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Zapata Vive: A Canadian *Chica* in Chiapas

by

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Abstract

Zapata Vive engages with the experiences of Greta, a Canadian woman who has come to San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico, to teach English as a Second Language. It is a creative response to the notion of the "Mexican mask", which is only removed during *fiestas*, and the vulnerability of women in a society with stark gender divisions, as put forth by Octavio Paz in *El Laberinto de la Soledad.* Greta's attempts to assimilate Mexican culture and achieve a fluency in Spanish language initially revolve around her relationship with Antonio, a Mexican. As this romance breaks down, and a hurricane comes through town, Greta is forced to examine the role of women in Mexican society. Claire, her British expatriate roommate, who has recently had a baby, is also engaged in contemplating issues of gender dynamics. *Zapata Vive* concludes with a party that is in honour of Greta's birthday.

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Day of the Dead

"When the dead arrive, you feel their presence. You can't talk with them; you don't call their names... We feel happy and peaceful; we go out to meet them, and feel glad that they have come." Froylan Martínez Cuenca from Huaquechula

One of Inés Alfaro's nephews is dripping orange popsicle on the knee of Greta's pants while, with his other hand, he grasps for a handful of marigold petals. He has perched himself on the woven basket of tamales so as to reach the apex of his grandmother's gravestone, where his mother has set a bouquet of flowers. The slushy pitter-patter distracts Greta from her unfocussed gaze over San Cristóbal's largest cemetery. This is the first time she has ever really attended a Day of the Dead ceremony. It is like nothing that she had anticipated. She knew the premise beforehand, having accidentally travelled through one in a bus when she was in South America, some years ago. Her seatmate, an old indigenous woman whose Spanish was scarred with a Quechua accent, had explained that *el día de muertos* is the one day of the year when the spirits of the dead come back to visit their families. For that one night, they enjoy life as they lived it before, dancing, singing, and eating their favourite foods from this side of the great divide. Because of this cursory explanation, and because, from the bus, Greta could see nothing more than flowers and effigies of skeletons amidst crowds, she did not know what to expect her second time around.

"C'mere, *niño*," she mutters under her breath, as she scoops up the toddler and sets him down on the ground scattered with pine-needles. He looks stunned and wholly undeterred. Greta waves the sugar-sticky fist still clasping the popsicle near his open mouth and wonders whether it is a bad idea to steal a flower for him. She is here, in the bright November afternoon, babysitting this unknown child on account of Claire, her roommate, who has kindly extended to Greta the invitation she received from the Alfaro clan to visit the graves of their ancestors. Claire has told her that the scent of the marigolds is meant to entice the ancestral spirits back from their spectral residences to the place of their mortal interment, where their progeny dutifully gather once a year.

The problem is that the Alfaro family has been taking a stroll around the cemetery for the last forty-five minutes, conveniently abandoning *el niño* to Greta's slovenly supervision. She doesn't even know his name; when prompted, he mouthed some sounds in incomprehensible Spanish baby-talk, setting his sincere dark eyes on Greta's face as if to enhance the guilt of her confusion. Immediately afterwards, as though he intuited the impotency behind her perplexed face, he lost interest in her altogether. Now, scanning the carnavalesque panorama of flower-laden graves, balloon vendors, and hordes of reverent off-spring, Greta imagines she's anonymous. She plucks a single marigold stalk from the bouquet and places it at *el niño*'s feet. With the object of his tomb-scaling enterprise suddenly within reach, he raises his rapidly liquefying popsicle up like a torch, grabs the flower with his other hand, and, in one swift movement, plunges the flower head into his mouth.

"Nooooo," Greta groans. When will the family get back already? This expedition from the house commenced far too early in the morning, when Inés enthusiastically pounded on the wooden door of the house that Claire, Claire's baby, Greta, and their other roommate, Leila, inhabit. Greta had planned to stay home, but the other two had convinced her that the spectacle was worth attending. Given that Claire's expedition was with her foster family, and thus would entail visiting graves of real family members, Greta was persuaded. Leila had plans to wander through another cemetery with her friend, Jaime; since Greta's Spanish language skills remained inadequate to decipher Leila's turbo-speed Madrid slang, going with Claire seemed a better idea across the board. Claire is from England and, although she has come to prefer Spanish after six years in Chiapas, will deign to speak English with Greta.

So she had piled into the box of the Alfaros' battered half-ton along with Inés's siblings, their respective spouses, and a slew of children. Claire, with her four-month-old daughter, Arianne, wrapped in a sling across her chest, squished in the cab with Inés, Inés's husband, and Inés's sister, who was also with infant affixed near the breast. In the morning's eerie half-light, Greta watched the maze of cobblestone streets trace the vehicle's trajectory to the far outskirts of town. From time to time, Inés's relatives endeavoured polite conversation, but Greta, already embarrassed by her accent, hadn't the slightest clue what to say beyond the simplest niceties. Eventually, the adults decided

that she simply couldn't understand Spanish; their commentaries accordingly devolved into exaggerated enunciations hollered over the truck's grunting and clanking.

The clan found a choice parking spot on the grassy boulevard between the road and the white-washed perimeter of the graveyard and, with an exceptional prowess, Señor Alfaro manoeuvred all the members through the obstacle course of human bodies, tombs and gravestones, to a relatively humble monolith that marked the remains of the family's matriarch. Claudia Alfaro, 1928-1989.

Greta wondered where the rest of the ancestors ended up, but decided against rupturing anthropological study with such overt queries. Instead, she accepted with a polite smile a cob of steamed corn that Inés pulled from one of a host of woven baskets. Gnawing on the cob in the remnants of morning's chilliness, seated on the corner of Claudia's gravestone, she wonders again: what the hell did she expect?

For one, she knows she hadn't expected so much sitting. The whole event was something between an uncomfortable picnic and a circus. Somehow, in her projections, she'd not envisioned that men would transfer their Sunday ritual of curbside drinking to the cemetery. She can't imagine that it's much past noon, but they're already becoming dangerously drunk. Will they vomit on the gravestones as they typically do into the gutters come siesta time?

While the men sanctimoniously swig the sugar-cane alcohol, the women are laden with too many children and too much food. The submissive mannerisms typical of individual Mexican women, when augmented to the female contingency of an extended family, quickly began to grate on Greta. More corn? More tamale? Some *arroz con leche*? I brought some *pan dulce*, if you'd like, with your hot chocolate. As they produce unending quantities of regional foods from their baskets, their children are bounding, bouncing off granite monuments. The children render the term 'off-spring' a truism. They are a plague of grasshoppers in what, Greta imagined, otherwise would be a field of quietly undulating reverence.

She figures that her original impression must have occurred in the purchase of postcards for her family, shortly upon arriving in San Cristóbal and obtaining work as an English-as-a-Second-Language teacher. One of the shops on Real de Guadalupe, San Cristóbal's main street, had a full rack of postcard-sized imprints of Day of the Dead

skeletons. Based on the woodblock prints by José Guadalupe Posada, they depicted skeletons with sombreros and mustaches, mothers with bony infants scarf-tied on their backs; a group at the cemetery ironically mourning a particularly dead skeleton bleeding at the eyes. Other prints showed fiestas: some skeletons dancing, others plucking at guitars with their bony fingers, still others suspended in the middle of a careful sip of alcohol. With these images in mind, she realises that she had wanted to see belief animated. It's a lot easier to lay out a meal of sweets, fruits and breads for invisible spirits than to make a woodblock print come to life.

Meanwhile, the landscape of people is wearying Claire. Arianne, slung in a pink scarf secured around Claire's body with two tight knots, is getting heavy. The baby is the outcome of Claire's brief affair with a gawky, immature El Salvadorean. Despite six months of romance, one broken condom hadn't convinced Claire that he was worth the effort; she dumped him shortly after she first missed her period and returned to San Cristóbal. Undeterred by her dismissal, and aided by the fact that he was from a wealthy family in San Salvador, he waited eight and a half months before borrowing the cash required for the trip up to Chiapas so he could harass the new mother and child. The entire expanse of Claire's social network had converged to ensure his expulsion from her life. When her immediate friends hadn't proved sufficiently intimidating, Leila single-handedly transformed Claire's plight from a small rupture in the fabric of San Cristóbal's society to a major upset. Drawn out by her fervent word-of-mouth broadcasting, that tear puckered and frayed and finally exposed the steely threads of vigilante justice maintaining the community's contours. She called on the Pinkies, the gang of drug dealers in town, whose cocaine brashness lent legitimacy to Leila's threats that physical violence would befall him. She summoned the witches, the people who studied sorcery and magic tricks *à la* Carlos Casteneda with an enlightened man named Don Lauro, who assured Claire's ex that they would soon begin exercises devastating to his bio-energetic health. Even so, no one complicit anticipated execution of their pressure tactics: for a born-and-bred El Salvadoran rich kid, imaginary tortures were sufficient. Two weeks after he showed up in town, he disappeared again, without farewells, either. Despite the relatively rudimentary nature of this repellant, Leila was proud of her handiwork, her

ability to congeal a community's contingencies: she liked to think of her project as a wiry *vagina dentate* that snapped at the unsolicited paternal presence.

For this reason, Claire isn't worried about this particular revenant so much anymore: he left town with his tail between his legs. After the episode, however, her anxieties regarding malevolent influences on the child have progressively swollen to the near-paranoid. On the advice of Inés, she took the infant to a healer in Zinacantán, for both Inés and she were concerned that *el padre* had given Arianne the evil eye. Shortly after the ex-boyfriend left, Arianne seemed to lose her appetite, became restless in her sleep and would cry for no apparent reason, all symptoms of *mal ojo*. Inés had warned that dehydration would wither Arianne into an *esqueletita*, a "little skeleton". If they didn't do anything, she would die. Claire, terrified by the potency of the father's passing malevolence on the child, readily agreed to the treatment the healer prescribed.

Sure enough, the raw egg that she set under Arianne's cot, following the healer's directions, coagulated overnight into the shape of an eye. The yolk darkened and the albumen solidified into an eerily accurate cornea. Thankfully, Inés was there, and was not as alarmed as Claire. They took Arianne back to the healer, the clay bowl containing the transformed chicken egg wrapped in towels and tucked in a woven basket for evidence. The healer washed Arianne with a special infusion, then brushed her with stalks of basil leaves, all the while assuring a terrified Englishwoman that her new baby would emerge from the ritual unscathed. These leaves, upon contact with the infant, turned a crackly charcoal hue, really, as if they had been scorched in flames. Claire was in awe. Inés thanked the healer profusely. For three days, the three women repeated the curative procedures, until the egg left out overnight still resembled an egg in the morning. After the last visit, when the basil hardly defoliated, Inés gave Arianne a small bracelet consisting of a dozen beads of amber on a red thread. She tied it onto Arianne's wrist, explaining that the amber would ward off bad energies in the environment.

Despite the alleged potency of this talisman which remains two months later, in the chubby crease between Arianne's hand and forearm, Claire is now acutely aware of the potential for encounters injurious to her child. As Inés points out, women jealous of Claire's fertility, or of Arianne's beauty, leave an energetic imprint of their resentment on the baby. Similarly, Arianne is too new in the world to have developed an immunity to

the lustful gazes of men, even though their energies are directed toward her blonde mother.

At the festival, the crowds, and, in particular, the jovial acquaintances of the Alfaros—who insisted on fondling Arianne's feet, her slumbering cheeks—started to represent a serious risk to Arianne's welfare. Claire figured she'd be better off by herself, at the tombstone, beneath the sun umbrella Inés had brought along. Plus, it was getting hot and the baby was getting heavy.

Along the side of the dirt path she spots Inés's nephew, the intrepid toddler, who has a knack for evading supervision. He is kneading his small, fleshy fist against the edge of a marble stone and periodically springing his chubby legs straight, obviously attempting to lunge his open mouth around a bouquet of *cempoaxóchitl*, marigolds, the flowers of the dead. "*Venga aquí, monocito*," she mutters. C'mere you little monkey.

She grabs his hand and leads him back to the Alfaro plot. He seems a bit bewildered, but allows himself to be in tow. Claire poses a rhetoric question to herself: Why can't the men lift a finger to help with the kids, for once?

When they return to base camp, Greta is staring at the general panorama of festivity, but jerks back, aware, when she sees Claire and company.

"Shit. Sorry, I forgot about him."

"It's okay. The family should have taken him with them, but his mother's other little one has been acting up. They're all over by the front gates buying sweets. I got sick of making polite conversation with all the people they keep running into." Producing a damp cloth from her shoulder bag, she wipes the nephew's orange-sticky face. "So what do you make of this?"

"I don't know. I thought maybe there would be more contemplation about the dead folks, more silence, maybe. You?"

"I like it. I think this is a healthy attitude toward death. It's not like in England, where someone dies and the quicker you forget about it, the better. There, everyone is left shattered, but unable to express it. Here, through memory, the dead are integrated into the present. They aren't gone because they are remembered." She snugs Arianne closer to her chest. "Plus, because everyone gives such nice gifts to their spirits, the dead are

happier in the afterlife, knowing that everyone here still cares about them. Or, at least, that's what's believed on this side of things."

Claire frequently compares her two cultures in this manner. Now that she's speaking English again, moreover to a Canadian who's never been abroad, she's noting these contrasts again. In Britain, one never breastfeeds in public. One doesn't behave in a way that expresses how one feels. So much social interaction is governed by the fear of violating the tightly laced standards of propriety. In Mexico, when the season of *fiestas* comes around, people only behave as they feel. Inhibitions are forgotten. Though she realises that gender roles are far more regimented here, and that Mexico is not entirely perfect, she has respect for a culture that is systematic and reverential about the need for catharsis.

The sheet of fabric holding Arianne to Claire's chest has shifted again to expose the infant's bare feet; with her right hand held under the tiny spine, she uses her left to untie the slipping knot on her back. Arianne's face twitches, but she doesn't awake. Although she's gained so much weight in the past month that she's started to give her mother back-aches when she's carried like this, Claire is averse to tying Arianne onto her back. That's what the indigenous women do once the child can hold its own head straight, but she's heard of babies slipping free. Maybe the stories are word-of-mouth legends, but she was told that one kid toppled out of the scarf holding him to his mother's back, crashed onto the ground of the market, and died from head injuries.

Arianne, now contentedly sprawled on her lap, asleep, should never be exposed to such a risk.

"Claire?" Greta pipes up.

Claire looks up. Greta is slouched against the tombstone next to Inés's mother's, smoking a cigarette. "*¿Si?*"

"Sorry, this might sound rude, but is anything going to happen?"

Claire considers the question. "It'll be more of the same, I think. They'll wander back here at some point, sit around, eat. The men will continue to get drunk, the women will try to keep an eye on the kids, and eventually they'll pack up and go home."

"Okay. Listen, I think I'm going to get going. The heat is starting to bother me and, well, I just feel like a tourist around Inés's family. I can catch a *collectivo* from here, right?"

"Yeh. I can't imagine otherwise. I think I've seen them stop a few blocks from the main entrance, where there's that traffic circle thing, if you remember. And don't worry about the family; they don't meet new people very often."

"No worries." Greta stands, loops her purse over her shoulder, and leans over to kiss Claire on the cheek. "I'll see you back at the house, then. Bye-bye, Arianne. *Ciao, niño.*" Claire reciprocates the gesture of etiquette, Arianne's slumber remains uninterrupted, and the toddler's eyes trail Greta as she commences the serpentine escapade through marble monuments and familiar festivity. His infantile mouth manages a wobbly smile. His stomach grumbles, and from his mouth comes forth a watery, mashed marigold-petal drool.

As the crowds and the copal incense fade away, Greta figures the route back to town won't be particularly complicated—once on board a *collectivo*, one of the seventies-era Volkswagen vans that pass for public transit here, she figures that any route will take her straight to downtown. From there, she can catch another to Cuxtitali. Through the cemetery crowds, through the stalls of candy vendors, she passes through the main entrance of the graveyard. There, where the crowds dissipate at last, the horizon broadens to the breadth of the boulevard leading away. The spacious panorama of streetscape—the ochre-dusty thoroughfare is vastly wider than the claustrophobic streets in town, lined by the white concrete walls marking the perimeter of unfamiliar industrial companies and skirted by unpeopled sidewalks—pushes her shoulders down to relax. She is a prairie girl; she likes being able to see where she's going.

The noonday sun blazes down from directly above. Shadows perish in the refraction off every surface. Greta fumbles through her shoulder bag for her sunglasses. She likes to wear sunglasses in public: she can stare at whomever she pleases, without having to worry about being seen. Now she sees, just as Claire predicted, a block or two in the distance, at the intersection of this boulevard with another, *collectivos* flit through light traffic.

As she reaches the intersection, whose dusty dirt corners are worn over by foot traffic, Greta lights up an *alita* to smoke while she waits for the *collectivo*. The spot is vaguely urine-stinky; concrete walls have a painted mural for some brand of automobile engine oil. She smoothes her fingers over the red and blue bannered paper package wrapped in cellophane and taps the top against her palm to knock out one of the thin, filterless Mexican sweet-tobacco cigarettes. The brand name, written in an elegant nineteen-twenties script over the image of a similarly antique airplane, translates as "little wings." A couple of times, she tried smoking the larger version, labelled "Alas," but the tobacco was too coarse. Greta had largely been drawn to the linguistic homonym: smoking an "Alas" was lighting up wings of sorrow. The opportunity to be a truly ironic smoker, however, reluctantly smoking the worst tobacco on the Mexican market, intercepted Greta's more practical interest in retaining part of her lung capacity.

Alitas, on the contrary, taste like candy. Even their wrapper looks as if bubble gum cigarettes should be inside, like those gas station treats that used to be sold in Canada when she was a kid. Those were the thin, bubblegum-pink rods wrapped in paper tubes from which you could expel exactly one puff of powdered sugar. There the resemblance to real cigarettes ended, though, because the only thing that you could do with the pinky cylinder after that was turn it into a wad of gum.

Greta prefers the little wings. Or the big wings, for that matter. She requested a window seat when she flew from Canada three months ago, and she was given one that allowed her to see the wing of the jet. When she was descending into Mexico City that day, the first thing Greta noticed from her vantage point above the clouds, her eyes stunned by that unnaturally bright light, was the taxis, the VW beetles that her guidebook explained to her were not actually antiques, but produced in annual, identical batches by the Mexican government since it bought the production machinery from Volkswagen.

Amidst the altitude's unnaturally bright light, sleep deprived from the flights that took her from Edmonton in the night to Toronto in the morning, to *el Districto Federal* in the midday sun, Greta was in awe. As the plane spiralled and swooned earthwards, the bright green vehicles coursing through the concrete arteries, through mazes of shale-grey buildings and pollution-stained monuments, seemed to pulse the metropolis into an organic entity. The heart of Mexico—for if D.F. were to be any organ, it would be the

heart—appeared to Greta to be entirely indifferent to her arrival. Perhaps for this, she fled so quickly to the peripheries, to Chiapas, to the liver, or maybe the spleen, in search of work as an English language teacher.

The *collectivos*, at any rate, are different from the beetles in Mexico City: they aren't the same neon grass green, but a worn white. Moreover they're vans, but of a kindred era, and Volkswagens as well, and they buzz through clogged arteries with a similar determination to destination.

Just when she begins to wonder whether this is a corner where the *collectivo* will recognise a boarding passenger, one careens around the corner. Surprised by the arrival, Greta throws down the half-smoked cigarette and waves her hand decisively.

The *collectivo* halts, precisely parallel on the street to Greta. She steps on board, smiling sweetly. It's an automatic routine by now. She masks her constant confusion of geographies in an unabashed friendliness. "*Va al centro, ¿sí?*" she intones in a vague sing-song.

Disinterested in such obvious queries, the driver peers over his left shoulder for traffic. "*Voy hacía Cuxtitali,*" he mumbles.

The vehicle propels forward before Greta has a chance to sit down. Stumbling toward the back, body bent low to accommodate the unpadded metal ceiling, she manages to land on one of the benches set against the wall. *Sweet,* she thinks, unfazed. *Not just to the centre, but all the way to Cuxtitali.*

After fumbling through her pocket for the three pesos fare, passing the coins to the grandmother seated behind the driver to pass on, she crouches herself comfortable to take in the scenery of this part of town. Her legs beneath her brown corduroy pants are sticky with sweat, and her thin t-shirt clings to her chest with perspiration and heat from the van's throbbing engine. Bending over to peer out the dingy window, Greta sees that the view is as generically Mexican as her impression was in the half-lit morning out through the covered wagon-like box of the Alfaros' truck. There are various industrial outlets, *Masateca tortillerias*, rainbow-hued concrete walls enclosing courtyards and machine shops, the odd hotel that proclaims its title in a flourish of painted stars. These are mundane details that feature better in photos, the sort that she's always forgetting to take, but that line the pages of travel guides and steep the audiences of homecoming slide

shows in a vibrant awe. She felt the same way when she first set foot in Latin America: overwhelmed by colours, curious about the minds of those accustomed to life amidst such chromatic splendour. The novelty of everything wears off after a while. Even the centre, with its immense cathedrals and cobblestone, is too familiar to instil wonder any longer. She has quit walking with her neck craned toward steeples and clock towers. There are people and obstacles at ground level. Even the indigenous, with their clothes of technicolour embroidery, their cracked and peeling feet that are moulded into their black rubber sandals, their half-rotten mouths, faded as spectacle before long. Even with their oily olive skin deserving of phrases like "sun-leathered." (Was that Graham Greene or Rosario Castellanos. Or her guidebook?) Somewhere she read that they weren't actually allowed to walk on the sidewalks of San Cristóbal until some ridiculously recent date, maybe the early eighties. That's why the gutters are so well polished.

