Secondhand City: Stolen Stories from La Limonada

Byron José Sun
University of Texas at El Paso, bjsun@miners.utep.edu

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For my family, my best friends

and

La Limonada
I’m
I’m what they left
The leftovers of what they stole
A people hidden on the summit
With skin of leather that withstands
I’m a smoke factory
A peasant hand for your consumption
A cold front in the middle of summer
Love in time of cholera
The sun that’s born
The day that dies
And the best night falls
I’m development in raw flesh
A political speech without saliva
The most beautiful faces I’ve seen
I’m the photograph of a missing person
The blood in your veins
I’m a piece of land with worth
A basket with beans
I’m América Latina
A people without
Legs but one
Who walks

— Calle 13, “Latinoamérica”
SECONDHAND CITY:
STOLEN STORIES FROM LA LIMONADA

by

BYRON JOSÉ SUN, BA Ethnic Studies and Spanish

THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
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MY POETICS: EL NUDO DE LA SOLEDAD

Literature is where I go to explore the highest and lowest places in human society and in the human spirit, where I hope to find not absolute truth but the truth of the tale, of the imagination and of the heart. —Salman Rushdie—

Gabriel García Márquez in his speech, “La Soledad de América Latina” given in 1982 when he accepted the Noble Prize in Literature, explores the history of some of the many conflicts América Latina has and continues to face. First, García Márquez tells about the exaggerated writings of the Spanish explorers as they described the landscape and different animals of the ‘new world’. These first writings created extraordinary legends of people, animals and cities of gold that were theirs for the taking. García Márquez called these tales ‘germs’, and claimed these ‘germs’ are still present in the literature of América Latina though it does not represent the reality of the people and places on which it is based. As García Márquez moves through time, he informs us of the many civil wars in América Latina, of the poverty and the forced migrations of its citizens. The 1980s in América Latina was a difficult time for almost all of its citizens but like always, hardest on the poor. García Márquez tells us:

[…] es esta realidad descomunal, y no sólo su expresión literaria, la que este año ha merecido la atención […]. Una realidad que no es la del papel, sino que vive con nosotros y determina cada instante de nuestras incontables muertes cotidianas, y que sustenta un manantial de creación insaciable, pleno de desdicha y de belleza […] (2).

García Márquez wants us to see that ‘real life’ should take priority when recognizing a literary work, especially literature that deals with the tragic reality of injustice and poverty taking place
in América Latina. As fiction writers, we must be aware of where our inspirations stray from reality because if we aren’t, we can easily fall victim to the same germs that infested the writings of the new world. We must stay away from stereotypes that are perpetuated by others (in this case people of América Latina) so that they are not idealized, so that they don’t become heroes, so that they are not treated as martyrs because they must be treated as human beings who have flaws and virtues. As writers who base their stories on reality, we must know that the fictional reality continues to happen in the ‘real world’. In other words it becomes too easy for the reader, as well as the writer, to forget that the stories do not end with the text but that their tragedies or happiness continue to happen in the real world.

On the other hand, instead of fictionalizing the real world, I could have written Testimonios of the people I saw to better represent them as humans. As with any text, and more so with Testimonios, they become the textual representation of someone’s life that many times gets more recognition than the actual lives of the people they come from. Testimonios serve their purpose when they are written and published to call immediate attention to the social problems in any given country to fix certain issues, but for some reason poverty is not one of those that can be changed through the power Testimonios have. The social issues I have focused on in my collection of short stories are ongoing and often go overlooked by too many people, and unlike the purpose of a Testimonio, I do not want to change a specific event in whatever part of the world. Instead I want to call attention to the raw reality of other people’s lives so the reader can better understand their world. Testimonios such as *Este es Mi Testimonio: María Teresa Tula* con Lynn Stephen, *Hasta No Verte Jesús Mío* con Elena Poniatowska and *Me Llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* con Elizabeth Burgos, many times overwhelm the reader with the tragic life of a single individual, cause outrage, and call for the reader to take action.
Many elements of tragedy and poverty in those texts are visible in today’s world, but those texts are limited to the actual events experienced by one individual, and I wanted to represent an entire community. 

I also saw that Testimonios have been edited and reworded by the writer who conducted the interview as well as transcribed it into text form. Many times the interview takes place in a different language than the text within which it is written. The text of that interview was written with a specific agenda that would emotionally affect the reader to take action. I saw that process as limiting my ability to reconstruct someone’s life because that life is not only the one bad moment the individual has undergone. A fiction writer has more freedom and at the same time is able to accurately write on ‘poverty’ to create awareness of not only one individual’s life, but to tell the story of an entire community, or even city, who have been denied a voice. Once a fiction writer understands the relationship of social change and their writing—he/she can create stories that give proactive agency to their characters in a way that Testimonios cannot. I see the proactive agency of the characters as a way for the writer to be self-conscious about where the stories come from, that they continue to happen and most importantly to give space for the reader to choose his or her own feelings. With the term ‘proactive agency’, I mean characters are not being portrayed as victims of their circumstances, or as martyrs, or even as completely evil people, but as human beings—with all the positive and negative associations entitled to that reality.

One element that Testimonios have that is also part of the proactive agency a character can get is the power the characters get through the text as it provides a “space to those voices which had been historically silenced or altered by official interpretations” (Denegri, 2). Like Testimonios, my fiction writing shares a similar problem and that is the power of the author. In
both cases the author dictates what is written and what is not because in both those traditions of writing “the subaltern cannot speak in a way that could carry any sort of authority or meaning for us without altering the relations of power/knowledge that constitute it as subaltern in the first place” (Beverley, 29). One way this can be broken is with the notion of the proactive agency a character gets from the writer and his experiences. In my case, I am both an insider and an outsider in my own stories. By writing about the stories I witnessed, I have the perfect space to be self-reflective and in that way, as the writer, I am always present in my own writing. In other words, in my stories I do not become a character directly, but I base my characters not only on my experience, but also on that of my mother’s past, on that of people I knew, and on the neighborhood where I grew up. Because of my knowledge I got from the people, my characters get a proactive agency from my ability to create a fuller vision of their world, its smells, how it looks and how it tastes. Once the narrative world of the character is complete the writer must keep working on achieving a stronger proactive agency of a character through balancing their tragic and happy moments. A character cannot be just tragic and to insure this does not happen the use of Magical-Realism can help facilitate the transition from tragedy to their happy moments or vice versa.

In my stories, I make use of Magical-Realism in order to create an extraordinary event that pushes the boundaries of what might be real and what is not. Magical-Realism allows the writer to use what is already found in the world to counteract tragedy. Vargas Llosa in The Perpetual Orgy tells us about ‘Things Humanized’ and ‘Human Beings Turned into Things’ to create alternative ways of telling a story. Vargas Llosa then explains, “The animate and the inanimate are subject to the fateful dynamics of the formation of pairs, thereby constituting a system of relations that has no rational explanation: in this sense the fictitious reality is not
historical but magical” (146). Vargas Llosa sees the need of having symmetry and duality in fiction because words many times are too perfect and when contrasting that to life creating those imperfections and inexplicable events becomes possible with the proactive agency of a character that acts within their circumstances. The proactive agency of a character, is a construction of the writer, as the writer creates a symmetry that juggles the duality of reality and magic where the use Magical-Realism becomes the balance to a tragic event, or to humanize things, and even to make human beings into things, because then and only then can a contrast be made with those three elements that can rationalize why certain events happen to a character. Fiction with the use of Magical-Realism should create not only an explanation of why it exists, but one that forges a better collusion of the fictitious reality to that with the historical reality to achieve a balance for the reader. The balance allows the reader to see how the author has chosen specific events and descriptions to create proactive characters with the agency needed so that they don’t appear like victims of their present circumstances and instead just the reality of life.

The writer also needs to be careful with the use of Magical-Realism because its overuse or misuse can affect whether stories are believable. The balancing game the writer plays with the reader can become ‘el nudo de la soledad’ because the story and history of América Latina has been written in a way where writers must think of extraordinary events to make the raw reality of the people believable. Gabriel García Márquez tells us:

Poetas y mendigos, músicos y profetas, guerreros y malandrines, todas las criaturas de aquella realidad desaforada hemos tenido que pedirle muy poco a la imaginación, porque el desafío mayor para nosotros ha sido la insuficiencia de los recursos convencionales para hacer creíble nuestra vida. Este es, amigos, el nudo de nuestra soledad (2).
Here García Márquez tells us that writers from América Latina have had no other choice but to make use of Magical-Realisms to make the incredible stories we see every day and everywhere believable. ‘El nudo de la soledad’ then becomes a problem the writer must overcome because once trapped in it, the characters are at risk of losing their proactive agency and instead of acting and reacting to their circumstances they are acted on and controlled by them. I have to admit—I am also trapped by the cycle of América Latina’s history, but I do not see it as something that is affecting my writing. Instead. I claim that in my stories, Magical-Realism makes part of the proactive agency a character gets from the writer as it becomes essential to the story of any one character, giving them an opportunity to be seen as a human being and not just another character with a tragic life. As a fiction writer the use of the imagination becomes the most important tool to have because the ‘real world’ once in text form is transformed into something different. Thus, understanding the power that a text has is a crucial element the fiction writer must have to create a proactive agency in a character.

In “Narcissistic Narrative” Linda Hutcheon tells us, “Art has always been ‘illusion’, and as one might surmise, it has often, if not always, been self-consciously aware of the ontological status” (17). Understanding art, or in this case fiction writing as an illusion can help the writer see the power he or she has to reveal life in a way that educates, entertains and makes the reader feel. Hutcheon tells us that René Welley wrote, “Art is ‘illusion’, ‘fiction’, the world changed into language, paint or sound” (17). Seeing fiction as an illusion, for its duration, it has the power to replace the reality of the reader into a mirage and understanding that gives the writer a greater power over art. Gabriel García Márquez was concerned about the texts themselves as having a life of their own separate from the real world that inspired them. As writers we must understand that separation, in order for the writer to exploit it, to get the best message across for the reader.
In other words, the fiction writer has the power of imagination at their disposal to create a text that will impact the reader the most.

Trying to recreate the ‘real world’ in a text form is a challenge no writer should undertake. The writer must take his/her experiences, what he/she see, and transform it by molding it in their own imagination. What comes out of that imagination is the written form of what was once the ‘real world’. The ‘real world’ is transformed through the prejudice, bias, ideas, and the imagination of the writer into an art form—something distinct from actual reality but something that must still be recognized as one form of that reality. If the connection to the ‘real world’ is lost then the writer is lost in ‘la el nudo de la soledad’ perpetuating the same literary problems América Latina has always had. The art form that is created as text can be used to teach the reader and at the same time entertain them with the hope that they will make the connections that those stories are happening in the ‘real world’.

In other words, writers take the ‘real world’ and its realities as they see it and alter it to make it fit the story they want to tell. The ‘real world’ then becomes their illusion with a message trapped in the meanings of words. Becoming aware of our surroundings, of political problems, of poverty and of the ever-losing war for social change is the ultimate tool. The writer must take control of and reshape it in the imagination so that readers that have never experienced that reality can have a hope of understanding it. For that to be possible the writer must first see the difference between life and art as well as real life and life in the imagination. Hutcheon continues to quote René Wellek,

The recognition of the difference between life and art, of the ‘ontological gap’ between a product of the mind, a linguistics structure, and the events in ‘real’ life which it reflects, does not and cannot mean that the work of art is a mere empty play of form, cut off from reality (17).
With this in mind the writer can be reassured that the reshaping of the ‘real world’ becomes necessary so that the story can be completed. If done correctly characters will preserve their proactive agency.

The following collection of stories was based on real events. As a fiction writer, I use Magical-Realism to not be trapped in ‘el nudo de la soledad’ and also to give characters a proactive agency. Understanding the stories of the people who inspire me became an important step in my writing process. As a fiction writer, I have also become aware of how important the understanding of the difference between the textual representation of life and the ‘real life’ that is used to write the story in order to exploit it. Once the story has been written and read, the writer is no longer alone in the world he/she created and thus both the reader and writer get farther away from el nudo de la soledad de América Latina.

Another strong and important element of my poetics is the use of Spanish and some of its grammatical rules that I borrow to utilize through my collection of short stories. I understand the long and well established history of code switching and or use of Spanglish in early Chicano/a literature as well as how it has evolved into its different modern usages. Now a days the use of code switching is no longer limited to only those Chicano/a writers who write about life in the United States. Luis Alberto Urea in his novels, The Hummingbird’s Daughter and Into the Beautiful North, that take place in Mexico, has found it useful to use code switching to preserve some authenticity, and the rhythm of the Spanish language. Even when Urea writes both his novels in English, the reader knows the original languages of the text takes place in Spanish and with that knowledge code switching continues to work in favor of the author. Daniel Alarcón in his short story collection, War by Candlelight that takes place in a slum of Perú, also uses code switching to present the reader with different Spanish words and terms. Even some novels
translated from Spanish like, *Quesadillas* by Juan Pablo Villalobos, preserves some Spanish words that become necessary to set the place, and with this the reader doesn’t forget that the novel happens in a small Mexican town.

One poem in the collection, *Bilingual Blues*, by Gustavo Pérez Firmat states, “The fact that I / am writing to you / in English / already falsifies what I / wanted to tell you.” With in those five lines, Firmat expresses like no other the problem I had to overcome with my short story collection. In an NPR interview by Renee Montagne titled, “For a bilingual writer, No one true language,” when told that he spoke both Spanish and English quiet fluently, Firmat responds, “I have a feeling that I don’t know either one fluently,” and continues, “I have a feeling that words fail me in both languages.” While writing my project, in many places I found myself struggling because certain dialog and descriptions only worked in Spanish. Firmat’s bilingualism grew from the feeling he didn’t have one true language as he later says, “[…] many times I wish I didn’t have the choice of languages. There is a Czech proverb that says: Learn a new language, get a new soul. I’m not sure it’s a true idea to have more than one soul” (Montagne, 1). A similar conflict has happened to many Chicanos/as in the past as well as for the new wave of immigrants into the United States. Language then becomes a way to preserve one’s identity and the mixing of the two (in our case Spanish and English) is a necessary step to counterbalance the fear of losing a part of the self. With my writing I wanted that language barrier and that fear of losing a part of my self to be blurred. I wanted to create a symbiotic relationship with the two languages that I represent because ultimately I knew my stories had to be written in English. The language barrier between English and Spanish is a great one and even more so when a reader only knows one of the two. Creating a balance for a monolingual English reader, for me, became possible because I could transplant as many of the Spanish language
roots as possible. My stories take place in a Spanish-speaking world, and one way to overcome
that was to use code switching to provide an English reader a taste of what it feels like to be a
Spanish speaker with a text that is predominantly written in English.

Now my problem became code switching itself. I wanted to use code switching
differently; I didn’t just want to offer one or two words in Spanish here and there. I wanted to
provide more Spanish without having to offer the translation right after it. What I ended up
doing, in some cases, was to provide the reader with half a sentence in Spanish and the rest in
English. With this combination, if the reader didn’t know Spanish, he/she would not have to stop
reading to look up what was stated in Spanish because everything could be understood with the
English half of the sentence. Other times I applied the same rule as above but this time with
complete sentences in Spanish. On those occasions if I was to remove the Spanish the action
continues, but by having it in the right place it adds a rhythm to the action, to the paragraph and
to the whole story. This combination the use of code switching serves multiple purposes, and
most importantly, it creates the notion the stories take place not only in the Spanish language but
also in a country located in América Latina.

With the use of code switching from English to Spanish accomplished, I pushed the
notion of code switching on some Spanish grammar rules. The most noticeable of them is the use
of the inverted question mark ‘¿’ and on a few occasions the use of the inverted exclamation
mark ‘¡’. In written Spanish both marks are necessary when beginning an interrogative or
exclamatory clause or sentences. I did this every single time a question mark appeared no matter
if what was just stated was in Spanish or English. To me that didn’t really matter because the
root language of every one of my stories was, is and will continue to be Spanish.
FRAMEWORK: LITERARY INFLUENCES

*Often the crazy stuff is true and the normal stuff isn’t, because the normal stuff is necessary to make you believe the truly incredible craziness.* –Tim O’Brien—

The following section will be divided into three sections with the different literary works that have had the most profound influence on my writing. The first one will look at two literary works that have taught me the use of Magical-Realism and how it can help the audience understand certain events that the characters are undergoing. The second category will look at two books that have had a direct influence on my own writing. Finally, the last category also involves two books where the themes chosen by authors have helped me shape my notion of the author’s responsibilities. I will limit my discussion of the themes for each category so that a better survey of the different literary works and their influence on my writing is clear.

**MAGICAL-REALISM: A BALANCING ACT**

*Los Recuerdos del Porvenir* by Elena Garro was my first introduction to Magical-Realism. Before reading this, I had heard several oral stories especially from my grandmother that added the extra elements to make the stories more believable and more fascinating. My earlier stories, before reading this book, took place in the field of what is ‘real’ as opposed to the endless possibilities of interpreting that realness to come up with a different perspective and different way of presenting the same information, but in a different way to the reader. As humans we are already bound to the notion of how we see and understand the world around us. The understanding we have is an illusion of what’s really around us so by providing a different perspective of it, the writer can hope to add an extra element where the ‘reality’ is changed to create an illusion of it for the reader to decide which fiction they will believe in. The first paragraph of Garro’s novel ends with, “La veo, me veo y me transfigure en multitud de colores y
de tiempos. Estoy y estuve en muchos ojos. Yo sólo soy memoria y la memoria que de mí se tenga.” The novel plays a lot with memory and how it has the power to change and bridge the real and the magical elements (11). The opening paragraph and the first couple of pages serve as an introduction to the narrator—and here is where the idea of having an entity that controls and that ultimately will be called La Limonada was cemented in my mind. Gorro created a ‘narrador en trilogía’ where el ‘yo’ is the physical pueblo where the novel takes place. The narrator also uses ‘nosotros’ to give the reader the idea of a communal pueblo mentality and finally most of the narration is in third person. The balancing of the three narrators was possible because the novel takes place in both the real world as well as the endless possibilities of the magical one. Ultimately the novel showed me that every tragic event was grounded in the realness of the real world and only after it is achieved can the magical element come into play. The magical element served as a balancing act to make the reader feel a more powerful feeling than the tragedy could do by itself contributing even more to the proactive agency a character gets from the writer.

In many of my stories the balancing act of tragedy and Magical-Realism are a direct influence from Garro’s novel, but Bless Me Ultima by Rudolfo Anaya helped me understand that Magical-Realism can also be used to explain the inexplicable. Both Garro and Anaya understand the power of adding the element of magic into a story that is grounded in the real world. One event that comes to mind from Anaya’s novel happens towards the end, when Ultima does her last job as a curandera, “‘Aiiiiiiiiie,’ Téllez groaned, “it is the devil dancing on my roof—’ His body twisted to the crescendo of the fearful drum beat. But almost as quickly as it had begun the noise stopped and the dark cloud moved away” (230). Here many people including Ultima and the main character have witnessed a supernatural event where the sky was darkened by clouds as rocks rained onto the house. I learned from this example that an inexplicable event can be
grounded into the realness of the real world through Magical-Realism. That is to say that any event, no matter how extraordinary it might be, or how difficult it might be to explain by everyday experience, can be explained through how the character sees and understands the world around him. The scene in Anaya’s novel is not completely explained because that is not the purpose of the text. Instead, the text provides the reader with the character’s interpretation of events. Ultimately I saw that the writer, in instances like the above, can give a different perspective of the events leaving the reader with many possibilities that fit the real world as well as the fictional one.

WRITING STYLE: THE POWER OF CADENCE AND STRUCTURE

Because of my exile in Guatemala my English skills were frozen at second grade. While in Guatemala I had to teach myself how to write Spanish based on how it sounded, and when I returned to the US and entered the seventh grade, my grammar skills were horrible. I have learned to adapt, but I think that the verbal way I learned Spanish and the mimicking of actual speech are strong elements present in my writing style.

Many of the books I read failed to inspire me. It wasn’t until I read Junot Diaz’s The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao that I found an encouraging voice I could identify with. For me, Diaz’s novel was a great example of how language and syntax could be used, as the following paragraph shows,

That night Beli drifted on a vast ocean of loneliness, buffeted by squalls of despair, and during one of her intermittent sleeps she dreamt that she had truly and permanently died and she and her child shared a coffin and when she finally awoke for good, night had broken and out in the street a grade of grief unlike any she’d encountered before was being uncoiled, a cacophony of wails that seemed to have torn free from the cracked soul of humanity itself. Like a funeral song for the entire planet (154).
I learned from Diaz that I could not only bend grammar rules but shape my writing to represent the people that they are based on. I learned that writing is not about conforming to present writing norms, but instead can be used to exploit the organic nature of language itself. The example above clearly shows how language and structure comes to life through the punctuation, as it is present in spoken language, free of unnecessary punctuation.

Another novel that had an impact on my writing was …y no se lo trago la tierra by Tomás Rivera. Rivera’s novel showed me that narratives don’t have to follow traditional written forms of storytelling in order to create a powerful story. The overall structure of the novel consists of 27 episodes and 13 untitled micro stories. The use of stream of consciousness, scraps of conversations, short description and even prayers force the reader to be vigilant in order to stitch together the collective narrative. Each episode provides the reader with different information that builds on the previous stories and remains relevant in the stories that follow it.

What I liked, and what I hoped I could also bring to my own collection of short stories, was to allow the reader to understand the characters as they continue reading other stories, seeing connections throughout the whole. Each of my stories provides a different perspective of life in La Límonada and builds on the previous stories and informs the stories to come. The shorter stories are often just descriptions or conversations that establish character and come to play in later stories. Ultimately, I wanted the reader to understand the characters as humans and to reflect on their own lives and see how they are connected.

Rivera’s novel also showed me the power books have to preserve history, as well as exposing readers to issues they might otherwise have never known about. The themes the writer has chosen to write about become important as we have the ability to provide a different perspective of the events that happen in real life.
THEMES EXPLORED: THE WRITER’S RESPONSIBILITY

Finally, in this last section, I will discuss how two novels have influenced the themes I explored in my collection of short stories. The first is La Frontera de Cristal by Carlos Fuentes. The novel has two parallel stories that at one point become one. The author not only created a strong narrative, but depicted difficult issues such as working in a maquiladora. Fuentes and his descriptions of maquila life made me conscious of the power a writer has with the words that are written. I saw that I had a responsibility not only to myself but to the people I saw in Guatemala to tell their stories to the best of my abilities.

During my undergrad studies, I thought it was only possible to approach immigrant issues with a strict seriousness. All of that changed when I finished reading Into the Beautiful North by Luis Alberto Urea. It taught me that crossing the border does not have to be handled in a serious tone. Writing about difficult issues does not have to be all about the sad events in a characters life but needs to be balanced with the events that make us feel human, especially happy ones. Urea’s exploration of crossing the border takes an epic perspective of a journey that is funny, as the comical becomes a narrative element to relieve tension in difficult situations. But most importantly it provides awareness of the important issues without sacrificing them by drowning the reader with tragic events to make the characters martyrs of their circumstances.

THE HISTORY: I AM BECAUSE WE ARE

It requires something more than personal experience to gain a philosophy or point of view from any specific event. It is the quality of our responses to the event and our capacity to enter into the lives of others that help us to make their lives and experiences our own. –Emma Goldman—

Understanding my past is necessary to understand why I write the stories I do:
In 1986 I was born in Guatemala into a life of poverty the United States helped create with a coup called Operation Success in 1954 that took down democratically elected president Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán. Arbenz Guzmán favored unions, minimalistic agricultural, educational and a healthcare reform with a focus on indigenous rights and he was replaced by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas, a dictator who not only reversed all the progress made, but also massacred the indigenous population in a genocide similar in effect and cruelty to the Holocaust. The result was the creation of wealth for rich foreign investors and the less than 1% of elites in the country. By the nineteen-eighties the economic situation for the poor and middle class had finally taken its toll and mass migrations started, not only from Guatemala but also from all over Central America—creating the Sanctuary Movement that resembled the Underground Railroad for slaves in search of freedom in the north.

After my second birthday, my mother and I crossed all of Mexico. It took us over a month because the Coyote wanted to sexually abuse a young woman in our group and only after he got his way did we continue our journey north. On the train ride my mother and two other women escaped from that Coyote and found another one who got high a few minutes before crossing the US border. The sewage tunnel dumped us in San Isidro where La Migra arrested us. A few days went by and we were able to post bail; however, we never returned for our mandatory hearing, disappearing instead into an undocumented life in the US. This event placed me by definition in the second generation where immigrant children younger than five years are brought to the US and where the educational system has a lot of influence on a child’s mind. If I had entered the country after puberty I would
have been part of the first generation because my identity would have been already constructed in my birth country. I didn’t have the opportunity to get to know my birth country or be properly assimilated into it. By the age of nine, I had lived in Van Nuys, California for seven years. I was educated in English and spoke Español at home. For my birthdays we celebrated with piñatas. For Halloween, I dressed up as the Power Rangers and the Ninja Turtles. My assimilation into the dominant culture was through school and popular TV shows of that time period such as *Saved by the Bell*.

I grew up as part of the second generation not really seeing or understanding the difference that set me apart from my other Latin@ and white friends. My father knew English and he got his residency through the Immigration Reform and Reform Act of 1986 (IRCA) and my mother didn’t know much English because it wasn’t necessary for her in Los Angeles. I underwent a selective acculturation where I was able to retain a dual ethnicity of norms and language of both nations I represented. All of that changed in January 24, 1995, when President Clinton, in his State of the Union speech said, "We are a nation of immigrants. But we are also a Nation of laws. It is wrong and ultimately self-defeating for a nation of immigrants to permit the kind of abuse of our immigration laws we have seen in recent years, and we must do more to stop it." That year marked the passage of the Immigration Enforcement Improvement Act of 1995, to aggressively secure borders and speed the deportation of illegal aliens.

On March 31, 1995, at the age of nine—INS agents told my parents that my mother and I had fifteen days to electively leave the country with the possibility of one day returning legally; otherwise we would be deported right
then and there and never be given a path to citizenship. This was the first time I felt that I didn’t belong to the place where I had grown up. I could not comprehend what made me so different that I had to be thrown out of my home country and forced into one I didn’t know. The fifteen days we had left as a family were filled with tears as we had to sell almost every belonging we had to be able to afford the airplane tickets and have some spending money once we got to Guatemala.

Once in Guatemala my first few days in school were extremely difficult; when the teacher asked me a question I answered in English and acted like I didn’t understand anything she was telling me. In Guatemala my English language skills didn’t help me at all. I had to learn to write in Spanish as well as in cursive. I learn to use “usted” for adults to show respect as well as “vos” with male friends and “tu” with some female friends. I had to learn my place and all of the cultural norms expected of me. In other words, I was undergoing a new acculturation—a reverse assimilation into the Guatemalteco culture. By the age of twelve in Guatemala City, Colonia Castillo Lara, I had become accustomed to the violence, to the Indigenous people begging, to the drunken men fighting over dimes, to the gun shots, to the dead bodies laid out in the street the next morning, to the abusive husbands beating their wives, to all the children with plastic bags huffing fifty cents worth of glue to forget their hunger, to the clapping hands making tortillas and to the blessings that I got from elderly women. I saw the disappearance of the fifty-cent bill with the face of Tecun Uman. I also witnessed the signing of peace in Guatemala on December 29, 1996 to the construction of Tikal Futura, one of the tallest buildings around where I lived. The feeling that I wanted to return to the US was always with me—I couldn’t escape the reality that my father wasn’t with us and
that I wanted to be with him; I felt trapped because I didn’t know where I belonged. I liked living in Guatemala, but at times I didn’t feel completely at home because my father wasn’t with us.

Again, it didn’t matter that I liked my new home because at the age of thirteen on October 27, 1999, my mother and I were given a pardon that ended our exile and allowed us to return to Los USAdos—by now I learned this was one of the nick names people gave the USA. In the time since our departure from Los Angeles, my father had moved to Oregon and our final destination was that state. Again I was in a new place and had to re-learn and remember my English language skills and my placement in the ESL program for four years helped but it also slowed me down in the years to come. In school I acted with the same norms expected of me in Guatemala. Because the main part of my identity comes from the Guatemalteco in me I now belonged to the one-and-a-half generation. The one-and-a-half generation is defined as a child who is born abroad, whose education begins in the birth country but who comes of age and completes her/his education in the US. The difference between the second and the one-and-a-half generation is that those of the one-and-a-half generation have a stronger personal connection with the birth country because they have actually lived in it. I have lived 21 years of my 27 in the US and I have an accent (not that it bothers me) when I speak English; this could be due to the age (almost 13) when I moved to Oregon. I was re-acculturated in Oregon to call myself Latino as well as to hold tight to my Guatemalteco culture—this part of my identity and my determination to share my experience are components that define my life as well as my writing.
My project “Secondhand City: Stolen Stories from La Limonada,” is based on my personal experience, people I met and the stories I overheard while living in Guatemala City. All of the stories in this collection are first or second hand accounts of real events. While in Guatemala, I often observed and experienced violence and in order to cope and, if possible, understand it, I’ve since reconstructed those events in my mind. Sometimes I put myself in the roles of the victims as I tried to understand their powerlessness, pain, and reasons why they were enduring the brutality they were living through. Other times I was the oppressor, the robber, the one causing pain and hurting others because I wanted to know how that power felt—even if it was only in my imagination. I wanted to know if the oppressor and the power they got from hurting others happened because of their own actions or if it was just the side effects of his/her circumstances. I saw patterns of how people acted depending on what neighborhood they lived in, and from this pattern, I came up with the notion of La Limonada as a living entity that controls its citizens. I came to see every house, every slum, every light pole (or lack thereof), every street and every district in Guatemala City as a symbol of power, a system of codes that works to perpetuate racism and classism to keep people under control.

My friends talked endlessly of La Limonada—they were afraid of the place and spoke of it as if the neighborhood had a mind of its own and the power to control its residents. To my pre-teen mind, this place became surreal. I convinced myself that the people of La Limonada were
violent criminals and acted the way they did because La Limonada as a place conditioned those people and allowed a space for them to behave that way.

La Limonada started as an illegal ghetto in Guatemala City. It’s located in a steep one-mile long ravine that became the border between Districts 1 and 5. It’s considered to be one of the biggest slums in Central America, with an estimated population of more than 60,000 people. That part of the city has been labeled a Red Zone; the poverty and living conditions have created a higher rate of violence and crime than any other part of the city. La Limonada became the perfect model for the city I wanted to construct my stories around. My stories about this place are not meant to be an accurate depiction of La Limonada in Guatemala City, but rather, they are a means to explore the conditions of poverty and violence found in almost every city of Central America, as well as the resilience and happy moments of the people who exist within that space.

I spent four years in District 7, fairly close to La Limonada and closer to the Landfill of District 3. Most, if not all my stories, took place in District 7, in the neighborhood called Castillo Lara (I don’t make this distinction in any story) which comprised ten streets but the important ones for me were: 10th avenue, 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th and 14th streets. Out of those streets 14th was probably the most dangerous one and the one that left the greatest impression on me because I got to know the neighborhood of El Palomar. El Palomar was where my mother grew up and where I lived a year after I was born. In Guatemala
City, Palomar is someone’s property that has been compartmentalized into a mini slum and in most cases it acts like one. A Palomar is usually located on someone’s property where one owner rents individual rooms of their house or small apartment-like complex. What makes a Palomar appealing to poor people is the affordable rent which keeps them off the streets and yet in livable conditions with electricity and some running water. El Palomar of 14th Street was bigger than any other Palomar in District 7, about the size of three houses. In El Palomar my mother met my father (who was the grandson of the owner) and years later they got married.

My connection to El Palomar was cemented in my mind after I got a tour of it from my mother a few weeks after we arrived in Guatemala in 1995. The place was like nothing I had ever seen: almost every wall was made of corrugated metal. My mother showed me the different rooms she lived in and told me the stories behind those doors. Many people recognized my mother and they invited us into their rooms where they talked about who had died and who was still alive from the old days. Everyone knew each other, so it became important for my collection of short stories to have recurring characters and each time they appeared in a story the readers would get a different perspective of them, mimicking the effect of hearing different versions of the same story from different people.

Another important element in my collection of short stories is the three robbers that appear in almost every story both directly and indirectly. It was important to have the same delinquents committing crimes all over the place because from my experience it was always the same names that were blamed for almost every crime committed in any given area. In the part of District 7 where I lived, there was a gang every one feared composed of Choco, Sombras, Charli
la Negra, José and Willy. All of them were no older than twenty and the first three were the most
dangerous and feared. The five of them were good friends with my mother because she was
friends with their mothers. My paternal grandmother had a stronger relationship with them
because she would buy some of the things they stole, and she also invited them to crazy
weekend-long parties at her house. I was able to observe them when they were drunk and high as
well as when they were sober. For the most part they were decent people but the crimes they
committed had no equal and they were responsible for some of the ones in my collection of short
stories.

