

SABLERO

Novel-in-Progress
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Me pregunto ¿Qué negocio es este?
En el que hasta el deseo es un consumo.

—Silvio Rodríguez

PROLOGUE

The Sablero, an excuse to descend. At least that was what he was for me. To go down, shrinking like a pupil in light, down, into the blind and deeper places where the anchorless mind, lacking visual information to cling onto, conjures its own, and the visions come—

The sablero, sitting there beside me on that hillside as night fell.

Tattoos creeping up his forearms and his neck, smile like rotting fruit. Behind his profile the first stars appearing in the still-blue sky.

As he finished the story he had been telling and fell silent, the sablero lifted up the corner of his shirt to expose the planetary belt of scar tissue that wrapped around his lumbar and the vulnerable spots below his ribcage. They had been made, or so he had just told me, when as a child he'd been forced to crawl through a passageway too narrow even for him, and the rock, as he ripped himself free, had held onto the skin that used to bind his torso.

Reptile-olive hide. Sidewinding nose that twisted one way where it was broken once and another where again broken and so on, thin long limbs half-muscle half-starvation and veins, like a wrapping of twine that constricted him. On his head greasy and golden locks, darkening as they reached the roots.

A bit black, bit mestizo, bit montubio from the central coast, a bit European, also—all those in turn, composed of impurities.

His given name was Sofronio, but he was generally referred to simply by the title of his profession: Sablero, which, in the regional slang of Mahraus to the utmost South of Ecuador, referred to a former miner, or the son or apprentice of a former miner, whose office it was, now that the conglomerates which held monopoly over that mountaintop throughout the twentieth century had departed, to go on worming through the veins that had been left open, sucking dry the unextracted mineral scraps and, here the key, acting as guides through the tunnels for those individuals who wanted to do the same. Who wanted, so to speak, a piece of the action: to try out a little bit of clandestine mining for themselves. Class of individuals of which I, by the end of my time in Mahraus, had casually become one.

The sablero. A dweller of abandoned places. A scavenger following in the wake of culture. Cleansing agent and at once, one mired in refuse.

And too striking his face for the physical and moral filth of the impression he gave.

The first time I saw him, I remember feeling, simultaneously, *revulsion*, indeed an almost moralist revulsion, and yet also the sting of an unmistakably sexual feeling such as, to my awareness, another male had seldom if ever provoked in me: but it was not attraction, exactly—it was not a pull toward a

body—it was, rather, like an unpleasant encounter with sex itself, or at least the underside of sex: its wrenching, languid and dissatisfied face. . .

I say “moralist revulsion”, a phrase which I dislike; I should explain myself. There is a certain look, a seediness that only certain people have—you might encounter one, coiled in the back of a rest stop somewhere along the road between Quevedo and Babahoyo, or see one in a doorway as you drive through some filthy coastal city, or walk into a notary’s office to get some paperwork done and find him there, basking on his desk—a look that sets them, somehow, beyond the pale of the ordinary scum, because, with most, they (we) are seedy in an easily-graspable way: one has no difficulty, upon seeing them, imagining the things they have done or the things that they think. What the sablero had was a sort of seediness that had something of the unimaginable to it, the suggestion, fueling the imagination, that there existed and you were now facing a form of depravity that you had not, could not have, conceived of. A seediness tinged with the mythic.

It was as though some marine creature, imagined inodorous, were dredged up into air, and the smell that it liberates from the medium of water is the smell of another world: more than simply nauseating, it was transgressive, forbidden, in defiance of some basic law about what should and should not exist.

And indeed, could not exist, or could not, at least, for long.

The sablero was forty-five when he died, or rather forty-five when he was presumed dead, though a body was never found. A fundamentally unstable form, decaying fast in the air.

That night on our hillside encampment, I observed the scars around his midriff, tighter on the bones than the rest of his skin, as though a corset, but more than those what caught my eye as he displayed the horribly healed wounds was not their ugliness, but that of the tattoos he had covered himself with. Faded and misshapen things, made with machines so crude they might as well have been poked in with sewing needles dipped in pen ink, others that indeed were. One that he made himself over the course of a ride down the Napo river, the woman next to him trying to make conversation but the motors roaring, drowning her out and his act unnerving her as little droplets of spray, blown from the wake of their own canoe as it was made, washed away the blood drawn from the punctures on his thigh.

As he lifted his elbow in front of his face in order to pull up the edge of his shirt, the lighter underside of his forearm was left facing outward, and on it, the tattoo that most curiosity provoked in me: just a dense, indecipherable blot of ink.

But those lines, not without a certain intentionality. Almost as though a cruel tattoo artist had simply wished to leave an ugly mark on this man's body.

I asked him what it was. He responded, in characteristic mutestyle,

'st it look like?

I answered him, honestly.

Like a misshapen black fucking lump.

And he grinned and nodded, ‘*s a rock* he said, and pointed up at the night sky, then let torso and head fall until he lay on the slope and his finger, descending in time, drew out the arc of a meteor falling the opposite way, with his mouth *ffffffssssbbb* and sizzling pieces chipping as it breaks through the stratosphere and the digit swings down to the horizon, disintegrates in the opening of a fist, another sound effect,

P’ufh!

And with that, the sablero closed his eyes and smiled, like he was in tranquility.

His open hand continued to descend, fingers softly undulating, as though it were the dust from a charred comet, raining unseen upon the earth.

Nothing more was to be gotten from him that night. He fell asleep exactly in the position he landed, or decided, at any rate, that in that pose he would remain, leaving me sitting there as we had both been a moment ago.

As he slept, Sofronio’s arm rolled slightly on its side and left that amorphous thing facing up the sky. Its crudely curved undersides and its top, vaguely polygonal, whatever it was meant to be when he

drew it. I was in disbelief at the thought of someone who would tattoo a rock on themselves. Then, I found myself wondering about the shape of a rock.

It was not, is not, in my nature to fall asleep with the sablero's ease, and that night I would remain in fact, well into the dark hours of the morning, thinking about the childhood—as had just been told to me—of this man whose very being seemed incompatible with the idea of childhood.

A hasty and impoverished bivouac: jackets on the ground, a little patch of brush cleared away and the debris piled to either side as makeshift barriers against the wind. Stars overhead coming on now, brighter than the lights of the village at the mountain's base. A brittleness to my breathing and heartrate.

No, that's not quite right. As it appears in my memory, it was a brittleness to the very time. The suspended moment, when it seemed the membrane wore thin that separated time, time as we knew it, the little linear river of time, from an unbounded sea or sky or void of time, where one might swim in any direction, or be sucked out by currents and drowned in the wide open, somewhere high above the trenches.

Such periods are brief, visionary, undetected as they occur. It is only later, running over years of life with a fingertip and coming across a sudden change in the texture, as though the fabric you touched were suddenly to tear, that you discover those periods. Their fragility.

With but a little pressure, a howling comes through from the other side.

The whole of my life in Mahraus and the south is one such period, all of it threatening to cede at the slightest touch, but most of all, those days of fleeing through the cerro. The scratches of the vegetation we waded through covering my skin, my torso bare and the t-shirt wrapped around my head like a turban. The sablero in front of me clearing the path. The rush of adrenaline of those days makes the images sharp, but the rising dreams and brittle time make them strange.\

That night, some two months from the day I met Sofronio, was only one of many such nights the two of us would have in the mild wilderness of the El Oro province as we fled Mahraus and tried to make it unscathed down to Catamayo, where—or this was the idea—we would be safe, but it remains fixed in my memory because it was the only time I would ever learn anything about the life of this man, this image of corrupt and mocking hunger, that such fascination exerted upon me.

I would remain there, awake, smoking and breathing, trying to dispel the gnawing feeling of pursuit in my gut—which after two days in the hills had become almost natural—and watching the various stages of the night go by, until the moon, which was then somewhere behind us on the other side of the mountain, had come to be staring level at me as it prepared to disappear into the mountains. But though I knew I would have to wake and be trudging in just a few hours, it was a warm and clear night, and our encampment on the hillside was a privileged place from where to watch the stars, the shadows of trees, and the lights of San Lucas in the valley below.

Beside me the sablero made not a sound, emitted not one snore nor wheezed intake of breath, did not even shift. As though he were not, in fact, sleeping, but lying in wait.

CHAPTER ONE
SKETCHES OF MAHRAUS

1.

At midday on the day of my arrival in Mahraus, I was sitting on a bench in the town's central plaza awaiting my contact, one Rocío Cevallos. At precisely the right time she appeared from behind me, wheezing greetings between breaths, folds of fat and armfuls of shopping bags quivering all around her, a human tremor. Together we took a cab up to the San Blas neighbourhood, halfway up between Mahraus proper and the Christ on the mountaintop, where Rocío signalled for the driver to stop in front of a shabby and pretty yellow house, hybridly constructed of wood and concrete, which was to be my home for the next year, or at least that was the idea.

A quaint little former mining village in the southernmost reaches of the country, Mahraus was the place of origin of the maternal side of my family, and, not coincidentally, it was the destination I had chosen for a period of self-imposed withdrawal that I would have loved to call exile (and probably did) at the age of twenty-six. An exile into which, at that very moment, I was now settling myself.

The time that preceded my moving there was one of the periods of my life in which I was at my most wastrel, remaining for entire months at the peak of an anhedonic passivity that from time to time will swoop overhead and leave me planted, immobile like a seedling. From that era I can recover only the barest scraps of memory, all of it about nothing—more like the elusive memory of a smell—but, as I see them, these are the basic facts: a breakup with a woman named Ximena, my lover for some a thousand years, actually four, and the person I thought I might be with the rest of my life, had left me floating, throughout the year preceding my departure, in a vacuum of self-defeat, an after-all pleasant and embryonic condition (saline, sac-dwelling) in which, and from which, not even the desire to

escape was left. I took the decision to leave Quito abruptly, on one of those rare lucid days when I could perceive my own pathetic condition and knew the my lucidity wouldn't last.

The destination, however, came as a surprise even to myself, Mahraus being a beautiful but after all random town if one took away the family associations, and was an arbitrary decision prompted, in some way, by thoughts I had following the death and funeral of my great-grandmother a month or so before my departure. The priest had spoken the words *For I am the resurrection* and I had imagined the molecules of her body dispersing and a stray few floating through the air back to her hometown, and then the image of that town had appeared before me, crystalline, and I had known then that I would go and live in Mahraus.

Rosa, eldest daughter of the deceased and my grandmother, had been the one who put me in touch with Rocío Cevallos, a childhood friend of hers that, unlike my ancestor, had never left the town where they both were born.

Standing outside the yellow house that she was leasing out to me, Rocío, not ceremoniously so much as ceremonially, like some kind of ritual action that superstition forced her to observe, first opened the door to the yellow house herself, and then removed the keys from the lock and handed them to me, stepping aside and leaving wide the entry. It was not until I was already inside examining the house, in the bathroom (turquoise flooring, pale orange walls, mix that would always give an alien glow to that room) as I ran the tap and flicked my finger back and forth under the stream waiting for the temperature to change, that I realized I was in the house completely alone.

I called out tentatively, *Rocío?* To which the shouted reply came immediately from the front door, *May I come in?*

It took a moment for me to understand what had just happened. Rocío, after handing over the keys to the house, had instantaneously switched to the role of guest, after which, as politeness dictated, she had to wait outside until she was invited in. The recalibration was so fast and absolute that it was almost like she had just performed for me an incredibly bad magic trick.

She didn't see the face I made as I growled, singsong, *come ii-iiin*, like she was a neighbour who had just happened to stop by, but come in she did, bustling through the door with a somehow surprised expression on her face as though to say oh, what a lovely house you have. After I told her *no, please, take a seat*, having taken the cue from her that I should in turn play my role of host —that somehow the whole fantasy, and maybe my whole fantasy of this little tourism-away-from-life I was giving myself, depended upon everyone committing to their roles— and thus do what was expected and offer coffee, she took a seat at the kitchen table and, satisfied that the scenario she'd so deftly created was flowing smoothly, began to give me the run-down of the house as I set the water to boil. What's more, I was *able* to offer her coffee, despite having just arrived, because a few basic supplies including condiments, dried goods, some old but decent pots, had been provided with the house, by Rocío herself, in what I at first had taken to be a remarkable act of generosity but which I realized was actually just the prior work that needed to be put in in order to allow this moment to occur. Though

why this might have been important to her—if I was understanding this scene correctly—I could not fathom.

Rocío leapt into her explanation of the house—which she had never lived in but had acquired for her oldest daughter after the daughter had gotten married and needed to move out of the nuclear household, and which had returned to Rocío’s hands after the daughter moved to Florida, where she had thrown away her Ecuadorian husband in favour of a Floridian husband—its distinctions and flaws and the stuff one would have to know if one were going to live there for a year. A prospect which was still, in a sense, unimaginable, such was the void that this moment presented.

