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Degradation and Race in Anacristina Rossi's Limón reggae

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Degradation and Race in Anacristina Rossi's *Limón reggae*

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literatures
Of Bard College

By
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Introduction

In reality, my Senior Project began with an impromptu one-month trip to Costa Rica in 2015, the summer after the completion of my sophomore year. A personal interest of mine, which stills remains to today, had been Afro-Latino culture. I had been learning Spanish since fifth grade, yet had since learned practically nothing about the African presence in Latin America. It appears to me that Afro-Latino culture is still very much “authentically African,” but sadly, Costa Rica doesn’t have such a culture. However, I did learn that there were many Jamaicans living in Costa Rica, especially in Limón, an area on Costa Rica’s caribbean coast. This did not initially pique my interest much, even in light of certain comments I heard, such as: “They speak their own language in Limón...it’s called patois.” I was already somewhat familiar with Jamaican culture, and was not as interested in black culture where the English had colonized, as I was where the Spanish, French, and Portuguese had settled. Remnants of African culture had a much better chance of survival under Spanish, French, and Portuguese leadership. This was because Latin America received a larger number of enslaved Africans during the slave trade, as Africa was geographically closer, and because Catholicism allowed enslaved Africans to hide their deities behind Catholic saints.

During my month in Costa Rica, a group of us went to the bookstore, where a friend of mine from the study-abroad program bought *Limón Blues*, a book about Afro-Costa Rican culture. This would indirectly influence my choice to translate Anacristina Rossi’s work(s). Later that summer, I received many boxes worth of books from a family friend, Dr. Brown, an old

professor of my father. Like me, Dr. Brown had a great interest in Afro-Latino culture. In these boxes was one of Anacristina Rossi's books, not *Limón blues*, but *Limón reggae*.

Initially, I proposed a translation of Lydia Cabrera's "Cuentos negros de Cuba," but it was recommended by the Spanish Studies program that students work on books that had not already been translated into English, so I began my search anew. At the beginning of senior year, I had narrowed my options to Félix Sánchez's *Nunca será como antes* and the previously mentioned, *Limón Reggae*. I ultimately decided on *Limón reggae*, because it dealt with the black experience in Latin America and the Caribbean.

One drawback about translating such a little known work is that there is a scarcity of published critical material about Anacristina Rossi. In the Spanish language one would say, *me costó mucho* to find relevant information about the author, a majority of which is superficial and extremely basic. Most of what I know about her and her works was taken from archived interviews (Polsgrove; Marchio).

Anacristina Rossi was born in 1952 in San José, Costa Rica. In addition to being an author, she is a professor and an activist. In her literary career, Rossi has written a number of novels, the first of which was *María la noche*, published in 1985. This same novel was translated and published in French as *Maria la nuit* in 1997. The plot focuses on the relationship between Mariestela and Antonio, and utilizes it to highlight certain binaries in their lives. The milieu of London unites the city's variety of inhabitants ("María la noche").

Rossi's next, and perhaps most well-known novel was *La loca de Gandoca*, published in 1991. It was read in Costa Rican schools until very recently (Polsgrove). Daniela, the main protagonist of *La loca de gandoca*, is fighting to protect *El Refugio de Vida Silvestre*

Gandoca-Manzanillo (“La Loca de Gandoca”). Regrettably, the message of the book and Rossi’s ecological activism led to her having to flee to Europe (Marchio).

Rossi then published *Limón Blues* in Costa Rica in 2002-2003, the first book in a proposed Limón trilogy (Marchio). Orlandus Robinson, the central character of the book, leaves Jamaica to work on his family’s farm in Costa Rica. However, he is quickly robbed of his property by the discriminatory practices of the Costa Rican government. More broadly, the novel addresses the Afro-Antillean cultures and social movements, namely Jamaican culture and Pan-Africanism, or “Garveyism.” Interracial relationships and their stigmas and consequences are also important themes in the book. Underpinning the entire novel is the treatment of historic violations of the rights of Afro-Caribbeans, largely Jamaicans, and the subsequent response of such marginalized populations. The sequence of historical events are creatively fictionalized by the author.

The second book in the series is *Limón reggae*, published in 2007, the novel that is the focal point of this project. The book is principally set in the city of Limón in Costa Rica, although the story also unfolds in other nearby Latin American countries. The protagonist of the novel is Laura, a person of color living in Costa Rica. She is both personally connected to San José, where she spent the first few years of her life, and Limón, although her spiritual connection to Limón is the more profound (Rossi 10). She is of Arab descent, but in spite of her dark skin is still perceived as a *pañã*, or mestizo, by the black community of Limón (30). At a young age, she goes to live with her Arab aunt in Limón (16). During her time in Limón, she becomes progressively more politically active, to the point of attempting to join a revolutionary black group called CoRev. She is, however, emphatically rejected by a majority of peers in this group

who see her as a foreigner, an enemy, and an undesirable participant in their organization (58). She later dabbles with a number of other politically active people and groups; unlike in the case of CoRev, she is allowed to join, but is left feeling unsatisfied. She yearns to become directly involved in the fight for the liberation of Central America and the world, which prompts her to leave Limón and Costa Rica entirely. Like its predecessor, *Limón reggae* discusses the themes of interracial relationships and the prevalent social movements of the time; however, unlike *Limón blues*, *Limón reggae* takes a less parochial viewpoint. The story does not focus exclusively on the black, Afro-Costa Rican experience, but assumes a pan-Latin American viewpoint (Marchio). In addition to the aforementioned novels, Rossi has published *Situaciones conyugales*, and various essays.

Anacristina Rossi began writing at about fifteen-years-old to escape an oppressive environment (Marchio). She also began to write to defy her mother, who believed that intelligent women would not find spouses (Marchio). At about eighteen-years-old, she had befriended some local artists and was giving them her work to be critiqued (Marchio). However, it was not until 1973, in London, that she was finally able to write as a woman free from the stigmas surrounding female intelligence, sexuality, and the like (Marchio). Among her first literary influences were Virginia Woolf, Henry Miller, Julio Cortázar, and Erica Jong; Marguerite Yourcenar, Marguerite Duras and Anaïs Nin were among influences that she found later in life, possibly while abroad (Marchio).

Anacristina Rossi is considered a mestiza, that is, she has mixed European and indigenous blood, though she has self-reported as having some black ancestry (Marchio). Her writing demonstrates a strong interest in the survival and preservation of Afro-Caribbean culture,

in defiance of the prevalent racism in her home and home country (Marchio). Although nearly all of her siblings were *moreno*, her only blond-haired brother was preferred by her father, who was annoyed by the sheer number of *moreno* offspring that he had (Marchio). Her family also disliked curly-textured hair, such as the author herself has, because it reminded them of Afro-textured hair (Marchio).

Rossi's connection with Limón is more than literary; she stayed in Limón until she was six-years-old, but went to school in San José (Polsgrove). In an interview, she says that despite going to school in San José, she and her family continued to visit Limón throughout the years (Polsgrove).

Limón, and the greater "Costa Rica del Caribe," is a unique place, with a unique history; it is very different from the rest of Costa Rica (77). The mainstream historical narrative of the Costa Rica's Caribbean coast informs us that there was no significant black population in Costa Rica's past (Fernández Rosario 15, 82). The earliest accepted appearance of people of African descent in Costa Rica was during the seventeenth century (17). The *Zambos-Mosquitos*, persons of mixed indigenous-African ancestry, allied themselves with the British of Jamaica and ravaged Costa Rica's Caribbean Coast (80).

The Costa Rican government initially had no interest in its Caribbean Coast (79). The hostile *Zambos-Mosquitos* lived there and the climate was largely unbearable for central Costa Ricans (79). The Caribbean Coast was therefore considered the frightening unknown, since both the location and its inhabitants were seen as "other" (77-78). This is because Costa Rica is usually understood as being only constituted by El Valle Central, or the Central Valley (84).

The United States began to take interest in the economic potential of Costa Rica in the nineteenth century. Afro-Jamaicans were considered especially fit for labor in the inhospitable climate, and thus fed the growing labor force of the future banana plantation system in Costa Rica (112). As the presence of Jamaicans in Costa Rica grew even greater, discriminatory immigration laws were established in the early twentieth century, which not only targeted black Jamaicans, but Chinese immigrants as well (88, 94). Simultaneously, mestizos from the “interior” flooded Costa Rica’s Caribbean Coast in an effort to halt the progressive “blackening” of Limón (93).

If discriminatory laws weren’t enough, prevailing stereotypes of the time associated Jamaican immigrants with death and violence, undoubtedly as a way to justify the undesirability of this ethnic group (96, 100). Stereotypes of the sort were ubiquitous, given that the media, especially newspapers, perpetuated them. Jamaican stereotypes were at least partially born out of growing resentment between “domestic” Costa Ricans and foreign and native-born Jamaicans in competition for work (101, 115, 117). The spread of racial or ethnic prejudice was not one-sided; Jamaicans had their stereotypes and share of dislike for Costa Rican mestizos (119).

Jamaicans that were denied citizenship became “temporary residents” (102). This state of limbo implied in “temporary resident status” prevented them from participating in local politics and confined them geographically, conveniently preventing them from advocating for themselves, their families, and their rights (93). Due to everything already discussed, Jamaicans, presumably both those born in Costa Rica and those born in Jamaica, were generally apathetic towards a nation that rejected them (103). Costa Rica was for them a land of opportunity, that

they eventually hoped to leave there, to return to their homeland (120). However, in the end, citizenship was conceded to all Jamaicans in the 1940's (15).

Economic opportunities attracted an influx of Jamaicans to Costa Rica. Minor Cooper Keith (1848-1929) was an American businessman who was largely responsible for the rise of Costa Rica's banana industry in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (84). Friendly with the Costa Rican government, he was given land, administration of the railroad for ninety-nine years, and other generous concessions (88). As previously mentioned, Jamaicans were thought to be the best workers and the most suitable for Limón's harsh climate, which earned them contracted exploitation in large numbers. Jamaicans were valued as ideal laborers because it was believed that they did not interfere in strikes, unlike other ethnicities living in Costa Rica at the time, a situation we see narrated in both Rossi's *Limón blues and Limón reggae* (109). Exploitation and unfavorable working conditions drove workers, largely those of African descent and from the Caribbean islands, to strike (109-110). As what might be considered a proactive measure, the United Fruit Company sowed tension and discord among the various working in their company (111). It might be assumed that this tactic reduced the chance of unity among ethnic groups, and the overall likelihood and effectiveness of striking.

The Jamaican opinion of Costa Rica was generally less than favorable. Historically discriminatory law and policies, pervasive anti-Jamaican sentiments, and the hostility of Costa Rican citizens, among other factors, contributed to a largely self-imposed retreat from mainstream society. Separation was further driven by cultural and linguistic differences, as Jamaicans spoke English and patois and maintained their own customs. To ensure the survival and continuation of their home culture, Jamaicans established English-speaking schools, based

on the model of schools in England (120). Jamaican caretakers did not want their children to attend Spanish-speaking Costa Rican schools because learning the dominant language did not interest them (234). But also, if they were to return to Jamaica, as planned, Spanish would be useless to them. One measure taken to coerce cultural assimilation was to fine Jamaican students and their families for speaking English in Spanish-speaking schools (234). This further pushed Jamaicans to isolate themselves and establish their own institutions.

The history of Limón, and particularly the Jamaican experience in Limón, is critically important to this project because it sets the scene for the entire novel, and the name does lend itself to the book's title. The history reviewed in the last several pages is replete with evidence of racial discrimination and prejudice, a catalyst of the degradation of Afro-Costa Ricans. In addition to the setting the scene of the novel, Limón takes an active role as one of the novel's principal "characters." It feels, experiences, and suffers. Within the context of this mixed-raced city, degradation reveals itself as a cycle, a cycle perpetuated by trauma, such as war, hunger, and discrimination.

In reading this work, I took note of the recurrent theme of degradation, the gradual process and consequences of humiliation of people of color at the hands of dominant power structures. Its relevance to *Limón reggae*, and to Rossi's larger body of works, is so great that she even referred to it, by name, in an interview (Marchio).

In contrast with Anacristina Rossi's *Limón Blues*, which deals almost exclusively with the experience of African-descendants in Costa Rica, *Limón Reggae* picks up some decades later in the 1970's and considerably broadens the scope of its subject matter. Afro-Costa Ricans remain integral to the narrative, but the author seems to have reoriented her focus to include the

entirety of Central America, which Limón is undoubtedly a part of. This turbulent and revolutionary time in Central America coincides, not incidentally, with other international struggles for freedom. The story begins in Limón, but it quickly picks up in nearby Central American countries, and at other times makes mention of global causes outside of Central America, and even of Latin America.

The Story Told in Limón Reggae

The novel begins in Costa Rica and details the formative years of Laura, the central character. She lives in San José with her mother and father, before her father is robbed of his financial insecurity and even his will to leave his bedroom (42-43). This situation deprives Laura of her youthful happiness: “Before the swindle life was beautiful. Laura remembers” (10). Because of the economic downfall of her father and the unpleasantness of the neighborhood of the relocated family, Laura finally asks to go live with her aunt, Maroz, in Limón: a place that had always been a part of her life, a place of refuge (12). As Laura navigates childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, so too does she navigate the changing landscape of Limón, as do other characters in the novel. “Limón’s a disaster. When we were small, at least it was clean. Don’t you remember? And before that, a long time before, it was beautiful,” Laura’s friend Percy says (28). The small town of Limón, which can be read as a microcosm of the whole of Central America, is becoming worse as Laura reaches adulthood and has been spiraling downward for a considerable amount of time.

A number of unforgettable moments highlight Laura's childhood, but the first among them is perhaps Laura's marked discomfort with living in a new neighborhood after her father's financial ruin, when Laura is seven or eight years old. This discomfort is not a result of the uneasiness expected of children approaching something new, as the first day of school, but of something much more profound. She is horrified by her new neighborhood's proximity to the largest *tugurio*, or slum, in the city of San José (13). These infamous children of the slum were reportedly "smelly, thin, with large patches of missing hair, and the whores were just as dirty and skinny and smelly and bald-headed, but weren't wearing underwear. They raised their dirty slips and showed their behinds and privates to everyone" (13-14). However, it is not this ugly image of the slum children that disturbs her, as much as it is their "face of pleasure and simultaneous heartlessness, ferociousness, an adult face with the worst part of an adult, which Laura senses, but can't understand" (14). These adult faces, or children's faces mixed up with something adult-like in them, understandably make no sense to her. How could kids, regardless of age, this young show such ugliness, one might ask. Moreover, the look on their faces is so potent, so warped, that a word for literally "it" eventually comes to mind: degradation. "It was definitely an adult thing," Laura concludes, but she had only seen it in children" (15).