Choco’s gang was not the only one to blame for all the
atrocities in District 7. When my mother was young, Robotón
and his gang lived in El Palomar. For the most part, I combined
both groups into three characters to make it easier to handle. A
gang only controls a territory for a short time and they
indirectly train the new generation of criminals. Once the new generation of criminals is strong
enough to stand up to the old generation, they viciously and publically kill each other off. In real
life Choco, José and Willy died the way I kill Robotón, Jupa and Calicas and in their place a new
drug lord ended up controlling District 7.

In 2010 I wrote the short story, “Acá La Limonada,” to show a different perspective of
poverty and violence. For me, it is important to balance the violence and crime of La Limonada
with the happy moments I experienced and witnessed. I want to provide the reader with a
perspective that offers both a raw version of true events and tender moments that depict the
reality of life in La Limonada.
I want to use my creativity to promote a vision of humanity, compassion and justice by exploring life in both war and peace. I strongly believe the writer mustn't try to replace the world with a less violent vision, but rather present it as it is, to force people to feel and think of their place in the world. For a moment, I want the reader to suspend their reality, their own perspective so they can experience the things I have seen firsthand. I am but a tool to give agency and voice to those who haven't been allowed one. Because of that, I mustn't forget the reality, the hardships, and the happy moments of the individuals my stories represent, as this is one way I can preserve our humanity. This became the driving force for my collection of short stories.

CONCLUSION: THE ANTIPREFACE

I have covered my poetics and the literary influences that have helped shape my writing. I have also gone over my personal history as well as the different people and places that inspired the notion of La Limonada. The organization I took with my preface was to provide a balance of my academic background and personal experience; both of them represent, in one way or another, my ability to express myself in writing. The academic side of my writing is where ideas become the reality. My raw journalistic reporting, the fulminating satire, the tongue in cheek humor, the horror of human suffering, the kindness of human beings, the personification of nature—all become possible because on the other hand I have real life and it becomes the driving power for those ideas. The elements I have discussed in my preface were always in some part of my mind, but most of the times I just followed my instincts as the story told me where they needed and wanted to go. All my stories were built on top of the foundation my personal

Illustration 13 – The alley where I saw the first dead body in 1996.
experience laid because I strongly believe my work is motivated by the people it’s based on and to them I owe my personal struggle to preserve my humanity. The collection of short stories that I have written isn’t just the reality of what’s on paper, unfortunately those stories have happened and the worst thing is that some of them are still happening in modern day Guatemala. There are many elements to my collection of short stories, some of which I have planed but many others just seemed to fall into place. So now it is time to let the readers judge my writing because ultimately they are the only ones with the power to do so.

byroN José sun
April 14, 2014


Sun, Byron José. Cover of the short story collection. 2014.

Sun, Family. All images are property of the author’s family.

xxxiv
Stolen Stories from La Limonada

José Trujillo
SECONDHAND CITY

Stolen Stories from La Limonada
SCONDHAD CITY

Stolen Stories from
La Limonada

byroN José sun
The moon yawns across the sky as La Limonada viciously flushes all its waste into the only sewer channel that runs along El Palomar. La Limonada knows what it does as the sewer water rises to overtake old Irma-Colocha’s shack. The corrugated metal wall facing the channel screams in pain to hold back the sewer water, but the force is too great and the wall gives way. Irma-Colocha’s table tiptoes through the water, carrying with it the stove, a box of matches, a half gone candle and remnants of a spider’s leg. The red bucket responsible for safeguarding her one bowl, two and half spoons and four coffee cups drifts away, saving only itself. The nail that crucifies last year’s calendar screams to the door it will never let go. The small wardrobe tips and drowns. Her pillow swims away. The old mattress feels the cold stabbings of sewage water while two-bamboo plants shift and symmetrically screw themselves around the shack dragging it as the current devours what’s left of it. Once the flood subsided, water’s wake, used condoms, wet toilet paper and fish skeletons swimming in shit mark a trail of desolation. And in the distance, filthy and gasping for air, Irma-Colocha stares at the vacant lot where her home stood, but she isn’t afraid—she’s already planned her next move; she wipes her face and walks away without looking back.
ACÁ LA LIMONADA: DON’T FORGET

Heeeey, you—el del gallo—yes you with the rooster, don’t forget what happened to Her. ¡She did exist! But first you need to know La Limonada cares—it controls you—makes you ignore, overlook, and forget everything that happens here. If you were to look at it from the highest peak, lo más alto de lo alto, you’d know Uncle Sam built this town with his own hands, a monument to his own image: a saint that makes dreams come true. Uncle Sam—aka corruption, aka free trade, aka death squads, aka illegal immigration, or more commonly known here as—LA LIMONADA—has already monopolized not only this town, but many others.

It has intoxicated its inhabitants. Los hipnotiza, los embruteze, los duerme, los droga to the point it only allows their senses to be aware of certain things. From up high, you can see the roofs covered with tires, rocks, cinderblocks, cans, bottles, footballs, empty chip bags, and candy wrappers. Their origins contradict each other, nadie sabe, nadie supo, pero esas cosas están en todos los techos. Tires, rocks, and cinder blocks placed by the people so their roofs wouldn’t blow away in the wind, others tossed by the supernatural forces of what some crazy people call gravity—but it was La Limonada, ella es la responsable, she’s the one who wanted it that way. It’s no coincidence that, during the day, you ignore people whistling, girls gossiping, packs of dogs chasing motorcycles, and someone screaming—auxilio, auxilio me robaron—and yet, no one seems to notice or even help. La Limonada accustoms you to the snores of drunks sleeping in the streets, growling stomachs, a child selling candy—a lost teen huffing glue—the clap of hands covered in masa, making tortillas. La Limonada has squashed the insurgency of the noise rats make when giving birth, of condom wrappers being opened, of Dr. Cifuentes—one of the
local drunk dentists extracting a tooth with no anesthetic, the cries of cucarachas mourning the lack of waste, shoes eroding away on the pavement, of people praying to the egalitarian gods: virgencita, san judas tadeo, san lazaro, san simón—ayúdanos—and none of them help. Y nadie escucha, nadie recuerda the sound of a man emasculated by the two gun shots from last night. Anoche, todo paso anoche—recuerda, solo tienes que recordar—

N-nooo, don’t go, I’m-not-done. Escúchame, you need to hear what I have to say—yes now, She mustn’t be forgotten. Don’t be outside past 7 p.m.—not outside. Don’t even dare look outside; the dogs don’t howl, the crickets don’t chirp, and even La Llorona doesn’t come here at night to search for her children. For that matter, don’t even think of outside. La Limonada will target you. This town needs to protect its secrets. Y por esos secretos esta ciudad es capas de cualquier cosa. La Limonada knows I was outside, me tenés que creer, it’s trying to get rid of me—I just started to fade a few days ago—yes fade, but I’m not crazy. Yo no soy un loco. If I stay in a place too long without talking, I’ll be stuck there and La Limonada will get me; the constant wandering helps me. I can see now what I didn’t see before. Todo es tan real, como si estuviera pasando otra vez y lo revivo, lo miro, lo siento todo.

Now my words have bound you to me. Even if you don’t want it. I know, I know, you’re wondering who SHE is and if SHE even existed—but she does exist—she did exist. Ella era—es una gran mujer como ninguna otra. Su nombre tan lindo y eterno es—was Doña Pancha. Listen and don’t forget, sí existió—if you forget, La Limonada will have succeeded again. ¿See that shack over there? N-no, the other one—yes, the last one—just yesterday it became the last one as well as the poorest part of La Limonada. If you don’t believe me go check—anda y revisa. By now the electricity, the good drains, the clean running water, and cable TV have forgotten that shack existed because it no longer has any. As soon as La Limonada made it so, the last shack
lost every benefit of being part of a modern city—just like that, she lost all she had. But let me
tell you what nobody knows, what nobody sees and what all have forgotten—¡Except me! I saw
it all—even what didn’t happen.

See that newly planted tree, ¡that’s not the only thing there! If you look carefully enough
you’ll see the scars of what was once there before the tree even existed. Let me show you, in that
same spot, al lado izquierdo de la covacha there’s an old but still standing cement pila that hasn’t
been used in weeks for all the moss growing on it. Where you see the wild grass, solo hace un
día—¿puedes creer? Uno. That is all it took. But don’t mind the grass, just see through it, and
you’ll see the barrel that once had clean water is now infested with mosquito larva. Past the
cluster of old trees over there, ¿see? Right there is an abandoned shack—una covacha que
aparenta estar abandonada, but it’s not abandoned—¡She lives there!

The shack’s roof and walls are made of cheap corrugated metal streaked with rust.
Sometimes when it was windy Doña Pancha could hear the nails barely holding the walls
together screaming in pain to not let go. Inside, the rust covered holes welcomed rays of light,
shining in at different angles and she followed the light counting the particles of dust or even
imagining she was one of them, moving in the sunlight as the day grew older. The only furniture
in the room is the bed, and a mattress she shared with a couple of rats that settled there illegally.
The bed frame is made of dark, smooth wood and on the top left post there is a white candle with
drip-dried wax reaching the floor, trying to escape her smell. A propane burner sits opposite her
bed. Two forgotten photos lay in the small drawer of the table, what was once her happy family,
her children, her loved ones and all her memories lie there, with a dead cucaracha and an empty
box of matches.
Cuando caen esos porrazos de agua, you know how crazy the rainy season gets here and you know how important those times are for the People of El Palomar. Like many others, Doña Pancha collected as much water as she could so it lasted a few days, hopefully till the next downpour. In June and July when the downpours were at their worst, she moved her bed to keep it dry and clean so rats wouldn’t invade it. Many times the drips that fell from the roof migrated. Sometimes over here, other times over there. She laughed and laughed when she guessed where the drops fell, and have all the buckets and pans ready. Ella era tan feliz con esa sonrisa que placaba y expulsaba todas sus infelicidades. As time passed, she had fewer and fewer pans, but it didn’t matter because the leaks eventually knew when to subside. Her shack, her house, her home, understood her suffering and always created exactly the same number of leaks as she had pans. But those days were over when she had to sell her last pan.

Doña Pancha had five grown children and probably many grandchildren now. Nietos que no saben que tienen una abuela que los necesita. Her two youngest daughters left, así de repente dejaron todo y se fueron a los USAdos to see if Uncle Sam’s legacy over-there was capitalistically better than what he offered here. Her older son, who she hasn’t seen in a decade, is a decent lawyer and after he opened his firm in District 10 he suddenly forgot about his mother. And the other two left without even saying good-bye, the same way her husband abandoned her when all her children were small. When they left she worked as a tortillera until she couldn’t keep up with the demand; then she washed clothes, but after a while she couldn’t satisfy her customers; then she ironed for others until she couldn’t lift the iron; then she tried to earn as a cook, but she was never good at it. En esos tiempos ella lloraba tanto, but not for the work she had to do but because she was left to beg for money. Her hands were tired. Ulcers formed on her feet from walking one district to the next to avoid people she knew.
Pero esos días de andar mendigando por las calles quedaron en el olvido and sometimes—pero solo en ocasiones raras, she wished she had the energy to do even that. As you can see, now Doña Pancha spends most of her days dreaming of a life, not of luxury, but a life where she can escape her present pain. A life where her bed no longer imprisons and forces her to beg the cosmos for a fantasy that would help her move one day at a time. Doña Pancha soñaba con una vida not too different from what she had when she worked and when she still had all the possessions she had to sell to buy some food. Now all she had in the world were Tita, Chancla and Ñico—two hens and a rooster that somehow managed to survive. They were her companions and la única razón por la que ella seguía viviendo. Now close your eyes, imáginate que estas adentro de su covacha. With your soul and heart imagine you see her now in bed; she’s there under her sheets. ¿Can you see her memories combust into fantasy? Don’t answer that yet—I’ll just tell you. Es tan hermoso sentir y ver lo que ella es capaz de recrear en sus fantasías. When she goes into her fantasies she is able to escape her present. She walks out of time and into the world where she is the table she had to sell; other times she is the dog barking outside—even that she is the noise of a conversation—and today is no different. Now lets walk through her fantasies and explore her life with out pain:

“Okay, mamá Panchita, if I have to,” Tita the gallina said as she sunk her feathery eyebrows.

Doña Pancha has also changed to a younger and stronger version of her past self to better maneuver through her fantasies as she said, “Tita, tenés que limpiar también. When we come back you will help Chancla clean the house.”
“Todo yo, siempre tengo que hacer todo yo. Just tell me, ¿why? I don’t think it’s that bad,” Chancla protests while pecking at the ground like she usually does when she is being scolded.

“Siempre es la misma cosa contigo Chancla, you’re just lazy,” when Doña Pancha gets mad she screams and that scream made her reposition her head on the pillow and for that second the world she creates broke and her face shows all her pains, but they all went away when she resumed her fantasy.

I love this part so pay attention, “Mamá Panchita, but Ñico never helps clean anything and he is the one that poops the most.”

“Leave Ñico alone, él es un hombrecito, and he does not have to help clean—but anyways, ¿what should we get for lunch Tita?” That Doña Pancha, she always gives more privileges to the boys and she gets away with it because she changes the subject to food.

“Mamá Panchita, ¿why don’t we make a soup, sí una sopita with all the ingredients we can find?” Don’t you just hate when Tita scratches the floor while answering—that makes me mad.

“Sí, that’s a good idea, let’s go then, before all the fresh vegetables are gone. Ñico, te tienes que quedar, you need to keep an eye on Chancla and make sure she finishes cleaning all the poop. Let’s go Tita and make sure you lock the door, because last time you left it unlocked and when we got back, it was open,” Doña Pancha always worried about the little things, but…okay I’ll continue showing you what happened—what is happening and remember this is all happening in Doña Pancha’s imagination.

“Alright, I’ll make sure I close it this time, Mamá Panchita.”

“Let’s cross now, no cars are coming.”
“Wow that car was coming faster than I thought.” Tita always makes me angry here, she should be aware of the cars, ¿why doesn’t she look at how fast they’re coming?

“Mira este, que abusivo he didn’t even care that the traffic light was red.” I know you know there are a few more blocks to el Mercado but this is how she remembers it so respect her fantasy.

“¿Mamá Pancha do you remember Antonio?”

“¿Cómo se me va a olvidar? He was always so nice to me. I remember this one time when the wind blew away the roof and he was the only one that helped me get the pieces back to re-nail them. (¿How much for these three potatoes?) Another time he helped me get onto the bus; the driver was impatient and wanted to leave me because I was too slow. (No, only give me two.) But I haven’t seen him in a while. I hope nothing bad happened to him. (Excuse me, give me three tomatoes instead.) ¿Por qué Tita?”

“Nomás, I was just wondering.” Tita said.

“¿Recuerdas a Juanito?” Doña Pancha asked Tita.

In real life Tita pooped as if nothing has happened, “Juanito…no, I don’t.” But Doña Pancha’s fantasy, Tita is a young girl that resembles her oldest daughter.

“It was probably before your time, but sometimes he wouldn’t go to school and spend all day with me. (¿Can you give me half a pound of chicken?) He was a good listener. He begged me to tell him stories, el pobrecito; at one point he was coming over so often I ran out of stories and I did not know what else to tell him. But then he just stopped coming, probably because he found himself a girlfriend. (Please remove all the skin before you weigh it.) I think this is all we need to prepare our soup—”
I didn’t want to get to this part, I hate this part, but you need to know it. Yes, you must know what they did to her—they broke her, her fantasy, her dreams, she is nothing without them. Le hicieron tanto daño a la pobre, but you need to know, así que escucha con el alma y el corazón en las manos:

The door of Doña Pancha’s shack came crashing down with a loud blast that jerked Doña Pancha back and into the present of the real world. The two hens and rooster rushed to hide themselves under the bed—sus corazonzitos palpitaban tan fuerte que parecía que se iban a devorarse entre ellos mismos. Three robbers laughed with drunken eyes as the old woman screamed for help. When all of this happened nobody could hear her; even if they could, they wouldn’t be able to tell where the screams were coming from because La Limonada had taken care of those screams.

Unlike the rest of the districts, District 7 didn’t have a crew so a three-man crew was formed. Robotón, the new boss, and his muscles terrorized the old woman inside the shack as he shouted to his two new subordinates, Jupa and Calicas, to tear the walls down—rompan y hagan mierda todo—he said. The walls took as much abuse as they could until they had no strength to hold on and Jupa managed to bring one side down while Calicas rushed to help him complete the job. The fallen scraps of rusted metal tried to rejoin the shack but were tossed far away where they helplessly witnessed everything that happened. Robotón commanded Calicas to take the propane tank and Calicas tried but failed—por la gran puta nunca podes hacer ni mierda—Robotón said taking over that job while he composed a rhythm of many more shrieks and blows that ordered them to find money or something of value. Calicas found the two photos and screamed because a dead cucaracha had touched him. Calicas threw Doña Pancha’s dishes out of the bucket and onto the earthen floor to see if she had hidden any money in the bottom of it. Ala
verga, yo se que esta vieja tiene que tener algo de dinero—somehow Robotón had convinced Jupa and Calicas of the idea there was money in Doña Pancha’s shack.

“¡Don’t forget to take the fucking chickens!” One of Robotón’s muscles spoke.

The bed didn’t allow Doña Pancha to move. She tried pleading—por favor don’t take them, I need them; but only dead screams came out. Her adrenalin started pumping, she was finally able to sit up—her screams were resurrected. Doña Pancha got a hold of Calicas’ arm; he didn’t want to hurt her but Robotón made him do it. No dejés que te falte el respeto, he said. She fell on the floor with an empty thud, the screams turning to cries. Jupa was able to capture the two hens—and even then she prayed, Dios mío ayúdame, ayuda a mis animalitos, protégelos de todo mal. The three robbers’ laughter and screams gobbled up her prayers. Robotón kicked her in the stomach, vieja puta, he wanted to kill her, morite ya, another kick, pore morite ya, but she was too worried about her animals. Roboton ordered Calicas to tear up the mattress, no me importa cómo lo hagás pero hazlo and carefully check to see if it has any hidden cash; but all he found was rat poop. They shattered her wooden bed frame in their desperate search for valuables.

Look to your left, there he comes to save her—two gun shots…. The first bullet let out a scream that echoed and wiggled through Doña Pancha’s ears for a couple of minutes. The second bullet escaped through a hole in the roof; rocketing out, trying to escape, but La Limonada forced it to descend—picking a house—then perforating the corrugated metal roof with a loud blast. The bullet finally ricocheted off the old TV coming to rest just five inches away from a startled child.

“¡Let’s go y llévense lo que putas puedan!” Robotón cried with a face that said he almost peed his pants. They had only captured the two hens. Calicas told them he couldn’t see the rooster—but he did see it; he saw when it escaped through the hole they had torn through the
back wall. Robotón and Jupa were already gone. Calicas looked back at the old woman on the floor—he hesitated for a split second but then continued running through the back door they created. Calicas might have gotten a glimpse of Don Kique, who worked as a gas station security guard, who also lived a few houses away and who always took this short cut to get to his home; but Calicas continued running trying to catch up to his crew that was already out of sight.

“NooooO, they took my little treasures. ¿Por qué mejor no me llevaron a mí? ¿Why them—why them?” Doña Pancha was looking all around for them, calling her babies as she ignored all the damage to her shack.

“¿Are you okay doña—?” Don Kique knelt next to her holding the gun in his right hand above his head. Doña Pancha’s eyes screamed that they had taken Tita, Chancla, and Ñico—se llevaron a los tres and they took them to kill them—they were going to eat them. Without them she was lost. All she said was “Tita and... and... Chancla, Ñico, will come back—I have to stay here, yo sé que van a regresar,” letting all her weight fall flat on the floor. Her savior didn’t understand her; he didn’t lift her because he was afraid of breaking her fragile bones that were only covered by a thin blanket of skin.

Robotón had knocked out two of Doña Pancha’s three remaining teeth; while the last one threw itself out of her mouth trying to commit suicide and Don Kique caught it as he saw the rest of them scattered all over the room. He saw that Doña Pancha’s fingernails were all decapitated; She had a few patches of long hair here and there but it was mostly gone. Doña Pancha’s chronic feet ulcers, arterial leg ulcers and venous leg ulcers had already eaten up a great part of her feet and legs—she insisted over and over that her babies, her treasures, might come back. Don Kique looked for some sheets to cover her from the cold when he noticed that her mattress was completely destroyed and that her old rusted table stove was on the floor but it was the only thing
she had left. The dirt floors were covered with many weeks’ accumulations of chicken and human excrement. The first time I smelled her room I reacted like Don Kique; when the smell of human excrement infiltrated his nostrils he feels as if his breath escaped his body and you think you’re on the brink of death—all you can do is rush outside for some fresh air. Don Kique wanted to help her, he really did, but La Límonada forced him to slither away and he eventually forgot about her. Don Kique se olvidó de su obra and he forgot he saved her life as he disappeared into the night.

Doña Pancha didn’t move. She didn’t listen. She stayed on the floor. She didn’t cry. The rats came back and found their mattress destroyed but the neighbors made arrangements and gave them a place to live. Not even the cosmos could console Doña Pancha as her thoughts died thinking of Tita, Chancla and Ñico y como Dios los tenía que proteger y salvar. As night came and the hour hand pointed to seven and the minute hand reach twelve while the second hand was rushing to reach the number one, a grey dog began to bark and howl, starting a chain reaction that crushed the sound barrier—light slowed, falling like rain swallowing up the darkness. A molecule of Hydrogen got drunk and then ran over a number 2 right in front of Oxygen—time killed space, and then committed suicide—matter was created to replace space but then somebody stole it. The moon eloped with a meteorite while the sun went to the bathroom. The trees were upside down—the wild grass was running in search of a place to call home. Near the shack, gravity was shifting and moving the trees closer and closer to what was now the new last shack. The presence of the old shack, the one nobody noticed and the one that no one will remember was taken by the wind as the earth devoured it.

It’s so hard for me to retell her story. Ella no le pedía mucho a la vida, but that’s what truly happened—La Límonada mustn’t win again, ¡we have to remember Doña Pancha! Tita,
Chancla and Ñico helped Doña Pancha; thanks to them she lived as long as she did. Once they were gone she fell victim to La Limonada and wasn’t able to turn time off, making it easier for La Limonada to get rid of that old shack with Doña Pancha in it. That’s what La Limonada doesn’t want you to remember, know or even see. But tell me, aren’t you wondering why one of the robbers had your same nickname? ¡Yes he did! ¿You must know that you have Ñico in your grasp right? No—that’s not a chicken you fool, that’s Ñico. You have to remember what you did so that you can change—it’s not too late for you, so run, run away but don’t forget what I have told you because I can’t stop feeling it and I can’t stop seeing it over and over.
THREE DAYS OF FALLING RAIN

The rainy season in this part of the world has always been the same and it will never change. For hours and hours the rain bombards the corrugated metal roofs of El Palomar with an extra viciousness than in any other part of La Límonada. In one of the many shacks with children locked inside, Jaime and Linda were always playing a game under the safety of a plastic blanket that also covered their bed. One of Jaime and Linda’s favorite games was to guess the number of leaks the pouring rain would create in their corrugated roof. In their current match of the guessing game Linda took her time as she felt the number 35 was about right while Jaime just guessed 26. For the past three games Linda had won and the last of those she won by guessing 29, five off the actual number. Jaime had already made up his mind; if he didn’t win he would never play with Linda again. To insure he won and like in every game, Jaime changed the rules. If someone was going to eat one whole pan dulce, the winner had to be off by three. Julia, their mother, could only afford one pan dulce for breakfast that the two of them had to share, so the winner would get a feast, while the other went hungry. Each time Jaime knew he couldn’t lose because he purposefully overlooked some of the leaks to keep the number closer to his guess. Linda, on the other hand, each time she noticed a new leak she shouted with all her might—in aquella esquina there’s leak—as she pointed the exact spots. And only after Jaime’s thorough approval did the new leak count as a new one. According to Jaime’s count the downpour so far had created 19 new leaks, but the day was still young, the thunder was going to continue its scream across the sky, the wind was going to blow harder and harder, aiding the bombardment of the corrugated roof. And by nightfall, 18 new leaks were going to be created.
ROBOTÓN (Row-bow-TONE): CORAZÓN DE CACA

He opens the door and the sound of the old hinges reminds him of the cries the cats he used to torture made. Three weeks ago a lost bullet kills Robotón’s mother. On that Tuesday night he concludes God doesn’t exist, that his promise to stop torturing animals, bullying children and elderly people died with his mother. He was free, por fin libre of any guilt his mother or God imposed on him. Now he was going to do whatever the fuck he needed to get money, to hurt others and to enjoy his life porque él es lo más importante en todo el mundo.

Before the door closed, Robotón pulled on an old shoestring hanging from a light that lit the toilet with a broken water tank and no seat. In the corner, an old rusted metal bucket was barely visible, overfilled with used toilet paper. Since his mother’s death, Robotón stopped going to school and has been living with his aunt, but only temporarily, and until he can get some fast cash to move out. His aunt doesn’t have much and he has to share a bed with one of his cousins. What he hates about her is that she asks him to take out the trash or to buy toilet paper when she has four, cuatro—no uno, ni dos—sino cuatro putos niños who could do it so he just ignores her.

As Robotón unbuckles his pants and they fall to his ankles he thinks that in a year, or maybe when he is over 18, he would have a wife and a son. He thought to himself he wanted a son he could train as he feels the coldness of the naked porcelain toilet he imagines telling his son to steal stuff from his classmates, even to steal kisses from girls. As he gets older, his son was going to be the best criminal in La Limonada. Robotón wouldn’t be like his father, who walked out on him many years ago. Él iba aser un papá de verdad. By the time the last drops of piss left the tip of his dick and after two loud farts, Robotón has in mind the perfect name for his
son, but in that instant, he decides not to even whisper it; con tantos malos espíritus por todos lados él no sabía si alguien le chismosearía al evil-eye to take away his only dream.

The first piece of shit splashes into the water and he remembers the old hag his crew robbed two days ago. He grins and shakes his head because everything worked out so well, his crew didn’t even plan anything. They were just walking by the old shack when all of a sudden the adrenaline was rushing, and he kicks the door down. The smell of shit and urine hits their faces, Calicas vomits and Jupa didn’t want to go in, but Robotón takes charge and his crew is going to follow him no matter what. The old hag was lucky because Robotón wants to put her out of her misery—according to him no one is going to live like that. The woman is almost naked and mostly bones—la vieja ya estaba pelona, all her hair fell off who knows when. The main reason he targets that shack is because Robotón hates how everyone in El Palomar talks about her and yet no one helps her. He kicks her five, seven, nine times but she didn’t die. He feels her bones break but she just didn’t die. Robotón is about to smash her fucking head into the floor when the gunshots make him run into the darkness of the night. The best thing to him is that even if he didn’t save the old hag his crew got some money for the propane tank and a good chicken soup even though the chickens barely had any meat on them. He did feel some regret—not for the old woman, but because he knows he must become a ruthless criminal, with no compassion. That is the only way he could save money for his son’s future.

Robotón pushes and pushes until he feels the satisfaction he is finally done taking a dump and with that came the thought he is going to take his crew to rob El Buen-Precio on the corner of Roosevelt and 8th Avenue. El Buen-Precio is on the border of District 7 and the wealthier District 11; making it just far away for the owners not to recognize him.
Looking around for the toilet paper, Robotón remembers his aunt had given him money to buy more toilet paper, but like always, he spent it on cigarettes and forgot to steal more. Robotón calls the names of his four cousins, pero ninguno de sus putos primos le contestan. When he finally dares to call his aunt, she hands him last Sunday’s newspaper. He takes it off her hands, “gracias,” and rips the paper into squares. He cleans himself until no shit marks are visible on the 8th square of paper headlining in a small picture-less story the rising poverty levels in District 7 and a prediction that in the coming months it became the most dangerous district in all La Limonada.

He pulls his pants up and takes a deep breath telling himself, ‘Everyone will fear my name because they will know I’ll do anything to survive’. Robotón pushes the wooden door open, and as he walked out, he pulled on the old shoestring hanging from the corrugated metal ceiling, leaving the interior in complete darkness.
El mierda del gato pasa corriendo por todos los techos de láminas despertando a todos los bebés and the screams of a battered Claudia volley Gaspar’s winning goal. Una manada de perros sale, a toda velocidad con la cola entre las patas, chillando because the ticks are making fun of how skinny they are. Flies pledge never to stand on crap again. Don Tulio grita porque se martilla un dedo. Little Ana shuffles the wastebasket for a clean piece of toilet paper. David se toma un refresco en bolsa que compró. Constipated rats scramble to find their missing shadows. Susan fights Caren for the last bucket of water. Linda and Jaime cheer joyfully because they are old enough so their mother Julia doesn’t have to lock them in before going to work. Executed wet socks hang on the rope dried by the parachute rays of sun. Un reloj sin baterías. The smell of wet garbage. Casquillos de bala caen al piso. The fire of a match lights Doña Antonieta’s table stove. The coffee boils. The tortillas burn and one less family goes hungry.
Linda was lying next to her two year old son José so he would fall sound asleep. Linda’s mother Julia stood patiently in front of the table stove waiting for the coffee to boil. Linda looked at Julia, she didn’t know if she was making the right decision. Linda was going to leave everything she knew, her madrecita, her brother and her friends. Linda didn’t know how to tell Julia she was going to lose another daughter. Her thoughts shifted to José’s safety because she didn’t know if she could protect herself let alone a two-year-old boy across the unknown country of Mexico. Linda heard people say that life in the United States was like a dream where anyone could eat meat every day and where there was running tap water all day long. Linda was afraid of the future. Afraid of not knowing how the coyote would treat her and her son, but she was a strong woman and she strived to overcome any obstacle. What Linda feared now was her mother’s reaction to what she had to tell her. The consequences of the news would be huge because it meant Julia wasn’t going to see José grow up and José was never going to know the love of his grandma. Linda recalled the phone conversation she had with her husband and the words: ‘I have sent you the rest of the money for the Coyote’. Linda didn’t have a choice. She had to leave because José didn’t have a future in La Limonada. She couldn’t raise a child in the middle of so much poverty and crime. Linda scanned Julia’s face. Her eyes. Julia had gone through so much to raise Linda and for one moment Linda hesitated—she wasn’t going to abandon her mother. If she was gone, Julia had to work again, and that was unacceptable to Linda.

“Mamá, come sit here and caress my hair. Ala mamá solo cinco minutos—¿sí? Tell me the story of how we came to live in El Palomar when I was little.” A battle in Linda’s mind
threatened to tear her in two. One side fought for her to leave everything in exchange for José’s future and the other part of her fought so that she stayed with her mother and both sides massacred each other.

“Linda, ¿why do you always want to remember those bad times, when we have plenty of good ones?”

“Mamá, please, una vez más y ya.” Linda hoped that those memories helped her clear her thoughts and make the best decision she could for both José and Julia.

“Okay, pero que conste que solo cinco minutos te voy a sobar tu pelo. It was Sunday and we had just gotten home from church when the owner’s three sons came into the little room we had. They threw our bed, our clothes and our dishes in the streets because we had fallen behind three month’s rent. I pleaded with them—yo les decía, les rogaba que nos trataran como personas y no como animales. Jaime was crying, but you were in shock, only staring at what was happening. I stood and screamed at them, but I wasn’t strong enough to stop them. I fought the oldest son because he broke the only coffee cups we had, pero con un empujón me tranquilizaron—no valía la pena que me lastimaran esos burros. I looked at both your faces, but I couldn’t do anything for us, me sentía tan inútil. We had no place to go and the little money I had was to feed us. Some of the people who knew us helped move our belongings out of the way, pero aparte de eso nadie nos ofreció un lugar para pasar la noche. All we could do was move our stuff under the bridge ten blocks away where another family of six was already living.”

“I remember they had a man and still they couldn’t afford a place to live. Yo me sentía triste por ellos también porque me imaginé que los echaron como a nosotros,” Linda saw the pain on Julia’s face but she also saw pride of telling a story so painful, but one that made them stronger.
“En aquellos tiempos todos estábamos bien jodidos. And even through we were screwed, the important thing was that we were all together. It has always been Jaime, you and me y los tres hemos sobrevivido todos los obstáculos que la vida nos ha dado. That evening under the bridge we arranged our things so we had somewhere to lie down before night fell. Lo bueno que eso nos pasó en el verano y no había mucho frío en la noche. With the frame of the bed we made a little room against the wall and the mattress was on the floor. ¿Do you remember that night? Both of you curled around me for comfort. You held on harder to me each time you heard a car coming.”

“Yo no tenía miedo, yo solo quería estar más cerca de ti. I also wanted to protect you because you had no one,” Linda said as she pulled José closer to her body.

“You tried your hardest not to show me your fear. Linda, tú eres mi hija y yo te conozco. Además we were all afraid that night. Anyone could’ve harmed us. The following morning the police came and told us we had one day to move out. As soon as the police left, I talked with the other family and asked the wife if she could watch our bedframe and mattress because we carried with us the few pieces of clothing we had. We knocked on many doors and they all said they didn’t want any children. It was getting late and it was out of the question to spend another night under the bridge. So I asked a few people on the street; they all gave me the same name—they wanted us to find El Palomar on 14th Street because it was constantly looking for new tenants. Yo le agradecí tanto a Dios por habernos puesto El Palomar en nuestro camino, without it we were going to live in the Landfill—not that it’s a bad place, but it’s not one I wanted my children to grow in.”

