

ITZEL I:

A Tlatelolco Awakening



Essential Prose Series 167



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ITZEL I: **A Tlatelolco Awakening**



Sarah Xerar Murphy



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*Mañana hace mucho tiempo
oiré olvido y celebraba míos
para saberlo Alguien que transita
inventando un destino.
Esto no es incoherente, como puede creerse.
Es un pueblo, digamos,
ya que el bosque es más fuerte que los rayos y el hacha.*
—JUAN BAÑUELOS, “Alguien” de *No Consta en Actas*
México, 1969

Tomorrow after a long time
I will hear forgetting and have celebrated mine
For Anyone to know who passing through
invents a destiny.
This is not incoherent, as could be believed.
Let’s say it’s a people,
given that the forest is stronger than lightning and the axe.
—JUAN BAÑUELOS, “Anyone” from *No Affidavit Affirms It*
México, 1969

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For all the *cuates* of '68

and above all

Guadalupe Otero Medina

and

Jorge Antonio Perez Vega

Artistas de Excelencia y Compañeros de Consecuencia

O al revés si acaso

¡El dos de octubre no se olvida!

The second of October is not forgotten!

I

Life Class



ITZEL WAS AN Auschwitz survivor. That is how I will always start. Whether I'm in Oaxaca eating grasshoppers or in Cacaxtla drinking *pulque*, or just surveying one or the other city or even Puerto Escondido on Google Earth, that is how I will begin: Itzel was an Auschwitz survivor. Over and over. Thinking one day I will do it: Write that story. Get it down. Until it will once more make me go to Mexico to try to retrace our route — our many routes — and become a refrain: Itzel was an Auschwitz survivor. And yet not a single word will be written.

Even if I have already let the fiction begin in my mind. Already changed her name. Even if I know it would have satisfied her, the real her, when I let her speak it. Laugh at how it seems so strange that an Auschwitz survivor should bear the name of a Maya goddess. But of course such a name would already have to appear strange to me, the me who will be the author, because she was so very blonde. As I suppose the Auschwitz survivor part will too, almost devolving into one of the New York jokes of my Brooklyn childhood, always a punch line for something: Funny, you don't look Jewish. Except that there is nothing funny about it. Which may be the reason, now, in front of my keyboard with Google Earth in another window, I will decide at last to write it this way: that it can be written this way. As this impossible hybrid.

Because I want you to know this: everything I say here about the camps was said to me. That part was real.

And so was she. This woman so very briefly my best friend. The first person to befriend me in Mexico, or whom I will befriend. And betray so badly. I still think that. Even if most might think from a superficial look at the circumstances that it was the other way around. So that a great deal more of all this is true too, certainly the part of Mexico I will be there for, in the making of its history, even the exact minute of the green flare falling from the army helicopter to begin the massacre at 6:10 in the afternoon of October 2nd, 1968. When I will see Itzel begin to run.

True as something of fiction always is. Though you can work out what yourself in the storyline, with its names changed to protect innocent or guilty, the details recombined mostly, only occasionally imagined. The way I will often do, in my head if not on the page: just to let me find the moral centre of my tale. But the specifics, the historical specifics: I will vouch for them.

◇ I will start to use that line early on: Itzel was an Auschwitz survivor. Even if I will use her real name then. And change it only when on Cozumel one year I'll be reading so much about the Maya goddess whose shrine stands at the island's centre that it'll become a way into the story, one that preserves the rhythm of the original as well as its unusual features, not like Vera or Elena or other names I'd thought of that can be easily pronounced in Spanish as well as English, when always I would like her own far too much before finding that one: the Maya goddess of medicine and midwifery, which will finally birth my tale, and be a gift not just to the goddess but to her, what with that sound, that 'ts' sound contained in that 'tz' so common in her own Hungarian and in the indigenous languages of Mexico, still intact.

Eetsell: She would love it.

As perhaps she did. Which is what will let me see it as the name she'll take when she joins the underground cell with us. I will hear her laughter in it and that will jog my memory because Cozumel's shrine to Ix Chel—another version of Itzel most say, though controversy

surrounds that too—will once more bring her and her code name to mind, how in her own way she will be midwife to us all. Because she will join the group. That too, is true. So that Itzel, that central voiceless hissing whisper in it, can seem both assertion and subterfuge, and so come to mirror her most salient characteristic. And I will keep it singular, one characteristic: assertion and subterfuge. Because one will never be present without the other.

It'll be easy to use that line to try to frame her. To put her in the frame. Better said a frame. Like a portrait. The better to see her. That's what I'll tell myself at the start. Though I do like that other phrase: put her in the frame. That British police procedural phrase. Even if the American use of frame might work better. That I am trying to set her up. It is easy enough to think that in trying to get a grip on her I might be trying to trap her inside some sort of misdemeanour if not felony I have come to think her guilty of. Or that Basta might have, just to get out of the picture himself. To leave us to it. Because there is a third character here. Of course there is. There has to be. The third point of the triangle. Or the outsider. Or both. The one who arrives late into town or mind.

Or perhaps someone else will play at least one of those roles. I'll leave it to you.

And besides, we will meet at art school, Itzel and I. And that's part of what we'll be learning to do. Compose the design within its limits: its frame. And we will paint each other. It will be long before I fall in love with words. Or at least the writing of them. I think I have always been in love with conversation. Have found in it a way to make each day new. Though back then colours will need to come out my fingers. Not remain to be imagined in my mind.

We'll call it the school on the road up. *En la subida*. The University of the Americas. On the road to Toluca where you go up a long way, well over nine thousand feet before you ever get to come down. The place where I will get my degree. My American degree. It's still an accredited American University, but moved to Cholula now—the town a dubious legend has it once contained three hundred sixty four churches built on three hundred sixty four pre-Hispanic pyramids—and bigger,

with many more Mexicans. Though there will be some Mexicans there even then, both as teachers and as students. Especially in the art school, which will already have a very good reputation, the place formed after the Second World War to give GIs with a little money from the GI bill a place to study on the tequila soaked cheap.

GI benefits are allowed to leave the US. Though you couldn't say the same for my National Merit Scholarship. I will have to pay the whole shot, one way or another. Though I won't care much since all I'll want is to get away. And besides, in the end it will be just as cheap, maybe cheaper, if you put together tuition, room and board, as the room and board I'd have been left with if I'd used my scholarship to go back to the University of Chicago where I'd been studying before I quit to organize against the Vietnam War for the Students for a Democratic Society.

And perched up where it was, the campus will be beautiful. Both the view of the city and out over the countryside. You could coast all the way back down into Chapultepec Park on roller skates if you wanted. Coast the way the poor from the village across the road will often do, but on their bikes, then stick them up on the roof of a second class bus to make their way back up the *subida* at the end of the working day. That's those lucky enough to have a job.

While Itzel will drive up in her old grey Peugeot, a scarf tied around her neck, and the roof down too, though the scarves will never be long enough to tangle around the wheels like they did for Isadora Duncan. I doubt even Isadora's scarves would have stretched to the wheels of that high squat car, not romantic at all, though you could fall in love with the feel of the wind in your hair. It's one of the ways I like to remember her, that image from the very beginning of our friendship when she'll start to drive me up: the cheerful humour that will laugh at the tamed self pretending to be wild in such small portions. Like when she pulls to the side of the road to make her left hand turn into the school from the dead stop dictated by Mexican law, her tongue between her white capped teeth as if she's about to take her life in her hands. Which she probably will be. As next will come the squeal of metal and pop of gravel as the car takes off almost out of control during the smallest break

in traffic, as often as not in front of the bus I will usually be on. I will notice her blonde curls and her scarf in that car squealing out in front of us before I ever meet her, and laugh with fellow students at the mad woman in the Peugeot before our bus comes to its halt squealing too just slightly up the road so we can get out and walk across. Though we'll all know that if she didn't do it that way, she might as well park her car and get out to walk with us.

She'll only come up to art classes three times a week. She'll have no intention of getting a degree, American or otherwise. The art program will be recommended to her by an old friend and one-time lover, an extraordinary and well known Hungarian painter who will paint a Klee and Kandinsky influenced kinder cubism with added Mexican warmth thrown in, all glowing colours and regard for his subjects, though I have forgotten his name.

We'll be in the life class together, the one I'll walk into one day and say laughing: Damn lady but you do *drive* that little bitty car.

And expect a blonde Southern drawl to reply, only to hear a far more hesitant accent, Hispanic overlaying Central European, making me switch quickly to Spanish as I look for a common tongue.

It will surprise her that I can.

No one here ever learns if they don't already know, she'll say, looking around.

It won't occur to me yet to ask why or when she had.

We'll get to that soon enough. The day she'll show me her tattoo. We'll be joking around by then. Us, and a girl named Sandra. Large featured, cinnamon coloured, hair eyes skin, neither white nor black nor indigenous or all or none of the above, so passing easily for Mexican, definitely Latina. But English her first language or so she'll say and damn proud she'll be of it, her home not Panama but what was once the Canal Zone, always said that way, never I'm from Panama but I'm from the Canal Zone, not the Erie or the Suez or some wonderful canal byway in England or Holland, you understand, but as if there were and could be only one. Its own truth perhaps, so thoroughly was the name joined to the power of the United States in Latin America it came to be like saying, I'm an American in that peculiar belligerent way

United States of Americans can have even as the rest of the Americans, all Latin Americans anyway, want to challenge them with every breath.

Find some way of saying we're all Americans here, even the good Indians aren't all dead. The way Mexicans might tell you all Mexicans are Mexican Americans. How could they not be if they're from America? And North America at that. Even if one recent US Secretary of State still couldn't figure out why most of the rest of the Americas is offended when wishing to be neighbourly and inclusive he calls their countries the US's backyard. The backyard Sandra will likely feel she is still playing in, what with the way you could hear it in her voice: I am an American. Really, an American.

Or at least trying to be an American, among all the Americans when she's the one who'll feel she isn't quite, the unincorporated nature of this US territory throwing citizenship if not identity itself up for grabs, but which will allow her to never be in her mind just one of the 'no Eeeengleesh, no Eeeengleesh' Latinos she will imitate without ever quite arriving at the word 'Spic'. Maybe because she'd too often been called one herself. While at the same time her own visual Latina-ness and wide physical gestures will allow her more than a certain cachet, a sort of authority as intermediary or gatekeeper better in the end, at least with the Americans, than I am an American.

Something with which she will boss most of the younger students around, mostly Americans staying with families and still scared of being in a foreign place. Or, in the case of the Mexicans, staying with their own families but still scared, this time of being among so many foreigners. And taking their classes almost exclusively in English. And then, there will be those who need to be impressed rather than bossed. Which might in other classes be a quizzical Vietnam vet or two who will know how to raise one or both eyebrows at her raucous laughter, but which in the life studio will be me. And Itzel.

Not that I'll be that much older than anybody else. Younger than many in fact, since the university will still have more older students than most to give it its atmosphere. While the young Americans and Mexicans, the usual eighteen to twenty-two crowd, their own silent majority, will soak us up: the guys coming back on the GI bill, early

Vietnam vets breathing a sigh of relief at getting out alive, few still patriots and fewer still willing to talk down the war, they'd have done all they could to stay home if that was their beef; others refugees from the rigours of their first younger try at college which had mired them in drugs or alcohol or early pregnancy or just partying hearty till they couldn't take it anymore, and this seemed years later a tropical solution; and then again, of course, Itzel and me. With Itzel a mystery to most.

And me a known but strange quantity: a veteran—and for that matter, survivor—of the student movement, the youngest of the first generation of the SDS. Out of the country on what some might think of as the romance, like the fifties anti-McCarthy Cuernavaca crowd, of self-imposed but FBI induced exile, but which I'll know to be only a form of R&R. At twenty-one I'll already have in seven years of militancy—militancy the way they use the word in Spanish, there's even a verb form *militar*, from the same root as military, so that if you're a *militante* you're an active member of a party or other political organization—from my first year in high school on. Though by the time I leave I'll be pretty militant in our sense too.

And starting the work with some kind of weird symbolism in 1960 itself I will move with the movement from boycotts to sit-ins to freedom rides to organizing marches and meetings and rallies to hiding draft dodgers to writing notes—would you believe using Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*—in secret code. So burned out so tired so tired so burned out. That phrase so very much our own invention: burned out. And while I may well have been one of the first I certainly wouldn't be the last walking wounded from a movement that spun—or burn baby burned—increasingly more and more out of control. So that when I go back for the international conference in New York with Basta, I will hardly recognize it.

And as for the mystery of Itzel. Truly older, forty-one I think back then, though you shouldn't quote me on it. All I really know is that it'll be her eighteenth year she'll spend in Auschwitz so she must have been somewhere around forty upon our meeting. That's all I remember of her age, though I think I will attend at least one bitter birthday party. When the Hungarian painter will be there.

And a most striking woman, too, Itzel will be. What with her blonde salon curls, sparkling blue eyes, dazzling if cap toothed smile, a stereotype almost were it not for her reticence, a painful shyness that will be easy to mistake for a held in almost jejune flirtation.

Not that I will notice her beauty so very much then. She will just be older. And at my age then it will be hard to conceive of beauty in a woman of thirty, much less forty or forty-one. While we may rail now at the unquestionable cult of youth, we forget that at thirty-three Marilyn Monroe will be considered over the hill, or that Jane Austen believed a woman's bloom is gone by the age I'll be back then. That beauty has in fact gotten permission to be older, even if its essence for a woman is still based in looking young, or at least trying to look young, as a symbol of still being in the game. Youth and life for women somehow become synonymous.

Yet mystery there will be in Itzel for everyone. And the unconscious and consciously unnoticed beauty will compound it: No one will be able to figure out what this elegant middle-class, Mexican but not Mexican *ama de casa*—lady of the house is the literal translation though in Mexico it's used by everyone not just telemarketers—will be doing there. And so gracious besides. But then no one will know the story. Or could parse what it could mean that we'll hang out: the elite meeting the beat and all that, like a banner on a Village coffee house. Her silk scarves and my old jeans adding to the mystery. Not that I'm sure either of us will have any idea to begin with why it will happen. Or how we will come to produce between us a certain atmosphere of worldliness, that I know something you don't know that people who have been through experiences outside the ordinary, whether trivial or profound, jungle tour or concentration camp, often broadcast. Which is maybe what will make us perfect for Sandra's courtship. Until that day.

Because, all slightly different, the three of us could laugh together. Even if it will too often be at the expense of others. With Sandra always loving to do her ever slightly malicious numbers to an audience, whether to us or to someone else. So that day in the life class it will just be Sandra, typical Sandra. And, in the end, really, only slightly over the top.

The life class model will be a middle aged woman, but, unlike Itzel,

with little life left in her. At least for this work. Typical really, of those who do this job, though there are those few, as often as not art students or artists trying to make ends meet who will put that extra zing into the work, especially for the quick gestural poses. Almost dancing for their three minutes—or even one minute—then change that resembles calisthenics or karate, the stuff they like to experience with a model themselves. But for those outside the milieu it's well, just a job, and a rather distasteful one at that, though in Mexico, unlike the States or Canada, compared to other jobs, disproportionately well paid.

So that judging from her look and from her clothes I will think this model to be one of the women from the nearby villages who do odd jobs for the school, perhaps this, taking off her clothes for students, the oddest of them. And putting her protest into her reluctance to hear the exact instructions, where to put arm or leg, head or hand. Or into letting her body slowly, very very slowly, ooze its way out of the pose once the instruction has stopped. Though she will be friendly and smile at everyone when robed between poses.

So I don't really know what will get into Sandra, except maybe the frustration with this model whose sinewy body was at the very least difficult—inharmonious, anti-rhythmic, not a Rubenesque soft curve in sight. Though that's the point and the wonder really, if you can get into it. What makes me sometimes think everyone should take life classes, maybe especially pubescent boys. There's just such an amazing variety of bodies, male as well as female, of muscle of fat of form of rhythm, of beauty to be teased out in each one with the charcoal or the pencil or the paints. And too the discipline, as you face the sheer and utter and unfathomable and impossible difficulty in bringing any body to life, that teaches a kind of respect before the miracle of us, the beauty of us, humanity beyond any culture's current packaging.

So that I will really be getting into it, my charcoal, I love charcoal—the compressed kind that never breaks—coming down hard and determined and loving, of itself of bodiness. As I dig into the shadow of the model's armpit, her buttocks, her shoulder blades, her knees, her back to me, as she will melt inexorably out of the pose. While Itzel, at an easel slightly off to my right, will do the same, but

slower, the line stiffer, the way it always will be, as her shoulders will await the instructor's criticism, his pencil correcting her page.

When suddenly Sandra, first bowing to us all, hands in front and back like a circus ring master, will leave her place at her easel, and tiptoeing up behind the model to make sure she is not heard, will shove her hand into the woman's armpit to jerk her shoulder back and around, then grab the woman's forearm to change its angle, raising it higher, to where it was meant to be. At least according to the instructor, who had left the room.

Laughter will spread around, coming mostly from Sandra's friends. Or at least the younger students she will tyrannize, as well as hang out with. While I will let out a gasp that will resonate with the quick violated shiver that goes through the model's body, and I will notice it is Itzel Sandra is looking at for approval. The middle-aged housewife she thinks of as wanting everything always in its place, the way she does her makeup, or her hair. That Itzel would extend that to others: wanting them not only in their place but properly positioned. While Itzel will just look confused. Not knowing what to do.

I will see her hand shake and make a small unwitting mark on her paper, one she will now smudge with her thumb as the model's body shakes. What is she to do now? What gesture can she make to Sandra? Who has, at least by her own lights, solved the problem we were all trying to deal with as our drawings went awry. And been buoyed up in knowing the others knew it. And that they will now know her place, and the model's and their own. While Itzel will just keep staring. The eyes meeting, meeting and locked, not a staring contest, but just not knowing what to do. How to take her eyes away. How to make that effort. Until when she shifts them she cannot stop the shifting. The angle of her head the same. The eyes darting. As if she is afraid of what gesture will follow. Does not know how to prepare herself for it. While I will just look at the model. Frozen. My charcoal poised. Staring as if that hand still pushes into her armpit. Believing I can smell the fear that emanates from it. This neither the first violation or the last. As if she now awaits being slapped.

I will turn to Itzel. And move to break the obsessive circling of her

gaze. Sandra her hand Sandra, Sandra the model Sandra her paper, her tongue pressing now against her upper lip. Staring in and out at once.

You can do more to a human being, I will say. I'm not sure you can do worse.

If I'd known Itzel's history, I never would have said it. Or at least have been so proud. My cheeks burn sometimes still, thinking of that pride. Of taking care of Sandra, who in her own insecurity will be playing to the crowd. To what she thinks the crowd wants. What might let her once more control them. With its perfect delineation of in group and out group, but also, its veiled threat. I have the power to do this to her. Do you think I have the power to do it to you? Do you think everyone but you would laugh if I did? And many, you can see it in the eyes, thinking the same. Am I as vulnerable as that? Could I be? Would that happen to me if I were cast out? My body made fun of in that way? My personhood? Would it be worse? So that the moment will tell me I have to say something. Just to cut through the nervous laughter. Though certainly I would have done better with something less pompous. Less above it all.

Maybe just: What the fuck Sandra, or *¡Qué chingados!* because she would have understood. Or maybe both at once.

¡Qué the fuck, Sandra, What *chingados!* for the bilingual edition.

That remark would have seemed so disproportionate had I known. Just so much cliché. Though on some level I'm still not sure it isn't true. At the very least that it is there it all begins: that worse that is the worst you can do. And it is, after all, what will really start Itzel talking to me. And it does echo in my life. Its small truth and the silly awkwardness of saying it like that, without a million qualifiers, that's just so me and my big mouth too.

Though I will at least remember to shut up in a Fifty Plus class years later, when I haven't quite made it to that fifty myself, a thing called *Life Sketches* or some such, combining visual art and creative writing. And there I'll be all perky to make an extra buck with this guy equally eager to write his Auschwitz memoir taking me back yet again even if he, a little older than Itzel and German, says it isn't really the camps he wants to talk about, his ambition is to end his memoir in the cattle

car. What he wants to write is how it all began, began for him, a kid with no notion of politics, how it was he was systematically isolated from his gentile friends.

So that he wants to tell stories of schools and summer camps, and yes he will really say that: summer camps. As if he were in the Catskills or the Muskokas or something, I'm still sure of it: summer camps. While he will tell how slowly, slowly, over those first years after Hitler came to power, not something that would be slow to our adult minds or even to the youthful sense of history I will have by the time I meet Itzel, but more the way I will be living my daily life then where still each month each day will seem so very, very long, time stretching out in a life not yet lived enough to know better, just the way it must have been for him, child time so that each day each rejection each loss will be immense as the goyim who had once played with him, the parents who had invited him over, the storekeepers who had smiled, will all stop doing it, some new part of his life snuffed out each day or snuck in on the sly as if a smile were a crime so that he will know.

He will feel it. The hurt though not the danger as he shrinks into himself. As even the schoolmates who had laughed with him will stop laughing and in public will not even meet his eye. Until there will come the day after all the whispers that the young man from the Hitler Youth will come into his class, and pull him to the front.

This is so you should all know. What one looks like, the Hitler Jugen will say. This is a Jew. And he will pull the student's pants down, then his underwear, to show to this class full of boys, his circumcised penis.

And yes I will think of the incident with Sandra again that day as I stand in front of the class advising them that to write something that moves the reader—it's why we do our own three-minute quick memory sketches too—you have to be there. Go back and be there. See it in your head, hear it smell it feel the cold or heat: Be there. Enter the scene: be there. Only to stop suddenly before going on as I smile wanly at him: Who was I to ask him to go be there.

Go be in Auschwitz, smell it hear it touch it, or even to taste his own tears in that elementary classroom with that blond Hitler Youth.

Say recall it to yourself like you're really there, be there. You'll get more detail, more precision, more life that way. As I will think: But who would want it? Itzel certainly wouldn't. So that I will almost say: Forget catharsis, get a ghostwriter, let her feel the pain.

And I'll go be inside my own scene: I'll see Itzel. Or not so much see her as feel her on the edge of my shoulder, the way we will be oriented toward the model that day, feel her look at Sandra, feel my own gaze unwavering from the model as if the after image of Sandra moving her hand still shimmers in the air, and then there is my comment flowing from my mouth, suspended there too as it breaks Itzel's gaze.

You can do more to a human being, but you can't do worse. As the scene combines with the boy in front of the class, his pants lowered, being treated clinically. That is his own word. Not hatred, just: This is the way it is. You should know them. Know what they look like. In the locker room. Make no mistake.

You can do more to a human being but you cannot do worse, I will think again. As I see Sandra move the model as if she were no more than a mannequin. While smiling conspiratorially at the class. Yes. It begins there. But the problem with such a statement is simpler: that it is the perpetrator's position that has been taken. Or better said perhaps, the potential perpetrator's. That you, spoken in that sentence could be only Sandra, an accusation made to let her know what she had done, or all of us who stood by our easels surrounding the model who could equally easily have taken it upon ourselves to make such a gesture. Or it could be the you that is really we, generalized beyond our classroom to take in anyone who might ever have the chance, the choice, to dehumanize. Yet always it would be the one with that choice: the doer, the perpetrator. Because once that choice is made any act can follow.

While for the victim, between that beginning in worse and that addition of more, lies the ability to live a life of dignity, maybe of subsistence only but still among friends, whatever your oppressor thinks of you. Like my own father's people. The ones who will survive the long march to Oklahoma then be subjected to the indignities of racism year in year out. With its concomitant poverty and almost total erosion

of their land base. And still find something to live for. Culture or the sunset or just making a living duck hunting at twelve.

Or even the community of European Jews before Hitler, the ones who will contribute so much to European culture besides. So that while the truth is that my student's long road to Auschwitz will begin in his classroom on that day, for the model in ours it will be just one more unregarded day among Mexico's poor. And, perhaps, at the very least, dreams of what the money she earns this way will bring her. And among her friends perhaps, the ability to laugh at Sandra harder than Sandra has laughed at her.

Yet it should still be said, that without that ability to look and not see, to render the other an object, none of this could happen. Not Auschwitz, not the kind of grinding poverty that will begin in the Americas with the despoliation of native civilization, the genocidal wearing down of those who will extract the gold for Spain, beginning one could say, the year after Columbus set sail, with his sailing that same year Spain will expel its Jews. The Sephardim, the Jews of Sepharad, of the Iberian Peninsula, leading us to that mistake we always make in English, thinking them the Jews of the Middle East, when they are only that part of the Middle East's Jewish population who arrived there and to all the other provinces of the Ottoman Empire as well as the Maghreb from Spain after 1492.

So perhaps regard for the other would make it impossible, that gesture, Sandra's gesture, in which will be contained all that *asco*, that disgust, all her training in the Canal Zone, not her I am an American, though perhaps in her case the two will get confused, but the I am not like you, with which those who routinely exploit the poor can day by day still maintain that the poor are different: They do not feel things the way we do. What the Hitler Youth will articulate as tears run down the boy's face, my student who was that boy will tell me.

Don't worry, he's not really feeling this, the young man will say. As if he were carrying out an act of intellectual hygiene. In which there will only be indifference, and the desire to get on with the job.

Only I will still wish in that writing classroom as my cheeks go visibly red for something my students have no idea about, just as I will

wish those hours later as I speak with Itzel sitting on the little wall of the garden overlooking the valley of Mexico just where I had been sitting when I found out about the death of Che Guevara only weeks before, that on that day I had said: Dehumanization begins here. Not: You can do more to a human being, but you cannot do worse. Because later, no more than an hour later, as I look at the blue numbers on Itzel's forearm, I will have to acknowledge that there is more and more and more that can be done to a human being that in its sheer accumulation is already worse, always worse, moment by moment worse, without help, or cure, or for many of its survivors, even healing.

Without remediation. Or remedy. *Sin remedio.*

But it will make her tell me. She thought what I'd said was true. She will say so. And it is there that our friendship will begin. Not just with our laughter, and my Hey, lady, and my hitching rides, and my closing my eyes as she makes that left-hand turn.

You're right, she will say. And she'll turn over her arm.

And I will stare at the numbers. Blue on inside of arm white. The thin skin at its most vulnerable. Then close my eyes. Where the numbers will echo. White on blue.

2

A Dream of Escape



IT IS NOT then that I will think of that line about her for the first time. Say: Itzel was an Auschwitz survivor. Then add: And as she had survived Auschwitz she went about surviving the rest of her life. That will be later, when I have already met Basta, when I have him to explain her to. The manicures, the hair, the accent of my very middle class, and for that matter, middle-aged friend. The one who will pick me up sometimes. Because it will seem I am always explaining something to Basta. Even if it's something he already knows and it's me explaining back to him to find out more. Or it's something personal, about him, me or someone else. Because as far as ideas go, he will be the great explainer. Though with Itzel often enough I will just breathe deep and say: Man, so Itzel is an Auschwitz survivor. *Pues, sí. Pues, sí.*

And I won't say the second line. Just let it be understood: She's doing the best she can. Because I'll be trying to figure out whether or when I should introduce them. Maybe by getting him to go places together with us. Without ever being mercenary by saying: Look, she has a car. Only emphasizing that she makes great company .

And that she's not anywhere near as conventional as she might seem. She'll have a *story* after all. It won't occur to me for the longest time how condescending that must have been. But we'll all be condescending toward our elders then. We'll be the Never trust anybody over

thirty generation. Though maybe young people are always condescending to their elders, and we just grow blind to it as we age. See only how condescending we are to them. Until we're old instead of older and see it clearly.

We will meet at the pension, Basta and I. Not the first one I'll stay at. That one will be more like a home stay house. A family taking in just one student. In Polanco. On Shakespeare Street. That's Sha-kes-pay-ar-eh, pronouncing each vowel clearly as you do in Spanish. I'll just love that: Sha-kes-pay-ar-eh, saying it to the cab drivers, or the students at the school. But then I'd loved the idea of Go-eeth-ee Street when I'd lived in Chicago too. Goethe Street. When I was at the University there.

The house will be a nice one too, part of the Mexican middle class of another era, or the tail end of the one I will be there for. Built in the twenties or the thirties, very art deco, I could almost swear Carlos Fuentes describes it in *Los Años con Laura Diaz*. With wonderful cast iron doors and gates and window grilles. Open spaces inside, with marble floors, large rooms, curving staircases and, once past the entryway, a ceiling two stories high. But somehow, though it should have been light and airy, it will be very cold and dark, as will the family, the shades of their minds pulled as tight as the shades in the living room, all stilted questions at supper, and wondering who 'my people' are — none of that Latin heat Mexico is supposed to be known for.

I will learn quickly enough this was typical too. This was the middle class. The middle middle class. The squeezed class, the frightened class. None of the *alegría* of the poor that comes from having nothing to lose, or of the rich who don't think they can possibly lose it. But the *mojigata* middle class, puritanical and rule oriented and shrunk down. So well-expressed in that wonderful adjective: *mojigato*, a compression of *gato mojado*, only with the adjective first: wet cat. Something the paintings on the walls will reflect along with the dark clothes. And the preoccupation with appearance.

Much like my one well-to-do more or less aunt. Sister to mother Billie's first husband. Middle class in the same sense, though it takes more to arrive there up north. And too what the English have always

meant by middle class, mostly still do I think. What Virginia Woolf and those of her generation certainly meant when they said an income. A room of one's own and an income. Not a salary, an income. Those who can, if barely, live off their investments. *Vivir de sus rentas*. What the old Mexican middle class still tries to do.

No one in this country can live off their salary, I've often been told by close friends. Mercedes, the woman who will run the first gallery I'll show in always says that. While most people actually will, including some who have said that to me. And let's remember that the new middle class, the one everyone says is growing so much now, the global measure of that, last time I looked, was earning ten dollars a day. So that really, no one in Mexico's old middle class would call that middle class at all.

So what's meant I suppose, is no one can live the lifestyle, home ownership and travel and all that, we expect even in the working class up north, if something beyond a salary isn't coming in. Your money working through somebody else's body, likely as not these days someone in that new middle class. Back then both Mercedes and Basta liked to say exactly that when those ads for home and investment started, when a small part of the working middle class will just be starting to get a bit more money: Let your money work for you. While it's always some exploited worker who really does. Just to get a small part of the money their work produces. Maybe while producing income for a union pension fund somewhere in the north. I've taken to saying it myself.

Not that I'll move out of that pension because of that coldness. Or the awkward questions. In their own way, they will be easy enough even if they'll reinforce my social shyness, my utter inability in youth to produce small talk. While I suppose my reticence will just seem nice. I don't think that in the weeks I will be there the loud mouth me, the tomboy who will have gone on to speak in front of thousands in New York, talked on television, organized meetings, been a member of national committees, easy always with conversation when it comes to ideas, will ever come out to play, not ever at all. And besides I've always been good at being the disappearing house guest, the way I will have to disappear in my own family.

Though I will admit the curfew will bother me, and that business about not wearing pants that will be enforced on female students at the school if they should happen to be staying with families, when I will already have noticed that, contrary to what was supposed to be what we now call cultural sensitivity training, all the girls at the UNAM, the National University, and its art school, the Academia de San Carlos, where I will also take classes, will all wear jeans. As will any number of others, including the family's maid Sundays in Chapultepec Park.

No, the reason I'll move out will be different. Part of that seeing the real Mexico that sophisticated tourists who call themselves travelers always get into, though I won't like to think of myself that way as I busy myself looking for the more exclusive Mexico, the more radical one, the one with the history I will have come to explore. And even in the guide books back then, some of the 'right' pensions for this type of tourism, or exploration let's call it, will often be listed. Like Trudy Blom's place in San Cristóbal de las Casas. And this one famous too, though I won't discover it through the guide books, but through the recommendation of relatives of one of the red diaper babies in the New York Chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society, maybe even Leonard Boudin.

The Oronsky house. I won't ever find out how they got hold of it. It was a rental for sure. And everything any mildly worldly young *gringa* might want. An old colonial house off in an old neighbourhood yet close enough to the Zona Rosa, the pink tourist district—and for that matter the road to Toluca the school was located on—to not be too out of the way. The kind of house of which few will be left even then. Though I will find myself in one or another from time to time, and outside the city, of course, even now there are still a bunch. Even in the outlying *colonias*—the neighbourhoods—that were once towns, sometimes even cities in their own right. The kind of house Frida Kahlo grew up in in Coyoacán: *La Casa Azul*. Though this neighbourhood will be closer to the centre, off by old Chapultepec, and definitely an anomaly.

You'd turn into a narrow curving street to walk along a wall of deep red *tezontle*, that marvellous Mexican maroon pitted volcanic rock of which so many old buildings are constructed, then open a carved

wood door into the traditional *zaguán*—the deep entryway—which in turn would guide you not into the house but to a central garden patio reminiscent of a medieval cloister. Where you'd be given a choice between walking into its centre where a carved colonial fountain will twinkle and squirt surrounded by potted plants, or to walk under the red tile-roofed portico with its little carved wood columns surrounding the patio on all four sides. Onto which the doors of all—or almost all—the rooms will open.

With only the dining room and kitchen at the back connected, and the two living rooms at the front, the ones with the only windows to the street, though they will really be more like doors, doors covered with grilles, because they will stretch almost from floor to ceiling. Windows where you might imagine colonial *señoras* or *señoritas* sitting doing their embroidery while gossiping with the neighbours, or perhaps even taking a supervised moment to flirt with a passing *galán*. While the windows of all the other rooms will give onto the patio and will be shaded by the portico.

What would be a marvellous arrangement along the hot lowland coasts, but which will lead in high altitude Mexico City to all the rooms being exceptionally cold. Wool sweater cold wool socks cold fingerless wool gloves if you have them cold. Except for the dining room which will be heated by the cooking in the kitchen and several small high windows that gather the sun's heat, facing south as they do onto the large *traspatio*, the backyard. So that some of the older residents will even have electric heaters in their rooms.

I will always want to call that gigantic back dining room the refectory since the place will be rumoured to have been at one time a convent, the front windows I suppose covered by tighter grills. Though its heavy wood table, which I'll be told came with the place, would have served just as well for one of those huge colonial or even post-colonial families—and probably did at one or another time in the house's history—the patriarch at its head. And the whole place just one storey, except for some servants' rooms at the back reached by a small outside staircase behind the kitchen. Where, since you never can get good help, or at least as much, these days—and yes, they do say that in Mexico,

in both Spanish and English and for all I know many languages besides—even if maids from the villages are always to hand, two small guest rooms will be located too, one of them to be mine. Which though tiny and small of window, will at least receive direct sun. And have its own small patio, really part of the roof, with enough room for one small chair. While across the *traspatio* will be located the tiny apartment of the live-in help the Oronskys will feel they can afford.

My room will look, even if obliquely, out toward the rest of the city, toward the park, the way my room at home will look toward the harbour, and be on the highest floor, a dream of escape if not the possibility of it. So that I will always go for the highest room, as if searching out the place highest above the tide line.

Which means my tiny pension room won't make me feel I'm being cheated. Though some might have called it the worst room in the place and hardly worth the money, even at twenty percent off the other rooms' price. While I will just breathe deep and smile, the air of the trees from the park refreshing like salt brine. Their branches visible, too, above and between the houses across the way. Big, and old, those trees. *Abuehuetes*. The Montezuma cypress. Some already old when the first Spaniards entered Tenochtitlán across the causeway at the park's end. Or so they say.

◇ Back in Brooklyn it will be a turretlike room in a cupola. Under the Brooklyn Bridge. In a big and equally anomalous house made cheap back then by its place between highways and polluted water, and neighbourhoods. An old sea captain's house it is said, complete with widow's walk, of which, in New York, there are also few left. Where Billie and her first husband—first partner perhaps I should say as we would today since she never will marry my dad, Dan, the one for me most important—will buy in, thinking underclass romance or later gentrification who knows, but long before gentrification will become a word, even if the concept will already be there.

The way there will already be suburb resisters trying to stay in town if not in Manhattan that first year of the war, of the Big One as we now say—so that maybe they'll puff each other up about it, since a

house in Manhattan will already be unaffordable. Even if Matt will be doing well right then in his own journalism contributing war pieces all over the place from his position on *Air Force* magazine, and Billie will still have her steady reporter's job and maybe the friends will just go on about the beauty of the house and the romance of Brooklyn, the docks right there, and the warehouses.

And even if a highway was soon to be built, well, it was just symbolic of our times, and there was the yard, perfect for parties, and everyone who was anyone would of course come over, even if it was across the Bridge, well it was right across the Bridge almost under it in fact. So maybe Matt and Billie will already be imagining the tours of Brooklyn they could conduct—they will, after all, edit a book on the borough before he finally leaves.

So there would be tug boats and seamen's bars, parks and museums and the botanical gardens, the picturesque and the highbrow and the intellectually stimulating and the poverty stricken side by side, with one respectable neighbourhood only three blocks away—even if one of those blocks is very long and on a steep angle up—and no disreputable neighbourhoods really much closer. Just the warehouses and a few old houses of older working class families tucked between, and those romantic too.

And then there would be kids, oh, the kids they were going to have, or at least Billie was—though I'm not sure she will ever tell Matt that, how he will never quite make it into the equation—who would grow up within range of good schools, a long if interesting walk away. Or a quick subway ride under the river to Manhattan. Or later if the walkway should open again, across the Bridge. Which, by the time I'm a teenager will become my favourite walk. When I will no longer play on the girders but walk out onto them to sketch. Oh yes, Billie and Matt could make something of this, yes, they could they surely could the place was, why not say it, almost a Victorian mansion.

So, I guess they did. Though never quite what they expected. As both will be pulled closer and closer into the orbit of the dive bars—real dive bars from when that phrase had a meaning—that Matt liked to frequent, and out of which will arise the father who will father me and later befriend me between rounds at sea. And keep the family going,

long after Matt is gone and Billie, by then the bars' best denizen, no longer can. Not even with what my dad will start sending back, along with the request to name the baby Quannah if a boy and Nauta Ann if a girl, when Billie writes to him shipboard to tell him that after their brief initial affair she had fallen pregnant.

And the truth is, in the end Billie and Matt will be right. The neighbourhood will gentrify. Will be gentrifying already by the time I leave for Mexico. And now all the warehouses are lofts, all the working class houses high mafia or upper middle. And that house. Well, that house, will finally become the centre of the action. Which everybody who is anybody will as finally frequent. While Billie, back to who she once was, her drinking bouts less as she grows more secure, though white haired and hunched over will become a waterfront activist given to regular lunches with the Borough President before she dies. With his representative turning up at her memorial on a barge under the Bridge because he is out of town.

◇ Some of the same romance of the big traditional house must have motivated the Oronsky's too. Though, definitely, it will not be the life of the street. Even if they too, will enjoy observing it from behind their grilles. Still they will know, as the O'Brien's never will, not Matt or Billie or Billie's children, how to keep themselves separate from it. The younger Oronsky, Magdalena, had apparently planned to use that huge dining room with its sixteen foot ceilings as a studio when she had found the house together with her doctor husband. When they were still thinking of living together.

Then when that never happened, it was a marriage of fondness and convenience after all, and she realized it would be way too expensive to keep up she had invited her European born mother down to Mexico to make it into a pension, since it will be just too overwhelmingly lovely to give up. They may finally even have bought it, I don't know. But since one of the best ways in Mexico to *vivir de sus rentas* has literally been to rent out houses, I don't know that their landlord would ever have sold it. Nor do I know, for that matter, unlike for Billie's house, if with the development of the last years, it is still standing. Though I like

to think it is. And a pension still. Or even a boutique hotel. Maybe even with a *temazcal*, an old fashioned pre-contact sweat bath—they're overwhelmingly popular with the New Age crowd now—though much more upscale than the ones Tavo, Magdalena's by then ex-husband and Basta's cousin, will take us to on the outskirts of the city.

While it will be political too, that house, just as Billie's will be. Or at least mildly so. In truth, Magdalena must have come down from Chicago around the time Matt and Billie will be buying into Brooklyn, sometime in the forties to study with the muralists, and with the Taller de la Gráfica Popular, whose work still influences political printmaking all over the world from Los Angeles to Moscow. And Magdalena will do rather well with it, really, before dropping printmaking for photography. Attracted always by the prospect of political art, socially relevant art she will call it, coming as she will from a strong European socialist background. Upper class socialist background.

You could see that always in the treatment of the servants. Both hers and her mother's. Tough love, and condescension. Scrupulously decent salaries by the standards of the day, but never enough to separate the servants from their class, to give them ideas above their station as English aristocrats always say in novels and soaps, and with high expectations, including for extra work that definitely will not be in the job description. And too, the privilege of bringing up the maid's son, and educating her sister. Who, though she will also work as under-maid, at the *Senora's*—the mother's—beck and call, because young, could be encouraged to work hard like the son to escape their class.

The Oronsky's will at least be different from old English aristocrats that way. Though in separating the young from their class they might too be content, like an exclusive mini-residential school, to separate them from their families—and their culture. At least that part that even in the mestizo towns was still profoundly indigenous. It was after all, still a time when you just didn't want to be too Indian, even on the left. *Los Indios*—*indígenas*, the polite will already say, as we are beginning to say Indigenous—were part of the real Mexico and interesting to see or visit and certainly getting invited to an Indian *fiesta* or two would give you cachet, and yes you should definitely take the

opportunity if it came up. Nonetheless, they might add, *nuestros indios mexicanos*, you can still hear people let this one slip today, say our Mexican Indians the way Southerners back in that period will say our Negroes—though most no longer get to *nuestros inditos mexicanos* slapping on an even more patronizing diminutive, well, they were still backward and impediments to social progress.

And there will be a feeling, dominant in Canada too at the time of Emily Carr—and there are connections, Carr to Barbeau to Paalen to Covarrubias to Diego and Frida to Georgia O’Keeffe to Mabel Dodge and Tony Lujan to D.H. and Frieda Lawrence—an atmosphere, that too encompassed the art world and will last at least through the sixties and seventies, something barely articulated but always there, that will warn you to get your Indians while quantities last. A moment more and you’d be too late. So the fiesta, of course, the fiesta, go, go, it might not be around next year.

The dying Indian discourse prevalent throughout the Americas, including Billie’s house, and an attitude perhaps still predominant among discerning tourists today. Except that today, at least for some, the ‘death of the Indian’ may not seem so very planetarily beneficial, or beneficial to the Indians’ assimilated and no longer Indian descendants who would, it will be thought back in those days, then be able to benefit from a kind of social progress no longer so very universally in vogue. So more do try to stop the devastation.

Though it can still take that other paternalistic form of trying to make the Indians—or any other indigenous people—into living museum pieces. Like the man who bought the Hawaiian island but would only let the original Hawaiians stay on it in their villages if they agreed to live exactly as their ancestors had.

While assimilation and programs to invite European immigrants to Mexico to better the race seem to have been part of a post-independence Pan American program—as the proponents of residential schools up north, in both the States and Canada, used to say—to kill the Indian to save the man. Or the woman, it’s hard to say whether man was meant to subsume both, or if women were not worth saving. Though the expression will grow no better for being unisex: Take the Indian out of the child. While during the colony it seems the Spaniards were

just as happy to save the Indians to do the work, unless of course, they should get in the way. So that maybe the proponents of Indians as museum pieces could seem by far the lesser of two evils. Saved for the day when even museum pieces could start talking back.

At least that's how I will see it. Basta and I will see it. And I know why I will. With my background, it's obvious. I could put together binders of racist remarks that others will fail to notice or fold nicely into their guidebooks. But why Basta will think that way I won't know. At least not at first. I'll just accept how he looks at things. Maybe as the gift of someone from my generation in that mostly older household. Or thinking it represents a choice in favour of his Yucatec roots. Because in Mexico it mostly is a case of choosing, mixed ancestry is so common it's assumed, so anyone can just decide to be *hispanista*, *indigenista*, even *yanqui-imperialista*, though no matter how Indigenous you may look by more northern standards, you don't get to be *un* or *una indígena* unless you speak the language, wear the clothes, take the blows. Those rained down now for the five hundred years since Cortés first made landfall in Vera Cruz in 1519.

Because an *indigenista* isn't necessarily someone who supports the culture of living Indians, though it can be used that way too, but often enough someone, from the early days of independence on, who might wish to deploy the Aztec Empire, really three highly militarized cities within the Valley of Mexico able to collect far ranging tribute, as a way of establishing a centralized Mexican identity within a large and multi-cultural populace. Twelve language groups, over two hundred languages, within the original territory.

While the hegemonic Indian as root is as imaginary a one with his Aztec feather headdress and far reaching gaze as he stands on his volcanic outcropping in his richly decorated breech clout, as the Indian of the north with his war bonnet and his horse perched atop his mesa, also with his breech clout. Perhaps both of them trying to find a living Indian somewhere on the horizon. Because in this discourse the only good, or at least useful, Indian is still dead. The way Basta will say that every last mestizo wanted the last Aztec Emperor, Cuauhtémoc, as their ancestor, but none wanted a Nahuatl or for that matter Yucatek speaking villager as their second, much less their first, cousin.

So I'll just say that we'll see this thing in each other very fast, we will meet in the Oronsky's kitchen after all. When as I walk through looking to get a cold glass of water, he will make a joke about the older Oronsky's frugality. Instead of inviting me to make a cup of tea for myself, he'll invite me to pull up a cup of hot water to share his teabag.

He could do that sort of thing given he won't be living at the pension anymore but just drop by sometimes. For lunch with the family, or with the maids. Really: to talk to the maids. It's what will get us giggling together. Especially after that early encounter when I am drawing him as he studies in the kitchen, when *La Señora O*, as they will always refer to Magdalena's mother, I think her first name was Inger, or something else utterly unpronounceable in Spanish, will come in to complain to Clotilde about the toy gun she has given to her son. When Basta will say, and not under his breath either, but smiling broadly, something I never would have dared, even if I'd have thought of it.

All the toy guns in the world can't equal the violence of paying someone four hundred pesos a month—about thirty-two dollars, what I could make in two hours of tutoring or ten hours of instruction at the *Politécnico*—for twelve hours labour six days a week, he'll say. And then go back to drinking his tea and reading his book. While, her mouth as rounded as the 'o' of her name, *La Señora* will just look at him. As will Clotilde. While later we will just hoot and howl.

I could tell you I fell in love at that moment, but it wouldn't be true. I'll just feel my body relax, feel sure I've found a friend, and that we share what will come to resemble a secret code. And surely and above all it will show me how much more than the doctor's cousin, Magdalena's first husband's cousin, he is, more than the *muchacho* the *chavo*, the cipher, of dark suits and a job at the stock exchange, Mexico's *Bolsa de Valores*. The one who will be analyzed himself often enough, especially when Magdalena, who will not be living in the house, is over. Although I will immediately love Basta's Maya face, that's what will make me ask to draw him. And—*basta*, Basta, *basta*—there'll be the high pitched giggle and the intense talk. Putting things together over and over. Seeing how things fit. Even in the kitchen, that's what he will do. Even as he makes that remark, it's what he will be doing.

Something he'll take it upon himself to explain to me another afternoon over a teabag when we'd been hanging out together for a while, how it wasn't a specific criticism he'd been making but a general one, I'd had no idea until then those four hundred pesos were the going rate in Mexico City where some, indigenous women in particular, who'd come from smaller villages deep in the countryside might be paid half as much. If I listened carefully, he'll tell me, making a joke of it, maybe I could go with that older friend I'd been telling him about, we could eat together in one of those places the ladies who lunch hang out, indeed a certain class of lady of leisure lunches in Mexico too, make it Sanborn's House of Tiles or some such, the one in all the guide books where for decades the Europeanized women of the upper classes had been coming, and still do, for their touch of their own vaguely realer Mexico, a cleaned up colonial one in truth, the waitresses all dressed in tarted up exurban outfits of peasant blouses and long skirts, where I might just hear those ladies talking about the servant problem, how it might be a good idea to leave the city to go to some tiny hamlet to find a young girl willing to work who had not yet gotten ideas.

There were practically caravans Basta will say, to Oaxaca mostly he'd heard but started to add other nearer states anyway, Puebla, Guerrero, Morelos, México, Michoacán on the lookout for the perfect reticent *muchacha*, as the maids were often enough called. *Mi muchacha*, no matter how old, sort of like in English for centuries the male servants, darker ones mostly, had always been known as boy. My girl we seem to have reserved for secretaries who call your girl, rather than domestic workers. But the more submissive the better, in both cases, I guess, but with variations as to what was to be submitted to. While in Mexico in those days appellations went from *sirvienta*, to *criada*, to *muchacha* to finally arrive at *gata*, a female cat, as a term of disrespect if not downright insult, very different in those sixties years from our cool cat. So that accepting or offering lower pay for *las muchachas* was part of that submission, making talk of how low you could go quite common, along with assertions of how you must be firm with them as with a child, otherwise they might be spoiled, *echadas a perder*, ruined. Best friend, beaten, bullied or a little of each, that dynamic would always be the same.

Maybe Basta will even relate it all to the Marxist theory of labour, though I doubt that, the relationship of domestic labour to the theory of surplus value won't get talked about much until feminists bring it up in the seventies, before that housework, the work of raising the labour force as well as the boss's children will be given no value at all. But Basta could feel that value, and along with it came the crux of his argument, contained so succinctly in that one statement. The point, he'll go on to tell me was the violence contained in such exploitative practices even at their most equitable, likening it to potential energy, stored like in a battery, ready always, given the right conditions, to corrode all around it, or to explode. I think of those early conversations still sometimes, that particular one each time I buy my fair trade organic coffee. Less exploitative, less deadly, sure. Fair? Never. But he will be sure *La Señora* had taken his point. She might not always admit to it but she usually did.

And the Oronsky's revenge will be that nickname. The way they will let me know they have his number too. Or that is what they will wish me to think, even if I will come to see it more as a way of dismissing him and his ideas. To say, You don't have to listen, you know. While at first, Basta will seem to me just a perfect diminutive for Sebastián even if it isn't a traditional nickname. Not the way for Mexicans Jesús has its Chucho, Rosario its Chayu, Guadalupe its Lupe, José its Pepe, Francisco its Pancho, Concepción its Concha, or the way for us Robert is Bob and William is Bill and Margaret is Peggy, but one designed especially for him. Until there will come the day at the pension's own luncheon table where all the guests could always eat if they wished, that *La Señora* O herself, though she won't be much given to making jokes in Spanish, sighs and says, not of one of Basta's offhand remarks but of a longer analysis like the ones he made for me, that it was almost as if his mother had known when he was in the womb.

That she had named him Sebastián, just so that we could call him Basta. Say *basta*, or even *¡basta*, Basta, *basta!* when we'd had enough. *¡Basta*, Basta, *basta!* Enough, Basta, enough. And he would never know what we meant even when we patted his hand. If we were just repeating his name in affection or telling him to shut up. Though the truth is all his friends will do it and he will take it with good cheer, teasing word-

play is a well-regarded art form in Mexico, a give and take learned young, so he will laugh even when those familiar with their saints, or his sister who wished to enter a convent, will add occasionally to make their meaning clear: *O te mato a flechazos*. Or I'll shoot you full of arrows.

So that in the end, he will use it himself in self-deprecating humour. Or to describe an arduous physical task. As for the climb we'll make with Itzel up to the Tepozteco—the small temple precinct above Tepoztlán some still say is the much contested birthplace of Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl—or up on the cone of the Popocatepetl with Matilde as well after leaving Itzel's car as close as we could get to the top. The day we will gather volcanic ash into small jars, watching how it will drift like sand around the little remaining scrub brush glinting blue purple in contrast to the bright vegetable green, a magic landscape like no other, filled too with the beauty of the valleys and the startling blue of the sky, until everything will start to waver and to dance, blue against green against purple grey against the darker green of pine and the square spots of bright houses far below.

And we will all have to sit down. And we will realize suddenly what it means to be slogging up a volcano at fifteen thousand feet plus with that same volcanic ash seeping into our inadequate shoes. When it will be Basta who will finally call out *¡basta!* this is it, we're stopping, and will later tell friends: Even I said *Basta*, even *¡basta! ¡basta! ¡basta!* before the end.

Though there are other things about which I will often wish he'd said *¡Basta!* before we'd all had enough. Before enough will already be too much. And like on the side of the volcano, some kind of giddiness in the rarefied atmosphere, in that instance one we ourselves will create, will not stop us in time. As has happened to so many with altitude sickness: pulmonary oedema, swelling and an inability to breathe setting in because they will not stop their effort to keep going. Into what they are sure will be even greater beauty, greater triumph. What we will feel was waiting for us, if we had just made it to the top.

And of course that day, not under but on the volcano, will be a decisive one for all of us who'll be there. Even if we won't know it yet.

3

American Beauty



AT FIRST I will think that whatever attraction I felt just resulted from Basta's proximity. That I had found him there like a particularly lovely piece of traditional pottery in the kitchen on my way to the dining room. Or that it came out of his previous occupation of the same small space. That he had left some piece of himself there like the bright amate bark painting on the wall. And besides, he too, loved roofs. He will move to another one after the pension, a real roof on a much higher building, the one where I will get my studio before starting to sleep in his room with him. A building even more like home. The way from the beginning he will be more like home. Down to his conflicts: more like home.

The way I will watch him in the kitchen. So that I will soon realize that even if he is coming just for lunch he will always enter the house that way, no matter that it's the long way around through the narrow back street. When there will always be that prior period of standing around that I'll think of at first as just making conversation, until I realize the effort it takes him to get there.

Señora Clotilde, *Señorita* Matilde, he'll say, giving the two maids titles no one else will give them but which they will give to others as a matter of course, smiling with courtly formality at their names. Clotilde the official maid, Matilde the younger sister—and an exceptionally

beautiful young woman. So that each time I see their heads come together, hers and Basta's, in one or another giggling conspiracy of shining straight black hair, I will find myself wanting to draw them, only to know I could never do justice to the combined force of their beauty, even if on Basta's neck you could see the healing acne scars.

But I'm a sucker for that sort of American beauty, real American beauty, aboriginal beauty, probably because it's the one thing of my father's I have failed to inherit. The ease with languages and the reading and the wanderlust, that's always been there, even if for me it's been on land.

This land.

Nuestra América, Basta will tell me. *Así la nombró El Che*. That's what Che Guevara called it. And he'll be silent a moment, thinking I believe of the astute guerrilla commander's recent death, looking at his hands as if in memory of how the CIA had ordered Che's cut off.

Like that phrase *Tercer Mundo* was his, he'll say, then add in halting English just for fun: That's Third World to you.

So *Nuestra América*, Our America, will be what I keep coming back to again and again. Only I've come to mean it differently. Think it differently, even if back then I'll think about it too, talk with him about it. How Our America could be made to mean more than the artificial difference between Latin America used to cover all *hispanoparlantes* and North America for the United States and Canada. Something that mixes cultural and geographical categories as if Mexico and Central America were not part of the northern continent, though I won't know yet to ask as now I sometimes do why Quebec then isn't part of Latin America. The French are Latins really, aren't they? Other times we mean them, along with the Italians, don't we? To usually get the huffy answer: well HispanoAmerica, IberoAmerica, then. To which I answer: But then, how name the further north? FrancangloAmerica? To which, of course, there is no answer.

So maybe Our *América Nuestra* could be more. Mean anything or anyone not central to the Empire that created itself out of that renaming that took place after the United States declared itself independent, and its new made citizens started to call themselves Americans instead

of English, as if those who had been the only Americans only months before no longer deserved the name of their place even if they were not the ones to invent the name.

So that in truth my question goes deeper. What I am after is Native America, Aboriginal America, Indigenous America, how to name that. Find its own name, some name that doesn't try to indicate before something else. As if the European after is always the standard. Until we quote Europeans to get away from Eurocentrism. Because whichever way you cut it, no one yet knows how to do that. Latinos, after all, are called that for speaking a European language and can be just as white as anyone else on the two continents. Or just as black. Or Asian for that matter. Between countries formed out of slavery like Brazil, or out of European settlement like Argentina, or the Asian immigration to the Caribbean, the Middle Eastern immigration to islands and continents alike, plus all the available mixing and matching, it's all up for grabs. Where else could a brilliant writer like Mexican socialist Elena Poniatowska — not dumb but nonetheless blonde this granddaughter of Polish Princes — come from and find herself in a northern magazine dedicated to women writers of colour. Colourful as her work may be.

And as for Latin America being nonwestern, if we're going by population origin, that could be equally true of both Canada and the United States. While the institutions of the state have equally western origins in all the countries of the Americas. Whether dictatorial or democratic. And as for violence, The Civil War in the United States was easily as bloody as anything Latin America has to offer. And slavery as an institution perhaps more heinous.

So that we will talk about all of that too, Basta sometimes lecturing me on aspects of the question I had not thought about as this too will become part of the intellectual conversations that will unite us, and he joins me on the search which played such an important role in what brought me to Mexico. How to name native America. Make it original not aboriginal. Truly Pan-American and ever-present. So you could never name either Latin America or Aboriginal America Aztlán or for that matter Turtle Island.

While I've come to think since that even the current Mesoamerica,

borrowed from archaeology and history, to name Mexico and Central America, takes in too little. Does not get itself north of the United States border where the Mississippian civilization of my ancestors had Mesoamerican style cities and institutions. And the Pueblo peoples used the *metate* to grind their corn.

So it is still true. We have not yet named this place ours. For native, mixed blood or newcomer, no one knows how to do it. This quest Dan, my dad, will spend his life on and bequeath to me has not found its lost continents. Though it's a funny thing, how born in Oklahoma Dan will run away to sea, while born almost in the sea, incubated in the salt air of that tiny cupola, I will run inland. Though perhaps in some way, he will ask me to. From that moment of my naming. Which Billie will consent to, thinking he, a seaman, would pick that unusual Nauta to in some way signal the sailor, the voyager. To be a feminine form of the suffix *-naut*. And she will think it a good destiny. A good ending she will say: to which I could attach any beginning at all. I could be any form of traveller I should want: aeronaut or aquanaut, astronaut or cosmonaut, hallucinaut or oneironaut. Until finally I am chrononaut — the time traveller we all eventually become.

While in Spanish it is not a feminization but like many words derived from the Greek always remains the same: *-nauta*. With *el* or *la* used to indicate the person's gender. So that with Nowta as its new pronunciation my name will acquire both a new sense of finger snapping urgency and a new series of teasing nicknames. The most frequent for when I'll be judged just too earnest, too serious: *la Aguanauta*. Not the more formally derived *Aquanauta*, because this name won't be for any love of travel over or under water but for being an *aguafiestas*: a party pooper. Another word play: That I could travel anywhere and still poop on just about anybody's party. Or more politely, *arrojar agua*. Throw *agua* on any *fiesta*.