Certain monuments, so to speak, persist in their seemingly inherent ability to mesmerise, though. Greta has shifted her attention to other, more social, interests. The *collectivo* halts a couple of blocks from the market, where most of the other passengers get off, and another batch board. These replacements are weighed down by sacks of groceries, odds and ends of household furnishings, and the odd child bundled and bound to its mother in brightly woven scarves. The stench of midday sweat infuses the van as they arrange themselves on the metal benches. Amidst their squeezing and adjustment, Greta peers and shifts and tries to sharpen her eyesight through her dark UV-resistant lens. *El Punto*, the Italian restaurant in town, has its front windows drawn open. The building is nothing to look at; it is no cathedral, no architectural wonder. She thinks that she sees a familiar figure, just the back of a head thick with black dreadlocks. It could be Antonio. He knows the owners of *El Punto* and she knows he eats there several times a week. Across the table is another figure. Greta can't make out the face, but she thinks that she can make out a swath of black hair. In San Cristóbal, only Antonio's friends have long hair.

She has been inside the restaurant only once, and that was before she and Antonio got together. Another traveller at the hostel was trying to find a place in town, too, and they went there to enquire about the room that one of the waitresses was renting. The guy had already seen the apartment, and had already politely declined moving into the insect-

infested flat strewn with the roaches of Mexican marijuana. She was desperate to find a place, having already secured the two jobs teaching that she still holds, and probably would have taken the place had the waitress, an anorexic blonde who spoke with an Italian accent, not suggested that another house was looking for a roommate. Her distracted pronunciation, her vacant blue eyes, moreover, her skeletal hips, made Greta nervous. Greta was certain that weed was likely the least nefarious of her chemical dependencies. The woman suggested that Greta might find this "*Casa Azule*" more comfortable than her apartment which was, really, quite small. Greta promptly agreed with the assessment, and, sometime later, moved into *la Casa Azule*, the house where Leila, Claire, and the baby Arianne had been living for several months. Greta was grateful. The weed all but Arianne smoked several times daily was preferable to hard drugs and alcohol.

And Greta was also grateful that the morning after she spent her first night at Antonio's place, he took her for breakfast not at *El Punto*, but in the market. She was self-conscious around Antonio's friends, always had been, and didn't want their first morning together to be plagued by social discomfort. So, dazed by hangovers scorched by late morning light, they clutched each other's hands as they descended into the cool bustle of the market. He led her through passages so narrow and convoluted that Greta had never imagined that human bodies were meant to negotiate them. They passed through a beige corridor dangling with bulk rolls of multicoloured plastic bags, through to a row of bakeries, identical and miniature, where shelves of larger loaves and baskets of buns set out. Quite deliberately, Antonio stopped at the centre stall and sat down at a stool at the counter. Adjusting another seat so that she could sit beside him, he requested two cups of *café de olla* and a plate of buns. "Have you been here before?"

"Nope. Didn't even know that it existed."

As the wrinkled man set down the mismatched aluminium mugs, Antonio produced a five peso coin. "It's a cheap breakfast. You should remember this place."

Of course, Greta has never gone without him. Cuxtitali has its own bakeries that sell the same bread, the "*pan regional*." It's just as cheap to eat at home. Plus, one day she found out that the yellowy shade of dough comes from pig fat. She's vegetarian.

"Hey, Tonito, is that your girlfriend?" Gabriel sets down his sandwich to point. "There, in the *collectivo*. I thought I saw her inside."

Moving slowly, Antonio turns to look at the street. The sunlight pains his eyes and the reflected flash of light off the vehicle's finish nearly blinds him. Shaking his head, he slices off another piece of lasagna and arranges it on his fork, gathering up stray pieces of spinach and cheese in smooth rotations on his plate. "Who knows," he comments, holding the laden fork in the air, "I can't see anything."

"Maybe it wasn't her, anyway. She'd have probably come in for a little smoochy-smoochy, y'know?" Gabriel flutters his eyelashes and mimes a passionate kiss.

Chewing, Antonio blushes. The night he and Greta got together, they were the spectacle of the evening. After weeks of pining after her, he had finally got up the nerve to ask her for coffee. She always came to the movies he showed in the upstairs cinema of Zapata Vive, one of the nightclubs in town. Most of the time she came alone, so there had been plenty of opportunity to speak to her before. Upon her acceptance of the date, however, Antonio's timidity immediately transformed into near-obsessive eagerness. He was supposed to pick her up from her hostel—this was just before she had moved to Cuxtitali—on Sunday afternoon, because he didn't have to work on Sundays. They had made this date on Thursday, and he was becoming delirious with anticipation, idealising Sunday afternoon with afternoon light on cobblestone streets—why does he think of Sundays like this? It was supposed to be a Sunday with its calm and sunshine that would filter through the leaves of the ivy plant in his garden as they sipped coffee. Sunday would make her skin glow, and they would both be free to enjoy each other's company.

On Saturday, the day before the Sunday he had planned, no one had shown up for movies, so he cracked one of the two *caguëmas* he had snuck in for after work, sat and watched the first film by himself. With the free cocktails that the bar provided, by the time the second movie of the evening was meant to go on, he was well liquored. *Borracho*. A couple of people showed up, an eager set of English speakers in the modish safari outfits that seemed to be the style these days for tourists. He didn't recognize them, and they looked at him as if he were some foreign animal. He didn't bother trying to stutter out the information in English; he just chanted, "*Quinze pesos para entrar, quinze pesos, quinze pesos.*" After some frantic group consultation, they each counted out fifteen

pesos from their pinky palms with infantile sloth, mesmerized by the coins' values as if they had never encountered currency before. He resisted the temptation to snap at them—some phrase like "don't coins have numbers on them in your country, too?"—knowing that they wouldn't understand his Spanish, let alone his drunken slur.

He pocketed the change, flailed his arms like airplane propellers while balanced on the stool to adjust the ceiling-mounted projector, pressed the "PLAY" button on the machine, then scampered downstairs to buy a decent drink now that his pants jingled with money.

Scaling down the gridiron stairs, Antonio scanned the panorama of the bar laid out before him. He was rusty, yeasty drunk. Cheap cocktails made with cheap alcohol and powdered juice mix gurgled in his stomach. The litre of industrial lager distended his stomach, pressed on his bladder. He felt corroded and tired. He needed to wake up, he needed to take a piss.

By the time he emerged from the men's room, the gang, the Pinkies, had shown up for the evening pool game. They assembled at the bar for the free cocktails, those vile cocktails. In the shadows, he saw a blurring movement in the corner of his eyes. A dark trace, flitting; he paused at the door into the room. He believed that Zapata Vive was haunted, but would never mention it to anyone.

Then Greta showed up with some guy. And some other people, maybe they were all out together. Maybe it wasn't a romantic situation. He went over, introduced himself. He couldn't decide about the rest of them, whether to bother shouting introductions over the music. The guy spoke good Spanish, though—Antonio couldn't but wonder what he was doing in Chiapas. When he kissed Greta on the cheek—her skin was so smooth, her breasts tight against her t-shirt—he brushed his hand down the side of her body, almost grasping, begging his fingers to linger, not to be so obvious so as to linger. He pulled away as she exhaled the plume of her cigarette smoke, and her breath was silver.

"*Estoy borracha,*" she leaned over, straightened herself on the bench, her smile giddy. Antonio, crouched on the ground, was almost at eye level with her chest. She collapsed back to slouching, whispered in his ear, "*Ya he tomado casi una botella de vino.*"

"*Jésus María*, you've drunk a whole bottle of wine? Do you want anything else? I could grab you one of the cocktails, if you wanted."

"The fucking cocktails," she laughed. "They're horrible. Sure. Why not, it's free booze."

"Exactly. Why not." He winked. As he walked to the bar, he considered whether he had just embarrassed himself, whether he should get a cocktail for the guy. At the bar, surrounded by sound and crowds of people, he was suddenly buoyed with confidence. He would just bring her a drink. No, that was too rude. Two drinks. One for her, one for the guy, or for himself.

After his return to her table, two plastic cups of neon orange cocktail in hand, any sense of nocturnal sequence dissolved. The guy refused the cocktail and Greta ignored him for Antonio. The alcohol made the two of them clumsy. Kneeling at her feet, then sitting beside her on the low bench, he felt the boundaries of personal space dissolved, as if he had forgotten whose body was whose. By the time he asked her to dance, they had known each other long enough and well enough in this proximity that was oblivious to everything. On the dance floor, amidst the churning crowds, their pelvises moved together, their lips met, and their bodies would have entirely fused, were it not for the layers of cloth that separated them still. That night they went back to his house, where she was delighted to find *musica Canadiense* on his CD shelf. She insisted that they listen to the disc of Montréal dance music while they made love once, twice, three times before dawn.

"Hey, *huey*! Man, what's up?"

Antonio blinks. He sets his fork down on the table. His mind is moving slowly, lingering in the images of that night: her freckled flesh, her apple-round breasts, her carrot-hair cunt. Memory makes a paragon of the body. She was the only *gringa* he'd ever seen naked before—the ones in the movies didn't count. Celluloid couldn't compare with the dimension of breathing, that throbbing depth of flesh. Yet his remembrance of that night, he's noticed this before, is peculiarly cinematic. The sequence unscrolls. He is the star; she is the leading lady. Their relations maintain a particular flourish that he has never felt before, or since, with women.

"Man, you're out of it." Gabriel cleans his plate, downs the last of his cup of coffee. "How are things going with her, anyway?"

"Oh, good. I'm seeing her tonight."

In the evening, Greta is waiting to meet Antonio at Las Velas, a labyrinthine *discoteca* located downtown that is hosting a fiesta in honour of the holiday. She is early and doesn't want to show up at the bar before he does. As she smokes a cigarette on a cast-iron bench in San Cristóbal's zócalo, its centre square, she massages the assonance in her mouth: *las velas*. 'Velas' is a peculiar word: it means either the candles or the veils, depending on the context. So the name indicates an illumination, or else a deliberate guise. The double entendre reminds her of the clichéd passage from Corinthians, "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known." Maybe it's her determined deficiency in biblical hermeneutics. The passage has stuck in her mind since she opened the good book to a random page one day. There's not much reading material around the house in Cuxtitali: Gideon's, a Spanish-language history of Mexico (but only the first tome, pre-conquest), and a handful of semi-academic readings Claire brought with her before she realized she hated graduate school.

She had crossed paths with Leila and Jaime at home, shortly before leaving the house. Jaime had driven his VW beetle up the hill to Cuxtitali so Leila could smoke some weed and show off her graveyard purchases before they went to dinner at some expensive restaurant. From what Greta could understand, their voyage to a different cemetery was without even the motions of ancestral worship. After all, the atmosphere was so festive that a stroll through the carnival of face-painters, sweets, balloons, ribbons, is annual entertainment without comparison, nor need for the affiliation of personal genealogy. One can still appreciate the superficial allure, without a care for honouring one's particular forbearers.

To commemorate the expedition, Jaime bought Leila a family of hollow sugar skulls: mama, papa, and two sizes of children's craniums. She arranged them on a shelf in the kitchen, doubling over with *ganja*-induced hilarity at each rearrangement of the festive decorations. Meanwhile, Jaime, shadowing the object of his affection with a

typically unabashed eagerness to provide platonic pleasures, told giggle-tinged stories of the drunks they'd encountered during their exploits. The recounts weren't amusing and Leila's gut wrenching humour began to wear on Greta, so she decided to leave early and take the scenic route downtown.

She considers a night on the town to be excusable; there are no tombs for her to mark with flowers and none of her nomadic concerns have gravity here. Visiting the cemeteries of others, no matter how close a friend one is to the family, if a friend at all, is a floating through the riveted genealogies of others. Reverence is false when the dead are someone else's ancestors. The Alfaros can trace their predecessors back to the conquest; they are all *Chiapanecos*, they are in the soil of this place. Greta can't even begin to feign such belonging. So why not ignore the sweet souvenirs, accept displacement, and soar, inebriated, in the throbbing lights of a *discoteca*?

San Cristóbal is like Vancouver, she thinks, or any other city where everybody is a stranger from elsewhere; the longevity of locals here is marked by years, not generations. Greta finds it curious that "*San Cristóbaliano*" is not a word; she has tried to pronounce it on a number of occasions, provoking an array of blank stares that universally indicates that the *Canadiense* is lost between languages again. Claire had quietly informed her that "*Coleto*", instead, is the moniker given to residents of San Cristóbal. Greta was not surprised. According to Greta's cheap English-Spanish dictionary, the word means "a leather jacket; one's inner self." Go figure. Dutifully, she took note of the idiomatic expression associated with the term, *echarse al coleto*, "to drink down, to devour." Stubbing out the cigarette on the edge of the bench, she repeats the phrase again. Eh-char-say-al-co-let-oh. The literal translation is more interesting: to throw oneself at a native of San Cristóbal. He is a leather jacket; he is one's inner self.

Greta remembers the date with Antonio. Having finished her smoke and without any idea of the time, Greta figures it's also best to make her way to the *fiesta* before the real born-and-bred Coletos, the pint-sized shoe shiners that plague the *zócalo* at all hours of the day, come to accost her. Speaking of leather, they refuse to believe that her faux-army boots are vinyl, and therefore impervious to the children's waxen treatment.

Las Velas is a cavern, an old colonial edifice half a block from the *zócalo*, four floors tall and grandiose in all its dimensions. Its cathedralesque ceilings and spiral

staircases instil awe in Greta for its former inhabitants. Weren't all these buildings once private residences? She arrives at the flamey red-orange banner marking its street-level entrance and passes through the glass-pane front doors. The bouncer is a friend of Antonio, a spindly, froggy-faced guy who stands half a head taller than Greta and most Mexican males; his face is creased with mirth to see her.

"*¿Qué onda, huey?*" What's up, man? He slaps her hand with casual amity and twitches his shoulder to indicate she need not pay cover.

"Hey, have you seen Antonio?"

"He's around here, somewhere. Came by an hour ago or so. Think he might be working, I don't know. Get in there, though, before the manager sees I'm not charging you cover. You'll find Antonio inside, no doubt. Ask at the bar if you need to."

"Cool. Thanks. Catch you later."

"You betcha." He winks.

Inside smells of ozone and the indelible perfumes of suburban society. The reggae band spills ruminations of sound check over to the far wall. Boys with pierced eyebrows and plaid shirts adjust their instruments with cosmetic delicacy beneath a dim demi-spotlight. Soon, the set. The seventeen-year-old keeners are assembled. Girls fidget in bleach-tight tees with glossy lips. Their masculine counterparts are prim and haughty in well-pressed khakis and button-up blue gingham shirts. They are the *frescas*, the strawberries: the rich kids with disposable income on a Friday night. It's not cheap to drink out all the time. Beer is four times more expensive at Las Velas than at the corner stores.

The only other demographic sufficiently extravagant to sustain the nightclub's operation is the tourists milling and stumbling about. They are lusting for a fiesta: downing drink after drink amidst their tactless and exclusive parties, clothed in their world-weary uniform of khaki pants with a multitude of secret pockets, topped with spaghetti-stringed tank tops or t-shirts, depending on gender. In this manner, foreigners recognise each other as kindred drinking mates. They huddle around low tables. Occasionally, alcoholic clumsiness surges, as if the tourists are giving a standing ovation, and they stand up to toast their five-dollar drinks. Meanwhile, the rich kids are listless as

if they are memorising the intricacies of mating rituals while they wait for the band to unite the seething multitude through the sound of music.

Upon this scanning of the room, her eyes tracking left to right as if reading an inventory of inebriation, Greta doesn't see Antonio anywhere. The sweat-stinky atmosphere is pandemonium. She starts toward the bar, pretending that she is invisible as she navigates the throng. As a participant in the churning of human bodies, she catches snapshots of debauchery's progress: sets of shiny lips relax their smiles to sip the mouths of beer bottles. A hand strokes inside the back pocket of a woman's white pants, and tresses of long black hair flip over a tanned shoulder. An inelegant combination of drunken white limbs and a red football jersey that is attempting an interpretation of the canned-music soundscape loses its balance and back-pedals into Greta. The body swivels almost instantaneously and lunges a hairy arm around her body. The face that this motion reveals is almost as red as the jersey. "Soo sorry," the man drools in English. "Can I buy you a drink?"

Her body pressed against his, she smiles politely and shakes her head. Let's pretend I don't speak English, she thinks, disentangling herself from his grasp. She makes a break for the spiral staircase, cast in iron and an escalating redemption from the *mêlée*.

The second level is more sparsely populated, which is a relief. Greta's shoulders relax as her eyes tumble over the dozen or so people milling about. An-ton-ee-oh, she mouths in her mind, where arrree youu? Half the floor has been cut away, and a railing, erected along the perimeter, is fringed by a dozen black metal tables so that everyone upstairs can watch the band from a bird's-eye view. She leans over the edge and gawks down at the stage. The band boys are still fiddling with their instruments. Behind them, pinned on the ochre wall, are six plaster skeletons corresponding to the six band members, each effigy plying its scoop-plaster hand on a different instrument.

Upon this observation, the elements of expectation and this dead-day thing conspire together: she expected these plaster skeletons that she'd seen in Coyoacan, in Frida Kahlo's house. She thinks that they're originally from Oaxaca; she saw them in all the tourist art boutiques when she was passing through there on her way to Chiapas. She had wanted to take one with her but couldn't because she had no space in her luggage for

such a large souvenir. Yet if there is one thing that she wants to remember, it is these plaster casts. They hung in Kahlo's house much as they now dangle from the burnt sienna walls of Las Velas, like life-size marionettes whose invisible strings ascend, beyond the ceiling, to the *cielos*, to the heavens. Greta can speculate naïvely before these images that daunt her, that this acceptance of mortality generated the life of Kahlo's paintings. Kahlo's sequential and imagistic autobiography occurred as a painful calcification of corporeal matter, the reduction of wet organic processes to dry depiction, which was then deceptively animated in its fusion with chromatic fury. Art begins in a standstill like death.

She is a zombie to these thoughts when brisk arms brush against her. She turns and it's him; she tries to kiss him on the cheek but her mouth slips from the stubbly side of his face to his lips.

"Here," he holds out a glass filled with a pinky-orange fluid, rubbled by ice cubes. "I saw you sneak up here and decided to bring you a drink."

"Gracias."

"But hey, we should set our stuff down and go dance. The band is just about to start the new set."

So, in the evening, the spotlights sing for Greta: *Nada más queda*. Nothing more remains. There's a boy dancing in her arms; he is vivid in the flesh. He conducts the rhythm; he emancipates it from the sweltering sound. Clearly, in the fakery of flashing illumination, he is gleaming; he flexes his forehead and flashes a gaze to her eyes. He spins her about and steps in time. Latinos are meant to dance well, though. What a cliché, Greta thinks. This is not really bolero. And I can dance. I'm only somewhat awkward for all this footwork. The sweat-moist air reveals her to the last layering of cloth. She is braless in her tank top. Does the convulsing assembly conspire for anonymity? Are there people watching the outline of breasts? How much have I had to drink already? She sucks his pierced tongue for a while even though she imagines his chiaroscuro friends are huddled by the bar. But there's skin, and his rough chin to smooth her cheek against. She doesn't believe that he really knows the salsa. Or maybe he does. We're past that now,

she thinks. He's the body that finds me, encompasses me, amidst the vivid orchestration of this ridiculous place.

Suddenly, in the thriving course of bodies and electrified sound, he convulses with social recognition. Without a word of explanation, he drifts away, still stepping precisely in time, plotting a course through the mechanically musical obstacles. Across the dance floor, darkened against the far wall painted blood red, he lunges closely to a stranger. The song, another predictable reggae number—tinged with Latin rhythms as all genres of music here always seems to be—plumes to its falling out. The couples surrounding her, partnered and intact, slow with the music. How Mexicans still dance *merengue* to American music, coupled and undulating in romance, she suddenly finds revolting. She stands in the midst of the hideous synchrony, melody and flesh, male and female. What the fuck. The song ends; couples disengage from choreography's hand-stretched protocol and embrace. What the fuck.