Linda’s eyes traced the wrinkles that eroded Julia’s face as she stared at the same bedframe Jaime and she played in on rainy days. Their belongings hadn’t changed much since
they came to El Palomar. El Palomar hadn’t changed either. It’s not poorer or richer—it just was. The only thing that seemed to change was the population of people, but somehow there was room for all of them.

More than a hundred other families lived in El Palomar. They always fought at the same time every night in the few hours the water was running—mostly because they were charged by the bucket and someone always got more than they paid for. Linda’s family couldn’t afford to buy water so they had to wait until it rained to collect water for the month. The Landfill was in her backyard and it was filled with toys, plates, spoons, even clothing and anything she found of use she took. The old plywood door to Linda’s shack had numerous dirt stains and mold; it never had been painted before. The lock still had some black paint barely visible, chipped off by the rain and the sun—now it was covered by what the paint was there to protect. She always lifted the door a little so it opened because the dirt floor was uneven. At first the only large furniture was the bed on the right side of the room but now they had an extra twin bed for Jaime.

The roof and the walls were of rusted corrugated metal. Linda stared at the only pictures on the wall her mother had collected from the stores that gave calendars at the beginning of the year. They still had the fireplace on the left side of the room where two old cinderblocks served as chairs—next to where she kept the old box with their dishes. All clean, but so old they were made only of scratched up plastic.

Julia was still caressing Linda’s hair as she inhaled and thought how Julia didn’t even know how confused and lost she was with the choice she had to make. With another deep breath, Linda took a last look at her shack as she said, “Mamá, ¿do you remember when I was an
adolescent teen and Doña Antonieta with her friends called me a whore and made up all those stories about me? ¿Se acuerda de lo que yo le prometí esa ves?”

“Allí viene otra vez esa putita calenturosa who has slept with all the men in El Palomar—even 90 year old Don Marcos. Qué asco me da nada más ver a esa muchachita shuca.” Doña Antonieta had an enormous mole near the bottom left part of her eye and Doña Beatriz got her grey hair at a young age; they always called Linda names as they looked at her from head to toes. They always stood in Doña Antonieta’s door gossiping. They criticized someone because they couldn’t afford new sandals. They told everyone when a girl got her first period. They thought they knew when a girl was just a few days pregnant. They judged people by the clothes they hung to dry. When someone passed by them they shouted accurate guesses on how many days that individual hadn’t showered. When they saw Linda they guessed how many abortions she had and how many she was going to have. Other times they didn’t even bother Linda; they just waited until her mother walked by to tell her of the numerous men going in and out of her room.

Linda’s mother didn’t even question what she just heard; all she wanted to do was confront Linda. “¡Mamá, you know how those women are; they’re always gossiping about things that never happen so time passes faster for them. Son unas chismosas mentirosas y nada mas.” Doña Antonieta knew the only way they could get to Linda was through her mother and each time it worked.

“It wasn’t just Doña Antonieta and Doña Beatriz—it was also Doña Angelita.”
“You know me, Mamá—you know that when I get pregnant my baby will have a father. Mis hijos no van a crecer como yo. My children will not only have a father but we’ll be a united family—unlike those women who have so many children and no father. I will find a good husband, a good man for me and a good father for my children.” After this confrontation, Linda’s mother no longer paid as much attention to the three gossiping but every time it hurt her. One day she confronted all three of them and all she accomplished was to incite them to increase their attacks.

Julia stopped running her fingers through Linda’s hair because she thought she saw a liendre running by, “Sí, Linda,” she said, “I remember those times and I’m sorry those women got to me. A mí me dolía tanto escuchar una y otra vez all the trash they spewed about you. I know I didn’t handle things too well, I should have confronted them instead of you.” Linda couldn’t help herself. She cried. Not because of their past, but because she knew what she had to tell her mother. The side of her, the one responsible to think of José’s future was winning. Painful as it was the future of a child was more important to a mother than her own happiness.

As a child Linda wasn’t fortunate to have a father because he died. Or at least that’s the story she liked to believe after her father beat up Julia and took what little they had. But that didn’t take away the empty feeling when she saw other children playing with their fathers. “Don’t worry about the past. De eso aprendimos mucho, now I—we have to think of the future, especially José’s future,” Linda told Julia, kissing her other hand and wiping the tears from her face. Linda had promised herself José was going to have a father; with that thought she rested her head on Julia’s lap. The room went silent. Julia glided her fingers through Linda’s hair as their tears were the only ones brave enough to shout the pain both of them were anticipating.
The dark night came to life. The hot magma the white candle created was flowing down on the left side of the bedframe. The flickering of the candlelight illuminated the room and all they had. Jaime was already sleeping. Linda’s mother told her to rest her head on her lap because she was going to look for lice. Linda also could fall asleep in a matter of seconds.

Then all of the sudden the whole room was filled with the smell of burnt hair waking Jaime and Linda.

“¿Qué es ese olor… why does it smell so bad?” Jaime asked.

Everything was dark—in a matter of seconds Linda’s mother put out the candle that had burned a large portion of Linda’s hair. Linda figured her mother probably picked up the candle so she could get a brighter view of the lice.

In the darkness and with the smell of burned hair suffocating their shack Linda imagined she could see her mother covering her mouth with her right hand. Her eyes closed. She was giggling—her mother wasn’t able to speak, the giggles overtook her and after a minute those giggles turned into laughter making Linda burst out laughing, forcing Jaime to do the same. The giggles and the laughter continued and it was a good ten minutes before any of them could get themselves to talk.

“¿Mamá, qué pasó? My hair, I can’t feel part of my hair. Ay no mamá, ¿cuanto de mi pelo se quemó?” Linda asked her mother several times to recount step by step what had happened and each time they laughed. The next day Linda cut her hair and kept it short until she got pregnant with José because someone told her it was bad luck to have short hair while pregnant.
Linda didn’t dare say a word. Linda wanted Julia to keep looking for lice like she used to, but those nights were over now. As Linda felt Julia’s hands she realized that her mother’s tears weren’t just because of the memories they were recalling. Julia knew and she probably had known for sometime now. All of a sudden Julia stopped playing with Linda’s hair and said, “Linda, sit up. I want to look directly into your eyes.” Linda’s stomach sank as she repositioned José on the bed and sat in front of Julia. Looking at Linda directly in the eyes Julia said, “Tú sabes cuanto te quiero and you’re always in my prayers. We have space here. We’ll find a bed for Josecito—él va a tener su propia camita aquí, next to me and we’ll sleep here as a family. Aquí tenemos todo lo que necesitamos. See, you don’t need to… we have a fireplace, plates, covers, pillows and—and I know you’ll find a job here—como siempre.”

Linda’s screams bounced off of every corrugated wall in El Palomar: “Lorena… Siomara…” Linda screamed for them to hurry up because it was getting late. Siomara had found a job for the three of them. All they had to do was sell soap door to door. Linda was so happy because she no longer had to work as her mother’s assistant cleaning houses. Now she was going to get paid for her work and she was going to help her mother.

Siomara was the first to come up and like always Lorena was the last. Siomara asked, “¿Linda, are you ready to walk all fucking day and did you bring good walking shoes?”

Linda only had her every day sandals so she chose to wear the new shoes her mother worked so hard to buy just in time of her birthday. For that reason Linda only wore them for a few hours on her birthday because she also had to use them for Christmas and New Years. “Of course I brought good shoes. ¿How does this work? ¿What do you say to the people?” Linda asked Siomara because she had more experience.
“You see Linda, you have to think on your feet. The truth is that the soap we’ll be selling is the cheapest and there is hardly any soap in it. Y no vale la pena robárselo. But you have to say it’s the best soap and it will clean stacks of dirty clothing—solo invéntate cualquier cosa, diles que el jabón es echo de la caspa blanca de nuestro Señor el Salvador y la gente lo compra como pan caliente,” Siomara told Linda as she cleaned her fingernails.

“Yo se, eso es pan comido para mi—I was born for this job then. I will even give them some pointers on how to hand wash easier because the soap is so good.” It sounded simple and easy. The trick with all the merchandise was playing loud music and the manager told all the girls the same thing Siomara told Linda, but without the part that it wasn’t a good soap. There were fifteen girls, and for every two bags of soap they sold they earned seventy-five cents. Some of the girls sold them for more so that they could get the extra cash. But Linda was the only one who didn’t because she knew it wasn’t a good soap.

As the day went by Linda had only sold a pair of bags. Only then she realized she wasn’t good at selling things door-to-door. The illusion of having a good deal of money to buy food and pay rent eroded on the hot pavement with the soles of her new shoes.

After lunch Linda sold her third set of bags. When she knocked on a door a heavy woman answered, “No puede ser, otra vez no. I’m not buying that soap again. Everybody don’t buy that soap. No lo compren. Please don’t buy it.” The fat under her chin jiggled with every word she said.

“Please miss. This is my first day. I’m just trying to do my job.”

“I don’t fucking care. I’d rather wash my clothes with dog shit than that soap. Everybody ese jabón es peor que mierda. No lo compren. Don’t waste your money.” The woman continued yelling her lungs out.
“Vieja puta, cállese y deje de andar diciendo mierdas—Linda, let’s get the fuck out of here,” Siomara pulled Linda because she had no idea what to do or what to say to the fat woman sweating with frustration. Both of them told Lorena what had happened and they laughed all the way back to the truck. It was already getting dark so they collected the money they earned. Siomara and Lorena were happy because they earned a lot of money. Linda had more blisters than money. She was exhausted and planning how to tell her mother she no longer had shoes for her birthday.

After hearing Julia say she should stay, Linda felt at peace with herself. Part of Linda didn’t want to leave and she was finally going to be able to say it out loud. At least that is what Linda wanted to say but what came out was, “Es que aquí en La Limonada no hay más que miseria, poverty, crime and drugs. I’m tired of having to work long hours for so little money. I don’t want to steal food from my boss anymore.” For a second a memory tried to escape from her subconscious mind, but it never made it out. If it did, Linda would have remembered the second time her mother took her with her to clean the house of the people that always gave her mother food to take to her children. That day Linda found out that what they got to eat were the leftovers from the soup the owner of the house prepared for their dogs. As Linda looked through the half open door, she saw how the owner was taking the best meat and even vegetables from her oldest pot and serving it to her two dogs. Soon after she grabbed a handful of bags and placed the remaining soup in it. When the day was over, with a smile on her face, the owner handed Julia the bag of soup as Linda’s mother received it with a humble smiling thanks. Linda continued, “I’m tired of taking extra money from my boss’s purse because she doesn’t pay me enough. I don’t want my son to grow up this way. I want him to have a father.”
“Yo sé lo que hemos tenido que hacer para tener una vida aunque sea un poco mejor. I know it’s hard but you’re not alone. You have me and I’ll get two jobs so that José doesn’t have to suffer as we did. You and your brother are older now and together we will work hard.

Nosotros somos una familia unida. We’ll give José the best future we can give him here. You don’t need to worry about food—we have never starved.” Julia was right; they always had food to eat. It wasn’t much but they were healthy as could be for people in their circumstances. Back then Linda hadn’t heard of a land where in a week a person could earn two months’ worth of wages. Now her husband had a car and in her life she has only been in two of them and both times they were parked. Back then Linda wasn’t allowed to dream. She wasn’t allowed to think and wasn’t allowed to fight for a better future. But she couldn’t say that to her mother. Instead she was reading Julia’s eyes and lost herself not in the bad memory that couldn’t escape her subconscious; instead she remembered—

Linda told her friends, “Ya mero va a llegar mi mamá del trabajo y la voy a ir a encontrar and it’s getting darker so I’ll just head home—nos chocamos al rato.” She ran back to El Palomar. Linda hugged and kissed her mother as soon as she saw her. “Mamá you’re finally home. ¿Cómo te fue en el trabajo?” Linda took the bag her mother carried as both of them walked the few remaining yards to their shack.

“It was good. Gracias a Dios todo me fue muy bien and they gave me this chicken soup they couldn’t finish.” She had a smile no one could steal from her because it was rare when they got to eat something so rich in flavor.

Jaime came in to the room and said, “Mamá— ¿what are we having for dinner?”
“We’re having a treat—una sopita de pollo que me regalaron—gracias a Dios.” Jaime, in a second, built the face he only used on Christmas. He ran and got his bowl and a spoon. Linda, on the other hand, had two bowls as she watched her mother pour into Jaime’s bowl more than half of the soup. What was left was divided in a way that Linda got more than her mother. The surprises weren’t over as Linda’s mother handed each of them two freshly made tortillas. The three of them sat on their cinderblock as they laughed and enjoyed eating every drop of soup.

Linda finally said out loud what part of her wanted to say as she told her mother, “But Mamá, his father is in Los USAdos.”

“Los USAdos, que usados ni que nada, todos hablan de los Estados Unidos as if it’s a promised land pero nadie ha ido. You don’t know anything about the United States and you could die getting there.”

Linda wanted to scream, she didn’t want to go. Part of her wanted to stay with Julia but the other part of her always showed her José’s future. “Mamá, I don’t want to leave but—”

Julia interrupted Linda and immediately said, “Don’t take Josecito. Leave him with me. Yo lo voy a cuidar como si fuera mi hijo. I will give him all I can and I know you’ll send money for us. You’ve heard all the stories I have—it’s not easy; it’s too dangerous for the both of you. José could die or something could happen to you and ¿what will a two-year-old boy do to survive? I don’t want to lose the two of you like that. Yo no quiero que ninguno de los dos sufra o mueran lejos de mi.”

“Mamita, no es solo mi decisión. My husband wants me to take José no matter what. He told me there’s no option of leaving José. The two of us must make the journey. And I have to respect his wishes.” With what was left of Linda’s heart she gathered her tears to finally say,
“I… I’ll leave next Saturday temprano en la madrugada.” Julia hugged Linda harder and harder. Without saying a word Julia got up and left the room. For the hour that Julia was gone Linda played with José’s hair the way her mother always did with her. Linda studied every angle of her life and what her mother just did, but it was all worth it. Linda had made her final choice and it was José’s future. No one was going to take that away from him and the farther he was from La Limonada the better.

One hour later Julia entered the room and Linda was still in bed next to José. Julia said, “You’re right, tú ya eres una mujer con su propia vida,” Julia continued, “I can’t hold you back any more. You must be with to your husband. He loves you and he loves Josecito. Make sure you always put them first. Él será tu futuro y lo tienes que cuidar con tu vida.” She wiped away her tears. “Let’s not cry in front of Josecito. I want to spend the last few days giving him all my attention, yo le quiero dar todo mi amor y mi tiempo.”

With those final words Julia ripped from Linda’s hands the last small piece of her already hurting heart. Linda was finally split in two; one half of her said, “I’ll work hard to send money for you so you have a better life here—so you do not need to work as hard as you do now. Yo se lo prometo madrecita. You’re getting older and your varicose veins will pop and bleed. You need to take care of yourself more. Yo le juro que voy a trabajar duro because it’s my turn to send money for you.” The other half didn’t say much; it just wanted to stay next to Julia and comfort her.

The days turned into hours and the hours turned into precious minutes Linda was spending with her mother. And every moment Linda told herself “I’m leaving… ya mero me voy y dejo todo,” just to make sure she was awake and she always was.
At the terminal Julia hugged José, after that Julia hugged Linda for the last time. Neither of them wanted to let go of all of those good and bad times they had together.

“Adios, Mamá, take care of yourself and pray for us,” Linda whispered in Julia’s ear.

“Sí Linda, you know I’ll pray for you. I’ll take care of myself so when you come back you are proud to have me as your mother. Promise me that you’ll take care of Josecito and your husband.”

“Yes, Mamá, yo se lo prometo. Don’t forget you’ll always have me and I’ll come back to see you.” The bus driver was growing impatient and Linda asked him for just a few more minutes. The tears on their faces made the driver back off, but only for a little while.

The bus driver honked the horn and told them, “Se me van apurando por favor, I don’t have all day, so hurry up.”

Julia made the sign of the cross over both José and Linda and said “En el nombre del Padre, del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo…”

“Gracias, Mamá. Jaime, take care of yourself and don’t let her work so much. Adiós to all of you who came to say goodbye to me. Lorena, Siomara thanks for being my best friends all this time. Gracias Robotón you didn’t have to give me the extra money, but I’ll use it only to buy José toys, like you said. Adios Doña Antonieta, Doña Beatriz and Doña Angelita—cuídense mucho y que Dios las bendiga.”

Once in the bus, the driver didn’t even wait for Linda to get to her seat before driving off. From one of the windows, as Linda was walking towards her seat, she saw her mother crying as if she were dead, but only a part of her was. That part that stayed behind, comforting her, wiping her tears, cleaning her home, washing the dishes, washing her clothing and being her daughter.
On Monday old and greedy Doña Matilde found a carcass in front of her house. Doña Matilde immediately blamed las Cucarachas that lived across the street in El Palomar because she never understood why someone wouldn’t keep their animals in a cage. Thus making her hate them even more because they didn’t dispose of the carcass. For years the brown mutt scattered all her trash while searching for something to eat. Doña Matilde threw rocks at it every time she saw it. Other times she screamed at the mutt to stay away from her property. She even waited for hours with a bucket of water to throw at the brown mutt when it passed by. What she detested the most was to cleanup after it because the mutt only pooped on her front door. One night the smell of rotten flesh woke her up. After an hour of looking around for the cause of the smell she found the brown mutt sleeping on her front door. It probably had been in the Landfill where it got all smelly. It took a week to get the smell out of her house.

With a deep sigh from behind the window of her metal door, Doña Matilde stared at it with loving eyes, but her face soon after was filled with hatred and disgust for it. She asked Jorgito, the drunk of 13th Street, to get rid of the body but he refused because she wouldn't pay him what he wanted. On Tuesday she asked the local kids to dispose of the smelly and inflated carcass but the kids refused like she always did when one of their soccer balls got trapped in her house. On Wednesday she was desperate, constantly looking through her window to see if it was still there. She didn’t know who else to ask because she had more enemies than she did friends. She was finally accepting the carcass wasn't going to go anywhere when she remembered that tomorrow was trash collection day. By Thursday morning she was waiting by the door with her mouth and nose covered, the man who collected her trash finally was in front of her, she got
excited and happy that the dead mutt was going to finally go away. But like the others, the trash collector refused to carry a mutt that had been dead for a few days. That night, again, she couldn’t sleep thinking of the dead mutt and how it was making her hate all living things.

On Friday morning, as she got the scent of her burned eggs—Doña Matilde got the brilliant idea to burn the mutt’s carcass and that evening she did. The smell of burned hair made people flood the street to see what was happening; most of them thought someone was being burned alive. As some people walked by, the sight of Doña Matilde pouring more gasoline over the dead mutt mesmerized them. Other people called her loca, crazy old hag, tonta, and even a witch but she didn’t care. Once all the smell of burned hair was gone, the meat cooked and at first it released a pleasant smell of carne asada making some of the witnesses hungry but then the smell of burned meat scared the few remaining spectators. For a few hours Doña Matilde poked and prodded the burning carcass to insure everything burned. When only the ashes and some of the larger bones remained she swept them into a pile. A few months ago someone gave her a black plastic bag, she didn’t remember who because she didn’t care, she was saving it for a special occasion because it was thicker than any other bag she had ever owned. With her hands she carefully placed the bones and some of the ashes into the black plastic bag. After collecting all that she could Doña Matilde carried the black bag as if it was a baby and placed it next to her bed—that night for the first time in decades she slept with the notion that she wasn’t alone in her home any more.
I am the shadow in your soul. I am every street, every dead dog, every lost bullet and even the dandruff that falls from your head. Yo soy, I seré todas tus pesadillas cuando estas durmiendo y cuando estas despierto. I am the knife that will kill your mother. I am all that moves people to do harm, but most importantly I am La Limonada and I will decide if you are worthy of joining Robotón’s crew. We’ll see if you have what it takes to do whatever it takes to survive.

Wait for it, just wait for it, you know your mother is wearing ‘the I know what you did’ face and en cualquier segundo te golpeará con ya sabes que. “Melvin, I saw you smoking with Robotón and the two other dogs that follow him—I already told you I don’t want you near those guys.” You know it’s always the same thing with her, but stop her this time and teach her to respect you. Demuéstrale que tienes los huevos bien puestos para defenderte de ella.

Just look at her, she already has the green hose with the two thin yellow lines she keeps behind the door. What a shame. Me das mucha pena. It only took one slash with the hose to pin you to the floor. But it’s not too late. Take the hose now—do it before it’s too late. You don’t even see the second blow—this time it landed on your legs. Even before you felt the burning pain, you know you have to cry and produce actual tears for her. ¿Tears, what tears?

“I told you Melvin, yo te lo dejé bien claro, I told you too many times. ¡This last one is because I told you!”

Not that speech again, tu madre solo escupe mierda, you have heard it all your life—¿why don’t you do something about it? ¡GET UP! ¿Can’t you see she’s weak? Fight back. Get her now. Get her just before she puts the hose back. Stop telling yourself the pain will pass—because it won’t. ¡Yes it will! Look at her now, she doesn’t have the hose—she is nothing.
NOTHING—

Stop stupidly remembering your first kiss, the first time you bought yourself a pair of shoes with your own money. Stop remembering when you scored the winning goal against the visiting sixth graders because it was the only good thing you did that day. It’s useless to remember the sound of raindrops on the corrugated metal roof to help you relax—you stupid little thing—stop remembering because it’s not helping you forget what she did.

Just look at her, she has been sitting on the bed for a few minutes now—acting all innocent, waiting for the water to boil to make coffee. Do something other than just laying there in the floor—GET UP, strike her now and remove the glimmer of innocence from her face.

¿What, what glimmer of innocence? But like always, you are too scared to even pick yourself up—you should’ve just begged her to stop. After all that’s what she wanted—she loved when you begged her to stop. She wanted to feel satisfied that the broken skin had caused you pain. And it did—didn’t it.

“Melvin, come here.” She calls you in her satisfied voice and commands you to sit next to her on the bed—this is your chance to get her back. “Melvin,” she tells you, as she looks in your eyes searching to find your fear. You drag your puny body next to her so she won’t get mad again, as she asks if you want some dinner. You should’ve taken her food and made her work after what she did. ¿Doesn’t it make you angry when she acts as if nothing happened? Now that she is next to you strike her. I wasn’t hungry and I’m not angry with her.

She asks you where it hurts as if she wasn’t the one who beat you. You were shaking, as you pointed at the exact spot where the hose cracked your skin. For a second you got a glimpse of her grin as she ran her fingers over your skin and felt the damage. Look at her face and see
how much she is enjoying your pain. No, she didn’t have a grin, she doesn’t enjoy hurting me ella me quiere.

“It’s okay Melvin, ya pasó, it’s all in the past now, I know you’ll stay away from Robotón and his crew,” she tells you kissing you on the forehead como una hipócrita. But you know she first looks at her fingers to see if she has any blood on them. No she didn’t. If blood didn’t stick to her fingers, next time she made sure to hit you harder to insure she could see your blood. This time she must have seen some because she immediately placed her closed fist on her chest—treasuring it. That’s not true no digas mentiras.

Yes… yes, don’t bottle-up the anger, deja que salga esa bestia que llevas dentro, let it out, let… it… out. Anger, I don’t feel anger. If only she knew, those tears weren’t because of pain but because you fear your own mother. ¡Stop saying I fear her!

If you don’t fear her then you must hate her, la odias, odiala, tienes que odiarla. No, I love my mother. ¿How can you love someone who beats you? You need to hate her like no other. She doesn’t understand you and rushes to hit you any and every time she can. No es cierto; she doesn’t just beat me without reason. I don’t hate my mother—I…I…I…love her…I do. No you don’t.

You hate her so much that you want her dead. Noooo, that’s not what I want. Yes, you want to be able to smell her rotting body. NO, she’s my mother and…and… I love her. LIES—you want to see her lifeless body. No I don’t. YES YOU DO. You live off of the notion she will burn in hell y va a gritar, y va a sufrir por todo el daño que te hizo. You dream a bus will run her over. You wish that rats will eat her alive. You desire it, so do it. Matala ya. Take her life. NO, stop spreading your lies, I didn’t cry and I don’t hate my mother—she is all I have—the only person who give her life for me. No, she wouldn’t and you know it, no eres nada para ella, that’s
why you hate her. So kill her now. *Shut-up, I said SHUT-UP and get out of my head—I’m not going to kill my own mother. So get out of my head y no regreses nunca.*
SECONDHAND FOOD: PANIFICANDO LA PAZ

Nicté, named after a Maya princess by her parents who could trace their lineage to royal blood dating before the Spanish invaded, had fled from her pueblito Tamahú with her two boys Juan and Lusbin. Nicté was forced to migrate to the big city in hopes of escaping not only poverty and hunger but, most importantly, her husband’s physical abuse against all three of them. Unfortunately, she was only able to escape one of her three oppressors.

Nicté and her sons had been living in La Limonada for almost a month and they had learned some Spanish but not enough to hold a conversation. For the past week they had been begging for money on one of the three walking bridges in front of El Mercado del Guarda, so that they could afford the bus tickets back to Tamahú. With what she collects one day she has to buy food and some candy for her children the next; making it difficult to save as she needed more than two thirds of the money to get home.

Her children had a full stomach but she hadn't eaten a decent meal or had enough water in days and her energy was low. Her two children were playing nearby, she tried keeping an eye on them, she really made an effort, it was just too hard for her to concentrate. The hot midday sun was right above her as she told her self in her Kaqchike—k’o janila q´atän, the heat was just too much for her and she didn’t have any shade. She felt the sun was concentrating all its heat on her, a way of punishing her for leaving her husband, she thought.

Nicté felt short of breath, niwajo' wuxla', light headed, her lips went all white, she didn't want to faint, she was almost gone, she thought of her two boys. Taq wal, she called them. Taq wal janila k'atän she told them it was too hot, taq wal k’o janila q´atän it was just too hot. Nicté
told them she needed air, niwajo' wuxla', taq wal niwajo' wuxla'. It was all useless; they were too far way to hear her.

She couldn't help but to give in, the heat was too great, her two boys, the heat, her thirst, her disorientation—the boys. Nicté saw her two children disappear into the cruelty of the city life she had experienced for a month. When she finally lost herself and as she was falling, a stranger named Milo approached her, he took hold of Nicté as he sat next to her. Milo gave her his bottle of cold water and talked into her ear words in Spanish she couldn’t understand. Slowly her color started to come back. Milo sat next to her until she could sit by herself again. Still a bit disoriented she said, “Janila matyox,” thanking the stranger who, just before walking away, gave her a week’s worth of pan dulce he purchased just minutes before with the last of his money.

Nicté hugged her children, the three of them were crying not because they were scared but because they were all okay and they were together. After each of them had two panes dulces, they shared what was left with the other people begging for money on their same walking bridge. Even though, they were all struggling to survive, all the beggars of the three walking bridges in front of El Mercado del Guarda, chipped in whatever they could to see Nicté and her two boys escape a life all of them were trapped in. The following day at five in the morning Nicté and her two children were on a bus headed towards their hometown of Tamahú.
Caliacas had fractured his leg and was out for the next few months. Robotón planned a few jobs and he desperately needed a third man for his crew. Robotón wasn’t too worried about finding a temporary replacement because one would come along when the time was right. Gaspar wasn’t anything special, he was just another tool. As a child Gaspar didn’t have to work; all he had to do was go to school and get good grades. Every morning Gaspar’s mother took him to school and with her final goodbye Gaspar’s mother kissed and whisper in his ear, “May God protect you. I’ll be home at about five,” and then Gaspar walked into school. Gaspar’s father for the past year had been sending his mother and three younger brothers, Santiago, Mingo and Bala, less and less money each month. When that started to happen, his mother got a job and started saving up money because she knew her husband had another women in the Unites States. All the money she saved she used to pay a coyote and on Bala’s fifth birthday she left—without saying good-bye to any of her children. The only one that knew was their grandmother and when night came she told the boys their mother has going to the States to find their father.

The days, the weeks, and eventually the months went by and there was no news of their mother. Gaspar called his father and on the few occasions he got through, his father always told him—the last time I talk to your mother she was in Mexico City two weeks ago and I haven’t heard from her. Gaspar’s Grandma was having difficulty keeping the four boys fed and in school. Grandma’s health wasn’t the best and she was always in pain; she never complained but Gaspar knew. Six months after his mother left, and two after their father forgot about them, Gaspar decided to stop going to school, and he told his Grandma after the first week of work when he had money to give her—that way she couldn’t stop him.
Gaspar got himself into debt with old Don Adel so he would be able to use the old shoe-shining box. “Y me la cuidas mucho que esta caja tiene mucho valor sentimental para mi, so take care of my box with your life, you hear. I’ll not charge you for it, but you have three weeks to get your own and if you don’t I’ll start charging you for it.”

Gaspar accepted and Don Abel lined up his 10 pairs of shoes. The first pair Don Abel shined himself and in every step of the process he gave a detailed description of what to do if he applied too much black ink or too little. Don Abel pointed out the best way to give the shoes shine without using too much energy because, after all, Gaspar had to shine a couple dozen shoes each day to get a good days worth of money. When Don Abel handed his box and shoe shining tools to Gaspar, he scolded him for the first four pairs Gaspar shined. After Gaspar was done with the tenth one, he was tired, his arms were shaking and his butt hurt from sitting on the small wooden stool. Don Abel instructed Gaspar to walk the pain off by going to the store for a soda and cookie. When Gaspar returned, he thought the soda and cookie were for him, but he was wrong. Don Abel’s ten pairs of shoes were dirty again and Don Abel had collected twenty other pairs from the neighbors.

“I can’t anymore Don Abel, it’s too much for my first day—ya no quiero seguir.” Gaspar complained but Don Abel didn’t care.

“This is nothing. You should be thankful that I brought all the shoes. When you’re out there, vas a tener que caminar y caminar y caminar for miles and miles, asking random people if they want their shoes shined. Most of them will ignore you and keep walking, a few will just say no, and others will ask you to step away from them. You will be lucky if you get ten pairs of shoes on your first day.”


“But, I’m going to District 10—allí todos tiene dinero—it’s the wealthiest and everyone wears dress shoes there,” Gaspar said.

“Ay tan inocente el patojo, ¿and you think you’ll be the only shoe shiner there? Well let me tell you, there will be hundreds there. If you take someone else’s business away there will be consequences. You’ll be in many fights over territories, you will get robbed, older boys will collect money for ‘protection’ and most likely you’ll find someone to teach you how to work the streets—with that I can’t help you. I haven’t been on the streets for so long and things have changed but some things will never change.”

The following day, Gaspar pretended he was going to school but he made his way to the bus stop where he didn’t wait long for a Route 22 bus that took him to the main terminal where he transferred to a Periférico bus that got him close to District 10. Everything was as Don Abel told him. Within the next two weeks, Gaspar got robbed four times. He was beaten for being in the wrong territory. He made all the mistakes a rookie makes and then some. Half way through the second week, Gaspar befriended the only girl shoe shiner he had ever seen. Some of the other shoe shiners were bullying her and Gaspar defended her. She was the one who showed Gaspar what streets to take and how to avoid the shoe shiners that were always causing fights.

After week three, Gaspar was able to buy his own box and tools. His Grandma allowed him to continue working only if he didn’t tell his other brothers because she wanted to keep them in school for as long as possible. Santiago, who then was thirteen, was the first to notice that Gaspar had more money to spend and that he didn’t do any homework. So Santiago confronted his older brother and Gaspar told him everything. Santiago wanted in, so Gaspar helped him buy Don Abel’s shoe shining box and with their income they could keep the other brothers in school.
Now that both the brothers were working the streets they learned to fight and defend themselves. They established their routes and territories and defended them with blood if necessary. Because of the security and the comfort of having Santiago, Gaspar started slacking off.

“Gaspar, despiértate ya, we need to go, if we’re late someone will take our spots.” Santiago pulled back the covers and tried his hardest to wake Gaspar but it didn’t work. All he got was a punch in the face.

“Ala gran puta deja de andar chingado, just go, I’ll sleep in today.” Santiago left and Gaspar slept in for a few more hours. For the past two months Gaspar has gone to work and then back so it was time for a day off. For his day off he decide to hang for a few hours at Sevicheria Nuevo Puerto located on 10th Avenue. When he got there, Robotón was eating the best plate the place offered and he had absolutely no worries. Gaspar got as close to them as possible. He heard Robotón talk about how easy he was making money.

“Fuck, I can’t believe that guy had that much money with him—puta y recontra puta que montón de billetes que traía ese puto. ¿Did you see his face when I told him to take off his pants and belt? That moment was pure gold,” Robotón was bragging to Jupa who didn’t say much just the occasional smile or shake of his head. When Robotón saw Gaspar and noticed he was paying attention to his stories, Robotón immediately treated him to a plate of what he was eating. Robotón talked for hours not only of his past adventure, but also of future ones.