This "it" is a corrupted result of the savagery of humanity, potently embodied by war and bloodshed. At the time Laura was coming of age in the 1970's, various revolutionary struggles were mounting in Central America. The majority population began waging war on their unfair and ill-reputed governments, and fighting often broke out. Many times such struggles boiled down to ideology, with essentially left-leaning movements pitted against the predominant system of capitalism. Often the United States was in collusion with these unjust political regimes.

Provided with superior arms and training, right-leaning forces could easily and bloodily take on the majority, committing acts of repression and violence against civilians. The majority of individuals had comparatively little access to similar-grade weapons and casualties were devastating (189). But, in returning to Laura's question about the slum kids—"what happened to them to make them so inhuman?"—we run into a problem. What made squadron soldiers into killers, obeying orders to kill 'little terrorists'" (144). And what preceded war, making the children and soldiers, for example, become savages, monsters even. One could say this is a cycle, and the initial catalyst was some sort of traumatic experience. This was surely one of Laura's primary reasons for joining the socialist revolution.

As depicted in the novel, Laura occupies an interesting place in Costa Rica society. In San José, where she lived when she was much younger, her race being of middle-Eastern descent was practically a non-factor (11). Yet, in Limón, it would become isolating to her as a person. Limón showed her another, much darker, yet, simultaneously more beautiful world. Despite her Arab, and supposedly African heritage, owing to her mulatto father, she was seen as a *pañña*, a derogatory term for Costa Rican mestizos, especially used by her black childhood acquaintances (30). It becomes very clear to Laura that she is different as she tries to enter CoRev, a black revolutionary group modeled after the Black Panthers. She is allowed by the group to take lessons in political theory, but is never given full membership status (48). Still, this does not dim her burning passion for the revolutionary fight or for combating the injustices in the Central American social landscape.

After moving on from CoRev, or being passed over, she receives more training and knowledge in school, at the University of Costa Rica's campus in San José. There, she becomes

involved with a few groups and most importantly, with a popular young professor who initiates a sexual relationship with her (84). However, she eventually grows disillusioned with both after a series of upsetting and generally negative experiences, so she leaves. Although these experiences appear utterly wasteful to her, they have the effect of furthering Laura's training and desire to enlist in the revolutionary fight, until she becomes directly involved. CoRev and the on-campus groups she joined helped her to grow ideologically. But when she becomes directly involved in the fighting in Central America, she feels she is now helping something much larger than herself. She is helping Central America, and other countries worldwide, gain traction in the fight against "the West" and its political regimes.

After becoming involved in the actual fighting in Central America, Laura witnesses new and surprising levels of inhumanity and degradation. In one scene the narrator notes that not even animals are not this savage, only humans: "'This,' 'something,' is profoundly human, animals don't do it; to degrade life, to strip it to its core and to see a neutral piece of flesh palpitating, suffering" (182). She loses comrades, and witnesses a young child, the son of fellow fighters, being orphaned. It's as if war brings out the worst in everyone, even Laura. At one point in the novel, she cunningly takes the life of a former comrade that betrayed their cause to the government (165).

Laura's later adulthood is a period of dissolution. The revolutionary struggles that marked her young adulthood have all but disappeared, taking a backseat to the treatment of the more mundane aspects of Laura's life, such as finding love and reconnecting with family. During a trip with a friend from her past, she meets and finds companionships in Raymond, Percy's brother; however, their relationship ends prematurely. In addition to Raymond relocating to the

United States for work, Raymond's family hates Laura because she is a *pañã*, bringing the book full circle in that her racial identity remains an inescapable aspect of life (244, 263). Perhaps such a turn, as it did in the beginning, will propel Laura into yet another major commitment.

As Laura's adulthood progresses, things only worsen. Aside from the slum children's cruel treatment towards animals, and maybe one or two other instances she witnesses, there is not much violence in Laura's life. Yet, as she became progressively more politically active, violence became a recurring, even traumatizing facet of Laura's life. Returning to normal, everyday life after her time spent fighting, it would seem that things would calm down a bit, but no. There is a new problem in the form of gangs in Limón. Worse yet, she thinks she sees the boy she began raising, because his parents were killed, running with gang members (280). He, like many other Limonese kids, can run free because of a lack of parental vigilance.¹

Limón, as we have seen, is a crucial space in the novel. For Rossi, Limón holds a special place in her heart: it has its own spells, sounds, and vitality, and like the various characters introduced throughout the novel, it too changes in character. The Limón of Laura's childhood, as Percy informs us, was at least more refined than it would be some years later, at the time of the narration. Even before the time Percy remembers, Limón was apparently magnificent, as his grandfather had told him (23, 28). The state of affairs, as presented by the character of Limón, seems much calmer, much quieter, and more mundane, although there are moments of greater conflict. The mention of groups like CoRev and their fight for Liberty Hall speaks to Limón's past, and its present, as a place of political activity. The messages of the politician, publisher, entrepreneur, and Pan-Africanist, Marcus Garvey, the Black Panther Party, and later

¹ Other Limonese parents would leave for the US because there they could find job opportunities.

Rastafarianism, are all welcomed in Limón. In the novel, Limón is engaged in an ideological war with itself.

Narrative Techniques in *Limón Reggae*

The varied narrative techniques of this novel are essential to capturing the character of Limón. The novel is set in the present, but contains numerous flashbacks to the past, particularly to Laura's childhood. Consequently, the narrative switches between the past and present verb tenses, such as in the following: "Maroz would let her go with Percy to certain communal activities like walks and church fairs. And she also would let her go with them to Matina, to Mr. Samuel's farm" (25). This flashback is immediately interrupted by the present (tense), as Laura "stops her memories and decides to go look for him," weaving a coherent narrative that seamlessly weaves together the past and present (25).

The novel not only alternates between tenses, but also gives the perspective of different characters. Because Laura is an outsider, a *pañá*, in what is a largely Afro-Caribbean-influenced place in Costa Rica, a true insider's perspective is necessary. This is why at certain key moments the perspective switches to Percy, who is Afro-Costa Rican, a boy or man, depending upon the time and place in the novel, and black. Chapter Two, for example, begins in the perspective of Percy, but is shortly thereafter picked up by Laura. During a conversation between members of CoRev group, while still in the perspective of Percy, Laura is contemptuously called a *pana* and declared a part of the "*blancocracia*, as Garvey would put it" (48). This focus on Percy's viewpoint illuminates Rossi's interest in Afro-Costa Rican culture and its preservation, which Laura is unable to provide. Though Laura and Percy are both Limonese, their life experiences are

markedly different, owing both to the predetermined differences in who they are, as man/woman or black/*paña*, and even more importantly, to the choices they voluntarily make. The characterization of Laura and Percy reflects the few opportunities available to Costa Rican minorities.

One of *Limón Reggae's* most important literary techniques is the fictionalization of history. Great Afro-Caribbean figures, such as Marcus Garvey, appeared in the book's predecessor, *Limón Blues*, as did mention of important movements and events, all of which shape Limón into what it is at the time of *Limón Reggae*. The novelization of history is achieved by the fact that even Limón is transformed into an important character, one that possesses its own smells, sounds, and personality. However, it does not respond or act of its own free will, as does a character in the traditional sense, but only as a result of the characters inhabiting the larger space of Limón. Moreover, external forces influence the course of Limónese history as much as do internal forces. In summary, Limón is a passive character, though an essential one nonetheless.

The Limón we perceive at the end of the novel is a burned-out one. Its characters, the citizens of Limón, have seen a fair amount of discrimination and injustice, as was initially depicted in *Limón Blues*, and many have gone elsewhere. Some have fled to other parts of Costa Rica for the schooling that Limón could not offer them, while others have gone abroad, primarily to the United States, for jobs that Limón could not provide (22, 45). Perhaps this factor is to blame for the prevalence of gangs in Limón, a deadly mixture of trauma and lack of parental guidance, created both by war and lack of opportunity. In the novel, Toño, a boy who is orphaned by two parents whom he lost to war, eventually becomes involved in the street life.

Even after Laura briefly assumes care of the young child, he joins a gang, and, with his other gang members, attacks her (280).

Despite the undesirable situation in Limón, there is hope, if only for Laura. Music, while not a necessarily major theme, has been present in some of the novel's more important moments. For example, Laura meets Percy's brother, Raymond, while reggae is playing and people are dancing on the beach (198-199). Reggae music consoles Laura, and even offers her something transcendental. The *compás*, or backbeat rhythm, has drawn her in since she first experienced it early on in the novel (107). *Let go me, man, let go me hand/ I am a true born Costarican*, the lyrics of an anonymous Calypso group demand. It is both interesting and important to note that the lyrics all appear in English, "unadulterated" by the Spanish language, which historically many Caribbean immigrants shunned. The lyrics, which are separated by large sections of text, caution, warn, or even give hope. In the final moments of the book, some of Bob Marley's lyrics appear: *Everything little thing's gonna be all right!* (291) Bob Marley, whose lyrics are featured throughout the book, adequately captures the spirit of *Limón reggae*. His lyrics are both hopeful and revolutionary, and he himself embraced the revolutionary Rastafarian religion, famously wearing his hair in dreads, an integral part of Rastafarian doctrine. In the novel, the refrain of *Everything's gonna be alright* can be interpreted as a message for Laura, for her friends, for Limón, and even for the world, especially after the disappointment that resulted from the war in El Salvador (1980-1992) and the Acuerdos de Paz Peace Talks that followed.

Sentence structure is another narrative technique that gives the book its depth and character. Many of the sentences are long, and written in a stream-of-consciousness style. Its paragraphs are equally long. This stream-of-consciousness style of writing gives an almost

disorienting feel to the novelized world of Limón. One excellent example portrays a scene in a Limonese marketplace:

The wave leaves [Laura] soaked with foam among the beggars, a black woman with elephantiasis pounces and says “Give me something, *my child*.” Laura’s eyes remain fixed on the giant scarred leg, on the contrast between the dark skin and the living red flesh. The woman touches her shoulder, saying “I said, give me something *my child*” and shakes a jar. Laura finds a coin in the pockets of her jeans and hands it to her while staring at the open flesh, and suddenly, a shoal of purple fish crosses her imagination. The shoal pulls her away from the wounds. She starts running (9-10).

In addition to illustrating the stream-of-consciousness aesthetic of the book, this passage also alludes to Laura’s immensely sensuous experience of Limón. Like her creator Rossi, Laura sees Limón as a place of immense smells, sounds, and diversity. In the first line of the opening paragraph of the book, we read that, “[Laura] has always been observant, details fascinate her” (9).

Translating Limón Reggae

Translating a text from one language to another has been an extraordinarily rewarding process for me, especially because of my appreciation for languages and the process of language learning. However, the Spanish language, like any other language, has a number of characteristics that complicate the translation process. One such feature, absent in English

fundamentally speaking, is a certain flexibility of syntax or word order. Thus, one recurring concern was when to restructure the original sentence. At times, it was very easy to decide. It helped to read my translation aloud and to listen for awkwardness in syntax. Sometimes slight adjustments were necessary, while at other times, I had to completely restructure the translation. The following sentence, which Laura's aunt, Maroz, speaks to her about black Costa Ricans and their adoption of Arabic names, is an example of some of the subtle difficulties of translating. In Spanish, the original sentence reads: "No sé qué les ha dado por los nombres árabes...el padre Morrison ahora se hace llamar Mustafá" (38). A literal translation of this would be: "I don't know what has been given to them by Arabic names...Father Morrison uses Mustafá now" (38). But this does not convey the proper meaning of the original, informal phrase. A more accurate translation would be: "I don't know why they're so into Arabic names, she says, Father Morrison uses Mustafa now" (38). In addition to the idiomatic "les ha dado," the placement of the adverb now is also problematic (38). In English, one could translate the phrase as "Father Morrison uses Mustafá now," or "Father Morrison now uses Mustafá," depending upon where one would like to place now, or "ahora." The latter option, nonetheless, sounds stiffer (38).

Another syntactically-related issue is whether or not to translate the words of the original directly into English. This depended upon the context of the sentence. Sometimes, a direct translation would make the most sense. Other times, due to the difference in meaning of cognates, or the use of idiomatic phrases, this was not an option. The exchange between Percy and Laura that follows was simply impossible to directly translate: "Todavía con la maña de decir palabrotas...No tanto, vieras que se me ha quitado mucho" (28). *Maña*, or bad habit, works in the context of the original sentence, but it would sound flat as roughly, "...a bad habit for

saying curse words” (28). Thus, I chose the more colorful English expression, “you still curse like a sailor,” utilizing a very relevant idiomatic English phrase (28). The next line of dialogue could not be directly translated either. *Quitársele* means to take out or off of someone. So a literal translation would have read, “You’ll see that it has been removed from me a great deal,” which makes no immediate sense in English (28). So I rendered it in context more naturally as, “I’ve calmed down a lot” (28). Certainly, this is more bland than the original, almost poetic exchange between Percy and Laura, but fluidity took precedence over style. Idiomatic phrases, it should be mentioned, were some of the greatest obstacles in the translation process. This was compounded by the fact that Costa Rican Spanish and/or Limonese Spanish has its own idiosyncrasies. *Paña*, a derogatory term for a Costa Rican mestizo, and *bailongo*, which I assumed referred to a dancehall, were some Costa Rican slang terms that appeared in the book. I decided that *paña* was so specific to Costa Rica that I left it untranslated, and simply italicized it, while I translated *bailongo* as dancehall, because its meaning was not specific, and unless one knew that *bailar* means to dance, he would not be able to immediately guess its meaning. To cite one final example, in an exchange between Laura and her mother, the mother says, “Lista, quedaste como chupada de vaca,” after having combed her hair and applied it with *Fijador de Limon M/O* (11). Literally, this would translate as, “You’re ready, you’re like licked by a cow” (11). Obviously however, this does not make much sense. A more sensible, idiomatic English equivalent would be, “You’re ready, you’re clean as a whistle” (11).

