

**Ashes at noon: Stories and poems about Quito, Ecuador**

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

Major: Creative Writing and Environment

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The student and the program of study committee are solely responsible for the content of this thesis. The Graduate College will ensure this thesis is globally accessible and will not permit alterations after a degree is conferred.

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2017

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## PUBLICATION ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Grateful acknowledgments to *Word Riot* for publishing “Flamenco” in 2015, to *Spilled Milk Magazine* for publishing “Los desaparecidos” and “Sol de lluvia” in 2016, to *Huizache* for publishing “Pumamaqui” and “Spondylus,” both forthcoming in 2017, and to *Glimmer Train* for placing “El Monstruo de los Andes” in their Honorable Mentions list for the 2016 New Writers Award.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my major professor, David Zimmerman, for his patience, friendship, and humor. I appreciate his support for my *realismo mágico* stories and my quest to represent my childhood and teenage years lived in the Andean landscape truthfully.

Thank you, Dr. Burke, Dr. Menefee, Professor Marquart, and Dr. Viatori for sharing your wisdom with me. Your classes inspired my work endlessly. I hope you see the fruit of your labor within my prose.

Gracias, cohort, for your support and comedy. I cherish our cheese potlucks, dances, and the deep sense of community we created. It was an honor to workshop your work. Un abrazo for all the second and first years who enlightened my life.

Nicolás, thank you for your faith in me. Gracias, Tía Nancy, Mama, Tía Carmen, Carlos Luis, & Carlos López. Llevo *Ana Mily* conmigo siempre. Gracias, Mami, Papi, Fanchi, y Cawo por su amor. Una familia Venezolana congelándose en los Andes— no hay subject más interesante ni dulce.

## PREFACE

I could write a thousand stories about Quito, but the stories in this collection are the closest to my existence; as a Venezuelan citizen who grew up in Quito, I am a part of the cultural syncretism at work in the capital of Ecuador. *Ashes at Noon* is a manifestation of research and travel: I've explored the outskirts, valleys, and hidden streets of my hometown of Quito and found the locations of my narratives, places tainted by our memories. The stories in *Ashes at Noon* represent my life in Quito, Ecuador, and the years I witnessed and participated in this culture. These stories overlap in terms of traditions, rituals, feelings, themes, sentiment, and an urge to share with others the stories of my hometown.

My aim for this collection is to pay tribute to the culture that raised me. I want to explore where I'm from, the narratives that made me who I am, and honor the environment of the Andes and all the ghosts that reside in it. My collection is anticolonial; it explores the pre-Columbian traditions we still abide to and the curuchupa—extremely Catholic, judgmental, prejudicial—and racist mindsets we're taught to follow.

Quiteños have baptized my old work place, Museo de Arte PreColombino Casa del Alabado, as a *hidden gem*. The museum is located one block away from Church San Francisco de Quito, the heart of colonial Quito; specifically, the pre-Columbian art museum is placed a few footsteps away from the famous plaza built weeks after the Spanish conquered the Incas. In this plaza, tourists try to take photographs of the church and its surroundings, but only end up with pictures of fragmented pigeon bodies. American and European tourists stand several feet away from the Afro-Ecuadorian family that sells coconut water out of white buckets—they always carry change for dollar bills in their pockets—and next to mini-markets owned by generations of families who refuse to sell their property to those invested in making the historic center of Quito

something other than what it is, a phantom landscape. On my way to work, I used to ride up from Cumbayá, a valley, up to Quito in my friend's car. I then hopped on the trolebus—the bus lines that connect all of Quito—and later faced a stone hill four blocks up to the museum doors. Every day, I stepped on stones dead Ecuadorians once stepped on. I stepped on rocks Bolívar rode his horse on, gravel placed by indigenous men and women—laborers, slaves, Incas—stones now covered in cigarette butts, pigeon excrement, and car tracks. In the heart of colonial Quito, in a house turned museum, I learned the worldview of Ecuadorian pre-Columbian cultures.

As I watched my coworkers avoid eye contact with the Shaman ceramic figure—a figure with no eyes, perhaps the Shaman would wear the artifact in front of his face like a mask—and as I accompanied them room after room, I realized that what made me more afraid than the pre-Columbian figures was the fate and origin of these pieces. A heart wrenching feeling took over my body every morning and night: who found these pieces? Who let them go? Where are the others? Where will my favorite artifact—a vase that features a belly button and drawings of snakes and the Napo river, a vase where the Napo people hid bones and afterwards buried the ceramic artifact deep inside Amazonian soil—end up? With these questions in mind, I created narratives about the pieces displayed in the museum, basing myself on anthropological research.

As a bilingual museum guide, I learned, internalized, and memorized Alabado's book written by Dr. Karen Stothert, PhD in Anthropology from Yale University. With the help of Iván Cruz Cevallos, scientific advisor to our museum, Dr. Stothert divided this book into to eight chapters, each section representative of every area in our museum. My museum guide text interweaves scientific data, traditions from live cultures, and history. The opening chapters explain pre-Columbian cosmovision: the universe is a harmonious whole divided into three parallel worlds, each world connected by the axis mundi, because “the continuity of life

[depends] on the steady flow of vital energy through these worlds.” As I taught these concepts to American and European tourists, I slowly pieced together the complexity and contradictive nature of Quito’s contemporary society: pre-Columbian artifacts—morteros, clay, stone, and golden sculptures of shamans, stamps, jewelry, whistling bottles, obsidian, knives, batons, anthropomorphic vessels, zoomorphic vessels, and more—sit in glass vitrines, in the middle of a colonial city designed by European clergy men and built by indigenous labor. The interweaving of worldviews defines our capital and identities. *Ashes at Noon* represents this weave.

My short story “Día de los difuntos” (translates to *Day of the Dead*) profiles our Ecuadorian version of this holiday. This holiday itself interlinks pre-Columbian cosmivision with Western thought (Catholicism). Ecuadorians visit their dead relative’s graves and bring food for them. We make guaguas de pan—“guagua” translates to *child* in Kichwa—little babies made with sweet bread and sugar, and drink colada morada, a scented potion. In my short story “Encomienda”—a story that encapsulates the era before the hacienda system, when indigenous men and women were first enslaved and indoctrinated—I emphasize the importance of food sacrifice. It is a revisiting of the tradition that gave birth to our day of the dead holiday. “Encomienda” is an examination of syncretism at work.

In “Día de los difuntos,” Soledad’s family visits the grave of their dead relative because Andean pre-Columbian cultures used to sacrifice their food and drinks; these cultures would bury their meals in graves “in order to promote good relations with the parallel worlds” (Museo de Arte Precolombino Casa del Alabado). “Día de los difuntos” examines the transition and evolution of this holiday while paying close attention to the reasons Ecuadorians don’t forget about the dead: the dead never left us.



Oswaldo Hurtado's *Political Power in Ecuador* defines the encomienda system as "... the assignment of a specific number of indigenous inhabitants to a white overseer who was obligated to protect his charges, to provide religious training, and to extend military assistance to the king, in exchange for a tribute that was to be paid in money or in kind" (2). This system gave birth to the hacienda system, a brutal structure of enslavement featured in Jorge Icaza's *Huasipungo*, a renowned novel we read in high-school. The bourgeois of Quito still own haciendas. I grew up visiting these haciendas; I rode horses through eucalyptus forests and thanked the hacienda maids when they poured us hot chocolates at night. In an encomienda system, essentially, several Spanish men oversaw a group of indigenous women and men – they were in charge of absolving the dominant indigenous worldview by teaching them Spanish, Catholicism, and new ways to work their land. This complete indoctrination is the main theme of my story, "Encomienda."

"Encomienda" features a scene in which Mama—*mother* in Kichwa, language of the Andes—hides from Lucas and Mateo. After she steals and buries all the remaining corn in the spots where other members of the encomienda were buried—she fed the dead—Lucas and Mateo begin to search their landscape for her – they need to punish her for her actions. She is a thief in their eyes. They find her standing between two of their cows, mimicking the stance of a Chaupicruz (100 – 1500 C.E.) sculpture: made of stone, the long anthropomorphic sculpture features hands pressed tightly to his chest, big, glossy eyes, and a round face. The length of this piece is meant to symbolize a connection between parallel worlds, the underworld and the world of the middle. Taita, *father* in Kichwa, carved this piece from a stone he found while mining for gold; it is a work of art that stands in the entry of Museo de Arte PreColombino Casa del Alabado in the World of Ancestors wing, the only work of art uncovered by plexiglass I asked museum visitors not to touch. Influenced by Marisol de la Cadena's "Indigenous Cosmopolitics

in the Andes: Conceptual Reflections Beyond ‘Politics’,” I’ve chosen to bring in actual artwork I’ve seen and thought of deeply into this short story to try and dissect the narrative behind it. Whoever carved this stone had a powerful connection with the elements. Stone is an immortal material, and Taita wanted to convey and venerate his ancestral spirits in a time of change. In her article, Marisol de la Cadena explains the difference between digging tunnels as a manifestation of cosmovision and destroying mountains as an example of Western thought practices: “These differences are consequential: while digging tunnels allows for the continuation of relations with earth-beings, the open-sky mining destroys earth-beings themselves” (355). The mining for gold, one of the goals for Lucas, Mateo, and Tomás—the three Spanish men in charge of an entire indigenous community—destroys the volcano Cotopaxi’s caves. Taita’s removal of stone, however, carries another meaning: he carves it carefully with the tools the Spanish gave him and creates the face and body of a person who is still with them but imperceptible, an ancestor he needs to venerate because he fears his family will starve.

Several ideas from Joni Adamson’s “Environmental Justice, Cosmopolitics, and Climate Change” resonate in my thesis. Quito is the city of phantom landscapes, a term used to describe the existence of ghosts and places that still exist/define that environment. I’ve applied the meaning behind the term “seeing-instruments” to several of my short stories. “El Monstruo de los Andes” focuses on Andrea, a high-school student who enjoys digging holes at night in the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito. She searches for pre-Columbian artifacts and encounters contemporary trash: Coca-Cola bottle caps, food wrappers, and buttons. The title belongs to the name of a Colombian rapist who traveled the Andes, sexually assaulting girls from impoverished (indigenous) boroughs. He was never caught; Andrea was raised with the idea that the Monster of the Andes could be right around the corner – she therefore lives her life with fear.

At the end of this story, Andrea sees a revenant: the body of a burned adolescent boy who died trying to incinerate this park. My main goal with the story is to demonstrate the idea that ghosts still travel around Quito's landscapes: pre-Columbian cultures still roam these environments, those who die never leave us, and those who haunt us define our actions. I use this forest as a "seeing-instrument." Europeans planted this eucalyptus forest; eucalyptus is not native to South America. Andrea wants to find pre-Columbian objects belonging to the Quito-Caras culture or the Incas because she wants to be part of their history. This piece is representative of my youth as I, too, feared the Monster of the Andes and lived next to this eucalyptus forest.

The construction of Church of the Society of Jesus (Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús, nicknamed "La Compañía") began in 1605. This church is one of the main tourist attractions of Ecuador. La Compañía is two blocks away from Church San Francisco de Quito, the first church in Quito; its construction began in 1534. Colonial Quito—a nickname for Downtown Quito—is a district that wants to maintain its colonial roots; the architecture of the buildings, the church, and even the impoverished indigenous communities remain strong in that borough. It is a common tradition for bourgeois high-schoolers to attend a communal mass days before their graduation. Ours was held in La Compañía. In 2010, we wore black skirts and pants with white button-downs and sat on wooden pews in a church lit by candlelight and yellow light bulbs. The light bounced off the golden walls: each and every corner of La Compañía is covered in gold leaf. We kneeled on leather and cotton kneelers and stood by old paintings while parents took our picture. The priest blessed us and wished us well upon graduation. In my fiction, I now revisit this church with new eyes. The gold leaf on the walls was brought from the Amazon. The rocks that support this church were brought down from Pichincha, the monumental stratovolcano in which the city

of Quito is built upon. The stone carvings of fruit, faces, and vegetables are a representation of its era of construction: the 1600s, a time when indigenous men were enslaved.

“Kuri” is Kichwa for *gold*. “Kuri” is also the name of my main character. “Kuri” tells the story of an indigenous man with green eyes; he doesn’t know who his father is, and he works as a stone man for La Compañía. As soon as one of the European priests sees Kuri, the priest becomes enthralled by his appearance. Kuri—brown skin, black hair, green eyes—agrees to be the priest’s muse for a painting, a painting that still hangs inside La Compañía today: baby angels of all skin colors floating, white clouds turned grey hovering. My goal, too, was to investigate the story behind this painting, and to incorporate its narrative into my very own story about La Compañía.

A couple of summers ago, I revisited La Compañía with my mother. We listened to the tour guide and walked around the giant columns and pews of the church. The loud paintings on the walls were more overpowering than the stories of the tour guide, until she began to describe Marianita de Jesús, a woman whose photographs I’ve seen everywhere in Quito; I thought I knew who she was, a nun who prayed every day in the church during its construction. The tour guide, however, told the story of a young woman who decided to never marry anyone and dedicate her body to the lord. Marianita could see into the future, cure diseases, and feed the hungry. She prayed every day inside La Compañía so that an earthquake would not break down what they were trying to build back in the 1600s: a strong presence of Catholicism in a South American country. Marianita de Jesús is remembered and venerated as a woman who gave herself to Christ, and Christ, in return, produced a miracle: those observing Marianita de Jesús corpse witnessed a white lily blossom from her chest. The day she died, she was magical.

Thomas King’s *“You’ll Never Believe What Happened” is Always a Great Place to Start* argues

stories makes us who we are: “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2). The La Compañía tour guide let the story of Marianita de Jesús out into the world. I retell her story in “Kuri.” All Quiteños remember Marianita de Jesús as a martyr. In “Kuri,” Marianita de Jesús dies when an earthquake overtakes the capital. She dies buried under La Compañía stones. Although a white lily doesn’t sprout from her bosom, and although I take away the magical aspect of her chronicle, her death does mean something; it is less impactful than the death of the indigenous men who brought down the stones from Pichincha the day of the earthquake struck. It is not as important as the death of those who were beat up by apuyuraks—*white bosses* in Kichwa—as they built the church. Her death is part of a sequence of events, a consequence of sorts, an outcome. La Compañía was rebuilt again after the big tremor; perhaps the Andean earth itself did not want the construction to continue.

The Chaupicruz sculpture from my “Encomienda” story was found in an hacienda. Haciendas are seeing-instruments; they contain stories about the owners who lived there and the daughters of indigenous men and women who worked inside the house. The lot’s trails marked by indigenous men who chopped wood, maintained the land, trained the horses, milked the cows, are narratives etched by excursions. The tomb the Chaupicruz created was unearthed by the Ecuadorian men and women who ride horses on Sundays. The hacienda is now probably a famous archeological site, available for visits pending payments. Icaza, too, treated the hacienda in *Huasipungo* as a seeing-instrument, examining how the oppressed indigenous people began to work their land in ways they didn’t work it before.

I’ve reworked several Andean myths in my thesis. I’ve filtered these myths through an anthropological scope: a contemporary analysis of colonialism, a reflection of Quito’s structural violence, and an exploration of the narratives I’ve encountered while growing up. “El cóndor del

Machángara” is based on the myth *El Cóndor de Galope Kaka*, as told by *Leyendas Ecuatorianas*. I’ve reworked this myth into my contemporary tale of Ana, a girl who lives in Cumbayá; she is in danger of being assaulted by one of father’s friends. Contemporary Ana and pre-Columbian Ana share several coming-of-age struggles. The most important struggle is the concept of growing up as a woman in Quito; we are at risk, we are prey. “Hacienda Lunar” is based on the myth of *La bella Aurora*, a story we once acted out in elementary school; in this tale, Aurora is depicted as the most beautiful girl in colonial Quito. Her beauty, however, doesn’t hide her sadness. Her father, a powerful hacendado, takes Aurora to a bullfight in order to relieve her daughter’s misery. The bull featured in this corrido becomes infatuated by Aurora’s presence. It escapes the establishment. Aurora and her family manage to escape, too. The bull, nevertheless, finds Aurora and kills her. My story “Hacienda Lunar” fills in the blanks of this myth, exploring an hacienda and its social structure.

*Ashes at Noon* studies the types of violence occurring today in Quito. “Pichincha” features a secuestro exprés, a type of kidnapping usually involving a teenager, a taxi cab, and an ATM. Sebas, the victim, is part of Quito’s upper-middle class. He does not survive the journey, like most teenagers don’t. “La oreja de toro” tells the story of Rafa, a high-schooler flamenco dancer who catches a detached ear twice: the ear of a flamenco dancer during her after-school practice and the ear of a bull during a bullfight. “La oreja de toro,” essentially, explores the connections and overlapping issues regarding the remnants of Spanish culture in Ecuador. “Saturno” features two main characters: Pablo and Benito. Pablo and Benito both live in Saturno, a building in González Suárez. The location of this avenue is dangerous; several airplanes have crashed into these buildings over time. I’ve chosen to explore two chronicles; in “Saturno,” I

demonstrate how an airplane accident could connect an indigenous worker and an upper-middle class teenager. Sebas, the main character in “Pichincha,” lives in Saturno, too.

When literature instructors teach Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Julio Cortázar in Ecuadorian high schools, they don’t ask their students to think about what the magical instances in each text stand for; they don’t treat the magical aspect of every story as something different, as a concept out of our reach. It is not a mystery. In fact, teachers focus on the political aspect of magical realism and how this type of literature attempts to capture our South American reality. García Márquez’s magical realism is born in the Caribbean; while living on the coast, García Márquez began to appreciate just how supernatural the reality of that environment is. Colombia’s magical realism was formed by the clashing and fusion of pre-Columbian cultures and their cosmovision, the worldview of the African slaves, and the religions of Spanish Gallegos and cults from Andalucía.

Ecuadorian magical realism is distinctive. I’d divide each region in Ecuador—the coast, the Andes, and the Amazon—as places of distinct representations of magical realism. In other words, the magical realism of the Andes is not equal to the magical realism of the Caribbean. Girls from Quito believe they shouldn’t cut their hair unless there’s a full moon. We don’t drop our purses on the floor when we get home because then we’ll lose money; we don’t want to be “salados,” *salty*, out of luck. We eat guaguas de pan on the day of the dead, get married in La Compañía, attend bullfights, dodge the men dressed as women wandering the streets on New Year’s Eve, and later, when the new year arrives, we burn hay and sticks in the form of a body—a man’s body—and jump over it. What connected Andean pre-Columbian cultures with coastal cultures—the spondylus and obsidian trade—has been replaced by Quiteñas going to the beach for the holidays and bringing back the ocean with them; we lay at nights in our beds, bodies

moving with the waves, our apartments facing mountain ranges. The magical aspect of pre-Columbian cultures is simply reality; the world we live in today—a paradox, a remnant, culture of consequence, a place that simply continues—is magical and tangible. García Márquez explained this concept beautifully: “The Caribbean taught him to see ‘la realidad de otra manera, a aceptar los elementos sobrenaturales como algo que forma parte de nuestra vida cotidiana’” (to see “reality in a different way, to accept supernatural elements as a part of our everyday life”) (Hart 12).

My collection of poems and stories chronicles the history of my hometown. My thesis could be linear. It could follow the pre-Columbian cultures that inhabited the Andes—Incas, Quitu-Caras, Chaupicruz—up to today, the days where indigenous children sell gum and cigarettes in the streets. Nevertheless, I’ve chosen to divide my collection into three chapters, each section representing a world in Ecuadorian pre-Columbian cosmivision: the underworld “Uku Pacha,” the world of the middle “Kay Pacha,” and the upperworld “Hanak Pacha.” We live in the world of the middle; our ancestors in “Uku Pacha,” the land below us; gods and monsters roam high up in the clouds, in the world above ours. Several stories within those chapters represent the axis mundi, a channel that connects all three worlds. These channels take the form of “caves, grottos, mountains or constructions such as mounds and pyramids” (Meyer). *Ashes at Noon*’s structure is an honor to the indigenous cosmivision that is still present and very much alive in Quito today.



EPIGRAPH

Oh, ciudad española en el Ande,

Oh, ciudad que el incario soñó;

Porque te hizo Atahualpa eres grande

Y también porque España te amó.

Oh, Spanish city in the Andes,

Oh, city the Inca empire dreamt;

Atahualpa made you a majestic city

And Spain, too, because it once loved you.

From *Himno a Quito*. Anthem of San Francisco de Quito, capital of Ecuador.

CHAPTER I HANAK PACHA

## Pumamaqui

Our pumamaqui tree disappeared. No footprints found across grass or sludge, no puppy paws or punctured land near our crop. Puff. It's gone with roots and all, the tree with hands of a feline. A leaf for every puma claw. Leaves our ancestors tore apart and boiled with water that drizzles down our mountains. They drank tea in epochs of change and pain. They drank pumamaqui tea that connects the upper and underworlds, paws open out to the sun, roots holding onto our dead. They drank it for wisdom and comfort. And today we search Parque La Carolina for the last pumamaqui tree. We pray a puma claw endures the downhill of a bike trail or graffitied soccer fields. Or maybe it's forever lost between horsetails and unburied bodies, Quiteñas now synonymous with postcolonial violence. We pray for our pumamaqui tree, buried beneath painted nails, Quiteñas in epochs of pain and change.

## Pumamaqui

El árbol desapareció. No hay huellas humanas ni huequitos de uñas perrunas alrededor de nuestro cultivo. Puff. Desapareció con sus raíces y ser, el árbol con manos de felino. Una hoja por cada dedo puma. Nuestro ancestro rompió cada hojita y la embulleció con aguita de montaña. Tomaron té en tiempos de dolor y cambio. Tomaron té pumamaqui que conecta el supramundo con el ultramundo, sus uñas abiertas hacia al sol, raíces abrazando nuestros muertos. Tomaron té pumamaqui porque sana y enseña. Y hoy rastreamos el Parque La Carolina en búsqueda de nuestro último árbol pumamaqui. Rezamos que sobreviva un dedito de puma cerca de la ciclovía o la cancha grafitada de fútbol. O tal vez está perdido entre colas de caballos y cuerpos insepultados, quiteñas ahora sinónimas con violencia poscolonial. Rezamos por nuestro pumamaqui, enterrado bajo uñas pintadas, Quiteñas en tiempos de dolor y cambio.

## El cóndor del Machángara

Papi throws our potatoes at the birds. White socks and sandals, long jean shorts with big pockets, brown leather belt, purple golf shirt, a black moustache that doesn't move when he talks. It all shakes as he grabs two or three potatoes with his long hands and pitches them at the black vultures that like to drink water from our backyard pool. They also like to shit on our windows and cars and on the basil and cilantro Mami grows next to the pool. Papi has joked before about buying a gun and shooting down the vultures: "una escopeta," he says as he holds an imaginary gun aimed at the birds whose feathers adorn my bedroom window, "y PUM! desaparecen." The heavy bag of papa chola I helped mom place in our grocery cart a week ago ends up opened, plastic bag lost with the wind, potatoes spread around our backyard, a few decorating the downhill of the cliff, and some, even, swimming in the Machángara river that encircles our neighborhood.

"Don't you end up just feeding them?" my brother Carlos asks my dad as we spend a day outside, bird shit smell lingering.

"No, they only eat what's already dead," I respond.

We don't know much about the black vultures, except that they remind us of other beings: a giant black chicken, a mean dog, a snake that likes to linger under the sun after it's fed, a resentful cat, a pig that eats too much, and the Ecuadorian condor, a majestic and endangered bird that flies so high only clouds can witness its splendor.

I don't want my father to kill them.

///

The myth of the Condor of Galope Kaka takes place in the Andes. The fable occurs before the Incas dominated the pre-Columbian cultures that resided in the long city we now call San Francisco de Quito. In the páramo of Galope Kaka, yellow flowers sprout from the riverbed and sometimes stay still when the night is too cold. It is the type of place where pulling a fistful of grass only produces another. Where the Andean wind is a vessel for secrets, chants, songs about love and curiosity, claims about life. Those who dipped cupped hands inside the river were immediately cleansed from pain. The water streaming down their throats is a liquid mystery, curing illnesses beyond physical ache. A river that cleans curses. It is the river of the condor and, as such, its powers are immeasurable.

///

My father says these birds are plotting something huge. We haven't seen them in a while. Potatoes intact. From our backyard, we look for clues around the swimming pool. "Anything that seems suspicious," Papi asks from the other corner of the lawn. I spot pieces of feathers near my bare feet. The plumages are so small, almost rectangular. Borders sharp yet soft to the touch. Grey, white, and all the shades in between. Rainbows of black that disappear with the moving clouds above me. These feathers belong to baby birds. Perhaps they were born here. Or maybe they flew above this specific spot a while ago, guided by their parents. The feathers are entrenched within the sharp grass and little bits of dandelion that flew from this morning's winds. I hope Mami doesn't see me touching the little feathers. Anytime Papi throws potatoes at the birds, she turns away, places her colorful apron over her mouth and closes her eyes. "We have no business with those animals," she says as I too turn away and approach her. It's as if she doesn't want them or any part of them entering her. Mouth closed, eyes locked, nose open, "but my nose hairs will catch it all." I look over at our kitchen. Right now, Mami's cooking lunch.

She's not watching. I then turn my head to the river down in the crevasse and remember the meeting spot of these beings: the giant rock that almost splits the river in two. We don't know how all the birds—all of them, no being left behind—fit on this rock. We also don't know what they do on it. But it's one of the few places in our landscape that's not covered in white shit.

Several of the neighborhood children—stupid boys that like to chase rabbits, wild rabbits they call them, but they are just the pets of our neighbor Juanjo—have tried to climb down the quebrada. They don't want to touch the water (nobody does. The water is dark brown and, from what we can tell, thick as yogurt.) Kids wearing expensive clothes want to jump from the little river beach on to the bird rock as a dare. From what I've heard no child has ever made it. They fall into the brown yogurt, cry for help, and the neighborhood guards—with shotguns strapped to their chests—climb down and rescue them. The Ecuadorian law prohibits people from tampering with rivers, but our neighborhood knows others don't follow these regulations. The Machángara River carries plastic bags and bottles, sometimes several car tires at once, used baby diapers, our poop, and, once, a baby some woman didn't want. The infant floated on the river and his journey went unnoticed until the river ended in Esmeraldas. The baby—now a child living happily in the beaches of Esmeraldas, he sells seashells to tourists—took several weeks to reach the coast. It is still a mystery how he fought the pollution, animals, and other dangers in his way. He—Roberto is his name—was featured as a headliner in *El Comercio* for five days straight. Then the next news trumped him: an American visa was granted to the indigenous man suing Shell.

The black vultures could be mutants. They were born in dirt water and fed with chlorine water from our pool. My brother says this is why they haunt our neighborhood: they are animals that don't know how to act naturally. It his working theory.

Papi and I give up in our search. I don't tell him about the baby feathers I found. As we enter the kitchen we are welcomed by Mami's cooking. Mami cooks too much food for lunch today: coconut shrimp, baby spinach salad, spicy chicken, meat with garlic and purple onion, rice, menestras, caldo de pollo, and two different juices, both made with azúcar morena, my nickname.

"What's with the feast?" I ask her, helping her put away some of the ingredients she already used.

"Viene Nicolás," she says. My tongue burns with the shrimp I grab from the serving plate. Coconut bubbles sizzling at the tip of my tongue. Nicolás is one of Papi's friends. Like father, he's an aficionado of golf, scotch, whisky, rum and coke with too much lime, and homophobic jokes when inebriated. What they don't share in common, however, is Nicolás' obsession with birds and bats. Over brunches and dinners, Christmases and summers, Nicolás looks out the terrace of every house we're in, examining branches and leaves, looking for fowl. And what he doesn't see he imagines, like the Galápagos penguin or the Great curassow, both beings lurking in his brain and around our kitchen table. He discusses their behavior and how it matches ours, their beaks and eyes, how they take flight. He moves his hand—pink and dry—as he mimics a bird taking flight, how his pinky is so distant from his thumb, how his cuticles are manicured, how his palm could grab and suffocate all the black vultures residing in our neighborhood. The lines on his hands tell stories of golf sessions with Papi, of his trips to the Amazon for work on the oil fields, of the birds he wishes he could cage.

"Why is Nicolás coming for lunch??" I ask Papi.

Papi dismisses me with a hand motion that means *your worries are silly, mija*.

"We're going to talk about los pajarracos," he says while helping Mami toss the salad.

“There are none,” I say back.

“Yeah, you killed them all with your potatoes,” Carlos says as he enters the kitchen. He too burns his tongue with the coconut shrimp. I forgot to warn him.

“He never even hit one,” Mami says. She laughs at Papi.

Papi’s face gets serious. This is the same look he gets when he stares at the golf ball that missed the hole after he putted. The same stare he gives me when I ask too many questions. And the same expression he gives anyone—including Mami—who hurts his pride.

“We can’t keep living like this, haunted by giant black birds,” he says, moustache not moving.

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The myth of Galope Kaka is about an adolescent girl. This oral narrative didn’t give her a name, but I think that if no one is willing to assign her one, I will. I’ll name her after me. Her name is Ana. Ana, like most girls my age, was going through a breakup. She hadn’t officially broken up with her boyfriend, but she knew she had to. He was flirting with too many girls. Ana couldn’t keep count of them with her two hands. Jealousy took over her actions: she dismissed her mother’s advice, told her boyfriend’s secrets to others, and imagined her escape from Galope Kaka, to a place beyond the mountains, maybe to the place where all the blue and purple seashells come from. Instead of dirt she wants to taste the salt entrenched within the conchs her culture trades for obsidians. She no longer wants to see her reflection in the clouds above her but in a space where her boyfriend does not exist.

Ana’s long hair touches the floor; she can’t cut it unless a full moon lingers in the sky for days. But every time a full moon takes over the landscape, she decides she’s not ready. Her breath smells like flowers. Eyes the color of the dirt when wet. Her skin is a soft leaf with tiny



thorns which, when touched, makes men bleed. Ana's heart is heavy and she can feel it through her breasts: they ache as she cries for him.

She knows the cure for her heartache is the river of the condor. Her mother once bathed her in it when her body would not stop trembling; days later, hair still wet from the river, her body stopped shivering. Today Ana wonders if the river of the condor will save her broken heart.

///

I eat lunch quickly. I don't even sit down at the table; I hover over the kitchen counter like an eagle cutting the air with my wings and barely dipping my claws into the water. I let my tongue burn with everything straight out of the frying pan and cool it with lettuce and juice. I eat it all and fast because I don't want to see Nicolás. Mami looks at me with confused eyes.

"Mijita, you'll burn your mouth," she says to me.

"And you're not leaving much for the rest of us," Carlos says.

"I don't like Nicolás," I say.

"¿Y eso por qué?" Papi asks as he washes his hands before lunch.

"Last time you both got drunk on the terrace he was being too loud," I tell him. And this is the partial truth. The entire truth is they were both so drunk and vulgar Mami had left them alone hours ago. They sat out on the terrace, whisky glasses never empty, talking about their coworker Andrés and his husband. Their homophobic rants echoed throughout our neighborhood. I'm sure even the pajarracos heard it. Their jokes about penises probably reached the outer corners of Cumbayá, the places yet to be gentrified. And when I went inside Mami's room to complain, she was wide-awake sitting at the edge of her bed. Mami can't sleep either, I thought as I approached her. Mami was crying, mascara goops forming at the edge of her eyes, black tears running down her cheek and settling in the river bed above her upper lip. Our

conversation didn't make much sense because she didn't want to talk to me—all her answers were lies—and I assumed she was crying because our grandmother had passed away recently and this was a constant scene, her hiding from us to cry – Papi doesn't console her, a side effect of having friends like Nicolás.

Nicolás is the type of man that doesn't bring his wife with him when he's invited to lunch or dinner at our house. This has been happening for years. We sometimes theorize that she doesn't exist because every time Papi asks him about her—her name is Luciana—he says she's ill or busy, often dismisses the question with his hand, just like Papi does with my questions: *your worries are silly, mija*. But we have met Luciana and, from what I can remember, her tres leches cake is delicious. Now Papi, too, after years of friendship with Nicolás, has been leaving Mami behind at home while he attends company dinners and other festivities.

I sat next to Mami and heard her lies about our maid, Marianita, and her growing belly. “She is pregnant,” Mami cried. “She will leave us.” Marianita, an 18-year-old Mormon, had gotten pregnant, and mornings without Marianita seemed impossible: the cooking, cleaning, bird shit wiping, and plant watering all at once were too much for one person, and it is, but who else would help? Not us. Mami's tears felt cold on my neck. This is when I spotted Nicolás walking up our stairs.