I poured out a mug of coffee for her and, with mine, continued to pace around and take in the house, what there was of it to take in. A box of a sitting room with two brass plates hung on the wall. A knit tableau (I thought it was a painting at first, until I approached and could make out the texture of the stitches) depicting what perhaps was a scene from the *Lazarillo de Tormes* or something. An old Spanish city, stockinged noblemen in the background, and to the fore a fountain, a smiling beggar-boy and his dog. Then there was a bedroom in which armoire and bed hardly fit together. The weirdly lit bathroom, and the kitchen with a little table in the middle and three tall tripod stools, one of which was currently Rocío’s throne. Next to the sink, a door leading out to a balcony and a jagged purple horizon, just barely visible through the little pane of glass inlaid in the wood.

Rocío’s drone continued, *the gas comes by every day at around six in the morning, so when you needed a cylinder you need to be up at that hour or you’ll have to go down to the dispensary and haul it up yourself.*

There is, of course there is, hot water, but it takes a couple minutes to come on because it gets pumped up from the cistern, also there's this miserable dog that gets in sometimes, just scare him off or whip him, I've been meaning to fix that fence so he can't get through, and oh yes. She strolled to my side out on the balcony where I was leaning on the wooden railing, staring down. Yes, the hole. Terrible tragedy.

Below my balcony there opened, as Rocío so aptly described it, a hole.

2.

A sinkhole, the size of a city block. A puncture wound. A point of entry.

My first glimpse of what lay inside that geography.

The sides of the crater were lined with broken sidewalk edges marking the place where the ground had fallen through itself and from there, dropped some seven meters to where the ruins of a swallowed neighborhood had come to rest. Down there, like laborious termites, workmen and retroscavators dug sections of concrete wall out of the rubble.

Red highland clay. All the burning freshness of where a scab had just been ripped off. The duller red of ground brick, faint orange of a thousand shingles. The paint still visible on certain bits of wall (Red on Red on Red)

Between the base of the wall of my house and the hole, some two meters of unadorned concrete floor remained, perhaps the inner courtyard of the adjoining houses, where laundry would have been hung and clothes stone-washed, and Rocío continued, casually, *Yes it was awful mijito, many many people dead. Waved a hand, But there will be more, of course.*

I looked at her. *More?*

Mm. Yes, why you see, it's like swiss cheese down there.

With her front and middle fingers she bored a wormhole through the air.

I was not confused as to what I was looking at—had heard about it before I came to town, but had not realized (Cevallos had left out the little detail) that it would be my backyard—a vital bone struck, a cave-in somewhere in the tunnels below Mahraus that, some weeks ago, had opened its mouth where there was only skin before, and sucked a little piece of the town back into the mountain.

Grabbing my shoulder *oh don't worry you're safe here Mijito! Safe as any of us are in this town, anyway, maybe safer. Think about it. When the next hole opens up it won't be right next to it, but in a completely different spot, right?*

I made an uncertain face but she plowed on,

Everybody knows that the mountain can't take any more, but they won't stop. They can't stop. What are you going to do, though, when you have generations of people that that's all they know how to do? People have been mining here since before this was even a civilised town, hasta los indios. They knew how to mine, you know, lived like animals, sin dios, sin patria, but they were excellent miners. In fact, I could see where this was going, the spring which triggered, apparently, all inhabitants of Maharaus to delve into the mythological origins of the town as she did then, index finger academically raised, said, in fact, it's rumored that somewhere in the hills of Mahraus or Paccha is where the treasure of Atahualpa is actually hidden.

Oh, wasn't it in the Llanganates? I said, but my eyes were still burrowing down there.

*Ha! That is what they teach people in schools, isn't it? No no, no no, let me explain. Of course no one knows, but dicen, **dicen**, and I repeat, that, when Atahualpa knew he was going to get killed, he sent word for his-mo-ther, a certain system of stressed syllables, endemic to the old women of old Mahraus, the queen-Pac-cha, to flee, and to take with her his treasure, so that the Spaniards couldn't have it. They say, that this is where she went, of course think of how remote this must have been back then, and that is why the town Pacha is named what it is, a misspelling of her name.*

Oh, I had no idea. A worker's head popped out from an empty windowframe that the rearrangement of parts had left horizontal, and after the head followed the worker's body, climbing out from the house whose ruins he'd been exploring. I thought it looked like he was having the time of his life down there, a kid in a great despoiled playground.

Yes, and there's a trail, that's supposedly the road she and her servants used, hiding in the jungles, that finishes just, there, somewhere in the valleys between Mahraus and Pacha, and that goes all the way down to Vilcabamba.

Hm. Is that where they were coming from?

Shrugged. *Uy, Mijito, who knows what is true. But since always, people have been digging around in Mabraus. And those men, god knows if they found any indio treasure, but they did find gold, and well, there you have it,*

She gestured chinwise to the hole. Halfway up its sides I spotted the cross-section of a severed sewer artery, still issuing a dribble which fell on the demolished rooftops below.

That's why this town is doomed. I looked back, surprised. *How can you tell someone not to mine when that's what they do? Tell n hambrecito without education whose father did the same thing, try and tell him not to. Of course, eso no quita that most of them are swine. People with no principles.*

The miners?

Yes. Well, no. You see, miners, what you would call miners as such, there's no more of them down there. What you have down there now are Sableros.

I...I... don't think I've ever heard that word.

Sablero, you know, like sable? She made a gruesome little gouging gesture in the air that was meant to simulate a swordsman with a saber but which appeared more like the unsavoury use of a scalpel. *It means an ex-miner who knows his way around the tunnels. People pay them to take them down so they can get a little gold. Sablero's what they call them.*

Why?

She shrugged. *It's the old west down there. Artisanal mining isn't a peaceful business. Too much excitement. My husband did a little bit himself.*

A little bit of...artisanal mining? I couldn't help but start chuckling from the absurd taste of the words in my mouth. Rocío gave me a little sidelong glance of displeasure.

Not **alone**. *But he went with a sablero down there, just a few times, mind you, and he made quite a little bit of money. That was years ago, of course, when people didn't know, he would have never done it now that this has started happening.* Gestured outwards. *But you know people. They can't seem to stop. . .*

A shrug.

Well, at least you have a view.

3.

Before Rocío left she had turned to me and said,

By the way. I'm so sorry about Rosita. Mi más sentido pésame. She was an exemplary woman, you know, pero lo que es la vida, suddenly, here as she shook her head she made a gesture of a fist gently closed into a moth-cage, opening, life, in its grip, being released, ceasing, if you're in touch with your grandmother, I'm sure you will be, I've already told her by phone, but it's not the same, so please, tell her, que la Rociíto Cevallos sends her condolences and that she needn't worry about her grandson, because he'll be well-taken-care-of here. And I say that not just for your her but for yourself. Don't you forget. As a son of your grandmother, you have a family here. The whole town, as a matter of fact, is your family. Mijito, call. Call whatever you need.

Thank you so much. (robotically)

How old were you again, Mijito?

Twenty-six.

Twenty-six. She seemed to make some internal calculation. And come over for coffee!

I will, thank you. (again)

I followed her out to the gate but she turned around again, *Yes, you should absolutely meet my daughter, you're both more or less the same age and I think you would get along wonderfully. Come along for coffee, say, Wednesday? For some humitas.*

No way out. *Eh... alright, yes. Wednesday sounds fine, thank you. Eh. Didn't you say your daughter lived in la florida?*

My oldest daughter. My son, the middle one, is in Guayaquil but my youngest, she's here with us. But you know Maharaus isn't much of a place for a young woman, you know?

Ajá, the whole aging population thing?

Uy, mijito. Un montón de viejas feas como yo! And on that note she slammed the gate and began to shuffle off down the hillside, still according the details for the coming Wednesday's afternoon coffee over her shoulder.

And I—nodding, nodding—listened to her until she either fell silent or fell out of earshot and then edged inside backwards, as though I were afraid to give my back to her.

Cevallos, a true specimen of the aging Mahrahuense matron, took me back to the women I had seen so many times around my grandmother when I was a child, the Colonia Mahrahuense group, a society of

emigrants from that tiny town who gathered to celebrate its culture, in their own odd ways, in a building in Quito's Mariscal.

In many ways Rocío's mannerisms were identical to theirs, except for her old-style Mahrahuense accent, which remained intact, museum-perfect, undiluted by the Quiteño influence that, in the case of my grandmother at least, had rendered it little more than a certain tone of voice, perhaps not even that. The Mahrahuense accent was a critically-endangered species, the few young people remaining having switched over by cultural influence to adopting the Guayaco accent (which of all the accents, is a truly deplorable one to adopt) and in its purest form, which Rocío exhibited, it was the epitome of the kind of accent that disguised itself as not being an accent at all, but—and thus the inhabitants would proudly have it—the tabula rasa of “correct pronunciation”, the distilled and absolute form of Spanish, the language's platonic form which all subsequent accents were a mere corruption of. As a rule, old Mahrahuenses and old Lojanos—the city of Loja having the closest endangered accent to Mahraus'—were the kind of people to have on hand a copy of the Real Academia de la Lengua Española's, and to think that it was a valid conversational move to draw the great fat tome like a pistol and begin to look up words mid-speech if you happened to say something that sounded suspicious, or worse, if you were dumb enough to dare question their grammar or vocabulary, furiously flipping to the relevant page and eagerly demonstrating that *their usage* of the term was the *correct* usage, the one accepted by that supreme authority in matters of language. They were also perhaps the only people in the entire Spanish-speaking world—certainly the only ones I know of—that actually did not pronounce the double-L as simply a Y, but considered it a different sound unto itself, a rolling,

lascivious thing that finally resulted in a sort of Y but to get there first involved the tongue writhing around inside the mouth as though it were someone else's.

Some, even—those given to thinking themselves blue-blooded—nauseatingly, conjugated with *vosotros*. But it was not even that they wanted to speak like the Spanish. No, it was a deeper and more curious pathology than that, for the ideal they were seeking, the deity whose bible was the RAE Dictionary, was not Spain (a good Mahrauhense would have accused the Spaniards of the present day of also speaking a degenerated form of Spanish) but an at once faded and crystallised image of an old Spain, imperious, imperial, Spain as it was—though it truly never was—when it had a third of the world, including the retazo that became this country, under its control.

Being honest, Rocío had just been exceedingly kind to me, but her—her very presence—hit something of an unexpected nerve. She was like those Colonia Mahrausense women that were like a certain kind of ghost floating around my memories of early childhood—ghosts, because since the only images of them were from that age they remained fixed in the archetypical state that all things have during childhood—and as such, she provoked in me the same anxieties. The memory when I was a young child, of one of them planting a great smacking sucking sonorous kiss right on the center of my ear, the eardrum seeming to explode as though a grenade had gone off next to me, and crying out and wrenching myself free from her grasp, no one around (parents, aunts) seeming to realize at all the savage violence that had just been inflicted. And when the woman said *oh, what's wrong?* with a voice like I was an offended puppy whose paw she'd stepped on and with a hand already reaching out to

pinch my cheek, then lashing at that hand and slapping it out of the air as behind me the roar of my father's rage erupted.

Then escaping through the tunnels of the house.

Their presence, the presence of these old Mahrahuense women—a form of toxic sociability, always simmering to talk and those full, almost African lips always trembling to let something out—caused an inherent discomfort in me, and yet it was a discomfort now tinged with nostalgia: Rosa Esther Valareso was dead, and for better or worse these people, with their deluded aura of royalty projected before them as though to prepare the air into which they were about to walk for their presence; these people, who thought themselves the last in a rare pure lineage more civilised, more Spanish, and yet somehow at the same time more Ecuadorian than the rest of the country, who were so proud of having lived in what they considered this island of culture in a sea of barbarity—at least until the jobs dried up and they moved to the cities like everyone else—these people were all dying, now, dying like flies throughout this twenty-year crepuscule that marked the end of their generation and all the ones that came before it, and thus making them, indeed, as they believed themselves, members of a rare and dying breed.

And there was something particularly and pathetically tragic about the extinction of just such a species, a wild parodic thing that only certain vicissitudes of geography and history—above all, the place's isolation—had allowed to exist in the first place, like an island on which animals had evolved that could exist nowhere else on earth, and were now blown, blown away by the winds of the present.

A perhaps ugly, perhaps flightless, perhaps unintelligent species of bird that stood there dumbfounded watching itself be eaten, aghast because it had no idea that such a thing was even possible—but a lonely one and the last of its kind, that you deftly and callously kill now with a rock.

4.

I lit up a joint and took it with the coffee that had been left over—that lovely combination of the two at once a little more awake and a little less, a little more focused in your dispersion— out to the balcony where I smoked gazing out at the pit, as, I already intuited, I would spend so many hours doing.

The pit was complex. Beyond the morbid fascination which it could not help but to exert, it was also just something to look at.

And after the initial shock had faded, the mere sight of it quickly ceased to be one of devastation, and became, for the months that I was to make a daily ritual of its contemplation, more like the pile of all the fragments of a jigsaw released onto the floor, every detail there but disassembled and become somehow foreign as it was ripped and rearranged—a piece of alleyway that, though sunken, had managed to remain intact and now wound a pointless little path between two houses. A toilet perched on a cliff of upended bathroom floor, jutting out alone from the sea of rubble like the back hull of a capsized ship whose nose has already begun the dive. A street dog that I watched clamber down one of the less steep sides and, for the next half hour, appear and disappear as he dove through ruined doorways, then emerged in a completely different spot, hinting—for the Boschian crater was just that, a hint—at the extent of the navigable passages that were left beneath the remains. The little delights that my balcony view offered were infinite.