Even from the other side of the dance floor, she recognises the motion that is a cliché of the streets: furtive hands reach deep into their pockets and reappear to swap small packages in an outstretched handshake. Meaningful masculinity transpires in that prehensile contact, whose material manifestation is the exchanged objects smuggled back into the safe compartments. Of course it is a drug deal.

Fine. Greta returns to the bar stools where they left their drinks and sweaters. The woman working bar smiles, reaches beneath the counter, and produces two shots of alcohol.

"Tequila," her cigarette-hearty voice proclaims, "for you and Antonio." She leans closer, so that her two braids of glistening charcoal-blue hair graze the counter. "He put in a couple hours of work but I don't think the boss will pay him."

"*Muchas gracias.*"

"*De nada.*" It's nothing. Her eyes glint before she pivots around to address the hail of another customer, her dark braids airborne and arcing at the movement.

Mashing a lime against her teeth, Greta fumes. She hates this matrix of society. It's just like home, in Canada, where everyone knows everyone and anonymity is an impossibility. Except, that is, for the fact that she is held apart from the intricacies of familiarity; if known at all, she is Antonio's girlfriend, and receives the polite gestures

worthy of that position. His female friends veil a gleaming green envy as they approach her, dutifully embracing *la canadiense* and marking her cheeks with lipstick leeches. These kisses break the seal of syllables, and their mouths flush forth buoyant phrases casual and jealous. They don't understand why Antonio chose her, whose niceties are performed as cardboard punctuations, who refuses to gaud herself in cosmetics and low-cut shirts, who doesn't even really smoke weed. Meanwhile, she hardly has the words to explain why she's terrified of these women, and, given Antonio is oblivious to their wiles, she doubts a proper articulation would matter much, anyway. He would tell her to ignore them. This is probably what she should do but precisely what she finds impossible to achieve.

Antonio stumbles up, declaring that he has bought another forty pesos of weed, but she knows that he is lying. Fucking Spanish. As if she can't understand deception because she can't put it in words. He has a coffee tin full of weed in his room; why would he care about another small package. Besides, that's expensive *ganja*.

"*Oyé, mi amor*. I have to take a piss. I'll be right back."

Greta smiles thinly and gazes at him with dull scepticism. She intends to communicate her incredulity, but he fails to acknowledge the possibility of grievance. His arm rests on the bar, casually encompassing her body; he stares out at the *mêlée*. A split second passes and he recalls his immediate plan of action.

"Whatever. I'll be here," she says, the quality of sweetness in her voice taffy-pulled.

"Okay." He plants a wet kiss on her lips and straightens, tugging her hand with his. His smile radiates pride, satisfaction, anticipation. "I'll be right back, then."

He weaves a path through the jumble of music and gyrating bodies. People are animate; he bounds lightly. She sets her cocktail on the edge of the bar, a smooth surface illuminated from beneath, running her fingers over the frosted plexiglass. *Through a glass darkly*, she thinks.

Antonio avoids his gaze in the washroom mirror as he darts toward an open stall. First swinging the sheet metal door shut with his foot, he secures this moment of privacy with his body, pressing his shoulder blades against the cool, graffiti-marred surface.

He empties a small mound of the white powder on the fleshy triangle between his thumb and forefinger, his thumb out extended from a loose fist, so that the skin is taut. With one nostril pinched, the other abruptly inhales once. He holds his head slightly back, clasping his nose. His eyelids are blinders sliding shut. Curious how dissolution feels so glorious. It is only a mechanical motion. Yet the body is as if weightless when a mere vehicle of pleasure. The process is repeated with the other nostril.

This is a disregard for processes delicate and biological, those that mire yearning. He should know better. Some solutions can be so expedient, though. For this, it is called blow. The word in English is a bubble bursting on his lips. At once, patterns are gone to the breezes of passing by; through chaos comes a singularity, powdered and absolute. Take my body, he thinks. It is carrion for confusion.

In this shit stained corridor, entries and exits punctuate the imbibition of unending streams of beer and cocktail. Bodies are urinating, excreting beasts. And Antonio knows them in their simplest form; he knows their jaws are clamped shut and will not speak to incriminate habits that are already too vulnerable. We enter metallic cubicles with our small expensive parcels, he thinks, and the sound of inhalation filters through the walls. Then we reappear, fondling nasal passages, stroking and fetishising the physiognomy of intake. It is masturbation; we are quiet about coping. Or copulating with what is beyond the spring-mounted door, with which interface is inevitable, the logical next step after perfunctorily washing our hands in the wash basin.

In the mirror, cocaine makes features blank. Liveliness is pressed through screens of lime, cut with chemicals and squeezed into this crescendo. The darkness in his pupils subsumes Antonio's gaze upon himself. And all he can conclude from this narcissistic observation is that the performance of this affair has sapped him.

Two lovers are too many.

He nearly got caught the other day when Olivia dropped by during lovemaking with Greta. Thankfully, his roommates intercepted her, fabricating a story about the stereo in the living room being broken so as to explain the strains of Bran Van 3000 seeping through his window into the street. What is he to do with Greta? Olivia's only meant to be in town for a week or two, to figure out the new programme with *Instituto de los Derechos Humanos*. Then she's back to Mexico City. He could, conceivably, play the

two women off each other for a period, but he doesn't know how well he would succeed at that calculated deception. He'd rather be smoking weed with the boys than collating schedules.

And Olivia. They'd not seen each other for, what, six months. She gave him warning that she'd be in town, but any expectations about seeing her again were wholly inadequate in the face of her arrival. The anticipation, that piecing together of the memories of her, of the touching of bodies and laughter, converged as some meagre phantom in light of her presence. How could he have forgotten? Remembrance's surge was so humble, nothing for the spectator: she rattled the sheet metal door, he sauntered to creak it open. They stood before each other for a full breath mark before anything. In that caesura of motion, the response was immediate and so lucid an approach: it has been a while, my love. Since the contours of you, in the flesh. In regards to her, the equations aren't that she is him, or he is her. Rather that the enigma of her emanates at the sight of her, and he knows that she possesses the solution to his otherwise encrypted existence.

He is still in the rush, even pushing the washroom door open seems an overly jaunty motion, but he needs to get back to Greta before he is lost in these thoughts; the chemicals still bubbling to nerve endings, he wonders if Greta'll know.

She won't possibly know. He'll be careful not to sniff, not to grind his jaw bovine-like, mid-cud-chew. She won't notice smudges of white in and about eager nostrils. It's about keeping secrets. Even if they're open secrets, there is the pact of silence.

As Antonio is struggling through the crowd, he is struck with an awareness of temporality ticking. He's been gone for a long time. When he finally makes it back to the bar stools where he and Greta had been sitting, her sweater is gone and there is no evidence of the cocktail glass from which she had been drinking.

Wendy, working bar, leans over. "*Tu amigacita,*" she informs him precisely, "*se fue.*" Your little friend left.

"Did she say something before she went?"

"Nope. She doesn't say much, that girl."

"No. She doesn't. Well, sometimes she does. Anyway, thanks."

"By the way, that shot of tequila there is yours, on the house."

"Cheers." He raises the shot glass in a solitary toast of appreciation. Wendy nods and turns to continue swabbing up a spilt cocktail on the bar counter a few metres away.

She's gone to fend for herself in the streets, he figures. Of the three of them on the mount, up that ghastly incline up to Cuxtitali, she's definitely the most stubborn. He's known both Leila and Claire more or less since their respective arrivals, and he has never known them to taunt the unspoken evening curfew for unaccompanied females. Yet it's after midnight, and he's certain that Greta isn't about to blow the seventeen pesos for a cab. She's like that. This is what he means, this is what she doesn't understand, when he asks whether she's *loca*. She thinks he means that's she's a lunatic, but it's not that. It's nothing to do with raving on street corners, asylums, or even reefer madness. She's *loca*, in the sense that he intends it, that she defies all convention with her will, even if she doesn't recognise it herself.

He sighs and takes a sip of the tequila. In any case, this makes things much easier tonight.

Greta is walking back to Cuxtitali. With each footfall, she imagines an iota of her irritation dissipates. She tries to convince herself that the spectacle of the *discoteca* was worth the trek into town and back again, though each direction is a half hour through the narrow cobblestone streets, ghost-town abandoned save for the street dogs. The mutts that lounge on sidewalks by day defy domesticity in their nocturnal coalescence into howling and territorial gangs. Despite their noisy bravado, Greta has learnt that the dogs, like all traffic on the streets, are harmless. Though canine circles form around her, shrieking terror through hunger-pinched throats, she can permeate the pack. Walking briskly, without sudden movements, she knows the emaciated canines will maintain a metre distance from her. She walks through their pack. The surround-sound of barking is a bird sanctuary in Hades. The dogs are so thin that their patchy fur hardly guises the cavity of the rib cage, nor the boniness of their limbs. Their vertebrae are like knuckles on a wire. She imagines running a drumstick over the knobby bones just for the percussive effect. Like the song, "Knick knack paddy whack; give a dog a bone. This old man came rolling home." She wonders what Antonio will do tonight in her absence. The city at this hour, well into its diurnal swing of night life, is a labyrinth of dark recesses whose complexity

of paths is ingrained on his palm. She can't imagine what he will do with this facility. She is jealous of his ability to skip from bar to bar, to be always among friends no matter where he appears. This is how Greta is at home in Canada: the social butterfly. That identity has been stripped away. Now she is the stumbling, stupid *gringa*, condemned to being on the outside of festivity.

The imminence of these dogs looms grander with every pace she takes away from the centre of town and Antonio. At once, she is impaled with nausea; the long street home, up the hill to Cuxtitali, strikes her in the stomach and the queasiness refuses to let her centre herself.

A taxi zips from around the corner; Greta's arm rises up from her side as if wires from above are conducting her movement. The vehicle halts beside her on the cobblestone street. She collapses into the backseat and announces, in a tone peculiarly assertive given her body is numb and flushing, "*Cuxtitali, por favor. 27 Calle de las Manzanas*."

La Llorona

Ay de mí, Llorona Llorona,
Llorona, llévame al río
Tápame con tu rebozo, Llorona
Porque me muero de frió[1]

The hurricane storms came without warning. The sky was clear until early afternoon and the weather was mild, as it had been for days previously, and, although there had been word that the hurricane in the Yucatán would send its storms to Chiapas, Greta took no precautions. The day was a Sunday: because she didn't have school, she was down in the market, bartering over the purchase of garlic cloves. The vendor was buttressing his argument in repeating that the garlic teeth were larger than at any other market stall. "Yes," Greta plied, "they are large. But they're not the largest. Truthfully, although I appreciate medium-sized garlic cloves, I know that I can buy cloves still larger a few aisles over. I am only trying to help your business, here."

The man scowled. Greta knew that her performance frequently irritated vendors. Beneath the assumed drama of buyer and seller personas, she was aware his disgruntled facial expressions weren't part of the theatrical experience: he found her genuinely annoying. She wasn't playing the right part: *gringas* are supposed to be gullible and passive. But she had stopped doing that a long time ago: she was enacting the role of a *Mexicana*, and her skill was improving. She began to suspect that she was a better barterer than Claire, too, who was always too nice and whose wiles, consequently, came off cardboard imitations. Moreover, Greta was just a better performer. Greta could perfectly imitate the falling-rising intonation of, "*No es caro,*" when she crooned back, "*Sí, es caro.*" No-it's-not-expensive! Yes-it-is-expensive! Claire's voice was too thin, incapable of the full-throat irony, verging on jest that the response requires. Had the rains

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[1] Oh, my Llorona, Llorona,Llorona,
take me to the river.
Cover me in your shawl, Llorona,
Because I'm dying of cold.

not arrived, Greta couldn't say how long she would have been there—on Sundays, there's not much else to do but go and buy groceries.

Without warning, a gust of wind fell upon the market, flapping the blue and white tarpaulins above the various stalls to near-flight, sweeping the dust on the pathways to scour the air. Above, the clouds crept across the atmosphere, advancing smoothly, as if lubricated by the lucid cerulean sky. The vendor, his automatic responses fine-tuned, flung his arms out to land exactly over the merchandise most prone to flying away.

"*Tomalo*," he grunted, as though he were a weightlifter embattled with gravity, "*para tus efuerzas*." Take it for your effort. "And get the hell home. It's going to storm like you've never seen."

Greta tried to make it home. Beneath the sky, whose cloudy thickness crushed the air, she walked as quickly as she could, burdened by a week's worth of groceries. One block from the corner of Calle Franz Blom and Avenida Vincente Guerrero, which marked roughly half-way home, the skies tore open. Clouds sliced apart, broke the water, and marked the beginning of an inundation that would not wane for weeks.

By the time she reached the corner, she was thoroughly drenched. She stood under the awning of the shop that sold china and elegant timepieces, observing the situation. Up the road the downpour obscured the stonework on the buildings and dissolved the horizon in a milky veil. The gutter beyond the sidewalk was brewing a pond. A taxi, she saw, was coasting through a cascade of waves. Her arm rose from her side and the vehicle slowed so as not to splash her, and pulled up by the curb, on the wrong side of the street.

Inside, after apologising for the mess she was making on the upholstery, she tried to barter with the *taxista*, pointing out that she was only six blocks from where she needed to be. The standard fare for a trip in San Cristóbal shouldn't apply for such a short distance. "*Sí, señorita*," he chuckled. "But I just saved you from the deluge."

On Saturday, the rain has been falling uninterrupted for six days straight. Despite her upbringing in Birmingham, Claire claims that British winters hardly compare to this storm spun off from the hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico. Her capacity for climactic coping is swollen with the excess of precipitation and about to burst. Maybe cabin fever happens like a bed sore: a tender reddening of healthy flesh that starts to stretch skin with

fluid. The tension mounts with the pressure of inactivity until the slightest topical irritation releases a sickly discharge.

She thinks it's possible. Everything else is flowing these days. Rain falls off the roof onto the patio, through the drainage spout to the sidewalk outside, and down the streets that could be navigated in a small watercraft. Rain falls on the house's external walls, which Leila coated with cheap pastel-purple tempera: the pigment has turned out to be water-soluble. Over the course of a couple days, the colour gradually eroded into the form of two-dimensional mauve stalagmites, then narrowed to tooth-picks before being washed away entirely. Rain falls on bodies: one day, Claire made the mistake of wearing an indigenous vest, embroidered with red thread, during a trip to the corner store. Its dye was dampened by a leaking seam of her poncho, and tainted the white blouse she had on beneath with stains in the shape of warped, distended rose petals.

None of the neighbours have water. Their house was built by their landlord with his daughter in mind, and therefore with all the requisite paternal paranoia in regards to natural disasters. The pipes have some special connections to the water reservoir so that the taps remain running even amidst the present downpour that has overwhelmed the lesser water routes. Houses within a several block radius must have known this since before Claire and Leila moved in, since they had these special visitors before either knew how special the house was. Whenever any disruption occurs in the aqueducts, families from all over Cuxtitali send their children over. The youngsters come knocking with buckets too large for their skinny limbs, curtsy politely at the door. Without waiting for direction, they head to the washing area, where there is a hose. They twist the handle on the spout and, with nimble expertise, fill their plastic containers. Then they hoist the buckets precariously on their small bony shoulders, splashing water over their soaked t-shirts and scurry on their way.

Claire avoids leaving the house these days, but not because she wishes to attend to these unannounced visitors. She just can't handle the rain. If she goes down to the centre during any spell of adverse weather, she usually stays the night at the house of one of her friends who lives closer to the centre. That way, she has nearly twenty-four hours to ensure that she has everything she needs before heading back up the hill. She did that on day three of the hurricane, and now she's been three days in the house. Nibbling at her

supply of sweet corn tortillas and salty fresh cheese, she is trying to learn how to knit sweaters for Arianne.

Her sole daily venture out is to buy a *Carlos Quinto* chocolate bar from the corner store. There, she folds back the dripping hood of her poncho and makes brief conversation with the married couple who run the place. This sort of human contact is essential, even if the exchange consists of predictable plaints about the weather. Whether the baby is staying warm and dry. (Of course!) Whether the roofs are leaking. (No, thankfully.) If she has enough firewood to keep the *chiminera* burning. (I certainly hope so.)

As she stands at the doorway, recoating herself in raingear, Claire taps the consonance of her verdict on the weather system along the line of her front teeth: *La tormenta es uno tormento*. The storm is a torment. The middle-aged couple tend to agree with Claire's illustrious statements on the nature of Chiapas—she is, after all, the only real blonde in all of Cuxtitali. Nodding as if their eyes are strung to her hand flipping a goodbye wave, they concur. It really is. A torment.

Back at home, unsheathed from her poncho's mostly impermeable plastic, Claire tears open the mylar wrapper. "Car-los Quin-toh" she whispers under her breath. One chocolate bar a day is an indulgence preferable to smoking weed in the morning, she has decided. Before Arianne was born, there wouldn't have been a question: Claire would be wake-and-baking. She probably wouldn't leave her bed, either. At least this way, energised by the refined sugars and cheap cocoa, she has the motivation to *do* things around the house.

She has decided to focus her afternoon energies on cleaning up the disordered heap of bric-à-brac in the corner of the kitchen. It's been eight months since she and Leila rented out the house, but already they have so much *junk*. Doesn't help that Leila offered to store the belongings of a couple of her friends while they went travelling. It's all here. Duffel bags of clothing, boxes of CDs, a record player (but no records, which means the household can't use it while its owner is away). A box of hand-me-down clothes from Gloria, which they've been meaning to give away to someone. Who, no one's yet decided. Then there's her own shelf of art supplies, books and cassette tapes, which she hasn't touched since she moved in.

Good thing Leila's been spending so much time at work with Jaime, Claire thinks. Otherwise, she would hover over Claire, criticizing the slovenly progress of her clean-up. Leila's conceived of another get-rich-quick (or at least, remain officially unemployed but not destitute) business scheme: download music off the internet and burn CDs to sell. Jaime's one of the only individuals in town with high-speed internet as far as Claire knows. Leila has already printed up a sheet of the albums she figures will attract would-be buyers, a compendium of dance-trance music that's impossible to find in San Cristóbal. Jaime, predictably, provided the starting capital. Leila always phrases such operations in the proper entrepreneurial terminology. Claire, however, highly doubts that this verbal zeal translated into the signing of a contract that would legally validate the loan. Should the enterprise fail, Claire is certain that Leila will guiltlessly declare "bankruptcy" to her sole investor.

Surveying the spider-plant-stealth of the messy accumulation for the first time, Claire realises something profound about the nature of domestic upkeep. One must regularly fortify organisation with a mind acute to its frays and lines of fatigue. If not, disorder seeps from the fissures and spreads to any available space, a veritable degenerative disease. What was conceived as the jumble corner of the kitchen, several paces opposite from the sink, stove and spice shelf—and thus away from all culinary migrations—Claire notices now, has taken over half the far wall and extends a metre and a half outward. Somehow—this perplexes Claire almost as much—somehow, this has escaped Leila's sanitary vigilance. Leila's habit is to mop the entire house in bleach water once a week and to bitch for days if dishes are left in the sink overnight. Yet, through some optical illusion, this proliferation managed to elude her. The mass has rendered itself invisible, a cancer quietly growing, while subsuming resources and stealthily extending its tentacles outwards. Because of its apparently independent volition, Claire finds herself approaching the perimeter of the disaster with the reverence due to an otherworldly beast.

The wooden doors of the kitchen creak against their swollen frame, fling open. Heralded by a gust of chilly air, Greta emerges from the covered sidewalk of the courtyard wrapped in a purple blanket, a ceramic coffee cup in hand. "Hey," she says, tossing the blanket on a chair by the kitchen table. "Arianne's just woke up, I think. I was

just about to make a pot of coffee, but I thought I'd ask whether you wanted me to go into your room and get her."

Claire looks up from where she is kneeling on the red concrete floor. "No worries. I'll just go. She'll want to be fed, no doubt, and there's not much anyone else can do about that. Plus, it's warmer in there."

"Okay. Just trying to be helpful."

Claire's blue eyes register incomprehension. "Uh. Yes," she mumbles as she slips through the door.

Greta didn't know Claire before Arianne came along, but she suspects that Leila is on to something when she complains that Claire is lost in a haze of maternity. Everything she does is for baby, everything is motivated by this obsession for maintaining Arianne's untainted newborn goodness. Leila rails against Claire, always behind her back, because her father wires money every month so that Claire doesn't have to work anymore. According to Leila, Claire could be doing lots of things for *lana*: Arianne is well-tempered and sleeps a lot, so Claire could resume teaching without much problem, which is one of the best-paid jobs around, if she actually wanted to.

