

# BORDER SENSES

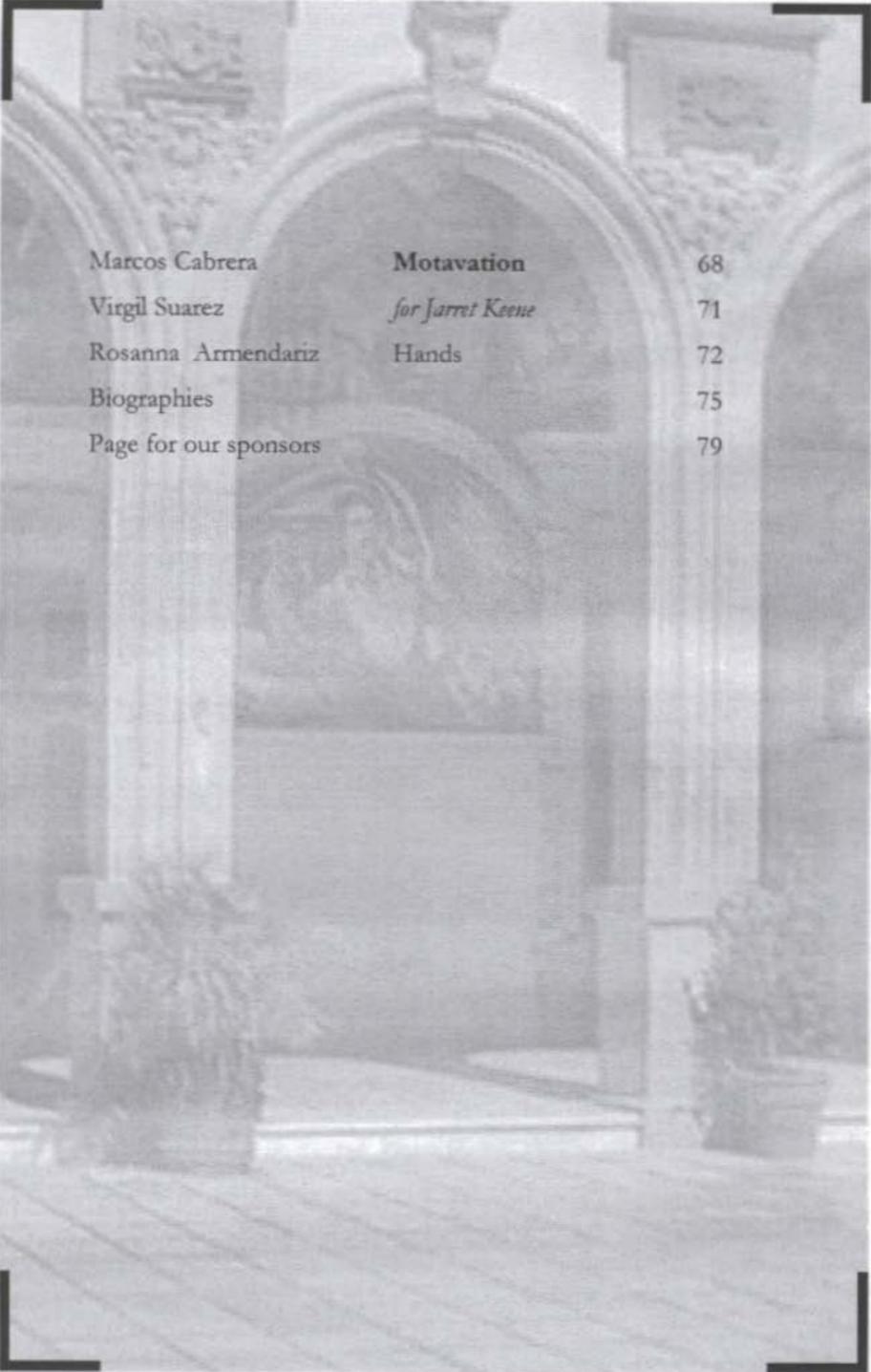
Poetry • Fiction • Art

Fall 2002 | Volume V

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## Shouting and Salty Goods: Essays on Travel and the Art of Fiction

(an excerpt)

July, 5, 2002

As I write this, I'm sitting on the plane to Mexico City. I've been meaning to go to Morelia for some time now, and decided this was the summer to do it. I'm using my advance money from *shadows* to finance the trip.

Last night, I went with Emily to the outdoor Fourth of July festival downtown. Then we went to my house to make love, something we had planned the night before as we hung out at the King's X with my friends. She leaned over and whispered to me, "It's been so long since I've fucked. How long it has it been for you?" I chose not to answer, but we agreed that the next night, after the festival, after the fireworks, we'd do it.

The festival was a disappointment. We spent the first two hours in line for food and drink tickets and then another hour for food and drinks. We saw Rueben and Melissa and we hung out with them for a while. After the fireworks, Emily and I went to my place. Felix was very excited to see us. He had been alone that night, Fourth of July, and the fireworks had scared him. He jumped up and down and whined and barked and ran in circles. Emily and I went into the TV room. She sat on my lap, and we kissed. I took off her blouse, which to my earlier chagrin, had an American flag across the chest. When I told her about my dislike for blind patriotism (how I quit dating the cop, because she had an American flag waving on her shiny red SUV), Emily looked at me like I was a naïve child. She tilted her head, and said, "You *do* know what day this is?"