I ashed the joint on the balcony's wood railing.

In the guest bedroom of the last house my great-grandmother had lived in before they moved her to a nursing home, a grim tenement building in a Colombo-Venezuelan neighborhood of far North Quito which I remember as being painted a shade of green more depressing than the concrete over which it lay, there was a sort of sculpture in beaten metal that depicted Mahraus. It was a flattish, bas-relief thing that had been mounted on a frame like a painting, though the most prominent houses in the tableau protruded some fifteen centimeters from the wall, and it had been made by some distant relation, the resident failed artist of my mother's family and a person who was little mentioned except to point out his dream-crushing career as a sort of cautionary tale to children (and sometimes adults). The piece however, had fascinated me since I was a boy. The blackened, reflectionless copper was shaped into the dome of a hill, and on that hill, piled madly and immoderately, sat the houses of Mahraus, beautifully crafted houses with balconies and sometimes even the traditional stilts, this latter feature rendered with but a trickle of sodder.

From the surface of the metal, all the angled roofs knifed out like so many dorsal fins. It seemed then, to swim before my eyes like boiling water.

Mahraus' appearance was indeed that of a sort of wall of houses. Due to the incline of the slope on which it had been constructed, most of the houses had to be built *into* the mountain itself, in such a way that a two story house in Mahraus would have an entrance giving out onto the street on the first floor, and then, on the second floor, another entrance which gave out onto the next street, a level

above. These levels were connected, for the pedestrian, by stairwell alleys, while the road oscillated its way up in long zigzags to either side.

One of the tangible consequences of this design, however, was that the streets were perpetually in shadow, always the mountains to one side and the houses to the other, the street layout becoming, unwittingly, mazelike, the attempts to reconcile human habitation with the physical landscape giving rise to a series of concentric, semicircular canals that closed in around the hilltop, which they ambushed, but never reached. From the inside, that is, from street level, everything in Mahraus seemed always to be rising, curving, rising—everything incorrigibly tilted, and barring some elevated position, the only way to actually see the valley below was to position oneself in a stairwell and peer through the slit that it presented in the wall of construction.

I reflected, pouring out the last few cold and divinatory dregs of estopa off the balcony and into the pit, that Cevallos had been right: if it were not for the hole into which the houses directly behind mine had sunk, I would not have a view.

Across the pit, past one more row of unsunken houses, the natural vertigo of the landscape took hold. The ground suddenly wrenched itself out from beneath the feet and miles down, the earth poured into the clefts rivers made in the valley floor as though, through them, it were draining away to someplace. At the very bottom could be seen the glimmer of one such river, and a bit further ahead, glass destellos from the windows of San Lucas: Mahraus' mirror image reflected in a puddle at the mountain's base.

The sun set more or less directly in my eyes, and though the ocean was still far away, something about the way the land in that direction did not end immediately against a mountain, but faded, bit by bit, in a horizon of diminishing hills one after another, or something about the way the land both yellowed and blued at once the closer it got to the sun in decline, made it evident—made it palpable—that, not far to the west, the long descent toward the coast began.

I spent the rest of the first evening unpacking and putting up those few items that I had brought with me to mark the territory out as my own—though there was not much to be had. Clothes; books, read and unread; cannabis seeds which I would set to germinate in little styrofoam cups the next day; a pile of notebooks, stationary, and pens—though I would not be able to write a word in all my time there—and the two or three so called decorative items, now serving more of a ritual use than a decorative one, that had followed me and survived through the various turbulences and domicile changes: first, a colourful banner, orange and pink the dominating tones, paraded through by hieroglyphic monsters and animals, supposedly in the style of the Paracas indians, and second a painting my friend Armando gave me as a parting gift when he left for Mexico a few years prior, which depicted, well, very little, as was generally the case with Armando's work, though it was not unpleasant. Lastly, and not without a degree of self-consciousness, I'll admit I hung up a cross my grandmother gave me as well.

5.

Threw myself backwards on the bed, puzzled, now I was here, as to what to do with the empty time that I had given myself by deciding to go to Mahraus.

To go, as I somehow thought of it, *back* to Mahraus, though I had actually only been there once before in my life.

To go back, or rather, to go *down*, down to the place from which one half of my genetic makeup flowed, and thus, I reasoned, one half of whatever it was that composed me. These notions seemed terribly important at the time, but in truth nothing could have been more distant to me than the village, except in the sense that its mythology (or rather its mythology as filtered through the words of those family members given to storytelling) had been, from infancy, been burned into my imagination and come to form the substrate out of which that imagination grew. An aesthetic, so to speak, of green underlaid with black, of coffee grains and deadly guanto flower, of limestone, sandstone and gold; women reverted to the feral and infants astride boa constrictors; worn fists breaking gemstones open on the cobbles like cacao fruit.

How much my decision to go to Mahraus was influenced by the fact that the sole previous time I had visited was on a trip five years earlier with Ximena, was something that I would not put into consideration until after I had already moved there.

A larger, though more banal reason to choose a remote area, whatever it might be, was that with two month's rent in the city I could live for a half year out in any village in the country. And it was not merely that the price of, say, an entire head of bananas (more than a whole family trying hard could consume in a week) was two dollars, but that in these places *MONEY*, even in its devalued state, simply did not work the same way. When I lived, for instance, in the province of Manabí for a time, I was always struck by how loose the notion of employment seemed to be for everyone there, and later, by how many problems this seemed to solve, and was under the impression of having lived my life at the butt of some huge and cruel joke. To say that nearly the entire population of the town I had then lived in was unemployed would not have been inaccurate, but it would have been to ask the wrong question entirely, for they were people for whom work was actually just a means of subsistence, and not the quasi-moral duty it was to the people I had spent my life surrounded by in the city. At any rate, I knew that it would not be difficult for me to survive in Mahraus while having to do essentially nothing

A rotund Nothing is the nice succinct answer as to what I sought there. Rotund, palpable, and therapeutic. Well. For whatever reason, whatever plausible causes one might find to justify the impulsive and ultimately base movements of life to oneself, less than a month after the smoke of my great-grandmother's cremation had drifted through vents unseen by those at the funeral home at Monteolivo up, out: to the inimitable mountain sky of Quito, I was laying on my bed in the bedroom in Mahraus that had suddenly, as though unexpectedly, become mine.

I try to think how I felt then, on that first night, but although the images are fixed (and indeed, perhaps immobilized by the act of retelling) in my mind, either there was never any emotional content in them—that is, either I felt nothing—or any content that there once was has soaked into, and is now to be found nowhere but, the ambiguous colours of the sky that evening, night already but with a faint ember blown on to the west; the smell of that house, which I cannot describe; and the erratic breeze of the weak fan spinning over my bed, slow enough that my eyes could chase the spokes around, and did, for a long time, until I drifted off.

6.

I remember the dream I had on that first night with absolute clarity.

It begins, as on uncounted nights and sometimes dawns dreams have begun for me, taking flight from an image that strobos before my visual sense like echoes intensifying until they cover everything, of a figure I saw years ago, or a deformation of a figure I saw years ago, a disguised man, his suit skin-tight but the mask on his face fully thrice the size of his head, formless, composed of ears of dried maize—mazorcas—purple, yellow, and white.

An inconsequential memory, a celebrant in a traditional costume of Saraguro, or someplace, during some fiesta de pueblo. Why it has stuck with me in that way, I don't know. But that figure, beautiful, grotesque when scrutinized, had become a toll attendant on the way to sleep. An inhabitant solely of that nether-zone.

This corn devil, or something that does not look at all like it, but is known to be it, rises out of the ocean and walks toward me; I am waiting on the sand.

The water is grey green, as it is on cloudy days, and the sand is almost horribly white. The man who approaches me has a pink spondylus shell clutched in the hand he holds up in front of himself, and blood is streaming from his ears down to his jawline and neck; he has ruptured his eardrums diving for the shell.

When he is within reach, he offers it to me.

I take the shell, offer in turn to the man the faded violet mazorca I have been holding in my hands.

We receive, and look down at the results of the trade in our hands.

I am holding, it has become, without transforming, just a cupped pile of horses' teeth. Runes carved into the flat sides. I try not to spill as I move across the sand and put them in the hands of someone who returns me two fistfuls of salt. They fall through between my fingers and I, in desperation, toss the salt into my mouth and the world goes unbearably bitter and the dream degenerates into a dirty kitchen during a party where a childhood friend appears and claps me on the back and grips my neck and scolds me for the woman I have chosen to love, saying *how could you*, and begins to enumerate her flaws and I break the fucker's nose and growl *cretino* and stumble outside, staggering, where I look up at the sky and see many stars and then a shooting star and I begin to make a wish on it before the shooting star descends and I realize it's a drone not a star with its two frontal red lights and one posterior green light, so I give the finger to the sky and stumble on until somehow I arrive and finally find solace in a brothel, a warm and lovely place deep in the jungle where the owner is the mother of a different childhood friend and they give me warm coffee with a splash of puntas in it and lead me to the room of a beautiful curly-haired whore encased, now unencased, in a black vest, and she smiles. The puta goes through her body parts one by one and lists the accumulating prices of each of them, an eye, a dollar, both eyes, two dollars, both eyes and the left breast, three dollars, and I feel as I watch her

that I understand something vaguely, something like that life must be given, always, to be received, and I understand that my lifespan will be shortened by this encounter and I welcome the months I will lose in exchange for this moment as I fall asleep, mesmerized, gazing into the swirling patterns of her pubic hair, which grow, as though a windblown slope, in an inverted pyramid shape, whorling, changing, and it is then, as I lose consciousness in the dream, that I awaken in body.

The first thoughts I had upon waking were not really thoughts, just scrambles to try and capture the retreating ocean of the dream.

Ran through it like the reel of a movie and rehearsed the scenes in a vain attempt to stall their oblivion and burn them into waking memory, but in doing so, I was aware of also, of reassembling it into something it was not. Most of all I wanted not to forget the lovely face of the whore, but it, like all face, is the first thing to disappear.

The second thought to appear was the dull observation that the light was coming from all the wrong places. Rather than the broad sheaf that should have entered and heat my entire left flank, showing me distant Cayambe as soon as I turn my head, what fell on me were two punctual rays, each no wider than a picture frame, one from my right side, another from directly above my head.

Only with my third thought, I remembered where I was. First morning waking in the familial seat.

I took my breakfast out onto the balcony and, as the coffee returned me him to that apollonian state of consciousness under whose light, dreaming seems absurd, I watched the claw of a bulldozer grip a steeple that had been unearthed; pry it free from the rubble.

CHAPTER TWO

UNDER THE SINK IN THE MAID'S ROOM

1.

Life in Mahraus, as was frequently commented upon by the villagers, was passed between one coffee and the next.

Indeed, so much so, that any attempt to write something about the place—or even set in the place—inevitably degenerated into a grotesque series of caffeine-driven encounters, since that was, after all, what the time there was composed of. Not the substance itself, which as the inhabitants of Mahraus prepared it was a vile sludge, but the occasion of sitting down to have it.

Mhraus grew an excellent coffee, the town had the perfect combination of altitude and heat, but its townspeople, from what I had observed even in my own grandparents, could not make a decent cup to save their lives, perhaps due to the fact that most of the population was stuck—the latest two generations having for the most part left and unwittingly created a village of the old—in that era, during the fifties and sixties, when lyophilized products had begun arriving in Ecuador like some technological wonder bestowed upon us by the ancestral aliens, and the assumption was born in people that everything that came in powdered form was obviously better than the correspondent liquid from which it was derived, and to which it would return following the simple addition of water. It was only recently, after years of exporting the raw product and receiving in turn these neat, soluble grains, that a couple of businesses in Mahraus had started attempting to toast the beans they grew themselves rather than exporting in bulk, but the gastritis-inducing acid they produced did little to undermine the claim that everything freeze-dried was better.

I had six cups of the sludge every day. To pay much attention to the substance itself was to miss the point, which was something more like to stop in the afternoon—to, stopping, taste something very bitter in the postmeridian hours and to feel a little rush, a lazy rushing through the slowness of this life here. Relaxed, unseeking, and yet eager and a little high. A gleam in people's eyes as we spent the long hours in accelerated stillness.

Days were cobbled up from a full and social breakfast and a three-course lunch; an afternoon coffee; a dinner, also in three courses; yet another coffee in the balmy, card-playing night and perhaps one last one when, during the insomnia-ridden stretches that did not plague so much as simply buzz around the ears of so many Mahrahuenses, fluorescent lights and slow fans went on around midnight in houses all over the town, and the sleepless individual, perhaps, rolled out to go without rancour to the kitchen to boil themselves some coffee and reheat the muchines from the afternoon, to which crackling smell their spouse would wake and, after a while, shuffle out and join the insomniacs. These were habits of local life which I required no help in adapting myself to, the natural tendency to revert to this lizard-like state endemic to small-town life perhaps (or so I fancied) residing in my very blood.