The guest bathroom is downstairs next to the kitchen entrance. At that moment, I wondered where Papi was – was he occupying the guest bathroom? But I doubt even a drunk Papi would do so. What bathroom was Nicolás planning on using? What if he wasn't planning on using a bathroom? Mami's tears streamed down my chest as I held her head near mine. Nicolás popped his head inside my bedroom, stared at the darkness, perhaps trying to decipher if the lump of blankets and comforter was me, the child of his good friend, his good drunk friend

whose laughs still echoed beyond the Machángara river, beyond the birth of the black vultures. Nicolás closed the door behind him.

About fifteen seconds later he walked out looking disappointed, his steps betraying him, hands strapping back the brown leather belt he unbuckled. My blankets warm and displaced, half of their body cascading down towards my bedroom floor. He looked at me as he walked downstairs. And today Nicolás is visiting our home and lunching in our dining room. He's going to use the guest bathroom, plant bombs or poison or venom in our backyard to scare or kill the big black vultures, and kiss my cheek when he says *Hola*. It all angers me. I let the food burn my tongue and my gums. I down the juice with the excess of azúcar morena. I tell Mami gracias and head upstairs to my room where I hide. I'm still chewing the coconut shrimp. Here no Nicolás enters, ni ningún otro hombre.

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Ana leaves in the middle of the night. Stars stare at the crescent moon quickly traveling the sky. Ana, too. She secures her long hair from it. Ana carries some seeds tucked beneath her breasts, life close to her skin. She carries them with her because she wants Pachamama close to her now, skin-deep, in case the river has other plans for her. Her toes pull grass as she walks. She turns around and memorizes her life in this community: a guiding mother fast asleep, a father who trades obsidians for spondylus, a man who is gone too much for far too long, five brothers and sisters who would love to watch the river of the Condor fail her. The páramo's yellow flowers are drenched in moonlight and all kinds of blues. A scene frozen in time. Ana walks with determination. She doesn't want her heart to ache any longer because her whole body aches with it: her knees hurt when she runs, her back when she lays down, her eyes when she laughs. If the river of the Condor does not heal her, she will have to live with the disappointment that perhaps

she's not important, perhaps the river only cures real issues, like her illness when she was a child, and she will have to live with this secret, too, because Ana doesn't want others to know the river refused her. What a disappointment. She is sure they'll call her a liar – the river cures all aches and people, maybe Ana is cursed beyond repair, maybe Ana never stepped foot in it, why would she bring us such shame.

///

Mami knocks on my door. I know this because her knocks are rough— they shake the rosary she herself hung above my bed. Not even Papi with his long hands knocks like this.

“Entra,” I tell her.

Mami tells me about Papi's plans to kill the birds. They will all die tonight. Obsidian feathers will float around Cumbayá and land on muck, feathers replacing the shit on our windshields. And the feathers on my window will remain remnants of a night caller, a being who feeds on the dead. She often points at the feathers embellishing my window when referring to the big black vultures Papi and Nicolás will envenom. This is all I will have to remember them by. Weeks ago, I heard some scratching on my window while I slept; something was grazing it roughly. I got up, turned on the ceiling light, and spotted one of the birds leaning on my window frame. A beak that could pierce glass. Claws orange and strange, held together like bones without cartilage. Eyes that looked out into the river with hope. And a featherless grey head— cracked skin and mountain ranges. My own condor. I didn't know what it wanted: I didn't have any dead animals in my room. So, it just left a few of its feathers behind, perhaps as a reminder that it is the size of my bedroom window, it is large and grand and majestic, its feathers infectious.

Mami leaves after she complains that I have not folded the laundry she placed near my bed four days ago. I nod as she reprimands my behavior, focusing specifically on today's lunch. Whose daughter am I that I don't lunch with the family, that I eat standing up hovering and flying over the sink taking care of the crumbs that fall?

"Perdóname, Mami," I ask her. She nods, and I read the worries swimming in her brown irises – she doesn't like Nicolas either, or at least what Nicolas does to Papi: he transforms him, and he hatches a new self.

She leaves after she folds all my laundry and tucks it away in my closet. I lay on my bed thinking about the vultures that dominate our neighborhood, the children who one day would like to crown the bird rock theirs, the Machángara river and its smells, the hours until bedtime, Nicolás, when will he leave, Nicolás, will he stay for dinner, Nicolás, poison, venom, bombs.

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Ana's feet feel like roots; they now penetrate the land below her, grabbing the soil molded by the river and the purple flowers that died years ago. She's reached it: the river of the condor flows in front of her – it carries wisdom and secrets and a million stories of salvation. Ana is petrified. She hides her breasts from the river and stares at its waves: small tornadoes and hurricanes created by rocks, moonlight reflections and wind, how many universes contained within this water, how it's travelled from the peak of the Andes down to the edge of her toes, how it's shifted landscapes, healed the broken, astonished her. Ana feels small. The pumamaqui tree that hovers over the river smells like serenity; her mother boils and drinks its paw-like leaves to calm her nerves and worries, especially all her concerns about Ana—she's young and fragile, big breasts and little knowledge of what's around her, she's dating a young boy, too, who is lost in space and time. Ana's mother wishes she'd focus more on her gifts and less on boys.

She lays her back on a stone embedded in the riverbank, her toes buried in yellow and green shards of grass. The sharp grass tries to breathe but the almohadilla, a sea of grass that covers the entire mountain range, prevents it. Ana can feel the tiny páramo sachá amor white flowers closing at the sight of the moon. The petals move inwards so slowly, the river seems to lose its speed, too. Her back is cold. The rock's humidity seeps into her skin, and as the cold reaches the echo chambers of her broken heart, she steps inside the river of the condor.

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I hear them talking downstairs as I braid my wet hair until there's nothing left, only thin orquettillas I used to claim were orquídeas, but a black mane with split ends is not an orchid, Papi once assured me. Now my hair smells like coconut shrimp, the smell of Mami's cooking seeping from my fingerprints shaped like swaying volcanoes. The braid that rests on my chest smells like the tiny orange bubbles of used oil sprinkled around our kitchen counter, like the sea animal Mami deveined and dipped in eggs and panko salted with white shreds of coconut, fried until brown, blotted with paper towels and torn apart by the teeth of a predator.

Papi calls my name, and I don't say anything in response – I'm sure his mustache quivers with disappointment. He calls it again, and I throw my braid back, the weight of my hair bruising my lower back. The ceramic floor feels cold, but the warmth emanating from my soles leaves no sweaty footprints. Before I reach our kitchen, I step out into the terrace. Another night of drinking is set: two wooden lounge chairs, a side table, two bottles of imported whiskey, the kind Papi asks Carlos to purchase when he comes home from college at aduanas, and a bucket of ice.

I don't see them, the birds who will die tonight. I smell the Machángara river and the constellation of trash it carries this evening. The moonlight fights grey and deep blue clouds and brightens up the river. The river trails around our neighborhood, separating houses protected by

guards—security guards who live well beyond the boundaries of Cumbayá, out in Puembo, out by the red rose plantations—from a parroquia of sculptors and veterinarians. These men and women live on a hill that constantly implodes with every month of heavy rain. Mami fears the hill will definitely disappear this April with abril aguas mil. “Where will all those people go?” Mami wonders, hands over nostrils, Machángara river smells protruding. The dust from the cement sculptures—lions and fountains, tiny babies with wings—has inundated the puppy mills from time to time, this tragedy making it to the starting segments of the 8 o’clock news.

“Buenas tardes, Ana,” Nicolás says to me.

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Ana swims in a river that’s not deep. In fact, the river of the condor only reaches her knees. But it deepens for her. It is wide and bottomless. Ana washes away her resentment and frustrations, the pain her boyfriend caused her. She feels her heart weaving back together, chamber to chamber, vessel to muscle. Certain memories come back to her: her brothers exploring a cave with her, the color of pumpkin squash and the taste of chicha, her mother’s hands as big and as long as the pumamaqui tree hovering over her, watching her bathe. Ana comes up for air and sees him.

A man wearing a thin and long black poncho gazes at Ana, llama fibers swaying with the gusts. He steps forward as Ana swims away a bit.

“Come forward,” he says, voice similar to her boyfriend’s.

“Who are you?”

The clouds blocking most of the moonlight part, and she really sees him. What smooth skin, what brown eyes, what puckered lips, what face. Ana’s renewed heart beats faster. She exits the river, the water that healed her clinging to her pores. Ana walks to the man who now

stands still, pumamaqui leaves turning away. The river is loud. It washes over rocks, muds, and flowers, these noises echo the Andes and unsettle the lava hiding underneath volcanoes.

“What are you doing here?” Ana asks the man. But Ana doesn’t get a response. As she steps out of the river, water trickling down her spine and legs, he steps closer to her, grabbing her by the waist. Her heart beats loudly in response. This is the gift from the river, a boy who holds her like she’s the only one for him. He begins to stroke her long hair with his palms, removing bits of dirt.

“How soft, your touch,” Ana says.

The smooth touch turns into rough rasping. The man’s fingers pull Ana’s uncombed hair, multiple knots once undone by the river of the condor now reappearing, locks twisting. The sky turns darker. And the man’s fingernails grow into sharp claws, his poncho into black wings, his puckered lips into a beak. The condor raptures Ana into his control, and they fly away, bird and woman, into the distant open mouths of volcanoes.

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From the terrace, I can see my mother. Mami walks up to the fence that divides our backyard and pool from the cliff and the river, sandals struggling through our newly-cut lawn. She places her hands on the grey rail and admires the river’s strength. How it avoids the rock of the birds, how it carries Quito’s waste, how it defines us. Papi, next to her, raises his index finger and soars it across the equatorial sky. The stars shine above them, twinkling messages to each other. Words travel above us and leave us. I hear Carlos shutting our front door shut. He unlocks the car, enters, and drives away from us, out to Quito for a night out. And Nicolás places his hands on my shoulder, he has me, he’s reached me, I am his, claws sinking into my skin.

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Galope Kaka is divided. There are those who blame Ana's disappearance on herself: she left us, she played with the river, and the river won. And then there's Ana's family. Her mother who stands under the pumamaqui tree and awaits its response. Where is my daughter? The páramo responds with noiselessness and apathy.

The oral narrative skips eight months. The time it takes to grow a child in a womb. I don't know what she ate or where she slept, if the condor protected her from evil energies. If she cut her hair or if it reaches her toes. And when the culture residing in the Galope Kaka páramo watch Ana—the girl who left a trail of seeds, the girl who never came back—walk up a blossoming hill of sachá amor, they become unresponsive. Weeks later, inside her adobe house and next to an illuminating fire, Ana gives birth to the child of the condor, a zoomorphic baby with belly button and wings, with legs and skin like a mountain rage, with puckered lips and hopeful eyes.

## Hacienda lunar:

San Francisco de Quito, Ecuador, 1874 - 1900

1900

A couple of decades later, the Chiribogas found it: a cadaver resting in between banks of uncut grass and mounds of dried mud. Its yellowed skull and horns bulging out in the landscape, its ribs forming a pattern of noises with every gust of wind that blew on our faces and carried the smell of the dead across what once was Hacienda Lunar. The big black obsidian bull did it. Uku killa hunted her down. Blocks, roads, trails away from la plaza de toros.

*An 18-year-old woman was found dead on her bedroom floor in the hacienda of Don Freile Freile, located right at the center of town, corner of Guayaquil and Chile streets. Aurora's body was stiff, putrid, and blanca like the stars in the night sky when found.*

I wrote "Disaster Strikes at Hacienda Lunar," published by *El Quiteño Libre* on March 1st, 1874, and it was left incomplete. I didn't disclose the cause of death. I wasn't allowed. The stories behind Hacienda Lunar went untold. Back then, Quiteños preferred to fabricate stories about Don Freile Freile's daughter and her untimely death rather than to learn the truth: a black bull seeking revenge killed the young woman, and this bull was the only survivor of the cattle catastrophe that rattled Hacienda Lunar in 1874. Now I attempt to piece Aurora's narrative together so that Quito today can see her for who she was, a child of tragedy, a result of our haciendas. I want to pay tribute to Aurora, Fanny, Mery, Segundito, and Baltazar, to discover why a bull would kill a woman, and to denude the lies we tell ourselves, like why we kill in revenge, too.

My handwriting in 1874 wasn't legible enough. But from my notes, I can still make out the famous Leticia. Leticia did not know what had occurred in her own home. I remember her hands holding her jewels tightly, white skin, purple veins, brown birthmarks; she nervously played with her golden necklaces as I interviewed her. Aurora's father was out smoking a rolled-up tobacco. He coughed every time he exhaled, his coughs bouncing off the red ceramic floors. They reached Aurora's room through her open window and us in the living room through the red velvet drapes that decorate each window. Leticia—the mother of the most stunning single woman in Quito—wondered if her daughter's nightmares and restlessness got the best of her Aurora that night. Meanwhile Don Freile Freile refused to answer my questions the day he reported his daughter's death; he took his horse and cantered across his property, surely thinking about the bull that looked so intently at her daughter earlier at the corridas, and gazing at the Andean mountain range closing in on all of us.

1874

Fanny and Aurora ate soup together, Mery—the main hacienda maid—told me as she made locro de papa for the entire household as a funerary rite. She peeled the boiled potatoes so quickly, I lost count after thirty. Papa after papa, Mery confessed a little caldo de papa—"ruqru"—could ease the hacienda's torment for today. She squashed all yellow potatoes with her wrinkly hands—only sign of aging on her—sprinkled the mix with salt and butter, and carved fourteen avocados to decorate each bowl.

In between sips of hot stew, Mery told stories about her daughter Fanny Puma and Aurora, Hacienda Lunar's prized possession; years ago, back in 1863, these girls held hands as they burned their tongues with chicken broth, sopa so hot the floating carrots and cauliflower

turned purple. Little hands intertwined under the table, they'd hold their spoons with the other and blow air through their mouths creating waves on their tiny spoons, some broth falling back into the bowl. Yet their soups wouldn't cool down and their tongues would burn for days afterwards. Bewildered, they'd look at their ugly grey and bright red bumps on their tongues together. First, they'd tell each other what the tiny wet hills looked like – Aurora would describe Fanny's as mounds of dirt slowly eaten by the wind, and Fanny would say Aurora's looked like the pink monster that dangles at the end of her throat, the one that moves when she screams. The girls would then rush to the mirror in Aurora's room and fog their reflections as they opened their mouths. And even though Fanny wasn't allowed up on the hacienda's second floor, they'd take their time and touch their tongue bumps with their index fingers—small volcanoes erupting—and remind each other to protest their next lunch if soup was being served. Mery said she would later find Aurora's long blonde locks tangled into little tornadoes with Fanny Puma's obsidian hair throughout the house. Tiny remnants of fog, too, imprinted on the mirror.

Without Don Freile Freile and Leticia's permission, Aurora taught Fanny how to talk like she talked, sit like she sat, even how to fan herself gracefully. But Fanny couldn't teach Aurora how to live the life of a forest child. Aurora wasn't allowed to go outside for too long without supervision. She wasn't allowed to eat wild flowers, to paint her face, to let Fanny sleep in her bedroom upstairs, the one that faces out to Pichincha. Fanny, nevertheless, was allowed to lunch with Aurora every now and then, when Aurora's parents were out dining with fellow proprietors.

“They were sisters,” she said, potato squash on the corners of her mouth. I spilled over el jugo de limón she made for me on the long wooden kitchen table, and the table absorbed none of it. She cleaned it with her sleeve, sugar and salt now stuck on her skin.

Mery cried when she described her last image of Aurora. Aurora tenía piel de porcelana, eyes of young honey, long and always-combed hair—she liked to run her fingers through her hair, el olor de lavanda seeping from her. Aurora had delicate fingernails that turned deep ocean blue when she died, a tongue that never healed from her blisters, lips like pink cotton, and one thousand beauty moles on her back. Mery once traced her finger through Aurora’s back and claimed Aurora carried the sky en su espalda: “the stars unite and outline the shape of a big house. Fanny, here, can you see the cattle eating tall grass, workers building fences? There I am, dressing Aurora, and you are down here, looking out the window at the streets. Can you see the wagons stepping on stones, women on balconies wearing flowers, the sun following all of us?” She said this with her hand in the air, finger tracing wind and dust, cheeks wet with regret. Mery no longer works at the hacienda. Her daughter Fanny is now married and working in some other hacienda in Quito, raising wealthy children that aren’t hers.

“Fanny loved Aurora,” Mery claimed as she smashed the potatoes. Aurora and Fanny grew apart once other rules settled into Hacienda Lunar. The summer of nightmares and midnight screams, the summer when all of Don Freile Freile’s cattle died, united the two beautiful girls briefly, but, shortly before Aurora’s death, the two stopped speaking to each other. When they were twelve, Aurora was enrolled in the Escuela de las Bellas Artes and Fanny homeschooled by the man who brushed Don Freile Freile’s horses. His name was Segundo, and, like his name, he was the second choice for Fanny’s education, Mery joked; Segundo, with a head full of grey hair, still talks with a lisp. When I talked him the day I was sent over to report the story, he said he had dedicated his life to this hacienda and did not want to leave. “I’m about to be a father,” he told me, grabbing his unbuttoned shirt and soaking up his tears with it. I asked him where he was when Aurora was killed, and he pointed at Júpiter, Don Freile Freile’s horse.

“This is all over, isn’t it?” he asked. We brushed Júpiter’s hair together. The horse didn’t move its tail.

“Segundito, why do you say so?”

“Nobody’s going to want cattle from this land anymore,” he uttered back. He meant cattle from a land that kills hacienda women, specifically white virgins.

Segundo’s hair sticks out of his skull like the coconut trees that once outlined Hacienda Lunar: the fruit fell when the household no longer needed it, sometimes clogging entrances and trails. A coconut once struck Fanny’s head as she helped lean tiny mirrors on the hacienda’s walls over time. Too many birds had died as they crashed into the house’s mirrors, a reflection of themselves, fractured bodies covered with morning dew peppered across the landscape. Segundo was first to notice. He’d walk Júpiter to every coconut tree before Don Freile Freile finished his breakfast as a morning job, and the horse would pick up the birds with its teeth, chewing on grey and black feathers. The day Fanny’s head was cut open by a coconut, she collapsed in front of the living room window, and like the birds she helped save, her wings spread open, blood seeping into the dry ground. After that, Don Freile Freile instructed the hacienda boys to chop down every coconut palm. “For Aurora.” Today Segundo works out of town, building a railroad for a train that doesn’t exist. His family, too, lives in the outskirts of Quito. None of his children bear his name. Not because the jokes about his name finally became such a burden—he was always thought of as a man who deserved to be second at everything—but because he can’t pronounce the opening *S*.

Eight years ago, the woman who usually taught the indigenous children of this hacienda died choking on an empanada de morocho. The piece of empanada she couldn’t swallow was sharp and yet not greasy enough to slide down her throat. Segundo was knowledgeable,

nevertheless. He taught Fanny the art of raising horses, he said, the importance of braiding their hair symmetrically, of feeding, bathing, and riding them. Segundo paid special attention to Don Freile Freile's main horse, Júpiter. Fanny learned how to saddle him up and prepare him for rides. She learned how to tame and comb his cyclone hairs, how to keep horseflies off his body, how to nail the horseshoe in. Júpiter sometimes followed Fanny back to her room after dawn. The horse would escape its stable, flick the lock open with his braided crest. Segundo said a white being would then trace the property at night, fighting off ghosts and protecting the cattle and Mery's potatoes. Segundo would find trails of chewed pumamaqui leaves leading up to los establos—leaves Mery infuses in her tea to calm her nerves—and then a Spanish beast awaiting its brown sugar breakfast, impatient but at peace. Baltazar—el curandero of Hacienda Lunar—claimed Júpiter came from above, from the kay pacha, as they call it; Júpiter is a beast from the heavens, a monster with four legs and white hair they couldn't control, a horse who would save Hacienda Lunar one day. But it didn't save Aurora.

As Aurora grew into the woman Quiteña society wanted her to be—defined, artistic, well-spoken, witty, a forever virgin until marriage—Fanny became the refined daughter of the Pumas who worked in the Freile Freile hacienda, nicknamed the Hacienda of the Moon, not because of the Andean moon that shined on the land often—it brightened up dead flowers and leaves at midnight—but because of Don Freile Freile's big round belly. As soon as Aurora graduated Escuela de las Bellas Artes and Fanny began working in the kitchen helping her widowed mother serve hot soup for lunch—never empanadas de morocho in this house again—the girls found themselves reunited at certain times of the day. During breakfast, Aurora would tell Fanny stories about her encounter with boys in family meetings; she would rant about how she could only work on certain types of art at school as a woman and about her mother's

insistence on her marrying Ignacio Robles, a boy so tall birds create nests on his head. Eggs fell and cracked on the wooden floor casually as he walked. During the evenings, Fanny would sit on a stool close to Aurora's bathtub and tell her stories about the cattle on the property—she nicknamed them, helped brand all cows and bulls with a hot iron bar in the shape of a crescent moon, and cried when they died—and complaints about working in the kitchen and burning the same spot on her wrists four times in a row. She'd watch the white bubbles burst on Aurora's pale skin and the water become darker as the filth of the day washed off her body. Fanny would stare at the shape of Aurora's shoulders and try to smell her scent. Later, with the broken piece of mirror that hangs in her bedroom, Fanny would look at hers and study their shape.

It wasn't long after they caught up and lived each other's lives vicariously. Ignacio Robles asked Aurora to dance in a party for the president of Ecuador's wife and Fanny knew all about the event: his hands on Aurora's waist, the smell of his breath, the two eggs that fell from his head and cracked on the dance floor, the yellow yolk that spread—Aurora carried some of it on the train of her dress back home.

Ignacio Robles proposed to Aurora the day before her nightmares began. In front of Aurora's entire family, he asked Don Freile Freile for her hand. The patrón smiled in response. Aurora's mother clapped and the rest of Quiteño elite society followed. It was the talk of the town: between the cutting of roses and the sweeping of balconies, men and women talked about Aurora and Ignacio – “it was about time,” they said, y “qué contento estará Don Freile Freile, his young one leaving his nest.” Pero things were different in Hacienda Lunar. The next night Aurora's screams awoke the hacienda. Curled up in her Mery's arms, she retold her traumatic dream: the earth shook like it did when she was little, the hacienda collapsed on her, but she



could still breathe through all the debris. Nobody came to save her. So, when she screamed herself awake, she saved herself.

Before the Moon's chandeliers became bird nests for Andean fowl, before the hacienda was sold to another elite family of Quito—the Chiribogas, a family who cares more about turning the cattle land into a garden for red roses, now the most requested item up north, than caring for the house—the Freile Freile household awaited Ignacio Robles' first visit. Leticia asked Mery to hide in the kitchen with Fanny. "Es costumbre," she assured me, as she cried over the death of her daughter, "to hide staff."

Segundo guided the Robles family into the property by horse. Before Aurora was born, the indigenous workers planted an entire row of palm trees bordering the main road toward the hacienda. The giant palm trees hovered over visitors as they traveled down the empedrado, grey rocks stabbed into the soil in the form a road. All rocks rounded by each human step and greyed by horse stride. The palm trees today can be seen from the front steps of Church San Francisco de Quito; it is still the talk of every Sunday. Churchgoers have nicknamed them "the Bella Aurora palms." How harrowing their curve—hunched over, lifeless and dry.

From the kitchen window, Fanny watched the hacienda indigenous boys guide the cattle in circles. They yanked tall yellowed grass as they walked in search for the greenest blades, usually hidden beneath small branches. The boys used these branches as whips to help fight the mosquitoes that loitered on the cows' tails. Black and white, brown and grey, the cattle ate the grass, and the smell of their excrement became trapped in the bread Mery was making that day.

"Close the window, mija," Mery asked Fanny.

"I want to say *Hi* to Ignacio," Fanny sighed.

“Why are you calling him by his first name? You don’t know him, do you?”

“Only by stories.”

“Listen, ushi, come here, take this spoon,” Mery guided her daughter Fanny. Fanny swirled around the soup that would be served for lunch that day: the sweat of the coriander ran up her nose, pieces of whitened chicken floated amidst an asteroid belt of carrots, broccoli, peas, all speckled by salt.

In the living room, as one of the hacienda boys lit the chimney’s fire, and while Don Freile Freile supervised from his big wooden chair, Aurora eyed Ignacio: short brown hair, two eggs nested, muddy eyebrows, eyes so dark she cannot differentiate his pupil from his iris.

“I can’t *see* him,” she told Fanny later that night as they licked spoonfuls of caramel in the kitchen. “He isn’t suited for me. Or I’m not suited for him.”

“But what did he bring you?” Fanny asked Aurora.

“Flowers.”

“What kind?”

“White roses.”

“Thorns? No thorns?”

“Thorns. They pricked my finger.”

“Well, I think you have your sign, if that’s what you were waiting for. He’s not the one for you.”

“I know.”

The girls ate the remainder of the excrement-tasting bread as they snuck out on Aurora’s balcony. Mery listened from the porch downstairs. Quito has never had a quiet night, not even back then. The owls hummed the tune of time-callers, men who paraded down the cobbled

streets of Quito guided by gas light, announcing the shifts in time, the hours passed. Fanny and Aurora heard horses strutting cerros and hills, scaring bunnies and moths back into hiding. They heard the stomping of men with liquor breath counting the steps up to Iglesia San Francisco de Quito. The girls sat on red ceramic tiles and talked about Ignacio's eggs.

"I don't love him," Aurora whispered as she sucked the dried blood from her cut. The thorn was gone—Mery took it out herself—but Aurora still felt its phantom pain.

"Does your mother love your father?" Fanny asked. Fanny, a child with no taita to look out for her when she ate forbidden leaves and dug up covered caves, did not know the meaning of paternal love. She begged Mery repeatedly to marry someone, anyone, even Segundito, but Mery refused to find love again.

"I hope so," Aurora replied.

"Do they kiss?"

"No."

That night Fanny slept in Aurora's bed. She cuddled her long blonde hair and curled up to her spine, protecting her best friend from Jose Ignacio's eggs. But Aurora's sleep was still disturbed, as Fanny predicted. Aurora woke up screaming. Fanny fell off the bed from terror, crouching underneath the mattress and awaiting the footsteps of Leticia, Don Freile Freile, Segundito, and Mery to pounce inside the room. Aurora's screams were infinite. Once Mery arrived, Fanny caressed her mother's toes with her index finger. *Mama, I'm down here.* From the doorway, Leticia examined the scene. She tugged on her silk robe to protect herself from the darkness in Aurora's room, from the presence of Segundito and Mery, hacienda workers, at night.

"¿Qué pasa, Aurora?"

Don Freile Freile awaited a response from the hallway. His robe touched his toes. Segundito examined the balcony and spotted the imprint of the girls' warmth on the tiles.

"Una pesadilla, she had a nightmare" Mery said, grazing Aurora's head.

"No," the child replied.

"¿Qué, entonces?" Don Freile Freile's voice echoed across the room.

"Morí en sueño." She died in her sleep.

"Es mal de ojo, es mal de ojo," Don Freile Freile mocked Baltazar's deep voice. He even changed his facial expression: squinted eyes, blue irises still shining, flared nostrils, his yellow teeth biting lower lip, hands clinging to the wooden rosario strapped around his neck, sometimes pulling on his curly blond chest hair. His breathing sped up: he panted around his land, brown boots picking up dried mud, his exhales white like smoke. In the morning, the cold from the mountains descends on Quito, and our whispers and wishes turn into vapor.

"Ese indio me dijo que era el mal de ojo, he told me my daughter was cursed," Don Freile Freile said. Between cigarette puffs, he explained the role of Baltazar, the indigenous man he had killed over Aurora's death. Baltazar, the hacienda's curandero—or what Don Freile Freile liked to think, the man who used black magic guided by Christianity—didn't fix her. How could he? Baltazar worked with the cattle. He helped feed them and took care of their wounds. With herbs, flowers, and roots, he cleaned cow and bull blood and helped birth calves. Diego Baltazar was born sixty years ago in Auquichico. He was born a curandero, a doctor, a wizard, an aid for his community. Baltazar never liked his first name. As a child, when he learned the power of limpieas and other healing practices, he asked those surrounding him to forget about Diego. He is Baltazar.

As a teen, Baltazar moved to Quito from the valleys in search of work. “I like to work with my hands,” he told Mery. He showed off his callouses and scars, counted them with his index finger. “Thirteen.” Hacienda Lunar hired him as a land caretaker, with Don Freile Freile and Mery as his overseers. The land died too often, as if trying to repel all life from it. In less than a month, Baltazar tamed Hacienda Lunar’s hills, cerros, caves, and cracks. His secret to healing relied on ancient knowledge. He’d pierce the rough Andean dirt with his fingertips and spill chicha made by Mery and Fanny inside every hole and crack. “This is how you feed the land back.” Tall grass grew; the cattle ate it all, even the yellow spring flowers Baltazar knew very well were nonnative. “Not all invasions are evil.”

One of Baltazar’s eyes liked to change color under the afternoon sun. The curandero claimed his eye knew more than him about a lot of things, including our ever changing world, and he used the shifts in shades of brown to determine patterns in our weather and in Don Freile Freile’s mood: a yellowed iris meant grey clouds, rough winds, and a thirsty Don Freile Freile quenchable only by liquor and afternoon cafecito; a reddened eye, though, brought an utmost sunlight, the kind that burns our skin, punctured by ten-second rain showers, as if the blades of grass became thirsty, too, and an exploratory Don Freile Freile, who’d search for answers regarding Ecuador’s economy beneath large piles of leaves and spiky flowers.

Baltazar taught Pedrito, the youngest hacienda boy, how to brand each animal. They’d do it together because when Baltazar died—“if he ever did die,” Segundito joked, then cried again—Pedrito would continue Baltazar’s legacy. Baltazar didn’t have children or a wife. He had Pedrito and Mery. Pedrito and Baltazar would tie up every animal and burn their flesh with hot steel. One day, Pedrito learned a lot about branding from a small black bull who wouldn’t stay still.

“I saw from it from the stables,” Segundito told us. “Every time Pedrito approached him with the hot iron bar, the bull tried to escape. And he did, like three or four times. By the fourth time, Baltazar caught him and rode him back to the branding grounds. Pedrito managed to brand him, but very poorly. Instead of a single moon, he ended up with ten rising moons.” The bull was too burned up; it couldn’t walk straight, as its back legs suffered damage from the wound. The black bull grew quickly, however, and with every angry kick and every grass shit he took, the moons grew bigger, too.

“Fanny nicknamed it *Uku Killa*,” Mery said. She rubbed her hands together, healing down her veins that popped out of her skin, blue, grey, and black channels and rivers soaring up to her arms, hiding underneath her poncho and long straight hair.

“What does that mean?” I asked Segundito and Mery.

“Under moon,” Segundito said.

“Like a moon that won’t rise, but it’s up there, yet dark. We don’t know how it got there, but we can see it. And it can see us back, too,” Mery continued.

Because the bull was swift and muscular, quiet and dangerous, an unafraid monster from underneath us, Baltazar took him under his wing. He’d make sure it fed itself, sometimes rode it during the late hours of the night. It impressed Segundito. How a man could tame a bull that wasn’t a bull. How Baltazar tamed a monster. Baltazar even crafted a metal ring for the bull’s nose.

“As if the bull needed to be distinguished in some way,” Segundito laughed. “It was the only giant black bull we had. The only one that survived.”

Mery hid her hands underneath her poncho and turned her back on us.

“It was Fanny’s favorite. And when they took him away, Fanny and Baltazar almost left us, too.”

Baltazar believed the nights of screaming and Aurora’s restlessness were the product of a curse: el mal de ojo. “He wanted me to warn him,” Mery told me over potato stew, “to warn Don Freile Freile that his daughter was ojeada.” She told Leticia, who denies the existence of negative and positive energies, yet keeps a single pumamaqui leaf under her bed, and Leticia told Don Freile Freile; Leticia’s anger against Mery and Mery’s natural gift for motherhood couldn’t interfere with her worry about Aurora. Her only daughter—the only inheritor to this land and cattle life, a seat at the upper class Quiteño society table, the successor of a seat that doesn’t have a say but does inherit food, parties, and horseback rides, a seat that can command a household of indigenous men and women—is now at stake; Aurora is in danger. The day Leticia brought over Padre Luchito, Baltazar helped Mery make cheese. At night, they’d taste the salt-less bits of dried up cheese and talked about Padre Luchito. Baltazar and Mery were both on the same side; he was not good for Aurora, he didn’t know how to cure mal de ojo. Padre Luchito was tall and carried a hump around on his back everywhere he went. Yet it would disappear when he knelt in front of the cross in the Hacienda Lunar jardín. Padre Luchito saw Aurora four times. Every visit, he’d press his thumb on her collar bones and forehead, whispering to himself.

“We didn’t know what he was saying,” Mery said as she shook her head. “He was talking to himself, but I guess Aurora was supposed to hear it, too.”

The priest wanted Aurora to pray ten Hail Mary’s every night before bedtime. Mery would pray with her. Both women down on their knees, elbows on Aurora’s beautiful bedspread, sewn and cleaned by Mery, never slept on by the housemaid. Mery prayed for Aurora’s recovery. She, after all, raised her.