In my bedroom, the lights out, we undressed each other, slowly, like opening gifts. As we lay on the bed, she was nervous, stiff. Performance anxiety, she said. I told her not to worry about it. "Let's just cuddle," I said.

"Why is it so easy for guys to just fuck?" she said, as we lay naked on my bed, Felix watching us from his matt across the room. "Hey, I got an idea!"

She sat up, excited. "We'll try again when you get back from Mexico, okay?" she said, "but an entire evening, dinner, movies, romantic stuff. That is, if you don't bring back a wife." She smiled. The only light came from the very end of the hallway, my back porch light. She's much more attractive to me now than she was a year ago when we dated for about three months. One would never guess she's a medical doctor, because she could pass for early twenties. She wears tight pants and little shirts that show her belly button. She's like one of those doctors you see in the movies, a beautiful, young redhead, and you say to yourself, "Real doctors don't look that way." As she sat on my bed, she put a

pillow on her chest. The light made the pillow so white.

"Are you disappointed?" she asked.

### July, 6, 2002

As I write this, I'm sitting in a Mexico City bus station waiting to go to Morelia. In this waiting room, they have free coffee and tea, and the family sitting opposite me is taking advantage of it. A little fat kid as dark as mud happily holds a Styrofoam cup of hot tea, and he dangles and dips the tea bag into the hot water. He's happy. Suddenly the tea bag plops into the cup and splash!, hot water hits his face. The fat boy cries, probably more from humiliation than pain. It's cute, but not sad. I'm reminded of that family of Latinos I saw last summer in a Barcelona café, one morning while I was drinking coffee with Elvia, my ex-girlfriend who lives in Paris and who traveled with me, as a friend, to Spain. She was hung over, her eyes heavy and red. Across from us, the little kid cried because he wanted to drink his sister's chocolate milk, even though his was exactly the same. The mother kept telling him, "Daniel, es lo mismo!" but the kid wanted his sister's glass. "Tu tocayo," Elvia said. "Daniel's not happy with what he has," I said, watching the boy scream. Elvia looked at me, squinted her eyes, and said, "No, he isn't."

It was kind of pathetic to see the kid cry over nothing. What real things are there for children to cry about? On the other hand, what a blessing that there are children who can still cry over unimportant things. Danny, little Danny Chacon, the child that I am and was, what things did you cry over? That time Droopy jumped up and ate your peanut butter and Jelly sandwich and everyone laughed, you cried so much.

One time, here in Mexico City, maybe at Chapultepec park, a small girl was with her family, maybe watching the clowns twisting balloons into animals, maybe she was watching the ducks float on the pond, maybe she was sitting on the lawn eating tortas, having a picnic with her family, I don't exactly remember, but suddenly a pigeon shat on her, plop, right on her face. The little boys in the family pointed at her and laughed, and we--or *me*, I don't remember if I was with Yu Ting or Ariana or alone--started laughing, but the little girl wept. So humiliated, she wept.

At the Fourth of July festival in downtown El Paso, I saw something that made me want to weep. This chubby Chicano entered the festival with his overweight girlfriend. He had a baseball cap turned backwards, long hair in a pony tail and a fat face. He was almost cute, like a little boy with big eyes. He saw a lady and a man standing in line--right in front of Emily and me. He walked up to them and said, "Hi, mom."

She said hi. He put his hands in his pockets, as if he didn't know what to do with them. He had an American flag on a stick in his back pocket. His girlfriend stood at a distance, looking the other way. The mother stepped in close, and he hugged her. A few awkward pats on the back. Then he looked at the man and said, "Hey, Dad." The father nodded hello without looking at him. Then there was silence. I looked at Emily to see if she was watching them, too, but she was looking at all the people.

Later, as the chubby Chicano and his girlfriend were standing in line for beer, he kept looking across the crowd at his parents. He pulled the flag out of his back pocket, turned toward his girlfriend and waved it before her. I sensed a history of pain in that family. Poor chubby child. What things did he cry about when he was a seven year old fat kid as dark as mud? How hard was his father? The man seemed unmoved that he had run into his son. He wore a baseball cap, and on the back was the label, "Hardware."

Later that night, as Emily and I lay in the dark in my bed, I thought of the young man and his father. "Hardware," I said aloud. I saw the child's eyes.

Emily held me in her arms. It wasn't until she felt my tears on her breasts that she thought something was wrong. "Are you all right?" she said.

"Fine," I said. "Just thinking about. . ."

"We can try again when you get back, okay?"

"No, that's not it," I said.

"I'm just tense," she said. "When was the last time for you?"

"But that's not it," I said.

Now, in Mexico City, I watch the fat kid crying in the bus station because the hot water splashed on his face, and I want to tell her about it.