My chosen place to enjoy this aspect of Mahrahuense life was established within the first week of my time there, when I became a regular customer of the Hostal Valverde, located on a corner of the main church square, a typical one in colonial style, stone benches congregating around a dry fountain. The coffee there was less shitty than elsewhere in the town, and more often than not, it was on the house, whenever the owner—one Iván Valverde, who, we discovered during the interrogation he subjected me to the first time I frequented his establishment, was vaguely related to me on my mother's father's

side (*Tell Marquito that Iván Romero still waits for the rematch, eh? In those exact words, mind you.*)—decided to stop by my table for a game of small talk.

This phenomenon, the fireworks of an unsurprising discovery of family ties with every stranger to cross my path, was to be a theme of my stay in the ancestral town. Living there had the quality of dreams, that, like a small theatre troupe, were continually cast the same handful of faces in every role—the villain, the hero, the ambiguous dark antihero, all the figurants and extras—until one could no longer tell them apart—and that was when the dreams began to take on an anxious edge.

2.

It was at the Hostal Valverde, sitting beneath a parasol on the patio that gave out to the plaza, that I caught my first glimpse of the sablero.

The day was a blurred and indifferent one of white sunlight. Having just finished a plate of tigrillo, I was, rather numbly I'll admit, attempting to read. It was so bright that even the glare of the pages was more than I could take without squinting.

My eyes had been running over and over again past the same sentence, the bubbles of syllables popping but nothing penetrating, nothing sinking in, when an imprecise, finger-drumming rhythm of hundreds of feet came and pulled away my attention, and I looked down:

To the right-hand side of the outdoor seating area, the Hostal Valverde commanded a view of one of the eight steep, cobbled tributaries that conformed the square, and from the end of this street far below me, an ocean of people came, lapping up the incline as though hauled by the moon.

It was a funeral parade.

It had started, probably, at the house of the deceased, and it was now making its way to the church where the mass would be held, after which they would pilgrim on up until reaching the cemetery, still higher on the mountain.

I have written down—due to the fact that in the course of re-reading it I had also run the pen under it as many times—the very sentence I was fruitless and repeatedly ingesting when I saw the parade; I include it here as memorabilia:

Humanity does not know where it came from, this being, this force, Bebeles-H'ii, whose name in the Sámbisa tongue is merely the word for HUNGER; what its role was upon this earth. Whether, as those of a scientific predisposition thought, it had long lay dormant or larval, reemerging like a cicada to feed and reproduce and die, or whether, as the more esoterically-inclined believed, it was not a being at all but a mere organ, the tail of God and the last part of it to pass through this world, erasing what the forepaws of that selfsame creator had made, after its short crawl around the earth.

—From *Bebeles-H'ii*, the doomed fantasy novel which, infamously, put an end to Roberto Thiele's career.

In the book, deep inside a landfill so old that in the deeper strata, petrol forms already, something monstrous awakens, and on the street arriving at the town square of Mahraus, a high-tide of black shapes comes on in the early afternoon.

Gravity was against the casket-carriers as they reached the stretch, right before it flattened out at the square, where the slope was at its steepest. Feet in shoes too polished and too flat-soled for the terrain

slipped against the cobbles. People stepped aside to let them pass and the old women of Mahraus, experts in the art of mourning and more convincing at it even than those actually implicated, begged of God mercy for the soul of whoever was inside that coffin and led prayers that the mourners, clumsily, tried to catch onto and follow.

Heat-wavering, now, the faces of the people in the first row began to resolve.

The row was six across, wide as the street itself. In the middle, two young men with their blazers off and drenched swathes like drippings of poorly-applied paint all the way down their sides bore the front end of the casket between the. To their right marched an old shrunken woman, still shaking uncontrollably though the well from which tears previously sprang had run dry, and then to her right, a teenager walked, his arm out in a stiff loop off of which the crone's weight hung. To the left of the bearers was a young woman: extremely, unhealthily thin, and so white as to seem hardly mestiza at all, with short hair that made little slicked spikes down to the base of her skull and large, fast eyes. Furthest to the left, in a succession of little sign-of-the-cross-movements like he was drawing hasty stars in the air, a priest blessed his way up the climb, his glam regalia the only spot of white in the black river aside from the bearers' shirts, which were near flesh-coloured by then as the sweat transparented them.

They heaved against the slope. The black coffin-head was like a boat they were trying to push out to sea. Almost there. Almost, past a few more waves that beat you back.

The old woman slips; the adolescent wrenches her up by the elbow and sets her on her feet. They keep walking.

Finishing the part of my coffee that could be finished before that final swill of bitter sand that lay in wait at the bottom of every cup, I watched as this first row of paraders broached the crest of the hillside.

The faces of these first six were now clearly visible: of the two frontal carriers, who had perhaps been chosen for the distinction based on closeness to the deceased and not physical strength, one was short and muscular and clearly had no difficulty with his task, while the other, though obviously related by blood, was thin and with a body that in every way told the story of a different and softer life, and had his teeth framed in the snarl that was pulling at the corners of his young face, trembling violently. Once in a while the woman would lean in to give him what was evidently some futile form of encouragement.

As they passed by me those behind them appeared, like segments in the body of a millipede. The corpse, with its entourage, proceeded toward the church. The crowd disintegrated as by waves they reached the open space and dispersed to fill it. Lacking the advantage in height the incline of the street had given me, in the flat square, the crystalline vision faded and the scene became, to my eyes, nothing but a mire of bodies.

Out of that mire, however, rose the coffin.

White-scorched, made áspero in the daylight (the church was just a burned mirage now) on the opposite side of the square four white-torsoed figures climbed the church steps, between them hovering an opaque object.

Instead of entering the building, the priest positioned himself and the carriers at the top of the stairs, face-out to the crowd. From that curious position he prepared to deliver his service. I can only guess that the elaborate but diminutive church could not contain such a tremendous crowd as had gathered to pay their respects to this person—whoever it might have been.

The crowd quieted. The priest, I imagined I could see the distant black hole of his mouth widen into a perfect circle for the recurring O's of *Dios*, though from my position across the square I saw little more than animated and plump stick figures.

Suddenly, I glimpsed something. A disturbance ripple out from one of the figures. I flicked my eyes through the group and all at once the man toppled—

Insolation. Strain. Collapsed face-forward and the others, not ready for this shift in weight, were thrown off balance as the coffin lurched forward, dived after the one who had fainted. And his face gave a bloody rebound and the casket lid swung and the bearers tried to wrestle it back but it writhed from their grasp,

Reared up before the crowd

(loll of two limp legs dangling upside down)

And one of the men did the only thing he could do and dropped his side of the coffin, raised his fist and with it slammed shut the casket before the contents could fall out entirely. The weight became too much for the remaining bearers, who crumpled underneath as the box collapsed onto the floor and slid down the church steps, disappearing from my field of vision.

Chaos in the crowd. Someone screamed and it was then, as my eyes, derailed, swung through the scene, that I saw a man there, on the adjacent sidewalk, howling with laughter.

He was dressed in funeral garb like all the rest, but he did not mix with the crowd.

His hair was a bright dirty blonde over the dark greenish tone of his face. He was thin in a way that suggested mala vida pero no debilidad, and there were elaborate, bony structures to his extremities. His joints, his knotted throat.

As everybody pointlessly milled, and a few well-intended souls made a mess trying to lift up the coffin and move the unconscious boy and wrench one or another lifeless object out of each other's hands, this man, in his solemn garb, his vulgar look, was doubled over clapping his hands, shaking with the convulsions of a mirth that I was too far away to hear.

Slowly, his laughter subsided. He wiped at his eyes and remained there shaking his head in the aftershocks of hilarity for a while, and then, feeling, perhaps, the friction of someone's stare on his skin, looked up.

The man who I would come to know as the sablero met the eyes that had been staring at him, and his lips peeled open to a grin. Decaying sweetness. Fruit flies.

3.

I did not know then, could not have known, the role that the sablero was to play in my life, and yet the sighting struck an undeniable chord within me, perhaps not only because of the man himself and what he provoked, but because it seemed in some way a deformed echo of that other funeral, the one that had in part prompted my move to Mahraus.

Those two analogous rituals—the one for my great-grandmother’s interment, and the one I witnessed so soon after my arrival in Mahraus—have by now of course, become indissolubly linked and perhaps, even, their parts shuffled in my mind.

The girl, for instance, the girl whose breasts’ dense, dark covering of freckles was left visible, barely, by a black dress sheer down to the bust—was it in my grandmother’s funeral that I saw her or in the one I watched from the comfort of the Hostal Valverde patio? It matters little. Just the images:

Close-woven netting over the foothills of her tits. Brown curls. The effeminate flourish of the priest putting wafers in people’s mouths (though he was white-tunicked in one and garbed royal purple in the other) and that hulking, suited beggar armed with a butterfly net, who went through the rows rattling it under people’s noses, asking them to deposit their dead moths inside.

Except now that I think of it, that second image had by necessity to have been at my grandmother’s ceremony: the other one had no seating. The scenes, if I concentrate on them, are separable—what gets

mixed are the faces, the general odour of formal suit and white flower, and that particular presence of mind that the death of others gives back to one: that awareness of *I am here, I am alive, and so what*.

The first ceremony, that of Rosa Ester, my great-grandmother, was, what, about a month or so before I left Quito in August 2017?

In the face of her death all I had felt, in truth, was relief, relief that finally a humiliation that had lasted too long was over—the terrified look in her eyes that she would get upon waking inside a maze of unfamiliarity, all those strange faces cooing at her; the sores on her immobile back; those abusive nurses she had had to endure, perhaps for years, before anyone else knew about it; that body, which could not defend itself but still hurt; the necklaces of tubes and needle-charms and all those other artifacts to prolong life without dignity, and a serious conversation with my father in which he expressed his desire for the plug to be pulled immediately and thus avert all of that shit should anything ever happen to him—yes, relief alone, and yet at her burial service, a train of thought was set in motion (thoughts about family, inescapability, all that) which fixated the idea of Mahraus in my mind.

I had acted upon that fixation, and now the image of those somber, weeping faces bidding farewell to Rosa Esther dreaming impassively in the open casket—we were each given a moment alone with it to say goodbye—had become the image of this creature, laughing uncontrollably at death and its politics.

In the blur of those first days, the memory of my first glimpse of the sablero scintillates, a gleam of dirt on the polished surface of a life that was somewhat blissful, but utterly unplaceable, passed in a way that made time and its contents impossible to look at directly. When I would later wonder what, exactly, had filled those early days, I would run up against a limit not of *memory*, but of *imagination*, for what I encountered in Mahraus was a sort of furnace in which events were melted and lost their shape to span over days, months.

I fell into habits. Mornings, I spent mostly clearing out the plot of land across the street from my house—the beginnings of brush that carried after the houses petered off—where I planned to begin a garden. According to Cevallos, whom I had asked, she saw no reason why my taking a little piece of mountainside and using it to grow his vegetable (and cannabis) patch should be regarded, in hers or anyone else's eyes, as different from the practices of subsistence farmers whose lives depended upon those little vegetable patches they cut out from this, and similar unclaimed hillsides. I had nodded. As a matter of fact I did see a difference, but the point was that I'd gotten some preliminary approval, and true to what the woman had said, the farmer I spoke to on the edge of his maize field (rather his impossible maize-slope) the first morning I ventured into the brush, couldn't have cared less what I did with any part of the mountain that was not already being farmed. I had to work only every other day to give my soft hands a chance to bleed themselves back to callus from the use of the machete, which I was woefully inept with.

Afternoons, I spent at the Hostal Valverde, or somewhere similar, or I ambled around Mahraus on long and unremembered wanderings, sometimes all the way down to the gas station that marked the

end of the town and sometimes up trails in the hillsides that led—through gentler, more oblique routes than plowing vertically up from my house—to the mountaintop, where the top-heavy, polyester-nailed-on-metal statue of the Christ bobbed woozily, the pole of the cross slightly flexible and doing an antennae-motion in the wind.

I also read. Read in the coffeeshops and by the side of the pit and in the shade of trees, on cloudy days, in the open in parks and, once, in what turned out to be an intense experience, in the church. I moved, not quickly, but fluidly, through the viscous mass of Thiele's book. A group of ascetic monks are locked in a desert monastery. From the few travellers that pass through, trading and bringing news of the outside world, they hear stories of a shapeless horror that is moving through the distant provinces, devouring everything in its path. Cities have been consumed. But no one can say with any precision what the thing is—only that it is a physical entity, not a weapon or an empire or a disease. A demigod, some say. *A God of Squalor*, spits a parts trader, thinking the heresy will outrage the monks, but instead they nod, for this does not contradict their notion of God. Entire sections are given over to obscure theological discussion. The monks accept the news of its coming like they accept all such things, but they begin to speculate, during their free time, about what is happening beyond the great black walls of the monastery and the stretches of desert beyond. Soon word comes of name this force, or the name by which people refer to it, Beheles H'ii, which the monks recognize because it appears, not as a name, but simply as the word for hunger, in the untranslated holy texts in the dead Sám-bisa tongue. Moods sober in the monastery. They begin to recite cycles of prayer to learn to accept the endings of things and to make their peace—and a vicarious peace for the rest of the world—with the Nothing that is to engulf them. In a sense, everything they have done in their lives, their entire order itself, can be said to

be in preparation for this moment, but the irrelevance of a statement like that one becomes clear, then more than ever. It will simply happen. They brace themselves for the great letting-go. But although the monks have spent their whole lives cultivating blankness, as Beheles H'ii approaches, they begin to have trouble performing their ablutions, distracted by pleasures of the body.