The evening that Gaspar spent with Robotón opened his eyes to the things he was missing in his own life. Gaspar wanted what Robotón had but at first he was hesitant to join the two man crew on some of their simpler jobs. But after feeling the rush of running away and
hiding he was hooked. On those occasions, Robotón was always eating junk-food and Jupa tried to imitate Robotón in every way possible, but Gaspar did a much better job of that.

As time passed Gaspar, Robotón and Jupa were no longer stealing from a few random people in the streets. Without even knowing it Robotón had trained Gaspar even on how they organized themselves to rob small stores and get the money they grew used to having each week. Gaspar acted differently with his brothers and Grandma.

“Gaspar, is it true, ¿are you hanging with Robotón? ¿Is it true what people are saying about you? Ya nos contaron que andas robando y drogándote.” Grandma asked Gaspar but he didn’t say a word; that day he even moved out.

“Robotón, I need a place to stay,” Gaspar said and Robotón welcomed him with open arms. What Gaspar didn’t know was that Robotón and Jupa were planning a heist where they were going to get enough money to last them for a year. Robotón explained to Gaspar how tired he was of running away after each robbery and how beneath his skills it was. Without telling Gaspar his plans Robotón borrowed a truck. Now that he had transportation he planned to rob a few houses in the nearby town of San Raimundo. As planned, Robotón only picked up Jupa and gave the day off to Gaspar; this way whatever money they got would be divided into two. What Robotón didn’t count on was that Jupa had managed to get his hands on a gun just to show Robotón he was as good of a man as any robber could be.

The next day, news got out that someone hadn’t only robbed two houses, but had also murdered the families that lived there. The people from San Raimundo were furious because they knew the police were never going to arrest anyone for the robbery and the murderers would go unpunished. Robotón and Jupa accomplished not only the robbery and murders of innocent people but they united an entire town to take up arms and defend their territory. San Raimundo
became the first known town to have its own citizens patrolling the streets—they armed themselves with guns, machetes and any weapon available to them. But the citizens of San Raimundo didn’t stop there, they wanted justice—so they started their own investigations.

As the days passed Gaspar didn’t even think of those crimes in another town. Robotón never mentioned a single thing and he always bragged about his crimes so there was no reason to worry about it.

Robotón got wind that people from San Raimundo were looking for him. After the thirty-year-old civil war ended in the 90s San Raimundo was the chosen destination for many ex-military generals and soldiers who had been trained by La Escuela de las Américas on the best torture tactics of all America. The rumors were that a mob in San Raimundo wanted to not only lynch Robotón, but also burn him alive to teach everyone a lesson. The only thing Robotón thought to do was to blame someone else for the murders. The next morning Robotón called one of the leaders of the armed citizens of San Raimundo and confessed to the robbery but not for the murders—he blamed murders on Gaspar.

Robotón promised to help the armed citizens capture Gaspar only if he was left alone and of course they accepted.

“Gaspar te tengo una buena oportunidad para hacer dinero así mira—refácil, we’re going to rob a store that’s just outside of San Raimundo, ¿así que te apuntas con los hombres o te quedas aquí?” Robotón said.

“But things over there are too dangerous for people like us,” Gaspar had heard that people in San Raimundo had armed themselves.

“A la verga, ¿qué putas, no me digas que tienes miedo? Just say you’re in because I have a plan. Don’t worry about the details now. All you need to know is that we’re going to split up.
Each of us will find their way up there—where we’ll discuss the plan. Esto va a ser más fácil que la paja que te diste cuando te despertaste. I assure you they will not expect us at that store. I’ve already seen the store, I just came from there and Jupa is already on his way so get ready; we’ll meet there in two hours.” Gaspar trusted Robotón and he needed the rush of easy money.

That afternoon Gaspar was in the exact spot Robotón told him to be—less than a minute after that Gaspar was surrounded by the armed citizens and some of them shouted, “¿How could you kill innocent children? Ellos eran inocentes.” Others screamed, “Asesino, let’s lynch the murderer.”

“No, you have it all wrong it wasn’t me. Esta es la primera ves que estoy en esta ciudad. I swear it wasn’t me it was…” Gaspar couldn’t finish as a punch to the jaw interrupted him. He was disoriented looking around for a familiar face but there was none. Right there and then he knew Robotón had framed him, but it was too late.

The mob paraded Gaspar through the streets of San Raimundo. During that time the mob screamed for someone to bring the gasoline, they dragged him by his hair—he tried to defend himself—they threw rocks at him. Gaspar was bleeding from everywhere and the mob was kicking him. A sergeant even managed to cut off one of his ears. Gaspar looked at people directly in the eyes to search for some compassion, but he found none. He was scared. His heart was pounding. He remembered his mother and blamed her for what was happening to him. He imagined his three brothers were there trying to help him—they were fighting off the mob hurting him. His Grandma was in the distance, crying because she couldn’t help.

The leaders of the mob commanded everyone to stop because it was their turn to teach that murderer a lesson. “Bring a chair,” one said. As they tied Gaspar, another one said, “Here, take a seat and rest. We know you’re tired. Pobrecito, ha caminado mucho.”
“Please don’t hurt my brothers they are only defending me and they have nothing to do with this,” he said as blood came out of his mouth, but it was useless because he only saw them in his imagination.

“None here is defending you. Eres una basura que nadie quiere. You are all alone like the families you murdered.” The mob screamed and threw rocks. “The army trained me to torture people and I will use all I know to make you suffer,” a faceless man said who was wearing a military uniform with many medals. What he did to Gaspar scared some of the mob away and the few that stayed to watch made sure everyone heard what El Coronel did so that no one messed with their town again.

It wasn’t until the next day that the word of mouth of the lynching reached Gaspar’s Grandma and his three brothers. Meantime Robotón washed his hands by saying he tried to convince Gaspar not to go because it was too dangerous; that’s why he was still alive because he was street smart—so he always said even when he was drunk or high. The Grandma was devastated to find out Gaspar was tied to chair and that they skinned him alive just before pouring gasoline on what probably was a lifeless body. Of his three brothers, only little Bala cried. Santiago thought that Gaspar died and his sufferings stopped there; of course he died a horrible and tragic death, but the ones that continued suffering were his Grandma and brothers. A few days later after the news Santiago had to train ten-year-old Mingo on how to shoe shine, but the two of them didn’t earn as much money as Gaspar. To make things worse, Grandma’s health was deteriorating each day and it wouldn’t be long before Bala had to work the streets.
No one knows Jupa’s real name and if they do they are too scared to say it. Everyone that knew where he was from has been either killed or beaten to keep them quiet. The rumors say one day he just appeared. He was thirteen-years-old and had no memories of who he was. Jupa didn’t even know how to talk, at least that’s what some say. Others say he was found almost naked and they took him to see Doña Eterna, a curandera who was over a hundred years old, to see if she could cure the boy and as soon as she saw him she said ‘Jupa’ and died on the spot. They say because of Doña Eterna’s age, she had trouble pronouncing words, and probably wanted to say ‘Puta’ at the sight of the boy. The name stuck. Everyone was afraid of the legend Jupa and his childhood had created. Some say he was the son of the devil because he had no bellybutton and others say he was La Limonada’s spawn because for about a year he acted like a dog. Even today people swear they saw Jupa run on all fours. Others say he fought other dogs for bones, and killed rival dogs to be alpha male. There’s no evidence of this, but they point to the time he disappeared to be trained by La Limonada in the art of crime, and thereafter became the second member of a three-man squad commanded by Robotón.

People truly feared Jupa as mothers warned their children, “Él es un animal, por nada en el mundo se le acerquen, mucho cuidado y los miro hablándole remember my words and stay away from him because La Limonada is using him to do its dirty work.” The legend of Jupa, whether it was true of false didn’t matter any more as his deeds spread like head lice through District 7.
I just got robbed. No puede ser Dios mío. No, no—I just got robbed. ¿How am I going to get the money back? Mom is going to kill me—ella me va a pegar. Last time she was mad at me…she…she, she’s going to…to… ¿What am I going to do now? Oh God—guíame, aconséjame te lo pido. ¿Why didn’t I see them? ¿Por qué siempre me pasa esto a mí? I’m sorry, they were right in front of me, pero no los vi. God, I know you must have tried to warn me, but I didn’t listen. I never listen. Please help me now, tell me what to do. Dame una señal solo eso necesito de ti. ¿Can’t you see that I’m scared? I don’t know what to do. I don’t want my mom to punish me, no dejes que me haga daño.

I was just standing there and they ambushed me. No me quedó de otra; I had to give them the money. ¿You understand right? Tell me you understand, or give me a sign you are listening. Please don’t leave me alone, not you too. I was just standing in line, waiting my turn, when all of the sudden those three came out of nowhere. Te lo juro, salieron de la nada… ¿Were you even there? ¿Why didn’t you stop them? ¿Why didn’t you help me? You’re never there when I need you. I’m nothing to you. You think you know everything and that you see everything, pero no. Let me tell you my version of the events: they were following me because they knew I had money. Somehow they knew I had my mother’s money, but they didn’t know I was going to fight for it.

One of them pulled a gun. The other one had a machete and… and the other one, the one with the muscles’ grabbed my arm, but I got away when I broke his pinky finger—because you weren’t there, yo me tuve que defender solo. As soon I heard the first shot, I threw myself behind Don Manuel’s blue pickup. My heart was pounding and I was out of breath. I prayed for you, but
nothing. My own adrenaline took over my body and gave me super speed, strength, my eyes were aware of everything. I got up. Two more shots, one of them passed by my ear, screamed it wanted to kill me. The other one meteored into the ground. I took a deep breath then I saw the alley—yo tuve que hacer todo y tu ni sabías lo que me estabas pasando. All I knew was that I needed to get to the alley to keep my mom’s money and my life.

As I got closer everything disappeared. Everything went dark. I listened. My ears hunted for sounds of the three robbers. At first, I thought you had finally come to help me, but after a few seconds, I heard the guy with the gun scream the name Robotón, when I realized that if you sent those three tú me querías ver muerto. But I showed you that I wanted to live. While the three of them were arguing about the wasted bullets and how they only had three, my vision returned and out of the corner of my eye, I saw the sun’s reflection and the one with the machete charged my way. He gained on me. I ran, but he ran faster. He got closer and closer. The thought of the machete forced me to run faster and faster but it was useless. I slowed; my shoes were sticking to the pavement. They had melted to the ground. I wanted to move. The alley pulled further and further away. Se alejaba de mí, peor yo no me iba a dar por vencido.

Robotón appeared before me. The other two surrounded me. Their faces screamed what their mouths couldn’t; it was as if their eyes kept me in place. I looked everywhere for an escape o por lo menos una escusa. I told them I had dropped the money. They looked at each other, and I ran towards the guy with the gun. I jumped and punched him in the face. He went down como un pedazo de caca. Robotón and the guy with the machete came after me. Robotón was strong, but too slow and not that smart. Machete guy only moved when ordered. I ran again, but tripped on a rock. They were almost on top of me. I don’t know how, but I threw the rock and it smacked machete guy’s face, knocking him out. Robotón didn’t bother to look down. I was cornered. I
looked around for a weapon, something, but the street was empty. I was going to die and no one would know who killed me. I threw the money and ran. I ran and ran. I ran home.

“I’m home Jairo y que día tan largo” No, my mom is home. ¿Where are you? You turned your back on me. Te olvidaste de mi otra vez. They just asked for my mom’s money and I just gave it to them—I was so scared, I didn’t even fight them. Se llevaron todo y me dejaron en la tienda llorando. She’ll punish me and you won’t do a thing.

“I hope you didn’t forget to buy dinner, ¿so where is it? And I hope you remember to put the change in my safe place.”

“Mamita, no te vayas a enojar con migo, but I was in the store. About to hand the clerk the money, y de repente Robotón me arrebató el dinero, they pushed me and look I got all hurt.”

“N-No Jairo, not again Jairo. ¿Where’s the belt? ¿Donde está el cincho que siempre tengo aquí? I will give you to the count of three.”

“Pero mamita, no fue mi culpa, creeme—Mom, it wasn’t my fault.”

“One…”

“Por favor mamita… perdóname.”

“Two…”

“Okay, it’s over there debajo de la almohada. Just remember it wasn’t my fault, toda la culpa la tiene Dios y Robotón.”
JULIA’S DENTURES: THE PERSUASION OF A SON

Two days ago Jaime got a phone call from his sister Linda telling him she had sent enough money for him to pay a good dentist and have Julia’s remaining teeth taken care of and even add some partial dentures. Jaime had been looking for the cheapest dentist he could find.

Jaime’s life had taken the wrong turn many years ago but Julia, because she loved him so much, never wanted to know what her son was involved in. Jaime went to jail three times for armed robbery. He convinced Julia he was framed every single time and she believed him. On several occasions Julia caught Jaime smoking Marijuana and he convinced her it was just a cigarette. After Jaime got married, Julia followed him to another woman’s house and after a few hours he came out with his clothes all wrinkled. He convinced her he was fixing a broken sewer channel and he took his clothes off so they wouldn’t get dirty. The list goes on and on with every time Jaime persuading his mother he was never at fault for anything.

After looking around for the cheapest dentist possible, Jaime found Dr. Cifuentes who both plotted on what was the best and cheapest solution to their problem. When they finally decided it was cheaper to remove all Julia’s remaining teeth and molars and make her a complete set of dentures they went out and got drunk.

When Jaime finally woke up he was sleeping in front of a house on 11th Street. Jaime got up and walked home because he knew Julia was probably at work. After Linda left, Jaime and Julia didn’t hear from her for a while and after Jaime got a call from Linda, she told him it was going to be a while until she found a job. Julia had no other choice, she started working and she was used to it. When Linda asked her to stop working because she finally had a job, Julia told
her she would but she never did because Jaime took most of the money Linda sent. In order to help herself she continues working.

Jaime was ready. He knew what he was going to say and how he was going to convince his mother. As soon as Julia got home from cleaning a house Jaime made his move. The first day he just casually mentioned it. The second day he said he had found a good dentist. By the fifth day Jaime only had the exact amount the dentist said he was going to charge for his services. If Jaime didn’t take her that Friday after she came home from work he was going to spend the rest of the money that weekend.

“Ya te dije, I don’t want to go the dentist; it’s too expensive and we can use that money instead to fix the roof. In two months Christmas will be here and after that the school year starts. Your children will need new uniforms, shoes, school supplies. We can save the money for them, please Jaime let’s not waste the money on me,” Julia pleaded with Jaime.

“We have to go Mamita, right now you’re not in pain but when you eat meat, cold and sometimes hot things I see your face in pain.” In all honesty Jaime didn’t care if his mother was in pain or not.

“I need my remaining teeth, because of them I can eat hard things like meat, tostadas, even tortillas. You think I don’t know how my girlfriends complain about their dentures and the foods they can’t eat any more—don’t make me go.”

“You know I’ve been saving for the past six months to buy your dentures. I want to see you smile and not cover your mouth.” Jaime had convinced Julia that Linda had only sent part of the money and that most of it he had saved—this ensure Julia would choose the dentures because it was cheaper and they would save money. After all she was his mother and he never took more than his fair share of money Linda sent her.
“I have always covered my mouth when I laugh. I lost the other ones when I was young because the people I worked for didn’t see the need to buy me toothbrushes or even toothpaste.”

“Mamita, the dentures will make you more beautiful, they’ll give you the confidence to go out more. ¿Don’t you want to go to el Mercado, to buy things you want to eat?” Jaime was running out of things to say and Julia still hadn’t changed her mind, not a single bit.

“I do not go to el Mercado because I do not like spending money. There are a lot of things I want to buy for myself so if I do not go. I am always thinking of my grandchildren, of how hard you work to get all of us what we truly need and not what we want.”

“Yesterday I talked to the dentist and he told me that today in half an hour he has time to see you and to remove your teeth so that in a week or so when you are better he will make a mold for your dentures,” Jaime notices the change in Julia’s face. He was getting through to her and it would be a bit longer before she said ‘yes’.

“So, ¿I will have a mouth full of teeth again? But, ¿what will I do for that one week without my teeth? ¿What will I eat? ¿How will I chew my food? I don’t want to go through that process. I don’t want to feel the pain of losing my teeth.”

“The dentures will be beautiful, we can even design it to have a gold crown on one of the front teeth, it will make the teeth look classy and you will be the envy of all your girlfriends.” He did it. Jaime had finally convinced his mother to get just what he wanted for her.

“¿Can we get two gold crowns? I have some savings we can use as well. But I want to go first and see the dentist because these days anyone calls themselves dentist.”

“Tell you what Mamita, let’s go and see the dentist, you’ll see what some of the dentures look like, and I know you will like them, and in two weeks you will be a new person, a beautiful
person. Just in case you don’t like any of them, I’ll take everyone out and we’ll go eat, I’ll buy the children a toy and even some clothing—¿what do you say?”
ACÁ EL PALOMAR: NO ERES UNA CUCARACHA

Soy triste borracha, paso la vida bebiendo y llorando, por una escoriá de amor. Me miro al espejo y quiero romperlo, por siempre maldigo al hombre perverso—you’re asking me, ¿what I’m doing out here? ¿Can’t you see I’m homeless? It’s obvious to me and to my few belongings, well what’s left of them anyways. La Limonada wanted to get rid of me, but I was too clever and with someone’s help I escaped the sewer flood just in time. La Limonada took my house but I got some of my stuff back. That reminds me, I need to take a little sip of the delicious drink I have here, right here in this plastic bag. A good sip, a sip that is good, delicious and refreshing. Refreshing and delicious.

What do we have here: look at you, nice clothes and shoes, bien bañadito, peinadito con tu pelito estilo nalga. You even have perfume on. ¿Aren’t you afraid you’ll catch something from us?

¿What are you writing down? I see now, so you think you’re a reporter, ay pobrecito. Look you even have a fancy camera and a camera bag. Credentials, I don’t need to see any credentials; that stuff is useless here. ¿You’re writing an exposé on what? On crime and poverty—I’m sorry but I’m not laughing at you, but what you do. ¿Aren’t you afraid? ¿What if you’re here because La Limonada wanted to get rid of you? ¿What if you are trapped here and can’t escape, will you make this place as your home? So let me get this straight, you think, okay you have evidence that La Limonada controls all of us and you’re going to expose her just like that.

Okay then, I’ll play your little game. No one more than me wants to see La Limonada exposed and I believe you, I do, I do—I doooooo—yes I do. Está bien—es-ta-bien, bien esta—
uste. Whatever you say. Pero, primero es lo primero—y lo primero siempre va primero. Come and sit here, next to me, don’t be afraid—a little closer, closer. Now that we are so comfortable let me tell our secrets so that you can put it in letters once you get to your office or ¿do you have just a cubical? I’ll tell you all I know, and I know many things, yes many things I know. I need to be honest with you, I might have had a few beers before—but it was a healthy few and it was in honor of my lost home and belongings. So if we sit here for a little while longer I’ll feel better. I just need to sit here until the world stops spinning. Stop asking the same question, I’m going to get to it soon—be quiet… …You’re handsome, ¿no me quieres dar un besito? Just one. Come-on, don’t be like that. I only want one. N-no, ¿why not? I used to brush my teeth—solo uno y aquí mira, on the cheek. It would make my day. So after I lost my house I’ve been here sitting on the curb all morning looking at the clouds, trying to hear what they are chatting about, but somehow I can’t. I want the clouds to tell me where they come from and where they are going—if they do, then I’ll be allowed to join them and drift. I always scream at them, ‘¿Why don’t they want to speak to me?’ Perhaps you’re right and they are talking to me and I just can’t hear them. You know a few years ago they took Estela and she was only a few years older than me and she wasn’t even special. ¿Don’t you want to see me happy, flying through the sky? Sure you do. Men like yourself will say what ever they need, to get beautiful ladies like me, to do what you want.

Wait a minute, I said...minute, a minute wait...wait. ¿Why is someone like you in the ghetto? I know that, you already told me you’re here to write some crazy story about all of us but what I don’t understand is ¿why during the day? You should know we don’t do business with your kind during the day. ¿Are you playing me? I bet you only want sex from us—from me;
that’s all you ever want from us. From us you want sex, sex and sex. Sex is so beautiful when
done right…

Borracha, ¿dónde, dónde, no la miro, dónde está para que brindemos?. Yo borracha—
yoooo. Jamás. Nunca. So let me sing you this little bolero: Estoy triste, borracha, pasó la vida
bebiendo y llorando, por una escoriá de amor. Me miro en el espejo y quiero quebrarlo, por
siempre maldigo al hombre perverso que me arrastra and that is dedicated to every bastard with
ears if you know what I mean.

Stop, stop right there, right there, stop—S. P. O. T. Puta hasta reputa fui—never a
drink—so if you call me that again I’ll leave. I knew it, but I’ll only accept your apologies if you
give me a kiss right here on the cheek. See it wasn’t so hard and with it you bought yourself the
story of my life: Tengo 20 años de haber dejado el oficio and I’m proud to tell you I was a puta
for over 20 years. Now, I said now, I’m a businesswoman. I sell condoms, some for 50 cents and
I even have multicolored ones just in case you need some later. C’mon just buy one now and get
it over with, you have the money, just one—no, not that one, please don’t take him, I like that
condom; he’s nice to me, take this one. I’ve wanted to get rid of it for some time now. ¿What do
you mean if I really know what truly happened to Estela? ¿Or do you mean the other Estela?
ESTELAAA someone is looking for you. See, no Estela here, nope… I already told you, the
clouds took her—I’ve never heard that she was ever lost here. But what I do know is I’m an
official clothes washer for all the putas that live here in El Palomar. I talk to them when they are
happy. I console them when men beat them up and even when they get raped just because a man
thinks he has rights over her puta’s body. So fuck them… fuck and re-fuck them y la madre que
los parió. Por siempre maldigo al hombre perverso que nos hizo infeliz y que todos paguen con
sus vidas ese ingrato amor.
Don’t tell me you’re going to write about that—no one wants to read that. Nosotras, ellas, ella… ¿él? Bueno las ex-putas somos honradas, I have never stolen a single bill in my life because I always take many of them. The work I did. I didn’t, no I didn’t, no, nope, I didn’t like it—because I didn’t. La Limonada took away all my options, all of them. Todas. I had to choose between una vida de puta or una puta vida. Now I see that they were the same thing. Todo es lo mismo. When my family found out I was una puta cualquiera they started to pray for my soul, ellos decían que se me había metido el demonio but they never clarified por dónde se me había metido. So the joke’s on them porque soy triste, borracha, paso la vida bebiendo, llorando con un llanto amargo por una escoriá de amor.

Okay, I guess if you say so: El Palomar is feared. I’m feared. We’re feared as the birthplace to the lowest criminal scums—as the place we use to reproduce ourselves, where we are indoctrinated as criminals. When a fetus appears in a womb the first thing it does is steal the mother’s life force then as a newborn it hijacks the parent’s attention. Toddlers carry knives to protect themselves from the shadows that puppeteer their nightmares. Ricocheting lost bullets hunt people down when they do something nice. The smell of marijuana, a husband beating his wife, crack cocaine, a wife beating her children, a teen overdosing, a granddad raping his granddaughter, a funeral, a brother raping his sister, a pencil mutilates a finger when it finishes its homework, and even the condom you bought from me has raped many girls.

But así es El Palomar. You learn. You adapt. You survive. ¿Are you sure you don’t want to give me another kiss? Okay—okay. El Palomar, mi querido Palomar, is the place where we eventually come to die. La Limonada sends the humans it no longer needs to…to…to disappear and never to be seen again. Mi Palomar, so close to La Limonada and even closer to hell—here
you will learn to appreciate and deserve life. El mundo no entiende por qué te maldigo y nadie entiende el sufrimiento de una mujer buena que de pronto se arrastra por el fango.

I, we, us, the residents of El Palomar, the good for nothing Cucarachas, as you call us, can’t be exterminated because we serve a purpose—no one knows what it is but we have a purpose—claro que sabemos, I was just being poetic for your writings. It’s simple if we didn’t have one, we wouldn’t be here. ¿Do you have a purpose? I don’t care. I, me, my voice can proudly say I’m a Cucaracha because no matter what La Limonada does to us we will still be here y todos vivimos aquí como si nada y felices. Just look at that little girl, see how she is enjoying that bag of chips, because she doesn’t know when she will eat some again. You people say that for every one of us who has a paying job there are hundreds living off of the scraps dumped on us by the wealthier citizens of La Limonada. That might be true, it might be true—yes it might be true but your article hasn’t come out to open your people’s eyes so for now those are the facts.

Don’t ask questions. No questions. I’m not going to answer any of your questions. Questions no answers. I’m going to tell you whatever I want: I came to live in this part of La Limonada before, way before El Palomar ever existed. Back then no one, no one, looked at me—I said look at me. No one wanted to live in this area; it was too close to the Landfill. But look at it now. Houses are all crammed next to each other so no open spaces can exist. In those days I was so young. Young I was. I said no questions, but I’m 70 now and back then I wanted to find love. Love. Lovely love. I was looking for it everywhere, I would even pray to mi Papá Lindo to give me aunque sea un indio, trompudo, descalzo, feo, but a man, a real man, who loved me and accepted me. He never came, he was too afraid of my love. Soy triste borracha, me pasó la vida bebiendo y llorando ese ingrato amor que nunca llegó.
Hold on, I need another sip of my drink and look at it, it’s almost half gone—this bag has to last me all day, so let me enjoy it. One morning I was at the cantina around the corner, the word started to spread, when everyone had heard it, we all rushed in. You should have seen us. Some of us carried our beds, others our clothes, tables—we were ready to start living in El Palomar. People were fighting each other in order to get the best bedrooms. Some people even killed each other, it was chaos; all I remember is that I had a patch of hair in my hand. So a system was made-up where if you had money you lived in better conditions. The most desirable and better-constructed rooms were and are the ones up here, where there is less danger and are closer to this street. The monetary system created order and happiness—we all knew where we belonged. We still are happy. Look at me I’m so happy—I need another sip of my drink.

You, yourself, uste, tú—¿Ellos quieren saber mi nombre? Está bien, aquí en El Palomar todas las Cucarachas know me as Irma-Colocha. When I was young I had the most desirable black curls amongst all the putas, y reputas, y recontraputas in La Limonada. When I was at the peak of my puta life I had many lovers giving me jewelry, different wigs, expensive lipsticks. They would pay to have my nails done, they took me to eat everywhere and they gave me whatever I wanted. If I asked them to hit their wives they would do it. I even asked a few of them to kill each other when I got tired of them. But as I got older all that went away. I became una borracha, trasnochadora, fumadora y en una borrachera—the lover I once had me sacó el ojo.

Then another lover I had gave me a glass eye, but in another stupor—lo perdí. Back then I was a drunk—not anymore, anymore not. Not, okay. Okay. El mundo no entiende cómo una mujer buena se arrastra en el fango por un amor perdido.

¿Have you ever been in love with some—
I have a great idea. It just came to me. I’ll give you a tour to give you a better idea of how we live here. Yes a tour. Your tour starts now. And now. ¿Or now? No, it starts now. Yes, yes, now. So help me up, gently, remember I’m a lady. Follow me. Follow I. ¿Follow us? Before we penetrate El Palomar through the mouth—I mean the only door in and out of it, look at the walls. Feel their texture, their age, and their life force. Take off your shoes so you can feel the ground beneath you. Now take a deep breath, close your eyes and glide through the portal. Feel the change of pressure, the new air, the will of gravity and remember the metal door, for you it might look closed, but it’s never closed for a true Cucaracha person.

And you’re in—see that wasn’t difficult; now slowly open your eyes and behold the head of El Palomar. ¿Shoes? ¿Whose shoes? Your shoes—¿They’re gone? They probably got scared and ran away. You’re wrong, shoes do run away, they do, a few days ago I lost my favorite chanclas that way. As you can see, the next four apartments are the only ones made out of cinderblocks and only these first two have a terrace. Las Cucarachas gossip about how they are the only ones with a washer because no one ever sees them washing their clothes by hand. Look at my hands, look at them, now feel them—¡Wow! Look at your hands; you have never washed a single dish ¿have you? They remind me of… of… of…

¿Do you know what love is?

Anyways, up here. ¿Do I have to tell you everything? ¿Can’t you see? There is a small slope that makes this part up here. I hope you’re taking good notes of this because not many outsiders get to be in here. I’m doing my best to tell you everything, but I can’t do all of the work. You also need to pay attention and experience what La Limonada has done to us. The upness of El Palomar is where the people with real jobs live. Unlike me, they haven’t made it up, up, uuuuppppp, up here is where the people with real jobs live. They eat meat three times a
day—I don’t think that’s true, no one can eat that much meat, it’s not possible. No, I don’t believe you. I refuse to believe it. Come here, I’m going to share with you a secret, closer, closer—I was once told that they all have cable TV but I have never seen the cables so I wouldn’t know if its true. ¿Why are you so close to me? I don’t want a kiss from you anymore.

In that apartment to your right. To your right that apartment. That is where Doña Manuelita lives. She is the loan shark of El Palomar but don’t call her by that name or she will ban you for a month and no more money for you. Yes, one whole month. Uno. Not two but sólo uno, dos, tres, cuatro. Lo peor es que nadie sabe de que trabaja. I have a few theories about why she’s always in her apartment—I’m not going to tell you. Stop asking. I’m not going to say. I’m not. If it weren’t for her, many of the children here don’t know what a cake tastes like. Once a month she celebrates everybody’s birthday with a single fiesta donde hay de todo—hasta chupe para los adultos. So I’m not going to tell you things I can’t teach you. All I can do is point them out and hope that one day you’ll be able to understand what I’m trying to do.

¿What is love? ¿Can you tell me those four letters?

Also you must note, there are no flies on this side of El Palomar—ni una sola mosca. Look at the walls; they are so clean, it’s just like dirt can’t exist on them. And if you take your time and smell the air you are able to inhale the scent of flowers—that’s right of flowers. I don’t know what kind of flowers—that’s a stupid question—it just smells like flowers, it even makes me hungry. I think, Don Milo, who lives inside the metal door over there, is responsible for all of that—y si él te habla, ignoralo porque es un viejo mañoso. He’s the one I know it. No one believes me—I know, yes I know better: he does exist. But this is the boring part of El Palomar. Nothing ever happens here so let’s keep moving, we have a few miles to go. El vino es mi amigo, el mundo no entiende, que siempre maldigo al hombre que me hizo infeliz.
N-No, don’t go wandering off on your own. You must stay behind me at all times, look at me, at all times, okay, always. And don’t ever take that dark alley—that’s where Robotón and the other guys get high. ¿You know Robotón? That makes more sense; you’ve only heard of his valor stories—no, only his crimes, well people misunderstand him. I guess you’ll need to know him to see he’s a nice guy to me. He was the one who gave me this drink that I’m enjoying now. Many girls have walked through there and when they come out they become the cheapest putas with no self-respect. ¿You wouldn’t want to become a puta right? Brindemos por eso and let’s take the long way. That’s a good question, we should ask someone about it. I’m kidding; I’m just messing with you, ¿I think? Yes… yes I’m just messing around; each social class has about three, no… it’s three, yes—no, yes, three other alleys just like that one—each one with its own dangers. El Palomar is made up of hallways connected by alleys and they are the only symmetrical things that never change, as you’ll notice each covacha—or as you know them, each shack is a different size, there are no two alike and each one with its own identity and problems. Some Cucarachas say that after living in a covacha for a long time, they can hear them talk and have actual conversations with them. Others say the covachas can shift and become bigger or smaller depending on how many people live in them. You’re so funny; they aren’t just going to answer you. A complete stranger and you’re not even a Cucaracha. You have to gain their trust and even after that no one insures you will be able to hear them. You know, my covacha was the one that warned me of the incoming sewer flood; it was the first time a covacha talked to me and I didn’t even live in her for that long. I just hope that one day before my life is over I get the opportunity to have a conversation with a covacha.

You know, I’m an old woman and love continues to play games with me…
Please don’t take your jacket off—you’re going to need it later on. I know it’s hot. It’s almost lunchtime, if you look around las Cucarachas are getting ready to eat lunch, so just leave your jacket hanging here—let’s hope nothing happens to it. Open your eyes wide and take good notes because this next step is an important one, the first of our few economical borders. This is too hilarious, you’re so funny, I can’t hold it in, I’m sorry but it’s too funny. Now you know that if you take something off you have to guard it. I thought it was obvious, but unfortunately for you I don’t have an extra pair of chanclas. I don’t, I do not, no, I won’t; you just have to be careful. From now on, desde aquí mira, desde aquí you need to watch your step, we’ll start to walk on a dirt path and it’s only going to get worse from here on. Right, right, right you notice the walls are now made of old wood—you can consider this the neck of El Palomar or just the high middle class section and as we head down, the living conditions will only decrease. I haven’t seen you take any photos so make sure you take a photo of this—wait, I want to be part of the photo. Let me just fix my hair, ¿does my makeup look fresh? Okay, I’m ready. Make sure you use that photo.