Though I will confide to Basta how Dan had told me one day in secret, on a visit to the Museum of the American Indian I think, that the name is not from the Greek at all. And that if I should need to travel, it would be for another reason. It would be to recover an identity. I will know already that had I been a boy, he had asked Billie to name

me for Quanah Parker, the great Comanche chief, and last to take treaty, and a favourite How to be a Happy Halfbreed symbol of his. Because Nauta, sometimes too written as Nadua, is Quanah's mother, also known as Cynthia Ann Parker, a young Scots Irish girl captured by the Comanches in a raid, who will eventually become Chief Peta Nocona's only wife. Then, when recaptured by white Texans, she will spend the rest of her days trying to return to her husband and children, to her Comanche community. Never to accept white society and in the end to starve herself to death.

So that my name will be a way of telling me that whatever was to happen, whatever my story should be, I would never have to give up and be altogether white. I could always find my way back, or forward, to what he will be teaching me. Food there would always be. At least for thought.

Though I will not tell Basta the rest of the story. Not then. That will only come with deeper intimacy. How it seemed Dan had always known what Billie would do. Arriving back in Brooklyn to live with us, he would find that I still bore the recently dead Matt O'Brien's last name, and that though long separated Billie and Matt had never divorced. And that she would no longer assure Dan that he was my father. She liked it that way: that I should be the daughter of the esteemed writer, brought up by the Native sailor on the border of Brooklyn's Indian Territory, the mostly Mohawk neighbourhood up by Pacific and Hoyt. Where Dan and Billie would then find a new hang-out in the high steel workers' bar, the Wigwam Bar and Grill, where Dan would be called by his tribal affiliation because he was the only Choc-taw around, and she would be his Mrs. The whole thing will always seem to her romantic as hell.

So that I have always felt his search is mine. And whatever else I might omit I will immediately tell Basta so. Even if my looks might make me Nauta Anygringa, my quest would then and always fit both meanings for my name. Why my degree will be in both studio art and Pre-Columbian art history, why I will start doing archaeological drawing at Mexico's Museum of Anthropology. Why I will live for decades in the rain shadow of Canada's Rocky Mountains in Blackfoot Territory,

before making my way to the land of the Passamaquoddy, and back to the sea. Though never entering it.

Landlocked. Unlike Dan. Though our quest will be part of a greater search as well. Not finding, but placing, here. Contextualizing it, I suppose. Inside its multi-faceted beauty. Where is here? is not the unique question of Canada as Margaret Atwood will be echoing when I first arrive, but is the question of all of the Americas. The question from which Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier will draw the concept of *lo real maravilloso*, the marvellous real, which we have translated into English as magic realism. Even if he didn't mean realism, but the real real: reality itself. America, its two continents and myriad islands besides, as reality made marvellous. And that I am an Americanaut, *una americanauta*.

And I never will let myself become Ann, despite all the times naughty naughty Nauta was shouted at me from a distance as a child. Closer and there would have been a fight neighbourhood statistics say I would have won. While New York pronunciation will conflate it with Knotty, which will stick. And describes me well enough really, when I think about it. How I tie myself in knots. Or never quite do what is expected of me. Or cross some invisible line. So I will relish it. How Naughty and Knotty will be interchangeable. How I can claim to never know if I am being called or reprimanded, or if it is a bit of both.

Though no one, as with Basta, will in doing it, fondly, if smarmily, ever pat my hand.

◇ So how could Basta's American beauty possibly fail to suck me in. As I drew him. Or the way, the few times he will be quiet during our discussions, his forearms will come to rest on his thighs and his hands reach out into space like a painting of a Maya king. Or his gestures too, like Maya sculpture when he will become so intent on his words that I will have no desire to say *¡basta Basta basta!* but just to let my eyes follow the intricacy of those movements. Though there will always be a shyness too, despite how absorbed he will get in his speeches, in the things he will say, as if only some notion far beyond himself could compel him to speak. Could make him not shrink into himself. Something we will come to see in each other.

It's always been the world of ideas that lets me enter conversation. Certainly it will be then. That's what will make my Spanish so immediately fluent: that need to know. And I will see it quickly this thing. Not in the kitchen, not as I will once more pull up a cup of water to share his teabag, but in the dining room. In one of those long afternoon dinners — *las comidas* — at the Oronsky's.

The ones Magdalena, almost a daily guest, will orchestrate. Conduct them really, just as you would a band. With the pension, of course, presenting an ever-changing variety of instruments. So that I will marvel at her, how she can do it, keep everything, most times, not smooth necessarily, but so perfectly in tune. While looking back I suspect that for her, that skill will be what she uses to bring under control the sense of adventure that had originally brought her to Mexico. And she will have too the love of dinners that so many great hostesses possess, combining people and getting them to relate together just as you wish, composing them as well as orchestrating them, with her always at the position of the golden mean, a little off centre but in a perfect position to manipulate the rest, sort of like Christ's position in Leonardo's *Last Supper*. And often as not with just as many participants, or even more, between friends from the outside and the pension guests.

And of course, always, the tools of language on display. In their primary function of making real what isn't there. The specific or the general. The concrete or the abstract. And while there will, of course, be discussions of Mexican history, even of the politics of the time, mostly though not exclusively seen through the eyes of the left of the ruling party of what was then a one party state, where Magdalena will have come to rest like many of the artists of her day, still, most of the talk will circle around the specifics of where to fit, how to exemplarize, those not at the table. So there will come the day, of course there will, that it will be Sebastián's turn, and I will learn that he is not just a frequent guest but a favourite subject. Something which will make me want to shout *¡Basta!* even *¡basta! ¡basta! ¡basta!* far more quickly than anything Basta himself could say.

Because something will make Basta's family life so exemplary that Magdalena will introduce it at the most anomalous of moments. Even

if that first time I'll just think we are having a light-hearted, even frivolous, conversation about swearing *a la mexicana*. Brought on by a young American couple just arrived at the pension bringing up their reading of Octavio Paz. *His Labyrinth of Solitude* to be exact, de rigueur reading then for anyone attempting to reach the real Mexico.

I'd read it myself the year before, right after my first visit. And knew already then of Malintzin, of Doña Marina La Malinche, Cortés's companion and translator, so perfect an example always of that Italian expression *traduttore, traditore*—translator, traitor—from long before, from my first study of the Aztecs in sixth grade, and from the books Dan got me to read to supplement the too easy explanation of the Conquest, the one that always somehow implies that the fall of Tenochtitlán and Tlatelolco, the conquest of Mexico City really, was accomplished by fifty Spaniards and represented the conquest of all of Mexico.

So any thinking about this woman will always be of interest to me, as will the way Paz names her the most *rechingadísima* of all of Mexico's *madres*, the primal fucked foremother, which is what will give all gathered at the table a good excuse to discuss in depth and at length the unique patterns of Mexican profanity that arise from the verb *chingar*.

As, after the first mention of *la chingada*, a Mexican guest will repeat it as *¡A la chingada!*, that great Oh, shit, throwaway expression, and the race will be on to explicate all the different nuances of that exclusively Mexican version of fuck. Not that *La Señora O* or Magdalena will use it much themselves, unlike most Mexicans outside that *mojigata* middle class whose dark house I once lived in. So it is Tavo, Magdalena's ex-husband of convenience so often at the table, another Octavio not to be outdone by this discussion's Octavio Paz, seated with his new wife opposite where Magdalena sits with her new husband, who will lead the charge.

Because this is the stuff that delights him, together with any off colour double-entendre he can ever find available, though of course he will encourage participation from all those present. Questions from the foreigners, additions from the Mexicans, even as I try to memorize each frequently used form, note those I have heard used, those I have used, if still infrequently, by then myself.

As we all laugh at all the many forms and positions of those many

chingadas palabras. So various that I will only learn them slowly, perhaps do not know them all even now, just know they have caused more than one book to be written. Though by the end of that conversation, it is not *chingar* I will have learned the most about. That privilege will be reserved for *madre*, and why in Mexico, as in the United States, she is the one who most often gets fucked. And why too, Magdalena will so delight in talking about it. Starting with reminding us how, to be truly polite in Mexico one must always—and she will giggle just a little—be very careful with this word.

You must never put *su* or *tu*, directly in front of *madre*, she will say, just because of what it might imply. And it won't matter if you use the formal or the informal. It's just like giving the right intonation to Your mother in English. Someone just might think you mean your *chingada madre*. *Chingada* or *rechingada* or *recontrachingadísima*. And she will actually say out loud the words she usually avoids before she adds: You must say *tu* or *su señora madre*.

Because, Tavo will then add not to be outdone: You must make sure they know you understand that whenever she has gotten fucked—and Tavo's English swearing will be very up to date—it was under the proper Church authorized circumstances and must be referred to by another verb altogether. Because the one thing the verb *chingar* can never ever do despite its elasticity is denote the act itself. For that—authorized or unauthorized—we use *coger*.

And the byplay will still seem marvellously amusing to me, almost English comedy of manners frothy, as I will continue to admire how well the conversation has been orchestrated, even the way Magdalena uses the current *desmadre*, the chaotic unmother of our swearing, to introduce the story of the *desmadrada*, the torn apart, the life in pieces, of the *señora madre de Sebastián*. And to explain how Basta's mother's story resonates so strongly with Paz's narrative. And with that verb we have all been examining, even if there is no form of *chingar* Ignacia would ever let pass her lips. Certainly not then.

If Basta's *señora madre* Ignacia had been sitting at the table, she would have looked upon us all with uncompromising purse-lipped condemnation. What perhaps I should have been doing myself, if I had not

simply found it—or thought I found it—such great fun, even if I will not participate much despite my own penchant for swearing, my belief, in fact, in how much swearing can tell us of a time, a place, a way of thought or life. Because in those days a pocket knife might bring out my loud déclassé tomboy self, but a single knife, fork and spoon, much less two or three carefully placed to the sides of a plate, or a silent servant serving from the right, will still be enough to turn me into a Victorian child: seen but not heard. Only speaking when directly spoken to.

So I will sit and listen, enjoying the back and forth, the bilingual orchestration. And up until that day, despite the small games, the party tricks, the subtle one-upmanship between Tavo and Magdalena, I will think them the friendliest, the least dangerous of any such dinners I have ever encountered. So that I will have relaxed into my own quiet, knowing there will come no moment when I have to defend myself from verbal if not physical assault, or that Billie will break into drunken song and my cheeks turn red in shame.

Instead I will love it enough to think, with no one looking down the table at me, that perhaps one day I would learn the way of such things and to participate with verve, even joy. No matter that Magdalena does perhaps seem to savour a bit too much her explanation of how Ignacia had once lived her own version not of *la vida loca*, but of *la casa chica*. Though it might have started out exuberant, unrestrained, as perhaps it did too for Malintzin with Cortés in that smaller house of which one is the lady. Not just the mistress, but the mother of bastard children, to a wealthy man above your class. Perhaps self-made like Cortés: a Conquistador. Or just a ladies' man, charming, in Spanish that too: *un conquistador*. But one who can afford you. And to set your family up. Often enough, in the house downtown. As Ignacia would be.

And how too, Magdalena's eyes will sparkle, as she will get Tavo to agree that his aunt Ignacia had once been extremely attractive, drop dead gorgeous in fact, something none of them, except Tavo's mother who had known her sister in youth, will ever find easy to believe even if they had seen photos. And which I still find hard to credit, given that the *señora madre*, the widow in black, I will get to know will be a creature of bottomless bitterness, her mouth twisted and turned down with

deep frown lines at the corners and a hunched over walk despite her relative youth, her clothes purposefully gloomy. A woman who, after a simple operation for varicose veins, will stand up from her wheelchair to push Basta into a corner when we go to pick her up just for the pleasure of lecturing him on how he never does anything for her, while berating him on his involvement with a spoiled and whoring *gringa* even as I stand there my hands full of her things.

So that I will always think of her as the kind of person who surrounds herself with loyal friends in order to complain about how there is no loyalty. Invites to dinner the family who have stood by her in order to tell them no one ever stands by anyone else any more. Asks in for coffee the neighbours who bring her food when she is ill in order to pontificate on how nobody ever does anything generous for anyone. And will continue to complain bitterly to her son as he pushes her wheelchair down the hospital corridor once she sits down again, about how he's never there when she needs him. A way of looking at the world that I will sum up for Basta in the language of Marxism we both will so easily use and equally easily laugh at: *Por fin entiendo la pequeñez de la pequeña burguesía*, Finally I understand the pettiness of the petit bourgeoisie.

Still I will not see where this is going as Magdalena speaks about how Ignacia had turned so decidedly drab: a six a.m. daily mass bead counting *beata* whose only hope in life must rest in her son, drab now too, because that was the way of Mexico. And his the destiny of any *hijo* of so obvious a *chingada*. So that soon she will try to bring Basta's social awkwardness, so similar to mine, into play to prove her point. To make my entrance into the world of Oronsky dinner parties an act not of joy but of rage.

As on the morrow for a moment it will not be him sitting there in awkward silence trying to figure out why the previous day's guests are looking at him with such avid undisguised interest while he plays with his cutlery, but me. I will see myself instead at one of those terrible dinners with Billie's relatives or rich friends back in the Midwest or at Thanksgiving with Matt O'Brien's, trying to keep my hands polite in my lap as eyes bore into me and I have to do my best not to burst into tears or explode into incoherence.

So that as I finally notice what Magdalena has done her best to set up, how much she enjoys seeing him awkward like this, *basta* Basta *basta* on display as the tongue tied obedient son, a meek *hijo de la chingada*, I will channel for a moment the person I could be in political debates or addressing rallies, even the one who will carry her dictionary to the cafés after class at San Carlos in order to participate in discussions, and I'll deploy her questions to bring Basta out. Something I will continue to do as I come to believe more strongly each time he is at the pension that what Basta owes is not to Ignacia in dark suits and stultifying work but to the world in making real the desire for change nestled inside his complex ideas and ebullient language.

While it is true that at some point in that first conversation, in a short lull perhaps in his explanations, *La Señora* O will shake her head and say: You do see why we call him Basta don't you? Though when she ends her explanation of the name by inviting anyone who wishes to do so, to just say the word, or perhaps repeat it three times as if to break a magic spell, still everyone will demur.

And one of the young Americans from the day before will say: But we're learning so much, then to prove perhaps that he too has learned from the day before add: In fact *un chingo*, your basic fuckload.

Which his wife, not to be outdone, will follow with: And not *chingaderas* or *chingaderitas* either. Not those small and smaller fucklets that clutter up our minds and our houses. Then she'll ask Basta directly: And what about the war? What are students here saying about The War in Vietnam?

And Basta will give us his analysis of that, and the state of the UNAM, the National University, as well.

Then when dinner is over and Basta has left for the university and I have just made my excuses to go up to my room to finish some homework and everyone else is moving from the dining to the living room I will hear one of the Americans sigh and say: What a brilliant young man. Just brilliant.

While the other will add this time: Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating.

And I will smile to myself even as I hear Magdalena say: Yes, but

... You have to understand ... You remember yesterday ... I explained ... He won't ... He doesn't ...

So that I will turn briefly to find Nieves, another economics graduate student and long time dabbler in Oronsky dinners, looking over at me. Then as our eyes connect she will mouth a quick *Gracias*. And though I will fully understand that gesture only much later when I find out she was Basta's first lover and how much influence Ignacia had in ending their relationship, I will remember immediately the last word that came up in that *chingada conversación* the day before.

The one Nieves introduced while looking intently at Magdalena even if it was still the comparison between La Malinche and Ignacia we were talking about. That marvellous and utterly unique way to name or just describe, both noun and adjective, that person who fucks you up or over with a quiet passive aggressive precision, fuck and quiet so gloriously mated that its adherents will hardly ever find any swearing necessary: *la chingada*, even *rechingada*, *chingaquedita*. The word that allowed Nieves to claim both La Malinche and Ignacia were not the fucked but the fuckers, not *chingadas* but *chingonas*, for their use of the quiet controlling weapons at their disposal.

Then as Tavo too exits the dining room and he looks over at me as well, measuring me for the first time, I will feel that I have joined a conspiracy, acquired a mission. With that word at the centre of it. Though I will not be thinking of either Ignacia or Malintzin but of Magdalena herself and *La Señora O*, their relationship not just to Basta but to Clotilde and Matilde, as I decide to make Basta my project: to make us into a united front against *chingaqueditismo*.

Though I will not notice as I continue to almost accidentally run into him, encouraging him not just in his ideas but asking him about what he wishes to do to realize them, that in persuading Basta to join with me I will be doing it too, *chingue y chingue*, *chingue y chingue*, bug bother beaver away, *queda, queda, muy quedita*, softly, quietly, a guerrilla in the jungle. Here she comes the equally silent counterinsurgent: *la contrachingaquedita*.

Though Magdalena will have to up the ante before I give my secret society a name. Or invite anyone else to join it.

4

Bunker H.



WILL CONTINUE to keep my two friends, or perhaps I should say my two projects, apart for the longest time. I will continue to mention them to each other sometimes, but there is no question that my reluctance to get them together will last. Maybe because I'm afraid they won't like each other. That they might come to judge each other wanting. Try to make me take sides. Maybe because I'll enjoy segregating my two lives. Even savour their separation. One the almost American school on the hill. The other the connections I will be making through the Oronsky house downtown. Including the Academia de San Carlos where I will speak Spanish all the time.

I don't know. Except that I will notice how I enjoy telling them about each other. Rather more perhaps than having them tell themselves. A lot of people do that, I think: Control their friends by controlling their stories. Maybe it's the Magdalena in me. Maybe it's what I'm still doing here. I just know I'll keep it up, that first line, that explaining.

So, Itzel is an Auschwitz survivor, I will say time and again to Basta in the Oronsky kitchen or even later as we sit on his roof, then maybe add my second line: And as she survived Auschwitz she has gone about surviving the rest of her life.

And I will fix him with a stare.

So you can understand her bourgeois values, I'll repeat. Her needs.

Making those remarks after getting back from lunch or supper, maybe cocktails, though never a dinner party, at her place. Or at the well-known Hungarian painter's.

The cars. The scarves. The dyed blonde hair. The beauty salon her sister owns. The make-up. It's a way of disappearing into what other people believe. A way of disguise. Like a chameleon.

But she's dedicated, I might add as I think more about throwing them together. She could be useful. She understands about the need for change.

Being useful in those days will be a compliment. It won't mean useful to us, that we will be able to use her, as might be supposed, or if it should take on that meaning, we will certainly, all of us, hide it from ourselves. Because we will want it to mean above all that our greatest desire, the what you might want to be of Be the Best You Can Be, will be to be useful. To others, to society, to the movement. Because, of course, the need for change will be paramount. Basta and I will both acknowledge that. Even if the sixty-eight movement won't have been born yet. Even if we will be speaking again and again about how nothing ever happens in this country. Nothing.

So very Mexican a refrain that years later, even as I write this, I will find myself reading Paco Ignacio Taibo II, writing from some time in the seventies, where someone in his detective protagonist's office will say it: Nothing ever happens in this country. And then add: And even when it does it doesn't.

But by then, I know Paco Taibo will know better. That it's another desperate trope. Because you don't always get the change you want. Though sometimes when you don't you do.

◇ While for Itzel, the political will always be the personal. Still years, though not many, before that women's movement phrase was coined. The call to action or insight will be contained in a word, a gesture, an image, a metaphor. Even on that first day she will speak to me. What will make her think me right—right with that You could do more but not worse, remark—will be the echo in Sandra's gesture. Something she will feel shaking her body or her very embodiment, that will push

into her experience of the more and the more and the worse and the worse and the worst: something in that lifting of the arm. How Sandra will lift the model's arm.

That's what will make her shiver, she'll say. The Nazi guards had examined the concentration camp inmates that way. Looking for the beginning of *bubos*. Buboes. I won't know there is such a word, in Spanish much less English, or the commonplace nature of such infections of the lymph nodes till Basta explains them to me. Ignacia had taught him to always check for them under his arms when he felt sick, they will be common enough in Mexico, and would in Auschwitz have indicated some kind of weakness to those guards. Not necessarily incipient bubonic plague—how long I will know that word but not its origins—but just reason enough to put you on the line for the gas chambers.

As it would be if someone had to lift your arm for you. As Sandra will do. And that examination, how often was it? Once a week? Once or twice a month? I don't remember now, but it is the one that will determine whether you lived.

And that moment its culmination: the raising of the arm.

I'll always remember that. How her arm will rise. A gesture like I'd seen a friend make years before under hypnosis. As the hypnotist told her that her arm was getting lighter and lighter—and it rose. Itzel's arm will rise like that. As if she does not see it, as if she cannot. As if her eyes have turned back into her head. Mesmerized by memory, and by horror. The arm just rising rising. On its own, her voice dull.

They always asked us to raise our arms, she will say standing in front of her three-panel gilded vanity mirror. When, if she does not pay close attention, she will find her arm rising. Before she can stop it. Before she can grab the deodorant to apply it to her beautifully depilated armpits just as the side panes, pulled in so she will be able to see the sides, the back of her hair, will catch her reflection and throw it back at her over and over, and those reflected heads, arms, upper bodies repeating in the mirror will slowly become for her neither her current self nor her own skeletal Auschwitz self but those around her on the line. Now fading out to each side yellow orange in the interior light. Disappearing. So that it will seem to her the moment so many were taken away.

It's not a moment I like to remember. It reminds me too much of the moment after, how she quickly slams down the deodorant or sweeps it off the vanity to turn away, refusing even to look herself in the eye to acknowledge her own survival: to feel some triumph in it. Not the goddess Itzel but the moon rabbit she is so often depicted holding tight in her lap, skittish and ready to bolt: to go to ground. The way she had gone to ground years before. So she will not even be able to smile at her own reflection. There will never be anything to assure that girl: Look you are here, you are. You made it. Not inside that expanding horror which will give birth to my next line.

Itzel was an Auschwitz survivor. And as she survived Auschwitz she went about surviving the rest of her life. Like a rabbit making its lair in muddy ground. Never quite comfortable, never fulfilled.

◇ The fact is, she will tell me, she had hardly even known she was Jewish. Her family was so secular, so assimilated, that fact only came home to her when she was made to wear the yellow Star of David. They were Hungarian, Transylvanian, of their community, their class, their country. They were sure nothing could go wrong for them. At least nothing very bad, or for very long. And Itzel at seventeen will have no more group identity than that: beautiful dresses, tasty food, a tasteful ambience. Parties, privilege, status, munificence, charity, kindness: a life of comfort to look forward to. She will never identify with anything beyond the family, the personal, at all. Certainly not with the different, as she will not think herself different. And always with the privileged, never with the oppressed. Not until our meeting her, when she will still grope after something: to find a place.

Even in the camps the only one of the other inmates she will ever really identify with will be her sister. And it will be different, that. The identification will be complete. She will follow out her sister's every move, that whole time in the camp, and even later. Raising her arm exactly as her sister raises her arm. Gesturing the way her sister gestures.

Before that she will identify with the Nazis, even the camp guards. She'll say so. The first time sitting around in the Hungarian painter's house not at a dinner or even a cocktail party, but just the three of us

eating dobosh torte on small porcelain plates in a parlour full of smoky pinks and teals, damask and brocades, and the most intimate of his paintings on the walls. Everything glowing in the electric evening. A place of such comfort, and such ease, everything for all its antique propriety, informal, almost casual somehow, well worn perhaps the best descriptor, or even worn well, because the painter did seem to wear the room, it was so much a part of him, a gentle man who invited easy confidences, complete security. Itzel's occasional lover still, and looking back, I think, the best, surely the most loyal, the most understanding, of her friends.

So that it should be no surprise that in that parlour, so different from the refectory of the Oronsky *comidas*, and in front of that man, she should first confess to me her most difficult secrets from the camps, the rhyming pair that still cut to the quick, the ones whose telling began with the simplest of asides. How she told me, in that most European of atmospheres as she looked at the delicately European sky coloured paintings on the walls which nonetheless contained from time to time one or another Zuñiga or Tamayo or Rivera influenced dark-skinned heavy-limbed Mexican beauty, how after all these years in Mexico, she will think Mexicans ugly, Indians ugly. It may be why she finds it in the life class so difficult to bring them to life.

Except if they happen to be very light, she'll add. It's easier then.

So that I'm sure she would have liked my blue-eyed copper skinned dad even if it won't just be for being a *güera* that she likes me. And she knows this reaction is a fault. Knows it very deeply. Knows it in her flesh, she will even say, pinching an arm and adding a sound between a giggle and a choking cough, before she will raise her forearm once more to show the tattoo. It was just how she was brought up. The darker races might be the salt of the earth, but they were definitely earthy looking. And in people, earthy might be good, or even true, but never beautiful. No, the Germans. Now the Germans were beautiful. Not all of them you understand. But that Nazi ideal German: That was beautiful. That was what she had been taught was beautiful. That was the romantic partner you imagined behind you smiling into your mirror before the dance. And there will be that terrible blank irony at the edge of her upturned lips.

Because—I've said it already—Itzel too, will be beautiful. Just like that, beautiful. I would have done well to look so good at forty-one. But let's make it clear that it is that straight-nosed—oh, the Nazis would have called it Aryan despite the Star of David and the Slavic high cheekbones—blue-eyed firmness to her face, that will give her her particular kind of good looks. That and the upward curve of her full soft lips, their unconsciously sensuous plenitude. And always too the way she will moisten them, as if they are her only point of contact to the world.

Promising, men would most likely call them, though not in front of women. As if what they promised is something no other woman could understand. Or what no man would wish she could, since a woman's understanding would break into his fantastic reverie. And besides it is only the unconsciousness that will make the promise, so you would not wish any other woman to know, or to change it to the conscious gesture of the femme fatale. Because part of Itzel's appeal will be in that too: the break in the spirit that will never let her know how beautiful she is. Or will at best confuse her because the centre of whatever beauty she will ever possess will be just that Germanic beauty she will so hate and so admire. So that any admiration she might allow herself as she looks in the mirror must contain that hatred too.

Perhaps that's why she will so often repeat that sentence. If only I could find them beautiful, looking off her balcony at Mexican men. Perhaps just to make me explain to her again how I think they are. And that it's visceral: I have not cultivated this. Explain to her as best I can Basta's unconscious beauty. Just speaking of him as *el muchacho de la pensión*, the young man—lad, the English would say; boy, the proper translation, has taken on too many negative connotations—of the pension. What they will always share, though his will be in that straight long Maya nose almost taking off directly from the forehead and those Maya hand gestures which accompany it almost as if leaning forward seated on a throne as in a Palenque carving. So sometimes I wonder if it will be thinking they wouldn't understand each other's beauty that will make me fail to introduce them. Rather than a fear of the beauty in them they might wish to share.

While at the painter's she will repeat it, shaking her head.

Even when we got to the camp I still thought them beautiful. And the people around me so ragged and panic stricken, they were ugly. Ugly. *Fea. Fea.* The F of the Spanish whistling, as if she could blow the image away.

And on that second ugly I will see the shiver pass up her right arm. As she looks out again through the painter's front windows toward the street: the people hurrying by. Going to the varying shops in the neighbourhood, and down the block, something they will have in common, her balcony and his ground floor, what he will urge her to paint and paint himself over and over in gentle colours from both places, his favourites the ones of the butcher shop across the street from Itzel. The cubist planes of the sides of beef brought in then hung up in the window. Something Itzel and I will both try to paint too. But only after the massacre. When we could wish that shop away. And we will not be able to tame the colours as the meat sings out: Come one, come all, come one, come all. *¡Asiste! ¡Asiste!* Demonstration, five o'clock, 2nd of October.

And we will all be shivering then.

It was the first thing I did, she'll say. When we arrived at the camp. When we were separated from our parents, and our brother. Only my sister and I left together. I picked the most beautiful guard because I thought he would be the kindest, and I went up as close as I could get to him and I asked.

Where did our parents go? I said. And he smiled. I can still see it. That white-toothed, wide, blond, Germanic smile. *Bunker H*, he said. *Bunker H*. And he laughed. And kept laughing. And said it louder, so that all the other guards laughed with him. Then he turned away. Only later would we learn what he meant. Bunker H. *Der Himmel Bunker*.

Der Himmel Bunker, bright like a neon sign in the air between us as I'll watch her trying to come up with a way of translating it. Almost ready to speak myself when the painter will notice her difficulty too, her mouth forming words that do not emerge, and move over to her side and put his hand over hers where it rests on the chair, and whisper to her softly.

She knows, Nauta already knows, he'll say pressing her hand to his

cheek as he looks at me, because he can see it clearly in my face. The initials are the same, English and German the same, though not the Spanish and I'd heard that word *Himmel* before anyway in some expression or other, *Gott im Himmel*, or some such on the lips of one of Billie's maternal Wisconsin relatives or maybe in the bright violent cartoons of the Katzenjammer kids. But he'll say it anyway, repeating her words first.

Der Himmel Bunker, then adding in English: The Heaven Bunker.

And after that she'll start to speak again and he'll let her say it herself: The gas chambers.

Bunker H: the gas chambers.

And she will laugh. And for this yes, there will be a faint edge of hysteria, of aggression, as she removes her hand from his before she continues.

To explain how at first she will not believe the people who tell her what that means. The terrible joke the guard has made. Even as he will leer at her, still beautiful the way she must have been before starvation set in. Only a few days later, on some kind of work patrol or other, she will meet another woman. I'm not sure she will ever say what exactly it was they were doing, though always I will remember how I'll first imagine it, walking across dead earth under grey sky in grey and black striped clothes. How I think we always imagine the camps. To see spring or summer, bright blue skies in the mind would seem an insult somehow to those who died there. No matter the stories, no matter their own longing for days of sunlight, they must be allowed to dictate this to us: a backdrop of unchanging tragedy seared into the earth.

The woman will be young, someone around Itzel's age, teenage, early twenties perhaps, who has been able to stay in touch with her boyfriend, how will never be said, but this too is a truth of the camps, that always there will be more communication than one might think, more interconnectedness, and him a man who had been sent to work in the crematoria, who had told her it was true: They were all being killed, all of them. All those who had been separated out upon arrival. Without doubt Itzel's parents were already dead. And this young woman will emphasize, against all Itzel's disbelief, that there can be no mistake. Their burned bodies formed part of the grey ash on the air.

And while Itzel's sister stands there, Itzel will fall to that hard earth. And declare: If this can be true in the world into which I have been born, then I will not live.

And it will be said exactly like that to me. Formal like that. Exactly. Though it is not Itzel who will say it, but once more, the Hungarian painter. Suddenly, losing control of her Spanish, Itzel will have squeezed his hand, her eyes asking him to translate from the Hungarian. While his is the voice that will carry the most emotion. Though I don't think Itzel's absence of feeling will come from repetition. I think it was likely that way when she first said it too, her head on the ground: She will be a slate wiped clean. There will be no feeling left. None that could be expressed.

The emotion will all be on the part of the capo, and of her sister. The capo who will come up and start to kick at her. The sister who will beg. The capo who will say that if she had not been chosen to die, it was her job to live. The Nazis did not choose by quotas but by weakness, this was not a question of taking someone else's place. Soon enough they would have room for them all in their death machines. She owed it to her parents to live. To be among those who lasted. For as long as she was able.

And all of it will be said in fury. It will be incomprehensible to that woman that anyone could do what Itzel is doing. Even if in truth many will. Still for this woman it will be impossible to believe that it is in this precise instant that all belief in the goodness of the world, all the world's light, will be extinguished for Itzel. That the Nazis were the fairies Itzel had been taught to believe in. While the capo will know from long before she was brought to the camp of the Nazis' evil. And will understand in the flesh the bargains she had made with them. And bargain you might, but the evil would remain unforgotten. It was the good you had to fight for. Fight to make real.

While what Itzel's sister will do is cajole her. As she had done when as a child, Itzel, the youngest of them all, would fall into a sulk, or refuse her food, or threaten to hold her breath till she turned blue.

Do it for me, she will say. C'mon Itzel. Do it for me.

Until between the two of them they will get her up.

And after, that's what Itzel will do. She will do it for her sister. Survive for her sister. As in that raising of her arm. Following her sister's every move. So that she will repeat it often enough looking at her hands.

Sometimes I wonder if I survived at all. If I am not simply my sister's shadow. Or a shadow of all those taken out of the line.

And her despair will seem absolute, unbreachable. Even if there will be the time I will go up, and so out of character for me, hug her from behind and feel the warmth of her body penetrating my clothes as she looks in the vanity mirror at shadow after deeper shadow in each reflection of herself, and I will sway a little back and forth carrying her with me as I place my cheek against her back and say: You're here, Itzel, you're here.

Then I'll add in a kind of desperation, flapping my hand toward the vanity: Why don't you get rid of it, just get rid of this thing?

Imagining she could use a small round mirror propped on a desk the way Billie will. Only she'll pull away from me. Look from one mirror to the other. Say: But my makeup. How could I put on my face?

But I will know in how she glances once more to her left, to that first mirrored reflection, the bright one, the perfect one before they all begin to fade, that she still sees her sister there, still guiding her. So I'll know it is that she needs: not the mirrors but the reflections. To define the face with which she confronts the world. No matter how quickly or how hard she will only a moment later slam that deodorant, that lipstick, down.

And in all the time I'll know her, except for some vague dreams of food, those are the only stories of Auschwitz she will ever tell. Just those three. The beautiful guards. The furious kicks of the capo. The following of her sister, always exemplified in the raising of the arm. Its repetition, over and over. As if it's all she will ever allow herself to see. Her sister's arm. Her own. Reflecting each other. While faces fade to nothing at either side.

Though at the painter's she will go to anger when she gets to Bunker H. To her own barely held in fury.

He will be in Bunker H. now too, that guard. He will. But in his case it will stand for *Hölle*, she will spit out, the meaning so obvious in

English that the Hungarian painter will bother with neither initials nor translation as Itzel's voice grates on the word harsher than I will ever again hear it.

Then she'll sigh. And once more look out toward the high windows of that sheltering parlour and on to the street.

I wish them in Hell each day. But still, I think them beautiful. And that beauty haunts me.

And her voice will be once more soft. Defeated. Her hands open on her lap.

So it should be easy to understand why she will tell us more than once how that Nazi beauty will continue to hollow her out. To make her the shell, like a crab shell left on a beach, of who she ought to be. Her own beauty too: a haunted shell.

And I would never accuse her of being manipulative for saying it. Think of her as fishing for the compliments I will always freely give. She will be stating a simple fact. And one she will try to overcome. But yes.

That's likely the story of Itzel and Sebastián. If not of Sebastián and Itzel.

II

Caput Mortuum



CHIAROSCURO. ESFUMATO. RAW umber. Burnt sienna. Grisaille. The techniques, the colours of art school will become the keys to our secret code. At first, as after that supper with the Hungarian painter, the darks, the greys, the subtle lights. The dark earths of the reflections in her vanity mirror fading to ochres, until in darker or faded times, Itzel will call me to say: It is a raw sienna day, a burnt umber morning, an ochre afternoon. And because in Spanish umber, which it is said gets its name from the earth of Umbria in Italy as sienna does from Sienna, is translated as *sombra* which too is shadow, we will use that meaning too: a day in shadow or in the shadows, of history or of one's own life.

Though our use of the colours of our art school learning will allow us to branch out, to play with our words, to move from the underpainted grisaille in its umber or sienna, its black hatch marks on white ground, its green earth used often enough to underpaint European flesh to bring it to life when the skin tones are applied on top, to the transparent colours of the glazes, that glowing overpainting, that dark over light that brings the clear brilliance of stained glass, or the scumbles of light over dark that set the teeth on edge, techniques we will be taught to use in our one class on the old Renaissance masters, then move from there to more recent masterly techniques, the impressionist disuse of black in favour of the juxtaposition or addition of the complement, the direct

impastos of Van Gogh and the expressionists, the clear fields of colour used by Matisse and the fauves, then back again to the sombre if more direct umbers — sombre and umber the same word really too — of the cubists. And our own secret love of the colours of Itzel's Hungarian with his tender pinks.

As we will talk of limiting palettes, deciding in advance just which few colours you will use, or the art school technique of reintroducing colour until you understand each one, as a way of organizing our confidences, talking of them as if we are building up a work of art. Its depths, its lights, what it pushes back or brings forward, as we assure ourselves our confidences will create something unique, just for the two of us. And even we will call those times together our *naturaleza viva*, instead of *muerta* in Spanish, and in English our moving rather than still, life. As we try to work our way out of the shadows. And weave our experiences together, intertwine them. But as if it were a work, like a Renaissance narrative painting, that no matter what we added or subtracted, could always be kept within its frame. Already that: the frame.

And it will be standing on her balcony that we will discover the last of the earths there in the sky, a colour we'd been taught to identify in the Renaissance robes of priests, called an earth because at the beginning like ochre it must have been mined, but is simple rust really, they don't tell you that, but that's all it means: hematite ferrous oxide. Though there's this purple variant that as a pigment is always a deep maroon that seems to glow with black, dull until that moment when we see it at its most transparent as the red moments after sunset gleam backed against green before they go to a true violet, and we say it at once as it scumbles there earthening the sky, the name of that colour we've never used in our work that now identifies not a priest but perhaps a prayer in the ending of the day.

That's *caput mortuum*, we both say at once and are delighted by it, that it will have come like that to both of us at once, so that we intertwine our hands like adolescent best friends tend to do, and arc our heads across the sky to the east, where the same colour dulls itself further in the clouds against a cerulean blue that begins its darkening toward ultramarine. As if the sky is being glazed.

And we will both feel it, that kick in the gut, and we will say so: how we see in that contrast, the purest melancholy there. And perhaps, in some sort of need for excess, at least excess of control, we will speak of what we see as the historic combination of the alchemist's dross, the leftover and the useless *caput mortuum*, with the ultramarine that came to Europe from over the seas, precious lapis lazuli ground fine from a mine in Afghanistan still working now. Even if when I first go offshore in the clear water of the Caribbean on my way to Cozumel for the first time, and the depth of the clear water below in which I have been seeing fish all the way to two hundred feet at last darkens to pure refraction blue and deeper blue, into which will float bright cadmium yellow sponges, I will insist some ultra pure form of sea water must have named the colour rather than the distance over the sea that purest lapis lazuli had to come. While in that balcony moment my eyes will stick not in water but in the darkening purity of the sky.

So that I will be the first to speak of how it was for me. How it will hit me one puberty summer riding home along Furman Street cavernous between the high brick warehouses of repeated tight shut iron doors on every floor and the rush hour traffic of the double decker Belt Parkway layered below the Brooklyn Heights promenade, standing up to pedal hard on the bike Dan bought for a dollar and then rebuilt for me, remembering perhaps for a moment the endless washers of the hub brake scattered all over the yard and how I considered it a miracle he ever got them back into the mechanism in the right order even as my eyes rise to the smallest strip of sky visible above to make me aware of the growing dark and how into that powdery deepening blue, still bright still bright, the clouds will float, so pink so very very pink.

And it will hit me like one of the strong waves on a near beach: the smell of creosote and spices, and those two colours — pink and blue. Devalued *caput mortuum* and ultramarine together whitened with such sadness. I will never have known such sadness. Never have believed in such sadness. So that the same pink *caput mortuum* will seem to darken then expand in my gut. And I won't know where to put it. So that it will seem for those moments to be the world.

And then it will subside.

And it will repeat itself all that summer long so that even when it is no longer there I will recognize its call feel its meaning the scent of ending as after a day of delight all by myself my brother away at camp I've gone to the docks to balance on giant bollards looking down at the turds and the condoms floating out to sea or to look down from the girders of the Bridge where I've walked out from the now open official pedestrian walkway onto a workers' catwalk where I can sit over the water which polluted as it is will still shine clear and blue for being so far down, and it's the sunset itself that's told me to leave and the blue and pink only catches me at the very last moment as I exit the underpass.

Or maybe I'm just taking the long way round from Cadman Plaza where I've walked the two-inch-wide semicircles of the fence tops my hands held out to my sides a perfect circus tight rope walker walking her hundred yards or so over and over in meditative concentration step step step then spin on one foot at fence's end or just played knock hockey with the neighbourhood boys in the rec centre, the ones who like me never got any summer weeks away. A time when always my route will be dictated by trying to keep alive as long as I can the moment before: whichever moment before.

Even if it was a knockdown drag out fight with one or another or some group of those boys over something that never ever mattered except the need to fight itself felt in the hands, the arms, the feet, the eyes as I avoid the time to go in to face more men coming home with Billie in another kind of fight night maybe with or without Dan at home or maybe I'll even be returning in peace with the two of them from a movie, we'll watch *On the Waterfront* one of those summers and *The Fly* in double bill another, and I'll feel the tension and know they'll be going out later and who knows who will be bringing the fight home. While sometimes too it will already be my turn to restore calm, curb the unrest, stop the fights. Because it's these summers that will become my job. Summers I will be too young to know for all my fantasies that one day I will leave: that I will know enough to leave. Much less how few short years away my leaving will start.

And the truth is that in all the time since I have found no one else who has shared this with me, this feeling of the pink entering the gut

from the blue: Itzel will still be the only one. But she'll tell me quickly that first day she doesn't really know if it started for her with adolescence. It might have. It was perfectly possible she'd felt it, the encroaching of that turbulence everyone will try so carefully to hide from her, maybe she'd seen it coming as she looked out her window, felt it in the enveloping beginnings of *caput mortuum* semi-transparent in the clouds.

She may well have done she didn't know she knew only that the ash blacks and greys of the camps had put paid to all that, made everything one toned, washed whatever life whatever colour anyone ever felt she was meant to have back not even to Holland's warm umber but to the strict black base paint of the Spanish *grisaille*, she could remember childhood but those later pre-camp years, scenes there were, but emotion was gone. That was all someone else's movie now. The way she will tell me years later maybe it was Lisa Minelli's when I meet her at *Cabaret*. So that this will come or come back to her this pink into blue in the days after. The days directly after.

When the camp is liberated. Not Auschwitz anymore but Bergen-Belsen, where she'll be sent, I'm quite sure that's the one she'll mention being sent to as the Red Army approached Auschwitz. When so many of the survivors will be herded there on foot, so many dying on the way. Making me imagine those arms that once mirrored each other on that other line—hers her sister's—used now to hold each other up. While sometimes I cannot imagine even that. Afraid that if I allow them to touch each other a rifle butt will enter the image to smash them apart. As the others fall away around them. Into shadow like the reflections in her three-way mirror, ochre orange scumbled over sepia as they fade. In my mind only. Because she will not speak of that either. Give it any texture any story at all. She will name it only. Just the once. And I will have to look it up later to be sure.

Then by the time she's finally freed by the Canadians and the English she will already be suffering from the typhus rampant then in the camp. And a doctor will make the decision to allow her to stay an extra week in the one ward with sunlight in the makeshift hospital to which all typhus victims have been taken. Or perhaps it will just be the one row of beds or cots with sunlight, it is hard to remember, or maybe

just hard for her to describe as she tells me how much those small rays of sunlight will make a difference to her, so restricted will her mobility be by her near starvation. So that they will let her stay there, in her one tiny place in the sun for all the two or maybe it will even be three weeks that she'll be in that facility, when most of the patients will be allowed just a single week of direct sunlight.

She'll be so weak, so unresponsive we might say today, so depressed, they will decide it's the least they can do for her, so afraid they'll be she will be among the many to die from typhus or dysentery or just the results of malnutrition even after liberation. While the diet which leads slowly to recovery, the simple sugar water and rice that will be all the weakened digestive systems of the newly liberated can tolerate, will have added to it paprika — paprikash — a first luxury for any Hungarian.

And the sunlight as she rests an even greater luxury. So that as she traces its passing across the floor, there will come elation because this bed, this yellow light, will be the first present she has received since she was forced to put on the yellow star, and it will be for her birthday, she'll say, literally for her birthday, the day, I think, she'll turn nineteen. While she will go on to say that she would have clapped her hands like a child if she hadn't been so weak, so very weak.

Yet still in the moments after sunset, when the sun she has allowed her eyes to play with on the floor during the morning has long passed over to the west and even its indirect light is fading and she looks up to the window through which those playful beams entered early that morning and sees the clouds turned pink, it will be as if a drowning wave of melancholy were filling her lungs, her throat, her mouth, and she will be falling — a mote of dust — through the sky. Alone. So terribly alone. So terribly paralyzed, even as her body will go on recovering. Until she will be beautiful once more. Except for the teeth she runs her tongue along. Those will be capped in Mexico.

It started me back, you know. It started me back. That first small kindness.

And I will notice as I look at her as we stand on the balcony holding hands that her eyes have filled with tears. That it could be thus, that it was not friends or family, for all the kindness her sister had always

shown her, but the kindness of strangers that will start her back: that terrible wonderful astounding rescue. Because friends and family no longer had the power beyond clinging as best they could to each other, to do anything at all. Always we are dependent on the ethics of the other. Remember that, when it comes your time to choose.

It will always be with me, Itzel will say, the terrible power of that combination, framed in that window, the strength of it as I looked up from my bed. The contrast of it. Not just blue and pink, but the happiness of the day and the twilight sadness coming on. And I will miss my sister then. Think of how they pried us apart as we clung to each other. How she, so much stronger she was, got no time in the sun. But it will be wonderful too. That I could feel something. I could. And I could let it happen. Even savour it sometimes.

And Itzel will begin to swing my hand, refusing further sadness as we look below at the yellow lights of the store windows now blinking on.

Caput mortuum, she'll say. Caput mortuum even as the last red purple fades from the sky. Who knew?

Caput mortuum, *calavera* even sometimes in Spanish, the death's head, the skull, first it is said, named by the Romans for the colour of dried blood. Caput mortuum exploding into ultramarine. Sadness exploding into the most precious joy. Then reversing. Darkest ultramarine, darkest indigo pushing back. And we will both agree: We need that moment to remember ourselves. But it is good to be together. And we will move closer so that we can feel the heat in our touching shoulders against the entering chill of Mexico City's mountain night. And we will go inside to get a wrap, and perhaps to venture out into the City's lights.

And as we descend the stairs, she will turn to me.

They saw me, she will say, they saw me. Those people in the hospital, they saw me. And it was good. For the first time in so long. It was good to be seen.

And then she'll make, of sorts, a joke. A double entendre—a *doble sentido*—which will stick with us, still sticks with me, to get through that twilight hour of old nostalgia and newer mournings.

Kaput mortuum, she'll say. Kaput mortuum. And I'll know from how she says it, exactly what she's saying. That German word adopted

into her Hungarian and into my English. Into Spanish too, as far as it goes. And perhaps for her, a *triple sentido* really. Made all the more marvellous given its German origins because the camps had ended her ability to speak the German she had studied so well at school, used even. Though unlike her sister, who could not maintain her second language — Transylvania's other language of Rumanian — and Spanish at once, as romance languages they were just too close, Itzel did maintain both. Could switch easily in and out of them. But her German, her once so fluid German, that was gone, completely. Kaput, too.

And she will like what she has just said. Talk about it. Kaput mortuum. And the hospital. To wake up without German. In her mind or in the voices around her. And if not without death, with sunlit days in which she did not have to think about it. Even *Der Himmel Bunker*, that place to which she was told her parents had been sent, those three still resonant words, left often enough to drift in the twilight untranslated. So that Kaput mortuum, and that brief gesture separating the crossed hands with which we signal the end of play, will open our door into the evening. An exit into the electrical anticipation of Mexico City's early night — arriving year round at almost the same hour — to see and to be seen.

Into that *tarde*, that evening of *Nos vemos en la tarde*. What we will say to each other to arrange to meet up. To see each other. Almost a *doble sentido* too. Because it is at that hour that we will see each other best.

◇ There will be other evenings of course when we will never notice the pink and the blue of the east, but just keep looking directly into the west, at the red ball of the sun as it disappears behind a low building — its tone determined mostly by whether we are looking into the late dry season dust of the *tolvanera*, or the rainy season clarity after an afternoon thunderstorm — when the sunset colours will seem to riff off each other in ever different ever changing tunes, so that I have never believed for an instant that far too easy and easily repeated throwaway line about the instant tropical sunset, meaning of course sunset between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, because it will seem to take forever that symphony of colours, each night picking different hues and

values tints and shades then playing them out across an imaginary keyboard or trumpeting them loud and subtle, so that the length of that sunset will always linger with me and make me think that trope some strange far northern European confusion, I'm not sure it's even said in Spanish, certainly I've never read it in any book in that language even if Madrid is on the same parallel as New York, so that I have decided it must come from farther north than that, they might say it in the Scandinavian languages or Russian too for all I know, but I think it originates in the assumption that heat should only occur with the extreme length of the northern summer day as if heat and daylight were somehow related, conceived perhaps by some sailor from Liverpool or Belfast, that then wanders into North American Anglo thought even if so few of us even in Canada live in the latitudes so many of the English and Irish do, far above the fifty-first parallel where I put in my thirty years.

So that we all just adopt it, comparing not the length of sunsets really, but the length of twilights, our summer solstice twilight contrasted to their winter one when we vacation between the tropics, or conjured from our usual position indoors at home envying such vacationers to make us fail to note how quickly our winter night falls, how short the movement through yellows greens and reds to caput mortuum and black.

So that maybe there's an evening for me on that balcony when I'll notice a twilight green, a particular green, and I'll tell Itzel how much I've wanted to paint that green and how I just can't get it, and maybe it's because that green doesn't know whether it's green or orange and maybe it's because of that green that I'm in Mexico. And maybe then I'll go on to tell her about the first time I saw that green from the train and how at the very least it made me go to art school, that and the colours of the day too, and I'll find myself describing that train ride from the Texas border into colours so bright I could barely believe them. And how that green was just there in the sunset and I wanted it I wanted it and I went back to New York and tried to paint it and I couldn't and I didn't see it there again either not even from the Bridge so I just tried to see it from the train with my mind and that didn't work, so I determined I would take that train again.

And maybe I'll repeat it again too or something like it one afternoon at the school itself precisely after one of those classes spent trying to capture one of those colours one way or another pure impasto or glazes or a combination of the two when we'll find ourselves sitting on the grass, that interwoven tropical lawn grass whose rhizomes you can stick your hand through, and we'll be looking into the daylight sky so much deeper, pure cobalt really, there perched as we are above the city, and I'll talk about how startling that light has been to me too, and it's the mountain light of course and I won't know that either for the longest time thinking it just a tropical thing myself when it's mostly the mountains that cutting edge clarity of blue pushed up against green of vegetation or grey of rock, not till I do the six day drive across Canada from Toronto into the Rockies each day more clear each hour brighter light deeper shadow as we start up the rise of the prairie to thirty five hundred feet before it meets the foothills and I don't quite believe it because I'm further north than I've ever been there above forty-nine and this story is already long behind me and it's so damn bright after the subtle pastel summers the unbearable winter greys of Ontario, and I burst into tears as we enter the mountains, mountains always to be my other ocean, my other place of so much slower moving waves, while that first time, that first time I saw mountains from that train—Brooklynite that I am truly I'd never seen them hardly even a wooded hill if maybe a bit of a palisade—closing in inexorably from each side as we moved up the tilted plain toward the mountain valleys and high subtropical plateaus of Mexico, and it wasn't just their bright against the blue but how they seemed to thin and vanish behind each other, each layer of umber of sienna of sepia lighter more transparent than the one before it while I had thought to see each one deeper in its colour as you do see sometimes even in Mexico in the blues of layered forested mountains, only these ones wavered desert bare and disappearing while the ones foregrounded weighted themselves onto the plains like the hips the thighs the outcurve of pelvic bone to femur, the incurve of groin up toward pubic caves of the life models I had already sketched in the sepia and sanguine of Conté crayon, moving my hands as I say it.

And then to see it all again those same shapes from the Pyramid

of the Moon in Teotihuacan, the surrounding mountains echoing the pyramid shapes, *desvaneciéndose esfumándose* into the horizon, mountain brown blue dominating valley green still at the beginning of rainy season and how I became disoriented though I didn't lose my east but my north, *perdí mi norte*, they say it that way in Spanish, in Mexico it's even a verb *nortearse*, that they don't have in Spain, at least it's not in the definitions of the Real Academia, though I'm sure it came to America shortly after Columbus with Spain's more southern sailors, this way to note so severe a loss of direction, not just the loss of east and west expressed in disorientation, easy enough in those days before any reliable method of measuring longitude, but to north and south, maybe from one of the first times those sailors crossed the tropics and the equator maybe even before those invisible lines had a name, but still noted the disappearance of the north star, the one thing they could always rely upon to guide them, so that some in describing the meaning of *nortearse* will even speak of a loss of identity, and there I am on that pyramid looking from sky to map and map to sky and I get it all backwards because I can't imagine it either not even surrounded by those barely oval shadows that the sun could be to my north at noon. So that when finally I figure it out because nothing is where it's supposed to be I sit down at the edge of the pyramid stairs before starting down and I lean back on my elbows and I can't wipe the smile off my face as I look into the blue of the sky and ...

Oh my god Itzel, the colours the colours, that sky that sky. I can still close my eyes and see it, still close my eyes and see the first time I saw it: that light. Do you remember your first time? Where you were? And I will point to the magenta bougainvillea climbing on a fence at the edge of the garden, that brilliant blue behind it.

And she will answer: Yes, yes. Then take my hand and tell me how it was the light for her, too. How after that time in the hospital and in some other kind of camp about which she will never say more than a sentence or two, a life on hold even with so much greater a hold on life or something like that she might have said once, food anyway and some sun, they had been found by their Catholic convert sister in Mexico, prosperous now, connected enough to easily prepare the papers of the

two sisters, while the one brother who too had survived the camps will join his brother in Palestine. Because that was one of the family's small miracles: that all of the younger generation will make it through, the three transported so late into the war, in 1944 I think it was for the Jews of Transylvania, and the two who had gotten out, all will be alive when liberation comes.

And Itzel's trip will be by boat of course to the port of Vera Cruz, and she will remember how it happened. She came in a European winter I think, so there will be the gradual lengthening of the day and with it the brightening of the light, so that it will seem a promise written in the sky, a continuation of what that brief sunlight across the floor had given her, and then there will be the port itself and her sister and her sister's family, the brother-in-law she only vaguely remembered and nieces now and nephews too, and then the ride up onto the *altiplano* out of the bright but somehow still hazy thick sea level tropical light of Mexico's fertile Atlantic coast, whose damp can make you feel you are swimming through it as through water or an icing picture on a birthday cake, then around the Citlaltépetl, The Pico de Orizaba, the highest of Mexico's snow peaked volcanoes and third highest mountain in North America when suddenly it's that utter mountain clarity, the one I had seen and she had seen it too.

I saw it too, she will say. That's right. From right there, right there from the Pyramid of the Moon.

And we will find ourselves looking at each other, realizing suddenly that we had been the same age, the same age, when we had each sat down at the edge of the steps down from that pyramid, twenty-one years apart. Though at different seasons, the opposite edges of the year. I was there in summer and she in winter, so the sun was to the south and no, *no se norteó*. And besides, she had no north to lose. Or if she still did, all that north that ended in an Auschwitz winter, a Belsen spring, the truth is she wanted to lose it, she was sure of that. And what she had found was him, him, and she mistook him for her true north: the pole star in her firmament.

That red-haired son of Russia who seemed to shine so brightly she thought him when first she saw him as another gift. A continuation of

what the light, that first bright light across the floor she had followed so eagerly with her eyes, had given her. And so it was she followed him.

◇ She will gaze off into space then as if not altogether there, while an ironic downturn to her lips will tell me she is no longer thinking of the brilliance of the colours, and I will be suddenly alert myself as if a cold breeze has passed behind my back, and I'll know I haven't heard this story. It's been hinted at but never told. I'm aware she was married and divorced, no children, but little more. Except that her husband, she has mentioned it in passing, was not a camp survivor, or even among those who had gotten out early from one or another part of Europe, but from an earlier community, perhaps the first wave of Ashkenazim to America.

America the way the Italians who immigrated to Argentina meant America when they invented the phrase *hacerse su América*—to make your America—to make it big in the place whose streets were paved with gold, a place that could as easily be Canada, the United States; the settler colonies of the southern cone, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina; or even to better the race in one of those campaigns taken on by Bolivia or Peru or Mexico, Brazil maybe or even Paraguay.

So that Itzel's husband's family will come sometime in the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century to escape the pogroms or just attain some form of greater social peace, perhaps between the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, or in the 1920's, even as more of the Sephardim too will be arriving, those descendants of the Jews expelled from Spain in 1492 who will never be officially allowed to come to New Spain but who will spread across the Islamic world, and who in those years after the First World War will arrive in larger numbers from the fragmenting Ottoman Empire than will ever make it to Latin America as secret Jews during the time of the colony.

And between the two communities, Ashkenazi and Sephardi, creating a rift in Mexico's—perhaps all of Latin America's—Jewish community that lasts till this day. With the Sephardic Ladino speakers still looked down upon. Though some have made it big in Central and South America where, like all those from the Middle East, Arabs or Persians or Kurds or Sephardim or the Turks themselves, they are all

called *turcos*. While part of this man's family will go to Argentina and the rest to Mexico, if I remember correctly. And keep themselves as separate from the mass of Mexicans as any other members of the *euro-peizante*—Europeanizing—upper class will do, even if, in turn, their Jewishness will be suspect. But they will create the community into which Itzel and her sister will move. Their Jewishness a stubborn symbol now, even if they had never taken it seriously until Hitler told them who they were. The way Itzel will never remove her tattoo.

And it was wonderful at first, she will say, like a fairy tale, this man who told her he loved her utterly completely as much as any man had ever loved a woman, that he would do anything for her and did, instructing her on how to dress and how to act and how to cook his favourite meals because the truth is she had never cooked, and loving how she did it for him, even if, just as in the family home before Hitler, they had a maid, a very good maid though perhaps as per the usual underpaid who could cook just about anything.

And he taught her too how to make love, because she'd never done that either, never had a chance, so that she felt she was being given not her life back because she didn't know what that meant anymore, but a life, a beautiful life she couldn't create for herself, and she enjoyed this, she really did, it was like following her sister in the camp, learning to read him, to do exactly as he wanted. Only when she wanted to give him the ultimate gift, that's how she thought of it, the ultimate gift a woman could give a man, not her virginity but a child, she wanted to give him a child she said, he would answer: Shhhh Shhhh, as he held her in his arms.

You're my ultimate gift, he'd say. You're the only child I'll ever need, he'd say, and he would pin her to the bed and tell her how to move, and where to touch him and what things to say to him in a tiny teeny child voice. And then sometimes when she would burst into tears when some dish or other didn't work or just because the clouds in the east had turned pink or because she was remembering her parents, he would say: You see Itzel, this is exactly what I mean Itzel, You're far too neurotic to have a child, the camps have made you far too damaged to bring up a child, you wouldn't want to inflict that on a child, would you?