4.

All in all, as I say: a generally untraceable phase in life. A few events from those first days in Mahraus, however, bear recording and have some—occasionally oblique—bearing on the things that were to come after them.

The first of these occurred during the afternoon coffee that I had idiotically agreed to have with Rocío, too slow to come up with a different answer on the spot, when she had asked me on our first encounter.

Late afternoon. Dainty porcelainware. Rocío left the living room of her house, saying, I'll just go into the kitchen to fix us something, Carmen, why don't you entertain our guest? and turns around to give me a meaningful and mischievous look and just then, only then, it dawned on me who I was supposed to be in that situation.

What I was being shown was a step beyond, or two steps to the side of, mere hospitality. I was being made, in a way that was not at all strange to the people who had prepared this encounter—of whom my grandmother was almost certainly one—to play the suitor to this young woman just barely out of high school.

And this realization, that Rocío had invited me over for coffee not merely out of her natural Mahrauhuense social vampirism, but to position me in front of her daughter, made me feel like the devil.

Before I could feel embarrassed and think of how best to back out of the situation and politely hint at my host that I was flattered, but not a viable candidate for her daughter, before I could think of a way to make small talk and just do what I had planned to do and burn away the necessary time with some easy prattle, instead something inside me snapped awake, irreverent, unempathetic, and I remember fixing my eyes on the woman sitting across from me, a coffee-table's distance away.

Pretty in the way that the women of Mahraus tend to be pretty, nothing sharp to her face, smoothly rounded nose and rounded edges to her bone structure, rounded full cheeks. White with deep black hair. The kind of makeup that effaced not only pores but features, and dressed, also, in a somehow neutralizing way, and painfully, painfully polite, painfully innocent or at least she appeared so with that perfect hostess smile and the hands clasped over the lap and it was there that it came pouring out of me, that thing—

Boiled y amargo all those last months of sterility when the essential tendon had snapped between Ximena and I, bodies alien in their own hands and those of others, and then the hunch the cringe the shrivelling inwards, *inválido y vergüenza*, the state of self defeat I remained in, and chose to remain in, through the months that followed, and something more and perhaps immemorial: a wave of, yes, lust, but more than that—a thing, that was to lust what greed was to ambition, gluttony was to hunger, a thing spiralling back on itself, eating itself. . . Not lust itself, but lust at lust, a pornography of hunger.

And unbidden a feral, predatory grin spread across my features. I felt it. That is, I detected it, more as an external occurrence than one I controlled, felt it open its way over my face, crack at my lips and pull them, and Carmen replied giving me a pleasant smile of her own.

I tried to mold my smile to one of simple friendliness, but of course, becoming conscious of this only made it feel more evil, only drew attention to its unempathetic quality, which I was not ready to feel ashamed of, not yet, and so grinned, wider,

And she smiled also, even wider, even politer, and her body prepared to make small talk, but she had nothing really to say.

And I watched her try and pull a topic for conversation out of thin air and did nothing to help her, but eyed her down, unfazed, unceasing, and smiled, smiled, smiled at her and I was feeling, almost, like a great screaming sound were coming out from my throat and it was a terrifying thing because I did not know what I was feeling, this terrible, wonderful, sickening and triumphant...

Like I could have died that day, been stamped to extinction against a wall that day, and wouldn't have cared.

I watched her clasped hands fidget nervously on her lap—and on a normal day I would have been sympathetic to the horrible moment she was going through then, the awkward agony of being thrust into this situation with a stranger who, on top of inherently having nothing to say to each other, was

being thrust onto you as some kind of prospect—would, in fact, be sympathetic, afterwards, after I had managed to push out of my head the thought of this prim, prudish woman splayed out on a bed, her legs thrown out wider than she ever thought they could be. The incestuous pleasure of tracing the hidden lines of her face, so much like my own. I would tell her, Hold your thighs. Hold them open. Pull your lips open. Show me. Her buttocks resting on her palms, her fingers would reach inward from there to tug at the edges of her labia, and a couple of hairs would unlock, and the kissing edges of her slit would part with an inaudible sound. More, I would say. She would pull more. More. She would have to let go to push her hands further in and have a greater reach, and then she would pull it open absolutely, layer upon complex layer. Look at me. And then I would run a finger along the innermost crease until a drop had collected upon its tip, and then I would raise it, gaze in approval at it, and tell her, gently, to open her mouth.

And with the utmost delicacy, I would touch my middle finger to her tongue. So softly she would not taste my finger, just the droplet that had unadhered from one surface to latch onto the other. I would be silent then, just watching her as she closed her mouth and pressed her tongue upwards against her palette to taste herself, this woman who had probably never done so, even out of curiosity.

Carmen mouths a question.

I'm sorry?

Oh. She looks surprised. I said, louder now as to a deaf person, how long will you be staying in Mabraus, Marlon?

And perhaps, I would have felt ashamed if I were not, if deserts inside me were not, also, somehow rejoicing at whatever was happening.

I made a gesture of hand-as-scales.

Ah, you know, it's hard to say, but... for the foreseeable future.

She started to say something and then stopped, with a look of restraint. I gave her an inverse nod, chin jerking to nudge more out.

What?

Nothing. I just think... most people leave Mabraus, rather than coming. Or they come to visit, not to stay. Or they do come, but not from the cities, most of the people who come to live in Mabraus are from the countryside...

And besides there is always time for regret and disgust in the future, and though it was all, the love and the lust, the hatred, frustration, pain and euphoria, though it was all mixed into a ball impossible to disentangle, and although that is the reason we are all fucked, although that is the reason that it is

impossible even to pull at one of those strings without the whole ball of our sickness falling down upon us, even despite that, despite everything—here, at least, was a snarl.

Something fucking alive, however base, and I would balance your stomach on the beam of that balcony. I would fuck you dangling your head out over that abyss, only my grip on your hips keeping you from falling.

Then I would pull you back and, after setting you safely on the ground, I would, myself, jump in.

I nodded and shrugged again, but before I could respond the mother stuck her head back in from the kitchen to add,

The worst of the worst, that's what my daughter is too polite to say, but since I don't have any hairs on my tongue, I'll say it: Mabraus is flooded with, I'm sorry, but gentuza form the countryside, that's the only word for it. That's why this town is becoming what it is right now. I wish you could have seen it like it used to be.

The inevitable *oh, but I've found Mabraus so beautiful as it is.*

*Oh, of course **the place** is beautiful. But before, mijito... the Culture! Ah... She sighed. But I'm sure you can tell the difference, just look, when you look at people on the street, I'm sure you can tell who's really from here and who's not, right, Marlon?*

I sipped my coffee, *oh yes certainly*, and indeed, the racial division between the two generations of Mahraus' inhabitants really *was* that visible.

The mother nodded, immensely satisfied. I made note of the fact that I was playing my ersatz role as suitor excellently, not impressing the girl, impressing the mother.

Exactly. I'm so glad you understand. The worst of the worst.

And taking our agreement for granted she disappeared back into the kitchen. Carmen blushed, and I matched the look she gave me, that still tried to be polite even as it supposedly took me into its confidence, apologizing for her mother, and I said:

And what about you Carmen? You've just finished school? What are you doing now?

Well, for the rest of the year I'm going to work in the store. But in January I'm due to be enrolled in the politecnica in Guayaquil.

Guayaquil?

Yes, the politécnica there's a good school.

Fucked-up city, though.

Yes. I'm going to be living with my uncle Carlos over there, though, so I think I'll be fine.

Oh.

Yes. He has two pet parakeets, and they can talk.

But really? I've always wondered about that. How convincing is it, and do they just make the sounds or does it seem like they understand something?

*Oh no, they understand. Well, at least I think they understand a lot of things. When anyone comes in the house they say **Buenos Dias** or **Buenas Noches**, when you go they say **Chau**, and when my uncles Carlos left, once, they begged him **no te vayas...***

Wow.

Yes. Anyway I'm excited to go and live with him and study.

And what are you studying?

Tourism and Hospitality. She nodded energetically.

Well. You're going to take over the store and the hotel? That's the plan?

Yes. That's the plan.

Mm. That's wonderful. and I nodded.

There were two green glass swans behind her, flanking a dead relative's portrait. If I leaned to the left side, slouching over the rail of his seat, I could align them so they were sitting on her shoulders, curving in to graze from Carmen's neck, which she had left bare by pinning her hair up.

The high fades. In the course of its passage, it both purifies and dirties.

5.

With a slam, rush of air and a gust of monologue already well underway by the time it came within earshot, the door of the Cevallos household—or what I thought of as the Cevallos household, but was in fact, the *Matamoros-Cevallos* household—swung open and the former half of that coupling, Mr. Matamoros, burst into the house, issuing speech as though it were an involuntary grunting. And perhaps due to the fact that the first piece I saw of this man was the flare of a nostril thrust, snoutlike, in the doorway, or because of his sharp but stubby ears, or because of that selfsame grunting speech or rather the desperate little mouth-breaths that broke its red-in-the-face flow, or, precisely, that pinkened hue of his skin—but for whatever reason when I saw Matamoros for the first time the word PIG fixed itself unshakably in my consciousness. Yes, pig, but with no real derision intended. . . just a porcine man in girth and nose and totemic impression who introduced himself, mid-grunt, as Antonín.

Weather banalities flowed from his lips. Laments about his work day and the general state of affairs; hellos, here, to Carmen, there, shouted into the kitchen, at his wife, then to me with a handshake. And all the while a constant, unstoppable narration of his actions as he performed them *wait just let me hang this coat here.. aja! there we go, close the door, there now, ah, you must be Marlon, yes? No don't get up I'll head on over, one moment* all dropped as though it were an accumulation of wrappers and coins which had gathered in the depths of his coat pockets and which he had just been in the midst of tossing out onto whatever surface he could find. That is, as though that manic and solitary filling-of-the-silence were not, as might be thought, a tool to stave off the potential awkwardness of entertaining an unknown guest, but rather something that was occurring independently of anything in

the present moment, an ongoing and involuntary process which we—his wife, his daughter, and I—just happened to be the witnesses of.

In the face of this verborrea I relaxed, allowing myself to flick off my social switch and simply lower myself into the narration, if that was the word for it, of this man, who required nothing, no input whatsoever from us. Who, as Rocío poured out the post-cafecito coffees for everyone, told us about the finca he had just purchased in Paccha, where he had a team of men now, even as we spoke, clearing out the forest to plant teak *because you know that's a cash crop, teak, and it grows so well here, and Moringa, that too, though I have no idea what it's good for but the gringos love it, I don't know what they do with it but they pay top dollar, much more by the pound than coffee, though of course you get more pounds of coffee per the plant. Moringa still comes out better, though. You know, casting to Rocío, I think one of the men is stealing from me. El Brayan. I notice, see they think I don't notice, but I notice, little things keep going missing, and I've had my eye out and I have the feeling. it's that Brayan, I've seen him, he's got that look about him...*

The gesture of a cat's claw swiping something from the air.

... miaow.

To me: *You know that expression? When we say Miaow it means he likes what isn't his. Anyway.*

Back to Rocío: *I'm think I'm gonna have to pay some of the others to, huh!, squeeze it out of him I'm just sure it's that one, but they'll find out for sure.*

Back to me: *Oh don't worry, that's the way the things are here in the countryside, it's all. . . you have to know how to maneuver, you know, how to deal with your workers, yours lands. . .*

Fortunately, as I say, nothing at all was required of any of us.

From there the conversational thunderhead hovered over to the subject of his family, which of course lest I had a doubt was *one of the few original Mabraus families*, no matter what anyone tells you—here Rocío gave me a confirming look as if to say *you see?—and we owned, you know what we owned? A water balloon factory. That's right, a water balloon factory. My father was the only one, you see, who had the formula to make the rubber juuust stretchy enough, just the right amount, to make a good water balloon, you see,*

Here he made a dramatic pause, made eye contact with each of us to make sure we were looking, and with his hands making ambiguous stretching and contracting motions, proceeded,

You see, if it's too stretchy, then you can fill it up with a whole liter of water and throw it and it won't even explode! Just bruise the poor person. But if it's not stretchy enough, then you can't even fill it. Mm? Mm?

And at that an Oooh, like we were receiving revelation, from the rest of us.

Some halfway through the meal, Antonín interjected, or rather, he interrupted himself to interject, *so, you're Marianita's kid, yes?*

... I'm sorry?

Carmen blushed brightly and the mother tsk'd her disapproval and, **No.** *God, Antonín,* making profoundly indiscreet eye-widening gestures that it was impossible she thought were invisible to no, *that was the **other** boy, Rodri, **Re-mem-ber?***

Carmen didn't know what hole to bury herself in.

*This is Marlon **Valareso***

Baquerizo, I corrected.

Yes, yes, that, but the point is he's a Valareso, Estercita's grandson at which Antonín jumped up with a genuine spark of recognition and exclaimed

But of course, Estercita's boy!