“She was like my own skin and blood,” Mery cried. Segundito got up and hugged her. “I don’t know what Aurora prayed for.”

The prayers didn’t work. It was a month after the screaming began, and Aurora yelled every night as she woke herself up from horrific nightmares. She then couldn’t fall back asleep. She’d wander around Hacienda Lunar shoeless. Her long blond locks reached the back of her knees and when she sat on the logs near the outskirts of the property, the blond locks became green with grass and moss. Aurora walked around and sometimes spotted Júpiter, too, roaming around, chasing off ghosts. Segundito would bring her back inside.

“She was sleepy. Her eyes would blink so much, I swear a hummingbird lived in her eyelashes,” Segundito laughed.

He’d bring her back inside the house and then run back for Júpiter. Mery would comfort her Aurora by racing her fingertips through her then uncombed her. She’d pull and tug, Aurora not feeling a thing. She’d then whisper prayers in her ears, write messages on her back with her nails, sing songs in her language. Aurora would stay up all night, listening to her and waiting for the sun to rise so she could draw again and dream of sleeping.

“I couldn’t handle it. Seeing her like this. That’s then tried to convince Don Freile Freile about Baltazar’s ways,” Mery said. Her arms were now crisscrossed under her red and pink poncho.

“How did you do it?” I asked her.

“I showed him what he did to the cattle.”

Baltazar had seen the land recede. Months after the healing, the grass grew too slowly. Even with his chicha injections to the ground, even as he poured the magical corn liquor into the dried up Andean dirt, the ground wouldn’t heal. It was in denial. It didn’t want the cattle on it, it



didn't want the boys to fight mosquitoes, it didn't want Júpiter, the beautiful white beast, roaming around its surface at night. It wanted them gone. This is when Baltazar went on a road trip. He took one of the horses, rode up to Cotopaxi, and came back with a rolled-up blanket.

“He unrolled it in front of us and Don Freile Freile,” Segundito said.

Little purple spikes of ñukchu uksachina decorated the red blanket, sewn by Mery but folded by Fanny. Baltazar had collected the flower with spikes from Cotopaxi's páramos. He'd placed them carefully on the blanket he spread out on the ground, making sure he didn't puncture his skin with it. At Hacienda Lunar, Baltazar asked each hacienda boy to grab the purple leaves by their stems. “Don't let it prick you,” he said, moving his index finger back and forth. The boys nodded in reply.

“I knew what he was going to do with that flower,” Mery said. “He sprinkled them across the property. It took days, and Baltazar didn't let the cattle eat during all that time. And then the grass grew as tall and shiny as the land before time, like the land of Eden.” Don Freile Freile poked the blades of grass with a bastón, smiled and then asked Baltazar to fix his daughter. La limpia took minutes.

He placed his hands on hers. Her pulse flew into him, and Baltazar's eye turned hazel. Aurora's locks laid on her chest as she observed the room: a thousand wooden crosses spread across each wall; a thousand naked Jesus Christs crucified, bleeding from their wounds; pumamaqui leaves embellishing every window, bits of spiky orange spondylus spread out on the floor, a shrine dedicated to Baltazar's gods, old and new. “You have been ojeada,” he told her. “Te miraron, and their wishes for you sank in. The jealous girls of Quito's desires for your demise, their dreams of you falling and not being caught, their wish to see you collapse.” Baltazar chugged aguardiente and spit it right back out to Aurora's chest. Her chest, blond locks,

and bones were now sticky with saliva and alcohol, the first step of la limpia. Fingertips on her shoulder blades left remnants of dried tea leaves on her invisible hairs. Baltazar sang old songs, words and phrases Aurora didn't understand. Pedrito brought in an egg; he cupped it in his hands the way he picked aguacates from the Hacienda Lunar trees: with such delicacy and appreciation for the creation of life and spread of seeds. The curandero traced the brown egg around Aurora's soles and earlobes, her belly button and the back of her knees, and when it reached her throat it cracked, another egg destroyed because of Ignacio. Was this one, too, birthed on his hair nest? Yolk on her collar bones. Baltazar smiling. "I knew it," he said. "You were cursed. Don't be afraid, Aurora."

"It didn't work," Segundito said. He'd been feeding Júpiter brown sugar, its crystallized diamonds covering Segundito's skin like jewels on a woman's neck: the subtle shine so buried beneath his arm hairs and melanin, and yet Segundito's soul was dark and unattached. Like Hacienda Lunar, he was broken.

"She slept for a day, but the screaming began the next night. And then, that morning, the sun rose but the cattle didn't. They'd been poisoned."

Pedrito—Don Freile Freile calls him "el chiquillo Pedro," Leticia "el metido, the one who always meddles," Mery "wawa Pedro," and Fanny "Pedrito" —killed Don Freile Freile's cattle. Or at least that's how Don Freile Freile thinks about the eight-year-old boy with mud eyes and a mushroom haircut, no left pinky and no hair on his legs. Pedrito dried bird blood off every window with his sleeves. He guided the cattle and swept away the flies. The boy ate the scraps of the Freile Freile's food: chicken cartilage, kernels of washed out yellow corn, crunchy greens,

sometimes chewed, sometimes fresh like the twigs he steps on as he wandered across the hacienda property, wondering what trees once lined the boundaries of Hacienda Lunar and how its fruit, its coconut fruit smell, still lingered. With rigor, he'd tie up cows and bulls on wooden posts he himself dug into the ground and proceeded to brand all animals in Hacienda Lunar with a hot iron in the shape of a half moon. It would take him months. The sheer cattle scream made him twitch, and Baltazar sometimes had to step in and stop Pedrito's arms from shaking. The boy, too, swept the front entrance twice daily, and removed all eggs that continued to sprout from the metal chandelier. But the birds were insistent: this is their home, the candle chandelier that hangs from Hacienda Lunar's porch, the chandelier that only lights up when the President comes over.

Pedrito healed beings with Baltazar. Mery giggled as she told these stories, and Segundito, as he listened from the kitchen porch, snickered and cried. Pedrito and Baltazar once helped a rooster afraid of its voice cock-a-doodle-do again, "It only took two Ave Marías and a flower bath," Segundito said, sitting crisscrossed by a patch of burnt grass, a remnant of last night's bonfire. The bonfire that kept burning in honor of Baltazar. His body burned close to the kitchen, close to Mery and Fanny, in proximity to the house he bled for, a family that failed him. Segundito's fingertips brushed black blades of grass, and every piece of carbon stuck on his skin encompassed a bit of Baltazar. Pedrito and Baltazar taught a cow how to run, "The rooster helped in that occasion," and once, rescued a carpenter bee nest from collapsing in Aurora's balcony and stinging the most beautiful girl in all of San Francisco de Quito.

"Aurora was in love with the buzzing, te acuerdas?" Mery asked Segundito, who nodded his head in response. He'd finally come inside, although he took his boots off outside. He didn't want to carry Júpiter's shit or Baltazar's ashes into the Hacienda Lunar kitchen.

“But we knew she faced danger,” Segundito said.

At sunrise, Aurora washed her face near her bed. With a ceramic bedpan that never really dried, she'd clean off any dust and dirt that settled on her as she slept. The windows in her bedroom weren't fully closed. “She'd feel boxed in when they were,” Mery explained. And Aurora liked hearing a restless Quito try to conquer the night while she laid on her belly and faced the balcony with one eye open. Her blue iris captured Quito in throughout the day: from the morning fog to Pichincha's snowed peaks in the afternoon to the evening fog that confuses condors into flying over our city, mislabeling rats for bunnies and women for female condors.

“I didn't want her to stop drawing them,” Mery said. She cut cilantro with such wrath, the knife cut too deep into the wooden cutboard and stopped her flow.

Leticia asked Pedrito el metido to take care of the carpenter bees. She ordered him around with her finger. She yelled at him three times in Aurora's bedroom. The first time for stepping on Aurora's bed. “He just wanted to get a better view of the nest,” Segundito said as he rubbed his brow. The second time for grabbing the balcony's black rail and leaving a muddy print. And the third for throwing a rock at the nest and letting the carpenter bees sting Leticia's face.

Before the carpenter bees poisoned her mother's forehead, temples, bottom lip and ears, and forever changed Leticia's face, Aurora sketched with charcoal the carpenterbees every morning. Since she couldn't sleep, and when she did she'd scream herself awake, her mornings worked as her quiet drawing hours and time of rest. She'd place the giant pad of wrinkled paper from Escuela de las Bellas Artes on her balcony floor, some remnants of red ceramic dust staining her dress and paper. Mery would bring her some breakfast: humitas, mantequilla, quesito, jugo de limón with a little sugar brought in from the coast. And some days she'd eat it. Aurora would stain her green corn husk black with charcoal. Pieces of charcoal peppered on

butter. Her hands covered in black and gray, she'd draw the outlines first: completely circular beings, curved creatures combating strong winds and Andean songs, el diablo encapsulated in crystal blackness. After Aurora died, Mery ripped some of those drawings from the pad and nailed them on her bedroom's walls. Two days later, Don Freile Freile sold the hacienda to the Chiribogas.

When the bees stung Leticia, Leticia demanded retribution. She wanted to give away Pedrito, to send him off to another hacienda or possibly to another city, a place where he wouldn't bother her anymore. Don Freile Freile fought her on this. The hacienda needed the boy. "They argued a lot about Pedrito, especially when he was around," Mery told us. "One day, he was helping Don Freile Freile bring in some wooden boxes and Leticia, from her balcony, yelled *Get rid of that boy now!* She was pointing at wawa Pedro."

From that day on, Pedrito knew he had to impress the mistress of Hacienda Lunar if he wanted to grow up here with Fanny and Mery, with Baltazar and Segundito, with Júpiter and the coconut trees that no longer are. He stole remnants of the purple spiky flower Baltazar sprinkled the grounds of Hacienda Lunar with, the flowers that made Hacienda Lunar the greatest of all haciendas. Pedrito rushed into Baltazar's shack, but then slowed down. He must've remembered all the times he punctured his bare feet with spondylus. The child forgot Baltazar did not feed the cattle directly with it, but with such urgency and fear of Leticia, Pedrito raced out of Baltazar's shack and out into the fields, caressing every cow and bull with his tiny fingers as he let the animals lick the purple leaflets from his hands. "He wanted them to grow bigger and shinier."

The next day, the cattle didn't rise with the sun. They were all dead. Except for Uku Killa, the beast Pedrito was too afraid to feed. Baltazar told Don Freile Freile. He had to. Don Freile Freile ordered the other hacienda boys to kill Pedrito. Leticia smiled from the kitchen

window. Five boys and one teenager took Pedrito el metido out to the outskirts of the hacienda. They told him to leave, but Pedrito wanted to stay. So, the boys chased him until Pedrito jumped the wooden fence out into another hacienda. Maybe he made it out to Cotopaxi. Segundito, Mery, and Baltazar didn't go with the boys. They stayed in the kitchen, drinking pumamaqui tea.

Fanny braided her hair as we talked about Aurora. Syllable after syllable, Fanny weaved her hair like a wave hits the beach: in, and out, in a pattern so natural and hypnotic, her black hair shined with the sun the way the sand glimmers with its remnants of foam. She looked like her mother – they shared the same dark brown eyes and freckles on their nose and cheeks. Fanny and Mery did differ in mannerisms: as Mery cooked potatoes for me and the rest of the household, she bit her lower lip and never blinked. And with Fanny, with her delicate hands that smelled like oranges—she had recently finished squeezing their juices to accompany lunch—with her nails lined with dirt and her reddened cheeks, she didn't look focused or centered. Fanny seemed lost. She looked around the kitchen and smelled the corn boiling in the stove. The first thing she said to me was “That's going to need salt.”

Fanny doesn't know how to explain a death she didn't witness but did feel. Down to her bones. Fanny was with Baltazar the day Aurora went to the corridas that afternoon. “I don't know when that dividing line was created or who created it, but it was there, physically, between us,” Fanny explained. “Mama used to say jealousy weighs more than a tree trunk. My heart was a branch. But Aurora's was our entire coconut tree plantation, the ones Don Freile Freile removed, the ones that fell on me.”

Baltazar accompanied Fanny to the market. As they dove their fingers inside sacks of golden kernel and white rice, they talked about Mery.

“I want her to marry somebody, maybe Segundito. Maybe Baltazar. Baltazar laughed as I described how lonely my mother is. I still wish he could marry her. I wish I could bring him back from the dead and make him sleep in mama’s bed.”

In between laughs, they heard the commotion. Women with lace veils fled the scene. Men carrying boxes of spinach and lettuce dropped their greens as they ran from it. Children who painted the cobbled streets red with the blood of each rose they stole from their farm stopped and looked up. A giant monster headed towards them with fury. Its refined tail bounced off its hind legs and muscles, its eyes centered on Church San Francisco de Quito’s wooden doors, its nose ring ricocheting from its jaw and muzzle, a skin tainted by full moons. Baltazar and Fanny managed to escape the bull; they headed back to the hacienda immediately.

At night, as Fanny sat near a puddle of water outside the stables, she touched her shoulders. She dipped her fingers inside muddy water, and drenched her naked shoulders. She imagined Aurora’s bathtub, a cream-colored and round pool. She pictured her best friend inside, happy, covered with white and golden bubbles, her skin glistening and lips as pink as her blistered tongue. An Aurora with no tragedy, an Aurora who she could drink hot soup with, a lover she could kiss. Then she heard it. The blasting of glass, the sound of falling. A monster jumping out of Aurora’s balconies and out into Hacienda Lunar’s territory. A monster hiding between tall grass and fallen coconut trees. Fanny’s heart fell on her hands, a beating organ of her and Aurora, and she held it with strength. She rushed upstairs and encountered a bruised and bleeding Aurora on her bedroom floor.

“I kissed her goodnight,” Fanny said, rubbing her fingertips on her lower lip. “I then hid underneath her bed and stared at a hair ball. It was us, tied up. Since I couldn’t bring her back, I buried myself in that cave and I still don’t want to come out.”

La plaza de toros is round and golden like our sun. Every seat is stone carved and glossed by black numbers. Pebbles from Pichincha's mouth and others from the coast lie on the center pit, subjects of violence from strong winds and April showers. We try to so hard to emulate the aridness of Spain's landscapes, we forget our sand doesn't soak up bull blood as well or fast. It takes days. Bull blood—gloomy, thick, insistent—disappears so slowly, sometimes condors fly in to pick up whatever remnant of bull skin is left between Pacific Ocean pebbles. The day of Aurora's death, the Freiles sat in the back row at las corridas. "Don Freile Freile liked the view from up there," Segundito said. He pointed his finger up at the kitchen roof, where a couple of carpenter bees buzzing silently began to form another nest.

All high-class Quito was present. I leaned on the wooden barricade to see if the gossip was true: Aurora was cursed with too much beauty and was now destined to suffer a life of sleeplessness and pain. Don Freile Freile hugged Aurora, her eyes sometimes shutting down, never quite staring at the commotions of the musical band entering la plaza. Trumpets and trombones shined with the afternoon sun. Leticia fanned herself and Aurora. The Freiles sat in silence as the rest of upper class Quito cheered for the matador, a boy so young his voice still quivered when he talked. However, he did not need to talk as he dodged an angry bull or as he paraded the red cape across our sky, making the bull dance for all of us. Yet we all became quiet as we tried to listen to the sounds emanating from the beast, a noise of restlessness and fight, of rebellion and sadness. The bull was meant to die that day, in front of Aurora, Leticia, and Don Freile Freile. Its body cut into pieces, some eaten by the boys who take care of the plaza's delicate sand, and other parts, like the ear, gifted away as an offering to the richest man in San Francisco de Quito at the closing of las corridas. Don Freile Freile keeps about one hundred bull



ears in a wooden box near Júpiter's stable. That day, he didn't need another addition. Instead, he sought to heal his daughter by holding her tight, allowing the cheerful sounds of ceremonies and Spanish adventure to cure her from a safe distance. This was his idea of a cure: the social event of the season.

On the other side of la plaza, Ignacio Robles inhaled the smells of a joyful Quito: liquor, corn, and red rose petals. He eyed his bride-to-be, the beautiful and tragic Aurora, and echoed the crowd. "Olé! Olé! Olé!" And as the corridas continued, the big black obsidian bull with a million branded moons on its side began to head up the stone seats with fury. It broke wooden barricades with its head and horns, ran up the stones like a free animal, and headed for Aurora. Don Freile Freile dragged his daughter by both arms and some locks of blond hair. They escaped the wrath of the uncontrollable beast. The bull, too, escaped la plaza de toros.

The town looked everywhere. The bull hid from us behind churches and markets, inside homes and caves. We couldn't find it, yet we heard it traveling San Francisco de Quito, wounding men and dodging red flowers. I walked home after the search party dwindled, and by the time I stepped outside for a rolled tobacco smoke, my hot cacao breath turning into vapor, Aurora was murdered. This is when it happened. At night, under the crescent moon and fleeting stars.

A few hours later, Don Freile Freile asked Segundito to grab Baltazar's ankles. The rest of the hacienda boys grabbed the curandero's wrists, head, and belly. As they exited the shack, Don Freile Freile hit Baltazar's head with a stick he found leaning on Júpiter's stable. Outside the kitchen, near the stone fountain Baltazar helped build, Don Freile Freile burned Baltazar's body in memory of his only daughter, the most gorgeous and tragic women of all San Francisco de Quito.

1900

In a sense, the bull is buried. The Andean dirt has covered it enough. The Chiribogas plan to leave the bones as they are, bare and out for any forager to stumble upon. The Chiribogas are afraid. And I was, too. Afraid of the bull that put Aurora's nightmares to rest and later escaped out into the hacienda's land, away from her but back to where it was birthed. Of el mal de ojo that gave Aurora her nights of terrors and days of apprehensions. Of Don Freile Freile's anger. Of the bull that laid in front of me, dead and defenseless, how it would flee these grounds if it could.

Church San de Francisco Quito's bells ring every Sunday. Los domingos scare off rats and pigeons living together underneath every statue of Virgin Mary. The rats come back. But the pigeons don't. Quito wants to believe Aurora was a myth. But her and her story stays within all of us. Because her narrative is the story of Quito: the taming and domestication of indigenous land and people, the syncretism of beliefs and histories, a social pyramid reworked and reborn so that Aurora stays on top. And when she fell, we realized how collapsible haciendas are. How a bull can kill a woman, how a criollo can kill an indígena, how a colonizer can kill a culture. The bells rang so loudly the day Aurora died, a couple of children became deaf from the strength of sound, a metaphor for all of us.

## El monstruo de los Andes

In the year 1980, a flood engulfed the city of Ambato, located two hours from Quito, the capital of Ecuador; the rainwater inundated homes, markets, and highland moors. Days later, the sun evaporated the overflowing water. Ambateños walked around their homeland, collecting items stolen by the rain—shoes, hats, chairs, tables, pigs, sheep, and broken weaving looms. As one man searched for his only female pig, he encountered a pit on the ground. He approached it, hands covering his nose and mouth, and discovered the decomposed bodies of four little girls; they'd been buried in the same hole, one next to the other, toes touching, yards away from a house made of adobe, wood, and hay.

This discovery is what Andrea thinks about as she continues to dig the hole in her backyard, eighteen years later; she thinks the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito belongs to her, not the patch of grass that works as one of her apartment building's balconies—the one where Lola, her dog, takes her shits. Andrea's apartment borders the giant park. A chain-link fence guards the forest, a historic landmark of the South American continent, from the city. Two months ago, Andrea discovered this fence is climbable.

Andrea's parents have warned her not to continue, they view her hole-digging enthusiasm as synonymous with grave-digging, but tonight they are visiting Andrea's grandmother who lives in Puembo, a twenty-five-minute drive from Andrea's home. Andrea is alone, in her apartment and out in the forest. As Andrea's parents sip tea and eat cheese and figs dipped in honey, she digs the hard Andean ground with the apparatuses she stole from her father's toolbox.

She previously stored the items of her dig inside a basket Andrea's mother presumed lost a long time ago and hid the container inside her closet, behind the tall rain boots she almost

never wears. It has not rained in months, not even in abril-aguas-mil, the month of a thousand rain showers.

Tonight, Andrea, again, encounters a ground that refuses to be broken. As she stabs the ground with her father's favorite eight-star screwdriver, Andrea pays attention to her surroundings: she observes the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito, a 1,376 acres habitat, with her headlamp. It is commonly known as Quito's lungs for a reason. The forest features thousands of eucalyptus trees. These trees absorb majority of the earth's nutrients and water, dismantling and suffocating its surrounding native trees. Europeans brought eucalyptus trees during the colonization of Ecuador; this species has been colonizing the Andean ground for centuries and has supplied infinite acres with flammable leaves, branches, roots, and earth. Andrea sees and hears this colonization on her nightly walks through the forest; her steps are too loud, they create an unnatural echo, and the smell of burnt eucalyptus acts as a warning sign – a fire has started.

Earlier that morning, Andrea's mother watched her daughter stare at the refrigerator's contents.

"One penguin dies for every second you stand in front of an open refrigerator," Andrea's mother said.

"They do not," Andrea replied, as she opened the freezer door and took out a frozen bag of yucca bread. Andrea and her mother walked towards the kitchen island. As Andrea reached for the pair of kitchen scissors, her mother quickly grabbed Andrea's hands.

"Have you been going out there alone again? Digging?" Andrea's mother asked.

"She hasn't gone out there in weeks," her father replied from the kitchen table.

"I haven't gone out there in weeks," Andrea mocked her father.

“Have you?” her father asked, standing up. He walked over and spotted the dirt under Andrea’s nails.

“You’re not going to find any buried treasure out there,” her mother says. She lets go of her hands and continues unpacking the frozen yucca bread bag.

“I’m not looking for treasure, explicitly,” Andrea replies.

“Then what are you looking for? All you’re going to find are roots, dirt, and maybe some dead insects,” her father said as he pulled Andrea’s hands towards the sink. He washed her hands without a sponge, using his own fingernails to dig out the dirt from underneath.

“The government doesn’t label pre-Columbian artifacts as treasures,” Andrea said.

“So, you’re a huaquero now? Planning on selling looted antiquities to the black market?” her father asked.

“If I find anything, I promise I’ll turn it in to the government—”

“Andrea,” her mother interrupted her, “you’re not going out to the park again. Not without supervision. Who knows the types of people you’ll encounter out there? Or the fires that could start and just engulf you? I forbid you from sneaking out, behind our backs, to dig. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.”

Andrea left the kitchen without her breakfast of frozen yucca bread. It’s not as if they taste that good—grandmother takes the time to make them from scratch—but she will miss the morning ritual of watching the news with her parents. As her father sips coffee and habitually burns his tongue, her mother writes a numbered to-do list with a pen Andrea is not allowed to touch. And Andrea watches the T.V. news, waiting for an update on the monster of the Andes.

This night, as her parents listen to Andrea's grandmother and the stories she always tells—tonight she's either retelling the one where she hopped on the green line bus headed towards Cumbayá and had to cover her nose because the indigenous men smelled horribly, the one where she found a tomato the size of her head in the supermarket and decided to grow her own tomato plants in her backyard, next to the pool but away from the doghouse, or the one where she stood amongst an enthusiastic crowd, extending her hand out to Pope John Paul II, hoping to be blessed by his touch—Andrea stabs the ground in search for a pre-Columbian object. According to the map shown and analyzed in school, three big civilizations could have buried millions of objects alongside their dead right above this spot, the spot where Andrea kneels and stabs the earth. Andrea doesn't carry around a compass. She didn't measure the longitude and latitude of the archeological sites already dug out by huaqueros—the traffickers who sold pre-Columbian artifacts to American and European museums—before beginning her trek. When she's ready to leave—when she's had enough of the forest, when her muscles ache too much, when she encounters a dangerous animal, when she finds something she thinks is pre-Columbian, or when she smells the scent of burnt eucalyptus—she spots the Southern Cross constellation up in the sky and walks away from it. She sees her apartment's lights—the kitchen, her parents' bedroom, the light purposefully left lit in her bathroom—and walks towards it. The apartment's lights are visible miles deep inside the forest.

Tonight, it is the scent of burnt eucalyptus. Andrea quickly packs her basket with her tools, turns around and runs back to her apartment. As she climbs the fence, the screwdriver that holds chunks of Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito falls, and Andrea sees the reflection of the moonlight on the fallen metal. She extends her arm, trying to reach the screwdriver from the top of the chain-link fence.

She didn't bring her father's favorite tool back with her. Andrea dreaded the idea of the Quito Firemen walking through the park, in search of the culprit who initiated the fire. The district knows the eucalyptus trees and their parched surroundings aren't to blame alone; young men and women walk around the park during sunset, leaving lit cigarette butts yet empty but glistening bottles of liquor behind. Some of them even light the fire themselves; several firemen have found matches at the site of origin. As Andrea puts on her morning robe made of wool—Ambato wool, it irritates the area behind her neck, and she constantly leaves bloody scratch marks trying to soothe the pain—she can hear the morning news on the kitchen T.V. Andrea walks faster, enters the kitchen, and sits down next to her father.

“You carry a peculiar smell around the apartment,” he says as he sips his coffee. His tongue burns.

“You need to blow at it and cool it down, like this,” Andrea replies as she mimics the sound of a quick but powerful Andean wind with her mouth. It is ghost-like.

“I cannot wait for you to go back to school in August,” her father replies.

“That's mean.”

“Your father's tongue is not the only thing on fire,” Andrea's mother says as she grabs the T.V. remote and turns up the volume.

The three of them watch a sector of the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito light up in flames. The newsman on site points his index finger to the sky, showing the routes of the helicopters that carry giant buckets of water to the blazing park. Andrea hopes they don't find her father's eight-star screwdriver; she hopes, perhaps prays, that they don't find the hole she's been digging. But she expects that they'll find them both.

Andrea's family does not view the fire as a total loss; her mother enjoys the smell of eucalyptus embellished the apartment. She opened the windows that morning, before she took out her to-do list. The scent woke up her husband. He got up, turned on the coffee machine, and watched clouds of smoke ascend from his giant backyard. It is a beautiful site. Maybe Andrea, too, thinks the fire is fruitful. It will kill the bugs that bother her during her nightly digging—like the giant moths that hang around her headlamp, mistaking it for the moon—and, perhaps, it will help her uncover the Quitu-Caras' pre-Columbian artifacts she's sure are buried miles underneath the eucalyptus' roots.

After the fire report, Andrea lowers her spoon and holds the bowl filled with milk to her mouth. She drinks it with both hands and, when she's done, sighs loudly. She doesn't notice her mother has lowered the volume or that she has popped up the guide on her satellite T.V., quickly browsing for something else to watch. As soon as Andrea lowers her cereal bowl, she notices, on the top right edge of the T.V. screen, the face of the monster of the Andes next to the anchorman.

Pedro Alonso López is the monster of the Andes. López was born in Ipiales, Colombia, and—from 1978 and on—he kidnapped, raped, and murdered hundreds of girls who lived in Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador. In a span of two years, López toured the Andes, destroying what he referred to as the innocence of little girls who ranged from ages 10 to 12; these girls—daughters of indigenous men and women who lived in the outskirts of big cities and whose protests and voices were unheard and silenced—were kidnapped during daylight and disposed of in man-made holes and ravines.



“Your grandmother is coming over tonight,” Andrea’s mother says as she steps inside Andrea’s room with a basket of clean laundry. Andrea’s robe hangs from the top of the canopy bed.

“I can do that,” Andrea stands up from her floor, leaving various books of the Quitu-Caras opened on the floor. She quickly grabs the laundry basket from her mother’s hands.

“The dirt under your fingernails is gone. And the smell of burnt eucalyptus. Good. Because I warned you the other day, didn’t I?”

“Yes.”

“And what did I warn you about?”

“People, animals, and fires in the park. Is grandmother staying long?”

“Do you have any other plans for the night?”

“It’s summer. So, no.”

The fire cleansed a third of the park. Andrea stood nowhere near it when it began. But the flames that engulfed the parched native plants and ground did uncover something, as Andrea hoped they would. The body wasn’t buried too deep in the ground. It wasn’t surrounded by artifacts made of gold, vases filled with chicha—a fermented drink made of corn or yucca, or tiny pieces of clay. It was hidden beneath a pile of dead eucalyptus leaves, and, later, beneath a mountain of smoke. The body, the burned body, belonged to a man who wore torn jeans, a black belt, and a leather jacket.

Andrea keeps the objects she collects from her dig inside one of her rain boots. Behind the boots, and underneath the basket—because it’s safer—Andrea hides a journal. She hasn’t

penciled in the actual significance of every object ever since she found the Coca-Cola bottle cap. One night, in the forest, Andrea dug out the cap with her left index finger, and the metal pierced her skin. As she bled, she tried to clean the dried mud stuck on the cap and tried to forget the familiar borders of its silhouette. It is not a bottle cap. At this depth, it can't be. The mud fell apart, and shreds of red glistened with the help of her headlamp. Andrea threw the bottle cap back inside the hole and sucked her finger's blood. Her light picked up the gleaming scales of a nearby snake, and Andrea stood up quickly. She packed her excavation materials, looked for the Southern Cross up in the night sky, and began to walk away quietly, as if the snake could sense her devotion to silence.

Grandmother should arrive soon. And before Andrea is trapped in-between her parents on their big living room couch, listening to grandmother's stories, Andrea licks her finger before turning a page on her archeology textbook. She finds Juan de Velasco's text on the only page with a folded corner and reads it out loud. She reads the text written by the man who summarized the entire history of the kingdom of Quito in one volume to her stuffed animals covered in dust—the ones that once slept in her bed with her now sit on the falling wall shelf—and to the poster of Atahualpa—a rendering she finds amusing, it is the last Incan king sitting in front of an abyss, watching a Spanish horse climb up the steep hill. She reads Velasco's words to herself because she wants to be sure that on the patch of earth that is now referred to as Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito the Quito-Caras once walked.

Their civilization was a kingdom. The Caras conquered the Quitus, and these two cultures, together, received the Incas and, shortly after, the Spanish colonizers after their long journey through the coastal lands. The culture Manteño-Huancavilca—known for their seats of

authority made of stone—saw the Spanish drop their anchors on a lonely beach in Isla Puná. And the Spanish colonizers, like true museum visitors, sought to carry everything they believed to be of importance to the Manteño-Huancavilca culture back with them. The Spanish stole their stone chairs and carried them up the Andes. Maybe Andrea will dig out a fragment of a stone seat that was left by a Spanish colonizer shortly after the war against the Incas began. Maybe she'll find a pre-Columbian artifact that does not belong to the Andes; it carries sand from the Pacific Ocean, and it clashes with the eucalyptus' roots.

“Did you take my screwdriver?” her father interrupts her reading as he walks inside Andrea's room.

“No.”

“Well, I guess I'm not building your bookcase today, Andre. Or fixing this,” he points at the falling shelf.

“Why?”

“Because I need all my tools.”

“But my books have been piling up on the floor over a year ago.”

“Keep enjoying them from down there because you won't get a bookcase until I get my screwdriver back,” he says as he shuts the door to Andrea's room. Andrea waits a while before she gets up, indignant, and walks up to her parent's bedroom. She'll tell them she took it with her for a school project. Or that Lola—the dog that shits on the balcony—mistook it for a thin bone and took it out of the toolbox that Andrea's father constantly leaves on the floor, open. But she won't tell them the truth. She's about to knock on their door when she overhears their exchange.

“You don't think it was him, right?”

“Who?”

“The monster.”

“No. He only targets little girls.”

“So, who killed the guy with the leather jacket? A man who targets adolescent boys?”

“He probably suffocated with the smoke from the fire he himself built, that arson kid.”

Andrea knows the monster of the Andes did not kill the man who lies, burnt and alone, inside the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito because he’s not interested in men. The monster of the Andes—she doesn’t call him by his last name, López, because then he will become a real person, a silhouette between the eucalyptus trees in her forest—is a myth taught in schools ever since 1980. Andrea and her friends cannot drift away during a school fieldtrip because the monster of the Andes could kidnap them. Not the boys. The monster of the Andes doesn’t snatch girls at night because he likes the thrill of the fight; he likes dragging the girls away, screaming, as their parents or grandparents cry out for help.

Andrea doesn’t dig during the day. She does not take advantage of her father’s afternoon trips to the supermarket or her mother’s post-lunch reading time.

The doorbell rings. Andrea closes her textbooks and waits for her grandmother’s voice.

“Andre!” she calls from the front door. Andrea gets up from her bedroom floor, opens her bedroom door, and stares down the hallway.

“Brought you some yucca bread!”

Grandmother calls Andrea like a dog. But her mouth waters, so she follows. Grandmother stands near the doorway, handing her long and unnecessary coat to Andrea’s mother. She holds out a brown bag stained with grease and Andrea snaps it out of her hand. She opens it up and

smells the cheese that cooked with the yucca. She carries her bag to the kitchen table, sits on her designated seat, and eats eat piece of round bread like popcorn.