And sometimes he would say it gently and sometimes sarcastically, and if she had done anything that particularly displeased him his voice would be as sharp as a knife, but always it would end with him comforting her and making love to her or, really, instructing her on how to make love to him and always always telling her: You're the only child I'll ever need. You'll always be my child Itzel. You know I'll always protect you, I'll never leave you.

Until he did. Told her she was just too much of a child, she was just too needy, couldn't she just get a life of her own, the camps had made her far too neurotic, he couldn't stand it, he needed a real woman. Only the one he'd found was the same age she'd been when they met, only this one, by the time he left Itzel, this one was already pregnant. Maybe he even told her: I need a child, Itzel, you'd never be able to take care of a child, Itzel, can't you see I have to leave you?

◆ And it's then when she can barely get out of bed that her sisters will speak to her oldest brother, who will come over from Israel, and arrogant and sure he will call it, just call it. Call it. Name her husband the AshkeNazi and looking directly at Itzel say: Just because you admired those Nazi guards, Itzel, was no reason to punish yourself by marrying one.

And then he'll go out to confront the man to make sure Itzel will get everything she needs. The apartment, enough money to live on. But as to a child, her husband's depriving her of a child, he will be silent. They all will, the whole family. Sure she is their weakest link, their child, the one they had always cajoled, always excused always spoiled always protected.

So that she'll turn to me and say: They were right, you know. Right. All of them. I am far too neurotic to have a child. I would have just passed on my neuroses. And then she'll add breathing deep and looking out at the sky that the Hungarian painter, at least he had given her the colours back. Knew she needed them. He is the one who had gotten her into the university art classes. And then she will start speaking about the street below or the garden around us, refusing to meet my eyes. Until she will once again make that gesture, the hands moving apart.

Kaput mortuum. Whispered. Like a prayer.

This is over. Over. *Basta*.

While later, and often, I think, I will try to tell her what a wonderful mother she would have made. That she had so much to give even if she would have been the kind of mother every adolescent girl loves to hate. Then I will talk about the movement, about meaning through struggle, because in those days that will always be my default solution. Good mother or no, in those days I thought the opportunity long gone, even if later I will have a child myself at forty-one.

So what I will try to do is give her instead the dream of the sixties. The family of choice and freedom as the recognition of necessity: the necessity for change. Where a new world could be the child of all of us. What I will be doing with everyone then. Including Basta, urging him out of deliberation and argument into action. Still not noticing how directive I can be.

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine and all that. Convinced that no matter how small it might be, still I had the light. And I will think it no more than the greatest of compliments when she says: Your determination. You remind me of my sister. You have her same hair. The highlights. The way they glowed when I first saw her after the typhus. So beautiful. Though she dyes hers now. Against the grey. We both do. At our Catholic sister's salon.

Break This Young Woman



WHAT I WILL never do is explain to Itzel the riddle she will set for me that afternoon, the one that haunts me to this day. The maze whose paths my life will walk, finding no exit. Or like a two dimensional cartoon character walking a Möbius strip, turn inside out each time around. First forward then backward, then over again. Or the onset of the aura of a self-induced migraine. The kind caused by a syntactic gap, a step between languages, where meaning is almost and never quite perceived, an impossibility, clear but not there, a triple negative perhaps, or an imaginary number. That sets my head aglow, separates one part of my face from another, weakens my limbs, makes me see patterns.

Except inside the gap. Except in this. The pattern still unclear. How is it that we pass on pain?

And perhaps it's that I really won't know yet the enormity of the question, its place in the centre of my life, of my loyalties. Or wish to bother her with its unclear message when clarity, political clarity, clarity of action, is what I want to be my gift to her. Though I will speak more about that first trip to Mexico, I do know that, and perhaps it is there inside my speaking that I will first be able to make out the outlines of that question. *A vislumbrarla*, almost illuminate it, hidden in the shadows. When I tell her how Dan had given me the money to come.

Because there was going to be a meeting in Austin to put together some kind of program or other, maybe even to speak with the guys just beginning to organize at Fort Hood, the way when I finally do leave for Mexico not then but the next year I'll pass through Austin again and take with me names and contacts and a code to write in, should it become necessary to get guys out of the U.S. that way. While that first time there'll be an older couple driving down for the meeting who'll agree to give me a ride, the way someone usually would that year I was putting together the New York office.

Only they won't be coming back, not right away anyway, they'll be driving down to the border at Laredo and then getting the train, they had no desire to drive in Mexico at all, and it will occur to them as we talk to invite me along on the trip as they will a couple of others at the meeting, and it won't have any particular political purpose at all, just be for a bit of a break, and if anyone deserved a break it was me, they said, I'd been working full out almost a year, and who really cared if the desperation that would eventually take over the movement was already setting in I probably really needed a vacation, we'd meet with a few people and learn a great deal no matter what.

So I really will be tempted, feel it pulling at me, but I'll have no money beyond the ten bucks a week the organization never even managed to regularly pay me, had even moved back into Billie's just so I could keep up the work. And even if such dedication gave me the moral authority to cadge dinners, made people give me money for late night cab rides that I usually pocketed then took the subway, still the organizer's Mexican vacation seemed a bit much to ask anyone to shell out for, there were always far more important things to do with even the littlest bit of money, so I'll refuse, even if they could see the longing in my eyes, then mention it to Dan, just back from one of his more and more frequent round the world voyages now that things were increasingly difficult with Billie. And he will simply give me the money. Say it was better than drinking it away, the way he often did right then, at least a Mexican trip's worth, when he first hit shore.

Then he'll begin to tell me once more about Mexico, about Mesoamerica, after all he'd gotten me to read Bernal Diaz de Castillo's

A True History of the Conquest of New Spain when I was eleven because my progressive elementary school was studying the Aztecs and it was better than the standard Prescott, and the *Popol Vuh* only a year later, already putting it up there with the texts of all the major religions, while debunking a bunch of Castillo, though never the magnificence of the Mexican—the Aztec—capital of Tenochtitlán. And then he will speak of the mound builders, the pyramid builders, of the Mississippi, our ancestors he'll say though in those days many including Billie will deny it, she didn't go as far as those who would say they were built by either Vikings or aliens—and not illegal ones either—but just joined those who denied those mounds represented cities at all even if today satellite and other evidence have made it very clear, so that he will make going to Mexico seem like a homecoming to me, a homecoming to the ancestors, and not just for Mesoamerica's influence on the Mississippians but the way so many EuroAmericans no matter their extraction, will feel about the Forum or the Parthenon, or even Stonehenge.

Something besides the colours that sitting there on that pyramid step will make me want more, much more as I look around and see the giant causeway fill with brightly dressed people, and wonder if I'm seeing my ancestors, or those who had travelled to trade with them. If any of them held in his backpack a small carved Mississippian stone panther like the one Dan will show me, the one whose style will be so like the ones I will first see on that trip in Mexico's National Museum of Anthropology, where within a couple of years I will be drawing small sculptures of the same size, figurine after figurine. So that on that pyramid, I will say once more to Itzel, in the end the truth is I found *mi norte*, I did not lose it.

What I won't know, not that year, not the year after, is that the gift of that trip will also be a farewell. It will not be just me who will never live again at Billie's. That in knowing he has set me on a path, Dan will also know that he has completed something he needed to do before he could set himself free. That neither the Port of New York nor any other east coast port will ever be his home port again.

Because it had all been getting worse for years by then, his relationship with Billie, the tension in the house more constantly palpable, the

incidents of crazy violence among the hangers on more and more frequent, while everything Dan did, even those things Billie supported sober, Dan's own venture into painting, his time at the Art Students League, or the brilliance of the strange crafts he did, on board ship and off, the carved lamps, the ships in bottles the scrimshaw, the small boats made from the breast bones of Thanksgiving turkeys even as he announced that day one of mourning for the people he would always call Indians, would be made fun of when Billie was drinking and his so wide reading on that Indian subject ridiculed by her drunk or sober, at the same time as she would tell all and sundry me included of course that she was bringing him out helping him overcome his deprived background, and the reading the thinking about aboriginal history, original history, will just never fit into her idea of what that meant, any more than having an American Indian identity ever did, no matter how much she romanticized her adventures with him this one was a romanticization he just had to get over, and while she will never use the word assimilate any more than the left really ever did in Mexico, she'll just say, If he wants to get on, wants to get along.

Then by the time I'm fifteen it won't just be what he did with his hands or his mind, but even, and in front of me, with his prick. While she will bring home less and less savoury men, and expect us to ignore it all. The way she'll expect us to believe she never remembered any of it, and to never mention it, because it would cause her pain.

Besides which there will be how she goads him, trying to get him to hit her, something I could not for years say out loud, this was no The bitch burned my dinner control syndrome, if he'd wanted to go after the cook he'd have had to beat himself and he seldom burned anything anyway, he'll be the one mostly stayed sober enough to save her in the early years when she'll mostly need saving. And I know you're never supposed to say anyone, anyone at all but especially any woman ever asks for it, but I'll let you in on a secret any scrapper, any street fighter, any bar room brawler knows, that physical pain, even a mouth full of blood, can taste as sweet as honey if it brings about the humiliation of your enemy.

And that what I've never understood about Billie is only how the

drink will make her designate us all, even the most innocent of us, as part of the enemy camp, I just know that it will and that it made me able to predict people long before I was ever able to understand them.

And as for Dan, who had watched his own raging father beat up on his mother, and who could never mourn that she left but always grew angry that she had not taken him, that will be the one moral line he never wished to cross: A man of integrity did not beat up on his woman. And that is another secret of the street fighter: that you know there are those who will use any weapon at hand to secure a victory, so that you must always stay in your centre to predict that move. Yet there is not one of us, I don't think, who has never failed that test, who has never given in to blind rage. And you could see it in Dan, that he will know he is no longer staying in control as he had at the beginning when he had to protect Billie from the rage she caused in others, but that he'll be increasingly losing it, losing it. So that his trips will grow longer and longer, but the rage will not subside.

While I will already be able to perceive in Billie, in that little smile, in that play of tongue on drunk wet lips, something that will tell me she would go to her death to achieve that taste of triumph in another's humiliation, and that over the years it will not only be Dan who could be made to wish to take her there. And too, that the weapons that inevitably lay around her, will be precisely those secrets she had become privy to during her supportive and sober days, when she will be the best of listeners and of advisers, the most giving of friends. What Dan will tell me years later when I meet him once on Vancouver Island when I'm out there to give a performance, that no one had ever given him so much, while his eyes looking out into the distance, his hands folding and re-folding the paper napkin on the old barroom table will tell me too, how much she had taken away.

While there will be the one morning after the bars have closed at three or four a.m. that I will wake up from a restless sleep to hear Billie screaming.

Nauta, Nauta, he's going to hit me, over and over each time more shrill, because of course she will think to achieve his final humiliation in his hitting her in front of me, in front of his child, something she will

even say not as I arrive at the door of the bedroom where they stand facing off, but as I leave when they both appear to have calmed down.

You won't do it in front of your precious little Nauta now will you, and then a series more of taunting words even as I climb the stairs up to my attic room, only before I can even settle myself into bed it's there again.

Nauta. Nauta. Help, Nauta. He's going to hit me, and I'm once more there on the stairs and walking into the room and his hands are balled into fists at his sides and that little smile is beginning to play across her lips as everything settles into calm again and I turn to go back up the stairs only this time I turn when I get to the top step and I sit down as I listen to Billie's voice start up again, teasing haranguing needling with that nah nah nanana voice even adults know how to deploy, and I'm waiting because already I know what I'm going to do.

So that when I hear the voice rising once more to a shout: Nauta, Nauta, he's going to hit me, this time I don't have nearly as far to go.

And this time when the silence ensues and I see that moist lipped smile changing to a grin I am the one with her fists curled into balls, and no, I don't say I don't care if he kills you even if I think it, but very softly very firmly: No matter what happens, I won't come down again.

Only she doesn't stop. Nor does he hit her. Instead she taunts him just a little bit more, and by this time it's true too his rage may have subsided just enough for him to see the trap, because when she comes staggering up the stairs and through the other door on my landing that goes to the small square widow's walk of this old sea captain's house, he is not chasing her. So that she just goes out onto that small fenced piece of roof, and starts to sing. The way she will often sing when drunk in that same nah nah nanana voice. And it will fall to Dan and me to drag her down. Because my brother is in his locked two room suite in the basement, where he has slept through it all.

And after that I will not come home for several days, maybe even a couple of weeks, because I will be fifteen by then and already I will be in the movement and all the work I'm doing will be giving me a lot of places I can crash, even if too, there will just be a few nights when it's summer and I can hear the drink in her voice, and I'll make a preemptive strike: I'll just choose the Staten Island Ferry.

So it's not only Dan whose times away will be getting longer and longer. Until finally in eleventh grade I will tell her that her difficulties with Dan have been getting too hard on me, putting the onus onto him, even if I can feel the betrayal in doing it, how it feeds the sober narrative of his abuse she will rely on for years, perhaps even till her death, but I will know I need to get away. And that I need her permission. And it will be for three months that time, but she will never call me on it, in part I'm sure because she did wish me well, but in part too because my academic achievement redounded to her glory, and she knew that if she tried to rein me in I would quit school and disappear, so that when I come home I will already have my plan in place: I will be applying for admission a year early to the University of Chicago. And she will acquiesce. Even if she never will send in my scholarship papers and I will have to swear out an affidavit that says I will be receiving no money from her before the university will agree to pay all of my tuition and part of my board. And I'll have written my ticket out. And I'll use it.

So why would I blame Dan for using his?

And for those of you who might say that he should have used it sooner. Whether you think that there is no excuse for abuse, and that he was the abuser and seeing the abuse in himself should have walked, or wonder why he stayed so long, why he endured such humiliation in such an emotionally abusive situation, I can only say that he was my father, and I was happy each time he came back to us, and for the time that he stayed. And I know that whether his mother could have taken him, the mere name that Billie had put on my birth certificate said he could never have taken me. Though maybe he gave me the strength to walk, whether my own trail of joy or trail of tears. But still my own.

While what I have most wondered about myself is that passing on of pain. And that maybe it will be Itzel, talking to me on that balcony, in that garden, who will bring that question to the fore for me. If only later when I know for sure that Dan has left, when it will no longer be a question I can ask her, will I wonder too how the pain passed on to me affected us all, or interacted with the pain in her she had never passed on to a child. A child who could have been only a year or two younger than me had she had that child right at the beginning of that controlling

marriage. Had it just been some other element in her that beautiful man she married had wished to control.

While for years I will think of it as merely a political question. That opposition between innocence and experience. Learn to couch it in academic terms, talk about master narratives and narratives of resistance. Even playing on words, speak of articulation with its meaning within language, the means by which we mean, and the kind of disarticulation that tears *las articulaciones*—the joints—apart, immobilizes us as it moves into our bodies when we are robbed of voice and of story and maybe even of a language, an idiom, an authenticity, in which to tell it, and instead circle the way Dan could a room, returning sometimes to Choctaw when he'd been drinking, only then to look out at us blind to his surroundings as he will rage without target, the way he will too when the war comes back, when all you can feel will be the raw pain pushed from his body into yours, and long for the tools, that he should have the instruments to rearticulate the narrative of his pain, find the means with which to tell it.

So that I will pursue it down the years, the question not its answer. Until there will come a time that I will even know it is that I pursue. And that pursuit will take me from court room to hearing room to auditorium stage to radio and television studios, to small meetings in the sparsely decorated living rooms of refugees. Translating, debating, bearing witness. Blind for the longest time to why I am doing what I do, thinking it is merely because I can, that where I'm located there are few who have my command of both Spanish and English, the ability to move back and forth the way I do, so that it's a simple act of expediency, my best, if small, way still, in that phrase we will use so much back then, to be of use. And in Spanish always, to be *consecuente*. Match action to conviction.

So that I will take that trail so long before blazed for me thinking little of how or where I entered on it until once more I will be inside one of the stark fluorescent lit hearing rooms of Immigration Canada staring at the portrait of the Queen on the wall in all her clean abiding innocence, thinking of the servants who must hide so that neither she nor any of her family may see them and have to acknowledge through them the labour done in their favour, the ultimate innocence though

perhaps no different than our collective failure to acknowledge the labour done to make our underwear or silverware, our jeans or our gowns, or that each time we pick up a package of plastic enclosed chicken parts pieced at forty-two birds a minute a student of mine will already have told me, we are as surely destroying a woman's own fingers, her hands, her delight in the suppleness of her body as any *señora* whoever beat or maligned her maid, so that perhaps the slogan beneath the portrait should simply read: Ignorance is Bliss. Better perhaps than *Honi Soit Qui Mal y Pense* though perhaps a modern reinterpretation of it. Not Evil to Him Who Evil Thinks, but No Evil to You Ever if You Just Don't Think About It.

So that I am perhaps thinking that or thinking what Matilde or Clotilde would have thought of such a thing, whether it would be better to be micromanaged the way they were by *La Señora O* or to pass always unseen. When the officer in charge begins to speak, and me to recite by heart the terms of the UN convention on refugees, the need for a well-founded fear of persecution based on your race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion before the young woman seated next to me will start to speak and my real work begin. And just as she speaks her tale of terrible damage that will allow her to stay in Canada if it is believed, I will assemble one to fit her circumstances, tell you that she will be from El Salvador or Guatemala, Argentina or Uruguay, perhaps the Chile of the Pinochet dictatorship as I did in the small story I will write of her, because of course any tale you write or tell must be adequately disguised, a hearing room is not an open court, all material is sensitive and confidential, and you must swear not to repeat it no matter how much it aches inside you.

So that any character you write must be more like a psychologist's recombined case study than a journalist's singular person with changed name used to carry out the unwritten oath to never use composite characters. Which means I might tell you that on the very day of coup or counter coup her father was ripped from her apartment, or a school mate from in front of her as she enters class, a brother or a mother, even a grandmother and a nephew, taken from a party years later, I did translate such a case at an open meeting after all. But whatever it is, it will be

someone she loved and whose presence in her life had always instilled pride and the case is she will be taken too, so that what will stand in the centre of her life is that day, that day her companion, parent, sibling, friend will be ripped from her, as if her life circled it, and all the rest, even the torture the officer will make her itemize will just be proof of her unworthiness, her guilt her shame, for ten years, maybe a dozen from that day that she was taken at thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen.

Then after she was released crossed mountains or rivers or jungles, did menial work or prostituted herself for phony papers, lost contact and took years before being found again by family themselves now exiles in Canada who on her first visit will put in her asylum appeal, or maybe she'll just find her own slow way from country to country passing her last border in a false bottom van a refrigerator truck or the trunk of a car to take asylum in a church basement from which strangers would then speak for her.

And the truth is that whichever it was she will cry and sob, and there will be moments when she cannot speak. And that it will be eight o'clock in the morning and each time she cries I will be overcome and cry with her. And the other truth is that when I try to expel those moments into story, disguised but also of course objectified, I will make myself invisible as I'll try to show not to tell, and that though there will be good reviews of the book that contains this story, I will also be taken to task: I wrote about damaged people no one could care about, it will be said, and of this story in particular, that I did not know of what I spoke: The tortured did not speak like that. This whole story must be made up without knowledge of Latin America or for that matter torture, from a fevered northern imagination. The tortured would never go so over the top.

And of course I will think of Itzel then, not that I will ever see her nor even imagine her, not even at her worst, or for that matter at twenty-one or twenty-two when she will arrive stunned by the light to the port of Vera Cruz, or even later as she will beg her husband for a child, to be so by turns histrionic, manipulative, pleading, aggressive, melodramatic as this young woman will be at twenty-three or four, five or six, having incurred her jailing her torture those years before, but I will

swear that the voice so stayed in my mind that any transcript you were to read of what I will translate that day except for its specifics will be exactly what I placed on paper.

But yes I thought, this demand that we suppress such a voice is real. On the one hand we believe that the damaged damage us, that they sully our innocence, as if innocence is in any way a positive aspect of the human condition, as if we do not live to experience, to grow and to change. As if Eden truly were idyllic only because within it we knew nothing. As if biting into the apple were not always the only answer. So that the question is never remaining innocent, but attempting to better the quality of human experience for everyone. Making it necessary that we note the place where horror lies and listen to it raw, not insist that it first be sterilized even as we produce what nestles in the other hand: the belief that what does not kill you makes you stronger.

So that we are willing to listen to the ennobled sufferer, the strong stoic torture survivor, the forgiving ex-inmate of the camps. Yet refuse to validate the many small deaths that weaken you henceforth, or to allow those disabled by suffering a place at the table, with a right to the pleasures of its food. We will seldom believe that what does not kill you merely does not kill you, and that you can be left with your consciousness encysted inside the moment of your wounding, forever with the shame of it: that you did not die. Even as you will lie on the ground, as Itzel did, your voice perhaps bordering—in its despair, in its desire to still be part of a world which can be manipulated—just a tiny bit, on melodrama. While we go on believing in a world where only those free of suffering, or those sufficiently ennobled by it, need apply for a voice. Or for a child. How easy it could be to make that judgment.

But the truth is it will not be the reception of that story that makes me think of Itzel, I will think about her on that day itself: She will haunt me in that hearing room. And I will see something I had not seen before, perhaps refused to see. When, because the officials asked for the specifics of her torture—something always asked to make up part of Immigration Canada's country by country torture archive which I suspect still forms part of how refugee status is determined—the officials will break this young woman once more. And all she will be able

to say sobbing, when they ask what kind of torture she endured is that she does not know. Because she will somehow think they want her to evaluate the torture not simply list its features.

I don't know what kind of a torture it was, she will say between sobs. But it must have been a terrible torture because I had always been very brave. Only when they attached the electrodes to my vagina I gave them all the names ...

And it will be of course the list of all the members of whichever youth group she was also a member of, maybe even of those who bunked with her at summer camp, or the names of other young people she had associated with, at school, in the choir, in the fields of her village or by the well when she fetched the water, just friends she had begun to gossip with, the in crowd or the out crowd: but all of them all of them.

And then she will reiterate how her brother, sister, father had been very brave she was sure of it even if she hadn't seen them ever again after they'd been taken away, so I will know she couldn't know really not even if whoever it was had been tortured in front of her their head dunked again and again into the bathtub filled with water and with the ashes of papers the family had done their best to burn, their hand placed on the hot *comal* where her grandmother had been cooking the tortillas. Even as I cannot stop myself from sobbing with her.

And it's then I'll see that what binds her to that day, that one, is that she has come to believe, maybe even her torturers told her to believe, that it was because she was so weak so very weak, that her weakness her betrayal of her friends had somehow reached out to destroy maybe to kill surely to kill, magic thinking at its most extreme, the one she loved the ones she loved, surely she is some kind of poison, just as we tell the damaged truly they are poison, the way the survivors who have been crippled psychically or physically by their experiences of the residential schools in Canada are told they are poison, surely they have poisoned those around them, surely there is something so terribly wrong with them that their children too should be taken away, just the way Itzel's husband implied her camp experiences her camp induced neuroses made her poison, Dan felt his own father's beatings made him

poison, and then this young woman is saying something else this young woman is thanking the officials for breaking her thanking me for my contribution, this young woman is saying: Thank you thank you. Thank you, all of you. This is the first time in ten years I have been treated like a human being.

And I am seeing something else. Yes, it is then I see it happen. As if from a far distance, as if I am seeing us both, my own back, her back, the two of us next to each other and in front of us not that small claustrophobic room, but the street, the butcher shop, and behind it the whole Valley of Mexico. As she looks over at the one immigration officer, the one actually doing the questioning—in those days there were always two in the room, this was before the Refugee Determination Boards—the one who has pushed her to this broken confession, who has in effect retraumatized her even if it's information they have to have. So that I feel a strangled fury creep into my hands as I follow out her gaze just visible to me as she looks over at him, tall and chestnut haired and green eyed with a perfect groomed moustache, a Dudley Do-Right of a man, a man of whom I will by then be rather fond, someone with whom I would joke in the halls.

I'll once tell him of giving classes at Berlitz where I'll be teaching Spanish and English as well as training other teachers for next to nothing, so that in making them give our first lesson I will learn to say: This is a book in fifteen or so languages, and I'll demonstrate our methods to him, the relentless speed of our questions bypassing the students' first language, tell him of our prohibition of smokers' smoking forcing them to concentrate, and he'll laugh and compare them to the interrogation techniques he'd been taught, the ones now bearing too easy fruit no matter how gentle he has been.

So that the tension between my hands and my voice will tell me what I am witnessing, my voice still emulating hers my body rebelling as in this last statement she signals her utter submission and her longing, you have without doubt seen the expression in the eyes of a small puppy as it wags its tail—oh, but our dogs are born to read us—perhaps gently pants, the way now she is recovering from her sobs, so that now her manipulations, her soft flirtations, are all aimed quite girlishly at

him, even her spontaneous tears and sobs, I can feel the slight time lag, are now being checked out for their effect after each recovery of composure as she watches his face intently for cues, with a hunger almost sexual in nature, as the fury will sweep up my forearms until I hold my elbows close to my sides, even as I go on in that relentless concentration that nonetheless takes up only that part of the mind dedicated to syntactical foreshadowing, the exact place prior to language becoming sound where it is still predictive, still plays the odds, but where a great deal of the mind is left free to perceive to know to arrange as long as you don't let words enter that other place to derail the translating voice as it moves forward and spoil it all.

But where too there is a visceral identification especially in direct oral interpretation or even transcripts thereof, where the voice passes through you yet leaves a piece behind to become a piece of you almost carnal in nature even if only brought by words as they construct not just the voice but a new persona through nuance of intonation, the vibrations of the throat the littlest movements of shoulders hands fingers, that bring with them embodiment, your voice always in a first person that does not belong to you but that melds you to the voice that speaks so that you cannot slip away, make a mistake, which is maybe why the worst for me will not be hearings like this but the few times I will translate the confessions of torturers, one where I'll stay nauseous almost for a week, and have to learn to do the small ceremonies of exorcism I will continue to use for years.

So that part of my mind of my body is in identification another part in total rebellion now, and I'll know this is probably exactly what she did before under an interrogation far harsher than this — far more enhanced some CIA director might say these days, though the CIA tortured in Latin America then too — in fact she might have been encouraged to do this, it's part of the good cop bad cop technique, one encourages communication, flirtation, the natural desire to please so especially cultivated in any case in girls, with its concomitant belief that such pleasing will be rewarded, something deeply part of what makes us feel human, so surely there has been some honesty even in this, while my hands are in pure rebel boy mode, moving inexorably toward the

adversarial that certain tones produce in me, not because I perceive an enemy so much as a place where submission even identification can leave you without an identity of your own, and I don't know who that knowing piece of me is angry at, him or her, but I do know what she has previously been robbed of.

And for the first time I will understand Itzel's relationship with her husband, understand how it must have been, how he could have glowed as bright as the Mexican light for her. How she might feel she could rest in him, feel that she could lay her submission, all of herself, at his feet. That same submission that in even asking that one Nazi guard that one question about her parents' destination with such flirtatious intensity could be seen to have so betrayed them, even if she hadn't really known what was going on then, that it alone could have broken their hearts and caused their deaths, they wouldn't even have needed the gas chambers to which they were taken, and now she could lay that same submission at the feet of this man, this fine man, this Jewish man, this *mensch*, so that this time it would be good, the results so very good, and at twenty-two, I think that was her age, like at this woman's twenty-three or four, five or six, she still wished to believe in a happy if damaged ever after.

And if this man said it was best that she should be his child rather than have his child, then that must be where all promise lay. And I will feel it in my body too as my shoulders sunflowerlike attempt to turn with that young woman's to follow her current sun, wish to turn to lean toward that official even as my hands my elbows will stop it: the fury in them. One I had been long training myself not to act on. To leave in my fingers. To push into my extremities. To tingle there.

While out in the corridor later my favourite official will turn to me and apologize, I think because he cannot apologize to her for what he has had to do, although there is in it too, a little of that I am sorry you had to see this of mistaking my tears for those of innocence rather than those of exposure, perhaps too much, to just such pain. That I already know the means of torture in the countries of every single refugee claimant I will ever translate for. Have even run from the police who would apply such torture. And of course it is that same question again:

Is there a way, a way of witness or empathy or absolution that can allow us to pass such pain on into the world around us that validates the carrier of that pain without brutalizing or having to carry a message of ennoblement?

And then too, of course, there is the fact that every bone in the underclass skeleton that keeps me upright no matter what other flesh has been subtracted or added rebels against extreme innocence at least beyond adolescence, convinced as I am that its blindness to the world around us damages far more than the stories of the damaged. But I am not ready for that argument I will make often enough, I am tired as I always am at the end of a morning of interpretation, even one far less gruelling than this, and my eyes are still a little swollen from my own tears too, and I know his paternalism is meant to be kind, so I put my hand gently on his forearm and I say: She reminded me of a friend, what she might have been like at that age. My friend Itzel. Itzel was an Auschwitz survivor.

And I do not add, as we both acknowledge that we wish this young woman well: I just hope she does not run into a man like the one you were pretending to be in there, my friend Itzel married one.

We just don't have that kind of intimacy. Though a month or so later when he is posted to Ottawa to take up a higher position I will wish I had. Feel perhaps it is something he needed to know. After all, I couldn't know if he was just pretending.

While that day even as I eat lunch in the Federal Building's cafeteria I will still feel the stiffness in my shoulders, know it is the same rigidity I will feel the night everything implodes. And I will ask myself: Had Itzel ever pointed herself toward me like that? Or had Basta? And had I ever responded?

And I will ask myself too as I savour that line, that Itzel was an Auschwitz survivor line I will repeat so often: Did this all begin in the smile of a Nazi guard, saliva on the lips of a drunk, the demands of a priest's cock, the strap in a father's hand, the ochre reflections, the umber shadows, of a hundred generations?

Sisters of the Sacred Subjunctive



FOR ALL OUR talks on her balcony Itzel never will enjoy coming to the pension. They will make her nervous, all those people.

It doesn't matter where we are, in the middle of the central garden by the tiny fountain or looking from the living room grilles out onto the street, someone will always manage to be around. And of course, both my room and my tiny patio will be far too small for two. So she will be a treasure that never will get unwrapped and examined back in the refectory at an Oronsky *comida*. Even if there are times I can remember Magdalena or *La Señora* looking at me expectantly, waiting to be told about the older blonde woman standing under the portico who has come by to pick me up in her Peugeot. So that maybe I will say she is in one of my classes, mention that she is Transylvanian when they ask if she is American.

So that she will be there just enough to recognize all the characters: Magdalena, *La Señora* O, Tavo, even the maids with their rhythmic off-rhyming names—all three syllables pronounced of course—Clotilde and Matilde. Though for some reason her appearances will never coincide with Basta's, I don't know why, I have no conscious memory of actively trying to keep them apart, even if I am well aware I was not trying to get them together—but rather keeping them well compartmentalized.

So it will be easy enough to let the house become an almost frivolous domestic drama at a distance—or what will momentarily seem a distance—for our lighter moments, its appeal almost like soap opera, a Mexican *Front Rooms, Back Rooms* rather than *Upstairs, Downstairs* complete with lessons and speculations to help me in figuring out my new Mexican world. With the transients, the short term stays, the ones that just came for *la comida* giving the series its episodic value like all those dramas set in hotels. In each hour: one story complete, one ongoing. Though the longest conversation she'll ever have there, light as it will seem when it happens, the early afternoon when I'd just introduced her to Tavo by the fountain in the central garden as she dropped me off for the mid-day meal after morning classes, will turn out to be a determining one, and not just because it will give us a nickname for Magdalena when we announce her the star of our favourite saga.

When Magdalena, coming out from beneath the portico and seeing the three of us speaking in Spanish, will come over and compliment me on mine. Then, perhaps assuming that this is the kind of classes Itzel and I are in together, ask me what I am now studying. And I'll tell her quite simply that I'm about to quit. There's nothing new going on. All it ever was in class anymore was repetition after repetition of the past and past perfect subjunctive. What these days in English we mostly call the conditionals, we don't seem to like the word subjunctive anymore, it feels too close to the nineteenth century and legitimizing by Latinizing, though it is still used sometimes to identify contrary to fact conditions.

But identical in intention in both languages by any name, and taught the same way right at the end—I'll know that for sure when I start teaching both—and then gone over and over and over, those speculations about what you would have done if the conditions had just been right, or what I would do right now if the weather were good, past perfect for an unreal past, past for an unreal present, and in Spanish exactly the same but with more forms to learn. While Magdalena will at this point speak to me in English.

Oh yes, the subjunctive, yes, indeed, she'll say. I'd leave that one alone too, if I were you, using the English equivalent of the very form

she is telling me not to bother with. I've been here more than twenty years, and you can get along perfectly well without it.

While I will look at her and shake my head, the way you do when you don't quite understand, as Itzel tilts her head to one side. Realizing that an assumption has been made about her. So I will start to prepare my answer, something about how I really enjoy grammar, who knows why, and the intricacies of language fascinate me — something that might have warned me I might one day need to write or perform — but I'd understood these forms a few classes back, and I'm just plain tired of them. After all, how much time could anyone spend explaining what they would have done in situations they never would have gotten themselves into in the first place? But before I can say a word, Itzel will answer Magdalena.

Oh, I don't know, she'll be saying in Spanish. I can use the subjunctive in three languages, and I do find it useful. I just wish one of them were English. Forcing Magdalena back to her rather good, if subjunctiveless Spanish.

Oh, you Europeans, she says with great good humour, making another better more accurate assumption: You're all so good at languages. I'm not sure I know a single European who knows only one.

While Itzel, not to be outdone, with humour, whether good or not I don't know, certainly with enough Mexican style *picardía* to remind me immediately that I had confided the humour of that *rechingadísima* conversation about *chingar* and *la chinguedita* to her, continues.

I'm not sure about that either. My sister who owns a spa in Las Lomas — de Chapultepec, of course, one of Mexico City's classiest neighbourhoods — who has been here longer than I have, never seems to get Spanish much at all. The other day one of her clients, quite a proper lady in fact, asked if a facelift would in any way damage her face and my sister wanted to tell the woman her face might just be swollen a little bit for a little while. I don't know if the subjunctive she needed confused her even more but *Puede que le chingue un poco* is what she said. Somehow confusing *hinchar* with *chingar*. So It might just puff it up a little came out It could just fuck it up a little. With the biggest problem, of course, that it made perfect sense. The woman, who turned bright

red, had no idea my sister hadn't meant to say it. One of the spa's employees would have to step in to explain.

But Itzel isn't done. She is now about to indulge in her own small bit of *chingaqueditismo*. Starting out while we are all still laughing.

Nauta is really rather good, she says. She was just talking, without a single mistake that I could detect, with Tavo here about how much more work she would have accomplished this year if she had had a studio. How much more work she could do now if she had one. He says that his cousin, a young man who eats here sometimes, knows of a good place, a room on the roof where he lives. Tavo recommends that she take it. It's unusual for a place like that to have a skylight.

And Itzel has managed to use all three subjunctives. Past perfect, past and present, that last the one still used in North American English for suggestions and recommendations, but in Spanish for doubt or hope of any kind, and Itzel's made it clear I understand them all. But she has also put me directly in Magdalena's line of fire.

I hadn't wanted to tell Magdalena about the room next to Basta's until I'd made up my mind. I could tell she was bothered by our growing friendship. Had known it since that other *comida* when I'd concentrated so on making him shine. Though I'd thought it was just an ego thing: She hadn't liked having her assertions undermined simply because they were hers. While over time I had come to know her stake in them went deeper. She didn't just think our friendship more than that. She thought it altogether wrong.

Though she won't deploy the artillery until later, in her preferred space, at *la comida*.

The big guns rumbling in. The big personal guns. After the graders and the dozers have cleared the way. And I won't really know why she feels she has to do it. What it is exactly about my friendship with Basta, his with Clotilde and Matilde that will so fracture her rules of social grammar, that intense indicative mode of hers which will speak of social change but fail to endorse the subjunctive of hope, of wishing and wanting and trying and even failing, the spaces where should have and would have become should and would and finally is.

So that we will come to wonder as we look at her out of the corner

of our eyes if it could ever be different, if she could ever embrace another tense, another mode of thinking where reality might be allowed to shift — surprise enter, desire defeat the odds. That place of the unreal, the unrealized, that makes language language, made humans wish our way into it all those millions of years ago. So that we will take to calling Magdalena Our Lady of the Indicative. The one for whom everything contrary to fact is just that: contrary. Bothersome. Annoying. *Una chingadera o chingaderita*. Always getting in the way.

While we will call ourselves the Sisters of the Sacred Subjunctive, and keep on laughing about it, until later when we let Basta in on the joke, and still later Matilde that night in Amecameca, when we have to change it from *Hermanas* to the more formal *Hermandad*. *La Hermandad del Sagrado Subjuntivo*. Even if using *hermanos* would have implied *hermanas*, just as *ellos* will always imply *ellas*, it will seem unfair to us that it doesn't work the other way around, that if you just use the feminine form, you can't get the brothers in alongside. So that *hermandad*, with its roots not in the Latin brother, the *frater* of fraternity, but in germ and germinate, no matter its translation as brotherhood, will seem best. And it will be Basta who suggests we should quietly and subversively start using all those other forms interchangeably, wherever they should occur, masculine 'o' one time feminine 'a' the next. Sort of like the way in English we've adopted they as an indefinite third person singular. For real. I think he and Nieves did that long before we got together.

Though that day Magdalena's story about Basta will no longer be an exemplary tale for the exclusive tourist, the exceptional traveller, the neophyte social critic. It will be for me. Even if it all starts the way it always will, with some kind of comment on *la casa chica*. Only this time she will take up Ignacia's special circumstances, hers hadn't been the most usual of *casas chicas* after all. Something Magdalena had never said in front of me, even if after that first time when I'd gotten Basta talking, she would now give me a brief nod before emphasizing Basta's brilliance, only to then talk pityingly about how in his circumstances, with Ignacia's needs and all, he would never get to use it.

Not that on that day or any other will she explain fully how Ignacia got into that position, anymore than Tavo or anyone else at that table

ever will, how she the youngest of eighteen children from a respectable family from Vera Cruz, but one of only two from the second wife, could have that happen to her. With her only full sister Tavo's mother, a woman who will marry well, and a very respectable man who everyone loves at that, and who will be widowed by the time I arrive. Though I do seem to remember something about how Ignacia joined the happy couple in Mexico City before Tavo, an only child, was born, and that it was through them and to their shame that she came to know the businessman she fell in love with.

And there was, of course, the part about how crazy she was for him, how ready to do anything. While the couple in truth won't form the most usual of *casas chicas* where she would have had the lower percentage of her man's time. Instead he will live with her and remain married to his wife in name only, though the wife will still be *la legítima*, the one recognized by the Church. And in society. What the wealthy call society, not the one most of us live in. Which is maybe why her more middle class relatives treated her as his wife and hoped for the best. And were only surprised by how it turned out because his leaving her wasn't by the usual way either.

Which is what Magdalena will be on about this day. Savouring it once more. And smirking pointedly in my direction. Because, she'll emphasize, Ignacia's man had not deserted her, had not traded her in for a younger model or left her high and dry to go back to his wife, but deep in financial difficulties, he had committed suicide. And it was then Ignacia had changed. After Basta's birth she had gone directly from maternity clothes to the drab she now wore, the man's last act she liked to say, to look into his son's eyes to tell the baby boy to always take care of his mother. Gone were the high heels, the lipsticks, the pretty hats with tiny veils for the Mass she attended not just on Sundays but every day now before work, convinced that her sin, her most grievous sin, had somehow caused this to happen to her—and yes she will always say caused this to happen to me, centring his action on herself—and that only penitence and prayer could save her as it had not saved him from the mortal and unforgivable sin of suicide. Or at the least save her children so they could in turn save her.

And then Magdalena will go on to tell that terrible story of what had happened when Basta was only—what was it, seven? eight? ten? One day when even his two sisters had gone out somewhere, with friends or with their mother or even to school, and maybe Basta will be home sick, but very young anyway maybe the same age I'll start taking the subway alone, even if we might think today it's just Mexican children who are left alone much younger. When the man will come to the door to ask for the cleaning, persuading the child he has been sent by the mother, so that Basta will let him have all his father's suits, the ones Ignacia had been saving all those years since his death. And then when Ignacia comes home and finds them gone she will give herself over to howling and pacing and finally collapsing on the large old overstuffed easy chair in the living room, swaying back and forth fanning her face, and repeating: It was the last of your father. It was all of him I ever had. The suits he left here, that's all. Just those suits, just them, just them. All I had. Those bitches made sure I got nothing, not even a photo, nothing. Those suits were all I had of Sebastián. Except you. I named you for him and look what you've done. You've killed the last of him.

And though the rest of her aggression will always be passive, oh so very *chingaquetada*, this one time she'll get up slowly groaning and pushing hard against the arms of her chair to go find a wooden spoon in the kitchen to beat Basta. And beat him and beat him.

And even if that thing she says won't be true, the bitches may not have given her anything at all, but the sons of the bitches, and the brothers and the uncles, the male relatives, the ones who knew of her, and had once associated with her, and who knew she'd stuck by him in his desperation, was in fact the only one to stick by him, will bring an early photo album over and leave it with her, and send some money from time to time, even if it will never be very much. But whenever it comes, it will come directly from them, there will be no estate left to be deprived of, the man had died broke. And the legitimate children will definitely be the ones his relatives will care for first. But still, there Ignacia will be, hyperventilating.

It's the last of him, the last of him, as slowly, without her even seeing it, Basta, all of maybe eight years old, will sneak slowly out of the living

room to lock himself in the bathroom, and to take all the various pills in the medicine cabinet. Since his father's gun, the one he'd used to orchestrate his death, will have disappeared long before the suits.

Only Basta will not die but just get terribly sick. And the amazing thing will be that he had been only weeks old when his father died, and no one, until that point, will ever have told him it was a suicide. Yet this is what he had done. And Magdalena will close her eyes and move her head back and forth at this point as if slowly shaking off the terrible thought: My god, how terribly hurt he must have been. Lord, could a wound like that, indeed, ever heal?

Only as she opens her eyes the littlest smirk will still play, almost triumphant, around her mouth as she looks across at me. As if suddenly we are alone, even if in reality the table is as crowded as usual. With regulars and newcomers alike. Yet still, her next words of warning will be aimed exclusively at me, as if Basta might not be there the next day among all these same people. As if it might not be far worse for him than that first *comida* where I took it upon myself to bring him out. This time they would not start out by looking at him as if he were a type to be catalogued, a not so rare bird in an Audubon guide, but as if he had been reduced to a series of slides under an electron microscope: to be searched for even the tiniest of lesions.

I don't know how close you are, she'll say, but please don't tell him. He knows about his father's suicide now, but no one knows if he remembers this incident. Ignacia had to tell someone so she told Tavo's mother. And she does depend on Basta so much. He really is all she has left.

But I won't promise anything. It will just make me very sad even if I will now know what she is trying to accomplish by telling this. And that part will make me angry. Far angrier, I am sure, than Nieves had been that first time I met her when she'd stared pointedly and talked of *chingaquetismo*. So I will disguise nothing.

It sounds to me like it's Ignacia who's forgotten the incident, I'll say. It sounds like she's learned nothing from it. Nothing at all. And that's interesting. Very, very interesting.

While Magdalena will not answer. Not directly. But just speak out into the air in English even if Mexican guests too are present.

I'm sure the future will bring Basta a nice steady Mexican girl who understands his position, she will say.

Ojalá que encruentre una mujer y una vocación que le ayude a realizarse, I will then tell the air myself.

And I will get up and excuse myself and leave the table. While Tavo, who was there earlier of course for both the subjunctive conversation and the mention of the studio, will wink at me and say in English as I walk past him where he always sits at the end of the table when on his own.

That's very impressive. Two subjunctives in one sentence, and with Allah willing in it, too.

And I still won't be thinking—not even for a second—that the woman to help Basta realize himself, and maybe help him to the vocation to do it, should be me. It will take the crisis with Clotilde to do that. Though I won't be able to resist touching Tavo's forearm as I leave.

I wanted to try something hard, I'll whisper. More complex than *¡chinga a tu madre!* That's only an intimate imperative.

Only for some of us, he'll whisper back. Only for some of us.

So that our laughter will make it easier to try something even harder. To say loudly enough that everyone can hear.

And Tavo, if by any chance you see Basta before I do, tell him I'll be taking that room. Make sure he lets the landlord know.

◆ Though I'm not sure that even the sharpest edge of irony in our laughter as we analyze the goings on at the pension over the next days would have been sufficient to allow us to guess how far Magdalena could take her lack of speculation, her disregard not just for the past unreal but for future possible real conditions. That realization will occur when I am well ensconced in my new studio room, when Itzel too has noticed something in how the young man on that roof has come to dominate my conversation. That more and more my stories will not simply be of *Front Rooms* and *Back Rooms* but of his movements through them, his

opinions of them. And as she teases me about him, I will realize that maybe her letting the cat out of the bag with Magdalena wasn't an accident at all. Why should I, or Magdalena for that matter, be the only ones to push someone in a direction we think they ought to want to go?



The No Name Brand



ITZEL WILL BE there as the crisis with Clotilde unfolds though neither she nor I will hear the full story until a long time later during the trip the four of us will make to Huejotzingo, Clotilde and Matilde's home town, after the movement has already been suppressed and Basta and I are married and Matilde is sharing a motel room with the three of us in Amecameca. That small town near the Paso de Cortés from which we will launch our hike up the Popocatepetl the next day those many years before the volcano's more frequent eruptions restrict climbing on its cone. When Matilde will use the *Carnaval* which we had just attended as her jumping off point to tell the story.

Not that Basta won't by then have heard it all, heard it much earlier in fact. While I will have heard snatches and passed them on to Itzel since the back story at least will be Oronsky *comida* fodder too. This drama of the servants, of the villages and small towns from which they come interesting of course, but rather quaint, not nearly so fascinating as the urban middle class on the *mojigata* decline, like the story of the young man predicted never to truly emerge from the *casa chica*. Except perhaps to bring up if someone at the table was about to go to one or another small *fiesta* or *festival*, *Día de Muertos* or *Reyes Magos*, Independence Day or Good Friday, maybe Shrove Tuesday for some *carnaval* or other, just like what we will be doing.

Only this one will have no pre-Lenten religious trimmings signalled in sensual excess, but be the most straightforwardly secular *carnaval* of all. Celebrating *La Batalla de Puebla*, the one that took place on Cinco de Mayo and whose importance rests in determining in 1862 that Mexico would be able to repel the Hapsburg invader and that never again would an attempt be made to set up a European empire on the North American continent. A date celebrated far more widely and more wildly in the United States than it is in Mexico even if up north its meaning is seldom known. Whereas the date's the thing the Huejotzingo *carnaval* gets wrong even if the blond bearded wood masks worn by the Hapsburg side among the costumed celebrants in their mock battles make the meaning clear. As does the fact that the blonds lose this time unlike in other pageants celebrating battles between *moros y cristianos*, when they win. Though Matilde will likely tell her story because the *Carnaval's* celebration of battle is framed by two stories of women and love and rape and wedlock.

The first of the brigand who loves the Corregidor's daughter. A story which even back then despite dissonance will make me hear the words of "The Highwayman," *the landlord's daughter, the landlord's black eyed daughter* and all that, maybe because as maximum military and judicial authority in the area during the colony the Corregidor certainly would have been a landlord too, or maybe it's just the sense of horses whiffing in the night, even if unlike Bess and the Highwayman, the couple do manage to elope, and, I hope, at least get a moment's pleasure out of the deal, before they are chased down.

And it is by no means to get her to betray him that she is killed, they've already got him dead to rights, but the same old same old, that she has betrayed her caste and her *castidad*—there must be some interesting etymology there to bring caste further into relationship with chaste—and as such the two must receive maximum punishment. An honour killing we would say today, so very much central too to the history of whatever it is we are at any moment calling West. So that they will, in the end, be burned out by soldiers and killed, while Matilde will kind of giggle at its absurdity as we watch, but tell us in the motel how she has long avoided coming to that part of the *carnaval*. She hates

it. While I will conclude from the intensity with which she says those words that she has brought us to both ceremonies, in particular brought Basta, just to feel the undigested impact of the place surrounded by a support she will soon let us know could not have come from her family. Though their pain might have been as great as hers.

Because *un robo*, as an elopement is usually called in Mexico, even if it is not a rape—the robber does not usually *violar* the robbed after all—is still a robbery, with the idea behind the word that the man steals the woman away from her family, which too is what the word rape derives from: It is a stealing. And why too it has been believed in so many places for so long that a husband cannot rape his wife, she has been bought and paid for and is legitimately his: marriage as indentured sexual servitude. So that the word used in Spanish and Italian, that *violar* that goes far beyond *violar* to describe a sexual assault, seems stronger, more honest, because the rapist does not only violate but also violates his victim.

At least in the word itself, ownership is not involved. Though if the girl consents to the *robo*, obviously, as in the case of the Corregidor's daughter, it can be felt that she too has stolen something, even if it is only herself, and punishment will not be long in coming. Though too, she may have in herself the power and the connections to wield punishment when she has been wronged by rape or *robo*. One incident not celebrated in the Huejotzingo *carnaval* though perhaps it should be: the story of a lady in waiting to the Empress Carlota who, violated by the Hapsburg Emperor Maximilian, returned to her home to organize her part in an armed insurgency to help bring him down. Or so Basta will tell us as we stand there watching.

Though a *robo* can, if an aristocratic union of estates is not in the offing, be of an advantage to the woman's family: They will not have to gather a dowry then. So that while it's true that force or seduction is sometimes used to guarantee that the girl the man wants cannot return to her family, for all sorts of possible reasons usually more economic than obsessive, to seal perhaps a bargain the girl does not really want, the way it used to happen too—and not so very long ago, perhaps in the case of some groups still does—among Anglos, that is not the norm.

And today, it is not usually done to avoid payment of a dowry but to avoid the costs to both families a church wedding with all its celebrations and gifts would entail.

And which is, of course, the second kind of union you can have, and is the one whose much more formal celebration, in keeping with its own formality, takes place on the opposite side of Huejotzingo's plaza from the first, with great pomp, ceremony and *mojigatería* because, tradition says, it is precisely at Huejotzingo's Franciscan *convento*, one of the four earliest monasteries to receive permission for construction among Cortés' Indian allies, that the first Catholic marriages of indigenous Americans will take place.

So that the Catholic rite so redolent of *sumisión abnegada* with its kneeling and its crossings and its repetitions is also re-enacted in the town. While it's in the plaza itself that the battle re-enactment takes place amid masked dancers and louder and louder shotgun fire. As it celebrates the beginning of the five years of guerrilla warfare that would lead to the Reform under Benito Juárez when the church will lose most of its land. So that maybe there is some strange ironic logic—typically Mexican really—in celebrating the battle that led to such great deprivations for the Church just before the beginning of lent, the time of personal sacrifice, of deprivation, that leads up to Easter and Christ's crucifixion.

While in the great war between the sexes, that never-ending power struggle, there is no doubt that in Mexico of the two marriage types, well and ironically celebrated surrounded by shotgun blasts, the *robo* like the *casa chica* usually gives far greater power to the man. And that, Corregidor's daughter aside, it is more for the poorer side of the town than the rich who usually assure that daughters, once married, will always be *las legítimas* with *hijos* who are forever *hijos de algo*. While a *robo* is an easier relationship for the man to walk out on, after, as they say, having his way with the girl. Or finding her ways, whether in the kitchen or the bedroom or the keeping of the house, inadequate to his needs. At which point he can call her if not *hija de puta* then simply *puta*. Which is what happened to Clotilde to start her on her road to the city, and the crisis in which by then we had all attempted to intervene.

And it's Basta of course who will use that contrast, back *hijo de algo*

up against *hijo de puta*, because that brilliant delineation of class distinction will always matter to him, will already in fact have defined so much of his life, and will continue always to do so as he struggles to define himself, he'll already have told me how he had seen it first in his high school copy of *El Quijote*, the book I too will always think of that way in the Spanish as they spell it now, never as *Don Quixote* because that *El* defines it as the one the only the beginning of *la novela*, of fiction, even if for Basta it was the beginning of his understanding of the history of class in the Spanish speaking world, because he could see how class contrasts solidified over time in those two phrases alone, *hijo de algo* moving through *hijosdalgo* to become *hidalgo* or *hidalga*, a noble, man or woman, because *hijo* or *hija de algo*, means son or daughter of something, just that: something. *Algo*. Some property. Some name. Some position. Some great past deed.

Of the kind perhaps Don Quixote himself was searching for crazily in his quixotic quests, or others fraudulently trying to buy to achieve their *limpieza de sangre*, the cleaning of their blood, through those certificates of *hidalguía* granted convert Jews and Moors doing their best to stay in Spain during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the original words of the phrase there still today in heraldry and the courts of the nobility as *hijosdalgo*. While *hijo de puta* had looked out at Basta in abbreviation from the pages of *El Quijote* too, and yes, he showed it to me shortened there on its pages to *hideputa*. Though since, and I'm sure Basta has by now noticed it too—it's even there in detective stories in English where Latinos appear—that compression has taken on more sonorous modern variants like *hijueputa* and, especially in Central America, just *jueputa*. Compressions I will come to love just as I will love their binary opposition. It seems such a convenient contrast, a way to quickly take sides in the class war. All you have to do is ask: Are you an *hidalgo* or a *jueputa*? And all is made known.

Because the *hideputas* or *jueputas* of the world are *los hijos del pueblo* really, the people's children, the way they use *pueblo* in Spanish: the common folk. Those without *amparo*. Shelter. The shield of a name. Just like a shield in heraldry for *los hijosdalgo* might imply. So when I start working with refugees from Central America I will easily understand how in El

Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua with their same history of Indigenous displacement and death, *puta madre* might, as in most of Latin America, still be the favourite expletive to explode, and *puta* as an adjective has become so Panhispanic that the verb *putear* has become a synonym for swearing, still it's *hijo de puta* that wins the Central American day so roundly it has become an adjective too, so that it's *jueputa* this, *jueputa* that, just the way we use fucking: so fucking good, too fucking bad.

So frequent that in my Canadian work with Salvadorans I will ask if it is best used before or after the noun. Or if that changes the meaning as it does with *grande*. *Gran* before and *grande* after making the difference between a great and a big woman or man. So that when I get to translate Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton's *Poema de Amor* where he turns *guanacos hijos de la gran puta* into a hymn of praise for the hardworking and despised poor of El Salvador, there on stage with the folk group Yolocamba Ita, I will get to alternate between the literal translation, Salvadoran children of the great whore, and the more emotionally appropriate mother-fucking *guanaco* sons of bitches. And I will think of Basta and how I first translated for him on stage and got to swear then too.

While, of course, that day in Huejotzingo, between *hijos de algo* and *hijos de puta*, *hijos de la chingada* must make its appearance to conjure La Malinche just the way those words had at that first Oronsky *comida*. Though perhaps this time it will occur the other way around and that most controversial of figures will conjure those words whose meaning Octavio Paz had maintained were rooted in her story, because Huejotzingo is in reality one of the very few places in Mexico where the woman herself had actually appeared, in her heyday of course, in those months when she strode by Cortes' side and he was known by her name rather than she by his. Something I don't think any of us knew back then anymore than we could have heard the much more recent speculation that her name never evolved from the doomed and inauspicious day Ce Malinalli One Reed as has been maintained for years but rather from one of those typical inter-linguistic distortions, moving from one language to another and back changing with each mispronunciation, that baptised Marina by the Spanish, the Nahuatl speakers she met, having no 'r' pronounced her name Malena then cut the 'a' to add the

honorific -tzin, which the Spanish in turn could not pronounce so called her Malinche.

While what we will know is that her negotiations were a success, and the Huejotzincas took the Spanish side. Perhaps convinced by the Massacre in Cholula—a polity they themselves had once conquered—committed by the Spanish so short a time before, if not by Malintzin’s intricate linguistic skill, her *verbo*, without which it is likely no living Spaniard from that expedition would ever have made it into the Valley of Mexico. And for all thinking about that decision today might make anyone of Indigenous descent feel the same as we might inside a theatre watching a horror movie, the kind where you want to reach up and shake someone, or yell as loudly as you can: Don’t go down those stairs, Don’t hitch that ride, Don’t turn on that light. And above all: DON’T TRUST THOSE HAIRY MEN STINKING THERE INSIDE THEIR ARMOUR. Still in that time in that place in those volcano bordered valleys we would all have to admit those Nahuatl speaking polities so long sites of internecine warfare and quickly changing alliances had many good reasons to do so. As did Malinche herself.

Which is what Matilde’s father, an autodidact and official in the municipal government, a man whose depth of knowledge might have surprised me had I not been Dan’s daughter, will explain to us as he looks at the copy of a piece of the Huejotzingo Codex he has on his office wall, the one which shows one of the earliest Indigenous colonial renderings of the Virgin and Christ child, even if he will not tell us of how that Codex won the Huejotzinca only ten years later an important lawsuit against one of the worst of Conquistadors, Nuño de Guzmán, a man who will subsequently wreak havoc in Michoacán. Though the father’s pride in his people will be both enormous and obvious, they had even been hosts to Nezahualcōyotl, the great Nahuatl poet and *Huey Tlatoani*, the Great Speaker, of Texcoco, in exile from fratricidal fighting in his home polity which the Huejotzinca would assist him in recovering, only to see him become instrumental in helping form the Triple Alliance of Tenochtitlán, Tlatelolco, and Tlacopan, what we call so blithely the Aztec Empire, who would then become the Huejotzinca’s enemies and competitors, with this new alliance with the Spanish obviously made to

attempt the recovery of a supremacy in the region they thought they richly deserved. And why not? Given an atmosphere like that and their limited knowledge of the newcomers much less of the diseases they would bring? And besides hadn't the Aztecs themselves joined with the Spanish on many an expedition of conquest themselves once Tenochtitlán fell? Leaving Nahuatl names all over the Maya area? Just as in Central America Malinche's name was later attached to the flame tree, *el flamboyán*, when it arrived from Madagascar via the Caribbean. Some say for its long sonorous tonguelike seed pods, with which anyone might shake out a rhythm if not a tune, in honor of her *verbo*; others for its brilliant red flowers, so like the glory of the cochineal dyed huipiles in which she dressed on her last expedition with Cortés, going to Honduras before retiring to her own well earned *encomienda*. Triumphant. An *hidalga* herself, the station of her birth to which she had always wished to return. Now with her own Indian serfs.

