. In the darkness of the causeway, he searched for the right course. He got a mouthful of the most horrible stench, the stench he was fearing, and jumped up, desperate to move forward.

—You're gonna fall off the bed— said the patient on the adjacent bed.—Don't move around so much, buddy.

He opened his eyes and it was afternoon; he could see the sun setting through the huge windows of the spacious room. He was trying to smile at his neighbor while he detached himself almost physically from the last image of his nightmare. His arm was in a cast, elevated by a pulley. He felt thirsty, like he had been running for kilometers, but they didn't offer him much water, just a mouthful, just enough to wet his lips. His fever was slowly overcoming him and he could've easily fallen asleep again, but he enjoyed staying awake. His eyes were half-closed as he listened to the chatting patients around him, and every once in a while he would respond to one of their questions. A little white cart was rolled up beside his bed, a blonde nurse rubbed the back of his thigh with alcohol and stuck him with a thick needle and a tube connected it to a hanging container of opaline liquid. A young doctor came over and fitted his good arm with a metal and leather device to check something. The night began to roll in and the fever started to drag him down slowly, his mind reached a state where all things had some sort of relief, like

looking at things through opera glasses, they were real and sweet and at the same time slightly revolting— like living in a boring movie and thinking to yourself that real life is still worse, and then deciding to stay.

An incredible bowl of golden soup was brought out and it smelled of leeks, celery, and parsley. A small slice of bread, that looked more precious than a whole banquet, was crumbled into the broth bit by bit. His arm didn't hurt whatsoever and only his eyebrow, where they had stitched the wound back together, would squeak with little jolts of pain. When the huge windows turned to a shade of dark blue, he thought it would be easy to fall asleep. He was a little uncomfortable lying on his back, but as he licked his dry hot lips he could taste the soup and he let out a sigh of relief, letting go.

At first there was confusion, as if, for an instant, he was a magnet attracting sensations that were mixed and muddled. He understood that he was running in total darkness, but the sky above him, the one that was covered by tree tops, wasn't as dark as his surroundings. "The causeway...he thought to himself...I've left the causeway." His feet were buried in a bedding of leaves and mud, and now he couldn't even take a step without getting lashed on his arms and legs by bush branches. Gasping for air, knowing he was cornered despite the silence and the darkness, he crouched down to listen. Maybe the causeway was nearby, he would see it again with the first light of day. In the darkness nothing could help him find it. Without thinking, the hand that was tightened around the handle of his dagger rose up to his neck, like a scorpion rising slowly from a swamp, to where a protective amulet dangled around his neck. He moved his lips, barely, and muttered a prayer for maize, the one that always brought fortunate moons, and he pleaded to the high Goddess, the bringer of prosperity for the Moteca people. But at the

same time he could feel his ankles slowly sinking into the mud...waiting in the darkness of the thicket was becoming unbearable. The flower war had started with the full moon, and three days and three nights had already passed. If he tried to find refuge in the depths of the jungle and abandoned the causeway within the swamp, maybe the warriors wouldn't follow his tracks. He thought of all those who were probably already taken prisoners, although the quantity didn't matter, what mattered was this sacred time. The hunt would go on until the priests gave the signal of retreat. Everything had its number and ending, and he inhabited sacred time, on the other side from the hunters.

He heard shouting and he jumped up, dagger in hand, and, as if the horizon was burning, he saw torches moving along through the foliage. They were close.

The smell of war was unbearable, and when the first enemy grabbed him around the neck he swore he felt pleasure as he buried the stone blade right into the other's chest. The lights began to surround him along with delightful cries of war. He lashed out at the air of him once or twice before he was lassoed in from the behind.

"It's the fever" came the voice on the bed next to him. It happened to me too when they operated on my duodenum. Drink some water and you'll sleep fine, you'll see."

Compared to the night he was coming from, even the shadow of the hospital room would seem warm and enticing. A violet lamp shone from the back of the room and was like a protective eye. He heard coughing, heavy breathing, sometimes conversations being murmured. Everything was pleasant and safe, no annoyances, no... He didn't want to keep thinking about the nightmare. There were so many things to distract himself. He started to look at the cast on his arm and the pulley that was holding it in the air. They had put a bottle of mineral water on the

night table beside him. He drank straight from the bottle almost greedily. He scanned the hospital room from his bed: the thirty beds, the glass cabinets... he probably didn't have much of a fever at that point, his face felt fresh. His eyebrow barely hurt, it was a reminder. He saw himself leaving the hotel again, taking out his motorcycle.