“Slow down, Andre. Mija, get her some yogurt, will you?” grandmother asks Andrea’s mother, who obeys and takes out yogurt from the refrigerator.

“Andrea, you’re going to choke,” her mother warns her.

“She knows how to chew,” grandmother responds. “You didn’t accompany your parents the other night. What a shame.” Andrea tries to respond, but her voice is muffled by the abundance of cheese in her mouth.

“They tell me you’ve been running away at nights.”

“She’s not running away. Not technically,” her father says as he enters the kitchen, grabs a cup of coffee and exits again.

“Where are you going? Can’t you see your mother’s visiting?” grandmother asks.

“I’m looking for some tools I lost. Somebody stole them from my toolbox.”

“Don’t forget to look inside the maid’s bedroom,” grandmother responds. “And if you’re not running away, Andre, what are you doing?” Andrea is inaudible. She fears choking to death, so she stops trying to come up with lies for her grandmother’s sake and chews her mouthful of bread slowly. “What I’ve been thinking is we—you parents, you, and me—should do a picnic at the park so you don’t feel you have to visit it at night.” Andrea shakes her head; she refuses to visit the forest during the day. She doesn’t think of the screwdriver she left behind—the one her father is currently searching her bedroom for—or the hole she’s digging. She thinks of the myth, a face hiding behind the smoke of burnt eucalyptus.

“I doubt that will change anything,” Andrea’s father says as he quickly enters and exits the kitchen. Andrea’s mother, on the other hand, has been quietly sitting across Andrea in the

kitchen table. She's been watching her daughter relentlessly stuff her mouth with pieces of yucca bread; the pen she uses to write down her to-do lists—which constantly consist of cleaning up after Andrea breaks the established house rules—is nearly broken. She's been twisting it, pressing its tip against her notepad, pushing the roller ball deep inside. All that is left from the pen Andrea can't touch are carved ink marks on paper.

Andrea finally looks at her mother, sitting next to her grandmother, staring at her open mouth.

"I'll be here around 9 A.M. And I'll bring some more bread for you, sweetheart," grandmother says as she strokes Andrea's hand, "I don't think they're feeding you much up here."

Andrea doesn't sleep well that night. In the morning, her father will blame the Atahualpa poster on her bedroom wall – how can she sleep with someone like that watching her? But he doesn't blame the rendering of Jesus that sits above Andrea's bed. Grandmother's gift watches her sleep. Sometimes, when the screw on the wall gets loose, and Andrea's father can't find his favorite eight-star screwdriver, the painting of Jesus—framed with wood and glass—falls on Andrea as she sleeps.

Andrea soon realizes she won't be able to get away with her mischiefs in the future. His father is furious, and she knows her mother resents her for the way she acted during grandmother's visit. She can't keep leaving objects behind in the forest—what if the screwdriver that sits in between dried leaves starts a fire soon? She thinks of her hole out in the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito, the one that refuses to be broken, and realizes that

August is in two weeks. She gets up, turns on her bedroom light, looks up at Atahualpa, the Incan king, and walks towards her closet door.

She will dispose of everything.

“Where are my things?” Andrea says as she storms into her parent’s bedroom the next morning. She wakes them with her demanding tone. Andrea’s mother grabs the alarm clock she keeps on her nightstand and looks at the time.

“What time is it?”

Andrea hears her father speak, so she walks up to him and sits next to him on the bed.

“We should’ve been woken up by the alarm in ten minutes.”

“Andrea, that is the worst thing you can do to a working couple. Wake them up right before their alarm rings.”

“You both aren’t working this summer,” Andrea replies.

“What ‘things’ are you asking about? Shouldn’t you be asleep, covered in dirt, or something?” Andrea’s mother asks from the corner of her giant bed.

“I placed some very private things in the back of my closet and now I can’t find them. Even my rain boots are missing.”

“Why did you hide them back there? Who’s going to go inside that mess and touch your things?” her mother asks.

“Is that why you’re up so early?” her father asks. “Or is it the Atahualpa face that stares down at you? We should get rid of that poster.”

“I’ll take our recycled materials to the dumpster tomorrow,” Andrea’s mother replies.

“Did you go inside my bedroom while I was talking to grandmother last night?” Andrea asks her father.

“Talking?” her mother asks.

“Fine, not talking but eating and listening?” Andrea insists.

“Yes, but I was only looking for my eight-star screwdriver. The one you took.”

“Your father handed me your rain boots shortly after your grandmother left. You were getting ready for bed and he approached me with the foulest boots I have ever encountered from you. Smellier than that time your school took you on a fieldtrip to the Cotopaxi and you stepped on llama shit.”

“And I gave the boots to your mother because they were stinking up your closet and—”

“And?” Andrea interrupts him. “You stole my things. Where is my basket?”

“My basket” her mother mocks her as she yawns. “I’ve been looking for that thing for months.”

“Well, the stuff inside the basket?”

“My other tools? Now eroded?” her father replies.

“And the things inside one of the rain boots?” Andrea asks.

“What things?” Andrea’s mother responds. “Did you stuff those boots with shit from the forest?”

Two hours later, Andrea sits on the front steps of her apartment building. She places her elbows on her thighs; her face rests on her hands. Above her, her apartment’s title is carved in the wall: “Vista Hermosa”—beautiful view. The edifice faces the volcano Pichincha and the city of Quito. Its title is not a reference to the forest behind it. From Andrea’s balcony, if visitors can



dodge the dog shit, guests can lean on the handrails and spot the blue buses that travel from the northern part of Quito all the way to the south. The blue bus picks up passengers who live in old northern farms—maids, nannies, construction workers, city-appointed cleaners, men and women who sweep up the capital’s dirt with brooms—and takes them to modern Quito for work. The buses leave a trail of smog behind, and this pollution forms a wave of mist that overtakes Quito in the mornings. From their bedroom window, Andrea’s parents see and appreciate this fog as a natural product of the Andes mountain range.

Today’s fog seems eternal. Andrea’s been sitting on the stoop for over thirty minutes, waiting for grandmother to arrive. While she waits, she sees some of the maids enter the nearby buildings, long black braided hair moving from side to side. Andrea’s maid hasn’t been here all summer; she, an eighteen-year-old Mormon, got pregnant—something Andrea’s mother disapproves of—and stopped coming to work at the beginning of her third trimester. It’s not that her big belly obstructed her from picking up the socks Andrea leaves on her bedroom floor. Now, in the summer, they form smelly castles. The maid cannot withstand to be lectured anymore; as she washed the dishes, vacuumed the carpet, cleaned up after Lola, and taught Andrea how to cook, Andrea’s mother stood next to her, not cleaning or teaching, but preaching about labor, women, and decency. Andrea’s mother was a real *curuchupa* of Quito: a woman who indoctrinates girls and values the body of Christ over the body of a woman, any woman, even her daughter. Andrea misses listening to her maid’s stories, particularly the ones about her grandfather, a strawberry farmer out in Puenbo.

Grandmother’s car pulls up. She waves to Andrea as her driver parks the car parallel to the curb. Andrea stands up and rings the buzzer to her apartment.

“Mami! Abuela is here!” she says.

“Don’t let her come up here,” Andrea’s mother replies, “I haven’t cleaned up the kitchen since breakfast.”

Grandmother gets out of the car with ease, holding a wicker basket with one arm. The basket contains a fleece blanket, two greasy bags of yucca bread—Andrea can smell them from the stoop—a glass bottle filled with orange and mango juice, and a newspaper. Andrea spots the monster of the Andes’ face in black and white print, front page, as grandmother throws the picnic basket over her shoulder.

“With this weather, we won’t need any hats,” grandmother says as she hugs Andrea.

“Do we really have to go to the park today?” Andrea asks, squinting her eyes.

“Don’t question my authority,” she replies as she kisses Andrea’s forehead, “this will be good for you. Where are your parents? When your mother gets down here, tell her I already packed the food.”

Andrea rings the intercom.

“Mami, grandma’s here.”

“Listen, Andre – we’re gonna stay. Your father is still looking for his tools, and he promised to fix all the hanging paintings and photographs today.”

Andrea leans in to the speaker, puts her right hand above her mouth.

“But I can’t go with grandmother alone,” she whispers.

“Keep her company. Come back in thirty minutes.”

“Mami?” Andrea buzzes the intercom many times, but her mother doesn’t answer.

“Mami and Papi aren’t coming,” Andrea tells her grandmother.

“Well, let’s hop on the car and leave before they decide they do want to come with us,” her grandmother winks.

The driver takes them to the public entrance of the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito. As they drive up the hill and pass the “Bienvenidos” sign built with wooden boards, Andrea sees a multitude of children drive their bikes in front of grandmother’s car, chasing dogs and soccer balls. Grandmother instructs the driver to park away from the park’s public bathrooms. When they get out, a ghost sings. The gust of Andean wind finds its way through the eucalyptus trees and pushes Andrea back inside the car. She fights the wind with her strength and finally manages to get out and shut the door. The park’s parking area looks deserted; there are people present—an abundance of people—but the earth looks and feels parched. Several firemen pass out fliers to those in line at the park’s entrance. It features the park’s new rules and a list of forbidden items.

“You can’t take this in,” a fireman says as he pulls out the mango and orange juice bottle from grandmother’s basket.

“That is freshly-squeezed juice,” grandmother fights back.

“In a glass bottle. And don’t leave that newspaper out there.”

They sit far away—miles away—from Andrea’s digging site. Yet the surrounding smells and sounds are extremely familiar to Andrea. As she stuffs her mouth with yucca bread, she reimagines her archeological dig: her hole and the red Coca-Cola cap, her fingerprints on the dry soil, the screwdriver sitting near the chain-link fence, and the Southern Cross constellation up in the night sky. She reimagines the Quitu-Caras meeting the Incas nearby, or the Incas fighting the Spanish and bleeding on native roots.

Grandmother takes out the newspaper, unfolds it, and holds it in front of her face. Andrea finds herself eye-to-eye with López—the monster who’s been on the loose since 1978. He is

missing a front tooth. His eyebrows resemble his moustache. His beard is shaven, but his little hair follicles are captured in the wanted ad. His eyes bewilder Andrea. One of López eyes looks out to the forest, and the other stares at Andrea.

“Strabismus,” grandmother says from behind the newspaper.

“What?”

“That’s why the monster’s eyes don’t look at the same point together – one’s lazier than the other. The condition is called strabismus.” Andrea nods in response; she looks away, out to the children playing soccer nearby. “Has your mother talked to you about him?”

“Yes.”

“And what has she told you about him?”

“I learn more in the school than in my house; I talk about him with my friends. But since the summer began, we haven’t talked about him. And Mami just threatens me with his presence. She tells me not to go to the park at night because he can see me and take me away, back to Colombia or something.”

“He doesn’t like to kidnap at night, they say in the paper.”

“I already knew that. They warn us in school, too.”

“Is that why you dig at night? So that he doesn’t catch you?”

“How do you know I dig?”

“Your father calls me daily, Andrea, all worried about you. It seems your mother isn’t rigorous enough. Or you are simply misunderstood. How I wish you hadn’t been sick the day Pope John Paul II visited—”

A ghost’s song interrupts her. The Andean wind arrives, steals the newspaper from grandmother’s hands—her fingerprints retain the ink—and carries it far; the whirlwind carries

objects from other Ecuadorians who picnic. Up in the sky, Andrea spots a baseball cap, a wool scarf, and dried eucalyptus leaves. Through the ghost's singing, Andrea hears her grandmother's voice.

“Go get the newspaper!”

Andrea stands up and is pushed by the strong breeze. She runs with it, towards the flying newspaper, towards López. She jumps, right hand extended up to the sky. Andrea runs alongside other young adults through the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito. Like dogs that have been released of their chains, they run with purpose, excited and angry. They, too, have been sent by their aunts, grandmothers, and older cousins to retrieve the items taken by the wind. Thirsty and out of breath, they reach one of the park's ravines. They stand on the edge and watch the wind take their belongings to the other side of the abyss.

“I wouldn't go there,” a boy warns Andrea. Andrea grabs a eucalyptus root as she climbs her way down; the newspaper, the face of the monster of the Andes, hangs onto a branch near the edge of the valley. Andrea stretches her arm, the same arm that tried to reach for her father's favorite screwdriver, and grabs the newspaper.

A ray of lightning strikes a eucalyptus tree that stands next to one of the boys. A fire begins.

Andrea climbs up quickly – she's used to working under pressure. The same boy that warned her lies on the ground, screaming; she grabs the boy—thunderstruck—and pulls his arm. The sun that once made her eyes squint dissipates. A cloud of thunder hovers over them. She manages to pull him up and they run together towards grandmother. As they run, the rain begins. Andrea, thankful for the rain, opens her mouth and sticks out her tongue. The millions of drops that soak their clothes form a lake inside her mouth.

When she arrives at their picnic location, the boy keeps running. Andrea hears her grandmother's screams. "Apúrate, Andrea! I'm drowning over here, esperándote," she shrieks as she holds the wicker basket above her head, collecting water. Andrea looks down at the newspaper she carried all this way. The newspaper's ink bleeds on her hands. López's face leaks into her skin's cracks and the paper falls apart, imploding.

In the car ride back, Andrea's toes play with the water inside her shoes. She carries an ocean on her feet. Grandmother can't stop talking about that morning to the driver; she forgets he was there. It is an apocalypse, she tells the driver. And he nods, trying to see through his windshield. A tsunami of rainwater damages his windshield wipers. Andrea's right hand is imprinted – she carries the ink of the monster of the Andes.

As the car reaches Andrea's apartment building, grandmother asks her to get out of the car quickly. "I have to shower," she urges Andrea. Andrea's parents wait for her outside, near the stoop, with umbrellas. Andrea's heart drops; she wonders what she's done wrong now.

"What did I do?" she asks her mother, as she closes the car door. But she doesn't hear a response because the raindrops are too thick. Inside, as Andrea's mother undresses her and urges her to take a warm shower—"you know the saying, wet feet, sick all week"—Andrea's question remains unanswered.

In the shower, she feels the burn on her neck. The Ambato wool keeps itching, and her fingers keep rubbing. Andrea fears washing her body with a hand that carries the face of the monster of the Andes. She tries to wash it off with a sponge, with the old, moldy loofa, with shampoo. But his face sticks. Andrea decides to leave him there.

As she gets dressed, she hears a knock on her door. “Mami, I’m naked, no entres,” she tells her mother. But her mother steps inside and closes the door behind her.

“How was the morning with grandmother?”

“Wet.”

“What happened?”

“I’m sure grandmother called and told you already.”

“Of course. But I want to know what happened to you.”

“She ordered me to run and get her newspaper.”

“Is that what that is?” Andrea’s mother says as she approaches her daughter. She grabs her right hand and opens it. “Newspaper ink?”

“It won’t come off.”

“Let’s go to the laundry room. I have a strong brush in there.”

“Mami, you’re going to burn my skin off.”

“I’ll go get it. You go see your father in the dining room. He has a smelly surprise for you.”

Andrea’s mother leaves. Andrea puts on her Ambato wool robe and grazes the back of her neck. As she walks down the hall, she can hear a camera’s shutter. Her father has laid out the items inside her rain boot on the dining table, on top of an old sheet. Her collection displayed out like a museum gallery. Her gallery.

“Why did you do this?” she asks him.

“We felt bad you went alone with grandmother today. So, we figured we should let you in our conversation on what we keep and what we discard.”

“About my things? A conversation about my belongings? I thought Mami was going to throw everything in the trash.”

“Yes, but is there anything you want to keep? Like this?” Her father holds up a wooden button. It was one of the items Andrea collected during her first dig. She knew it wasn’t a pre-Columbian item—the line “MADE IN CHINA” is printed on its back—but she needed to bring back something. A discovery. A basket of things covered in Andean dirt. In her journal, the wooden button is catalogued as contemporary clothing item.

Andrea walks up to her father. He continues photographing her findings, and she looks at them intently. The rotting wooden button. The metallic ring. The white baby sock. The aluminum wrapper of Chocosoda, a soda cracker covered with milk chocolate – it is no longer produced. The two pieces of a broken number two yellow pencil. A dead white dandelion. A dead yellow dandelion. A small piece of eucalyptus root shaped like a snake. And the item Andrea planned on burying herself, as a way of fixing what she constantly broke: a seed of naranjilla, the small orange fruit native to the Andes. She took the seed back with her, however, after realizing the land wasn’t ready. She needed to heal it first.

“Can I take all of them back?”

“You want to rebury trash into an ecological system?” her father asks.

“Where are these items going to end up?”

“In the trash.”

“In the Zámbez valley. It is literally a valley, a Grand Canyon, made of trash. I know this because María told me about it. She lives near it.”

“One of your friends lives near the Zámbez dump?”

“Not one of my friends. María, the maid.”



Her father becomes silent. He stops looking at his photographs on his camera's screen.

"I can take these items back—at least the ones that will decompose quick enough—and bury them again. Where they once were."

"A reshaping of history," Andrea's mother says from the dining room entrance. She leans on the doorway, playing with the strongest brush she owns.

"A continuous history," Andrea replies.

Andrea's hands are dry like the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito once was; that morning's rainwater eliminated the forest's drought and fed Andrea's skin – but in the shower, as she tried to scrub the monster's face away, she ruptured her skin. Tonight, she kneels in front of her pit, headlamp pointing at her hands. She can feel the forest's water seeping into her pants; her knees are brown with mud, her khakis tainted. Andrea's hands penetrate the chocolate lake formed inside her hole. Her dry skin disappears. She spots bubbles popping on the water's surface as she feels the wetness of the Andean land with her fingers. The newspaper ink disappears into her.

Her basket sits to her right. She collected the eight-star screwdriver on her way down from the fence. That is the only tool she carries. The rest of her mother's basket contains the items she stole from the park. She even carried back the naranjilla seed she planned on planting weeks ago; the ground is ready. While she continues to play with the soil that soaks the rainwater's nutrients, she stumbles upon a different texture. She cannot see inside the pool of water—the headlamp cannot penetrate the hole's chocolate milk—but she wonders if the coolness of that object belongs to the Coca-Cola bottle cap she purposefully threw back inside while digging. But the object is alive.

A frog makes its way out of the brown lake. It climbs up a eucalyptus root and stays next to the border of the hole Andrea dug. The frog is black. Her headlamp cannot pick up the frog's eyes or their luminosity, but it can see through its front leg's skin; it is transparent, glowing, almost non-existing. Other bubbles burst on the lake's surface. Other frogs pop their heads, black figurines floating, and step out.

Soon, numerous frogs surround Andrea's crater, and Andrea blames the non-native plants for damaging the park's ecosystem. They do not know how to handle the equator's climate patterns; seeing as no rain fell from the sky, they've been starving other plants for months, stealing their water and nutrients, forcing them to become time-bombs for forest fires. And now, with the pool of water that inundated them this morning, the water simply floats, decomposing everything, creating an unseen environment for the forest inhabitants.

The forest senses her anger. She clenches the ground, grabbing patches of dirt and pulling them out of the crater. She places the dirt next to her basket, cleans her hands with her damp pants, and begins placing the items she stole back inside the hole.

She throws in her last two findings—the Chocosoda aluminum wrapper and the broken yellow number two pencil—and these items float. A sound echoes through the forest. Andrea looks up and tries to see what animal is approaching her. She looks intently for the gleaming scales of a snake, the snakes that find their way to the balcony where Lola takes her shits and eats the mice that Lola doesn't, but she only finds smoke. It doesn't smell like burnt eucalyptus—the smell her mother appreciates. This smell is new.

Andrea moves her head to the right and spots a man standing next to her. Smoke comes out of his clothes, the rips on his jeans and black leather jacket were caused by a fire, and his face is unrecognizable: it is a crater, volcano with no eyes. Andrea smells his skin burning. He

stands on top of a root, shoeless, facing her. Andrea stands up quickly and watches the man walk away. The smoke from his body leaves a pattern of hazy waves, slowly dissipating in the darkness. Andrea looks up at the Southern Cross— she is ready to go back home—and doesn't recognize her own urine streaming down her legs, entering her shoes, but the feeling is perceptible. She, again, carries an ocean on her feet.

She quietly grabs the basket and remembers the conversation she had inside the kitchen with her parents, thirty-minutes ago. It was right after they'd agreed to let her go on, tonight, by herself. Andrea had argued that her nights had become a routine, almost a ritual, and that she was a master of the forest. She knew how to climb the fence, she told them, "it is too easy," and how to find her way back if she'd gone in too deep, or missed her digging site: "our apartment's lights are too bright. They basically guide me back every time." Her parents reprimanded her for her actions— "you are a thief of the park," her mother said, and her father, in between sips of black Andean coffee said, "you are never doing this again." And afterwards, her parents asked her to take her father's cellphone with her, because "if you need to go alone, you should at least take the phone with you." Andrea argued that she'd lose the phone, something her mother agreed with—"You lose everything. Your school's lost and found box is filled with your things"—but her father placed the phone inside her khaki's front pocket anyway. Tonight, she feels for the cellphone's silhouette on her leg with her wet brown hand, but both pockets are empty. Andrea looks down at the pit filled with water. The phone is in there. "And if you do lose it," her father said, "you'll replace it." Andrea kneels quickly, drops her basket, sticks her hand inside the pit, and grabs the cellphone. As she stands up, the ghost that lives in every corner of the Andean mountains sings. The wind is back.

Andrea looks at the spot where the man with the burned body and face stood. As she fights the wind to keep her stance, she searches for him again. The smell of his burnt body lingers inside her nostrils. The remnants of his trails of smoke disappeared. Andrea wonders where he went, why he was here, if he's injured, if he needs help, if he's coming back after her. But the man with the burnt jeans and black leather jacket, a victim of a forest fire, a boy once engulfed with flames he feasibly created, his dead body broadcasted on live television, doesn't return to find her. His eyes are missing. His skin, too. His parents, owners of a spinach farm in the south of Quito, have turned in photographs of him—as a child, as the young adult he is now—to the authorities. They are searching for him, still. They refuse to believe his son would be a part of the arson crimes committed in the Guanguiltagua Metropolitan Park of Quito, the forest behind Andrea's apartment building.

The wind pushes Andrea too hard, and one her legs lands inside the pit she dug. The brown water mixes with her urine, and she tries to run back to her apartment. The wind creates a wall she cannot break down. Andrea can see her bathroom's light, in between moving branches and flying leaves. The ghost sings loudly, and it pushes Andrea into her hole. She falls, water splashes around the frogs, they leap away, and Andrea feels the land moving beneath her. Multiple snakes begin to crawl out, following the movement of the jumping frogs. Andrea screams. The wind dissolves.

She finally manages to get out, drenched. Her clothes absorbed majority of the pit's water. She steps out of the hole and looks for the cellphone she held in her hand. It is gone. As she turns around to face the pit—the snakes and frogs are gone, too—she sighs in relief. The cellphone is there, squished into the mud.

Mami will want her to shower immediately, once she gets home. Andrea will leave trails of mud on her apartment's stoop, stairs, doormat, hall, bedroom's rug. Papi will want her to take down the poster of Atahulpa because "it is a bad influence." He thinks it forced her to dig; he thinks she was searching for his treasure. He'll want her to pay for the damaged cellphone. Mami and Papi will both tell abuela what happened while sipping tea and eating figs drenched in honey and salted cheese. "Andrea went back alone, and we'd thought she'd come back quickly, but she took her time. And she came back soaked." Andrea will stand across from her superiors, trying to fight the comments, but her mouth will be stuffed with food.

Before Andrea kneels to pick up her father's cellphone, she looks around. The burnt man is not standing next to her. But she hears footsteps. The burnt man wasn't wearing any shoes. These footsteps are loud, continues, rising. Andrea cleans her headlamp with her hand covered in mud; she doesn't clear all the sludge away, but enough light illuminates the park. A figure walks nearby, a dark silhouette of a man. Andrea kneels, steps inside the pit, her headlamp now lighting the equatorial night sky. She holds her hands covered in mud to her chest and places her legs inside the hole.

She lies inside the hole she dug, covered in mud, and hears the snakes sliding away from her. They're traveling far. The frogs are nowhere to be seen. Andrea's toes touch. She realizes her headlamp's light will reveal her hiding place and quietly raises her hand, touches her forehead. Her light dimmers. Those who die never leave.

CHAPTER II KAY PACHA

## Spondylus

This is how we burry you, mud in your eyes and earth skin. In the mountainside of Pichincha they'll find you, great cacique, remnants of the Pacific in your eyelashes, traces of oceanic salt hidden in your belly button. From your neck hangs the food of our gods, a conch we didn't rescue from the water, but did trade for obsidians. How sharp. Watch how it entraps all our senses, how it attracts dirt to your chest, how it reflects us: continuous beings, ancestors in the making, Andeans filled with beach sand. We trade volcanic rocks for celestial love, and when no other red and orange conches remain to reflect our equatorial sun, we'll know our culture's life has ended. Because how will we bury each other with no conches or chicha or mortars or wind vessels without fear of forgetting?

## Spondylus

Así te enterramos, lodo en tus ojos y piel de tierra. En las faldas del Pichincha te encontrarán, gran cacique, escombros del Pacífico en tus pestañas, pedazos de sal oceánica sepultrada en tu ombligo. De tu cuello cuelga el manjar de los dioses, aquella concha que nosotros no rescatamos del agua, pero si intercambiamos por obsidianas. Qué puntiagudo. Mira cómo atrampa nuestros sentidos, cómo atrae el fango a tu pecho, cómo refleja lo que somos: seres continuos, ancestros en proceso, Andinos llenos de arena de playa. Intercambiamos rocas volcánicas por amor celestial, y cuando no queden más conchas rojas y naranjas que reflejen nuestro sol equatorial, sabremos que hemos acabado. Porque ¿cómo vamos a enterrarnos sin conchas ni chicha ni morteros ni flautas de doble silbato sin miedo al olvido?

## Encomienda:

“... the assignment of a specific number of indigenous inhabitants to a white overseer who was obligated to protect his charges, to provide religious training, and to extend military assistance to the king, in exchange for a tribute that was to be paid in money or in kind.”  
 - Hurtado, Osvaldo. *Political Power in Ecuador*, 1980.

He takes our flowers. Even the kishuar I collect alone. He yanks them from my hand when I get back from my walks. Small orange petals remain hidden in the webs of my fingers. He places the stolen flowers inside his book; every yellowed page contains a different type. “How infinite,” he utters while smelling the pages in his book. The flower that grows inside la escuela is first: ñukchu uksachina, the purple flower that grows two flowers, spikes and petals – they tried to hide it underneath the wooden floorboards, but it rose between the cracks. Years ago, when we built the school, he held out his hand in front of us. “Stop,” he said, kneeling down and yanking the ñukchu uksachina out of the ground. He smelled it. Mama sat several feet away, between the grasses, in disbelief. After he left with the flower in hand, I placed the wooden board on the ground and covered the small hole. Even now, while we listen to him preach, Mama taps my leg when she sees a purple leaf sprout. “It’s rising again.”

“You believe that there is one God. Good!” Lucas says as he licks his thumb with his purple tongue to turn the golden page over. The ñukchu uksachina he keeps in his flower book turned the page purple, too. “Even demons believe that – and shudder. James 2:19.” Lucas told me his mother gave him that bible when she parted from him in Spain. She wrote a message for him on the last page. His mother pasted the page with cacti glue to the book’s hardcover to ensure that the message wouldn’t be read by anybody but Lucas; it remained stuck throughout her son’s journey from his home to my home. “Even the rats couldn’t tear it apart; we were



starving, and a little cacti glue sounded like dessert. But I only read the letter once we landed in the coast. It asked me not to come back to her.”

I don't listen to Lucas' stories anymore. I once did, as a child, when Mama and Taita were out digging. They would come back with dirty hands and faces, empty-handed, blackened by their excavations, and find me sitting next to Lucas, listening. But days like today, when we are summoned into the school because one of my sisters misbehaves, I am forced to listen to his sermons. I'm sure it was Achik. She was named after light because her skin is darker than mine and her character too. She was born here. Achik does not like to stay within our land's boundaries—misbehaves

Today he talks about God. Lucas points his finger up to the sky, and it reaches the low ceiling. He wants us to look up at the clouds and imagine Jesus Christ watching over us. I sit in-between my Mama, who spends every second inside la escuela staring at the wooden floorboards, and Achik, the reason we're being schooled on our day of rest. Chilina sits next to Mama. That's all of us. But once there were more. Taita died while mining. We were told this. That same night, I helped build the wooden fence around our land. We never recovered my father's body; Lucas said “it was unsalvageable,” covered too deep beneath the rocks that fell on him. Lucas argues that he was, in a sense, buried. Some of the others managed to run away; I'm sure the moonlight lit their way. The three women, Mama's friends, died of disease. And the others were killed by Mateo.

Mateo doesn't preach with Lucas, or help Tomás out with the cows and our bull. Mateo's house is separate from ours, about fifty steps west. He built that house alone, while Tomás and Lucas built ours with Taita and the other men. I sat next to Mama and Chilina, watching Taita learn how to use a nail. I've never been inside Mateo's house, but I know he keeps a sword,

metallic gear, and drawings inside. The metal suit shines with the moonlight. Its light reaches our house.

“Mana?” Lucas asks for me.

“Manarikuypac,” Mama always corrects Lucas. She doesn’t speak his language. She refuses to.

“Manarikuypac,” Lucas resumes. “Would you like to continue?” He walks towards me, places the open bible on my lap, and asks me to read. I recognize the words and the chapter, but I tell Lucas, “Achik should read. She is the one who needs this the most.” Lucas smiles and agrees. He takes the book from my lap, walks over to Achik—she braids her hair every day, it now reaches the floor when she walks over to the cows—and holds the golden pages out in front of her.

“Manarikuypac is wrong,” my sister fights back. “I have not done anything immoral.”

“You climbed the fence last night,” Lucas responds. That is where she was. She wasn’t lying next to me, or holding Mama’s other hand. I knew something was wrong when I didn’t feel her constant midnight kicks on my back.

“What were you doing?” I ask her, leaning forward, seeking her face. Achik throws her hair back, its lengths hit Tomás—he sometimes sits in during our sermons, especially the days he fights with Mateo. They are fighting now more than ever before. “Watch it, muchacha,” Tomás replies, scratching his eyes. Mama corrects him—“Achik”—and taps my thigh. I look down at the floorboard and spot the peaks of the purple spikes climbing up from the ground.

“Ah? Or is ‘Where were you going’ a better question?” Lucas continues his interrogation of Achik. “You couldn’t possibly be trying to run away, there’s nothing out there for miles.” I learned what Lucas means by nothing the day we sat outside after dinner and witnessed some

deer jumping the fence, running through our land, and skipping back out. In response to my amazement, he said, “That’s nothing. Where I live, Mana, we have several different types of deer. Much bigger than those.” Achik doesn’t answer Lucas’ questions. She doesn’t look up at the bible, or up at Lucas’ blue eyes, or back at Tomás and his reddened eyes. She braids her hair, eyes stuck on the wooden floorboards.

Achik remains silent. Lucas and Tomás raised Achik with Mama; they have known her since she was a baby, and they still cannot determine her character. Lucas and Tomás sometimes call her “la loca” behind her back, ever since she began to bleed. She heard it once, her nickname, while they were brushing their horses. From then on, Achik decided to never speak to them again. At night, in our house, I remember telling her “that would never work in school.” She tried it out and only received a slap in the face. Her silence angered them. When my father came back from the mine that day, everything changed. It was as if Taita had been there when they slapped her, sensed the redness of her cheek, the pain on her skin, like I did. Sometime later, after Taita didn’t come back from the mine, Achik spoke even less to them. She’s always taking risks, and I’m always afraid to follow.

We are dismissed from sermon. Mama goes out, sits on the grass, and sings to Chilina. Chilina sucks her thumb and lays her head on my mother’s chest. Achik is forced to go to sleep without dinner. But I can see her from here. She looks out of the window and gazes at the fire Mateo began after our sermon. I look away and begin my walk. Lucas lets me out of the land’s boundaries, beyond the fence, because he likes the flowers I collect. I only go out at night. I can never keep them once I return, and I am warned not to go north, closer to El Cotopaxi, closer to the gold mine.

I keep their roots. Some of their petals. Their powder. I search for other traces of ñukchu uksachina, but I think it only exists beneath la escuela. We'll never get it back. After I return from my walk, Lucas inspects the flowers—"You brought the same types yesterday"—and takes them from my hands. I hide some petal shards underneath my nails.

Mama is the last one to walk into our house. She tells me to not wake Achik, but doesn't realize Achik hasn't fallen asleep yet. When Mama and Chilina snore, Achik tells me why she crossed the fence. She's been waiting for me to get back from my walk to tell me. I can sense her nervousness through the floorboards. "I wanted to cut my hair," she murmurs.