¿What do you mean nothing exciting is happening? If you look hard enough there’s a story everywhere; the problem is you. You can’t expect everything to happen chronologically. Life is just full of random events that you, yourself, need to put together. I’m giving you this tour so that you can organize those random events and create something out of them. You’re just not looking. So pay attention, look to your left and just wait for it. I have a surprise for you—te lo juro, cross my heart. ¿Hear those wordless screams and the footsteps slamming the corrugated metal? That’s Mayo-Loco running on the roofs. He’s about six years old and he’s naked all the time but just wait, you’ll see him. Don’t worry about that, no one knows what he’s screaming any more but that’s not the important thing. Look at him run by, he knows where to place his feet
and look, look, the metal roof screams in pain even before Mayo-Loco steps on them. Both of them play an important game so Mayo-Loco never falls through the roofs. ¿Pero las miraste? Did you see how they were following him? Everyday dozens of flies cover, hang and enjoy life in and around his asshole—they all take turns y se gozan la mierda fresca. Nobody tries to help him anymore, he’s just too wild, just wait—one day it will make sense to you. At first Las Cucarachas tried helping him but eventually they all forgot about Mayo-Loco. Before his voice gave out, he screamed that he no longer wants to be naked; that he was afraid the flies were going to take him but so far they have only taken his voice. Now he runs and hides from them so that they don’t steal from him, but no matter where he is, they always find him. See you just have to know where to look, but you’re an outsider so it’s okay, you will learn soon enough.

Let’s keep moving. You need to see the other parts of El Palomar and keep taking pictures. They will help you understand us better. I’m going to take you to a special place. A place I call crazy jungle or the stomach, but first we must go through the heart. Don’t pay attention to that girl crying. Her mother leaves her locked up all day when she’s at work. I said don’t worry. It’s normal here, that’s our version of babysitting and it only happens when a parent can’t take the children to work. Every parent does that at one point. The worst thing that has ever happened, that I have witnessed, happened to Jaime a few years ago when he broke his arm. Linda, his younger sister dared him—no, you can’t interview them, Linda already left El Palomar and I’ve seen Jaime around working as a bricklayer for some of the new houses in District 7. When this happened they lived on the hallway parallel to this one, you know, he broke his arm when he was trying to escape through the roof—we all laughed at him. I’ve also heard of many tragedies just last year, we lost three children to a fire. When you’re trapped in a small shack with no TV, children find other ways to entertain themselves, so they play with fire.
Parents always warn their children but they just don’t listen. Las Cucarachas never seem to notice the fires until it’s too late. On that occasion we all found out after the mother got home and opened the door to find her place torched. Her screams devoured her, the only thing she left behind was a trail of tears that were trying to escape El Palomar but Las Cucarachas made sure they didn’t escape and they were boiled to make drinkable water.

I wonder who can tell me why love is so…

Just be patient, we’ll get there when we do, so just keep following me, look, we can see it from here—¿have I ever told you how the crazy jungle of ropes was created? Good, because I’m not going to tell you. Nosotras las Cucarachas have our secrets and only if you’re one of us can you truly understand our life. All I can tell you is every morning the ropes try to mate with the sky but they always lose themselves with clothes for the sun to dry. It all seems out of control but everyone knows what belongs to whom and never, ever, does something go missing. Let’s walk down so you can see the contrast between las Cucarachas: to your left you can see how the pants are so worn out to the point—Your cellphone’s missing and you immediately assume that las Cucarachas took it, you probably gave it away, or you sold it but I don’t care, because you don’t need it here so relax, all will be okay. What’s important here is how the hanging pants look better than the ones you have. See how yours are ripped at the bottom—that reminds me of a lover I had. He didn’t like to wear shoes. I insisted, and insisted, and insisted, and he disappeared, gone and I never saw him again. Maldigo al hombre perverso que me hizo infeliz, el vino es mi amigo, el sólo comprende la horrible tragedia que enlodo mi vida y arrastra mi ser.

Love is always better when you see it on TV. Love disguises itself as happiness—it fills you up, it makes you want to hope again. Love is the key to find what you’re missing in another person. Otro brindis—por los malditos hombres and the love they give us. Mi Palomar, I love
you. And don’t worry, I won’t tell all your secrets. I promise, I won’t tell all your secrets to a
man. Él, este, aquel, ellos, tú don’t deserve to know them from me. I know you’re hurt and they
might be bleeding. Don’t tell me you’re tired already. True, or false, more true than false and less
false than true—we have walked a lot, but remember, I’m giving you a tour and you’re only
paying attention to what I point out—it’s not your fault, but ¿what does that mean? Yes it always
means something if not we would be lost, so don’t question my words, my voice, because there
is a lot more to see than what I point out.

¿Can you teach me to whistle? I forgot how to do it when I lost my front teeth—¿have
you seen them anywhere? I had them right here but now they are gone. Be quiet, perhaps we can
hear them. They aren’t going to get away from me this time. ¿Can you hear them? They are over
there, no over here; they are next to that barrel of water. Get them before they move. Now they
are next to the empty bucket, you must keep up. They are next to Doña Margarita’s wooden
door. Look at them they are making fun of us. Get them. They are on the roof; they are going to
fall and break. No, look they were accepted by the clouds. There they go, up to join them. Wave,
wave goodbye. They look so happy they’re free—they’re finally free. Un traguito más para la
prosperidad de los dientes fugaces. El vino es mi amigo por eso lo tomo, el me ayuda a encontrar
las palabras para maldecirte por siempre escoria de amor.

You know love slows time down so it can take advantage and feed off of our happy
moments…

Tell you what—¿what to tell you? If I tell you, ¿will you tell them? ¿Will they know
because of you? ¿Will they know because you understand or because I told you? It doesn’t
matter so shut up, ¿have you learned nothing so far? What people like you don’t know is how the
middle class section is infested with rats and the lower you go the more creatures you have to
share your shack with. Uno se acostumbra a todo eso y después ni cuenta te das cuando la comida tiene algunos insectos—you, I, we even get happy when a fly is in the soup because we rarely eat something so rich in flavor. That reminds me, a few years ago we came under attack and many of us lost a lot of clothes until we found out an invasion of white rats was killing our native population of gray rats. It took us many years to train the gray rats so they wouldn’t make their homes in our mattresses. They had to learn not to poop everywhere and they also had to learn the night belonged to them and they could do whatever they wanted and it pained us to see all of them dead.

—Hijos de puta, they stole the million dollars I had in my pocket. Mierdas, I’m going to kill you all—

How exciting, we finally reached the bellybutton of El Palomar, move, move to the side. See all the children rushing through; they all play with Don Arévalo when he gets drunk. Sometimes they ask him the multiplication tables and he answers them correctly. Other times they ask him to sing the national anthem and he does it—so proud of his country. No, the kids aren’t afraid of him. He must be in a bad mood today but the children know he’s not going to hurt them. In a minute or two he will rush through, and ¡be careful! He’s usually swinging a machete with his left hand. A few years ago he chopped off his right arm by doing what he is doing now. Pobrecito, he was so handsome when he was young and now look at him, no shoes, dirty clothes and most of the time he sleeps on the street. Hey, ¿what happened to your beautiful white shirt? You’re so nasty, look at your shirt it’s all dirty, ripped and a few buttons are missing. ¿Who stole your buttons? ¿Why would someone do that? But at least you have parts of your shirt, you’re not completely naked, so everything will be all right.
¿Why would you ask that? Look, my drink is almost gone; I only have a few more sips and you’re making me drink another one so soon. Of course I had children, children, yes children, my children, I had them myself. But just because I was a puta doesn’t mean I was a baby factory. Nosotras las Cucarachas del Palomar no dejamos hijos tirados por todos lados. I only had two children. Look at my hand and count my fingers—sólo tuve dos hijos. ¿Is that clear to you? Two. Okay. Two. My first-born was taken away from me because the dad’s family had lots of money and they didn’t want their son to marry a puta. Mi varón me lo mataron and I never knew where they threw his body. I don’t want to talk about this anymore; I need another sip—yes another sip. Me miro en el espejo y quiero romperlo, me la paso bebiendo, brindemos por los que ya no están con nosotras.

When love has finished feasting off of our happiness it needs to shit and it does it bringing with it the cruelty of unhappiness…

Let’s keep walking down. We need to find the alley that looks like an elephant trunk—more like a penis if you ask me. Don’t even try. Try not. No one tries. We know better. Just overlook it. This happens to her every week. Try not to feel her pain. Her pains don’t feel. Don’t feel her tears. Don’t feel her black eye. Don’t feel the kicks. Just go on and forget about it. Try it; it’s fun. Remember, when you start hearing her cries you have reached the borderline that divides the poor from the middle class people of El Palomar. Don’t get involved; it’s their fight. At least this time he didn’t beat her with the side of the machete. I have told her many times to leave him but she doesn’t listen. She just doesn’t listen. Ya le dije que con un hijo una sale adelante and I have told her to give her son a different life but she loves that bastard too much. Por eso maldigo a todos los hombre perverso que nos hacen infeliz, que todos se vayan al infierno y que sufran toda mi infelicidad.
Love is our own selfish fetish to suffering because we can’t let it go…

Here it is, see I told you, it looks like an elephant trunk. The gray and corrugated metal with a rounded roof gives you, us, me the feeling that you are a booger or sperm whatever works for you. Let’s take this alley then we’ll make a left, trust me, if we keep going down on that hallway we were in we would have seen the colon of El Palomar. You can even smell the public bathrooms from here. La mierda flows like a slow river. The flies have made a resort of it. You can see some of them swimming, surfing, tanning themselves and you don’t have the stomach to handle toda la mierda de las Cucarachas. The worst is when you are walking by and some teen who wants to be funny, throws a rock at all the shit and all the flies scatter in fear. Then you find yourself with a few flies on my—I mean your face, or lips, and even in your mouth. A few seconds later you realize where they were and I start to scream and curse at anybody and everybody. El vino es mi amigo, el mundo no entiende, que siempre maldigo al hombre que me hizo infeliz.

Love hurts us so much, it feels so warm and it never is. It hurts so much to love and to try to find what was lost so long ago. We are finally here, on one of the knees of El Palomar that has hurt me so much. I hope that as we walk down you notice how much older and rusted the shack’s cheap corrugated metal looks. ¿Why does love hate me so much? All I ever wanted was to spend my last days with him—that is the best question you have asked so far, but no one knows, we never count, no one counts, never one knows, because each time one disappeared three immediately take its place. Come closer, I said to come closer. I need to whisper in your ear: no one talks about this because no one wants to hear it, at night strange things happen here, yes, strange mysterious things but you need to experience them because if you don’t you will never
understand them—¿do you see that spot of red dirt? No the other one, the one closer to that shack. On that spot one of my lovers was taken. He was swallowed in a gulp.

I lost him. Love took him away from me. So take pictures and take notes because people will believe you. Las Cucarachas say I’m crazy, that I’m always alone, seeing things, and that he never existed but he was real—I felt him every night when we slept together. What no one knows is he’s still there—underground. The dirt swallowed him. No one believes me. Look, I have a picture of him. Each time I see it, I hug him, I kiss him, we dance, he gives me shooting stars. I rearrange the clouds for him. At night I cover him with my blanket and then I drink to be with him but when I wake up the next morning—he’s not there with me so I drink more. Él era mi indio, trompudo, descalzo y feo, la escoria que me abandonó y por él sufro. I know he’s still there. I wish I could dig him out and take him with me. He needs me. I need to rescue him. He’s all-alone. I’m all-alone.

Shut up. You have learned nothing from me. You don’t know anything, nothing because you are worse than shit. I can’t do this again. I already said goodbye and now I have to say it again, all because of you. Adiós mi Negrito, adiós lindo—me voy. Take care of yourself mi Negrito. I’d like to take you with me, mi Negrito, but I can’t; they won’t allow it. Cómo me duele dejarte allí durmiendo. You know I can hear him in there—his heartbeat, his breath, his blood fueling his body and his soul crying for me. I’m so close to him. I’m here mi Negrito—aquí estoy. ¿Why does this love I feel hurt me so much? I can’t take it anymore. Love shits on me once again but this will be the last time. One thing I can tell you mi Negrito, I’m never coming back here; I don’t want to feel like this again. I don’t want to reconstruct myself again. Last time I left my whole being with you mi Negrito. Not this time, this time I take everything, our whole world, all its happy moments and the sad ones too.
Adios mi Negrito te amo.

Soy triste borracha, paso la vida bebiendo, por una escoría de amor, un amor que me abandonó, la horrible tragedia que enlodó mi vida y me dejó sufriendo, sola y triste con mi amigo el vino. Paso la vida llorando y brindo y vuelvo a brindar porque el mundo no entiende cómo una mujer se ahoga en la miseria de vida, escoria de amor.

I blame you. It’s your entire fault. Now I have nothing to drink—all I have is this empty bag I’ll just throw it away. Away it goes… goodbye. Bye. Now we have to move faster, we must go further and further down—beyond the feet and onto the toe with fungus. So keep up. Let’s take this other alley. Quickly. Keep moving. Follow me, we must hurry. No, through this hallway. Walk faster. Watch yourself, this section is filled with small rivers of sewer water. Let’s take a right here. Keep walking. Pick that shirt up and place it back where it was. Yes, that used to be a well of water but now people throw their trash in it. We are waiting for the day when it’s filled and covered with dirt to add a few more shacks. Let’s move. We are almost there. Just a few steps more. Don’t pay attention to those children. They don’t know what they are saying. Ignore those women. Move faster. This is the last alley we have to cross. Just one more step. I know you can do it. We are just passing the shacks made out of boxes and soon when the rainy season begins they will morph into plastic shacks. One more—just one more step, I promise it’s just one more.

Yes, its true you have seen so much but that is not enough to change the minds of the citizens of La Limonada. If you want to make a true change you will have to experience firsthand all our sufferings. You’re nothing now. You’re not even a Cucaracha; you are our waste. La Limonada disposed of you and El Palomar found you were of no use to us. You’re nothing. Nada. Now comes the true test and we’ll see if you can learn and survive in our way of life. You
saw many things but you didn't experiences a single one of those events. This time you will start from the bottom—lower than mierda and worthless to all but yourself. I brought you here and protected you as much as I could. I promise that you will be able to keep your notes and camera—so guard them with your life. Make this place yours; learn to adapt, survive, and to appreciate your life because you lived it and not because you saw it from a distance. Soy triste borracha, me pasó la vida bebiendo y llorando ese ingrato amor. El mundo no entiende cómo una mujer buena se arrastra en el fango. Miseria de vida, escoria de amor. Me miro en espejo y quiero romperlo por siempre maldigo al hombre perverso que me hizo infeliz.
Calicas’ past was different from Robotón and Jupa’s. Calicas’ parents didn’t abuse him. En lo contrario, muchos se daban cuenta que el era el hijo preferido; they got him new clothes whenever he needed them or not. Calicas even liked going to school, but his life lacked adventure, adrenalin—lo que él llama hakuna matata—well his loose interpretation of how someone should live because after all it was his favorite song to sing along when watching *The Lion King* movie. Also, for some strange reason he wanted to tell his children and grandchildren of the crimes he committed and how he escaped that life. Él quería ser un ejemplo para sus hijos y nietos of how a criminal life wasn’t worth it in the end. He planned to live his teens in a life of crime. Calicas convinced himself that he was using his criminal life and not the other way around. Calicas was the smartest of the crew, but Robotón rejected his input most of the time.

Hace ya meses cuando robaron por primera vez and all three of them were so scared they didn’t know what to do. Calicas was the one who told Robotón their first crime should be small because Robotón wanted to rob a bank and if they had, they’d all be in jail now. Robotón completely ignored Calicas comment as he commanded the crew to rob none other than the poorest person in all of El Palomar. At first, being the third member of Robotón’s crew was difficult for him. He got less money and worse, Robotón and Jupa constantly bullied him: they called him a worthless piece of shit, kicked him, punched him, and if Calicas was drinking something, they took it and threw it away. Other times Robotón pinned him to the floor and farted in his face. Cuando esto pasaba Calicas siempre se cagaba de la risa. Calicas always had bruises on his arms and legs. On a few occasions, he considered quitting but Robotón made it clear that if he did, he’d break his legs and arms, hasta le dijo que le cortaría el pene y se lo
metería en el culo and Robotón would do it in a way where Calicas wouldn’t die of it. And if that
didn’t work he’d just kill his parents in front of a dickless Calicas.

Calicas wasn’t happy. Things didn’t go according to plan. Y hasta dejó de decirse a él
miso hakuna matata. It seemed to him his new criminal career was using him. Robotón forced
him to smoke weed. Most of the crimes they have committed weren’t worthy of retelling. Calicas
wanted to quit, but he was too afraid. He knew it was just a matter of time before he lost control
and joined Robotón and Jupa in gang rapes. Desde el principio él se prometió que nunca iba a
violar a una mujer, but Calicas needed to prove himself to Robotón because he was getting
suspicious that Calicas didn’t like women. ¿Who in their right faking mind passes up the
opportunity to have whatever women they desired? Sexo y sexo gratis es la mejor bendición de
Dios and if God gave them dicks it was to have as much sex as possible—at least according to
Robotón.

In a few hours Robotón will walk in and give Calicas two options. The first will be to
perquiriar a line of cocaine and the second, to join him and Jupa at a special party later that night.
Robotón knew Calicas didn’t want to do drugs because he fought so hard against smoking weed
before a job. Calicas quería tener el control de su cuerpo y así saborear esa adrenalina y hasta ese
miedo que era lo único que lo motivaba. Before Calicas even knows it, his first gang rape is set
in stone. Later that night he will convince himself that he needs to do it if he hopes his treatment
will change. Pero por ahora, he can continue eating his meal because tomorrow he will be a man
but not the type of man he hoped to be—pero por lo menos un hombre que usa lo que Dios le
dio.
Melvin has had a headache and stomach pain for the last few days because he’s only eaten half of what he guessed was once a ham sandwich he found while roaming District 3’s Landfill. In his right pocket two coins rattled as he rushes toward the hardware store on Tenth Avenue. With the money he had, he could never afford a piece of plain bread, so the meal he needed was out of the question. Melvin was new to street life; it had only been two weeks since he ran away from home because he was hearing a voice that was telling him to kill his mother. Melvin didn’t want to buy huffing glue, but it was all he could afford, what every other street child told him would help his pains.

After Melvin made his purchase, he headed to the far corner of the store. Once out of sight from the clerk, Melvin caringly untied the knot from the clear plastic bag the glue was placed in. At first, he rejected the powerful fumes that entered his nostrils, burning his throat. His eyes watered and his pains subsided and retreated into a forgotten part of his memory. He was just an empty shell bullied by the loving and yet cruel currents of life. Melvin peered at the clock on the wall while the glue in his system invented epic fights between the numbers and at the end they are all dead—flat on a white surface. He found himself chasing the second hand trying to capture it, or maybe to stop it—NO to kill it, so the fragment of time he was currently living wouldn’t be stolen from him. His brain felt like it belonged to someone else and he wanted that feeling forever. The minute hand tried to make Melvin feel the need to go back home by summoning every moment that had yet to come, but he rejected them; they were only regurgitated desires of a life when he was loved. He looked towards the hour hand shouting the recycled memories of his father’s death, of his mother’s cries, of his abuser, of his loneliness and
of his pains as he savagely inhaled the glue’s fumes to keep living that one moment where he was nothing but the sounds of a clock ticking.
Muchas gracias chofer por dejarme pasar and I really like your hat with La Virgencita de Guadalupe—May God bless every single one of you as well as the bus driver and please buy a bag of peanuts from this young man—¿what’s your name young man?—Please help Bala by buying a bag of peanuts. He’s earning his living like we’re all trying to do. Y de Nuevo les deseo uno muy buen día a todos, today I’m here asking for a piece of your heart so that I can take it to my sick son; he has cancer and I have the papers here to prove it. Hace unas semanas I lost my job and I’m ashamed to say it, but I can’t support my family anymore. Todo esto me da una gran pena, pero no vergüenza porque vergüenza es robar and I ask all of you to search your pockets for any loose change that I would gladly take. I know my family will overcome these tough times so beforehand, before even walking by your seats, I want all of you to think—what if I wasn't taking some of your money kindly and instead I was taking all of it at gun point; think and analyze those words and may God bless all the help you give my family.
OPERACIÓN ÁNGEL DECAPITADO

A ngela needed to run. Robotón, Jupa and Calicas had been following her for a few blocks now. Unfortunately for Angela, it was the end of the month and payday was a few days away so she couldn’t afford a taxi. Angela’s new medical assistant job was more of a secretary job than anything else and to impress her new boss she stayed late reorganizing patient files because the last secretary had died of old age and she had organized the records in a strange way. Angela was in the zone so she lost track of time and when she noticed how late it was she grabbed her jacket and ran out the door. The streets were filled only with the noise of the light poles.

All of a sudden Angela heard whispering and giggling and as she turned to see what it was she saw three figures transform themselves into her greatest fears. Robotón, Jupa and Calicas were about a block away receiving orders from La Limonada to make an example of Angela so that no one ever again dares be outside late at night. Angela inhaled and exhaled and at that time she remembered her high heels and her son Enemias, a six-year-old boy who was probably awake and waiting for her. ¿Who takes care of Enemias if something happened to her? She remembered her mother. They hadn’t spoken in many years. Angela’s mother hated that her only daughter lived with a drunk. At the time that didn’t matter to Angela but if her mother only knew he had abandoned her for another woman—she’d be happy and that was a pleasure Angela never gave her.

She walked faster and faster, breathing harder and harder. Her heels beat a rhythm that drifted, intoxicated, aroused, enticed the three figures to pursue.
The gang of three needed to get closer and closer to the sound her heels made. They kept their distance and when Angela looked back she only saw three shadows as the gang of three kept their distance. La Limonada wanted to toy with Angela and give her hope that Robotón, Jupa and Calicas just wanted to have a good time, but at a distance. And that plan worked because Angela was almost home and she could see Enemias opening the door and hugging her.

She only had a couple blocks to go until she was finally home—her hopes rose when La Limonada made its move. The light poles focused their energy on Angela, waiting for her to step into their light so they could control her. One of the light poles got a hold of her and produced a light so bright that part of La Limonada went dark. But she was so close to home, to Enemias, that the light poles had no effect. La Limonada ordered a light pole to collect all of the light it could, becoming denser like a small sun. Angela couldn’t move, she was strong, and wouldn’t let herself be controlled like that.

La Limonada ordered the light pole to consume more gravity, causing it to implode, creating a black hole. Angela wasn’t the only thing dragged towards the black hole, but she was the only one resisting. The gutters released all the trash they had been hoarding and the streets flooded with a wave of decomposing trash. Once all the trash was gone, the trees were forced to sacrifice their leaves. The black hole was out of control, furious it had not devoured Angela—it wanted her, it needed her, too, but she needed to make it home to Enemias.

The black hole targeted a brick house close to Angela. The bricks came loose and bulleted towards to Angela, missing her. La Limonada was pressuring the black hole and it pulled harder and harder at everything that it could. Angela crept closer and closer to the black hole. Out of the despair, Angela ripped off a hand full of her hair and threw it into the darkness.
The hair changed the black hole and transformed it into a black butterfly that extinguished itself with the first flap of its wings.

Angela’s body was covered with small bruises. But all she cared about was getting home to Enemias. The sidewalk on 10th Avenue was gone. She had to walk on the actual road, where scattered potholes reorganize themselves to only appear beneath her, in hopes she tripped.

La Limonada set free Robotón, Calicas and Jupa, even when La Limonada knew they weren’t ready for a mission like that. There was no other option; the gang of three must finish what it could not do. Robotón as the strongest looking of the three figures climbed halfway up a light pole extending his wings and screamed for her to join their fun. Thirteenth Street was on her left side and was offering sanctuary but 13th Street is loyal to La Limonada and it was never going to help Angela. Angela ran to keep up with her pounding heart while 13th Street made one last attempt to woo her but Angela’s maternal instincts again kept her from seeing it.

Robotón, Calicas and Jupa start morphing and changing into beasts that can think only of sex and fun without regard to anyone else, as they get closer to Her. Keep running—she needs to keep running to get to 14th Street and to Her son. The three figures’ footsteps get louder and louder—thundering to make sure her ears bleed so that she can’t hear anymore.

Robotón glided through the air and tackled Angela. He pinned her down to the ground, not realizing that her right hand reached the territory that 14th Street controlled. Angela screamed for help but no one wanted to hear her. She now belonged to those three things La Limonada sent. The pavement around her right hand cracked. Small pink flowers grew in-between the small cracks; their roots are extending through 14th Street as the small flowers release their pollen to inform the sleeping inhabitants of La Limonada what just happened. The gang of three were so lost in-between their ecstasy and adrenaline that they didn’t hear the new orders La Limonada
gave them. La Limonada lost control of Robotón, Jupa and Calicas, as they weren’t aware of what Angela was doing. Angela’s nails ripped themselves out of her fingers. Five whirlpools formed out of the center of her fingerprints and, as they reached their full destruction, the gang of three raped Angela’s body. The thing that was Robotón went first as the other two pulled her legs back until they broke them. After each of them raped her body several times, she was unrecognizable. The three of them bit off her ears, lips and nipples. Her left eye was swollen shut and the right eye was ripped out of its socket. Jupa made sure to scatter all of her teeth so the authorities couldn’t recognize her. When the three of them finished, Angela’s body had no blood left in it. La Limonada had to do damage control so it ordered Robotón and his gang to cut up Angela’s body and placed the different parts in public areas with two different notes. One of them was written with Angela’s blood and was only visible to those the pollen had reached, warning all of them that worse things were going to happen to them. The other note, the one that was visible to everybody else, stated that criminals wouldn’t be tolerated even if they were women.
Every body settle down, silencio por favor… I said shut the fuck up—thank you, and please excuse my language. I’ve learned through the years that students of your generation pay more attention to a nerd if he talks like a ghetto nerd—así que esperen putas, pusas, tetas, vergas, culos, and mucha mierda—because there’s never too much shit. As you probably know you’ve registered for political sciences 101 here in La USAC and please if you’re in the wrong class de una vez a la mierda, por favor váyanse a la mierda and don’t waste my time. My name is Licenciado Guillermo Jaramillo but you can call me Tito—and don’t fucking ask why, lo único que se es que así me han dicho desde que me acuerdo. So just call me Tito your humble servant pero no su puto. Also, if you won’t do any of the work please just drop my class there’s a long waiting list. I’ve posted a copy of the required books outside so after class do what you have to do. We’ll have two tests and one project and that’s it, as simple as that, so make sure you come to every class porque todas van a estar de a huevo and because of that, no texting, no food, to chewing gum, no sleeping, no se pasen notas, no masturbating y en mi clase solo permito dos cosas: the first is a pen and paper to take notes, the second is to always ask questions of everything because they not only clarify material that might be on the test but they help fuck you up even more, you’ll see what I mean later.

So let’s get started—

The first half of the 20th century saw the erection, y una bien grande, of an economical empire that build with peasant hands, dirty fingernails, heavy blisters, a bananote curtain with América Latina’s virgin fertile lands. Horny gray haired investors from a land called the United States, or as some of you call it—Los USAdos—they simply unzipped their pants and lubed
themselves, todos nerviosos y excitados, like in front of a wet pussy as their pre-cum started stimulating the pinche puto dream to turn a small pueblito de mierda called La Limonada into a metropolis of over two million putos swimming around with a single tail to insure a strategic foreskin in case of war but, most importantly, to insure an economical dominance with the exploitation of all natural recourses de todo el hijueputa mundo.

The wet dream, of course, became a reality but not only in La Limonada; instead it prematurely ejaculated all over América Latina’s open mouth. In fear because they felt the damage of just the tip of the great dick, the people started calling the foreign investors—The Pulpo—one entity of putos with eight different long tentacles that stuck them in whatever tight or loose hole they could. The Pulpo not only controlled the present generation of La Limonada citizens but their unborn fetuses also felt the pleasure, the arousal, the dirty foreplay of its tentacles. Apuesto que eso les traé buenos recuerdos. The Pulpo united the fruit industry into a single Chiquita company that prided itself on its sustainable agricultural practices. The company managed to sustainably fuck the people in every position imaginable by stealing all the nutrients from the soil right underneath their naked feet y los pobres desgraciados ni cuenta se dieron.

Once everything worth stealing was packaged and shipped abroad, the people were paid with democracy in the form of a dictatorship and a 30-year civil war—that continued the fucking of the people with death squads, rape, abduction, torture and mass graves for the generations to come, to moan, to enjoy and to beg for more and more. The Pulpo, con toda la sabiduría de una vergota, didn’t trust the citizens of La Limonada to do all that social chaos by themselves—that would’ve been absurd—so it was only natural to provide them with council and money in the millions of dollars. Now that The Pulpo had its tip in side the poor motherfuckers—it just said, ‘a la verga con todo lest go all in’. The plan was a true deep throat fuck, but no ordinary dick would
do, it had to be the long veiny dick of the United States military.

The last half of the century saw how a full boner became semi erect then flaccid ending a 30 year civil war that was more of a genocide with a bloodshed in the hundreds of thousands of poor bastards who gave their lives to make the dreams come true of a single Pulpo. To this day The Pulpo still profits from smoke factories constant fabrication of air pollution, water pollution, land pollution and if the pollution doesn’t exist they simply create it to continue the tradition of fucking things over and over until they become less than worthless. The Pulpo has, is and will continue to profit from cheap peasant hands for years as it has insured it's very own supply of hand jobs. Hasta la ultima gota del plan salió perfectamente como debía, The Pulpo was even assfucking the formation of a tax-free economy where illiteracy became the main goal of all politicians and where less than point zero one percent own everything—including but not limited to: rain water, volcano ashes, rain clouds, wind, humidity, la caca de las gallinas, hasta la de las vacas, genetically modified corn, genetically modified grass, all the fruits, fruit trees, seeds, some insects, all of the natural minerals, rivers, lakes—no matter how contaminated they made them, and how can we forget the occasional death squad. I know, I know, I might have taken it too far, they might not own la caca de las gallinas.

It must have felt like a bitch when it finally crawled into The Pulpo’s hairy culo that its banano curtain spawned its very own bastard child called—Diaspora—but it was already too late, ya la tenia bien metida, as diaspora had spread like herpes across all its domains. In the 80s it got really popular for people in La Limonada to, y algunos de sus familiares might have indulged in it as well, ship themselves to foreign lands, especially Los USAdos, because they truly believed that if people over there loved their products—there was no real reason why they wouldn’t be loved the same way—it made sense, in a fucked up way. Soon after the mass
shipment of cheap labor, diaspora started to consume the middle class and even the upper class and en un abrir y cerrar de ojos todos se estaban empacando y mandándose por coreos. The brain drain to Los USAdos left the city with a broken political system that fomented corruptions as the only opportunity for a better way of life—in other words, it was the literal shit the American Dream craped every day. As you might know, usually with crap there are chunks that resembled the food it once was; those little chunks became the memories of development in raw flesh—that at first became a reachable goal for the people here, y todos cantaban y gozaban. Then it became a hope, y la gente solo cantaba entre los dientes. Then it became a dream, and soon after the nightmare for the people in the underdeveloped districts who could never ship themselves to Los USAdos and thus becoming the leftovers, los nadie, la mierda and worse that used condoms.

The people in those districts are first owned, used and disposed of by The Pulpo. Once The Pulpo deems them useless they become secondhand goods and the city of La Limonada reuses them to maintain itself. This place has become a secondhand city that will do anything to survive in the shadows and off of the scraps The Pulpo leaves behind. La Limonada is a city with its legs ripped off, but a city that continues to walk, because it doesn’t know The Pulpo allows it. And it only allows La Limonada to exist because its accumulated poverty, its filth, its murders, its crimes, its secondhand people, their unsafe sex, their need for land reform, their need for a livable minimum wage, for better schools, for better housing, for better hospitals must continue to exist so Los USAdos can keep enjoying their way of life, because after all, The Pulpo has worked hard to create and most importantly to maintain their seed, their dream, their banano curtain—and its bastard child.

¿Any questions? Remember, be careful you never know who’s listening.
He wasn’t good with the ladies—¿mamacita rica estás, no quieres tu orden extra grande de McPene que tengo aquí? He used the same line every time and the ladies always ignored him but on a few occasions one would say—masita la que tenés en los dientes animal—and she immediately became his next target. Él pobre sufría por las mujeres más de lo que admitía cuando estaba borracho. It didn’t help that the ladies feared him because of the stories they heard and to make things worse he never brushed his teeth y siempre tenía un aliento a mierda que de alguna manera it had managed to reek a thousand-fold worse than human shit.