Who would've thought that things would end up like this? He tried to find the exact moment of the accident, and it angered him to find a hole there, an empty space, that he couldn't manage to fill. Between the crash and the moment when they pulled him from under the motorcycle was gone, a fainting or whatever kept him from seeing anything. But at the same time he had a feeling...that blank moment, that nothingness, had lasted an eternity. Actually, it wasn't even time, it felt more like he had passed through something or across some tremendous distances. The crash, the brutal crashing into the pavement. Whatever the case, when he finally got out of that dark well, he felt almost relieved while those men lifted him up from the street. With the pain of his broken arm, the blood dripping from his cut eyebrow, the bruise on his knee...he felt relieved to return to the day feeling supported and helped. And it was strange. At some point he would ask his doctor. Now his exhaustion was winning him over, it was slowly dragging him under. His pillow was so soft, and the fever in his throat was cooled by the fresh mineral water. Maybe he could really fall asleep, without those evil dreams. The violet light from the lamp above started to dim, little by little.

Because he was sleeping on his back, he wasn't surprised to find himself in that position when he woke up, but the humid smell, the stones oozing dampness, tightened his throat and forced him to understand. It was useless to open his eyes and look around him, he was surrounded by an absolute darkness. He tried to stand up straight, but he felt rope tied around his

ankles and wrists. He was staked to the ground, the stone floor that felt freezing and damp. The cold crept up his bare back and his legs. He moved his chin about awkwardly, trying to find the amulet, but discovered that they had ripped it off his neck. Now he was totally lost, there wasn't a single prayer that could save him from the end now. In the distance, as if filtering through the stones of the dungeon, he could hear the sounds of ceremonial drums. They had brought him to the teocalli. He was in the prison of the temple awaiting his turn.

He heard a scream, a hoarse scream that reverberated off the walls. Then another, ending with a moan. It was he who was screaming in the darkness, shouting because he was alive. With the cry, his body was defending himself from what was coming, the final inevitable end. He thought of his brothers who were probably in other dungeons, the others who were ascending the temple steps, the steps to sacrifice. He gave one more muffled shout, he could barely open his mouth. His jaws were stiff and, as if they were made of rubber and moved languidly, opened slowly with an interminable effort. The clanking sound of the bolts shook him, like he had been whipped. He convulsed and twisted trying to get away from the rope that was burning into his skin. His right arm, the strong one, fought until it couldn't anymore. He saw the double doors of the dungeon open and the smell of the torches reached him before the light did. Barely covered by their ceremonial loincloths, the priest's acolytes approached and looked at him with contempt. The light reflected off their sweaty torsos, their black hair was full with feathers. The ropes loosened and in their place hot hands grabbed him, hands hard like bronze. He felt himself lifted up, face up as always, he was being dragged down the hallway by the four acolytes. The torch bearers went on ahead, illuminating the corridor with wet walls and a roof so low that the acolytes had to crouch down to get by. Now they were taking him, really taking him, this was it.

With his face up, only a meter away from the living rock that was from time to time illuminated by the torches. When the roof would give birth to stars and when the stairs arose in front of him, filled with chants and dancing, it would be the end. The corridor would never end, but it was just about to end, soon he would smell the air filled with stars, but not yet, they would carry him on in the neverending red penumbra...they would keep yanking him violently, and he didn't want that, but how would he stop them since they had ripped away his amulet, which was his true heart, the center of his life.

He emerged, all of a sudden, into the night of the hospital, to the sweet high ceiling, to the soft shadows that surrounded him. He thought he had screamed, but the neighboring patients were sound asleep. On the night table his bottle of mineral water had some bubbles in it, they were translucent against the blue shadow of the tall windows. He wheezed and tried to find relief in his lungs. He forgot about those images that continued to stick to his eyelids. Everytime he closed his eyes he would see the images forming instantaneously and sat up terrified, but he was happy to know that he was awake now, being awake protected him and dawn was quickly approaching, with the good sleep that one has at that hour, without images, or anything... It was hard for him to keep his eyes open, the drowsiness was stronger than he. He made one last effort, with his good hand he reached out toward the water bottle, but he couldn't grab it; his fingers closed once again in the black darkness and the never ending passageway continued, rock after rock, with reddish flare, and he, face up, groaned because the ceiling was going to end, it was rising, opening up like a shadowy mouth and the acolytes stood up, and from above a waning moon shone onto his face, where his eyes didn't want to see, despairingly he would close and open them hoping to find himself on the other side, to find himself in the high ceiling of the

hospital, a safe place. And every time he opened his eyes he found himself in the night beneath the moon, while they carried him up the steps of the temple and now with his head backwards he saw the towering bonfires creating red columns of fragrant smoke and, all of a sudden, he saw the stone shining and running red with blood, and he saw the feet of a victim swinging side to side as they dragged him away to throw and roll his body down the north stair of the temple.