So that the more I think about it, the harder it will be to credit Malinche with *malinchismo*, to see any equivalency between them, her name and the belief—too often held, though surely not exclusive to Mexico—that everything from away is always better. Not when her difficulties and her triumphs in what some are now calling the Spanish Aztec War rather than the Conquest of Mexico, were ones so surely born of the history of her place, its struggles between what are best named nations, or, perhaps, if you think of the Tarascans and the Maya, perhaps the Zapotecs, maybe others too, more as alliances if not empires. While it was, and likely is, those who most condemn her, who use Malintzin as a model of perfidy, who have most wished to create out of Mesoamerica's multiplicity a hegemonic Mexico designed on European models. Going so far in the nineteenth century as to graft European faces onto statues of Aztec emperors even as they will speak of a national character and later still a great new race, while condemning loyalty to *las patrias chicas* and other manifestations of regional diversity. Then, from their centralized government in Mexico City, decry as traitors to the new European modeled nation state any peoples who fought the marauding armies of the three Aztec cities.

Ideas whose outlines might have been seeding themselves in our

minds, or at least in Basta's and mine, as we'll walk the back streets of Huejotzingo from Matilde's father's office to the celebrations, his small belated wedding gift of a pre-Columbian bowl he had found in the area of what was thought to be the original Huejotzinca city nestled carefully in my bag. Though what will be foremost all that day, will be the choices of women. As we will think of Malintzin, the real woman who once walked these same mountains pathways, poised somewhere nearby facing the Huejotzinca *tlatoani* in her rich red *huipil* her long black hair loose as she is often portrayed in other early colonial codices standing somewhat ahead of a smaller seated Cortés in his plumed helmet, her hands in expressive courtly gesture, *las volutas* of elegant speech curling from her mouth. So that we'll find it hard to credit Paz's *chingada* too, finding her *mucho más chingona* after all. With her skilled *verbo*, its elaborate passive aggression, finding her finally, as Nieves insisted, the greatest of *chingaquetitas*.

To recognize as Basta will mention once more, how class, social standing, will always have a lot to do with the choices a woman is offered, how in that contrast between *hijos de algo* and *hijos de puta* any woman could be called *puta* as easily as *chingada* just for a lack of protection, it will make no difference really whether she is married or single, promiscuous or monogamous or paid for the act. Or, I will even think, as later I listen to Matilde, if she is barely past puberty and *virgen sin macula*. Because her social position can so easily dictate that she is *chingada* in any case. Quite totally, if definitely not royally, fucked. *Chingada* or *rechingada* or *requetechingada*. Or any other of its variants. And *puta* and *hija de puta* besides. So you could easily argue for the equivalence of the two phrases. *Puta* or *chingada*, that Mexican difference is not so very important: You're fucked either way.

Which is when we will come around a corner to encounter a pack of those emaciated dogs that inevitably inhabit Mexico's towns and villages and slums and I will act quickly to keep them at a distance just as Basta has taught me to do by raising my empty hand in a throwing gesture because the movement itself will always convince the dogs the hand contains a rock. And I will bring our linguistic play full circle again. Or almost.

Son of a bitch, I'll yell loudly then at the curly haired *güero*, the biggest but skinniest of them, each protruding rib tiger striping his coat with the black of its deep shadows in the bright sun as I make him speak English in my mind for his coyote yellow hair when he turns tail with a whine.

Son of a bitch, I'll repeat savouring the expression as I remember how it's the most used translation for both *hijo de la chingada* and *hijo de puta* whether spoken in anger, wonderment or frustration.

So I'll remark on that too, with a slightly twisted smile, tell the rest there's not a single *hijodalgo* among those scrawny dogs. That anyone who has wandered the village byways or the unpaved slums of Mexico, with its packs of strays just like these know that their pups too are the streets' children. The *Don y Doña Nadies* of the world, the Mr. and Ms. Nobodies, the *Ninguneados*. What we might call today the No Name brand: *jueputas* all. Each and every one. *La puta*. The bitch. *La chingada*. Their mother. *Su Madre*.

So I'll go on a bit too, thinking about contractions and translations. Note how a *jueputa* can as easily be an *hija* as an *hijo*, but no one is ever called a daughter of a bitch, that in English a woman just gets to be the mother bitch herself, a few of which too, some with their well used teats almost dragging on the ground, snarl briefly among the dogs. Then thinking how maybe it's just because such an expression does not roll so easily off the tongue, that daughter of a bitch would never have the rhythm necessary for a drawn out whistle of surprise or a bitten off slap of bitterness. Nor could you ever compress it down to *sumbitch* the way southerners do the guy. So I'll mention that. Adding: Maybe applied to a woman it's just *Some Bitch!* that's being said. And I'll like that. Think: So would Malintzin.

So that laughing we will walk past the pack of strays one or another of us raising a hand each time a lip should be raised into a snarl or a step taken toward us. And we will continue to laugh and to congratulate ourselves on the continued elegance of our multilingual analysis, Itzel occasionally throwing in something in Hungarian, even as we fail to notice or even see those ragged dogs behind us continuing to make occasional brief forays towards us in ones or twos as such dogs always do, lips curled

in a shy snarl or tentative wag of tail upon noticing our laughter, their people sensors still intact enough to see our friendship and for this judge us friendly, at the same time as for us they cease to be of any importance at all, almost to disappear, *desapercibidos*, unperceived, what happens too with the people of the streets, homeless, *putas*, street beggars, *niños chicleiros* turning into background and background noise: part of the hum of a busy day. So that it will not occur to us in that moment to think about how relentless attention might be worse. When those who feel they are children of even the smallest unheralded or heraldic *algo*, some little stuff some tiny reputation some barely perceived good deed, can turn quite easily, hands and voices raised to heave their real or imagined stones, their easy shaming insults at those who have broken rules they themselves have not even invented. What Matilde will soon be telling us about: how this had happened to Clotilde. How the town's attention to her would never stop. Until she would wish to disappear.

Because he didn't leave her. It was far worse: She left him.

Like Malintzin, she decided for herself. For a woman without her *algo*, this way of getting above her station perhaps the worst of all. What else was there to call her. *Putas, putas, putas*, from all sides *¡Putas!* Even Some bitch! would give her too much power.

While our conversation, with its image of a dignified and proud Malintzin will buoy Matilde up. Help keep her head above water, the way quite literally she had to keep her chin up when it all went down.

Something she will tell us about as the evening takes hold.

9

Putas in Waiting



IT WILL NOT only be Malintzin's shadow that walks with us through Huejotzingo. And accompanies us to the motel in Amecameca where Matilde will tell us the whole story of Clotilde and the town. Explain how much worse it will seem to so many that she would walk out on him. Refuse to knuckle under to him, or really, to his mother. How very much they will think it fine to give her that *puta* appellation: She deserved it. And they will say so. Over and over. And some, they will act on it.

And Matilde will be very grown-up as she tells the story, safe with us in the motel taking on the role of a city girl, and showing great pride in how she can use the *carnaval* examples, taking on a gradient of the tone she would have listened to often enough from one or another denizen of the front rooms of the pension as she came quietly in and out to accomplish one task or another. So that there will be no edge of fear or shame as there might have been from time to time earlier in the day, and far more often on our first visit to the town not with Itzel but in Tavo's doctorly Mercedes diesel together with Marie Claire and Magdalena, during that far more staid but delicious celebration of Independence Day food at the height of the movement.

When we mostly spent our time with the women doing the preparation and felt Matilde's glances bouncing off us as she checked to see

if we were all right, that we were not somehow grossed out by small town life, the lack of toilets or hot running water even without the *carnaval*'s dizzying bursts of fire from ancient shotguns held high by oft drunken folklorically masked figures as she guides us about the town. Which will always let us see so much of her father in her, his love for everything *huejotzinca y Huejotzingueño*, the pre-contact Nahua and the post-contact mestizo all at once. The obsidian blades and the maize and the chocolate, the coins and the apples and the walnuts, the ceramics and the cider. And that Virgin on amate bark, of course.

Though amid the *carnaval* too I will be able to distinguish her difficulty on occasion. How she will glance at Itzel and me from time to time out of the corner of her eye almost with a kind of shame: Would the costumes be too garish the musket fire too loud, the dances too silly the drunken jokes too off colour the lack of proper cutlery too icky? Looking to see if she caught any edge of urban horror, while Basta, ages ago brought into her inner circle, will get only giggles and quick smiles.

While later in the motel I will see her relaxing, and even if it is true that I'll be able to hear some of Magdalena's tones in how she speaks, something to tell me she is separating herself from her sister, there will be a pride there too. Because she knows full well Basta and I have been living in the same room since I left the Oronsky house and before we married, and for that matter, the story of Magdalena, with her secret marriage to Tavo for her immigration papers. So she will be urban and urbane about this whatever it costs her.

After all this was the way those who did not have money for the big wedding got married in Huejotzingo and throughout Mexico. And Basta will have been spending a lot of his time with both her and her sister making sure they felt there was nothing wrong with not having money except the exploitation of poverty itself, and that was not your own fault. And the *indígenas* and mestizos of Mexico had been marrying like this since the Spanish came. Catholic weddings in the courtyard of the 16th century Franciscan monastery aside. If the couple had no means to put the ceremony together and the priest arrived in the village only twice a year the man simply stole the girl, had her sneak out of her parents' house to come to his. And after that, there was no

going back. Any more than there would have been for Lydia Bennet in Jane Austen's day.

And of course this is what Clotilde had done. She had had her *robo* too. Probably at Matilde's age. And in the end it's why she will be in Mexico City. Why she will be working as the Oronsky's maid. There'd been the young man in the neighbourhood with whom she had been flirting and talking and making eyes and sneaking out, going each meeting that little bit farther in their awkward embraces until to absolutely no one's surprise one night she did not come home. But changed her house for his. Only to find out she didn't really like him that much after all.

That is mostly what Clotilde will say anyway. Though sometimes she will imply that he had forced her. Which will also be entirely possible. There are *robos* which truly are what we would call today not just a stealing away but a rape. The bandit's henchmen may have pulled the Corregidor's daughter from her room and thrown her without ceremony over his horse too, just because he wanted to possess her. It's possible she may not have loved him at all. Just as a boy might force a girl some evening in the barn or against a tree or wall because he needed a wife to help his mother with the house. What Clotilde will sometimes say had happened.

Though mostly she will take a deep breath and admit she had wanted him too, only to find once she left her family's house a tyrant in her mother in law, who was not hers in law at all in fact, and the boy suddenly gone indifferent. And afraid. Completely unable even unwilling to defend her. As if he had only courted her in the first place under his mother's orders. And Clotilde was a proud girl, and she wasn't going to take it, so she went home. Back to her own house. Where they will take her in. Though they won't like it. Will try to persuade her to lie in the bed she had made.

Which is when she will start saying she didn't make it. And even if she did she didn't want that bed any more, and it was her choice, wasn't it? While her mother and father, even if they will occasionally ask Where did we go wrong? will never ask it very seriously. Something had gone wrong, yes, but the way things go wrong sometimes for everybody, no one can predict the future, so they will support their daughter

and treat her just as they had before she left. So that it will be the best possible outcome, or so it might seem.

Because in the end it won't be the family who reject Clotilde, but the town. They will not shun the parents, or the brothers or the sisters or their children. They will not even shun Clotilde herself. Instead all the men will start talking to her, and standing too close, looking at her directly as small town men in that area never do at women as they ask: Well now, you've done it with him. When are you going to do it with me?

Once a woman had tasted of a man, after all ... You know the drill. The myth of the merry widow: She couldn't stop. Wouldn't be able to give it up. Except neither Clotilde's *novio* nor her mother out of law were dead. And then there will come the day her brother-in-law will proposition her, the husband of the one sister who had married well, or in any case best of them all, the family fortunes were varied that way, going from their own middle position, with Mateo's prominence, their compound with its animals and trade in the local fruit, to one child raising a family of six—it will be the first time I will visit such a home—in two small adobe rooms with its outside kitchen under a stick rather than corrugated tin roof, to this man with that bit more land, that bigger concrete house inside a larger compound whose greater wealth will allow his wife greater status among the women.

Though she will wear her hair in the same two long braids down her back tied at the ends with the same bright wool, and except for her gold jewellery she will dress the same, in a simple if damask shirtwaist, probably an update of what had been introduced by the monks who performed those first church weddings. A dress like the one she'll have on when I see her in the exterior plaza of the convent where too the re-enactment of the wedding will take place. And her apron will be much the same as that of all the other women, her hands as cheerfully grinding peeled walnuts on her *metate* not during the *carnaval* but that first time I meet her in the fall making *chiles en nogada* with her sisters.

And incensed she will be, not with her husband, but with her sister when she finds out, and before she can stop herself she will tell Clotilde she is a *puta* and a *puta* she will remain as long as she stays in town like that tempting all the men. Which will be the last straw for Clotilde. She

loved her sister. And she could see herself bringing nothing but sorrow to all those who surround her. Yet she will refuse to go back to that man. Or to his mother.

So she will leave for the city. Like many a ruined small town girl in many a European novel. Pornographic or romantic. Serious or light.

While somewhere in there, in that Amecameca motel room, to keep everything on the light side while broadening the scope of Matilde's story without any disrespect to its drama, Basta will take up the case of the *puta* or her *hija* again to recite a favourite poem. One he and I had laughed about only weeks earlier when he'd recited it to me as we walked by his old school, probably the most famous poem ever written by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the famous seventeenth century Mexican Hieronymite nun, and early feminist, more and more renowned now as one of the best poets of the Spanish baroque, though always known as such in Mexico and among the literati of Spain. And this poem taught to every Mexican school kid girl or boy he'll say, as we walk arms around each other while he puts together theories swaying down one of Mexico's yellow on tan on yellow on orange on deep *tezontle* purple red caput mortuum downtown streets past the courtyard of his old school.

And tells Matilde in Amecameca that if she doesn't know it already for sure she'll learn it at *prepa*, he's so sure she'll be going to high school, the first in her family. And you can see that he wants to make her feel her words have encompassed a reality bigger than her small town, that we are all equals in this somehow as he tells us laughing again how himself he'd been taught it by nuns, because, as you could imagine Ignacia would do, with those small monies sent her by the father's family, she had sent him to that drab stone Catholic school we will pass as we walk, run of course by a teaching order.

A dreadful experience, he'll tell me, he'd rather have been brought up in the whorehouse where he'd almost lost his virginity, that comparison probably why he'll recite the poem to me right then, and it surely is interesting that with all their other *mojigatería* the nuns of his schooldays would still teach this, a respect for the greatness of their sister poet perhaps: *Hombres Necios que Acusáis sin Razón a la Mujer*. Foolish Men Who Accuse Women without Reason, with its best lines:

*¿O cuál es más de culpar,
aunque cualquiera mal haga:
la que peca por la paga
o él que paga por pecar?*

Extremely simple really, for one whose baroque lines I will later learn are usually exceedingly complex, and best translated plainly I think even if some of the lovely Spanish alliteration is missed as well as the rhyme, simply because they are so outspokenly plain:

Who should more be blamed,
though each does ill:
she who sins for pay
or he who pays to sin?

While he will choke on yet another giggle as he repeats to us how when he learned the verses, and recited them to Ignacia, she threatened to wash his mouth out with soap. Or some such anyway, he will then add. Maybe she just called the school.

And I'll just say: Son of a bitch again, in a tone of wonderment this time, and staying purposely in English to bring our conversation full circle. That's some Madre. And not *señora* madre either. With Mother not Sister the word always used, generically anyway, to refer to nuns.

While when he recites the poem to me, we will both wonder why, if a famous seventeenth century nun could recognize this contradiction it was still so hard for others, and we'll talk of why hookers should face such isolation despite performing a task Mexico's society, among so many patriarchal others, has always found indispensable—and this years before in the north we will start talking about sex workers.

Then in the motel room in Amecameca he will concentrate on the other lines, because the poem is not mostly about who pays or does not pay for sex, but that men should—*Queredlas cual las hacéis o hacedlas cual las buscáis*—should either want women as they make them, or make them as they want them. In other words: If they don't want women to act on their heterosexual urges, they should stop asking them to do so.

So that while we might argue that men do not make women, that women make themselves, the message that runs beneath is one well worth learning: Don't turn against people who do what you beg them to do.

A lesson that in this particular arena still fails to be learned. Look to yourselves, it says. If you believe sexual urges should be controlled, control your own first. Why are you so afraid of your own responsibility that you blame others? Restrict your own world, not theirs. Enough with the slut shaming already, it's 1680.

As untranslatable it seems into daily action even now as the elegant simplicity of that poem is into any other language. Some element seems always to be missing. The rhyme or the reason. So that we will all agree: What is it a seventeenth century nun knew, that all the men of Huejotzingo with their beautiful sixteenth century *convento* somehow missed? How they should have looked to themselves, and stopped calling Clotilde names.

◆ I think Tavo will be the one to first learn about Clotilde, and that he's likely the one to first have told the story at the table too. Something about finding her. Then asking the Oronsky's if they needed a maid. I don't think it will be Magdalena at all. Though Tavo and Magdalena will always be in competition over which one knows the most about the real Mexico, with Magdalena by then out photographing everything and Tavo taking Marie Claire, his new wife, a Swiss sculptor, out into the countryside so she could sketch, or just taking friends around to interesting places he'd discovered, the way he will Basta and me often enough.

So that I don't think it will be photographing the Franciscan monastery, its brilliant plateresque architecture and exterior chapels intended to integrate the indigenous into the new faith through outdoor ceremony that will bring Magdalena into contact with Clotilde and Matilde's father, though certainly it could have been. The father was, after all, one of the important men of the town, and one of its principal record keepers. I just think Tavo will find his way into Huejotzingo for some reason of his own, it could even be something about the wonderful alcoholic cider for which the area is known, though more likely

something about either the colonial or the precontact town that will bring him to Clotilde's father, perhaps a search for pre-Columbian artefacts—like many of his generation, he will be a proud collector—in the city centre of the Huejotzincas some miles away from the new city.

Something of which Mateo will know a lot, Basta and I will not be the only ones to receive beautiful pre-Columbian artefacts as gifts, and Mexicans have been allowed to collect such things, even if never to let them leave the country. So it's easy to understand how Tavo will be informed that the girls' father was the man to know. And perhaps one day, over pulque or beer, Mateo will talk about his daughter who had made her *malpaso*—her misstep as these things are so often expressed—and spreading his hands out on the table and shaking his head, tell Tavo he just doesn't know what to do. He wants to protect his daughter but he doesn't want to get into a feud with the men of the neighbourhood either. And it will be Tavo who'll know the Oronsky's maid has left, and suggest Clotilde take a job in the city.

She's a fast learner. And loyal. The father will say.

They're good people and fair, Tavo will answer. And even if the first will be truer than the second still both will be true enough.

And so it will be done.

While later, maybe at the father's instigation, to get her out of harm's way, Tavo will suggest the youngest daughter come into the city too. And the Oronsky's will grab the opportunity to rescue the bright and beautiful Matilde. Have her go to school, work part time. She might even go all the way. High school. University. Show what opportunity can do.

◇ It's easy to understand then how in that motel when we will all be telling stories, telling them and analyzing their meaning, that amid the give and take Matilde will be reminded of her sister's, and how she will choose to be oh so very grown-up and join us in our tellings. Just the way she will have been so very grown-up when she came to the roof as the crisis reached its peak. After all, as soon as we get off the Popo the next day, we will take her back to the Oronsky's to get ready for her exams for *prepa*—for high school. The first of the big opportunities her time at the Oronsky's will offer. Already an educational level that

small town girls, even small town boys, will seldom attain in those days, and her first big step into the adult world. And she will want us to know exactly what had happened. Why the crisis had come about. Why Clotilde did what she did back in the city. What was behind it.

So that when there is emotion at all in her telling, it will be anger not shame, and yes, a certain blushing guilt, because she knows that what her sister had done was in the end the basis of the great opportunity she will be going back to. Even if she will, I suspect always, in her own way still love her hometown. Because as soon as it was suggested to the parents that Matilde could continue her studies in the City if she chose to, all she would have to do was work part time, the parents made the choice very very quickly. Because she was bright and loved both her studies and all that extra information her father gave her, even she will say so. And in loving it she will love *lo huejotzinca y lo huejotzingueño* as much as he will. But there with us she will also say a lot of things Magdalena had never said, so that this was no *Back Rooms* story told from the front rooms I had previously told Itzel either. But a revelation for both of us.

Because Magdalena will fail to value or never know of the burden placed on Matilde, what perhaps Tavo had seen in Mateo's eyes and noted in passing: how the man's greatest pain will come from the danger to his youngest daughter. Yet until Matilde tells us we won't know that it had gone beyond rumour, beyond Hey what about your sister whispered to Clotilde, or the neighbourhood women so solicitously asking of the mother how soon she intended to find Matilde a husband, perhaps even offering a nephew or a son, perhaps even an older widowed brother, but was said to Matilde directly in street or market place.

What Matilde tells with such vehemence, that by the time she left Huejotzingo at twelve or thirteen, the neighbourhood gossip about her had already been going on for months, maybe years, had started perhaps within weeks of Clotilde's return to her parents' house, that wondering what the younger sister was being taught, and everyone seeing what a beauty she was growing into talking about how her parents should marry her off fast, or asking when she would be made available to them. Saying that maybe all the girls in that family were *putas* in waiting who just needed one little taste of a man to do it with them all.

So who was going to give that first little taste to Matilde? Teach her what Carlos Fuentes called in one of his books, *la disciplina del pene*—the discipline of the penis, its rigour or some such. So you can see: The poem Basta will recite so beautifully will mostly be for her. To let her see her story as so much bigger than her town. With so much broader implications. And from the way she will look at him as he speaks, we will see too how she might have trusted him enough to have spoken with him about this already.

While the fact that no matter how much they might have been thrilled by the educational opportunities, her parents had sent Matilde away to save her from a too early marriage or the continued advances of those men, will form a distinct reason why, despite those odd little looks to make sure we are enjoying ourselves, the occasional looking away in shame at a bare foot or toothless mouth, one of the dancers so drunk he has to take off his blond bearded Hapsburg soldier mask to puke in the gutter, she will enjoy so much playing our *carnaval* tour guide as she walks around the old neighbourhood in her new jeans, knowing that all the neighbours, maybe the whole town, knows she is about to take her exams to enter *prepa*.

Something that will make her radiant that day in a way that Clotilde perhaps was when first infatuated with her young man, though I don't think she ever had the looks that will make Matilde one of the most beautiful women I've ever seen. In that white toothed, black haired, chestnut skinned, high cheekboned way reserved only for some very lucky women of American Indigenous descent. And Matilde will know how bright the future looks. Easily as bright as her eyes. Though sometimes they will cloud as she speaks, and she will find some way to say as her hand twists a pillow or a piece of cloth, that she wishes the future could be as bright for her sister.

And that she knows we had wanted so much to help that afternoon of the crisis. We did. All three of us. Even if it will only be as she speaks that we will begin to understand why that story will turn out as it did.

The Most Unintended



EVERYTHING WILL SEEM to happen if not at once that Sunday noontime, then in a quick and rising crescendo. As first Clotilde, Matilde and Ramoncito arrive on the roof and noticing them out of the corner of my eye from where I stand cleaning my brushes after two hours of putting finishing touches to a project due the next day, I leave my task to watch them. Matilde in front holding the hand of a crying Ramoncito, Clotilde, a huge shiner and dried blood caked around her swollen nose and on her Sunday dress, hanging back. Then when Basta comes over from where he has been reading Matilde will start to talk a mile a minute, propelled out of her adolescent shyness by anxiety and anger.

This time she's going to do it, this time Clotilde's going to press charges, this time enough is enough. It's over. We're not going to let it happen again. *¡Basta! ¡Basta! ¡Basta!*

And it will be close enough to the first time I've heard that word said three times in a row without it ever even once being Basta's name that had the atmosphere not crackled with her anger's energy I might not have been able to suppress a giggle. As Clotilde looking down will just nod in affirmation at the end of each of Matilde's assertions. Yes, this time she is going to do it. Yes, this time enough is enough. No, it is no way for Ramoncito to grow up, seeing Ramón hit her like that.

And it is exactly then that Itzel will come through the roof's doorway ready to take me off on the Sunday picnic she has arranged for an indefinite—Oh, around noon—in order to finally meet Basta even if it means she has to climb up the five flights of stairs to the roof to do it. Only to erase the mischievous grin playing on her lips for this much awaited encounter and replace it with a far more formal smile and an outstretched hand as she takes in what is going on.

Though we will all know of course, all of us, I will even have discussed it with Itzel, that Clotilde's first brief almost marriage will seem to have broken her will. That she will choose badly a second time too. That this time Ramoncito's father will beat her. And that after such determination the first time around she will be willing to play *la mujer abnegada*: the image most chosen, despite so many other possibilities, to exemplify Mexican womanhood. The abnegated woman. *La que aguanta*. The one who can endure anything and everything. And will choose to.

Especially once she has a child. So that Clotilde's abnegation and Ramón's violence will be one of the ever-present *Back Rooms* dramas.

Basta will be happy they hadn't called ahead, or hadn't been able to reach him since he will no more have a phone in his room than he will a toilet. There will be a shared toilet on the roof but only one private phone on the second floor and the pay phone down in the shop that sells tickets for the lottery. This will be the usual way in Mexico City in those days. If you should want a phone where there isn't one already it won't be a case of getting a new number or even a new phone, some new jacks, the way it will be in any city up north, but of paying for the installation of the phone lines, maybe from the street into the building. Something that still dictates the popularity of cell phones in a lot of places today.

And since paying for a phone line will be generally unaffordable a large part of the middle class will live with a series of message taking options, and telegraphs will often be sent even within the city for important occurrences or appointments. And while the downstairs neighbour had agreed to receive messages for Basta—he'll seem a nice young man, a university student soon to make something of himself—neither she nor her maid will be at home.

So it will be obvious to us, we'll talk about it later, how the trip over will have given Matilde and Clotilde not the time to think better of what they're going to do but to build up their determination, their *coraje*—something between courage and rage—as they egg each other on. Even the stares of the people on the bus making Matilde speak louder, Clotilde nod faster. Until they will be ready for us.

So that at the end of Matilde's speech Clotilde will be able to raise her eyes to Basta's and say: Yes, yes. *Estoy lista: Sí*. I'm ready.

And for Basta to take each sister by the arm at once and turn them around, announcing that they will go to the police station, an easy walk really, *para levantar el acta*, this time to press charges. Without giving his pronouncement any thought, or perhaps because he has given it much thought—I'll find it interesting that he knows the police station's location—as we do sometimes, imagining what we will do if a certain situation arises: another use for subjunctive mode.

While Itzel, without a moment's hesitation has taken over the care of Ramoncito. Quickly switching out our afternoon in the country for Chapultepec Park and its rides. Explaining to him how he will stay with us while his mother and aunt go talk to the police. After stretching out her hand as formally to this four-year-old as to Basta.

The park awaits us, *jovencito*, she says, fondly calling him a young man and smiling broadly. We'll have our lunch in the old park then go on the rides in the new. Have you seen the carousel, the horses galloping around and around and up and down?

And the more she speaks the wider Ramoncito's eyes will open, the more they will brighten. She has picked the place she knows he will love the best. Because of course he has been with his mother and his aunt, even with his father, for a Sunday picnic on that one traditional maids' day off, he has even walked with them through the zoo, the museums, all the things that on Sundays will be free, but he has never ever been on any rides, the most he has ever gotten that cost money is a chile covered mango on a stick, or a small ice.

So that we will sit in the old park among people as smiling and happy as we might appear, whatever any of our back stories might be, from the younger working class families in their jeans or slacks, shirtwaists

or minis, pulling tortillas out of small woven baskets; to the older and wealthier in their Sunday best, their dark suits and dresses, politely picking out their bread and cheese, wine and cold cuts from large hampers brought by chauffeurs from nearby cars and then served to them by uniformed maids who will glance from time to time out of the corners of their eyes at their colleagues lucky enough to be experiencing a day off.

A scene that I'm sure will have been mounted by then for centuries throughout the western influenced world though I will never have seen it before and could not help laughing and making comments to Itzel about our art history classes with their *déjeuner sur l'herbe*, and all those naked women hanging around among the clothed men in formal suits and hats. Though needless to say, in this scene the women will be as well if not more dressed than the men.

Then after that we will go to the new park for the rides, and when even that is done, on to Itzel's place where we will set Ramoncito up to draw on a table, the bright colours of the carousel horses he has ridden, the twisted loops of the rollercoaster he has not, amusement park ride after amusement park ride. And all this time I will envy her ease with him, as mostly I sit or stand around, occasionally pick up a pencil to sketch, unable to think what to say. Until at last, the three others will arrive back from their hours with the police.

Spent alternately in waiting and ridicule. Clotilde belittled, Basta sniggered at, as the cops try to get something out of him which will imply that he is more than just a friend to at least one of the two. In which he will gain a firsthand knowledge of the kind of behaviour Clotilde and Matilde have experienced in their home town, somehow both made *putas* in the eyes of many around him, while he, by implication, will be their pimp. There had to be something nefarious in Clotilde's pressing charges against her man. And in Basta's helping. Maybe he was what she'd done to make Ramón hit her.

After all, it's the never ending story, the one that makes Billie so hard to talk about: She must have done something to deserve that beating, mustn't she? Until at last, one officer will take the complaint, and appear at least to believe it, and promise action, even cluck in sympathy, even as he asks over and over: Are you sure you want to do this? Are you sure it's for the best? Think of your son.

While Clotilde will get through it, all of it, her chin up even if her hand squeezes Matilde's hard, her nails digging in. And for once she will make no excuses for Ramón, the way she would sometimes say that her having had a man before him was enough reason for Ramón to use her as a punching bag. Though it will be Matilde and Basta who will have to emphasize that it's precisely for her son that she is doing this.

Then later we will sit around drinking tea in Itzel's kitchen all of us triumphant as I watch Itzel sizing Basta up: his talk, his smile, his elegant Maya gestures, his quick and decisive action, so different from what the stories of *¡Basta Basta basta!* had led her to believe. And after that, we will all go out for *tacos al carbón*, charcoal grilled tacos, your choice of meat and salsas with grilled scallions on the side. Then Basta will go back to the roof and Itzel will drive the four of us home. And we will all make it an early night, tired as we will be from the demands of the day.

Only I will find the next morning when I walk into the kitchen that everything has changed. And we will all find out not what it means to be like so many women, as Clotilde has been forced to be, Our Lady of the Sorrows, but what you do if you are Our Lady of the Indicative, and you don't understand the future subjunctive—the one that tells you tomorrow hasn't happened yet. Because Clotilde will have changed her mind. And she will later tell Basta how, when Magdalena arrived back with *La Señora O* the night before—they'd been off to *merendar*, have a late supper, with friends—and she found out what had happened, she quickly turned on Clotilde, backing her into a wall with her vehemence, asking her who the hell she thought she was wasting everybody's time like that.

She knew Clotilde would never go through with it. They'd been there before. Clotilde knew damn well she wasn't the kind of woman who could manage on her own. Ramón would be back inside their little apartment in the back of the pension in no time. There had been no use whatsoever in throwing him out, or pressing charges. And what was she doing bothering Basta? He had important things to think about. She should know better. And all this despite the fact that the tiny apartment comes with Clotilde's job and Ramón will barely work at all, just occasional jobs as a *tameme* loading and unloading in one of the markets using a

tumpline like the ones that had once allowed Indians to haul Spaniards up mountainsides. And if Magdalena and the Señora should be worried about the child, they could always give Clotilde a bit of a raise.

So that by the time I get downstairs, Clotilde will be convinced. Though she won't give me the details, she will tell me Magdalena was right in telling her she was too weak to do it. After all she wasn't a woman like Magdalena who could manage on her own. A professional who understood things. Even a woman like Matilde would one day be. She should be satisfied with her lot, and with who Matilde could become, and she will rub her hand up and down the wall she'd had her back against: I should take the message to Basta when I went to the studio to pick up my project, tell him to forget about coming over to talk to her about the restraining order, and all the other things they had planned to do.

And I will know from how she looks at me that there is little I can do to change her mind. I don't know her well enough for that. Anything I say will just reinforce her sense of her own weakness now that she has caved. I will only seem to echo Magdalena: See, you couldn't last a day. And I'll know that Matilde is at school and, I suspect, has already done her best. So I will go up to the university with my work then hurry back to the roof as quick as I can, Itzel driving me between classes, to catch Basta between his morning shift and his own classes in the afternoon. I'll know he is Clotilde's last best hope.

Only by the time he gets to the Oronsky's nothing even he can say will change Clotilde's mind. Or Magdalena's. Who will laugh and dismiss the idea of charges, or restraining orders, as more of his impractical idealist nonsense, like his talk. And she will shake her head, this time quickly, as if shaking such idealism away, maybe she'll even say *¡basta*, Basta, *basta!* Waving her hands back and forth in front of her: She wasn't going to help in another quixotic quest. He knew as well as she did, Clotilde was much too passive to manage any of this. He was forcing her to something beyond herself. Almost as if she really were saying getting above her station. Forgetting that she'll be talking about the small town woman with the guts to walk out on her first partner, and on her in-laws. Who has a past encouragement might help her to build on.

And as for Matilde, when she tells us Clotilde's full story those months later, there in Amecameca, you will still be able to discern the edge of the overwhelming anger she has felt at Magdalena, even if she will allow that Our Lady of the Indicative—we will just have told her about that, she will even indicate her willingness to join our subjunctive *Hermanidad*—always means well. Neither she nor any of the rest of us will yet know Matilde is on the verge of becoming the next victim. Because, after Matilde has taken her exams for *prepa*, her results will be lost. Everyone else will receive theirs, but hers will seem simply to disappear.

And when she asks Magdalena and her new European husband to look into it, they will decide quickly that for all the high hopes they once had that she could do it all, no academic ambition too high, and truly they did speak of it that way, so bright she shone, still they were indeed just that: hopes. Or not even that: fantasies. Like Basta's belief Clotilde could leave Ramón. This lack of results must mean that she had failed. And they will look at each other and tell themselves, and tell us when we call them on Matilde's behalf, that it can't be helped: After all, her youth in Huejotzingo won't have prepared her as it has prepared the middle, even working, class youth of the city, and maybe she isn't as bright as they once thought, and maybe her nutrition, her limited diet ... all the classist arguments taking almost no time to surface even if they have not seen her results.

So that instead of trying to find out what has happened they quickly start to look for something else for her to do. A Vocational school perhaps. It might still lead to the Politécnico, or maybe some quick course in some trade. Hairdressing maybe. And besides, even if she'd gotten in, they'll say, she likely wouldn't have been able to compete, Matilde didn't have the background for that. And if worse should come to worst: There was always full time with them.

While once more, Matilde will call on us and speak to Basta. And even within all the difficulties of that moment he will take it on. He, after all, had taken those exams. Results didn't just disappear. In or out: You got them in the mail. So he will insist on the tracing of her results, and when Magdalena and her husband tell him repeatedly not

to bother—I will hear all their arguments against it—he will go down to the Education Ministry repeatedly until they are found.

And when they are, they will be outstanding. As, before the tests were lost, even Magdalena said they should be. So that story at least, of belief in possibility, and the wherewithal and generosity to follow it through, will have its happy ending. As in truth will Basta's, at least as far as getting away from Ignacia's terrible bitter emotional miserliness is concerned, her particularly acute case of *chingaqueditismo*.

Yet I have never known what the results of all of this will be for Magdalena. Not really. Though decades later I will come across a book containing her photographs and a text by one of Mexico's best known writers. About the northern border, the *maquiladoras*, the assembly plants where so many women from the poorest parts of Mexico wind up having to work—and about domestic violence. And I will think: Oh my, so at last she has come to this place. Shelters and restraining orders, new laws and education programs have at last made the struggle against such violence part of the indicative mode. Something that right thinking people do.

And perhaps when she is asked, she will talk about how long ago she became aware of the problem through a maid in her mother's house, and how terrible it is, that women, especially poor women, still feel they have to put up with it, the way that maid did, the way she always took him back. And Magdalena will not remember the young man who held open the door to change, when it was she who slammed it shut. She who put the words of *la mujer abnegada* in the maid's mouth before they could be spoken, had perhaps not yet been imagined, not this time. Just because they were so expected. Because that was the way things were.

Maybe in the future someone could rescue the poor, the underclass, but they were not thought able to even aid in their own rescue. And poor women back then least of all: They would never be capable of taking up their own agency. Of making their own choices. Right thinking people knew better, however much they might regret it.

While now, I think, it is the presence of the young man our narratives would most question. Yet I will assure you that they both were there. I witnessed them. And that book about the *maquiladoras* if you

wish to, you can find it. Though the young Latino man will be more difficult. He will likely be lost in the shadow, in the dark, where so many futures generate, their beginnings lost to us. But he is as much a part of this history of change as any other. And yes, no matter what stories you have been told of Mexico, its unbridled *machismo*, and no matter how many of them may be true: He was there. And if he does not ring true, perhaps you should concentrate your hearing more on the subtlety of the subjunctive. The place where things happen that we think will not, cannot. And if even that does not help, blame my lack of skill. But let him be. Such a man was there. And he led us on this course. And I know his name.

◇ While we will spend the next days after Clotilde goes back to Ramón, whether up on the roof, at cafés, in restaurants or outside our various classes, complaining still that nothing ever happens in this country. Our own difficulty in believing in change no matter how we will speak of it, failing to see the gathering energy that will soon give birth to the Student Movement of 1968.

Though by late that Monday my beliefs about my relationship to Basta will certainly have undergone a transformation. Even as Itzel drives me back up the hill that afternoon. And we continue to discuss our Sunday and our despair at its outcome. Though whatever the results she will tell me, reaching across the shift lever for my hand, she'd loved our afternoon with Ramoncito, and even our tacos, and as for Basta, well, she had been delighted by him. And she will start to tease me more than she had already been doing in the days since I'd set up my studio on the roof, ribbing me about how ever-present this young man seemed.

And each time when I reply vehemently, that no, he is my buddy, my ally in that crazy house, she will just laugh. Especially when I find myself taking up the very arguments Magdalena will so adroitly use with me, so that you could hear Magdalena's voice in them, if not Billie's the times she'll speak of Matt O'Brien, the husband who got away and whose prestige she'll never quite get over. As she repeats again and again her claim that he never would have married her at all if his

mother hadn't been visiting relatives in North Dakota. And my words will be exactly theirs, and I won't even notice it.

They never do leave them you know, I will say to Itzel. They complain they bitch they whine, but they always do what Mama wants. That's how the system works. And there's no way out. In the Catholic family, Mexican, Irish, it makes no difference, the mother-in-law rules. The husband's mother. And I'm not going to get mixed up in that. Especially with all the extra burdens Ignacia puts onto him because of his father. The suicide, you know.

While she will try to catch my eye then say: You should hear yourself. It seems to me, you're mixed up in it already.

Only this time, looking at me out of the corner of her eye briefly as she drives she will firmly say instead: I like him. The spark. And a man like that. Who would do what he just did? So firm, so decisive. And in aid of the family maid in a pension where he once lived ... I'd snap him up in a second.

So I will. I will go back to the roof and I will. And it won't occur to me to think about who told me to do it. Or that it could matter. Not as the excitement of the day before, my own exhaustion, the look on Basta's face in my memory as he ushers Matilde and Clotilde through the rooftop door, will make me see him anew and companionship change to desire. And let ensue what even forty-eight hours before would have been the most unintended of all consequences: We will not get out of bed for a week.

III

Buenos Practicantes

THAT ISN'T STRICTLY true, of course. There was eating and there was working and there was the occasional class attended by one or the other of us or a walk the few feet across to the studio to elaborate on some sex born idea. And then of course too, my absolute reluctance to go back to the Oronsky's to face Magdalena, to hear what she might be saying and bite my tongue, or to explode and then get told I just didn't understand. I'll use that reluctance to put the moves on Basta in fact. I've always been too shy about these things to be direct. It's part of that social awkwardness that makes ideas so much easier a place to engage, whether I believe I ought to be like that or not.

So that I will just walk into Basta's room when I get back from the school and ask to borrow a hammock to set up in the chain link laundry cage which will become our shared outdoor living room from the moment I take the studio. We'd even gone to an outdoor market one Saturday to buy two bright striped pine and cotton sling sun chairs, to share as we drink the tea I'll bring with me from the States, Twinings Irish Breakfast, the good stuff I'd been drinking since my first year on my own, made from the leaves in a pot so that there will be no reason to share a teabag.

But the chairs would be far too uncomfortable to curl up in to sleep and Basta had a couple of well worn rope hammocks that had lost both

their bright colour and their scratchiness, though later we will bring back some rayon and cotton ones from Vera Cruz. And a hammock could be as easily strung up from side to side of that laundry cage I so loved as from the brass hammock hooks set into so many walls in the tropics. Just two S hooks through the chain link and you'd be done. And Basta will already have taught me how you lie crossways in a simple sling hammock: It's the most comfortable thing in the world. Afternoons I'll want to read, that's how I'll do it, with both the hammock rope and the shadows from the chain link fence making strange patterns on my skin.

And I will love them so. Those cages. Love the one on our next building too in fact. How so many, perhaps most, roofs in Mexico City have that feature. At least the ones on the older apartment buildings. They all have laundry cages, one for each apartment and sometimes one for each of the roof rooms once designed for servants, while in this case we will agree to share the one he'd already rented. Each one's sides and roof made of chain-link fencing to guarantee your laundry not being stolen once it's hung after washing in the corrugated concrete sinks—usually cold water only—also on the roofs for that purpose.

And while we will use ours as it was intended, hanging up our—is it littles or smalls the English say for underwear?—after washing them ourselves or hiring someone to do the larger laundry for us, we will also give ourselves a three-room apartment by using the cage as a garden, outdoor living room and balcony, even a guest bedroom—and we won't be the only ones. We'll even arrange potted plants around the cage's edges, mostly herbs and cacti, so that between hammocks and sling chairs and greenery we could line up next to each other and look out over the roof's edge as if we were sunbathers by ocean or pool. And during the rains, when the tough mountain thunder storms didn't produce hail, we would even tarp the roof and sit there still. Or serve our friends tea or tequila on our coffee table made of crates.

So that it's one of the hammocks I'll ask for.

I think I'll sleep in the cage tonight, I'll say. I can't stand the idea of seeing Magdalena. Of hearing her smarmy explanations for what she's done. I think I'd hit her. Leave her in a lot worse shape than Clotilde.

While at the same time, I will look at him in a way I will never have looked before.

And he will answer: You can share my bed, if you want. Said with a kind of giggle.

Because we will mostly share that same awkwardness. At least we will say so.

So that I will be surprised at how good we are at it: *el acto*. The act. I'll make one of the classic mistakes around that word only months later. Almost as good, maybe even better, than confusing *binchar* with *chingar*. At our wedding. Though it will be hard to even call it that. Our civil union then, down at the equivalent of city hall, so that when I'm supposed to ask for *el acta*, the certificate of the marriage, using that general word for any legal document, the one I'd learned by then those months before for the laying of charges, the getting of a restraining order, how you are always *levantando un acto* raising rather than taking out an order or a writ. With the masculine pronoun there only because you always put *el* before a stressed 'a', *el agua* and *el águila* are two of the most used examples, because of the awkward sound of two 'a's together, sort of like saying 'an' rather than 'a' apple. So that in this case instead of the *acta* it will be the *acto* I'll ask for.

¿Y *el acto*, señor, *el acto*? I'll repeat.

Until the official will answer, happy in true Mexican fashion at any opportunity to emphasize anything off colour, a slip of the tongue, a language error, a classic double entendre, a *doble sentido* you'd say in Spanish, not the borrow from an antiquated version of another language but a richer expression, so fully alive inside its own tongue that it doubles its *sentidos* on its own, two directions on a road, the doubled impact of anything felt, the subtle dig the simple pun, so that he answers simply, delighted but deadpan: ¿*El acto*? I'll leave that up to you to do in the privacy of your own home.

And then looking at us he'll add with raised eyebrows and a smile, he could tell from the group these wouldn't be fighting words as they might for some: That is, if you haven't done it already.

And I'll be very tempted to say: And good we are at it too. But of course, I won't quite dare. So Tavo, one of our three witnesses, will do it for me.

Son buenos practicantes, he'll say. Because that one's his own private joke. In official announcements of marriage, or in the bans published

on the church walls, they don't say you're single, they say you're celibate, or else widowed, since you're not allowed to be divorced. I have no idea what they say if there's been an annulment. While Tavo will always ask: *¿Célibes porqué célibes? ¿Porqué no practicantes?* Why don't they just say practicing?

Meaning the way a doctor practices, rather than like a musician trying to get it right. So that from that day forth, even after we've broken up, and may be practicing on others, we will forever be his *practicantes*. The way often enough he will greet us: *¿Cómo están mis practicantes?* And of course, he would give us the benefit of being good.

Though by the time he starts it we will already have had months *de práctica*, a practice, even if you never get it right, I've always thought of as musical enough. And surely, yes, even then, on the day of our wedding we were still dedicating our daily, or almost daily, hours to it. Even if that was too shortly to come to an end. Because at first of course, we just couldn't get enough. Of the sex, or of our stories that preceded and followed it. All the small confidences of when a relationship comes — overused pun intended — together.

And both of us, unembarrassedly bringing our previous experience to it, and even talking about it some, first sexual encounters, that sort of thing, a kind of where we'd learned what we liked, though we more showed than told each other. So that too was a surprise: that it was so easy to talk to each other about absolutely everything.

He will even tell me on one of our long walks through the city as we enter the old red light district, of his first sexual encounter. How like most young Mexican men of his generation — though by no means all, Mercedes, my first gallery's owner told me that she and her first lover initiated each other in the back of a car just as so many up north might do — Basta will do it in a whorehouse. And he will piss himself instead of getting an erection, he'll tell me, he was so scared. And the whore will be terribly understanding and sympathetic, though he will still manage to do nothing.

And I will tell him I'd bled like a stuck pig, or the way they say stuck pigs bleed, and was terribly surprised, because, though part of the pre-pill generation in terms of when I'd become sexually active, I had come

to think of losing one's virginity as nothing much. It was still New York, after all, and it was still the progressive schools, in a city where girls of the intellectual class would as oft as not be fitted for a diaphragm as a sixteenth birthday gift from their parents. The age back then when we became legal. That's how we said it: legal. I'm legal now. To make our own sexual decisions. Even if we couldn't vote or for that matter leave home without permission: without risking detention and arrest.

And while Billie's acting out will mean I would never talk with her about such things, in her sober moments she will joke with friends in front of me about how her gynaecologist smuggled diaphragms into New York from France in the lining of his trench coat. Because, despite the state's liberality, Catholic influence will make all contraception illegal, as it will remain when my friends got me an appointment for my diaphragm fitting. And then, by my eighteenth birthday, the pill will have come along, and I will get that prescribed to me to help alleviate menstrual cramps. Which will actually even be true, despite the activity it will make easier: My periods will be far less bloody than losing my virginity, but more painful than labour.

But as for losing that virginity so casually with a man I still like a great deal, but with whom I will not be in love, that will be planned for. And we do remain quite casually in touch, I see him sometimes when I return to New York. It's still true though, that however much I'd wanted it that way, to purposely cancel virginity's vaunted value, its loss did fill me with a strange grief, in a way I have only read in the work of one Mexican man, a short story that Basta will pass to me within hours of my telling him. And I will read it sitting next to him in bed in the early evening, and wonder at how a Mexican man could zero in on that feeling, of a young woman sitting in a privy if I remember, looking at her soiled underwear, just as I had sat in a Manhattan bathroom full of hexagonal white tiles like many in old buildings, astonished at the blood flow which had made the sex act that first time so awful, and that bathroom like the floor of a slaughterhouse.

And then after talking all that out we will commit ourselves to the act once more and go out for yet another late-ish celebratory dinner at a local Austrian Restaurant I think, where to purposefully add to the

irony we will eat *carne cruda*, raw meat tarted up as *bistec tartar* to keep up our strength. And look longingly at each other as we suck our blood stained forks. And there never will be a moment in which I will wish to say: *Basta*, *Basta*, *basta*.

And in those first days too we will take it upon ourselves to remember each thing we might do outside our lovemaking, cataloguing each activity at the end of the evening determined to remember the small nuances of our days together forever. And while we will not go to the O'Keeffe and Stieglitz lengths of giving our privates private names, nor even come up with those ridiculous nicknames for each other lovers often do, we will make up even sillier words for the infinite amounts we are convinced we love each other, coming up each day with a term for a new order of magnitude, a name for an infinity bigger we'll say than any other yet discovered by mathematics.

Yet in all that naming of activities and infinities, in which I could detail each walk we took, each place we ate, each can of soup we bought to heat on the hotplate, each can of Calmex tuna stuffed jalapeños we opened, I could not have told you then nor tell you now how long it will be before seeing Itzel will again become one of them. A week, ten days, two weeks, I don't know.

Only that there will be one phone call from the pay phone downstairs, and that it will be to thank her.

Yes, yes, yes, I'll say. I did it. I'm with Sebastián. I'm living here. You were so right. Yes. He's wonderful. So wonderful. I have never been so happy. And other things of that sort that I will no more repeat than I will any of those terms for infinity. The ones I can still rhyme as I go to sleep at night.

As we slowly untangle ourselves, days later yet again, I'll call to ask if she will drive me over to the Oronsky's to get the rest of my stuff. Where I'll enter embarrassedly the back way only to learn that neither Clotilde nor Matilde were any more surprised than Itzel by my sudden move. Though Clotilde will ask me eyes averted if what had happened to her had anything to do with why I was moving. In that way abused women have of thinking they tarnish what they touch.

But they both will smile when I say: No, it was just *Basta*, *bastó con*

Basta, then they'll giggle and look me in the eye as they tell me they'd known it all along. They'd made bets on how long it would take. While much later, when Matilde tells the story in Amecameca, I will giggle and say that I suppose my fleeing the Oronsky's might be looked upon in Huejotzingo terms as a *robo*, too.

Then after unloading my remaining stuff on the roof, we'll go with *Basta* to a coffee house way down in the south of the city, maybe even in Coyoacán, to celebrate.

A coffee house of the kind that is both the place and the event, what the Chileans call a *peña* with folk singing and food and drink and talk. Maybe poetry recited, or other readings, a political discourse or two though never typically Latino long, and chatter, endless chatter.

I won't be sure from the way she looks around if Itzel had ever been to anything quite like it before, though certainly similar things through her painter friend, and this one, trying for a Pan-American tradition, Mexico and South and Central America with a little bit of *el norte*, certainly Greenwich Village, thrown in. All properly cosmopolitan with one couple there *Basta* will know through Tavo, the wife from Holland the husband from Argentina, with their friends from all over, and others I will know, believe it or not through art school friends from New York, people connected with a bilingual magazine called *El Corno Emplumado*, including poet and midwife Margaret Randall, who will be among those who flee to Cuba after the massacre, some even think of hijacking an airplane to get there, in those days before airplane hijackings will become murderous hostage taking events, but will be escapes from far more murderous regimes, though in the end they won't do it. And all sorts of talk, talk, talk. In which *¡basta! ¡basta! ¡basta!* could be said to many others besides *Basta*.

Where I will by no means be the only *gringo* on the left, but yes, I will have a certain cachet for having dedicated my twenty or so hours a day to organizing with the SDS against the War, with the movement in the States, especially then with the escalating demonstrations at the universities, just as romanticized—Hell no, we won't go—and all that, as Latin America and Che Guevara in the States. So that between my brother in Vietnam and me working against the war, and very aware of

the inroads of the movement among the military, I will get all sorts of questions only some of which I'll have answers to, most of them about what it was like to organize — to actually organize — *en las entrañas del monstruo*, a very popular phrase back then.

From a quote written in a letter by Jose Martí right before he died, who said, referring to the States, *Viví en el monstruo, y le conozco las entrañas*, I have lived in the monster and I know its entrails, or its bowels, as the quote is often translated, so that United States of Americans have come to speak of living in the bowels of the beast. And though Basta won't really understand till we go to the States ourselves why I'll find it so funny, some of the other Americans there will, with at least one, a Puerto Rican named Eduardo there with Niki, the daughter of a very famous American folk singer, even guffawing when I joke about how it meant we had to start a bowel movement. While I'll go on to explain to the others who spoke no English how moving your bowels is a polite way of saying *cagar* — to take a shit. Though, greeted as such a heroine, I won't go on to say that I'd felt that those bowels were getting so twisted up, and the movement with them, I'd had to shit myself out of there.

Though funny as the metaphor might seem, even if you translate *entrañas* more properly as guts, especially as it too is often used to mean the heart the centre the guts of a problem, and as a verb means to entail, the quote is still well liked and oft used, though the wise have switched the translation of that one word to belly, trying I'm sure, to rid themselves of the jokes too often made, while maintaining a little, if not all, of Martí's sense of being engulfed by as well as knowing from the inside out. While for many in that moment the quote will encapsulate the idea that the more those caught in the entrails could make a mess of things the sicker the beast would get, and they'll talk up those words of Che Guevara's: that it will be high time to create, two, three, many Vietnams. The way too, in the States we will already have reversed the slogan: End the War in Vietnam, Bring the Troops Home Now, to End the Troops in Vietnam, Bring the War Home Now.

And of course we will talk too about May in France, and maybe even the death of *El Che* in Bolivia the fall before and where will the war in Vietnam be going anyway, and will armed struggle be the only

answer for the whole of the continent, and was Che's vision of *Nuestra América* valid, and what did we think about the guerrillas in Guatemala and Colombia, the FARC that almost fifty years later and far more compromised has only recently entered an agreement with the Colombian government, well did they stand a chance, well did they?

Did anyone and if so, who, while of course there will be talk too about art and politics poetry and politics theatre and politics how could there not be in that crowd and what did we all think about the social function of art or for that matter its lack but mostly the conversation will keep coming back to us and to Mexico and to how nothing ever happens in this country not ever.

That most common of mantras, said over and over by everybody there as if saying it could itself change things while somebody will throw in, because somebody always does, maybe one of the Argentines this time: Well what can you expect from a one-party system governed by an oxymoron: The Institutional Revolutionary Party, well really? And even there might have been a Canadian there to relate that to the oxymoronic Progressive Conservatives I don't remember, it's certainly something I wouldn't have known about then, only that there was at least one Canadian there sporting a maple leaf, and then someone will proclaim in English at some moment or other: We always everywhere seem to be governed by either morons or oxymorons, only I know it won't be me. Though there's no doubt that the figure of speech to dominate that conversation will be repetition, that endless repetition: Nothing ever happens in this country. Nothing.

Until finally someone will announce that it might be nothing but there was to be a demonstration the next day to celebrate the anniversary of the Cuban Revolution and maybe we should all go. It could at least be interesting and why not celebrate the fact that something happens somewhere anyway. And no matter anyone's particular position on the Latin American left all will agree, whether backers of their own Communist party, someone else's socialist party, Guatemala's guerrillas or Uruguay's Tupamaros, or maybe supporters of nothing left at all but just some kind of middle of the road liberal entity moronic or oxymoronic, people who like Magdalena will back some faction of Mexico's

ruling party or their own, still this will be *Nuestra América* not theirs, and Cuba will always be a good one to back because, hey, they'd stuck it to the U.S., hadn't they?

So some will say they'll go and some won't but pretty soon we'll be in Itzel's Peugeot on the way home and who knows what I've done or eaten but I'll feel more like I've got a beast in my belly than like I'm in the belly of any beast I'll be so full of intestinal cramps that I've taken the back seat so I can lie down and bite my lips in order not to moan, while I listen to Itzel and Basta talking and note happily how much they seem to like each other so I won't mind at all being back there even if I could do without the pain, while when we get back Basta will tell me how I should have more confidence in my friends, of course he liked Itzel, she was wonderful and he'd known it since we'd had tacos with Clotilde, Matilde and Ramoncito when she had in no way talked down to them, and I will open the drawer with his little collection of medicines and swallow a lot of *carbon vegetal*, activated vegetable charcoal, Tavo's and Mexico's favourite intestinal remedy, to absorb whatever toxins are in there, though everyone will know not to take it for too long as it absorbs a whole bunch of nutrients as well, and then we'll get back into bed again, where he will rub my belly and we'll practice our *acto* anyway though very, very slowly and on our sides, and maybe he'll bring me to orgasm by some nuanced version we've been practicing as well that involves his hand and his tongue lower down.

And he will say he'll go on the demonstration, and I will say it's going to depend on how close I have to stay to a toilet, and we will go to sleep with no sense at all that a lot more than our own personal world is about to change.

That something is about to happen in this country.

Because the next day he will go and I will not. I will feel still far too rotten to even make it to class, though when he comes in I'll be working in the studio, it will be a few hours by then since my last toilet run, boiled white rice made on our hot plate with a sliced banana on top have been doing the trick, so I'll immediately note a different kind of nervous energy about him than I've ever seen. Then when we've made our tea and taken it out to the cage and set our chairs up side by side

he'll tell me how the demonstration for the twenty-sixth of July met up with a demonstration of high school students, students from *prepa*, protesting police repression after a sports event, and that once the two demonstrations were together, as if prepared beforehand, as it likely was — we already knew the government was looking for excuses to control all dissidents prior to the Olympics — *los granaderos*, the riot police, had attacked both.

And everybody had scattered. But he'd seen Niki and Eduardo and thought they'd been among those who hadn't gotten away, he wasn't sure, but damn, damn, still: It was amazing.

So that he will let a slow soft whistle out between his teeth, and we will lie back looking at the clear rainy season night sky which the earlier rains have scoured until we can see stars, saying in wonderment, first one then the other, passing our knowledge back and forth.

Something's happening.

Putá, algo está pasando.

Chingada madre, qué ondas.

Ya vamos andando.

Sí que sí, Simón and other things more or less equivalent to Oh, Wow, or *Guau* as the Spanish now write it, until I will get out of my chair and take his hand to lead him over to one of the hammocks hidden there in the dark, and we will silently practice our *acto* yet again, which, by the way, is a lot easier in a hammock than you might think, and a lot more fun. Though we will be each in our separate hammocks, swaying lightly, by the time we hear the hurried footsteps on the stairs. And then a hard rapping on Basta's door.

The *Gringa* Who Done You



I **T WILL NOT** be the police. Though I will lay you odds others will be receiving just such visits from them at the very moment we jump up and crouch down in the shadows at the farthest corners of the cage. Only emerging when we hear Tavo's voice calling Basta's name and mine. As he stands in the shadows, a woman behind him still framed in the stairwell light: Niki's mother. Basta will have called it right, Niki and Eduardo have been taken.

Because those two people we'd been discussing the same topic with, that Nothing ever happens in this country topic, will wind up deported. Even if you could be mildly political like in the Oronsky house, participation by foreign nationals in Mexican politics is specifically prohibited in the Mexican Constitution, Article 22, I believe. So even if you might be allowed to talk till all around you cried *¡basta!* real politics, action politics, will not only be frowned upon but acted against, the usual action a quick ride to the airport.