Sensitivity to register was also an important part of translating. When translating the speech of younger children, I had to consider the use of contractions, which do not appear in Spanish, and phrasing, to ensure that it agreed with the way a child typically speaks. In an

instance of conversation with Maroz regarding Percy, Laura says, “No había muchacho en el mundo más dulce y más serio” (24). At first glance, I would translate this as, “There was no sweeter or more serious boy in the world,” but considering Laura’s age, and my tendency to embellish, I knew that I needed to lower the register by simplifying the sentence (24). Thus, “He was the nicest and most serious boy in the whole world” (24). The original sentence uses *dulce*, or sweet, which, I believe, would be uncommon in a younger child’s vocabulary, given the context. I also question her assessment of the seriousness of Percy, yet there are no alternative phrasings of *más serio*. In considering register, even between two nearly, similarly-aged children, I wondered to what degree would the speech patterns of each individual vary, as problematized in early conversations between Laura and Percy, though I found it difficult to make a significant linguistic distinction between the two.

Much of *Limón reggae* is written in a stream-of-consciousness style that manifests itself in what would be termed as run-on sentences in English. As a result, I often had to decide whether to maintain the original style or split the free-flowing thoughts of the narrator or characters into units that were much more manageable and readable for a English-speaking audience. In the second paragraph of the novel, the narrator reflects Laura’s thoughts, observing that:

Cada vez hay más pobres aquí en el mercado, piensa, y en ese instante una ola verde se levanta y crece y crece y se revienta contra los farallones de Manzanillo y es como si estallara contra su pecho, queda bañada en espuma blanca, esa capacidad que tiene Laura para hundirse en una imagen que al principio es un color, por ejemplo verde, un color que crece hasta volverse ola que estalla y se

abre y despliega otros colores: el cielo celeste, el verde oscuro de los bosques del acantilado, el mismo acantilado color natilla (9).

Clearly, there is a lot going on in this passage, to the extent that reader can easily become lost in the mix of senses that are summoned. This sentence violates fundamental English grammar rules as it connects clauses by overusing the conjunction *y*, or *and*. To break up this sentence, nonetheless, would be egregious. This was an intentional stylistic choice, one which reveals Rossi's literary influences. Therefore, I rendered it as:

There are more and more poor in the market, she thinks, and in that moment, a green wave rises up and grows and grows and crashes against the headlands of Manzanillo, and it's as if it exploded against her chest, she becomes bathed in white foam. Laura has this ability to submerge herself in an image that begins as a color, for example, green, a color that grows until it becomes a wave that bursts and opens up and reveals other colors: the blue sky, the green darkness of the trees of the cliff, the cream-colored cliff itself (9).

Ultimately, I separated the sentence into two, but otherwise maintained the original sentence structure. Not only does this maintain authenticity in terms of characterization, but it also preserves the integrity of the author's original work.

The use of song lyrics, all in English, is another unique feature of the book. In fact, the lyrics, "Stop /what you're doing cause I notice/ it is leading you to ruin" begin the first chapter (9). They appear even before the Spanish text, and thus, their importance is clear. Similarly

themed lyrics of warning, caution, and admonishment appear elsewhere, always textually distanced from the Spanish that surrounds them. This is significant for the fact that these lyrics are imported, and so is the language they are written in, English. Despite efforts to assimilate the Jamaican population of Costa Rica into a mainstream mestizo culture, their culture survives. As Percy explains, “Carnivals, *man!* A ten-day binge to dance for those *blancos* who come to see if we were monkeys. *Man!* We’re doing bad and those pitiful musicians only think of making stupid songs” (21).

This exclamation, surprisingly enough, raises an additional aspect of discussion of the translation process. As already mentioned, Rossi smoothly and easily switches between English and Spanish; however, her use of English is not only confined to English song lyrics. Bilingual characters interlace their use of Spanish with English words. In translation, one difficulty was visually showing their bilingualism. When discussing with Laura religion, and its apparently pernicious influence, Percy says, “Smile, *negrito*, *Jesús* loves you” (28) The difficulty of translating this sentence was that “*negrito*” and “*Jesús*” were in Spanish, while “Smile” and “loves you” were in English (28). Ultimately, I decided to italicize the English words and keep the Spanish words as they were, hoping that readers would intuit Percy’s facility in English and Spanish. At other moments in the text, I would append “she [or he] said in English,” to a sentence that was originally entirely in English: “‘Percival, whe’ are youh?’ Mummah, Percy’s mom, said in English” (20). The distinctive orthography of Mummah’s Jamaican English reinforces the brief clarifying phrase. Though I chose to keep the lyrics in English, I realize that this does not create the same bilingual effect for the reader of the translation as it does for the reader of the original.

Translating Anacristina Rossi's *Limón reggae* was an enjoyable, albeit meticulous experience. I learned that the translation process is far from intuitive, and that a good translator must consider all of the subtleties of language and writing. I believe that my translation is good, but that it can be improved even more in terms of register and fluidity. In the future, I would love to translate Anacristina Rossi's *Limón blues*.

Translation

Laura fully opens her eyes to take in her surroundings. She has always been observant. Details fascinate her. A smile with its front teeth set far apart, a shade of skin so black that it appeared blue. Since childhood, the peculiarities of life have entranced her. And they continue to.

It's summer vacation. She's in central Limón and walks near the market. She recently spent a week in Manzanillo with Eudora Curtis and her aunt Maroz, and her mind oscillates between observing the beggars digging through the trash and losing herself in memories of Manzanillo. There are more and more poor in the market, she thinks, and in that moment, a green wave rises up and grows and grows and crashes against the headlands of Manzanillo, and it's as if it exploded against her chest, she becomes bathed in white foam. Laura has this ability to submerge herself in an image that begins as a color, for example, green, a color that grows until it becomes a wave that bursts and opens up and reveals other colors: the blue sky, the green darkness of the trees of the cliff, the cream-colored cliff itself.

The wave leaves her soaked with foam among the beggars, a black woman with elephantiasis pounces and says "Give me something, *my child*." Laura's eyes remain fixed on the giant scarred leg, on the contrast between the dark skin and the living red flesh. The woman touches her shoulder, saying, "I said, give me something *my child*," and shakes a jar. Laura finds a coin in the pockets of her jeans and hands it to her while staring at the open flesh, and

suddenly, a shoal of purple fish crosses her imagination. The shoal pulls her away from the wounds. She starts running.

She moves away from the market, heading towards the breakwater.

She stops by *la Capitanía de Puerto* and sits, but not on the boardwalk's lower step, but rather on the upper part. She moves her legs to where the waves burst without wetting her because they sink into the pores of the coral. Laura stays like this for a moment, looking at the bay and Uvita island in front of her. The sun burns her back, she checks her wrist, it's two, she raises her long hair so that the breeze can refresh the back of her neck, she lets it fall again. She turns to the city and sees the horizon, which she always enjoys: tall wooden houses with rusty zinc roofs.

Before the swindle, life was beautiful. Laura remembers.

Her mom wakes her with a kiss and the smell of coffee from the kitchen greets her, her mom tosses her long hair and says, "Precious little thing!" It's a morning ritual: the kiss, the words of affection, the aroma of coffee, and if she holds still she can hear her father turn the pages of his newspaper. There isn't any hot water in her house. Laura shivers under the spray of the shower but likes the shivering that comes with being cold. Drying herself, a little bit of heat tickles her. She puts on talcum powder, she gets dressed, proudly puts on the blue slip and the impeccably clean blue blouse that says "Escuela República del Perú." Laura is in first grade.

Her mom is waiting for her with a brush and comb to fix her hair. She slowly untangles the knots so that Laura doesn't complain and Laura takes the opportunity to examine her face in the mirror. She looks at her mouth that's fairly small, as if painted, she likes her mouth, her lips

are similar to her father's; she looks at her nose, about which her mother says, "We don't know if it's going to have a lot of character like Aunt Maroz's or be discrete like your father's or mine," but that's not important to Laura. Her eyes are important. They're large and dark and they have large curly eyelashes, that's good. What's unusual are the eyelids, they're wide and appear to be always slightly closed and people think that she sleepwalks or that she's absent-minded. Well, sometimes she does get distracted looking at colors or the way the sun illuminates something or a dog's tongue, but that's not sleepwalking, that's concentrating. She thinks it was her eyelids that made a new classmate point at her and say jokingly, "She's Turkish!" The other little girls didn't pay attention but that girl had a brother in the Rudín school, and one day when they were leaving school, some brats started to yell "Turk, Turk!" She went home very angry and her mother said, "What stupid boys, next time you tell them you're not Turkish, you're Lebanese." To Laura, this seemed worse, "Then, ignore them," concluded her mother. So she asked, "Where is Libya? Where is Turkey?" Her mother took the globe and found the Middle East and said to her, "My family comes from two places," and she pointed out one such place in Libya and another further down, and explained, "It isn't Turkey, but the Turks invaded it a long time ago, way before your great grandfather Abdul arrived in Limón." All of this because of some damn eyelids. Her mother also has eyelids a little like hers, at half mast, but her mother's eyes are very blue and so, people don't see the eyelids, they only focus on the blue.

Finally, her ponytail is ready and her mother takes the jar of gel and applies it to the temples and from front to back, and when she finishes she says, "You're ready, you're clean as a whistle."

Laura goes to breakfast. She gives a kiss to her father, who is dark with green eyes and very curly hair, her classmates who have seen him say, “He’s so handsome!” Although she once heard them say that her father had black hair and when she came up to them they got quiet. Her father wants to leave his job at the Securities Bank to start a business. Her mother objects, they constantly shut themselves in the room to argue. What does it mean to do business, Laura thinks and takes a bite of her buttered bread.

She is seven and crosses the city of San José every day. She goes from her house, next to the parish of La Dolorosa, to Morazán Park where Perú Avenue is. She likes the path she travels. The morning air is always very clear. On her journey back, she can see the Heredia mountains in front of her, which are bluer than the eyes of her mother. One Sunday, a few months ago, she went with her father up one of those hills. San José unfolded below, and to the right Alajuela and the large mountain of the Poás volcano appeared. The view was so incredible that Laura couldn’t breathe. Afterwards, they entered the forest. The trees were covered with moss and bound together with climbing vines and her father went along making an opening with his machete. The bushes and terrain smelled deliciously damp but Laura thought, “What if we get lost?” Suddenly, they began walking in silence, save a few birds that made a “chch chch chch” sound. In this cacophony of sounds, they heard a scream. Laura felt it sharply in her stomach, but didn’t get scared. Her father looked at her. It was a warning scream, but not a dangerous one. Nothing was dangerous there. Her father smiled at her and said, “It’s best we go back.” And then they saw a quetzal. Laura was completely astonished by the color of the bird which jumped up and down from branch to branch in front of them, until it left the forest. And now when she crosses the

street, with the Heredia mountains in front of her, she knows that she has a sweet spot for these mountains because Limón has already made her aware of the beauty of nature.

Limón is another part of Laura's life. Not only central Limón, Limón Town, as her aunt Maróz says, but rather the provincial south, the beaches, the forest, the rivers, and treasures she knows thanks to her adventurous father and especially her aunt's friends like Eudora Curtis or Miss Rose who invite them. Her mother says a trip to those places is an odyssey. First, they take a train, a branch of La Estrella. They cross the river on a ferry and from the other side, in Penshurt, take the *burrocar*, a train platform pulled by mules. Poor mule. The *burrocar* stops in Cahuita or Puerto Viejo. When they get to Manzanillo they have to take a boat. When the burrocar breaks down a cousin of Eudora Curtis brings them horses. By horse, the trip lasts twice as long, but it's more beautiful.

Laura remembers the first time she fell in love with Limón. She was three or four years old. She started to become aware of the smell of the train. "It's the substance they use to cure railroad ties," her father said. And the smell of those inside the train. The smell of black women and the things they sold: mints, coconut cookies, *patís*. After passing through the tunnels, where everything is dark, a few light bulbs are lit. The texture of the wickerwork on the seats and her leaping heart every time they crossed ravines. And finally, the best part would come. A change in the air. After many hours, that change could first be felt in the Estrada or Matina station. It was like being wrapped in a warm hug. Laura felt herself splashing and moving in a very soft and sweet-smelling atmosphere. To breathe that air was almost euphoric. It was the air of Limón. And suddenly, to be there, to get off by the platform, to hear different San José music and a different language. Limón English. Later, Vargas Park and its gathering of dense trees that house

a family of sloths. Even later, to go to Happy Landing and eat ice cream and lastly to Aunt Maroz's house to sleep.

That was her life. A normal life until her father left his job at the Securities Bank and started his own business, until they swindled him and left him to pay a fortune which he'd never be able to repay and Laura's whole life broke under the pressure. They lost everything and had to rent a small, awful house in a terrible neighborhood. Her father stayed in bed and refused to leave. Her mother started sewing for others and selling food. Nothing was the same after that.

The worse thing about the neighborhood was that you had to go by one of San José's largest slums and the kids there were smelly, thin, with large patches of missing hair, and the whores were just as dirty and skinny and smelly and bald-headed, but weren't wearing underwear. They raised their dirty slips and showed their behinds and privates to everyone.

Laura remembers her first morning in that new neighborhood. In place of coffee, a rotten smell, a smell of dead animal came over her. The smell entered through her bedroom window, which looked out onto the street. She hopped from bed and poked her head out. The kids of the slums, dirty and thin and half-naked and patchy-headed, were shitting in her doorway. Laura ran to tell her mother, but they had already ran off. Only giant pieces of shit remained. Her mother explained that the poor don't have toilets and so have to go looking for places to defecate. Laura helped her mother clean with buckets of water.

Laura is eight years old and to see the kids shit in the doorway infuriates her. But what really obsesses her are the faces they make.

Their mouths becomes deformed, the lips hang down, challenging and cruel. It's a face of pleasure and simultaneous heartlessness, ferociousness, an adult face with the worst part of an

adult, which Laura senses, but can't understand. Laura doesn't know what to name this expression that tears them away from childhood and turns them into monsters. It's as if this expression were signaling that to be completely filled with shit was the first stage of something much worse. And Laura doesn't know what scares her more: their thinness, their smell, that they go around half-naked, the hairless pink spots on their head, or the degradation of shitting in the entrance to somebody's home.

In those moments she didn't call it degradation, she called it humiliation. And the expression they wear shows that they like it. As if humiliating the doorway were an act of vengeance. But what are they taking revenge for? What have she and her parents done to them? Nothing, like the cats the children torture, usually little cats. They take them and tear off a limb or a paw. They cut them up or they pop their eyes out with sticks and nails. Laura can't sleep with their agonizing meows in her head.

Laura turns ten, she starts fourth grade and can't study because she hears the meows and cleans the shit and thinks about the kids' faces.

Since, at first, she didn't have words to name the expression on their faces, she would call it "something," "that."