With one last hope he shut his eyes, moaning, desperate to wake up. For a second, he thought he would succeed because he was back in his hospital bed, unable to move except for his bobbing, hanging head, but it still smelled of death and when he opened his eyes he saw the bloody figure of the sacrificer approaching him with the stone knife in his hand. He managed to shut his eyes again, but this time he knew he wasn't going to wake up, he was already awake. The wondrous dream had been the other one, absurd like all dreams: the one where he passed through strange avenues of an amazing city, with green and red lights that shone without smoke or fire, with an enormous metal insect humming between his legs. In that infinitely deceitful dream he had also been lifted from the ground, someone had approached him with a knife in his hand, stretched out with his face up, with his face up and eyes closed among the bonfires.

THE SUNKEN PARK

Every evening, when he got out of school, Arturo would look out to the green extension down the hill from the street. But that time he only looked onto the pond of still waters. When he saw that it was getting dark, he got scared and retreated, nearly sprinting from the sunken park.

If you don't like it, don't eat it. But I forbid you from taking things out of the fridge at night— Aunt Florencia removed the plate of meatballs and rice. Arturo took some sips of the lukewarm milk and gathered the crumbs that freckled the table cloth.

He was going to be nine years old. His world could be reduced to Florencia, the one-story home, the cat you couldn't pet, the primary school "Juan A. Mateos," and Rafael, his classmate, his friend, the one who went to the movies with him and fished secretly with him in the pond of the sunken park.

A few months back, Arturo brought home a toad wrapped up in a wet handkerchief. Florencia slapped his hands and threw the toad into the fireplace with burning logs and newspapers. Later, Arturo brought a white mouse. Florencia didn't say a word about it. She simply smiled and rejoiced when the cat pounced on the mouse and killed him before Arturo was able to snatch it away.

He went home, grabbed his math notebook and began to solve problems. When he finished, he left his pencil beside the portrait of the man who would visit him every month and would give him some cash. Arturo never wanted to call him "Papa," like the man would've liked him to.

One night he was about to fall asleep when he heard Florencia in the living room shuffling a deck of cards in front of those women who paid for their futures to be told.

—It's been seven years since she saw him. Of course, she's tried but we wouldn't let her. Arturo thinks that his mom went up to heaven and that his father only visits every once in a while because he's a pilot and he's always traveling. You can't tell the truth to kids. Ricardo has a new family and the past, thank God, will stay in the past. The boy's no problem. He's lived with me ever since his mother abandoned him and, as you can see, I'm educating him like I taught my brother. Senora, the worst part is that money has run dry. I can't ask Ricardo for any more money because he's got hefty expenses with his wife and daughters. I have to do whatever I can. Since I was fifteen I've worked from sunrise to sunset. That was the cross I carried. First for my brother and now for my nephew. There were no boyfriends or parties or fun times for me. I don't complain either. Our Lord knows what he's doing. My only company is my little cat, because Arturo is ungrateful and he doesn't even talk to me... Ah, Senora, forgive me. You have your problems and I'm troubling you with my own. Never mind me...shuffle seven times. Split the deck in half for me and then touch them.

Florencia went into Arturo's room. She had the cat cradled in her arms.

—Have you said your prayers? Get on your knees. Come on, we'll both pray. They knelt down beside the bed. The cat jumped onto the bed and settled comfortably between the pillows. When they finished, Florencia picked the cat up, kissed the boy on the head, and left the room. Arturo feared that the grey hairs that glistened against the white bedsheet would get into his mouth and make their way into his lungs.

—Have you poisoned the cat yet? Rafael asked.

—No way man. It got sick is all. It doesn't want to eat and it screeches all the time. The old lady thinks the neighbors across the street gave it rat poison. Sitting in the park they watched as the foliage shuddered in the wind. Arturo drew symbols in the dirt with a blunt pencil.

—Look, a four leaf clover- shouted Rafael.

—No: it has five. Look closely.

—What a shame. Seemed like good luck.

—Listen, I just finished my bullfighting card collection. Come over so I can show you.

—Won't your aunt get mad?

—She won't even notice: she's too sad about the cat to notice.

The boys saw Florencia approaching from the corner of the street. She didn't answer Rafael's greeting. She looked straight at Arturo and said:

There's no hope for the cat. I don't want it to keep on suffering. You need to bring it to the veterinarian. Here is the address of the office. It's really close. Say you're going on my behalf and take the sweet little thing along with this cash. Don't wait and see how they do it.

—What do I do with the body?

—They'll incinerate it.

They entered the house. The cat was motionless on the sofa. Arturo made sure that she was still breathing. Florencia kissed her, caressed her and covered her in tears. Uncomfortable in Rafael's presence, she felt she had to explain:

—You guys don't understand how I feel. She has been with me for more than ten years. Nothing could replace her.

She laid her down in a straw bag lined with cotton wool. They went out to the street.

Florencia stayed behind and cried in the doorway while the boys walked out of her sight.

—How much are you bringing? Asked Rafael.

Arturo showed him the bills.

—She gave you all this? It costs that much to kill a cat?