"Why not cut it here in the house? Why go out there? Why cross the fence?" I ask her.

"Mama won't let me cut my hair. I had to go."

"You weren't running away," I say.

"Why would I run away? I grabbed a knife, the knife Tomás uses in the kitchen, and tried to make it up el cerro, closer to the moonlight."

"Why?"

"Mama told me if I cut my hair without a full moon in the night sky, my hair will never grow again. That is why her hair stayed the way it is – it only reaches her breasts. Haven't you wondered why it hasn't grown? She told me her mother cut her hair as punishment, decades ago, when Mama was still a child. It was day. The moon wasn't even lingering in the day sky." I think of Mama, milking the cows, mute. Her black hair that smells like the orange flowers I want to keep laying still on her back. Her hands pulling down the cow's teats.

"So, what happened? In the morning, everything seemed to be fine," I say.

“I climbed the fence because I wanted to get closer to the moonlight, and away from Tomás and Mateo who were out by the fire. I arrived at the highest peak in el cerro only to find Lucas walking alone.”

“What was he doing?”

“Walking alone. It’s hard to tell a story when you’re not listening.”

“But why walk outside the fence? When there’s so much territory inside the fence?”

“Because he can.”

“What happened? When he saw you?”

“He pulled me by my hair and told me to go back in the house.”

Achik and I try to talk a little while longer, but we can’t hear our whispers because Mateo and Tomás’ screaming is loud. It even woke up Mama. She now lies in the dark, holding Chilina close, eyes open. Their fight is reminiscent of what happened last night. Mateo played with the fire—he lit up a stick up in flames, held it out in front of him, and then blew it out, repeatedly—as Tomás told him how he was going to go back to the coast and “find himself a wife, make children, and stay there. The cold here is too much.” Mateo grunted back to him, and Tomás was silenced for a while. But then he got up, placed his hands on his hips, and said, “Are we supposed to be here forever? With them?” He pointed at us. Mateo mumbled back—his voice, inaudible. At that height, Tomás could see the giant moon shining its light on el cerro’s peak. He stood still, not fighting Mateo back on whatever he had uttered.

I try to dream of Taita. I try to dream of my father every night. But I dream of other things. The day he left to the mine alone, the day I last saw him, Mama wasn’t feeling well. Every time she tried to stand up, she screamed and grabbed her hips. Mateo feared she had

contracted the disease and had enclosed himself in his house. While Taita made his way to the mine, unaccompanied, pickaxe in hand, Lucas asked me to check Mama's body. "What should I look for?" I asked him. "I want you to tell me if she looks like the other women did when they died." Lucas held up a scarf to his mouth when he talked to me. I barely remembered how Mama's three friends died, but Achik—my younger sister—reminded me: "They died with blisters on their forearms and face – little moons of water popping and dripping down their skin. Their bodies burning."

Mama didn't have little circles on her skin. As I checked her back, she told me she knew what was wrong. She had walked by the cerro without any moonlight guiding her. She stepped on a hole dug by an animal and fell on a bush. A stick pierced her lower back, her bones shifted, and one of her legs became shorter than the other. She began to walk unevenly ever since.

I want to dream of my father. I want to walk with Taita to the mine. Something he and Mama didn't want me to do. I want to cross the wastelands with him, travel so far away we can no longer see the wooden houses we built for ourselves out here. But I can only remember my father's wrinkles on his forehead—four crooked lines, all united with an axis—his slanted eye, wounded from war, his strong hands that break the rocks, pull the corn and papa from the ground, his words, "Manarikuypac, stay close."

Mama grabs hers and walks away, her black hair static, refusing to sway with the morning's winds. Mateo grunts after her, and Lucas says, "Regresa, mujer!" Mama keeps walking. She nears the fence, and Mateo touches the knife he keeps hidden inside his clothes. Then Mama stops and kneels; she starts digging with her hands. Patches of grass are launched across the field. Dirt, too. Lucas yells, "Qué haces?" and this shout makes all of us stop eating.

Mama returns with nothing, unafraid. She has buried her ear of corn. She sits back down, and, with the same hands covered in soil, feeds Chilina her corn.

Mama's action was punished. Mateo walked up to her and Chilina. Mama stood up, and Mateo slapped her cheek with the back of his hand. He then grunted at Tomás who was sitting nearby. My legs shook; I felt a rupture inside my stomach. It grew with every strike. Tomás got up and grabbed Mama's wrists. He took her inside the school.

Now we are all brought into la escuela. They do not make us sit on the front bench. We are displaced. They make Achika sit in the front row, alone, her hair tied up in a bun; it makes her head lean backwards. She's in pain. The rope ties her wet hair tightly. Mama sits in the back row, next to Tomás. Her cheeks are red. His eyes scan her soil-covered fingertips. His hands grab her wrists. She leans over to watch Chilina. Chilina and I sit on the second bench together. She sucks her thumb. The men try to make us fill up these empty spaces in this room. Mateo, Tomás, and Lucas want us to occupy the air that was once shared by the others, the ones who are no longer here.

“And he said: Let us make man to our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature that moveth upon the earth,” Lucas says. His voice is loud; it echoes across our school. Lucas' lesson today goes back to the first lesson, our first class, and I remember this one clearly.

When I was little, Lucas opened the golden page book and pointed to the first page. He told us the world was created for us; it is under our control. That night, during our dinner, Lucas screamed at Taita. With anger, Lucas said we couldn't bury food and drinks inside the grave of others because they are dead.

“Muertos!” Taita screamed back at Lucas, his mouth learning new shapes, conforming to their language. “Muertos we will be if we do not sacrifice our meals.” I could not remember what my father was yelling about. I had never buried our food inside the earth, next to corpses. My memory failed me. All I could see, the first scene in my mind, was my Mama’s breasts, her belly-button, the sound of metal clashing, the long walk to Cotopaxi.

“We must bury our food because we need to be well connected,” my father explained to Lucas.

“With what? Hunger? Starvation?” Lucas asked back, pointing to the log Taita sat on before he stood up quickly. Taita was angry. During that dinner, he had collected rations of food from all of us, including Mama who had Achik inside her belly. And Tomás had taken the food away from him in one yank, claiming if we weren’t going to eat it, he would. He ate it all, licked his fingers when done. Taita sat across from Lucas. The fire lit up all our faces.

“That is what we will be—starved. We must bury our food to connect with everything,” Taita replied.

I now wonder why Lucas didn’t listen to him or why Tomás ate the food we gave father; Taita carried it with his hands, walking around the fire. He was going to bury it in each grave. Only three people had died by that point: Mama’s friends. Her friends would rejoice with our food, hold it tightly with their bones. Now the food we eat grows in different patterns; sometimes it sprouts from the ground while we sleep. Other times it doesn’t leave the ground for long periods of time. We now live in a period of no food; the only food we eat is the one stored inside Tomás’ kitchen. I know Mateo keeps some corn in his house, too.

There aren’t many people living here, in these four places, in this time of no food. We are all that is left of us. Mama, Chilina, Achik, and me. Mama hasn’t tried to sacrifice our meals for



the longest time, but today she had had enough. The ground knows this. The wooden board doesn't warm up with our bodies. The sun peeks through our window, illuminating my feet and the golden edges of Lucas' book. I wonder if the sun shines so intensely on the cave Taita is buried in.

"I want to know," Lucas says as he approaches my mother, "why you did not eat your food today." Mama remains quiet. Tomás tightens his grip. Her hands turn red.

"She wanted to bury it," I say. I want them to stay away from my mother. My voice surprises me.

"Why?" Lucas asks. He walks towards me.

"My father once told you," I remind him.

"But why do the dead need food? Doesn't your mother need food? She has not eaten all day."

"That is her sacrifice," I reply.

Mama remembers where they are all buried. The ones who are no longer with us. She remembers where Tomás dug the holes, where Mateo threw the bodies, where Taita asked him not to, where Lucas opened his golden book and prayed, mouths covered with scarfs. I know this because I wake up today, and I sense Mama is missing. She is not in this room with us. I look out our window. With Achik, we count how many small mountains of dirt enclose our landscape.

"Thirteen," Achik says.

Thirteen of us are gone. My father's body is the fourteenth body. Mama buried half of our corn into the ground. Thirteen pieces of corn we cannot eat. They'll think she stole the corn

from the kitchen. Mama may even have taken Mateo's corn. Mateo now walks towards our house, knife in hand.

Achik runs out, her hair so long it trails behind her like an elongated shawl. I run outside, waving my hands in the air. I find Mama in the landscape—she stands still between each of our cows, her black hair mimicking the cow's dark fur—and motion her to come back to our wooden house.

Taita didn't work as hard as Lucas, Mateo, and Tomás wanted him to. He used to come back from the mine with blisters on the web of his fingers, bloody feet, tired eyes, but never with the gold they wanted him to find. Taita argued he needed more men to pick the rocks, but the other men oversaw planting the corn and potatoes, milking the cows, killing the cows, and rebuilding the structures that fell too quickly, like our house. So, Mama offered to go with Taita, and they let her go; they figured Mama's strong arms would benefit father.

One day Taita and Mama came back with a giant stone. Mateo saw them from the peak of el cerro and ran towards them with such joy, asking them if they had struck gold. Achik and I watched from the fire, holding hands. I always feared Mateo's strong attitude—what would he say to Mama and Taita if they had not found gold today? What would he do to them?

“We must break this stone,” Taita told Mateo. Mateo grabbed the stone and ran towards the pit of fire. As we sat watching Taita pick at the rock, Mateo celebrated by chewing the meat inside his mouth loudly.

“Do you think there's gold in that stone?” Tomás asked Lucas. Lucas stared at the rock intently.

“There has to be some gold somewhere in this place,” Lucas replied. He scratched his hair with his uncut fingernails.

“If God is willing,” Tomás said.

Taita kept picking the rock until the fire died. Mateo walked back to his house quietly, perhaps thinking that the discovery would take place tomorrow. Taita instructed us to go back to our house, telling me to grab Achik’s hand tightly. He stayed up all night. Mama stared at him through the window. I don’t know if any of us actually slept because all I could hear was the strike of his pickaxe and the rock shifting, my father’s grunts, his movements in the air.

The next morning, we wake up and find out Taita is not here. He is not standing near the fire pit, hitting the giant stone, and tearing it apart. He is back in the mine, alone. The three Spanish men stand together, surrounding the place Taita inhabited all night. Achik crawls between the feet of Lucas, and he picks her up. I make my way in between Lucas and Tomás, Tomás warning me not to be disrespectful.

“Be careful, muchacho. And, ¿buenos días?” he said.

“Buenos días,” I said in response.

I didn’t look at Tomás as I greeted him that morning. The morning fog had dissolved, but the morning dew was still present on the ground. I could see some footsteps heading up to el cerro; the morning dew outlined them. They were Taita’s.

Mama finally joined us. She stood behind Mateo for a while, hoping they’d let her through. She finally figured she had to make her way through their large bodies, like I did. We all looked at Taita’s stone together. It was no longer the stone we saw last night, raw, organic, and found. I saw Mama looking at her hands.

The stone was now a person. It had eyes, a nose, a mouth, even eyebrows. Its small hands were carved next to its sides, underneath its giant head. The stone was encrusted inside the ground, buried halfway deep. All of us must have wondered how Taita elongated the rock, how it transformed from a grey and dirty rock to a being.

“What has he done?” Lucas asked. He hugged his golden page book.

That is how Mama stands now. Like the figure my father once carved, her hands are straightened out and placed next to her torso, eyes looking up at the sky. She is a part of this earth. The cows wag their tails. The flies that sat on their tails move, some sit on Mama’s head. Mateo approaches her with his knife out. She grabs her hair, the short hair that never grows, and drags her to his house. Achik and I are still running towards her, and now we walk in fear behind Mateo and Mama.

Today is the day we will see Mateo’s house. He doesn’t shut his door behind him. He leaves the door open as he throws Mama inside his house. Drawings and sketches of Jesus and the Spanish army decorate this small room. His armor—the one I see at night, it shines brightly with the moonlight—stands in the corner next to his only window. His sword is hung up on the wall and underneath sits the pile of gold he took from us. Mama’s bracelets, Taita’s necklace, the other men’s clothes embellished with bits of gold, the women’s neck braces, ankle bracelets. Beneath the gold, almost hidden, sits the mountain of obsidians. How bright they shine drenched in black.

Mateo beats Mama with the sword he hangs on his room, but it doesn’t cut her. It bounces back with fury. Achik kneels next to Mama, trying to hug her between strikes. Mateo raises his sword up high, the way Taita used to raise his pickaxe, and lands the butt of his sword

on Mama's body. He tries to break her like Taita used to break rocks. Mama doesn't have any gold in her; the gold that was hers and ours and Pachamama's now lies inside the pile.

Between grunts, I walk towards the pile and squat down. I pick a little obsidian stone that sits outside the giant pile and grasp it tightly in my hand. Mateo keeps beating Mama until she doesn't make a sound. Achik finally gets to hug her tightly. Tomás comes in and yells at Mateo. "We only have three of them now, idiota!" Lucas steps inside with a bowl of river water and dips his fingers inside of it. He then sprinkles the water on top of Mama. "God bless her," he utters beneath his breath. He's blessing her.

We've dragged Mama out of Mateo's house. He closes the door behind him. Mama's face is unrecognizable. Achik cries, holding my legs, and I drag her and her hair across our ground, hands on my head. Cotopaxi watches us, clouds gathering in front of its peak. It disappears behind their grey. Chilina cries from inside our house; she presses her mouth against the wooden wall, bites it, screams. She sees Mama lying between patches of dirt, immobile, and wants to be close to her. She will not stop crying until she is tucked beneath Mama's breasts. Chilina has never been patient. Now it is our job to teach her how.

The day we saw a mother kuntur and her baby fly above us, Chilina learned what patience means. Mama and Chilina laid on the grass together. Their feet pointed towards the sky. Achik sat next to me, looking at the patches of red on her skin. I played with the flowers tattooed as lines across my palms; I close and open them, the flowers Lucas cannot take away, the flowers within me. The wind pushed my hair inside my eyes; they grew red. Mama said it's time for me to cut it – if I cannot see, she insisted, how could I possibly go on my walks? I know she was pretending to be unkind. If I had to be tested on my walks the way Lucas tests us in la escuela,

I'd do better than Achik—my only competitor. Achik constantly freezes, taps her foot loudly on the wooden floor—the ñukchu uksachina hiding beneath the floorboards trembles, I'm sure—and guesses the wrong answer. Even though Lucas tells Achik her Spanish is superior than mine—“You'd fit right in with Spain society, of course with a few minor changes” he says—I know the golden page book better than she does. Mama wanted to cut my hair because she didn't want Lucas to. Or Tomás. Mateo never cut anyone's hair. We are all relieved of this fact.

Lucas cuts hair like I collect flowers: he grabs the flowery ends, tries to comb it with his fingers, some petals remain stuck to his skin, then he finds the nearest point to its root and grabs his knife. He slashes, back and forth, heads rocking, until it is uneven and done, root intact.

“What about me? Can you cut my hair?” Achik asked, scratching the hair on her legs. Days later we realized what was happening to Achik. Every time she laid on the grass with us, her legs started to itch. Lucas wondered if she had the disease, but he noticed the redness subsided once Achik was placed inside, hidden from the clouds and winds, away from the tall grass. He firmly stated Achik's aversion to the outside and warned her to stay in; her skin should not be tampered with, he said. “Minor changes.” Achik went outside anyways, wrapping her legs that touched the grass with the poncho she outgrew. She would never not be outside.

“I will never cut your hair,” Mama responded. Achik protests by walking away. That day we didn't have to be in la escuela at all, we were in fact encouraged by Lucas to talk to each other and ponder on the lessons we've learned all week, but we didn't talk about school. Achik walked near the school and peeked in through the hole on the wooden wall: ñukchu uksachina sprouting?

Instead of talking about Lucas' book, Mama laid down and told Chilina to lay next to her as if she wanted her to stay in that position forever; she walked her through: Rest your back on

the hill, feet point upwards, hands near your chest, eyes closed. I think she didn't want our lives to continue like this, without Taita or the others, without what she's used to, concepts and histories I'll never learn.

After Achik left, Chilina shivered; she had fallen asleep on the grass. She woke up to mother's touch and her eyes spotted the birds up in the sky. Two black silhouettes darkened by the sun, their feathers floating in the air. The figures circled one another, and Chilina followed their movement with her finger. Mama looked up. She, too, raised her finger and followed the bird's trajectory.

They flew high up in the sky, far away from us. But they were giants so we felt them close. I liked the baby kuntur's mannerisms; it tried to keep up with its mother—the colossal being—by flapping its wings constantly, instead of gliding through the air. It was still learning. One of mother kuntur's wings hid the sun from us. Everything turned dark for a few seconds. I heard the men screaming at each other near the houses. As they left our space, the sun came back, and Chilina rose.

Chilina's brown eyes followed the kunturs' movements. She raised her brow in response to the kuntur's imposing appearance. She began to walk towards them, hands raised to the sky. I could not help but laugh – my little sister was so small she couldn't talk and was afraid of everyone including the weather—lightning, specifically—but Mama. The condors, nevertheless, did not intimidate her. She walked faster, picking up her tiny feet, stumbling through the pointy bushes. Mama didn't do anything. She watched her youngest daughter flee for the kunturs, and I stopped giggling. I became concerned. Was she watching her leave?

“What is Chilina doing?” I asked mother to see if she knew.

“Following kuntur,” she responded.

Chilina disappeared for a few seconds behind some plants. I stood up and found her sitting, playing with her surroundings.

“I’ll go get her,” I told Mama. I walked towards Chilina—she didn’t go very far, but far enough for Mateo to possibly intervene.

“Chilina,” I said. She looked up at me. Chilina was biting a black feather. Obsidian black.

“Where did you get that from?” I asked her. She didn’t respond. Instead, she took it out of her mouth, her saliva connecting her lips to feather, and handed it to me. I was not ready for this. The feather, I’m sure, weighed more than Chilina herself. It was condor feather that fell from the sky, and Chilina had found it. She placed it on her mouth as she places everything, but she somehow managed to not fall under its weight.

I grabbed the feather with two hands and turned around. Tomás was returning Achik to us. I couldn’t hear what he was saying, but the way he wagged his finger in Mama’s face made me realize Achik had done something improper. He looked at us and squinted his eyes. He then left. As Tomás walked away, he pushed Achik, and she fell near Mama. Mama grabbed her hand and looked back at us. We returned with the kuntur feather. I struggled carrying the feature and my baby sister at the same time.

Shortly after, during our dinner, Tomás asked us—me—what we were doing today out by the bushes. I responded with “walking Chilina around,” but Tomás wanted to know more about the feather that sat next to Chilina. He walked over, still chewing his meat, and tried to pick it up. He couldn’t.

“Madre mía,” he said. He tried to pick it up with both hands, pulling some feather hairs out with his strength. He managed to drag the feather out in the darkness. There was no moonlight that night. I tried to open my eyes and find Tomás body. I think Mateo did too, but he



got tired of trying to differentiate Tomás's body from other dark moving things and got up. He walked away from the fire, light lingering on his giant shoulders, and talked to Tomás.

"Pero qué haces?" he asked him. Tomás grunted back. "Déjalo. That is not worth anything." I didn't understand the concept of worth until we walked into Mateo's house and spotted the mountain of gold and obsidian he hides from the rest of us. I think we only hide the things we care about. After we were told to go back to sleep, and Chilina tugged at Mama's breasts, Tomás decided the feather would be his.

"The feather stays here," he responded. He smiled.

In our house, Mama soothed Chilina with whispers in her ear. "Tomorrow," she kept saying, but Chilina cried all night.

Today I wonder what will happen to us. I want the condors to come back and take Chilina with them. They'd grab her by her poncho, and she'd float and see the landscape surrounding us, maybe fly to Taita's cave and bring him back from the dead. I do not want Chilina to stay here any longer. She will not grow up without Mama. Achik could barely make it through the day when Mama was here, guiding her. I can barely breathe without Mama. All I can hear is Achik's shrieks and my loud heartbeat. I can't hear Lucas' instructions or Tomás and his constant spitting. I stare at Mama's face trying to decipher what to do and then look up at Mateo—the giant—staring at the golden page book, blood dotting his hands.

Mateo doesn't know how to read. He looks at the golden page book over Lucas' shoulder at times, especially at the beginning of class. I think he wants to know what Lucas will be discussing. Mateo places his dirty index finger on the page—once he leaves, Lucas cleans the filthy page with his pants—and mouths the words. He tries to whisper them. Nothing comes out.

I see his dark mouth open and move, trying to express the words Lucas knows so well. His eyes shake and squint, the words on the page become clearer. But they never mean anything. He becomes frustrated and leaves, his giant muscles barely fitting through the door we've built. I'm sure Tomás doesn't know how to read either. As Lucas circles our land to find a suitable burial site for my mother, pointing at places, Mateo glances at Lucas' book.

I don't know why we are different, why we deserve different beginnings and endings, why Taita and Mama can't bury food for the dead, beings who are here, have been here, will be here after us, why Achik is "loca," why we bathed Chilina with water two years ago and nearly drowned her baby head, why he takes my flowers, my stories, my recollections.

Achik lets go of Mama's hand and tosses her hair back as she runs towards Tomás, who is somehow still spitting at the ground and its dewy clovers, pushing him to the ground. My sister's fury escapes through her hair: it is a whip, and Tomás is in agony. Lucas has wandered off with a crying Chilina in his arms. And Mateo drops the golden page book as he rushes to save his friend, his Spanish companion, the one who shared the ocean journey with him, the one who helps him control us. He helps Tomás stand back up; some blood trickles down his neck. There's a rock on the floor marked by Spanish blood, and Achik runs. My sister runs over the fences, her hair whipping through the air, over our cerros, and into Cotopaxi, into our Taita's arms. Tomás follows.

I prepare the obsidian that rests in the palm of my flower hands and await Mateo's rage. I will be punished for this, like I am punished for everything I didn't do. He sprints towards me and I step away from his grasp; I feel his air, the air he creates with his anger and body, and he falls. This is when it happens. I climb over him, cut his throat with my volcano stone, a mirror

turned weapon, Spanish blood oozing down my fingers, tainting my being. Mateo shakes. Lucas comes back. Where did I gather this strength?

“What have you done, Mana? You’ve committed a sin,” he says, holding my baby sister and walking backwards.

“Manarikuypac,” I remind him. I shake with fear, but, somehow, I am satisfied.

Lucas sits Chilina down and rushes to Mateo’s house. I look out to Cotopaxi and think of my father and sister. I look at its white peak and wide open mouth, it spews some smoke and ash. Is it Taita? Is he coming for us? Because our world is ending. The sun and its light line up above us: a bleeding Mateo and me, a boy tainted by him. It is noon. I look down at the man I killed. Eyes open, mouth drooling, chest soaked by his own blood, the blood that has dried up on my palms. Is this a sin I have committed? To save us from the man who scared me and killed others? Was it a sin to kill my mother? Was it a sin to bury our corn?

I slowly wipe my hands off on my clothes. The blood doesn’t leave me. Yet time has escaped me. I walk slowly but the clouds gather quickly. I enter our school, feeling every part of my body, and Lucas’ stare from afar. It’s strong. He’s watching me. The ñukchu uksachina sprouts. I yank it and it hurts me, too. Mateo still lies on his back, sunrays hitting his body, ash spewing from our volcano. I stick the purple flower—petals and spikes—inside his mouth because I want to bury him like they buried it, like they murdered my father.

## Kuri

I lift the pickaxe above my head, arms stretched out, remnants of Pichincha fall on my shoulders and hair. The volcano smells like ashes, but the dirt, brown and glossy, tastes like an avocado's seed. Mama likes to slice our avocados in two. She feels its ripeness with her fingers, plucks it from our tree. Outside, she perforates its seed, tells me how the avocado seed looks like her belly when she carried me—"stretch marks like roots," she says—and places the seed inside my cupped hands. I look up at her brown eyes and lick the seed.

"Cuidado!" one of the men next to me says as he grabs my clothes and bits of my hair and pulls me away from my spot. Pichincha drops a gigantic stone where I once stood. My pickaxe lands next to me. The volcanic stone blocks the sun from my eyes. Other men gather around it and touch it; their fingers follow the cracks of our earth.

"How huge," they say in chorus.

"We can't carry this one down to the church," one man says as the volcanic rock begins to leave us like it visited us: gaining speed, squashing other men below our spot, tattooing itself with their blood.

"Get up, quickly," the man who saved me pushes me back up. He's looking at my green eyes. I look away, down at the rock that fell from the sky. But the man's eyes remain on me.

"Thank you," I tell him, amidst the yells of fear from others.

"Thank me later," he responds, as he points his eyes to the apuyurak; the leader of our excavation runs towards us on his white horse.

"Be careful! Leave that rock alone!" the apuyurak yells while he struts his horse around us. He turns back to look at my pickaxe sitting on Pichincha's side. The apuyurak's eyes are

green like mine. They carry a little blue, perhaps a reflection of the turbulent sky above us. I stand up, pick up my tool, and look back at him, his white socks stained with Pichincha's dirt. He rides away.

"It's the volcano."

The man who saved me points his finger towards Pichincha. I look up and squint my eyes. The rainclouds that once covered its peaks disappeared – I can now see the snow kissing its patches of trees. I've never touched snow. I wonder if it feels like the dirt that falls off the mountain. I wonder if it tastes like it, too.

"What about the volcano?"

"We shouldn't be breaking it," he responds. "Don't your hands tremble with every strike?"

I look down at my hands—a parched desert, my calluses are immovable sand dunes; my dried blood is the cracked river. What about the purple stains covering my fingertips? Pickaxe stains. Dead desert flowers—and hear the screams from below the mountain. I walk towards the cliff and look down at the others. They're looking down their cliffs and following the fallen stone's trajectory. It's not stopping.

There's a fire in the horizon; the black clouds in the sky are attached to the earth through a chain of smoke.

"What is your name?" the man asks.

"Kuri," I tell him.

"Why did your mother name you after gold?"

I never tell him Mama thinks my green eyes will be worth more than gold one day. She says I am not like the others, and I've learned to hide my eyes from big crowds. As we walk down the mountain, I can feel his eyes on mine. He wants to know why my eyes are green—ripe avocado green. We walk towards the fire. I try to keep my eyes on the trail of smoke, but my feet continue to stumble on the rocks we've placed earlier to create a road down the mountain. Round and warm rocks. They remember us from this morning.

Rain begins to fall on our stones and us. I thought the rain clouds had left, but the weather in my hometown shifts as quick as a rat escapes my grasp. Everything around me tastes like the air we breathed up in Pichincha: I can barely hold it in my chest.

“Está lloviendo a cántaros,” the apuyurak shouts as he strolls down next to us. His white horse steps inside the rain puddles next to me and the water splashes my sandals. The apuyurak thinks our sky is raining like vessels – like buckets of soap and dish water thrown from balconies near my house. The women throw the dirty water near nightfall, when the workers are home, the markets are closed, and the only ones walking down the road are those yelling the time with a bell in hand. Every evening, I hear the bell's echoes from our backyard; it announces the sunset.

“Kuri,” he calls my attention. I can barely understand the tone of his voice through the droplets of rain. They form a wall between us.

“What?”

“Pick up your feet – don't drag them. Look at your toes.”

I'm bleeding. The rain turns my blood pink.

“You never told me your name,” I reply.

“Mallki,” he replies after a long pause. Mallki’s hair was once covered in ashes and bits of stone; now the color gray has melted down his face and neck. I can see where his fingertips intervened with the rain. His eyes aren’t tainted silver.

Our walk down Pichincha feels eternal. When we climbed the volcano this morning, I could feel the air I inhaled when I woke up leaving my body. But when the sweat that covered my neck and chest met Pichincha’s cold breath, I forgot about my breathing. I put on the sweater Mama gave me and picked up my pickaxe.

The cart of stones I’m carrying down the mountain cannot roll down by itself. I must control its weight and force with my back. And when I stumble, we all know the apuyurak’s green eyes are on me.

We’re near the construction site. We left the rain behind. People pass me by. My eyes centered on my stones. The woman selling tomatoes and corn holds on to her bag as we struggle along; she looks at us intently, trying to decipher which one of us stole her bag of earnings yesterday. But she can’t differentiate any of us. I am a clone of others. We’ve all taken off our sweaters, sewn by women we know, and tied them across our chests. Double knots to fight Pichincha’s winds. We walk in the same beat. Even our stones clash together the same way.

I hear Mallki talk to a crowd of stone men and farmers; they respond to his stories about the stones used in Church San Francisco de Quito with eagerness. He’s pointing at the white giant wall and how it breaks with the pattern of stone. The church is immense. Monjas and frailes sleep in different sides of the edifice, taking turns at ringing the bronze bell embellished with roses every time an apuruyak dies. It hasn’t rung in weeks. Children enter the church for Sunday mass with enthusiasm, yet they leave with their heads down, some tugging at the

remainders of Jesus stuck on the roof of their mouths. Inside, the church smells like fruit-eating bats and soap, like rules, wood, and fresh paint. Sometimes it smells like Mama.

“My ancestors helped build that church,” Mallki tells the others. “My blood is hidden behind the white paint. But our yawar will be as easy to wash off on La Compañía’s stone.” The men around him nod their heads as they walk along Mallki. I heard once Church San Francisco de Quito took more than one hundred years to build. The church we’re building now has also taken years – my years, Mallki’s years, the apuyurak’s years.

I like to think my ancestors, too, helped build that church. My green-eyed father could have died placing tiles on the roof; he could’ve lost his balance, fallen on the stones, Pichincha stones he placed years ago, and died. And this is why I never met my father. The church is to blame; our labor is to blame.

We are nearing the trail of smoke. I follow the collapsing string of smoke up to the sky. Through a crowd of people yelling prices and stories, a few men spitting on the ground, some women whispering secrets, everybody looking at my cart of stones, I spot a woman in a black veil. Her eyes are blue, like the sky before it rains; her eyes carry rain clouds and water. Her eyes are a warning. The sun bounces off her skin so delicately. I stop to watch her walk; I wonder if she’s ever grabbed a pickaxe, if she’s ever touched a calloused hand. She looks up at us. I wonder if it will rain again. Her eyes are on mine, her eyelashes on mine, her lips on mine. She’s headed towards my construction site.

The man behind me stumbles and hits my parked cart. My stones fall. The sound of the crash isn’t lost through the laughter and screaming of the crowd. I can hear the apuruyak’s horse nearing, tree branch in hand.



As I drop off the stones from Pichincha and add them to the mountain of stones outside our church, I sit near the source of the fire: the kuri men are making gold leafs. They pound the gold with their hammers. Strike after strike, knees bent, sweat under their chins, they flatten the gold, until only a thin layer remains; I hear it weighs as much as a bird's feather. Other men take the gold leaf into the church, disappearing under the shade inside the edifice. They're covering the walls, ceiling, columns, and doors of the new church in gold, more gold than was ever used in Church San Francisco de Quito. More gold than our ancestors ever touched. The gold men lift their hammers high into the sky, and the pattern of their strikes sometimes looks like the v birds design in the sky.

As I use the tip of my fingers to measure the size of the tree branch's imprint on my back—four fingers wide, blood filling the cracks of my skin—I watch the weakest gold man cough in between every stroke. He sweats more than the others. He is the bird that never learned how to fly. His skin is fractured, bits of gold stuck between his cracks. His eyes are red and dry from the smoke, but I can still make out their color: brown like his hammer. He lifts his hammer and the hammer's weight beats him – he falls. The hammer falls on him.

“¡Auxilio!” he screams between coughs. I run towards him, but I'm not fast enough – my feet are too numb. Other gold men begin to gather around him. I finally push through them and kneel next to him. I grab the hammer with one hand, throw it far away from him, and place my hand on his cheek.

“What's your name?” I ask him. He coughs up blood. It mixes with the sweat on his chin.

“His name is Tutanaya,” one of the men responds.

“Tutanaya, can you breathe?” I look into his eyes. They are moving, nearing the back of his skull. “Help me carry him out of here, away from the smoke. He can’t breathe.” The others stand next to me, looking down at my hand on Tutanaya’s face.

“We better get back to work,” the biggest kuri man replies.

“What’s going on?” a man asks as he makes his way through the circle. He’s the kuri apuruyak. He looks down at me, my bloodied feet and shirt, and at Tutanaya.

“He fell and the hammer fell on his chest – look at his throat. He’s bleeding too much,” I inform the apuruyak.

“Everybody continue working,” he commands. “You two, carry him out of here.” The strongest kuri men grab Tutanaya and lift him up. As I transfer Tutanaya’s blood from my hand to the ground, the apuruyak indicates me to stand up.

“Do you know how much that hammer weighs?” he asks, looking at my eyes.

“No.”

“You grabbed it, as if it was a feather, and threw it away with just one hand. I saw it from over there,” he points his index finger towards the wooden bench near a patch of roses. “How did you do it?”