One afternoon Laura's fourth grade teacher said that the class would have to do an experiment: kill and dissect a toad to study it. Laura got upset. "How can the class do this to a toad, crush its life for an experiment?" And then, she suddenly saw the connection with her "that." To shit in someone else's doorway and cut up a cat, or pop its eyeballs is to crush life. And to put blind cats in the middle of the street to see what happens is an experiment. That's why the kids laugh like crazy when the cats are hit and crushed.

Another one of the kids' experiments is to cut off their paws and see how long it takes for them to bleed out. But why do they do those experiments, who asks them to do it? And one day when she was brooding over this subject she saw more connections. Someone experimented on those kids and they couldn't defend themselves, like toads can't defend themselves. And now, the kids are the ones that experiment in doorways and on cats that can't defend themselves either. But who experimented on the children of the slum? What all-powerful professor ordered the experiment? And what was the experiment, what did they do to them?

"That" definitely was an adult thing, but Laura had only seen it in the kids. Until one day, on the street between her house and the slum, Laura saw it in an adult. She still doesn't understand, and didn't understand then why an expensive car passed by. It went by very quickly at the same time that a destitute man was crossing the street. The car slowed abruptly, but still hit him. It didn't seem to be serious because the man got up and walked to the car. The small, well-dressed girl driving the car lowered her window without turning off the motor and said, "Sorry, I didn't see you. Are you ok?" And the man, who was carrying a brick, destroyed her rear-view mirror and started hitting the hood and when the woman screamed, he screamed louder, and what scared Laura was a certain something in his voice, "*something*" vicious, profane, like the indecent expressions of the children when they were shitting at her door. For some reason, the man was screaming, "I shit on you, bitch, you're a piece of shit," and he would have destroyed the woman with the brick if two people hadn't come and taken him by the arms.

After this event that only she witnessed, Laura couldn't sleep and if she did, she had nightmares that made her scream, but that she never remembered in the morning. When she also stopped eating, her mother took her to the doctor, a friend of Maroz's from Limón. After

examining Laura, she said that it was only nerves, but that it also had to do with prepubescent hormonal changes. And there, in the doctor's office, Laura got up the courage to say, "I know that I have to be in San José to help you, Mommy, but I'd rather live in Limón. Her mother's blue eyes filled up with darkness and then with light. "Yes, my love, ok, don't worry about me, I can manage."

The hardest thing to do was to say goodbye to her father. The room was already tiny and practically without ventilation, and now with the curtains drawn and the only window closed, the room became sweltering. "Bye, Dad," Laura said and bent over. Her father raised his head and whispered, "Bye, Laura," and he who had always sweetly smelled of *Aqua Velva* or *Old Spice*, had foul-smelling breath.

She started to feel relief as soon as she got on the train. The smell of railway ties made her happy. Laura had always had an excellent memory, but since her father went broke, it took a lot more to remember, like everything else. And what's beautiful was that as the train moved forward and the rattling made her feel progressively better, her memory returned. She imagined herself with Maroz and Eudora fishing for prawns in a creek in Puerto Viejo. Eudora would show them to her and say "dem crayfish" and then laugh with a harsh laugh full of high and lows.

In Limón, Maróz's house and store were far from any slum, but Laura suspected that if she got near the poor, she would see "something," "that." She couldn't tell Maroz, but each time she passed beggars on the street, she would lower her eyes. One day, a classmate invited her over to do homework. Maroz allowed her to go, and they left together talking and laughing until Laura saw that they had to cross a giant slum. Laura became paralyzed. "What's going on,

c'mon, let's go," said her friend hurrying her. Laura couldn't move or breathe. If she discovered "that" in Limón, there'd be no escape nor salvation. Her friend pulled her, and Laura had no choice but to walk. It smelled like smoke and trash. She even lowered her head. Until her friend said, "You're acting very weird, you are very weird...Why are you holding your head like that?" And Laura had no choice but to raise it. She looked at the people in the slum, all that human life. And they looked at her, they smiled at her, and little by little she calmed down and finally managed to breathe: no one had "that."

Laura lived with Maroz from ten to thirteen, and during this time she refused to go to San José and her mother understood why. Things went well with her pastries and she hired an employee and stopped sewing and Laura was happy because sewing damages the eyes. Her father got better, but was never the same active, handsome, and kind-hearted man again. When Laura turned thirteen she didn't have any choice but to return to the capital because she wasn't sick anymore and her mom wanted to enroll her in a Catholic school. Her parents continued to live in the poor and neglected neighborhood, but at least the government was getting rid of the slum and relocating the people into large, new public housing neighborhoods.

She has spent a lot of time lost in her memories, seated on the boardwalk. It's almost three. She swings her legs towards the street and before jumping up, takes a second look at the tall wooden houses with zinc roofs, the damaged, but decent Victorian houses. Laura likes them, she even loves the details of the balconies. "That's called a continuous balcony," Maroz would say, and the English and French invented those little curlicues. Limón once looked like New Orleans. And possibly because of that similarity with New Orleans, Laura has always liked central Limón, and the balconies' details and the seals of carved wood that imparted a certain

atmosphere: that Limón was distinct, it had a strange immigrant population, which Maroz was a part of, and her grandfather Abdul, and all the black and Chinese people.

Laura walks along the breakwater. She thinks gratefully of the fact that Maroz has completely trusted her from the start and of the people of Limón, of all sorts, allowing her to walk freely through the city, a liberty that she exercised with delight once her obsession with “that” had ended. The only thing that Maroz didn’t allow her to do was to go anywhere near a dancehall called *Black’s*. Laura had always paid attention. “Laura always obeys,” Maroz informed her parents with a nasally accent. A wave of tenderness and love for her aunt invaded her. When she left to live with her, Maroz had given her five gifts.

The first gift was darkness. The night she arrived, Laura had nightmares and screamed and woke up. Maroz came to her room and found her terrified, bathed in sweat; she sat near her and felt Laura’s wet forehead and damp pajamas with her wide and large hand, and moved the tangled hair from her temples and braided it. Maroz didn’t ask about the nightmare. She only hugged her and said “Let’s not turn on the light, let’s let the darkness calm you.” And Laura, who was now feeling better, asked her “How?” And Maroz explained to her that the night transmits its own sense of tranquility. “At night, everything stops to regenerate itself. Darkness is a liquid, like medicine. It’s a type of silence, a time of pure rest. Let it enter you.” And then, her aunt fixed her pillows, she put them against the headboard and asked her to lean on them, half-sitting up, and to close her eyes. Laura obeyed and felt that the night really was a thick liquid that was falling over her eyelids and her skin and impregnating her with stillness. Shortly afterwards, Maroz added: “I feel like the darkness is protecting you.”

And later they began the habit of sitting in what Maroz called her “study” or “library,” a place that was already calming in and of itself, and there rocking in the easy chair, they awaited the shadows, which, according to her aunt, smoothed things out: the outline of things, emotions, reason, and the heart.

The second gift was books. Laura had left behind her children’s books and couldn’t ask her aunt to buy new ones, so she immersed herself, fascinated, in her aunt’s books.

The third gift was to gossip with her and later to encourage her painting and drawing. This gift was related to the first two. Not long after coming to live with her aunt, Laura realized that her happy dreams always had colors and that when she was afraid, the darkness calmed her, that when she was sad the colors raised her spirits. And after immersing herself in the darkness, she discovered that the colors would become much brighter, more intense. And Laura started to talk in colors to Maroz: “On blue days I don’t have class” (it was Friday) or “Yellow makes me dream of mom” (it was Monday). And maybe because painting is associated with childhood, it seemed normal when Laura asked Maroz to buy her watercolors and pencils and she didn’t think she was too grown up. She bought her paints, pencils, paper, cards. But the other part was missing.

In a corner of the library, by itself on a shelf, there was a fat, leather-bound book, with golden lettering. One Sunday, when Maroz was at the store, she took it. It was very heavy so she put it on the ground to examine it. Its golden lettering fascinated her, its rough texture, it looked like real gold. She trailed her eleven-year-old fingers across its embossed letters and didn’t think they were letters, but drawings. She found ink and paper and started to recreate those lacy drawings, like spiderwebs. She filled page after page. She was so engrossed, that she jumped

when Maroz said sternly over her shoulder, “Habibi, what are you doing with the Holy Qu’ran?” She was going to scold her when she saw the papers, that perfect Arabic calligraphy, but this child doesn’t even know Arabic, she thought, stopped her dead in her tracks. With the desire to scold her completely gone, she picked up the papers. “Habibi,” she exclaimed, exhaling a long breath like a snake. It was both a word of affection and a whistle of admiration, “Habibi, you’re an artist.” From that moment on, Maroz lent Laura the Qu’ran and also started to ask her to draw people, “Draw me the bag lady on the corner” or “Draw me the Calypsonian singer sitting over there,” and afterwards she would take the drawings and sit down to discuss them with Eudora.

The fourth gift was to let her to say swear words. Laura had been a polite girl, but everything changed with her father’s downfall: every swear word she heard in school or on the streets stayed in her head and then would come out of her. If she dropped a cup, she’d shout, “¡Motherfucking fucker!,” or if a teacher scolded her she’d whisper, “Bitch, bitch,” and if someone on the bus someone bumped her she’d scream, “Asshole!” Her horrified mother started to punish her and Laura contained herself in some way. But whenever Laura came to Limón, Maroz was very surprised by the stream of swear words, the number of bad words and her sweet, childlike voice didn’t go together. “Habibi,” she said after Laura finished, “you can be as foul-mouthed as you want in the house, but if you call someone an asshole in the streets, you’ll be in trouble.

The fifth was both a gift and task: to teach her English.

Laura has walked for miles remembering and thinking, her memories stop when the breakwater ends and she arrives at what was the American part, and then Hospital Point. She

walks away from the coast, to the left, and comes to the giant fig trees of Jamaica Town, as Maroz likes to call the Roosevelt neighborhood. Percival's neighborhood.

Where might Percy be, your friend?

1970

"Percival, whe' are youh?," Mummah said in English.

I'm sitting on the patio, *under the ackee tree* with granddad.

I don't answer Mummah because granddad opened his mouth and a harsh sound issued from his throat. I think he's finally going to talk! If I answer Mummah or stand up, he might lose the desire to talk. Excited, I go near Granddad, finally, you're going to talk, *Grandpop! Mummah* calls me again, Granddad continues making the harsh sound, Mummah gives up, I hear her go outside, slamming the door. Granddad opens his mouth wide and when I'm sure that the words are finally coming out, he closes his mouth and is completely quiet.

He looks at me powerlessly, with tears. I avoid his eyes. Granddad's watery look gets lost in the sea.

Our house is on the crest of the hill above Jamaica Town and we can see the Caribbean from anywhere. Uvita Island, Grape Key is in the center of the sea. To the right, the boats are docked at the wharf or waiting in the bay. A pretty and completely deceptive scene. There's no future in Limón. There's no work, there's no life. We blacks fall into poverty and indifference.

It's February and hot, or rather stuffy, and to top it off, the music has already started going. Two houses below, at the middle of the hill, a carnival band practices. Carnivals, *Man!* A ten-day binge to dance for those *blancos* who come to see if we are monkeys. *Man!* We're doing bad and those pitiful musicians only think of making stupid songs.

Hell, sometimes they get themselves together and play well. It's when Maikí's grandfather comes with his clarinet and pushes them to play jazz. Before going up the hill, Maikí's grandfather goes by the market and gets together some beggars that were once famous jazz players in Louisiana. Then, the Calypsonians get creative. Like now, they're playing a mixture of bolero, swing, and blues. Grandpop forgets his tears and concentrates:

I tell you...

Stop doing what you're doing cause I notice

It is leading you to ruin

Stop!

Grandpop happily listens to the entire song, his face, tense from having tried to talk, smooths out. We like Maikí's grandfather's clarinet that climbs like smoke above voices and houses. We like the chorus, we like the syncopated rhythm of *Stop!*

But the song ends and we tense up again.

We stay tense and silent under the ackee tree while evening advances and light slips away. The sea is losing its turquoise spots and becomes completely indigo. What might be Grandfather thinking about? He looks at the sea. I put my elbows on my knees and hold my head up with my hands. Grandpop turns. He has noticed my desperation, and perhaps my thoughts.

We blacks can't come come together to grow out of poverty. We're citizens, Costa Rica is our homeland and one's homeland shouldn't abandon its children. But we don't complain. We

shrug it off and look for a future in the United States. In the last few years, more than a third of our community has left.

Granddad is becoming progressively skinnier, but everyday he dresses in elegant shirts, striped shorts and a tie or bowtie, mom says that he made a fuss when they stopped selling the silk housecoats in Limón to which he was accustomed. But, who do you dress for? Ever since he became ill, he doesn't want anyone to see him and if he leaves, he travels incognito like a small child.

Granddad lost the ability to talk when the large floods in Matina came. I was eleven. Five thoroughbreds died and his library was ruined. Before that, he was communicating and would come to my room with books like *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Rip Van Winkle*, which I would devour. When he would give me things like *The Social Contract* by Rousseau, I would read very slowly and very lazily or I wouldn't read it at all, now I lament the education I lost. The water rose very high and the books became paste, when grandfather saw the disaster he roared, *Mummah* didn't know what to do and the only thing she could think of was to say, "You're dirt" and when grandfather stopped roaring he couldn't talk any more. He doesn't write because his hands shake, but the doctors say that his muteness doesn't have much to do with Parkinsons.

Grandfather was the best journalist in the Central American Caribbean, he founded lodges, newspapers, and led the Garvey movement at one point, the U.N.I.A. If he talked, he'd explain how Limón stopped being cultured and spirited and instead became clueless.

Clueless is an excellent word that Sylvia taught me.

Grandfather looks at me and moves his hands as if telling me to leave and ask the other older folks. *Grandpop*, that's impossible. They don't want to talk with younger people and when

they agree to talk, their stories are nonsensical. The worst are those that took over the U.N.I.A. They are very uncultured, they're all about the limelight, they get together in secret as if the U.N.I.A. was a lodge and Garvey's ideas were esoteric, and they don't allow young people to participate. Why did we change, granddad? I need to find out why and write it in a book and you nothing. In the hospital, they say that you'll never write again, because of Parkinson's, but if you continue to try, you'll speak again. According to *Mummah*, you were the best essayist and a great orator. You wouldn't tell me the ridiculous stories that others did.

The music suddenly gets louder, granddad and I jump about, they always play that calipso like that.

Let go me hand, man, let go me hand.

I am a true born Costarican.

I don't like the lyrics, *Granpop* couldn't like them either, they imply that the only blacks that are good at it are those that were born here in Costa Rica, when in reality there are hundreds that were born in Bluefields, in Colón, in Pearl Lagoon, or in Jamaica, and even in Trinidad.