A few weeks ago, Linda and José left the city of La Limonada and she was the only one who wasn’t afraid of Robotón. Ella le decía como comportarse con las chavas pero él siempre le decía—“Yo soy un macho and a real man follows his instincts.” She also saw how much attention and care he had for José or Chepito como el le decía. Robotón was desperate to have a child of his own. So every opportunity to rape a woman he took without hesitation and because he now wanted a son he didn’t kill them afterwards. Él estaba motivado y sinceramente sentía que el merecía ser padre. He studied a few women whom he considered worthy of his seed and after he raped them he kept a close eye on them to see if he got any of them pregnant and, if he did, stealing the baby was his next step. Some victims he raped many times and when he found them walking on the street, he talked to them—I hope you’re not thinking of having an abortion porque si lo llegas a hacer yo mato a toda tu familia and I’ll even rape your fucking dog and feed it to your cat—he told them as he questioned them to see if they were pregnant. What Robotón didn’t know was that he was never going to be a father and unfortunately for his many victims, he only found out years later after he visited a doctor to see why he couldn’t get anyone
pregnant. After the news he went to church for the first time since his mother had died many years ago. He kneeled, acting as if he was going to pray in silence, but instead he said—Dios, ¿cómo te atreviste a hacerme esto? You took away from me my only dream and you will pay for it—when every other devotee saw it was him who was screaming they all left as Robotón continued to destroy the interior of the church. After a few days he accepted he was never going to be a father so he began killing his victims, and then he was more vicious than before.
By Mirolo J. Pressentino:

Yesterday Joel López, a 35-year-old bus driver and father of three, was murdered along with two unnamed passengers. López’s route, 22 to El Milagro, is considered one of the most dangerous routes in all of La Limonada because of high gang activity in that sector.

Yesterday at 10:15 am, local police were called to Avenida Reforma just a few blocks away from the bus terminal. Witnesses stated they believed they had seen three men, described as light to dark skinned individuals. One was strong. Witnesses stated the suspects might have been covered with tattoos. The two men entered the bus from the back doors and walked to the front and pulled out a gun and shot the driver dead. Witnesses say the two passengers were killed because they tried to exit the bus before the suspects did and were gunned down with at least two shots each.

Afterward the suspected gang members exited the bus and walked away from the scene as if nothing had happened.

Twenty minutes after the initial call, two police officers arrived at the scene where they pronounced the three victims dead. One officer stated that the bus driver was shot point blank in the head and still wore a hat of the Virgen de Guadalupe. The officer also stated the two passengers were shot in the back. After another forty minutes, agents of the Homicide Investigation Division of La Limonada Police Department showed up and questioned witnesses about the suspects. Officers got a few promising leads and expect to make an arrest in the next few days.
In response to the murders, all the bus drivers in neighboring sectors have halted services until the government or the police chief could assure them they were safe and that the death of Joel López did not go unpunished. Many drivers have pledged to start arming themselves. As of yet the drivers are still waiting to hear from either organization.
Doña Jany was desperate now. She hadn’t eaten breakfast and it was past five in the afternoon. She had been looking for Robotón and his crew for hours, but people were pointing her to the wrong places and when she finally found them just hanging she said, “¿Robotón, uste sabe donde esta mi hijo. Así que dígame where’s my son Melvin?” Those words finally left Doña Jany’s mouth; her son was missing for the past three weeks, and for that time she has looked everywhere for him. It wasn’t until today in the morning when a strange woman, who looked pale like bones with long black hair that resembled more of a cloak than hair told her to go and talk to Robotón and to ask what he did two days ago. After that Doña Jany wasn’t thinking of the growing list of criminal activity Robotón and his crew had committed in the last month because they were her last resort to find her son.

She wasn’t scared of them anymore but she was scared of what they could tell her. “I know you know where he is, por favor solo dígame y ya no lo molesto,” Doña Jany demanded, her face fearless, her hair fighting off the wind, her fists ready to be thrown onto any face.

Robotón, Jupa and Calicas leaned their usual way, on their usual wall, on the same old Fourteen Street of District 7, the same wall they used as their private pissing area and the main reason so many people avoided walking there. “En primer lugar no te comportes como una puta con menopausia,” Robotón said, “remember who you’re talking to. I have no fucking idea who your son is.”

Doña Jany never lost eye contact with Robotón. She stood her ground. “People told me you were talking with him just two days ago. Y mi corazón me dice que uste sabe donde esta mi hijo.”
Robotón and his two friends looked as clueless as ever. They sincerely had no idea what Doña Jany was talking about—they all looked at each other and acted as if not a single thought popped into their minds.

“¿Puta madre, people told you? Fuck, then it must be true. Let me see, ¿what was I doing in the morning two days ago? De plano me despertate tarde, ese día me tenía que bañar pero me dio pereza and then I did a little job that got me a little something—”

Doña Jany held back her tears. She couldn’t force them to give her more information.

“What did you make my son do? I know you forced him to do something. ¿No mira cuanto estoy sufriendo por saber alguna noticia de él?”

Robotón tried to pay any attention to what Doña Jany said.

“Ahhhhhh, I was right here, y estaba parado así como siempre con la cabeza en alto y como todo un macho when a fuck-face, he goes by El Chinches or some shit like that. Anyways, for some time he was bugging us that he wants to join our crew, but fuck him, we don’t want any little mama’s boys. A few weeks ago he stopped asking to be part of our crew, y me vale verga porque lo dejo de hacer, he even stopped talking to us. Two days ago he asked me if I had some money he could borrow… for his, I think it was for his glue addiction, o a lo mejor era para la puta que se quería coger, he was all dirty and smelled like shit—pero eso es lo de menos”

Robotón said, while looking at his two friends and laughing. “When I told him to go to hell, he went crazy. He was screaming about a voice in his head, but that’s not my fucking problem.”

Robotón’s friends pushed off the wall and they stood next to Robotón who leaned in toward Doña Jany. “I told him to get a job, all of us here have jobs. I even referred him to one of my carnales who works the Landfill. Its easy money I told the little bastard—who thanked me and
left—I assume he went to the Landfill.” With his head, Robotón signaled his crew—time to leave, and followed two girls walking towards the corner store.

They walked away and she just stared at the wind, not noticing the plastic bag it carried across her feet. “Dios mío, el esta en… it can’t be… he is in… Landfill—but it’s been raining too,” she murmured. Doña Jany didn’t move, just an empty cold body. She was lost in the word Landfill. “Ha estado lloviendo mucho Dios mío and he’s in the Landfill—.”

Images of life in the Landfill invaded her mind: Single mothers with babies on their backs, looking for food, sisters holding their little brothers by the hand, showing them how to search through the trash. She lost control over her body. Her empty body walked by itself.

A boy finding a better looking pair of shoes and trying them on, someone scaring off a dog because it was eating what looked like a good meal—Doña Jany’s body ran across streets, cutting off motorcycles, stopping moving cars because her body needed to get to the Landfill no matter what.

Thousands of vultures circling the sky looking for another dead body. Cats and rats working together to find the best spots to poop. A street vendor screamed for someone to stop Doña Jany’s body had pushed him and made him drop his basket with chile rellenos, tostadas con frijoles and panes con jamón.

People carrying big loads on top of their heads. Others riding on carts they had built. Many focused on the trash just dumped. Others walked distances on the old trash, following bulldozers as they uncovered endless possibilities of new material. Doña Jany’s body reached the end of La Limonada but couldn’t take the last step into the Landfill.

She called—screamed for Melvin to return to her but it was useless, she only imagined the screams. The sun and the colors it painted killed themselves into darkness as the last light—
pole over Doña Jany turned on. The circle of light it created took hold of her body. La Limonada didn’t allow anyone in the Landfill at night. It didn’t let her see anything beyond that circle of light.

La Limonada feared the Landfill’s darkness and deployed light poles to hold a perimeter on pinpointed locations along its border. The darkness taunted Doña Jany to escape the light and to join the suffering and screams of the Landfill at night. She wanted to enter the Landfill, but couldn’t move. In the last of Doña Jany’s dry and soundless screams, six letters escaped. The ‘M’ was eaten up by rats. An empty chip bag kidnapped the ‘E’. The ‘L’ and ‘V’ dueled each for the ‘I’ who wanted to marry a cockroach. While the ‘N’ echoed through time in search of Melvin.

She imagined finding Melvin and taking him home, but only at home would she realize she had carried his dead body. When her tears landed on Melvin’s dead body and brought him back to life; he hugged her, and they danced like she’d seen on the cover of an American magazine where two loved ones dances with big smiles on a patch of green grass and flowers that overwhelmed the eye. Melvin’s reanimation didn’t last long. His body decayed as reality set in.

Doña Jany was still looking out into the darkness of the landfill, her despair, her worry—he might be hungry, scared, dead—was wiped away by the hope that he was alive and trying to get home. Doña Jany’s hopes constructed a story of her son waiting for her when the light shining above invaded Doña Jany’s mind, hypnotizing her to forget. She didn’t know what she was, and she forgot why she was on the border of La Limonada and the Landfill. One by one the light poles commanded her body to keep walking. Where the light of one pole ended another
took over. Street by street, the light pole puppeteer guided her body till the last led Doña Jany to the old door of her home.

Without turning on the lights, Doña Jany pushed the door shut, not bothering to lock it with the wooden pole for extra security. She regained her memories and control over her body. She took her left shoe off with her right foot and left the other one on. She lifted Melvin’s bed sheets and entered the bed. Melvin’s smell reminded her she was allowed to cry, something she hadn’t done since her husband abandoned her. Doña Jany went through all the possible scenarios of what could’ve happened, but La Limonada steered her thoughts toward Melvin’s death, and his dead body lying cold in the Landfill.

She relived every happy moment she had with Melvin and repented the bad. Doña Jany’s tears ran along her nose and crashed onto Melvin’s pillow. The small shack trapped her. The blankets chained her down so her desires to end her life couldn’t be accomplished.

The small shack now protected only one soul, two twin beds, five bowls, nine spoons, four pairs of boy’s shoes, one wardrobe and an old TV on top of a wooden stool—rose from its foundations and returned to the Municipal Landfill of District 3 in search of places nobody knew existed. It organized the rats and cockroaches to search as deep as they could go for Melvin’s body, but it was useless; his body couldn’t be found. The rats and the cockroaches concluded that Melvin never existed and the crazy woman who claimed to be his mother was but a lost nightmare belonging to someone in La Limonada. Whatever the case, finding nothing, not even a dead skin cell belonging to Melvin, the shack with one sound returned to its foundations—carrying with it an extra passenger.

Doña Jany forced her eyes open. She thought she felt Melvin’s presence but it wasn’t him who stood before her. It was a strange woman who looked pale like bones with long black hair
that resembled a cloak an entity Doña Jany associated with Death. In reality it was the Landfill itself planting the seed of its plan to come in the near future. Death didn’t speak. Death didn’t even move. Doña Jany screamed in agony as she told Death not to touch Her with its cold eyes. Death haunted her past, present, and future crushing them together and splitting them apart, creating and destroying Doña Jany’s reality.

“Just take me with you, ya no quiero seguir sufriendo en esta vida” Doña Jany said without thinking.

With its eyes, Death cut away meat, reshaped and resized bones until Doña Jany’s body resembled a little girl. The excess body mass decayed underneath her and the pain brought the memories oppressed by La Limonada of her happy childhood.

“Ya no me lastimes, I don’t want to feel pain… I just want to die,” Doña Jany cried out but with some hesitation. Some of the decaying body mass painfully morphed back into her body and now Doña Jany was an adolescent teen, flooded with hormones and sensations that she was denied because she lived in La Limonada.

She relived the pain of giving birth and her husband’s abandonment. Death didn’t move and Doña Jany was now in her sixties. “Death, I know you don’t want me to die yet, you have opened my eyes to the oppression La Limonada imposes on all of us. Este dolor es tan grande y cada día será un reto más, pero yo tengo que vivir por él, and he deserves for some here to remember him. I will miss my son until my last breath. I don’t know how I didn’t see our living conditions. Just look at our few old belongings. We are nothing. En esta ciudad no valemos nada y somos desechables. My son was nothing. No one will ever know he is missing and that hurts more than all you have showed me.”
Death executed her last test and showed Doña Jany all the pains and sicknesses of the ninety-year-old body she would inherit but that didn’t matter.

“I will fight until I recover my son’s body. El merecé un entierro cristiano y yo se lo voy a dar cuésteme lo que me cueste.” Doña Jany passed the last test and as Death departed she gave Doña Jany a gift. The gift was a whisper from Melvin that said, ‘te amo mamita’. In the echo of the whisper, Doña Jany felt Melvin in his last seconds of life before an avalanche of trash swallowed him. With this little gift, Doña Jany knew where to recover her son’s body and Death insured Doña Jany’s loyalty to the Landfill in the coming battle for control.
JULIA’S DENTURES: DR. CIFUENTES OF DELTA SMILE

Mi señora, your son told me you don’t want to get dentures because you’re afraid they will make you a different person, pero me tiene que creer que eso nunca va a pasar. ¿Do you trust me? Okay, so we can work together to make you more beautiful, porque uste ya es una mujer tan bella. After all I’m the professional. You don’t know how many beautiful women like yourself come here to remove their teeth just to get dentures. They like how comfortable I make them feel, but especially they like that they can customize them as they please. You don’t know how important a change of teeth can be to a person’s self-esteem. Con sus placas nuevas hasta pueda que uste encuentre a un su enamorado someone who will love and who you will marry even at your age. You will be a new woman, una mujer independiente and beautiful, a woman who can go anywhere and buy anything because she is not afraid of showing her beautiful new dentures.

The whole process will be very cheap. Here is the plan: today we take out your remaining teeth and molar and next week when you feel up to it, you will come back and start choosing and designing your new dentures. ¿So what do you say? That’s the answer I wanted to hear so open wide and let me take a look at your teeth. If you have good strong teeth then I will advise your son not to remove them—so don’t worry too much and trust me. Okay so open wider, yes just like that, now let’s see how you’re doing—this isn’t good, mi señora que mal tiene estos dientes, not good at all, how many times do you brush a day? No, with someone like you, brushing twice a day isn’t enough; you need to do it four times a day.

Mi señora, no se como es que ha aguantado tanto uste pero ya no va a sufrir mas. Your remaining teeth are really fragile, and can break any time now. If they break it will be harder for
me to remove them and it will cost you more. ¿What do you say? ¿Do you want to remove them today or wait for when your teeth break and you have to pay a lot more money? Think about it, and if I were in your position I would definitely do it today. ¿So what do you say? Good decision, you mentioned that money is an issue, but if I apply less anesthesia it will be a lot cheaper, ¿do you want to do that? Good, so let me apply some here and over here, you’ll feel a bit of pain but I know you’ll be strong because you want to save some money so open wide and brace yourself.
Por la gran puta, condón de mierda—que’s what I get for buying the cheapest one. I’m sorry mi amor but without a condom I can’t make love to you. Qué suerte más puta y mierda la que tengo. I love you and all but you know I don’t want any children—well not yet. Puta y recontra puta. Maldito condón. I don’t have money to buy another one. You know how tight money is. I was looking forward to our first time and you know that, lo siento mi amor pero sin condón no. Please don’t go, quédate, we have a few hours until my parents come back—stay, maybe you can give me a hand job or a blowjob. Don’t look at me like that, ¿can’t you see? I really, reeeally… look at my dick, I really want to make love to you. Fine be that way, that’s right just walk away from our love and from my dick. Puta madre, que mierda de mujer. Can’t she see that I’m doing this for the both of us. Ni siquiera un blowjob, now I’ve to use my hand again—fuck my life—at least I got to see and play con esas tetas que se echa, pero ya se le pasará, she’ll be back y si no… me dejo de llamar Santiago.
A disembodied voice that was trying its hardest to sound welcoming and friendly said,

“Joel… Joel López is your name. I know you can’t see, hear, smell, taste, or touch me but I know you can feel my presence and you can feel I’m your friend—I’m probably your only friend here. Just think of me as the one who will make your transition into the other world smooth and easy. You are nothing without me. I can give you everything you ever desired and all you need to do is come with me and all of this will be over.”

“Do not listen to him Joel, you must endure, this is only temporary but necessary to earn your place amongst us,” a Second voice said and this one was warm and honest.

“You don’t have to suffer all of this—just come with me and I’ll give you everything,” the first voice restated but Joel said nothing as he drifted into a memory.

I can’t believe how expensive things have become and look at Lupe. She doesn’t worry about how much money we have because she is an optimist, but I’m not like that. Tomorrow I’ll wake up earlier than usual to start my route sooner. The money I earned today covers only the gas the bus uses, but other than that I can’t even afford to buy my children new shoes and God knows they need new ones. I don’t want my children to have to suffer as I did. My poor mother was always working and she could only afford to buy us new clothes for Christmas.

I work long hours and by the time I get home my children are already sleeping. How I miss you my Lupe, you don’t even know how much I love you. Look at you, as I caress your black hair it chains me to you.
On nights like this one, just before I quietly walk into our home, I look up at the stars and see your face. I remember that back then, before you were my girlfriend, I memorized every single constellation your birthmarks made. I couldn’t take my eyes off of you. You used to ask me if your nose was too big for your face and I laughed at you just to make you angry. Your lips, I have told you many times I don’t like you wearing lipstick but like always you ignore me. I remember the face you made when I stole the first kiss from you. A week passed before you talked to me again. I like thinking while I look at you sleep mostly because you don’t contradict me. But you know, sometimes when I look at your closed eyes I can feel you contradicting me.

Joel was able to see around him. He thought he was in a room but he wasn’t sure, as half of it was black and the other half was white. A voice from the dark side of the room said, “You can see my divinity now, your eyes tell me everything, ¿are you scared of me? It doesn’t matter because I’ll give you whatever you want.” The room seemed to vibrate.

“Joel, you must endure to join us,” the second voice said and Joel was able to observe that the whiteness of that side of the room fluctuated as it spoke.

“Jooooeeel, look at all I can give you—yes, that is Lupe,” Joel realized he was dead. Yet the sight of Lupe made him feel tempted even when he could not clearly hear the voice say, “I can give her to you. Just come with me and all your family’s sufferings will end and all your desires will start. Look at yourself, you are but a fragment of what you used to be, but with me you will make Lupe a real happy woman and you can have her whenever you want.” Listening to the voice he remembered when Lupe said, “I love you, Joel. When I’m not next to you I feel empty. I’m always thinking of you, the other day my mother scolded me because I broke almost all our plates. My friends no longer want to hangout with me because I’m always talking of you.
I’m tired of having my little brother chaperone us because I need an excuse to leave the house, I don’t want that anymore, and I want you to meet my parents.”

Every time she spoke I felt I didn’t have the words to express myself as she did. “I feel the same way,” I said. “I love you, I always have, you’re the best thing that has happened to me and I’ll do anything to prove it to you.”

“I want us to make our relationship official and I want my parents to meet you so that we can go by ourselves. I’m not a little girl anymore.”

“Let’s go right now Lupe and get it over with,” I jokingly said because I was nervous.

“Joel, look at me, and hear my words: I’m not playing around with you and when you meet my parents I want you to have taken a bath as well as be dressed in your best clothing.”

“Okay, I’m sorry, your parents need to know about us because your little brother is going to get fat or too many cavities with all the candy I buy to bribe him.” I couldn’t help myself I just had to say it.

“Let’s plan for this next Sunday at six so be ready—ok. At six sharp. Did you hear me? At six. Also, buy my mom something.”

When Joel woke up from what seemed and felt like a dream, the dark side of the room said, “Joel, doesn’t it feel strange to hear your name when you don’t have the body that everyone recognized? Now you can see and hear all that I can give you so you know there are no limits to my power. Whatever you can imagine I can create for you. If you want money I will give it to you. If you want more time with your family I can make that happen. All you need to do is come with me, as simple and as easy as that.” This time Joel was able to hear the coldness of the voice and yet it had so much to offer him.
On the other hand there was the white side of the room and its voices sounded so peaceful as it said, “Patience, Joel, that is all we ask of you.”

“Patience is for the weak and with me you will never wait for anything. So stop wasting your time and let’s create you a world that meets all your desires.”

When my mother cooked, the whole neighborhood could smell it. “Mom, the food smells incredible. It even woke me up, look at the freshly made black beans with eggs, I can even hear the plantains frying on the stove,” I told her.

“Today is your tenth birthday, Joel, and I thought to give my big boy his favorite breakfast. So sit and eat.”

“I want to eat two plates—no three,” I sat on the table waiting for her to bring me my first plate of food.

“You thought I forgot but first go and wash your face and teeth.”

“Okay.” I went but first I made a million faces at her and she smiled when she saw me.

“That was too fast, Joel but I’ll let it slide this one time.”

“Thanks mom, wow… this smells so good, I can smell all the different ingredients. When I have my wife I will make her cook like this everyday.”

“Joel, you’re so funny but you should know no one will cook like me.”

The smells of the room were strange to Joel. The white side seemed to smell of sunflowers and the dark side, was strange and he couldn’t decided if it smelled like burned plastic or burned hair. “¿Can you smell her? I know you know that’s Lupe’s smell. And it isn’t
just any smell—you know it’s her smell after sex. With me you never have to work another day and you can be in bed with her whenever you want.”

“Joel, just ignore him, we know you can do it you have two more tests and you will be with us,” the second voice that came from the white side didn’t offer much, just patience and it was strange because Joel trusted it the most.

“Tests, this is no test; this is torture—they make you remember your past so that little by little you can be reborn again. ¿Why would you want to be reborn again and have no say on how you will live that life? With me you will have it all. So no more happy memories for you. I will show you the saddest one.”

I can’t believe that street vendors are getting younger and younger everyday. So that’s his name—Bala, poor boy, so young and already working to support himself and most likely his family as well. This is a new low for people in La Limonada to allow children to work instead of going to school and act like if nothing is wrong, just gets to me. ¿Who knows if he’s eating anything? ¿Who knows how many buses he entered to try to sell peanuts and who knows how many bags he had sold? Not too many people do. On good days I have enough money to buy my family something special, but I can’t imagine too many good days for a peanut seller. I want to help him but if I ask for a bag of peanuts he probably won’t take my money because I charged him no fare to get on my bus. Just thinking of the peanuts with chile and lime is making my mouth water I can almost taste them. The boy is probably the same age as my oldest son, he even has the same color pants as my son’s uniform. My son, ¿what will my family do if something happens to me? Route 22 has gotten so dangerous lately that I can’t even afford the new tax the gangs are asking of me. This city is full of thieves. Lupe has no idea how much money the gangs
extort from me and I don’t want her to know, my children must stay in school and get educated
to get a better job. I don’t want my son to be the child selling candy on the street or on public
transportation. I just need to work harder and drive faster to pick-up as many clients as possible.
I need the money and my family needs the money.

“Open wide, Joel and taste this...yes, it’s one of Lupe’s kisses but that’s not all. Take a
look at this feast she has prepared for you. You need to come with me. I need you. This is your
last chance—I can’t wait any longer, we must go, if we don’t she will be lost forever.”

“Don’t go, Joel. We know you are worried about Lupe and your children but this is not
the way.”

“For fuck’s sakes, Joel I will show you your last moments so you come with me because
Lupe will suffer without you,” the note of the voice that came from the dark side of the room
finally showing its hidden intentions. The shift into the next memory wasn’t as smooth as the
previous ones because the dark side of the room he was in controlled this last one:

On the morning of your death you woke up and told your Lupe, “Good bye, Lupe. I’m
running late but when I get home I’ll bring you a gift.” She was so sleepy she didn’t even hear
you and she just kept dreaming. You didn’t even give her a good-bye kiss—you didn’t have her
on your lips one last time, how can you let that go? You didn’t smell her hair and you didn’t
even eat the breakfast she prepared for you. As you were warming up the bus, you didn’t even
think of how her skin felt. All you had in mind was how late you were on your monthly
protection payment to the gang that ran route 22. It was just two days; they would never kill you
for just two days. You almost had all the money; if you worked hard all of today you should have had all the money.

You didn’t even see them coming. How many times did Lupe tell you to fix the back door, but you never listened. You were just a few blocks away from the protection of the terminal in Avenida Reforma. You were too busy collecting the fares you didn’t even see the three men. You didn’t even have time to react to the gunshot when the bullet penetrated your skull. Just like that you were dead, gone and poor Lupe is home with no clue that you are dead. When she finds out she will go crazy. She will have to put the kids in public school. She will lose the house, ¿What if she ends ups living in the worst place in town—El Palomar? ¿What will you do then?

But you are dead inside this room of ours and you can’t do anything for them now. Once the bullet rattled your brain everything was gone. You didn’t even have time to remember Lupe or your children one last time. You just became another statistic; forgotten once you reached the cemetery. This will be the last time I offer you a way to help Lupe and your children—so what do you say, ¿will you join me?

“"Yes, Joel, join me and I will give you Lupe and everything you have always desired."

Joel wasn’t ready to die just yet and with the dark voice he was going to help his Lupe and his children.

“Joel, you must trust us walk towards us. Walk towards the light. All we can tell you is Lupe and your children will be okay but if you don’t come with us you will be lost for eternity.”

“"Yes that’s it, just follow me and I will give you a second chance with Lupe.”
“Please, Joel, don’t follow him come back to us this is your last chance.” It was too late.

Joel didn’t listen and walked into the darkness.

“He is all mine now so back off. Joel, your love story has no name and no equal. Now you are part of me and I will help Lupe as much as I can, but I must tell you if she accepts my help it usually comes with a price so before you disappear, rejoice because you made the best choice by joining me and becoming part of La Limonada itself.”
He was devastated, with puffy red eyes and the tears hadn’t stopped flowing for the past few hours. Jupa didn’t want to get high but he was drunk. He was all alone in complete darkness. He had never lost someone so close to him and he didn’t know how to deal with it. He got up every day and she was there. At night she was the only one still awake when he entered the room. Now she was gone. Her heart had stopped and he didn’t know why. She was gone. Just like that her existence was erased from the world and he wasn’t even there for her last moments. Knowing that made him angry with himself. He cried even more. He wanted to shout. He wanted to scream he was in pain but he couldn’t. He was too afraid someone would hear him and spread rumors he was weak. There was no way he was going to get attached to someone like that again. He didn’t love anyone else like he did that Turra, the small green Señorita bird he had for the past six years. And now that she was gone he destroyed the last remains of his humanity. No longer was he going to have a connection to another living creature on earth and the only way he felt alive was to cause as much pain as possible to others. From that night on Jupa did just that to every victim he tortured.
HARVEST YOUR DEATH

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Look at you, sentadito todo relajado como si no hubiera pasado nada. ¿How can you be so relaxed after beating her like that? I am the one who decides who dies and who lives in my city. Do not question who I am because I will not tolerate insubordination from a human y mucho menos un pedazo de mierda como tu. It has taken me so much to build La Limonada to what it is today for some human in a moment of rage to undermine and bypass all of my power. Just look—look at her. Look at her unnatural position on the floor. Her head shouldn’t be like that. You fucking idiot—don’t say it was because dinner wasn’t ready. You know it’s because you disgust the prostitutes and none of them want to serve you. You’re pathetic and you don’t even know it. Just look at yourself. You don’t have a job, you don’t brush your teeth, you don’t shower and you wonder ¿why women don’t want to have sex with you?

Don’t dare look for the drawer with the knives. No te atrevas if you’re not going to kill yourself. You know you don’t have it in you, at least not yet.

I allowed you to scream at her, but I never authorized you to hurt her. Remember the day before yesterday when you first laid hands on her and you slapped her because the tortillas were cold—I didn’t step in because afterwards you felt bad and you said you were sorry. Así que yo mire para el otro lado, but then yesterday you started kicking her. The slap you gave her made you feel like a real man. However you aren’t, you don’t even have a girlfriend and you will never have one.

You’re right, you never actually cared for the old hag, ella era otra de las tantas putas que te tenían que servir and you only used her but it’s one thing to escalate from slaps to kicks and
another to hit her on the fucking head with the frying pan. You screwed up. No—you fucked up big time today. It’s been more than an hour y la pinche vieja no se a movido pero ni un poquito.

You have to admit, you’re worried because the old hag isn’t moving—especially because no one will give a shit for you. Levántate de la mesa and go see if she is breathing, go find out if she’s still in the sick and defenseless body of hers. For once, en tu puta y miserable vida do something for the old hag who gave you so much.

Finally you feel the fear your granny always felt when you started screaming at her because she knew that at any moment you’d snap and start hitting her. Now would be a good time to start looking for the knives.

Yes, turn around. You know that’s the drawer with the knives. Continue walking towards them—look at them and caress their sharpness. The blow to the head—that’s what fucked her up and you just now realized that. Pobre vieja, lo bueno que se murió rápido. So take the biggest knife. Yes the old hag is finally dead. You finally got rid of her. Stop—don’t say it wasn’t your intention to kill. You hit her with a fucking frying pan ¿qué putas pensabas que iba a pasar después de eso?

What a shame you only now just realized how much you need poor old dead granny—for fuck sakes stop crying. No te comportes como una niñita y admite that you killed her. Don’t blame it on the frying pan. Stop—stop being a little bitch. Quit your crying. Granny doesn’t blame you. She forgives you. She is standing beside you and she wants you to take the knife in your right hand and kill yourself. She wants you to be able to see her again and you can only do that if you’re dead. ¿Don’t you want to see and be loved by granny again?

If only you could see your granny cooking your dinner. It’s a real shame that you can’t see how your granny’s refrigerator enjoys seeing her mistress without the pains of old age. You
can’t even hear how your granny’s favorite chair shouts out the good news to the worn out dresses in the closet. All her belongings shout she is free. La pobre ya no tiene que sentir miedo. Even the trash can outside heard what happened and you are just stroking the knife, wasting time. You must hurry; she isn’t going to stay for too long. You know what to do if you want to see her again and leave with her. Your granny is cleaning her house for the last time. So hurry up and use the knife before she is gone.

Así mero, síguele… the knife will help you see her again. Quickly, her belongings scream with excitement because she’s finally done. Do it fast because your granny is about to open the door and once she is gone you will never find her.

Well, too late now. She just spread her wings and took flight, leaving you all alone. She’s gone y te dejo solito. Now you have no one to protect you. Now you know you’re truly worthless. I am making sure that fear, insecurity, and guilt invade every cell of your body, mind and soul. It is too late to accept you lost everything. You no longer can resist my direct influence because shit is worth more to a fly than you are to me—kill yourself.

Yes, plunge the knife deeper into your heart and get the fuck out of my town.
As the cockroach ran across the wall, Enemias was lying on his bed and noticed it, dragging an egg sack, proof that even a small and disgusting creatures had the pleasures of sex. He heard Milo take out his keys and unlocked the door. He thought to himself how pathetic his life was compared to an insignificant insect that had sex because it needed to reproduce itself. Enemias’ life has been a shit hole ever since his mother died when he was six years old. A few months before Enemias’ third birthday, his alcoholic and puto de mierda father, abandoned them after his wife found out he had another family and made him choose one family. Of course Enemias father chose his real wife and by then the child already was legally recognized as his son.

One day, three years later, his father’s past came back with a vengeance. When the police knocked on his front door and he saw the six year old Enemias he must have shit his pants just a little bit—there was no chance his wife would take in a bastard child and what was worse for him was that she was going to divorce him and take all her family’s money with her. Enemias’ father had no choice, after signing all the documents that the boy was delivered to him and before his wife found out—he took the boy out for ice cream and made a few calls. An hour later Enemias’ father handed the boy to Milo, one of his distant uncles—who in reality wasn’t even a relative. Enemias’ father, after his duties were over, just walked away without saying goodbye to the boy—and just like that they never saw each other again. From that first day Milo was always a stranger who looked at Enemias with perverse eyes. Once Milo was in possession of Enemias he decided to move to the opposite side of District 7 where 10th Avenue almost ended and where no one knew them.
A few days ago Enemias turned twelve and he was old enough to finally standup for himself and push away Milo. The night of his birthday Enemias promised never to be a victim of his stepfather’s sexual abuse and tonight he finally stood his ground when Milo entered the room and immediately started to take off his clothes. Enemias looked at him with disgust. He was scared. But this was the last time he saw Milo getting ready to have sex. Never again was he going to be abused. Enemias’ heart pounded faster and faster. His adrenalin gave him the final push to say, “No, I don’t want to do this anymore. If you don’t want me like this then I’m out.”

Enemias pushed Milo and as he fell shirtless to the ground and with his pants already on his ankles he said, “Don’t go. We can talk about this.”

It was past eleven at night and the streets were deserted. Enemias was proud of himself because he had done what he wanted to do since he was six years old. He had fantasized about the day when he finally said ‘No’. As he was walking he finally had some hope of changing his life, well at least that one aspect of himself he always hated. But he realized how alone he was and that he had no place to go. Enemias knew that Milo would take him in, no questions asked, but it had a price. Enemias now knew Milo made sure he rented the smallest room he could find so there was space only for one twin bed—that way they always had to share a bed. Enemias reached 10th Avenue and without knowing it, he was walking towards the place his mother had called home. There were no cars, so he walked in the middle of the road, feeling like a lost dog trying to find its way home.

“Home,” Enemias said out loud without understanding the word. Enemias wanted a place to call home—a place that he felt safe and comfortable, like what he had when his mother was alive. He never knew her and she might have been abusive like everyone in his life. He searched
his memories to find someone who could take him in and provide him a safe shelter—something even a lost dog had experienced, but no one came to mind.