“With just one hand.”

He slaps me with the back of his hand. My eyes swing across the landscape.

“Watch your attitude. Pick up the hammer you threw. Ask the others what to do.”

“I work up in Pichincha,” I tell him, looking back at the volcano. “I’m not a kuri man.”

“Come back here tomorrow,” he says as he walks away. “Follow the trail of smoke.”

I don't tell Mama I've been assigned a new job. She believes my work up in Pichincha is honorable; I am a part of Pachamama, building a place of worship for Jesús with Pichincha stones and the gold from the east – a group of men dig out the gold from the rivers of the Amazon, I heard it first looks like pebbles of sand, and carry it to our city. They do this every month. Apuruyaks follow them on the trail of gold by horse. They melt the pebbles in the fire station near our church.

Tutanaya never came back. His hammer is mine now. I strike the gold like the others: sweat on chin, cough when the wind pushes the trail of smoke near our bodies, following the movement of the birds above. Together we are a unit of sound. One man, bald in the head but hairy in the chest, grabs the thin layer of gold once I'm done flattening it. He takes it to the church: walks underneath the equatorial sun, looks at the men coming down the mountain—my men— and passes the rose bushes near the remnants of bucket water. He reaches the church—we call it La Compañía—and hides behind its shadows.

My hands don't tremble as much as they did with the pickaxe. The desert flowers are almost completely vanished – the color purple evolved into orange after hours of work.

The man hasn't picked up my finished gold leaf in a while. I look for him and spot him near the bench of roses, talking with a woman whose dress reveals her chest. She's the daughter of Rodrigo, my neighbor. Rodrigo has asked for an avocado seed since I can remember. He sells aguacate in the market, and craves to grow a tree like ours one day. "Think of all that silver," he once said to me. Our aguacate tree grew with me as I aged. It blossoms when Mama needs it to, it will live after we're gone. I pick up the gold leaf that needs to be delivered; my sweat marks my fingers on the metal. I walk towards the church, as I look back at the man with the hairy chest. His eyes are on the woman's cleavage. Nobody guards the entrance of the church.

I smell the ashes of Pichincha inside La Compañía; it's the volcanic stones we brought down. Sculptors grab the stones and strike them with smaller pickaxes, while women wearing scarfs around their mouths sweep the dust out of the church. One of them piles her dust on my sandals as I look up at the church's dome, the only source of light. Bits of Pichincha float around me, some land on my skin. The sculptors turn Pichincha into something impossible: shells of spondylus, vines of grapes, kernels of corn, and as the sculptors shape these items, I can sense the regret in their touch. Why would they turn our Pichincha, our volcano, into a church?

"What are you doing here?" a man dressed in black asks me. His eyes are green, too.

"Delivering this," I say as I hold up the gold leaf. He looks down at it, points me towards a group of men and watches me walk away.

"Where do I put this?" I ask the group of men.

"Don't touch that!" a short man with long brown hair stands up quickly from the ground and yanks the gold leaf from my hands. "What are you waiting for? Go back." He stares at the gold leaf in search of imperfections. Perhaps he spots the lines on my hands and fingers, perhaps he senses the smell of smoke emanating from my body.

As I walk away, I look around the church and at the faces, flowers, vegetation, and clouds the sculptors are designing on La Compañía's walls. The stones become something different, unrecognizable.

I bump into her. Her black veil is now stained with my sweat. Her blue eyes look up and meet mine. She's a flower, an azucena, a white lily.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I say as I walk away from her. From the corner of my eye, I can see that she still walks towards the only wooden pew placed inside the church. She kneels next to it and holds her hands together; she's praying.

“You, come here,” the man dressed in black calls for me with his hands; it’s as if he’s trying to kill mosquitoes with only one hand.

I approach him and look at the spots of paint on his hands.

“What’s your name?” he asks me, staring at my green eyes.

“Kuri.”

“Who’s your father? Is he one of the men in charge around here?” He points around.

“I never knew my father.”

He grabs my hand. It still smells like hammer and metal. He looks at my skin, my avocado seed skin, and turns it over. He stares at the lines in my hand and back at my eyes. His touch is delicate; the patches of paint on his yurak skin feel like the bumps on a poisonous leaf. His skin screams danger. I pull my hand away from his.

“At what time do you finish your labor?” he asks.

“I’m not supposed to be here,” I respond. As I begin to walk away, I hear his anger emanate through his loud breaths.

“Don’t leave. I am speaking,” he says.

“I am home before the bells begin to ring.”

“Come by the church after you finish.”

I leave La Compañía with a pain in my stomach. The apuruyak is waiting for me by my hammer, tree branch in hand, next to the man with the hairy chest.

The kuri men wash the smoke off their faces next to a chorrera nearby. As I wait in line for my turn, I look back at La Compañía. The sky behind it changes colors, leaving the shades of blue behind – it is now pink and orange, the color of my veins after I strike the hammer all day.

I wipe the droplets of water from my face with my clothes and place my hammer next to the other hammers and make my way to the church. The rest of the people around me walk the other way – the men who work up in Pichincha pass me by, nodding their heads when they spot me. I see Mallki walking; his hands are on his shoulders. His feet are purple. He does not acknowledge me.

I enter the church and look for the man wearing black clothes. I walk by the rest of the workers, the sculptors and those in charge of the gold leaf, asking if they've seen the man who asked for me.

"Nobody's looking for you here," a man replies. His hands are on his waist.

"Kuri."

I see him in the back of the church. I walk towards him, arms crossed.

"I don't think I'm supposed to be here," I tell him.

"Step inside," he responds, moving a room divider towards him. I walk inside a room lit by candlelight. The smell of paint and wax is evident, from the floors to the open ceiling.

"This is where I work," he says to me, as he directs me to a wooden stool.

"I'm definitely not supposed to be here," I say.

"Please sit – I'll tell you why you're here." I grab the stool, drag it towards the edge of the room divider and sit. He grabs a candle and walks towards a canvas: a painting of various angels hovering next to a tree. The tree bears apples, bananas, corn, and avocados. My toes curl up on the floor. An eternal flow of wind enters the room through the open roof, but the candlelight remains strong.

"Can you see the color of their skin?" he asks me. I lean in closer, eyes squinting.

"Yes," I reply. "Can you tell me your name?"

“Fernando,” he answers, without looking back at me. His hands are on the canvas, following the curvature of an angel’s head. He quickly turns around.

“This place, this beautiful church, is for us, Kuri,” he says as he points the candle up towards the sky. The stars are as clear as ever. I spot the Southern Cross and look back down Fernando.

“This place,” he continues, “represents us. You are a part of it, I am a part of it, the men who bring down the stones from the mountain are a part of it. And we are all starting to look alike; I see tall men with fair skin pushing carts with stones on the street. This has never happened before; their eyes are brown, hair is black, but their skin is light. Light like mine.”

I look down at my hands.

“You, Kuri,” he walks towards me, “are the representation of our new life here in San Francisco de Quito. Do you know what color your eyes are?”

“What kind of question is that? I know what colors my eyes are.” I stand up. My stomach aches. I begin to walk away but Fernando pulls my arm.

“I need your help,” he says.

“What about your helpers? I don’t paint. I don’t know how to do draw,” I respond. “I can’t help you. I am one of those men who carries stones down from Pichincha. I am a stone man. I wasn’t supposed to be here today, carrying that gold. I am not a kuri man.”

“I need you to pose for me.”

I yank my arm away from his and look around the room. The angels’ eyes are blue and green, their skin is the color of the wall – white and dirty, covered with the drops of dried rainwater.

“I just want to paint your skin color. It feels right to paint an angel who looks like you, who represents all of us.”

I look around the room and back at Fernando. His eyebrows are huge like his nose. His neck filled with wrinkles and droplets of blue paint. Skin of poison.

“What does your name mean?” I ask him.

“I was named after a saint.”

“Your name has no meaning,” I reply.

“I think means adventurer.”

I’ve become a routine. While I sleep, my feet remember the hike up to Pichincha, the eternal hike up and the unending descent, and I wake up with my hands grabbing my toes. The pain doesn’t go away when I walk towards the fire in the morning. It stays with me. The chain of smoke disappears at night and comes back when the roosters outside crow. After I turn gold into multiple gold leafs, I wash my face with our chorrera. I first wait until all the kuri men clean the environment off their skin. The water washes the hammer’s force off my hands. I watch the droplets create a river down my neck, it flows into my chest, and then the river becomes a cascade that washes me away to some place far away from here, far away from Fernando. A crowd begins to dissipate as I make my way to La Compañía. I pass by Mallki; he still doesn’t say anything to me. His feet are still purple. Inside La Compañía, I don’t look at the sculptors or at the men who are covering Pichincha stones with my gold leafs. With my hands, I move the room divider and sit on the stool Fernando pulls out for me. I give him my hand, and he grabs it. He looks at it intently with a candle. He mixes colors for two hours; the bells ring. I memorize the angels and the color of their hair: blonde brown, blond, brown, blond. When Fernando



indicates our day is done, he yawns. Candles are blown. He grabs his work kit and walks me out. I walk home, alone, unshaken. The men with bells look at me as I try to dodge the water falling from balconies above me. The water splashes on my feet. I remember the walk up to Pichincha and the rainwater that turned my blood pink. The men ask me what I'm doing outside. "I don't know," I reply, as I walk inside my home. Mama sleeps as I try not to dream of the hike up to Pichincha ever again.

But before I leave La Compañía, I begin to sweat. It is night. The stars are out. My skin feels the light from the stars and becomes warm. This is when I see her. The woman with the black veil and blue eyes. She's sleeping inside the church, next to a lit candle. Every night, she falls asleep in front of the Jesús painting Fernando created, in front of my skin.

"What's the name of the woman who sleeps here at night?" I finally ask Fernando as he looks intently into my eyes, trying to decipher what shades of green exist within me. Avocado, avocado, avocado with salt.

"Don't talk to her – it'll distract her," he says as he mixes his oils.

"But what's her name?"

"Mariana. We call her Marianita."

"She's Marianita de Jesús?" I ask looking back at the room divider.

"Yes. She works here all day."

"What does she do?"

"She prays – that is her job. She prays for us and our church."

"For your health and the health of the stones?" I ask.

Fernando keeps looking into my eyes.

"She prays so that earthquakes don't destroy what we're building," he tells me.

Fernando sits down and places his tools on the table. He touches my neck with his right hand. Fingers run up my face and stop at my lips.

“How old are you?” he asks.

“Seventeen.”

His other hand is on my leg. The warm poison begins to leak into my clothes and skin. I tug my leg away, and Fernando yawns. He blows the candles out, grabs his tool kit, and begins to walk me out of the church. When we’re both outside, we begin to walk our separate ways. I stop and look back at him. His figure—a black silhouette that shines between other shadows—disappears behind a wall.

He’s gone. I turn around and quickly walk back to La Compañía, step inside the dark church, and head towards the only lit candle. She’s sleeping next to it, curled up under her black veil.

“Mariana,” I say, tapping her shoulder. She wakes up, blue eyes facing the candle. Her eyes are a warning. She turns and looks at me. I am sweating. My hands begin to tingle.

“Who are you?” she asks.

“I work here – I’m one of the kuri men.”

“What are you doing here this late?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“But why are you here?”

“I was working with Fernando in the back room – he’s painting a portrait of me as an angel.”

“What’s your name?” Marianita asks as she sits up. She leans her back on the wooden pew.

“Kuri.”

We talk all night. I learn she knew she wanted to be a nun when she was a child, when she witnessed other nuns embrace each other outside Church San Francisco de Quito. She wanted to be special in the eyes of God. Her father refused to let her be a monja, to reserve herself for a religion and not for a man. So Marianita ran away from home, hid in Church San Francisco de Quito under a pew for a few days. The man who found her—Padre Almeida—asked her to devote her mind, body, and soul to Jesus Christ. And she did. She slept in the church like a potted flower for years. No earthquakes struck our land during her devout years. Her blue eyes conquer mine as she tells me her stories, as she completes me. She now lives here in La Compañía, in the church built by my stones, gold, and skin, and she sleeps to protect it from evil.

“But Pachamama isn’t evil,” I tell her.

“Its earthquakes are,” she responds.

“*Her* quakes,” I correct Marianita.

I want her to meet Mama and our avocado tree. She can feel the ripeness of its fruit with her fingertips, pierce their skin with her blue eyes, the bluest eyes Pachamama has conceived. When we part, I walk home at the same time the men light the gold leaf fire. I crawl into my sleep space and dream of her eyes for a while. They shine so radiantly.

Minutes later, the roosters begin to crow. I don’t change my clothes because they still smell of her. I put on my Pichincha sandals, brown leather tattooed with my blood. Mama was out in the yard, touching avocados with her fingers. I leave home and walk by the woman selling tomatoes and corn. She stills holds onto her bag. My hammer waits for me by my station, and my hands begin to feel the echoes of each strike. I change paths, walk by the hammer, and heard

towards La Compañía. Men call after me. They know what I'm doing. I'm not going back to the gold. I will not flatten it for them, for the church Marianita guards. I run towards the church and spot her: black veil, silent prayers, fair hands pointed towards the sky. She's praying to Fernando's Jesus.

"Marianita," I say as I kneel next to her.

"You're not supposed to be here, Kuri," she says without looking back at me. But she smiles. So, I insist.

"Marianita," I say as I turn her face towards me. Those lips. Two men grab me—each one of them holds one of my arms, I can feel the gold leaf fire through their fingertips—and drag me away from her.

"Pedazo de mierda," they say as they carry me outside. They let me go, and I spot the apuyurak next to my hammer. A tree branch. His foot taps the soil. I get up and disregard the scrapes burning on my legs.

I walk towards the apuruyak and stop when Pachamama starts to tremble. I look up at the sky and spot black birds flying away from us; they don't form patterns as they flee. The chain of smoke that connects the sky to our earth breaks in two. People to begin run away from the market, pushing me to the ground. Some step on my body. The screams from the men on the mountaintop reach us. Mallki. Pichincha falls on them. I lay on the ground as others run over me, their fear breaking my bones. I hear the echoed shrieks and watch La Compañía collapse. Corn, gold, angels, and avocados crumble into dirt, dirt transformed back to dirt. Marianita couldn't save it.

## Plaza San Blas

for el indígena Jumandi, for Mami who took pictures of a tiny little bone sitting in a dark vitrine of the church of San Blas, for gringos who visit Quito and don't know, for me because I didn't know, for you who now knows, for those who believe the historic center of Quito is simply history.

Our ancestor Ucuyaya follow us with big perforated eyes a flat nose a carved smile but look at him closely as his hands pressed on his chest track us now so put him in your pocket because that's where he fits since he's made of bone like yours and mine and represents every one of us and what we once were—mud, mud, mud—and what we will be—earth, earth, earth—in the future they'll find Ucuyaya buried and a human missing a shred of his shin bone while Ucuyaya lies next to him but the others will never find our ancestor because not all the dead are buried so in the future some are placed inside wooden boxes and thrown under earth under sun but some under shadows of stone and yet bone is removed from bodies and paraded in churches like a famous bone in Quito which is not an Ucuyaya it's not our ancestor this bone this being this person is European he'll be named Obispo San Blas the man whose bone is as small as an Ucuyaya will be found in his church with his body in the cemetery of San Blas and this little bone is not carved no it doesn't need eyes or a nose or hands it's a little bone a European bone enclosed in a glass box it's a memory of the great founder of this church the one who saw Jumandi el indígena die at the stone footsteps of this church but Jumandi el indígena won't be buried because there's nothing left of him in the church's plaza to bury since his brains and insides remain scattered and his being and us buried underneath will remain simply waiting for them to carve Jumandi's bones into an Ucuyaya the Jumandi Ucuyaya the ancestor who fought for us

los criollos will watch him perish

and gringos will take photographs of where Jumandi el indígena died

they'll step on everything we left behind      the mud we once were  
the earth that we are

CHAPTER III UKU PACHA

## Flamenco

Ecuadorian girls learn flamenco, an Andalusian dance, in Elementary school. I danced flamenco wearing black leotards and red lips, sometimes stained front teeth. I remember my tongue licking my teeth, the taste of makeup, my sprayed, pulled-back, combed hair filled with carnations, not roses—Mami and I bought carnations from a man with no nails. His skin, sunburned and cracked, hidden under his blue Pepsi cap. “Twenty-five carnations for a dollar!” he yelled at parked cars. He tapped my window, touched my fingers with his fingers. I handed him a dollar coin tattooed with Sacagawea’s face, and I wore his carnations, wet, blossoming beings, to dance. I danced with red and black polka dot skirts, from my belly to my toes, sewn by a woman who lived in a tiny cement home— mountains of clothes, my torn clothes, on the floor. Her delicate, pinched, band-aid fingers. She touched my flat chest, waist, and bottom with her fingers, measuring me with yellow tape. With black leather flamenco shoes, in front of our parents and under the equatorial sun, we stomped the ground, hammers on a wall: persistent, rhythm-less beats, tough. A South American raucous. My hands high up above me—twirling, circling, fingers like dancing fans, opening and closing.

## La oreja de toro

The music of las sevillanas bounces off the cafeteria walls. Spanish fingers touch metal cords, men trace the palms of their hands against the smooth wood of their guitars, a crowd claps with the rhythm in the background. The girls listening to the CD of Andalusian music can't see her, but a flamenco dancer in Madrid follows the men's orders with her feet, stomping the ground and sweating her jewelry off. She smiles gracefully at the crowd between twirls. Some red lipstick drawn on her cheek from the times she touched her face with the back of her hand, stealing paint from her lips. Her voluminous and layered dress astounds the crowd. She lifts its lace hem and holds it delicately with her fingertips, scuffing the floor with her heels; she creates a pattern, a language of scrapes and scratches. Next to a pile of lunch trays still sticky with Ecuadorian food, Rafaela swears she can hear the dancer's gold earring fall to the ground as the music waves stream out of her dance teacher's jukebox. She knows that as she stomps her feet—heel, toe, punta, taco—forty seconds in, the dancer's earring falls and lands. At this moment, Rafaela raises her spinning hand up to the cafeteria ceiling, almost touching the remainders of historic food fights staining white paint, and tries to catch it.

Every flamenco practice, her hand remains empty. Today, Rafaela straps her flamenco shoes to her feet, both black leather bands worn out. She drops her skirt to the ground—brown and white polka dots, the hem sewn by her. As she walks towards her group of friends, she grabs her hair and ties it in a high ponytail. It swings like the tail of a horse.

“Manos arriba!” the dance teacher screams. The girls run to their positions, the black metal patches under their shoes tapping and scratching the linoleum floor. Rafa thinks the short woman who cleans the cafeteria kitchen at night can trace the girl's steps, pirouettes, claps, and



sweat through their footprints. She places her white sneakers—shoe laces worn out, too—on the marks left behind by the girls who dance flamenco after school and teaches herself to dance. Her broom waits quietly next to the grey refrigerator.

The girls look at each other on the mirror the dance teacher brings with her for practice. She says she bikes to class every day, avoiding cars and flipping angry Quiteño drivers off with her manicured finger, because “women must remain fit.” Rafaela and her friends don’t know how she straps the gigantic mirror to the back of her bicycle. One day, finally, they realized the dance teacher was lying. She hides the mirror in a nearby janitor’s closet, next to the broom of the short woman whose passion for flamenco is bigger than the teacher’s. Adults lie all the time.

The girls vary in size. Rafaela is the tallest; she competes with Pichincha’s grandeur, the volcano that once covered her entire school with ashes, while its two peaks stare back at the girls who dance. The volcano knows all of them.

As the disk repeats itself, the girls begin to dance. Forty seconds in, Rafaela catches the falling earring, and accidentally slaps the head of one of the other dancers in front of her. An hour later, she tries explaining this incident to her mother.

“Pero why did you hit her in her head?” her mother asks as they reach the nearest red light.

“I didn’t. I always do that forty seconds in.”

“Do what?”

“Move my hand like that,” Rafaela says. She slaps the glove box.

“Is that part of the routine? Injuring yourself?”

“No. Forget it.”

“I don’t want to get any more phone calls from your angry dance teacher.”

“Aja. Bueno. So, what’s for dinner?”

“Yaguar loco.”

Rafaela rolls her eyes. Lamb blood for dinner. She can already smell it. Blood peppered with peanuts, avocado, and cilantro, floating on a sea of potatoes Mami buys from the woman who sits on one end of the roundabout near their home. Street potatoes.

“Qué asco. What are we celebrating?”

“The bullfights begin tomorrow—”

“You hate the bullfights,” Rafaela interrupts her mother.

“Exactly. I’d rather you eat blood in your food than see it flying across a field of sand.”

“Que bestia, Mami. Osea, you criticize me for punching a girl on the head—”

“Well, if your father likes it, then you should too.”

“Punching?”

“No seas estúpida. I mean the soup.”

“Did Papi get me and my friends seats for la plaza?”

Half of Rafa’s family money is invested in the Plaza de Toros in Quito, Ecuador. Oil paintings of bulls bleeding, black and white photographs of men stabbing animals, and portraits of Rafaela as a child dressed up as a flamenco dancer as decorate her father’s home office. Rafa’s mother won’t ever step foot in that room of their apartment. She actually has never been to a bullfight, but somehow fell in love with Fernando and his adoration of Spanish culture. “It was his cologne,” Rafa’s mother once told her. Rafa’s mother grew up on an hacienda in the outskirts of Quito. Her daughter didn’t share the same upbringing. But Rafa did learn how to milk a cow in a middle school fieldtrip, and she does ride horses in the summer. When she was

little, Rafa once asked her parents if her mother's skin color was a product of being outside too much. She could see her father's veins on his arms, but she couldn't find her mother's.

“Yes, seats at the top of the plaza. The ones where you can turn around and jump off into the street. Which I trust you won't do.” The plaza is a gigantic yellow cone ornamented with advertisements for credit cards, liquor, and country clubs. Rafa's father is in charge of distributing those advertisements properly—they can't obscure the beauty of the cone. The antitaurinos who chant outside the plaza while the bullfights take place swear the cone changes color at times: from the butter yellow a scarlet red arises. The seats are numbered with stenciled black spray paint. Women who paint their nails with the color *sangre de toro*—the color of old wine—lean their backs on the stenciled numbers. Their big hats and sunglasses cover their faces. Blue jeans and brown boots uniform. They shake the dust off their bottoms as they stand and sit constantly, less like a soccer game, more like mass on Sundays. Their cameras try to zoom in into the bullfighter's eyes—are they green or are they blue—but sometimes the bull's tail, horns, or eyes get in the way. And then there's a picture with blood digitally imprinted in their cameras. This is when they hit the delete button.

Rafa and her mother reach another red light. Children who sell gum tap Rafa's car window. She nods her head and searches for change in her mother's car.

“No tengo, mijita,” her mother says as she looks past Rafa and treasures the children's stare.

Rafa picks up her backpack from the car floor and sticks her hand inside her front pocket. The men and women crossing the street watch Rafa struggle as they avoid the girl who juggles bowling pins. The pins rise and fall, looping. Rafa touches her used gum wrapped inside its foil—the dance teacher once told them a story about a girl who danced flamenco with gum. She

never made it to the fourth sevillana. She then feels the round edges of her calculator, the name of the hottest bullfighter written in whiteout: *ALFONSO PIEDRAHITA*. Some change: two dollar coins. And an object Rafaela's fingertips don't recognize. It is soft and warm like the skin on her neck. It is small and Rafa can hold it inside her hand. It palpates on her palm, skin cracks filled with sound.

"Dale algo!" Rafa's mother says. She points to the green light. Rafa quickly lowers her window, let's go of whatever she was touching, and hands the kid who sells gum the dollar coins. The girl who juggles, too, collects coins and insults from other cars. Rafa searches the inside of her backpack for what she felt. The warmth disappears.

As they reach their apartment building, they pass the billboard announcing this year's December celebration: *Feria Taurina de Jesús del Gran Poder*. Quito was founded on December 6th and named San Francisco de Quito. Nobody calls it that. On this week of December, all schools close. Teachers don't assign homework. Seniors disappear two weeks earlier, jamming pre-Christmas morning school buses with their cigarette and Cuba libre stench. Rafa, a junior, doesn't have class, but she does have flamenco practice. "Women don't take vacations."

Alfonso Piedrahita is twenty-three years old. He is Spain's prodigy. Rafa grew up staring at men in tight colored outfits swing their red capes at black bulls. Piedrahita is one of them. A superhero. While sitting on her father's lap, she never looked at the bull running around the ring. She watched the man in tight pants dance. Rafa stared at the shape of his legs, his calves, the way his body moved while dodging death. Piedrahita is the billboard's main feature. His eyes are bigger than the bull's horns.

When they arrive home, Rafa doesn't eat her mother's soup. She lets the yaguar loco boil as she stores her flamenco dress in her closet next to the other ones. Thousands of

multicolored polka dots stare at her. Her fingers touch each hem, searching for imperfections, remembering the last time she danced in that fabric. She's been dancing since elementary school. Her hand movements—wrist rotation, finger coordination, a seduction of her palms—are smoother than her cursive calligraphy. Her calves are stronger than her best friend's—Mercedes—even though Meche plays soccer. At bedtime, she crawls under her covers and dreams of tomorrow: Alfonso Piedrahita's eyes, a flirty Juan Pablo, finally skipping flamenco practice.

The earth shakes at seven. Paintings and photographs jiggle throughout their apartment. Some flamenco dresses fall off their hangers. Rafa's mother stops cooking breakfast and stares at the yaguar loco still sitting on the stove; it doesn't move. The cross that hangs above Rafa's bed falls on her. Rafa's eyes open. She counts how many times her body moves back and forth in bed—sixteen—while a thin line of blood drips down her forehead. Papi should not have nailed the cross above her bed. His wife told him this. Rafa thinks about her neighborhood. She wonders if it will finally plummet with this tremor. Other Ecuadorians stop their cars in the middle of the road, get out, and feel the movement of the earth below them with the soles of their shoes. Some keep driving and honk at the parked cars. The woman on the street near Rafa's apartment keeps juggling bowling pins. The woman who sells potatoes runs after her escaping produce. The children who tapped Rafa's window yesterday sit quietly on the side of the road, hugging the trees painted half white, mouths filled with gum. They hope the quake ends soon.

It ends after one minute. Rafa brushes her teeth, showers, and puts on blue jeans and brown boots. Juan Pablo and Rafa's other friends will be here soon. The bullfights begin at one. Her purse hangs on her desk chair, next to her school backpack and under posters of flamenco

dancers. With wet hair dripping down her back, she walks towards her backpack and kneels. Rafa remembers the warmth and heartbeat. She sticks her hand inside her front pocket and searches for it. Her hands feel the gum wrapped up in foil, the empty space where the dollar coins once sat, her calculator. She takes it out and stares at the whiteout: *ALFONSO PIEDRAHITA* is scratched, part of the F is missing. She traces the paint with her index finger. Nothing is left inside this pocket. She shakes her entire backpack. School books fly out—*The history of Ecuador Part I, Huasipungo*, her pre-calculus textbook, and a broken necklace she forgot she stored in there.

It falls last. Rafa stares at it with widened eyes. Water droplets stain her jeans. The gold earring she tries to catch every practice sits on top of Jorge Icaza's *Huasipungo*. The one that, forty seconds in, falls off the flamenco dancer in Madrid. The earring is a waterfall of gold, several unbroken beads attached spread across the book. Rafa can see herself on the gold's reflection. The earring pierces a hole on a soft earlobe. This cartilage lies still, supporting reddened skin. The dancer's ear is a cave.

The intercom beeps. Juan Pablo is outside. Rafaela grabs the dancer's ear, throws it in the trash, washes her hands with soap in the shape of a flower, and runs downstairs.

"Mijita!" her mother screams after her.

"Que?!" Rafa screams back.

"Behave yourself."

Juan Pablo has liked Rafa since they were in fourth grade. He used to grab her pinky in the cafeteria. Rafa was forced to eat her rice only with one hand. Eleven years later, JuanPa still attends every flamenco dance showcase Rafa's in. He watches her polka dot dresses move on

stage, dodging air, fighting gravity. He throws thornless roses on stage after the music stops. Rafaela picks most of them up. Not his. Rafa doesn't really like Juan Pablo.

As the rest of their friends wait inside JuanPa's car, he stands outside counting the birds that bathe in the apartment building's water fountain. They chirp, fight, wrestle, dance with drowning wings. Rafa steps out of the building entrance wearing the Colombian hat her father gave her last Christmas: sombrero vueltiao, the finishing touch of the taurino's uniform. Rafa's hat features the repetition of the chakana, the Inca cross. Rafa's father believes this is an accident.

Rafa hugs JuanPa, gets inside the car, and waves goodbye to her mother. She stands alone in the kitchen, her tongue looking for remnants of last night's yaguar loco on her gums. Fernando is already at the yellow cone, overseeing the watering down of the plaza's sand.

Juan Pablo and Rafa sit next to each other, knees touching. Their backs lean on the fence that saves them from falling. From this height, Rafa can see Pichincha up close, closer than in the cafeteria mirror. Its antennas and teleférico attempt to cover the volcano's greens and browns with grey. They are unsuccessful. Because Pichincha is overwhelmingly beautiful; Rafa knows this. The crowd chants as the men in horses walk out into the arena. White, brown, and black horses stride gracefully, lifting sand with their legs, eyes wandering out into the crowd. Their fur shines intensely. The men who ride the horses spin their hands in the air. They mimic a dancer's hand, but they lack grace. The men pull the horse's harness tight. The smell of beer and rum lingers in the atmosphere, and the Andean winds carry it around the city. The breath of Daniel, Juan Pablo's best friend, reaches those living down in the valley of Cumbayá: the shawarma he ate in the car, some chicken that fell on the backseat and on Rafa's hair, the shot of rum he drank

with pride, the cigarette he smokes to impress Meche, the scent of the gum he accidentally swallowed after cheering too much. Rafaela glances at the men riding the horses. These men are old. She can read their age through the density of their mustaches.

The band plays “El chulla quiteño,” the song every Ecuadorian high schooler is forced to memorize. It tells the story of a good-looking adolescent boy who overtakes Quito with his handsomeness. The girls in Rafa’s grade roll their eyes at the tune every December. The trumpets and trombones prevent JuanPa from speaking to Rafa without yelling. “Quieres otra cerveza?!” Rafa spots the hair growing on JuanPa’s chin and shakes her head. “No, gracias.” Meche tries to talk to Rafa as well, but Rafa can only hear the protest chants from the young men and women outside walking the petroleum streets: “Tortura, no es arte ni cultura!” Their shirts are black and feature a white bleeding bull. Cops wearing highlighter-yellow vests prevent them from entering the plaza. Taurinos who arrive late spit at their protest chants: “Savages!”

The crowd rises. Alfonso Piedrahita steps out into the sand. Rafa’s heart beats faster. She looks down at her purse—it fell, this is what Meche was trying to tell her—and remembers the ear and earring she left behind in her bedroom’s trashcan. The tiny white hairs on the earlobe. Her pink hands. Juan Pablo looks at her and asks, “Are you ready?”

Piedrahita raises his red cape into the sky. The equatorial sun shines on his suit’s golden emblems: crosses, swords, the crown of the king of Spain. His suit is pink and gold, tight like a glove. His posture is splendid. The men who look at Piedrahita immediately stop hunching. They raise their beer cans for him. Two women faint. Rafaela picks up her purse, looks at Meche’s strong calves, and straps her purse across her body. Blue and red flags sway, flags of the city of Quito, with the smells the wind carries. The wind is unimpressed by Piedrahita; it raises sand into his eyes.



The band's horns announce the beginning of the fight. A majestic black bull is released from its entrapment. Its tail is long and furious; it moves like a leather whip. The bull wags it across the ring. Its legs move up and down. The bull is an earthquake. Men and women in the crowd can feel Piedrahita's adrenaline. The bull comes after him, eyes steady, and Piedrahita raises his cape.

“Olé! Olé! Olé!”

Seconds later, Piedrahita takes out his decorated spears. To celebrate Quito's independence, those in charge of the spears decorated the knives with the colors of Quito: deep blue and blood red. Piedrahita stabs the bull repeatedly with Quito's colors. The lances dangle as the bull continues to create earthquakes, running around the arena. Somehow, the bull's black coat is darker. Rafaela has never seen such a color. How the animal bleeds for a crowd, how the bull bleeds for Rafa. The clouds in the sky linger on top of their fight. The world stops turning. Piedrahita's suit is no longer pink. It is the color of blood and the color of violence. As the crowds outside witness the yellow cone become scarlet red, Piedrahita's pink suit reddens completely.

She stares at its eyes. The color of brown polka dots. They hang inside her closet, some fallen from this morning's tremor. Its eyelashes carry mosquitoes. Its eye stare at her. The bull runs after the man who taunts him. Sometimes, it trots very close to the wall where men wearing sombrero vueltiaos scream at it; they wag their fingers at the best. The bull attempts to pull the spears from his flesh with the wall. It can't. Then the bullfighter hurries back, waves the color red in front of it. This time, as the bull watches the red cape escape him, the bullfighter encrusts his sword inside the bull's body. It reaches its heart.