Great-grandson.

Yes yes, that, why of course, Estercita's boy, yes now that I think of it the resemblance is clear! You're handsome, like her, you know your grandmother was known in Mabraus for being a very attractive woman in her youth!

I see.

Yes, her daughters too.

Uh-huh.

In fact, when I was mozo, you know, those days before this one here caught me, made a show of looking raunchily at his wife, in my mozo days, I used to chase after one of Estercita's daughters! Little Marta, you know, she was year older than me and she was... uuff. It's true. I can't lie. No, but that was a cruel woman. Engreida. So I said good riddance.

Uh-huh. Yeah, that's my grandmother's older sister.

She was terrible, son. Terrible...

But sidetracked him, evidently against his expectations, into a tangent of memory deep enough that for

a moment, he paused, genuinely paused and his eyes disengaged in a way that made them, briefly, impenetrable.

The other three of us shipped our coffees and Rocío opened her mouth, about to bravely take up the conversation, when again *you know I was with a, what is it now, it must be a cousin or second cousin of yours, Enrique Valareso, do you know him? Not doing great, the poor guy*, and with that lapsed back into a diatribe that was to consume the rest of the meal.

6.

The moment Rocío announced her time—and by silent cue Carmen’s time—to retire had come, cue which I thought applied to me as well, and so stood up with a face that expressed regret that said moment had finally arrived when Antonín abruptly jumped up and said *No, stay!!*

Before I could assume this was the customary host protests, to which the customary guest had also to decline amidst a storm of apologies, he already had a bottle of cognac out and in his hand and was insisting that the guest, naturally, could leave any time he pleased, any time, that is, after having had one, just one drink with his host, *ya sabe*, he said, *among men*.

So a drink was poured. Goodbyes were made. The (tentative) idea was thrown around of organising a second playdate between myself and Carmen, the sound of doors clicking closed from further in the house came and after clinking glass to seal whatever kind of covenant was being sealed between myself and this man, a dry heat fell and radiated where the drop of alcohol reached the back of my throat and spread through my chest cavity.

A moment of silence, please. A friendly and detached look between the two people as though we had only now suddenly wound up in the same room together and were just now, two hours in really acknowledging each other’s presence.

Either the alcohol or else the absence of his wife and daughter did the middle-aged man well, for as we settled into the beginnings of our glasses of cognac, he eased, for the first time, the screws of his jaw

and his speech, for the first time in the night, decreased to a bearable level, in which the exchange could begin to approximate a conversation.

So what business are you in, Mr. Matamoros?

Matar Moros! Heh beh, a little obscene chuckle. Heb. No. I'm a lawyer I do land stuff for the indios over here, though, lately, I'm tired, you know, and I'm trying to just live off my properties. La edad, it gets to you.

We talked. The talking, like all that I'd done since arriving in Mahraus, was to actual conversation what the sucked dry shells of an insect consumed by a spider was to a living insect. Talked about his son, who owned a float of buses, about his older daughter, who cleaned houses in Florida, about me, what my plans were in the town, to which the answer that I had prepared for all such occasions had only now started to disturb me slightly.

My great-grandmother, who died right before I came here. . .

Estercita!

Yes, Rosa Esther. I, uh, I'm writing a little piece about her life. Nothing too researched, you understand, all the stories that I need I've already gotten from the family, this is just to get the feel for the place where she grew up, you know.

Yes yes yes, why of course! To soak it in, yes?

That's right. Life here also seems a bit calmer...I thought I might be able to concentrate better, you know, just sit down to think.

I think that's just marvellous. And how are you finding it, so far?

Great, you k-

Oh! His eyes flashed, you're renting the Manuela Saenz house, yes?

Yeah, it's-

And what do you think of Mahraus' local attraction, mm? Seeing as how you've got a first-row seat?

Um. Oh. It's... yes, terrible.

Mmm. Yes, sure, terrible, but captivating, isn't it?

I looked into his eyes. Yes.

Yes it was. And we held our silence like that for some time.

You know, he said, and paused again.

Resumed, a few weeks ago when it happened, and the house was still empty, I went over there. Spent quite a lot of time there in fact... you see during those first few days the rubble was still, eh, readjusting, and every once in a while something would shift and another house, or, a- a- half a house, would suddenly just sink, would just, whoosshh...

Sucked an open hand closing downwards to fingers bunched, like a flower closing, an eggshell shattering in reverse.

And the strangest thing is, how gentle it was. You would never think so, would you? It sounds like oh this violent thing, but, no, it was the most, the most delicate thing, like a feather, I tell you... just this house, sinking, with a little fffffff, like flour, it seemed like, and then nothing.

Aaahh. He gave a long and satisfied sigh.

Pause. His fascination—well, our mutual fascination— with the hole reminded me of something.

So, Mr, Matamoros. Rocío mentioned that at some point, you did some mining?

At which point the pig is roasted. That is, at which point, a *sonrisa de chanco hornado*, a roast pig smile, the way the animal's skin curls back along the faultlines of its skull in imitation of mirth when it is put in the fire, with embarrassment, and eagerness, and the childish desire to spill one's guts it spreads across that face, sweatier after two drinks, and after a moment just looking back at me with those stupid transformations occurring over his face, Antonín Matamoros said,

The words, faster still, but more stuttered and broken to pauses, said, *oh, uh, is that what she said, yes well I suppose, I mean, is that, uh, I, well now that you mention it, I did. Yes. I did. Just a little, of course, it's not like I wanted to get rich or anything I was just intrigued, I, uh... Would you like to see something?*

To which I nodded.

So the moor-killer rose to his feet, still with the same to-be-punished-child grin all over his face, and before I could where we were going, strode past me and I heard the click of a door open, a door which, as I turned around to look, turned out not to be the front door to my back, but one that I had not noticed upon entering the house—an exit, positioned diagonally, that cut a small corner out of the side of the living room opposite the window, where the eyes naturally tended, designed, clearly, to remain inconspicuous as possible. A cramped agglomeration of walls could just be made out beyond the shadow cast by the open door, beside which stood my host, holding it open and gesturing, with his insecure lips, for me to enter.

I finished my glass of brandy and stood up.

Era el cuarto de empleada, Antonín said as he flicked on the light to the sound of my approaching footsteps, as if that much were not obvious from the house's design and the sight revealed now as the light came on: The sole, now long-blanketless bed, in such close quarters with the sink-and-toilet combo which occupied one of the three walls—a wretched but complete thing with a little oval mirror right it above and below, a drawer for toiletries that reached the floor, the mat laid between the bedroom side of the room and the bathroom side just wide enough to fit a person's feet at shoulder width on it, and for that person to walk in, turn around, walk out... perhaps do exercises on the narrow strip of floor. There was, however, nothing to see. Nothing certainly to justify the face still occupying Antonín's face, who is now standing like a magician by his hat next to the sink, welcoming me into this room where I there is hardly enough space for the both of us to stand without feeling immersed in each other's rancid breath, expectantly.

Though it's been years since we've had a maid, of course... Antonín trailed off, then picked himself up again and looked at me newly half-sobered, *You won't tell Rocío, of course?*

Of course not. Not knowing what the fuck I was agreeing to.

Of course not. No, I know I can trust you, I got that feeling right away, yes...

And with that Antonín, unexpectedly, flung open the doors of the cabinet under the sink.

It took me a second to understand what I was looking at.

The interior of the cabinet was darker and more chaotic than the outside, and irregularly shaped. No, that was not it. The interior walls of the cabinet were, toward the outside, straight and white like one would expect, but then towards the back of the cabinet something strange happened to my sight and—

And then my eyes did the necessary refocusing trick and the light/dark patterns resolved, into the image of: the flat, white sides of the cabinet, stretching backwards in an ordinary fashion until they reached the back wall, at which point they encountered not a wall, but the splintered concentric haloes of a hole blown into wall, then, where the grainy edges of broken concrete leave off, yet another halo, this time where hole was blown, not into the wall of the house this but the mountain itself, the bedrock onto which the wall was poured.

And from there, continuing from the toiletry cabinet under the service bathroom sink of the Matamoros-Cevallos household, a dark tunnel stretched.

The pig man was speaking again, had lapsed, indeed, back into another monologue, was divulging another grotesquerie made of syllables, but I was no longer listening.

How? When the eyes, inevitably, are drawn inside, inward through ring after ring as it tightens around the burrowing gaze and pulls, pulls it in deeper, and in those envelopments, sound goes away and you are left alone with whatever see, whatever you place for yourself, at the end of that tunnel. . .

And without realizing it I was already kilometers into the shaft, all still crouching on the service room floor, a stride away from the cabinet whose throat stared, unblinking, unswallowing, at me.

The rising tone of Antonín's distant monologue indicated a question, and I nodded in response, and all of a sudden, the bulging body of the man eclipsed the tunnel.

And he got on his knees before the opening and leaned forward, and his shirt stretched from the movement and pulled up over his back, and the fat blossomed from the blossomed from the uncovered parts of his torso as he introduced his head into the cabinet just barely wider than his shoulders and crawled inside, stubby little hands helping push the girth along and in, funneling, no, stuffing the excesses of his body in, though the sharp cabinet edges dug at his flesh, until the hands, pulling a final stretch of belly with them, disappear and all that is left, apart from the wriggling stumps of the man's feet, is the pink half moon of his ass, shaken out of its casing and leering as the proprietor squirms, burying himself nose-first in the tunnel he has secretly blown into the wall of his own house, like a pig into his trough.

CHAPTER THREE

DESCENDING

1.

The rest, as they say, is history.

His wife had not, Antonín told me, forced or even coerced him to stop making his little excursions into the mines with the sablero he'd been hiring for that purpose. Nor did he know how to tell me why, exactly, he had chosen to publicly suspend his activities while beginning this altogether more bizarre—as if the whole thing were not absurd enough already—and more weasley continuation of the practice, except an evasive, *eh, I, I longer felt good about it, going down there, messing with those people...*

Sitting outside in the living room once again. Clothes not dirty, but scratched. I raised a questioning eyebrow,

So you...?

Oh, I got one of my men to do it! It was very easy. See, He had known, through the guidance of his sablero, that one of the shafts of the Arcapamba Mine that ran closest to the surface passed directly beside this neighborhood—beside meaning at eye level with them, directly into the mountain at the same elevation where their houses stood—and it had been no great effort, once the initial tricky bit of opening a delicate one-person tunnel through the wall of the house had been accomplished, to blow open a few twenty-meter stretches in various directions, until one of them hit the mark and opened onto the shaft.

On the one hand, it made no sense to me that, however deformed Antonín's values, he should somehow feel less uncomfortable with this so-obviously-shady operation than with the excursions he was making before, which seemed to belong to a more general anarchic order but at least one without the duplicity of hiding, and yet... and yet I intuited that perhaps this moving of his strange and greedy hobby into the definite sphere of secrecy was somehow an act of admission, of something that was already shameful, or something that already implied secrecy, even when it was it in the open—something, in short, that feels wrong and exciting, as I felt then, though dimly, the curiosity drowning out the wrong, which anyway was abstract, intangible, when I asked Antonín to put me in touch with a sablero so that I, too, could make an incursion.

He looked delighted in such an honest way when I said that, like a man who discovers his obscure and really quite sad passion—a stamp collection, or something—is actually appreciated by another, that his sharing it has not been demeaned. Happily, Antonín rushed into the kitchen and came back with a yellow sheet on which he'd scrawled a number. I looked at the note.

Sofronio Alcazar, 099-252-8873

Thank you, I said, and folded it into my wallet.

As they say, *Me gusta, me gusta, pero me asusta*.

I could not have given less of a fuck about mining. I wasn't even needing cash, nor even wanting, any more than one is always wanting. It was more the beckoning of that black pupil, the dark and nonsensical invitation. . . the fact that imagining the weight of the entire mountain hovering over me, all around me, was the very substance of nightmares: not terror, but scale and the incomprehensible. And how to explain? (unless you already understand what I mean) that in some drives, in the strongest, nausea comes, hand in hand, with a sort of lust.

Two days later, I was meeting the man whose number Antonín had given me in a bar—one of the very few in Mahraus—called *Espuela de Gallo*.

2.

So named after the blades affixed to the legs of fighting roosters with which they tore themselves and each other to shreds, the *Espuela de Gallo* had a certain grimy appeal to it. Hanging off the eastern side of Mahraus, the bar, which had evidently been built as an add-on to the original house, protruded like a tumor from its walls and dangled over the incline, which was so steep at that point that there were no stairs connecting one level to the next, just a wall, and the solitary concrete stilt which held the room up.

The clientele of *Espuela de Gallo*, in turn, consisted of precisely the demographic Rocío referred to with the phrase “Gentuza del Campo”, that is, people—more toward the indian side of the mestizaje gradient—whose families had moved to Mahraus from the surrounding countryside within the last generation or two, and its existence in the midst of clean wooden Mahraus struck the same discordant and to my eyes, *completing*, note that they did. A balancing of forces.

Little more than a dampened plywood box with a concrete floor, the place was dirty, too bizarre to be exactly ugly, and of course, like all establishments of its kind through the whole country, its walls were decorated with the iconic Pilsener beer calendars from years ago: big faded tits all around. The barman may or may not have been mute.