Evening comes to an end and so does the music. The last rays of light float in the sea and in the sky, but it hasn't cooled down. He rolls up his sleeves. It's five thirty. At six he was supposed to meet with Sylvia. And on the subject of Sylvia, he remembers her friend Laura. It's been two years since he's seen her. He feels guilty because he stopped writing her and calling her. He remembers her long hair, her impulsiveness, her still, dreamy arab eyes that

unexpectedly became fast and aggressive. The memory is refreshing within the mugginess of the day.

With careful gestures, grandfather asks me to sit down again, to come closer to his chest. I get close. He wants to speak telepathically with me.

I remain still at his side while it gets darker. Among the houses and voices of the streets, the band's music starts up again: *Please help me I'm falling...*

The giant fig trees look like doors to Laura. She sits down on a concrete bench to think. What if she went up to look for Percy? She hadn't seen him in three years. They at least would write to each other. His letters were respectful and he only talked about books. But last year he stopped writing and each time she called him, his mother spoke hostilely and evasively, "*He not at home,*" or his sister said, "*Percy is in, Pañagirl,* but he doesn't want to talk with you." A few days ago, in Manzanillo, Laura had asked Eudora and Maroz if they knew why Percy wasn't calling or writing. Maroz, who knew the family because she had been very close friends with his grandfather Samuel, said: "Percival has problems." "What kind of problems?" Laura continued. "Huge ones. There's a person in Limón that wants to kill him." Wants to kill Percival? Impossible. There wasn't a sweeter and more serious boy in the world. They had become friends because of that gentleness. It was in a Social Studies class. A new teacher, from the interior, said that the capital was named after San José because he was the patron saint of the *Ticos*, Costa Ricans. "I don't think he's mine," Solange said. She was the best student and the teacher from before had encouraged her to express herself. "Then you're not a *Tica*," the new teacher said. And Laura, to defend Solange and because she was impetuous, proudly announced: "He isn't

Solange's patron saint because they're Baptists, and he's not mine because ours is San Marón." Maybe it was the strangeness of a name no one had ever heard before or the way Laura said it, the fact was that everyone, teacher and students, burst out laughing, and the teacher made it worse by saying, "Wouldn't it be San Bailón?" which increased the laughter. She doesn't remember why she hadn't seen Percival leaning there in the doorway, waiting for his sister Solange. He was two years older and in the boy's school. And Percival said in Spanish, with a lot of gentleness but arrogance, that San Marón was the saint of the Eastern rite in the Syrian Catholic Church. His comment was so unexpected that the laughter stopped, even the teacher's, and an uncomfortable silence descended, which Percy took advantage of to add, "San Marón's followers were among the first Christians in the world." The teacher finally reacted and ordered him to leave, but when he scolded Laura, it didn't matter, San Marón did exist and it was the fucking teacher that was wrong.

Solange ended up being just an ordinary friend, while Percy became her best friend. And during those years he always had that mixture of authority and sweetness that really impressed her that first day. "How did you learn about San Marón?" Laura asked much later. "We study these kinds of things with Father Morrison." "Who's Father Morrison?" "A very important man that worked with Garvey. And he's also a pastor."

Maroz let her go to certain activities in town with Percival like strolls under the moonlight and church fairs. And she would also let her go with them to Matina, to Mr. Samuel's farm.

Laura's stops remembering and she decides to go look for him. She crosses the line of fig trees and goes up the hill. The door is open. She knocks on it with her knuckles.

No one.

“*May I come in,*” she asks in English, and without waiting, enters and finds herself, unexpectedly, with Solange, both scream in surprise, laugh, and hug. Solange has gotten very tall. They look at each other and slyly evaluate the other’s beauty. Solange leads her to the kitchen and gives her something to drink. Laura looks to the patio, to the ackee tree, asks about don Samuel, Solange says that her mother took him to the doctor’s. “Is he in bad shape?” “He’s like he always is,” Solange says. She tells Laura she studies in Miami. “It was lucky that I caught you then,” Laura says. “Yes, generally I’m working all July in the US, but I came because my older brother has problems.” “Serious problems?” Laura asks. “*So so,*” Solange says, moving a hand, “Were you looking for him?” Laura says yes and in that moment the affection that she had for Percy permeates her. They stay quiet for a moment, drinking soda. After, Laura continues, “I’d like to see your brother, where is he?” “I’ll tell you only if you can keep a secret.” “You know that I always keep secrets, Solange.” “*Alright, look,* in Langley’s house.” “But I don’t know where that is.”

Solange takes her the door and from there points out Langley’s house in the distance. “It’s the one with a trumpetwood on the sidewalk,” she says. They say goodbye.

Laura walks on the hot asphalt, the sidewalk is cracked, in the house with the trumpetwood tree, there’s a tall and skinny man, a very handsome boy that looks at her with dark, intense eyes, but Laura’s not focused on his eyes, but on something much lower. She felt attracted to the contrast between his strong and wide back and his narrow hips, almost fragile, and it makes her want to get closer, to touch him. I have a fire inside me, she thinks, and almost closes her eyes because she imagined undoing his belt and unzipping his pants and finding the

line of hair that goes down from his belly button. I really want to twist my fingers in those little hairs, she had seen that line of hairs in photos of naked men and maybe her father, and it had seemed like the most delicious thing ever, but why would she ever want to touch a stranger like this, the desire was irresistible. She was on her period of course, when her period came, even though she was still a virgin, a fire would grow inside of her and she'd feel like she was burning. She had told Vera, her best friend in Catholic school, and Vera had told her the same thing happened to her, that they had to lose their virginity and make love, that there was nothing else to do about it. Surprised and embarrassed, Laura doesn't stay long at Langley's house, she moves on. But she feels the boy's eyes on her back.

Someone whispers at her back, "Laura, it's Ahmed." Laura turns around. The very handsome stranger is in front of her and he asks, "Don't you recognize me?" Laura slowly shakes her head and widens her eyes, she doesn't remember any Ahmed, nor does she remember such a friend. However, he is unexpectedly very familiar. Laura looks at him with surprise, intrigued. The young man hits his forehead with his hand and says, "*Of course*, no one has told you that I go by Ahmed now, but Habibi, Aisha. Have I changed that much physically?"

Only two people in this world call her Aisha or Habibi: Percival and Maroz. "Son of a bitch, you're Percival," she softly exclaimed. The last time she saw him he was a skinny and sickly-looking fifteen-year-old boy, but of course, some people shoot up like a weed, now he's probably eighteen and has his ID, now he's older, a full grown man. A genuine asshole, Vera, who also is foul-mouthed, would have said, and it made her laugh. "To my hideout," he muttered. "You never hid," she says to him. "No, but really I'm in hiding," Percy clarifies with a

whisper, "I was lucky to see you, I had to come out of hiding because Langley was supposed to send me some papers, but no one came. *I saw you instead,*" he said in English.

There are crowded bookshelves on the wall. Percy sits on the bed and offers her the only chair. He observes Laura's movements, he says, "You move like an Arab princess." "I don't think so, Maroz says that Palestinians are bumpkins." They both laugh, relieved. "Why did you change your name?" Laura asks him. "Because Percival is a colonial name. But Ahmed is a free name." Laura can't stop looking at him. When their eyes meet, she averts hers. "I'd like to change my name to Aisha one day." Ahmed nods, "*Yeesh, I know.*" Laura had told him that when she was born, Maroz wanted to give her that name, but her mother strongly objected because no *Tica* had that name, and people were going to make fun of her.

Laura asks him: "Why are you in hiding, what is this shit about them wanting to kill you?" "You still curse like a sailor," he observes. Not as much, you see I've calmed down a lot," she responds. "Do you still scream 'Asshole!' at people when you get mad?" "But of course, Ahmed. I'm not a little girl anymore." "Well, the thing about the threat is true," he says, moving closer to the window that looks out onto the marigold garden.

"It's been three years since we saw each other," he adds, turning around to look at her. He bites his lips.

Laura remembers how much she liked to see him bite his lips, she doesn't know why.

"I think it's been more than three years," she says, embarrassed.

"No. Three years. How could I not know? I've counted. They've been terrible."

Saying this, he turns his back to her again and looks at the garden. Laura tries to go closer, but a rough sound stops her, a kind of sob that gets stuck in her friend's throat

“*Man! So hard...*”

“But what’s happening?”

“Everything. Everything’s bad. But the churches are the worst of all. *Man!* I hate churches.”

“Perciv...Ahmed, “How can you hate churches? They’re very important and also there’s so many of them.”

“Ho ho ho! ‘So many of them.’ Churches are like lollipops that stop babies from crying.” Percival turns around and opens his large, dark arms with a melodramatic, “*Smile, negrito, Jesús loves you.*”

Laura doesn’t know if he’s being serious or joking. She looks at him, concerned. Percival continues:

“Limón’s a disaster. When we were little, at least it was clean. Don’t you remember? And before that, a long time before, it was beautiful.”

“Percy...”

“*Man!* The name’s Ahmed! How come you can’t remember something that simple? And don’t tell me that the churches are ours. The only organization that’s truly ours is Garvey’s movement, and our only house is Liberty Hall.”

“Liberty Hall?”

“*Yes.* Because of the churches. Liberty Hall and Garvey's movement are in the hands of usurpers.”

“White usurpers?”

“No, Habibi, why’d you think that! Black usurpers. Traitors. Last October they tried to sell Liberty Hall to some Asians, you know, the only building the community has. And the churches didn’t move a finger. *Man!* But we stopped that move.” He furiously hits the wall and bites his lips again, but this time it’s so hard that Laura thinks he’s going to hurt himself.

“Who’d you stop the move with,” she asks.

“We have a revolutionary organization,” he answers, looking at the garden again. “Have you heard of SNCC?”

“No. What’s that?”

“*Man!* You don’t know anything. It’s like you’re somebody else. Where’s Aisha, the warrior? You’re being spacey! Laura, *look*, the members of SNCC are revolutionary students in the United States.” His tone is impatient, angry. “*Alright*, are you against the Vietnam War?”

“Of course, but I can’t do anything in school.”

“Yes you can. I’m still in school too and we’re forming an organization now. It’s called CoRev.”

“You’re still in school,” Laura asks. In her astonishment there’s disappointment.

“I’m repeating eleventh grade. Saving Liberty was very stressful, we had to bring the case to court. But we won and when the judge ordered the usurpers to return the property, that delinquent leader promised to kill me. So, I hid. *Man!*,” he said in English.

“And if he’s a delinquent, why is he free?”

“Because no one snitches. Only us, the members of CoRev.”

“But why doesn’t anybody snitch on him?”

“How would I know, Habibi!,” he exclaims, irritated, and trying to control himself, he explains: “probably to avoid a scandal that would bring more racism from you and the other *pañas*.”

Laura doesn't like when Percy says *pañá*. Blacks call Costa Ricans *pañas*, and when they say it, it's used as an insult. He begins to search carefully among the books and bends to write. Laura asks herself who the other members of CoRev could be and notices that Percy is wearing a T-shirt that says Black Panther Party. She can't believe it. Vera, who went with the *American Field Service* to California, had told her about the Black Panthers because she admires them very much. Percy continues writing, Laura gets closer and asks: “Are y'all members of the Black Panther Party?” He falls over laughing, Laura always loved his laugh, and he tells her no, but that they want to continue the party's program, and so they read a lot, the books some Limonese people living in Los Angeles send them. “Ahmed, the warrior woman still exists,” Laura says, touching her forehead and with a strong desire to participate in something as exciting as what he's in, “remember that we said we were going to change the world.” Yes, she was twelve and he was fourteen, and laying on a bridge at Matina farm when they had arrived at that decision. “I think that I remember more than you,” Percy responds, smiling, and with a very soft voice, then he pricks up his ears. He goes to the door, Laura follows him. “*Who the,*” he asks without opening it. He's met by Langley's unmistakable laughter. Percival opens the door and four tall and mysterious boys, also dressed in black, enter with tilted berets and dark glasses. They turn to her. She can't see their eyes behind their sunglasses, but the tension in their mouths and the wrinkles on their foreheads show that they don't like her, except for one of them, a very skinny boy named Maikí. Maikí looks at her with warmth and with a smile. Percival asks: “*Remember*

Laura?” Maikí says that he remembers and extends his hand, Langley moves his head to say no and chewing gum asks for Sylvia. “Who’s Sylvia,” Laura asks full of curiosity and immediately sees that she has put her foot in her mouth. But Maikí intervenes to not make her feel as bad, he tells her, “Sylvia is my cousin, we’re both from Cahuita but are living in Limón.” The others become uncomfortable, they obviously don’t like that Maikí speaks to her. Percival breaks the tension by asking, “Did you bring me the papers?” Langley has them, he gives them to Ahmed while chewing gum with his mouth open. Percival looks at them, he touches his chin, he has practically no beard, he puts them on a shelf, takes others, mutters: I’m going to the door, now I’m going,” and leads Laura to the hallway and as he says goodbye, he gives her what he has in his hand and begs: “I want you to read it.”

Laura leaves Langley’s house worked up. She squeezes what Ahmed gave her. Her curiosity is too much. She goes down to the breakwater and sits on the step to read. He wrote in a corner, in English: “Women do fight, I hope that they inspire you.” There are photos. A black woman standing up to some soldiers. Another speaking to thousands, proud and defiant. Black women with *walkie talkies*, running. Below, it says: *Freedom Summer 1964*. It’s been almost seven years exactly. She looks for their names. The most important leader, judging by the pieces of text underlined in various colors, is Kathleen Neal, a distinguished member of SNCC and the Black Panther Party. Is Percy asking her to join something like this? Amazing! Under Neal’s photo appears the Black Panther Party’s program. It says that it’s the only revolutionary party in the world that incorporates women’s liberation and gays’ liberation. “We believe that no one is another’s property and that women have the right to have their own name.”

Laura likes what she's reading so much that she laughs alone. She can't wait, she needs to join Percy's group immediately. Of course there's a small problem, the other members of CoRev don't like her, except for Maikí, and they could decide not to let her in. But no, the party's program says that, "We don't believe in male dominance. We recognize that all women have the right to be free, how can they not allow her to join? We'll fight for a socialist system that guarantees a complete, creative life, without exploitation, to all humans..."

She finishes reading and goes home. Maroz has left. She mechanically puts on her pyjamas because she can't stop thinking. "Where did Laura, the warrior go," Ahmed complained. She should still be there, on the farm in Matina. Laura remembers. It made her jealous seeing Percy ride the thoroughbreds, but she only dared to ride the regular horses, like the ones Eudora's cousin gave them to travel from Peshurst to Puerto Viejo, some small, handy has-beens, but harmless.