The bull is dead. It collapsed as it kept running, polka dot eyes scanning the crowd. Piedrahita celebrates with a sand-covered smile. He walks towards the defeated beast, cuts off its ear with the sword that touched its core, and throws the bull's ear into the crowd. The ear reaches new heights. The men and women, including Fernando, standing on the front rows try to catch it but fail. The ear—a triangle of flesh, black bloody hair, a tender cave—flies into Rafa's chest. It pushes her. Her back hits the rail and forces her to sit down. She grabs the ear with her hands and feels its heartbeat.

## Día de los difuntos

Soledad had just turned fourteen when she found out her mother had died. It was October, days before Halloween. The Andean grass was arid and yellow, and the city had finally painted over the graffiti signs near her apartment building. As they drove home from the hospital, Soledad followed the skyline with her index finger. One by one, the tall buildings in Quito collapsed, pushed by Soledad's finger and the speed of their Toyota. Dentist offices, newspaper headquarters, embassy buildings, and the apartments of several widowed grandmothers fell into the petroleum streets. Men and women in the streets ran away in terror. Stray dogs and underground rats, too. Her father spoke to her gently, his right hand moving the rearview mirror, searching for Soledad in the back seat.

Two years have passed. The buildings that Soledad pushed with her finger stand still and upright; incoming planes dodge them as they try to land in the Mariscal Sucre airport. The parched October land has recovered with April and its thousand showers, and collapsed, again, by the fall breeze.

Soledad is now a senior in high school. After finishing her homework, she slowly enters the kitchen like she now slowly enters every room in their apartment. Her father sits at their table. He glances at the book of recipes in front of him. He shaved off his moustache that morning, and Soledad barely recognizes him; the man who sits on her kitchen table wears her father's clothes—the brown pants with the ink stain that never washed away properly, the red tie she chewed on when she was little, the glasses that became bigger and bigger as father ages—and looks back at her. Soledad still wears the basketball shorts and sports bra from her afterschool practice that day, her body moist with cold sweat.

The light bulb that hangs low, so low Soledad has hit it multiple times while standing up quickly, illuminates the brown stain at the front of the recipe book. This was Mami's book, and the brown stain is Soledad's. A big remnant of the day they made chocolate cake. The post-it attached to the recipe book is father's: a purple post-it stuck on the Día de los Difuntos recipe. Soledad walks towards her father and hovers over his shoulder.

“Tonight?” she asks him.

Father grabs her hand and nods. Soledad sits next to him, pulls the recipe book towards her and opens it to the noted page. The guaguas de pan recipe—small, sweet bread in the shape of a baby wrapped in a shawl—is something they'd do together, Mami, father, and Soledad. On November 2nd, if nobody close to them had died, they would bake the guaguas de pan, make colada morada—the scent of the day of the dead food filled their home—and decorate their apartment with flowers. Father and Soledad make guaguas de pan and colada morada alone now. They make it for Mami.

Soledad's hands grab the dough delicately. While father stirs the colada morada pot, purple bubbles popping, Soledad rolls the dough with her fingers. She forms the body of the baby, a small child wrapped in his mother's shawl, his arms tucked to his sides, while her mother's hands guide hers. Open and close your palm, pinch with your fingertips, rip with strength. She places the body on a tray and sticks it in the oven. It doesn't incinerate. Father gives Soledad a sip of the day of the dead potion: black corn flour, a bushel of fruits, pineapple, naranjilla, blackberries, babaco, strawberries, and blueberries.

“It's getting better.”

“I'm getting better?” father asks.

The colada morada sits in the refrigerator all night, and the warm baby sleeps next to it on the counter.

The next morning, before they pack their car with the food they cooked and stored all week—rice, menestras, beef, beans, food for Mami—Soledad looks at her parent's room from their doorframe. Her mother's side of the bed is undone. Father is showering. She walks in, carefully thinking about her footsteps and the sound they could make, and stares at the clothes hanging on the closet. Her mother's elegant dresses hang on the back end, covered with plastic. She grabs a dress and touches it, arm hairs sticking to plastic. Soledad plays with the dangling golden beads. This is the dress her mother wore to graduations and first communions. The beads dangled as she walked. They didn't make a sound. The golden beads hit Mami's body and bounced off graciously. Mami was an icon in this dress. Nobody cared if she wore it too many times to too many occasions.

Today Soledad refuses to remember her mother as a simple dress. She wore this fabric several times—skin cells lingering—but she wasn't this dress.

Outside their apartment, the trees outlining their sidewalk are elegantly dressed. The city painted the trees' lower halves white. The telephones poles, too. But the giant palm trees, the trees that obstruct their apartment's view, are painted grey. The city didn't use brushes or buckets of paint; the buses and their smog tainted the trees.

The day Mami died, young activists hung a giant white bed sheet near the El Trébol roundabout: the busiest intersection in Quito. Quiteños inside buses and others hailing cabs outside witnessed the sheet absorb smoke over time. Over the course of two days, the young activists roamed the streets, holding up ripped white sheets and protesting the contamination of

their city. Our lungs are that sheet, they'd say, pointing at the bed sheet that hung like a flag. On the opposite side of the now grey bed sheet, the enormous painting of Manuelita Saénz—a revolutionary leader in Ecuador, Bolívar's long-term mistress, and later another married aristocrat in Peru's capital—oversaw the city. Passengers catching the bus to work witnessed the eyes of Manuelita staring back at them. During those days of protest, Manuelita too observed the white sheet become greyer and greyer. The sheet was black the day of Mami's funeral.

The cemetery Soledad's mother is buried in stands in front of a food chain store and next to one of the biggest bus stations in Quito. From their car, Soledad and father watch buses filled with people pass by the cemetery. Quiteños holding flowers and plastic containers filled with food get out of those buses and walk to the cemetery; they find their dead loved one's hole in the wall, hang flowers—some hang plastic flowers because they dislike the idea of another being dying—sit in front of their tomb, and take out the food. Four chicken legs because you liked to bite them and let the sauce drain down your chin, they tell the wall. Three ears of corn buttered and salted. The stinky cheese you liked too much; let it sit out here a while longer. A bread in the shape of a baby with a smile drawn out in sugar, and a cup of our day of the dead potion. We'll drink it with you. You've always enjoyed it. The stray dogs and cats watching from a hill next to the bus station smell the food and plan their evenings. Late at night, when the dead eat the food and the stray dogs and cats fight them for it, a man who hates artificial flowers will pick up all the plastic plants and replace them with live ones: red wet roses. These would not last all year. Next year, when those families come back to feed the dead, the flowers will be gone. A thief, they'll think. The smog from the buses also painted the trees in the cemetery grey.

This is the third and final year Soledad and her father will bring food for their mother. This is the last time she'll need it. They'll still make guaguas de pan and colada morada in the future, but they won't feed it to Mami. She'll be well on her way to the afterlife.

Mami's stone is marked with golden letters—*MARÍA LAURA BENITEZ*. The old women who always hover and always cry nearby say, "She died too young, in her prime." The strangers' heads always covered with beautiful black veils for the day of the dead. Their mouths painted red, the color of the live roses. They don't know Mami. They never knew her. Soledad traces the carved words with her index finger and wonders why her mother was taken away in her prime. Or whether that was Mami's prime. Taking care of an adolescent who yells at her when Friday nights come around—"Everybody's going to the club party, why can't I?" "Because it's not safe"—or refuses to try new food, or hates going to church on Sundays, or compares her life to hers: "I hope I never have children."

Soledad cries as she touches the white rose father placed on Mami's grave. "Ya, mijita, everything's okay," father soothes her, mustache still missing, glasses a bit bigger. Soledad looks up at the sky, white clouds fighting rain clouds, the volcano Pichincha staring at the ones visiting the dead, and decides this was the worst holiday ever created.

"Can we go home?" Soledad asks her father. The food around Mami's grave smells so good, other families surrounding them become jealous. They only brought chicken soup and mozzarella cheese.

Father sits down in front of Mami's grave. Soledad looks around: a multitude of families encircling their loved one's graves, delicious food scents carried on by the Andean wind, a mixture of cries and laughter. She sits down and stares up at Mami's grave. Other crypts surround her crypt. Most of those people died more than ten years ago.

Mami wasn't technically buried, Soledad thinks as father talks about his dead wife. She lies in a coffin stuck on a white wall, surrounded by other coffins and people who visit them, thinking a tree will grow right where their loved one is buried. A tree can't grow from a wall. Who gets to be buried underground?

Mami died in a car crash. She was driving up to Quito through Nayón, the Garden of Quito. The Nayón women and men who sell their flowers witness a lot of deaths—they live near cliffs, and the fog that descends at seven does not help the distracted drivers who talk on their phones—but Mami's death went unnoticed.

Soledad's mother left her workplace before the fog descended from the Andean mountains. She drove past the massive bronze condor that oversees the rest of the Cumbayá valley, and then the radio turned mute, or so Soledad likes to think. Years later, she still shivers every time she imagines her mother's car gliding off a cliff with a soundtrack playing in the background. Please don't let it be the newest pop hit.

The car got stuck between two large trees, and, together, they formed an H. Mami's body fell from the open car door and other branches and some trash debris fell on her. The trash that others throw while driving through Nayón, like the shit they don't like concealing in their car. This is what the newspaper said. They printed it because this is how the police found her. Soledad thought Mami was buried there, in Nayón, next to the men and women who sell their flowers, underground.

As he talks about his wife, father looks at the guagua de pan sitting in front of his dead wife's tomb. The guagua de pan wasn't always a child wrapped in his mother's shawl. He remembers making his own guaguas de pan when he was little, and he once told this to Soledad, but when does Soledad ever listen to him now? The term guagua—*child* in Kichwa—only



applied to father, not the being he was shaping. Back then, the bread took the shape of the dead, any shape that may be, and children would create life out of them: the dead represented as llamas, cows, bunnies, condors. Father would eat the animals and other beings they left behind at home as soon as they'd come back from burying grandfather or grandmother. The colada morada was the potion the dead would drink, and he or she would be symbolized as a bread, a sweet bread, tossed around in their old kitchen, sweetness licked by their loving relatives.

But generations before father, the guagua de pan didn't exist. The potion was made by those who unburied their dead and celebrated with them their passing, the rain, new life. Live beings touching dead beings, bones shaking, rot unearthed. Father likes to think the dogs howling on the hill nearby won't eat the bread Soledad made last night. It is a baby wrapped in a shawl—babies Soledad eats in school, dipped in the hot purple potion—but it is also his wife, and they can't kill her again.

“Are you listening to me?” father asks Soledad. She looks up at him, her eyes overwhelmed by her thoughts and that landscape.

“I'm trying to remember something funny that happened with Mami. Others seem to be laughing at their memories together.” Father looks at his surroundings. All he sees is a multitude of widowers sitting next to their children. This city is making everyone a widow, he thinks as he drinks some colada morada. The scent goes up his nose and sits in his head as he imagines María Laura sitting next to them, enjoying the colada morada he made for her. She will wonder where the moustache went, why the recipe book is post-it labeled and color coded, and why Soledad still hasn't showered since her basketball practice – he never really could take care of her alone.

“We won't come back next year, so I guess we better tell all of our stories now. Should we tell the ones we told last year?” Soledad continues.

“You don’t think Mami will listen later? When we’re not here?”

“No, I mean, I don’t know, you’re the one who insists we come here every November. Shouldn’t you be the adult here and lead?”

“What I’m trying to say—” father says as he grabs Soledad’s hand.

“Please don’t say she’s everywhere.”

For two years, every November 2nd, after visiting the cemetery and dropping off food for Mami, father and Soledad would drive down to Nayón. They would both be somewhat enthusiastic, father’s hands grasping the driving wheel tightly, Soledad’s eyes widening. They wanted to see where her car made the H.

This year, as they approach the cemetery’s parking lot, they pass the men and women who sell flowers. They wave their white roses and sunflowers in the air, signaling father to park near their locales. But father drives on. Soledad and father then count the number of crosses placed near the cliff’s borders. Seventeen. The crosses were made of stone, painted white, stabbed in the ground, and surrounded by blue and pink flowers. These crosses represented bodies. Specifically, the bodies of those who died on these cliffs, or because of these cliffs. When Mami died, there were only three crosses puncturing the ground. After the accident, two more crosses were added.

Father now parks the car near Mami’s cross and next to the blue heart painted on the street. The hearts symbolize those struck and killed by cars. Quito is sprinkled with blue hearts. Soledad gets out and walks towards the cliff. Father’s heart shakes. Every step Soledad takes towards the cliff is a heart attack for him. She kneels down and touches her mother’s cross.

“Can you believe there are so many?” father asks.

“Yes,” Soledad replies, “I can. Just look at this place.”

If Soledad and father would stay for two more hours, they’d witness another car drive off this cliff. This time it wouldn’t be because of the Andean fog that descends at seven. Or because the driver was drunk or checking his text messages or talking on his cellphone. It’d be because of the curvature of the road, the slimness of the highway, the proximity to nothing, the high possibility of falling. Things fall without being pushed.

Father spots a pack of street dogs walk near them. The dogs sniff their surrounding grounds, some bark at Soledad, but she keeps grazing the grass surrounding Mami’s cross.

“It was one of them,” father says.

“It will never be their fault,” Soledad replies.

“She fell dodging them. Those dogs. They’re everywhere.”

“Papi, that’s not what happened.”

“Sole, Mami fell trying not to kill those dogs. They were crossing the street as she was driving.”

“What else was Mami supposed to do?”

Tears begin to stream down father’s face. They land on the bed of his top lip and form a lake. Father licks the salty tears and walks towards his daughter.

Several rats begin to crawl out of the trash sitting at the bottom of the precipice. The pack of dog runs down the cliff, chasing the rats, some grasping them with their sharp teeth and foaming mouths. Soledad stands up and stares at the animals fight each other in the place her mother’s body fell.

Father is in the kitchen, soap bubbles covering his nails. Is he thinking of the dogs, the street, and the cliff? There was only one blue heart painted on that street. The neighborhood painted two more after María Laura's accident. Soledad knows father never accepted his wife's death. It would've been much easier, he's always said, if María Laura wasn't behind the wheel. If instead, she was the blue heart painted on the street, like the ones he sees to work every day. If she would've been the pedestrian that walked near the cliff that day, curious of the precipice's depth but afraid of the rats underground. The scrubbing of the plastic containers is too loud. He doesn't hear his daughter. Soledad takes this as an opportunity; she opens the door to the master bedroom slowly and enters their walk-in closet. The yellow light from the lampposts—painted half-white—illuminates the bedroom. The dress with the golden beads hangs quietly inside the plastic wrapper. No signs of grey. Soledad steals the dress, and as she carries it to her bedroom, she holds it up high. The fabric shouldn't touch their wooden floor. In bed, she tucks the dress in next to her. As she falls asleep, Soledad plays with the golden beads, sometimes pressing them hard against her fingertips. Mami, regresa. Mami, mírame, Mami, come back. Outside, tall buildings fall to the ground.

## Los desaparecidos

can't be found on milkboxes. But relatives see their loved one's faces everywhere: on other faces, food—rice, plantains, the chicken they just killed, its eggs, its feathers—the Pacific Ocean, the last standing condor; it flies above them as Ecuadorians sit outside the President's house: palacio Carondelet, walls from 1800s, white paint recently reapplied, pigeons on the roof, too, the offspring of colonial birds. Parents with hand-drawn signs for their sons and daughters. They chant to the President the names of their children: Jessica, Edgar, Ramiro. The sky swallows all names. Guards ask them to be quiet because colonial Quito can be destroyed with sound bouncing off old walls and indigenous women who sell strawberries, Afro-Ecuadorian men who sell coconut water, tourists with cameras strapped to their bodies. Los desaparecidos are looked for in lakes and rivers, new mountains and old, ditches and valleys, hills of trash and golf courses, in houses, apartments, balconies, roofs as old as the colonial era: red brick, touch it and hands become as red as a white shoe on a clay tennis court, is that where the desaparecido was found, where he went missing, or where the police found a new body, a body no one was looking for, was it on a sports field? A soccer field next to the mouth of a volcano, the nearby store that sells cigarettes to children, the bus with slashed leather seats and messages in pen and whiteout: I am here, I exist, remember me. Years pass by, parents protest monthly to no avail. Ecuadorians write poems, songs, and pasillos about Jessica, Edgar, and Ramiro, in the name of all desaparecidos.

## Pichincha

Sebas stands under the equatorial sun, with one hand acting like a baseball cap's visor, a crumpled receipt from the pastry shop caught between his fingers; his hand keeps his eyes away from the white sunbeams that bounce off the petroleum-colored streets. His other hand holds a white collapsing box of milhojas—*thousand leaves* dessert made of stacked puff pastry and arequipe. Inside the mall Quicentro, while glancing over the dessert showcase, his mouth watered – a wave of saliva covered his tongue and gums. His brown eyes glistened. Sebas could taste the sugar between his teeth, he could feel the lines that define his fingerprints as his tongue collects the remnants of caramel from his hands.

He's outside the Quicentro's front entrance, waiting in line for a taxi. He's seventh in line. Sebas looks up and reads the name of the streets that corner the mall: Shyris Avenue, named after the king of the pre-Columbian culture Quitu-Caras, and Naciones Unidas Avenue, title crafted after World War II. Four children, made up of sweatpants and faces covered in dust, run up and down the taxi line, wearing trays of candy, chocolate, cigarettes, and magazines on their chests.

“Un Marlboro rojo por veinticinco centavos!”

One of the children, covered in dirt, yellowed teeth, shining eyes, offers a cigarette to Sebas.

“No, mijo, gracias,” Sebas replies. As the line shortens, and as other Ecuadorians get into cabs, not slamming the passenger doors and immediately rolling down the windows once they're inside, the four children keep offering those in line treats. This is their neighborhood. Sebas has seen these children grow up on Shyris; the children once sold cellphone chargers and coloring

books, occasionally umbrellas and cans of foam for carnival. Sometime between an eight-year-old Sebas and Sebas today, a freshman in college who still enjoys morning cartoons, the children of the streets of Quito have remained children; they've upgraded to selling cigarettes and candy, however. Sebas claims Quito is his home, but he really doesn't know this city: for him, the kids are a part of his background, but they're truly a bigger part of Quito he will never understand.

Sebas's phone rings. It trembles inside his jean's front pocket. While holding onto the box of milhojas with his left hand, he dives into his front pocket and takes out his Nokia; he's had the same cellphone since 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The caller ID reads *Mami*.

"Alo, mami?"

"Sebas, where are you? I'm heading home from work. Did you buy the cake? Do you want me to pick you up?"

Sebas looks at the taxi line – he's fourth now.

"Are you far from Quicentro?" Sebas asks his mother.

"Yes, just getting off work. I can be there in about an hour."

"No, ma, it's fine. I'll get on a cab and be home way before you get here."

"I don't like you taking cabs from the streets. I don't trust them."

"They're the cab company of Quicentro, ma. It's a regulated system."

"Aja. Bueno. Qué bestia. You should listen to me every now and then. Did you buy the cake?"

"I bought milhojas."

"Only you like milhojas, mijo," his mother replies.

"Everybody likes milhojas," Sebas says.

“Fine. I guess we can buy something else on the way to your grandparent’s tomorrow. I’ll see you home soon.”

Sebas rolls his eyes.

“Chao, mami.”

“Chao, mijito.”

He places his phone inside his pocket and continues to wait for his cab. The sun still burns his forehead and the box of sweets seems heavier by the second. Los abuelitos won’t finish these desserts, anyway; and maybe this is why Sebas chose the milhojas as the post-dinner dessert: so he could later devour them in their kitchen at night, guided by a peeking moonlight between the window shades.

“Go, man,” the boy behind him taps his shoulder; Sebas turns around and sees a young boy with pierced lips and bleached hair. His eyes are a mixture of green and hazel.

“Thanks,” Sebas says to the boy who taps his piercings with his tongue.

His cab arrives. A 90’s Hyundai, yellow and green, featuring *CIERRE DESPACIO* and *PROHIBIDO FUMAR* stickers on the passenger windows. An artificial green pine, a miniature plastic hummingbird frozen in an open-winged pose, and a wooden rosary hang from the taxi’s rearview mirror. Sebas opens the passenger door, places the box of milhojas on the far seat, sits down, and closes the door. A cloud of rainwater shields his cab from the toxic sunrays. Sebas tries to roll down the window—his right hand pushing and pulling the knob back and forth—while the taxi driver turns around, black sunglasses and cigarette breath.

“That window doesn’t work, mijo,” he says, shaking his head.

“Okay,” Sebas says as he leans over, trying not to touch the box of milhojas, and lowers the other passenger window. He feels the Andean breeze enter the taxi.



“Where to?” the taxi driver asks.

“González Suárez, edificio Saturno, lot 101, next to the girl’s catholic school,” Sebas replies, taking out his phone from his front pocket. Mami hasn’t called back. He catches a glimpse of his reflection on his Nokia’s screen: big eyebrows, grey glasses, coffee eyes, growing beard, gelled hair. Sebas’s mother once told him he had his father’s nose—slim, perky, refined nostrils— and he confirmed this one afternoon by outlining his nose with the tips of his fingers while looking at a colored photograph of his dead father. He’d memorize every facet of his father’s face, yet forget several details such as the scar on his upper lip caused by a biking accident, a lazy eye that floated away during lunch, his nostrils that flared when he’d get mad. Sebas would forget what his father looked like the nights Sebas walked around their formal living room at night, touching photographs and searching for his father because we forget what we never knew.

“There’s a lot of traffic in 6 de diciembre. I’m going to go via 10 de agosto and then turn around,” the driver says, leaving Quicentro, foot on pedal.

In the evening of December 6th, 1534, the Spanish renamed the pre-Columbian city Quito—created by the Quito-Caras—to San Francisco de Quito. The street named after this date travels the northern part of the city, connecting malls and buildings. It drowns in smog and is constantly lit by traffic lights and flickering ambulances.

“Bueno,” Sebas replies.

The taxi drives past 6 de diciembre and joins 10 de agosto.

Sebas looks out his window and watches men selling roses, “25 red roses for a dollar.” He cannot see González Suárez avenue, his street, from 10 de agosto, but he can see the stratovolcano Pichincha, the peaks wawa, Kichwa for *child*, and ruku, *grandparent*, from his

window. He remembers the year 1999 and Pichincha's explosion—a white mushroom cloud against to the baby blue sky, the ash masks he wore to elementary school, the volcanic ashes he'd shampoo off his hair in the shower, the grey river he formed with his body.

His family took pictures of the eruption from their balcony in González Suárez avenue. Sebas has lived in González Suárez, named after Federico González Suárez, an Ecuadorian priest who served as the Archbishop of Quito, all his life. González Suárez wrote *The General History of the Republic of Ecuador* in the late 1800's in which he objectively criticized the Spanish conquest. Now, the street named after him encompasses tall buildings—monstrous apartment structures made of concrete and bricks, built by men who can't afford to live in González Suárez—facing the valleys of Cumbayá and Guápulo. During the last three decades, two airplanes have crashed into the tall buildings; the airport of the capital of Ecuador was once located in the middle of the city, minutes away from González Suárez, and those who lived by the airport had already grown accustomed to their deafness, like Sebas' grandfather.

The fog that begins to descend the Andean mountains at 7:00 P.M. every day disabled both pilot's visions. Due do the many plane accidents provoked by the Andean mist, the government decided to close that airport and open a new one in the nearby city of Puenbo, the town where Sebas's family lawyer goes to watch legal bullfights on Sundays, the town where the fog is invisible.

Daily, from their tall buildings, the González Suárez wealthy watch the fog settle in their street; they watch the fog fall from the mountains on maids leaving apartment buildings, hands tight on their black leather purses, and at the thugs waiting for them to come out of work. They watch the fog descend on the neglected girls from the nearby school looking out for their

forgetful parent's cars, on the dead spring flowers that refuse to grow, on the petroleum-colored street covered by cars with their lights on.

In the 10 agosto avenue, the day the creole screamed for independence in 1809, at 4:00 P.M., Sebas plays snake on his phone while the taxi sits in traffic; through the loud honking and bus smog, he tries to focus on the game. He needs to beat his old record. The meter's red digits read \$2.50. Sebas's taxi finally moves. He looks up and finds himself in a street he doesn't recognize. The stores facing the street, named after their owner's children—*VÍVERES LAURITA*, *ALMACÉN PANCHO*—are closed, locked up. Sebas reads the angry graffiti on the walls sprayed by the sore losers of La Liga, one of the soccer teams in Quito, trying to figure out where the taxi driver is taking him. The taxi keeps turning corners and Sebas feels lost.

“¿Dónde estamos?” he asks the taxi driver.

“This is a shortcut. Too much traffic in 10 de agosto,” he answers. Shortly after, he stops the cab in a deserted road. Sebas's head hits the front seat's head rest. His nose aches. His grey glasses, picked out by his mom and sister, drop to the car's floor. As he tries to reach down for them, Sebas sees the cloud of rainwater that followed him home hover over him, shielding him from the afternoon sunbeams that once stung his forehead. Both passenger doors open. The taxi driver gets out of the car while the men who opened the passenger doors beat Sebas with their fists. The man who opened the door to the box of sweets drags Sebas out; the box of milhojas falls to the ground, and the man steps on them, crushing their shape.

Sebas screams. The man who crushed the milhojas stops and looks down at Sebas: a college boy lying on the floor, in the shape of a fetus, on top of his box of sweets. His nose and lips bleed. His shirt is ripped. His pants wet from his own urine. Sebas cries, lips trembling.

“Shut up!” one of the men screams at him.

“Oye, the duct tape,” the taxi driver, still and apathetic, tells the men. One of them walks away from Sebas, and Sebas follows his feet with his eyes—black boots and undone shoelaces—to the back of the car. The man reaches the trunk and opens it. Sebas watches him walk back towards him and looks up. The man carries the face of a secondary character, a persona that exists in the background of Sebas’ life while continuing his very own existence. He is a part of the background, never an interaction, yet an important part of the web of Sebas’ life: he exists in malls and movie theaters, in buses and public restrooms, when Sebas is there, watching a film while chewing popcorn or washing his hands delicately with soap. He exists in Sebas’ life for Sebas, and Sebas never knew.

The men start tying up Sebas’s feet with duct tape. They pull up his jeans, and the duct tape pulls his leg hairs. They tape over his lips—he tastes the metal in his blood—and place his hands behind his back. He feels the tape tighten his wrists, the men’s strength, his heart beating. Both men carry Sebas up and place him inside the taxi; Sebas’s head hits the door frame. His forehead bleeds.

It’s happening. Sebas is now part of a narrative: the kidnapping stories, the tales of theft and murder that swallows contemporary Quito in one bite. It’s as if the city has been waiting, plotting for this exact moment, the moment when Sebas becomes part of a violence that never left San Francisco de Quito.

Sebas watches the men talk. Their lips form words and sentences he cannot comprehend. He cannot move or speak, but he can see the hummingbird and rosary dangling, the meter’s \$3.00, the keys placed inside the ignition.

“Oye, puto,” the man getting inside the passenger seat says to Sebas, “do you want to see your family again?”

Sebas nods his head.

“Are you going to do what we say?” the other man asks as he sits next to Sebas and slams his door shut. The tiny Hyundai car shakes. Perhaps this is what causes the quakes that Sebas grew up to: the morning and sometimes early dawn quakes that wake up school children too early, the cause of the moving chandelier in the lobby of Saturno, the shaking of framed photographs. It all trembles because people slam taxicab doors.

Sebas nods his head again.

The taxi driver gets inside the cab, turns off the meter, and turns around. He took off his sunglasses. They now dangle from his shirt’s front pocket. His brown eyes swim in a sea of red veins.

“You González Suárez piece of shit. You think you can dirty up my taxi with your fucking milhojas,” the taxi driver speaks only to Sebas.

Sebas weeps.

“¿Viste? He pissed himself!” one of the men says as he points at Sebas’s crotch. His blue jeans are now navy.

“Hijo de puta,” the other one responds as he shakes his head.

“Lift him up! Lift him up!” the taxi driver orders the men. Together, they hold up Sebas’s body. Sebas’s head hits the cab’s roof. His blood leaves a stain shaped like a broken galaxy. With his head glued to the roof, Sebas stares at other taxi stains: blood splatters shaped like galaxies and black holes. One made by Quito.

The taxi driver opens his glovebox and takes out a rolled-up newspaper. He unrolls it and gives his men the pages. They place the pages underneath Sebas’ shadow. They then drop Sebas and he falls on the cover of *El Comercio*. The main news: the new airport in Puenbo and its

abundance of parking lots. In a smaller header: the old airport is now a community park. In the back page: 2 bodies have turned up in the old airport's park since its inception.

"Did you ask him what his name is?" the taxi driver asks his men.

"No," they reply, both staring at Sebas's taped-up mouth.

"Did you get his wallet?"

One of the men steps outside and picks up Sebas's wallet. He sits back inside, closes the door, and takes Sebas's ID out.

"Sebastián Vicente Freile Rodriguez," the man reads. He then stares at Sebas's picture and looks back at him. He notices the cut hair and the grown beard.

"Bueno, Sebas Freile, we're going to need your cooperation," the taxi driver says as he turns on the car. Sebas feels the engine shake the car.

"What's your bank?" one of the men asks Sebas.

Sebas tries to answer Banco Pichincha, named after the active stratovolcano, but all the men could hear were his moans.

"Check his fucking wallet!" the taxi driver orders, while trying to light up his cigarette. The man holding Sebas's wallet finds the hidden credit cards behind the pictures of his family: passport-type photographs of his mother and sister, one of himself, and a folded up and crumbled picture of his dead father. His eyes are creased.

"Pichincha," the man says.

"Okay, listen, Sebas Freile," the taxi driver says as he turns around. His face is covered in smoke. "It's 4:23 P.M., and we're going to take you to an ATM. I need you to take out the maximum amount, which I think is \$300 for you, and then come back inside my car. And then

we will wait until midnight, take you to another ATM, and you'll take out another \$300. Do you understand?" He turns to his men. "Did you take his jewelry?"

"And after?" Sebas tried to scream through the duct tape.

"He only had a digital watch, his wallet, his shitty Nokia phone, and the box of milhojas," one of the men answers, slapping Sebas in the face.

Sebas's face swells. His eyes sting. The punch turns his head around and, through the back window, he sees the collapsed box of milhojas covered in the taxi's smog. Mami really had to buy the cake now.

"Nobody likes milhojas. Where's the Nokia?" the taxi driver asks.

One of the men hands him Sebas's Nokia. The taxi driver laughs and places the Nokia inside his shirt's front pocket.

"You don't have an iPhone?" the taxi driver asks Sebas.

Sebas shakes his head.

"Should I take off his tape?" one of the men asks.

"Hold on," the taxi driver replies, shaking his head, "Do you understand the plan, Sebas?"

Sebas calculates how much money his family has in their shared account—the money he earned working as a waiter in the Mexican restaurant, the money his sister saved from their allowance for her trip to Italy—and feels relieved. He nods.

"But he can't go out with pissed pants," one of the men elbows Sebas in the chest. Sebas moves his torso back up and leans his head on his head rest.

"Give him your pants, Javi" the man on Sebas's left says.

"Don't say my name, stupid. Fuck that. You give him your pants," Javi replies.

“When he gets out, you wrap your coat around his waist, like an apron, do you understand?” the taxi driver says as he begins driving.

“My coat? On his pissed pelvis? Ni vergas.”

“Santi,” the taxi driver says, sunglasses back on.

“¿Si?” Santi, the man sitting to Sebas’s right, asks.

“Didn’t know you were a maricón,” the taxi driver says, looking at Santi from the rearview mirror.

“I’m not a faggot!” Santi screams back.

“Then let the González Suárez mierda wear your fucking coat to the ATM. And lower your fucking voice. You’re in my car.”

The taxi remains quiet, except for Sebas’s quiet moans and the holes on the road. His tears damp the tape over his mouth; the tape begins to fall apart.

“Take it off – take his tape off,” the taxi driver instructs, “we’re almost at the ATM.”

Santi takes Sebas’s leg tape off. The other man rips Sebas’s mouth tape, taking bits of his lips with him, then moves on to take off the tape strangling his wrists.

Sebas feels his wrists and the lines where the duct tape used to be. They are now indented roads, red, purpled, and numb. He feels his face, wipes the blood off his nose with his index finger, and places his hands on his thigh. He feels the dampness of his jeans and the wet newspaper underneath.

“Looks like it’s going to rain,” Santi says, looking out his passenger window. Sebas looks at Santi—a young man with gelled spiky hair, white shirt, black pants, black boots, honey eyes—and then looks to his right. The other man stares at Sebas’s eyes – his dark chocolate eyes intimidate Sebas.