And when the cited sablero, this “Sofronio Alcazar” appeared—what did I imagine? Another degenerated colonial son, like my ancestors, like the quaint old people that had converged upon me

like flies from the moment I set foot in this town? I was drifting slowly through a tunnel of music, music and mild, recreational melancholy.

You see, the music in places like this one necessarily had to belong to one of a few categories: either it was purely old-school reggaeton day in and day out, or they might play the typical salsas and merengues (the same goddamn ten songs) that were the substance of every wedding or fifteen year party, common to all social classes, Joe Arroyo, and the like. Or they might, as happened to be the case here, play that specific sort of archaic, syrupy Latinamerican pop which I'm not sure I can even describe, but which you know instantly when you hear it: una cierta estirpe, a list of names and faces, lost in time, that were the same as the names and face that accompanied the half-naked chicas Pilsener on the walls. Names like Leo Dan. Sandro. Hugo Idrovo. Roberto Carlos. And of course, Jinsop.

Jinsop.

It was my friend Paula, on a long drive to the beach, who introduced me to the immortal genius of Jinsop for the first time. Discovering that the auxiliary cable of her car was broken, we had stopped at a gas station to buy stacks of pirated CDs from a salesman who had positioned himself at this Terpel station, right on the Panamerican highway as it exited Quito, precisely for the purpose of providing people like us with music on their way to the coast, every disk on his menu but an iteration of one of the typical mixtapes of which every Ecuadorian has memorized a version, with slight variations—the rock de los ochentas CD, the rock en español CD, the Boleros mixtape, and the Rocoleras—which probably had a fair overlap with *Espuela de Gallo's* playlist.

However, on this occasion, Paula had suddenly jumped as she flipped through the plastic pages with their pockets of CDs, squealing, *this one, no matter what else we're taking, this one has to be there!* and wrenching free an item whose cover made me give her a skeptical face. The music dealer looked at Paula, whom he had evidently underestimated, nodded with the sage approval of one who knows. The cover showed an Asian man with mushroom-y hair, making flashy pistol gestures with his hands and wearing a screaming pink shirt in front of an also screaming pink background.

Pau, what is this?

*Fucking **Jinsop!***

Uh-huh...

You don't know Jinsop?! she said. The salesman clicked his tongue. Listen, I don't care if you don't want to listen to it or not, but I'm getting this for Andrés. He's a huge fan and it's so hard to find his albums...

Nope. Can't find any of them anymore, agreed the seller.

Pau shook her head, People are fucking ungrateful.

In these stops, it was tradition to buy some ten collections, because one knew that only about half of them would actually work, but on this occasion the harvest turned out to be particularly sterile, and of those ten, only four turned out to be operational, of which one, labelled as Simon & Garfunkel, was in fact not Simon & Garfunkel but instrumental covers of their songs in traditional flutes and Andean instruments (for some inexplicable reason the preferred muzak at every tourist spot where the owners wanted to flaunt their Ecuatorianidad and yet give foreigners something they were familiar with, both enterprises to which that miserable choice of music was poison). Indeed, I had not wanted to listen to whatever kind of sounds were produced by man in the pink shirt, and yet after two laps around that Boney M-choked eighties rock collection and two also around *Grandes Éxitos de Soda Stereo*, when a third spin threatened to take on nightmarish tones, I acquiesced to putting on the Jinsop.

Words cannot really follow into the territory of music. The point is, Andrés never received the CD Pau had bought for him, she and I burned it until it glitched, all the way to the beach and back.

The glittering stage of some ignominious eatery-turned-concert-hall in Machala. A baby-blue curtain hung up behind the stage where there are no instruments, just a solitary mike, and Jinsop approaches, *¿Que tal, Machala?*

They go insane. You think that maybe amid the cheers you can hear people having orgasms in the background. The recorded instrumental track begins to play, and Jinsop, stiff, inexpressive, face immobilized from the cocaine, makes it rain. Like it was a fucking joke.

And who were you, really, Jinsop? Who was this man who would die at fifty-three, burnt out from conquering the popular stages of lower-class Ecuador for two decades? Whose songs were recorded in the seventies and eighties but sounded like they had come out of some forgotten corner in the origins of rock and roll, lush with cheesy surf guitars and obscene brass arrangements? Who was this adoptive son, who everyone assumed was Chinese but in fact was Korean-North American, the signature accent that gave his records their distinctive sound not an Asian accent at all but just the nasalizations and pirate Aarr's of a North American, un gringuito cualquiera? His parents, diplomats, or something, had brought him to Quito as a child, where he'd gone to an upscale school that fostered his English more than his Spanish, and so he never lost its accent. But when the parents left again toward the end of his teenage years, he chose to stay behind. And why? What place could a young Asian man have found in the Ecuador of the seventies, when he would have been a rarer sight than a Bengal tiger (which at least might have made its sad way through some circus) and not a welcome one, either? The deck should have been stacked against him; if anything, he should have been hated—it was, after a time when it was not taboo for people to remark, as my grandfather was known to cheerily do, to the panic of the entire family, *Haz Patria, Mata un Chino*.

And yet whatever he had, whatever it had for him, Jinsop fell in love with this country, this last retazo of the Gran Colombia, and the country fell in love with him. And not, the country that his parents introduced him to, the country that his school belonged to and the one to which he, the respectable son of an American diplomat, should have belonged, no, not for you, Jinsop.

To you, the stages of Quevedo, Babahoyo, Ambato. To you Portoviejo Rock City and Milagro, the yellow-eyed Guasmo, and the inferno of Lago Agrio. You conquered them all.

A melodramatic voice. An almost robotic body. A gentleness, even when he was coked out of his mind.

This lost soul, alien in every way and more native than the last of them.

In the Espuela de Gallo, I noticed the Jinsop poster next to a Colombian-looking mulatta in a thong and, from the instant I saw it, awaited the inevitable moment when his music would come on, which it did almost immediately. *Ven, Chiquilla Ven*, and a deep and cheesy blues settled into my soul, and aggrandized but unironic nostalgia breathing hard and focused when, the occasion marked with the precision that only a soundtrack can give to reality, the man whose laughter and grin had so perturbed me in the funeral walked into the bar and, immediately recognizing me as the odd one out amid the clientele, walked up to my table and offered his hand for me to shake.

Marlo? Sofronio. Sablero, pa servirle.

3.

Squeals of yellow brass, as though from an old western, flame out to either side of Jinsop's black and fuschia voice. I perceive the static of an old television screen, a crash crash, a glove. Emotions so pure and over the top they can never exist, except in songs like this one, and out of this glorious kitsch explosion, walks Sofronio.

I kept my eyes fixed upon his face as after clasping my hand he swung, with the slothlike movements that those long sinuous limbs permitted him, over to a chair which he spun around and hauled his leg over the backrest of, straddling it and leaning in to face me. He, also, kept his eyes fixed upon me through the process.

I was watching him now and rewatching him as I had seen him in the funeral, and I could see that in his eyes, too, there was the spark of recognition.

We watched each other. He didn't speak much but his mouth always hung slightly open, as though that part of him were literally *unbinged*. And there was a bobbing motion he made with his head whenever a bark of laughter shook it, that made the loose jaw swing slightly, open and shut. Suddenly the jaw moved, and words dropped out, to the floor like he was almost too lazy to speak them,

So you wan' go down?

I shrugged. *I'm Curious. But I don't-*

Mm. Just get to know, eh? Como quien dice, por la' gana nomás.

Yeah. Basically.

A ya. Ya. He made a smacking sound with his mouth. *O sea you don't want to mine?*

No.

He nodded and smacked again, looked he was pondering something and brought up his hand to his mouth, where he gnawed pensively on an already well-worn spot on the side of his index finger.

Well? I asked, waiting, *Can it be done?*

He spat out his finger. *Can.* Scoffed. *Everything can. So you want, the kid's version, yeah?*

Yes.

Así como de jueguito nomas. He smirked at me. I was losing my patience with this shit and gave him one final smileless *yes*, and he nodded, satisfied. *Bueno pue'. I do that too. Get you in with a group 'm taking down there Saturday, to Jorobadita, sound good?*

Ok. How much?

He shrugged. *Twenty?*

Sure.

He nodded. Got up. *Bueno pue'* and began to take his leave when,

You were in that funeral parade the other day, weren't you?

He stopped in his tracks and began to chortle, *Sabía! I knew I'd seen your face somewhere.*

Who was it?

What?

Who died? I was just wondering.

The sablero looked at me with confusion on his face. *Why were you there if you didn't know him?*

I wasn't. I was just watching.

Oh. Aah! At the hostel!

Yes.

The sablero smiled like he'd understood something and then he responded. —*El Doctor Valareso. The Doctorcito. Ex-mayor of Zaruma, died in that cave-in the other week. That's why so many people there, you know, he made a jerking-off gesture and then made to toss it in the air, Bah. Huevones. But that's the way it is. People love themselves a fucking politician.*

I scoffed. *So why were you there then?*

The Jinsop song ended. Roberto Carlos began to sing rock n roll praises to Jesus. Sofronio winked at me as he turned to leave,

Had to. I was the one found the body. Came in through the mines—he made a gurgling sound effect—Uuurp! Came up from below and found him in the hole.

I only breathed a *Fuck*, but Sofronio, already two steps away, bounded back to add one last phrase, rubbing his thumb against his middle finger in the universal symbol of money,

Y no me pagaron mal, eh? And another wink, and out the door.

And as I watched him leave, vulgarly hanging his weight off the door as he slouched out, pelvis-first, seeing the way the crude tattoos blurred across his limbs like he was only the angry unfinished sketch of a human being, spilling from the sleeves of his mottled multicolor t-shirt with its infinite little tears, I felt again that unmistakable sexual tinge but that this time, to be sure, was a violent and hateful attraction.

4.

As I walked home that night, climbing the steep curves under the orange, night-devouring streetlights, I realized that part of what had given me the singular and distressing impression that the Sablero had given me on that first sighting was in part due to the dissonance—the instinctive dissonance, that reverberated within me, though I was not able to put my finger on it at the time—of *that* man being in *that* place, dressed in *that* manner. In a suit at a funeral, Sofronio was an enigma. In a filthy t-shirt in a filthy bar, he was just one more.

And yet in a certain sense that was not true. Perhaps it was that I had already done too much work mythifying him for myself, but I still perceived a certain green aura of sordid royalty around the man, even as he was, just one more gamín amidst the thirty or so others.

I arrived home to open my laptop and make some inquiries. First, whoever this person was, that shared my last name and that I may or may not have been related to. Upon googling the Doctorcito Valareso, my computer screen excited itself as it projected a screen long selection of scandalous articles and corruption accusations, plus also the website of the municipality of Mahraus, dedicated precisely to fighting those claims and cleaning the name of this cadaveric, schielian man, who reeked in a way perceptible even through the filter of photographs and the stale screen. His smile was perfect and looked like it had been surgically implanted onto his face. It seemed there was little doubt as to his character, but people kept electing him as mayor again time after time. Afterward, I tried to google Sofronio but I found nothing.

I fell asleep reading Beheles H'ii that night?. The scene begins solid, disintegrating in the course that my mind did. A monk is tormented by the food on his plate. Steamed chicken, white rice, chopped beets. He knows he should eat this and be accepting of it, knows that food, in moderation, is necessary to keep his body alive and that these things matter, insofar as anything may be said to matter, and that therefore he should eat. And yet for the first time in his long life of eating austere meals, meals so bland they are easy to regard as merely fuel, he is distracted by the sensuality of the meal. An austere sensuality, to be sure, but existing nonetheless. That is, for the first time in a lifetime spent observing the passing of thoughts like black ships on the horizon, watching them but letting them go, not delaying them, for the first time he realizes he not only needs to eat the chicken in order not to die: he actually wants to eat it. He very badly wants to. The monk remains very still, watching the food and observing, observing, observing the desire within him.

5.

It stood to reason given that La Jorobada was the mountain that housed Zaruma, that La Jorobadita, hill under which the eponymous mine was dug, was a smaller but nearly identical dome. It was, really, in a straight line, only some three kilometers away, but the circuitous road from which one had to approach it—going down to San Lucas, then on to the desembocadura of the valley, and around the ridge to come up through a different valley—meant that the drive from Mahraus, for me, bouncing in the trunk of Sofronio’s red pickup truck with the sixteen-year-old San Lucas gamín whom he had brought along as a supposed assistant, took some forty minutes.

I will say that there was nothing particularly special about my first immersion into the tunnels, nothing that would have made one need to go back. Some dark smooth stone (smooth where they had tapped into a natural vein in the mountain); some dark granulated stone (granulated where they had blasted their way through with dynamite and drill); sightlessness. I did not yet realize, as I later would, that it was in that sightlessness where the magic of the mines resided. That I would become, in fact, a connoisseur of it. At that moment I didn’t really know what I was doing there—in fact the word “pointlessness” seemed to flap annoyingly around my head if ever I paid too much attention to my thoughts (the thoughts, after all, of one thoroughly indoctrinated into the culture of work from which no vacation will really let one escape, and rewiring is difficult)—all I knew was that inertia was lovely. I was following the next not logical but impulsive step that followed impulsively from the last I had taken, and that with the premeditated collapse of gravity, here I was. So I shrugged. I had not come to Mahraus to obviate my every whim, my every unexamined decision, but to let them run.