That's probably part jealousy. Leila hates money. She always calls it *lana*, as if 'wool' is a term more bound to material necessity. Leila hates having to work so that she can afford her *tortilla*. Other things about Claire irritate Greta. Like how Claire bought a special pot, a little cistern of clay that sits on the windowsill, which she announced was for Arianne's mashed food alone. In a saccharine passive-aggressive tone, she informed Greta that it was not to be used for coffee, ever. Then both she and Leila use it for whatever they want, since Arianne's not on solid food yet, anyway. And Claire gets grumpy when Greta can make Arianne stop crying and start gurgle-giggling. It's as if Greta is a source of energetic pollution in the household because she drinks coffee, smokes, comes home drunk sometimes. Because, despite these failings, Arianne still likes her.

Coffee. Tipping the forty-litre water jug to almost a right angle, Greta fills a pot and continues the routine of preparation. She begins to measure out four rounded spoonfuls of the coffee that the indigenous sell in the market. The vendors always let potential buyers sniff the heap of grounds, because everyone cuts the coffee with chicory.

Too much chicory, though, and the ten peso plastic sac doesn't even last for two weeks. Too much coffee, and they're not turning a profit. The customers might overdose on caffeine. Even so, Greta always adds more than she would of the commercially packaged, *Chiapaneco* and certified organic coffee. Counting the clumps as they drop into the water, the convex spoon-forms floating intact, she muses about how the turning of the days doesn't matter anymore. She can count the distinction of days only by the grey skies that turn black. Meanwhile, the rain is oblivious and torrential at all hours. How can the clouds be so heavy, how can the sky contain so much liquid? She lights the burner, places a lid on the pot and collapses into the chair where she's left her blanket.

Covering herself in that insulation is hardly any comfort: it, like most everything, is damp. Despite her best efforts to keep it from direct rainfall, it is only becoming progressively clammier. Even the air in the house must be nearly one-hundred-percent humidity. The wet clothing, which she hangs up to dry on the line in the kitchen every evening, only drips off enough moisture to be less soaking by morning. She wonders if her bed is beginning to mildew, or whether she's even capable of noticing.

All of this is miserable. On top of everything else, a landslide has blocked the roads to Mexico City. Antonio told her that Olivia was meant to be here for a week, maybe two, and now she's stuck here. This Greta learnt when Antonio showed up at the English Centre last week after she had finished teaching for the day.

Dreadlocked, gristly-unshaven, and sporting a Black Sabbath hoodie, Antonio at the school spelt instant demerit points for Greta's pretence of propriety there. In the eyes of the ultraconservative management, she was already nudging the borders of decorum with her *laissez-faire* attitude, her penchant for Mexican street slang, her blue jeans, and cigarette smoking. As she emerged from class and saw him chatting with the school's owner, she felt ground-level gravity sweep up and solidify around her. Encased in this static terror, she wondered if it was because her boss no doubt believed that her association with septum-rings and tattoos was tantamount to devil worship, or because something must be amiss in the universe if Antonio was picking her up from work.

They slipped through the sheets of rain into a *cantina* a half-block from the school where they sat at a plastic table sheathed in a plastic table cloth. Even before he managed to gulp away his trepidation to form the words, "*oyé, no puedo continúar más en esa*",

Greta knew that she didn't need to listen, that she didn't need to know why he was unable to continue. She wasn't an idiot: he reeked of infidelity. The odour had been on his sleeves, in his embraces that had started to disintegrate in her arms, for weeks. "No, you don't have to explain. It's someone else, isn't it?" she snapped.

Glumly twisting and tearing a beer coaster between his fingers, Antonio nodded. He opened his mouth a few times, a fish expelling gaseous sentiments, all the while maintaining his gaze on the shredding mess of cardboard in his hands. Exasperated with his utterly irreducible existential angst, he mumbled that he was "complicated."

Yes, yes, Greta thought to herself, searching for the scorched Spanish words to respond. "Sí, sí, unlike the rest of us simpletons, you are complicated." She steadied her shaking hands on the vinyl floral tablecloth. "*Oyé, huey*, keeping two lovers is complicated. All that shit with schedules. It doesn't, however, *make* one complicated."

More than anything, she was searing humiliation for having participated in the amorous spectacle so publicly. In front of all his friends she had revealed herself. They no doubt knew the true situation, and this shame overshadowed any nuances of sympathy. Her cheeks flushed to think of how she had been made a fool in front of everyone. Typecast as the foreigner who doesn't understand how Mexican men work. Whereas she thought that she had been different, that things had been different for her, with him, she was slotted into the same role as any other unsuspecting female. Stunned and incapable of absorbing the petty excuses and explanations he was offering her, she got up to leave.

Antonio begged her not to think poorly of him, and that was that. As she walked away, he called after her, encouraging her to come over whenever she wished, for coffee. Yes, Greta grumbled to herself, we will sip our chaste *café* instead of fucking ourselves silly. Some discontinuation of relations. Fumbling with a cigarette, determined not to validate the invitation in turning around, she swore to herself that she would never set foot inside his house again.

Electric with fury, Greta started the walk home. Her legs transformed into clean conduits for her rage, propelling her further away. She hated his arrogance in assuming that she was unaccustomed to these sorts of situations. He behaved as if she were foreign to these sorts of messy affairs, as if this were another hurdle of cultural understanding that she was incapable of surpassing. Infidelity isn't a uniquely Mexican phenomenon,

she thought to herself. As if she wasn't aware of how night lives lubricated by alcohol and chemical confusion can be slippery sometimes. She might have been new to Mexico, but she was not new to the messiness of romance, to the messiness of life.

The fact that Antonio seemed to think that she was so naïve infuriated her—it meant that what she regarded as an honest attraction between two individuals was really the Mexican dating the exotic *gringa*. Her identity, her position within *Coleto* society had, in that brief conversation, been rendered null and void. What place did she have now? The other ESL teachers, though entertaining in small, alcoholic-tinged doses were adamant in their refusals to learn Spanish, to befriend anyone outside of the tourist bars. There were some Canadians doing work with some of the human rights organizations that sprung up post-Zapatista uprising, but they arrived in Mexico secure in their respective missions to save the local population. They befriend the shoe-shine children as if they can't bear to encounter a Mexican who might resemble them. And then, rounding out the twenty-something population in town, are the New Age freaks, Claire and Leila's friends, who exist in San Cristóbal for the sake of one Don Lauro, who teaches the teachings of Carlos Casteneda. They do strange exercises in the moonlight in order to uncover their true animal spirits, place weights in the smalls of their backs when they sleep so as to facilitate disembodied dreams, and generally operate on a level of spiritual consciousness that Greta can bear only for short periods of time. Greta doesn't fit in with any of them but, because of Antonio, she has to start over again, as if she had just arrived.

She would never reveal any of this to Antonio, of course, and not because she was incapable of expressing the experience in Spanish. He didn't deserve to know.

For this, she has buttressed her disgust and fury with external nonchalance. Since they split, she feels all she does is walk, to school, to the market, to the houses of her few friends, to the other cinema in town. Walking, thinking, stewing over the affair, she considers each intersection a fateful decision. She may or may not encounter Antonio or his cohorts. Certain *cuadras* of *Real de Guadalupe*, and *B. Dominguez* are off limits; *5 de Mayo* she does not walk in the evenings. She detours elaborately from the most logical route from the centre to her house, the one that passes by his apartment on *Ejército Nacional*. These are the problems with urban migratory patterns. She always knows where he is likely to be. The town's not big enough for anonymity.

Sometimes, when she gets up the nerve, she'll walk by his apartment. His is the room facing the street; sometimes she can hear voices inside. She tells herself that she's not seeking him out if it's an accidental encounter. If he swings the front door open as she's walking past, she'll say she's been taking in the streetscape.

Even despite these precautions, she bumped into Antonio a couple of days ago. They had chatted amicably, superficially, about the things that people in a small town do when they encounter familiar strangers. He said, "*Nos vemos después, ¿okay?*" We'll see each other after.

"After what?" she asked, unfamiliar with the parting expression. The terminations to conversation with him always put her on edge. Perplexed by idiomatic expressions, she overanalyses the privileged moments of conversational etiquette, convinced that they require an exhaustive decryption that will reveal the state of their relationship. She had problems with "*adios*." When they were dating, he would always say that when they parted. But "*A-dios*," when the Canadians she knows appropriate the Spanish salutation, sounds a deliberate finality. It is a knell: Good-bye, Fare-well, Good-Riddance. For weeks, she felt as if she was constantly on the verge of the ultimate rejection. Stupidly, she didn't realise, at least in this part of Mexico, the phrase appeals to its etymology: "to God." Rolling potential mnemonics through her mind, she settled on, "For only God knows what will become of us."

"Y'know, *after*. We'll see each other *after*."

Greta kissed him on the cheek, deciding to understand that this meant they would see each other once Olivia had left. "*Bueno, nos vemos después*," she whispered in his ear. Her hand, on his side, squeezed the soft flesh. He didn't stiffen. Slowly, he tightened his arms around her, hugging her closer. He kissed her close to the ear and, for a moment, held his face pressed against hers. His hands still pressed on her back, she brushed her hand over his black dreadlocks, swept back the curly wisps over his forehead, and smoothed her fingers over the two Vs of brow where his hairline was receding. Her lips brushed his.

Half whimpering, he disengaged. "Greta, I'm sorry, I have to go. *Te juro, nos vemos despúes, ¿okay?*"

A thin smile twinged on Greta's lips. "Okay. *Adios.*" She was surprised that he had been so malleable, especially on a crowded street, where anyone might see them.

The roads are really completely impassable, though: *La Jornada*, the daily newspaper printed by a bunch of Marxists in Mexico City, has not been delivered for over a week. It's more leftwing than any other national daily that she's ever seen. Greta has come to rely on *La Jornada*. It prints all the news that Canadian papers refuse to acknowledge. Since there's no news radio in San Cristóbal, it's the only way that she can access the world without the internet.

The title means "A whole day's work": all the toil that takes place between sunrise and sundown. Every day, after work, she passes by both the shops that normally sell it, thinking how fitting it is that *la jornada* has disappeared. Hardly any of the students show up for school anymore, if any show up at all. Even though the visible markers remain—she keeps up her routines—they are hollowed-out forms of normalcy. She wants for something to puncture the suspension of disbelief, she wants to stab this mildewed incredulity and make a wound like a flower, a rose whose petals bleed to exhaustion. This standstill is too painful to endure with nothing to show for it. She wants for the aftermath already, when reconstruction will have its object, when the crisis can be objectively assessed, when she can show her scars.

Because of this daily custom, the vendors are starting to recognise her. They must wonder what motivates her persistence, her fidelity to the ritual. Wet and forlorn, she is always with the same query: "*¿Ya llegó La Jornada?*" Has the paper come? "*Mañana,* maybe, *pero quién sabe.*" Yes, indeed, she thinks. Who would know when normalcy will resume. She thanks them and, occasionally she buys one of the local papers. But they are tabloid editions that serve only to broadcast the births, deaths, and marriages alongside the scandal of the moment. These days, the front covers are always devoted to grainy photos of water cascading, rivers that have swollen to wash away another house, another small town. Relatives sob at the ruin of their homes and their livelihoods. Their faces, photographed and scrunched in permanent lament, fail to interest Greta. It's cheap journalism, all sensationalism and deluge. Paging through the porous newsprint always leaves her feeling more devastated than *au courant* with the latest news. She wants to

read about international events, the watertight and impervious happenings of heads of states and foreign governments.

For an alternative, Greta has been seeking out real narratives: fiction that would give her a sense of motion forwards, a direction. Even if she had a fictional prescription of how to pierce those frustrated circles of stalled temporality, she would feel better. She combed over her small bookcase earlier, but the only book in English she hadn't already finished reading was James Joyce's *Ulysses*. It's hardly the volume to foster chronologic fidelity. That protagonist's day was too long. Rooting through the books in the kitchen that morning, she came across a copy of Octavio Paz's *Arenas Movedizas*, a pocketbook of surrealistic short stories. It took her a while to figure out the title meant "Quicksand," even with her dictionary in hand. She has just finished reading one of these stories entitled "*Mi vida con la ola.*" Everything requires decryption, but Greta is becoming adept: *ola* is different from *hola* ("My life with the 'Hello'") and *olla* ("My life with the sauce pan"). It's "My life with the wave." It's the story of a man who falls in love with one.

Paz is gorgeous and misogynistic. In his lush descriptions—Greta has a sufficient sense of Spanish rhythms to know that his lyrical voice is exceptional, plus there's her worn and spineless dictionary to help—she is lulled into his perspective. Who wouldn't fall in love with such an aquatic creature? Her allures are manifold. She is slender, svelte. "Full and sinuous, she enfolded me like music or immense lips," Paz writes. Love is a game that they play together: she sprinkles herself onto his back, fans open like a plume of white feathers, and, unlike mortal women, with their limited number of souls and bodies, she lacks "this secret locus that makes a woman vulnerable and mortal, this small electric button around which everything spins, sparks, and pulls." The wave, in contrast, is eternal undulation. She remains the same even as she courses through the unending metamorphoses that those confined to flesh-and-blood cannot muster.

When winter comes, the man, whose love has already chilled with the weather, arrives home one day to find the wave frozen in front of the marble fire-place where there is no longer fire. She is now a statue of ice. Adeptly taking advantage of the situation, he throws a canvas sack over her form and sells her to a friend who runs a *cantina*. This new

owner immediately takes a pick to her, breaking her into small pieces and depositing her into the beer cooler. The story ends.

Another frozen narrative.

There's a distinct pounding on the front door. The coffee gurgles as it boils over. Greta extinguishes the burner flame, tosses a poncho on, and rushes out to greet the visitor.

It's brilliant, she thinks while leaping over puddles, that there is no roof to protect us when we answer the front door. All the rooms in the house, though their doors all face the courtyard, are connected by a sidewalk that is covered by an extension of the roof. The architects failed to consider the front door. She yanks the wooden door open to a shivering, navy-blue-anoraked woman. Inés. Greta hasn't seen her since the day of the dead, since that uncomfortable expedition with her and her entire extended family.

"*¿Clarita está?*" she demands.

"*Sí*, she's here. In her room."

With the affirmative response, Inés barges past Greta, brushing her shoulder without pausing to excuse herself, and trots across the courtyard towards Claire's room. Her gait is un-athletic: her legs propel her by a movement bending at the knee, her torso flinches slightly, side-to-side, while her arms shift arrhythmically at the elbow. As Greta wryly observes, she is behaving as if she hasn't already been saturated with rainwater.

When Inés reaches Claire's door, she frenetically raps against the wood. Too rushed to pause for Claire to answer, Inés scoots inside, and firmly presses the door shut again. As Greta returns to the kitchen for her coffee, she overhears the high-pitched squeals of delighted salutations. Inés is truly annoying, she decides. And too overbearing.

Although Greta wouldn't mind if her roommates were to enter her room without asking—given that she has hardly achieved a transformation of her space from a concrete chamber to living quarters, she doesn't feel that she has much to conceal—she is careful never to enter the rooms of the others without asking. More so than Leila's, Claire's room is *inhabited*: soft lighting, countless mats on the floor layered over each other, embroidered wool wall hangings, and a cradle for Arianne. Inés's blatant indifference to etiquette surprises Greta. She is a guest in the house, but she behaves as if she belongs

here more than the people who live here, as if she's Claire's guardian spirit. The mother-knows-best mentality seems to motivate most of her interactions with Claire, yet she is only the mother of one of Claire's former boyfriends.

During one of Claire's longer stints in Zinacantán, Leila took the liberty of chronicling Claire and Inés' friendship. Their relationship really began to flourish after Claire and the son broke up. Like his father, he was a musician, and Claire, according to Leila, got sick of his drifting eyes and the musician lifestyle. Probably missing her own family, Claire was determined to remain friends with Inés. They had always "fallen well together", Leila explained, in the same serious tones particular to her accounts of the origins of *Coleto* social nexus. Their proximity was enabled only once the boyfriend was out of the picture. He lives in San Cristóbal with his new girlfriend, and doesn't make it to Zinacantán so often anymore. So, once Arianne was born, Inés found the grandchild neither of her two sons had yet provided for her. According to Leila, however, the friendship causes problems. Claire's former boyfriend, who now lives in San Cristóbal, sometimes brings his current girlfriend home for dinner, and, more often than not, Claire greets them at the door.

In the recount, Greta knew Leila exaggerated Claire's obliquely self-serving tendency. "And whenever Claire's there, and they come over, she's always showing off the vegetable garden, the meals she cooked. 'Do you like my *mole*? It's Inés' special recipe! What about my *chiles rellenos*?' She makes sure that everyone knows that she belongs there, rather than Inés' own son and his girlfriend, who's practically her daughter-in-law."

Claire sweeps into the kitchen, collecting squash and tomatoes from the hanging baskets and sliding them into her shoulder bag. "I guess I'm leaving right away," she announces to Greta. "Inés came all the way into town to see if Arianne was doing okay in the chill. She's driven all that way, so I should go with her. Their house is warmer, too." Securing the remaining sweet corn tortillas in a thin blue newsprint package, and carefully depositing the package in her bag, she bids farewell. "We'll see you in a couple days, maybe a week. Help yourself to anything in the kitchen and take the stereo from my room, if you want some music."

"Cheers." Greta smiles thinly. Great, she thinks. I'm all by myself now.

Claire patters through the puddles, out the front door. Inés, who has pulled up so that the rusty truck is right in front of the house, lobs opens the passenger side door from the inside, so that Claire doesn't have to struggle with the handle while holding Arianne. Claire darts inside, shifts her body over the woven wool blanket covering the seat, and tries to shut the door behind her. Given that she only has one arm free, and that's mostly sheathed in poncho, the door thumps against the frame of the pick-up, almost latching but not quite. Inés, oblivious, guns the engine.

"Hey, wait! The door's not closed!" Claire bleats, slapping the palm of her free hand against the dashboard.

Inés doesn't take her eyes from the road. "Sorry. I thought you had it. Slam it harder at the stop on the corner." While the vehicle slows into a gentle cascade of water at the bottom of the hill, and a small spray gurgles up through the gap of the partially-closed door, Claire reaches over to the door handle and, aided by a firm kick with her right foot, manages to propel it a couple inches open. Then, her forearm taut, she prepares her body weight for the inverse lunge. The door clangs securely shut and Arianne, buried beneath several blankets, a shawl and a poncho, squawks. Claire ignores her as she fumbles with the seat belt.

"I think you did it," Inés comments dryly, checking the traffic in both directions before proceeding.

"Yeh, I did it to Arianne. Why are you driving so fast, anyway?"

"Sorry. Just nerves. The roads are pretty bad, and I was afraid that I wouldn't be able to come get you. No mudslides, though. I heard that the route to Mexico City is impassable."

"Well, like I said, I'm glad that you came to get me. The house is pretty horrible these days." Claire shudders. She tries to imagine that the motion in her shoulders releases the muscle memory of confinement in the house. It's like yoga, or meditation: she can convince her body, and thus her mind, that there are no more chills, no more damp, no more isolation to experience. No more single motherhood.

"Horrible cold or horrible in company? That one American there looks like she could be hard to manage." Inés jets left at the next corner and heads toward the

periferico, the newly-paved double-lane highway that snakes around the town. Not only is its smooth surface freshly painted with striped lane dividers, it avoids the quagmire brewing in the downtown streets, which are at a lower elevation.

"She's not American, she's Canadian. And no, she's not bad. The house is too cold. It's lonely. Depressing, *¿tu sabes*? It reminds me of the winter back in England when I was 'on the dole'... that's, uh, *ayuda sociale*, I think. When the government gives money to people who don't have jobs?" Claire always finds it strange how her memory works in images—months can be summed up in a single mental photograph, to which the elemental strands of experience bind themselves. The entirety of that season is an image through a soft filter that she retains of her coffee table in her grimy flat: the pile of roaches spreading ash over the cheap veneer surface, a couple sticks of half-burnt incense, a discarded crisp wrapper, an out-of-date television guide. An old sleeping bag snaked on the dusty sofa. The objects connote more abstract miseries: being stoned for days on end, pausing only from the ritual of rolling and smoking those green buds in zigzag blues to nap on the couch through the afternoons. The banal babble of the daytime soap operas bleeding through her dreamless slumber. Exchanging her pyjamas for tight skirts and bar slut necklines come night to visit the unmemorable prick that she was dating over those months. He worked in a pub a few blocks away; she would sip the gin and tonics he'd sneak her until he was off. A crude character with bad teeth is hardly worth remembering, now, except for what he signified. To recall his beer-and-cigarette bad breath snoring odours on her pillowcase denotes no more than the nadir of her self-esteem, a shorthand formula for the threshold of her suspended disbelief in herself. It was after that winter that she realised that she was never going to finish her master's thesis. Her father, sensing the potential sea change in Claire, loaned her the money for two-day-intensive teaching classes, the sort that certify one to teach English abroad, and for a ticket to Mexico City.

"You mean '*subsidio de desempleo*,'" Inés corrects, her eyes remaining fixed on the road. "Doesn't sound bad, though, this '*dole*' business. I wouldn't mind someone paying me to sit around and do nothing all day." She pronounces it "*doh-lay*". In two syllables, in this Mexican accent, Claire cringes. She doesn't know why she brought up any of this at all.