She and Percy spent many hours riding horses or fishing or simply talking, laid out on the bridge. And they spoke of changing the world. Percy had the idea, the first time he told her, it electrified her. Change the world! *Yes, man*, in China and in Russia and in Cuba they changed it, and on other Caribbean islands, things are going on there. He already had a man's voice. She remembers that she liked his words but also his lips, thick and smooth and mobile, and the color of his skin.

Maroz said that Percy's grandfather was a *dandy*, an aristocrat. Mr. Samuel already had stopped speaking, but he would go with Maroz to the movies. And one day Lawrence of Arabia came out and Mr. Sam said they had to go, and they all went together, even Percy's mom brought Solange. Solange got bored, she wanted to leave. The others however were practically

hypnotized. Until the end, tears ran down Maroz's cheeks, but she never wanted to explain to Laura why.

That movie affected them. Because on the following trip to Matina, Percy took the old horse from Laura and gave her the reins of a thoroughbred mare. Laura looked at the mare: very tall, energetic, and told him: "I don't want to." "*But why,*" he sweetly asked, "if it's tame." Tame *to'r ass*, asshole," Laura said angrily, frightened. He insisted without getting upset: Seriously, Habibi, you're not going to get hurt." But Laura continued, "No, you bastard, *stick the fuckin' horse up your ass*, it scares me, it's making me panic," and she internally thought, this asshole sonofabitch wants me dead. But Percy insisted. First he made her touch it, move a currycomb across its belly and its haunches, get very close, smell it, it smelled lovely. That relaxed Laura, it amused her. Together they saddled up. When she was ready, a peon raised her up and got her on the horse, he didn't give her time to protest or throw herself off. To be on top of the mare was delightful. And when she entered an enormous field that Mr. Sam used to train his thoroughbreds, Percy screamed, hitting his chest, "I'm Auda, the best horseman in the world," and he began riding at a gallop and Laura's mare followed him, Laura was fascinated by the powerful gallop and unexpectedly yelled, "I'm Awrence and I come to remove the Turks from Arabia!" "I'm a fighter, I'm Aisha, the warrior woman!"

As she entered the grasslands, happy memories of Aisha, the warrior woman merged with the words from the revolutionary documents that Percy gave her. But Laura doesn't dream about that. She dreams about travelling across Matina's plains on a white horse, but now she's not a girl and she's not by herself, Percival is with her, he's behind her holding the reins and has to move his arms under hers, he brushes her breasts without intending to, and Laura feels Percival's

waist, his hips, his crotch knocking against her buttocks as the horse gallops, it's a completely real dream, the white horse runs and she doesn't know if it's the rhythmic shaking of the galloping horse or Percival's hand between her thighs, she doesn't know, but something begins throbbing there, something begins between her thighs and scatters, her entire body pulsates and booms. She wakes up agitated, throbbing because of something delightful that knocked her over. She moves her hand to her crotch, it's soaking wet; on one hand, she feels proud and adult-like, and on the other she feels insecure, curious.

She immediately gets in the shower and when she gets out, she takes the time to look at herself in the mirror. She knows she's very beautiful. She looks at the dark brown skin she inherited from her father. The arabic eyes that used to bother her are now a source of refuge. Large, brown, liquid, they had the power to boil and to kill. When did her eyes change from being half-closed to being fatal and totally open. It was when she was able to enjoy saying bad words, what a strange connection, and although her command of swear words came to an end, her alert and open eyes remained. She examines her mouth, it's pretty, it's well made, she inherited it from her father like the complexion of her skin. Her hair is long, shiny. And her breasts. When they grew, they embarrassed her, very pointy, they brought her too much attention, but now she likes that. Her legs are large like her aunt's, but much larger. Vera isn't wrong, her body is ready to have sex and also she wants to do it with her childhood friend, a terrible and amazing thing at the same time.

Laura finishes getting ready and leaves.

When he opens the door for her, she barely says hello, she looks at him with the eyes of a sparrow hawk, the way she looks when she's about to yell, "I'm Awrence," or, "I'm Aisha, the

warrior,” and starts to gallop. Percival is very happy to see her like this again. “*Come in,*” he says, in English. She passes and announces: “I’m going to join your revolutionary group!” Percival looks at her with astonishment. Laura repeats: “Yes, Ahmed. Aisha, the warrior woman has to become a revolutionary. As I read the papers you gave me, I understood. What’s up? You don’t believe me?” Because Percy doesn’t respond, she tries to revive the bond that they had, she says: “A long time ago in Matina, you explained to me that anyone could change the world, and I felt something very beautiful at that moment, Ahmed, there’s a feeling of neglect inside of me and I always hide it, and as you say “change the world,” the feeling of neglect lets up, and that was when I was a little brat and understood almost nothing. Percy...I meant to say Ahmed, look, more than neglect, I feel impotent and hateful and even want to die, definitely because of the slums, because of my father’s situation, although I couldn’t admit it to myself; I hid it, and that stuff about changing the world channeled these feelings, I don’t know how to explain...” Percy listens to her attentively, he agrees, “Laura, it was really nice to have you as a friend, you’re much better than my other friends. Also, what you’ve said is how blacks always feel: full of feelings of neglect, hate, and impotence and even suicidal tendencies, but hiding, *man*, hiding...” “I know,” Laura says, “now I know that that brings us together. Riding your grandfather’s horses I became ‘Awrence,’ and afterwards Aisha, a warrior woman. But I didn’t learn how to become a real-life warrior horsewoman, you can’t know what it’s like going to convent school. The papers you gave me opened my eyes. I want to join CoRev.”

Ahmed gets closer and says yes, that the fight welcomes all, the poor, the exploited, women, blacks, latinos, vietnamese, but that he had given her those papers to expand her mind. CoRev is only for our community, although an exception could be made, the big problem is that

you're still young, Laura." "When I turn eighteen will you let me join...?" she asks. "I think that you'd be able to come to our study groups when you turn seventeen." "Really?" "Next year," she asks with her eyes wide open. "*For sure,*" he says gently.

Ahmed speaks to her softly. Laura feels affected by that intimate voice, by his closeness, by the heat of his body, his narrow hips. Last night's desire submerges her, drowns her, and then she tries, she lifts her large hand and slowly caresses Ahmed's cheek, she almost reaches his mouth. Ahmed takes her hand. Laura gets much closer. But Ahmed's gesture is to avoid her caresses, to separate their bodies. "Habibi *dearest,*" he says releasing her, "I have a girlfriend. I'm in love with a woman."

This phrase feels like a low blow. "Who is it?" she asks with effort. "Sylvia," he responds.

Percival realizes that Laura is about to cry. "How could you be in love with him?" Tenderness overwhelms him. He wants to hug her but stops himself. "Laura, *look at me,*" he says in English. One day you're going to be a wonderful woman. I believe in you. That's why I gave you the documents, to help you. In a year you can start coming to our study group meetings, I promise you, I'm going to help you find your way. Speaking of paths, tell me if you already thought about what you're going to study. A true revolutionary should have a job." "I think I'm going to be a painter," Laura faintly says, looking at the garden, and adds, angrily, "Percy stop treating me like a little girl, I'm a woman too, like your girlfriend." "Yes, but you're not legally a woman yet. And stop calling me Percy, the name's Ahmed!" he exclaims with a roar that makes Laura jump. They begin to laugh. He picks up an envelope:

“When my paternal grandmother died last year I found this letter from your great grandmother. It’s from the prohibition days.”

“What was prohibition?”

“It prevented Chinese, Arabs, Turks, Syrians, and Coolies from entering Costa Rica. Take it.”

“Thank you,” Laura murmurs, starting to read.

It says that her great grandfather Abdul hid some recently arrived Arab immigrants and those affected by prohibition law in his house. Kaleb Bready was there then, a supposedly Syrian resident living in Limón, Marcelino Juleidini, also known as J. Ischia, “...Daúd Mansour secretly landed under the cover of the Valencia’s smoke. I married an Arab and for Arabs, the most important value is hospitality,” her great grandfather writes, “because of this I went hungry and never had dry pajamas...”

Laura puts the paper on top of a shelf, she has to keep calm, to feign indifference, to not show that her failure to seduce him pissed her off. She ties up her hair with a deliberately sensual gesture. She ties it up slowly in a ponytail, takes the letter and decides to leave as if nothing painful had happened, thinking about the future, about what they could do together, about friendship. “Bye, Ahmed,” she says, “We’ll see each other in less than a year if you keep your promise.” “I will,” he assures her, contritely. They head for the hallway when they hear a key. The door opens and there’s a woman with hair like a halo around her head, dressed in black, tall. Beautiful, Laura thinks. The girl that just got there doesn’t look at her, she only speaks to Ahmed. His face lights up when he says, “*Aright* Sylvia!” He doesn’t try to introduce them, perhaps because Sylvia, having settled down, yells: “You did it again! *Youh hav to com.*”

Percival curses and looks for her cap, they both rush her and leave, and close the door without even saying goodbye.

She begins walking quickly and to feel awful and then runs, now it's nighttime, she loses her grandfather's letter on her way home and doesn't care, she finally reaches Maroz's house, there are no lights on, she enters and collapses in the darkness.

A pain makes her shrink, what makes her hurt like this, perhaps the indifference of that woman, Sylvia, her disdain, she looked at her for three seconds and didn't even introduce herself, a wave of passion and desire to touch Percy also hurt her, what a shame, she had tried and Percy had rejected her, oh how shameful. And the two had left without even looking at her.

She begins to cry and bites her fists and yells, "Asshole! Percy asshole, asshole, asshole!" Her yell is liberating, but she continues crying. Now she isn't crying, she's only rocking rhythmically to cheer herself up when her aunt enters and turns on a small light. "Aisha! Habibi!" "What's happened?" Laura lifts a pair of sad and tearful and red eyes, "Don't worry auntie, I'm ok now." "Well, I don't know, wait here, I'm going to get my things." Laura listens to her open cabinets and then enter into the darkness with her jars and bottles. Maroz sits her on the sofa, she slowly combs her hair and rubs her arms and the nape of her neck with lavender water. She leaves.

Laura stretches herself out on the sofa and stays like this, alieved, floating over blackness. She hears her aunt turn on the coffee maker and, shortly after, enter pushing the rocking chair with her foot and carrying a tray with sweets and cups in her hands. She looks like a battleship. "Tell me, did something happen to Percy?"

“No, auntie,” Laura says taking the cup, “but for now we can’t be friends. He’s a revolutionary and I am too, but we can’t do it together because I’m underage. He says I have to wait a year at least. Also, he has a girlfriend, Sylvia, who treated me like shit.”

Maroz watches her without talking and makes herself comfortable in the armchair. They remain in silence drinking tea.

“They want to kill Percy because of a building called Liberty Hall,” Laura says suddenly.

“Liberty Hall is Black’s,” Maroz says, rocking herself in the armchair.

“What? That dirty dance hall?”

“You went there, Laurita? Did you disobey me,” Maroz asks worriedly, stretching her neck.

“No, no, auntie, never, but the entire world knows that Black’s is a dump. They are going to kill Ahmed because of a dump. Just so you know, Auntie, Percy doesn’t call himself Percy anymore, he calls himself Ahmed.

She pronounces the Arabic name in such a formal a way that the two laugh, a nervous laugh, her eyes fill with tears, she removes her glasses, she wipes her eyes.

“I don’t know why Arabic names are so important to them,” she says, “Father Morrison calls himself Mustafā now.”

“Auntie, why didn’t you let me go to Black’s?” Laura asks, going closer.

Maroz rocks in the armchair, she moves her large hand across her head, feels her short, wavy, gray hair. She sighs. Then she speaks with her nasally accent.

“Habibi, Limón’s black community has its taboos. Black’s is a taboo.”

“Why is it a taboo, auntie, I don’t understand.”

“Yes, something one can’t talk about.”

“But, why?”

“Sorry, Habibi, I’m not going to talk about it.”

“But do you know what happens?”

“Yes, but I can’t tell. Secrets are very important to them. They protect themselves from *pañas* with their secrets. Because they don’t get along well with *pañas*.

“Yes, now I know, auntie,” Laura says.

“But it wasn’t always like that, Habibi,” Maroz says, pushing herself in the armchair, as if rocking were helping her to speak. “In the beginning, blacks were kind-hearted and they believed that Costa Ricans would consider them equals. But one day, they realized that *pañas* considered them undesirable, inferior. In the 20s and 30s, *pañas* did everything they could to destroy them. The government stopped them from getting jobs, they wandered through the streets, dying of hunger, almost half of them had to leave. When Figueres gave citizenship to the ones that remained, they were already a very wounded, distrustful, closed, secret community.

“Auntie, do you think they hate whites?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. In the first place, *pañas* aren’t white, they’re mestizos. The English are white and blacks love them, or at least loved them. They also get along with the French and the Germans. In reality, blacks in Limón get along well with everyone that’s a foreigner.”

“They got along well with me.”

“Yes, but that was only when you were a young girl. And my friendship with Eudora and Miss Rose and Samuel has endured because they don’t consider me a *pañas*, but an Arab.”

Laura looks at her aunt again with hurt eyes. “Habibi,” Maroz continues, serving her some sweets, “I knew that something unpleasant was going to happen between you and Percy, but I couldn’t avoid it. Did you fall in love?”

“Ay auntie, I don’t know. He was my best friend, not anymore, now Vera is my best friend, even though she lives in California. There is another person in the revolutionary group, who also is a good friend, his name’s Maikí.”

“Maikí Robinson? His family is from Cahuita. His grandfather, Denmark Robinson, is that old jazzman, the one who wears the jacket with the tailcoat.”

“The one with the tailcoat? It’s been awhile since I’ve seen him. Auntie, I don’t know if I’m in love with Percy, but I like him a lot, I’m trying to say, physically. He’s very handsome.

Laura’s eyes become filled with tears again.

“He is very handsome, yes, Habibi, but they want: “Blacks to only date other blacks.” Laura it’s very late, we’re going to bed.”

She woke up well-rested, as if renewed, the pain was like a knife that entered and left. She poked her head out of the window, the sea was still and the sky was shining. Today is Sunday, she remembered, I’m going back to San José today.

Maroz was making breakfast.

“Auntie, you’ve always been very quiet and Mommy keeps her mouth shut, Mommy only speaks about the parish and Father Pipo, I don’t know much about y’all, tell me about yourself. Don’t worry, there’s time.”