He had no one to help him. He walked for hours, hoping that a drunk driver wouldn’t see him and run him over. He imagined his reaction to the pain as a speeding car made contact with his skinny body and in that moment he wanted to feel everything so that he knew he was actually alive. Enemias wished, as his body was thrown away, he forgot all the suffering. According to Milo’s stories, his mother Angela, died at the hands of Robotón and his crew, but that was the extent of the details Milo ever gave him and he had no one else to ask. He looked at the streets and felt alone. No one knew he was there; even worse to him was the thought that Milo was probably worried and looking for him—that made him angry. It made him hate himself because he wasn’t able to make human connections with people. He was always alone, thinking about other places and when he was finally free his thoughts went back to Milo. Enemias wanted to be in places where no one knew him, where he had his own bed—that’s all he wanted, his own bed. Because of Milo, Enemias had lost hope in others; no one noticed his pain. He dug a hole in his heart that got deeper and darker until he lost himself in it.

Enemias was looking forward to his newfound freedom, especially that he never had to see Milo. His fantasy of someone grotesquely killing Milo or that a dog with rabies bit him never came true, but what was happening now was even better because Enemias acted with his own agency and power making him feel like he never did before. Without knowing it, Enemias was just a few blocks away from the exact spot where his mother Angela was raped and murdered by Robotón and his crew. Enemias didn’t see the police car riding behind him slowly and with the lights turned off. Once the car was close enough to ensure Enemias wouldn’t run away the officer inside turned the lights and sirens on. At gun point the police officer told Enemias to lie
down on the ground and to put his hands on his head as the officer handcuffed him and walked him to the back of the patrol car. Enemias imagined Milo was on the passenger side of the patrol and that anytime now he would come out and made fun of him.

Enemias was confused, he didn’t know why he was arrested and the police officer didn’t say a word until Enemias was in the back seat of the patrol car. “¿Por qué es tan solo un chico lindo como esta?” The officer asked, looking at him in the rear view mirror. Enemias didn’t say anything. He was looking directly at the eyes of the officer. “¿Por qué no hablas? sabes que esto es un barrio peligroso y nunca sabes con quién te encuentras. No te preocupes que aquí estamos en confianza, así que dime tu nombre.”

“Enemias.” He lowered his head. He didn’t want to see the officer’s face because he recognized the eyes.

“You have a nice name, a decent name, not like mine—I hate mine. It’s so common that’s why I want you to call me Hilachas—ese siempre ha sido mi apodo.” Enemias didn’t look up and only repeated the nickname once in his head. “No me tengas miedo—como dicen, no temas al que temió. I’m a cop and I’m one of the good ones. You don’t know how lucky you are that I was the one who picked you up. The other police officers patrolling this area would’ve just shot you on sight and left your body there like if you were an animal. I’m not like that, I respect the uniform, unlike those pigs that kill any person, but they think twice before killing an animal. So tell me, ¿eres de este barrio? I don’t think I’ve seen you before because I don’t forget a face—especially one like yours. ¿So tell me what district are you from? Don’t be like that, just tell me. It’s not going to hurt you for telling me something like that, ¿is it?”
If Enemias told him the truth, who knows what the police officer would do. So he lied and told the officer he was from around the corner and that he had been walking because he got into a fight with his stepfather. “You know what Enemias,” the officer interrupted Enemias, “I hate stepfathers. Disculpa la palabra pero todos son unos puto, you don’t know the stories I have heard. All of them are clueless on how to treat young people. They have no idea of the needs of a young man, like yourself.” Milo always talked to him like that, but he hoped then officer was good like he said. “If I had any children of my own or even stepchildren I’d treat them with love. If they were boys I’d give them all my time, my understanding and my love. Unfortunately I have none.”

“¿Where are you taking me?” Enemias didn’t recognize any of the streets anymore. The police officer was speeding away from District 7. They had just passed El Mercado del Guarda on District 11 and Enemias had no idea where he was being taken.

“No te preocupes. I’ll take you to a nice place. There you can take a bath, sleep in a comfortable bed, have a nice meal and a place where you can relax. Don’t look at me with those eyes. I promise, I’m not going to kill you or hurt you in anyway. I’m going to give you the best night you have ever had, you’ll see. By tomorrow morning you’ll be so happy and thankful you came with me.”

“Please let me go. I don’t want a place to sleep. I have a place of my own. My friends are expecting me; that’s why I was walking because they are expecting me. Solo parece aquí y yo miro como me regreso.” The officer wasn’t one of the good ones after all.

“Don’t worry about your friends, ellos siempre estarán allí pero esta noche será inolvidable. Once we get to our place and after you have cleaned yourself and have had something to eat you can call them. I told you I’m not going to hurt you, you’re like the son I
never had and you’re so beautiful, I’m going to give you what you deserve and treat you like a delicate flower. Una florecita que si no la tratas bien se marchita.”

Enemias had heard similar words before from Milo long ago. He thought he had blocked the memories of the first nights he spent with Milo but they all came back to his mind; those nights weren’t as Milo described them and tonight would be no different.

“Ya no llores. No seas así. Please stop crying. All I want to do is give you a night you’ll never forget. Mira ya llegamos, wipe your eyes and look, see I told you this hotel is one of the best in the city. ¿Don’t you like it? So please wipe your tears, I’ll unlock the door so you can get out and I know you’re not going to run away; that is how much I trust you. And don’t try to run away because if it comes to that I’ll shoot you and trust me I’ll hate myself for it, but it’ll be your punishment for being ungrateful. So just come with me and we’ll have a good night without anyone getting hurt.”

“Ok, I’m not going to run away,” Enemias told him “Please use a condom—that is all I ask of you. Yo quiero que esta noche sea inolvidable y que tu cariño sea un amor platónico pero con condón.”

“You had to do that. ¿Why did you say that? Why did you ruin our night, this was our night—I was going to make you so happy.” The officer pulled Enemias by the hair throwing him on the ground. The officer didn’t remove the handcuffs, his loving eyes changed to those of a madman as he kicked Enemias.

The officer pulled his gun out and commanded Enemias to get up and to walk towards the door in front of them. Once inside the hotel room the officer turned the radio on and at gunpoint commanded Enemias to start dancing and removing a piece of clothing each time a song ended. Once naked the police officer raped Enemias without a condom until Enemias fell unconscious.
When Enemias woke up, he was lying on a street he didn’t recognize covered with a blanket. He got up, and his entire body was in pain. It took him a few steps to remember how to walk. Enemias felt the dry blood on his legs but he continued walking because he wanted to get to the only place he knew as home. Enemias asked a few people directions to get back to District 7, but with no money he had to walk all the way back to Milo’s one room apartment. “Home, I’m finally home.” Enemias told himself as he knocked on the door and Milo welcomed him with open arms.
I’m so sorry Mamita, yo no quería esto se lo juro, yo solo quería su felicidad. I didn’t know your face was going to get so swollen. I know you’re in pain but the dentist lied to me, se lo juro, he said he was going to give me a discount but he didn’t. He was probably drunk on the day of the procedure and after we left he drank all the money I gave him so he told me we have to pay him more to get your dentures; that’s why I don’t have any money left to buy you pain killers—I’m sorry Mamita, no me mires así, a mi también me duele mucho lo que te está pasando, I didn’t know it was going to be like this, but we’ll get through this together. Juntos como uste siempre dice. All will be worth it—you’ll see, in two or three weeks when you are smiling we’ll even take a family picture so that we’ll never forget how happy we are. Please don’t cry, just drink this; it will help with the pain.
Una liendre lays an egg on Jairo’s head as he hears the first shot, ants troop, the second shot, gravity kills a fly. Here, light reincarnates into a candle, Robotón, Jupa and Calicas take the money by force, certain as death, a third shot is fired, fear; the sound of rat droppings, rubber soles erode on the pavement. Jairo sees how the last shot kills its victim, as dog chased a ball. Heavy breathing. Jairo runs, flies having sex in mid air, he runs and doesn’t look back, a cat hollers, Jairo continues running into his shack, his heart—pounding. He hides; ticks plan a feast. He waits; the slug finally dies under the salt. Jairo closes his eyes. He relives the victim’s death. He doesn’t go out for a few days reimagining he had saved the day.
Exactly one minute after seven at night my father, a shooting star, fucked the ass of the night sky that—don’t ask how—gave birth to me. The only firefly in all La Limonada—at least that was the bullshit they tried to feed me. After the first second of my birth, I noticed I was near the front lines: gravity versus matter, explosions, confusion, chaos, dead carcasses, vomiting particles, and light fighting off the falling darkness. I couldn’t believe the fucking mess I was in—I still can’t, but at least now I’m not being monitored like a baby. My birth was quite the commotion for the rebel troops fighting against La Limonada—fuck, they all thought I was their fallen angel, sent by the gods to help their cause; poor bastards if only they knew. But I don’t really care what they think because as soon as they had me they started drilling mission and information into my head. I hated them for what they were doing to me. They all thought I was just another empty drone they could brainwash and control. I was unique. The only one of my kind who could blend into darkness and move through light in an instant—most importantly, for them anyways, was my ability to infiltrate La Limonada and she was never going notice me doing so.

During my intense training, they gave me patriotic speeches bloated with shit that I simply block out. I’m my own self and no one will tell me how to feel or how to think even if they thought they were fighting a greater power because in the end it’s all shit from the same horse. I’m aware that I’m the ultimate product, the weapon that will end the war and one that doesn’t have the right to be happy or even desire happiness. To them: I’m an abnormality, the product of a secret love affair, a weapon that can only destroy—no, I can’t even do that. All I can do is gather intel. It’s a bitch. I rather they strapped a bomb to my chest, I would walk into any
place, without hesitation, and just blow it up—so I wouldn’t have to deal with them anymore. Instead I was fucking built to gather the crumbs of important information to finally destroy our rival. However all of that is bullshit; their biggest mistake was they didn’t know my potential. But I’ll play along—for now—

While I waited for orders to infiltrate La Limonada, the darkness of the night was working to pulverize and to shit all over the puny city of La Limonada with all its waste on all its fucking, good for nothing, lazy ass citizens, who didn’t like the darkness of the night. I didn’t even know those citizens and I detest their cowardliness. All of them are idiots, with no will of their own, with no dreams of being more than just another rock—it boils my blood just thinking that I have to dedicate my life, my time, my energy to free them when the majority don’t even know they are being controlled. If it were up to me I let them be fucked over and over and over again.

I was trained with anger and hate, but what they didn’t know was I could choose to become whatever I want. I decided not to hate La Limonada, like they wanted, I choose to hate the people that never did a thing to help themselves. If it weren’t for La Limonada controlling those people they would all be fifty feet deeper into the shit hole, they call city. If we free them they are just going to waste their new gift. On the other hand many would die and that was exactly what the rebel forces wanted—that way the few that remain would be grateful for the second chance. It’s hilarious that the rebel forces didn’t even know someone like me was going to see through their tactics. All of us are told that we’ll be the reason we won the war and the sad thing is that all our troops believe that bullshit lie.

I was told, probably the same words in the same order that every cadet hears before heading to the frontlines, tonight will be the night when we destroy La Limonada, as if it was as
simple as that. I have to admit, I felt I could make a difference, but that lasted for a second until I was given my mission. My mission was to find a way to dismantle the covenant of protection the light poles produce. The best theory we had, total bullshit in my opinion, was that the light creates a perfect arch just below the layer of pollution. The layer of pollution serves as an iron curtain allowing particles of light to kamikaze into shooting stars, cutting the darkness of the sky, and keeping it at bay. It’s a bitch to think, but La Limonada never will allow someone to just come in and shit all over it—and the rebels know that. La Limonada is the master of counterinsurgency and attacking it head on was our biggest mistake.

Finally, after a few long minutes of sitting here, the order for me to mount the thunderbolt is made. With a flash and a blast I’m transported to the frontline. The thickness of the iron curtain tells me I must keep flying through it. From the corner of my left eye, I see six shooting stars heading in my direction. Particles of the night shield me from two of them. Another shooting star bolts by and I manage to maneuver out of its way. The remaining three know they have no chance against me so they collide with one another creating a mini big bang whose expanding nebula sends me falling into La Limonada. The lights stab my eyes and I close them immediately. Sounds screech—I cover my ears. My instinct is to turn myself on and blend with the light. The winds starts cushioning my fall so I start to slowdown and after a few seconds I know it’s safe to open my wings and gain some control of my body. As I’m falling I uncover my ears and open my eyes to see the city of La Limonada for what it is:

A dog masturbates with the screams of a cat. Two gunshots from a priest impregnate an agonizing nun. Hunger takes the lives of seven children. Shit crucifies the carcasses of dead dreams on light poles. A girl commits parricide with her memories to stop her father from going into her. Fat Casimiro misplaces his dick in his neighbor’s vagina. Wet clothes take up arms
against parachuting dark matter. Wild grass marches. Pubic hair is drafted. Dead skin cells object to the war. Blood traffics through veins to deliver ammunition. Turds crush into water. Half a blowjob—they are all clueless to what’s happening. I start to panic, it’s the after effects of the explosion, I can’t breath, I must breath…

Two. Inhale. Four. Exhale—my left eardrum shatters just in time for me to see a light pole’s flickering. It wants me. It needs my attention. In the few milliseconds the light is off, two small poles project the cosmos in the blackness of the sky. Two projecting beams start moving through the sky synchronizing on my location—I feel puny. I’m nothing to this fucking cause; this war is meaningless to me. I should’ve just kept falling and crashed into some random street and died on my own terms. But as I look into the two lights calling me, wanting my attention I start to feel different. I feel the anger die as the lights start to influence my body. I know I must get to that place. There is something fucked-up about it and I can’t stop myself—I also feel the need to land, but can’t control myself.

I’m at the source of the light and it’s coming from her eyes as they project not only the cosmos but also her entire life. I orbit around the light getting glimpses of sounds, images, smells and feelings—they call her La Mosca. She was going to get married to Tito, a political sciences professor in La USAC. La Mosca loved him with all her life force and I can feel her pain and yet her love is stronger than ever. In a few years she would have been taking her two boys to school. Then she has another child, a daughter this time. They play. They fight. Run. Jump. Eat. Cry. Her husband Tito is promoted so they finally buy a house and a used car. Gray. Flat tire. Broken windshield. New puppy. Bark. Missing. Found. Dies. La Mosca laughs. We dance—they dance. Thirty-eighth anniversary. Old and wrinkled. They fade. It never happened. It never was going to
happen. It will never happen. My eyes fill themselves with tears, they are drowning my thoughts and I feel human for the first time.

“¿Did you see that shooting star Tito?” La Mosca asked me as her future fades away and her present is projected into the sky: She’s attacked. A slap. A punch. The ground. Money is missing. Three faces. Scream. Robotón. Spit. Calicas. Enjoy. Jupa. Grin. A shoe slips from its foot. Clothes don’t come off. A knife. Cuts. Penetrates. Stabs. She starts to lose consciousness. She gets a glimpse of Tito’s face. She is gone. Her brain is still alive. It wonders what happened to Tito. It knows the small knife that pierced her abdomen manipulates blood to leave her body in an orderly-fashion. She just showed me she was yet another victim of the city life—but I don’t care. Her death was not my problem—its not my fucking problem so ¿why do I feel I love her? I tell La Mosca that death is but a natural consequence because shit just happens to shitty people. I need to fly away. I need to get away from La Mosca. I feel. It has. Love. No, I don’t. Love. Fly. I must. Fly. Think of your mission—fuck it. It was never my mission. ¿What am I doing here?

“Don’t fight it Tito. You know who I am and what I mean to you, so don’t fight it,” La Mosca said to me but I don’t know. It can’t be, it just can’t. I was one of them but I hate them so much. I wasn’t. No.

The suicide of a flickering light pole above us breaks me free. But I’m not the only one. A full blast of La Mosca’s being is transmitted and exported into the night sky. The darkness falls on to us like expelled diarrhea stranding us in this patch of city streets. We were going nowhere. No one was going to help us. We were all alone. Her body is almost empty of her being. I’m holding La Mosca tight against me. I can’t let go. I can’t feel. I can’t smell. I can’t fucking hear—I’m just here holding onto to her fleeing light. I don’t want to care about her—I won’t care about her, but it’s useless. I do love her.
She is gone. The last traces of her light leave La Limonada. The darkness of the sky has finally sucked her up. I’m free of her and yet I feel a part of me is missing…I need her in my life. I can’t see myself without her. I look around to see if I spot an enemy soldier because I want him to kill me but there is no one around. I scream. I fucking scream my lungs out. I’m so desperate to kill myself that I can’t even explain why I have this feeling. As I lay on the naked pavement thinking of ways to kill myself I look up at the sky and see her running from star to star. Her sight makes me want to join her. I start to feel all sorts of emotions I was denied in my training and I know I must go to her. The light pole above me is resurrected and turns on brighter than before—melting two dead bodies on the sidewalk as it tried to burn off my wings.

“Tito, come to me.” I hear a voice talking through the traffic of the city. I ready my wings; I need to get to La Mosca. “Tito, don’t stay down there—come and join me.” Her voice speaks through a rat giving birth. My wings and armor tell me to continue my mission but I choose what I want to do. I try to fly towards the iron curtain but I’m too heavy—I rip off all my armor and I continue flying.

I look down at the mechanical city and see sewer channels feeding life into the streets. No one screams they want to be saved. As I continue flying, the city life continues as the citizens of La Limonada live their daily lives as if nothing is happening. I make it to the iron curtain but my wings aren’t letting me go through so I dispose of them. I crawl through the thick layer of smog. I look up at the universe and she’s there waiting for me. My mission, the rebels, and La Limonada can go fuck themselves. I won’t play their game—they can destroy themselves. I start running with two legs on top of the iron curtain. My body starts to crack. Light is filtering. It’s escaping this body. The pieces of my hard shell fall onto the defecating image of La Limonada. My legs become stronger and when I realize I don’t need them they are gone. In the expanding
moment that I scream my name “¡Tito!” all fighting ceases. I find myself next to La Mosca, holding hands and feeling loved. No longer will I play by anyone’s rules but my own and as we walk from star to star-making memories, the war resumes below us and we don’t give a shit about it.
I’m a Covacha and This is My Story

I don’t have a name and if I did, I wouldn’t say it—no vale la pena. People here call me their room. I’m even called their home. For some, I’m their house but my personal favorite is their covacha—pero esos detalles de que soy no importa. Lo que en realidad es importante es how my story can’t be learned from a book, the radio, or even through the few TVs owned by the people I have sheltered. It’s not easy for me to tell a story from my long life. I have good memories, but I also have dark ones and those are the ones always on my mind. It’s important for me to get across just one event in my life and the one that is the hardest and most difficult experienced. This one story is not unique only to me, I’m not the only covacha that exists in La Limonada—there are thousands of us providing shelter for those who can’t afford anything else. Lo que si les puedo decir y asegurar is that my experience represents that of all covacha. We represent not ourselves but the people that live in us and that’s why I must remain nameless.

Hay tanto que decir and so much to learn. Up until yesterday I housed a single mother and two children who were six and eight. The mother couldn’t afford to send her children to school, and worked from six in the morning to about five in the afternoon, leaving the children locked inside me. The poor little children had no TV, they only had a few toys and for most of the day they were bored. I have to give credit to Elias, the oldest of the two, whose creativity allowed him to come up with the most elaborate scenarios, for David, the youngest, to imagine.

Before the fire that took their lives, they were exploring a planet that appeared out of nowhere next to earth. The brothers explored the planet until that fantasy was exhausted. Elias was able to construct castles and fortresses with the few cardboard boxes their mother found for them and he even used the three bed sheets they owned. Their mother did a good job hiding the
matches because she knows Elias likes to play with fire but yesterday she was running late and completely forgot.

Elias had built a castle y era enorme with a hundred rooms and two hundred bathrooms. They were attacked by a giant cucaracha and they needed a special weapon to destroy it. Elias looked around and noticed the matches next to the table stove. He planned to revive a dragon he had slain centuries ago. He lit a match and threw it at the giant cucaracha. Elias lost sight of a few burning matches the dragon had spit. The flames were too large and it was too late. Their bed was engulfed in fire.

I wished I could have helped but it was out of my control. Elias panicked and threw some of the cardboard boxes onto the fire, hoping it would put it out. The smoke spread and David fainted. The heat was too great. Elias was scared so he pulled his bother to the other side and hugged him.

“Everything will be okay. Ya versa hermanito, todo va a estar bien, someone will come and help us.”

The heat inside of me was so great that it started cooking the two brothers until they didn’t move. They didn’t scream in pain. The flames burned their hair, their flesh while they lay hugging each other in the corner. No one helped them. No one noticed the fire until Elias’ mother came home and opened the door to find the devastation.

I don’t know how long it will take for someone to make me their home again. As a covacha we witness so much. Es injusta la vida que nos pide ver tanta pobreza y miseria. I just wish more of us shared our experiences to our tenants so that they can learn. I won’t be the first nor the last covacha to unwillingly trap children locked in by their parents.
He did it. Calicas was finally a man—un macho que usa la verga como Dios manda and even better yet un macho accepted by Robotón. Now there was no stopping him because he actually liked Robotón’s gang banging parties. He liked the power, the rush, how they fought back, and how they screamed for help, but especially he liked when they stopped fighting because that told him they liked it and he imagined they were begging for more as he raped them. It was only a matter of time, las pajitas que se echaban ya no lo excitaban, before he hunted women by himself so that he could prove he was just like Robotón. However for now he was satisfied that Robotón was telling everyone how he took control of women and how he makes them beg for more of his manhood earning him real street cred for having la verga so large that a stallion was going to have penis envy.
On her official identification card her name read Inés Juárez. But for those who knew her in person she was Julia or Doña Julia, even Grandma and for the lucky few, she was La Tatuana. She’s from a small village called Tactic located in the old country where the coffee plantations ruled the way of life. She was the smallest of six children and because of the long hours under the sun, the abusive bosses, the many venomous insects and the extremely low pay, her mother had to give her away to a wealthier family to be raised as an indentured maid in exchange for a place to live and food. Today she barely remembered her childhood. When she sees a little girl in her traditional indigenous clothes her real name was Chiqui, sometimes she remembers that name and it brings a smile to her face. Other times she remembers her mother’s favorite fruit was Jocotes, but it had been a while since she was able to taste the exploding sweetness that comes after the teeth break through the thick skin because her stomach is too sensitive. On a few occasions, when hanging her clothes to dry, she remembers playing jump rope with her two older sisters and with her two brothers she played football with an empty can. As hard as she tries and even after a few tears she couldn’t remember her last name—it was useless, too long ago for a memory of it to be stored anywhere in her mind.

The years of her childhood have been stripped of all the cruelty and abuse she lived through when she was indigenous, when she knew her language, when she was poor, when she worked as a maid and now the happy glimpses of a past life are what resurface. As she grew into womanhood, she left her first husband, then the second, and even a third, she moved to the big city of La Limonada. She lived through the death of her first child, and successfully raised Linda and Jaime—those memories were now lost amongst all the other experiences of her 81 years.
when her few teeth and molars were replaced by dentures because the dentist needed money and mostly because Jaime wanted to keep most of the money Linda had sent their mother. For several years now Julia had forgotten that she liked to use sandals as she had developed unusually thick toenails and now all her shoes are covered so she never has to think about it. During the day she never took off her apron, which had anything from loose change to the remote control of her TV in the pockets. She was unaware that because she was forced to wear an apron before, now she needs one so she can feel safe behind it.

A few years ago her daughter Linda was able to pay for Jaime to join her in the US. Jaime’s departure broke her heart and when she found herself all alone she created a daily routine that comforted her. Now that her two children were sending her remittances, she still lived in District 7, as those are the streets she knew. Her apartment on the corner of 10th Avenue, is just five blocks away from 14th Street and El Palomar. Living on 10th Avenue is considered a middle or low middle class privilege but Julia didn’t care; she would rather be living in El Palomar but have her family close to her. Julia has a daughter in law and three grandchildren, but they don’t understand her autonomy—her will to be free and to do whatever she wanted—so they only visit her when they had to deliver Linda and Jaime’s cash remittance for the month.

Julia started her days at about five in the morning. She would sit on her bed and without thinking she started to braid her long hair. She spends her day cleaning, then napping and then cleaning more. Her days make Julia seem like a normal elderly woman but as soon as the clock marked seven at night, she was already in bed with her hair unbraided and lost in a deep sleep where her consciousness no longer rules her memory. Because her hair was no longer braided, the flow of all the memories in La Limonada immediately regained their course within them and as soon as this started to happen everything changed.
Now and vividly the memories start flowing through each individual long black hair and in that instance La Limonada activates its defenses as her sheets start choking, engulfing, and fighting to keep her in place. The coils of her mattress spring out to provide backup for the sheets who are losing. Her long black hair starts to weave itself in and out of her skin to resemble not only fur but to actually reshape her body. Her bones, with advanced osteoporosis, are easily persuaded by the long black hair to morph and take a different shape. Her fingers are shrunken to resemble paws. Her arms and legs became the same length, as the black hair continues reshaping her back to ensure better mobility when running. Her excess skin became the building materials for the parts of the creature that didn’t exist. Nothing is wasted. Everything is recycled and reused until Julia is no more and her transformation into La Tatuana is complete. Julia’s clothes are still holding a human shape to fool her sheets and the mattress coils. The small creature, when light hit it at a certain angle, resembles a dog. Other times she looks like a big cat, a bear, even a horse but her shape isn’t important because she became an agent of change in any given memory she enters.

With a yawn, La Tatuana squeezes herself out of the prison the bed sheets and coils created to keep her from altering the memories of La Limonada’s citizens. She stretches herself and starts her rounds by walking through the streets of District 7 to find a person who needed her help. As La Tatuana walks, each individual black hair radiates the memories of a person’s life span. Some of the memories inhabiting La Tatuana’s hair had passed, others were passing, but her true gift didn’t come from being able to see those memories—it came from her ability to help that person see happiness where there was none and make them agents of change in their own lives.
While walking there is one person La Tatuana is thinking of and she makes her way to El Palomar where Doña Antonieta is fast asleep. Doña Antonieta has been one of her recent breakthroughs. For a while now La Tatuana has been trying to make Doña Antonieta understand her past so that she can stop ruining young girls lives. In the past Doña Antonieta tried to ruin Linda’s life by telling everyone she slept with many men and had numerous abortions. Linda never allowed for Doña Antonieta’s insults to ruin her day or to make her think less of herself, but other adolescent girls haven’t been as fortunate as Linda. Doña Antonieta has ruined countless reputations and caused many breakups and even a few divorces. La Tatuana has showed Doña Antonieta her past so that she can understand why she acts the way she does. When Doña Antonieta was a young adolescent girl her stepfather raped her and her mother covered it up by making her have three different abortions. Once Doña Antonieta understood her past, and this was no easy task, it took years for her to accept she was raped and many more months for her to start making connections to the young girls she was attacking. La Tatuana showed Doña Antonieta that the way she was trying to help the girls wasn’t the right one. La Tatuana spent many nights showing her the power of her words as she took her on expeditions to explore all the lives she had ruined. It was so close now and La Tatuana knows a change is near but for now Doña Antonieta needs time to see her own errors and La Tatuana just walks by her shack.

The night is young, El Palomar is peaceful and La Tatuana walks towards twenty-four year old Mayo-Loco’s shack where she finds him running naked and enjoying his childhood because his children never will experience such a difficult life even though they are living in El Palomar. La Tatuana overlooks Don Arévalo who is drunk asleep on his usual corner and because of his old age he now accepted he was never going to change and he was okay with it
because soon he was going to die anyways. La Tatuana suddenly stops and sits in front of Irma-Colocha’s shack to observe what is about to happen. Irma-Colocha is an old worn out woman and she only has a few more seconds of life. Irma-Colocha’s last thoughts are about the pain La Limonada inflicted on her by taking away her only love, then her shack, but unlike others, she chooses to balance her last moments by not only reliving her loss—she also relives every happy moment she has. With one last grin because she lost a crazy reporter in El Palomar, Irma-Colocha passed away with no hate in her, making La Tatuana wag her tail. La Tatuana got up and walks by Santiago, Mingo and Bala’s bed—the three of them were sleeping after a long day of work. It was easy for La Tatuana to influence them so they wouldn’t go into a life of crime because she just shows them what happened to their oldest brother Gaspar. On one moment she combines their goals, their dreams, and their will to live so that they always help each other as well as their ill Grandma in every possible way.

Doña Jany’s shack is cold and void of color. She is the only person in El Palomar La Tatuana never helps. Doña Jany aided the Landfill by feeding Doña Pancha rotten eggs and she now realizes she was used. Doña Jany didn’t kill herself physically but she destroyed all her memories and desires. Now all Doña Jany has of her past is her name and for La Tatuana that is punishment enough. As she continues to walk she hears Jairo scream. Jairo has always had a powerful imagination so it was normal for him to scream as he slept—with a closer inspection La Tatuana sees he is just reenacting the day Robotón, Jupa and Calicas robbed him and like always, he changes it so he looks like a secret agent fighting off his worst enemies. As La Tatuana walks by Jairo’s shack, she just shakes her head because Jairo’s mind is just too powerful. Jairo is better off getting the thrills he gets in his dreams and made up memories. Without them Jairo
would start looking for the same thrill in real life and La Tatuana is never going to allow that to happen.

La Tatuana rehabilitates many individuals and when a person takes action and control of their own lives that one black hair turns into a gray one and falls off. As La Tatuana continues her usual rounds through El Palomar there is one person who is more vulnerable than usual and that is Robotón. La Tatuana sees her chance, as one of Robotón’s tears leaves a trail of crystals on his face. Once inside she finds Robotón alone in an empty shack sitting on a wooden stool. La Tatuana projects every happy moment onto the four walls of Robotón’s shack as she stays away from the gruesome ones where he’s a torturing animals and people. Robotón finally opens his eyes when he hears his mother’s voice. But something is strange, Robotón is actually feeling something but it’s too good to be true. Robotón gets on his knees and screams he didn’t want a life of crime but he has no choice; La Limonada gave him no other option. In that moment, when he said ‘La Limonada’, everything starts shaking. The shack disappears, and all that is left is an empty field, the wind starts blowing, and lightning illuminates the skies as it starts to rain.

“I can’t believe you fell for it Tatuana, lero lero you fell for it lero lero.” Robotón’s disembodied voice echoed like thunder.

“Robotón, it’s not too late for you. Yo te puedo ayudar a cambiar tu vida. Just look at all the happy memories I have of your childhood.” La Tatuana tries to reason with Robotón but it’s useless. She’s trapped and the only way to escape is to beat Robotón.

“You know, La Limonada has been trying to get rid of you for some time now and today I’ll take care of our little problems by killing you.” On one side of the sky the sun starts to shine through as the rays project not only Robotón’s past happy memories, but also the thousands of possible memories he could be having if only he had changed his life.
“Robotón, remember the promise you made your mother. Tu le juraste que no lastimarías a un se vivo nunca mas. You need to remember her and honor her wishes.” La Tatuana starts to run because the raindrops turn into balls of fire aiming to kill. La Tatuana is fast and on the few occasions she couldn’t dodge a ball of fire she shields herself with Robotón’s most gruesome memories. Robotón thought he was winning but La Tatuana is playing both defense and offence.

In a second the settings of the battle changes into the desolate streets of La Limonada. La Tatuana continues to run but the streets are changing—they are alive and they are trying to squish her into non-existence. As a wave of cinderblocks starts to chase La Tatuana, Robotón says, “I know where you’re going, but you won’t make it there, yo me voy a asegurar de destruirte.” La Tatuana is running towards the moment Robotón promised his mother he was going to be a man of good. From her left side an avalanche of corrugated metal is heading her way and to the right—what looked like a sand storm started moving in.

“I will not be beaten by the likes of you, aunque no lo creas yo soy más fuerte, más inteligente, más ágil que tu,” La Tatuana screams as she picked-up speed and runs towards the only direction Robotón is allowing her to go. A few moments later she sees the trap as trees start sprouting and weaving each other into a wall. Robotón knows the wall of trees is built to withstand anything and when his three attacks are definitely going to kill La Tatuana on impact.

“Te tengo atrapada and there is no way you can ever escape now,” Robotón is confident La Tatuana has no way out, “Just accept your demise because whatever you try to do is useless now.”

What Robotón didn’t count on is that La Tatuana has all his memories and she is going to use them to escape. Painfully La Tatuana pulls the black hair containing almost all Robotón’s memories. Unfortunately for her the strongest ones and the one that will help her escape, was the
memory of Robotón promising his mother he would be a man of good. As soon as the black hair left her body it became a comet and La Tatuana is using it to run away. Unfortunately for her and for Robotón with each step she takes she destroyed his most powerful memory. Below her, the three attacks collide. Robotón with tears in his eyes, hugs his mother, promising he is never going to hurt a living thing again as the one memory destroys itself allowing La Tatuana to escaped Robotón’s consciousness.