—It's what the vet charges.

—You know what I think? Let's leave the cat in the park and keep the money to ourselves.

—Never. What if she gets better and walks home? My aunt would kill me, literally kill me. The cat has gotten lost before and she always finds her way back home. She'll probably do it again.

—But she's already dying. Can't you see? We should do her a favor and finish her off.

—I'm scared. If my aunt finds out...

—She'll never know about it. Imagine what we could do with that cash: we could go to the movies, rent a rowboat in Chapultepec, buy any candy or sodas we want. Anyway... Arturo felt the body nestled in the straw bag. *Will she die? She's evil. Florencia loves her more than she loves me.*

—No, no I wouldn't dare. I swear I'd feel too guilty about the cat.

—She's gonna die anyways, right? Leave the bag in the middle of the street. With so many cars nobody will know.

—But she would suffer a lot. One day I saw a dog...

—You've got a point. Let's think of another plan.

—Give her away to someone?

—Are you crazy?... I know, let's drown her.

—Don't be dumb, cats know how to swim.

—Look, let's go to the park. No ones around at this hour.

The park was deserted and the smell of the pond hovered about the trees. Rafael jumped to grab the low branches and pretended to ride a horse. He said,

—Listen, why don't we hang her?

—She would suffer a lot—repeated Arturo. The cat tossed and turned inside her prison. *I shouldn't be afraid. She's gonna die anyway. Better to be done with her once and for all.*

—Careful; don't open the bag: she can escape.

—No. You think so? My aunt will go totally nuts if she finds out that we disobeyed her and stole her money.

Arutro shuddered in the cold and cracked his fingers. Night was about to fall. Rafael found a slab of concrete among the weeds, a broken off part of an abandoned building. He approached him and managed to lift the slab in the air.

—It's ready: hold the cat still for me and I'll bash it in.

—Is there no other way?

—Do what I tell you.

Arturo took the cat out and lifted it by the belly.

—Hurry up. This weighs a ton. I have to aim for the head.

—Now. Don't move.

Rafael held the slab of concrete over his head

—Count to three and I'll throw it. Bueno...uno, dos...

The cat sensed the danger and regained its quickness. She escaped from Arturo's hands, jumped, fell unharmed a few meters ahead, and ran off into the bushes.

—You didn't hold on to her right. You idiot.

—I couldn't. I don't know how she squirmed her way out.

Arturo stood still. A minute later he urged:

—She's alive. We need to look for her. Bring her back. My aunt Florencia is gonna kill us.

—Now we've really bothered her. Call her out to see if she'll come back.

—Yeah, of course. Cats are intelligent. I can already hear her telling us: Here I'am on your orders! Kill me please and waste your Aunt's money! She never listened to me anyways.

For a long while they looked, called her name out, looked among the weeds, searched through the tree branches, all between the murmuring birds and toads: all of the night's beings kept the cat hidden. Tired and frightened, Arturo said goodbye to Rafael. He went home with the fear of finding her curled up on the sofa in the living room. But he only found Florencia in the living room. She was laying with the cards and hadn't stopped crying.

—Sorry for being so late. There were a lot of people in the vet and I was last in line.

—You hand delivered her to the doctor?

—Yes. He said there wasn't a problem.

—You seem down...I understand. I should've gone myself. Do you want a snack?

—No thanks, I'm headed to bed.

—You don't know how much I miss that cat...I'm gonna get her ashes first thing tomorrow morning. As long as I'm alive she'll accompany me in this house.

Arturo was sleepless and dawn arrived as he found himself tangled in his bedsheets. I don't even want to imagine what's gonna happen when Florencia finds out that we never even made it to the veterinarian's office. She'll never believe that the cat escaped. She'd say, "You always hated her. It was your revenge. I will never forgive you. That boy is evil. He convinced you. You guys killed her to hurt me and to steal my money. Bastard, you really are the son of your mother. Now you'll see who I really am. I just finished talking with my brother and you're headed straight to the reformatory, so you can rot with fellow prisoners and assassins." No, he'll defend me. Or who knows: he's never been kind and I don't appreciate his gifts. Because of Rafael I'm tangled up in this with no way out.

Now his only hope is that the cat returns. In the slightest noises I thought I could hear her footsteps. Look tía, I swear to God we didn't bring her to kill her. She got better and that's why we left her in the park. Listen, Aunt Florencia, I really love that cat too.

He couldn't take it anymore. He got up, took out the bills he hid in the closet, ripped them and threw them out the window. The wind scattered the pieces of paper. *Maybe the best thing to do would be to run away and never come back. But where would I go if I can't do anything and don't even know the city well at all?*

Florencia heard noises and opened her eyes. In vain, she searched beside her for the little body that she used to caress. Slow, useless caresses that used to fill up all her time, Florencia went on forgetting the days.