Maroz is happy because Laura no longer has pain in her eyes and in her intense and smooth voice there’s no pain either. They finish making a thyme paste with yogurt and they sit at

the table. Maroz serves her an aromatic tea and smiling says, “Yes, it’s true, Habibi, my Aisha, I haven’t told you much, your Mother and I are reserved, although your Mother is worse.” She cuts slices of pita bread and spreads them with paste. “You have your reasons for not telling me things, but I want to know more about you. The train leaves at twelve and it’s barely nine, we have all morning, Auntie,” Laura begs her. Maroz finishes eating and gets comfortable, she moves her large and thick hand across her short hair. Look, Habibi, I was orphaned by my mother at two years old. Baba married again, you already know that, with a *pañã* from here in central Limón, your great grandmother. They had your grandmother Yalile and a little later, your grandmother also died. Baba was jinxed, poor man, I know you’re thinking it. It’s just that back then many people in Limón died of yellow fever, of dirty sewage, and typhus. To flee from those illnesses perhaps, your grandmother Yalile went to San José. I stayed to help Baba in the store. But Baba died. I had a boyfriend, Mr. Malik. I stayed in front of the store while John Malik made plans for us to get married. But he contracted yellow fever and also died. Now you’re going to think that I’m cursed too, poor woman. But that’s not true, you’ll see.

Initially, I became a widowed orphan. My neighbors really helped me, like the Tabashes, the Esnas, but Sam was the closest one to me. No, it’s not what you think, Aisha, it wasn’t a crush, we knew each other for thirty years. Look, Baba became friends with some rich black folks and got permission for me to study in their schools and learn English, the English-speaking schools were excellent, with a British curriculum brought over from Jamaica. Sam taught the rest to me, in fact, he was indirectly responsible for the me and Eudora being able to teach you English. When did Mr. Malik die? I don’t remember now. Was it in 1928? I just know that the song *Yes! We have no bananas* was popular at the time. Samuel entered my life and he distracted

me with his books, his newspaper, and his constant preoccupation with his community. It hurts me to see him now, you know, as smart as he was, and now he can't speak or write, and maybe he's decaying internally, we just don't know.

At the time, gangs with children aged from six to fifteen were ravaging the city. In 1929, Wall Street crashed and everyone felt that the end of the world was near. But afterwards, the world got better, businesses were going again, people prospered and we were able to help street gangs. Blacks celebrated.

That was a delightful time. The person you now see as slow and fat was a really pretty girl, who in 1933 found her true love. Yes, I said no to his proposal, I was twenty-eight years old and I didn't want to compromise my sense of happiness, no one could say, "Today, you're not going out, Maroz," nor demand that I make them something to eat. Samuel said that my attitude wasn't typical of Arabs, and he was right. What changed my Arabic fate was Malik's death, God please accept him into heaven. When he asked my hand in marriage, I was a young girl, and if I'd married him, I wouldn't have been happy. Happiness came to me little by little, Laura. In the beginning, I confused it with bad luck, a feeling of neglect that would end when I married Malik. But then I saw that Malik died too. A little while after his burial, and while still mourning, I started to feel strangely good. Those were the communist times and my employees were asking me for overtime pay, in Limón they worked ten and twelve hours, on Saturdays and on Sundays. We sat and I served them sweets and coffee. I listened, one by one. Later, another part of me said, "You're right, but business isn't good enough to pay them overtime. We're going to work only eight hours." They were surprised. "And Sundays? Now we're not going to work on Sundays? And Saturdays?" "We'll rearrange schedules so that we can open some weekends. I

want to hear your suggestions.” And so that’s how it went, talking and planning. And after I saw their smiles and that they were working better, I felt like there were bubbles in my body. Stocktaking and payroll stopped tormenting me. That was what it meant to be an adult, to be free. That, my girl, was happiness.

During those year Samuel convinced me to study the Arab question, The Balfour Declaration, The Sykes-Picot Treaty. In 1949 I went to the Holy Land, a place I vaguely remembered, Jaffa, the oldest town in the Mediterranean, where the whale vomited out Jonas. There horrific things happened to me. Thing so terrible, that when I returned to Costa Rica, Limón was like paradise, and so I let you walk freely. And I cried a lot while seeing Lawrence of Arabia because the Arabs were ingenious, gullible, and stupid.

“Ingenious, gullible, and stupid, like mommy says about my father,” Laura says sadly.

“Ok, perhaps the same thing happened to your father and the Arabs, but the Arabs couldn’t come together during a crucial moment either.”

Walking, Laura bumps into Maikí and he happily greets her and says, “*Come back soon.*” That makes her feel accepted, although it’s only a formulaic courtesy.

Hi dad, I’m coming back from Limón, again you’re laid out in bed, I don’t want to bother you, I’m going to speak quietly, I’m here to tell you about the good things that happened to me, well, one time things didn’t go so well for me, I was hurt badly but it felt like a knife that entered and left. Something bad happened with Percival, but that’s not what I want to tell you. Mom isn’t here, she’s with some neighbors she knew, some people from church, they caught up with Father Pipo after mass; those women act perfect, they don’t leave her alone in the darkness or the sunlight, they help her make pastries, and they’re becoming more Catholic all the time, including

her. Oh, dad, the years go by and instead of getting better, you're going downhill, I hate to see you like this. They broke you on the inside. They took your will to live and now you can't fix it. Maybe because you're ok. They were strong, astute, and rich. You're honest, trusting. Your confidence wrecked you. You don't hear me because you're drugged up or sleeping, but I'm going to tell you because your soul might be awake. Well, I don't know if your soul's awake. I don't like saying soul any more. Dad, when the rich bastards left you in ruin, God became a problem for me because, if God would let them do what they did to you, then he was very cruel. I stopped believing in God. Listen to me, dad. When you were still bankrupt, a feeling of death overwhelmed me, with a nasty gray color. I didn't want to live in a world where the good lose and the bad win, and that was the only world there was. Because of that, although the colors made me happy and I liked them a lot, there was a part of me that was always gray, though I didn't realize it, and when I realized it, I hid it. Then one day Percy told me that ordinary people could change the world, and when I heard, it was very strange, as if the grayness left and the colors entered the deepest part(s) of my body, it's very hard to explain. And afterwards, I saw Lawrence of Arabia and I wanted to be like Lawrence, tenacious and brave, if he'd been able to expel Arabia's invaders, I could change the world. But, the problem was how to do it. And what I've come to tell to you is that I know how to do it now. It's called revolution.

There's another thing, dad. The children of the slum. They were corrupted. They looked at me with that corrupted, rude face. It's because people did "something" to them. I don't know if the revolution can change what's already corrupted, and I don't know if it can make you healthy again. But I know that it's the way and I know thanks to Percival, who isn't Percival anymore, but is Ahmed.

Ready to fight in this competition

Cyril Sylvan

Langley is lying in the armchair with his legs stretched out. He chews chicle making noise and that annoys me, *man!* He raises an envelope from the floor, rips it, takes out a letter, sighs, reads it. Reinaldo, Albert, and I look at it. “*Arigh!*,” he announces, still chewing, “*Mummah* says that there’s money in New Jersey, that I have to stay here while they save money to buy this house, *she sends money for the rent. Arigh!*, we’ll still have a free *headquarters.*” He lazily gets up from the armchair and lets out one of his usual laughs.

Maikí and the three girls from CoRev–Mavis, Virginia y Marcelle–are cooking. Mavis sticks her head out and says, “*Labster ready,*” in English.

Today we bought lobster. This is the year for lobsters, I never saw this many since I was a young boy. Vendors put them on the sidewalk in burlap sacks, and because they have to sell them alive, the lobsters crawl out of the sacks and walk away. When we were traveling here, the streets were full of those creatures, and Maikí thought that we should celebrate a year and a half of CoRev by eating lobster and because they sell them dirt cheap, we bought two sacks and a tin plate to cook them. We had to make a bonfire on the patio. Maikí and the girls were putting live lobsters in the boiling water, which is really barbaric.

We’re already at the table when she sticks her head out, very elegantly and dressed in all black, Sylvia, my love. She usually comes late. She’s only in Limón on the weekends and during vacations because she studies in San José. There are no colleges in Limón, colleges need money. Everyone in CoRev finished high school, but if we want to be work professionally, we have to

leave. *Man!* The country's first port and there's no place to study! But we always educate ourselves. I first learned from my grandfather, later from these folks and Father Morrison, and now from the friends that send us books and newspapers from New York and California. The United States is *Pig Amerika* like the Panthers say, but it's also a source of knowledge and public awareness. Like in Garvey's time.

After smiling at me, Sylvia looks for a chair and asks with a slightly hoarse voice to make space for her. She sits in front of me, delighted by the banquet. Maiki's garlic and butter salsa is sublime, and so is the fresh and firm tail meat.

"*An what about de beer?*," Sylvia asks in English, before bringing the fork to her mouth.

"This is a work meeting about work," Langley explains. There's no beer.

"Sylvia doesn't remember rule number three," Reinaldo says. Sylvia looks at him, finishes chewing and asks:

"*Rule number three?*"

"*Yes, sweet,*" Langley says in English, "Members can't drink alcohol while working."

"Wrong," Sylvia corrects him, "*No party member can BE DRUNK while doing party work,*" she says in English.

"You weren't here when we changed it," I say to her. We changed the rules and our platform.

"I know that," Sylvia says, stopping to look for a glass, "but I don't remember that rule changing."

"It's because, when you're in San José and studying, *you get distracted,*" I say.

“Today’s meeting is about political education classes for the new members,” Virginia says.

“OK, thanks for reminding me,” Sylvia responds.

“*I want to raise a point,*” I say to them in English.

“Ahmed has the floor,” Langley says, chewing with half-closed eyes, “*man, dis labster IS GOOD!*”

“I want my revolutionary friend Laura to be able come to the political education classes,” I announce to them clearly.

“Laura, *who dat?*,” Reinaldo asks in English.

“The arab woman that was with me that evening a year ago when y’all...”

“*Why youh call har árabe? She plain pañagirl,*” Sylvia rebukes.

“Because she’s more Arab than paña, her real name is Aisha,” I respond.

“Ha ha ha!,” Sylvia exclaims sarcastically. “Arab *to ‘r ass!* More paña than gallo pinto. *Aisha you say? Nobody calls her dat.* Does she even speak Arabic? Is she Muslim?”

“There are Christian Arabs, Sylvia. But she isn’t Christian, she seems like an atheist to me. And her aunt does speak Arabic,” I explain to her and immediately regret it. *This should not be happening,* I shouldn’t be fighting with Sylvia. I soften my voice. “In any case, *dearest,* revolution has to happen all over the world, it doesn’t just belong to blacks. If she’s Arab or paña, it’s our obligation to help her to grow.”

“*Oh yes? Since when* are there obligation?,” Sylvia asks, looking at everyone. “No part of our program says this.”

“*Sweet*, the spirit of the 1970 Convention is totally international. We adopted this spirit, maybe you forgot,” I say.

“*Ahmed is right*,” Langley says, and looks at us one by one. But Sylvia also is right, because we don’t like that paña.

“Not me. I like her,” Maikí says.

“So that makes two,” I say and try to laugh, but it doesn’t work.

“*I doant know her*,” Marcelle says.

“We haven’t seen her either,” Mavis and Virginia say.

“Well, I don’t trust pañas, even as revolutionaries,” Albert says. It’s the first word he’s said since he arrived.

“The ox spoke!,” Sylvia says.

“*Listen all*, we can’t have this *ghetto* mentality, it goes against the revolutionary spirit,” I say.

“In theory, Ahmed is right,” Langley says.

“But in practice, he’s not,” Reinaldo says.

“I have an idea,” Langley says. “I want the paña to come to our political education classes, but don’t want her in the group, no vote no voice.”

“And that’s too much,” Sylvia says. “She’s part of white supremacy, *as Garvey would put it*.”

“*I object*,” I say.

“*Arigh, stap this!*,” Langley exclaims. “Now we’ve got an agreement, we’re not going to waste anymore time on that paña.”

“Right!” I say, both content and irritated. I lower my head.

She leaves the house to go to Langley’s, she’s very excited, she really wants to take those classes! A little while ago, in December, she took her high school exams and passed, now she’s a graduate and is free, well, more or less free, she has two months of freedom until she enters the U, two months to be in CoRev. She thinks that if they accept her into class, they’ll let her join, and then she can be like Sylvia, who studies in San José and comes down on the weekends. Ahmed told her to bring a notebook, she got it from the store, Maroz sells all types of things, not only food, also dressing table items, stationery, books. Her aunt’s store is on Second Avenue and it’s been decided that she’s going to work there everyday, but she can participate in CoRev’s activities. Laura presses the notebook against her chest while walking quickly, she’s so excited that she feels infantile, like before she started school every year.

She arrives at the market, today there are drunks and beggars, as well as other indigents that already are on all fours digging through the trash. And the black women with elephantiasis, she had forgotten them, now they follow her asking for alms, damn, why don’t they see them in the hospital? Laura begins to run.

She leaves the market’s surroundings and breathes with relief.

It’s the third week of December and they should be having a storm but they’re not, the Caribbean monsoon is late, there’s a delicious sun out, a clear air. She really likes the rippling of the water, those small and consecutive waves that make the sea shake and are related to the trade winds, in this day the air and water get goosebumps and become tremulous because of the trade winds and then the monsoon comes. It hasn’t come yet.

Yesterday Ahmed told me: “class begins at one and you have to be on time.” She looks at her watch, 12:45.

She walks faster.

Laura knows that rushing is childish, but her appearance is adult, this morning Maroz’s mirror confirmed it. She cut her hair at her shoulders and straightened it and moved it around her neck. She’s taller, thinner. What will class be like? Ahmed calls it political education. And as she thinks about these class, she begins thinking about her drawing classes, Maroz was the one that insisted that she go and the one who paid for it. They started with the human body. The model was a very handsome man and when he entered naked, Laura became breathless, again the fire inside, she couldn’t concentrate. But later her interest in drawing became stronger and she became one of the best in the class. She liked everything about the class, she ate up the teacher’s explanations, it amazed her to discover that the entire human body could be reduced to geometric figures.

She starts to go up Jamaica Town’s hill. Half way up she stops to rest and looks below: the turquoise sea, the green island, full of trees, steam in the bay. A weak but consecutive swell leaves white lacework. She continues walking and hears a song:

Stop what you’re doin’ cause I notice

It is leading you to ruin so

Stop!

She likes the ballad, it’s by the Lobster Band. This has been a lobster filled year, Maroz sent her various sacks. “It took a lot to get them,” she said.