The harshness in Inés' voice Claire takes as another cue that she should drop the train of conversation. Inés shuts down like this whenever Claire happens upon another example of what Inés interprets to be British privilege. It vaguely annoys Claire, if only because she knows that part of Inés' attraction to her is due to this supposed pampering. In other words: Inés admires Claire for being a Feminist. The capital-F is audible when Inés explains to her friends that, in Britain, all women are raised as Feminists. They do not pander to men, for they are allowed to live exactly as they please. Claire's decision not to marry Arianne's father, to sever ties with him altogether, epitomizes this paradigm. "She lives in a house in San Cristóbal with other *females*!" Inés likes to remind her women friends in Zinacantán, the chicken seller with the tired eyes, the woman who tends the *tienda* with the *posh*-soaked husband. This single fact about Claire's life in Mexico is meant to be proof of her indestructible spirit, of her certain incarnation of the first-world feminist revolution, the one that tore away the hides of chauvinism to reveal the essence of the immortal and invincible feminine.

Claire bites her lip. Inés' envy for her, as its manifestation pendulum-swings from admiration for to alienation from, obscures the pedestrian reality of Claire's situation. There is a gulf between the two of them when they play house together—Inés takes the regularity of her domestic duties as an embarrassing burden for the sake of "patriarchy" (a word Claire taught her, and Inés has misused once or twice to describe the nature of her bonds to Señor Alfaro). Claire is, for her part, burdened by a solitude that revolves around Arianne's tiny body, a small centre whose pristine nature she must maintain, even while the rest of her identity cannot retain its gravity around that point. She feels herself washing away, essential aspects of herself trickling into muddy streams of oblivion. Inés' housewifely schedule has values that are underestimated in everyone's but Claire's eyes. She sees Inés' domestic routine like clay pots lined on a windowsill—complete this duty, then this, then the next—while Claire feels herself floating away, washing away, with nothing to contain her. The mundanity of tradition keeps one mired in the presence, even if it is a matter of enacting an unjust existence.

Not that she would choose Inés' life, but they are two competing miseries.

Inés is coasting down the highway at a velocity that slightly unnerves Claire. The drive to Zinacantán is, in good weather, about half an hour. Even in the downpour, Inés is determined not to be delayed. Thankfully, there's hardly any traffic—the occasional pick-up truck hauling some kind of freight to market, the odd taxi. Besides, even though Inés is a bit kamikaze right now, Claire knows that Inés is a good driver. Through the panes of shatter-resistant glass glazed with streams of falling water, Claire watches the foliage of the Jovel Valley flit past. Green is greener than she remembers being possible. Water-logged and charged with chlorophyll, the plants alongside the road are saturated exaggerations of lush landscape. They are embedded in a copper-creamy soil that sometimes streams pigment across the asphalt. The glistening deltas of erosion threaten to wash away the roots. The branches arc groundward from the precipitant beating, bending as if on the threshold of collapse.

In the cab, Inés is grinding her molars. Her jaw clicks a syncopated count. Wet driving gloves tense fists around the smooth-worn plastic steering wheel. The outside sounds—the erratic hum-splash-hum of tires treading through puddles, the windshield wipers flitting futilely, to and fro on the glassy cascade—with these noises of leather squelching moulded handgrips and mandible malaise, creates a frenetic, disorienting cadence. The pulsing clamour is nauseating. Inés is lost in thought. Claire can't remember the last time she was carsick. She unwraps Arianne so that her tiny face is open to the air, and rubs her hand against her back in regular circles.

Now that Greta knows she'll be returning in the evening, drenched, to a cold empty house, preparing for school is a miserable affair. The proper packing procedures have congealed into automatism: she takes her big backpack, folds the books and notes she needs for class into one plastic bag, a dry set of clothes into another, her water bottle and a piece of fruit in another. Her cigarettes, lighter, and wallet go into left-hand pocket of her polar fleece jacket, over which she layers an anorak and a poncho. She doesn't have rain pants, so she always wears the same pair of black nylon raver pants that she found in one of the second-hand clothing shops for fifteen cents. They dry more quickly than anything else, and don't hold too much water. The only problem with them is that, as

she wades through the sidewalk puddles to school, they soak and cling to her legs. The fluttering poncho only keeps the skin-tight spectacle partially concealed.

None of this makes for a pleasant stroll. Should she bend her elbows ninety degrees, should raise her hands to wipe hair from her face, rain pours down her sleeves, up her arms, down her shirt. Two of the streets she has to cross are drainage routes for the neighbourhoods at higher elevations, hell, maybe for the whole Jovel valley in whose centre crease San Cristóbal is planted. She doesn't bother to roll up her pants, or take off her sandals, as Claire recommends. She wades through, the coursing stream sometimes as deep as her knees.

The whole ordeal is hardly worth the effort, since most the students don't come to class anymore. She arrives shortly before four o'clock—today's class is meant to begin on the hour—having smoked a quick cigarette underneath the eaves half a block before the school. This is because her boss, Saúl, one of the few Mormons in San Cristóbal, considers smoking in front of children a terrible example, nearly a mortal sin. She strolls the last stretch oblivious to the rain: by now she's soaked, and, if she keeps to the right hand edge of the sidewalk, the eaves along these canary-yellow houses shield all but her left shoulder from direct rain. She can't get much more drenched, anyway. At school, she changes into her dry clothes in the smelly ochre-painted washroom underneath the stairs, then goes upstairs to wait.

Waiting is the worst part. She never prepares her lectures—she doesn't have to, since the teacher's guide anticipates unqualified instructors and has every lesson plan described in exhaustive detail—so the waiting is sheer boredom. She's always forgetting *Arenas Movedizas* at home, so she doesn't have anything to read. To kill time, she washes down the whiteboard, arranges her erasable markers on the tabletop, and repositions all the students' desks on the grey linoleum floor so that they each have a clean sightline to the immaculate whiteboard. Once that is done, her watch reads that it's ten after four. If Pedro doesn't show up soon, she's going to head somewhere for dinner. He's the only student who will brave the storm to make it to class. If he doesn't show, she'll have to repeat the procedure in two hours for the next batch of students.

Prying one of the windows open, she presses her torso out over the window ledge. She pulls a cigarette from the pocket of her polar fleece jacket, and, balanced so that her

entire arm and head are outside, she is overlooking the courtyard below while shielded from the rain by the roof's overhang. She has another smoke. The school was created after her employer was denied the latest opening for an ESL instructor at the University, again—of all people, Claire beat him out this time. Claire pointed out the obvious reason why Saúl was rejected three times from the ivory tower: his English was only recognizable as such to Mexican monolinguals. At any rate, because of this final institutional slight, and because San Cristóbal already had four English-language schools operating independently of the university, Saúl's "Oxford English Language Academy" evolved as a strictly capitalistic enterprise to laud linguistic mediocrity at low, low prices.

Greta wouldn't have guessed that Pedro would be the only student so committed to the class. He's the Tzotzil twenty-eight-year-old for whom English is his third language. "Second and a half" might be a better description. He is, in this regard, one of the school's star pupils: he has been bumped up the scholastic echelons of linguistic proficiency to the most senior level offered by the school. In the spring, for students such as Pedro, Saúl intends to introduce TOEFL-preparation courses, which will enable Pedro cerfication from the Test Of English as First Language. Greta has seen old copies of this exam—most native speakers would have difficulty achieving the scores required for official fluency in English. She knows that she will be asked to instruct these classes, and she is dreading it. Judging by the abilities of the penultimate level, all the students will fail the exam. As instructor, she will be held responsible for that mass sacrifice to the gods of English grammar, as if the entire structure of the academy has not conspired to lead them to their fates. Another identity in this culture will be cleaved from her amorphous strangeness and will perish alongside her student's hopes of linguistic fluency.

When Pedro arrives, predictably twenty minutes late, Greta decides that they should spend the remaining hour and a half of class playing Scrabble. They use the Spanish board that is usually kept hidden in the closet downstairs, the one reserved for teaching materials. It comes with special tiles for the "ñ", "ch", "ll", and "rr", which makes playing in English a lot harder, even before taking into account the different frequency of letters, lack of a "w", and their adjusted values. Nevertheless, wanting to maintain a shred of instructional authority, Greta makes a deal with him that, although

she will spell the words in Spanish, he has to play in English. She makes him promise that he won't tell Saúl that she has given up on the lesson plan. It seems ridiculous to lecture when she will have to repeat everything once everyone starts to show up again.

Saúl tends to chastise her for these games that she plays with her students when one or two attend class. Adding insult to insubordination, these "time-wasters" are unmentioned in the teacher's guide, which is the only interface with both the English language and pedagogical strategy that the school management recognises. These days, she doesn't trust his logic that they should continue to keep on illegally-photocopied schedule even without most of the students. After the latest of these periodic confrontations, she had visions of standing in an empty classroom, proceeding with the assigned timeline. In fact, she realised acerbically, she could probably pick up the pace, since she wouldn't waste any time responding to those pesky questions that students tend to ask.

As she unfolds the playing board on the linoleum floor in the centre of the classroom, and passes Pedro a wooden ledge for the tiles, she remembers one last thing. "Pedro, *una cosa más: no digas a Saúl que estoy hablando Español, por favor.*" Don't tell Saúl that I'm speaking Spanish. These days, the exasperated enunciation of ESL English is wearying Greta. Her throat goes dry from speaking so slowly, her jaw tires from the exaggerated syllables and facial expressions. It is the stuff of dramaturgy: she is supposed to be imitating Saúl's atrocious accent, reproducing the way that words are wadded up in his thick Mexican jowls, softened like a mother-beast who partially digests the food that she then spits into the open mouths of her pampered offspring. She can only fail at this role, and the students frequently swing by Saúl's office to complain about the inadequacies of her daily performances. No matter what she does for them, she disappoints, because they simply can't understand her English, her foreignness. She could make up other excuses, racism or sexism or ageism (she is younger than two-thirds of her students), but that would only politicise the atomic xenophobia at stake: she is not Saúl, and that is that.

Today the incarnation of that imperfect role is too daunting. The unpopularity of her professorial attitude cleaves away at some sensitive tissue, as does the universal

incomprehension of her native tongue. She wants to appear as an equal, as another who is learning the language of a culture. Today, she will speak Spanish.

Besides, she tells herself, Pedro is far more interesting company with a vocabulary exceeding a dozen verbs, fifteen adjectives, and maybe a hundred nouns. She reaches into the soft wine-coloured sac and pulls out an 'ñ'. Pedro produces an 's'. "We ahr starting game!" Pedro declares proudly.

"Sí, sí," Greta smiles as she draws her tiles and begins to contemplate how the bonus squares on the game board align with the array of letters before her. Even though the tiles are a bit bizarre—she was dinged with the "ch", the "rr" and the "ll" on her first draw—she chooses to focus on the familiarity of the tiles, the board.

"*Llena*," she announces, laying down the four tiles. She's spelt "full," vaguely aware of the irony of the word, when she feels so empty. "*Llena como el cielo, tal vez*," she adds softly. Maybe full like the skies. Scoring the word on a scrap piece of paper, only fourteen points, is nonetheless buoyed. She loves Scrabble—making linguistic sense out of a random assortment of letters has always been soothing for her. The way that the meagre impotency of the single letter pieces come together for structured meaning represents something strangely primordial, like the witnessing of creation. And she is creator.

"Hey, Pedro, what's the word for these games, "cross words" in Spanish?"

"I don't know what you talk about."

Greta performs some mental calculations. Cross-words, mots-croisés, *palabras cruzadas?*

"Y'know, the blanks going up and down, you fill in the words... are they called *palabras cruzadas?* Published in the newspaper everyday?" She immediately regrets the query—she doubts that Pedro actually reads any newspaper.

"No, I think you think of *los crucigramas*." Pedro doesn't look up from his tiles. "*Por favor,* teacher, I am thinking very hard right now." His body is curled toward the slate of tiles, crouching cross-legged on the floor. There is a sprinkling of dandruff on the crown of his down-turned head. His collar is damp from the rain, glistens of moisture on his neck. Suddenly, without conversation, sitting alone together on the floor is a

proximity that makes Greta slightly uncomfortable. His breathing is thick, a sturdy pacing of air that deserves the barrel-shaped torso from which it emanates.

Greta knows that he comes from some small town in the mountains, and, in the same way that she is mesmerized by the bodies of farmers, their musculature honed by subsistence work, she is fascinated by the flesh before her. Even if she admits that she is captured in an idealism about labouring on the land, about a full day's tilling the fields, sunrise to sunset, and the bodies that are bound to such processes, she finds herself staring at the little bits of his skin exposed. A thick greasy darkening in his skin rings his collar line, a permanent suntan, and his fingernails are bluntly trimmed. He has one leg stretched out; beneath the worn-out jeans, she imagines that his skin is like Antonio's, smooth caramel pigmented. Masculine is masculine.

In the slowest, most pensive motion, his right hand begins to move up from the linoleum, his stocky fingers are setting down letters. C A R S. Greta surveys the moment. He has taken ten minutes to spell a four-letter word. Six months from now, he will be writing an exam that will confer the same linguistic fluency as a native speaker's. Pedro looks up, and, at once, she is reminded of the yellow stench of his breath. His hand moves to his nose, just to scratch the side of his nostril, but he is the one in the class who feels no shame in scratching at his nasal interiors. Greta had noted it as a gulf in cultural norms, and now she is repulsed. Besides, he's not Antonio, he's not even a farmer. He's a schoolteacher who goes to the same church as Saúl, who intends to return to his village in a few years, once he tires of the city life, once he learns English well enough to teach it in the local school.

Even with the restrictions Greta has imposed on the Scrabble game, that she play in Spanish and he in English, she will beat him easily. When she spells "*churros*", the word for fried, doughnut-like pastries, whose batter snakes from a star-shaped mould into a vat of oil, he is shocked. "How'd you learn that word?" he asks in Spanish.

"I pass by a *churro* seller on the way to school every day" she replies, still maintaining a feigned sweetness in her voice.

Claire has just finished frying the *chiles rellenos* when Inés' husband crashes in through the front door. *Chiles rellenos* are her speciality, pretty much the only dish that

she can contribute to Inés' cooking. She scorches the *poblado* peppers on the *comal*, pressing the dark emerald skins against the hot metal until they are blistered black. While they sweat in a paper bag, she mixes the fresh cheese and vegetables for the filling, then slices the peppers open to stuff. Finally, she coats the pepper packages in a batter made of egg whites and flour, then begins to fry them, four at a time, in a fry pan.

The chicken isn't finished, but the rice is. One could argue two-thirds of the meal is ready, which is better than zero thirds ready. This isn't good enough for Señor Alfaro. He's home early—he drives a taxi, and obviously there isn't much business right now, as hardly anyone will venture out in the rain. He plops down at the head of the table—Inés still hasn't set out the cutlery, since she didn't expect him for another couple of hours—without bothering to change out of his wet clothing. His leather jacket is darkened with moisture—he is too stylish for plastic. "Where's dinner?" he barks. Even over the aroma of the fresh frying *chiles*, Claire can smell the *posh*, sugar cane moonshine, infused in and dripping from each syllable of his demand.

Turning from fluffing the rice so that she is a three-quarters portrait to her husband, Inés speaks submerged venom. "You're home early. It's not ready yet. I had to go get Claire; then we had to stop to get the chicken. The roads are terrible and you know how they are at the butcher's. Five minutes to sell us chicken and half an hour to gush over our granddaughter."

Pedro jerks his head to the side, violently, as if he's been slapped across the cheek, and scowls. "That child is not our granddaughter! Why do you keep telling everyone in town that she is? Do you realize," he roars, setting his hands on the table to steady himself as he rises to his feet, "that every time you tell someone that, you're sullying the name of our son, who certainly is not the father? Men come up to me and ask how my son can prance around with his girlfriend when his wife is at home, with you, with the child."

"Pedro, Pedro, Pedro," Inés chants. She has turned back to the pot of rice, and is fluffing the grains with methodical vigour. "Quit taking things so seriously. Everyone understands that I call little Arianne my granddaughter only because I consider Claire to be as a daughter to me."

"No, they don't! They don't understand! You know how the people in this town are! They're fucking mules! They don't hear 'I wish I had a granddaughter' when you call that baby your '*nieta.*' And where the hell is my dinner? I come home from a hard day at work and I want to eat, goddamnit!" His tongue thickens pink with fury, as if each mouthful of words is an offence to his palate. Saliva froths at the corners of his mouth and his lips curl back to bare teeth as he spits out syllables.

Setting a ceramic bowl over the plate of *chiles rellenos*, Claire decides that this is an opportune moment to go check on Arianne. Without looking up at Señor Alfaro, she crosses the room and heads into the hallway.

In the guestroom, Arianne is still sleeping. The clock on the wall reads half past eight. Dinner is late, but Señor Alfaro isn't usually home until ten. Inés has to prepare everything for six, the hour that he says that he will be home, the hour that he gets off his shift, but typically he stops for drinks with his friends after work. The sole *cantina* in town is a stale place, serving only *posh* and *caguëmas* of cheap beer to the exclusively male clientele. Claire has never been inside, of course, but has glimpsed through the entrance into the shady, cigarette-stinky room where the regulars gamble over cards and drinks, wager bills on the edges of worn pool tables. Señor Alfaro knows all the men. It's a boys' club, populated with the sort of husband that Claire despises. The ones that won't let their wives breastfeed their babies in the night time because that's more irritating than an infant wailing. The ones who demand sex from their post-partum spouses, whether the women are willing or not. When Claire hears stories of these men, usually when she's in the market and talking to other new mothers, she cheerily points out that this, precisely, is why she does not have a husband. She sees little differentiation between the type and the particular instance, or chooses not to. Inés' husband is an ogre like all the rest. A dirty man who has bypassed the normative processes of human maturation, and remains suspended in this mealworm existence. She sees no need to apprehend the specifics of character any longer.

She can hear that in the kitchen, in her absence, the argument is escalating. She never knows what to do when this happens. Señor Alfaro will calm down in a bit, a few minutes or a few hours—he is predictable like that—but she feels as if she is abandoning Inés when she disappears into the other room. Of course, Inés has to deal with him all the

time, but Claire feels that her presence might help Inés realise that she doesn't have to live like this. The woman is interesting because she knows about raising babies and making sense of the market stalls of regional vegetables, but Claire wishes that she would stand up for herself more often, that she would just leave him. She's talked to Inés about that, about her moving into the house in Cuxtitali, but Inés is bound to Zincantán—it's not even her village, but his—and the incomprehensible security that she derives from serving him.

Claire rustles under the blankets on the bed and curls her body around Arianne's tiny form. She watches the infant's breathing, mesmerized by the way that her tiny irises flit beneath thin eyelids. What do babies dream about? She wonders. Suckling? Sunlight? The womb? Arianne exhales deeply: it's a small breath, and Claire wants to grasp it in her hand, to feel the lightness of this being, to document the infant's ethereal purity.

This is why she doesn't need a husband. She has Arianne; the two of them are just fine together. If only Inés would realise.

Outside, the storm kicks up again. A rush of wind shudders the house, batters the window shutters open. Through the window, the back porch light illuminates a pocket of night. Rain is falling in sheets on the patio, on the waxy leaves of the avocado tree, up to the incandescent perimeter of the single bulb's diffusion. Beyond that is raging darkness.

Claire has tried, particularly in the past week or so, to think of the wind as a benevolent force. Even if the wind that she's been dealing with has been the spin-off of the hurricanes in the Yucatán, which almost doesn't count as wind at all. She's not sure what it counts as, but normal breezes are perplexing enough for her. Occasionally, in the past, she has tried talking to the gusts, usually when she's wrapped in its midst. She wished that it would go away as she lugged Arianne and her groceries up the hill to Cuxtitali, wondering if her pleas were best phrased in English or Spanish or in the broken Mayan she picked up years ago tutoring a Mayan student. If she could only divorce her dialogue from language altogether, she thought the wind would finally understand. Once she attuned herself to the gusts, once she focused on the sensation as an animate force, though, she found that she didn't know what to say at all. Of course she could still beg for it to relent its force upon her, but she became so overwhelmed by its sadness. Somehow, to penetrate its obliviousness for the momentary plight of a single overburdened woman

on her way home seemed arrogant. As it swept through the streets, the wind cried a melancholia for civilization itself.

This wind, though, is different. She thinks she is intimidated by it in the same way that she is by Señor Alfaro, the same way that she is by the men on the street who whistled at her blonde hair even when she was nine months pregnant. No, she clarifies to herself, the grunts and piercing noises of the men are dumb, muddy taunts that stick to her skin, that sully her spirit. They seek to conquer feminine strength. This wind is more than that, if only because it is louder, it is vengeful. It is a sheer will, a sand-scouring ambition that endeavours to efface the pettiness of architecture and urban dwellers, the curvaceous sanctity of geographical form. The wind is an unabashed fury at mankind and all that sustains the edifices of civilisation.