La Tatuana is exhausted; not everyone fights her like that. Most people don’t even recognize her as separate from their own desires. The biggest regret she has is because she had to sacrifice the few memories, that one day could have helped change Robotón. Now she walks back to Julia’s apartment thinking she will never rehabilitate Robotón. La Tatuana wiggles herself into Julia’s clothes that are still holding her human shape. Her long black hair slowly untangles itself from her skin as those parts start to resemble human features. And only then did Julia’s bed sheets and coils loosen themselves to return to the position she took when sleeping. The following morning at five in the morning Julia sits up on her bed as she braids her long black hair, after she’s done, she takes her dentures and places them back into her mouth to start her daily routine.
By Mirolo J. Pressentino:

Today at five in the morning an A.N.D. bus left La Limonada with a final destination of Tamahú. The authorities, after arresting the drunk bus driver, released his name as Luis Eduardo Méndez a 28-year-old man who is also a suspect of similar crimes in the past two years.

The suggested passengers capacity for an A.N.D. bus is of 50 to 60 adults but like always, buses are packed to the limit and some bus drivers have report they can fit double that amount to insure more profits.

Authorities, with a follow up statement reported that in the sharp turn, after kilometer mark 97, the drunk driver lost control of the bus as he might have fallen asleep. They continued to state that more information would be released as soon as the drunk driver’s questioning and full written confession had been processed.

According to rescuers, none of the 88 passengers survived the more than 200-foot fall into the ravine. If they didn’t die on impact they would have from the fire or the smoke as the emergency exits on the bus were sealed shut.

Rescuers also stated that out of the 88 casualties, 12 were children, 47 were women and 29 were men. Rescuers are having a difficult time identifying the victims and are urging possible relatives to visit their headquarters and claim the bodies. Family members have one week from today to make all necessary arrangements if they don’t, the victims will be labeled as a Doe and buried accordingly.
very morning for the past year, after waking, Bala washed his hands, teeth and face. Only after did he earn the right to stand in front of his Grandma. He wore the pants he used the previous year as his school uniform and waited for her to tell him what to do.

“Balita, I’ve tried preparing the bags of peanuts for you but my hands are in too much pain, I could only do a few of them—I’m sorry. I wanted to have everything ready before you woke up but I couldn’t.” Bala wanted to say something but she interrupted him as she added, “And, yesterday I wasn’t able to buy you limes, I wasn’t feeling good, you know how the pain comes and goes so I just forgot. I’ll stop by Don Nesh’s stand and all you have to do is pick up the limes—so don’t forget.”

“Gracias, Abuelita you know I don’t like seeing you work when you’re in pain. You should’ve woken me up,” little Bala told his grandmother as he rushed towards her to finish filling the small plastic bags with a portion of peanuts that he needed to sell throughout the day.

“Balita, don’t worry about me. Tu sabes que yo soy una mujer trabajadora de las que ya no hacen and I will never stop working because I have you and your brothers.” She reached for a bag. “Here is your breakfast. Make sure you eat it and I don’t want to hear you sold it for extra money.” She looked Bala straight in the eyes and he smiled because he had no idea how she always knew what he did for extra money.

Bala looked down at his shoes and saw how last night his older brother Santiago, who worked as a shoe-shiner with his other brother Mingo, had shined his shoes. Bala tried to shine shoes but he was horrible at it and his brothers instead told him to find some other job he could actually do with out costing them so much ink and money.
His grandmother on her way out said, “Be careful out there, ¿okay? Come here and I’ll give you your blessing before I go. En el nombre del padre y del…” While his grandmother mumbled a prayer, he remembered his mother’s voice and how she used to call him Juanito. He liked his name and how she pronounced it with love and care, but those days were long over now because the nickname ‘Bala’ was all he was ever called. “…Amen.”

“Let me help you with that Abuelita,” Bala said. He picked up a basket filled with the food his grandmother prepared the night before and placed it on her head. She carried a bucket with some soft drinks, juices and ice. Seeing his grandmother with her usual load, made him question his contributions to the family and how he wasn’t doing his fair share. He knew grandmother was in pain but she didn’t complain about it. What always got to him was how he could do nothing about his Grandma’s pains. That morning he woke up with the desire to help his family by any means necessary. Grandma, Santiago and Mingo were all he had after the tragic loss of his oldest brother Gaspar and that made them a stronger family. Gaspar died tragically and it hurt him to learn the details of how he died but as time passed, he tricked himself to believe he understood Gaspar got what he deserved just because he didn’t want to continue suffering for a brother like he did for his mother.

Grandma walked out the door and made the sign of the cross. Bala remembered when he was little walking next to her street-by-street yelling “Se venden tamalitos de elote, chipilín y blancos,” until they reached El Mercado, where they walked until everything in the basket and bucket was sold.

“Adiós Abuelita y con mucho cuidado cuando cruce una calle. May God and my mother protect you,” Bala said to himself as he walked to the altar he had built for his mother and where he placed the only black and white picture of her. He remembered her skin color looked like
his—at least he convinced himself he could remember because he had just turned five when his mother left almost four years ago. He also wanted to remember how her long black hair felt but he couldn’t—he couldn’t even remember the smell of it so he imagined it smelled like maize. He looked at the picture memorizing every wrinkle, her long hair and her eyes to force his brain to remember what he couldn’t any more. He walked towards the door and looked at the altar one last time and said, “Madrecita, protect me from all evil.”

Bala left behind the safety of El Palomar and 14th Street. He passed 13th, then 11th Street and ran across bustling 10th Avenue, the streets crowded and he became nameless. For some, Bala was just a stupid boy who left school to work, a thief, a glue-sniffer, a drug dealer. But for the majority that did business with him, he was the faceless kid who sold peanuts—the only job he found he actually made some money. The one, who in his left hand carried a big bag of peanuts and in it, a small bag with salt and one with chili that supplied him for the rest of the day. In his right hand he carries the most important instrument any street vendor needed, a wooden instrument no one seemed to care that he built in a T-shape by nailing two cedar boards his friend, the carpenter, had given him. On the top part, he had twenty-five little nails to display each individual bag of peanuts.

Bala didn’t want to take the long way to get to Don Nesh’s vegetable stand. There was a good chance Robotón and his crew wasn’t on what they called their third pissing ground that morning, but unfortunately for him the three of them were there.

Robotón said, “Hey guys, look at what we have here—una cargadita de Dios y según él, he is going to work. Que puto de mierda este…” He yawned for the third time. Bala and his brothers avoided the gang as much as they could but sometimes it was inevitable. Bala hated the three of them for the murder of Gaspar, but he didn’t blame them for surviving; after all it wasn’t
only their fault his brother was dead. And plus Robotón did save him from getting robbed the other day so he just had to deal with it. For now, it was too late to avoid them.

Jupa grinned and said, “You need to give us a couple bags of peanuts so don’t be a puto and give us some.”

“Yeah, así que nos das unas a las buenas o a las malas, you decide. I’m sure you don’t want us taking them by force—¿Do you?” Robotón flexed his muscles while Calicas looked the other way demanding nothing from Bala.

“Okay… okay… pero solo una para cada uno and Robotón you can take two.”

“Thanks for the extra bag—but where’s the lime?”

“I have to go buy them, people like fresh limes—I’ll have some next time, I promise,”

“You heard him guys, si este putito no cumple we’ll teach him who is boss around here. But get the fuck out of here you’re distracting us. And tell Santiago I want to talk to him.” A few chewed peanuts fell from Robotón’s mouth.

“Okay, I’ll tell him when I see him.” He walked away and thought to himself, there was no way he was ever going to allow another of his brothers to hang out with Robotón. No, he wasn’t going to mention a single word to his brother.

The main reason Bala liked Don Nesh's vegetable stand was because he knew how to cut the limes in a way to get the most pieces out of one and also Don Nesh, no matter how early or how late Bala walked by, was always there selling his vegetables and fruits. “Don Nesh, ¿did my Abuelita stop by and order my limes?”

“Claro que sí, I just finished cutting them a few minutes ago and don’t worry, your Grandma already paid me and for your loyalty I threw in a few extra limes.”
“Gracias Don Nesh and may God repay you,” and to himself he also mentioned how his mother was also going to repay him.

He ran to the bus stop where he waited for a route 22 bus. Route 22 was the most dangerous route in La Limonada and after five in the evening the rates automatically went up five times day rates. Usually route 22 buses were orange but the one he got on was red. Bala flashed the bus-driver his merchandise and the driver, who wore a hat with the Virgen de Guadalupe, nodded and signaled him to get on without paying the fare. Bala walked in and said, “Good morning. Today I bring you these delicious peanuts with salt, lime and chili.” He was too shy to recite the speech Mingo made him memorize for five hours. He walked row-by-row, person after person—quietly. Some of them ignored him completely, others told him “No thanks,” and others just “NO.”

At the next stop a humble gentleman entered the bus in worn-out but clean clothes and gave an incredible speech of how his child was sick and how he needed everyone’s donations. The humble man also asked every passenger to buy a bag of peanuts and when he did one small child begged his mother to buy him one, only one bag of peanuts—that was all he wanted.

Bala stood in front of them waiting on the mother’s response to confirm his first sale of the day and when she consented he said, “Muchas gracias, Señora.” Bala headed to the back door where his few shy howls competed against the roar of the engine. His hair didn’t even move because he had so much gel in it. He secured his merchandise and continued yelling the most important destinations the bus had left to attract customers of the different bus stops to repay his debt to the bus-driver.

Bala jumped off a few seconds before the bus came to a complete stop and yelled, one last time—Avenida Reforma.
He found himself in the middle of El Mercado del Guarda where some carried chickens by the legs. Others carried baskets of clothing. Women rushed to deliver plates of food to the vendors who had ordered them. On the footbridge a woman was screaming “Robber” and a kid ran away with her purse. Some vendors said, “Good morning, ¿what can I give you today?” Others said, “Todo a 10, whatever you want just for 10.”

An old man’s voice encouraged people to form a circular orbit around him. They elbowed to get to the front and see what the voice was advertising. The old man was persuading people to buy a blend of herbs he had manufactured during his travels, with the guarantee that it cure every pain instantly.

The old man’s charismatic voice made Bala recall memories of the past few weeks when his Grandma complained about the pain. Bala needed to help his grandmother—a powerful urge ran through his body, in the past he was helpless, he had no idea what he could do in order to help her but now he had a possible solution as he asked himself, “¿Could it be true? I must buy this. It doesn’t matter how much it costs.”

In situations where Bala didn’t know what to do, he never asked God for any advice; he always asked his Mother in hopes that somehow she’d intervene and deliver his questions to God. He believed that through his mother He would answer faster. Some nights when his brothers and grandmother were in a deep sleep, Bala went to his Mother’s altar, on the corner opposite of his bed, and talked with her. They couldn’t tell him if his mother was dead or alive and most of the time Bala assumed she was dead because no mother on earth would ever forget about her children. In his heart Bala knew that was the only reason she never contacted them and it made him angry when his brothers compared her to their father—because she was a saint compared to him. Other nights Bala asked her, ¿when she was going to come back from Los
USA?os? ¿Why has she never called or sent them money? ¿Why did she leave and not take him with her? He asked her what she was doing and how life was in the US. Bala told her he liked school, but it was more important to help Grandma earn money. Bala only told her once how Gaspar had died. Other times he told her when his brothers or himself got robbed. He told her he almost didn’t remember her. Some nights he comforted her and other nights the picture comforted him. Bala could hear her breathe, her heart pound, and yet the memories of her were gone. He only thought he could remember her calling his name, but he never accepted the fact that he had forgotten her.

He remembered months ago when his grandmother dropped the basket of food she carried on her head. She returned home crying because she had lost all the food and profit for that day. Grandma told Bala the pain was unbearable to the point she almost fainted and with tears in her eyes, told him how for nights she couldn’t sleep because of the pain. And he remembered two weeks ago, one night when he thought everyone was sleeping, he got up to go talk to his mother and saw his Grandma rubbing her hands and arms. She didn’t want to burden anyone with her pain.

He bought the herbs and spent all the money he had. He needed to find his grandmother as soon as possible. But she was in El Mercado San José, much closer to El Palomar.

He had to get to the other side of the avenue to catch a bus, but the avenue was the biggest in the city. It had six lanes going one way and six the other way. She would drink it and all her pains were going to go away. The footbridge was only going to slow him down and he had to get it to her as quick as possible. He glanced to see if cars were coming. He ran as fast as he could, not to dropping a single peanut, weaved between cars, but didn’t make it to the divider.
Bala’s small body flew a few yards on impact, his peanuts scattered over the road. Traffic came to a complete halt in all lanes.

People were running to see what had happened. Some were starting to cry. Others covered their eyes, their mouths—the sign of the cross bounced from hands to face, eyes were wiped dry of tears. A few begged God to give them the opportunity to help with the rescue. The motorist got out of the truck and cried. He asked for forgiveness. “Someone help me, ¿what should I do? I didn't see… until… no fue mi culpa. Yo no lo miré.”

A mob of people gathered around the tragedy. Some got their cell phones out and they started calling everybody they knew to tell them what just happened. The mob demanded the motorist do something but it was useless—he was useless.

Everyone was shouting for action. But what no one ever saw or asked about was the boy who had lost his life. No one cared about the faceless boy who some called a thief, a glue-sniffer, a drug dealer or a peanut seller—whose lifeless body was kicked out of the scene and out of everyone’s mind.

The mob cried that the peanuts were going to go to waste. The tortilla makers lamented not having those two pieces of cedar to use as firewood. The mob of people couldn’t understand how the driver didn’t see such an important instrument. As soon as the police arrived they took the motorist into custody because they feared the mob was going to lynch him.

The mob of people flooded the tragedy, and a fat woman fainted with her fart; a man’s words constipated his mouth, mothers comforted their kids, brothers hugged each other, enemies held hands. Every single police officer, fire fighter, and ambulance was there but, like always, they didn’t know what to do. An elderly woman started to cradle and kiss every wounded peanut. A blind man started to pick up the scattered salt particles and the mob of people followed his
example and everyone worked together to pick up the fallen peanuts and salt particles. The T-shaped instrument was rushed to the nearest carpenter to be rehabilitated as well as to straighten and replace some of the broken nails. What couldn’t be saved and what everybody was lamenting, was the death of the chili and the limes, but through the television and newspapers they are immortalized in the minds and hearts of every citizen in La Limonada.
One week after AIDS finished devouring Enemias thin boy and three days after his burial, Milo was still mourning the loss of his companion and even lover—at least for him.

After Enemias was raped by a police officer, he started working the streets as a male prostitute. Milo no longer had sex with Enemias but he cared for his wellbeing. Enemias always talked to Milo about his clients and Enemias even confided in him when he was beaten up or not paid for his services. Milo didn’t feel as alone when he had Enemias as he did right now standing on the edge of El Puente del Incienso. He didn't want to take his life because he thought he had damaged Enemies but instead he sincerely was depressed. He no longer cared to live as he closed his eyes and threw himself into the abyss. Unfortunately for him, he landed on a shack and after his body penetrated through the roof, he landed on a queen bed. He didn’t die of the fall but he did break many bones that left him immobile and at the mercy of others. The owners of the shack that broke his fall were as poor as a person could get. Without notifying the authorities they just carried the body to a near by field that also served as an illegal dump. Milo managed to survive for one and a half days. Minutes after his body lost all life in it black vultures started eating him as they got glimpses of his past life, of his love for Enemias, of his hard work, of the abuse he got from his abuelo, from his tío, and even from his teacher. But the vultures didn’t care. They just wanted to eat as much as they could and a few hours later, Milo was pooped all over the city of La Limonada.
LAS CUCARACHAS TAMBIÉN LLORAN

Today is Wednesday morning and Natacha would have been 54 if it weren’t for the rotten eggs dipped in spicy sauce Doña Jany prepared the night she invited Natacha for dinner. After that dinner, Natacha fell ill. Her body was already weak and the food poisoning took its toll. Her already malnourished body gave out. She died a few days ago—last Monday morning to be exact. Her death marked a weakening in the defenses of La Limonada, signaling the start of what a few called ‘extraordinary events’, but here such things don’t happen without a reason.

The Landfill has been preparing for this event for sometime—summoning so many black vultures it’s impossible to count them. The three white vultures on Natacha’s roof had finally accepted the Landfill’s promise of a mammoth feast unmatched in the last 100 years.

To understand how La Limonada’s defenses work, Natacha’s tragic conversion into a Cucaracha of El Palomar must be understood. Natacha has been a woman who always made the best of things, and this drew La Limonada’s attention. For this, La Limonada took away the man she loved. One day Natacha’s husband hired a beautiful secretary. That same day he abandoned her, left everything, and disappeared from Natacha’s life. As a housewife, Natacha could no longer afford to have a maid. She could no longer pay rent for their District 9 apartment or her daughter’s private school. She had no one. Her husband’s family disowned her. Natacha was forced to live in the poorest part of La Limonada, a block away from where she grew up in District 7.

She sold everything she could and at bargain prices and, along with her daughter and mother, rented a one bedroom with a small kitchen, towards the front of the shack complex called El Palomar—this was only possible because her mother wasn’t afraid of poverty or of
working at whatever job as long as she could earn money honestly; after all Natacha’s mother was no stranger to any of it.

In that apartment, with hard work, Natacha was able to buy the third refrigerator in El Palomar. She put her daughter in a cooperative school a step above public. After ten years of living in that small apartment, her mother stopped working and Natacha spent too much money on her mother’s medicine. No matter what, Natacha always held her head up high, and above all, humbly accepted any job offered to her.

To save money, Natacha ate less and less to insure her daughter and mother had sufficient food to eat. Her daughter wanted to drop out of school but Natacha dragged her each morning and saw her off to class so that one day she would get a good job. But La Limonada had other plans, and her daughter eloped with a random man forgetting about her mother and grandmother. Instead of getting angry, Natacha was happy her daughter escaped life in El Palomar. She was going to be okay—not the best but okay and for her that was more than enough.

For about ten years, Natacha and her mother have been the only neighbors of an old woman named Doña Pancha who disappeared mysteriously with her shack. The following day Natacha’s and her shack became the last with no running water and no electricity, next to the broken sewage channel that drains all the waste matter not only from El Palomar, but also from all of La Limonada directly into the Landfill.

The Landfill was tired of getting only the trash La Limonada didn’t want. The Landfill only wanted a few miles of prime real estate closer to the city but La Limonada always denied it. As long as Natacha and her mother were alive, she protected not only El Palomar, but also the rest of La Limonada from the Landfill.
The only place The Landfill had direct access to La Limonada was through the last shack of El Palomar and for the past six or seven years Natacha had been standing guard. The Landfill had no other option; Natacha had to die. At some point during those six or seven years Irma-Colocha built herself a shack next to Natacha’s home, making it the last shack, on that moment the Landfill saw its chance to infiltrate and set its plan into motion. A while ago, no one can remember how long exactly—not even her, Doña Jany just remembered she bowed her loyalty to the Landfill, with a weird aftertaste in her mouth of revenge towards La Limonada. The plan was simple; Doña Jany would feed Natacha bad eggs and because of her poor health it would be more than enough to kill her.

When La Limonada finally noticed the weakening of its defenses it had been several months and it immediately flushed away Irma-Colocha and her shack with a sewer-flood. El Palomar had again an incorruptible soul guarding that strategic post from attack. The Landfill continued to entice Natacha and her mother with what they’d been denied in La Limonada. The Landfill knew it would never succeed and when it failed, it was no surprise after all it was just keeping appearances. The Landfill continued attacking their desire to live, their love for each other, and their hope but it was useless. The thin barrier of contentment the two women radiated was too powerful for the Landfill to ever penetrate. Now it was only a matter of days before Natacha was gone.

After eating the rotten eggs Natacha was weakened and to make sure she died, the Landfill sent mosquitos with Dengue to finish her off. A few seconds after Natacha’s death, a single white vulture landed on their roof as its black minions spiraled in the sky above.

The morning that Natacha died, her mother tried several times to wake her up. The old woman didn’t know what to do. She tried to cry but tears wouldn’t come. She hugged her
daughter as hard as she could and the shacks in El Palomar started to sweat. The wealthier the shacks, the worse the sweat. Mist filled those rooms and mold reproduced itself on every surface. Matches wouldn’t spark, TVs failed, the three refrigerators in El Palomar sputtered and broke down.

Las Cucarachas of El Palomar gossiped about the strange events. Cucaracha men who abused their wives couldn’t stop crying because they felt the guilt for their crimes. The oldest Cucaracha women laughed with joy for hours and hours. The Cucarachas crawled the endless labyrinths of hallways; others ran on the roofs trying to find where the condensation source was because it started to turn into drips of salted water.

In the shacks closest to Natacha’s, the children licked the sweet condensation off the walls. The children enjoyed it so much that in between ecstasy, they glimpsed their own futures. Las Cucarachas’ movements seemed to be choreographed—an organized chaos of people doing what they do best. A few women took charge; they were going to get to the bottom of what was happening and they went room-by-room inspecting and expecting to find someone smoking crack.

Natacha’s mother released her daughter’s dead body. At that moment all the movement in El Palomar stopped, the mold disappeared, the electronics sprung to life, and everything dried up. The Cucarachas returned to their homes.

Natacha’s mother prepared two cups of coffee but only one had sugar; they couldn’t afford to indulge in things like that. When she finished her coffee, she returned to bed to spend time with her daughter. When Natacha’s mother kissed her daughter’s forehead, a hurricane storm struck the inside of their shack. Volcanoes exploded but a single drop of rain extinguished
them. Rivers dried, lakes overflowed. The last shack barely held together while the raindrops cried because they fell and fell, never reaching their destination as the night died.

The following Tuesday morning marked the second day of Natacha’s death and La Limonada was clueless about the events that were sure to come. That Tuesday morning a tornado of more than a hundred black vultures spun in a living spiral. Two white vultures sat on the shack’s roof waiting.

Natacha’s mother got up and this time it was her turn to drink the cup of coffee with half a spoon of sugar. She didn’t notice the floor was like the surface of the ocean created by the previous night’s storm.

A small stream of the clear water exited the shack and created a pond along the open sewage channel. The pond attracted the children of El Palomar; they drank the water, some washed their feet, others splashed. The children played the entire day and the water never got murky. When the Cucaracha teens joined the children and drank some of the crystalline water they appeared and disappeared in the water—each time in a different position and in a different illusion of what could never happened to them, all happy moments in a life away from El Palomar.

As night fell, Natacha’s mother saved half an egg and a tortilla in hopes that Natacha woke up. She licked her thumb and index finger and choked the flame of the candlestick and El Palomar went completely dark. A peace filled the air making every living thing felt part of the complex cosmos they lived in; that night even time got to rest.

Now three lone white vultures sat on the roof of Natacha’s home. And thousands of black vultures spiraled around the perimeter. They go even higher than what the eye can see and beyond what the imagination can create. From afar they look not like vultures flying but like a
tornado suspended in a single location trying its hardest to rip to shreds a barely standing shack but failing to even touch it. The dust, trash and grass were sucked upwards in the vortex.

The three white vultures waddled and gripped the corrugated sheets, tearing off pieces of the roof, and as soon as those pieces left their beaks, they were transported up and swallowed by the vortex. Each time the shack lost a piece of itself the other shacks wanted to take up arms, but each time they tried, they spread farther and farther away. Some of them attempt to combust, others rust sections of their walls in protest, but none of them dare to intervene directly. The Cucarachas of El Palomar hadn’t noticed anything: some of them were fighting for water, others washing their clothes; some were taking a dump—the usual for the time of day.

Inside the shack, Natacha’s belongings bounce from wall to wall trying to escape. Their two coffee cups slip through the holes the white vultures have created. The only thing still in its place is the bed with the two elderly women in it. Natacha’s mother had a big smile on her face when a single tear wiggled across it, transporting her to the crevasses between worlds that in her mind became the zoo—a place she always wished to visit.

At the zoo, Natacha was waiting for her to celebrate her birthday; they ate cake, saw all the animals twice. They walked and walked without getting tired and, most importantly, they had each other.

The three white vultures had ripped much of the roof off but not large enough for the bed with Natacha’s mother on it. All of a sudden the Cucarachas of El Palomar were commanded by La Limonada to disappeared into their homes.

A cry of death of one thousand parrots welcomed Robotón, Calicas and Jupa. They raced through the main doors heading down towards the last shack. Not even the air dared resist them.
The white vultures sped up but it was useless. Gravity wasn’t working in their favor. They slowed down until they couldn’t bite off a single piece of corrugated metal roof.

“Did you think La Limonada didn’t know of your attack?” Robotón yelled with all the might his muscles gave him. But no one answered. “You heard the boss, you know what to do,” Robotón told Jupa and Calicas.

La Limonada had finally sent its heroes to defend the territory that protected the rest of the city. Robotón, Jupa and Calicas each tackled a white vulture—their cries forced the spiraling black vultures to fly faster and faster, sacrificing themselves, so that small pieces of the shack started disintegrating into the vortex to make way for the bed to fit through. By now, only the bed with the two women was left inside the shack.

The three heroes tackled the white vultures at the same time and, as soon as they touched them the vultures grew as tall as them, Calicas was the weakest of the three. So it was natural for him to ask for help when the vulture was on top of him biting off chunks of flesh. Jupa and his opponent landed in the sewage channel where he managed to pull most of the tail feathers off the vulture. Robotón and his muscles broke both wings on his opponent as they crash-landed.

On the Limonada and Landfill border an electric field began to form—growing because of the collision created by the push and pull power fight between the two entities. The Landfill sent billions of flies and La Limonada countered the attack with pesticides that ultimately neutralized each other. La Limonada sent a meteorite that the Landfill broke into smaller pieces, creating a tsunami of trash. Gravity and wind aided La Limonada as they all successfully stopped the tsunami. The electric field grew, sparking a thunderstorm and with a blast, La Limonada blew up the Landfill and flammable gases burned and spread an inferno ripping over the trash.
Robotón saw his chance and threw the white vulture towards the thunderstorm. He watched how the flames consumed his opponent. Jupa ripped out handfuls of feathers; the vulture struggled to get out of the sewage channel. The black vortex had finally managed to make a hole big enough for the bed to be lifted through the roof. The shack walls were also missing big parts to the point where it was visible how the bed was resisting the pull of the vortex, but it was useless. The vortex was too powerful now.

Robotón jumped towards where the white vulture was attacking Calicas, but a single fly that survived the massacre warned the vulture so it shifted its body grabbing Robotón with its claws.

The bed with the two women ascended half way up the spiraling vortex. Jupa had ripped almost all the feathers off his opponent and punched the almost lifeless carcass. Robotón crash landed with the vulture on top of him, it ripping chunks of his flesh, but Robotón managed to avoid the blows and broke its beak. The bed almost neared the mouth of the vortex and when it did, the Landfill would have the power to infiltrate and destroy El Palomar. Robotón got hold of the beakless vulture’s neck and ripped off its head with only his mouth. He screamed at Jupa to give him a boost. Jupa threw Robotón to where the bed was levitating. He didn’t care about the lifeless body, he only cared to save Natacha’s mother. As soon as Robotón landed on the floor carrying Natacha’s mother, the vortex had no resistance and disappeared in a steady drizzle that was penetrated by light, leaving behind a double rainbow.

Robotón ordered Jupa to get sheets from the neighbors. The three heroes placed Natacha’s mother in the shack. They didn’t care if she was comfortable or if she had a home or any belongings or food because as long as she was alive, she protected the better off citizens of La Limonada.
Robotón and Jupa carried Calicas out of El Palomar and, as soon as they left, people retook their daily routines, living off of the convictions implanted by La Limonada, and only seeing a mirage of a truth they wanted to see. Natacha’s mother spent her last few days in the crevasses between worlds where she gave La Limonada a few days to find a replacement. When that finally happened, the shack was disposed of and for Las Cucarachas there was no time to regret it—reality just moved forward and three shacks took the place of the fallen one.
We interrupt this radio broadcast to provide you with a special radio announcement: two weeks ago a fire spread throughout the Landfill produced by the trash’s flammable gases—but that’s not true; you know it isn’t. Over three thousand families have been affected, and about three hundred children were evacuated from their school and classes have been canceled until further notice. Don’t believe them, no one was ever evacuated—all those families and children are dead, poor kids, they were all burned to death, and you didn’t even do anything to help them. They keep telling us that the black smoke had taken the lives of more than a dozen adults and at least six children but the numbers are much greater than that—by my own calculations the smoke alone will continue to kill about twenty-five more people each month because of lung cancer and other respiratory infections. The four hundred and thirty garbage trucks that serve La Limonada have been circulating like nothing has happened because they were forced to do so if they wanted their families to be safe. You must know that fifty settlements of people living off of the Landfill have been burned. A week ago twenty families were forcefully evacuated and now they are homeless. News outlets are not reporting on how fast the fire has spread and how the smoke can be seen from space. No one is reporting on the decree of a half dead white vulture that war will come. Two days ago it was reported that millions of gallons of water and more than a thousand dump tractors filled with soil were necessary to extinguish the burning fire and it’s all lies, they are lying to you. Why can’t you understand they’re lying to you? The media never reports on how districts three, five, seven, eleven and eighteen of La Limonada haven’t had running water for the duration of the fire because La Limonada wants it all burned. Please you must open your minds and hearts to the truth so that
you can provide aid to the refugees that are escaping the fire. But most importantly we must come together to stop la Limonada from doing whatever it wants with all of us. We have to show it that it doesn’t matter how poor we are because all of us have a heart that beats life into our souls and that makes all of us human beings that feel and have dreams.
At the last minute, the gang of three canceled their anniversary celebration. It had been nine years since they joined forces to become the most powerful gang in all La Limonada. Robotón even bought a small cake and cut three equal slices—something he never did with the money they robbed. The three of them ate cake and drank beer; it was the most peaceful party the three had, in the last few years. None of them got drunk and they enjoyed each other’s jokes and company. What the gang of three didn’t know was that it was be their last party together. Robotón was 24, Jupa was 25 and Calicas was going to be 23. The three of them were legends in all of District 7.

What they didn’t know was that a year ago, La Limonada started recruiting a new gang. It was time to make room for the new generation of criminals and there was no room for the two gangs.

Next week Calicas will die at the hands of an undercover police officer, riding on the same bus the gang tried to rob. Robotón was in front with the gun. Jupa was in the middle with a machete and Calicas was in the back with two knives. After Robotón shot the roof, the undercover officer got up and shot Calicas dead. Robotón killed the police officer but it was too late. Robotón and Jupa had to leave Calicas’ body behind. The two of them went into hiding because they knew the police wouldn’t rest until they found who killed one of their men.

After about two months, a black car started following Jupa and on the corner of 10th Avenue at gunpoint, four men forced him into the car. Three weeks later, they found his dead body in the new municipal Landfill of District 3. Every inch of his body had an AK-47 bullet in it; except for his head that had only one bullet hole to make sure he was dead. The rumors
started. Some people said he was selling drugs on someone else’s turf. Others said that the new
gang wanted control over District 7 and kill off their competition. A few blamed the police and
like always the murder went unsolved.

Robotón was scared. If he was going to die it was going to be a memorable death—a
death they all talked about for years to come. Unfortunately for him he didn’t die in a gunfight or
a memorable death. Choco was waiting for Robotón outside of El Palomar. He lassoed Robotón
and dragged him behind his motorcycle at high speed through District 7. The first people to see
Robotón cheered to see someone had finally taken justice into their own hands. Robotón’s skin
and blood left skid marks all over the place. They watched Choco drag Robotón’s lifeless body as if it was a parade. When Robotón stopped screaming, Choco slowed and people followed
behind like a procession during holy week. They witnessed Robotón’s last breaths and tears of
blood. Robotón was trying to speak but no one could understand him. A few saw a dog like
creature moving through the shadows and only one knew it was La Tatuana—when she got to
Robotón’s head, she licked his wounds. The life in Robotón’s body was gone and with it, the
people that gathered to watch how he died.

Now it was time for the new leader Choco, La India-Loca (the first woman to ever be
chosen as a member of the gang of three) and El Gallinazo, to rule the crime and violence of
District 7. The brutality the new crew was going to bring would make people remember the good
old days when Robotón, Jupa and Calicas were in power.

For now the three of them are enjoying each other’s company as they eat cake and drink beer.
My ultimate goal is to use my creativity to promote a vision of humanity, compassion and justice. I'm a transnational human who has roots not only in the United States but also in Guatemala, and I refuse to choose one from the two—what I can't find in one part of my identity I find in the other. I strongly believe the writer mustn't try to make the world less violent, but to actually force people to feel and think of their place in the world. I'm but a tool to give agency and voice to those who haven't been allowed one. Because of that, I mustn't forget the reality, the hardships, and the happy moments of the individuals my stories represent, as this is one way I can preserve our humanity. Bachelors of Art in Ethnic Studies and Spanish from the University of Oregon. Master of Fine Arts in Bilingual Creative Writing from the University of Texas at El Paso. Publication: Going Places: True Tales from Young Travelers, Beyond Words Pub, May 2003 with the story “My Trail of Tears.” Experience: Two years of teaching experience with the first year composition program at University of Texas at El Paso.

Permanent address: 3049 Pepperidge Ct.
Forrest Grove, Oregon, 97116

This thesis was typed by byroN José sun.