“And? What if it rains?” the taxi driver asks.

“Nothing,” Santi replies.

“You’ll still go out with this motherfucker and walk him to the ATM with this,” the taxi driver says, reaching a red light. He reaches down to the cave beneath his seat and takes out a handgun, a concealed revolver.

Sebas’s body tries to pee again, but there’s nothing left in his system. He feels weak. The saliva inside his mouth begins to pile up like a tsunami, and Sebas tastes the vomit building up inside his throat. The acid train arrives at his mouth, and he swallows it back down, feeling the burn inside him. It’s the beans and rice he ate for lunch. The egg he asked his friend’s mom to make him because señor Helena can really cook a sunrise egg. Bits of yolk remain hidden in Sebas’ gums.

The taxi driver pulls up to a Banco Pichincha ATM located outside a building in 10 de agosto. Sebas looks around and hopes he sees someone he recognizes. He hopes they see him and call for help. But the people walking by the taxi keep walking, holding on to their suitcases and purses, to their backpacks and shopping bags. They walk around the parked cab, unaware of Sebas and the revolver pointed at his waist.

Three people wait in line at the ATM. They’re all women, purses in front of their bellies.

“Here,” the taxi driver says, as he gives Santi baby butt wipes, “clean him off.” The taxi driver carries an entire closet of goodies in his car. It’s as if he’s prepared for it all. Even an apocalypse. An apocalypse caused by him. Except maybe he should fix his passenger windows, too.

Santi and the other man wipe Sebas’s blood off his face and fingers.

“Javi, give him your jacket.”

“I thought we were going to put Santi’s coat on him.”

“Javi,” the taxi driver says as he turns around, “dale tu puta chaqueta.”

Javi takes off his dark blue jean jacket and places it on Sebas’s lap.

“Put this on – tie the sleeves behind your back,” Santi instructs Sebas.

“Ya apuren,” the taxi driver says. He unlocks the car’s doors. Javi gets out and places the revolver in the back of his jeans, underneath his shirt.

“Ven puto. Be quiet, okay? You’re just going to get some cash, and we’re coming with you,” Javi says to Sebas.

Sebas looks back at Santi. Santi gets out of the taxi and closes the door. Sebas begins to scooch. He gets out of the car, and Javi gives him a nudge. The car stays parked, taxi driver inside. Santi and Javi walk behind Sebas as he gets in line for the ATM. He can’t feel his legs. He looks around and expects someone to notice him, his pain, his peed pants, his broken nose. But the women waiting in line do not see Sebas’s face and its agony in the shape of sweat. They’ve never had to. And what if they would? What would happen to the weave of Sebas’ existence if a secondary character breaks role? If suddenly they’re someone Sebas doesn’t have to say, “excuse me” as he walks by them, if suddenly they are real?

He’s second in line. The woman walking away from him does not look at Sebas, but she catches a glimpse of his shoes – the black, ripped, and dirty Nike’s his mom’s been asking him to throw out.

“You’ve got other Nike’s, other shoes,” Mami once said, as she stared inside her son’s closet.

“When they break, I’ll throw them away,” Sebas said in response.

“You need to learn to let things go.”

“You’ve said that already. I hope you don’t mean Papi.”

Javi bumps Sebas with his shoulder. He turns around and sees Javi, dark chocolate eyes, moving his eyebrows. It’s Sebas’s turn at the ATM. While looking out for the police or any curious being, Javi hands him his wallet. Sebas holds it tight with both hands and walks towards the machine. In the side mirrors, he can see a blurred Javi and Santi waiting for him – pretending to be in line, pretending to not know Sebas. But they know him better than anyone, at this point.

The ATM’s clock reads 5:00 P.M. People are getting off work. El trolebus is filling up. Taxis are being hailed along the street by those standing in corners, index finger straight out, pointing at the other side of the street. Sebas’s mother is arriving at their home, unpacking her purse, looking for her phone. Where is Sebas? she’ll ask his sister. And she, Ale, with the eyes of her dead father will say, No tengo idea, ma.

Sebas inserts his debit card. The ATM swallows it. Without his glasses, he searches for number five’s bumps. He dials his code, the date of his father’s favorite Ecuadorian soccer match, La Liga versus Barcelona: 5/8/12. The maximum amount in Sebas’s card is \$400. Sebas’s stomach sinks. He takes it all out. The machine spits out his card, his cash, a receipt. Sebas turns around, dollar bills in hand, crisp receipt between his fingers, and hands the money to Javi.

“Put your money in your fucking wallet, you piece of shit,” Javi instructs him, thin lips, sharp teeth.

He follows Javi’s orders. The wallet won’t close and he places it, open, in his back pocket. Javi nods his head to the car, and Sebas follows his commands. Santi goes around, opens his door, sits in his original seat and waits for Sebas to come inside. Once inside, sitting on wet newspapers, Sebas takes his wallet out. He hands it to Javi. Javi elbows Sebas on the nose, tattooing his elbow with Sebas’s blood. Sebas screams.

“Be quiet! Pásame la plata,” the taxi driver says, lowering the radio’s volume. Javi hands him the wallet. He was listening to Julio Jaramillo, Ecuador’s sweetheart. A pasillo he once wrote for a woman he loved became more important than Ecuador’s national anthem.

“Give me my fucking jacket,” Javi says as he pulls his jacket’s from Sebas’s body. Sebas keeps screaming. He stomps the taxi’s floor and the car shakes. Another tremor will take over Quito. Crosses and rosaries will fall off painted walls, potted flowers will fall and collapse, revealing their insides to worms and ants.

“¡Ayúdenme! Please,” he cries into Santi’s face. Santi looks at him with sad honey eyes and hushes him. Sebas then feels a cold piece of metal stuck against his rib cage. Javi threatens him with the revolver. The taxi driver turns up the radio’s volume. The taxi begins to move.

“¡Por favor! You already have the money,” Sebas pleads with Santi. Santi looks away and elbows him on the nose. Sebas lays his head on his seat and collapses. It is the feeling of a soccer ball that once hit him between the eyes, the day he wanted to be the hero amongst his friends and volunteer as a goalie. Nobody wants to be the goalie. And Sebas sucked at it. Mami placed icecubes on his swollen face that night; she held her son’s head on her chest. A similar position. Sebas knows it well.

Sebas opens his eyes. The taxi’s movement rattles his head. The car is going uphill, up a stone street, in the historic center of Quito. Sebas recognizes the church and convent of San Francisco – its Mannerism elements, the wooden doors that enclose the Baroque golden walls and ceiling, the pigeon shit on the plaza. He looks to his right – Santi is there, looking through his window. And Javi is looking at Sebas, gun in hand.

“He’s awake,” Javi says to the taxi driver.

“Maybe Sebas Freile will enjoy the view,” the taxi driver responds.

They’re driving towards San Roque – the sector behind the historic center, the place where the tourists can’t go, but where the view is overwhelmingly stunning. It’s a postcard view.

“How long was I out?” Sebas asks Santi. Santi doesn’t look at him.

The taxi drives past several closed stores and houses, most of them painted baby blue and yellow, some children playing in the street, and two men drunk fighting in a corner, half-empty Pilsener bottles lining up the block. The taxi driver parks in front of a store. The sign reads *MICROMARKET JULIO*. Two women sit outside on red plastic chairs, Brahma beer chairs, smoking.

“Dos Lark,” he says as to Javi.

“Why me?” Javi asks.

“Go get me those cigarettes. You need to learn to obey.”

Hesitant, Javi gets out of the car. He greets the women, kisses them on the cheek, and enters the store. The taxi driver rolls down his window.

“Fer – you’re not going to say hello?” one of the women asks the taxi driver from her red chair.

Fer gets out, slams his door shut. He approaches the woman who called him by his name, a woman with giant breasts hidden under a poncho, and slaps her. Her lit cigarette falls to the ground.

“Don’t you see I’m working?” he asks her. Fer makes his way inside the store and finds Javi. The woman places her hand on her wounded cheek. Inside the taxi, Sebas continues to cry.

“Santi,” Sebas says to Santi. They’re alone in the car. Santi doesn’t look back at him.

“Don’t talk, puto.”

“Santi, please help me. Please let me go.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Santi warns Sebas.

“Please, I can run. I can run away. I’ve been here before. They won’t find me.”

“You’ve never been here before. Los de la González Suárez don’t go here. And they will. They’ll find you. Now shut the fuck up cause they’re coming.”

The cab’s door opens. Javi gets inside, takes out his gun, raises Sebas’s shirt, and reveals the three lonely chest hairs Sebas grew on his chest the day he hit puberty. He’s proud of them. Sebas remember his father’s hairy chest at times, especially at night when he runs his fingers across his chest as he falls asleep and dreams of his father. He’s only seen his father shirtless at the beach. Sand pebbles stuck between the forest he grew on his chest. They’d visit Casablanca in Esmeraldas and try to imagine the brown murky waters as transparent Caribbean waters. These were their vacations, after all. Waves would hit his father’s chest and the hair remained the same: curly yet upright, strong and thick. It always did surprise Sebas. How did he hide such hair under a tie and a blazer? And did death take Sebas’ chest hairs with him, too? It is Sebas’ working theory that he stopped growing up the minute his father died. There was no man left in his family to emulate. Sebas feels the cold metal and Javi’s adrenaline between his ribs.

“Relax, Javi,” Fer says from the driver’s seat, “Put the gun away.”

The taxi driver turns around and looks at Sebas.

“Did you wanna use the bathroom or something?”

Fer laughs.

“Yes, can I?” Sebas asks.

Javi points the gun at Sebas’s head.

“What did I say, Javi?” Fer asks. He lowers the gun, but keeps his eyes on Sebas’s head.

“When are you going to let me go? You have your \$400 dollars.”

“Shut up, González Suárez. I know where you live, remember? Saturno, edificio 101.

Fucking idiot,” Fer replies as he shakes his head.

The cab grows quiet. Fer turns on the engine and drives away from the store. The woman he slapped earlier flicks the taxi off.

“We have to wait a couple of hours, Sebas,” Fer says as he turns a corner, “and when it’s midnight, we’ll go back down to an ATM and you’ll take out another \$400. In the meanwhile, I need you to shut the fuck up.”

“What happens after we go to the second ATM?” Sebas asks.

“He said to shut the fuck up,” Javi replies.

“Don’t speak for me,” the taxi driver turns around, eyes set on Javi.

The car turns left and parks inside an open garage of a house facing the street. The house’s gate is lined with broken glass bottles. They are a message. Fer turns off the engine. Sebas can’t smell the cab or the burning forest nearby. He touches his battered wrists and his bruised lips and sees the dangling hummingbird and rosary. They’re now intertwined.

“Javi, put the gun away. Jesus,” Fer instructs him. He and Javi get out of the cab and slam their doors shut.

“Is someone staying in the car with him?” Santi asks Fer. Fer taps on Santi’s passenger window with his knuckles. Santi lowers the window, looking back at Sebas – he sees his bloody hair and scalp, his coffee eyes, ripped lip, fractured nose, the crease where his grey glasses once stood.

“Stay with him,” Fer says as he leans over, “Pórtate bien, Sebas Freile. Roll it up,” Fer says as he taps the cab’s door. Santi rolls up the window. The cab remains quiet. Sebas leans over, his pants are almost dry, and places his head between his knees.

“¿Qué hora es?” Sebas asks. Santi remains quiet.

“What time is it?” Sebas screams.

“Shut the fuck up,” Santi replies.

“Your name is Santi, verdad?” Sebas asks.

“Te dije que te calles, cara de verga.”

“I swear I won’t go to the police. I just want to go home.”

“To González Suárez, apartment building 101?”

Sebas closes his eyes. He thinks of his mother and the times she’d yelled at him for disobeying her. He’s scared of her, too. He then senses a tap on his shoulder. He gets up quickly and looks at Santi.

“What?” Sebas asks, “Are you going to hit me in my fucking face again? Just let me stay here, without beating me, until midnight, okay?”

“Don’t talk to me like that,” Santi replies, lowering his tone.

“Fuck you.”

“Keep it up and he will shoot you in the face.” Santi points at the car seat in front of him. Sebas cries.

“Santi, how long until midnight?”

“My name is not Santi. Shut the fuck up.”

“Why can’t you just tell me the time?” Sebas asks as he looks up at Santi.

Santi looks at his coffee eyes.



“6:17 P.M.,” he says as he looks at his watch.

The cab doors open. Javi gets in, pointing the gun at Sebas’s ribs. Fer slams his door shut and turns around.

“Your mother called, Sebas,” he says as he turns on the car, “what a woman. She sounds around my age. Very sexy. She said she called the police and canceled your debit card. She said to return you safe.” He takes the phone out of his shirt’s front pocket and throws it at Sebas. The screen is cracked. Was his snake record deleted, too?

Fer pulls out of the garage and roams San Roque, a neighborhood once lined by expensive colonial houses, women on balconies, streets lit by candlelight. The children playing on the streets avoid the fast taxi. The women sitting in front of the store yell after the cab. Fer doesn’t break when the cab begins to go downhill. The sky turns dark. The equatorial sun is leaving Sebas. The cloud of rainwater that followed him disappears. They drive by Church San Francisco de Quito, cut through Quito’s colonial center; the taxi’s pollution falls on historic buildings, tourists guarding their trekking backpacks closely—they’re afraid of theft—indigenous women selling strawberries and ice-cream, children feeding crackers to pigeons. When the taxi reaches a red light, Fer turns around, a smile on his face. His teeth yellowed by cigarette smoke.

“Do you want to go home?”

“Sí, please,” Sebas cries.

Fer gets on 10 de agosto. Sebas is on his way home. A few minutes pass by, and he can see the tall buildings that encompass González Suárez avenue. He can’t spot Saturno. The cab drives away from the skyline. The buildings become smaller through Javi’s window.

“¿A dónde vamos? Por favor, where are we going?” Sebas wails.

“Shut him up, Santi,” Fer instructs him.

Santi looks at Sebas.

“Now!” Fer yells.

Santi places his left hand over Sebas’s mouth – Santi’s hand collects the dry blood that once lingered on Sebas’s lips. He tries to mute Sebas’s screams while Javi stabs Sebas’s ribs with the revolver.

Fer drives under bridges that usually flood with rainwater and speeds up at yellow lights. He avoids traffic through shortcuts, through tiny and quiet streets filled with secondary characters, extras Sebas knows exist but will never meet. They are there to fill up Sebas’ background, appear in tourist photographs of Ecuador, posters that work as promotional material for a South American country; these secondary characters will become the subject of political wagers and presidential messages. These people will be talked about but never talked to. Fer honks at them, and they yell back at him. Sebas makes eye contact with some people, and they look at him and at the unfamiliar hand covering his mouth. But they don’t stop the car. The taxi approaches a new landscape. Sebas spots the old airport facilities – the broken-down control tower, the graffitied airline signs. The community park’s parking lot is empty. Javi opens the car door and pulls Sebas out. He points the gun to his head and Fer interrupts him.

“Not here,” he says, waving his index finger.

Together they jump the community park’s fence and stare at the massive runway.

The fog begins to descend. It’s 7 P.M. The Andean mountains are bleeding, too. Sebas is on his knees. Behind him, the three men discuss Sebas’s life. He feels the mist’s dampness on the back of his neck. He looks up and sees a plane fly over them, red and white lights in the sky, bombs of sound dropped on the ground, heading over towards the new airport. Land here, land

here, land here, run over us, run over me. The plane flies by the stratovolcano Pichincha and its two peaks, hidden underneath the royal blue equatorial sky, and as he listens to the men who have beaten him, stolen from him, harmed his soul, fight about his life, he quickly gets up and runs down the airstrip. He sprinkles drops of blood and sweat throughout the ground. He is afraid. The men scream after him. Pichincha is watching him go.

“¡Sebastián Freile!”

He runs down the yellow lines, hoping he stumbles upon a police officer roaming the park at night, hoping Fer doesn't grab the gun from Javi's hands and shoots him, hoping an airplane lands on him and ends it all. He wants to see his mother, smell her hair as she hugs him. He wants to see his younger sister Ale and her eyes; she carries the eyes of their father. He wants to live the life Papi wanted him to live before the heart attack took him from Sebas. He wants the milhojas they left behind.

They're not running after him. He doesn't hear footsteps pounding the ground, mimicking his, or the loud heartbeat of a smoker's lungs. Sebas quickly turns his neck around and sees a blurry Fer, sunglasses off, standing under the only lit park lamp, pointing a gun at Santi's head and grabbing Javi's shirt with his other hand. Sebas slows down.

“Kill him, maricón, que se te escapa!” Fer screams.

“Apura!” Javi echoes Fer.

“I'm not a faggot!” Santi screams back.

Santi runs, too, gun in front of him, towards Sebas. They both run down the runway, in the darkness of Quito, through the fog. Santi's fast. Sebas imagines a plane landing – it will run him over with its wheels. It will kill them all. And Santi shoots his gun. The shot's echoes travel near Sebas; they perforate the mist, and he screams.

He can hear Santi crying, the tears on his cheeks hidden by the fog. Sebas feels a cold piece of metal burning through his spine – the bullet travels and settles in his muscles, and blood pours out his back. His legs fall apart, his feet grow numb, and his motions carry him far. He falls, right cheek on petroleum street, eyes wide open to the Andean mountains.

Saturno:

Avenida González Suárez, Lote 101, Quito, Ecuador

The fog descends at seven. In Saturno, from apartment 14C, Pablo's family can see the Andean mist take over their González Suárez neighborhood: with goosebumps on their skin, the volleyball team from the all-girls escuela católica waits for their after-school bus outside as traffic becomes imperceptible, the tainted palm trees that align the street disappear, the corner store *MARÍA FLORES* bars up its windows but still accepts cash in exchange of hard liquor, and the Argentinian choripanes restaurant runs out of beer. In their apartment, Pablo's mother pulls the shades down. "I don't like people seeing in," Alma says. Even as a child, Pablo knew the only being observing him was Pichincha, the volcano with two peaks that watched him grow up. Every sunset, Pablo would stick his nose in-between the blinds and feel the cold air of Quito through his nostrils. It was a salute to the volcano that oversees all of Quito. Pablo was still here, behind closed curtains, awaiting a response from wawa or ruku Pichincha. The cold air forever lived between glass.

Two days before the army airplane hit their apartment building, Pablo's mother decided the clothes she kept in her bedroom's closet should finally go. Alma's mother had died years ago, and the clothes that she wore daily were stored in the back of her closet, next to the ash masks the family began wearing on October 7th, 1999, the day ruku Pichincha bathed Quito in ash. A mushroom cloud of grey, white, and brown connected Pichincha to the blue sky above them, stopping all traffic and scaring all birds, and this moment in time was encapsulated on postcards later sold to tourists for a dollar. As she sorted through the clothes, she forgot to cook dinner for her and Pablo, her seventeen-year-old son, that evening. She forgot that the extra rice

stuck on the bottom of the boiling pot and the onion-bathed meat with too much fat on it always feeds Benito—Saturno’s janitor—every night. She forgot how her lipstick had stained the white ash masks red, how Pablo’s mask was a bit chewed up, how her mother had written her name outside of hers. “A mi nadie me la va a robar,” Gabriela explained. Pablo’s grandmother believed the volcano’s explosion would unleash waves of crime in the city. The secuestro expréses would emigrate from Venezuela to Ecuador, cocaine violence from Colombia, another border war with Peru. Vandalism would devour the capital and spit out graffiti messages of love, pickpockets, and teenage maids who specialized in stealing pearl earrings from wealthy homes. Yet the only thing missing from their home after the final bits of volcano ash were swept up out in the streets was Pablo’s father. And nobody stole Pedro.

Pedro left them for Spain, where he worked as a construction manager. He bought a two-way ticket but never flew back. Pablo remembers watching Iberia red and yellow planes fight the Andean fog and dodge tall buildings as they landed on the Aeropuerto Mariscal Sucre. He remembers the ache he felt with every landing, with every lift off, with every plane that disappeared beyond the mountain range that defines Quito. Pedro adapted the Madrid accent too quickly, sometimes Pablo couldn’t understand him on the phone— “it’s the *s*, Mami, I don’t understand his *s*.” And Pedro never wanted to fully explain his job. “Construyo casas para otros,” he uttered on the phone. Pablo’s father builds houses for European men and women and sleeps in an apartment built after the Spanish civil war. “But he sounds happy,” Alma defended her husband.

As his mother coughed at the ash imprinted on the masks, Pablo’s school bus neared their apartment building. While staring out his bus window, he counted the number of stories he could tell his mother tonight at dinner: one, how a drop of white pigeon poop landed on his friend

Matías's forehead during recess. What were the chances? And does this fecal act mean good luck? Two, how Pablo's study group tragically failed the physics assignment: to drop an egg safely from the school's rooftop. The egg shattered and the yolk fried with the 12 P.M. sun. And three, a broken narrative he heard while waiting in line for nachos and cheese at the cafeteria: the pilots who land airplanes in Quito need extra practice. Is our hometown truly that impenetrable? He went up the elevator, said "¿Qué más?" to the girl from the Catholic school that always rides the elevator with him at 3:30 P.M., and later found his mother Alma in her bedroom, crying next to a pile of dead grandmother clothes.

That night Pablo's mother did not want to eat dinner. No dishes were used in the kitchen. Pablo made a mustard and cheese sandwich—Alma never taught him how to cook—swept up the bread crumbs that fell on the ceramic floor, and went to bed. Nobody pulled down the shades that night.

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Benito—the building's janitor—keeps four types of flowers up on the roof: white roses, red carnations, yellow roses, and a single sunflower. This is a tradition he hopes the future janitor maintains. Men have been hanging flowers on balconies since the foundation of Quito, and because the apartment he's in charge of doesn't have any terraces, Benito thinks the rooftop carries the same amount of cultural weight. It is a ritual to spot a blooming flower in the terrace of a woman who is also blooming. To slap the bees that come nearby with a rolled-up newspaper but hope they stop again sometime soon, but not when someone's reading out in the balcony. To spot the man who yelled out the time every hour when nobody owned clocks and throw him a petal. To create a medicine for children who believe anything: place the petal of a wet rose on your canker sores. It will make them disappear.

Benito's father, Agosto, worked as a janitor in this same building. He even helped name the building, or so Benito tells the children as they wait for their school buses: "It used to be named Júpiter. My father changed it to Saturno." An eight-year-old Pablo nodding along, always shaking Benito's hand as he got on the bus. "Chao, mijito." Benito's father helped construct the edifice. Agosto's bloodline is entrenched within the cement walls, wooden floors, and big glass windows. Agosto is the soil and sun growing Benito's flowers and the exhale from Pablo's breath fogging up Alma's windows. Other buildings in González Suárez feature armed guards. Big shiny shotguns strapped across their chests. Benito carries a knife in his sock. And he's never had to use it.

Mothers and wives yell for Benito through the intercom and sometimes even through their windows. They've run out of hot water. A pigeon has entered their apartment. They've lost their keys. The toilet overflowed, the pressure cooker exploded, the clouds are lining up: "Will it rain, Benito?" They need someone to accompany their adolescent son to buy food for dinner at the nearby market, the one where Benito's grandmother once sold her potatoes. She used to carry her produce all the way from Puenbo to Quito on a giant green bus. She told Benito that the greatest thrill of her forty-minute bus ride was seeing the mountains and hills go up and down as the road coiled around the Andes. She now is forced to delve further into Quito, all the way to colonial Quito, where cobbled streets still carry the putrid scent of 1650's San Francisco de Quito, where micro markets don't sell produce—only stolen items—where churches were purposefully built on top of indigenous sites of worship.

The owner of Saturno doesn't live in the penthouse anymore. He moved down to Cumbayá, the gentrified version of Puenbo. As Benito helped the movers pack the penthouse,



the owner spotted four gray hairs on Benito's head. The janitor who will soon replace Benito is not related to Benito because Benito never had children.

At sunrise, the ghost fog that settled at night disappears. The four flowers that sit quietly on the rooftop are wet and blossoming. Benito touches them with the back of his hand. He wasn't there that afternoon the army airplane hit Saturno; he had taken the 5 P.M. bus to Puenbo with his abuelita, the woman who could no longer carry all her unsold potatoes alone. White and yellow petals decorated the newspaper's front page the next day, alongside a plane that was painted in different shades of gray as if it was meant to camouflage between tall city buildings.

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The airplane flew from the Amazonian city of Coca to the capital with five men on board, all sons of lower class men who fought to defend their land from Peru in the War of 41. On March 20th, 2009, the army airplane—colored white, black, and grey—grazed the Linda Vista apartment complex and stole the floating clothesline of the Buendía family. The airplane dragged their clothes—three jeans, two bras, and one button-up shirt—to Saturno, where it crashed into the fourteenth floor of the building. The motor of the plane ended up in Pablo's bedroom.

Hours earlier, Pablo gathered Gabriela's clothes and tossed them in a black trash bag. His mother stood next to him, watching over. "No, not this one," she would say, grabbing an item of clothing that embodied her mother, a woman who feared what Quito had to offer. When she was forced to ride the trolebus, because Alma or Pedro were unavailable and because taxis take advantage of senior women—"I really can't read the fare from the backseat," she'd say—Gabriela would take out her cherry chapstick and snort it scent. "Huele a indio," she'd complain. In this bus, it smells like indigenous men and women who transport carrots, potatoes, and aguacates from Puenbo to the city. For Gabriela, it smells like Benito y Agosto y Benito's

abuela, like brown skin and farming, like a colonial history that never left Quito. But her daughter, Alma, didn't want to remember her mother that way. The way she alienated all those who could not afford to live in González Suárez and all of those who built the avenue facing Guápulo. Gabriela, in Alma's heart, was the woman who taught her how to make colada morada and guaguas de pan, how to properly decorate the Christmas tree, how to find a husband like Pedro—a twenty-year-old universitario with dreams of becoming a soccer player for La Liga or Barcelona, but would end up a failed architect, and later emigrate to Spain, where he'd witness the Othering of brown Ecuadorians by white Spaniards. In the end, Pablo packed the trash bag with only three items: a swimsuit, a short scarf, and Gabriela's ash mask, her name once scribbled in permanent marker untouched.

The airplane meant to land in the airport Mariscal Sucre, right on the giant petroleum-based strip of land that interrupts an ocean of cement and faux brick buildings. It didn't. The plane departed from Coca at five, and by the time it reached the capital—a city in the Andes, a colonial town made of mountain skirts and valleys—the fog began to descend.

After school that day, Pablo had bought Marlboro cigarettes and El Sol matches to impress the girl who lives two floors below him—the brown-haired but green-eyed Catholic school girl who never responded to Pablo's loud sighs in the elevator but who did once, just once, smell like cigarette smoke. As he grabbed the almost empty bag of his grandmother clothes and headed to the basement's trashcan, he realized that moment in time was his chance to try out smoking on the roof. He needed to practice the art of smoking, and Alma wouldn't follow him or sneak up on him. She was stuck on her bedroom floor, staring at clothing items her mother used to wear. Pablo can't make a fool of himself in front of his crush. What's her name, again? He

needs to learn how to hacer el golpe, how to swallow smoke and not cough himself to shame. And so, Pablo headed to the roof.

Once outside, he dropped Gabriela's belongings in front of the metal door labeled *TECHO* and squatted next to Benito's flowers. The white roses ached for the descending fog. It hadn't rained in Quito for months. The 6:15 P.M. ethereal sky had disappeared; it was ephemeral in nature, an array of pink and orange pastels that turned every Quiteño's skin yellow for a couple of minutes. Pablo looked up at Pichincha. The volcano with two peaks looked back at his son—how Pablo had grown with no Pedro, how a seventeen boy had never kissed a girl, how Pablo still poked his nose through shut blinds to salute his father, the one who always cared for him, the one Pablo never forgot. The 7 P.M. fog reached Saturno's roof. Benito's sunflower turned towards Pablo as if this upper-middle class boy was the sun. Three pimples spread across his forehead like a broken constellation, a mustache that refused to grow, a throat that coughed up the smoke of American cigarettes. The carnations were the first to tremble. Pablo believed an earthquake was striking Quito. Did he have time to run downstairs and save Alma? But then he heard it. The sound of the Iberia airplanes that roam the capital's sky every couple of hours, the apparatus that carries fathers away from sons, makes citizens into immigrants, Ecuadorians into Spaniards. The army airplane rose against Linda Vista, Saturno's next door building, and promptly hit Pablo's home, cigarette ash sprinkled around Agosto's soil and Pichincha's fog.

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At night, as Quito's police force barricaded González Suárez avenue and prevented maids from leaving their workplace and men from entering their penthouses, Benito returned home. This is what he saw as he walked up to his workplace, his father's old workplace, his home.

Saturno falling apart. He looked up and spotted Pablo watching Quiteños forming a crowd from the roof. Mis flores, Benito wondered.

For Benito, this scene ignited a memory: twenty years ago, an Ecuadorian Air Force plane struck Saturno for the very first time. It struck Saturno before it was even named Saturno. The airplane managed to hit no other buildings but Júpiter. It landed on its roof, completely destroying a cement shack Agosto had built for his wife and son. Júpiter faced the great valley of Guápulo, and some of the passengers, as they walked around Júpiter's roof, admired the church: it shined despite all the fog drowning the valley, despite the smoke coming out of the airplane's left engine. Like museum visitors, they asked Agosto and little Benito where they were, what was happening, where they should head next.

"You've crashed into us," Agosto uttered. Weeks later, a postcard featuring a green Armed Force airplane and Júpiter's rooftop was sold to tourists for 20,000 sucres, or eighty American cents. Benito's first home within Saturno erased. He thought of his taita Agosto in between petals of roses and carnations, in between a sunflower that refused to look at the equatorial sun.

The night of the second airplane accident, the owner of *MARÍA FLORES* didn't bar up its windows. *MARÍA FLORES* sold more popcorn and plantain chips than any day of the week. The Argentinian restaurant experienced a slow evening. They did not run out of beer that night. González Suárez was in a halt. Old women from neighboring buildings, during their first walk out alone in months, conferred next to the police officers. "El edificio is cursed," they said, trembling, mouths painted red. Quito's temperature dropped substantially. But the cold didn't put out Saturno's fires. Benito helped every resident of Saturno escape the building. Pablo's bedroom was impenetrable. Alma's television had fallen over. Quito's firemen—the brave

children of soldiers who put out forest fires—were under too much pressure. They put out as many fires as they could, and came back the next day to sweep up the ash. The ashes of lot 101 inundated Quito the way Pichincha once did: a tragedy in the form of a spectacle.

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Today Benito still lives in the basement of Saturno. Next to the residential storing rooms filled with unused golf clubs and forgotten television sets from the nineties. He still doesn't have children, but he still has not been fired. Residents of Saturno—during one of their post-airplane crash meetings—talked about the disappearance of Saturno's owner. His kidnapping was all over the news. *Man with sombrero de Panamá found dead in Tumbaco, a neighboring valley of Cumbayá*. He never came back to check on Benito's forced retirement.

Benito helps families remove unwanted vermin and fowl from their apartments; he takes out their trash and recycles their clothes; he eats what they leave behind, paints over chipped walls, changes lightbulbs, silences smoke alarms; he plants new flowers up on the roof, remembering the ones that died during the colonization of the Andes, the seeds brought by the Spanish, the flowers that decorated balconies and Saturno's rooftop, his father embodied in soil.

Pablo and Alma moved uptown to an apartment complex in Eloy Alfaro avenue, where the fog doesn't kill. Pablo, with less acne but with a Marlboro addiction, is now enrolled in Universidad de las Americas; he lives with his mother, still, because Alma can't forget the crash, and Pedro never came back, and Gabriela still haunts her closet. They left all of Gabriela's belongings behind in Saturno, even the mask she wore when Pichincha punished Quito with ash.

## Sol de lluvia

Paper kites dodge raindrops over our heads and birds hover in between la virgen of el panecillo's crown: blue, green, purple, and pink comets fight birds, others become them, and some raindrops turn into white shit, but this transformation begins with el sol de lluvia— three hours after the sun is at its highest, cold water falls from the sky and floods streets, balconies, rooftops, and the downpour turns burnt trees and grass green, yes it turns cometas into birds, and the birds soaring over el panecillo wrestle and peck at each other's bodies for the pieces of empanada, sandwich, and chocolate tourists throw at them, and the downpour, too, makes the virgin look like a space ship: her aluminum skin sparkles, her crown makes those in the north of Quito turn their heads away from its brightness, and the virgin sits on el panecillo—*little bread* in Spanish, it's the *illo* we use, like in bocadillo and chiquillo, something small—not amarillo—like the ten cent bread that fits in your shirt's front pocket, bread that pops out of the Quito landscape and skyrockets the virgin up into the air, and if she takes our sins with her, but not the sins of those in el sur of Quito because she turns her back on them, wings too, if the virgin's gone to Mars, we'll still have the birds that turned into paper kites—they are comets—remember, we hold the string.

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