And through this torment, Claire can hear screaming. It is a woman's voice, woven into the ominous droning tenor of the storm's hail. It sounds like *la Llorona*, the weeping woman, the one who was abandoned by her husband and, in her rage, drowned her children. When she realised what she had done, she cut her throat on the riverbank overlooking the current that washed away the small, swollen bodies. Or some variation on the theme—Claire's heard so many different versions. In Zincantán, in any of these communities distanced from urban progress, some people still believe in ghosts. Particularly the women, they like to warn Claire of all the ill that might befall Arianne. La Llorona, she's been told, steals infants and young children who wander out in the rain by themselves. Sometimes they will say that the weeping woman is *La Malinche* herself, the mistress of and first translator for Cortés who, when she became aware of her complicity in the conquest of the Mexican peoples, committed the same slaughter.

Claire shivers. The room is cold. She covers herself in blankets. A few layers of wool will keep away the draughts through the window, if not the cold breezes of superstition. The clock reads quarter past nine. It's not too early to sleep.

At home in Cuxtitali, Greta shudders in her bed. Nothing is warm. She's decided to give up on the showers she thought would warm her up—the hot water heater is working, but something is wrong with the cistern that holds the heated water. Turned on full-strength, the shower nozzle emitted nothing more a vigorous trickle. Given that the

bathroom door is so swollen by humidity that it refuses to fit into its frame anymore, a constant draught of cold air fanned into the shower stall where, naked, Greta cupped her numb hands under the stream and splashed her body. When she got too chilly to handle it anymore, she towelled herself off, leapt into her damp clothes, and leapt into bed.

With two candles, four blankets, and a caguëma of the familiar superior beer, camping out in bed could be worse. She has moved the stereo into her room, and is listening to the radio. On her way home, she had remembered that Saturday nights Antonio's radio programme was on. Although she knew about the programme before they knew each other well—he had to leave in the middle of a screening once when she was the sole attendee—it's on at an awkward time. As he, too, has admitted, no one who cares for his sort of music sits at home and listens to the radio at ten o'clock on a Saturday night.

Greta, of course, does. Or, she is at home on Saturday nights. She just doesn't remember to listen to the radio. Even before the hurricane hit, she realised that she despised going out. "Out" came to represent an ultimate vulnerability to social undulations, a matter of avoiding Antonio's gang, and the mostly futile struggle to re-establish a circle of familiar faces. When Claire and Leila are around, they usually have their friends over in the evenings, people they befriended in the classes they take to learn the magic of the Carlos Casteneda books. They grate on Greta, but she forces herself to spend time with them so that she, at least, spends time with someone. She uses them to break up her solitude in the same way that she makes sure to eat vegetables at every meal.

Meanwhile, the radio cranks out tinny *musica ranchero*. Taking a sip from the caguëma, Greta wonders how much longer she'll have to endure this. She lights a cigarette off of one of the candle flames, and sits, smoking, wondering how the myth came about that she just killed a sailor. That seems to be a European superstition, one of the ones that she's picked up from staying with other travelers in Latin American hostels. It is strange how cultures of exteriority blend together. Canadians would no doubt think that she's being ridiculous. At home, her friends would find the slight British accent she's picked up pretentious. That's from having to enunciate so clearly to Claire's waning Anglophone ear, from drinking with the only other ESL teachers from abroad, who are British, in loud bars. But the drunker she gets during these "after work beer" drinking

sessions, the harder it becomes to avoid speaking Spanish. She is everything foreign and nothing familiar to everyone all the time.

At any rate, these days, if you count walking in the rain as a nautical exercise, everyone is a seafarer. She's staring at the ochre-painted concrete wall, eyes absently fixed on the postcard she taped to the wall above her desk. It's the only decoration in her room, this skeleton in a *sombrero* strumming his guitar. His ossified mandible cracks open a gumless grin. This figure does not cease to mesmerize her: he is in pieces, yet he holds himself together. His lack of flesh is no deterrent to his corporeal integrity. In fact, it might make him more flexible, more adept at the contortions that are joyous. But the question remains: how do things come back to life?

Yesterday, Greta could have hazarded that Olivia had gone home. There was an absence in the air. The thought of him was freer in her mind. She imagined herself to certainty that he, too, was caressing the thought of her, lusting after the memory. Then, last night, she saw them together, in the same room where she had been with him, the two of them together in bed. She dreamt that they had fallen in love and Olivia was going to stay to live in San Cristóbal. A perfect picture-book ending. When Greta awoke, it was raining. In the dull morning, she morosely acknowledged that anything that she could say about the affection that had passed between her and Antonio would be the stuff of utter fiction. Enough time had passed that memory had disintegrated, that the idea of his body fused with hers had revealed itself as ephemera. She now has nothing, not even an image, onto which she might anchor her memories.

His voice comes on, finally. Despite the consternation of her better judgment, Greta's shoulders collapse into pillows. It is a relief to hear him, to know that he still exists, that his mouth still moves, that his voice still is. She moves onto her mattress in order to be closer to the stereo. She wants to cup the stream of intonations and keep them in a glass bowl. She wants a pond where her quicksilver memories turn to keepsake, turn to goldfish for the sake of keeping.

And yet his words are still slipping from her ear, sliding into invisible drainage chutes that she can't block off. He is hardly recognizable on air. His language is culled of street-trash-talk and slang and inserted into the brusque etiquette of song identification. *Where are you, who are you, where are you.* She is begging him in her mind, calling out

to him in pleas so well-enunciated. Please speak more slowly. *Más despacio, mi amor.* Let me hold onto you.

A song comes on, something that just sounds like *electronica* to Greta. She crawls from bed to find one of the roaches that she found abandoned in the kitchen a few days ago and had decided to save. It's by her mattress, half-flattened by her discarded copy of *Ulysses*. Touching the charred tip to a candle's flame, Greta takes a couple of puffs. The music in the background crescendos to a computerized haze. She stubs the joint out on the concrete floor, promising that she'll sweep tomorrow.

When he speaks again, the marijuana has hit her and she half expects him to call to her by name. But he hardly says anything at all—he doesn't comment on the music, only announces the next track. For once, she wishes that he would be like other DJs who ramble on, tell pretentious stories about how "I met this musician once backstage" and how humourous the episode was. She doesn't care what. She just wants his voice, as if that would enable her to lay claim to his identity, something static.

After three or four songs, Greta finally relaxes and starts to listen to his musical selections. She's stoned and surprised by how *good* the music is. It envelopes her, wraps her, and she swears he's moving into the ribbons of sound that are flooding over her. Reverberations merge. An acoustic moment elongates until its theoretical purity streams forth: undulation for which no commencement or finality is imaginable. Greta is a particle amidst this unending musical metamorphosis, coasting on the possibilities beyond whatever the tactile instruments, of sinew strings and lacquered shells, might muster.

When he announces the ultimate selection of the show, Greta is jolted from her reverie. In the clipped tones, his voice higher in pitch than she remembered, he thanks his special guest co-DJ who hasn't said a word. A woman's voice speaks to thank him for thanking her. Her accent is so perfectly Mexican and, as she forms those precise, soft words, her voice is so induced with love that Greta melts. She needs no more proof that this is Olivia. If they aren't perfect for each other, then they're just about.

With that, the programme ends. Greta listens for a while, waiting for more information, or an accidentally broadcast conversation where private voices limn

celebrity. The next DJ comes on, though, a gruff older man who coos an enthusiastic greeting before returning the station's broadcast to chirpy *ranchero*.

She rustles through her handbag for the jiffy marker that she leaves there, for when she finds herself before an impromptu graffiti job. Greta is familiar with the problems of surface: so she knows the ink will bleed into the sheets. She knows the words will be illegible in the morning and that she won't know what was so important to record amidst this maelstrom once it has passed. Tomorrow, in the morning, the rain will be falling in straight lines to the ground again, emptying to the lowest altitude, eventually to the ocean. Catharsis is purifying; a flood is a cliché. She tears off her two sweaters and t-shirt in one motion, and uncaps the marker. Her skin, in the air, ripples almost instantly to goose-bumps. Her nipples are chestnut coloured points. When she sets the marker down upon her skin, she thinks herself a blank white sheet.

The Lesbian Flick

Para realizarse, el amor necesita quebrantar la ley del mundo. En nuestro tiempo, el amor es escándalo y desorden, transgresión: el de dos astros que rompen la fatalidad de sus órbitos y se encuentran en la mitad del espacio.

For love to realise itself, it must violate the law of the world. In our time, love is scandal and disorder, transgression: that of two stars that rupture the fatality of their orbits and find themselves in the middle of space.

-Octavio Paz *El Laberinto de la Soledad*

After sex with Olivia last night, Antonio chose to light up a joint to help him sleep. "We are ritualistic people," he declared, flicking his tongue across the adhesive edge of the rolling paper. In one fluid motion, he rolled the paper into a tightly-packed marijuana cigarette, smoothed its round diameter between thumb and forefinger, then plunged its length once quickly through his lips damply pursed open. Saliva lightly coating the chlorine-whitened paper, it wouldn't burn too fast. He shuffled through the *bric-à-brac* on the bedside table for his lighter, and for a moment after the flint sparked, he puffed rapidly on the joint to keep it aflame. His cheeks bulged slightly before each inhalation, and he kept his eyes fixed on the ember flushing brighter. He knew that Olivia was scowling at him, her features tensed into that perturbed grimace that was her normal reaction to his smoking weed before sleep. As she had told him many times, lighting up a joint after sex is one of the least romantic things that one might do. Some time ago, however, she realised that this verbal chastising made no difference to Antonio's behaviour. Reverting to the more universally intelligible system of facial discontent and grumbling, she had, no doubt, hoped that the simplified message would become more evident in its intones.

Undeterred from his habit, Antonio adopted the blissful attitude that a deliberate disregard yields. He reclined on his back as the room filled with green-sweet smoke, ashing on the floor by the bed. Tomorrow, maybe he would sweep. Thoughts that dealt with domestic duties dissolved in the smoky halo surrounding his body. His only

concerns in that moment were the fumes deepening in his chest, the perfectly round smoke rings that lofted and dissipated in the yellowy light of his beside lamp.

When she first came back to San Cristóbal, Antonio had tried the first couple of nights to forego this nighttime ritual, but he hadn't been able to sleep. Up until the hurricane hit, he had waited until her breathing deepened, until snores hit the crescendo of her breathing, until her arm loosened from around his torso. Then, slipping into his boxer shorts, he would sneak out into the living room, tiptoeing and furtive, a cartoonish insubordination.

The few times she awoke when he returned to bed, he mumbled something about having to use the washroom. Despite the obvious aroma of his breath as he pressed his lips against hers, bidding her good night for the second time, she seemed not to catch on. The masquerade persisted until the rains descended and the roads back to Mexico City washed out. Cognizant that such calamities are not so expediently undone, Antonio gave up on appearances. As all other imprints of routine dissolved, he judiciously resolved that mutual adoration should be oblivious to such petty squabbles.

So, last night, in bed and supremely relaxed, Antonio had a few good tokes, then set the rest of the joint somewhere. Smothering the ember on the lid of the metal box that held his stash, he deliberately let this appear as a concession—just a little bit of weed before bed. Too much and you can't sleep, anyway, but she didn't know that. He expected her to be impressed that he didn't smoke the whole thing. Once the joint disappeared, she sighed and rolled over to embrace him. Her breasts pressed soft rounds against the side of his ribcage, her arm laid across his chest to grip his shoulder, her thin elbow resting on the small mesh of hair in the middle of his chest. She kissed his cheek good-night.

Antonio, too, exhaled. Stoned, he felt that her body finally felt comfortable next to his. This newfound tranquillity came in waves, verves of electrical somnifacient. He felt striations flow around their bodies, knitting them in a cocoon together, a shell of fuzzy slumber sealed warm and impenetrable. Dreamless sleep coaxed him away.

Now, in the morning, he can't figure where he put that half spliff. Still naked, surveying his room from his cross-legged perspective on the mattress, he doesn't see it

anywhere. That was it, he has no more weed. This is unfortunate. The canister is crumbs and stems. He can get some more without any difficulty but that entails leaving the house. It can't be past noon, and it's pouring. Of course, Olivia pranced out of here a few hours ago, but that's what she's good at doing: waking up and zipping to work. Her custom of waking early has never wreaked such havoc before—usually she's down for a week, or he's up in Mexico City for a week, so the differences have never sunk in.

"Sheeee-it," he drones in English, collapsing back onto the mattress and drawing the covers up around his chin. "*Esta mañana está chingada.*" This morning is fucked.

The notion of "morning" has been a recent reintroduction to his diurnal lexicon. For the past five years that he's been in San Cristóbal, he's been working in nightlife culture, in some manner or another, be it bartending, running movies at Zapata Vive, organizing the monthly raves in town, or the club that he tried to open himself a couple years back, when he really believed that San Cristóbal could support a club that played real *electronica*. After that venture failed, he reverted to the monthly raves, relying on that and his late-night radio programme to sate his musical predilections. The only sunrises he had seen before Olivia returned had been those parties when everything worked out, when the music, the chemicals, and the people converged in a euphoric frenzy that crescendoed at dawn.

Both of them had been in a bad mood in the morning. Olivia woke up at nine, though they must not have slept before three or four. She shook him awake, from dreams flexible and lucid that rapidly dissolved in the chilly morning air. His first thoughts were pleas for a different weather system, one that might break through and relieve them from this climate. He shivered and buried his face in his pillow. If he could just wake up when all of this was over.

Olivia tried to get him to go to work with her. She decided about the same time that the roads washed out—which stranded her in Antonio's warm, marijuana-infused embrace—that he should be working with her at *Derechos Humanos* with her again. When they met, almost two years ago now, he was out of work, and she had exerted her managerial potency in creating a temporary position for him. Since the situation at Zapata Vive had deteriorated to the point where he hadn't been paid for almost a month—and, because of this, had been subsisting on his relatively meagre drug-dealing profits—Olivia

had begun periodically to insinuate that he might work again for the human rights organisation.

He is certain that she would find him a good position, plus there was the fact that he desperately needs the money. He should have been convinced. His reticence continued to spin around insubstantial issues—weed, for one, but also for not having finished his degree. Or, rather, for not having completed the mandatory *servicio social* after his coursework that would grant him the piece of paper. For someone who declared herself so political, she failed to understand why he refused to do two years of volunteer work at some government agency in order to be a legitimate graduate. He argued that it was a transparent ploy: demand that the newly educated "free thinkers" slave on the government's behalf, then see what sort of citizens emerge. Having completed hers at an inner-city women's shelter, Olivia maintained that the experience isn't indoctrination. Nevertheless, Antonio knew that the point of the volunteer stint (if it could be considered *voluntary* when there's hardly any choice in the matter) is to teach people, by trial and tempering, how to become blind to routine corruption. How to laud blatant inefficiency. How to faithfully maintain the status quo.

It was the trajectory of betterment that she's forcing on him, from bar culture to keen bureaucracy, that bothered him. He was irritated by the presumption that one is integrally superior to the other, when both are plagued by their respective problems. Temporary financial problems aside, he announced he was quite happy with the rest of his life.

For these reasons, he declined the offer to go for breakfast prior to her going in to the *Derechos* offices. Breakfast marked the cusp of one slippery slope: after they ate, she'd insist that he walk her to work. There, she would persuade him to come into her office and help her do something, and soon it would be lunch, or close enough that he should stay and eat with her, and, then, maybe, he'd be able to flee after lunch. Most likely not, though. No, he was not going for breakfast. It was too much of a commitment.

To show that she wasn't afraid of the morning, she stood, naked, and flexed her arms above her. In the cloudy light filtered through the curtained windows, he saw goose bumps spread over her flesh. Her skin looked embossed with frost. Her nipples tightened. She switched on the stereo: the same music that cushioned the sounds of their

lovemaking from his housemates now gushed into and over the quiet drone of street traffic and rain. She began to dress, *meno mosso*. Music touched her hips, as small spirals on a pelvis that rippled slight gyration. The sight of her sent a shivering cascade over Antonio's body. Those sounds were meant to incite bodies to action: last night, so that their flesh might delve in pleasure, this morning, cruelly, to enter the cold deluge.

Nonetheless, he watched. Dressing is a delicate thing. Her body out from bed insinuated a more absolute absence: desire began to well in that taunting of the perhaps-forevermore-irretrievable. As she bent over to retrieve her underwear, her breasts hung down, two fleshy pendulums united in the same gentle swinging motion. He could not reach them, even if he tried: she had transformed herself into a spectacle. Uncovering the undergarments from the formless clothing on the floor, she scooped her breasts into the cups of her bra, slid her legs through her panties. Antonio, still observing, felt his penis harden.

At first, he wasn't certain for what reason a simultaneous tide of disgust began to creep over him. In the subdued shades of the morning, all he knew was that their bodies suddenly became ugly. Shadows enveloped half her body, while the other half was illuminated by the light through the window. Chiaroscuro images such as this are sometimes hard to read, he realised: one glance they are one thing and, in the next, they are precisely the inverse. Two profiles or a flower vase. A soft bum or cellulite. The portrait of a young woman or the profile of an old spinster. Curvaceous hips or stretch marks. His belly, meanwhile, had morphed glutinous. The ruffle of coarse hair on his skin, up from the pubic bone, had thickened, as if the venom of older age was seeping over surfaces.

They made eye contact. Too perplexed to have a reaction prepared, his gaze was indifferent. She glared at him, and continued to search for the rest of his clothes. Antonio peered down at the tented bed sheet on his lap, his freshly recognised chicken legs extended as minor folds on either side. We're no different from two dogs that get stuck fucking in the street, he thought. In all the clamour and yelping, it becomes difficult to figure which is hurting the other, or whether they are both suffering equally and mutually inflicting the pleasure that has turned on itself.

It had been six weeks since she arrived. Their bodies had become so familiar that Antonio developed a corresponding amnesia regarding the naked bodies of other women. Olivia's flesh was becoming an extension of his own—her unshaven armpits, the weight of her breasts, the nubbled brown ovals of her nipples. The freckles scattered across her shoulder blades, the mole on her inner thigh: somewhere along the way, he himself was transformed into the liturgy of her irreducible physical self. Yet he remained perplexed. *How it is that we are dissolving so readily into the stereotypes of heterosexual love?* Her cunt has become all cunts, yet his insertion into its warmth is a cliché that remained peculiarly inexhaustible.

Six weeks of regular sex and a domestic conjugality: he knew something had changed when he started to cringe upon hearing the love ballads that he used to like to hum under his breath. Passing the metal working shop down the street, he began to curse their naiveté. Those are the men blaring their radio on the sentimental station day in day out—even through the rain, the melodies were clear in the streets. He figured that they must have turned up the volume to compensate for the white noise of raindrops on sheet-metal roofs. He failed understand how his sensibilities had turned on him. Love became nothing more than a bland arrangement of phrases; the patterns of mating ritual were rendered so mundane. The soaring ballads proved how thoroughly steeped the illusion was in popular consciousness: everyone yearns for their soul's fulfilment to be found in another.

Yet up close, in these shared quarters with Olivia, the romantic salvation to which the songs aspire, to which he aspired, suddenly seemed a concept too feeble to contest with reality. Love doesn't change anything in the world, at least not the secluded and sequestered affections between two thrown together in a storm. Two bodies hermetically sealed in this small place to endure the downpour.

She was dressing, making herself proper for public exposure, disguising her particular contours in a uniform of Mexican femininity. She stepped into the tight hip-hugging black jeans, boot-cut, wriggled into a spaghetti-string tank top, a yellow polyester cardigan. Her stockinged feet slid into sturdy black boots, the ones with an exaggerated heel to elevate her posture. She straightened, smoothing her hands over her

body in that unconscious and exclusively female appraisal of self. She was femininity, and Antonio's response was exquisite nonchalance.

For, to him, she looked absolutely typical. The transition was complete. Letting his hand slip to his crotch, Antonio absently stroked himself. Flesh was more exotic last night.

Last night, they went to see one of the films showing for *Festival de Cinéma Francés*. Olivia had picked up a festival guide weeks ago, but the only one that piqued her interest was the one called *La Répétition*. The description in the festival guide made it sound like a steamy lesbian romance. Being the more ardent feminist, Olivia had to convince Antonio to go see it. In Mexico City, there is no stigma associated with her overt endorsement of the homosexual lifestyle. For her, it is a political cause. For him, quite aware of the degree to which Chiapas is the backwaters of Mexico, he must tread a thinner line. Less distinction is made between those who support gays and lesbians for the sake of human equality—and Antonio has no problem doing that, when individuals are concerned—and those who support the cause for motivations more personally interred.