She's already at Langley's house. There are various boys and girls of her age at the door. They look at her amicably but reservedly, they barely say hello. Everyone walks with an air of importance and mystery, she thinks, we feel chosen or predestined because we've chosen a path that will change the world. Laura's sure of this and she can't stop her head from filling with images of victory and suffering, even though they're rather general images, fantasized, barely related to the books that Ahmed lent her, one about the Black Panthers and a small red book by President Mao. She didn't understand them much, but they excited her.

One of the girls looks at her watch, Laura looks at hers, it's 1:15, the girl smiles, Laura hopes that Sylvia isn't the instructor.

Ok, very good, Maikí is the person approaching with his hand raised. "*Aright, Laura.*" he exclaims when he arrives, he says hello to her first, then the others. The breeze moves the trumpet wood's leaves. Maikí opens the door and rushes them in: "*Come on in.*"

"*Now I want your opinion, tell me: what's a revolutionary?*" They're seated on the floor, Maikí walks in front of them. They have to watch him and listen to him, Maikí doesn't let them write. "If you write you'll become distracted," he told them.

They're uncomfortable on the floor, but it doesn't matter, they're watching Maikí: "What does it mean to be a revolutionary?" he insists. Hands raise unconfidently. There are tentative answers: to be against the racist system, to fight for the rights of blacks, to defend the exploited. "A revolutionary is someone that wants to change the world in a radical way," Laura says. Maikí points her out with his long and dark index finger, "Those are key words," he says, "change and radical."

It's very hot. Laura feels her blouse about to stick to her body. She gets distracted. She looks at the others. The transparent balls of sweat on their faces suddenly unite and form a drop that slips and falls to the ground with a plic! They have dark stains under their arms, surely she does too, and a damp collar. And she smells their smell. Very distinct. She almost didn't notice it about her classmates because they were little girls, but she started to notice it as she grew up. It was the smell of blacks that sold things on the train and the smell of Percy's grandmother and mother too. And the smell of Solange when had finished growing. A sweet, vanilla smell. Did they notice her smell? How would she smell to them? According to Maroz, Arabs have a special smell because they eat certain foods. But she's not as Arab as Maroz. And although her mom denies it, her father could be a mulatto, like many people in Costa Rica.

"What are you thinking about, Laura?" Maikí says raising his voice. Laura jumps in shock, Maikí never raises his voice. "Sorry, I got distracted, it's just that this room is hot..." Desmond, could you open the kitchen and patio door?," Maikí asks while opening the door to the street. A pleasant draft refreshes them.

"Aright, let's see who's really paying attention."

Maikí moves his long arms like a window fan: "Laura said 'to change the world in a radical way.' But to say it like that is very arrogant." Maikí hits his solar plexus: "Before changing the world, you have to change yourself," he tells us. "To change one's mind isn't sufficient enough. What's most important is changing the heart."

Evenings always end windily, it starts to get dark and no one realizes. The things that Maikí says fascinate her, she later notes: “A revolutionary is a supremely generous being. A radically new being.”

And now night falls and Maikí says this class is going to end: “Make a circle and grab hands. Breathe deeply and concentrate on the hand that you’re holding. Feel it. Feel their skin and warmth.”

And like that a lot of time goes by, with their eyes closed, holding hands.

Laura and Maroz are sitting in armchairs, observing the night, to greet the shadows they were always quiet, silence was an important part of the rite, but Laura can’t stop speaking at the moment. She’s been living with her aunt for three weeks, but Christmas was in between and her parents came from San José and they invited her to many church celebrations in Limón and it’s not until now that they have time to talk: “Auntie, it’s marvellous, you’ll see,” Laura says. She distinguishes the smile of her aunt in the semi-darkness, how incredible, Maroz is sixty-some-years-old and is like a friend of her age, she doesn’t have to explain much to be understood by her. “Maikí’s classes are the best. Reinaldo’s class is boring.” And rocking herself, Laura continues telling her about the communication exercises and that they’re going to visit the very poorest of black people in town. “Of course Auntie, their focus is their community, you should’ve seen him that day when he said that Limón should’ve been a separate country, I thought it was a joke, but no.” And suddenly, rising up from the rocking chair and turning on a lamp she says: “Auntie, I want to teach you something.” She picks the backpack up off the

ground, gets out the spring loaded and thick-paged notebook, rips a sheet with a charcoal drawing on it and gives it to Maroz. Maroz takes it, intrigued, and with a certain reverence. “Habibi!” she exclaims like it was her first time saying this, the word is a whistle of admiration. It’s a drawing of a young black boy leaning against a wall. The side that he leans on transmits the effort, the tension in his muscles. He’s naked. His long legs crossed like scissors, they intersect at his ankles, they hide part of his manhood. His free hand expresses movement and that gives him a casual and informal quality that is contradicted by the tension in his muscles as he leans, and by the intensity and seriousness of his eyes, of his mouth, of the energy with which he bites his lips. “But it’s Percival,” Maroz says with a weak and very soft voice and without taking her eyes off the drawing, and adds, turning to look at her and without raising her voice, “How did you do it? I already know that the members of CoRev are avant-garde and that they believe in sexual liberation, but I didn’t know that they taught sex-ed, or do they?” Laura lets out a guffaw, “No Auntie, that’s crazy! That evening Ahmed was in his jeans and Black Panthers T-shirt. Auntie, you paid for classes so that I could learn to draw the body and see the muscles under clothing, it’s not that difficult.” “You weren’t paying attention then,” her aunt says entertained and relieved. Yes Auntie, I did. What happens is that Ahmed talks very slowly. You know how he is. He takes everything seriously. He lets us take notes. I was taking notes and because I write quickly and he was leaning back and staying still to give the others a chance, I began drawing him. First I drew a sketch. That night, I continued it, I had to erase a lot, correct a lot, do it and re-do it, but now I’m happy.” Yes, Habibi, Aisha, it’s very beautiful,” Maroz says looking at it again. “Ok, auntie, I wanted you to know that I’m not wasting your money.”

Maroz looks at her niece, who is keeping the drawing in her backpack. She looks at her large, attentive, and profound Arabic eyes, her long and beautiful hands and thinks that the best thing about Laura isn't her beauty, that thick, rippling hair, that beautiful mouth, that curvaceous body, that intense, sweet, and immensely pleasant voice; no, the best thing about Laura is her honesty. But it's not exactly honesty, it's something else. There's a word in English that describes it: earnest. How do you translate it? She doesn't remember. Maybe there's no equivalent in Spanish. She loves Laura so much that she can't express it. Love and fear. Where will life carry her? Has she made a mistake by giving her so much freedom? She tells her that the drawing is good again, that she has a bright future as a painter. Laura thanks her, turns off the light, "It's better to talk with the lights off, Auntie." And then Maroz faces what preoccupies her: "Habibi, tell me, did they talk about sex? Because knowing your mother, she never; and I..." Maroz was afraid that Laura would pull away, but it's the total opposite: "Mom, nothing, of course, and in school they talk about it like it's nasty. I had a professor that always said, 'Girls, marriage is key,' of course Vera and I didn't believe it." "Ok but, has someone explained to you how things are, that's to say, practical things...?" "Oh, Auntie, you should have seen it. In fourth grade, a young, very rebellious nun came, and she made us read *The Diary of Ana María*. Well she wasn't falling in love with the gardener! And she told us about everything she did with the gardener, they did teach us practical stuff. Oh, Auntie, we really liked her. But even before the rebellious nun came, I didn't believe that sex was nasty. I believed the Koran more." "The Koran?" "But it's in Arabic, Laura!" "Auntie, I know you know, you have a translation, and also the Hadiths. You said I could read the WHOLE library." "And when did you read the Hadiths and the Koran?" Oh, auntie, it's been a while, I was between eleven and twelve. I didn't read it

all, Auntie, there are very boring parts. We're perverts at that age, I looked for what talked about sex and women and periods. And I found out that it explained it well. How to do it. And that I didn't have to hold back. And it talked about the Prophet's favorite wife most, and maybe because her name was Aisha, I liked what it said. That women have to take a bath after having an orgasm. And that they can have sex on their periods, but putting a sheet in between, I didn't understand that..."

The little squirt's smart, she really fooled her. She had all that in her and never said anything to her. Sam, who's very cultured, said: "*All that carnality in the muslim writings, Maroz...*" Yes. The way one talks about the body and its urges. Did Laura's sexuality, freedom, and ability to easily imagine Ahmed's body come from there? Laura's sweet voice interrupts her thoughts: "Auntie, can you answer a question for me that I've had for awhile: *mahdi* is semen?" Maroz begins to laugh softly, her laugh increases and spreads to Laura, their laughter spreads throughout the library, the house, this night during the beginning of January, during which the wind roams freely and it begins to rain heavily. It's the first night of the monsoon season.

"What are you doing," Laura asks, having entered her office stealthily as she writes.

"An *earnest* person is a living, intense, concentrated, serious person," Laura reads over her aunt's shoulder, who scolds her for being nosey.

Today is February 28, in two days she's leaving me, Maroz thinks.

"Why are you so happy?," she asks.

"Because these have been happy months, Auntie. Have you noticed I don't curse anymore?"

“Your bad words made me laugh. Did happiness send them away?”

“Well, they asked me in CoRev. It’s part of their eight points. Oh Auntie, you know we study like crazy, the eight points, the rules, the platforms, the programs, the fundamentals of serving the community, auto determination of women and gays, family, children’s rights...”

“Aisha, you’re making my head spin, you’ve told me this like four times already.”

“Oh Auntie, it’s because I’m excited.”

“Let’s have some tea,” Maroz says, getting to her feet, fixing her hair with her hand.

“But black tea, Auntie, so I can wake up, I’m tired, and at night we’re all going to Springfield.”

This was her goodbye party. In Springfield. Well, what they were celebrating didn’t have anything to do with her, but she liked to make believe. She hears Maroz preparing Arabic cookies. Maroz has a sweet tooth. Two perfect months, she thinks. Monsoon season started on the night of January 7, and there was torrential rain for a month, but CoRev didn’t cancel classes. They had to postpone their work in the country. And the day monsoon ended, a fabulous summer began, golden and yellow, that’s still going on. Her arms and legs are very tan, not just because of the work in the country with CoRev, but because she was with Eudora in Puerto Viejo for a few weekends. Summer’s colors are golden and yellow, she thinks. She runs into Ahmed there, his father has a farm in Puerto Viejo. It was the beginning of February and they met by chance at the Chinese-owned corner store. Ahmed was dressed in white, with a white hat, she didn’t recognize him at first, he looked like someone from another time. Laura would think about that time when the sea, forest, and sky around the corner store were so beautiful that she couldn’t paint them, she’d never be able to capture their unbelievable perfection. When she saw the man

in white, she thought, I can paint him. “*Hey!*,” he screamed in English, and raised a hand to greet her. Then Laura recognized him, ran, they hugged and she thought, breathing in his vanilla and *bairrún* smell, this is the closest to his body I’m going to get.

Ahmed took her to a ruined building and told her it had been the headquarters of the U.N.I.A. He showed her the graves of his people, hidden between the forest, the houses where Garvey’s men lived. Ahmed had explained things Eudora never did, Eudora never explained anything, the half-sunken boat or the prosperity that cacao brought for example. That weekend was golden and the weekends that followed were golden and beautiful. Laura sunk into a memory that at first was a color, the gold of summer.

Her aunt comes with the tray.

“Don’t come back late, Aisha.”

“You let me go to Springfields, but not Black’s.”

“They’re two different things,” Maroz says, biting a sweet with almonds.

“They’re similar bars.”

“No, they’re different.”

“How are they different?”

“Do you think I’m stupid enough to tell you the difference and break the taboo?,” Maroz exclaims.

She put on her pajamas feeling very bad, her mood was unlike it had been during the last two months and unlike the calm euphoria that she had felt in the evenings while drinking tea with Maroz. She didn’t know what made her put her foot in her mouth. Or maybe she did.

She felt generous in Springfield, internally different. Following the Black Panthers, they organized a *serve the people* program to feed the poorest blacks that begged storekeepers for money. And they visited the largest slum, the one in the swamps. The worst part was the smell of dead animals, of shit, of piss, and trash. The people of the swamps were multi-ethnic, but blacks were the only ones that would listen to their preaching. That night, when they arrived, there were thousands of very poor black people listening to a reverend. Ahmed had leaned against a fence post with his legs stretched out and crossed like scissors. He was looking at his people. Laura was very close and she heard him painfully say, “*Behold, this is the great army of the Limón unwashed*, like my grandfather says.”

They were all together for the first time, seated around a table at Springfield, all of the students and members of CoRev, even Sylvia. As she drank, Laura was becoming more and more sentimental.

Maybe sentimentality was to blame.

Maikí and Reinaldo were seated among the students and they were talking about the *serve the people* program. But they immediately changed the topic and spoke about starting a newspaper. Laura liked this idea very much. She was already half-drunk and raising her voice a little, she told Maikí, “I also want to help with the newspaper. From San José...” Maikí smiled, but he didn’t answer her. Then, Laura raised her voice more and repeated her offer, only this time she addressed everyone, not just Maikí. They didn’t listen to her. She thought that they were too focused on their conversations. And she grabbed a spoon and hit her bottle and yelled, “*Hey, friends, listen*, I need to work with you on the newspaper. And Sylvia, who had been talking with

one of the students and Ahmed, turned around and looked at her with round eyes full of disdain. But she didn't address her.

“Who can explain to this *pañã* how things go around here?,” she said.

Reinaldo finished taking a sip of rum and turned to Laura:

“*This is your last day with us,*” he said in English.

“And if you don't understand English, I'll translate. Look, this was your last day with us,” Sylvia told Laura.

“Don't be so crude, you're violating the first rule *which is to be polite,*” Ahmed protested.

“*To be polite to our people, not to paña people,*” Sylvia barked.

Laura wanted the earth to swallow her whole. How humiliating! She had to get up and run away. But she couldn't. She remained still, like she was made of lead, nailed to the floor.

“What they want to say,” Ahmed said with sweetness, “is that you're a revolutionary now and you have to find your own way.”

Maikí looked at her with eyes full of affection and agreed:

“*Yes, you're absolutely ready to go your way.*”

And now, while the clatter of the train to San José shakes her, tears run from her eyes and she thinks about how horrible it was, but it's over now.

She stayed seated, humiliated and quiet until the end of the celebration, and later Ahmed had walked with her home. A little before getting there, he moved his hand over her shoulder and said: “Habibi, you have to find your own group. Now, CoRev only lets

the Afro-limonese community join because our actions are going to have racial aims. I'm sure you'll understand."

Yes, she did understand.

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