While for that couple, even if the ride will be quick, the wait will be longer. And its privilege accorded only to Niki within that same year. She will be the daughter of fame after all. And of a fame whose owner is beloved in Mexico. Along with a mother who once she gathers her energy will know much more than how to weep. Or wring her hands. I will never have seen it before: an actual wringing of hands. Though

even then, the deportation will not happen so very fast, the authorities will take their bit of time. Weeks anyway. And though there will be no torture, there will be discomfort. And some humiliation. What those with connections are generally treated to if they are not designated too much of a threat.

I don't really know what will make me hang back at the fence. Why I won't come forward immediately with Basta, hands outstretched in greeting. If it is the flowing caftan or the histrionic gestures, far too reminiscent of circle in the round productions of Greek tragedy in Greenwich Village. Black too, if I remember. As if in some kind of proto-mourning protocol for the intellectual older upper middle of the times. Though it's true that by the time I push off from the fence with the one foot I have raised against the wire, in an almost aggressive gesture I know well from childhood, I will already be aware of what has all the warning sirens going off in my head and moving quickly down through my body. So that I greet them both quickly, turn the chairs to face the hammocks, gesture Basta into one, volunteer tea or tequila which I know will be refused and return to my place, my face hidden in shadow.

Because I have already watched how the two will move to the door first of Basta's room, then that of my studio, then see us, their eyes adjusting to the dark. And then how her black caftan outlines itself through the chain link against the city lights, and how Octavio will stand at the door to the cage, announcing who she is and asking as she still weeps, if there is anything we might happen to know.

Had we seen Niki, did we know where she might be, if she'd been picked up. While Basta will answer yes to the first and no to the second. They'd been separated right at the beginning of the mayhem, when the two demonstrations had come together. And as for the second, No, no, he didn't know, though maybe there might be some people ... maybe the ones at the coffee house, maybe they hadn't been separated maybe they'd seen ... maybe Tavo might know them too?

While only Tavo takes the offered seat. As the mother, I've forgotten her name, grabs the chain link with her backward facing fingers, stretching her arms out like the crucified Christ, then stretches her face out into a grimace to match, much like Munch's *Scream*. While I resume

my position at the other end of the cage and lean once more against the wire like any small time Brooklyn hood from the old neighbourhood. In ripped blue jeans yet, the ones with the torn out knees I'll use when painting. And then there's the cigarette dangling from the corner of my mouth for one moment before the smoke gets in my eyes, because it's not a pose I can hold for long. I do better with rolling the lit butt in my hand. Or throwing my knife from one hand to the other without looking down.

So I'll distract myself a moment thinking of that. The old tricks I learned to impress. Think maybe I should take my knife out of my back pocket where I keep it most of the time when I'm working in jeans, it's good for cutting anything from string to cheese, an old German army K55, one eighth inch still legal in New York, not a switchblade or even a grav knife, but one which I can open with one hand if I need it when I carry it in my shoulder bag when I'm out, or pull from my pocket and open with a flick of my wrist for show, since each time he gives me a new one, my brother first loosens the spring.

So I will think about doing that, pulling it out to clean my art work dirty nails. And decide not to. The scene, already, if you should take only the costuming into consideration, too much like a face-off between Demeter in search of her daughter and James Dean. Or maybe, with my shortish chestnut brown hair and flat chest even if overly wide hips, I've been cast as Riff in *West Side Story*. After all, we'll be on a roof. And from the moment Tavo stops talking and the mother opens her mouth, it will all be the Puerto Rican's fault. All of it.

He was the total sleaze. And he had made Niki do it. As if going on a peaceful demonstration even in Mexico was something you had to make somebody do. And Niki, of course, was slumming. The way a lot of good lefty girls — good white middle class lefty girls — will be doing in those days. Poor blacks and Puerto Ricans, not natives yet, AIM won't be up and running, but men with no manners. That's the part that she will say, actually say: men with no manners. And something about what had gotten into her, into Niki.

And I remember smiling and nodding. And trying to stop the smile from becoming a grin, my lips from asking: What? Into her? Don't you

mean, who? While, even still, the uuuhhhn of assent that comes out of my throat will be more of a growl.

And it will be Tavo who manages to tell her while looking directly at me: Niki did nothing wrong. It was a peaceful demonstration, held every year. I'm sure there were foreigners on it last year and the year before. All the power you have in resolving this situation will come from remembering that.

And he will be looking directly at me still.

So I will finally say: I'm on the vegetable charcoal and white rice diet. Otherwise it could have been me. They were probably looking for foreigners to help fuel an outside agitators narrative. Everyone does that.

And then I'll mean-spiritedly add: Eduardo's likely the unlucky one. His Spanish isn't very good, but if he'd kept his mouth shut, without Niki he likely could have passed. Maybe been left alone entirely. Mixed in with the crowd. You never know.

Then Basta and Tavo will go on to talk about how in Mexico whenever the government is criticized, they always talk about *nuestras idiosincrasias* and how whoever is doing the criticizing doesn't understand them, is a foreigner, or being influenced by foreign ideas, so that despite Mexico's revolutionary history wanting social justice or a more democratic less corrupt government becomes a kind of *malinchismo* of the mind.

And somehow by bringing this all into perspective, making it part of a bigger picture, it will start to look to Niki's mother like a problem that can be solved, part of an order in some way still rational, a nasty but still comprehensible part of that Mexico which had always welcomed her and her husband, the Mexico they had thought it safe for Niki to visit, Puerto Rican or no Puerto Rican. While both Basta and Tavo will all the time try to be comforting: Niki will be all right. They're sure of it. This will all blow over quickly.

Which, relatively speaking, for Niki it will.

I won't open my mouth again until they leave. And I'm alone again with Basta. And even then it will be largely silence as I finally push myself off the fence again to come over to him and take his hands.

'*Uta*, I think I'll say, that expression I've learned to use instead of

puta or *puta Madre*, the one that doesn't quite swear, sort of like saying She-oot instead of Shee-it. What was that?

While he'll just shake his head and say: Poor Eduardo.

Because we'll agree: It was going to be easier on Niki for any number of reasons. A young woman, a foreigner with connections, a *güera* ... especially once they found out more about her. He'd just be a throw-away. So that one of us says, I don't remember which.

I hope her family thinks it through, gets over this blame thing, has the courage of their lifetime of convictions: That they do something for him.

Or maybe it's something that we say in pieces, speaking over each other. Fast, the two of us together. Because we'll both know better.

While Niki will get on that airplane long before Christmas, Eduardo will do the two and a half or so years that most of the sixty-eight prisoners will. The high value detainees anyway, to use a new and lovely euphemism. And I don't remember if I will ever tell Basta the whole story, because it's in the days right after we've broken up that I will almost get to meet Eduardo again. I'll be preparing to get myself on the lists to visit his cellmate, the son of a family that will have just moved into what will be by then my building. A working class family from Sinaloa, the northwestern state that will even then be the marijuana as well as the tomato capital of Mexico, now home to the most dangerous of drug cartels, and always in its own way Mexico's wild west, with lots of cowboy boots and Stetsons and a bit of a gunslinger mentality, and the family below me along with many others they will tell me, descendants of the French who had come over with the Hapsburg Maximilian to try to make Mexico a European style empire.

Many of them *güeros*, the way I am *güera*. Fair hair without being blonde, fair skin without being pale: a recognizable and always related colouring. So that, though I will often be asked what other part of Latin America I am from, that will be the only era in all my time in Mexico I'll be taken for Mexican. In all the shops in and nearby my building. Because of that family I'll get to be from the North too, without being from north of the border.

And any strange nuances left in my accent will just be assumed

to be *norteño*, like my straightforward manner that too, Mexico's north is famous for. How the women will swear and look you in the eyes, and not one of them will ever say *mande usted* or just *mande*—at your orders, literally: You order—as many Mexicans say not only when they are placing themselves at your orders but in place of Pardon? when there's something they fail to hear or understand. And as for my neighbour, they would likely have been able to torture all the names of all the people he'd ever worked with out of him before he would give up a *mande usted*.

With this northern family down in Mexico City in solidarity with their son. The mother a widow with four sons and a daughter. The daughter married up north, the other sons in school or working, just as she will be. And all of them, visiting their political prisoner, along with any number of young women from the university, at least twice a week.

So that I will be about to join them. Only just as I'm getting it together to wander off to the jail, passing as one of his cousins, the two cell-mates will get out. One into the arms of his family, the other onto an airplane. Packing their bags on the same day. This time for real. The way they'd been having bag packing contests for the better part of their time in cellblock 'C', one of the three cell blocks assigned to *los pepes*—the political prisoners.

And getting out the day after the Joe Frazier Mohammad Ali rematch. The first one, the one Ali lost. My new neighbour will tell me all about it. How they both loved boxing. Loved Ali. Only getting out could have mitigated their disappointment.

And he'll brag to me how he taught Eduardo Spanish, real Spanish, the Spanish Eduardo had never learned to speak, Spanglish was what he'd spoken my neighbour will say, almost like any *gringo*, though his accent was better, if to start very, very Caribbean: fewer 's's even than Sinaloa. But it was better than mine now, he'll go on to say, giving me a wink, not that I didn't speak well, no one would take me for a *gringa*, but he didn't see how anyone could take me for a member of his family either. I spoke too much like a *chilanga*, a denizen of Mexico City, and by the time Eduardo got out, he sounded like a real man: *un vato de Sinaloa*, down to his much improved swearing. With *vato* the way they

say guy in Sinaloa, but only in third person reference, never as address the way they might say *bato* and pronounce it the same way in L.A.

And my neighbour, *el vato ese* could swear, he taught me *chingos* of new words, and for that matter *madrales*, and *putamadrales* and *chingaputamadrales*, those varying sizes of fuckload and motherfuckload and whore-motherfuckload that will finally make me ask him if they represented an arithmetic or a geometric progression. Was it like tens, twenties and thirties, or hundreds, thousands and millions? Or maybe even a Fibonacci sequence, you learn about such things in art history, each one summed with what went before?

My neighbour will tell the same story as Niki's mother. And his swearing will be at its most creative as he tells it. Because he'll have the other version. The one about the rich girls, or the *gringas*, how they always betray you. Repeating how Niki had gotten out within weeks, but adding how Eduardo had never heard from her again. A perfect Texmex, or for that matter Sinaloa or Sonora Pancho Villa style *corrido*. Mexico's best loved country music, with accordion as well as guitar accompaniment when you get north far enough. One that other lover of Billie's, the gold-toothed Mexican, could have sung: The *gringa* who done you wrong song.

And I won't like that version either. The always the woman's fault version, especially the déclassé uppity nose in the air woman's fault. I will have about as much patience with the *gringa* who done you wrong as with the Puerto Rican who led you astray. So that I will blow raspberries or sing *ayayayay* each time my neighbour tells it. And make crude hand gestures. Or imitate him imitating the *chilangos*: *No me chingue-e-es 'mano-o-o*. Don't fuck me around bro'. Those last vowels very long. The 'e' train wheels screeching around a corner. The 'o' a long blast of its horn. And I'll know he wants to implicate me in it.

But I won't try to explain it to him the way I will to Basta, what it could be like to feel implicated in a privilege you never really enjoyed. Though I might tell him directly how I've always had a secret sympathy for girls who go what Niki's mother would have called slumming. Without it, and that telegram to Dan at sea, I likely wouldn't be here. Certainly wouldn't be who I am. So I just might mention that latter in

passing, and use it too, to fall into a kind of Mr. and Ms. Macho challenge and response relationship that might just include the story of how I felt that night leaning against that fence even as I actually do pull the K55 out and slice an orange to make offer of a piece stuck on its point as I tell him about Niki's mother, and Niki's origins, Niki the folksinger's daughter, and how I might hope one day to hear her sing the song of what happened for herself.

Then maybe, I know I did this at least once, I'll go on to compare how girls in the movement up north, girls like Niki, might go out of their way to pick out a militant from the tough side like Eduardo to how the often though not exclusively more upper class university girls would come around the *Carcel Preventiva de Lecumberri*—still the jail not the penitentiary as political prisoners seldom ever get sentenced—on the Sunday open visits to pick themselves out a *pepe* to give themselves cachet. Because I'll know that the good looking working class tough guy persona of my neighbour had gotten him lucky more than most. Rumour had it there'd been a veritable parade of *universitarias* past his cell door.

And I will openly wonder if Eduardo, with his position, will have aroused the same kind of interest, working as he was, *un latino en las entrañas del monstruo* up north. And I will wink at my neighbour. Maybe getting laid made up for at least some of the extra time Eduardo had spent in jail? Better anyway than being a woman *pepe*, far scarcer in the cells those, no matter how many of them there'd been on the demos, they didn't even have their own cellblock, and only enjoyed conjugal visits if they were married to a fellow political prisoner. Received wisdom of the time being that, despite the kind of merry widow thinking prevalent in places like Huejotzingo, women didn't need 'it'—*el acto*—that is.

While my neighbour will just answer that nothing made up for being in jail. Two years six months and five days to be precise. And Eduardo, who heartily agreed, that bit longer, right from the movement's very first day. There might be others, intellectuals mostly, who got used to it, got comfortable even, filled their cells with books and papers, enjoyed the visits from women and students and fellow intellectuals alike as if they were entertaining in their own home, got on

with their work with a smile, but not him, not Eduardo, what they enjoyed was boxing and packing their bags. And as for the women, yeah he felt sorry for them, he knew from experience women needed 'it' and he winked back. But then they might have cut off his other visits if he'd married a sister *pepe* and he laughed.

Then there'll come the time we'll be sitting at his dining room table and he'll take out his pistol to clean it, the kind of thing he'll do often enough, his equivalent to my knife I guess though his tough guy act will be a lot more real than mine, it was a known fact that during sixty-eight, and since he'd gotten out as far as it goes, he'd been working as what might best be called security, an enforcer, protecting the *dirigentes*—the leaders—and others in his faculty from the depredations of the *porras*—gangs of students paid by the government to beat up on movement participants. Just the way Dan participated in the goon squads to protect the strikers during the organization of the Maritime unions, a newspaper wrapped around the lead pipe in his hand, the origin of the expression lead pipe cinch I've always thought.

Only when he notices how when he takes the automatic out I back away a little from the table and move my chair a little bit to line it up with his, he'll take it for some kind of soft hippie pacifist fear, and start to tease me, so I'll tell him with *picardía* as I point to the tequila in front of him that I have always preferred drunks with rifles to drunks with pistols, because you have a better chance of staying behind the rifle barrel, even if it means getting too close to the person holding it. But he can see how much I trust him from the fact I've chosen not to crouch down directly behind his chair. Or snatch the gun from him from that position.

And it's true of course that there'd been enough of that in Billie's house, so I could feel it that thing which in that moment will shake my hand and make me move, though it was already starting to get hard to casually remember without some direct stimulus the part of me that started looking for the best move, the aggressive pose the hiding place the quiet word, whatever strategy seemed right for the moment I saw a weapon, but she was there and she will be present in that one small shake of the hand that pushing back that he will see, so what else was

there ever to do with it but make it a joke. So I don't know how much of it he'll ever believe is real, though I can hope he'll give me the same benefit of belief I'll give him.

Because I'll know enough to realize, bragging or flirting or just because, not much of what my neighbour will ever say will be macho invention, and sometimes he'll have the confidence to not even try to be blasé, like the time I'll have gone out with mutual friends and one of them will take out the pistol my neighbour has lent him so we can all do some target practice, and the pistol will misfire twice in a row. And we will tell him so on our return. And he will go pale. Literally, pale. He'd been threatened by some members of one of the *porras* only days before, and badly outnumbered that was the pistol he'd pulled out. And his hands too, will briefly shake just like mine, though it will be far too close a call to joke or even swear. He'll just look at those hands and speak very carefully.

Suerte que no disparé, he'll say: If I'd actually pulled the trigger they would have killed me. *Me hubieran matado*. And you could tell he'd been there. In that exact place, outside that exact building he'd just described. Where they tried to waylay him. And he'll go on. Tell how it had happened to him once, too, a time he'd been leaving a bar with friends and a guy he'd been having problems with was waiting outside. And *el vato ese* had pulled a gun and the guy's gun was the one to misfire. And it was amazing, and he'll kind of spread his fingers and look at them as he says it, but he'd gone all rabbit in the headlights. He'd just stood there. In a kind of stupor, of shock.

So that *ese vato* got to pull the trigger again, and even a third time before he reacted *y lo bajó a chingadazos*, he took the guy down with his fists. And it was the only time he'd ever put the boots to a guy—and he will, by the way, wear cowboy boots though only one of his brothers will wear a Stetson—and he'll say again how proud of that he was, repeat how he believed in the fair fight, loved John Wayne and had *Shane* as his favourite movie: You never ever hit a guy when he was down. You just didn't. And yet he couldn't stop himself. Once he had *el vato ese* on the ground he just kept kicking him. His friends had to pull him off.

So yes, those *vatos de la porra*, they would have killed him for sure. For sure. And he'll stare at his fingers a while longer. Then say, the way he always will when he wants you to believe him: *Y chingo a mi madre si no.*

While I'll just stare at him.

And not tell him how well I understand. Though I think he'll see it in my stare, hear it in our silence.

Until I'll finally say: But if they had you'd never have gotten the chance. To fuck your mother I mean.

And I'll relax into sparring with him again, the way I will always enjoy taking out my only recently and still not altogether discarded tom-boy persona to do it, so it won't seem to matter that I'll never try to explain anything about myself in any depth, that I'll just laugh with him and play with that persona, because we'll still arrive at some kind of trust that will mean the next big student demonstration to take to the streets will be organized in part from my phone, and I'll start going out with his best friend, a beautiful tall young *güero*, six foot one I think, who I've always described as a cross between Mick Jagger and Michelangelo's David, his hair the colour of mine but curlier, his high cheekbones and straight eyelashes speaking to some tall Plains mix.

On whom I will have the opposite effect as my neighbour's family will on me, that whenever he is with me he'll be taken for a *gringo*, especially when I finally get him to wear the wine dark combed cotton bell bottoms I'll bring him back from the States because he'd asked for jeans but I thought these would make him look like a rock star while all he'll do is ask me if they come in Men's. And laugh when wearing them he and I will be able, in a smaller later demonstration along the Paso de la Reforma, to walk out of the tear gas and past a line of police.

It will be such a tourist area that they will automatically leave us alone. And he'll have already had his experience in sixty-eight with arrest too, along with my neighbour a month or so before the massacre while out with a *brigada*, those small groups that held *mitines relámpago*, lightning meetings quickly on street corners or even better on buses on which posters would be pasted, slogans or calls to meetings painted, speeches made to passengers, then the bus let back on its route before

the police could arrive, something still done in Mexico. What the forty-three killed in 2014 will be doing right before they disappear. While that time back then my friends won't get away any more than the kids in Ayotzinapa will, though not to so dire a consequence. *El vato ese* will be let out more or less at the same time as Niki along with the rest of those arrested with him and my neighbour, including at least one other young woman.

And the guy telling me my neighbour was kept only because he wouldn't stop mouthing off. So the forces of order decided my neighbour was dangerous. An irony I will never bring up with either of the two friends. Ask them how they feel about it. Had their visits ever been fraught with tension because one could leave and the other couldn't. Those won't be the kind of feelings you could ever make our kind of a joke of.

So it won't be like with Basta that night after Tavo and Niki's mother leave. When I'll go through so much of my *déclassé* background. My thoughts on it. Even if from my neighbour I will learn a lot more about myself than I would dream of saying out loud. While with Basta, it will be from the saying out loud, the explicating, that I will learn. Though not enough to avoid what is to come. Even as I will keep at it, trying to put it all together, to explain how as far as slumming it goes, whether it is your mother or your father who does that. Goes slumming to find their life's companion.

Whether looking for sensuality or adventure or the salt of the earth; or out of lack of belief in their own value, as the privileged who watch the slummers among them will often try to convince themselves is the only thing it could be; or contradicting the laws of probability and finding in bar or office, supermarket or corner store, crowded subway or movie line-up, quiet walk in the park or loud civil rights march, an other they truly understand and who understands them. Still what they never seem to cotton onto is that they make you different. Their children different. No longer like them. They make you part of the slum. Or of the working class neighbourhood. Because often enough the place of the privileged's slumming isn't really a slum at all.

While for you, some of your roots will always be there. As they

were in my visits with Dan to the union hall, my listening to his stories of native history, they won't simply be of interest to me, I won't be a baby journalist or anthropologist on a childhood long field trip. Who he is, what he says, will become an integral part of me, at the core of my self. More legitimate in fact than the privilege of Billie's Middle Western WASP origins she will nonetheless try to convince me are my own. Even, sober, tell me I could be a debutante, or a member of the D.A.R., the Daughters of the American Revolution.

While I will always like how Dan always quoted Cherokee comedian Will Rogers: We didn't come over on the Mayflower. Let's just say we met the boat. Using the expression Billie's wealthier friends did from that time before flying when they met the ocean liner of friends returning from Europe. My own childhood, my hybrid origins in it, something I will not be able to withdraw from, to look at from the outside.

And it won't be anything so easy as a *gringa* who done you wrong song that I'll need to explain that interclass even inter-race tension I can still sometimes feel. That made me back in my movement time in the States pronounce myself in true sixties Marxist fashion—and it was, after all, in the vocabulary of those days true—a child of the despised lumpenproletariat, originary of a nether bohemia, from among the never do wells, the never amount to anythings of the world, the drinking, not the working, poor. The underclass. Roque Dalton's *hijos de la gran puta*. Those who were never supposed to be agents of change any more than Indians were. That was left to the disappearing industrial proletariat. Who sailors somehow never seemed to be part of. No matter how industrial Dan's engine room job. Too much travel I suppose, too many bars if not women in every port, making them underclass agents of chaos. Even as others sought out some kind of new working class.

I'll even confess to Basta about that period of shame about my origins in the neighbourhood when I'll be willing to go so far as to believe the sober Billie's analysis of Dan, the way she will try to explain him to me the months he's away at sea, even if the books he will be having me read at the time should have made me know better. That he will briefly become for me too the inarticulate undereducated Indian she'll be bringing along, and not my dad at all, the way she will leave

that role to the dead Matt O'Brien, the writer I will never know, whose identity she will deploy like a hand puppet while Dan will become merely her boyfriend.

I will even go along with how she'll explain the beautiful looping handwriting of his letters to me, its precision almost that of Islamic calligraphy. As she opposes it to hers, wild and legible only to herself. His: the longing of the lower class, she will say. Hers: the unabashed efficiency, even the risk-taking, of the intellectual. And I'll let mine deteriorate. Determined to be intellectual at the very least. And I'll swear myself to both a nun-like purity and to never being poor again. And be briefly, Oh fiddle-dee-dee, willing like Scarlet O'Hara to take anyone at all a slave to do it. Until I encounter the movement, and what I have come to know reasserts itself. And myself with it. While all those emotions, from shame to pride, from rage to reckless joy, will still surface as I confront my world. Like, I tell him, with Niki's mother.

Though it won't be that night but the next, or maybe even several nights later, that something else will occur to us. When we can see more clearly both the government's intentions and the movement's growth, after another demonstration when the Preparatoria Número Uno, the oldest Preparatoria in Mexico, had already had its eighteenth century door blown out with a bazooka leaving the students behind it dead and many more wounded, and the movement had replied with even larger demonstrations and the formulation of a list of six demands, *el pliego petitorio*, which included naming those responsible for the repression and the freeing of all political prisoners. Demands I'll hear about in my printmaking classes at The Academia de San Carlos, the National University's downtown art school, and whose discussions Basta will be participating in.

When swaying in our hammocks again, he'll push off with one foot and grab my hand so he can say: That thing you said to Niki's mother. You may have been right. Maybe they did just grab her because she was a foreigner. Maybe they were looking for outside agitators. Maybe even for you. We don't know what they know. They may have you *fichada*. We are lucky you weren't there.

And while I won't quite believe that, that I'm a marked woman,

that I'm known to them, still it won't be impossible. Everyone doing the work at the level I'd been doing it in New York will know the FBI at least will have them in their sights. We'll have always known they were building dossiers on us all even if the proof of that will only come much later with the Access to Information Act. While then I'll just say in a kind of wonder as we swing there: And here I just thought I was winding the woman up. Making Niki take part of the blame. Even if there was nothing blameworthy at all.

Then I'll kind of giggle. Suddenly imagining Billie in Niki's mother's place. If it had been me. Or Ignacia and Billie facing off. *La chinguedita* against my loud-mouth *rechingadísima madre*. What a match.

And I'll tell him. Only he won't really understand. Just say: Your mother. Would she really do something like that? Put the blame on me?

Not exactly, I'll say. Not behind your back anyway. She'd just get drunk and tell you to your face. Ask you who you think you are getting it on with her daughter. Ask me if it was just your big Mexican prick that was doing it for me. Though she'd probably pull in all her contacts to get you out of jail so she could do it. But rest assured, sooner or later, she attacks everybody. Like the scorpion crossing the river: It's in her nature.

While only weeks later, we'll be in New York, and she will. But forewarned and forearmed and confident in our love, we'll still be laughing. At least about that.

But of that night, that night with Tavo and Niki's mother and the shadow of those two detentions. They will hold me there, in the shadows too, in a way I'd never been before, but that in turn will teach me a new dedication to my art. I could even tell you that the marriage will be born of that visit. That much is likely true.

The Beast in Our Bowels



'LL BE THE one to get the invitation to the international student conference that brings us to New York. Though Basta is the one it will be perfect for. At least I'll think so then. When speech by speech, demonstration by demonstration, each day he'll be more at the forefront, more of a leader. So that even if at the meetings sometimes he'll be too theoretical, enough even to make someone still shout out: *¡Basta Basta basta!*, and maybe throw a paper airplane or some such, still, it will be with that typical Mexican *choteo*, a gruff kind of teasing of which he will by no means be the only victim. And done mostly in the spirit of argument rather than dismissal. Even if it will take a thick skin sometimes to recognize the difference and ride it out.

With this a conference of students from all over the world, from the movements of the day—the Germans would be there, the French from May, the English, the Italians, and now there'd be a Mexican from a movement, a real Third World movement, a grass roots student movement that will be getting bigger by the day, rivalling what any place in the world had to offer. And even if that movement will not quite be taken seriously, not for ideas, it will be too much of a mass movement for that, not exemplary like Regis DeBray visiting *El Che* in Bolivia, or May in Paris, people down there won't after all be talking about surrealism and Situationism as much as habeas corpus, communal living

as much as better working conditions, ending alienation as much as ending torture, the tyranny of the spectacle as much as the dictatorship of the day, things that could seem old hat without the romance of armed struggle, yet still it will be huge, amazing, and right next door. And real. Very, very real. While Basta, through the kind of invitations I will still be receiving will get to represent it.

So that I will imagine us as returning to Mexico as heroes, or if not quite heroes then the next best thing, people with new contacts, new things to say, who had taken it upon themselves to get the word of the Mexican student movement out to the world. Something that would position Basta even better in a movement we'll be convinced will still be ebullient, growing, spreading ever larger throughout more and more of the Mexican territory, and into more and more Mexican workplaces and homes by the time we get back.

Because the demonstrations will no longer just involve students but workers too and housewives and even government bureaucrats, the ones who, when the government demands they form part of a counter demonstration or lose their day's salary, maybe their jobs, will in the best sarcastic humour come marching and baaing and chanting: Baa baa baa! *¡Somos borregos!* *¡Somos acarreados!* *¡No vamos!* We're sheep! We're herded! We don't march! Baa baa baa!

So that a movement which we would bring as a gift to the world, would then, through us, get gifts in return. And too, why not say it even if I will try my best to hide these things from myself then, but what a coup for me. To be among that everyone who is anyone of the international student movement, coming back from Mexico, with a true Latin American radical in tow, I would be thought of among my friends as someone doing something truly important, even if we would all say it was just being of use in some small way. And even if within months it would resemble what some other young women radicals will be doing with the *pepes*. So why not take Billie up on her offer to pay for the trip out of the money from one of the newly rented upstairs apartments in the renovated house in the old now slowly gentrifying neighbourhood?

She will be lonely, and feeling guilty that year my brother will be sent to Vietnam. So I could do my daughterly duty, I will still be into

doing that occasionally back then, believe it or not, I'll still want to rescue Billie too, at least some of the time, and besides, she owed me. Even the translating I would have to do for Basta would do me good, I could hone a skill I will not yet have. The one I will in fact be able to turn just about immediately into a job for *Sports Illustrated* during the Olympics once back in Mexico. Though I will not imagine for a moment what words I will find myself translating from the conference's plenary stage. Any more than I will be able to imagine that by the time we get back, even if our friends will not say it, we will not be returning heroes, but convinced we had cut and run.

And besides that: wrecked the conference.

Itzel, of course, will think it all thrilling. That we two will go be international students together. The way she will be thrilled with us from the moment we'd finally gotten it on. Even with the way we will acknowledge her as our matchmaker, as well as our sounding board in all those indispensable three way conversations that started that night in the coffee house. She will just keep smiling. And agree without hesitation to keep an eye on the rooms. Our rooms we will now think of them as. Our rooftop suite. Our penthouse. The way it is at that age.

Everything so fast, so fast. That we, us, now so firm. And the Peugeot Itzel had only recently used to help make that us come true, now making her every day more not just part of our small us but of our larger one, as she will use that car to help distribute leaflets and drive people from the movement around. The way all students with cars will be doing whenever they can. And often enough it will be the girls who have them.

It's one of the ironies that in a country like Mexico the female students are often of a higher social standing than the boys because when a family of limited means makes a choice to send one child to university, it is most often, though not always, a male. Luck and brilliance will sometimes make it different, like in the case of Matilde. Though it's more often like the friend of my Sinaloa neighbour I will briefly go out with, the working class European style beauty, but the youngest of nine and the only one sent to the U. And all his brothers as well as his parents chipping in to pay his way. Even a couple of his sisters.

While Itzel will get to be the oldest of the *niñas bien*—the rich chicks—with wheels the student movement will have at its command. In her scarves still, and with the top down times it won't rain she could carry anything anywhere, no questions asked. And she will love her new role. Love it. And it will make me happy, now utterly convinced I am rescuing them both.

So that she'll also be the one to call us regularly to give us the news. Keep us up with what's going on. I'll even teach her to write in code, the way I had been taught before I left the States in case I had to get deserters out through Cuba. Though mostly it was just in case, the way I told her: just in case. The way, too, we will have codes for calls and returning calls. Though we will never think it could actually be dangerous. Never think we might need them.

Itzel will be with us really, right since the beginning. Of the movement as well as our relationship. From that first morning after Tavo's visit when we'll go over to her house for breakfast, carrying our many varieties of *pan dulce*—a Mexican breakfast tradition brought over from Europe, always more varieties of sweet rolls than the company can eat—bought at the *panificadora* across the street. Because on the morning of that first day after that first demonstration, our first morning in our new world, the day after Niki's mother has come and we have been up all night in our hammocks our faces turned upward as the sun rises, the first thing to occur to us is to tell Itzel.

There had been something in her enthusiasm at the coffee house that will make us sure she'll just have to know what has happened, to us to Niki to Eduardo, to the demonstrations to the demonstrators, all of it. She must. And we will be sure that she will be with us as we try to figure out what happens next. And even, in her own way, she'll end up being more public than me, despite all the *pintas* I will go on, since she had her citizenship. And of course, I will want her to get involved, and will love to watch how she will start to deploy ideas, and to ask questions, will love especially to see her out there smiling and taking things around, and coming to the meetings we'll hold up there on the roof. Dedicated to study as well as strategy. Or the larger rainy evening ones in the houses of others.

So that it will seem like a celebration the morning that we leave on our big adventure, Basta's first international travel about to begin. And there Itzel will be, driving us to the airport. Bringing a carryall filled with little craft works I might be able to sell for extra money. *Rebozos* and Oaxacan wedding shirts and *molinillos* for foaming chocolate and children's toys. We would go fifty-fifty. And all of it laughter and smiles.

Though we should have noticed something amiss when in Chicago with the Democratic convention so recently over we will be stopped and separated. Questioned in different rooms while they go through our things until Basta's halting English will make them put him back in with me so I can translate. Making us both laugh once we're allowed back on the plane to New York. Thinking, amiss maybe, but not serious, for serious they would have gotten their own translator and neither Basta's credentials from the *Bolsa* nor Billie's address would ever have been enough to let him continue on.

While only later will it occur to me to wonder if maybe they had some inside information: After all, I'd told Billie on the phone I'd be bringing some stuff to sell, and the guys who'll stop us will take their time, and when I accidentally French inhale the cigarette I'm nervously smoking, they'll admire my technique. I'd never said exactly what I'd be bringing. Stuff, I'd said. Just stuff. And that will sound the same way then as it does now.

It won't be Itzel who tells us, that second or third day of the conference when everything will still be going so well, that the army has invaded the university. I don't remember who'll be up on the plenary stage, or even if he's interesting. Basta will already have given the break-out session talk on Mexico, but someone we had met there will suddenly be by my side whispering in my ear, and then there I'll be taking Basta's hand as he sits next to me taking notes—he'll always take notes—while I whisper to him. And I don't remember anymore either if the guy will get his information from Liberation News Service, housed only blocks away, or from mutual friends in Mexico who had called a student house nearby, but he had been the most knowledgeable person in our session and now he'll know this.

The army is invading the university, he'll say. Just that. And then

there'll be the three of us walking up onto the stage. Repeating the same information. Only more formal.

It has come to our attention that the Mexican Army ...

And then the silence. The shock, the hurt, the silence. After all, the people we'll be looking out at will be students. From all over the developed world, what is still called the developed world, mostly from among its developed white elite, and only weeks after the Chicago convention but two years short of the Kent State massacre there'll be knowledge of tear gas and mace and high powered water cannon and billy clubs—but not rifles. Not machine guns.

Not on any of our parts. Not on Basta's. Not on mine. Even with the bazooka deployed against the *prepa* door, the snipers always present on the roof of the National Palace during the demonstrations, the tanks emptying the Zócalo of overnighing students who had stayed to await a presidential response to the demand for dialogue, not one of us will yet dream of machine guns.

What my dreams will contain for years after: soldiers on adjacent roofs with rifles with machine guns. Looking at me as I sleep. At Basta next to me. Laughing, talking, taking aim.

Yet it won't be then that all hell breaks loose. That will happen later. After that first silence, and then the voices all talking at once, we will get back to business. High on a strange kind of excitement. At least to begin with. All the students gathered there, all of us, who'd been talking up a storm about what the world's new student movements meant, will be confirmed in our reality, in the idea that we are at the cutting edge of history. We are the agents of change: The violence of the state will prove it.

Perhaps in its own way, this could be one more of Che's Vietnams. Perhaps that it will occur on the periphery, of the empire, or of the minds of most there, will be thought inevitable, even right. So that we will be caught up in the news itself, the details of it. How the University had by now been taken without difficulty and with few of the leaders there making their escape because no one had believed it was really happening. It was one of those possibilities we'd all talked about, all of us, over and over; in fact, it will be the topic of many a rooftop meeting, many a casual cup of coffee.

Yet in the end we won't really ever have believed it could happen, not me and Basta, and pretty much nobody else either. Except the few paranoids, we will think. The ones who will phone the university night after day after night, to say the army is on its way. So that I can just hear how it would have gone, how the phones would have been answered: *Que dejen de chingar, cabrones, ya con ese cuento*. Stop fucking around, assholes, enough with that story. Or: *Ayyyyy, cuate que ya estuvo-o-o-o-o* no more belief for the voice on the other end than for the boy who cried wolf, no one believing this time will be for real.

Que ni soñando 'manito-o-o-o—Not even dreaming, little brother. That long *chilango* vowel again. So that Basta and I will likely be the most surprised of all.

While all hell will wait till the next day. Or perhaps just later that night. It could have been the one long night of September 18th, seeming to stretch on forever. Certainly it is jumbled enough in memory for that. Except I know that those of us interested will arrange to be updated almost by the hour. To find out that the army is assaulting the Polytechnic Institute and various of the schools—*las prepas y las vocas*, the preparatory and vocational high schools—associated with each National institution, the UNAM and the IPN. And that the students, our friends, our *compañeros*, will already be fighting back. Though it will take days for all schools to be taken, one after the other, *a sangre y fuego*—with blood and gunfire, already we will be desperate. On edge. Wishing we were there. Where what was to be done would be clear. Decisive action not just possible but meaningful. And danger shared.

So that it will be our insistence, mine and Basta's, and that of those we will become closest to over the first days of the conference, that we must do something, which will cause the demons' howling. The call to action that will within hours bring one of the conference organizers—the one who had gone out of his way to invite me there—over to my seat in the plenary theatre to thank me, his voice heavy with irony, for ruining his conference. Because once action is called for, no one will be able to decide what it should be. Or if it should be at all. And neither the shouting nor the insults will stop. And the fact that we must have looked impossibly brave will not help, but add fuel to the fire. Or, perhaps better said, *chiles habaneros* to the beast's bowels.

Anyone might think it would be easy to start with a resolution, all movements seem to start with resolutions, whether it's really to do something or to get rid of some pesky people who just keep coming back wanting something to be done, that's how the SDS wound up spearheading the anti-war movement after all, always, there is a resolution: Pass a resolution. That's the easy part. Except now. What will make it so easy to see how far the movement has deteriorated. What will make me feel so good that I'd left. Because even before that first resolution of solidarity could be passed there had to be a debate on whether the best solidarity wasn't to build the movement at home.

As if, if we could just agree to do it, the few moments it would take to pass a resolution and make a press release and pass it on to those we wished to inform could possibly interfere with the building of anything. Or even with lunch. Clear, easy, simple, done. Like a get well card to a friend in the hospital: Sorry about your army. Get well soon. Thinking of you.

While before you can say *El pueblo unido jamás será vencido* or *La lucha continúa* or even *Venceremos* we'll have gone from People all over the world are right now sending resolutions in solidarity to the representatives of the *Comité Nacional de Huelga*, the National Strike Committee, it will be meaningful to those who haven't been captured, it will help to let them know the whole world is watching them if this conference of international students sends a resolution; to hours and hours and hours of raised fist lead by example revolutionary vanguard talk up against arms linked let the people know mass movement talk and the next thing you know we're not debating a resolution—we must have passed the resolution, I certainly hope we passed the resolution—but what action to take and there'll be the Youth Against War and Fascism up at the front yelling about how if you were a real revolutionary you would leave this room right now and march out of Columbia to break windows: The people will come out to join us we'll face down the pigs just the way the Mexicans are facing down the pigs, while Jeff Jones a lovely blue print bandana tied around his head, a guy who will be in the Weather Underground within three years, is sitting next to me telling me how the problem with all these pussies who won't do any-

thing is just that they're pussies, and I'm not up to Don't talk about pussies unless you've got one so I let it slide, while the mass movement people too are on their feet now ready to link arms to take on the raised fists if not the pigs, yelling: We want support broad support broad support we need to get the word out we need people to know and how will they know if we don't tell them breaking windows doesn't say a word, then the self-proclaimed revolutionaries again calling them chickenshit liberals. We have to show through our actions the solidarity we are capable of and I swear to god it will be midnight by then and there's Basta getting up on the stage and he's lost it he's absolutely lost it and it's not *¡basta* Basta *basta!* anymore with unity of theory and practice with praxis and *la coyuntura* that favourite naturally spoken Latin American left word become the awkward conjuncture in English and every Marxist's *correlación de fuerzas*, it's not even Howdy fucks the way he'd taken to mispronouncing folks just to see the looks on folks' faces, but just calling everybody the equivalent of fucks in Spanish and meaning it.

What else could he do inside *tan grandísima desmadre* but mean it.

Absolutely mean it.

And then there's me following him up there. My first on stage interpretation and mostly what I'm getting to translate between *chingada madre* and *hijos de la chingada* is what could have been anyone's first long lesson on how to swear in Mexico with its *chingaputamadr* of repeated expressions only mostly it's *pendejos y que pendejadas y no se me apendejen* among other variations on yet another mostly Mexican expression with less of the fucker and more of the schmuck than *cabrones* but still with the weight if not the meaning of asshole.

Asshole and assholeries and don't go all asshole on me, something much more freely used than its English equivalent because just about anybody except maybe Ignacia could easily ask *¿que pendejadas son estas?* What assholeries are these? without batting an eye, so that I will never have thought to even ask myself if *pendejo* has a specific meaning as nobody ever mentions it much less deconstructs it the way they do with *chingar* and its variants, there is no philosophy of *mexicanidad* to explain its particularity, so it will be a long time before yet another conference does it for me, one full of Canadian and Chilean trade unionists I've

been flown in to translate for, in Winnipeg maybe or Saskatoon, where I'm once more up on stage as the conference starts to wind down without a decision on some important action or other being reached and one of the Chileans who like all Chileans never uses *pendejo* as any kind of expletive wants to hurry things along and tells us all rather matter of factly—the Chileans after all have their fighting factions and their endless discussions too—that he doesn't want to spend all the rest of the day *tirándose de los pendejos*, and no it's not throwing the assholes the idiots the fucks it's not even shooting at them this *tirar* is pulling, pulling, but pulling what, all day pulling what?

And suddenly I know there can only be one answer, it's pubic hair, it's got to be pubic hair, between the pulling and the pending, that sense of hanging out at the edge, a *pendejo* is a pubic hair, it's so obvious I should have seen it before, so that calculating quickly I go on, finish up, say: Pulling on my short and curlies, all day pulling on my short and curlies.

And everybody who hasn't gotten it yet starts to laugh harder perhaps than those who already have, because what I've said isn't an expression in English, not like if I'd just said jacking off, so it seems original, funny, not like for the Chileans for whom the expression's been just a bit of typical light hearted profanity, though they do laugh harder to hear it in English and all that combined laughter gives me just enough time before I have to start translating again to be carried back to Columbia into that other sea of faces, pushed into the moment when Basta says: *No hay que apendejarse* Don't turn yourselves into pubic hairs, Don't do this.

And I see all those students all those activists in that room suddenly like that, twisted messy matted chaotic, *pendejos pendejos pendejos*, turning into *pendejos* into pubic hairs and I start to smile myself if not to laugh as I wait for the speaker's next words and wonder too if Basta saw them like that while looking out over that crowd, if any Mexican actually knows where the word comes from or if it's long lost its original meaning, if all it has left for anyone is its weight of criticism or self-criticism.

So that maybe I'll laugh out loud about it later when this other

Canadian conference too is over, when I'm drinking wine and listening to folk songs with the Chileans and talking of the ubiquity of armies and of their artillery, of tanks rolling along streets and across campuses, and maybe too I'll tear up as I repeat it, *Pendejos pendejos pendejos* pubic hairs pubic hairs pubic hairs, and tell them how I've only just now realized what the word means and they will confirm it for me these people for whom a *pendejo* is only a *pendejo* and Mexico's *pendejo* is a *huevón*, even as I go on to tell them about Basta, Basta and Basta's name and how that time at the Columbia conference between the theory and the profanity Basta too will say *basta* even *¡Basta basta basta!* more than once before he stops, but how what he will mostly be saying is: We can't argue, we have to do everything we can, take all the roads open to us. Every last one.

What the Chileans too as they combat the military dictatorship are slowly deciding that they need to do. End the factionalism and do what needs to be done. With respect. All if it. Even amid all the events and the demonstrations and the underground meetings and the armed struggle, to take a deep breath and go to the polls to vote No in the referendum on Pinochet's power. The one many have been boycotting because they think it rigged or that it doesn't fit in with their version of their *coyuntura*. But whose triumphant, and internationally supervised, No vote, a product of much of that same work they and so many others have been doing for years, will finally end the dictatorship.

While I will watch in my mind how Basta suddenly stops and takes a deep breath. And gathers himself once more, and stands stock still and looks around.

They're killing our friends, you know, they're killing them. He says. *Habrà alguna cosita, algo, alquito, por más pequeña que sea, algo, que podrán hacer.* There must be something, something, some little thing, no matter how small, something you can do. Will you do it? Each of you, do it?

That's the way I like most to remember him. Basta. Always. Just as I will at that conference while laughing with the Chileans. The best of him, right there in that moment. The calm, the moral authority, the authenticity: the moment when the orator marries her voice to her truth. Any orator. Any moment. And you can feel it, how the space resonates when it happens. When it is done or when you've done it. Speaking,

performing, translating: You've done it. When, this time, everyone is with you because you are with yourself and you have hit some core. And the space around you expands, like those moments when voices singing or chanting together take on one voice and all at once we are bigger than ourselves.

And I will know it to be true back then and now too whenever I think of it no matter that the Situationists, there too at the Columbia conference, in all the glory of their theory about the spectacle will make a cartoon of Basta as Daffy Duck in a Viva Zapata sombrero holding a slingshot down by his side and saying something I've long forgotten though I'm portrayed there too half his size as some more diminutive Disney creature, Minnie Mouse I think in her oversized shoes and red lipstick even if I will long before have given up makeup, but both of us portrayed as part of their vaunted spectacle: a Third World side show to satisfy the empire's hunger.

So that even if I will easily see that there is something in it, enough to make me force myself to laugh no matter how much it wounded me to be seen like that, enough to make me try to find my own theoretical rhetoric to deny that any of it is true, the bitter contradiction will always be that I know both things can be true at once. That even authentic moments—and this one as authentic as any moment can ever be—can be used too to flavour the spectacle, to add a certain spice, and it can work whether you are gullible and insecure or making yourself feel superior in the cynicism of believing only spectacle is possible.

Either way you will still be consuming the climactic, even cathartic moments of others to flavour your world view. What I will feel so strongly and not know how to name as I come off the stage when a young woman grabs my hand and says: You're beautiful, the way so many of us were calling each other beautiful then and all I can think of to answer will be: So are you, because I'll be trying to say: This moment belongs to all of us is all of us as it shimmers with the same feeling as the street demonstrations in Mexico the magnificence of *La Silenciosa* the hundreds of thousands of people in the unified silence of The Silent Demonstration so few days before we left even as I stood on the sidelines.

And yet there will be that question at the same time so present

without any sexist Situationist cartoon to help it along, that if she put the beauty of that moment onto me, beautiful perhaps in my exaltation, was she making me spectacle, giving away her own power, and in it, everybody's, into a world of reified celebrity. Where what she longs for is only to be me in that moment in front of the crowd. Another question I've never been able to answer but which still frightens me into reticence or a brief prayer even as I step onto a stage.

When I will still feel her hand grabbing mine, and feel for an instant that I do not know where or who I am, whether I speak for myself or in translation. And then I will tell myself my loyalty must be to the moment, and to making it real, and I will take a last deep breath and it will be all right. Even if I can never define how or even if. Because the boundary between the spectacle and the authentic is so easily, and nefariously, blurred that I know that if I stop to think I risk being caught in the Situationist desert of their most favourite cartoon, the one I see published over and over even now in histories of the movement, even if I've never seen again the one of me and Basta on stage even among my own papers: this one two cowboys on their horses.

With the first one asking: What do you do? and the second answering that what he's into is reification. Only I don't remember if it's that same cowboy going on to explain himself, or the other one who then remarks: I ride, I just ride. Just that: I still ride. I just ride. And that maybe what I ride, like Mexico's black vultures there pictured above the cowboys' heads if not Basta's and mine in their cartoon of us, are the thermals of history. The beast in our bowels. And there's no getting around it: drifting or reification. And the question always: Agency, where is agency?

And still the hope that sometimes even in such moments of histrionics and helplessness, still the space can change, the way it will that night, even if most of the audience will not understand Basta's words until I translate them. When I will pitch my voice low in imitation of him, low and big to take in the room unmixed, and to make it resonate, the way I will always try to do when translating, and perhaps some of the depth of what he has said will echo too in my voice into the stillness of the room.

And I will know that in his life there will be more moments like that. The way I have wished him more and many, even if I have not translated or even shared them. So that for me, seeing him like that, remembering him like that, is my way of wishing him well. Perhaps of praying. For him and to continue to believe something will grow from those moments. Even if we cannot see it.

While that night a small space will be created in which at last we can do something. But whether it will come from what he says or the simple exhausted lateness of the hour I will never know. Except that little it will be. Very, very little. And we will become the creatures of others, whether beautiful or heroic or Minnie Mouse and Daffy Duck with his slingshot.

So that the demonstration of the brave will storm from the room and go to do their damage shouting their way down — Broadway I think it was. And maybe they will break some windows and maybe they will just howl inside their masks, but no one will know of what they howl, and I don't think the demonstration will even be covered. And the anti-spectacle advocates will wander out perhaps to nearby cafés on the upper West side or perhaps as far away as the East Village. Where maybe they will smoke up a bit and maybe they will discuss the difference between the theatre of resistance and that of cruelty, between spectacle and reification. Or maybe they'll just shrug and sigh and say: Nothing ever happens in this country, except that they might add the word real: Nothing real ever happens in this country.

And when it does it doesn't. And not be able to stop laughing, the way you can only do when you're high and face a paradox, the sillier the better. And no one will cover that either because that's part of the point: to not be covered. While the rest of us, the pusillanimous pussies, let's say, will stay up to make phone calls and leaflets and press releases and information packages because we're the ones with the information and we'll go to the Mexican embassy the next day on no sleep and picket and maybe a dozen more people will be there than stayed up with us and maybe it will be covered in *The Times* at the very end of a very small article somewhere in some interior section that at least thinks that the actions of the Mexican army are part of the news of the

world. So that I will be left thinking that if I had to stay up all night I'd rather have been high in a café or enjoying the crash and sparkle of spectacular windows breaking on Broadway.

But at least a few more people will know and maybe say something and we will go home to Billie's, Billie on her now mostly recovered best behaviour, the binges fewer by then. And in the small cupola room that was once mine, in one of the three newly renovated apartments, this one not yet rented, we will whisper and we will analyze and there will come a moment when one or the other of us will say: *Qué día de mierda*, and the other one will echo it, with all those same swear words which Basta had started off with on stage the day before, *pendejos y pendejadas y chingaderas e hijos de la chingada y cabrones y su rechingadísima madre*, until suddenly Basta will say in English, showing he has understood much more than I had thought about what it was to live inside *las entrañas del monstruo*, and of its language too, because that last time he repeats: *Qué día de mierda*. What a shit day, he will add an extra bit in English.

A bowel movement, he'll say. We really have been in a bowel movement.

And we will start to laugh. And we will be the ones who can't stop. Not high but overwrought and overtired, one of those more desperate times when it doesn't matter whether the last thing said is really funny or not but it just tips you over the edge and you're either laughing till you cry or laughing till you piss yourself, until if you're not careful pretty soon you'll be the one not in a bowel movement but having a bowel movement, and maybe one of us will even say something about that as we just keep laughing and laughing until I will literally start to hiccup and then run into the still pristine new bathroom on the floor below, the thunder of my footsteps probably waking Billie two floors below that, the laughter become a gag reaction. As if I could throw up the day. And the day before.

And after that everything will be nonstop. For all the days we have left in New York.

Because of course we'll have planned to stay for more than just the conference. To add on a little vacation time, a little tourist time, a little getting to know the city time for Basta, a little showing him around

for me. A bit more of the left movements, with its vocation time too, meeting and interviewing student leaders and those from other growing insurgent organizations for a small but important Mexico City magazine, *Sucesos para Todos*, Basta writing and me translating. Because he'll have just started doing a few short articles for them as well as his studies and his regular morning job, with these interviews from our trip planned to let him quit the *Bolsa* when we get back in favour of just doing the magazine. Only now we will find that though some of the interviews will go forward, mostly what we'll be doing is giving interviews not getting them.

And we will talk about it. Going back right then.

But all the contacts we have made in New York will say: Stay, stay, you can do more here.

And all our friends in Mexico will say through Itzel: Stay, stay, you can do more there.

Everyone agreeing our job is to get the word out, that it was better than being one more on the demonstrations, or behind the barricades, the street fighting still going on back in Mexico. Even the defense of the Politécnico in Zacatenco, which will fall finally five days after the University was first invaded. Only somehow not being there. Not sharing that risk as well as that euphoria, will already feel bad. Even if it's only solidarity we will long to be there for.

So that each time we accede to those petitions to stay, and Billie of course will be loudest of all, she'll even manage to stay mostly sober and to not attack Basta until almost the very end, because she will just want me safe. While Basta and I will look at each other and often as not the laughter will creep into our eyes.

Yes, we are doing important work here, we will say: *Estamos en las entrañas del monstruo*. We're building the bowel movement. And though we both might say it on the phone to Mexico only Basta will dare say it in front of other people. Making it sound like another one of his linguistic errors. Coming from that bad initial translation of *entrañas*. While I will always get to laugh as I correct him. Even as he will have to keep a straight face. Try to look embarrassed. While alone, we will feel the original meaning of that word embarrassed. Neither the abashed

of English nor the pregnant of Spanish. But burdened. Just burdened. We will feel weighed down, immobilized in our emotions even as we keep moving.

And then there will be that last talk we'll be invited to give. At the New School for Social Research the night of October third. The one which will make us change our flight. From October first to October fourth because we think the talk important.

And it's true: It will turn out to be the most important talk we give. And the audience will be large. And it will be spellbound. Because we will get to explain the massacre. The massacre of the second of October, 1968. When, at exactly 6:10 p.m., a flare will be dropped from a helicopter belonging to the Mexican Army as a signal that the student leaders have been corralled on the third floor of the Edificio Chihuahua in the Tlatelolco housing complex and that now the army may commence firing on a demonstration of over 10,000.

As if it could ever be explained.

A Reproduction of The *Guernica*



WE WILL GET that news from Itzel. Upon returning to Billie's after a dinner out. Not with the friends from the conference or my old friends from the SDS, the way we'd been spending most of our days and our evenings since the conference ended. Not talking about the global student movement, France Germany Japan Mexico the U.S., and what it meant. Not after answering questions about the Mexican movement and where it fit in. Not after entering the offices of the Black Panthers or talking to leaders of the recently founded Young Lords to find out how they operated. Not talking about the *Comités de Huelga* nor about all the other new, democratic means of getting things done that will have come into use in Mexico. Not even about facing off with the army as it will come to occupy the schools, or where the movement will go next.

No, we'll be out at a *de rigueur* family dinner. The one I would always have to do, at least once, when I came in. No matter from where. But that I had somehow missed this time, pleading busyness, always something to do what with the conference and all, my need to see friends, to show Basta the city. Until this last minute postponement, when Billie pounced. And later attacked.

Not that I won't usually enjoy these dinners. With one of Billie's cousins, the husband, really, of one of Billie's cousins. A particularly-

brilliant woman, but agoraphobic, who had committed suicide some years before. The one who had always stayed in touch, even when Billie had fallen so dramatically, and so seemingly irrevocably, from the middle class. And now her husband and Billie, always that one dinner, always that one political argument. The one I'll feel I'm being taken along for. The way in my adolescent years once I had become politically active I will be taken along to argue with her rich friends, the ones from families so much more well-to-do than hers, but with whom her upper middle class family had shared a country club. The ones who had formed her youthful circle once, the way the SDS will form mine. The ones she stayed in touch with that we will always see the times her father paid for her visits home.

Yet, with this cousin argument will always be civil, smiling, somehow fun. Not like it could get with the rich of Toledo, Ohio. Where, as Billie smiled triumphantly, I would end feeling that the phrase from that Dylan song, despite the fact that I'd only made eye contact with him once across a smoky coffee house room when no one yet knew who he was, and another time when already famous he came to a meeting of the National Council of the SDS, was written for me: *You unpatriotic dirty rotten commie rat.*

Only it would be bitch at the end and nigger lover thrown in somewhere because I'll be going on the marches with Martin Luther Coon, proving forever for me, and long before Donald Trump, that it doesn't take being a redneck—in its original meaning perhaps, of a white man whose neck is red from working outdoors with his head down—to be a dyed in the wool racist.

And maybe it will be different with this man with his joy in argument because he will come from a poor Polish family in Gary, Indiana the town from which Polack jokes will arise, and rise himself to become a corporate counsel for some multi-national or other, very brilliant, very curious, very liberal, but in that way only United States of Americans can be: voting Democrat and always ready to take on the foreigners for their America and apple pie and a pretence of democracy if not for god. A lot of them still around, but back then it will still isolate you to be against the war, make you seem not just from another country as far as

such people are concerned, but from another planet. What will make us start calling ourselves freaks instead of hippies, make so many of us feel there could be no common ground at all, could never be any ever again.

The beginning of what's come to be called the culture wars I suppose, only there will only be a few of us on what is now the liberal side, who had already broken with the hegemony this man loved to represent, and Billie loved to set me against. And because he will always love to argue, the way good lawyers do, the dinner will be just that: an argument. Into which he will always insert the fact that he thought I should be a lawyer, my talents were being wasted in the arts, and then he will force me to rise to the occasion, matching him point for point.

So that Basta will laugh about it later, in Spanish as we walk home, telling me he understood it now, how I could face down Magdalena. And why I must have been a dynamite organizer, he was sure of that. He envied me my intensity, he said, my speed, how sure I was, it was why he had fallen in love with me: I could take him out of himself. He will be sure it was because of me that he could now be doing what he did. Not just the usual putting ideas together but bringing them to some form of fruition. Making them real.

He'll even credit me with sustaining him on the conference stage, as if I had granted him that eloquence so natural to him. While this lawyer years later, after he retires, will finally tell me he'd been wrong about Vietnam. And wonder how much of American policy—it was after a shelling of neighbourhoods in Lebanon—was dictated by racism.

Only that night he will be in his previous form. Questioning, contradicting, baiting—the way he always would. And us. Both of us. Both Basta and me. It's probably what will make Basta say what he will. Because we will never be allowed to settle into speculation, the place he feels secure. So he will just try to be firm, knowledgeable, polite, safe. To talk and affirm our position, as much as he can in English—no Howdy fucks no bowel movements this time—without giving too much away.

And being forced to defend Mexico too: the brilliance of its culture, its history, its intellectual heritage, the writers, the painters, the musicians, the architects. This was no backward backwater. Its people had been civilized far longer than this man's. Enough with the *mañana*

stereotypes, there were Mexicans who knew how to get things done. And they were doing them: right now. Yet feeling that United States of American condescension, in spite of his degree in economics from the UNAM, in spite of the courses he'll be continuing to do toward his Master's. It will be implied more than once that if he were really smart he would have gone to an American university.

Until he will finally grow tired of these small unconnected affirmations that give no room for eloquence or overview, and stop the man by saying with overwhelming but caustic simplicity: Rich, you mean. If I had been rich.

Because that's the truth of it. Those are the great majority of Mexican students who wind up in the States, there is little room for foreign scholarship students of the kind both this man and I had been at the University of Chicago. While the UNAM has always been one of the best Universities in the world.