The rumour that the owner of Zapata Vive prefers masculine company, for instance, has precluded the relationship that most bar-owners have with the police. As far as Antonio understands, it's a matter of plying the officers with the effects of their desires when they show up, and making semi-annual donations to the city's budget. Subsection: voluntary contributions to general urban upkeep. Though the owner follows the letter of bribery's etiquette, he constantly remains out of favour. Whenever the municipal authorities decide their coffers are waning, he gets busted for the regular charges: evidence of illicit drug use within the bar, and presence of minors in an establishment serving alcohol. This is an obnoxious cycle, for both the employees and the clientele: every three or four months, Zapata Vive closes up. No one is paid, and the more oblivious regulars are left to wonder why sixteen-year-old coke sniffers have no problems anywhere else. Most everyone publicly maintains a silence politely veneered in perplexity. On occasion, however, when the temporarily unemployed drunkenly converge at Las Velas, someone lets slip true opinions on the *pinche maracon.*

For this reason, although Antonio sincerely befriends women, even those whose sexual inclinations are well-known, he is careful about keeping his image intact. Particularly around men. Of course, when he brought this up with Olivia, she reacted vehemently. She sat him down and engulfed him in a lengthy and passionate condemnation for such opinions: one must defy discriminatory conventions whenever they arise, particularly when issues of human dignity are at stake. Just because the people around you abuse homosexuals doesn't mean that you can't be stronger and sympathise with the underdog.

"Besides," she had intoned, "secretly, you would like to see me with a woman, would you not?"

"Uhh..." Antonio stammered. Not really, he thought, but he guessed that it would be wise for him to agree. He envisioned her mouth turning frothy, were he to tell the truth. Bubbles of sea-foam salvia would amass in the small pinky creases in the corners of her lips. Her tongue would loll, thickened by loquacity and inflamed by polemic. His girlfriend would turn into... a rabid lesbian. The instant the image lathered to ineffaceable mental lucidity, he engaged in a desperate, and mostly futile, effort to purge the image from his mind. She was Olivia, his delightful and heterosexual partner. The girl who liked mascara and push-up bras. "Uhh... I suppose so."

"Well, that's good. Let's go."

They had walked to the venue through the rain. The main theatre in town had been transformed into a cinema for the sake of the festival. They were a little late, and had to cram themselves into the seats in the marble-floored room. Like them, most people seemed to have had arrived by foot. The cumulative effect of so many people removing their rain-coat layers was that the mausoleum chill of the auditorium quickly melted into the humidity of bodies breathing in wet clothing. Looking around, Antonio saw almost the entire arts community of San Cristóbal—the painters, ex-patriot dramatists, photographers. No one from Antonio's crowd but they hardly ever appeared out before midnight. Though he could imagine their paying to see two women get it on, they no doubt figured that the flick wouldn't outdo the stock at the XXX video store.

In contrast, Olivia seemed to know most of the water-logged demographic personally. Once they secured their seats, she leapt into the aisle, where a small group of acquaintances had congregated. Clasping Antonio's hand, she dragged him along to forge introductions. Amidst her flurries of small talk, Antonio tried to play the role of the sympathetic partner. Between salutary embraces, his fingers worked the worn hem of his t-shirt, the brassy buttons on his jean jacket.

Half an hour after the scheduled start of the film, one of the festival directors appeared on-stage to give an introduction to the audience. Since there was no sound system, hardly anyone took notice of the figure speaking at the front of the auditorium; only when the lights dimmed to darken the theatre did the rustling of programmes and whispers die down.

The film began. Antonio couldn't remember the last time that he had seen a movie on such a big screen—the wall on which he had played the projections in Zapata Vive was miniscule in comparison. The corporeal recall of those days, even, was fading. He hadn't shown a film for weeks. He was mesmerized. The actors' faces were sketched so large that he could see the pores on the foreheads, teeth marred by coffee stains, the wrinkles on aging hands. A graininess softened the edges of architecture, so that they loomed, dream-like, above him. He felt he inhabited those rooms chromatically exaggerated by special camera filters and luminous projection.

Drifting through images, entirely suspended in the grandeur of the projection and the effortless voyeurism, Antonio lost himself in cinematic temporality. Two women were friends as adolescents; both wished to be actresses. They meet several years later: one has become an actress, the other a dental technician. The dental woman becomes obsessed with the actress, a weird instantaneous response. She knows that she is right; her ambition from years back, which she dismissed in lieu of the normal life of teeth, wakens and fixates its gaze on a single object, this pretty petty actress. She sinks her immaculate dentition into her ideal. Isn't this ambition, Antonio thought. One's success in life is dependent on oblivion, or a cultured ignorance, toward the details of what is clamped into grasp.

The propaganda's gauzy image of two women lip-locked and semi-nude was false advertising. Dental lady corners the doe-faced actress and forces herself on her. Actress

hurls her would-be suitor off her body. Dental lady backs off, though her imagination is not deterred. Content to admit the anticlimax to himself, Antonio nonetheless received a sharp jab in the side. When he turned toward Olivia, her eyes didn't budge from the screen. With exaggerated artificiality, she cleared her throat.

The second the credits began to roll, she jerked toward one of her *Derechos* friends who was seated on the other side of Antonio. "The obsession was never fully explicated," she proclaimed.

Eager to partake in a veritable art-house cinematic experience, a rarity in Chiapas, no one budged when the credits came on, scrolling and untranslated. Yet murmurs from the audience, ruminations of uncertain dissatisfaction, began to percolate. Sensing compatriots in dissent, Olivia raised her voice and continued, "We weren't given sufficient psychological insight for us to truly appreciate what motivated the one woman to become so obsessed with the other."

As the lights slowly made the room brighter, Antonio sprawled in his seat and reassessed the audience. A lot of Don Lauro people, the resident arts community, an assortment of *Derechos* folk were gradually rising from their seats. The demographic was pretty much everyone in town who believed themselves to have artistic sensibilities.

Then, across the theatre, he saw Greta, at the end of a row of seats, by herself. She was obviously preparing to leave, which wasn't surprising given the movie was over. He knew her so well in these movements, from the days when she came to see the movies he showed at Zapata Vive every night. For the more obscure films, the art-house cinema that he dug up from the library of the arts college, she was frequently the only other person in the room, the one that he single-handedly transformed each night into a cinema via the projector and his skilful arrangement of bean-bag chairs. He had always been glad for the company, since the income he garnered in showing these films was hardly enough to pay the premium Zapata's manager demanded for his use of the room. It was worse not to make any money by himself. At least with one paying customer, he could tell himself that his interest in obscure films wasn't entirely decadent.

While showing the films, he would let her smoke, though it was not allowed. Sometimes, he would look over at her, at the opposite side of the theatre-space, tracing her profile with his eyes, seeking evidence that perhaps she wasn't completely

mesmerized by the picture. At the time, he still had no idea who this red-haired stranger was, but he was sufficiently attracted to her that he didn't mind the plumes of smoke that drifted up darkly between the projector and the projection. She was predictable in that and other manners: after the film ended, she assembled her belongings, before he had a chance to turn the lights back on, but always after a reverential pause for the credits that had started to roll. Then, she darted out.

Because of this cinematic ritual, they didn't speak for weeks. One day while he was collecting her ten-peso entrance fee, he summoned the courage to ask her whether she wanted to teach him English. In exchange for free movies, of course—he didn't want her thinking that he was just another asshole accosting her because she was another piece of foreign flesh. From her hair, he knew that she must garner a lot of attention already. Following that exchange, though—from which evolved a complex and theoretical economy of salsa tutorials for French courses, Spanish lessons for cooking, that was deftly defeated by the simpler, more practical, exchange of bodily fluids—they never sat on opposite sides of a movie theatre again. That is, not until *La Repetition.*

Antonio slouched deeper into the maroon plush. *Por favor, no me miras*, he begged under his breath. *Please don't look at me.*

Olivia dug her elbow into his side. "*Tonito*, let's go already." She arose, briskly wrapped herself in her wool poncho, and grabbed her umbrella. "*Vamonos, huey*," she announced, kneeing his thigh impatiently.

For a moment, his body remained rag-doll relaxed. He looked up at her with incredulity. She didn't have a clue. The gravity of this spider-web of sightlines was completely lost on her. He was gluey enmeshed and vulnerable. The intricacies of undivulged narrative had balled up, and he was snared at the nexus of their taut fibres.

Finally, he leaned forward, fetching his anorak, he muttered, "*Sí, sí, señorita.* Whatever you wish." Taking a few deep breaths as his hands shuffled the ground for his belongings, then he straightened and stood with a grin fixed to his face. With this expressive transformation, he had to be impervious to whatever unfortunate social encounters might come to pass.

As they moved toward the exit, he was conscious of Greta in the aisle parallel to theirs, moving in synchrony with them on the other side of the theatre. Olivia had grasped

his arm in hers, and he tightened the fixtures on his nonchalant face. Upon seeing the two of them together, Greta mercifully quickened her pace. She manoeuvred through the slow-moving horde without overt indication that she was fleeing the particular image of Antonio and Olivia together. Rather, and Antonio relaxed as this thought passed through his mind, she was behaving as if she wished to avoid an encounter just as much as he. Overwhelmed by this prospect of trust amidst so much social tension, at once, Antonio felt peculiarly close to Greta. Olivia would have swooped down on him, were the positions the other way around.

In the lobby, the crowd started to plastic themselves in rain gear. Through the glass doors of the theatre, the rain was cascading in the same diluvian quantities as had become the norm. Another acquaintance of Olivia approached the couple. *How does she know so many people?* he wondered. With only the most minor of interruptions for polite greetings, Olivia adeptly encompassed the newcomer into her enthusiastic critique of the film.

"Yes," the newcomer commented, "the psychological development or, say, justification was certainly lacking. But doesn't the scarcity or, or, superficiality of the depiction of obsession allude to the ultimately incomprehensible nature of mental derangement?"

"Not more of this bullshit," Antonio mumbled under his breath.

"Pardon me?" the newcomer queried sweetly.

"Oh, nothing."

"Hmmm," Olivia exhaled, as if she had not witnessed the dialogue. She set her forefinger on her lower lip, indicating the most profound thought processes were transpiring in her interior. "That's an interesting point. But, in order for yours to sound valid, we must take into account the perspective of the cinematic narrator. I don't think that we see things through the eyes of the Louise character."

"No, no, that's not what I meant!" The newcomer's hands became flustered, fanning exasperation in the space between her body and Olivia's. "Not only do we not understand because we're not Louise, and not lesbian-obsessed with this friend from years past, we don't understand because Louise doesn't understand herself what motivates obsession! She's compelled to these simple conceptions of love, so she sees

fame as an actor as the ultimate aspiration. If she can be responsible for Natalie's success as an actress, then she thinks Natalie will love her. Things aren't any more complex than that—not for Louise, not for the movie. That's why it doesn't seem to make sense to us—we're supposed to be experiencing her mental states."

The musty air was combining uncomfortably with the cold draught coming through the doors as people begin to exit. From across the lobby, Greta appeared from the door of the woman's washroom. As Antonio watched her, a prickly sensation spread from his hands, up his arms, and merged in the centre of his lower back in a circular rippling motion. The undulating pressure there almost made him stumble forward, in a motion that would appear as if he had been shoved from behind. He swore the energies of his spine had been split open, and his motor functions strung to filaments. Wires the texture of corn-silk were trying to conduct his limbs toward her.

Completely oblivious to the crowd chatting or waiting for taxis, she set down her shoulder bag and her layers of sweaters and raingear on the ground and began to dress herself for the walk home. Initially only in grey wool slacks and a tight white t-shirt, she quickly covered her torso in a navy sweater, then a thick North American native wool sweater. Watching as she wriggled her way into the clothes and rustled her hair to fit the hood of the last woolly insulation, Antonio was reminded of the frequent response she used to give when people asked her whether she was afraid of walking through Cuxtitali alone at night.

"There are only the dogs to worry about," she would say. "And those you only need stare down." She would pick up the same thick wool sweater, as though it were courtroom evidence. "With loose pants and this on, with the hood up, no one can tell that I'm a girl." Her eyes twinkled as she enumerated the possible alibis for this adolescent alter-ego she had for the streets. Having never seen her in disguise from a distance, Antonio had to concur: as she slid into her poncho, no one would be able to tell the difference between this *Canadiense* and some *Coleto* kid.

And so she set out, walking from the glass door-entrance to the street, lighting up a cigarette mid-pace, and aiming for the median of the cobblestone roads so that she wouldn't be surprised by culprits assailing from the obscure street-level nooks and crannies. In camouflage, Antonio didn't worry about her, as he knew most men would,

and maybe should. Sensing his distraction, Olivia tugged at his sleeve. "*Tonito*, let's go for beer with these people. We can talk about the movie more. Plus, they're heading for Zapata Vive—maybe you could try to get the money they owe you."

Exhaling deeply, Antonio let her take his hand.

Zapata Vive

Greta's birthday falls on a Sunday, but Leila won't let the party be held until the next day. It will be a housewarming party, too, since *Casa Azule* hasn't been inaugurated yet. Though Claire has specifically requested that they not be invited, it's the only day that "the Pinkies" can attend. They're the town's resident Italian mafia, the tightly-knit association of boisterous alcoholics and drug dealers who run the Italian restaurant, *El Punto*. The women are actually Italian; their boyfriends all hail from the Distrito Federal, Mexico City. No one knows from where the monicker arrived, except that it's the name of one of the guys. Pinky is a grinning, scrawny kid with these coals for eyes--hardly the alpha male of the group. They keep El Punto open on Sunday nights but close it on Mondays; so, even though Greta's working on Monday, she hasn't much choice but to agree to the rescheduling: Leila's already invited them. The point is that these are all of Antonio's friends. Greta has no desire to celebrate her birthday in their company.

Claire, too, is singularly unimpressed that Leila's bypassed not just her appeal that the gang not come but has changed the date of the party in order to accommodate their agenda. Her idea of a fun night with friends does not involve the consumption of copious amounts of alcohol, weed, and cocaine. Rather than confronting Leila, however, she elects to endure the evening as if the party didn't exist. She allows baby Arianne to play naked in the Monday morning sun. With one hand on the chubby bare back, one hand clenched on the edge of a concrete step in the courtyard, she expresses her discontent to Greta. "Arianne's only five months old; I have my whole life to party once she's older. Now she doesn't need to be exposed to those coked up assholes." She sighs quaintly; overt frustration clashes with her diminutive, blonde-blue-eyed serenity. "I'll just stay in my room. Anyone who wants to visit me can visit me there."

Between the three roommates, Leila has made a collection of ten pesos each so that she can prepare some *ponche* to offer the guests. That and rectifying the house's hygiene means she's stressing out. No doubt, she'll whine tomorrow that both Greta and Claire always leave her to take charge of difficult situations. The charge, however, will be problematic: she'll have to bitch to Greta about Claire and, likewise, to Claire about Greta, and the two are obviously united in sentiment against her. Plus, Greta explained

when Leila appointed herself legislator of festivities that she couldn't help with the preparations if people were coming over on Monday, since she works until nine o'clock. So Greta slips easily from responsibility, having already decided that the evening is no longer on account of her birthday, but a convenient exhibition of Leila's social prowess.

The day of the *fiesta*, Greta leaves the house in the early afternoon. The third week of November heralds the first clear weather since the rainy season's onslaught. Strolling toward downtown, she can see past the other side of town: the mountainside concealing Chamula and its string of neighbouring villages is lush-green. Construction workers coated in *Cruz Azul* concrete dust are renovating the house by the Methodist church; the cripple on the corner of the *Masateca Tortillería* nods his sun-leathered face, resting against the brilliant yellow-green-white façade. The balloon man would whistle far and wee, Greta thinks. The skies clearing is like spring again.

After work, Greta drops into Café Museo Café to have a coffee and read the newspaper. It's the coffee museum coffee shop, and Greta likes the palindromatic sentiment in Spanish. She hardly feels the imminent guest of honour for the evening's *fiesta*. Rather, she has adopted the resolution of a tentative invitee who must arrive fashionably late, lest the party suck in its early stages. The coffee shop has cheap, tasty espresso, a subscription to *La Jornada*, and almost uniquely employs seventeen-year-old boys who gaze upon her with shy, lustful eyes as they present her with her *café americano*. Sometimes they even give her an extra chocolate biscuit to dip in the coffee. This is a preferable environment, by far.

Her seat, where she always sits, is toward the back, positioned under the glass roof so that, in the afternoons, soft sunlight illuminates the tabletop. And from there, she can refocus her eyes from her notebook or reading to gaze on a print of Diego Rivera's *Flower Day*. The painting mesmerizes Greta. She wants to know the identity of the dark-skinned man with a basket of callalilies bowing to two indigenous women. He glows with a supernatural symmetry. Greta is certain sometimes that he is a deity who eluded the conquistadores. One that Rivera uncovered amidst ruins, carved on a temple's mossy wall, and resurrected in technicolour. It is as if this being's spirit wanders to inhabit corporeal form from time to time. And he sells these flowers, so innocently, he lowers his

head and his fingers interlocked are serenity. She wishes she could see the facial reactions of the women, who triangulate the display, whose gazes are angled toward him. They know who he is, if identity can be construed in the immediacy of a gaze. Only they can penetrate the humble front of a flower vendor, recognise longevity's quiet endurance beneath the gesture of subservience. The one on the left curls her fingers as if reaching toward salvation; the other, baby engulfed in her white shawl, seems more restrained. Greta wonders if the child steadies this second woman's attraction toward the spectacle. Instead of enrapture, she admires. Maybe the child's face is glowing from the reflection of pure light off the flowers, and that is a distraction.

Greta reads the newspaper. The headlines defend Lula's election to president of Brazil. *La Jornada* is run by a bunch of Marxists in Mexico City; they do things like run front-page portraits of Noam Chomsky when he presents *la Casa Blanca* with petitions against the War on Terror. No dissenters receive such print-inches in North America. This is novel. An hour to comb through the day's events calms Greta's nerves. She smokes a couple cigarettes after the coffee is done, glances at the clock on the wall. Ten thirty. She supposes that she should go now. The flower vendor doesn't make eye contact, but Greta imagines that he agrees.

Thankfully, when Greta nudges the sticky wooden door open, her house is witnessing the commencement of a feasibly entertaining fiesta. She avoids the dark mass of people huddled around the kitchen table that has been set up under the covered walkway edging the courtyard. Instead, she heads for the voices in the living room. From the smoke wafting from the chimney, someone's obviously lit up the fireplace; she hazards that she hears the forced accent of an enthusiastic American monologue.

She slips in; sure enough, the Americans have arrived. Even though her friendship with the Oregon couple is one of thinly veiled mutual irritation, she's heartened to see them. She sure as hell wouldn't have shown up had she had any choice in the matter. But then, she's not surprised: they're always eager to "meet the locals" and practise their Spanish-language skills. Amidst a loose semi-circle of a dozen people curled around the fire, Greta spots them. Four or five of the others she knows. She moves discreetly to join the crowd on the carpet, but Leila catches the movement in the corner of her eye. The lot

of them break into a spontaneous rendition of "*Feliz Cumpleaños*", heralding to the far end of the house that the birthday girl has arrived.

After the kisses and congratulations, Greta decides to go to the kitchen to find some of the *ponche*. It's normally a tasty punch of boiled fruits and sugar, but she knows in advance that the incarnation Leila's brewing will be herbalist and healthful. The house's entire collection of mugs has been thoughtfully assembled on the stovetop; she reaches for one and peeks over the edge of the massive cauldron. Leila's obviously tossed in a pineapple, some apples and oranges, but as Greta pours herself a mug, she's unable to identify the seaweed-like greens that catch in the ladle. Undaunted, she takes a sip. Refined sugar is verboten, as are any sweeteners in quantities sufficient to affect the palate, so the admixture has a slightly bitter aftertaste. No matter. Greta fills the last third of the mug with *posh*, the cane-sugar distillation whose aroma alone makes her stomach turn. Unless she's redeemed by the kindness of strangers, she'll have to pick up some beer before the shops close at eleven.

A sheen like plastic veneers over the house. The party preparations, the houseful of people, make the place strange. Greta cannot engage, cannot envision herself becoming part of the festivities. Deciding to visit Claire in her room, to see how Claire is coping with the crowds and the noise, she passes politely through the crowd of Pinkies. They are standing around the table out in the courtyard, chain-smoking, hacking up breezes of marijuana smoke, and eating pizza. There are two enormous pizzas on the table. A bouquet of flowers from the market, set in a clay vase. White-yellow-purple kisses set on stalks.

As an ensemble, the Pinkies are so eerily identical, she thinks. The men have stout figures and dark, long hair, and the women are uniformly tall and thin, long blonde hair. *Maybe they don't recognize me*, she hopes. *We have nothing to say to each other, anyway, we've never said much to each other anyway.* She thinks that she has had nightmares about them, marching in their skin-clinging black clothing through the cobblestone streets like skeletons regurgitated from their subterranean lairs. Or maybe those are the memories gouged in waking consciousness of having caught sight of them by daylight, patrolling the streets, with a stench of chemical drugs trailing in their wake.