The entrance to the mine was a circular bore like a hobbit hole clycloping the very top of the hill, outside of which, on a dirt plateau like a parking lot, there stood the tin-roofed shack, clearly all that remained of the small complex that once stood in this spot, where the guardador—a miner himself, said Sofronio, and quite insane from the mercury poisoning, though to me he just looked like a trembly and sick old man—charged two dollars per person as an entrance fee.

The teenage assistant hauled out a humid-smelling bag that had accompanied me and him in the back of the truck, and from it he pulled hard hats, reflective vests and headlamps—musk-choked items all of them infused with the sweat of generation after generation of strangers—and distributed these among the clients. In the light, dressed up like grimy little miners, when it was obvious from those baby-smooth faces that none of us, save the sablero, were, we looked ridiculous for a moment, but then, after listening to Sofronio’s instructions, we went into the mine, and looked like nothing at all.

The group consisted of myself, Sofronio, Sofronio’s aforementioned gamín, who I learned was named Weber, and three other people who had also “signed up” for the “tour”: a couple in their early thirties, and a scrawny young man some five years younger than me. All pseudo-tourists like myself, that is, people who evidently did not come from Mahraus but had some kind of tie to the area, some reason to know these internal things. But although we had made our introductions when Sofronio picked us up that morning, although in the tunnels we would be close enough to occasionally feel the soft prods of one another’s breath as we walked single file, despite all of that, the first sensation I was aware of, stepping into the mine, was a feeling of anonymity, of a sort.

Warm breath, and the bovine shuffle of bodies in front, bodies behind, but bodies reduced to the crunch of their footsteps and the nudging forward of their ungulate presence behind me, but presences alone, not people. Anonymous.

Faceless even if you can see them, and anyway each of us left, instinctively—except the couple who attempted to defy single file and squeeze in side by side—a distance between themselves and the person in front just large enough that a ring of black potential would be left between where the arc of the individual's own headlamp gives out and that of the next person begins. Because it was, inherently, an odd sort of tour: there was not really very much to see, and that narrow stretch of lighted gullet, between I and another, was the closest one could come to creating for oneself a view.

And instinctively, also, we all went silent.

The air that circulated there was dry but soft, somehow—it had a roundness to it, but came, or so it seemed to me, intermittently from the outside, when it would touch the back of my skull and prickle up the curl there against the edge of the helmet, but then, around the contours of the man and woman in front of me and onto my face, from within, from the lungs of the Jorobadita.

A railing that looked like shoddy plumbing, occasionally painted yellow or bearing the ugly remains of yellow paint from years ago, appeared and disappeared periodically to our right side, and, sliding my hand along it whenever I could, making the hand jump off into the dark air as though from a ramp after every time the railing discontinued. We made our way down the tunnel at a mild,

near-imperceptible downward angle. We continued in this fashion for a distance long enough that, by my guess, we should have been close to coming out at the opposite side of the hill from which we'd entered when without warning the passage ended. Visibility was so limited that all I was aware of was that the woman in front of me had stopped and the distance between us closed when I abruptly came upon her and her husband and the sablero standing in front of a gruesome contraption, made worse in the glare of the headlamps, which cast shadows unnaturally, old horror movie lighting style, upwards.

It was a thoracic mess of steel encrusted into the stone wall, at once like a device made to inflict pain upon the body and like the tortured body itself: a fragile, rusted cage, or rather the bottom half of a cage with, above it, just the crude skeleton of a couple of metal beams. And in front of this thing, this precarious bucket made to angle people into the stone like bait into the bottom of a river, we formed an orderly line.

It fell to Weber the young gamín to stay at the top of the shaft and man the car motor that had been rigged to haul the cage up and down the hole. The cage doors opened with a sound of pain, let in two passenger, plus the sablero, and then squealed in pain again as he shut them and gave Weber the signal to press down on the pedal. The whole tunnel became a choir of agonized metal as the motor began to rumble and the chain links to pass through the pulley system, every part of it as dry yet sensitive as the grinding of joints without cartilage.

In the cage, the sablero stood behind the young couple as they waved at us, both clearly terrified, and the cage became just a ball of light sounding the depths, a flashlight, dropped and sinking into a well.

I leaned as far out as I could over the shaft and give an impressed, fearful whistle. I looked back at Weber. He grinned — *You wanna do something?*

What's that?

Fuck with them.

I gave him a sort of questioning look, but the truth is I was already smirking as suddenly he rammed down his foot down on the accelerator and made the cage drop some five meters, and from below the terrified screams of the couple rose, bouncing madly against the walls as they tried to escape the shaft.

And he lifted his foot again and the jolt of the cage's rattling stop was heard, then a moment of screams that continued after it.

He and I were howling with laughter and the other man, still up there with us, smiling in an embarrassed way but also looking at us as though we were psychopaths. Down there, the couple had stopped screaming but now the woman was sobbing and the man trying to supposedly comfort her with a voice more trembly than her own, and all the while both of them cursing at Sofronio, who was trying his best to suppress his chortles as he shouted up,

Weber, vergajo hijo de puta, I said not to do that this time!

And Weber, wiping at the tears on his face, just said to me under his breath —*Ayayay. Worst thing is, he did say not to. Aaah. But it's worth it every time. Every fucking time.* And then he continued bringing the cage down, this time at a steady rate.

The cage returned, empty save for Sofronio.

We got on. As we descended, both me and the other man had our eyes fixed on Weber, who, lit from beneath, looked terrifying, as the smile only began to creep in once he was almost out of sight, and it was then that I braced myself and grabbed onto the railing and raised my free hand above my head to give him the finger, waiting for the inevitable. . .

But it never came.

We reached the bottom peacefully and Sofronio positioned me at the base.

I watched the sablero go back up once more to pick up the remaining member of our party, or rather I watched the light he cast go back up, the beams rendering the surroundings visible but the figure from which they radiated only a shadow behind the insectile bars—a lobster in a cage, extinguished by now, being pulled from the boiling water. Above, the possible sun of a kitchen light.

6.

On the way back to Mahraus I rode up front with the sablero. The husband, by his own petition, went in the back with Weber, making a show of sitting opposite him and staring at him silently, expressionless, trying to look threatening—as though he were memorizing Weber’s features or something—but the truth was that he was outmatched by the boy, who genuinely could not give less of a fuck.

I had been wrong about it not being the kind of tour where there was anything to see.

From where we had stepped off the elevator cage, Sofronio had taken us through a path that after numerous bifurcations, declives, and turns, spilled out onto a series of galleries where the walls, if you shone your headlamp on them, adopted wild and subtle colours.

There were places where all the duller stone had been scratched away to reveal sections of wall comprised entirely of white quartz with streaks of pink and yellow, splintering naturally into rectilinear towers and pyramids. Other places, where rivulets of dully iridescent stone, orange-black, purple-black, or green-black, looked like the sections of a subway wall where the tile and concrete had undergone a mysterious—and seemingly impossible—process of decomposition, resulting in vile, expressionistic waterfalls. At its most spectacular point, the walls of the passage remained as narrow as they had been, but the ceiling suddenly vanished was revealed, if one swung the torch beam upward, to

have fled high into the firmament of stone above our heads, perhaps some twenty meters, forming a grotto whose walls were somewhere between yellow and black.

Evidently, these halls had been left untouched for the benefit of the tourist. I was interested by the details, as I would have been at any exhibition, but the truth was that the effect these precious minerals and their sparkle had upon the “landscape” (though this term does not ring true, for some reason *mindscapes* insinuates itself to me, though I steer clear from that as well) of the mine, was rather one of cheapening. The wall of quartz with its thousand whitish thorns seemed to me an affront to the purity of the monotone rock.

To everyone’s great excitement, Sofronio pulled out four pairs of little toy-like hammers and chisels and distributed them among us, saying we were all free to take a small souvenir from one specific wall, which he now directed us to. After futilely chipping away a dust that was good to no one, the first piece that I managed to chip off was—is, for I still have it—flat, trapezoidal, about the length of my middle finger, and had, during the first few hours that it was in my possession, delicate, horrifically sharp splinters angling out from the side where it had been attached to the wall. I picked it up gingerly, like a fragile organism in my hands, and, tossing out the white sugar-and-mint pills, trapped it safely in an Altoids box that I had in my backpack. The delicate splinters broke off within minutes anyway.

I watched the man, winking at his wife as he checked behind him to make sure the sablero wasn’t looking, give a terrific blow of the hammer and break off a protruding piece of rock about the size of

his own jaw and quickly stuff it into her purse. She too looked giddy with excitement as he did this. The sablero, indeed, wasn't looking.

In fact he was not behind us at all, but had drifted away and was at the far end of the hall, where the grotto narrowed until vanishing.

He had walked as deep into the recesses as he could. The walls pressed into his shoulders at either side, but ahead of him, past where he could no longer fit, the space continued, the grotto narrowing so slowly that before they reunited, shadow took over, and into this shadow he appeared to be looking. As though, were he to continue walking, he were capable of fading into the rock.

As though he were a Moses with the sea about to fall back around him. As though he could not sustain the magic.

I watched him shine the beam of his lamp—he had it in his hand—into the canal, and raise his head as though straining to see something deep inside.

Then lower the beam, but remain there, looking in, for some time.

When we were done collecting our souvenirs—the wife's purse bulged under the strain of the six or so fist-sized stones the husband had harvested while Sofronio was distracted—we returned to the barrenness of the entrance tunnels.

The return drive was made mostly in silence. The sun had disappeared by now and the sky, brick red but unspectacular because the clouds were so uniform there was no texture to them. Sofronio drove, a cumbia chichera CD in the truck's player and a drugged half-smile on his face. He looked relaxed, but free of the need to socialize. Evading the awkwardness I also pretended not to notice the three people in the seat behind me.

At some point, however, I suddenly thought back to the night I had met him and it occurred to me to ask the sablero, *Hey,*

Diga?

... the, "Doctorcito Valareso", who you said you found his body?

He let out a bark of laughter *y sí, so?*

I shrugged. *I read about him after you told me... a lot of stuff came up...*

Un sapo, ese man. A frog. By which he meant a gutter creature. A low life.

Oh yeah? It was not feigned surprise so much as it was a gentle egging on, allowing more.

Ha! Un sapazo. Like you've no idea. That man had his fingers stuck in aaall this mining shit. Veale esto: this guy, he'd make himself out like he was the so-called owner of the mines, and he was charging us a "tax" to go down there. Because he had the cops in his pocket, if you didn't pay up, you could come out a tunnel and find them waiting there to arrest you.

He fell silent for a moment, and then added, *But the mines belong to nobody anymore, entiende?*

Mm.

Así como le digo. Every so often one of those comes along, trying to make like he's the muy-muy or something. And course since he had money, right, thinks he can get away with what he wants...

Fuck. But so why did he die in that collapse? Was his house among those that fell? And, this was the point that had most confounded me when I thought of it, how did you know to look? Why did you go in there? Were you looking for survivors, or did they call you, or...?

And Sofronio was dryly laughing and shaking his head.

Ab no, pues chucha. He said between bouts of chuckles No, his house wasn't in Mabraus at all. He had a mansion somewhere around. I think by Paccha or something.

And so?

Sofronio's smile went as though into a reverie. *I didn't "go in" to anything. I was already down these and this rumbling came, un sacudón, así, Fraaaa! and I thought the world was coming down on me. First I thought I'd get crush and then I thought I was going to be trapped in there, and I thought, I'm fucked. SO I'm running around, looking for some kind of a way out, when, vea,*

He waved his palm, as we do when attempting to evoke the picture floating in the air, which is there, for me, it hangs there, and the three in the back seat are also leaning in to listen,

*I come out a tunnel, and I see a light, and I say what's that? So I go, and I go, and what do I see, but the fucking **sky**? Last thing you expect, down there, the sky. And I come out, and suddenly I notice that I'm standing **inside** the living room of a hose. Do you understand? The tunnel has transformed into the living room of a house, o sea, the house has fallen but instead of falling apart, the insides had linked up with the tunnels. . .*

Sofronio nodded and gave a low musical hum, *Mmm-mmm, yes, mmm, and that's where I found the old fucker. Others too, many others, but that was the famous one diga!*

And he broke out laughing.

You came in from below?? I didn't think that was possible. I had not stopped to think about it, but I had assumed, of course, that he came in from above. He nodded,

Mm. All that's still open. Eso, uuy, all that is still open.

I remembered the dog I had seen, weaving in and out of the rubble. We fell into silence for a while, though Sofronio kept chuckling softly under his breath.

All of a sudden I remembered the other side of my line of questioning, *but so the Doctor Valareso, the mayor, what the fuck was he doing down there?*

But the sablero, after a last cynic snort, just shrugged, and we drove the rest of the way without saying a word until, when we reached the Hostal Valverde—where we dropped off the Guayaquileño couple—the sablero turned around in his seat to inform the wife, nodding at her handbag,

Those rocks are worth nothing, by the way.