And then to arrive back at the house after that. Ready to collapse. And helping Billie in, already drunk. Already starting to sing and taunt that little bit at the dinner. So that before I even have time to tell Basta that surely he'd done as well as I had in that evening of verbal fencing that had left us both feeling somehow hollow and undermined, she will start in for real. And it is into the middle of her howling that the phone call will come. Not from Itzel, but from the Hungarian painter. Short, clipped, it will, after all, be expensive to call back then. And not much to it. Would we be sure to bring Itzel back a reproduction of the *Guer-nica* from the Museum of Modern Art.

I don't know why she was so insistent, he'll say. And it's late here. I never knew she liked Picasso so much. And I'll know from his tone that he knows more than he's saying, and that he's worried even as he adds, trying to joke: I know she loves art, but couldn't she have just sent a postcard?

And I will tell him that we will be coming back in just a couple of days. She must have just thought of it. And I'll sit down, hard, a leaden feeling in my gut.

Something's happened, I'll say to Basta. Something big.

Because that's what the words mean. We'd set up an art code for how

seriously we should take waiting for her to call back when she couldn't immediately make a call herself. Because it was fun really, with our mutual studies of art and art history, to use the titles of paintings from the Modern—no one called it MoMA then—or the Met to indicate the level of seriousness of the emergency. With Picasso's painting, done to memorialize and protest the saturation bombing of the small Basque town of Guernica by the Luftwaffe during the Spanish Civil War—the first of its kind some say—at the top of our scale.

So that I will turn on Billie and just say: Shut up! And there'll be something in my tone that makes her do it. As if she hears a call from another dimension. So that we will laugh about it later—a lot later—that only the massacre could stop her, when she'd only just gotten around to the part about the size of Basta's Mexican prick, telling me that maybe I should stop thinking with my cunt.

But we won't even be bright enough to turn on her new colour TV. Maybe not wanting to. Maybe telling ourselves that nothing that could have happened in Mexico, Guernica or no Guernica, however important to us or to the country, could be so big as to make the news up in New York—except maybe like our picket line on some interior page of the *New York Times*. Surely never broadcast news.

And we will have an hour to wait before we begin to imagine how many were killed that night, some coming to think it might turn out that as many people died in Mexico City on October 2nd, 1968, as those 1,654 civilians killed in Guernica on April 26th, 1937. Even that plane-loads of bodies were dumped from army planes flown out to sea as Paco Ignacio Taibo II alleges in his memoir, *1968*. Though it will not surprise any of us that the Mexican government's estimate of casualties should turn out to be less than a tenth the German estimate of three hundred civilian deaths in Guernica. With a little over three hundred itself remaining the most accepted middle of the road estimate for the deaths in Tlatelolco, a number established by *The Guardian's* sports reporter John Rodda. While the Mexican government's estimate, starting right after the massacre at four, will reach no more than twenty as the days go by. And even today recognizes only forty-three. While thirty-seven is what the *Times* will say at the time, if I remember right. Raising the

number of bodies just that little bit in contradiction to the Mexican government. While the government will insist too, that the unarmed and peacefully assembled students started the shooting.

So that we will simply sit there. In Billie's living room. Looking at each other. Smoking. Waiting. And drinking Billie's scotch, which she, out of respect, out of now wanting to remain supportive will cease to imbibe. It always will be the strangest part of her drinking, the total personality change on only perhaps two ounces of scotch, and that the strangest of triggers could turn her back. What will always make me wonder if it was more some kind of undiagnosed major mental illness that will make her turn into a monster and back rather than the drink itself. What many around her will wonder with me, certainly Basta as we'll sit there looking at her waiting for the call. Because she will stop talking altogether. As we listen to the ticking of the one clock in the room, and to our beating hearts. While we stare at the phone.

We will know there was to be a rally that day. And more. We will know Itzel was planning to go to it. I won't say we encouraged her. Just that we will find no reason to discourage her. The street fighting will be over. It was planned to be—and from the student side will be—a completely peaceful demonstration. A way of saying the movement is still alive. That students, even deprived of their schools, will find creative ways of getting the word out. Everything from the traditional hijacking and painting of buses, the painting of graffiti on strategic hoardings and buildings and overpasses, to sitting peacefully in the bus or on a park bench in Chapultepec or some other park, then taking out some brown packing tape, the old fashioned kind, paper with dried mucilage on one side, so that the perfectly studious young girl will take it suddenly from inside a book where it had been serving along with others as a book mark, lick it quickly while trying to look as if she is adjusting hair or makeup, then paste the small piece of tape onto the inside of the bus: And there will be the printed message, *asiste*, come, attend, *mitín Plaza de las Tres Culturas, Tlatelolco, 2 de octubre, 17h*.

Or just leaving the same messages around printed onto sheets of paper. The ones Itzel will have been hauling around the city in her grey Peugeot, her scarves flying. I will even find one among my oldest archival

boxes when I sort them for my most recent move. But it will be from later. It will just say: *La lucha continúa*. The struggle continues. What we too will soon be pasting here and there as we travel the streets of the silenced city.

So why shouldn't she go, we'd been asking ourselves. She should stand up and be counted, too. And she'd gone to so many of the demonstrations already, really, hadn't she? If we'd been there, even I would have gone. It would have been too important to miss. Even if I'd stood a little to one side. By the entrance to one of the buildings perhaps. Because what could happen? A little tear gas maybe. But even with snipers on roofs, even with the *Cuerpo de Granaderos* wading into the occasional crowd, it wasn't like the street fighting to take the Politécnico not when there had been so little violence against the large peaceful demonstrations, what could happen, really?

And besides, wasn't she in that group of people least likely to encounter harm, all she had to do was smile her middle class blonde smile, her older, no matter how metaphorically, I could be your *señora madre*, smile, and even if the waters would not part, the riot police, the soldiers, would separate—these will not be Nazi guards, there will be no concentration camp barbed wire—and let her through.

And that last the only thing about which any of us will be proved right: the shining brilliance of it.

Not that she will tell us the story then. Not when her call finally comes through. From a *Central de Teléfonos* downtown, one of those places people without phones will go to make long distance calls, because she will not yet have made it home. So she will be quick, there will be no way to know who is listening, or if she might be identified. All she could manage then will be to repeat how awful it was.

Awful. Awful. Awful. *Horripilante*. They just started shooting. They just kept on shooting. We don't know how many they killed. They just kept on shooting. No one knows. Bodies everywhere. They kept on shooting. Then noticing her voice is starting to rise her words to repeat over and over like gunfire she will take a breath so deep we can hear it over the line and calmly ask us if we can stay near a phone the next day: She will call then after gathering as much news as possible. For our

talk. So we can let others know. Because unlike the protesters at the Democratic convention those weeks before as we passed through Chicago, Mexico's students could not chant: The whole world is watching. It wasn't.

And she will hang up.

And we will not even have time for our usual sign-off, that *Cuidate*—be careful, take care of yourself, likely more common in Spanish even than in English. Something that will have a newer, stronger meaning. A whisper of prayer

After all, we will think we'd just been giving her make work. Something to do while we were gone that would make her feel of use.

Silly really, looking back, to think she might need something to keep her involved. She will already be involved and well liked long before we leave. And would have continued her tasks with or without us, I know that now. But we were afraid, I guess, that she would drift away from the movement if she did not have continued contact, approval, incentive, from us. So making her our phone contact won't be something we actually thought the least bit dangerous. It will be to keep her in touch. She'd be seeing all those other people anyway, and it would give her even more reason to listen to them.

We will talk about it a lot. We'll even say it to her. How she needed to feel included, that we didn't want to have to fear losing her if we left the city, that she would drift away, or worse, start to listen to her family, her ex-husband and her older sisters, who thought the students mad. Who did not understand what they had to complain about. Who would tease her about coming so late to politics, or tell her we were all communists anyway. We'll talk about that too, after my dinner with them.

When one sister, the one who owns the spa, will fix me with her eyes, and point to me with her fork.

What do these students want anyway, she will say in clear though accented English, her English certainly better than Itzel's and her Spanish much worse, even if she was the sister who had come first, the one who had converted.

The government does so much for them already. She will add. It's not like back home. Like what was done to us. Not at all.

And even if Itzel will say, on her own with no urging, that though it was certainly not the same, that when you see this kind of repression, the riot police, the political prisoners, not just repressing students over the years but small farmers, workers, assassinating opposition leaders, certainly that was like the beginning of fascism, wasn't it? And then when I add stuff about poverty and what amounted to indentured servitude the sister will just wave it away.

It was that these—*indios*—and she will say that word in Spanish, rather than the English Indians, they didn't understand about discipline, about hard work, they needed a strong hand. Though maybe she will add that phrase in Spanish too. *La mano dura*, it's a stock phrase of Spanish discourse and not just in Latin America, but Spain itself. Look at Franco, at the civil war, at *Viva la Muerte*. But the Indian part, *el indio*, *los indios*, *nuestros indios*, that was pure America. And if it will be for the moment, the Mexican part of America, surely in one form or another, generally speaking with overwhelmingly genocidal results, it's been tried on everywhere.

But these *indios* they were not only underdeveloped but undeveloped, they ate badly and always had, look at their diet, their *moles* their *tamales* their *tacos*, she will even go on with the old and discredited argument about the nefarious nature of maize corn—the one used to infuse pride in European cuisine in generations of the upper class, though never with complete success—how bad it was for you as a staple, how it had stopped the advancement of civilization in the Americas. And even mestizo Mexicans won't be ready for democracy in her opinion, not yet, not till more of the Indian was taken out. And she, of course, like many, since the pre-revolutionary days of dictator Porfirio Diaz, will be part of that effort to better the race. She had had children who had married Mexicans of a better class, after all.

Not that she will by any means be the one to formulate that argument. All of its points were made first by *criollos*—those Mexicans of pure Spanish descent—and mestizo Mexicans themselves, so who was I to complain of it coming from her in particular? It will just be hard to take and keep smiling. To keep doing it even for Itzel and her family's peace. So I will finally smile for a last time. Rather broadly in fact. It's

something I tend to do. A Guatemalan friend will remark on it after a particularly onerous afternoon with refugee settlement officials in Canada. You smile before you attack, he'll tell me. A habit I will already have obviously developed.

I've told you my dad is Indian, I will say. Choctaw, among the best corn farmers in what is now the USA, before the Europeans arrived. Healthy too. Squash, beans, corn, all in one field. And often enough the women did the farming. Supplied most of the food. Owned the land. Something I will add even if I won't be at all sure about that or even if you can talk about land ownership, not the way we do anyway.

And maybe there will once more be a little of the punk leaning against the chain link fence in the denim jacket thing to it. Even if I will be using the right fork. I had prepped myself for this. Was determined not to freeze. To use the improvements I'll have made at the Oronsky *comidas*, remember what they'd taught me in that all girls' prep school I made the mistake of going to because they'd offered me a good scholarship and everyone thought they would help me get into a good university.

Though I will think I've blown it completely, when she stops, her fork in mid-air. And says: Oh, I'm so sorry.

And I think she will just manage, from the look on her face, not to say: But you don't loooooook Indian. Maybe because she's had enough of: Funny, you don't look Jewish, though I have no idea if that will ever have happened in any circle she'd been part of. If it has ever been part of Mexican Jewish culture. Or if, as a convert, anyone around her in Mexico outside her family would even know.

But I've sure had it enough, because, of course, I don't. There's always someone around to tell me I don't look at all Indian, to which I answer that the fact I'm not all Indian doesn't mean I'm not Indian at all, no matter that it's hard to see, I'm a Celtic mix not a darker Mediterranean one, with the other part of my *mestizaje* Anglo-German, and my hair is chestnut brown though not as rich with red highlights as Dan's. It's the kind of colour that goes directly from blonde to black, where highlights can seem almost green. *Güera de las güeras*: In Mexico I'm fair, very fair perhaps, but never blonde. Not like Itzel or her sisters,

with even the one whose hair she always compared to mine more blonde. As I've said, I'll be the exact colouring of my Sinaloa neighbours, with some variation of tan or gold, grey or green in the eyes. Even a half a century later I've managed to get called *güerita*, not a cat call anymore but just the way in English, Billie always did that, someone might call you dear. The way she did the FBI agent who came looking for Basta after we'd left.

While after her initial shock, Itzel's sister will quickly change the topic to food. Though she won't be able to help glancing at me from time to time. And then will add something, much later, as I am leaving, so there will be no time to initiate a conversation about it.

But they're a different kind of Indian up there, aren't they? she'll say, as if giving me a gift. Stronger. Taller. Great horsemen. Great warriors.

And there won't be time for me to clarify that either. Even if I know the Woodland Indians were thought of as great warriors too. As some of them undoubtedly were—look at Tecumseh—just like the warriors of the plains. Still despite the Choctaw ponies, named for the small horses that walked our people's Eastern trails, it will not be as horsemen that Eastern Indians are known. They are the great woodsmen, the great scouts of a completely different stereotype. The ones you see crouched down tomahawk in hand, one feather hanging behind an ear from a head band, since a plains war bonnet would long since have gotten tangled in the underbrush. Or maybe standing tall, their one feather also standing up, wrapped in a blanket, raising one hand to say Ugh, How? Or arms crossed for White man speak with forked tongue.

But I won't have the time to explicate yet another type of Indian. Shoehorn it into the Plains Indian stereotype so especially beloved of Europeans. Who seem fascinated by it. It's said even Hitler loved it, even if, with just a bit of a chance he likely would have put them on line for extermination, or saved them by declaring them, despite the dark hair and eyes, descendants of Vikings if not Visigoths. The ones the Spanish always claim.

So I will just smile and say goodbye. And congratulate her on the wonderful dinner, and reiterate how much I liked the dobosh torte from the one Hungarian bakery in Mexico City. And she won't say, though

I'll swear I could see her thinking it, how she never could teach her maid to make proper pastry. Itzel had told me about that ongoing complaint.

Only later when I apologize for blowing things for her, for making her family relationships more difficult, sure she would pay for bringing me there, Itzel will assure me I have nothing to worry about. They'd liked me very much, she will say. Spoke of how 'refreshing' I was, and how educated—and how clear eyed and firm—like the Indian warrior my dad must be. Though I think that part, from the twinkle in her eye, and because she knew by then Dan was a war hero—and a scout—will be something Itzel will make up on the spot.

So I will just laugh, it will be good enough just to know that they had not gone on and on at Itzel about the company she was keeping. Because they would do that sometimes, guarding her associations, part of that seeing her as the weakest of them. The same way her ex-husband had convinced her she was too neurotic to have a child.

And then she'll add: But what can you say about someone who confuses *hinchar* with *chingar*?

But you can see how we still might feel Itzel needed support. Especially since, now that the one dinner had happened, we will be convinced it would surely happen again while we were gone. And if the next time it wasn't the sister who had converted, it might be the other one. The one she had followed so carefully through the camp. Copying her every gesture. The one whose post typhus hair she kept comparing to mine. If she were the one to criticize the company Itzel was keeping, laugh at the ideas she was picking up as an older student, tell her she was still just as naïve as they had kept her before the camps—she just might fall back into it. Nod her head in compliance and raise her fork exactly as her sister will. The same as once she had raised her arm. And follow along.

So we will think she needed a mission. And other company to keep. And because she might feel like a bit of an outsider among that mostly younger crowd once we left, now that we wouldn't be sitting next to her at those meetings as she'll begin to express her ideas, that she just might retreat back into herself, to the passivity she spoke about in the activity of our first *caput mortuum* days: how afraid of the world

the camps had made her. While more recently she might mention how good it felt to feel that fear retreat.

So we will set her up so she will have to talk with people. And so they will know how necessary her work is and talk openly and without condescension to her. Letting her continue in that blooming that will so delight us. And that Basta will always say corresponded with his own, and thank me for it. As if it were my doing and not his own.

Because if we are afraid for Itzel, it won't just be of her family. We will also be afraid, the two of us, Basta and I, the way I had once been afraid in introducing her to him, that our new friends, our political friends, the ones we will not only discuss the issues of the day with but decide what to do next with, the ones who in their turn, and we'll know it, will be grooming us—that they would not see in her the delicate beauty so ready to flower. That thing that we had seen. Afraid like young people everywhere of judgement, we will be even more afraid for her.

That they would not think of her as about to bloom in new soil, but as already *marchita*, as can be said of older women in Spanish, already wilted. Past it as we say. Past it. Even if they were receptive to her help, to what she could do with her car, perhaps they would see her differently if we were not there.

So that the last thing we would have believed would be that by the time we returned, danger would not be a question of vulnerability, of the possibility of psychological hurt, but all too real, and that we will have placed her in the middle of it.

Though we will know from the moment she greets us at the airport that this time she will more than have simply survived. This time what had not killed her had truly made her stronger: She will have continued to bloom. And that we will be the ones who feel *marchitas*. No longer in spring or even summer. But past it all. Past it. Or that Basta will take to telling me how he should have come back the moment the army invaded the university.

All I ever was up there was Daffy Duck, he'll say bitterly. Daffy Duck. That's all. Daffy Duck. If I'd been here I could have done something real, whatever it was it would have meant something. It wouldn't have been una *simple pendejada*.

And for the first time I will feel like saying: ¡*Basta* Basta, *basta!*
Maybe even want to stick my fingers in my ears. Or make him quit
La Hermandad.

Anything that might get me away from his new subjunctive of
despair.

Pressurization Failure



IT WILL BE so hard after we get back. So very hard. For us and for those around us. All and each and everybody around us. And even if in that last meeting with the congress organizers, no longer accusing us of wrecking the conference but treating us with a new respect bordering on awe, David, a good friend I had brought into the SDS when I was organizing, will give me a hug and wish me luck, and end with the words, speaking as if for the whole organization if not the whole student movement: It's the closest we've ever come to sending someone back to the front.

Still it won't be like that at all. A front is what I could have wished for.

What we will return to is a city under occupation. A city in defeat. What will echo is its silence. Something I never would have dreamed of and yet still dream of: that silence. On the buses on the streets in all the places that would usually be *bullicio cotorreo efervescencia*, the ebullience of voices talking shouting whispering, there was silence. The birdlike cricketlike muttering below everything: That hum was gone. Gone. In its place: only eyes refusing to meet and silence.

And in the midst of it, the beacon of Itzel's smile. So that it is no wonder we will cling to her like shipwrecked sailors at the foot of a lighthouse, as if in her, even in the fact that she had been there in the Plaza there were strength and hope. Or perhaps it will be as if to the long black skirts of a priest, as if she could absolve our absence.

While the city will go on quietly around us voices returning slowly to a normal level, getting ready for the Olympics as if, should everyone just behave normally enough, everything could be made normal: Hope rage and memory could be sluiced away in the preparations. Like the cold laundry water down the drain of our corrugated stone sink on the roof. And if you had not been very involved, or not involved at all, how could you possibly help such wishing? How could you not want to believe that the wound to your city your country your world had not been so very deep? That truly it had just been a small demonstration, that the students had started it, that few had died. And the Olympics, *México '68*, with its uniforms, its logos, its stencilled doves could be the Olympics of Peace after all.

So that Ignacia in her office at Relaciones Exteriores, the highrise at the architecturally celebrated Plaza's south end, a museum now, will hide under her desk along with all the other secretaries on the four to seven part of their shift as bullets hit the building, fully aware of the helicopter and of who is doing the shooting, even of the length of time, the terrible two hours the shooting will go on, the sporadic shooting after, and how many must have been killed.

Happy for the first, indeed the only time I'm sure, that Basta is with me, she will say so. Even later, in the midst of howling and wringing her hands about the marriage—the only thing worse than his living out of wedlock with *la gringa esa* will be the idea of the two of us living in it—she will not deny thinking it wonderful he had been in New York. Though within days of the Massacre she will decide it was all not just the students' fault but the students' doing, and as to trembling under her desk.

I don't know what you mean, she'll say. I just don't know what you mean. Isn't it marvellous, all these people in Mexico for the Olympics? Visitors from all over the world seeing the real Mexico, so clean, so hospitable, so very modern.

While Magdalena will say very much the same. A marvellous opportunity to showcase Mexico for the world awaited us, why had those naïve students tried to ruin it all. They understood absolutely nothing about the realities of their own country. Even if, yes, the government had gone perhaps, a little too far.

While I will be isolated days in the *Sports Illustrated* house, where I had gotten a job—through Billie’s contacts I must admit—not as Olympic but as house translator. So that I will not do interviews with athletes, though sometimes I will get to eat with them, while mostly I’ll just be the one who helps with phone calls, or shopping, or talking to the servants, and I’ll feel it there too: the blooming of complacency.

Not that they had ever been anything else but complacent, I don’t think, those people. At least about such things as these. I will get a rise out of them by my reasoned and implacable opposition to the war, the one I had brought to rallies and television programs when I’d organized in New York, the one that used the arguments found in the Pentagon papers before Daniel Ellsberg ever made them public.

And they will be incensed of course by the black power salute made from the podium by Tommie Smith and John Carlos, talking about biting the hand that feeds you, while I will argue that if you bit before the hand ever got around to bringing you food, you never got fed at all, you just died or at least stagnated with no opportunities to make any gesture of significance. Except maybe guerrilla warfare. And you can bet they won’t like that statement at all.

It will all remind me, in fact, of the Oronsky’s: how they thought their sending Matilde to school meant she owed them unwavering loyalty. Always that pervasive: Look what we’ve done for them. As opposed to what they’ve done for us. Or what we’ve taken away. And that ‘we’, always used to identify affirmatively with a chosen history; yet always refused for the negative one. We’ve done good. Who, us? It was our ancestors did bad. A comparison I doubt those journalists would have understood. Any more than they will take seriously the events of the Plaza.

Most of them will have arrived the day before as Olympic preparations were only beginning, and thinking to take in a Mexican style demonstration, they will go there. They’ll see it. Hear the guns even if they’ll never stand in the line of fire. Will go to the Mexican government press conference after, know the officials are lying. So they will laugh about it. Chuckle really. Splay their hands out on the table. This was Mexico, after all, wasn’t it? These were violent people, weren’t they?

The official story will hardly be worth challenging. So all of them,

all of them, and all the others, all the American journalists in all the American papers will write what they are told. Only Oriana Fallaci, the Italian journalist, writing in *Look* among other places, will talk with the student leaders about to give their speeches from the third story of the Edificio Chihuahua, and speak of it, how she stood among them, how they were taken prisoner, beaten, made to run the gauntlet, how she herself was shot, and how officials of the police even stole her watch. And will say later, that she had never, even in war, seen a massacre of this magnitude. That in war, at least both sides are armed.

While the Americans will be silent, all of them. Not just in that house but in all the other papers. Even the *New York Times* will write of a shootout, then report fewer than fifty dead. More will not be news fit to print. Hardly news at all. While I will ask myself how it could be you could shoot for so long and kill so few. Ask: Is there a mathematical formula to calculate this, a way to estimate death per second, per minute, per hour? Even as I will be fully aware that if I asked, those around me would agree. It is for this they will laugh behind their hands at the press conference.

The only problem is that they will shrug again. And maybe begin talking once more about that black power salute. So that I will reframe my question: How could you shoot for so long and have how many you killed mean so little to so many? And never ask it. Of course I will never ask it. For this I know there is no formula. And I am afraid of the reply.

While on my second day there the guy in charge of the house and its denizens will take me aside to tell me the *Life* bureau chief for Mexico had called to say he'd received information that the secret police were rounding people up and that information should be given to me, and to anyone else who might potentially need it.

And the guy will look pointedly at me and say: Tell your friends.

And I will look at him and say: Yes. Though I think he will be able to tell from my face that I already know.

So he will say: Watch yourself.

And I will nod.

And then he'll call over the one young Mexican who works there too. The one who'll fly up to New York on a commercial flight once a

week with the photographers' film while the magazine's private jet will make the second weekly flight, the only way to guarantee having topnotch up to date shots in those predigital days. And he will tell the young man the same as he just told me and we will look at each other and smile, happy the bureau chief bothered to do that even if it only confirmed something we will already know. The way it will confirm to me something else I already know: that the *Life* bureau chief, that all the American journalists around me, will know exactly what's going on. And still they won't, or can't, or don't care enough, don't think this place will ever matter enough, to fight to see it in print.

So that I will think once more of David. Over and over. Of David. Not of what he'll say to me, but of what I'll say to him.

Not about front lines, but of what it was those left behind could do. When he'll ask that question just that way.

Those of us here, he'll say—and no, I don't think he'll mention the bowels of the beast—what can we do to help?

And how I'll answer without thinking: Call in bomb threats on airplanes.

While in that house I will think over and over about what I had said, even as I will note no airplanes will be diverted over bomb threats, not that I had ever expected such a thing to happen, not yet, not in those days, though there will be hijackings going on in Latin America. But always by dissidents—once, I remember, a Brazilian woman with a group of over twenty children under threat for their parents' activities making it to Cuba. Diversions becoming at some point so frequent that a young woman from Trinidad in one of my later classes in Latin American literature at the University of Toronto will laugh about how on a trip home in those early seventies days her flight was hijacked coming and going.

But she'll note she'd enjoyed Cuba. Loved it, in fact. Great beaches and they were very well cared for. No one yet took much less killed hostages. And the only actual bombing I remember was when a Miami doctor decided to take the whole plane down to kill his wife. And besides I will know that I had spoken out of anger and desperation, and expected nothing. Yet it will not have been a joke. I had meant it. Meant it. Every word.

Threaten airplanes on their way into Mexico City. Make them divert the flights. It will disrupt the Olympics. The government did this so the Olympics would run smoothly, so disrupt them.

And I will wonder again, standing in that peaceful living room, that maid clean kitchen, as I have again and yet again over the years: Does that make me a terrorist? And if it does, do I want to be one?

◇ We will use the word even then. And I do remember the sensation in the pit of my stomach in the moment I will say those words. I am a terrorist this has made me a terrorist right now this instant I am what everyone would call a terrorist I am advocating terror what am I doing threatening the lives of the innocent. Because I will know, who doesn't, that even if it isn't much of a threat still it is a threat of some sort each time you cause a plane to dump fuel and to land—I've since been on a plane when it happened, not long after in fact, on my first trip back to New York from Mexico City alone I'll watch the fuel pour out of the wings to form clouds as we turn back moments after takeoff from Dallas.

Because of a pressurization failure, they will tell us, the smokers snuffing out their cigarettes as quickly as they can as if in a form of prayer, a propitiation of the god of fire to prevent static buildup or a spark while we tell ourselves: This isn't dangerous it couldn't be dangerous, this plane's come three stops with the problem already—the route then was always Acapulco, Mexico City, San Antonio, Dallas, New York—and they'd told us so, this couldn't be dangerous, not dangerous at all.

Maybe they just had to fly higher, wanted to avoid passenger discomfort. And each time I say it my body will stiffen further my fingernails dig in deeper on the armrests of my seat. And I will allow myself to hear the whinnying horse laugh of the labouring engines as the universe's twisted guffaw at my question only as we taxi down the runway.

Yet I will ask myself another question too often enough. Why not share the danger out, even just a bit. Maybe make the government rethink, just a little, its actions. Because the danger to that plane could never reach the level of what it might mean in those last days of the movement to be young and Mexican in the streets of Mexico City. Or even a somewhat older couple who might consent to making a phone call.

Because that will happen to us in those two or maybe three shorts weeks after we get back: the days of the Olympics. That call I will make to the underground newspaper in Boston — they won't be called alternative yet — and how because I know it will be long, we'll pick old friends of Basta's who'd become good friends to us both, a wonderful ceramist and his wife just a bit older than us who, while sympathetic to the movement, won't have ever participated so we'll all be sure their phone isn't tapped, by then we won't be absolutely sure about Itzel's or even her sister's from whose house she'd made her long informative call the day after the massacre, so I'll talk and I'll talk detail after detail and then the next day the secret police will come to their door.

Because while it'll be true their phone wasn't likely tapped — and we won't find this out until later, though it's something maybe the *Life* bureau chief already knew — during the Olympics the *Secretaría de Gobernación* will randomly listen in on all the international calls — intervening I want to say because that's the verb you use in Spanish, intervening on your phone even if you never know they're there — and they will hear this one, as I will surely talk way more than enough for them to find out where the call is coming from, if they'd have come quick they could have caught me at it, I must have talked for way more than an hour. Given the expense of long distance in those days probably close to an airplane ride's worth.

While the ceramist will think fast that next day when they show up, telling them that yeah, there'd been a *gringa* he'd met downstairs in the little convenience store and she'd asked him about making a phone call. And he'll probably throw something in about *qué buena estaba*, she was a real looker, whether or not he thought I was, or something like that anyway with a wink just to get them on the same page, they all knew about *gringas* wink wink though he hadn't managed to get anything out of it wink wink wink except the exorbitant amount the *gringa* had paid him for the call.

And no, *en absoluto*, he'll tell them, he had no idea what I'd said, he didn't speak any English, he thought maybe this *gringa* was talking to a boyfriend, she seemed very passionate about something, maybe even it was a parent and she was asking for money. Wasn't that what

gringas did, snivelled and begged and got money from Daddy or even the boyfriend so they could come down to Mexico to get a little something from a real man? And then he won't speak any Spanish either, not to Basta and me anyway, nor will his wife, not for months. Months.

So that I will continue looking around me at all these people who had the opportunity, the time and the space and the immunity, to communicate all the stuff I had told the kids in Boston without worrying about a damn thing, and how they knew it too, knew that what I knew was true, I will even see it sometimes when they'll just keep on drinking, like that one night with the Russians over—we'll have a photographer of Russian background who'll know them all—bringing such good vodka and caviar that I'll stay late, long after the maids I usually translate for have left to do their unpaid night labor for the family who have rented them out with the house, only to find that when the Russians leave and the *Sports Illustrated* folk start to talk about Mexico again not about the games but about Mexico itself their eyes will no longer drift away from each other's, nobody's gaze meeting anyone else's just the way it will be on the buses only with more guilt attached, but instead they'll get all full of a vodka fuelled nervous energy as their voices rise and trip over one another's as they talk about exactly where they'd been that night, which had seen the helicopter, which felt the shots, who saw who run, who saw bodies carted away, prisoners marched by hands on heads, or just pressed their back against a wall closed their eyes and saw nothing only listened press credentials at the ready as the shooting went on and on, and all of it ending again with which of them had attended the press conference afterwards and how much exactly the government had lied.

When once more the shrug will come. Until this time it will be me who will think of the black power salute. And feel my head about to explode: It was the same hand feeding all of us that was feeding those athletes who had raised their hands high in the air, and I will bite my own lips then, knowing no matter how hard I clamped down I just wouldn't be able to bite that hand hard enough to make anything happen, or even really, manage to explain myself.

So why should I care about the increased danger caused by any kind of bomb threat, I wouldn't even have cared if there had been a bomb

threat on my own plane flying back, I would just have asked Basta if he thought the *zopilotes*—the black vultures—could fly as high as tourists over the dead down below. A thought and a plane ride I will always remember when I hear that bitter joke that passes through country after country of the Central America of the eighties, one person saying to the person standing next to him as they contemplate the circling *zopilotes*: We should pay homage to them, *Los mejores de nuestros hijos están en sus entrañas*. *Entrañas* again: The best of our children are in their bowels.

So that I still think I would have been ready to take whatever consequences there could have been to my words, the way I'll already know I'd have willingly taken that chance with bystanders' lives as I stand leaning against a lintel in that house that night watching all those journalists continue to drink, asking myself for the first time if that combination we always use of innocent and bystander is not perhaps itself an oxymoron, all those tourists on their way to the Olympics of Peace the government will still call it, who won't even know why students will be taking their lives in their hands right up to and through the Olympics and even right under their noses, going out with cans of paint to spray blotches of blood red into the hollow breasts of the cartoonish Olympic doves seen all over the city or, if they had a bit more talent or time, as some of us at San Carlos will, to paint a more realistic bayonet stabbing through the dove's heart.

While those tourists won't even know what that blood red means or for that matter the meaning of the chains over the man's mouth in another popular image you could still see affixed to a wall sometimes, first drawn by Adolfo Mexiac, a member of the *Taller de la Gráfica Popular*, the People's Graphics Workshop Magdalena had long ago come to Mexico to join. Because no one knows for sure how many people likely died even now and those visitors won't know at all because nobody will tell them those reporters sitting and laughing or trembling with the frisson of remembered fear won't tell them, but then again they won't ever ask, won't ever really want to know.

So that if there's any guilt I've ever felt about my words it isn't for them for any of them, it's for David. Because even if that afternoon he would no more be calling in bomb threats on airplanes than anyone

else would, within two years he will be underground with the Weather Underground and his long term partner with whom he will have a child will escape naked from the townhouse explosion on West Eleventh Street where a homemade bomb will go off early to kill two of their own and then years after that when most of the Weather folk have long surfaced David will be implicated in the death of two security guards during a bank robbery that was supposed to finance the revolution which is all he'll say even in court when questioned, I did this for the revolution, so that soon after he will be serving three consecutive life sentences.

So that yes, I will wonder sometimes what that hug he gave me, what his words to me, what mine to him, what impact they may have had. How much will whatever feeling I caused to arise in this young man son of some kind of suburban privilege have to do with all of that. In how he will come to see his world as one at war, and to see himself locked in a combat that will always need more than words. In which all pain all guilt all death have to be shared out. Whatever its consequences. To him or to anyone else.

Though I should warn you. Saying this does not mean I believe in decorative violence. Of the kind you wear because you believe it makes you look like Che Guevara or La Pasionaria. Though violence does not of itself, like torture, break the social contract at its base, gratuitous violence will always break something, even if you don't know what it is for the longest time. Or even how important it may have been to you.

While still, even today, I will ask myself, what is any community's claim to innocence? Are we not all implicated, not bystanders at all, in what we eat, wear, buy, view, visit? Perhaps we are not being fed by any hand, perhaps it is us who are doing the feeding. And until we stop feeding this beast whose *entrañas* trap us the beast will not die. Yet I see no way to stop feeding it. While then I will just echo Lenin and probably Lennon: What is to be done I would say to Basta over and over. ¿Qué hay que hacer? ¿Qué se puede hacer? ¿Tu? ¿Yo? ¿Nosotros? ¿Qué? ¿Qué?

◇ So that it should be easy enough to understand why getting married will seem for the moment the only answer. To be a liberation, an insurgency: a definition. The way it is always said in Spanish: *llegó el momento de*

las definiciones. Hay que definirse. The hour has arrived. It is time to define yourself. As we come up with a plan that will at least allow me to stay in Mexico. And us, all of us, the three of us, to forge ahead rather than just make side trips into calmer waters, beautiful places, the trips that in many ways will save us. Trips to everywhere and anywhere. And over and over. In search of a real and realer Mexico with Tavo and Marie Claire, sometimes even on our own, but mostly with Itzel. In Itzel's car where our tripartite friendship had blossomed from the very beginning even before the car will fill with movement literature.

And it will be on one of those trips that the decision will be made. When, once I am free of the *Sports Illustrated* house and the Olympics, Basta and I will make a longer trip down to Vera Cruz with Tavo and Marie Claire though we will tell Itzel we wished it could be with her or at least that she could come along. Except that it's for a family wedding and there won't be room in car or house what with wedding presents and Tavo's mother and Marie Claire's pregnancy and we'll be introduced as already husband and wife to a bunch of cousins Basta had never met before and we'll sleep in a matrimonial hammock among a line of matrimonial hammocks stretched out at intervals in the living room for house guests because that's how they do house guests in Vera Cruz, the brass hammock hooks are hidden behind little circular brass plates on the walls of long mostly concrete middle class living rooms and you pull the hooks out for the guests and string the hammocks wall to wall and they all sleep in a row so that it will be there that we decide definitely to do it as we scratch and scratch whether awake or asleep the thousands of bites, hundreds anyway I did count to two hundred before I reached the first knee, from sand flies—*jejenes* they call them, these relatives of the northern black fly—we'll have gotten two days before on an empty beach north of the city and in all the time since failed to assuage despite being given a local home remedy, a topical rub of marijuana tobacco and alcohol and god knows what other herbs so the hammock will bounce and bounce and even if we will not commit ourselves to our usual *acto* you can bet the other guests will think that's what we the newlyweds are doing, so why not be newlyweds we will whisper softly to each other not between our usual sweet nothings and

variegated infinities, but while swearing heavily if quietly about the danger of my deportation.

Why not do it, we will repeat, there is nothing against doing it, nothing at all, and even if it doesn't work out divorce was really easy as long as you didn't have kids, that's why so many *gringos* came south to do it, those will be the years of oft reported quick Mexican celebrity divorces, so what did we have to lose, we who loved each other so much we should probably be getting married anyway. Right? Right. Of course. Nothing could be better.

And it won't matter that Ignacia howls and complains over the phone already angry that Basta could live with *la gringa esa*, that I had taken him away from the straight and narrow to mire him in temptation and sin. Or that Billie will at her coolest say: Are you sure you know what you're doing, dear?

Dear the way she had deployed Dear with that young FBI agent to whom she gave absolutely no information when he came looking for Basta three days after our departure. Dear, then the little smile I could feel over the phone then all the damning with faint praise that: Well, I liked him well enough, but marriage? Really, dear, you're so young.

Which she'll then follow up with at least two drunken phone calls to the Oronsky's house since I will never give her the phone number for the downstairs neighbour. So that the Oronsky's will hang up on her and reduce their own comments to raised eyebrows. While still we will do it.

And the day before when my stress is so high I can't see and my heart is suffering arrhythmias there will be Tavo too giving me his prescription.

Just don't do this too often, he'll say. Even if once or twice might be fine and this one for the best. Which is what Marie Claire will think too and Itzel even more. So we will do it. We will become Tavo's *practicantes*. And we will continue *practicando*. At least for a while.

And after we have returned from Vera Cruz and we have done it, we will within days make our next important commitment: the one central to our other equally important practice—the political one. The decision that will take us from mere participants in a broad open movement,

practicantes of another sort, to give us the title of *militantes*. Those fully integrated into an organization. With a voice and a vote and a duty. And rules to follow. As we will join an underground cell. And take on our code names. And that second ceremony will be much more formal than the first. And Itzel will, of course, be there at both.

She will witness our marriage. And join the cell with us. The three of us this time stepping forward together. And it is then that Itzel will become Itzel, the name she will always carry for me. And she will be far more radiant than I ever was a bride. And very sure of the step. Because of what had happened that night. In the Plaza.

The story she will tell so surely during that other of our trips in the motel in Amecameca after our day of *carnaval* in Huejotzingo. Among so many others. When our world will seem to come back for an instant into harmony. And as quickly blow apart.

IV

This Day-Glo *Retablo*



WE'LL HAVE HEARD the story before. On the trip back from the airport in fact. And several times thereafter. In walks through the Plaza, in meetings of the group, in casual Oh yes, I was there conversations. But they will all seem bare bones compared to this. The depth in it. The resonance. The way we will hear it, the way too we will hear Matilde's story on our second trip to Huejotzingo. The one we will choose to make for *Carnaval* because the first one sometime around September's Independence Day with Tavo and Marie Claire had been so perfect.

In those days right before the brilliance of the *Silenciosa*, the Silent Demonstration when at least three hundred thousand people, some say a half million, mostly students, will prove their discipline, their seriousness, their commitment by walking to the Zócalo in complete silence, only days before our trip to New York when we will accept Tavo's invitation to go up to Clotilde and Matilde's home town, there on the skirts of the Iztaccíhuatl. For a day trip, despite the length of the drive. Because Tavo will want so very much for Marie Claire to see it, the mountain will remind her of Switzerland he says, and the fruit too, that it will seem such a privilege to be there for the celebrations that he will invite us. While even Magdalena will wheedle her way into the big old lumbering diesel Mercedes along with all her photography equipment.

Though the whole trip will be mostly to eat that most famous of dishes, the *chiles en nogada*—chiles in walnut sauce—of the area, with their Mexican flag colours, green of chiles, red of pomegranate, white of fresh peeled walnut, served only in those late summer early fall rainy season weeks not only for Independence Day but for the ripening of the walnuts, the *nueces de castilla*, introduced by the Spanish almost as quickly as the 16th century monastery and church were built, along with peaches and pears and apples, included too in the chiles' meat stuffing, the European fruit that have made Huejotzingo's cider famous throughout Mexico, with the surrounding orchards' altitude giving just enough winter to make such fruit such nuts possible.

So that the town's best known product is still the sparkling alcoholic pear or apple cider so often served in Mexico instead of champagne. Genuine cider of Huejotzingo always a special treat. Though there will never ever be cherries, I don't know why. Just their *desabrida capulín* cousins growing on trees by the side of the road. Cherries the only fruit while in Mexico I will ever miss.

And then there will be all those special treats from what Tavo has assured us will be the realest of Mexicos. Begun with our first visit to Matilde's father's office, despite its amate Virgin a place very much what we of the north, or for that matter Mexico City, would consider properly officelike, so much so that I remember it with paneled walls, though, despite the number of trees growing around Huejotzingo and up onto the skirts of the Iztaccíhuatl, adobe—or concrete if you could afford it, *tezontle* and plaster if colonial—will still be the building materials of highland choice.

So, while it is possible that such cases might be built against such walls, I am not really at all sure his artefacts will inhabit glass cases with wood doors as you will find so often in Mexico's small provincial museums, and that the books, the many, many books, will be behind glass as well. But for sure there will be books on chairs and desk and floor, some opened some closed. Including other copies of colonial and pre-Columbian codices besides the pages from the *Codex de Huejotzingo* and the *Lienzo de Tlaxcala*, this latter a history rather than a page from a lawsuit, so that Malintzin is there instead of the Virgin, both wearing

huipiles, only in some drawings, rather than the Christ child, Malintzin, like the warriors around her, carries a shield.

And so much to say, oh, so much to say, and the spread hands as he will go on. And on. As he communicates as quickly as possible the information he so loves, that he has accumulated about his people over time. So that between him and Basta you would never know to which one to say enough, or if you would want to listen forever to this chestnut haired, full moustached man, the most European looking of his family, so opposite to stereotypes of laconic Indians and small-minded townspeople.

Though his own father will run closer to stereotype at least in his looks, a dynamic individual too easy to take at first glance for the Mexican asleep under the cactus of too many *mañanas*. And though a talker too, his talk will be slow and deliberate and mostly looking at his hands even as friends and family and a younger audience of the recently acquainted surround him, among them the three of us, properly introduced by his granddaughter. But then what could you expect of a man rumored to be over a hundred years old?

And sharp as the well-honed machete lying by his side where he squats *en cuclillas* on the tamped down earth his back against a lime coated adobe wall as white as the traditional shirt and pants he wears, the most traditional of post contact wear, but so rare by the time I get to Mexico that I'll see them but for three times only in photos, with the younger men almost universally in jeans, because those traditional whites will be far too likely to qualify you as a torn foot Indian — *un indio patarajado* — when you enter the cities or even the larger towns, while this man will wear his with the pride of someone who could tell you about the Revolution of 1910 and his role in it.

Then to complete his outfit he will wear a red bandana — the traditional *paliacate* — around his neck and the by then standard leather strip top and truck tire bottom *huaraches* on his feet, and to his other side on the ground his coil woven straw sombrero will rest next to him to reveal his still salt and pepper hair. And now too a city audience, complete with European immigrant, *gringa* tourist and even a granddaughter in jeans just like the men. With this man the first person to make me note that no matter what the average age expectancy in the

area, the old could get to be very, very old, and very wise, indeed. The way the women, though they may look old to us by thirty, something remarked upon in every guidebook, if they make eighty, compared to us usually look surprisingly young.

While the greatest surprise, the greatest treat, the image that will stay with me forever, what I will tell Itzel about over and over that second time in her car, will be the *chiles* themselves, and even more than the eating of them, the preparation of this dish that both Magdalena and Matilde have assured us are the real *chiles en nogada*, the kind you'll never find in a restaurant anywhere, the kind not many people outside this town ever get to taste, that Itzel has of course missed because you can only get them during the season of that first trip, and in this place, or one like it among the mountain villages and towns of Puebla where walnuts are grown, if any others should ever bother with such a dish.

Because they must be made before the walnuts dry, and the walnuts themselves must be peeled, that thin bitter skin, even far more bitter before drying, that covers the kernel removed. And that is a task far too labour intensive for anything smaller than a neighbourhood, if not a village, or a large convent like the ones in which it is said they were invented, of women to take on. So that it is this peeling of the still juicy nut, not the addition of cream or goat cheese as in restaurants and recipes everywhere, that makes the walnut sauce white, and to burst on the tongue. What the three of us will watch, and occasionally taste, as Matilde looks on in delight as they are offered to us to try as hundreds, no thousands, of them — the halves the fragments of walnut — are peeled by hand by chatting laughing women, while others break open the pomegranates, chop the cilantro, gut the roasted chiles, or mix the *pica-dillo* — that mixture of ground meats nuts and fruit with which to stuff them. The basic rhythm in a symphony of colours, to which are added the new multi-coloured plastic containers, the bright cotton and damask of dresses, the ribbons in braided hair.

Until I too can see agriculture as culture, food, like language, as one of the sustaining complexities of human life. So that I, who only a short year or so before in my organizing days on my ten bucks weekly salary would brag that food made no difference whatsoever to me, I'd

take a pill if I could, I had more important things to talk about, will not be able to stop talking about it, this new discovery, and how suddenly important, just as important as anything I'd ever talked about, it will now seem. How in Huejotzingo I will see for the first time how food is more than nutrition or even nurturance, but is history—this time the history of my America—palpable in the hand, in the mouth. And I will emphasize again and again the nuanced nature of it.

And it won't just be because I want Itzel to know as we drive up that second time, but because I am fighting in my mind with Magdalena. Who had spent her good time on our way back in the car on that first occasion breathing deep and talking about being renewed by this return to the simple life at the very moment when Basta and I were being renewed by the brilliant complexity of the movement, and yet felt too in our journey to Huejotzingo such a depth of connection.

And besides I had already been inoculated against that sigh for the simple life in Billie's house. Too much talk of Dan as a simple man when I knew without anyone telling me that he would always be one of the most complex personalities I would ever come across. That human character is by nature complex as are all our languages. That there is neither natural man nor simple woman. That even when we try to explain simplicity, as in a Zen koan, we complicate it, set it against itself. Like in the twinning of Mesoamerican thought I would later learn about, where it is contrast that sets the world in motion. Through the Nahua creator god Ometeotl the Lord Lady of Duality, or the Hero Twins of the Maya who resurrect each other to return from Xibalba to save the world. The way the light interactions of difference not the harsh eliminations of fitness cause evolution, allow for survival. So that I will see in that ongoing neighbourhood conversation, in that town now grown into a small piece of a megalopolis that still sells its cider and candied fruit by the roadside, and note too, even in the talk inducing approving and disapproving stares at Matilde on that second trip, the place where change can start.

The truth is I will probably be babbling on about it even more for Matilde's sake than for Itzel's, and god knows Basta had already heard all about this new thinking of mine in any number of my Riff against

the chain-link riffs. But the truth is Matilde will be in the car with us, just as she had been on the way back on that first trip, and even if Magdalena had spoken mostly in English, for Marie Claire's sake she said as she shared with us what she considered her depth of understanding of Mexican culture, and which was indeed a depth of understanding of the culture of the Mexicans she hung with, full as many middle to upper class intellectual Mexicans' heads can be with stereotypes of inscrutable if resentful Indians and happier but simple mestizo peasants, I still won't know how much Matilde had understood, or how much it might affect her, the way Billie's narrative of Dan's inarticulate Indianness had affected me. Had made me feel I had to reject Dan to escape into the world of the mind I envisaged for myself even as I started to work in the causes he believed in and to use my mind to understand them.

And I will want somehow for Matilde to understand that there was value and even seeds of change in where she came from. That that was what Basta and I had seen on that brilliant fall day among the *chiles* such short but difficult months before. Not a relaxing return to the simple life. As if there could be such a thing as the simple life. All that nonsense in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. As if we don't need to fulfill our social needs in order to establish a means by which we can fulfill our need for food and shelter. As if all people do not express spirituality or make art. As if that art is not by its very nature complex. Even, like the *chiles en nogada*, in their colours their flavours, as if in practicing making them, the voices of the women, the patting out of the tortillas were not a practice as great as the routine playing of a violin.

And because I had not had the strength, the wherewithal to face down Magdalena on that ride, wanted to savour my own feelings about the trip rather than defend myself as I was called romantic, silly, without a scientific or an objective approach to life, the way I had been so often by Billie. So I will try to make up for it, and to prepare Itzel. Though it will be Basta in the end who sums it up. Just says: She's Our Lady of the Indicative, all right. And explains that to Matilde for the first time. And asks her to join our *Hermanidad* in a vote for complexity.

With the laughter in the girl's eyes showing she needs neither

encouragement nor explanation. After all, this bright young *muchacha*, in both senses of the word, told us when we invited her to a movie that though she was sure *La Señora O* would let her go with a smile, *La Señora* would equally as surely take it out on her later. Matilde will be no stranger to paternalism or for that matter *chingaquetismo* and its adherents, and will know already how to parse them. So that looking at Matilde I will have no doubt that already, despite all Magdalena's talk of the real Mexico, this small town girl understands both the sophisticated Magdalena and her mother far better than they do her, and that the two of us understand particularly well why Basta adds, putting together what I have not: Whatever anyone might say about Mateo, he is no simple man. Any more than your Dan.

So that I will know he has seen through to what underlies my words. So that—for a last time perhaps—I think he always will.

Though I still believe what I said that day, the way I still believe so many things I believed then. Can see in the small connections between people places from which realization rather than reification can arise. See even in Cancún those decades later, in that city built too after I left, and as significant in the changing dialogue as the discovery of Cacaxtla or the excavation of the Templo Mayor, as part of the perfect antidote to Nothing ever happens in this country. So that while I will mourn the ecological disaster of the Maya Riviera still I will hear so many more bold Maya voices, see the signs written in the new Yukatek orthography even as I eat my flavourless *chiles en nogada* with their less than fresh walnut sauce in the one upscale restaurant of an all-inclusive hotel I have come to for a multinational wedding.

Noting as I pop pomegranate in my mouth the seeds of change even there, as I think of my walk through Chichén Itzá not with our official guide but with our Maya bus driver speaking of his grandfather's work with Linda Schele the great Mayanist and art historian, part of the decisive deciphering of the Maya script, as he speaks of her work, his grandfather's work, on the restoration of the Temple of a Thousand Columns, and I of all Dan had taught me of the Mesoamerican connections to our people in the north.

While at the same time we both mourn the destruction of the

marine life of Caleta Xel Há, once deemed the world's greatest natural aquarium, now an ersatz nature park where almost nothing lives, the mangrove swamp all cleaned up so you can tube through it without your butt getting bitten off by an American alligator, the few fish near its outlet to the sea all farmed and released for the not so very discerning snorkellers to see, there where I snorkelled once among fish in their thousands, among anemones and urchins and sea fans clinging to rocks and when diving quickly through a brief tunnel raised my hand too far and broke off a red urchin spine into its back, and only just remembered in the instant pain not to surface or try to breathe till I reached the end of the tunnel.

And pissed on the wound then of course, as I'd been told to do by a *comandante* in the Guatemalan *guerrilla* of the seventies in Mexico on a kind of R&R as members of the *guerrilla* of the eighties too will later do, a movement contact of course, with whom my partner and I will leave his .308 carbine when we depart the country, not quite the *carabina treinta-treinta* of Mexican revolutionary songs, nor with a long enough rifled barrel to make a sniper's weapon, but in the *guerrilla* any arm will do.

So for all we will know as we return to Huejotzingo in Itzel's car on the second trip how terribly such hope in change can go awry, we will need to return to that place. And to share it with her. To breathe not just the hope, but the instrumentality we had known, that we will be trying to gain back through our work in the semi-clandestine cell we will be by then immersed in, so that we will wish to check in, to see if we can feel again what we had felt. While instead of harmony, it will give us tales of *jueputas*, *hidalgos* and chaos. What we had not counted on, for all we should have known, was the noise. Just how loud they are: shotgun blasts.

So that somewhere between the convent's sixteenth century walls so like the church in the Plaza and the smell of gunpowder and pulque, the wild dance of characters covered from top of head to huarachied foot, the beards of their hieratic masks in ochre and umber and lamp black, their grins fixed their eyes emptied, we will to our surprise still find what we had longed for. Though not the rhythms of daily life

exemplified in the food making for yearly celebration, still there will be the overwhelming dislocation of true carnival so celebrated in post-modern discourse to take us out of time: into myth perhaps, or ourselves. So that we will be open to those places we will need most to go.

Even as Itzel calls it. Declares her need to get away from the smell of gunpowder and wild dances, and those men so different from, so reminiscent of, other soldiers. As she takes the two of us by the arm, and Basta takes Matilde by hers, and we turn to leave, walking slowly from the central square of Huejotzingo, much as Itzel had once left the Plaza of Tlatelolco once she had stopped running in order to look around. And we will pile into the Peugeot, and Basta will drive us away because he had said he would share the driving, but also because Itzel is shaking. And we won't say goodbye to anyone, not that I think our leaving was noticed, and we will make our way back toward Amecameca, on the skirts of the Popocatepetl, that other, this one still active, volcano. Where we will let that loud chaotic trip, the shotgun blasts a perfect even if rather stereotypical masculine partner to the calm womanly patting out of the tortillas of the first, push us into a place of recognition, of realization, from which there can be no return.

◇ The first thing Basta will do after he helps her out of the car is apologize to Itzel for the noise as Matilde and I pull the *mole* and *pulque* we have been given out of the car. And we collapse onto the beds in the small motel, though maybe it's only after we've eaten that one of us says: It must have been awful, those masks, that anonymity, those grins, after the Plaza. We hadn't thought ...

And Itzel, says: Yes, I ... I hadn't thought either.

And Matilde, who doesn't know says: You, you were in the Plaza? What was it ...

And she stops, realizing there are some questions you just don't ask. Except that Itzel will put her hand over Matilde's and it won't be wrong but terribly right as Itzel's eyes seem to drift far away and she goes to the door and opens it so she can look out at the volcanoes as she speaks, and for all we know what mountainsides her eyes cling to, we will know too that she is in the Plaza, inside the sense memory of it.

So that Itzel will feel herself awaiting the dusk inside the afternoon of the second of October, the warmth of it, and the anticipation of that moment of pink and blue without sadness cocooned the way she will be in the excitement of the people around her, how thrilled she will feel to be among them, how the girls' dresses will glow with the orange end of daylight. And how they will all seem suspended there on the raised *tezontle* grey and red platform of the Plaza, a bright dish all too ready to be eaten. But by all of them she'll think, by all of them. That way you breathe sometimes in sensual joy among the bodies around you on a beach, feel you are drinking, eating the world.

Until she'll hear the helicopter, the scissorlike chopping of its blades, and anticipation will turn to anxiety, then fear. While she will make herself believe it belongs to the news media, even if there is a strange fluttering in her stomach as she merges with the crowd.

Because the soldiers, the police, the ones she will have seen as she approached, the few of them, there was something in them she will say, something. In how they will turn away from her smile, it will remind her of something, not of the guard who had laughed at telling her that her parents had been sent to Bunker H, not him, but others, the soldiers who could not meet her young woman's gaze as they were herded onto the cattle cars.

They're not all the same, she will whisper. Not that it makes very much difference. Not in what they end by doing. Not usually anyway. And she will shrug. Because that night it had.

She will remember clearly when the first flare fell, and the second, though she will not see the signal from the white gloved hand that will confirm the leaders of the Strike Committee have been corralled there on the third-floor balcony of the Edificio Chihuahua. Green she will think the flare was, bright and green for a moment before the image dissolves into the sound of gunfire, a kind of communal synaesthesia sight into sound into smell, sudden fear and gunpowder, then a simultaneous intake of breath, like a hiss as someone nearby stumbles, and others begin to run. Then more running, all unclear, though the colours still bright too bright are what has made the coloured costumes and masks of this Huejotzingo day seem so overwhelming.

Did you see me looking for shoes on the ground? she'll say. Did you see me? There'll have been so many of them there on the rock pavement of the Plaza as she ran.

Even as she sees herself passing by what will seem a terrified soldier as she finally gets down off the Plaza's platform and reaches the edge of the buildings—she will not remember if down a stair or jumping off, probably the way so many lost their shoes—though from the many appearing in the photos we'll all be pretty sure that some at least will come from bodies that will subsequently be dragged away, in a clean-up that begins long after Itzel gets to the buildings and runs between them to make her getaway.

While in those narrower spaces she will hear the panicked breathing of those around her, though she will never remember exactly how she came to be there and will no longer know how far away she'll be from the Plaza itself, just that the shooting could still be heard, so she will wonder if perhaps she is in some sort of passageway it will seem so filled with light, but yes, there will be twilight still so who could know it hardly mattered, what she will know for sure is that the soldiers would be there soon, she will remember someone being pulled away from her getting clubbed, will have noticed them clubbing others, see others fall sure they'd been shot, so what was there to do, what was there to do with everyone running, running, and she'll be getting tired and she'll know they're surrounded so instead of keeping going she'll slow down and move closer to the wall of one of the buildings, and stand upright and look around and straighten her skirt, then open her handbag to find her lipstick and put some on, rubbing her lips together as women do, which is when two young students will stop.

God they could have been even younger than you Matilde, she'll say. Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen. First year of *prepa* or *voca*, last of *secundaria*.

And they'll stare at her as if she's crazy, crazy or from another planet putting on lipstick like that, or maybe, just maybe, someone who didn't really know what was happening. Someone just coming home. Only to have her walk up to them, without thinking about it, and put her arms through theirs, the way she will through ours as we leave the central square in Huejotzingo.

You are my children, she'll tell them. Remember.

And they will start to walk. The three of them, to walk. And as they walk they will collect two more young students and then two more. As she measures her pace, calmly walking toward where she has parked the Peugeot. And yes, she will squeeze them in, two in the front and four in the back, she will comment on it again the next day on our more comfortable ride back, and as they walk she will smile her privileged blonde smile at any soldiers that she sees, and if they even look a question at her, that is what she will repeat: They are my children, my children, my children's friends, she'll say. I've promised them a movie.

And those soldiers, the same ones who will soon be breaking down the doors into the apartments in those buildings, they will not stop her. They will smile and move back and away. And let her through. With her six charges. None of whom should have passed for her children. And who knows if it really will be a question of class. Of class and hierarchy and caste, an internalized admiration so strong those soldiers, who will know their place as soldiers most always know their place — could not move against her. An admiration for the *güera* that they could no more change than she could change the admiration she felt for those *güero* Nazi guards.

Or if it will be a deeper form of authority they will feel emanating from her that will make them take her at her word despite their orders, because they want to. Because she will make them want to. For that moment it will be a way out of doing a harm they will not really want to do, and they will take it. The force of what she will do, the moral authority in it, will set them free to listen to their best selves and not their desperation or their orders.