The breeze around them is flecked with a sort of harsh powder that suspends insomnia, that strings limbs to involuntary movements. A tongue languishes. Greta is wrapped in the cold flush of memory, moving through the bodies, avoiding elbows and hips.

Pursing her lips to smile oh-so slightly, she notes with relief that Antonio's not there. He might not be showing up. Greta flits through the shadows skirting the courtyard to knock on Claire's door. A fist on wooden surface: something concrete. Over the beating, swirling *electronica* music blasting from the stereo, she can hardly hear Claire's response. She nudges the door open a crack, a bit further. "Claire?"

"Yes, come in, Greta."

Upon entering the bright warm room, Greta immediately feels guilty about the mugful of *ponche*. The little that she's drunk of it percolates warm and toxic in her blood. Swallowing doesn't cleanse the taste of posh from her mouth. In the warm room, she tries to throttle her imagination, cease it from darting through fear's dark contours, moth-pressing itself against worry and darkness.

Claire is lying in bed with Arianne, her body curled around the baby, her back toward the door. The music from outside is almost inaudible; the concrete walls are surprisingly soundproof.

"So, whatcha doing?" Rough-hewn words pretend to be casual.

Claire smiles weakly. "Going to bed early. How are you liking the party?"

"It's okay. I just came back from work, actually. I grabbed a coffee on the way home. There are a lot of people here, eh? I don't know most of them." She crouches on the mat by the bed, shyly, her intrusion in the room acute. Claire shifts her body so that she is peering down at Greta from the bed.

"No, me neither. I don't know where Leila meets all these people. Guess that's what she does when she goes downtown. Meets people."

There's another rapping at the door. A tall indigenous man swings the passage open. Greta vaguely recognises him as the eldest of Inés' sons, not the one who Claire used to date, but the other one. The better musician, as Claire describes him. He comes in, sets his hands on the white bedspread, and leans over to kiss Claire on the cheek.

Greta's discomfort surges. Because she doesn't know the last time that they saw each other, she decides not to interrupt. "I'll let you two chat," she says softly, slipping out the door.

Greta breathes relief once back in the living room. Plumes of expelled marijuana smoke drift with the fumes from the fire. Leila's put up curtains along the median of the room so as to conserve the fire's heat. The division makes the mauve-concrete space feel less bowling-alley immense and more sociable. She's arranged scented candles and incense sticks in the four corners of the reduced room. A sanctuary that is suspended in the social syncopation of a roomful of stoners. Greta sits on the fringe of some conversation domineered by a white-clad woman, regally positioned cross-legged at the hub of a handful of talkers. Aside from the Americans, Greta suspects everyone else is too stoned to speak.

The lady dressed as if in lamb's wool is distributing handbills for a poetry reading. Greta surmises without need for further evidence that she's the star of the show. The woman is going on about her latest book in a hushed tone that intends to indicate the profoundly tranquil nature of her soul. The listeners are forced to tilt their ears to decipher her syllables.

"Pardon me," Greta pipes up. The woman in white revolves to look at her, as if Greta were the buzzing of an insect in a Buddhist sermon. "Have you any of your poetry here? I mean, did you bring a copy of your book? I'd really like to read some... I like poetry."

Her pristine expression sours. *God, a faux pas*, Greta thinks. *I've obviously offended her sensibilities.*

"No," she says quietly. "I don't carry the book with me." She lowers her hand, poised like Adam's so close to grazing God's grace and gestures to the stack of handbills on the floor. "I'm having a reading next week, if you didn't know."

Of course Greta knew. She left at least forty by the cauldron of *ponche* and took the liberty of pasting a poster on the kitchen wall. The fact of the event is somewhat difficult to miss.

Just then, Antonio bashes through the wooden double doors and collapses on the floor beside Greta. Greta is stunned. "Happy happy birthday," he croons as he mauls her with a clumsy bear hug. The ease of his embrace indicates that he is drunk, and this seems to make things better.

"What's up, man?" she asks in English.

"*Nada*," he laughs. *Nothing.* "That's how you answer, right? You don't say *chido*. *Chido* is wrong." *Chido* means 'cool.' Greta explained to him, ages ago it seems now, that the most '*chido*' response is to say 'nothing.' The appeal to that past conversation makes her spine straighten and her arm withdraw from the small of his back.

"*Claro, huey*. You learn quickly." Tonight seems the evening of weak smiles. She wants to look away, enmesh herself in another conversation to get away from the uncomfortable silence she feels is coming.

"Hey." Antonio nudges Greta and disentangles one arm to reach over to his side. "You've tried the pizza?"

"No. I haven't had a chance yet. Didn't realise that it was for everyone."

"Of course, silly. The folks at *El Punto* heard that it was your birthday. They made it for you. I brought you a slice. Do you want it?"

"Yeh, sure. Thanks."

With the *ponche* Greta's been drinking, her tongue is coated with a vaguely nauseating greenish film. She barely tastes the pizza in her mouth, realising only then that she has forgotten to eat dinner.

Meanwhile, the conversation semicircled around the fireplace has shifted gears. The poetess has lost the spotlight; the director of *Frecuencia Libre*, 99.5 FM, is describing the station's legal troubles. As a full-fledged pirate radio operation, the authorised broadcasters in town have combined efforts to try to force them off the air. She has some manoeuvre up her sleeve that will enable the station to keep broadcasting, which is impressive by virtue of its sheer determination, though the specifics are hard to hear over all the other noises.

Greta thinks *Frecuencia Libre* is great. Aside from being the only operation in town veritably challenging the status quo by virtue of its existence, its content seeks to defy cultural prejudices. They play spots consisting of a stern female voice declaring that

women have "the right to a life without violence." This includes, she continues, not only spousal abuse, but sexual discrimination in the workplace, and harassment on the streets. In addition to their more didactic feminist moments, there was a much-publicised roving Pap smear campaign last weekend. For Saturday and Sunday, willing women could go to one of three *plazoletas* in the centre and receive the test, free of charge and discretion guaranteed. Unlike the various feel-good organisations, Greta sees *Frecuencia Libre* as one of the few groups in San Cristóbal that is actually challenging political lethargy, actively changing things.

"*De veras*," Greta injects, "the work you folk do is great. I heard the publicity about that campaign last weekend. There isn't anyone else doing this sort of thing, is there?"

"*Gracías*." A flicker of appreciation passes across the woman's lips. "There have been other projects before, but, right now, we're the only ones focussing on work like this."

Antonio, too, is eager to meet the woman in charge of operations at the station. Using the voice that Greta is amazed to hear as she watches the syllables emerge from his smooth, thick lips, the voice that she recognises from the night that she listened to his programme, he addresses her with queries and technical comparisons. His programme features on one of the community stations that is officially condoned, though he admits that it's a bit ironic for him to be working for them.

The poetess nudges Greta. "Here," she whispers, shoving a slice of pizza in Greta's hand. "I'm not hungry."

Greta thinks the *ponche* has given her a buzz already. The poetess has carefully picked the toppings off the pizza, but Greta gorges it down anyway.

The Americans rush up, barging through the doors and clumsily attempting to avoid the people sitting on the floor. Greta cringes. They are tall and loud, with flat voices and obnoxious accents, and they drive her crazy. Although Greta is always careful to qualify her disdain for the stereotypical American tourist-traveller when she's around them—Oregonians are not *really* Americans, and adds that Californians aren't either, just to ensure that she leaves an impression of magnanimity—she is at a loss when it comes to

understanding the nature of their zealous cultural interface. She tries to comprehend, for the sake of something of a social network of her own, but it's not always easy. So she had swung by their apartment several days ago to invite them to the party.

There, she was witness to their pride and joy, their near-complete collection of the dolls the indigenous women sell. Zapatistas on horseback, Zapatistas with bundled babies and/or wooden guns, Zapatistas in white, blue, black, and brown wool cloaks. The conversation piece is meticulously organized, on a conspicuous shelf in their rented apartment, by each figure's respective stature. In addition to three sizes, there are the keychain models to negotiate. They like to mention that these particular tourist items only exist because one journalist, amidst the swarm that descended on the city like locusts in January 1994, mentioned to an indigenous woman that she should dress up her dolls like Zapatistas. Overnight, this woman got her hands on a bolt of black wool and transformed her colourful indigenous dolls into hardened *guerrillas*. These small mannequins were a hit. The journalists loved them and wrote stories home about them, including photographs of revolutionary merchants posing with their wares. Indigenous perspicacity dictated that the other vendors quickly follow suit.

Jeff is something of a journalist himself, back in Oregon. He writes a bit, here and there, for lefty publications. Emma is a filmmaker, hoping to find some homeless HIV folk to film in San Cristóbal. They're wounded Americans, the type that is determined not to be affiliated with the ignorant American stereotype that everyone despises. Their conversational energies are devoted to the minutia of counterculture, counter politics, and elaborately conceived conspiracy theories about 9/11. They laud "progressive" leaders like Venezuela's socialist president, Hugo Chavez, Cuba's Fidel Castro, and Brazil's leader, Lula, the enlightened and accomplished former shoe-shiner-boy. Despite the rapid discovery that there is a dearth of dying AIDS victims on the streets here, they have read some books about Chiapas. Before seeking out other filming locations in other, more sickly states, they both enjoy imparting regional insights that demonstrate their atypical education. The story of the Zapatista dolls is their favourite in this category.

Strangely, though, Jeff has yet to locate the would-be prize of his collection: a doll of Marcos himself. As if reflection of reality, that figure with a pipe clenched between stitched revolutionary lips is so elusive.

Greta doubts they're unique in their passion for the commodities of instituted revolution. The spirit of Emeliano Zapata does endure here. In namesake, at the least. Zapata is only great because of the post-modern insurgents who have a knack for coining terms. Did anyone care about him before a bunch of Mexico City Marxists culled his name and image from historical annals, establishing him as the founding father of revolutionary upheaval? Greta finds it ironic that the anarchist at the root of this cult of personality has become the template for revolutionary politicians. Now, he is a formula: keep the clothes of the common person, smoke tobacco, and wear a distinctive hat. This will convince the masses that you are really impervious to the corruption of power. It helps to be born with a birthmark in the shape of a hand, on the chest: a fist raised in revolt. Auguries always propel the alchemy of flesh to legend.

She half expects to unwrap one of these dolls when they present her with a *regalito*, a little gift. They are speaking Spanish with her, which she finds forced, since no one else is listening, no one else cares to hear.

In the roughly wrapped package, she finds a copy of "*Los Super-Hits Mexicanos*, Vol. IX", a CD compilation of all the songs that are played with near-fatal frequency on the popular music radio stations. The cover of the album depicts a scantily-clad blonde woman, an obviously American image appropriated from some soft-porn catalogue that would otherwise have been condemned to its deserving oblivion circa 1985. Amidst the packaging, there is a roll wrapped in white tissue paper—this is the doll, Greta thinks. Preparing herself to feign surprise, she begins to unravel the cylindrical object. Not a Zaptista doll, but a giant green bud of marijuana.

"We've just bought weed and thought you'd like some."

"That's very nice of you," Greta says deliberately in English. She hugs each of them, and kisses them on the cheeks. The gesture is half North American left-wing activist, half Mexican. "It has to be better than the stuff we have here. We've been smoking the stuff that Leila brought home a month ago, a grocery-bag full that one of the Pinkies gave her for free because it had too many seeds in it. You should see it, actually. It's half seeds, half bud. We were thinking of starting our own grow-op, but we'd be starting out with fucking bad genetic material."

Jeff straightens to his full height, some six-feet-irrelevant, towering above Greta and Emma. He pushes his chic thick black framed glasses further up his nose. "Hey, listen, we're going to score some beer," he quacks in English. "Do you want to come?"

"I think all the shops are closed. They close around ten or eleven out here. It's not like the centre, where you can find booze at all hours."

"Nah." He shakes his head. "One of the guys out there says that he knows a place that stays open late, c'mon."

The guy is a short creep that Greta recognises as the boyfriend of one of the Italian women. The Americans collect him from the gang of Pinkies who are still standing in their circle around the kitchen table, and the four of them break into the night. Creepy, who has a name that Greta fails to hear, insists he knows exactly where to go. There's a particular shop, he insists, that is run by a particular family whose patriarch "loves booze." He stays up late every single night with his friends, gambling and drinking. They set out together, heading down the road towards town, but Greta lets them go ahead. In the night, the cobblestone reflects luminescence from the streetlights. Greta thinks the stones are almost glowing from the refracted light. Her stomach is warm, as if awakening, it is pulsing an energy that makes her walk more slowly. The streets are eerily empty and strangely quiet. Usually, street dogs howl come their nocturnal transformation from sleeping strays to packs of would-be wolves, but even that desperate crooning is absent. The night is mesmerizing. The sound of her feet on the stones is a smooth and glistening rhythm. The skies spiral silence in her ears like an enormous, disembodied conch shell. Up ahead, as if miles away, the conversation between Creepy and the Americans murmurs in three voices: Creepy's sly Mexican, Jeff's duck-like accent, Emma's crisp and arrogant locution. Their voices become louder, harder to ignore, and Greta realises that they are waiting for her.

The effort of seeking out alcohol vaguely unsettles Greta. Although she is well aware that the men of Cuxtitali drink themselves to a stupour every Sunday—their collapsed bodies sometimes slumber the afternoons on the sidewalks and in the ditches—she has no desire to delve into the specific details of their alcoholism, let alone to rely on them for her evening. She likes to think of Cuxtitali as a sort of haven away

from the chaos of the centre, where the bars and the nightclubs are vortexes that suck sunlight and the propriety of circadian rhythms.

"Slowpoke!" Jeff jokes in English as she approaches the others, who are standing in front of a darkened storefront, its yellow sheet metal doors pulled down and a red grating locked over that.

"This is it, I think," Creepy declares.

"Are you sure?"

"I think so." He begins to pound at the door. The metal resonates a horrible discord. Greta worries that they've got the wrong place. Even if they've got the right place, this is rude. The shop is closed, there is no light through the cracks. There is light through the cracks. Someone yanks a panel open from the inside. A sleepy woman's face appears. Instinctively, Greta moves back from the light thereby removing herself from that culpability. Creepy takes hold of dialogue, clipping commands or queries. He turns and demands eighty pesos from the three Anglophones. The Americans realise they've forgotten their wallets at home. *Eighty pesos?* That's a day's work for Greta. She fumbles through for her wallet, finds two fifty peso bills that she passes over. The woman reappears at the hole in the door with three bottles of beer. Creepy passes the money over and the panel closes. *Fuck*, Greta realises, *of course they don't have change this time of night.*

Soon, they are crashing through the entrance of the house, buoyed by no less than three cagüemas. The short creep has already cracked one; his fee for having accompanied us, Greta thinks. He slinks over to the arm of his heroin-chic lady, refuelled and smarmy graces redefined for her company.

Unabashed, the Americans decide to befriend the Pinkies. That crowd is too stoned to notice the intrusion into their clique. Greta cringes and raises up to light the near-litre bottle of *cerveza* she's purchased. Nine hundred ninety millitres minus one good swig. Squinting for the sake of profound contemplation, she thinks: that's a lot of beer. A whole lot of beer.

She hears her name. Antonio's appeared beside her. "Hey," he's saying. "How'ya feeling?"

This a silly question. "Fine."

"You don't feel a little weird?"

"I'm drunk enough, but only 'cuz I've drunk."

"Did you eat pizza?"

"Yah. Three, I think, slices. Mebbe four."

"And you don't feel a little… weird? We made it at the restaurant, with lots of weed." He motions to the table, where, in the light, Greta sees that the pizza is crumbled with green. The crust, the sauce, the fresh tomatoes, all of it is marijuana green.

"No," forms on her lips, but the pronunciation lapses as he touches her on the arm. *Is that the gesture of trying to find me?* Greta thinks. *I am engulfed.* The picturesque house disintegrates. The crowd is gone. She is looking into his eyes. *I see myself here*, she thinks, as if she is thinking aloud, but her mouth is not moving. Nevertheless, she swears that he is hearing her. *We are kindred on this plane and impossible on all others. She must be the better woman, if only because she is absent from here. She is in those recesses where identification is mockery, where potentials attempt farcical intersection and succeed because they are bodies, they are bound by habit and familiarity. You and I have nothing but this, this hallucination.*

She does not extend her arm that feels corroded, that reeks with desperation's unleashed cascade. She is alone in this tumult. She is always alone. *Don't I apprehend that well enough already to not defile this innocent gesture with reciprocation?*

She turns away. There are still guests over; Leila will want her to play hostess for longer. Yet the energy to meet the collision of society eludes her. That dolorous contortion of self, the chirpy Mexican friendliness that performs a perimeter around her, two centimetres thick, disintegrates. She is speaking another language, not Spanish, no anything. A new numbness casts grey over those regions of the mind directing speech. This is being without capacity.

"*Necessito el baño*," she manages to mumble. This not entirely untrue: she would want to vomit were she not so afraid of collapsing. Seeking out the path of shadows to her room, the figure of Antonio blurring into the assemblage of people, she passes the clock that says it is nearly half past midnight. The light in Claire's room is turned off; Greta doesn't even want to consider her state in comparison to Claire's, with this

malignant toxicity spreading through her body. The image of his outstretched arms imprints itself over the darkness as she slips into her room, slides the door shut. It's still early. She might make it back out again.

But the concrete walls are such a soothing enclave.

Time passes inside. The darkness of the room becomes pierced with strands of light as her eyes become adjusted, blazing bright streaks against the walls. Greta's stomach is churning; she finds a plastic bag that she holds in her fist as she rolls into bed and wraps herself in blankets. She dry heaves into the sac, spits. Out, she wants all of this out of her. It is lodged in her, it is radiating within her, she has consumed too much.

Hours elapse, or so it seems. The music from the party feels like it is trying to pry her away into its waves, pull her from her bed where she is curled in the foetal position, clutching her pillow between her limbs. She can't decide whether to lock the door behind her. What happens if she dies inside and no one can access her from the outside? What happens if she chokes on her own vomit. What if she vomits? She thinks of death, dying in this horrible horrible place. The murmur of conversations outside percolate again, the soundscape of new age music swells. These are sounds that throb and escalate the spirit. Greta feels herself drifting away, her body relaxes its grip on materiality, and her body isn't attached anymore to anything.

A knock on the door sends a shock of terror through her. She needs all the energy from her tongue to bleat '*estoy dormiendo*' in a hoarse voice. Someone might believe that she is sleeping.

"Greta? Greta? Can I come in?" It's Antonio.

"*Ya, pasale, entonces.*" Come in already, then. The words clip from Greta's mouth before realising that she is saying them, as if their command is independent of her volition. When Spanish appears like this, without her having to think, she is almost always amazed at the way that the language has seeped into her. Six months ago, every stutter was a conscious effort.

He comes in, waiting a moment at the cracked door for his eyes to adjust. Then he moves toward the bed, toward the mattress on the floor, and sits on the edge.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like shit. You?"

"Messed up," he gurgles in English. "*Yo estoy* Messed Up."

"I tell you," Greta whispers in Spanish, "you speak English better than my students. You never needed a teacher, you've seen enough movies to get by." She feels almost normal right now, at the nadir of another undulation of intoxication, focussing on pretending normalcy.

"Silly. I am a Mexican monolingual."

A stream of moonlight through the window, or the astral pale illumination from the streetlight outside, sheds chalk on his skin. He is glowing, he looks unnatural, *sobrenatural*, supernatural.

"*Oyé, no puedo continuár más*..." Greta begins, aware that she is quoting him. *Listen, I can't continue*....This time, though, she's not thinking about their relationship—or lack thereof—but of her existence in San Cristóbal. "I'm tired of being here. I want to go home."

"You can't leave! What will I do without you?"

This merits a tired smile on Greta's lips. "Asshole," she says evenly, without malice, with just enough tenderness that he realize that she has been emptied of all lingering emotions toward him. "We never see each other. You won't notice me gone. I thought you had a new girlfriend, anyway. Doesn't she keep good enough company?"

His hand on her reclined torso turns to a pointed finger that jabs her. "You're not Olivia! Olivia could never replace you! I mean, go home or go wherever if you're unhappy, but I will miss you. If you leave, you'll miss the Christmas *fiestas*, too. They're fun. The day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and all of that. On Christmas day there's always a super rave, too. It's a month of parties."

Greta feels like she has eaten a month of parties already. "Feel my stomach, feel how upset it is," she orders, moving his hands to her bare flesh. "I don't need anymore parties." As his fingers smooth over her skin, she feels the terror begin to dissipate, to turn into a warm calm that spreads throughout her body. Her hands slip into the small of his back as he leans over to kiss her.

"*Nos vemos después, entonces,*" she whispers into his opened mouth.

He laughs. "*Sí, sí, nos vemos después.*"