Because there will be other stories like that, the way there always are, which will emerge slowly from the Plaza. The apartment dweller who, when the soldiers break in, will claim nine young people, all about the same age, as her siblings. The three young men who will walk along singing old *corridos* and acting drunk. The smiling young girl who will just say hello and then walk by. Stories to be set out like bright gems among the repeated horrors of lying all night on piles of bodies, or of enduring days of torture before release, or watching soldiers shoot un-

armed civilians without thought, demonstrators and passers-by alike. Or shoot their comrades in arms caught in their own crossfire.

And too the other stories, the ones of the political prisoners now held in the Lecumberri prison, the members of the Strike Committee surrounded before the firing will even have begun, who will tell, full of opposite insights into the human condition, stories of soldiers out of their own fear egging each other on to more and more brutal acts as the captured leaders will be made to run a gauntlet: beaten, clubbed with rifle butts, spat upon, insulted, clothes torn away. The two sides of humanity, as close to each other as the two sides of a coin. And who would know, ever, which way the coin would fall. What would dictate to which side any one of them would jump. Any of us might jump. With our own love, all our metaphors of love, or with our own fear. With the stereotypes that give free rein to our hate. Our rage. Our joy in torment. In the suffering of others. *La saña*.

So that after Itzel is done, it will be a while before anyone speaks.

You are so brave, Matilde will say. So very brave.

And then we will be silent again. It will seem for a long time until Basta says, looking at his hands: I don't know if I could have been as brave as you, but I still wish I could have been there. And then he'll kind of give one of his signature Basta giggles and add: Anything would have been better than Daffy Duck.

And I'll be about to add: With Minnie Mouse in a bowel movement, when Itzel says: I'm sure you were a great deal more than Daffy Duck.

Saying just what I'd been saying for the months after that Columbia conference, while Basta will start a new thought with the words: Think what we could have done ...

And I will be about to jump in again, to say a little bit more seriously that perhaps we'd only been cartoons to some, but it was still important we'd been there to do what little we could, say what nobody else had been there to say, when he will look up at me.

Think how much more information Itzel and I could have gotten to you if we'd both been here. How much more of the word we could have gotten out.

And staring back at him I will grow cold. And notice as his eyes

go back to Itzel how he has covered her hand with his. And I will say nothing. Even what I will truly believe, that his presence had been responsible for whatever impact we had had. And that he had come into his own there. His authenticity, his knowledge had impressed them all. Even the Situationists. Why else would he have become their target. They didn't make cartoons out of everyone who got up on the stage. I was just the translator.

While only a piece of that last thought will remain as my mind freezes: that I am getting lost in the translation. That he is translating himself to me. Them to me. Even as he goes on, perhaps seeing something of what is happening to me in my face or perhaps just because it is the next emotionally logical place to go, to take from what Matilde has said and build on it, but now holding Itzel's hand he says: You have always been brave. You have, Itzel. Even in the camps. You were brave. We've talked about this: your bravery. You can see it now, can't you?

And I'll think I am being ridiculous. This is all it has ever been. Encouragement. The encouragement she so richly deserves. And if he's been giving her this encouragement in the cups of coffee or *atole* they've enjoyed after their study group meetings nights I'm with my friends in San Carlos talking the political relevance of art or out on *pintas*, well that's as it should be, isn't it? This is what it means to have the kind of open friendship we have, doesn't it? We share different aspects of ourselves with different people, don't we? And think of how much Itzel is learning from Sebastián. I can even hear it as she begins to talk about the camps. To tell Matilde of her past. What will in turn allow Matilde to tell her own and Clotilde's story to us. Participate with it in so grownup a way.

And I will make myself relax. And I will enjoy hearing Itzel. Love it in fact. And believe that it is good to hear a reformulation of some of the ideas I too have discussed with Basta in her framing of the story she now tells. How she uses the politics of the moment, the new theories arising in Latin America, the ones still so important in our understanding of capitalist globalization, that one that says even the industrial revolution was no simple natural advance, but resulted from the mega-deaths of the First Nations of the Americas. With Europe's own

genocidal racism its by-product. Because civilization can never be a simple evolution from step to step, from A to Z, but must contain always a multiplicity of possibilities—something you had to know if surrounded by civilizations of advanced astronomers and agriculturalists with no iron age. While Itzel will be placing herself and her story into this new and larger narrative of exile and return, fluidity and agency: her moment not under her control, as history is never under any one individual's control, but hers to ride, to shape.

So that even if I see her looking from time to time over at Sebastián to see if she has got it right, it will not matter. It will just seem a product of that study group Basta will be leading, the kind such organizations as ours always had, with mine more art oriented than his, we were considered ideological equals after all, and always in them we found and tested ideas, so that it would be right for her to check back with him, no matter that there are those who I'm sure would maintain, certainly in bitter moments I've done it myself, that everything she will say that night came out of the chameleonlike protective coloration she had long ago learned to take on, that will always have allowed her to survive if not to thrive, the one that will make me shiver that morning years later in the hearing room. Because I don't believe for a minute she was showing her new ideas off to us just to show herself one of us: that she deserved to live, just as she had once raised her arm. Because still I know: We will not make her say I.

I know that much: We will not make her say I.

Because when she arrives at that moment days after the guard has told her that her parents have been sent to Bunker H, to *Der Himmel Bunker*, when she curls into herself on the ground and says that if their deaths, their deaths so many deaths, could be made to happen in the world into which she has been born, then she will not live, when she arrives at the moment of her getting up she will say I. Without ameliorating the blows raining down on her, the deep wound inflicted by this knowledge, still she will say I. Not my capo, my sister, made me get up, but: I.

I got up. I got up. I realized my capo was right that I owed it to my parents. So I got up. And I knew I would have to follow my sister, do

everything she did. She was so much stronger. If I was to survive, I had to. So I did. And I did. Survive.

And when she stops, she will be trembling. And the hairs on the back of my neck and on my arms will rise, the way they do sometimes when you hear music. And I will know I am hearing something beautiful, that even when I try, I cannot change. She has taken a gift, and made it her own. Used it to change the most intimate of her dwellings inside herself.

The way I think we will all hear it. And it will change something in us forever. Whatever should follow. To become a place we could always return to: that knowledge.

So that it will become my imagination's personal *retablo*. One of those paintings, usually on tin, so often found in churches in Spain and in Latin America that give thanks to a saint, to a version of the Virgin, for some miracle, some rescue, some cure, some survival, some nick of time. A shipwreck, a lightning bolt, a disease, a runaway horse, or, in these days of *telenovelas* and talk shows, on typical Mexican irony, the gift of Viagra to save your marriage. And this a gift to all in that room, a gift she will give back to us. Perfectly framed. So that I can always take it out, just to look at it. To feel its contours.

The ochre of Huejotzingo's dry season streets, the dust arising to coat dancing legs, the grey grisaille of gunpowder rising in the air. The umbers of the *pulquería* interiors from which so much laughter emerges. The high tones of red painted cheeks on bearded masks, the veridians the ultramarines the cobalts the cochineal based carmines of old costumes. The sunset glazes to capture the pink light of snow on the volcano. The subtle sepias and ochres of the Pre-Columbian bowl given us by Mateo. The events set out in comic strip style, one after the other as is often done, Matilde's story its final frame, because I will always think too, Itzel freed her to speak, to enter the world of that little girl she had been so few short years before when those men started their lascivious remarks, even sometimes grabbing her. With Itzel at the *retablo*'s centre, the curlicuing *volutas* signifying speech in Mesoamerican picture text emerging in hard edged contrasting fluorescent colours complex from her mouth. So bright. So very bright.

And behind this Day-Glo *retablo*, the caput mortuum of a sixteenth century convent's tezontle walls. That I will dedicate in thanks over the years, along with any other *retablo* I will ever dream, in tribute to his final canonization, to Saint Oscar Arnulfo Romero, murdered by Salvadoran paramilitaries during the civil war of the eighties as he said Mass.

Yet I will not be surprised when two weeks later I am sitting with Basta in a restaurant and his voice seems to be coming from so very far away.

She needs me, he is saying. She needs me. To continue her growth, to continue my growth. She has come such a long way in such a short time. But she's still afraid, you know. She needs me now, she really needs me.

What will surprise me is my own response.

It Won't Take Kryptonite



WE WILL GO to that restaurant for the first time, the three of us, right after an evening tour of Tlatelolco with Itzel. When she will take Basta and me on the route she had walked to get out such short weeks before. When she will for the first time try to remember where exactly she had picked up each young person. Though the Plaza tour itself is something we will do often enough with various people in the months directly following the Massacre. Sometimes with Itzel, sometimes not. And each time we'll discover other people doing the same. People to whom we will flash the 'V' with our fingers. The 'V' that means peace in the States, but in Latin America: *Venceremos*. We will prevail.

The 'V' then of both my movements, and flashed there in the Plaza not upward in the air the way we all will throughout the city for those magnificent movement weeks, but down at the side of the body, now a secret gesture, telling each other why we are there, to what we belong. And always the little stories of who had been where when, and how they had escaped, and who had fallen and what the army had done. I'll even take my brother there that winter with Basta and Itzel when he comes to visit us shortly after getting back from Vietnam. He'd been an armorer Stateside, and he knew ordnance. That's the way he'll put it: I know ordnance.

So that while he walks with us he'll deftly identify what kind of armament had made which holes and which dents in the walls of those buildings so much like urban working and middle class buildings everywhere. Except for the bullet holes which, war by war, get less and less exclusive by the year. Though perhaps not covered over as quickly—even if it did take months—as in this development of which the Mexican government has been particularly proud, the way they are still proud even now no matter the further tragedy of death as buildings collapsed during the 1985 earthquake of the way those rectangular buildings with their trees and little parks, their balconies and beige façades I seem always to remember bright coloured, surround the Plaza of the Three Cultures of Tlatelolco.

Tlatelolco. The place where, so ironically, the last *tlatoani* of the Mexica, Cuauhtémoc, himself a Tlatelolca rather than a noble of Tenochtitlán—a Tenochca—as Moctezuma had been, will make his last stand against the Spanish, and their allied indigenous nations brought to Cortés's side by Malintzin's golden tongue, like the Huetjotzinca from whom Matilde will descend. So that still if you visit there you will see truncated pyramid steps from the precontact central square where this small Aztec city once had its temple, filled with garbage by the Tenochcas after a pitched internecine battle, even as it became the greatest market of the Aztec Empire, to raise its myriad voices almost right there beneath your feet.

The same temple from whose stones the church of Santiago Tlatelolco, still active on one side of today's plaza, will be quickly built, the first of its kind that first year after the conquest, with the same first Franciscans a decade or so later building the *convento* attached to it just as they did the Convento de Huejotzingo. Only to start in Tlatelolco the first European style school for Indigenous youth the way friars all over Mesoamerica, first the Franciscans then the Dominicans and Augustinians, later the Jesuits, will build schools or try occasionally to create Utopian communities though mostly they'll just coax the Indigenous into Christianity perhaps even into turning their other cheeks while their lands are being redistributed into mostly Spanish hands.

At the same time as their more soldierly brethren enticed the

conquered and allied highland Nahua peoples alike into foregoing their regularly scheduled ritualistic *xochiyaoyotl*—their flower wars—to leave their mountain valleys to join wars of conquest throughout Mesoamerica while taking up a new model of total warfare, of scorched earth and civilian death, of killing them all, complete now with the new god to sort them out. So it will seem of little wonder that snipers could be positioned on such a church roof during the Tlatelolco massacre while a government cinematographer will document the event leaving horrifying footage still not revealed to the public in its entirety, or that neither the church nor the cloisters of the monastery will be opened to the fleeing demonstrators, and parts of the monastery used instead as temporary holding cells.

And then to one side of the church out on the Plaza itself a plaque, distinct then though its incised words have been allowed to fade since, that still stands ready to make sure any visitor who walks there understands the Plaza's name, the three cultures of pyramid, church and housing development, there's this dedication:

On August 13, 1521, heroically defended by Cuauhtémoc, Tlatelolco fell to Hernán Cortés. It was neither a triumph nor a defeat, but the painful birth of the mestizo city that is the Mexico of today.

So that whether one wishes to read triumph or defeat or just what is and therefore what must be made the most of into the beginning in this place of the great dying of all the mainland peoples of the Americas—smallpox was already rampant in the area by the time Tlatelolco fell—that reaches so far beyond the city of the Mexica, Mexico City, and even the country that bears the same name, still we can all agree on the depth of the pain represented in this short statement and let it stand as a metonymy rather than a hegemony, as we celebrate the multiplicity of the indigenous cultures that have survived to flavour a mestizo world. The sign's poignancy made so much greater by this recent cataclysm, now, too, finally, memorialized there, its newer embossed stone letters overshadowing the older one, as it speaks of *el dos de octubre de 1968*, that day which will change all our lives. Out of which too, a new Mexico

continues to grow. Overseen still perhaps by the grinning goddess Tlazoltéotl, seductress, garbage eater, labouring mother, so often portrayed squatting, her child emerging from between her legs into the intense tapestry that will always make up the Mexico of whichever today.

Though what we will notice most and what will make Itzel shiver not just this but every time we come to any edge of the wide smooth Plaza and look down the distance to the ground, is what an easy target they must have been, all those people.

Sitting ducks. Sitting ducks, that's what my brother will say, over and over. While he identifies the marks left, some by thirty some by fifty calibre machine guns. Others without doubt by rifles. Thirty calibre again. On semiautomatic or automatic. He could tell that from the sweep of the holes. Though the words I will have trouble translating for Basta and Itzel are those two he will repeat, coming up only with *blancos fáciles*, even *blancos facilísimos*—easy targets, the easiest of targets.

Then I will turn to my brother as he continues to identify the bullet holes in the not yet replaced plastic side panels of buildings, the strafing tears in the bark of trees, the gouge marks in concrete or stone, the possible ricochets. And I will tell him another story of those sitting ducks, those too easy targets, one I had already heard during the Olympics in Tavo's living room. Where Basta and I will be invited, as Marie Claire works in her studio, to listen to a friend of his, a martial artist of great renown, a Houdini or Evel Knievel daredevil type really, whose public demonstrations will often enough place him in harm's way.

Because cousin Octavio the doctor isn't just Tavo but Octo el Pulpo, a.k.a. the Octopus, sometimes even Doc Oc because Mexicans love superheroes and crazy even if half English nicknames and Spiderman among them, and there's no one doesn't know Tavo knows everyone, that he's got a tentacle in every ocean river cove and backwater, moves not just in the world of famous folk singers or self-educated officials in obscure towns who collect the history of their ancestors but in that of comic book characters come to life, of escape artists and magicians, *curanderas* and *brujos* and spiritualist séances, charms sold in markets to make you love or stop loving, invisible or invincible or so fast that like this man you will barely be seen as you move to catch a bullet in your

hand the way it's said the best Korean martial artists can do, or dive out of a plane while removing chains with your cape only opening at the last moment into a parachute.

And who knows where Tavo had found this guy, what *bruja* or *curandero* had first spoken in awe of his performances, what medium had called them a breath of the beyond, in what market hung next to what curative herbs dried devilfish or magic mushrooms Tavo had first seen displayed a photo of him in his bright superhero costume, but we'll know when Tavo speaks of him with both a twinkle in his eye and a grinning enthusiasm that he is not taken in by the hype. Yet the level of the man's physical achievements fascinates him, probably becomes the principal reason he and Marie Claire will have both their daughters enter the martial arts to become the first Westerners to be invited to train in a very prestigious—and mysterious—Tibetan monastery. Something Mercedes will tell me about long after I leave.

Though it is not the man's martial prowess that will bring us there that Olympic evening, perhaps the very one we watch Czech dissident Vera Časlavská win gold on the parallel bars while this man speaks of her technique, but because he is also a *paracaidista* and member of an elite unit of the Mexican army. A *capitán* I think or maybe a *teniente*, even a *coronel* though I doubt that last, and anything I think I remember of them could as easily have formed part of his stage name: *El Coronel Maravilla* or some such. Though the story he will tell, always I will remember that clearly. And how much he wants it heard. What Tavo will underline: This man had insisted he invite us when he heard we were in the movement. And the man himself will emphasize how he hopes we will tell others. The usual request: that we get the word out.

Then, after announcing in solemn tones that the army is in near rebellion, this man will look down at his hands and begin to cry. And it will be a long time before he recovers, as he continues to speak through his tears. As he recounts how in the Plaza it was government snipers who started the shooting, who caused the soldiers of the regular army to return fire and to panic and to kill more than a hundred of their own in their crossfire. And that this was what, this was what had done it, that crossfire was making them rebel.

And finding out.

Not just that they'd killed their own but that they'd been betrayed into killing them, and the students too, because they'd believed it was the students, the demonstrators, that the students were firing on them, the students had set them up, lured them in, and why, why, why do that, why plan that, and so disciplined, firing from the windows of those apartment buildings, so *a propósito*, the students had been meaning to massacre them, they were convinced it wasn't the other way around, they were just there to keep order, not to take any action, and we, Basta and I, we were students, we had to understand, what had happened was not the army's doing, not their army, the regular army, not what they would have done: They'd been trapped, lied to, waylaid.

They had believed they were under fire from the students. They'd been tricked into believing that. Truly, they had. We must believe him, they had. Because thinking the students had betrayed them they'd betrayed the students, so they were doubly betrayed, all of them doubly betrayed, because it wasn't the students it was their own. Not their direct superiors, they hadn't known either, it was layered this trick, but their own.

Nor do I remember if this man will ever name it, know if he ever knew it, ever say it was the Presidential Guard, under direct orders from President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz the way his successor President Luis Echeverría will declare, I just know how strongly that information decades later released from the US National Security Archives will resonate with me when I hear it on NPR, so that I'll know I've heard it before, the way it will resonate again when I read González de Alba's *Otros Días, Otros Años*, the memoir of a bitter ex-political prisoner who, out of step with his comrades, even in trying to minimize the Massacre and excuse the army instead inculpates the Batallón Olimpia, so maybe this man really will say it, will know to be just that specific, though whatever he'll say he'll mention for sure that it was some elite army unit—and not his either. Going through more than once how the regular army after behaving the way they had toward the students, starting with calling them *traidores, hijos de la chingada* then acting accordingly, had then found out it was they themselves who had acted

like *cabrones coyones hijos de la puritita chingada* not *hombres hechos y derechos, pero puros pendejos, pendejísimos* because they'd been fooled too.

Even if it wasn't their own officers, still the army itself, their institution, what gave them their identity made them men, *machos, hombres duros pero justos*, had betrayed them. And then there will come the repeated question, the one they all were asking: How were they supposed to behave now? How were they supposed to hold their heads up *pendejos* that they were after they'd shot down all those unarmed students, girls as young as their daughters, and others too, workers, bystanders, street vendors women as old as his own *señora madre*? And their own, they'd killed so many of their own. How could *un hermano del ejército*, a fellow soldier do that to them, how was that possible?

And this man will repeat again his first words: The army was in near rebellion. So many soldiers. In near rebellion. And that we had to tell the others, we had to. Even if nothing came of it: Others had to know. Had to understand. And that they were sorry. And intended to do something about it. Something. Because they had been doubly betrayed. And he had asked Tavo to bring us there just so we would know. Just in case. And he will keep on crying.

For a while.

Then something will slowly change. And his swagger will return.

Yes, we must do it, we have to. Like in *La Revolución*. We are compelled to rebel. What else is there? *¿Qué más da?*

He will grin then. And though he will continue to look directly at us, the way so many good entertainers do before they enter their act, I will see the moment his gaze widens out, becomes interior, as if imagining the character he has to become in order to begin.

And the hairs on the back of my hands will stand up right then, and I will feel a sharp cold tingle in them the way you do so often at the first sign of danger, like what happens when you're driving and the truck coming toward you briefly crosses the centre line.

Does he feel too safe? I'll briefly think. Is the regard his martial arts community, his daredevil community, even Tavo and his *curandero* community have for him, the safety of the bright superhero suit he wears to showcase his abilities, are they fooling him? Because there is something

in how he speaks, how his machismo reasserts itself, that goes so far beyond the limits any of the students any of the activists I'll ever know — even my perennially locked and loaded downstairs neighbour kept in jail two extra years because of his mouth — will ever set themselves that I will find myself leaning forward to say: Please stop. Please.

Yet I won't do it. I am too fascinated by the insights he is giving us. By the tantalizing act he is able to make me believe will follow even as I notice how one by one the eyes of both Tavo and Sebastián will seek out mine. And then when we get home I won't myself for the longest time be able to stop crying, and Basta will hold me and cry for a moment himself though we will say nothing of what we will have seen in that last moment, nor will we mention it to Itzel or any of the others in our group when we later give his information to them, because we know that to say out loud that you believe someone doomed will always seem to call that doom, to lay down the very curse you wish to avoid but whose course you already know. That your words will make real what you most ardently wish could be sidestepped.

And then, there will come the day that we are once more at Tavo's, and Marie Claire will be there, and Itzel, when Tavo will look at us and tell us this man has been killed in a helicopter crash. And we will look from one to the other.

Sí, I will say, and I will look at Basta.

Sí, Basta will say and he will look at Tavo.

Sí, Tavo will confirm, and he will look at me.

And then we will all look down and away. And say nothing more. And Tavo will not have to say that no one believes it to have been an accident: It will be the same look that passed between us that night.

And only later will we tell the other two that we had known him doomed from that very night. What I will tell my brother too, as we walk between the bullet holes. No matter if you can catch bullets in your hand or swim to the surface after escaping the tightest of locked safes, climb the smoothest of glass building walls in your bare feet or slip silently through the air removing the chains from around your body, no matter how long and how comfortably you occupy that magical space between fact and fantasy, still, it won't take Kryptonite to kill you.

So that I will imagine him always tumbling to the ground in a sparkling bright Mexican wrestler style superhero suit, the kind whose mask I will buy a grandson years later on a trip back, no matter that I know that in his grey beret and dull camo he has been consumed by the flames. Even as Tavo tells us of the events held, the speeches made, the newly written *corrido* sung for him. And that will be the last we will hear. Except that Tavo and Marie Claire's first daughter will bear his name.

And I will tell his story more than once. The way I will here, and to my brother in the Plaza. Even of the way this macho military man broke down and cried that night at how he, at how his comrades in arms, had felt doubly betrayed, and how he had to return to his swagger and doom himself with talk of revolution to overcome the bone chilling effect of that feeling. And of the grief at how in turn they had betrayed themselves, and each other. And my brother will lean against a wall in an obscure dark corner below the bullet holes, and tell me that there's many a Vietnam vet has felt the same. And then he'll light a joint.

While later as we walk again I will assure my brother too how for all that man's last macho bluster I will believe him. This man, this soldier, this crazy accomplished superhero costumed martial artist: even to the numbers I had believed him. That whether or not they were exact, they were close: close. No matter how braggadocio he might be in speaking of his own accomplishments, or how much he might crave more of an army rebellion than could ever be realized, of the numbers he will speak without exaggeration. And my brother at last will say too of those numbers that they are in proportion to the bullet holes. So that I will ask him with bitter humour that question I never asked in the *Sports Illustrated* house.

Well, armourer, I'll say, do you think you could come up with a formula for it? Like for the trajectory of an artillery shell. For how many you would kill, how many would fall before you? According to calibre of the weapon, rapidity of repeated fire, to stopping or penetrating power, to the speed of the bullet, the size of the Plaza, the length of time the shooting would go on. Do you think there is an equation that estimates how many of your presumed enemy you might kill, or how many of your own?

And I will notice that my voice has risen to a whine, that I am crying too, even as I flash the 'V' to another group that passes, and see in their eyes a recognition not just of my moving hand, but of my tears.

I will already know too that the story of this prestigious martial artist who died for his assertion that over one hundred soldiers were killed in their own crossfire—one hundred twenty-five is, I think, the exact number he used—the man I always imagine vibrant and red suited before an awestruck audience will weigh a great deal in what will make me a high counter, one who counts in hundreds of dead, in the matter of the Plaza. A high counter the way we designate those who have always estimated the Pre-Columbian populations of the Americas in the millions high counters, just because it is easier for business as usual, ideology as usual, to call such people something just that little bit dismissive in order to empty the two continents of their dead. That matches the way I see the Plaza being emptied of its dead.

Though there will be much more to push me in that direction too. And not just the many variegated stories of the witnesses. Of survivors who will lie all night among the bodies of the dead themselves pretending death and know that they are many; of demonstrators who will try to count those they see fall even as they run; of passers-by who will see bodies loaded onto trucks or into vans; of reporters who will know way more had fallen than they can or will ever write about.

Nor will it even be the number and variety of the silent bullet holes my brother will count. But too the suppression of story and of evidence that will follow. Of families who will have their dead returned only when they swear they have died from a different cause, perhaps at a different time, certainly somewhere else; of names families will become too afraid or too ashamed to mention; of students, even those not there that night, sent by the privileged to study in schools far away, by the poorer to work among distant relatives after quitting their studies; others older and younger deserting their families and fleeing on their own—to Texas, California, Chicago, New York, maybe Europe.

So many lives, like Ignacia's, built on pretending not to notice, not to see. I still remember her waving her hands in front of her, saying she'd never said anything about bullets through office windows, never.

We'd never heard her say any of those words she'd so clearly uttered in those first days after the Massacre, never, repeating herself, so desperate she'll be to get us to agree.

So that even today, when a multi-party system celebrates the documented forty-three as the Heroes of Democracy, and calls us to now formally memorialize those few names we have, to lay wreaths and other memorabilia in front of their small monument each year, on the second of October for the Massacre then again on the second of November for the Day of the Dead, when an altar might be made for them with freshly harvested marigolds, I cannot help believing that should tradition call us to imagine a pathway home made from those orange *cempaxóchitl* petals, when we might welcome them into the home of our minds if they cannot find their own, they would tell us that the enormity of the Tlatelolco Massacre is being shrunk to a bite sized, perhaps soundbite sized *bocadillo*. That like the custard filled *pan de muerto*, the Dead Day bread, we might be eating, will forever be an appetizer too easily served up, too easily swallowed, its sweetness too easily utilized to get us to forget by pretending to remember. Though the irony of that number will always resound: forty-three. Because it is the exact same number as the students disappeared in Ayotzinapa in 2014, heroes of democracy in their own right. Whose names new ways of disseminating information will allow to be immediately made known, even if few of their bodies, most likely too consumed in flames, will ever be located, not even their DNA identified. *Mientras la magnitud del 2 de octubre no se olvida.*

Because the weight of the many refusals to forget or even to normalize does inform how much more Mexico now does to find all its disappeared, the demonstrations, the recitation of names, the flags at half-mast, the small private museums, the larger public ones, El Museo de la Memoria Indómita in a small colonial building a few blocks from the Zócalo or El Centro Cultural Universitario Tlatelolco in the old Relaciones Exteriores highrise where Ignacia once worked and hid under her desk. As if the Plaza were a beginning point, a point of recognition no longer reserved for an upside down 'V' flashed from one hand to the next, so that as I walk toward it again fifty years later what

strikes me is how I see small stickers everywhere, just like the ones we pasted on walls or bus stops during the movement and after the horror of its ending, invitations or exhortations stamped with their small graphics now seen in exhibits of the art of sixty-eight, or just stamped letters like another I found on curled old packing tape inside a sketch book from the time repeating just those words already telling us of the second of October that must never be forgotten, only the words I see on the steps of an overpass over a wide avenue leading toward the Plaza that didn't even exist when I lived in the city contains only the two words: *¿dónde están?* Asking where they are, the disappeared, the way the cry resounds throughout Latin America, and in so much of the translation I have done, the Plaza a beginning point for me too, with the one face that fits on so small a sticker standing in for all of them, the thousands and hundreds of thousands, the way the chant, begun I think by the *Madres De Plaza De Mayo* in Argentina, resounds to include them all: *¡Vivos Los Llevaron! ¡Vivos Los Queremos!* Alive They Took Them! Alive We Want Them!

Though when I see the photos of the mothers of Ayotzinapa the morning newly inaugurated president Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador announces plans for a truth commission about the events surrounding the students' disappearance, I notice the only words visible along with the children's pictures are *¡Vivos Los Llevaron!* Perhaps because the truth is all of us know them dead. So that it suddenly no longer seems to matter how many exactly there were in the Plaza, just that they went so long uncounted, in their moment bereft, in a way that no small monument with names found since can attest. Even if those names must be attested to for all the years *que no constaban en actas*. Were not found in documents. Anywhere. Anywhere at all.

Though more important, more subversive, than the official monument, it seems to me, is the small almost cheerful three dimensional model of the sixty-eight Olympic dove in relief as if formed out of the central white circle of the blue white and red logo of the CNH, the National Strike Committee of 1968, then launching itself into the sky, brought by a pickup truck and left in a small green triangle at the edge of the Zócalo opposite the National Palace the evening of the commemorative fiftieth anniversary demonstration. Antimonuments such things

are being called, placed by groups of activists, artists and others, then massive petitions launched to keep them in place, this one Mexico City's fifth, only the embossed sepia plaque at its base solemn with photos of tanks. While on its side a passerby can read: *Dos De Octubre No Se Olvida. Fue el Ejército. Fue el Estado.* The Second of October is not Forgotten. It was the Army. It was the State.

Because even if I cannot attest to the accuracy of Paco Taibo's airplane carrying bodies to be dumped in the sea like so many have been over the last decades in Latin America, their bodies never found or found by luck, like Pope Francis' good friend Esther Ballestrino whose broken body washed ashore. So that it is as if those bodies, the unnamed bodies of the Plaza are tumbling through time gathering more and more bodies, starting with the dead of the Halconazo, the next demonstration to hit the streets of Mexico City on the tenth of June in seventy-one, the demonstration the violence in Alfonso Cuarón's movie *Roma* centres around, taking place just after most of the sixty-eight prisoners got out or back from exile to be organized in good part from my phone by my downstairs neighbour and his *compañeros*, when I will meet the line of march only to find those arriving in time with the riot police already desperate, scattered. But which despite its dead filled us with a sense of triumph the paramilitary perpetrators and their government handlers were so quickly recognized, only to devolve just as quickly into the Dirty War that sliced in silence through the seventies leading slowly to the Chiapas rebellion of the nineties, all the unnamed dead accruing like compound interest until we arrive at the named but missing students of Ayotzinapa, the more than two hundred thousand dead from the drug war, its thirty-eight thousand missing. And among them always, the thoughtful mornings the hallucination multiplies, the flash of a small figure in a metallic superhero costume as we continue to pay the horror forward, a small part of a debt that can never be settled up.

Though that superhero soldier will not be the only man to cry over the Plaza in my presence. Even if his story is the only one I tell my brother as we walk through the Plaza that night. Because I will not meet the most important of them for another two years when he comes to my apartment to use my phone. A man who will never get to walk through the Plaza to examine the bullet holes, and will refuse to go there once

he gets out of jail when they have long been filled in or covered over. Once more a friend of my downstairs neighbour, his *líder máximo* in fact, the best known of the student leaders at the School of Sciences, one day to become a man high up in the PRD, The Democratic Revolutionary Party, before it splintered, who'll be captured among the other speakers from the third floor balcony of the Edificio Chihuahua, I don't remember if directly by members of the Batallón Olímpia—a unit which surely did know the plan all along—the ones who will follow the signal from a white gloved hand when the bullets have only just begun to fly, or if my friend had time to run up the stairs and hide in an apartment until its door was broken down and all hidden inside removed. A man who will not simply, when I meet him, have done his more than two and a half years in jail, but actually been sentenced, to twenty-six years I think it was, then quickly exiled to the Chile of Allende.

Not that I might not have that confused with the sentence given to a man exiled from Chile to Canada within months of the military coup, a man who will come later to work with the Organization of American States around questions of Indigenous rights, a man marked with the *mestizaje* of the far south, who, when the court is told he had freely signed his political confession, will smile to show the obvious sores from the electric torture still visible around his mouth, and have four years added to his sentence then and there for *desacato a la ley*: disrespect for the law. But will with great luck be quickly freed from the concentration camp where he is being held and sent to Canada through a deal with the Canadian government.

The ironic juxtaposition and the similarity of the two stories, only three years apart—one from seventy-one and one from seventy-four—will make it far too easy to get the numbers mixed up. After all, it will be well over two decades of their respective sentences that neither one of them will ever have to serve. Though the lengths of the exiles which rescue them from their prisons will be far different.

The Mexican student leader will return within weeks to Mexico, because the Mexican government will claim that he, and all the other student leaders sent into exile, had sold out their friends and gone to work for Chile's new Marxist government. Then, caught in an undeniable contradiction when those that had worked with them in sixty-eight

publicly demand their return, the government will give in and allow them to do so. While my Chilean friend will never return to live in his native country and return to visit only when the dictatorship ends more than a decade and a half after his arrival in Canada.

Though for this man it will not be his personal story of the Plaza that brings on his tears. Not his capture or the running of the gauntlet between the soldiers' rifle butts, not the later torture or the *simulacros de fusilamiento* those mornings they take him out to be shot and the firing squad shoots only blanks. None of that will make it hard to go back. He will be able to tell those stories easily, in his house or mine, in restaurant or cantina, just as he will talk easily of his brief exile to Chile, his admiration for the government of Allende. He won't be escaping his story at all. That will be talked out with the same dark humour we will all indulge in, which, in another two years and a bit, will also make my Chilean friend smile from the witness stand, and see his smile later echoed in the knowing laughter of his community. Subject as they will be to even harsher conditions of disappearance and torture and concentration camps and secret prisons than the México of those years. What will prevent this student leader from going back to the Plaza will be feeling responsible.

Sitting ducks indeed, he might have said to my brother were he there with us. He will say the equivalent often enough to me. And even, I will teach him the expression.

But who could know we were a target? he will add. Not like that. Tear gas maybe. The riot police and their clubs, one or two dead, ten, twenty, maybe—but that? Wholesale slaughter? Never. How could we have known? If we had, we would never have called for that demonstration. Especially there. We served ourselves up to them on a platter. Literally, on a platter. A beautiful, smooth, stone platter. Not ducks on the water. Roast duck on a platter.

And he will add an Aztec reference: A fucking sacrificial stone. A giant fucking sacrificial stone. And the Plaza, all of it, the Tzompantli. You know, you illustrate for the Museum. Where the victims' skulls were exhibited, there's a small one among the ruins. Then he'll echo Tavo's soldier friend: They were so fucking close they killed each other.

But if you couldn't have known ... I might then say, and let my

voice drift. While he will shrug and look out my window, at the busy and noisy street below.

I know. He will say. I know. But it doesn't help to know. If I went there ... I wouldn't be able to stop crying. Maybe ever.

And what I will notice are the tears still rolling down his cheeks. Looking at this big man, no *güero* this other *sinaloense* but unusually Indian looking for a *norteño*. Yaki maybe, like Dan's cousins. Or Tarahumara. Even Comanche. Like the husband of the woman I am named after. Like my name. The tall Indians of the north Itzel's sister will so romanticize, even this man's friends will, calling him Gerónimo or Cochise, maybe even Crazy Horse—Caballo Loco—as a nickname. Especially since he will be so close to that other leader whose name really will be Cabeza de Vaca—Cow's Head. While he in turn will laugh not so much about my nicknames as about their secret origins. He will like that. The contradictions in them: that not just Nauta Anygringa again, the way I'll sometimes call myself.

While most everyone else I'll ever meet who'd been in the Plaza, tears and survivor guilt aside, will be giddy with the fact of their escape, and want to relive it, feel again that moment of knowing they are out, they are okay, and they'll give or take those tours, flash those 'V's, guiding their friends among the buildings or exchanging locations, trying to find the exact place they'd stood. So it won't just be Itzel who'll take us but others too, just to see us confirm their luck, the way friends who for whatever reason hadn't been there will always be brought to do, no matter why they hadn't made it to the demonstration, away like us or just tired after a long day or maybe doing a short stint in jail or in the overflow cells of the Campo Militar Número Uno—where likely too we will buy the grass for my brother's joint—or for that matter simply busy getting laid.

But all who could together celebrate the miracle of survival will, whether they go over their routes out, name the extent of their torture, or, like with my brother, examine the bullet holes. Even my downstairs neighbour, jailed before the massacre, will go when he gets out over two years later with friends or family who had been there. Starting then to honour this *2 de octubre* that we must never let be forgotten. Just as that soldier will in Tavo's living room, the student leader in mine.

Though on those walks, even if we might already hope what had

happened could be etched indelibly into the consciousness of Mexico, maybe even of the world, and come to be as memorialized as the defeat of Cuauhtémoc, still mostly what we will feel is the need to hold on. And to etch the reality of the Massacre and its stories indelibly into ourselves. To let it steer our future actions.

So that our decision to let the Plaza do exactly that will be represented in our visits to that restaurant. Which is why too we will take my brother there. It will seem always an appropriate ending to such a tour. To settle into the warmth and camaraderie of such a place. Wrap our fingers around its hot cups of *atole*, drink in its atmosphere, all that relaxing him too until he'll start to tell us, mildly stoned the way he'll be, his stories of Vietnam.

Not that he'll have seen combat. The orders that had destined him to armoury with an artillery unit had been changed by the Tet offensive of February, 1968 to put him into supply in the main depot in Saigon. But still, he'd heard too much, witnessed too much, been too close to too many bombs, had the trailer blown off his truck, learned altogether too many terrible stories and had a Vietnamese girl friend like so many GIs always ready to tell him more. And he had listened, and been shaken to his core. He hadn't been prepared for this, he'll say, even if he'd never liked the war.

Still, his response to Billie's house had always been to hang with the neighbourhood guys, and to quit school and to drift, to lose his student deferment and pay it no attention, to keep his mind elsewhere as he had making his models while dreaming his dreams from the basement rooms of the house. So that when drafted, he'll do his duty and comply. Neither he nor the neighbourhood could imagine him doing anything else. Even when I offer him a route out, he'll say no.

Then spend his first year in armoury Stateside talking down the war as the guys in basic training hand in their rifles until the army decides to send him to see the conflict up close. And when he returns he'll move back into his old rooms until he can find an apartment in another part of the redesignated Red Hook, Carroll Gardens Annex now, who knows what then, but still in our old stomping grounds, an easy biking if not walking distance away. Then marry a wonderful neighbourhood girl with relatives up on Kahnawake.

I'll tell Billie then and Basta before my brother arrives in Mexico that I wasn't afraid as much that he would die as that the man who came back would be someone I could not recognize. Only to find out on that Tlatelolco tour that I could. And that I will always understand how he can still prefer a universal draft to security companies and a professional army to do a country's dirty work. So that we will listen carefully as he speaks, and over the next days we will join him in our cage where he will sleep in one of our hammocks, and we will take down his testimony, Basta and Itzel transcribing as I translate. And though it's likely Basta still has the two language tape recording and the few small articles that will come from it, I will occasionally find their intertwined handwriting alongside transcripts of the testimony of Guatemalan refugees and Chilean torturers.

Where I will look at it sometimes, and remember how my brother's stories will become part of all the stories of those days told and retold on our visits to the Plaza, and to that restaurant, and how it will all become part of what confirms us, just as that superhero soldier will, in the decision we will make there. So that sometimes I imagine the two of them counting bullet holes together, Vietnam vet and martial artist, or dream of them as I fall asleep, along with all those other bodies, Vietnamese sometimes too, women in those hats of embroidered interiors Dan would bring back from his round the world voyages, falling through the air, one in his fatigues, the other in his superhero costume, passing a joint back and forth as skydivers do a baton.

This too, later to become a tiny corner of the *retablo* I make in my mind. Because for all its horror my world will still seem then so brilliantly in place. Full beyond even the Plaza's flashing 'V's with our sense of the group survival I'm sure my brother will see in our three faces in the restaurant even as we sit there. That sense of our secret connection contained in the decision to join the cell we will make on our second visit there. Though we will never tell him about that. We will be strict in our adherence to the rules.

Outsiders Zero



IT WILL BE well known in Mexico City, that place which will so quickly become ours. At least among a certain discerning crowd.

Perhaps it still is, the children who worked there then, now with children of their own working still. Though it will only be a place for going to for a very light supper or after the supper—*la cena*—you eat at seven, eight or nine, for a meal or even a snack in Mexico they call *la merienda* even if in some other parts of the Spanish speaking world that will mean a light lunch. But light in any case that meal, and never mentioned in the guides, you discover it the first time someone invites you, *vamos a merendar* they say, and you've got not just a new word but a new concept, a meal that's not always eaten but that has a name, and can vary like breakfast from savoury to sweet, tacos to *churros con chocolate*. With this place—technically a *taquería*—one of those places you can find on any street in Mexico City as long as it's not too high class, the ones with no doors, just a step up onto concrete or marble tile to enter, and delicious things to eat once you get inside.

But you could forget the food here, not that it wouldn't be good, it would be just as good as any other one of those little restaurants where they sell tacos at off hours and *comida corrida*—a cheap one kind only prix fixe meal—at midday. What will bring the discerning crowds here, the we've-got-an-urban-secret crowds, will be the *atole*, the best

in the D.F. those who know will say, or even — their voices emphatic — in *all* of Mexico, the way capital dwellers all over the world sometimes do for things they cannot conceive of being better anywhere else, even if you want to say when you hear them, but what about that little place on that plaza, you know the one, in Toluca, or Ometepe. Or for that matter Teaneck, New Jersey or Medicine Hat, Alberta. Making your voice sound as if they ought to know, everybody who is anybody does, just to play around.

With *atole* already something important to know about if you're to be a traveller rather than a tourist, much less pass for a *chilango* or any other kind of Mexican. It's been a staple of all Mesoamerican peoples for the longest time, using the same corn meal, the same wet *masa*, the ground nixtamalized maize. A great word, and real in English now, nixtamalize, used by the academics and other experts in the area, derived from *nixtamal* the word for maize that's been boiled with ground limestone or sea shells to make it easy to strip the skin, technically the pericarp, but also giving it an added protein boost that changes maize from the worst of staple grains to the best, and which forms the basis of the Mesoamerican diet, from *tamales* to *tortillas* to *gorditas* to *atole* with this last a drink, what in English we would once have described when we too drank such things, as a thin gruel. Or a pabulum.

And yes, it is a baby food too. So that when someone wants to spoon feed you propaganda in Mexico you say they're giving you *atole con el dedo*, they're giving you *atole* with their finger, just the way babies are first fed this drink, or for that matter, anything but the breast. Something we'll be saying often enough in those days as the PRI government — the government of the Institutional Revolutionary Party — will keep trying out new versions of what had happened in the Plaza, how few had died and how the students had started it anyway. So that as they switch it around, we will just say they are giving us *atole con otro dedo* — *atole* with a different finger, because of course that thin ground gruel, whatever the finger or the flavour, is still — as we say in English — SSDD — same shit, different day.

Not that — unlike shit — *atole* can't be delicious. Just supremely easy to swallow. The way Ignacia will only take those few days after

hiding under her desk to start swallowing the government's lines. And Magdalena too, who should definitely have known better. While any number of things can be added to *atole* as well. That's probably why that expression fits so well. Why sometimes it's even *otro atole con otro dedo*. With this place specializing in *atole de fresa*, strawberry *atole*. Something you can easily get in a mix at the corner store, only it would be artificially flavoured, and in this *atole* the fresh strawberries will float to the top like tiny bleeding hearts.

We will even comment on that, make it our own Aztec addition despite the fact that strawberries were brought by the Spaniards and the Aztec symbol for the heart was the *tuna*, the refreshing crisp blood red fruit of the prickly pear, as I will only recently have learned in my studies. But something to say in memoriam to Tlatelolco's first massacre when it was the Mexica who died there. And who knows why, the dark humour again, but that comment, will somehow make our first evening of *atole* after the three of us tour the Plaza, somehow light. Even joyful. Full of delight in each other and the open flavours of the Mexico City night, by now over its silence. And how after she has taken us for the first time on the route she thinks she walked, we will savour that moment of Itzel's triumph: all my children, indeed.

And that joy will repeat itself on each visit, the way it will with my brother those months later. Even as we tuck in Cuauhtémoc and bleeding hearts along with Itzel's Plaza story while we steep ourselves in the simple folklore of the restaurant, so that as I look around, I can breathe deep and make my own addition once more. And let us sink completely into humour.

Itzel could set up an *atole* place of her own with them, I will say. To echo this one.

Because that will be the other thing always said of the place by the seasoned traveller: how it's so marvellously idiosyncratic a piece of the real Mexico. Family run, of course, like so many of these small restaurants but by a rather larger family than most, thirteen or perhaps even as many as eighteen children, and before you think I exaggerate remember that Tavo's and Basta's mothers will be the youngest children in just such a batch, though in their case they will be lonely full sisters

with sixteen half brothers and sisters older than they, and no, for your information that so fecund first wife will not die in childbirth but of some other more contagious ill of the time.

Nor by all accounts will she ever be all tuckered out. There will be servants for all the other work, after all. The way among the poor, I have known these families, the work of the older children will often give the mother time and space, as much of it anyway as she had before her motherhood. And as for death in childbirth that's luck of the draw and of the midwife. So we'll make it thirteen here for that Mesoamerican lucky number, and note how, because there are so many, or just because it impresses the clientele, they will be identified only by number, loud calls going out from the parent in charge to *Dos* or *Siete*, *Uno* or *Doce* as each is needed. And all of them scurrying about, I could use the cliché and say like mice, only I like cockroaches better, just for Itzel's reply to my comment, which she, in turn will make for my brother, too. As if we have orchestrated it.

Well, it might work, but I sure wouldn't make my children eat the cockroaches, she will say.

And after that, I will be the interpreter, as she will tell in turn the story the Hungarian painter had told her—all of us, you see, will have heard of this place, its status legendary—of a group, not a family but a group of young men in their work suits, probably among those who will still work those traditional Mexican hours with the long siesta, who'd just gotten off work at seven or even nine. That tradition still in place back then though already giving way to the Anglo hours of nine to five as not only the wealthy but more middle class families just as in the North will start to move to the suburbs, the kind whose men won't be able to afford to keep mistresses in apartments downtown anyway, much less a *casa chica* like the one Ignacia had headed.

Though it will still be true then, how true it is now I have no idea, that some of the guys, guys of all classes, will casually *ir de putas*—go out whoring, though it sounds so much more, not exactly respectable but the done thing in Spanish—not just on Saturday nights, but after their second shifts. Whether or not they could afford the kept woman, they still might choose for the occasional quick rental rather than a long

term lease. Perhaps what these men, by all reports they will be a mix of ages, will be about to do. After all, the place will be close enough to the city's best known red light district, some of the women on their own there will often enough be hookers on an obvious break.

So *atole*, then tequila, then maybe the bordello for these guys. Or maybe not. Maybe they'll be out on the cheap, and just fucking around.

Yes, *chingando*, Itzel will say. Then add, an aside for us we might choose to explain later: And this time I don't mean *hinchar*. But, *chingue y chingue*, she says, that typical fucking about in order to fuck you up—one of them sees a cockroach ...

Crawling up the wall, says Basta taking over while demonstrating the bug's movement with the fingers of his right hand as he raises it toward the wall. So the guy says in his loudest voice just to make sure everyone in the place hears: *Una cucaracha, una cucaracha*.

Itzel's turn again: *¡Dios Mío, Que horror!* In imitation of the man's high falsetto as he utters the essential battle cry of middle class *mojigatería*.

As if in fright just to make a stir in the restaurant, Basta goes on to say.

Which of course materializes, only—Trece let's call the one who will be rushing by carrying *cinco* maybe *seis*, an Itzel's children's worth anyway, of *atole* to one of the tables—quickly pitches his voice equally high and desperate too, and says as loud as he can: *¡No te la comas! Favorcito, no te la comas, es de la casa*, Don't eat it, pretty please, don't eat it, it's property of the house. As if cockroaches were pets, or a daily meal. And said to this suited man not in *usted* but in *tu*.

In the familiar, it's Itzel's turn to continue as she puts her hand over Basta's forearm and looks toward me to make sure I get that nuance translated for my brother, because it will be such a cutting part of putting this man in his place. So that the whole restaurant will burst into laughter and another legend will be born. Even cockroaches adding to the cachet of the place.

I was told you could almost hear the roar of the crowd. Itzel goes on to say: And the new numbers going up on the scoreboard: Home team one. Outsiders zero.

And as my brother laughs, as uproariously as everyone does who hears that story a first time, we three will know we tell it just to imagine in delight Itzel running such a place with her six children from the Plaza. And we will grin at each other and briefly hold hands, then raise them, like a winning team. Me, in the centre, the translator of it all, then the players really, passing phrases one to the other more like hockey players coming fast down the ice than like footballers running and passing the ball, because even if such a simile would be more appropriate to place, there might even have been a soccer game on the television in the corner of the restaurant, still the play would be much too slow.

So that their two voices have intertwined in the telling just as their handwriting will in that transcription we will soon be making. That will remind me sharply each time I come upon it of what I will not see that night: how by the time of my brother's visit they will already be coming to that restaurant alone, and that as I speak my brother's words to them, theirs to him, no matter how clearly he sees our connectedness, I will already have been moved that little bit toward the edge: be the outsider, the translator, the placeholder zero, even as together they so joyfully tell the story of *las cucarachas del lugar*. And even, because of my brother's curiosity, of *La Cucaracha*, that song of Pancho Villa's car.

When he hears the word he'll decide to make the joke himself—he'll know the lyrics of the song from Billie's old lover just the way I will, it was the first song I learned—about how neither he nor La Cucaracha could go without their *mariguana que fumar*, their marijuana to smoke. While after the explanation about the car, he'll tell us how he wishes he'd known the song's origins when he'd been driving his forklift in Vietnam, because that would have been its name.

And I will not even notice how Basta and Itzel look at each other across the table, as I, opposite my brother, listen for his words. And feel only pride when they both tell me they are astounded at how I can do it, and so fast like that make them understood. That everyone should have such a translator. So safe will I feel in the wonder of that previous evening, it must have been only our second visit, when we'll make our decision. The one that each time we enter that restaurant will make us squeeze each other's hands and wink. And even if we might long to tell

it to my brother after all he has shared with us, never tell to anyone outside our cell.

We will know better than that. That's why we will join. For a sense of protection as well as participation. Because the need to carry on will be so strong, and we will know it is either speak or be silenced utterly. Yet it will no longer be easy to always know to whom you speak. Or what the results might be. The cost of speech, never entirely free, will have gone too high. Yet along with the triumph of survival will come too the grief that dictates the need to make such survival count. Even if direct speech will have become difficult.

And to find the place this could be best expressed, be more than scattered stories, a 'V' flashed down and away, will become our goal. That was why our need to allow ourselves to be recruited, to join our little cell will be so strong, our need to go to meetings, to talk, to understand, to plan—and to know that there are other cells—of our group, of other groups. That some of the people we meet at parties, at wider meetings, at concerts movies lectures plays are part of us, parts we will guess at but never know for sure, or people we will be sure of without ever knowing their real names or where they live. And never ask and as surely never tell, we will be as aware of the rules of need to know as any spy.

And we'll know some of it will be of no use too, we will know well enough how some earlier organizations had been torn apart, know that the sixty-eight movement's political prisoners are not the only ones in jail, know too, and yes it will be apparent now, that people could be killed or made to disappear, like the girl whose photo I saw on the overpass steps, her picture could go back as far as those years, or the ones just after I left, I saw such photos in the Museum of Indomitable Memory, so that any layering that might prevent reprisals on all our members will seem worth our while whether to stop or just ameliorate the horrors of future torture, of terrible threats made to loved ones, because this is where threats are effective, where torture works.

So you try to make sure no one has too much information or that the accuracy of what information they have will be time sensitive: At a certain moment they will know they can give it and cause little damage

to others, and so remain morally intact. Because, as to breaking, no, not everybody does. That too, no matter what they say in Hollywood movies is not always the case, just the most usual. While the myth of the unbreakable comrade no matter how rare is still helpful: believing in it helps to bear the pain longer, helps you feel each minute you last brings you closer to the ideal. Gives you a sense of worth to help you carry on. Or so the tortured will tell me. Like all those saints in their pain believing it brings them closer to Christ.

Though, no matter how helpless you might be within this terrible abuse, as helpless as any abused child, still the shame of giving in could break you again, I have even seen those who have chosen to torture rather than be tortured break as well. While torture itself, the institution of it, don't let anyone fool you on that either, I've said it before: Torture works. Only it's to destroy people, protest, the social contract: Ask anyone who has endured it, no matter the results in them as an individual. Getting information is just an excuse for trying to fulfill a far darker goal. To break bonds of trust, of love, of hope, of belief. To wound a community. Perhaps mortally. To destroy its ability to name itself such: just another form of cultural genocide.

Humanity is the collateral damage. Or not so collateral. Sometimes loss of humanity is the intent. Because either way broken or unbroken neither mind nor body will ever be the same again. Sometimes will not be again. But for information far into the future, no. It won't give you that, even if occasionally it will turn someone into your plaything, make them go out and get it for you. There is no ticking time bomb. Except the future held in the body or the body politic of the tortured. That will explode, maiming a world far larger than itself. With terrible results. Again and again. So that yes, in every way we will try to do what little we are able. And will swear like so many before us and so many to come, never to forget. And say those other words so many have had to say that we always hope will not have to be said: *¡Nunca jamás!*

And it will be how to do this we will discuss from our very first visit to that restaurant. And very soon, perhaps on our second visit, come to our conclusion. One long taken by the time we speak with my brother. And even if we do not speak of it, much of what we will say,

how we will say it, will be part of that conclusion's result. And always it will be the best of why we return there. At least for me.

It will be easy to sit there that first evening and make that decision about the group. Already with the sense of determination and renewal we will have gotten from walking among others flashing the secret 'V'. What in part we will have come for: to let the Plaza and its bullet holes steady us in our decision, give us the gift of strength to take the next step. The one we know we want to take. Because it's time to do more. Time to move into that world of *noms de guerre* and passwords once more. Like the ones we had used on the telephone at the time of the massacre. But bigger. More thought out. More serious.

So that we will sit talking about having to do something and how having to do something meant: *having to do something*. Really, having to do something. Like Che Guevara said: *El deber de todo revolucionario es hacer la revolución*. How could we get around that. The duty of all revolutionaries was to make the revolution, wasn't it? Wasn't that what our comrades had fought for? Died for? Wasn't that what David had meant about sending me back to the front? We had to take the fight to the enemy now.

We had to figure out how. The part Che Guevara had managed to leave out. Or that if in revolution one wins or dies the battle might still take you to your death in old age. And we will have the invitation. All we will have to do is take it up. So that soon we will be urging each other on. We must take up the challenge. All we have to do is step forward. Take the opportunity. To be *consecuentes*. To make a difference. The three of us. Together. And we will clasp hands. As we will again as my brother looks on.

This was the way friendship, revolutionary friendship, was supposed to be, we will repeat. And in that moment we will be happy. All of us. I will see it in their faces. And feel it in mine. Our glowing radiance. And for myself: I am not sure I have ever been happier. As happy, sure. As joyful. The world's best fuck, a day of the best work, the birth of my children. But never more.

Though that part will not surprise me, how like all happiness, it will not last. And that is not cynicism speaking, or bitterness. Happiness

sustains through its repetition not its permanence. So that moment too is among those I would not give up, I would not. The soft sustaining warmth of those intertwined fingers. No more than I would that I of Itzel's in Huejotzingo, that central image of my personal *retablo*.

But affirm myself in it, all of us in it. Always. Though I will often enough wish I had been ready for what was to come when we raised our hands again in front of my brother as Catorce or Tres or Siete sidled by us her arms laden with those little bleeding hearts. Or that Basta had picked another restaurant for our tête-a-tête.

That this one could have remained a place of simple triumph, not of triumph and defeat.

Cuantos Piquetitos

NOT THAT THE raised heartbeat and blurred vision of our wedding day should not have served to give some kind of warning of difficulty to come. As should the nightmare sense of irreality that accompanied us to the Vera Cruz of our decision to marry. As if the edges of objects glowed with a pervasive dread. As if each eye saw a vaguely different set of colours, a slightly different outline, or as if two superimposed and differently coloured transparencies failed to quite match. So that everything was crazily off, desperately disjointed, and if you looked away for even a moment horror could slip between. Nothing at all like that sense of peace we will be saying we find in each other. Even as we tell ourselves this is the best of all possible times to be in love. Tell others the same.

And feeling that strangeness from the moment we step into Tavo's car on that drive southeast that weekend one month after the massacre and directly following the Day of the Dead. Along a route I'll never quite recall no matter how bright beyond bearing are those images from the day itself with its depth of blue in the sky contrasted with the transparent orange of the marigold petals—the *cempaxóchitl* I'll see then for the first time—drifting out of village cemeteries or across streets where the day before they had formed the roads for the dead to return to their homes, and the steeples of village churches stand bold and white or

sparklingly tiled against that blue while tombstones dance in the chaotic green of multitudinous small leaved plants, and photographs in the Kodachrome of the day with its ASA of 64 would still have to be taken at f16.

Each colour seeming even in the deepening green cut out as if with the sharpest blade of an X-Acto knife until we slowly start to descend from high dry plateau into wet tropics as we near Mexico's east coast, and the bright hot tropical haze begins to take over and make the sky close in and the eyes hurt and I remember Itzel's description of her own trip up, up, up onto the *altiplano* and I grab Basta's hand and tell him about it and we whisper to each other again that we wish she were there with us, the five of us together not just us four in the car, but yes, this is about family just family after all, and maybe we say: But we're family the three of us a family of choice closer to each other than any possible biological relation or maybe we just tell each other we have to do it we've said it before we have to take that long road trip together instead of all those day journeys, it would be wonderful a trip to the sea with Itzel, and I am sure we will both be thinking we would find harmony then, not this disjointed almost painful if utterly beautiful landscape, as if already she has become our talisman.

Though this trip will be almost as good we assure each other this reunion with a part of Basta's family he's sure he's never seen, even the cousins still on the Yucatan his immediate family migrated from two generations back will be at this wedding.

Though we will go first to a lovely lonely beach arriving at sunset so that we awake to those itchy bites from the sand flies we'd not even noticed the evening before as we staggered through the deep sand across the lonely beach of Palma Sola to our powder blue painted wood slat cabin. *Piquetes, piquetitos, picaduras*, bites that by the next morning will make me run down to the ocean to douse their fire in the murky green Gulf of Mexico water my eyes to the blue line of horizon then snapped closed as they start to sting not just in early morning's powdery light but in the salt spray as the water reaches my waist and I briefly watch the now red now yellow orange of the bright through my lids only to have those colours too turn murky green as the next unseen

wave crashes over me then lifts me off my feet to throw me down hard into the sand of the bottom.

Only when I struggle back onto my feet the salt now seeping into my eyes will impede me opening them again just long enough to block my view so that the next wave can do the same and the next and the next repeat the process until I am tumbling end over end over end and the taste of sea and semen from that morning's sex are no longer a salt bitter pleasure but a choking drowning without end until far enough up the beach I can raise myself onto hands and knees to crawl up the slope of the beach my head lifted to blue sky again as I no longer gulp water and air together barely distinguishing between the two but flare my nostrils and snort like a mare to clear my throat and breathe air.

Deep deep into aching waterlogged lungs. Even if the drowning sensation will barely diminish over the days as the world will continue to smell of salt and semen and the marijuana infused alcohol we will keep rubbing onto our bites even as we tell ourselves tell each other that the true balm is our love and savour the sound of the cliché in it as if it united us to an infinity of besotted inarticulate lovers as we plan our marriage in what we will convince ourselves is happily ever after happy anticipation.

As the sensation accompanies us from our living room house guest hammock to our queen bed in the enormous but barely furnished room in the nineteenth century hotel we will share with Tavo and Marie Claire that one night we will spend in the city centre of Vera Cruz where after the sensual sounds of *huapango* and *música jarocho* have calmed, *La Bamba* and *La Bruja, por tí seré* and *ay qué bonito es volar*, their tropical beat and intense falsetto, comes the midnight screeching of old tram wheels on older track below the tropical shuttered windows to become in dreams the screams of the wounded the beaten the tortured the captured in the Plaza the near drowning sensation an echo of waterboarding—we knew by then of this torture's use—over and over.

So that now I am always tempted to say that I clearly remember how that morning as I entered the water there was something in the taste of his semen that let me know it was ending, had ended, before it had yet begun. Yet the truth is I did not know that, but have pushed

the distress of later events back into all those moments that had enough reason for a terrible distress of their own to make us without doubt mistake so very many things, clouding not just our vision but our being from the moment we drink glass after glass of water as we give that last talk in New York and the water will not soothe the dry metal of fear and horror and grief in our mouths because everything will seem to be ending and the more it will seem to end the more we will insist we never will, so that always in those days I will be on the cutting edge between horror and desire an edge that indeed slices deep but that I will not be able to name, while all it will ever be is the *resaca* of the Plaza in all the definitions of that word the flotsam and jetsam left on shore by the outgoing tide, the tide itself its rips its undertow, the hangover from a long and alcoholic night.

Or just consequences. Or *consecuencia*. Results and commitment. Consequences and *consecuencia*. Like a light flashing on and off on and off, consequences *consecuencia*. Horror desire horror desire horror desire horrordesire, until it pushes my feet into the sand and weighs down my legs and I fail to dive under that first wave the way I had known to do since I was a child swimming off New York beaches as early as Saint Patrick's Day. That it wasn't my eyes closed against the salt at all, but a desire for the feeling of drowning. To torture myself for an information I could not recognize until all I might want is unmoving ground as the tide pulls at my feet my hands my knees as I crawl up the beach. Horrordesire *resaca resaca* consequences consequences *consecuencia*. That I will wish to refuse. To keep on refusing.

As that sensation will lap at me from time to time and again and again behind my eyes as we lie in our hammocks on the roof until that whole period between our decision in Vera Cruz and our honeymoon in Jalisco will contain that undercurrent, that undertow, *resaca resaca*, that leaves me always with that itching burning on the skin that taste in my mouth that will become so much a part of my story that even on our idyllic days it will be there in memory, a time of itching and scratching the way once in Los Arco del Sitio, an eighteenth century stone aqueduct, the highest in America some say, started by the Jesuits, its construction stopped by their expulsion, on one of our many day trips with

Itzel down by the small stream below the four layers of causeway arches I will rub a stick held in my hand along the algae covered rock at the stream's bottom and I will hear it, hear it scratching, I swear, hear through my ears, the vibrations on hammer and anvil stirrup and drum, and that to this day I don't know how.

Will it be a mix-up in brain or body will my ear vibrate or my imagination in this strange form of synaesthesia? Except that it will be like that all those days something rubbing buzzing rubbing only I will refuse it refuse it till it vibrates my body. Full of *piquetes piquetes piquetes piquetitos*, something always *picando* the sand flies of Palma Sola to itch to cause to scratch that was horrordesire horrordesire and should have been warning, warning already enough.

So that there will be no way we can escape it on our five day honeymoon even as we huddle and squirm together on the long bus ride to Guadalajara and whisper again how we must put time and a bit of money aside to make our next oceanside road trip a trip with Itzel and we look down into deep valleys at far away villages until our arrival in the city in the middle of the afternoon marvelling already at the dry landscape through the blue bus windows, a dryness that will in the end unlike the rich foliage of Vera Cruz take us the way it always does on Mexico's Pacific coast right to the edge of the ocean.

While that sand sea itch will hit us again in the dusty streets of that landlocked city entering our bus tired eyes in the bright market colours as we walk from the station and will scratch too at our ears in the strident tones of the square built woman holding her own against the police who are harassing her for selling on the street as she gets up into the face of one of them to shout: *No te metas conmigo hijo de la chingada que yo soy muy macha*, Don't mess with me motherfucker or the weight of that word anyway, to which is added that wonderful feminization of a woman calling herself very male, *macho* of course the male of any animal species, so this is a bit like telling everyone how ballsy your very womanly self is even if in Mexico when I got there women were already using *ovarios* bragging at having them *muy bien puestos* the way that *muy macha* voice carries us across the tiny square to our tiny hotel where we ascend to our this time tiny room on the edge of the red light district

its door opening to only inches from its narrow bed its lone window in the even more miniscule washroom its shower head directly above its seatless toilet like a claustrophobic and shrunken combination of Palma Sola and Vera Cruz with its itchy sheets and street noises rising up the airshaft, *piquetes piquetitos picaduras* in eyes in ears on skin, the room's colours clashing until today when I think of it I will without any attempt at accuracy always see them like the colours of that Frida Kahlo painting I have by now taught over and over though it's true too I might already have seen it and been blown away by it by then on my first visit to her museum in the Blue House on that first decisive trip to Mexico, though I don't really know if it was still in there then or just on the museum's walls in the many photos of Frida or of Frida and Diego together when they lived there, or even in a book or two in a gift shop or the nearby Librería Gandhi, or even if its title would have been the ironic *Apasionadamente Enamorada* Passionately in Love of its original exhibition in 1938, though I do know I would not have reacted to its newer title yet, *Unos Cuantos Pequetitos*, thought *cuantos cuantos piquetitos*, would likely not even have understood its meaning, A Few Small Nips it's so often translated even if it should be jabs really a *piquete* even a *piquetito* must penetrate directly, proboscis or knife, even a screwdriver, the wound does not come from a closing jaw, neither love nips nor nips of puppy teeth nor the tearing canines of its Some bitch! mother, not even the crush of a pliers, while it's the synaesthesia of breathing your own future I can still feel in my nostrils along my skin like sand in the crotch of a bathing suit recently tossed with you in the waves as I think of that room, *piquetes piquetes piquetitos* jabbing at you in that moment before the breaking of the skin the integrity of the body before the itch or the spilling of blood, the man standing in the painting a knife hanging in his hand looking down at the twisted body on the bed of the woman he has not just jabbed but stabbed and stabbed his expression dull while two doves one black one white hold a banner with the title in their beaks as if it were just any *retablo* no matter how empty of prayer, and the colours kind too as the colours of *retablos* often are, the way I see them each time I open one of the many books I have that contain that image and run my fingers along the page to the wilted green the teal the pink

the orange of wall and wainscoting and floor even as my eyes follow the bloodstains out to the edge of the painting and onto its frame.

And I look at the man's hand limp by his side holding the knife and feel how they implicate us all and try to come to some political conclusion to make in my lecture how I think Kahlo herself abhorred domestic violence the way so many have the way we did in that police station in that strange incident that brought us together that it wasn't just Diego and his shenanigans made her react into that portrayal when she read the words that man had said to the judge after killing his girlfriend, *Eran solo unos cuantos piquetitos no veinte puñaladas señor juez*, It was just a few small jabs not twenty stabs your honour, because standing looking at that image even as I formulate my ideas turn them to lecture notes I smell the ozone and bathroom damp of awakening into that room next to Basta as we both spring awake after a long nap and look around, each of us convinced a man has come in and stood over us looking down just as the man does in that painting though we do not see this man's hand, *piquetes piquetes piquetitos*, and there is that salt blood taste in our mouths as we check the room that yes the dead bolt is set that yes the one window in the bathroom is too small for even a child to crawl through, and then we'll sit back on the bed.

Hijole, we'll both say, a kind of Wow or Shee-it of surprise, and we will note no taste of fear or horror in the mouth but just go on.

We had the same dream. We hallucinated the same man. How cool is that? *¡Qué buena onda!* How totally absolutely cool.

And we will immediately take up the challenge of making that dream just another piece of the mythology of our oneness. Our two in one personhood. No matter that we find ourselves looking over our shoulders in a kind of paranoid panic at critical moments for all the remaining days of that honeymoon trip, whether in the separate shower of the larger hotel we will immediately flee to, its curtain far too reminiscent of that scene in *Psycho* I have internalized without ever having seen, or making love on the beaches of Barra de Navidad when this time he is tasting me and both our bodies suddenly stiffen and for a moment we will fail to breathe, and perhaps I might for an instant wonder if this horrordesire that rises in me will rise sometimes in him even as I push

myself to a harsh almost painful orgasm that does not bring peace, still we will not say it.

Not even when I will once more come close to ocean panic, taste deep the salt smell of drowning as a cramp in my leg forces me to drop all the clothing we had planned to put back on when we reached the other side of the brackish water that rushes to exit the lagoon that gives the town its name and threatens momentarily to wash me out to sea so that we will have to return once more when my cramp is resolved to dive down and dive down and dive down the twelve or so feet to the bottom to find them—we have after all only two changes of clothes—then go on later to the *saladeros* back on that other side to see the drying frames made from sticks tied together by the lagoon waters where fishermen salt the meat of recently caught sharks to sell as cod, dry the fins to sell to the Chinese restaurants of the Federal District and the jaws for the fun of watching awestruck tourists admire their sharp rows of teeth, and where too they will make *cecina*, that delicious sun dried jerky, salting not the traditional beef but the red beeflike meat of sea turtles where even as we savour the meat in hungry desire we look on in horror at the slaughter, the quick piecing of the animals with the oldest of knives, the men standing over them while the blood flows away over the light wood of casually pounded together tables into the sandy ground and I see that man once more standing over our bed even in class the transparency of that painting behind me on the screen, the blood of the scene perhaps projected onto my face, while my nostrils flair with the odour of salt and blood and the metal of old knives, as if I can breathe the painting into my nostrils, while still looking from men to salt shark to slaughtered turtles to glint of knives we say again: The same dream, that man, *el mismo sueño, qué ondas*, the same dream.

So that whenever we talk of it we do not ask if that man brought us a warning but rejoice instead in our closeness, even occasionally in our sense of foreboding our horrordesire almost as if that dream, that hallucination were a horror movie we had both watched from very very close. And even if we occasionally ask if he too were not part of the *resaca* of the Plaza we feel in our bodies, we will ask it with an element of pride as we acknowledge how in tune we must be with that energy, that horror, so that we will be sure, whether or not we'd seen a knife

or any other weapon, that the man will bring us a memory of violence done and not violence yet to do. Or to avoid.

He will be like our afternoon dreams, our sleepy hallucinations, of soldiers on the roof hidden behind the water tanks as we nap in our hammocks in the laundry cage. So that after our return home even when we feel the edge of horror the itch of those *piquetes piquetes piquetitos* we will never fear the dream nor our memories of the dream. But always assert even after a moment of jerking away that it has unified us more completely, made us think ourselves one soul in two bodies, confirmed that we would not, we could not, ever do each other harm. As he will take my hand in his or I will take his in mine and we will smile.

And repeat again even more softly: The same dream, *el mismo sueño*, the same dream.

So that the person standing over us will always be the Massacre, the army, the incarnation of violence or of longing, a man dead in the room or a man come to visit someone dead in the room, a ghost a spirit who smells on us our horrordesire, not just the memory of sex but the hallucinated horror of violence, like the blood splattered to the edge of that painting's frame that enters the mind with the rhythm of jostling cattle entering the slaughterhouse, a smell that will cling to us perhaps more strongly for not having been in the Plaza that day or even at the University for the army's invasion.

And it is that smell has led that man back to our room just as the trail of *cempaxóchitl* petals might lead a spirit from the graveyard to the brightly coloured trinkets, the sugar skulls, the *aguardiente de caña* and *mezcal*, the chocolate, the tacos, the favourite foods on the altar made for the Day of the Dead. Those same orange marigold flowers we will have seen still blowing through the graveyards by the small village churches as we cross the high plateau past the huge dish of the radio telescope of Tulancingo with Tavo and Marie Claire on our way down to the opposite coast those weeks before when we will plan the marriage that will lead us to our tiny Guadalajara room.

So that at its worst we will look at each other and say not: We had the same dream, but once more: We should have been there. While I will lay my finger across his lips faster than you can say Daffy Duck.

And even if on our long slow twelve- or maybe sixteen-hour trip

back to Mexico City as we look once more out the bus window at villages far below our winding mountain road, the ocean drowning sensation of tumbling waves and rushing currents will arise in my throat and lungs to make me remember and choose to recite what I can of Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*, trying somehow to let Basta feel a bit more of the interior darkness that arises in me oceanic still in those interior valleys, still I will not pursue it.

But just grab his hand and laugh because I will love how he extrapolates from that dream and that poem not despair but determination, telling me that if indeed there are ignorant armies there below us, ignorant armies that once pillaged their way across the high plateaus and deep narrow valleys of Mexico, ignorant armies that still pillaged and repressed and massacred in the countryside and in Tlatelolco, still they were not us, we were possessed of the knowledge and love and hope of justice with which to combat them, and it was in this, in our joy in the struggle that we were called to be true to one another, *a pesar de pena o dolor o incertidumbre*.

Our dreams gave us enough to bear the clamouring chaos. We did not need escape from pain into certitude. And that one dream, that dream gave us each other. Would always give us each other: one person. And as long as we had each other, we had nothing to fear.

Then when we are finally back we will tell Itzel all of it. How our honeymoon has echoed Vera Cruz but so much better, even the crabs and the fish better, the turtle *cecina* with its taste of red meat and sea water better than any meat we have ever tasted. How when the man at the *saladero* offered it to us on the end of his knife, first to one and then the other, we knew that the meat the knife the dream were a gift, and none of them, nor any other weapon would ever come between us.

And she will laugh and say: *Híjole*, just as we had. You had the same dream. *El mismo sueño*. The same dream. And she too, will agree with us, and I think believe it: We could never do each other any harm. *No nos haríamos nunca ningún daño*.

While she will take the last of the *cecina* we have brought back with us and cut it up and place it around the edges of a platter with a bit of lime like the most delicate carpaccio and we will eat it with our

fingers, then laugh as we lick them. And we will call it our honeymoon solidarity supper. And because he still remembers the eloquence of his words after I recited that poem, Basta will have me repeat my recitation so he can repeat them.

And when he ends he will take each of our hands and say, to make sure Itzel will not feel left out or let down: Even if in sleeping we haven't yet shared the same dream, awake we do. And it's a much bigger dream, greater by far than the shadow of violence watching us in our beds.

And if I shiver, I will refuse to notice that too.

As he raises his glass full of the tequila we have brought back from Tequila, the town right outside Guadalajara that gives that particular *mezcal* its name. And he will use as best he can the English he has learned in New York.

— Ah loves let us be true to one another. And to our struggle, he will say. Then go back to Spanish to add: *La lucha continúa*. And I like to remember him saying too, *El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido*. Only I think it was the Chileans of the Allende Popular Unity period invented that and it's the '68 political prisoners, the ones exiled briefly to Chile in 1970 or '71, will bring that slogan back to Mexico a year or two more into our future.

So that I will never let myself feel the undercurrent. Or articulate what it could mean. Or see in that moment or in Itzel's already intense gaze Basta's longing for separation. And for all I am still startled by the coherence of my political analysis back then, even my analysis of others, I know it is equally true that I did not do equally well by own my emotions, and that I still wanted, still believed in that impossible total merger with another, and perhaps longed to find in it the peace of a home I had never known. But I do wish I'd seen it sooner, this thing, that the belief in a two in one person might be a trap. A harm to each other in and of itself.

And that I would surely never be holy enough to let it merge into a trinity.

Yet, however briefly, I would try.

De Dos Güeras



WILL HAVE no idea what to feel or what to try for that night so soon after our evening with my brother when we will go to that restaurant alone for the first and only time, Basta and I. When there could have been thirty children and I could have heard all the numbers without ever noticing. Had thirty cockroaches climb up onto my plate and eaten them without thinking. Even if I will laugh as loud as ever, perhaps louder than ever I will be so anxious, though I won't really know why and it certainly won't unfocus my eyes as it did the day of our marriage when it lasted all the way through the party Itzel had organized for us, there'll just be that feeling to start that something that something that something is not right is not right, that something is not right, words repeating with the slightly rapid beating of the heart, the long dark shadow like in *Madeleine*. And the fear as primordial.

So that I will make a joke of my own, a not very good one, though it's true enough we'll never have been there without Itzel. We will think of it, or at least I will up to that time think of it, somehow as our place, meaning always the three. While for them I am about to learn it could as easily be the two. Or the whole study group. They have been coming here quite regularly after their meetings from weeks before my brother even got back from Vietnam, so that the joke won't altogether be untrue either.

The men aren't staring at you with as much envy as usual tonight, I will say to Basta because I will notice his noticing the evaluating looks the men will give us as we come in.

This time you're not *El Señor de dos güeras*. It must give them a so much bigger thrill when we are both here. We should have called Itzel and asked her to come along. I think they think we're mother and daughter and you're paying us for a threesome. Sometimes the hookers stare too.

And my laughter will sound hollow even to me.

Especially once he reaches across the table to say: You're both such beautiful women how could they not envy me? Just for being in your company.

And he will give me a long tender look.

They must see how happy we are, he says. They can see it in our faces. Then he will add, as he turns my hand over and draws on it with his finger: I came here with Itzel last night. While you were giving your English class. She called to ask me to come. It's her I want to talk with you about.

And I will look at his face, and everything will change. This time I am sure. My instincts were not wrong in Amecameca. I am right. He is *El Señor de dos güeras* after all. Or soon he will be.

Though he will avoid talking about it for a while. Start instead with talking about that first visit, when we'd just been for the first time in the Plaza. And too, about his survivor guilt, the one that will come up again the night of that trip to Huejotzingo. Not that we hadn't talked about it before. A lot, really. How we will both suffer not just the guilt of survival but of absence. So that it will be true that we had both from time to time envied Itzel. Tlatelolco envy I will even name it.

And while neither one of us will ever claim any need to be one of the martyrs of that day, there will remain something in us, perhaps our lives long, that will wish to have shared the danger if only to take up our part. To be among the winners and losers of that particular lottery. The way a soldier or guerrilla fighter might feel if not there for some obscure reason at the critical juncture of a war she believes in.

Yet from the very beginning I will know that Basta will feel it more

strongly than I do. Otherwise that cartoon would just have been water off a Daffy Duck's back. Instead of exemplifying his helplessness, that place in himself that will feel as silly, as awkward, as babbling, as ineffectual as that character. And he will beat himself up with it many times more than once as he will fervently wish he had been there instead of Itzel. At least in my presence. Almost as if he wished to creep inside her skin. See out her eyes each time she speaks of it. Though it is only in Amecameca he will wish in front of me that he had been there with her.

Though he will say to me sometimes too: I should have come back as soon as the army invaded the university. I should have been here to see what I could do. Maybe it would have been better if just you had stayed in New York.

Still working with Itzel will never be mentioned. Not that we wouldn't have taken such work for granted. Still: He'll never have made it the centre of his desires. Even when he'll praise Itzel for having been so strong in our absence.

And he will remind me of that, her strength her resolution as we made our choice for the group that other night not so long ago in this same place. Likely the only two reasons we'll be sitting right there: Itzel and Itzel. Probably too why it's where she'd chosen to meet him the night before. Because he wouldn't have been able to resist acknowledging something they'd both already have known. And in that place now with me where the three of us had sat together and decided definitely that we should join the cell, become *militantes*, he'll know he would never be able to back down from any decision he had made. Would not even be able to contemplate wanting to. It will be our place for *definiciones*. For defining ourselves by our acts. *Sin confusiones ni obfusaciones*. So that I will try to match them even in that.

As he talks not just of her determination but also of her delicacy, her need, her fear. How now is the time to do everything we have in our power to forward her growth. Then he will switch it to I. Now was the time for him to do everything in his power to forward her growth. She needed him. This brave woman just conquering her fear. Just coming into her own. Who had been there for us all.

I did not need him. Not like that, he'll say. I knew who I was, where I was going, after all. And he will speak again the way he often would of how strong I am. Repeating again how I could have done New York on my own.

You could have done that work for both of us. You're that strong. And those were your people.

Not seeing any more what he had added to what we'd done, how crucial it had been. Why his presence was likely far more important than mine. Even as he will again praise Itzel for having been so strong in our absence.

And the thought will come to me again: I was only the translator. And again it will enlarge. This time not that I am lost but that I am losing him in the translation. And I'll think: Is this what he married me for? So that I could translate him. Not from a stage but in the world. Into a larger, bigger, better, more solid self. I was not there to reflect him as many men might want, but to recreate him, the way a translator does language. And I'll think again: equals sign or placeholder zero. Is this the beginning of my new world?

And I'll know what he's going to say as he takes my hands and looks into my eyes. And as I look away. Into the talking, laughing, teasing crowd.

Not just that she needs him but that he needs me.

And from then on I will know it all. Everything that he will say.

◆ Even as he goes on to speak about a different night not all that long before. What must have been our first or maybe our second meeting after the student strike was broken, in those days right after we had to admit it was over, those days when *los Comités de Huelga* will become *Comités de Lucha*, the Strike Committees become Struggle Committees, even if the CNH, *El Comité Nacional de Huelga*, The National Strike Committee, will maintain its name and its acronym down to this day, those initials appearing even now on posters and on that modified Olympic dove in the Zócalo. A time when we will have pledged ourselves to that new slogan of *La Lucha Continúa*, and try to pretend it will be easy to regroup. When the hardest thing to let go of will be our stubborn anger, our refusal to believe we have to leave direct confron-

tation to retrench and regroup, to resist long enough to survive until we can once more grow, when people will start saying privately, I'll do it myself. All I want is a return engagement with equal fire power, and dream guns again not in soldiers' hands but in my own.

When at San Carlos we will already have started making those little stickers with and without their graphics so like the one on the overpass I will see fifty years later that it will bring tears to my eyes to remember them handed to all and sundry, Itzel still making deliveries in her car, with all of us from all the splintered groups pasting them any time and anywhere to everything, next to seats on buses or tables in restaurants, the waiting rooms in official buildings, some still going out on *pintas* to paint slogans or throw red paint on the chests of leftover Olympic doves, while there will be days our helplessness will make the whole city seem as claustrophobic as the jail or the holding cells of the Campo Militar Número Uno. No matter what we say or paint or signal with our fingers, upraised or turned down in that 'V'.

So that there is one graphic I will always remember as I bring myself face to face with that moment when Basta twists his fingers into mine there in the restaurant to remind me of that other night, a poster placed carefully if secretly on the walls of the time, one you can find in all the books from twenty-five or forty years later, then on the walls again but of museums at fifty, this quick linoleum cut of an open-mouthed woman her head covered by her black *rebozo* reaching out toward a casually pointing masculine hand its wrist marked with a police officer's stripes. A mother ready to shout, to beg, to cry out as typeset words surround her: *Sí Señora su muchacho está muerto*; yes lady your child is dead but *piénselo bien* think carefully about it ... If you open your mouth you're at risk of LOSING YOUR OTHER CHILDREN, that last writ in large caps.

And no, no one's child will be dead, not in that group as we stand around chatting after our meeting, the usual stuff, the ongoing if desperate political talk mixed in with the personal details of everyday life, when one of the women will just break down, the wife of one of the older political prisoners, and good friend to two of the women now over in the women's jail, a journalist you might have thought unbreakable she

seemed so bold and full of ideas even as she acted as her husband's amanuensis, with him our most brilliant theoretician, so that I could imagine them talking ideas even in bed or as she nursed their youngest child.

That was the point really, not dead yet, but the children, taking the children with her to the prison and how the guards looked at them, the friendliest giving them sweets, something that had seemed fine at first, probably was really, except the last time or two another guard had stood behind that one, with crossed arms and a little smirk that would make her swear, really swear, that it must have been the prison authorities gave him his instructions, who started to tell her what attractive children she had, she obviously took care of them so well, she must be a good mother, she should dedicate herself to that, in a tone you didn't have to be an aficionado of gangster movies to understand.

It was awful, just awful, she'll say, the way he looked from her to them. And back. That teensy lip licking smirk. The smarminess of it. And she will raise her hands from where she is sitting a fist clenched a hand raised as in that poster but somehow as if begging permission for her sudden sobs, while we will all look over toward her, immobilized, caught off guard, except for Itzel who moves over and takes her hands then kneels down to face her, speaking softly for a while before helping the woman up and hugging her tight. Oriana will be the only name I know her by, this woman who welcomed us into our *clandestinaje*, who herself had recently taken on the name of the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, precisely because, wounded in the Plaza, Fallaci was one of only a few exceptional journalists to write something honest about it. Certainly the only one in a major US magazine.

So that I will watch Itzel lead Oriana from the room still holding her hand, then help her on with the coat or cape or shawl always worn against the chill of a Mexico City winter night, at least once you've been acclimatized by a first winter, a garment that might seem unusually light by northern standards, but mostly because we would be wearing the heavy sweaters you never took off because in most apartments it could easily be as cold in as out. I have never worn as much wool as I did in Mexico City, though the truth is when I notice Oriana shivering I won't be the only one who realizes it isn't from the unheated apartment's

cold. While what I will notice most is one of the leaders, a man only sometimes present at our meetings, watching Itzel, evaluating her positively I'll think as I see a smile play around his eyes, even as I'll feel the same pride in her as I did in Amecameca, how she is blooming before our eyes, then catch Basta's eye to share my pride with him.

While later when Itzel gets her home Oriana will go further.

No, I can't do it, I can't do it, I can't do it, she'll repeat over and over.

And she didn't want to have to, she didn't want to do this work when she knew for a fact that if she ever felt her children were threatened, and things like that had already happened we'll all know that, people's children had been threatened to get confessions when previous underground organizations were discovered, Oriana will have a friend whose daughter was returned only after she made a political confession. No names of others just a list of everything she had participated in, and why she might want to do it again without question, but wouldn't, no, not ever, and she didn't mind signing her name in the offices of *Gobernación* once a week as many ex-political prisoners had to do, she would do it for the rest of her life if she had to, if they would just give her daughter back to her. And it's probable too that the woman was allowed to go home with her terrified toddler already sick with bronchitis only because in addition to her confession an uncle would intercede for her—will offer *amparo*—and he had powerful friends.

Though she, Oriana, she will tell Itzel that she knew she would go the distance, make any kind of confession they wanted, she would tell them whatever they wanted to know, and things they didn't even know to ask, give up Che Guevara himself *con nombre y señas*, with names and locations and passwords, if he were still alive, and she didn't want to be in a position to burn—that's the expression for blow the cover, *quemar*—anybody at all, not ever, she didn't. She wouldn't be put in that position she wouldn't. She would continue to visit her husband and to edit his work and to bring him news, maybe even encoded messages, but she didn't want any more involvement than that. She didn't want to endanger anybody. Not her family, not anybody else. While Itzel will rub her cheek with the back of her hand, and say that truly, such participation on Oriana's part would be enough. And after that, each week

during one of Oriana's visits to the *pepes*, Itzel will babysit the children. On another, accompany them.

Not that I will find out about any of that till that night in the restaurant. I'll only know how Itzel will come to the next meeting of the group ready to tell us what the results had been of this moment of breakdown. Which she will do in the crisp dry tone that in such a group tells you that's all you need to know, if you know her well enough she'll tell you more, as she makes us aware that Oriana will no longer be coming to our meetings. With her husband in jail and all her added responsibilities she knew she had to limit her activities. She would keep editing and collecting her husband's work, but that was it, no more meetings no more plans. No other participation.

Though it won't be Oriana Basta wants me to understand as he speaks, but rather Itzel, what this had done to Itzel, how terrible that was, how Oriana's description of those guards had taken her directly back to the camps, made her see that young man saying *Himmel Bunker* even if the guard in question with his little smirk wouldn't have looked the same at all, then the next evening of the study group, instead of going over the evening's politics afterwards she'll grab his hands just as he is grabbing mine and tell him about it, how her world had been obscured by a thick sepia wash and she'd had to keep blinking, her cheek against Oriana's as she hugged her so the woman couldn't see it, even as she behaved as she knew she must, did what she knew would help. Yet she'd been so afraid that she needed to tell someone, that's why, after they'd all gotten up to say their goodbyes in the restaurant, this same restaurant, she had nonetheless lingered at the table then sat back down, making Basta sit down as well, and the words had just started to flow out of her.

To cause me to ask myself, my interior voice rising to a plaintive whine, not only Why didn't she call me, but also to wonder whether he'd played with her fingers the way he will be playing with mine or if it was the other way around, had she played with his fingers this way last night, had she rubbed hers against his cheek the way she had against Oriana's. Then to further imagine what that would have felt like. We'd held hands often enough, but I had never felt her fingers on my cheek.

Feeling increasingly cold as he explains her fear, taking my fingers out of his to put them first to my own cheek then around my cup to feel its residual warmth as he goes on to tell me that after that they would mostly stay here afterwards each time the study group met because Itzel had started to accompany Oriana on the Thursday visits to the jail, the one each week on which she'd take the children, there were three per week, including the general open visit of a Sunday, when everyone with permission to come will come.

It's the list I'll just be getting myself on when my downstairs neighbour is released, a visit when even people who don't know the prisoner can attend, the visit when the university women will come cruising or on blind dates to see if they can pick themselves out a *pepe*, or others to speak with the leaders to come to a better understanding of where things might be at, *cual las coyunturas, cuales las correlaciones de fuerzas*, especially once the decision had been made, even in horror and disappointment and rage, to end the strike. Then the other two visits for lawyers and family, spouses or girlfriends.

Itzel had seen it in Oriana, how she needed the company, that it would help just to have another adult along, whether she waited outside the cellblock or got the permission necessary to enter with the three children, *la niñera más güera de la galera* Oriana called her in jest, the fairest nanny on the cellblock, so of course it became necessary to tell Basta each time after the study group how it had gone, she couldn't tell Oriana after all, what was happening was so hard for Oriana she didn't need to think it was hard for Itzel too, best she just think her the brave woman of the Plaza, but she did need to talk, so after that even if upon occasion Basta only received a quickly spoken The visit went okay, mostly they would let all the others leave the restaurant unless somebody else needed a ride home, when instead they'd returned or gone sometimes to some other place, or maybe, and I could see him hesitate, and I'll know he is about to say Itzel's apartment, but stops himself, blushes instead, looks around confused, letting me know that no matter how much he emphasizes how nothing's happened between them yet, his silence is already telling me how much he's wanted it to even before she invited him to this restaurant last night.

So that I see him seated at her table or on her couch longing to reach out toward something different even as he takes her hands and she tells him it's because of him she can be brave, and he tells her: No. Just like I saw him do in Amecameca, repeating: No Itzel, you were brave in the Plaza, your bravery was your own. With that tender look deeper than the one with which he'd started our conversation, to let me know exactly how differently he already intends to end tonight, that more than their hands will be touching even as he speaks again.

After that we always talked about her fears, our fears, both of us, our fears, he says then, letting me know how she felt far more at ease with him than with the whole group, and I did understand why she'd picked this place for the night before, didn't I? Itzel had felt so comfortable here since that first time, she'd gotten such strength from being here with us so close to the Plaza, making me remember how much he'd talked about her increasing political clarity without ever mentioning anything about her feelings before, he'd never mentioned this other increasing understanding between them as he created his private world with her that sounded with its sepia washes too much like our days of chiaroscuro, of umber and ochre and caput mortuum and cobalt.

She'll likely have talked to him even about that, I'll think, he's already told me how she'd talked of me reminding her of her sister in the camps, and it won't seem such a compliment at all any more but more of a box to put me in, maybe even a drawer to be closed, how she'd look over and see my hair she said was her sister's hair of after the typhus when they knew for sure they'd made it through, and she'd see her sister waking her, cajoling her, and how she could feel it, my strength as I just sat there in those meetings so firm in my positions and it would warm her before she turned back to what she was doing, the way she was sure it warmed Basta too, and all I'll want to do is shout or whine: But it's my place too, what about me? What about telling me, I'm not the whole group, what about me? Only I'm doing what I will persist in doing all evening:

I do, of course I do, I say: Definitely. *Comprendo. Entiendo.* How deep her terror can go. How much she needs... And I'll remember how often I've said Our support, want now to say, Your support, but I can't

make it pass my lips. Choke a bit instead. Take another sip of my now cold *atole*.

I will understand Itzel, what it was she was doing, she'll have invented her own aversion therapy, putting her hand her mind closer and closer to the flame until she dares to snuff it out, the way too she might feel in Oriana's children herself barely out of childhood looking at those guards in Auschwitz, and in the hands of Oriana's children what it would be like to hold the trusting hand of a child of her own. But Oriana, no, I didn't get Oriana, I was young and I wanted my battle scars, so I'll think Oriana should just get on with it, I won't comprehend until I have children of my own how you could be not the walking wounded but a walking wound, those first infant years when I'll reverse in my mind that inane idea of Freud's about penis envy, how woman perceives her vagina as a wound and in the throes of birth she extrudes a penis, or owns the phallus as the Lacanians might say, thinking no, you take in a penis and you extrude a wound, a fear for your children that does not scab over until childhood ends and never ever heals.

While then maybe I'll have some sympathy for Oriana's sobbing, even her leaving the work of the group, that not wanting to endanger others had seemed legitimate, but I'll think going to the jail a simple thing, time out of your day but just a visit after all, why would you need company for such a thing, and besides there would be no danger there, not with that unwritten rule, true in much of Latin America I will later learn, that a political prisoner is safe once he or she has been transferred to the jail, that the minute the *acta de amparo*—something like a writ of habeas corpus, though not quite the same—is served and your whereabouts acknowledged, you will be safe from further abuses—what are we calling them these days, enhanced interrogations?—with their torture and their death threats and their threats to family, or even the kidnapping of family members. All of those will be over. You could rest, write a treatise or two, even a book of poetry or a novel—at least one sixty-eight prisoner, a beautiful young gay man, the later reactionary González de Alba, will start his successful literary career in jail—maybe watch Ali versus Frazer on the telly, or listen on the radio, enjoy your marital, premarital, postmarital and extramarital visits if you're a

guy, and whatever gender you may or may not be, the ones from your *compañeros*. The fantastic and other cellblock talk, the meetings, even, if you want, the exchanging of recipes. Because the *pepes* will have their communal cooking too. In other words, get on with your life. As limited, if meaningful, it might be. Exactly what I'll think Oriana should do. After all her husband will be doing just that. She will pick up his writings, after all.

Good for Itzel, is about all I'll say, failing to add how I admire her bravery, her determination, look away and bite my lips before I can say, I'm glad she has your support, still wanting to demand to know why she hadn't picked me to talk to. Or us. Together. All those trips. Wasn't it months now we'd been sharing everything?

◇ Though Oriana will turn out to be right, and likely lucky to have Itzel along, when a little less than a year after our talk in the restaurant, on New Year's Day 1970 to be exact, in defiance of that unwritten rule, at the end of the Thursday visit as she'll stand there still inside the prison just as the cellblock doors have been closed behind the departing *visita*, a group of armed men will sweep into the cellblocks of the political prisoners. So that she will hear it all, the crashes, sobs, screams, without hands enough even with Itzel's help to put over her children's ears, when that gang of *incondicionales*, the prisoners who work for the guards, the *porras* of the jails really, the ones who'll keep order for privileges and maybe a bit of money to shoot up or send home, the ones who on their own cellblocks will *romper la madre* of whomever the guards want beat up only now—they must have gloried in those orders—they'd been sent into the cellblocks of the political prisoners to attack them, to steal and to break their possessions, pots, pans, radios, electric razors, hand crafted cups, to beat them and to rip their clothes, burn their books, manuscripts, drawings, scatter letters from mothers, girlfriends, fathers, simple acquaintances, tear them up maybe piss on them. All of it just to remind the *pepes* and their visitors listening who's in charge, that no hunger strike like the one they'd been on for days by then, would hurry their sentencing or their freedom. Easy enough as well to incite many more than the *incondicionales* to participate, there was envy and resentment

enough to go around, whether of the gifts from friends or the visits from so many young women, the ability to establish within reason their own rules, though any rumoured proselytizing the political prisoners might have been doing about that, any encouraging of the common prisoners to do the same too, to organize themselves into committees to make demands, would have been enough reason of itself, hunger strike or no, for the administration to use violence to put the political prisoners in their place, a warning to keep their subversive thinking to themselves as well as a way to intimidate the families, intimidate us all.

And violent it will be. With the guards' little smirks gone to wide nasty smiles as the visitors cower there listening, trying to maintain their dignity while on the other side of the doors the political prisoners fight back or attempt to get back into their cells and somehow keep the doors closed against the *incondicionales* with their lead pipes and their coshes, maybe even some knives. The leader I'll meet later who'll do his short Chilean exile will even tell me at the same time as he'll talk about his inability to go back to the Plaza, that he thought he had killed a man that day, getting the guy's pipe away from him and smashing him with it even as he turned to then use it to jam closed the door of the cell he was about to enter to protect himself and the other political prisoners already huddled inside.

It will be a terrible change and I will remember acknowledging to myself just how prescient Oriana had been even if I will say nothing when she walks into that emergency meeting the evening of New Year's Day to bear her witness, Itzel once more at her home to babysit the children who were having a terrible time getting to sleep, where we have been called together to stay late into that night no matter how tired we are from what we have done on New Year's Eve, if we formally ate the twelve good luck grapes at midnight or sat on a roof looking at the sky getting stoned among art school friends, but upon Oriana's entrance we will all fall silent, and I'll know I will be up longer than most as I have been asked to come specifically in order to once more lose myself, dizzy and sleepless, in translation, I am only there to fulfill our need to get the word out about the attack on the political prisoners, not just to Mexico but to the world, to try to make sure the government will not

try the same thing again through our calling the outside world's attention to it, so I have been called upon to make sure an English version of what has been said is available to our contacts in the United States and perhaps the greater English speaking world or even for further translation.

Though I will be asking myself even before we start as I once more look around that winter cold apartment, talking theory, tactics and strategy again, mostly with the guys, the way Itzel once said she envied, if this might not be the very last time that I will sit in that room with that particular group of people, so that as I look over at Oriana and ask myself only briefly where Itzel is and how this has affected her, if her campaign of desensitization has been successful, I will find myself back in the restaurant again when all of this still had a multiplicity of possible outcomes. Forever after to seal all the dread and the violence and the clinging to one another into just one day: broken strike and hunger strike and their outcome, Oriana's and Itzel's alliance, Basta with his fingers twisted into mine in that restaurant, myself looking out exhausted at those faces as Oriana speaks, all one act and one result. So that I will be amazed when I find out, reading González de Alba again, that the attack on the political prisoners occurred on New Year's Day 1970 not 1969 and that it was intended to break the prisoners' hunger strike not the student strike that had already led to the Massacre. And I will see again that one image of a woman one arm outstretched, one hand fisted, though what she begs for is not so very clear.

While in that restaurant I see myself sighing and squeezing Basta's hands as he rushes on speaking again about Itzel's needs, how deep they run, making it easy to understand how he feels he is molding her, translating her into that person we spoke of swaying there in our hammocks only weeks before wrapped in our ponchos the tips of our noses cold in the close to freezing December night of the last days of 1968. How I too had helped to start it then, telling him just as the leadership did how much encouragement the study group could give her, how much he could help, so that when I expressed my admiration for her he felt pride, pride in what he'd done for her and sitting there his *atole* too grown cold he'll still be feeling it, how instrumental he has been in who

she is becoming, how that image of his aid to the blooming Itzel shines for him like a beacon, and I will feel the power of it, how it pulls him forward into the future makes him feel that he is becoming who he wishes to be, that translation he saw me making there on the stage for him, when his voice held his audience so tight he was necessary and not just of use so that this is what has become most important: his need of her need of him. With me steadfast, looking upon them as from afar, to confirm it.

So that I will never get to say: But I am afraid sometimes too, I'm not all that strong, I'm not who you both say I am, I need you too, because I'll know my needs do not figure in this.

I understand, of course I do, I will say again instead. *Entiendo perfectamente*. As if understanding could do anything to assuage the growing, glowing, caput mortuum purple pain that swells in my body, tunnels the edges of my vision, pushes the moving Treces and Doces and Sietes, the seated businessmen and hookers and theatre goers into a limited palette of mauves and crimsons, lavenders and pinks layered over ochre.

As too, I will know why mine and Itzel's colour coding is no longer in use. Where our many hued days have gone, that a new code has been developed, with other key phrases, other stories, one whose words I will not know even if I know with whom they are shared. And I will feel it again like a blow, the eye contact I'd seen in Amecameca, the deep tenderness in those two sets of eyes. Looking at her not at me. Looking to him not to me. How long had it been, for how long had I not noticed it? And my jealousy will be of him then. And I won't know which one of them I want back. Except I want to ask about the code. What is it? Do you have colours or infinities? Why can't I be there, too?

Solid. Loud. Real. Savouring them.

While, as to his words, I swear I will believe them. That I still believe them. I think I always have. His will be a hierarchy of needs far more real than Maslow's.

Tolvanera

AND SO IT is that you will find me in that restaurant behaving just as he has finished saying I always do, with just the kind of cool he will say he has always so appreciated, acting the way he'll say I'd done at that conference in New York or in the weeks following our return, the way I'd been his rock too that day Clotilde and Matilde arrived with Ramoncito on the roof, the way I'd worked tirelessly on my translations, so smooth so unafraid I'd even analyzed Niki's mother, both her needs and her limitations instead of panicking. Even if my own memories will keep telling me how much I have appreciated in all our time together right from the beginning the fact that I didn't have to put a brave face on anything, that the promise of oneness allowed me to confess my limitations, feel my fears, talk them out. Even as I find myself once more analyzing with him, as we often will together the lives of others, Niki or her mother, Magdalena or hers, Ignacia or Billie or Tavo or the members of the group, or what it is that will make Itzel, Itzel.

Even what it is will make her take that name. What we will do again now. Not speak of my envy of her ease with Oriana, my own feeling of going stiff unable to move faced with her emotion, but ask ourselves, ask each other, what it must be like to have lived Itzel's life, repeating just as I had before I introduced them: Well, Itzel is an Auschwitz

survivor, and as she went about surviving Auschwitz, she has gone about surviving the rest of her life, never quite happy never fulfilled. All those lines I had long before started making up in my head, and going on of course to acknowledge her need of him, its importance, how this is her time to *floreecer*, to bloom, and yes, of course, he did have to be there for her they did have to fulfill themselves, realize themselves in each other.

And yes, there is no question but that I will be there for them, that's what revolutionary friendship was about, wasn't it? You could take that back all the way to Emma Goldman, to Alexandra Kollantai, to so many of the most interesting of the first socialists, the first feminists, couldn't you? And we will be inside the kind of intellectual discussion we had always enjoyed, and if I should want to say *¡basta basta basta!* at all, it will not be to him, but to the red pink mauve colours at the edge of my vision and deep in my gut. *¡Basta basta basta!* enough of you enough. I believe this, I believe in this, let me be good with it please let me. And almost I will forget why we are there, except that the pink the purple will remain at the edge of my fingers, surrounding the *atole* cup I grasp.

Nor will I believe in sexual exclusivity back then, still don't as far as it goes, think it's probably easier in the long run, but believe believe, even short of a sacrament, I can't bring myself to that. I could never reconcile myself to the idea no matter who I was with that I would never desire anyone else again. Or even, no matter what my experience with it, that any world should of necessity end if I or my partner acted on such desires. I am that much a child not just of my time but of my circumstances, and too for that matter of my rather polymorphous if not perverse sexuality, that while I believe in going with your gut I believe too in taming it with your beliefs when you have to. And allowing unto others what you allow to yourself.

And understand too that old Austrian socialist friend of Billie's who said she would never be ruled by her feelings, not ever, and it wasn't around sexual relations but about going to a Nazi rally in her youth and wanting to roar as loud at Hitler's speech as anyone else in the crowd even if she didn't believe a word. And as for finally throwing her womanizing husband out, it was that he had become downright

embarrassing, she was no longer sure she could invite either a pubescent middle school student or a ninety-year-old great great grandmother to her house.

But that's the trick, not being ruled, isn't it? Moving on an understanding that controls impulse. Hears it, but doesn't always act on it. Using that word control as *controlar* is used in Spanish to talk of information. This time the information emotion gives. If you have it, you control it. You can use it. I will even say that to him. And add.

Of course it's hard for me, I'll say. But I do understand, truly, I do. How important I am to you, but how you need each other in this different special way. And it won't quite be the talk of primary and secondary relationships that will be springing up already in the North, but will have many of the same features. That we will both accept the deep meaning of both relationships, and yes, I will tell him that I understand how much he needs me too, and I will not even pull my hand away when he says: And Itzel, Itzel, you know how much she loves you.

So that I will tell back to him the story he is telling me, how this was not exactly what I'd wanted when I'd helped Itzel start on this road, the one that had brought her to activism, but surely it was a version of it. In fact, in its own way it was exactly what I wanted for both of them, wasn't it? This agency, this realization they felt in their communication, and if that had helped them discover this special relationship they had with each other, then that was beautiful, too. That sixties word again.

Who was I to stop it, not with how she was now coming into her own, it was wonderful that he could give her what she needed at this crucial juncture, or conjuncture, that he too had come so far, we had all come so far, so of course if they still needed my support well, of course, of course really, I could see that, do that. And no, I would never dream of stopping them from loving each other. This was the right thing for him to be doing, right perfectly right, and for her of course, and I will turn my hand up under his so that I can squeeze back.

Repeat: how yes, he must go to her right now, yes.

How happy I am for you both, I may even say, then repeat it: I'm so happy for you both. For you both. I am so happy.

And I will mean it, that person I am watching speak will mean it.

And somewhere inside myself right now writing this, there is still someone who meant it. Who still means it. I mean it I mean it I meant it. With all my soul, I meant it. With all my mind I mean it. But my heart would not stop its rapid beating. Or my eyes return to seeing the greens, the blues, the yellows of the world.

Go to her, you must go to her, I will say again as I smile a big smile, a smile as big as the one he smiles back so that I will know he can't see the stiffness in my facial muscles so different from the openness in his face the eagerness because all he can see is her, and how she awaits him.

So then comes the last pat on the hand the last quick goodbye *abrazo* and light kiss on the mouth along with the last reiteration of how much he loves me he needs me he is grateful for my understanding.

And then he's saying: I'll see you later. I don't know how late I'll be, so don't wait up.

And the next thing you know I'm on the street and walking. And I won't be able to help it. That I will arrive home and it won't be late enough to go to bed so I will try to work on a new painting and be unable to concentrate, so that I will make a cup of tea and go into the cage and set it down by a canvas sling. And I will think about what it is in this minute in this exact second that they are doing. So that I will try to read by the light we have mounted from the chain link ceiling first an article in Spanish and then a book in English and I will lose track of the words on the page as I imagine their words to each other.

So I will then turn off the light and lean my head back to look at the stars because it's a brighter night than it has any right to be in the late March *tolvanera*, the dust haze, the dust storms, the whirlwinds of dust that arise on street corners and move along blocks and high into the city skies in the late dry season from the lost city they will call it then —*la ciudad perdida*— of Nezahualcōyotl. Not a romantic Shangri-la type El Dorado place that writers have made conquistadors look for since first the Spanish crossed the ocean even if it bears the rather intriguing name of Texcoco's poet king, the Fasting Coyote whose words lament the ephemeral nature of our life on earth from the engraved stone walls of the Museum of Anthropology where I will be doing archaeological illustrations by then, but the shanty town just outside Mexico City's

eastern limit in the dried but still never properly drained bed of the salt lake named after his city-state, which in those days will throw up its dust on dry windy days to allow the whole city rich and poor and middle alike all to breathe its sharp alkaline sands filled with the powdered shit of its service free inhabitants then turn the streets to muck when the rains come.

Nezahualodo Nezahualmud, an old nickname taken from the worst days when the shit will return to being the poor's exclusive property and to wade through it their exclusive privilege, though these decades later a giant red steel coyote greets you as you enter the new city's densely populated streets paved and piped to calm the *tolvanera* and give relief to its inhabitants with the new slums of subsidence dust and floods moved farther out so that even with the burning eye days of smog that barely let you see two blocks away much less to the near mountains or farther volcanoes, I have no idea if anyone in Mexico City's centre ever gets to search through so dusty a haze to try to make out stars like the ones I will barely be able to see that night or just think I can, a few dull salmon spots anyway in the pink sky while it gets later and later and I can't stop doing it, imagining just what part of their own *acto* they're in so I finally just get up and go down to the street and walk to the park to the increased darkness of Chapultepec only blocks away and no. No.

This will not be a self-destructive act of total desperation. More one of self-recovery, a recourse I'd taken often enough, whether on the Staten Island Ferry or the Brooklyn Bridge. And except sometimes for the cat calls of the men it never will bother me to wander Mexico City late at night, I think I've said this before and it's true I'm a late night wanderer of cities and even if this isn't the time I will journey through an old neighbourhood of rags in the City's centre and think I have entered a novel by Cortázar no matter that I've come to love the detailed realism of his surrealism by the time I take off for Chapultepec, that other late night will occur later at a time when I can be Wordsworthian, worth perhaps my words, and recollect all of this in edgy tranquillity with a good friend and for a brief time lover, another ex-political prisoner but an intellectual who did almost come to love the peace of his time inside, who has named his cat Rocamadour after the dead child

whose name is repeated again and again in Cortázar's *Rayuela*, and he can inform me that Basta and I, well it was simple wasn't it we both had mother problems *estaban los dos chingando a su madre* trying at least to fuck our mothers up or out of our heads, with the double entendre of stretching that fuck word to where it should never go, to mean *el acto* itself, and he will laugh while I won't, but kick out instead quickly to the side and catch him exactly in the knee and he will fall among the piles of cleanly cut rags strewn all about us the leftovers no doubt of some nearby cottage industry their colours muted by the streetlights along sixteenth century streets down by the *Zócalo* where small boys and maybe a *marimacha* or two, a tomboy because there's always one no matter how much we like to forget that girls too will be boys and play rough or just soccer in the street late at night while some girlier boys or girls stand in doorways without doors and everything will be warmth and nostalgia as I help him up and dust him off and we cannot stop laughing, while this night there cannot be any such bittersweet reminiscing emotion, that warm pink blanket cannot be pulled over me everything is still either ferocious images of them or the shining reddish dark caput mortuum glaze in the gut as if I'm turned inside out the same as my Brooklyn night wanderings when I will have to get away from the violence of the house and there will be no man available to whom to proclaim my rather manipulative need of him, yes I've done that too, gone that route, much more to get the high of sex itself attain its release than to use sexuality to attain shelter, shelter I could attain easily enough through my work though sometimes there will be friends just friends too with whom to hang out to walk endless streets or take the Staten Island Ferry back and forth all night but friends or not I always will have myself and just enough of those street smarts that breed themselves in the bone of a childhood lived like mine, the eyes in the back of the head that push you out of danger for those times when you don't even care if every move you make places you in harm's way and the next thing I know I'm in the park this time among those Montezuma cypresses I could just make out from my room at the Oronsky's, the *abuehuetes* old as their Nahuatl name of old man of the water and I'm imagining them surrounding Malintzin as she enters the causeway

in her magnificent *huipil* with Mr. Malintzin, as the indigenous called Cortés, by her side, him named after her by most Mexica in a still undigested irony as to who conquered Tenochtitlán and the magnificent park in which I can still sit stood at the city's entrance while the causeway that left from it now Paseo de la Reforma brought the city's purest spring water as well as its conquerors, with the water of the three Mexica cities' lakes divided by the aqueduct Nezahualcóyotl designed used only for agriculture on the fresh side and the drying of salt on the other, the kind of thing I probably will manage to finally think about academic thought so very much like counting sheep or the one two of my steps to try to get my mind away from the raw red still *en mis entrañas* the purple edges of my green surroundings until I'm walking up the side of the castle hill where the Niños Heroes are supposed to have died throwing themselves from the walls of Chapultepec Castle rather than give themselves up to other conquerors the invaders from the United States in 1847 *From the Halls of Montezuma* the hymn of the U.S. Marines and all that, or so the story goes even if everyone in Mexico City, Basta was the first to say it to me, looks down from the castle walls and says there's nowhere they could have jumped that they wouldn't have rolled to the bottom so there I am sitting where maybe a *Niño Héroe* once landed and thinking of Basta's laughing face when he first told the story to me and I'm back to how now it must be laughing into Itzel's blonde curls which in turn makes me wander off just that little bit into the grass only I don't throw up I can't throw this feeling up I just gag before I find a patch of grass to sit on to look out on all the lights of the city thousands, millions of them and I hear the words again and again She needs me she needs me and the reply Go to her go to her and it no longer matters how often I repeat out loud or to myself, I understand I understand I mean it I mean it, the red hollow that was once *mis entrañas* inside this beast of the self won't go away.

Until dawn has passed and I walk out and there's the yoga class we will go to sometimes, the light of dawn yoga class that starts minutes before sunrise or minutes after in Chapultepec because dawn changes only by about an hour throughout the year so we would always be there before Basta would go to his job at the *Bolsa*, or me to the first brief

morning classes I'll give at the Politécnico, the seven to ten shift before switching to early evening, and this day too there's all those people in all those postures and the damp of the dew rising at six in the morning.

Because yoga will already be popular in Mexico back then, the class will already have been going for years is still going now for all I know, there are all these things we think of as New Age that Mexico integrated long ago, Tavo and his alternative medicine and life style alternatives are an example, his daughters trained as skilled Kung Fu fighters later to be sent the first Westerners to that monastery in Tibet while during my period there he'll already feed you yoghurt with your antibiotics even prescribe you a pill to replace intestinal flora and the homeopaths will be called *chocheros* because they give you those *chochas* those teeny pills, so the yoga class is greeting me the few who know me to recognize me waving a small wave as dressed completely wrong still I kick off my shoes and we all now go on into the next posture, the cobra I think it is I'll be doing the cobra, stretching up and out curving my back to massage the kidneys to force the red feeling out to the ends of my fingers so that instead of encompassing me or crawling along the edges of my sight it rushes out to encompass the world.

And I walk back home and Basta's still not there so I go back to the cage hammock in hand it's the soft white cotton one we will be given by the relatives in Vera Cruz as a wedding present for the wedding we were only then beginning to plan, and I string it up on S hooks from the chain link the way we always will and I think of when we got it and that first night together in a matrimonial hammock when we itched so much from *los jejenes* their *piquetes piquetitos picaduras* and tried to ease the itch rubbing in the marijuana tobacco alcohol infusion and we couldn't sleep so we talked all night and decided to marry and joked about how we'd do it just to deserve that hammock whose white cotton netting I pull up around and over me tight as if to pupate inside its white strings a cage within a cage so that I wonder if he only married me to get me in a cage his translator in a cage cotton or steel either way it doesn't matter he just wants to keep me in a cage because he needs me he needs me she needs him she needs me she needs him they need me. And I wish I was the one she needed the way she did when our friendship

started that we still had our days of cobalt and ultramarine layered alizarin and rose madder from cochineal grubs on nopal cactuses our cloud pink dusks she needs him.

Until I am sleeping when he gets back and comes in and puts his arms around me as I sleep. And I snuggle into him and smell her and say: Oh, you're back. How was it? How's Itzel?

And I turn away until the sun is shining directly on my face, with its strange yellow orange dusty dry season rays.

Another colour I will never capture in paint.

Nor ever again in the words to explain it to Itzel.

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About the Author



INTERPRETER, TRANSLATOR, COMMUNITY activist, teacher, visual, performance, and spoken word artist, Sarah Xerar Murphy (Sarah Murphy), is also the award winning author of multiple works of fiction and memoir among them *Connie Many Stories*, *Lilac in Leather* and *Last Taxi to Nutmeg Mews*. She has published, performed, exhibited and toured in Mexico, Spain, the United States, United Kingdom and Canada. Xerar Murphy has been honoured with Canada's Golden Beret Award as well as an Arts Council England International Artist's fellowship on which she toured and saw produced a live music and sound art CD of her full length spoken word monologue *when bill danced the war*, a story of her Choctaw father's war heroism and PTSD. At a Banff Centre residency facilitated by Adrian Stimson, *The Weavers 2012*, a literary installation in celebration of Maya weaving and commemoration of the Guatemalan genocide of the eighties was brought to fruition then exhibited in both Maine and New Brunswick. Brought up in New York and a subsequent resident of both Mexico and Canada, much of her work has been among Latin America's exiles and refugees in both Toronto and Calgary, work for which she has received special recognition from Calgary's Chilean community. Murphy holds a degree in studio art and Mexican pre-Columbian and colonial art history, as well as studies in Latin American and Spanish literature and brings a multicultural and biracial perspective to all her work. She currently lives in Passamaquoddy Territory in Bocabec, New Brunswick.

COMING SPRING 2020

ITZEL II

*The affair will end long before we enter the bar in Puerto Escondido. Or so Itzel and Basta will tell me. And Nauta in turn will tell us in the opening lines of Itzel II: A Three Knives Tale. But will it? And if it doesn't what will it mean? Find out as we continue to follow Nauta, Itzel and Basta through the cascading outcomes of their desire for agency and for change in themselves and in their world. As we contemplate the range of actions such desire makes them take and the range of emotions it brings, from euphoria to despair, we will move from the Oaxaca coast back to Mexico City, from Nauta's Brooklyn streets to her time in Canada, from the attraction between Basta and Itzel that has altered the characters' friendship to the rumours and reckonings that result. The 10th of June, 1971—The *Halconazo*—when the '68 prisoners are out and the students of Mexico City return to the streets, an event movingly documented in Alfonso Cuarón's Oscar winning film *Roma* and the history altering contemporaneous photographs of Armando Salgado, will be brought alive by the author's intimate knowledge of an event that was in part organized by movement friends from her phone. The book's recounting of a meeting days after this demonstration, the last time we will see the three friends in the same room, will then serve as a springboard to move them into their separate futures. As Nauta continues to measure her Mexican experiences against who she has become, she will see herself once more wielding the knife she has carried since puberty, as she is brought face to face not just with the violence of others—both political and personal—but her own.*

